

**Abibifahodie!
Language, Consciousness, and Decolonization¹**

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Language, beyond its utility as a medium of communication, is also a signifier of political and economic power. It is also, perhaps most importantly, an expressive instrument of a people's worldview. Thus, as Africans have and continue to struggle for self-determination in the world, they are often beset by an on-going dependency on the very languages of those peoples who are the architects and stewards of the system opposed to such liberatory ends. This essay seeks to examine the intersections of language and decolonization with respect to African people. It offers a critical examination of several notable proposals and seeks to explicate the indispensability of language as a key element in the contested terrain of African consciousness.

Keywords: language, Pan-Africanism, decolonization, Swahili, revitalization

Introduction

The liberation movements of the Twentieth Century have been highly effective at revealing the partiality of many conceptualizations of decolonization. While African independence movements succeeded in seizing the reigns of state power, they have generally failed at liberating the economic means that sustains the effective power of any state apparatus. As such, the promises of the independence movements generally remain unfulfilled, as African societies have transitioned from prostration before the old colonial masters to subservience before the lords of global capitalism.

Moreover, that the conceptualization of liberation has not sufficiently interrogated the need for both paradigms and process of re-Africanization is notable and problematic. Indeed, while liberation has often been limited to discourses pertaining to the state and the economy, the cultural matrix of a people necessarily dictates the trajectory of their movement and development.² Therefore, when Carruthers states that "The process of Africanization and transformation cannot be separated neatly into two stages—they overlap,"³ he is referring to the necessity of an interweaving of the ostensibly political, economic, and conceptual. As the political and economic are expressions of culture, they too must reflect the concretization of a

¹ *Abibifahodie* is an Asante Twi term that translates to English as "Black liberation".

² Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

³ Jacob H. Carruthers, "Black Intellectuals and the Crisis in Black Education," in *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*, ed. by Mwalimu J. Shujaa, 37-55. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 52.

people's worldview, that is, "the way a people conceive of the fundamental questions of existence and organization of the universe."⁴ Thus, the liberation struggle is, inescapably, a cultural struggle.

Perhaps central in this ongoing cultural struggle has been the continued colonization of Africa's cultural sphere via European languages. The adoption of Kiswahili in East Africa notwithstanding, European languages—the languages of conquerors, enslavers, and destabilizers—remain the languages of governments and other major institutions such as schools at nearly every level.⁵ While some would dismiss this as a triviality borne of the expediency of continued reliance on European languages given their global diffusion, degrees of technical development,⁶ or their functioning as supposed bases of linguistic unity,⁷ what must be considered is that this retention has not only constrained the full flowering of Africa's indigenous languages, but has also succeeded in sustaining the super-ordination of Europe and European culture within the lived realities of the supposedly decolonized.⁸ As Mukoma Wa Ngugi notes, "decolonization in the language of the colonizer would be a contradiction,"⁹ as it is a state of affairs that necessarily leaves intact fetters of domination.

Furthermore, this language problem exists not only in Africa, but also in the African Diaspora, where the primary languages of most Africans are the languages of their ancestors' captors and tormentors. This is notable, as even our discourse pertaining to liberation must be mediated in the languages of those historically opposed to those ends. Thus, begging the question of how the inescapable epistemological vectors of language determine the conceptualization of liberation as both an ontological and political quandary.¹⁰

⁴ Carruthers, "Black Intellectuals and the Crisis in Black Education," 53.

⁵ It should be noted that Swahili is the national language of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and thus is used by an estimated 80 to 100 million speakers. See M.M. Mulokozi, "Kiswahili as a National and International Language." ed. by University of Dar es Salaam Institute of Kiswahili Research (Dar es Salaam: University of Dar es Salaam, 2000), 1, 6.

⁶ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987); Ayò Bangboṣe, *Language and Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

⁷ Chinua Achebe has argued that the colonial languages provide a shared medium of communication, one that facilitates both national and international communication. See *Morning yet on Creation Day* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975).

⁸ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent* (Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2010); Diop, *Black Africa*; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford England: James Currey, 1986); Rekhety Wimby, "The Unity of African Languages," in *Kemet and the African Worldview: Research, Rescue, and Restoration*, ed. by Maulana Karenga and Jacob H. Carruthers (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press 1986).

⁹ Mukoma Wa Ngugi, *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 43.

¹⁰ This point relates to several deeper queries. What are the implications of conceptualizing "freedom" or "liberation" in the language of your enemy? Can one truly express a notion of freedom delinked from an oppressor's culture when using the oppressor's language? On the ontological level does the Kiswahili term *uhuru* equate to the English term freedom? Does Asante Twi term *fahodie* equate to the English term liberation? Even if these equivalences exist, does our reliance on the English terms speak to a lingering dependency, an absence of the type of intellectual freedom that is an indispensable element in liberatory struggle?

