# Linguistic Rights in Multilingual Africa

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## Abstract

*Language issues have long been a problem in Africa. Language policies that have been pursued by most African countries after independence are similar in most cases as countries faced more-or-less the same linguistic reality, that is, several indigenous African languages and one or two European languages used as official language in the country. Like other policies adopted by African governments, language policies derive from political and social realities of the time. The OAU declared that colonial borders were inviolable and therefore, had to be maintained by African governments. This legitimised the splitting of some language groups into two or three or sometimes even four countries. As a result linguistic minorities were created out of groups that were otherwise not linguistic minorities. Many of these so-called minority languages are not even recognised in educational institutions. This paper presents an argument that the problems of linguistic rights in multilingual Africa stems from political decisions that were made with little concern for language issues. Therefore, the solutions should be political and may involve revising earlier declarations by OAU on the inviolability of colonial boundaries. This should be possible if linguistic rights are treated as human rights and given serious attention by national governments as well as the international community.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is a well attested historical fact that 'language is an instrument of politics, and that the state wields its influence through the choices that it makes in the language, or languages of administration, law, the military, education, and so on'(R. Wardhaugh, 1987 p9). This observation is more pronounced in multilingual Africa where governments are faced with a choice to perpetuate the colonial languages barely understood by the majority of their populations or resorting to the several indigenous languages understood by the majority but not used in any official domain. At the attainment of independence, most African states South of the Sahara chose to continue with the European languages in spite of the obvious fact that few were competent in those languages and many were illiterate or semi-literate even in their mother-tongue.

Various reasons (both linguistic and purely political) can be put forward to account for that apparent anomaly. It seems, however, that political considerations took precedence

over linguistic factors. African states were faced with a mammoth task of speedy development of their respective countries that were economically backward and largely non-industrialised. To achieve that dream of an economic revolution the African governments felt that strong and unitary nations were a necessary prerequisite. The various ethnic groups and the multilingual realities were perceived as threats to national unity. African languages were feared as divisive to the nation and so only one language was needed to unite all and that language should be 'neutral'. For that reason European languages got the blessings of emergent African governments and the African languages were denied their rightful positions. It was then that slogans like "One Zambia, One Nation" arose.

While it is appreciated that any country should be expected to do its best to enhance nationality, it seems African states had a rather more pronounced problem on this issue. Governments seem to have gone beyond reasonable limits to save national unity, with suppression of genuine expressions of discontent and in some cases culminating in civil wars. It is interesting to note that all African states south of the Sahara have their boundaries determined by colonial powers. Actually, African states are 'the chance creations of political accidents' (Wardhaugh, 1987 p3). The efforts by various African governments to foster nationhood amongst their citizens have often meant the suppression of ethnic identities and consequently languages. Yet in the modern world it has become acceptable that, "speaking a particular language is also often closely related to expressing a certain nationality or identity" (Wardhaugh, 1987 p5). In an attempt to foster the spirit of nationhood by suppressing ethnic identities and loyalties, linguistic minorities were created. Those linguistic groups found in the border areas suffered most as their kith and kin found themselves in another state. Of the few African languages recognised and promoted for limited use in education, the languages found in the border areas suffered most. Some language groups that suffer partition include; the Somali who were divided between Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and the Somali Republic, the Maasai who were cut nearly in half by Kenya – Tanzanian border, the Bakongo who were cut between Gabon- Congo, Congo-DRC and DRC-Angola boundaries, the Gourma were cut between Burkina Faso, Togo and Benin, the Tswana are across the South African and

Botswana borders (Asiwaju, 1985:2). For instance Zimbabwe shares Tonga with Zambia, Venda, and Sotho with South Africa, Kalanga with Botswana, Ndau with Mozambique. What this actually means is that Zimbabwe shares ethnic groups with all its neighbours, while this is not peculiar to Zimbabwe it is not a healthy situation for national development.

We therefore, have boundaries that ignore cultural, ethnic and linguistic boundaries imposed on African populations. Unfortunately, the OAU in 1963 declared that colonial borders were inviolable and therefore, had to be maintained by African governments. This resulted in language groups being split between two or three or sometimes even four countries. Linguistic minorities were created out of groups that were otherwise not linguistic minorities. Some of these languages are not even recognised in educational institutions. According to the UNESCO declaration of 1953 languages should satisfy certain criteria to be designated as either minority languages or mother tongue. According to the UNESCO Committee the definition of mother tongue is "the language which a person acquires in early childhood and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication. …it need not be the language which his parents use; nor need it be the language he first learns to speak, since special circumstances may cause him to abandon his language more or less completely at an early age (Fasold 1985:293). The UNESCO Committee further defines vernacular as "A language which is the mother tongue of a group which is socially or politically dominated by another group speaking a different language. We do not consider the language of a minority in one country as a vernacular if it is an official language in another country" (Fasold 1985:293). Most languages are excluded by definition from being classified as minority languages and speakers of these languages have their linguistic rights usually ignored if not out-rightly denied. If the mother tongue is not necessarily the language of the parents or the first language that the child learns then in Africa this poses a lot of problems for defining the linguistic rights of minority communities. For instance minority-language groups might be forced to have their children learning the languages of the dominant groups.

