Multilingualism and multiculturalism: why Africa is different

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Chapter 4
Multilingualism and Multiculturalism:
Why Africa Is Different

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines specifics of African contexts relevant for teaching in multilingual and multicultural environments. It starts with basics, pointing to a toxic cocktail of ideas that may have value in the North, but is counterproductive in Africa. Thus, it examines ideas of 'language' as applied to Africa proposing to distinguish between discerned and designed languages. If participation in education increases a transition to using a limited number of designed languages as medium of instruction will become necessary and possible. This will overcome the current diglossic situation dominated by former colonial languages. On culture, the chapter proposes a non-essentialist definition. Recent research shows that the old 'tribal' categories have lost their meaning in many (though not all) parts of Africa. An appreciation is needed of the new cultural traditions that are emerging on the continent. Understanding Africa's specificity will lead to a new research agenda and to new ideas on what teaching and learning in Africa's multilingual and multicultural environments mean.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in a multicultural and multilingual context is likely to be different, depending on different contexts. Most research and most publications in this area are written by and for an audience that is familiar mostly with Northern contexts and applicable to teaching in such a context. Thus, in many cases, a situation is taken as a frame of reference whereby speakers of a previously underprivileged language seek to emancipate themselves and gain the same privileges as speakers of the more privileged language (such as the French speakers in Quebec in Canada, who seek the same rights enjoyed by the English-speaking majority). A different Northern perspective could be a situation in which the arrival of new

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immigrants poses challenges to an educational system that was previously geared only to speakers of the dominant language, such as in countries of Western Europe. In these cases, the challenge is to ensure that all cultures are respected, and that people get equal treatment. What these contexts have in common is that in the dominant system, the cultural and linguistic rights of the speakers of the dominant language are guaranteed. The problem is one of extending similar rights to minority groups that currently do not have such rights or whose rights are currently restricted. Academic research and discourse focus on how this can be done.

For Africa, the context is a radically different one and this should lead to a different starting point for research and debate. This is where this chapter hopes to make a contribution. A key feature of African contexts is the *diglossic* situation that prevails in much of the continent: a former colonial language that is not indigenous to the country and is usually not spoken as mother tongue or L1 by many people in the country is nevertheless used as the medium of instruction in education and dominates in administration and other domains. This means that in most African countries, speakers of large (sometimes majority) languages do not have the rights that are afforded speakers of majority languages elsewhere in the world. This is a basic injustice, as pointed out for example by Skuttnab-Kangas (2013).

The same is true, in a different and more obscure way, for the area of culture. In most countries outside of Africa, cultural differences are clearly marked; usually, they are congruent with linguistic differences. In Africa, that is not the case: the old, precolonial markers of difference no longer apply or apply only partially, but there is no clarity on what has come in its stead. Authors such as Ake (1993) and Vansina (1992) have pointed to this problematic area. On the ground, it is clear that most Africans peacefully negotiate their existence in multilingual and multicultural environments. Yet we also see much-publicized cases of ethnically inspired strife and violence. In many cases, the existence of such different cultural identities is downplayed or outright denied, in favour of a more 'modern' but sometimes artificial 'national' identity.

This means that both in cultural and linguistic terms, the indigenous peoples of Africa (basically: almost all Africans) lack the rights that indigenous peoples elsewhere are hoping to get and that have been recognized by various United Nations (UN) agencies. However, this state of affairs, one that is very damaging for Africa, is hidden from sight by what I would call a *toxic cocktail of ideas* on language and culture in Africa that work together to paint a picture of the continent as static and unchanging and that severely limit African agency. A decolonial approach to teaching and learning in a multilingual and multicultural context that is specific to Africa has to start by deconstructing this cocktail: we need to re-examine the basic terms and concepts we use in light of African realities and build a new analysis based on such a re-examination. To do that, the following sections look at the area of language and multilingualism, then at the area of culture and multiculturalism. A last concluding section examines the links between the two as applied to Africa and attempts a brief discussion of the consequences of this re-examination for teaching and learning.

LANGUAGE AND MULTILINGUALISM

None of the concepts used in this area can be applied uncritically when it comes to Africa. So before talking about multilingualism, we first need to look at the concept of 'language' and how it is applied in Africa. To find a way forward out of the dominant disempowering discourse, we propose to make use of the distinction between *discerned* and *designed* languages.

