

# Reviving African Languages and Culture: The case of Aleck Macheso's Songs in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

African countries share a common history of colonialism. Colonialism which these people went through has seen them relegating their languages and culture. It has also impacted on their development potentials. The use of colonial languages by most African countries has seen them failing to move forward using their own indigenous languages. They are either looking East or West in a bid to solve their problems. Against this background, the task of this paper is to explore and enlighten how language can be a powerful tool to liberate people and empower them towards a better future. Chacha (2003) posits that to accomplish the Pan African goals and objectives, a release, a renewal and a re – awakening for the African people is needed. Africa must embrace a new approach. The new approach rests on recognition of the role of language, an indigenous African language which will not only facilitate social integration but also spur technological and economic prosperity. It is against such an understanding that the researcher in this article wants to elaborate the importance of using indigenous languages by local people to solve their problems and be able to move on within the confines of their culture. For that noble obligation to be fulfilled, the African renaissance model will be used together with Aleck Macheso's selected songs.

**Key words:** Reviving, indigenous languages, development, colonialism, culture, African renaissance

## Introduction

This article is intended to relate the role of language, indigenous African languages to communicate ideas that matter to the people concerned. It is there to lay bare the importance of using indigenous languages by local people to solve their problems and be able to move on within the confines of their culture. African people have been challenged with the colonial legacy of the language they are now using in almost every

sector of their day to day lives. They can no longer articulate their concerns in the language of their forefathers which they can best express what they would want through the use of their metaphors, proverbs and so forth. This is quite important for the indigenous people to do because once these rich linguistic variables are used they can awaken their mind and be able to see and solve their problems in a manner they would understand. It is on this basis that this paper is going to explore Macheso's selected songs and see how he has managed to capture people's problems and give solutions in a language that they understand thus re – awakening their language and culture. The songs used in the article are Baba namai, Mwari wenyasha, Ziva zvaunoda and Shedia among others.

### **Macheso and his music**

Alick Macheso came onto the music scene in 1998, with his debut album *Magariro*, which carried "Pakutema Munda". Simbaradzo (1999) was the turning point in his career and Mundikumbuke and Mai Rubhi brought Macheso into the limelight in the sense that he attracted quite a number of followers as he dealt with issues that concerns people hence he became a famous musician. The artist was to follow on the success of Simbaradzo with *Zvakanaka Zvakadaro*. *Zvakanaka Zvakadaro* was followed, in 2003, by *Zvido Zvenyu Kunyanya*. Macheso can dance, sing and play the guitar - a rare combination of skills among musicians. Macheso was born in 1968 in Shamva, 90 kilometres to the north of Harare, to parents of Malawian origin - a fact that was to inspire him to be able to speak and sing in five languages - Shona, Chichewa, Sena, Venda and Lingala. Growing on a farm, especially before Zimbabwe's Independence from Britain in 1980, the environment did not offer him many opportunities. In 1983, at the youthful age of fifteen, he left the farm compounds of Shamva to head for Harare. (The Herald, 15 July 2004)

Arriving in the capital at the invitation of a relative, who had been inspired by Macheso guitar-playing prowess at the farm compounds, the two went on a music-inspired journey, joining several bands, mostly sungura-playing outfits. In 1997, he broke ranks with Nicholas Zacharia, to form his own Orchestra Mberikwazvo. Macheso is well known throughout all of Africa as one of the most successful African singers and ranked among the best bass guitarist on the continent. Alick Macheso is Zimbabwe's best-ever selling artist with his album *Simbaradzo* being the highest ever sold album in Zimbabwe, a record which is yet to be broken by any artiste in Zimbabwe to date. *Simbaradzo* sold

350 000 copies breaking records for album sales in Zimbabwe, (The Herald, 20 August 2013). Macheso is believed to be arguably the best sungura artiste ever to emerge from Zimbabwe although Leonard Dembo (also a sungura great) was also good. In recent years Macheso has risen to become an advertising face for many corporations with his recent achievement being an award winner of the Red Cross brand ambassador, (The Daily News, 2 April 2002). The artist is also for his talent to write and perform music which addresses people's daily problems, their social and cultural life.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: The African Renaissance Approach**

This article is going to be guided by the African renaissance model. The African Renaissance ideology stems from the premise that any human civilisation ought to be self-independent, self-determined and be proud of its own identity. Scholars, intellectuals, and the public have found that renaissance is the idea of the rebirth of some sort of Africanism (for example cognitive process, culture, political ideals, economic structure and others) seems to be the common denominator of a present or immanent African Renaissance Miller 1993, Marable 1995, and wa Thiong'o 1986. African Renaissance is,

A shift in the consciousness of the individual to re – establish our diverse traditional African values, so as to embrace the individual's responsibility to the community and the fact that he/ she in community with others together are in charge of their own destiny. (Louw 2000: 15)

Renaissance implies that there is need for the people to rethink their past. In support of the same view, Josse (2009) suggests African Renaissance can be looked at in two parts, African and Renaissance within the main concept of African renaissance. The term African has been used to define those things that are indigenous to Africa. Terms such as traditional African values and return to aspects of Africa's indigenous civilisation imply that there are such things as traditional values and indigenous civilisations that are unique to Africa.

The use of the term "renaissance" however needs to be clarified. According to Louw (2000), in dictionary language it refers to the revival of art and literature under the influence of classical models in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period during which this

took place or the “culture and style of art, architecture...” The word also implies “any similar revival” (Thompson 1995:1163). When the idea of African renaissance was introduced, Nkrumah’s vision was political but also more than political it was also cultural and philosophical and in his terms afro- centric. This is the meaning of Nkrumah’s proposal for a new African personality, one loosed from an attachment to European and American cultural entanglements. According to Asante (2012) the character of Nkrumah’s African vision poses that he is among the first to call for an Afro centric reality for Africans. Africans believe they are entering a new era that is being referred to as the African Renaissance. This era, if properly defined, could impact the value system of all Africans who are searching for their lost cultural heritage. The search for a lost cultural heritage may be reflected in Christian churches and schools that emulate Western-based curriculums and Western forms of expression, for example language, music, forms of praise, worship and administration.

Josse (2009) has it that African renaissance is a recognition of the spirit of Pan Africanism. The continuity between Pan Africanism and the African Renaissance is evident also in the arena of formal education, a phenomenon inherited from colonialism that divides Africans when posed with questions surrounding its value in the anti colonial and anti globalisation fight. On the other hand, Diop (1974) suggests that the call for African Renaissance is not essentially a new phenomenon, historically the desire to shrug off colonialism has been characterised as Pan – Africanism, Negritudism, Liberation, Freedom fight among others. A prominent philosophy reflective of anti – colonial sentiment and closely linked to the African Renaissance is Pan Africanism which is an attempt to mobilise Africans to unite against the tyranny of colonialism by redefining an African identity and freedom independent of colonial influence.

The concept of African renaissance viewed as a contemporary model from Pan Africanism, entails that African people and nations achieve cultural, scientific, economic renewal. As the concept was first articulated by Diop in a series of essays beginning in 1946, which are collected in his book, “*Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development 1946-1960*”, the book gets to the heart of issues that dominate his thought as an intellectual and a scholar on Africa. According to the Echo (2013), African renaissance even if it is related to other aspects of African culture, language remains key to achieving the grand objective for the continent to revive African languages and culture. Relating language to African Renaissance explicitly, Diop eloquently notes that, “the development of our indigenous languages is the prerequisite for a real African Renaissance”, (Diop 1974: 34 ).

## Looking down upon one's self and others in Macheso's Songs

In African tradition and culture people are encouraged not look down upon one another or even upon yourself. This is because each person is born with a different talent hence laughing at one's weakness may result in a misfortune. That is the reason why the Shona people have a proverb which says, 'Seka urema wafa' (Don't laugh at anyone whilst you are still living). This is used just to warn people that they are destined differently, hence, laughing at one another is not a good thing to do because that misfortune or whatever is being laughed at, may end up on you. The Shona people also believe in the Lord, that is 'Musikavanhu'. These indigenous people know that everything is made possible in their lives through this person. Thus it is manifested in the song *Ziva zvaunoda*. In the song, the musician is suggesting that God knows what He has in store for us so each person should be able to do things in time and according to what God has planned for him or her. Macheso says in the song:

*Mwari vanotaura zvazviri zvisinei nezvaani gutsikana nezvauri usati  
waoongorora nhingi kushora zvauri kune vamwe ari machena  
zvakakupa kutadza kuziva nepaumire chaipo.*

(God speaks as it is to everyone different from one another be satisfied with what you have before looking at someone, looking down upon yourself and yet others will be appreciating you which has made you fail to know where exactly you are standing).

This stanza above clearly shows that each person has her own way of life. People are encouraged to desist from copying one another because God has plans for each one of us. This results in one losing focus in life.

The musician further clarifies that one may want to copy or admire the next person and yet he or she has better things. The issue which the musician brings home is that people should not follow what others do without the knowledge of doing it least one will regret tomorrow when time has run out. The artist says;

*pane vamwe vedu vanogudza mudungwe,  
pane vamwe vedu vanoita sehozhwa  
inozodzoka shure yanzwa kuti yabondera,  
nguva yapera hona. Ukakurumidza kumedza kutsenga  
kuchada hokoyo, chenjera*

(Some of us just follow others, some of us behave like snails which does not see where it is going, time has gone. Beware if you rush to swallow when there is need to chew first)

The proverb '*kukurumidza kumedza kutsenga kuchada*' (don't rush to swallow when there is need to chew) shows that people need not to rush things as they will regret afterwards. In the song above, it is clear that people in life have a problem to compare their lives with others so the musician is using language through music to re – awaken culture. The musician is awakening people that they need not to worry about their destinies, they need to take time and follow what God has in plan for them. Thus language is an important tool that people can use to grapple with concepts and ideas in their quest to improve their condition. Language is the key instrument of communication but it is also the principal means of establishing and sustaining social relations.

Still on the same note, African renaissance approach things from an African perspective. This follows that people from an African descent understands that when one person has done good then others are encouraged to copy and appreciate one another. In the song *Mwari Wenyasha*, the musician is bemoaning the issue of jealousy amongst the Africans. He is suggesting that when one person has done well others should copy and do well as well. This is manifested when Macheso sings;

*Mwari wekudenga... imhonzi rudzii yamadyara matiri mambo  
isingaperi...*

*Panopuwa makombororero hatifarire seiko pane kuti timuzembere  
tigovawo nemapudzo naye, tofamba naye mumagutwa nemunzara.*

*Pane rudo vamwe tinofara umwe anotsamwa pane kuti  
timuvhunze tozorondawo matsimba erudo mumazirudo eeerudo*

(Lord of heavens... what type of seed has you sown in us God...  
When one has been blessed we are not happy instead of us copying  
from them and walk with them in abundance and hunger. Where there  
is love some will be happy and others angry instead of asking how  
they have done it so that we will copy from them)

The use of the powerful phrases such as 'what type of seed' implies something negative has entered the people and it is causing the people to fail to acknowledge one another. The way to find solutions to African problems was found amongst themselves that is

the reason why African solutions are needed to address African problems in which language is key. The musician in this case enlightens people through language with illustrations they are familiar with so that they shy away from that type of hatred. Macheso says:

*Dura rayo riripi chero netsapi dzacho dziripi,  
dai zvaiwanikwa ndaisva ndavesera moto zvikatsva  
kosara dota rinotsvairwa nemhepo yedenga.*

(where are the store houses of this seed? If they could be found  
I wish i could burn them to ashes which will be taken away by wind)

The discourse used by the musician above shows that this jealousy and hatred is not an acceptable behaviour amongst the African people. The fact that the musician wishes that the harvest could be burnt to ashes and no traces of the seed could be seen reflects that unity is the only acceptable behaviour for people to make progress. This is the reason why Macheso goes on to say it is as a result of hatred and jealousy that people look down upon one another and end up in trouble after failing to take heed of advice from others, *vamwe vakaudzwa hondo nemurwere wepfungwa vakamusvora hanzi anorwara uyo* (some were warned by a mad person that there is war and they did not take heed and found themselves in trouble). The musician at the end is giving advice or solution to the problem when he says, '*musayera mhumu tererai mashoko...*' (don't judge someone by his or her body just listen to the words of advice). Thus Chinweizu et al (1980) remind that although languages carry cultural values, these values are not the crucial generators of the values which they carry and transmit. Language is a very important component of all artistic activities of community development and of nation building.

### **Social Family Problems in Macheso's Music**

According to Chimhundu (2005) language is at the heart of a people's culture and it is imperative that cultural advancement of a people, economic and social development will not register significant gains without the use of indigenous languages. The use of indigenous language in the music played by Macheso shows that his music reaches a wider audience in Zimbabwe hence the transformation of these people's lives means their problems would have been solved. In the song *Baba namai*, the musician sings

about an indigenous African family where things are not going on well. The artist is calling for the parents now to look into the matter and search for the causes and solutions thus African solutions to African problems. The musician says:

*Baba namai musha wedu washata mamhepo awanda  
hatichaziva zvekuita.  
Tarirai mukoma ave kurwara nepfungwa sekuru Zanda  
kutsakatika nenyika.  
Kana paine akashinhwa akaromba chikwambo ngaabude pachena  
chidzorerwe kumwene wacho, zvinopedza dzinza.*

(Father and mother our home is not ok, a lot of things are happening  
Look brother has brain problem and uncle Zanda has just gone away.  
If there is anyone who has goblins let him come out open and return  
to the owner, it will finish the whole clan)

As illustrated in the above lyrics of the song, the musician basically sings about family problems which are encountered by the Shona people in a family set up. The Shona people believe in the theory of causation. This means that there is no illness or death which can come alone (Bourdillon 1987). The African people are a kind of people who believe that ancestors have a very important role to look after the family such that if any misfortune befalls the family they would want to know where it came from. Thus, in the song Macheso asks the parents that can't they see that a lot of misfortunes have fallen them and pleading with the parents to find out the causes of those problems. The language used by the musician really shows that something has to be done.

Furthermore, in the spirit of wanting to know the reason for the misfortune, the artist goes on to question who could be the person causing the problems in the family. This is normal of the Shona people to find out the problems and solutions associated with their lives so as to map a way forward. The lyrics on this part say;

*Angava aniko ada kutipedzesa, angava aniko ativavarira  
Ingava ngozi yapinda mumba medu, chingava chikwambo dzorerai*

(who could be the person who want to finish us, who could be  
the person who wants to destroy us. Could it be the avenging spirit,  
could it be goblins, return them)

Barker (2008:75) comments on language and culture, and in the first place he says, ‘language is the privileged medium in which cultural meanings are formed and communicated’. In the second place the critic says, ‘language is the means and medium through which we form knowledge about ourselves and the social world’. From an African perspective then language used in the work of art should be meaningful to the intended audience and the only way it can be meaningful is to be performed in the language they understand for development to take place. Thus in this case when the indigenous Shona people hear such a message they will look into their problems with an idea and the know how to solve them hence cementing the idea that language should be at the centre of a people’s lives so as to re – awaken their culture. A good example on the power of language for development can be taken from the Asian tigers who are economically prosperous because they are using indigenous languages in the process of production. There are a lot of factors which combine in the process of production. Indigenous languages can aid more people to be involved in the production process and may improve communication efficiency during production.

In the song titled *Shedia* the musician brings out the problems daughters - in – law and mothers – in – law go through in their daily lives. These are social challenges which are found in the home. The issue which is brought out in the song is between *muroora* (daughter – in - law) and *vamwene* (mother –in - law). It has been made to appear natural in the African cultural tradition that these people do not go along well. The reason could be that they will compete for attention from one person so they become jealousy of each other. It is in line with this understanding that the musician uses language. His target people understand the problems associated with this conflictual relationship. In the song, the daughter – in - law says;

*Handibvi pano chero zvadini vamwene vangu, murume wangu  
nehama dzose vachindida ini, mhaka yangu imi neni handiizivi  
muchazoguma maidura nerimwe zuva iro.*

(I will not go anywhere my mother – in – law when my husband  
and all other relatives love me. Am not aware of my problem  
with you, you shall make it known at the end)

The daughter – in – law in the above stanza is telling her mother – in - law that she will not go anywhere as long as her husband and other relatives love her. When these conflicts are happening in families, the mother – in – law would want their son’s wives to leave and they remain with their sons so this one is saying she will stay until she is told where

the problem is. This is quite clear as it is communicated in a language that the target people understand very well. In a bid to bring out solutions to the problems that people face in the communities the musician further gives the reason why this hatred is there between these two people. He says;

*Rakazosvika zuva rekunzwa chokwadi cheruvengo  
Mwana wangu zvaaindiitira kare hapachina hazvisirizvo  
zvaava kuita makore ano pada ndiwe wava kumutsiva tsiva*

(It came a time when the truth of the hatred had to come out, my son is no longer treating me the way he used to do long back maybe you are the one who is causing it).

From the above example, it is clearly shown that the root of the problem is caused by mothers - in- law who are failing to accept that their sons have grown up and have started their homes. They would expect that they should continue treating them the same as they used to do before they got married. This is quite common in many African societies that is why the artist has picked up such an important and common message to address.

As African solutions are needed to solve African problems using language, the artist goes further to give solutions to that problem when he sings that:

*Gara mushe Shedy iwe iwe, gara mushe Shedia  
Vaka imba Shedy mwana iwe, vaka imba Shedia  
Bereka vana Shedy muroora bereka vana Shedia.  
Vamwene havaroihwi, ndiwo moyo wekubereka.  
Hachidzorwe chitema hachidzorwe*

(Stay well you Shedy, stay well Shedia  
Build your home daughter – in – law, build the home Shedia  
Bear children Shedy, bear children Shedia  
You don't beat your mother – in – law, that is how  
it is when you have a child. Also don't return sin by sin)

As illustrated above, the solution to this problem is well spelt out where the daughter in law is advised to keep quiet and never to fight with her mother – in- law. She is encouraged to stay, build her home and bear children bearing in mind that it is normal

like that. The advice or solution is further cemented by the idea that one cannot return a sin by another sin (*chitema hachidzorerwi*).

The power of language can also be witnessed in Thomas et al (2004). In their study of the discourse of a former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mahamad the critics explore the ways national unity is constructed in a multiethnic country like Malaysia. Thomas et al (2004) argue that the role of discourse is to shape the beliefs of people who establish certain ideologies as common sense which in turn influences behaviour. This is best summarised since;

Language can be powerful, particularly if a speaker tries to exercise control over other speakers. From the moment they start asserting their ideologies to their constituents' politicians in particular are keenly aware that they must use powerful or persuasive language. More powerful linguistic devices such as the metaphor, euphemism parallelism and the use of the pronoun are needed increase the potency and persuasiveness of language. (Thomas, et al 2004)

The above authorities are of the view that language is influenced by one's ideology. This means that even if social, cultural or economic solutions are to be witnessed in people's lives their language has to be used to address those especially in their music as illustrate in the paper.

Furthermore, Fanon (1952) notes that the issue of language is important because speaking a coloniser's language mean existing absolutely for the coloniser. This is best summarised when he says:

To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but also to assume a culture to support the weight of a civilisation...Every colonised people...in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local; cultural originality ...finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above the jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (Fanon 1952: 17 – 18)

This argument implies that particular languages embody distinctive ways of experiencing the world of defining what we are. Thus, we only speak in particular languages, but more fundamentally become the person we become because of the particular language community in which we grew up.

## **Conclusion**

The article elaborated on the role of Alick Macheso's music in reviving language and culture of the Zimbabwean people. The musician under discussion sings about social and cultural issues of the people. He uses a language which is suitable and which many people are conversant with. The Shona people's proverbs, metaphors and other linguistic variables are prevalent in the songs and it is that language which revives their culture and makes people able to solve their problems. The article managed to capture some of the songs which vividly captures the discourses that expose that African problems needs African solutions. It is very important for the indigenous people will recognise the importance of using their languages and culture in their day to day lives. The article used the African renaissance model to lay bare that Africans can best do their things together in a culture and language of their own. The model establishes that Africans should be at the centre of their languages and cultures and African people need to maintain their African way of living as a point of reference for action.

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