

MULTILINGUALISM / MULTICULTURALISM IN AFRICA AND ITS IMPACT ON A READING CULTURE: THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE

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1. Introduction

Multilingualism/multiculturalism has always been a major challenge to the development of literacy, a reading culture, publishing and libraries in Africa. Almost every African government has to contend with multiple languages, a situation that impacts on communication, education and development in general. For people in Europe, where most countries are traditionally monolingual or are duo lingual or trilingual, it may be very difficult to fully understand the extent of challenges brought about by multilingualism.

2. Is there a difference between multilingualism and multiculturalism?

But before elaborating on the challenges brought about by multilingualism, it would be necessary to get clarity about the question whether language and culture are synonymous or whether there is a difference. I think you will agree that there is a difference: Culture is a broader concept, language being one of its components. Culture also goes psychologically deeper. It has to do with identity, with who you feel you are. It has to do with the customs and beliefs you have been brought up with. Language is of course, intimately part of your identity. It is the language of your parents and your relatives, in which you mostly dream, pray and feel most comfortable with. The same language can of course be spoken in several countries, but this does not mean that these speakers have the same cultural identity. Australians and Canadians don't consider themselves British, Austrians and Swiss don't consider themselves German, and Argentinians don't consider themselves Spaniards.

Political identity again, may coincide with language in some monolingual countries, but in multilingual/multicultural countries such as Namibia, they don't coincide. A Kwanyama, a Herero or an Afrikaans speaker will each have her/his own language and cultural identity but will feel politically as Namibians. If these three people should meet in a foreign country for the first time, they will experience the affinity they have for one another as Namibians. I myself have experienced this many times.

3. Multilingualism in Africa

The number of spoken and written languages per African country varies considerably, from e.g. 400 spoken languages in Nigeria, to 120 spoken languages in Tanzania, to more than twenty written languages in Ghana, to fourteen written languages in Namibia and eleven in South Africa. ¹

Most African countries with many languages, find that the easiest option for communication and educational purposes, is to stick to the colonial language, namely English in Anglophone Africa, French in Francophone Africa and Portuguese in Lusophone Africa. The problem is however, that large portions of their populations never manage to master these colonial languages with the result that they are entirely cut off from the educational process, from becoming functionally literate, from reading, from using libraries and from development *per se*. In Nigeria some may speak some Pidgin English, or in Namibia, "Namlish," a local form of poor English. ²

4. The problem of functional illiteracy in Africa

Being able to speak a language does not make one literate. Literacy requires that one should also be able to read and write the language spoken correctly and with ease. The definition of functional literacy is, "having the reading and writing skills necessary for every day living and the workplace, equivalent to eight years of successful formal schooling in the mother tongue or preferred language of learning" (Hoffmann, 2008:11). One must be able to draw conclusions from texts.

Some facts and statistics, mainly from Anglophone, Sub-Saharan Africa, will demonstrate the problems surrounding literacy:

4.1. Governments too often assume that once a person has acquired basic literacy skills, he/she will remain literate. This is not the case. In many African countries, many new-literates relapse into illiteracy again within a few years. Upon completion of the course, there is almost nothing in a particular language for the new-literate to read apart from the few primers written for the literacy programme.

¹ It is understandable that Nigeria has been finding it impossible to develop orthographies for so many spoken or oral languages. The main languages they have established orthographies for are Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba.

² Some information on East Africa: In Tanzania a unique tripart language system is in existence. Sandwiched between the local languages and the colonial language, English, there is another indigenous but also transnational/transborder language, namely Kiswaheli which is spoken by the majority. Kenya has the same tripart language system. Kiswaheli is also widely spoken in Uganda. In the rural areas the local language is the first language spoken, followed by Kiswaheli as the second language; most rural people don't speak English at all. In urban areas, Kiswaheli is often the first language spoken and English the second language, but all in all, English is spoken by an estimated 5% of the population only. A class system in all three countries has developed, with local languages at the bottom, Kiswaheli in the middle and English at the top. English remains the language of a small elite, yet English is glorified by many as "a panacea that can solve all problems" (Rubagumya, 2003:5). This mindset will consider education in Kiswaheli to be second class education. Parents, who can afford it, send their children to English private schools. These are the only schools that usually have relatively well-stocked and well-functioning school libraries.

4.2. During the Namibian National Census of 2001, a link between high infant mortality and illiteracy of the mother was found. Research has also proved that the mother's level of literacy determines to a large extent, a child's success at school. She is the most important parent who should support the child's development and academic progress; more so because there are many families in Africa without a father. If the mother is illiterate, she cannot fulfil this role.

4.3. It is therefore not surprising that the World Bank has found that gender disparity in literacy promotes a higher illiteracy rate. If 75% of the men are literate and only 25% of the women, illiteracy will increase. If men and women each have about a 50% literacy rate, illiteracy goes down. Unfortunately twice as many girls are out of school than boys (Greaney, 2003).³

5. Problems in education

The main problems surrounding education in Africa are high outcomes of functional illiteracy in spite of schooling or literacy training, high school drop out rates, and gender disparity, i.e. the tendency of parents to send their sons to school and keep their daughters at home. Two of the main reasons for these problems are poverty of the parents and the use of a language learners are not familiar with as the educational medium in schools.