Language

One of the first things one inevitably comes across when reading about Africa and language is the statement that there are over 2,000 living languages currently spoken on the continent. The most often quoted source for this is the *Ethnologue*.[1] This statement works in a very disempowering way: it easily leads to the conclusion that using African languages in formal domains would be impractical, costly and divisive and is therefore best avoided, for now, and for the future. This helps to paint a picture of Africa as static and treats the current setup as a given that does not need to be questioned and cannot be changed. Before we can decide on the truth or otherwise of this statement, we first have to consider what it really means: what is a 'language'? Most people would think of the criterion of mutual intelligibility: if two (hypothetical) monolingual people who do not know one another meet and understand one another, each speaking in his or her own way, they must be speaking the same language. However, by its own admittance, the criteria used by the *Ethnologue* for deciding what is and what is not a language are based on more than mutual intelligibility: they are 'not based on linguistic criteria alone'.[2] On the one hand, language varieties that have little mutual intelligibility can be considered as part of one language if there is 'a common literature' or a 'common ethnolinguistic identity'. This helps to keep a language such as English, with its many varieties, as one language. On the other hand, even though there may be mutual intelligibility, language varieties may still be treated as different languages 'when they have long-standing distinctly named ethnolinguistic identities. This last criterion is often used for treating similar speech forms as different languages in Africa. Authors such as Prah (2012) have therefore argued that the number of languages in Africa is grossly overstated.

However, there is a different point that needs to be made here and that is about the relationship between spoken languages and languages used in formal domains. Basically, what is often overlooked is that there is no country on earth in which all languages spoken in that country are also used at all levels of education. Van Pinxteren (2021a), inspired by earlier work by Kloss (1967), has proposed to make a distinction between languages as *designed* and languages as *discerned*. Designed (or intellectualised) languages are those languages that have been formalized to some degree and can be used in all formal domains, such as for higher education, law, administration, etc. Both in principle and in practice, designed languages serve speakers of a number of related discerned languages. These do not all have to be mutually intelligible! Van Pinxteren (p 88) gives the example of Germany, which is considered to have speakers of a number of different German-like languages.[3] Yet, speakers of all these different languages use a common, designed form of German (*Hochdeutsch*) for higher education and in other formal domains. It is logical to think that such a strategy, common all over the world, could also work in Africa for speakers of related African languages. In principle, this points to a way out of the problem of 'too many' African languages. In principle – but why is it then not happening in practice? This is a question also asked for example by Wolff (2016).

A partial answer can be found in the current literature, such as the overview given by Clayton (1998). He points on the one hand to existing explanations such as the world system (ex-colonial powers trying to hang on to their spheres of influence) and the need for nation-building (a colonial language being the least divisive option). However, these explanations again paint Africa in a static light and offer little opportunity for agency. Therefore, Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021) have put forward a different explanation. This explanation is linked to participation in education in general. Overall, their argument is that as long as education is aimed at only a small minority of the population, any language of convenience can be used. However, because language abilities are not distributed equally over a population,

using a language that is very different from what speakers already know will become more and more problematic as participation in education increases. As Chebanne and Van Pinxteren show in greater detail, the consequence of this is that elsewhere in the world (including in North Africa) a switch has been made from difficult to learn languages to easy to learn languages.

In order to understand this a bit better, it may be helpful to point out that there are two ways of looking at ease and difficulty of language learning: one can look at it from an absolute and from a relative perspective. An absolute perspective would be that of the proverbial visitor from Mars, who might want to try to find out what the common features are of human language and which languages are outliers in that respect. In practical terms, however, a relative perspective will always be more useful. This means that one looks at which languages are easy or difficult to learn for speakers of which mother tongue. Thus, Mandarin Chinese might be difficult to learn for speakers of English, but easy to learn for speakers of Cantonese (and vice versa). In the literature about language learning, the relevance of this difference between languages that are easy to learn (and to teach) and difficult is almost always omitted. In fact, the implicit assumption seems to be that it is irrelevant. An example is Heugh (2011, p. 120), who asserts: 'First language speakers of Afrikaans in South Africa have become highly proficient in English, i.e., they achieve high levels of bilingual proficiency, where English is taught only as a subject for one lesson per day.' She holds this up as an example for Africa, the implicit assumption being that native speakers of, for example, Xhosa, given the same expert teaching, would reach the same results. This ignores the fact that Afrikaans and English are two closely related languages, whereas Xhosa and English are not.

