

COLONIALISM AND LINGUISTIC DILEMMAS IN AFRICA: CAMEROON AS A PARADIGM

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Africa is the richest and most variegated continent on earth: geographically, climatically, historically, culturally, linguistically and resource-wise. That much is a palpable fact, requiring neither proof nor, for our purpose here, any further elaboration or analysis. Africa is also, paradoxically, the poorest continent on earth. Precisely because of its variegated riches, Africa is the most exploitable as well as exploited continent on earth. So it is on account of its exploitation and exploitability that Africa can be called a paradoxical continent: the richest as well as the poorest continent on earth.

The colonial intervention which, of course, lies on the same continuum with the slave trade, is, without doubt, the most important experience in the human history of Africa. And the most important single event in the colonial history of Africa is, arguably, the Berlin Conference of 1884 during which European imperial nations, like good hunters, stood over the map of Africa, like a game, and, with their imperial pens (penknives?) quartered her up amongst themselves, for its exploitable resources, with regard for neither the linguistic, cultural nor political state of affairs on the continent.

The imposition of European languages and systems of education on Africans followed the "partitioning of Africa" as necessary and inevitable corollaries, corrugates and support structures of colonial activities whose impetus, motive force and overriding aim remained economic domination and exploitation. It is possible but quite idle to speculate on what the history and situation of Africa might have been without the colonial experience. The experience itself is now simply an unalterable part and parcel of African history. It is a historical datum comparable to an individual's having been born or brought up at a particular place or time. *Post factum*, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about it. This, of course, does not mean that some of the effects of that experience cannot or should not be altered. But recognising the irreversibility of the colonial experience itself is important in determining which of its enduring effects can be changed and arguing for those which should be changed. No matter how bitter and unpalatable (or sweet for that matter), the colonial history *is* the history of Africa and any attempt to run away from this concrete historical fact cannot but create a certain egocentric predicament. I am, of course, quite aware that calling historical events "facts" might raise problems of meaning at a certain philosophical level. I am equally aware that we cannot separate history qua history from present selectivity and interpretation. Nevertheless, I hope that the meaning of my claims here is not only quite clear but relatively uncontroversial.

Now, as already mentioned, one of the inevitable corollaries of colonialism was the imposition of European languages and systems of education in Africa. Today, eleven decades after the Berlin Conference, and almost four decades after the beginning of the end of the overt colonialism, African countries, with scarcely any exceptions, created through historical circumstances, find themselves facing many dilemmas among which some of the most controversial are linguistic dilemmas. There is no African country which is not a linguistically plural country, with the colonially inherited languages vying with several indigenous languages. In Cameroon, for instance, with a population of about 12.5 million, the colonially inherited official languages are English and French, superimposed on about 240 indigenous languages. The linguistic dilemma facing African countries can be very simply stated: Should African countries (themselves colonial creations) continue using the languages and systems of education inherited from colonialism or jettison these as undesirable colonial legacies in preference for indigenous languages and systems of education?

In the face of this dilemma, my suggestion is basically that African countries should seize the dilemma by both horns; that is to say, that, while reversing the colonial policy whereby the indigenous languages were purposely marginalised, they should continue to use the colonial legacies, which, if properly domesticated, can serve very well as vehicles for national unity, integration development, as well as for international and global interaction. Such a suggestion might be called "utilitarian" or "instrumentalist" or "pragmatist" in quite an ordinary and obvious sense. But I wouldn't want to be drawn here into the philosophical controversies surrounding these terms.² As philosophical theories, I consider both utilitarianism, pragmatism and instrumentalism, in fact, to be untenable. But in a non-philosophical sense, I have no problem with any of them and consider all of them, in fact, indispensable in our day to day living.

In fact I should go as far as claiming that, properly used, the African educational and linguistic legacies of colonialism are rather positive and beneficial unintended effects of the colonial enterprise. That being the case, I consider it undesirable for Africans to continue bemoaning either colonialism in general or the particular fact that European languages and systems of education were colonially imposed on them. Such an attitude is likely to obscure or even completely negate the possible benefits that can be reaped (drawn) from the experience of colonialism and its surviving legacies.

