Abstract

Despite language rights being almost obliterated from the global scene for a long time, demands for them have never been absent. In Africa, the Indigenous Language Rights Movement came to a head in the 1960s as part of the wider Pan-African idealization. From as early as 1967, such African luminaries as Julius Nyerere, Cheikh Anta Diop, David Diop, Mohamed Ismail, Eskia Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka, Peter Nazareth, Grant Kamenju, Pio Zirimu, Ali Mazrui and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, started questioning the exclusion of African Languages and literatures in official government circles. Over the years, many other intellectuals and accomplished scholars of African writing and modes of thought have voiced their sentiments concerning the issue of indigenous languages. The core of their argument is that as we become more globalised intellectually, we become increasingly more concerned about linguistic diversity in general, and the future and role of African languages in particular, all as part of our wider focus on the importance of cultural diversity in world affairs. Language rights advocates have argued that language and culture are difficult to separate. Language is viewed as an ethnic characteristic and parallel therefore to colour, race, religion and common history. This is the basis of ethno-linguistic nationalism now ubiquitous in much of Africa. In post-colonial Africa, this has become a self-conscious ideological movement that fuses nationalism with anti-imperialism and with a commitment to indigenous African languages. These free-thinking intellectuals begun to formulate new approaches, strategies and policies to the language question in Africa. The purpose of this commitment has been to create a new discourse that would stand separately from and, sometimes, in opposition to the discursive systems from the ex-metropolitan Europe.

Pan-African opinion and efforts to address the language issue are best exemplified by the Inter-Governmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa (1975) and the Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States(1975), both of which recommended the increased use of African languages. Despite the OAU Language Plan of Action for Africa (1986) setting the agenda and putting forth justification for the same, the issue of language rights in Africa still suffers from, among other problems, avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation, and declaration without implementation. It is increasingly
becomingly clear that most African leaders are not yet sufficiently conscious of what is fundamentally at issue in the promotion of African languages and their imperativeness in general development of the continent.

Thus, the language debate in Africa continues to dominate every single literature and language conference to do with Africa. With the current cultural and linguistic globalization now in vogue and with the declared desire for an African renaissance, there is no doubt that the issue will continue to elicit discussion with even greater aggressive insistence in the future. The emerging forces of globalization have created a basis, a reason, and an opportunity for the revival of the African Linguistic Nationalism. In its pragmatic sense, the movement is a program of Africans uniting towards the goal of linguistic liberation; it is a countervailing force against the pattern of linguistic exclusionism emerging in the world as a consequence of globalization. Although language is at the heart of the African Linguistic Nationalism, the struggle is not a matter of language alone. It is a social, political and ideological battle as well.

Against this background therefore, this paper seeks to explore the contributions of African intellectuals to the construction of the language movement in its spatial dimensions and cultural content, and political and ideological agendas. African Linguistic Nationalism is highlighted and treated as a narrative of African identity quest and solidarity, an evocation and exaltation of pristine African culturo-linguistic heritage, authenticity and genius. It is a preoccupation with African linguistic consciousness in the so-called New Global Linguistic Order, marked by domination and resistance, by conflicts and attempts at homogenization, and by a European linguistic monolith clashing with a dynamic of African multilingualism. Why has the dream for an ideal Pan-African continental language remained a mirage?