The Burden of English in Africa: From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism.

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**Introduction**

Over the past decade and a half, issues related to linguistic hegemony or linguistic imperialism have become intellectually and scholastically engaging for a wide range of interested parties. Possibly the most seminal voice with respect to English language hegemonism, during this period, has been Robert Phillipson whose path-breaking 1992 book, *Linguistic Imperialism*, set the cat amongst the pigeons and started a cacophony of often strident debate around the issue.¹

Phillipson identified English linguistic imperialism as language preeminence asserted and consolidated through the establishment and persistent reproduction of structural and cultural disparities between English and other sociologically coexistent languages. Phillipson rightly fingered the phenomenal spread of English as an entelechy tied to the historic trajectory of the British empire on which the sun never set (while it lasted) and contextualized it in the contemporary post-colonial and neocolonial realities of our times. Amongst other things he argued that government-funded instruments and agencies like the British Council play a crucial role in underwriting this condition of English linguistic supremacy. Another interested voice Karen Stanley, in a forum for the teaching of English as a second language, writes that; “Over the years, different people have proposed that English language teaching carries with it imperialistic influences. At times this has been in relation to the imposition of an outside language on native languages, resulting in their allocation to a secondary status along with the cultures they represent. At other times, the teaching of English was seen as a tool to propagate the economic, cultural or religious values of dominant world powers.”²

These and similar positions have of course generated a lot of contrasting reactions. What is however undeniable is that history teaches us that wherever colonial or imperial overlordship is established, the culture and language of the conqueror is invariably imposed on the conquered. Cultural and linguistic imperialism is the practice of promoting the culture or language of one

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people on another or others. It is usually the case that the former is an economically and/or militarily powerful nation and the latter a less affluent and poorer technologically endowed one. Empires throughout history have been established using war, physical coercion and cultural assimilation. While the weapons of war are the most pertinent and rapidly effective tools of imperial subjugation, cultural cooptation is the more benign face and strategically favored method of imperial overlordship and “pacification.” In the long term, subject populations tend to be acculturated into the ruling culture, or indirectly acquire its attributes. Indeed, often ethnocide is a consequence of imperialism on subject peoples.

Some Random Examples of Linguistic and Cultural Imperialism

Some random examples of cultural imperialism are the following; the Arabization of Africans in the Afro-Arab borderlands, with contemporary flashpoints in Mauritania and the Sudan. In Algeria and Morocco, there is tension between the Berber minority groups and the central Arab governments. The Berbers (‘Amazigh – translated as “free men”) have long felt that their cultures and languages are threatened by Arabization. Through centuries of Arabization these originally indigenous inhabitants of the area have become minorities. The Coptic language of Egypt at the time of the Arab conquest has today become extinct except for ritual and liturgy. The Mongolian imperial Khans of medieval Russia held future grand princes and heirs to the Moscow throne as bondsmen. In captivity under Khan thraldom, they learned the language and political culture of their masters. “The Russian princes accepted the language, culture, administrative system, and military innovations of the Mongols,” The extinction of Etruscan culture and language was caused by the influence of the Roman imperial growth. Classical Greek culture absorbed many of its conquered peoples (such as ancient Judea). The subject populations became immersed in Greek culture and the spread of the koine (common) Greek language was an instrument as well as a result of this cultural assimilation. As Western exploration of the Americas increased, European nations including Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and

