

ENGLISH AND FRENCH AS OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN CAMEROON: THE INTENTIONALITY OF COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THE FAILURE OF A CAMEROON-CENTRIC IDENTITY; 1884 AND AFTER

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ABSTRACT

In the globalized world of today, geographic frontiers have become almost virtual and relations between cultures are manifested through diverse configurations that not only demonstrate the prowess and identity of the different cultures but through their uniqueness, enable the different cultures to sell themselves in the global cultural market. One of these is the national language(s) of a country. Cameroon was colonized by Germany (1884-1916) and 're-colonized' by Britain and France (1916-1961). After independence and since then, the various constitutions of the Republic continue to uphold that 'the official languages of Cameroon shall be French and English' (Cameroon, 1961, 1972; 1996). Using historical research principles to collect data and present this analysis, I attempt to trace the origin and evolution of English and French and their sustained use as official languages in Cameroon. I argue that contrary to the colonial discourse which upholds alien languages as part of the civilizing mission, they represent the most powerful tool for colonial subjugation. Both the British and the French like their German predecessors intentionally suppressed the emergence and use of local vernaculars- one or two of which would have ultimately emerged as national language(s) after independence. The failure of the nation to replace these languages at independence demonstrates a failure in our search for uniqueness; a Cameroon-centric identity. I conclude that, contrary to popular opinion that English and French put Cameroon on an advantageous position in our globalized world, and beyond the fact that these languages demonstrate the permanency of neo-colonialism, the country is *pseudo*-represented on the global market place of national languages if globalization means a melting port of local/national cultures; one identity fed by multiple sources (Burbules and Torres 2000:193); a renewed importance of the local and the dissolution of erstwhile colonial identities (Mebrahtu et al 2000:46); unity in diversity; and most especially the obsolescence of the explanation of difference in terms of centre and periphery or my colonial master and I (Slater 1998: 655).

Keywords: Indigenous, National, official Languages, Colonial Representation, Globalization, Cameroon-centric Identity.

INTRODUCTION

In most parts of Africa, the official languages have remained those of the former colonial masters and governments have either persistently failed in attempts to revert to indigenous or national languages or have hardly thought about such initiatives. How did it all start, why is it that despite the multiplicity of languages in Africa, most countries ended up adopting the European language of their colonial master as official language and language of school instruction? Why is it that no indigenous language emerged even though the general tendency and cry for indigenization has been rife since independence?

In attempting to answer some of these worries, the paper seeks to advance the view that through effectively pursued colonial objectives and continued presence after independence,

the colonial authorities were determined from the on-set to ensure the colonized people's continued adherence to metropolitan languages and cultures. This is contrary to some Eurocentric discourses which put the failure to establish indigenous languages as official languages on weak African leadership, indigenous people and local circumstances (Dekorne, 2012, Whitehead 2005). This discussion stems from the premise that in the building of a Cameroonian identity, the indigenous linguistic component becomes very significant especially in today's global context. As Giles and Coupland (1991:107) postulate, culture "can be viewed as derived from, if not constituted in, communication and language practices".

GEO-HISTORICAL AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Cameroon is generally referred to as Africa in miniature, given that it possesses a majority of the geographical and cultural characteristics of almost all the regions of Africa. Also, three of the four language groups in Africa are represented within her boundaries (Neba, 1999: 65-98; Greenberg 1966 in Anchimbe 2005:34). These are the Congo-Kordofanian; the Nilo-Saharan and the Afro-Asiatic groups. The structures of the fourth, that is, the Khoisan have not been found in Cameroon. Amongst these three groups, a total of over 270 indigenous languages exist in Cameroon- a linguistic situation which Fonlon (1969:9) has described as "the confusion of tongues".

It is this notoriously complicated linguistic and geographical area that the Germans annexed and called *Kamerun* in 1884. European activities previous to the German annexation were limited to the coastal strips around the Wouri River. Portuguese sailors under the sponsorship of Fernando Gomez arrived there around 1471 (Ngho 1987:1) and named the area *Rio dos Cameroes* (river of prawns). Subsequent Europeans (Spaniards, French and British) revised this appellation until the territory has become known as Cameroon.

In 1916 after the German defeat in the First World War, the territory was partitioned unequally into British Cameroons (1/5th of the total land surface on the western side and the French the rest of the 4/5th of territory). These portions were officially handed to the two powers for administration as Mandates of the League of Nations in 1922 and as Trust Territories of the United Nations in 1946. While the French established a resident administration in their sphere, the British until 1954 administered theirs as an integral part of Nigeria. The French Cameroons got independence on 1, January 1960 and the British Cameroons on 1, October 1961 through a plebiscite held earlier on 11, February in which they voted for reunification with the former French Cameroons. The two spheres established a federal system of government which lasted till 20, May 1972 when a unitary system of government was voted in a referendum.

