

## African Indigenous Languages in Higher Education

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**ABSTRACT** The paper uses secondary sources to interrogate the role of African indigenous languages in higher education transformation. Multilingualism in African higher education is seen as critical in promoting African scholarship and Africa-led globalization. Kiswahili and isiZulu are used as case studies. African universities such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) and University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) have incorporated the promotion of these languages in their strategic policy frameworks. The sustainability of these language programmes in higher education and Africa-led globalization requires the building of a critical mass of young experts grounded and committed to the promotion of these languages; the coordination and cooperation of stakeholders to avoid duplication of efforts. This can be done through joint projects, fellowships, scholarships, external examination, conferences and electronic interaction.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of promoting African indigenous languages such as Kiswahili and isiZulu in higher education, within and outside Africa, is best illustrated by the story of two young English agricultural extension officers and their experiences during their first field trip in the rural areas of Tanzania. The two agricultural experts were ready to impart their modern agricultural knowledge and technologies to the rural subsistence farmers in the country. However, on the very first day of their assignment and encounter with the farmers they came to terms with one issue which tends to be neglected in the course of their tropical agricultural training in England, that is, the issue of learning and knowing African indigenous languages as an important tool of inter-cultural communication with the local people. They came to realize that in spite of all the academic theories about imparting modern technologies in African rural communities, paradoxically the higher education system in England failed to recognize the importance of indigenous languages in knowledge transfer across cultures for sustainable community development.

This marginalization of African indigenous languages is not only a problem of foreign higher education institutions. In Africa itself, the discourse on socio-economic development tends to ignore the role of African indigenous languages

and knowledge systems. Laitin (2005) states that if development is to be viewed as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of a society then the indigenous languages, of the local communities become an important variable in the sustainable development process. The importance of indigenous languages in the socio-economic development discourse is found in the nature of language and the functions it performs in a society. Language is a tool of communication. Development goals can only be achieved if knowledge and information is communicated effectively in the local language related to the cultural values of the people.

Armah (2005) states that since language is the major tool of communicating knowledge, the marginalization of African indigenous languages in higher educational institutions as centres of knowledge production, has contributed to the neglect of African indigenous knowledge systems in higher education. Indigenous knowledge are the long standing traditions and practices of specific local communities which encompass the skills, innovations, beliefs, experiences and insights of the people in their respective environments and communities. These have been accumulated over the years and applied to maintain or improve livelihood. These knowledge systems are traditionally transmitted orally using the local languages, from one generation to the other (Hunn 2001).

The Malaysian sociologist, Alatas (2004) developed the concept of 'the captive mind' to refer to an uncritical imitation of Western research paradigms within scientific intellectual activity. He looks at the role of language in this process, especially in higher education. The issue of the captive mind within the context of African indigenous languages is well elaborated by Fanon (1967) and wa Thiong'o (1986). They conceptualize the colonisation of the mind as a process that involved stripping the colonised of their ancestral culture including indigenous languages and replacing it with Western culture and languages. This process occurred through the western education system, particularly higher education, where foreign languages are taught and are dominant in intellectual discourse. Students are taught in colonial languages to reject their own heritage and embrace Western worldviews, value systems and lifestyles as the human norm. Louis (2006) adds that in African higher education, this rejection takes place in all the stages of the research process, that is, identifying and selection of research problems, selection of methodology and methods of data collection. All these are guided by literature sources which are predominantly Western; the language used in the construction of research instruments and the dissemination of research findings is in most cases that of the colonisers. The research process becomes a struggle between the interests of the Western knowledge and Africa indigenous ways of knowing and value systems.

One of the primary objectives of promoting African scholarship through African indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous languages in African higher education is to enable the continent to contribute towards the global pool of knowledge on its own terms (Said 2005; Department of Science and Technology 2004). Africa cannot competitively enter the global knowledge economy whilst relying on Western knowledge systems and languages. Therefore, offering of Kiswahili and isiZulu in higher educational institutions such as at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), contributes to the strategic objectives of promoting African renaissance and Africa-led globalization through African scholarship (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012b).

