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The vexed question of African languages in education. Still, a solution may lay in front of us. Revisiting Orality for an authentic African future¹

1. Introduction

It is common cause to highlight the importance of language to humans. “*To be human is to exist in language*” writes Capra (1996; in Chambers 2005: 120). And he adds “*In language we coordinate our behaviour, and together in language we bring forth our world*”. This encompassing view of language, which underlies its social and cognitive dimensions, states its centrality to the condition of human beings – after all, notwithstanding intricate debates whether semiotic systems of some ‘non-human animals’, to borrow a phrase from Mitchell (2013), qualify to be called language, articulated language remains the most immediate criteria that tells us apart from all other living species. One can legitimately infer from

¹ This essay was elaborated with, mostly, South Africa in mind. However, beyond regional or national specificities, we feel the analysis may capture the essence of a process at play in the whole sub-Saharan part of the continent. Thus, while tailored for urban South Africa, we think the suggestion, *mutatis mutandis*, could be valid further afield.

People who – often unwittingly – contributed in the making of this paper are too numerous to be named. Particular gratitude to Suzy Platiel who, during regular exchanges over years, contributed to open my eyes on the centrality of oral processes in the making of human beings. There is no way to do justice to her many achievements and insights. I also wish to express my indebtedness to my colleagues in a South-African-based Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) – led National Research Foundation (NRF) – funded project looking into literacy acquisition in Foundation Phase classrooms in Gauteng and Limpopo. School visits and class observations conducted at this occasion, as well as stimulating intellectual debates within the project, especially with Michael Joseph, Esther Ramani, Vic Webb and Cas Prinsloo, informed (some of) the views expressed herein. The editor, Stephanie Rudwick and Philip Pare were kind enough to go through a first version. Their incisive comments are gladly acknowledged. Of course none other than myself bears responsibility for analyses and opinions herein.

such observation that the circumstances where infants acquire language inform decisively their perception of the self and the building of their identities, and hence their development into adulthood (Horsthemke 2004: 580). Indeed, much in a child's future depends on the very first years, which constitute, up to year 8, "*the critical foundation for cognitive, linguistic and general developmental milestones*" (Agbedo & al. 2012: 45 quoting a Unesco report). Moreover, and in line with the early age, these capacities are enhanced by the affectivity that binds the child to his/her caretaker(s). Nowadays, in large parts of urban Africa, all too often the natural environment – the immediate family and surrounding community



Author with Eugeniusz and the students,
University of Warsaw

– has fallen prey to the combined blows of wars, poverty, isolation, time-demanding works, family dismemberment and other social ills including diseases. In South Africa alone, by 2011, according to a report from the South African Institute of Race Relations² households made of single-parent – usually mothers – have become the norm while nearly 100 000 children

live in child-headed ones. Thus for many deprived children schools have become the main loci providing an opportunity to interact meaningfully with adults, even if few countries have, like South Africa, reached the goal of extending primary education to all. Moreover, given the time spent by learners in school or in travel to and fro there remains precious little opportunity for parents or guardians to guide their children, even when they are available. Socialization occurring with peers in the streets is no valid alternative. It falls short of the required input in terms of linguistic and cultural transmission. It has led to the apparition of mixed languages (see Beck 2010 for a general view across Africa). Makoni (in Beck 2010: 25) observes that speakers of those varieties "*may not necessarily be able to develop full competence in each (or even any?)³ of the languages of the*

² <http://www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/family/parenting/single-parent-households-the-norm-says-study-1.1057033>, November 2013

³ Our comment.

amalgam". Indeed, there follows rampant creolization and subsequent cultural and language loss (Lafon 2013c).⁴ This situation is reinforced by unmonitored exposure to mostly foreign TV/ video programs now further disseminated through cell-phones. As a consequence, "*the mental space in which people dream is occupied by western imagery [and] the innumerable varieties of 'being human' are eliminated*" writes Odora Hoppers (2002: 80).

Education however cannot be reduced to schooling. Webster on line⁵ defines education as "(...) *the transmission of the values and accumulated knowledge of a society.*" In the same vein Alidou (2009: 119) sees African education "*[as] a societal project that takes into consideration African languages, cultures, values and belief systems and above all the type of societies that each nation wants to build.*" Education is the way by which human communities groom the youth into adults, who will, when time comes, carry over the burden of ensuring that the community survive and prosper and that its legacy blooms. There are other forms of imparting knowledge than the barracks- or convents- style establishments of 18–19th century Europe that have been transplanted in Africa. Education in Africa must be re-invested with its full humanistic aim of forming and shaping adults apt to function adequately in a given society and, on this basis, in the world. "*An African-based education*", write Dei *et. al.* (2006: 58), [should] "*build the individual and collective worth of learners as responsible and conscientious human beings who (...) fulfil their common obligations to a larger (...) community*". One path towards re-investing education with its full scope lies in acknowledging the historical background to today's situation in Africa. Understanding the historical origins of the present-day quagmire is key to solve today's language and cultural challenges, and possibly societal and developmental as well. The past offers clues able to afford African languages their due place. Indeed, the language question emerged when school education was introduced in the wake of the colonial conquest.

I shall first look briefly at the issue of language in schools today, then glance back into history before putting forth a modest proposal that combines aspects of local tradition and western schooling in a hybrid strategy, with South African urban and semi-urban settlements in mind.

