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## Language, education and identity in Africa

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## **7. Language, Education and Identity revisited**

At the start of this study, I used the example of Adichie's novel 'Americanah' to point to a number of wider issues I wanted to speak to, regarding the status of African cultural identities today, the relationship with language and more in particular, the relationship between culture, language and education. In this concluding chapter, I revisit those issues, making use of the insights gained earlier. What did we learn? What remains unexplored? What is the way forward?

In order to do that, I will first summarize the main conclusions from the earlier chapters and discuss the limitations of my research. This will lead to a discussion of the research agenda that this work suggests. In the next section, I will situate the approach of this study within a broader context of empowering and disempowering views on Africa, including a critique of the toxic cocktail of ideas that currently puts a brake on the scope for African agency. The study ends with a concluding look at the issue of cultural autonomy.

### **7.1. Main conclusions – findings and limitations**

In chapter one, I explained my interest in 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. This means that I am interested in looking at culture. I aligned myself with the vision of Prah, who sees language as a central element of culture. I criticized the over-confidence in social engineering and its possibilities of 'nation-building' in Africa (or elsewhere). I took issue with the tendency by Marxists to downplay the importance of culture. I mentioned the tendency of scientists to fall into the trap of taking one of two pre-scientific myths as their starting point: the 'Africa as a country' and the 'Tower of Babel' myths, either describing Africa as a cultural whole or, on the other hand, as infinitely fragmented. I criticized both myths for being disempowering, obscuring an appreciation and understanding of the different African cultural identities that form part of the full spectrum of human cultural identities.

I then turned to Vansina, who predicted the emergence of neo-African traditions, carried by African languages. I again pointed to Prah, who has drawn attention to the central role of education in African

languages for African development. These insights combined led to my three main research questions, formulated in chapter two:

- How can we describe large-scale cultural differences and similarities in Africa?
- Why are African languages not being used more in higher education?
- What possibilities are there for rational language in education policies?

In terms of method, I restricted myself to using methods and approaches that have already been used in other continents as well and to using data that are in the public domain and based on African self-representations. My interest is in documenting long-term trends and showing Africa in its dynamism and diversity.

The starting point of my research on culture was the definition of a **culture as a value system that serves as common point of reference to a people**. This definition is at the group level – not at the individual level. It accepts that within any cultural whole, there is a large amount of diversity. The key element is that individuals who know or consider themselves to be part of a specific culture know its values, even though they may not themselves subscribe to them on a personal level.

I pointed out that just asking people how they define their culture is not a sophisticated or reliable way of getting to descriptions. I showed how in order to compare cultures and describe large-scale cultural differences and similarities, the approach of cross-cultural psychology offers a vocabulary that has been used in many parts of the world, though only sparingly in Africa. I positioned myself within that field, aligning myself broadly with the approach as initially developed by Hofstede and Minkov. This approach depends on the use of value surveys of comparable groups across a range of countries. That makes it difficult to implement. An important starting point is the World Values Survey (WVS), which has been held repeatedly in more than 90 countries worldwide. The WVS, though, has a number of weaknesses: it was developed within a framework that is slightly different from that of Hofstede and that I criticized as being too ideological. Furthermore, not all the questions of the Hofstede Values Survey Module (VSM) are included in the WVS and therefore it is difficult or even impossible to get information on all six of the Hofstede/Minkov dimensions from the WVS. For Africa, a problem is that only a small number of countries in Africa have been surveyed. Therefore, I turned to the Afrobarometer survey, which covers a much larger number of countries and is based on African self-representations. An added advantage of the Afrobarometer survey is that in principle, it allows for disaggregation of

data to the ethnolinguistic group level. Ethnolinguistic group distinctions in Africa are problematic, but they are currently the closest we have to identifying different cultural groups on the continent. The Afrobarometer survey was not specifically designed as a values survey and does not include many similar questions to the WVS or the VSM. Nevertheless, my assumption that values shine through in more or less any set of questions asked across a range of countries proved to be correct: I was able to show a close relationship between parts of the data on cultural differences and similarities as researched by Hofstede/Minkov/Beugelsdijk and data contained in the Afrobarometer survey. I did that using three lenses: *hierarchical cluster analysis*, *cultural dimension scores* and a *comparison of scores from Africa with scores from other continents*.

