

French and Cultural Diplomacy – The African Experience.

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There is cultural pluralism, since different societies have their own environment. Consequently, there can be no justification for any particular culture to claim superiority over other (Ohaegbu).

Abstract

The French language is probably the most widely used language in the world after English, if one considers the number of people using it outside its native France. As the key that has opened France to many foreigners and the vehicle that has transplanted French culture to all corners of the known world, French and by extension French diplomacy, has been able to create as well as destroy a lot in the world outside France. Africa, the continent on which the largest number of people uses French, either as an official language or lingua franca, has had its affairs greatly directed and distorted even to an alarming proportion. The struggle for the survival of mother tongues and hence the people seem to be futile and wasteful under the relentless bombardment from a seemingly never depleting arsenal of the French language and its cultural diplomacy. As Africa writhing with pains from this cultural rape and sustained sapping of its very life's blood continues to suffer, one wonders if a middle ground can be found or do we have to wait for the ancient healer of all wounds; time?

Introduction

The continent of Africa has been at the receiving end in all aspects where ever it appears in world history. Invaded from east and west by expansionist forces, it has not been able to find its foot in world affairs till today.

Perhaps the aspect, in which the continent has suffered the most, is in her culture. It was seen by the west until recently as a continent without a culture, heritage or any kind of past.

The tongue of its inhabitants was literally pulled out and they were forced to communicate in foreign tongues that they had to learn. French for example through the period of colonialism and till today became the lingua-franca, even mother tongue of millions of Africans.

France has in this field perpetrated a cultural diplomacy that has sought by all means to render neutral all indigenous languages. French has become language of the elite, official language, lingua franca and a sine qua non for daily existence for millions of Africans on the continent.

This undeclared war fought through a seemingly harmless cultural diplomacy if not checked will on the long run wipe out all African languages and aspects of culture in francophone Africa.

French and Its Beginnings

Some two hundred million people worldwide use French, officially, as native speaker or as lingua Franca. Compared to the population of the world the number is small. However, the number of people worldwide who find themselves in a position where they need to be acquainted with French for one reason or the other increases by the day and nobody seems to see any need or any reason for him or her to stop using French. Perhaps only the Flemish once saw the need, not to stop using French, but to match its use with their native Flemish in Belgium.

French is as of consequence a world language, due to the politics of European expansionism, started centuries ago, technological development and early scripted language "advantage" which the Caucasians now enjoy at this time of human evolution.

English is the language natively spoken in the Island of Britain. English is the only other language before which French is second best worldwide, a fact due more to the power of America and Americanism in world affairs than to any other thing.

French as a language originated and evolved from Vulgar or Street Latin spoken by soldiers of Julius Caesar's army which conquered the Gaul's, and so belong to the group identified as "Romance" languages today. Spread by conquering Roman soldiers, the romance languages today, may be said to represent living shadows of the ancient Roman Empire. Clearly therefore, it is seen that French evolved albeit as a result of outside contact with conquering and colonizing forces, of the very early indigenes of present day France.

Statistical Data On French In Africa

In Globalization, France and the future of French, it is stated, “that for about half of century, or more France has been fighting hard to emerge as the leading European nation against the American hegemony ... it has consequently spent huge sums of money feverishly struggling to promote French”. This should be common knowledge to any watcher of international affairs.

As already stated above, some 200 million people speak French, and of these, some 115 million are in Africa, in former French colonies of Africa from north to south. It is used as official language in most all these countries, as elite language in some like in Morocco and Tunisia, or alongside some other language, like in Cameroon with English; Burundi with Kirundi; Central African Republic with Sango; Comoros with Shikonur and Arabic; Djibouti with Arabic; Equatorial Guinea, with Spanish and Portuguese; Rwanda with Kinya-rwanda and English and in Seychelles with English and Creole. (French peace corps) <http://www.peacecorpswiki.org/French>

In all, 31 Francophone countries use French either as a first or second language, making Africa the continent with the most speakers of French in the world. This language that arrived with colonization from France and Belgium now makes African French speakers a very important part of the Francophonie, France’s new cultural colonialism, helped by bad governance and poverty in the continent.

In Africa, French has three varieties; the west, central and east African varieties used by about 75million people; the Arab and Berbers variety spoken in the north by about 36 million users and that of the creoles and Indian Ocean about 1.6 million users.

As for vocabulary we have two main groups; the Abidjan French vocabulary and Kinshasa French vocabulary groups.

In recent times, France has even tried new unions with of course the sole aim of increasing the use of French worldwide. The example is portrayed by president Sarkozy’s recent attempt at a Mediterranean union and several attempts to tilt ECOWAS towards preferring French as main language. In fact some French language teachers in Nigeria favour this move as is the case with Atim Ikara (2005) who thinks that because more ECOWAS states speak French as official language, French should now be made its official language and the other none French speaking states “frenchified”. Ridiculous, because in terms of numbers if one followed the statistics quoted from Onumajuru (2004) it will mean some 140 million English speaking people who are in the majority and using a language which is first choice internationally and worldwide, abandoning it to use one spoken by some 65 million people and is second choice worldwide. Hardly justifiable by any standard or reason. If it were an indigenous African language the argument could begin to have a cultural and long-term merit.

Culture

Definitions of culture though generally agreeing that it is the sum total of any peoples way of life, do have some slants depending on which intellectual discipline is concerned.

The new world Encyclopedia states that the word is from the Latin roots Colere (to inhabit, to cultivate or to honor) and generally refers to “patterns of human activity and their symbolic structures that give such activities significance.” It further states, “Culture is a complex of features held by a social group and that is, no matter the size of the group, family to nation and even global.”

For UNESCO it is the “set of distinguishing spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and it encompasses in addition to art and literature, life styles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” The three elements of Values, Norms and Artifacts have always been emphasized.

