



Reclaiming African epistemologies: The use of indigenous languages for education in postcolonial Uganda

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Abstract

This paper examines challenges and possibilities to reclaim indigenous African languages in the decolonization of education in postcolonial Africa. Using decolonization theory, the paper critiques the epistemic marginalization caused by colonial language policies and their continued impact on modern African education. Through desk reviews, theoretical analysis, and critical observations, the paper explores ideologies that hinder the reintegration of indigenous languages into the educational system. The paper argues that native languages are vital in preserving African epistemologies, identity, and the preservation of cultural memory. It discusses challenges hindering the reclamation of indigenous languages, such as language selection, financial constraints, ideological variations, and urbanization. It argues that reclaiming indigenous African languages is not only an educational necessity but also an act of epistemic justice, cultural renewal, and intellectual emancipation.

1. Introduction

The colonization of Africa was not merely a political and economic venture, but a profoundly epistemic project designed to marginalize indigenous knowledge systems and install Western intellectual authority. Decades after formal independence, the dominance of this Eurocentric educational model persists, raising critical questions about the continued marginalization of African languages. This eurocentric educational model refers to the colonial schooling system that privileges Western knowledge and curricula (like the study of western science, Christian religious education, physics, biology, etc) as superior forms of knowledge. It institutionalizes

European languages, particularly English, French, Portuguese, among others, as the primary media of instruction, assessment, and academic legitimacy. While relegating African languages and indigenous ways of knowing to the informal, cultural, or pre-academic sphere. While scholars like Nwosimiri (2022) propose “epistemic decolonization” as a necessary process to dismantle Western dominance, the effective reclaiming of indigenous languages as primary modes of instruction in the modern African classroom remains largely unrealized. This failure persists despite widespread consensus that knowledge becomes explicit through language. For example, Ngulube (2012) observes that reading materials in South Africa are predominantly published in English and Afrikaans at the expense of indigenous languages. European imperialism did not merely redraw Africa’s political boundaries; it fundamentally sought to reconfigure indigenous consciousness. Through the deliberate imposition of colonial languages (English, French, and Portuguese) the colonial project systematically separated African peoples from their epistemological roots. Indigenous African languages, the repositories of culture and philosophy (Mazrui, 1993), were actively disparaged during this encounter, labelled as backward, unscientific, and primitive. This meant they were deemed unfit to be mediums of instruction in formal education (Sekiwu et al., 2022; Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, 2021).

This linguistic displacement was not accidental. It was a deliberate act of cognitive domination; a neo-colonial mechanism designed to keep Africa tethered to the epistemological apron strings of Europe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Yet to attribute this condition solely to the machinations of colonialism is to ignore the post-independence complicity of African states and elites in perpetuating linguistic dependency. The persistence of Eurocentric education over sixty years after independence reveals not merely the durability of colonial infrastructures but also the political inertia and epistemic mimicry of postcolonial governments that continue to privilege colonial languages as symbols of modernity and progress (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986; Bamgbose, 2011). Consequently, postcolonial Africa often remains marginal in global discourse not due to a lack of indigenous knowledge, but because many institutions continue to privilege external epistemic standards, limiting the platforms, recognition, and policy influence necessary for indigenous voices to be heard. This is because academic publishing regimes, funding priorities, curriculum benchmarks, and international policy frameworks continue to be defined largely by Euro-American epistemic norms, which positions African knowledge as supplementary rather than authoritative and legitimate in global discourse. African languages remain marginal in global school syllabi largely because dominant

international curricula, publishing industries, and assessment regimes continue to privilege European languages such as English and French as standards of academic legitimacy. While many countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America use national or indigenous languages as the primary media of instruction across primary, secondary, and higher education, most African countries adopt African languages mainly in early primary education before transitioning to use of English, French, or Portuguese at secondary, tertiary and university levels. Although exceptions exist (most notably Tanzania with Kiswahili and Ethiopia with Amharic), the broader pattern reflects a combination of global academic pressures and domestic policy choices that continue to limit the sustained use of African languages in formal education.

