Ali A. Mazrui

Language and Race in the Black Experience: An African Perspective*

One out of every five black people on earth has a European language for a mother tongue. The dominant European languages in the black world are English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. Dutch trails behind as the fifth Eurafrican language. It is to be found among people of mixed race in South Africa and in places like Surinam. The largest black nation outside Africa is in Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

French is more dependent upon the black world for its global status than English. While the majority of French-speaking people are white, the majority of French-speaking *countries* are black. Over twenty African countries have adopted French as the main language of national business. Italian has not been adopted as a national language in any African country, but it is widely understood among elites in Somalia, Ethiopia and Libya. As for the German language, it has a residual role in Namibia.

Although in Africa itself European languages are seldom mother tongues of indigenous people, the continent has produced exceptional black masters of European languages. It is one of the ironies of literary history that the first black winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature has not been an African-American or a Jamaican for whom English is the mother tongue, but a Yoruba-speaking Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, in 1986. Similarly, the most honored black user of the French language in France has not been a black Frenchman or woman from, say, Martinique for whom French is the mother tongue, but Leopold Senghor, the philosopher-poet and former president of Senegal.

Much more common than linguistic accolades for blacks from Europeans, however, is the link between language and white domination over blacks. Our emphasis in this analysis will be especially on the *African* part of the black experience, though aspects of the conclusions are of much wider relevance.

The history of language in Africa in the twentieth century reflects closely the fact of continuity and change in African political, social, cultural, psychological and economic realities. The period characterizes the consolidation of colonialism and racism with their far-reaching linguistic and cultural policies, the struggle for independence, the emergence of neo-colonialist trends and the rise of African self-consciousness in matters relating to the preservation and promotion of African national institutions.

In many ways the half century before independence constituted a period of maximum threat to indigenous languages in Africa; and yet at the same time they were the years of codification, new orthographies and literary output for some languages which were previously unwritten. African languages were threatened by colonial policies which gave a new emphasis to European languages in education and administration. And yet some of the major indigenous tongues acquired new orthographies based on the colonially imported Latin alphabet and were consequently better preserved in writing than had been possible in their days as purely oral tongues. Colonialism threatened the indigenous heritage by the promotion of European languages. And yet colonialism inadvertently helped the preservation of African oral legacies by the miracle of the written word. This essay is partly about this interplay between the tongue and the pen, between the indigenous and the imported in the field of language in cultural transition.

Language Policy and Racial Attitudes

European arrogance during the colonial period had two major components: the premise of a *superior* race and the premise of a *superior* culture. The balance between racial arrogance and cultural arrogance varied between one imperial power and another. On the whole, the French were more *culturally* arrogant than the British refusing to mix cultures in colonial schools and insisting on the supremacy of French civilization. The British, on the other hand, were more *racially* arrogant than the French insisting on the segregation of the races between schools but permitting the mixture of cultures in the curriculum. It has been said that the French did not mind who made

love with whom provided the preliminaries were conducted in impeccable French. The British *did* mind who made love with whom. Sometimes they minded who made love at all. It would therefore be a mistake to assume that these differing imperial powers so distinct in their racial attitudes would evolve the same *language* policies in their colonies. Different forms of imperial arrogance had different implications for language planning in the colonies.

Because the British were less *culturally* arrogant than the French (though more racist), African languages fared better under the British raj. Indeed, a distinction can be drawn between Germanic-speaking Europeans generally (the Germans, the British, the Flemish, the Afrikaners) and Latin-speaking Europeans (the French, the Portuguese, the Italians and the Spaniards). The Germanic Europeans were more likely to insist on the segregation of the races. The Latin Europeans were more likely to dismiss "native cultures." Sometimes for purely racist reasons (as in the case of the Afrikaners in South Africa) Germanic-speaking Europeans insisted on the greater use of indigenous languages in education and a greater recognition of African cultures.

In contrast, Latin Europeans were more mesmerized by ideas of *assimilation* (or Portuguese *assimilado*) and showed less tolerance towards indigenous languages than did the Germanic-speaking (or Teutonic) powers. As a result one was far more likely to see newspapers in indigenous languages in British colonies in this later period than in French or Portuguese colonies. One was also far more likely to see the use of indigenous languages in schools in British colonies than in French, Portuguese, or Italian colonies in this late colonial period. We shall spell out these policies more fully later.

At their most extreme French colonialists believed that no African was good enough unless he or she spoke French. On the other hand, there are German whites in Namibia even today who believe that no African is good enough to speak German. There certainly were white settlers in colonial Kenya who forbade their servants from speaking English to the master's family even if the servant's English was much better than the master's Kiswahili. The social distance between the servant and the white mistress especially was often maintained by ensuring that the servant did not address "the *Memsab*" (East Africa's equivalent of *Mem-Sahib*) in the English language. When the Germans promoted Kiswahili in colonial Tanganyika and the British in colonial East Africa as a whole, the reasons were sometimes purely

racial, sometimes due to missionary zeal or colonial convenience, and sometimes scholarly.

Two cases of European domination in this period happened to be internally *bilingual* Belgian domination of the Congo (French and Flemish) and the Anglo-Afrikaner domination of South Africa. There were dilemmas to be resolved by the white oppressors themselves in these subjugated countries.