It is Julian Huxley who gives an interestingly new different categorization, which he sub-groups as “mentifacts” “sociofacts” and “artifacts” that is to say the manifestation of culture mentally, socially and in the arts. All in all culture remains a people’s way of life however one looks at it and to attempt to forcefully, coercively or by alienation, transport your culture on another culture is a real violation of human rights. It is also self dehumanizing for any people to swallow a foreign culture whole and entire without adaptation, due to the dynamic nature of culture as both are tantamount to a categorization of culture, which Ohaegbu (1977:1-26) effectively counters in his argument as mentioned at the opening.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy is, put simply, the art of managing the relationship between two sovereign states not minding the age old definition of a diplomat as an honest man or woman sent abroad to lie and lie for the good or his or her country.

In modern times, diplomacy has evolved into intercultural communication in all fields of human endeavour. The increasing difficulty of settling international conflicts of today has compelled the move from simple traditional

diplomacy to cultural and multilateral understanding. The case of seemingly intractable situations in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Somalia and other flash points of world politics further emphasizes this need. This brings us then to the subject of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy

Wikipedia free encyclopedia describes cultural diplomacy as “a special form of diplomacy, that carries a set of prescriptions which are material to its effectual practice; these prescriptions include the UNEQUIVOCAL (emphasis mine) recognition and understanding of foreign cultural dynamics and observance of the tenets that govern dialogue. It goes on, and defines same thus:

“Cultural diplomacy is a domain of diplomacy concerned with establishing, developing and sustaining relations with foreign states by the way of culture, art and education. It is also a proactive process of external projection in which a nation’s institutions, values system and unique cultural personality are promoted at a BILATERAL and MULTILATERAL level.”

Cultural Diplomacy-A Two Way Avenue

While trying to nurture a favorable perception of our country’s national ideals and policies with foreign audiences, we should never fail to recognize the cultural identity of the target nation. This includes psychology, mentality, and way of life, customs, traditions and history. The success of cultural diplomacy is dependent on intercultural dialogue and mutual respect. There are therefore three main prescriptions for cultural diplomacy.

Recognition: Recognizing the distinct cultural dynamics of the other; affording hence equal human rights on EQUAL TERMS – (emphasis mine)

Understanding: Parties are also prescribed the study of foreign cultural dynamics in order to gain understanding of the traditions history, language and general way of life pertinent to the engaging party. During this process, parties may discover aspects of a foreign culture which they fundamentally disagree with or find abhorrent. One cannot agree with every aspect of a foreign culture.

Dialogue: A universal tenet of basic dialogue requires that one listens while the other is speaking and vice versa. This is what helps collaboration.

Africa and French cultural diplomacy

Taking an objective look at what consists cultural diplomacy or what it means or is defined as; it is clear that the possibility of its operation between France or Britain and any former colonies is remote or non-existent. The French president Mr. Sarkozy as recent as the year 2009 had the shameless but self convinced audacity to state during a state visit to an African nation, a “leading” one for that matter by European standards, which are the paradigms we are condemned to accept and follow, that AFRICA WAS NOT FOUND IN WORLD HISTORY. That was in Senegal.

Since colonization that followed the slave trade, the very heart of much of the continent has been obscured.

Different writers of protest novels and plays have aptly depicted the situation in different works.

From Cameroonian authors like Oyono and Mongo-Beti, who put it in bold relief, to milder and more philosophical presentations of Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and I.R. Mbise of Tanzania, amongst others also of west, south and central Africa, the story of undermining and dehumanizing the African and African culture is complete. Most all former colonies have political, economic and military pacts that in essence take away sovereignty in real terms. Since the “End” of colonialism that followed the slave trade the very heart of the continent has been in a kind of haze that seems to effectively hang over the continent to such an extent that leadership, the basis of effective growth and development seems to be blindfolded in the mind.

Oyono in decrying the situation states (1956,p167-168) in the mouth of Essomba, “...rien de ce que nous vénérons n’a d’importance a leurs yeux...” and Eza Boto (1955,p134) « ...qui dit colonisation dit aussi abâtardissement de toutes les valeurs culturels africaines ». For Achebe “...the white man thinks he has been talking to a dumb beast...” (Morning yet on creation day).

The thesis of this paper is that due to historical circumstances predispositions and “Gegebenheiten” a milieu of equal standing for cultural diplomacy for France and African countries does not for now exist.

Certainly not with the ceaseless French military interventions in supposedly independent African states, planned coup d’états, intervention in internal affairs and foreign policy dictations.

Most of Africa even Ethiopia which was never colonized is still too much of European backside if not BOYSQUATER, that without having to go into desettling details, one can easily see that we do have a lot of thinking and adjustments to do.

Conclusion

From available statistics, French presence in Africa is so strong that no direct confrontation or challenge can work, in other to check the imbalance nor is there need for it. For France, French culture is a 'superior culture' 'and so has to carry on with her "mission zivilisatrice," which sadly enough some of our brothers and sisters have resigned themselves to.

However, we of this generation cannot close our eyes as if we were not seeing. The potential lies in us. If we do nothing to start something going, then not our children or their children who have absolutely no connection to our history, our languages, our concepts of reality, heritage and of God, (what ever each holds that to be, from our dominant and blinding European perspectives), that can do anything from nothing.

In doing something we would have started to think of how eventually perhaps in our children's time we would have started to overcome the shame that was Berlin in 1884/85.

I do realize that a lot of Nigerians earn their living propagating French culture by way of perpetuating its language, one way or the other. I make no plaedoyer for revolution, but for the search for a compromise situation, for mutual self-respect and the restoration of human dignity, ours and theirs too. Humanization not globalization.

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