

Denigrating the local, glorifying the foreign: Malawian language policies in the era of African Renaissance

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Abstract

Malawi's *Vision 2020* document, a national document that serves as a vehicle to project a future for a more developed, secure and democratically mature nation, laments the tendency of Malawians to denigrate local products and glorify all things foreign. Yet, paradoxically, the document does not address the important issue of promoting Malawi's indigenous languages. This silence can be interpreted as reflective of the population's inclination to ascribe greater value to foreign culture. In Malawi, as in many other African countries, indigenous languages are not considered worthy as media of education, subjects of advanced study or critical vehicles for national development. They are still victim to a discrimination rooted in Africa's 500 plus years of European enslavement and colonisation. Against the backdrop of the pursuit of an African Renaissance, this article looks at Malawi's language policies since independence in 1964, and at how, ten years short of an idyllic national vision, Malawi measures up on the important issue of language.

Keywords: African Academy of Languages (ACALAN); African Renaissance; Chichewa; Chinyanja; Chitumbuka; colonialism; English; Hastings Kamuzu Banda; language policy; Malawi; Malawi's *Vision 2020*; mother-tongue instruction

The African Renaissance and language

The word 'renaissance' has been variously defined as a rebirth, revival, renewal, reconstruction, recovery and/or reawakening. Ntuli (1998, 16) defines the African Renaissance as 'the rebirth of the African continent after centuries of subjugation'. The idea of the African Renaissance is not new. It has always been part of the Pan-African spirit. However, with the demise of apartheid, South African leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki joined with academics to give the idea of an African Renaissance a new lease of life. Indeed, the African Renaissance can never be a single-discipline affair. As Boesak (2006, 176) notes, we are all invited 'from our different walks of life and our various academic disciplines to participate in rigorous discussions on the whole range of issues the African Renaissance would produce'. It follows, therefore, that no single academic discipline has the monopoly over the lens through which the African Renaissance can be looked at (Odora Hoppers 2006).

Language cannot be excluded from a dialogue on the African Renaissance (Alexander 1999; Makgoba 1999; Makgoba et al. 1999; Vale and Maseko 1998). Africa is burdened by an excessive and debilitating dependence on the languages of its former colonisers: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Some have claimed that 'Africa is the only continent out of the three that experienced the yoke of colonial oppression that, several decades after her independence, is still divided on the grounds of European languages: so-called Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone Africa' (Diop 1999, 6–7). Such characterisation, however, fails to acknowledge that the Americas are similarly divided. It is against this backdrop that Vale and Maseko (1998), Makgoba (1999), Alexander (1999), Moodley (2000) and M'bow (2007), along with various contributors in Wolff (2003b), have illustrated the link between African languages and the African Renaissance. For example, in the introduction to *The African Renaissance: The new struggle* (1999), the editors lament:

While most contributors in this volume are Africans who speak one African language or another, none has used an African language in their writing. We have all used the African idiom and borrowed English as a means of writing. Our nuances, impressions and interpretation of English language are rooted in our African languages, experiences and meanings. Can African people champion their Renaissance through the medium of foreign languages? This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to African people. (Makgoba et al. 1999, xi)

Neville Alexander, a prominent South African language scholar, concurs. 'To speak of an African Renaissance without addressing the fundamental question of the development and use in high-status functions of African languages is a contradiction in terms' (1999, 11). If the African Renaissance is to be measured in terms of economic development, the role of mother-tongue languages is critical. A study conducted 20 years ago concluded that the populations of Europe's then three richest countries (based on per capita income) – Luxemburg, Norway and Switzerland – were predominantly dialect speakers. It was observed that these countries had enormous societal tolerance for linguistic diversity.

In addition, linguistic diversity was officially tolerated, with Norway going so far as to enact legislation prohibiting teachers from trying to change the way children speak in the classroom (Trudgill 2000, 197–198). It is, therefore, not surprising to note that the African Union (AU), through the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), is championing the development and promotion of African languages. The AU recognises African languages and cultures as tools vital for the achievement of the African Renaissance (AU 2006).

