

# The Introduction of Colonial Languages in the Educational Systems of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Effects on Economic Development: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a literature review of the introduction of colonial languages into sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Prior to the colonial period, the indigenous languages were used in SSA for instruction. With the introduction of European rule in SSA, particularly British and French colonial rule, African children were no longer permitted to communicate in school with the language they knew. The World Bank implemented several structural adjustment programs since 1960 to improve the African educational system, but these programs became counterproductive. Finally, many trained and educated Africans continue to leave the continent to take opportunities in the West. There is a need to explore the perceptions of educators who have studied this question regarding how the imposition of colonial languages in African schools has affected the development of skilled human capital in SSA. Quantitative survey data may then be useful to generalize the research results.

**KEYWORDS:** *Globalization, brain drain, colonization, colonial language, post-independence SSA, structural adjustment program (SAP), sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), skilled human capital, linguistic, trade liberalization, Anglophone, Francophone*

## Literature Review

Between 1970 and 2000, globalization expanded rapidly, but sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) did not benefit from this expansion (Miskiewicz & Ausloos, 2010). As globalization has expanded since the 1980s, with educational systems expanding in tandem, Africans have not benefited from these increases and in fact have fallen behind other developing countries (Benjamin, 2007). The problem may be partly due to linguistic barriers in the education of African students who learn foreign language in classroom that destroy their cultural identity. Several studies have argued that modernization process in SSA did not bring benefits in education system as expected (Fanon, 1968; Mandela, 1994; Nyerere, 1968; Rodney, 1982; & Said, 1993). However, Nyerere (1968) argued that reintroduction of the local knowledge system in classroom may have an option to improve education system.

This paper is a literature review of the introduction of colonial languages particularly English and French, in

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sub-Saharan Africa. Topics covered include the Anglophone education system, the Francophone education system, the literacy rate, the departure of educated personnel for Western countries, and the language -related barriers to the development of skilled human capital. The conclusion is followed by future recommendations.

## INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), introduced the concept of human capital. The theory of human capital was formulated into an economic analysis based on an assumption of education as an investment. In a breakthrough seminal work, Shultz (1962) first introduced the idea that an investment in education ultimately translated into a positive effect on economic growth. Harbison and Myers (1964) also supported the idea of a connection between the investment in human capital and economic growth. This theory is borne out in many part of the world, including SSA, where there are a large number of

poor, unskilled laborers with low levels of education (Kovoos, Yourouhuo, & Amoaku-Adu, 2012).

Prior to the 1884-1885 Berlin conference, indigenous languages were used for teaching children in schools (Babci-Wilhite, Geo-Jaja, & Lou, 2012). At that conference, however, representatives of European powers met to divide the map of Africa among the powers (Babci-Wilhite, Geo-Jaja, & Lou, 2012; Ndulo, 2003; Ramutsindela, 2010). The European languages became the main languages of instruction and day-to-day communication with the outside world (Prah, 2009).

After the African nations achieved independence, a landmark conference on education was held in 1961 at Addis Ababa (United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1961). At the conference, a decision was made to prioritize attention to higher education as a way to enhance economic growth, social growth, and political transformation in postindependence SSA (Banya & Elu, 2001). At a follow-up educational conference, the *Lagos Plan for Action* (Organization of African Unity, 1980) extended the results of the Addis Ababa conference to enrich the university education system, and the educational policies of many SSA countries are based on the *Lagos Plan for Action* manifesto (Banya & Elu, 2001; Samoff & Carroll, 2004). Despite these efforts, little progress has been made since these conferences in the development of an educated workforce in SSA.

SSA is widely known as the poorest region in the world (Reppen, 2015). Poor economic conditions usually lead to the low development of human capital (Barro 1991; Denison, 1985; Shultz, 1989). Colonial rule in SSA has harmed public education, particularly primary and secondary education (Brown, 2000). Members of the vast African population did not flourish under colonial rule even as other parts of the world benefited from it (Nsamenang, 2005).

