

One-On-One Riddling Approaches to Local Languages and Literature Revitalization in Uganda. June 2018

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Abstract

The gains and challenges in fulfilling the Asmara 2000 declarations on African Languages and Literatures have shown that individuals are the key to sustainable revitalization. Using riddling approaches, the author has brought Lusoga from the doldrums of an endangered language to the realms of vitality in Uganda. Riddling constructs words, acts and thoughts of individuals into collective knowledge for the general good of society. By sidelining policies that put national budgets above the interests of people, the high costs anticipated in undertaking any substantial language development program have been superseded. Through individual efforts, over 100,000 artifacts have been documented in the past 15 years, making Lusoga Language and Literature readable, researchable and examinable in Schools. Proving that, regimes needed more individuals than money to promote mother tongues; and the removal of national and official language policies that hinder the use and development of local languages.

Key words: Riddling, Revitalization, Language Policy

Background

This paper highlights efforts made by the author in contributing towards local language and literature revitalization in Uganda since the Asmara 2000 “Against All Odds” Conference; and discusses the impact that riddling approaches have had on Mother Tongue Education (MTE) in Busoga schools and community. It also deliberates on the challenges and prospects for the future. It problematizes the known fact that people’s worldviews are best expressed in their mother tongues and that when developed languages are favoured as national and official languages ignoring the majority of the people using the under developed local languages in their everyday lives are alienated.

The author’s gains and challenges in fulfilling the Asmara 2000 declarations on African Languages and Literatures have shown that individuals are the master key to sustainable language development. It is evident that people’s attitude for local languages and literatures (L1) is still very low in Uganda. The majority of the people are striving to learn foreign languages at the expense of local languages. Parents and schools still enforce the English as the official language oblivious of the revised laws regarding local languages as languages of instruction. Mother Tongue Education (MTE) teachers have not been well oriented to teach using L1 in the face of a multilingual community demands, therefore, many who shift to urban areas have resorted to English and lost on mother tongue.

Urban-rural migrations have made the rural members to get desperate with the thought that those learning in English perform best and have better opportunities thus looking at the rural pupils as disadvantaged when it comes to national examinations and job opportunities. Whereas this has not been proven yet, it is evident that the worst performing candidates in public examinations are

highly concentrated in public schools in the rural areas; and many parents have blamed the L1 factor while the government has pointed at laxity and failure to implement government policy on the part of the parents, schools and local authorities. “From this point of view, the participants did appreciate that the government had sanctioned the teaching of their language.” (Juliet Tembe and Bonny Norton 2011:15)

There are a handful of teachers in Uganda that sincerely believe that the L1 policy in the thematic curriculum could salvage the communities by training pupils who will return to serve their communities when they graduate. They site themselves as true examples of those who learnt in their mother tongues and returned to serve their communities while those who went away to first world schools did not return at all. After learning Luganda and English, it is claimed that “they went on to work for the White man and the Central Government and were returned in the coffin for their burial,” as echoed during a riddling event in Kidiki village in Kamuli district in 2007.

A retired teacher also commented that, “it is those of us who were taught in Lusoga who sympathized and returned in Busoga to serve here. All our other friends went away to serve elsewhere and even married from wherever they went.” These two related scenarios show that individuals have a great role to play in language development. Any efforts that encourage or discourage individual contributions to MTE therefore work against the very principal of self-determination and personal growth.

Studies by Altinyelken and Hulya Kosar (2010:160):

Suggest that although teachers were in general enthusiastic about the new curriculum and appreciated the improvements they have noticed in their students, they were also rather critical of a variety of issues over the curriculum and the

implementation process. These issues range from heavy load of the curriculum to lack of teaching and learning materials, from large classes to inadequate teacher training. Yet, most of the criticisms were concerned with the implementation process, suggesting that the introduction of the thematic curriculum is accompanied with similar problems as the introduction of the 2000 Curriculum. Despite the limitations imposed by structural problems and the way the curriculum was implemented, teachers stated that they did their best in trying to implement the new curriculum as effectively as possible since they believed it contributed to the improvements in their students' achievement levels, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

This means that

Why riddling?

