Language, education and identity in Africa

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1. Introduction

1.1 Africa's Absurdities – a look at Adichie's Americanah

Fortunately, Africa has given the world a number of great cultural and literary contributions. It has produced many world-renowned musicians, artists and writers. One of them is certainly Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and one of her world-acclaimed novels is her 2013 book, 'Americanah'.[1] In the novel, she tells both about life growing up in a small University town in Eastern Nigeria and about the challenges of moving to and living in the UK and the USA. I read the book in a Dutch translation, but in fact her work has been translated into many languages, including for example Lithuanian and Malayalam.[2] However, what struck me as absurd is that the book is not available in any of the major Nigerian languages – it has not even been published in Igbo, Adichie's mother tongue.

Why is this so? Fortunately, Adichie herself gives the answer:

> 'I'm not sure my writing in English is a choice. (…) Although I took Igbo until the end of secondary school (…), it was not at all the norm. Most of all, it was not enough. I write Igbo fairly well but a lot of my intellectual thinking cannot be expressed sufficiently in Igbo. Of course this would be different if I had been educated in both English and Igbo. Or if my learning of Igbo had an approach that was more wholistic.
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> The interesting thing, of course, is that if I did write in Igbo (…), many Igbo people would not be able to read it. Many educated Igbo people I know can barely read Igbo and they mostly write it atrociously.
>
> I think that what is more important in this discourse is not whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa.'[3]

But does this not mean that Adichie is estranged from her own culture? Again, she herself gives a clear answer:

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[1] A short review I did at the time is still at https://www.africaontheblog.org/book-review-amerikanah/ retrieved 19 February 2020.

[2] http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/adichie/cnaprim.html#translation retrieved 16 February 2020.

[3] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/01/i-am-proud-to-be-a-product-of-igbo-land-chimamanda-adichie/ retrieved 16 February 2020.

> 'Language is not just about communication it's about word feel. Some people argued that language is the only thing that makes a culture but I disagree. I think identity is much more complex, I think that culture is really a way of looking at the world and so there are Igbo people who do not speak the language but that does not necessarily make them any less Igbo.'

However:

> 'Language is the constructs of culture, the end of language marks the beginning of the end of culture. And this I think is giving value to who we are and to our culture (…) Having confidence in your culture does not mean you have to be ethnocentric or you feel your culture is better than others, what it means is that you are satisfied with what is yours. And so there will be no need to dehumanize others.'[4]

So according to Adichie, not being able to use one's own language sufficiently leads to a handicap, because it limits how certain feelings can be expressed. There is a relationship between language and culture, but it is not one-on-one: one can be culturally Igbo without necessarily speaking the Igbo language – however, if there would be no Igbo speakers left, that would be a threat to Igbo culture.

The example of Adichie's Americanah is only one out of many more that could be given and it is good to see that this is an absurdity, one that is peculiar to Africa. In Africa, intellectuals are educated in a language that is not their own. However, they are educated so well that they manage to appropriate this language so that it becomes their own – to the detriment of the language of their people, whose culture they still proudly share. This African absurdity, in a nutshell, brings together all the elements that this study wants to speak to: what is the status of African cultures today? What is the relationship with language and more in particular with language and education?

These are questions that may have answers that are different for every *individual* – but they may also have answers at the level of *societies.* It is this second level that is the focus of this study. In order to address the issues head-on, a few other elements need to be discussed first – that will be the topic of the following sections. Section 1.2 starts with a consideration of the word 'Africa' and what it entails; that allows me to define a basic starting point for the study, in solidarity with African thinkers such as Prah. Section 1.3 then provides a basic look at languages and at the criteria generally used for counting them. Section 1.4 briefly discusses higher education and its function in society.

[4] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/01/i-am-proud-to-be-a-product-of-igbo-land-chimamanda-adichie/ retrieved 16 February 2020.

Sections 1.5 and 1.6 look at identity: first in connection to the discourse on the nation state and then in connection to the internationalist discourse. Section 1.7 ends this introductory chapter with a plea for building a vision on cultural identity, language and education that explores possibilities for African agency.

1.2 Language, Education and Identity in Africa – starting points

Every word in the title of this study needs to be looked at in order to understand what we are talking about here and in what context these terms need to be seen. What do I mean by 'Africa'? What does 'Identity' mean? How about the terms 'language' and 'education'? These are all very broad terms, so it is proper to start to clarify how I want to use them and what more specifically I want to deal with in this work. Let's take it one by one…

First, the issue of 'Africa' and related to that, the issue of who is an 'African'. The name 'Africa' itself is not a recent invention, going back as it does to Roman times. Another name that has been suggested for the continent is Alkebu-Lan, which apparently is an ancient Arab term meaning 'land of the blacks'. Ali Mazrui (1993: 10) pointed out that Europe's gift to Africa was the gift of African identity. This is probably true – it is probable that in precolonial times, the Zulu already thought of themselves as Zulu, but certainly not as Africans. Of course as pointed out by Zeleza (2016: 17), the same holds true for everybody else – Europeans never thought of themselves as Europeans (many British still don't), nor did Asians or Americans. In that sense, then, the gift is not so much due to the charitable nature of Europeans but rather due to the centuries-old process of increased interaction between peoples of different parts of the world, a process in which Europeans played a prominent role, although they were by no means the only ones.

The issue of who is an 'African' has several answers.[5] One is to say that 'Africans' are people with a relatively high degree of skin pigmentation. I think that type of reasoning is infected by racist thought and must be rejected. Another is to say that 'Africans' are those who live or were born and raised on the African continent – including Arabs, but excluding African Americans. A third is to say that 'Africans' are those who regard themselves so – including African Americans but excluding Arabs. This latter position is the one taken by Prah (2014: 71). For me, as a European, I think it is not necessary to choose between these last

[5] For a discussion, see Adibe (2017).

two positions: since African unity is still a long way off in any way, shape or form, it will be up to Africans to settle this debate in the way that will eventually turn out to be the most appropriate. But what does that mean for identity in Africa and for African identity?

