TEACHING CULTURE IN PORTUGUESE AND YORUBA FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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E kú àná, ẹ kú òní.
àlfẹ́niíkí làì kíni kú ìjẹta
a dífa fún olọ́gọ̀tún
ọmọ alagbàwòrò sorò.
Ifá ní àsèyí ṣàmódún,

àsàmódún ṣèmîìn.

(Ifá Ọdún)

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that culture is the backbone of any language. Given the fact that the Saussurean definition of language identifies, among other features, side by side with the arbitrary nature that characterizes any linguistic system, a compulsory conventional entente that will allow for meaningful communication in any given language, culture, that is, the culture of the community of users, cannot but represent a central determinant to the existence and sustenance of any human language.

Two examples can be given here to illustrate how central cultural acquisition is to a second or foreign language acquisition. Unfortunately, both have to do with the death of a language. It is widely accepted by cultural anthropologists and other classes of specialists in the domain of human sciences that the easiest way to kill a language is to take away its culture (and/or vice versa). In many parts of the world, colonization has been responsible for the death of many languages. Mention can be made here of the drastic modification of the linguistic map of the various regions of the world that were subjected to sustained and prolonged colonial occupation between the 16th and 20th centuries. These include Africa especially Sub-Saharan under various colonial powers, (it is obvious, though, that Arabic too must have displaced a few native languages in North Africa before it finally established itself as the language and culture of the Maghreb), some parts of Asia, the whole of the American continent from North to South where thousands of Amerindian languages and cultures were literally wiped out to give way to the imperial

languages and cultures of Luso-Anglo-Franco-Ibero-America as we know them today.

On the other hand, it remains a linguistic irony and paradox that, although the Latin language is always cited as the perfect example of a "dead language", it's cultural ghost still lives on today, so to say, in the region known as Latin-America, despite the fact that some notable intellectuals from that region of the world, eager to denounce the *Ourocentric*[1] motive of the christening of their region with such a label, sometimes object in no uncertain terms to such a denomination. (See Marras: 1992)[2].

Another poignant example can be drawn from the history of Esperanto. The dream of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, the polish intellectual who invented Esperanto as the first planned human language in 1887, was to one day see this artificial language as the ultimate vehicle of human communication and understanding that would lead to the true brotherhood that he assumed was the perfect antidote to wars that were threatening the social and political stability of Europe and the modern world at that period. However, in spite of drawing its structure and content from about a dozen or so of the major languages of the "modern world" at the time3, in spite of creating for it all the artifices of a language community – radio, cinema, and other media networks, books, literature, conferences and seminars, etc. – Esperanto as a language has found it difficult to attain the status of a living language specifically because there is no real "Esperanto" culture to sustain it. A good proof of this is that it is not even included in the Wikipedia list of World Languages. Although, it may not have been difficult for Esperanto to meet some of the other criteria used in defining the Wikipedia list, (like the number of speakers, estimated at over a million for Esperanto), the fact still remains that it does not possess any geographical space exclusive to its speakers where an Esperanto culture can be said to exist. What this means is that, Esperanto has no native culture, therefore, it cannot have native speakers (and vice versa).

What we have tried to do in the preceding paragraphs is to establish the importance of culture to the acquisition of linguistic competence in a foreign language. We will now dedicate the rest of the paper to share with the readers how we go about introducing the cultural quotient into our foreign language classes. For this

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[1] The pun here is on the unmistakable association between Europe and the *ouro* (gold, in Portuguese language) which was considered the principal object of extreme value that prompted the rush by Western European nations to the Americas in search of the *el dorado* (the land of gold) starting from the 16th century. Interestingly, the appearance of the Euro (whose pronunciation in French brings it even closer to the priceless *ouro*), the European common currency continues, in a most sonorous way, to keep alive this economic compulsion, further perpetuating the eternal cult of the fiery coins in the mind of European and other neo-Latin romantic subjects.

[2] Most especially the introduction.

