Hybridization and Identity Crisis of African Languages and Culture in Diaspora: The Case of Refugees in New Mexico

Emma ASonye, PhD.
Africana Studies, University of New Mexico
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Introduction

- ❖ New Mexico is home to over 2 million people with diverse identities and languages.
- ❖ About 147 refugees were admitted into New Mexico in 2017 (Schleder, 2017).
- ❖ Refugees from Africa make up 31% of all refugees admitted into New Mexico from 2013 to 2016 (Goodkind et al, 2017; Asonye et al, 2018).
- ❖ Dem Rep of Congo contributed the highest population of refugees in the US in 2018 (Cepla, 2019).
- ❖ Refugees contribute to the linguistic diversity of New Mexico with English and Spanish at the top

African Refugee Community (ARC)

❖ African Refugee Community in New Mexico (NM) form a major minority community in the State.
❖ 95% of African refugees in NM come from non-English speaking countries and so, are not literate in English.
  ➢ They have the lowest linguistic profile
❖ Linguistic barrier in ARC has been compared to that among many deaf children in some African countries (Asonye, 2018; Asonye et al, 2018).
❖ Two major languages are Ki Swahili and Kirundi
❖ Average family size is 7-8 compared to that of other refugees, which is suggested to be 5.

Agencies

❖ Government and non-governmental agencies that render different services to the refugees include:

➢ Office of Immigrants and Refugees Affairs (OIRA)
➢ Refugee Well-being Project of UNM (RWP)
➢ Central New Mexico Community College (CNM)
➢ Lutheran Family Services of NM
➢ Catholic Charities of Central NM
➢ Immigrant and Refugee Resource Village of ABQ (IRRVA)
➢ Albuquerque Public School (APS), etc.

Services

❖ The above agencies render the following services
  ➢ Housing and resettlement programs
  ➢ Job/employment
  ➢ Food stamps and related packages
  ➢ ESL/education
  ➢ Healthcare access and others, etc.

Some Existing Policies

- ❖ Most Refugee Assistance service last for 90 days
- ❖ Within time any refugee adult is expected to have settled in, learned English and have been employed.
- ❖ Any refugee young adult (17 and above) must seek employment even if such wishes to go back to school.
- ❖ All educational instructions are in English language

Pilot Project on ARC in New Mexico

❖ In 2018 a UNM sponsored project was set to provide linguistic and computer literacy to African refugees in Albuquerque
   ➢ And to collect their demographic data
❖ Program was designed to incorporate refugees immediate languages in teaching them English
❖ Program focused on spoken language and reading comprehension.

Approach/Method

❖ Consistent family and community outreaches and visits
❖ Refugee church and other gathering visits
❖ Initial data was sought from among existing agents
❖ Linguistic and computer literacy classes were held for the refugees.
❖ Demographic data was collected.

Initial Observations

- ❖ No comprehensive data of ARC among the agencies
- ❖ Significant reluctance among the young refugees to learn English
- ❖ Adults that were willing had little or no time because of their job
- ❖ Linguistic and cultural barriers impacted daily life.
- ❖ Middle school and High school age participants appeared frustrated with learning English.
- ❖ The system wants a quick and immediate hybridization of the refugees
  - ➢ Creating a path to identity crisis

Our Linguistic Literacy Class

Speaking and Reading Class
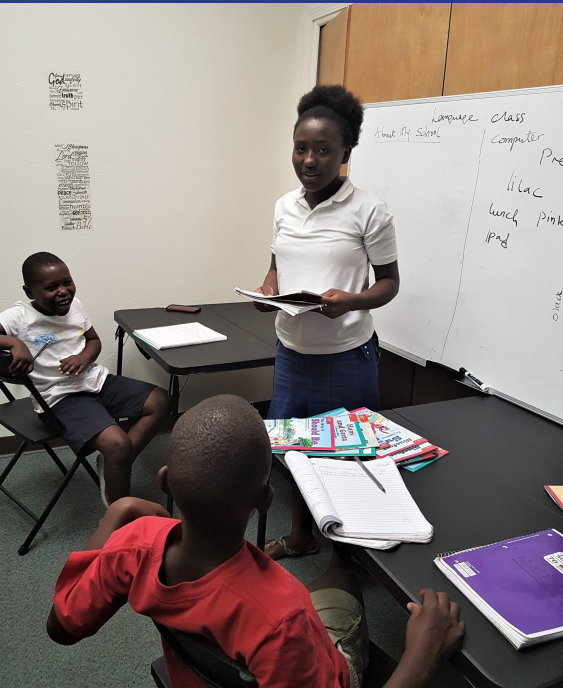
Our Linguistic Literacy Class

Our Computer Literacy Class

Basic Computer Appreciation Class

The Participants

- ❖ Countries of origin: Burundi, Dem Rep of Congo, Uganda, Tanzania
- ❖ Length of stay in the US: Minimum of 1 year
- ❖ Immediate languages: Ki Swahili, Kirundi
- ❖ Fluency level in their languages: All are fluent in their different immediate languages
- ❖ Fluency level in English
  - ➢ Speaking: The adults - next to zero, children and young adults - minimal fluency
  - ➢ Reading: Adults - zero, children and young adults - very minimal
- ❖ Age distribution: 6 years to 60 years

Findings Based on Classroom Interactions

- ❖ All participants have relatively equal spoken English and reading fluency
- ❖ Participants expressed confidence speaking their native languages to express difficult English expressions
  - ➢ The freedom to use their mother tongue produced an increased interest to learn English
- ❖ Students expressed their frustration learning English in school
  - ➢ Frustration is due to lack of smooth communication between them and the teachers.
  - ➢ They get tagged by fellow students for their limited communication in English.