In the case of Belgian domination of the Congo, the dilemma was indeed between the Latin legacy of the French language (intolerant of indigenous languages elsewhere in Africa) and the Germanic legacy of Flemish (in the tradition of greater accommodation with local languages elsewhere). The power of Francophone Belgians in the *metropole* in this period ensured that the French language was the one which was bequeathed to the Congo. The power of the Flemish missionaries and educators *"on the ground"* in the Congo ensured some tactical tolerance for indigenous languages and avoidance of French "assimilation" as a policy in the Congo. Francophone power in Belgium resulted in the exclusion of Flemish in the colonies. Flemish power locally in the Congo resulted in the minimization of the French impact and the promotion of indigenous languages.

The other European dilemma in Africa concerned South Africa. The competition between Afrikaans and English was more purely inter-Germanic rivalry in our sense. Two versions of the Teutonic paradigm had clashed. For reasons which were designed to protect the white man rather than preserve African culture, the Afrikaners preferred to slow down "the westernization of the native" in this period. Language policy was part of this deceleration of the westernizing process. Afrikaners preferred "Bantu Education" as a device of keeping Africa "African" and white power supreme!

But unfortunately for the Afrikaners, this was a period of Pan-African identification among their "natives." More and more black South Africans felt that if they had to choose between English and Afrikaans, the former was of greater Pan-African relevance. On the one hand, Afrikaans was a symbol of white oppression, on the other hand, the English language was a means of communication with much of the rest of Africa. Two Germanic languages had widely differing implications. Afrikaans was a language of racial claustrophobia. English, on the other hand, was a language of Pan-African communication. The Soweto riots of 1976 against Afrikaans were part of that linguistic dialectic.

What of the role of Arabic in Africa during this period? In the Maghreb, the French tried to strengthen two rivals to Arabic: the promotion of the French language itself and the cultivated rivlary of indigenous Berber. French language policy tried to foster a triple heritage of verbal communication in the Maghreb—Arabic, Berber and French. It was part of France's policy of "Divide and Rule." The policy had more success than it deserved at least until the 1940s and 1950s when North African nationalism tried at last to transcend ethnic and linguistic differentiation.

Along the Nile Valley (mainly under the "Germanic" British), Arabic had an easier time. The supremacy of Arabic in Egypt was far less challenged than it was in the Maghreb. Indeed, Egypt was a fountain for the spread of Arabic elsewhere. Northern Sudan was increasingly Arabized partly as a result of the impact of Egypt. Many Sudanese resented Egypt's *political* influence. Paradoxically, most of them nevertheless embraced Egypt's cultural, linguistic and religious leadership.

What about Southern Sudan? Although this period experienced some of the worst confrontations between Sudan's North and South, especially from the mid 1950s onwards, this period also witnessed the most rapid linguistic Arabization of the South ever. In most other parts of Africa, the spread of the Islamic religion has usually been faster than the spread of the Arabic language. This is true of the Islamization of Hausa-speaking, Wolof-speaking or Swahili-speaking regions of Africa.

By contrast, Southern Sudan has experienced a faster spread of the Arabic language than of the Islamic religion. Southern Sudanese are less likely to go to the mosque than to pronounce with sophistication the Arabic words "*Insha' Allah*" (If God wills).

Language Situation and Language Policy

The spread of Arabic along the Nile Valley is only one instance. In the period since 1935 there have been other languages which have spread geographically far beyond the areas where they were spoken in the preceding years. Some languages have become languages of contact, inter-ethnic communication and lingua francas.

Four forces have been particularly important in the spread of languages: religion, economics, politics and war. The spread of Arabic in Africa historically has been mainly under the momentum of the spread of Islam. But, as we have indicated, Arabic is spreading in Southern

Sudan today because of political and economic considerations rather than as a response to religious conversion. The role of war in the spread of Arabic in the South is more complicated.

Christian missionaries all over Africa have also played a part in the spread of languages. The use of indigenous languages for the spread of the gospel has sometimes favored particular African tongues as against others. Proselytism has once again disseminated not just "*the* Word*" in the sense of religion, but "words" in the more literal sense of language.

The economy has also played a part in the spread of languages. Migrant labor, urbanization and the expansion of markets in this period have all brought people of different linguistic backgrounds together. The dramatic growth of mining industries since 1935 has also served as a magnet for attracting linguistically diverse workers with the resulting need for languages of contact.

The years from 1935 also happen to be the period of expanding involvement of the masses in *politics* initially in the struggle against colonial rule. The political mobilization of the masses, especially after World War II, increased the political use of both the imperial languages and some of the African ones as well.

World War II itself had linguistic as well as other consequences for Africa. The multilingual Africans enlisted into the armed forces created a need for a common language of command. Sometimes the imperial language of the particular European power was simplified for military needs. In British Africa the use of an indigenous lingua franca sometimes seemed to make better sense. In East Africa, Ki-Swahili developed into a military lingua franca for the King's African Rifles. Later on, the importance of Ki-Swahili within Uganda's armed forces created a surprising linguistic bond among men from otherwise diverse cultural backgrounds. When in power in the 1970s Ugandan soldiers even gave Ki-Swahili the status of a national language in the country, and expanded its use in the mass media.

Both in relation to the armed forces and for other reasons, the *gender question* has also been a factor in the spread of languages in Africa. About half of the *men* in Uganda speak some kind of Ki-Swahili but a far smaller portion of Ugandan women do. More important than the masculinity of the security forces is the fact that migrant labor in Uganda and elsewhere is more likely to consist of men than of women. Urbanization in Africa generally also involves more mobility among men than among women. As a generalization we should there-fore conclude that bilingualism and multilingualism in Africa (and per-

haps in most other societies) is more widespread among men than among women.

