

The Nexus between Language Rights, Democracy and Education in Multilingual Zambia

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Abstract:- This paper is a critical reflection of how language rights in Zambia are distributed by policy and exercised by individuals beyond the ethnic divide. To do so, the paper looks at the language policy in Zambia and how it explicitly and implicitly empowers some and disempowers others. It also provides arguments for how some individuals are symbolically violated based on their language incapacities and ethnic affiliation by extension. The paper ends by offering suggestions on how language rights can be distributed and exercised by all in Zambia. At the centre of the paper is the problematisation of regionalisation of languages by policy and the colonial influence on the policy which has engendered English hegemony at the expense of people's enjoyment of universal language rights.

I. INTRODUCTION

Zambia is a landlocked country with approximately 17 million people. Zambia is a multilingual country and is claimed to have 73 languages mostly because the country has 73 ethnic groups (Kashoki, 1978). Regardless, there is no proper consensus on the number of languages because the relationship between language and tribe is equally contentious. Africa (1980: 127-128) argued that "if the term tribe is seen as being coterminous with the notion of language or dialect, then the frequently articulated claim that Zambia has 73 languages and dialects is understandable". In trying to estimate the number of languages in Zambia, UNESCO (1964) gave the range of 50 to 100 vernacular languages whereas Grotspeter (1979) stated that there are 30 distinct languages in Zambia (see also Mwanza and Bwalya, 2019). Mwanza (2016: 39) clarified the number of languages and dialects present in the country when he asserted that "Zambia has 73 dialects which can be collapsed into between 25 and 40 mutually intelligible languages". The 2000 census narrowed the number to 22 different languages (Gordon R, 2014). Here, it is important to note that while linguists like Mwanza (2016) and Mambwe (2014) argue that the number of languages is between 25 and 40 languages, they have in mind that languages are different from dialects. What cannot be denied therefore is that while Zambia may have less than 40 distinguishable languages, there are more than 40 dialects. Put together. It can be argued that Zambia has more than 60 languages and dialects.

Zambia's multilingualism is characterised by the existence of several languages and dialects in the same country. Multilingualism refers to the presence and use of many languages in a given community (Simwinga, 2006). Gal

(2007) defined multilingualism as the use of more than one language by an individual person or community. In the school set up, Garcia (2009) explains that multilingualism is the presence of two or more languages in the classroom or school. Mwanza and Bwalya (2019), Bwalya (2019 and Banda and Mwanza (2017) therefore state that a multilingual classroom constitutes language varieties spoken by individual learners and teachers from different speech communities. In this paper, the use of the word democracy follows Mwanza and Bwalya (2019) usage where they argued that democratisation of the classroom means the use of language varieties inherent in a multilingual classroom or speech community from which learners come from. The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to education without discrimination. Article 2 of this fundamental document establishes the basic principle against discrimination on the grounds of language. Article 5 of the 1960 Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education specifically recognizes "the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including the use or the teaching of their own language," (UN General Assembly, 1948).

II. SOME OVERALL THOUGHTS ON LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN AFRICA

To begin with, it is vital to define certain terms. Diversity refers to internal differences within a country and reflects variations in culture, ethnicity, class, religion, language, gender, disability and sexual orientation (Banks, 2011). Meanwhile, Donnelly (2003) defines Human Rights as the rights that one has because of being human. Having defined the terms, it is important to note that access to education is a universal Human right. However, in multilingual set ups like most African countries where the education policy is based on monolingual language policies and ideologies, some pupils to whom the language of instruction is familiar will access learning while those from other language backgrounds are symbolically violated (see also Mwanza, 2017, Mwanza and Machishi, 2019). In this regard, language is used as a resource for both inclusion and seclusion (Wakumelo, 2010). To this end, linguistic diversity possess a challenge to children's right to accessing education in general and learning in particular. De Mejia (2002: 38) argued that, "linguistic diversity provides opportunities for intercultural exchange, and this can lead to an attitude of receptivity and lack of prejudice." Zambia is a multilingual society which has more than 60 languages and

dialects. Thus, there has been a historical challenge of choosing one local language to be used as medium of instruction in schools. The challenge as Biseth (2008) observes, is to strike a balance between diversity and unity as a nation. Banks (2009:310) also elucidates that “unity without diversity results in hegemony and oppression; diversity without unity leads to Balkanization and the fracturing of the nation-state”.

