

# The Use of Vernacular Languages in the Malawian Literary Industry

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The threat to 'smaller' African languages can come from 'larger' African languages as well as from European languages, and is liable to do so if a government, anxious to promote one or more of its widely spoken languages, is tempted to discourage the study and writing of other languages of the country. A more positive approach is for the success of 'larger' African languages to be presented as an encouragement for the written development of other languages in a country (Dalby 1985:31).

Malawi's political history took a new turn in 1994 when the first post-independence multiparty elections were held marking the end of a one party dictatorship and the birth of multiparty politics. The thirty years of the one party state in Malawi (1964-1994) led to a number of negative developments such as peoples' loss of various freedoms and rights (e.g. freedom of expression). Very tough censorship laws crippled the country's literary industry and the language policy played a significant role in retarding the growth of literature in Malawi. English and Chichewa operated as the only officially recognised 'languages of the pen' in Malawi. I will examine the consequences of this post-colonial language policy for the Malawian literary industry, and suggest possible ways forward. Now that Malawi is economically and politically liberalised, efforts should be taken to promote creative writing in the once marginalised languages.

## **literary beginnings and post independence policy**

The history of writing in Malawian languages starts with the nineteenth century arrival of Christian missionaries who realised that in order to achieve success in the evangelisation task they had to use indigenous languages. The missionaries set up bush schools in which African converts were taught the 3Rs with the aim of developing a group of Africans who could read religious literature and then preach to fellow Africans. Malawi's first printing house, Hetherwick Press, was set up at Blantyre Mission by Scottish missionaries in 1884. The missionaries became the first developers of the vernacular languages, codifying the vernaculars and producing orthographies, grammars and dictionaries. Some of the fruits of missionaries' work included translations into indigenous languages of the Bible, catechisms, hymn books, secular literature, and literary works in indigenous languages produced by the missionaries

themselves. Other works of secular literature were created by the educated Africans with the encouragement and support of missionaries. This marked the birth of the literary industry in Malawi (see Mwiyeriwa 1978a).

The language policy which the country pursued after independence crippled the production of literary works in indigenous languages. In 1968, Chichewa was made the only indigenous language with official status. Thus Chichewa, and English, became the two languages of the mass media. Chichewa also became the medium of instruction at primary level from standards 1-4 and the only indigenous language taught as a subject from the primary school to the tertiary level of the education system. English maintained its preindependence position as the language of government business, the judiciary, parliament, commerce, mass media, and the medium of instruction from senior primary school up to the tertiary level.

People of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds were urged by political leaders to ignore their ethnic differences, and Chichewa came to be seen as a symbol of national unity and identity (Timpunza-Mvula 1992). People of various ethnic groups were called upon to identify themselves with one nation (Malawi), one leader (Life President Dr. Hastings Banda), one party (the Malawi Congress Party) and one language (Chichewa) (see Chirwa 1994). This political climate led to the development and promotion of Chichewa at the expense of other prominent indigenous languages such as Chitumbuka, Chilomwe, Chiyao etc. The idea of having Chichewa as a national language in the current author's view, was not bad in itself. However, what is lamentable is the fact that Chichewa's development was not accompanied by development of other indigenous languages. For example, the government set up the Chichewa Board whose functions included

advising on the use of the Chichewa language throughout Malawi and promoting as well as giving guidance with regard to work on the Chichewa language in Malawi and neighbouring countries (*This is Malawi* 1972:6).

Yet other Malawian languages were not given such opportunities. The then Life President Banda took an active role in promoting 'good Chichewa' and gave public lectures on the subject. He often charged that missionaries and local nonnative speakers of Chichewa (e.g. Yaos, Lomwes etc.) had spoilt the Chichewa language. It was not surprising, then, that in 1975, the University of Malawi elected him to an honorary Chair of Chichewa in recognition of his services to the national language (*This is Malawi* 1975:17).

No other indigenous language received support from the government and the president. The prominent position acquired by Chichewa meant that other indigenous languages were reduced to languages of the home. To this end, Mwiyeriwa's (1978b: xiv) claim that 'the emergence of Chichewa as a lingua franca has not meant the liquidation of other languages' is far from telling the truth. Alex Chima argues that in the thirty years of Malawi's one party dictatorship, Chitumbuka together with so many other Malawian languages were severely marginalised by the government's policy of granting official recognition to only one indigenous language. He adds:

while I agree that such a policy may have economic and other attractions, its rigid enforcement has struck me, with many other Malawians, as sad, being dangerously monoculturalist and ethnocidal. This could have become a tragic case of induced cultural extinction and the elimination of people's right to function in their own language and culture (Chima in Turner 1996:iii).

