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MEETING OF EXPERTS ON THE PROMOTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES  
IN EASTERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA AS MEDIA OF CULTURE  
AND LIFE-LONG EDUCATION

(Dar es Salaam, 15-21 December 1971)

I. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PROBLEMS AND POLICIES  
OF THE AFRICAN STATES

by

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The purpose of the questionnaire drawn up by the Secretariat of Unesco on the linguistic and cultural policies of African Member States was to establish:

the rôle of each African language in the community in which it is the instrument of communication and the cultural vehicle;

the present state of development of each of these languages;

the status accorded by each African State to the languages of the country;

the resources allocated to the implementation of the policy of promoting and utilizing these languages in teaching, education and cultural life.

A. In search of a suitable conceptual framework

Analysis of the replies received clearly shows that:

1. Few African States were in a position to give the linguistic and cultural problems raised by the questionnaire the attention they deserve. In this connexion, however, indifference is frequently the result of a lack either of a systematic policy or merely of coherent practice. Nevertheless, the heads and officials of government institutions for research and education, when consulted on a personal basis during the Yaoundé meeting of experts on African languages in relation to cultural activities, completed the above-mentioned questionnaire for some of the languages in their countries;

2. Even in these cases, however, little interest was expressed in any but the vehicular languages of geo-political communities or in languages with an inter-African rôle, whereas from the cultural point of view the languages of ethnic minorities may be just as rich as those of majority ethnic groups.

It should also be pointed out that confusion tends to arise over certain socio-linguistic terms - language and dialect, national language, official language and

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cultural language, vernacular, natural language and mother tongue, language used by a majority, dominant language, vehicular language or language of instruction - some of which are understood and used differently in different countries, depending on whether French or British influence predominates.

For this reason, rather than disguise the philosophical, doctrinal and political considerations which underly linguistic research, a meeting should be organized to clarify these questions once and for all, to denounce the prejudices inherited from the colonial period which still underly certain conceptions, and to determine which direction the African socio-linguistics should take, to decide which of the basic alternatives it should choose and what methods it should use.

#### B. Use and status of the languages

An analysis of the replies to the Secretariat questionnaire nevertheless provides some interesting information and makes it possible to understand both the nature of the linguistic problems confronting the States and their approach to these problems.

All the linguistic and cultural communities dealt with in these replies are at least bilingual and use certain widespread vehicular African languages as a means of communication between ethnic groups.

These vehicular languages, often with pronounced dialectal differences, have acquired the status of linguae francae either on account of the relatively large proportion of those speaking it and of the important part played in trade or culture and the historical (often religious and political) rôle of those whose natural languages they are, or on account of the special social functions conferred on them, officially or otherwise, under European colonial rule.

Because of the preponderant position of these inter-African languages in relations between the bulk of the population in one country and that in another, there must be some form of regional co-operation between the Member States concerned.

Although they are used at all levels of the traditional education system as media for acquiring knowledge and have thus earned the status of languages of traditional instruction, African languages for the most part remain marginal languages, whereas paradoxically, the foreign languages that are after all little known and little used by the indigenous population are raised to the rank of official languages and languages of instruction.

Unfortunately, this state of affairs has deep roots in the mentality of the westernized urban élite. The linguistic and cultural "colonialized people's" complex is rife even in some of the African national liberation movements. In fact, for many African leaders, national education and the acquisition of one or more European languages and cultures are practically synonymous, which thus creates an alien mandarinat in black Africa.

#### C. Diversified situation

The present state of development of modern African languages is very uneven:

- (a) Some languages have been standardized, i.e., their grammatical and lexical rules have been codified, whereas others do not even have a transcription system which would give them the status of written languages.

- (b) At the present stage, the African languages are also differentiated from each other by the richness and variety of their cultural works.
- (c) The number of qualified staff to teach them and of textbooks available in these languages is on the whole insufficient and unfortunately it seems that more than one State relies entirely on external aid (bilateral, international or private) in order to meet its needs.

However, in countries under English influence, instruction is given during the first two years of primary school in the child's mother tongue, and from the third year another African language, usually with an inter-ethnic rôle, is studied, whilst English becomes the sole medium for the acquisition of knowledge.

