

AN EDITORIAL STATEMENT

IN SEARCH OF AN AFRICAN LANGUAGE

Black Africa is in search of a language of its own. It seriously needs a language that is as free of foreign influence as possible and that is integrative at home. That African States, upon the attainment of Independence from European colonial rule, chose to retain the 'official' language imposed on them by their former colonial masters should not be considered ill-advised. Faced with the prevalence of numerous indigenous languages in each territory, the new African ruling elite's retention of a neutral foreign language was, at least for the time, a useful political expedient.

But it seems to us that most of the westernized rulers of the new African states have been in error in their apparent unconcern while these languages continue to consolidate their privileged positions. The rulers have even proceeded to coalesce their new states on the false basis of the colonial languages they speak, resulting in the emergence of two competing French-speaking and English-speaking clubs. The false nature of this polarization was recently pointed out by Togo which, until recently, was a staunch member of the French-speaking OCAM which it described as suffering from profound illnesses. It should disappear and make way for a less political, more technical organization less exclusively founded on language and more open to the promotion of real African unity.... Perhaps what needs to be done is to wind up OCAM completely and in its place a larger and more viable economic union should be formed with the English-speaking states.'

Some states have attempted to solve the language problem by replacing a colonial language with the most widely spoken or understood indigenous language. On 4th July 1974, for instance, President Jomo Kenyatta decreed Kiswahili the new official language of Kenya. He and the government of Kenya deserve praise for boldly deciding, following Tanzania, to replace English with

Kiswahili. At the same time, while Kenya and Tanzania should rightly feel proud in having adopted a national lingua franca, we fear that from both national and continental perspectives the choice of Kiswahili hardly assaults the African language problem frontally.

Admittedly, the adoption of Kiswahili not only opens more opportunities for more people than English did, but it also has the immediate advantage of being spoken, written or understood by about 60% of the Kenyan population. It is a fact, however, that its vocabulary is about 40% Arabic; which makes some people wonder whether the goal of cultural pride and independence has been truly and finally served in replacing one colonial language with one that is strongly linked with the East African slave trade. Moreover, even if Kiswahili had been a pure African language, some people would still oppose its adoption from feelings of ethnic jealousy; they probably would regard Kiswahili as no less foreign than English. One of the immediate repercussions of the sudden adoption of Kiswahili will be to place non-Swahili citizens at a disadvantage in terms of employment or other opportunities.

While we hail a country's adoption of Kiswahili or any of the other bigger languages as being consonant with the need to wipe out all the appurtenances of a past colonial tutelage, we feel that this can only be an interim measure which should not divert us from our ultimate goal of total linguistic independence as much from the Europeans as from the Arabs. We merely pick on the Kenyan example as a convenient and timely illustration of our case that if we must reassert our cultural pride and independence, we have to go all the way. Endowed with thousands of languages, Africa's need for a new and uniting language will neither be met by permanently retaining the use of colonial languages nor by imposing the most widely understood indigenous language over our states. We propose the creation, by African linguists, of a new language that will give our posterity all those initial advantages that have been denied our own generation. The great merit of such a language is that it will preserve our sense of cultural pride, in being ours, and will facilitate

communication within the continent. It will also minimize the incidence of ethnic jealousies.

We realize that this will take a long time to accomplish, but the advantages will be well worth the effort. In any case, we respectfully submit that the time to begin the deliberations is NOW. Several conversations with African linguists have confirmed our belief that it is, indeed, feasible to create an African language using the structural and semantic features of the existing African languages. The general feeling, however, is that since the Bantu languages differ significantly from West African languages, the creation of two African languages - one from West Africa and another from the Bantu language area of East, Central and Southern Africa - might offer a more realistic approach.

We therefore call on African scholars - linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, and others, of whom there is an impressive number - to put their heads together on this crucial matter, in a true African spirit. They would need to agree on a methodology of selection and construction, on the nature and extent of government support, and on the best ways of introducing the language or languages into the educational system.

Needless to say, there will be strong opposition to this idea not only from our foreign detractors but also from our own intellectuals (some of them very articulate and persuasive) whose mentality is yet to be decolonized. And even when the efforts cease to be merely exploratory and enter a serious stage, skeptics will continue to scoff at them. Our appeal, therefore, is to those well-meaning scholars who share our feeling that this is an historic challenge to which the African genius has to find an appropriate answer. (It is part of the mockery we can gladly dispense with that this appeal to our African brothers and sisters is itself couched in a foreign language.) There will be no historical precedents to provide easy ways out; and our perseverance and discipline will be sorely tested over the formative years. But we are confident that we can eventually provide the type of solution we have envisaged. As we said earlier, though, we have to begin NOW.

N. Ngwenyama