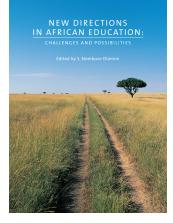# University of Calgary Press

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN AFRICAN EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES
Edited by S. Nombuso Dlamini
ISBN 978-1-55238-564-7

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THE PLACE OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF KENYA

Grace W. Bunyi

ABSTRACT

Nearly five decades after political independence in some countries, education has had little demonstrable impact on the problems that confront the people as development has continued to elude Africa. In this chapter, the author explores how education is the tool to empower the African people to seek and find solutions of the problems that confront them; specifically the author argues that African indigenous knowledge and languages must play greater roles in an education that will lead to greater development of African countries. The author begins by extricating the ties between language, education, and development and underscores the central role of African indigenous knowledge

and languages in Africa's development. She focuses on Kenya as she discusses the socio-political and economic processes that have led to the marginalization of African indigenous knowledge and languages in education before critically analyzing the reasons often given for the non-use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction. The chapter ends with a discussion of the major challenges to the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction and concludes with suggestions to ensure the empowering use of these languages, which she argues will consequently lead to greater socio-economic independence.

INTRODUCTION

The problems that confront African nations at the beginning of the twenty-first century are enormous and permeate all areas of human life. An enumeration of problems that the human race faces reveals Africa taking the lead in nearly all areas. The people of Africa struggle daily with basic problems of hunger, war, and civil strife, and with new and old diseases. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria continue to wreak havoc on their lives, reducing life expectancy rates to below forty years in some countries and impoverishing survivors. Poverty levels in Africa are appalling, with more than half of the populations in many countries having been declared officially poor on account of living on less than one U.S. dollar a day. These everyday problems of the African people are usually characterized as problems of development or the lack of it.

It must be pointed out that this characterization of African countries' problems as problems of development is not entirely new in Africa. Indeed, on the attainment of independence by various countries starting late in the 1950s, African leaders preached the gospel of development. In Kenya, for example, the first president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's rallying call was that all should unite to bring *maendeleo* (the Kiswahili word for development) through tackling three enemies: ignorance, disease, and poverty. Indeed, as is the case today, within the development discourse of the time, education was seen as key to the solution of the other development problems and African governments set about expanding their educational systems with some

success. At the time of independence in Kenya in 1963, there were 6,058 primary and 151 secondary schools with enrolments of 891,553 and 30,121 pupils, respectively. In 2004, there were 17,804 public primary and 3,621 public secondary schools with respective enrolments of 7,122,407 and 923,134 pupils (Government of Kenya, 1998; Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2005). However, rather than rethink and transform the European education models transplanted into Africa courtesy of European missionaries and colonial administrators, African governments adopted these models with slight curriculum changes such as introducing the geography and history of Africa. African indigenous knowledge and culture, which had been disparagingly characterized as primitive and pagan therefore continued to be considered unfit as educational resources and to be excluded from education. Further, African indigenous languages, the symbols of and media through which African knowledge and culture is transmitted, suffered devaluation in colonial society due to their contact with the languages of the political, social, and economic power wielding European colonials in spite of being given some roles in education by some imperial powers such as the British.

Nearly five decades after political independence in some countries, education has had little demonstrable impact on the problems that confront the people as development has continued to elude Africa. In this chapter, I argue that, if education is to empower the African people to seek and find solutions of the problems that confront them and thus contribute to their own and their countries' development, there is need for African indigenous knowledge and languages to play a greater role in education. I start by extricating the ties between language, education, and development and underscoring the central role of African indigenous knowledge and languages in Africa's development. I then focus on Kenya and discuss the socio-political and economic processes that have led to the marginalization of African indigenous knowledge and languages in education before critically analyzing the reasons often given for the non-use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction. The chapter ends with a discussion of the major challenges to the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction.

Economic theories, with their emphasis on economic growth, have traditionally dominated development scholarship. However, development models based solely on economic considerations have been found to be inadequate. Critics of such models have argued that economic growth manifested in improved GNPs or GDPs does not necessarily translate into improved living conditions for the people, and calls have been made for a more expanded view of development (Mohochi, 2005). Supporting an expanded view of development, Bartoli argues that, when viewed widely, development encompasses the general improvement of a people's material well being, with areas of concern including food, health, education, and life expectancy (cited in Mohochi, 2005). This view is in line with the United Nations Development Programme's approach to development, where the concern is with human development, which it holds refers to development of the people, by the people, and for the people (Bartoli, cited in Mohochi, 2005). Participatory development has become the rallying call of this approach to development, which puts the ordinary people at the centre of the development process as active participants in their individual and societal development and transformation. Participatory development is by implication interactive. Since grass root African people interact in their indigenous languages, these languages are key tools in the development process. Further, when there is a disconnect between the language of the leaders and the experts who have been educated in European languages and the language of the people who are proficient only in their indigenous languages, no development can occur, as the two cannot communicate.