The hierarchical cluster analysis builds on an approach developed by Minkov and Hofstede (2012). They looked at WVS data at the level of in-country administrative regions and posited that if national culture is a meaningful concept, then data from such regions should cluster together nationally, rather than being spread randomly over many different clusters. They found that for the great majority of countries they used for their research, this was indeed the case. My approach was different from that of Minkov and Hofstede, in that it used Afrobarometer round 6 survey data and looked at ethnolinguistic groups, rather than at administrative regions. Working that way, I was able to identify data from 35 African countries, including 26 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and from there 187 individual ethnolinguistic groups.

The findings show that indeed, in many countries the groups do cluster together at the national level. This is especially so for countries where this would be expected, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Madagascar. For a country like Lesotho, the Afrobarometer survey has sufficient data from seven ethnolinguistic groups, who all cluster together. One can wonder what the meaning still is of these distinctions for a country like Lesotho. Ethnolinguistic groups also cluster together in a number of other countries, such as Niger. In other countries such as Ghana, most ethnolinguistic groups cluster together. However, there are other countries, such as Guinea, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Tanzania in which the groups do not cluster together neatly. My conclusion was that there is not one common pattern that applies across Africa. In general, approaches that map cultural differences onto linguistic differences, using linguistic differences as a proxy for cultural differences, are not reliable, at least not for the whole of Africa.

For the second lens, I attempted to arrive at individual dimension scores for ethnolinguistic groups and I was able to do that for four out

of the six Minkov/Hofstede dimensions: 'Fix vs Flex' (LTO), Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV) and Power Distance (PDI). Especially the Individualism versus Collectivism distinction is well-accepted in the literature and used in a variety of settings.

The findings broadly confirm the picture obtained through the hierarchical cluster analysis. In some countries such as Ghana, the largest ethnolinguistic groups show similarities, even though some of the smaller groups show different patterns. In Southern Africa, the picture emerges that for example the Sotho of Lesotho and the Tswana of Botswana are no longer culturally the same as their counterparts in South Africa; they score differently on 'Fix vs Flex' and on Indulgence versus Restraint, and less so on individualism. In South Africa, a new cultural tradition seems to be emerging, as predicted by Vansina. This is a shared new identity, even though 'black' South Africans speak several different discerned languages. On the other hand, in a country like Kenya, large differences remain between ethnolinguistic groups. Thus, the Luo of Kenya are closer to the Acholi and the Lango of Uganda (with which they share linguistic similarities) than to other ethnolinguistic groups in Kenya.

The third lens compares Sub-Saharan Africa with other continents. It shows that Africa's internal diversity is at least as high as the diversity that is found in other continents. On the other hand, it also confirms the common perception that on average, Africa is more collectivist and Europe more individualist.

Together, these three lenses provide 'proof of concept': using cross-cultural psychology, it is possible in principle to describe large-scale cultural differences and similarities in Africa and it leads to new insights into African identities today, that are different from what was handed down as insights from colonial times. This method can be used for charting the emergence of 'neo-African' traditions, as predicted by Vansina. The first signs of such a development are visible in the data.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that there are limitations to this research, due to imperfections in the underlying data. Even though the overall picture seems reliable, the data on individual ethnolinguistic groups should be interpreted with some caution. Adapting the Afrobarometer survey to take better account of cultural values and to ensure better representativity at the ethnolinguistic group level could go a long way towards addressing these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> This is also signalled by a keen observer such as Dowden (2015: 619). He ends his book on what is perhaps an overly optimistic note: 'The wound that parted Africa from its soul is healing. Its schizophrenia is ending. Africa is finding itself.'

