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Contemporary Language Development: Lessons from African Literature for Repositioning and Revitalization of Indigenous African Languages in South African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In South African higher education, the dominance of English and Afrikaans continues to raise concerns about the marginalization and development of indigenous African languages. Consequently, strategies are being sought on how to revitalize indigenous languages in the higher education sector. This study argues that critical lessons for addressing these challenges and achieving the desired goals can be drawn from African literature. Therefore, this study aims to examine how African literature contributes to the development of indigenous African languages and explore strategies from African literature that can effectively revitalize and promote indigenous African languages in South African higher education. The study is a qualitative study that involves a review of African literary texts. Furthermore, thematic analysis was conducted to identify how African literature contributes to the development of indigenous African languages. Practical lessons and strategies that can inform the revitalization of these indigenous languages within higher education were identified. The identified strategies that were adopted by African literary writers in promoting indigenous languages include: documentation, codification and standardization, vocabulary expansion and modernization, cross-linguistic translation, and hybridization, and code switching. All these would require strong institutional commitment and intellectual investment. Through drawing on lessons from African literature, universities can cultivate a linguistic landscape that preserves indigenous languages and empowers them as vehicles for knowledge creation, innovation, and cultural expression.

Keywords: African Literature; Higher Education; Indigenous Languages; Language Development; Linguistic Hybridity

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1. Introduction

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a living repository of culture, identity, and ancestral knowledge. For indigenous communities, language serves as a fundamental pillar of heritage and tradition and captures and understands indigenous people's worldview^[1]. However, indigenous languages across the globe face an existential crisis due to historical colonization experiences, long-standing colonial policy impacts (such as formal schools and forced assimilation programs that actively seek to eradicate indigenous linguistic identities), urbanization, mass media, globalization, increasing dominance of global languages, and younger generations shifting toward dominant languages^[2] for education, employment, and social integration, all of which lead to significant intergenerational language decline and loss^[3]. The consequences of language loss extend beyond communication barriers to include the erosion of cultural memory, indigenous epistemologies, and community cohesion. According to UNESCO^[3], nearly 40% of the world's estimated 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing, with indigenous languages constituting many of these endangered tongues. Indigenous language development remains an uphill battle despite efforts to preserve and promote them despite language revitalization^[4, 5] movements that have gained momentum through grassroots initiatives, policy advocacy, and the integration of indigenous languages into formal education systems. As the world acknowledges the urgency of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity, it becomes imperative to critically examine strategies that can foster indigenous language promotion to ensure linguistic resilience and survival for future generations in an increasingly globalized world.

South Africa recognizes twelve official languages, including English, Afrikaans and nine indigenous languages. The South African Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, aimed at promoting multilingualism in institutional policies and practices across public higher education institutions was gazetted on 30 October 2020^[6], with effective implementation beginning on 1st January 2022^[7]. Despite the fact that constitutional provisions and policy frameworks promote multilingualism^[8], the development and use of indigenous languages in higher education remain significantly constrained^[9]. English and Afrikaans continue to dominate as the primary languages of

instruction and academic discourse, marginalizing indigenous languages and limiting their intellectualization. This linguistic dominance creates barriers to knowledge transmission, academic success, production, accessibility, and cultural representation, particularly for indigenous students and scholars^[7]. Although various language policies and interventions have been introduced to integrate indigenous languages into higher education, their effectiveness remains limited. This study argues that African literary works rich in indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and linguistic diversity offer valuable resources for developing strategies to foster indigenous language growth in academic settings. African literature, encompassing both oral and written traditions, serves as a crucial medium for the preservation and transmission of indigenous languages. Through storytelling, poetry, drama, and novels, African literary works capture linguistic subtleties, cultural expressions, and historical narratives that colonial influences sought to suppress. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka have demonstrated how literature can serve as a tool for linguistic and cultural reclamation, suggesting the use of indigenous languages in education and intellectual discourse. Drawing on the rich linguistic resources embedded in African literature, higher education institutions in South Africa can develop more effective strategies to integrate indigenous languages into academic settings. This approach not only promotes linguistic inclusivity but also reinforces cultural identity, ensuring that indigenous languages thrive within scholarly and intellectual spaces. However, the systematic utilization of African literature to enhance indigenous language development remains underexplored. Hence, understanding how insights from African literature can be effectively applied within higher education is essential for advancing linguistic inclusivity and academic equity.