Cameroon as a Paradigm

When we consider the problems and dilemmas created in Africa by colonialism, the case of "Bilingual" Cameroon stands out as an unparalleled paradigm, to the extent that, if a satisfactory solution is discovered or invented there, it would be easily applicable to all other African countries. I have placed scare-quotes

around "bilingual" for reasons that would be apparent soon. I have said "Cameroon" simply, in order to avoid also putting scare-quotes around the expression "Republic of Cameroon" for reasons that should equally be evident shortly. Some Cameroonians would go as far as insisting that the name "Cameroon" should always be written within quotes because of the fact that the name was coined and given by some Portuguese navigator-adventurers on account of the remarkable quantities of prawns (shrimps, crayfish, njang) called "cameroes" or something of the sort in their own language that they discovered at the mouth of the Wouri River towards the end of the 15th century. But my view of history in general and of names in particular is such that I don't believe we need to go that far.

Cameroon is often very appropriately called *Africa in Miniature*. Cameroon is indeed like a summary or pocket edition of Africa. In Cameroon, all the macroscopic problems of Africa as well as its potentialities are microscopically present. If we turn the map of Africa to look like a pistol, Cameroon would be the trigger. Cameroon is the meeting if not the melting point of the colonial legacies of the leading imperial nations on earth: Germany, Britain and France. Cameroon's geographical, biological, historical and cultural diversity leaves out little of real significance that exists elsewhere on the African continent. The major ecosystems and climatic zones, the flora and fauna of the continent are all to be found in Cameroon; so are the different races - from the pigmies of the south-east through the coastal Bantu Negroes, through the Sudanese Negroes of the savannah middle belt to the Arabs of the far north. Cameroon's population is also composed of almost equal proportions of traditional religionists (39%), Christians (40%) and Islamists (21%) - a perfect case of that triple heritage to which Kwame Nkrumah and Ali Mazrui have drawn so much attention, where traditional African, Euro-Christian and Islamic values meet, mix and mingle.

In terms of economic resources, Cameroon is self-sufficient in domestic food production, and produces in exportable quantities almost everything that can be produced in other parts of Africa: Cocoa, Coffee, Tea, Groundnuts, Bananas, Cotton, Palm Produce, Timber, Petroleum and countless fruits. With about 240 (236 exactly according to linguistic experts) indigenous languages and corresponding tribes, Africa's rich linguistic and cultural diversity finds eloquent instantiation in Cameroon. Shaped like a triangle, Cameroon is the perfect compromise between circles and squares. But Cameroon is also that singular country in Africa where you find the squarest pegs in the roundest holes. In spite of its enormous human and natural resources, Cameroon is today, like many other African countries, a beggar-nation, the hardship level of whose ordinary citizens has assumed really alarming proportions.

Some Historical Signposts

According to historians, one of the Kings of the Douala area of Cameroon (King Bell) signed a commercial treaty with the English in 1856. Subsequently, all the kings of the area wrote a joint letter to Queen Victoria inviting England to establish a "protectorate" over the area. But as her Britannic Majesty bid her royal time in answering, the Douala kings, in disappointment, turned to the Germans who quickly set up a "protectorate" in 1884. The English later arrived (a few weeks too late) with a mandate from Queen Victoria to do what the Germans had just done but, to their disappointment, they saw the German flag already flapping triumphantly in the Douala breeze.

At the Berlin Conference of 1884, Germany's colonial lordship over Cameroon was confirmed. The Germans then set up their capital at Buea on the slopes of Mount Cameroon (Fako) with a relatively cold climate free of mosquitos, and from there consolidated their grip over Cameroon. The peace-loving peoples of the coastal areas were easily bribed with exotic European products such as spirits and mirrors etc. The politically very well organised kingdoms of the hinterland had to be subdued by military force. By the eve of the First World War (1914) the Germans were in total colonial control of the country. But when the Germans were defeated in the war, they lost Cameroon along with all their other African colonies. The League of Nations took control and placed the western part of Cameroon under British mandate and the eastern part under French mandate, an arrangement which the United Nations confirmed in 1945 when it replaced the League of Nations.