⁴ Most languages and cultures betray signs of creolization – English being one oft-quoted example alongside Swahili, French, etc. Creolization *per se* is a historical phenomena that is part of the make-up of most present-day human communities. However the present situation differs significantly from previous processes. Globalization carried by the modern means of communication ensures there is hardly any space left untouched by the pressure of the dominant language and culture, which may result in general homogenization and language and cultural loss.

⁵ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/education>, November 2013

2. Language in schools⁶

In Africa, language policies of which the choice of the language to be used in schools is a major component have been taken hostage in political debates, arising around conceptions of state formation and nation building (Ricento 2000; Tsui 2004; Ferguson 2013: 17). Some authors even claim that the promotion of a language cannot be divorced from ethnic nationalism – see Kriel (2010) *à propos* the defence of Afrikaans in South Africa, in the past as well as the present, even if the inclusion of Afrikaans-speaking coloured communities brings a shade of nuance to the position. Indeed, defence of local languages is easily portrayed as divisive. Almost automatically it invokes ethnicity, opening the floodgate to claims of ‘tribalism’, if not political autonomy. Even if the rationale for the development of African languages over “international” ones arise ultimately from political considerations, it is important to disentangle the issues. To that end, we shall limit ourselves to what is conveniently subsumed under language policy in education, viz., the debate on the use of African indigenous languages as mediums of instruction *aka* Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in modern South African educational parlance, in early education, viz., the primary level. Choice of medium at higher levels, particularly for scientific subjects, involves other challenges. The use of African languages as LoLT beyond primary is in any case premised on a consistent policy from year 1.

3. The crux of the problem

Opinions differ widely, and often drastically, among stake-holders – academics, educationists, Ministry of Education personnel, parents and learners – as to whether African indigenous languages, viz. languages born and bred in African soil, to the exclusion of varieties of Dutch, English, French and Portuguese, even if the nature of pidgins remains contentious, should be used at all in education and if so, to what extent.⁷ Indeed, the question of the role

⁶ The topic has generated studies galore. Suffice it to quote but a few, each including various views, such as, dedicated to Africa, the compilations by Alidou et al. (2006), Abdi et al. (2006), Brock-Utne & Skattum (2009) and also on new trends at the world level, Rubdy & Tan (2008). Each paper herein contains ample bibliographies. Our argument is congruent with the analysis in Brock-Utne (2000)’s source volume, in particular chapter 5 dedicated to language.

⁷ See Wamba (2011)’s review of Brock-Utne & Skattum (2009) for a convenient summary of arguments.

indigenous languages should play in education in Africa is one which is mired in controversy. The debate rebounded after African states attained Independence as education policy became (presumably) a national prerogative. The choice was, arguably, in the owners' hands.

Mainstream thinking advocates for the sole use of international languages, which in this context happen to be the metropolitan, viz. the ex-colonial ones⁸, English, French and Portuguese, in the names *inter alia* of education efficiency, progress, preparing the youth for a better future (e.g. Qorro, 2009: 59 for a tentative list). This attitude is deeply rooted. For instance as early as 1889 Camerounian communities petitioned the missions for education in “*a civilised language*”, viz., English or German, against attempts to use a neighbouring ‘*backward*’ variety (Ngoa 2006: 47). As so-called ‘globalization’ – which, with Africa in mind, amounts rather to westernization under a capitalist liberal paradigm (Ndhlovu 2013: 38) – spreads its wings further, increasingly English displaces other colonial languages. This goes with the perception of language as a mere commodity to be traded in the global market, where English reigns supreme (see Rudby & Tan 2008).⁹

A substantial number of experts and academics, however, among the staff of international agencies, together with local intellectual elites, including personnel in Ministries of education, echo the well-established educational advantages of first literacy in a language familiar to the child, to improve cognitive development (Ferguson 2013: 17). Since at least the 1924 Phelps-Stokes foresighted report's on education in (then) British colonies which unequivocally stated “*the disregard of the Native language is a hindrance even to the European language*” (in Brock-Utne 2000: 146), many observations, not least McDonald (1990)'s study of education in South Africa, have confirmed that good knowledge of one's own language contributes to learning and conversely that insufficient knowledge has adverse effects. Cummins (1979) theorized it in the linguistic interdependence principle, illustrated in a plethora of case studies world wide, for instance Mohanty (2006: 280), Chumbow (2013: 41). This lobbying combined with donors' pressure and occasional concerns to placate minority groups and implement educational human rights, has resulted in a significant number of countries in Africa now allowing – at least in the book – for the use as LoLT of some local languages in early primary education, usually as the step ladder towards acquiring the metropolitan language, in so-called transitional models.

⁸ Hausa, Swahili, not to mention Arabic, are, among others, international languages; still they are usually not implied in this context.

⁹ From now on, we only refer to English, as representing all the metropolitan languages.

Even ‘Francophone’ countries have bought in, essentially subsequent to France’s change of mind on the matter (Albauch 2009). Only few have yet, though, like Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malagasy and Ethiopia, a fully developed curriculum for (some) local languages as subjects further up the education course. However this is not without problems, especially regarding the selection of the school varieties. Often times, states’ apparatuses take the opportunity to promote a locally dominant African language over ‘non-dominant’ ones, leading, at the very least, to further marginalization of the former, as in Tanzania, possibly forced assimilation into the culture the later expresses, as is the case in Botswana and arguably Malawi and Zimbabwe (Nyati-Ramahobo 2006; Batibo 2004; Mtenje 2004, 2013; Issa & Yamada 2013; Peresuh & Masuku 2002). In urban areas, the every day variety may have drifted so far apart from the ‘school variety’ that, even though they are subsumed under the same label, some question their mutual intelligibility (Lafon 2005; Cook 2008). Arguably, in such circumstances, standard varieties should rather be taught as subject for their cultural value than be used as LoLT.

