

The Language of Instruction Conundrum in Africa

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Introduction

Of all the problems we face in African education today, the most nettlesome appears to be the question of language of instruction. In concrete terms, it boils down to the option between a colonially introduced language and a local language, preferably the mother-tongue. This is an issue about which Birgit Brock-Utne whose work we are today celebrating has persistently laboured and had a lot to say and debate about. The question she has in one of her papers trenchantly asked in the title is; *Education for All, in Whose Language?*¹ In that paper, she observes that in as far as African languages as languages of instruction are concerned, two distinct trends are discernible. Firstly, there is “a strengthening of dominant languages which, in the context of Africa, means the former colonial languages.”² Secondly, there is also, “a growing concern among African ministers of education and some intellectuals for a

¹ See, Birgit Brock-Utne, *Education for All – In Whose Language?* In, Birgit Brock-Utne and Metsa Sibongile Koloti. *Education for All, - In Whose Language?* Report No. 6. *Education In Africa*. Vol.8. Institute for Educational Research. University of Oslo. 2000.

² *Ibid.* P.iv.

preservation and revival of African languages as languages of instruction in at least the primary schools in Africa.”³ She rightly argued that these two situations are in tension.

The relevance of this issue is underscored by Martha Qorro’s sparkling witticism that; “to want to give education without considering the medium of instruction is like wanting to give water to a village but not considering the pipes.”⁴ Malekela makes the decisive judgement that; “To continue using English as a medium of instruction in post-primary education is a torture to most of our children; and it is unfair.”⁵ In whose language should we pursue African education? The issue has been also taken up by Zubeida Desai who points out that; “In South Africa too, mother tongue education is seen as a given for English-speaking, and to a lesser extent, Afrikaans-speaking, learners. It is taken for granted that these learners will learn best through their primary languages. However, when it comes to speakers of African languages, the debate rages furiously. Why is this *right* then so *wrong* for the majority of learners in African countries such as South Africa?”⁶ The problem has variously, to equal measure, been amply laid bare by all these and other observers.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, nowhere else in the world, but in Africa, do we in all seriousness ask ourselves this question. To pose this question in France, Norway, Iceland, Netherlands, Germany Russia, China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Indonesia or most other places in the world would be almost laughable. Why is this still an issue when it comes to Africa and Africans? Why is, what is considered to be common sense to the rest of the world a great and endlessly continuing issue of debate and dissension in Africa?

Africa proper (non-Arabic Africa) is the only area of the world where the overwhelming majorities (90 percent and often more), half a century after the departure of the colonial powers, continue to use the languages of their former colonial masters to increasing degrees as languages of instruction. This extended lease on life of the colonial languages is possible largely because those groups and social elements in charge of African societies, the elites, want to keep the colonial languages and want to use these languages as languages of instruction.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martha Qorro, quoted here from Birgit Brock-Utne. *Learning through a familiar language versus learning through a foreign language: A look into some secondary school classrooms in Tanzania*. In, Birgit Brock-Utne, Zubeida Desai and Martha Qorro (eds). *Focus on Fresh Data on the Language of Instruction Debate in Tanzania and South Africa*. African Minds. Cape Town. 2006. P.21.

⁵ George Malekela. *English as a Medium of Instruction in Post-Primary Education in Tanzania: Is it a fair Policy?* In, Birgit Brock-Utne, Zubeida Desai and Martha Qorro. *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa*. E&D Ltd. Dar Es Salaam. 2003. P. 111.

⁶ Zubeida Desai. *A Case for Mother Tongue Education?* In, Birgit Brock-Utne, Zubeida Desai and Martha Qorro. *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA)*. Dar es Salaam. 2003. P.46

In cultural and linguistic terms, the African elites are generally closely tied to the cultures and languages of their erstwhile masters. Invariably they speak, read and write the languages of their previous masters and only have oral command over their own home languages, although these latter are the languages spoken by the overwhelming majorities of their societies. Many are thus illiterate in their own languages. Their leadership and status in their societies are culturally maintained, singularly, on the basis of the fact that they enjoy relative mastery of the colonial languages, above the masses. They therefore have a built-in tendency, in order to protect their social interests, to protect the hegemony of the colonial languages. Let us trace the underpinnings of this African conundrum.

The Roots of the African Condition: East West Parallels

Old Africa, before the Western encounter, was only patchily literate. In the Horn area there had been traditions of literacy which predate most of the western experience. Old Ethiopic, *Ge'ez*, was written centuries before the Romans entered Britain. Indeed, early inscriptions in *Ge'ez* and the *Ge'ez* alphabet have been dated to as early as the 5th century BC, and in a sort of proto-*Ge'ez* written in Epigraphic South Arabian letters since the 8th century BC. *Ge'ez* literature begins in earnest with the Christianization of Ethiopia and the foundation of the Axumite civilization in the 4th century.

