

AFRICAN LANGUAGES, FROM YESTERDAY TO NOWADAYS: WHAT IMPACT ON GLOBALISATION? A STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *MATIGARI*

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Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer que les langues africaines sont confrontées à de grands défis dans ce monde nouveau et que beaucoup reste à faire pour leur revalorisation. En effet, aujourd'hui, le monde est devenu un village planétaire et progressivement, nous parvenons à cette unification mondiale longtemps prônée. Cependant, malgré tout cela, le seul blocage entre les peuples reste la langue. Il faut savoir que la langue, c'est l'identité d'un peuple. La perdre donc c'est perdre son identité. Pour préserver leurs langues dans cette mondialisation, certains auteurs Africains utiliseront plusieurs stratégies dans leurs écrits. C'est le cas de Ngugi wa Thiong'o qui va même abandonner la langue anglaise pour le Gikuyu avant d'y revenir. L'œuvre Matigari que nous étudions est l'illustration parfaite de cette décision. Elle avait été initialement rédigée en Gikuyu, la langue maternelle de l'auteur avant d'être traduite. C'est ce combat qu'a mené Ngugi wa Thiong'o jusqu'à sa mort très récemment. Vu toutes ces difficultés, l'on peut s'interroger sur l'avenir des langues africaines dans cette mondialisation.

Mots-clé : défis, identité, langues africaines, mondialisation, revalorisation.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to show that African languages face major challenges in this new world and that much remains to be done to enhance their status. Today, the world has become a global village and we are gradually achieving the global unification that has long been advocated. However, despite all this, the only barrier between peoples remains language. As a people's identity, language is very important. Losing one's language is tantamount to losing one's identity. To preserve their languages in this globalised world, some African authors use several strategies in their writing. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for example, even gave up English for Gikuyu before returning to it. The novel Matigari under study is a perfect illustration of this decision. It was initially written in Gikuyu, the author's mother tongue, before being translated. Ngugi wa Thiong'o fought this battle until his recent death. All these difficulties led to wonder about the future of African languages in this globalised world.

Key words: challenges, identity, African languages, globalisation, revaluation.

Introduction

Defined as the distinguishing mark of identity (G. Aondona, 2009, p.448), language plays an important role in the life of peoples. It enables individuals from the same group to recognise each other and often facilitates marriages (N. Sobania, 2003, p.2-3). Belonging to an ethnic group creates what G. Aondona (2009, p.441) describes as a 'very strong bond between members. Long rejected by the colonialists, African languages have since been perceived as those of savages (R. Araeen, 2010, p.248). Indeed, 'The West generally sees itself as civilised, modern, developed and rational, while seeing other parts of the world as barbaric, atavistic, underdeveloped and in the grip of passion rather than reason'. In their desire to bring their 'modern model' (O. Rabah, 2018, p.31) or this civilisation, modernity and development to the Africans, they imposed their languages on the Black and at the same time forbade him to express himself in his local language to ensure that he quickly assimilated theirs. Ngugi wa Thiong'o said that humiliation was the punishment for those who were caught speaking their mother tongue, while those who did their utmost to speak the colonial language were honoured (P. Kenneth, 1982, p.35-35). The aim of this whole strategy was to distance black people from their culture, as B. Obi so aptly put it. Obi, (1983, p.20). « This means that he was in fact distancing himself from himself and his immediate environment. » To return to their culture and, above all, their languages, African authors used several methods, each with its own specific characteristics. Ngugi wa Thiong'o chose to write only in Gikuyu and Swahili to lead the struggle. The novel we under study, *Matigari*, is a perfect illustration of the author's choice: it was written entirely in Gikuyu before being translated a few years later. In this work, the author tries to highlight his language and thus promote African culture. Unfortunately, he was forced to revert to English a few years later. Since then, the fight to defend African languages seems to have stagnated and they are struggling to take off. What is the place of

African languages in this globalisation? In other words, what are the challenges facing them ? To answer these questions, we will draw on the postcolonial theory defined by Marie Carrière (2012, p.56) in these words:

(...) it is a reading practice that 'enables us to move beyond particularism and clichés' (Desroches 2003,4) in order to deal with encounters, conflicts and even paradoxes relating to uprootedness, crossbreeding, otherness, internal and external movements, memories, critical approaches and the play on language, forms and genres in a literary work that is clearly (but not exclusively) migrant.
P.56

The work, which is in three parts, is structured as follows: the first part is entitled African languages and the objectives of the past. The second is entitled African languages: where do they fit in today? and the final part is entitled African languages in the face of the major challenges of globalisation.