If religion, economics, politics and war have played a part in the spread of languages, they have sometimes also threatened the survival of some of the smaller languages. Many African languages have been losing speakers through assimilation to other language groups. Some are slowly disappearing as the number of their speakers dwindles. Many factors have contributed to this state of affairs since the 1930s. Among them are improved communication in the geographical and linguistic sense, colonial and postcolonial language policies, the work of language promoters including missionaries, ministries of education and broadcasting and to some extent teachers and linguists. There is also the sheer dynamism of some languages to survive, thrive and expand, while others contract in a situation of linguistic competition.

It is generally acknowledged that the African continent constitutes the most complex multilingual area in the world. The complexity results from the high numbers of languages, the way they are distributed, the relatively low numbers of speakers per language, and intensive language contact in many areas of the continent resulting in widespread multilingualism. It is thus difficult to know exactly how many languages there are in the continent, partly because of the problem of delineating languages and dialects; moreover, there is a considerable variation among language names in different areas.

Then there is the role of language in deciding where one ethnic group ends and another begins. The question arises: Can there be different races with the same skin color? Are black African groups which differ in speech a case of different "races" or different "tribes?"

When C. G. Seligman published his classic but controversial *Races of Africa*, the first problem he had to confront was the definition of "race." Who are the Bantu? What constituted a Nilote? Who are the Hamites and Nilo-Hamites? Seligman admitted that language by itself was not an adequate guide to "race."

> Yet the study of the races of Africa has been so largely determined by the interest in speech, and it is so much easier to acquire a working knowledge of a language than of any other part of man's cultural make-up, that names based upon linguistic criteria are constantly applied to large groups of mankind and, indeed, if intelligently used, often fit quite well. Hence, in describing the great racial groups of Africa, terms such as 'Bantu' which strictly speaking have no more than a linguistic significance, are habitually employed...[1]

In general, Seligman used the term "race" to mean a family of related "tribes" like the Bantu, but even the definition of "tribe," in turn, had to be overwhelmingly reliant on linguistic criteria. The Nilotes are those who speak Nilotic languages; the Bantu are those who speak Bantu languages. In this case we mean speech in terms of the mother tongue.

Even within "tribes" we can say the Baganda are those to whom Luganda is the first language. Imagine applying the same criterion to the English language. The English are those to whom English is the first language? What would the Scots have to say about this? Imagine the response of Jamaicans and Trinidadians.

The point becomes even clearer if you move from language to community. It may be defensible to say those to whom Luganda is the first language are Baganda. It is much more controversial to say that those to whom English is the first language are themselves English.

Languages: Communalist and Ecumenical

What we have here is a distinction between communalist languages and ecumenical languages. Communalist languages are those, like Luganda and Luo, which can be used to define a race or a tribe. Communalist languages are race-bound or "tribe-bound," and define as communities those who speak them as mother tongues. Ecumenical languages are in fact extra-communalist. They transcend these boundaries of racial or ethnic definition.

Communalist languages could be highly absorptive in the sense of allowing even newcomers to the language to be categorized racially or "tribally" as natives, provided they have, in fact, succeeded in being linguistically assimilated. This phenomenon has been striking in Buganda itself, where new groups coming in during the last two or three generations, acquiring Luganda gradually as a first language, have in time become Baganda. They become Baganda once Luganda becomes their first language.

Are communalist languages only spoken by one or two million people? This, of course, is not the case. There are communalist languages that are spoken by many millions. It is indeed arguable that the language which has the most speakers in the world, Chinese, is itself a communalist language with its expanding billion speakers. The situation is still such that we can say that the Chinese are those to whom Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin) is the mother language. If they live

in Korea and are gradually assimilated into Korean language and culture, they do after a generation or two become Koreans.

In Africa the most important non-European languages are Arabic, Hausa and Ki-Swahili. Arabic or Hausa are communalist languages in their different senses, but Ki-Swahili has ceased to be that. At the moment the majority of those who speak Ki-Swahili speak it as a second or third language, and there is an increasing number of people who grow up bilingual in Ki-Swahili and their own "tribal" language in Tanzania, Uganda or Kenya. It will become increasingly difficult to say that whoever speaks Ki-Swahili as a first language is a Mswahili. Ki-Swahili is, therefore, less absorptive than even Hausa, but that may also be its strength. The *Waswahili*, in the original sense of "the people of the coast," were defined to some extent in terms of some degree of Arabization and Islamization. Because they are now politically marginal, their language stands a chance of being acceptable to others.

But the same cannot be said of Hausa. When, in the old Federal Parliament of Nigeria, before the first *coup* of January 1966, it was proposed that Hausa should be adopted as the national language of Nigeria, strong voices were heard against the proposal. Chief Anthony Enahoro, for example, said in parliament:

> As one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people wish to impose their customs, their languages, and even more, their way of life upon the smaller tribes.[2]

And a Nigerian Minister visiting India in 1953, in relating his country's problems to a comparable multilingual situation in India reaffirmed that:

> We are not keen on developing our own languages with a view to replacing English. We regard the English language as a unifying force.[3]

Since then the fears of adopting one of the Nigerian languages have assumed even sharper significance. Certainly, in the wake of the Nigerian Civil War, and a suspicion in some quarters of a potential Hausa domination of the country as a whole, it has become even more rash to reactivate the campaign for the adoption of the Hausa language as a national language. For the time being then, Hausa is doomed to be basically a communalist language.