The benefits of teaching children in their mother tongue/first language are that children attend school more regularly; they don't drop out easily; they are academically more successful; they learn the second language more easily; they are socio-economically more successful (Greaney, 2003).⁴

³ The problem of functional illiteracy in Africa: Additional notes

- Adult literacy statistics are not very reliable. UNESCO has developed a system to test literacy levels but only a few countries are implementing this system of assessment (Greaney, 2003).
- In Tanzania where adult illiteracy initially dropped from 67% in 1970 to only 10% in 1986 through a nationwide literacy campaign, illiteracy rates rose again by 2000 to over 30%, in some areas up to 50%. School attendance went down with many drop outs. This is said to have been caused by an economic slump that necessitated drastic reductions in spending on education and other social services (Rubagumya, 2003: 4).
- According to the Tanzanian professor and linguist, Rubagumya, there is no African country, also in Anglophone Africa, where half of the population speaks, reads and writes English (Rubagumya, 2003).
- In South Africa, only 15% of all black matriculants (12 years of schooling), are functionally literate in English, their preferred language of learning. It means that only 1 in 29 children entering the school system, emerge as functionally literate matriculants. As a result, there are 12.4 million functionally illiterate people in South Africa (Taylor, 1999:12).

⁴ Problems in education: Additional notes

- In South Africa the school drop out rate is 77% over 12 years of schooling. The international school drop out rate according to UNESCO is 21% (Hoffmann, 2008:11).
- There are 42.5 million out of school children in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- In Swaziland, three quarters of learners in remote rural schools are boys. When parents are too poor to send all their children to school, they send the boys because "they must go and find work in the gold mines in South Africa; a girl's place is in the kitchen. She doesn't need school" (Mmema, 2003).
- In northern Nigeria two thirds of all girls cannot read (Gordon, 2003).
- In Uganda only 17% of Grade 6 learners have attained the basic minimum level of academic competence (Kalebbo, 2003:32). Five million children in that country are not going to school at all and for those who attend primary school, there is only one book for three learners according to K. Mapuya, Ugandan Minister of Education and Sports.

6. Why is education in the colonial language favoured?

6.1 Owing to poverty and ignorance, many parents see the colonial language as a vehicle of development and want their children to become fluent in this language in the hope that the children will be more successful than they were to secure good jobs.

6.2 The implementation of multilingual education policies accepted by politicians is often difficult or even almost impossible. The number of mother tongue teachers is inadequate; just anybody who can speak a language cannot teach a language. The infrastructure of trained and knowledgeable officials and funding in the civil service is lacking. To implement multilingual education will require huge budgets for the development of mother tongue training programmes for teachers at tertiary institutions, the writing and publishing of thousands of readers and set books in several languages and the creation of many new posts.

6.3 In spite of the acceptance of policies favouring mother tongue education, many African governments deep down, are indifferent to universal mother tongue education. Many politicians, being members of a small elite, prefer to maintain the *status quo*. These political leaders speak the colonial languages fluently and send their children to private schools and first world universities. Former colonial powers and other first world leading countries, many of whom still believe that Africans are not able to manage their own governments properly, also have an interest in strengthening the colonial languages in Africa; they want to exercise some indirect control of governments. They e.g. do not even have scruples to cooperate and do business with African dictators who are prone to be manipulated and bribed (Harlech-Jones, 1995:1-2).

What chances have children in Africa then, to develop in today's world? Imagine Italian six year olds being expected to learn to read, not in Italian, but in a foreign language that they don't understand and most of their parents don't understand, and is not spoken outside the school either! Most parents living in Europe would object to such an impossible demand on their children and rightly so. We in Africa see the consequences of such an ill-conceived policy every day.

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- Already in 1971 in Nigeria, a National Policy on Education accepted that the mother tongue will be the medium of instruction in the primary school. It did not work however, because it was unacceptable to the people. So the use of the mother tongue in Nigerian schools is rare (Onukoogu, 2003). In northern Nigeria two thirds of all girls cannot read (Gordon, 2003).
 - In 1975 the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa, held in Accra, Ghana, as well as in 1976 the Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States held in Lagos, Nigeria, agreed on the strengthening and greater use of local languages as media of instruction in schools. An Inter-African Bureau of Languages of the Organization for African Unity (OAU, now African Union AU) was established. Progress has been slow, however.
 - South Africa has an excellent policy to develop its 11 official languages and implement these in at least during the lower primary levels, but policy and practice have not been going hand in hand. English is favoured by the government and preferred by the parents who have a choice: instruction for their child, either in the mother tongue, during the junior primary (first three years), with the phasing in of English later, or English medium instruction only, right from Grade 1. Many of them choose the latter.
 - Only 22 countries of the 155 developing countries world wide, are on track as far as Education for All (EFA) is concerned. The majority are not making a success of EFA (Greaney, 2003).

7. The negative impact of education in an unknown language

It impacts just about every area of development, including education, a reading, culture, literacy, libraries, the publishing industry, gender equality and the quality of life. Here some reservations expressed by experts and related facts:

7.1. Rubagumya (2003:1) believes that learning the colonial language first, impedes, rather than facilitates literacy. Parents who will not or cannot take the responsibility for raising their children to speak and think in English should let their children be taught in the mother tongue otherwise the education of their children is doomed to failure.

7.2. Mother tongue instruction in a class atmosphere facilitates cognitive perception in which the child can partake in a dialogue which promotes learning (Haacke, [1986?]: 14).

7.3. School-beginners are known to begin school with great excitement and eagerness. Many African children, however, soon lose their eagerness to learn when taught in a language they struggle to understand. Classroom interaction is often very poor because learners are not enthusiastic and interested. Often they find no support at home because their parents are either illiterate or semi-literate, particularly in the official language.

7.4. Education in the colonial language is culturally alienating. African children who grow up speaking the colonial language as their first language can be termed Afro-English or Afro-Saxons (Rubagumya, 2003: 6-7), Afro-French and Afro-Portuguese. Elite parents create an artificial environment in their homes, alienating their children from their surroundings.

