

# Official Language Policies in Africa

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## 1. Introduction

Africa today is characterized by a multiplicity of policies and attitudes concerning its indigenous languages. And this appears largely to be a direct result of its relatively recent history of colonization by external powers. With the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, all the countries of Africa today were under colonial rule, in some cases beginning from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but for the vast majority of them beginning from only the nineteenth century. Independence – political rather than economic independence – finally came for such countries at different times mostly from the late 1950s to the late 1970s.

## 2. Colonial Language Policies

The external powers that colonized the different African countries came from different parts of Europe, and as their origins differed, so, too, did their language policies. They of course all imposed their respective official languages on the different territories controlled by them. But in addition to that, whereas the English displayed linguistic tolerance to the extent of permitting suitable indigenous African languages to be used as media of instruction for the first three to four years of grade school and then taught thereafter as a school subject if so desired, the French, the Portuguese, and the Spanish did not tolerate the use of any indigenous African languages at all in the public domain. Pursuing a policy of total assimilation, their aim was to turn each and every one of their subjects in Africa into a perfect linguistic and cultural replica of the corresponding citizen in their respective home countries in Europe. In other words, the French, for example, wanted the indigenous peoples of their African territories to be French through and through; similarly for the Portuguese and the Spanish. Accordingly, while colonialism lasted, no indigenous African languages were ever taught in school, let alone being used as media of instruction in the territories controlled by those three colonial powers. In those territories, French, Portuguese, and Spanish were, as applicable, the sole media of instruction at all levels of the education system.<sup>1</sup> The effect of that policy remains there till today, as will be seen below.

But even where indigenous languages were allowed to be used in grade schools, as in the English colonial territories, the use of such languages was restricted. As said earlier, such languages could only be used officially in the first three to four years of grade school. Thereafter, all instruction was expected to be given in English. From grade four onwards and except during the few periods allotted to indigenous languages on the official timetable, all pupils were expected to converse among themselves as well as with their teachers only in English. Anyone caught conversing during school hours in any indigenous language (pejoratively termed a ‘vernacular’) was liable to a fine, corporal punishment, or some other form of punishment such as being made to write out in longhand a hundred or two hundred tokens of the promise, “I shall never again speak in the vernacular in school.”

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\* The writer remains greatly indebted to the organizers of ACAL 43 for fully sponsoring his attendance at the conference to present this commissioned paper, which made him think what he didn't think before as well as ask questions that never even crossed his mind before about official language policies in Africa.

<sup>1</sup>The only known exception to these observations, and a very happy one at that, is that of the colonial territory then known as Belgian Congo, but now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). There, thanks largely to the liberal disposition of King Leopold II of Belgium, the then sole proprietor of the colony, Christian missionaries developed a number of indigenous languages, among them Lingala, for propagating their immigrant religion and also for use as media of instruction in grade schools.

Not being taught one's native language at all in school, as under the French, the Portuguese, and the Spanish, also referring to it as a 'vernacular' in the sense of some unworthy and primitive speech form, and, above all, being punished for speaking it even to one's little school friends – all these said one and the same thing to the young African school child, namely, that his native language was definitely inferior to the colonial language taught to him and also spoken to him in school. This feeling was to be later reinforced by the unfortunate choice of official language made by his newly independent country!

### 3. Language Choices at Independence

At independence, each newly emerged country in Africa had to decide, in line with practice elsewhere in the world, what language or languages it would use for its nationalist and nationalistic needs. The choices made then or shortly thereafter are as shown in Table 1.

