

AFRICAN PERSONALITY: THE PLACE AND ROLE OF LANGUAGE

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Executive Summary

The concern of the paper is on the indispensable relation of human language in human endeavour. It explains the extent and efficacy of language not only as a means of communication but also as a tool of conveying and impacting morals. This research argues that the facts that moral values are meaningful and effective dependent on the contents of language has the ability to sustain values if well used and to as well misrepresent values if abused especially in expressing them. Therefore, the content of language in African personality serves as both a means of communication and a source of transmitting cultural values and morals. This paper using hermeneutic method posits that language has the capacity of explaining one's personality and cultural values. It argues that the depth of language in African society is traced to the worldview of the people since in conveys both their thoughts and their values. Hence, in order to understand a person as expressed in human discourse and agitations, language is the only means towards human self-authenticity, self-dynamism and self-participation. The paper concludes that since humanity cannot be separated from its language in all ramifications despite the limitations visible in the human linguistic engagements, the power of language has the ability to sustain, promote and talk about a person and their values, because rich cultural values are expressed in our language.

Keywords: Language, Culture, African Personality, Morality, Self-Authenticity

Introduction

Africa is one of the continents in the world that comprises of different cultures and traditions speaking different languages. As a medium of communication, Language plays a pivotal role in shaping the African personality, serving as both a medium of

communication and a repository of cultural identity. The intricate relationship between language and identity is deeply embedded within African societies, influencing social interactions, cognitive processes, and worldview. As articulated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a prominent Kenyan writer, language is not merely a tool of communication but a bearer of culture, history, and consciousness (37). This sentiment underscores the profound significance of language in defining the African personality. In Africa, linguistic diversity is extensive, with over 2,000 languages spoken across the continent (Lewis et al 121). Each language encapsulates unique cultural norms, values, and traditions, contributing to the multifaceted tapestry of African identity. The utilization of indigenous languages fosters a sense of belonging and pride, reinforcing communal bonds and preserving ancestral knowledge. Consequently, language serves as a conduit for intergenerational transmission of heritage, enabling the continuity of cultural practices and customs. Moreover, language shapes perceptions of self and others, influencing social hierarchies and power dynamics within African societies. Linguistic choices can reflect societal attitudes towards ethnicity, class, and gender, exerting a profound impact on individual identity formation. Therefore, understanding the place and role of language in constructing the African personality is essential for comprehending the complexities of African societies and fostering inclusive development initiatives.

In this work therefore, we shall be exploring on the overview of Africa personality, the linguistic landscape of Africa, examining the impact of language diversity in Africa and the role in which language plays in shaping African personality.

Clarification of Terms

Personality

Personality refers to the unique pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that distinguish one individual from another. It encompasses a wide range of characteristics, including temperament, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social roles, which collectively shape how a person interacts with the world. Psychologists often conceptualize personality through various theories, such as trait theory, which identifies enduring qualities that predispose individuals to behave in consistent ways across different situations. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the role of unconscious processes, divided into the id, ego, and superego, in shaping personality development (87). Meanwhile, humanistic theories, like Carl Rogers' person-centered approach, focus on the inherent goodness and self-actualization potential within individuals.

African Personality

African personality refers to the diverse range of traits, values, beliefs, and behaviors that are characteristic of people from the African continent. It encompasses various cultural, historical, and social influences that shape individuals' identities and expressions. In his book, Okolo observes that “the phrase ‘African Personality’ has become rather common in the social and political utterances of many contemporary African leaders and intellectuals” (48). He then traced back the phrase to Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana as its ardent promoter. Before the First Conference of Independent African States held in Accra in April 1958, Nkrumah had emphasized the need for “self-expression” by Africans from their own collective/common experience (or identity) as a people. He said: For too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now what I have called the African personality ... will have a chance of making its impact and will let the world know it through the voices of Africa’s own sons. (Quaison-Sackey 35).

Language

Language is a system of communication that uses symbols, such as words or gestures, to convey meaning. It allows people to express thoughts, ideas, emotions, and information, and it can be spoken, written, or signed. Language is a fundamental aspect of human cognition and plays a crucial role in social interaction, cultural expression, and the transmission of knowledge.

Overview of African Personality

The concept of African personality encapsulates the unique cultural, social, and psychological traits that characterize individuals and communities across the African continent. It embodies a rich tapestry of values, beliefs, and practices that have evolved over centuries, shaped by diverse historical, geographical, and sociocultural contexts. As articulated by philosopher Kwame Gyekye, the African personality is rooted in communalism, spirituality, and a deep connection to the land (75-79). These foundational elements underscore the importance of collective identity, interdependence, and holistic worldview within African societies.