Vansina has pointed to the key role of languages in developing new traditions, and Prah stresses the crucial role of (higher) education in this context. That is therefore the focus of chapter four. The use of African languages in higher education remains very limited and it seems reasonable to suspect that this in itself hinders the development of the neo-African traditions predicted by Vansina. My second research question was to explore the reasons for this and to explore possible future developments.

Using a theoretical framework developed by Bourdieu, I argue that there is one explanation for the limited use of African languages in higher education that has hitherto been overlooked in the literature: the issue of the relatively low enrolment figures in Africa, as compared to the global North. My basic argument is that as enrolment figures increase, the pressure on using African languages as medium of instruction will also increase, simply because language learning abilities are not distributed equally across the population. As long as education limited itself to an intellectual elite, it was possible to select only those most gifted in language. Using the educational system of Estonia as a benchmark, I argue that in future, this will no longer be a cost-effective option. In order to develop the argument, I proposed a new distinction between discerned and designed languages, inspired by terminology originally proposed by Kloss. I argue that in formal settings, but also in education, the designed languages that are used will always be different from the repertoires spoken at home; therefore, they need to be learned. I have shown that it is possible and in fact common that one designed language serves several different discerned languages.

The third research question, on the possibilities for rational choices for language use in higher education, is equally difficult to answer and necessitated a number of innovative ideas. I argue that higher education requires use of a designed language, therefore always requiring a certain amount formal learning from the user. However, in order to educate as many people as possible, it is important to minimize the required language learning by staying as close as possible to the language repertoire learners already have. In order to develop a way of thinking about this, I made use of Levenshtein distances as calculated with the help of the ASJP database and benchmarked them to a schema for ease of language learning. This yielded a new way of approximating which languages are 'easy' or 'difficult' and for whom. I concluded that rational choices would be possible, and proposed to base such choices on four principles:

1. Develop a limited number of designed languages for education.

2. Designed languages should be chosen in such a way that they are easy to learn for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible.
3. Strive for inclusivity: choose designed languages in such a way that all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.
4. Make use of existing bilingualism as a resource.

The case study on Ethiopia led me to propose a fifth principle:

5. Build incentives for linguistic collaboration, especially for related linguistic communities.

I tried to show how the theoretical insights thus gained could be applied, presenting five brief country case studies, of Botswana, Congo Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana and Tanzania. They reinforced the point that cultural and linguistic differences cannot be mapped onto one another. However, they also made clear that indeed, in all cases it is possible to propose rational language policies, using a limited number of designed African languages. Such rational policies would represent a tremendous improvement compared to the current situation.

For Botswana, I argued in favour of special arrangements for speakers of the Khoisan languages in the country, in addition to the use of Tswana. For Congo and Tanzania, most people would be well-served by one of the Bantu languages spoken in those countries. For Ghana, the situation is more complicated and as many as six languages might be needed (still below the number of nine languages currently supported by the Government, but only up to primary school level). For Ethiopia, by far the most complicated country language-wise in my list of cases studies, in theory only five languages would be sufficient,<sup>2</sup> although in practice this seems unrealistic.

The study provides an additional way of looking at decolonization of African education: changing the University curriculum will not be enough. In addition, it will be necessary to re-think the 'educational pyramid' from the bottom up and to think about rational choices for increased use of African languages. A developed society requires a productive population and a productive population means an educated population. In many African countries, primary education is now almost universal. However, there is a scope and need for considerable expansion of (appropriate) education at secondary and tertiary levels: Africa will need to educate all its brains. In order to do that efficiently, it will be essential to use African languages. Clearly, doing that might

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<sup>2</sup> Even though, as pointed out, this would present problems for speakers from several smaller linguistic communities.



also help in the development of new cultural traditions in Africa, although the relationship might not always be one-on-one.

There are limitations to my approach: a purely desk-type theoretical exercise of this type can never be enough. This research provides an approach that can serve as an input to a national and continental dialogue on language in education policies. Of course, input from local scientists and leaders is going to be more important, input that needs to take perceived historical and cultural differences and similarities into account.