7.5. On the socio-psychological level, the assimilation of two or more dissimilar languages can lead to cultural disorientation and stunted verbal expression. The person becomes culturally torn (Melber, 1985:14). The Zimbabwean author and Shona-speaker, Dambudzo Marechera (*in* Melber, 1985: 14), poignantly describes the effect English, his second language, had on him: "... I lost the ability to express the simplest things I incessantly talked disjointed nonsense I felt raped inside through the conflict between Shona and English I felt literally as if my words had been stolen" [*my translation from the German*].

8. Cultural differences in reading, publishing and library use

Since the majority in most African societies are not only poor but also in transition from orality to literacy, there are marked differences in reading, publishing and library use as compared to first world countries:

8.1. There is a wide-spread attitude that reading is just for educational purposes and not also for leisure and pleasure. Entertainment in African communities is essentially mainly oral/aural.

8.2. There are many illiterate adults in Africa. Aliteracy occurs when people who can read do not do so. They may read instructions on packets but will not read for pleasure because they use reading for utilitarian purposes only. They have never learnt to love books. They will not read to their preschool children or take them to the library because they believe that their children only need books once they go to school. They don't know children's books and there are very few or maybe none in their own local language.

8.3. For a long time, the few public and school libraries in Africa were little first world islands, containing only books in the colonial language and of irrelevant content for its clientele. This cemented a belief that libraries are places for learned people only.

8.4. Enthusiasm among many African teachers to develop their school library is lacking. They reduce education to what is being tested, so rote learning from textbooks is all they expect from learners.

8.5 In the light of all these constraining factors, it becomes clear why publishers are reluctant to publish books other than school text books prescribed by the education department. Whereas 35% of books published for children in Europe are school text books, 95% of all books published for children in South Africa, are school text books. Illiterate parents who hardly have enough money for food, will not buy children's books for enjoyment. The publishing of such books, called trade books, is considered by most African publishers, as an unprofitable undertaking. In South Africa, only 4% of the population can afford to buy books.

8.6. The indigenous languages are not being developed to keep abreast with the growth of information. For communication and publishing in the indigenous languages, many words to describe e.g. scientific and technological concepts are lacking. Speakers find that they have to use many English words when trying to express themselves on academic research topics and technology in an indigenous language. Rubagumya (2003) however, believes that "a language has to be used to develop; don't wait for it to develop first before you use it."

8.7. Reading behaviour in most African homes is quite different from European family reading patterns where parents read and also read to their children. Just the opposite is often the case. The children read to their illiterate parents, help them to fill out forms and read instructions on packets and medicine bottles. It can happen that a child reads to a whole village of illiterate adults.

8.8. In Africa one will see all sorts of mobile libraries: bicycle libraries, libraries on the backs of camels, donkeys, horses, library boats, moving book tents, etc. The bibliobus does not work in Africa. The roads are too bad and most communities cannot afford the fuel and maintenance of a huge bus.