African literature, a rich and diverse body of work, serves as a powerful reflection of the continent's history, culture, and social realities. Spanning centuries, African literature encompasses both oral and written traditions, showcasing the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and social change. From the ancient oral traditions of griots and storytellers, which were vital to the preservation of history and culture, to the contemporary works of celebrated authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Thomas Mofolo and Wole Soyinka, African literature has played a central role

in shaping the continent's intellectual landscape. Rooted in the diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes of Africa, this literature reflects the complexities of the continent's colonial past, its struggles for independence, and its ongoing quest for sociopolitical transformation^[10]. In addition, at the heart of African literature lies the preservation and exploration of indigenous languages, which are intrinsic to the continent's cultural heritage. Through storytelling, poetry, drama, and novels, African writers not only express the experiences of their people but also engage in the ongoing process of reclaiming and revitalizing^[11] African languages that colonial powers sought to suppress^[12]. The African literature thus becomes a tool of resistance, empowerment, and self-definition, offering a platform for marginalized voices and providing space for the assertion of African identity in the face of globalizing forces. This literary tradition not only addresses the complexities of the African experience but also engages with universal themes such as migration, conflict, gender, and social justice, making it a crucial reference point in global literary discourse.

Scholars have highlighted the essential link between language and preservation of culture. According to Diko^[13], the isiXhosa language with its linguistic structures and expressions, is a vital repository of the amaXhosa cultural identity, which is deeply integrated with traditional knowledge systems and social norms. Also, Gwerevende and Mthombeni examine the interconnection of South African indigenous languages with music and dance and highlight that these elements constitute the socio-cultural environment that is essential for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage^[14]. In addition, Agyemang and Kuntsoh discuss how indigenous film in Africa contributes to the preservation and transfer of cultural values and languages and offers a modern means of cultural expression and learning^[15]. Additionally, Ilokaba stresses that language, literature and culture are interrelated with literature serving as an aesthetic expression of language and a vehicle for cultural expression^[16].

The preservation and development of indigenous languages is an urgent task in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa, where numerous languages are endangered due to historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors. As these languages face increasing marginalization, the need for practical and effective language revitalization strategies becomes more pressing. The African literature, which is rich in

diversity and history, offers a compelling reference point and guide for indigenous language development. Through their work, African writers have not only reflected the cultural and linguistic richness of their communities but also actively contributed to the revitalization of indigenous languages, creating a framework for sustainable indigenous language development. This paper, therefore, aims to i) illustrate how African literature contributes to the development and transformation of indigenous African languages and ii) explore how strategies from African literature can effectively revitalize and promote indigenous African languages in South African higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative research design to investigate how African literature fosters the development and revitalization of indigenous African languages. This study hinges on postcolonial theory, with a particular focus on nativism as a critical framework, to examine how African literature informs contemporary language development and the revitalization of indigenous African languages^[17]. Nativism refers to the ideological and cultural movement that emphasizes a return to indigenous traditions, languages, and identities that were marginalized or suppressed during colonial rule^[18]. It resists the dominance of Western influences and seeks to reaffirm precolonial cultural expressions^[19]. Through a nativist lens, the analysis explores how selected literary texts depict resistance to linguistic imperialism and advocate for the reclamation and repositioning of indigenous languages as essential tools for cultural identity and academic discourse.