A different formulation of the expanded view of development posits that development is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing the socio-cultural, political, and economic spheres of human life. According to Bodomo (n.d.), a comprehensive view of development calls for a complete transformation of the socio-political and economic belief systems of a particular society to suit its present needs. This view places the cultural capital of any society at the centre of its development. Bodomo further argues that, since language is a repository and a tool for the expression and communication of these very socio-cultural, political, and economic belief systems, successful

conceptualization and implementation of this societal transformation can only be achieved through the use of the languages that are indigenous to the society. The implication here is that African indigenous languages have a key role to play in the continent's development. Clearly, whichever way you look at development, language is a key tool and African indigenous languages should be an integral component of the conceptualization and implementation of development efforts.

On the other hand, few would argue with the proposition that education or knowledge is a key development tool. In both Western and African educational thought, cultural transmission has been identified as one of the most fundamental functions of education (Dewey, 1916; Kenyatta, 1953). In this view, a people's culture or indigenous knowledge constitutes the content of education. For centuries before the advent of European education and education systems in Africa, African indigenous knowledge sustained African societies for generations. African indigenous knowledge spans all areas of human life – economic, culture, politics, science, and technology. Using African indigenous knowledge in areas such as agriculture, politics, and medicine, African societies were able to address problems of food security, peaceful co-existence, and health. Though excluded from formal education in the colonial and postcolonial eras, to date, African indigenous knowledge is part of the lived experience of African people, especially the rural poor, and it is stored and communicated in songs, dances, beliefs, proverbs, and folklore. It is also to be found in the social institutions, traditions, and practices of the people.

Development literature acknowledges that indigenous knowledge continues to be an integral part of the culture and history of African local communities and that it continues to be used at the local community level as the basis for decisions pertaining to food security, human and animal health, education, natural resource management, and other vital activities (Gorjestani, n.d.). Indeed, some express the opinion that the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge and accompanying destruction of natural wealth – plants, animals, insects, soils, clean air, and water – and human cultural wealth such as songs, proverbs, folklore, and social-cooperation is the greatest threat to economic stability of the African continent (Burford et al., n.d.). A good indication that African indigenous knowledge continues to be an important resource is the fact that the informal economic

sector, which in some countries represents as much as 50 per cent of the total economic growth, draws from the accumulated skills and expertise and indigenous knowledge systems (Emeagwali, 2003). Emphasizing the importance of indigenous knowledge in development, Abdalla (cited in Mohochi, 2005) states, "third world countries must see development as being first of all based on the assertion of their cultural identity" (p. 3). African indigenous languages are part of indigenous knowledge and culture, which are so crucial to Africa's development.

Many scholars have shown that language is not only part of culture but that it is the repository of culture and therefore embodies culture. Many have emphasized the intricate ties that exist between a language and the culture it symbolizes (Fanon, 1967; Goke-Pariola, 1993; Spencer, 1985). For example, Fanon (1967) states, "To speak [a language] … means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.… A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (pp. 17–18). This statement underscores the fact that a language symbolizes its native speakers' culture and that any language is also constitutive of the culture of those who speak it natively.

Language plays a key role in education and cultural transmission, whether within the indigenous education model, which was and continues to be informal, or the Western model, which is formal. Indeed, few would dispute the contention that language is the tool for education. In the informal education processes, constituted of the interactive activities of children, their parents and/or other caregivers, teaching and learning take place through oral/aural language. Within formal education, it is mainly through verbal interactions between the teacher and the learners and among the learners themselves and through learners interacting with written language by reading and writing that knowledge is constructed and acquired in the teaching-learning process. Indeed, language learning itself is seen by many as an important part of what becoming educated is all about. As Obanya (1999) has observed, "In promoting the development of every child, the primary focus is on language development" (p. 18). Indeed, many of a child's early years in school are spent on developing linguistic skills or what some language and learning scholars have described as learning to use language as a tool for thought (Wells, 1989). In this regard, scholars have argued that, in a multilingual environment, the

use and development of the child's indigenous language in his/her early years of education is best suited for his/her cognitive and emotional development (Cummins, 1981).

