

# **Language, Literacy and Education in African Development: A Perspective from Cameroon**

Maurice Tadadjeu

**SIL International  
2004**

## **Contents**

Abstract

1. Introduction

2. Redefining African Development and Education

3. A Framework for an Accelerated African Development

4. Mother-Tongue and Adult Literacy: The Case of Cameroon

5. From Basic Reading and Writing Skills to Socio-Structural Literacy

6. Motivations for Mother-Tongue Literacy through Schooling

7. Cameroon Experiment in Mother-Tongue Literacy through Formal Schooling

8. Conclusion

References

## Abstract

This paper was presented at the International Literacy Year Colloquium in October 1990, in Washington, D.C. It argues that there is an urgent need to redefine African development and education to set these on the right track. Three decades of development efforts, based on nonAfrican models, has resulted in regression, not development. Conclusions for needed change are based on several years of successful educational experimentation in mother tongues in Cameroon. African society is a valid milieu for economic development and should not be denigrated by outsiders or its own people. The society should not try to take on either a capitalist or a socialist orientation, but keep its own healthy combination of the two. African development and education must be deeply rooted in the soil of African culture and languages.

## 1. Introduction

There is an urgent need to redefine African development and education to set these on the right track. Literacy activities are important to education efforts. The philosophy that governs literacy is a part of the education philosophy.\*

This paper sheds light on these challenging efforts. Instead of presenting a recipe for African education or literacy, it discusses basic issues that make up the background for suitable recipes.

I draw on material from various mother tongue education efforts during the last decade of our field experience to illustrate these issues. This paper examines the domains of adult literacy and literacy through formal schooling. It also examines the key role played by African languages in literacy and education reform. Cameroon is making progress in this area.

## 2. Redefining African Development and Education

The history of three decades shows that a post-colonial notion of civilization played an important role in African development. African development was built on a social prejudice that continues to label our society as uncivilized and inferior. What was once called *primitive* or *uncivilized*, we now call the *underdeveloped* or *developing world*.

Those in power used education to promote this point of view. This thinking says people need to be taught better ways of governing, feeding, and taking care of themselves. African elites consistently used it in their relationship with illiterate, rural people.

African development was misconceived since the early days of political independence (Tadadjeu 1989b). Written documents of the 1960s defined, planned, and described African development on the basis of foreign interests. These interests were only superficially different from colonial interests. Africans lived under the illusion that their countries were developing. Evidence shows that most countries were not developing. The majority actually regressed. Africa has twenty-eight of the world's forty-one poorest countries. The current economic crisis proves that we still do not meet the basic conditions for development.

After thirty years of development efforts in the Third World, the focal point in development is industry. Industry uses science and technology to produce and sell goods and services in large quantities. Science and technology must be linked to industry, as in the developed world. The newly industrialized countries show the central role of industry in development. In Africa, science and technology are divorced from industry.

---

\*Maurice Tadadjeu received a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Southern California in 1977. He is a member of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Yaounde. He is also head of the Department of Languages and Linguistics at the Institute of Human Sciences, Yaounde.

Literacy is another factor in industrialization. Most literacy activities are linked to some industrial product. Reading and writing almost always trigger some kind of industrial development.

A new development strategy requires new conditions. One condition is an authentic African social model of enterprises. Another condition is new thinking among African political, economic, and intellectual elites. Political democracy, decentralized social structures, and private initiatives are key. African elites must buy African-made products over non-African products. If they do, others will follow.

### **3. A Framework for an Accelerated African Development**

The assumption that the African society has to become either capitalist oriented or socialist oriented is wrong. The underlying relationships between language, culture, and education are interdependent (Tadadjeu 1988). These lead to an authentically African social model (Tadadjeu 1989a). The political, economic, social, and cultural bases of our ancestral heritage shows both collective and individual features (Tadadjeu, Gfeller, and Mba 1988). This model is more advanced than either the capitalist or socialist model. Africans have a duty to popularize the African social model as the framework for development.

Culture is the practical way of life of a community. This includes the political, economic, artistic, spiritual, scientific, industrial, pastoral, agricultural ways of behaving, producing, exchanging, and consuming. No community can develop normally if it is brutally cut off from its culture. Such a disruption can be fatal.

An education system is a mechanism to pass a social model from one generation to the other. An education system is also a sort of mirror, projecting the image of the society into the future. The content of education includes all the basic principles of the social model.

