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**LANGUAGES FOR INTERCULTURAL
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Series Editors: Michael Byram and Alison Phipps

Vernacular Palaver

Imaginations of the Local and Non-native Languages in West Africa

Moradewun Adejunmobi

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Introduction

The word ‘palaver’ enjoys a long history in certain regions of the African continent. *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* traces its etymology to the Portuguese word *palavra*, meaning ‘word,’ or ‘speech,’ and ultimately to the Latin *parabola*, referring to story or word. *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* further elaborates: ‘An often prolonged parley usu. Between persons of different levels of culture and sophistication (as between 19th century European traders and traders of the African west coast).’ The term was probably introduced to the West African coast by Portuguese sailors who visited that part of Africa from the 15th century onwards. Related terms still exist in other Romance languages today, with the French *parole* being perhaps its most celebrated cognate in literature and language studies.

The word *palabre* continues to appear in the vocabulary of French-speaking West Africa where it refers to discussion. Indeed, the *arbre à palabres* used to be a popular authenticating fixture and location in early African literature in French. In Anglophone West Africa notably, *palavra* has entered into the varieties of Pidgin and Creole spoken in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana. As in French, palaver or *palava* in the West African Pidgin and Creole languages likewise denotes discussion, although frequently and metonymically, it connotes dispute and even trouble, argument, or calamity. Several factors account for the links between the word palaver and contentious discussion in contemporary West Africa. Among these factors, one might consider the fact that in the restored slave forts of the city of Cape Coast Ghana, tour guides will often describe the rooms where European and African traders met to discuss their business as the ‘Palaver Room.’

This book then is a contribution to an often contentious discussion about vernaculars in the postcolonial world. It is a palaver about vernaculars. And since I have started by tracing the etymology of key terms in my title, I might as well also point out that many of the early palavers on the West African coast were truly about vernaculars; that is, they were about the traffic in slaves, since the word vernacular derives from the Latin, *verna*,

indicating the native-born slave. In African studies, the palaver about vernaculars has engaged the attention of scholars in linguistics, education, literary and cultural studies among others. This book addresses the debate over language specifically from the angle of those working in literary and cultural studies. It therefore does not provide the kind of statistical data that scholars working in sociolinguistics and education might be accustomed to examining. While I have found the work carried out on this subject in the disciplines of education and sociolinguistics extremely helpful, I feel there is a need to consider what the implications of such research might be for the way those of us working in literary and cultural studies approach questions of language and identity in a postcolonial setting. My book then, focuses, specifically, on arguments over language and identity as they have been presented in literary and cultural studies, and particularly in discussions of postcolonial literatures and cultures.

Scholarly conversations about language and identity in the postcolonial world often take as their premise the prior existence of an ideal monolingual order, centered around mother tongues and disrupted by the violent processes of colonization. Those who start from this position also suggest that a return if possible to an emphasis on the mother tongue and to this ideal order would constitute a suitable remedy for a situation where people now carry out much of their significant educational, cultural, political and economic activities in foreign languages imposed upon them during the colonial period. From this angle, instances of recourse to the colonizer's language in particular, are interpreted as signs of cultural subordination, and of a desire for identification with the colonizer's culture and nation.

I begin in this book from a somewhat different premise. Supposing in fact, people in postcolonial contexts had come to terms with life as polyglots in a multilingual world. Supposing in fact their resistance to colonialism, and later still, globalization entailed using different languages for different purposes. Supposing in fact, they did not systematically interpret their own willingness to use non-native languages as indications of a desire to identify with foreign cultures. My aim, in this book, is to try to explain why people continue to produce texts in languages that are not their mother tongues, why they join organizations using languages that are not their mother tongues, why they have not initiated the kind of response to non-native languages that several literary and cultural critics seemed to anticipate. One of the main questions I will be addressing in the book is the following: Does the increased prominence of so-called global languages like English signal a decreased attachment to more localized cultures among non-native speakers? My response to this question is mostly in the negative as I caution readers against systematically interpreting a willing-

ness to use non-native languages as evidence of a desire for identification with cultures previously thought of as foreign.

