

Language Practices in “Francophone Africa”¹ : A Legacy of European Colonialism

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My appointment to the *Chaire annuelle Mondes francophones 2023-24* at the *Collège de France* and the public lectures I gave there in spring 2024 have prompted me to think harder about the coexistence of French with autochthonous languages in Africa since the late 19th century. I focus here on the period following the “Scramble for Africa” conference (1884-85) in Berlin, when the continent was divided among European powers into multiple exploitation colonies, where they would extract raw materials to fuel the European Industrial Revolution. The colonizers superposed their national languages over African ones as *lingua francas* of governance and taught them to autochthonous colonial auxiliaries, who generally interfaced between them and the masses of the colonized populations (Mufwene, 2022). This was the beginning of what has been described as diglossia or, when taking into account the *autochthonous lingua francas* sandwiched between the European and African ethnic languages (see below), triglossia.

The auxiliaries functioned as elementary school teachers, clerks at the lower levels of the colonial administration and at the lower courts of justice, petty officers in the army and police force, assistants to medical doctors, and secretaries of mercantile companies, among other junior administrative positions in the colonial administration. They are also known in history of colonization as go-betweens and intermediaries; and they spared their European bosses the “burden” of learning autochthonous languages, although, to be sure, some of the latter in junior rank, along with missionaries, did learn some of the languages. As a matter of fact, some of these administrators and missionaries are the ones that started African linguistics, for instance, Carl Meinhof (1857-1944), William Bleek (1827-1875), Clement Doke (1893-1980), W. Holman Bentley (1855-1905), and Maurice Delafosse (1870-1926).

¹ This label begs the question because on average French is a minority language in the relevant African polities, (based on the statistics of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie’s 2023 report—see more on this below, in the main text) and is primarily used as a lingua franca. The label “eclipses” the significance of autochthonous languages used as vernaculars and, for some of them, also as regional lingua francas. In Francophone Europe, French is used typically as a vernacular, though its standard varieties have specialized for formal or official functions.

Missionaries have often also been blamed for defining language boundaries in ways consistent with their proselytization endeavors, disregarding how the Natives had defined their own ethnolinguistic affiliations. More specifically, the missionaries sometimes lumped several languages (from the perspective of heritage speakers) into single larger ones whose boundaries corresponded to their administrative divisions of the land, as in the case of *Ewe*, *Fon*, *Fulfulde*, *KiKongo*, *Khoe*, and *San*, each of which is actually a language cluster. That is, the traditional languages were stipulated as dialects of the new ones. On the other hand, they also turned what heritage speakers considered dialects of the same language into separate languages, as in the division of *ChiShona* in Zimbabwe into *ChiManyika*, *ChiZezuru*, and *ChiKaranga* (Makoni et al., 2006).

Given the relative prestige enjoyed by the colonial auxiliaries, especially because they were also housed in buffer zones between the residential quarters of the European administrators and the Natives' neighborhoods, the Native languages were increasingly subordinated to those of the Europeans. The auxiliaries' capacity to interface between their bosses and the other Natives underscored the value of the little schooling that was available then and that of bilingualism in the European and African languages, especially major ones that would be promoted to the status of *lingua francas* for interethnic communication among the Natives. The latter category of languages facilitated the colonial enterprise because several auxiliaries were not Native to the regions where they found employment and simply had to know the relevant *lingua francas* instead of all the ethnic languages. These major languages also evolved into urban vernaculars for the Natives who relocated to the emergent colonial cities, homes of extensive language contact where societal multilingualism became the norm, unlike in traditional villages, which were typically monolingual.

These urban varieties, such as *Urban Wolof*, *Urban Sango*, *Urban Lingala*, *Urban Swahili*, and *Urban Bemba* then started to index modernity, which they still do today in popular culture, in contrast with the ethnic languages spoken in rural areas and the European languages still considered foreign. They have been used in the blue-collar sector of the formal economy (introduced by the colonizers), another index of modern life, though the colonial industry was developed more for the economic development of the European metropolises than for that of the colonies. Commenting on this situation, Walter Rodney (1972) observed that Africa paid for its

own underdevelopment, especially since the wages of the Natives were derisory compared with the contribution of their labor to the growth of the metropolises' economies.