The British administered their own part of Cameroon which came to be known as "British Cameroons", composed of "Northern Cameroons" and "Southern Cameroons", from Lagos as a part of Nigeria, their largest African colony. In the part under French mandate (French Cameroons) agitation for independence started as early as 1948 when the UPC (Union des Populations du Cameroun) was founded by Felix Moumie, Ruben Um Nyobe, Ernest Ouandie and A. Kingue. The programme of the UPC was centred around the slogan "Immediate Independence and Unification". The French were not amused. They savagely suppressed the UPC and it went underground. Some of its militants escaped to Southern Cameroons. The UPC rebellion continued in French Cameroons especially in the Bassa and Bamileke regions through "independence" which the French "granted" on January 1st 1960. The country became known as La Republique du Cameroun. The rebellion was not definitively crushed until 1971.

Meanwhile, in Cameroon under British mandate, parliamentary democracy was flourishing with several parties in lively and healthy competition. The first ever elections were won by the KNC (Kamerun National Convention) which formed a government under the leadership of Dr. E.M.L. Endeley. In

1959 the ruling party lost heavily to the opposition party, KNDP (Kamerun National Democratic Party) and John Ngu Foncha headed a new government.

Nigeria gained her own independence on 1st October 1960 as a Federal Republic. Then the United Nations proposed a plebiscite in Cameroon under British mandate with two options:

(a) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Federal Republic of Nigeria?

or

(b) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Republic of Cameroon?

As one of the kings of the hinterland, Fon Achirimbi II of Bafut, remarked about this proposal, it was a choice between "Fire and the Deep Sea". But for some obscure reasons, the third option of simply achieving independence as an autonomous country was not proposed. My own conjecture here is that, given the lack of firm grip that the British had had in this area, and given the phoney "independences" that the colonialists were now arranging all over Africa, they did not want to take the risk of having a truly independent country at the "trigger" of Africa, especially in an area where traditional rule had clearly demonstrated its capabilities and potentialities.

Be that as it may, the UN conducted plebiscite took place on February 11th 1961, and Southern Cameroonians voted overwhelmingly (70,49%) to achieve independence by joining La Republique du Cameroun while Northern Cameroons opted for remaining as a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

After the plebiscite, a constitutional conference was held in the border town of Foumban between Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroun during which a Federal system was adopted with a provision (Article 49) that any attempt to abolish it would be null and void. And so the Federal Republic of Cameroon came into being, composed of two federated states: West Cameroon (capital, Buea) and East Cameroon (capital, Yaounde).

Things went on fairly smoothly in the Federal Republic of Cameroon, a bilingual and bi-cultural (English & French) country with three parliaments, two legal systems (Common Law and Napoleonic Law), two educational systems, two administrative systems and two peoples with different collective experiences, orientations and outlooks, trying to understand and learn from each other in a bold experiment at nation-building.³ Until 1966. In September 1966, Alhaji Ahmadou Ahidjo, the leader of East Cameroon who was now the President of the Federal Republic while John Ngu Foncha, the leader of West Cameroon was his vice, tricked the leaders of all the other political parties to sink their differences and merge into a single party. The result was the CNU (Cameroon National Union). Now under a one party state, he moved fast to assume dictatorial powers and set up a highly efficient network of state espionage and repression. Then in 1972, he organised what he called a "referendum" proposing a unitary state. Not surprisingly, his proposal "won" by 99.99% of the votes

supposed to have been cast. Then, by decree, Ahidjo changed the name of the country from Federal Republic of Cameroon to United Republic of Cameroon.