European languages that have dominated education in Africa have not been of much help in the African people's development endeavours. Education scholars focused on language issues have argued that only education that is anchored in African indigenous knowledge and languages can serve the goal of national development in Africa. Prah (cited in Brock-Utne, 2005) has, for example, observed thus, "it is the empowerment of Africans with their native languages, which would make the difference between whether Africa develops, or not" (p. 178). On the other hand, Spencer's (1985) observation is worth noting: "No developed or affluent nations, though many of these have minority languages, utilize a language for education and other national purposes which is of external origin and the mother tongue of none, or at most few of its people" (p. 390).

In the foregoing paragraphs, I have tried to explicate the relationship between language, education, and development and to show why it is that any effort aimed at transforming the lives of African people (and through them the countries) must take account of African indigenous knowledge and languages. However, this has not been the case. European languages introduced to Africa through colonialism continue to be the key languages of education in Africa today. In the next section, I focus on Kenya as a case study of the colonial, post-colonial, socio-economic, and political processes that have led to the entrenchment of English in education and the marginalization of indigenous languages and the indigenous cultures that they embody before discussing the impacts that this has had on education.

THE KENYA CASE: SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

There are four language categories in Kenya: African indigenous languages, of which there are over 40 (Abdulazizz, 1982); non-Kenyan languages, including Indo-Asiatic languages and European languages other than English; Kiswahili, Kenya's national language; and, English, the official language. Whereas nearly everybody in Kenya speaks

an indigenous Kenyan language, it is estimated that 75 per cent of the population have varying levels of competence in Kiswahili and that only 15 per cent of the population know English well enough to use it effectively in all areas of life (Abdulaziz, 1982). Although spoken by a small minority, English continues to play the dominant role in education at the expense of indigenous languages.

COLONIAL ROOTS OF THE MARGINALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

The marginalization of Kenyan indigenous languages during British colonial rule had to do with shifts in the reasons why these languages were used in education.[1] The missionaries introduced Western-type education to Kenya in 1844 when Johann Kraph established a mission station at Rabai near the coast. The colonial government only started taking an interest in education in 1909. In this period, the missionaries taught and used the indigenous languages as languages of instruction for ideological reasons. They saw these languages as the most effective in reaching the souls of the Africans and thereby achieving their conversion to Christianity. The missionary interests in proselytization were well served by indigenous languages. Education in the indigenous languages meant that graduates of missionary schools could read the scriptures for themselves and for others.

The teaching of and through African indigenous languages was encouraged in British colonies (Bamgbose, 1991; Spencer, 1974). This was because, unlike the French and the Portuguese colonial powers that sought to assimilate a few Africans into French and Portuguese culture and therefore did not teach indigenous African languages, British colonialism pursued separatist policies. The other colonials with a presence in Kenya were the white farmers, known as white settlers, who were perfectly happy with this racist practice. They supported indigenous language education for Africans, whom they saw as "people destined to till the land" (Crampton, 1986) and therefore not fit to learn English, the language of colonial power. Consequently, in the early part of British colonial rule in Kenya, the practice was to teach indigenous languages and to switch to Kiswahili in Standard 3 and to continue teaching in Kiswahili in junior secondary.

In the latter part of British colonialism in Kenya, indigenous languages were marginalized through the expansion of the teaching of English in African schools. Following the two Beecher Reports of 1942 and 1949, which recommended that English replace Kiswahili as the *lingua franca*, colonial education started to lay more emphasis on the teaching of English. The colonial government's Education Department Annual Report of 1951 called for the teaching of English in the lower classes of primary school, and English as the language of instruction right from Standard 1 was introduced in 1962 (Mbaabu, 1996). According to wa Thiong'o (1981), the colonial government realized that its days were numbered and therefore found it necessary to ensure that in its absence its interests would be served by those Africans who took over power. The colonial government therefore expanded the teaching of English as a way of passing on British values and standards to the incoming African elite.

Consequently, by the end of colonial rule in 1963, the indigenous languages were losing even the small traditionally uncontested roles that they had as the languages of instruction in the first years of school. In addition, there was a tendency among teachers to neglect the teaching of these languages entirely (Gachukia, 1970).