Another problem is caused by the implicit assumption that *anybody* can learn (or be taught) a foreign language to the desired level of proficiency and that the cost involved (in terms of teacher and student effort required) is on average the same for all. We know that this is not the case: in advanced countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), some people become perfectly literate, whereas others remain functional illiterates for their entire lives. This may be partly due to unequal learning opportunities, but there is no denying that it is also due in part to unequal abilities: some people learn a different language much more easily than others. Participation levels in higher education in Africa are still far below those of the global North, in spite of impressive advances over the past few decades. In 2020, the Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education was less than 9.5 per cent for Sub-Saharan Africa. For the group of High-income countries, that same ratio was above 79 per cent.[4] Thus, it is likely that the minority of children now able to attend tertiary education in Africa can indeed do this in a foreign language – because they are among those who are linguistically more gifted (or have received better primary education because their parents can afford to pay for it). However, if in future participation levels were to rise to approach those of the High-income countries, this would change.

A shift from using a difficult to learn to an easy to learn language is always a switch towards a *designed* language, never a switch to all the languages *discerned* in a country. In Morocco, for example, the most commonly spoken form of Arabic is known as Darija. This is discerned by the Ethnologue as a separate language. However, the change in language use that is going on in Morocco is not from French to Darija; it is, rather, a shift towards Modern Standard Arabic. This is a designed language (developed in the Arab world over a century ago) that Moroccans have to learn in school; however, for people who already speak Darija, Modern Standard Arabic is much easier to learn than learning French. Conversely: the Moroccan educational system can work much more efficiently if it uses Modern Standard Arabic, compared to using French as the medium of instruction. Such a shift from a difficult to learn designed language to an easy to learn designed language is happening in North Africa, where the Gross Enrol-

ment Ratio in tertiary education is now approaching 37 per cent, but not in other parts of the continent. Instead, 'multilingual' education is being advocated. But what does multilingualism mean?

Multilingualism

Multilingualism refers to two different phenomena (that may occur at the same time): the phenomenon that some people may be able to speak more than one language and the phenomenon that in a given country, more than one language is spoken. We will briefly examine each in turn.

It is sometimes argued that Africa is different from for example Europe, or North America, because most Africans are multilingual: they easily speak five, six or even more languages. The implicit argument here is that due to this multilingualism, using a former colonial language in education is not such a huge problem in Africa. This type of discourse hides several issues from view.

Firstly, 'Africa is not a country'. There may certainly be areas in Africa where multilingualism is common. On the other hand, there are also areas where most people are monolingual. The Ethnologue, for example, estimates that nearly 15 million people are monolingual Amharic speakers.[5] The same, by the way, is true for Europe: in a country like Slovenia, many people speak several Slovenian dialects, in addition to Croat, English, German and Italian. In neighbouring Italy, most people speak only Italian. Generalizations, such as that 'all' Africans are multilingual hide more than they show.

Secondly, the distinction between 'speaking' and 'not speaking' hides different levels of proficiency from view; it is too simple. Almost anybody can learn to say a few words or sentences in a foreign language. However, using that language for academic writing, for example, takes far greater knowledge and skill. Therefore, saying that a person 'speaks' many languages is fairly meaningless unless we also identify the level of proficiency in the different languages.

Thirdly, there is the issue of intergenerational transmission of language. Do parents teach their children all the languages they themselves 'speak'? Or do they privilege one language, for example, because they think doing that will improve their children's chances in life? This last phenomenon is widespread in many countries in Africa, where parents who themselves are multilingual in fact raise their children as native speakers of the former colonial language, in an attempt to give them an optimal starting position. Multilingualism in those cases is actually an early predictor of intergenerational language loss.

Lastly, one should take into account which languages are privileged and for what purpose. Thus, the language spoken for use in the market may be different from the one used in church and that may again be different from the language used for example in hospital or in court. These languages may require different partial speech repertoires and (again) different levels of proficiency.

