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The Impact of the Educational System on Writing in National Languages: Problems and Prospects

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The writings in national languages constitute a topical issue in Africa and is always dealt with during intellectuals' meetings. This is all the more important than it is closely related to the education system which, because it was imposed by the European colonizers, is totally Eurocentric and inadequate to our African realities.

I will analyze first how the education system served as a means of colonial penetration for the European settlers. Then I will see to what extent it is mandatory to change the education system and adapt to our own realities and needs. This leads me to the analysis of the role that writings in national languages can play to achieve this goal.

I: The colonial education system: a means of mental colonization

First of all, it should be noted that implementation of the colonizers in Africa was made possible through the use of education. Indeed, aware of the impact of education on the mentality of the Africans, the colonists used it as a weapon to complete their colonial penetration in Africa. There was in a certain way a sustained brainwashing process reinforced by an education system totally based on Europe. Moreover, as expressed by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'O, a "mental colonization" necessarily involves a neutralization of the education system: "The education system was the first fortress to be stormed by the spiritual army of colonialism".

Thus, to achieve that mental domination, the colonial powers established an education system mainly based on their own needs, without taking into account the aspirations of the African peoples. This system, of course, was totally inadequate and had some bad effects on the mentality of the Africans. It produced what Ngũgĩ called “the kind of education which nurtured subservience, self-hatred and mutual suspicion. It produced a people uprooted from the masses”.

Often there was racial discrimination in the allocation of schools, of teachers, of teaching facilities. /... / So in history people learnt about the rise of the Anglo-Saxons as if they were the true ancestors of the human race. Even in geography, the rocks of Europe had to be studied first before coming to Africa.

Therefore, this Eurocentric aspect of the education system has contributed to a large extent to the shaping of the mentality of the Africans. They received ideologies from the West, and which caused a feeling of inferiority among them. Moreover, the colonial education placed Europe at the center of the universe and of History.

Through this “cultural imperialism” therefore, Africans have been filled up with European ideas and principles. These ideas are corroborated by Ayi Kwei Armah in *Osiris Rising* through Bai Kamara:

Bai Kamarashook his head. "So far it's not been our work. From the time I began teaching, all we Africans have done is to find stuff readymade-syllabuses, curricula, the whole education system. "We haven't created our own system." (*Osiris Rising*, 189)

Unfortunately, for the majority of Africans who have suffered this spiritual colonization, the shock was terrible. Because in trying to combine two cultures essentially different, they finally gave in to the pressures of the European system which seemed to offer more opportunities. It is in this “cultural trap” that have fallen characters such as Baako (*Fragments*), Samba Diallo (*Ambiguous adventure*), Seth Spencer Soja (*Osiris Rising*), and so on.

The inadequacy of the colonial education system is the logical result of the subjectivity of those who designed it. Indeed, the main purpose of the colonial education system was to turn Africans into subservient people and “watchdogs” in service for the colonizer. According to Kofi Anyidoho, “Armah presents Western education for Africans essentially as a system of handling carefully organized to alienate the African from himself and his people's way of life”.

In the document produced by the Manda Group in *Osiris Rising*, Armah points out the basic assumptions of old literature and history syllabus.

Basic Assumptions of the Old History Curriculum.

The colonial History curriculum was designed to demonstrate the glory of Western history. It assumed that all societies were destined to grow by imitating the West. Hence a key purpose of history teaching in Africa: to supply Africans with suitable European models to imitate. (*OR*, 216)

/.../

Basic Assumptions of the Old Literature Syllabus.

The old Literature syllabus put forward the assumptions that the serious study of literature was essentially the study of Western literature;

that African literature was a recent, 20th century phenomenon; and that ancient Egyptian literature had nothing to do with the African continent. (*OR*, 219)

Of course, when putting Europe at the center of the programs, the aim of the Europeans was to make the Africans believe in their inferiority and, at the same time, to train those who would occupy the key positions in the colonial administration and, therefore, help them still have a hand on Africa. In other terms, they wanted to create a new elite who would rule at their place and in their favor. This justifies why the target population for that training were the sons of chiefs first.

When Louis Faidherbe arrived in Senegal in 1854, he was convinced of the power of education and the spreading of the French language. Thus in 1855, he founded “l’Ecole des otages” (the school of hostages) which became later “École des fils de chefs et des interprètes” (the School for the sons of chiefs and interpreters).