A more startling communalist language is Arabic, "startling" partly because of its distribution across different nations, and partly because of the great variety of colors of those who speak it. One would have expected Arabic to be as extra-communalist as the English language.

Just as English has native speakers who range from Australian industrialists and English dukes, to black fishermen in St. Kitts in the West Indies, so Arabic has native speakers who range from white Lebanese millionaires to black Sudanese soldiers. And yet while English is ecumenical, Arabic has retained its communalist nature in spite of the diversification of the colors and origins of its speakers.

The Arabs as a "race" defy pigmentational classification. They also defy any attempt to place them in any one particular continent. Are the Arabs Asians, Africans, both, or neither? It is not often remembered that there are more Arabic speakers within Africa than outside Africa. Arabic may have started in the Arabian peninsula, and then spread into the Fertile Crescent, and into Africa, but the balance of preponderance of speakers has changed. In some ways the situation is the equivalent of the change in relationship between England, as the birthplace of the English language, and the United States. The mother country, England, is now overshadowed by her former imperial extension and the danger now is of Britain becoming an extension of the United States rather than the other way round.

Does the analogy hold in the relationship between Arab Africa and the rest of the Arab world? It certainly holds as between the old Arabic peninsula proper, on one side, and Africa and the Fertile Crescent combined, on the other. Countries of the peninsula proper especially Saudi Arabia from which the Arab invasions of the seventh century originated are now overshadowed numerically even by Iraq and Syria on their own. If we put Africa on one side and the rest of the Arab world as a whole (peninsula and Fertile Crescent) on the other, the preponderance of Arabic speakers is still on the African side. As the Egyptian scholar and statesman, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, once put it, in a book published in 1963:

> It must not be forgotten that sixty percent of the Arab community and seventy-two percent of the Arab lands are in Africa.[4]

Although by crossing the Atlantic the English language became less communalist, by crossing the Red Sea Arabic remained as communalist as ever. Those who spoke Arabic as a first language became after a generation or so Arabs. The result was a staggering mixture of groups. As Erskine Childers once put it:

> ...the Arab world...comprises very many widely varying races or historical ethnic groups. The short list is bewildering, and distinguishing 'racial' definitions are themselves treacherous. From west to east, the list must include Berbers, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Arabians,

Turcomans, Egyptians, Nubians, Haemites, Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Sumerians, Kurds, Persians and a small host of ancient migratory infusions who it is safer to describe simply as Semitic.[5]

Childers goes on to say that anyone attempting to give a racial definition of "What is an Arab" would founder hopelessly in the waves of several thousand years of migration, invasion and intermarriage.

'Arabism' has nothing to do with 'race,' but has to do with language, cultural tradition and heritage...[6]

But Childers here is using the word "race" as some kind of descent by blood. Muddathir Abd Al-Rahim has also used the blood definition of race, and rejected it as not meaningful when applied to the Arabs.

In fact, however, Arabism...is not a racial bond which unites the members of a certain ethnic group. It is a cultural, linguistic and non-racial link that binds together numerous races—black, white and brown. Had Arabism been anything else but this, most modern Arabs, both Africans and Asians, including the entire population of Nothern Sudan, would cease to be 'Arab' at all.[7]

But if one insists on regarding the Arabs as a nation, then the applicable criterion is linguistic. The Arabs are those who speak Arabic as a first language. Very often they are also Muslims, and have acquired other aspects of Arab culture. The central defining characteristic becomes linguistic. Arabic, in spite of the richness of pigmentation among its speakers, remains more "race-bound" or nation-specific than the English language.

What we have here, then, is a paradox. The English people are more racially exclusive than the Arabs. But precisely because a person did not become English merely by being English-speaking, the English language became less racially exclusive than Arabic. With the Arabs, those who spoke their language became absorbed into the "race." With the English many of those who spoke their language were decidedly out of the "race." Therefore, today we identify those who speak Arabic as a native language as belonging to a particular "race." But those who speak English are decidedly not necessarily English. The English language is less race-bound partly because the Engish people have tended to be racially exclusive.

Perhaps French comes in an intermediate position between English and Arabic. The French assimilationist policy, and the colonial tendency to accord French rights to those who absorbed French culture, was strikingly reminiscent of the history of the Arabs. Perhaps if the

number of speakers. The British who did not want their language to become a universal language are landed with precisely that fate, while the French have had to embark on a determined attempt to stop French from receding in importance.

The major instrument for the initial spread of the English language was the British empire itself. French expansionism was also the single most important medium for the spread of French. But the British empire was bigger and more widespread than the French empire. Secondly, France never succeeded in producing the equivalent of a United States that is, a linguistic child who then became bigger than the mother, and began to contribute even more than the mother in the spread of the shared language. Certainly since the disintegration of the British Empire, the biggest carrier of the English language has been the American rather than the Briton. By 1966, it was estimated that there were already one-and-a-half million Americans abroad on business or technical assistance programmes, and millions more American tourists sampling the world in all its diversity.

