

Editorial

## The Local Language of Global Environmental Knowledge

Tapping into local knowledge of the environment is extremely important for the sustainability and effectiveness of technology transfer schemes in aid of environmental quality. Therefore, it can be informative to explore the roots and meanings of the words people use to describe their environment, as this often says a lot about their perception of the relationship between people and nature and among adjacent cultures. According to Childs<sup>1</sup>, there are more than 2000 languages in Africa, distributed among six major linguistic families (Figure 1). We should expect that each of these languages has an equivalent to the English word “environment” which has several interpretations, but in our context, meaning more or less the aggregate of biotic, abiotic, social, and cultural factors and conditions that influence human life and communities. It is not surprising that the major language families in Africa align with environmental regimes shaped mostly by climate and the availability of natural resources that facilitate colonization of habitats and cultural homogeneity (Figure 1). However, the historic flow of socio-cultural and linguistic families has been enriched by the superimposition of foreign languages such as Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese, each of these with their own conceptualization of “environment” and its interpretations. For this reason, it is not likely that globally celebrated event such as the “World Environment Day” will have the same meaning in all parts of Africa, and we should care very much about how local developments shape the adoption of global frameworks on the environment.

The World Environment Day (WED), celebrated on June 5<sup>th</sup> of every year since its establishment by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972, is meant to increase the awareness of the inter-dependence of human societies and nature, especially given the intensified influence of localized human action on global environmental conditions. The theme for this year (2007) turned out to be “Melting Ice p a Hot Topic?” which aimed to focus attention on the effects of climate change on polar ecosystems and communities. It begs the question why Africans should care about the polar ice caps melting. But we should. Certainly, the disappearing snows of Kilimanjaro have become the poster case for the unnerving projects of climate change (Figure 2), but most Africans have never touched snow. In many countries, the theme for WED-2007 was covered faithfully in alignment with the global framing, but there were important additions that reflect what local communities care about, including tree planting, water quality, and biodiversity (Table 1). That some local themes for the 2007 WED is important because it underscores the resilience of what is important locally despite the shifting global agenda. The capacity to re-interpret global frames using local language should be encouraged throughout the world. That is the only way to engage local knowledge effectively in the service of global sustainability.

**Table 1.** African Country Themes for World Environment Day, 2007

COUNTRY	THEME FOR “WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY”, JUNE 5TH, 2007 .
BENIN	Waste is wealth
BOSTWANA	Indigenous knowledge to create a sustainable environment in a changing world.
CAMEROON	Planting trees
CONGO REPUBLIC	<b>Melting Ice – A Hot Topic?</b>
EGYPT	Think global, act local
GABON	Ecological chain of the water cycle
GHANA	Global Change and Energy Crisis, Whose Responsibility?
KENYA	<b>Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign</b> Environmental conservation
LIBERIA	<b>Melting Ice – A Hot Topic?</b> impact of climate change on the Liberian environment

<sup>1</sup> Childs, G.T. 2003. *An Introduction to African Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin.

Table 1. contd.

LIBYA	Environmental responsibilities, especially in the field of oil & gas industry. Endemic biodiversity <b>Melting Ice – a Hot Topic?</b>
MAURITIUS	Global warming
MOZAMBIQUE	<b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b>
NAMBIA	Nurturing of the trees
NIGERIA	“The Drops of Life” Art in Environment Environmental awareness through electronic media <b>Melting Ice – a Hot Topic?</b>
SENEGAL	The importance of respecting and protecting the environment and living in harmony with it.
SEYCHELLES	<b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b>
SOMALIA	Stop the war; war destroys the environment.
SOUTH AFRICA	Eco- Design for Competitive Advantage Touch Africa Lightly The Wolf in the Forest An Inconvenient Truth Afro-centric Sustainable Development within the Global Village
TANZANIA	Planting Trees <b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b>
TUNISIA	Inauguration of a new environmental corner
UGANDA	Melting Ice on the Rwenzori Mountains - a key future Resource based Conflict.
ZAMBIA	<b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic</b>