From the issues raised above one can make a claim that what has been perceived, as language problems in Africa are actually political problems dating back to the colonial period. The problems are partly rooted in history and partly arising from present political orientation of independent African countries. While it is the imperialist powers that demarcated the territorial boundaries of modern African countries, it is independent African governments that gave legitimacy to colonial boundaries by their agreement to uphold boundaries established by colonial powers. It was the same statesmen who tried to build nations within the confines of colonial imposed state boundaries. The serious blunder in this attempt was to create nations using Western models of nationhood, the nation-state idea. All this was done in spite of the multicultural, multilingual and multinational reality on the ground.

Immediately after attaining their political independence, African governments rightfully attempted to foster national unity. This was and still is a noble cause for all responsible governments. However, in identifying the unifying factors that is where miscalculations were done. The search for a single unifying "neutral" language was the blunder which African countries have paid for dearly in terms of lack of economic development and political stability. At independence, African states had populations within those states that unfortunately governments misconstrued for 'nations'. It is true the populations had been restless and ardently anti-colonial but it is debatable whether that anti-colonial pan-Africanism was nationalism. In the same manner that the populations had no loyalty to colonial regimes so was the case with colonial demarcated boundaries. African leaders began an unenviable task of fostering nationhood within populations in state boundaries that had not only been imposed on them but also had divided them and scattered into minorities over different countries. There is no single country in Africa south of the Sahara that does not share one or two ethnic groups with its neighbours. Nationhood implies among other things having distinctive cultural, historical, linguistic or other features that identify one nation from the other. It is not easy to have that in African states without either incorporating nationals of a neighbouring country or even excluding potential nationals.

## LINGUISTIC RIGHTS

If we acknowledge that the question of nation and state has posed problems in Africa then we must accept that the issue of linguistic rights is even more complicated. It is through language issues that problems of nation and state in Africa have clearly manifested themselves. We ought to note that language rights like all human rights are equally important and should receive serious attention too. The significance of language rights is perhaps best described in the Recommendation of the 22nd Seminar on Human Rights and Cultural Rights at Racife, Brazil that reads,

> Every social group has the right to positively identify with a language or languages and have its identification accepted and respected by others. Every child has a right to learn fully the language or languages of his/her group. Everyone has a right to use any language of his/her group in any official situations" (Tollesfon 1991:172).

As has been shown by many studies, those who have political power use it to gain power over language and those who have power over language in turn use it to gain political power (Eldelman 1977, Puel 1993, Hodge and Kress 1979, Fairclough 1989. In Smieja (1997:102). It is therefore, under the present conditions in modern societies almost impractical to have all social groups controlling their language situations or having enough political power to protect their linguistic and cultural heritage. Those groups without political power usually have no power over language.

According to Karetu, the question of cultural rights becomes an issue when there is a minority group living amongst a majority. … Linguistic rights, he said, have to be regarded as an extension to cultural rights, as they also allow for the survival of one's culture (UNESCO 1998:29). In multilingual Africa where every nation is multi-ethnic and multicultural the concern over linguistic rights is more pronounced than in monolingual nation-states, that is, if monolingual states actually exist.

## NATION, STATE AND LANGUAGE

The tragedy that faces African countries today is the persistent aspiration by the ruling elite to use language as a unifying force in nation building. This misplaced aspiration draws its justification from the nineteenth century European model of a nation-state.

Within this framework, the state is percieved as corresponding to the notion of the nation. According to Pound (1972) "The State is likely to show the greatest stability and permanence when it corresponds closely with a nation." Therefore, an ideal situation according to this view is when there is congruence between the state and the nation.

Once the view that the State and the nation should correspond is accepted it then follows that a common language is similarly perceived as an indispensable part of the nation state. According to Isayev (1977 "Language is a nation's most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis." (Bamgbose 1991:16). The search for a common language by emerging states is based on such assumptions. The common language has been seen not only as a convenient means of communication but also as a unifying force. One would have thought it naïve to seek for a common language in a multilingual situation, but nation builders found that a noble effort. Well nowadays, many ethnic conflicts challenge the traditional perception of the Nation-State as a homogenous and mono-cultural entity (UNESCO 1998:28).

Notwithstanding these finely polished ideals of a nation-state, in Africa South of the Sahara the nineteenth century type nation-state is not only unattainable but also unrealistic and out-rightly undesirable. It is important to take into cognisance the fact that modern independent African states did not rise out of cultural and linguistic nationalism. Instead modern African states are colonial creations as Bamgbose (1991:10) writes that, "One of the legacies of colonial rule in Africa is the creation of many artificial states in which several ethnic groups have been brought together under one administration within a single territory." For instance, Kenya has about 35 (thirty five) languages, Sudan 133 (one hundred and thirty three), Tanzania 113 (one hundred and thirteen) DRC 206 (two hundred and six), Nigeria 400 (four hundred), Cameron 183 (one hundred and eighty three), Ghana 57 (fifty seven), Angola 29 (twenty nine), Qote d' Ivoire 58 (fifty eight), to mention but a few (Bamgbose1991:2).

**MULTICULTURALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM**

That African countries are multicultural and multilingual has long been an acknowledged fact. What has not been acknowledged, however, is that the one nation, one state concept is not to the best interests of peace and development in Africa. Some flexibility should be exercised in dealing with issues of nationality, language and boundaries in Africa. Governments are likely to succeed in negotiating boundary adjustments than in suppressing other languages and cultural rights to some groups.

Firstly, there are cases in Africa south of the Sahara that need re-adjustment of colonial boundaries in order to re-unite linguistic groups that find themselves minorities in a number of countries when in fact they are one large group to form a language community on their own. As minorities trapped in different countries your language has little or no recognition and your political and economic strengths are equally diminished.

**LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY**

Since it is now widely accepted that rightly or wrongly, language has been used, as a marker of identity to try and act otherwise would be unwise. But ethnic identities do not by themselves pose a threat to the unity of the State except when that particular group feels that its identity is threatened. "People become a people through institutionalised awareness of differences vis-à-vis others" (Royneland 1997:29). Similarly, we can claim that minorities are created by the discriminatory behaviour of the dominant and powerful groups that have a tendency to deny others access to the limited resources and opportunities.

It is imperative that all ethnic, cultural or linguistic groups whether small or big should learn to share and co-exist with other similar groups, "Since scarcely a single nation or ethnic group has its territory entirely to itself…" (Royneland 1997:28). It should be a duty then of governments and non-governmental organisations to help foster the spirit of co-existence among all groups sharing the same territory. One way of ensuring that is by the recognition and promotion of linguistic and cultural rights for all.

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON LANGUAGE PLANNING

The promotion of linguistic rights of various nationalities in Africa can hardly succeed under the current political conditions within states whose boundaries were established by colonialists. Writing on the weaknesses of the policy of maintaining colonial boundaries Asiwaju states that,

> "…despite their general awareness of the location of the boundaries drawn through several ancestral territories, inhabitants of the various culture areas have maintained across the boundaries kinship ties and other socio-cultural relations, as well as economic activities. Were they to do otherwise – namely accept and respect the new international boundaries as effective lines of division – they would be embarking on a course of self-liquidation as ethnic units" (Asiwaju 1985:pvi).

Therefore it would be wise to have boundaries that would coincide with the expectations and needs of the peoples affected.

Secondly, the cost to maintain colonial boundaries as if they were divinely sanctioned has been higher than the probable cost of adjusting them. A number of African countries have experienced bloody and lengthy civil wars as well as military take-overs mostly motivated by instability in the countries. Ethnocide has been prevalent in Africa in most conflicts. Therefore, the question of linguistic and cultural rights cannot continue to be glossed over when it has brought so much instability in Africa.

Thirdly, having done a little bit of adjustment of boundaries still all African countries would need to adopt policies that recognise and promote the interests of all cultural and linguistic groups within their borders. This could be done by totally changing the concept of one-nation, one-language and one state. African states should be sympathetic to cultural self-determination, as cultural and linguistic diversity is an acknowledged reality. By the way it is possible for a number of nations to share a state (Eriksen in Royneland 1997:26). If pluralism means tolerance of different political views, then we must view tolerance of linguistic diversity as a part of plural democracy (Royneland, 1997:111)

Writing on the importance of multilingualism, Agnihori says, "It is not only that sustaining multilingualism in our school education is consistent with our sociolinguistic

reality, but also there is now increasing evidence (Peal and Lambart, 1962; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Lambert and Tucker, 1972; among others) that bilingualism leads to great linguistic tolerance and more mental and cognitive flexibility"(Crawhall, 1992:48). By promoting multilingual education in most African states there are likely to be more benefits to social coherence than when doing otherwise. It would result in more tolerant citizens. Legal safeguards on their own are not enough to ensure the protection of linguistic rights of various groups unless the people themselves are tolerant of each other's rights and are prepared to co-exist within the same territory.

**CONCLUSION**

The question of linguistic rights in Africa is as important as the question of human rights in Africa. Like the issue of human rights, the language question derives partly from colonial history and partly from language and development policies pursued by African governments in the post-colonial era. Both these factors have connived to perpetuate linguistic minorities who today are not only suffering from false minority linguistic status but also political and economic deprivation. Nothing that falls short of cultural and linguistic self-determination could solve the current linguistics quagmire besetting most African states south of the Sahara. The reasons advanced for the maintaining of colonially drawn boundaries have failed to yield the anticipated peace and unity of Africa. It is high time that African statesmen and cultural activists as well as human right groups revise the issue of boundaries in Africa in order to carve boundaries that attempt to coincide with cultural entities rather than mere rivers and gorges than mean differently for populations in the frontiers. In any case all state boundaries are man-made and therefore subject to change when need arises. It would be absurd to think that boundaries in Africa would remain unchanged to eternity in spite of the obvious need for adjustment.

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