Language Documentation as a Strategy for the Empowerment of the Minority Languages of Africa

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1. Introduction

Following a numbers of conferences and workshops which have been organized in recent years in Africa to discuss language issues[1], two major preoccupations have been identified as paramount, namely (i) how to make African languages play more active and effective roles in the development of the African continent and the individual African countries and (ii) how to safeguard the indigenous languages particularly the endangered languages, as valuable resources for Africa and national heritage in the individual African countries. One of the solutions to both preoccupations was found to be an active and protracted program of language documentation throughout Africa (Kube 2006). This solution was based on the fact that most indigenous African languages have not been sufficiently described or codified. Therefore a systematic description and codification of the indigenous languages would empower these languages for public use, preserve them for future generation as well as give them more utilitarian value.

At the Bamako workshop held in March 2006, it was observed that linguists ought to play a more active role not only in describing and promoting all the indigenous languages in the respective African countries, but also in sensitizing their governments to devise more supportive policies, particularly with the intervention of the AU-sponsored African Academy of languages (ACALAN).[2] The following recommendations and resolutions were made at that workshop (Kube 2006:10):

- Recognize and promote research capacities available at African universities and research institutions;

- Develop research projects aimed not only at documentation but also revitalization and intellectualization of African languages;

- Encourage collection, transfer and exchange of good practices in the safeguarding of languages;

- Consult with beneficiary communities before starting any documentation project, involve communities in the research work and accompany research projects with capacity-building in the communities;

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[1] Such conferences and workshops include: the International workshop on Safeguarding Linguistic Diversity in Africa organized by the AU-supported Academy of Languages (ACALAN) jointly with UNESCO, held in Bamako, Mali, from 23rd to 25th March 2006; the 5th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL), held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 7th to 11th August 2006; and the International Workshop on Sharing Best Practices in Safeguarding of the Endangered Languages of Africa, organized by UNESCO, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 9th to 10th February, 2007.

[2] The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) was created in 2003 as an arm of the African Union (AU) with the primary mandate of promoting regional and sub-regional cooperation in the development of the African languages for public use in their respective countries. The Headquarters of ACALAN is in Bamako, Mali.

- Promote the use of African languages both as teaching subject and as medium of instruction at African universities;

- Establish a database listing languages and research domains that need urgent attention and intervention in order to concentrate and optimize research efforts;

- Create synergies between universities and among linguists through various instruments and platforms such as sharing of Internet discussion lists, creating electronic newsletters, developing bibliographies and creating online data archives;

- Establish guidelines and procedures for language standardization in Africa;

- Concentrate linguistic research on standardization and harmonization of orthographies and alphabets, terminology development and preparation of tools for using African languages in Information and Communication Technology (ICT);

- Consolidate and extend existing continental networks on specific research domains (terminology, translation, lexicography, etc.);

- Create national offices of ACALAN;

- Create language commissions for cross-border languages bringing together linguists, NGOs, related governmental bodies and members of speaker communities.

Also, at the fifth World Congress of African linguistics, held in Addis Ababa, in August 2006, three important parallel sessions were organized, namely language mapping in Africa, endangered languages and approaches to language documentation. Most of the papers presented in these sessions gave case studies involving the description and documentation of particular languages as a way of linguistic preservation or empowerment. It was generally observed that language mapping was important in Africa in determining the location, distribution, number of speakers and levels of vitality of the various languages in a country or region. Such information was crucial not only in guiding language planners in making informed decisions but also in enabling linguists and ethnographers to carry out documentation work systematically. In fact, it was noted that language mapping was one important aspect of language documentation. On the other hand, there was a great concern over the alarming rate of language shift and language death all over the continent. New strategies of language description and codification involving partnerships with the relevant communities and other institutions and organizations were recommended. Equally, more accessible, comprehensive and language-based descriptive approaches should, as much as possible, be applied.