LANGUAGE POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN MISSIONARIES

When the missionaries of the London Baptist Missionary Society (LBMS), who introduced western education in Cameroon, arrived in 1840, they discovered that indigenous languages were used naturally and quite conveniently within each linguistic group for official communication and education. The question of whether to introduce English or study one of the many languages for communication and instruction became a serious issue. With their main purpose being evangelization, the missionaries understood that they could not convert the natives into Christianity if they could not read the bible. Instead of introducing the

English language, the missionaries began learning the local indigenous languages and translating educational materials and Christian literature from English into them.

Joseph Merrick settled in Bimbia, (later part of British Cameroons) where he opened the first school on Cameroon soil in 1844 with about sixty children. He at once devoted himself to the study of the *Isubu* language. In May 1844, he set up a printing press in which he began producing his “first class book” and an *Isubu* vocabulary book. His quick mastery of the language enabled him to prepare and print some textbooks (class books) in the language, which proved acceptable to the people.

In Douala (later part of French Cameroon), Alfred Saker the LBMS leader in Cameroon devoted his time and energy to the mastery of the *Duala* language, the production of textbooks for the school, the translation of portions of the Bible into *Duala*, and to the teaching of young men and women to read and write Duala. By June 1856, he had printed 1,000 school lessons and had 3,000 more about ready for the press. In June 1860, thanks to his rapid mastery of the language, he published his first *Duala* version of the New Testament. In 1872, he completed his translation of the entire Bible into the *Duala* language. He also completed a large Duala dictionary and rewrote the Duala grammar he had put out earlier (Underhill, 1870:156). By the time the Germans annexed Cameroon in 1884, *Duala* and to a limited extent *Isubu* were widespread and acceptable amongst the coastal villages and people who had made contact with the LBMS Missionaries.

LANGUAGE POLICY IN GERMAN KAMERUN

Following the Germans’ annexation of the territory in 1884, the colonial administration introduced *Herensvolk*; the Master Race Theory as colonial policy. It required all colonial people to see their German masters as superior human beings (Ngoh 1987:41). At this time, the Culture War ‘*Kulturkampf*’ was rife in Europe (Gwanfogbe, 1995:15) so the Germans did not give any room for the public utilization of any of the indigenous languages for which the missionaries had developed a literature. Only German was allowed. The 1907 educational conference banned the educational and public use of the Duala language which had so far become ubiquitous amongst the coastal and forest people. This was re-echoed in 1910 when the authorities made German the official language in use in the colony. Only mission schools which showed considerable progress in the use of German benefited from government Grants-in-aid (Ihims 2003:25).

LANGUAGE POLICY IN BRITISH CAMEROONS

Britain demonstrated a theoretical interest in indigenous languages but her failure to ensure their practical proliferation raised questions as to their real position. In 1927 the Advisory Committee on Education in British Tropical Africa passed the *Memorandum on the Place of the Vernacular in Native Education* (Colonial Office 1927). It stated that “a man’s native speech is almost like his shadow, inseparable from his personality...hence in all education, the primary place should be given to training in the exact and free use of the mother tongue” (Whitehead 1995:5). The Southern Cameroons Provincial Education Committee supported this view that

The use of English as a medium of instruction in the earliest stages of school would slow down the child’s progress...it is important to employ the native tongue as calculated to preserve whatever is good in native customs and ideas.... So everything should be done to train teachers so that *all* the schools

are efficiently staffed to teach in the various vernaculars (Cameroons, 1927:93).

In this respect, the dialects spoken by the tribes of the Southern Cameroons were classified into two main groups. Two southern divisions of the province; Victoria and Kumba belonged to the Bantu group and one of the languages; *Duala*, which had been studied and used by the early missionaries, was identified for educational use amongst the principal tribes in these divisions. These tribes; Bakweri, Bakossi, Balundu and Bafaw were believed to be sufficiently akin to *Duala* for them to acquire and understand it very quickly (Cameroons, 1926:148). In the two northern divisions; Mamfe and Bamenda, the committee was of the opinion that the one language of the Bamenda Division- *Munghaka* spoken by the Bali, which had been studied and used by the Basel Mission could also be effectively adopted for educational instruction in the schools of the Mamfe and Bamenda divisions (Cameroons, 1926:148).

The 1927 memorandum was passed with the general understanding that to impose Western ideals and modes of thought on the African is foreign to the true aim of education. This was the feeling in most parts of British Africa where the adaptation of education to local realities was still the key educational philosophy. It was re-echoed in the 1935 *Memorandum on the Education of the African Communities*. But despite the passing of the 1935 memorandum, it was clear that the local colonial authorities did not favour the implementation of the vernacular education policy. From the early 1930s, government began developing a *laissez-faire* attitude- with the schools making the final language of instruction decision. The 1934 Annual Report observed that the schools in the Cameroons “have continued to work on the principle to teach English in the elementary schools, after a very short period of learning in the mother tongue” (Cameroons, 1935:78-79). By the end of the mandate period therefore, it could be said that there was no common policy regarding the educational use of the indigenous languages in Southern Cameroon.

