

Democracy, Language and Inclusive Education in the African Context.¹

Kwesi Kwaa Prah
University of Zululand
Kwadlangezwa

Introduction

Democracy is ultimately more an ideal, a principle, than a formally constituted and historically fixed formula of government. To varying degrees and extents, it has featured in different societies at different points in history. In our times, the desirability of democracy as an overarching principle of social organization is one of the least contested popular values of political life. In Africa, since the mid-20th century, it is institutionally identified with universal adult suffrage, the right for all adults to vote in the selection of state and representative leaderships, “one man one vote” as it is sometimes called. While other enabling conditions such as rights to association, equality before the law, free speech and religious freedom are generally acknowledged, most African states principally adhere to the symbolism of universal suffrage. While this is the idea, practice leaves much to be desired. These ideas as broad values, have in substance been the conditions which have been used as defining principles for the constitutional basis of the post-colonial citizenship in Africa.

Democratic deficits are not exclusive Africa, Asia and Latin America. In the West, glaring and flagrant deficiencies in democratic practice have been both common in the past and present. Ancient Greece the much-vaunted cradle of Western democracy rested on a slave underclass. In most of the West until the 1920s women did not have universal voting rights. Throughout the 1960s in Northern Ireland Catholics protested for civil rights. The United States of America was built on slavery, since the abolition of the “peculiar institution” in 1865 and the Reconstruction era which followed, Jim Crow laws, lynching and voter suppression directed against its supposed citizens, of African descent, has never stopped. Some gains were made in the Civil Rights Protest era of the 1960s but since the ouster of Trump again in recent weeks and months some states in the US are passing legislation to make it difficult for African-Americans to vote.

Most people will agree that modern citizenship is at best an educated condition, and that democracy is the most satisfactory formula for the organization of society today. Thus, citizenship is a requisite feature of a democratic system. When we say a socio-political system is democratic, we are also saying that the system is sensitive and responsive to the interests of the citizenry and also that this citizenry operates the routinization of government through an institutionalized elective process which gives them a share and say in government, however removed they may be from the immediate area of political leadership and decision-making. Furthermore, modern citizenship eschews the idea of superior or inferior citizens. All are equal before the law, all have equal voting rights, without exception all are free to engage in the activities of citizenship, all are in the expression of their political rights free to express both individual and group interests. Thus, for democracy to flourish, there is need for a constant state

¹ An earlier version of this paper was offered as a Zoom lecture for The Research Group on, Diversity, Inclusion and Education, the University of Stavanger, Norway (Mangfold, inkludering og utdanning | Universitetet i Stavanger (uis.no), 29th January 2021.

of social and political interrogation and debate between those in and out of authority. Representation must be accountable and must institutionally provide for eventual recall. For citizens to meet the challenge of questioning and seeking information on matters affecting them, literacy is crucial. It increases the speed and volume of information flow. It puts people on indelible record. Print and access to print is therefore vital for the cultivation of a citizenry, which is alive to these possibilities. In an earlier address the point was made that, “conditions crucial to the cultivation of a democratic culture in which the idea of freedom of the press has a fuller meaning are that there has to be a high level of literacy in the African languages of the masses; a level high enough to make newspapers, intellectually, realistic propositions. It is also possible to say that newspapers in languages, which come easily to them will enhance the literacy levels of the people. For as long as media work is preeminently in European languages, they will be unable to reach a substantial section of mass society. ... this condition will steadily undermine the development of a more fully fledged democratic culture. Furthermore, it will continue to inhibit the potential of the citizenry to participate in state-wide decision-making.”²

In the contemporary world, across the globe, people of almost all political persuasions make claims of affiliation and adherence to democracy as an ideal. It includes in its conceptualization different prerequisites for different societies. From left to right in the ideological spectrum, most minds would endorse a preference for democratic processes and practices as the fairest and least conflictual approach to collective decision-making. Institutionalized consensus-based decision-making, social inclusion, the celebration of diversity and the cultural empowerment of citizenry, values of tolerance, equality before law and last but not least secularism; these have become related and undoubted standards in much of the present-day world. This is what global late capitalism in the early decades of the 21st century reveals. For the last two centuries the West has been its heartland. In more recent times the centre of global capitalism has moved East. Japan led the way in the late-19th century, China under the Chinese Communist Party is supervising a stupendous capitalist production process which continues to power-on the Chinese economy at awesome speed. As the middle classes grow, the demands for more bourgeois democratic rights will increase.