### METHODOLOGY

The paper uses secondary sources to discuss the role of African indigenous language in

higher education with special reference to Kiswahili and isiZulu. Secondary sources were used due to their availability, accessibility and affordability compared to conducting a primary research in the various countries where Kiswahili and isiZulu are used and/or taught in higher education. The secondary sources included past research, websites, articles, books.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### African Indigenous Languages in African Scholarship

African scholarship addresses developmental challenges including educational transformation from African perspectives. This takes into cognizance of issues such as the role of African cultural and value systems in education, moral and economic development (Makgoba et al. 1999). African scholarship is central to the process of the Africanisation of the university in Africa (Msila and Gumbo 2016). For example, post-apartheid, South African universities and other higher education institutions are currently engaged in a process of transformation. This process involves redressing the inequalities of the past, and erasing various forms of discrimination. Specifically relevant to the current paper is the Transformation Charter of the UKZN which "recognizes the importance and value of African languages as academic languages" (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012a: 5). The University of KwaZulu-Natal, a research-led university, came into existence in 2004 as a result of a merger between the then University of Natal and the then University of Durban-Westville. The University of KwaZulu-Natal has declared itself as the premier university of African scholarship (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2006, 2012a, b).

An examination of secondary sources revealed that the promotion of African indigenous languages at UKZN is in line with the South African National Language in Education Policy (1997) and Language Policy for Higher Education (2002). In identifying itself with these National policy imperatives, the university enacted the language policy of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2006). The university introduced isiZulu as a dominant medium of academic communication and module in all undergraduate degree programmes. All students registering for

undergraduate degrees, particularly in the professional areas of nursing, education, psychology, law and commerce at UKZN are required to register for compulsory module of isiZulu. It will also be developed to be a language of research. IsiZulu is currently taught in higher education institutions in Asia, America and Europe.

Pursuant to its vision and mission of being a premier university of African scholarship, the UKZN introduced Kiswahili teaching programme in the College of Humanities in 2012. The university thus became the first university in South Africa to teach Kiswahili. One of the primary goals of this initiative is to promote the vibrancy of African Indigenous languages in the institution. Kiswahili as one of the major African Indigenous languages in Africa and one of the official languages of the East African Community and African Union. The East African Community includes the countries Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. The number of people learning Kiswahili in universities and other institutions of higher education all over the world is rapidly increasing. The language is currently being taught as a foreign language in more than 100 universities and other higher education institutions in North America, Europe, Latin America and Asia including the Middle East. Within Africa, Kiswahili is taught in a number of universities in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, Libya and many more. Kiswahili carries national language status in Tanzania and Kenya.

This institutional policy on multilingualism is in line with the broader vision of building a premier university of African scholarship as one of the key imperatives for the transformation of higher education in South Africa. The policy has a national significance of contributing to nation building and intercultural communication achieved through multilingualism in education (Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. 2010).

Mwansoko (2003) demonstrates the prevalence of Kiswahili in research publications and conference proceedings. For example, in Tanzania there are academic journals that are exclusively in Kiswahili such as *Kiswahili* - a journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, and *Kiocha Lugha* - a journal of the Department of Swahili at the University of Dar es Salaam. Some academics publish through Kiswahili in international peer reviews journals. For example, the

*Nordic Journal of African Studies* does carry some articles in Kiswahili. Some of these articles have been written by non-Africans, thus stressing the point that Kiswahili is not confined to African academics.

The paper would also like to point out that although, South Africa, has recognized nine official languages, there is no journal that is exclusively published in isiZulu or another indigenous African language (Kamwendo 2014). A current effort to elevate the status of isiZulu in the publishing arena includes the special issue of *Alternation* (edition 13) of 2014 which had some papers written in isiZulu (Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. 2014: 4). Certain national conferences have in the past years accepted the presentation of academic papers in isiZulu. Recently students are now allowed to defend their research proposals in isiZulu at UKZN, if they want to do so. Masters and PhD levels, students registered in isiZulu related programmes are allowed to conduct and write their theses in isiZulu.