[3] As an invented language, Esperanto is not genealogically related to any ethnic language; it can be described as a language whose lexis is predominantly Romanic with an agglutinating morphology. Its phonology, grammar, vocabulary and semantics are based on Western Indo-European languages. Its phonemes and most of its semantics are essentially Slavic while its vocabulary is derived primordially from Romance languages with a minimal contribution from Germanic languages and some words derived from various other languages. (The Etymological dictionary of Esperanto "Konciza Etimologia Vortaro", by André Cherpillod, makes reference to as many as 110 languages). Source:

http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hist%C3%B3ria_do_esperanto#Propriedades_ling.C3.BC.C3.ADsticas.

purpose, we have decided to present two analogous situations based on our teaching experiences of Portuguese as a foreign language in Nigeria, and Yoruba as a foreign language in Brazil.

1. Teaching culture in a foreign language class I: Of Brazilian *beijinhos* and *abraços*

As a teacher of Portuguese, one of the courses we have found most stimulating and rewarding, both from our point of view as the teacher, as well as from the feedback we get from students in terms of their performance and competence, are the courses titled PRT 101 and 102 – Audio-Visual Course in Portuguese I and II respectively in the curriculum of B.A. Portuguese at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

In the Departmental course outline, the teaching content and methodology of PRT 101 and 102 makes it clear that the objective is to introduce students to the four basic competences of a foreign language acquisition, viz.: aural and oral comprehension and expression as well as written comprehension and expression. However, any conscious foreign language teacher will discover early enough that such an objective cannot be fully realized without a good dose of cultural content that would make the courses more readily comprehensible to students. This is to be achieved through the use of prescribed texts as well as "authentic documents" culled from the Brazilian quotidian literature such as the print and electronic press, films, music, etc.

As foundational courses, PRT 101 & 102 are perfect for introducing the Brazilian culture to foreign students. Usually, our student audience in the class is made up of a Nigerian majority, plus a handful of foreign students from neighbouring African (mainly Francophone) countries, such as Benin, Cameroon, Niger and Ivory Coast. One of the topics that students usually find most interesting is the one on body contacts as part of the greeting culture of Brazilians. Although the Francophone students in the class are probably exposed to the use of "cheek pecking" that is also a feature of greetings in French culture, the Nigerian and other Anglophone students usually find such body contacts quite novel and amusing.

The course starts with an introductory explanation to the class on the cultural code of greeting and salutation common in most Nigerians cultures where no body contact whatsoever is necessary, neither between members of the same family (except when the Yoruba parent passes his/her hand affectionately on the head of a prostrated son or knelt-down daughter while at the same time addressing him/her with the family lineage and/or the child's personal *oriki*[4]), nor between friends or mere acquaintances. It is often pointed out that even the culture of handshaking (utmost expression of warmth and courteousness, by western standards) was introduced by the British into the Yorùbá society.

[4] O*riki,* defined as "praise names" and "praise poems" rendered in a sing-song way to extol the past heroism of a lineage, a clan, a family, a land, an animal, a god, or an individual, is a unique feature of the Yoruba culture. For more on oriki in Yoruba culture, see, among others, Abimbola (1977); Babalola (1966, 2000); Barber (1991) and, Olatunji (1994)

On the other hand, the use of body contacts during greetings being a fundamental feature of Brazilian culture, the fact that there are different kinds of body contacts in Brazil is usually stressed. Thus, apart from the usual handshake, the cultural use of the *beijinho* (cheek pecking), and the *abraço* (hugging) among Brazilians are highlighted. However, since each of the two modes of greeting has its time and place, it is usually emphasized that if used inappropriately, one could be breaking a cultural norm or committing a *faux pas*. For example, although Brazilians consider a simple handshake to be too formal and too cold as a form of greeting, it could be preferable in certain situations, especially when one is greeting a political authority in a formal situation. This is important so that students don't try to give a hug or a cheek peck (or both!) to the President or the 1st Lady of Brazil if they suddenly showed up one day at a solemn state ceremony[5].

Nevertheless, since Brazilians pride themselves on their human warmth and friendliness which has become one the registered trademarks of the country, especially in tourism circles, any gaffes, as the one mentioned above is often quickly forgiven. Besides, the warmth with which Brazilians receive foreigners usually confirms the nicknames that some of the Brazilian states and tourist destinations have acquired over the years. For example, the state of Bahia is nicknamed *terra da alegria* (the land of happiness) while Rio de Janeiro is called *cidade maravilhosa* (marvelous city). Our students of Brazilian Portuguese are therefore taught that in the country whose language and culture they are learning, right from the first moment two people are introduced or meet each other, it is typically Brazilian to exchange *beijinhos* without forgetting to add that *beijinhos* are only allowed between a male and a female, or between two females, but never between two males as is the case with certain Francophone west-African cultures.

