

## French Language Teaching in Nigeria and the Indigenisation Philosophy: Mutual Bedfellows or Implacable Arch-Foes?

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### Abstract

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Nigeria, like most contemporary African states, has resorted to indigenisation as a functional and dominant paradigm to combat cultural imperialism and preserve her cultures. This has enabled the indigenisation philosophy to reign or be envisaged in many sensitive sectors of the country's life, including education. In line with this French language teaching in primary and secondary levels of education are visibly indigenized as it appears more afro-centric than franco/Euro-centric. The teaching of the language clearly gives privileges to the francophone African cultures over French cultures. This thinking is founded on the belief that Nigerian learners of the French language are likely to seek communication and integration first with their African counterparts before any other francophone (western) community. This paper critically analyses some of the challenges of this indigenisation philosophy with respect to foreign language teaching in Nigeria. It argues that this indigenisation of French language teaching is confronted to a westernisation of Nigerians learners of the language; caused partly by the Franco-centric nature of French teaching at university level and the influence of such bodies as the French Cultural Cooperation and *Alliance Françaises*, which adopt a more Franco-centric approach in their teaching and promotion of the language French in Nigeria.

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### Introduction

Education is counted among the principal socialisation forces as well as among the state apparatuses serving the complex interest of ideology and cultural hegemonic control.

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In Africa, education has been working as a serious tool of western cultural imperialism. It has been argued by a number of critics that, from the colonial period till present, education has represented a major vector of the introduction, selling and firm implantation of the western culture in the continent. Today, it is not surprising that western education and its resultant cultural products remarkably continue to be felt in the life of Africans and to more and more shape their frame of thinking. Through this education fashioned according to Western cultural values and inherited by African states from their various colonial masters, Africans are continually and tremendously made or groomed to rather think like the Whiteman and to more or less embrace the myth of the Whiteman's superiority. Salawu (2006:9-10) notes and passionately decries this phenomenon/anomaly when he concedes that:

The structure that the colonialists handed down still remains till today, decades after they have left. In fact, it is even more strengthened as English (for instance) and Western education continue to remain the language and education of power and progress in life. Therefore, there is an understandable fast growing interest in both the language and the education. Africa remains far from catching up with the pace of human progress in the advanced world. Therefore Africa continues to look up to the West. This aspiration is captured in the concept of *empathy* [...] and revolution rising expectation.

A close look at school curriculums, the contents of school subjects and textbooks and manual used in most African schools among others suffices to prove this fact true. In contemporary Nigeria for instance, the youth is, from childhood groomed - through both formal and informal education - into being a heavy consumer of western culture and a mimicker of the Western way of life (Salawu 2006). The child is virtually made to be a 'cloned' westerner as Achebe in Ezeafulukwe (2012:61) notes this phenomenon, with particular reference to metropolitan areas of the country. "We are at cosmopolitan centres and the predominant cultures of the centre are from Europe. And so whatever your political or ideological positions might be, you very soon discover that your child is inheriting all kinds of nefarious ideas".

A number of Nigerian critics, educationists and policy makers have proposed strategies to redress the situation and save Nigerian cultures from complete erosion.

Their contributions and suggestions are mainly rooted in the philosophy of indigenisation which is closely associated to such neologisms as localisation, afro-centrism, ethnocentrism, de-colonisation, 'nigerianess' and the like (Awoyemi 2013; Kolbowe and Madu 2013; Iwuagwu 1997; Awobuluyi 1992). The term indigenisation has thus become a cash word among Africanists and culturalists. It has subsequently been equated to the philosophy of cultural protectionism.

The move in favour of indigenisation in the Nigeria educational sector has been manifested in multiple steps including the revision of school curriculum and didactic practices to include the teaching of/in mother tongues, the inclusion of African oral tradition and literature among others (Awoyemi 2013; Ezeafulukwe 2012; Iwuagwu 1997). In line with this, the teaching of French has visibly been indigenised to some extent. It has been conceived to be more Afro-centric especially at primary and secondary levels of education. This Afro-centrism is however faced with a avalanche of challenges: among which feature the westernisation of the Nigerian learners' mind, which is partly enabled by the learners' constant exposure and heavy consumption of western culture through other socialisation institutions such as the media and religion. This westernisation of French learners' minds is equally owing to the Franco-centric French teaching programs at the university level. It is not uncommon that French language learners very much prefer to learn French the French way (entailing knowing and adopting the French way of life) than learning the cultures of African francophone cultures; this, owing to multiple factors that will be discussed by this essay. This paper focuses on the challenges met by the indigenisation of French language teaching/learning in Nigeria. It explores the adoption of the indigenisation philosophy in some sensitive sectors of the country especially in the educational sector and presents the westernisation of Nigerian learners as a major threat to this indigenisation philosophy in Nigeria.