Additionally, in most African countries such as Malawi, Namibia, and Uganda, there is usually a wide variety of linguistic groups living within the same borders. Usually a former colonial language is used as the official language and given a higher status than the indigenous African languages, despite the fact that the latter are spoken by the majority (Biseth, 2008).

Choosing one language as official language as well as medium of instruction arguably gives an advantage to one group of people over others. African countries have been using the colonial master’s language (English, French and Portuguese) as the only medium of instruction in schools under the guise of maintaining unity and peace (Linehan 2004). To the contrary, countries that have accorded linguistic rights are said to be amongst the most peaceful and democratic societies (Patten and Kymlicka, 2003). In this regard, linguistic diversity would be of great benefit to the citizens. Thus, there is need to develop a language policy which takes into consideration the needs of minorities, at the same time passing on the skills to the learners that will make them function effectively in each cultural setting.

Kymlicka (2010) is in favour of mother-tongue education, arguing that majoritarian languages are best learned by minorities when these are a supplement to, rather than supplants mother tongue education. It is only through having access to a societal culture that people have access to a range of meaningful options (for their own pursuit of the good life) – because familiarity with a culture determines the boundaries of the imaginable and cultural identity provides an anchor for self-understanding (Bangstad, 2015).

Furthermore, The United Nation’s (2004:33) Human Development Report links cultural liberty to language rights and human development and argues that there is

... no more powerful means of ‘encouraging’ individuals to assimilate to a dominant culture than having the economic, social and political returns stacked against their mother tongue. Such assimilation is not freely chosen if the choice is between one’s mother tongue and one’s future.

This implies that the role of language as an exclusionary tool and hence limitations on people’s ability to use their native language—and limited facility in speaking the dominant or official national language—can exclude people from education, political life and access to justice. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa has more than 2,500 languages, but the ability of many people to use their language in education and in dealing with the state is particularly limited. Magga et al., (2005) observe that in more than 30 countries in the region, the official language is different from the one most commonly used. Only 13 percent of the children who receive primary education do so in their native language. Schools often see the mother tongues of minorities as necessary but negative temporary tools while the minority child is learning a dominant language. As soon as s/he is deemed in some way competent in the dominant language, the mother tongue is left behind, and the child has no right to maintain it and develop it further in the educational system. This is a serious Human Rights violation. It violates the right to education and it may result in linguistic genocide, (Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008).

In the Zambian context, the Ministry of Education National Policy document highlights paying particular attention to democratization, decentralization and curriculum relevance and recognizes diversification, pluralism and responsiveness to people’s needs (MOE, 1996). However, the process of diversification of languages in Zambia must be able to reflect the linguistic rights of minorities and should not be neglected in today’s democratic dispensation. Currently, only seven out of seventy-three local languages are used as a medium of instruction from grade one to four and English takes over from grade five to university. English language is given a higher status partly because of colonial perpetuation and its economic value as it is associated with modernity and progress (May, 2001). Thus, all examinations are conducted in English.

The whole area of language in Africa, in particular the issue of which language of instruction should be used in African schools, has been a controversial subject for years. Despite consistent advice from education experts and international organisations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), many governments have continued to provide education predominantly in European languages as the medium of instruction even where such use is not educationally appropriate.

Generally, learners in Africa do not comprehend what the teacher is articulating when the teacher follows the official language policy by exclusively teaching through the approved medium of instruction, a language that is foreign and unfamiliar to the learners (Brock-utne, 2003, as cited in Holmarsdottir, 2006). Consequently, using of unfamiliar language excludes learners from participating in lessons. Hence, they are neither helped to develop democratic skills nor empowered to participate in governance and become democratic citizens (Biseth, 2008).

