

## **COLONIALISM AND LINGUISTIC DILEMMAS IN AFRICA : CAMEROON AS A PARADIGM (REVISITED)**

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### *Prolegomena*

Godfrey Tangwa's article titled "Colonialism and Linguistic Dilemmas in Africa: Cameroon as a Paradigm" posits that the Berlin conference of 1884 constitutes a landmark in the history of Africa in that the continent was divided between European imperialists in an attempt to reap the benefits of its natural resources, without any regard for "the linguistic, cultural or political state of affairs on the continent". In fact, Tangwa's problematic is clearly stated in the following terms:

The linguistic dilemma facing African countries can be very simply stated: should African countries (themselves colonial creations) continue using the languages and systems of education inherited from colonialism or jettison these as undesirable colonial legacies in preference for indigenous languages and systems of education ?

The whole paper evolves around this pertinent and controversial question which has attracted a lot of intellectual debate in recent times. In other words, should African countries try to unmake history by refuting the past which remains part and parcel of them ? Is the choice really easy, if at all there is a choice to be made ? That is the question ; and there lies the main thrust of Tangwa's argumentation. The author's position is absolutely clear: Africans should continue using the received languages "as vehicles for national unity, integration, development, as well as for international and global interaction", while at the same time "reversing the colonial policy whereby indigenous language were purposely marginalised". This notwithstanding, he fails to propose a language planning policy whereby both the received languages on the one hand and indigenous language on the other could be used side by side for the benefit of Cameroonians in particular and Africans at large.

In handling this issue, which we consider to be primarily of linguistic concern, the author reveals that his mind is a highly critical one. The paper probes into a lot of socio-cultural and political questions, presented in an in-depth analytical manner. Yet, for the student of linguistics that Tangwa professes to be, he lacks the linguistic arguments to make his point. In our opinion, it would have been more rewarding if he carried out some detailed investigation into the Cameroonian linguistic history before seriously embarking on such a high level scientific and intellectual venture.

As stated earlier, Tangwa's paper addresses a very pertinent issue ; and this explains why it has attracted our attention. But given that the linguistic

aspect of the issue at stake is not given proper consideration, we think it is our duty to situate the ‘linguistic dilemmas’ as observed in the Cameroonian context in view of complementing important information that is inexplicably absent in the work.

### *Language Policy in Cameroon during the Colonial Era*

The assertion that during the colonial period African languages were relegated to the background may not entirely be a truism. When we consider the policy of Indirect Rule as practised in territories administered by the British, we observe that here the use of indigenous languages was almost an imperative since the British made maximum use of traditional and native authorities in order to reach out to the people. Hence local languages remained an indispensable medium of communication at the service of the colonial administrator.

On the contrary, the French policy of Assimilation gave very little importance to indigenous languages given that frantic efforts were made to transform the indigenous population into Frenchmen. And how best could this objective be attained if priority was not given to the French language and culture? In his article, Tangwa fails to bring out this difference in approach which characterises the two main colonialists on the African continent.

As far as Cameroon is concerned, it is perhaps a regrettable oversight that Tangwa’s paper makes no reference to Stumpf (1979) whose work presents a detailed account of language policy in Cameroon during the colonial period. In fact, all began with the Berlin Conference during which Germany ‘officially’ received the mandate to colonise Cameroon. However, prior to the arrival of the Germans, the Baptist Missionary Society of London, headed by Joseph Merrick, had touched the coastal town of Douala as early as November 1843. Before arriving Douala, they had first been to Fernando Po in 1841. Thus, the first missionary station was founded in Douala in 1843 and the second in Bimbia in 1844. In the area of education, the first missionary school was opened in Bimbia in 1844 and the second in Douala the following year. Victoria later followed suit; and in these schools, English and Duala were the languages of instruction. By 1887 when the Baptist Missionary Society left Cameroon for the Congo, their schools could boast of about 280 pupils who were taught in both English and Duala.

The German missionaries who arrived Cameroon at the beginning of the German colonial period did not relent efforts in using indigenous languages for education and evangelisation. But in 1897, the colonial administration, through Governor Von Puttkammer, put a ban on the use of indigenous languages in schools. Only the German language was henceforth to be used for education. Furthermore, in 1900, a colonial law known as the ‘Schutzgebietgesetz’ gave the

missionaries the right to carry out only their evangelisation mission in local languages.

Seen from this perspective, indigenous languages were not completely jettisoned ; they continued to play an important role in the socio-cultural life of Cameroonians, given that languages such as Bulu, Basa'a, Ewondo, Duala, Mungaka and Fulfulde were taught and widely used for evangelisation (Mbuagbaw, 2000: 135). Secondly, in view of the fact that up till 1907 all the existing schools in the territory were mission schools, it was rather difficult for the colonial administration to have full control of the language policy as practised by the missionaries. In other words, the colonial language policy as prescribed by the German administration in Cameroon was hardly rigorously applied by the missionaries. This can be testified by the fact that when the first public school was opened in 1907, the German administration issued an order to the effect that German was henceforth to be the only language to be used for education - as if this had not been done before. But how could such a language policy be efficient where only six primary and three agricultural public schools existed in the territory prior to the First World War, as against more than a hundred schools opened and ran by the missionaries in the Western and Southern parts of the country ? In fact, throughout the German colonial period, indigenous languages continued to enjoy a somewhat comfortable position - more comfortable than did the German language.