This evolutionary scenario introduced not only the socioeconomic stratification within the Native population but also of their languages (as noted above), elevating the urban vernaculars to a level above the ethnic languages. To borrow from the terminology of *creolistics*, the European colonial languages, functioning as languages of both power and exclusion, became the acrolects, while the ethnic vernaculars became the basilects (obviously in multitude), and the urban vernaculars, which include more words borrowed from the European languages (especially in the mouths of the elite), occupy the middle position. Relative to the ethnic languages that the colonial system coopted as urban vernaculars, they correspond to creole mesolects. One can detect some coloniality in the fact that, except in villages, the less schooled Natives do not fuss over this borrowing of words from the European languages, which index urban modernity. Yet, mixing a European language with elements from autochthonous languages indexed inadequate command of the former and was/is derided! For their competence in the European languages, the colonial auxiliaries occupied the social category of *évolués* ('evolved') in French colonies, putatively individuals who had evolved from the condition of savagery to that of civilized, consistent with what the French called *mission civilisatrice* (the counterpart of "the White man's burden" among the British) and invoked to justify colonization. The rare Africans who had studied in Europe and returned to the colonies were appointed to the best positions that the Natives could occupy in the colonial system, but they were also considered as threats to the colonial world order. Their better command of the colonial languages was of course well appreciated.

Salient on my mind, and at the center of my lectures at the *Collège de France*, has been the question of the extent to which the language situation has (not) changed since Independence (in the 1960s for most countries). The European languages have acquired the status of official languages (rarely that of co-official language), and those who command them well are automatically also considered more intelligent and competent, therefore more suitable for the (postcolonial) world order, especially if they also enjoy special connections with more established people in the system. As noted above, the urban vernaculars index African modernity and are vibrant in popular culture as well as in the blue-collar sector of the little-developed formal economy and in urban informal or vernacular economy.

By contrast, the ethnic languages still function as vernaculars and thrive in rural areas, the conservative homes of the population majorities. They also function as the media of intimate communication or ethnic solidarity among the economically disenfranchised adults in urban centers, especially the first-generation in-migrants. Many of those who are disenchanted with or discouraged by life in the city and return to the village speak the ethnic languages with a vengeance, partly to prove how little they have changed culturally. Adult urbanites still use them for communication with relatives from the rural areas who visit them or when they visit the latter in the village. They are also the languages the elite use to seek help from members of the same ethnic groups when they are stuck or need to bargain the price down during commercial transactions. Thus, there are so many different reasons why most ethnic languages are far from being endangered in Africa, though natural disasters causing populations to relocate can lead to language endangerment among ethnic languages in rural areas (see, e.g., Tosco, 1998, Dimmendaal & Voeltz, 2007).

I submit that the main reason is that the formal economic sector functioning in the European official languages has hardly grown since Independence. The state of affairs provides little incentives for investing in them as *lingua francas*, let alone as vernaculars, at the expense of autochthonous ones. The fact that much of the little formal economy inherited mostly from the colonial period involves manual labor, for which the wages are derisory, has discouraged those in rural areas from adopting them as vernaculars for modernity. Traditional subsistence economic practices, which have helped villagers survive, exert no pressure on them to change vernaculars. Overall, this raises the question of why Africa is still so wedded to European colonial languages that benefit primarily the privileged minorities in power.

Beginning with Independence, the former colonial auxiliaries stepped in the shoes of the colonizers typically rivalling each other for the best positions in the government; and now their children or grandchildren have replaced them. They have all maintained the colonial world order to the point where one can say that only the faces of the colonizers have changed complexion, but the colonial socioeconomic structure continues. In other words, colonization from without has been replaced by colonization from within, as the autochthonous rulers have moved in the quarters of the former colonizers and use their languages to both exploit their fellow citizens and to serve the European economic development at the expense of that of their respective countries. Thus, the European languages, retained as official languages, function as tools of exclusion and

marginalization for the majorities of the national populations. Yet, the official languages had been chosen to be inclusive and help unify the citizenry! Autochthonous languages have been avoided allegedly to prevent interethnic conflicts! I return to this topic below.