Then, there is the phenomenon that in many countries in Africa, many different languages are spoken. Here, again, the situation is not the same in all countries. In some, such as the Republic of Congo, all indigenous languages belong to the same family and are related. In such countries, it would potentially be possible to choose one or a few of these languages as national *designed* language(s), easy to learn for all. In some others, such as Botswana, one language is clearly majoritarian and other languages are spoken only by small minority groups. Again, this majoritarian language could in principle be developed as a *designed* language, but special measures would have to be taken to safeguard the position of speakers of minoritarian languages, such as the speakers of Khoisan languages in Botswana (Chebanne and Van Pinxteren, 2021). In again other countries, indigenous languages belong to different languages families. For those countries, using indigenous languages in formal domains would have to mean using more than one language, such as in other multilingual countries (Canada, India, Switzerland…) However,

this is not a suggestion one can come across in the literature on Africa, because it is erroneously seen as being 'divisive' and working against 'nation building'. Instead, one can read wild ideas about using a constructed language (such as 'Wazobia' for Nigeria) or of using for example Swahili, also for speakers for whom learning Swahili would be just as difficult as learning English.

One fashionable idea that is much touted is about what is called 'translanguaging'. This is also a concept that has several definitions and uses, but in an African context, it usually means making use of different languages in classroom settings, for example, both Pidgin English and British English, or Xhosa alongside English. What these strategies have in common is that they instrumentalize a language with lower status in order to learn a language with higher status – thus in fact maintaining and even reinforcing the existing diglossic language systems in Africa. There is no doubt that in certain situations, this can work: it is better for students than rigidly prescribing the use of the high-status language. However, there are several problems with this strategy as well. One: translanguaging will not work everywhere: it requires a situation where all or most in class have some familiarity with the same set of languages or language repertoires. Two: if the language of formal examination remains the high-status language, then as mentioned above, the net result will be a strengthening of these high-status languages and therefore a weakening of the others. Three: as mentioned above, this then leads to the question of what this will mean for intergenerational language transmission: it is likely that translanguaging will only contribute to intergenerational language loss.

This brief discussion shows how the basic situation in many countries in Africa is characterized by a privileged position for the former colonial language, which is used as a *designed* language for use in most if not all formal domains, including in education. In fact, education is a key domain here because it is through education that knowledge of the former colonial language is to a large extent obtained. This situation can be sustained for two reasons: one is that the participation in education in Africa is very much lower than in other parts of the world. Therefore, if participation in education were to increase to reach levels comparable to those of the global North, this would have to change. The other reason is that there is a complex ideology at work here, a cocktail of ideas that work together to prevent an appreciation of the true state of multilingualism in Africa and that paint the current situation of the continent as static and unchanging.

CULTURE AND MULTICULTURALISM

If possible, the area of culture is even more difficult to deal with when it comes to Africa than the area of language, because of a host of widespread conceptual unclarities, mystifications and misunderstandings. In the following, I will try to unpack some of these and at least conceptually make a start with pointing a possible way out of the quagmire.

Culture

'Culture' as a concept is and has been interpreted in many different ways and is indeed left undefined in many articles that purport to deal with aspects of culture. It is often used interchangeably with 'ethnicity', likewise often left undefined. This does not make things easier. As far back as 1993, Claude Ake already referred to the concept of ethnicity as 'phenomenally problematic' in Africa, where there is a

'tendency to problematize the people and their culture, an error that continues to push Africa deeper into confusion.' So – if we want to avoid this error, what do we need?

First, we need a definition that does not ossify culture as something static and unchanging. Definitions that define culture as something our forefathers did will not do. The definition needs to recognize that African cultures exist and that this is a positive thing. Definitions that show culture as something anachronistic or as divisive and dangerous do not help. The problems this can lead to can be seen for example in Ngeutsa et al. (2021). They have developed a scale that measures the degree to which individuals adhere to what they call 'traditional cultural beliefs and practices', which they say are common to the whole of Cameroon. But they acknowledge that "some people from Africa may have become 'culturally Westernised' to the extent that they may adhere very little to African cultural beliefs and practices." Could it be, however, that Cameroonian culture (or Cameroonian cultures) have changed from their traditional form, but that 'modern' Cameroonians have still not become culturally 'Western' (whatever that may be)? By equating culture to adherence to traditional practices and beliefs, Ngeutsa et al., unfortunately, blind themselves to an understanding of any new cultural tradition that may be emerging in the country.