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4 Ibid.
5 Ariel Cohen. Russian Imperialism: Development and Crisis. Greenwood Press. Westport. 1996. P.31. Cohen further notes that; “The diplomatic ceremony of the grand princes reflected Mongolian practices until the sixteenth century, such as the famous chelom bit’ye (headbeating), a linguistic calque and administrative borrowing of the Turkic bas ur, which in turn was a borrowing of the Chinese kow tow – “technology transfer”, in which administrative innovation tends to spread as fast as military inventions.” Ibid.
7 Unfortunately, the term “koine” has been also used to refer to the (a) pre-Islamic Arabic standard which was the basis of early classical Arabic or Arabiyyah (used little or hardly ever for conversational purposes) and (b) the conversational form of Arabic which “was spread over most of the Islamic world in the first centuries of the Muslim era”… This “koine” apparently “existed side by side with the Arabiyyah although it was rarely used for written purposes and most modern Arabic dialects, especially those outside Arabia, are continuations of this koine, so that their differences are chiefly borrowings or innovations which took place subsequent to the spread of the koine. The situation is thus partly analogous to the frequently cited case of Greek, in which the modern dialects are not direct descendants of the early dialects, but derive from the koine, and present dialect differences are generally innovations which took place subsequent to the spread of koine. The major differences between the two cases are the persistence of classical Arabic virtually unchanged through the entire time span of this series of developments, and the fact that the Greek koine was based to a large extent on the spoken Greek of a single center.” R. Kirk Belnap and Niloofar Haeri. Structuralist Studies in Arabic Linguistics. Charles A. Ferguson’s Papers. 1954 – 1994. Brill. Leiden. 1997. Pp. 51 – 52.
Portugal all raced to claim territory in hopes of generating increased economic wealth for themselves. In these new colonies, the European conquerors imposed their language and culture with long-lasting and so far indelible effects.

In the British Isles, a revealing instance of cultural and linguistic imperialism is the imposition of the Prayer Book and the consequent rebellion of 1549, where the English state sought to suppress non-English language-speakers with the Book of Common Prayer. In replacing Latin with English, and under the guise of suppressing Catholicism, English was effectively imposed as the language of the Church, with the intention of it becoming the language of the people. At the time people in many areas of Cornwall did not speak or understand English. Many speakers of the Cornish language were decimated while protesting against the imposed literature. It was in the course of this rebellion that Cornishmen wrote themselves into history with the statement that, “...and so we Cornishmen, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English.”

Throughout the 18th and 19th century the dominant English establishment attempted to eliminate all non-English languages within the British Isles (such as the Welsh language, Irish language and Scottish Gaelic language) by outlawing them or otherwise marginalizing their speakers. The most obvious and culturally most significant consequence of the conquest of Ireland by the English was the suppression of the Irish language and the adoption by most people of English as their first language.

The Spanish in the Americas followed the universal logic of imperialism and language. The view of Antonio de Nebrija, Bishop of Avila, as stated in the prologue of the Grammatica Castellana (Castilian Grammar) published in 1492, was that; “Language has always been the perfect instrument of empire.” Nearer our time (1910-1945), Japanese colonialism in Korea similarly imposed the Japanese language on Koreans. Hatada writes that; “Under the slogan “Naisen Ittai” (Japan Korea as One), newspapers and magazines published in the Korean language were closed, the Korean Language Society was disbanded, and Korean writers were forced to publish only in Japanese. Students who spoke Korean in school were punished. There was pressure to speak Japanese at home, adopt Japanese family and given names, and worship at Shinto shrines, the religious basis for which had been transplanted from the home islands. Korean Christians who refused to show reverence to the emperor as a divinity were imprisoned or ostracized.”

Romanov Russian imperialism in the 19th century imposed linguistic regimes of overlordship and Russianization of the people who came under its servitude. After the 1917 revolution, the emergent Soviet Empire maintained the linguistic supremacy of the Russian language but granted some mitigating principles of local and regional autonomy. It is possible to classify seTswana dominance over the Khoe and San languages in a similar fashion. Today the Khoe and San speakers of Botswana are culturally being rapidly assimilated.