Mazrui wrote about 'identity' as a singular, but would it not be better to speak about 'identities' as plural? The example of Adichie shows that people have multiple identities – Adichie is a writer, a woman, an African, an Igbo and more - and all these are part of her identity. For the purposes of this study, I will limit myself to *cultural* identity or identities. In addition, my focus is at the level of cultural groups, not at the level of individual identification. This theme will be explored more in chapter three.

'Europe's gift to Africa', like so many of Europe's gifts, is not only a blessing, because in the European perception, the word 'Africa' comes with a host of preconceived ideas and peculiar conceptions that are not purely flattering – perhaps best summarized in the image of Africa as the 'dark continent' (see also Zeleza, 2006: 16). Africa and Africans have been portrayed as somehow less than human, as 'other', as 'savage', as generally inferior, threatening and not necessarily good, as open to being tamed and civilized.[6] The classic study on orientalism by Said (1978) can also be applied to Africa, as was shown in a grandiose manner by Mbembe (2001). This type of portrayal is by no means ancient history: Apartheid as an institutionalized system was dismantled only in 1990 but elements of the ideology that underpinned it did not suddenly disappear at the same time. Overcoming this heavy historical load and turning it around is no mean task. It has three starting points:

- A radical recognition of our common humanity and a rejection of any type of dehumanizing or othering discourse;
- A focus on African agency: on the rightful struggle of Africans to be in charge of their own destiny and to make their own choices;
- A look beyond Africa: consider Africa in its diversity as well as in its unity also in comparison and in relation to other continents.

These three starting points seem like truisms – they should go without saying. Why is it necessary to state them like this, at the start of the

[6] These mechanisms have been dissected in the field of postcolonial studies. For a good introductory text, see McLeod (2010). For an analysis of the type of discourse this has generated, see Pratt (1992). Another aspect is the way in which images of Africa are gendered – Africa as the emotional, mysterious, wild and threatening side of femininity, in need of salutary masculine moral and disciplinary intervention.

introduction? Unfortunately it is, because to this day, thinking about Africa is influenced by a number of influential approaches that are in contradiction to one or several of these starting points, as we shall see further on in this study.[7]

These European-based perceptions of Africa have of course been resisted and rejected in Africa and by Africans, who have sought to develop an alternative, decolonial vision of Africa. This has been done most clearly in the various strands of the Pan Africanist movement. But what is Pan Africanism, and what can Pan Africanist thinking contribute to thinking and research on identity, education and language?

Prah (2014: 1) gives a brief definition of Pan Africanism as a belief consisting of two parts: 1) 'that the future of Africa and Africans must lie in the hands of Africans' and 2) 'that only unity can rehabilitate Africans from the stunting legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism'. These are beautiful beliefs, but what is their practical meaning? There are a few elements that are relevant here. The first of these elements – the leading role of Africans and what this means for my position as a researcher – will be examined in chapter 2.3. Here, I will look at the idea of 'unity' as seen by Prah.

The issue of African 'unity' and of how to achieve it has itself and paradoxically been and still is one of the most divisive elements in the Pan Africanist movement. Unlike the issue of 'who is an African', this is an issue on which I do need to take a position. Broadly speaking, the division has been visible from before the days of the creation of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 and it can be characterized as the distinction between those who favoured a gradual approach to achieving unity, starting from the already-established nation states (e.g. Azikiwe) and those who favoured a quick evolution towards a 'United States of Africa' (e.g. Nkrumah) (see for example Prah 2014: 63/4).

The position I take here follows that of Prah (2014: 78), who takes a clear stand, one that at first sight might also seem paradoxical. For him, unity is necessary to allow for diversity and it has to be built gradually and bottom-up. Prah is critical of the current division of Africa into its various nation states – he sees a solution in a mosaic of arrangements that transcends current national boundaries: 'To build identities on the basis of neo-colonial states without recognising the primacy of deeper historical identities is tantamount to elevating falsehood to the status of truth.' Prah believes that 'tolerance and cultivated pluralism' are needed and indeed possible everywhere under normal circumstances. He calls (p 77) for decentralisation and a secular order: 'Decentralisation will

[7] See also for example Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020: 6): 'cognitive injustice is (…) a social injustice that cascades from the denial of other people's humanity'.

enable us to give better democratic expression to localism, ethnic diversities and popular empowerment at the local level. This will help keep ethnicism in check. Secularism will permit religious coexistence (…).' Prah is of course not alone in this opinion. Davidson (1992: 321) already felt that the nation-state should be dismantled in favour of more regional participatory frameworks. Wa Thiong'o (2004: 36) calls for 'a united Africa not as a union of African heads of state but as a union of the African peoples', borderless, but based on participatory forms of democracy.[8]

Prah is not a primordialist: 'The idea is not to give a new lease of life to cultural fossils and outdated practices which have no relevance for the present and the future, but rather to build on what people have and have had for ages, adding new values and ideas to foundations that are time-tested.' (p 80) This idea is echoed for example by Ayittey (2015). Englebert (2005), however, shows that even though there is *some* scope for a re-purposing of indigenous political structures, this should not be overestimated.

Prah is critical of the role of African states in the Pan Africanist movement. He feels the Pan African ideals should be 'driven by civil society' (p 95). He calls for a cultural movement that would help to combat self-hatred and would 'provide the pride and confidence necessary to forge ahead.' (p 97) This, in his view, should lead to 'democratic orders which are adapted to the peculiarities of African societies; constitutions which acknowledge diversity and provide scope for the coexistence of ethnic and cultural variation; decentralized systems which allow localities and constituencies the ability to create and run their own affairs.' (p 102) This is a view that is shared for example by Appiah (2012).