Pupils of the “Ecole des otages” in Saint-Louis



Ecole des otages de Saint-Louis, Senegal



Present day Ecole des otages, now Ecole Khayar Mbengue

This favor given to the sons of chiefs is explained by the fact that those who agreed to collaborate with the colonizer were maintained to the throne. Thus, these leaders, anxious to stay in power and to maintain their privileges, have fallen into the ideological trap set by the colonizer.

Thanks to the education system, the colonists succeeded in making some Africans believe that they had neither history nor culture, that they had not created anything, in short, that they “did not exist” before Europeans came to “civilize” them.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “civilization” is “the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced”. In the Collins Dictionary, the term is defined as “the

condition of being civilized; social organization of a high order, marked by the development and use of a written language and by advances in the arts and sciences, government, etc.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “A relatively high level of cultural and technological development; specifically: the stage of cultural development at which writing and the keeping of written records is attained”.

From these three definitions, it appears that “civilization” is perceived as a higher level of education; a pretext used by the Europeans to justify first their settlement in Africa.

Unfortunately, this conception was interiorized by many Africans for whom Europe was the symbol of advancement and perfectness. In Senegal, for example, when you dress well or you are smart, the Wolof would say “*kii dafa siwiliisé*” (*siwiliisé* is a deformation of the French term “civilisé”)

The historical legacy of Africa has thus remained hidden and centuries of historical truths altered or simply suppressed by the Europeans. This is what Cinque calls centuries of “dirt” in *Osiris Rising* (142).

Through the voice of Cinque, Armah considers westernization as a “dirt”. This may be true if we take into account the nihilistic nature of

the colonialist ideologies tending to deny the existence of an African culture or civilization.

However, Cheikh Anta Diop tried to prove the existence of a typical African civilization and the link between Africa and Egypt through important researches in the field of Egyptology. He tried to highlight some physical and linguistic similarities between the Egyptians and the other populations of Africa (example between Wolof and Egyptian languages).

Yet, despite the significant amount of data provided by Cheikh Anta Diop, his thesis is questioned by Alain Ricard who considers that the thesis of Cheikh Anta is just a response to the colonialist ideas already established on Africa by Europeans. Reacting to the linguistic theories put forward by Cheikh Anta, Alain Ricard states that the comparison between the Wolof and the Egyptian languages is not enough because “the status of the Wolof data which serve as reference for the demonstration is questionable”.

In fact, Ricard considers that "practicing a language does not imply that we understand spontaneously how that language organizes the speech. Thus, he turns himself at odds with his own ideas insofar as the Wolof language is not his mother tongue. We therefore wonder if Ricard himself does not fall into the trap of a language he does not practice; a reproach which he made to Cheikh Anta.

Does it mean that it is impossible to understand the internal mechanisms of a foreign language? Or does it mean that Cheikh Anta himself does not actually understand the deep structure of Wolof, which is his mother tongue? This puts again on the table the issue of national languages which, beyond the theoretical aspects, requires a serious analysis especially concerning their writing. Of course it is impossible to deal with the writing in national languages without having a closer look at the education system. An important hypothesis is that it is impossible for us to succeed in the writings in national language without a revision of the education system.

II: Revision of the education system: a necessity

Given the Eurocentric nature of the education system, it appears necessary for us, as Africans, to undertake a revision of that system. Because, as long as it will be maintained, Africa will always depend on Europe. In that respect, Ngũgĩ raises a number of questions which answers will probably help us establish an adequate education system in Africa:

Here is our main question: if there is need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, why can't this be African? Why can't African Literature be at the center so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?

Ngũgĩ calls for a new orientation placing Africa at the center of the education system. In other words, we need a new vision focusing more

on African realities. Ngũgĩ suggests that we put the emphasis more on African literature which role, he says in *Writers in Politics*, is to help take the appropriate initiatives.

To better tackle the issue of the education system, we must engage in a more organized struggle involving intellectuals, especially in the fields of literature and history.

Therefore, to neutralize the nihilistic philosophy of the colonizer regarding the existence or not of an African culture, it is necessary to recover that cultural identity of the continent. It is in this perspective that the African and Africanist studies are important because they allow us, as Africans, to understand what led us to the point where we are.

Armah's view is reminiscent of that of Kwame Nkrumah who considers that history, culture, arts, and languages are the main pillars of an education policy aiming at freeing Africa and the Africans from a mental domination. This reminds of Bob Marley's song *Redemption Song* in which he says "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, None but ourselves can free our mind".