In 1982, Ahidjo suddenly resigned, for reasons that remain extremely mysterious up to the present, and handed over power to one of his most loyal acolytes, Paul Biya. In 1984, Paul Biya, without any more need to pretend a referendum, issued a decree reverting the name of the country to La Republique du Cameroun, the name of French East Cameroon before Reunification! At that point, most Southern Cameroonians became convinced of what a few among them had started whispering as far back as 1966, namely, that there was a covert policy to destroy the historical, legal, administrative and educational foundations of Southern Cameroons so as to assimilate it into the Francophonie. The period, spanning a decade, from 1984 to the present, is current affairs. So I will not go into that here.⁴

It should now be clear why the name La Republique du Cameroun (Republic of Cameroon) is highly problematic for all historically conscious patriotic Cameroonians. The name signifies either an act of unilateral opting out from the 1961 Union on the part of East Cameroon, as some West Cameroonians have argued, or an act of assimilation of West Cameroon into East Cameroon. The present name of the country ought to be changed. For while there may be nothing in a name, that does not mean that you should join your neighbour and start answering his/her own name. My suggestion is that the country should revert simply to KAMERUN in its German form. This would remind everybody of why an anglophone state and a francophone state ever thought of merging to form one potential nation. It is also the best face-saving solution for the regime of His Excellency Paul Biya and its external (mis)advisers. This is a suggestion whose reasonableness, appropriateness and advantageousness seem to me self-evident. I therefore will not only not waste any time trying to prove the obvious but will also immediately start practising what I am preaching by using the name KAMERUN throughout the rest of this essay.

The official national languages of Kamerun are English and French. And for this reason, Kamerun is usually inappropriately referred to as a bilingual country. As already mentioned, there are 236 indigenous languages in Kamerun which had been there long before English and French came into the scene. And besides these, there is also Pidgin English which predates both English and French in Kamerun and is, perhaps, more widely spoken though less widely written than both English and French. Kamerun is more appropriately described as a multilingual country and many Kamerunians are, in fact, multilinguists. What is true of Kamerun here is equally true of most other African countries.

My Contention

My contention is that, although colonialism was an evil thing in itself, there is no need for African countries, its victims, to continue bemoaning this historical fact and that some of its corollaries such as modern education and the European languages which were the vectors of its introduction can be considered as rather beneficial unintended effects, the silver linings, as it were, on the dark clouds of the colonial nightmare, and put to very good use as vehicles of national unity and integration, modernisation and global dialogue.

The fact that the past is completely determined and out of our reach whereas the future is, at least partly and in very important ways, still open and therefore influenceable by us, makes the first part of my thesis so evidently true as to be almost trivial. But that something is evidently the case does not, unfortunately, necessarily imply that people see it as such. The history of a people, any people, and the African continent in this particular case, is simply the sum-total of what has happened to them/it in the past. It goes without saying, therefore, that there is nothing that can be done about it. Historical reality is immutable although this fact is quite compatible with attempted falsifications of history. History lies outside the realm of prescriptivity and should accordingly, be approached quite dispassionately. This does not, of course, imply that we cannot or should not draw lessons from history but only that is completely useless, almost irrational, to bemoan history just as it is completely useless, almost irrational, to regret one's biodata such as race, place and time of birth, gender etc. These are things that can and should simply be accepted and then put to whatever prescriptive uses.

The second part of my thesis is, admittedly, more controversial and more difficult to demonstrate. The "western system of education" through the medium of European languages was introduced in Africa for colonial purposes. Nevertheless, I am contending, this was inextricably linked with certain very important advantages. One of these was introduction to a system of education that is more modern than most indigenous African systems of education. The new system of education was based on writing whereas traditional African education was based mostly on orality. The advantages of writing over oral tradition are too obvious to need any cataloguing here.⁵

Without writing, science, in its broadest signification, is impossible. There is no implication here that Africans were incapable of developing writing. In fact, some Africans, such as Njoya, king of the Bamouns in Kamerun, did invent an indigenous *Mvem* script. But the fact is that, for historical reasons, such indigenous forms of writing did not develop to gain wide usage. There are some people who urge that Kamerun, for instance, should retrieve, develop and use the *Mvem* script in place of modern writing to prove that, without the colonial interference, Africa would have developed and modernised quite satisfactorily. But that would be a costly and pointless exercise. With few putative exceptions, all

other scripts have today been superseded by modern writing (Latin Alphabet). Most other scripts ever invented will remain, for the foreseeable future, only of historical-anthropological-archaeological interest. Notable exceptions here would be such scripts as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew and Korean which are more of symbols of national identity than international scripts.