Language in the colonial era

The colonial powers that came to Africa shared the common belief that they were culturally and linguistically superior to Africans. But in implementing their colonisation project, all colonial powers did not pursue a common administrative strategy (see Michelman 1995; Spencer 1974; Wolf 2008). For example, the British followed what was called 'indirect rule' in countries such as Nigeria and direct rule in the settler colonies. Under the indirect rule system, rather than rely solely on a superimposed colonial administration, pre-existing indigenous structures were subverted and used to exert colonial power and domination. In the British colonies, there was also a heavy reliance on Christian missionaries to establish schools that could train African functionaries to work within the colonial structure. Missionaries, in turn, saw indigenous African languages as the best media for evangelisation, and as a result their schools placed great emphasis on literacy in the indigenous languages. This led to the wide-spread use of indigenous languages as media of instruction, but only in the lower classes of primary schools. Secondary classes, and whatever limited tertiary education was on offer, remained the domain of English. This language policy was strongly favoured by the Phelps-Stokes Commission – a commission dispatched from Britain to study the educational needs of the colonies. The Commission recommended that tribal languages be used in the lower elementary standards or grades, that a lingua franca of African origin be introduced in the middle classes of the school if the area was occupied by native groups speaking diverse languages, but that the language of the European nation in control be taught in the upper standards (Lewis 1962).

In contrast, the French followed the assimilation policy. They were highly protective of French culture and language, and severely restricted the development and use of indigenous African languages in their colonies (Spencer 1974; Michelman 1995). Colonised Africans were expected to abandon their cultures and languages, and to assimilate into the superior French culture. Colonial French authorities in Africa regarded their language as part of their mission to civilise the colonised, and indeed declared that it was their 'sacred mission to bring its benefits to those unfortunate enough not to speak it' (Michelman 1995, 217). The French pursued their *mission civilisatrice* through education and the imposition of their language as the only language in education (Michelman 1995; Spencer 1974; Wolf 2008). In order for Africans to embrace 'civilisation' (French or British), they were expected to shed integral aspects of their identities, notably their African names and languages (see Wa Thiong'o 1986

and 1993). This meant a prohibition against speaking an African language on school premises. There are countless stories of Africans who were punished for related infractions. Wa Thiong'o (1986) cites a Kenyan case during the British colonial era when pupils who spoke Gikuyu were humiliated and forced to wear metal plates bearing demeaning inscriptions such as 'I am a donkey' or 'I am stupid', otherwise students were severely beaten. Similar forms of punishment were meted out in the French colonies. an object, referred to as *le symbole*, would be 'circulated from student to student as each was caught by his classmates speaking his native tongue' (Michelman 1995, 219). Whoever was the last holder of *le symbole* was subject to corporal punishment. The Portuguese emulated the French in adopting a restrictive approach towards indigenous African languages.

Regardless of the policy, the common denominator for all colonial powers was the self righteous belief in their own superiority over the African. By extension, therefore, the languages of the colonisers were superior. The overglorification of English (and other colonial languages) is directly traceable to the colonial era. Discriminatory treatment of indigenous languages remains one of its enduring legacies. Language policies and practices that were put in place diluted African peoples' confidence and pride in their own indigenous languages, and resulted in the elevation of the colonisers' language (Wa Thiong'o 1986, 1993 and 2005). To borrow from Wa Thiong'o (1986), Africans became mentally colonised. A common feature of post-colonial Africa is the persistence of language policies that 'privilege European languages and dilute the esteem in which the African languages [are] held' (Mazrui 2004, 117). As a result, some Africans still suffer from a linguistic inferiority complex.

Malawi, a multilingual and multi-ethnic southern African country, was under British colonial rule from 1891 to 1964. The harbingers of British colonial rule were the pioneer protestant Scottish Christian missionaries, who persuaded the British government to establish colonial rule over a territory that later came to be called Nyasaland. With the installation of colonial rule in 1891, English became the official language of Nyasaland. Because two of Nyasaland's central provinces were predominantly Chinyanja-speaking areas, the colonial government promoted Chinyanja as a national lingua franca. Chinyanja also received official status for use in the mass media and education. Realising that the northern province was in fact predominantly a Chitumbuka-speaking area, Scottish missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission lobbied successfully for the granting of official status to Chitumbuka too, resulting in the use of the language in education and the mass media (Kamwendo 2009). Consistent with British policy, the indigenous languages were taught at the primary and middle-school levels, while secondary school instruction was conducted in English.