In this context, Wa Thiong'o points to the importance of language (p 33): 'The retrieval and use of African languages is of paramount importance.' Earlier on, Sow and Abdulaziz (1993: 551) already posited that African languages should 'perform or perish'. Prah agrees (p 78): 'Language is the most important feature of culture and it provides, as a historical record, better understanding of the peoples of Africa than the colonial experience.' Therefore, he sees developing the different African languages as necessary for the achievement of African unity. However, he also argues that the number of African languages (commonly put at over 2,000) is grossly overstated.

It is in this spirit, then, that this study has been written. Although restricted by the limits imposed by my background and intellectual capabilities, I choose to work within a broad framework that has been

[8] For a more recent but similar example, see Oloruntoba and Falola (2018: 29).

developed by African thinkers. I do not take a position on who is or is not an African. But I do want to stand in solidarity with Prah and others with him who see Pan Africanism as a way of building Africa on the basis of African cultures and languages and carried by civil society. African identities from this Pan Africanist perspective means a view of African identities as actually experienced and built by Africans – not as constructs that have been engineered by the various state-building and nation-building initiatives that have been imposed from above, often with very limited success.

Taking this position opens up a vast agenda of research and analysis and in this study I will only be able to do a fairly limited exploration of the most important issues regarding the two central elements pointed to by Prah, the element of group cultural identity and the element of language, especially as related to education. This is because languages are no longer only transmitted from generation to generation in the home. Education plays an increasing role: people acquire language skills not only through speaking, but also through reading, studying and via the media. The extent to which people are able to acquire and use language skills depends to an increasing extent on the education they will receive.

Before diving into that, however, some more introductory remarks about the separate elements of language, education and identity are in order to further clarify my position.

1.3 Languages: the importance of numbers

Almost all discussions of languages in Africa start with a reference to the Ethnologue, which currently lists Africa as having 2,140 living languages.[9] However, this is not the only source on the number of languages in Africa. Another database is the Glottolog, which has the aim to list all 'the world's languages, language families and dialects'.[10] They work closely with the Ethnologue and list the number of languages in Africa as around 1,845 (Hammarström 2016: 23). Maho (2004: 294) argues that the Ethnologue grossly overestimates the

[9] https://www.ethnologue.com/region/Africa, retrieved 10 July 2019.

[10] http://glottolog.org/about/about, accessed 22 June 2020. The Glottolog database is interested in discerning a high number of languages because it uses these distinctions for an attempt to show the historical evolution and the relative age of languages – their genealogical relations. This is also known as 'glottochronology'.

number of languages in Africa and thinks 1,500 would be a better estimate. Likewise, Djité (2008: 23) feels 'the multilingual picture of the continent is blown out of proportion'. The Encyclopaedia Britannica of 2001 lists 1055 linguistic groups (cited in Alesina et al, 2002: 159). Prah (2012) does not give a specific number, but feels the number of languages in Africa is even more grossly overstated. He quotes Lord Hailey who gave a number of 700 in 1938 (p 302) and also points out that in any case, 90% of Africans can be reached through their first, second or third language in not more than 39 languages. Maris (2010) has taken the Ethnologue's description of languages in the Netherlands as his starting point; on the basis of this, he estimates that the Ethnologue overstates the number of languages in the world by a factor two or three.

How is this possible? Is linguistics not a science that works with unambiguous, objective criteria, leaving no room for misunderstanding? Clearly, it is not. The Glottolog gives the commonly-used definition that in order for a language to be considered separate from all others, it should be '*not mutually intelligible* with any other language.'[11] This criterion, as shown by the different estimates given above, is open to different and subjective interpretations and has itself been criticized as ideological (Rajagopalan, 2010). Several attempts have been made to find tests and to establish criteria for deciding on mutual intelligibility, but no general model has emerged, as Gooskens (2013: 209) concludes in her methodological overview. Therefore, the decision on what to call a language is, in principle, not only a scientific but also a political decision. The Ethnologue is clear about this, listing two criteria in addition to the criterion of mutual intelligibility:

'• Where spoken intelligibility between language varieties is marginal, the existence of a common literature or of a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both speaker communities understand can be strong indicators that they should nevertheless be considered language varieties of the same individual language.
• Where there is enough intelligibility between varieties to enable communication, they can nevertheless be treated as different languages when they have long-standing distinctly named ethnolinguistic identities coupled with established standardization and literatures that are distinct.'[12]

This means that for example for English, it is possible to speak of one language, in spite of the numerous varieties of English (also known as

[11] https://glottolog.org/glottolog/glottologinformation, retrieved 22 June 2020.
[12] https://www.ethnologue.com/about/problem-language-identification, accessed 23 June 2020.

'World Englishes') that exist in the world, with partly very limited mutual intelligibility. In this context, McArthur (2003: 56) has introduced the term 'English Language complex'.

On the other hand, this type of criteria setting allows the Ethnologue to split Oromo,[13] a language of Ethiopia spoken by more than 37 million people and widely used in the media and in education, into four different languages. By its own admittance, the Ethnologue's criteria for keeping the various Englishes together as one language but splitting up Oromo into four are not purely linguistic. Makoni and Meinhof (2006) make the point, also made by several other authors, that what is and what is not called a language in Africa has been manipulated by the needs of missionaries and colonial administrators. Makoni (1998) illustrates this more in detail for Shona.

