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### Religion and Language: The Two Tactics Used by the British to Colonize Kenya

As a child, one learns the culture of one's parents. Parents pass down endless traditions to new generations such as the gathering of extended family for Thanksgiving dinner, teaching a child a cherished family recipe, or taking the child to hunt deer. One important tradition for numerous families is the passing down of their native language. For example, a second-generation American child learns the home language of their parents to preserve their family history and pride. The passing of these traditions to a new generation of family members embraces and idea of hope that such traditions will continue for successive generations. However, for the inhabitants of the British Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, local traditions were forcibly ceased and replaced with the British culture and the English language. Many native languages and traditions vanished while the English language and British culture ruled over Africa. This supremacy over Africa created a linguistic divide for the natives with devastating consequences.

The British Empire colonized approximately 25 percent of the total land in the world by the end of the nineteenth century (Elkins 5). At this point in history, 445 million people were under the dominion of the British Empire (Elkins 5). In 1895, the British seized Kenya, as well as the surrounding area, and formed the region known as the British East Africa region

(Sandgren 19). In the 1920s, the British separated Kenya from British East Africa and created the Colony of Kenya (Van der Bijl 19), which was roughly the size of Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota joined together (Sandgren 18).

When the European countries partitioned Africa, England began to see the unique opportunity that was known as the “Dark Continent” (McCrum 185). The British Empire felt the need to “enlighten, civilize, and purify” their newly added colonies and, hopefully, bring forth a new renaissance in Africa (McCrum 185). For the British, the moral burden, also known as “the White Man’s Burden”, of developing these “heathens” into British citizens came from the knowledge they possessed “with their superior race, Christian values, and economic know how” (Elkins 5 - 6). Sir Philip Mitchell wrote in *The Agrarian Problem in Kenya*:

They are a people who, however, have much natural ability and however admirable attributes they may possess, are without a history, culture or religion of their own and in that they are, as far as I know, unique in the modern world (qtd. in Van der Bijl, *Mau Mau Rebellion: The Emergency in Kenya 1952–1956* 27).

The British Empire viewed the Africans with a “paternalistic” manner and believed in the responsibility the British colonists had in “civilizing” the African people (Van der Bijl 27).

For years, missionaries and Christianity played a vital role in the colonization of the British Empire. The British Empire used missionaries and Christianity to spread civilization for a fraction of the cost of military intervention (Elkins 20). The British government saw the use of missionaries as a tool that would be financially cheaper for the British government. The cost of colonization over time was expensive for the British government both financially and militaristically. The task assigned to the missionaries was not only to save the souls of the British

Empire's new "savage" citizens but also to spread British ideology and the English language to civilize the "savages" (McCrum 185). The British government hoped the missionaries could convert the savages to not only the British religion and language but to its democracies as well (Hughes 834).

To facilitate the colonization of Africa, the British Empire used Christian missionaries to bring Africa into the modern civilized world that the British Empire cultivated. Christians of various professional backgrounds, including educators, farmers, doctors, and nurses, answered the call to become missionaries to Africa (Hughes 823). Church Missionary Society member, Canon Wittenbach, requested Christians to become "Christian revolutionaries, attacking evil wherever it appears", understanding that both African souls and African bodies were to be rescued from perceived peril" (qtd. in Hughes 823). Missionaries were sent to Africa to establish schools, teach the superiority of the British culture, and teach the English language to raise Africa's living standards (Hughes 825). The use of education and literacy packaged with Christianity became the chosen tactic to spread English language superiority in Africa. As Professor John Edwards states, in *Language and Identity*, missionaries sought to not only bring religion to an area but a cultural and linguistic alteration that natives had no choice in accepting (119). For the natives of Kenya, the only available opportunities for higher education were at the schools the missionaries established.