My first chapter considers the circumstances in which resistance to colonialism or for that matter, support for the colonial enterprise will involve an agenda specifically designed to promote the use of a vernacular or mother tongue. The objective of this chapter is to prove that support for vernaculars can be an integral part of the colonial enterprise, just as support for selective use of non-native languages can play a role in resistance to colonialism. In my second chapter, I argue that the emergence of a literature envisaged as 'African' involved a re-configuration of the concept of the local among those Africans who participated in the creation of this literature. This in turn necessitated the recourse to languages understood by all those committed to this new vision of the local. My conclusion indicates that in cases where the colonized intelligentsia did not at the same time invest in the promotion of an indigenous lingua franca, literatures embodying such visions of the local could not but be expressed in the colonizer's language.

In the third chapter, I consider Nigerian video film as one instance among others where contemporary urban West African audiences have been willing to engage with a cultural practice in a language that is not a mother tongue. I make the case that advanced proficiency may not be the only and main factor at work in determining whether an audience will convene in response to an activity in a foreign language. I also attempt to show that these West African cases do not fit the model of the elite audience often associated with African cultural products in European languages. Looking at recent Ivorian romance fiction, the fourth chapter examines evidence of the continuing preoccupation with questions of local identity in West African texts produced in non-native languages. In fact, I suggest that such concerns over local identity may be even more overtly articulated in cultural texts and styles bearing a close resemblance to cultural trends identified as foreign than in those cultural forms with a longer presence in a given society, and whose affiliations with the local may be less subject to question. The point of departure for my argument in the fifth and final chapter is the assumption that foreign societies are viewed as territorially separate and alternative locations for cultures which are as localized as one's own culture. Where people engage in activities using non-native languages that are also languages of wider communication, the desire may be not so much for identification with a specific foreign culture and society as to transcend the limitations imposed by more localized attachments. My discussion in this chapter is based on a study of the relationship between language use and questions of identity among members of Charismatic churches in contemporary West Africa.

In sum, it is my intention to suggest that recourse to non-native languages does not necessarily reference identification with the foreign. Just as the word palaver has undergone assimilation into the contemporary West African vernacular notwithstanding its foreign antecedents, so also non-native languages have become deeply implicated in contemporary West African productions and imaginations of the local. As to be expected, some readers will take exception to my approach to the issues of language and identity in this book. I too recognize that there is no intrinsic merit in stirring up further palaver on this particular subject. If however this and further discussions do something to advance our understanding of how people actually respond to non-native languages, I will have accomplished at least some of my goals for the book.

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Chapter 1

Colonial Encounters and Discourses of the Vernacular

In his first novel, *Climbié*, published in 1956, the Ivorian author, Bernard Dadié, recalls in the following manner the climate surrounding the use of vernacular languages on school grounds during his early years of schooling in the French West African colonies:

The decision was therefore made, and circulars were distributed to all corners of the bush and even to the smallest village schools. 'The speaking of dialects on school property is hereby forbidden.' It was precise. The zones were clearly demarcated. On that day was born the token – a piece of wood, a box of matches, anything. It was entrusted to the top student in the class, whose duty it was to give it immediately to anyone caught speaking his own dialect. From the day the token first appeared, a coldness settled over the school. The students sang as well at the beginning of classes as they did at the end, but without the same abandon, the same gusto, the same fire. And the breaks, once so happy and loud . . . they too felt the effects of the new rule . . . Because of the token the students liked to get as far away as possible from the school-yard as soon as the final bell rang. They waited anxiously for the time to leave and watched the shadows grow smaller . . . (Dadié, 1971: 15–16)

Images of the schoolroom, of the token, and of other humiliations continue to hover over memories of initial encounters with the dominant tongue, with the standard language, with Received Pronunciation in fiction and non-fiction around the world. Certainly, experiences similar to Dadié's have been recounted by a number of other African authors, including Dadié's compatriot, Jean-Marie Adiaffi (1980), but also by the Congolese, Sony Labou Tansi,¹ and most notably by the Kenyan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981).² Nonetheless, and despite the inauspicious beginnings, Dadié's protagonist in the novel *Climbié*, does manage to complete his education and to become as an adult increasingly sensitive to the injustices of colonialism. Even more significantly for the argument that I will be

developing in this chapter, Dadié wrote this largely autobiographical work with its many criticisms of French colonial rule, manifested inter alia in its language policies, in the very language that had been imposed upon him as a child at school.