In line with the approach chosen by Heller and McElhinny (2017), it is important to ask the question what political functions are served by the different discourses on language numbers in Africa. Once the question is asked, it is not so difficult to find the answers. As Prah (2012: 303) has pointed out, the Ethnologue's owner, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), is a Protestant missionary organization committed to bringing the Gospel in all the 'tongues' of the world. Their desire to be complete in this may lead to overstating the number of languages.[14]

Given the political nature of these criteria, it would be possible to apply them in a different way, for example a way that is appropriate to a decolonial, Africa-centred way of analysing languages. This is precisely what has been attempted by Prah, the founder of CASAS, the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies based in Cape Town, South

[13] Oromo-speakers themselves call their language Afaan Oromo, but it is also known as Oromiffa. It is common that languages are known by various names and spellings. Just as the decision on what to call a language and what to call a dialect can be a controversial one, about which there is not always unanimity between linguists, so also the names of languages and their groupings into families and subfamilies can be contested. Many languages have a name in their own language and a different name in the languages of those they come in contact with. Sometimes, the name by which a language is known is considered to be pejorative by the language speakers themselves. I cannot claim any detailed knowledge of the languages discussed in this and the following chapters. The designations for the languages I use are mostly those used by the Ethnologue or by the ASJP database (see chapter 5.4). For language (sub-)families, I have relied on the classifications given by Glottolog. Use of these names and classifications implies no academic or political position on their appropriateness or accuracy.

[14] For a related, much more explicit approach, counting the number of 'unreached people groups', see the Joshua Project, https://joshuaproject.net

Africa (now part of the University of the Western Cape).[15] Part of its core mission is to work on the harmonization and standardization of African languages, based on their mutual intelligibility.[16] Their stated interest is to minimize the African language count.

It is important to note that this discussion is not a value-free academic debate: the way the number of languages is counted in Africa has real consequences in a number of ways. One is that the number of languages itself is often cited as a key reason why using African languages more in domains such as education would be impractical, if not impossible. Attah (1987) is a good example discussing this problem for Nigeria. Another is that statistics on language numbers are often taken as a proxy for statistics on ethnicity. There is a large body of literature that tries to explain Africa's uneven development record as a function of the ethnic fragmentation that is seen in many African countries – see, for example, Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2016). Obviously, the input data may have an influence on the outcomes. Thus, uncritically using these numbers may lead to distorted outcomes. Much of the work in this area, starting with that of Easterly and Levine (1997) uses the Soviet 'Atlas Narodov Mira' of 1964 as its basis. As Posner (2004) has pointed out, this Atlas is based on data from the colonial period. This leads to an explanation of Africa's relative under-performance that leaves little scope for African agency.

The position I take, then, is that the term 'language' is not politically neutral and needs to be problematized in an African context. However, this study does not pronounce itself on the number of languages that exists in Africa. Instead, it proposes a more sociological approach that will be elaborated in chapter 4.1.

1.4 The function of education

If the discussion on 'language' is in part also a political and ideological discussion, the same holds true more strongly for education. In order to understand the political functions of education, I make use of the productive theoretical framework that has been developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1979). These authors define education as a *field*, a system of social positions, structured internally in terms of power relations. Education helps to form the *cultural capital* of a country and

[15] https://www.uwc.ac.za/News/Pages/UWC-Gifted-Priceless-African-Gem-CASAS-Lifts-African-People-By-Lifting-African-Languages.aspx retrieved 10 July 2019

[16] http://www.casas.co.za/History.aspx retrieved 10 July 2019.

provides a specific *habitus*. Together, these terms help us understand the role of education in class (re-)production. Higher education can be conceptualized as a sorting machine that selects students according to an *implicit* social classification and reproduces the same students according to an *explicit* academic classification. This explicit academic classification in fact closely resembles the implicit social classification (Naidoo 2004, summarizing Bourdieu).

Bourdieu and Passeron help us understand that enrolment levels in tertiary education for a particular country give an indication of the social function of tertiary education in that country. This indication is largely independent of the quality of the education. In general: if only a low proportion of the population of a country has access to tertiary education, then that education will be key to reproducing such a country's elite. If, on the other hand, a very high proportion of the population of a country has access to tertiary education, then such education itself will not be the key mechanism for reproducing the elite.

Bourdieu and Passeron's theory leads to a second important element to look at when analysing education: this is the relation between the elite and the rest of the population. An indicator of this is the amount of selectivity in the educational process. This is about the difference in educational level between the elite and the rest of the population – in other words, about how 'steep' the educational pyramid is in a given country and at a given point in time. Highly productive societies in the global North depend on a highly-educated population. In other words, in these countries there is a broad intellectual top that is made possible by a broad base of people who also receive the best education that suits their capabilities.

So, Bourdieu and Passeron identify two elements that are relevant for analysing and understanding the social functions of education in a society: one element is which proportion of the population receives higher education; the other element is the relationship between that proportion and the proportion of people in education in general (the 'steepness' of the pyramid). For Africa, these two elements are tremendously important, although they are usually overlooked in the literature. This is also where there is a meritocratic or, one could say, demographic linkage between education as such and the medium of instruction (the language) used in education. For people at the top end of the intelligence scale, historical experience has shown that in a way, it does not matter what the language of instruction is. In Europe, elite education for a long time was in Latin or in other languages other than the mother tongue. In India, Sanskrit has been used as a medium of instruction for centuries. All over the Arab world, the classical Arabic used for instruction is very different from the spoken languages. And in

Africa, the use of colonial languages did not block the emergence of great intellectuals. For people closer to the lower end of the intelligence scale, the language of instruction may be of greater importance; this issue is examined in greater detail in chapter 4.

At independence, Africa inherited colonial systems of education aimed at recruiting only a small elite for employment in administration and business. Therefore, the issue of which language to use for higher education was not really pressing – there were more than enough intelligent Africans to fill the few places available in the colonial education systems. However, this meant that inequalities in society were reproduced and strengthened via the mechanism of knowledge of colonial languages. However, language abilities are not distributed equally over a population. It is to be expected that as education expands, the issue of the medium of instruction can become relevant, where it was not relevant before in colonial systems of education. This idea is examined more in detail in chapter 4.2.