9. The Namibian experience

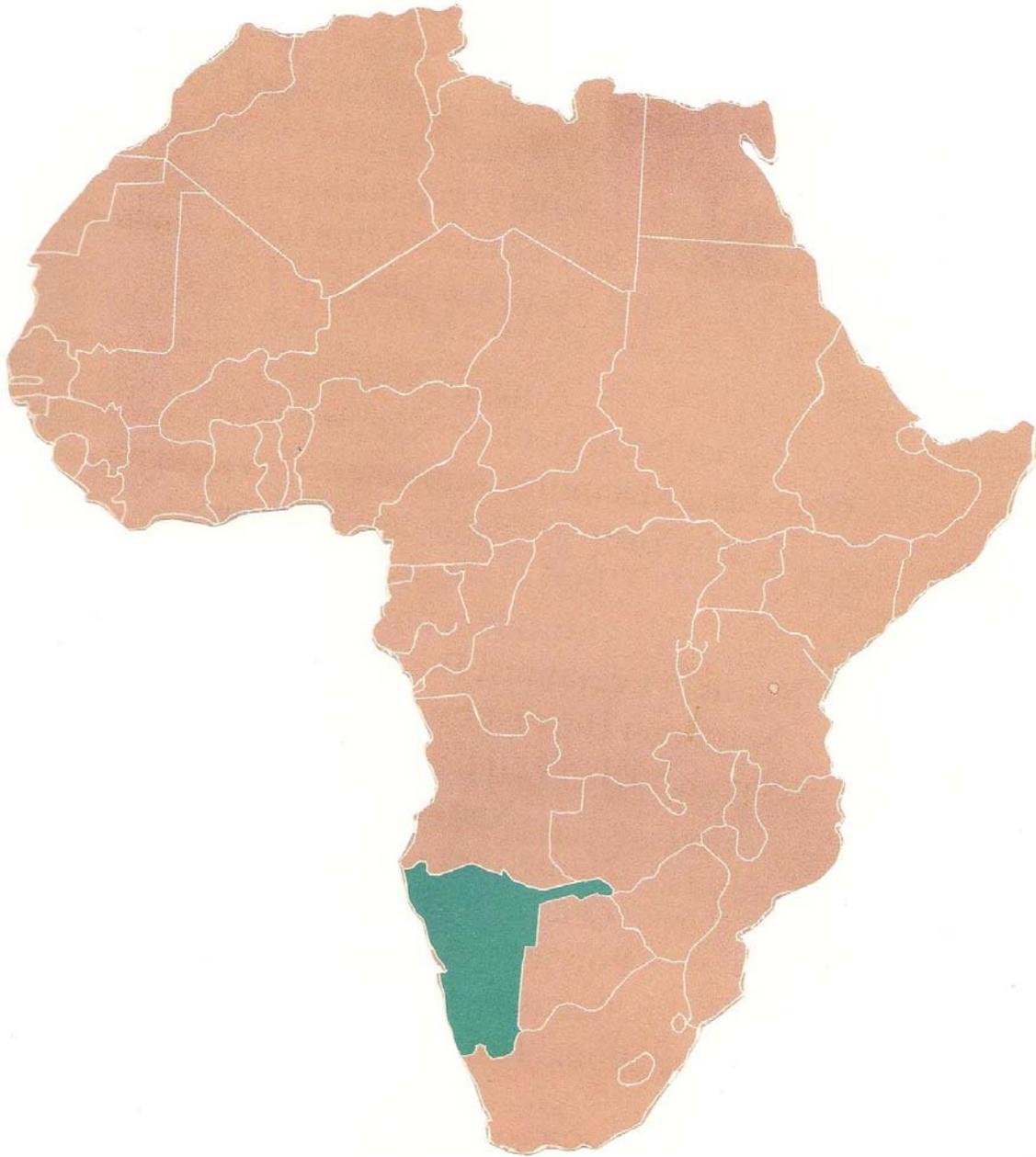


Figure 1

9.1. The colonial legacy: some facts about Namibia

Namibia is a large country but with a population of only 2.2 million inhabitants, a great part of it being desert. Namibia, previously called South West Africa, became independent on 21st March 1990 as Africa's last colony, after at first 30 years of German rule and 75 years of South African *apartheid* rule.⁵ Figure 1.

⁵ The colonial legacy: some additional facts about Namibia

9.2. The language scene in Namibia

There are fourteen written languages in Namibia with a standardized orthography.⁶ In addition, there are also about 16 oral languages for which no orthography exists. At the time of independence in 1990, there were two official languages in the territory: Afrikaans and English.⁷ Already early in the 19th century, Afrikaans became the dominant *lingua franca* in south and central Namibia and by 1990 the majority of the population could communicate in Afrikaans.

Namibia was never colonized by the English, and yet English is now the only official language in Namibia. This was a decision of the new government nineteen years ago, even though barely 5% of the population could read and write proper English at the time. In 2001, it was the home language of only 1.9% of the population. The main reason given for this decision was that English is a world language and that it would be difficult to choose any one of the Namibian languages as the official language of the country. Afrikaans was unacceptable to the new leaders since it was seen as the language of oppression.⁸ Furthermore, it was believed that English would be a unifying force that would promote national integration and unity and inter-cultural understanding. Kashoki (*in* Melber, 1985:33) however, considers this to be “a misguided notion. At worst it is a counterproductive and even dangerous notion. National integration is not achieved by the mere mastery of the official language of the state.”

It was thought that through the introduction of a neutral language such as English, everybody would be equally disadvantaged, i.e. it would prevent the privileging of some groups (Harlech-Jones, 1995: 8). This assumption was wrong. The majority of the until then, privileged whites, had a relatively good

Namibia is situated on the west coast of Africa and bordered by Angola in the north, by Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe in the northeast and South Africa in the south. Its size is more than 820 000 km². Germany lost the colony after World War I and South Africa was mandated in 1919 by the League of Nations to govern the territory. As from 1949 South Africa governed the territory as if it belonged to South Africa in spite of national and international resistance to its rule. The despised *Apartheid* system of racial segregation and oppression was instituted.

⁶ The fourteen written languages in Namibia with a standardized orthography are, according to the 2001 census, in order of number of people speaking these languages at home: Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Khoekhoegowab, Afrikaans, Otjiherero, Rukwangali, Silozi, Rumanyo, Thimbukushu, English, German, Ju|'hoansi, !Xuun and Setswana.

The language policy of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka already in 1981 included the institutionalization in Namibia of “the various languages to their greatest advantage” (Chamberlain et al., 1981: v) but not much has been done in Namibia to promote the local languages over the past 19 years.

⁷ Afrikaans, in the form of Cape Dutch, was brought into the country mainly by two prominent political tribal leaders, namely Jonker Afrikaner and Hendrik Witbooi, both born in South Africa in ca. 1790 and 1830, respectively. The Orlam Afrikaner settled in Namibia in 1796 (Dierks, 2000: 12-20).

⁸ Afrikaans did indeed become the language of *apartheid* after 1949 with the influx of white government officials from Pretoria, South Africa. It however, remains the fourth biggest Namibian mother tongue. It is also being spoken for more than 150 years, by many more Namibians for purposes of cross-ethnic communication.

command of English at the time of independence, and in addition, there was the small group of Namibians who returned from exile, having been trained in Europe, particularly in English speaking countries, who had an excellent command of English. These two groups immediately found themselves part of a small Namibian Anglotocracy or Anglo-elite, while the rest of the population was grossly disadvantaged and still to a large extent is. The other thirteen Namibian languages are accepted in the Namibian constitution as 'national languages' but they are not vigorously promoted. Harlech-Jones (1995: 9) states that the position of the new government is that "There should be a substantial nod in the direction of 'bilinguality' and 'multilinguality' – but not so substantial as to endanger the dominant position of English." A more gradual phasing in of English as official language would have brought about a less drastic and abrupt change.

9.3 The position of languages in the school system and other related issues

English medium instruction was instituted by the new government in 1991, with the option of mother tongue instruction during the first three years of schooling, where after compulsory English-medium instruction is phased in in Grade 4. Some schools however, do not opt for either the three years mother tongue instruction or the second Namibian language option and instruct in and teach English from Grade 1.⁹

The sudden transition from Afrikaans-medium instruction to English-medium instruction in Namibian schools in 1991 was problematic.¹⁰ Even today after nineteen years, the poor comprehension of English has been identified as the main reason for poor school leaving examination results. According to a UNICEF survey on reading skills of Grade 6 learners in Africa in 2003, only 7, 6% of all Namibian Grade 6 learners can read well, while another 25, 9% possess minimum reading competency. Two-thirds of Namibian Grade 6 learners cannot read.¹¹

9 Included in the option of mother tongue instruction, is that when after the first three years of mother tongue education, English-medium education is phased in, the mother tongue may be offered as a subject right through to senior secondary school level. Some of these languages are only offered until Grade 10, however.