The method of implementing an otherwise good program is the cause for so much disparity and failure. By means of the one-on-one riddling approaches, which capitalize on the strengths of individuals in a particular area of competence, to create knowledge for change, the author has brought Lusoga from the level of an endangered language to a vital linguistic tool in Uganda. This has been made possible by first sidelining those policies that put national budgets above the interests of individuals and language communities. The idea was to put more volunteers in the business of knowledge creation through methods for re-centering the role of individuals in language and community development. Bringing together individuals for the purpose of creating knowledge through riddling is quite rewarding. "Riddling is intended to challenge and critique, entertain and inform, colour and beautify communication with those for whom it is intended, without physically excluding those who are not the intended primary audience." (Gulere 2016:205)

Since 2000, the author has engaged in riddling with individuals and communities on a one-to-one basis, challenging one another to make humble contributions to their language by speaking,

reading and writing something of value in their mother tongues “Although riddling is widely believed to be a game for children, it is mostly performed by those who have the most social experience and mastery of observation. Naturally, these include the parents and older persons performing in community with the children.” (Gulere 2016:6) Therefore, the high costs anticipated in undertaking any substantial language development program are waived by individuals who volunteer to create knowledge through riddle discourse.

The concept of riddling was used to create critical masses of language users, writers, readers, learners and teachers in the process of revitalizing local languages and literatures in Uganda. The languages were selected basing on the enthusiasm of at least one individual native speaker, to write and translate without pay, any simple text of their choice. Whoever came up with a text in his or her mother tongue was then asked to translate that text into either English or another local language of their choice. They were also asked to freely share their materials with members from their language community and the public at large. Importantly, the riddle sessions brought out information on subjects that were critical to national development especially in the areas of health and security.

Riddling is often used to circumvent taboo topics like sex and sexuality, sensitive political issues, addressing superiors, talking between elders in the presence of children, outsiders, unwanted or unexpected guests; during recreation, play, rituals, ceremonies and initiation activities. (Gulere 2016:204)

Since “riddling empowers the performer to decide the destiny of the performance according to individual wits” (Ibid 204), the author involved at least 200 individuals in implementing the Asmara 2000 declaration under the Local Language Education and Development (LLEAD) project 2001-2004. In this period, they were able to among other works translate and peer review the Uganda National Anthem in about 25% of the Ugandan languages and dialects namely,

Lugbara, Lusoga, Lulamogi and Litenga, Rukhonzu, Luganda, Ateso, Agakaramojong, Kupsabiny, Lumasaba, Runyoro, Rutooro, Runyankore, Rukiga, Kiswahili, Acholi, Lango, Kumam, Lugwere, Lunyole, Lubwisi, Rufumbira, Alur, Lululi, Kinyarwanda, Gujarati.

Also, 50 poems were written down in most of these languages and translated into English too. Many of these individuals and materials have formed the core teams that have been working with the Ministry of Education, National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) and Research Triangle International (RTI) projects on local languages in Uganda.

The idea of individuals co-opting other individuals to bring a work to completion is an important method of work that we learn from riddling as it leads to collective leadership (Kuenkel 2016) and consensus building. At the end of the LLEAD project, there were nearly 1,000 contributors from various languages including translations into Chinese and Afrikaans. As we embark on another phase of the Post-Nairobi declaration, it is hoped that the products will grow in quality and quantity as these are critical in the acceptability of MTE in the schools.

In the communities sampled to evaluate the impact of the work, we learnt that most of them were happy with the initiatives because it helped them to understand the message of the Uganda national anthem, Youth anthem, Women's anthem and African Union anthem. This also because they participated in the process of translation, peer review, notation, discussion and singing in the local language. It served to confirm that many political statements made in English as the official language in Uganda were not effective because of the language barrier.

Through riddling, words, acts and thoughts of individuals are constructed into collective knowledge for public consumption. The one-on-one encounters during riddling encourage

individuals to take the responsibility of competitively contributing to the common pool of knowledge. Although the group may be physically big and socially located, and the participation collective, the product of the performance is first and foremost, an attribute of the actors who have developed the habit of observing, re-organizing and sharing their facts in public.

Riddling allows reasonable interaction between the participants who are also active audiences. That is why there is continuous switch of roles between the riddle performers as happens in social discourse. The dialogic style of riddling has deep social influence on the life of the people involved, especially the proficient performers who are usually acclaimed and held in high esteem and rewarded with leadership roles hypothetically and in real life. (Gulere 2016:5)

For that matter, governments that claim that, it is too expensive to undertake any substantial language development and that the use of the numerous local languages is too expensive choose the cheapest route to underdevelopment. By choosing developed languages like English, Kiswahili, Arabic and French as national and official languages, the majority of Africans whose worldview are best understood and shared through their mother tongues are carelessly alienated.

Lusoga Language Revitalisation

Language revitalization is a soul searching activity that needs individuals who have the energy and enthusiasm to produce invaluable results. In the absence of a framework for mobilizing financial resources to promote MTE in Uganda, the gap can be bridged by the wealth of the human resource that believes in the Kisoga wisdom that: *aagya t'ayagha asinga*, '*Ndilyagaana eyo*' – the one who goes while harvesting is better than one who says, 'I will find it over there.' It is important to note that language acquisition and growth is cumulative and collective, and not procrastination.