Language has been and remains one of the most potent symbols of ethnicity and group identity in human society. In the words of Fishman (1989: 32), language is the 'quintessential symbol' of ethnicity.³ To wit, there have been an increasing number of mobilizations around questions of language and identity around the world. From the language-based nationalisms of Eastern Europe in the 19th century to the more recent language movements of the post-Soviet Union, from the struggles over Afrikaans in Apartheid South Africa to the conflicts over bilingual education and the English-Only movement in the United States,⁴ language seems poised to become even more than in previous centuries, a convenient flashpoint and battleground for resolving disagreements over identity, nation, migrancy and territory.

My interest in this chapter is in what I will describe henceforth as discourses of the vernacular. And because there is a tendency to speak of dissimilar mobilizations around language in terms which obfuscate different types of responses to dominant cultures on the part of subordinated communities, I find it useful to start by explaining what exactly I mean by a discourse of the vernacular. I will use the term 'vernacular' to describe language in its specific function as a mother tongue while I define a discourse of the vernacular as the organized activity undertaken by concerned individuals with a view to making such mother tongues the officially recognized means of communication in the major institutions of a territorially circumscribed community.

I should point out that my concern with issues of language and identity in this chapter derives mainly from a desire to explain the emergence of African literatures in European languages and their continued resiliency in comparison to African literatures in indigenous languages. Scholars of African and postcolonial literatures are generally familiar with narratives recounting the imposition of European languages in the educational systems of colonial Africa. While such narratives provide invaluable insight into the intellectual climate of an age from the viewpoint of those who actually suffered through such experiences of imposition, it is worth noting that the majority of these narratives have nonetheless been recorded in texts produced in European languages. In other words, to the extent that these authors continue to use the imposed languages and have not become involved in movements to change the language policies of the communities to which they belong, their condemnation of colonial educational policy cannot yet be considered a discourse of the vernacular. It is the failure of

many African writers to transform concerns about language into active discourses of the vernacular that I find particularly intriguing, and which leads me to some of the following reflections on major and minor discourses of the vernacular in the contemporary world.

In response to a tradition of criticism that largely overlooked writing in indigenous languages, there has been considerable effort in recent years to prove that African literature written in indigenous languages was as significant as writing in European languages. Accounts of this neglect of indigenous language literatures in the canon of African literature generally deploy a vocabulary replete with the well-known oppositions between colonizer and colonized, foreign and native, center and periphery. While the fact of colonialism is absolutely central to any discussion of the marginalization of indigenous-language literatures in Africa, discussions of the language situation that move rapidly from the fact of colonialism to the colonized mentality of the educated elite in explaining the continued dominance of European languages in literary writing, confuse the historical setting with the response to the setting. Like Zachernuk (2000: 183), I suspect that 'colonial intellectuals are [not] predictable simply by virtue of being colonial', and as such, responses to the colonial encounter are preferably studied as distinct from, and not as extensions of a particular administrative system. For even where colonized elites gave assent to colonial policy, their assent represents a distinct phenomenon often motivated and sustained by considerations of a rather different order. To overlook such considerations is to construct colonized elites as being always and totally devoid of agency.⁵