The Banda era in Malawi

During the first 30 years of independence, Malawi was largely a one-man-governed state under the authority of President-for-life Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who was the first prime minister and president of independent Malawi. Before entering politics, Banda

spent many years studying and practising medicine in the United States of America and in Britain. In 1958, he was invited to return to his home country, then Nyasaland, to lead the campaign for independence. Through the Malawi Congress Party, Banda successfully campaigned for independence. It was largely a non-armed struggle for independence, in stark contrast to the experiences of countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola and Namibia, which attained independence after armed liberation. In the general elections of 1964, Banda and his Malawi Congress Party were voted into power. Banda became prime minister. In 1966, he assumed the position of President of the Republic of Malawi, before later becoming president for life. His rule can best be described as a dictatorship (Short 1974; Vail and White 1989). After a national referendum in 1993, the life presidency was dissolved and one year later Banda lost the presidency through the ballot box. He died in 1997.

At the time of independence, English was Malawi's main official language, and the two indigenous languages, Chinyanja (later renamed Chichewa) and Chitumbuka, were the auxiliary official languages. In 1968, the ruling Malawi Congress Party resolved to make Chichewa the only indigenous language carrying official status. At that time, Chichewa was the most widely spoken language in the country. In addition, Chichewa also happened to be Banda's mother tongue – he never missed an opportunity to favour and promote his mother tongue over Malawi's other indigenous languages, doing this under the guise of strengthening nationhood through one unifying indigenous language. In the process, Chitumbuka was stripped of its official status and marginalised (Kamwendo 2009). This process was accompanied by the persecution and marginalisation of Banda's political opponents and/or critics – especially those who came from the Chitumbuka-speaking northern province (see Short 1974; Vail and White 1989).

Banda fought linguistic and cultural servitude with one arm, and condoned the same servitude with the other. As Mphande (1996, 81) observes, Banda had 'a personality fraught with contradictions' (see also Short 1974). Years of self-imposed exile in the West had made him adopt a lifestyle that was in opposition to the reality of the country of his birth. It is within this context that Mphande describes Banda's aesthetics as having been

fundamentally European, and this was perhaps exemplified by his trademark three-piece Harrods of London suit, his Homburg hat, the English cane in his right hand – and in his left hand the famous fly whisk given to him by Jomo Kenyatta. To crown it all, Banda was always attired as though in response to, or in anticipation of, typical London weather, for he always wore a coat even when the tropical sun was dazzling red hot. (Mphande 1996, 81)

President Banda's linguistic choices, too, exposed him as a man of inconsistencies and contradictions. On several public occasions he complained that the pioneer Christian missionaries had spoilt Chichewa. To prove this hypothesis he pointed out flaws in biblical translations. He would even correct the orthography, often without any scientific or linguistic basis for such change. Banda delivered a number of public lectures on Chichewa at the University of Malawi, but strangely enough, never in Chichewa or

in any of Malawi's indigenous languages. He always spoke in English, requiring an interpreter to translate his words – even his lectures on so-called good Chichewa (Kamwendo 2006).

The other side of Banda was that of a leader determined to develop Chichewa as the national language. After Chichewa was elevated to the status of national language in 1968, the Banda regime suppressed the development and promotion of all of Malawi's other indigenous languages. A major boost for Chichewa came in 1972, when the Chichewa Board was set up as a statutory body to prescribe correct usage of the language. In line with the tradition of language academies of the West, the Chichewa Board's overall tone was prescriptive. The Board had three declared functions: to develop a national dictionary in Chichewa; to prescribe the rules of its orthography; and generally to oversee its development (Kamwendo 2006). While the Board was able to produce a standard orthography for Chichewa, up until the time of its dissolution, it was unsuccessful with its dictionary project.