Findings Based on Outreach/Visits

- ❖ Families struggle with a lot of barriers and need and have limited knowledge and access to basic resources.
- ❖ Some school aged young people are not in school
  - ➢ They take menial jobs to help sustain the family
- ❖ Many young people who are not in school expressed limited interest in our class despite that it's free.
- ❖ Culturally-different volunteers are assigned to families by the agents.
- ❖ All barriers they face are tied to their language barriers
- ❖ A feeling of "not accepted", "not like them" is perceived among the adults.

Families and their Linguistic Distribution

Family A

- ❖ Family Type: Extended family
- ❖ Country of Origin: Republique d'Afrique
- ❖ Population: 15
- ❖ Arrival: Arrived the US in 2016
- ❖ Age Distribution: 2 adults over 40 years, 1 adult over 25, 2 young adults over 15, 10 children 0 to 14.
- ❖ Linguistic Distribution: All speak Arabic, 1 young adult speaks very little English and French, 1st to 10th Grade understand a little English with minimal speaking competence
- ❖ One is in jail for beating his girlfriend.

Family B

❖ Family Type: Nuclear (traditional) family
❖ Country of Origin: Tanzania; Dem Rep of Congo
❖ Population: 8
❖ Arrival: Arrived in 2017
❖ Age Distribution: 2 adults over 40 years, 2 adults over 20, 3 young adults over 15, 1 child.
❖ Linguistic Distribution: Swahili; father speaks some French, 1st to 10th Grade speak very little English

Family C

- ❖ Family Type: Extended family
- ❖ Country of Origin: Tanzania; Dem Rep of Congo
- ❖ Population: 10
- ❖ Arrival: Arrived 2015
- ❖ Age Distribution: 3 adults over 40 years, 4 adults over 20, 3 young adults over 15, 1 child.
- ❖ Linguistic Distribution: Swahili and some French, and very little English
- ❖ No adult is in school. Some young adults moved to another State to try and go to school

Family D

- Family Type: Nuclear (traditional) family
- Country of Origin: Burundi
- Population: 10
- Arrival: 2016
- Age Distribution: 2 adults over 35 years, 2 High Schoolers, 1 Middle Schooler, 2 Elementary Schooler and 1 infant.
- Linguistic Distribution: Swahili and Kirundi; father speaks a considerable English
- Both parents work

Family E

- ❖ Family Type: Nuclear (traditional) family
- ❖ Country of Origin: Dem Rep of Congo
- ❖ Population: 9
- ❖ Arrival: 2015
- ❖ Age Distribution: 2 adults over 40 years, 2 young adults, the rest are Middle and Elementary Schoolers.
  - ➢ Two children have mental disabilities
  - ➢ Father is bedridden after a fatal accident
- ❖ Linguistic Distribution: Arabic and French. 1 High Schooler speaks some English
- ❖ Nobody is employed

Similarities across Families

- ❖ Children across families are more prone to learning English
- ❖ Parents across families have the least understanding of English, especially the mothers
- ❖ High Schoolers have the most frustration with English
  - ➢ Complain about bullying and communication barrier with teachers
- ❖ Almost all the young people do not want to go to College
- ❖ All employed adults do similar unskilled job.
- ❖ All families have gone through CNM or Lutheran Family ESL classes

The Big Question

❖ What is the fate and identity of African refugees in the next 10 years? Will they ever be self-sustaining, enculturated and contribute to community development?

The Impacts of Our Study

❖ A first demographic data collection of African Refugees was established, though not yet completed

❖ Awareness was created among refugees and the agencies that work with them about the challenges ARC faces

❖ Refugee families and individuals felt a sense of belonging at each outreach and home visit

❖ Classroom participants felt at ease speaking their mother tongue while learning English

❖ A significant improvement on spoken English performance and a slight improvement on reading comprehension

Limitations of Our Study

- ❖ Limited time - the time was not enough to extend the scope of the study

- ❖ Fewer Participants - Due to limited time and the unwillingness of the refugees, the study fell short of the targeted population of 60 participants

- ❖ Insufficient Data: There was very limited data about ARC from the services providers

- ❖ Limited Funds: Approved funds could not take care of a lot of logistics

Resultant Action Towards Solution

- ❖ Consequent upon our findings, Africana Studies of University of New Mexico will establish African Language and Culture Institute [ALCI]
- ❖ Institute will teach 4 African languages from Summer 2020 including Swahili
- ❖ Institute will incorporate service learning and study abroad programs to include African refugees and volunteers in ARC
  - ➢ Volunteers will get to learn African language and get exposed to African culture
  - ➢ Refugees will get an extended sense of belonging in a larger community.

Conclusion

- ❖ This study concludes that African Refugee Community in New Mexico is one of the most marginalized population
  - ➢ With low linguistic profile
  - ➢ Sociocultural barriers
- ❖ The impacts of their marginalization seem to result to a sense of hybridization and identity crisis
- ❖ Certain policies are completely do not support their social mobility
- ❖ If the system could allow them to retain their linguistic and cultural identity while they learn English, they would integrate quicker and be more productive

Recommendations

- ❖ Subsequent studies should focus on different age groups at different times
- ❖ Adequate attention should be given to Middle and High Schoolers. They seem to be the most affected by identity crisis
- ❖ Service providing organizations should recruit more African inclined volunteers on their outreach services.
- ❖ Adequate documentation of their demographic data is needed
- ❖ More funding is desperately needed
- ❖ Each refugee that turns out as a nuisance is a nuisance to the community and American society at large!

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