In order to come to a more precise understanding of the response of educated Africans to questions of language choice in the colonial period, I have chosen to concentrate on instances where the colonizing authorities did in fact support the idea of vernacular literacy for the colonized, as happened with the British authorities in several of their West African colonies. Where the colonizers systematically imposed their own language, it is easy to conclude that the colonized elite had little choice but to acquiesce to the policy of imposition. But where colonizing officials embraced a discourse of vernacular literacy, we may have to consider other possibilities in explaining the reluctance of a colonized elite to take advantage of the opportunity that was, as it were, freely offered. Against this background, I intend in this chapter to examine the failure of colonial discourses on vernacular literacy to generate widespread enthusiasm among colonized elites in Africa and to prevent the emergence of vibrant literatures in the former colonial languages, particularly in the West African and southern Nigerian contexts. All colonizers no doubt considered their culture superior to the cultures of the colonized, but all

colonizers did not develop a discourse around the vernacular. Most colonized groups sought to defend and safeguard their culture in some way, but all such groups did not develop a discourse of the vernacular as part of their resistance to colonialism. And perhaps for these reasons, the ambivalence of African nationalist figures and writers towards discourses of the vernacular ought to be considered not so much as an aberration to be deplored, but as a fruitful illustration of the circumstances in which discourses of the vernacular become unattractive to those who have been designated as its intended beneficiaries.

Vernacular Literacy and Colonial Education

To start with, in advancing our understanding of these circumstances, I propose to consider 'major' discourses of the vernacular, or discourses developed by those in a position of power, and the kinds of reactions that such major discourses engender on the part of designated beneficiaries who are usually excluded from positions of power. The activity of British authorities in the colony of Nigeria in the late 19th and early 20th century is instructive in this regard, as are the responses of the local educated elite.⁶ Here, as was the case in Dadié's narrative, the question of vernacular literacy in the colonies most frequently surfaced in relation to educational policy. In British West Africa, the first policy statements on educational matters by the British authorities were made public in 1882. The fact that the 1882 Ordinance, as it was called, made no provision for the teaching of the local languages, or instruction in the vernacular within the formal school system provoked an immediate outcry from missionaries in southern Nigeria who prepared a memorandum of protest, and from many educated Africans whose reactions were recorded in the lively Lagos press.⁷ The vigorous protests addressed to the British authorities on this matter are often identified with the onset of a larger wave of cultural nationalism among educated Africans in Lagos, which lasted from the 1880s roughly until the second decade of the 20th century. But for a host of reasons, which have been adequately discussed elsewhere,⁸ and which included the expanding institutionalization of racism, disagreements with the British authorities were increasingly played out on the political rather than cultural arena after the 1920s.

The 1882 Ordinance was apparently the foremost occasion when the colonial authorities disregarded the role of indigenous languages in educational policy in colonial Nigeria. The 1882 incident was also the main instance when politically active educated Africans made a discourse of the vernacular a significant part of their 'political' agenda. However, subsequent Ordinances passed into law as from 1887 reversed the provisions of

the 1882 Ordinance regarding the place of indigenous languages in native education. In fact, the 1926 Education Ordinance stated that 'Among infants and younger children, all instruction should as far as possible be given in the vernacular . . .' and it was responsible for such a turnabout in the language policies of the state that Awoniyi (1975: 99, 127) credits it with generating renewed interest in the work done on at least one of the indigenous languages, Yoruba, as from the 1920s onwards. Special memoranda were also issued in 1927 and 1943 by the British authorities stating preference for the use of vernacular, i.e. the mother tongue, at least in the early years of schooling in the colonies.

Support for vernacular literacy in southern Nigeria started long before the 1882 Ordinance. Earlier in the 19th century, Protestant missionaries had begun expressing reservations about the use of English in schools. Reverend Buhler, the German director of the Training Institution established in 1859 by the Christian Missionary Society, complained about the confusion caused by instruction in English, and recommended instruction in Yoruba (Awoniyi, 1975: 50–1). Among the missionaries, the initial impetus for supporting vernacular literacy arose from the desire to provide scriptures to African converts in their own language (Ajayi, 1965: 131). For the same reasons, they also felt that non-native missionaries ought to become proficient in the language of the community where they worked (Smith, 1926: 45–6). But with time, evangelization took a back seat, and the discourse on vernacular literacy was increasingly realized within the context of concerns related directly or indirectly to the form of the education to be provided for colonized Africans. Those who spoke most frequently on the need for vernacular literacy often spoke in the same breath of these other issues, so that they gradually became integral components of the discourse on vernacular literacy.