	Country	Official language(s)	National language(s)	Pseudo-national language(s)
1	Algeria	Arabic	Arabic, Tamazight	--
2	Egypt	Arabic	Arabic	---
3	Eritrea	Arabic, English	Arabic	---
4	Libya	Arabic	Arabic	---
5	Mauritania	Arabic, French	Arabic	---
6	Morocco	Arabic	Arabic	---
7	Sudan Republic	Arabic	Arabic	---
8	Tunisia	Arabic	Arabic	---
9	Benin Republic	French	--	Adja, Fon, Batonu/Bariba, Dendi, Yoruba, Ditamari,
10	Burkina Faso	French	--	---
11	Burundi	French	Kirundi, Swahili	---
12	Cameroon	French, English	--	---
13	Central African Republic	French	Sango	---
14	Chad	French, Arabic	--	---
15	Comoros	French	--	---
16	Cote d'Ivoire	French	--	---
17	Democratic Republic of the Congo	French	Chiluba, Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili	---
18	Djibouti	French, Arabic	--	---
19	Gabon	French	--	---
20	Guinea Conakry	French	--	Fula, Kissi, Kpelle, Malinke, Sousou, Toma
21	Madagascar	French	Malagasy	---

22	Mali	French	--	Arabic, Bozo, Bambara, Bomu, Dogon, Fulfulde, Manikakan, Mamara Senufo, Syenara Senufo, Songhay, Soninke, Tamasheq, Xaasongaxango
23	Niger Republic	French		Hausa, Zerma, Songhai, Tubu, Tamajeq, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Gurma
24	Republic of the Congo	French	--	---
25	Rwanda	French	Kinyarwanda	---
26	Senegal	French	Diola, Malinke, Peul, Serer, Soninke, Wolof	---
27	Seychelles	French, English	Creole	---
28	Togo	French	--	Ewe, Kabiye
29	Angola	Portuguese	--	---
30	Cape Verde	Portuguese	--	---
31	Equatorial Guinea	Spanish	--	---
32	Guinea Bissau	Portuguese	--	---
33	Mozambique	Portuguese	--	---
34	Sao Tome and Principe	Portuguese	--	---
35	Botswana	English	Setswana	---
36	The Gambia	English	--	---
37	Ghana	English	--	Akan, Dagbane, Ga, Gonja, Ewe, Adangbe, Kasem, Nzema Dagaare,
38	Kenya	English	Swahili	---
39	Lesotho	English	Sesotho	---
40	Malawi	English	Chichewa	---
41	Mauritius	English, French	--	---
42	Namibia	English, Afrikaans	--	---
43	Nigeria	English, French	Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba	---
44	Sierra Leone	English	--	---
45	Somalia	Somali, English	Somali	---
46	South Africa	English, Afrikaans	Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, Sesotho, Pedi, Tsonga, Swazi, Ndebele	---

47	South Sudan	English	--	---
48	Swaziland	English	SiSwati	---
49	Tanzania	English	Swahili	---
50	Uganda	English	Swahili	---
51	Zambia	English	--	---
52	Zimbabwe	English	Shona, Ndebele	---
53	Ethiopia	Amharic, English	Tigrinya	---
54	Liberia	English	--	---

Table 1: Official Language Choices by African States<sup>2</sup>

The official languages in Table 1 above are the languages actually used for high school and college education as well as for legislation, commerce and industry, and external affairs in the countries concerned. With the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, the countries that opted for English as their official language (Nos. 35-52) did so apparently out of necessity – they had no indigenous languages of their own that could effectively fill that role; similarly for the countries (Nos.9-34) that chose French, Portuguese, and Spanish as their official languages. The two sets of countries concerned are mostly located to the south of the Sahara. Unlike them, the countries to the north of the Sahara (Nos. 1-8) in the vast majority of cases chose Arabic as their sole official and national language and only in a few cases chose it as a co-official language with the languages of their former colonial masters. In other words, whereas the countries to the north of the Sahara overwhelmingly chose to drop colonial languages at independence, the ones to the south all chose, instead, to retain them. These contrasting choices of official languages in Africa actually appear to have a deeper sociolinguistic explanation than mere necessity, and are to be considered in some detail shortly.

