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THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING FRENCH AND GERMAN IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COLONIAL AFRICA: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE, 1859-1960

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Abstract

The paper examines how the teaching of French and German was introduced to Nigeria from 1859, when the first secondary school was founded, and the ensuing development under the British colonial rule, which encouraged the promotion of English language. It discusses how Nigerian students and teachers, on their own, and in spite of the absence of encouragement from the native speakers of the languages, took advantage of the available facility for learning the foreign languages. The paper ends in 1960, when Nigeria attained political independence and was free to formulate its own educational policy including the teaching and learning of the African, European and other foreign languages.

Key words: Indigenous languages, examinations, school performance, colonialism, Independence.

Introduction

Language is a powerful social and political tool used for the transmission of knowledge and the acquisition of skill, attitudes and values. Language is far more than being an important and effective component of the education process. It is a symbol, an identity for communication. It is therefore central to the delivery of education. Whoever controls the education policy and system with its language component also controls the destiny of the people. Governments and peoples have therefore fought hard to have a dominant influence and authority on the responsibility for the education and language development of the given location.

Africa was rich in its ownership and patronage of languages. It was indeed the assumption that language is of critical importance to an educational system that the indigenous African governments and peoples ensured that language education was built into the traditional educational system. The richness of the languages as vehicles for the transmission of values of bravery, fairness and justice was well appreciated by the indigenous governments, which also carefully cultivated the interest of the people in language development.

The challenge came to the use of the indigenous languages as the medium for communication with the coming of Muslim and Christian missionaries, Arabic and European languages were introduced. But the missionaries did not expect that the people would abandon their local languages and opt for the use of the foreign languages. In many cases the missionaries had made efforts to learn the local languages. For example, British colonial officials, especially anthropologists were expected to have some rudimentary knowledge of the local languages before they were promoted to the next level in their posting.

At the non-formal education level in the home and the market, the local languages remained in active use. Thus the indigenous languages continued to be the medium of

communication and of conducting sacred religious rituals and everyday activities However; the formal school system encouraged the use of the foreign languages. But the situation changed with the growing expansion of colonial rule and the increased dominance of the foreign languages as medium of exchange and communication.

Control of Language and Education Policy

Following the introduction of Western education to Africa and the scramble and partition of the continent by European powers in the late nineteenth century, the various European powers and the educational providers became intolerant of indigenous cultural practices, educational system, and African languages. This led to the introduction of the teaching of the European languages to the geographical regions under their authority for social and political reasons. Africans who began to appreciate the value of the acquisition of the knowledge of European languages began to patronize the learning of these languages the colonial officials, on their partappreciated the place of the indigenous languages in making their job as administrators easy. For example, Lugard did everything he could to learn Hausa. His biographer noted his failure and inability to realise that aim, stating that "Lugard did not become proficient in Hausa language, "and was never able to dispense with an interpreter" (Perham, Diaries: 48)

Lugard however did much to promote the cause of Hausa as 'lingua franca' in Northern Nigeria where he was high commissioner. To this end, he directed that: "The language of social intercourse will be English or Yoruba in the South, and English or Hausa (Yoruba in Ilorin) in the North, as the case may be. The medium of instruction will be English in the South and in higher standards in the North –in the lower standards in the North- Hausa" (Lugard: 139). But Lugard was also mindful of the need to promote the English language. For this purpose he

directed that "In the South, and perhaps in some districts in the North, English must be the common language" (Lugard: 125). As Bamgbose, Banjo, Adeniran, Awoniyi and Omolewa have observed, the British were determined to fully exploit their opportunities as colonial rulers to promote the English language and had used the official Educational policy and the use of the British examination bodies for that purpose. (Bamgbose, Banjo, Adeniran, Awoniyi, Omolewa).

It is of course difficult to identify a common official language policy of the colonial administration at this time. It is therefore not surprising that Lord Kimberley directed that "instruction in English must, of necessity, at first be given through the medium of the vernacular" but that "Government encouragement should not be enlisted to stimulate or preserve the use of these native tongues" (Lugard:125). At the same time, the colonial office was favourably disposed to the learning of the local languages by the colonial officials and the general populace. Colonial officials were expected to learn and pass examinations in local languages, especially Hausa and Yoruba.

The College of Preceptors of London, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and the Oxford University Delegacy for Local Examinations were invited at various times to conduct secondary school examinations. The regulations of the British examination bodies which were adopted without modification required that candidates pass the English language paper before the award of the certificate. This meant that students had to put in some extra effort to the learning of English. The Examining bodies however allowed students to offer approved local languages at the examinations. Yoruba and Hausa, which were known to have adequate literature, were approved languages and Igbo was added at a later date.

