

"Language and the colonial instrumentalization of knowledge"

Messanh Amedegnato, Sename Koffi Agbodjinou, Nadia Ofouatey Alazard, Milena Bühring, Rosilla Goussanou, Filipe-Guilherme Pirl and Ohiniko Mawussé Toffa in conversation

In this conversation the ways in which language has been instrumentalized in the colonizing project are described, developing a value system that still responds to colonial logic, in this conversation Anani Dodji Sanouvi places special emphasis on the ways in which these values were imposed through words and proposes possible strategies to resensitize these concepts with the intention of changing the knowledge system.

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Nadia Ofouatey Alazard - I have a question about the preservation of history and traditions. I can imagine that people would want to close a chapter in history and the information belonging to it, because this knowledge is very personal, and sometimes it shouldn't be public. And the way of sharing it is through oral history, from mouth to mouth. And this history is then just shared with specific people. So, I wonder, when objects from the West coast of Africa and, more specifically, from Togo are in a museum right now, what do you think is the best, or the better way to take care of those objects. Do you think the responsibility of sharing this history and keeping this tradition and these objects is the museum?

Sename Koffi Agbodjinou - To keep it where? In a museum? In a museum in Europe or a museum in Africa?

Milena Bühring - I think museums as an institution have to change the way to preserve these objects.

Rosilla Goussanou - It is important to understand the colonial instrumentalization of knowledge to not do the same mistake done by the colonizers, this is very important. Missionaries, and colonizers, went to Africa, and they were selling European values. I can tell you those values were not accepted at all, and I realized, doing my PhD, that the reason for this was an interruption in the communication with the Ewe population. What Ewe people were telling to missionaries was not fully understood by those missionaries, our values were not understood. They came with another divine proposal. They wanted to set up Christianity, and in order to do that, they were destroying Ewe moral values. I can tell you in our country we lost our main language, that is Ewe. We are using now a language totally under Christian influence. French. One example of how we lost the belief in our language is the word "tr?wo", it is now a bad word in Togo with a bad connotation, but in the period before the arrival of missionaries it was not like that. "tr?wo" were very important gods of the Ewe world. So, what did missionaries do? They changed the meaning of the most important God of Ewe culture. "tr?wo" an now is seen as a bad God and as a bad word. And we

are still under the influence of French culture. We are continuing to use this Christianised language.

For that reason, it is important now to make a deep reflection on our languages. Ask ourselves how we are using words, this colonization through language happens through operating European languages. And my first question now is, what are we calling museums? I want to ask myself can we go to Aného and ask these people, how do you call a museum in your own language, or try to know how are they understand it.

There are a lot of models to build the world, and those models are thrown in Africa like dice, the museum is one of those models, our objective is to not be like the colonizers. In order to do that is important to think now, about how the project of Maison Gbégbé could be built from the bottom to the top, using the grass-root knowledge to work closely with local people, to allow them to be attached to all that is implemented. I'm reading now this book by Souleymane Bachir Diagne a big philosopher a very important philosopher of the negritude. In this book, Souleymane explains the problematic meaning of Art as a concept after colonization. He writes about how the European are telling the African peoples, that those objects are called now "fetishes", when the truth is that the god(s) or the spiritual power of these objects mostly leaves those objects- Why does this happen?.

Art and object are related, we should now know how we are using those words in the international languages between Europe and Africa because Europe is powerful through its languages, Europe is powerful through a colonial normativity, those names and those values should not continue bonded towards other values that cannot be understood by Europe. We are intellectuals. I have a Ph.D. here in Europe and I will try to find a way to discuss as an African scholar with a European scholar, but I always said there are a lot of scholars in Africa, and the major parts of them, don't have this possibility to have this discussion. I want to say, I am speaking for them, I want that their voice to be heard by the people in powerful positions. And if I can put it shortly, I want that you reflect on the language we are using now.

Anani Dodji Sanouvi - Can I maybe make a comment? I think I am in the right place at the right moment, at the right time, you know, because we've been researching for many years, we were thinking about a lot of things, actually about things that you comment, like the epistemological aspect of things when we think about something in English or in German or in French, we found out that exactly those things do not exist in our mother tongue the ewe. And even inside the Ewe language, we have some differences between the ewe from Togo and the ewe language in Ghana. We find that the imposition of languages and words was extremely violent, it was religious slavery going on for centuries. This religious slavery and many things we know today is something that we are still discovering, what happened. I agree with you, if the vocabulary is trying to change we need to think in our mother tongue. What do those words and thoughts mean to us, not in English or in German, or Portuguese. We are going to redefine how we think about this element because effectively there is nothing like 'Art' in the Ewe language. I was asking the elders what is Art in ewe? And there is none. It is a collection of movements, is a specific action, or is a specific

activity, that defines the feeling of the collective, we are talking about a different dimension, we are talking about the cosmical dimension, and we are talking about the physical dimension, we are always in connection of those two realms. That's why it is so difficult when seeing those objects; if the god is gone, it is no anymore a fetish.

