

LOCAL LANGUAGES AS A PRECONDITION FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract:

Nigeria and indeed many African countries have been wallowing in underdevelopment. This could be attributed to poor governance to which this part of the world has been subjected. Part of the problem lies with the language of governance since effective communication must take place between the government and the governed for governance to be effective. The majority of these countries are governed in English and other foreign languages. Considering the fact that the governance of these countries in foreign languages has not yielded the desired result, this study makes a case for the adoption of local language as the alternative medium for moving African nations forward.

Governance is a means through which the conducts and activities of man are regulated in any given society. The governance of a country can only be said to be effective when it breeds development at the grassroots level. No central government of any nation can afford to engage as many people as required to render essential services to the grassroots or even make policies that would meet their domestic needs. It delegates power to the local authorities to carry out these. In the words of Adigwe (1979:21), local authorities “concern themselves with domestic matters. They take charge of public health, the provision of transport and recreational facilities, education other than higher education, the construction of roads and sewers, and the provision of fire services”.

Local authorities also make Bye-laws for the good governance of rural dwellers, and maintain order. They build markets and promote agriculture by giving soft loans to farmers. They also provide improved species of crops and livestock as well as fertilizers and other agro-allied chemicals at subsidized rate for these farmers so as to boost food production.

When a country has these, and many more provided for her populace, the country is said to be developed. In other words, development is a product of effective governance. Given the condition of living of over 80% of Africans in different African

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nations, governance in Africa cannot be adjudged effective. No wonder African countries are described as 'third world', 'developing' or 'under-developed' countries by the western world. Third world countries are characterized by low level of development, and its attendant drastic effect on the poor masses.

For governance to be effective, the government must carry the vast majority of rural dwellers along in most of her developmental policies. Suffice it to say that development would thrive in Africa if governance gives room for mass participation. Consequently, this paper would dwell on the difficulties imposed on effective governance by the use of foreign languages as the language of the government in African countries.

The Implantation of Foreign Tongues in Africa

Europeans came into Africa initially, to trade and later, to colonize. Sequel to the abolition of the Trans Atlantic slave trade, some freed slaves were settled in Freetown while some of Nigerian origin who could still trace their way back to their homeland did so. One remarkable thing was that these ex-slaves came back to the African soil speaking the language of their masters since many of them had received formal education from abroad. This facilitated the spread of the English language in this part of the world. Akindele and Adegbite affirmed that:

During the boom in human cargo across the Atlantic, thousands of slaves were shipped to the plantations in the America and West Indies. While many workers were on the plantations to keep the industrial machines of Europe running, many more were retained to perform some other domestic chores. Whether at home or on the plantations, the slaves and their masters needed to communicate. The masters needed to communicate with their slaves. The slaves too needed to talk or complain to their masters. Importantly, the slaves were collected from various spots along the coast, hence, initially, they spoke their various indigenous languages which could not be understood by all of them nor by their masters. The need therefore arose to train them to speak a common language- English. Thousands of the slaves who had competence in English were brought back to Africa and settled I Freetown, Sierra Leone. Some made Freetown their home and many helped to propagate the English language by setting up evening schools to train people in English. (2005: 59-60)

These ex-slaves, especially those with Christian orientation served in different capacities as clerks, court messengers, interpreters and teachers in the formal school system established by the missionaries to train the natives in the English language which they needed so that they can read their Bible and prayer books.

It coincided with the period of industrial revolution in Europe during which European countries needed market to sell their over produced goods, as well as buy raw materials like: gold, ivory, hides, etc for their industries. The market was readily found in Africa. With time, these European powers: Portuguese, Spain, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, etc needed to protect their business interests in Africa in what was tagged the

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'scramble for Africa'. Consequently, the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 in which the foreigners practically partitioned Africa among themselves. The only effective way of doing it is to introduce their governments and their languages to their African colonies. Acquisition of territories became a matter of prestige for them. The more territories a European power has, the more prestigious for her. Britain and France had an upper hand in the acquisition of territories. For instance, Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone (West Africa); Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda (East Africa) and Zambia, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe (South Africa) are all Anglophone African countries, while Togo, Zaire, Senegal, Algeria, Guinea, etc are Francophone African countries. Britain and France shared the former territories of Germany among themselves after the defeat of Germany by the Allied forces. This explains why some African countries like Cameroon, Rwanda, etc use both English and French as their official languages. Cameroon, for example, has English speaking Cameroonians and French speaking Cameroonians. Also, Portuguese is spoken in Sao Tome é Principe.