It must be pointed out that the Africans themselves were opposed to teaching of and in the indigenous languages. This is because English had become the language of political power and elevated socio-economic status in Kenya. It was the language spoken by the politically and economically powerful white people and the African functionaries in the colonial civil service. Writing about the situation in Nigeria, in particular, and in British colonial Africa, in general, Goke-Pariola (1993) states that, for the Africans, "To speak that language in itself was power … the local person who understood the White man's language increased his own power dramatically: he became a man before whom others stood in awe" (p. 223). At the same time, insofar as they gained employment in junior positions of the colonial administration, those Africans who acquired English language skills gained inclusion into colonial power. According to wa Thiong'o (1986), in Kenya, "English was the official vehicle and formula to colonial elitedom" (p. 115). Consequently, African parents demanded that their children be taught English. They saw indigenous language education as third-rate education meant to deny them English and hence the economic and political power controlled by those who spoke it.

POSTCOLONIAL EDUCATION AND THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Indigenous languages were dealt an almost fatal blow by the first post-independence education commission in Kenya, popularly known as the Ominde Commission; the blow came through its recommendation that English be the medium of instruction from Standard 1 and characterization of indigenous languages as "essential languages of verbal communication." The commission observed, "We see no cause for assigning to [the indigenous languages] a role for which they are ill adapted, namely, the role of educational medium in the critical early years of schooling" (Republic of Kenya, 1964, p. 60).

The second post-independence education commission, the Gachathi Commission of 1976, subsequently reversed this policy (Republic of Kenya, 1976). However, the attitudes towards indigenous languages expressed in the Ominde Commission Report continue to influence the position of these languages in education. Current language in education policy as regards indigenous languages is that they are to be taught and used as languages of instruction for the first three years of school in linguistically homogeneous areas.[2] According to this policy, indigenous languages have only a bridging role between the language of the home and English, the language of education in Kenya. They do not have a place in the education of Kenyan children beyond Standard 3, and they have no role in the education of all those Kenyan children in linguistically heterogeneous areas. Further, in practice, for various reasons, including the mistaken belief that the earlier English is used as the medium of instruction the more quickly the children will learn it and learn in it and the lack of teaching-learning resources such as textbooks in the indigenous languages, many teachers rush into using English as the language of instruction right from Standard 1.

Currently, the discourse in support of the strengthening of the teaching of English centres on science, technology, and globalization. It is argued that English is the language of science and technology and that school curricula should emphasize computer-based technology and English as the language of such technologies. Further, one hears more and more about the need for Kenya's education system

to produce graduates for the global labour market and therefore the need to emphasize English, the global language.

In addition, there are those who express concern about the falling standards of English and argue for emphasis on the language. For the last three decades or so, Kenyan newspapers have carried articles that decry the poor English skills of primary and even secondary and college students. "The Big English Problem," "Language Experts Concern…," "Declining Standards of English Language…," "English Standards are Falling" are all fairly common features of newspaper article titles. Such articles offer opinions about the causes of the falling standards and suggestions concerning how the teaching and learning of English can be strengthened. In the emerging discourse, indigenous languages are seen as hindrances to the effective learning of English and as languages of little value – languages that cannot take one anywhere.

As already indicated, right from independence in 1963, Kenya has looked to education for the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enable Kenyans to attain development. However, development is not in sight for Kenyans as good numbers of them continue to suffer from the lack of fulfilment of even the most basic needs. Each year, communities living in arid and semi-arid areas are confronted by food shortage problems. In the worst years, several million people are reduced to depending on famine food relief which causes the government to declare the famine a national disaster. Clearly, the Eurocentric, English-language-dominated education has not been of much use to the majority of Kenyans who live in linguistically homogenous communities in the rural areas and draw on their indigenous knowledge for survival.

At the same time, the education system has enormous problems of its own as it struggles towards the United Nation's Education for All (EFA) goals of access, quality, and equity. Educational problems are multidimensional and are often caused by a variety of factors. In the case of education in Africa, language of instruction has been identified as key to the problems (Obanya, cited in Brock-Utne, 2005). In what follows, I discuss some of the problems that are associated with the use of English – a second or even third language for the majority of the learners – as the language of instruction in the primary school in Kenya.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE USE OF ENGLISH AS THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Access

While enrolment figures showed a dramatic rise in 2003 when free primary education[3] was introduced in the country, reports indicate that over 1.7 million primary school age children are still out of school. The children who took advantage of the free primary education policy and re-entered school and the majority of those out of school are children of the poor and marginalized inhabitants of the rural areas and urban slum communities. One would have thought that the very marginalized pastoralist, nomadic, and largely Islamic communities in the North Eastern province, for example, would have taken advantage of the free primary education policy and enrolled their children in school in large numbers. However, extremely low enrolment rates are still common. The province attained a net enrolment ratio of only 19.6 per cent (and a gross enrolment ratio of 26.9 per cent) in 2004. I believe there is a linguistic and cultural explanation that plays into the equation. These low enrolment communities are the same communities that are culturally far removed from the Eurocentric culture of the Kenyan elite and English. The latter are considered the legitimate social capital resources in education in Kenya. These communities, which invest in a different form of social capital, therefore, do not see the need of enrolling their children in school.