I- African languages and the objectives of the past

In the past, with the difficulties facing their languages, several African authors used different strategies to defend them. It should be remembered that African languages were baldly appreciated (J. Conrad, p.1899), so that they were banned from schools. Anyone caught speaking one of those languages was punished and humiliated. Ngugi wa Thiong'o bore the brunt of this. His childhood was marked by humiliations due to his attachment to his language. In an interview with K. Parker (p.34-35), he described his experiences in the following terms: "I remember that we were given corporal punishment when we were caught speaking our native languages in school. We were made to carry plates round our necks, with the inscription 'I am an ass' or 'I am stupid'(...). Conversely, when a child did very well in English, he was praised; the other pupils in the class were made to applaud him, he was

given rewards". These comments clearly show that Africans were not allowed to express themselves in their own languages but, on the contrary, were forced to speak that of the colonist. The white man imposed his language on Blacks, wanting at all costs that the little Negro forget his own in order to appropriate the language imposed on him. N. Sieben (2012, p.1) explains this situation well when she says:

By examining the history of Kenya and other African colonies, Ngugi shows that when Christian missionaries and other European colonizers entered Africa, they forced Africans to speak European languages as a means of enforcing their control. They set up schools that taught children European languages while deprecating the use of native languages. Language became a means of separating children from their own culture and history. While at home, children were taught about their ancestry from their parents through oral stories, at school they learned to criticize their native cultures if they wanted to become "civilized" and gain the favour of the "White man's God.

By imposing his language on the black person, the white man was trying to 'create' a new human being who would not be rooted in his origins but who would be made in his image or in the image of the white man. It should be remembered that this situation created a frustration in these people that drove them to challenge the authority of the settler. Ngugi wa Thiong'o stated that "Since I had been detained for writing [...], I felt that I had to continue writing in that language as an act of defiance." (P. Kenneth, 1982, p.35). Because of his unwavering determination to defend his language, Ngugi was arrested and put in prison. This constant threat, far from chilling him, pushed him to go further. First, he tried to break the yoke of alienation by changing his name from Ngugi James to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1977. In the same year, he publicly rejected the English language, in which he refused to write, before returning

to it a few years later. Alluding to this period, K. Djiman (2013, p.16) concludes with these words: “1977 represents a milestone, a crucial period in Ngugi’s emphatic rejection of the Shakespearean language.”

Let's just say that he was not the only one to adopt this strategy. Chinua Achebe fought the battle in his own way. He resorted to transliteration to preserve the authenticity of his message (Echezona Ifejirika, 2014, p.1). L. M. Kenalemang (2013, p.6) said of him that “Because Achebe originates from Nigeria, a colony of Britain, some of the writing elements he uses in his novels such as language and style are influenced by that.”

In this reference, the author is alluding to Chinua Achebe's own technique. To put it clearer, each author used a particular and personal method to defend his language, which was a kind of trademark for him. Kourouma was seen as a master of ‘interlanguage’ (Jean-Marc Moura, 2014, p.5). concerning Ngugi wa Thiong’o, K. Djiman (idem) said: “Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes in English to draw the attention of English people that he is not English.” In other words, Ngugi wanted to show the colonist that he was African and remained attached to his language. All these techniques expressed the frustration of these African authors with their languages, which were simply trampled down. It was their way of fighting for the revaluation of their languages. We agree with G. Aondona Ioratim-Uba (2009, p.448), who argues that language is an individual's primary identity, a “label of identity”. Nakhisa Andrew Wanyonyi (2013, p.76) goes further on the role of language. He states that it is part not only of our identity but also of our culture. Losing it is tantamount to losing our identity. This is the reality African authors wanted to avoid. They did not want to lose their originality. F. Fanon (1952, p.30) already recognised that “to speak a language is to assume a world. When the white man imposes his language on the African, it is obviously his culture that he is imposing on the child. Due to the fact that the white man's language had been imposed on them at a time when these authors could not react, they waited until the right time. When that

opportunity arose for them to act, they did not hesitate. Seeing their identity threatened, African authors had no choice but to fight to restore it. They will, then, use the pen as an assegai (M. Naumann, 2003, p.53) to make themselves heard. So, what is the situation of our African languages today?

II- African languages: where do they fit in today?