Who, then, is responsible for this enduring Eurocentrism? The answer lies in the uneasy nexus between colonial legacy and postcolonial complicity. African policy elites, trained in Western paradigms, have often internalized the myth that development and global participation require linguistic subordination to former colonial languages. As a result, the African home, school, and university have all become sites of epistemic dependency. The proliferation of Western languages in African households is not merely a residual colonial effect; it reflects postcolonial aspirational politics that valorize the foreign over the indigenous. If the world is truly tending toward globalization, then the logic should be that all languages and cultures matter in reconstructing the global knowledge economy. Intercultural philosophy, as R'boul (2022) reminds us, insists that at the apex of knowledge generation, all human experiences must count equally, regardless of their geographic or linguistic origins. Reclaiming indigenous languages in education, therefore, is not merely a cultural project; it is a political, philosophical, and emancipatory imperative. It challenges the monopoly of Western epistemic systems and enriches the collective human narrative with plural voices and ontologies. This paper, thus, argues that the reclamation of indigenous languages is an indispensable pillar in the broader project of decolonizing education in postcolonial Africa. This paper argues that, the reclamation of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in Uganda's education is crucial for decolonizing the curriculum and challenging the continued dominance of foreign languages. By 'reclamation,' the authors mean deliberate policy and pedagogical measures that restore utilization of indigenous languages as legitimate media of instruction in formal schools and knowledge production, thereby challenging the colonial privileging of only western languages. To decolonize without restoring the worth of the mother tongue is to rehearse the very colonial logic one seeks to dismantle. As Tupas (2023) observes, "the mother tongue is not merely a medium of

expression; it is a vessel of memory, identity, and a preserve of indigenous epistemologies” (p. 14). The political choice to marginalize it is therefore both an epistemic and moral failure—a betrayal of the continent’s own intellectual sovereignty.

The rest of the paper is divided into seven sections. The second section lays out the decolonization theory as the conceptual lens for the paper. The second section discusses the rationale for decolonizing education in postcolonial Africa. The section argues that it is indeed vital to decolonize African formal education as one way to reclaim indigenous ways of knowing and practices in the postcolonial school structure. The third section investigates pathways towards promotion of sustainable reclamation of African indigenous languages. In the fourth section, the paper explores the challenges inherent in the reclamation process. Section five provides policy recommendations for redressing linguistic marginalization, and the sixth section concludes by reaffirming the necessity of indigenous linguistic sovereignty.

2. What is decolonization?

Before any further debate, it is crucial to examine these questions, “What is decolonization? What is the critical segment of decolonization that applies to this paper’s argument?” Collins (2016) defines decolonization as a formal “flag independence” which is the achievement of sovereign nation statehood by a previously colonized territory. Similarly, Von Bismarck (2012) provides a traditionalist view of decolonization as a process by which legally dependent territories obtained their constitutional independence and entered the world stage of international relations as sovereign states. This kind of transition was symbolized for these countries by raising their own flags, composition of new national anthems and joining the United Nations as full and equal members. However, these definitions focus on the political description of the concept. Yet, decolonization is beyond political interpretation. Lock (2023), for instance, argues that decolonization is not merely the removal of the colonial flag or the end of direct foreign rule. It is the restoration of being, the rekindling of the African spirit, and the re-rooting of knowledge in the soil of the continent. This restoration is causally dependent on the recovery and central use of the mother tongue. This is because language operates as the first site of epistemic liberation; the medium through which thought, values, and identity are produced and transmitted. When a people lose their mother tongue, they lose the cultural and philosophical grammar that sustains decolonization. The essence of decolonization theory is to resist epistemic erasure from a superior grouping.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) cements it that decolonization is a struggle against intellectual and cultural domination imposed by colonial modernity. Decolonization of this nature refers to the dismantling of Eurocentric worldviews that continue to govern African life through western language and knowledge systems. Hence, there exists a direct causal link between linguistic hegemony and epistemic dependence: colonial languages sustain colonial thought structures, while indigenous languages dismantle them by reasserting local modes of reasoning and knowing.

There is also what is termed as cultural decolonization which permits students to see themselves in what they are learning as a reflection of their history. Cultural decolonization further encourages students to look outwardly and consider perspectives and experiences vastly different from their own (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Through student-centred learning experiences such as project-based and experiential learning, students bring a wealth of cultural referents and native experiences into the classroom (Omubor, 2023). This implies that the decolonial turn in education cannot occur without linguistic transformation, because language shapes the very epistemic environment in which learners interpret their world. In this sense, indigenous language becomes both the cause and the carrier of decolonial consciousness. This is partly why Sindhu (2024) analyzes the work of Frantz Fanon by emphasizing that the most enduring legacy of colonialism lies not in its political structures but its psychic and cultural residue. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, echoing this same call, stressed the colonization of language as the gateway to the colonization of consciousness (Brinkman, 2024). Language, for Ngũgĩ, is not neutral. It is a carrier of culture, a conveyor of history, and a medium through which a people affirm or deny their humanity (Abbane & Toualbia, 2022). In his real writing, “*Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1998) nails it:

“...We as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?”

From Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s powerful reflection, cultural decolonization is the conscious rejection of colonial languages, ideologies, and cultural frames in favour of indigenous expressions rooted in native languages, and thought systems that affirm African identity, dignity, and sovereignty. His rhetorical question equates the

continued use of colonial languages in African literature with political dependency, suggesting that cultural independence is as vital as economic or political autonomy. Thus, the causal pathway becomes evident where linguistic colonization breeds cultural dependency which leads to cognitive domination. On the other hand, linguistic liberation leads to cultural renewal which then determines epistemic sovereignty. This chain underscores that the mother tongue is not just a communicative tool but the foundational cause that activates decolonization across the political, cultural, and intellectual spheres. This reasoning simply means that African emancipation is not only political and economic. It is that whole spectrum that carefully sees the liberation of Africa in all its dimensions, be it political, economic, social, psychological and even cultural. Cultural liberation of Africa would bring into play the role of indigenous African languages in building an African entity that is ostensibly recognized in the global order. Hence, indigenous language serves as both the instrument and outcome of decolonization: it initiates the process by reclaiming thought, and it is reinforced as African societies redefine themselves in their own linguistic image. There is no human language that is inferior; all languages are a particular peoples' cultural expression of their sovereignty in the global space. Decolonization emerges not merely as the absence of colonial rule but as an active process of dismantling the "neo-colonial spirit", replacing it with indigenous self-expression and epistemic agency. According to Akumbu et al. (2024), decolonization is about reclaiming the tools (especially language) through which a people define themselves, engage their reality, and envision their future, beyond the shadow of imperial domination.

In the context of decolonizing African education, reclaiming indigenous languages becomes a sacred act of linguistic liberation (Phyak, 2021). Here, the mother tongue acts as the causal bridge between cultural identity and intellectual autonomy: when learners think, reason, and express in their native tongues, they reconstruct reality from their own epistemic positions. This brings us to conclude that the decolonization of African education is an assertion that the interpretation of African realities must be expressed through African mother tongues. That knowledge rooted in the African community (i.e. in proverbs, oral traditions, and ancestral memory) must find its way back into the postcolonial African classroom because of its importance. When African teaching and learning is propelled using her languages, this is true ethnocentric significance. Therefore, mother tongue instruction does not merely accompany decolonization; it causes it, by transforming how Africans conceptualize truth, value, and knowledge within their own cultural lexicons. This African

philosophical reality rhymes well with what scholars like Joyce (2023), Maluleka (2023), and Sefa Dei et al. (2024) who say, that decolonization is necessary to reorient education away from the paradigms of the colonizer toward the lived, local, and liberating experiences of African people. From the lived experiences of African people, knowledge is rooted in indigenous languages and is responsive to communal realities. Hence, indigenous languages are the operative mechanism through which decolonization is enacted; they are both the means and the evidence of decolonial progress. The major reasons in support of decolonization are:

- a) Indigenous languages transmit African philosophies, values, and identities essential for authentic learning.
- b) Education engrained in local realities addresses African socio-economic and environmental contexts more effectively than colonial models.
- c) Reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems challenges Eurocentric dominance and affirms African ways of knowing.
- d) Teaching and familiarizing students in both local and Euro-American languages makes education more inclusive, especially for rural and marginalized populations in Africa.
- e) Decolonized education helps undo the cultural alienation caused by colonial schooling and revives intergenerational knowledge systems.

This study positions decolonization as conceptual anchor, grounded in African thought and resistance. Decolonization is about reclaiming the intellectual sovereignty of African people by entrenching educational transformation in their own philosophies, histories, and struggles as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) advocates. Decolonization ensures that reconstruction of knowledge systems emerge from within African epistemology, enabling education to serve liberation, not assimilation into Eurocentric norms (Tembo, 2022; Bhambra, 2021). That use of the mother tongue revitalizes indigenous language; revitalized indigenous language sustains cultural consciousness; and sustained cultural consciousness fulfils the goals of decolonization. It is within this framework that the reclamation of indigenous languages is understood not as nostalgia, but as necessity. Decolonization is rather a radical act of repossessing knowledge, identity, and the future of postcolonial Africa.

3. Rationale for Indigenous Languages in Education

The reclamation of indigenous languages in education is a deliberate effort to ground schooling in African realities, examples, and aspirations. Colonial-era curricula often misrepresent history and geography, exemplified by the narrative that John Speke “discovered” the source of the Nile. African communities, who were already aware

of the river, physically guided Speke to its source, yet the river was renamed *Nile*, erasing the indigenous name *Omugga Kiira*. Correcting such misrepresentations through the integration of local knowledge is crucial for fostering historical accuracy and cultural self-recognition (Mutongoza, 2025). Similarly, European-centric curricula prioritized figures such as Napoleon and Shakespeare while sidelining African leaders and literary icons like Shaka-Zulu, Es'kia Mphahlele, and Bessie Head. Re-centering African voices ensures students see themselves, their histories, and their languages reflected in the classroom, promoting epistemic justice and cultural pride.

