

Politics Language And Thought The Somali Experience

REVIEWS

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in a common strategy for reorganising the country's domestic and international relations to meet the challenge posed by a hostile external environment, correct the adverse effects of that environment consequent on the country's colonial heritage, and minimize the cost and maximize the benefits of external resources to the country. It seeks to maximize independence, promote economic development, and insure socio-political stability in a way that enhances national power (p. 14).

Nnoli is rightly critical of the earlier, somewhat naïve assumptions of pre-1967 Tanzanian diplomacy that idealistic appeals would lead to change in world affairs. More critical perceptions and explanations of international inequality and national powerlessness have led to a revised conception of its political economy and external-internal linkages. Likewise, academic approaches to African foreign policy need to learn from the existential and analytic experience and response of Tanzania in world politics.

TIMOTHY M. SHAW

*Department of Political Science, Carleton University, Ottawa, and
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia*

Politics, Languages, and Thought: the Somali experience by DAVID D. LAITIN

The University of Chicago Press, 1977. Pp. 268. \$19.00.

One by-product of the U.S. Peace Corps experiment in Africa has been the substantial number of instant 'experts'. Young college graduates from the United States were sent to Africa to spend a year or two teaching and living among villagers still practising 'stone age' cultures. This, of course, moved many budding social scientists to formulate sweeping generalisations about these 'primitive' societies that presumably had been waiting all along for someone to come and properly introduce them to the outside world.

David Laitin's slim volume has to do with such a discovery and may safely be renamed *The Rediscovery of the Somali by an American*. In a stricter sense, however, the book is essentially about Laitin and only incidentally about Somalia; thus the reason for his rather catch-all title. There is a vivid description of his problems with skittish immigration officials in emergent Africa, and the demanding, even perilous task of an American attempting to survive in a remote region of the underdeveloped world, namely the North-Eastern Province of Kenya, a disputed territory inhabited by ethnic Somalis.

The author faithfully reports his findings on a set of preconceived, highly structured research questions, using Somali subjects and social settings. He wanted to test theories of linguistic relativity in contemporary Africa, and the Somalis were chosen because most are bi-lingual and 'in the throes of an interminable debate concerning the language of politics' (p. 163). Laitin also wanted to determine if language has an independent effect on other social institutions, and whether or not the choice of a European language for official purposes by an African nation was not responsible for the perpetuation of a 'colonial mentality' (p. 164).

Politics, Languages, and Thought: the Somali experience consists of eight chapters and a conclusion. The first part contains a general discussion of

Politics, language, and thought in the Somali experience is a complex interplay that

reflects the rich cultural heritage and the socio-political landscape of Somalia. The Somali language, an Afro-Asiatic language, serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle of political expression and identity. Understanding the nuances of this relationship is crucial for grasping the broader Somali experience, especially in the context of its historical struggles, cultural narratives, and aspirations for a unified future. This article delves into the intricate connections between politics, language, and thought in Somalia, examining how these elements shape the national identity and influence the political discourse.

The Role of Language in Somali Politics

Language is a powerful tool in politics, serving as both a medium of communication and a means of cultural expression. In Somalia, the Somali language plays a pivotal role in the political landscape.

The Somali Language: A Historical Overview

- **Origins and Development:** The Somali language has a rich history, with roots tracing back to the Cushitic languages. It is characterized by its unique phonetic structure and grammatical rules.
- **Standardization:** In the 1970s, the Somali government undertook efforts to standardize the language, introducing a Latin script that facilitated literacy and education. This move was crucial in promoting a national identity.

Language as a Political Tool

The Somali language has been employed in various political contexts:

1. **Nationalism:** Language has been a cornerstone of Somali nationalism, uniting diverse clans and communities under a common linguistic identity.
2. **Political Rhetoric:** Politicians often use the Somali language to connect with the populace, employing proverbs and idiomatic expressions that resonate culturally.
3. **Media and Communication:** The emergence of Somali media outlets has enabled broader discourse in the Somali language, fostering political awareness and engagement among citizens.

The Interplay of Language and Thought

Language shapes thought, and in the Somali context, this relationship is particularly evident. The way Somalis express themselves linguistically reflects their cultural values, social norms, and political ideologies.

Cultural Expressions and Political Ideologies

- Proverbs and Sayings: Somali proverbs are rich in wisdom and often used to convey political messages or critique leadership. For example, the saying "He who does not have a strong back does not carry a load" emphasizes the importance of resilience in leadership.
- Storytelling Traditions: Oral traditions in Somalia have historically been used to communicate political ideas, historical narratives, and societal values. These stories not only entertain but also educate and inspire future generations.