Likewise, it will be compulsory to restore the historical and cultural truths so that the new generations could carry out the struggle for a cultural liberation. During the inaugural ceremony of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana on the 25th, October 1963,

Nkrumah declared that: “By the work of this institute, we must reassess and assert the glories and achievements of our African past and inspire our generation and succeeding generations, with a vision of a better future”.

Therefore, history plays a very important role in the setting up of new curricula focusing on the true historical legacy of Africa. For Cheikh Anta Diop, this should start with a historical flashback in order to discover the real justifications of the past and present of the African people.

This is all the more important that most scholars working on Africa are confronted with a lack of sufficient data, particular written information. That scarcity of written documents is one of the main problems of African historiography.

From another standpoint, studying the history requires the use of sources already existing; that is the collection of the written data to prove the existence of a typical African history. But this project cannot be successful without important changes in the education system which is mostly a replica of the European one. One of the most important changes consists in two main points: (1) to focus more on Africa and the Africans; (2) to take into account the national languages as early as the primary school.

In Senegal, this Afrocentric aspect is understood by the National Comity of History and Geography which, in its new program, “gives the priority to the history of Africa”. For the Comity, the main objective of the new program is to “know the role and the place of Africa in the history of humanity”, but also to “understand the role of civilizations in the process of identification, modernization, and development of societies and nations”.

This last argument corroborates that of Armah who considers that studying the history of ancient Egypt is not only a redefinition of the African people, but also a self-identification. In other words, this allows us, as Africans, to know better “Who We Are and Why?” (*Osiris Rising*, 9). It is in this perspective of self-knowledge that new programs of history and French in the Senegalese schools now focus more on Africa.

For example, for the history program in “classe de seconde” (first year of high school), Africa occupies 39 hours on a total time of 45 hours, that is 86.67% of this volume. This proportion goes to 81.81% in the second year (“classe de première”); and to 62.79% in the last year (“classe de terminale”).

Table n°1: New history curriculum at high school.

1 st year (classe de première)		2 nd year (classe de première)		3 rd year (classe de terminale)	
Parties / Themes	Hours	Parties / Themes	Hours	Parties / Themes	Hours
African prehistory	9	The industrial revolution and its consequences in Europe	8	The world in the aftermath of the second world war	8
Civilizations of ancient Africa	8	Imperialism in Africa	10	Decolonization and affirmation of the third world	19
West Africa from the 7 th to 17 th centuries	10	Imperialism in the rest of the world	6	Negro-African civilizations	8
The slave trade its consequences	6	The world from one war to another	14	The Muslim civilization	8
Africa from the 18 th century to the eve of the imperialist invasion	6	Senegal from 1914 to 1945	6	x	X
Europe and America from 1776 to 1870	6	X	X	x	X
Total hourly volume	45	Total hourly volume	44	Total hourly volume	43

Source: CNHG, Ministry of National Education, Dakar, May 1998, pp.22-27.

For the program of French, now they begin the teaching of the tale and the poetry of Négritude in the first year. Similarly, in the second year, the poetry of the Négritude is started as well as the theatre. Therefore, we notice that Africa is now given more place in the new curricula.

Table n°2: New program of French at high school (series L₁, L₂, S₁, S₂).

Second class	First class	Class Terminal
Humanism	Romanticism	Surrealism
Classicism	Realism and naturalism	
The philosophy of the enlightenment	Parnassus	
Neoclassicism	The symbolism	
The poetry of Negritude	The novelistic creation	Aesthetics of genres
The tale	The theatre	
The new.	Poetry: Negritude and other currents.	