Cultures as Circles Within a Circle

Modern writing belongs to no particular people, country, nation, race or continent. Modern writing belongs to human culture in general. Similarly, modern education which uses modern writing as its chief implement is not the property of any one culture, people, race, nation or continent. As an aspect of human culture in general, it belongs equally to all human cultures and any culture that neglects it or completely refuses to avail itself of it does so at its own risk, the risk of disappearing rather quickly.

It is by modifying at will the content (to a lesser extent) and the uses (most importantly and to the greater extent) of modern education and not by trying to fashion a distinctively unique system of education that any people, nation, culture etc. can put their unmistakable stamp on their education.

It is a matter for grave concern that some Africans think of such things as science, technology, engineering etc. as being aspects of western (white) culture which Africans, for reasons of racial dignity, independence and patriotism should abandon and create their own "authentic" equivalents of them. This is a fatally wrong way of thinking and looking at things. These things, no matter to whom credit may be due for their invention and development, are aspects of human culture in general. Africans (like any other people) can put their own distinctive stamp on these only by contributing new developments to them and, most importantly, by the uses to which they put them. Are there not black people and Africans in particular who have contributed significantly to the development of science, technology and engineering as well as those who instruct white students in these things in Europe and America etc? Would this be possible if these things were distinctively exclusive aspects of western (white) culture as some people would have us believe?

As I have argued elsewhere⁶, cultures can be considered as forming intersecting and overlapping concentric circles within a circle (delimiting human from non-human cultures) and no particular human culture is as distinctive and exclusive as appearances and some people might lead us to think. Something that is of relevance to all human cultures is certainly more important than something that is relevant to only a particular culture or people. And to discover or invent or develop something that is relevant or important for human culture in general is necessarily to lose the copyright or patent over it. Which particular person, people or culture can claim exclusive right over the invention or devel-

opment of, say, fire, agriculture, cooking, building, clothing, etc? None. Because these are achievements and aspects of human culture in general. The same is true of writing, science, technology, electricity etc. All peoples and nations and cultures have contributed in varying degrees to make these what they are.

The fact that a particular person, people or culture invented something is no guarantee that others who are only benefiting from the invention as an aspect of human culture may not supersede him/them/it in its use and further development. These are things over which national or cultural pride, on the one hand, and shame, on the other, are quite out of place. The Chinese invented gunpowder but it was Europeans who eventually made the most effective use of it to spread their imperialism. Just as Europeans invented or, at any rate, fabricate sophisticated torture equipments and dictators of the so-called third world have excelled in their use. Mathematics was invented by Africans (Arabs and ancient Egyptians) but today it is made use of by all people on earth to the extent that some people including even some Africans think that mathematics is foreign to African culture. Even with such very cultural things as art and music, African music and art have been appropriated by Europe and America and turned into multi-billion "hard" currency industries.

Language and Pragmatism

Now, what about language? For, if the colonially introduced systems of education along with writing should be considered as advantageous by-products of colonialism on account of being aspect of human culture in general, surely the same cannot be said of the colonial languages? The same modern education using writing can surely avail itself of the indigenous African languages as vectors of that education. Why not? This is where my pragmatism without philosophical antecedents or underpinnings comes in. My position here is that, where a viable international indigenous *lingua franca* exists, as in East Africa, for example, it should certainly be used without any further ado as the main vector of the educational system. But where no such *lingua franca* as yet exists, as in Kamerun, for instance, the best option would be to carry the education in both indigenous languages and an international language, as far as desirable and practicable in each case. African countries are pure creations of historical circumstances, legacies of colonialism. And the most realistic approach is to make the best of a bad situation within the colonially inherited boundaries until such a time that regional co-operation and pan-Africanism might be in a position to salvage from some of the damage done by the Berlin Conference and help towards more deliberate and rational modification of national boundaries. So, when I advocate the colonially inherited languages for African countries, it is, first and foremost, for purposes of internal communication and only secondarily for external use.

