



# African Indigenous Languages as Semi-official Languages : A Study in the Causes of Political Conflicts in Africa

Charles Alobwede D'epie

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# *African Indigenous Languages as Semi-official Languages: A Study in the Causes of Political Conflicts in Africa*

## **1.0 The Beginnings**

**B**efore the advent of colonialism in Africa, each tribal enclave was an autonomous nation. The word nation is used here to denote people born in a specific place, speaking a common language, bearing major characteristics of features, culture, temperaments, loyalties and having a common heritage. With the advent of colonialism, this notion of nation was considered conservative and needed expansion. Colonialism arbitrarily partitioned Africa into colonial territories. The new creations amalgamated natives of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic origins and forced them to function within the artificially created territories for the political, economic and military drive of the colonising power.

Colonialism thus gave birth to a new type of nationhood — a nationhood in which the natives surrendered their ethnic loyalties for those of the colonising power. This involved the acquisition and application of the Western notions of nationism and nationalism. Nationism denotes governance while nationalism denotes the patriotic feelings one has for one's nation. In both governance and patriotism, language poses a problem. Governance requires, according to Fasold, "communication both within the governing institutions and between government and the people" (1984: 3).

The people who were to be governed or who were being governed were illiterate and diverse. They needed to be educated and united. The need for the language of governance, that of education and national cohesion engendered the desire for an official language (OL) — a prestigious, bias-free highly efficient language capable of handling the functional load of governance, trade, modern religion and diplomacy. Only the colonising languages satisfied these requirements. They were therefore imposed as the official languages.

### **1.1 Indigenous Languages Under the Canopy**

Fishman (1970: 689) defines an OL as “a language used in the business of government — legislative, executive and judicial.” Each colonising power had its language policy *vis-à-vis* OL/indigenous languages. The attempt to implant the OLs through formal education did not interfere with the use of indigenous languages (ILs) so long as they (ILs) remained under the canopy of the OLs. Only Germany (that annexed Cameroon in 1884) was faced with a situation in which an IL (Duala) and a foreign trade language (English) were making it impossible for her to establish German as the OL of Cameroon. In 1907, she banned both English and Duala from official use in Cameroon. Apart from this, indigenous languages thrived under the canopy of the official languages.

One important facet of colonialism was the attempt to disenclave the hinterlands. The construction of roads and railways; the establishment of religious, economic and administrative centres revolutionised social contact among the diverse indigenous peoples who converged in them. This created a language problem. The illiterate masses could not use the official languages for inter-ethnic group communication. Yet, they had to communicate if they were to make good their new settings. The problem thus needed a by-pass, and the by-pass was the adoption of a lingua franca (LF). A lingua franca is a language of consensus. Samarin (cf. Fishman, 1972:665) lists the most important LFs in Africa — Bangala-Lingala, spoken in South Africa; Kituba spoken in the Congo Basin; Sango, spoken in the Central African Republic; and Swahili, spoken in

Tanzania and neighbouring countries. To this list one can add, Pidgin English (a semi-indigenous LF) spoken mostly in West Africa, and Hausa.

The use of LFs, were not tantamount to what Fasold calls language shift, but to bilingualism — an acquisition of a second language for the purpose of wider interaction. This gave the LFs more prestige, a prestige that placed them comfortably as the second in the hierarchy of languages. Here, however, we should make a distinction between the more popular inter-regional LFs and the less popular regional LFs. The inter-regional LFs cut across countries and may even have regional varieties. The regional LFs are more localised and homogeneous. At the bottom of the ladder are the ordinary ILs.

## **1.2 Characteristics of the Languages**

### **a) Official Languages:**

As earlier stated, OLs were characterised by their efficiency in handling government business, transmitting knowledge, and ensuring national cohesion. Being non-ethnic and protected by law, they wielded unchallenged authority nation-wide and were a symbol of national pride. They reflected the overwhelming influences of their countries of origin and imbued their speakers with the halo of world statesmanship. Because they were open and formal and were administered to reflect the discipline of their home countries, even indigenous Africans using them tried as much as possible to abide by the rules.

