

## Language history and its present relevance

### Panel D28 on 3 and 4 December 2020

Language history is an important element of construction of pre-colonial history in Africa. In the last decades the appreciation for cultural diversity has grown substantially and with a growing interest in the past. Stories of origin have gained importance and many cultural festivals have been initiated. The interest in the past has the potential of highlighting differences and engendering discourses of belonging. Balanced language history with a central interest in language contact can engender interest and positive attitudes to the history of ones' neighbours. The panel is interested in papers that deal with current discourses about the past, specifically in communities in Africa, their literary and political dimension as well as their bases in language history. Language history, here includes historical reconstruction, contact linguistics, oral history, philology and manuscript culture.

#### **Convenors**

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#### **Discussant**

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### **Iraqw culture and identity in a unified Tanzania by Maarten Mous and Daniele Merolla**

The Iraqw or Irakw (also known as the Wambulu by Swahili speakers) are a Cushitic-speaking ethnic group inhabiting the Great Lakes region of East Africa. The paper on Iraqw culture by Mous and Merolla investigates how the Iraqw negotiate their identity and their values and how this is relevant in the development of Tanzanian culture. During colonisation in Tanzania, which was mostly by the English but also by the Germans, the Iraqw peoples were seen as hardworking and pursuing of modernity, which led to the acceptance of the Iraqw by the colonisers. As Tanzania becomes more modern and is influenced by globalisation and thus children are more likely to go to school, traditional cultures and languages are disappearing. This is just one perspective, however. Traditional languages and cultures are also seen by many as valuable heritage and an important part of emancipation.

### **The impact of orality on the written text in Swahili Ajami literature of Angoche by Chapane Mutiua**

The Swahili language is one of the most important languages of Africa and continues to have a tradition of being written in Arabic script. The Swahili Ajami literacy was developed with the advent of the Arabic script in West Africa. There is a cyclic influence between oral and written language, an investigation on Angocheans and their orality and Ajami literature shows. The paper explores the why and how of this relationship and finds that the active interaction between the oral and the written discourses in Swahili manuscript culture is the most important challenge for the standardization of Swahili Ajami orthography.

### **In search of the hero: the Fumo Liyongo legend and its recurrent re-explorations by Clarissa Vierke**

Fumo Liyongo is believed to be a historical figure, however it is not sure from which time he is. Liyongo is linked to different geographical places and different stories in many African countries. For example, in Kenya Liyongo is linked to a place almost at the Somalia border. The hero is believed to be buried here. The article by Clarissa explores the changing form of Liyongo and the influences of other parts of the world have had on this changing form, finding in the end that there was no fundamental change brought by Western modernity, however Western endeavours to collect and print stories did contribute to manuscript

productions. Fundamental shifts happen all the time, Clarissa states, and the nineteenth century forms of literature and art are not less diverse than the present-day spectrum.

### **Word- game and linguistic borrowing in a Zargula song by Azeb Amha**

Azeb Amha analyses the structure of Wodella, a work-song by the Zargula-Gamo, sang by two women. These kind of songs are used in cultures during time-consuming activities of work. The content of the Wodella includes the teasing of one another and suggestive references about relationships. The Wodella involves at least three different languages and uses these languages as a form of word-play. The Wodella song is thus a way of showing the knowledge of different languages. It is however not clear in what language the women actually sing, so future research must be conducted to form a conclusion on this matter.

### **Oral genres as sources of knowledge in West Africa by Felix Ameka**

The Western idea of knowledge is based on modern science and the process of globalisation is still based on these concepts and ideas. However, knowledge is not a concept that can be understood in the same way everywhere and is a too big of a concept to be grasped by just a few. Felix adds that the mainstreaming of knowledge privileges modern science over traditional systems of knowledge, which is problematic and different oral genres are also good sources for knowledge. These are other forms of knowledge sources that do not align with modern science, such as festivals, proverbs, names and oaths.

### **Swahili intellectual history from Kenya's Lamu archipelago by Annachiara Raia**

The paper by Raia explores to what extent the identity and the traditions of the Archipelago, a group of islands, still resonates among the community and how this contributes to the African intellectual history. The Archipelago were part of the British protectorate and their dialects of the coast and their recording of poems contribute to the Swahili history. The centre of the Swahili culture originates from the Archipelago islands. The importance of these islands and coastal districts is stressed by scholars, as their histories are relevant to Africa.

## **The discussion**

There were not really any discussions during the panel, more so interesting topics of conversation and information that gave room for stories and experiences. The first was during the first half of the panel during the presentation by Maarten Mous on prospects of the use of the Iraqw. When someone asked what the prospects for the use of Iraqw were for official purposes, Mous explained that there is no official recognition for Iraqw yet, or any of the other languages for that matter. This includes the teaching of the languages in school: it is seen against the law to introduce the Iraqw language. However, now that Swahili is a big language in Tanzania, there is no more real threat against unity by smaller scaled languages or communities, which is why they did not get official recognition in the first place. There might thus be more room for tolerance in the future, but for now there is no official recognition of the Iraqw language.

Furthermore, the presentation by Felix Ameka really opened up ways for a conversation on the sources of knowledge systems and the challenges of it. During his interesting presentation he discussed how there is corporation of knowledge production in higher levels, however that there is a gap for the contextualisation of this knowledge at local levels. By taking a globally defined concept and applying it locally, a problem arises: concepts are not effective as they do not align with different cultures, morals and practises. So does education achieve anything in African countries if these concepts are not effectively applied to their lives?

Daniella Merolla, the discussant of the panel picked up on the conversation and added that even though the best intentions are there, the knowledge cycle is in fact not there and a lot of work needs to be done. It is also important to take the colonial historical perspectives of the African peoples into account and remember that they are coming from this period of colonisation and that they are very different than Western countries, not only in their believes and cultures, but also in their willingness.

Two quotes that gave great definition to the panel and the conversations were both quotes from Felix Ameka's presentation on knowledge in West Africa. The first quote 'knowledge is like a baobab tree, a pair of hands cannot embrace it' references to an important part of Felix's presentation and the conversation afterwards, about how Western universities and knowledge production institutions cannot define concepts locally and apply them globally, as they themselves cannot embrace all the knowledge. It is important to take into account different cultures, historical backgrounds and local practices when defining concepts, which

leads to the second quote by Felix Ameka which I found very interesting and opened up a lot of room for thought: 'before we get to reconstruct, we need to deconstruct (...)'. In this content Felix linked the quote to formal education and about how Western based concepts are applied locally in Western African countries and education systems, even though they are not compatible with the culture of the peoples. First we need to deconstruct these concepts and then reconstruct them, keeping in mind the understanding of indigenous knowledge systems, which form the foundations of all