

INTRODUCTION OF LOCAL LANGUAGES IN THE MALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM – THE ISSUE OF POLITICAL WILL

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Résumé

Les langues africaines, bien que parfois peu valorisées par les Africains eux-mêmes et leurs dirigeants, peuvent parfaitement être utilisées comme langues officielles de travail et outils d'enseignement dans les écoles, pour autant qu'il existe une véritable volonté politique. Non seulement les langues africaines peuvent être utilisées dans les écoles, mais leur utilisation effective est une condition préalable à la performance des systèmes scolaires, qui est également une condition préalable au développement durable de tout pays. L'ambarique et le kɛswabɛli, qui sont souvent cités comme deux exemples de réussite en matière d'introduction des langues indigènes africaines comme supports d'enseignement dans l'éducation formelle, sont des références que les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest comme le Mali peuvent imiter. Partant du principe qu'aucune langue n'est supérieure ou inférieure à une autre dans la mesure où toutes les langues constituent un moyen de communication parfait pour leurs locuteurs, il est important de noter que le Mali, comme de nombreux pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest, manque de courage politique et de motivation pour déclarer une langue comme le bamanankan, qui est parlée et comprise par l'écrasante majorité des Maliens, comme langue officielle. Cet article montre, avec des preuves solides, que l'échec des initiatives liées à l'utilisation des langues nationales au Mali est principalement dû à un manque de volonté politique réelle et authentique. Il donne l'exemple de plusieurs pays qui étaient dans le même gouffre que le Mali dans le passé, mais qui ont fini par avoir un système éducatif fort et performant lorsque leurs dirigeants ont démontré une réelle volonté politique de promouvoir leurs langues locales. Avec une définition claire de ce que l'on entend par volonté politique, l'auteur explore comment les Africains de l'Ouest en général et les Maliens en particulier peuvent s'inspirer des exemples de réussite qui existent déjà sur le continent africain, en l'occurrence l'ambarique et le kɛswabɛli, pour aller de l'avant.

Mots clés : *ambarique, éducation formelle, kɛswabɛli, langues nationales, performance académique, volonté politique*

Abstract

African languages, although sometimes not much valued by Africans themselves and their leaders, can perfectly be used as official working languages and media of instruction in schools as long as there is genuine political will. Not only can African languages be used in schools, but their effective use is a prerequisite for the performance of school systems, which is also a prerequisite for the sustainable development of any country. Amharic and Kiswahili which are often referred to as two success stories when it comes to dealing with the introduction of African indigenous languages as media of instruction in

formal education, are references that West African countries like Mali can imitate. Going from the understanding that no language is superior or inferior to another in so far as all languages are a perfect means of communication for their speakers, it is important to note that Mali, like many West African countries, lacks political courage and motivation to declare a language such as Bamanankan, which is spoken and understood by the overwhelming majority of Malians, as an official language. This article shows, with strong evidence, that the failure of the initiatives related to the use of national languages in Mali is mostly due to a lack of real and genuine political will. It gives the examples of several countries which used to be in the same abyss as Mali in the past, but which ended up having a strong and performant educational system when their leaders demonstrated real political will to promote their local languages. With a clear definition of what is meant by political will, the author explores how West Africans in general and Malians in particular can inspire themselves from the success stories which already exist on the African continent, in this instance Amharic and Kiswahili, in order to move forward.

Key words: *Academic Performance, Amharic, Formal Education, Kiswahil, National Languages, Political Will,*

Introduction

The importance of using a child's mother tongue in the process of his/her education has been proven and documented to a large extent over the years by researchers in the field of education (Canvin, 2003). Indeed, learning is much easier for children when it occurs in a language they understand best, that is the language they use in their interactions with family members, friends outside school, in the community, etc. (Cummins, 2001). In Mali for instance, various approaches were introduced in public schools since independence with regards to the use of children's national languages as medium of instruction. Those approaches failed most of the time to improve students' academic performance in a country where French, although used as the official language, is spoken and understood by a relatively small percentage of the population (Minta, 2020). Worse, some of the approaches were so disastrous that they were purely and simply abandoned (Kodio, 2018).