Within a neoliberal framework, education in developing countries can create economic progress and eradicate poverty (Nordenvard, 2014). To increase skilled human capital, many SSA countries liberalized their trade policies (Maclean, 2010). Africans were fully willing to engage in cultural, social, economic, and educational assimilation under globalization. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Asian experience, increases in skilled human capital were not observed in SSA (Njoupouognigni, 2010). In some SSA countries, low school enrollment hampered the building of the type of skilled workforce that may have exploited globalization (Grimm, 2011), and the prospects for development

are far behind prospects for other developing countries.

### Colonial language

Nations undergo the vital development process by means of the contributions of trained and educated citizens (Shultz, 1962; Harbison & Myers, 1964). The level of education needed for this development process has been lacking in SSA (Benzamin, 2007). A major impediment to the growth of a strong educational system has been the introduction of colonial languages.

SSA has many different indigenous groups, indigenous religions, and geographical environments (Zaoual, 1999). These different enclaves have different languages and dialects, including the major languages of Zulu, Twi, Yuruba, Hausa, Swahill, Xhosa, Krio, Kiswahili, and Sotho (Brocke-Utne, 2012; Michelman, 1995). When European countries gained control over SSA, colonial languages took precedence over local African languages in the schools (Babci-Wilhite, Geo-Jaja & Lou, 2012; Rwantabagu, 2011). However, the indigenous multilingual environment meant that teaching in a single common language was difficult, and few teachers were available to teach effectively in this environment or to formulate a common classroom language (Brock-Utne & Skattum 2009; Davids, 2010).

Ghana has 11 major local languages and 67 minor languages. However, the official and classroom language is English, which many students in Ghana struggle to comprehend (Rosekrans, Sherrris, & Chatry-Komarek, 2012). Among students in sixth grade, 77% are unable to meet the minimum standard requirements for reading and writing in English, and 91% do not meet the minimum standards in mathematics (Rosekrans et al., 2012). The devaluation of local indigenous languages in Ghana has hampered economic and social development as well as the ability to build a reserve of skilled human capital (Truong, 2012).

Ghana is a large country, and using all 11 major languages as instructional languages would be difficult. To overcome these major linguistic hurdles, Ghana of course has implemented English as the primary instructional language. This solution, however, has not been of benefit in the creation of an educated population. Of note, education was well established in African culture at an informal level before the European colonization of SSA (Todd, 1983).

### Anglophone educational system

Prior to World War I, the British used English as the classroom language in colonial Africa at all educational levels. This educational policy changed after the publication of the Phelps-Stokes Fund Reports, which showed that not using native languages in the classroom caused serious harm to the local people. After that, Britain changed its policies, and indigenous languages were used for children in the elementary schools (Fonlon, 1967; Gerard, 1981; Michelman, 1995). The result was that school enrollment increased. However, in postsecondary schools, the British restricted the enrollment of SSA students because they feared the threat of a highly educated class to their colonial rule. This restriction had a strong negative effect on enrollment in postsecondary education (Blakemore & Cooksey, 1980).

### Francophone education system

In contrast to the British system, under French rule French was used at all levels of education. However, a bilingual educational system, including French and the local language, was used at the secondary-school and university levels. In contrast to the system in Anglophonic countries, the French system had a positive effect on enrollment in secondary schools (Ayafor, 2001; Mbassi-Manga, 1973; Mumford, 1970). However, French colonial rulers used this educational system in the secondary institutions cautiously because, like the British rulers, they also did not want to see more highly educated African natives who would pose a threat to their colonial power (Brown, 2000).

The exclusive use of the French language in elementary schools reduced school enrollment and therefore reduced the number of classrooms (Berg, 1965). In addition, educational costs increased because of an increased need for teachers trained to teach in French at the primary level (Berg, 1965). The higher incomes in the British colonies also contributed to more payment for educational expenses (Brown, 2000).