The introduction of free primary education as part of the renewed efforts towards universal primary education is an important step in opening up access to the masses of Kenyan children. However, for all Kenyan children to access and benefit from education, their indigenous languages need to play the crucial role of languages of instruction for much of primary education.

Repetition and dropout

It has also been observed that once children enrol in school, many fail to make progress. For example, the Ministry of Education's statistics show that the grade repetition phenomenon is considerable and that the highest repetition rate of 17.2 per cent is at Standard 1 (Ministry

of Education, Science, and Technology, 2003). The report indicates that most of these children repeat because they fail to acquire literacy. The fact that children at this level do not learn how to read and write in Kenyan primary schools is understandable since the official curriculum expects them to acquire literacy in two or three languages – English, Kiswahili, and the indigenous languages – simultaneously. It would make better sense for the curriculum to be designed so as to allow children to acquire initial literacy skills first in their indigenous languages, which they already know and which they would therefore learn to read in more easily. They could then transfer the skills to acquiring literacy in Kiswahili and then English (Cummins, 1981).

Furthermore, school dropout rates in Kenya are high. Less than half of the children who enrol in Standard 1 complete the eight years of primary education. Many reasons contribute to children dropping out of school. One of these must surely be their experience of schooling. Owing to the use of English as the medium of instruction, many children do not have empowering school experiences. Obanya (cited in Brock-Utne, 2005) has pointed out:

> It has always been felt by African educators that the African child's major learning problem is a linguistic problem. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough. (p. 173)

In agreeing with Obanya, Brock-Utne (2005) asserts that the major learning problem for the African child is linguistic; if the children lack the language of the school they are "stamped as dumb." I would argue that such experiences cause many children to drop out of school.

Educational outcomes

Educational outcomes, even when narrowly measured by students' achievement in national examinations and other types of assessment tests, are low in Kenya. For example, there are indications that Kenyan primary school learners are not attaining literacy skills necessary for successful learning. The 1998 SACMEQ criterion-referenced English reading test administered to a representative national sample indicated that 77 per cent of Kenyan Standard 6 pupils had not attained the English reading mastery level deemed desirable for successful learning in Standard 7 (UNESCO IIEP, 2001).

On the other hand, in a report accompanying the 2005 issue of the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination results, the Kenya National Examinations Council reported that some of the candidates should not have gone beyond Standard 1 as they had not learned anything by the time they sat for the examination in Standard 8. According to the report, in the English composition paper, some candidates spent their examination time copying the lead sentence over and over again instead of constructing a piece of narrative in line with the sentence.

The above learning achievement reports suggest that many Kenyan children are leaving school before they acquire basic literacy – perhaps the least of the skills that are controlled by the school. This is not helping Kenya's fight against illiteracy. Reports indicate that there are over 4 million illiterate Kenyans – a figure that comprises those adults and out-of-school youth who have never enrolled in school and those who enrolled but got little in the way of literacy skills out of the experience.

Curriculum and pedagogy

The quality of education in Kenyan primary schools is poor. Classroom ethnographers who have sought to document classroom processes reveal that the use of English as the language of instruction is associated with intellectually unchallenging curriculum and pedagogy. I will use data from my study of language use in a rural Standard 1 class to demonstrate this.

From my discussions with the teachers in this school, I found that because of their lack of English on arrival in school, the children in this school were being characterized as having learning problems. The headmaster of the school told me, "Language is another problem we have especially in lower primary. Because the children come without any knowledge of English, they take a long time before they can understand and communicate in English."

The teachers in the school also constantly told me that the children did not learn easily and that they did not understand easily. The Standard 1 teacher explained that her solution to the "learning problems" of these students was to keep repeating the same thing over and over again. She said, "You have to keep repeating so that they understand and you keep repeating what you have already done so that they don't forget."

