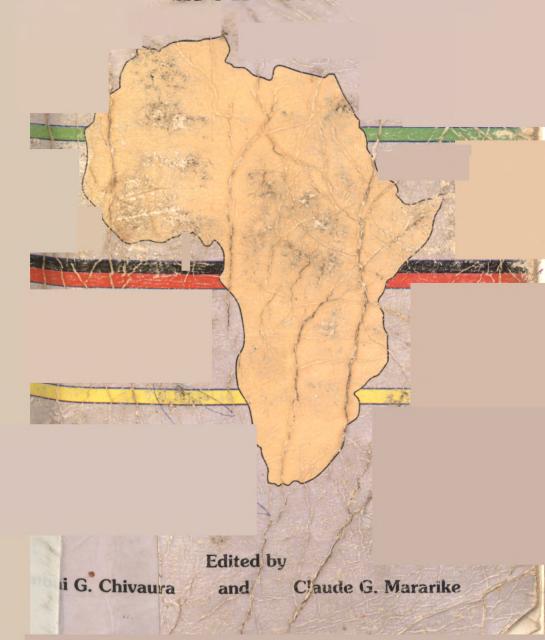
# The Human Factor Approach to Development in Africa



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## The Human Factor Approach to Development in Africa

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## Language, Culture and Human Factor Development

Wacira Gethaiga

#### Introduction

On 22 August 1996, Zimbabwe celebrated the launching of the first monolingual Shona dictionary, *Duramazwi ReChiShona*. The dictionary was conceived, researched, compiled and published by indigenous speakers of Shona.

We probably all know what a dictionary is. It is a book that gives a list of words in alphabetical order. It gives the meanings of these words in the same language. Most dictionaries also show how the words listed are pronounced. We consult dictionaries to understand the meanings of words. Available dictionaries of Shona and most African languages are bilingual. Bilingual dictionaries are helpful to those who want to learn a new language. The dictionary helps them understand what the words in their own languages mean in another language. The users of Shona/English dictionaries were, therefore, English speakers who wanted to learn Shona. Now, *Duramazwi ReChiShona* can be compared to *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Both are monolingual. Both are based on the idea of language defining itself in order to understand itself for its own good and self-advancement. This self-definition, to my mind, is what I understand to be the idea of the role of language in the development of culture and the African Human Factor (HF) as defined elsewhere in this volume.

I start with this simple explanation of a dictionary to advance two propositions: a) that language, especially the 'mother' tongue, is the basis of all learning and cultural transmission of knowledge and (b) that those who do not value their languages and cultures do not respect themselves and cannot, therefore, expect others to respect them. We shall compare the experiences of African-Americans and Africans to illustrate the role of language for the transmission of knowledge and culture. We shall consider this in the context of colonialism and slavery.

Language is, perhaps, the most important HF which distinguishes one cultural group from another. It is also the vehicle for transmitting centuries of a people's achievements to future generations. For these reasons, language makes a people unique and proud. It gives each people an identity. It is a carrier of their culture and culture, according to Edward T. Hall:

is man's medium: there is not one aspect of human life that's not touched and altered by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves, (including showing emotions); the way they think, how they move, how problems are resolved, how their cities are planned and laid out, ... as well as how economics and government systems are put together and function (1977: 16).

Personality, self-esteem, emotion, equanimity, creativity and conflict resolution modalities, are some of the HF values contained in culture and transmitted by language. Language is thus, the thread that weaves and gives them meaning. In other words, culture becomes learned behaviour. One is not born with culture or language but acquires them both by actively interacting with one's environment.

One linguistic theory is based on the premise that our language and cultural environment have direct impact on our way of thinking and affects the development of our ideas and opinions. The well renowned Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that the language we use is more than just a medium for interpersonal communication; by learning a language, we also develop a framework for interpreting our social reality. As a result, language is significant in determining our social reality and our knowledge and experience of it (Deutscher, 1973: 209).