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9 http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Cultural:imperialism.htm
Comparative past and present cases abound. We can in sum say that in our times, the examples of China and Russia where respectively Han and White Russians have held linguistic and cultural sway over other language groups (the Chinese themselves often describe this cultural and linguistic hegemonism as “Great Han Chauvinism”), together with the hegemonic linguistic results of Arab conquests of North Africa and the Sahel, plus European imperial domination of most of Africa, Asia and the Americas are examples which attest to linguicism in their most blatant modern forms.13

**Language, Elite Formation and Colonialism**

In classic colonial relationships, it is mainly the conquered who learn the language of the conqueror. In much of British colonial Africa, Western education and the use of English in the education was started in the late 19th century. Its prime object was the development of social elements that would serve harmoniously in the colonial order and provide a socio-linguistic bridge into African society. But the conduct of education was left largely in the hands of the missionaries who came with the advent of colonial power. In order for the missionaries to reach the hearts and minds of Africans in their central object of Christian conversion they translated the Bible into African languages, wherever they went. Most of the early African language literature produced for Africans by missionaries was for purposes of evangelization. However, in order to assist and facilitate the Western colonial administrative project, Africans were taught, beyond the initial years of vernacular school, in the language of colonial power.

In Eric Ashby’s well-known text *African Universities and Western Tradition* he observes that; “one of the symptoms of British cultural nationalism has been an invincible confidence in the efficacy of British education, not only for home consumption but for export; not only for Englishmen but for Indians, Africans, Malayans and – for that matter – Americans. It was Macaulay who wanted to create in India ‘a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.’ For a time the Indian intellectuals were his strongest ally in this endeavour. English was deemed more significant than Sanskrit; Shakespeare more relevant than the Mahabharata or (mine italics) the teaching of Buddha.”14 The creation of native English-speaking elites was thus a requirement for successful colonial activity. In order to effect rule, these nascent elite elements were necessary as intermediaries and interlocutors between the heights of colonial administration and the mass of colonial subjects. The use of English was a requirement for social mobility in the colonial hierarchy for the native populations. Indeed, one can say that it was possibly the most important factor in the enhancement of social mobility amongst the colonized natives in British colonial Africa. The masses soon recognized the fact that if you wanted to prosper in the colonial order, you had to use the master’s language, imitating the master’s voice, even when this meant the total replacement of your mother tongue.

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by the colonial language. These are the roots of the contemporary preference for colonial languages in Africa.

It would be however a misreading of the climate of opinion in the colonial period to suggest that the British colonial administrators were all of one mind about the role of English in education for the future of the African. There is some tentative evidence that opinion existed which saw the long-term value of education and advancement on the basis of African languages. In Lord Hailey’s monumental work, *An African Survey* produced in the 1930s we are informed that; “Only experience will show the extent to which the African languages, with their absence of a literary tradition, will assert themselves in the face of the influences to which they are being subjected … Though for the present vocational and higher education is necessarily given through the medium of a European language, yet educational policy, at all events in British territories, assumes the growth of vernacular literature which will minister to the growing intellectual life of the community. It cannot at present be foreseen whether an African or a European language will ultimately become the vehicle of the higher forms of intellectual activity; the experience of Asia would seem to show that there may be a parallel development, in which the European and African language each has its own function, both for literary and other uses. If any general conclusion is possible in a matter where the factors are still so indeterminate, it is that administrations should, in dealing with questions in this field, look on the problem as one demanding not merely linguistic study of the traditional academic type but an examination of all the social considerations involved.”

The point here is that the rationality of the idea of African languages for the mass education of Africans was not altogether lost on colonial administration.

It is 70 years since the above was written and the directions in which language of education policies in Africa have moved do not augur well, at all, for the prospect of a pro-African solution to this African problem. The predominant climate of opinion amongst the decisive elites suggests that the colonial languages should continue to dominate the cultural, particularly intellectual, scientific and technological space. Even where opinion favours the use of African languages there is stubborn inertia and a lack of political will to address the problem favourably for the use of the languages of the overwhelming majorities of Africans.

