

**What about the Politics? A Realist Interrogation of the Stand to Conduct African Studies  
Research in African Languages**

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**Abstract**

That research in the discipline of African Studies should be conducted in African Languages is becoming a popular intellectual stand. It has been driven by the logic that the best way to capture the experiences and convey the realities of a people is to work with their languages. **But who is considering the politics involved: the struggle for value and balance of forces amongst who funds research, who needs research, what kind of research is conducted and funded; and, where is research realistically best disseminated to achieve its set aims and objectives?** This paper explores, interrogates and analyses 'these politics'. Findings from both are subjected to in-depth analysis and the conclusion is drawn that though conducting African Studies research in African languages is, in principle desirable, **its realization is almost impossible to pursue within the realistic intra Africa and global context of struggle for value and balance of forces.** A few ways of doing so are then suggested.

## Introduction

About two thousand languages are commonly attributed to Africa, but this may not be a fair description because new ones are daily discovered and old ones keep going into extinction. Whether or not the figure is accurate, Africa is home to a substantial portion of the world's linguistic diversity amongst which Nigeria alone has over 450. Dimmendaal (2011) helps categorize languages into eleven families plus eight of what he calls 'isolates' which include the most widely used ones that serve as transnational *lingua francas* —for example, Manding, Hausa, and Fula(ni) in the Sahel; Yoruba in Nigeria and Benin; Lingala in the Congo basin; Swahili in East and central Africa; and Arabic varieties in North Africa, Chad, and Sudan (Dimmendaal 2011:2). In modern-day Africa, all the indigenous languages and their families operate in addition to ex-colonial (European) languages that many countries have made official. Others such as creoles and pidgins still exist as variants of Euro-indigenous languages being used by multiethnic communities that are found across Africa.

In spite of this complexity of socio-linguistic situation, many researchers of African Studies are agitating that African languages be used to conduct African researches. How is this achieved given many global variables that determine its success? What about the politics, especially?

'Politics' here is used in its wide sense. It refers to vested interest, that which is determined by what one gets or loses when and how as explained by Laswell (1936). Our paper views politics primarily as struggle amongst the elite as the primary holders of power. Subjecting this view to research activities, what one sees is the struggle for value and balance of forces amongst **who funds research, who needs research, what kind of research is conducted and funded; and, where the research realistically best disseminated to achieve its set aims and objectives.** The quest for conducting African Studies' research in African Languages which has been driven by the logic that the best way to capture the experiences and convey the realities of a people is to work with their languages.

**Who needs research, what kind of research and where?** We could adopt the conceptualisation of research as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing ones in new and creative ways that generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings which could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes (Western Sydney University: The Department of Education and Training). When we do, the question of who needs research remains ever relevant. Thus, should we ask who needs to create new knowledge and use existing ones in new and creative ways so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings, Africa will be located right in the center of the answer.

Many reasons can be adduced to the foregoing declaration. A bulk of the knowledge of African people remains untapped for use in their socio political activities. African scholars had studied philosophy, for instance, for more than two centuries mainly based on Euro Western paradigms until recently when they began to attempt to take a break, with some of them systematically situating Orunmila as the father of African philosophy the way Socrates is often regarded in

Europe (Oluwole 2017). Alamu et al (2013:527) particularly established the relationship between Computer Science and Ifa Divination with the conclusion that the former is quite relevant to global technological innovation and development. Ayoade and Agbaje (1989) edited a collection of essays on African traditional political thoughts in ways clearly different from those of Plato and Aristotle. Before all of them, some other African scholars had raised alarm over many aspects of African indigenous knowledge that had been somewhat understudied and under-researched in science, politics and many other aspects of life.

Contrary to the perception of many in the Global North, it is not necessarily landing in the U.S. or Europe that many African intellectuals prefer. As soon as they have pursued education and/or research opportunities in some of these countries, they are inclined to return to Africa if resources and infrastructure that are often more readily available in Europe and America were available. But they never do. So, Africa continues to lose talents, intellectual property, mentorship, and modeling for future generations, in addition to the loss of focus on African genetic, technological, and health challenges. So, while it is clear that The Global North funds research in, and for Africa, there is need for the continent to produce a critical mass of researchers in order to challenge the shameful history of exploitation of the natural and human resources of the Continent by other countries and multinationals.