Neither the British nor the French colonial powers allowed African children in the schools to communicate with each other in the languages they spoke at home, heard in the streets, and answered to the strangers. Instead, while in school, the children had to use a language they never heard outside the classroom and often did not understand well (Brock-Utne, 2000, 2007, 2010; Brock-Utne & Hopson 2005; Brock-Utne & Skattum, 2009; Prah & Brock-Utne, 2009a, 2009b). Rather than supporting an assimilation process into the colonial system, the European educational system further alienated the African population (Rwantabagu, 2011; Trudel, 2007).

When the colonial powers changed hands from one nation to another, Africans suffered linguistic changes as well. Germany colonized Cameroon in 1884 and in 1907 declared the German language to be the instructional language in school (Sturnpf, 1979). Then, in 1919, Germany ended its colonization of Cameroon. The British took rule of the southern part of Cameroon and imposed English as the instructional language, ignoring the native languages (Sturnpf, 1979). The French took rule of the northern part of Cameroon, and the new rulers imposed French as the instructional language, again ignoring the native languages and failing to include them in classroom instruction (Rwantabagu, 2011; Todd, 1983). The imposition of English and French in Cameroon has created a major handicap in the educational opportunities and the development of skilled human capital (Ayafor, 2001).

Without using the indigenous languages in school for instruction, progress in Africa is impaired (Prah & Babachi-Utne, 2009a, and 2009b). A foreign language used for instruction in the classroom is more harmful to learners than the use of a language learners use in day-to-day life (Hall & Cook, 2012). Good-quality teacher training can improve the quality of education (Dibapile, 2012). However, well-trained teachers are in short supply in SSA, and the lack of modern education affects the development of skilled human capital. If teachers do not have a good understanding of the language they use to teach students, then the education will not serve to accumulate the skilled human capital needed for future generations (Dibapile, 2012). African students at all educational levels will benefit the most from the use of local, indigenous languages for instruction (Davids, 2010). Language influences culture and higher cognitive processes, a fact ignored by the colonial powers (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008).

The debate continues in SSA as to whether to use indigenous languages in formal education (Trudell, 2007). In many SSA countries, local languages are used for primary grades, and the colonial language is used in higher education. However, many SSA policymakers continue to hesitate to use local languages for instruction in the schools (AbdulAziz, 2003; Bamgbose, 1991; Biuyi, 1999; UNESCO, 2003).

### Asian countries

In many Asian countries, the colonial language was used in schools and workplaces (Brock-Utne, 2012). However, despite similarities in colonial rule between Asian and African countries, Asian countries have overcome the issue of colonial language in ways that did not occur in Africa. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and

Tamil replaced English as the instructional language in primary schools, resulting in a 97% participation rate among the primary-school children (Brocke-Utne, 2012; UNICEF, 2010). Overall, developing countries outside of Africa had average enrollments of 80 percent in 1999. In contrast, the average enrollment in elementary schools in SSA in 1999 was 58%, increasing to 76% in 2008 (UNESCO, 2011).

Like SSA, India has many indigenous languages. Nevertheless, the colonial language of English was of extraordinary assistance in enabling the country to participate in globalization. English in India remains a language in high demand (Mesthrie, 2010). The government of India, however, made a decision to use English as a second language, successfully downplaying the local language issue as an educational priority (Mesthri, 2010). Many Indians who are connected with the economic infrastructure speak English as well as they speak their own native languages.

In 2009, governmental authorities in Malaysia decided to use local languages for instruction in mathematics and science (Babachi-Wilhite, 2012). In contrast, long after European rule ended in the SSA country of Tanzania, the autonomous region of Zanzibar decided to reintroduce English in primary schools after the native language had been previously used for instruction. Neither teachers nor students in Tanzania had a command of English sufficient for this change to succeed (Babachi-Wilhite, 2012; Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2006).