Source: CNHG, Ministry of National Education, Dakar, May 1998

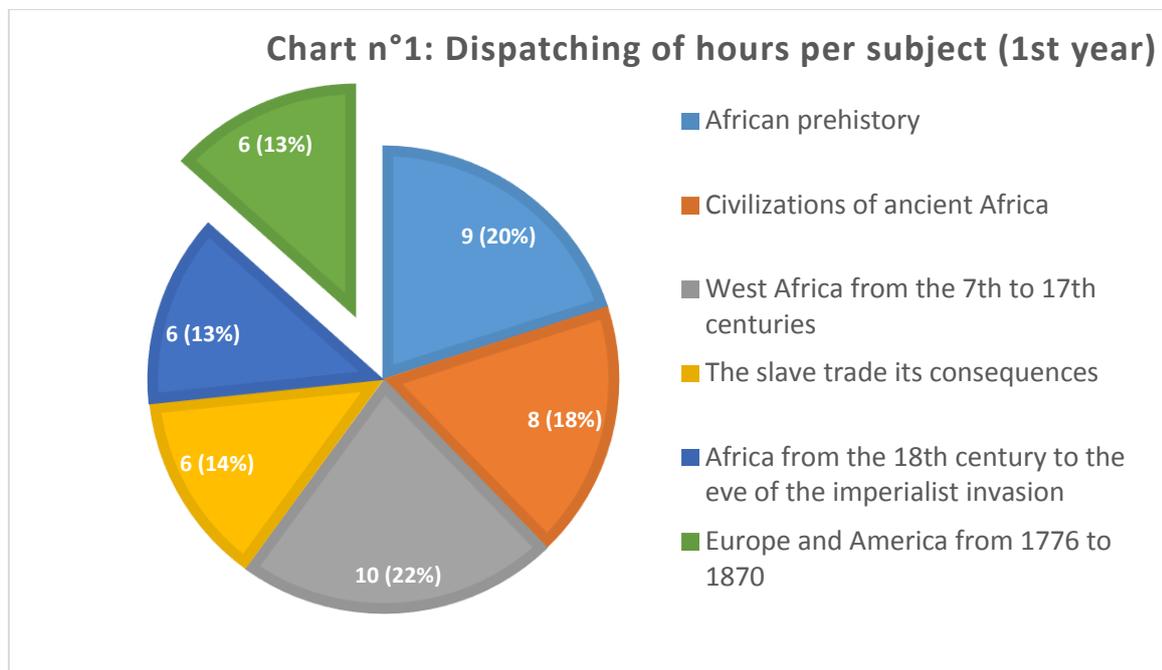


Chart n°2: Dispatching of hours per subject (2nd year)

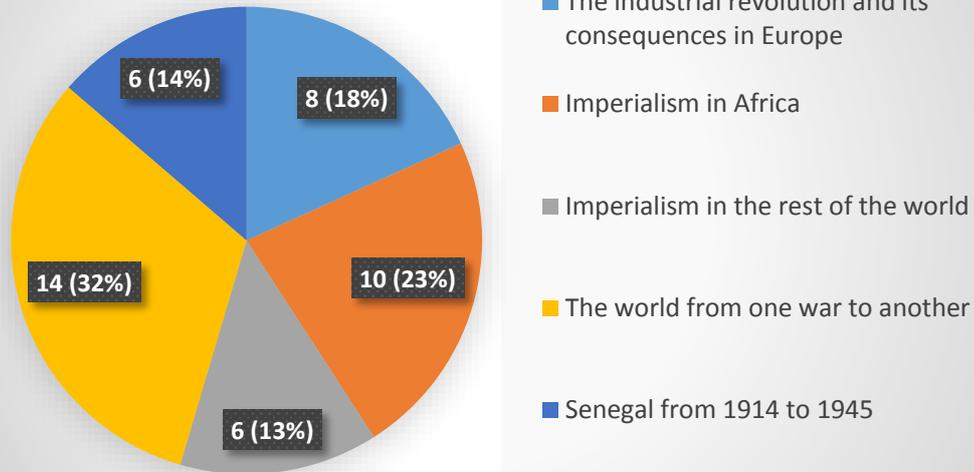
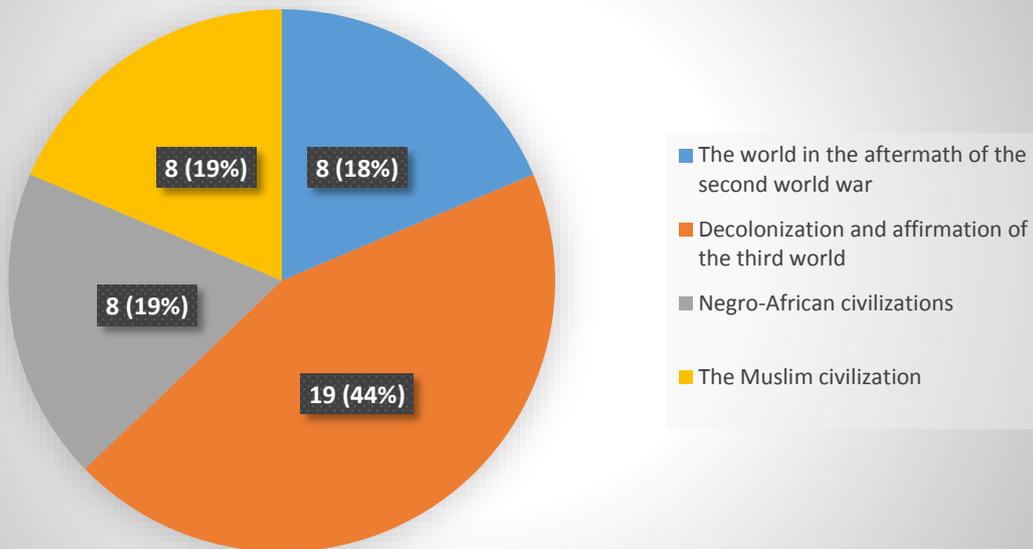