The following excerpts from a reading lesson in Standard 1 illustrate what the teacher was saying. The lesson started with the reading of the new words in the text as follows. In the excerpts, *T* stands for teacher, *SS* for students and *T* and *SS* for teacher and students:

T:	So let us first of all read the new words. The new words are on page 17. Okay. The first word here is ride. Say riding.
SS:	Riding.
T:	Riding.
SS:	Riding.
T:	Again.
SS:	Riding.
T:	Once again.
SS:	Riding.

The other two new words in the reading text, "reading," and "bean-bag" were treated in the same manner. The reading activity then moved into reading of sentences and proceeded as follows:

T:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T and *SS*:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T and *SS*:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T and *SS*:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.
T:	Again.
T and *SS*:	Tom has a book and Mary has a book too.

The teacher then asked different groups of children to read the sentence and then individuals. The sentences "Tom is reading his book and Mary is reading her book" and "Tom's book is green and Mary's book is green too" were read in the same manner. This is how these Standard 1 children were introduced to reading. They spent most of their reading time repeating pieces of the reading text after the teacher over and over again. Some of the children did not have the reading textbooks while others did not even bother to look at what was being read but they "read" nevertheless. Clearly, for many of these children, reading translated into memorizing bits of the reading text. In content area subjects lessons, these learners spent much of their learning time participating in oral/aural drills during which

they mindlessly repeated bits and pieces of supposedly important information – usually that which was likely to appear in examinations and other school-based assessments. Writing activities in their turn engaged the learners in copying from the blackboard or textbooks and doing endless fill-in-the-blanks exercises. These repetitive, boring, and intellectually unchallenging learning activities constituted the experienced curriculum for these Standard 1 children.

These lessons fall within what Freire (1970) has referred to as the "banking model" of education. Freire argues that the banking model of education treats learners as empty vessels to be filled by the teacher, rather than as active participants in the production and acquisition of knowledge. According to Freire, this model of education does not empower the learner to take charge of his or her own life and transform it. In Africa, education that is non-transformatory is insufficient; given the role that education is expected to play in the development and transformation of African societies.

Equity

The discussion on the colonial roots of the marginalization of indigenous languages revealed that the introduction of Western education in Kenya in the colonial era led to social stratification based on English-language skills and education. The privileged few Africans who gained some education and English-language skills constituted the new elites. Through the use of English as the language of education, the new elite has been reproduced and strengthened. School ethnography studies have documented these social reproduction processes. In my study, for example, I documented classroom interactional processes in two primary schools and demonstrated that children from elite backgrounds and those from poor backgrounds received unequal educational treatments (Bunyi, 2001). While the class with elite background children was exposed to a fairly challenging and interesting curriculum, the reverse was the case in the class with poor background children. I argue that such differential treatment leads to educational success and social mobility for the elite children and to educational failure and social stagnation for the non-elite children.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted some educational problems that are associated with the use of English as the medium of instruction in primary schools in Kenya. In spite of these problems, several reasons for not using indigenous languages as languages of

instruction in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa have been advanced. Obanya (1999) refers to these reasons as popular fallacies. I will now critically discuss some of these popular fallacies.

POPULAR FALLACIES ABOUT INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LANGUAGES AS LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION

There are too many languages

It is often argued that, because of the multiplicity of indigenous languages, it is difficult to choose one as the language of instruction as this would be seen as favouring the community that speaks the language natively. This argument does not hold for Kenya since we have the national language Kiswahili, which could be used as the language of instruction in the primary school as in Tanzania without much ethnic resistance. Furthermore, research has shown that rural and urban poor Kenyan children are more comfortable speaking Kiswahili and find it easier to learn than English (Muthwii, 2002).

In her critique of the too many languages argument, Brock-Utne (2005) has written about what she calls the myth of the many languages of Africa and argued, "The demographics of language and linguistic diversity in Africa are not really different from what obtains in other parts of the world" (p. 176). Brock-Utne blames the missionaries for the fragmentation of African languages in their work of identifying linguistic communities and developing orthographies. She singles out the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) for criticism for continuing to fragment African languages in its work.[4] Brock-Utne argues that the fragmentation of African indigenous languages serves the economic interests of the strong publishing industry in the West, while working against the use of these languages as languages of instruction.

Costs of the production of materials and teacher training

The cost of producing teaching-learning materials and training teachers in all the indigenous languages is often said to be prohibitive.

However, language in education scholars have been quick to point out that the African children's educational failure as manifested in high school dropout and repetition rates, poor learning achievement, and poor educational outcomes such as low literacy rates are all due to the use of European languages and carry an even higher cost (Bamgbose, 1991; Brock-Utne, 2005; Obura, 1986).