### Literacy rate

Historically, Sub-Saharan African nations have had low school enrollments, especially in Western Africa (Grimm, 2011). SSA educational systems remain ill-equipped and weakly budgeted. However, when governments spend more money in education and physical infrastructure, this expenditure ultimately results in decreases in rural poverty (Haggblade, Hazell, & Reardon, 2009). Indeed, education is a hook to pull the poverty out of a society (Babchi-Wilhite, Geo-JaJa, & Lou, 2012). However, Africa is behind the rest of the world in terms of the level of knowledge among the population (Bagire & Namada, 2011). Many poor, unskilled laborers exist in SSA because of the low levels of education and low population density (Kovoes et al., 2012).

SSA needed four million more teachers than it had in 2003. Ghana had only a quarter of the number of qualified teachers it needed, and Lesotho had only 20% (Lewin & Stuart, 2003). Education and training in Africa need more attention from the world's research community. In 2007, international donors

and African governments spent \$3.5 billion in SSA to improve enrollment conditions (Grimm, 2011). The World Bank (2009b) alone spent \$720 million in SSA in 2009 for educational purposes. Nevertheless, African nations are falling farther behind in education than are other developing countries.

Education was not a new occurrence introduced to Africa by the colonial powers (Fafunwa, 1974). Even prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, Africans were educated informally in their own indigenous languages and knowledge systems. However, the result of the current educational system has not been impressive. Only 5% of Africans have access to higher education, compared to 16% for the rest of the world (Prakash, 2003). The main goal of the 1961 Addis Ababa conference was to increase universal primary education and to increase secondary enrollment by 30% by 1980, but this goal was not achieved (King, 1991).

Through education, a society expands its intellectual, social, and emotional potential for living in harmony (Nsamenang, 2005). Because of the poor educational system in SSA, this potential has been undermined. The level and variance of household income affects the ability to invest in human capital for children (Kruger, 2007). The education critically needed for a trained labor force is lacking (Castagna, Colantonio, Furia, & Mattosio, 2010). The paucity of investment in health and in areas of higher education such as engineering and science has hampered not only the literacy rate but also economic growth (Chea, 2012). The effect of a lack of modern education on economic growth in SSA needs to be understood.

**The World Bank and the educational system:** The World Bank has been involved since 1960 in advising SSA and other developing countries in the area of education (Samoff & Carrol, 2004; World Bank, 2009b). Additionally, the World Bank has implemented several structural programs to improve the African educational system. People in developed countries have criticized neocolonialism and the dependency of Africa on the developed world for the lack of progress (Obamba, 2013). However, these attempts by the World Bank to revitalize and restructure the system in SSA did not bring progress.

In 1963, the World Bank published a memorandum addressing the development of vocational and technical education in SSA, but educational issues at the university level were ignored (World Bank, 1963). The structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the World Bank, under the new liberal trade policy, hampered the improvement of human capital (Campbell & Kandala, 2011). To secure loans from the World Bank under the neoliberal trade policy,

Africa was required to follow certain policies that harmed economic development in the region. In Nigeria and the Congo, for example, the contractual agreement imposed by the World Bank to obtain loans stipulated that those countries had to import textbooks (Geo-JaJa, 2006). This requirement severely damaged an existing infrastructure of local publishers.

Modernization theory would demonstrate that as people in SSA attend schools and develop skills, the increased skills will ultimately improve economic growth. After independence in the 1960s, SSA countries allocated a significant portion of their budgets to education. However, the SAP programs implemented by the World Bank did not improve skilled human capital. In fact, as part of the new liberal trade policy, these programs prescribed the removal of subsidies from education as a precondition for securing loans from the World Bank and the IMF (Nsamenang, 2005). The removal of subsidies was designed to reduce government expenditures. This prescription not only harmed education but also created two classes of children in African society: wealthy urban children who attended private schools and poor rural children who tended to drop out of school (Campbell & Kandala, 2011; Johnson, Ostry, & Subramanian, 2010; Okoli, 2012). These programs therefore created severe harm for children seeking a formal educational system to enhance their knowledge and skills (Erny, 1973).