Language serves as a symbolic representation of our consciousness. Without symbols, it would be impossible to give form to ideas and opinions. Words as symbols determine the message we send and receive, and the course of action we are expected to take. For example, great empires conquered and imposed their will on other nations and people through language. The language of communication and what was communicated were both the culture and interests of the conqueror. The language of the conqueror also became the language of religion. This is how the conqueror chained the souls of the conquered to his own gods. The power and influence of the language of the colonizer, therefore, extends beyond merely facilitating communication between the conqueror and the conquered. It stunts the human potential of the colonized and creates a sense of inferiority in them before the colonizers. Through language, the colonizer becomes a god, and the colonized his creature. But colonialism imposed foreign languages on unwilling people. Therefore, when the power of the colonizer determines, the colonized revert to their own languages, cultures and identities. This is what is happening in Eastern Europe after the disintegration of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). The same is also happening in former British colonies. The example of Zimbabwe with its launching of the monolingual Shona dictionary is, therefore, illustrative. The world's new cultural groups, namely, African-Americans and Afrikaners in South Africa, are also included in their determination to assert themselves through the the creation of their own languages.

The Afrikaners affirmed themselves by creating their own language using the Dutch tongue. They deliberately went out to create an identity that distinguished them from others. In their own language, they drew strength and told stories of real and imagined acts of heroism, taught their young how their Christian faith helped them endure great persecutions by the ungodly English, how they protected their wives and children from wild African armies, and how from these experiences, a culture and language they are proud of and use to bind themselves together.

#### African-Americans: language and culture

While the Afrikaners actively invented themselves, the creation of the so-called Negro was a deliberate collusion of all the institutions in white America. These institutions were economic, political, social and religious. These institutions were used to oppress

the black people in America. Their language, culture and history were denied recognition and expression. The ultimate impression given to the world was that the black people had no language or culture of their own. Those who have read or have seen the televised version of Alex Haley's book, root remember the lengths to which Europeans went to try and destroy all vestiges of African languages, history and culture which the slaves could refer to. In their places, the white men put the behaviour matrix which they expected from the black people. This included the fear of Europeans, self-hatred, distrust of one another and dependence on a white god. The agenda worked. The language used to achieve this, was in the form of imperatives such as, 'Come here! Obey! Cook! Plough! and Harvest!' It left no doubt about what was expected of the Negro. Where language alone failed, it was the whip.

Under such a cruel system, the blacks learned to see themselves as boys and girls, not as men and women. More importantly, they knew no other reality outside the system that the white man created for them. They were given whatever first names came to the mind of the plantation owner, who was both master and father. In fact, white masters were real fathers of the blacks by raping the black women. To say that blacks in America lost their languages and culture is to make an understatement. The languages and culture of blacks in America were virtually annihilated.

Anthropologists, for example Herskovits and Frazier, have argued on the importance of languages and culture and on whether African cultures should be retained or not. But we would like to go along with Fanon (1986, 1952) who says that 'he who has language carries the whole weight of his civilization on his shoulders.' It would seem that very little of African civilization was left on the shoulders of the African-American after several centuries of its destruction by white America. It is true that a 'language', euphemistically called 'Ebonics,' did develop out of the amalgam of imperative words and remembered vernacular dialects, but 'Ebonics' has not quite become a language of the people which can carry the weight of African civilization, culture, history, philosophy and world out-look.

Willie Lynch, a white slaver and sugar plantation owner in the West Indies, advised American slave masters not to waste money buying replacements of slaves. He even advised against killing or maiming recalcitrant ones. He suggested, instead, a better and more effective way. It was to turn the slaves against each other. He would divide them according to colour gradations and bestow favours and previliges on the light ones. Blacks would, for example, be divided according to age and sex, house or field workers and to the length of time of service. The second step was to plant seeds of distrust in each group. The only person they would trust would be their white master or mistress. Such a strategy would bring about a self-perpetuating system of servitude to the white man in Negroes, with little loss of productive capacity for generations, and eliminate rebellions.' He was right.

The importance of the language used becomes very critical in a people's perception of themselves and their god. The enslaved Africans were not allowed to pray to their gods and the preferred process of no two slaves from the same geographical area in the same plantation, helped. When they were allowed any kind of spiritual expression, it came in the guise of the plantation preachers whose mandate was to 'help' them

adjust to a life of perpetual pain. The Bible became the true book of oppression. Selections indicated that the white people had support from God, even as Christ accepted the power of Pontius Pirate. 'You would have no power over me, if it was not given to you from above' became a favourite of the Calvinists and Afrikaners alike. 'Slaves obey your master... wives obey your husbands...' were repeatedly preached to Africans to teach them subservience. They were also taught to pray to God and take all their troubles to Jesus. Without going too far into theology, in the language of slavery, a black person was anything but a man or woman; a boy, uncle, miss, or aunt. These are the nice ones. To this day, when the average Black American says 'The Man', he is referring to the white man. God created man in his image. Which image is in the head of the listener'?