This theoretical framework enables an exploration of how African literary texts function as both a site of cultural preservation and a site of linguistic innovation, which challenges dominant language hierarchies and thereby promotes indigenous linguistic expressions. Additionally, the study adopts a hermeneutic-interpretive approach^[20], which allows for a contextualized reading of texts that focuses on how language use within the literature reflects sociolinguistic realities^[21]. This approach ensures that textual interpretations remain sensitive to historical, cultural, and political influences on indigenous African languages^[22].

The primary data for this study consists of a broad se-

lection of African literary texts. The selected literary texts represent subregional diversity, encompassing works from East, West, and South Africa to provide a comprehensive, yet contextually rich analysis of indigenous language development and revitalization. These texts were chosen for their accessibility and familiarity to ensure thorough engagement with their thematic and linguistic contributions to the study. The comprehensive review of texts allows an extensive but less in-depth analysis of a wide range of works rather than a highly detailed examination of a limited set. This method ensures that key linguistic and thematic patterns are identified across multiple texts. Furthermore, the study employs thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret recurring themes that illustrate the role of African literature in indigenous language development. Through uncovering these patterns, this study explores practical lessons that can inform strategies for repositioning and revitalizing indigenous African languages within South African higher education institutions.

3. Discussion

3.1. Examining How African Literature Contributes to the Development and Promotion of Indigenous African Languages

This section discusses how literary works contribute to the development and promotion of indigenous languages. The following are the ways through which these have been achieved: documentation, codification and standardization, vocabulary expansion and modernization, translation and cross-linguistic influence and hybridization and code switching.

3.1.1. Documentation, Codification and Standardization

The documentation of indigenous oral languages is a critical step toward the promotion and development of indigenous African languages. The urgency of language documentation as a means of safeguarding linguistic diversity has long been emphasized^[23]. Research by UNESCO indicates that languages that are not actively spoken or written down face a high risk of extinction^[3]. On the other hand, codification and standardization refer to the process of developing a formal^[24], structured system for a language to make

it more consistent and widely accepted in written and spoken forms^[24, 25]. Several literary works, linguistic projects, and the efforts of prominent writers have contributed to this process.

Many African languages are known to be primarily oral in their mode of communication. In the context of indigenous languages, African literary works such as novels, poetry, and folklore collections have played crucial roles in the documentation, codification, and standardization of indigenous African languages. Through their works, African literary writers have provided a foundation for these languages to be standardized and expanded for academic discourse, literary texts, and everyday communication through documentation of oral tradition. One of the earliest examples is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who is a major advocate for writing in indigenous African languages. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong's commitment to the Gikuyu literature has significantly contributed to the development and expansion of the language's vocabulary. His decision to write *Caitani Mũtharaba-Inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*)^[26] in Gikuyu was a radical statement on linguistic empowerment^[27, 28], challenging the dominance of colonial languages in African literature. Through demonstrating that Gikuyu could be a medium for intellectual and literary expression, Ngũgĩ not only enriched the language but also paved the way for future generations of writers to embrace their mother tongues in academic and creative writing. Similarly, his *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*) was originally written in Gikuyu before being translated into English to ensure the survival and literary enrichment of the language. His acts empower African languages, making literature more accessible to the local population. Similarly, the Yoruba literary tradition also reflects the deliberate codification of indigenous languages. Fagunwa's pioneering novel *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irínmọ̀lẹ̀* was among the first to be written in Yoruba, setting a precedent for Yoruba literature and expanding its literary vocabulary^[29]. His works demonstrated the capacity of Yoruba to engage with modern storytelling, helping standardize its orthography and structure for future literary and academic use.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* plays a crucial role in preserving and developing indigenous languages by integrating Igbo linguistic elements into English prose^[30]. Achebe incorporates Igbo proverbs, folktales, idioms, and untranslated words such as "chi" (personal god), "obi" (hut