In 1916, following the defeat of Germany in Cameroon during World War I, Cameroon was shared between Great Britain and France. The territory under British mandate continued to use some indigenous languages like Duala, Bafut, Kenyang and Mungaka, alongside with English in schools (Bitja'a Kody, 1999: 82). In French-speaking Cameroon, there existed perpetual conflict between missionaries who persisted in the use of indigenous languages and the French colonial administration. The latter took a series of measures aimed at promoting French, while at the same time relegating indigenous languages to the background. In 1917, the French colonial administration instituted a special subvention for schools which used French as the language of instruction. Eventually, schools that taught in indigenous languages were suppressed. This is expressed in decisions rendered public on 1 October 1920 and 28 December 1920 whereby the 47 schools opened by King Njoya in the Bamun region wherein Bamun was the language of education were all closed down. As from 1922, 1800 schools run by the American Presbyterian missionaries, and in which Bulu was taught, suffered the same fate. This systematic linguistic persecution (cf. Stumpf, 1979) was carried out with vigour, until French became the sole language in use for education. This notwithstanding, indigenous languages continued to serve not only for evangelisation but also for popular communication. In other words, while the official language remained the monopoly of official communication, the indigenous languages dominated unofficial communication in churches, the market place, cultural celebrations, ritual ceremonies, the home, etc.

How else could these languages reveal their vitality ? Cameroon's unique situation of 248 indigenous languages (cf. Breton and Bikia Fohtung, 1991) is not the least easy to deal with. Such linguistic diversity has been at the background of the complicated language equation for Cameroon. For those who find solace today in contenting themselves with the fact that the colonialists did everything to relegate Cameroonian indigenous languages to the background, the question to be asked them is simply what they have done so far to remedy the situation, be it at the individual, community or institutional level.

### *Language Policy in Post-colonial Cameroon*

If the colonial powers in Cameroon and elsewhere in the continent were bent on promoting their respective languages, it is undoubtedly due to the fact that these languages were the main tool of European colonisation. Language being the vehicle if not the expression of culture, would it have been possible for the Europeans to effectively colonise Africans without imparting the European languages ? This explains why during the colonial period indigenous languages were somewhat marginalised, although such marginalisation was carried out in an uneven manner by the different colonial powers.

As power changed hands at independence one should have expected a sudden reversal of language policy, given that colonial power had now given way to black power. Unfortunately, this was not the case ; some African countries like Cameroon barely continued with the colonial language policy. The two colonial languages (English and French) continued to remain official languages for several reasons. First, owing to the multitude of indigenous languages, it seemed more reasonable to resort to the European languages, being 'no man's languages' in the African context, rather than choose any of the indigenous languages for official purposes. Needless to mention that political officials at the time feared an impending language conflict if they acted otherwise. Secondly, given that the indigenous languages were not standardised, adopting them for official purposes could have entailed a lot of investment and sacrifice in terms of manpower and financial resources. In addition, prior to independence, very few of these languages were relatively well developed, let alone standardised. Although the Bible had been translated into languages such as Duala, Bulu and Mungaka, the bulk of the rest could neither boast of didactic material appropriate for teaching, nor any form of codification. Hence the difficulty in using them as languages of instruction. Adopting European languages as official languages thus presented relative economic advantages at the time, more so in view of the fact that communication with the international community whether through diplomacy or trade would be greatly facilitated.

Of course, these arguments do in no way spare Cameroon of the blame of having failed to adopt a national language policy for the country. In fact,

whereas some African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal and Central African Republic have come up with well defined language policies that give due consideration to indigenous languages, Cameroon, with its characteristic indecision, is still lagging behind. In Nigeria, Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa have long been elevated to the status of national languages. There, they do not only serve as vehicles for education, but are also studied up to University level. The case of Cameroon is rather pathetic in this regard. According to Chumbow (1996: 7-8):

A proposal to select six zonal languages for Cameroon and teach them at the University of Yaounde was implemented for a while in the middle sixties, but was suppressed for fear that those whose language was not selected (i.e. the majority) will revolt.

Such fears have made the choice of one or more national languages an impossibility for Cameroonian authorities, who have resorted since the National Council for Cultural Affairs held in Yaounde in December 1974 to considering all the 248 indigenous languages as 'national' languages.

Although successive governments since reunification in 1961 have been more concerned with promoting the policy of official language bilingualism, it would be unfair to lose sight of the developments in the area of mother tongue education and the development of indigenous languages. Many critics of language policy such as Tangwa unfortunately consider the issue strictly from government's role. For them, the absence of a clearly defined language policy in successive Constitutions of the country (1961, 1972, 1984) suffices to make sweeping statements that are sometimes devoid of steam.