In support of promoting African indigenous languages in higher education Thompson (2009) is against the view that promoting these indigenous languages will reduce the quality of education and the unifying role of dominant foreign languages such as English or French. He refers to the practice of many African students who learn and study professional subjects in the indigenous languages of the host countries such as Germany, Russia, China, Japan and a number of East European countries (Sure 1998). Given the necessary support, why can't this gesture be extended to the dominant African indigenous languages such as Kiswahili and isiZulu as part of promoting the African Renaissance through African scholarship in higher education?

### **African Indigenous Languages in African Renaissance**

If the African Renaissance is to become more meaningful and if African scholarship has to be taken more seriously, then the use of African indigenous language in higher education should be promoted and supported. Mulokozi (2004) indicates that the growth of Kiswahili as an African indigenous language spoken across ethnic and national boundaries has contributed greatly to the building of this sense of national and regional identity in East and Central Africa.

Kiswahili has become a regional language. A national and regional language is a language that could be viewed as widely spoken, understood and accepted by a given national or regional community. It constitutes its common heritage, serving as a collective cultural and political symbol and identity, and as a tool of expressing common ideals and aspirations.

Kiswahili has proven to be a unifying language spoken and understood by majority of ordinary people in East and Central Africa. It has been observed that it is through Kiswahili that the people in these countries think, understand and express regional issues (Kasenga 2009). Moreover, in these countries, students in higher educational institutions interact, converse and socialize in Kiswahili outside their lecture theatres and laboratories. It has contributed to this national and regional identity by its ability to develop from a minority language in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to a regional language which brings together people of diverse cultural and linguistic origin in East and Central Africa and beyond.

In both the colonial and post-colonial periods, its secularization has encompassed in its use for cultural, spiritual, administrative, educational, economic and political purposes. It has become a means of expressing and sharing cross-cultural values among diverse ethnic, cultural and national groups. Different ethnic groups use Kiswahili to share their cultural values; the governments of the different countries of the region have used Kiswahili as a national and regional language to explain and articulate to the people their various development policies in agriculture, education, environmental protection, culture, etc. This has enabled government to reduce the cost of administration and governance and create national harmony among diverse ethnic and cultural groups (Amidin 2005).

For instance, in Tanzania, Kiswahili as the national language has been used to promote cultural self-reliance and self-development. Various governmental policies, including research policies in Education (Education for Self-Reliance), in Agriculture (*Siasa ni Kilimo*, that is Politics is Agriculture); Natural Resources Conservation (*Mali Asili na Wanyama Pori*, that is Natural Resources and Wildlife), etc. have been articulated and disseminated in Kiswahili. In order to enable more citizens to have access to these policies including the legal and justice system, law courts have increasingly used Kiswahili, and specialist committees have been

appointed to work out and develop an adequate legal vocabulary. Tanzania has utilized Kiswahili not only as an expression of the African identity and scholarship but also as an expression of being a Tanzanian. It has become part of Tanzania's patriotism (Lyana 2012). In a cultural-nationalist context, Tanzania has given Kiswahili as a national resource, educational roles as a medium of instruction in schools.

The notion of the African Renaissance is of high relevance to the current discussion about Kiswahili for communication modules at a higher education institution that is located on the South African soil. What the researchers find relevant here is what can be termed African linguistic renaissance. The late Neville Alexander made a very critical observation when he said that "to speak of an African Renaissance without addressing the fundamental question of the development and use in high-status functions of African indigenous languages is a contradiction in terms" (Alexander 1999: 11). Makgoba et al. (1999: xi) also advance the same view: "Can African people champion their Renaissance through the medium of foreign languages? This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to African people." The demise of apartheid in South Africa triggered an urgent need for a transformation process. Transformation goes beyond merely looking at gender and racial representations. Language was one of the key cornerstones of the apartheid system, and in knowledge production, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages. African languages are expected to play a more robust role in science and academia and knowledge production (Nzimande 2012). As Nzimande (2012: 1) argues, "the debate is no longer whether we should develop African languages as languages of scholarship in academia, but rather when and how should these languages be part of our academic discourse beyond the mere symbolism that is currently at play at most of our universities."

