

**The role of local agency in the defence of minority languages:  
Indigenous language committees in Northwest Cameroon**

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The centrality of language in the survival of indigenous cultures is well understood today. Language is an essential aspect of the maintenance of ethnic and cultural identity, and is central to current discussion of minority rights (May 2001). As Korang and Slemon note, "every theory of culture puts language at the centre of debates about power, ideology, subjectivity and agency" (1997:249).

At the same time, it is recognised that successful initiatives for combating linguistic and cultural marginalisation must be grounded in the indigenous community itself. In a review of indigenous language education initiatives in Papua New Guinea, Skutnabb-Kangas (2003:82) notes that "community initiative and involvement seems to be decisive for [language] revitalisation to work". May and Aikman (2003) note the role of local indigenous educators around the world in the struggle for culturally relevant education. The role of local individuals and organisations in language revitalisation or maintenance initiatives has been documented among the Maori of New Zealand (Durie 1999), the Pulaar of Senegal (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001) and certain minority language communities of Benin and Burkina Faso (Akoha 2001).

However, such examples of effective community-based action in defence of indigenous language are relatively few. Given the thousands of languages around the world which merit and need support, documented cases of community activism in minority language 'rescue' are not at all plentiful. Reasons for this include the marginalised and resource-poor status of a minority language's speakers, as well as the widespread belief that embracing colonial languages is certain to result in economic and social progress (Adegbija 1994).

In this context, the indigenous language committees of Northwest Cameroon provide dynamic models of the role which community based organisations (CBOs) can play in the development and maintenance of minority indigenous languages. Capitalising on their ability to develop collaborative networks within the language community, and founded on the support of a strong traditional authority structure, these CBOs are proving to be effective in promoting the mother tongue as a viable alternative for learning and communication within the language community. In the process, the values and worldview embedded in the indigenous language are also being highlighted and affirmed in the community.

This paper is based on research conducted in 2002-2003 which focused on three indigenous language committees of Cameroon's Northwest Province: the Bafut Language Association, the Kom Language Development Committee and the Nso' Language Organisation. The principal research methods used were direct observation, document study and extended interviews of 57 people involved in the various language

committee programmes in the Bafut, Kom and Nso' communities. These language committees are only three among scores of such committees operating for the promotion of national languages<sup>1</sup> across Cameroon (NACALCO 2001). However, these three were chosen for study because of the range of their activities and the language-related outcomes for which they have been largely responsible in the local areas.

### ***Language, the community and post-colonial identity***

The ethnolinguistic groups of Bafut, Kom and Nso'<sup>2</sup> number approximately 80,000, 150,000 and 150,000 respectively. The majority of these three populations live in rural or semirural, culturally homogeneous regions where the local language is integral to everyday life. Most of the children are monolingual when they begin school; many of the women and some of the men demonstrate very limited bilingualism in English. People tend to exhibit pride in their language, and speak it by preference in both village and urban contexts. At the same time, members of the Bafut, Kom and Nso' communities maintain extensive contacts with urban, 'modernised' Cameroonian society through schooling, travel and interaction with relatives who live outside the language community. The most influential representative of the 'modern' world in the language community, however, is the formal education system, which prioritises English language and English-mediated forms of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

As a former British colony whose education system is still modelled on the British curriculum of colonial days, the Northwest Province today is a site where construction of a postcolonial identity significantly implicates language choice. This fact has significant implications for literacy and use of written language. Collins and Blot (2003:122) describe the place of language and literacy in forging the "hybrid identity" which has come to typify the postcolonial societies of Africa and elsewhere.

From the colonial to the postcolonial world the struggle for identity is a struggle to write the lives of subject peoples, such writing being in the language of the victors (or in the language of the conquered *transformed* by the colonizer...)  
The languages used and the literate means employed, the texts produced and read, tell us much of the construction and transformation of selves through literate practices. Such selves are not *formed* by literacy; but the forging, both social and personal, of a "new" hybrid identity occurs in the cauldron of culture clash where literacy is both weapon and shield. Literacy is neither cause nor consequence; the process of self-fashioning is, rather, mediated by literacy.  
(Emphasis in the original.)

Collins and Blot argue that the use of written language is a crucial aspect of forming this "hybrid" postcolonial identity. In the Bafut, Kom and Nso' language communities, choices regarding literacy, including the alternatives of local-language literacy or English-language literacy, play out this larger process of self-formation. It is

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<sup>1</sup> In Cameroon as in other anglophone African nations, the term 'national languages' refers to the minority African languages of that nation. The colonial languages which dominate formal education government are termed 'official languages'.

<sup>2</sup> The land of the Nso' people is called Bansa'. Their language is Lamnso'. For Kom and Bafut, the same word is used for the people, the language and the geographical region in which they are concentrated.

<sup>3</sup> In the francophone provinces of Cameroon, French takes an equally hegemonic role in education.

here that the language committees of Bafut, Kom and Nso' have begun to have an impact on community self-identity through their promotion of local language literacy practices.

### ***The language committee***

The Bafut Language Association (BALA), the Kom Language Development Committee (KLDC) and the Nso' Language Organisation (NLO) are community-based organisations concerned with promotion of the written mother tongue, primarily in order to maintain and strengthen the indigenous culture. Justin Suuyren, secretary general of the Nso' Language Organisation (NLO), states:

At the bottom of everything, you find, is the mother tongue. . . . The idea of holding the language intact, as a vehicle of communication, as a store of the treasure of the Nso' people, has been the primordial aim of the Nso' Language Organisation because all these cultural values, the written language, the various norms, can only be stored in the Nso' language <sup>4</sup>

The priority ends of the language committees are the increased use of the written mother tongue, strengthening of the indigenous culture associated with the mother tongue, and more successful learning for the community's children. To meet these ends, the language committees have committed themselves to implementation of adult literacy and mother tongue education programmes, the production of mother tongue publications and local advocacy on behalf of mother tongue use.

The involvement of the language committees in mother tongue education over the past decade has two additional bases: the desire to lessen the alienation that develops between schoolchild and community (Sarangapani 2003); and the potential that has become evident for improved school performance of local children who are taught in their own language. The enhancement of local children's learning has thus become another important aspect of the language committees' commitment to local language maintenance.

### ***History and structure of the language committees***

Each of the three language committees began with the advent of a national level experimental mother-tongue education programme called PROPELCA (Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Cameroonian Languages), launched in 1981 by the Department of African Languages and Linguistics of the University of Yaoundé I in cooperation with national government and NGO partners. Education in the mother tongue had not been unknown in the history of the country, although attempts to write Cameroonian languages met with little success until the establishment of a standard alphabet for the country's languages by Cameroonian linguists (Tadadjeu and Sadembuo 1979). However, PROPELCA represented the first organised attempt to use the language of the community in primary school classrooms across the entire country.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Justin Suuyren, Secretary General of the Nso' Language Organisation. Interview.

<sup>5</sup> The use of Cameroonian languages in education dates back to the Basel Mission' vernacular schools, beginning in the 1920s. However, these schools were limited to the Mungaka and Duala languages, which

Once PROPELCA began in various language communities, it quickly became evident that local leadership of the initiative was essential:

With the launch of the experimental PROPELCA course, [the originators of PROPELCA] were now obliged to work in various communities, they needed persons to guide and direct those things. That was what we could call the genesis of the whole thing. And you find that from that time now, people were in charge and it was called a language committee by that time. They were working on it, giving guidelines to those people who wanted to do research at that time. . . . The [language committee] administration has changed hands, from one president to another and various executives, but the aim has been one: to see to it that there is didactic material in the mother tongue ready to help any learner. So that has been in place until this present date.<sup>6</sup>

The NLO was established in 1981, BALA in the late 1970s and the KLDC in 1989.

These language committees are made up of language community members who live in or near the home areas of Bafut, Kom and Bansa'. An executive committee of roughly 15 people forms the active core of each language committee; in the case of the KLDC, sub-committees for literacy, translation and finance have the responsibility for activity in their domains. The executive committees tend to be composed of educators, local authors, members of the traditional authority system, and members of the elite who are interested in promotion of the local language and culture. Executive committee members draw no salary for their participation; some staff members such as literacy supervisors and coordinators, many of whom are also school teachers, receive the equivalent of part-time salaries or honoraria for their work for the language committee.

The wider membership of the language committee is considered to include everyone who speaks the local language. Meetings of the general assembly of the language committee are held yearly (BALA), every two years (KLDC), or every four years (NLO), while the executive committees meet 4-12 times per year. Expectations of the general assembly's role have more to do with awareness raising, while the executive committees are charged with planning and implementation of language committee programmes.

The marks of a good language committee include active participation by the leaders in its various programmes, as Hon. Albert Waingeh, the chairman of the KLDC, noted that

A good language committee has the ability to give continuous training, the ability to put out regular publications, and to follow up work on the field in adult literacy and PROPELCA classes.<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to have influential people on the language committee, as BALA literacy supervisor John Ambe observes:

When you have people who matter in society, then the language committee makes policies and sees that they are well implemented.<sup>8</sup>

### *The authority of the language committee*

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were taught and used even in communities which did not speak those languages. PROPELCA by contrast, currently operates in 30 languages of Cameroon, serving 34,000 children.

<sup>6</sup> Suuyren interview.

<sup>7</sup> Hon. Ndim Albert Waingeh, chairman of the Kom Language Development Committee. Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Ambe John Che, literacy supervisor, Bafut Language Association. Interview.

The language committee sees itself as the focal point in the community for maintaining use of the mother tongue and expanding its use in written form. Authority over language questions and responsibility for quality control is also an aspect of the language committee's self-identification. William Banboyee, formerly the Catholic Education Secretary for Cameroon and current chairman of the NLO, explained:

The NLO is the highest authority of Lamnso' writing. Anyone who writes in Lamnso' is supposed to send his manuscript to the Nso' Language Organisation, and for free they give help.<sup>9</sup>

BALA has a designated *academic council* which vets publications in the Bafut language, and whose authority to do so is based in community recognition of the language committee's role:

BALA requires that all Bafut publications pass through its academic council. This is quality control. ... The Bafut people respect BALA as 'the association that can solve language problems'.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to speculate where this sense of authority comes from; certainly it is at least reinforced by the support which the language committees' association receive from the traditional authorities of these three communities (see discussion below).

### *Programmes and activities*

The language committees' activities in promoting use of the written mother tongue encompass several dimensions. One dimension is the production of indigenous language publications. As described above, the language committees see themselves as responsible for the production of good quality written material in the mother tongue. These include language and maths textbooks for the mother tongue literacy and education programmes, publications about the language and culture, religiously oriented texts for use in the Christian churches, and a limited number of development titles. Figure 1 below lists the titles that have been written in the three languages so far. Not all the existing titles were published by the language committees, but most were seen and approved by them. At the current time, the language committees are the source of most of the new mother-tongue publications.

*Figure 1. Titles published in Bafut, Kom and Lamnso' languages*

Literature type	Bafut	Kom	Lamnso'
School texts (PROPELCA)	5	8	9
Local culture/history	2	3	15

<sup>9</sup> Mr. William Banboyee, chairman of the Nso' Language Organisation. Interview.

<sup>10</sup> Ambe interview.

Development topics	--	6	3
Christian Scriptures	4	6	6
Other religious	--	8	19 <sup>11</sup>
TOTAL PUBLICATIONS (non-periodical)	11	31	52
News bulletin (produced by language committee)	Occasional	Occasional	Occasional
Diary/calendar (yearly)	Since 1980	Since 1995	Since 1978

Another dimension of the language committee's task is the supervision of the local PROPELCA mother tongue education programme (Tabi-Manga 2000). Nationally, this programme currently serves approximately 34,000 children in 30 languages, across eight of the 10 provinces of Cameroon (NACALCO 2001). It consists of two types of classes: those for primary grades 1-4, in which the mother tongue is used throughout the day as a medium of instruction; and those for primary grades 5-7, which provide mother tongue literacy instruction only. Supervisors and teacher trainers with BALA, the KLDC and the NLO oversee the implementation of these programmes in local primary schools where the headmaster and teachers have agreed to provide mother tongue education. The language committee is responsible for the recruitment, training and supervision of the teachers and facilitators for these classes.

The language committee's adult mother tongue literacy programmes are also active. Estimates of the numbers of Bafut, Kom and Nso' learners involved in these two programmes are listed in figure 2 below.<sup>12</sup>

*Figure 2. Estimated numbers of mother-tongue literacy learners in Bafut, Kom and Nso'*

Language community	PROPELCA students	Adult literacy classes
Bafut (2003)	5,400	22 centres, 518 learners
Kom (2003)	5,000+	50+ centres
Nso' (2001)	2,100	446 learners

Finally, the language committees' task includes local advocacy on behalf of mother-tongue literacy, raising awareness among the indigenous population of its value and accessibility. Parents, teachers, community leaders and local education authorities are all targeted by the language committee, by means of special events and personal interaction.

### ***Community institutions and language maintenance***

<sup>11</sup> Most of these publications are by the local diocese of the Catholic Church, which has been printing and reprinting various titles since 1976.

<sup>12</sup> The rural environment and decentralized nature of these programmes pose challenges for obtaining exact counts of participants.

Notwithstanding the drive and enthusiasm of the language committees to promote use of the mother tongue, the effectiveness of these initiatives is largely dependent on the support they receive from locally influential institutions. These institutions include traditional community authorities, local representatives of the national government, and the elite of the community.

#### *Traditional authorities*

The traditional leadership of the language communities of Bafut, Kom and Nso' has a significant role in social and political life in the home areas. These leaders rely on the mother tongue for the execution of their roles and duties; the community rules and rites so essential to the role of the traditional authorities are articulated and performed in the local language. While many (though not all) of these leaders are well able to speak English, by preference and by custom they use the mother tongue for matters pertaining to the language community. The mother tongue embodies their identity as traditional leaders.

These traditional leaders demonstrate a keen awareness of the potential benefits of mother tongue literacy for reinforcing their authority and supporting the effective enactment of their roles. The role of the written mother tongue in preserving the rites, rules and unique cultural information of the community is valued by the leadership. It is no surprise then that the king, or *Fon*, of Bafut is the honorary president of BALA, that the Fon of Kom is one of the KLDC's patrons, nor that the NLO's organisational chart has the Fon at the top as its "supreme leader".<sup>13</sup>

#### *Government political authorities*

The role and interests of the traditional authorities where local languages are concerned may be contrasted with those of the government that represents the nation-state. The jurisdiction of the government entities of the region are geographically, not ethnically defined: province, divisions and sub-divisions do not correspond to ethnic homeland boundaries. Thus the role and interests of the local and national government in influencing local language use are limited, except where education is concerned.

This does not mean, however, that no connections exist between the government and the community organisations that promote mother tongue. To the contrary: as the primary local institutions concerned with promotion of mother tongue use, the language committees cultivate cooperative relationships with local government entities. So for instance, the KLDC's headquarters in Fundong (Kom) are located in the office of the Divisional Delegate of the Ministry of Youth and Sports; one PROPELCA teacher training course held in Banso' in July 2003 took place in the local office of the sub-divisional inspectorate for nursery and primary education of the Ministry of National Education. It is also the case that the entire PROPELCA programme is situated squarely within the infrastructure of the national education system, and as such is subject to the government educational authorities (see below).

The language committees are not institutionally part of the local political apparatus either. However, they do actively seek budget allocations for their programmes from the local urban and rural councils, in the conviction that it is the

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<sup>13</sup> Suuyren interview.

natural responsibility of the local government to support mother tongue literacy programmes out of their fiscal budgets.

### *Government and parochial education authorities*

The education system in the Bafut, Kom and Nso' areas consists of both government-run and parochial Christian schools; the two kinds of schools are roughly equal in numbers. In each school system, the educational authorities have a significant impact on use of the local language in schools.

Historically, the parochial school authorities have been the most open to implementation of mother tongue education. The first experimental schools in PROPELCA were Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian institutions. Given the sympathetic view towards use of local languages which characterised the original missions, this perspective of the parochial education systems is not surprising. Mission school support for PROPELCA continues to be strong in some regions, but has faded in others due partly to issues of financial hardship.

The government education authorities, on the other hand, have not historically been overtly supportive of language committees' efforts to promote formal learning in the mother tongue. However, with the new national law on education (Ministry of National Education 1998) which recommends the use of "national languages" in primary schools, local education authorities are now beginning to promote the PROPELCA programme. Both the authorities and the language committees are seeing the potential of this sort of partnership; the former because the language committees' programmes are already-existing means by which the national law can be fulfilled, and the latter because of the substantial promotional possibilities inherent in government endorsement of the PROPELCA programme. Hon. Albert Waingeh, the chairman of the KLDC and himself a former Member of Parliament, noted:

The KLDC is the trial or demonstration arm of these authorities. . . . The government speaks a lot about development of national languages, but it has no established way to do that. The hope is that the KLDC will be the forerunners in this area.<sup>14</sup>

### *Members of the local elite*

The attitude of the elite towards the mother tongue and the home community is characterised by a certain degree of tension. The prestige gained by those who have left the homeland is based on their having negotiated the English-language education system and being proficient in the English-dominant urban environment. At the same time, those same people sense their loss of cultural currency in the home community as they lose facility in the language and do not keep up with the events and traditions of the community. For these elite, broadened use and acceptance of local language in the educational realm holds the risk of eroding the basis of their status and authority. Prah (1995:71) describes the ambivalence of the elite towards increased use of the mother tongue in community schooling:

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<sup>14</sup> Waingeh interview.

Although in many instances it can be said that the élite recognises the need to use indigenous languages in education, the conditions of their formation and the interests tied to their cultural base in society makes it existentially difficult for them to negate the basis of their position in society.

Prah's description matches local realities as found in Northwest Cameroon. Patrick Meliim, an NLO executive committee member and literacy supervisor, has observed the reluctance of the Nso' elite to identify with the language they grew up with:

[The elite] are very shy over use of the mother tongue; they live in cities and don't fit back into the culture. They don't use the mother tongue in the house with the kids, they send their kids to the USA and elsewhere. In order for them and their kids to fit in in the homeland, they play down the role of the mother tongue.<sup>15</sup>

Increased attention to the mother tongue diminishes the linguistic and social capital the elite have accumulated, and emphasises their failure to maintain the language and lifestyle of the homeland.

However a small segment of the educated elite of the Northwest Province have thrown themselves into support for use of the written mother tongue, seeing in it the maintenance of the cultural identity and vitality of their people. The elite who participate in the language committees and their umbrella organisation NACALCO share this perspective. These advocates of mother tongue use are incensed by the uncritical rejection of home culture and language which characterise many members of the elite who have left the values and culture of the community behind them.

### ***Linguistic impact of the language committee's activities***

One of the most significant outcomes of these promotional activities is the strengthening effect they appear to be having on the minority languages involved, in terms of oral competence, increased linguistic understanding, and corpus planning.

#### *Improved oral competence*

In several instances in this study it became clear that, at least for children, learning to read and write in the mother tongue was also a means of learning to speak the language better. The following comments came from adults who had attended PROPELCA classes as children:

Attending PROPELCA classes helped mould my tongue, to suit a typical Banso' indigene (PAS: Nso' 01).

It has made me to love the mother tongue and to speak it well (PAS: Kom 20).

It has helped me to express myself in communities and in our tribe as a Nso' man [person] (PAS: Nso' 02).

PROPELCA teachers corroborated this phenomenon. Bafut PROPELCA teacher Raphael Ngwa described it this way:

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<sup>15</sup> Mr. Patrick Meliim, literacy supervisor for the Nso' Language Organisation. Interview.

Learning to read and write helps people to understand and know Bafut grammar. If a person speaks you can tell right away if he can read and write Bafut. Mainly it is that they apply tenses correctly, and they know the greetings that are appropriate to the context.<sup>16</sup>

As the children learn, their parents also learn - or are reminded of - aspects of the mother tongue which they had not been speaking correctly. This phenomenon was encountered most often in Bafut, where the proximity to the provincial capital of Bamenda causes the mother tongue to be more mixed with English and French than is the case in the Kom and Lamnso' home areas. Ngwa has observed:

Classes teach students the correct way to speak Bafut, not just read and write it. Pupils will then go back and challenge their parents on how Bafut should be spoken. The parents will come back to the teachers and say, "Is Bafut really this way?"<sup>17</sup>

Another Bafut PROPELCA teacher reported that, far from being displeased about being corrected, the Bafut parents approve of what their children are learning:

The parents are happy when that happens; it makes them support the language teaching. Parents may not know all the days of the week in Bafut, or the months of the year. Now they are ashamed to ask their child; after all, [they think,] "Who was born first?"<sup>18</sup>

### *Increased linguistic understanding*

Participating in mother-tongue literacy instruction in Bafut, Kom and Bansa' also involves gaining an understanding of the linguistic structures of the language. The PROPELCA teacher training courses teach rules for writing the mother tongue, features of the phonology and grammar of the language, and tone awareness. Indeed, some people attend the PROPELCA teacher training events primarily in order to learn more about the language.

In PROPELCA classes themselves, significant time is spent on mastery of the grammar and alphabet of the mother tongue. In one grade 7 class observed, BALA literacy supervisor John Ambe taught the 12 Bafut verb tenses by eliciting them from the students, then asking for the English names of those which correspond to English verb tenses. It became clear that Bafut has more verb tenses than English does. Ambe pointed this out at the end of the class, noting that "Bafut does have grammar, just as English has"<sup>19</sup>.

### *Corpus planning*

The various mother-tongue literacy programmes are active in corpus planning (Cooper 1989) as well as teaching literacy. The mother-tongue literacy programme is engaged in standardisation of spellings, the re-establishment or 'rescue' of vocabulary which is in danger of being forgotten, and language modernisation. The latter two are a

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<sup>16</sup> Mr. Raphael Ngwa, Bafut PROPELCA teacher. Interview.

<sup>17</sup> Ngwa interview.

<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Rose Alangeh, Bafut PROPELA teacher. Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Observation notes.

priority particularly at the level of primary school science and mathematics. In one PROPELCA teacher training course observed in Bansa', a mid-course exam had two questions:

1. Write in Lamnso' the words for a) +; b) - ; c) [division sign]; d) [multiplication sign].
2. List six words in Lamnso' that describe quantity.

Knowledge of such specialised vocabulary is necessary for any mathematics teacher who hopes to teach the subject in the mother tongue. However it is not standard vocabulary for most Lamnso' speakers, who would have learned mathematics in English.

An instance of 'vocabulary rescue' was observed in one teacher refresher course in Bafut, where the class of 14 teachers compiled a comprehensive list of animal names in the mother tongue. More than 40 wild animals were named during the session. At one point, there was some uncertainty about the precise Bafut name of the pangolin, whose name they could not immediately produce in English either:

Is it *mbaranga'a* or *ambaranga'a*? They say it over and over to each other and finally decide on the first spelling. Then they talk about what the animal looks like.... It occurs to me that I am watching the standardisation of the Bafut language in progress.<sup>20</sup>

Corpus planning is considered by the language committees to be part of their ongoing responsibility. At one meeting of the literacy sub-committee of the KLDC the chairman noted that the current Kom-English dictionary has spelling errors in it, and he asked committee members to "bring in words that you feel are not spelled right and see how to resolve [the spellings]".<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in the Bafut, Kom and Nso' language communities mother-tongue literacy acquisition entails more than simply learning a code for written expression of the language. The process of language learning that accompanies literacy acquisition has cognitive and social impact on the individual learner. On a broader scale, the processes of corpus planning which form part of the mother-tongue literacy programmes have implications for the stability of the language across the community. For these people, learning to read and write the mother tongue has a positive impact on language maintenance at individual and community levels.

### ***The challenge of finances***

Outside support for the language committees includes a measure of financial support from the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO)<sup>22</sup> and its partner linguistic organisation, SIL International, and pedagogical and linguistic consultant help from NACALCO experts. These connections to institutions

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<sup>20</sup> Observation notes.

<sup>21</sup> Observation notes.

<sup>22</sup> NACALCO was created in the mid-1990s by University of Yaoundé personnel, as an umbrella group for representation and support of local language committees in Cameroon.

outside the community can pose a challenge to the language committee's desire to be 'owned' by the language community, as the community is quick to identify outside partners with the availability of significant financial resources (an assumption that is in this case inaccurate). All three language committees are prioritising development of a financial base that is local to the community, believing that responsibility for the vitality of the written mother tongue ought to belong to the community'.

Financial strength and sound financial management are a goal of these language committees, yet the financial aspect appears to be where all three committees struggle the most. It is not a matter of mismanaged funds; indeed, in some cases committee leaders invest their own funds in publications, transport and meeting costs when finances are tight. But as far as being able to budget realistically, counting on certain income, none of the three language committees is able to do it yet. The lack of funds means that literacy supervisors are regularly forced to walk up to four hours between schools, and general language committee meetings must be cancelled or postponed. PROPELCA classroom teachers not only receive little or no financial incentive to teach in the mother tongue programme, but they may have to pay their own expenses at annual training and updating events. Understandably, this has a negative impact on the willingness of teachers to be involved in PROPELCA, as there is no financial incentive to do so.

Given these financial constraints, it is hard to know how much the language committees will be able to grow or even continue at their current level of production and programme maintenance. The economic situation in rural Northwest Province has been deteriorating since the early 1990s<sup>23</sup>, and even committed staff cannot afford to give their services for free. Language committee members regard this funding shortage as a serious obstacle, and are making active attempts to canvass traditional leaders, local councils, development associations, and other potential sponsors for financial help.

### ***Position in the language community***

The language committee occupies a curious position within the language community. Endorsed by the traditional authorities, yet without strong financial security or any real means of coercion, the language committee appears to thrive by creating and maintaining a network of connections to other people and institutions in the community. NLO general secretary Justin Suuyren describes how the NLO seeks partners in the Nso' language community for its efforts to promote the written mother tongue. He notes that traditional leadership is a primary focus for the language committee, as has been seen above:

We have the traditional setup, the traditional assembly [of Nso' leaders], and we try to integrate with them and see how they can chip in. Sometimes we go there for research . . . you go to consult them at their various meetings and they enlighten you what to write so that what you will produce should not be rejected (OI: Suuyren 29 March 03).

However, other institutional connections are also important, including the Christian church denominations. The Christian church is a strong potential supporter of

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<sup>23</sup> The local economies were hit during this time by a fall in coffee prices and the devaluation of the Central African cfa franc by France to 50% of its former value.

written mother tongue for two reasons: church services employ significant amounts of written material, including the Bible; and use of the oral mother tongue is prevalent in those contexts. For these reasons the language committees make a priority of gaining support from the churches in the language communities.

There are church groups, that is church groups or other organisations like NGOs who are a bit inclined to what we are doing. Because we are trying to make sure that the written language makes it into the church, because the church in this our land here is more honoured (Ol: Suuyren 29 March 03).

It is noteworthy that the language committee is forging partnerships with two very different local institutions: the traditional authority with its attachment to traditional religion, and the Christian church, whose leaders are often vocal against those same aspects of homeland tradition. The potential tension of this partnership is resolved pragmatically, as each institution sees itself as using the other towards its own ends. So the traditional authorities are happy that the mother tongue is being promoted in the church, because they believe that increased mother tongue use increases their own legitimacy. On the other hand, the church leaders who advocate use of the written mother tongue (especially the Bible), are pleased with the support for mother tongue demonstrated by the traditional authorities.

Suuyren's description further emphasises the inclusive nature of the NLO:

Anyone who shows interest, we go to that person and interact with the person and see how far they could help in the spread of the language, because our target has always been to reach every person.<sup>24</sup>

Language committee workers are very aware of the need for winning over community members, particularly where mother tongue education is concerned. John Ambe of BALA noted:

It is very important to educate the parents, to sensitise them, because otherwise they can make it [implementing PROPELCA] very difficult.<sup>25</sup>

This attention extends to members of the elite as well, whose support - for reasons described above - may require extra effort.

Similar strategies are used in addressing the language committee's strained financial conditions, as local leaders are reminded of their obligations to the community. The KLDC literacy committee members explained:

This organisation has no money at all, so it is good to contact the councils for financial aid. We are not telling them what to give us, but just informing them and seeing how they can help us.<sup>26</sup>

With all of these efforts at forging partnerships in the community, the only real source of active opposition which the language committees find appears to be from those who are attempting their own representations of the language. One expatriate has for three decades been producing Kom publications in competition with the KLDC and in a different orthography, although the scope of distribution and influence of those publications seems quite limited. In Bansa', one man has developed a math book in Lamnso' which uses the traditional Lamnso' right-to-left convention for reading numbers.

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<sup>24</sup> Suuyren interview.

<sup>25</sup> Ambe interview.

<sup>26</sup> Observation notes.

Despite the objections of the NLO, this unnamed person has continued to promote his unique approach to the written representation of Lamnso'. However such opposition is not well supported institutionally, and the language committees do not seem overly worried about it threatening their authority and community-based support. As the NLO's chairman Justin Suuyren concluded:

Those are some of the few problems we have been having; it only comes from the few who are claiming to be quite literate. But when you get to the real Nso' man who is here at home, he welcomes it [the NLO's programme] with absolute satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Mother tongue education: an act of resistance?***

Despite all this progress, the activities of the language committees in Bafut, Kom and Nso' take place in a linguistic and educational environment that strongly supports the hegemony of the English-dominated formal education system in Northwest Cameroon. In this context, the question arises whether the language committee's influence on primary education and language attitudes in general are helping to bring about local support for educational outcomes which reflect community-based values rather than Northern-oriented values. Is mother tongue use in schools gaining acceptance because the community is ready to further modify the language-related norms of education and refashion them to serve local priorities, or because it enables students to achieve as dictated by standardised English-language examinations? In fact, both these reasons could well play a part in acceptance of mother tongue education, as the communities are both contesting and accepting the cultural and linguistic dominance of formal education (Giroux 2001).

If PROPELCA does represent a site of contestation to the dominant educational ideologies of language and culture, then clearly it is the language committee that is the primary agent of this contestation. However, to see the language committees of Bafut, Kom and Nso' as the leaders of some form of politico-linguistic resistance would be a mistake. Their aim - expressed over and over - is simply to mobilise the community around promotion of the written mother tongue, although they are highly aware of the cultural and educational implications of that aim. They are also aware of the community's respect for the current form of formal education, and the prestige with which English and English-mediated knowledge are viewed. Indeed, as members of those same language communities, language committee members share that view to some extent.

Therefore the community mobilisation that language committees hope for is only achieved as they identify themselves in a positive and non-conflictual fashion with the language community, embedding themselves in and drawing their authority from that community. The language committee's ethos is thus characterised not by the rhetoric of conflict, but by that of cooperation and networking. Even the elite, many of whom support English schooling as the 'norm', are courted and drawn into sympathetic involvement wherever possible. The advantage of this approach is that collaborators - who wear individual human faces - can be engaged in relationship; 'the enemy' (the

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<sup>27</sup>Suuyren interview.

hegemonic linguistic and cultural norms of current formal education), on the other hand, can be safely contested because it has no human representation.

### ***Future prospects for language maintenance***

A spirit of optimism pervades the language committees' leadership as they look to the future.

The future of the KLDC is bright! I don't see any turning back.<sup>28</sup>

The future of PROPELCA in Nso' is bright, it just needs to take time.<sup>29</sup>

They have been particularly encouraged by increased official support for PROPELCA, prompted by the recent statement by the national government on using national language in school. One NLO literacy supervisor even predicted that eventually young people will be able to write their school leaving exams in the mother tongue.<sup>30</sup>

The mother-tongue classroom can in this sense be seen as a site of contestation of the hegemonic influence of the English-dominant educational environment, resistance buoyed by the hope that the written mother tongue may someday be fully accepted as a means of formal learning. However, this enthusiasm belies a certain fragility inherent in the language committees as they exist today. The financial constraints under which they operate are severe, and if support is not secured soon from local or national sources the prospects of sustaining these various mother tongue promotion programmes are not strong.

It is easy to approach the sustainability of community-based initiatives such as these in a simplistic manner, reasoning that "if the community really wants it they will support it". To some extent this is true, but the process and resources issues involved require support beyond that of the local community. Particularly where the goal is changed language attitudes and use, local community support requires long-term cultivation. These three language committees have been operating for between seven and 20 years, and are only now beginning to see significant community-wide response. Without past support from the University of Yaoundé, NACALCO, SIL, international donors and national government bodies, even the most committed efforts to promote the written mother tongue in these language communities would have been short-lived. Even today, renewed commitment to facilitating the efforts of these community-based organisations is needed.

Assessing the prospects of minority African languages, Breton (2003:214) argues that the only hope for maintenance of these languages lies in "convergent efforts of enough speakers, cultural grass-roots associations, linguists, missionaries and various researchers, supported . . . by national or international institutions". This study's findings agree with that assessment. Those national and international institutions which prioritise the defence of indigenous languages need to seek out and facilitate locally-based initiatives such as BALA, the KLDC and the NLO, which certainly have the vision for combating linguistic and cultural marginalisation but cannot achieve this vision on their

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<sup>28</sup> Waingeh interview.

<sup>29</sup> Mr. Yongka He'en, literacy supervisor for the Nso' Language Organisation. Interview.

<sup>30</sup> Meliim interview.

own resources alone. Only in this way may effective locally based action in defence of indigenous languages and cultures be established and sustained.

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