In the 1920's, around the time of the establishment of the African National Congress in South Africa, Marcus Garvey was trying to give the black masses a sense of God that they could relate to. The 'good book' says 'God created man in his image'. Look around into your mind: do you see God in your image? Does he/she look like you, or like the statues you have seen in the Catholic Church or Bible picture book? If the image does not look like you, you have someone else's god. Then how can you expect help or support from such a one?

And what kind of reception did Garvey get for this revelation? Almost a complete rejection by the black masses whose image of an all-powerful, omnipotent god almighty did not coincide with his being black. The depth to which this self-denial can reach is shown by the fact that even after thirty years of desegregation, children — black and white — do not believe that a Black Father Christmas is capable of bringing them what they want.

When formal education was introduced to Black-Americans after emancipation, black people, then and now, believed that it would lift them and put them on par with their former betters. This did not happen. In school, they learned that America was a land of freedom, that there was the Bill of Rights which guaranteed every American, life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. The language was very clear, but when they looked around, they found that somehow all of these guarantees did not apply to them. They then suffered from what psychologists call cognitive dissonance due to lack of correspondence between reality and ideal.

Socialization is coercion to accept the created reality for the 'good' of society. On the positive side, it is a process which allows for harmonious co-existence. On the other hand, it painfully forces the oppressed to make choices among unpalatable alternatives: death, flogging, lynching and acquiescence. The African-Americans have exercised all these with varying degrees of discomfort.

One hundred years after freedom from slavery, the American Blacks, with all their achievements, still operate from a culture devoid of positive self-esteem and awareness of African cultural values. It has been drummed into them that they were nothing before they were enslaved, that there was nothing from where they came and that they were better off than their distant relatives living non-descript lives in Africa.

Almost 50 years ago, Dr. Kenneth Clark, a psychologist, did a study of selfperception among young blacks. He discovered that they didn't like themselves or anything black. The results of the study figured prominently in the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. That study has been replicated many times, most recently, about five years ago, by Thompson in U.S. and the Caribbean, with similar results.

#### **Africa**

While the black people in Africa did not go through the same degree of brainwashing, the end result was not different. History indicates that Africa was not colonized until the colonizer had learned enough about human behaviour modification through education. There was four hundred years in the data bank to show that the easiest way to control is immediate show of great compelling force, (the rifle vs. spears and shields), removal through killing or detention of those who would challenge authority, [recent examples include Kenyatta and Mandela) and destruction of the cultural attachment of people, that is, language, desecration of their shrines and forced relocation from their ancestral homes.

The 'Willie Lynch' method become fully operational on the eve of the 'scramble' for Africa and later. The common factor in present day neo-colonial, independent African nations is the multiplicity of ethnicities forced to live together. There is no single African nation which is made up of one linguistic group. It is common knowledge how colonialism went about doing things. The present day African states, which some would die to preserve, were created by drawing arbitrary boundary lines without taking into consideration the integrity and identities of the existing cultural groups. The same cultural group found itself divided and belonging to different countries under the rule of different European colonial powers.

African writers such as Achebe, Ngugi, Oyono, Abrahams and Beti have depicted this phenomenon in their imaginative works and described fully its tragic effects on the beliefs, values and world views of African people. According to Achebe (1987), the centre of reference shifts. Africans are converted to Christianity and European culture in order to survive. Their religion is desecrated. The python is killed. The 'egwugwus' of the ancestors are unmasked.

When nothing happens to the 'strangers', the people begin to question the validity of their own beliefs. Without the mooring power of culture, society drifts aimlessly and falls. Victory goes to the strangers.

To complete the destruction of African societies, 'education' was introduced to teach the languages, cultures and religions of the oppressors. The churches needed natives to go and preach their religion for them. The government wanted natives to take over the drudgery of office work. Whether it was direct administration, as in the French and Portuguese colonies, or indirect administration as in the British colonies, the end result was the same. A small group of Africans was recruited to be the cadres of the colonial administration. They were strictly taught to follow their masters' footsteps.