Again, in Africa there are those countries (such as probably Ghana), where there is a level of national unity across linguistic divides and there are others (such as probably Tanzania), where linguistic divisions for the majority of the population are more limited, but where nevertheless the cultural differences are considerable. It is good to point out that, in spite of the attention given to fierce ethnic conflicts on the continent, most Africans do in fact manage to live in peace with their neighbours, even if they speak a different language or come from a different cultural background. In contrast to many in the Global North, Africans are by and large not only multilingual, but also multicultural. That means that they are able to navigate different linguistic and cultural contexts much more easily and more ably than most Europeans or Americans could. This is an asset, but this adaptability also helps to keep the underlying linguistic and cultural realities on the continent out of sight. Yet, these realities exist and deserve to be understood in their dynamism. The process of building neo-African traditions is not yet over – there is a dynamic here that is still developing. In order for that process to continue, use of African languages in higher education will be important. Fortunately, the process of expansion in enrolment will itself set in motion a sociological process leading to increased use of African languages in higher education. This will be helped by careful planning and rational choices – but as I have shown, such rational choices are possible.

## **7.2. The way forward: a research agenda**

This study is built around a few basic premises. One of them is that Africa's development issues are caused not by plotting of ruthless neo-colonial exploiters, not by prevailing climatic conditions, not by skin pigmentation or other genetic differences, not by something inherently 'wrong' in Africans or in African culture, and not by general backwardness. Instead, I have pointed to Vansina's explanation, cited in chapter two: the basic problem lies in the way in which the old cultural

traditions in Africa have been destroyed in the colonial period and have not yet been replaced by a new set of commonly-understood cultural traditions. If this is the crucial problem, then a research agenda should crucially be centred around understanding these developments and at identifying strategic opportunities for agency.

Prah (2014) has called for decentralisation in Africa, democratisation, transcending current national boundaries, development of languages and basing oneself on 'deeper historical identities'. In this study, I have limited myself to language in education and to cultural similarities and differences – already a vast field of exploration. Research into the other areas (best ways of achieving democratisation and decentralisation, how artificial boundaries can be overcome) is also going to be necessary, but I do believe that such research has to base itself on an appreciation of, as Prah says, 'what people have and have had for ages', or, to use the words of Wa Thiong'o (2005: 164): 'only through the use of African languages shall we be able to break with European memory'.

Throughout this work, I have pointed to the need for more research. In the area of culture, I have given a 'proof of concept', showing the potential of cross-cultural psychology. However, better questions and a better way of covering ethnolinguistic groups would be needed in order to get more reliable results. I pointed to the work done by Noorderhaven and Tidjani (2001), who explored the possibility of finding additional dimensions from the study of Africa – follow-up work would be useful.

It is clear that the frequent assumption taken in development research that linguistic diversity can be taken as a proxy for cultural diversity deserves to be questioned – it can no longer be taken at face value, because situations as described for Belgium by Hofstede may be much more common in Africa than in Europe and furthermore, their occurrence does not seem to follow a readily predictable pattern.

I argue that the convenient shortcuts in thinking about language cannot be used unquestioningly any more. Thus, the distinction between 'speakers' and 'non-speakers' of a language is too easy. Likewise, the assumption that there is a set cost of learning a different language that is equal for all learners is wrong, as is the assumption that anybody can learn any other language to whatever level of fluency. Comparable research into the actual levels of fluency in foreign language use reached in Africa is lacking.

Dimmendaal (2004: 85) has called for capacity building of African linguists – certainly a call I would support. However, he limits himself to 'the area of descriptive and applied linguistics' – by which he essentially means 'training of some younger colleagues in the documentation of

poorly studied or undescribed languages'. Likewise, Lüpke (2019: 489) feels that linguistic research should be expanded to record and analyse an ever greater number of social interactions between speakers. She calls for a 'perspective that acknowledges people as agents in their sociocultural environment who exert choices and adapt to changing circumstances' – hardly a revolutionary new perspective. She calls for a 'dramatic increase in interdisciplinary linguistic research on language ecologies' (p 486).