Nations or countries or continents which possess a single language are usually thought of and described as being lucky. But this is because the full potential advantages of linguistic pluralism have not yet been contemplated or drawn. Linguistic pluralism should bring to any people the richness of variety, variation, differing world-views and perspectives and the wide range of possible choices implied in such a situation. The idea considered by some an ideal of *one nation - one people - one language* in no way signifies an indispensable and indivisible hallowed trinity. The idea of *one nation - one people - several languages* signifies a potentially superior alternative. The potential advantages of linguistic pluralism should be very similar to the advantages of, say, democracy over monolithic dictatorship. A dictatorship is a system which depends on a single person's wisdom while a democracy tries to depend on collective wisdom. And to ride on the wings of a single individual's wisdom, no matter how powerful, knowledgeable and good s/he might be, is to choose the ditch as a destination, sooner or later. The potential advantages of linguistically plural societies over mono-lingual societies are also similar to those of a multi-lingual person over a mono-lingual person. We could, in this regard, in fact draw very important lessons from the importance of biodiversity in nature. I am reliably informed that biologically diverse communities of plants and animals survive disasters much better than communities which have little diversity. Might there not be something here as to how Africans have survived enslavement and racism?

Language and Internationalism

Now, a language does not become or remain an international language by deliberate choice. The reasons why any language becomes international are complex and include, among others, economic, historical and politico-military reasons. Only evolution, which is more encompassing than mere history, can determine which language becomes an international language. In fact, any language which consciously and deliberately tries to become or remain an international language is more likely to subvert its own chances of being so. I believe that something of the sort is presently happening to the French language.

My advocacy that African countries should continue using their colonially imposed and inherited languages is further conditioned to the extent that these languages are international languages. It is very significant to note in this regard that Bernard Fonlon, the chief philosopher and theoretician of Kamerun's official bilingualism, changed his mind about Kamerun's bilingual policy before his death and instead advocated that English should be Kamerun's first official language in spite of the fact that Southern Kamerunians who inherited English from the British constitute only 25% of Kamerunians.

English is indisputably the first international language of our times. People for whom English is an indigenous language may be proud of this fact but this is irrational, for there is no good reason to be at all. People for whom English is not a mother-language may be ashamed or jealous before this fact, but that is equally irrational, for the same reason, that is, lack of a good reason so to be. Even if English had not been imposed on Africans by colonialism, it would have been in their own interest in today's contemporary world to master and use it. As an international language, there is a wealth of informations, knowledges and wisdoms encoded in English which any of its users can decode to great benefit. It is for these reasons that I claim that the colonially imposed languages or systems of education were blessings in disguise for Africans.

The use of English as the inescapable international language of contemporary science, technology and communication need not in any way disturb the development and use of the indigenous African languages. How does learning and using a foreign language stop anybody from using his/her own mother-language? The widespread mastery and use of Latin through the Middle Ages up until very recent times did not stop the English people from being English, the Germans from remaining Germanic nor the French from continuing with their exaggerated love of the French language. Today, Latin, once an unrivalled international language, is a dead language. But nonlatin Europeans are none-the-worse for having adopted and used Latin when it was the inevitable international language. On the contrary, their various indigenous languages, which have all outlived Latin, have been greatly enriched by Latin. Latin played an important role in the unification of the European races which originally were as diverse linguistically and culturally as the African tribes are today. In fact, what is today called *western culture* has Latin and Judaeo-Christianity as some of its defining characteristics.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and His Disciples

No treatment of the problems arising from linguistic legacies of colonialism in Africa can be complete without mention of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (formerly James Ngugi) and his very powerful arguments against the use of the colonial languages in Africa. Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey & Heinemann 1986) can be considered the antithesis of the thrust of my argument in this paper. Ngugi has been, for a long time, an ardent crusader of his point of view. He has gathered a large crowd of followers and supporters from all over the world.