However, colonial administrators did not only introduce their languages as medium of instruction because they felt it was convenient for them. It was always also part of a project to drastically reform, 'civilize' African societies in order to better suit the colonial project (see for example Lebeau and Ogunsanya, 2000). It is interesting to note, as Prah has done, that there is one group of Europeans to which to some extent this has also happened, namely to the Afrikaans-speaking community in British-administered South Africa. They fully understood what was going on at the time and fiercely resisted it. Prah (2010a: 141) quotes Boer leader Steyn who in 1913 quoted Tacitus who wrote some 2,000 years ago: 'The language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is the language of the slaves.' The function of education in reproducing the cultural capital of a society is therefore profoundly tied to medium of instruction issues. A discussion aimed at overcoming the problems and injustices introduced in colonial education therefore in one way or another also needs to take language of instruction issues into account.

The task colonialism set itself of 'civilizing' Africa was not a small project and it had considerable effects on African cultural identities, both intended and unintended.[17] In order to explore those issues a bit more they are discussed in the next sections, first within the context of the debate on the nation state and then within the context of the debate on internationalism.

[17] Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020: 5) cites Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in this context, who has used the image of a 'cultural bomb'.

1.5 Identity and the Nation state

The discussion of European versus African perceptions of the continent leads to the need to discuss another one of Africa's absurdities, the current setup of Africa's states, as inherited from colonial times. Can national cultural identities even exist within the framework of Africa's colonially-determined state borders? This is a debate that I cannot do justice to in the framework of this study, but it is important to take a look at some of the ideas doing the rounds, because they do influence the thinking on language, identity and culture in Africa to a considerable extent. To do that, I will use as an example the thinking advanced by Dutch author René Grotenhuis.[18]

Current Western thinking about states and nations has a history and it is good to have that history in mind. In 1830, formal colonization of Africa had barely started, through some French and Portuguese footholds and the Cape Colony. At that time, Europe was recovering from the Napoleonic wars. In Europe, monolingual nation states were still a marginal phenomenon: countries like Germany, Italy, Ireland, Poland or Norway did not exist yet. The continent was dominated by a number of large multinational empires and Kingdoms: the Austro-Hungarian, British, Ottoman and Russian empires being the most conspicuous, together with the French monarchy. In 1815, around the time that Moshoeshoe I struggled to form a Sotho state (covering an area much larger than the current state of Lesotho), what is now Germany consisted of a loose federation of 39 independent states. As a unified state, Germany was founded only in 1871. Its first leader was Bismarck, who played a key role in the later carving up of Africa. Italy came together a year earlier, in 1870, after several wars led among others by Garibaldi. Greece more or less came together only in 1919. In other words, the processes that went on in 19th century Africa are not altogether different from those that went on in Europe in the same period, even though the power relationships and the resulting patterns of domination and resistance were of course quite different. One term that is often used with reference to Africa is the term 'Balkanization', pejoratively referring to the large degree of ethnic diversity (and strife) that characterizes the Balkan area of South-Eastern Europe. It is good to realize that in the racist discourse rampant in Western Europe 150 years ago the peoples of the Balkan area were not considered to be much above Africans.

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[18] His book was chosen not so much because it is a foundational text on these issues, but because it provides a useful overview and serves as a backdrop for clarifying my own position.

The development of more or less monolingual nation states also led to or was spurred on by the forming of a number of new and influential ideas, notably ideas about how forming such nation states was a natural phenomenon (*primordialism*, see for example Shils, 1957). In its more extreme form, these led to fascist ideas of 'Blut und Boden',[19] the 'inalienable' ties between a person's cultural background and the nation he or she should identify with. The reaction was likewise influential, pointing out the *constructed* nature of nationalist sentiment (see for example Gellner, 1983 and Anderson, 1983). These are basically the two frameworks that have been developed in analysing nation state formation in Europe and that authors have endlessly attempted to use in providing suggestions for how states should be seen in Africa and for what should be done to improve them. Either Africans should attempt to form homogenous nation states, different from the current ones (the primordialist view) (for an African view on this, see Agugua, 2018: 118); or Africans should try to turn their states into viable entities ('nation building', the constructivist view) (for an African view, see Ugwuanyi, 2018) or Africans should not bother about statehood at all.

In my view, neither of these recipes does Africa sufficient justice. The model of the nation state is a social innovation that has been appropriated by people the world over and that offers advantages as well as disadvantages (in different combinations in different economic, social and historical settings). Africans will have to make use of this innovation in their own way and in doing so, adapt it to suit their own needs, needs that will not be the same everywhere on the continent and at all times.

Here, I will discuss the work of Grotenhuis (2016) and his ideas about and experiences with fragile states (not only in Africa). His main argument is that for fragile states, it is not enough to do state-building (a process of building a country's national institutions). It has to be accompanied by a process of nation-building (a process of building a sense of identification with and belonging to the country). In that sense, Grotenhuis reaches similar conclusions to those of Olowu and Chanie (2016: 12), who have examined the issue of state fragility using a number of case studies, mostly from Eastern and Southern Africa and who conclude that legitimacy is one of the key issues regarding state fragility. Because Grotenhuis gives the more comprehensive treatment of the two, I will concentrate on his line of reasoning.

Grotenhuis seeks to provide an answer to how the concepts of nation, nation-building, fragility and identity are related and are meaningful. He points to the idea that in modern nation states, **people** are supposed to

[19] These are the German words for blood and soil.

determine their own future (principle of self-determination), rather than rulers. For Grotenhuis: "The nation is about identity, who we are in the sense of 'self-identification'." (p 28). But how does this identification come about? Grotenhuis puts himself in the constructivist camp. He discusses whether or not it would make sense to redraw state maps, in order to provide a better match between peoples and states, but is against that. He mentions the 'risk of fragmentation', saying that it will not offer a real solution (p 39) and that homogeneity cannot be created because of the diversity that is everywhere nowadays.