French and German influence

Yet within the period under study, the teaching and learning of two key European languages, French and German, were actively being promoted in some Nigerian schools. It is generally forgotten that the English language acquired its status as the language of communication among the several ethnic groups in Nigeria only because it was taught in schools distributed all over the country. Thus, in order to explain the growth of the English language at the expense of French or of the Nigerian mother tongues, one should examine some of the factors which militated against the teaching of the non-English European languages in Nigerian schools.

Firstly if one accepts as convincing the view that Nigerians began to have a smattering of English because this was needed by the government and commercial firms for interpreting and for the conduct of routine duties, one must necessarily focus attention on French and German interests in Nigeria. Secondly, the teaching and learning of French and German was within this context of the British colonial education and language policy. Thirdly, compared with the British, the number of French and German traders in Nigeria by the mid-19th century was small. For the French had gradually been squeezed out of Nigeria when the British occupied Lagos in 1851. And a further development came when the more powerful British companies bought out the shares of French Compagnie du Senegal and societe de l'Afrique Equatoriale, the leading French firms. By 1900 the situation in Nigeria was made more complex with the revocation of the Charter of the British firm, the Royal Niger Company, and the establishment of British colonial administration in Nigeria

There were however some attractions of French and German in colonial Africa. As traders, merchants from France and Germany, there was the need to have some partners with

whom they could discuss and negotiate in their own native language. But in the end, the nationals decided not to challenge but to cooperate with the colonial language policy. One explanation for adopting this option could be the awareness of the fact that the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 had set out guidelines for establishing areas of influence in Africa by the various European powers. It is also possible that the various nationals were themselves aware of what their own governments were doing with respect to the transplant of their own language to their areas of influence.

By 1905 the effect of British conquest could be felt in most parts of Nigeria with the installation of an apparatus of law and order, postal system and communication network. This inevitably brought more British personnel to Nigeria. As a French priest observed:

'Le gouvernement du Niger n'est plus la Niger Company qui pendant 15 ans n'a fait qu'exploiter le pays sans rien faire pour le progress materiel et pour la civilization indigene. Le gouvernement est le Colonial Office de Londres. Et depuis cinq ans qu'il est etabli, a change la Nigeria.'[1]

It is however true that a few French companies such as the Compagnie Francaise d'Afrique Occidentale and John Walker soon got established. But these restricted their activities to business and took no part in the administration of the country. They also contented themselves with recruiting Nigerian versed in the English language. Sometimes workers were recruited from Cotonou in Dahomey and transferred to Lagos, but these were very few indeed.

At any rate most French traders took up residence in Lagos, leaving only a handful of their compatriots in the interior. Under this circumstance, there were very few Frenchmen in the interior to provide the necessary incentive to learn French. In Lagos and in the whole of

[1]Archives de la Congregation du Saint-Esprit (hereinafter CSSp), Paris, 192/A.V. Report by Father Lejeune, 24.4.1905.

Southern Nigeria, there were few French people. In its Report on the Southern Nigeria Census in 1911, the government of the colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria stated that the European population was 1,526 males and 135 females, and that among these were 1,383 British, 168 Germans, 43 French, 19 Italians, 6 Austrians and 6 Greeks.[2] Table I shows the distribution of French and British nationals in Nigeria between 1931 and 1960. Table II shows the distribution of French, British and the Germans in the 4 regions of Nigeria from 1952-53.

Between 1903 and 1959 all the Governors were English speaking, so were the Directors of Education, Colonial Secretaries, Residents, District Officers, Principals and Headmasters of schools.[3]

Such indeed was the force of British propaganda against the Germans that the atmosphere in the country was by no means conducive to the continued stay of Germans or to the promotion of German studies including the language, history or culture.

The role of the French and German missionaries

The last hope for the introduction and sustenance of the learning French and German came with the arrival of the French and German missionaries in Nigeria. The first Roman Catholic Mission to settle down in Nigeria was the Society of African Missions founded in

[2] National Archives Headquarters, Ibadan (NAI), Report on the Southern Nigeria Census, 1911.

[3]Information is compiled from the Nigeria Civil Service List: The Preliminary Inventory of the Archives of the Nigerian Secretariat 1914-54, compiled by L.C. GWAM (Ibadan, National Archives Headquarters): 196; and the inventory of the Administrative Records from the Colony Province, compiled by L.C. GWAM (Ibadan, National Archives Headquarters): 196. Unfortunately, there was no trace in the archives of the answers to the forms dispatched to Nigerian colonial officials with instructions that they 'should be completed legibly in manuscript in the interests of speed'; Section 7 of the forms had asked for information on 'proficiency in languages other than English'.