On the ground, in sharp contrast to statements, it is not irrelevant to observe that attitudes and practices of all those with an option, regardless of their stated opinions, tend to converge: it is well known that even the proponents of the use of African languages are keen to register their off-springs in English-, French- or Portuguese- medium schools¹⁰ rather than schools using African languages where those exist. Their statements in favour of African languages thus appear as little more than political posturing. Still, their attitude is pragmatically justified. Who would detract from choosing the best option available for one’s own progeny or, at least, escape the worse? In South Africa, schools using African languages are located in rural areas, townships or informal settlements, all characterized by high poverty. They serve the downtrodden, those who have no alternative. They are, as a rule, under equipped, under-staffed with lowly qualified teachers, mismanaged, etc., to the extent of being globally perceived as dysfunctional (Lafon 2012). ‘*Dysfunctional and impoverished schools, (are) used by the majority of South African children*’ can observe Botsis and Cronje (2007: 50), while ‘*a small number of well resourced schools (are) used by the privileged minority*’. The later, including private schools which have mushroomed in Africa in the wake of economic liberalization, offer, comparatively, better quality. Located mostly in urban or suburban areas, they are overwhelmingly, if not all, English-medium.¹¹ These are the establishments where the elite register their own children. Indeed,

¹⁰ In South Africa, one has to add Afrikaans.

¹¹ See note above.

language practices subsume the dichotomy of a system that has become ‘*bimodal*’ (Pretorius, 2008). When on top of it English becomes the language of the home, this leads to a situation where parents are ‘*raising little foreigners in their home*’ as observed sadly the famous Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo (Time of the Writer Festival, Durban, 2007). Thus children from families enjoying better opportunities, often having spent a stint abroad, possibly graduated from foreign universities, tend to look down on their land of origin and entertain the same prejudice against local cultures, displaying the same lack of familiarity and understanding as the ordinary expatriate expert. A frequent aim of their education is to find a job in the West or in international bodies, as education is seen, rather uncritically, as the key to poverty alleviation through ensuring immediate material returns. Some will even overplay their hand as they want to create distance with an exotic, disadvantaged other, lest, in the eyes of their European colleagues, they be seen as belonging to the same ‘backward’ bunch. In a vain attempt at striking back, the arrogance of this group is sometimes derided by their peers. In the 1990s Zimbabwe, they were referred to as the ‘nose brigade’ while in present-day South Africa they are ‘coconuts’ or ‘oreo’ (Rudwick 2008, 2010).¹² As early as 1952 Fanon had denounced this cultural alienation in his trend setting *Peaux noires et masques blancs* (litt., black skin and white masks).

This is a very bad omen for local languages. Among the consequences language-wise, “*language shift, language loss and ultimately language death*” (Putz 2004: 67 quoting Brenzinger). Even if it betrays primarily a quest for quality rather than a derogatory view on one’s own language, as studies in South Africa have shown (Heugh 2000; Mark Data 2000 in Lafon 2010; Ndhlovu 2013: 46), it nurtures the belief in the intrinsic superiority of English-medium schools (Mohanty 2006: 280 for India). Correlatively, the absence of recognition of one’s variety in the school syllabus promotes self-depreciation (Okonkwo in Brock-Utne 2005: 1).¹³

In that context, it is not surprising that a strong preference for the metropolitan language is the rule among African parents (see Agbede & al. 2012: 48 for

¹² The prejudice does not operate only in favour of international languages. Moodley (2000: 111) reports on non-Wolof speaking Senegalese Academics who shifted to Wolof to avoid being taken for rural ignoramus. In Zimbabwe speakers of the rural varieties of Korekore (Northern) and Ndaou (East), both part of the Shona cluster, when in town, try and hide their revealing accents (field notes, 1990s).

¹³ The measure announced in November 2013 by the South African Department of Basic Education that an African language will be introduced for *all* learners incrementally from 2015 may be a step in the right direction; however, one has to wait for it to be implemented to pass judgment on its ability to transform.

Nigeria). In countries with so-called mother-tongue education, given a choice, most parents or guardians would follow the example of the elite and “*vote with the taxis*” (Lafon 2010), that is, would register their charge in those schools using an international language, even if far from home (Bunyi 1999: 342 for Kenya; Vavrus 2002: 382 for Tanzania; Mesthrie 2008 for South Africa).¹⁴

We contend that the narrowly utilitarian view of education implicit in the debate which reduces language to a mere tool supporting skills and knowledge acquisition largely pre-empts its outcome. Education cannot be reduced to formal education, or what happens in schools. If it were, in today’s world, and unless the balance of power changes drastically, African languages are clearly crowded out, notwithstanding transient victories triggered by language activists, as South Africa illustrates. Dual-medium education where both the local and international languages are seen as interchangeable, as is argued *inter alia* by Kamwangamalu (2013), well-intended though it may be, is equally doomed to remain on the wayside. The playing field is so overwhelmingly tilted against African languages economically, politically, linguistically – for lack of language development – if not demographically – if we factor in language diversity. Of all the languages of the world possibly only Chinese would stand a chance, that is, if Mandarin is accepted across all Chinese communities and if the Chinese themselves do not give in to English as a business language.¹⁵ The use of local African languages in school makes sense, we contend, only if it goes together with a total revamping of the whole education framework to tie it more closely to the realities of the continent, taking into account facets of local cultures and worldviews alongside western science. The notion of a universally valid school curriculum must be seen, like universalism (Odora-Hoppers, in Brock-Utne 2000: 11), as a delusion that hides assimilation into Western cultures. Pride in one’s community’s cultural and other achievements must be restored for African languages to be fully accepted in their multi-fold role.