Although, by the close of the 1940s, there were recurrent pronouncements that “the free development of the minds” of Cameroonian infants “must not be hampered by making the assimilation of ideas unnecessarily difficult by presenting them in a language not readily understood”...and that “the use of the vernacular as a means of instruction must *continue* (United Kingdom 1947:97; 1948:134), they were just lip-services to satisfy the United Nations Trusteeship Council. There was no effective control mechanism by colonial education authorities to ensure the effective application of the vernacular policy. It was clear that the British colonial mind-set was for the effective entrenchment of the English language. As early as 1916 when they arrived Cameroon, British colonial officials had begun showing that the indigenous language policy was just unnecessary. In 1923 they reported that “the first end in view is the formation of character; the second, the acquirement of the English language (Cameroons, 1923:51). This was a regeneration of the 1847 intention of the British Privy Council Education Committee which emphasized amongst other points the diffusion of a grammatical knowledge of the English language as the most important agent of civilization (Hall 2008:786). To the colonial authorities, English was becoming the commercial language of most parts of the world and given all this, they believed that a break had to be made with ‘languages barren of useful knowledge’. That is why when the first *Memorandum on the educational use of the vernacular* was passed in 1927, conservative opinion in the British Colonial Office reacted immediately. They warned strongly that ‘to displace English from its present position in elementary schools will be a very serious political mistake to make as well as an educational blunder’. In Cameroon the resident warned school authorities not to;

...use a native language for instruction...even in the initial stages...(as it) will be detrimental to the standard of efficiency...without introducing English at the very beginning. Cameroon was a country of innumerable languages... so English...is to be the medium of instruction in Cameroon (Cameroons, 1926:148).

By 1948, the colonial authorities disregard for vernacular education was overt. Although the 1948 Nigerian Education Ordinance stated that “the vernacular should be the medium of instruction in the first three years of schooling” it insisted that it should be “...only where its use will aid in the thorough assimilation of the instruction given”. It stated categorically that “English should be taught and employed as the medium of instruction and that “it is most important that both teachers and pupils should use it correctly” (United Kingdom, 1948:134). Even when the 1952 UN Visiting Mission recommended the educational enhancement of indigenous languages and a 1953 UNESCO report confirmed that education is “best carried out in the mother tongue of the pupil, adult or child” (UNESCO, 1953:13) the colonial attitude to indigenous language use was negative.

In 1954 Britain declared that “it is not possible to use anyone vernacular as medium of instruction in the Southern Cameroons.... All agencies [must] use English as the medium of instruction and in all schools, English [must be] taught as a subject (United Kingdom 1954:113). In 1958, the Director of Education at Buea, the capital of Southern Cameroons, hit the final nail on the coffin. On January 28, he sent out a notice stating,

Although the mother tongue of children may *aid* in instruction, English is to be the medium of instruction in schools *in Southern Cameroon* and all text books used must be English (File Sb/a/1959/11, NAB).

One is therefore bound to believe that it was never an intentional British colonial policy to harness the local languages into becoming the languages of instruction or official languages in their colonies. Despite several pronouncements on the matter not much was made of them. It was proficiency in English that was their goal (Otondi, 1964:36-37). The practical problems of implementation could have been mitigated if local British authorities wanted the policy to succeed but like Vernon-Jackson (1967:503) explains, the harnessing of government policy and economic exploitation ‘necessitated or depended increasingly on the attainment of a formal and recognized schooling in English’.

LANGUAGE POLICY IN FRENCH CAMEROON

France had already devised a language policy for her African colonies long before her presence in Cameroon. As early as 1903, her plan had been to create an African elite through an educational system identical with that of France while the masses were to be given basic instruction in spoken French, reading and writing French, arithmetic and vocational skills (Moumouni, 1968:42). Based on these, an educational programme for Cameroon was drawn up and addressed to all Divisional Officers in a circular of 29 August 1916 (France, 1921a:430). On 2 November 1916 another order implemented a pass in French as the basis for the recruitment of indigenous teachers while a more developed educational programme which was to be used by pupil teachers (moniteurs) was issued in February 1917 with emphasis on the mastery and use of French as the language of instruction (Gwei, 1975:206). The missionaries had greatly developed literacy in prominent indigenous languages such as Duala, Bassa’a, Bulu and Ewondo, but French authorities saw this as a potential threat to their assimilationist policy. They remarked that “it was fitting to react against this tendency”

immediately (France, 1921a:431). An order was passed on 8 September 1917 emphasizing that French was to be the substance of knowledge and matter on which pupils of private schools were to be examined. The level of success in French was to be the government's basis for the award of grants-in-aid to the Missions. An official subvention scheme in this regard was begun in the same year (MacOjong 2008:140).