The failure of the various approaches in the use of national languages in formal education in Mali is largely documented and many reasons are put forth to explain that failure, including among others the absence of training for trainers, the lack of motivation from teachers, parents and learners and the lack of adequate documentation (Skattum, 2010). But the issue of lack of political will is not often mentioned as a cause of the failure of the African education systems in general when it comes to the use of indigenous languages as stated by Professor Gorgui Dieng, a prominent linguist from Université Cheick Anta Diop in Dakar.

We know that there are some success stories in Africa, especially in the eastern region of the continent with regards to the use of national languages, even if they are few. Some countries in East Africa such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania were able to do marvels with Amharic and Kiswahili, which are languages spoken locally with the status of official language. Considering the fact that the success of African indigenous languages in schools is closely related to a strong political will from political decision makers, the purpose of this article is to show how the political will was articulated in the few African countries where local languages were successfully introduced as official languages and explore to which extent the same approaches, measures and arrangements can be replicated in Mali.

Another purpose of this article is to explore those factors which illustrate the role of strong political will in educational achievement through the use of Africa's national languages in the school system. We will need to identify those areas of decision making where a strong political will help bring in all the ingredients of educational achievement. We will have to define the concept of political will and relate it to aspects of decision making regarding the use of our national languages in our school system.

1. Definition of political will

According to Little (2011, p.6), "*political will might be defined as a sustained commitment of politicians and administrators to invest the necessary resources to achieve specific objectives and a willingness to make and implement policy despite opposition*". She further draws the attention to the fact that education reforms on several developing countries have been driven by strong political will from the highest level and that the historical cases of Mao in China, Castro in Cuba, Museveni in Uganda, Rawlings in Ghana and Kannangara in Srilanka provide compelling examples. Political will and stronger national leadership, according to UNESCO (2000), are needed for effective and successful implementation of national plans.

Little (2008a) in Little (2011, p.6) suggests that "*with respect to education policy in developing countries, national political will is a combination of the motivations of a wide range of policy actors, including politicians and administrators, and actions that result in policy texts, allocated resources, activity plans and timetables*".

Going from the understanding we got of the issue of political will above, one can say that it "meaning the political will" is the main reason

of the failure of the various approaches implemented in Mali after independence. Mali has experienced several phases in the implementation of approaches using pupils mother tongue, none of which was a real success (Minta, 2020). The issue of promoting national languages was raised since the 1962 major reform of Education, but it was only in 1979, nearly 20 years after independence that national languages were introduced in Malian schools (Traoré, 2009, p. 158). As far as using local languages in educational systems is concerned, it is important to highlight that historically, no country has developed through the use of a borrowed or foreign language as stated by Prah (2003), which shows us how critical the use of national languages is especially for our developing countries in Sub-Sahara Africa, especially the French speaking countries. Considering the definition given earlier by Little (2011) with regards to political will, one might be tempted to wonder what decision makers in Mali did for the implementation and promotion of national languages when we consider how important the latter ones are for the performance of a school system if implemented properly and subsequently for the sustainable development of a country given the fact that they are intertwined.

2. National languages' teaching history in the Malian education system.

Since the independence of Mali, there have been three major phases in the history of bilingual education at elementary school level which are the following: *l'école expérimentale de la première génération* [the first generation experimental school] which lasted from 1979 to 1987, *la Pédagogie Convergente (PC)* [the convergent pedagogy] which lasted from 1987 to 2002, and *le Curriculum bilingue par compétences* [the competency-based bilingual curriculum] which was initiated in 2002 up until now (See Kodio (2018) and Minta (2020) for a detailed description for the three major phases).