In much of Sahelian Africa, from the Senegambia to East Africa littoral, varieties of *Ajami* (local languages written with the Arabic script) were used to write African languages as a result of the Arabo-Islamic expansion which followed after the death of the prophet Mohammed and the entry of Arabs into Africa from the middle of the seventh century AD. The central legacy of this *Ajami* heritage lies preeminently with the Timbuktu heritage tradition. In the Horn area of Somalia, The Arabic script was first introduced in the 13th century by Sheikh Yusuf al-Kowneyn to aid Koranic teaching. In the 19th century Sheikh Uways al-Barawi improved the writing of Somali with the Arabic script and based it on the Maay dialect of Southern Somalia. In South Africa, the first written version of Afrikaans was produced in *Ajami* by the Muslim Malay slaves who were brought to the Cape by their Dutch masters. In both cases, that is *Ajami* and *Ge'ez*, the social bases of the literacy traditions were narrow and were largely driven by religious castes and orders. Even in the case of *Ajami* where the social basis was broadened this was undertaken to reinforce the basis of proselytization and religious pursuits. Arabic remained a preferred vehicle for the transmission of the doctrine and until today for some Islamists it is “the language of God” (as Colonel Gadhafi would have it).

As I have elsewhere indicated, over and above the “imported” scripts, Africa has some indigenous examples of written forms.⁷ The Akan of the Ivory Coast and Ghana developed the *Adinkra* system of ideograms. Until 1972, when the latin script was adopted by the Siad Barre administration, pre-eminently the Somali language was unofficially, but popularly

⁷ K.K. Prah. Language, Literacy and Knowledge Production in Africa. In, B.V. Street and N.H. Hornberger (eds). Encyclopedia of Language and Education. 2nd Edition, Volume 2: Literacy, Pp. 29 -39. 2008.

rendered in the *Osmania* script devised by Osman Yusuf Keenadiid. While it was in form a good part Ethiopic, it had also significant Arabic and Italian influences. Previous to that, in 1933 Sheikh Abdurahman Sheikh Nour had invented a script for Somali known as *Borama* or otherwise called *Gadabuursi* which was in practice only used by the Sheikh's small and narrow group of acolytes in Borama.

The Vai script, strictly speaking a syllabary or a catalogue of characters, each of which denotes a syllable rather than a single sound, was created in the 1830s by Momadu Bukele. It remains popular in Liberia, particularly among the Vai, where it is mostly used in informal correspondence. More recently, in the sub-region, Mende (a purely phonetic Mende script from Sierra Leone was devised around 1920 by Kisimi Kamala), Loma, Kpelle and Bassa, have developed related scripts, which lean on the Vai example. All of these, like the Vai example are syllabaries. An alphabet, Nko was devised by Souleyman Kante in 1949. Till today, it is used very restrictedly and primarily by speakers within the Mandingo, Malinke, Bambara, Dioula, Kasonke cluster, especially in Guinea, Mali and Ivory Coast. A Bambara “Ma-sa-ba” syllabary was devised by Woyo Coulobali in the Kaarta region of Mali in 1930. Between the decade spanning 1920 and 1931, syllabaries had appeared for Mende, Bassa, Loma, Kpelle, Efik-Ibibio. An earlier esoteric alphabet has been in use for about a century among the Efik in southeastern Nigeria. Better known, perhaps, and historically better widely studied is the Bamum script (Shūmon) invented and developed under the direction of King Njoya of southern Cameroon. It was originally conceived as a logographic system, and was gradually changed by successive royal edicts and directives first to a syllabary and subsequently to an alphabet. After 1910, his scribes began compiling the chronicle of the Bamum Kingdom. This was finished during the 1920s in the closing years of Njoya’s reign.

In sum, over the past century a number of indigenously conceived writing systems have been produced. Most of them have from the start been largely esoteric and invariably religious in inclination. There is also the particularly interesting case of *Oberi Okaieme* a language which was created by members of a millenarian sect based in the village of Ikpa in the Itu Division of Calabar Province in 1931. The sect was founded in 1927, but the language emerged in 1931. There is no evidence that the language and script survived beyond the 1930's. None of these African scripts has been effective competition to the colonially introduced Roman alphabet. None seriously moved outside the narrow confines of small exclusivist groups, often semi-religious. It is interesting to note that this religious dimension of literacy and scripts is shared by religious communities as historical entities in other parts of the world.⁸

Thus, Africa with the exception of small pockets remained preliterate until the arrival of the West in Africa. In geographical expanse, until Western presence almost two thirds of Africa was preliterate. Literacy, with Western presence was inaugurated largely and almost overwhelmingly by missionary groups whose intentions were prominently, in the first

⁸ Ibid

instance, the winning of “souls” to Christianity and secondly, the facilitation of the colonial project through the education of selected elites.

The situation in large parts of Asia was distinctly different. The Chinese were writing long before Europeans came to writing. India is a similar case in point (*Brâhmî* and *Kharo.s.thî* from the 5th century B.C.). The Arab world enjoyed writing in a more socially extensive way than westerners did until the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. In Japan and Korea, *Kanji* and *Hanja* respectively had arrived from China in the opening centuries of the AD era. This writing tradition moved from Korea to Japan in the fifth century AD. In both instances the spread of Buddhism had been crucial to the transfer of the writing system. Therefore, the existence of autonomous traditions of writing, beyond Western initial stimulus, had existed as cultural traditions which were strong enough to resist Western defacement, during the era of colonialism. This had not been the case in Africa where writing and its benefits, for a huge part of the continent, had been introduced through Western tutelage.