Lyons on December 8, 1856, by Marion Bresillac.[4] The Mission to Nigeria, led by an Irish priest, began its work west of the Niger in 1868, about 27 years after the first English-speaking missionary arrived in Nigeria. It is significant that the French missionaries who joined the mission service from France and those who crossed over from Dahomey to join the newly-installed mission did not consider it expedient to promote the teaching of French.

In 1885 another Catholic Mission, the Holy Ghost Fathers, with headquarters in Paris, took over the work of establishing the Catholic faith east of river Niger. Founded by Father Liebermann, a French priest from Alsace, the Holy Ghost Fathers were dedicated to missionary work in Black Africa.[5] The mission to Nigeria was led by a French Father, Joseph Lutz. Father Lutz's aides, Fathers Horne, Hermas and Jean Grotto, were all French. They established mission centres at Agouleri, Nzube, and Onitsha. This team was later joined by Father Reling and Fathers Raulas and Lejeune, all three of them French; and Father (later Bishop) Joseph Shanahan. Although Shanahan was Irish, he was educated in Paris and was 'tres fort en francais' having studied Classics and Theology at the Paris headquarters of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers.

Like their colleagues who worked around the west of the river Niger, the Holy Ghost Fathers began to use the school system for the promotion of their evangelization crusade. Schools were established in large numbers and the curriculum prescribed by the colonial government was faithfully followed. In its schools program the Catholic Mission was guided by a desire to co-operate with the colonial government. By 1891 the Holy Ghost Fathers reported that they were not initiating any novel educational experiment in the country. 'The country

[4] For a detailed account of the Mission see R. GUILCHER, *La Societe des Missions Africaines: ses origins, sa nature, sa vie, ses ceuvres* (3rd ed., Lyons, Bibliotheque missionnaire africaine, 1956).

[5] R.P. BRIAULT, ed., *Le venerable Pere Liebermann: la reprise des Missions d'Afrique au dix-neuvieme siecle* (Paris, De Gidord, 1946): 18 sq.

having been brought under the control of England,' the Fathers reported, 'English is the official language.' The Fathers were enthusiastic when they reported that 'many of our pupils speak it considerably well, and even write it'.[6] The role of the Catholic Fathers has been described as characteristic of the desire of Catholic Fathers to co-operate with secular authorities. As Horner asserts,

'… The Roman Catholic [Church] has been accustomed to official relationships with political States in one way or the other since the fourth century. This Church hopes and plans for an eventual concordat with every State [and will take full advantage of whatever useful relationships can be affected. Far from showing suspicion of government subsidies, the Roman Catholic Church regards them as her just due and protests [at] reluctance on the part of any government to make them available.'[7]

Perhaps it is more pertinent to explain the attitude of the Fathers by the requests of Nigerians for schools of their choice in which the Whiteman's language would be taught. In view of the growing importance of English in the school system and for employment opportunities, the Catholic fathers reasonably considered it wiser to teach English rather than French or the vernacular. Thus, as in most mission schools, the teaching of English was vigorously pursued. The results were most rewarding. The Catholic Mission schools grew and won increased recognition among the people.

[6]BRIAULT (1946): 18 sq.

[7]A.N. HORNER, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions among the Bantu of Cameroon: A Comparative Study* (Ph.D. Hartfield Seminary Foundation, 1956): 3-4. Quoted in F.K. EKECHI, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914 (London, Frank Cass, 1972): 192*.

The activities of the Catholic Mission were in sharp contrast to the determination of the Anglican Church to emphasise teaching in vernacular. The consequence of the approach of the Anglican Church to the teaching of English was a loss in membership of the Anglican Church.[8]

The Catholic priests constantly reminded themselves of a need to cooperate with the government and at the same time to win the affection and respect of the local population. This objective was achieved in large measure by their English language program. They seemed to believe that they would become suspect in the colonial setting if they encouraged the study of French, and they therefore preferred to give little attention to the teaching of their native language. Reporting their activities in 1904, the Holy Ghost Fathers explained that:

"Bien que nous soyons Francais en majorite dans notre Prefecture, le gouvenement prefere cependant nos eleves. Si nous pouvions repondre favorablement a toutes ses demandes, toute l'influence dans l'interieur serait a nous."[9]

The Mission remained consistent in its language program throughout the period of its activity in Nigeria. French priests who were sent to Nigeria made great efforts to be well-versed in English. For example, Father Lena, who was from Vannes in the province of Rennes in France, studied English and succeeded in producing pupils who obtained awards of excellence in English language at competitions organized for schools. And, even during emergencies when teachers were needed for Catholic schools in the country, Father Shanahan emphasized the need for priests coming to Nigeria to have a working knowledge of the English language. He insisted in one of his letters that 'il serait indispensable d'avoir deux Soeurs possedant le Certificat

[8]OMOLEWA (1978a) `The Ascendancy of English in Nigerian Schools, 1882-1960'. *West African Journal of Modern Languages*. No. 3 pp. 86 - 97.

