

THE FUTURE OF THE BANTU LANGUAGES

By W. B. LOCKWOOD

THE Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress of the People at Kliptown, Johannesburg, contains the demand that "All people shall have equal right to use their own languages." Of late, this question of language has been very much to the fore in South Africa, where it has been discussed in the progressive press and elsewhere, and very different views have been expressed.

Recently, D. T. Cole, a lecturer in Bantu languages at the Witwatersrand University, wrote an article in *Forum* (Vol. 3, No. 2) dealing with the problem of the exceptional linguistic diversity in South Africa. His article is symptomatic of the confusion in the minds of many people, including well-wishers of the African, and it will not be out of place to consider his opinions.

Cole envisages for the Bantu languages a policy of linguistic unification which in the distant future might lead to the creation of two major Bantu languages. These two could then be "offered" official status which, says Cole, is out of the question for any Bantu language at the moment. Cole is led to this view by his general conception of the Bantu languages: "It is not an economic proposition, from any point of view, to maintain our seven literary Bantu forms as separate languages, nor to offer them anything like the status of English or Afrikaans . . . In addition . . . there are numerous lesser languages . . . whose small populations do not warrant (literary) development." For these patronising assumptions Cole does not, however, advance any evidence.

In fact, these assumptions are entirely erroneous. Cole deals with the problem as though it were purely a linguistic matter, although, as will shortly be clear, he tacitly makes a number of political assumptions. The future of the Bantu languages is not primarily a linguistic question, it is a political one.

Let us first ask the question: Which languages are to be used, and which not? I would say that if democracy is to exist, every man and woman must have the right to the practice of the mother tongue for all purposes. From this it follows that all languages should, as of right, be recognised officially. Where democracy is to prevail, it must have its firm foundation in local government. In the main, local government must always be the business of the local people and if these are to participate in democratic organisations, then the local languages must be used as the normal media in the localities. One of the crying needs of the world today, especially among Non-Europeans, is for literacy and education in the modern sense. It is axiomatic that progress is fastest where education is conducted in the mother tongue, for how could it be otherwise? In Africa, this presupposes the development and extended use of all the African languages. Then, as literacy becomes

general, the demand for all kinds of publications will increase and the natural tendency will be to wish to read principally matter printed in the mother tongue.

It is incorrect to state that relatively small linguistic groups cannot support a literary language and a modern literature. Cole refers to the Venda of the Northern Transvaal and says that since Venda is the mother tongue of less than 150,000 "its future as a literary language is distinctly tenuous." It is not so much numbers, but certain material conditions that are decisive here. If the Venda people are to remain as they now are, then indeed the Venda literary language will have but a precarious support. But should the Venda become an educated and prosperous community, then the Venda language too will prosper and flourish. Let us consider the implication that some 150,000 people are not sufficient to support a native literary language. The population of Iceland amounts also to about 150,000 souls; they live in a climate much less hospitable than the Venda and on soil much less fertile, yet Iceland not only runs its own Icelandic schools, but even its own Icelandic University, and produces, in the Icelandic language, a most voluminous modern literature. Out of their own resources, the Icelandic people created their own native literature and gave it a characteristic form in the saga, a form which has inspired imitators throughout the world. I humbly suggest that several of the African peoples will have traditions no less rich and art forms no less expressive than the Icelanders. What the Africans want surely is the chance to make themselves heard. The Icelanders are 100 per cent literate. Are the Venda? Every Icelandic child attends school compulsorily. Do the Venda children? The printing presses in Iceland turn out several different daily newspapers and have a wide range of weekly and periodical literature. Do daily newspapers and the like appear in the Venda language? Icelandic is an official language enjoying the dignity that only official status can give. But Mr. Cole has told us that the Venda cannot be "offered" official status. The Icelanders possess their own wireless station exclusively at the service of the Icelandic people. Have the Venda anything like that? Of course not. And this is the crucial point. It is not numbers, it is the abject poverty of the Venda, it is their present backwardness which makes their literary language so "tenuous."

To leave the matter in no doubt, I will go further in this matter of numbers. To the south of Iceland lie the Faroe Islands, inhabited by only 30,000 peasants and fishermen. But the Faroese language is official for all purposes, there is a flourishing daily and periodical press in Faroese, education is conducted in the mother tongue and a modern literature exists. This is in accordance with the democratic will of the people and, needless to say, the Faroese are justly proud of their progress here as elsewhere. I have had the privilege of experiencing this at first hand, for I have made a special study of Faroese, of which I am a fluent speaker.

It should not be thought that these small Northern peoples have cut themselves off in any way from the great languages of Europe. On the contrary, a large number are able to express themselves in one or more foreign languages, much as many Bantu speakers know some

English and Afrikaans. Obviously similar developments would take place naturally in South Africa if every linguistic group were in a position to make the most of its resources in a modern way.

Any worthwhile discussion of minority languages today must include a reference to Soviet policy, a policy which is identical with that pursued by China and several other countries. It will suffice here to refer to the Soviet Constitution (adopted in 1936). Article 110 lays down that "court proceedings shall be conducted in the language of the constituent or autonomous republic or autonomous province, with the guarantee to persons not knowing the language of full acquaintance with the material of the case through an interpreter, and also of the right to speak in court in their own language." Article 121 reads: "Citizens of the U.S.S.R. have the right of education. This right is ensured by universal compulsory elementary education, by education free of charge, including higher education, . . . by instruction in schools in the native language . . ." (Translation in S. and B. Webb, *Soviet Communism*, pp. 528 (20), (22).) This policy which began effectively in 1917 has led to an unparalleled development and use of all the languages of the U.S.S.R. The implementing of this policy meant that several minor languages which before 1917 had never been written down at last received a literary form. According to Professor W. K. Matthews, **The Languages of the U.S.S.R., 1951**, no less than 13 languages of the U.S.S.R. are spoken by as few as 2,000 persons or under. Yet every one of these is cultivated as a literary medium and printed material issued regularly in them all. One of these languages, Yakugir, the speech of a tiny community of arctic nomads, is used by only 500 souls. Yet this smallest of linguistic groups has since 1930 possessed a cultural base with a printing press for the production of a modest literature in this language.

What now are we to think of Cole's contentions that seven literary Bantu languages in South Africa are too many and that languages with a small number of speakers do not "warrant" literary development? If the Soviet Union can make provision for its minorities in this way, prejudicing no man or woman on account of language, is not South Africa also capable of doing the same, given the will to do so? Cole seems to have been completely put off by the large number of languages actually in use in South Africa. However, there is no cause for defeatism. Similar conditions are to be found in the Caucasus, where 50 languages or so are in use in an area considerably smaller than the Union of South Africa. But, as we have seen, according to Soviet practice each group uses its own language officially for its own affairs. For wider contacts better known languages serve as a means of communication, in the Caucasus especially Georgian and, of course, Russian, which is the state language of the U.S.S.R.

Along lines similar to these we may yet see the way forward for the African languages of South Africa.