### **African Indigenous Languages and Africa-led Globalization**

The promotion of African indigenous languages and African scholarship in higher education will contribute to the building a critical mass of human capital to advance Africa-led globalization. Kiswahili offers to the world a language that carries no colonial baggage. This is due to the fact that unlike the case of languages such as English, French, Portuguese and Span-



ish, the spread and use of Kiswahili is not associated with any establishment of colonies. In other words, Kiswahili is not the language of any former colonial power (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998; Mulokozi 2004; Moshi 2006). Kiswahili has grown as a language of choice by millions of people in East, Central Africa and other regions of Africa and beyond. There is, therefore, a growing number of non-native speakers of Kiswahili. In fact, just like English, non-native speakers of Kiswahili outnumber the mother tongue speakers. Kiswahili has attained the status of *lingua franca*, thus becoming a major cross-border language on the African continent. There is an increase in the demand for Kiswahili translators and interpreters by various global agencies that offer language services to law enforcement, hospitals, legal services, immigration services, airlines and schools (Moshi 2006).

There is also a growing number of teachers, academic researchers, translators, interpreters, language editors, journalists, radio and television broadcasters and publishers whose point of focus is Kiswahili. This means that Kiswahili is a growing job-creating African language. It is an economically rewarding language. This goes against the claim that African languages are generally not in the job-creating mode, and thus their speakers see no value in learning or specializing in such languages when they are economically dead ends. But the case of Kiswahili tells a different story. Here is a language which can claim to have a vibrant language industry growing around it (Moshi 2006).

Another area which promotes African indigenous languages' contribution to Africa-led globalization is in the global performing arts. Hip-hop is no longer confined to the West where it has strong roots (Muhidin 2010). For example, in East and Central Africa, Kiswahili hip-hop is gaining much popularity among the youth. The same applies to other African indigenous languages such as IsiZulu. The global dimension of hip-hop plays a great role in attracting non-African indigenous language speakers to the lyrics and the associated performances even when the language used is not fully understood. Kiswahili-based Hip-hop, for instance, offers a new avenue for learning Kiswahili through soft emersion and away to share African indigenous knowledge and cultural values that are not easily accessible through print media.

Lyana (2012) shows that the attraction of Kiswahili hip-hop music to non-native speakers is evident in the number of foreigners, particu-

larly the youth and tourists, who buy Kiswahili - hip-hop CDs and audio cassettes of this music and their keen interest in learning both the lyrics and the accompanying dance moves. The poetic nature of the lyrics makes it relatively easy for Kiswahili learners to learn the language and the dance moves. Interest in attaining fluency and high proficiency levels of the language also seems to be on the rise both at institutions in the West and at language centers in both Kenya and Tanzania. A good example is the MS-training Center for Development in Tanzania that, for many years, used to attract only a handful of learners from Europe. Currently, the Centre registers thousands of students from Europe, the Americas, and non-Kiswahili speaking countries in Africa.

These examples demonstrate that African indigenous languages are gaining a global prominence as a tool of promoting African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and associated value systems. They have and continue to be used to shape the understandings of the world about Africa and its value system. This globalization of African indigenous languages and associated African indigenous knowledge systems is facilitated by the growing use of these languages in world media. Kiswahili is broadcasted in international media channels such as the Voice of America, Radio Deutsche Welle, BBC radio and Television, and Asia radio and TV programmes. Kiswahili has been identified by Microsoft for the development of scanner OCR that would identify Kiswahili text. It was selected due to its status as a strong and widely spoken and understood indigenous African language that can stand a global test in business and communication.

Various African scholars and researchers within and outside Africa are developing manuals in African indigenous languages that are intended to facilitate understanding of how information and communication technology (ICT) such as Word Perfect could be utilized in African indigenous languages by Microsoft (Raymond 2008). However, Pariola (2009) notes that African indigenous languages face the same challenges from eurocentricism affecting indigenous African knowledge systems in the global knowledge economy. They are perceived as unscientific and not capable of meeting the challenges of globalization, especially modern science and technology.