Chart n°3: Dispatching of hours per subject (3rd year)



However, one of the main obstacles is the transmission of the message in a foreign language: that of the colonizer. Of course, it would be very difficult to teach certain subjects in Pulaar or Wolof or Serere; but at least the history of the people could be taught in national languages.

This would help the children understand many concepts which, in a European language, cannot find but terms close in meaning.

But we may ask the question: to what extent the national languages can be used and be effective in the education system?

III: Constraints and advantages of writing in national languages

Writings in national languages are still a topical issue at the Centre of discussions among African intellectuals. It is therefore urgent to find reliable solutions to the matter. For that purpose, we must first remove the linguistic borders.

In addition to their communicative aspect, the national languages are the reflection of a cultural authenticity. For Simon Mayamba Maku Ibaanda, the language “allows the group to identify themselves and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a precise linguistic or ethnic entity”.

This means that the national languages have a functional role in the redefinition process of the Africans. Therefore, it is important to place the writings in African languages in their historical context.

According to Ngũgĩ, it is obvious that the choice of the language has affected the development of literature in Africa:

One of the most famous ways in which imperialism has affected the development of African literature is in language choice. During the colonial stage of Western imperialism in Africa, African languages were suppressed and European languages were deliberately given a status that made them the inevitable vehicle of African people's self-definition.

We notice that the psychological factor played a key role in the process of “linguistic colonization”. African writers engage themselves in a dynamic of restoration and development of African literature; a dynamic in which the writings in African language are of a paramount importance.

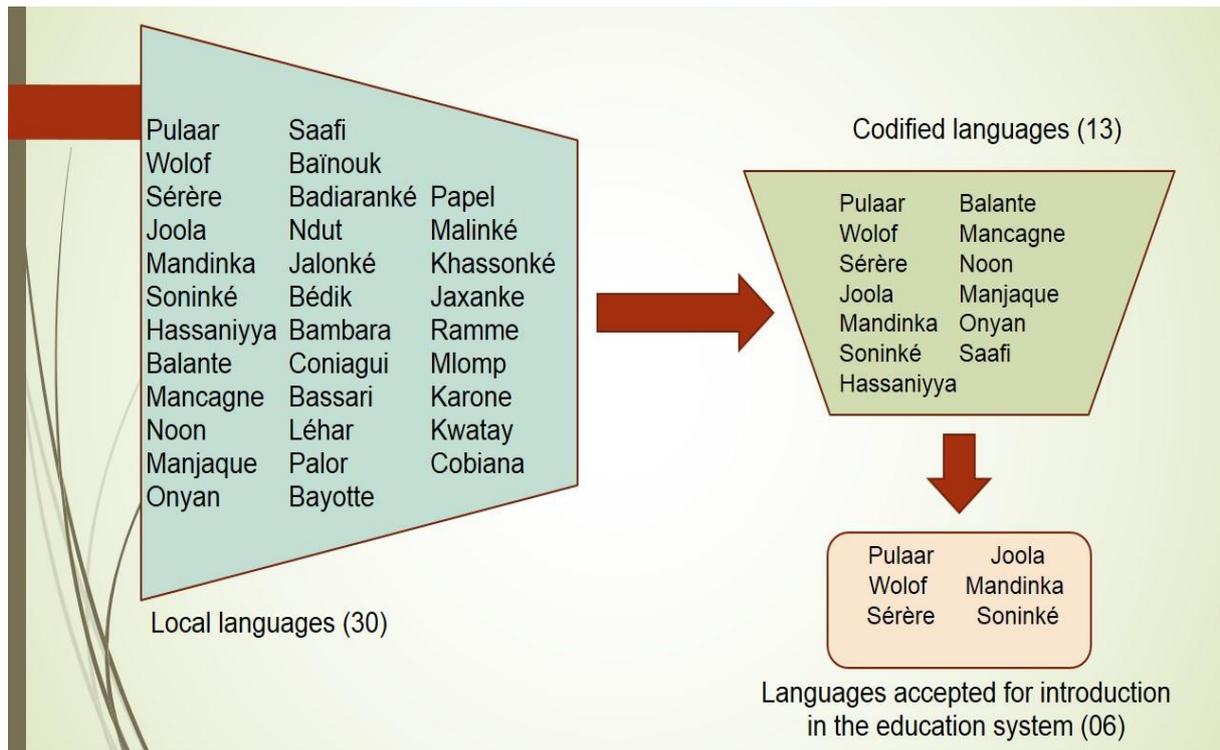
Cheikh Anta Diop insists on the importance of the linguistic factors in the promotion of what he calls the “cultural personality”. However, this linguistic awareness alone is not enough to achieve a “linguistic decolonization” of African literature. Indeed, it is necessary that African writers show evidences of creativity and proficiency.