Understandably, Nigerian students always find it awkward at first to practice this culture of *beijinhos* because in Nigerian (especially, Yorùbá) cultural practice it is considered as an excessive and "immoral" demonstration of intimacy in public. For a man to first bring his face close to a woman's face and then bring his cheeks or lips close to hers, while making those funny smacks (nwam!, nwam!!) could be interpreted as being too indecorous for some cultures, especially when there is neither blood nor amorous relationship between the man and the woman in question. To the average Nigerian mind therefore, such intimacy should be reserved for other occasions.

Another cultural norm related to the correct application of the *beijinhos* that our Nigerian learners of Portuguese are often reminded of is that it is generally considered of bad taste to give or accept *beijinhos* when you are just coming in from the sun and your face is covered with sweat. In such a case, the *beijinho* should be blown from a distance, accompanied by the explanation: "estou todo suado/a", that is, "I am sweating all over".

On the other hand, teaching Nigerian students the culture of *abraços* (hugging) is a bit less awkward although learners still demonstrate a certain resistance to what

[5] This was exactly what once happened to this author once in Brazil while he was being introduced to the wife of the Mayor of Salvador at the opening of the CarnavÁfrica of Bahia in 2002. One could sense the Brazilian city's First lady's awkward feeling and embarrassment at the occasion.

they consider the indiscriminate distribution of *abraços* by Brazilians[6]. Such reluctance often avails the teacher, the perfect opportunity to call the attention of learners to the similarities and dissimilarities between the Brazilian and Nigerian perspectives in the use of this universal body language of affection. We then often find it appropriate to stress that, whereas, in the Yoruba (African) context, one may use a hug to demonstrate affection to a close friend and to loved ones only in most family settings, (e.g. parent/child – especially, mother/child – relationship, brother/brother, brother/sister, sister/sister and sister/brother relationships, or even between members of the extended family, e.g. grandparents/grandchildren, aunt/nephew, uncle/nephew, aunt/niece, uncle/niece, cousin/cousin, etc.), in the Brazilian context, the hug (*abraço*) is used a lot more freely as a measure of friendliness and/or affection.

In essence it is usually explained that the Brazilian use of the hug covers a much wider spectrum of people and occasions, ranging from simple salutations, to sympathy for a bereaved person, or simply to demonstrate solidarity, while drawing the attention of the students to the unwritten rules of the *abraço*, showing them when an *abraço* may become a problem, even to Brazilians.

One of the materials we commonly use in this respect is an extract from the Website of the Brazilian private-owned media conglomerate known as REDE GLOBO culled from the site of G1 (www.globo.com) of the 22 May 2007, a date that is celebrated in Brazil as the "dia do abraço" (National Hugging Day). The material gives a comprehensive account of the "dos and don'ts" of *abraço*. In the material, Fábio Arruda, a Brazilian etiquette consultant gives useful hints on how and how not to use the *abraço* at different moments such as when relating to colleagues at work, the bride at her wedding ceremony, at burials, at birthday parties and other celebrations, when greeting an ex-boyfriend/girlfriend (most especially in the presence of one's current companion), at first meetings with some categories of people, especially the 'notorious' Brazilian *sogra* (the mother-in-law)[7], etc. One of the golden rules our Nigerian students of Portuguese as a foreign language who travel to Brazil for their Year Abroad programme are told to practice when in doubt about the level of intimacy they need to exhibit at a given time and place, is the rule of etiquette that suggests that *beijinhos* are always better than a*braços*.

[6] This ultimate use and abuse of *beijinhos* and *abraços* is most evident in the virtual interactions of Brazilian where virtually every e-mail is concluded with the either "beijos" or "abraços", even where no great intimacy exists between the addressee and the addressed.

[7] There is a Brazilian myth of the sogra as a potential enemy to be feared, especially by the men. This is borne out in numerous popular music like Samba and Pagode in which men depict their *sogra* in not very flattering terms. (see for example the music of Zeca Pagodinho, Bezerro da Silva, and a host of others). In fact, the relationship of a man with his Brazilian mother-in-law (sogra) is another cultural idiom that a foreign student needs to acquire. Fortunately, there are "manuals" available for that too!