What are called national languages in Table 1 are indigenous African languages that have been specifically designated as such either in the constitutions of the countries concerned or in some other kinds of official documents put out by such countries. Very clear cases of such languages are those of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in Nigeria, Swahili in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, as well as Xhosa, Venda, Zulu, etc. in South Africa. The Nigerian constitution, for example, makes very clear provisions for Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (the three major languages in that country) to be used (along with English) for conducting legislative business at the federal level. At the state level, the same constitution allows any indigenous language or set of languages to be used for that same purpose (along with English). However, being designated on paper as a national language is one thing and being actively and truly so used is quite something else. Thus, the official policy regarding Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in Nigeria was announced for the first time at an official press conference in late December 1977. Up to now (more than thirty years later), however, there has been no clear indication that the government of that country has any serious intention of implementing it (Awobuluyi 2010: 12-17; Bamgbose 1991: 117-18; Emananjo 1998). Consider Swahili next. This is a national language that keenly interested outside observers saw at Tanzania's independence in 1964 as having, of all the indigenous languages south of the Sahara, the brightest prospect of becoming a truly official indigenous language. But the government of that country apparently felt otherwise; for in 1987, at the instance of an aid agency whose main mission was (and still is) to promote English values at the expense of others, it decided to in effect foreclose any further development of that language by having it completely replaced by English as medium of instruction in all the country's high schools and colleges (Albaugh 2005: 48; Mgqwashu 2004). As for the nine indigenous national languages of post-Apartheid South Africa, another key country in Africa, it appears that they are now only so in name (Buekes 2008), partly owing to resistance from no less than the intended indigenous beneficiaries of the policy concerned (Mgqwashu 2004).

The term "pseudo-national languages" is used in the same Table 1 in reference to indigenous languages that are officially recognized, as it would seem, merely to make the peoples speaking them feel good at being recognized and acknowledged by no less than their own governments! Such languages tend to be almost any and every significant indigenous language present in the country concerned. Clear

<sup>2</sup>Source: Albaugh (2005); 'Languages in Africa,' <http://download.travlang.com//africa.htm>; 'Background Notes – US Department of State,' [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/); <http://www.ethnologue.com>; <http://en.wikipedia.org>; and personal knowledge.

examples of such languages are the languages called ‘national languages’ in Benin Republic, namely, Adja, Batonu/Bariba, Datimari, Dendi, Fon, and Yoruba. Such languages may be used for news broadcast on radio and television but are otherwise not officially used for any other purpose, particularly in formal education. According to Wolff (2000: 341), the ‘national languages’ in Niger Republic fall in this category, too. And the nine ‘national languages’ of Ghana, officially so declared in the early 1960s, arguably now fall in this category as well, as that country has since 2002 opted for an English-only medium of instruction throughout its education system (Owu-Ewie 2006).

There are countries in Table 1 that have nothing at all entered for them whether under national languages or under pseudo-national languages. Most such countries were under French, Portuguese, or Spanish colonial rule, and as said before, those three external powers neither recognized any indigenous African languages nor assigned them any official role at all under them in Africa. Their colonial policy of not acknowledging the existence of indigenous African languages outlived their stay in Africa and carried over with little or no change into the post-independence era in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa. That accounts for countries like Angola, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and Togo in Africa today that still do not make use of any of their indigenous languages either at all in the public domain or for more than news broadcasts on radio and television and, maybe, for occasional electioneering as well.<sup>3</sup> Any developmental work that has so far been done on any of the indigenous languages in such countries has been done mostly by foreigners and foreign NGOs like SIL in Cameroon and Benin Republic, for example.

#### 4. Reason for the Current Plight of Indigenous African Languages

Given the linguistic scenario just described, the question naturally arises as to why the governments and peoples of Africa south of the Sahara appear so uncaring and unconcerned about their indigenous languages. Part, if not all, of the answer to this question will be found, in this writer’s view, by asking and answering the question hinted at above, namely, why did African countries north of the Sahara all choose Arabic as their common official language in preference to English, French, Italian, and Spanish, whereas the countries to the south made the exact opposite choice of adopting English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish for the same purpose in preference to suitable ones among their numerous indigenous languages?