Moreover, at the international workshop on "Sharing Best Practices in the Safeguarding of the Endangered Languages of Africa", organized in Addis Ababa in February 2007, the main concern was how to identify best practices in the safeguarding of the endangered languages in the continent. The main question was therefore how to accelerate the process of documentation. The following recommendations were made (Kube 2007:9-10):

- Prepare and disseminate guidelines or standards for carrying out main safeguarding measures such as orthography development, dictionary and teaching manual design and for effective and equitable research-community cooperation;

- Continue collecting and disseminating approved models of university studies programs and curricula preparing students for community-based language documentation;

- Continue collecting and sharing good practices in safeguarding endangered languages, for instance through submission to the UNESCO Register of Good Practices in Language Preservation;

- Extend the UNESCO/ACALAN Data base on university departments and national research institutions to take stock also of other initiatives and actors in the field of safeguarding endangered languages (community-based, carried out by NGOs, etc.);

- Sustain the newly established network of African experts and institutions through setting up an email list for disseminating information, extending it to African universities other than those who took part in the meeting;

- Continue advocacy initiatives among governments, universities and speaker communities to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding African languages;

- Use summer schools as a means of providing extra training for students, professional linguists and community members in planning language safeguarding activities and in the techniques, principles and methods of language documentation. Funds should be sought from various sources;

- Link language safeguarding projects to the safeguarding of African cultures and traditional knowledge. One way of safeguarding indigenous knowledge was through projects based in the communities and undertaken by the community members with the help of linguists and ethnographers.

Thus language documentation has been found to be both crucial and central in the preservation, safeguarding and revitalization of the African languages. This paper examines the place and role of language documentation as an important strategy in the empowerment of the minority languages.[3] Its main argument is that documentation aimed at the description and codification of the endangered languages for use in the respective communities can be an effective way of not only safeguarding but also empowering these languages. The paper contends that documentation can be one strategy of revitalization of the endangered African languages of Africa, if it is carried out in collaboration with and for the benefit of the relevant communities.

2. Language documentation as a discipline

Documentation as a discipline has been made more explicit in recent years, especially after the publication of the proceedings of the conference on documentation which was held in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, in 2004. According to Himmelmann (2006:1ff), in the first chapter of the proceedings, language documentation is concerned with the methods, tools and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a lasting multipurpose record of a natural language. It is a record of a language in as many of its facets as possible, namely social/local variations, registers, written or oral modes, social or cultural uses and other aspects of its manifestation. Documentation is said to be multipurpose or multifunctional because the primary data that are compiled and preserved must be useful in all fields of theoretical and applied studies, that is language description, linguistic enquiring, cognitive linguistics, language planning, pedagogical linguistics, comparative linguistics and sociolinguistic surveys. On the

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[3] In this paper, a minority language will be defined as any language which is usually demographically inferior and normally not used in any public functions. Such a language is, therefore, marginalized as it is excluded in national affairs. As a result, the speakers tend to shift to the more privileged language(s).

other hand, language documentation is expected to be lasting as it is not only meant for immediate use, but also for the use of future generations. Hence, data must be preserved in lasting form, such as in the form of digitally stored multimedia corpora.

According to this conception, documentation aims at accuracy of the data through systematic and rigorous methods of investigation, comprehensiveness of content coverage by being as thorough as possible, usefulness of data in both theoretical and applied studies and the accessibility of the material to the various users. Language documentation in its new form has been described as a rapidly growing field which has evolved as a response to three concerns namely:

- The increasing concern over the endangered languages all over the world, a trend which is threatening the world linguistic diversity and therefore loss of important information about natural languages;

- The increasing concern over a number of scholars who are more concerned with theoretical concepts than the extent or accuracy of the data. Such scholars would be contended to work on scanty or non typical speaker data in their quest to support or disprove linguistic theories;

- The increasing concern, particularly by linguists who are emotionally attached to Africa, that linguistic analysis should not only benefit theoretical linguistics but should be useful to the relevant speech communities, since it is their rightful heritage. In fact, this stance has been taken in response to UNESCO's tireless outcry for the preservation of the *Intangible Heritage and Linguistic Diversity* and the increasing consciousness about the speakers' rights to use their language in order to participate fully in their national affairs as part of democracy and equality.

Hence the threefold sources of motivation for documentation, namely to preserve data of endangered languages, to build comprehensive linguistic databases and to service the relevant communities, have played a major role in the establishment of documentation programs and projects all over the world and the carrying-out of numerous documentation projects supported by international bodies, such as UNESCO, the Endangered Language Fund (ELF), The Endangered Language Programme (ELP) at SOAS as well as the other numerous donor organizations in Europe and America.

3. Documentation needs for Africa

From the several recent conferences and workshops held in Africa in connection with the promotion or safeguarding of the African languages, most linguists in Africa would like to lay most emphasis on the third motivation, namely to service the relevant communities. The process of documentation should aim at not only the preservation of data of the indigenous languages for academic purposes but also, and mainly, the empowerment of the communities so as to be able to use their languages extensively and proactively. The empowerment process should also enable the speakers to value their languages, to build a higher self-esteem and to readily transmit their languages and culture to the younger generations.