An additional complicating factor is the reality that, today, the strength of the English language in the elite culture of Africa is partly due to the virtually unchallenged global power of the United States as an English-speaking super-power in our contemporary unipolar world. In my judgement, this fact is much underestimated. This reality makes itself felt at the global cultural level and influences the thinking of our inveterately Europhile African elites.

In so-called Anglophone Africa, yesterday and today, in the sub-culture of the elite one could more or less get by with monolingualism based on English. One could circulate socially, fairly effectively, using only the English language, and there are many who believe and argue openly

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that their mother-tongue is so inferior and useless that it is not worth speaking. This mentality has extended from the late colonial period into the post-colonial period as attitudes increasingly prevalent in many elite families where children of parents who both speak the same African language resort to speaking English with their children, and insisting that English should be spoken in the house. I dare say, you all would know people like that, and possibly there may be even some of you who practice such habits.

African elites today encourage the use of English, as language of instruction, with the excuse that preference for English is a means of overcoming so-called problems arising from societal consequences of linguistic pluralism. In fact the real and unspoken reason is the desire to consolidate their own social advantages through the social elevation of the English language, because they already have an adequate facility in the use of the language.

Of course, in the long run, what would happen in the face of the relentless persistence of this attitude is that slowly our languages could face perdition and extinction. We can, in a way, say that the main players in the game of the destruction of African languages are no longer Westerners in themselves in Africa, but rather large sections of the African elites.

This cultural and linguistic usurpation of Africanism attracted the attention of Dan Jacobson who very early in the era of African independence, fifty years ago, in an article he wrote for the *Encounter* observed that; “… most Africans who want to write want to do so in English or French, rather than in their native languages. Could there be, for a writer, a more dramatic sign of a willed severance from the past than his adoption of a language other than the one spoken by his people in their own past? And in adopting this other language is he not immediately putting himself into an extremely awkward and problematical relationship with his people in their present?”

There are some African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo who in letter and spirit agree with this diagnosis. I am of similar persuasion and in full agreement with Ngugi that cultural decolonization must for the African writer ultimately mean writing in African languages; addressing your audience in the languages which belong to them and belong to you.

Over the past 20-30 years, I have been actively involved in work and advocacy in favour of the use of African languages for science, education and development. My arrival at this school of thought was the result of an earlier intellectual odyssey and longer search for answers to the problems of African development. In the immediate post-colonial era, indeed at the commencement point of the so-called, “Decade of African Independence” (1960 – 1970), many of our generation as young idealistic intelligentsia had been involved in an active and zealous, but poorly educated search for answers to African underdevelopment and backwardness. There were very many of us who found ostensible answers in technicist and economistic intellectual corners. Some of us were swept along from one intellectual fashion to the other, all offering eventually ineffectual results for the solution of the problems of African underdevelopment.

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Culture, Language and Development

It was an important realization, a Damascus-road experience, for some of us, to finally come to the conclusion that culture is the central location for answers to the challenges of underdevelopment; and that culture, in an anthropological sense (that is including all areas of social life created through the genius of humanity), should be our point of departure; furthermore if language is the main feature of culture, in which all social and human activities are transacted, then we should ensure that our languages become developed and refined instruments capable of yielding developmental benefits in our quest for scientific and technological advancement and the emancipation of Africans. If language is the prime and requisite instrument in the exercise the pertinent question is which language? As Brock-Utne trenchantly asks; “Education for All, In Whose Language.” Should we use the languages of mass society, the languages of mass creativity, the languages which the masses use with confidence and which have collective social and historical memory for them or the languages spoken with limited efficiency by the societally small narrowly-based elites, who number no more than 5 – 10 % of our populations? It was not difficult to realize that the credible option lies with the languages of the masses of the people.

A society develops into modernity when its citizens are literate in the languages of the masses. In other words, it is not possible to reach modernity if the language/languages of literacy and education are only within the intellectual ambit of small minorities. Historically, the jump towards expanded knowledge production and reproduction in societies has only been possible when the languages of the social majorities have been centrally placed.