The European advocates of vernacular literacy in Africa during the colonial period made their views known in books, journal articles, and at international conferences linked to specific interest groups, namely missionaries, education officials, linguists and anthropologists. The international conference on Christian Missions in Africa, which took place at Le Zoute, Belgium in 1926, was one such forum which brought together missionaries and therefore those largely responsible for educational instruction in colonial Africa. The participants at this conference specifically debated on issues of language and in particular on vernacular literacy at several sessions. Opinions on language and education were also to be found in journals dealing with educational questions in the colonies, such as the journal *Oversea Education* published by the British Colonial Government.⁹ Articles on the subject appeared regularly in publications belonging either to individual missionary groups or linked to several Protestant mis-

sionary organizations such as the *International Review of Missions*, or *The Bible Translator*.

In my opinion, some of the most interesting articles on vernacular literacy and literature were featured in anthropological journals that specialized in African studies, including for example, the journal, *Africa*, and the *Journal of the African Society*, later renamed *African Affairs*. Founded in the early 20th century, both journals remain important players in the production of scholarly discourse on African culture. The journal *Africa* deserves special attention because it featured more articles on the structure of African languages, on vernacular writing, and on native education than other Africanist publications such as the *Journal of the African Society*. *Africa* made its first appearance in 1928 in Britain as the main publication of an organization called the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IALC), which later became the International African Institute. The establishment of the Institute, based in London, was proposed at a conference of linguists working on African languages in September 1925 (Lugard, 1928: 8). The actual convening occurred at a meeting of interested Africanists, including missionaries, anthropologists, colonial administrators in June 1926 (Smith, 1934: 3). The IALC intended to differentiate itself from other anthropological bodies working on Africa by giving special consideration to African languages and literature in the vernacular in a time of social change. Its special concerns were reflected in the constitution of the organization, where the first item in the list of objectives indicated that the IALC was set up 'to study the languages and cultures of the natives of Africa' (Smith, 1934: 4).

The founding editor of *Africa* was Professor Diedrich Westermann who had earlier served as a missionary in Togo, before becoming a professor at the University of Berlin. Professor Westermann was a staunch supporter of African vernacular literacy, and widely recognized as a foundational figure in West African linguistics. Westermann the linguist is well recognized in African language studies; Westermann the cultural entrepreneur, less so in studies of the literature and the cultural politics of the colonial period.¹⁰ The editorial inclinations of *Africa*, under Westermann's direction and his many publications on the subject of vernacular literacy provide numerous instances of the cultural entrepreneur at work. It was no surprise, given his predilections, and those of the IALC that the first three articles in the inaugural issue of *Africa*, dealt in passing, or extensively with the role of the vernacular in colonial Africa. Subsequent editions featured articles presenting linguistic findings on African languages, but also advocating vernacular literacy as educational policy. The IALC further established an annual competition for African vernacular literature in December 1928 to act as a stimulus for authors writing in indigenous

African languages (Westermann, 1937: 497). The canon of early African vernacular literature was largely formed from authors who first received recognition for their creativity through these competitions (Gérard, 1981: 184).

There were a number of related concerns linked to this campaign on behalf of the African vernaculars. In the first place, and looking through several articles on vernacular literacy and education in the early editions of *Africa*, it is soon apparent that distrust of the highly educated, and therefore Europeanized or 'denationalized' African served as the major premise for much of this discourse. In his article in the first edition of the journal, Carl Meinhof (1928), professor of African languages at the University of Hamburg explained how disregard of mother tongues resulted in the emergence of detribalized and untrustworthy Africans. Proposing a system of education based on respect for African tradition and the use of the vernacular in one of the early editions of *Africa*, Bryant Mumford, the Superintendent of Education in Tanganyika in East Africa, declared without hesitation: '... the semi-Europeanized Native, everyone agrees is a product to be avoided' (1928: 156). Frederick Lugard, chief architect of the policy of 'Indirect Rule' in British Africa, and variously High Commissioner and Governor-General in the colony and protectorates established in Nigeria between 1905 and 1919, was one of those who strongly agreed. His dislike of educated Africans was legendary and is well documented.¹¹ He favored the development of what he considered suitable education for the natives, which would include instruction in the vernacular. In his mind, missionary education was largely to blame for the emergence of 'denationalized' Africans, and though the majority of participants at the Le Zoute conference were missionaries, he gently chided them for the damage their endeavors had done to the true African.