Moreover, African personality encompasses resilience, creativity, and adaptability in the face of adversity, reflecting a history marked by colonization, slavery, and systemic injustices (Nwoye 693-702). It emphasizes the importance of oral tradition, storytelling, and ritual practices in transmitting cultural heritage and fostering social cohesion (Wiredu 96). Additionally, African personality is dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing a diversity of ethnicities, languages, and lifestyles that contribute to the continent's vibrancy and resilience (Asante 59). Understanding the complexities of

African personality is essential for appreciating the richness and diversity of African cultures and societies.

The Linguistic Landscape of Africa

Africa is a culturally diverse and linguistically heterogeneous continent. It presents a classic example of linguistic diversity with almost 2,000 indigenous languages, which are grouped into the following language families: (i) Afro-Asiatic (approximately 200 languages covering nearly all of Northern Africa, including the horn of Africa and the central Sahara at the top of the Nile); (ii) Nilo-Saharan (consisting of about 140 languages with some eleven million speakers scattered in Central and Eastern Africa); (iii) Niger-Saharan (covering about two-third of Africa with about 1000 languages and some 200 million speakers, and including the Bantu languages of Central, Southern, and Eastern Africa); and (iv) Khoisan (about 30 languages in Western part of Southern Africa) (Bamgbose 91). A graphic picture of the multilingual situation in Africa is painted in a working document by UNESCO, cited in Wolff:

According to the definition of languages and dialects there are between 1,250 and 2,100 languages in Africa...It is a trivial statement to say that monolingual countries are more the exception rather than the rule if we are to adhere to strict criteria. Even in an apparently monolingual setting, the geographical distance (dialects), the social distance (sociolects), the historical and other codes and registers will make the situation more complex (5-6).

Homogeneity is a fiction in the linguistic field more than in any other. Taking an arbitrary threshold of 90 per cent as the defining landmark of a monolingual country, only a handful of countries meet this criterion in Africa. The ones generally cited are Botswana (language: Setswana), Burundi (Kirundi), Lesotho (Sotho), Madagascar (Malagasy), Mauritius (Creole), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Seycelles (Creole), Somalia (Somali), Swaziland (Seswati). The degree of multilingualism varies greatly. About 105 million people speak around 410 languages in Nigeria, 30 million people in Zaire use 206 languages and Ethiopia has 97 languages for a population of about 45 million. Diversity is not the characteristic of giants alone. In Cameroon, 185 languages are used by 8 million people, giving an average of 50,000 persons per language; 3 million inhabitants of Benin are spread over 58 languages while 2 million Congolese have at their disposal 31 languages. On the other land, Mauritania has four languages, Niger ten. These figures need to be scrutinized further, and they yield interesting and useful information. With a population of about 28 million, Tanzania has 120 languages, among them Kiswahili which as a lingua franca is used by the vast majority of the population. Mali has 12 languages and 90 per cent of the population use four of them and 60 to 65 per cent use only one language (UNESCO 3).

Language and Identity

Language is one of the determiners of understanding people's culture in the world. When a speaker communicates a particular language people may speculate about the origin, nationality, culture, religion and ethnicity of the speaker as language reflects embedded cultural identities of people within a language. Hall, S. states that language represents the shared meanings of a particular culture and culture exchanges the meaning through language with the society members (37). Primarily, language as one of the mediums of conveying innumerable opinions, ideas, emotions and knowledge serves multiple functions in framing the diverse cultural identities of a particular group. Different languages representing diverse geographical locations express people's voices reflecting their cultural identities. The language and culture continuously co-create cultural values, traditions and identities through human interaction (Maine et al 383-392). Language can reveal the different hidden social and cultural realities of the people when they develop a certain lifestyle and culture with the family members and society through languages from early life. Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. state that "a person's identity results in linguistic interaction as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than an internal and psychological one" (585). Therefore, the linguistic performance of individuals distinguishes their cultural identity as they use distinct language to talk and perceive the world. Many social theorists and cultural researchers in the area of sociolinguistics and anthropology argue for the role of language in shaping cultural identity. For example, Kennedy states that "language can positively navigate and construct cultural identity by strengthening the connection of people in the community" (39). Similarly, Ennaji illustrates that what factor differentiates an Arab and a French from an Igbo has the cultural communicative function of their mother tongue as the culture can transmit the people's shared mentality, lifestyle and behaviors based on local, tribal and national languages (86). Every language with a distinctive nature shapes the people's cultural identity with the reflection of different social and cultural realities, historical traditions, typical lifestyles, shared cultural values and belief systems of a specific society resulting in the promotion of solidarity, preservation of cultural traditions and developing the socio-cultural system of a nation.

