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Writing and Civilization : A View from African Culture

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Writing and Civilization: A View from African Culture

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1. "LANGUAGE" AND "WRITING"

I would like to start by considering the relationship between language and writing, and the different impacts they have on people.

Speech (J. *kotoba*) includes both *langue* and *parole* as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. Writing (J. *moji*) is not an essential element of language activity (*langage*). Language appeals to the sense of hearing through the medium of speech sound. It is an essential, natural activity for human beings. It is well known, I am sure, that von Humboldt stated that humans would not be human without language ("Der Mensch ist nur Mensch durch Sprache"). It is by using speech to make a first-order segmentation of the universe around them that humans are able to take cognizance of the world, come to terms with their experiences, and gain a sense of identity. As a result of this process of conceptualization humans create, and take up residence within, a so-called linguistic intermediate world (L. Weisgerber). One might say that language is a tool for coming to terms with people and the world, a tool for confining the world inside of man. Note, however, that the expression "confine the world inside humans" is just a figure of speech.¹⁾ For example, *bonsai* and gardening are means of creating a microcosm within a limited space—confining the world, and the arts of poetry, fiction, and painting also have something in common with this. However, it is questionable whether high-level imagery could take form if language did not exist. The famous story of how Helen Keller conceptualized "water" is a good reference for the role of language as the tool that enables

1) I am not making a strong claim about thinking regarding the so-called linguistic relativism, a concept due to W. von Humboldt, E. Sapir, B. L. Whorf, L. Weisgerber, and others. That sort of relativism has to do with the relationship between language and non-linguistic phenomena and the correlation between linguistic structure and concept formation or between vocabulary and mental structure, and implies that linguistic structures actually determine patterns of thought.

humans to take cognizance of their experiences. In this respect all the peoples of the world, or any single one of us, are normally subject to the same conditions. Language is an invention that everyone uses.

Writing appeals to the sense of sight through the medium of markings. However, it is merely a secondary, artificial tool, created with the existence of language as a premise. Experience and knowledge are communicated by language and are recorded by writing. That is, one might say that writing is a tool for formalizing a language on a still more abstract level (a second-order segmentation). In other words, writing is a tool for confining a language. Neither the term "second-order segmentation," nor the expression "writing confines language," are anything more than figures of speech. The function and character of writing differ essentially from the case of first-order segmentation. Both are concerned with the formation of a consciousness of self and experience, which is also the objective of anti-il-literacy education. In this way a language becomes fixed, abstracted, and objectified. At the same time, that language is liberated from the constraints of time and space and eternalized. However, not all the peoples of the world, or every single one of us, knows how to read. Writing is not an invention that everyone can make use of.

The human past is generally divided into prehistoric and historic at the first appearance of written records. Accordingly, it is because the Sumerians first invented writing that it is said that "history begins with the Sumerians" (S. N. Kramer). And "history" and "civilization" are almost synonymous here. In fact, we know that the invention of writing occurred in each of the four great cradles of civilization. The definitions of culture and civilization are vague, and the words are commonly confused. Here I take the spiritual side to be culture and the physical aspects to be civilization. Accordingly, civilization comprises systematized cultural trappings. To put it very simply, language is a cultural trapping, and writing is one of civilization.

Writing, when first invented, probably carried great weight in religious ritual; there can be no doubt that the religious and political power structures that were taking form tried to exploit the benefits of writing. As can be seen in ancient Babylon and Egypt, writing became symbolic of theocratic authority; reading and writing were the specialized skills of limited elite groups. Writing was born as a cryptic art.²⁾ But inventions realize their greatest significance only when everyone can use them. As long as only a select few make use of them monopolistically, inventions may become dangerous weapons, and while they bring benefits to those who use them, their very existence is a threat to others. That can be said to be particularly

2) Note, however, things other than writing could be have authority and mystical power. The glossolalia of spiritual mediums, for example, seems to emphasize the mysticity of spoken language. Generally in traditional Africa, language is thought to be power. Language draws its creative and, at the same time, active power from something holy, and it relates directly to the preservation and destruction of the harmony of the world surrounding one person and another. See BÂ [1980].

true in the case of such a practical invention as writing.

Those persons who know how to read and write can scheme to use their knowledge to monopolize and control language, which is the domain of all. As a result, a gap begins to develop between everyday spoken language and written language. In modern Japan, nearly everyone receives a school education and nearly all seem to belong to the literate class—although there are those in ghettos of discrimination, for instance, who cannot read or write, and even now anti-illiteracy education is being zealously carried out. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the control of language by the intellectual stratum that exploits writing is gaining ground, for surely the discrepancy between intellectual language and everyday language is growing larger.

Intellectuals who connive to control written language can be thought of as tricksters who must be watched every minute. The *ansani* 'spider' who appears in the fables of the Ashanti of Ghana is such a one. This sage, the story goes, had gained possession of all the wisdom in the world, but at one point, in order to hide all of his own wisdom, he packed it all into a large jar and tried to put it somewhere where others couldn't reach it. (Because of the lack of a certain piece of knowledge, of which he was unaware, the sage's self-righteous attempt to horde knowledge fails in the end.)

2. "IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS A TERRIBLE SQUABBLE"

In Africa south of the Sahara, on which I would like to focus in what follows, only in very exceptional cases can we speak of an invention of writing. I. Hrbek [1981] has the following to say about the West African Vai script and Bamun script, which are well known as scripts indigenous to Africa:

Many texts were written in the Vai script which was invented about 1833 by Momolu Duwela Bukele and spread very quickly among the Vai people, so that at the close of the century nearly all of them knew the script and employed it currently for private and official correspondence, for keeping accounts and also for writing down customary laws, proverbs, stories and fables. Many neighbouring peoples such as the Mende, Toma (Loma), Guerze (Kpelle) and Bassa adopted and adapted the Vai script and employed it for similar purposes.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Sultan Njoya of Bamun (Cameroon) invented for the Bamun language a special script which he reformed four times during his lifetime; but in contrast with the Vai script, used generally by the majority of the people, knowledge of the Bamun script remained restricted to a small group at the Sultan's court. Nevertheless, Njoya composed a big volume on the history and customs of his people in this script, a book on which he continued to work for many years and which constitutes a real mine of precious information about the past.

Further, P. Diange [1981] reveals that systems of ideographic and phonetic scripts existed among a large number of African peoples, such as the Bambara, the Dogon,

the Yoruba, the Nsibidi, and others, and argues against the consensus, saying that "the use of writing has been a permanent feature of African history and thought." As research advances, the myth of "illiterate Africa" will crumble away. Still, the natural development of political and social structure in Africa was not tied to the full utilization of writing. Writing was brought in from outside along with the propagation of Islam, Christian proselytization, and, once again, colonial administration.

Generally, Africa south of the Sahara enjoyed a culture that did not, until quite recently, necessitate the intermediation of writing. And even now, in my opinion, the essence of orally oriented traditional culture and the nature of its personal relations have not changed very much. We might say that sub-Saharan society is one in which one language and another, one person and another, make direct contact "without frills." Consider, for example, the Swahili greeting *Habari gani?*, used whenever you meet someone, regardless of the time of day. This phrase literally means 'What news have you?' and the reply is always *Nzuri* or *Njema* 'I have good news'. News here refers to something seen, something heard, or something actually experienced. The verb *huburi* (from the same root as *habari*) means 'pass on by word of mouth'. *Habari* does not refer to something in the system of knowledge (*elimu*) acquired by reading. There does exist in Swahili a verb *jua* that refers to the transitional act of finding something out or to the experiential state of knowing, but there has never been one word that means knowledge as to the product of accumulated acts of finding out. (The noun *ujuzi*, derived from *jua*, refers to a state of knowing as opposed to a state of ignorance, the state of knowing resulting from experience.) *Elimu* 'knowledge' is a borrowing from Arabic, and the Swahili verbs *andika* 'write' and *soma* 'read' originally meant 'line up neatly' and 'learn (e.g. in a Qur'anic school); receive instruction' respectively.