Grotenhuis is ambivalent or, one could say, contradictory about nation-building. On the one hand, he is against redrawing borders. On the other, he holds that 'sovereignty of people is the founding principle of the nation – without this a nation has no existential legitimacy' (p 59). But who are the 'people'? For this, he turns to the concept of 'republican citizenship' (p 61), that implies both rights and responsibilities in relation to the state. He discusses the 'communitarian perspective' (p 62), which he sees as problematic. Instead, modern republican citizenship is built on a recognition of rights and obligations. It is this that gives the nation-state it legitimacy (p 70). Legitimacy 'is rooted in the affirmation of belonging by the people' (p 75). 'The challenge is to build states using domestic capacities, knowledge and traditions.' (p 79). This also needs trust (p 84). 'There is a pre-reflective sense of relationship that gives the confidence to ask a question or try to solve a problem: We understand each other by language but also by culture, values, accepted behavior.' (p 85)

Just letting this happen naturally could take generations and current fragile states cannot afford that, Grotenhuis argues. Therefore, a conscious effort at state-building needs to be accompanied by nation-building. The 'European road to nation-building, paved as it was by violence, is not a very feasible road for fragile states today' (p 90). 'homogeneity can no longer be a goal of the process, simply because it cannot be achieved. Nation-building has to be realized in a fundamentally diverse reality.' (p 91)

Grotenhuis examines what he calls the 'Scylla and Charybdis of nation-building' (p 101). The Scylla is that nation-building 'is laying the fundaments for exclusionary politics.' (p 102). The Charybdis is denying the idea of identity altogether, which in the eyes of Grotenhuis is wrong as well: 'It means claiming that in essence we are unique individuals and that identity is an individual not a collective issue. I believe that such a claim presents a serious misunderstanding of our social nature' (p 103). The solution he sees is what he calls 'moderate patriotism' (p 105). "Being connected to our specific 'imagined community' does not exclude the possibility of engaging with and caring for others outside

that community." He thinks a constructed, 'modern' national identity can co-exist along with sub-national cultural, ethnic or religious identities. Grotenhuis is against copying the European model of nation-building, even though 'research shows a relationship between (ethnic) homogeneity and economic progress' (p 111). Yet: 'The challenge for fragile states today is to foster a sense of belonging and togetherness that is strong enough to build a stable and secure society, but that avoids the goal of homogenization'. The idea of building identity is introduced through the concept of 'identification' (p 111). The problem becomes how to make 'Toeareg, Peul and Bambara into Malinese without the need to discard their ethnic or tribal identity' (p 114). In other words: 'The challenge in fragile states is to build an overarching national identity out of a range of minority identities.' (p 117) He seems to be against decentralization of the type favoured by Quebec: 'Accepting the substate nation as a viable option will only fuel the ambition of these nations to govern themselves.' (p 120) He repeats that fragmentation is a risk, rather than a solution (p 121). He then proceeds to provide an outline of a programme for nation-building, consisting of stressing the common elements and shared cultural features (p 157). 'There is one cultural component that merits specific attention: Language. It will be difficult to create a national sense of belonging without a common language.' (p 157). However, this can be solved because many people are polyglots (p 158). He also sees the possibility of a 'limited number of official national languages'. Globalization helps in his view: 'The nation-state does no longer need to load all the aspects of our identity with specific national content' (p 158/9). He feels a conscious and inclusive design process needs to build this and calls for national fora to do the job. (p 163).

In spite of this, he also points out that 'When legitimacy is the key problem, nation-building as a complementary process of state-building seems counter-productive and impossible.' (p 174). He reiterates that 'institution building is embedded in a cultural, social and spiritual understanding that they relate to' (p 185). He calls for further research into 'how people understand their national identity' (p 187).

In my view, Grotenhuis deserves to be commended for his recognition of identity issues and for his plea for accompanying state-building with nation-building. He correctly points out that a state that is not understood by its inhabitants will not have legitimacy and will therefore fail. However, the solution he proposes falls short of the mark for four reasons:

- An over-confidence in the power of social engineering.

Europe has always tried to re-engineer Africa and the world and Grotenhuis is part of this grand tradition (for another example, see

Yeros, 1999). He seems to feel that any fragile state can be morphed into a nation. Even for the ones that currently lack legitimacy in the eyes of the people, where nation-building is impossible, the only solution he sees is preparatory measures, awaiting the time which must surely come that people will come round to the view of the nation-builders. This is where Grotenhuis is trapped between his own Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, he sees the importance of community and rejects the image of people as completely atomized individuals. On the other hand, he believes that any combination of cultures and ethnicities can productively be brought together in a modern nation. The fallacy here is to assume that when something is 'constructed' there must also be a 'constructor', a distinct person or institution that does the constructing. Instead, there are social processes at work here that involve so many different actors that to assume a common, conscious construction project is a gross overstatement of what is actually possible (even if it were desirable).

- An inadequate understanding of culture.

Grotenhuis sees 'culture' as uniform and not allowing for diversity. He does not understand that a common cultural framework still allows for considerable diversity among individuals.[20] He therefore wrongly equates nations that are characterized by a common national culture with homogeneity. Wrongly equating cultural coherence with homogeneity logically but wrongly leads to the conclusion that because such homogeneity does not exist (anymore) it is fruitless to strive for it. He is unable to discuss the problem in the terms in which it deserves to be discussed, namely to what extent cultural diversity can still be managed within a single nation state.

- Scant attention to the problem of language.

Stating that because many people are polyglots the problem of a common language can be solved does not do sufficient justice to the issues at hand – this is discussed in greater detail in chapters four and five; I will not elaborate on it here.

- Acceptance of the status quo.

Even though Grotenhuis acknowledges that states are social constructs, have not always been around and probably will not always be around in their current form, he refuses to discuss any type of redrawing of state borders and refuses subnational decentralisation, saying this will only lead to fragmentation. In this, he differs from Olowu and Dele (2016: 14), who see decentralisation as one of the possible solutions.[21]

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[20] For a fuller treatment of this topic, see chapter 3.1.

