



Sahelian Languages, Indigenous Knowledge and Self-Management

Africa is a continent of many languages — over 2,000, in fact, by recent count — though many are related and a number are inter-comprehensible to a greater or lesser degree. It is also a continent of multilingualism, where a relatively high proportion of the population speaks or understands more than one language. In addition, the distribution of languages is far from uniform. West Africa is a case in point. Coastal areas are for the most part characterized by a large number of native languages, many not widely distributed. Interior regions, and the Sahel in particular, on the other hand, are characterized by a smaller number of languages of broad diffusion.

The reasons are both topographical and political. Dense forests, numerous rivers and the ever-present tsetse fly made lateral communications and horse-borne transport very difficult in coastal regions and gave rise to a multitude of ethnic groups and small language communities. However, in the inland areas of savanna and desert-edge plains, travel was easier over long distances. Empires arose to regulate and tax the flourishing trans-Saharan trade and at the same time spread vehicular African languages like Bambara, Wolof and Mooré over wide spaces. It is therefore said that one can go from Dakar to Lake Chad overland using only three African languages — Wolof, Bambara and Hausa — whereas a trip of equal distance down the coast to Nigeria would require more than 300.

In the Gulmu region of Burkina Faso, located in little-developed areas of the extreme east bordering Benin, Tin Tua, a local NGO established in 1985 by

community members to resuscitate a generally unsuccessful state-supported literacy campaign, has created a network of literacy centers devoted to instruction in the Gulmancéma language, a minority language in Burkina Faso, but one spoken nonetheless by over 500,000 people. The centers cover 31 villages of the region, all of which (with the exception of the district capital) lacked primary schools at the inception of the program. It now serves about 15,000 adolescent and adult learners annually, of whom 41 percent are women. Tin Tua has also launched a monthly Gulmancéma newspaper, "Labaali," which has 3,000 subscribers and employs journalists equipped with motor bikes and tape recorders in all of the villages covered.

On the strength of the results of these literacy programs, the association began, several years ago, creating community primary schools where the initial grades of instruction are given in Gulmancéma and French is gradually introduced. Two years ago, the first cohort of students trained in these community schools reached the watershed

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of the primary education completion exams, which must be taken in French and govern admission to secondary schooling. The children who had started education in their mother tongue performed, on average, significantly better than the graduates of standard primary schools. The curriculum designer from Tin Tua tries to explain their success: "When you consider the environment in which all this is happening and the fact that there is only one instructor per school who speaks French, what is surprising is the speed of learning. Is it because the mother tongue serves as a springboard for performance in French, or is it the motivation of these students, the active instructional method used or the devotion of the instructor?"

African languages as an accounting tool

Now move west several hundred kilometers into southern Mali, a cotton-growing region where rates of schooling are still little over 20 percent.. In the last two decades, a string of village associations centered around Koutiala and Bougouni has progressively taken over full responsibility for the marketing of agricultural crops, the management of farm credit, and the reinvestment of proceeds from these operations. And

they have done it in large part by mastering accounting and administrative systems developed directly in the Bambara language. The story is much the same further north in the inland Niger delta, where rice is the commercial crop. In the village of Niono Coloni, local leaders organize examinations to ensure that candidates to the democratically-elected positions of responsibility in the farm cooperative all have the requisite basic level in written Bambara, though the accounting forms used are in fact bilingual and include French labeling as well. Koranic students and primary school dropouts interested in applying for the positions generally enroll in the local adult literacy center to develop proficiency in the phonetic transcription of Bambara.

These are not isolated examples. Throughout much of Sahelian West Africa (countries bordering the southern edge of the Sahara Desert), the written form of African language is being used to an increasing extent as a vehicle of local, if not nation-wide, communication and a means of expressing indigenous culture.

The change is most pronounced in the Francophone countries, where relatively little recognition was given to African languages, considered "dialects" and potentially disruptive of national unity and international communication.

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Slow but sure change

Several factors have contributed to this change, including the advent of more representative governments and ones more tolerant of civil society, the spread of African languages brought about by internal migration and interethnic contact, and a gradual shift towards recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge and of African culture. At the same time, experience and research have increasingly demonstrated that children starting school instruction in their mother tongue or a language already well known to them stand a better chance of success — including success at mastering a second language of written communication like French or English — than those who are forced to assimilate a totally foreign language from the outset. Adults, too, seem to acquire second language facility most easily through a written knowledge of their own language.

Change has been slow in coming, particularly at the central level, where more has been said than done. The introduction of African languages into primary school education, for example, has remained for years at the "experimental" level in countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Senegal and there has been little commerce between agencies of non-for-

mal education, which used national languages, and those of formal education, which did not.

Over the 1990s, however, momentum has been building at the local level. It has been fueled in large part by the development of new income-generating enterprises — the cooperatives, businesses, non-governmental associations and local community governments that have taken root in an era of demographic pressure and relative economic liberalization. To manage these enterprises themselves, local people need at least a core of literate staff; to ensure some degree of democratic accountability in the effort, they need a means to ensure larger numbers of members at least a modicum of literacy and numeracy. African languages — most of which are now written in Romanized or Arabic script — provide a much more accessible means of attaining this goal than instruction in English, French, Arabic or Portuguese.