It is clear from a number of studies that many of the African languages are marginalized and therefore highly endangered (e.g. Bamgbose 2000, Batibo 2005, Grenoble and Whaley 2006, and Nettle and Romaine 2000). Most of the more than 1,800 minority languages in Africa are endangered, to varying degrees. Hence, the process of documentation must be carried out to keep record to these languages before their extinction. But just keeping records would mean that we accept their extinction—like recording family information from an old person lying in a death-bed without doing anything to save his life. We need to carry out documentation as another way of empowering and revitalizing the threatened minority languages in Africa.

4.   Documentation for language empowerment

Language empowerment is the institution of a set of measures to raise the social status of a language as well as to make it more viable in handling public domains. According to Bamgbose (2000:17), there are a number of measures that can be instituted to empower a language. These include the description of the different aspects of the language structure; codification, that is the preparation of usable materials based on the standard form of the language; and capacity building, that is the development of the language in terms of structure and lexicon so as to meet new communicative demands. Moreover, language empowerment enables the indigenous languages to be used in education, literacy campaign, local administration and mass media. Such public use usually raises its prestige and its utilitarian value. Lastly, the esteem of a language sometimes is associated with incentives to the users, such as socio-economic opportunities or access to jobs. It is often disheartening to see regulations in many school systems where pupils are forbidden to speak their languages in the school compound, because they have to speak only the county's official language which often happens to be English, French or Portuguese. Equally, in many African countries, the tendency has been to use the knowledge of English, French or Portuguese as an important requirement for those seeking white-collar jobs, even where such candidates were proficient in the local languages.

Documentation for language empowerment aims at not only the compilation and presentation of linguistic primary data but also and especially, the preparation of materials which are usable in the relevant speech community and the country in question. These materials would include: practical orthography; user-friendly reference grammar; basic reference dictionary; specialized dictionaries or thesauruses of plants, wildlife, environment and indigenous knowledge systems; literacy materials (for learning and sustaining literacy); any variety of reading materials (historical, cultural, health) for cultural and socio-economic empowerment; and any other relevant materials. In fact, a number of documentation studies have already been carried out on several languages, to varying degrees, in Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Nigeria and Togo (Kube 2007). Also several specialized dictionaries have been prepared, particularly on bio-cultural aspects of plants and wildlife, such as the ones compiled by Brenzinger and Heine (1995), Cole (1995), and Heine and Legère (1995). Moreover, the inclusion of cultural studies in the teaching of African languages as foreign languages has generated a number of research projects aiming as the description and documentation of the cultural traditions of the relevant communities.[4] A good example is the monumental *Kiswahili Language and Culture* by Lioba Moshi (1998).

Evidently, one has to be mindful of the fact that some linguists prefer to focus exclusively on the theoretical features that the African languages manifest, rather than the welfare of the speakers or the fate of the languages themselves. The main argument of such scholars is that the fate of a language is an exclusive responsibility of the relevant community. The linguist has no business in the matter, except to document the language for record's sake. Such linguists maintain that languages have emerged and died for centuries. It is not therefore a matter about which mankind should be so much concerned.

5.   Case studies on documentation for empowerment
5.1. The case of the Naro language in Ghanzi District, West Botswana

Naro is a Central Khoesan language spoken by around 9,000 people in western Botswana and eastern Namibia. It is numerically one of the minority languages of Botswana, where, with a country's population of only 1.7 million, the majority of languages are spoken by less than 10,000 people, as

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[4] The production of documents on the traditions and customs of the communities whose languages are taught as foreign languages appears to be one of the most important objectives of the African Language Teachers' Association (ALTA).

Table 1 shows. The San languages, shown by an asterisk on Table 1, are the most endangered languages in Botswana due to their marginalization, small number of speakers and the traditional legacy of subjugation of their speakers by the dominant Bantu language speakers. On the other hand, Setswana, which is demographically and socio-politically the most dominant language, has attracted many second language speakers as it has assumed the roles of national language and lingua franca.

Table 1. The estimated number of speakers of the Botswana languages (after Batibo *et al.* 2003)

	Language	Estimated number of speakers	Percentage of speakers
1	Setswana	1,335,000	78.6%
2	Ikalanga	150,000	8.83%
3	Shekgalagarhi(including Shengologa)	48,000	2.82%
4	Thimbukushu	30,000	1.76%
5	Shiyeyi	18,000	1.06%
6	Nambya (Najwa)	15,000	0.88%
7	Sebirwa	12,500	0.73%
8	Zezuru (Shona)	12,000	0.70%
9	Otjiherero	11,500	0.67%
10	*Naro	10,000	0.59%
11	Sindebele	9,000	0.53%
12	Afrikaans	7,500	0.44%
13	Chikuhane (Sesubiya)	7,000	0.41%
14	Setswapong	6,000	0.35%
15	*Shua	6,000	0.035%
16	*!Xóō	5,000	0.29%
17	*Tshwa	5,000	0.29%
18	*Khwedam	4,500	0.27%
19	*Ju│'hoan	4,500	0.27%
20	Silozi (Serotsi)	3,000	0.02%
21	Sekgoa (English)	3,000	0.002%
22	*Kua	2,500	0.015%
23	*ǂKx'au‖'ein	2,500	0.015%
24	Rugciriku (Rumanyo)	2,300	0.14%
25	*‖Gana	1,300	0.008%
26	*Nama (Khoekhoegowab)	1,000	0.006%
27	*│Gwi	1,000	0.006%
28	*ǂHua	200	0.001%
	Total	**1,703,300**	**99.53%**

The Naro language has benefited from a vigorous project, known as Naro Language Project (NLP) which was started in the 1980s by the Reformed Church in D'kar village, western Botswana. The primary aims of the Project were to describe the language system, to promote literacy among the speakers and to translate the Bible into Naro. The activities of the Project were boosted in 1991 with the arrival of a Dutch linguist and missionary, Mr Hessel Visser and his wife, Coby Visser. The couple started to work tirelessly on the Naro language with the main aim of documenting it for community use and missionary activities. The documentation work has involved the following activities (Visser 2000):

- The description of the language by carrying our both phonological and grammatical studies;

- The designing of a standard orthography based on the sound system of the language. The orthography was designed with the involvement and acceptance of the Naro community;[5]

- The preparation of a user-friendly practical grammar and a sizeable reference dictionary. These documents have proven to be useful not only for the educated young Naro speakers, but also for the older generation;

- The compilation of literacy materials for both children and adults. The Project has prepared numerous user-friendly texts to help the Naro community members and outsiders in acquiring basic and functional literacy in the language. It has initiated regular literacy classes using these materials;

- The development of reading texts, such as short stories, history books, newsletters, reports and booklets on culture and income generation activities, so as to sustain literacy. The most popular publications include a magazine, known as *Naro Nxara*, meant to enhance reading skills while informing and entertaining the readers. The magazine, which is usually produced in 400 copies, comprises information on general knowledge, health and spiritual life;

- The translation of Bible passages in the Naro language, which has been carried out very successfully. The Naro Language Project has, as of 2007, translated 70% of the Bible (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naro_language_project, 2007). A popular booklet, known as *Daily Manna*, containing Bible passages is published regularly. With an average of 200 copies per issue, the booklet has helped in enhancing literacy skills and sensitizing the Naro people to make spiritual reflections.

The Project initiated classes in Naro for both children and adults. Parents and community leaders were involved in the organization of the curriculum and the learning activities. The learners were highly motivated as the content was based on their daily experiences and the literacy work was focused on cultural and socio-economic empowerment. As a result of this type of documentation which focuses on community and practical use of the primary data, the Naro language and the respective speakers have been highly empowered. This can be evidenced by the fact that the speakers have become more emotionally attached to their language, as they find it as valuable as the other languages, like Setswana or English.[6] This is because it can also be written down and that books can be produced for people to read. Thus, the speakers have developed more confidence and higher self-esteem, as they can now be identified by their language and culture. Moreover, the Naro parents are vigorously encouraging their children to learn the language, since they have now given value and want it preserved and used by future generations. The language is now attached to socio-economic gains in terms of literacy and income generating activities. The Naro people can now read and gain knowledge about culture, health, economic production and spiritual life in their mother tongue.

As a result, the Naro language has become vibrant and therefore has attracted second language speakers, particularly the |Gwi and ||Gana speakers, who find it as a key to better living socially and economically, particularly in having access to the many Naro publications. One of the effects of the

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[5] The speakers had a say in the choice of symbols, such as the rejection of the phonetic based click symbols which they considered to be undesired sticks.

[6] In fact, at the launching ceremony of the Naro dictionary in 1996, one of the community leaders is said to have stated that the fact that Naro language could be written down, just like Setswana and English, made him proud and confident, as that meant that his language was as good as other languages. This comment was encouraging as San communities have traditionally been subjugated and marginalized by the Bantu speaking groups.

documentation-based empowerment of Naro is that the language is now classified as one of the regional dominant languages in Botswana because of its vitality, use in some public domains and ability to attract speakers of other languages (Batibo 2005:52).

5.2. Collaborative research with Non-Government Organizations and Church groups in safeguarding and empowering minority language communities

Given the alarming degree of endangerment that most Botswana languages are experiencing, there has been a strong impetus to initiate collaborative research with other bodies that are working on the Botswana communities. One of the most active bodies is the Kuru Family of Organizations (KFO). The Kuru Family of Organizations (KFO) is a network of San-owned community development organizations, operating in the west and northwestern parts of Botswana and South Africa. It serves around 40 communities and covers a wide range of focus areas, including early childhood development and education, poverty alleviation, community based natural resource management, art and craft, community health, language development and land security. The members of the family are: Bokamoso Trust, Kuru D'kar Trust, Gantsi Craft, Komku Trust, TOCADI, Letloa Trust, San Arts and Crafts (all in Botswana) and South African San Institute in South Africa (Garay and le Roux 2005:1). In Botswana most of these organizations are found in the Okavango, Kgalagadi and Ghanzi districts.

Most of their activities in empowering the San communities have been successful mainly because of their research based approach, in which thorough understanding of not only the San needs but also the San way of life and aspirations are documented. Then solutions are sought with the San communities as the driving forces and leaders. Such activities have helped in instilling self-esteem and self-determination among the San communities in Botswana and South Africa. The collaboration between linguists and KFO has concentrated mainly on the area of linguistic empowerment. Linguists and ethnographers have collaborated with members of KFO, who normally comprise foreign volunteers and educated San speakers, and some Church organizations, to work out the phonological systems, conduct grammatical analyses and compile lexical items of the relevant languages, with the aim of designing orthographies, grammatical sketches and dictionaries. Such documents become valuable resources for the relevant communities not only in the establishing of literacy activities, but also in creating a sense of self-esteem and confidence. So far, basic descriptions and orthographies have been prepared, by different organizations,[7] for languages such as Ikalanga, Shekgalagarhi, Naro, Sebirwa, Shiyeyi, Setswapong, !Xóo, Ju│'hoan and Khwedam, through this strategy. Moreover, reference grammars, dictionaries and literacy texts have been made available for Ikalanga, Shekgalagarhi, Naro, Shiyeyi, !Xóo, Ju│'hoan and Khwedam, apart from the abundant literature found in well established languages such as English, Afrikaans, Setswana, Nama, Thimbukushu and Otjiherero.

The linguistic empowerment has in turn triggered social and economic empowerment as through mother-tongue literacy and pre-school education in local settings, the communities have been able to participate fully and meaningfully in developmental activities, attend to welfare matters in their communities and initiate their own projects, as not only their language is used in communication, but also records are written and read in their language. Moreover, with the help of KFO, Church groups and local organizations, many minority communities have initiated income generating activities, such as crafting, painting, sculpturing and embroidering. Through their literacy knowledge, they are able to market their produce and handcrafts, train in small business activities and conduct cultural tourism based on their produce. As a result, job opportunities have been created for a number of young people

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[7] There are other organizations which have also worked on the Bantu languages, such as the Lutheran Bible Translators and the local speakers' associations, such as KAMANAKAO (for Wayeyi), SPIL (for Bakalanga) and Chaula (for Bakgalagarhi).

in these communities. Thus, the most effective way of language and community empowerment involves a holistic approach, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. A holistic method of empowering a minority language

Linguistic empowerment		Socio-political empowerment		Economic empowerment
• Carry out a comprehensive sociolinguistic survey to determine patterns of language use • Conduct language description • Codify the language by establishing standard orthography, grammar and dictionary • Design literacy materials • Train literacy teachers • Introduce reading materials to sustain literacy		• Assert own perspective and self-determination • Gain appropriate land rights • Drive own education and literacy programs • Strengthen cultural and spiritual heritage • Build human capacity, leadership and self confidence • Have access to social and political benefits and services, as other citizens • Advocacy for supportive language policy		• Devise independent and sustainable economic base • Increase own income • Improve income utilization methods • Train in income generation skills

The effect of this linguistic empowerment process, which has in turn triggered both social and economic empowerment, in the Botswana remote communities, comprises increased per capita income in the relevant communities, increased number of youth reaching higher education, expanded functional literacy, development of positive attitudes towards own languages, healthier lifestyle, more self-confidence and self-determination, slowed rate of language shift, and easier learning of Setswana. Moreover, this type of community empowerment has increased self-esteem and sense of ownership in the communities, particularly those of the Khoesan origin, who were long subjugated by the Bantu groups.

5.3. Collaborative research in partnership with other institutions and donor agencies

Another strategy that linguists in Botswana have used in accelerating the rate of documentation of the Botswana languages is collaborative partnership with other institutions and donor agencies. One of the most successful programs, which has evolved from such partnership, is the UB-Tromso San Collaborative Research and Capacity Building Programme. This program is funded by NUFU, a Norwegian program for development, research and education dealing mainly academic research and educational co-operation. The program, which is carried out jointly between the University of Botswana (UB) and the University of Tromso in Norway, was started in 1996, with the overarching objective of promoting research by focusing on the linguistic, cultural, historical, social economic and legal situations of the San people, who make up some 100,000 individuals, scattered in many remote areas of mainly Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. While the University of Botswana uses the program to enhance its research undertakings on the San communities, the University of Tromso applies its extensive research experience on the Sami or Lapp communities in Norway to assist in empowering the San communities.

A number of studies have evolved from this collaborative venture, as can be witnessed in the various publications, many of which are to be found in a special annotated bibliography (Willet et al. 2002). In the area of language, the San studies have included sociolinguistic surveys to determine the

extent of language shift and maintenance, language attitudes and strategies of language revitalization; descriptive studies of some of the languages so as to prepare orthographies, grammars, dictionaries and glossaries; and specific studies of San culture and traditions (Hasselbring, 2000/2001). The program has provided funds for researchers to conduct documentation studies in language and other disciplines. Moreover, the program has attracted researchers from other countries in the southern African region as well as from abroad. New collaborative research partnerships are being established with institutions, such as the Institute of African Studies in Cologne (Germany), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (Japan) and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (England).

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to highlight the role of community based language documentation in the empowerment of the minority languages of Africa. In supporting the UNESCO-ACALAN advocacy for accelerated documentation activities in Africa the paper has shown how collaborative activities with other institutions, non governmental organizations and Church groups could enhance the process of documentation of the most endangered languages. Moreover, the collaborative nature of most of the research undertakings has created a high impact because of combined expertise, experience and resources. One advantage of such collaborative ventures is that many projects have attracted donors, who have provided funds. Thus, the vast collaborative research which is being undertaken on the various ethno-linguistic communities of Botswana has not only helped to preserve the linguistic and cultural wealth of these communities but also managed to revitalize the respective languages and the traditional way of life of the people. This is because the relevant communities have been involved in the various research undertakings, thus building a sense of participation and ownership. Many of the documents which emanate from such studies become relevant in the socio-economic empowerment of these communities and the preservation of their languages and culture.

It is true that documentation should be an activity of language compilation and preservation. However, while much emphasis has been laid on the use of documentation for theoretical and applied studies in linguistic and anthropological cycles, we should not lose sight of the fact that it should also be used to safeguard the intangible heritage of the communities in which the relevant languages are spoken as well as be a valuable national resource for the respective countries. Preserving a language should not only be recording it, as it will only remain in digital or media forms, while it dies in most of its oral forms. Rather, preserving a language should aim at empowering the language and its speakers so that it remains a living phenomenon.

Moreover, a community based documentation approach has the advantage of involving the cooperation and goodwill of the language speakers. It has been reported, in a number of incidents, that communities have become hostile or resentful to researchers as they see them come to take away their indigenous knowledge without themselves benefiting from such endeavors. Some researchers have resolved to pay big sums of money just to appease un-cooperating villagers, such as the case of the Khoesan groups in Botswana who consider themselves to be exploited by foreign scholars. The answer to all this is therefore a re-orientation in our research modes and aims, to be able to subscribe to both our institutional demands (i.e. publish or perish) and our obligations to the relevant communities, as in every language lies the accumulated knowledge of humanity, given that each language is a unique window of experience that the speakers have accumulated through time.

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