However, the lack of development and use of local languages cannot be blamed on the government alone. One of the major contributors to the stagnation of local languages is the attitude of the African people. This is particularly true of the educated, who have demonstrated a lack of confidence and interest in African languages. For example, in recent years the use of English in (some) homes in Zambia has increased to the extent that it has assumed the role of mother tongue. It is quite common nowadays to find children born post independence who claim not to know any local language. Some parents do not see any value learning in local languages and resist their use in education. These are the parents who regard education chiefly as a means of obtaining a white-collar job. Since English is the only language required in some professional careers, parents are reluctant to let their children learn African languages (see also Wakumelo, 2013).

Apart from English being the key to obtaining a good job, there is also a tendency to associate knowledge of English or being articulate in English with intelligence. Very often there is a tendency to judge those with a native or near-native spoken competence of English as intelligent and fast learners and those without this competence as dull, slow or poor learners. Thus children's intelligence is adduced, unwittingly perhaps, on the basis of prior exposure and competence in the foreign language being taught. The result is that an increasing number of African parents are consciously using English, exclusively, in the home in the hope of improving their children's 'intelligence' and therefore performance in the classroom. (Kashoki 1990: 85 in Miti 2007: 7). Related to this is an attitude that, the African elite, themselves occupying positions of authority in society, send their infants to expensive pre-schools for the sole purpose of making them learn English before they go to primary school. In Zambia, Mwanza (2012) reported that it was common for parents to send their children to English medium pre-schools before they move to government. The study reported that most of these children struggled in government schools where the language of initial literacy was a Zambian language. As a result, they spoke in English because they considered English as a language of education and local languages are mere home languages. It is this changing sociolinguistic landscape facilitated by language attitudes by both parents and children which is promoting English instruction at the expense of local languages, local cultures and eventually epistemic access.

Miti (2007), attributes this to the policy that has elevated English above the indigenous languages. Parents want their children to benefit from the educational, political and economic power associated with English. This would not be the case if the same power and prestige was given to African languages. These parents are merely enslaved by the policy. Thus what needs to be changed is the language policy. Only then can it be possible to start working to change the parents' mind set. This can only be achieved if the policy that promotes English above African languages is changed. Local languages seem to have little value. As noted by Alexander (nd: 13)

....unless African languages are given market value, that is unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high-status functions, and thus, eventual escape from the hegemony of English.

The message from the quote above is that generally in Africa, foreign languages and colonial languages have dominated official domains in Africa. Consequently, African indigenous languages have been relegated to unofficial domains and have been used negligibly in education because the implicit belief is that English, for example, is the language of education and not local languages.

III. CONTEXTUALISING LANGUAGE RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

Banda and Mwanza (2017) argue that language policy formulation and implementation has seen a number of twists and turns. Zambia has never had a consistent language policy from the time the missionaries' introduction formal education in the Northern Rhodesia, now called Zambia. Attempts to promote local languages and make them official languages to be used in official domains have suffered setbacks for many reasons. Instead, English has dominated official domains in Zambia and it is the only officially sanctioned official language by the constitution. There are also seven regional languages whose official status is currently only limited to the first four years of education and as optional subjects at secondary school. As hinted earlier, some of the reasons given for the promotion of English above Zambian familiar languages is the idea that English is a unifying language and brings peace in a multilingual country. This thinking has been present in Zambia since the 1960's even after Zambia got independence. For instance, the first Zambian minister of education had the following to say in parliament:

It is unity in diversity which must be forged without exacerbating inter-tribal conflicts and suspicions which have a disruptive effect. Because of this fact, even the most ardent nationalist of our time have accepted the inevitable fact that English- ironically a foreign language and a language of our former colonial masters- definitely has a unifying role in Zambia. It is the language used by the administration at all levels- central, provincial and district. In parliament, in the courts, at meetings of city and municipal councils, in the more advanced industrial and commercial institutions- the banks, post office and others- English is the effective instrument

for the transaction of business
(Mwanakatwe, 1974:212-213).