At the same time, there are examples of cost-effective ways of producing indigenous language teaching-learning materials in Africa. These include the Rivers Readers Project, which began in 1970 in Nigeria with the aim of producing literacy materials in twenty minority languages. The project showed that, by making use of uniform formats and illustrations and by using cheaper materials, it is possible to reduce the production costs of teaching-learning materials considerably (Williamson, 1976). With advancement in technology and the advent of desktop publishing, the costs of producing materials can be brought down even lower.

Indigenous languages are underdeveloped

The argument here is that African indigenous languages lack terms to express scientific and technological concepts, which constitute a big portion of school subjects, while many are yet to acquire orthographies. Fortunately, no one denies that African indigenous languages like other languages have the potential to develop to meet the communicative needs of their users. It is in fact because the need to use the languages in education has not arisen that they continue to lack the necessary linguistic resources (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994). Once the need is created, African indigenous languages have risen to the occasion, as was the case in Tanzania when Kiswahili became the language of instruction for the entire primary level.

On the other hand, developing orthographies for indigenous African languages is not an impossible task. What is required is commitment and determination. Nineteenth-century European missionaries with less training and resources than are available in Africa today developed orthographies for some of the languages. Though criticized for fragmenting indigenous languages, the fact that SIL is cost-effectively developing orthographies for many minority languages in Africa is proof that it can be done.

Use of indigenous languages threatens national unity

It has been argued that current boundaries in Africa were *concocted* by European colonial powers at conference tables in Berlin in 1885, rather than being *natural*, and that therefore African countries are made up of peoples of varied ethno-linguistic backgrounds (Laitin, 1992). Consequently, an emphasis on indigenous languages in education might lead to divisiveness and ethnic tensions. However, linguistic homogeneity has not always engendered peace in Africa, as ethnic wars in Somalia where Somali is the sole language and in Rwanda with Kinyaruanda is the sole language have shown. Further, as Pattanayak (1988) has observed, "'languages' do not quarrel. When representatives of languages do, the reasons are mostly extra-linguistic" (p. 380). More often than not, the reasons for the ethnic tensions have to do with the sharing of power and resources among the various linguistic groups in the country. Furthermore, it can also be argued that, whereas indigenous languages may divide people along ethnic lines, English divides people along class lines. Divisions along ethnic lines are more visible and therefore quicker to detect than divisions along class lines, which are hegemonic and therefore less obvious and thus difficult to detect and resolve.

In the above discussion, I have tried to demonstrate that critical analyses of the reasons that are often given to justify the non-use of African indigenous languages in education do not hold much water. These reasons leave the question: "Why have African indigenous languages not been given their rightful role (i.e., that of languages of instruction) in the education of African children?" without a satisfactory answer. In the next section, to conclude this chapter, I offer what I consider to be the real explanation, which I refer to as major challenges.

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AS LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION

The major challenges that confront the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction can be appreciated by looking inwardly

at the postcolonial community itself and outwardly at how the community is positioned in relation to the globally powerful First World nations (Stroud, 2000). Within the community, language attitudes of both the elite and the non-elite denigrate indigenous languages and legitimize European languages. This is so because, for the elite, European languages constitute a valued resource that they have access to and control over – a resource that they can use to benefit not only locally but also in the global labour marketplace (Mazrui, 1997, cited in Stroud, 2000). The non-elite, on the other hand, see their lack of the European language as the reason for their marginalization, and therefore in their misguided view that more means better, they want their children taught in European languages as early as possible. Consequently, education policies and practices around language promote the use of European languages for instruction as early as possible; thus excluding indigenous languages from education gets the support of all in the community.

The above formulation mirrors the situation in Kenya where, even when poor primary school students, their parents, and teachers admit that the students have difficulties understanding lessons taught in English, they still say that they prefer English as the language of instruction (Muthwii, 2002). The elite in their turn have no doubt that English should remain the language of instruction. They argue that education should prepare one to work anywhere in the world and that since English is the global language it should receive emphasis in the school.

At a global level, African countries' economic dependence on the developed world countries leaves them little room for cultural, political, and even educational self-determination. Stroud (2000) has argued that the problems faced by African indigenous languages are not about inadequate resources or even about education; "they are fundamentally about who is to exercise the power of deciding what social and symbolic capital should accrue to different languages" (p. 4). In summing up this theoretical formulation, Stroud (2000) says that the problems that indigenous languages face are basically "problems of deprivation, marginality, and poverty of the speakers of the languages" (p. 3). In their encounter with the languages of the economically and politically powerful nations, as in the colonial era, African indigenous languages have a poor start as languages of the socio-economically and politically powerless.