Democracy’s standards and provisions have constantly evolved and alter as societies change. The central principle remains inviolate while the practical and historical manifestations as economic and social institutions expose its changing and evolving character. It is adapted to address and suit historical, cultural and social peculiarities of the larger social and economic groupings in society. Its content is defined by the preeminent classes and the dominant ideas associated with them. Democracy is primarily characterized in the interest of the ruling groups.

But also, democratic societies bare the habits of the majorities, they recognize the sovereignty of mass society, and provide equal rights to citizens and to minorities of all types, cultural, linguistic, religious and political groups. Inclusivity, “the fact or policy of not excluding members or participants on the grounds of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability etc,” the embrace of the other is therefore, in our times, a prime feature of a democratic society. The notion of inclusivity also implies co-existence of difference and the recognition that cultural diversity enriches societies. It at the cultural level universalizes the notion of democracy, and offers dispensations based on tolerance, accommodation and cultural space in an increasingly incommensurable world.

Noticeably, the elaboration and deepening of the concept of democracy, has been marked over the last century and a half by the idea of the right of people to self-determination. This has recognizably been variously articulated from the early 1860s. Woodrow Wilson, as leader of the United States, supreme imperial power emerging out of the “war to end all war” placed it in 1918

² Kwesi Kwaa Prah. Language and Freedom of Expression in Africa. Ghana Free Expression Series No. 2. Media Foundation for West Africa. 2001. Pp.22-23.

centre stage at the Peace Conference in Versailles following the 1st World War. The idea became a cornerstone of the principles of international relations under the auspices of the emergent League of Nations. Subsequently, after the 2nd World War, human rights tenets as formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) were recognized by the world body. Nearer our times Mondiacult, the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City in 1982 has added to an increasingly shared universal understanding of the need for cultural pluralism in the modern world.

The 1982 conference, without dissenting voices, rejected hierarchical positioning of cultures since there are no rational grounds for discrimination between “superior cultures and inferior cultures.” The conference reasserted the duty for the respect of all cultures. The meeting highlighted the fact that cultural identity was the defence of traditions, of history and of the moral, spiritual and ethical values handed down by past generations. It advised that present and future cultural practices were just as valuable as past ones and underscored the understanding that both governments and communities should participate in the development of cultural policies. Therefore, governmental institutions as well as civil society should collectively contribute to the development of cultural policies.³

One of the key achievements of the meeting was its reformulation of the culture concept. It acknowledged that heritage also includes all the values of culture as expressed in our daily lives. It is crucial to include in its understanding activities calculated to sustain the ways of life and forms of expression by which such cultural values were conveyed. The Conference observed that the attention given to the preservation of the “intangible heritage” may be regarded as one of the most constructive developments of the preceding decade. It is also notable that this meeting was arguably the first occasion that the term “intangible heritage” was officially used by the world body.⁴

The Conference, besides redefining the concept of culture (by including in its definition not only arts and letters, but also modes of life and livelihood, the fundamental rights of the human being in both individual and group contexts, value systems, traditions and beliefs), approved in the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies a new definition of cultural heritage which included both tangible and intangible works through which the culture and creativity of people finds expression: languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries. The Mexico Declaration also asserted that every culture represents a distinctive and irreplaceable reservoir of values since each people’s corpus of traditions and forms of expression are its most effective means of demonstrating its presence in the world. In this sense, it also remarked that cultural identity and cultural diversity are inseparable and that the recognition of the presence of a variety of cultural identities wherever various traditions exist side by side constitutes the very essence of cultural pluralism.⁵

Culture and Language

Culture is a spacious and encompassing concept. It embraces the totality of products which have resulted from the creative ingenuity of humans. Some of these products are material and are therefore tangible while others, in such areas of social life like religion, language, beliefs, customs and values are intangible, shared understandings, but are often more instrumental in the guidance of behaviour than the more recognizable material products of culture. While culture is the result of human creativity, it is above all, the key factor which shapes the way people behave. In as far as it is a historical and social product often tied to geography and environment it tends to have specificity with respect to the peoples who create particular cultures. Thus, while cultures vary

³ See, 1982-2000: From Mondiacult to Our Creative Diversity. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/1982-2000-00309> Accessed, 16.1.2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

from one society to the other and also in societies, there are also features of different cultures which are common to humanity as a whole.