Concern for the cultural integrity of the African was another component of this discourse. To quote Mumford (1929: 139) again: 'It is common knowledge that primitive peoples after continued contact with the white races almost invariably deteriorate in art, morale, and physique, and become discontented or idle.' Out of this concern for African cultural integrity arose an additional object of suspicion, the corrupting influences of trade and Creole languages, and of the lingua franca. And though there was disagreement about whether or not to promote vernacular literacy at the Le Zoute conference, the participants were apparently able to come to agreement on at least one point: 'No attempt... should be made to impose upon larger language units any African so-called lingua franca' (Smith, 1926: 113). The deficiencies of the lingua franca were eminently evident to supporters of vernacular (that is mother tongue) literacy. W. Schmidt (1930: 139) in a talk to the Executive Council of the IALC, impressed upon

his audience, the need to avoid 'the spread of mongrel and stunted languages, such as Creole-French and pigeon [*sic*] English, and so on which constitute a serious obstacle to real progress and civilization.'¹² For similar reasons, many Protestant missionary groups in Tanganyika opposed the use of Kiswahili in elementary schools because it was not a mother tongue. And in those parts of Kenya where instruction in Kiswahili had been introduced, William Laughton (1938: 224) was of the opinion that educationists should 'deplore something which possesses as little cultural value as Pidgin English.'¹³ A Congolese teacher working for the Swedish Evangelical Mission complained in the 1950s about the spread of the trade language Lingala to the detriment of Kikongo, the mother tongue of his people. 'I know Congo families,' wrote Joseph Samba (1952: 49), 'where Kikongo is not spoken anymore. Lingala has taken its place. Or what is even worse, they prefer the artificial language called Kituba (a rudimentary trade language based on Kikongo) . . .'

In the third place, support for African vernacular literacy was closely linked to statements acknowledging the value of real African culture, that is traditional culture, and of the African past in particular. On the surface, the discourse appeared driven by a kind of teleological purpose that would eventually lead Africans to modernity. But at the heart of the discourse on vernacular literacy was the postulation of an ineradicable gap between the African and the European that was both cultural and temporal. As individual cultures and peoples were called to individual destinies, so also they were assigned to their own temporal vocations. The vocation of Europe was modernity; that of the African, the past. It was not the past of antiquity, which too was European, rather it was some kind of intermediate stage, subsequent to European antiquity and prior to European modernity.

Thus, the Africanist discourse on vernacular literacy was like many other anthropological discourses of the time, predicated upon the principle described by Johannes Fabian as 'the denial of coevalness' defined as the 'persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of anthropological discourse' (Fabian, 1983: 31). In an article on vernacular language literature in 1932, E. R. Hussey explained the connection between the vernacular and the African past for readers of *Africa*. The advocates of vernacular literacy, he said, dedicated themselves to this cause because 'they believe that African languages form an essential link between the people and their past' (Hussey, 1932: 174). The early resolutions of the Executive Council of the IALC made the case even clearer, invoking the ancestral environment of the African: 'we are of the opinion that no education which leads to the alienation of the child from his ancestral environment can be right . . . Neglect of the vernacular involves crippling and destroying the pupil's

productive powers by forcing him to express himself in a language foreign both to himself and to the genius of his race . . .' (Smith, 1934: 10).

In the context of discussions surrounding vernacular literacy, this respect for the African past usually resulted in a tendency to elevate the older generation of Africans above the younger. Westermann (1926: 429) noted with concern that 'the younger generation is sometimes inclined to reject or to desert the indigenous forms of life altogether, and to adopt the western system indiscriminately.' And Mumford (1929: 153), whom we have quoted before, proposed the development of a school system relying on older African men: 'Older influential men who remember the old traditions and the state of affairs before the interference of the white man would be preferable to younger men who possibly might have more alert brains but who may be more prejudiced in favour of new-fangled ideas, rather than those of traditional value.'

