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REVISITING LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN BAABA SILLAH'S *DREAMS OF THE ISLANDS*: A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract

The themes of linguistic nationalism and identity construction abound in Baaba Sillah's Dreams of the Islands. This paper examines how Sillah uses language in reconstructing a national identity anchored in the cultural and linguistic heritage of Kataminian society. Our goal is to investigate how the novel questions the logic of imported epistemologies, especially through the colonial education system, and reimagine new cultural identities based on the framework of postcolonial African literature. A postcolonial approach is used to analyze how the novel engages with themes of linguistic hierarchies and cultural imperialism. The methodological approach lays emphasis on linguistic vitality to unearth the conflict between imposed linguistic hierarchies and efforts to reclaim cultural recognition. In this critical inquiry into language and identity in Dreams of the Islands, it echoes a decolonized future where the voices of the marginalized are made central to national and global discourse.

Keywords: *linguistic nationalism, reclaiming indigenous languages, dreams of the islands, linguistic hierarchies; identity construction.*

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INTRODUCTION

Dreams of the Islands (2013) is Baaba Sillah's third in a sequel of three related novels; the other two are When the Monkey Talks (2004) and Dabbali Gi (2010). The novel unfolds a postcolonial society's collective meditation on the socio-political and socio-cultural entanglements under colonial rule within the decade of the 1950s. Set in Kataminaland, Sillah's fictional name for present-day Gambia, the novel confronts the imperial order on three fronts: intellectual, political, and economic. Intellectually, the language of colonial education, which also happens to be the language of the courts and, erroneously, of social mobility, is brought under scrutiny. Moreover, the seed of political emancipation is sown in the novel, with grassroots politicians taking the initial steps in the formation of political parties. Finally, the novel features the main setting as a vibrant trading center where numerous commercial activities and trading practices culminate.

When viewed through a postcolonial lens, Dreams of the Islands becomes an emblem of cultural hybridity and power struggle from the vantage point of an enlightened survivor whose goal is to keep the records right. The novel tells the story of some youngsters who meet onboard a ship from Bathurst to Georgetown to attend high school education. Through the journey and their stay in the provincial island city, these youngsters developed strong bonds of friendship that would last decades. The narrative is a recollection of their high school memories, where the different narrators have borne witness to the dreams that they carried from the island, which continued to shape their lives even in their golden ages. Therefore, it is not a surprise that when these friends meet at a class reunion, their discussion will feature the dreams they brought from the island, which include struggles for political independence and cultural recognition. More generally, the novel reflects not only imperial domination but also the resilience of indigenous traditions, highlighting how the colonial language of education and governance has been a site of both oppression and agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of language occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse

(Oliveira, 2020). Mufwene (2017) considers it as the cornerstone in discussions of colonial power structures that have conditioned linguistic vitality and hegemony. Language is power. In the words of Ngugi (1994), language is the most significant tool through which "power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" (p. 9). Ngugi adds that "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (p. 9). In essence, during colonial conquest, language did to the mind what the bullet did to the bodies of the colonized. It is the view of writers like Ngugi that language should be appreciated as a weapon of power and resistance much the same way arms embolden defiance and thuggery among those who wield them (Oliveira, 2020; Ngugi, 1994). Hence, language becomes crucial in the process of decolonization, guaranteeing agency to the colonized. Mbembe (2021), commenting on Ngugi's decolonizing theories on language, argues that for a university in Africa to be considered decolonized, it "should put African languages at the center of its teaching and learning project" (p. 57). This position signposts the relevance of language in the process of knowledge production.

We cannot talk about linguistic nationalism without talking about linguistic vitality or linguistic hegemony, which cannot be discussed without making reference to multilingual societies, a meeting of cultures, or migrations of various sorts that have resulted in the creation of those hybrid spaces. Rajagopalan (2001) argues that in such a multilingual setup, our linguistic identity becomes a "function of the political climate" (p. 23) prevailing in those societies at specific historical periods. In most instances, language becomes a tool for resistance and a marker of culture and identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Describing languages as "flags of allegiance," Rajagopalan (2001, pp. 17-18) posits that any basic knowledge of world history will support the assertion that "languages and language loyalties" are often exploited by dominant groups for political gains. Citing the ancient Greeks, for instance, Rajagopalan (2001) reflects on how they (the Greeks) "developed their sense of national/ethnic identity by observing how unlike the Barbarians they were" (p. 19). To achieve this configuration is to create a sense of difference between languages, adding that:

It is not that differences between languages actually impair

communication between peoples; it is that people who do not want to communicate across their sectarian divides are apt to 'conjure up' linguistic differences where none in fact exists so as to justify their inability (or rather, unwillingness) to communicate. (Rajagopalan, 2001, p. 23)

Fanon (2008) does talk about the "zone of nonbeing," a concept in which the colonizer questions the humanity of the colonized, especially the black African, and which was used as a justification for crimes against humanity on colonized African subjects. After much struggle, these initial hurdles give way to questions of equity between the colonized and the colonizer (Memmi, 2003). However, the colonizer could not come to terms with the idea of being equal with the colonized in terms of factors such as history, race, and global geopolitics (Gordon, 2015). The same challenge goes for language. A denial of the existence of another or other languages besides one's own precedes the questions of equity. Rajagopalan (2001) contends that in order for one to acknowledge the presence of other languages different of one's own, "it is absolutely essential that we convince ourselves that those alternative forms of speech are just as comprehensible to its speakers as ours is to ourselves" (p. 21).

At this point, the issue of language power comes into play. The language of the colonizer, which is the language of the conqueror, is introduced (or rather enforced) into the intellect of the colonized (Ngugi, 1994; Oliveira, 2020). Mbembe (2021) tells us that "a people, overcome through force of arms, suddenly has to submit to the control of foreigners of another color, another language, a completely different culture, convinced of their own superiority" (p. 102). In fact, his position was that "the European languages spoken in Africa are foreign languages imposed by force on defeated and subjected populations" (Mbembe, 2021, p. 97). The result of such language dynamics empowered European-language traditions, linking them to "the global, the written, and the modern, while African-language traditions were often qualified in relation to the local, the oral, and the past (or tradition)" (Marzagora, 2015, p. 1).

Nail (2015) posits that social motion is influenced by either expansion

or expulsion. This concept could be attested in Dreams of the Islands, where migration has taken on different forms. Two of the forms presented in the novel immigrated from the West. These include European colonialist administrators and expatriates on the one hand, and on the other, repatriated freed slaves to Kataminaland. A second kind involves the migration of natives from the city and various parts of the protectorate to the provincial capital of Georgetown in pursuit of high school education. This group includes those who migrate in search of better opportunities at the trading centers along the river and to the colonial capital, Bathurst. These patterns of movement between the islands of Bathurst and Georgetown function as metaphors for the fluidity of identity.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this qualitative study, selected passages from Dreams of the Islands—the third in Sillah's trilogy—are analyzed. Two conceptual leanings have been applied. The first draws on Mufwene's (2017) notion of language vitality to understand the political factors that condition language choices. The second anchors on language and identity, using Ngugi's (1994) arguments on the language of education in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The combined use of these concepts offers deeper insights into the role of language in carving identity and nationalistic tendencies. Through close reading, which is a core interpretive tool in qualitative literary research, this paper investigates Sillah's presentation of the themes of linguistic nationalism and identity construction. Since the study involves issues of language, power, and identity, a postcolonial theoretical framework is considered most appropriate.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

Language in Dreams of the Islands appears both as a tool for empowerment and control. Nail (2016) highlights this importance when he argues that "the fluency of language is tied to the fluency and flow of nationalized social mobility" (p. 149). The narrative corroborates this view because, since the introduction of English as the medium of instruction and governance in Kataminaland, it seems to serve a dual function. On one hand, it offers access to education, guarantees opportunities, and facilitates

socioeconomic mobility, summed up in "if I don't learn English I'm going to suffer" (Juffermans, 2007, p. 126). Nail (2015), in his description of the figure of the "barbarian," mentions among three concepts "the inability to speak the language of the political center (Greek)" (p. 53). If those without English are relegated to the fringes of society, they might as well fall within the nomenclature of "barbarian" since "the borders of the nation are not only territorial, they are linguistic" (Nail, 2016, p. 149). Similarly, Ngugi (1981) argues that for the colonizer to ensure total economic and political control, the colonizer schemes his control over the "cultural environment; education, religion, language, literature, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people's values and ultimately their world outlook, their image and definition of self" (p. 12). These arguments are often central in postcolonial texts, and so it is with Dreams of the Islands.

