

# Challenging African Scholars through African Languages: A Re-Examination of the Question of Development

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## **Abstract**

*The underlying conception of African societies as societies of orality does not foreclose the possibility of integration into a global development initiative. Though finding a unilateral and concrete definition of development is a difficult task, the debate concerning the very possibility of development in Africa has different dimensions to it and the lack of writings in African languages is one of the major obstacles to development. It is against this background that this paper considers the possibility of development through a process of knowledge acquisition and scientification of African languages. This initiative will enhance the thought system and deliver the continent from the hammer of underdevelopment. Hence, the paper argues that the potentialities of African languages are not exhausted as there is no culture whose traditional ideology cannot cope with the demands of the developing modern world.*

## **Introduction**

The sustainable development of Africa has been the major concern of African scholars of diverse disciplines and specialisations since the independence years. Many theories, articles and books were written and published to achieve the desired goal. However, the magnitude of the intellectual effort deployed did not yield the expected result. Consequently, Africa is still at the cross road and the situation remains what it was in the early years of independence, in the 60s, if not worse. As such, it goes without saying that African scholars and African leaders failed the continent as they could not match their desires with

actions. The much needed collaborative effort between intellectuals and political office holders was missing and the continent is at the receiving end. Despite an increasing number of technocrats, experts of African origin in different field of study, the continent is still spending fortune on transfer of technology. It is against this background that this paper takes a look at the challenges of development in Africa specifically in the light of African languages. In other words, can development be engineered in Africa with the “scientification” of African languages? By scientification I mean a process of domesticating scientific concepts by African languages.

### **Development as a Concept**

Development as a concept is both complex and ambiguous. *The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (Webster, 2013:350) defines development as the gradual evolution or completion; the result of such an evolution or completion. Development is also defined as the series of changes by which an individual, plant or animal passes from a lower to a higher state of being or from an embryonic condition to maturity<sup>1</sup>. This definition confirms the multidimensional approach to the concept of development. This view is corroborated by Walter Rodney in his book *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* as he observes “development in human society as a many sided process” (Rodney, 1972:1).

Actually, for many decades, there was a widespread view to reduce the concept of development to economic considerations alone. As such, many theories of development were first and foremost theories of economic development, growth and transformation of human societies. This approach was basically the major concern of many African countries considered as developing countries. Theories of development both from Africa and the Western world did not factor in some aspects such as cultural, political and religious among others. Development as a concept was defined solely on the basis of economic considerations thereby omitting some fundamental aspects of African life.

Surprisingly, this underemphasizing of the non-economic aspects of development was at the same time embodied in the majority of

strategies adopted by most of the international financial institutions in conjunction with African governments that fashioned strategies to develop Africa. The outcome of these theories and strategies are simply a failure noticeable in most third world countries. Given the above, it is clear that development is not a one sided process, rather it is all encompassing ranging from economic growth to increased welfare, human and technological development, poverty eradication and political independence. Others are education, capacity building and security among others. Therefore, development is not purely an economic phenomenon; rather it is a multidimensional process involving growth processes, sociopolitical systems and human capacity to freedom and choice of variables. In this respect, this paper focuses on the possibility of development through indigenous means, precisely indigenous languages by a mastery of scientific concepts necessary for developmental initiatives.

### **Africa and the Burden of History**

The scramble for Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century and the Berlin conference of 1885 were two critical events that shaped the history of the continent. With the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia, virtually all African soil was “owned” by the then European super powers. Colonialism and Imperialism justified the systematic plundering of African natural resources and many African countries lost their freedom to the European countries (Martinussen, 1977: 35). In the process, African values, cultures and civilizations, were distorted; Africans became acculturated and lost their integrity. As a result, many African values and traditions were replaced by the colonial masters’ norms and values, including the languages of communication. Olusegun Oladipo in *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy* says:

we belong to nations oppressed in the past by foreign domination and ravaged in the present by indigenous misgovernment. And our cultures have been distorted through long standing foreign blandishments importunities and outright impositions. (Oladipo, 1995: 12)

Even after independence in the 60s, the cultural and linguistic legacies of the colonial era are strongly rooted in the former colonies as they are transmitted from generation to generation. Indeed, willingly or unwillingly we are confronted with a *fait accompli* that gives us no room for choice of maneuvering. A concrete example is that this paper is written in English language and not in any African language.