Furthermore, we have always produced Black intellectuals who are deeply grounded in various western

While liberation is not merely a matter of language, language is linked to worldview, and this, ultimately, expresses a people's total way of seeing the world. Rkhty Amen (Wimby) states, "Since most of our conscious modes of conceptualizing, acting and moving about are conditioned in part by our language, to use the language of another culture is to use that culture's ideas; and to use another culture's ideas in place of one's own is to relegate the latter to a position of *de facto* inferiority."¹¹ Thus, language is linked to the conceptual, and its application indicative of the dynamics of power implicit in its operation. Therefore, one is either struggling within the conceptual strictures of alien paradigms, or working to effect liberation *literally* on African terms. In this vein, the call for "uhuru sasa" (which translates as "freedom now" in Kiswahili) during the Black Power era of the United States, was not merely an invocation of the right to self-determination by African people, it was simultaneously an invocation of the African *asili*,¹² a Kiswahili word meaning *essence*, whose eradication or subversion had been the goal of enslavers. As such, this call for freedom was simultaneously a call for social power and cultural reclamation. This illustrates that language is an indelible part of any struggle wherein culture, or rather the *asili* of the people, is marshalled as an instrument of political education and mobilization. Language serves to demarcate the varied frontiers of struggle, not simply the goal to "free the land" but also the goal to liberate the mind as a coterminous endeavor.

This essay seeks to explore the brief history of the Pan-African language proposals. It will investigate the proposal of Kiswahili as the principal Pan-African language, the proposal of joint, regional Pan-African languages—such as the adoption of both Kiswahili and Hausa for East and West Africa respectively, the proposals of constructed languages, and finally the proposed revitalization of the ancient Kemetic language—*mdw ntr* (Medew Netcher).¹³ This essay will consider not only these proposals in the abstract, but also their implications for the formulation of a "Grand Vision of The Future,"¹⁴ that is, a vision of destiny for the African world beyond the myopia of the status quo, and beyond the conceptual frontiers of European languages and the epistemic constraints to which these consign us.

Our Language Problem Revisited

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes, "The domination of a people's language by the languages of their colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized."¹⁵ Thus, the colonization of the cultural sphere of African people has been sustained, in part, via the imposition of European languages. The problematic impact of linguistic colonization is a malaise that has been noted by a number of Pan-African thinkers. In this section I will offer a

intellectual and critical traditions. Intellectuals whose mastery of European philosophies and theoretical discourses has been impressive. Have we been as adept at promulgating emancipatory discourses that come from our own indigenous cultural contexts? Is there a cost associated with our shortcomings in this regard? Ultimately, can we be free on the terms given to us by those from whom we are trying to liberate ourselves?

¹¹ Rekhety Wimby, "The Unity of African Languages", 162.

¹² Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).

¹³ All words from *mdw ntr* are rendered initially in transliteration, followed by phonetic spellings in parenthesis. Subsequent references to these terms interchange the transliteration with the phonetic spelling.

¹⁴ Anderson Thompson, *The African Principle Essay Series* (Chicago: African World Community Press, 1999), iv.

¹⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 16.

brief discussion of critical commentaries from Ayi Kwei Armah, Cheikh Anta Diop, Rkhty Amen, and Simba Tayari respectively, all of whom have sought to explicate the centrality of language to the struggle for liberation.

Armah: Remembering the Dismembered

In his essay *Solving Our Language Problem*, Ayi Kwei Armah discusses the dilemma facing African writers, that of dependency on foreign publishers and literary production (that is writing) primarily in European languages.¹⁶ He argues that this problem is not merely one pertaining to the writer's craft or their ability to reach a populace not literate in the dominant foreign languages—though these are critical challenges. Dependency on European languages also exemplifies a cultural malaise, a static quality represented by the continuing institutionalization of foreign languages at the level of national and international bodies on the continent. He maintains that this regime has resulted in the continued devaluation of Africa's languages, which are generally relegated to use on the local or national stage as “lingua franca” for the masses of the people, but not as administrative, scientific, or artistic languages in many cases.

Some writers have argued for the embrace of Africa's various ethnic languages as mediums of literary communication. Ngũgĩ, for example, has linked the literary use of African languages to the on-going anti-imperialist struggle.¹⁷ However, Armah contends that though these languages may suffice in terms of communicating with a smaller community of native speakers, they will invariably be constrained in their capacity to reach a wider audience for whom these languages are not common. Thus, the writer in an ethnic language, though capable of reaching those literate in the language, will also be limited in going beyond this initial audience.

Instead, Armah proposes that Africans follow the Soviet-model, wherein writers wrote in their various, local languages, and these works were subsequently translated into a major language (Russian in the case of the United Soviet Socialist Republic) capable of reaching a national and international audience, and finally translated from Russian into various other languages such as German, French, English and so on.¹⁸ Applying this to the African context, African writers would create in their preferred local or ethnic language (i.e., Wolof, Kinyarwanda, Ndebele, and so on), and their written works would then be translated and published in a major (that is, transnational) African language. Then these works would be translated into other languages, African and foreign such as English, French, Portuguese, and so forth. Armah argued that this structure would, inevitably, allow African writers to reach the entirety of the African continent primarily via its indigenous languages.