In light of the material presented in this part of the thesis, this conventional research agenda seems too limited (although it would require considerable funding) and not well focused. It seems clear that no research agenda can afford to ignore language policy, language planning, engineering and language learning. Leaving these matters outside of research is disempowering, as it relegates speakers of African languages to a reserve-like status, outside the mainstream of a democratic debate.

I have demonstrated that rational choices in developing designed (African) languages for higher education are possible and unavoidable. But I do not have an answer as to which languages this would be and how it should be done in concrete cases – I cannot go beyond developing the reasoning and developing the context. Moving from there to implementation will require considerable research and the energies of educators, linguists and policy makers alike. Research into which languages would be seen as acceptable or which could serve most speakers of discerned languages as designed language is needed, research into language policy and effective policy implementation is likewise needed.

I have argued that current educational systems in many African countries are wasteful and need to be re-thought bottom-up, rather than top-down. How would it be possible to use existing resources in a more efficient way, leading both to curricula that are more appropriate for local situations and to higher academic achievement overall? The study has given 'proof of concept' that African languages will be essential for that – but that in itself is not sufficient. How to go about this in concrete situations? What can educational systems deliver in Africa, under different language regimes? Where does the 'language barrier' lie in concrete cases? My schema for ease of language learning is based on US experiences. In comparison with those US experiences, how easy is it for which African learners to acquire sufficient foreign language knowledge (or to be taught such knowledge through education)? Those are questions that could occupy the energies of linguists and social scientists for years to come and attempting to

answer them might be more productive than investing more and more resources in merely recording social interactions between speakers. In general, the institutional position of languages in a position to be developed as designed languages needs to be improved and strengthened. Thus, in Europe, there exists an organisation such as EFNIL,<sup>3</sup> that brings together all national language academies. In Africa, the only similar national institution seems to be BAKITA<sup>4</sup> in Tanzania. At the African level, there is ACALAN,<sup>5</sup> but it is grossly under-resourced and not very effective in what it does. Much more research and dialogue is needed at the national level, also to map both the linguistic and cultural similarities and differences and to use them as the basis for making the difficult choices in language development as well as in decentralisation and democratisation that will be needed in order to achieve an accelerated development path that is based on the values of Africa's peoples.

### 7.3. The search for empowerment

In chapter 1.2, I pointed out that I am inspired by a decolonial vision that seeks to build Africa on the basis of African cultures and languages and is carried by civil society. It is a vision that wants to base itself on ideas of African empowerment. But which ideas are empowering – and which ones are not? In order to add a bit of detail to the general vision, let us first look for a moment at what, then, does *not* fit in that vision. Typically, what does *not* fit are all ideas that somehow depict Africa as essentially static and unchanging and that either treat it as a coherent whole (the pre-scientific myth or trope of 'Africa as a Country') or as infinitely fragmented (the 'Tower of Babel' myth, both discussed in chapter 1.7). All of them tend to deny the possibilities of African agency and the potential for conscious policy choices to have a positive effect. A few examples:

- There is the idea that Africa's woes are caused by prevailing climatic conditions. If that is so, then obviously Africans are doomed – they are the victims of their geographic location and have no or only limited agency themselves. An example of this is

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<sup>3</sup> European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL), <http://www.efnil.org/>, accessed 4 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> The National Kiswahili Council (BAKITA), <https://bakita.go.tz/eng/welcome>, accessed 4 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), <https://acalan-au.org/index.php>, accessed 4 March 2020.

the Cool-Water idea, used by Welzel (2013). He advances the idea that the moderate climates of Europe caused Europe's advance, but that sooner or later, by some sort of natural process, Europe's blessings will spread to the rest of the world. Adopting this idea leads to severely restricted scope for African agency.