10 The South Africans instituted mother tongue instruction in the junior primary phase in Namibia in the 1950's. For close to forty years, it was compulsory during the first three years of schooling and thereafter Afrikaans was the medium of instruction in schools with English and the mother tongue offered as subjects, most of them up to Grade 12. Since then many Namibians believe that the main reason why so many parents reject mother tongue instruction for their children, even today, is because it was part of the hated and despised *apartheid* rule. The South Africans wanted to divide and rule by keeping Namibians separate in their ethnicities and many Namibians see the language policy of the time as part of it. The assumption that they reject mother tongue instruction for their children for this reason, however, does not explain the same phenomenon in other African countries that have been independent for a very long time. Ghana has been independent for 48 years, and Kenya and Nigeria for 46 years and yet many parents in those countries also prefer English medium instruction. It is more plausible that they do this because they consider the colonial language as the motor towards progress.

¹¹ In the same survey, UNESCO established that in Kenya where only 69% of all Kenyan children attend primary school, almost two thirds of them can read well and another 20% can read with minimum

Not only learners but also most teachers struggle with English. Both groups suffer from anxiety about learning and teaching through the medium of English (Chamberlain, 1993; Melber, 1985: 15). Within a couple of years after the abrupt switch to English medium education, it became clear that both teachers and learners were not enjoying education in the schools. It appears that both groups were feeling frustrated with having to communicate in a language nobody could speak and/or understand well. Already by 1992-1993 discipline in Namibian schools had deteriorated to an alarming level. Some learners had become so rebellious and aggressive that teachers were afraid of them. A survey in 1993 by field workers of the Florida State University found that 60% of Namibian teachers spoke English so badly that they were not able to teach effectively in that language.¹² In 1993 the results of the first public examinations at the end of Grade 10 were devastating if not unexpected.¹³ Government was clearly concerned about these bad outcomes but blamed mainly the teachers in stead of itself in the first place.

There were however, several Namibian educationists who had serious reservations about the sudden institution of English medium instruction in the schools, but initially, during the emotional two years after independence, most of them did not dare express their opinions publicly, for fear of being branded as opponents of the new government. Some voices did however, express grave concern, some already before independence, namely Phillipson, Skutnab-Kangas and Africa as quoted by Melber in 1985 (pp. 30-32) who stated that the Namibian language agenda was reinforcing inequalities, the creation or perpetuation of elites and causing the denial, stigmatization and underdevelopment of mother tongues. They did not condemn English as the official language of communication, but only its overhasty implementation in the schools. They recommended the reinforcement of the mother tongues in education and the offering of English as a subject only for the 12 years of education. They criticized resistance against the use of mother tongues as the expression of a colonial mindset. Harlech-Jones (1995: 12-13) quoting Popper (1966: 157-8), states that "A dogmatic insistence driven by a vision of a distant, Utopian ideal leads to undemocratic measures, because the effort to reach these distant goals requires a strong centralized rule of the few to keep the project on track and to ensure that the populace is not diverted by hardships along the way, by disagreements as to methods and by different proposals."

competency. One difference is that in Kenyan primary schools, the medium of instruction is mainly Kiswahili, an African language that most Kenyans can speak well.

¹² Another 25% of the teachers surveyed, scored only one point out of a possible 9 which means, "few words, no communication" i.e. they could not communicate in English at all (Kotze, 1994:11).

¹³ Only 15% of Cambridge O Levels (Grade 10) learners in 1993 passed. In 2001, more than half of Namibian Grade 10 learners failed, resulting in enormous numbers of teenagers being out of school. They are not allowed to repeat Grade 10 in school but only through the difficult mode of distance learning. Of boys that age, 60% were not in senior secondary school. By 2004 only 41% of Grade 10 learners graduated to Grade 11. Only 11% of the learners who passed the IGCSE examination for Grade 12 in 2003, qualified for admission to local tertiary institutions. Those who fail Grade 12 are also not allowed to repeat Grade 12 in school.

Furthermore, “that considerable neglect and suffering will probably result while the ultimate aim is being pursued;” and that the suffering, neglect and hardship along the way may possibly prove to have been largely in vain. “The Utopian engineer will have to be deaf to complaints and ... it will be part of his business to suppress unreasonable objections” (Popper, 1966: 160). Harlech-Jones also quotes Berger (1976: 210): “Policies that ignore the indigenous definitions of a situation will fail.” The effect of this Utopian language policy on the education of the already most disadvantaged, is that they are rendered voiceless and not able to make themselves heard in public debate owing to lack of command of the official language; they are dispossessed of the dominant language, passive, helpless, confused and profoundly suspicious of government (Harlech-Jones, 1995: 22-23). Melber (1985: 34) also warns with the chilling slogan: “A voiceless people, die a soundless death.”

The Namibian psychologist, Dr Shaun Whittaker, warned in 1999 that sudden immersion in a language unfamiliar to children has failed in every single African country that tried to implement it. To expect primary school children to become fluent in English within three to four years is unrealistic and irresponsible (Allgemeine Zeitung, 1999:4).¹⁴ In a letter published in the New Era of 19th August 2005, N K Mbaeva, teacher of history and Otjiherero at a Windhoek secondary school, complains that “where kids are taught to speak a second language at the expense of the mother tongue, (it) creates a semi-lingual society They don’t speak any language properly Africans, for how long are we going to regard everything African as second best? Our self-image, our culture and our identity are tarnished as we regard our own language as inferior to English.”