### **literary drought in indigenous languages**

Lack of government interest in the promotion and development of indigenous languages other than Chichewa means that when you go into a bookshop or library in Malawi, you discover that the first thirty years of independence (1964-1994) have been a disaster as far as literature in indigenous languages is concerned. Kamthunzi, one of Malawi's prominent writers turned to writing in Chichewa after discovering that not much had been produced in this language. He claims that it makes sense for him to write books in Chichewa since his target audience comprises the ordinary man and woman in the village who are often literate in Chichewa and cannot understand a text in English. His dream is:

If these books would ever taste the blessing of being translated into other languages, I would opt for other Malawian languages like Chitumbuka Chiyao or Chilomwe before any foreign languages (Kamthunzi 1994:47).

According to a survey conducted by Writers and Artists Services International (*WASI*), the period 1900-1988 witnessed the publication of 142 literary works mainly 'in three languages: English is the most frequent; followed by Chichewa the national language and Tumbuka' (Turner 1990 27). Much of the literary production in Chitumbuka was done in the period before Malawi's independence. The Livingstonia Mission of the Church of Scotland in the Northern Region of Malawi contributed significantly to the development of Chitumbuka as well as encouraging the growth of secular literature in the language. As for other languages such as Chiyao, Chisena and Chilomwe, literary works remain non-existent; one, therefore, cannot talk of a novel in Chiyao, a short story anthology in Chilomwe, or a collection of poetry in Chisena in Malawi.

This situation has given rise to a situation under which there is now in the Chichewa language

an unequalled growing body of literature which includes essays, poems, plays, newsletters, books and fully fledged novels. This volume of literature is increasing at such a geometrical progression that one would assume that Chichewa is the only authentic literature of national importance. Unfortunately, there is no corresponding literature in any other languages (Timpunza-Mvula *et al* 1995:4).

When we turn to the oral literature side, the situation is still the same: Chichewa has the highest list of recordings of oral traditions such as folktales, epics, proverbs, fables, riddles, etc. In the preindependence era, due to the cultural and linguistic liberalisation

policy of the time, researchers had the freedom to collect and record oral traditions from any ethnic/linguistic group of their choice. However, under the one party state, academic freedom (which includes freedom to carry out research) was tightly controlled, and research on oral traditions mainly centred on the Chichewa language.

## **democracy and linguistic liberalisation**

In 1994, Malawi changed from a one party state to a multiparty state, with a new constitution which includes a Bill of Rights. In addition to the right to freedom of expression the new constitution recognises that:

Every person shall have the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of his or her choice (Section 25, chapter IV: *Malawi Constitution*).

People are now free to operate in the language of their choice. Linguistic liberalisation has also translated into the introduction of Chiyao, Chisena, Chitumbuka and Chilomwe languages on the national radio. Furthermore, the same languages have been proposed as media of instruction in the first four years of primary education in Malawi which should provide one of the motivations for producing literary works in as many languages as possible.

Despite this linguistic liberalisation, the Malawian writer and publisher remain glued to the two 'traditional' languages i.e. English and Chichewa. Whilst the new government does not confine writers and publishers to English and Chichewa, there are a number of obstacles that writers and publishers face. Unless the following obstacles are removed, Malawi cannot adequately enjoy the fruits of its linguistic liberalisation.

## **technical problems**

Only Chichewa has had its grammar and orthographic principles developed and reviewed by a language developing body, the Chichewa Board. However, the work is far from being satisfactory. For instance, at the time the Chichewa Board was being dissolved in 1995, the much awaited Chichewa dictionary had not been finished. So even Chichewa poses problems to those who want to use it in writing. Malawian poet and critic, Anthony Nazombe, is quoted as saying that he opted for English as the language of his literary output because Chichewa's

rules, spellings and so on, keep on changing, so you cannot be sure whether you are writing correct Chichewa. This has inhibited me, and I have refrained from writing in Chichewa. I feel more comfortable in English (in Lindfors 1989:34).

Nigerian writer, Cyprian Ekwensi (1988:96) has a similar problem:

For years and years, there has been a standing controversy about which

Igbo is the right one to speak and write. Dialects and orthographies vary from district to district and clan to clan.