- There is the idea that there is something inherently 'wrong' in Africans or in African culture, leaving likewise little scope for African agency. An example of this is the idea by Van der Veen (2014) that Africa's problems are caused by 'important African characteristics of its political, economic and social culture'.<sup>6</sup> These characteristics are peculiar to Africa, and can be seen as well in Latin America, but '(o)nly in the Latin American countries that nevertheless had a sizeable proportion of the Indian population'.<sup>7</sup> Like Welzel, Van der Veen sees few options for Africans, except to work diligently at becoming 'modernized'. Another example is the idea that for any number of reasons, Africa is afflicted by an endemic disease called patrimonialism or neopatrimonialism, explaining the endemic corruption on the continent – a disease for which there is no apparent cure.<sup>8</sup>
- There is the idea that Africa's woes are caused by plotting of ruthless neo-colonial exploiters. In a vulgar Marxist view, this leads to the conclusion that the African masses have little choice but to welcome capitalism as a necessary step in history's unavoidable march to socialism. Again, this restricts African agency.
- There is the view that Africa will be fine once it has modernized. This leaves little scope for African paths to development. Yet, such paths may be relevant, and not only for Africa. When Greta Thunberg was asked at the 2020 Davos summit what she would like to change, her simple answer was: 'everything'. And indeed, in paragraph 28 of the UN Agenda 2030 (UN 2015: 12) world leaders say: 'We commit to making fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services.'

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<sup>6</sup> Page 425 of the Dutch original, my translation.

<sup>7</sup> My translation, page 426 of the Dutch original: "Alleen waar het aandeel van de indiaanse bevolking in de Latijns-Amerikaanse landen toch aanzienlijk was[, in de Andes en in Midden-Amerika, bestonden serieuze statelijke organisatieproblemen, die soms het beeld van een 'falende staat' opriepen.]" For a polite criticism, see Sefue (2004).

<sup>8</sup> See Mkandawire (2015) for a discussion and critique of such theories.

Such fundamental changes are also necessary in order to avoid or mitigate climate change. The modernity theory basically holds that Africa needs to 'catch up' with the rest of the world (especially the Global North) and to 'modernize', in the sense of becoming more like the North. Clearly, if the modern world needs 'fundamental changes' in order to become sustainable, then this same modern world can no longer be held up as the ideal that African countries should strive for. However, the opposite is also not right: it is also not right to claim that something cannot work in Africa because it has proven to be unsustainable in the developed world.

In line with a Pan Africanist vision, then, Africans will have to make their own choices and in doing so, they will of course take elements from elsewhere, but to that they will add elements of their own. They should neither be advised to take up the Northern development model lock, stock and barrel nor to reject it outright.

In this study, I looked more closely at a number of other disempowering ideas, especially related to culture and language.

- In the culture area, I have argued in chapter 3.1 how various ideas about culture work to obstruct a view of both the constants and the dynamics of African cultures and cultural identities. These are concepts of culture as related to artefacts or products, or view culture as the way our ancestors lived, or only associate negative things with culture, such as its use as a marker to artificially mobilize primordialist sentiments. I have also shown how authors tend to assume that culture needs homogeneity and they then say that because in practice they do not see such homogeneity (with individuals having 'multiple' and 'shifting' identities), culture as a concept is outdated. In general, there is often a confusion between what describes the level of individuals and what describes the level of larger groups. All these obstructions work together to create the situation already described by Claude Ake in 1993: referring 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.'
- In chapter 1.5, I have criticized another but related very common set of ideas on Africa, the idea that social engineering has complete freedom to build 'nations' in Africa, no matter what the underlying cultural basis is. If culture is unimportant (either

because Africa forms a cultural whole or because Africa is infinitely fragmented or because socialism is anyway going to make all men brothers), then it is logical that the sacrosanctity of current nation states is the starting point of any further thinking.

- The assertion that Africa has more than 2,000 living languages is often repeated uncritically and leads to an unwillingness to engage with language issues. This is not made any easier by the fashionable ideas discussed in section 4.1.1 about 'languoids'. These ideas lead to a neglect of language planning and language policy, and to a focus on discerned languages or language as spoken by people, away from a discussion of how designed languages and policies favouring indigenous designed languages can play a role as inclusive enablers rather than as exclusive gate-keepers. Furthermore, Africans have been raised with the idea – proven to be false both by research and through practice – that the best way to teach a child a foreign language is by using it as medium of instruction from an early age.