Many who experienced the colonial period feel they are worse off now than then, as they have less buying power and schooling has not improved the living conditions of their children (and grandchildren), owing to little economic development relative to population's rapid growth and more competition in limited job markets. For many, if not the majority, both the official language and the autochthonous languages used by the army and the police are tools of disenfranchisement. Hope for the improvement of living conditions thanks to adequate competence in the European languages has generally become elusive. Everything suggests that it is high time to revisit current language policies and economic development. Since the latter have fostered more exclusion from than inclusion in national welfare and politics, shouldn't especially Sub-Saharan language policies and practices be oriented more to within the nation-states than outside (Mufwene, 2021)? Shouldn't they become more inclusive? And shouldn't the languages for these facets of national lives be autochthonous rather than European and therefore foreign? Shouldn't language practices favor the Natives over the foreign world?

Why is Africa trapped in the paranoia of being cut off from the outside world if the official languages were autochthonous? Why do we keep thinking that Sub-Saharan African languages are not yet suited for imparting scientific and technological knowledge adequately beyond the elementary school?² They won't be unless we start and work to adapt them to modern science. As a matter of fact, curricula must be updated too, to include African specificities in and contributions to science as knowledge construction in any domain. Experts in specific disciplines should be encouraged to start sharing their expertise in autochthonous languages, as challenging as the endeavor may be at the beginning. And they should be highly rewarded and compensated for doing so, just like administrators and executives too who do the same in their domains of employment. The financial incentive will speed up the process of decolonizing language practices and formal education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The same goes for health care providers! They should be able to communicate directly with their patients in autochthonous languages

² I leave North Africa out, because Arabic has already proved itself as very capable of my wish. In part of the Middle Ages, it was the language of scholarship and governance in Iberia, present-day Portugal and Spain. And Arabic is used in formal education in North African countries and the Middle East.

rather than through interpreters in the official languages. The days of colonial auxiliaries should be a thing of the past by now.

Why do African leaders stick to the Western *one-nation-one-language* ideology when it has failed to prevent ethnic and regional conflicts? It appears that, rather than language, it is inclusive governance and economic development that unify a nation-state, when it empowers the population, rather than only the elite class, economically. Language policies should be less disconnected from economic development. Politics such as Switzerland and Belgium show that countries can function reasonably well with multiple official languages, as long as their economies are prosperous, and the political systems do not discriminate against particular ethnic groups. And the histories of countries such as Somalia, Burundi, and Rwanda show that ethnic conflicts may endure even if the populations are united by the same national language. They show that the root causes of the conflicts are not linguistic but must apparently be sought in how equitable and inclusive governance is and how the pie of the economic returns or profits is distributed within the population. And problems typically also include the kinds of relations African countries maintain with the former metropolises or international organizations whose financial aids are more in the interest of the capitalist powers of the Global North than of populations of the Global South. Check how high the interest rates are, while the volumes of national debts keep growing. One cannot help noticing that economic growth, which is often reported by the World Bank does not entail economic development, as this famous financial institution sees it in terms of quantities of raw materials produced and sold to nations of the Global North.

What is evident is that discussions of language policies and practices in Africa should not be disconnected from those of economic development. This proceeds with fewer difficulties and if the economy functions in languages that the employees understand well, even if they do not speak them (well enough); these are typically the autochthonous ones, even when they are not their mother tongues. Economies function and make progress more effectively if communication is not a problem from the top to the bottom of the structure.

Let me now focus on “Francophone Africa.” Curiously, this part of the continent is exhorted by the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF) to “combat” the spread of English around the world because this endangers linguistic and cultural diversity. It ignores the fact that regular speakers of French in the majority of its member States are demographic minorities,

though they enjoy disproportionate economic power relative to the marginalized majority—a situation that is so odd. In any case, if English should be considered as a “killer language” dangerous to African languages, so is French as an imperial language. A chameleon remains one regardless of its color! What the OIF is really worrying about is that the spread of English diminishes the importance of French as an imperial language. After all, there is no evidence suggesting that French as the vernacular of Francophone Europe (viz., France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Luxembourg, although only France is overwhelmingly francophone) is endangered by the fact that more and more of its speakers are learning English too. African languages do not appear to be endangered by the fact that the elite are using European languages as their *lingua franca*. Being plurilingual does not necessarily favor one language at the expense of the others. For many plurilingual Africans residing in Africa, this is not necessarily the case.