Moreover, there must be sufficient writings of quality to constitute the basis of an adequate policy of development for the writings in national languages. African languages must have a “literary tradition” that allows them to resist the invasion of foreign languages. Alain Ricard states that “If the community is not able to produce itself the instrument of their literary expression and agree on the standard language, they inevitably give in to the pressures of European languages”.

From another standpoint, we may wonder if the writings in national languages will reach the target population; if it would not be a kind of “literary suicide” for African writers. The answers to these questions will no doubt contribute to providing concrete solutions to the issue.

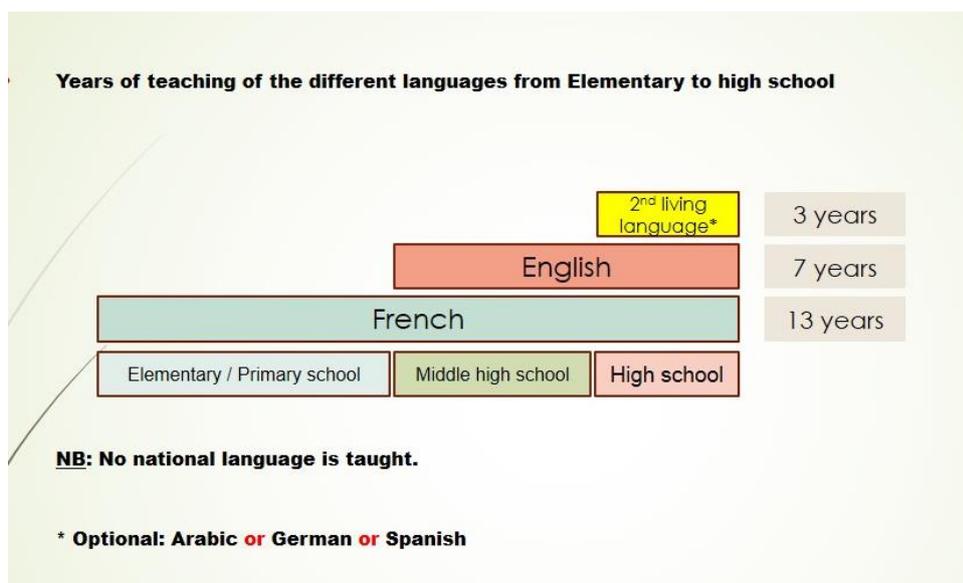
However, we are convinced that writing in national languages remains the most effective way for the restoration of our cultural identity; because it simply means that there exist actually literary traditions which are typically African. But it would be totally useless if those writings cannot be read and understood by a wider audience. Therefore, one of the most important steps is the codification and popularization of the national languages.

In Senegal, we find more than 40 local languages, of which only 13 are codified. Among those codified languages, only 6 were recognized in 2001 as enough equipped to be taught at school: pular, wolof, sérère, joola, mandinka, and soninké.