or home), and “egwugwu” (ancestral spirits) into the novel. He resists the complete assimilation of African narratives into European literary structures. His use of proverbs, such as “the palm oil with which words are eaten,” Achebe emphasized the centrality of oral wisdom in Igbo communication^[30]. Through embedding untranslated terms, Achebe asserts the legitimacy of indigenous languages in global literature, ensuring their continued relevance. Beyond Achebe, African literature has contributed to the phonetic preservation of languages, as seen in Yoruba praise poetry (Oríkì), which maintains pronunciation patterns through tonal markings. Ulli Beier’s documentation of Oríkì in *The Heritage of African Poetry* preserves critical tonal distinctions, such as in “Sàngó Olúkòso, Àrá Kòso!” (Sàngó, the roaring one, the master of thunder)^[31]. Similarly, Mqhayi’s *Ityala lamawele*^[32], one of the earliest isiXhosa novels, helped formalize isiXhosa grammar and phonology. The novel’s use of tonal harmony and click sounds, as seen in “Ndithi ke ngexesha elinye, umthetho wamandulo wawuthi...”^[32], ensures that proper pronunciation and linguistic structures are maintained, preventing shifts that could alter meaning over time.

African literature has also played a significant role in codifying grammatical structures, sentence construction, and word formation in indigenous languages. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (Devil on the Cross^[26]), written entirely in Gikuyu, enriched the language by expanding its lexicon to accommodate contemporary themes. His phrase “Mwaiharirie wa gutongorwa” (the competition of exploitation) adapts capitalist terminology into indigenous linguistic frameworks^[33], ensuring the continued evolution of the Gikuyu vocabulary. Similarly, Achebe’s incorporation of Igbo syntax into English prose, particularly in proverbs such as “The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them”^[30], preserves traditional Igbo sentence structures. In Sesotho literature, Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* introduced standardized grammar and vocabulary, as seen in the structured phrase “O ile a hlaha joaloka naleli e khanyang haholo” (he appeared like a very bright star)^[34]. This poetic and descriptive usage in written Sesotho contributed to the language’s academic and literary development.

Moreover, literary pioneers such as Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Sol Plaatje, and Thomas Mofolo have significantly

contributed to the formalization of isiZulu, Setswana, and Sesotho through structured prose and poetic refinement. Vilakazi’s novels *Noma Nini* and *Udingiswayo KaJobe* provided some of the earliest structured examples of Zulu fiction, using a clear grammatical framework to establish a standardized literary form^[26, 35, 36]. Similarly, Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi*^[37], while written in English, integrates Setswana proverbs and oral storytelling techniques. His use of idiomatic expressions such as “Ga e phiri e latlha ngwana wa yona” (a hyena does not abandon its cub) highlights the depth of Setswana oral traditions within written literature^[37]. Furthermore, Plaatje’s translation of Shakespearean works into Setswana played a crucial role in standardizing the language. This makes it suitable for a variety of literary and academic applications. Through their contributions, African writers have ensured that indigenous languages are documented, preserved, expanded, and adapted for contemporary discourse, reinforcing their significance in both oral and written traditions.

3.1.2. Vocabulary Expansion and Modernization

Vocabulary expansion and modernization refer to how literature contributes to the growth and adaptation of indigenous languages by introducing new words, expressions, and concepts, ensuring their relevance in modern discourse^[38, 39]. The African literature has significantly contributed to this process by expanding and modernizing vocabulary, allowing indigenous languages to accommodate contemporary realities such as technological advancements, political discourse, and scientific concepts. Through the literature, writers have introduced new words and expressions that describe modern ideas that previously had no equivalent indigenous languages. For example, terms related to governance, education, and technology have been adapted or created within literary works, enriching the lexicon. This process involves coining new words, borrowing from other languages, or modifying existing vocabulary to fit evolving contexts. Similarly, as societies evolve, new topics, technologies, and ideologies emerge, making it necessary for indigenous languages to adapt to remain functional in modern communication, education, and professional settings. The literature plays a crucial role in this adaptation by integrating modern terminology into storytelling essays and academic works^[40–42]. This ensures that indigenous languages remain dynamic and relevant, bridging the gap between traditional linguistic heritage and

contemporary discourse.