One of the key differences in the development experience of Asia in contrast to Africa is precisely the point that, none of the phenomenally developing Asian states is advancing forward into modernity on the basis of colonial languages. Capitalist development in Asia has been sufficiently and successfully adapted to the cultural baggage of Asia. The cultural dressing of Asian development is more Asian than Western. In other words, Asia has indigenized westernism. An important facilitatory factor which partially accounts for Asian success in utilizing its culture as a basis for social and economic advancement in our times is the literate base of a good part of Asian cultures. Jack Goody has drawn attention to this point with the argument that;

Indeed part of the phenomenon called neo-colonialism has to be seen in terms of this very openness which is associated with the absence of a strong, written tradition that can stand up against the written cultures of the world system. There are important distinctions to be made between different socio-cultural regions of the Third World, of the world system, not simply in terms of their relationship with the metropolis but in terms of their own indigenous, socio-cultural organization, in terms of communications as well as the economy. While the major societies of the Asian continent were strongly affected by the expansion of Europeans, they were more rarely ‘colonies’ in the African, American and Oceanic sense; nor are they today neo-colonial from the cultural standpoint. Their written traditions have provided them with a more solid basis for cultural resistance than is the case with most oral cultures.⁹

The validity of this observation appears to me to be incontrovertible. It is a point which must have implications for future development planning in Africa. However, an additional point which must be made is that while a written culture has made the resistance against cultural

⁹ Jack Goody. *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge. 1986. (1989 edition). p.86.

neocolonialism of parts of Asia more successful, what has perhaps been most central in this cultural resilience has been the standing of the world religions of West Asia and Asia proper. Western cultural penetration of the non-western world never successfully undermined the status of the major religions of Asia the way they successfully did in Africa. African religious practices were judgementally “heathenised”. In Asia, although the westerner never in theory doubted the superiority of Christianity to all else, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Shintoism were never seriously regarded as religious confessions to be replaced as part of the “white man's burden.” Such literate religious lore was backed up by literate priesthoods or castes which were sociologically determinate, in time tested ways, to the protection of vital traditional social institutions. Crucial in this regard was the fact that they were written religious cultures with scholarly and verifiable histories. As cultural bases, this provided Asia with a confidence which was not significantly dented by the colonial experience.

The Missionary Position on African Languages

Missionaries have been overwhelmingly the pioneers in rendering African languages into literate expression. Their concerns have not been the achievement of African literacy as an end in itself, but rather literacy as a facilitator for, in the first instance, evangelization, and secondly, towards the amelioration of the human condition. Their partners in this quest were the colonial administrations. And indeed, from the early years, colonial governments left native education in the hands of the missionaries.

For the missionaries, in order to reach the “hearts and souls” of Africans, it was obviously expedient to reach them in their own languages. But apart from this, in order to effect the emergence of an elite conducive to the practical intentions of colonial administrators, it was necessary to ensure proficiency in the colonial languages. The dichotomy embedded in these two separate objectives produced long-lasting tensions which have been passed on to the present period.

Right from the start, the missionaries favoured the use of African languages as languages of instruction in education. This position was described in later years as the “older anthropological school”.¹⁰ The colonial project required the existence of Africans (at least an elite) who spoke wrote and were able to think, however limitedly, in the colonial language. The Phelps-Stokes Commission Reports of the early 1920s suggested that; “Tribal languages should be used in the lower elementary stages, while in the areas with a degree of linguistic differentiation a *lingua franca* of African origin was to be used in the middle forms. For this latter purpose Swahili in East Africa was favoured. The language of the European nation should be begun in the upper standards only.”¹¹ The same point was affirmed in two *British*

¹⁰ Lord Hailey. *An African Survey. A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara.* Oxford University Press. London. 1938. P.1223.

¹¹ The reports of the Phelps-Stokes Fund referred to here are: Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa: A Study of West, South and Equatorial Africa by the African Education Commission* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1922) and

Memoranda of the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies (1925 and 1935) where the view was that, the use of local vernaculars (as they were designated) in education, particularly in the lower forms, was to be stressed”.¹² Seventy years ago, recognizing the divergent pulls which colonial expediency on one hand and long-term African interests on the other hand, dictated. Hailey observed that;

... but it is not yet possible to estimate the extent to which they will determine the survival of different languages or language groups. A language, over and above its value as a means of communication, is an integral part of the individuality of a people, intimately connected with every aspect of its social life, and it derives from this source that ‘emotional’ quality which makes it resistant to influences from external sources. It was the emotional element which enabled some of the European languages to resist the influence of latinization and to emerge subsequently in a national form, while others, though submitting to the Latin influence, nevertheless reproduced much of their own idiom and vocabulary in the form of language finally evolved. There are, again, many instances in which people who have been politically and economically assimilated have still retained their own speech. Resistance of this type is, however, a varying force; as Meillet has pointed out with regard to the past, ‘all the regions whose history is at all ancient have, within historical times, changed their languages at least once, and often two or three times.’ *Only experience will show the extent to which the African languages, with their absence of a literary tradition, will assert themselves in the face of the influences to which they are being subjected.*¹³ (mine italics)

Language of Instruction Under Colonialism

As colonialism in Africa matured, so also did the entrenchment of language policies and practices which elevated the position of colonial languages as languages of instruction. As compared to the British, the French from the start, tended to be very partial to the use of French as language of instruction, from the earliest age of schooling. We are informed that; “The Belgians had always stressed the necessity for a broad basis of elementary instruction in the vernacular and by 1954, for example, the percentage of the total Congolese population in

Jesse Jones, *Education in East Africa* (New York: Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1925). The passage quoted here is from Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa* ... P. 26.

