

Kono District Development Association

Solving Identity Crisis through Language Lessons. *By Tamba Gborie*

Identity crisis is a hot topic among the children of ethnic minorities in the Western world. For some reason, the children think it is time to align with their ethnic origin. Some of these children have experienced discrimination one way or the other; consequently they have resorted to accept who they are rather than be a carbon copy of a culture they do not belong to.

On this basis the Kono District Development Association (KDDA) in London introduced Kono Language classes to answer some of the questions about identity. Children, youths and adults of Kono origin that were not fortunate to learn their mother tongue at an early age can now count on the KDDA if they wish to learn the language. Kono is one of the dialects spoken by people from the Eastern part of Sierra Leone. It is by far the smallest tribe in the country but commands respect, power and wealth. Kono is the only district, which is named after the tribe. As a district with diverse communities, the classes are open to anyone born and bred in Kono or lived in Kono and want to attend the classes are welcome to do so if they wish. Classes are held every fortnight.

A number of Kono speaking people echoed that learning your mother tongue makes you know who you are; your identity and your culture. Migrant black people living in the Western world admire and practise Western life styles with a few detaching themselves from their people and have no clue about their culture. These are the ones caught up in a disorientated state of identity crisis. To a large degree, this has impacted on black children in schools and in colleges. At the other end of the spectrum migrant Indians, Chinese and Coloured Latinos to name but a few, display their culture in the form of dress, dance and speech. In their respective homes they make time to teach their children their mother tongue as a secondment to their adopted languages without obstructing the education of the children by any measure.

Unlike most black households in the Diaspora, it has got to a level where the parents concede that they have failed their children for not making any attempt to speak their language to the children from birth. Nowadays a record number of black children are excited to know where their dad or mum comes from and what language they speak. The children sometimes ask their parents, especially the mother “But mum, why don’t you speak your language?” Such question has thrown many parents off their stride and are left asking why they failed to teach their children, their mother tongue.

The inception of the KDDA in the early 1960s was a mile stone, to see Konos coming together for a common purpose vis-à-vis the development of Konoland. Nevertheless, looking back at the historic launching and the collective purpose of the association, the power struggle of the 1990s among Kono elites to present day court wrangling has not deterred the association from progressing further. What people admire about this great association is the strength to withstand the whims and excesses of forces out to bring it down. “United we stand divided we fall, an abridgment members hardly speak of but it is the bedrock for the association’s continuity”, Dr. Kai Ngegba the current chairman remarked in a speech delivered to a packed audience during the last KDDA general meeting.

Regardless of the difficult times the KDDA is going through right now, it has not relented in organising its traditional ceremonies and social gatherings, outings to beaches, visits to old people’s homes and hospitals to meet sick people. In addition, the recent introduction of Kono literacy classes to teach people who want to learn Kono dialect are signs of greater things to come. October, 06/2012, is a day that will be remembered for a long time to come as KDDA firmly laid the foundation of Kono language lessons, with a substantial number of children, youths and adults attending the first lesson. The students were impressive, especially the young children, they were engaged and motivated to learn. At the end of the first lesson this writer spoke to Elizabeth Sam, a sixteen year old pupil of Harris Academy in South London what she thinks of learning Kono. “I am proud to be part of the Kono lessons, I want to learn Kono and be able to speak it”. Elizabeth was born in the heart of London to Kono parents but she has never been to Sierra Leone; she is excited about learning her mother tongue.

Mr Sahr .Y.O. Lebbie, a former chairman of the association emphasised that every Kono person has a responsibility to teach their children Kono language so that the next generation of Konos will benefit from Kono history, Kono language and Kono culture. “The onus is on us to make our own history and future”. Mr. Lebbie told Konos. Kumba Fasuluku one of the adult learners was born in Koidu town now Koidu city, was brought up in London, attended the first day of the Kono classes. This is what she said about the lessons. “One of the most important things, is coming here and learning about our history, our language and our roots; to learn Kono, means you start to discover new things; you realize who you really are. You appreciate Kono history and its rich culture”. The Konos believe that learning their language

will create awareness and build a sense of pride among the learners as part of Kono tradition and identity. “It gives us an opportunity to speak in one language and to have one vision about our future”, says, Sahr Nyankuma Momodu one of the pupils on the course. Sahr Kayamba Fasuluku, Tamba Sukuwa, Tamba Kutubu Momodu, Sia Gborie and Jasmine Mafinda, were few of the children who attended the first day of the Kono classes. Angel Mafinda, Aiah Fasuluku, Ruth Ngegba, Aiah Kayamba Momodu and Maiama Fasuluku are the youngest learners; they were very happy and called for the lessons to be held every week.

If the first day of the classes and the motivation of the children together with the numerous phone calls from people expressing interest in the classes is anything to go by, then KDDA better start searching for a bigger space because the number of students is expected to increase in the coming weeks.

En route to learning ones mother tongue could be rocky but worth the journey, however the KDDA is determine to help those Konos caught up in a limbo of identity crisis.