The potential of this scheme notwithstanding, Armah notes that a continental Pan-African language has not yet been determined for Africa. Thus, he considers two separate proposals. First is the Kiswahili (or Swahili) language of East Africa. In discussing its capability, he writes that Kiswahili is the “one African language admirably suited to function as our common ancillary language” given its geographic dispersion and ability to absorb foreign influences.¹⁹

In addition to the former, Armah considers *mdw ntr*, the language of *kmt* (Kemet or ancient Egypt). He states that its extensive development in antiquity has left it well suited for a range of practical applications in the present. He also argues that it is well served by its neutrality, for it

¹⁶ Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, 125.

¹⁷ Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 28.

¹⁸ Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, 127-129.

¹⁹ Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, 129.

is not the native language of any living African population, thus depriving any speech community of an inherent advantage due to their familiarity.

More recently, Armah seems to have moved away from both ideas, instead advocating the creation of an artificial language based on elements of a plethora of continental languages.²⁰ This is an approach that has been favored by others, and will be taken up later.

Diop: Language and a Pan-African Future

Similar to Armah, Cheikh Anta Diop has approached this question, exploring African languages' overall significance to the ends of Pan-African unity. He notes that the embrace of African languages on the local and national level is a critical matter in avoiding the formation of highly stratified societies, wherein those not fluent in the colonial tongue are unable to participate in debate and discussion about the future of society through the holding of public office.²¹ For Diop, the embrace of African languages on the national level satisfies the pragmatic issue of equity, that is the capacity of the society to fully engage the masses of the people, and in so doing, potentially marshal their capacity towards productive ends.

Secondly, he argues that the perceived limitations of African languages, that is in their present capacity to serve the ends of research, are not insurmountable challenges. He writes, "European languages must not be considered diamonds displayed under a glass bell, dazzling us with their brilliance. Our attention must be fixed on their historical development. Creatively, we discover that similar paths are open to all."²² In this, Diop argues that European languages' technical utility are not intrinsic qualities of the languages themselves, but rather are the logical by-product of centuries of effort that has merely resulted in their present states, and that a similar process is practicable for African languages.

The latter point is important as Diop argues that the dependency on European languages was, in many respects, merely a signifier of a deeper and more problematic tether, one sufficient to sap Africa's intellectual and economic potential. He writes, "The influence of language is so great that the various European mother countries feel they can afford to withdraw politically from Africa without great loss as long as their (linguistic) presence remains in the economic, spiritual and cultural spheres."²³ Thus, Diop concludes that language is not merely a medium of communication, but a mooring of servility, a basis of slavish dependency that serves to reinforce the hierarchical relations between African and European nations. Mulokozi has also expressed this point, stating that "Certainly the French, Britons, and Portuguese will do everything in their power to ensure that their languages remain dominant, for language for them is a political, economic and strategic question."²⁴ In this way, both authors echo Carter G. Woodson's famous thesis that the duly mis-educated would actively participate in the maintenance of the oppressive order, that their educations served as a tether, reinforcing the bond of subordination and obfuscating viable pathways towards African self-sufficiency. Woodson writes:

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions.
You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his
"proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door.

²⁰ Morehouse College, "Global Conversations with Dr. Ayi Kwei Armah," Morehouse College, March 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpJD7UxSwPQ>.

²¹ Diop, *Black Africa*, 9.

²² Diop, *Black Africa*, 12.

²³ Diop, *Black Africa*, 13.

²⁴ M.M. Mulokozi, "Kiswahili as a National and International Language," 10.

He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.²⁵

This is made more apparent in Diop's linking of the dominance of foreign languages with the reinforcement of alienation. He argued that while expediency often dictates the retention or adoption of European languages, that these are inherent signifiers and instruments of powerful "cultural interest[s]".²⁶

Rkhty Amen: Languages as a Source of Dependency

Both Armah and Diop illustrate the importance of language, not merely as a tool of transmission, but also as an expression of political and economic interests. They have not been alone in this view as some African American scholars have also considered language's importance to the prospects for liberation.

For instance, Rkhty Amen has argued that language serves a basis of dependency, that the reliance of Africans upon European languages is not merely an indication of our failure to maximize the utility of our own languages. Such a pattern also betrays our belief in the willingness of the European world to carry African people into the future.²⁷ Having neither prepared ourselves for the possibility that we might be denied such passage, or that Europeans might seek to actualize a future that might be detrimental to African interests, we face a terrible malaise of needing to rely upon ourselves. *Kujitegemea*, a Kiswahili term meaning self-reliance, is not terrible in an absolute sense, but can loom ominously for those unprepared to actualize it. Therefore, she argues that our language priorities are inextricably linked to our notions of futurity.