Mali is considered as the pioneer in the field of using national languages as a medium of instruction in francophone Africa. But very little progress is noticeable in this field so far. A general failure with regards to bilingual teaching is highlighted in the general report from the National Education Forum. According to Skattum (2010), the report suggests to « consolidate what was achieved » before envisioning any massive generalization of bilingual education.

3. Overview of the Language Policy of Mali

The Language Policy Document of Mali (2014, p.12) states the following:

Local languages have been central to Mali's language policy; various governments made a great deal of efforts for the use of indigenous languages in schools in Mali through several reforms. In the National Forum on Education organized in 2008, it was recommended that a language policy should be formalized to ensure the use of national languages in all public domains to guarantee an optimum development of the country.

The language policy document (p.12), further states that the country's language policy is based on the following seven principles:

- National languages are the foundation of national cultural identity;
- The respect of linguistic diversity strengthens national unity;
- Every citizen has the right to speak and to be educated in his/her mother tongue;
- Promoting all national languages is a prerequisite for an endogenous development and real decentralization;
- Every citizen should be able to learn at least one national language, one or two African languages and one or two other international communication languages in addition to his/her mother tongue ;
- Languages impose themselves by their dynamic ;
- The language policy of Mali is based on convivial functional multilingualism that articulates with decentralization and African integration, having as a matrix one language of identity, one lingua franca and one language of international communication.

One might easily think, based on the above principles, that there is a strong political commitment towards the promotion of national languages in Mali. However, these statements need to be taken with caution given the fact that there is very little sign of promotion or use, if any, of national languages in the field, be it in schools or in administration (Minta, 2020).

The French language is still and remains the only official language of Mali, although it is spoken and understood by a relatively

small percentage of the population. The language policy document of Mali states that despite the positive results related to the use of national languages, they do not have a status of working languages alongside French in Administration, Legal system, Institutions of the Republic, etc.

The government of Mali has tried to demonstrate willingness to use national languages in the field of education in several ways, although many of them were a failure. In Mali's language policy document (2014, p.34) published by the Secretariat General of the Ministry of National Education, the following is stated:

The Education reform of 1962 and the Malian Constitution of 1992 as well as the Acts and decrees which follow, namely the Act No. 96-049 from August 23, 1996 laying down the rules for promoting thirteen national languages and the Act No. 99-046 from December 26th, 1999 concerning the Outline Act on Education, together with Decree No. 85/PG-RM from May 26, 1967 setting out the alphabets of four of our languages and Decree No. 159/PG-RM from July 19, 1982 granting the status of national language to ten of our languages, show the political commitment in favor of national languages from successive governments.

The above acts and decrees are supposed to be evidence of efforts and commitments made by the Malian government with regards to the use of national languages in Malian schools. Furthermore, there have been efforts regarding the promotion of national languages through initiatives such as the creation of a Ministry of National Languages, the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education and National Languages and a Malian Language Academy (AMALAN). The Malian Government is also in a joint partnership with ACALAN, the African Language Academy which is a major actor in the field of promotion of African languages. The African Language Academy based in Bamako is a Pan-African organization founded in 2001 by Mali's former president Alpha Oumar Konaré.

However, as stated previously, the language policy document states many nice things that may mislead those who are not aware of the

situation existing in the field of education in Mali. In terms of achievement for instance, it states the following (p.34):

Significant progress has been made in terms of corpus planning of national languages. Twelve languages were developed out of thirteen, meaning they were equipped each with an alphabet, spelling rules, a basic lexicon, specialized lexicons in several areas of activity, a reference grammar, monolingual dictionaries (for some languages, functional literacy manuals, textbooks, management documents, practical guides (for some technical fields), scientific, technological, and cultural publications.

