

Challenges to Management of Linguistic Diversity in the Sudan

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Abstract:

This paper maintains that, even after the secession of the South, the Sudan is still characterized by linguistic diversity, whose management is faced by many challenges. The paper starts by describing the present linguistic map of the Sudan in terms of the multiplicity and diversity of its languages. The major language problem in the Sudan is the erroneous belief among both the 'Arabists' and the indigenous languages' activists that Arabic and the indigenous languages are mutually exclusive (i.e. in competition against one another). This belief stems from the wrong language policies of the colonial administration and the immediate following national government. It still survives and constitutes the biggest challenge to management of linguistic diversity management.

Key-words: 'Arabists' – indigenous languages' activists – mutually exclusive

تحديات تواجه إدارة التنوع اللغوي في السودان

تسعى هذه الورقة إلى القول بأنه، حتى بعد انفصال الجنوب يظل السودان متسماً بالتنوع اللغوي، وإن إدارة هذا التنوع يجابهها الكثير من التحديات. تبدأ الورقة بتوصيف خارطة السودان (الحالي) اللغوية من حيث تعدد لغاتها وتنوعها. تتمثل المشكلة اللغوية الرئيسية في السودان في المفهوم الخاطئ السائد بين كل من "العروبيين" والمتحمسين للغات المحلية،

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واعتقادهم أن اللغة العربية ومجموعة اللغات المحلية تعيش في حالة "تعارض متبادل" (mutually exclusive)، أي في تنافس ضد بعضها البعض. وقد نشأ هذا الاعتقاد من السياسات اللغوية الخاطئة التي تبنتها الإدارة البريطانية والحكومات الوطنية التي تلتها مباشرة. هذا المفهوم (الخاطيء) ما زال سائداً ويشكل أكبر التحديات التي تواجه إدارة التنوع اللغوي في السودان.

1- Introduction

Immediately after the secession of South Sudan, some Sudanese politicians started to believe that the secession brought an end to cultural and linguistic diversity in the Sudan. This is because they think that the (remaining) Sudan is linguistically (Arabic) and culturally (largely Muslim) is homogeneous. In fact, the cultural and linguistic map of the remaining part of the Sudan has not undergone drastic changes in as far as 'diversity' is concerned. Sudan is still characterized by linguistic as well as ethnic and religious diversity (around 70 languages, almost the equal number of ethnic groups and three religions). Arabic is the *lingua franca* of the country, known by ca. 90% of the population as first, second and third language. With its demographic and cultural weight and the support of the state, it dominates in all aspects of life, whereas the other indigenous languages are neglected and left without defined roles to play.

What distinguishes the Sudan from other countries with similar characteristics is the parallelism that exists between language, on the one hand, and ethnicity, religion and power, on the other hand: Arabic is generally identified with Arab ethnicity, Islamic religion and power, whereas the indigenous languages are generally identified with non-Arab (African) ethnicity, Christian and traditional African religions and lack of power (with a limited space for exceptions). They are these extra-linguistic issues that constitute the main

challenges to language policies and management of linguistic diversity in the Sudan.

I intend in this paper mainly to:

- a- reconstruct the present linguistic map of the Sudan with the aim to highlight the degree of the 'diversity' therein;
- b- review the previous language policies and identify the reasons of their failure;
- c- stress the necessity of management of linguistic diversity in the Sudan that engenders a robust language planning, make some proposal towards this end and discuss the challenges that face decision makers in its achieving.

2- Characteristics of the linguistic map of the Sudan

The present Sudan is the third largest country in Africa, with an area of 728.200 square miles inhabited by ca. 30 million people. Like many of the tropical African countries, it is characterized by linguistic density and diversity, as mentioned above. But it is also distinguished from the other countries of Africa by a number of additional characteristics, most prominent among these being the instability of its language situation, the unbalanced demographic weights of their speakers, multiplicity of its border languages and existence within its territories of a number of West African immigrant languages. This is in addition to the 'endangerment' of the majority of its languages. In what follows we try to give more details about these characteristics.