¹² The reports are: Great Britain, Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Cmd. 2374, *Memorandum on Education Policy in British Tropical Africa* (London: H.M.S.O., 1925), and Great Britain, Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial No. 103, *Memorandum on the Education of African Communities* (London: H.M.S.O., 1935). Quoted here from Philip Foster. *Education and Social Change in Ghana*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London. 1965. P.160.

¹³ *Ibid.* Pp. 97 – 98.

schools was 9.4 per cent as against 4.5 per cent in British territories and 2.7 per cent in French areas.”¹⁴

The tensions between classical missionary-advised language of instruction wisdom on one hand and colonial administrative needs on the other continued right through the colonial period. But, the fact that education was funded by colonial governments and that the missionary schools received significant subsidies from the colonial governments meant that the interests, as expressed by colonial governments, increasingly overwhelmed and dominated policy options. By the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 30s, the picture of language of instruction policies for a few countries was expressed as follows:

In Nyasaland the vernacular is the medium of instruction during the first four years in primary schools. English is then introduced as a subject in lower, middle, or central schools for three years and becomes the medium of instruction in upper, middle, or station schools. In Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda the use of Swahili as a convenient language in place of the local vernacular is common. In this connexion the policy put forward by the Director of Education in Uganda is important, and indicates a tendency in Uganda to replace Swahili by the vernacular or even English. The Director advocates the use of the vernacular as a medium of instruction during the first four years and the introduction of English as a subject in Class IV, the emphasis on the vernacular decreasing until English becomes the medium; Swahili should be permissive and introduced only if desired as a subject in Class III. This is in effect the practice obtaining in Buganda and Busoga, and it is suggested that it should be extended to some other linguistic groups. In Kenya, Swahili is introduced as a medium of instruction at the third or fourth standard between the vernacular and English, as a solution of the difficulty of providing instruction in a vernacular to pupils of mixed tribes speaking different languages in schools which are not advanced enough or equipped with staff qualified to use English as a medium. In the native administration schools of Tanganyika, Swahili is the medium and English is not taught; in the government and mission primary schools, however, Swahili is the medium for the first four years only, after which English becomes the medium. In Northern Nigeria English is the medium at the ‘middle’ or secondary stage. For pupils whose primary education has been entirely in the vernacular, a preliminary year is devoted to the intensive study of English. In the Gold Coast English becomes the medium after Standard III. Although it is generally recognized that the introduction of a second native language as a medium, or the usage of a lingua franca instead of the local language is far from ideal, and also that it is important not to alienate the native from his mother tongue, the difficulties of providing teachers and text-books in the vernaculars and of instruction to mixed classes are in some areas insuperable.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid. See footnote 19, P.172.

¹⁵ Op cit. Lord Hailey. Pp. 1258 – 1259.

The upshot of this evidence is that, during the colonial period, in as far as language of instruction policies were concerned, “all roads led to English, French or Portuguese.” Where Swahili was introduced, this was done as a temporary convenience to be superseded at a later stage by English. Hailey explains the rationale behind the English-led language of instruction policy thus:

The language to be used as a medium of instruction, and the stage at which the teaching of English, or of a useful and widely spoken language such as Swahili, can be introduced, present complex problems. The diversity of native languages is considerable and large language groups are the exception rather than the rule. The measures taken to meet this difficulty have been described. An important factor is the desire of Africans themselves to learn English, which in many cases is the incentive to seek education. A knowledge of English is of commercial value, for at the mines, the trading stores, and on European estates the English-speaking native can often command a better position and a higher wage. Again, there is the natural desire of the African to learn a language which is that of his rulers; the scarcity of general literature in the vernaculars is not without its influence in this direction among a people to whom reading is a new-found pleasure. The weight of native opinion has sometimes led schools to attempt the teaching of English in early standard through inadequately equipped teachers, a system that leads to discouragement.¹⁶

Seen from the viewpoint of the colonial power it is not surprising that they favoured policies which would entrench their interests and power. They had created elites which shared profound cultural interests with them. The linkage which this implied extended into the foreseeable future. Much as some elements in the metropolitan governments and their local representatives may have admitted that the colonial project would have to be abandoned at some stage, and independence acceded to, all of this was seen to be in the distant and misty future. By the time the colonial project became visibly doomed and prospectively terminal there was a distinct elite and semi-elite in place which had interests in maintaining the *status quo*, in most respects.

