

How to Sustain the Empire without Military Presence

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Abstract

The common factor in the global colonial project by European countries has been the introduction of their language and culture to “vanquished” communities. This is visible in the African continent and Latin America. As they intended to create a “home away from home,” even after former British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan’s “winds of change” have breezed through, collapsing one empire after another, the mainstay feature of those colonies—language—remains at the heart of liberated nations. This often unavoidable status quo has meant that the colonial project cannot be completely dismantled without leaving remnants of it that will forever connect the colonised with their former coloniser. Language has been used through centuries as a potent weapon against native communities who have never fully developed dictionaries and other forms of language preservatives. The apartheid society, as a colonial project, went a step further by cleansing some languages and Balkanising them with others, thus creating artificial linguistic communities for reasons of ethnic governance. In its manifestation this process was supposed to produce a gradual death of “other” languages in a covert ethnic genocide that pitched ethnic communities against each other. Why has South Africa, 24 years later, not reversed this apartheid hurdle that gave birth to Bantustans and homelands? Why did the democratic government agree on a figure of 11 official languages when they knew from their own membership both inside and outside the country that there were more than nine African languages spoken in South Africa? What can be done to assist authorities to get a proper grasp of the linguistic challenges facing the country at a time that some people feel culturally conquered without a shot having been fired? And why is a democratic dispensation continuing the conquest of ethnic minorities?

Keywords: empire; colony; apartheid; tribalism; ethnicity; dialect; linguistic; expediency; Sepulana, liberation; Mpumalanga; France; PanSALB; Bantustan; homeland



Introduction

If I gave you a week-old puppy today, one of the first things you will do is to give it a name, let us call it Bobby. The next is to teach it your language. You teach it “Sa!” and “Voetsek!”, which loosely mean “attack” and “withdraw.” The dog is your cadet and you train it to relate to your vocabulary. You do not care that dogs, like all animals, have their own manner of speaking. When they are a group and are about to attack, you do not hear them say “Sa” to each other; they use their own doggy vocabulary. You as a dog owner do not care about their language because we humans believe we are superior to animals. We even label them “a man’s best friend.” A friend we reward for every instruction well-executed. At the end of the day we say it is loyal to its owner. A dog’s loyalty appraisal comes when it finally understands its owner, his movements, his smell, his likes, his facial expressions, his dislikes and when he is happy or sad. Eventually a dog’s mood becomes closely tied with that of its owner to the point that when its owner dies, its mood becomes so poisoned it goes into mourning. Some even stop being vicious altogether because the one person they were living to impress is gone. We sometimes teach our dogs to perform acts we as humans cannot do. We teach Rottweilers to kill, German Shepherds to outrun and outsmart our toughest villains and Greyhounds to catch hares and rabbits. The best we do is to teach them loyalty. We do not respect dogs; we just abuse our relationship to exercise control.

This goes to show that language is not just about communication, or sending information from Zwelakhe to Zodwa. Language is about hegemony. It is a human manifestation of power. It is about how you express yourself, what your ancestors stood for and how you want people to perceive you. That explains why the default language of criminals is isiZulu. For example:

He wena nja, ngizokuqitha ubuqopho. Ngizokufaka intshiza

...is not as lame as

we makwavho, ndzitakudlaya sweswi. Utaloba yi xihatla.

Even criminals in the Limpopo village of Vuwani will threaten you in isiZulu because history tells us isiZulu is the language of warriors; of brave men from Inkosi Shaka Zulu, Dingane and many others. You can start to imagine a Mopedi person about to hijack a car yelling:

Ye wena setaela, tiša sefatanaga. Keta ’o thaba ka mphaka madi a tala sekotelo.

You might laugh and think it is a candid camera moment.

Contextualising the European Colonial Project

After the 1885 Partition of Africa Berlin Conference, the French and English were amongst the most powerful military powers that rushed before everyone else to carve out fertile slices of Africa. Colonial intelligence did not bank on tropical diseases, especially the French, who grabbed a large chunk of North and West Africa. The moment they shipped thousands of soldiers and workers from mainland Europe for occupation; much to both resistance from natives and tacit co-operation by the traditional leadership, their biggest hiccup was selling everyone the colonial project.

Irrespective of enforcing the colony with powerful weapons and subjugating natives, they had something coming for them. After the monsoon season hundreds of their soldiers and workers started dying. An epidemic seemed to target only the French and none of the natives they enslaved in their compounds, who did not understand a single French word. What killed them was the Tsetse fly, which causes fatal yellow fever, something natives had already developed immunity to. After hundreds of their troops were decimated, the French—who called the Tsetse fly the West African Air Force—decided to withdraw from North and West Africa. However, not before they had hatched a plan. Their plan was to identify the most influential, most visible and most respected Africans, ship them to France, educate them and orientate them to the French way of life; then return them back to their homelands to govern the less-educated natives on behalf of the French. The hallmark of this strategy was the teaching of French and French values to these Negroes. In that way the measure of intelligence in those countries was going to be one's ability to speak and write French and to behave like a Frenchman. French missionaries, literature and culture were going to create a little Paris in every colony.

Thus, the French and their guns were gone but the colony remained intact. To this day French remains the measure of intelligence in Francophone Africa. Even though there have been developments of yellow fever antidotes, the French Republic no longer harbours intentions of civilian occupation, but maintains negligible military outposts and mission schools in every former colony, from Mali to Algeria, while governance is handled by mentally colonised Africans.

Role of Missionaries in Creating Linguistic Communities

Commenting on the role of missionaries, Limpopo-based cultural worker, Vonani Bila, says:

One of the smartest things the Swiss did when they came to Gaza was to write a pidgin version of Xitsonga, which had little regard for the ethnicities that made Greater Gaza or Gazankulu which stretches to Mozambique, Tanzania and South Africa. All they wanted was to write our language so we can read the Bible and they, as owners of our

orthography, can remain a permanent feature of VhaTsonga civilisation. (Bila 2002, Interview)

Bila's organisation, Timbila Project, is today the publisher of the very first Xitsonga dictionary written by natives and not Europeans. Let us not forget that almost 90 per cent of black languages that we brag about today were written and developed by Europeans.

The Curse of Post-apartheid South African Society

You might wonder why this piece of colonial history is relevant today. It is because the French were neither the first nor the last entity to colonise; who after failing at physical occupation decided to commit cultural genocide and wipe off nations that refused to adopt foreign languages and values. South Africa is a typical example. We are no longer a colony of Britain but English remains the measure through which intelligence is judged. We laugh at soccer players who cannot speak proper English and applaud white people who speak pidgin isiZulu.

The black middle class sends its children to schools that have no added value apart from being English medium. We send our kids to private schools then complain that white kids refuse to play with them. We fail to understand that Afrikaners send their kids to private schools to be instructed in Afrikaans. We send ours to be instructed in English and when Afrikaner kids gather to be taught *gedigte* (poems) and not mix with our kids—since they are there for English instruction—we rush to the Human Rights Commission or Equality Court complaining. We equate whiteness with intelligence and proximity to God.

Equality and equity are two varying concepts. Equality is an ideal, while equity is a reality. Section 9 (5) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 under Equality says:

Discrimination is unfair unless it is established that the discrimination is fair.

The Quagmire of South African Political Elites

That aside, we remain a British colony. In a country where white people constitute less than 20 per cent of the population, our politicians deliver State of the Nation, State of the Province and State of the Municipality addresses in English—even when there is not a single white person in the audience. Even when there are predominantly black people in an audience, like at a conference, it gets conducted in English; *nna aketjibi gore re rêbêng re pêtapêta ka mmolabolo wa matjwabodikela*.

The physical chains might have been removed, but the mental leash is tighter than ever. In his essay “We Blacks,” as if talking to black people today, Steve Biko wrote:

Black people under the Smuts government were oppressed but they were still men. They failed to change the system for many reasons which we shall not consider here. But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the “inevitable position.” (Biko 1977, 28)

He further went on to say:

All in all a black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (Biko 1977, 29)

Apartheid’s Leap into Indigenous Linguistic Architecture

In the 1960s, in preparation for the establishment of Lebowa homeland, architects of apartheid started a forced removal of thousands of Mapulana from mostly Eastern Transvaal to a new region named Mapulaneng. It was going to be the seventh region of the homeland. No one is really sure what the long-term intentions of the apartheid masters were. It could have been to grant Lebowa, like Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and Venda some semblance of statehood. However, they were not and could not be independent autonomous states when their language policy was decided in Pretoria by people who loved their Afrikaans so much they legislated that it be an integral part of the linguistic landscape in every homeland and Bantustan; except KwaZulu-Natal, where Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi rebuffed them.

They chose Sepedi to be the language of Lebowa, not because Sepedi was spoken by the majority but; according to a study by the University of Limpopo’s Sesotho sa Leboa Lexicography Unit, only a paltry 30 per cent of the population. The aim was to sow seeds of dislike amongst Bakone, Batokwa, Balobedu, Mapulana and other ethnic groups. In that divide and rule arrangement all other nations became Bapedi and their languages became dialects of Sepedi. So, a people who constituted 30 per cent of the population were imposed on the majority 70 per cent in Lebowa.

The aim could have been to normalise the national picture, whereby a minority Afrikaner population was ruling over a majority black population. Lebowa’s Chief Minister, Dr Cedric Phatudi, was unlikely to challenge Pretoria’s Afrikaans narrative because he ruled in the same skewed set-up. Thus, when children in Mapulaneng went to school, the erosion of their language started. No child was allowed to speak Sepulana or even use it in the school environment. Sepedi became the medium of instruction, enforced by expatriate “clever-blacks,” who like French-educated natives, equated the ability to speak and write good Sepedi with elevated intelligence. No learner was

allowed to move a grade if they failed Sepedi. That language became ingrained in the linguistic DNA of Mapulana to the point that even learners' parents felt the need to speak Sepedi with them at home to assist them to catch up fast and move a grade.

The scenario currently playing itself out in black middle class households—whereby parents speak to their children in English and not Siswati or isiNdebele—has been happening in Mapulana households since 1972.

The Mapulana Socio-Political Conundrum

However, with the dawn of democracy Mapulana were justified to foresee the restoration of their linguistic and cultural rights as the liberators flaunted democratic credentials. University of Limpopo academic, V.M. Mojela, revealed in 2007:

In 2002, the Sepulana Language Development Committee wrote a submission to the Joint Constitutional Review Committee requesting a constitutional amendment which gives official status to Sepulana. The Joint Constitutional Review Committee transferred its submission to PanSALB for investigation, which in turn gave this assignment to the Sesotho sa Leboa National Language Body. This language body found the main cause for this demand to be the sidelining and the “stigmatisation” of the Sepulana dialect and the replacement of the name of the standard language Sesotho sa Leboa by Sepedi in the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Consequently, the Sesotho sa Leboa National Language Body recommended to PanSALB to seek the reinstatement of the name “Sesotho sa Leboa” in order to reunite the Basotho ba Leboa communities. (Mojela 2007, 9)

Truth is, there is no language called Sesotho sa Leboa. Leboa is Sepedi for that compass point called north. Sesotho is the language of Basotho. Such casual use of characterisation risks opening another argument that could make Sepedi a dialect of Sesotho.

The people who sat on the Limpopo chapter of the Pan South African Language Body (PanSALB) all came from ethnicities that enjoyed official status and had nothing to gain from another language being added to the PanSALB budget. Rather, they had something to lose as they would then have to share resources with thousands of other people in Bushbuckridge. Bushbuckridge was then part of Limpopo and their argument that Sepulana was a dialect of Sepedi enjoyed “national” sympathy.