The content of the education given to Africans on the continent was the same in essence to the education given to the blacks in the diaspora. Blacks were taught the European past, the great battles that Europeans fought against one another, and the

attitude that Europeans were superior to other races. The African experience before and during colonialism was no concern of the colonizers' education objectives. The missionaries got the assistance of African converts and intellectuals to learn African languages and produced bilingual dictionaries. These helped them to get the message to the African majority. Africans were taught to pray to Abraham, Jacob and Moses as their ancestors and gods, instead of the gods of their own forefathers. These were referred to as animistic gods and pagans. Those who continued to worship them were called heathers or sinners, whose souls could only be washed white, by a white god.

What the oppressors wanted were docile, subservient natives, who, according to former apartheid leader, Verewood, should be taught from childhood that equality with the white man was not for them. Their role was to serve the white man without questioning why. They wanted hardworking labourers, not thinkers.

A poem by the Mozambican Jose Craveirinha helps us to illustrate this.

The cattle is selected/counted, marked / and gets on the train, stupid cattle.// In the pen / the females stay behind to breed new cattle// The train is back from the mines (migoudini) // and they come rotten with diseases, the old cattle of Africa // oh, and they have lost their heads...// Again the cattle is selected, marked and the train is ready to take away meek cattle / Stupid cattle, /mine cattle, cattle of Africa, marked and sold (Gecau, 1989: 31).

African people, here, are likened to cattle. The animal imagery is appropriate. It shows how Europeans regarded Africans. They are beasts without HF characteristics. The British approach to education, language and culture differed from that of the French and the Portuguese. These wanted black copies of themselves. The British were clearly against the idea of black Englishmen. They wanted servants. To this end, the British taught in African languages, not English. They wanted blacks who could read, write and keep accounts, in as short a time as possible. The mother tongue approach was, therefore, the most direct. English was introduced, and even then, only gradually. It became the teaching language in the upper grades.

The Sapir-Whorf linguistic hypothesis which I cited earlier, holds that, in acquiring the English language, the Africans would develop a framework of interpreting English social reality. In that framework, their perceptions change from being African to being European. Let us consider African reactions to the word 'dog'? Do they see a skinny, underfed mangy cur, a small tiny dog, a French poodle, a German shepherd, a bulldog, a police dog or an Irish setter? Is it a pleasant image or a disturbing image they formulate in their minds? Do they feel like petting that dog or do they feel tense before the image of the dog they imagine? To the Africans, the dog they conceptualize in their minds depends on the experiences that they have had with dogs in their social, political and cultural life. The word 'dog' is an English word. It refers to dogs as conceived in the English language, English life and by the English point- of- view. Africans who speak English are trying to relate to dogs as the English people do, not as Africans do, although in reality, they see dogs and relate to them as Africans.

The same is true with words such as white, black and yellow. From the English point of view, the word 'black' invokes historically negative associations. Witches

are black. Death is associated with the colour black. Evil is 'black. Magic is black. Ostracized people are 'blacklisted' or 'blackballed'.

White in the English language, culture and psychology connotes positive values of purity. Bridal gowns are white, signifying virginity. Light and snow are also associated with white and therefore, purity. Asians are yellow and, therefore, cowardly, tricky and unreliable. They cannot be trusted. (Moore, 1988: 269-279; Baker, 1988: 280-295).

Indeed, words acquire meaning within their socio-linguistic cultural context. In Gikuyu 'white' is associated with leprosy, death, sickness, and even poverty-opposite values to those in English.

What I have tried to show therefore, is that language plays a crucial role in HF development and the process of socialization. It is my belief that in developing language, people also develop images to represent their experiences, surroundings and indeed, themselves. No people have ever associated themselves with negative values. This explains why East, Central and Southern African people never called themselves 'black' but bantu, meaning human beings, cultured people, or beings who embody values associated with good behaviour and civility. This is what andu in Gikuyu, watu in Swahili, vanhu in Shona, abantu in Zulu and Ndebele, antu in Chewa mean. Any people, therefore, associated with the values and world-outlook of the black people are, from the African point of view, culture and language, called bantu. By the same token, and from the African point-of-view, culture and language; the English, French, Germans, Italians, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese, have the same values, culture and world-outlook, and, are therefore, all classified as one. They are 'varungu' in Shona, abelungu in Ndebele, azungu in Chewa and so on. Varungu or Azungu as a concept, includes even those blacks who behave like whites. Therefore, expression the 'white person' is a cultural concept rather than a mere colour concept.