Banda's devaluation of his country's indigenous languages and his excessive admiration of the West were also manifested at his privately owned school,¹ the prestigious Kamuzu Academy, an elitist school modelled on the British grammar school, Eton:

The architecture, landscape, and social practice of the school were replicas of England's Eton, right down to red bricks, cricket pitches, and rugby fields; the school uniform and dinner table etiquette; the laundry hours and English muffin breakfast. (Mphande 1996, 86)

Although he portrayed himself as the leading promoter of Chichewa, the language policy pursued at his Kamuzu Academy demonstrated quite the contrary. The school, which admitted the cream of the crop of Malawi's youths, adhered to a curriculum that emphasised the study of English, classical languages (Latin and Greek) and history (*ibid.*, 86–88). On many occasions, President Banda revealed his closely held conviction that a person could not claim to be truly educated if he or she had no knowledge of Greek and/or Latin. (In order to suit the president's definition of an educated person, the University of Malawi was forced to open a Department of Classics.) Not only was Chichewa not amongst the subjects offered at the president's elite school, speaking Chichewa (or any other of Malawi's indigenous languages), even outside class, invited punishment from the school authorities. This repudiation of Malawi's culture extended to native teachers who were not welcomed at the elite school. Banda was once heard to say that he did not want any *mutu bii* (black head) to teach at his academy (Kamwendo 2006). The Kamuzu Academy continues to operate, but has dropped its past discriminatory practices.

The teacher recruitment policy and the language curriculum championed by Banda at his Kamuzu Academy were the clear products of cultural and linguistic imperialism. As Wa Thiong'o observed, one of the signs of cultural imperialism is that people 'want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own' (1986, 3; see also Wa Thiong'o 1993). President Banda's comportment is in line with Canagarajah's view that in the post-

colonial era, some people 'find themselves torn between the claims of Western values and their indigenous cultures, between English and the vernacular' (1999, 2). Banda was a man torn between two worlds.

The post-Banda era and Malawi's *Vision 2020*

The first post-Banda administration, led by President Bakili Muluzi from 1994 to 2004, instituted fundamental language reform, moving the country from a culture of linguistic assimilation to one of linguistic pluralism. That is, from a culture that deliberately attempts to make speakers of all languages adopt a country's dominant language, to one that acknowledges linguistic diversity as a reality and grants official status to as many languages as possible. As part of this shift, the national radio was transformed from a bilingual station (Chichewa and English) to a multilingual station (English, Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Chiyao, Chisena, Chitonga and Chilomwe). Secondly, the Chichewa Board was transformed into the Centre for Language Studies, a linguistically more inclusive academic and research institution. Thirdly, a new language-in-education policy for primary schools was announced in 1996, calling for the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction in areas where such languages are predominantly used (Kamwendo 2006, 2008 and 2009).

An important initiative aimed at unifying the nation around a cohesive plan of national development was launched by the government in 1998: the Malawi *Vision 2020* project (Government of Malawi 1997). It was a collaborative effort involving all branches of government, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders. Nation-wide consultations with a wide range of stakeholders were conducted to solicit aspirations and perspectives on how to attain sustainable development. Workshops with experts on strategic issues were organised and a national conference on the Vision was held in 1997, before the Vision was officially launched. The main objective of *Vision 2020* was to help Malawians project the type of country they wanted to have by the year 2020, and to articulate strategies that could lead the country towards this vision. Its mission statement reads:

By the year 2020 Malawi, as a God-fearing nation, will be secure, democratically mature, environmentally sustainable, self reliant with equal opportunities for active participation by all, having social services, vibrant cultural and religious values and being a technologically driven middle-income economy. (Government of Malawi 1997)

A lack of self-confidence and/or pride in being Malawian – an issue that arose throughout the consultative process – was identified as one of Malawi's strategic challenges:

Malawians have low self-esteem. They have no confidence in local products and in their culture. The challenge is to restore self-confidence and pride in being Malawian. Malawians must be able to identify themselves with their country, their cultural heritage and their indigenous products. Malawians must also be assertive and confident and be free from servitude and low self-esteem. (ibid.)