Learning through the mother tongue is essential for cognitive development and cultural consciousness. The first language shapes thought patterns, memory, and cultural logic, forming the mental framework for all further learning (Hwami, 2016; Bulhan, 2004). Indigenous languages thus operate as instruments of decolonization, enabling students to reason and engage critically within the context of their communities. Linguistic self-recognition fosters indigenous linguistic consciousness, which strengthens cultural identity, ultimately enabling meaningful decolonization. Without this foundation, education risks producing alienated minds disconnected from local realities and knowledge systems.

Colonial and postcolonial education systems have historically emphasized rote learning and abstract knowledge imposed from outside, teaching students *what to think* rather than *how to think*. This creates a cognitive dissonance between school and home life. In South Africa, for example, students often learn European wars and Elizabethan literature while gaining minimal knowledge of African kingdoms such as Mapungubwe or indigenous literary heritage, despite constitutional recognition of eleven official languages (Stein, 2017). In Uganda, English predominates from upper primary through university, marginalizing local languages and limiting comprehension, engagement, and performance. Addressing this alienation requires not only curricular reform but also institutional and policy commitment to linguistic equity, ensuring that the classroom reflects learners' socio-cultural realities.

Reclaiming indigenous languages requires systemic, practical interventions. This includes integrating African languages as mediums of instruction, enhancing teacher training in mother-tongue pedagogy, promoting academic research in indigenous languages, and involving community elders and knowledge bearers in curriculum design. The classroom thus becomes a site of cultural affirmation, spiritual renewal, and resistance to epistemic domination (Sekiwu, 2023). Through indigenous languages, students access African philosophical thought, including insights from

Nyerere, who valorized local knowledge in the face of imperialism, and Fanon, whose analysis of the colonized mind remains instructive (Mulenga, 2001; Hilton, 2011).

This process is cyclical: mother-tongue instruction cultivates linguistic consciousness, which reinforces cultural identity, ultimately enabling authentic decolonization. Without linguistic reclamation, education continues to produce alienated minds, disconnected from their cultural and epistemic roots. Only through sustained policy implementation, political commitment, and resource allocation can education shift from alienation to emancipation, transforming the classroom from a site of imposed knowledge into an instrument of liberation and community engagement (Stein, 2017; Adyanga et al., 2022).

In summary, indigenous languages are not merely symbolic additions to the curriculum; they are central to cognitive, cultural, and political liberation. By restoring the mother tongue to its rightful place in education, African schools can cultivate learners who are intellectually empowered, culturally grounded, and fully capable of participating in decolonial knowledge production. The reclamation of language, therefore, is not optional, it is a prerequisite for dismantling the epistemic and cultural legacies of colonialism in African education.

4. Pathways to the Reclamation of Indigenous Languages in African Education

In the aftermath of colonial incursions into Africa's epistemological landscape, language stands as one of the most deeply wounded casualties. Yet, it is through language that a people remember themselves. Language carries the seed of being; it is both archive and oracle, memory and imagination. This means that reclamation of indigenous African languages within modern educational systems is not merely a pedagogical preference, but an ontological necessity. It is a return to selfhood, a refusal of epistemic subjugation, and an affirmation of African humanity in its own terms. However, the pathways to language reclamation are elaborated below.

a) Policy on Indigenous language Revitalization in Schools

First of all, the re-centering of indigenous languages must be understood as a conscious, philosophically grounded, and multidimensional act of resistance and restoration. It calls for more than the superficial inclusion of mother tongues in primary or elementary school reading exercises. Rather, it necessitates a

paradigmatic reorientation which revolves around the development of curricula, instructional materials, and institutional cultures that are rooted in African linguistic traditions, rather than merely translating into them. To develop the place of indigenous languages in a country's education system needs first to identify the philosophical roots of language, develop this framework, identify those that deeply understand the crux of language because they will be the forebearers of its integration and implementation in the school system. For example, Ngaka (2021) points out that Uganda's education reform emphasizes mother-tongue-based education, which was emphasized through the thematic curriculum policy. This is rooted in Astington et al's (2013) theoretical belief that children learn best in a familiar language, particularly in the early years of their education. Therefore, Uganda's education policy is that in lower Primary (i.e. from Primary 1 to Primary 3), instruction is conducted in local languages, chosen based on the dominant language of the area. English is only gradually introduced as a subject and the medium of instruction from Primary 4 onwards (Ssentanda, 2014; Tembe, 2008). This gives some room to schools to inspire learners to master their indigenous languages.