In Dreams of the Islands, English does not only erroneously become a yardstick for measuring intelligence but also becomes a criterion for accessing opportunities and profitable business (Juffermans, 2007). In essence, it was the language of power. On the other hand, the English language enforces a cultural hierarchy that devalues indigenous languages and knowledge systems, perpetuating the colonizers' dominance (Mbembe, 2021). Furthermore, Mbembe asserts that:

At the purely political level, the colonial language would have had the function of imposing the law of a power without authority on a militarily defeated people. To do this, the colonial language needed not only to kill off the native languages that resisted it or erase all traces of them. (Mbembe, 2021, p. 98)

Sillah seems to express his suspicion of such an imposition on African consciousness by interrogating the rationale behind the suppression and humiliation meted out to students who are found wanting for speaking their indigenous tongues in school and how such an act has a demoralizing effect on their psyche (Oliveira, 2020). The narrator says:

I still cringe, often in my sleep, thinking about the humiliation of the

"vernacular symbol". Imagine the stench, the rattling noises and the stigma attached to speaking your own language. Imagine also the associations that were etched in your sub-conscious about the definition of your own self through the other's language? Just think of how our minds have been subjugated and our spirits conquered by the acceptance of the language of the conqueror. (Sillah, 2013, p. 316)

But what justification did the colonizer give for the above situation? Taking cues from the senior resident master's mantra, "School encourages pupils to mix, live, and learn from each other" (p. 133), one may assume that school will serve the purpose of an even hybrid space where cultures will be allowed to mix freely. But Sillah seems to hold a certain reservation towards such a behest even when it seemingly promises a community that could "look beyond ethnicity, culture, and area of origin in the country" (p. 133). The policy promised that by the time the students leave at the end of their studies, they will have attained a level of basic competence in one another's indigenous languages to not have the need for any interpreter during interactions. However, Sillah tends to argue that such a pronouncement is just a smokescreen, as it is part of a scheme aimed at injecting a new language with all its aesthetic reflections into the intellect of Kataminians. In this scheme, only English is spoken throughout the week, as captured in the excerpt below:

You will not speak to any one in Wolof by the way. In the course of the weekend you can speak Jaaxanka or Pepel or any other language. There are severe penalties for speaking the "vernacular". The least would be to wear an atrocious symbol made up of the most despicable items such as broken sandals, ox thigh bones, worm infested tins of milk and so on. The more debasing the symbol, the better for punishment! (p. 133)

In the end, instead of students learning from each other's language, they are all coerced into learning English. Wherever intergroup dialogue was enhanced aside from being a school rule, English became the option, as attested in the narrator's description of his linguistic choices: "He could not speak Wolof well and I could not speak Mandinka beyond exchanging pleasantries. So we spoke English" (p. 38). Sillah's suspicion becomes heightened, and through his characters, he launches his resistance through

questioning the role of language in social advancement and national identity. Similarly, Mbembe (2021) posits that "there could be no political, economic, or technological liberation without linguistic autonomy" (p. 98). Imagine what happens in a court hearing as succinctly captured in Sillah's words:

The magistrate may hear the case in Mandinka, the court clerk could be Wolof, and may provide her own translation in English. The magistrate gives his judgment in English based on what farrago he has before him. Then the accused persons will be made to put their thumbprints on the dotted line as having read over and acknowledged the declaration as correct. It is difficult to estimate how much of that truth had been impeded by language and how much of the truth and nothing but the truth had fallen between the languages and the accused person's inability to read and write. (p. 118)

From the above excerpt, it would be true to say that the compulsion for learning English extends beyond the school and classroom. Those who have it have the privilege and power to decide on behalf of those who do not (Juffermans, 2007). A loophole in the case of the court is that the clerk, who is described as corrupt, has the privileged role of being able to overturn statements and trick the non-literate into signing to endorse his inaccurate statements. In short, he works for the highest bidder. It seems that Sillah's theory about language is summed up when he writes that language "is a powerful tool in the evolution of the distinctive spirit of a people and the era in which they lived. The pupils had imbibed the value of English and did not miss this point" (p. 157). This has made his characters question the justification for the enforcement of English in school and as the language of the court, even when the majority of the cases involve illiterate people. This may drive us to posit that the choice of language in the court is equally a well-thought-out scheme to suppress indigenous languages and coerce natives into learning English for their own protection (Juffermans, 2007).

LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES, CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND IDENTITY CRISIS

The narrative explores how language hierarchies affect power and

identity. Mufwene (2017) posits that colonization and globalization are often cited as causes of indigenous language endangerment and loss (LEL), which has inspired a lot of debate around linguistic hierarchies. Consequently, we may postulate that when the colonial language met the various indigenous languages in Kataminaland, a pidgin was born, but instead of using it to encourage assimilation and acculturation, the colonizer rejected it, creating an atmosphere where the colonial language is associated with prestige while the indigenous languages are relegated to vernaculars. Dreams of the Islands captures this in the policy that deters students from speaking their native languages throughout the week or be met with a severe punishment. It is apparent that characters who have a certain mastery of English are frequently elevated within the social strata, while those who rely on vernacular languages are considered limited and face exclusion and marginalization (Juffermans, 2007). This disparity reflects the broader societal valuation of colonial languages over indigenous ones, perpetuating once again inequalities rooted in colonial histories.

Inasmuch as the school principal promises that high school will offer students the rare opportunity of being able to learn the languages of their friends and classmates, in reality it only offered them a foreign language to learn while at the same time suppressing the indigenous languages. As a response, Sillah (2013) sometimes laces his narrative with subtle vernacular expressions such as "Moom Sa boppa, fang sotoo, Moom sa rééw, Noo mutoo, Tee sitoo" (p. 281) or for the narrator to say, "I am entrusting you in the safe hands of Yalla, yonentabi ak Seehu Tijaan" (p. 24). Other isolated examples include kabba fruit, selling marabaa, or Ndongoyaa Youth Cult. The choice to use these vernacular texts in the narrative could be read as a challenge on the dominance of the colonial language. The art also suggests that while the imperial language dominates discourse in official contexts, indigenous languages, on the other hand, flourish in informal and private contexts, highlighting the tenacity of indigenous languages as markers of cultural pride and resistance.

Dreams of the Islands captures the bane of the colonial renaming of places such as James Island and Bathurst as an attempt to overwrite indigenous history and culture. These alien names, imposed by imperial

authorities, act as tools of domination. They uproot the cultural and historical worth of local identities and replace them with the worldview of the colonizer. These renaming practices rob the postcolony of not only their cultural identity and ownership of renamed institutions but also their collective memory as a people (Williamson, 2023).

The traditional names of most indigenous places have a history and an essence to them. By renaming them, these aspects are lost, leaving society vulnerable to new histories and identities. The colonizer inadvertently asserts his authority and reshapes narratives in such colonized societies while suppressing indigenous voices in the process (Williamson, 2023). The imposition of foreign names such as Armitage High School—named after a brutal colonial governor—is a colonial legacy that symbolizes the subjugation and marginalization of local histories and traditions in Kataminaland. This can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism and has been the inspiration for a character in the novel to utter the following: "But for now, we are still under colonial rule and I figure that after we become independent, we will begin to rename these places and call them by the names of our own heroes, our heroines and our champions" (Sillah, 2013, p. 94). This was one of the dreams that was hatched on the island but had to follow the character through to their golden ages.

The novel highlights how the enforced use of the English language in schools suppresses indigenous languages, leading to their marginalization within both the school system and the wider society. This practice manifests the role of the colonizer's language as a tool of cultural imperialism (Ngugi, 1981). The colonial education system, as depicted in the narrative, shapes aspirations and identities by promoting Western ideals and standards (Mart, 2011). The narrative has it that Armitage students have a strong admiration for their Headmaster, whose English language competence accounts for a great part of his strength for "he spoke with the tongue of the Englishman." The headmaster himself had not failed to repeat to his students that English was a "superior language that ranked highest in the pecking order of languages" (p. 157). As such, the school had not failed to imbibe the value

of English in students, as can be drawn from the following excerpt:

In fact, many a pupil hid behind walls and corners so as to eavesdrop on their Masters' language and to hear them pronounce the magical words, marvel at the ease they had with the inflections, and how they had transformed the use of the language into a fine art. (p. 157)

From the above reference to the aesthetic use of the colonizer's language, we learn that Western-educated elites are considered the standard and role models for students to emulate (Juffermans, 2007). This phenomenon has resulted in conditioning students' behaviors and values to align with colonial norms. By idolizing and mimicking their teachers, students have been disconnected from their indigenous cultural roots as they strive to attain the markers of success in the colonial education system. Sillah claims that for those endowed with English language skills, "some exercised its power with recklessness, some were fairly judicious in its usage, others were humbled by it, and yet others viewed and used it as a passport to power, prestige, and prosperity" (p. 157). These reflect a society deeply stuck in ambivalence, since it reveals the tensions and contradictions faced by individuals caught between preserving their heritage and embracing a source of social mobility.

The elders, in their stern favor for tradition and indigenous ways, look upon foreign ways as the storm that uprooted their customs and cast their world into disarray. Consequently, this older generation approaches foreign culture and values with suspicion and caution. They hold on to the oral history that had been passed on to them through the ages, even though Western education later came in to question the accuracy of such modes of historical knowledge transfer. In contrast to the old, the young have their minds shaped in schools built by the colonizers and therefore see those same ways as ladders to climb out of the shadows and to grasp new possibilities and status. Such exuberance triggers a tug-of-war between holding fast to the ways of tradition and seemingly progressive thoughts of embracing change (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). As the characters traverse this uneasy path, some cling to the old ways, wearing their traditions like a second skin, while others drape themselves in Western clothes and speak the colonizer's tongue, weaving the old and the new into something neither fully one nor the

other.