Language of Instruction; From Colonialism to Post-Colonialism

Throughout Africa, almost without exception, the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism or neo-colonialism went through without seriously cataclysmic hiccups. Reference is often made to the violent turbulence experienced in the Portuguese colonies, and the other settler-colonial states, i.e. Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. However, fuller examination reveals that even in these societies, with the exception of Zimbabwe, the colonial state was never completely replaced by nationalist insurgents. The African elites inherited the colonial states. They hardly reformed them and their state infrastructures were

¹⁶ Ibid. Pp. 1257 – 1258.

certainly not replaced. This point extends not only to economic considerations, but also to the cultural, political and social dimensions of the colonial states.

Indeed, it is arguable that the elites almost naturally fitted into the scheme of things. They had been leaders of native society, but leaders who spoke the languages of the colonial masters and shared many of the introduced tastes, values and other practices that had been taught them during the period of colonial tutelage. They were culturally thus, removed from the cultural life of mass society. The masses were the custodians of the old culture of Africa and spoke African languages. The elites spoke the language of Shakespeare and Racine. It was therefore not surprising that the policies in education particularly the language of instruction policies were simply continued. In fact, these policies were reinforced and entrenched in the post-colonial era. In as far as they represented unreformed colonial policies in the post-colonial era, they can be described as neo-colonial.

Kashoki illustrates with an account of his life the way in which our inappropriate language policies affected his life and experience. In his paper on; *Prevalence of Functional Illiteracy in the Mother Tongue: Is socio-economic development via indigenous African languages attainable in contemporary African societies?* he writes that,

For purposes of vivid illustration, I offer myself in this regard as a ready representative case in point: Born in 1937, in Northern Rhodesia, the present-day Zambia, I began to acquire my Western type of formal education in 1945 at the not-so-tender age of twelve by today's standards. At that time the prevailing language-in-education policy was based unequivocally on the principle which held that a (school) child should receive instruction both in and through his or her own mother tongue and that this right should not be withheld from the African child, and further that, as a general rule, the first three years of school education should be carried on exclusively in an African language. Thus it was that when I first entered a school classroom in sub-standard A in 1945, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to begin acquiring the basic skills of reading and writing in my own mother tongue- IChibemba, which at that time, fortuitously, happened to be one of the indigenous African languages that had been included among those officially prescribed for use in the formal education system in Northern Rhodesia. Then in 1949, now in Standard III, after a brief period of savouring the privilege of being instructed through the medium of my own mother tongue, *what I now consider to be a personal life-time tragedy befell me as well as others of my generation. This was so because at this point the language-in-education policy now stipulated that from henceforth I would be required to learn and to be taught in a foreign language – English – throughout the rest of my formal education. As a result of this, I have remained in a continuous state of elopement with the English language to this day, all in all, a span of some 58 years, or slightly more than of my life time on this planet* (mine italics). In order for the point being made to be appreciated, it is pertinent to recount yet another personal experience in the same vein. Towards the late 1990s, as response on my part to the challenge posed by the

Language Plan of Action for Africa to specialists working in the field of language that they should strive to strike a proper balance between the scientific study of African languages and their practical promotion, I most unwisely (i.e. without fully realizing what I was getting myself into) applied to the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the University of Zambia, where I have been based as a researcher since 1971, for funds to enable me undertake a research project that was designed to entail describing IChibemba orthographic rules through (or in) the medium of the language itself. In the course of undertaking this scholarly piece of work, I soon came to realize that the protracted period of slightly more than half a century of unbroken attachment to the English language had acted adversely to distance me almost totally from my mother tongue. *The most notable lesson I came to learn from this experiment was that at this point in my life I had great difficulty functioning as a scholar in my native language. In other words, IChibemba had in practical terms virtually become a foreign language to me over the years* (mine italics).¹⁷

What is remarkable is that since the beginning of the post-colonial era in one state after the other Africans have elected to designate as national languages a number of their local languages. But there is hardly any movement in elevating the status of these languages to official languages. In many African constitutions, on paper, these national languages are given lofty and almost equal status to the colonial languages. But indeed, this remains simply on paper. There is little practically done to implement the thinking behind such policies. Instead, what we invariably find is that the entrenchment and expansion of the role of the colonial languages has steadily increased. In some cases, like in Madagascar, Tanzania and Somalia where at some point strong indications and initiatives in favour of local languages as languages of instruction had been made we have subsequently seen major reversals. In Lesotho, Madagascar, Somalia, Central African Republic, Botswana and Swaziland where practically there are African languages spoken by almost all the people, we still see no headway in favour of the African languages.

In many of the important meetings and subsequent declarations made by Pan-African institutions, much pious intentions and statements of purpose have been given to the importance of African languages to social transformation and development. But we still have to see the practical expression of political will and serious intent at realizing these nationalist sentiments with respect to language and language of instruction policies.