## **1. A Brief Overview of Indigenisation in Nigeria**

Indigenisation is a derivate of the adjective "indigenous". The term "indigenous" has its root in biology (precisely in botany) and refers to native plants and species. The full meaning of the term (concept) 'indigenisation' depends on the specific context in which it is used.

In Christian missionary practices for instance, the term “indigenisation” describes the process of planting ministries that fit naturally into their environment (Weightman 2008:1-2). Indigenisation can therefore be defined as a process whereby a concept or practice is adapted or fashioned according to native characteristic (native/indigenous cultural values). It entails infiltrating local customs and other cultural values into the concept or practice (Tania 2007; Weightman 2008) to make the concept/practice fit the environment.

Indigenisation in Nigeria has taken different faces depending on the precise sector in which it has been adopted. The first manifestation of the indigenisation philosophy in contemporary Nigeria was viewed in 1976 with the promulgation of the indigenisation decree which was aimed at wresting control of the economy from the hands of foreign elements (Ekpang 2008). The move was driven by the Obasanjo-Shagari administration. The indigenisation decree instituted the nationalisation of some multinational corporations such as British Petroleum and Barclays Banks among others. As indicated, the indigenisation decree touched sensitive economic sectors such as banking and petroleum.

Indigenisation has equally been experimented in the media sector, with the promulgation of a broadcasting code which is glaringly driven by cultural protectionist objectives and which stipulates a 60-40 percent ratio for local and foreign contents of broadcast station. To show its indigenization orientations, the code reveals its cultural objectives to be “(i) [to] seek, identify, preserve and promote Nigeria’s diverse cultures; (ii) to critically select the positive aspects of foreign cultures for the purpose of enriching the Nigerian culture, (iii) develop and promote the application of indigenous aesthetic values” (NBC Code 2006: 12-13).

In the educational sector, indigenization can be viewed in the country’s National Policy on Education’s support for the teaching in/of mother tongues. The policy encourages the teaching of national languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in addition the pupils ‘mother tongue and recommends the teaching of these pupils in their mother tongues in the three first years of early education. It stipulates that:

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment.

Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1998:9)

It is however worth noting that it has been extremely difficult to use mother tongues to teach, partly because of the cosmopolitan nature of the classes and also because some concepts and neologisms particularly in science subjects have proven to be untranslatable into local indigenous languages. As such despite this recommendation by the National Policy on Education and solid campaigns and lobbies for educationists, culturalists and linguists in favour of the teaching in mother tongue, this aspect of indigenization has not found enabling conditions for it to be applied in practical pedagogic context (Awoyemi 2013; Mokwenye 2007; Mohammad 2005). Awoyemi (2013:35) gives a synthesis of the major challenges to the teaching in/of mother tongues thus:

Some Nigerian critics have postulated that such an experiment or adoption could prove very expensive. Their argument has been that some concepts already expressed in text-books have no Nigeria equivalent in the indigenous language, thus they claim, translation could distort meaning and concept. Secondly they feel that the process of training staff in this dimension could prove laborious and a huge amount of financial commitment to translate any, and all, blue-prints into reality would be needed. Finally they suggest an unwillingness of the groups to give up their language in place of any other indigenous language.

## **2. Indigenization of the French Language Teaching in Nigeria**

The indigenization of French language teaching in Nigeria is perceptible in two facts: (i) the objectives of French language teaching in Nigerian secondary schools as laid down by the official curriculum for secondary education in the French subject and (ii) the overriding philosophy of manuals and French language methods (*On y va!*)<sup>3</sup> having been recently adopted in pedagogic situations in Nigerian secondary schools. These manuals and textbook are clearly in line with the philosophy of indigenization.

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<sup>3</sup> *On y va!* is the French language method/text-book presently used in all classes of the secondary schools in Nigeria. It is the fruit of a research work by a team of foreign experts in collaboration with some local linguists.

The two national curriculums (for the first and second cycles of secondary education) for the teaching of French reveal the desired afro-centric nature of the teaching of French. They all stipulate in their second and sixth points the aims of such learning.