After a prolonged border conflict, Bushbuckridge became part of Mpumalanga. There was an expectation by Mapulana in Bushbuckridge and Thaba-Chweu that, since there is no record or anthropological evidence of Sepulana being a dialect of either Siswati or isiNdebele, finally they would have their dignity restored by a democratic government. The view was that everybody from the ruling party in the province and government

knew that Bushbuckridge was a Shangaan and Pulana region. Jonathan Malele, a cultural activist based in Bushbuckridge, says:

All you have to do is listen to our traditional music, the coded language used in initiation schools and some of the early written text by anthropologists and researchers to see that Sepulana has always been a language and Mapulana are very different from everyone else in both culture and tradition. (Malele 2002, Interview)

He adds that our literary tradition has always been oral, which means something not being written does not devalue its authenticity.

How the Democratic Order Fails Linguistic Communities

However, in 2014 when the Mpumalanga Department of Culture, Sports and Recreation promulgated the Mpumalanga Languages Act, it designated Siswati, isiNdebele, English and Afrikaans as official languages of the province. Under “Objectives of this Act” it is declared:

... empower the public to use language of their choice in order to access government services, knowledge and information.

My question would be: How does the Act empower a public whose mere existence is not acknowledged? If my language of choice is Sepulana, can I access the IDP or Provincial budget in it?

To those in Bushbuckridge the question was: Is this piece of legislation a reflection of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the province or an indication of the power dynamics in Mpumalanga? Was it a warning shot that political power had shifted from Bushbuckridge to other regions, which speak two Nguni languages?

Funds are said to be available for the development of 11 languages. However, there have never been funds budgeted exclusively for languages other than the 11 official languages; and given the narrow interpretation of the Constitution’s mandate by the Mpumalanga provincial Act, one was left wondering what does subsection (f), which stipulates “the Objectives of this Act are to promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity in the province,” really mean.

A lawyer for the Department of Arts and Culture could not explain why English (which is spoken in 58 countries); Siswati (which is also the official language of Swaziland); isiNdebele (which is one of the two official languages of Zimbabwe); and Afrikaans (which is designated official status in nine provinces) are being prioritised ahead of others in Mpumalanga, while Shangaan (which is one of the languages spoken in Bushbuckridge), was not. He reasoned that Shangaan was designated official status in Limpopo.

This indicated little comprehension, absence of consultation and lack of public participation because Shangaan is only spoken in Bushbuckridge; in Limpopo they designated Xitsonga.

The issue was raised with Dr Thulani Mbuli of PanSALB Mpumalanga, who was candid that the issue of Sepulana had been raised within PanSALB and that the consensus was that Sepulana is not a dialect but has developed to the status of a community language—which is one level away from being an official language. However, when asked what the requirements are for Sepulana to become an official language, Dr Mbuli said PanSALB does not have guidelines.

What that sounded like can be best described by a metaphor of a group of 11 former beneficiaries of apartheid’s language policy having dinner in a locked room, enjoying salami, samoosas and sushi; being asked by a hungry child how to partake in the feast and being told there is no key to open the door. What is more worrying is that the “11 language policy” is not transformative, since for the past 24 years, no single language has been developed by our democratic government to become official. In other words, the wagon has not moved an inch since 1994. The 11 languages—which are celebrated as revolutionary—are nothing but the nine homelands and Bantustans with English and Afrikaans as the *makhulubaas*. The current language policy of South Africa is a perpetuation of the Bantu Homeland Constitution Act as it keeps nations such as Mapulana, Bahlangwa, Bakutswe, Mambhayi, Balobedu, Bakgaga, Baroka, Batokwa and so forth invisible. This is cultural genocide on a scale last seen with Gukurahundi in Matabeleland. If you cannot destroy a nation with bombs, you destroy their identity with legislation.