Ngugi's views on this problematic are clear, consistent and very well articulated. Given the autobiographical snatches and glimpses of historical contexting in Ngugi's book, one cannot but sympathise with his point of view. Colonialism and especially Neo-colonialism is a monster with ten faces and a

hundred feet walking by a thousand paths. It is perhaps thanks to the anopheles mosquito that colonialism showed a different face in parts of West Africa from the one it showed in parts of East Africa. The personal experience of individuals as well as the collective experience of communities is also quite varied both under colonialism and under the neo-colonial dictatorships that have replaced it in most parts of Africa. Differing reactions and attitudes to what we may call our colonial patrimony are therefore understandable. Ngugi has, all through his turbulent life and career in Kenya, convincingly matched his professed convictions with appropriate action. He has demonstrated the depth and sincerity of his convictions by patiently and courageously suffering for them. Nevertheless, neither conviction nor sincerity nor both together is a criterion of truth or prescriptivity. As a generalised prescription, I consider Ngugi's views on this particular problematic quite erroneous.

But I am less concerned with proving Ngugi wrong than with convincingly arguing for what I consider right, as I have attempted doing above. On one little but crucial point, however, I should say that I consider the linguistic philosophy underlying Ngugi's arguments quite erroneous in its exaggeratedness. Language is certainly very important to humans and even to non-humans. But language is important as a *tool* for communicating. Language is not as determinant of human thought and behaviour as Ngugi's arguments presuppose. All forms of linguistic philosophy (as distinguished from Philosophy of Language) which attempt to reduce all our problems to problems of language or which confuse reality or facts with the language with which we attempt to describe them, are patently false. There is an influential view in certain philosophical circles, received from Ludwig Wittgenstein, to the effect that the limits of one's language signify the limits of one's world. But, although I do believe that language and reality have some sort of dialectical or cybernetic relationship, I find this view unconvincing. Language is not an ontological datum. No one is born with the outlines of his/her mother-language already traced or imprinted, as it were, in the mind. All language is acquired through learning. So, although language is a very important instrument of culture and identity, all theories which essentialise or ontologise language are clearly false. It is culture which creates language and not language which creates culture.

Some of the disciples of Ngugi leave the very substantive issues with which he has been concerned to chase shadows and appearances, mistaking *form* for *content*. When my first child was born on February 25th 1991, my mother, as Nso custom and tradition demands, was asked to "name" the child. She called her "Kinyuy" (It is God who knows), not to be confused with "Nyuyki" (God knows). I myself then called the child "Prima" and, accordingly, registered her as *Prima Kinyuy Tangwa*. Whereupon some disciples of Ngugi harangued me for giving the child a foreign name. They demanded to know if any of my ancestors was called Prima. I answered that none of my ancestors was called Prima but that I did not give the child the name because it is a foreign name but

rather because the name has meaning for me in spite of being a foreign name. They then demanded to know what I meant by it and I answered that, by it, I meant "the first in a line that may neither be long nor straight". Of course they did not understand that and that was my point. All names in Lamnso are meaningful but only the name-giver knows the real nuance of the name because it is usually connected with some aspect of his/her personal experience. The experience of Nso people has gone far beyond Nso and Lamnso. Why should this not be reflected in names? In fact, one of the kings of Nso, Seem Mbum m (alias Mbinglo) named one of his sons born during the Second World War "Hitler". Another Nso prince is named "Chaff)" after a foreign doctor who worked in Nso.

But on these matters it is very easy to leave the corn and go after the chaff. There are people who think that wearing a western type of dress like a suit is a mark of being educated, prosperous or important while there are others who consider it a shameful sign of a colonised mind. But the dress you wear, just like the name you bear, while sometimes an index of self-expression, makes absolutely no difference as to what you are or what you think about any issue. Nothing of substance can be deduced from the mere fact that someone is dressed in a danshiki. In this connection, I always remind people that Nyerere answers "Julius" and Mandela answers "Nelson" and both wear western suits; whereas Sese Seko Mubutu, in an ostentatious "African authenticity" ceremony dropped "Joseph Desire" from his stock of names and capped his French suits, which for some reason he couldn't abandon, with a leopard skin cap.