There is urgent need to develop standard orthographies and grammars of other major languages of Malawi. This will alleviate writers' problems when using these languages. It is pleasing to note that in April 1996 the University of Malawi established a Centre for Language Studies (replacing the Chichewa Board) whose mandate is to develop and promote Malawian languages. Among the initial projects of the new Centre is the review of the existing orthographies for Chiyao and Chitumbuka.

### **prestige and economic considerations**

There are some writers who feel that it is prestigious to write in an international language such as English. Writing in an international language affords them the opportunity to be known across their country's borders. While this is true, we should bear in mind that it is the quality of the literary work that makes a writer popular or unknown beyond his/her homeland. Njabulo Ndebele has argued that

Tolstoy did not write in English. Nor did Ibsen, nor Thomas Mofolo. Yet their works are known the world over (in Lindfors 1989:50).

It is often argued that it is economically more rewarding to write in an international language than in an indigenous language because an international language guarantees a wider readership, and hence more to be pocketed from royalties. What is needed in Malawi is that writers should lobby for reasonable royalties from publishers. The current rates of royalties are just too low to motivate the writer's interest. Special incentives should be set aside by government and publishers for writers who opt for indigenous languages. One way of boosting creative writing in these neglected languages is to organize writing competitions which carry with them reasonable and attractive prizes. On a recent trip to South Africa, the author of this article came across a call for entries in the 1996/97 Kagiso/First National Bank Novella writing competition. Top winners were assured of having their works published. In Malawi, unfortunately, writing competitions do not offer much in terms of money. What the author found particularly striking about the Kagiso/First National Bank competition was that the competition was open to all the eleven official languages of South Africa. The case in Malawi is that often writing competitions are restricted to English and Chichewa. Organisers of writing competitions in Malawi should open up to the following semiofficial languages: Chitumbuka, Chiyao, Chilomwe and Chisena.

### **publisher's lack of interest in indigenous languages**

Chichewa is the only indigenous language that has been of interest to publishers and sponsors of writing competitions. For example, both Popular Publications and Dzuka Publishing have a Chichewa series. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio One has some programmes devoted to literary items eg. 'Writers' Corner' is a

programme in which literary works in English are critiqued; 'Nzeru Nkupangwa', a programme on Malawian culture airs some poetry and short stories in Chichewa; 'Mlakatuli' is a programme on MBC devoted to Chichewa poetry. 'Theatre of the air' covers radio drama in English. There is need to have similar radio programmes featuring creative writing in the other major languages of Malawi.

Some interest in publishing both literary and nonliterary works in indigenous languages has started to be noticed. On the nonliterary scene, Manchichi Publishing House of Zomba launched a Basic Chiyao Reader, written in simple grammar and with simple structures, progressing from one syllable words to sentences of several phrases. The same publishing company has started translating already published literary works:

In the absence of any original creative writing in Chiyao so far we have started with translations from published sources. These translations are of two kinds: original writing from Chichewa or English and written folkstories in either of the two languages (Manchichi Publishing Company Catalogue 1996:5).

### **negative attitudes towards indigenous languages**

Clearly, negative attitudes towards indigenous languages are detrimental to the growth of literature in such languages. It is unfortunate that thirty years of independence have not freed some Malawians from linguistic imperialism or linguistic chauvinism. There is a tendency to degrade local languages, and go for foreign languages (especially the language of the former colonizers). Often we

hear people brag that they only read the English articles in the bilingual newspapers, finding the vernacular portions rather unpalatable (Mwiyeriwa 1978b:xxiv).

When an indigenous language is on the verge of 'death', very few people express concern. However, when the position of English is about to be threatened, loud cries are heard. Recently, the Ministry of Education directed that as from the 1997 academic year, vernacular languages will be used as media of instruction in the early phases of the primary school (grades 1-4). You just have to read the papers and listen to the radio to have a feel of people's concerns that the policy will lead to a lowering of standards in English. Whether this is a genuine fear or not is not the crucial matter here, but what is important to note is that those who express such fears seem not to care about indigenous languages.

In conclusion I would like to join with those warning that national languages should not be developed 'at the dire expense of regional languages' (Ngugi 1986:72f). When will African languages be elevated? Why do Africans question efforts aimed at elevating the status of their indigenous languages?

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