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Language, education and identity in Africa

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2. Research questions and research methods

2.1 From starting points to research questions

In chapter 1.2 I based my position on Prah, arguing in favour of a view of African identities as actually experienced and built by Africans. But that is still a very abstract statement – how does it lead to research questions and, just as important, why does it even matter to develop such a view? In order to get a bit closer to answering those questions, I need the thinking of the renowned Belgian/American scholar on Africa Jan Vansina.

In 1992 Vansina published a little-noticed but key article, entitled 'A Past for the Future?' He started his article with words that are still relevant today, almost 30 years later (p 8):

'Watchers of international statistics of development know that the evolution of the countries of tropical Africa north of the Limpopo and south of the Sahara including Ethiopia and Sudan differs from what is happening elsewhere in the world. (...) there is no other block of countries in the world that is in as bad a shape.'

In fact, Vansina's article is not the only one that starts this way – many authors over the past decades have wondered why Africa seems to be underperforming and have offered several types of (partial) explanations. Vansina offers an explanation that is crucial to this study (p 9):

'[T]he uniqueness of Africa south of the Sahara and its difficult situation today flows from problems with its basic cultural traditions.(...) there is no longer a single cultural tradition to which all the people within each country or larger region subscribe. This means that even the basic criteria for perceiving reality are not commonly held by all (...) This situation is the fruit of a cultural history unique and specific to the region as a whole.'

What makes Africa unique in Vansina's eyes is not the content of its cultural traditions by themselves. Rather, it is the way these traditions were destroyed in the colonial period (p 16):

'By 1920, the conquest had cost the lives of perhaps half the population of East and Central Africa and had ruptured the continuity of the old traditions in the whole region by breaking their capacity for self-determination. The old social order was totally destroyed by 1920 and replaced by a new social order based on European views.'

So, in the Americas and in Australia, the indigenous populations were basically decimated and a settler population took over. In Asia, existing cultural traditions were largely left intact. It is only in Africa that a significant population was kept, but their cultural traditions were destroyed. The word 'destruction' here suggests that nothing was left, but that is perhaps too strong.¹ However, a dichotomy was created between the colonially-educated elites and the masses that did not exist before. Vansina (p 18) calls the colonial period an interlude in history, 'but one that left the population of each territory in great cultural disarray between a popular tradition that was still being formed and a European tradition instilled into a small elite. From today's point of view it could be argued that either there should not have been a colonial period at all or that it did not last long enough.' In Vansina's view, the relatively weak performance of Africa is due to 'the congruence of a minority tradition with a despotic ruling group which denies the self-determination of the majority tradition that is the rootcause, even though the congruence be imperfect. This situation prevails in Africa south of the Sahara. It does not in any large block of countries elsewhere in the world' (p 22).

However, Vansina holds that this situation is by definition unstable and unsustainable. In his prediction: (p 22/3)

'There will emerge two neoaffrican traditions built in part on the common Christian or Muslim cultures and in part on the legacy of precolonial traditions. These neoaffrican traditions will be carried by African languages. They will not be monolithic.² Variants of popular culture will reflect urban and rural ways of life as well as of different social strata all within the common neoaffrican tradition. But the creation of a stable common majority tradition, like all such major cultural phenomena may take a long time, perhaps two generations still, and its emergence will not end the cultural dichotomy by itself. (...) In the end the rulers themselves can no longer avoid being drawn into the orbit of the majority. The baneful dichotomy between western influences and the majority tradition can then be expected to end through the absorption of portions of the western tradition, despite its

¹ Willerslev and Meinert (2016) provide an insightful account of the (temporary) consequences of a complete breakdown of the social order during famine, for the Ik people of Northern Uganda.

² Two traditions that are not monolithic – the imprecision of this language suggests that Vansina himself was not too sure about the number of traditions that will emerge and how they will be subdivided. In this study, I will not take a position on this but stick to the main idea, namely that new cultural traditions will be formed.

continual reinforcement from outside of the region. And then Africa south of the Sahara could finally flourish (...)'

Where Prah's general views are abstract, Vansina adds a layer of historicity and gives a clear justification why studying cultural traditions in Africa as they are emerging is important: it is only once neoafrikan traditions have evolved that Africa will be able to flourish. This is a slow process, one that takes generations – but perhaps it could be influenced with sound policies, based on an appreciation of what is happening.

There is much in Vansina's sweeping statements that could be explored further. One thing to note is that he speaks of 'emergence', alluding to the fact that this is a long-term societal process involving many actors. He does not use the language of 'construction' or 'building' employed by Grotenhuis and many other authors. For the purpose of this study, two aspects are of key importance: one related to cultural traditions, the other one related to language.

Vansina wrote his prediction almost 30 years ago – that means that we are now almost one generation later. In his prediction, we still have to wait for another generation until the formation of 'a stable common majority tradition' is complete. If that is to happen, however, the process of forming such a tradition should already be on its way and it should be possible to see a glimmer of where things are going. But how can this be researched?

2.2 Research Questions

Bekker (2001: 3) has asserted 'that there is no current elegant theory on the construction and elaboration of ethnic identities which may be applied across countries, cultures and continents'. The traditional way of discussing cultural differences in Africa is by looking at different ethnolinguistic groups, however problematic distinctions along ethnolinguistic lines may be. If Vansina is right, then cultural differences at the ethnolinguistic group level must be losing their significance and new cultural patterns must start to emerge. It is my assumption that it is possible to see something of these processes by using the approach of cross-cultural psychology, an approach that analyses cultural differences by looking at differences at the level of countries or larger groups. My first question is:

- How can we describe current large-scale cultural differences and similarities in Africa, using the methods and terminology of cross-cultural psychology?