The citation above confirms the argument that the dominance of English in Zambia is because of the belief that it unites the people of Zambia. Mwanza (2016) problematized this thinking when he argued that the statement meant that Zambian languages were divisive and that they were disruptive. Clearly, this ideology can be observed today in the attitudes of many Zambians including school going children who view English in positive light relative to Zambian languages which they mostly consider as inconsequential.

As mentioned earlier, Zambia has continued to revise its language policy especially in relationship to education. In 2014, there was a policy change. Prior to that, Zambian languages were used as medium of instruction in grade one and English took over from grade two to University. By 2014, following several studies which reported low literacy levels, the government decided to extend the period of using local languages from one year to four years. The policy states as follows:

The policy on education recognises the use of familiar Zambian languages as the official languages of instruction in the Pre-Schools and early Grades (Grades 1-4).... In Zambia, the seven (7) zone languages; Cinyanja, Chitonga, Ibibemba, Kiikaonde, Lunda, Luvale and Silozi as well as the widely used community languages in specific school catchment areas will be used for this purpose..... English will be offered as a subject, beginning at Grade 2..... English will still remain as the official medium of instruction beginning at Grade 5 up to tertiary. (The Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013: 19)

This policy was meant to give more time for the use of Zambian languages to be a strong literacy foundation. While it appeared very progressive and responsive to the literacy concerns of several researchers, Kombe and Mwanza (2019) as well as Mwanza and Manchishi (2019) argued that this policy was not necessarily a new one as a similar policy was in place in Zambia starting from 1953 to 1966. The other important issue to mention here is that the policy mentions seven regional languages and other community languages which have not been named. The problem in this policy just like the policies before is that familiarity of language is judged on the geographical location of a language user. It is based on the assumption that if someone lives in a particular region, they will automatically be familiar with the regional language. In addition, the policy overlooks the fact that there are other languages which are not official languages which are not mutually intelligible with the seven regional languages. Thus, even if there is a provision of 'other community languages', but these so called other community languages

have not been developed and there are no school materials in those languages. In fact, there are no materials even in the seven regional official languages. How then can these languages be developed. Kombe and Mwanza (2019) conducted a study to investigate whether teachers were prepared to implement the 2014 policy. The findings showed that teachers were not really trained. It was also reported that there were no teaching materials which teachers needed to use to implement the policy. Other than the lack of materials, there are other policy issues which have been problematic in Zambia which has impeded the rights of learners to access learning. I turn to these issues below.

Zimba (2007) conducted a study in Lundazi to determine whether Cinyanja was appropriate for use as medium of instruction among the Tumbuka speaking children. The findings showed that most children were not familiar with Cinyanja and almost none was familiar with standardised Nyanja because it was not mutually intelligible with Tumbuka. There, in practice, what this meant was that Tumbuka children could not access learning due to language barrier thereby being denied the right to education. This is one example which shows that languages policies in Africa and Zambia in particular are exclusive. In fact, Banda and Mwanza (2020) and Mwanza (2020) argued that the Zambian language policy is based on monolingual and monoglot language policies and ideologies. Cummins (2010) referred to such policies as sink or swim. Ultimately, this makes education a very difficult endeavour by children who come from minority language groups which are not used as official medium of instruction.

Kumwenda (2011) conducted a study to assess whether pupils to whom Chewa was their first language would outperform those to whom Chewa was not their first language. The findings showed that children to whom Chewa was their first and familiar language performed better than those to whom Chewa was not their first language. This findings confirms the idea that learning is effective when and if it takes place on a child's familiar language.

Mwanza (2012) also conducted a study in Lusaka with the aim of finding out if the use of Cinyanja as the exclusive medium of instruction was effective in a cosmopolitan environment. The findings revealed that Cinyanja was not appropriate language of classroom instruction because most of the pupils were not familiar with the language. It was found that children belonged to different language groups and spoke different languages. Most crucially was the fact that the variety of Cinyanja was common in Lusaka was different from the one used in schools and found in school books. The study further showed that some teachers and pupils ended up using other languages such as English and Bemba because they not cope with the demands of English. In other comprehension example, pupils could not understand what they were reading because of lack of vocabulary and limited knowledge of the culture associated with the language which had serious implications on meaning and general

comprehension. In short, the idea of regional language in Zambia has proved to be problematic and not helpful in driving the literacy for all children in the country. What one observes is the continued marginalisation of children belonging to minority ethnic groups.