¹⁴ Interestingly, the reverse, so to say, also happens occasionally, as is testimony the popularity of the newly introduced bilingual model in Mozambique (see Chimbutane 2011; Lafon 2013a), and possibly also in Niger, Mali and Burkina-Faso (Traoré 2009). Should we conclude that parents are seeking what was denied them during colonization (Lafon 2011, 2013b contrasting Mozambique and South Africa)?

¹⁵ One significant rift being spelling, as Taipeh/ Formose maintains an ideogram based system while continental China has gone the alphabetic Latin-based route. Moreover to attract international experts and students mainland China is promoting English-medium degrees, which could be a knife in the back of its own centuries-old culture and language (<http://www.bestcollegechina.com/>). Already, taking advantage of its past and its autonomy, Honk-Kong has allowed English to become medium-of-instruction in high schools when learners are proficient in the foreign language (<http://www.scmp.com/article/640686/chinese-medium-schools-will-be-allowed-teach-english>).

Of course, since the era of independence there have been many calls for an ‘African curriculum’ as some put it. For instance, in the wake of the 1990 Jomtien Education For All Conference, this concern was high on the agenda of African representatives (Brock-Utne 2000: 9). More recently the 2012 ADEA Youth Forum stated: ‘*African cultures, history and languages [should] be placed at the heart of the development of education and training*’ (in Glanz 2013: 58). But, unsurprisingly, little has happened on the ground in terms of a decisive break with practices flowing from colonization. African systems of education as a whole remain Euro-centred.

4. Language as the nerve for development

Another line of argument towards the use of local African languages in education and beyond is worth examining in the light of the above. It emphasizes the link between language and development based on the centrality of language with respect to culture, and hence to development (Prah in Ndhlovu 2013: 36). It ascribes the root cause of the continent’s lasting socio-economic failure to the use of culturally alien and poorly understood media in education and beyond (Williams & Cooke 2002, Chia 2006).

In the conceptual domain, Chambers (2005) shows how the hypocrisy or double talk behind the catchwords (and concepts) extensively used in development propaganda is reinforced by the fact that they are expressed in a language foreign to the supposed beneficiaries. To facilitate development, Mooko (2009) calls for the use of local vernaculars in Botswana, rather than English and/or Setswana only, and so does Kame (2012) in Cameroun. The same rationale applies to health issues. Van Dyk & al. (2001), without however dwelling on language, explains the failure of many Aids prevention programs in Africa by the lack of attention paid to local beliefs and attitudes linked to sexual practices, something Lafon (2006) reported for Mozambique and Mutaka (2006) for Cameroun. However, if the reasoning rests on the “*global mirage*” (Abdi 2006: 19) which equates development to socio-economic or materialistic progress along the developmentalist discourse that has taken sway in west-dominated institutions, its validity is questionable. In economy as elsewhere, language change *per se* would not suffice to redraw the power lines between the global North and the global South. Poverty in Africa (and in the rest of the ‘third world’) largely comes from colonial exploitation, continued if altered after Independence. Language domination is a consequence, rather than a cause, of global unequal relations. But if development is conceived, away from materialism, “*as the meeting of*

human needs, which enables the potential of human personality to be realised”, as suggest Thomas & Potter (in Williams & Cooke 2002: 302), if “*people are put at the centre*” (Trudell 2008: 75), the integration of the worldviews elaborated in non-western languages might find a strong motivation and hence the languages given recognition and space. This may also trigger renewed interest in local products and skills to ground everyday life, much beyond their attraction on the exotic market. Indeed, self-denigration and systematic preference for imports applies equally to locally made products, thus thwarting burgeoning industries (see Adegoju 2006:19 for Nigeria).

5. Bird's view on Education in Africa

5.1. From precolonial...

In pre-colonial times African societies, like all other societies in the world, had each developed their own strategies of education. Some even attained great achievements in Antiquity (Brock-Utne 2000:145, quoting scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Walter Rodney). According to Rodney (in Abdi 2006: 15), the following features were characteristic of African systems: close links with social life, collective nature, progressive development in conformity with children's age, as well as no separation between education and productive activity, and between manual and intellectual domains.

From colonial records, we know that in most communities, children would normally learn about their community, its mores, beliefs, moral codes and behaviours through the well documented tale-telling activity which gathered the young around an adult, during many a night, lit by the fire of a hearth as well as other language-driven activities. The importance of tales on acquiring social mores is well known. It has been recalled by many authors, like Ngugi, S. Platiel (1993), Ntuli & Pretorius (2005), Mutasa et al. (2008), Haire & Matjila (2008), etc. What is less emphasized and of more relevance still, is their crucial role in developing reasoning capacity. Very few children are insensitive to tales well told. They easily become fascinated and want to emulate the narrator, repeating and creating their own, thus developing the capacity to see causal and temporal relations, etc.¹⁶

¹⁶ Experiments in schools in French Guyanna and southern France impulsed by S. Platiel extrapolating from her research in Burkina-Faso, have tellingly demonstrated the positive effects of telling tales in the classrooms, in terms of creating interest in the children, triggering their willing participation and enhancing their social, linguistic and reasoning abilities. See <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-sur-les-docks-prelude-au-salon-du-livre-23-«-les-histoires-de-suzy-platiel—plaidoyer-pour-les-contes>, November 2013.