In our times, it is hardly possible for any one particular culture or cultures to be sealed-off from diffusionist impulses from other cultures. The whole universe of cultures in the world cross-fertilize each other. However, those cultures which are able to hold their own in development are those which are able, fairly independently, on their own terms, to maintain a selective approach to those external cultural elements that they incorporate and adapt into their own. Very importantly, such autonomously acting cultures do not compromise their foundations and do not abandon their mainsprings in favour of external influences. This has the consequent result that the owners of such cultures are able to maintain a decisive degree of confidence and resilience in the value of their own and are able to construct innovative cultural structures built on their own premises.18


17 This point was well made by Mahatma Gandhi that; “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people’s houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.” Quoted here from; Dahr Jamail. Colonizing Culture. Truthout (Perspective). 27th May, 2009.
These conditions, as described here, of selectively adapting and accepting cultures are well-exemplified by many of the cultures and societies of contemporary Asia. In countries as varied as Japan, Korea, China, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, Western influences and cultural usages are being continuously absorbed without unnecessary cession and compromise of their own. They are becoming advanced economies and cultures without losing the integrity of their age-long heritage. Crucially, they use their own languages.

An important facilitatory ingredient which partially accounts for Asian success in utilizing its culture as a basis for social and economic advancement in our times is the literate base of a good part of Asian cultures. As Goody some years ago observed; “Indeed part of the phenomenon called neo-colonialism has to be seen in terms of this very openness which is associated with the absence of a strong, written tradition that can stand up against the written cultures of the world system. There are important distinctions to be made between different socio-cultural regions of the Third World, of the world system, not simply in terms of their relationship with the metropolis but in terms of their own indigenous, socio-cultural organization, in terms of communications as well as the economy. While the major societies of the Asian continent were strongly affected by the expansion of Europeans, they were more rarely ‘colonies’ in the African, American and Oceanic sense; nor are they today neo-colonial from the cultural standpoint. Their written traditions have provided them with a more solid basis for cultural resistance than is the case with most oral cultures.”

**Literacy in Our Languages**

Some years ago, Jean-François Revel in a review of the work of Emmanuel Todd drew attention to the fact that, for the latter, the riddle of “development” is not sphinx-like and indecipherable. The simple truth is the fact is that most of the explanations and theoretical exposures of underdevelopment hitherto suggested by a host of social scientists have been unsatisfactory, particular, in this respect we can safely say that none of the purely economic explanations has come anywhere close to practical viability. Furthermore, it is impossible to address the conditions of underdevelopment without understanding what brings about “development” in the first instance. Attention invariably focuses primarily on only one of its aspects, i.e. “economic take-off” a la Walt W. Rostow and the variant formulations of his latter-day acolytes. “Economic take-off” is really a manifestation and consequence rather than the cause of development. This is all the more so because development is very obviously a lengthy process which often takes a long time to consolidate. The real launch-pad is literacy. For Todd, every society that “takes off” may be seen to have crossed, some decades earlier, the decisive literacy threshold of 50% of the population or – still more decisive – 70% of young people aged 15 – 25. Thus, for example, Sweden and Switzerland, which were still almost totally rural in the 19th century, had the highest rates of literacy in Europe – hence the speed of their subsequent industrial take-off. Around 1850, Germany was the butt of sarcastic commentary from the venerable Marx, who considered it a backward, provincial backwater removed from the redemption of industrial progress; in the

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1880s Germany overtook England and led the world in the chemical industry. The reason for this developmental sprint was that, at the very moment when Karl Marx was leeringly jeering at it, Germany had reached the critical literacy rate, the critical mass and technological threshold for greater accomplishment. The recent swift expansion of Japan, South Korea and the more recent “Asian tigers” only becomes comprehensible when related to a similar cultural background. For “cultural development precedes and is inseparably bound with industrial development; or, to put it differently, development is first and foremost, cultural.”