In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*^[26], he coined new political terms in Gikuyu to reflect contemporary realities, such as “*ithogarĩria*” to mean “selfish capitalist” and “*bururi wa Mbois*” (Land of Parrots), which satirically refers to a dictatorial regime. These terms illustrate how literature can modernize indigenous languages by introducing vocabulary that reflects political discourse and economic concepts that were previously absent in the language. Similarly, *I Will Marry When I Want*^[43], Ngũgĩ introduced terms such as “*matongoria ma bururi*” (national leaders) and “*uthamaki wa wĩyathi*” (imperialism), enriching the Gikuyu language and enabling it to address modern political and economic themes, such as class struggle and neocolonialism.

In *The Interpreters* Wole Soyinka modernized Yoruba-inflected English by blending traditional Yoruba cultural concepts with modern intellectual discourse^[44]. For example, he coined “*Ogunian rage*” to represent a relentless, destructive energy derived from the Yoruba god Ogun, symbolizing societal unrest. This integration of indigenous cosmology with modern themes enriched both Yoruba and English vocabulary, highlighting how indigenous languages can evolve to express contemporary ideas. Shabaan Robert, in *Kusadikika*^[41], contributed to the modernization of Swahili by coining the term “*kusadikika*” (the land of the believable), which described a fictional utopia and helped introduce abstract political and philosophical ideas to Swahili literature. His work expanded Swahili's capacity to engage with modern themes, such as governance and ideology, thus making it more adaptable for contemporary discourse.

Vocabulary expansion and modernization in African literature are crucial for adapting indigenous languages to modern contexts. Writers such as Ngũgĩ, Soyinka, Robert, and Kunene have significantly contributed to this process by introducing new terms that accommodate contemporary realities in politics, economics, and social discourse. Through their work, indigenous languages have been enriched with vocabulary that reflects modern ideologies, historical events, and complex societal issues. These literary innovations ensure that indigenous languages remain relevant and functional in both intellectual and everyday communication.

3.1.3. Cross-Linguistic Translation

Translation plays a crucial role in the development and preservation of indigenous languages by enabling cross-

cultural and linguistic exchange^[45]. When African literary works are translated from and into indigenous languages, they contribute to cultural exchange and mutual understanding by allowing different linguistic communities to share ideas, traditions, and worldviews, fostering a deeper appreciation of diverse cultures^[46]. Furthermore, translation strengthens indigenous literary traditions, as many of these languages lack a large body of written literature. By translating major works into indigenous languages, their literary corpus expands, reinforcing their status as languages of literature and intellectual discourse^[47]. Moreover, translation enhances linguistic development by introducing new expressions and refining grammar and syntax, making indigenous languages more versatile for modern use. A notable example is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which has been translated into multiple African languages, including Igbo, Swahili, and Zulu, among others. This reinforces the novel's cultural and linguistic relevance beyond its original English form and has popularized storytelling traditions in these languages. This finding demonstrates the richness and adaptability of African languages. By fostering cross-linguistic influence, translation ensures that indigenous languages continue to thrive and remain relevant in contemporary literature.

Ngũgĩ demonstrated how African languages could be platforms for intellectual and literary discourse, challenging the dominance of colonial languages. His *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*) was first written in Gikuyu and then translated into English. This ensures the preservation of indigenous linguistics and, at the same time, is accessible to the global audience. Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* was originally written in Acholi, a Luo dialect spoken in Uganda, and later translated into English. Its poetic and cultural richness was preserved^[48].