Literacy gains in Burkina Faso

Examples are numerous in Burkina Faso, a country whose name itself is an amalgam of two prominent African languages. “Burkina” is Mooré for “honest person” and “Faso” is Jula and Fulfulde for “nation” — a nation of honest people. In Bouloulou, a small village in the northern tier of the country not far from Ouahigouya, women are flocking to a literacy center opened for them at the demand of their own economic development association. In the capital itself, Ouagadougou, a group of newly literate women of the Goughin district have banded together to create “Song Taaba,” a cooperative devoted to the manufacture and sale of soap and peanut butter. After an initial failed attempt at entrusting management responsibility in the few members with the rudiments of primary schooling, they ended up developing accounting and management systems in the Mooré language and have since created a nationwide network of local women’s businesses.

In fact, across the country, the numbers completing literacy courses have begun to rival those completing primary schooling, a form of education still restricted by lack of French-language trained teachers and outside funding. By 1996, there were, in round figures, 4,000 literacy centers compared to 3,000 primary schools. In that same year, 46,000 out of 72,000 literacy students tested were declared “literate” in one of the national languages of the country, whereas only 11,000 of the 86,000 entrants in sixth grade moved on to middle school. Interestingly, 52 percent of the successful literacy students were women, whereas only 40 percent of the sixth grade enrollees, and only 8.5 percent of

the middle school matriculants, were girls. Nine out of ten of the newly literate women, according to the National Institute of Literacy, were active members of local women’s associations and cooperatives.

Articulating indigenous knowledge

Twenty-five years ago, when the first wave of national literacy campaigns was dying out in Sahelian countries and the first hints of locally-supported literacy were appearing, a wide-ranging evaluation was conducted of literacy’s consequences in western Mali. Research was carried out by case study, and the team of Malian evaluators happened to spend several days in a village named Sirakoro, south of Kita. Though government support of the program had been irregular, they found there some remarkable results.

The first group of young people made literate in the village, who then occupied positions monitoring transactions in the local peanut market, themselves trained a second cohort. Shortly thereafter, the majority of adults in the village had learned to read and write in Bambara/Malinké, and the village authorities decided that attention should be given to children’s education. They resolved that no child should henceforth reach the age of twenty without knowing how to read and write in his or her own language. Because there was no formal primary school within walking distance, the village created its own independently and proceeded to build curricula for its program. Among other things, the literate young people took it upon themselves to write down the history of the village and its region and teach it to their pupils.

This pattern has been increasingly repeated over the intervening years in different parts of the Sahel. African languages are acquiring written form and being used as a means both of managing local enterprise and recording indigenous knowledge. After two or three decades of highly variable success when directed top-down in “national campaigns”, literacy classes began in the 1980s to acquire momentum even as they were taken over by local associations and non-governmental associations for their own uses. And they have led in a variety of ways to the better articulation of local culture.

Functional trilingualism

One difference between the first wave of literacy action and this more recent history is local ownership. Another important one derives from the fact that African language literacy is now not generally presented as an alternative to compe-

tence in international languages like English and French, as a form of “rural education” or “Bantu schooling” for those not entitled to the “real thing” — but rather as both a cultural and political asset by itself *and* a springboard into second language learning.

In addition, a new complementarity among different languages is gradually emerging, one sometimes called “functional trilinguism.” This three-tiered scheme targets everyone becoming literate in their own mother tongue, then mastering an African language of wider communication (like Mooré, Wolof or Bambara), and finally acquiring a language of international communication like English, French or Arabic. The approach seems counter-intuitive for monolingual speakers of northern countries but is not difficult to conceive — or witness — on a continent where over 50 percent of the population already speaks at least two languages.

Giving voice to minority culture

Burkina Faso again provides a case in point. Situated on the boundary between the Sahelian and coastal regions, the country counts no fewer than 71 languages, though fully 75 percent of the population speaks one or another of the three most widely-spread (Mooré, Jula and Fulani) as a second language of communication if not mother tongue. All but a few of the “Burkinabè” languages (adjectival form of the country’s name) are now transcribed and used in written form. Increasingly, therefore, a speaker of Gourmancéma is likely to learn Mooré or Fulani plus French in the course of his or her education, whether that training follows formal schooling or non-formal education in literacy classes.

For this reason, the locally-rising tide of Sahelian language use has also been a rallying point for minority cultures in West Africa that wish to affirm their own identity as part and parcel of the nation and preserve traditions while opening bridges to wider society. The Tin Tua association illustrates the point. So, too, does a remarkable experience in the Podor region of northwestern Senegal.

Since 1986 the organization “ARED” (Association for Research on Education) has dedicated itself to the publication of reading materials in the Pulaar language for learners in the departments of Senegal bordering the sea between Dakar and St. Louis. Pulaar is a regionally-specific version of the Fulani, Peulh or Fulfulde language, found throughout Sahelian countries but nowhere a majority culture outside of sections of northern Cameroon and the Futa Djallon mountains of Guinea. ARED’s program is actually only one of a series of efforts, including another coordinated by APESS (Association Peulh pour l’Education et la Science) in Burkina Faso, that have been devoted in recent years to promoting the use of different regional variants of Fulfuldé.

The activities of ARED have been energetically supported by associations of Pulaar speakers who have emigrated to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Maghreb and Europe. This support has enabled ARED to produce a whole series of books and newspapers in Pulaar and to give a new impetus to literacy courses for adults. ARED has at the same time published manuals on a variety of local development, agricultural and action research topics in Pulaar. Achieving literacy in Pulaar has become a symbol of honor in village society in this part of Senegal, and literacy campaigns launched on this basis have greatly contributed to a cultural renewal throughout the region.

This is precisely the sort of “indigenous” effort at knowledge construction that is now cropping up more frequently across the region. What form it will take in the future is unclear. But it does seem more likely to survive than the cultural and literacy campaigns of the early decades of independence, precisely because it is “owned” by local actors and founded on local economic and social necessity.

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