

# The Impact of Colonialism on African Languages

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## Abstract

Africa is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world. Its languages represent different histories, communities, traditions, systems of knowledge and cultural identities. UNESCO estimates that Africa is home to approximately 1,500 to 3,000 languages, demonstrating the remarkable linguistic diversity of the continent. The arrival and expansion of European colonial powers profoundly influenced African societies. Colonialism affected not only political and economic structures but also education, culture and language. European languages such as English, French and Portuguese were introduced into colonial administration and education and, in many territories, gradually acquired greater institutional status than indigenous languages. This created a linguistic hierarchy in which the language of the colonizer was often associated with education, employment, administration and social advancement, while many indigenous languages were given a secondary position. Language is more than a means of communication. It carries cultural memory, traditions, values and collective identity. Consequently, the displacement or marginalisation of an indigenous language can also affect the cultural identity of the community that speaks it. Studies of African education have shown that indigenous languages were historically devalued in educational systems, while colonial languages frequently remained dominant in formal education. The present paper examines the impact of colonialism on African languages and discusses the continuing relationship between language, culture and identity. Particular attention is given to the writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose linguistic ideas provide an important perspective on cultural decolonisation. His decision to write in Gikuyu and his arguments in *Decolonising the Mind* demonstrate his belief that African languages are essential to cultural identity and resistance to linguistic domination. The paper argues that colonialism significantly altered the linguistic landscape of Africa, but it did not completely destroy indigenous languages. African languages have survived, adapted and continued to serve as important means of communication and cultural expression. The future of African linguistic identity depends upon strengthening indigenous languages through education, literature, research, translation, technology and public policy.

**Keywords:** Impact, Colonialism, African Languages, Indigenous Languages, Linguistic Identity, Cultural Identity, Language and Power

## Introduction

Africa is a vast continent characterised by remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity. Language occupies an important place in African social and cultural life because it functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of preserving history, traditions, values and collective memory. The linguistic diversity of Africa is therefore closely connected with its cultural diversity. Language can be understood as a system through which members of a particular society communicate and participate in their shared culture. It develops within a social environment and reflects the experiences of the people who use it. For this reason, language and culture cannot be completely separated. When a language is weakened or excluded from important areas of social life, the cultural knowledge transmitted through that language may also become vulnerable. The history of colonialism introduced a major transformation into the linguistic situation of Africa.

European powers established political and economic control over large parts of the continent and introduced their languages into administration, education, missionary activity and other institutions. English, French and Portuguese became particularly influential in different colonial territories. In many cases, these languages continued to occupy important official and educational positions even after political independence. The linguistic consequences of colonialism therefore continued beyond the end of formal colonial rule. The issue became one of language policy, educational opportunity, cultural identity and social power. UNESCO has observed that language choice in education is closely connected with questions of identity, nationhood and power.

The impact of colonialism should not, however, be understood as a complete replacement of African languages. Indigenous languages continued to be spoken within families and communities and, in some cases, became national or regional languages of wider communication. The present African linguistic situation is therefore multilingual and complex.

### **Methodology**

The present study follows a descriptive and analytical methodology. The research primarily examines the relationship between colonialism, language and African cultural identity. The primary sources include selected African literary texts, particularly *Weep Not, Child* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and the critical and non-fictional writings of African writers on language and colonialism. The secondary sources include scholarly books, research articles, UNESCO publications, institutional reports and reliable academic websites related to African languages, colonial education and linguistic policies. The study is qualitative in nature. It analyses how colonial rule affected the status and use of indigenous African languages and how African writers have responded to linguistic domination through literature and cultural expression.

### **Colonialism and Language**

Colonialism is a system in which one country or political power establishes control over another territory and its people. Such control is not limited to political administration. It can also influence education, economic structures, cultural practices and systems of knowledge. Language became an important part of the colonial system because colonial administrations needed languages for governance and education. Missionary organisations also used European languages while developing schools and religious institutions. Over time, proficiency in the colonial language could become associated with educational achievement and social mobility. This produced a distinction between languages used primarily in everyday community life and languages used in formal institutions. In many African countries, English, French or Portuguese acquired greater institutional authority, while indigenous languages were often restricted to domestic, community or oral contexts. The problem was not simply that another language was introduced. The deeper issue was the unequal status assigned to different languages. A language becomes powerful when institutions give it authority in education, government, employment and literature. Consequently, colonial language policies contributed to what can be described as linguistic inequality. Research on African education has demonstrated that indigenous African languages experienced processes of devaluation and delegitimation in both colonial and postcolonial educational systems. In Kenya, for example, the use of English as a language of education has been associated with unequal educational experiences.

### **Indigenous and Colonial Languages in Africa**

The African continent contains an extraordinary range of languages. UNESCO currently describes Africa as home to approximately 1,500–3,000 languages. These languages belong to different linguistic families and are spoken by communities of very different sizes. Some major African languages include Kiswahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Oromo, Igbo, Zulu and Shona. These languages continue to play important roles in African societies.