Another source of inspiration was the riddle precedent that, “*Toola pinini ote ku pinini ofune pinini* – take *pinini* and put on *pinini* to get *pinini*” commonly enjoyed and shared by children in my village that underscores the meaning that you have to get something small to add it onto another small thing in order to get a small product. In effect, nothing will come out of nothing (Shakespeare) and so any individual contribution to the buildup of literature in the local languages is the most welcome.

Before 2000, there was hardly anything in Lusoga language to talk about apart from one defunct *Kodh’eyo* Lusoga newspaper (1996-1998) and less than five books including Yekonia Lubogo (1960) *History of Busoga*, Lyavaala Lwanga (1969a) *Kiyini Kibi*, and (1969b) *Ndi Mugezi* and they were long out of print. The persistent argument was that using mother tongue as language of instruction was a given that should not be used to compromise the quality of education by simplifying concepts to match the level of language complexity and development. Instructional materials at international standards had to be developed and made accessible to the learners in schools and community libraries. This is how the writing of the bi-lingual dictionaries (NCDC, 2007) and later the revision of orthographies (NCDC, GoU, RTI, 2010, 2016) came about.

Now, there is one monolingual Lusoga dictionary (Nabirye 2009) and two bi-lingual Lusoga – English dictionaries (Gulere 2008 and Kayaga 2009) three novels *Agakuba Omughafu* (....) (Troubles of the Poor People), (Gulere (2013), *Bya Kufa Kuleka*, which is an anthology of 111 short stories by Gulere (2013). He has also compiled two poetry anthologies entitled, *Maliriza Enhumba Eyo* (Complete that House) and *Empambo* (Pumpkin seeds), as well as adaptations of five plays: *Nantameigwa* (Antigone), *Omugole* (The Bride), *Ebikemo by’owoluganda Yero* (The Trials of Brother Jero), *Ekitalo kya Kyabazinga Mukama* (The Tragedy of King Lear), and

Enkwe mu Kibuga (Betrayal in the City), one newspaper *Agaf'eyo* (2016) and thousands of children's and beginners' instructional materials online and in print.

Emphasis on translations and adaptations

In riddling, young performers learn from older ones in order to acquire similar styles and eloquence and that is why we have opted for translation and adaptation as the gateway to independent writing in Lusoga and the other languages. During the Asmara 2000 great gathering at Segneti, under the sycamore tree, individual voices were the basis for the representation of the many mother tongues on the continent. Presenting the Lusoga anthem of my people of Busoga in a foreign country and among people who didn't even understand a word of what I was singing encouraged me to translate the anthem *Tuli ba Nkabi Inho* into the English version, "We are indeed blessed" which I have since shared publicly. I also translated the Uganda National Anthem into Lusoga and had both anthems performed on October 8, 2000, by Mpolyabigere Performing Group during the occasion of my Master's degree celebrations at Nsinze in Namutumba district in eastern Uganda.

The audience publicly noted that the national anthem in Lusoga had spoken to them more relevantly than it had ever done before in English. Since then, I began to convince other people to translate the national anthem into their mother tongues. The result of this effort was the online compilation of "The Uganda National Anthem in 25 Languages" that has been running since 2003.

These efforts have resulted into over 100,000 artifacts in the form of words, books and articles in various languages including the Asmara 2000 Declaration in Lusoga, Ateso, Aga Karimojong,

Rukhonzu and Luganda. Most of these activities were coordinated through the Association of Lusoga Language Educationalists, Researchers and Translators (ALLERT) that was later transformed into the Association of Local Language Educationalists, Researchers and Translators both of which were founded to involve more like minded individuals in revitalizing our mother tongues.

Feed Back to Communities

Co-creating and giving back to the community that gave in the first place is the core principle that riddling employs to keep language and the culture of riddling vibrant. The active use of local languages as official means of communication is more important and cost effective than the expenditures on health and security combined because language learning through riddling approaches promotes self-consciousness, consensus building and collective responsibility.

MTE is therefore the key to opening up the human potentials for development and social cohesion “In riddling, creativity, puzzlement, challenge, competition, and pomp are systematically exercised. The performance thrives through keenness of observation, appropriation of the social and physical ecologies and spaces of the performing community and it may index tradition and global changes in the society. (Gulere 2016:5) These qualities in riddling are used in bringing like minds together to promote their own languages.

Efforts were put in the founding and strengthening of groups and association, partly to implement the Asmara 2000 declaration, and to influence the people’s attitude towards their local languages. The Jinja Culture Research center (1997), Association of Lusoga Language Educationalists, Researchers, and Translators (2002), Association of Local Language

Educationalists, Researchers, and Translators in Uganda (2007), Lusoga Language Academic Board (2010), and Regional Lusoga Language Board (2013) are some of the groups through which individuals have voiced their contributions.

Although these groups may not have many people registered as members, their role as flag posts has been commendable in stimulating local language literacies. Many people have reported a positive change in attitude towards Lusoga Language through their contact with and access to the products of these associations. However, the insistence on English as official language has incapacitated the self-esteem and buildup of confidence in local languages among the community leaders and teachers of MTE.

A case in point is the failure of Local Council meetings to transact business democratically because of language impediments. During the last term of office, Iganga District Local Government passed as law the use of Lusoga in Council debating. This decision was highly criticized by many people as backward but the few people who stood in support of the council decision enabled Iganga district to involve more councilors in the debates.

On a positive note, Mukono district Local Council has this year intimated that they will use Luganda during their debates, a move that has been supported by Buganda Kingdom Government. There is a public call for the National Constitution and laws to be translated into local languages to also enable the legislators and the public come to grips with the issues being legislated.

Riddling in Lusoga is a profound intellectual exchange intended to educate, entertain, socialize, mentor, and empower the audience-participants. A complete Lusoga riddle act happens in seven moves, namely: (I) antecedent, (II) precedent, (III) unraveling, (IV) crowning, (V) declamation, (VI) affirmation and (VII)

agreement. The highest level of creativity is at the declamation stage where the riddle performer exercises utmost mastery of language and culture to link up the riddle images with the contemporary context of the session and event. (Gulere 2016: 108)

As agreed in Asmara 2000, we continue to lobby key government players, local school authorities and University Councils to give local languages a chance. For example, Professor Manuel Muranga and I have addressed Schools, Universities and Local Government Authorities on the value of multilingualism. Such papers were delivered at Makerere University in Kampala (2001), Kyambogo University in Kampala (2002), Busoga University in Iganga (2008), National Teachers' College in Kaliro (2014) and Mountain of the Moon University in Fort Portal (2015).

The riddle yet to be resolved is that; who will revitalize the local languages –yours and mine – if it is not you and I? How will our languages survive without us if we live without them? What will happen if your language and mine are not published and who will publish it if it is not you? The answers have partially been found in the community libraries, culture research centers and local publishing houses whose intention is to promote the indigenous languages at functional levels.

Also, through the organizing meetings, conferences, voluntary classes, that use local indigenous languages, language growth was strengthened. In particular, our involvement with US Peace Corps language orientation programs and HIV/AIDS Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) in hard to reach areas in Namutumba district (2008 – 2012) encouraged voluntary translation and publishing of key documents into Lusoga. The events were opportunities to pre-test several language theories and practices on matters that were found to be of interest in the field.

Similarly, external researchers were invited to carry out strategic studies in Busoga and other areas have led to the translation of several documents into Ugandan languages in key areas of education, public health, justice, HIV/AIDS, telephony and radio broadcasting as prioritized by their research teams and based on our community agenda.

Successes and Prospects

Now, over 100,000 artifacts have been documented, making Lusoga Language and Literature readable, researchable and examinable in Schools. Implying that, regimes needed more individuals than money to promote mother tongues; and removal of national and official language policies that hinder language use. The author notes at the end of the first ever Lusoga bibliography listing thus

The “Lusoga 2013 challenge” was to develop 1,000+ bibliographic entries and to make all these materials available in print (book and DVD) before 2015 as part of our contribution to the Millennium Development Goal towards universal access to knowledge and education. We believe that the development of the Greater Nile Valley will largely depends on how best we collectively harness the languages and cultures of the peoples who are the custodians of the Nile basin. We therefore invite you to write research and develop materials related to this important theme. (Gulere 2013: 82)

Individual efforts have consolidated into language policies as the riddle of language development continues to be unraveled step by step calling upon each one of us to contribute their best answer to the common pool of knowledge instead of waiting for government budgets and donor funds that are not forthcoming. Since individuals have the stamina for language use, documentation, education and advocacy, they too are the pathways for national language growth and development programs.

Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) supported the printing of 100 copies of each of the 40 titles used during the piloting and implementing of the Lusoga Language and Literature syllabus in ten Secondary Schools (2010 – 2012). Fountain publishers also sponsored the author in compiling the *Eibwanio: Lusoga-English Dictionary* (2009), while Menya Publishers published *Eigwanika ly'olusoga* (2008), and MK published the *English-Lusoga dictionary* (2009) while the rest of the books were mostly self-published in print and online.