Linguistic density and diversity

About 70 languages are spoken within the Sudanese national territories. These languages belong to three out of the four language families (phyla) of Africa according to Greenberg's (1966) classification (except Khoisan). Adding the immigrant languages, we find that 16 out of the 18 branches comprised in these three families are represented in the Sudan. It is worthy here to note that Sudan falls within eastern part of what D. Dably (1970:163) calls the "Sub-

Saharan Fragmentation Belt”, which he finds to be “one of the most complex areas in the world” (ibid:170) in term of linguistic density and diversity. However, while Dalby’s belt applies perfectly to the former united Sudan, it exists to a lesser extent in the present Sudan.

Instability of language situation

About 25 years ago, Bjorn Jernudd (undated) described the language situation in the Sudan as being “not well defined and constantly changing and will not be stable for some time”. One of the salient features to underline in this regard is the uneven geographical distribution of the Sudanese languages. As native homes, these languages concentrate the Nuba Mountains, Southern Blue Nile and Darfur, while in some regions in the northern part of the country (e.g. Northern or Eastern Sudan) one may hardly count more than 5 languages. However, the actual factor behind the instability of the language situation in the Sudan is the constant population movement, especially during the last 30 years, as a result of the civil wars on the one hand, and drought and famine on the other hand. As the direction of the movement has always been from the peripheries to the centre, Greater Khartoum today has become a new home for all the Sudanese languages¹. One of the ultimate outcomes of this phenomenon is the acceleration of language shift to Arabic.

Unbalanced demographic weights of the speakers

Balanced demographic weight of languages’ speakers is not expected in a linguistic map of any country in the world, but the disparity in the case of the Sudan is too sharp to escape the remarks of sociolinguists. This sharp disparity has a strong bearing on the problem of language and it adds to the challenges to management of linguistic diversity in this country.

¹ - E.g. in 1988, 51 languages were found to be spoken in an area of ca. 8 square kilometers in the vicinity of Khartoum. See Miller & Abu-Manga (1992).

The table provided below supports my statement on the remarkable disparity in the demographic weights of the Sudanese languages' speakers. Individual figures are given only for the first 14 most widely spoken languages (as mother tongue), based on the results of the fourth census (1993) in which the total number of population is estimated at ca. 25.5 million.²

Table (1): Languages and numbers of speakers in the (united) Sudan 1993³

Language	Number of speakers	Percentage
Arabic	13,191,340	51.1%
Dinka	2,740,900	10.6%
Beja	1,181,335	4.6%
Nuer	1,160,398	4.5%
Fur	663,913	2.6%
Zande	648,783	2.5%
Bari	418,920	1.6%
Masalit	406,310	1.6%
Fulfulde	392,100	1.5%
Koalib	386,713	1.5%
Toposa	306,375	1.2%
Hausa	295,775	1.1%
Lotuho (Latuka)	290,575	1.1%
Shilluk	236,565	0.9%
92 other Sudanese languages	3,498,840	13.6%
Total	25,818,842	100%

² - The present figures are worked out by conversion from the 1956 to the 1993 census, because – due to the civil war – Southern Sudan was not included in the latter census, i.e. of 1993.

³ - Source: Y. Kh. Abu-Bakr & A. Abu-Manga (1997). Modification of the lay-out and insertion of the percentage figures were made by H.F. Idris (2007).

As noted above, these figures and percentages go back to the 1993 census. Of course, after the secession of the South the picture may change slightly but not drastically. So, from the above table we can notice that, apart from Arabic, none of the other Sudanese languages satisfy the condition of the 'majority language'. However, the picture remains still incomplete without due consideration of a language with heavy historical weight; that is Nobiin (a Nile Nubian language related with the ancient Nubian kingdoms). Although this language does not appear on the above list, its speakers constitute today the most enthusiastic group in the Sudan that struggles hard for its revitalization.