[21] The issue of decentralisation itself points to a rich literature that is impossible to treat within the framework of this work. For a good introduction of the possibilities and difficulties, see for example Erk (2015).

This is a contradiction in his line of reasoning that Grotenhuis is unable to resolve. By sticking to the status quo, Grotenhuis also ignores the insights of people like Smith (2013), who have argued that decentralisation actually gives opportunities for creating citizenship and increases feelings of belonging and does not necessarily lead to secessionism.

All in all, Grotenhuis believes that national cultural identities can be constructed within the framework of Africa's colonially-determined state borders – but it remains little more than a statement of faith. He sees the problems, but does not manage to really tackle them. Before going into a more in-depth investigation of the issues, there is another element that also needs to be looked at – the influence of internationalist thinking, especially Marxist thinking on theories of the state in Africa.

1.6 Identity and Internationalism

From the start, Europe's supposedly civilizing mission in Africa has been contested – contested not only by Africans, but by Europeans as well. Karl Marx, in his *'Capital',* published in 1867, lambasted the capitalist powers for their 'undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder' in the colonies (quoted in Lamola, 2019: 56). Therefore, from an early period onwards, Africans who sought knowledge about Europe and its ways also encountered European ideas and ideologies resisting colonization and all that it entailed. In 1917, the Bolshevik revolution proved that it was possible to overthrow the established order and to build a new one. This greatly increased the appeal of Marxism-Leninism to oppressed peoples everywhere and those who stood in solidarity with them – including to Africans.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of Marxist thought for thinking about Africa and I do not want to underplay its contributions. However, Marxist thought systematically underplays the role of culture and of cultural differences. This is understandable when looking at the development of Marxist thought in the context of its period. The nineteenth century was the period in Europe were more-or-less homogeneous nation states were being formed: the countries of Germany and Italy both date back to the late nineteenth century. The Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires were on the retreat. Napoleon established a multicultural empire under French leadership, but was defeated, leading to France retreating more or less within its linguistic borders. These developments were ideologically supported by an increasingly nationally-oriented bourgeoisie that used nationalistic

ideologies and sentiments to muster support for the often violent conflicts that marked these developments. (Financially, the bourgeoisie was able to do this in part because of the revenues it obtained from the colonies.) Within this context, Marxism proposed an alternative way of looking at the world. It posited the basic similarity in interests of the dispossessed workers (the 'proletariat') in different countries and put forward class struggle as the way ahead. The socialist revolution would lead to a new system, to a common, equal culture of socialism, sharing the wealth of the earth among all that inhabited it.

The Marxist prediction is yet to become reality. The collapse of the multinational states of Yugoslavia and Russia led to a resurgence of nationalism, even in former socialist countries. Differences between countries are not only based on linguistic differences, but also on differences in mentality (see chapter three). Hofstede (1980) and others after him have shown that cultural differences are persistent over time and relevant for explaining a host of social phenomena.

In the Marxist view, 'culture' is at best a thing of the past, consisting of folkloric remnants from a precapitalistic past. The unifying effects of capitalism would lead to all workers being equal in their impoverishment ('V*erelendung*') and, after the socialist revolution, their equality in the ideal world of socialism. At worst, 'culture' is an instrument in the hands of the capitalist class, used to divide workers and to enlist their support for wars that were fought in the interest of capitalism and imperialism.

These views can all still be seen in current thinking about Africa – denying, downplaying, deprecating or incriminating cultural identities is common. However, as Ake (1993) points out: 'we tend to forget that even though ethnicity might be constructed it is also a living presence, an important part of what many Africans are.'

One example of the Marxist type of analysis is Walter Rodney (1972). His 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' is still a standard text on Africa's history and a must-read for all progressive thinkers on Africa (see also Hirji, 2017). Rodney's work offers insightful analysis in clear language and debunks many myths on African (under)development. However, he employs a strict Marxist schematic, according to which societies progress from the communalist system via the feudal system to the capitalist and then the socialist system. That means that to him, the development to capitalism is progress: it is a necessary stepping stone before socialism. Nationalism, in Rodney's approach, is a phase in social development (p 242), occurring when large enough units are formed. As a true Marxist, he assumes that it will disappear under socialism.

The intellectual difficulties that this presents can be illustrated by Neocosmos (1995). Neocosmos, himself a Marxist, discusses and criticizes the 'invention of tradition' discourse that has been put forward by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984). In looking at the history of struggle in Southern Africa, he is forced to admit that "not all 'ethnic' movements are in and of themselves anti-democratic" (p 43). He explains this by saying that due to the undemocratic and oppressive nature of colonial regimes, progressives were forced, almost against their will, to mobilize along ethnic lines. However, as soon as democracy appears, Neocosmos contends, progressives will abandon ethnicity and organize in accordance with their true class interests. The possibility that people might at the same time decide to organize within frameworks bounded by common cultural identities *and* be progressive is not one that a traditional Marxist can admit to.

A more recent example of how a Marxist approach interprets ethnicity is seen in Van Binsbergen (2017). He analyses the emergence of an Nkoya ethnic feeling in Zambia as a form of 'false consciousness': in the Marxist scheme of things, ethnic feeling detracts from the unification that must necessarily come with capitalist and socialist development and therefore goes against the 'class interests' of the oppressed – hence the term 'false consciousness'. Using this type of reasoning, Marxist thinkers (both African and from elsewhere) have consistently dismissed group cultural identities as perceived by Africans themselves as backwards, constructed, artificial and in short, 'false'.

Lamola (2019), discussing Mbembe's 'On the Postcolony', points out how Marxism helps to explain the dehumanization of Africans from an economic point of view – its usefulness in terms of organizing economic exploitation, where Mbembe analyzes the discourse at an ideological level. However, Lamola does not move beyond this – the way forward he sees is not one in which different cultural groups regain their autonomy, but again an ideal democratic society, in which all differences magically disappear in favour of a homogenized common humanity.