[9]CSSp 192/A/IV, Report for 1904.

official d'enseignement primaire anglais'[10]. And he explained that the country had no urgent need for German Sisters.

The language policy of the Catholic Fathers should be seen in the light of the evangelization work of priests who risked their lives by coming to Africa where 'sun poured down with merciless fury', and 'night [was] made hideous by clouds of mosquitoes settling on blistered hands and faces'.[11] On arrival in Nigeria the Fathers noted that many Nigerians already spoke broken English; a language patronised in view of the economic and social advantages which knowledge of English brought to the speaker and writer. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to see the language issues as a necessary development from the missionary zeal of the French priests who sacrificed their language to save souls for Christ in Africa, to resist 'l'invasion des sects protestantes', and to fight 'the Godless schools founded by the government'. Perhaps the account of a dream in which Father Shanahan had protested to a superior, who had insulted him, could summarise this selflessness to missionary work by the French priests:

> 'Insult me – yes, by all means!
> Insult my country – perhaps!
> But insult Saint Patrick – never!
> Never – mon pere – never!'[12]

In their reports and prayers French priests seemed to consider their French nationality only as secondary to their evangelical work. They spoke more of 'le bon Dieu' and directed their correspondence to Rome on important ecclesiastical issues. Their letters to Paris were mainly reports of their expense and income, and their progress in missionary endeavour. The prayer of

[10]CSSp 191/B/VII, Letter from Father Shanahan to Mother M. de S. Columban of the Sisters of Franciscans de Marie in Rome, 18.3.1920.

[11]JOHN P. JORDAN, *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria* (Dublin, Burns Oates, Clonmore & Reynolds, 1949): 9. See, also *Chronique des Missions confiees a la congregation du Saint-Esprit. Apercu historique* (Paris, Bibliotheque missionnaire africaine, 1932): 129.

[12]JORDAN: 27.

Father Lutz, the founder of the Holy Ghost Mission in Nigeria, is striking. Father Lutz, a French priest, prayed in 1900:

'On my knees I beg the favour of devoting my life to the salvation of souls in Africa, even though it means death. Let me save but a single soul and I shall die with the desire of my heart fulfilled.[13]

In later years they considered their language program as part of their effort to fight government schools which were 'institution without God' and Protestant schools which made it possible for 'our enemies' to increase in numerical strength. This feature of interdenominational rivalry through the educational institutions was highlighted in the official account of the growth of the Catholic Mission in Eastern Nigeria:

On s'apercut alors que le success des Protestants tennait a leurs ecoles, montees a la moderne d'apres les programmes du gouvernement britannique. On s'essaya a faire de meme et on y reussit assez bien, car le pouvoir civil regardait peu a la difference religieuse en matiere d'assistance scolaire et, d'autre part, la population donna vite confiance aux pretres catholiques. Les resultants des examens, sanctionnes par des subsides importants, firent vivre les missions.' [14]

The story of the efforts of the German priests is perhaps equally interesting. It is not usually known that a German missionary, Reverend G.F. Buhler was on the staff of the Church Missionary Society training Institution at Abeokuta between 1857 and 1864.[15] Yet, this German priest made considerable impact on his students. However his influence was felt more in the field of administration (he was Principal of the Institution from 1857 to 1864) and music than in

[13]Quoted by JORDAN: 17.

[14]BRIAULT: 520.