Border and shared languages

Sudan shares borders with up to 6 neighbouring countries, which makes it the country with the most numerous neighbours in Africa. Since political boundaries in Africa do not coincide with ethnic or linguistic boundaries, Sudan shares at least one language with each of its neighbouring countries, as follows:

Table (2): Border languages

Neighbouring Country	Languages
Egypt	(Nile) Nubian, Arabic.
Libya	Zaghawa, Arabic.
Chad	Zaghawa, Arabic, Maba, Daju, Kanuri, Massalit, Tama, Daza, and others.
South Sudan	Dinka, Kresh.
Ethiopia	Koma (Gumuz), Berta.
Eritrea	Beja, Tigre, Tigrinya and Arabic. ⁴

⁴ - K.M. Jahalla (2009) provides a detailed list of languages the united Sudan shares with each of its neighbouring country, the total of which may amount up to 50.

The shared languages are exclusively those of the major Muslim West African nations. Establishment of West African communities can be dated in terms of centuries. Since the advent of Islam in West Africa until recently West African Muslims from as far as West as Senegal and Mauretania used to cross the Sudan on their way to or back from Mecca in Arabia for pilgrimage. A number of these pilgrims, for one reason or another, settled permanently in Sudan. However, such old migrations of individuals or small groups of people had a very limited linguistic impact, because these immigrants have already been completely integrated linguistically and culturally in the Sudanese Arab communities. In fact, the enrichment of the Sudanese linguistic map by West African languages was associated with the wave of West African migrations to Sudan as a result of colonialism during the first decades of the last century. As a result of this historical event the linguistic map of the Sudan added a number of West African languages, the largest of which are listed in the table below:

Table (3): Shared languages

Language	Shared with
Fulfulde	Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, Nigeria Cameroon and Chad.
Hausa	Nigeria, Niger Republic, Ghana, Togo, etc.
Kanuri	Nigeria, Niger Republic, Chad.
Songhai	Mali, Niger Republic, Benin.

Looking into Table (1), we find that 2 of the shared languages (Fulfulde and Hausa) appear among the first 7 most widely spoken languages in the Sudan, which testifies to the relatively considerable demographic weights of their speakers (this is without counting those Fulani and Hausa who already lost the use of their ancestral languages in favour of Arabic). Although part and parcel of the Sudanese

linguistic map and their speakers being Sudanese by law, the shared languages may still face a difficult constitutional problem relating to the newly adopted (and endorsed in the Interim Constitution of 2005) language policy whose first clause reads: “*All indigenous languages of the Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted*”. The question is that: Are the shared languages to be counted with the ‘indigenous’ languages, given that, languages such as Fulfulde and Hausa are usually classified as ‘Nigerian languages’? There are people who will definitely say, ‘no!’. What then will be the reaction of their speakers?⁵ A similar question applies to some border languages whose speakers are more numerous in the neighbouring countries than in the Sudan. So, here lies the implication of border and shared languages vis-à-vis the challenges to management of linguistic diversity in the Sudan.

Language endangerment

The results of all the language surveys carried out at the Institute of African & Asian languages (Univ. of Khartoum) or elsewhere confirm the fact that the Sudanese local languages are steadily receding and retreating before the rapid spread of Arabic. This is true even of languages with historical weight such as Nobiin, whose the young generations of speakers have been found to be shifting to Arabic (Zumrawi 1983).

Recession and resistance of languages depend on a number of variables, among which are mainly the demographic size of speakers and the functions, prestige and historical weight of the language. Unfortunately, ca. 90% of the Sudanese local languages do not enjoy

⁵ - Paradoxically enough, I am a member of the Fulani community in the Sudan and the chairman of the ‘Council for the Development and Promotion of the National Languages’ appointed by the Head of the State to implement the above-mentioned new language policy. This may be the reason why this question has not yet been raised.

any of these variables. They are therefore regarded as threatened and endangered.