The correlation between development and African languages is not a new idea. African scholars from independence to contemporary times thought of evolving a system in which many African countries will operate. Some advocated a bifocal system in which an indigenous language will work side by side with the “colonial master’s” foreign language; others advocated a *tabula rasa* of the old order and solicited a new system by which only the indigenous language will operate. Ultimately, these positions are not unconnected with the idea of the Africanist Ali Mazrui that:

No country has ascended a first rank technologically and economic power by excessive dependence on foreign languages. Japan rose to dazzling industrial heights by scientificating the Japanese language and making it the medium of its own industrialization... Can Africa ever take off technologically if it remains so overwhelmingly dependent on European languages for discourse on advance learning? Can Africa look to the future if it is not adequately sensitized to the cultural past? (Mazrui, 1993: 18).

Ali Mazrui’s idea in this quotation is self-explanatory as it raises the concern of many African scholars on the condition of the continent in the committee of continents. The state of development of Africa poses many unanswered questions. Interestingly, another African scholar and historian in his work *La natte des autres: pour un développement endogène en Afrique* writes:

the societal and economic crisis in Africa is fundamentally a cultural crisis. Cultures are meant to change thereby preparing changes in perceptions, concepts, values, as well as scientific and technical

progress which societies should own and integrate to the extent of becoming creators of these values. If our continent must progress, she must integrate the "Education time". (Ki Zerbo, 1992:116)

Joseph Ki-Zerbo's "education time" is the time of redefinition of the tenets of development in Africa. In the process, he notes, it is time for Africa to attempt an invention of models, concepts and strategies through linguistic tools as a way of partaking in the global scientific world.

### **The role of Indigenous Languages**

Language by definition is a medium of emotions or ideas by means of speech and hearing in the community of human beings. Some linguists extend this definition to include other living beings such as animals (apes etc.). In other words, besides human beings, animals also have their ways of expression. However, in a community of men, a language is very important to sustain the relationship among men. It is the means through which human culture is acquired, communicated, transmitted and shared.

Meanwhile, before further explanations, there is need to clarify the meaning of an indigenous language. There is mother tongue, community language, national language, inter-African language and international language. In this context, what is the focus of our attention is the indigenous language. By indigenous language, it is understood mother tongues, community languages, local languages or a geographical based language. Consequently, the language referred to, is limited to a given community. It is in this vein that Richard Schaefer sees language as the foundation of every culture<sup>7</sup>. Based on this definition, it goes without saying that language as a mean of communication is as important and vital to human socialization and existence just as blood is vital to the human body. Consequently, the role language plays in the development, progress of any human community is as important as the existence of the society itself. However, language just like the society itself is dynamic. In this regard, and for the sake of clarity, it will be proper to determine what an indigenous language is and its contribution to development.

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are not necessarily national languages and the reverse is also true. It is precisely in this regard, that the Nigerian language policy must be redirected towards improvement of indigenous languages and their proper utilization for the attainment of transformation goals. The potentialities of indigenous languages for domestication of knowledge are certain if properly channelled. If English, French and Portuguese as official languages of many African nations bring unity, indigenous languages in my view hold the key to accelerated development. Indigenous languages are seen as tools with which to facilitate positive transformation and advancement by creating not only wider acceptance of existing diversity but also of facilitating a greater number of social opportunities to speakers of minority languages. Accepting and appreciating the cultural and social value of indigenous tongues, and incorporating them more formally into political and educational sectors is a means by which individuals can effectively shape their own destiny. This view is equally expressed by Cheikh Anta Diop in *Nations, Nègres et Cultures* Tome II. *Présence Africaine*. He writes:

It is more efficient to develop an indigenous language than to learn a foreign language. Educating in an indigenous language saves one many years in the acquisition of knowledge. Many a times with a foreign language, words are covered in a way that the mind gets to the meaning of it with pain. (C. Anta Diop, 1979: 415)

The quest for development with indigenous languages is possible through two main aspects. First, a formulation of an educational policy on the use of indigenous languages in line with the UNESCO conference in Harare in 1997, Asmara in 2000 and secondly the domestication of sciences by indigenous languages. This second aspect is the focus of this paper and the responsibility of African scholars just as the first aspect is mainly political and administrative.

## **Empowering Indigenous languages**

The empowerment of indigenous languages is a very complex and difficult exercise. The reason is simply connected to the historical factor as earlier mentioned, of many African states with different languages and an imposed official language. Many African states are even at a crossroad on what to do with the numerous languages in conceiving a concrete roadmap for development. The process requires a specified language policy defining clearly the role of languages in national development. As such African scholars and policy makers should be willing to take up the challenge. Interestingly, Ayo Bamgbose in his work: "Education in Indigenous Languages: The West African Model of Language Education" (Bamgbose, 1983:17) identified three dimensions to be considered for a clear language policy. First is the agent dimension. For the Nigerian scholar, the agent could be individuals, civil society organisations, the government, regional and international organisations, etc. These agents are the actors of a defined policy reflecting various tribal, communal and national interests. This first dimension is critical as it touches language policies in human societies. The second dimension is the domain of intervention. It could be public, private, educational, administrative etc. The third dimension is the scope. In this regard, it can be national, regional or international.

However, these three dimensions can only lay the foundation of a language policy through which a framework is developed for a proper implementation at the national, regional or international levels. In this case study, the framework of implementation is the national level as we are concerned with indigenous languages and the role in national development. Interestingly, language policy for development in Africa brings to the fore different patterns among which we have three major ones. These patterns are clearly spelt out by Adegbija in his work "The Context of Language Planning in Africa" (Adegbija, 1994: 144). They are the amodal, the unimodal and the multimodal policy patterns. Adegbija is of the view that the amodal extols one foreign language and reduces other languages which are mostly indigenous languages to second class tools of communication. The practice is common in most French and Portuguese ex-colonies such as Mali, Senegal, Togo, Benin Republic, etc. For instance, the French assimilation policy favours this

pattern. The unimodal policy pattern is found in places like Tanzania with Swahili language and Somalia with Somali language. What is obtained in the unimodal policy is that an indigenous language is extolled over other languages, alongside the foreign language that dominates some sectors of national life (i.e. education). The third is the multimodal policy pattern in which a foreign language and one or more indigenous languages are favoured over other indigenous languages.

In Nigeria for instance, the multimodal pattern applies as the combination of English, Yoruba, and Hausa and Igbo languages take preeminence over other indigenous languages. Indeed other indigenous languages are relegated to a lower class. From this analysis an observation comes out. From the amodal to the multimodal through the unimodal, most African countries seem to be incapable of conceiving a pattern without a foreign language input. The most affected by this incapacity are the French former colonies completely under the yoke of the master's ideology. It is so obvious that most modern educational patterns in this part of Africa are thought, designed and implemented in the language alien to their culture.

Saddened by this fact, Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher from a former French colony (i.e. Benin Republic) decries the continuous exclusive usage of European languages as language of the sciences. The "Beninois" philosopher advocates "an alternative language policy that favours the dissemination of knowledge and its ownership by the people" (Hountondji, 1998:3). By people, in this context, Hountondji means African people who by way of the alternative policy will come to term with the developmental policy that promotes African languages and gives them a visibility that conforms to the modern trend of the scientific world. Paulin Hountondji's observation and advocacy for an alternative policy is not unconnected with the central role a language plays in the development of every group, people, tribe and community. Without language, there is no idea, thought, consciousness and information cardinal to the foundation of every culture. In this respect, The African Union made year 2006 the year of Africa's indigenous language. It was a year to bring to the fore the relevance of indigenous language to African consciousness and true development.