2. Teaching the Yoruba "E kú" and "Èmi ni..." phenomena to Brazilian Students of Yoruba language, culture and civilization

Although there is no doubt that the Brazilian culture, especially the cultural practices and worldview of the Northeastern region of Brazil comprising the states of Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, Paraíba, Piauí, Ceará, Pernambuco and Maranhão, owe a lot to the culture(s) of the enslaved Africans that formed the great majority of the inhabitants of this region between the 16th and the 20th centuries, there are still some cultural idioms and conventions that need to be taught explicitly to Brazilians learning an African language. In the case of Bahia, for example, the nagô (Yorùbá) cultural elements constitute more than 60% of what is generally accepted as baianidade – the art of being a bahiano, leading us to coin the term YoruBaianidade, to describe the influence of the Yoruba culture on the Bahian identity in our 2005 doctoral thesis (see Ayoh'OMIDIRE, 2005). Notwithstanding such close relationship and identification of the Bahian identity with the Yorùbá, it was still necessary to make explicit some aspects of the cultural norms of contemporary Yorùbá users in the courses we taught at UFBA between 2002 and 2006.

Diverse aspects of the Yorùbá culture need to be explicitly taught in a foreign language class, including the avoidance of an indiscriminate use of first names for people in the Yorùbá society, as names are considered sacred; the mastery of the treatment formula for equals and superiors, etc. Specifically, in Brazil, there is the need to teach explicitly the use of personal pronouns and their derivatives within the Yorùbá cultural context i.e. the ìwo/èyín or the o/e dichotomy (translated roughly as you/you sir or, better still, the French *tu/vous* dichotomy); and, of course, the all pervasive use of the "E kú" formula to mark the different period of the day and to cover all imaginable human activity.

Concerning the cultural code of name using among the Yorùbá, our Brazilian students were taught that, as opposed to the Brazilian culture in which it is most appropriate to use the first name for everyone, name using among the Yorùbá has to conform to different norms, such as, age, social hierarchy, sex, familiarity, time of day, etc. It was an opportunity to touch on the issue of *oríkì* and *orúko àdàpè* (roughly translated as praise names and pet names, respectively) as forms of address used as a way of avoiding the use of the first name.

Above all, it was pertinent to point out to Brazilian learners of Yorùbá the sacredness of the name given at birth (*orúko àbíso*). To a Yorùbá, such a name is not to be called out indiscriminately at public places like the marketplace or other social gatherings. A parallel was often drawn between this Yorùbá norm and the practice common among members of the Brazilian orisa community. As a culture derived mainly from the nagô/Yorùbá tradition taken to Brazil by enslaved Africans between the 19th and the 20th Centuries, the Afro-Brazilian religious idiom forbids the indiscriminate use of the *runco,* i.e. the name given by the orisa to a devotee on the day of his/her initiation, outside the temple, commonly known as *terreiro* or *roça* in Bahia. As in the Yorùbá-African context, such a name is jealously guarded

and zealously protected from non-initiates as it is believed that a person in possession of such an intimate name has the power to harm the bearer spiritually.

Another of the very first aspects highlighted to Brazilian learners of Yorùbá was the Yorùbá cultural norm of the insistence on greeting people with a more or less consecrated formula for every imaginable human situation and activity. This we referred to as the 'humanism of the Yorùbá people' evidenced in the "E kú" philosophy whose historical and sociological import we impressed on our Brazilian students[8]. (Ayoh'OMIDIRE, 2004: 31-32). Furthermore, students are taught that whenever a Yorùbá person sees another Yorùbá and he has no "E kú" salutation to offer him or her, it can be guessed that everything is not right between the two.