Riddles, an important part of cultural repertoire, “*present cognitive challenges and are also an invaluable tool in acquiring linguistic and cognitive skills*” (Ngonyani 2013: 1). To mark the turning point into adulthood, in many societies, girls and boys would be initiated, a process that could be lengthy and included relevant teachings, such as “*the love and protection of nature*” (Haire & Matjila, 2008: 161) and occasionally the teaching of secret languages or professional codes. And there were the avoidance rules, known in South Africa as *hlonipha* custom (from the Zulu term), which required brides and bridegrooms to avoid certain terms alluding or bearing resemblance to in-laws’ names. These made for intricate language knowledge. Moreover, in what Akkari (2004) refers to as “situated education”, children, according to their gender and age, would be associated to activities central to the continuation of the family and the group – herding cattle, cultivating, fetching wood and water, nourishing and catering for the smalls, etc.

A crucial feature that cuts across all African education practices is their reliance on orality. With few exceptions – Ge’ez in Ethiopia and, much later, Vai and its sequels in West Africa whose impact was restrained by the secrecy that surrounded them – African societies¹⁷, unlike Indian or Asian ones, did not develop their own scripts (see for instance Mohanty 2006 for India, Kosonen 2013, for South-East Asia), nor, apart from Muslim communities, did they adopt an imported system.

5.2. ...through colonial...

With colonialism came school education, to ensure, in Ngugi’s strong-minded words, “*the colonization of the minds*”. The school was a main lever for cultural assimilation. The education model brought to the colonies had developed in Europe over centuries. It had acquired strong national and/or denominational features. Attitudes towards local languages were at odds, as has been underlined by many scholars. “*The British generally made it a policy to introduce vernacular education (...) The French (...) disregarded local vernaculars entirely and opted for French*” comments Kamwangamalu (2013: 325). Thus under German, British and also Belgian rules, which left a greater role to the missions, local vernaculars found their way in the school during the first years, while for French and Portuguese mainstream thought this was anathema. However, whether it was brought by missionaries or by lay public teachers, whether missionaries were on the payroll of the colonial state or of private worshipers back in the homeland, whether access was restricted to a chosen few or opened more widely, all that matters not here. With hindsight, in the African context, the commonalities which

¹⁷ See <http://classes.bnf.fr/ecritures/arret/lesecritures/afrique/01.htm>, November 2013.

ran through all systems outgrew their differences. School education relied on two main pillars alien to African cultures, namely i) the school itself as an institution insulated from everyday's life that "*involves learning 'out of the context of action, by means that are primarily symbolic'*" (Bruner in Graff 1987:18; also Chanaiwa 1981: 229), and ii) literacy, understood as implying "*basic or primary levels of reading and writing*" and "*a set of techniques for communications and for decoding and reproducing written or printed materials*" (Graff 1987: 18, 19). The importance of literacy in western education cannot be understated. "*Literacy is the key to the curriculum. Virtually all schooling after the first year or two assumes pupil literacy*" (Hannon in Bloch 2000: 4). What matters further is that Africa's own strategies of education had no place. "*Colonialism would undermine the pragmatism and relevance of education in African society*" (Abdi et al. 2006: 4). More often than not African own systems were fought by missionaries upset at their frank admission of the facts of life or by administrators worried, sometimes with good reason, that they might nurture resistance to European domination. Concomitant with the destruction of their societies (Abdi 2006: 15), Africans were thus "*educated away from their cultures*" as Brock-Utne (2000: 17) put it so appropriately. So much so that, even when African languages were used in the first rungs of the education ladder, there was hardly any content adaptation to the African soil. For instance, in the 1930s, chief elect Albert Luthuli (future president of the ANC) then a staff member at the American Zulu Mission Adams College on the outskirts of Durban could state, positively in his view, that "*except in the matter of language, there was not much difference between black and white education*" (Luthuli 2006: p. 20).¹⁸ African language texts had to conform in terms of genres, topics and views to feature in the curriculum. Unsurprisingly, given the context, they were overburdened with Christian images and references. The delay in publishing Th. Mofolo's powerful novel *Chaka* by the Paris Mission in Lesotho is a sterling example of the censorship then exercised by the missionaries (Kunene 1985; Couzens 2004).

The Western school canons were maintained throughout by the colonial powers, whether state or denominational, and the model essentially remained an import. After all, the overall aim was to 'civilize', viz. to acculturate, in many cases to 'christianize', the 'natives', deemed to have no culture of their own or cultures not worthy of formal recognition and maintenance.

A look at Qoranic schools may illuminate by contrast this state of affair.

¹⁸ This was to change with the imposition of apartheid "Bantu Education", which focused, initially at least, on manual skills.

Here is a system equally brought from the outside. It was introduced in the wake of Islam and spread by conquest and/or more softly through the intermingling of peoples. Until recently at least, it showed significant adaptations to local situations. Local traditions and practices were acknowledged in teaching practices, as was teaching itself. Indeed, teachers, paid or compensated for by the parents, were themselves members of the selfsame communities and they brought their cultural background to their practice. In fact the synthesis between pre-existing traditions and Islam which many Muslim communities in Africa illustrate was carried largely through the Qoranic schools. Local languages served as media of instruction and could even be written in the Arabic script (see Tamari 2009 for Mali); occasionally, this gave rise to the long lasting Ajami literary traditions (see Knappert 1967 for Swahili; Lafon 2007 for the Comoros).