In 2000 Dr Becky Ndjoze-Ojo, then Deputy Director Language Centre, University of Namibia, now Deputy Minister of Education also warned as follows: “Namibia cannot with one language promote indigenous development especially, when that language is not indigenous. We as a nation need to promote and preserve our indigenous languages” (Ndjoze-Ojo, 2000: 81).

At this stage however, in spite of the difficulties encountered over the past 19 years in the educational arena, it is clear that the government is not prepared to institute the mother tongues as main media of instruction at least for the primary school phase, with English as a subject only. Parents also, in spite of high learner failure rates, are still not aware that English medium instruction is the main cause of their children’s poor performance in school. Most parents seem to want their children to be instructed mainly in English as from the fourth school year at least.

¹⁴ Dr Whittaker advocated mother tongue instruction in the primary school with English as a subject to be phased in gradually, and in the secondary school, half of the subjects offered in the mother tongue and half in English (Allgemeine Zeitung, 1999:4).

¹⁵ In comparison, 75% of all parents in Holland want their children to be instructed in the mother tongue for their whole school career; generally mother tongue education is accepted worldwide, as a *sine qua non*.

By 2005 government concern about the low quality of education prompted the adoption of a 15 year strategic plan, the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) for the period 2005/6 – 2020 to bring about reformation of the education and training sector. The World Bank is assisting the Namibian government in the areas of primary and secondary education, vocational and tertiary education and training and information technology. A few measures for the enhancement of early childhood development and pre-school education,¹⁶ as well as the retention of children in basic education,^{17 18} do not touch the core of the problem surrounding the low quality of education in Namibia. Government remains in denial to the main cause of the problem, namely English medium instruction in the schools. Deep down decision-makers must know that “a failure in it (English) is tantamount to a failure of the educational system” (Ndjoze-Ojo, 2000: 80).

¹⁵ Louw (1998: 23) in a survey of mother tongue education in Grades 1 to 3 and language preferences of Namibian school leavers found that the percentages of learners that were receiving mother tongue instruction in 1997 were very unequal. They were as follows: Afrikaans 60%, English 88%, German 94%, Khoekhoegowab 33%, Oshikanyama 82%, Oshindonga 92%, Otjiherero 31%. Percentages of school leavers, who wanted their children to be taught in the mother tongue as first language, were 100% of German speakers, 49% of Afrikaans speakers and only 17.4 of Khoekhoegowab speakers. Forty one (41) % of the latter group denied their mother tongue and insisted that they were English speaking, 47% of Otjiherero speakers did the same.

¹⁶ In 1990 the newly established Ministry of Education terminated all government funding for early childhood development. Preschools and Kindergarten had to find funding elsewhere. Formal basic and secondary education clearly enjoyed a higher priority and they still do. The policy framework for long-term national development until 2030, does not include future government funding of early childhood education (Government of the Republic of Namibia, Office of the President, 2004: 96-99).

¹⁷ School attendance in Namibia is deteriorating. According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2009, only 81% of all school-age children are presently attending school. In 1993/94 86% attended school. In 2005 UNESCO considered Namibia as one of the leaders in Africa, based on its survey on Education for All. Almost all school-age children (98%) for Grade 1 were in school and of these learners 92% graduated to junior secondary school. This is high in comparison with most African countries. But 85% of Namibian learners from Grade 1 up to Grade 9 are automatically promoted to the next class at the end of the school year because the Ministry of Education cannot fund uncontrolled repetition; repeaters increase the number of learners per class. A learner is however, allowed to fail once during Grades 1 to 4, once during grades 5 to 7 and once during Grades 8 to 9 (Government of the Republic of Namibia, Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training, 2001: 99-100). The first examination for learners is in Grade 10. It is thus not surprising that so many parents are shocked and upset when their children fail the examination that is a requirement for admission to senior secondary school.

¹⁸ Namibia came third on the UNESCO list for gender parity in African schools during the 2005 Education for All schools survey, but average Namibian statistics may be misleading. Whereas gender parity is the case in some regions, in the historically most disadvantaged regions such as Kavango, Caprivi and Kunene, it is not. Gender disparity in Kavango is similar to Nigeria, Ghana and Congo Republic with only 39% girls as compared to 61% boys in Grades 11 and 12.

9.4. Literacy in Namibia

At the time of independence in 1990, 65% of the population was illiterate. Since then government has made great efforts towards the eradication of illiteracy.^{19 20}

²¹ By 2004 the national literacy level was 83% but according to the UNICEF survey of literacy in Namibia in 2003, far fewer Namibians were functionally literate and had the skills the labour market needed. This is not surprising taking into consideration that the criteria for literacy used in Namibia, are much lower than the eight years of schooling required by Hoffmann for functional literacy. Namibian statistics for literacy are based on a requirement of four years of schooling in the mother tongue.

9.5. Publishing in Namibia

Macmillan Education Namibia publishes most of the children's books in Namibia. They publish mainly prescribed school books and only occasionally trade books, i.e. books for general information and entertainment for children.²² Particularly publishing in the local languages is not financially viable. A publisher can only publish such books with the help of sponsorships.²³

9.6. Libraries in Namibia

In 1991, shortly after independence, there were only 27 public libraries in Namibia, 23 of them serving mainly whites (Töttemeyer, 1991:10-44).²⁴ Since then, the number of community libraries of the government library service has more than doubled to 60. There are also 33 Teachers' Resource Centres and 13 Community Learning and Development Centres.

There is however, a tendency in the Namibian Ministry of Education, to spend the budget for community library materials mainly on non-fiction and text-books

¹⁹ The programme of the government to eradicate illiteracy is as follows: Three levels of literacy training of one year each, is offered to people 15 years and older. The basic literacy course is offered in the mother tongue, also the intermediary course. Thereafter a course in English is offered.