3- Language, identity and linguistic human rights

It is common ground that there is a link between language and identity. For May (2001:132-135), language use is central to the formation of group boundary. He further argues that the link between language and identity encompasses political and cultural dimensions. The political dimension is associated with particular ethnic and national identities, whereas the cultural dimensions contain, *inter alia*, the negotiation of one's individual identity in and through language. However, in the case of the Sudan, the problem goes beyond May's arguments, because of the involvement of 'religion' in the language problem, on the one hand, and the early (and inappropriate) intervention of the British colonial power in this problem, on the other hand, as will be shown in the next section of this paper.

Another issue related to this paper relates to linguistic human rights. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Philipson (1994:1), linguistic majorities, speakers of a dominant language, usually enjoy all those linguistic human rights which can be seen as fundamental, regardless of how they are defined. On the contrary, most linguistic minority groups in the world do not enjoy these rights. The above conclusions apply perfectly to the case of the Sudan. In order for the Sudan to attain a reasonable degree of socio-political stability, it needs – among others – to implement a language policy that should be guided by a will to respect the linguistic diversity and human rights of all people, at both the individual and the collective levels. This is because, as noted by Norton (1997:2), "where languages are imposed, communities resist and appropriate them by developing oppositional discourses and ideologies of their own". Unfortunately, the historical, socio-political, economic, ideological, ethnic and linguistic situation of the Sudan is too complex to allow for an easy implementation of such an ideal language policy.

4- Language policies in the Sudan - An overview

This section derives its relevance and importance to the present paper from my belief that the main challenges Sudanese linguists and language planners face today in managing linguistic diversity are products of the unfortunate legacy of the defective language policies designed for the Sudan since the beginning of the colonial period (ca. 1900). Therefore, discussion in this section must refer to the formerly united Sudan

Language, along with culture, was among the important issues in two civil war-ending negotiations and agreements between the central governments, on the one hand, and Southern Sudan, on the other hand. These are the Addis Ababa Agreement (1972) and Nivasha Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (2005). I will come back to the details of these agreements later on in this paper.

My thesis departs from the fact that the two other peace agreements, viz.: the Abuja Agreement between the Sudanese government and the main faction of Darfur rebels (April 2006), and the Asmara Agreement between the government and the Eastern Sudan rebels (October 2006), do NOT include any clause on language. This means that language and culture are not among the issues for which the rebels of these two regions carried arms. In other words, the local communities of these two regions can be linguistically and culturally considered as part of the larger northern part of the Sudan.⁶ As such, we can easily establish that language and culture are only issues in the conflict between Southern Sudan and the rest, or the northern part, of the Sudan. If the North stands/struggles for Arabic and the South stands/struggles for the indigenous languages, then this means by definition that the actual competition and conflict is between Arabic and the indigenous languages.

⁶ - The initial claims of these regional groups were economic and socio-political: better political representation and economic equity.

Although the issue in focus is language, yet with a deep look into this issue one discovers that there are other objectives that lie at the bottom of this issue. These objectives relate mainly to the questions of religion and national identity. In other words, the competition that appears to be between Arabic and the indigenous languages is, at the underlying level, a competition between Islam and Arab identity, on the one hand, and Christianity and African identity, on the other hand.

In the Sudan, Arabic and indigenous languages have been involved in the spread of Islam and Christianity, respectively, but in different ways. Islam and Arabic (language and culture) are inseparable entities; the presence of the one entails the spread of the other. This is because the Quran in Islam is regarded as being constituted of both 'form' and 'content'; the language of the Quran (Arabic – form) is, for the Muslims, part of its miraculous power:

“The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear” (Quran – The Bee:103)

On the other hand, since the last two centuries until today, Sudanese indigenous languages have been studied, developed and reduced to writing mostly by the Christian missionaries, whose objectives were to translate the Holy Bible into them and propagate Christianity through them. Like in many of its colonies, the British administration in the beginning of the 20th century entrusted the task of education in Southern Sudan and the southern part of the Nuba Mountains to the Christian missions. At that time these two regions were not (effectively) Islamized, although a kind of pidgin Arabic had already started to develop as a *lingua franca*.