[15]Most writers discus the contribution of Dr. A.A. Harrison, M.D. (Cantab.) to the training of the 'promising native youths' to be educated at Abeokuta. See A.A. ADELOYE, 'Some early Nigerian Doctors and their Contribution to Modern Medicine in West Africa', *Medical History* XVIII (3), 1974: 277-278.

language education. Thus Dr. Nathaniel King (1847-1884), who trained under him, became an accomplished musician. Another of his students, Robert A Coker also distinguished himself in music and was named by his comtemporaries, "Mozart of West Africa' under whose direction, 'the Christ Church Cathedral initiated the practice of Easter Services featuring anthems and choruses'. Coker also became 'friendly with the German Consul, Herr Johanning with whom he organized a concert at Glover Hall in 1893.' [16]

Like the French Catholic priests, Reverend Buhler was primarily an evangelist, who lived to win souls for Christ. The dissemination of the knowledge of his mother tongue was not a priority. When his wife, Sophia Mary, died of fever on January 4, 1861, at Ake, Abeokuta, the English Edition of Iwe Irohin reported that Sophia Mary 'died as she had lived in the faith of Jesus and with the certain hope of an inheritance above with the Saviour'.

The role of Reverend Buhler in the promotion of English and Nigerian mother tongues can be compared to that of Diedrich Westermann, the German professor and director of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures founded in 1929. A professor at Berlin University, Westermann spent a considerable portion of his life in the promotion of African indigenous languages and was a prominent inspirer for the foundation of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. [17]

The impact of the British

[16]Lynn LEONARD, *The Growth of Entertainment of non-African Origin in Lagos, 1860-1920* (M.A. dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1967): 57-58.

[17]The study of the life and work of Professor Westermann is still much neglected by educational or missionary historians. Some useful information on his contributions to African language studies can be found among *Oldham Papers* at the offices of the Missionary Societies of Great Britain and Ireland, Eaton Gate, London.

The British government did not seriously make any conscious contribution to the teaching of French or German. Instead it actively encouraged the study of English in its grant-aided and government-owned schools. For example, the Education Ordinance of 1882 made the teaching of English compulsory in the categories of schools mentioned above. 'Vernacular' and other European languages were excluded. And when 'vernacular' was later added to elementary schools curriculum, French and German remained excluded. The government did not however object to their being taught as supplementary subjects at the secondary schools, and did not protest when Nigerians began to offer French as an optional examination subject.

The British colonial government indirectly contributed to the advancement of the learning of French by the provision of French examinations in Nigerian secondary schools. Under the existing arrangements, Nigerian students could sit the Cambridge Preliminary, Cambridge Junior, and Cambridge Senior examinations; the London Matriculation and the Intermediate Arts and Degree examinations of London University. It was hoped that this arrangement would make it possible to assess the effectiveness of French teachers and their students through external evaluations. This exercise was then expected to inspire students and stimulate their teachers, and therefore advance the study of the prescribed subjects.

But since the examination bodies invited and approved by the government in Nigeria were from England, examination scripts, including those in French, had to be written in English. It was therefore impossible to pass the examinations unless the candidate had a sufficient knowledge of the English language. English was prominent in the time-tables in secondary schools; it was taught as a subject and served as the language of instruction.

As a logical consequence of the operation of examinations by the English examination bodies, English text-books, English authors and English educational documents became works of reference in Nigerian schools and public libraries.

French studies also tended to promote the study of English because of the emphasis on translations from English to French, and from French to English. Although grammar and composition were taught, the emphasis was on the need to use the subject as a vehicle for the promotion of communication between the English people and the French. Although some English educationists believed that it was more important to learn to understand speak, and later on to write French and have translations 'banned or else deferred to a comparatively late date', the 'old orthodox school,' who were trained in the classical traditions, were more influential in the making of the school curriculum and were 'thorough believers in the sufficiency of grammar, translation and composition'.[18]

The examination regulations in French provided for the translation of English prose and verse passages into the foreign language, a free composition with an outline given either in English or the foreign language, and sometimes a comprehensive test in the form of a passage of the foreign language prose to which certain questions, in English, were appended to be answered in English.

One may illustrate the type of expectations demanded from students of Modern Language in Nigeria. In the first examination in the French language conducted in Nigeria in December 1910, the candidates were asked to give the 2nd person singular of the present indicative of bouillir, envoyer, valoir; the 2nd person plural of the present subjunctive of boire, conclure, s'en aller; and the present participle of savoir, mandire, joindre. They were also requested to translate

[18]See C. BRERETON. 'A Note on the Teaching of Modern Languages', in Margaret DE GAUDRION VERALL, et., *Remi en Angleterre* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1899): 14.

into French: 'He is not so stupid as you think; hold your tongue you don't know what you are saying; he loves and obeys his father; and he has been angry with me for a fortnight.' The candidates were further asked to translate some sentences and passages from French into English.[19]