In an increasingly globalizing world, where we are all becoming global villagers, near neighbours, living cheek to jowl with everybody else, those cultural features which are shared collectively by humanity as a whole are increasing by the day. European beer and Scotch whisky are culturally globalized in much the same way as Chinese and Indian cuisine are. Safari, the KiSwahili word for journey has become common parlance for a tourist package to see African wildlife. But, in spite of the universal cultural habits which we increasingly all indulge and share, most of the group specifics of culture and the peculiarities of cultural traits, values, artefacts, science and technology remain. The skills for some technologies are for reasons of history or culture, more prevalent in specific countries. The Swiss have made a name for watches. for and are created more easily in some societies than others. In Japan, bathroom technology is more sophisticated and adapted to Japanese cultural values and practice than anywhere else. The adaptation of science and technology to suit the cultural and institutional foundations of the social life of a given people affirms the sense of confidence and cultural well-being of the people concerned.

Language stands at the heart of the culture concept. Language is an organized sequential arrangement of vocal sounds which are used and shared in communication by human beings, and which comprehensively catalogues objects, events, and processes in the human environment. It is the historical register of the human experience. The cataloguing function of language is a feature, which is often under-argued or under-represented. It is a register, a compendium of all that is known or recognized in our environment. Languages are cultural worlds, carrying the histories and memory of their users. It is a record of the history of a given speech-community, mirroring its experience and bearing all the imprints and history of its users. No single area of culture is as revealing of the history of its users as language.⁶ We can therefore say that knowing a language means gaining entrance to the cultural world of the speakers of that language; it provides a worldview of its speakers.

Language, or more pointedly the lexicon of a given language can tell us whether the society is pre-industrial or industrial, hunter-gatherer or sedentary-agricultural, tropical or temperate. The nuanced use of idiom and accentuation differentiates commoner and aristocrat. regional origin, native and foreigner. All of these realities are captured in language and its use.

The grand delusion of the African elites is that it is possible to move forward to equality and modernity in a globalizing world on the basis of languages, which are totally foreign to the overwhelming majorities in Africa. This extravagant fallacy assumes that modernity, understood as technological and scientific advancement are tied to the usage of the received colonial languages. There are those who would argue that, indeed this position is hardly a misconception, and that rather, it is the understandable response of current elites to the conditions of the present in which their social and material interests are inextricably bound with the maintenance of the status quo.

There is no greater mark of superiority and inferiority in the contemporary African scene than the inability or ability to speak a colonial language. The implications of this ability or disability is best exemplified in those places in Africa where membership of parliament is acceptable or not acceptable depending on whether the person is able to speak in the elite colonial language. For as long as Africa remains trapped and bound in the consequences of colonial language usage there is little chance of advancement either at the scientific and technological levels or the socio-cultural level. Another consequence of colonial language usage is that the culture of democracy

⁶ K.K. Prah. African Languages for the Mass Education of Africans. CASAS Book Series No.7. 2nd Edition. Cape Town. 2000. pp.33-34.

can hardly be indigenized and owned by the masses of Africa. The persistence of colonial language usage in Africa will in effect mean that the aura of inferiority will continue to linger around Africa and Africans. It is the principal sign of our cultural inferiority.

Language, Culture and Knowledge

If culture is sociologically represented by language and language-community, language defines the entirety of knowledge as an expression of culture. What we know is what we can speak or write about. There is nothing in our individual or collective realities that is beyond language. Reality in effect is captured and represented by language and it is in language that we socially transact all our interventions based on shared or divergent understandings of reality. Thus, knowledge is tied to culture. It is in culture that knowledge is provided in accessible forms. But if culture is the repository of knowledge it is through language that the opening to knowledge as a cultural attribute is accessed. Does this mean that knowledge is bound to specific cultures? That is certainly not the case. Knowledge is ultimately expressible in any language. In other words, there is no language, which from start is entrusted with the preservation and development of knowledge as a universal human quality. Knowledge can be transferred into any cultural system and accessed through the language specific to the culture in question. The above points need to be stressed in the African context where too often it is assumed that African languages are incapable of scientific and technological development.

If we want to engage the fuller participation of civil society in African countries for purposes of education and development in any of the identifiable societal spheres, for example, democracy, health, media, human rights, gender issues, etc. it is obvious that mass society should be reached and engaged in the languages that are accessible to them; the languages that they best understand and easily express themselves in. Literature in all these spheres, to be effective, needs to be provided in the languages of the people. Greater civic participation cannot be achieved if the languages of engagement are foreign to the people.