In other words, if a Yorùbá person sees another engaged in an activity for which he cannot find an appropriate "E kú" formula, it is either because the activity is not a dignified one or the situation is not a normal one. For example, while students are taught that there is a special greeting reserved for every moment of the day, like. "E kú àárò" (Good Morning), "E kú òsán" (Good Afternoon), "E kú ìròlé" (Good Evening), "E kú ojórò" (Good Dusk), "E kú alé" (Good Nighttime), "E kú àfèmójú" (Good Dawn), etc, they are also informed that there is no such greeting to be offered if one should come across a person at some unholy hours of the night. This is borne out by the Yorùbá proverb that says: "òjò òru kò pa enirere, bi ko pa olè, a pa fóléfólé, a p'alásàsí, a p'elébo". This means, whoever one meets in the dead of the night cannot be up to any sociable activity, he is either a burglar, a malefactor or someone engaged in ritualistic practices who may be in the process of transporting some fearsome sacrifice (in which case it is considered extremely dangerous to move near such a person, as the potency of the sacrifice might negatively affect the first person to set eyes on it, leading to death, paralysis, insanity, or any other similar pathological conditions). For the same obvious reasons, the Yorùbá will never conceive of offering any "E kú" salutation to a couple engaged in the act of lovemaking as this is considered a sacred and intimate act which is not supposed to be witnessed by a third party, and if the latter did, the courtesy will not be returned.

The last example of the place of culture in language learning we would like to present in this essay is the teaching of the Yorùbá convention that governs self presentation to strangers. As teacher of Yorùbá, this author was once involved in an evaluation exercise on the content of some manuals used in the teaching of Yorùbá as a foreign language prepared by non-native speaker specialists. While assessing one manual (with its accompanying audio materials) produced in Europe for the teaching of Yorùbá, we noted with amusement the inadvertent abuse of the verb "to be" in the introductory formula presented in the first chapter. The first thing that attracted our native-speaker attention in the said manual was the use of the European style of self introduction in dialogues like the one below:

[8] Historically, the use of this philosophical formula was what earned the Yorùbá people their first collective ethnic identity as they became known within the multi-ethnic African community of Sierra Leone in the 19th Century as the *Akú* people.

Túnjí – "E káàárò o, èmi ni Túnjí"

Solá – "E káàárò o, èmi ni Solá"

Túnjí – "Káàárò o, Solá".

Solá – "Káàárò o, Túnjí"

Grammatically, there is nothing wrong with this dialogue. It is undoubtedly a situation where two strangers are introducing themselves to each other. However, to a native Yorùbá speaker, the dialogue is culturally awkward. This is due to the fact that the verb "ni" (to be) is not used intransitively in the Yorùbá language and culture to present oneself as could be done without any problem in most European languages:

("Je suis Túnjí"/ "I'm Solá"/"Eu sou Fred"/ "Ich bin Schmidt", etc.)

What is then often stressed to our foreign learners is that in Yorùbá, if one uses the verb "to be" to present himself or herself in the manner employed above, to the Yorùbá native ear, that would sound like an arrogant and self conceited introduction, since the cultural translation of such a self introduction is something like saying: "Hi, I'm the (wonderful) Túnjí you've heard so much about…", in which case, the only response option open to even the most civilized native speaker would be: "And so what?", "Et alors?", "e daí?". Therefore, to avoid such unsavory reactions, our students are taught to give preference to such self-introduction expressions in Yorùbá as: "Orúko mi ni Túnji", or, "orúko mi a máa jé Túnji" which both roughly translate to "My name is Túnjí, je m'appelle Tunji, meu nome é Tunji), etc.

Conclusion

This paper set out to look at the cultural idioms – conventions, gestures, spoken and unspoken codes, etc. – that learners of a foreign language need to acquire and interiorize in order to validate their competence in the new language. In the course of this essay, we have tried to justify our claim that language is the vehicle of culture, while culture is the backbone of a language. We have also tried to show some of the strategies that can be developed to effectively teach the cultural component in a foreign language class. Apart from the points we have raised so far, one of the foreign language teacher's best allies could be the use of original audio-visual materials and authentic documents produced in real life situations for the daily use of native speakers. Furthermore, the use of supporting materials like magazines, music, films, and other multimedia aids as compulsory and permanent components of foreign language teaching activities to be adopted by the teachers, as well as the constant watching of television broadcast materials originally produced for the consumption of native speakers, are well tested strategies that help foreign learners to familiarize themselves with the culture of the target language. For example, for the acquisition of the Brazilian culture, the popular soap-operas and sit-coms popularly called *telenovelas,* produced and aired daily on Brazilian local and international stations are highly recommended while, to

students of Yorùbá language and culture, one of the best didactic and cultural aids we usually recommend are the Yorùbá video films generally referred to in contemporary cinema parlance as *Nollywood* productions.

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