#### **Kiswahili**

Kiswahili is one of the most widely used African languages, particularly in East Africa. It belongs to the Bantu language family and has experienced substantial lexical influence from Arabic as a result of historical contact along the East African coast. It is widely used in countries including Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Kiswahili is particularly significant because it demonstrates that an African language can function beyond the boundaries of a single ethnic community. Its contemporary status also demonstrates the possibility of developing African languages as languages of wider communication.

#### **Yoruba**

Yoruba is one of the major languages of West Africa and is particularly associated with Nigeria and neighbouring regions. It has a rich literary and oral tradition. Yoruba demonstrates how language is closely connected with ethnic identity, history, religion, oral tradition and cultural practices.

#### **Oromo**

Oromo, also known as Afaan Oromoo, is widely spoken in Ethiopia and neighbouring regions. It is an important language of communication and cultural expression among Oromo communities.

#### **Hausa**

Hausa is one of the major languages of West Africa and is widely used across several countries. It has historically functioned as an important language of trade and wider communication. Its continued use demonstrates the importance of African languages beyond their immediate ethnic communities.

#### **Igbo**

Igbo is widely spoken in southeastern Nigeria and has a rich oral and literary tradition. The works of Chinua Achebe have played an important role in bringing Igbo cultural concepts and expressions into English-language African literature.

### **Zulu**

Zulu is one of the major languages of South Africa. It is not simply a means of communication but is also closely associated with cultural identity, history and oral traditions.

### **Shona**

Shona is one of the major languages of Zimbabwe. It possesses several varieties and continues to function as an important language of everyday communication and cultural expression.

These examples show that African languages cannot be treated as remnants of a precolonial past. They remain living languages that continue to evolve and adapt to contemporary circumstances.

### **Colonial European Languages in Africa**

European colonial languages continue to have important institutional roles in many African countries.

#### **English**

English became influential in many former British colonies. It continues to be used in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, among others. It is frequently associated with higher education, administration, international communication and professional opportunities.

#### **French**

French continues to play an important role in several countries of West, Central and North Africa. The expression **Francophone Africa** is often used to describe African countries where French has a major official or institutional role.

#### **Portuguese**

Portuguese remains an official language in several African countries, including Angola and Mozambique. Its presence reflects the historical influence of Portuguese colonialism. The contemporary African linguistic situation is therefore not a simple opposition between African and European languages. Many African societies use several languages for different purposes. A person may use an indigenous language at home, a regional African language for wider communication and a former colonial language in education or professional contexts. The African Union itself recognises the multilingual character of the continent. Its official languages include Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Kiswahili and any other African language as provided by the relevant institutional framework.

### **Colonialism and Education**

Education was one of the most significant areas through which colonial languages gained authority. Colonial education often placed European languages at the centre of formal learning. Students were expected to acquire the language of the colonial administration in order to progress through the educational system.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o illustrates this experience in *Weep Not, Child*. Njoroge's education includes learning English, demonstrating the importance of the colonial language within the educational system.

"When he reached standard 4, Njoroge began to learn English." — Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child* (1964)

The importance of this example lies not simply in the learning of English. It shows the relationship between language and educational opportunity under colonialism. English becomes a gateway to formal education and therefore acquires a social value that indigenous languages may not possess within the same institutional system.

This issue continues to be discussed in contemporary African education. UNESCO reports that a large proportion of African children begin schooling in a language different from the language spoken at home and emphasises the educational value of multilingual and mother-tongue approaches.

UNESCO's policy guidance has also stressed that African languages should not be confined to oral communication or the earliest stages of schooling but should be developed for wider educational, social, cultural and political purposes.

### **Language, Culture and Identity**

Language is deeply connected with cultural identity. Through language, communities transmit stories, songs, proverbs, beliefs, customs and historical memories from one generation to another. When colonial languages become dominant in formal education and literature, indigenous languages may lose some of their institutional authority. This can create a cultural distance between educated individuals and the languages through which their communities have traditionally expressed themselves. The problem is particularly important because oral traditions constitute a major part of African cultural heritage. If younger generations lose access to their indigenous languages, they may also experience difficulties in accessing certain forms of oral knowledge and cultural memory. This does not mean that learning English, French or Portuguese is necessarily harmful. These languages can provide access to international communication, higher education, employment and global literary networks. The issue is one of balance and linguistic equality rather than the simple rejection of European languages.

### **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Linguistic Decolonisation**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is one of the most important African writers to discuss the relationship between language, culture and colonialism. His views on language developed significantly throughout his literary career.

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngũgĩ argues for the importance of African languages in literature and cultural life. The book presents language as closely connected with culture, history and identity and advocates linguistic decolonisation.

His decision to write in Gikuyu was therefore not simply a linguistic choice. It represented a conscious attempt to reconnect literature with African communities and to challenge the dominance of European languages in African literary production.

**Ngũgĩ states:**

“I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenya language, an African language, is a part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people.”

— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986, p. 28)

For Ngũgĩ, language carries the historical and cultural experience of a community. Writing in an African language can therefore become an act of cultural affirmation.

His argument also challenges the assumption that African literature must necessarily be written in European languages in order to reach a wider audience. Instead, he places emphasis on developing African languages as languages of literature, education and intellectual expression.

**Language as a Form of Resistance**

Language can function both as an instrument of domination and as an instrument of resistance. During colonialism, European languages were connected with political authority, education and administration. However, after independence, African writers and intellectuals began to reconsider the linguistic structures inherited from colonial rule. Writing in indigenous languages can be interpreted as a form of resistance because it challenges the assumption that European languages possess greater literary or intellectual value. Ngũgĩ's use of Gikuyu is a significant example of this process. The African literary tradition also demonstrates that European languages can be appropriated and transformed by African writers. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have used English in different ways to represent African experiences. Therefore, the postcolonial language debate is not simply about choosing one language and rejecting another. It is also about who controls language, whose experiences are represented, and which languages are given institutional and literary authority.

**Language and Power**

Language is closely associated with power because the language used by institutions often determines access to education, employment and political participation. A colonial language can acquire prestige when it is the language of government, law, higher education and professional employment. Individuals who have greater access to that language may therefore enjoy social advantages. This linguistic inequality can continue even after political independence. In some African countries, the colonial language remains important because replacing it with one indigenous language could create political tensions in multilingual societies. As a result, governments often maintain colonial languages while simultaneously promoting national or regional African languages. The African Union's recognition of Kiswahili and other African languages within its linguistic framework represents one example of the increasing institutional recognition of African languages.

**The Continuing Importance of African Languages**

The survival and development of African languages is important for several reasons. First, indigenous languages contribute to cultural preservation. They provide access to oral traditions, folklore, songs, proverbs and traditional knowledge. Second, they contribute to social identity. Language helps individuals maintain a connection with their families and communities. Third, African languages have an important role in education. Research and UNESCO policy discussions have repeatedly emphasised the value of mother-tongue and multilingual education. Fourth, African languages can contribute to literary development. Writers can use indigenous languages to create literature that emerges directly from African linguistic and cultural contexts. Finally, technology provides new possibilities for African languages. Digital publishing, online education, translation technologies and artificial intelligence can potentially support language documentation and revitalisation. UNESCO has recently highlighted the use of technology and AI for documenting and promoting African languages.

**Colonialism and the Contemporary African Linguistic Situation**

The contemporary African linguistic situation is the product of several historical forces. Colonialism introduced European languages and gave them considerable institutional authority. Independence did not automatically remove this linguistic hierarchy. At the same time, indigenous African languages have demonstrated considerable resilience. Many continue to be spoken by millions of people and remain central to cultural life. It is therefore inaccurate to say that colonial languages completely replaced African languages. A more accurate conclusion is that colonialism changed the relative status and institutional functions of African languages. European languages became dominant in many formal domains, while indigenous languages continued to dominate or remain highly important in everyday communication and cultural life. The challenge for contemporary African language policy is to create a multilingual system in which international languages and African languages can coexist without the latter being treated as inferior.

**Conclusion**

The impact of colonialism on African languages extends far beyond the introduction of English, French, Portuguese and other European languages. Colonial rule altered the linguistic hierarchy of African societies by giving greater institutional authority to the languages of the colonizers. These languages became associated with administration, formal education, employment, political power and social mobility, while many indigenous languages

were marginalised in formal institutions. However, colonialism did not completely eliminate African languages. The continued use of Kiswahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Oromo, Igbo, Zulu, Shona, Gikuyu and numerous other languages demonstrates the resilience of African linguistic traditions. Africa remains one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions, with approximately 1,500–3,000 languages. The major issue, therefore, is not whether European languages should simply disappear from Africa. European languages have become part of contemporary African societies and can provide valuable access to international communication, education and employment. The more important question is whether African languages can receive equal respect, institutional support and opportunities for development. Education is especially important in this regard. When children encounter a language at school that is completely different from the language spoken at home, learning can become more difficult. UNESCO and other educational bodies have therefore emphasised multilingual education and the integration of African languages into educational systems. The ideas of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o remain particularly significant in this discussion. His advocacy of writing in Gikuyu represents an attempt to reconnect literature with African cultural experience and to challenge the assumption that European languages should remain the principal languages of African intellectual and literary expression. His work demonstrates that language is closely related to culture, identity and power. The future of African languages depends upon their continued use not only in homes and communities but also in education, literature, research, media, administration and digital spaces. African languages should not be treated merely as symbols of the past. They are living languages capable of adapting to modern knowledge and technology. Thus, the decolonisation of African languages should be understood as a process of restoring linguistic dignity, strengthening cultural identity and creating greater equality among languages. The preservation and development of African languages can help future generations remain connected with their cultural heritage while participating confidently in an increasingly multilingual and globalised world.

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#### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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