After decades of struggle to reposition themselves in the international sphere, African languages remain, despite everything, in their initial position. They continue to fight for recognition and assertion of their identity. C.-Y. Chiang (2010, p.35) even maintains that many people are sceptical about the objectives of globalisation. For them, globalisation is simply a means for imperialism to impose itself and expand: “They point out that globalization is a fully international system of cultural exchange through which the imperial power is strategically maintained and expanded.” In other words, nothing has changed. The words of Matigari, the eponymous character, are full of meaning: “Then and now...the past and the present...yesterday and today... What curse befell us? the present and the past.” (p.16). These words show that no real changes have been made since then. In other words, the past and the present remain the same. We share Ibrahima Ba’s (2012, p.186) opinion about the fact that ‘no change, no improvement worthy of the name, has been noted’. Very limited in this modern world, African languages seem to play the same roles as they are recognised to serving as a means of communication between members of the same community. In fact, we get the feeling that our languages play no other role in the new world apart from those mentioned above. Moreover, they are only spoken in Africa, among us, particularly in our ethnic groups. To put it plainly, African languages seem to be reserved solely for identifying peoples. On this basis, it can be said that they are limited, or even ‘useless’, compared with Western languages, which play many roles in the societies of the world. The latter facilitate

communication and help with teaching. A. Nakhisa (2013, p.76) argues that : “The globe is now a bigger village. The only difference being that in order to reach an understanding with its inhabitants, students and members of EAC have to know all notions in other languages too, aside from their native ones.” P.76).

For him, therefore, in this globalised world, we must not be content to speak only our mother tongue, we must be open to other languages, which is not a bad thing. However, there is a feeling that only Africans make the effort to learn Western languages and adopt their culture. Western writers, such as the French or even the English, don't really need to use words or expressions in their writings to try and promote their languages, since they are already used throughout the world. Africans are obliged to do so because only they and their community understand what they mean. Authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and others use this technique.

In today's world, no African language is the official language of any Western country, whereas French and English are official languages in most African countries, as is the case in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and many other African countries. This raises the question of reciprocity and cultural exchange. Africans simply draw from the cultural reservoir of the West, while the West does not seem to do the same. This cultural exchange, so much advocated by certain authors, seems essential and important. However, we realise that in this exchange, only the African borrows, because the others receive practically nothing from us in the way of culture. Prinz, Aloys, Siegel and Melissa (2019, p. p.7) state that: “Culture encompasses a person’s religion, *r*, (in particular as a proxy variable for mentality), language, *l*, and education or skills, *e*. The reason for applying these dimensions of culture is that they seem crucial for acculturation and integration into the host country’s society.” On this basis, we understand that culture is a combination of religion, language, education and skills. When we use this definition, we realise that most of these elements

come from the White man. In other words, even in the 21st century, the West does not copy the continent's cultural model.

Africans are neglecting their own language in favour of Western languages. The case of Tunisia at one time is a concrete example where speaking French was seen as a privilege. P. B. Stevens (1983, p.108) spoke of this with regret in the following words:

The prestige of French in Tunisia often makes possible the use of that language as an expression of power, an assertion of authority. Urgent requests and orders given in French are felt to receive quicker and better compliance than those given in Arabic. Because of its authoritative connotations, French allows Tunisians to maintain social distance in certain situations.

This quote shows that Africans seem to be ashamed of their own language, which leads to its weakening. As a result, African languages are disappearing in favour of the colonial language. There are several possible reasons for this. Even if immigration and mixed marriages play an important role in this 'linguistic suicide' referred to by Baker (2001, p.50-51), the African is primarily responsible. We all know that immigrants in the host countries are confronted with the harsh reality of language. Because of language barriers, they are forced to adapt and to relegate their language to the background because there is no one to talk to.

Today, because of the presence of these languages and mixed marriages, African languages are gradually disappearing. Godwin Aondoua underlined this fact in one of his writings. He said:

A language is endangered when a critical number of its owners (the young) refrain from speaking it, writing in it and fail to take steps to reverse the neglect. Language owners may inadvertently refrain from speaking their language because it is not accorded prestige value and roles."

Put differently, if African languages are left behind and neglected, they will extinguish and even, disappear. And globalisation is a great challenge for African languages.

III- African languages and the major challenges of globalization

African languages face many difficulties and challenges. With regard to the first challenge, teaching, Africans still don't have the opportunity to teach the new generation in their own language. We are still using the language of the colonists to teach, and that undermines our credibility. Boniface, Mongo-Mboussa (2006, p.107) is clear on this point. He states that : “(...) it is clear that we will never be able to make the qualitative leap towards a real collective appropriation of the most modern knowledge if we do not educate our populations in African languages.” His position is strengthened by a ‘Unesco recommendation (1950), which sees the mother tongue as the guarantor of quality education.’ (S. A. Ozouf, 2014, p.334). One cannot assert to be linguistically independent and still depend on the colonial language. Unlike the Western languages that Africans learn in schools and universities, no African language is taught in the continent's institutions. It should be remembered that many maintain that our languages are unfit to perform this function. Some authors, such as P. B. Stevens (1983, p.102), believe that our African languages are not adapted to the realities of education, which would justify their absence from the education system: “However, in much of the Third World, the former colonial language has been maintained (...) because none of the local languages has ever been considered capable of expressing the technological, scientific, administrative and pedagogical needs of the society.” This unsubstantiated view has led M. E. Epietung (2024, p.8) to maintain that our languages are surrounded by “prejudice and contempt”. In fact, according to this author, contrary to what many people say and think, our African languages have the aptitude and capacity to play the same roles as