Nigerians struggle for the mastery of the French language

It is imperative to note that most Nigerians continued to use their mother tongue as the first language. But for purposes of contact and communication in business, many of them had begun to speak 'pidgin English' and 'pidgin French' by the middle of the 19th century. Thus the French priest Lutz met 'a guide who could speak some English'[20] on arrival in Onitsha in 1885. Jordan explains that this guide was one of the 'servants of the Company' (the Royal Niger Company).[21] But initially Nigerians did not care what European language was taught in the country and protested against the 1882 Ordinance which established English as the medium of instruction in Lagos schools. The Lagos Times considered this Ordinance contemptuous of the Nigerian people and asked: 'How ridiculous it would be to proscribe the teaching of English in England in preference to Russian, French or German.'[22]

However, in view of the indifference of the French and German governments and French and German residents in Nigeria to the teaching of French and German, Nigerians had to depend on the facilities provided by the British government. Only King's College, Lagos, made some provision for the effective teaching of modern languages in the country and only French was selected. The existing mission Teacher Training Colleges on which the nation depended for its

[19]See the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate (hereinafter Cambridge Syndicate), *Annual Report for 1910*.
[20]*Bulletin de la Congregation* XIII (1883-1886).
[21]JORDAN: 10.
[22]See *Lagos Times*, 12.7.1882.

teaching staff emphasized the learning of Latin, Greek, and English, in addition to teaching methods, philosophy and history.

It is, however, interesting to note that in spite of the teething difficulties which confronted Nigerian students, they resolved to attempt to learn French and consequently to take public examinations in the subject. The explanation for this may be that the exclusion of French from elementary school curricula aroused the curiosity of the more inquisitive Nigerian publics who therefore determined to take a closer look at the subject by studying it as a school subject at the secondary school level. Another probable reason could be prior awareness of the French language, French culture and France from accounts given by Nigeria's neighbours, notably the French-speaking people of Dahomey.[23] For these, being French subjects, had knowledge of French civilization. And through trading activities and family connections across the border, the Francophone Africans possibly spoke of their new masters and told stories about the romance of France, her language and people. The saying 'See Paris and Die' which emphasized the beauty and charm of Paris and its people, gradually became popular in Nigeria where parents sent their children mainly to the United Kingdom and America.

The view that Nigerians possibly began to study French for employment reasons would be less acceptable. For a certificate in the French language could lead only to careers in journalism, information services, public relations, library work, teaching, broadcasting or interpretation. But in Nigeria newspapers were published in the 'vernacular' and in English, and so French was of no relevance. Furthermore recruitment into specialized fields of public relations and information services was carried out by the Colonial office in London and not delegated to the Governor. As for schools, very few offered French – and mostly at post-primary

[23]For the description of the strong ties between Dahomey and Nigeria, see M. OMOLEWA, 'Dahomey Immigrants in Nigeria, 1900-1975', *Nigeria Magazine,* in press.

school level -, which would make a holder of the School Certificate in the French language unemployable in the teaching field.

Perhaps a more plausible explanation for the study of French by Nigerians is that it was accepted in the educational world as an academic subject and, in the spirit of the age, the Black man needed to show excellence in a subject, irrespective of the content. The first African President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, used a similar justification for the study of logic which he counseled his compatriots to pursue.[24] Ayandele believes that some Africans in Nigeria were aware of such assertions as A.L. Cureau's to the effect that 'the Black man could only be made a good joiner or mechanic'.[25]

Nigerian parents must have also loved to encourage their more gifted children to attempt to study French. Nigerians who therefore considered themselves good at languages took to French. There was also the fact that French could be taken as an optional language paper to complete the requirements for the award of certificates by the examination bodies in England.[26] But equally possible is the view that Nigerians studied French because they attached some importance to the mastery of languages and that many of them would be delighted with the opportunity provided to study French in addition to other foreign languages, mainly English and Latin. Other reasons for Nigerian schools offering the languages and for students working hard to offer them could be the availability in school curriculum and as examination subject by the examination bodies from Britain, the confidence of the school authorities and subject teachers

[24]Quoted in M. OJIKE, *My Africa* (New York, the John Day Company, 1946): 82, and in EKECHI: 188.
[25]See E.A. AYANDELE, *The Educated Elite in the Nigeria Society* (Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1974): 21.
[26]The English Examination Boards Regulations required candidates to pass a minimum of five subjects selected from at least three groups including group I. The group division was as follows: Group I: English, Group 2: History, Latin, Yoruba, French, Religious Knowledge. Group 3: Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Biology. Group 4: Drawing, Book-Keeping, Shorthand, Art.

that the students could excel at the examinations on the subject, and contact with the French and German native speakers and users of the languages either as employers in their firms and companies; or with neighbors in Dahomey and Cameroon whose official language was French and German. The curiosity by some of the students to learn some subject that was new and unusual could not be ruled out. It cannot also be argued that French and German were not in any competition with, or threat to, the indigenous languages which were actively in use out of school. Some of the schools may have also wanted to prove that they were different and capable of offering unusual and uncommon subjects.