#### Remedial action

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans tried to counter institutionalized racism by affirming their blackness both as a colour and value concept. The struggle to affirm the goodness of being black as a colour was an uphill task since in the English language and culture, nothing black would ever be beautiful. But the important step forward to note here, in the African-American's affirmation of their blackness as a race, was the realization that they had learned, for the first time that they would never be white, look white or be accepted as white. 'Passing' for white became synonymous with 'selling out'. So they stopped using harsh chemicals to straighten their hair. Instead they wore big Afros and dashikis to proclaim their African heritage. They opted to learn African languages such as Swahili and Yoruba, instead of English. Some travelled to West Africa in search of their roots. Being black in colour began to assume an extended meaning to embrace being black in origin, civilization, history, language, culture, religion, world-outlooks, values and beliefs associated with African people. Unlike the African-Americans and blacks in the diaspora, Africans on the continent, especially the educated elite, aspired for white

values in their struggle for independence. Independence would be a chance for them to exchange status with whites. The only difference would be that they, the blacks, instead of the whites, would be the ones ruling over their fellow blacks. Everything else, including the language and culture used at home and taught in school, business organizations and institutions, was inherited intact.

In Kenya for example, the tripartite education system of Europeans, Asians and Africans was desegregated into a unitary system where Asian, African and European children would all be taught in English from the moment they entered school.

A study carried out six years later, showed massive failures of rural school children and an enormous burden on parents in pre-school preparation. The government's answer was that each child would get a Certificate of Primary Education regardless of whether he or she had passed or failed. Government's decision to retain former European schools as they had been during colonial times and allowing entry only to children of politicians and rich Africans and Asians, meant a massive national investment spent in produing would-be 'black Europeans' who proudly boast that they do not speak 'bush' languages.

Continuation with the colonial set up after independence is contrary to what the freedom fighters fought for. Those who spearheaded the freedom struggles for Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Kenya and other African nations, wanted the reclamation of their languages and culture. They wanted to put back what had been systematically removed by colonialism, namely African pride and self-esteem.

African self-negation is illustrated by Jean-Marie Adiaffi in his novel, *The Identity Card* (1980). Prince Meledouman is almost tripped by a young student who is running away from possible punishment from a teacher for using his African language instead of speaking the prescribed French. A discussion on the French language between the prince and the teacher ensues as follows:

Teacher: French is one of the most beautiful, most melodious languages in the world. It has yielded one of the best, richest, most profound literary heritage in the world ... at this point in our history, it means success, social consideration, promotion ... In any given society everybody looks for recognised values which will give him three things: human respect, consideration and social importance. The French language presently gives us all of these. As a teacher it is my duty to make sure that the children 1 have been entrusted with acquire a perfect knowledge of this new vital tool. That is why I am a realist.

Prince: No, You are an opportunist.

Teacher: No, a realist. When we can write our dialects, maybe.

Prince: You mean our languages?

Teacher: Dihie, let's not play with words.

Prince: No, it isn't playing with words, as long as words still have meaning, an exact and precious meaning. There's a basic difference between languages and dialects. And if we reduce our national languages to the rank of simple, poor dialects, it means we are making a political choice. And through that political choice, we are killing them

(Adiaffi, 1980: 74-77).

Yes, in speaking other peoples' languages instead of our own, we are making a political and cultural choice at once. We are denying our own African languages and culture and embracing European languages and culture. We are running away from being African and independent. We are heading towards being European dependents and servants.

The question of which language to use for education should not be a problem for Africa except for those who have come to detest themselves as Africans so much that they would rather be Europeans. We have to match our education with our reality and as Africans with a colonialist education are not at all a measure of our reality. They are like a child in African orature who was sent to a well to fetch water for the thirsty but broke the calabashes after the people had quenched their thirst. The intellectuals and leaders then decided to guard the well jealously against anyone who would come to drink from it, but they themselves alone.

Only a fraction of our people speak the so-called national languages. The majority speak their own languages. Our language and cultural policies need to respond to this prevailing majority reality and enrich the use of Africa's mother tongues in schools and teach them syllabuses with African cultural content and ideological world outlook.

#### Conclusion

For African-Americans, a choice of language has already been made. They have, therefore, to reverse the negative images about them contained in that language and culture. For Africans on the continent, use of their own mother tongues for self cultural expression in schools, at work and play should be an imperative rather than a merematter of choice. We must use the tools of language and culture to restore Africa's self esteem and boost the creative potential of African people to develop Africa and her HF.

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