The above decisions were reiterated in an Order issued on 1 October 1920, laying down government regulations for all private schools and in another, on 25 July 1921 prescribing conditions for classification of schools as recognized or unrecognized (Atayo 2000:35). No school was to be opened by any Mission without authorization from the colonial administration. No authorization was to be granted unless the mission concerned undertook to carry on teaching in French. All private schools were obliged to follow a curriculum prescribed by the administration. (France, 1921a:431). To be placed under the recognized list, schools were obliged to offer at least twenty hours of French courses per week (MacOjong 2008:139) and all private school teachers (white or black) had to hold qualifications required by government.

French courses were also provided to catechists, evangelists and all church workers (Gwei, 1975:205-6). The administration saw in them a good means to promote the French language and civilization. In a decision rendered public on 1 October 1920 and 28 December 1920, 47 schools opened by King Njoya in the Bamoum region (where Bamoum was the language of education) were all closed down (MacOjong 2008:140; Echu 2003:5). Throughout the Mandate period, a majority of the schools run by the American Presbyterian Mission and in which Bulu was used as language of instruction forfeited government grants (Atayo 2000:35) for not meeting prescribed language regulations. A presidential decree of 10 May 1924 reorganizing education in French West Africa and a French Cameroon Commissioner's Order of 19 March, 1930 all confirmed that France was "convinced of the impossibility of propagating the achievements of a modern civilization by means of a 'primitive' language" (Chumbow 1980:285). "The propagation of the French language and civilization" was therefore made the "the principal objective" of French educational policy in Cameroon (Gwei, 1975:205).

By 1934, except for the American Presbyterian Mission, this policy seemed to have registered significant success as it was reported that "everywhere teaching and learning was going on in French" (Wilbois, 1934 :213). In 1922, the American Presbyterian Mission had 36, 139 pupils in all its schools. Of this number 8 were recognized schools with 1,900 pupils but figures of the unrecognized schools for which the remaining 34,239 pupils attended and for which instruction was entirely in the indigenous languages are not established. By 1938, there were 1,061 unrecognized schools with 30,914 pupils and only 37 recognized with 4,429 pupils (Gwei 1975:210-214). The government acknowledged the effectiveness of these schools but declined granting them authorization for not meeting government regulations (France 1938:104; DeKorne 2012:45).

In addition to retaining the loyal cooperation of the Missions, the colonial administration also found additional methods to promote the superiority of the French language throughout the Mandate. On 1 October 1936, it prohibited the production, sale, collection or distribution of publications written in indigenous languages dealing with magic, sorcery, or divination. It went further to impose a tax of 12.8% on books written in foreign languages as opposed to a tax of 4% on books written in French (DeKorne 2012:47). The indigenous languages in French Cameroon were all placed in the category of foreign languages in regards to the tax

law (Stumpf 1979:82). This policy did not favour promoters of indigenous language literacy. None of the early newspapers which had started publishing in Duala, Bulu, Bassa'a and other local languages lived beyond 1936 (Derick, 1989:123; Vernon-Jackson 1967 :15).

In the Post-World War II period the administration continued to discourage the public use of vernaculars. During the 1944 Brazzaville conference, De Gaulle reiterated that French African colonies should discard any idea of autonomy or evolution outside the French Union and its policies (Mveng, 1963:407-8; Gwei 1975:145). It was resolved that "teaching and learning must exclusively be carried out in the French language" and that "the educational use of indigenous languages is absolutely forbidden in private as well as government schools" (in Stumpf 1979:19). On the hills of the Brazzaville Conference, an order was issued in 1945 for the expansion of primary education, the structure and duration of which was to be in conformity with the metropolitan system. It gave pre-eminence to French language and literature (France, 1945:706). The 1947 report to the United Nations Trusteeship Council indicated the extent to which France had succeeded in her mission to completely abolish the use of indigenous languages. It confidently stated that "no vernacular is used as language of instruction in public as well as private recognized schools [only French] (France, 1948:123; Johnson 1970 :79).

Throughout the 1950s, French continued to be the only language of instruction and official business in French Cameroon despite the 1952 UN Visiting Mission's plea for instruction in the vernaculars. In 1960, shortly after independence, the Ahidjo government signed the Franco-Cameroun Treaty (Ngoh, 1987:281; Fanso, 1989:172). Amongst which was a cultural convention that gave French the privileged position as the language of education and government business; an indication that French would remain the official language of the independent state of Cameroun.