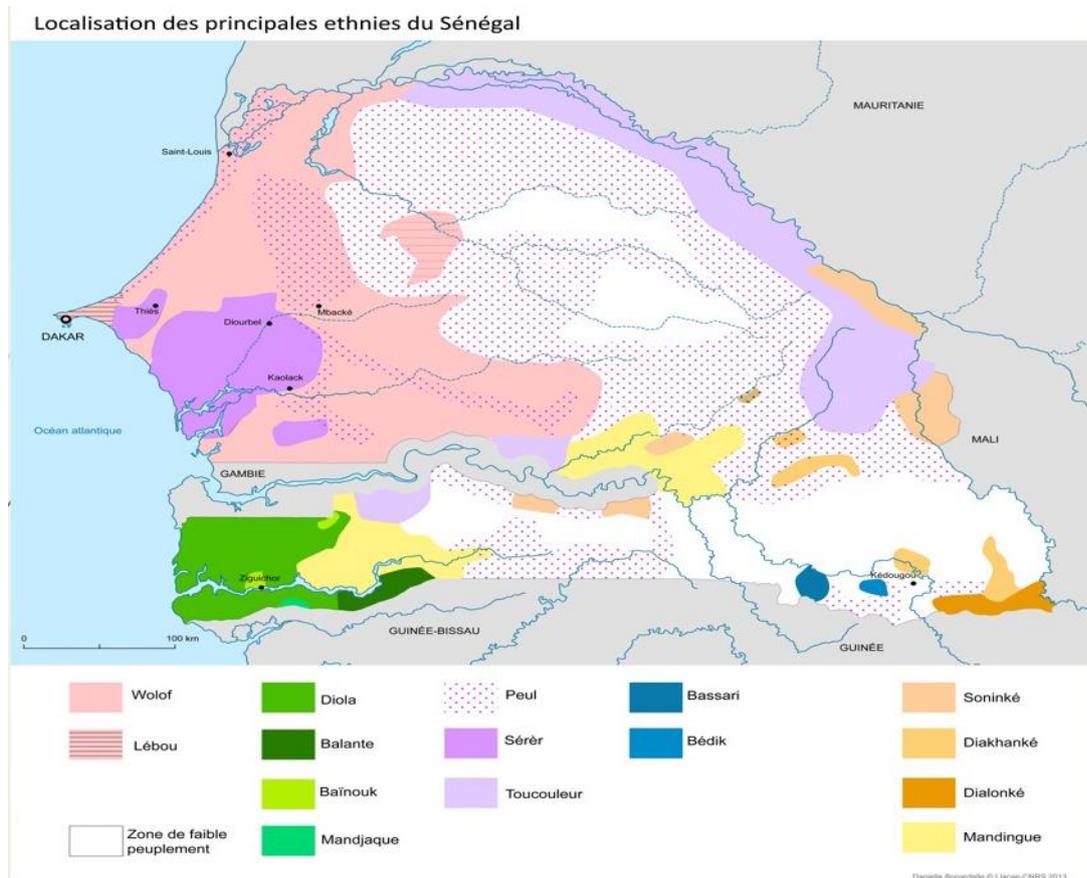
However, none of the languages is actually taught at school.

The main obstacle is related to political rivalries. In the 1980s, the Senegalese government decided to implement what they called a “functional literacy teaching”. The purpose was to train the civil servants in the writing and reading of Wolof. Unfortunately, that policy did not last long because the majority of the civil servants, who were not actually Wolof, did not accept that supremacy of the Wolof language over their own mother tongues.



As we can see on the chart above, French is taught from elementary school to high school (13 years). English is taught from middle high school to high school (7 years). From high school, the student choose a second living language (Arabic or German or Spanish). We therefore notice that only the European languages are taught in the Senegalese education system from elementary school to high school.

In a research I conducted in 2005 about the introduction of national languages in the education system, when I was administering one of the questionnaires, I noticed that each interviewee answered in favor of his mother tongue. But the languages that came frequently are Pulaar first, then Wolof. This step forward made by the Pulaar language reflects in fact the dispersion of the languages in the country.



In fact, Pulaar is the umbrella term referring to two languages of the same family: Peul and Toucouleur. So, when we look at the map, we see that the Pulaar language is more present in the country.

To summarize, we can refer to the table below.

Main problems	Suggested solutions
A Eurocentric system.	Revise the education system by centering it more on Africa and the Africans.
Scarcity of data in national languages.	Undertake a digging process to find out all existing data; train peoples so that they could produce enough documents in national languages.
Absence of political will from governments.	Oblige governments to take into account the national languages.