In the aspect of economy, all over the world, it is African economies that have been at a perpetual disadvantage. The countries of the Continent are being preyed upon by those in the global north aided by the multinationals who explore natural resources and those who process and sell them. In Africa, it is bad enough that research as a social endeavour is under researched and under-explored, it has been hypothesized that interrogations of the understandings and perceptions of African intellectual towards research is necessary to ascertain how they understand research. This is a strong determinant of their attitudes towards research itself and the grants and funding that accompany it. Same may be derived from looking into how the past research resources available were managed, the social, economic and political implications of not funding research projects vis-à-vis the research resources and evaluation for recommendation of policies and practices that can enable TETFund and Nigerian lecturers propel Nigeria's development through research. So long as research, especially scientific ones, is a vital driver of economies, politics, technology and others, it is Africa that needs it more than other continents and thus to focus more on it. The wisdom here must have informed the establishment and spread of African Studies centres and institutes around the world.

Africa represents the youngest and fastest-growing population in the world. Over the next decades she will account for the world's highest population while other continents will be experiencing decline (UN World Population Prospects 2019). Health wise, the African Continent hosts about 20% of the global burden of disease, yet with currently below 1% of the world's share of scientific research output (WHO Disease burden and mortality estimates, 2018). Africans represent the oldest and most diverse genome in the world, and studies of their disease and public health are critical not just to improve the mortality and morbidity of Africans themselves

but also to shed light on disease that impacts peoples of African origin who reside everywhere in the world (see for instance Tishkoff, S. A (2008). At the socio political level, the post-Colonial reality of the 54 countries of Africa, like developing countries worldwide, has been such that the most qualified students and early career researchers in Africa immigrate to seek ‘advanced’ training in the Global North. As this scenario benefits those countries in the Global North, it drains the best talents in the African countries too. In fact. A recent research report so exposes

*When we analyzed data using Elsevier’s SciVal tool, which measures the research performance of 8,500 research institutions and 220 nations worldwide, a more detailed picture of Africa’s research emerged. Compared to other regions, Africa has by far the strongest growing scientific production: 38.6 percent over a 5-year period from the start of 2012 to the end of 2016. The number of authors is growing at an equally astounding rate of 43 percent over that period. This is 10 percent higher than the next fastest growing author population in the world – that of the Middle East – at 33 percent during the same period (Mbaye, Rose et al 2019).*

One can safely declare therefore that in the entire world today, no continent needs research more than Africa. Europe is over studied and over-researched, and has got to the level of what Levenstein (2013) calls The End of Knowledge. Africa is the place where new knowledge are abundantly untapped and old ones are open to further testing. This may explain why decolonization, blackness, racism, xenophobia and other dominant global research issues today are focused on Africa. Indeed, it’s Africa that needs research. But as advanced statistically by Mbaye et al, “in terms of extramural funding (table 1), salmonellosis was the disease with the lowest proportion of studies acknowledging financial support (0.48, CI 0.39 to 0.57). HIV, malaria, tuberculosis and Ebola had high percentages of studies that reported receiving funding (greater than 70%), but under 10% of the acknowledged funding was from African country sources. As suggested by the coinciding CIs, whether or not the first or last authors are affiliated to AI does not seem to affect the reception of funding”. What this means is that the idea of who needs research is as important as who funds research; for the tow seriously explains the politics in global research funding and the direction the policies will go. So, If Africa needs research, but the Global North funds it, t African Studies researchers are now calling for the study of Africa with the use of African languages that have been found to be almost irreconcilably multiple, what is and where lies the politics?

## **The politics**

African countries appreciate research grants from donor countries, but they are often weekend by the insistence of the donors that the already economically traumatized people bring in their own money, sometimes called counter funding, in order to be eligible. Inability or incapacity of many African granting agencies to provide their share of the money has on many occasion fallen many research projects by the wayside. There are about 100 research donors who want to focus on Africa with focus of aspects of education, health and HIV, human rights, entrepreneurship and innovation, disability studies, agriculture and women (Peak Proposals.com). The counter funding factor has been the problem.

## **Language and Indigenous language in research**

Language is purely a social and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. They are used to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings. Listening, speaking, reading and writing the four critical aspects of any language. In the most general way we can identify four major skills. Speaking and writing involve some kind of production on the part of language user, and they are often referred to as 'productive skills' or 'skills of expression'. In addition to these two are listening and reading which allow the language user to receive either written or verbalized information. In this case we refer to 'receptive skills' or 'skills of comprehension'. It is within these means that any social formation express and exchange mental concepts amongst themselves. In this way a skilled language user is one who can convey his information, message, and the use language in order to communicate our thoughts and feelings. Persons who use languages well are skilled equally in four aspects of language skills. In the most general way we can identify four major skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. We conclude that interdisciplinary projects must allocate time to the development of shared vocabularies and understandings. Common understanding derived from shared languages in turn plays a vital role in enhancing the relations of trust that are necessary for effective interdisciplinary working (Aruna and Sneha 2012).