Together, this forms an entangled web of sometimes contradictory ideas that are called up time and again and work together to deny African agency. Together, these ideas on development, on culture, on identity, on nation building and on language truly form what I would call a *toxic cocktail of ideas* that a decolonial vision is up against. Together, they 'explain' Africa's misery and turn Africa into a passive recipient, in need of foreign intervention – essentially still following the colonial model. Let's recap: Africa's underdevelopment is explained either by its geographical location, or by faults in its culture. Those that dare to think about culture usually give it a negative connotation in connection with Africa. The only way out is through a modernization (or through socialism) that is seen as coming from outside of the continent. The continent is anyway seen as a 'tabula rasa', a blank sheet, ready to receive foreign-based social engineering recipes.

In chapters 1.2 and 1.5 I pointed to criticisms of the artificial nation states that were formed in Africa and to the related problem of endemic corruption, mismanagement and, in short, 'failed states'. The 'toxic cocktail' of ideas makes it impossible to contemplate a reconfiguration of some of Africa's more desperate nation states – as suggested by African thinkers such as Adebajo (2010) or, at the sub-national level in Nigeria, by Adejumo (2004). For a critique of this complex of ideas, see also Prah (2004).

In the areas of language and education, the toxic cocktail also works in a way that is entirely disempowering. Linguistic categories that make

the continent look infinitely fragmented are imposed on it. The distinction between discerned and designed languages is not made and as a consequence, the importance of language policy is denied or simply ignored altogether. This means that a debate on using African languages in higher education is relegated to the fringes and does not take centre stage. The colonial system that equates foreign-language knowledge with social and economic progress is reproduced, leading to a reproduction of the rift between the elites and the masses of the population and hindering the development of cultural autonomy, a development anyway not well understood because of ideas of culture that see culture as something old-fashioned at best, negative at worst.

To give an example of ideas which I think *are* empowering, let me point to the results of the 'Tracking Development' project (Vlasblom, 2013). This study compared four Asian and four African countries and tried to explain the difference in development between the two sets of countries. The main finding was that in Africa, in contrast to Asia, investment in small-scale agriculture has been neglected. This finding, I think, *is* empowering, because it points the way to promising policy options that African countries can pursue. There is a link with language and education as well: if there is a dichotomy between the elite and the masses and if education is moulded on the colonial approach, then there is likely to be less attention to investment in agriculture, compared to when the elite also speak the language of the masses and when education is conceived in a bottom-up manner. Increasing productivity in agriculture requires educated farmers who have a good understanding both of agricultural science and who have the required business and marketing skills. The traditional idea that those who were without education could make a living by subsistence farming is flawed, because it stands in the way of agricultural, and thus of general development in Africa.

Developing a decolonial and empowering perspective, then, involves much more than pious statements and it cannot afford to ignore the language issue. Throughout this study, I have shied away from using hard to understand concepts such as 'epistemic oppression',<sup>9</sup> but I do think there is a case to be made for it. Attacking epistemic oppression, though, can only be done by looking at what it is composed of: a whole amalgam of partly scientific and partly pre-scientific theories, ideas, notions and myths that work together to form this toxic blend of ideas

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<sup>9</sup> Epistemology is the philosophical field that deals with the theory of knowledge and how it is produced. Epistemic oppression as a term was highlighted by Dotson (2014) and refers to persistent exclusion, hindering contributions to knowledge production.



that needs to be unpacked and re-examined.<sup>10</sup> In this work, I hope to have provided at least some ammunition for that.

Fortunately, as I have shown, trends in enrolment are likely to push education systems to the limits of what they can achieve in terms of foreign-language teaching and will lead to increased pressure to switch to African languages, at least in parts of the higher education systems. Such a switch is entirely doable, as I hope to have demonstrated in the case studies of chapter six. It will contribute tremendously to the formation of new cultural autonomies.

