

## Cross Border Movement and Language Barriers in West Africa

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**Abstract:** This study examines cross border movement and language barriers in West Africa. The Economic Community of West African States Protocols on Free Movement of Persons, Rights of Residence and Establishment established in 1979 made the movement of persons possible with little or no impediments within the West African Sub-region, with the vision of a fully integrated sub-region in years to come. In spite of the high rate of migration which characterizes the sub-region, language barriers which impede the cross border movements of persons have not been given much attention in West African migration studies. The study therefore seeks to examine language barriers in West Africa and how they manifest in the movement of persons within the sub-region. The study adopts a descriptive approach, examining the manifestations of language barriers in the intra-regional migration dynamics of West Africa. The study finds that the existence of a linguistic gap is a fact in West Africa, however, the development of multilingualism and cross-border languages have been instrumental to abating the language barriers in the Sub-region.

**Keywords:** Migration; Colonialism; Development; Globalization

### 1. Introduction

Migration which refers to the movement of a person or group of people from one geographic location to another, either within or across an administrative or political boundary has increasingly become one of the fundamental characteristics of the current international order (Chang, 2010). Migration, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, is as old as human existence and has constantly characterized

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human history as it is believed that humans migrated extensively both voluntarily and involuntarily (Oteng-Ababio et al, 2018).

These extensive movements of persons or human populations have been part of human history since time immemorial and individuals or groups have migrated from one place to another in the quest to adapt to their social, political, economic, ecological and cultural environments per time. In the most primitive historical records of man, he used to migrate frequently from one place to another in search of food, water, shelter, livelihood and security (Fayomi, 2013). Society however evolved overtime and developed from the primitive lifestyles to more stable and stationary ones. In most recent times, there has been an increase in the rate of migration from rural to urban areas and from developing to more developed regions, thereby making internal and international migration very relevant and important areas of research and development in the Twenty First Century (Longchar and Lumami, 2014).

Within the West African sub-region, movements of persons have occurred within geographical boundaries and from one country to another. It is neither a new trend nor phenomenon as there have been bulk movements of people right from ancient times which were caused by certain happenings or events at the time. As a matter of fact, migration predates the colonial period in West Africa (Fadayomi, Fayomi and Adejumo, 2014). Historical facts reveal that people have always moved as individuals and as groups from one location to another for various reasons ranging from escaping war and repression, freedom from hunger and poverty, freedom from religious and political issues, search for new socio-economic opportunities and even at some point as human trafficking/ slavery or as a form of ethnic cleansing. For whatever reason and in which ever circumstance migration has occurred, it has resulted in demographic changes and historical linkages between societies. Scholars are of the opinion that migration in recent years has increased notably (Myers, 2001; Martin, 2003; Munz, 2013; Chiswick, 2015), and over the years, the subject of migration has compelled global attention, especially as it has to do with security and development.

Research and studies have revealed that West Africa is one of the sub-regions in Africa with the highest rates of back and forth migration and as a result of the dynamics and scale of migration within the sub-region, studies on migration West Africa have largely focused on issues of development and security, however, there

is need to also look at the issue of language. This study therefore seeks to examine the dynamics of migration in West Africa and the manifestations of language barriers to movement of persons. This paper therefore contains the following sections: Introduction, Literature Review; Migration in West Africa; Cross Border Languages in West Africa; and Language Barriers in West Africa.

## **2. Literature Review**

As a result of the colonization of African countries by European colonial countries, foreign languages were introduced to Africa. During this time, the European countries took control of territories in Africa which they claimed for themselves. Some regions had more than one European country that claimed them at various points in history. The interaction of colonial languages and African speakers created new African uses of the colonial European languages. As a result, the colonial languages became official language(s) in most African countries. While this remained the case in the years which followed, some Africans however spoke indigenous African languages as a first language and colonial languages as a second or third language. (Yaro, 2008; Amanor, 2011).

After gaining independence, many African countries, in the search for national unity, selected one language, generally the former colonial language, to be used in government and education. Often schools were instructed, and official government business conducted using European languages. Colonization according to L'eglise and Migge (2007) played an instrumental role in the development and use of language in the African continent because a form of prestige was assigned to European cultures and languages such that even when African countries gained political and administrative independence from the colonial powers, the cultural and linguistic decolonization of European and non-European cultures is one which has been still difficult to attain, with several scholarly discourse revolving around the linguistic and social inequalities which ensued as a result of European imperialist expansion. To Lodhi (1993), for economic and/or political reasons, West African countries have chosen colonial languages as their official languages, while considering one or more indigenous languages as national languages. He describes this as linguistic imperialism and continued dependence on colonial languages. The colonizers were considered as being in possession of history, culture and intelligence while the colonized were considered as lacking these essential characteristics; indigenous languages were seen as inferior and uncultured

while foreign (European) languages were considered superior. However, in recent years, African countries have become increasingly supportive of maintaining linguistic diversity and the language policies which are being developed in recent times are mostly aimed at multilingualism (Ikwuyatum, 2016).