In answer to this question, some people might be easily tempted to see this preference as but an example of the way colonized peoples, brainwashed by their former colonial masters, tend to value things associated with such masters more than their own.<sup>4</sup> Thus, given a choice between two otherwise identical products, one of which is labelled ‘Made in England’ and the other as ‘Made in Nigeria,’ the average Nigerian would even today instinctively go for the one labelled ‘Made in England’! While there may be some truth in this answer, brainwashing by their colonial masters in fact could not be the factor actually responsible for the type of language choice made at independence by the countries of Africa south of the Sahara. This is because the peoples of North Africa and South-east Asia, who were similarly colonized and, therefore, must have also been similarly brainwashed, nevertheless did not make the kind of official language choice made in Africa south of the Sahara.

Another seemingly possible explanation would be that the countries of Africa south of the Sahara each feature to varying degrees a bewildering diversity of indigenous languages, and that diversity made it totally impossible for them to choose any (ones) of their indigenous languages as their official languages. But then, linguistic diversity is not peculiar to the countries of Africa south of the Sahara; there is linguistic diversity in South-east Asia, too. According to Ethnologue.com, linguistic diversity there is somewhat as in Table 2 below.

<sup>3</sup>As reported by Owu-Ewie (2006: 77), Cote d’Ivoire at independence actually pledged to its departing colonial masters that it would not tamper with their colonial language policy.

<sup>4</sup>Another form of this explanation occurs in (Bamgbose 1991: 69) as “Language in education provides the best illustration of what has come to be known as an *inheritance situation*: how the colonial experience continues to shape and define post-colonial problems and policies. Thus, while it would seem that African nations make policy in education, what they actually do is carry on the logic of the policies of the past.” As is to be expected, however, this variant is, *mutatis mutandis*, open to much the same sort of objection as the one actually under consideration here, namely, why is it that, of all the former colonized territories, only those of them in Oceania, the Americas, and sub-Saharan Africa continue till today with the official language policies of the past?

	Country	Population	Living indigenous languages	Former colonial power	Official language
1	Bangladesh	153,281,000	42	English	Bengali
2	Cambodia	13,956,000	23	French	Central Khmer
3	India	1,134,403,000	438	English	Hindi, English
4	Myanmar	47,967,000	111	English	Burmese
5	Vietnam	85,029,000	106	French	Vietnamese

Table 2: Linguistic Diversity in South-east Asia

To be sure, linguistic diversity did create problems for India at independence in 1947 as well as shortly thereafter. But those problems were not such as made it impossible for the authorities there to easily figure out what indigenous language or languages to elevate to official status. Quite the contrary; they easily settled for Hindi as the country's principal official language. And having done that, they immediately went further to make practical concessions designed to assuage the feelings of the speakers of other eligible indigenous languages, one of those concessions being the continuing status of English as a secondary official language in that country today. Thus, it can correctly be said that none of the countries of South-east Asia was completely hamstrung by linguistic diversity when the time came for them to choose their respective official languages shown in Table 2 above. That being the case, if linguistic diversity played any role at all in Africa south of the Sahara, it must not have been the main factor responsible for the choice of official languages made there at independence.

It turns out crucially in this connection that the languages that successfully edged out colonial languages as official languages in North Africa and South-east Asia had, and still have, one thing in common, a thing which languages in Africa south of the Sahara (and in Oceania and the Americas also) virtually all lack. Those indigenous languages of North Africa and South-east Asia were, and still are, all languages that each have a long and glorious tradition of written and highly treasured secular and religious literature in all the known genres. In many cases, that tradition dates back well over a thousand years and, therefore, predated European colonization of most of the countries concerned by a long stretch. Now, if the essential attribute of an 'H' language variety is taken to be being "the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature" in the words of Ferguson (1972: 245) as quoted by Fasold (1990: 38-39), then those North African and South-east Asian languages eminently qualified as 'H' language varieties during colonial times. As such, they were at that time essentially at par status-wise with the colonial languages that came into contact with them.