Impact on Political Thought

The linguistic landscape of Somalia influences political thought in several ways:

1. Collective Identity: Language fosters a sense of belonging, linking individuals to their cultural heritage and community.
2. Political Mobilization: The use of the Somali language in political discourse encourages grassroots mobilization, as citizens feel empowered to engage in political discussions in their native tongue.
3. Resistance and Resilience: During periods of conflict, language has served as a form of resistance against oppression, with poets and activists using it to articulate dissent and advocate for change.

The Effects of Colonialism and Globalization

The Somali experience has been significantly shaped by colonialism and globalization, both of which have impacted the use of language in politics and thought.

Colonial Legacy

- Language Suppression: During colonial rule, the promotion of foreign languages (like English and Italian) often marginalized the Somali language, creating a disconnect between the populace and their political representation.
- Cultural Dislocation: Colonialism disrupted traditional structures of thought, leading to a struggle for cultural preservation and the reclamation of linguistic identity.

Globalization and Linguistic Exchange

Globalization has introduced both challenges and opportunities for the Somali language:

1. Language Borrowing: The influx of foreign languages, particularly English, has led to the borrowing of terms and expressions, influencing political discourse.
2. Diaspora Communities: The Somali diaspora has played a crucial role in preserving the

language and culture, using social media and other platforms to engage in political dialogue and advocacy.

3. Access to Information: The internet has democratized access to information, allowing Somalis to engage with global political narratives while simultaneously promoting their own cultural perspectives.

Contemporary Political Discourse in Somalia

In contemporary Somalia, the interplay of politics, language, and thought continues to evolve, reflecting the dynamic nature of the society.

Political Fragmentation and Unity

- Clan Politics: The political landscape in Somalia is often influenced by clan affiliations, which can complicate language use in political discourse. Politicians may use language strategically to appeal to specific clans or communities.
- Efforts Towards National Unity: Despite the challenges of fragmentation, there are ongoing efforts to promote a unified Somali identity, with language playing a central role in fostering national solidarity.

The Role of Youth and Education

The younger generation in Somalia is increasingly taking an active role in shaping political discourse:

1. Education Initiatives: Educational programs aimed at promoting the Somali language and culture are crucial for empowering youth and fostering a sense of national pride.
2. Social Media Engagement: Young Somalis are using social media platforms to express their thoughts on political issues, advocate for change, and connect with the global community.

Conclusion: The Path Forward

The relationship between politics, language, and thought in the Somali experience is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its people. As Somalia continues to navigate its political landscape, the Somali language will remain an essential instrument for unity, expression, and resistance. By embracing their linguistic heritage and fostering inclusive dialogue, Somalis can work towards a more equitable and prosperous future, where the power of language serves as a bridge to understanding and collaboration. The Somalis' journey is one of reclaiming identity, asserting agency, and building a nation that reflects the values and aspirations of its people.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does the Somali language influence political discourse in Somalia?

The Somali language serves as a unifying tool in political discourse, allowing for the expression of national identity and cultural values. Politicians often use proverbs and idiomatic expressions to resonate with the public, making the language a critical component of political communication.

What role does language play in shaping political thought among Somali youth?

Language plays a vital role in shaping political thought among Somali youth by facilitating access to information and fostering engagement in political discussions. The rise of social media platforms has enabled youth to express their views in Somali, creating a new space for political activism and dialogue.

In what ways does colonial history affect contemporary Somali political language?

Colonial history has left a lasting impact on Somali political language by introducing foreign terminologies and ideologies that continue to influence political rhetoric. The struggle for independence and self-determination is often articulated through a language that reflects both resistance and adaptation to these historical influences.

How do different dialects of Somali affect political representation and inclusion?

Different dialects of Somali can create barriers in political representation and inclusion, as political leaders may favor certain dialects over others, leading to marginalization of communities. This linguistic diversity can complicate consensus-building and representation in a politically fragmented landscape.

What is the significance of proverbs in Somali political discussions?

Proverbs are significant in Somali political discussions as they encapsulate cultural wisdom and ethical considerations. They are often used by politicians to convey complex ideas succinctly, persuade audiences, and establish credibility, making them a powerful tool in political rhetoric.

How does the diaspora influence political language and thought in Somalia?

The Somali diaspora influences political language and thought by introducing new perspectives and terminologies that reflect their experiences abroad. The diasporic community often engages in political advocacy and discourse through social media,

bridging local and global issues and shaping the political narrative in Somalia.

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