Language expresses a people's culture. It expresses the principles that make up the social model of the community. It is the means for passing the social model from one generation to the other. African languages traditionally filled these cultural and educational functions. The colonial and post-colonial systems shook and partially disrupted these functions.

The education system is a flagrant violation of the African cultural heritage. It negates the African social model. The system uprooted several generations of people and condemned them to self-devaluation. The system produces people who cannot manage their own affairs without external assistance.

The educational system in Africa reflects the kind of society that has emerged in the last century. This society has no equivalent. It started in the colonial era as an extension of the western world. In the post-colonial era, it moved to centralized, authoritative, and anti-democratic systems protected by the western and eastern worlds. The education system shows the same corruption, mediocrity, external dependence, lack of self-confidence, and lack of creativity found in the society.

An education system cannot improve without promoting an improved vision of the society. The African people must have their own vision of society as the framework for building the education system. They must promote their culture to accelerate their development.

Foreign institutions, individuals, governments, and nongovernmental agencies need to acknowledge that they cannot help Africa in all domains. We must do some things for ourselves. These include the definition of our social model, the general orientation of our development, and the setting up of our education system. This includes the definition of the content of our formal and informal education. Foreign help in these issues must focus on the most universal aspects of education and some means of implementation.

#### **4. Mother-Tongue and Adult Literacy: The Case of Cameroon**

Recent estimates say that four million Cameroonians above fifteen years of age are illiterate. This includes people who never went to school and those who have lapsed back into illiteracy. The Cameroon population is about eleven million people. This is a young population. About 60 percent of Cameroonians are below twenty-five years old.

The accuracy of literacy rate estimates is doubtful. Formal schooling is the basis for such estimates, and no internal activity aims at measuring the national literacy rate. Most of the figures are derived from external sources, like UNESCO estimates. How did the data get to the external sources?

One thing is clear: Cameroon, like many other African countries, has relied heavily on formal schooling as a means for promoting adult literacy. Fortunately, Cameroon has one of the highest school attendance rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Seventy percent of primary school age children attend school. The major problem is the content of education.

The official organization of adult literacy and adult education is loose. The Ministry of Youth and Sports is in charge of these activities, and they confuse acquiring literacy skills with learning French or English. They do not consider literacy skills in local languages when figuring the national literacy rate.

Over the last decade, we have worked closely with the ministry in charge of adult literacy on issues related to adult literacy and education. This has resulted in new orientations toward adult literacy and education. Cameroonian scholars developed theoretical frameworks to guide adult literacy and education (Minjes 1987). Scholars from the University of Yaounde, the Institute of Human Sciences, and the Cameroon branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics did essential linguistic research. These groups published materials to guide mother tongue adult literacy (Shell 1981, Shell and Wiesemann 1987).

The sensitive issue of mother-tongue literacy has received close attention, scrutiny and experimentation. We increasingly recognize that Cameroon languages must play a key role in adult literacy and literacy through formal schooling. Official support of this was shown in the celebration of Literacy Day on September 8. The entire first week of September, activities promoted literacy, especially mother-tongue literacy. Activities included public expositions of mother tongue literacy materials, awards of diplomas to new literates, visits to literacy classes, interviews, and conferences. More important, the president of Cameroon has set up a national committee for literacy. This committee will advise the government on all policy and practical matters concerning literacy.

In October 1989, the National Association for Cameroon Language Committees (NACALCO) was formed to promote Cameroon languages in adult literacy and formal education. This group participated in the Literacy Day celebration. This shows a new dynamism in literacy. Literacy efforts in experimental research, theoretical development, nongovernmental initiatives, and official policy formulation are beginning to bear fruit.

#### **5. From Basic Reading and Writing Skills to Socio-Structural Literacy**

In Cameroon, as elsewhere in the Third World, adult literacy has gone through two stages. The first stage focused on the learning of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. This stage preceded UNESCO. The limitations of this stage became unbearable and led to the functional literacy stage in the 1960s. Functional literacy campaigns were launched all over the world. At first, the success of this approach was very encouraging, but, as time went on, its limitations became more apparent. The limitations are the lack of appropriate content.

For adults, reading and writing are meaningful only as they relate to daily activities. Functional literacy aims to help the new literates master new skills related to their work, living conditions, and participation in the development of the community and nation. In Cameroon, literacy uses have been restricted to economic, religious, and specific cultural activities. Economic activities are restricted to

the level of job execution. New literates have little to do in transforming the economic and political systems that exploit them.