When we speak of literacy, it is of course not in the abstract. Literacy bears reference always to a language or languages. In Africa the tendency has been that, when we speak of literacy, we tend to think of literacy in the colonial language. We do not seem to imagine that literacy in our languages can be of the same status as literacy in the colonial languages. Even worse is the premise that literacy in our languages does not yield any benefits, except the ability to read the Bible and allied literature. My argument here is that this idea is totally wrong and that indeed literacy in the colonial language refers to literacy for ±10% of our populations. On that statistical basis it is impossible to move a society forward. If one also, for reason of argument, imagines that the task is to make our populations literate and work in French, English or Portuguese, we must realize that, that day will never come (at least this is my hope). If it did, the day that happens Africans will cease to be Africans and become French, English, Arab or Portuguese (in this respect our colour is totally irrelevant) because ultimately it is culture not colour which makes people.

**African Languages and Education**

Bodies like the World Bank, most donor agencies, most African governments, a large group of African and non-African academics suggest that pupils should be taught in the mother tongue only at the primary school level, after which they should switch to education in English, French, or Portuguese. My view is that, this position subscribes to a neo-colonial cultural relationship through language-use. Rather, I would argue that throughout the educational experience, up to and through the tertiary level, pupils and students should be taught in the mother-tongue or first language. It is in these languages that the intelligence of Africans is most discerning and creative, these are the languages of mass society and hence its development. It is the only way to culturally validate the democratic principle in social organization. This way, the transfer of science and technology into the cultures of the African masses will be assured. Failure to do this means that we will continue to pursue an elitist educational policy of cultural denationalization of the African masses who form the overwhelming majority on this continent. Today, this process of cultural divestment is largely led by an elite which is historically and culturally African in origin, but in social practice incurably eurocentric. As I suggest in an earlier paper, in Africa today, eurocentrism is propagated more by African elites than westerners.  

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We are not suggesting that English should not be taught in African schools. We are saying that, as is done in Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and many more, English should not supplant the role and position of the local language/languages. It should be taught as a subject, a “contact language”, as is done in all these other countries and not allowed to replace the legitimate and rational functions of local languages.

**Detractors of Mother-Tongue Education**

Whenever the recommendation is presented, that African languages need to become central in all levels of education and all areas of social life in Africa, if Africa is to have a realistic chance at development, most observers react with different degrees of surprise and shock. The fact that, in all countries of Europe or Asia, people use their own languages for these purposes is easily forgotten. Somehow, for Africa a different logic becomes operative, and this logic is articulated as either one or more of the following arguments (presented here in no order of hierarchy):

1. Africa has too many languages for it to be practical to use African languages for education and wider social life. That, indeed, because of this assumed plethora of speech forms, any attempt to use one or the other language, is likely to engender tension and conflict.
2. African languages are in quality too poor to carry modern notions, science and technology; they are only fit for poetic and limited expression
3. African languages have hardly any literature
4. It will be too expensive to develop African languages.
5. English is a universal language and so there is no need to spend time and resources on African languages which have only limited use.
6. Africans do not want to work in their languages. The languages of power are English, French, and Portuguese.

These arguments are limited in logic and bear fallacies which can be argumentationally easily confounded. For a start, implicit in all of them is a cultural inferiority complex vis a vis western languages. No language, as is now well understood by all serious linguists and other social scientists, is incapable of development as languages of science and technology. Where languages suffer from this malaise, this is simply because the necessary social and economic inputs and philosophical orientation have not been invested in them to elevate their quality to modern or modernizing languages. There is no language which from Adam is either elected or selected for greater things. Languages develop because people develop them. One of the requirements in this development process is the production of literature. If the language and literature is important enough for us we will throw resources at the effort.

