How Franck Zanu Deceives Himself and His Audience About Africa

Eliakim M. Kambale

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Franck Zanu and his favorite problematic argument

Franck Zanu is a Benin-born American commentator who hosts *Zanu Project Rethink*, a channel where he discusses African development, culture, colonialism, and race. In a recurring argument, he asks guests for the word "maintenance" in an African language. When they cannot supply an answer he accepts, he takes this to mean that the language lacks the word, that the culture therefore lacks the concept, and that this absence helps explain Africa's development problems. The argument appears in his discussion with two African students and his interview with Nick Freitas. This piece examines those successive conclusions and shows where the reasoning collapses.

Watch Zanu make the argument: 9:40–11:00

Fault no. 1: The argument from ignorance fallacy

When Franck asks a guest for the equivalent of "maintenance" in their language, several assumptions stand between the reply and his conclusion. The first is that if the word exists, the guest must know it. If the guest does not know it, then it does not exist. This alone is faulty reasoning. When the guest admits to not knowing the word, the answer establishes only their lack of knowledge at that moment. It does not establish the contents of the language. This is a typical argument from ignorance fallacy, or *argumentum ad ignorantiam*: what someone does not know is made to establish what is not there.

Several explanations could account for the guest's answer. They may have limited fluency in their native language. They may have received their education in a colonial language and learned technical vocabulary primarily in that language. The term may belong to a profession they have never practiced. They may simply have forgotten it. Zanu's question does not distinguish among these possibilities, yet he treats the reply as if it permits only one conclusion.

It is also possible that the language, in its current use, has no exact equivalent. Even then, its present vocabulary does not establish that the word never existed. Languages evolve: words emerge, change meaning, fall out of use, and are borrowed from other languages. A term may

disappear as the practice or industry that sustained it declines, particularly when the transmission of knowledge between generations is interrupted. An absence today would therefore require investigation into the language's history before it could support a claim about what its speakers have ever known.

Slavery and colonialism offer possible explanations for such losses. An artisan taken from a community could leave without passing on their skills. Forced displacement could separate apprentices from teachers, while colonial economic changes and competition from industrial imports could undermine the livelihoods that sustained a craft. If the practice declined, opportunities to use and transmit its specialized vocabulary could decline with it. Later generations might inherit neither the skill nor the words, even though both had once belonged to their community.

Changes in education could deepen that interruption. A craft taught through families and apprenticeships depends on sustained contact between learners and practitioners. Where colonial schooling displaced or devalued those forms of learning, the knowledge they carried could lose its route to the next generation. The new schools might teach neither the local craft nor its vocabulary. They could instead produce someone who discusses technical subjects fluently in a European language but struggles to name them in their own. That difficulty could reflect how the person was educated and what they had opportunities to learn.

Zanu's question leaves this history unexplored. He encounters a possible break in transmission and treats it as proof that there was never anything to transmit.

Fault no. 2: The assumption of linguistic determinism

Even if we grant that a language has no equivalent word for "maintenance," the next step still fails. Zanu assumes that the absence of the word establishes the absence of the concept. But a word and a concept are different things. An idea can be expressed through a phrase, an explanation, or several more specific terms. What English gathers under "maintenance" might be expressed through distinct descriptions of preserving tools, caring for buildings, or keeping equipment in working condition. The absence of a single umbrella term would not establish that these activities, or their purpose, are unknown.

This inference depends on a strong assumption of linguistic determinism: that the vocabulary available to people sets the limits of what they can understand. Yet the exchange itself gives reason to question that assumption. When a guest offers an expression such as "take care of," they are attempting to describe the idea through words they already possess. Zanu may reasonably ask whether that expression captures the precise meaning he intends. Rejecting it as an exact translation, however, does not establish that the guest cannot understand the distinction. He would have to examine their understanding of preventive care, preservation, and repair. Instead, he treats a question about translation as if it had already settled a question about thought.

Let's consider *defenestration*, the English word for throwing someone out of a window. Its Mandarin translation is 把……抛出窗外, which literally means "throw … out of the window." The phrase expresses the action through several words. Phrase-based expressions are also documented in Arabic and Hindi, and in Tagalog for the verb *defenestrate*. A speaker can understand the action, describe it, or commit it without needing a dedicated word. If speakers of Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi, and Tagalog can understand throwing someone out of a window through a phrase, why should African speakers need a single word to understand maintenance?

Fault no. 3: The hasty generalization fallacy

Even if Zanu had established that a particular language lacked both the word and the concept, he would still have to justify extending that conclusion to an entire continent. His guests cannot stand for every African language, community, profession, and tradition. This is a hasty generalization: a conclusion whose scope exceeds the evidence offered for it. Asking a few people a question does not turn their answers into a finding about Africa.

Fault no. 4: The false cause fallacy

There is also an unsupported causal inference. Even if a missing word and poor maintenance were both established, their coexistence would not prove that one causes the other. Does the vocabulary shape the practice, does the practice shape the vocabulary, or do both reflect other circumstances? Zanu would need evidence that distinguishes these possibilities. His question supplies none, yet the answer is made to carry an explanation of development.

Knowing what maintenance means, valuing it, and consistently carrying it out are three different things. A community may understand preventive care while lacking the money, equipment, trained personnel, or institutional arrangements to practice it reliably. Even widespread neglect would not establish that the concept is unknown. Zanu would have to distinguish between a failure of understanding and a failure of implementation. His vocabulary question cannot make that distinction.

Fault no. 5: The non sequitur fallacy

Even if every preceding claim were true, the conclusion that Africa cannot develop would still not follow. A present deficiency does not establish a permanent incapacity. People can acquire knowledge, change their practices, and create institutions that sustain those changes. Languages can develop the vocabulary needed to describe them. The leap from "this concept is absent" to "these societies cannot develop" is a *non sequitur*, Latin for "it does not follow." To justify that conclusion, Zanu would have to establish why the supposed deficiency could never be overcome. His question about a word establishes nothing of the kind.

The revival of spoken Hebrew gives us an example of how a language can expand its vocabulary to meet new needs. This process began decades before Israel's establishment. Hebrew had continued through religious, literary, and scholarly use, but its adoption for everyday life

required vocabulary for contemporary activities. Teachers and language committees recovered older words, assigned new meanings, coined terms, and borrowed from other languages. They supplied terminology for mathematics, construction, carpentry, and other fields. Missing vocabulary presented work to be done. Why should a supposed gap in an African language establish that its speakers could never do something similar?

Conclusion

Does Franck not notice these errors, or does he recognize them and continue misleading his audience deliberately? I can't tell.

What should you learn from this? Well, that a confident speaker can make faulty reasoning appear coherent. His apparent authority supplies the *ethos*; insecurity about Africa's past and uncertainty about its future supply the *pathos*; the chain of conclusions supplies the appearance of *logos*.

Similar shortcuts turn lower female imprisonment into proof that women are less violent or nicer, overlooking the harm women can cause by humiliating someone, spreading malicious gossip, deliberately making false accusations, or excluding them socially. They turn violence in a Black neighborhood into a claim that Black people have low IQ, sporting success into genetic suitability only for physical labor, or Asian representation in mathematics and engineering into proof of innate racial superiority. In each case, the conclusion exceeds what the observation establishes.

Complex explanations take effort. When someone finally makes it all "make sense," the relief can become a reason to stop questioning and absorb the explanation as gospel. Once the story feels coherent and confirms what you already suspect, it becomes easy to overlook how little has actually been established.

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