

How the Fumo Liyongo legend was captured by the state

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Language history and its present relevance, Panel D28, 3 December 2020

The panel discussed three examples of language evolution in East Africa: the Iraqw identity in Tanzania, the Swahili Ajami literature in Angoche and the Fumo Liyongo Legend. While these examples were quite different from each other, three main ideas resonated in all three lectures.

First, language is fluid: it is shaped by its surroundings. Languages and traditions are in communication with and affect each other. This point was especially relevant in the discussion about Swahili Ajami literature. In Angoche, Mozambique, the influence of oral-ity, Swahili Ajami literature and Arabic script led to a unique ‘intermarriage’ of cultures and traditions. This intermarriage was also present in the example of the Fumo Liyongo legend,

as the narrative and its interpretation changed throughout time and across regions.

Second, language actively impacts its surroundings. For instance, language is a powerful tool for identity formation. The example of the Iraqw, the ethnic group inhabiting part of the Great Lakes region of East Africa, proved this point as it showed how the expansion of the Iraqw language influenced the growth and preservation of the Iraqw identity. The third idea is that due to this identity-formation power, language is often linked to state building. The role of language in state formation was also touched upon in the Fumo Liyongo legend example. This ancient legend has always been told in different ways across East Africa. However, nowadays this narrative is presented as a monolithic part of national literature, for example in Tanzania. A legend that can be found across borders and in different ways is now limited by the state, as states have appropriated it as a part of their national literature.

In other words, language and literature are shaped by context and shape their context. Ignoring this, as often has happened and continues to happen in state formation, is a simplification of reality. This demonstrates how knowing and understanding the origin and history of languages and literary traditions is relevant to avoid flawed discourses.

Take-aways

- Language is fluid, it is shaped by its surroundings
- It actively impacts its surroundings as well, providing identity, for example
- Language also plays a role in state formation