For a Batswana audience it is interesting to indicate that, I have had occasion to draw attention to Naomi Mitchison’s *The Africans*; a rather patronizing and ambitious undertaking which was written, as she confidently says, “with a view to reinterpreting the history of Africa not only to outsiders but above all to the Africans themselves”, the author shows herself to be sold to the
idea that African languages cannot be languages of science. She argues that; “Some languages develop in the direction of accuracy, and most European languages are of this kind. They break up words and ideas and partly analyse them … Words in ordinary use get shorter and simpler instead of longer.”

This is indeed an unfortunate misreading of the reality of languages in general and African languages in particular. The German “wiedervereinigung” (re-unification) is composed of words “wieder” for again/re and “vereinigung” for unification. Again the German, “Familienformen” which is written as one word would be in English two words “Familien” (family) “formen” (types/forms/ formations). The Dutch word “wereldoorlog” (world war) is made up of two words, “wereld” which is world and “oorlog”, which is war. This compounding of words is rather more common with European languages than African languages.

Mitchison goes on to suggest that SeTswana for example is “essentially good for poetry, singing and some kinds of conversation”, but un-analytical. For her, Chinese ideographics where whole concepts are gathered up into a single written character “is also bad for science.” She omits in this argumentation the fact that for centuries, Chinese science led western science at a comfortable distance. She adds that; “So nowadays Chinese is being altered accordingly. Perhaps African languages will be modified in the same way or perhaps they will be kept for speech, poetry, fiction and drama, while English or French is used as a useful written language of non-poetic communication.” The Chinese today, who are galloping ahead in economy, science and technology, with their ideographics still in use, will find her observations not only wrong but also very amusing.

English, French and Portuguese are languages of power in Africa today because they were put in that position by the colonial powers which colonized Africa; the subsequent inheritors of colonial power, the African elites, which have from the onset on post-colonialism reproduced themselves, continue to maintain these languages as their cultural basis of power. What this by implication also means is that, if Africans wish to fundamentally roll back the cultural edifice of colonialism in its current neo-colonial form, we would need, as of necessity to re-centre our languages in the social order.

**The African Tower of Babel**

One of the most persistent myths in the study of African society is the idea that Africa is the prime example of the *Tower of Babel* that linguistic diversity is of such proportions that Africans cannot share or work in their own languages. There are some of us who have come to the conclusion that this idea has intentionally or unintentionally become a useful tool in the hands of those who want to see Africans work in perpetuity in the colonial languages. What the Centre for

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24 Naomi Mitchison. Ibid. P.53.
Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) has been doing through its network of researchers has been to knock as many holes as possible into this myth by offering evidence to the contrary.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is remarkable that no clear and consensual picture exists with respect to either the number of languages on the African continent, or how these languages can be usefully classified. Each researcher on African languages appears to put his or her own tally of numbers on them. What is not easily recognized by many observers is that most of what in the literature, and classificatory schemes, on African languages passes as separate languages in an overwhelming number of cases are actually dialectal variants of “core languages.” In other words, most African languages can be regarded as mutually intelligible variants within large clusters (core languages). Indeed, almost all African languages are trans-border languages, and the majority of them cross more than one state border.

What CASAS’ research has revealed is that over 80-85 percent of Africans, as first, second and third language-speakers, speak no more than 15-17 “core languages”, based on our clustering on the basis of mutual intelligibility. Africa, for its size is hardly a Tower of Babel. We are arguing that, if the total population of Black Africa is between 700 and 800 million, (as first, second and third language speakers) the Fula, Pulaar, Peul, Tuculor, Fulful, Fulbe, Fulani cluster, Hausa and its varieties, Oromo, Igbo, Mandeng, Amharic, KiSwahili, Yoruba, the Gbe, would produce about 50 million in each instance; the Nguni dialects, the Sotho-Tswana, the Akan, the Eastern and the Western inter-lacustrine Bantu (Kitara) languages, Luganda/Lusoga/Lugishu and Luo, Gur, Lingala, Kikongo are between 30-40 million per set. Other languages, of much smaller size, but which enjoy preponderance within existing states include, Fang, Sango, Nyanja-Cewa, Wolof, Ovambo-Herero and Somali-Samburu.