Whenever the recommendation is made, that African languages need to become central at all levels of education and all areas of social life in Africa, if Africa is to have a realistic chance at development, most observers react with different degrees of surprise and shock. The fact that, in all countries of Europe and most of Asia, people use their own languages for these purposes is easily forgotten or overlooked. Somehow, for Africans a different logic becomes operative, and this logic is articulated as either one or more of the following arguments; that Africa has too many languages for it to be practical to use African languages for education and wider social life; that, indeed, because of this assumed overabundance of languages any attempt to use one or the other language is likely to engender tension and create societal conflict; that African languages are too intellectually bereft and epistemologically anaemic in quality to carry notions of modern science and technology. Some observers even go as far as advising that African languages are only fit for poetic and limited domestic utterances. Other arguments which are presented to dissuade the use of African languages for education are that our languages have hardly any literature and that the cost and effort of developing them is prohibitive. On the bases of these arguments the detractors propose that because the imperial languages, French, Portuguese, Arabic and English are “universal languages” they should be the languages of logical recourse. Unfortunately, a sizeable proportion of African elites buy into these arguments. There are others who contend that Africans do not in fact want to work in their languages, since visibly in this neocolonial era the languages of power and vertical social mobility are English, French, and Portuguese.

These contentions are defective and bear misconceptions which can be in disputation easily invalidated. For a start, implicit in all of them is a cultural inferiority complex vis a vis, Arabic and Western languages. No language, as is now well understood by all serious linguists, is incapable of development as languages of education, science and technology. Where languages

suffer from this malaise, this is simply because the necessary social and economic inputs and philosophical orientation have not been invested in them to elevate their quality to modern or modernizing languages. Metaphorically, there is no language which from Adam is either elected or selected for greater things, i.e., languages which are inherently superior. Languages develop because people develop them, the owners of the language purposefully develop them. The requirements in this development process are their intellectualization, technologization, and the production of supporting literature. Three outstanding examples of this speedy and conscientious process of language development during the last hundred years are Modern Hebrew, Bahasa, and Afrikaans.

English, French, Portuguese and Arabic are languages of power in Africa today because they were for purposes of imperial dominance put in that position by the colonial powers which colonized Africa; the subsequent inheritors of colonial power, the African elites, which have from the onset on post-colonialism reproduced themselves continue to maintain these languages as their cultural basis of power. What this by implication also means is that, if Africans wish to fundamentally roll back the cultural edifice of settler-colonialism or colonialism in its current neocolonial forms, we need, as of necessity to re-centre our languages in the social order.

It is the African elites who set the pace for the rejection of African languages in Africa. The masses of Africa live and work largely in African languages, their full involvement in the development process in Africa can be best achieved when African countries work in local languages. This is the difference, in this respect, between Asian and African countries, and this is one of the main reasons why Asia is making such rapid progress while Africa marks time or retrogresses. The universality of English was achieved through imperial endeavour. In the colony the language of the imperialists is the language of power. English went around the world with flag, anthem and the Gatling gun, and not through an inherent advantage of the language.

Of all the detractions marshalled against the use of African languages possibly none has been in effect as pernicious as the suggestion that Africa is a Tower of Babel. The most common figures suggested for African languages range between 1000 and 2000 plus. Indeed, it is difficult to find figures from any two observers which coincide. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is remarkable that no clear and consensual picture exists with respect to either the number of languages on the African continent, or how these languages can be usefully classified. Each researcher on African languages appears to put his or her own tally of numbers on them. Given the ubiquity and arbitrariness of the African languages numbers game which goes on, one can conclude that this idea has knowingly or unknowingly become a convenient argumentation instrument in the hands of those who want to see Africans work permanently in the colonial languages.

If development must come to Africa it must come in the cultural features and recognize the historical continuities of Africans; it must be based on continuities which speak to the African imagination; it must come in African languages. We need to remind ourselves that no language is from origin a language of science and technology. Languages become modern and scientific in their competence because people decide to make them so and invest in them the necessary resources to make them so. In the UNESCO Report of the Commission on Culture and Development (1995) the point is adequately made that; "All languages are equal in the sense that they are an instrument of communication and every language has the same potential as a world language. The realization of this potential depends on the opportunities it is given. It was once believed that languages are like living creatures; they are born, grow, decline and die. This picture is false. Languages are wholly both instruments for and results of the societies in which they are used or abandoned. The fate of all languages is the result of the social and political environment,

above all of power relations.”⁷ We need to terminologically equip our languages to embrace modern science and technology; that is essential to the work of intellectually extending the frontiers of African languages to embrace modernity. In this respect, Asians have sound lessons for Africans.