In a UNESCO-sponsored conference for African Ministers of Education which took place in Abidjan from the 17th to the 24th of March 1964, it was concluded that; the mother tongue has superior advantages for literacy education for both pupils and adults. Over the years, such

¹⁷ Mubanga E. Kashoki. *Prevalence of Functional Illiteracy in the Mother Tongue: Is socio-economic development via indigenous African languages attainable in contemporary African societies?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the Association of Law Reform Agencies of Eastern and Southern Africa (ALRAESA), on the theme, *Law Reform and Economic Development*, Livingstone, Zambia, 14 – 18 April 2008.

sentiments have been fairly common and incessantly repeated. In the same year, 1964, a *Meeting of Experts on the Utilization of the Mother Tongue for Literacy Education* was held in Ibadan. In 1966, in Bamako, a *UNESCO Experts Meeting on the Transcription of African Languages* endorsing the same finding took place. A *Pan-African Cultural Festival* held in Algiers in 1969 reiterated the spirit of African linguistic assertion and revitalization. Other meetings of significance were held in: Yaoundé (1970), Cotonou (1975), Port-Louis (1976), Niamey (1978), Ouagadougou (1978), Bamako (1979), Abidjan (1980), Bamako (1981), Nouakchott (1981), UNESCO (1982), Addis Ababa (1986), Accra (1996), Okahandja (1996), Harare (1997), Asmara (2000), Bamako (2000), Bamako (2001), Bamako (2002), Kinshasa (2003), Accra (2005).

Most of these meetings were sponsored by UNESCO and all of them restated the essentiality of local or mother tongue approaches to literacy education and language of instruction policies, especially during the early years of education. The thinking behind this was probably best stated by the findings of the *Pan-African Cultural Festival* in Algiers in 1969. In their report it was stated that;

... the national language plays an irreplaceable role, it is the mainstay and the medium of culture, the guarantee of popular support both in its creation, and its consumption. Once we had recovered our sovereignty, it was a first essential duty for us to revive the national languages inherited from our forefathers, without in any way calling to question the profound unity of our nations. Language is one of these features in the life of peoples which embody their genius. It develops with them, and they cannot be deprived of it without being out of it, wounded and handicapped. Nevertheless, and in order to survive and fight, a part of our peoples had to learn the language of our colonizers. There is no one language which is basically more suited than another to be a mainstay of science and knowledge. A language translates and expresses the lives and thoughts of men. From the time when our development was suspended, our cultures trampled underfoot and the teaching of our languages often forbidden, it has been obvious that we must double our efforts to make African languages efficient instruments for our development. The analysis of our cultural realities reveals to us the dynamic elements in the life of peoples, in both their spiritual and material aspects. Among these elements which made up our indomitable African personality, we should emphasize these values which have come down to us in spite of the vagaries of our history and the colonialist attempts at depersonalization. From them can be abstracted a sense of ethics revealing a profound inborn sense of solidarity, hospitality, mutual aid, brotherhood and the feeling of belonging to the same humanity. These values and this sense of ethics are to be found expressed in our African languages, in our oral and written literatures, in our tales, legends, sayings and proverbs, transmitting the wisdom and experiences evolved by our peoples.

The 1986 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Heads of States Meeting in Addis Ababa adopted a *Language Plan of Action for Africa* which amongst other things stated that; “at

national level, the imperative need for each OAU Member State to consider it necessary and primary that it formulates with the minimum delay a language policy that places indigenous languages, or languages spoken and in active use by its peoples at the centre of its socio-economic development.” A decade later, during the, Pan-African Seminar on *The Problems and Prospects of the Use of African National Languages in Education* held in Accra (August 26 - 30, 1996), the Charter which emerged; *For the Promotion and Use of African Languages in Education*, stated in its preamble that; “(1) Whereas, for over one hundred and fifty years, efforts have been ongoing, both by Africans themselves and others, for interested persons and institutions, towards the development of the languages of Africa for use in education and as tools for both the material and the cultural uplift of the African peoples; as evidenced by the following agreements, among others: The Charter of the Organisation of African Unity (1963); The UNESCO Declaration on the Principles of International Cultural Co-operation (1966); The OAU Cultural Charter for Africa (1976); The OAU Lagos Plan of Action (1980); The Declaration on the Cultural Aspects of the Lagos Plan of Action (1985); The OAU Language Plan of Action for Africa (1986). (2) And whereas these efforts have continued throughout the years and very significant contributions have been made through African language studies and promotion to the determination of linguistic universals and to human understanding and development in general; (3) Whereas today there is widespread recognition of the importance of African languages not just for the above purposes, but even more so, as key factors in the total social and economic emancipation and the cultural and spiritual advancement of the African peoples; (4) Whereas there is now near total awareness of the value of education using the African languages for the purpose; and all but, a few of the African states are now committed to the fullest possible use of their languages in education” I was at this meeting. Another 11 years have since passed. Little or no headway has been made.

The riddle remains that, in the face of such Afrocentric ideas and ideals, in high places, on language of instruction and the place national languages in the social and cultural lives of Africans, why does the persistence of the central role of the colonial languages continue? Why is there consistently a lack of political will to implement these ideals?