### **b) Inter-regional LFs:**

These languages, though not official, could be described as the most widely spoken in any colony. They ranged from pidgins to indigenous languages. They were, and are still characterised by their popularity

in both urban and rural areas. Unlike the official languages, they were acquired informally and that made them the languages of the masses. Although they were indigenous, they were not exclusive. In other words, because their native speakers were unmarked, they were much more open and bias-free than the regional LFs. The only element of bias noticed was in situations where status wielding OL speakers considered the inter-regional LFs as languages of the underprivileged.

Regional LFs, on their part, could be considered as languages of consensus between or among near or distant cognates. They were therefore highly localised. They hardly cut across whole countries, though they were found to cut across boundary interceptions of neighbouring countries. In spite of their being localised, they were not as exclusive as the ordinary indigenous languages.

#### c) The Ordinary Indigenous Languages:

These were the most highly territorialised languages, that is, conservative languages bound to conservative (enclaved) areas. Their native speakers protected them and frowned at non-natives trying to speak them. The languages formed a sort of ritual bond with their native speakers and their native land. The natives could tolerate the official languages, and the inter-regional lingua franca, but not other ethnic languages.

### **1.3 The Prestige of Indigenous Languages**

Although it can be argued that during the colonial era the prestige of ILs was unmarked, the inter-regional and regional LFs enjoyed undisputed leverage in Western religion and "local" commerce. Religious denominations even developed writing systems for them and translated the Bible in them.

The non-LFs existed in varying degrees of prestige. In some cases, the coastal languages or those that first got in contact with the

white man, claimed superiority over those of the hinterland. Since religious, economic and administrative centres were first established along the coast and its immediate hinterland, the people of these regions were the first to be educated and therefore the first to assist the colonialists in the act of governance. The hinterlanders who came to the centres were relegated to plantation workers and petty traders. In some other cases, where a hinterland ethnic group had developed a writing system and therefore a higher civilisation than the neighbouring tribes, it looked down on them. This was the case with Hausa, Fulbe and even the Bamoun speaking peoples. Another instance, is where a tribe, because of economic viability, looked down on the poorer one(s) as in the case of Rwanda where the minority late-comers, the Tutsis looked down on the Hutus. Ibo and Yoruba, in Nigeria; and Bamileke in Cameroon (to mention but these three) because their geographical spread and number of speakers stood out in a class of their own. They could not be considered as LFs since they were mainly spoken by their native speakers. But from their spread and population they acquired undisputed prestige.

## 2.0 The Official Languages as Regulatory Languages

The foregoing discussion tends to disemphasise Halliday and al.'s (cf. Fishman, 1984: 160) claim to the equality of languages. According to them, "any language is as good as any other language, in the sense that every language is equally well adapted to the uses to which the community puts it."

Colonialism adapted European Languages to the uses to which colonising powers put them. Indigenous languages whether LFs or non-LFs were as such of little consequence in the colonising process. And so long as the colonial set-up remained in place, only the languages (OLs) adapted for it were more equal.

A language is spoken by people. Its prestige reflects the prestige of its speakers. If it is not adapted for use in a given set-up, both its

prestige and that of its speakers submerge. The prestige of indigenous languages and that of their speakers submerged in the prestige of official languages and their native speakers — the white men. Thus, the Blacks who assisted Europeans in the governance of the colonies were trained to think (reason), speak and act according to the ideals of the OLs and their native speakers. Non-conformity was severely sanctioned. This greatly regulated ethnocentrism was a characteristic of tribes, families, fraternities and businesses during the colonial era. Although each colonizing power recognised ethnic diversity in its colony, it focused its attention on leading the people to a common destiny - the progress of the colony.

## **2.1 Cracks in the Whole**

To facilitate administration, especially that of very large colonies like Nigeria, Belgian Congo, Tanganyika, Uganda, Sudan, etc., colonial powers divided up the colonies into administrative units based mostly on geographical convenience. Incidentally, the geographically convenient units corresponded to ethnic enclaves or ethnic groupings manifesting near or distant cognates. Thus Nigeria was divided up into the Yoruba dominated West, Ibo dominated East, and Hausa dominated North.

So long as governance was aimed at upholding the economic, political and military might of the colonising powers, inter-ethnic group tension remained unmarked. But, as earlier seen, the coastal people who assisted the colonialists in governance were gradually being inspired by the ideals of freedom. In spear-heading the struggle for independence, they antagonised the colonising powers. Meanwhile, the hinterlanders, considered the underdogs, had a two front process of scholarisation — in the plantations and back at home.

Furthermore, because they remained behind the screens in the political struggle, they endeared themselves to the colonising powers. This, coupled with their superior numbers, set the stage for change. The ideals of democracy were in their favour and they saw the "one man one

vote" principle as a sure way to a *coup de théâtre*. This embryonised the ethno-religious sentiments which were to prepare the stage for the politico-linguistic loyalties that were to characterise the pre- and post-independence black African nations.

## 2.2 The Stage Before Independence

Between the early fifties and the early sixties, the Pan-Africanism that had sprung from Pan-Negroism was well entrenched and its founding fathers — Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, (to mention but two) — were spreading the doctrine of self-determination. At that time, the world was split into the eastern communist block and the western capitalist block. The West had colonised Africa and therefore had a global strategic advantage which the East was jealous of and was doing everything to upset.

The desire for freedom from colonialism was gaining insurgency proportions among Africans. The West, conscious of its strategic advantage over the East, was intransigent in granting independence, and reacted unkindly against the proponents of independence especially the radical ones who tended to show inclination toward the East. This led to the reversal of western values. The West was much more prepared to hand over power to narrow-minded, half-baked politicians than to the radical founding fathers of Pan-Africanism. As such, the western concept of ideal constitutions was relegated to any constitution whatsoever, so long as it stood to exclude a «radical» from becoming President. Elections could be rigged, if that would stop an eastward radical from becoming President, or if he did become one, a *coup d'état* could be carried out with impunity to eliminate the "radical" — the case of Lumumba of the Belgian Congo. A government could be destabilised if that ns include rice, maize, and millet. Starch fromegime — the case of Angola; or an unimaginative, conceited, handpicked western stooge could be imposed with sheer military force. All these set the stage for black rule

in black African countries. This stage had, of course, socio-linguistic implications which unfolded in full force only after independence.

From the foregoing, one can conclude that black «leaders» who assumed power at the time of independence and even after, did so either fraudulently or through negative violence (of *coup d'états*) like the cases of Mobutu and Amin; or positive violence, like the case of Jomo Kenyatta. Our interest is not on how wrong or right the assumption of power was but on its effect on the socio-linguistic and socio-political life of the nation.

### **3.0 The Socio-Linguistic Consequence of such Assumption of Power**

The assumption of power through fraud, negative or positive violence bred fear in the leaders. In their attempt to counter the fear, they created protective law enforcement units — army, *gendarmarie*, police — of mostly their tribal people. Law enforcement thus moved from national law enforcement (that had characterised the colonial era) to tribal law enforcement. The linguistic consequence of this reversal of values was that the leaders' tribal languages became semi-institutionalised as they became languages of in-group communication within the sensitive law enforcement units of the nation.

Furthermore, to govern is to assume powers. To govern with the backing of tribal law enforcement units is to assume absolute powers. To institutionalise an indigenous language and thus make it co-exist with an inherited official language is to give it and its speakers official status. When languages co-exist as official and semi-official languages, they are bound to be used in situations in which there would be interference, code mixing and code-switching and why not, language switching. When languages undergo these processes, they lose their purity. The tilt is often toward the language that forms the speakers' linguistic substratum. Since the indigenous languages formed the speakers' linguistic substratum, the inherited official languages became mulatto languages and so lost their purity and vitality in cognition and functions. In other words, the

languages — English, French and Spanish — remained phonologically and grammatically European but semantically African because they were made to express black African ethnocentric thought processes rather than those of their native speakers. A mulatto language is in fact, a slough, a make-belief. Once Africans unconsciously transformed inherited official languages into make-beliefs, the languages lost the ability to handle the institutions conceived, established and sustained on the principles of the authentic languages. Government, education, economy, diplomacy and even religion were all conceived, established and nurtured on the principles of the authentic European languages. Immediately after, the languages underwent transformation, the institutions collapsed. In some countries, the collapse was sudden and violent, in others, it was gradual, yet, with the same devastating effects. This collapse is not the focus of this paper. It is mentioned here, to show how indigenous languages, as semi-official languages, have indirectly influenced the collapse of the vitality of inherited official languages, and how that has helped in the collapse of the totality of the inherited system, and how that has led to civil wars and threats of them.