3.1.4. Hybridization and Code Switching

Hybridization and code switching in the literature refer to the blending of languages; these are communication processes that reflect the multilingual realities of African societies and play crucial roles in the development and preservation of indigenous languages^[14]. Hybridization involves mixing indigenous languages with colonial languages such as English, French, or Portuguese, creating a unique linguistic style that mirrors the way people naturally communicate in multilingual settings^[49]. Through incorporating indigenous words, phrases, and expressions, African writers legit-

imize and promote these languages in literary and academic spaces. Similarly, code switching, which involves alternating between indigenous and colonial languages within dialogue or narration, captures the authentic voice of characters while preserving indigenous linguistic structures and making texts accessible to a wider audience^[50]. This has been highly reflected in African literature as a means of indigenous language development. For example, in the *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o integrates Swahili Gikuyu and English^[19]. He uses hybrid expressions to challenge colonial language dominance and makes use of Gikuyu words such as "uhuru" (freedom) and "matunda ya uhuru" (fruits of independence) to critique postcolonial Kenya. This demonstrates how code-switching helps expand the vocabulary and expressive range of indigenous languages. In the text, Munira is a schoolteacher in Ilmorog; he addresses the villagers about the need for education and development. While speaking to them, he uses Swahili to connect with them emotionally. However, when making an intellectual point, he switches to English. This is depicted in the extract below:

Munira: "Tunataka watoto wenu wapate elimu bora, lakini bila bidii yenu, hakuna kitakachofanyika." (We want your children to get a good education, but without your effort, nothing will happen.)

Villager: "Lakini mwalimu, serikali haijatusaidia! Tunahitaji msaada." (But teacher, the government has not helped us! We need assistance.)

Munira: "I understand your concerns, but the responsibility also lies with us. Development is not something we wait for; it is something we create"^[19].

Similarly, in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*^[44], he features a fusion of English and Yoruba by using Yoruba mythological references and proverbs to enrich the narrative. The same is the case for his *death and the King's Horseman*, who uses Yoruba words such as "egungun" (ancestral masquerade) and "oriki" (praise poetry)^[51]. This helps keep their cultural weight intact. Soyinka employs phonetically Yoruba-influenced English to capture the rhythm and speech patterns of Yoruba speakers, which helps him create a hybrid literary language. Wole Soyinka integrates Yoruba expressions, proverbs, and cultural references into his English-language works. This not only keeps Yoruba alive in literary discourse but also ensures that indigenous languages are represented in global literature. Consequently, readers who are unfa-

miliar with Yoruba are introduced to its richness, whereas native speakers see their language validated in intellectual and literary spaces.

Furthermore, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* mix Shona and English. This helps her highlight the tension between colonial education and indigenous identity^[52]. For example, the protagonist, Tambu, often reflects in English but shifts to Shona when discussing traditional customs or family conflicts. Words such as "mukoma" (elder brother) and "sadza" (a traditional dish) are left untranslated, grounding the narrative in its Zimbabwean cultural context^[52]. Through code switching, she demonstrates the fluidity of bilingual identities in postcolonial Africa. Similarly, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* uses isiXhosa phrases and folklore within an English narrative, which helps preserve traditional idioms^[53]. Example: He uses phrases such as "Amaxesha amabi" (bad times) instead of its English equivalent to reinforce a uniquely Xhosa worldview^[53]. In his *Heart of Redness*^[54], he integrates historical Xhosa speech patterns and keeps some words untranslated to emphasize their cultural significance. Mda's novels modernize indigenous languages by integrating them into contemporary storytelling. This proves that African languages can coexist with English in literary spaces. In Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories*^[55], his characters frequently switch between English and isiZulu to reflect the multilingual reality of South African life. He uses phrases such as "Hawu! What are you doing?", blending isiZulu exclamations with English, which is a style common in township speech. The use of code switching between English and Zulu, Ndebele, helped expand indigenous language use in contemporary fiction. Another instance of hybridization and code-switching in literary work is Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*^[56]. The text is a post-apartheid novel set in Johannesburg. It mirrors real-life multilingual urban speech, with characters switching between languages fluidly. The author uses separate terms such as "batho ba rona" (our people) and Tsotsitaal slang to reflect the diverse linguistic identities of Hillbrow residents. Mpe's use of multilingual storytelling captures South African urban linguistic dynamics and highlights the adaptability of indigenous languages in modern literature^[56]. This practice encourages bilingual and multilingual writing by promoting indigenous language literacy^[11, 57]. Furthermore, through hybridization and code switching, African

literature not only preserves indigenous languages but also modernizes and globalizes them, thereby reinforcing their development and significance in contemporary discourse.