- (d) Every field of modern life is affected by linguistic problems; effective access by the African masses to education, to a part in public life and to the benefits of economic development depends on this, particularly during this first decade of independence.

In addition, almost all the African languages are used as literacy instruction media for the rural masses and for radio broadcasts, even if the broadcasts are not always on a regular basis and if the languages are not always the chief languages used by the stations concerned.

This partial acknowledgement by the ruling classes of present-day Africa in some cases even extends to their use in the press. However, even in these cases they need to be modernized.

No African Government has yet made a serious attempt to apply the necessary intellectual and material resources to develop one of our national languages to the point where it could become a vehicle for the economic, social, legal, political, scientific and technical literature of the contemporary world.

In every case studied, the use of European languages as the media for secondary and higher education, for relations between African States and for the scientific and technical training of Africans would therefore seem to be necessary for the time being and to represent the only realistic solution.

#### D. Languages and Policies

Briefly, analysis of the replies to the linguistic questionnaire reveals that:

1. State policy in the various countries in regard to the promotion of African languages lacks precision, direction and continuity, as concerns both its definition and its implementation, despite the fact that these languages are duly recognized in official documents and instruments and, with many centuries of historical and cultural development behind them, still preserve their force and vitality.

2. In universities, in institutions for African studies and research and in some cases among certain groups of intellectuals and organizers of youth centres and theatre companies there is an increasingly discernible and growing movement to describe, teach, write, develop and promote certain vehicular languages.

3. Nevertheless, during this decisive decade of nation-building in Africa, their national languages have, in some cases, still not been transcribed and as a result are still not written; in others, they are insufficiently standardized even where they do serve as inter-ethnic media of communication, or else cannot be used in schools or to express concepts that are traditionally outside the ken of those who speak them; in yet other cases, they are studied and used for teaching and translation only by missionaries and traditional Muslim scholars whereas the development, modernization and promotion of these languages are a task far beyond the scope of these religious authorities alone.

Whilst it is true to say that these questions of linguistic and cultural development lie primarily within the domain of national sovereignty, since they are essentially a question of the duty of African Governments towards their own citizens, no final solution can be found without material and intellectual support through international co-operation.

## II. PROMOTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

This brief description of the situation of African languages, given in place of a general introduction, will have indicated, if not the direction taken by the linguistic and cultural policy of the Member States concerned, at least the nature and characteristics of the problems to be solved if the promotion of African languages and cultures is to be encouraged.

### A. Need for interdisciplinary co-operation

Some may, perhaps with reason, wonder why we stress the interdependence of the promotion of our cultures, their teaching and their dissemination by our languages, when culture, education and communication are traditionally separate Unesco activities and in our various countries come under different ministries.

Quite apart from the self-sufficient conclusions that could be drawn from a critical analysis of the evolution of Unesco's policy of co-operation with the African countries, it can be said that:

1. Long held in contempt, the African languages, in our societies where the chief means of communication is oral, still bear witness, in an especial way, to the cultural development of our nations and are the repositories of the thought and civilization of our peoples. Thus they do not merely perform the function of communication, of expression, but transmit and safeguard the cultures.

2. During the colonial period, African works were translated into European languages and frequently distorted because the original principles and concepts on which they were conceived, preserved and transmitted were not properly understood by those who translated them into, and analysed them in, European languages. These translations and interpretations were then disseminated through books and pictures and even taught to Africans, giving rise to misunderstandings and sometimes to prejudices which were detrimental to understanding between peoples and friendly co-existence between our societies.

3. The rediscovery of the traditional culture of African nations is a subject of great interest for the twentieth century, but only through the language and usually only after long and painstaking research is it possible to tune in to this "aural heritage".

4. The translation, interpretation and critical appreciation of African cultures can only become possible when they have been fully explored in their authentic form and have been disseminated by word of mouth, by books, pictures and teaching or by music.

5. The main task therefore concerns the language itself - to transcribe, write, codify and disseminate it - which means preparing and publishing spelling books, readers, grammars, dictionaries, reference books, primers and other educational and cultural works.

6. Lastly, the implementation of the project, for a General History of Africa, with the collection and transcription of oral traditions and literature, of Arabic and ajami (non-Arabic) manuscripts compiled by the traditional Muslim scholars, has shown up the need for interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, ethnologists, archaeologists, historians, musicologists, philosophers, educationists and mass media specialists.