Regarding the question of national identity, by the beginning of the 20th century the northern part of the Sudan, being mostly Arabized and Islamized, had already developed what I may call 'Sudanese Arab culture'. Under the influence of its elites centred in Khartoum and linked with Egypt, the Sudan identified itself as an Arab rather than

African nation. On the contrary, the southern part of the country (Southern Sudan, the southern part of the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile) represented/represents a different ethno-culture: non-Arab African ethnic groups, very little Arabic and Christianity and traditional African religions.

This is briefly the historical background under which the previous language policies for the Sudan were designed. The reader will notice in what follows that the previous language policies were dictated by the different constituents of the above historical background, and the main actors in these policies have not been able to harmonize these constituents for the service of the Sudanese 'nationhood'.

In my opinion, two periods corresponding to two language policies played a pivotal role in accentuating the North/South dichotomy on the issue of language and culture:

- a- The period from 1898 – 1945; the (first) colonial language policy.
- b- The period from 1945 – 1972; the colonial/national language policy.

The colonial language policy (first period) aimed at a complete barring of the Arabic language (and Arab-Islamic culture) from the South (and later on the Nuba Mountains), although at that time Arabic had already developed as sole *lingua franca* in that region (Idris 2008:50). The measures taken to achieve that aim included:

- i- The Rejaf (Language) Conference (1928), organized jointly by the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures (London), the British Government in the Sudan and the Christian Missions operating in the Sudan. Its main objective was to select and

promote group-indigenous languages (excluding Arabic) to be used by the Christian Missions as media of instruction and preaching.⁷

ii- The Law of 'No-Man's Land'; through evacuation of strips of border lands between the North and the South in order to hinder any human contact between the two regions.

iii- The 'Closed Districts Ordinance' (1929); through tight restrictions on travel from the North to the South and vice-versa. Movement of a citizen from the one region to the other required a written permission (warrant, visa?) by the government.⁸ The aim of this policy was to segregate the two peoples and allow them "to develop in consonance with their own ethnic, cultural, economic and linguistic aspirations" (Nyombe 1997:103).

iv- The Educational Policy for the Nuba Mountains Regions (1930); according to which Arabic, hitherto used as medium of instruction, was to be taught only as a subject and written in Roman script, i.e. free of Arabic and Islamic culture. In his memorandum on this policy, Gillan, the then District Commissioner of this region, write: "... I cannot believe that we ought to increase the initial strain inevitable to this process by giving him (the pupil) access to every written form of Arabic political and religious propaganda" (Hurreiz 1968:49).⁹

Through these measures, the two parts of the country were separated by what historians refer to as 'iron curtain'.

It is noteworthy that indigenous languages were opted for education and preaching in the Rejaf (Language) Conference not because the British were keen about promoting these languages, but because the Italian and German Catholic and Protestant missionaries

⁷ - For more details of the Rejaf Conference see J.D. Gabjanda & H. Bell (1979).

⁸ - For more details on these measures, see S.H. Hurreiz (1968).

⁹ - For the complete version of the above memorandum see S.H. Hurreiz (1968:45-50).

opposed any attempt of using English, which neither they nor the targeted people knew at that time. So, the above language policy closed the door firmly on Arabic, but without including any measures for developing an alternative *lingua franca* (Miller & Abu-Manga 1992:11). Therefore, Arabic continued by necessity to play that communicational role and eventually to spread further and further.

After the end of World War II the British colonial policy underwent a sharp change. Accordingly, in 1945 (second period) the colonial government in the Sudan decided to reverse its Southern Sudan language policy, thus opening the door widely for Arabic. The change was justified by the fact that Southern Sudan was “inextricably bound to the Arabized North” (Nyombe 1997:106). In this case, Arabic knowledge was necessary for the southern Sudanese, if they were to compete for employment and participation in the national affairs. The subsequent national governments after the Independence (1956) continued ‘pumping’ Arabic through teaching curricula with force and vigour equal to that which had previously barred it. The same Arabic curriculum taught in the Arabic speaking North was implemented in the South, without considering:

- i- the difference in cultural environments;
- ii- the difference in religions and systems of belief;
- iii- the fact that the southern pupils and students were, until then, pursuing their education through a different system, which necessitated a transitional period and a gradual implementation of the new educational system.

