

# A LETTER TO LUGANDA SPEAKERS AND LUGANDA WELL-WISHERS

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**Dear Luganda Speakers and Luganda Well-Wishers**

## **Re: Request for Funding**

I am writing this letter to you in order that I may appeal to you for funding a project to transform the Luganda language into a medium of science.

At the very outset I wish to make extensive contact with two incisive African thinkers: Professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah (1993) *Mother Tongue for Scientific and Technological Development* (hereafter abbreviated to MTSTDA); and Dr Kahombo Mateene in OAU Bureau of Inter-African Languages (i) (1973-1980) "Reconstruction of African Linguistic Policies", (ii) (1985) "Linguistic Liberation and Unity of Africa" (hereafter abbreviated to OAU/ BIL 1973-80 and OAU/ BIL 1985 respectively).

With regards to the language problem in Africa Prah writes:

In all developed societies science and technological development is based on the native language, cultivated as the mother tongue. In Africa, the position is different.

MTSTDA: 46

Development initiatives and projects coached in European languages for the use of African masses have little chance of firm and meaningful implantation or acceptance. Such approaches ignore indigenous thought-structures and reinforce neocolonialism. It is arguable that even the elite which has facility in the usage of European languages, is not

and cannot be sufficiently well-grounded in these languages to be able to technologically and scientifically create. MTSTDA: 47-48

I am reminded of remarks made by the Dutch psychiatrist Hilbert Kuik, who worked near the lake shore of Uganda at Entebbe during the 1960s. In one of his weekly letters to the *Vrije Nederland* written from Uganda, he dryly and with acute perception noted that;

When people speak of developing countries, they immediately think of economic backwardness. To deal with that, projects are conceived and technicians and money sent. When the projects fail, blame is put on the social and cultural practices of the people.... Only rarely do people (from the donor countries) realize that the language barrier is the culprit which prevents new ideas from taking root.... the fact that the inherited colonial official languages, French and English operate more as inhibiting than facilitating factors, is a point which in my estimation is poorly appreciated by both the local governmental authorities and the international agencies.

Kuik was spot on. The notion of 'cultural blockage', impenetrability, the assumed incomprehensibility with which African society meets project development work by western donor agencies, has been in the past used to explain the poor success levels of such projects. MTSTDA: 49

I fully concur with Prah, and particularly note **the implicit reference to Luganda** made by Kuik, the Dutch psychiatrist. Mateene thinks in a similar vein. However, his views take on a vital historical dimension in that:

It is said that African languages are underdeveloped, and it is true; it is also true that they are developable. But what has been done to develop them? Almost nothing. OAU/ BIL 1973-80: 25

We are deceiving ourselves to hope that Africans can be better united by the adoption of modern European languages. We must learn a lesson from Latin which after serving as a common language to the intellectual and leading elites of all the European countries of the middle ages was, during renaissance, kept away by the vernacular languages of diverse nations that existed at the end of the Middle Ages. These languages are today the colonial scientific languages. OAU/ BIL 1985: 26-27

If I were to read Mateene in parochially restricted terms, then all he is saying is that Luganda should rebel against English just as English rebelled against Latin. But he is actually urging all Africa to linguistically emancipate itself. He goes on to sketch a solution to the problem:

Our long-term final goal to pursue will be to render African languages the languages of work in all fields of national activity. As our linguistic dependence on Europe starts at

school, and as most jobs are learnt there, African languages must be the working languages in schools, that is to say the media of instruction. OAU/ BIL 1973-80: 17

The introduction of African languages as media of instruction must be radical, that is to say, that it must aim at reaching the university, instead of stopping at the lower or middle levels. OAU/ BIL 1973-80: 23

[The] method of introducing African languages in education year by year up to the highest level, implies that the current system will only be progressively eliminated, allowing in this way, those who will have begun their studies in one system to complete them in the same system. The making of school text books which is done year by year can be done a year or two in advance before the implementation of the new system. OAU/ BIL 1973-80: 24

Before responding to Mateene's recommended solution to the language problem in Africa, let Prah be heard:

If Africa is to develop, we need to begin from where we are. Scientific and technological knowledge must come to the masses in forms and in languages which speak to them, and in which they can exploit their native genius. MTSTDA: 77

In the light of Prah's characterization of the language problem, his recommended solution amounts to a hollow platitude. But Mateene's recommendation is on target. The only snag is that at least another century would have to elapse for linguistic independence to be achieved.

Irrespective of the solution to be adopted, what, we might ask, would be the fate of English? On this issue both thinkers agree neatly, for they write:

The usage of African languages for science and technological development does not mean that, international and cosmopolitan languages like English or French should be abandoned. These latter can and must remain languages which Africans study as second and third or fourth languages. The mother tongue should however be the primary language taught to the tertiary levels of education. MTSTDA: 75

and

We are not opposed to the use of any European language, but our linguistic independence can only be achieved if our languages are given priority over foreign languages in all fields. OAU/ BIL 1973-80: 17

In other words, English is to continue playing its rightful role of an international language of science and technology.

I would like to present my own solution to the problem. It is based on the systematic extrapolation of the Luganda language as the following list of achievements indicates:

- (i) A virtually complete English-Luganda list of word stems and roots used in biology and medicine is available.
- (ii) A purely Luganda version of biological nomenclature (both Botanical and Zoological Codes) has been set up and exemplified.
- (iii) A list of more than 300 Luganda affixes (i.e. prefixes, infixes, and suffixes) has been defined in Luganda.
- (iv) “An English-Luganda Glossary of Basic Scientific Terms” which will serve as the “infrastructure” of scientific communication in the class/ lecture room is in place. During its compilation I kept two constituencies in mind: (a) for Luganda and non-Luganda speakers including those who may decide to seriously consider this Appeal for Funding; (b) for Luganda-speaking scientists who may take up the rewarding task of articulating **all** science at **all** levels of education and training.
- (v) A project proposal entitled “Extrapolating Luganda to a Medium of Science” is accessible at [www.luganda.com](http://www.luganda.com)

In conclusion, I would like to point out that I am steadily building a team of highly qualified scientists who are ready to work with me as is spelled out in my aforementioned project proposal.

Yours faithfully

Kibuuka B Kiingi

**Postscript**

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