Functional literacy has not become an important factor in overall national development. Successful Tanzanian adult literacy led to the same development as did the failed adult literacy of the Central African Republic. Many vexing comparisons can be made with other African countries.

The next stage to which literacy should move is one in which literacy skills are no longer used as economic and political weapons against illiterate adults. I call this a socio-structural stage. Here literacy instruction provides skills so that the learner may fully participate in the activities aimed at restructuring the social milieu to adapt it to the needs of modern life. Here illiterate adults are not thought of as ignorant people, as big children to be educated by the so-called educated elite. They are simply recognized for what they are. Their cultures are not looked down upon as being inferior. No attempt should be made to impose western value systems on local ones.

In this stage, African languages play a key role. The illiterate adults who are cut off from national development and exploited by new socio-economic systems speak African languages. These adults have an important socio-cultural message for the new generation. They know the traditional social system from which the new one should develop, and they know the local value system. They possess the traditional scientific and technological heritage that helped the community live through centuries.

Many elderly illiterate people do not need to learn reading and writing skills. They can give new literates in local languages the traditional knowledge and know-how. This should be written and included in the content of formal education.

I am not saying that only African languages should be used in adult literacy. Adults who need literacy skills in the foreign languages should be given the chance to learn these skills (Tadadjeu 1987). Nothing should prevent anyone from learning to read and write in his mother tongue or in another language. What has been wrong is the use of western languages as tools for cementing prejudices against African illiterate adults.

The involving of new literates in local economic activities should take a global approach. They should fully participate in decisions concerning economic activities in the community and nation.

I hope that such a process will come soon. The country has been undergoing major economic and political changes. These are leading to greater liberalization, democratization, and decentralization of national life. New developments in adult literacy will be part of national renewal.

## **6. Motivations for Mother-Tongue Literacy through Schooling**

Literacy through formal schooling remains the most effective means of promoting literate communities. The use of mother tongues is a central issue in this process. Promoting mother tongue literacy through formal schooling means the teaching of African languages in primary schools. Sound historical, cultural, pedagogical, scientific, and technological motives support such an enterprise (Tadadjeu, Gfeller and Mba 1988).

The teaching of national languages is a major concern in all African countries. This includes the francophone countries not engaged in it before or after independence. This shows a major change in the linguistic history of Africa. This change is worldwide. Scientific and technical progress accompanied the emergence of a strong linguistic consciousness, especially among minority groups fighting for their identity and survival. Action has been taken throughout the world to promote the development and teaching of local minority languages.

The development and teaching of African languages has become an irreversible trend. It will soon spread to almost all countries. Cameroon is conforming to a historical trend that we should follow. Teaching of Cameroon languages goes back to the colonial era and has increased in the last twenty years.

Since language is the best way to transmit culture from one generation to the other, the teaching of African languages supports the need for an authentic cultural identity. The problem of a national cultural identity is a philosophical and ideological issue that is a problem only for those who feel that their culture is threatened. The problem of cultural identity rarely came up in remote villages because people lived with little outside influence. Now, the latent conflict between our cultures and the western culture is making itself felt, even in village life. This is centered in the schools, which transmit the western culture more than the local culture.

Africans who feel culturally threatened and have a philosophy of national identity are those who have been uprooted from their cultural origins by the colonial school system. They are left in the uncomfortable position of being seated between two chairs, one a western chair and the other an African chair. It is easy to see why the historical trend toward the teaching of African languages began. Intellectuals and French-speaking African leaders like Leopold Sedar Senghor realized that school had turned them into hybrids who were neither white nor black, neither Europeans nor Africans. As a result, they had almost nothing to contribute to *universal civilization*. This is why *Negritude*, the oldest trend of this sort, favored teaching African languages. President Senghor argued in favor of teaching African languages, but actually did little to implement this idea.

The movement to teach African languages in schools expresses the desire of Africans to be themselves in a world of give and take. It expresses their desire to educate future generations in a way that will remain faithful to African values. Cultural identity is an impalpable reality that can be experienced, but only partially expressed, because the words that express a culture are an integral part of that culture. One cannot expect to evaluate the desire for cultural identity, because its elements are not readily quantifiable.

The teaching of African languages in the school system is not an end in itself. It is a means of expressing a certain conception of our society. Language has always been the best means of expressing a culture. No other means of communication has surpassed it in this domain. We must teach our languages in schools if we want a cultural or national identity to transmit to future generations.