The United States contributes large amounts of money towards the teaching of English in a large number of countries. Partly because of American leadership in important areas of science, English has become the primary language of science, aviation, sports, and increasingly even literature and the theatre. As one East African publication put it some years ago in a delightfully pungent, if journalistic style:

> When a Russian pilot seeks to land at an airfield in Athens, Cairo or New Delhi, he talks to the control tower in English.[9]

The same weekly journal drew from a recently established report estimates to the effect that seventy percent of the world's mail was by 1966 written in English and an even bigger percentage of cable and wireless transmissions. Sixty percent of the world's broadcasts were already in English. And more and more countries were introducing English as a compulsory second language in schools.

Yet in spite of this phenomenal spread of the language the British at home seemed to look upon it at best as an amusing phenomenon and at worst as something which is tending to pollute and corrupt their language. On the one hand, because English is now no longer communalist or race-bound, many foreigners to the language are scrambling to bring it into their lives. But because the English people themselves continue to be relatively insular, none of the new native speakers of the language are admitted into the fold as "English people." Indeed, some

of the new varieties of the language are not always recognized as legitimate.

An example of this scramble for the possession of English was a delightful argument which broke out in the *East African Standard* (Nairobi) in 1965. A Mr. M.S. Robinson, an Englishman, complained about the degeneration of the use of English in Kenya with particular reference to the impact of broadcasting on general usage. The purist response of British users of English as contrasted with the experimentalist tendencies of American users of English had asserted itself in Kenya in defence of the pristine originality of the texture of the language. Back came a reply from a non-British Kenyan, Mr. S. Meghani disputing Mr. Robinson's monopolistic approach to the English language. Mr. Meghani said that if Mr. Robinson did not like the way Arab people spoke English, he should also remember that others may not like the way he did:

> English as spoken by an Englishman is not at all pleasant to listen to ... let alone easy to follow.

Mr. Meghani went on to challenge the claims of the English people to the English language:

> It is not at all wisdom on the part of a tiny English population in this wide world to claim that English, as presented and pronounced by Americans, Canadians, Africans, Indians and the people of the Madras State is not English. It may not be the Queen's English, but then what? Has the Englishman the sole right to decide upon the form and style of a universal language?

Mr. Meghani then asserted that the whole trouble lay in the name which the language continued to bear. The name, suggested Mr. Meghani, was now a misnomer since English had by far outgrown its origins.

> Strictly speaking, English cannot be called 'English' at all, since it is a universal language belonging to all. It is difficult to understand why it is still known under that horrible name; it should have another name.[10]

Within a few days back came a reply from another native speaker of the language, seemingly from the British Isles. This new correspondent confessed that he held the view that civilization was bounded on the North by the Thames — and woe to those over-tolerant individuals who would substitute the Trent — and on the West by the Tamar and the Severn and on the South by the English Channel. He supported Mr. Meghani's suggestion that English as spoken by Mr. Meghani and

"others of similar linguistic and cultural attainments, including the V.O.K. announcers" should bear some other name. The new writer thought that was the most sensible suggestion he had heard for a long time.

> As one who holds ... that the English language is an autochthonous product of that civilization (bounded on the North by the Thames and on the South by the English Channel), I feel that your correspondent's suggestion should be acted on immediately or, as he would probably prefer to put it, implemented forthwith. There is, however, no need to coin a new name for the 'universal' language. There is a time-honored one: 'Pidgin-English.'[11]

This new correspondent sounded very much like a native of the British Isles. His pen name was Mr. Ben Trovate. But evidently he was assimilated enough, and over a sufficiently long period of time, to have developed a strong possessive attitude to that variety of the English language spoken in the area bounded by the Thames and the English Channel.

We have had, then, the spread of English, capturing peoples and nations, and yet having those new "converts" rejected as linguistic unequals by the originators of that language in the British Isles.

The Emergence of Afro-Saxons

Before the end of this century there will be more black people who speak the English language as their *native tongue* than there will be inhabitants of the British Isles. Already African-Americans alone, who speak the language as a first language, are more than the equivalent of half the population of Great Britain. And then there are a few more million black speakers of the language scattered round the Caribbean and the northern fringes of South America. Within the African continent, the only black native speakers of the English language so far are the social élite of Liberia, descended from African-Americans. There are also a few black native speakers of the English language in places like Sierra Leone. But at least as important a phenomenon is the growing number of educated African families that are using English as the language of the home. A number of African children, especially in West Africa but also increasingly in East Africa, are growing bilingual in English and their own African language because their parents are highly educated and often speak English to each other.

It is these considerations which make it likely that by the end of the twentieth century there will be more black *native* speakers of the English language than there are speakers of it in the British Isles. An Afro-Saxon population, linguistically influential, would have truly come into being. But this kind of situation has its tensions. The Anglo-Saxons, liberal in some spheres, but racially exclusive in their history, have tended to create complexes among those they have ruled or dominated. And where English conquers the black man as effectively as he was once conquered by the Anglo-Saxon race, tensions between dignity and linguistic rationality are unavoidable.

An important illustration comes with the late James Baldwin, one of the most gifted black users of the English language this century. Baldwin once wrote an article on how he stopped hating Shakespeare. He admitted that part of his hatred of Shakespeare was originally the phenomenon of turning away from "that monstrous achievement with a kind of sick envy." In Baldwin's most anti-English days, he condemned Shakespeare for his chauvinism ("This England" indeed!). But his most important area of revulsion against Shakespeare was in connection with Baldwin himself being a black man condemned to being native speaker of the English language, and in his case to writing in that language.