Nigerians who offered French at examinations, however, worked under severe limitations. First, there was inadequate provision of literature in French either in the schools or at the few public libraries. Then, there were few people in Nigeria who were familiar with the language. This situation made it very difficult for the beginner in French to find some competent person to correct his mistakes. The situation also made it difficult for the student to acquire the proper pronunciation, or to have a fairly accurate intonation in French, a serious drawback since the aim of language teaching is to enable pupils to approximate as near as possible the speech of native speakers.

Furthermore, because the language was not given priority attention in the schools, insufficient time was given to it in the time-table.[27] Yet the student needed a lot of contact with the teacher in the absence of gramophone records which he could not afford. The fact that the French language played no vital role in the award of certificates is equally significant. For many candidates who failed in French were able to obtain full certificates, whereas failure in the English language brought doom to the Nigerian candidate no matter how well he distinguished

[27]ADENIRAN(1975), AWONIYI(1973); OMOLEWA (1975a).

himself in other subjects. This therefore was the background to the practice of reserving more hours to the study of English in schools and fewer hours to the study of other 'ordinary' subjects such as French. Many school principals and teachers began to take the teaching of English too seriously.

Unknown to the Nigerian students, there were studies which drew attention to the problem of learning more than two or three languages. Already, the Nigerian child had to learn his mother tongue to converse with his parents and neighbours; and he then went on to learn English at elementary school. At the secondary school level he was encouraged to study Latin as part of his education in the Classics. He therefore usually took up French as the fourth subject. But as Paul Christophersen asserts,

'It is not possible for an ordinary human brain to handle more than two – or at most three – languages with any degree of perfection […] it is possible to speak several languages fairly fluently i.e without hesitation and with a tolerable degree of accuracy – but to be "at home" in more than two or three languages, to use them with the same ease and accuracy as native speakers, is not given to ordinary mortals.'[28]

Christophersen then draws attention to the basic problem of those who study foreign or second languages. He explains that 'keeping up two languages can sometimes be a strain, even if one has known them both from childhood'. And he concludes that:

[28]P. CHRISTOPHERSEN, *Bilingualism:* An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, Ibadan, on 17.11.1948 (London, Methuen, 1949):1.

'Most unilingual people are not conscious of any effort when speaking their native tongue, and they assume that for the bilingual it is the same with his two languages […] Bilingualism does undoubtedly require a greater mental effort than unilingualism.'[29]

Performance of the Nigerian students

The first public examination in French for Nigerians was held in December 1910.[30] Seven Nigerians entered for the Cambridge Junior examinations, four of these for French. Only one of the four passed the French oral and written examination designed 'to test the candidate's ability to understand what is spoken, speak so as to be understood, and read what has been written'. Unfortunately the student who passed the French paper failed the examination while candidate No. 242, I.L. Oluwole, who failed the French paper, passed the examination having done very well in the compulsory subjects including English language. In December 1912, 23 candidates were entered for the Cambridge Preliminary examination but all those who sat the French paper failed.[31] No candidates entered for French in the Cambridge Junior examination for that year. The three candidates who entered for the Cambridge Senior examination in French failed the paper but passed the examination; two of them also passed in Latin. In December 1914, the results of Nigerians who sat the French paper at the Cambridge Preliminary examination continued to be bad and all the candidates failed the examination in French.[32]

[29]Ibid.: 2.
[30]Cambridge Syndicate, *Annual Report for 1910.*
[31]Cambridge Syndicate, *Annual Report for 1912.*
[32]Cambridge Syndicate, *Annual Report for 1914.*

There were no entries for French in the Oxford University Delegacy examinations held in Lagos between 1929 and 1937 – Nigerian candidates having selected Latin, Shakespeare and Composition; and in 1937, Yoruba.[33]

Despite the appalling poor results in the French papers at various examinations and the limited facilities for its teaching, Nigerians continued to show considerable interest in the subject. It was offered at the University evening classes in Lagos up till 1950, when the institution folded up.[34]