The teaching of national languages is also motivated by its pedagogical importance. Beginning education in the language a child already knows increases his ability to absorb knowledge and to learn other languages.

Some experiments in the developed world show that children experience no major problems when taught in a second language. These experiments were done in the developed world in a balanced bilingual context. These contexts cannot be compared with those in Cameroon, where most children begin their education in a foreign language. After a lot of effort, failure, and wasted time, some children gain more competence in the foreign language than in their own. This is an unbalanced bilingualism in which gains in the foreign language are made at the expense of the mother tongue. According to some psycholinguistic hypotheses, people educated in a state of unbalanced bilingualism will not develop all the intellectual potential that they could have developed in a balanced bilingual situation. People whose cognitive development has been limited will never give to humanity all that they could have given. On the contrary, they will have cost humanity more than they should.

In Cameroon, we must consider the two separate situations of two official languages. French-speaking Cameroonians have a pedagogical motivation for teaching national languages, especially in urban areas. Most children there already know French when they start school. They are either bilingual in their mother tongue and French, or monolingual in French. Speaking French is an advantage in school but a disadvantage culturally. In English-speaking urban areas, few children know standard English before they begin school. They speak Pidgin English, which gives them no psychological advantage when they start school. This is why Pidgin, if it is the mother tongue, should be used in urban kindergartens. This would prevent a psycholinguistic blockage to Cameroonian children's development in English-speaking areas. In practice, kindergarten teachers already resort to Pidgin to make themselves understood by the children, but this should be made official.

It is still necessary to teach in the mother tongue before or while teaching in the foreign language. Teaching in African languages stimulates children's scientific and technological awareness at an early age. Then they can become true agents of development in a scientific and technological society, not just be consumers of science and technology. Most who design and carry out programs of instruction in Africa do not understand this.

Experience shows that children can learn the basic principles of science and technology through games using any language. The Japanese excel in this, which helps explain their technological and scientific strength. This scientific goal conflicts with the widespread prejudice that says that our languages are not capable of expressing scientific and technological concepts. This prejudice developed during the colonial period to speed the destruction of African heritage. It spread through our society by our own people who had not risen above the disastrous influence of the colonial school system. This prejudice is unjustified.

Our languages do not always have terms to express some modern technological and scientific phenomena. Our lexicon may lack words developed in a foreign context, so new concepts or products came to us in foreign languages. With no interest in developing our languages to deal with imports from foreign cultures, our languages fell behind in assimilating new concepts and expressions. Every language can express all reality. Our languages are beginning to develop terms for imported terms such as *diploma*, *airplane*, *machine*, and *electricity*.

The scientific and technological reasons for teaching in national languages promote social change. We hope to convert our society from being a consumer to being a producer of the science and technology we need. This scientific goal is of interest to every Cameroonian. It aims at making even the youngest Cameroonians into producers of science and technology.

These motivations for teaching African languages are not exhaustive. They are different from the specific goals of particular programs of instruction in national languages. The motivations should be made into specific objectives that can be achieved and measured for specific languages in a specific time or setting and according to a specific methodology.

I am encouraged that, since the New Deal Congress of Bamenda in March 1985, the CPDM party has encouraged the development and use of written forms of our languages. President Paul Biya favors this development. His policy is clearly spelled out in his book, *Communal Liberalism* (Biya 1987). In Cameroon, we no longer swim against the stream. We are on the right track and should continue with even more determination.

## **7. Cameroon Experiment in Mother-Tongue Literacy through Formal Schooling**

Human resources are the determining factor in national development. We believe that education is the best means for human resources development. In the education system, nothing conditions success more than language and language-related skills.

The Operational Research Project for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCA) was set up to participate in educational development and reform. This project started in 1978 under the auspices of the University of Yaounde. A team of twenty researchers, headed by me, carries it out. The following institutions also participate in the project: the Institute of Human Sciences, the Cameroon Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Roman Catholic Education System, and the Protestant Education System. Because of the linguistic complexity of Cameroon, the PROPELCA team had to start with a preparatory phase (1978–80), during which it did preliminary studies. The experimental phase started in 1981.

The PROPELCA project showed that the Cameroonian child is best prepared to become an agent of the transformation of his own environment if early educational content is presented in the mother tongue. This is especially true in rural areas. The project also showed that the child who starts school in the mother tongue and moves progressively to the official language, masters the second language better than one who starts schooling directly in the second language.