But again, those statements need to be taken with caution since the achievements mentioned are not visible in the field of education for the most part according to teachers of national languages throughout the country (Minta, 2020). Also, it is important to draw attention to the fact that there are significant budget issues when it comes to implementing initiatives related to the promotion of national languages, namely in the educational system. Indeed, the Malian Government does acknowledge challenges in the language policy document. Those challenges are mostly related to funding national language initiatives, namely financial challenges which are the most important ones. However, what is sad is that the government counts on technical and financial partners to fund national language promotion initiatives, and as pointed out by Canvin (2003), those partners do not show much interest in investing in such projects.

Although Mali and many African countries put forth the issue of limited resources and financial challenges when it comes to implementing initiatives related to national languages, those factors alone cannot justify the successive failures of such initiatives. For instance, Kosack (2008), found that even though issues related to shortages of funding, as well as books, classrooms, and qualified teachers are very often put forth when addressing problems related to primary education, the dearth of government commitment to primary education which, according to him, is often referred to as “political will” is another reason that may indeed be even more important. The other barriers are often surmountable with political will, according to him, and

without it, even unlimited resources will rarely produce access to quality primary education. Kosack (2008) goes on to give the example of Saudi Arabia, which no one would mistake for poor, but which is still among the five countries in the world with the most children not attending school.

4. The examples of Amharic and Kiswahili

Amharic and Kiswahili, two languages used in Eastern Africa, are official languages in the countries where they are spoken and are very often used as references to prove that African languages are not inferior to any other language and that they can be used in virtually all the fields which are necessary for the development of a country. We will see below what made those two languages particularly successful, the different factors that came into play, and the role of a strong political will in the process.

Amharic, which is an Ethio-Semitic language, serves as the working or official language of Ethiopia, and is also the working language of several of the states within the Ethiopian federal system (Gebremichael, 2011). According to Meyer (2006), since late 12th century, Amharic has been the working language of courts, language of trade and everyday communications, the military, and remains the official language of Ethiopiato to date. In the 2004 Language Access Act, Amharic became one of the six non-English Languages in Washington DC, allowing education and Government services in Amharic¹.

As for Swahili, which is also referred to by its native name Kiswahili, it is a Bantu language and the native language of the Swahili people. Swahili, according to Mazrui (1995) is used as a lingua franca of the African Great Lakes region and other parts of East and Southern Africa, including Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, some parts of Malawi, Somalia, Zambia, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In the African Union, Swahili has a status of working language and is officially recognized as a lingua franca of the East African Community (Nurse and Hinnebusch, 1993). The teaching of Swahili was legalized in South African schools in 2018.

There are particularities with Amharic and Kiswahili, which may explain to some extent why external influences did not hamper their

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic>

development as official and working languages in the countries where they are spoken. It is important to note that Ethiopia, where Amharic is mainly spoken, is one of two African countries that were never colonized (the second one being Liberia) and therefore one of the very few African countries which do not use a European language as one of its official languages.² But despite the fact that it is a local Ethiopian language, Amharic gained popularity over the centuries and is also spoken in parts of Djibouti, Egypt, Israel, Canada, and the United States in addition to Ethiopia³.

Considering that Ethiopia has no colonial past, it becomes easy to understand why nobody was able to impose a foreign language there. But that does not mean that the country did not meet other challenges when developing and introducing Amharic throughout school system, court system, trade transactions, etc. It certainly took strong leadership and determination from the leaders of the country to develop Amharic in all the areas where language is essential to make a country function properly.

Unlike Amharic, Swahili on the other hand is spoken in countries which have a past colonial history. But the various colonial powers favored and encouraged the development of Swahili instead of imposing their language to the detriment of local languages like France did in its former colonies. Indeed, various colonial powers that ruled on the coast of East Africa played a role in the growth and spread of Swahili.⁴

According to Nurse & Spear (1985), the widespread use of Swahili as a national language in Tanzania came after the independence of Tanganyika in 1961 and the government's decision to use it as a language to unify the new nation resulting in the use of Swahili in all levels of government, trade, art as well as schools in which primary school children are taught in Swahili, before switching to English (medium of instruction) in Secondary schools (although Swahili is still taught as an independent subject).