Western languages. The examples he gives in his article prove this, and the conclusion we can draw from his work is that literature has developed through several African languages (M. E. Epietung, 2024p.8-9). The important thing to remember is that our languages are suitable for teaching in our national schools, colleges and universities. J. Kenyatta (1938, p.99) said the following: “Apart from the system of schools which has been introduced by the Europeans, there is no special school building in the Gikuyu sense of the word: the homestead is the school.” This means that everything started with learning the language at home. We also know that languages adapt to other languages through inventions and borrowings, as F. Barth (1969, p.11) puts it so well : “We are led to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation, mainly in response to local ecologic factors, through a history of adaptation by invention and selective borrowing.” On this basis, Africans can also ‘invent’ words, known as neologisms, to adapt to educational, university and technical realities.

Today, we need to enhance the value of our languages by teaching them in our schools, both public and private, and this is strongly recommended by several authors. W. Cross (2003, p.27) argues that “BlacAfrican children transcend colonialism. The only way to do this is to teach BlacAfrican languages to the children.”[sic]. Early in the past, voices had been raised to encourage their integration into the education system, as we see here with K. Watson (1999, p. 13) who pointed out that : “As a result it is becoming apparent that many governments, especially in Africa, are facing increasing pressures not only from outside but also internally, demanding that there should be greater emphasis placed upon the encouragement of local languages and literacies in education.” All these factors help understand that we need to teach our languages in schools when we know that ‘the French language is incapable of conveying the nuances of the African language’ (J.-M. Moura, 2014, p.8). Africans are not averse to learning Western languages. However, we hope that as much as these languages are

learnt in our African schools and universities, our African languages should also be learnt in order to enhance their status. A. Nakhisa (2013, p.76) states that “Maintenance of the language of origin is one’s right and its fundamental instrument for one’s growth and has a positive effect of learning the second and third languages e.g. communitarian languages like French, English, German, Spanish, Russia, Chinese, Japanese amongst others.”

In his view, learning our African languages will help us to learn what he refers to as secondary or Western languages. Simply put, our languages are the means that will facilitate the learning of other languages. On this point, he is joined by C. Komenan, who stresses that “To succeed in adapting English to the needs of its user, two things are necessary: first, having a sound knowledge of the borrowed language in order to be able to dominate and transform it, and second, one must master one’s own language and culture.” The two ideas go hand in hand and encourage the learning of our mother tongues and, above all, their mastery.

The book *Matigari* that we are studying is a pure Gikuyu product. It was written in Gikuyu before being translated into English. Ngugi wanted to lead the fight, thinking many writers would follow. Unfortunately, he remained alone and was unable to achieve his goal, and was forced to retrace his steps, i.e. the English language. That was certainly what justified his ‘prolonged silence’ alluded to by D. Coussy, (2003, p.25) before his very recent death. If we share the point that African languages should be taught in our schools and universities, the second challenge or the big question to be answered is: which language should be chosen for teaching, given that it is impossible to teach all of them? The problem will therefore lie in the choice of the language. Indeed, if one language were to be chosen as the official language of Africa, which one would it be when we know that each member of the community wants to ‘promote its own language’ and that they are faced with a kind of adversity and even animosity (G. I.U. Aondona (2009, p.442). The choice will be difficult when we remember the violent conflict between the ‘Berom, Afizere,

Anaguta/Hausa-Fulani' over the simple appointment of people who did not belong to their communities (G. I.U. Aondona (2009, p.441).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that a number of writers have taken up the cause of promoting African culture, particularly languages, out of frustration. These languages were rejected by the colonial power, and many were tortured for speaking them. To try and restore their place in African societies, to enhance their status or to oppose this linguistic oppression, they resorted to a number of strategies. Unfortunately, the sad fact remains that African languages have not really evolved. They face major challenges, including the threat of extinction and the problem of teaching in our universities and colleges. Our view is that, following the example of China where Mandarin is taught from primary school to university on a compulsory basis, certain African languages could also follow this example, because the introduction of these languages not only enables them to be maintained in culture and society but also to be learned and mastered by the learners. Teaching in our mother tongue will make things easy for learners because they will understand what is taught to them without great effort and they will not be spend year to learn the language for understanding the class. The problem that could arise would undoubtedly be the choice of language, given that Africa has more than a thousand (1000) ethnic groups and that each one struggles to promote its origins.

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