There also exists a group of languages known as cross-border languages. These are languages which are divided among various communities/ethnic groups often across geographical boundaries. These cross-border languages characterize several languages of Africa in general and West Africa in particular with implications for possible divergence of the language bracket in two or more countries, especially in a situation where the official languages are different. Overtime, there have been alterations and modifications of these cross-border languages. Some cross-border languages include Somali (widely spoken in the horn of Africa), Hausa (spoken in Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Togo, Ghana), Yoruba (spoken in Nigeria, Togo, Benin), Fula (in the Sahel and West Africa), Swahili (spoken in the African great lakes region), Luo (spoken in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and South Sudan) (Arthur, 1991; Adepoju, 2008).

Another factor that has arisen as a result of the influence of colonialism and colonial languages is the demise of several languages, also known as language death, which was either as a result of the total physical elimination of the group of people speaking same language or as a result of a switch from one language to another by indigenous persons. In the view of Amali (2016), throughout the long multilingual history of the African continent, African languages have been subject to phenomena like language contact, language expansion, language shift and language death. A case in point is the Bantu expansion, in which Bantu-speaking peoples expanded over most of Sub-Equatorial Africa, displacing Khoi-San speaking peoples from much of Southeast Africa and Southern Africa and other peoples from Central Africa. Another example is the Arab expansion in the Seventh Century, which led to the extension of Arabic from its homeland in Asia, into much of North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Cultural and linguistic innovations spread along trade routes and languages of peoples dominant in trade developed into languages of wider communication (Nkonko, 1997; Nwanosike and Onyije, 2011; Wang, 2016; Chung-Fat-Yim, Himel, and Bialystok, 2018).

European colonization of the African continent also changed the contours of movement in West Africa along purely commoditized norms. These were

entrenched after independence as African economies had not broken the shackles of colonization but continued to feed the metropolitan cores in Europe and America through the international commodity markets. Internationalization crystallized into globalization with widespread implications for commodity, capital and people movements and the motives, drivers and conditions under which migration occurred in these periods differed significantly (Thacker, 2008; Woodley, 2015).

Colonial powers actively impacted on the linguistic composition of several countries and after independence, most were able to shed several colonial inheritances but language was not a very easy one. The countries of West Africa today fall into at least one of three colonial legacies of an imposed language – English, French or Portuguese. In West Africa, the colonial powers Britain, France and Portugal encouraged the use and integration of their language into the cultural fabric of their colonies (Yaro, 2008). While the French and Portuguese were more forceful and intense in instilling their languages (as part of their cultures) in colonies, Britain was less forceful and also encouraged the use and development of the peoples' indigenous languages. The two different approaches to languages by the colonial powers as stated by (Stuchtey, 2010) were rooted in Eurocentric and racist ideals, with the former reflecting the French and Portuguese feeling of societal and linguistic superiority over its colonies and the latter being a product of the feeling of superiority of the British and their desire to maintain a distinction between Africa and Europe.

Francophone West Africa, as a result of the commitment of colonial France to impose its language on its colonies, experienced the most intense influence of the colonial language. France emphasized the importance of the knowledge and use of the French language, history and culture to all of its colonial territories. France deemed these cultural and linguistic impositions as necessary for the civilization of its colonies as well as their integration into the French empire. Portugal also adopted a system which sought to replace indigenous languages with Portuguese and did so also within administrative and intellectual spheres but was not as strict or with its policies as the French were because they did not harbour the same feeling or superiority and linguistic/cultural pride as the French did. In British colonial territories also, the English language spread widely also but this was not the result of an imposition of the language, rather, while the use of the English language spread remarkably, the use of indigenous languages was also encouraged. Asante (2007) is of the view that the British policy of encouraging the extensive use and development of indigenous languages consequently promoted positive

feelings towards the colonial language. In West Africa (today), nine countries including Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo are Francophone, five including the Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone are Anglophone while two including Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau are Lusophone. Amedegnato (2013) points out however that although these colonial languages are the official language of their respective countries, they are not spoken by the largest number of people.