May be dropping the name "James" made some personal difference to Ngugi. At the personal level, the widest freedom should be allowed in this area. But with regard to his work, both artistic and academic, and his struggles, both socio-political and academic, would it make any difference if he were still James Ngugi? Did bearing "Julius" in any way prevent Nyerere from being, so far, the only African Head of State to have made a convincing effort on behalf of his people instead of amassing personal wealth and to have quit power willingly and voluntarily? Did bearing "Nelson" prevent Mandela from fighting racism and dictatorship in South Africa to a halt? Names are neither here nor there. The food you eat and the clothes you wear have got nothing to do with it. I know a Catholic priest who could not do without "Beacon and Sausage" (Bickin and Shoshage) for breakfast but who contributed immensely towards Africanising the Church.

Conclusion

Africa's linguistic colonial legacy will not go away; it is in Africa to stay and it should stay. Africa's indigenous linguistic heritage, as it comes out from the

wings into centre stage, must come to terms with this fact and also with the related fact that the artificial national boundaries drawn by historical circumstances cannot be simply wished away but remain amenable to modifications under suitable circumstances.

From outside Africa, it is at both encouraging to see the interest shown by so many western Universities in African languages and worrying to contemplate the possibility that the study of African languages might end up as no more than an exotic field for western academic adventurers and their African assistants. On the continent itself, not much is being done and much cannot be done in most parts of Africa under the present circumstances. The University system in most African countries is today in a state of collapse for various reasons including, among others, laughably inadequate funding, explosion in student numbers, decay of University structures and infrastructures, flight of University Lecturers and intellectuals from economic hardship or political persecution to calmer greener pastures abroad, generalised social and economic chaos etc etc.

In most African countries today there exists a generalised sense of frustration among the entire citizenry arising from what we may, borrowing and extending an expression of Biodun Jeyifos⁷, call the arrested process of democratisation. The hopes raised in Africa in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the dictatorships of Eastern Europe and the false promises of the western power blocks to condition support and aid to African regimes on democratisation, have all ended in frustration if not despair. With a few exceptions, dictatorship is riding triumphant in most African countries with the connivance of the western democracies. First things will have to come first. Until the politico-economic situation changes for the better in most African countries, it is unrealistic to think that matters relating to language policies would be addressed in any serious or meaningful way.

Notes

¹ This paper was first read at an international conference: "1995 AFRICA "Breaking Boundaries: Beyond the land of Cush. New Critical Encounters with Languages and Literatures of Sub-Saharan Africa", Tel Aviv University, 18-23 June 1995. I am grateful to the German Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for an ongoing fellowship award which enabled me to write this paper. I thank Barry Wilkins, Sue Willdig and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl for critical comments on an earlier draft.

² In 1992, I published an article in *Quest: Philosophical Discussions* (Vol. VI, No.2, December 1992) on "Colonial legacy and the Language Situation in Cameroon". And some of my critics started talking about my "utilitarian conception of language" thereby giving the impression that I am a philosophical utilitarian. I am nothing of the sort. See, for instance, James Uroh, "Colonialism and the Language Question: A Reply to Godfrey Tangwa" (*Quest*, Vol. VIII, No. 2 December 1994).

³ For some telling differences between West Cameroonians and East Cameroonians from the point of view of a West Cameroonian, see "Our Mungo Bridges (Or what separates West

Cameroonians from East Cameroonians most tellingly"), *CAMEROON/LIFE*, July/August 1993 & October 1993.

⁴ Those particularly interested in this period, especially the last five years, can read the collection of essays, written by Rotcod Gobata: *The Past Tense of Shit* (Book One) [Nooremac Press 1993] and *I Spit on Their Graves* (Book Two of the Past Tense...) [forthcoming].

⁵ I have discussed some of these in the first part of my article "African Philosophy: appraisal of a recurrent problematic. Part 1: The Sources of Traditional African Philosophy.", *COGITO*, Summer 1992, pp. 82-84.

⁶ See "African Philosophy: appraisal of a recurrent problematic. Part 2: What is African Philosophy and Who is an African Philosopher?", *COGITO*, Winter 1992, pp. 142-143.

⁷ See *Research in African Literatures*, Spring 1990, Vol.21, No.1