This experiment was carried out in four Cameroonian languages: Ewondo, Duala, Fe'efe'e, and Lamnso'. Over 3,000 children went through the experiment in eleven schools between 1981 and 1987. The PROPELCA team has developed a model for optimal, mother-tongue initial education at the primary level, especially in the rural areas. Though the experiment was a success, use of the model in other areas is not known due to the linguistic complexity of Cameroon. An extension phase will apply and adapt the project on a larger scale. This will guarantee the success of the model at the national level.

In 1984, ten Catholic secondary schools asked PROPELCA to help put Cameroonian languages into their curriculum. This led to the initial development of a third PROPELCA model adapted to the secondary school level. A fuller development and an evaluation of this model is a part of the extension phase of the project.

This project brought a profound social impact. Local education authorities made various commitments to promote initial mother-tongue education, especially in the private sector. This gives a good grounding and motivation for the extension phase.

Following the final evaluation of the experimental phase in 1986 and 1987, the PROPELCA team set up an extension phase of the project. The objectives of this phase are the following:

1. At the primary level, we will extend the number of subjects from 3,000 to 30,000. We will extend the languages from four to twelve to test the transferability of the model from one language to another.
2. At the secondary level, the PROPELCA team is extending the initial model from the first and second years to the third and fourth years. Steps are also being made to validate this model by giving national language tests in the official examinations at the fourth year.
3. At the preschool level, we aim to start initial mother-tongue education in the kindergarten classes. Emphasis is on the development of scientific and technological awareness of little children through games in the mother tongue derived from the immediate environment.

The extension phase will last six years, from September 1989 to June 1995. The project will then transfer to the Ministry of National Education for the general use phase. The PROPELCA team hopes that, by 1995, it will develop a unified and harmonized language education system for Cameroon. It will run from kindergarten to the end of the first cycle of the secondary school. This is based on balanced bilingual and trilingual education.

The activities of this phase are similar to those used since 1981. They include the development and production of experimental materials, the training of teachers for classroom experiments, and supervising and evaluating extension classes. This extension phase has already started. We face some difficulties due to a severe economic crisis, but we hope to survive the crisis and reach our goals.

## **8. Conclusion**

African development cannot be a foreign seed planted on foreign soil. It must be deeply rooted in the soil of African culture. Education should not continue to uproot future generations, but must become a homemade education. African languages play a key role in this renewal process.

Cameroon is an African country where significant progress is being made in research, education reform, and adult literacy. If political democratization and social decentralization come soon, this country could be a model of development in Africa.

## **References**

Biya, Paul. 1987. *Pour le Liberalisme Communautaire*. Switzerland: Editions Pierre marcel Fabre/ABC.

- Minjes, ed. 1987. *Introduction a l'Education Extra-Scolaire et a l'Alphabetisation*. Yaounde, Cameroon: Minjes.
- Shell, Olive. 1981. The SIL Experience in Mother-Tongue Literacy in Cameroon. In Maurice Tadjadjeu. (ed.), *Language Education in Cameroon* (Collection PROPELCA No. 3). Yaounde, Cameroon: Universite de Yaounde.
- Shell, Olive and Ursula Wiesemann. 1987. *Guide Pour l'Alphabetisation en Langues Africaines* (Collection PROPELCA No. 34). Yaounde, Cameroon: Universite de Yaounde.
- Tadjadjeu, Maurice. 1987. La Problematique de l'Alphabetisation au Cameroun: Point Sur la Recherche. In Minjes (ed.) *Introduction a l'Education Extra-Scolaire et a l'Alphabetisation* (Actes du seminaire regional UNESCO-CONFESJES pour l'Afrique Centrala 12–16 Octobre 1987) 43–55. Yaounde: Cameroon.
- Tadjadjeu, Maurice. 1988. Langue, Culture et Education dans la recherche d'un Modele Social Africain. *Annales de la Faculte des Lettres et Sciences Humaines* 4 (2): 3–18.
- Tadjadjeu, Maurice, E. Gfeller, and G. Mba. 1988. *Manuel de Formation Pour l'Enseignement des langues nationales dans les Ecoles Primaires* (Collection PROPELCA No. 32). Yaounde, Cameroon: Universite de Yaounde.
- Tadjadjeu, Maurice. 1989a. *Voie Africaine: Esquisse de Communautarisme Africain*. Yaounde, Cameroon: Club OUA-Cameroun.
- Tadjadjeu, Maurice. 1989b. Redefinition du Developpement Africain. *Afrique Unie* 1. 8–25.