Thus it can be seen that the promotion of African languages and cultures comes at the meeting-point of the activities of the sectors of Education, Social Sciences, Human Sciences and Culture and Communication. Hence, it must be the subject of a special programme, the execution of which will require collaboration by these three sectors and by the corresponding ministries and departments of African Member States.

#### B. Proposals for a policy to promote African languages and cultures

The tasks to be accomplished in order to promote African cultures fall mainly under the headings of:

research;  
information and dissemination  
education.

##### 1. As regards research, it will be necessary:

to equip research centres and to collect oral and written traditions in order to approach the languages through the cultures;

to store and protect this cultural heritage in order to preserve it and facilitate its promotion;

to prepare transcription and standardization systems and teaching and cultural material so that the cultures may be approached through the languages.

##### 2. As regards dissemination and communication, it will be necessary:

to promote creative literary or linguistic work, the publication of classical or representative works, oral and written, traditional and modern, the publication and dissemination of African-language translations of works written in other languages;

to foster the use of African languages by means of the press, records and music, radio, the cinema, television, pictures, popular theatre groups, youth clubs and centres, cultural associations formed to promote inter-African vehicular languages etc.

3. As regards education, it will be necessary:

in educational and literacy establishments and centres, to promote the study of African languages and literature, in other words the use of works previously prepared and published in these languages;

to encourage the adaptation and modernization of the vocabulary of widely-spoken inter-African vehicular languages through the compilation and dissemination of scientific and technical works using these languages;

to assist in the training of teachers, research workers and programme organizers and in the establishment of regional or national centres which could be set up for this purpose.

Such a list of tasks, brief and condensed as it is, seems ambitious and certainly expensive. However the expenditure could be considerably reduced if regional centres like the one at Niamey were to be set up in the field, suitably equipped and assisted, and entrusted with the operational aspects of the work. It would then be sufficient:

to consolidate such centres by providing them with the material for collection, conservation, publication and dissemination, and by covering a major proportion of their operating costs for a certain period;

to assign them responsibility for the scientific aspects of various research projects by specialists in African languages and cultures and the management and supervision of the implementation of certain contracts concluded within the framework of the ten-year programme at present being drawn up;

to sign with them contracts for research, editing, publication and dissemination of cultural and educational works and documents in African languages;

to provide them with experts to ensure the scientific and technical training of African personnel which may be needed by the States concerned in order to implement the ten-year programme.

Having thus been entrusted with the operational aspects of Unesco's cultural, linguistic and educational programme for the whole region, these institutions would from time to time be visited by members of the Secretariat to whom they would report on their achievements, their problems and their management. They would organize study groups and technical and vocational training for African personnel, discussion groups, seminars and conferences on subjects of general interest.

These regional centres would be backstopped at Member State level by:

national research institutions;

learned societies of a regional character;

cultural associations, etc...

It would then be sufficient to assign them one or more tasks to be performed in the framework of the priority programme and to supervise their execution.

These university research institutes, learned societies and cultural associations set up in the field, working under the scientific and material responsibility of the regional institutions, would carry out projects the completion of which would not take more than two years, thus falling in with Unesco's biennial budget procedure. The following activities, among others, would come under this category:

the description and transcription of a language;

the compilation and publication of introductory works: spelling books, readers, elementary dictionaries and grammars for immediate use in primary education or in literacy centres.

Thus, only the execution of general projects would be directly managed by the Unesco Secretariat. This category of activities would include the following:

publication of classical and representative works chosen by means of a strict selection procedure at the level of the national and regional institutions;

preparation of reference works such as cultural dictionaries, descriptive grammars, general and systematic dictionaries of inter-African vehicular languages - this work would be spread over several years or budgetary periods and would require the co-operation of specialists from various countries in Africa and elsewhere.

Thus conceived and implemented, the programme to promote African languages and cultures will enable Africa to obtain the maximum benefit from international co-operation by firmly establishing in Africa itself the structures, the material facilities and intellectual resources for a vigorous and irreversible cultural and linguistic upsurge and by inculcating in the African personnel involved that habit of working together which at the moment is sadly lacking.