Therefore, we need to recognize African cultures as having a contemporary, dynamic existence, not confined to the past or the countryside. We need a way of looking at culture that is non-essentialist: on the one hand, it needs to recognize that individuals can and do see their cultural background in different and sometimes critical ways and wish to act as agents of change; on the other hand, it should not reduce the idea of culture to something limited to individuals, treating them as atomized and isolated from wider society. To cater to those requirements, I propose to see a **culture** as a **value system** that serves as a **common point of reference** to a people. This definition does not solve all problems – but it does offer some advantages over other approaches. Let us unpack this a bit more.

Culture as **value system** draws attention away from culture as a collection of artefacts. Thus, culture is more than the dances, masks, or, in the case of my own culture, the windmills and wooden shoes and other products of old. Culture is also not restricted to what is sometimes described as 'high culture': art, literature, music etcetera. Artistic expressions are cultural – but culture is not restricted to art. Culture is related to the values people have, usually transmitted from generation to generation. However, such an intergenerational transmission can also lead to change: the young interpret the world differently from the old. However, the way this change happens is different in different cultures. Thus, the Egyptians of today are culturally different from the Egyptians of half a century ago – but that does not mean that they have become Ethiopians, for example, if only because the Ethiopians have changed as well. This also means that statements of the type that people have 'lost' their culture are relatively meaningless. Cultures and societies change – but that does not mean that people become in some way without culture, due to them 'losing' or shedding it.

A value system as a **common point of reference** draws attention to the fact that individuals who may be brought up in a specific culture are not all controlled by that culture – they do not have to individually subscribe to the dominant values of the culture, as long as they share the knowledge about what these dominant values are.

In this vision, contrary to what is written in many papers on Africa, culture is a feature of human societies that should be seen as essentially positive: it is not a dangerous ploy to divide people (although of course cultural elements can be mobilized to construct and stress difference). It is also important that in this vision, cultures change, but cultural difference is here to stay. Utopian visions of the type that once we get world socialism, all workers will be the same and cultural differences will lose their meaning

(echoed in a way by visions of a world in which all Christians will be equal brothers and where before the Lord, differences will also disappear) have little relevance for the world today.

Once we accept this, however, the next question becomes how we can map and talk about such different value systems. This field of study is known as cross-cultural psychology, of which Geert Hofstede (2001) is probably the most well-known proponent. Cross-cultural psychology analyses and compares value systems in different societies by analysing the pattern of differences in (average) answers given by large numbers of respondents from different groups in different societies to value-related survey questions. Hofstede has organized these into different value-related dimensions of culture; he has developed scales ranging from zero to 100 and uses these to discuss cultural similarities and differences between countries. Perhaps the most well-known of these dimensions is the individualist versus collectivist dimension; typically, Europe and North America are seen as being on the individualist side, Africa on the collectivist side. Hofstede's value-related questions are still available as the Values Survey Module.[6] However, Hofstede-based surveys have not been implemented repeatedly and in a large number of countries. The largest and most well-known survey that has been able to do something similar is the World Values Survey, which has covered more than 100 countries and has been carried out recurrently since the early 1980s.[7] However, it has only limited coverage of Africa. In recent research, the Afrobarometer survey has been used to map cultural similarities and differences in Africa and within individual African countries (Van Pinxteren, 2020, 2021b). This research leads to some important conclusions:

- Whereas in Europe it is usual that cultural boundaries are also linguistic boundaries, this is much less common in Africa. On the one hand, some peoples that share a common or similar language may belong to different cultural areas; on the other hand, some peoples that speak different languages may belong to the same cultural area.
- In several cases, the old ethnolinguistic ('tribal') distinctions that were seen to exist in the colonial period seem to have lost much of their meaning today; in others, they remain relevant.
- In some countries, a new national cultural identity seems to be emerging; in other countries, this is not the case. There is no clear pattern across Africa; there are not even clear regional patterns.