Simba Tayari: Lugha ni Utamaduni

The motto of the Swahili Institute of Chicago, "Lugha ni utamaduni" is highly appropriate in explicating the deeper dimensions of the problems of language dependency, particularly among those most estranged from their ancestral traditions.²⁸ "Lugha ni utamaduni" translates from Kiswahili as "Language is Culture", and for Simba Tayari, the institute's founder, language is a bridge, connecting living Africans to their ancestral traditions. He argues that the *Maafa*—the Kiswahili term offered by Marimba Ani to describe the interrelated processes of slavery, colonialism, and their legacies—occasioned not merely the loss of language, but also the loss of culture, and with this the profound alienation characteristic of a condition of being unmoored from one's traditional values. Therefore, he argues that language reclamation represents not merely a process of acquiring novel means of communication, but the basic foundation for healing and transformation.

In this section, I have attempted to explore some of the critical discourses pertaining to language, particularly with regards to the retention of European languages among African people. Various scholars and advocates have noted that despite their technical utility, European languages serve as tethers, constraining the development of Africa, African people, and African languages. As the processes of colonialism and slavery have represented a disruption of African life, some have argued that African languages represent a potent means for its restoration. Thus, in the following section I will examine possible solutions to the language problem facing us.

²⁵ Woodson, Carter G. *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Trenton: Africa World Press 1990), xiii.

²⁶ Diop, *Black Africa*, 12

²⁷ Rkhty Amen, *Women's History Month Address: The Legitimacy of Mdw Ntr and the Legitimacy of Kemet for Resurrecting an African Worldview*, DVD.

²⁸ Simba Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya* (Chicago: Swahili Institute of Chicago, 1994), 6

Our Language Solutions

During his presidency, Kwame Nkrumah supported the use of Hausa, Kiswahili, and various local languages for state broadcasting services. He is also said to have considered the utility of the Hausa language as a regional language for West Africa.²⁹ These moves are notable, for they illustrate how Nkrumah, similar to Nyerere, viewed language as a tool in the formation of Pan-African nationalism.³⁰

In this section I will explore various proposed solutions to our language problem. I will begin with the proposed adoption of Kiswahili as the principal Pan-African language. Next, I will consider a regional approach, that is, the adoption of various languages within specific regions of the African world. Third, I will examine the prospects of artificial languages such as El-Afrihili or Guosa. And finally, I will discuss the proposed revitalization and adoption of mdw ntr as a Pan-African language.

Sema Kiswahili: Lugha Yetu³¹

The Kiswahili language has been a leading exemplar of the promise of Pan-African language. Its broad diffusion in the pre-colonial era, its appropriation by colonial authorities as an administrative language, its embrace by resistance movements in the region, its concurrent embrace by African Americans as a language of liberation, and its continued expansion on the African continent have made it an ideal candidate.³² Historic factors have contributed to these advantages. The maritime orientation of the Swahili people, as well as the cosmopolitanism of Africa's eastern coast as early as around 1000 CE, have served to place the Swahili language and the Bantu peoples of East Africa at the crossroads of a trade that intersected Africa, Europe, and Asia.³³ It was this milieu that contributed overwhelmingly to the cultivation of a lingua franca or *lugha ya mawasiliano*³⁴ whose lexicon reflected the social intercourse of the region. As a result, the presence of words from sources such as Hindi, Farsi, Arabic, and Portuguese illustrate the malleability of the language, that is its ability to absorb foreign influences, and in so doing, adapt to change.

While the context of colonialism represented a potent challenge to African people, contributing to contradictory manifestations of the language's application as an instrument of European hegemony, its eventual emergence as a "Language of liberation"³⁵ is most revealing as numerous Pan-Africanists and nationalists embraced Kiswahili as an effective tool for communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries. The fact that it is presently spoken in various East and Central African countries by tens of millions and possibly even one hundred million people is indicative of its communicative facility and its acceptability by a range of speakers who see it as

²⁹ Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Politics: An African-Centered Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³⁰ John M. Mugane, *The Story of Swahili* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015).

³¹ This statement translates into English from Kiswahili as "Speak Swahili: Our Language".

³² Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*; Mulokozi, "Kiswahili as a National and International Language"; Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*.

³³ Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*.

³⁴ This term translates into English from Kiswahili as "a language of communication". See "lingua franca," TUKI English-Swahili Dictionary, accessed July 22, 2021, <http://www.elimuyetu.co.tz/subjects/arts/eng-swa/1.html>.