Above, I used *Francophone Africa* between quotation marks precisely because French functions more as a *lingua franca* than as a vernacular in this part of the Continent and it remains a minority’s additional language in most of the relevant nation-states. A problem is that the minority elite using French as an emblem of their success are endowed with an economic and political clout that is disproportionate to their demographic size, especially the subset of it in the government. The fact that it is spoken on average by no more than 40% of the national population (according to the OIF’s own apparently inflated statistics³) after over sixty years of functioning as the medium of formal education in high school and higher education shows that the investment in time, efforts, and money (typically inadequate) has not been profitable from an economic perspective. The official language has created greater inequities than should be expected of a language that should be more inclusive in the politics and economic development of the relevant nation-states. The socioeconomic structure in which it is used is a continuation of the colonial regime, which was exploitative and profitable to European metropolises. One must wonder what the meaning of Independence is when the colonial socioeconomic structure is maintained.

The logical choice would have been for an autochthonous language, which may be easier for the Natives to learn (van Pinxteren, 2022) through casual interactions with others, as we have

³ Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, accessed 19 March 2025, *Langue française et diversité linguistique : Qui parle français dans le monde ?* <https://observatoire.francophonie.org/qui-parle-francais-dans-lemonde/>

traditionally done in Africa. Facing pervasive multilingualism, we could even have given up the Western *one-nation-one-language* ideology, especially since it has failed to guarantee, or at least facilitate, the national unity that advocates of a European language as the official language have invoked to justify its choice. As noted above, inclusive economic development does a better job of uniting a national population than an official language which serves the needs of the former metropole first. For instance, it is economic development that drove English as the dominant language of the United States, whereas its constitution has no mention of it as the official language.

Note that because the language of the former metropole continues to be used in the former colony, its citizens who visit feel no pressure to learn at least one of the autochthonous *lingua francas*, even when researchers come to do fieldwork (which is then conducted through interpreters).⁴ The situation creates an asymmetrical social relation in which European cultural practices are preferred to those of Africa. The exception to this general observation consists of the economically disempowered citizens, the majority who are mostly rural and are overlooked in most, if not all, economic development plans. Generally, urban demographic growth, largely an outcome of rural exodus, has produced neighborhoods that are mega-villages that lack urban infrastructure with residents relying on family ties or ethnic solidarity to survive. These are precisely the places where one can realize that ethnic languages are not endangered by either the European official languages or the autochthonous urban vernaculars. The language of solidarity for these disenfranchised is ethnic.

The vernaculars of these disenfranchised majorities have generally been treated as unfit for the modern world order. Socioeconomic exclusion and political disenfranchisement are what have kept them alive. The prejudice that holds them as inferior languages is a legacy of European colonization which favored European languages over autochthonous ones, then considered as primitive and less evolved, just like their speakers. It simply made life easier for the colonizers, sparing them the challenge of learning the local ones in regions where they operated. It is one of

⁴ This practice, followed by other visitors from the Global North who also stay or settle in affluent neighborhoods that used to be restricted to Europeans during the colonial period, is in contrast with that of Chinese small business owners. The latter reside in less affluent neighborhoods, learn autochthonous languages, and operate their businesses in them, setting themselves in competition with Native small business owners.

the reasons why little investment has been made for developing education systems that can operate fully in autochthonous languages after elementary school.

I think that the fact that Africa has produced several outstanding scholars speaks against the colonial prejudice. It is outrageous that African leaders have kept in place an educational system that promotes measuring the success of its graduates according to metrics inherited from Europe. Pretending that African languages are unfit for formal education because they are putatively not equipped for discussing science and technology is unwarranted. To my knowledge, it is practice that will make the autochthonous languages adapted for this function, not prejudice about their suitability. As a matter of fact, this prejudice was also true of the European languages themselves that replaced *Classical Latin* as the language of scholarship; and the use of African languages will prove that they can be adapted to impart academic and technical knowledge. It is the mind and commitment that will adapt autochthonous languages as adequate media of education. The present prejudice against them conjures up the label *évolué* used for the Native elite before Independence, mostly because they could speak French in “Francophone Africa.”