The document is divided into ten chapters: an overview of the Vision; good governance; achieving economic growth and development; achieving a vibrant culture; developing economic infrastructure; food security and nutrition; human resource development and management; achieving science and technology-led development; fair and equitable distribution of income; and natural resource and environmental management.

However, nowhere in these ten chapters is language expressly stated. Given the close link between language and culture (AU 2006; M'bow 2007), one would have expected the Vision document to address language in Chapter 4, but it does not. This silence on language creates the erroneous impression that language is not relevant to matters of national development. If language is the medium through which human beings communicate, and communication is a critical tool for national development, how can a nation genuinely prepare its vision without taking the language question on board? It is imperative that communication occur through languages that people understand, and in sub-Saharan Africa, this generally means utilising an indigenous language, not the language of the former colonisers (Djite 2008). 'The effective mobilization of the masses ... for national development requires the democratization of access not in an exoglossic (foreign) language but in a language (or languages) the people know best: an African language' (Chumbow 2002, 171).

It is a fact that in sub-Saharan Africa the languages of the former colonisers are not competently used by the majority of the population (Djite 2008). Therefore, indigenous languages remain the only linguistic route through which the majority of the citizens can best be reached. To have failed to acknowledge this and not to have built upon this fundamental principle in a forward-looking document like Malawi's *Vision 2020*, reflects a critical flaw in thinking. It is evidence of the low self-esteem and self-confidence which *Vision 2020* was meant to address and to reverse.

Indeed, to this day the 1996 directive of the Secretary of Education ordering that Standards 1 to 4 be taught in the mother tongue has not been implemented. This is because of insufficient political will being demonstrated by the government, inadequate sensitisation programmes to explain the importance of this policy, inadequate human and material resources; and lingering negative attitudes towards indigenous languages (see Kamwendo 2008 for a detailed discussion). Vocal critics argue that what Malawi needs instead is increased and better levels of teaching in English. They maintain that the mother-tongue policy will lead to a further deterioration of an already declining standard of English in the country, and that the decline was due to excessive use of Chichewa (Nsapato 2002). Yet it is 'now axiomatic that a child learns better and develops faster cognitively over a period of time than when taught in a foreign medium' (Chumbow 2002, 170). Eddie Williams, a renowned linguist, offers empirical evidence from Malawian (and Zambian) schools that mother-tongue instruction has no negative effects on the acquisition of literacy in English (1996 and 2006). Yet this research evidence is often ignored by the opponents of mother-tongue instruction.

The affinity for English has led many parents to send their children to English-only schools in Malawi (and other African countries) in order to improve the children's language skills (Matiki 2001). What one often hears is the claim that English-medium

schools produce excellent results – attributed, of course, to the use of English as medium of instruction. What is ignored, is that the private English-medium schools in urban Malawi are not only better equipped, they are also better staffed with qualified and better remunerated teachers. This is in sharp contrast to Malawian public schools which are mostly poorly resourced. Williams (2006, 170), for example, observes that in Malawian public schools, conditions are ‘among the most materially impoverished in the world’. Williams (2006) also notes that teachers’ competence to teach English, or to teach in English, is low. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that such schools fail to produce excellent results.

Non-English-speaking countries that invest heavily in mother-tongue education – even when the national languages are not spoken beyond the country’s boundaries (i.e. Norway, Sweden, Liechtenstein and Switzerland) – are able to compete favourably with English-dominant developed countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America (Brock-Utne 2007) – proving that English is not synonymous with education, let alone quality education. It is possible to have quality education delivered through indigenous African languages, as long as the necessary investment of resources is made.