Thus, the change was too abrupt, the dosage was too big, and the measures were too coercive, severely testing the toleration of the Southerners. But above all, the Christian Missions were, by definition, against the new policy.

Thus, the wrong language policies of these two periods, both against and in favour of Arabic, combined with inappropriate means

of their implementation, were responsible for widening the North/South dichotomy regarding the issue of language.

The three subsequent language policies, including the last one (the one based on CPA 2005), were designed in and for war-ending negotiations, and were worked out exclusively by politicians without due consultation of language experts. This is why, as noted by K. Jahalla (2008), many of the essential points in these policies were but mere idealistic aspirations which did not take into account the actual socio-political and economical reality of the country.

The article on 'Language, Education and Culture' in the Addis Ababa Agreement (1972)¹⁰ states that:

- Arabic is the official language of the Sudan.
- English is the main language of the Southern Region.
- Indigenous languages can be used by the regional government in certain executive domains; this includes their promotion and use as media of instruction.

It is to note here that the point concerning the indigenous languages is confined to the Southern Sudan Region to the exclusion of the indigenous languages in the rest of the country.

Indigenous languages at the level of the country at large were given consideration for the first time in the National Dialogue Conference on Peace and Development, organized by the present regime a few months after its access to power in September 1989. That conference produced a resolution on 'Language and Education' that states that planning for a language policy and education should be based on the following considerations:

- Arabic is the mother tongue of a large Sudanese community, a means of communication (*lingua franca*) for many Sudanese

¹⁰ - Also organized under the supervision of the International Churches' Council and the late Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Silase.

communities, and the official language of the country since Independence.

- English has a special position in the Southern Regions, and it is a means of communication with the outside world.
- The government should not take scarcity of financial means as a pretext for barring any indigenous language from being used as a medium of instruction.
- The government should adopt the initiatives of ethnic groups wishing to promote their respective tribal languages and use them as media of instruction for their children.

That was the situation *on paper* regarding the rights of the indigenous languages in 1989. Let us now see what happened on the ground (i.e. in reality) from that time up to the signature of CPA in 2005 (ca. 15 years):

- i. Arabicization of higher education (implemented in all the Sudanese universities, including those of Southern Sudan, and all the faculties, including those of applied sciences).
- ii. Direct and indirect support of the Arabic language and culture.
- iii. Steady drop in standards of English language knowledge even among university graduates.
- iv. Complete lack of any attempt to promote or even to support the promotion of the indigenous languages (regarded as mere '*dialects*').

On the other side of the front, this period witnessed the most intensified language activities in the recent history of the Sudan aiming at preservation and promotion of the indigenous languages. These activities were mainly undertaken or assisted and supported by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an organization belonging to the American Protestant Church. Thus, small unofficial literacy classes were opened for the war-displaced communities from Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains in their camps in Khartoum and other towns of the North. Teachers were sent to Nairobi for

training in writing their mother tongues. SIL's publications in this area amounted to ca. 100 works in the form of books on orthography, primers, readers and teachers' guides.

During this period, language awareness also awakened among the speakers of what I call 'languages with historical weights' in the northern part of the country. Thus, 'Nobatia Society for Reviving Nubian Heritage' was established for revitalization of Nobiin, working in coordination with an already existing analogue body (The Nubian Studies and Documentation Centre) based in Cairo.¹¹ Likewise, a Fur language committee – another language with a historical weight¹² – was established in Khartoum and registered as an NGO, whose concern - *inter alia* – is the preservation and promotion of the Fur language.¹³

The language policy under implementation at present is the one agreed upon in the civil war ending CPA between the central government and the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) of the Southern Sudan, signed in Nivasha (Kenya) in January 2005, also endorsed in the Interim Constitution of 2005. The resolution on language in the agreement was in the form of the following five points:

¹¹ - The main current concern of these two bodies is writing the (Nile) Nubian language in Old Nubian script. They already produced some Nubian text books in this script.

