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Language, education and identity in Africa

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0. Preliminaries

0.1 What is this study about?

There is a general consensus that Africa after independence has by and large not been able to meet the expectations its peoples had of it. In the literature, several reasons are given for this. A starting point for this book is the position taken by the late Africanist Jan Vansina who, in 1992, analysed that the key explanation lies with the lack of cultural autonomy in Africa. According to Vansina, this loss of cultural autonomy was caused by colonialism. However, he feels the situation will change for the better in future: Africa will find a new form or new forms of cultural autonomy. This book investigates that idea, looking more deeply at two aspects of it: an analysis of existing and evolving cultural identity in Africa and a look at the role in this of African languages, with a focus on higher education.

Some relationship between language, education and identity seems logical. In part at least, identity is experienced through language and transmitted through education. The Ghanaian sociologist Kwesi Prah develops an argument that in a sense is a mirror image of that of Vansina: where Vansina holds that new cultural traditions will be expressed through language, Prah argues that using African languages, especially in education, leads to culturally appropriate and broad-based development.

In order to explore the issues of language, education and identity, it is necessary to go back to the basics and to examine key questions that are usually left unanswered in the discourse on Africa. What is cultural identity? What is language? What is the role of education in connection to language and identity and what are the choices open to Africans?

In examining these questions, a recurrent theme in the book is the issue of African agency – the choices open to Africans. The study examines certain discourses on Africa in terms of whether they are empowering or disempowering. My conclusion is that there exists in fact a toxic cocktail of ideas that block or diminish African agency; this study seeks to suggest alternative approaches at least in the domains of language, education and identity that increase opportunities for African agency.

On cultural identity, the study uses the approach of cross-cultural psychology to present new data on actually existing cultural similarities and differences in Africa. It shows that, contrary to popular tropes about the continent, this diversity is considerable – but not endless. In some countries, new national cultural identities are emerging – in others not. There is no clear mapping of cultures onto languages. On

language, the book introduces a new distinction between ‘discerned’ and ‘designed’ languages. It argues that formal education always requires the use of a designed language, always different from that spoken at home. However, if education is to be culturally appropriate, economically relevant, to reach all and to work for the benefit of all, it is crucial to use a designed language that is as close as possible to what learners already know and speak. The book presents an innovative way for starting a discussion on which designed languages to choose and through a number of case studies shows how, at least in theory, rational choices are possible in Africa that would lead to immediate improvements: they would be more cost-efficient, better for learners, and would contribute more to building the cultural autonomy that is already developing. The book thus calls attention to the need for renewed attention to language policy and language planning in Africa. The book can be read as a plea for a new appreciation of the cultural richness of Africa as it is evolving and of the key role African languages and education can play in mobilizing African creativity and agency and in attaining new forms of African cultural autonomy.

0.2 How did this study come about?

Chapter 2.3 gives some information on my position as a researcher, but in order to understand a bit of my intellectual and political background it may be helpful to give some information on how this work came about.

My political education started when I was in secondary school, a secondary school in the safe but slightly anarchistic Dutch town of Bussum of the seventies. I was moved by the injustice taking place in the colonies that still existed at the time in Africa, especially in Angola and Mozambique. Later, my view was broadened, as I became aware of unfair trade relations in the world, as put on the agenda by the Dutch third-world solidarity movement of the time. During and after secondary school, I developed in addition a fascination for anything related to communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. Through a year as a youth exchange student² and through contacts afterwards, I gained many useful insights and skills, which I have continued to develop.

In my University years, my focus was on how people can organize themselves in order to gain increased control of their living conditions and of their environment, especially in the Netherlands. However, after

² See <http://www.afs.org>

my studies, my focus shifted back to Africa. My first job was with one of the larger anti-apartheid organisations that existed in the Netherlands at the time, the Holland Committee on Southern Africa. That period taught me many things, including:

- The importance of solidarity: it means supporting a movement without necessarily always agreeing with every choice made by that movement. Solidarity in this case meant that the liberation movement was seen as the primary actor – the choices of that movement were leading. In principle, a position of solidarity means that one does not attempt to make choices for or on behalf of others.
- The importance of education: one of my jobs was recruitment and preparation of Dutch teachers who went to Zimbabwe.
- The importance of thorough political analysis: never again did I hear or read analyses as clear as those of the South Africans that I got to know in the period of the anti-apartheid struggle.

My second and third³ jobs were for the international environmental movement. This also gave me the opportunity to live in Kenya for four years. A key difference between environment and development groups is that the environmental movement's primary orientation is towards influencing its *own* society: environmentalists want to improve the environment they themselves live in. By contrast, development organisations are primarily concerned with changing things *elsewhere*: change in the organisation's own society is at best a secondary thing for developmentalists. Internationally, within the environmental movement, there is again an attitude of solidarity based on a shared appreciation of how difficult struggles for change can be. This solidarity echoed my earlier experiences in the anti-apartheid movement and made me feel at home. I was greatly inspired by meeting some of the leading figures of the environmental movement, such as the late Nobel peace prize winner Wangari Maathai, of Kenya's Green Belt movement.⁴

My last job led me to do research into internet facilities of Universities and research institutions, primarily in Europe, but also in other parts of the world.⁵ There, I became aware of the huge differences that exist between Universities: their organisation, their functions, the facilities they offer.

All these experiences gave me the feeling that Africa was handicapped not only by its history, but also by current perceptions of the continent and the choices made based on those perceptions. I started to explore

³ See <http://www.foei.org>

⁴ See <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org>

⁵ See <https://compendium.geant.org>

that feeling, first in a series of blog posts⁶ and then later, when I had the opportunity to take early retirement, in the Research Master African Studies⁷ that is offered by the African Studies Centre of Leiden University in the Netherlands. This led to a number of new ideas and experiences and to encounters with Africans, for example at the ECAS Conferences of 2017 and 2019.⁸ These again also led to the establishment of the Edinburgh Circle on the Promotion of African Languages, which for me is an important forum for exchanging some of these ideas and for giving them a reality check.⁹ All of this led to a PhD project that gave me the opportunity to investigate my ideas in a more in-depth manner. Parts of the study have been or will also be published elsewhere; however, I have attempted to tell the 'whole story' here and thus hopefully make it more than the sum of its parts. The study was made possible in no small part by my supervisors and a number of others, mentioned in the acknowledgements.

⁶ Most of them still accessible or available through <https://africanations.wordpress.com/>

⁷ See <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/research-master-african-studies>

⁸ See <https://ecasconference.org/>

⁹ See <https://ecpal.home.blog/>