These conclusions are relevant for policy research today. Thus, there is a good body of economic research that tries to explain the economic performance of African countries as a function of their ethnic fragmentation. These studies, such as the one by Michalopoulos and Papaiouannou (2016), base themselves on the map of 'ethnic homelands' of Africa that was produced by G.P. Murdock in 1959, as reproduced below. Even at the time, the value of this map may have been questionable, for example, because many of the ethnic designations at the time were seen through a colonial gaze and were therefore manipulated. In addition, in many areas in Africa populations, even at that time, were highly mixed from an ethnic point of view. Still, even today the Murdock map is used and overlaid on a map of today's borders, to show that most countries are home to multiple ethnic groups and that many ethnic groups are spread over different countries. It is only relevant to do this, of course, if the ethnic divisions of Murdock still correspond to relevant cultural divisions that persist to this day. However, if in large parts of Africa they have lost their meaning, to make way perhaps for a reconfigured cultural map of Africa, then the Murdock map will lose its relevance as a basis for this type of economic research dealing with today's Africa.

Yet: even though the tribal divisions as seen by Murdock may no longer be adequate in today's Africa (if ever they were), there is no denying that Africa is not one cultural whole and that cultural differences within Africa are as large as within other continents. That diversity also manifests itself at the level of

Figure 1. Map of African ethnic homelands as depicted by G.P. Murdock (1959). This image is taken from a tweet by Facts About Africa, @OnlyAfricaFacts, 12 November 2016.

many of today's African countries. What does that mean when discussing the challenges and opportunities of dealing with multiculturalism in Africa today?

Multiculturalism

At the time of independence, around 1960 for most African states, leaders decided to maintain the colonial borders – they may not have had much choice to do anything different either. These leaders were all Western-educated and deeply steeped in colonial thinking, even as they sought to overcome it. One of the characteristics of the colonial mission, as portrayed by the colonizers themselves, was the drive to 'civilize' Africa, by introducing it for example to Christianity and to a whole host of ideas and institutions that have been brought together under the umbrella term of 'modernity'. Underlying this was a deep belief that this was worth doing and that it was possible: a belief that Africa's social and cultural fabric could

be re-engineered. In this, the colonial enterprise was partially successful: as Vansina (1992) has argued, the precolonial larger cultural traditions that existed in Africa were all more or less destroyed by 1920. However, the enterprise of building something back in its place had less success. Again following the analysis of Vansina, what happened instead was that a dichotomy was created between a well-educated elite, oriented towards the West, and a leaderless and disoriented mass. In this situation, the newly independent countries of Africa sought to build new, 'modern' African nations and to build new national cultural identities. An example of this is the socialist experiment in Tanzania, masterminded by Julius Nyerere. It was centred on two main elements: a common language (Kiswahili) and a form of 'African socialism', captured in the 'Ujamaa' idea. The first of these elements was successful – Kiswahili remains the national and official language of Tanzania to this day. However, the idea of creating a new, Tanzanian, 'African socialist' cultural identity was a lot less successful. In the words of Blommaert (2014, p. 40): this underestimated the 'cultural resilience' of the 'common man'.

Recent research (Van Pinxteren, 2020) has shown that this process did not lead to the same results everywhere in Africa: in some countries, it had a measure of success, whereas in others it did not. Thus, Van Pinxteren's hierarchical cluster analysis of the similarity of ethnolinguistic groups shows that the fourteen ethnolinguistic groups analysed for Tanzania belong to five different cultural clusters. By contrast, out of the five groups analysed for Ghana, the four largest ethnolinguistic groups belong to the same cultural cluster. This means that in some countries (such as Ghana) a form of national identity might be forming, whereas in others (such as Tanzania) this might not be happening. More information about this would be useful, but it is hidden from sight by the fact that in many countries, unbiased research into cultural differences and similarities as they exist nowadays is impossible, due to a combination of the unclarity about the concept of culture in the first place and due to the taboo, that has been placed on fostering 'tribalism' and other forms of potential ethnic divisions.

This lack of clarity is not made any better by another factor, which on the whole, however, is positive: the fact that Africans often are much better at managing and navigating cultural differences than those Europeans or Americans that have grown up in monocultural environments. This is not necessarily the case for *all* Africans (or indeed for *all* Europeans) but nevertheless is good to point out. Even in Africa, there are some people who grow up in a monolingual and monocultural environment. However, many either grow up in rural areas where people of many different backgrounds live together or in urban environments where the same is the case. In the words of Prah (2014, p. 78) 'tolerance and cultivated pluralism' are the normal state of affairs in Africa. Tensions only become visible under exceptional circumstances, such as when an influx of cheap labour coincides with an economic downturn (as has happened in South Africa) or where ethnic strife is deliberately and irresponsibly instigated as part of election campaigning (as happened in Kenya in 2007). What this means is that research on cultural differences and similarities in Africa is seen as not urgent (because there is no problem) or counterproductive (because it may lead to problems) or restricted to a negative appreciation of culture as an instrument in mobilizing division, conflict and strife.