For South Africa, a new post-apartheid Language-in-Education Policy was enacted in 1997. Post-apartheid South Africa framed language as a human right, acknowledging the deep psychological and cultural identity embedded in indigenous languages (Ntentema, 2021; Mashiyi, 2011; McKay, 2017). According to McKay (2017), eleven languages are official in South Africa, and schools must promote the mother tongue-based bilingual education in the early years of schooling (Grades R-3). Learners can be taught in their home language wherever feasible, in order to strengthen the mother tongue use in classroom instruction. Simultaneously, learners are also introduced to a *First Additional Language (FAL)*, which is typically English, especially if the home language is one of the African languages. Mudau (2019) writes that, from grade 4 onwards most South African schools then transition to English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), though this is not mandated and is a practical choice in many contexts. South African schools can further offer a *Second Additional Language (SAL)* which is often another African language to support the broader goal of developing multilingual citizens. Kretzer and Kaschula (2021) note that, there are three types of South African schools, that is single medium schools which teach in one language only (e.g., Afrikaans), dual medium schools use two languages in the same class (e.g., a teacher alternates between English and isiXhosa), and parallel medium which offers instruction in separate classes or streams for each language (e.g., one stream in English, another in Sesotho). However, implementing this in practice depends on teacher capacity, resources, and the language

demographics of the learners.

At the macro-level, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) supports language development and monitors rights violations. In Ethiopia, Gemechu (2010) writes that the Multilingual Education System (1994) provides the overall policy on preservation and utilization of indigenous languages in schools. Here, language is seen as a political right and a key to ethnic federalism. Woldemariam (2020) says that in Ethiopia the belief is that linguistic identity should align with political autonomy and cultural dignity. Each regional state in Ethiopia has the right to choose its working language and language of instruction. Then, Ikome (2019) observes that primary education in Ethiopia (up to Grade 8) is conducted in local languages such as Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, and Somali.

b) Production and Dissemination of Literary Works

Reclaiming indigenous languages must begin with the production and dissemination of intellectual and literary works that are not only conceived and authored in these languages but also reflect African logics, ethics, and metaphysics. As Ofosu-Asare (2023) asserts, indigenous texts must go beyond simply telling African stories; they should provide learners with an education that is both linguistically familiar and philosophically aligned with their lived realities. Sekiwu (2023) identifies “*Ubuntu*” as a core African logic and ethical framework that must be integrated into African education. He advocates for the reintegration of oral traditions, ancestral wisdom, and holistic spirituality to ensure that knowledge is culturally familiar and philosophically congruent with students’ experiences. This is a crucial step in decolonizing education. McKay (2017) similarly speculates how Ubuntu values (i.e. emphasizing community, empathy, and shared responsibility) can be nurtured through a parallel curriculum supported by school workbooks. She argues that embedding themes of social and environmental justice allows learners to engage with real-world contexts that promote collective well-being, reinforcing interconnectedness and moral responsibility. This approach aligns education with Ubuntu principles and encourages students to see themselves as part of a broader, caring community. However, the goal is not only to produce African literary works but to ensure that African wisdom is authentically voiced and accessible to learners. For instance, in Ancient Buganda, boys were taught survival Ubuntu skills like hunting and farming by their fathers or uncles, while girls learned domestic skills from their mothers or aunts. These Ubuntu skills were vital for survival, social continuity and related in a sustainable fashion with the environment. They can

extensively be integrated into modern African education and taught in the students' mother tongue.

South Africa provides a valuable example of how mother-tongue education can support academic development while nurturing Ubuntu values. Although current policy limits the use of indigenous languages to Grade 3, debates persist regarding the benefits of extending this approach. Research by Network (2000) shows that children perform better when taught in their home language during the foundational years, as it strengthens their cognitive development. This aligns with the view of Ting-Toomey et al. (2014), who argue that reclaiming indigenous languages is also about recovering traditions, customs, and values that are unlikely ever to be taught in the Western-biased education system. However, this should be done without completely discouraging the teaching of western dialects in African schools. Learning Euro-American languages side-by-side with indigenous languages promotes openness to diverse global people and ideas. It helps students connect beyond their immediate context, thereby balancing rootedness with global awareness in an Ubuntu-informed and inclusive framework.

Nonetheless, in this indigenous language reclamation process, books and literary resources are not enough. There is need for financial and human resources to facilitate the process. The printed word, though powerful, cannot bear the full weight of ancestral wisdom. It is in this context that the role of elders (as custodians of oral knowledge and philosophical thought) is radically reimagined within the African educational praxis. Doing research on university education, Omodan (2024) validates that elders are not peripheral figures; they are epistemic agents whose insights have too often been sidelined by Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge validation in the higher education ambit. Akinyemi et al. (2021) and Adom et al. (2021) also show that the venerable African elder's stories, proverbs, and oral histories are not quaint remnants of a fading tradition; they are living archives of African intellectual labour, encoded in the syntax of survival, resistance, and collective wisdom. Reintegrating elders into the educational progression is thus not just an act of melancholy. It is an epistemological correction, a vital gesture towards reconfiguring education to reflect the lived beliefs and cognitive traditions of African communities.