#### **4.0 The Reality**

The study of language for developmental purposes necessitates the study of it for destructive purposes. This study of indigenous languages as semi-official languages, would not have been necessary if the phenomenon were temporary. But the fact that a black African Head of State remains in office indefinitely calls for in-depth study of the effects of the indigenisation of the linguistic set-up of the country. Halliday says,

linguistic structure is the realisation of social structure, activity and symbolising it in a process of mutual creativity. Because it stands as a metaphor for society, language has the property of not only transmitting the social order but also maintaining and potentially modifying it (cf. Pugh, Lee and Swann, 1985: 81).

The symbolisation of a social structure can be positive or negative. Positive, where the members of a nationality identify themselves as linguistically homogeneous, and negative, where they see themselves as heterogeneous. Heterogeneity engenders language loyalty that may degenerate to violence when people become over ethnocentric. People become over ethnocentric if they have absolute power. According to Vander Zanden:

Power refers to the ability of individuals or groups to realise their will in human affairs, even against the will of others. As such, it provides answers to the question of whose interests will be served and whose values will reign. (1988: 224)

It is only in a situation where individuals or groups have absolute power to rule that they impose their will on others even against their will. Such power is usually characterised by godheadedness. The individuals or groups seize the three arms of governance — the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. And once they are endowed with such powers they start translating their preferences into reality. These preferences (culture) are usually ethnocentric and are reflected in the indigenous languages of the individuals or groups. The individuals or groups dominate the media (radio, television and papers) and through the use of the inherited official languages, indirectly sell their preferences to an unwilling audience. (We have already seen that inherited official languages that are used as vehicles for the transmission of the values of restricted codes become make-belief).

#### **4.1 The Point of Conflict**

Official and semi-official languages are more effectively used in capital cities — the seats of governments. In situations where non-natives assume power and start imposing their preferences on the natives, they create smouldering or open conflicts. From the time of independence (1960) to the time of the first *coup d'état*, the Yorubas tolerated Hausa rule in Lagos for apparently two reasons, the cool and gentle ways of the Northerners, and the fact that most Yorubas are Moslems. But with the

investiture of power on General Ironsi, an Ibo, the Ibos (who had laid claims to the right to power through the forerunning political exploits of Nnamdi Azikiwe for independence) started imposing their preferences on the natives, thus antagonising them. This led to the rift between the Ibos and the Yorubas who had also laid claims to the right to power at the time of independence, through the political exploits of Awolowo. No doubt then that the Yorubas helped in the overthrow of Ironsi. When at last, after the civil war and another coup, General Obasenjo, a Yoruba, came to power, the Yorubas saw that as a legitimate right. Power was at last in the hands of the indigenous people of the capital city — a city that was the mirror of the nation; the political, economic, social and religious hub of the nation; a city in which Nigerians of all walks of life flocked to directly or indirectly have their share of the national cake, but a city in which the destiny of the nation could be translated into reality through the medium of a non-lingua franca, Yoruba.

Once an indigene of a capital city becomes the Supreme executive, and therefore the Supreme head of the Armed forces, he assumes the powers of legislature and magistracy. National employment becomes ethnic appointments. He appoints people of his ethnic group to all key positions and thus makes the national capital an ethnic capital. His appointees, also appoint people of the same ethnic group at lower ranks. Once that is done, the indigenous language becomes an undeclared official language. It becomes the medium for the formulation of the political, economic and social policies of the nation. National thought, national plans and national goals become ethnocentric, and become disguised in decrees and decisions rendered and made public by the media in an inherited official language. This was the situation in Rwanda before the 1991 democratic elections. The Tutsi minority ran the capital city entirely. They were in full control in thought, word and deed. The Hutu majority became strangers in a country they also laid claims to. Then, the elections turned the tables, and their revenge became the bedrock of the present day genocide.