On the attainment of Independence in 1960 and matters arising thereafter

With the approach of independence, Nigerians began to give serious consideration to establishing University Departments where French could be taught. As Abiri explains, 'an awareness of the need for Nigeria to engage in diplomatic relationship with her neighbours led to proposals for instituting the study of French and German at the University College, Ibadan' in 1959.[35] Nigeria also began to develop an education and language policy. But there has always been room for more to be done to give the deserved recognition to the indigenous language while also encouraging the learning of other world languages including the European languages as avenues for world integration. It was clear that neither the teachers nor the students were fully aware of the implication of adding the learning of additional European languages to English language which was already taking a toll on their educational progression. The parents and the

[33]University of Oxford Delegacy for Local Examinations. *Examination Papers and Reports for 1929-1937.* For a detailed discussion of Oxford examinations in Nigeria see M. OMOLEWA, 'The Oxford University Delegacy of Local Examinations and Secondary School Education in Nigeria, 1929-1937', *Journal of Educational Administration and History X (2), 1978b: 39-49.*

[34]See OMOLEWA, M (1975) 'Evening Schools and Adult Education in Nigeria, 1900-1975', *Arbeitspapier,* Serie 7, 1975b: 9-10.
[35]ABIRI: 56.

schools were also not guided by the imposed educational policy for which they were not consulted. In any case it was difficult to identify what the schools and the students stood to gain by the increase in the foreign language component in the absence of any African language. But the point was made by the students and their teachers and schools that, given the necessary motivation and incentives to learn, Africans can always excel in the acquisition of language tools. This point has been amply demonstrated by the pioneering and highly respectable work of eminent academics and professionals in language education, led by Ayo Bamgbose and Ayo Banjo.[36]

Independence was expected to have brought to an end the reluctance to teach and learn the local language. It is strange that there still seems no clear and conscious awareness of the importance of indigenous languages that are considered as heritage and which should never be lost but must be protected and preserved. The gains of Independence ought to have led to the educational choice that would enhance the development of indigenous languages. Thus in spite of the attainment of independence and the formulation of a language policy, a radical appraisal of this language issue is still missing, especially as the tragedy still continues till today.

It is against this background that it becomes imperative to examine the consequence of a lack of writing and written literature which has contributed to the problem of the marginalization of the indigenous African languages.

Furthermore, one should explore the consequences of the failure of African governments and peoples to effectively address the question of the vital status of African languages and literature in the development of the mind of growing Africans preparing for a future of self-confidence and pride in their heritage.

[36]BAMGBOSE, A (1991) Language and the Nation; BANJO, A (1996) Making a Virtue of Necessity: An Overview of the English language in Nigeria

One of the important problems in Africa today is, among other things, that of identity, and of the means of creating and disseminating knowledge and information. 50 years after so-called independence, we have no native official languages (just as we have practically lost our indigenous religious cultures). How can we have an identity as African peoples without our own philosophies of those things that concern subjects like the mysteries of life and death, or the question if say salvation if African peoples after centuries of abuse by other races. Language is certainly one of the means by which peoples' identities are differentiated. Yet we are complacent with the use of other peoples' languages. Do we even reflect that a failure to develop indigenous languages will continue to limit our achievements in all fields of human endeavour? Many of the African governments appear too lazy to evolve a radical language policy and have conveniently chosen to continue to blame their misfortune on the role of the European invasion and British Imperial rule which had understandably excluded African indigenous languages in secondary school curriculum during the colonial era. But the tragedy is that African governments have been distracted by other issues that have made most of them lose their souls and forget why there was a demand for Independence.

An excellent illustration of the diversionary role played by government is perhaps the amusing decision of the military administration of Sanni Abacha. Nigeria's membership of the Commonwealth had been suspended due to the murder of an environmental activist by the military dictatorship. In response to the humiliation, Abacha had decided to adopt French as "a second official language" to spite the U.S. and the U.K. which were in the forefront of opposition to his regime in 1993-1998. This policy which was by no means feasible as most schools had neither the teachers nor an enabling environment to implement the policy, was then reflected in the National Policy on Education (NPE). The revised NPE made French a subject in

the Primary School Curriculum and a core subject at Junior Secondary School. Strangely, even after the demise of Abacha, the revised policy has remained in subsequent revisions of the NPE.[37]

It may therefore be concluded that the attainment of Independence has hardly led to the restoration of the lost glory of the African language and the restructuring of the educational system and the determination of a new language policy. Independence was also expected to facilitate the advancement of the African languages, offering them the opportunities for competitiveness and the opportunity of becoming world languages, drawing attention to their richness in poetry, music, proverbs, literature and their traditional use for the inculcation of the spirit on self-confidence, patriotism and healthy living involving being good neighbours.

Notes and References

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[37]E-mail communication from Ayo Bamgbose to Michael Omolewa, 28June 2013