Apart from self-publishing, there are few publishing houses in Uganda that publish materials in local indigenous languages outside government bidding. We have therefore resorted to online publishing although we know that our main targeted audience has limited access to the internet. The most common platforms we use include emails, blogs, Wordpress, Googlebooks, Wiki, and Academia; that offer free space and free sharing.

Uganda Community libraries Association (UgCLA) has also contributed to the growth of the Lusoga language. Through UgCLA collaboration with the African Storybook Project (ASb) sponsored by South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) over 40 stories were developed in Lusoga and at least ten are already approved and available on the ASb online library.

ASb complements my own Academia blog¹ that has at least 200 items running. The materials are mostly primers written in Lusoga and other Ugandan languages including English. I have uploaded research papers, legal documents in translation and several other resources requested by my readers. A draft bibliography of Lusoga songs, books and research papers with 1,088

¹ <http://mak.academia.edu/CorneliusGulere/Posts>

entries has been running since December 2013 and has been viewed over 104 times. There were 2,779 profile views, 19,154 document views, 262 followers between 2011 and 2014, thus proving that, the interest in minority languages is not unfounded.

Challenges

In spite of these innovative interventions, public and private discussions including the writing of minutes during meetings, family conversations and personal diary records are endemically in foreign languages.

The National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) started the implementation of the expanded Local Languages and Literature curriculum in 2007 and only Lugbara and Acholi were able to examine their candidates in 2010. Lusoga came on board in 2011 with over 100 candidates and to date, at least 10 Ugandan languages have been introduced on the national curriculum as examinable subjects. Although, the Ministry of Education has not recruited any teachers to handle these languages, the principle of riddling continues to work and the numbers of teachers and candidates enrolling for the various languages continue to grow.

Lessons Learned

We have learned that not many people will pay for the books whether in soft or hard copies so we have desisted from curtailing the interest of many language enthusiasts and sympathizers who may be interested in our work but have no money to pay for it. This is in my view one of the reasons why the e-[EiwanikalyoLusoga](#) sold only two copies 15 months after its launch (Nabirye and Schryver 2013) adding that:

In spite of all the marketing efforts — which, lest it be forgotten, come on top of nearly a decade of detailed research, painstaking dictionary compilation and inventive fund-raising running into the tens of thousands of Euros —, during the first fifteen months of e-Eiwanika ly'Olusoga being available, exactly two copies of the downloadable version were sold: one to a private user in Uganda, and one to a library in the US.

Strategies for the future

The strategy for the future is to encourage everyone to habitually speak, read and write a simple word and sentence in their mother tongue. We also encourage everyone to share their words and sentences in public discourse online through whatsapp, youtube, email, sms and blogging.

When tourists, readers and researchers come to our communities, they should find us in active discourse with each other on some of the subjects that we have written about in order for them to build meaningful rapport with us. This should encourage the world community to engage with us in equitable ways that will create new knowledge for the common good.

Cheap internet sources and more targeted individuals are critical in the revival of our languages and their gaining of prominence online through content creation and engineering of the content. Although the users may mostly be urban based, there is hope that rural audiences would soon grow as cheap and quick internet coverage becomes available.

Inter-linguistic interlocution will also be increased through intra-linguistic translations and the writing of multilingual book primers cutting across the regions of Uganda to be prioritized for the beginning and the East African Community as possible means to encouraging the formation of nationally, regionally and internationally acceptable dialects.

Conferences on languages should also be organized regularly and each University as center of learning and knowledge creation should take up the challenge to empower their students in areas related to Local Language Education and Development.

Conclusion

Many Lusoga riddles precedents begin with the statement: “*Ndini...* -- I have...” which suggests that riddling is a personalized activity, therefore the task of revitalizing our languages, is also a personal affair; not to be left to impersonal institutions. Governments that are pre-occupied with short term economic returns cannot focus enough on life time investments like language form and style that riddling promotes.

Since the one-on-one riddling has mostly depended on personal contacts and the use the internet, many local communities have not been reached effectively through the internet. The idea to have the natives actively involved in the language discourse with each other and the rest of the world joining as participants and not language monitors is yet to be realized. A fairest bargain for the future of our languages was to post words and materials online even in their raw forms while at the same time keeping the local debates active. In this way, interested researchers would find the materials and debates provocative, relevant and purposeful.

On the other hand, there is great hope that the increase in the number of local private actors and government interest in language events like the International Mother Tongue Day on February 21 and International Literacy Day in September 8 will soon lead to better language policies and inevitable government funding of the language programs in Uganda.

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