Interestingly, the quest for scientific development in Africa has been the subject matter of many African fora and colloquia meant to design a path of concrete development for the continent. The potentials of the indigenous language for the domestication of knowledge are well known even though the roles assigned to them are basically those of communication and interaction. The levels of abstract and scientific knowledge are not yet explored as many African states are still undecided on what orientation to give to indigenous languages. Meanwhile, experiences from other parts of the world such as Japan, Philippines, Egypt, Greece, Russia, Iran, China etc. have shown that indigenous languages are robust, adequately equipped for all rung, fields and levels of education including scientific knowledge. This is truer as the countries listed above are in their respective locations political and economic powers on their own. The recognition they earn in my view, derives from the capacity to make meaningful usage of their languages and transform their world.

### **Indigenous Languages and the Sciences**

The term science refers to its Latin origin *scientia* which means to know. The English Dictionary (NIWC Dictionary, 2013: 1127) defines science as knowledge of facts, phenomena, laws and proximate causes, gained and verified by exact observations. Indeed in association with technologies, science and scientific discoveries have changed the world and revolutionized man's orientation both in thinking and practice. However, it goes without saying that most of scientific claims that changed the fate of the world are from the western world because science speaks their language and they speak the language of the sciences. Other parts of the world are toeing the path in the same language disposition of the west even though some countries as earlier mentioned got their "scientific independence" through a conscious and steady usage of their language in the business of knowledge acquisition.

It is in this context that a rethink of Africa's participation becomes relevant. Hence, attempts by African indigenous languages to focus on all levels of education including scientific knowledge can be understood as a confirmation of what Léopold Sédar Senghor once affirmed of Négritude as a contribution to " *la civilisation de*

*l'universel*" meaning "the civilization of the universal" (Senghor, 1975:83). Indeed, this contribution starts from an adaptation of scientific concepts in various languages available in Africa. Perhaps, some critics may refute this idea on the ground that a consideration of many languages will be an obstacle to progress. The answer to this criticism is not farfetched as the efficacy of European sciences comes from their multi linguistic approach to sciences. Most European countries developed through a domestication of scientific concepts in their respective language. The same paradigm applies to Asian countries such as Japan, China etc. Concretely, what Africa needs in order to contribute to universal civilization is to be actors in global initiatives and not spectators by overwhelmingly adopting their languages as tools in the process of discourse and advance learning.

Adeyemi Ademowo (Ademowo, 2012:14) suggests the pragmatic-approximating process that in my view can serve as a serious enterprise in the "scientification" of indigenous languages. It is a process of painstakingly, thinking, discussing, explaining and approximating new words in translating scientific concepts and theories from foreign to indigenous African languages without any possibility of loss of meaning occasioned by cross cultural translation. According to Ademowo (Ibid., 2012:14), the process involves three stages namely, explanation stage, thinking stage and approximating stage. He goes further by explaining the stages. The first stage involves active dialogue, which entails explanations and discussions on the English meaning of scientific objects and theories. Actually, questions and clarifications take place at this stage. The second stage involves deep thinking, personal reflections on the explanations offered at the first stage. In the words of Ademowo, this stage will enable participating linguists and scientists who are not of African origin, to personally re-examine the concepts explained, objects described or process narrated. The third and final stage deals with the supply of approximates for the debated and considered scientific terms. Professionals involved in the process must be exhaustive enough in their practice, precise and consistent. Ademowo got a brilliant idea with his process and has the merit of conceiving a roadmap that lays the foundation of a possible scientific take-off in Africa. No doubt, the process is one adopted by

many countries that translated most scientific manuals in their respective languages for the purpose of advanced learning.