#### **7.4. Concluding remarks: towards regaining cultural autonomy**

Vansina (1990: 259) sees autonomy, taken as self-determination, as key to the possibility of a cultural tradition to succeed. Wursten (2019: 31) makes a further point: democracy can only work if citizens perceive a measure of control and autonomy – the way they do this, is culturally determined. In chapter three, I have given evidence of the fact that Africa has a rich, but not an endless cultural diversity. In chapter five, I have pointed out that in the key area of higher education, it is possible to come to inclusive and rational choices for designed languages. In chapter 6.6.3 I argue that even though the link between culture and language is not strictly one on one and that it is to a certain extent malleable, there is not a complete freedom there. There are some linkages between culture and language that have a strong historical basis; building on these linkages can and does form elements for the emergence of new African cultural traditions, as predicted by Vansina. If we accept that cultural autonomy is a precondition to development, then we should at least devote some thoughts to what such a cultural autonomy would entail.

There is a rich literature on cultural autonomy, looking for example at the nation states in Eastern Europe or at the rights of minority cultures in North America.<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to treat this here, but it is possible to make a few general observations.

First of all, it is good to point out that in the literature, a distinction is frequently made between *regional* autonomy – that is territorially-based – and *cultural* autonomy, that is not (necessarily) territorial. Nimni (2007) has provided an example of how a model that allows for cultural, rather than regional autonomy could be implemented. This is relevant

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<sup>10</sup> For an insightful discussion, see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful historical overview see for example Roach (2004).

to bear in mind, because in Africa, territorial decentralisation is often seen as one way of combating bad governance issues on the continent. The idea is that by bringing the government closer to 'the people', it will also become more accountable. If territorial decentralisation roughly parallels ethnic or cultural lines (as is the case for example in Ethiopia and in Kenya), then indeed forms of territorial autonomy could also lead to forms of cultural autonomy. Of course, if (as in Kenya) the official language remains a colonial language, the dichotomy between the elite and the masses may remain.

To get an idea of what cultural autonomy would entail, it is good to look at the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a non-binding resolution adopted with an overwhelming majority by the UN General Assembly in 2007. The term indigenous peoples is not unambiguous, but Wikipedia cites a preliminary UN Working Group definition of 1982 that holds that

'Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society (...)'<sup>12</sup>

This definition is generally held not to apply to Africa, with the exception of small and distinct minorities such as the Khoisan peoples of Southern Africa or the Pygmies of Congo. However, it would be strange if such minorities would be given rights that are denied larger groups or majorities – the assumption is, in fact, that majorities already enjoy such rights and have denied them others – a situation that may not be applicable in many African countries.

Indigenous peoples, according to the declaration, have 'the right to self-determination'. 'By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' (Article 3). According to Article 4, they 'have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.' Under Article 13, they have the right to use and develop their own languages. Article 14 gives them 'the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.' 2019 was the UN-sponsored 'International Year of Indigenous Languages'. One of the conclusions from that year was: 'The protection, support and promotion of linguistic

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<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous\\_peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples) accessed 6 March 2020.

diversity and multilingualism is crucial for peace, development, good governance and reconciliation in our societies, as well as for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals'.<sup>13</sup>

Do African ethnolinguistic groups currently have the rights indigenous groups should have? Except perhaps for largely homogeneous countries such as Botswana or Madagascar and except perhaps for Ethiopia, they clearly do not. What is more, it is not even so obvious what larger cultural units exist, even though denying their existence is clearly impossible. Can they get such rights in future? Yes they can – but for that, conscious choices and conscious policies will be needed, based on knowledge that has a decolonial starting point.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://en.iyil2019.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/strategic-outcome-document\\_iyil2019\\_eng.pdf](https://en.iyil2019.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/strategic-outcome-document_iyil2019_eng.pdf), annex page 7. Note that UNESCO is also planning a 'decade on indigenous languages', 2022 – 2032.