Furthermore, as the cases of English and French in Canada, Dutch and French in Belgium, and French, German, and Italian in Switzerland suggest, when two 'H' language varieties come into contact, they may borrow from each other if necessary; there may or may not even be friction between them; but they will not readily succumb, one of them to the other. Accordingly, the 'H' colonial languages in North Africa and South-east Asia predictably did not succumb to their indigenous 'H' rivals there; but neither did their rivals succumb to them. What actually happened, instead, was that the former simply removed themselves figuratively from the scene, thereby enabling their indigenous 'H' rivals to automatically step into their shoes so to speak and become the official languages of their respective territories.<sup>5</sup>

Regrettably, however, none of the indigenous languages of Africa south of the Sahara have ever had or enjoyed anything close to the 'H' status of the languages of North Africa and South-east Asia being considered here. Except for those of them that had pre-colonial contact with Arabic through Islam, most such languages of Africa south of the Sahara got reduced to writing for the very first time only when colonialism came with Christian missionaries and sundry traders in its vanguard. Even then, colonization did not afford any of such languages both the opportunity and the length of time needed for them to consolidate themselves as written languages possessing the requisite bodies of respected written (as opposed to oral) literature that is for that reason able to command or inspire the steadfast loyalty of its

<sup>5</sup> Apparently only India had several eligible 'H' speech forms to choose from; hence the language riots that attended the choice of Hindi in the early years of that country's independence.

speakers or users. For that simple reason, when independence finally came for their respective territories, they proved not surprisingly to be no match at all for any colonial languages in the way that the ‘H’ indigenous languages of North Africa and South-east Asia did.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Conclusion: Cultivating Indigenous African Languages the Yoruba Way

The lesson from this for the countries of Africa south of the Sahara is that they all need to take their indigenous languages much more seriously than hitherto. They have a lot more work to do on those languages than they appear generally to realize. The work requires them to zealously develop both the *linguistic* and *literary* potentials of at least the major ones among such languages up to or even beyond the levels of those of the ‘H’ languages of South-east Asia at independence. And as they do not have all the time in the world to do that, they simply have to work fast, considering that the world for its part is not waiting for them to catch up.

As if then fully aware of this, some then young Yoruba linguistic and literary scholars met over one weekend at the Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly the University of Ife), Ile-Ife, Nigeria, some four decades ago. Because the state authorities could not be bothered to do so (see footnote 7 below), the scholars concerned decided to start promoting the Yoruba language in their own little way in their individual enclaves in the various colleges and universities then located in south-western Nigeria, where Yoruba was and still is the only major indigenous language to talk of. The scholars formed an association (Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria (YSAN)) that would hold annual conferences at which papers on all aspects of Yoruba, written either in Yoruba itself or in English, would be presented, discussed, and subsequently edited for publication in a journal to be known as *Yorùbá*. At the Association’s annual conferences, there would be special sessions organized to discuss and agree on new Yoruba terms proposed by members in the areas of Yoruba language, literature, and pedagogy. Armed with such new terms as were agreed upon, members would go back to their bases and start teaching the three targeted aspects of Yoruba, in Yoruba, rather than in English as was previously the case.

When the Yoruba students trained as above left college, they, too, formed their own association (Yoruba Teachers’ Association) complete with its journal known as *Yorùbá Gbòde* (‘Yoruba is now the talk of the town!’). And, what is more, they in turn taught and continue till today to teach Yoruba in the Yoruba medium in grade schools and high schools.