In the global North, in most countries, there is a dominant culture that has to deal with the changes brought about by increasing numbers of migrants from other countries. This poses two types of problems (neither of which are very new): the dominant culture needs to learn to adapt and open itself to influences from elsewhere and the migrants need to find their proper place in the new country through a combination that will consist partially of adaptation and partially of claiming cultural rights.

In Africa, in some places, these problems exist as well. However, Africa also has a set of problems unique to the continent. This includes first of all a knowledge problem: we do not know how 65 years

of colonial domination and 65 years of independence and nation-building have affected cultural differences and similarities in the different parts of Africa and for its many ethnolinguistic groups. The Murdock map of 1959 was probably far from accurate at the time it was published – it is certainly not adequate now – yet it is still being used as the basis for countless studies on the relationship between ethnicity and the economy in Africa. Over the years, there has also been a large push for decentralization on the continent, the hope being that devolving governance to lower levels will bring it 'closer to the people' – in other words, will align better with the different cultural areas in the continent (see for example Olowu and Wunsch, 2004). But if the knowledge about this is limited, then also the recipes given in this area will be flawed.

Africa also has a problem with how it perceives itself. The dichotomies between 'modern' and 'traditional', 'national' and 'tribal' or 'Westernized' versus 'African' are all equally inaccurate and disempowering. New African identities are clearly emerging. Vansina has predicted that little by little, in this process the dichotomy that was created in the colonial period will disappear. That is where the challenges of researching and teaching multiculturalism lie in Africa, calling for an agenda that is defined by Africans, rather than following the much more limited agendas that are relevant for the global North.

The argument in this section has been that an appreciation of current cultural differences and similarities in Africa is hampered first of all by the lack of a non-essentialist definition of culture. Prevalent definitions of culture see it as something anachronistic, divisive or dangerous. This means that discussions on Africa continue to base themselves on old ideas about pre-independence African ethnolinguistic groups that must have lost much of their meaning in some parts of Africa, though perhaps not in others.

Africa's preoccupation with 'nation building' and the dichotomies between 'modern' and 'traditional' are inaccurate and block sight of new African identities as actually emerging. More and different African-led research will be needed in order to understand these issues in a better and more positive light.

Having looked at multilingualism and multiculturalism as relevant for Africa each in turn, it is now time to bring the two strands together. For that, we need the next and concluding section.

CONCLUSION

Overcoming the 'Toxic Cocktail' in Teaching and Learning

So, what are the elements of the 'toxic cocktail of ideas' on language and culture in Africa that I claimed are damaging to the continent?

- There is the idea that Africa presents a near-hopeless and relatively static hotbed of linguistic diversity. Portraying Africa as hosting a myriad of different languages works in a disempowering way, blocking a discussion of using African languages in more domains. Potentially, there might be a solution to this problem, a solution that has been implemented in other continents, but not in Africa: this can be found by using the fact that standardized or intellectualized (or in my terms: *designed*) languages can in fact serve speakers of a number of related *discerned* languages.
- The idea that anybody can learn (or be taught) any other language and that anybody will be able to use that other language at the desired level of proficiency represents a gross and false oversimplification that is inadequate in African situations. This allows the continuation of a fictional

idea, namely that one day African educational systems will be able to give all children adequate education in what is essentially a foreign language, not related to their first language(s).

- I have pointed out how the new fashionable strategy of allowing children to use different languages in class ('translanguaging') is at best only a partial solution and at its worst a precursor to intergenerational language loss.

In a spirit of increasing the possibilities for African agency in this area, I have pointed out how an expansion of participation in education is likely to force countries in Africa to seek solutions in future that make use of a limited number of designed African languages.