3.2. Lessons from African Literature for Contemporary Language Development, Repositioning, and Revitalization of Indigenous African Languages in South African Higher Education

The progression of African literature offers profound insights into the development, repositioning, and revitalization of indigenous African languages. African literary works have long functioned as instruments of linguistic preservation, expansion, and modernization, demonstrating that language is both a cultural repository and a dynamic medium for intellectual and social transformation^[58]. These literary interventions provide valuable lessons for contemporary efforts to integrate and elevate indigenous African languages in South African higher education.

One of the critical lessons from African literature is the role of codification and standardization in reinforcing the legitimacy of indigenous languages. Literary texts have historically contributed to the stabilization of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and orthographic conventions, transitioning many African languages from predominantly oral traditions to written forms and thereby strengthening their legitimacy as academic and literary mediums^[33, 59]. This lesson underlines the need for indigenous languages to be systematically documented, codified and incorporated into academic instruction, allowing for their use in scientific, philosophical, and theoretical discourse, which is supported by Heugh et al.^[21], who noted that integrating these languages in the science classroom could increase the relevance of schooling for indigenous students. For contemporary language development in South African higher education, the standardization of indigenous languages through literary production can serve as a model for formalizing these languages in academic discourse. Consequently, higher education institutions must invest in developing standardized terminologies for scientific, technological, and philosophical concepts in indigenous languages, ensuring their applicability in academic research and instruction.

Another lesson drawn from African literature is the necessity of vocabulary expansion and modernization to ensure

the continued relevance of indigenous languages in contemporary discourse. The capacity of a language to adapt to new sociopolitical and technological realities determines its long-term survival. This process of linguistic enrichment is essential for the contemporary revitalization of indigenous languages in South African universities. If these languages are to be used as primary media of instruction, it is imperative that they are equipped with specialized terminologies in fields such as law, science, medicine, and technology. The expansion of indigenous language vocabulary will enable their use in academic publishing and research^[54], further solidifying their place in higher education^[60]. Furthermore, in this digital era, the expansion of indigenous vocabularies must go beyond literary works to include scientific, technological, and academic discourse. South African universities should collaborate with linguists and literary scholars to develop contemporary lexicons for indigenous languages, making them viable for digital communication, artificial intelligence, and academic research. The incorporation of new terms into educational curricula will enhance the intellectual and practical utility of indigenous languages, ensuring their continued relevance in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Translation is a powerful tool for repositioning indigenous languages by fostering crosslinguistic and cross-cultural influence^[61]. The African literature has demonstrated that translation can serve as a means of preserving linguistic authenticity while making indigenous narratives accessible to broader audiences^[19]. This exemplifies how translation can facilitate the transmission of indigenous knowledge^[62] systems while ensuring that indigenous languages remain vibrant and widely used. For South African higher education, translation initiatives should focus on making academic knowledge accessible in indigenous languages. Key academic texts in science, humanities, and social sciences should be translated into isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, and other indigenous languages to facilitate linguistic inclusivity in higher education^[63]. Likewise, translation efforts should work in both ways, thereby ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems and literary works are translated into global languages, thus positioning African intellectual traditions within global academic networks.

Similarly, the multilingual reality of African societies is well reflected in literary works that employ hybridization and code switching. This literary strategy offers a compelling