In as far as African development is concerned, the upshot of these facts are that the harmonisation of African languages which show high levels of mutual intelligibility would greatly facilitate the economies of scale in the development of educational, media and cultural materials which could go a long way in strengthening the basis of society for the cultural and social development of Africa. Furthermore, it is the only way of culturally empowering the masses of African society. It is the one way we can remove the cultural cleavage between the elite and mass society. It provides the key to the methodology of eradicating the stigma of inferiority, which the colonial experience has vested in African languages.

In the context of the issues I am raising here, it is a shame that one of the most advantageous and least problematic of the situations we have in Africa, continues to be trapped in a maze. seTswana in Botswana is spoken by the ethnic baTswana forming about 80%, as first language. The Kalanga who count about 11% also invariably speak seTswana as second-languages, a good proportion of the other minorities also can effectively acquit themselves in seTswana. There is no reason why seTswana is not used for education up to the tertiary level and in national affairs. Here again the main stumbling block is the elite which prefers the neo-colonial linguistic status quo. If education in Botswana is organized in seTswana, in no time, certainly not more than 10 - 15 years science and technology will reach villagers in a language which fully belongs to them. If
the exercise can be coordinated with Namibia, South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia and Angola, Africa will be marching forward in this region to modernity sure-footedly.

I am not saying we must not learn any English. Like the Asians say, English is a “contact-language”, we all do well to know it, but not at the expense of our own; not a replacement for our own. All it takes is a judiciously constructed national curriculum, which produces as the Dutch system does, people competent in several languages.

**Lessons from Afrikaans**

We must learn from the Afrikaans experience. The struggle to assert the usage of Afrikaans in the face of English hegemony, continued in the years following the Anglo-Boer War. Sometime in 1906, the English Cape Town newspaper *The Cape Times* could condescendingly write that; “Afrikaans is the confused utterance of half-articulated patois.” Afrikaans was often denigratingly described as a *kombuis taal* (a kitchen language), referring to the fact that it was a language used in the kitchen by servants and slaves.

The rise of Afrikaans as a language of literacy and education was in the decade following the Anglo-Boer war *a cause célèbre* of Afrikaner nationalists. In 1908, D. F. Malan expressed the view that; “Raise the Afrikaans language to a written language, let it become the vehicle of our culture, our history, our national ideals, and you will also raise the people who speak it … The Afrikaans Language Movement is nothing less than an awakening of our nation to self-awareness and to the vocation of adopting a more worthy position in world civilization.”

Sensitivities against the social power of English was strikingly registered in 1913 when the Boer leader Martinus Theunis Steyn (former president of the Orange Free State – 1896-1902) cabled the *Kaapsch Taalfest* the following words; “… the language of the conqueror in the mouth of the conquered is the language of the slaves.”

In virtually all historical cases, the removal of the imperial cultural and linguistic imposition or overlay and a resort to the vernacular, opens the way to a renaissance. This happened to the whole of Latinized Europe, with the emergence of Portuguese, Spanish, French and English. This phenomenon includes the more recent case of Afrikaans and the Afrikaners. Afrikaans, Bahasa and Modern Hebrew are the three language miracles of the last hundred years. They are all languages which within a generation have been literally successfully cobbled together to become fully-fledged languages of science and technology equal to any other in the contemporary world. What did it take? It took sense of purpose, vision, political will and the economic wherewithal to achieve this. This is what some of us want to seen done with our languages.

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Closing Remarks
We do not want to be slaves neither do we want to compete with Shakespeare in his own language. We cannot profitably do this. If we try to do this, we will be perpetual second-rate Englishmen not Africans; Walter Bagehot’s “unfit men and beaten races.” We want to move forward with our belongings and on our own cultural steam. To do this we must lay down once and for all, the burden of English.