In its combative campaign against the increasing hegemony of English over French at international organizations, such the *United Nations*, the headquarters of the *European Union*, and the *World Health Organization*, the *OIF* encourages representatives of its member States to use French instead of English. One would think that, because it promotes linguistic diversity, it would encourage them to use major languages of their respective countries instead. I see here a recruitment of the leaderships of the member States to fight a language war that is not theirs nor in the interest of the populations they represent. It is reminiscent of African troops being drafted during the 20th-century *World Wars* to fight for what were essentially European wars and not at all in the interest of their homelands. Then it took several decades before the “tirailleurs sénégalais,” associated with a fictional rudimentary “français tirailleur” that they didn’t actually

speak,⁵ were compensated for their service to France! France hardly honored the promise of making them its citizens, showing to what extent they had been exploited.

In another vein, instead of thinking about the root causes for the rejection of France's control over "Francophone countries" by the Sahel (especially Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), the *OIF* intensifies the teaching of and in French in "Francophone Africa." It still claims that the former metropole's language unites the remaining countries and they should continue celebrating the prestigious culture associated with French. To be sure, one can say that the OIF is doing its job of promoting the superiority of French over the putatively less prestigious languages and other cultural practices of the member States where French is not spoken primarily as a vernacular. Ironically, the relevant Sahel countries maintain French as "langue de travail" ('working language'). It looks like everybody is confused and the rulers antagonistic to France's imperialism are still mentally colonized! If they were working for their peoples, they would give up French and use major autochthonous languages for inclusive governance and public administration.

Paradoxically, instead of developing more self-reliance, the countries are turning to alternative colonizers, Russia and China, which exploit them the same way as France, except with less colonial guilt and without imposing their foreign languages. They just create demand for them, thought they are not encouraging the relevant Sahel countries to also reject French as "langue de travail." They don't care and are not encouraging them to resort to their respective major autochthonous languages either. Instead, they are happy that the Sahel countries are "francophone" and use it for their transactions with them. All this makes fewer languages for the Chinese and Russians to learn for their economic imperial ventures!

One important reason for this evolution of things is the weak economies of the Sahel, like of other Sub-Saharan countries. After over sixty years of national political corruption and economic exploitation by the Global North, these countries have not spared the financial resources needed to pay for their economic developments. The latter entail their populations' welfare and sound

⁵ The first term designates 'African infantrymen in the French colonial army' (recruited first from Senegal but later from other colonies too); and the second term is used in reference to the "broken French" that the troops allegedly spoke.

formal education, in addition to building the requisite infrastructures. They cannot fund adequate formal education, which implies funding the requisite work to shift to African languages as media of education. Nobody pays attention to the big elephant in the room: When will Africa emancipate itself linguistically? Attempts by Presidents Bassirou Diomaye Faye of Senegal and Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to address their peoples in Wolof and Lingala respectively are still timid. Aside from the fact that the *OIF* is worried about this, there's also the fear that the Native elite harbor against losing the emblem of their status, as, in addition to their fortunes, language is what separates them from the disenfranchised majority populations. The elite are happy to maintain the socioeconomic structure inherited from colonization and securing their privileges, as well as, alas, supporting the economic development of former metropolises where they save their money and buy expensive retirement homes. It is also where their children receive their education and remain protected from potential political overthrows. They are not in the least embarrassed by the economic gap between them and the disenfranchised majority.

I hope I have made it obvious that the official language problem in Africa is not the multitude of languages. Burundi and Rwanda, where one autochthonous language is spoken as a vernacular by the two ethnic groups, cannot invoke societal multilingualism as an excuse. The use of a European language as the official one is part of the socioeconomic structure inherited from the colonial period, which should be replaced with a new, (more) inclusive world order. It is a global problem in the sense of being interconnected with various other aspects of the relevant societies, and it calls for a global solution in which multiple facets of the problem are attended to concurrently. I hope that those who offer solutions will bear this reality in mind and contemplate the option of a global socioeconomic revolution and think it through. This is not a call for more wars! The message is to educate the political leadership into realizing that the proposed change, rather than investment in weapons of oppression, may bring peace to Africa sooner. We must start measuring our individual successes by national metrics rather than foreign ones, governing inclusively rather than exclusively, investing within rather than outside, and empowering autochthonous languages economically.

I wish all the best to the new journal, which I strongly support, hoping that contributions to it will be more innovative than those in current journals of language policy and planning.

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