POST-INDEPENDENCE LANGUAGE POLICY IN CAMEROON

Following reunification of British Southern Cameroons and *La Republique du Cameroun* on 1, October 1961, official bilingualism was instituted in the new Federal Republic. The Federal constitution of 1961 in paragraph 3 article 1h made it clear that 'the official languages of Cameroon shall be French and English' (Cameroon 1961:1). The government's attention became fully directed to increasing the number of literates in the two official languages. With the assistance of UNESCO, the federal government funded a nationwide bilingual programme. This programme had 7.500 literacy centres popularly known as "*L'Ecole sous l'Arbre*" (schools under trees) (Anchimbe 2006:134). Unfortunately, by 1969 the programme had collapsed due to lack of further external funding. The government also set up a Bilingual Grammar School in Man O War Bay (moved to Molyko-Buea) in 1962 and signed cooperation agreements with France, Britain, and the USA which amongst other things led to the promotion of English and French through the establishment of *Alliance Franco-Cameroonaise*, The British Councils as well as British, French and American cultural centres in the national territory. In 1964 the President of Cameroon Ahmadou Ahidjo declared that;

When we consider English language and culture and French language and culture, we must regard them not as the property of such and such a race, but as an acquirement of the universal civilization to which we belong. This is in fact why we have followed the path of bilingualism since... it offers us the means to develop this new culture...and which could transform our country into the catalyst of African unity (quoted in Anchimbe 2005:36)

The teaching of indigenous languages Bassa'a, Bulu, Duala and Ewondo which had been going on in some of the early schools such as College Liberman, Chevreuil, Retraite, Mimetala and Le Sillon became stifled by government's policy of official English and French Bilingualism (Anchimbe 2006:136). In fact in Dschang in 1966, government authorities seized books, typewriters, duplicators and other materials from an indigenous language school established by chief Djoumesi. This singular act was described as government's "act of vandalism on its own cultural identity enhancement and a failure to take into account its own cultural treasure" (Momo, 1997:13).

In 1972, when the unitary state was established, the unitary constitution again emphasized that 'the official languages of Cameroon shall be French and English' (Cameroon 1972:1). No declaration was made with regards to indigenous languages. They were merely declared national languages in December 1974 by the National Council for Cultural Affairs. In 1977, the teaching of Duala, Bassa'a, Ewondo, Bulu, Fulbe and Fe'efe'e which had been going on in the Department of African languages and linguistics of the University of Yaoundé was abruptly ended (Chumbow 1980:302).

The revised constitution of 18 January 1996 continued to guarantee the pursuit of the official bilingualism policy although it added a statement on the promotion of national languages. Section I, Art I (3) states that;

The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages have the same status. The state shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages (Cameroon 1996:1).

The most recent development has been Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 on the General Orientation of Education in Cameroon. This law, like the 1996 constitution, makes a special emphasis on the teaching of national languages but generally, it simply repeats previous government positions on the English and French Bilingualism. It states that;

The education system shall be organized into two subsystems: the English speaking subsystem and the French speaking subsystem, thereby affirming our national option for bi-culturalism... the languages of education, therefore shall be English and French... the state shall institute bilingualism at all levels of education as a factor of national unity and integration (Tambo, 2003:121).

Apart from stating that "the general purpose of education is to train children for... their smooth integration into society", the law states in section five that "one of the objectives is to promote national languages" (Ibid 2003:121). The insertion of a national languages clause in the 1996 constitution and the 1998 law on education has authenticated the activities of some organizations that have been translating the Bible into indigenous languages and teaching them in schools (Albaugh, 2007:18-20; 2009:7; Anchimbe 2006:135).

THE FAILURE OF A CAMEROON-CENTRIC LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Despite the seemingly sympathetic outlook of contemporary legislation and the work of non-governmental organizations working to revive indigenous languages in churches and schools, recent research on the politics of language choice in education and public service demonstrates a *de facto* prejudice for the mother tongues that are supposed to form the Cameroon peoples' cultural and linguistic identity (Echu 2003:4). In 1992 David Laitin observed that nationalist leaders understand that "espousing rhetoric that favours African

languages” may bring political rewards but this to them is not comparable to “the unity of the country which is easiest to achieve by continuing to advance the colonial language” (Laitin 1992:112). Ericka Albaugh¹ in her recent studies reveals that , many of the divisional delegates of education and school administrators shared this view for purposes of administration and for fear of a potential political backlash (Albaugh:2007:9) . Parents on their part “could not see how learning the local languages will help their children get a job” in a society where the language of business is not the dialect. “They want their children to learn things that they cannot learn at home” (ibid:9). The findings demonstrate that both at the level of government where policy is to be initiated and amongst the subaltern who are supposed to be the direct beneficiaries, there is still a lot of ambivalence regarding the adoption of a national language policy in the country.

The startling effect of the disinterest is obvious amongst the present generation which continues to see the learning or use of mother tongues as an extra hurdle. Bitja’a Kody in his 2001 study of language use in the city of Yaoundé, reports that 32% of young people between 10 and 17 years old do not speak any Cameroonian indigenous language. French is their only language of communication (cited in Anchimbe, 2006:136). This population is bound to increase in an exponential manner by the next generation, given that such Cameroonians will not be in a position to transmit the indigenous languages to their children. This situation is suicidal for the indigenous languages, which are bound to continue dying progressively.