²⁰ By 1993/1994 the percentage illiterates had dropped to 32% but in certain remote regions such as Kunene and Omaheke it was much higher and in urban areas lower. Of the population over 65 years of age, 77% were illiterate. Between the ages of 15 and 54, more women were literate than men, the men being reluctant to go for literacy training. Particularly in the Ondangwa 1 and 2 Regions, women attendance exceeded that of men by far (Lind, 1996: 126-134).

²¹ Since there is also in Namibia a lack of reading materials, particularly in the smaller languages, it is possible that some of the new-literate are relapsing into illiteracy again. There have been suggestions from literacy students that the three years' training should be extended since they do not feel confident yet. It is encouraging that there are three Namibian newspapers, two mainly English and one mainly Afrikaans, who devote certain pages to news reports in the main Namibian local languages. This is a great contribution towards the support of the new-literate at least in some languages.

²² The government is the only buyer of the school books and the main buyer of the trade books. The latter books are bought by the library services for the school and community libraries. Parents seldom buy books for leisure reading for their children.

²³ Publishing in the local languages is the biggest problem. With a small population and so many languages, only a very small print run per language can be produced. Printing only 500 copies is expensive and even 500 copies take a long time to sell.

²⁴ The other four libraries were run by churches and mining companies (Töttemeyer, 1991:10-44). The new community libraries established by the government library service are mainly in the deprived pre-independence areas.

which are mostly in English, leaving almost no funds for fiction in any language.²⁵ The role of the public/community library as a centre for the promotion of a reading culture in its widest sense, serving everybody from babies to senior citizens, is thus being reduced to places of study for learners. The fact that the public at large are tax payers with certain rights as regards library services is largely ignored.²⁶

At the time of independence in 1990, 77, 3% of all Namibian schools were without any school library or book collection of some sort (Töttemeyer and Stander, 1990: 5-32).²⁷ Great efforts are however, being made by government since independence, to supply the majority of deprived schools with at least some collection of school library books, mainly in English. The really well-stocked and -staffed school media centres are mainly in private schools.

10. Efforts to solve the problems surrounding the reading culture

10.1. In Africa There are several encouraging initiatives toward the development of a reading culture in Africa.^{28 29 30 31 32 33 34}

²⁵ Community libraries are seen by many learners, finding it difficult to study in overcrowded huts without electricity, mainly as convenient study halls. They enter the library with their own study materials and leave again with those. They very often don't use the materials in the library.

²⁶ The meagre portion budgeted by government for fiction, was recently cut by 33% to buy prescribed school text books to put on the shelves of community libraries. Eloquently complaining about a lacking reading culture in Namibia, decision-makers do not seem to realize that a love of books develops mainly when reading is experienced as enjoyable, interesting, uplifting, fascinating, intriguing, moving, encouraging, exciting, gripping, thrilling, awe-inspiring.

²⁷ During the former South African dispensation, school library services for blacks were grossly neglected. By 1990, 77, 3% of all Namibian schools were without any school library or book collection of some sort, while at the same time there were 66 excellent school media centres with full-time staff in the former white government schools (Töttemeyer and Stander, 1990: 5-32). The newly installed government however, promptly cut the funding for the 66 school media centres thereby allowing them to deteriorate despite the fact that all white schools were opened to all races in the same year. Lack of funds for new acquisitions, lack of full time library teachers and inadequate facilities hamper the satisfactory development of school libraries in the country. Where a government school has an excellent library, e.g. the Suiderhof Primary School in Windhoek, its development is due to parent involvement, Readathon fund-raising and other special fund-raising efforts by the staff.

²⁸ So far six Pan-African Reading for All Conferences have been held biennially since 1999 in various African countries. Hosting such a conference offers an enormous stimulus towards the promotion of a reading culture in that country.

²⁹ The annual Zimbabwean International Book Fair was the centrifugal point of movement in the book trade for a long time, circling out to all parts of Africa. The August 1998 fair e.g., was attended by 300 exhibitors from 50 countries, half from Africa and half from all over the world and almost 20 000 visitors. The theme of 1998 was 'Books and Children' and an Indaba on Books and Children was held in Harare on 1 and 2 August. It is a pity that owing to the increasingly precarious political situation in Zimbabwe leading to international sanctions, the Zimbabwean Book Fair has been scaled down considerably. Since 2004, the biggest international book fair in Africa takes place in Cape Town, South Africa.

³⁰ The home of the Pan-African Children's Book Fair is Nairobi, Kenya, held annually in May.

³¹ Since many African languages are related, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), under the auspices of the African Union Commission, has grouped African languages in 12 language clusters in an effort to reduce the number of languages to be developed. The point of departure is that every African will understand at least one of these clusters. One language per cluster will be selected for promotion and development.

³² ACALAN has five core projects, one of which is the development of scientific and technological terminology in selected African languages.

10.2. In Namibia In Namibia laudable efforts are also made to promote literacy and the reading habit.^{35 36 37}

I will single out only one Namibian initiative owing to time constraints: The work of the twenty-one year old non-government organization, the Namibian Children's Book Forum. The organization promotes a love of reading among Namibian children and the production of children's books in all Namibian languages through various projects. Since 1995, story books in fourteen languages have been published in co-production with local publishing houses. The 'Under the story tree' - project is a 93 page children's story book, illustrated in full colour: the various language versions having been funded by donor agencies.³⁸

11. What needs to be done to promote a reading culture in Africa ?

11.1. Good policy towards multi-lingual education, the development of and publishing in multiple languages and the promotion of libraries and a reading culture, is no guarantee that it will be implemented, but it is a start in the right direction.