In the case of Kiswahili, Mulokozi (2004) indicates that the development and growth of Kiswahili as a national and international lan-

guage has been dictated by demand, both economic and social. Therefore, as long as this demand exists, Kiswahili will continue to develop and expand. In this process, Kiswahili will encounter obstacles from both within and without Africa. In the case of within, its success may arouse narrow ethnic particularism and nationalism among certain groups or nations, and these could be manipulated by unscrupulous politicians to hamper the adoption of Kiswahili as a national or pan-African language. Within the Swahili speaking communities, there might also arise similar chauvinistic sentiments seeking to reconfine Kiswahili to its "original" coastal shell. These sentiments are already shown, but being ahistorical, will probably not have much impact. If they are to succeed, they could trigger a negative reaction from many people within and outside Africa who are abandoning their languages in favour of Kiswahili.

However, a more serious obstacle to the development of African indigenous languages such as Kiswahili and Isizulu, as global languages in higher education is the threat from dominant foreign languages, especially English and French. It might be much harder for these languages to win this fight, in the short term, mainly because the African leadership is still mesmerized by things foreign. The current English/French/Portuguese speaking elite that has ruled and ruined Africa is unlikely or perhaps unable to abandon its Europhilia. This is complicated by the fact that in the context of globalization, Africa is still on the receiving end. It is still being globalized, just as it has been done for centuries. Yet there are areas in which Africa too can globalize the world if it is serious enough in areas in which Africa excels, including its indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Thompson 2009; Said 2005).

### **Gender and African Indigenous Languages in Higher Education**

Bodomo et al. (1995) argue that the gendered nature of African indigenous languages and knowledge systems tends to be neglected in the sustainable community livelihood and development discourse including scholarship in Africa. This is elaborated by Kamwaya (1997) who indicates that over half of the population in the rural areas of Africa are women. They play a central role in locally-manageable and cost-effective

sustainable livelihood of their households and local communities in terms of food security, health, and natural resource management. In this process they depend on their local languages such as IsiZulu and Kiswahili to communicate associated knowledge, technology and value systems across generations. Kassim (2001) explains further that gender is embedded in all African traditional institutions, social practices, beliefs and desires that go along with the mapping of language use through communication, interaction and establishment of the social order. For instance, in East and Central Africa where Kiswahili is widely used in socio-economic, political and cultural communication, women, who are mostly responsible for the food and nutritional needs of their families, possesses a detailed awareness of the species and ecosystems which surround them. In traditional agriculture, women are involved in almost all aspects of farming, from seed selection and planting, to harvesting, weeding, winnowing and storing grain. They are often the local educators, passing on traditional knowledge and technologies, acting as traditional birth attendants in many rural societies, where there is no access to "modern" medical facilities. They are as well instrumental in developing and sustaining techniques and designs for textiles, clothing, and other valuable forms of traditional cultural expression (Murphy 2008).

The integration of African indigenous languages and knowledge systems in higher education research will provide student to have knowledge and awareness on the interplay of gender relations in terms of differentiation and specialization in African societies. They will realize the way indigenous knowledge and skills held by women often differ from those held by men, affecting patterns of access, use, and control, while resulting in different perceptions and priorities for the innovation and use of knowledge systems.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper uses the cases of isiZulu and Kiswahili to discuss the contribution of African indigenous languages to the promotion of African scholarship, African Renaissance and Africa-led globalisation. It was revealed that both languages are imparting African cultural value systems in society, education and socio-economic development. They provided students and other people within and outside Africa, with

access to African indigenous knowledge and value systems. Institutional multilingual policies have been enacted in some higher educational institutions such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa to support the role of African indigenous languages in higher education transformation. Both Kiswahili and IsiZulu are taught in higher educational institutions in various parts of the world. They also contribute to African indigenous knowledge production and dissemination through the research, publications, national and international mass media.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that the development and promotion of African indigenous languages such as Kiswahili and isiZulu in higher education should take into account the current global trends and needs, especially in the area of information and communication technologies (ICT). Furthermore, for sustainability, there is need to develop a critical mass of young experts grounded and committed in the development and promotion of these African indigenous languages. Moreover, the success of this endeavour will need the different stakeholders involved in these languages in all parts of the world, to work together. They will have to cooperate and coordinate their activities, share resources, and experiences to avoid duplication of efforts and reduce costs. This can be done through joint projects, fellowships, scholarships, external examining, conferences and electronic interaction.

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