Another study by Mwanza (2020) also criticised the notion of duration of mother tongue use. He argues that despite several changes to duration of mother tongue in Zambia, literacy levels have not improved. His main argument is that duration of using mother tongue is secondary in the factors that truly engenders literacy development. Thus, he suggests proper teacher training, provision of adequate and appropriate teaching materials and adopting classroom language practices such as translanguaging which effectively recognises the language abilities of each learner in the classroom and whose result is inclusive teaching. What is crucial in Mwanza's paper is the suggestion of multilingual language practices and the need to be inclusive not only in policy formulation but also in the recontextualisation of the language policy in the classroom through adopting practices such as translanguaging.

Banda and Mwanza (2017) pointed out that Zambia was using outdated orthographies which did not correspond with languages as used by speakers especially in urban areas where languages have significantly changed due to language contact phenomenon. The result of this is that language as prescribed in schools is different from what pupils are familiar with. Even parents find it difficult to help their children with homework since they equally do not function proficiently in the official recommended language. Thus, there is need to revise the orthographies and increase the number of languages to be used in schools so that pupils do not just access the classroom, but they also access learning which is the ultimate goal of schooling.

In summary, studies and a critical look at the Zambian language policy shows clearly that it is based on the monolingual colonial ideology. Moreover, since there are a lot of essentials missing such as materials means that teaching and learning literacy is difficult in the country. Children are excluded from learning on the basis of languages as those who are familiar access learning those who are not familiar cannot. This symbolic violation of children's rights to education and learning as well as the corresponding dominance of English should be challenged and changed in the absolute attempt to provide learner centred teaching whose interest is the child.

IV. FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSION

The practical challenge of promoting democratization around Africa requires attending to issues of linguistic diversity. The multilingual class room should not be looked at as a problem but a resource for demonstrating Human rights and democratic principles. If linguistic diversity is used as a resource, learners are likely to acquire the "knowledge, attitudes, and values needed to function effectively in pluralistic democratic society" (Banks, 2009). Moreover, article 4(1) of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons

Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, or Linguistic Minorities enshrined that; States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instructions in their mother tongue (UN, 1992). This entails, linguistic minorities have the right to use their languages to participate in the learning process and be accorded power to take part in decisions regarding their own lives in the context of a wider society (Torres 1998).

In addition, equal rights must be guaranteed for all. Unfortunately, equality within a democratic nation-state does not always imply that the languages spoken are accorded equal status. For linguistic minorities or marginalized groups, it has been found to be important that their familiar language be recognized in the education sector, because this is the only way to achieve the desirable goal of additive multilingualism (Cummins 2000; Desai 2000, Kymlicka 2001). Additive multilingualism is the process by which a new language is learned while the learner still maintains and develops the mother tongue (Cummins 2000; Heugh, 2000). It is now widely recognized that it is of the utmost importance to develop skills in both languages in order to enhance cognitive, linguistic and academic growth. The main factor that enables this goal to be reached is the status that the educational system accords the mother tongue or first language (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). However, this is still very problematic for many countries in Africa where multilingualism is still viewed as a problem and not as a resource which can be promoted for social economic development.

From a micro perspective, the right to use the mother tongue increases children's capacity to learn in school (Banks 2001). Strong academic and conceptual skills in the mother tongue are crucial for achieving good skills in an additional language. The intellectual and academic resources of bilingual Multilingualism and Education for Democracy students will also increase if the first language is maintained. Furthermore, this also promotes equality for the relevant minority groups in the right to define their own future.

For all the suggested changes to take place, there is need for political will, attitude change and proper training and retraining of teachers since teachers are the central stake holders in the implementation of any curriculum. Thus, quality teachers and ones who are familiar with both content and methodology as well as being familiar with the curriculum are needed in the pursuit of equitable distribution of knowledge in the classroom (Manchishi and Mwanza, 2013, 2016 and 2018).

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