Multilingualism in Africa

We want also to observe that, multilingualism is a ringing African sociological reality. Brock-Utne and Mercer write that, for example, a Tanzanian school inspector, Moshi Kimizi relates how he grew up with three different languages. He would speak one of them with his father’s clan, another and very different one with his mother’s clan – they all lived in the same compound – and Kiswahili with his friends. He could not say which one was his mother tongue or first language. Africans are multilingual and most Africans speak several African languages, at least one of which is likely to be a regional or more common one which could well be used as a language of instruction Adama Ouane a former Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, also reports that he grew up with three different African languages simultaneously and, like Moshi Kimizi, he is unable to determine which one is his “mother-tongue” or first language. Mass society in Africa is not Francophone, Anglophone or Lusophone; Africa is Afrophone. A study in Nigeria which found that 60 per cent of the population spoke two African languages, 30 per cent spoke three languages and 10 per cent spoke four or more languages. Africans are now increasingly moving within and between countries and are as a result becoming more and more multilingual in African languages.⁸ In Nima, Ghana, 69 per cent of those interviewed spoke at least four languages and 41 per cent spoke five languages or more. The multilingualism of Africans is especially pronounced in urban and peri-urban areas where speakers of many languages interact.⁹

The CASAS Experience

If Africa is to move forward educationally and developmentally, the culture of the masses would need to be brought in from the cold. The principle of inclusivity requires this. No section of the population should be unfavourably serviced on any account. Furthermore, education and the mass media must reach the urban and rural millions in ways which culturally speak to them; in forms which do not dismiss or gloss over their historical and cultural heritage; but rather recognizing these, constructs education, knowledge and the use of the mass media on the basis of what the people already know, the cultural institutions to which they primarily respond. Building on these is the surest way of consolidating, expanding and deepening the African experience.

Another important factor in the African linguistic reality is the fact that because most African languages until recently (the past 150 years) have been purely oral expressions, with limited largely evangelical Christian literature. The spoken languages remain the main repositories of African culture. These issues constituted the rationality of the CASAS (Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society) work. The project was identified as a harmonization and standardization of African languages orthographies project and seen as a prerequisite for African development and the mass-level usage of African languages.

⁷ Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. UNESCO. Paris. 1995. 1996 edition. P.179.

⁸ Birgit Brock-Utne and Malcolm Mercer. Using African languages for democracy and lifelong learning in Africa: A post-2015 challenge and the work of CASAS. International Review of Education. Springer. 23rd November. 2014. Springer Science and Business Media Dordrecht and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2014. DOI 10.1007/s11159-014-9448-7

⁹K. K. Prah. A Tale of Two Cities: Trends in Multilingualism in Two African Cities: The Cases of Nima-Accra and Katutura-Windhoek. In, Prah, K. K. and Brock-Utne, B. Multilingualism: An African Advantage. CASAS Book Series No.67. Cape Town. 2009. Pp. 250-274.

Starting from 1997, we saw to the clustering of African languages on the basis of relative mutual intelligibility, lexical and structural proximity of 85 percent or more for a good part of the continent. Some gaps still remain and need to be completed, but we now have a fairly good picture of the situation on the ground. In most of the outstanding areas, because most languages are trans-border languages, where in each instance the picture in the surrounding countries and areas are clear, much of the remaining work can easily be constructed. In some cases, we are seeking additional data and evaluation.

What CASAS' research has in this endeavour revealed is that with our multilingual backgrounds, over 80-85 percent of Africans, as first, second and third language-speakers, speak no more than 15 to 17 core languages, based on our clustering on the basis of degrees of mutual intelligibility, i.e., structural and lexical similarity. Africa, for its size is hardly a Tower of Babel. We are arguing that, if the total population of non-Arabic Africa is about a billion (as first, second and third language speakers) the Fula (Pulaar, Peul, Tucolor, Fulful, Fulbe, Fulani) cluster alone would account for about 60 million, Hausa and its varieties bring up another 50 to 60 million, Oromo, Igbo, Bambara, Amharic, KiSwahili, Yoruba, the Gbe, would produce another 50 million in each instance, the Nguni variants, the Sotho/Tswana cluster, the Akan, the Eastern and the Western inter-lacustrine Bantu (Kitara) languages, Luganda/Lusoga/Lugishu and Luo, Gur, Lingala, Kikongo are between 40 and 50 million per set. Other languages, of much smaller size, but which enjoy preponderance within existing states include, Fang, Nyanja-Cewa, Wolof, Ovambo-Herero and Somali.

Conclusion

As Africans seeking to emancipate and develop Africans, we need to champion our own interests. We cannot expect that our progress should be entrusted to the care of other societies and external interests. If African education and societal progress is to move forward like it is doing for the greater part of humanity, we must pull ourselves up, ourselves.