This question will be explored in chapter three of this study.

A key element in Vansina's prediction is that African languages will be the carriers of these neoaffrican traditions he hopes to see emerge. Culture is transmitted in large part through language. Language and culture are both transmitted in the home, but also in important social institutions, such as education. This in fact ties in directly with the work of Prah, who wrote as far back as 1991 (p 61): 'If African languages are developed, to carry modern science and technology, transformation of the African earth would be rapidly advanced.' This is echoed in the assessment by Djité (2008: 2), who asserts that the 'education systems, the health systems, governance and hence the economy are all crippled, and in no small measure, because of lack of genuine communication.' Like Vansina, Prah wants to see Africa flourish. However, he sees the increased use of African languages as a precondition for such a development and specifically points to the need to develop them for use in science and technology. For this to happen the first step would be to use African languages as medium of instruction up to tertiary level. This is currently not the case and this then becomes the second central question that I want to investigate. It translates into two specific research questions:

- Why are African languages currently not being used more in higher education as medium of instruction?
- What possibilities are there for rational language-in-education policies in Africa?

I am not the first one to ask these questions: they were asked in similar terms by Djité (2008: xiii).³ Here, they will be explored in chapters four and five. Chapter six tries, to the extent possible, to bring the two strands together, through five case studies of as many countries.

It is clear that these two elements, the culture element and the language element are related and will have a mutual influence on one another. This will be further examined in the last chapter of the work.

³ Djité asks: '[W]hy should Africa continue to use European languages as the sole media of instruction and administration?' and: 'How can African languages be used to improve outcomes in (...) education (...)?'

Before getting to the meat, though, first a reflection on my own position and perspective as a European researcher is in order.

2.3 Research methods and my position as a researcher

When discussing issues of language and culture it is important to clarify one's personal starting point as well. This is partly a matter of upbringing, gender, experience and age that is inescapable.⁴ However, I do believe that it is possible to 'work around' these givens and to consciously choose a position.

In my view, science is not a value-free thought experiment. Scientists should be aware of the role they play in societal debate. The role I want to play is one in solidarity with those who are resisting oppression and are trying to build an Africa based on authenticity, based on the interests of the peoples of Africa and not based on narrow self-interest. I want to seek alliances with those Africans that seek the same path. In spite of these big words, I want to do that in a way that is modest and conscious of the pitfalls. For pitfalls there are: in the 'good old days' of colonialism and apartheid, things used to be easy, in a way. It was easy for a well-meaning European to choose sides against colonialism and apartheid. But today, these choices are not so easy and obvious any more. Yet, in the literature as well as in person, I have found a number of Africans I can choose sides with and it is partly through their guidance that I have been able to develop some of the thoughts outlined in this work. Two of the starting points that I mentioned in chapter 1.2 are worth repeating, because they are related to the position I have chosen:

- 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.

In addition, I will try within my limitations to be conscious of how a gender perspective may be relevant to elements of my research.

⁴ Dutchman, originally Roman Catholic, experience mostly in progressive NGO settings, 60+ - these are terms that together serve to pigeonhole me fairly tightly for those who are familiar with the Dutch context and I give them here for the sake of completeness – but as said, I think their relevance is limited because they do not fully determine the positions I take.

For the research methodology, this means that I will try not to take on a role as 'mediator' or 'interpreter' and therefore not to speak on behalf of or for Africa or Africans. I will take positions and present opinions, some of them strong, but they are my own interpretation and do not pretend to present an 'African' point of view, even though I do think that my work can be seen as being inspired by a Pan Africanist perspective as outlined in section 1.2. I will restrict myself to using data that are based in a way that is as direct and unmediated as possible on African self-representations. The data I use are not 'mine': they are out in the public domain and can be used by anybody. My research methods should be transparent and repeatable. In addition, I will only use research methods that can and have been applied equally well in other regions than Africa alone. In doing that, I want to avoid an otherizing gaze, also at the methodological level. My interest is in documenting long-term trends and showing Africa in its dynamism and diversity. In that sense, my use of data sets fits in with the long-term approach chosen for example by Dietz and Akinyoade (2018). Language, education and identity are all very wide fields of inquiry and in the framework of this study it will be impossible to go very deep into all of them. Therefore, the research in all three areas should be regarded as attempts to deliver a 'proof of concept', hopefully inspiring others more competent in every one of those areas to do further work. Since part of this study is about language, a short reflection on the language I want to use may be appropriate as well. Parts of this study makes use of statistical techniques and engages with specialist linguistic literature. There, I need to use terms from those fields that may not be familiar to readers with different backgrounds. However, my pledge is to attempt to use language that is plain and that will be understandable for any educated reader. Some scientists seem to glorify in using language that is as elaborate and as difficult to understand for the uninitiated as possible.⁵ This may be a useful strategy in certain academic circles but it is not how I want to write.

⁵ Just to show off, a reference here to Syrotinski (2007) seems appropriate. For the masochistic reader: this is a completely impenetrable text that discusses, among others, the work of Mbembe.