Therefore, in order to give the work its cultural relevance, Sillah laces it with indigenous expressions, folktales, and proverbs. One recognizable trait in the narrative is Sillah's choice in using the Wolof word "Goorgi" in place of "Mister" as a complimentary term for certain respected men in the community, such as Goorgi John Koli Fay, Goorgi Usmaan Jeng, or Goorgi Njaaga Samba. At other times, he resorts to using standalone indigenous expressions such as "Moom Sa boppa, fang sotoo, Moom sa rééw, Noo mutoo, Tee sitoo" (p. 281) or a combination of English and local expressions such as "Jambakeero green skirts," to describe Armitage girls' uniforms; "Ceebet season," to describe the season before the rains; or "kabaa and tol fruits," to describe some wild tropical fruits. In addition, Sillah tends to deliberately deviate from conventional spelling of traditional names such as Siise (instead of Ceesay), Njaay (for Njie), Mareena (for Marenah), or Foode (for Foday). Such word choices and writing techniques applied by Sillah echo Ngugi's (1994) submission, which involves the usage of a "non-conformist spelling style" (p. 8).

Moreover, the use of indigenous proverbs abounds in the text. Sillah borrows wise old sayings, mainly from Wolof and Mandinka (the two most widely spoken languages in The Gambia). The choice to reference these expressions seems to be two-sided. One of the functions is to break the myth of the absence of wisdom, but more importantly, it is to show how the essence of certain expressions is lost when translated into another language. To a native Wolof speaker, the proverb "to every mouth that God opens, God will put bread in it" (p. 233), or the proverb "one must never make mention of the names of people or count an audience. There will always be, as they say, in that very audience, others who deserve a mention and are not getting it" (p. 55), retain their meanings but lose the wittiness and aesthetics with which the native speaker makes such utterances. A similar situation is true for the Mandinka proverb, which says, "Often an old man may hide in the dark for some reason. However, if no one else sees him, he must be able to see himself" (p. 60). Again, this expression is robbed of its beauty when

translated into the colonizer's language. Perhaps Sillah's intention is to get his readers to repeat the expression in the native language to attain a certain degree of closeness to the text.

Apart from indigenous expressions and proverbs, Sillah's wits at being a great storyteller have not gone unnoticed. Gomez and Fanneh (2015) referred to him as a new "brand of a writer of literature and a new story-teller" (p. 166). Similarly, in Dreams of the Islands, Sillah blends traditional storytelling within the art of novel writing. Some of the folktales in Dreams of the Islands include Abdu Malfaa, the tale of the hippo hunter; Gambi Yella, the legend of Samba Gelaa Jeegi Bah; and the legend of the apes and the stone circles. These tales, having been passed down through oral tradition from generation to generation, debunk the assertion that no work of literature existed in the colony before the arrival of the colonizer, as proposed by oral literature experts who claim that "only written Europhone literature, in its 'modernity', falls within the realm of aesthetics, while oral traditions, not quite 'literature', pertain to the domain of anthropology" (Marzagora, 2015, p. 1). Such a process of categorization certainly limits the contributions from the non-West, especially colonized societies whose languages have not been developed into autography. However, although the folktales in Dreams of the Islands might not have been written, they contain the major elements that make up a literary work that leaves one to ponder over the whole practice of classifying literary works.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores how colonialism, in Dreams of the Islands, has left its mark on the socio-political and socio-cultural space in Kataminaland. Take those colonial renaming practices, for instance, or the institutionalization of language hierarchies. They enhance exposing the scars in how Kataminians keep negotiating their identities. This approach to Dreams of the Islands unearths Sillah's subtle contribution to postcolonial discourse by shedding light on the multifaceted struggles and triumphs of a formerly colonized society. Linguistic nationalism and identity construction may be considered as the novel's triumphs through the steadfastness of colonized Kataminians in protecting their languages and cultures. Dreams of the Islands then becomes a space for negotiating

between the remnants of colonial rule and the aspirations for self-definition in a formerly colonized nation. One additional lesson from Dreams of the Islands is that while language has been cited by many earlier writers as a tool for subjugation and cultural alienation, Sillah presents it as a contested space for liberation and self-expression.

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