Its aims is also to widen the scope of the learner's knowledge about the French and the French speaking community [and] seek to be a synthesis of past Nigeria syllabuses as well as those of other countries and benefits from the experience of the past in order to fit into the present modern Nigerian context. (Federal Ministry of Education 2001)

It is clear that these aims are informed by the country determination to promote 'Nigerianess'/'Africaness' even in the educational sector as well as is pushed by the desire to facilitate Nigerians' smooth integration in a sub-region (ECOWAS) numerically dominated by francophone countries. This move towards facilitating regional integration with francophone ECOWAS countries is spelt out in the country's national policy which stipulates that "for smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998: 9).

French language teaching in Nigeria is therefore designed to provide the learners with the sufficient communication skills and aptitudes to make the language a tool for communication first with the immediate African francophone community (West African francophone community) then the rest (Western-France and Canada for instance) of the francophone world. This passes through the adoption of afro-centric syllabus and school textbook as seen in the adoption of the *On y va!*, French method in the country's secondary schools (Simire 2013; Ariole 2013; Mohammad 2005; Mazauric and Sirejols 2005, Onyemelukwe 2002).

*On y va!* as a French method/text-book is afro-centric as its content is shaped in such a way as to appeal to a local public of learners and users. The scenes described in the textbook are mainly taking place in African cities. The main characters used in the textbook are Africans, bearing pure West African names and efforts are made by the authors of the textbook to adapt the lessons and civilization objectives to the

socio-cultural aspirations of the English speaking community of West Africa (mainly Ghana and Nigeria).

The learners can easily identify with the main characters featuring in the textbook as well as with their various daily occupations. These characters visibly share in the dreams of many Nigerians. The learners are equally made to learn more about West African socio-cultural diversities than the Western (French) civilization. That is why, in their review of the textbook, Mazauric and Sirejols (2005: 3) underline the phonetic similarity between the title of the textbook "*On y va!*" and the Yoruba word "*O ya!*" (a call to action) and further describe the phrase both as an appetizer addressed to the local readers/users of the textbook as well as an energizer to the French learning process. They equally analyze the guiding philosophy of the conception of the book in line with the spirit of localization/indigenization. They argue that, indeed, the first possible motive of foreign language learning is geographical proximity and the practical interest the learner may develop in such an experience. It would of course be artificial to base the French language learning in Nigeria in the immediate environment of the learner who, in everyday situations, is compelled to use his mother tongue and perhaps other African vehicular languages, in addition to English. Meanwhile, they speak and write French in many neighboring and in remote African francophone countries like Benin, Niger, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso or Gabon. They finally observe that as a method of French language learning *On y va!* capitalizes on geographical cultural proximity between Nigeria and the other francophone African countries.

C'est sur cette proximité géographique et culturelle que *On y va !* prend appui et sur l'intérêt que l'acquisition de la langue française peut représenter pour les jeunes désireux de communiquer avec des voisins africains, et plus largement, de s'ouvrir au reste du monde.

*On y va!* capitalizes on this geographical and cultural proximity as well as on the interest the acquisition of the French language may represent to youths desiring to communicate with the neighboring African counterparts in particular and to get exposed to the rest of the world. (Our Translation)

This may be strong indications that the textbook is really adapted to fit the Nigerian context. It represents a facet of afro-centrism which being an anti thesis of

cultural imperialism is the best form of decolonization of French teaching the Nigerian government may have thought of.

It would have been artificial to base the teaching of French in a purely Nigerian socio-cultural setting, given the fact that Nigeria is an English speaking country. It appears more practical to base such a teaching in a francophone West African socio-cultural context which is in many respects similar to (or engulfs) that of Nigeria. Afro-centrism may very much be effective here as we strongly believe that there is an evident affinity between the different African cultures (Summer-Paulin 1998; Salaudeen 2008).

### **3. Euro-Centric French Language Teaching in the University and Westernization of learners as two Threats to the Indigenization Philosophy**

French language teaching is indigenized basically at primary and secondary levels of education in Nigeria. In the University level, there is a drastic shift from this philosophy as French language teaching is relatively more Franco-centric than Afro-centric. One evidence of this fact is the dominant presence of French literature in the university school curriculum which, coupled to some other cogent factors, tends to expose University French students more to French civilization than African cultures. In connection to this fact, Simire (2013:113) makes the following remark.

La littérature française occupe une place assez importante dans ledit programme (le programme universitaire Nigérien). Du niveau « prélim » jusqu'en année finale de License, les apprenants universitaires nigériens sont exposés à des œuvres de grands auteurs du 16<sup>e</sup> au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle : Molière, Racine, Victor Hugo, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Ronsard, Jean Jacques Rousseau, etc.