> ...I felt it so bitterly anomalous that a black man should be forced to deal with the English language at all—should be forced to assault the English language in order to be able to speak ... I condemned [Shakespeare] as one of the authors and architects of my oppression.[12]

Some of the irritation came from the characters created by Shakespeare himself. Baldwin mentioned how some Jews had, at times, been bitterly resentful of Shylock. Baldwin in turn, as a black man, was bitter about Caliban and dubious about Othello ("What did he see in Desdemona anyhow?"). Baldwin's quarrel at that stage, with the English language, was that it was a language which did not reflect any of his experience. But one day he found himself in a non-English speaking situation, having to think and speak in French. Baldwin began to see Shakespeare and the English language in a new light.

> If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I have never attempted to use it, had only learnt to imitate it. If this were so then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test.

Baldwin found support for this possibility from two "mighty witnesses"—his black ancestors, who had evolved the spiritual and sorrow songs, and blues and jazz, and created an entirely new idiom in an overwhelmingly hostile place; but Baldwin also found support from Shakespeare, whom he now regarded as the last bawdy writer in the English language.

> Shakespeare's bawdiness became very important to me since bawdiness was one of the elements of jazz and revealed a tremendous, loving and realistic respect for the body, and that ineffable force which the body contains, which Americans have mostly lost, which I had experienced only among Negroes, and of which I had been taught to be ashamed.

The language with which Baldwin had grown up had certainly not been the King's English. It had been the English of the black man in the New World.

> ...an immense experience had forged this language, it had been (and remains) one of the tools of a people's survival, and it revealed expectations which no white American could easily entertain.[13]

Black Metaphor and English Semantics

However, there is a residual racism in English metaphor on matters connected with white and black colors. A few hours before I started writing this particular part of this paper I received in the mail an issue of the monthly magazine, *Africa Report*. In the correspondence columns there was a bitter complaint, critical of President Nyerere's old regime, by a Tanzanian living in the United States. The Tanzanian complained that articles published about his country tended to "whitewash" the regime and its failings. Personally, I have sometimes caught myself saying that one of the "blackest stains" on Nyerere's career was his decision to let his former ambassador in Washington, Othman Sherrif, to be taken to Zanzibar, probably to his death. I suppose, in such a context, one could attempt to use a different metaphor if one could stop oneself soon enough. But how much of a choice in synonyms do I have when I want to discuss *blackmail*? Or something sold on the *blackmarket*?

It is true that most of the time when we are using these words we are not connecting them with any racialist tradition which associates black with evil and white with goodness. The metaphor is so much part of the English language, beautifully integrated, ready for use unconsciously in a spontaneous flow. As metaphor, black has carried repeatedly, and in a variety of contexts, decidedly negative connotations. White has

ambivalent connotations but, more often than not, favorable ones. The connotations have been so stabilized that users of the language are unconscious of those wider links with racist traditions. But does not the unconsciousness make the situation even worse?

It would not matter if English continued to be the language of the English people. But precisely because it is the most eligible candidate for universality, and also because black native speakers of the language are on their way towards becoming more numerous than the inhabitants of the British Isles, the case for a gradual diversification of English metaphor in the area of color becomes important for African writers. They need not change the word blackmail into whitemail, or black market into white or brown market; but a new consciousness of the residual racism of the English language, and new imaginative coinings of alternative metaphors, at least within African versions of the English language, would help to improve the credentials of the English language as an African medium. In accepting the English language as their own, black people should not accept its idiom passively and uncritically. There may be a case for the deracialization of the English language.

As a starting point in such an endeavor, we should at least be clear about the broad negative connotations which the metaphor of blackness has assumed in the English language. There is, first, the association of blackness with evil; secondly, there is the association of blackness with *void* and emptiness; thirdly, there is the association of blackness with death. These three areas of negative association have, in fact, multiple sub-associations. The association with death, for example, also makes black the color of grief. Conversely if war is death, white becomes an alternative to green as the color of peace. The white dove becomes the messenger of reconciliation.

But let us take each of these three broad negative connotations in turn—black is evil, black is void, black is death.

In some ways, most deeply structured into the language is the notion that black is evil. To some extent the difficulty has its origins in the Europeanization of Christianity. As Christianity became a religion whose chief champions were white people, angels gradually became white and the devil was black. The biblical heritage of the West profoundly influenced metaphorical usages in more popular literature. With regard to the English language, the *Bible* and Shakespeare might well be the greatest single contributors to the popular metaphor. From the point of view the association of black with evil nothing has captured it more sharply than Blake's Poem, "The Little Black Boy."

The poem exclaims with a startling revelation this whole universe of metaphor: "And I am black but O, My soul is white." John Bunyan and other religious writers also have made suggestions about washing a black man, or an Ethiopian, white as a way of conferring upon him salvation. John Dryden puts limitations on the degree of blackness which is admissible in heaven, as well as on the degree of whiteness which could even deserve hell. To Dryden the agony of purgatory is the predicament of he who is "too black for heaven, and yet too white for hell" (*The Hind and The Panther*).

But, as we indicated, next to the *Bible* it is Shakespeare who has had the greatest single impact on the metaphorical evolution of the English language. Problems therefore arise when African literary figures, and even African Heads of State, find themselves imbibing the Shakespearean idiom.