- In the area of culture, Africa is hampered by prevalent visions of culture as something that is either old-fashioned or bad (or both). The lack of a non-essentialist definition of culture that is based on values peoples hold as common point of reference blocks an appreciation of the positive and dynamic nature of African cultures today.
- This also means that there is a lack of understanding of cultural differences and similarities as they exist in Africa today. Studies such as in the economic field continue to rely on the 1959 Murdock map of 'ethnic homelands' in pre-independence Africa. This map, if ever it was accurate at all, has certainly lost most of its relevance today.
- The mistaken post-independence stress on 'nation building' in much of Africa has also meant that a true appreciation of the possibilities and difficulties offered by Africa's multicultural and multilingual makeup have been ignored, have been under-researched and neglected, thus leaving the space wide open for populist manipulation of real or perceived differences.

However, also in the area of culture, change is on its way: in line with Vansina's predictions, societies will evolve in the direction of new African cultural identities. These will probably be based in part on increased use of designed African languages in educational and other domains. However, to bring about such an evolution, there is a great potential role for African social science, for which the full agenda is still to be defined. For teaching and learning, there are some immediate and some more long-term consequences of this line of thinking. The more immediate ones are related to the area of culture.

Firstly, it is important to realize that there are cultural differences within Africa, within African countries, and between Africa and the rest of the world. This means that not everything that works abroad can be translated or copied unquestioningly to a different cultural context. Thus, Tabulawa (2013) has explained the inappropriateness of Western-imposed models of learner-centred pedagogy for a country like Botswana by looking at cultural differences. A sensitivity to such differences and a critical approach to models coming from abroad would seem appropriate and would need to be fostered in teachers and with educational authorities.

Secondly, teaching 'African culture' should not be restricted to teaching about the ways of old. If culture is dynamic, if it is a frame of reference for the present day and not something that used to exist in precolonial days, then teaching culture needs to move away from restricting itself to 'how things used to be'. Descriptions of how things were in the past in Africa are often anyway unduly influenced by Western, biased accounts given by early visitors or anthropologists and should never be taken at face value. Care should be taken that teachings about 'African culture' do not teach about a past that has lost its relevance for the present and may either seem stale or, even worse, may serve to reinforce stereotypical images that stand in the way of a forward-looking cultural dynamism. Instead, attention should also be given to

contemporary forms of art, literature and music, rooted in the African continent but presented in new and innovative ways. In any case, it is clear that in many countries in Africa the old 'tribal' distinctions have lost their meaning. In its stead, we see the emergence of a new Africa and new African culture or cultures, in ways that are youthful, energetic and optimistic. They may yet provide an alternative to Western cultural models that are unlikely to be sustainable for the future.

In the area of language, ultimately, change has to come from policy and there is only limited scope for agency for individual teachers within the current language policy frameworks. Perhaps one issue is an attitudinal one. It is not difficult to find references in the literature on African education to statements about how education is failing, how standards are dropping, and how generally things are not in a good state. However, there is a counter story, that needs to be told as well. This would be a story that stresses the tremendous progress that has been made in the past decades in increasing the participation in education in Africa in many countries and at all levels. Teachers and learners have to struggle with inadequate resources and inefficient language policies that force them to use a foreign language that takes tremendous effort to master. In light of this, they are doing an admirable job and they deserve to be proud of what they are doing. Any short-term strategy that can help learners and teachers to make the best of these sub-optimal policies, such as code-switching and translanguaging should be used unashamedly.

Again, ultimately change has to come from policy. Teachers and learners can themselves be a force of change: they can start to point out that it is a fiction that African education systems will be able to expand to the levels of participation currently common in the global North whilst continuing to use a foreign medium of instruction. It is important to start demanding changes in this area and to ask for a long-term vision and commitment that can sustain such change.

Thus, in more ways than one, enlightened teaching in Africa's multilingual and multicultural contexts can potentially make invaluable contributions to the further development of the continent.

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ENDNOTES

1 https://www.ethnologue.com/region/Africa accessed 20 January 2022.

2 https://www.ethnologue.com/about/problem-language-identification#MacroLgsID accessed 20 January 2022.

3 This chapter follows the language designations as contained in the *Ethnologue* database. Locally in Germany, some of these languages as discerned by the *Ethnologue* might be considered different dialects of the same language instead.

4 http://data.uis.unesco.org/# accessed 3 March 2022.

[5] https://www-ethnologue-com./language/amh accessed 28 January 2022.
[6] https://geerthofstede.com/research-and-vsm/vsm-2013/
[7] https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp