

Advancing the Discourse on Language in Africa: An In-Depth Examination of the Perspectives of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complex and evolving discourse on language in postcolonial Africa, with a focus on the critical perspectives of two leading African intellectuals, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah. Through a comparative analysis of their works, this study explores how both authors engage with the role of language as a tool of both oppression and liberation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o advocates for the use of indigenous languages as a necessary step toward decolonization, asserting that African languages are vital for reclaiming cultural identity and intellectual autonomy. Conversely, Ayi Kwei Armah emphasizes a broader cultural renaissance that includes the reclamation of African languages as part of a larger effort to reconnect with pre-colonial histories and philosophies. This paper examines key literary texts from both authors, including Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *A Grain of Wheat*, alongside Armah's *Osiris Rising*, *Kmt*, and *The Resolutionaries*, to illustrate their distinct yet complementary visions for Africa's linguistic and cultural future. Ultimately, this analysis advances the conversation on language in Africa by highlighting its profound implications for postcolonial identity, education, and political sovereignty.

Keywords: Postcolonial Africa, Language decolonization, Cultural identity, African literature, Cultural renaissance

Introduction

The discourse surrounding language in postcolonial Africa is deeply intertwined with questions of identity, culture, and power. This conversation is often framed by the tension between colonial languages, imposed during periods of European domination, and indigenous languages, which embody the continent's diverse cultural heritage. At the heart of this debate are two intellectual giants, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah, whose works provide profound insights into the role of language in both subjugation and liberation. This paper undertakes an in-depth examination of their perspectives, situating them within the broader postcolonial literary framework, and interrogating how their views contribute to the ongoing discourse on language in Africa.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his works such as *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) and his novels written in Gikuyu, challenges the dominance of European languages, arguing that the use of indigenous languages is essential to the decolonization process. For Ngugi, language is not only a medium of communication but also a carrier of culture, shaping perceptions of reality. He posits that the imposition of colonial languages on African societies engineered cultural alienation and cognitive oppression, and thus, advocates for a return to African languages as a path to reclaiming agency and cultural authenticity.

In contrast, Ayi Kwei Armah's literary contributions, notably in both his novels and essays, including, *Osiris Rising* (1995), *KMT: In the House of Life* (2002), *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006) and *The Revolutionaries* (2013), emphasize the reclamation of African historical consciousness through language. Armah's perspective is rooted in a Pan-African vision, where language is a vital tool for reconnecting Africans with their pre-colonial past and restoring a sense of continuity with their heritage, while contributing in the making of the continent. While Ngugi's focus is primarily on the linguistic decolonization of African literature, Armah advocates for a broader cultural renaissance, which includes but is not limited to language. His vision extends to the revival of African philosophies, histories, and traditions that were marginalized or erased by colonial powers.

Through a comparative analysis of these two figures, this paper seeks to advance the discourse on language in Africa by exploring how their differing approaches to linguistic decolonization reflect broader ideological concerns. By examining the intersections of language, identity, and power in their works, this study highlights the critical role that language plays in shaping postcolonial African literature and thought. Moreover, it underscores the implications of their ideas for education, political autonomy, and cultural preservation in contemporary Africa.

In tracing the literary trajectories of Ngugi and Armah, this paper will engage with key texts from both authors, including Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), alongside Armah's *Osiris Rising*, *Kmt*, *The Eloquence of the Scribes* and *The Resolutionaries*. These works serve as foundational texts that articulate their visions for Africa's linguistic and cultural future. By situating their arguments within the broader postcolonial literary canon, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggles over language in Africa and the possibilities for reimagining the continent's intellectual and cultural sovereignty.

Methodological Framework

This study adopts a comparative literary and discourse-analytical approach situated within postcolonial theory. The corpus is deliberately restricted to the essays and non-fiction prose in which each writer most explicitly theorizes language policy for the African continent, rather than the wider span of their fiction: for Ngugi wa Thiong'o, principally *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), *Moving the Centre* (1993), *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1998), and *Secure the Base* (2016); for Ayi Kwei Armah, principally *Remembering the Dismembered Continent* (2010) and the essayistic passages of the novel *The Resolutionaries* (2013), read alongside *Osiris Rising* (1995) and *The Eloquence of the Scribe* (2006). These texts were selected because they state, argue for, and defend a position on language rather than merely dramatizing it, which allows the two authors' proposals to be compared on comparable ground.

Four comparative criteria structure the analysis: (i) each author's diagnosis of colonial language policy and its consequences for African societies; (ii) the practical mechanism each proposes for linguistic emancipation — mother-tongue writing and translation for Ngugi, the construction of a reconstituted continental language for Armah; (iii) the historical and cultural justification offered for that mechanism; and (iv) the limitations each author himself acknowledges. Within this postcolonial frame, Ngugi's position is read through the lens of language-decolonization theory, which treats language as the primary site of both mental colonization and liberation, while Armah's is read through Pan-Africanist cultural nationalism, which treats language as one instrument within a broader civilizational reawakening. Reading the two authors through these complementary lenses, rather than a single one, makes it possible to specify precisely where their projects converge — a shared rejection of unexamined dependence on European languages — and where they diverge: Ngugi's insistence on existing mother tongues versus Armah's pursuit of an invented or reconstructed common language.

The Relevance of Language and Its Centrality in Culture

Colonization's ability to weaken Africans and subject them to European and Western dominance can be attributed, in part, to the widespread imposition of European languages throughout the continent. This imposition went hand in hand with the marginalization of African languages, which European powers often dismissed as mere dialects or vernaculars. As Ngugi argues in his essay *Something Torn and New* (2009), Europe effectively planted its memory on African soil while imposing its culture through the dissemination of its language, the imposition of its naming conventions, and the construction of historical monuments that served as symbols of dominance in the colonies, reinforcing its claim of superiority. In *Secure the Base* (2016), Ngugi further warns that colonization's 'biggest branding was that of the intellect through language,' since each language, however small, functions as a bank for the memory a people generates through its interaction with the natural and social environment; suppressing a colonized people's language therefore meant marginalizing its memory while elevating that of the conqueror to universal status (p. 69).

The settlers were quite aware of this central place of language in their strategy to dominate their subjects. By introducing European languages, they establish them as vectors of communication, commerce and education. In schools, African languages are ignored and those who use them are often punished (Ngugi, 1986, p.11; Ngugi, 1993, p.51). This process then accompanies what Seyni Maaty Joobe calls, in *The Revolutionaries*, 'the removal of memory' (p. 376). In *Moving the Centre*, Ngugi goes on to note: 'If it was the gun which made possible the mining of this gold and which affected the political captivity of their owners, it was a language which held captive their cultures, their values, and hence their minds' (p. 49).

Ngugi and Armah stressed the importance of language in the process of decolonization and liberation of the continent. Both authors skillfully employed Caliban's paradigmatic process to illustrate how Europe imposed its languages, effectively discouraging and penalizing the use of indigenous languages. Language, as they rightly contend, constitutes an integral component of culture, serving as both a means of communication and a vessel for preserving cultural identity. Ngugi articulates this perspective in *Decolonizing* (pp. 13-14), emphasizing that language acts as a carrier of culture. Similarly, in *The Revolutionaries*, Jehwty, who recognizes its profound significance in relation to culture, proclaims, "Language is the matrix of culture. Our liberation hinges on cultural unity" (p. 415). Therefore, there exists a profound and inseparable connection between language and culture, forming an essential nexus in the broader context of the continent's liberation struggle. On culture, Ngugi writes in *Decolonizing* that a people's moral, ethical and aesthetic values — 'the set of spiritual

eyeglasses' through which they view themselves and their place in the world — are entirely carried by language, so that culture becomes 'almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next' (pp. 14-15).

In the sense that we consider language as culture, we can easily envision the intrinsic link that governs them, to which we referred. Ngugi reflects again in *Decolonizing the Mind* that language-as-culture operates on three levels: it is a product of the history it also reflects, forming, in the mind of a child, the very images through which a people conceives of itself; it mediates 'between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature'; and it transmits those images of the world, in their historically specific particularity rather than in language's bare universal capacity for communication, through the written and oral literature of a given community (p. 15). For Ngugi, in other words, a specific culture is never carried by language in general, but only by a particular language, with its own history — which is precisely why he insists that Gikuyu, and not English, must carry Gikuyu culture forward. Armah arrives at a structurally similar premise by a different route: rather than locating culture in the particularity of a single language, he locates it, as the discussion below shows, in a shared civilizational memory that predates the fragmentation of African languages, so that for him it is history and philosophy, more than any one tongue, that must be recovered and reconnected.

As Ngugi astutely highlights, language serves as the vessel for culture, acting as both its repository and its guardian. Within the tapestry of a society, language functions as a vital repository, preserving the accumulated knowledge, inventions, and technologies amassed over its historical journey. Ngugi beautifully characterizes language as a treasured possession of a society, a repository of its identity and heritage. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, he states that language, for him, 'was not a mere string of words': through the riddles, proverbs and word-games of his childhood he learned 'the music of our language on top of the content,' so that language offered not only a view of the world but 'a beauty of its own' (p. 11).

This exemplifies the profound impact of European languages, which Africans have significantly enriched, on the cultural landscape of African societies. The act of writing in a foreign language inadvertently estranges African culture, a sentiment poignantly lamented by Ngugi in *Writers in Politics* (1981) as a continuation, by other means, of colonial extraction: just as Europe once looted Africa's art treasures, it now, in his words, 'steal[s] the treasures of the mind to enrich [its] languages and cultures,' so that

Africa needs back not only its economy and politics but ‘its culture, its languages’ (p. xii).

Thus, through African literature written in European languages, African intellectuals enrich its languages and enlarge its audiences. In reality, Africans are even forced to express themselves in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish as means of communication between themselves. Today, we are referring to whole parts of the continent as Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone and even Arabophone. This process leads inexorably toward the death of African languages. African elites are less inclined to speak their own languages and even feel a sense of inferiority about expressing themselves in their local languages, which exerts considerable pressure on the African masses who try to emulate them. In such a situation, Africa enriches European culture with these languages as it enriched its economy with natural resources which Ngugi aptly observes in the following passages of *Moving the Centre* that the pattern replicates colonial economics: just as gold, diamonds, coffee and tea are extracted from Africa, processed in Europe, and resold to Africa, so too is ‘the raw material of African orature and histories developed by African languages... taken, repackaged through English or French or Portuguese and then resold back to Africa’ (p. 38).

The Debate Over Colonial Languages in Africa

The issue of language is a concern raised long before independence. Cheikh Anta Diop, like David Diop, already stressed the urgency of resolving this problem whose failure would lead to an unfinished decolonization process. Then it was Obiajunwa Wali, the Nigerian, who, in 1963 at the Makerere conference, while facing the confusion and contradictions that inhabited African intellectuals after independence, stressed that the use of European languages in Africa could only lead to a dead end. He then called for the urgency to act by implementing strategies for the promotion and empowerment of African languages. In his article “The Dead End of African Literature” (1997), Wali states:

The consequence of this kind of literature is that it lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self- enrichment. It is severely limited to those few European-oriented college graduates in the new universities of Africa, steeped as they are in European literature and culture. The overwhelming majority of the local audience, with little or no education in the conventional European manner, has no chance of participating in this kind of literature. (p. 332)

While depicting that alarming situation, Wali though made it clear that:

The purpose of this article is not to discredit these writers, who have achieved much within an extremely difficult and illogical situation. It is to point out that the uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration. (p. 333)

Today, the question of language looms ever larger, revealing its enduring complexity and the profound divergences among intellectual giants like Chinua Achebe, Ali Amin Mazrui, Wole Soyinka, Boris Diop, Ngugi, and Armah, among others, who have grappled with this intricate issue.

In the African context, there exists no realm that more accurately encapsulates the multifaceted nature of the language quandary than literature. Literature, as a venerated sphere, occupies a pivotal role within societies, serving as the conduit through which writers craft the very essence of human existence, as articulated by Ngugi in *Writers in Politics*. During the tumultuous era of decolonization, African writers found themselves compelled to wield European languages as their primary literary tools. Their mission was to address the colonial settlers and elites, denouncing oppressive colonial practices and fervently advocating for decolonization. These writers, products of the colonial educational system, often had no recourse but to express themselves in European languages, a facility they had honed with greater proficiency than their own native tongues. This predicament mirrors the tale of Caliban, who, as elaborated in *Moving the Center*, adeptly wields English, the language Prospero taught him, to subvert his colonial master – ‘The Caliban of the colonial world had been given European languages and he was going to use them even to subvert the master’ – (p. 79). In this vein, luminaries like Achebe unabashedly embraced English as their medium of expression, viewing it as a divine gift entrusted to them for the articulation of their voices in the pursuit of truth and justice.

According to Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind*, Achebe asserted that ‘Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it’ (p. 5).

This position, which critics have labelled the ‘fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature’ as Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind* (p. 6), has long prevailed among African writers. Ngugi even likens Achebe’s position to that of Senghor when he writes the following:

The final effect was the same: Senghor's embrace of French as this language with a universal vocation is not so different from Chinua Achebe's gratitude in 1964 to English – 'those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. (p. 19)

Achebe was surely not the only intellectual who had such an opinion, as Ngugi points out. At that time, Es'kia Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka – he later deemed it appropriate to use Swahili as an African language – (Ngugi, 1981, p. 56) – or Ali Amin Mazrui¹ had the same attraction for English (Ngugi, 1981, p. 57). Achebe was certainly aware of the blocking factors that hamper the use of local languages to convey his message. These were mainly related to the transcription issue related to these languages, their limited audiences and the low literacy rate of Africans. Achebe, guided by a pragmatic approach, was primarily focused on effectively conveying his message to the broadest possible readership. However, what he did not fully recognize was the rich literary heritage cultivated by precursors who composed in local languages both before and during colonization. This legacy, as elucidated by Ngugi in *Moving the Centre* (p. 38), underscores the existence of a long-standing literary tradition in Africa, encompassing both written and oral forms, dating back to antiquity and continuing to thrive in the present day. Ngugi's revelations shed light on poets in East Africa who crafted verses in languages such as Somali, Swahili, and Gikuyu prior to the advent of foreign languages on the continent. Furthermore, the remarkable contributions of Chief Fagunwa, whose works were subsequently translated by Wole Soyinka, challenge Achebe's perspective.

Despite Achebe's pragmatic endorsement of colonial languages for African authors, Ngugi, a staunch advocate for African languages, made a bold departure from English after the publication of *Petals of Blood*. His subsequent novels, including *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari*, and *Wizard of the Crow*, were penned in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. Ngugi firmly asserts that literature truly embodies its African essence when composed in African languages. Nevertheless, he finds himself compelled to translate his works into English to expand their reach and overcome the linguistic barriers imposed upon him.

¹ Ngugi reassures us, however, that these writers could have changed their minds as he himself did. (*Writers in Politics*, 58).

Ngugi is convinced that only African writers can help the continent boost its local languages as other writers have done in other spaces for other languages (Ngugi, 2016, p. 73). This opinion was already echoed when he wrote about the role of African writers and intellectuals as they grapple with the issue of language in *Decolonizing*:

We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed, what all Writers in Politics in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavors. (p. 29)

Ngugi's conviction put him at odds with the Kenyan authorities which jailed him after the publication of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want). Ngugi's initiative, however, remains limited due to the restricted reach of the Gikuyu audience, which limits the scope of his message, hence his use of translation.

In *Moving the Center*, Ngugi admits that this initiative remains constrained: writing in an African language 'in conditions of exile' is especially difficult when, as with Gikuyu, 'there are no journals or newspapers in the language inside or outside Kenya,' leaving writers no outlet but translation or borrowed space in European-language journals — 'and both options are clearly not solutions.' The resulting 'dearth of outlets for publication,' he concludes, also stalls the growth of a conceptual vocabulary adequate to modern technology and science, in a self-reinforcing 'vicious circle' that only a community of scholars and readers writing in the language itself could eventually break (p. 14).

For him, this strategy can help promote local languages. This is why he engaged in popular theatre with Ngugi Wa Miri and Micere Mugo before facing retaliation from the Kenyan government. Ngugi regrets that there is no common African language.

The Practicality of African Languages

A shared African language would give Africans an opportunity to communicate on their own terms, one able to take precedence over other tongues and prevail across the entire continent. While Ngugi laments the absence of a common African language, he keeps reminding us in his essays (*Writers*, *Decolonizing the Mind*, and *Moving the Center*), that it is possible to adopt Swahili and erect it as a continental language. He writes in *Moving the Center* that Kiswahili 'would make an excellent candidate' for such a role

precisely because its spread ‘has not depended on its economic, political, or cultural aggrandizement’ and carries ‘no history of oppression or domination of other cultures,’ even as it is already spoken across Eastern, Central and Southern Africa and beyond (p. 59).

In addition, Ngugi posits in *Decolonising the Mind* that ‘Kiswahili would be the all-Kenya national and official language; the other nationality languages would have their rightful places in the schools; and English would remain Kenyan people's first language of international communication’ (p. xi). Ngugi's stance certainly has evolved to deny the English language this role of a vector in international exchanges in Kenya today. The credit he gives to Gikuyu, his own mother tongue, and by extension, to all other African languages is such that today, he sees only translation as a means of mediation between different speakers of different languages. This is why, for Ngugi, translation occupies a central place. Since settling in Irvine, California, he has worked for what he calls the dialogue of texts based on translation. After his advocacy for a fair treatment of all languages, he calls for the promotion of translation to maintain discussions between different peoples. This is how he sees his ‘cultural contact as oxygen’ to remind of Césaire famous assertion (Ngugi, 2012, p. 2).

In any case, Ngugi is well aware of the issues related to the issue of African languages and the varied positions adopted by writers. This is how he recognizes it in *Penpoints*, where Ngugi casts himself as the Socratic ‘gadfly’ of the language debate: he concedes that ‘the issues are complex’ and any solution ‘long and difficult,’ but insists this is ‘not a reason for ducking the issue and burying our heads in the linguistic sand of Europe,’ pointing instead to writers such as Masisi Kunene, Abdulatif Abdulla and Chief Fagunwa who ‘have kept faith with our languages’ (p. 128).

Ngugi also admits the existence of several constraints related to African literacy, vocabulary, especially with technical terms and spelling as he explains in these terms in *Moving the Center*:

Writing in African languages has many difficulties and problems. Problems of literacy. Problems of publishing. Problems of the lack of a critical tradition. Problems of orthography. Problems of having very many languages. In the same country. Problems of hostile governments with a colonised mentality. Abandonment by some of those who could have brought their genius – demonstrated by their excellent performance in foreign languages – to develop their own languages. (p. 40)

Despite the existence of these constraints, in *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi is firmly convinced that only writing in local languages could bring

salvation in safeguarding the continent's culture. To do so, it will be necessary to have writers who are committed and determined to lead the struggle. It will require a motivated writer, a motivated translator, a motivated editor, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a progressive state, and finally, above all, a motivated and expanded readership (p. 85).

In Armah's work, the rejection of European languages and culture is obviously more virulent. Oddly, despite this radicalism, Armah has always used English as an instrument in his writing, which seems paradoxical. That Armah is among the few African writers to have made 'a serious encounter' with the language question, infusing English with the register of the dirge, singers and griots so that the African writer can 'speak in accents that address all mankind through an unmistakably African voice' — an approach Ogede considers 'revolutionary' precisely because it avoids both the mother-tongue purism associated with Ngugi and the uncritical 'prison-house of conventional English' (Ogede, 2000, p. 3).

Ogede thus seems to place Armah in the block of African writers who domesticated English to give it an African touch. If it is true that Armah attempts to Africanize his texts written in English, it mostly has to do with their narrative structures as Lorentzon demonstrates than in the use of slang English which is only visible in *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born*. Ogede goes further still, judging Armah's solution 'the most practical and commonsensical' available to African writers, since an 'eminently readable idiomatic English' allows him to carry 'the burden of indigenization without sacrificing the ability to communicate' with an international readership (Ogede, 2000, p. 4).

Certainly, we cannot deny that Armah has 'indigenized' the English language, as evidenced by the jargon he uses in his early novels (*The Beautiful Ones*, *Fragments*). However, we must admit that the extent to which Ogede attributes this phenomenon is of lesser importance compared to some practices recurrent in the novels of a Chinua Achebe or a Timothy Mofolorunso Aluko.

To truly grasp Armah's deliberate choice to employ the English language, we must contextualize his struggle within a broader historical perspective. This approach offers profound insights into Armah's rationale, revealing how it allowed him to reach a wider audience while circumventing the potentially divisive path of elevating one African language over another—a path fraught with the tensions exacerbated by the legacy of colonization. Furthermore, Armah argues that had he possessed proficiency in an African language spoken by millions, he would have eschewed English as his medium. In sharp contrast to Ngugi, Armah views an unwavering commitment to his mother tongue, a language understood by only a limited number of people, as a deviation from his overarching mission as an African

writer. In essence, Armah appears to have struck a nuanced compromise with English, as evidenced in *The Eloquence*:

It is an unsatisfactory compromise that will last all my life, but I prefer to use any language, however flawed, that enables me to communicate with Africans in Angola, Botswana, Chad, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, while dreaming of, and when possible, working toward, the future emergence of our common language. (p. 121)

Armah adopts therefore a pragmatist stance to refer to what Achebe considers 'a pragmatic matter' (Achebe, 1976, p. 67). However, unlike Achebe, as we shall see, he proposes to work on the acquisition of a continental language. He rejects the option of writing in his mother tongue, as advocated by Ngugi with Gikuyu and Boris Diop in Wolof, constrained by a limited audience. Nonetheless, it is worthy to note that the views of Armah, Boris and Ngugi overlap in the extent that, regardless of the option, they will resort to translation. Importantly, to have other African people from different languages use the continental language Armah proposes to develop, translation would also play a pivotal role. Armah seems to be looking for an African language, ideally capable of reflecting the continent's diversity. The two other writers, having not yet found one, have decided to begin the process of rejecting colonial languages to write in their local languages.

It is important to recognize that the utilization of local languages in writing, a practice embraced by both Boris and Ngugi, and one that Armah critiques while highlighting concerns about limited readership, possesses intrinsic value. This approach lays the foundation for remarkable publications in these languages, paving the way for significant time and energy savings once a common language is established.

In his pursuit of a pan-continental language, Armah draws upon the example of Soviet languages and Russian. Writers in the Soviet context initially compose in their native languages before adopting Russian as a mediating instrument or bridge. This serves as a compelling model, often cited by African intellectuals, illustrating a method that could be replicated on the African continent. In such cases, local languages remain vibrant and evolving while contributing to the enrichment of a shared linguistic medium. However, this connection between Soviet languages and Russian is facilitated by the inherent linguistic kinship they share, a concept Armah aptly labels the "Russian powerhouse connection" (Armah, 2010, p. 129). It is lamentable that, thus far, Africa struggles to lay claim to a similar advantage of linguistic kinship.

While there is currently no African language capable of playing this bridging role between the different African languages in the same sophistication Russian does with the Soviet languages, Armah reassures that the language issue can be addressed through the choice and learning of such a common language. In *Remembering*, Armah writes:

The problem is not intractable. But any solution will depend on the choice of one common, central language. Once adopted, that African language will be taught as a compulsory language in all African schools, alongside the current official languages it will eventually replace. No African will be denied access to foreign language, but all educated Africans will be competent in that one African language, so that by the time the continent is wholly literate, Africans conversing one another will no longer need interpreters. (p. 219)

Armah, akin to the perspectives articulated by Ngugi, Soyinka, and as noted by Whyte (2003, p. 132), along with the insights of Ali Mazrui, asserts that Swahili holds the potential to serve as a unifying bridge among all African languages. His stance derives its foundation from the presence of numerous favorable attributes within Swahili, including its established script and its close affinity to various other African languages. Armah, in a reflective tone, presents the following proposition in *The Revolutionaries*:

There is one African language admirably suited to function as our common ancillary language. That language is Kiswahili. It enjoys structural and lexical affinities with a lot of languages over large areas of the continent, east, south, central, and even the lower west. Flexible and highly absorptive, it can take inputs from practically every African language in its future development. (p. 129)

However, Armah identifies certain limitations that can render this endeavor laborious and, to some extent, even impossible. Despite its substantial borrowings from Arabic and Persian, which have led some to question its status as a purely African language — although this assertion is not universally valid — Swahili, in his view as noted in *Remembering* (p. 130), evolved into a lingua franca relatively recently in African history, primarily through commercial exchanges. Moreover, concerns arise regarding its appropriation, as it is already spoken by a distinct community. Some Africans may harbor feelings of injustice and resistance towards the promotion of one language at the expense of others (p. 130).

In light of such circumstances, Armah posits that another language, Kemet from ancient Egypt, would perfectly address the situation. Kemet is

free of all the constraints mentioned above and proves the best option for a continental language around which all other African languages could gather and reinvigorate themselves. Armah lists the assets of that language in the following words in *Remembering*:

Because that language underwent an exceptionally long development as a philosophical, administrative, scientific and artistic vehicle, it offers us an immense accumulation of useful concepts, images and expressions from which designers of a future African language should be free to choose what they think most useful, insightful and elegant. (p. 130)

With Kemet, Africans are likely to feel a sense of common ownership, free from any unfair treatment as they would with Swahili. Armah recognizes the intricacies associated with the Kemet transcription, which is accessible only to a restricted group of initiated scholars. However, he advocates for its selective utilization, specifically focusing on extracting those components and elements deemed relevant for the contemporary application of the language. With Kemet, Africans are likely to feel a sense of common ownership, free from any unfair treatment as they would with Swahili. In other words, this heritage must be used critically and selectively.

Inventing an African language based on the Kemet of ancient Egypt would be an arduous task that could be only accomplished by seasoned African intellectuals who know their history. Not only does it require an immense amount of work, but it also takes an enormous amount of time to achieve results. However, as it is the intellectual's duty to formulate proposals, Armah can benefit from the indulgence of the theory building, despite the limitations of his position.

In *The Revolutionaries*, Armah attempts to apply this theory of establishing a common language. Indeed, the core members of the TransInter Group have set themselves up as a task force to work on the creation of a 'common African language' (p. 386). In reality, these individuals seem to have the best profile to address this language issue, especially as they are all interpreters, or 'language specialists' who, albeit unwillingly, help to enrich European languages when they interpret them at conferences to enable Africans to understand each other.

To do so, they start by taking certain precautions. The first is to choose a language with which everyone could identify, so as to avoid the frustrations or accusations of partisanship that Katombe was trying to raise when he ironized Benga about the choice that would have to be made from among the thousands of African languages (p. 465). The second is that no content should be imported or the use of European languages or Arabic

would be allowed – ('no European or Arabic imperial freight', (p. 386). Finally, the third stipulates that there should be no Creole, as this could revive colonial legacies. In light of such precautions, it becomes clear that no current African language can meet the outlined criteria. As a result, they urge for the use of Kemet, which at their level, would do the trick as they state:

Ancient Egyptians scholars knew the value of a common language. It was one key to the creation of a cohesive society, and that was the core secret of Egypt. Unity. Their official language ro en Kemet, was a synthesis of all the ethnic languages that came together in the unified society. If today .we're interested in a unifying language, we can proceed rationally, from a core of indispensable words, syntax, and idiomatic structures... (Armah, 2013, p. 387)

The idea of Benga, the group's mentor who owns extensive knowledge about ancient Egypt, is to start with a set of commonly used words (p. 387) to form the core structure of the language (p. 388) that these specialists intend to create. They will then put in place a second core structure to include scientific and technological words, as it was the case in Egypt, and to challenge the idea that African languages cannot have a lexicon specific to science and technology. It is worth recalling that Ngugi already addressed this point in *Secure the Base* when he referred to Cheikh Anta in the following remarks:

There are, of course, those, of course, who argue that African languages are incapable of handling complexities of social thought, or that they do not have adequate vocabularies for accommodating the concepts of Western rationality. This objection was long ago answered by one of the brightest intellects from Africa, Cheikh Anta Diop, when he argued that no language had a monopoly of cognitive vocabulary, that every language could develop its terms for science and technology. (p. 71)

So far, for Armah's specialists in *The Revolutionaries*, if there are terms that do not exist in the Egyptian language, they will have to be adapted from current African languages. If they do not exist at all, they will have to be invented. The exercise begins with the creation of a vocabulary, with each participant contributing a list of words from the language he or she knows (p. 471). Jehwty explains the process in the following terms:

We make a list of available text....

We highlight lexical, philosophical and cultural connections with other Africans, as many as we have members who speak them...

From the vocabulary of Kemet, we select a basis core. From the grammar, we use syntactical forms. Like past, present, future.

We add ways to form adjectives, adverbs.

We add prepositions, conjunctions, etc.

We expand the basic vocabulary by adding words we choose from the widest possible large of African languages. (p. 473)

The method which Armah theorizes in *Remembering*, and that this group attempts to experiment in *The Resolutionaries*, proves to be quite innovative. It is not only bold in its decision to make Kemet the foundation of the new language to be established but also groundbreaking in its egalitarian approach. It encompasses all the languages and communities across the continent, providing the initiative with the necessary impetus and dynamism to advance. While the role of an intellectual like Armah is to propose possible ways forward for the well-being of his community, it must be stressed that putting this theory of establishing a new language into practice is proving arduous.

First, we need to look at the context and conditions in which a language is born. A language birth appears actually to be more the result of natural societal phenomena than the outcome of an artificial undertaking driven by the actors of a given society (Harari, *Sapiens*). It is rare, almost unprecedented, to trace the voluntary creation of a language in the course of human history. Languages are born and developed either by the socialization of individuals, or by the growth of trade, technology and culture.

Equally, the time factor involved in establishing this language on the continent raises questions about its effectiveness. It will take a long time for this undertaking to come to fruition. But with Armah, readers are already used to the fact that he does not attach too much importance to time boundaries as he inscribes his action in the revolutionary praxis. In his stance, the individual is working for an ideal for which he will not be sure to benefit himself in the short term. In these times of acute disruption, Africans would surely be more interested in investing in their own socio-economic well-being than in devoting much-needed effort to creating a language. This accounts for the position of other interpreters in the group, such as Erasmus Matunda (p. 307), who does not see the relevance of this undertaking. Considerable awareness-raising work will therefore be needed to convince writers and Africans of the need to embark on that adventure. Ultimately, Africans have to ask themselves whether it might not be easier to explore

other avenues that would enable African languages to assert themselves through the existence of a dynamic economy and culture that would help impose themselves on others.

Conclusion

This comparative reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah confirms that both writers treat language as inseparable from the colonial and postcolonial struggle over African identity, memory, and self-determination, while proposing markedly different solutions to the problem they jointly diagnose.

Where the two converge is on the diagnosis: for both authors, the imposition of European languages was never a neutral instrument of communication but a mechanism of cognitive and cultural dispossession, and both reject the pragmatic accommodation with English or French associated with writers such as Achebe. Both also concede that no single existing African language can, on its own, bridge the continent's linguistic diversity, and both therefore assign translation a central, if provisional, role in any transition away from colonial languages.

Where they diverge is on the remedy. Ngugi's solution is linguistic and immediate: writing, publishing, and educating in existing mother tongues — Gikuyu above all — while advancing Kiswahili as the most plausible candidate for a pan-African lingua franca, precisely because it carries, in his account, no history of domination over other African peoples. Armah's solution is civilizational and, by his own admission, longer-term: rather than privilege any living African language, which risks reproducing the very inequalities the continent seeks to escape, he proposes the deliberate construction of a new common language out of Kemet, the language of ancient Egypt, on the grounds that it belongs to no single contemporary community and offers, in his view, an unmatched reservoir of African philosophical and scientific vocabulary. The *Resolutionaries* dramatizes the practical difficulty of this project as much as its ambition: the TransInter Group's own members disagree over whether the undertaking is worth the effort it demands.

Read together, Ngugi and Armah map the two poles between which contemporary debates on African linguistic decolonization continue to move: a pragmatics of mother-tongue revival that can begin immediately but remains fragmented along existing linguistic lines, and a maximalist project of pan-continental linguistic invention that promises unity but has, to date, no realized precedent to draw on. Their disagreement is less a contradiction than a division of labor: Ngugi's model addresses what can be done now, within existing language communities, while Armah's addresses what might eventually unify them. For policy and education in Africa, the practical

implication is that neither position can be pursued to the exclusion of the other: mother-tongue literacy and publishing, as Ngugi advocates, and long-term investment in a shared continental language project, as Armah proposes, are complementary rather than competing agendas, and any coherent African language policy will likely need elements of both.

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