Central to this reclamation is the fact that numerous linguistic and cognitive studies (Yang, 2006; Serpell, 2010; Hale, 2001; Murrell Jr, 2002; Bloom, 2002) have affirmed what Black communities have long perceived: children think more clearly, reason more effectively, and learn more joyfully when taught in the languages of

their homes and hearts. But the implications of mother-tongue instruction extend far beyond improved comprehension. To learn in one's indigenous language is to engage the world from a place of ontological security; it is to know that the medium through which knowledge is conveyed and discussed affirms, rather than erases, one's cultural identity. In this sense, language is not simply a tool for learning; it is a space of being, a vessel of dignity. In Nigeria for instance, early education in Yoruba or Hausa improves comprehension and affirms cultural roots (Jegede, 2024). Tanzania's use of Kiswahili fosters national cohesion and cultural pride (Kessler, 2006). Senegal's bilingual programmes using Wolof and Pulaar show stronger literacy outcomes and learner confidence (Benson, 2022). In Burkina Faso, adult literacy programmes in Moore lead to higher engagement and retention (Konfe Tiendrebeogo & Reeder, 2023). These cases show that learning in one's mother tongue is not just pedagogically effective; it provides ontological security, affirming that the language of instruction is also a language of cultural continuity. This is not to say that all repertoires for action that may be incorporated in a culture are to be continued. Culture is dynamic as people continue to discuss issues considered to be problematic; for example, rigid gender divisions experienced as restrictive. But what is important is that the value of Ubuntu as seeking relational harmony is encouraged.

c) Voices from around the world

Finally, the reclamation of African languages in education must be understood as a generational project; a long arc of return that links past, present, and future. It is a project of healing and learning; a spiritual and a political endeavour. As we speak our languages in classrooms, we speak our ancestors back into the future. Elsewhere in the world, for example, the reclamation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English offers a significant parallel (Ueland, 2020). AAVE has been reasserted by scholars, activists, and educators as a legitimate form of intellectual expression. The movement to affirm AAVE as a language of academic value is ongoing and spans generations (Knapp, 2015). Much like African languages in African education, this reclamation seeks to restore cultural identity while undermining the linguistic supremacy of European languages for educational equity. In New Zealand, Awal (2024) notes that the Māori language revitalization project typifies the generational nature of linguistic reclamation. The Māori language, once suppressed by colonization, is now integrated into New Zealand's educational system. This process began with grassroot efforts in the late 20th Century and has evolved into state policy that promotes the Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori-language immersion schools). Despite the challenges, the ongoing intergenerational effort to

reintegrate the Maori language has led to a resurgence, especially in the cultural and political domains.

In the Middle East, the revival of Hebrew as a spoken and written language in Israel offers another significant example of a long-term generational project. Once considered a liturgical language, Hebrew was revitalized and promoted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a means to unify Jewish people and reconnect them to their heritage (Werczberger & Monterescu, 2024). However, this linguistic renaissance unfolded alongside the displacement and marginalization of Palestinian communities, for whom the dominance of Hebrew in the public and political spheres is often experienced as a marker of erasure and exclusion from their own ancestral land (Mor, 2024; Weiner, 2023). In my opinion, this thoughtfully balances cultural revival with political context, admitting both Hebrew's significance and Palestinian experiences of displacement and exclusion. In Canada, efforts to reclaim indigenous languages have been part of a generational struggle against colonial language policies that sought to erase indigenous cultures (Roche, 2024; Samper & Ruiz, 2025). Programmes like language nests and initiatives for young children work toward ensuring that indigenous languages are passed down to future generations. Therefore, Africa can learn from these global examples to craft a sustainable revitalization programme and with the view that reclaiming indigenous languages in education is a long-term and intergenerational process. Africa can do this by implementing inclusive language policies, developing original curricula, training educators, engaging communities especially elders, and investing in literary research and media. Sustainable language revitalization requires systemic planning, intergenerational commitment, and integrating language with cultural identity and educational practice.

5. Challenges hindering the Path to Reclamation

The path to reclaiming indigenous languages in African education is fraught with deeply teething challenges. This is because colonial legacies devalued African languages, fostering internalized inferiority, created policy inertia, and perpetuated systemic neglect. Some of the challenges include:

1. First, Africa's linguistic diversity poses a fundamental logistical challenge. With over 2,500 languages spoken across the continent, determining which languages should be prioritized in education, especially in multilingual regions, can become politically and socially contentious. Language selection, standardization, and orthographic development require not only cultural

sensitivity but extensive consultation and consensus-building. In Uganda, for example, there are over 65 indigenous languages, yet only 12 were selected for instructional use under the thematic curriculum introduced in 2007. While the policy aimed to promote mother-tongue education in the early years of primary school, implementation has been uneven. Many schools face a shortage of teaching materials that are in local languages, and only 33% of schools reportedly use mother-tongue instruction consistently.