Current Language of Instruction in Education Policies

Any examination of the varieties of language of instruction policies in Africa reveal a basic character which features fairly ubiquitously from country to country. All of them seem to favour the employment of the respective colonial language beyond three to four years of primary school, home language/mother tongue language of instruction. The logic which comes through from this policy is that the mother tongue for well-shared universal reasons is the best foundation for commencing education. Therefore, it is crucial. The concession that is made is that it is allowed three to four years initial education and then pupils are switched on to the languages of, if you like, “lofty education.” What this implies is that the mother tongue, or for that matter African languages are for one reason or the other unsuitable for education beyond the primary level and should give way as soon as possible to the colonial language. During the colonial period the logic of this policy rested more on the fact that the colonial

project was built on the language of the master. The master could not administer the colonial project without use of the colonial language. This rationale falls flat the moment the colonial power leaves or is dismissed and processes of the emancipation of the formerly colonized peoples becomes the desired order of the day.

The reasons offered during the colonial period for the limited and temporary use of local languages were articulated thus:

1. There are too many African languages for us to be able to justify rationally and economically their use.
2. African languages have limited demographic and geographical significance therefore it is wiser to use global languages.
3. African languages have limited lexical capacity to deal with the realities of modern society, science and technology.
4. African languages do not make for so-called “societal unity.”

These reasons have been inherited and are propagated now, quietly, by African elites who, as earlier indicated, make sanctimonious pronouncements about the unsurpassed value of national languages for education and development, but then proceed to practice policies which undermine their declared hopes and aspirations. If we examine the arguments that are made against the use of African languages through the whole length of the education system their spuriousness is not difficult establish.

The myth of the African Tower of Babel has been argued against on countless occasions by observers who have insights and knowledge of African languages. Seventy years ago it was observed that; “Great as is the seeming multiplicity of languages, there is not an equal measure of real diversity: the tendency of closer examination has been to reveal significant and essential similarities not only in the sound system and vocabulary, but even more in structure and idiom.”¹⁸

In recent years, the work of CASAS has revealed that as first, second or third language speakers at least 80% of Africans speak no more than 15 – 17 “core languages” (by core languages we mean, languages in a cluster which enjoy a very high degree of mutual intelligibility). The problem of using African languages on the basis of large demographic variables arises only because there is not enough cooperation between African states on this issue, but perhaps more fundamentally, Africans are not yet sufficiently convinced that unless they use their own languages development and modernity would be unattainable.

The argument of the limited demographic and geographical significance is also tied to the conceptual fractionalization of African languages. The moment we understand that in, for

¹⁸ Op cit. Lord Hailey. P.97.

example, the Sudan, Bari, Mondari, Nyangbara, Fajelu, Kuku and Kakwa are not separate languages but dialectal variants of the same languages and that, another example, Asante, Fanti, Akyem, Akuapim, Kwawu are not separate languages but variants of Akan, etc. etc. the idea of an African Tower of Babel falls flat.

It is of course possible to develop African languages. No language is from Adam designated or blessed with science and technology. Languages acquire these facilities when we provide the necessary inputs to develop them. Their lexical capacity requires attentive and goal-directed measures. In Liliana Mammino's significant work on; *Terminology in Science and Technology* she writes that one; "frequently happens to hear that 'African languages do not have the proper terms and, therefore, they cannot express science.' This statement is born by the confusion between *language and science* and *terminology* and it imbeds the idea that terminology terms are the true knowledge-carriers. Such idea is the actual philosophical assumption underlying the opinion that current inadequacies in terminology are tantamount to the impossibility of expressing science. The degree of awareness about this philosophical (and methodological) aspect varies largely in different contexts, and many of those who express that opinion might have never analysed its philosophical roots. However, the statement is often perceived and accepted as a truth whose validity could be taken for granted ... that statement has no foundations, ... it is rooted in confusions between features having different natures and different roles."¹⁹

The other idea which has with time proven to be of little value and in fact is societally pernicious is the notion that in order to avoid ethnic or tribal manifestations African languages should be eschewed in favour of colonial languages. There is little to be gained in supposing that we can create culturally homogenous state entities out of societies which have from time immemorial had different ethnic formations. Attempts to do this in Africa have rather created ethnic rivalries and tensions manipulated by contending elites in their struggles for resources. Current wisdom shared by the United Nations is that it is more judicious to celebrate diversity and create space for tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different nationalities in any given state. This requires also decentralization of authority and devolution of power to local communities empowering them to control the circumstances governing their own lives and culturally allowing them to be. Much as we may want to do this, we need to remember that the idea of celebration of diversity cannot be licence for the wanton creation of diversity. We do not have to elevate every district, dialectal variant or ethno-cultural sub-unit to the level of a nationality. Political democracy, devolution and decentralization deal effectively the empowerment of groups at the grassroots level.

All societies which have developed towards modernity have done so on the basis of their own cultures and languages. In our times, this has been aptly borne out by the experience of China, Vietnam, Malaysia, India, Indonesia and other countries. Many of these countries

¹⁹ Liliana Mammino. Preface. *Terminology in Science and Technology. An Overview through History and Options*. Ditlou Publishers. Thohoyandou. 2006.

were colonial territories in the same way that African countries were. The serious difference between these Asian states and African states is that development and modernity in Asia is being negotiated on the basis of Asian cultural and linguistic peculiarities.