At least two pamphlets of new terms in the three targeted areas were produced and commercially published (Awobuluyi 1990 and Bamgbose 1992). The more committed of the scholars who were or still are able to do so have continued since then to transcribe Yoruba oral literature as well as translate various books and official documents from English or French to Yoruba, in addition to writing in Yoruba journal articles and book length works for use, in some cases in high schools, and in others at undergraduate and postgraduate levels; e.g. (Adeyemi 2006, Awobuluyi 2006, 2008 & forthcoming, Bamgbose 1990, and Owolabi 1989).

At this writer’s institution, undergraduate and postgraduate students are not only taught their language and literature courses entirely in Yoruba, they are also encouraged to undertake and present

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<sup>6</sup>A similar view was expressed independently by Adebayo Williams in a paper entitled ‘The Invention of African Intellectual Tradition’ and read on the occasion of the World Philosophy Day at the University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, on November 17, 2011. The paper was subsequently published under the pseudonym of Tatalo Alamu on pp. 3 and 22 of *The Nation on Sunday* of November 20, 2011. The relevant portions of it are as follows:

The question is: is it possible to philosophize in a strange language? It is to be noted that countries and societies such as China, Japan, India and the oriental tigers, while enduring the odd colonial infraction or even brutal decimation, never surrendered the cultural and intellectual initiative to the colonialists. They swiftly reverted to their indigenous cultures and powerful philosophies once the colonial masters departed. Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintoism acted as binding glues for these societies, helping them to survive and even leverage to their advantage the worst of the psychic and cultural atrocities of colonization.

In the particular case of colonial Africa, it is a major historical tragedy that there was no major or dominant African culture strong and resilient enough to withstand the ravages of colonization and to subsequently act as a cultural and philosophic hub for the rest of the continent. A feeble attempt to impose the Swahili language as this pan-African cultural hub could not even get off the ground probably because the Swahili culture itself emerged from the crucible of Arab colonization in Africa.

their Master's and doctoral research in Yoruba to, among other things, enable them to acquire still more ease in communicating in the language.

The small group of Yoruba scholars of four decades ago succeeded in making history; for Yoruba language and literature are today taught only in Yoruba (rather than in English, as in the past) in grade schools and high schools in all the Yoruba-speaking states of south-western Nigeria. Children who are taught in this new way, and who are ignorant of what obtained in the past, take it as just the only natural or sensible thing to do! Furthermore, the hitherto very conservative and, therefore, unwilling education authorities, finding themselves presented with a fait accompli by university and high school teachers, have quietly resigned themselves to the new trend of Yoruba being taught and examined in the Yoruba language. What this small linguistic revolution now suggests to this writer is that, if Yoruba-speaking scholars in other disciplines would only bestir themselves and collaborate with their linguistics and literature colleagues in the matter of creating the required technical terms, the same education authorities would similarly easily be forced, against their conservative will, to accept Yoruba as the sole medium of instruction in all subjects except English and French in the education system of the Yoruba-speaking states in Nigeria.

Now, what the Yoruba group has achieved so far, with little or no help and encouragement from state authorities,<sup>7</sup> at best constitutes the very preliminaries of what is certain to be a very long process that will inevitably take decades. As any such process has to be started some time, now appears to this writer to be the right time for other major language groups in Africa south of the Sahara, with the generous and long-term support of the relevant state authorities and institutions, to start actively promoting their individual languages with a view to creating strong, deeply-rooted, and lasting traditions of reading, researching, teaching, writing, and publishing in them. In that way, it is hoped, at least such major languages of Africa south of the Sahara will not lose out again in future as they sadly did in the recent past in contact and contest with exogenous languages.

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<sup>7</sup>As the then president of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria, this writer and the other members of the association's executive in the early 1980s sought audience with the civilian governors of the Yoruba-speaking states of south-western Nigeria, with a view to briefing them about the objectives and financial needs of the association. Only the governor of Lagos State in the person of Alhaji Lateef Jakande gave us an appointment, and then only to see, not himself, but the Secretary to his government. Nothing subsequently came out of our interaction with that Secretary.

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