The Reality of Bushbuckridge’s Linguistic Limbo

Twenty four years later, Mapulana remain a conquered people. They remain in chains. They are a colonised people. First colonised by the Dutch in 1652; Afrikaners in 1910; then Bapedi in 1972; and currently MaSwati and AmaNdebele who—according to the province’s Language Act—refuse to recognise that Bushbuckridge has its own residents who speak neither of the languages designated as official. Mapulana remain an occupied people, even though there is no army or fences that restrict their movement. The restrictions that exist are in understanding anything not written in their language. All government communication is in designated languages. There is nothing that speaks to old people in Bushbuckridge who grew up speaking Sepedi in school and Sepulana at home—these people are now in linguistic limbo.

No nation has ever developed in the language of others. This explains Africa’s lack of progress; visibly Francophone Africa. This also explains why Bushbuckridge is not developing. A few years ago it posted the lowest matric pass rate in the whole province and an intervention was prescribed. You cannot prescribe solutions before diagnosing

the problem. Has anyone ever thought that it might be because it is only in Bushbuckridge where children learn everything in foreign languages? AmaNdebele children have an IsiNdebele class, AmaSwati learners have Siswati classes; if they do not understand anything in English it can easily be explained in their mother tongue. However, in Bushbuckridge that benefit is not there since their mother tongue is not designated for instruction. Illiteracy will continue until Sepulana becomes an official language in Mpumalanga and Mapulana children join the rest of South Africa and not live as if apartheid was still the norm.

The Role of Deep-rooted Tribalism in the Language Debate

It is up to the powers that be, especially in provinces such as Mpumalanga, to adopt a progressive posture when dealing with minority communities. It is easy to be a tribalist; all you have to do is to hear how I say something before hearing what I am saying. The undoing of many African societies post-liberation has been the emergence of tribal tendencies whereby some tribes believe they have been ordained to rule over others; to dominate every sphere of life and to choose who they should be. Typical examples are the Kikuyu in Kenya and the Shona in Zimbabwe. There is nothing more annoying than being told you are something you know too well you are not. If I say “ayenna Mosotho ke Mopulana,” nobody qualifies to dispute it, unless they are using the apartheid template, whereby black people can only be Nguni or Sotho.

Today the questions would be: If Sepulana was refused recognition and development funding in Limpopo because it was perceived to be a dialect of Sepedi, in Mpumalanga it is perceived to be a dialect of which language? What are the reasons for its cold reception here in Mpumalanga? Would politicians be equally passive if Mapulana were a community in the Western Cape that the DA-led government refuses to recognise? We still wonder why Siswati is not a dialect of isiZulu, since according to historian and linguist Dr Gubudla Malindzisa it was only in the 1980s that Siswati gained official written status in South Africa.

In a conversation with Professor Taban Lo Liyong of Juba University in South Sudan, he said:

If you look around your tribe today and you find no genius today, no Albert Einstein, no Kwame Nkrumah, no Barack Obama; rest assured that there were once many. Language is a difficult project to construct, and it's only geniuses in your ancestry that invented yours. (Taban Lo Liyong 2004, Interview)

We can honour them by speaking it, teaching it and designating every language in existence its official status.

Conclusion

Humans fail to learn the language of dogs because we do not respect them; we patronise them with bones and snapping fingers while we despise them. In English mythology, Tarzan had to learn the language of the apes when he was raised by them in the jungle because he needed them more than they needed him. Those in power see no need to learn or promote the languages of those they consider subordinate or of a lower caste. It becomes an eternal colonisation that, as usually happens with any spring that is compressed, something has to give. We also know what happened with Afrikaans when it tried to over-pitch in 1976; it is hoped that the current overpitching of Nguni in Bushbuckridge does not produce the same fatal results when Mapulana realise that their peaceful engagements with government are ignored, often for political, tribal and ethnic expediency.

Appeal for social cohesion will not materialise since only equals can cohere. There cannot be cohesion until every Mpumalanga resident feels equally respected.

Note

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