Perhaps this is not the best example for illustrating the point, but it does seem to me that most of the trappings of "civilization" in sub-Saharan Africa are borrowed from outside. And writing is the foremost of these. It has long been common sense in Europe that unless human experience and knowledge are set down in writing and objectified, history will never be an object of consciousness. Accordingly, for Hegel, Africa was "a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of night as far as the development of self-conscious history is concerned." In short, history was considered not to exist for Africa below the Sahara. Although the existence of political activity and culture of the sort that might interest an anthropologist was recognized, it was believed that events were in eternal flux and lacked finality; such aimless activity, lacking consciousness of self, could not be a proper object of historical research. Africa before the beginning of writing was thus considered a hinterland, "primitive" and unrelated to "civilization."

Yet the "civilized" did not necessarily understand the "primitive." An example of this misunderstanding can be found in the translation of the Christian Bible. Missionaries introduced alphabets into many African languages and tackled translations of the Bible, but their efforts faltered on the difficulty of bridging the gap be-

tween cultures. The opening verse of the Revelations of John says, as we all know, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Swahili version of this is *Hapo mwanzo kulikuwako Neno, naye Neno alikuwako kwa Mungu, naye Neno alikuwa Mungu*. Due to the fact that the missionaries did not understand the polysemy of the word *Neno*, they inadvertently were telling Africans, "In the beginning, there was a terrible squabble, a squabble that came along with God, and became a part of God."

3. WRITING AS A DEVICE FOR VIOLENCE

It was, however, not Christianity but Islam that first brought writing to sub-Saharan Africa. A number of native African languages were transcribed in Arabic by Moslem intellectuals in the so-called Ajami writings, and there is evidence that writing was thought to carry a certain authority or mystical power. One may cite as an example Kimwari, a chieftain in the area of Usambara in present Tanzania. Himself a pagan, Kimwari installed a Moslem who could read and write as his personal secretary and had him write letters in his name. He also kept sorcerers on his estate and had them make amulets written in Arabic in preparation for the attacks of neighboring pagan chieftains.

Prior to this, the intelligentsia of the Swahili society on the Indian Ocean coast had been writing the Swahili language in Arabic script. Most of what is still extant comprises works of metrical poetry and annals from the 18th century onward. The motivation for transcribing Swahili with Arabic characters is made clear in the works themselves: the Swahili intellectuals always asserted of their own identity as Arabs. This contrasts with the ethnocentric tendency to revile the languages of foreigners seen throughout the world and epitomized in the invidious etymologies of such words as *barbarian* and *Hottentot*. (For their part, the Arabic people who went to the coast of East Africa never held the Swahili language in contempt.) Clearly the Swahili intellectuals wished to borrow the power of writing for themselves.

I have seen a wonderful story.
It is all written out
And being readable in Arabic
Its meaning is clear to me.

When I saw that in writing
My heart had hope
That they would take that from Arabic
And write it down in Swahili.

("Utenzi wa Shufaka," stanzas 44-45)

My brothers, give unto me
Scraps of paper and
Good black ink and
A choice reed pen.

Let me translate
 The great deeds of Job,
 Servant of the all-merciful Lord,
 From the tales in Arabic.

Let me translate from the Arabic
 The places that are not clear,
 And pass them on to you all
 Clearly in our own language.

If I do, all will understand their meaning
 For I can explain it to many
 In our own language
 And many of us do not understand Arabic.
 ("Utenzi wa Ayubu," stanzas 1-4)

It was the abiding hope of the intellectuals of Swahili society that, by writing down stories that had originated in Arabic and narrative tales of oral tradition in their own language, they would not be forgotten nor would their meaning be misinterpreted. The Qur'anic schools of the time, where literacy in Arabic was taught, created this echelon of literates among the upper classes. They stood at the hub of social authority and began to enjoy flaunting the learning as "knowledge."

One must not forget, however, that all of the poetic works of this classical period were to be recited in public. Even those who could not read could therefore participate in these performances of the erudite; they might often have been able to memorize the words and recite them themselves. Speech was of greater importance than writing, and knowledge was transmitted to every class by the spoken word. Even today, one can find people able to recite these classical works. Siti binti Saad, said to be the greatest Swahili singer of this century, could not read or write herself, but she created an immense number of lyrics, said to run to nearly 100,000 words.

As long as poetry (writing) was still sung like this,³⁾ it was possible for the intellectual class that wrote it to communicate with the general public without the medium of writing. As a result, the gap between the the upper classes of society and the masses was kept to a minimum. Even in a small, closed society like that of the Swahili, it was not until the advent of prose writing, which uncoupled speech and writing and allowed the latter to develop independently, that the distance between the two classes increased and sharp cultural rifts developed among the various strata of society.

The diffusion and development of writing quickened during the colonial period. Western-style school education spread to some extent during this period, for colonial administrative needs required the nurturing of a limited literate class.

3) That poetry is sung seems to be a universal characteristic of the premodern world, where the sharing of a common aesthetic value—the sharing of a common folk ethos—was the ideal of the community. In this regard, at least, the ideals and aspirations of the individual were in harmony with the direction of the group as a whole.

In addition, colonial documents of all kinds as well as school textbooks extended the range of prose writing; from the viewpoint of African tradition, the fundamental nature of the language took a path of development that could very well be called abnormal. Consider, for example, diaries. Africans did not customarily keep diaries, but some Africans started keeping track of their life histories in imitation of Europeans. Although diaries are written, they are typically not intended as vehicles for communicating with others. Keeping a diary is a secret activity and, I think we can say, one that suppresses speech.

Furthermore, the oral tradition—in short, language—was robbed of its life force as myths, legends, and the like were transformed into written form during the colonial period. This transformation gave the old tradition the coercive power of a standard, and discouraged people from transmitting it in the way they had in the past.

4. WHAT IS A STANDARD LANGUAGE?

Let us now look at the details of the standardization of the Swahili language that took place in the colonial period and its consequences. In particular, I want to call attention to the activities of the Interterritorial Language (Swahili) Committee set up in 1930.

In all regions of East Africa, activity by Christian missionary groups preceded the development of colonial administrations. The missionary groups were intent on translating the Bible, but this job was accomplished using various orthographies in the different East African regions. As a result, the important question of how to achieve linguistic unification in East Africa soon rose to the top of the agenda for colonial administrators.

In 1925, an educational conference was held in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, and a committee to study the standardization of the Swahili language was established. This was followed in 1928 by an inter-territorial conference held in Mombasa, Kenya, attended by such luminaries as the German linguist C. Meinhof. At this time, the Zanzibar dialect, pushed by the Universities Mission to Central Africa, and the Mombasa dialect, furthered by the Church Missionary Society, were in competition; in the end, the former was selected as the foundation of Standard Swahili, and opened the way for the Inter-territorial Language (Swahili) Committee, established in 1930.

The committee comprised the directors of education of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar, an official from each government and two private citizens from each of the four countries, bringing the full committee, with chairman (initially F. Johnson), to 17 members. The membership was totally European; not until 1946 was there real participation by Africans.

The tasks of the Interterritorial Language (Swahili) Committee were chiefly the following items:

1. To establish an orthography and get interterritorial agreement to it.

2. To authorize publications, including textbooks, and unify the use of vocabulary, including neologisms.
3. To foster unification of grammar and syntax through publications.
4. To encourage and assist Swahili-language authors.
5. To republish existing materials in standard Swahili.
6. To further the publication of literary works in general, in addition to textbooks.
7. To produce authorized translations of (mainly British) textbooks.

Inscribed on the reverse of the title page of every publication that received the approval and authorization of the committee were the words, "The Swahili in which this book is written was approved by the Interterritorial Language (Swahili) Committee," somewhat like the line "Authorized Version" on the King James Bible.

The Interterritorial Language (Swahili) Committee also directed its effort to bringing Swahili dictionaries up to date. The job was completed in 1939 after the death of the first organizational chair, F. Johnson. It is highly significant, I think, that a Swahili intellectual who was asked to participate in the project sent a letter saying, "*Mimi sikubali kushirikiana katika kukiharibu Kiswahili* (I will not take on the job of destroying the Swahili language)," and refused the request.

Swahili was reborn as a totally new language through the creation of the standard language. A great number of school texts and manuals began being published, and with them came the bizarre phenomenon of formally reteaching the native speakers of Swahili this new language. The standard language, as a literary form, naturally differed from the everyday colloquial; the phonological inventory and grammatical structure had been simplified and many expressions were coined in the mold of English thinking (Anglo-Swahili). The linguist C. Broomfield had this to say about the new standard:

Most of the Swahili contained in these books is correct grammatically, and may be defended on that ground. Grammatical accuracy, however, does not of itself constitute a language, and it is perhaps this very exaggerated application of grammatical rules that has led us away from the real Swahili language, and made us substitute something which is at its best lifeless, though intelligible, at its worst both lifeless and unintelligible. (W. H. Whiteley, *Swahili—The Rise of a National Language*. 1969, p. 87)

Such perjorative names for the standard as *Kizungu* 'white man's Swahili', *Ki-Serikali* 'the colonial administrators' Swahili', and *Ki-Standard* 'systematic Swahili', have since made their appearance among Swahili speakers, and standard Swahili has even come to be rejected as an "Arab-European version of a *lingua franca*."

There are many articles in the newspapers and magazines of the period from which one can infer just what the authorization of a standard language meant to speakers of Swahili. One official in the Kenya Ministry of Education pointed out in

a letter submitted to the seventh issue of the committee newsletter that, by standardizing Swahili, the committee had changed it into a completely different language; he charged that the writings in Swahili published with the authorization of the committee did not reflect the nature of the real Swahili language, and protested further that the development of the Swahili language should conform to the "Swahili mind" instead of being forced upon it from the outside.

The debate drags on even today. One example is L. Harries's review of the novel *Safari ya Ndoa Saba* by G. A. Mhina and G. A. Mhina's rejoinder to it.⁴⁾ Harries, a distinguished American scholar of Swahili literature, singles out each non-standard locution in the novel, and criticizes it harshly:

"... these narratives do not represent the speech of any group or community of East Africans today, nor are they representative of any former texts published with the approval of the East African Swahili Committee or, formerly, of the Interterritorial Language Committee. There can be little doubt that if these narratives had in earlier days been submitted to the Interterritorial Language Committee they would not have received the approval of the Committee." (*Swahili*, vol. 37 no.1)

Mr. Mhina countered that

Prof. Harries is more a purist than one who advocates standards. ... Many *Wazungu* (Europeans) including himself are still considered as authorities of Kiswahili. ... Therefore we need to differentiate the East African *Wazungu* Swahili speakers from the *African* Swahili speakers. ... Prof. Harries is somehow losing touch with current usage of standard Swahili. (*Swahili*, vol. 37 no.2)

The most important effects of standardization may be grouped under five headings: (1) modification of orthography; (2) usage of Arabic loans; (3) changes in meaning; (4) grammatical changes; and (5) sound changes. Here we will confine ourselves to the last three categories.

The word *nyama* can be cited as an example of (3). The original meaning was 'animal, meat'. In Swahili, nouns that have the prefix *m-* in the singular or *wa-* in the plural generally indicate the category of living creature. Therefore, in standard Swahili, the words *m-nyama* 'animal' and *wa-nyama* 'animals' have been created, and *nyama* is restricted to the sense 'meat'. As a result, the old saying *Mimi ni nyama, wewe ni kisu*, for example, which meant 'I am an animal, you are a knife (I am at your mercy)' comes out as 'I am meat, you are a knife', which of course misses the point.

Moreover, along with this change in meaning, new forms for grammatical agreement were introduced. As an example of (4), a division into simple present and present progressive along the lines of English was put in force. For example, *ndege waruka* 'birds fly' vs. *ndege wanaruka* 'some birds are flying'.

As for (5), Swahili has always had aspirated and unaspirated obstruent

4) *Swahili*, vol. 37 no. 1 and vol. 37 no. 2 (1968).

phonemes, distinguished in minimal pairs of lexical items, yet the aspirated/unaspirated distinction was ignored in the new orthography.

Other differences between the natural and standardized language can be conveniently observed by comparing documents written before standardization and later revised. Rather than give detailed examples, suffice it to say that, unlike any pre-existing dialect, the standard language makes more use of (1) conjunctions, (2) the infinitive mood, (3) demonstrative and personal pronouns (independent and accusative forms), (4) the copula, (5) relative affixes (pronominal or adverbial), and (6) devices that facilitate the functional distinction between nouns and adverbs [MIYAMOTO 1989].