¹² - This is the language of the defunct Fur Kingdom (1640-1916) of Darfur, the arena of the civil war, presently considered to be the most severe and ferocious in the World.

¹³ - Groups of political activists in both the Nile Nubian Land in the extreme north (bordering Egypt) and Darfur in Western Sudan are at odds with the central government on questions relating to the welfare of their regions. They are the members of these groups who are, at the same time, engaged in the above language activities. Therefore, the central authorities are somewhat suspicious about their activities. For more information see F.H. Idris (2007:57-8).

1. *All indigenous languages of the Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted.*¹⁴
2. *Arabic is a widely spoken national language in the Sudan.*
3. *Arabic, as a major language at the national level, and English shall be the official working languages of the national government and the languages of instruction for higher education.*
4. *In addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any other national language as an additional official working language at its level.*
5. *There shall be no discrimination against the use of either Arabic or English at any level of government or stage of education.*

In conjunction with the above points, it was decided that a council was to be established under the Presidency to cater for the implementation of the new language policy.

In response to what was stipulated in the CPA, and in pursuance to the provisions of Article 91 (5) (c) of the 2005 Interim Constitution of the Republic of Sudan, an act of the ‘Council for Development and Promotion of the National Languages’ was worked out, passed by the Cabinet Office and the States’ Council, and finally approved by the President of the Republic on July 27, 2008. In February 2009, a presidential decree was announced in the media declaring the birth of the above council and the appointment of its chairman¹⁵ and eight

¹⁴ - The term ‘national language’ in this resolution is expected to stand merely for “belonging to the nation” and not ‘national language’ in the proper socio-linguistic sense, which means selection of (usually) one language for expression of national feeling, pride and identity resting on shared history and culture, such as Kiswahili in Tanzania.

¹⁵ - The appointed chairman is a professor of African Languages and Linguistics; head of the Department of Sudanese and African Languages, Institute of African & Asian Studies, University of Khartoum; with scientific knowledge of 7 international and (African) regional languages.

members¹⁶ to implement the new policy. An efficient Secretary General¹⁷ was nominated by the Council and appointed by the President of the Republic and temporary – and at that moment satisfactory – premises were allocated to this council, which enabled it to embark in action. So, as can be seen, language problem in the Sudan has been taken seriously for the first time in the country's recent history, but from what preceded, we can see that the challenges are too complicated and deeply-rooted to be surmounted in decades, leave alone years.

6- Problems and challenges

The main problem of language in the Sudan is its link with the questions of religion and national identity, which engendered the deep-rooted entrenched belief among the educated groups in both the North and the South that Arabic and the indigenous languages are opponents to one another. The roots of this matter go back to the early extremist language policies adopted at the two periods mentioned earlier in this paper (1898-1945 and 1945-1972) and the inappropriate means of their implementation. The unfortunate result of these policies is the still widely-held erroneous belief among both the indigenous languages' activists and the 'Arabists' in the present Sudan that these two language parties are **MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE**.

¹⁶ - The eight members were selected meticulously with balanced regional and language representation: One from each of the Southern Sudan Greater States; one from the Nuba Mountains; one from Darfur; one from Easter Sudan; an Associate Professor of English; and an a Professor of Arabic linguistics. The latter is really a precious source-person: More than 50 years of experience in the area of language policies; a pioneer in seeking symbiotic complementary relationship between Arabic and the other Sudanese indigenous languages. By 1955 he was already working on Southern Sudanese languages in the South.