Again, the argument that African should use their languages for 3 – 4 years at the primary school level and then move into the colonial languages is another way of saying that African languages are irredeemably doomed to backwardness and perdition. It is a lie which serves ultimately the maintenance of neo-colonialism, at the cultural level. The idea also implies that the three to four year foundation is only meant to prepare African children to the later use of the colonial languages.

My argument is that African languages should be used for the entire educational system. So that Africans in their democratic majorities develop on the basis of their own histories, cultures and languages and also have confidence, self-affirmation and self-reliance in the production and reproduction of knowledge. The earlier such wisdom is cultivated and implemented, the sooner we shall be able to move towards unfettered modernity in Africa. It is also important to point out that, if we do not proceed on this basis, which ensures a democratic approach to the language question in Africa and which empowers the masses with their own languages, we are headed, at some stage, towards a collision between the elites and the masses.

At the level of language and the implication of the production of materials in African languages we need to harmonize mutually intelligible speech forms so that on the economies of scale we rationally allow the production of literature accessible to large communities. I am happy to report here that, CASAS has made pioneering headway in this direction.

As things currently stand CASAS' overall record can be represented as follows. Of the 15 -17 major clusters which in the understanding of CASAS as first, second or third language speakers about 85% of Africans enjoy currency with, CASAS has been able so far to harmonize Sotho/Tswana (siLozi, seTswana, siPedi, seSotho), Nguni (siSwati, isiZulu, isiXhosa, siNdebele), Runyakitara (Runyoro-Rutoro, Runyankore-Rukiga and other varieties include Ruhaya, Runyambo and Rukerewe [Northern Tanzania] and Ruhema and Ruhuma [Democratic Republic of Congo]), Eastern Interlacustrine Bantu Languages (Luganda, Lusoga, Lumasaaba, Lusaamya, Lunyole and Lulamogi) and Mandeng (Bambara, Dyula, Kassonke, Bamanan, Mandinka, Maninka). These are all languages which are spoken as first, second or third languages by about 50 000 million people, in each instance. The Luo cluster (Acholi, Dholuo, Dhoadhola, Lang'o) has been partly harmonized. We still have to see if the orthographic solutions we have found for them can also cover Shilluk, Anyuak, Jur, Pari and Lokoro. Work in this respect will start in the first week of June 2008 in Juba, South Sudan. KiSwahili stands well and does not need harmonization. These are what I call demographically "first order languages."

We have been able also to harmonize smaller clusters (second order languages) like Gur (Gurene, Kabyè, Koulango, Lokpa, Moore, nCam, Sénoufo and Tem), Akan (Fanti, Ashanti, Akim, Akuapim, Kwawu, Brong, Baule, Agni), Gbe (Ajá, Ewe, Fon, Gain, Phelé), Venda, Shangaan (xiTsonga/xiChangana), the Shona and related speechforms (*Western Shona*: Lilima/Kalanga, Nambya; *Eastern Shona*: Hwesa, Barwe, Manyika, Ndau, Nyai; *Central Shona*: Karanga, Korekore, Zezuru), Namibian Bantu languages, the Western Khoekhoe and San languages, Ateso/ Karimojong cluster. The South Central African languages, including the cross-border languages of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia have for the greatest part been harmonized. These include languages such as ciNyanja/ciCewa, ciNsenga/ciNgoni/ciNsenga, eLomwe, eMakhuwa, ciYao, ciTumbuka/ciSenga, iciBemba, kiKaonde, ciLunda and Luvale, and related dialects. They now have a single spelling system, rather than three or more spelling systems within the same languages.

More recently, CASAS has been able to bring almost to a conclusion the harmonization of the languages of Namibia and the cross-border languages (Angola, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa). Two groups of languages have been harmonized. They are the Bantu languages and the Khoekhoe and San languages. The Bantu languages include, Oshiwambo, Rukwangali, Rumanyo, Thimbukushu, Oshierero, Diriku, Few, Kwambi, Kwanyama, Lozi, Mashi, Mbalanhu, Ndonga, Subiya, Totela, Tswana and Yeyi. The Khoekhoe and San languages include, Khoekhoegowab, Khwedam, Ju!'hoansi, Damara. This work has and is being done by a continental network of African mother tongue linguistics, professors and lecturers.

Harmonization work is supposed to begin in the Southern Congo DRC. Furthermore, CASAS is currently engaged at various stages in the production of primary school graders for all levels of primary education in Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. For these three countries, indeed, the work is almost completed. What is remarkable is that the governments in all three countries are entering into agreements with CASAS for the production of primary school books for all grades. This augurs well for the introduction of teaching and reading materials based on the newly developed orthographies.

Closing Remarks

As I bring my address to a close, I would like us to remember the person we are celebrating on this occasion, Prof. Birgit Brock-Utne. I have over the years regarded Prof. Brock-Utne as a comrade in arms in the struggle to locate African languages appropriately in African education. She has been a valiant, undaunted, unflinching and determined fighter for the cause. It is my hope that as she leaves the University of Oslo, she leaves behind some younger persons, intellectual and scholastic progeny to continue the fight she executed so consummately. I am sure her contribution and her advocacy would live long after her. Congratulations Birgit.