2. Second, the financial burden of producing high-quality educational materials in multiple languages is significant. This includes not only translating existing texts but also creating original, culturally grounded content, training teachers, and developing assessment tools, all of which require long-term investment and planning. Such planning occurred in the case of the South African workbooks for school children model, through it was indeed a huge task.
3. Perhaps the most difficult challenge is ideological. Colonial and post-colonial education systems have left a lasting legacy of internalized linguistic inferiority, where many learners, teachers, and even policymakers perceive indigenous languages as unsuitable for scientific or intellectual engagement. This perception hampers both policy implementation and community support, making language reclamation not just a technical task but also a psychological and cultural reorientation.
4. There is also a challenge of inadequate policy enforcement. While many African countries have official language in their education policies as one way to promote the use of indigenous languages, the implementation often falls short. Schools frequently revert to colonial language usage due to pressures from parents, concerns over national examination performance, and lack of oversight or accountability. Ministries of education may lack the capacity or resources to monitor compliance, and school administrators often make pragmatic decisions to use colonial languages for perceived advantages. This disconnect between policy and classroom practice weakens public trust in indigenous language education and slows systemic change.
5. As Africa experiences rapid urbanization, many children in cities grow up speaking foreign or colonial languages (*lingua franca*) because they are the most spoken dialects in urban centres. This leads to a language shift where indigenous languages are rarely spoken at home or passed on to younger generations. In many urban centres, children may have limited exposure to their ancestral languages, making mother-tongue instruction difficult to implement. Teachers face heterogeneous classrooms where few students

share a common indigenous language, undermining the feasibility of using these languages for instruction without complex language mapping and policy adaptation.

6. Many African languages remain largely oral, and few have standardized written forms. Even where orthographies exist, there may be multiple versions of spelling, grammar, and syntax. The process of standardizing a language, that is developing consistent grammar rules, creating comprehensive dictionaries, and training language professionals takes years of linguistic research. Without standardized forms, producing textbooks, exam papers, or training teachers becomes highly challenging. Moreover, political debates often emerge over which dialect should be standardized. This can delay progress or create resentment among language speakers.
7. A major ideological barrier is the perception that indigenous languages are inferior. One professor once despised another who was teaching a native language as one who studied a “regional subject”. By “regional subject”, the contemptuous professor meant a language that is globally undervalued. After decades of colonial and postcolonial language policies, many parents view English or French as gateways to upward mobility, and fear that teaching children in local languages will limit their global competitiveness. This resistance is often strongest among urban or middle-class families who associate mother-tongue education with rural poverty. Even in rural areas, parents sometimes prefer colonial languages in the classroom, believing it gives their children an academic and economic edge. These deeply internalized ideas must be addressed through public awareness campaigns and evidence-based advocacy, to help children learn in their mother tongue. But to cater for parents’ concerns, English or French can be taught as additional languages and subjects so that children gain proficiency in them for global relevance. This should be part of the language policy.
8. On the side of technological exclusion, most digital education platforms, e-learning tools, and mobile apps used in Africa are developed in western languages like English, French, Chinese or Japanese. Indigenous languages are largely excluded from tech ecosystems, making it difficult for students to engage with learning materials outside the classroom. This digital exclusion is especially detrimental where digital access could potentially bridge educational gaps. Without indigenous language support in technology (such as spellcheckers, voice-to-text tools, or educational games), learners are pushed toward colonial languages for digital literacy deliverance, hence perpetuating linguistic inequality.

9. Another challenge is that language is often deeply tied to ethnic identity and political power. Promoting one indigenous language in a multilingual state may be interpreted as sectarianism towards some ethnic groups, potentially inflaming historical tensions. For instance, privileging Luganda over Rukiga in Uganda, Luo over Gikuyu in Kenya, or Chichewa over Tumbuka in Malawi, can spark some protracted resistance and resentment. This makes language planning in education a highly sensitive process, requiring inclusive dialogue, equitable representation, and careful balancing of linguistic interests to avoid deepening divisions rather than nurturing national unity.

But overcoming these challenges requires political will, community mobilization, and a generational shift in how African societies value and conceptualize their linguistic heritage; not merely as tools of communication, but as repositories of knowledge (and ways of developing knowledge as a communal enterprise), identity, and power.