² <https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/2020/04/09/lead-with-amharic/>

³ <https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/2020/04/09/lead-with-amharic/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swahili_language#Colonial_period

The Swahili language also played a major role on the political front during the hot times of struggle for independence. Swahili was used by the Tanganyika African National Union during the struggle for Tanganyika independence as a language of mass organization and political movement. It was used for pamphlet publication and radio broadcasts to enable the people to come together and fight for their independence. Naturally, Swahili was adopted as the national language of the nation after independence and Tanzanians are very proud of the language especially because it is used to unite over 120 tribes across Tanzania. With strong and genuine political will, Tanzanian leaders were able to use Swahili to strengthen solidarity among the people and put them together, which is among other reasons why the language remains a key identity of the Tanzanian people.⁵

The institutions that Tanzanians used for the promotion of Swahili are quite similar to those which exist in Mali for the promotion, development and use of local languages. Interestingly, we find that after Tanganyika and Zanzibar unification in 1964, *Taasisiya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili* (TUKI, Institute of Swahili Research) was created from the Interterritorial Language Committee and that TUKI was merged in 1970 with the University of Dar es salaam, while *Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa* (BAKITA) was formed.⁶ BAKITA, which is an organization dedicated to the development and advocacy of Swahili as a means of national integration in Tanzania is very similar to AMALAN in Mali which has similar missions.

In its mandate, BAKITA's core activities consist in creating a healthy atmosphere for the development of Swahili, encouraging use of Swahili in government and business functions, coordinating activities of other organizations involved with Swahili and standardizing the language. BAKITA has two visions. The first one is to efficiently manage and coordinate the development and use of Kiswahili in Tanzania. The second one is to participate fully and effectively in the promotion of Swahili in East Africa, Africa and the entire world (Kharusi,2012).

According to Kharusi (2012), although other bodies and agencies can propose new vocabularies, BAKITA is the only

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swahili_language

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swahili_language#cite_note-32

organization that can approve its usage in the Swahili language. Similarly, AMALAN is the only organization whose transcriptions are accepted when it comes to national languages in Mali. As stated above, AMALAN is very similar to BAKITA in many regards. Like BAKITA, AMALAN's mission is promote and develop national languages in such a way that they can be used in formal education, among other missions. The question now is: why is BAKITA, which is an organization with the same mission as AMALAN, much more successful than the latter one in the implementation and promotion of local languages?

The answer seems to be the political will factor. It took strong and genuine political will and commitment to make BAKITA succeed in its mission whereas the efforts and initiatives of AMALAN were not followed by any concrete action, as stated anonymously by an AMALAN worker. Political will is the core of everything and nothing is possible without it when it comes to educational policies in general and the implementation of indigenous languages as official languages in particular.

The case of Ghana in the 1980s also illustrates how political will and motivation can improve school system and students' performance. In 1981, J.J. Rawlings came to power through a military coup directed against the Ghanaian elites. According to Kosack (2008), Rawlings' new Government improved Ghanaian primary education so much so that in 1986, the World Bank decided to help, and in the subsequent decade-and-a-half provided invaluable technical expertise and lent Ghana 260 million dollars for primary education, with the Bank as a catalyst, and the other donors joined up, more than doubling the Bank's contribution. Kosack (2008, p.5) depicts the situation of the Ghanaian education system in 1988 before and after the aid as follows:

The aid was a tremendous success. Primary education expanded and improved: the number of primary students increased by more than 60 percent between 1987 and 2000; inflation-adjusted per-student spending rose 16 percent. In 1988, World Bank surveys found that less than half of schools could use their classrooms in the rain, less than 80 percent had blackboards, and two-thirds reported shortages of chalk. Only 13 percent of English students and 21 percent of math students had a textbook. In 2003, when the World Bank

again surveyed schooling in Ghana, two-thirds of classrooms could be used in the rain, 94 percent had a blackboard, and less than five percent reported shortages of chalk. 72 percent of English students and 71 percent of math students had at least one textbook. Of course, the real signs of success are found not in a school's buildings but in the achievement of its students, and here too the signs were positive: test scores increased in both math and English. For example, in identical English tests, two-thirds of primary school graduates in 1988 could not outperform guessing; in 2003, less than a fifth scored as poorly as if they had simply guessed. The reason for this success was that the Ghanaian government already wanted to increase the quality and availability of primary education for Ghana's poor, whose support it needed to stay in power. In fact, the World Bank's own assessment of its success in Ghana credits the Ghanaian government's political motivations.

The current situation of Malian public schools at elementary and secondary levels is not much different from the disastrous situation which prevailed in Ghana before Rawlings' coup and personal involvement with sound political will for positive change. Although it is difficult to get statistics on the percentages of students who have textbooks or classrooms equipped with teaching material in Malian public schools, we can say, for having visited some of those schools, that the situation is chaotic. Indeed, very few students have textbooks in those classrooms which are often overcrowded.

Moreover, teachers desperately need training, especially with regards to the Bilingual Curriculum in elementary and junior high school and the Competency-Based Approach in high school which are supposed to be used nationwide in Mali. In a 2018 interview that I conducted with national language teachers who were from nearly all the Southern regions of Mali, all of them confessed that they received no prior training, nor did they have any previous experience with regards to the teaching of national languages. They were recruited most of the time with degrees in other subjects such as English literature, German Literature, Linguistics, etc., with the assumption that they would be able to teach the national

languages that they speak as their first language. I conducted another interview recently to find out whether the situation has improved, but sadly I found that there was not much change, if any.

NihanCoseleciBlanchy, the author of UNESCO's 2016 document titled *If you don't understand, how can you learn?* revealed alarming findings stating that only 2% of teachers in Mali and 8% of teachers in Senegal feel that they are ready and able to teach in local languages. But AdamaOuane, a former Minister of Education in Mali responded that a serious assessment would reveal that even not 10% of teachers would be able to teach in French either.

Conclusion

Research demonstrated that children learn better in their mother tongue than in a foreign language. Research also demonstrated that no country has ever developed with a foreign or borrowed language alone. As such, the principle of using national languages in our educational system is generally accepted. But it is still necessary that the elite of the society have the political will needed to evolve towards a more efficient and productive use of African languages, especially in Francophone Africa. It is a fact that French is very powerful in the former French colonies, unlike English in the former British colonies. For example, Bamanankan in Mali does not have the same weight as Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa in Nigeria, even though they are all languages that are spoken locally in these countries. The degree of development of Amharic which is used from primary to higher education in Ethiopia is no secret and Swahili is so developed that it has become an international language. But we must not delude ourselves; the development of our African languages will be very difficult next to French because we have a colonial past that still weighs on the advancement of our educational system.

It is important for us to dig and find out what actually happened between our leaders and those of the former colonial power in terms of agreements in the monetary and linguistic fields, etc., in order to really move forward, because we are willing to evolve, but the question now is to know if it is possible to do so in view of the agreements that bind us to the former colonial power. As for the agreements with the French government in the monetary field, for instance, it is only over the last few years that the African people became aware of how France holds them in the palm of its hand with the CFA franc, a currency which, according to many experts, is one of the main obstacles to the development of the countries which use it.

It is obvious that any effort towards the promotion of African national languages is already doomed to failure if we continue to do what we have always done so far, the same causes leading to the same effects. And finally, when we talk about political will, we need to know what an institution like ACALAN (African Academy of Languages) which is a specialized institution of the African Union and whose first objective is the promotion of African languages and AMALAN (Malian Academy of Languages) are doing concretely because their actions are not much visible on the ground. This is the reason why I think that the problem concerning our national languages is much more institutional and structural than personal and cultural. We should therefore see to what extent organizations like ACALAN and AMALAN can be more useful and productive for the benefit of our educational system.

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