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The language debate entered a new phase today at the Culture and Development Conference taking place at the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, with inputs by delegates from recently liberated neighbouring countries sharing their experiences with South African delegates.

The Mozambican Minister of Education and Culture, Mr Kathupa, gave the historical background to the marginalisation of indigenous Mozambican languages under Portuguese colonialism through the cultural assimilation of Mozambicans by insistence on religious and educational instruction through the medium of Portuguese. He said that the reason that Frelimo prioritised culture in its struggle was to restore the self esteem of Mozambicans which had been lost through acculturation as well as empower the different language groups of Mozambique through the official use of their own languages on a regional level.

When Frelimo assumed power in 1974, he said, it insisted on the participation of government officials in the abovementioned process by making it compulsory for them to communicate with Mozambicans in local languages. Frelimo also established a Language Research Institute to study the cultural background of indigenous African Languages as well as a Department of Translation to ensure that all official information was available in regional indigenous languages. The Mozambican delegate emphasised the fact that culture had to be perceived not only as artistic production but also as "mahanyera", a philosophy or basis of life.

Cde Qedusizi Buthelezi, the co-ordinator of the ANC's Language Commission raised the importance of an equitable Language policy in a multilingual country like South Africa with particular reference to official status. From informal research conducted at regional level by the ANC Department of Arts and Culture, English emerged as the language preferred by most respondents as future "official" language of South Africa, although the ANC did not subscribe to the concept of one or several languages being accorded an "official" status at the expense of others. At the end of Cde Qedusizi's presentation it became obvious that South Africa was undergoing similar problems with recently liberated countries like Mozambique and Namibia, both of which were faced with the massive task of destroying the language stereotypes inherited from colonialism and apartheid respectively.

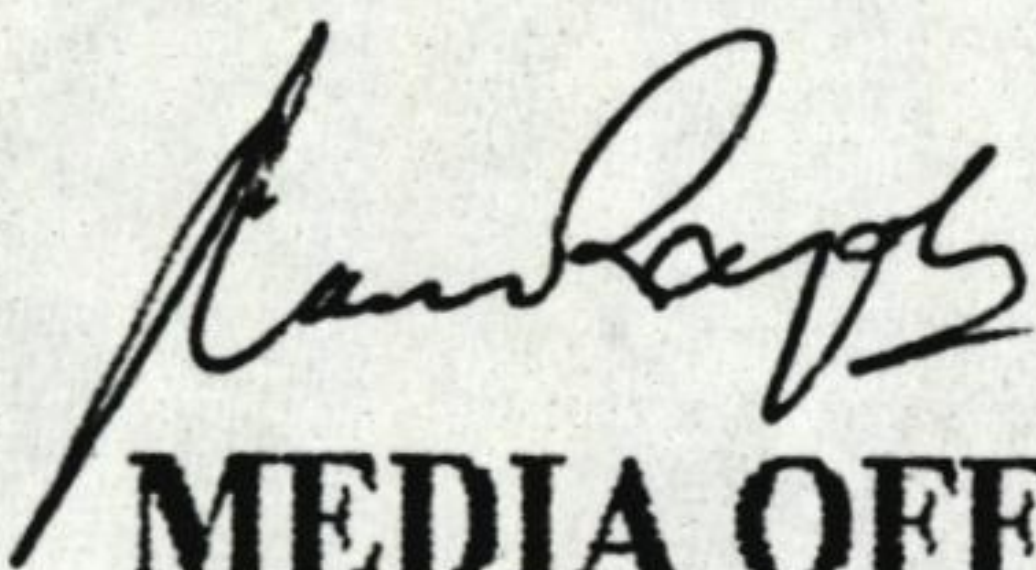
It became obvious from the subsequent question session that the major area of concern pertaining to language was that of education. Parents were most concerned as to whether the languages taught at schools empowered their children for future careers and preferred that their children study languages like English which have assumed the status of careerism.

Cde Albie Sachs, National Executive Committee member of the ANC based in the ANC Western Cape Region and a renowned linguist added that the concept of nationalism did not have to subjugate people's cultural identity but that it had to be empowered by the enhancement of people's language rights.

Mr Vadarajan, Minister of State in India shared the experiences of a multicultural country like India with the conference. He said that since India gained independence in 1947, that populous country had to contend with the problem of multilingualism in all aspects of life. Hindi and English were chosen as the two official languages, with English being official for a limited period of time i.e until indigenous Indian languages had developed enough to be used in an official capacity at regional level. Mr Vadarajan also emphasised the language had to serve as a uniting rather than a divisive factor and that there was no need to reject any language on the basis of its association with an oppressive past.

Another concern raised by the delegates from the floor was the lack of or, the apparent negligence of language rights for the orally handicapped to which Cde Qedusizi Buthelezi answered that the ANC was looking into that area but that progress can be achieved through the involvement of experts in the area.

It is thus obvious that, for South Africans to formulate a comprehensive policy, intensive grassroots education about the implications of language decisions they may take as well as consultations with countries that have undergone similar experiences as South Africa would have to be embarked upon.



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