## **4.2 Why that Violence?**

We should here recall that before the arrival of the white man each language group was a self-contained enclave. The language, its speakers and the land had a nondescript ritual bond. With the arrival of the white man and the institution of his language as the language of common consent, ethnic sentiments were relegated to the background. But the white man's language which aimed at uniting the country politically, economically, judicially and socially also laid the bedrock of division. It institutionalised political, economic, and social stratification of not only the society but also the land — some geographical regions became more important than others thereby provoking migrations and causing the stranger/host dichotomy. In spite of that, so long as the white man's interest remained the focal point, inter-ethnic group tension remained unmarked. But when he was replaced by black leaders and the population found no improvement in their lot, tension welled up. In the words of Fanon:

The distribution of wealth that it effects is not spread out between a great many sectors; it is not ranged among different levels, nor does it set up a hierarchy of half-tones. The new caste is an affront all the more disgusting in that the immense majority, nine-tenth of the population, continue to die of starvation. The scandalous enrichment, speedy and pitiless, of this caste is accompanied by a decisive awakening on the part of the people, and a growing awareness that promises stormy days to come. (1963: 167)

The stormy days are the present day reality of Africa. From the Sudan, to Rwanda, to Angola, to Nigeria, what have you? The ruling clans emit unprecedented ethnocentrism which makes them perceive non-clansmen as objects of hate, spite and possible threats to their hold on power. Such prejudicial attitudes fan the flames of revenge and in the words of Fanon, "the masses begin to sulk, they turn away from this nation in which they have been given no place and begin to lose interest in it." The masses do not simply lose interest. They lose interest and ferment rebellion."

In Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon, the natives (who are now in power) are outnumbered by other ethnic groups put together by

almost 50-1. Yet, in Government, and government offices, in the banking sector and in the military, they outnumber the other ethnic groups put together by almost the same ratio. With that strong presence in all strategic places, their language, Fang Beti, (the lingua franca of three very near cognates, Bulu, Eton and Ewondo) has become the semi-official language of the city. In fact, its prestige has relegated the English Language, the constitutional second official language, to third position. As the language of governance, judiciary and banking, Fang Beti has acquired such an elevated position that its speakers, in the words of Zandem "give it a tangible existence through titles, rituals, honorary degrees, emblems, conspicuous display of leisure and consumption, and mannerism in speech."

This *malaise* is not unique to the natives of Yaounde. All ethnic groups which find themselves in power have that disease. Power exposes them to unaccountable wealth and makes them arrogant especially in symbolising their ego. This chains up with negligence and disregard, if not spiting non-tribes people. It is not therefore uncommon to hear remarks like the ones below:

1) "You go to a government office and all of a sudden, you find yourself in a village — a jungle of tribes people speaking their tribal language in complete disregard of others."

2) "When one gets to an office and listens to the language of common consent, then suddenly there is a switch, and government business is stopped to satisfy an ethno-centric ritual... After the kissing, embracing and handshakes, the women lapse into their language and forget that people are waiting to be served..."

3) "You can't imagine! You get to a bank. The cashier tells you to queue up. You queue up for three hours, then just when you get to the counter, her tribesman comes in with an entourage and breaks the queue. She rises and welcomes the intruder in their language and starts

serving him and his entourage. You feel it would have been better if you did not belong to your country. Your temperature rises in anger but you can't do a thing. You sigh in defeat and humiliation..."

These three comments, selected from a wide range of oral grievances expressed by disgruntled citizens, reveal the gall that underlies the split between the governed and the governors. The remarks may be considered light-hearted but in fact, they are the bedrock on which the violence that is ravaging Africa lies.

## **5.0 Summary**

This paper has attempted to situate post-independent failure of the political, economic and educational institutions in black Africa on indigenisation. The institutions had been conceived, founded and executed on the principles of western thought, and each authentic western language was well adapted to the uses of the institutions. Post-independence Africa however saw two processes of the indigenisation of the institutions — the indirect and the direct. The indirect process rendered authentic western languages as mere tools for the transmission of translated native thought. The direct process used native languages (of the ruling clans) in the execution of the institutions. These two processes transformed both the institutions and the languages into make-belief. They, as such, lost their vitality, and collapsed.

*Charles ALOBWEDE D'EPIE*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences, University of Yaounde I (CAMEROON).

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