¹⁷ - An occupant of a number of high politico-administrative posts since 1990, the last of which was *Wali* (Governor) of Western Darfur

The 'Arabists' haunted by 'the theory of conspiracy' against the Arab-Islamic identity of the Sudan, thinking that this identity is targeted by the Christian-Imperial powers. To them, the end goal of the Christian-Imperial powers is to 'Africanize' Sudan on account of its Arab-Islamic identity. The promotion of the indigenous languages is seen as but one of the avenues leading to that end. There are others who argue for the curtailing of the indigenous languages from a different perspective; these are the people who believe in 'unity in homogeneity' (in opposition to 'unity in diversity'). For these people, promotion of these languages will hamper the promotion of national unity.¹⁸ However, such an argument is not unique to this group of Sudanese. Elsewhere too there are people who believe that attachment to the mother tongue (and/or ethnicity) leads to mobilization of negative nationalistic sentiments and fosters a low motivation to learn the majority language.¹⁹

For the indigenous languages' activists, on the other hand, marginalization of their languages, and eventually cultures, turn them into 'second class citizens' deprived of identity and eventually of power.

So, the greatest challenge to management of linguistic diversity in the Sudan today is rectification of the erroneous belief that the two language parties are mutually exclusive, which is not expected to happen easily and in a short time. A practical language policy for the Sudan should depart from the conviction that the two language parties can indeed co-exist and benefit from one another.

¹⁸ - Paradoxically, the people at the Arabic Academy of the Sudan were very annoyed by the establishment of the 'Council for the Development and Promotion of the National Languages'. They insisted that the Council should be under their academy.

¹⁹ - Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:137) dismisses this argument speaking in favour of 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'.

Ethnicity and religion recurs in the problem of language in the Sudan in conjunction with political, economic and socio-cultural factors. The Arab Muslim society of north-central Sudan, being the first to enjoy western modern education, dominating the economic sector and controlling the military power, have been since the independence running the country as decisive decision-makers. Through time, their culture developed and became prestigious, thus, imposing itself as the mainstream of the Sudanese culture. So, as we can imagine, without bringing an end to the 'undeclared war' between Arabic and the indigenous languages, no effective implementation of a just language policy can be attained, however coherent and nicely written.

The multiplicity of the Sudanese languages, their irregular geographical distribution, the border and shared languages, etc. constitute another area of challenge for a country like the Sudan, suffering of a high rate of illiteracy, tribal conflicts, political unrest and, above all, poverty. For many Sudanese, 'language promotion' or 'language human rights' stands for the use of the indigenous languages in education or at least teaching them in their respective home-regions. In this regard, I always call for the distinction between the 'ideal' and the 'practical'. It is true that UNESCO recommends the primary education to be through mother tongues. I wonder how this recommendation can cope with the fact that, in a town like Dilleng in the Nuba Mountains (with 200000-250000 inhabitants), where up to 42 languages were recorded by K.M. Jahalla (2006). As residential quarters are not language-based, more than 10 mother tongues may be spoken by pupils in one and the same class. This is without mentioning the problems of teaching material and teachers training.²⁰ Some parents may also be worried about the ability of their

²⁰ - In many regions, the educational authorities are struggling for seating the pupils and meeting the teachers' salaries, which some of them may not receive for more than three months.

children to compete at the further levels, where education will mostly be in Arabic.

7- Conclusion

I have tried in what preceded to shed light on the complicated nature of the linguistic situation in the Sudan. Readers should not understand from my analysis of the linguistic diversity in the Sudan that this diversity is impossible to manage. The long term solution of this problem goes hand in hand with settling of true democracy, equality and justice.

For the moment, the ‘magic key’ to management of linguistic diversity in the Sudan is getting rid of the unfortunate legacy of the past in respect of the Arabic/indigenous languages dichotomy. Our newly established ‘Council for the Development and Promotion of the National Languages’ must concentrate its effort on this matter. Meanwhile, the indigenous languages have to be given their due rights to express themselves in whatever appropriate form possible. Languages with reasonable regional weights should be accorded an official status of Regional Languages with defined functions (e.g. effective use in regional mass media for health education, mobilization, announcements, in addition to cultural and recreational programmes). This is already a step in the process of the management of linguistic diversity. However, the state must have one language that serves the purpose of ‘nationhood’ building, a language that symbolizes its national unity. Arabic, being known by ca. 90% of the population, is, practically, the only language that can play this role.

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