Now, what we are facing in the museum is a big lie, a public lie. And today how can we redefine this? And this is, I think, what makes it extremely important. What are we going to do? We are going to have a big talk? We are going to have big thinking and reflection? That can take maybe years. But here it is already happening, and that is amazing that we are starting this discussion. That's fantastic. Thank you so much.

Ohiniko Mawussé Toffa - I'm happy also, I'm happy to meet you all because I think the Maison Gbété allows those reflections to go on. And I'm happy to be here. And I think we Africans, we need to reinvent the European languages in our mouth, we need to appropriate them and to use them as we understand them, and to write in that appropriated way, because journalism and grammar create normativity, they are setting a frame, for using words for using ideas. The Europeans want to put every knowledge in frames, and that is not possible for our cultures, so it is now important for us to reflect on that language lot. We cannot throw them away, people are using those languages in Africa, they are born, and are growing up learning French, or English, and for that reason, it is important to reflect on those languages, and to use them in the best way, so we can feel proud of who we are, and proud of our traditions, and feel proud of our reality.

Filipe-Guilherme Pirl - Thanks a lot for those very beautiful words. I'm very interested in how we in this object-subject dichotomy and how we construct the objectivity and the subjectivity of the other through performance and through performing and naming it. And you said that you were looking for how those so-called objects were called before. We are calling them objects and thereby taking out the god of it. So my question is, in the meanwhile, until we find out how they were called, how should we call them in the meanwhile? Because right now we call them objects the whole time. And this is the term that is falling most of the time in this conversation. And if we would have drunk every time we call them objects, we would have been very drunk. That's my question. How should be talking about it? How we can name them without being violent because we are reproducing this violence by calling them with old words.

Ohiniko - It is a very, very good question. I love this question. I will say it. I can not put down these words, calling them objects, to do that we need to change the knowledge system, to understand why we call them objects we need to understand the concept of objectification.

And when you read objectification by Foucault, proposes objectification as a disciplinary power. We are writing. And I am using the pronoun we because I am involved in it because using that language makes me also guilty of this dishonesty. It is difficult for me to find a solution to all that. I can see that we need to reflect on language building. It is important to continue the reflection, the critical reflection on the European language. In Germany, the German language is a good

instrument that at the same time a very powerful instrument, because the history of this language has been down to the history of racism, a history of Nazism. So, the German language produced war to set up this power relation, and it is now important to reflect on that language. How are we capable to produce those words to make this asymmetric power relation possible when we get to that point, we will find a way to combat, to decolonize the colonial epistemic structure of the colonial system.

I found it personally difficult to call them. And when I can not find the precise word for those objects, I call them in my language, I know them, I call them by their real names. And I think it is important for people walking inside a museum to learn Afrikans languages and to learn how they can see through this language, and also to call them by their real names shows big respect for those gods.

But this is problematic because, in my society where I come from not all the people are allowed to say those names, not everybody can call them, and this is a very, very big issue colonialism gives us big problems. We should solve them, and we need money to do it.

Messanh Amedegnato - Welcome, to everybody. Thank you so much Dr Toffa, You know that in Africa we use four elements Hevièssso, Sakpata, Dan, and Edan I know the name of those elements because I'm a priest, which means that I don't forget the knowledge of my ancestors. , and now I'm an international priest of Hevièssso. I use the knowledge of Sakpata and Heviessso as they can walk together. So, my practice is based on Heviessso, which is the god of justice, and Sakpata, called in German Mother Earth. If someone has a problem Heviessso is a powerful energy to solve it. This energy is universal.

What doctor Toffa is saying is that when the Christians took things away from us, they didn't take the real names or the real energy of elements, because Heviessso can be transmitted into different materials, glass or wood, but they didn't know the real name of this energy. And the important thing is how we call that energy in our language.

In Togo, we have 42 different ethnicities, and 42 different languages, and when I say Heviessso in my language, in Togo they have 42 can have different words for this. That means that now is the moment to tell the people what the real meaning of those objects is, now we can explain what that object was created for. For example, it could be an object that belongs to me, it is from my family or is an object that could be shared with the entire world.

If it's an object that can be shared with the entire world, it can be exhibited, but when it is private, it should be returned to me, or the clan who produced it. To understand this I will explain a little bit deeper, I have my own god, I have my own spirit that I get from my father, that is something private, and cannot be shared with the entire world.

But now is a good moment, I think that us around Maison Gbégbé can let the people know the

differences, we can explain the differences between some private objects that belong to the oldest families that came from different places like Benin, that were taken by violence and keep powerful energies, and other kinds of objects that maybe can be shared with a wider public. We need to teach them what is the (Vodou Sakpata, Vodou Heviesso, and Vodou Dan) we need to reveal their real names. Because colonizers took some objects against their will, it is now the moment to tell them, where these objects come from, we need to tell them what is the meaning of those forces. And is our elders in Togo the ones who know the stories of these objects, where they come from, and our elders are the ones that know their real names and meanings.