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**L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle  
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century  
A África e os desafios do Século XXI  
إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين**

**Language Policy Lapses in Africa:  
The Curse of Statehood and Nationhood**

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## **Abstract**

Language can be a key contributing force towards the consolidation of nationhood and the realization of national development and that is why it is important for a country to formulate a national language policy. The failure of many states in Africa, to come out with a clear transformational language policy appears to be a major handicap in their experiences of nation-building. Despite the fact that language is a powerful symbol of society, if its potential is fully recognised and exploited, ironically to-date European languages dominate in most African states in all the formal and technical domains, such as government, business administration, science and technology, trade commerce, international relations and education. Indigenous languages in Africa have therefore been restricted to a few domains of use and the less formal ones are relegated to less glamorous domains such as intra-community communication, interpretational roles in local courts, use by politicians in local political rallies to name a few. There are only a few countries in Africa, e.g. Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia and most Arabic speaking countries, which opted to develop their indigenous lingua franca to serve as national languages. The former colonial languages have, therefore, continued to strengthen their positions of prestige at the expense of the indigenous languages. The use of ex-colonial languages has far reaching implications that undermine the consolidation of nationhood.

Africa's failure to harness the cultural and social efficaciousness of language in national construction is contrasted with the observable trend in all the world's developed countries which have well calibrated language policies. In these countries, technology is adapted and integrated within their cultural and social values, thereby providing a means of mobilization and the fomenting of national cohesiveness. This paper demonstrates that language policy can be an effective tool of political socialization and mobilization for effective participation of all citizens in nation-building. This explains why countries like the Netherlands and Denmark in Europe have preserved their languages for use in their daily social and economic activities while many others including China, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand, base their development strategies on the indigenous languages because this is the only way to involve the whole population in the development effort to meaningfully bring about technological advancement within the country's cultural framework.

The paper argues the absence of an effective language policy in African countries is the curse of statehood, nationhood and development. Development in Africa slows down because important communication relies on foreign languages of the former colonial masters and the parties involved in the process of development cannot interact effectively. A common language therefore should be seen as an integrating force, a means by which political empowerment and participation of all citizens is fully facilitated. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore how African languages, if empowered, would foster development of Africa, to begin with, by involving the entire population of a nation, and consequently spill over to other countries of the world. It makes sense to argue that the dominance of foreign and largely colonial languages has undermined not only the cohesiveness and perceptiveness of citizens but also seriously undercut their development of self-confidence and sense of Africanness. As a result many nationals are rendered unable to access government information because of bridling communication barriers.

In view of these arguments, this paper seeks to explore strategic importance of language as a tool of statecraft that can be harnessed in accelerating social and national transformation. Africa need not rely on foreign languages for its development when it has such diverse linguistic resources which are well saddled in its cultural heritage, and which if developed would unite not only people of its various nations but also foster prospects of enhancing regional integration. Well defined language policy outlays should be formulated as a basis of reasserting African authenticity and self-hood and providing sustainable charters of national consolidation of statehood and collective idioms as well as a national behavioural ethic. Therefore, the paper marks a departure from sterile textbook circumscribed models of explaining development and as such emphasizes the need to place fundamental value on national language policy. That is basically why the paper seeks to show that if a common language is adopted, the transfer of skills, new knowledge and other vital information desired to effect radical and sustainable changes in 21<sup>st</sup> century African states will be both feasible and germane to the building of a true sense of Africanity.