When he was President, Julius Nyerere even had to confront the ominous task of translating the Bard into Swahili. The plays which Nyerere has translated so far, are *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Both include metaphors of negative association of blackness. *The Merchant of Venice* is, in any case, a play partly concerned with racial or religious consciousness. There are references in the play to black people and customs of color. But there is also a very explicit association of the dark complexion with the devil. Portia has had to deal with earlier suitors including a French Lord, a Baron of England, a Scottish Lord, a German Duke. But also among those who want her is the Prince of Morocco. In Act I, Scene 2, she notes the importance of his dark complexion, even if his entire behavior is saintly. Blake may be satisfied that a black boy is black but has a white soul. Portia has different ideas about the black-skinned Prince interested in her.

> If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.[14]

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had to grapple with this racialistic insinuation, in order to render it into Swahili. He decided to translate "complexion of a devil" more as "face of a devil" than "color."

> ... kama ana hali ya malaika au sura ya
> Shetani ni heri anighofiri makosa kuliko kuniposa.

Nyerere's friend, Milton Obote of Uganda, was perhaps even more consistent in his admiration of John Milton. The Satan portrayed by Milton in *Paradise Lost* had, at least in the initial phases of the rebellion, a heroic stature. Satan had rebelled against the tyrannical

omnipotence of God. He had rebelled against the tradition of kneeling to pray, of flattering the Almighty with the grand epithet of singing hymns in His praise. Until he rebelled, Satan, like all angels was, of course, white. Obote at school and at Makerere admired, not Satan as a symbol of evil, but Satan as a symbol of rebellion against total tyranny. Indeed, Obote adopted the name of Milton in honor of the author of *Paradise Lost*. Satan and his followers were driven out of Heaven into the great deep. They found themselves lying on the burning lake of Hell. John Milton has an epithet for Hell — it is "Black Gehenna." From being a white angel, Satan was becoming a black devil. We might almost say that this heroic figure portrayed by Milton, and admired by Obote, was the first black person in eternity. And God had sentenced him from the start to a life of perpetual hell. Christian art even in Ethiopia portrays Satan as black.

Yet, what did it matter? It was precisely this issue, and the way it was formulated in *Paradise Lost*, which inspired young Apolo Obote in Uganda. What if Satan finds himself in "Black Gehenna?"

> The mind is its own place, and in it self
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

And then the most important poetic line in the intellectual development of Milton Obote:

> Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n.[15]

Related to the whole tradition of identifying blackness with the Devil and whiteness with the angels are the metaphors of shepherds, flocks, sheep and lambs in the figurative language of Christianity. "The Lord is my shepherd." But what is the Lord to do with the *black* sheep of Africa? We are back to the color prejudices of Christianity and of the English language. The sheep and their wool, which is usually white. The black sheep of the family is the deviant, sometimes the wicked, exception.

From blackness and its association with evil there is an easy transition to blackness and death. Sir Patrick Renison, then Governor of Kenya, defiantly resisting pressures to release Jomo Kenyatta, bracketed these two associations of darkness and death in his very denunciation of Kenyatta. He called Kenyatta "leader into darkness and death." The concentration of darkness in the middle of the night carries ominous suggestions of danger and evil. The black cat is often interpreted in this tradition of metaphor as an omen of bad luck. The worse luck was death, and the worse omen, impending death. Alfred Tenny-

son described a grave as "the gross blackness underneath."[15] The black band round the arm at funerals, the black suit that the dead man is sometimes supposed to wear, the black dress the widow is expected to use all carry the cumulative associations of blackness with death. Even in translating *Julius Caesar*, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had to translate the phrase of Octavius, "our black sentence." This was the sentence of death passed by the counter-conspirators against those who might have been implicated in the assassination of Caesar. (Act IV, Scene I). Nyerere's compatriot and fellow translator of Shakespeare, S. Mushi, had, in turn, to grapple with the dark recesses of Macbeth's mind. And Malcom speaks of Macbeth as "black Macbeth' referring to the foul nature of Macbeth's soul, as well as suggesting its orientation towards murder and death. (Act IV, Scene 3).

As for the association of blackness with the void, this has given rise to a number of sub-associations, ranging from emptiness, ignorance, primitiveness, to sheer depth. The "dark ages" are dark both because we do not know very much about them and because there is a presumption of barbarism and primitivism in them. It is partly because of these preconceptions concerning emptiness and barbarity that many African nationalists, black as they were in color, objected to Africa being described as "the dark continent." Why were these dark people indignant that their ancestral landmass should bear the title of "the dark continent"? Precisely because their initiation into the connotations of the English language had sensitized them to the negative implications of such a description of Africa. Darkness as emptiness and barbarity certainly influenced Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (now Lord) in his dismissal of the concept of African history as being meaningless. In his own infamous words:

> Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history...but at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...and darkness is not a subject of history.[16]

Conclusion

We have sought to demonstrate that the colonial period represented considerable danger to indigenous African languages as the imperial European tongues were promoted with greater vigor in the colonies. The threat was particularly serious in those colonial powers of Latin expression (French, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish) which had a strong preference for cultural assimilation in their language policies for the colonies. The imperial powers of Germanic expression were

perhaps equally contemptuous of indigenous languages but did not want to replace them completely with European culture. The British policy of Indirect Rule especially had cultural implications which resulted in greater use of African languages in schools in the British colonies and greater promotion of African languages for literacy under the British flag than under the French or Portugese. But languages were affected not just by deliberate policy but also by wider social forces. Religion, economics, politics and war played their own different roles in spreading some languages in Africa and inhibiting others. But while colonialism threatened African tongues by the promotion of European ones, colonialism preserved some tongues with new orthographies.