These foreign tongues were introduced into African nations because the westerners were not keen on learning African vernaculars. In fact, Omolewa as quoted by Eyisi and Ezeuko reported that Rev Metcalf Sunter, the first Inspector of Schools in West Africa, dismissed African vernaculars of having no practical value in the following words:

These languages... (are) only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use to civilization... The natives must and will know English in spite of all well-meaning but diseased notions; it is the language of commerce and the only education worth a moment's consideration. (2008:196)

Worthy of note here is that these African nations were a conglomerate of many empires, kingdoms, clans and stateless autonomous communities that already had organized ways of life in their different settlements before the colonial masters coaxed them into different nations and imposed their government on them. There was an immediate need for a language that would serve the dual purpose of facilitating communication between the British and the natives on the one hand, and among the ethnic groups that made up these African nations on the other hand. The colonial masters introduced their languages to serve the communication need. It was also "a vehicle for the training of the badly needed manpower to run the fledgling government services" (Baldeh 1990: 2). Thus, menial clerical officers were trained with the assistance of the ex-slaves. Proficiency in the metropolitan languages became the mark of an educated man and a passport to securing the cherished white collar job. Ever since then, most African countries have continued to use the foreign tongues as their official languages as it is the only way to thread cautiously on the complex linguistic situation into which they have been plunged. Meanwhile, some African countries also adopted some of their local languages as part of their official languages. For example, in addition to English, South Africa adopted Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Northern Sotho, Siswati, Ndebele, Tsonga, Venda, Tswana. Zimbabwe also uses Shona and Ndebele and

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Tanzania also uses Swahili, yet, none of these local languages can serve as the sole official language of any of the countries because they are not geographically spread in other parts of the countries. Nigeria (with over four hundred indigenous languages) and the Republic of Uganda (which has been described as the meeting point of several major languages) suffer most from that ‘indiscriminate merging of small nations by the westerners. The two countries have English as their sole official languages. In addition to these, Pidgin and other official languages (Arabic, French and Chinese) are spoken in Nigeria. At this juncture, the question that should be asked is what implication has the use of these foreign languages on governance in Africa.

The Dominance of Foreign Languages over African Local Languages

History reveals that the languages of colonial masters exert much influence on the vernacular languages of their colonies. For instance, English replaced the native languages of New Zealand, North America, Australia, most parts of Canada, and became their first language. African vernacular languages have been relegated to the background for years in favour of the languages of the colonial masters, especially English and French. Most African vernaculars are not developed to cater for the needs of the modern world and many are not yet documented. On the contrary, Britain and France have invested much money and provided adequate literature to promote the spread and use of their languages in Africa, Asia, and America. The two languages are international languages used in the deliberations of the United Nations and her agencies. The English language, in addition to being an international language, is a world language. It is the language of science and technology, international media, international pop music industry, and air traffic control. It is also the language of international trade, tourism, sports, and diplomacy. Little wonder Bamgbose (1971: 35) observed that:

Of all the heritages left behind by the British at the end of the colonial administration; probably none is more important than the English language. This is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much internal as well as external communication.

Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009: 49) affirmed that “the English language will continue to be at the centre of the Nigeria development because...there is no immediate alternative among the various indigenous Nigerian languages.” In fact, there is no Nigerian vernacular that is qualified to occupy the position of language of unity as well as the official language that English has been occupying in the country after over fifty years of independence. English is the language of the creation of the Nigerian nation.

English and French languages are Africa’s window on the world. As the official languages of most African countries, the foreign languages are used in higher education, legislature, mass media, administration, law courts etc. They are the languages uniting the tongues and tribes in various African countries. Commenting on the place of English in the British colonies, Quirk observed that:

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Despite the association of the English language with the former colonial rulers, it has been retained for pragmatic reasons: where no one native language is generally acceptable, English is a neutral language that is politically acceptable, at least at the national level, for administrative and legal functions; and as an international language for science and technology, it is desirable for higher education (1995:45).

What applies to English in Anglophone countries applies to French in Francophone countries. Since success in African nations is measured by the level of proficiency in the country's foreign language, many Africans aspire to learn the foreign tongues for different purposes. Many parents are elated when their children learn to express themselves in the languages due to their utilitarian values even when such children could hardly utter a word of their native language. The effect of this is that the vernaculars are neglected and if nothing serious is done may die off like many languages of the world.