6. Policy Recommendations

In order to better reclaim indigenous language in formal education in Africa, this paper recommends the following:

- a) To manage linguistic diversity and promote effective instruction, African governments should create regional language clusters grouping mutually intelligible dialects. For example, Runyakitara in Western Uganda and Luo in Northern Uganda can serve as standardized instructional media, preserving linguistic identity while promoting administrative efficiency. Bundled or harmonized syllabi allow indigenous languages to function as coherent tools for teaching across multiple communities.
- b) Governments should form commissions comprising linguists, teachers, and community leaders to guide language selection and policy implementation. Community-led mapping of local languages and consensus-building processes can ensure that school language policies reflect socio-cultural realities, strengthening local ownership of educational reforms.
- c) Public-private partnerships should fund the development of textbooks, teaching guides, orthographies, and digital resources in indigenous languages. Governments must dedicate budget lines for teacher training, localized publishing, and curriculum development, ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder the revitalization of indigenous languages in classrooms.

- d) Nationwide campaigns should reframe indigenous languages as instruments of intellectual, cultural, and scientific empowerment. Highlighting literary, philosophical, and scientific contributions in local languages (through media, curricula, and public forums) can challenge ideological barriers. Role models, including scholars, writers, and public figures, should be celebrated for their use and promotion of indigenous languages.
- e) Ministries of education must enhance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure effective language policy implementation. School funding, performance evaluations, and inspections should be tied to compliance with indigenous language policies. Clear guidelines, accountability structures, and support for district-level language officers can facilitate grassroots enforcement.
- f) In urban areas where language shift and diversity are high, schools should implement multilingual classrooms using flexible approaches such as trans-languaging or dual-language instruction. Complementary programs—such as after-school heritage classes, weekend language centers, and urban mother-tongue media content—can sustain exposure and connection to indigenous languages outside the classroom.
- g) Universities and research institutes should lead efforts in standardizing orthographies, producing teaching materials, and conducting linguistic research. Governments must support collaborations among dialect speakers, local publishers, and community organizations to develop resources, train teachers, and create national language academies to coordinate standardization and capacity building.
- h) Community dialogues and parental education campaigns should highlight the cognitive and academic benefits of mother-tongue instruction. Showcasing testimonials of successful multilingual scholars, such as Festo Karwemera (Runyankore-Rukiga) and Professor Livingstone Walusimbi (Luganda), can motivate communities to embrace indigenous language learning and cultural heritage.
- i) Ministries of education should highlight schools with thriving indigenous language programs, encouraging parental participation in curriculum development. This builds trust, enhances community buy-in, and increases the perceived value and prestige of learning in mother tongues.
- j) Collaboration between ministries of education, ICT, universities, and tech developers can produce digital tools, educational apps, e-learning platforms, and AI interfaces in indigenous languages. Supporting youth innovation

through language-based tech competitions can expand access to modern learning while reinforcing the relevance of local languages.

- k) African governments should implement education policies recognizing multiple local languages equally rather than privileging one. Language boards should include representatives from all major linguistic groups, while parents should support the development of their children's linguistic competence at home. This approach promotes indigenous languages as tools for unity, shared heritage, and cultural pride rather than division.

7. Conclusion

The reclamation of indigenous languages is not a peripheral task in Africa's educational transformation; it is the cornerstone of authentic cultural decolonization. To continue educating African children solely in colonial languages is to perpetuate a cognitive dislocation, a form of epistemic exile that strips them of the right to see themselves reflected in the very medium through which they learn, think, and dream. This linguistic alienation creates not only educational inefficiencies but also spiritual fractures, where knowledge becomes divorced from identity and culture, becomes divorced from consciousness as asserted by Urgel (2025). In reclaiming African languages within the structures of education, that is from early childhood to the university level, Africa affirms that her children need not trade their tongues for intelligence, nor their heritage for opportunity. Rather, she declares that knowledge is most potent when it springs from the soil of familiarity, when it echoes in the cadence of home. According to Dube et al. (2024), indigenous languages are not barriers to global participation; they are vessels of African thought, reason, philosophy, and metaphysics. They carry the stories of resistance, the ethics of community, and the veritable cosmologies of peoples whose wisdom long predates colonial intrusion.

As the famed African writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o powerfully argued, language is not just a tool of communication; it is a repository of memory, a mirror of worldview, and a battlefield of power (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). To teach in the mother-tongue is therefore not merely a pedagogical decision; it is a radical act of cultural affirmation and intellectual curiosity. It is to refuse the inferiority complex imposed by colonial education and to restore dignity to African knowledge systems. For Africa to justly rise, not as a shadow of Europe but as a sovereign contributor to global thought, her languages must be reclaimed, esteemed, and revitalized. Classrooms must ring once again with ancestral voices and as the foundation of innovation. In doing so, Africa

not only reclaims her languages but reclaims herself.

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