5.3. ...to Independence

At Independence, expanding the colonial education network to all and sundry was one stated aim of the new regimes. The rulers were in their number products of that system and adhered to it. The model suffered only cosmetic changes. History programs gave prominence to the continent and to the new nation, the colonial rationale was (sometimes) questioned, resistance to European conquest, especially the early days, was epitomized. But, with very few exceptions, Tanzania “education for self-reliance” under Nyerere’s *ujamaa* policy being one such attempt, now buried along with the memory of the socialist ideal (see Vavrus 2002: 375), the overall orientation and the model itself remained a carbon copy of the original which it tried, mostly in vain, to emulate. Roy-Campbell-Makini (2000: 112) puts it best: “*Knowledge brought by the Europeans has become enshrined in the curricula of most educational institutions in Africa while African beliefs and practices are viewed by the Europeans and the most successful products of their educational system as backwards and uncivilized*”. No significant attempt was made to reshape education within the respective indigenous cultural frameworks by bringing in local practices. Rather, those practices were often derided as primitive and dismissed (Horsthemke 2004: 573). What subsisted of them was discouraged, if not forbidden, as in revolutionary Mozambique (Lafon 2008). “*The educational goals are oriented towards the reception of western ideas and the acquisition of knowledge and skills considered to be relevant in western societies*” (Hanf & al. 1975: 69). The proclamation of the Education for All strategy in 1990 with subsequent increase in rates of school attendance has in many places dealt a final blow to what was left of traditional education (Lewandowski 2012 *à propos* Burkina), even if, in countries such as South Africa, schools now condone initiation and other traditional ceremonies

(own research, Mamelodi, Pretoria). No wonder local languages were largely overlooked in the process. Of course, this cannot be divorced from the fact that the independent African states themselves are but colonial creations, of which schools are part and parcel. More specifically, the continuity between colonial and post-independence practices can be ascribed to the relatively short span of time since schools were introduced, reinforced by (neo-)colonial or imperialist agendas (Prah 2009: 85). Links with former colonial countries turned imperial metropolis provided support, in terms of teachers and manuals, allowing for equivalence, transfers, etc, at a time when schools would prepare a tiny minority to attend Universities abroad. Today, the global education paradigm pushed by the international agencies which set the agenda (Samoff 1999) ensures that the Western influence prevails in pedagogy and curriculum design if not in contents, emphasizing the vocational purpose of schooling. *“the common discourse of learner-centredness, as promoted in the English speaking West, has become controlling and culturally corrective in its prescriptions of how students ought to behave in the classroom”* writes Holliday (2005: 130). Brock-Utne (2000: 35 & seq) describes several cases where this influence has been exercised to the detriment of local contents. Some private schools even delinked with national education systems and prepare for exams from the former colonial country (Vavrus 2002: 377 for Tanzania). This fosters dependency, both financial and ideological as Qorro (2009: 73) illustrates for Tanzania again. Local universities, themselves no genuine development in Africa, are part of this whole setting. That came at the high cost of authenticity. The unquestioned acceptance of the western education model spread from the ruling elite to the whole populace. Qorro (2009: 73) sees in this factor the reason why school certificates are seen not so much as a guarantee of knowledge and expertise but as a mere passport to job opportunities. Without real national ownership, it is bound that the utilitarian view of school education would prevail.

Still, schools are rarely up to their idealized models in terms of means, as translated in class sizes, equipment and material, teachers' qualification, training and motivation. In most cases they remain poor imitations, which leads to an inestimable waste of time and resources. It is true to mention that, in those few countries having mother-tongue schooling, attempts are made to encourage primary school teachers to resort to texts from local traditions. There is nowadays a concerted effort to publish literature in local languages (see the extensive reference list in Welch 2012). However, due to class size, over ambitious curriculum, financial difficulties, at times lack of knowledge or even interest from the teachers, this is rarely done and when it is done, rarely as efficiently as it was in the natural social environment. So great was the ideological pressure of the Western

model that even Qoranic schools, in spite of significant commonalities with the Western schools, found little grace. They were usually condoned but left out of state-supported education. Children have to attend them before entering the 'proper' school or do both simultaneously, making their school day awkwardly lengthy.¹⁹

The claim that Education for All can be implemented effectively and efficiently while making use of an alien model is a no-brainer. For one, the resources are just not there, as was argued recently for language in the South African context (Taylor and Coetzee 2013). This strengthens the case to revisit the whole framework and "*recast the philosophical foundations of African education*" (Abdi 2006: 23). As argued by Peresuh & Masuku (2002: 29) re Zimbabwe, "*it would be necessary to rewrite and re-orientate the content and materials [...] which are geared to an English language mediated imagined²⁰ common culture*".

6. Merging the old and the (not so) new

It is more than clear that schools in Africa "*did not grow out of the local societies*" (Hanf & al. 1975: 68). It is this aping, down to nitty-gritty details, of an institution that prospered in widely different historical, social and cultural dispensation, even worsened in recent years by the narrow focus on education as a key to a rewarding career, which has led to a situation where local languages appear cornered. After all, "*the medium of instruction problem emerged in the late 1880s with the introduction of Western education in Africa*" reminds Alidou (2004: 197).

The historical or anthropological look at education in Africa underlines missing elements in the European brand of school education practised in Africa, especially in towns and urban settlements: the African tradition of community education and socialization through lore and interaction with adults. With a view to maintain and promote African languages, these could be reintroduced as part of a new, inclusive curriculum, constituting a true form of hybrid education encompassing the whole education process, much beyond the mere duality of medium, in a complementary allocation of tasks.