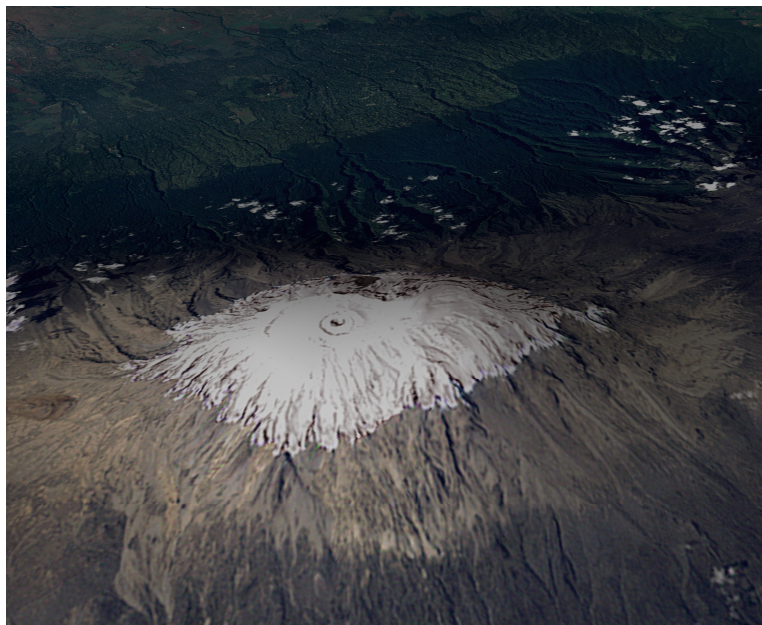


Figure 1. Map of African language families and local words used in reference to general understanding of “environment”.The distribution of language families follows the classification scheme of Joseph H. Greenberg<sup>2</sup>.

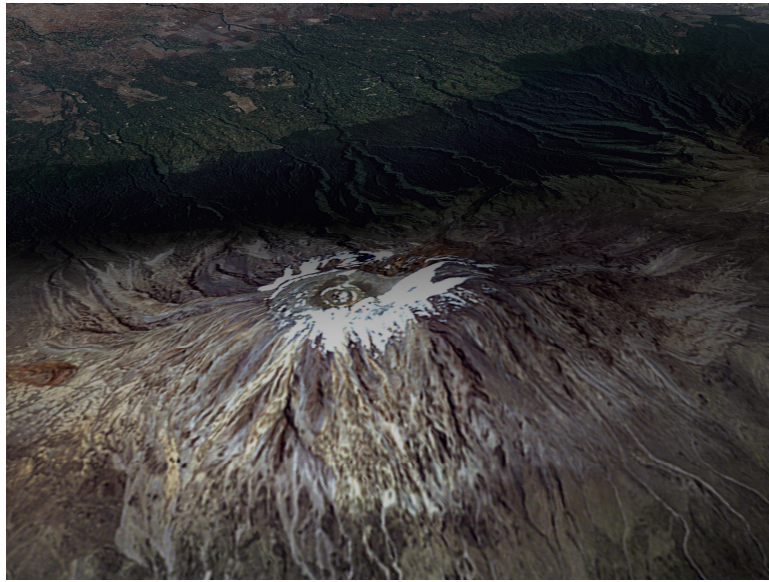
<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:African\\_language\\_families.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:African_language_families.svg)

**Table 2.** History of World Environment Day themes

<b>Year</b>	<b>Theme for World Environment Day</b>
2007	Melting Ice – Hot Topic?
2006	Deserts and Desertification – Don't Desert Drylands!
2005	Green Cities – Plan for the Planet!
2004	Wanted! Seas and Oceans – Dead or Alive?
2003	Water – Two Billion People are Dying for It!
2002	Give Earth a Chance
2001	Connect with the World Wide Web of Life
2000	The Environment Millennium - Time to Act
1999	Our Earth - Our Future - Just Save It!
1998	For Life on Earth - Save Our Seas
1997	For Life on Earth
1996	Our Earth, Our Habitat, Our Home
1995	We the Peoples: United for the Global Environment
1994	One Earth One Family
1993	Poverty and the Environment - Breaking the Vicious Circle
1992	Only One Earth, Care and Share
1991	Climate Change. Need for Global Partnership
1990	Children and the Environment
1989	Global Warming; Global Warning
1988	When People Put the Environment First, Development Will Last
1987	Environment and Shelter: More Than A Roof
1986	A Tree for Peace
1985	Youth: Population and the Environment
1984	Desertification
1983	Managing and Disposing Hazardous Waste: Acid Rain and Energy
1982	Ten Years After Stockholm (Renewal of Environmental Concerns)
1981	Ground Water; Toxic Chemicals in Human Food Chains and Environmental Economics
1980	A New Challenge for the New Decade: Development Without Destruction
1979	Only One Future for Our Children - Development Without Destruction
1978	Development Without Destruction
1977	Ozone Layer Environmental Concern; Lands Loss and Soil Degradation; Firewood
1976	Water: Vital Resource for Life
1975	Human Settlements
1974	Only one Earth



**A**



**Figure 2.** The melting ice cover of Mount Kilimanjaro (Panel A – 1993; Panel B – 2000) has become the poster case-study for climate change and aligns well the the 2007 theme of the World Environment Day. Images are by courtesy of Jim Williams, NASA GSFC Scientific Visualization Studio, and the Landsat 7 Science Team.

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