The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Cleavages: The Case of Linguistic Divisions in Zambia

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Once taken as primordial, ethnic groups are now recognized to be historical creations, products of tangible processes of administrative categorization, political mobilization, and socialization.

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Indeed, the entire body of research that employs indices of ethnic fractionalization to account for outcomes like economic growth rates, political instability, and the outbreak and duration of civil wars embraces the idea that the numbers and relative sizes of ethnic groups in the political system are central to the explanation; after all, the ethnic fractionalization index measures these factors

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For example, the Bemba-speaking community dominates Zambian politics.10 The supremacy of the Bemba group is directly related to its large size and its domination of the politically crucial mining towns of the copperbelt. Yet in the precolonial era Bemba speakers accounted for less than ten percent of the population of present-day Zambia and lived more than a hundred miles from the rail line. It is necessary to know how they acquired their present size and geographical location to understand their political weight today, and it is in turn necessary to focus on the cleavage-shaping effects of colonialism. Specific actions and administrative policies undertaken by the colonial state and its missionary and mining company allies helped shape the contemporary Zambian linguistic landscape. These actions and policies led to the consolidation of the language map from dozens to just four and to the four language groups' physical location in Zambia.

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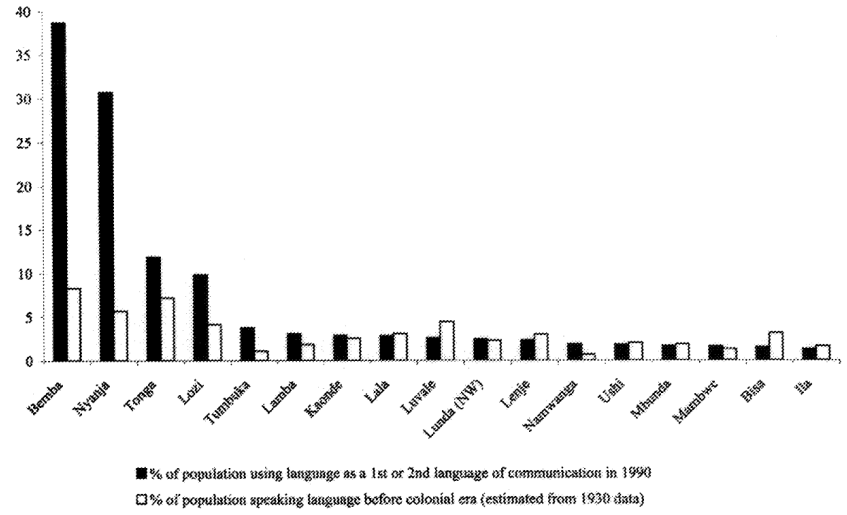
Figure 1 Language Use in Zambia/Northern Rhodesia in 1930 and 1990



Source: *Republic of Zambia 1990 Census of Population and Housing*, *Northern Rhodesia Annual Report on Native Affairs*, 1930.

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Language was central to the missionary enterprise for a simple reason: in order to teach the gospel, the Bible first had to be translated into the local language. And before the Bible could be translated, the local language itself had to be written down. Early missionaries in Northern Rhodesia therefore doubled as linguists. Many of them devoted as much energy to writing grammars, compiling dictionaries, and translating hymns, religious books, and readers into new written vernaculars as they did to proselytizing.

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The local vernaculars into which the Bible was first translated and for which grammars and dictionaries were first written were thus "exported" from the domains where they were originally spoken to adjacent areas, where they came to coexist with or replace the languages that were previously in use.

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The principal mechanism through which this "export" of vernaculars came to affect actual language use was mission-sponsored African education

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An advantage of defining the dependent variable in this manner is that it automatically controls for the tendency of missionary societies to locate their stations in districts that were already linguistically homogeneous.

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The results of the analysis suggest, first, that urban location is significant. Urban settings generate a strong standardization of language use. The more important finding, however, is that, controlling for urban location, districts with long histories of exposure to missionary societies that were committed to African education showed significantly greater evidence of language homogenization by 1990 than other districts.

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Missionary activity seems to have led to the consolidation of language use.

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Because the medium of instruction in these schools and literacy courses was Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, or Lozi, every newly literate student who did not already speak one of these languages became a convert to one of them.

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Even more important than newspapers was radio broadcasting. Thanks to the invention and rapid proliferation of the "Saucepan Special," an inexpensive battery-operated radio set developed specifically for the Northern Rhodesian African population, thousands of Africans had access to radio in Northern Rhodesia by the 1950s

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The principal instrument used by the company for this purpose was African taxa-tion. By "consciously [setting] the rate of tax at a level that would successfully draw African males away from their homes to the usually distant centres of white agriculture and industry," the administration forced thousands of Northern Rhodesians out of their villages.

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Roberts estimates that, by approximately that date, "more than half the able-bodied male population of Northern Rhodesia was working for wages away from home."

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1 A strong tendency towards linguistic homogenization therefore emerged along Northern Rhodesia's rail line. And the policies that brought thousands of laborers there thus contributed significantly to the countrywide consolidation of language use.

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This can be tested...

To be sure, the decision of the colonial administration in 1927 to adopt Bemba as the language of instruction in the northern part of the territory, Nyanja in the east, Tonga in the south, and Lozi in the west tells something about the spatial distribution of these language communities. But it does not explain why different segments of the industrial rail line came to be dominated by different groups. Nor do the mechanisms described above provide insight into each language community's size and thus political clout.

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The region of the country that supplied the largest percentage of the urban area's migrant population also supplied its dominant language.41 Patterns of migration from rural to urban areas are thus critical in explaining Zambia's language map and again require examination of the colonial administration and the mining companies.

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Finally, the entire northwestern portion of the country in Figure 2 is unshaded, signifying that none of the four major languages of communication took hold in this area. Not only have Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi been unable to penetrate the northwest, but no single local language has dominated the area

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First, missionary societies could not help to consolidate patterns of language use in the northwest because, for reasons of population scarcity and transportation difficulties, very few missions were located there

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2 Only 3 percent of the books published by the government in the 1950s were in Lunda, Kaonde, or Luvale

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Sources for data here?

Two interesting implications of the foregoing discussion bear mention. First, despite their clear effects on Zambia's linguistic landscape, none of the colonial era policies and actions were motivated by a desire to affect the sizes or distributions of language groups. They were motivated, instead, by concerns about saving costs and facilitating administration. The missionaries needed to translate the Bible, but they sought to amortize their investments by extending the boundaries of the language communities in which they were working beyond their original confines.

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> Second, politics was absent. In the construction of language communities in Zambia political entrepreneurs did not try to mobilize ethnic groups or assert their supremacy. The communities of Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi speakers expand-ed, not because of the conscious efforts of their leaders to enlarge them, but because of the independent decisions of individual community members to make the most of the educational and employment opportunities that the acquisition of new languages made available
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> Even more conspicuous than the lack of communal mobilization by Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi speakers, however, was the absence of any significant protest by members of the nonfavored language communities. Why was there no backlash against either the speakers of the four privileged vernaculars or the representatives of the colonial regime that granted these languages privileged status? The answer lies in the fact that learning a new language did not require that one turn one's back on one's own. People did not trade in their "old" language for a "new" one but developed language repertoires that included both.
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