African languages could be brought in *primarily orally*, through the medium in which they excel, rather than as vehicles for 'foreign' knowledge through 'foreign' procedures. Blommaert (2005) reminds us that the discourse of linguistic rights, when positing languages as theoretical equals, leads nowhere. One has to

¹⁹ In the Comoros, it is only recently that modernised Qoranic schools have been established, which combine religious and cultural teachings to western modern contents.

²⁰ Emphasis added.

look at domains of use. Stroud (2004: 89), elaborating on Fishman, establishes the importance for minority languages of reclaiming lost functions before they can eventually move to the same terrain as their bigger competitors. Conversely to a view shared by many scholars who dwelt on the topic of the use of African languages in education (*inter alia* Alidou 2004: 209, Webb 2006, also Welch 2012), we hold that literacy, that is, the reference to written documents, is not a requirement for their meaningful use in education. What is a requirement is for learners to acquire a good command of the language. Obviously a language spoken in the home and the immediate community is the first candidate. To that aim, rich oral transmission may well suffice as it has in Africa over centuries, ensuring cognitive development, viz., reasoning ability and so forth, as well as devising efficient ways for cultural transmission. Anthropological research has amply shown that orality does not prevent transmission of values and knowledge (see in particular the works of Goody). Over-emphasis on literacy – arguably another avatar of the aping of western education – has blurred the essential fact that orality comes first in human development (see Welch 2012: 5) and that literacy is optional. In the present situation, orality, as noted by Dei et al. (2006: 67), is also a form of resistance. In most of Africa, written codes, need it be recalled, are colonial creations, if not impositions. Premising the use of African languages in education on the written domain might even be counterproductive. Indeed, the written usage of African languages has rarely been appropriated by the speakers, even though texting on mobile phones may offer unprecedented opportunities to write in mother tongues.²¹ “*The greatness of Zulu verbal art is in its oral traditions*” wrote Scheub in 1985 (1985: 505). Still Zulu could claim over a century-old tradition of written literature. How much truer then for languages more recently, if at all, instrumentalized! Orality of course need not be the end of the game. Deeper knowledge of the language, in terms of linguistic structures as well as cultural wealth, together with the acquisition of the technique of reading and writing, even in another language, has the capacity to boast mother-tongue literacy, if taken up willingly by speakers.

How then can some relevant traditional practices be reintroduced?

Most areas, particularly urban sprawling townships or informal settlements – schools are in any case more common in urban settlements than in rural areas, increasing the perceived marginalisation of the later (Hanf & al. 1975: 76) – contain hordes of unoccupied adults, some of them at least with the relevant knowledge and experience, who could be entrusted of the not inconsequent task of linguistic and cultural transmission. Of course these cultural mediators

²¹ We hope to come back to this issue with data from a SA chat room.

would be vetted and approved in a process involving parents, local teachers and the state. Not all candidates would qualify. Possibly a stipend could be handed over, or food, especially in cases where food schemes are in place. Sessions could be set in the yard of their homes, for the benefit of the children in the neighbourhood. Placing the sessions outside the school would emphasize that school is not the only source of knowledge. Besides tales, story-telling, and other oral genres, recourse would be made to games, plays, songs, etc., of which there is no short supply in local languages. Children should be in smallish numbers, as compared to class sizes – not more than 10 or so, to enable the adult mediators to afford children individual attention. Oral activities have to be interactive, with children responding, creating their own stories, responding to riddles, etc., and being listened to by adults. Oral art functions effortlessly, through pleasure, which would make the sessions popular with children and could successfully compete with TV and computer games. Obviously these sessions would be conducted orally in the language or speech form of the community. It is a sure way to enrich the vocabulary, including categories of terms peculiar to African languages which are coming fast into disuse, such as ideophones, to enlarge the stock of proverbs and other idioms whose knowledge, besides informing the mind, often tells the native from the outsider, to explore grammatical structures, and so forth.

The issues of language choice, norms and dialectal differences, which have proved to be such a hindrance in the absence of accepted standards, would fall away, as would in great part that of language diversity. This is crucial. The very logic of mother tongue education is often defeated by the discrepancy between the local variety and the school standard or the national language as the case may be. When (so-called) mother tongue literacy is run in parallel in the school, the formal class would teach the standard form of the language in contrast, rather than in opposition, to the oral practices of the sessions. Stegen (2005)'s suggestion of using Swahili for teaching local Tanzanian languages contrastively is an idea that might prove valuable. In places where local languages do not feature in the school curriculum, the school would introduce the foreign LoLT, while the community sessions would ensure oral competency in the local speech form. In that case at least, the difficulties of teachers' deployment when they have to use the mother tongue of their learners would be simplified, allowing for transfers across ethnic as well as social boundaries.