Issues of language policy are certainly the responsibility of States and governments ; however, the role of local councils, village communities and the local elite cannot be under-estimated. In fact, community initiative has been instrumental in influencing language policy in post-independent Cameroon. Although for a long time, no clear policy statement existed on the national language question in matters of teaching, use for education and dissemination, the 1996 revised Constitution made provision for the development and promotion of national languages in education as indispensable aspects of Cameroon's national identity. Such a decision was facilitated thanks to the National Education Forum held in Yaounde in 1995 during which many participants were favourable to the teaching of national languages in schools. Then in 1998, "the parliament passed a bill on the general orientation of education in Cameroon with special emphasis on the teaching of national languages. This bill was subsequently promulgated into law N° 004 of April 1998 by the Head of State" (Mba and Chiatoh, 2000: 5). Although the Ministry of National Education is yet to outline the practical modalities for the application of this law, there is no doubt that the stage is set for eventual action.

Furthermore, as far as mother tongue education in Cameroon is concerned, PROPELCA (Programme de Recherche Opérationnelle pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun) has been working relentlessly since

1977 under the auspices of Maurice Tadadjeu, professor in Linguistics at the University of Yaounde I. These efforts in the promotion of Cameroonian languages have equally been sustained by SIL-Cameroon, CABTAL (Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy) and NACALCO (National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees). Mention should also be made of the fact that as early as 1979, the National Committee for the Unification and Harmonisation of Alphabets in Cameroon languages adopted the harmonisation of the writing system of Cameroonian languages (cf. Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979). It goes without saying that mother tongue education at the early stages of primary education as conceived by researchers working in this domain will soon be a reality.

### *The Way Forward*

As earlier observed, the policy of official language bilingualism is so challenging that it constitutes in itself the main core of Cameroon's language policy. Although political speeches since the time of President Ahidjo have always talked of the promotion of indigenous languages without clearly spelling out any orientations in this regard, the message is, however, simple. Article 1, paragraph 3 of the Constitution of 18 January 1996 states:

The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages.

That the present Constitution mentions the issue of national languages whereas previous Constitutions were simply silent on the question is rather significant. And although the State seems to assume the guiding role as clearly stated in the aforementioned Constitution, it equally encourages private initiative in this domain. This explains why experimental projects in the area of teaching and research have long been carried out through private initiative with the silent approval of the government. Such initiatives as observed through the action of SIL-Cameroon, CABTAL, NACALCO, etc. constitute the way forward in the right direction. Consequently, we do agree that our 'national' languages be encouraged and developed through mother tongue education, standardisation, teaching and research, as well as their effective use at the socio-cultural level. As Chumbow (1996:5) rightly points out, there is no doubt that "the early use of the mother tongue in education has significant long term benefits with respect to maximising the development of the intellectual potential of the child".

It goes without saying that a trilingual language policy model whereby English, French and indigenous languages are encouraged not only in education but also in other domains will reap considerable benefits for Cameroonians.

Such a model could equally be applicable to other African countries, for as Chumbow (1996: 3) remarks:

The colonial linguistic heritage (vehicle of modern science and technology) must be reconciled with the African linguistic heritage (vehicle of indigenous knowledge and culture), indispensable in the development of nations that are not only modern and viable, but also African in the same way that technologically viable Japan is Japanese. The task of nation-building in Africa therefore involves reconciling the colonial legacy with the African heritage as a pre-condition for take off in the direction of the ideal for national development.

This endeavour is not solely the responsibility of the State ; it is the challenge of each and every member of the community to ensure that both the indigenous languages and foreign languages are promoted. Cameroonians of good will should understand that it is their responsibility to learn not only the official languages but also one or more indigenous languages. Neither policy statements nor their practical implementation suffice ; individual effort remains the gateway to success.

Cameroonians in particular and Africans in general should thus take the bull by the horns now. It is unreasonable waiting for a *Godot* who will never come. Consequently, we therefore beg to differ with Tangwa that “until the politico-economic situation changes for the better in most African countries, it is unrealistic to think that matters relating to language policies would be addressed in any serious or meaningful way”. To say this will entail that matters pertaining to language policy are linked solely to political and economic considerations. Such a vision is grossly erroneous, for socio-cultural factors are equally of great relevance. To begin with, Africans must themselves show interest in their indigenous languages and cease to consider them inferior to received languages. Language attitudes of this nature do in no way give our indigenous languages their due place in African civilisation.

Thus a balanced language policy will become effective when mother tongue education is introduced in the early years of primary education (say the first two years), the official language being introduced later on. Such a policy will only be realistically implemented gradually where possible, especially in the rural areas. The indigenous language of a particular rural area will thus be used in teaching and promoted at different levels. And, where applicable, one or more indigenous languages could be promoted at the sub-divisional, divisional or provincial levels. Once more, through government endeavour, local councils, language committees and individual initiative, the teaching of English and French on the one hand and indigenous languages on the other should be encouraged nation-wide.

The issues Tangwa raises in his paper are certainly crucial not only as far as the Cameroonian context is concerned, but more globally as far as the African

situation is concerned. If we judged it necessary to revisit his article, it was because of the need to fill the vacuum created more by error than by design. This done, it is hoped that the reader will have a more comprehensive vision of the issues at stake.

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