Fourthly, it was understood that where higher education was offered to Africans, proficiency in European languages would play a significant role in such education. Westermann (1934: 259), like many other Africanists writing on the issue of native education, admitted that a small class of Africans would need to acquire Western education and mastery of English in order to become the vanguard for developing the entire community. The fact, however, that mother tongues would not be used in higher education acted as a real disincentive to further investment in vernacular literacy for the many Africans who considered higher education a route for escaping permanent subordination to Europeans in the colonies.

For their part, advocates of vernacular literacy frequently suggested that higher education be made available only to a small minority of Africans in every colony. Thus, the vast majority would have no need for higher education, and consequently no need to acquire literacy in European languages (Westermann, 1929: 350).¹⁴ In the Lagos colony for example, the missionaries vigorously opposed the idea of education beyond the elementary level for Africans (Fajana, 1982: 34–6; Ajayi, 1965: 152–3; Ayandele, 1966: 286–9), and if secondary schools were eventually established, it was mainly in response to overwhelming pressure from African parents who demanded higher education and also raised the finances to support the schools. The missionary plan in contrast called for an education heavily weighted in favor of 'industrial' that is vocational and agricultural instruction. Parents were as opposed to these plans as they were to the idea of instruction in the vernacular, and for good reason. In Ajayi's words, the earliest missionary vocational schools did nothing more than 'produce masons and carpenters to build missionary houses and coffins' (1963: 519). But what most parents wanted was an education that would enable their

children to compete for the best paying jobs in the colonial administration or to set up businesses independently of European control.

Finally, and in the fifth place, advocates of vernacular literacy assumed that if Africans educated in the desired manner engaged in literary activity, the result would be 'cultural' and 'traditional' rather than 'political' and contemporary in orientation, and primarily directed towards transcription of oral texts rather than analysis of contemporary reality. At any rate, it was certainly not anticipated in the founding of the IALC that the educated African who wrote in European languages would contribute in any way to the localizing discourses that were being produced about the continent in journals like *Africa*. In fact, a specific division of labor and language functions was envisaged. One series of publications titled 'African Studies' would publish the research and opinions of 'experts.' The second series to be called 'African Documents' and would consist of texts by Africans composed in their own languages before being translated into a European language. These vernacular texts would consist essentially of 'stories, songs, dramas, riddles, proverbs, historical and other traditions, descriptions of social institutions and customs, myths and religion in its every aspect . . .' (Lugard, 1928: 4). Literate Africans were to furnish diverse narratives for this series, preferably from the past, and preferably in their own languages, while the European experts would provide the theoretical interpretation of the texts.¹⁵ It was a division of labor that was to dominate the discipline of African studies for decades to come.¹⁶

African Responses to Colonial Discourses of the Vernacular

If the colonial administrators and missionaries who were responsible for most of the education available in the British colonies up till the 1950s were so committed to providing instruction in the vernacular, how then did the use of English as a language of instruction ever become so widespread, not only in secondary schools, but also in elementary classes in many British colonies in Africa? The answers are several fold: on the one hand, the colonial administration required proficiency in English for prospective African workers in the civil service and this requirement created in itself an incentive to seek instruction in English in post-elementary education since those who had any formal education thought that they should be able to compete for such jobs. The fact that policies of this sort clearly negated the supposed objectives of colonial discourses of the vernacular only served to generate the suspicion that advocates of the vernacular within the colonial administration may have been more interested in disparaging those Africans who were already literate in English, than in instituting actual

incentives for acquiring literacy in the vernacular under the colonial system.