So, what have we seen? One the one hand, different strands of thought, either Marxist or other, all downplay the importance of cultural and linguistic differences in Africa and therefore deny and disempower African identities. On the other hand, they over-estimate the possibilities of social engineering, continuing Europe's tradition of assuming that Africa could and should be re-shaped, 'civilized'. One line of reasoning follows the pattern of Grotenhuis: because linguistic and cultural identities are 'constructed' anyway and since the pattern

followed in Europe was in some way wrong or outdated or not applicable, Africa can freely take a new path towards credible national identities that fit neatly within the boundaries drawn for it during the time of colonialism. The only thing that is needed is the right approach towards 'nation-building'. Alternatively, the reasoning is that Africa, like the rest of the world, is well on its way towards socialism and under socialism, nation states as we know them will become a thing of the past anyway and cultural differences will be eroded, until only the nice folkloric dances and handicrafts of the past are left over.
These influential ideas have a great effect on what has been written about Africa. How is this being done?

1.7 Identity and culture: my perspective

Culture, ethnicity and language are important issues for Africa that can hardly be avoided. Yet, these are also large and contentious problem spaces. This means that it is difficult even to get a reasonable overview of current thinking, let alone to take a position. Therefore, many scientists would rather avoid it. Instead, they fall into either one of the two traps described by Mamdani (1996: 11): 'abstract universalism and intimate particularism turn out to be two sides of the same coin: both see in the specificity of experience nothing but its idiosyncrasy.'
Thus, for example, it is common in anthropological literature that authors take issue with the compromised points of view developed by their predecessors and take issue with the image of Africa as a patchwork of a large number of 'tribes', each with their own territory, culture and language. However, it should be realized that if the analysis stops here, it ends up doing in a different way what it criticizes in others: it defines Africans by what they are ***not.*** It is this definition of Africans by what they are not that authors such as Fanon[22] and Mbembe (2001: 9) have developed an allergic reaction to. Unfortunately, this is what happens: the intellectual analysis stops at this point, giving way to one of two myths that are both logical consequences of defining Africans by what they are not. These are the pre-scientific 'Africa as a country' and 'Tower of Babel' myths, two contradictory myths that exclude one another, yet happily exist side by side in the discourse about Africa (Prah 2008: 71). (Indeed, myths in other domains often contain contradictory and seemingly incompatible elements as well – that is part of what makes them so fascinating.)

[22] See Gordon (2010) for a discussion of Fanon's approach to knowledge in this context.

Why is this logical? The starting point, as we have seen, is defining Africans by what they are **not**: for example, they are not like the images created by earlier anthropologists and are not like Europeans. But then what *are* they? That is a very big question for Western science, which normally does not deal with questions like this. Thus, the answer to the question is typically not given; instead, one may see that a small area is identified and studied and described in great depth, using for example the 'thick description' approach pioneered by Geertz (1973). In itself this can be fine, but not if done in isolation. So if the answer about African identities is not given, what general image of Africans remains? Two avenues are open to the speculative pre-scientific Northern mind: either that of all Africans as a relatively homogeneous group of 'others' (the 'Africa as a country' myth)[23] or that of Africans as an infinitely atomized and fragmented group of 'others' (the 'Tower of Babel' myth). Both myths or tropes, then, are a consequence of a line of reasoning that starts and ends by defining Africans as what they are not. Both essentially paint a picture of Africa as static and unchanging, are defining Africans as 'other' and are therefore essentially disempowering.[24] Both, also, obscure an appreciation and understanding of the different African cultural identities that form part of the full spectrum of human cultural identities. But of course, even in spite of the self-imposed blindfold of Northern science, people in Africa are attached to and do claim their cultural identities and this cannot all be dismissed as 'false consciousness' (Doornbos and Van Binsbergen 2017:71). Africans who celebrate their cultural identities are rewarded for this by being portrayed as eternal trouble makers: ethnicist, essentialist, tribalist, identitarian – all words that are symptomatic not of the backward nature of Africans, but rather of the backward nature of dominant Western scientific discourse.

What is needed therefore is a vision of what Africans *are* like or what they are becoming, in their unity and in their diversity, in their

[23] See also the insightful analysis by Mbembe (2002: 630), who criticizes both the 'nativist' idea of African nationalism and Marxist-inspired 'Afro-radicalism' as sharing the same mode of knowledge production or 'episteme': '[B]oth consist of superstitions that function to persuade us that nothing is happening in Africa because history (…) has already happened'.

[24] The discourse on empowerment and disempowerment is outside of the scope of this study. However, I understand these terms in the sense as originally defined by feminist thinkers and movements at the end of the 1980s. In that sense, the term 'empowerment' challenges existing power relationships in society, whereas disempowerment takes away the possibility to raise such challenges. For an overview of the origins and evolution of the term, see Calvès (2009).

dynamism and in relation to other humans on the planet. This study represents an attempt at mapping out a vision, using approaches that have been used elsewhere as well. It starts with a look at the area of group cultural identity. In order to find a way of looking at the continent in such a way, I have not used an anthropological method. Instead, I make use of the approach of cross-cultural psychology (chapter three), an approach that relies on survey material from different countries. In chapters four and five, I look at language and language in education issues, again making use of data analysis methods.[25] Chapter six then tries to combine the theoretical framework developed in the earlier chapters and to apply it in five case studies, looking at as many countries. This approach may seem distant and in a way it is, although it is taken in a spirit of solidarity, as outlined in chapter 2.3. It allows me to think about language, education and cultural identity in a way that tries as much as possible to start from African self-representations and that explores possibilities for African agency.

[25] In the literature, this would be characterized as an *etic* approach, one that looks at the subject from outside. This would be opposed to an *emic* approach, that tries to describe subjects from within. Both approaches have their inherent difficulties, advantages and disadvantages – discussing them falls largely outside the scope of this study; for a good discussion, see for example Peterson and Pike, 2002.