The introduction of local languages and lore in early education by adults of the community would defuse the feeling of backwardness triggered by their marginalization. A better-balanced position between the languages and cultures would follow, contributing possibly to slacken the pace of language shift, as well as positively impact on the children's image of the self and identity building,

perception of the community, increasing vertical social cohesion. The image of rural life, often associated only to poverty and backwardness, could be at least partially rehabilitated, especially as community sessions would reclaim its cultural worth. The positive effects of the various genres of orature on cognitive development need not be restated (*inter alia* Bloch 2006, quoted in Welch 2012 and above). The use of the local language is further an invite for indigenous knowledge to be brought in, especially through lore as acknowledged early by Lafon F. (1982). Horsthemke (2004: 583) quotes “*traditional healing, conflict resolution, basket-weaving, pottery, local agriculture*” *inter alia* as worthy of consideration. Mutasa & al. (2008) highlight the relevance of folktales for environmental education. And, albeit in a slightly different perspective, Tourneux (2011)’s bilingual source material for classes in Cameroun which makes available both the community’s views as expressed in its own language (Fulfulde) and the western scientific insight on natural features such as species of fish or bats. Of course indigenous knowledge and cultural features should not be glorified uncritically on account of their authenticity, lest we fall into the swift sands of cultural relativism (Horsthemke 2004). Culture is dynamic. Beliefs which contradict scientific truths, practices now deemed socially unacceptable, especially around gendered roles, must be left aside or at the very least contextualized.

Is this to say that formal schooling should be discontinued or delayed? Not quite.

Let us look first at pre-schooling. In many places, crèches or pre-schools have become the in-thing. They attempt, once again, to copy the West, with their educational games and pretty coloured material, and, more often than not in the African context, early introduction to the metropolitan language to increase the child’s chances in school. ‘Community’ care could advantageously replace the above, while existing crèches could be transformed to focus on orality in local varieties. Let early child development be culturally rooted.

Second, school does not probably have to start so early and be so time-consuming (especially given the average low outcomes in Africa). That this happens in the West does not make it a must. Rather, it should be seen for what it really is, a palliative to the unavailability, and sometimes, unwillingness, of parents to tend to their children. Close monitoring of children in smaller groups could in any case help customize the starting age for formal schooling. Children do not develop at the same pace. Very much in accordance to practices in modern, up-market alternative schools²² children cognitive development would

²² I owe this insight to Stephany Rudwick who specifically referred to the Montessori brand of schools.

be assessed by the mediators before moving into formal schooling, reducing class repetition or weak understanding.

When school starts, for the first 3 to 4 years or longer, attendance could be limited to, say, three hours in the morning, with a focus on second language learning and possibly mother tongue literacy, while the afternoon is left to the community sessions, which could continue as after-care when need be. What about the sacred-saint curriculum? No one would deny that at least some of the skills taught by the schools, including the command of an international language, are crucial in to-day's world. But the pace of learning as well as the obsession with mathematics would probably need to be questioned. Some subjects could be spaced, others, such as life skills, would become redundant in view of the social relevance of the lore and tales. In other cases, both fonts of knowledge could be brought in. The few examples cited above suffice to show that it is not an 'either or', there is no "*conceptual divide*" (Dei et al. 2006: 54).

Due to their improved knowledge of their language, children would in any case be in a better position to understand and apprehend the contents of the formal classes. But much more than language and contents is involved. Children would benefit cognitively from a better social and psychological environment. Community mediators could, to some extent at least, compensate for absentee parents in a way that teachers in crowded classes cannot, and trigger children's more harmonious development.

It is obviously crucial that the community sessions do not appear detrimental to (formal) education progress. For that to happen, to avoid bypassing strategies from sceptic or reluctant parents, they would have to be made part of a renewed, inclusive curriculum, enforced by the state, where oral competence in local languages is valued. Controls where the children would express themselves orally in the local language could be made part of the annual assessment.

This limited 'African' curriculum' is, we feel, realistic. It amounts to little more than the reintroduction of humanities in the classical sense of contextualised knowledge and moral values, based those on African tradition as expressed in specific cultures, a *reculturation* as Abdi (2006: 24) puts it. It would be part of a hybrid education system including orality in African languages on the same footing as writing in metropolitan language, and knowledge emanating from both sources, local as well as western. This would offer children the opportunity to become the bi-/ multi- cultural adults that Africa so desperately needs and grow to constitute the counter-elite that Prah (2009: 83) is calling for.

The proof of the validity of such a twofold education system lies in front of our eyes if we care to see. The great African intellectuals and politicians of yesteryear and even today, the likes of, say, Senghor, Nyerere, Mondlane,

Mandela, Krumah, Ngugi, Dube, Plaatje, and many more, did not attend English or French or Portuguese – medium speaking crèches and preparation schools. They followed traditional practices, many underwent initiation. They were fluent in their mother tongue and conversant with the culture before they entered mission or government schools, where they learnt the official school language and adopted Christianity. Who would say they lacked in achievements?

7. Conclusion

Africa urgently needs to reassert herself. The much-vaunted African Renaissance cannot ignore the continent's cultural practices and worldviews as expressed through her languages (Moodley 2000: 103). Prah (2003: 17) advocates the use of African languages all along the school course as a tool for the empowerment. The road towards an African future may thus start by looking back. A soft approach to African languages maintenance and development could reconcile the old and the new through the involvement of local communities to set up informal sessions for children, reminiscent of traditional practices immersed in orality. Indeed, weaning Africa from Europe (Ron Simango 2009) cannot happen in a language alien to the community. This may be a step towards promoting a model of development giving prominence to social and spiritual wellbeing over material wealth. At a time when numerous signs show that the planet cannot bear much longer the wastage of resources that goes under the name of progress, this is a route that Africa needs to engage on, for its own sake as well as that of humankind. Only thus can she create conditions more enticing for its denizens than risking their lives attempting the new, self-inflicted and hopeless middle passage.²³

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²³ The **Middle Passage** was one leg of the triangular trade which shipped millions from Africa to be enslaved in the New World.

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