French literature occupies a very important place in the said syllabus [Nigerian University French language programs]. From year one to the final year of first degree programs, the University learners of the French language are exposed to the literary works of great authors of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century: Moliere, Racine, Victor Hugo, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Ronsard, Jean Jacques Rousseau, etc. (Our Translation)

These students' constant and heavy exposure to French literature coupled to some other factors work in favor of the westernization of their mind. Also working



towards the westernization of French language learners are French languages teaching schemes run by French cultural institutions such as the network of *Alliances Françaises* that are present in strategic Nigerian towns.

These institutions provide classes based on the use of French language methods like *Echo*, which are veritable vectors of the French culture. A key motor governing the teaching of French by these institution is “learning French in the French way” which can rightfully be interpreted as an exhortation to potential learners of the language to go about the learning process prepared to appreciate and why not adopt the French culture. Moreover, the exams organized by these institutions (the *Alliance Françaises*) with the collaboration of French Cultural cooperation (DELF and DALF<sup>4</sup>) require candidates to have a relatively profound knowledge of the French culture. It is worth noting that the fact that these qualifications (offered by these institutions) are recognized worldwide - as they follow the common European framework of languages - makes such a Franco-centric teaching attractive but compelling to most Nigerian.

The latter therefore prefer going through a linguistic training based on the Franco-centric manuals and textbooks just to secure acquisition of skills that will enable them be successful in the examinations. All these are factors indirectly contributing to the westernization of Nigerian learners of the French language. It is therefore not surprising that many French language students in Universities or in linguistic centers - attending linguistic programs that are dispensed in *Alliance Françaises*, - be directly or indirectly influenced, through Franco-centric manuals, textbook, teaching methods and the like to be more lovers and ready adopters of the French culture than African cultures. Simire (2013:114) reviews some Nigerian French language learners' (university students) perceptions of France and French culture during an immersion program in the Badagri French Village of Nigeria and comes up with the following observation:

Beaucoup ont en même temps trouvé la France comme un pays attirant, accueillant ; un pays dont la culture est internationale et dont les citoyens sont racistes. [...] En dépit de ces argument, certains apprenants ont qualifié la France de

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<sup>4</sup> DELF and DALF are abbreviations. The first stands for *Diplôme d'Elémentaire de Langue Française* (Certificate of Elementary French Learning); meanwhile the second stands for *Diplome Avancé de Langue Française*.(Certificate of Advanced French learning) They represent the two main levels of evaluating French language learners according to the Common European Framework of Reference.

« beau pays », de pays « riche », « tranquille » dont les citoyens sont « gentils », « agréable » et aiment les étrangers et qu'ils sont racistes.

Many have at the same time, said that France is an attractive country, welcoming; a country with an international culture and with racist citizens. [...] Despite these arguments, others described France as “a nice country”, “a rich country”, “peaceful” where citizens are “kind” and friendly to foreigners and that French men are racist.

One can note the multitude of positive epithets used to qualify France and her culture. Racism seems to be the only negative phenomena to have been decried in the French culture as appraised by these young informants. Though it may be argued that such a description may have been influenced by a variety of other unconnected tools and institutions of representation such as the international media, we firmly argue that students' exposure to Franco-centric education has its own influence in their perception of France and the French culture as good and superior (Simire 2013:114).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted an exploration of the philosophy of indigenization in Nigeria. It has presented the model as a dominant and functional paradigm adopted by the Nigerian state in sensitive sectors like the economic, media and educational domains among others, to combat cultural imperialism and advocate for the protection of Nigerian cultures. The apparent indigenization of French language teaching in the primary and secondary levels of education is just an expression of this laudable state philosophy. The indigenization of the teaching of the French language takes the facet of a kind of Afro-centrism manifested by a teaching practice which is adapted more to West African socio-cultural realities than to the European or better French culture. However, this Afro-centrism (indigenisation) of French language teaching is confronted to a westernisation of Nigerians learners of the language partly caused by the Franco-centric nature of French teaching at university level as well as the influence of such bodies as the French Cultural Cooperation and *Alliance Françaises*, in the teaching of the language in Nigeria.

Based on observation presented in this reflexion, this paper wants to recommend that the indigenisation philosophy be applied at all levels of the teaching

of the French language in Nigeria. Indigenisation here will not mean a total exclusion of topics or courses exclusively devoted to the French civilisation in the different university programmes or primary and secondary school syllabuses.

Just as the country was able to define the foreign content tolerable (limited to 40%) in the local media production, they should also be measures to concretely and objectively define the amount of French culture related topics or courses. Preference should be given to the francophone African culture in the distribution of courses in a French teaching program.

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