11.2. Primary education should be in a language intelligible to the child; if English is the official language of the country, it should be taught as a subject as from Grades 1 up to 7, but not as the medium of instruction in the primary school. This step towards multi-lingual instruction in the primary school can only be done in stages owing to the great expenditure required to develop readers and text books in all languages. In the junior secondary school, from Grades 8 to 10, English should be gradually phased in, to the extent that by the senior secondary level of Grades 11 and 12, half of the subjects could be taught through English medium. The development of multilingual text books for the junior secondary and senior secondary schools can also only be done in stages.

11.3. The government should get its priorities right and stop relying almost solely on foreign donors for multi-lingual education; they should budget properly for the African language programmes.^{39 40 41 42 43 44 45}

12. Conclusion

One has to agree that the future of African children is bleak unless a drastic change in attitude and priorities towards multilingual and multicultural education in the mindsets and wills of decision-makers whether they are politicians, officials

³³ Another project of ACALAN is Stories Across Africa (StAAf) of the University of Cape Town Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA). This is a multi-national Pan-African publication project for children's stories in various dominant African languages.

³⁴ UNESCO initiated a United Nations Literacy Decade in 2003. The goal is to achieve 90% literacy in the world by 2012. The project offers national governments, non-governmental and civil society organizations and the international community the mechanism to intensify their efforts towards literacy and education for all in their countries.

³⁵ Namibia is one of the few countries in Africa, where the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003-2012 has established in 2004, a National Coalition for the Decade together with Namibian public and private sector stake-holders involved in literacy. In 2006 a strategic plan was adopted for individual, community and national development in the country.

or parents, takes place. There are too many mostly hidden agendas at play that hinder the development of a reading culture in Africa. But now I will conclude in my capacity as founder and chairperson of the Namibian Children's Book Forum: Let us do what we can from our sides, rather than passively sitting back and despairing, lest we become part of the problem. I thank you.

36 Since 2005, the Namibian Ministry of Education is making special efforts to provide readers and teacher guides in six of the mother tongues for the first three grades. Until then, suitable readers in the Khoekhoegowab, Otjiherero, Rukwangali, Rumanyo, Thimbukushu and Silozi languages were inadequate or lacking. The Upgrading African Languages Project (AfriLa) was funded by the German Foundation for Technical Co-operation (GTZ) with N\$ 10 Million. The Ministry revised the curricula for the three grades to accommodate the teaching of these languages. ETSIP initially supported the publication of school text books in Mathematics and set books for English, but is now shifting its focus to support of the publication of set books for the teaching of local languages.

37 In the Oshana region in northern Namibia, a 'Holiday Reading Adventure,' is organized annually during the first week of December since 2003. The project, organized by the Regional Office for Lifelong Learning, is aimed at inculcating the culture of reading and a love for books among children as well as their parents. More than 70 schools have been participating.

38 The work of the Namibian Children's Book Forum (NCBF)

The work of the NCBF is a unique example of what can be done to promote a reading culture in a country challenged by so many difficulties. The NCBF was founded 21 years ago in February 1988 with two main aims:

1. To inculcate a reading culture and a love of books in Namibian children and youth, starting with their mother tongues

2. To stimulate the creation and production of children's books in all Namibian languages.

In order to achieve the first aim, the NCBF organized many activities, the largest project being: The annual National READATHON in September, involving more than 400 000 learners in schools throughout the country (Töttemeyer, 2003; 2001). Twelve Readathons were organised by the NCBF between 1989 and 2001. Readathon aims to enable learners to become book lovers and give schools an opportunity to develop their school libraries. The last week of September, from the Monday to the Friday, is Book Festival Week for four days and Readathon itself is held on the Friday. A variety of book- and reading related activities are organized by schools. Should schools wish to raise money for their school library, learners read for sponsorship and/or go and read stories to the community and request donations. For Readathon 2001, the NCBF distributed close to 300 000 illustrated story pamphlets in eleven languages, weighing seven tons, to 90% of all book-deprived Namibian learners. It was the biggest children's story multi-lingual project in the history of Namibia. In 2002 the NCBF negotiated with the then Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture for the take-over of Readathon. Since then it is an annual event on the official time-table of all Namibian schools.

In order to achieve the second aim, the NCBF organized several activities, including the conferral of the prestigious Namibian Children's Book Award (Töttemeyer, 2004). Since 1995 the NCBF has ventured into publishing children's books in fourteen languages. These publishing projects are the culmination of 21 years of efforts by the NCBF to supply individual children, school libraries and classrooms with enjoyable multi-lingual fiction. It is hoped that children, having been immersed in as many well-written and beautifully illustrated mother tongue stories to read as possible, will grow to know and avidly read children's books and that some of them might become the future writers and illustrators for African children.

39 Too many languages is no excuse for doing nothing. In Namibia, several languages are closely related, i.e. they belong to a cluster, e.g. Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, Rukwangali and Otjiherero. One of these could be developed to accommodate all speakers of this group, thereby achieving a reduction of languages as recommended by the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN). Opposition to this idea from the speakers can however, be expected.

40 Publication of fiction in the chosen African languages should be vigorously promoted so as to develop a love of reading.

41 Teacher training programmes should include the indigenous languages that have been chosen for the schools, so as develop a pool of qualified teachers for the teaching of these languages.

42 In urban areas where most of the languages are present, schools should each offer only one or two of the languages according to a plan for the city, so as to ensure that there will be at least one school in every town where a learner can be instructed in an African language he/she can understand.

43 Governments should consider raising a reading levy from all corporations, or raising a reading tax of one cent on each can of beer.

44 The education of girls should be encouraged for it is said: 'Educate a girl – educate a nation'.

45 The development of school and community libraries should be a high priority; Backup literature in the mother tongues should be developed for the new-literate and stocked in the community libraries.

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