However, I find that Ademowo's process portends a danger which is to make professionals mere translators of science manuals. It is against this background that I suggest a modified pragmatic approximating process imbedded in indigenous educational system which in my understanding can be termed the "pluralistic pragmatic process". Pluralistic pragmatic process is a process through which an individual acquires from childhood to adulthood basic knowledge of his indigenous language both in spoken and written aspects. Through rigorous training, individuals will acquire a deep knowledge of their indigenous language with the capacity and ability to think in depth in them. Pluralistic pragmatic process is first and foremost pluralistic because it considers various African languages in their originality and specificity; then it is pragmatic as it is consistent with the culture and values of African languages. It is a process as it is unfolding and advancing, ever-evolving in time and space.

Obviously, more explanations need to be given on the functionality of this process as the challenge of development before Africans is enormous. The challenge is not a venture into a choice for reclusion and confinement into the language territorial ground or a renunciation of the recognition that foreign languages offer, rather the challenge is a responsible choice of self-realisation, fulfilment and freedom. Iran, China, Japan and Egypt as earlier mentioned are among others, concrete examples of the conceptual take-off into development. By conceptual take-off, we mean the potential of a people to develop concept in their indigenous language for development. However, this learning stage does not foreclose a possibility of training in other languages so as to widen the scope and facilitate interaction with the external world. What is at stake in Africa is the capacity of a people to adapt reality with their worldview and conceive ideas through their cultural values and standards.

As matter of fact, pluralistic pragmatic process is the capacity of an indigenous language to conceptualize and develop scientific concepts. Interestingly, the idea of scientific status of indigenous languages has

been debated in different forms by African scholars for several decades (Bello: 1987, Afolayan: 2006, Fayemi: 2013). The general consensus is that if other developed states were able to do it, Africa can also make it. Indeed, my submission and humble contribution aims at Africa's development through its languages. Consequently, pluralistic pragmatic process takes into consideration the pluralistic nature of Africa and its many languages. As such, if development should take place, the pluralistic nature of Africa should be considered. However, one may be tempted to ask: will this idea of development materialize considering the present structure of states in Africa that are mostly colonial amalgams?

The question is justified as there is an intrinsic link between language, the structure of states and development. Developed countries such as France, Russia, America, China and Japan among others experienced breakthrough with a unified language. On this note, language becomes the epicenter of development and if Africa must develop, language and by extension, ethnic nationalism must determine the structure of states. Obviously, there are challenges in the present structure of Africa, though not insurmountable considering the intellectual contributions of scholars across the continent. It is this line of thought that the pluralistic pragmatic process affirms that professionals based on their area(s) of expertise will be encouraged to develop theories and concepts in their respective languages. In this vein, the process through which a professional is given time, resources and motivated to develop concepts and theories in his indigenous language will be instrumental to development. Once there is a breakthrough, his achievement will be tested and taken to the public place for adequate visibility. The great Senegalese Afrocentric scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop in his work *African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974) redefined the place of Ancient Egypt in Africa and World history with scientific evidence. Unfortunately, the scientific breakthrough was done in French and not in his native Wolof language. Drawing insight from this experience and many others, I believe that with the pluralistic pragmatic process, an in depth research work in any indigenous language has the potential to become a scientific breakthrough. Indeed, its vulgarization and visibility will come naturally because of its relevance and importance to humanity.

## Conclusion

Thinking Africa's development is a lifelong experience that it involves the soul of serious minded Africans. Solutions will always be proffered to existing problems, but they are representation of the time and space to which they belong. It is in this context that I believe that the suggestion made in this paper on the possibility of African languages contributing to the scientific development of the continent is one of those in depth contributions to Africa's greatness. As an African, one has come to terms with the fact that knowledge alone frees man and raises him above the ordinary condition of existence which sciences provide.

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