Furthermore, and on the other hand, the facts show that African parents demanded teaching of English, particularly in those places where a previous tradition of literacy had not taken root before the arrival of the Europeans.¹⁷ The missionaries were well aware of the fact that most African communities were indifferent, if not hostile to Christian doctrines, and would tolerate their presence only if they accepted to offer 'education' which had to include teaching of literacy skills in English, and the kind of accounting skills required for doing business with European merchants. Since missionaries in southern Nigeria were dependent on education as the main plank for evangelizing skeptical communities for the first half of the 20th century, they had little choice but to oblige African parents and communities by teaching English or lose the opportunity to make potential converts.¹⁸ In hindsight, one cannot but be struck by the irony of the fact that subsequent generations of Africans have tended to attribute sole responsibility for the prominence of English in the school system to the missionaries, in much the same way as they have held missionaries responsible for privileging the humanities over instruction in vocational skills in colonial schools, even though that too was a calculated strategy adopted by Africans in the Lagos colony in the interest of competing with Europeans settled in the colony (Ajayi, 1963: 522).

The resistance to vernacular instruction came as no surprise to European supporters of vernacular literacy who were well aware of the possible reactions that their proposals might generate among both literate and illiterate Africans. They had little reason to believe that Africans in the colonies would find the idea of vernacular literacy especially attractive. Dr Loram, who chaired the panels on education at the Le Zoute conference and was Commissioner for Native Affairs in South Africa, remarked during the discussion on this subject: 'The black people will finally say, we want to be taught in English and not in the vernacular' (Smith, 1926: 68). In anticipation of the expected reaction, Schmidt (1930: 139) proposed in a paper delivered to the Executive Council of the IALC, that African feelings on the matter be disregarded: 'It would be undesirable,' he wrote, 'to comply with any unwise wishes the natives themselves may express in favor of adding European languages to the school curriculum.'

The political repercussions of implementing all the components of the discourse of vernacular literacy for Africans were equally evident to those Europeans who embraced it. In Mumford's opinion, '[a]ttempts to preserve the old methods may be interpreted by many Africans as an attempt to keep them a subject race and to withhold the benefits of civilization' (1929: 154). Edwin Smith, who reported on the Le Zoute conference,

further explained why educated Africans would probably be opposed to the idea of making vernacular literacy the sole form of literacy in the schools:

Any attempt to adopt the vernacular as the medium of instruction would meet with the strong opposition of certain classes of literate Africans who would feel that the door of opportunity was slammed in the face of their children . . . So strongly do Africans feel on the subject that if their mother tongue were made the basis of education they would open private schools for the teaching of English. (Smith, 1926: 68–9)

This, indeed, was the situation among the Igbo people of southern Nigeria, who confounded all efforts by the missionaries to make instruction in vernacular the norm, and were willing to pay additional fees for instruction in English (Fajana, 1982: 54). Nonetheless, British officials and missionaries continued to offer support for vernacular literacy, especially at the elementary level, and a tradition of writing in the vernacular did begin to emerge in many of the British colonies, making writing in several indigenous languages a viable option in places such as southern Nigeria. Indeed, both Yoruba and Igbo with the highest number of native speakers and literates had produced winning entries for the IALC competitions by the 1930s.¹⁹ This fact notwithstanding, within a decade of these developments, a tradition of writing in English had begun to develop among college graduates within the very same language communities, and in time became so well established that authors of Yoruba and Igbo extraction now make up a disproportionate section of Nigerian novelists writing in English (Griswold, 2000: 41). Indeed, so significant was the willingness of Igbo writers to produce creative writing in English that according to Alan Hill (1998: 124), one of the former directors of Heinemann, the press that published Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and launched the African Writers' Series, fully half of the first 20 novels published by Heinemann in the series were written by Igbo authors.²⁰

And yet, there is every reason to suppose that the most prominent figures to emerge as English-language writers from southern Nigeria at the end of colonial rule had probably first acquired literacy in a mother tongue before moving on to English. Certainly the best-known writers were familiar with writing in the vernacular. Chinua Achebe, whose father was a catechist and teacher with the Anglican Mission, was undoubtedly conversant with at least one version of the Igbo Bible. For his part, Wole Soyinka was sufficiently well versed in reading Yoruba to translate the earliest masterpiece of Yoruba writing, a novel by Daniel Fagunwa, from Yoruba into English in the mid-1960s even though his autobiography suggests that he