5. THE CONTRADICTION OF MODERN AFRICA

With the expansion of school education and the implementation of adult anti-illiteracy education under the pressures of modernization, Africa's literate classes are now steadily growing, yet the majority of the population still cannot read or write. The illiteracy rate even in the 1980s, for example, was 40.8 percent in Kenya, 53.7 percent in Tanzania, 71.9 percent in Senegal, 82.6 percent in Mauritania, and 86.8 percent in Burkina Faso. The standard by which someone is judged illiterate is extremely vague and the criterion for literacy varies from country to country, ranging from whether one can write one's own name to whether one can understand official documents. In general, however, it seems the ability to read and write in latin letters is all that is required.

The biggest problem in this respect is the fact that literacy is directly related not to mother tongues or folk languages, which are the everyday languages people use at home and first acquire, but rather to their training for ability in such foreign languages as English and French. More often than not, the folk languages of Africa have no scripts, and even if they do the truth is that they are ill-adapted to the demands of so-called print culture. Script is introduced for training in a foreign language (often the official language), not for reading and writing the mother tongue.

As a result, there is frequently little or no connection between written language and spoken language in the linguistic life of Africans. The mother tongue or regional language (such as Swahili) one uses everyday and the written language simply do not correspond to one another. In other words, one can get by with one's first language or a regional language at the *habari* level, but one is dependent on a foreign language at the *elimu* level. In most societies, if you read what is written to someone else aloud, it is the same as if the person were addressed in spoken language. But in Africa the language of public education is foreign, the language one reads is foreign, and the language of conceptualization for those who learn writing is foreign as well. Thought takes visible form only through a foreign language. The only languages of intellectual production and intellectual consumption are foreign.

Naturally, the objective of normal anti-illiteracy education is totally lost under such circumstances. One might even say that the result of anti-illiteracy education in Africa is to put Africans in an external world and culture from which they can look at themselves. This method of self-recognition is all too likely to bring about a psychological state of insecurity we might well call colonial alienation. Such alienation can take one of two mutually related forms. One is to separate oneself deliberately from the surrounding reality, and the other is to assimilate oneself deliberately with those things that are at the furthest remove from one's own situation. Both forms of alienation begin with one consciously severing the language of concept formation, thought, public education, and spiritual development from the language of everyday reciprocal negotiations in one's home and community. This amounts to separating the spirit from the flesh and setting up two unrelated language realms inside the same person. It is like "separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" [NGUGI 1987]. I, as a speaker of Kansai dialect Japanese—and not even a pure version of that!—recall feeling a deep malaise, sometimes even revulsion, for the standard language I first learned from school textbooks and radio announcers, but colonial alienation is much more severe than that.

It seems to me that Africa is in the most contradiction-ridden and difficult phase of that part of its history of civilization that deals with language and writing. To gain writing means to become alienated from one's own language and culture.

One example of the violent collision and friction between the cultures of Africa, which never had need of writing, and civilization, for which writing is the infrastructure, can be found in the long poems *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970) of the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek (1931–1982). In *Song of Lawino*, Lawino, Ocol's first wife, who is the embodiment of the rich tradition and ethnic values of the Achori people of Uganda, berates and derides her husband and other Europeanized Africans who have been inculcated with modern European values and become rootless, out of touch with African tradition. In *Song of Ocol*, Ocol lashes back at his wife bitterly. Having been denounced as someone all but dead, as a man who has smashed his own testicles with huge masses of books, a man no longer able to return to his roots, he now defends the newly risen bourgeois class that has been educated and has made something of itself, and he decries the "primitive" side of Africa.

Intellectuals like Ocol, referred to in Gikuyu rather contemptuously as *msomi* (plural *asomi*), emerged at a relatively early stage in those nations of Africa with many languages and peoples, particularly those that were not Islamic, where for a variety of reasons there was a rapid attempt to move in the direction of modern Europe. In terms of the history of European civilization in Europe, they are at the earliest stage of development, the foster children, so to speak, of European civilization, torn between the two worlds of Africa and modern Europe. It is nothing short of ironic that it is from precisely these segments of the African intelligentsia

that the supporters of African nationalism have emerged.⁵⁾

At first, there was enthusiasm for providing the native languages of Africa with writing, a movement directed by Europeans. But eventually modern nationalism raised its head; Africans who discarded the native languages and deliberately adopted a European language began to appear.⁶⁾ In this sense, the Africans nipped the development of their own languages in the bud even as they took up the banner of nationalism. Furthermore, the traditional power relationships among the various African nations have been realigned willy-nilly by differences in their responses to western Europe; the modern relationships between one African "tribe" and another have been, so to speak, created anew as a result of colonization.