Disrespect for indigenous languages goes beyond primary education and is manifest in the thinking of some academics at university level too. When a colleague at the University of Malawi was promoted to the rank of full professor of African Languages and Linguistics, a fellow academic who had been away to Europe on a PhD programme, remarked: ‘za Chichewa zomwe zija mpaka kukhala nazo professor?’ (You mean that Chichewa has made him rise to full professorship?). When Professor Al Mtenje (Mtenje 2002) of the University of Malawi presented an inaugural lecture titled *The role of language in national development: A case for local languages*, he was accused in some Malawian academic quarters of trying to undermine English, which is still perceived to be synonymous with education (Matiki 2001). There are some people in Malawi (and elsewhere in Africa) who even think that students who specialise in teaching indigenous languages are intellectually deficient. The intellectually gifted are expected to pursue the more challenging subjects like physics, chemistry and mathematics. It is, therefore, not uncommon to find students of African languages at the University being laughed at: ‘Inu kubwela ku university kudzaphunzira ndakatulo basi?’ (You came all the way to the university simply to study Chichewa poetry?)

Wa Thiong’o (2005, 17) has issued a challenge to African intellectuals: ‘How many social scientists have ever written even a single document in an African language?’ African academics should show the world that it is possible to conduct academic business through African languages. But when African academics pour scorn on African languages, non-academics (and government policy makers) cannot be expected to take African languages seriously. When African languages are negated by African academics, one wonders how Africa will ever attain the much-needed renaissance, since for many ‘the future of the African Renaissance lies with Africans and mostly with African intellectuals’ (Mangu 2006, 156).

Conclusions

There is no doubt that colonialism was an enormous blow to the development of indigenous languages in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa. Unfortunately, independence has not much improved the situation on the language front. President Banda's regime sang two contradictory songs: the song of linguistic nationalism and the song of the supremacy of English. As a leader he sent the wrong messages to his countrymen/women. Paradoxically, it was during the colonial missionary era that Chitumbuka and Chiyao (to a lesser extent) thrived. It was the missionaries who promoted the use of Chitumbuka as the *lingua franca* in the northern province of Malawi – a policy that was reversed under the Banda regime (Kamwendo 2009; Vail and White 1989). In Banda's post-colonial Malawi, language policy and practices have reinforced the superiority of English and other Western languages.

Malawi is ten years from the target date of the Malawi *Vision 2020* document, and it has been 14 years since the mother-tongue education declaration was issued. What progress has been made? Writing in 2008, Mtenje (2008, 26), in his stocktaking of language policies of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), points to Malawi 'where a draft language policy emphasizing the value of mother tongue multilingual education has not been approved for over 10 years'. Malawi's non-implementation of this important education policy was recently noted at the August 2010 ACALAN planning workshop for the Chinyanja/Chichewa Commission in Blantyre, Malawi. As long as African languages are kept out of the education system they remain stigmatised, always perceived as having less value than the languages of the colonisers, and incapable of being effective vehicles for national development. In 1998, when it launched the Malawi *Vision 2020* document, the country missed a golden opportunity to make that connection. In contrast, Botswana's *Vision 2016* makes a clear link between language and national development, including education (Republic of Botswana 1997). Unfortunately, Botswana, too, has not implemented the development and promotion of its indigenous languages in education – another case of a declaration not being followed by implementation (Mtenje 2008).

Adegbija (1994) has rightly observed that many post-colonial governments in Africa have not seriously questioned the inherited language policies. Consequently (as in the case of Malawi), the attainment of political independence has not erased linguistic and cultural servitude. Linguistic imperialism, as Phillipson (1992, 1995) would call it, is still alive. This is why some African scholars (for instance, Mazrui 2004; Wa Thiong'o 1986 and 1993) have called for the linguistic decolonisation of the mind. Concurrent with this, there is the need to dispel the false claim that the elevation of the status of an African language is tantamount to a declaration of war against English (or any other colonial language). As African scholars have noted:

There is nothing wrong with European languages; there is nothing wrong with Portuguese, English or French. But there is something not right about people abandoning their own languages for others. You have two legs already, why talk about borrowing somebody else's legs? We are not talking of disengagement with the world but engaging with the world from a more confident base. (Wa Thiong'o cited in Palmberg 2004, 19)

It is possible to use English without degrading one's own mother tongue and/or other indigenous languages. We live in a world in which English is the most powerful language. The importance of acquiring English is therefore a fact. Malawians and all Africans should aim to possess both English (or any other international language) and their indigenous languages, so that they can approach the world from a position of linguistic strength.

Note

- 1 'Privately owned' although substantially funded by state funds and other resources.

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