By the mid-1980s, parents began paying school fees for their children that had been subsidized by the governments after independence. As a result, by 2000, 39% of the children in SSA were no longer in school (Nsamenang, 2005). Additionally, after independence from the colonial powers was won, some SSA governments implemented discriminatory admission tests that excluded many talented students from good universities. The cost of attending SSA universities increased to 400% above the per capita annual income, compared to 26% above the per capita income in the United States (Nsamenang, 2005). The removal of subsidies particularly affected girls, because parents saved on school expenses by keeping girls at home to help with housework (Okoli, 2012).

### Brain drain

One of the many side effects of globalization is the “brain drain.” The brain drain is a departure of educated, skilled employees from their own country to seek better opportunities elsewhere (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005). Even many people who have overcome the obstacles to earning a higher education in SSA are unable to find suitable work. The unfavorable working conditions, insufficient salaries,

and vulnerable economic conditions faced by many Africans drive them to leave the continent for better opportunities in developed countries (Sihao, 2012).

The resulting shortage of experts is visible everywhere. For example, to formulate African development programs, governments hire individuals living outside of Africa and not even familiar with the African context (Nsamenang, 2005). SSA has particularly suffered from a brain drain in the health care sector, creating a vacuum of professional people (Joint Learning Initiative, 2004) and creating serious damage in many developing countries (Crush, 2012).

Sixty percent of Africans are less than 25 years of age. Members of this demographic group need immediate attention in procuring jobs and increasing their skilled human capital (Toure, 2012). Africa has approximately 200,000 scientists and engineers, and 20,000 of these individuals have left Africa each year since 1990 for better economic opportunities (Sihao, 2012). Between 1987 and 1997, approximately 10,000 professionals left South Africa alone to seek a better life in the West (Crush, 2012).

In 2011, approximately 3,000 African-born professors are teaching in U.S. universities, constituting approximately 3.3% of the total foreign scholars teaching at U.S. universities. In contrast, Europeans and Asians constitute approximately 83% of the total foreign scholars teaching at U.S. universities (Editorial: “Significant decline in African scholars teaching at U.S. colleges and universities,” 2012). Thus, while SSA is struggling against the issues created by colonial languages in an effort to increase skilled human capital, the number of talented and educated Africans is decreasing because of seeking the better opportunity in the west. This created more vacuum for skilled human capital that is already lower than the Asian and other developing countries (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2012).

### Conclusion

The educational system in SSA is characterized by programs oriented to European languages and culture in the primary, secondary, and postsecondary educational institutions (Ogbu, 1994). The system does not create the level of human capital development that is needed to adapt to the economic globalization of the 21st century. Both French and British colonial rulers in SSA restricted education in the region because they worried that a well-educated native population might pose a risk to their colonial rule (Brown, 2000). The use of colonial languages was an important arm of this policy. The colonial educational system, which incorporated colonial languages replacing local indigenous language into classroom instruction, that has a severe negative

effect on SSA's education system and was a purposeful motive of the colonial powers not to increase skilled human capital in SSA but to conduct the colonization smoothly without interruption by the SSA people (Benjamin, 2007).

Even after the colonial rulers departed, neoliberal trade policies functioned to reduce educational access to large numbers of Africans. Many Africans continue to find their educational opportunities limited. SSA countries may need to develop their own programs to replace programs developed on the basis of Eurocentric concepts (Nsamenang, 2005). The hope is that SSA is breaking with the negative effects of the colonial heritage by improving the economic structure and social cohesiveness of the region.

The level of skilled human capital in SSA is low. A trained labor force is critical to improving skilled human capital (Castagna et al., 2010). To develop skilled human capital and assimilate into the global economy, SSA needs to incorporate local languages into its educational systems (Rwantabagu, 2011). The colonial language may have interrupted the expansion of education in Africa, but this obstacle can be overcome in the effort to create a skilled workforce and ensure economic development for the future. Researchers need to explore the perceptions of educators to understand how the imposition of colonial languages in the SSA educational systems has affected the development of skilled human capital and therefore economic growth in SSA during a period of globalization. Quantitative survey data may then be useful to generalize the research results.

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