The Impact of Language Diversity in Africa

In virtually every part of the world, the challenges of language recognition, language rights and attitudes arise in jurisdictions where language diversity exists. Recently in Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A., a proposal to legislate English as the city's only official language suffered a setback because those who voted against it argued that it would diminish the provision of emergency services in languages other than English. This is based on the belief that a citizen is able to exercise his/her rights only if he/she receives communications from government officials or service providers in a language he/she understands (Patten 696). Language rights become more contentious when dealing with

multilingual nations with a great diversity of languages and cultures. Long before factors such as conquest, slave trade, missionary activities, colonialism, and migration came to alter the linguistic configuration of Africa; local languages of the natives were the subject of convenient choices depending on the region and location of the speakers. Each nation has continued to adapt her individual peculiar socio-cultural and socio-political experience to manage linguistic issues arising from the factors mentioned above. At best, many countries have opted for a multilingual society to support the traditional socio-cultural landscape and contain the potential spill-over crisis that may arise from unfavorable language policy by those in power.

The linguistic situation became more complex when the colonial powers that shifted the national borders of the nations in Africa paid little or no attention to the existing linguistic, religious and cultural affinities and political organizations of the ethnolinguistic groups. The convergence of several diverse languages in these new nations inevitably created the challenges of language management, language rights, language attitudes, allocation of roles and the development of language policies that would adapt to the circumstances that are prevalent in individual nations. Whether in the English and French-speaking West Africa, or the Portuguese-speaking nations in Central and part of Southern Africa, or Arabic and French-speaking North Africa, language issues have continued to generate debates that has led to the emergence of different language policies. The subsisting multilingual situation has also given rise to classifications such as official languages (in most cases the imported languages), national languages (e.g. Swahili in Tanzania), network or broadcast languages (e.g. Tiv, Nupe in Nigeria) and indigenous languages. In Africa, the official languages are often the languages of government, the mass media and medium of instruction in schools. National languages are indigenous languages that also share the functions of official languages. Broadcast or network languages, on the other hand, are languages used for limited communicative purposes within a region, while indigenous languages are used for personal and intra group communication within the locality where they are spoken and across regional boundaries where language affinity exists or where speakers of those indigenous languages are found.

The implication of choosing the imported languages as the official languages is that most children in Africa come in contact with the official languages for the first time in primary school. By implication then, only a marginal population with access to formal education will acquire some level of competence in the language used to conduct the affairs of their nations. As is the case in Mozambique with the Portuguese language, so it is in Nigeria with English and in Benin Republic with French. “The imported official and dominant language is effectively controlled by only a minority, which, by virtue of this control, also has access to political and economic power (Bamgbose 44). The language power thus creates inequality at virtually every stratum of the society,

bifurcating the society into those that have language power and those that do not. The emergence of different language policies has often taken into consideration the critical role of the imported languages against the background of the numerous indigenous languages in Africa. The controversies that language selection procedures often generate have supported the position of those who favour the retention of the imported languages as the languages to be used for official communications. However, it is believed that such language policy (e.g. in Nigeria) will continue to perpetuate the dominance of the imported language over all the indigenous languages. Gilbert Ansre was very blunt in criticizing the choice of the language of the colonial master. He argued:

Any country which takes seriously the need to develop its human resources maximally cannot afford to under-use such resources. Much less can it afford to do so on linguistic grounds. If the language or languages selected to be used for resource exploitation and wealth acquisition are those mastered only by a small minority of the population, the unemployment and the emergence of an exploiting and wealthy minority can be the only results expected... A nation-state in which the constitution is an obscure document written in a language understood well by a small minority and used for communication by even less cannot be said to be politically developed (6).

Although the challenges of socio-economic development in Africa may not be solely blamed on the language situation, it is a fact that language, to a large extent, impacts on socio-economic and educational policies that in turn underpin progress towards national development. The complex language situation in Africa notwithstanding, each nation has been exploring ways to successfully manage the peculiar situations in its communities.