Indigenous languages are a pride of every nation in terms of its cultural identity especially as the world has become a global village. But when people have failed to esteem them, they are bound to fall into attrition. Like Mufuene explains, “languages do not kill languages; speakers do” it becomes like a community whose members refuse to produce off-springs (2003:1). The historical, anthropological, literary and to some extent the intellectual asserts of most countries are concealed in the languages used by the different peoples that make up the nation (Nforteh, 2008:37). The neglect of these languages has not only deprived the Cameroonians of the desire to use their languages to segment their world but in terms of globalization, has stripped them of the opportunity to show the world one of the things which most people hold in high esteem; a linguistic identity.

Contrary to popular opinion that English and French put Cameroon on an advantageous position in the context of globalization, these languages only continue to reveal Cameroon as a state which has either found it difficult to cut off the colonial chains or is still to be shown the advantages of effective national identity and indigenization policies which do not leave out the language question. The claim to an identity is incomplete if it has no unique language through which it is expressed. Jaffe (1996:818) holds that ‘linguistic identity is a prerequisite for cultural identity and political stability. Moreover, culture, if it has to be vocal and immediately comprehensive, must be viewed as derived from, if not constituted in indigenous communication and language practices. With English and French as Cameroon’s official languages, the country is *pseudo*- represented on the global market place of national languages if globalization means a melting-pot of local/national cultures; one identity fed by multiple sources (Burbules and Torres 2000).

¹ This author served as one of her field assistants during her research stay in Cameroon in 2008

THE INTENTIONALITY OF COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS AS THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

Several languages of instruction and official language research literature in Africa blame the African elites and local circumstances as the cause for the preference of European over indigenous languages (Dekorne 2012; Whitehead, 1995; Gwei, 1975; Fonlon 1969; Chumbow 1980; Anchimbe, 2005; 2006; Albaugh 2005;2007). The first reason they often state is the multilingual nature of the territories (Truong 2012:6). They also argue that the colonial authorities did not push (force) the language on the Cameroonians (Dekorne, 2012:58; Whitehead, 1995:9). Dekorne (2012: 61) for example writes that “in British Cameroons, the promotion of vernaculars in the school system throughout the colonial period did not result in the ultimate acceptance of this policy by the people. She argues that as independence approached and the school system was placed in the hands of the Cameroonians, they had the chance to implement a vernacular in education policy but rejected it in favour of the exclusive use of English in 1958. Whitehead also confirms this view. He explains that;

Nowhere in the evidence placed before the Advisory Committee in London was there any overt suggestion that the Colonial office had any predetermined wish to dominate, subvert or control the minds of Africans or any other indigenous people for that matter...Official British sources do not support the view that colonial schooling in British colonies was dictated by the deliberate policy of cultural imperialism but was most certainly motivated by good government or what might more accurately be described as enlightened paternalism (1995: 8,14).

Even in French Cameroon where assimilation was overt from the beginning, the same argument has been raised; that it was the French Cameroonians desire for French and hatred for vernacular education that propagated an all-out French language policy. In June 1935, in the last edition of a Cameroon based short-lived newspaper (March-June 1935) which published in native languages, the editor Eugene Schneider, had grumbled that French Cameroonians were not interested in the paper as a means of expressing themselves in their own languages (Derick, 1989:123) even when it was obvious that official policy had not encouraged training in the mastery and use of vernaculars. Derick also asserts that none of the UN Visiting Missions had reported ever receiving complaints on the subject of French as the language of instruction or official communication from the natives; (at a time when harsh local administering authorities did not permit any open protests of colonial policies).

The arguments perpetuate enlightenment modernism that colonialism and colonial education were never means of subjugating the African to a subservient position. On the contrary, with a postcolonial mind set, they are a careful reminder of Europeans' long time inconsiderate intentionality of using their languages and people to dominate the world. It is without doubt that developments in education were precipitated by changes in economic and political considerations especially after the Second World War. It is also certain that in both the Southern Cameroons and French Cameroons, a legislature and government had been put in place several years before independence. Despite these developments, the failure to develop an indigenous official language policy is still accounted for by the conscious British and French colonial policies of domination and assimilation which by the time of independence, had eaten into the marrows of the Cameroonians and their leaders. According to Nforteh (2008:36)

Our situation (English and French as official languages) is as a result of the colonialists' failure to give the indigenous languages the opportunities to gain

an acceptable status (not because of multiplicity or otherwise but) because their main policy was cultural assimilation whose most significant vector was the alien language (emphasis mine).