Although the English language has dominated the world of research today, and out of all the languages in the world, researchers experience undue pressure to publish primarily in English, Somerville (2020) explains that it had always not been so. Early philosophers and scientists published their thoughts in their native languages before translating to Latin and Greek; and their researches were disseminated globally. Only about a century ago was French and German ranked along with English as the primary languages in which research was communicated. By the end of the Second World War, publishing in Greek and Latin reduced, giving way for German, English and French which later came lesser and lesser until English became the dominant language by which research was published and communicated.

The landscape of research publishing today, when it comes to Language, looks like emphasis placed on English so as to appear international.

Setting out to gather data from the Directory of Open Access Journals, DOAJ, we discovered 9,153 open access journals indexed in 43 languages, 53% of these journals are published only in English, and 47% of these journals offer an alternative language to publish in. In fact, we particularly noticed that until 2010, the number of open access journals that were indexed that offer an alternative language to English exceeded the number of journals that publish only in English. English-only journals seem to have just taken the lead on indexing over alternative language journals in the last 7 years.

But there are challenges that come with English being the dominant language in research: it is like asking for directions from someone who did not speak the same language. If verbal communication is difficult in that situation, written one will be even more. Good research is being done all over the world, by native English researchers and non-native English researchers. What is most unfortunate is when language is a barrier for that work to be widely shared and understood by others. One of the reasons international researchers want to publish their work in English is because many notable journals are published in English, and having their manuscript accepted can be critical for career advancement. For African researchers who wish to conduct researches in African Languages, there are also great journals published native language.

That English was not the language of publishing at the beginning of intellectual tradition suggests that thoughts and ideas can be, and indeed, are best expressed in people's indigenous expressions. It also suggest why the language of a people is the most practicable way of communication amongst the people, and that is the position of those researchers who insist that the best way to conduct researches in African Studies is to utilize African Languages. Their logic also stipulates that European and American or Asian Studies are best conducted in the languages of the clan.

### **Conclusion**

There are many levels on which the future of the world, not just the future of Africa, is being impacted by African research, so, it is critical that Africa cultivates and nourishes the potentialities of her intelligentsia, and the best location for this to be done is inside Africa. Many individuals there are who have been out of Africa due to the need to conduct researches, and many of their researches focus on African Studies, especially the aspect of discovering many hidden knowledge. These individuals and groups need to return as a matter of urgency, and in order to compete for their, African research institutions must offer language and stylistic innovations that at minimum can result in quality research being conducted.

However, the politics must be considered and played. What comes to mind when politics is mentioned is value and who gets it. What is in it for research funders and donor agencies if what they sponsor come in a language that they can neither read nor write? How is it even possible – perhaps practicable for them to identify the particular African language to use among the over 2000 that they continent has? Amounts Africans themselves, how well is any of these languages acceptably utilized across tribes, clans and other social cleavages and how acceptable will one

of them be? Even if one is accepted in the name of being an African language and for the purposes of having the advantage of indigenous communication, will the purpose not be defeated for those Africans to whom the chosen indigenous African languages are not indigenous? How do we play all these politics and, if they can be played, will the sacredness of intellectual objectivity not be lost in the process of playing them? Indeed, global civilization changes from time to time, and the language of the dominant group of nations is often used to conduct world's political, economic and educational businesses. At the level of idea, this can be challenged, but even the challengers will be confronted with the questions of handling the amorphous and complex situation if the reverse is done. This is the quagmire in which those making case for the use of African languages to conduct African Studies researches may find themselves.

The thought of conducting African research in African languages is rational and the idea is noble; especially given the earlier raised argument that it is Africa that needs to conduct more researches and be researched into. But implementing it requires a play of complex and sensitive politics that may create more contradictions and counter-productivity than the status quo. Because research is essentially what is conducted locally but disseminated globally, it should adopt its own language; and that should be the most hegemonic global language at a particular period of civilization. This will preserve its sanctity and objectivity without precluding the possibility of further localizing the dissemination where it first rose from.

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