Arabic, French and English have played a particularly important *international* role within Africa. The majority of Arabic-speaking *people* in the world are within Africa but the majority of Arabic-speaking *states* are outside. On the other hand, the majority of French-speaking *states* in the world are in Africa while the majority of French-speaking *people* are outside. Without Africa the French language could never count as a *global* language.

Today Zaire is, in fertile territory, the largest French-speaking nation in the world. Zaire is in population the second largest French-speaking nation after France. Fairly early in the twenty-first century Zaire stands a chance of becoming the largest French-speaking nation in the world, both territorially and in population, as Zaire continues to outstrip France in demographic growth, and as Algeria elevates Arabic above French.

Africa is less fundamental to the global status of English than it is to the universal credentials of French. But that Africa has now entered the ranks of genius in the use of the English language can be attested by the 1986 award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, for his work written in a form of English which had been profoundly affected by Yoruba culture.

The continuing stigma on the African linguistic scene is the inadequate attention given to indigenous languages by most post-colonial African policy-makers. Outside countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Arabic-speaking Africa and a few others, there is still excessive African dependency upon the colonial legacy of the European languages in both education and public life.

Since the human species itself originated in Africa, human language must have started in this continent. It is one of the lamentations of the period since 1945 in Africa that the African peoples have not yet

shaken off the chains of linguistic dependence on Europe. Dependence on a smaller continent which is a mere recent upstart in the long history of human communication. In most of present-day Africa, especially south of the Sahara, it is impossible to be a member of parliament without competence in a European language. It is almost unthinkable in post-colonial Africa for a Head of State to be without a command of the imperial language. The resulting irony is that a continent, which is the mother of human language itself, has now become so dependent on imported tongues.

As for the legacies of Latin and Germanic cultures in Africa, it remains obstinately true that one is more likely to see "vernacular newspapers" in former British than in former French colonies. Class-rooms conducted in indigenous languages are more likely in African countries of Germanic expression than of Latin. While the British have indeed been more racially arrogant than the French, France has been, as we have indicated, more culturally arrogant than Britain. The history of language policy in Africa this century has been profoundly affected by this obstinate imperial dialectic, with all its wide-ranging ramifications in the process of social change.

We have also shown how darkness as a characterization of Africa's personality is still resisted by the darkest of all peoples in color, the African nationalists themselves south of the Sahara. The connotations of the English language, with all its accumulation of negative associations in relation to blackness and darkness, are pre-eminently to blame for these anomalies. The starting point of black aesthetics must, therefore, be not only the black power motto: "Black is Beautiful" but also the insistence that black is not evil, nor is it emptiness, nor indeed is it death. The Christian symbolism of the black soul, of the black devil, of the black armband at a funeral, might need to be transformed in the pursuit of new aesthetics for the black man.

Resort to symbolism from African traditions could help to provide alternative metaphors for African English. Death certainly can be as legitimately portrayed by whiteness, if African traditions of body-painting are involved, as by blackness. In the third dimension of the Islamic tradition, the dead body is covered in white cloth. And a completely white cloth could be ominously reminiscent of what the Waswahili call *sanda* the white material that is the last apparel of man. Of course, there are occasions when African customs themselves equate blackness with negative connotations. But these anomalies are present even in the English language. The simile "deathly white" is perfectly good English, if one remembers that a white man, when he is

dead and no longer has blood flowing in his veins, becomes indeed, at last, really white. The white man only manages to live up his name when he dies. But, on balance, the Africanization of the English language must definitely include the deracialization of English. Black aesthetics have to rescue blackness and darkness from the stifling weight of negative metaphor.

NOTES

1. C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, Third Edition, (London: Oxford, 1957), 1-2.
2. F.A.O. Schwarz Jr., *Nigeria: The Tribes, The Nation, and The Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1965), 41. This paper is indebted especially to Mazrui, *The Political Sociology of the English Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "The Foreign Policy of Egypt," in Black and Thompson (eds.), *Foreign Policies in the World of Change,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 328.
5. E. Childers, *Common Sense About the Arab World,* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1960), 70.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Abd Al-Rahim, "Arabism, Africanism, and Self-Identification in the Sudan," *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* Vol. 8, No. 2, July 1970, 248. And see also Edward Atiyah, *The Arabs* (London: Pelican Book No. A350, 1955).
8. Lugard, *Annual Reports,* 125, Cited by James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), 136-137.
9. See the section on "Education," *Reporter* (Nairobi), December 30, 1966, 13.
10. See Letters to the Editor, *East African Standard* (Nairobi), February 15, 1965, 4.
11. *East African Standard* (Nairobi), February 19, 1965, 18.
12. See James Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," *Insight,* No. 11, (Ibadan: British High Commission, 1964), 14.
13. *Ibid.,* 14-15.
14. *The Merchant of Venice,* Act I, Scene 2, 151-153.
15. These issues are discussed more fully in Mazrui, "On Poets and Politicians: Obote's Milton and Nyerere's Shakespeare," a chapter in his book, *The Political Sociology of the English Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).
16. *Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind,* Conclusion.