In short, if we were to make a diagram of hierarchical relationships in which the peoples who responded rapidly to Europeanization under colonial rule hold the dominant positions, that diagram would carry over to the Africa of today with the exception that it would now represent the pecking order of Africa's ethnic groups among themselves. This situation is bound to result in misunderstandings and distortions of history. The collisions, friction and cultural gaps between languages and peoples that were granted writing and those which were not have left deep rifts that are sure to govern the future progress of African history.

5) There are those who believe that it was languages such as English and French that caused the emergence of nationalism in Africa. "Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before. ... And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing." (Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day*, p. 77). "English and French have become the common language with which to present a nationalist front against white oppressors." (Es'kia Mphahlele, *Transition*, no. 11)

6) Poet and former president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor has written of the superiority of French over African languages as follows: Mais on me posera la question: 'Pourquoi, dès lors, écrivez-vous en français?' parce que nous sommes des métis culturels, parce que, si nous sentons en nègres, nous nous exprimons en français, parce que le français est une langue à vocation universelle, que notre message s'adresse aussi aux Français de France et aux autres hommes, parce que le français est une langue 'de gentillesse et d'honnêteté'. Qui a dit que c'était une langue grise et atone d'ingénieurs et de diplomates? Bien sûr, moi aussi, je l'ai dit un jour, pour les besoins de ma thèse. On me le pardonnera. Car je sais ses ressources pour l'avoir goûté, mâché, enseigné, et qu'il est la langue des dieux. Ecoutez donc Corneille, La Fontaine, Rimbaud, Péguy et Claudel. Écoutez le grand Hugo. Le français, ce sont les grandes orgues qui se prêtent à tous les timbres, à tous les effets, des douceurs les plus suaves aux fulgurances de l'orage. Il est, tour à tour ou en même temps, flûte, hautbois, trompette, tam-tam et même canon. Et puis le français nous a fait don de ses mots abstraits—si rares dans nos langues maternelles—, où les larmes se font pierres précieuses. Chez nous, les mots sont naturellement nimbés d'un halo de sève et de sang; les mots du français rayonnent de mille feux, comme des diamants. Des fusées qui éclairent notre nuit. (Léopold Sédar Senghor, Introduction to his poems, *Éthiopiennes*, le 24 Septembre 1954.)

6. HOW CAN THE CRISIS BE AVOIDED?

Civilization is replete with examples of how man gives form to that which is formless. Civilization does its best to reify every intangible activity and conscious thought or experience, to make it a work. Writing can be said to be the most fundamental device of this kind to which civilization has given birth. Humboldt says that "language is not *Ergon* (a work) but *Energeia* (an activity)." If we use these words, then writing can be said to be a device that turns *Energeia* into *Ergon*.

In present-day Africa, all varieties of experience and knowledge, both native and alien, are moving from the activity to work, in Humboldt's sense. We must therefore ask what alternatives exist to writing for making experience and knowledge conscious. Besides writing, civilization now offers, for example, graphic images and sound recording.

From the standpoint of a theory of civilization, present-day Africa is by no means illiterate. Every nation has equipped itself with writing. The problem is that the apparatus of literacy is functioning in such a way as to sever the language of everyday reciprocal negotiation from the language of conceptualization, thought, and spiritual development. This increases the friction between civilization and culture and, in the worst case, lets civilization destroy culture. While writing is creating new traditions and systems in Africa, we must not overlook the fact that it is a double-edged sword and is simultaneously wiping out many kinds of experience and knowledge carried by the oral tradition.

Is it possible to find a way to escape this paradox, this adversarial relationship between everyday language activity and writing, what I have called colonial alienation? Surely this is the most important problem to be confronted when we deal with the issues of writing and civilization in Africa.

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