The Need for Local Languages in Governance

In Nigeria and other Anglophone countries, English is politically acceptable at least, at the national level. It is mainly at that level that the foreign languages which serve as the official languages of African nations are used to conduct the affairs of the nation by few elites, while about 80% of the population of different African nations are illiterate citizens. In other words, a vast majority of Africans are excluded from the affairs of their governments. By way of support, Oyelaran in Emenanjo (Ed) stated this about Nigeria;

Briefly put, language is being used by the minority of commissioned agents to exclude the vast majority of Nigerians from participating in the affairs of the nation and, therefore, from liberating themselves from servitude to the so called advanced nations (1990:24)

This is applicable to all former colonies since all of them are made up of different peoples brought together under one nation. Competence in the foreign languages gives Africans access to participate in government businesses. But few Africans are fluent in these languages. Thus only these few are involved in the governance of their father land. African situation is a pathetic one. They are ruled in foreign languages, vehicles of foreign cultures right in their own land, yet the western world is expecting the continent to develop. Development is a far cry once there is no fertile ground for it to thrive in. The use of foreign languages in governance in Africa cannot promote effective participation among the local populace; hence, there is the need for the local language of each locality to be used as the instrument of governance in each of these localities. It is a known fact that language marks man's personal and group identity. Ruling a people in their own language would naturally provoke interest and mass participation in governance. These peasants in rural areas have no business with high sounding and impeccable foreign languages, but only need to be reached and convinced in their own languages on the importance of some government policies.

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Every group has an emotional attachment to its language. Quoting Omolewa's notes on the pronouncement of the Phelps stoke commission to Africa in 1921, Fodeh noted that;

Native tongue is immensely more vital in that it is one of the chief means of preserving whatever is good in the native custom, ideas and ideals ...All people have an inherent right to their own language .It is the means of giving expression to their own personality however primitive they may be...No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language. (1990:4)

The uneducated local farmer, petty trader, road side mechanic, truck pusher, hunter, blacksmith, etc cannot comprehend the essence of governance when he does not understand the meaning of most of the policies of the government that are being advocated to him through the use of a foreign language. The illiterate African who can neither read nor write cannot understand the Bye Laws of his locality if it is not written or addressed to him in his local language: the only language he understands. There is nothing to discuss about effective governance in a country where the laws and deliberations of the legislature are enacted in a foreign language and not subsequently translated into different local languages to enable the uneducated populace understand most of the laws and the implications of contravening the laws of the land. The judiciary is not left out. The governments of different African countries have not made efforts to translate judicial decisions into different local languages so that the illiterate rural dwellers can understand and follow them carefully. Presidential addresses made by African leaders have not been translated into the different local languages of the country so that the illiterate rural dwellers can understand their speeches beyond the familiar notes of the national anthems sang at the beginnings and ends of such broadcasts. Where the Federal Ministry of Agriculture has new ideas to sell to farmers on new methods of fertilizer application or even availability of improved species of crops and livestock in their gardens, foreign languages are the least effective media to bring the information to the doorstep of the illiterate farmer.

Indeed, in order to move Africa forward, Africans must be ruled in the local languages of their respective localities. Once this is done, effective participation in governance as well as effective understanding of government policies would be achieved. In order words, the use of local languages in governance would enable the grassroots promote, participate, understand, and even encourage government policies in their own little ways. Allowing the African populace to participate in their own governance through the use of their own languages would make Africa grow like other continents and the issue of under-development would become a thing of the past. No meaningful development can be recorded in a country where a good majority of the citizens do not comprehend the language of governance.

Conclusion

Governance in Africa is conducted in languages, which are alien to a vast majority of Africans. These languages, especially English and French have attained international

standard and as such, they are Africa's window on the world. They also serve African countries immensely at the national level. But the truth remains that Africa has been using these languages for decades yet, no meaningful development has been recorded in African countries. The reason is that the grassroots do not understand most of the government policies meant to improve their lot because they are made in alien languages. For effective governance to thrive in Africa, the grassroots must be carried along, and this is possible if they are reached in their own respective languages. So governing Africans in their own languages would surely promote growth and development of Africa.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, if adhered to, would foster effective governance, as well as promote growth and development in Africa:

1. African leaders should liberate themselves from the shackles of their colonial masters which have made them rely on them for political, economic and social advice and would not allow them consider basic issues like the development and the use of local languages to relate with the uneducated rural dwellers. This will lead to the optimum development of the continent.
2. Government should liaise with media houses to translate presidential addresses, including the breakdown of yearly budgets into different local languages. When this is done the populace will come to terms with government businesses.
3. Major government policies should also be transmitted to the populace in their respective languages.
4. The constitution, which is the grundnorm of the laws of the respective countries should be translated into different local languages to enable the majority of Africans to understand them and of course, adhere to its provisions.
5. Again, judicial decisions should be translated into local languages so that the uneducated Africans will not fall prey to offences which under normal circumstances would have been avoided by them. In many African countries, there is no Law Report that is written in any local language.
6. Since education is the major instrument of development, effort should be made by the government to provide basic education to the door steps of uneducated Africans through Adult Education programme. This will enable them learn to read and write at least in their local languages and make them better members of their societies.

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