³⁵ Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*, 8.

an appropriate and practical auxiliary language. In this way, Kiswahili has also been a bridge for diverse peoples to adapt to their present.³⁶

This language has also been a means whereby Africans, notably Africans in America, have endeavored to imagine the future. This is most clearly reflected in Kiswahili's popular embrace in the United States during the Black Power era.³⁷ Kiswahili's inclusion in the Pan-African holiday created by Maulana Karenga, *Kwanzaa*, its use in the names of various community institutions such as the *Shule ya Watoto* ("School for Children") in Chicago or *Uhuru Sasa Shule* ("Freedom Now School") in New York City, and the adoption of various Swahili names by numerous individuals such as Haki (truth), Safisha (pure), Jitu (giant), Malaika (angel), Tayari (ready), Maisha (life), Mwafrika (African), and so forth all underscore the depth of meaning that the Kiswahili language took on among African Americans desirous of a reclamation of an African identity. As such, the concurrent invocation of *umoja* ("unity"), *kujichagulia* ("self-determination"), *kujitegemea* ("self-reliance"), and *uhuru sasa* ("freedom now") in both Africa and the Americas also affirms the degree to which Kiswahili was the embodiment of Pan-African thought and practice during this time.

It should be noted that while the ancestry of African Americans can largely be traced to west and central Africa, the Kiswahili language, rather than being directly connected to this ancestral legacy, has served, in many respects, as a signifier of this African heritage in a general sense. Herein, the language's seeming ethnic neutrality has been seen as a virtue in light of the multiplicity of languages spoken by the ancestors of African Americans. As such, Kiswahili has served to embody both a critical African consciousness as well as a tradition of struggle for self-determination.³⁸

In short, Kiswahili offers numerous advantages—it is already established as an international language, has numerous print and broadcast media, and has an extensive history of writing dating back to at least the Sixteenth Century via the use of Ajami script.³⁹ Kiswahili is taught in institutions of higher education in East Africa and beyond (both in other parts of Africa and around the world), and it is largely regarded as an ethnically neutral language—thus negating potential opposition to its adoption and expansion.⁴⁰

However, the Kiswahili language, though expanding, is not firmly entrenched in West Africa. As such, concerted efforts would be needed to institutionalize it in such a geographically disparate context. Furthermore, while the embrace of Kiswahili by Africans in the United States has been notable, this has not occurred throughout in the African Diaspora. Thus, methods of popularization and diffusion for contexts such as Brazil, Columbia, Haiti, Jamaica, and so forth may have to be devised. It should be noted that the retention of traditional African cultures in other parts of the Americas may mean that other African languages may have greater degrees of traction in different areas, thus posing other complexities for Kiswahili advocates to traverse.

A Regional Approach to Language

While many have embraced the viability of Kiswahili as a Pan-African language suitable for the

³⁶ Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*; Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*.

³⁷ Scot Brown, *Fighting for Us: Maulana Karenga, the Us Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*; Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*, 254-264;

³⁸ Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*

³⁹ Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*; Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*, 177-178.

⁴⁰ Mugane, *The Story of Swahili*; Mulokozi, "Kiswahili as a National and International Language"; Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*.

African world, others have instead offered it as one element in a regional approach to language policy wherein a regional language is designated for different parts of Africa—east, west, south, and north. This approach seeks to adopt African languages which have been well-established in their respective geographic milieus. In this configuration, Kiswahili is typically proposed for East and Central Africa, while Hausa and/or the Mandé languages might be suitable candidates for West Africa.⁴¹ Still, others have proposed that Kiswahili be the default language of Africa's Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere.⁴² Given the extent of Yorùbá cultural influence in the Americas, in addition to the notable and increasing presence of Yorùbá-based cultural practice (most notably Ifá and related spiritual traditions) among Africans in the U.S. since the 1950s, this is also an interesting Diasporan consideration.⁴³

However, despite the flexibility and logic of the above approach, it is not without some criticism. For instance, some languages may incite resentment or resistance due to local or national histories of tensions between groups.⁴⁴ In other instances, some might insist that African languages are insufficiently *developed* to serve as mediums of written communication for a range of applications from the literary to the governmental to the scientific, thus necessitating varying degrees of augmentation and adjustment.⁴⁵ However, it should be noted that some scholars have problematized the notion of *development* as being inherently Eurocentric, thus ethnocentric and an instrument of neocolonialism.⁴⁶

The Case for Constructed Languages

Given the challenges associated with living languages—their grammatical complexity or their association with ethnic or national interests—some advocates have proposed the use of artificial languages as solutions to the African world's language problem. Both K. A. Kumi Attobrah and Alexander Igbinewka have offered proposals. Attobrah developed El-Afrihili in 1967 as a potential Pan-African language.⁴⁷ The lexicon of Attobrah's language drew from a plethora of African languages and employed a regular, systematic grammar. Similarly, Igbinewka's Guosa language has been offered as a language solution for West Africa for decades. His motto has

⁴¹ Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Politics*, 184; Edward L. Powe, e-mail message to author, February 10, 2016.

⁴² Tayari, *Lugha Yetu: Mwanzo Mpya*.

⁴³ Kọ́ lá Abímbó lá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Ìrókò Academic Publishers, 2006); Fèhìntòlá Mosádó, *Yorùbá Yé Mi: A Beginning Yorùbá Textbook* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin Department of African and African Diaspora and the Warfield Center for African and African-American Studies, 2012).

⁴⁴ Ayo Bangboş, *Language and Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 14-16; René Dirven and Martin Pütz, "Language Conflict Seen from the Viewpoint of the Rationalistic and Romantic Models," in *Explorations in Language Use in Africa*, ed. by Augustin Simo Bobda (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴⁵ Diop, *Black Africa*, 9-12.

⁴⁶ Ama Mazama, "An Afrocentric Approach to Language Planning," *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 1 (1994): 3-19; Kamau Rashid, "Beyond the Fetters of Colonialism: Du Bois, Nkrumah, and a Pan-African Critical Theory," *Equity & Excellence in Education* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1672593>.

⁴⁷ K.A. Kumi Attobrah, *Ni Afrihili Oluga: The African Continental Language* (Akrokerri, Ghana: The Afrihili Center, 1970).

been “Swahili for the East. Guosa for the West.”⁴⁸ Similar to El-Afrihili, his language draws from a cross-section of languages, but primarily West African languages, especially those from his native Nigeria.⁴⁹ More recently, Ayi Kwei Armah has embraced the possibility of a constructed language,⁵⁰ and made such a project the central element of his novel *The Revolutionaries*. In it he advocates for the creation of a language that draws upon a plethora of living African languages, in addition to the language of ancient kmt—mdw ntr.

While constructed languages are appealing in terms of their possible simplicity and modularity, they lack, as Edward L. Powe has noted, “a solid base from which to expand.”⁵¹ Thus, while one can observe the expansion of Kiswahili from its coastal, East African base further inland via the vectors of trade, an artificial language would require a concerted effort in order to achieve significant propagation. Given the lack of historic precedent for such an endeavor, this is a doubtful prospect.⁵²

***mdw ntr*: A Bridge to Both Our Past and Future?**

The late Twentieth Century witnessed a surge in interest among Africans in America in the ancient Nile Valley. Far from being an anomaly, this attraction to African antiquity was anticipated by Martin Delany, the Nineteenth Century advocate of Black Nationalism, W.E.B. Du Bois, whose early Twentieth Century historical treatises contributed substantively to the formation of the African-centered philosophy of history,⁵³ and the entire generation of scholars whom Anderson Thompson refers to as the “Black Scappers” including John G. Jackson, Josef

⁴⁸ “Home Page,” Guosa Educational, Scientific and Cultural Institute, Incorporated, retrieved on October 5, 2017, (<http://www.guosa-language-tv.com/>).

⁴⁹ Alex Ekhaguosa Igbineveka, *The Complete Dictionary of Guosa Language* (Richmond, CA: Guosa Educational, Scientific & Cultural Institute, Inc., and Guosa Publication Services, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Revolutionaries* (Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2013); Ayi Kwei Armah, “Global Conversations with Dr. Ayi Kwei Armah,” Morehouse College, retrieved on March 17, 2016 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpJD7UxSwPQ>).

⁵¹ Edward L. Powe, e-mail message to author, February 10, 2016.

⁵² It should be noted the constructed language that has experienced the most success to date has been Esperanto, which was created in 1887 by a Polish ophthalmologist named L.L. Zamenhof. He sought to create an international language that would address the social tensions that he believed were the result of the inability of different groups to communicate with one another, an observation informed by both his local milieu, in addition to the nationalism and warfare of late 19th and early 20th Century Europe. Despite some successes, Zamenhof’s language has not yet become an international language on the scale that was initially imagined by him and other Esperantists (exponents of Esperanto). However, his creation is the most widely spoken constructed language on Earth, with some estimates declaring 2,000,000 speakers. Esperanto’s relative success notwithstanding, constructed languages face formidable challenges. See Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages: Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

⁵³ Greg Kimathi Carr, “The African-Centered Philosophy of History: An Exploratory Essay on the Genealogy of Foundationalist Historical Thought and African Nationalist Identity Construction,” in *The Preliminary Challenge*, ed. by Jacob H. Carruthers and Leon C. Harris, 285-320 (Los Angeles: Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations, 1997); Martin Delany, *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color with an Archaeological Compendium and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991).

Ben-Jochannan, and John Henrik Clarke.⁵⁴ The full flowering of this was to manifest itself in the final decades of the Twentieth Century, as evidenced by the scholarly productivity of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations, the Kemetic Institute of Chicago, the Journal of African Civilizations, and other groups.

This attraction to Kemet was not based, as some have suggested, on an insufficient appreciation of the cultures and traditions most directly linked ancestrally to Diasporan Africans in the Americas, such as Kongo, Igbo, Yorùbá, Mandé, Akan, and so on. Rather it was informed by a reflection on the magnitude of Kemet's legacy and its anteriority to later African societies. Each of the latter points have been critical in the arguments of those who have advocated for the revitalization of Kemetic culture, including its language *mdw ntr*, as indispensable elements in the process of re-Africanization and the affirmation of African self-determination.

In his book *Mdw Ntr: Divine Speech*, Jacob H. Carruthers notes the perilous implications of mooring African thought to European epistemologies and ontologies, that is, of attempting to understand and articulate African paradigms within a European worldview.⁵⁵ Rather than engage in the laborious process of explaining the African worldview via European discourses, he instead argued that we must abandon them, that we “must break the chain that links African ideas to European ideas and listen to the voice of the ancestors without European interpreters.”⁵⁶ This means that the tethers of intellectual bondage can be destroyed via a thorough engagement with African thought, and to do this, one must necessarily engage with African languages, including the language of classical African antiquity—*mdw ntr*.⁵⁷

This conceptual de-linking is potentially present within the ideational matrix of any African language, however, as Rkhty Amen contends, the depth of Kemetic thought, as reflected in its literature, provides a vast and unparalleled resource that might inform our reclamation of an African worldview.⁵⁸ She cautions however that “Because many of the features of Kemetic language and thought are foreign to Indo-European language systems, researchers need to be careful in their research, not to cloud their work with their modern, western interpretations, perspectives and linguistic rules and orientations. This surely cannot be a simple task.”⁵⁹

One small example of the dilemma that she explicates here pertains to the area of intellectual inquiry referred to by Europeans as *ethics*. Merriam Webster defines ethics as “a set of moral principles: a theory or system of moral values.”⁶⁰ There is no word in *mdw ntr* that means ethics per se. There is, however, the Kemetic concept of *m3't* (Maat), which refers to correct thinking and action. Carruthers provides a more expansive explanation. He writes that the “Kemite

⁵⁴ Anderson Thompson, "Developing an African Historiography," in *The Preliminary Challenge*, ed. by Jacob H. Carruthers and Leon C. Harris, 9-30 (Los Angeles: Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations, 1997).

⁵⁵ Jacob H. Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr: Divine Speech* (London: Karnak House, 1995).

⁵⁶ Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, xviii.

⁵⁷ Jacob H. Carruthers, "A Memorandum on an African World History Project," in *The Preliminary Challenge*, ed. by Jacob H. Carruthers and Leon C. Harris, 356-61 (Los Angeles: Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations, 1997).

⁵⁸ Rkhty Amen, n.d. *Women's History Month Address: The Legitimacy of Mdw Ntr and the Legitimacy of Kemet for Resurrecting an African Worldview*, DVD; Rkhty Amen, *The Writing System of Medu Neter* (The Institute of Kemetic Philology, 2010).

⁵⁹ Amen, *The Writing System of Medu Neter*, vii

⁶⁰ “Ethic,” Merriam-Webster, accessed October 5, 2017, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethic>.

principle of universal order is Maat.”⁶¹ According to Obenga, Maat “implies order, universal balance, cosmic regulation, justice, truth, truth-in-justice, rectitude and moral uprightness.”⁶² Thus, Maat is not equal to ethics. It explicates not merely a model of personal behavior, but is also a societal ideal with implications for the broader political-economy, in addition to articulating Kemetic beliefs about the nature and functioning of the universe itself. In this way, equating Maat merely with *ethics* constrains the depth of its meaning. De-linking Maat from the concept of *ethics* provides a much more expansive framework from which to understand the Kemetic worldview.

Therefore, the language of kmt enables one to, as Carruthers said, “listen to the voice of the ancestors.”⁶³ The language links us to a body of deep thought that explicates the breadth and complexity of knowledge in African antiquity, and also informs our own efforts to revitalize the African world view in the present.⁶⁴ This is demonstrated in the works of various African scholars, who pose that Kemetic knowledge offers an abundant resource, capable of informing our lives and work in numerous ways. Furthermore, given Kemet’s place in African antiquity, it also represents the legacy for all African peoples, a cultural exemplar which might serve to both unify and inspire.⁶⁵

Furthermore, mdw ntr provides a conceptual repertoire capable of enriching any extant African language.⁶⁶ The practice of borrowing words from Indo-European languages reinforces a corrosive cultural dependency and undermines efforts to augment our indigenous languages. Thus, Carruthers’s statement, “Our terminology should be permeated with Kemetic phrases and words,”⁶⁷ captures the intelligence of utilizing the lexical inventory of mdw ntr to augment our present-day communication, in addition to mdw ntr’s capacity to link living African languages to a shared past, while also reinforcing the logic and utility of finding African solutions to African problems. Finally, the efforts to devise scripts for extant African languages might also be satisfied by the use of mdw ntr. Its development over thousands of years and varied forms demonstrates a high level of versatility, and also suggests that the script can be adapted to accommodate other African languages. In short, mdw ntr’s relevance as a Pan-African language, a language for all African people, is evident in its communicative capacity, in addition to its potential as a tool of cultural reorientation.

Conclusion: Prospects And Possibilities

This essay seeks to understand the implications of language for African liberation. I have argued that language is not unmoored from the structural challenges of social transformation, rather that language is an inextricable element in the decolonization of the African mind, and as such provides the conceptual matrix for both reclaiming an African worldview and also establishing a basis of self-determination.

⁶¹ Carruthers, Jacob H, *Essays in Ancient Egyptian Studies*, Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1984, 56.

⁶² Theophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period: 2780-330 BC* (Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2004), 189.

⁶³ Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, xviii.

⁶⁴ Amen, *Women's History Month Address*.

⁶⁵ Diop, *Black Africa*.

⁶⁶ Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*.

⁶⁷ Carruthers, *A Memorandum*, 360.

Also, I offered a brief and critical analysis of various language proposals. A regional language approach has the capacity to accord to existing linguistic realities. Constructed languages are able to achieve, by virtue of effective planning, a high degree of learnability. However, it should be noted that while the proposals for regional and constructed languages offer a number of benefits, each occasions its own challenges. Regional languages are vulnerable to ethnic-based political conflicts, while constructed languages will necessarily be constrained with respect to their establishment and expansion. The proposals for Kiswahili and mdw ntr on the other hand, though still imperfect, offer a degree of flexibility and economy which is notable. Kiswahili's wide and growing diffusion, perceived ethnic-neutrality, and on-going development make it a viable consideration. mdw ntr's historical significance, its manifestation as a conduit of African deep thought, and its script—which can conceivably be used to write any African language—also makes it a deeply compelling candidate. In fact, Carruthers articulates the utility of both considerations when he states that, “Medew Netcher (hieroglyphs) should be our classical scholarly language just as Ki-Swahili should probably be the contemporary universal black language.”⁶⁸ However, it should be noted that the viability of institutionalizing Kiswahili in West Africa remains unproven. Furthermore, devising mechanisms to revitalize mdw ntr as a “living language” will require a host of challenges beyond those of even a language like Kiswahili given its current status.

Beyond this brief essay, a number of important considerations remain such as devising mechanisms to maximize the diffusion of the selected language(s), including the creation of media, the establishment of speech communities, the integration of these languages within African institutions both on the continent and in the Diaspora, and so forth.

Additionally, we should consider what insights, if any, can be gleaned from current efforts by other peoples to revitalize their languages, such as those of the Maori, Native Hawaiians, Native American communities, and so forth. What dissemination strategies did they employ? Have their language campaigns resulted in other gains in areas pertaining to political education, economic development, etcetera?⁶⁹

However, while this essay has largely concerned itself with Pan-African language proposals, and with this the politics of empowerment which undergirds them, there is another, albeit simpler path. Kwesi Kwaa Prah has noted that the idea that Africa is characterized by a multiplicity of unintelligible languages is problematic. He notes “that as first, second or third language speakers 80-85% of Africans speak no more than 15-17 of what can be described as ‘core languages’, these latter being language clusters which enjoy a high degree of mutual intelligibility which permits them to share the same set of spelling rules.”⁷⁰ Based on this, Prah advocates for the harmonization of scripts across language clusters and the institutionalization of local languages within a broad range of contexts including schools. Thus, Prah's solution bypasses the need for a Pan-African language per se, and instead builds upon bases of unity implicit in Africa's core languages, while also empowering African cultures, and Africans themselves. Furthermore, his proposal holds interesting implications for Diasporan African

⁶⁸ Carruthers, *A Memorandum*, 360.

⁶⁹ The Graduate Center, CUNY, “Inq13 | Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Eve Tuck – ‘Decolonizing Methodologies’,” April, 29 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIZXQC27vtg>; Grubin, David, “Language Matters with Bob Holman,” 120 minutes, Arlington, VA: PBS, 2014. DVD; Lorraine Boissoneault, “How to Resurrect a Lost Language,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-resurrect-lost-language-180962937/>.

⁷⁰ Prah, Kwesi Kwaa, “Mother-Tongue Education in Africa for Emancipation and Development: Towards the Intellectualisation of African Languages,” In *Languages and Education in Africa*, edited by Birgit Brock-Utne and Ingse Skattum, 83-104, Oxford, United Kingdom: Symposium Books, 2009, 101.

communities, who might also be empowered via the institutionalization of their languages in schools, the state apparatus, and so forth.

Finally, language is, as Simba Tayari writes, the essence of culture. It is not merely a communicative tool, but is also the embodiment of people's worldview and way of life. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes that "Language, any languages, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture."⁷¹ Therefore, my position is not that language is merely facilitative of worldview, but that language is constitutive of it. Inherent within it are inevitable epistemological and ontological vectors. Those struggling to reclaim or safeguard their cultures should be mindful of this. This requires that language be given due consideration as a central and inescapable element in the process of liberation. It not only enables us to know and imagine our past, it also informs our vision of the future. It provides the conceptual framework via which we apprehend reality, and as such, is a matter of weighty potential.

⁷¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 13.

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