The Kenyan people gained access to churches, schools, and medical facilities established by Christian missionaries, but at a high cost (Elkins 20). Kenyans were charged fees for medical attention and tuition for school while being told to abandon their native languages and religions (Elkin 20). Kenyans that continued to practice their native customs were denied admission into missionary school (Sandgren 21). During this time, missionary school officials understood the

power and control over the locals and the demands they could ask (Sandgren 21). They understood that the need for formal education was great in Kenya and the missionary schools were the only means to gain such education; therefore, they could place admission requirements on the native Kenyans to comply with their ideology in exchange for the education (Sandgren 21). In *Language and Identity*, Edwards comments on the European missionaries thoughts on English dominance and the attraction to it, “‘They’ will come to ‘us’ if they know what’s good for them; ‘they’ will make the linguistic moves necessary to connect their communities to ours” (Edwards 122). This thought process that Edwards describes is the perfect illustration of the mindset of the missionary school officials at this time. Conversion to Christianity was not only expected but demanded.

In *Decolonising the Mind*, author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, claims his attendance at a missionary school in Kenya caused his education to no longer support his cultural and linguistic upbringing (11). Thiong’o expresses how the “harmony was broken” between his native language and his education once he attended a colonial school (*Decolonising the Mind* 11). Thiong’o experienced a new “puzzling” practice at the missionary school he attended (*Dreams in a Time of War* 63). Students gathered together before class to participate in a morning prayer lead by the teacher (Thiong’o, *Dreams* 63). Thiong’o explains, for a long time, he did not understand this ritual and he would not close his eyes but watched his fellow students murmur silent prayers (*Dreams* 63). Thiong’o, later, understood that this ritual was required, and no student would defy the act. He attempted to nudge a fellow student to open his eyes, like Thiong’o did, but failed (*Dreams* 63). Eventually, Thiong’o learned to close his eyes, but would not pray, and sometimes would watch as the world before him held a fascinating act he could not ignore (*Dreams* 63).

These forced religious acts by the missionaries captured the local children to convert and trained a new generation of British African inhabitants. African author, Chinua Achebe, expresses the lack of choice between the abandonment of his native language for the English language of his education and the guilt he felt in leaving his native language behind (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 7).

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it (qtd. in Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 7).

Achebe, like others, was part of the British educated generation of children in Africa. The guilt of leaving the native culture of their past behind was a powerful force during this time.

The English language literacy programs, however, came with certain restrictions and expectations. Kenyans had to abandon their native languages, such as Gĩkũyũ, and accept English as an “unsolicited gift with gratitude” (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 7). Since Kenya became part of the British Empire, those inhabiting Kenya were British citizens who would speak English and practiced Christian values. Native Kenyan culture and native languages, especially Gĩkũyũ, were no longer acceptable forms of communication. The success of Kenyans adaptation to the British religion and language was “measured by how quickly, deeply, and thoroughly” one adopted the British religion and language and denied one's native culture and language (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 111).

The use of religious texts to further education started to appear in Kenya's colonial schools. The use of Bibles in schools helped spread Christian ideology, but also the English language (Edwards 101). Bibles became an instrument to teach the English language and writing

style, especially the King James-authorized translation (Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter* 23). The King James-authorized translation was favored because of its use of English was exemplary (Thiong'o, *In the House* 23). The King James Bible would teach students to use Anglo-Saxon root words, not the Latin root words. The Kenyan students would learn, from the written word of God, correct style and structure that could be seen throughout Christian-British philosophy (Thiong'o, *In the House* 23). Van der Bijl describes a local African saying in his book, *Mau Mau Rebellion: The Emergency in Kenya 1952–1956*, “When Europeans arrived in Kenya they had the Bibles and the Africans had the land, but now it is the reverse (33).”

The use of missionaries to facilitate “cultural change” was at the behest of the British government (Edwards 119). One should not scapegoat the missionaries’ overall mission as if conquering Africa was their only goal (Edwards 119). Although the British government introduced missionaries to Africa, the missionaries endeavored to treat the Africans “as a person” (Hughes 828). They held to the philosophy that “the personal touch alone can transform ‘development’ into true progress” (qtd in Hughes 828). Missionaries hoped by representing Christ’s “personal touch”, they would invoke a different view than the colonial state of Britain and, hence, be more effective (Hughes 828). The missionaries sent to Kenya did challenge the British government and their choices regarding the treatment of the Kenyan people, but ultimately, as colonial power declined, the missionary organization began to have an identity crisis of their own (Hughes 835 - 836). Missionaries became a tool that was failing the British government and, ultimately, a burden to the government’s diplomacies. The fracturing and infighting of the missionaries throughout Kenya caused their “voices” to not be heard in parliament.