Rather than seek to show the indigenes the value of their home languages, they were made to believe that theirs were for savages and that to be educated meant abandoning their indigenous systems of articulation for that of the colonial master. This indoctrination (Truong 2012:8) had worked perfectly well according to the plan for which the *Whiteman's burden* was taken up; “(to) check the show of pride; (in) your newly caught silent, sullen peoples who are half devil and half child (Kipling, 1962:143). Although Whitehead (1995), DeKorne (2012) and Read (1953) put the blame on native demand for Alien languages, they also confirm that from the onset popular opinion in Britain held that

African mother tongues must ultimately decline...any effort to foster them *should* only retard the process and not prevent it... Africans must be made to know and we must not depart from the point that where government and business processes are carried on in English, *natives* must be made to use only English (cited in Whitehead, 1995:9).

Evidences from the French colonial reports on Cameroon as well (1921, 1924 and 1952) show that the French were unbending regarding their position on an indigenous language; often stating that;

The indigenous languages...cannot be taught in the real sense of the word....The Mandate has given us charges first of which is to ensure the evolution of the natives towards a superior civilization....Since France has been deemed fit for this task, she can only do it by using its own national ingenuity which cannot be realized without recourse to the French language (translated from French in Chumbow, 1980 : 281).

Besides the banning of vernaculars, the French also associated a lot of benefits to the mastery of the French language. Apart from financial assistance to schools which promoted the French language (Truong 2012:8), its mastery was required for a native to rise through the ranks of the colonial society and administration (Gardinier, 1963:33) and acquire the status of *évolué*. This status came with a better social standing; guaranteed one a job in the administration, a French identity of *citoyen* and an exemption from the *indigénat*, *corvée* and *prestation* (DeKorne 2012:14; Fanso, 1989:67-8, 75; Ngoh, 1987:105,337). Based on this policy, the rest of society was made to believe that if they wished to gain the same elite lifestyle as the select group of *évoluées*, they had no option but to abandon the vernacular and go for the French language and civilization. The heavy presence of French settlers (colons) in Cameroon also contributed to strengthen this position. By 1960, there were over 10.000 settlers in French Cameroon (DeKorne, 2012:24; Vernon-Jackson 1967:27). They persistently propagated the idea that indigenous languages lacked expressions of ideas which were salutary to progress and were unable to convey in the same complexity the arguments and ideas that the French language could (Gwei, 1975:202; Société d' Etudes Camerounaises, 1945 :10).

The postcolonial perspective therefore strongly argues that the fervent support for the ubiquitous use of the European languages in Africa had never departed from any of the colonial circles. That the choice of official languages in colonial territories was never that of the speakers, but of the colonialists, based on economic and political interests or cultural or religious ethnocentric biases (Ayuninjam, 2007:7). Although throughout the history of British

colonialism, several Memoranda advocating the educational use of the vernacular saw the light of day, the British strongly believed that if British supremacy over the world was to become a reality, it should have started with the spread of the English language (Mbembe, 1992:25). In French Cameroon, the French held strongly that the knowledge and use of the French language were the only means by which Cameroonians could acquire French culture, bring about complete assimilation and be led to an advanced stage of civilization; *Mission civilatrice* (Fanso, 1989:65; France, 1923:19). Fanon (1963; 1967), Said (1978), Rodney (1982), Prakash (1992), Chakrabaty (1992), Mbembe, (1992), Bhabha (1994), Ngugi (1986), Smith (2002), Spivak (1999;1988), have presented this argument in diverse fields of study. From the above, one can rightly state that contrary to erstwhile excuses of ethno-linguistic multiplicity and the need for national unity and integration, the official neglect of an indigenous language policy during colonialism was for the purpose of fulfilling colonial agenda and accounts for our failure to depart from it over fifty years since the end of colonialism. According to Stumpf (1979:140) what took place in Cameroon since 1884 from the arrival of the Germans to the British and French takeovers could be termed “the systematic linguistic persecution.” Others have termed it cultural obliteration (Fanon 1967) brainwashing (Ndille, 2005) or “an unsevered colonial umbilical cord (Adegbija (2000:80)”. According to Makoni and Meinhof(2003:2)

Just as Africa was considered the Dark Continent, similarly African languages were seen as non-prestigious...as odd-sounding noises that can “call the rain” when spoken in public *at* best suited as media for the transaction of the local, the home and primitive....The more ‘refined’ duties of education, law, administration and politics were assigned to the educated colonial languages.

According to Wolf (in Ouane and Glanz, 2011:55-58) if the Africans resorted to alien languages at independence, it was more as a result of the colonial mind-set implanted in them and less because such languages provided the only opportunities for Africa to enter the capitalist world. This is added to the continued colonial presence in African territories after official independence in terms of neo-colonial packages of technical advising, cooperation agreements and missions, foreign aid, memberships into Francophonie and Commonwealth, British, French and American cultural centres and other bilateral and multilateral schemes. These agencies continue to ensure the entrenchment of what Samarin (1984:436) has termed the ‘linguistic cultural baggage’ of the colonizers by propagating the idea that what has been good for the goose (the European) will continue to be the ideal for the gosling (their former African colonies).