model for language policy implementation in South African higher education. Universities should embrace multilingual education models that incorporate code-switching and hybrid linguistic practices^[64]. Course materials, lectures, and academic discussions should be structured in ways that allow seamless transitions between indigenous and global languages, thereby fostering linguistic inclusivity and intellectual accessibility. Embracing multilingual education, which incorporates code-switching and hybrid linguistic practices, has significant implications for the development of indigenous languages^[65]. When universities integrate both indigenous and colonial languages into their curricula, it creates an environment where indigenous languages are not viewed as separate or inferior but rather as valuable and relevant. This shift encourages the daily use of indigenous languages, ensuring that they remain a part of everyday communication in academic settings. The more students and educators use these languages, the more they contribute to their preservation and growth, preventing them from fading into obscurity. Furthermore, incorporating indigenous languages into higher education helps elevate their status and recognition. Through teaching and conducting research in these languages, universities validate their importance and help breakdown the societal stigma that often surrounds them. This not only encourages students to use their indigenous languages with pride but also challenges the notion that only colonial languages are appropriate for academic and professional discourse. In turn, this increases the likelihood that indigenous languages will also be spoken and valued outside of academic settings.

In addition, multilingual education models allow for a smoother learning process. Students can switch between languages, drawing on their fluency in colonial languages to better understand and express themselves in indigenous languages^[66]. This approach fosters a deeper connection with both languages, improving language skills while making indigenous languages more accessible and practical for everyday use. By reducing the barriers to learning, students are more likely to retain and apply their knowledge of indigenous languages. The incorporation of indigenous languages also encourages the development of educational materials, such as textbooks, research papers, and digital resources, in these languages. As more academic content becomes available in indigenous languages, it enhances the availability of

resources for students and researchers, enriching the learning environment. This, in turn, fosters a sense of pride and ownership of the language, as it becomes not only a tool for communication but also a means of academic and intellectual expression. In essence, the embrace of multilingual education in universities can transform indigenous language development, turning these languages from relics of the past into living, thriving tools for the future. Through this inclusive approach, indigenous languages can flourish alongside colonial languages, creating a richer, more diverse academic and cultural landscape.

4. Conclusions

The development, revitalization and repositioning of indigenous African languages in South African higher education require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. Lessons drawn from African literature provide invaluable insights into the processes of documentation, codification, vocabulary expansion, translation, and multilingual education. This is because literature has long served as a powerful tool for linguistic preservation and intellectual advancement, proving that indigenous languages are not stagnant remnants of history but adaptable vessels for scientific, philosophical, and technological discourse.

A critical lesson from African literary practices is the importance of systematically documenting and codifying indigenous languages to reinforce their legitimacy in academic and professional spaces. Standardization efforts, including the development of structured grammar, vocabulary, and orthographic conventions, must be prioritized to facilitate their integration into higher education. Without such formalization, these languages risk being side-lined in favour of dominant colonial languages. Furthermore, vocabulary expansion and modernization are imperative to ensure the continued relevance of indigenous languages in contemporary discourse. As scientific and technological advancements shape modern knowledge production, South African universities must collaborate with linguists and scholars to develop specialized terminologies that allow indigenous languages to function effectively in academic settings.

Translation emerges as another vital strategy for linguistic inclusivity. This makes academic materials in science, humanities, and social sciences available in indigenous

languages, ensures accessibility and empowers students to engage with knowledge in their native tongues. Simultaneously, translating indigenous knowledge systems into global languages enhances cross-cultural academic exchanges, positioning African intellectual contributions within broader scholarly networks. Moreover, the multilingual nature of African societies reflected in literary works that incorporate hybridization and code-switching presents a compelling model for higher education institutions. Rather than enforcing rigid linguistic divides, universities should embrace multilingual education frameworks that allow seamless transitions between indigenous and colonial languages. Such an approach would foster an inclusive learning environment, validating the importance of indigenous languages and ensuring their sustained use in both academic and everyday contexts. The promotion of indigenous languages in South African higher education requires deliberate policy implementation, institutional commitment, and intellectual investment. By drawing on lessons from African literature, universities can cultivate a linguistic landscape that not only preserves indigenous languages but also empowers them as vehicles for knowledge creation, innovation, and cultural expression. Through these efforts, South Africa can move toward a more inclusive and decolonized academic system that reflects the country's linguistic diversity and cultural heritage while ensuring that indigenous languages thrive in the modern era.

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