### **3. Migration in West Africa**

Migration is one of the most important phenomena in Africa today. Internal and international migrations have been integral aspects of the evolution and development of African societies; having taken different forms and cut across various societies, existing in a wide range of demographic and geographic contexts. Falhaux and de Haas (2016) posit that while Africa accounts for high rates of international migration to regions such as North America, Europe and Asia, the bulk of African migration has occurred within the continent. The intra-regional flow within the continent usually targets countries such as South Africa, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia. Migration in the region, as pointed out by Awumbila (2017) has a crucial cross border component which is largely reflective of the arbitrary nature of the boundaries which were carved out by colonial masters and inherited by contemporary African societies.

The political and historical evolution of African societies provides a better understanding of the movement of persons within and across national boundaries. When considered within the context of the pre-colonial era, it is seen that the movement of persons in Africa was often unstructured and came about largely as a result of ecological and socio-political factors such as natural disasters, internecine warfare and search for farmland (Massey, 2003). The colonial period however, significantly altered the migration patterns in Africa such that the motivation and composition of migration went beyond the search for settlement, security and farmland to forced displacement of persons as a result of slave trade. Isyaku (2017) captures that during colonialism, there were political and economic structures imposed such as territorial boundaries and tax regimes. There was large scale labour migration to mines and plantations which resulted in the rise of clandestine internal and cross-border movement of persons. Similarly, the development of

transportation networks and infrastructure such as roads and railways as well as the development of major cities increased the rates of internal and international migration which was mainly characterized as seasonal, male-dominated and across borders (Awumbila, 2017). The factors responsible for migration in West Africa include:

### **Socio-political Factors**

Social conditions which act as push factors of migration include religious, ethnic, racial and cultural persecution (Lidak, 2014). The threat of conflict or war or an actual war/conflict situation is also another factor. In countries of West Africa, the politicization of ethnic and religious identities breeds conflict and has the tendency to culminate into political unrest. Studies reveal also that in the decades following independence, states which were undergoing political transition from authoritarian forms of government and dictatorships to democratic governments were more susceptible to internal conflict and political instability. Another argument is that the potential of conflict in more socially diverse and heterogeneous societies is higher than that of homogenous and inclusive societies, thus a leading cause of migration (Fish and Kroenig, 2006).

### **Economic Factors**

This has to do with the state of the economy of the country of origin as well as the country of destination. Sampath (2015) opines that persons tend to migrate from their countries in situations where economic conditions are not favourable and risk further decline, to a location with a better economy or economic opportunities. Economic factors account for many international migrations because migrants escape their countries to places with higher economic prospects; leading to West Africans migrating to more developed countries. This has historically been the main form of migration amongst African migrants to destinations such as North America and Europe, also known as South-North migration (de Haas, 2007). Globalization, which manifests as market liberalization, technological advancement, improvement and development of communication and transport have also increased the rate of internal and international migration (Czaika and de Haas, 2014).

### **Ecological Factors**

When persons are seriously affected or displaced by ecological or environmental conditions in their home country, there is a tendency that they will move in search

of more favourable conditions. Some causative factors include natural and environmental disasters, climate change, outbreak and spread of deadly diseases and epidemics, contamination of food, water and air may cause persons to flee their country of origin in search of more favourable ecological conditions (Piesse, 2014). Scholars are of the opinion that of all the factors causing migration of persons, the ecological are the most serious, having the capacity to become more apparent in years to come and potentially intensify the impacts of other political, social and economic push factors (Lenz, 1995).

To Yaro (2008), several tribes of the sub-region were recorded to have moved southwards to present locations in search of safe havens and better ecological conditions. Most of these early group movements involved larger tribes who sometimes used force in settlement. With an apparent partitioning of the West African landscape by the various tribes be they centralized or acephalous, the need to exchange products of the different ecological areas led to trade in commodities which crystallized into the famous trans-Saharan trade routes. Integration between the peoples of West Africa transcended beyond trade in commodities to include intermarriages between powerful kingdoms, exchange of slaves and military alliances (Sow, Adaawen and Scheffran, 2014).

#### **4. Cross Border Languages in West Africa**

The cross-border languages or trans-national African languages are languages commonly spoken by two or more countries within the West African Sub-region. Some of these languages are identified as Hausa, Fulfulde or Pulaar, Yoruba, Bambara or Jula, Senoufo, Ewe, Gurmancéma, Mandinka and Dangara just to name a few (Kanana, 2013; Bonchuk, 2014). This demonstrates the various ethnic and cultural ties in existence between states of West Africa, in form of indigenous linguistic affiliations. These are languages which are spoken on a daily basis in many cross-border activities. Studies reveal that in West Africa, Hausa, Fulfulde, and Mandinka are the most widely spread in the region, but it does not mean that they are the most spoken. Also, the percentage of how wide spread cross-border languages are reveals more or less how effective they can be for the West African community social cohesion if they are effectively considered in the regional integration process (Chimhundu, 1997).



According to the African Academy of Languages, cross-border languages are languages common to two or more states and domains straddling various usages (Amali, 2016). These types of languages exist because many African borders were haphazardly demarcated and people speaking the same languages, sometime with very small nuances, were found on both sides of the border. Therefore, they adopt their common languages in cross-border activities. Plonski, Teferra and Brady (2013) opine that it is apparent that most of these activities contribute highly to the commercial life of their countries, and are mostly considered as informal in the African countries. The use of such languages promotes the culture of each party and creates a sentiment of belonging that enhances spontaneously any type of relationship engaged in by the countries involved, simply because there is less hindrance to communication and understanding between the parties (Gallois, 2018). Even though cross-border languages are de facto pivotal facilitators for cross-border business and cultural integration, they have remained least documented and not really understood in the regional integration process in Africa, especially West Africa (Olympio, 2004; Metondji, 2015).

It is established in literature that cross-border language plays the role of facilitating cross border economic activities, opening avenues for access to alternative centers of political power, trans-border political mobilization and strategic cooperation by communities across national borders (Feyissa and Hoehne, 2008; Metondji 2015).

## **5. Language Barriers in West Africa**

The existence of linguistic gap is a fact in the West African region. The struggle is effectively noticed after the independence of African countries, when the fate of their lands and populations were given back to them after a long period of Western countries' domination and imperialism. For purpose of administration, the imperial States established the use of their language as the only medium of education for the African people. To Amali (2016), they also used their languages in daily administrative work, making therefore secondary African languages, which are considered as having less importance for development. Immediately after the independence, the few people educated in the former colonizers language with the particular ability to understand and negotiate with them were called the African elites. They took the leadership of West African countries with the formal intention to maintain their position of elites by pursuing the same language policy inherited from the former colonizers (Lunga, 1997). The use of these foreign languages not

understood and spoken by the majority of the West African populations created many frustrations and distance between the leaders and their people (Folarin, Folarin and Olorunyomi, 2015). This amplified the linguistic struggle which involves the cohabitation of the former colonizers languages with the African languages, and mostly the harm that comes out of it.

The African languages are given a very low status in the region, and their use is typically restricted to domains that are not really important for the leadership, while French, English and Portuguese have maintained their high status. It confers to them (French, English, and Portuguese) the right to be used in “prestigious” domains as indicated by the leadership (Bamgbose, 2011). This situation has drastically drawn back the involvement of the populations in capital projects of development such as those in the regional integration process. That situation has affected the development of African languages in the region, thus responsible of their low status. According to Babatunde (2014) for instance, African languages lack written tradition, vocabulary, orthography, production of materials that can be used in schools, and new concepts that fits in the current world development of science and technology. Concerning the development of science and technology, the African leaders’ grand interests for modernization and economic development can justify their language choice, in the sense that these foreign languages were extensively used in science and technology, a situation that is adequate for the rapid transfer of knowledge.

The negative perception of multilingualism is another damage caused by the linguistic struggle in the region. Abongdia (2009) posits that the multiplicity of African languages in the region is assumed to be problematic for communication and development in comparison with a single language policy. This was an excuse for the elites who opted therefore, for French, English, and Portuguese as their official languages. Their choice was based on the belief that one language unites and many languages divide (Costa, 2018).

To Kwamwendo, (2004), this negative perception of multilingualism constitutes a real obstacle to the appreciation of the asset that represents African languages. This, Bamgbose (2011) notes has led part of the West African populations to adopt negative language attitudes, especially the elites who prefer to educate their children in the imported language, not giving to them any chance to speak their native tongues, even at home. Conversely, it is common to observe many of the

speakers of African languages who depreciate deliberately the value of their languages anytime it has to be compared to the imported languages.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The absence of a common language among the states of the West African sub-region constitutes a linguistic complexity and in some cases, the attitude of the people of this region to the linguistic differences has rather been counterproductive. Of even greater concern is the sharp divide along the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese. The influences of these languages and the associated colonial masters have been that of competition as opposed to cooperation towards the attainment of economic and political emancipation of the sub-region.

The history of migration and interaction as well as the rate of daily interactions which occur among the West African citizens has given rise to the development of multilingualism in the sub-region. This should be encouraged with emphasis laid on cross-border languages because not only do these serve as auxiliary vehicles of communication in some cases, but also, if adequately developed, they have the capacity to contribute to the social cohesion, economic development and integration of the West African Sub-region. During the development of language policies and programmes, there should be provisions for indigenous languages to be incorporated, especially with those policies which relate to the borderland areas so as to facilitate the free movement of persons within the sub-region.

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