The declaration of a state of emergency by the British in 1952 changed Kenya drastically. At this time the Mau Mau people, local Kenyan natives, began their rebellion against the British Empire. During the state of emergency, the administration of all schools became the responsibility of the District Education Boards which were comprised of patriotic nationalists and Englishmen (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 11). These patriotic nationalists and Englishman desired more control over the natives since tensions were growing due to the Mau Mau rebellion. Shifting the administration roles from missionaries to English nationalists proved a dramatic shift in education and the use of English in Kenya. The District Education Boards would use similar tactics as the missionaries, but instead of the conversion to Christianity, the Board wanted the conversion to British ideology at all cost. The teaching of history and English were the two massive changes the District Education Boards implemented (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 167).

Prior to the state of emergency, history taught to the Kenyan children was from a predominantly African viewpoint (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 167-168). Thiong'o describes learning about African kings, such as Shaka, and the British conquest of South Africa (*Dreams* 168). After the District Education Boards gained control, however, teachers received an "official government-approved syllabus" to guide the lessons (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 168). Kenyan students were taught the "positive" establishment of missionary schools, British explorers, such as Livingstone and Stanley, and the discoveries that were founded by the British explorers in Kenya, such as Mount Kenya and Lake Victoria (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 168). Schools required Kenyan children to read Dickens or G.B. Shaw instead of the oral traditional stories of their forefathers (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 12). As Thiong'o said, "thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds" (*Decolonising* 12).



English became the standard to determine not only intelligence but loyalty to the British Empire after the District Education Boards seized control. As Thiong'o states, "In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (*Decolonising* 11). Schools began practicing means of physical and emotional abuse to curtail the use of native languages (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 11). The use of Gĩkũyũ at school, the most popular native language of Kenya, was an act of rebellion. If a student spoke in Gĩkũyũ at school, they would be punished. Some examples of punishment were corporal punishments, humiliation, or monetary fines (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 11). Thiong'o remarks on one such punishment in his book, *Dreams in a Time of War* (176-177). He describes how the teacher would give the first student that spoke an African language a piece of metal, then the student would pass it to the next student that "repeated the infraction", finally, at the end of the day, the student holding the piece of metal would be physically accosted by the teacher (Thiong'o, *Dreams* 176-177). Students were manipulated by teachers to report other students that spoke in Gĩkũyũ, in an effort to weed out the Gĩkũyũ language (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 11). Once the District Education Boards gained control, a student's progress was determined by their level of competency with the English language (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 12). For example, if a student could not write in English, they failed to progress to the next level of schooling (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 12).

The breaking of Kenyan's "old self" and creating British "selves" was the focus of British colonization. Detaching native cultural and language identity from the people of the countries the British colonized facilitated the ability to implant, through various means such as missionaries, the British culture, the British nationalism, and the British language, English. The British needed to decimate the native identity and language of these countries. Without the

ability to control the local citizens, the British would fail to gain control over the wealth, natural resources, and land of the countries the British colonized (Thiong'o, *Decolonising* 16).

Since the decolonization of Kenya, authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have taken steps to revitalize the native languages, such as Gĩkũyũ, of Kenya. The hope is in restoring native languages, such as Gĩkũyũ, the door to restoring Kenya's national identity would open. Thiong'o wrote *Decolonising the Mind* as a "farewell to English", and now solely writes in Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili (xiv). Much like the rest of the Commonwealth of England, Kenyans are slowly rediscovering their national and individual identities in the world apart from the British Empire and presenting to the world the rich culture of their people, which includes their native languages and religions that the British Empire desperately endeavored to obliterate.

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