Further, education in African countries is heavily dependent on foreign donor support. Such support, especially from former colonial powers, comes with economic interests of the publishing companies back home, which are better served through education in European languages (Brock-Utne, 2005). To push their cultural and linguistic agenda, donor countries such as Britain place strong cultural institutions such as the British Council in their former colonies. The imperialistic mandate of the British Council is to promote and transform the English language into a world language (Ogunjimi, 1995).

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the problems African indigenous languages face are both those that are from the local discourses and those that are global in making. Since the problems emanate from dependence, Africa will have to come up with development models that look into the strengths within Africa so as to be empowered enough to take charge of its own development.

All the same, African children cannot wait until the problem of Africa's dependence on others is solved to receive a meaningful education. Implementation of transformatory language in education policies and practices must be part of the process of overcoming dependence. Tanzania is often cited as one of the few African countries that transformed education by making Kiswahili, a language spoken fluently by more than 95 per cent of the population, the language of instruction throughout primary education through its Swhilization policy of 1967. English is introduced as a subject in Standard 3, taking over as the language of instruction in the secondary school (Rubanza, 1998).[5] Tanzania has therefore chosen to have only two languages (Kiswahili and English) in education and has not provided any educational role for its more than 120 indigenous languages (Rubanza, 1998).

I would not recommend the two-language Tanzanian model for Kenya. For one, unlike in Tanzania, although Kiswahili serves as the *lingua franca* in Kenya, a variety of other indigenous languages are the only languages spoken fluently by a large majority of Kenyans, especially those living in the rural areas. Secondly, adopting the two-language model in education in Kenya would signal the beginning of the death of the currently vibrant indigenous languages. Thus, even in the context of globalization, I believe that education should lead the way in the revaluing of indigenous Kenyan languages and through them the indigenous knowledge they symbolize and carry.

However, a policy that could be interpreted as denying children English would be undesirable and not acceptable to the elite and the poor alike. Consequently, I believe that Kenya would do well to seriously implement the three-language model (indigenous Kenyan languages, Kiswahili, and English) already implied in current policy with some modifications.

My proposal is that *all* Kenyan children learn an indigenous language from Standard 1 to 8 and that they be examined in the language in which they learn. This will ensure that *all* children are taught the languages equally. Currently, when indigenous languages are taught, they are taught only in the rural area, which causes them to be negatively regarded. Kiswahili and English should be introduced in Standard 1 but only the oral/aural forms so as to allow students to attain literacy in the indigenous languages – the languages they already know – first. As regards the language of instruction, I would propose that indigenous languages be used from Standard 1 to 5 instead of up to Standard 3 as current policy stipulates. This is so as to allow children to acquire meaningful English competence levels to enable it to be used as a medium for learning other subjects. I would propose a gradual switch so that some subjects such as social studies and literature in the form of oral literature can continue to be taught in the indigenous languages right up to the end of the primary school level.

All the same, owing to the complex socio-linguistic context in Kenya, a uniform language of instruction policy may not be workable. For example, there should be provisions for children who speak Kiswahili or even English in their homes and community – and who therefore have higher linguistic competencies in these languages than in indigenous languages – to use them as languages of instruction from Standard 1, with those using Kiswahili switching to English in Standard 5 just like those using the indigenous languages. I believe that what all parents want is that their children experience school success and receive a good education in order to improve their quality of life. The implication here is that the quality of education in schools using indigenous languages and Kiswahili as language of instruction should be as good as, if not better than, the quality of education provided in the schools using English as the language of instruction in Standards 1 to 5. This has implications for teacher training and retraining, as well as for teaching-learning materials production and availability.

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Notes

1   Colonial education was based on racial segregation with separate schools and curricula for the whites, the Asians, and the Africans.

2   English is taught from Standard 1 and is the medium of instruction in all schools from Standard 3 onwards. Kiswahili is taught as a compulsory and examinable subject from Standard 1 to Form 4 – the end of the secondary level.

3   Under this program, no direct fees or levies are charged and children are supplied with teaching-learning materials such as text books.

4   SIL has a significant presence in Africa, where it works in more than two hundred languages in over twenty countries (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997). In Kenya, SIL works under the auspices of a local NGO – Bible Translation and Literacy – whose objective is to develop minority languages.

5   Initially, the plans were that Kiswahili would eventually be used as the language of instruction at all levels of education including tertiary.