It is because of the ‘unsevered umbilical cord’ that the Minister of Social Services in Southern Cameroons MHA Hon. V.T Lainjo declared in 1958 that “English is to be the medium of instruction and that all text books used must be English” (File Sb/a/1958/4 NAB). It is also for the same reasons that the French Cameroon government signed the Franco-Cameroon treaty in 1960 guaranteeing that French would remain the official language of the territory after independence. Likewise, it is because of the intentionality of colonial representations that Fonlon (1969:9) argued that “it is absolutely impossible to achieve, through an African language, the oneness of thought and feeling that is the heart’s core and soul of a nation” and why Ahmadou Ahidjo told Cameroonians that “we must in fact refrain from any blind and narrow nationalism” (choosing an indigenous language) (quoted in Anchimbe:2005:36, emphasis mine).

The colonial mind-set further accounts for why several well intentioned language policies that included native Cameroonian languages such as Njock’s 1966 model were hardly ever

appreciated (Anchimbe, 2006:134). It also explains why other alien languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian, Arabic and Chinese continue to be taught in both secondary schools and universities in Cameroon. Although no immediate employment opportunities within the country exist for such graduates, government still encourages their acquisition and teaching (ibid 2006:134). Meanwhile there is very little consideration given to local languages despite the enormous work being carried out by pro-indigenous language organizations such as the Programme de Recherche Operationelle pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun (PROPELCA), the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL-Cameroun), The Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL) and the National Association for Cameroonian Languages Committees (NACALCO) (see Albaugh 2007:18-20; 2009:7-8).

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the rejection of vernaculars throughout Africa cannot be a conscious resolve of the colonized in a period where supreme power rested with the colonizer even for a long time after the European flags were pulled down. He writes that

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves (Ngugi, 1986:3).

Ngugi argues that the colonial powers 'insistence on the inferiority of the indigenous culture has since independence continued to take precedence among the people of Africa and has made them to want to identify with that which was furthest removed from themselves (Ngugi 1986:16). The colonial governments needed the people of Africa to believe that the culture of their own country was inferior to the culture of the colonizer in order to ensure that their subjects did not attempt to gain any type of political or economic equality with them. This mentality unfortunately, has remained with the Africans for too long. Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes;

Colonialism, (has) brought about a strong sense of inferiority; a divided sense of self...a veritable emaciation of the stock of national culture...banished the native customs... created a sense of alienation in the self-identity of the colonized peoples. (Fanon, 1967: 190-197)

According to Fanon, what Lacan calls the concept of the mirror-image in identity formation has remained with Cameroonians; a phenomenon of identity formation in reference to the image of completeness in the body of another person outside of the self (Bowie, 1991:17-43). Fanon puts it succinctly;

As I begin to recognize that the Negro (Vernacular) is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro (Vernacular). But then I recognize that I am a Negro. (There are two ways out of it). Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin,...and I try, to find value for what is bad (develop an auctotonous language which was not the case) or... since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the colour of evil..., I have only one solution, to rise above this absurd drama...and reach out for the universal; (in this case being English and French) (in Ashcroft et al, 1995: 325 emphasis mine)

With such a mind-set, it would have been strange for any African leader to have thought of doing with its language policy what SekouToure dared to do by rejecting independence on French proposed terms;-independence within the French Union and evidently, Cameroon's

our hope of departing from alien languages is more of ‘a lion’s liver which is a vain wish for dogs.’

CONCLUSION

The paper has shown how colonial discourses have used local circumstances such as multiplicity of languages and political and administrative arguments to justify the failure of indigenous language policies in Cameroon. By taking a postcolonial perspective, it has gone beyond this premise to argue that, the failure of Cameroon and many other African countries to revert to an indigenous language at independence could, to a greater extent be accounted for by colonial policies of domination and exploitation. It also argues that the successful entrenchment of such policies in the colonized people continues to give credence to the Luke-warmness of all stakeholders towards a national policy on the educational and administrative use of indigenous languages or what Fanon has termed the “emaciation of the veritable stock of national culture” (Fanon 1963:167). This ‘pitfall of national consciousness’ (Ibid:119), has serious implications to cultural assertiveness in this age of globalization where ‘interculturality’ on an egalitarian basis as against domination is expected to be the norm.

The English and French identity is too widespread and lacks the reserve of secrecy and exclusion which is enjoyed only by adhering to native tongues. On the global front it doesn’t distinguish a Francophone Cameroonian from a Gabonese or an Anglophone Cameroonian from a Nigerian. If language is thus central to identity, it is important for the government to reconsider the question of one or several national languages as official from the many linguistic identities that can be traced in Cameroon. To do this several concessions have to be made beginning with breaking the neo-colonial chain. Like Anchimbe (2005:39) observed, it may require more than a single generation to implement a Cameroon-centric linguistic identity but it should not completely be overruled as an impossibility

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