The Role of Language in Shaping African Personality

There is every need to comprehend the place and role play by language in shaping African personality as such, we shall explore some of the areas language necessarily takes influence on which include:

A tool of Cultural Identity

It is pertinent to state that language is the tool of cultural sharing between the members of a community because interacting in a language means understanding the culture and the process of being an integral part of it. Supporting this, Fuller, J. M. emphasized that the cultural identity depended on interlocutor's interactions and the choice of language in different social contexts (105-129). Similarly, Vygotsky, L. S. argued that the interaction between individuals and the community performed the semiotic functions therefore language as a linguistic and cognitive tool supported children to internalize

the social and cultural thoughts of others at first before framing their psychological thoughts in the community (85).

Transmission of Cultural Exchange

Language transmission from one generation to another generation provides a foundation for cultural transmission and modification as mother tongue interaction in a family and society helps to learn all the basic cultural values and traditions which grow as an identity in the future. Gelman and Roberts indicated that language as a powerful engine of cultural transmission exchanged different sets of cultural skills representing the private, public, cultural and mental system of the society (7900-7907). Likewise, Kinzler et al. interpreted the role of mother tongue as one of the social and cultural identity markers as more than 6000 mutually unintelligible human languages were mostly learnable in early childhood (106-111). However, some researchers argue that language transmission within a particular culture can be challenging for establishing a separate cultural identity if the language speakers migrated from one nation or culture to the next as Bhugra contradicted that when individuals from a particular sociocultural background migrated to another linguistic and cultural background, they might feel socio-economically disadvantaged, culturally discriminated and alienated (129-141). Learning language and shaping a new cultural identity can be a problem for people in the new socio-cultural context, on the contrary, the findings of Miller and Collette emphasized that people improved their multicultural identity and life standard developing the required skills to function in the multicultural society after learning the international languages with a sense of satisfaction in the target culture and the pride of one's culture at the same time (614-631). Therefore, these findings present that learning and transmission of language continuously exchange cultural and multicultural identities irrespective of geographical location.

Hegemony and Cultural Representation

Multiple ethnic minority languages in Africa have not been officially promoted and preserved from the national level as a result cultural traditions and identity embedded within these languages are on the verge of extinction. As the majority of people use some small languages in the written and spoken discourse and English languages widely practiced as the medium of education, media, technology, business and economics. Supporting this, Phyak identified that many local languages of indigenous communities had fragile socio-political, economic and educational representation due to the monolingual language policies of the country therefore the language policies needed to establish the ethnic and cultural identity of indigenous people incorporating them in the explicit policy formation and implementation (127-143). Similarly, Giri argued that Africa as a linguistically and culturally diversified continent ignorantly do not promote ethnic minority languages due to the invisible language politics by the

interest of ruling elites as a result minority language had no definable position and adequate recognition in different fields and language policy (87-100).

Preservation of Cultural Pride

Language develops and preserves the culture and culture interacts within the language system therefore people with different castes and communities persistently want to preserve their languages and cultural identity as cultural pride. For example, Gurung reported that some major communities of Africa today want to develop a unified language script of their language to preserve and promote their cultural and ethnic identity for future generations (98). Therefore, how cultural identity presents a particular community can be the output of the language system. Thus, it reflects that the close connection between language and cultural identity that lack language preservation brings a threat to their cultural identity therefore people with specific cultures want to promote their language system to endorse their ethnic dignity and cultural pride.

Language Learning and Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is associated with language learning because recognizing language elements enable learners to assimilate with the cultural activities, sign, symbols and societal consciousness encouraging adjustment in the new culture. Li argued that cultural understanding and cultural transformation can be increased through learning diverse linguistic features of a language which empowered learners against cultural hegemony (136-143) Similarly, Freire focused that the multicultural and multilingual teaching-learning practices emphasized socio-political consciousness, cultural awareness and social actions to foster the cultural identity of the individual using languages (56-71). Similarly, Donitsa-Schmidt and Vadish highlighted that language proficiency and acculturation enabled the North American students to learn the Hebrew language, Israeli culture and lifestyle for establishing new Israeli cultural identity while studying there (33). Therefore, the above literature emphasize that language learning is one of the significant components to trace the cultural identity promoting language learners to assimilate into the new culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the significance of language in shaping the African personality cannot be overstated. Language serves as a vessel for cultural expression, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission of values and knowledge. It plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities, fostering a sense of belonging and preserving cultural heritage. Moreover, language empowers Africans to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres, advocating for their rights and contributing to societal development. However, the diversity of languages across the

African continent presents both challenges and opportunities. Efforts to promote multilingualism while preserving indigenous languages are essential for fostering inclusive societies and maintaining linguistic diversity. Ultimately, recognizing the place and role of language in shaping the African personality is fundamental for promoting cultural pride, social cohesion, and sustainable development across the continent.

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