

https://dspace.org/

The fruits of the tree of knowledge: Power versus pollution in official attitudes towards African vernaculars in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1933

Jeater, Diana

1995-05-22
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8816

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

SEMINAR PAPER
to be presented in RW 7003 SEMINAR ROOM
at 4.00PM **22nd MAY 1995**

TITLE: The Fruits of the Tree of Knowledge: power versus pollution in official attitudes towards African vernaculars in southern Rhodesia, 1890-1933.

BY: **Diana Jeater**

NO: 379

THE FRUITS OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE: power versus pollution in official attitudes towards African vernaculars in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1933.

Unlike French colonial administrations, British colonisers did not attempt to impose their language on those they colonised. Instead, they charged their administrators with a duty to learn the local vernaculars. In regions where there were few white settlers, this was a fairly straightforward exercise. Southern Rhodesia, however, was a 'settler society'. The debate about the usefulness for ordinary white settlers of speaking local languages was also a debate about the risks and the benefits of different policies for controlling the African communities. The question of how far the state should encourage a broad knowledge of the vernaculars amongst various sections of the white communities was fundamentally a question of how power could best be exercised.

The need to know

The section of the white state which most clearly needed the vernaculars was the Native Affairs Department. There were several purely practical reasons why it was useful for Native Commissioners to have a reasonable grasp of African vernaculars. From the first, the legal obligations of the British South Africa Company required some dialogue with African communities. The Charter under which the British Crown granted authority over 'Rhodesia' to the BSACo, and the 1898 Order in Council which set out the terms of that authority, had included the stipulation that, in administering justice, local African communities' laws and customs should be respected, unless deemed repugnant to natural morality or justice. In cases where such repugnance was deemed to exist, there was an implicit obligation on the Company to prevent the practice as far as possible. In all other cases, however, the BSACo administration found that, where disputes arose, it needed to ascertain what the 'authentic' custom was - and then to insist upon its observance.

Information about local law and custom was initially largely guess-work, and an uncritical transfer of knowledge about Zulu practices. However, by 1897, the Chief Native Commissioner was being asked by the BSACo's Legal Adviser whether it was:

> possible to obtain authentic information as to the customs of Natives in regard to the succession of property,

since questions had arisen about how such matters should be settled.[1]

The Legal Advisor noted that in Natal there was a Native Code which set down such matters; but since there was a suspicion that the local Africans might be inconvenient enough to have different

---

[1] Thomas Scanlen, Legal Advisor BSACo to CNC, 21st October 1897. N1/2/3.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

practices from those in Natal, it was necessary for NCs to make inquiries from the Africans themselves. Ideally they would do this in person, but, if necessary, through interpreters. The entire administration was therefore required, ab initio, to have a fairly advanced level of communication between itself and the African communities.

Native Commissioners who had a good working knowledge of local vernaculars were therefore much needed in Southern Rhodesia in the 1890s. As well as the stipulations of the Company's Charter, the 1896-7 struggle against white settlement and expropriation (the 'first Chimurenga') had forced the Administration to recognise that hostility had been engendered by inept and exploitative NCs in the preceding five years. It was acknowledged that effective tax-collection, efficient labour recruitment and peaceful jurisdiction required officials who could explain government regulations and perhaps even gain local respect. Such officials, it was fondly believed, would soon supercede African authorities in the local power-structure:

> Before the rebellion "and even now" [sic], no Native would willingly bring his dispute before a Paramount if he could get a Native Commissioner who was acquaint [sic] with the Mashona Customs, and language, to settle it for him instead.[2]

In fact, however, most of the experienced NCs who were recruited at this time, and who remained to dominate the Native Affairs Department hierarchy for the next thirty years, were not so 'acquaint'. They knew far more of Zulu customs and language than Shona ones[3], having been recruited from Natal.

However, the Natal recruits were at least reasonably equipped for work in Matabeleland, as siNdebele was closely linked to Zulu, and many social practices were similar to those in Natal. Language skills were an essential part of the training for all members of the police corps and Native Department in Natal. As Mrs Madge Condy recalled about her father, who joined the Natal Mounted Police in 1885, and moved into the Zululand Civil Service in 1891:

> my father became an expert Zulu linguist...My father's work both in the Police and in the Civil Service brought him into close contact with African people - Zulus - and he came to know their customs, lore and

---

[2] NC Salisbury to CNC, 24th December 1897. N1/2/3.

[3] The term 'Shona' is used here as a convenient and widely acknowledged name for the communities inhabiting the central and eastern regions of Southern Rhodesia, and speaking one of the dialects identified as part of the chiShona language group. The names of the dialects and of the language group itself were given by European missionaries.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> language well. This knowledge was an important factor in his appointment as Native Commissioner in Matabeleland during a recruitment drive for these posts.[4]

Knowledge of the local vernacular was, therefore, recognised as an important asset in appointing NCs, helping them in their work of tax-collection, labour recruitment and the hearing of civil and criminal cases.

As in Natal, the BSACo knew that it was not enough to have linguists among its NCs. It was also necessary, for the basic enforcement of its laws and regulations, for its police force to have some grasp of the vernacular as well. The Civil Service language examination for NCs was feared to be too demanding for police officers. Instead, in 1913, an examination in Chiswina [sic] and Sindebele, "of a lower standard that that of the present examination and for which only Police candidates will be eligible" was proposed. The aim of the viva voce test was:

> ascertaining whether the candidate is possessed of a colloquial knowledge of the language which he offers adequate for the purpose of conducting the less important everyday transactions with natives.[5]

It was emphasised that there should be no "obscure native idioms" in the statement to be simultaneously translated, as these would constitute "catch questions". (How the officers were expected in real life to deal with such idioms - which are fundamental to Bantu languages - was not addressed.) Nonetheless, while wary of language experts and 'catch questions', the Administration in Southern Rhodesia clearly required some knowledge of the vernacular from many of its employees, simply to enable a basic exercise of power.

Over and above this practical consideration, however, the Administration found itself facing an additional imperative to foster a knowledge of the vernaculars in its officials. This was not simply a superficial knowledge adequate for "the less important everyday transactions", nor even the more extensive knowledge required for finding out about 'native customs'. This was the kind of knowledge which used the language as an insight into the world-view of those who spoke it.

The Jesuit missionary, A M Hartmann, who produced the first chiShona dictionary for whites, stated explicitly the importance of understanding African languages as part of the process of imposing white power and hegemony:

---

[4] Interview with Mrs Madge Condy, conducted by D Hartridge, February 1969. Oral/CO1.

[5] Acting Secretary, Dept of the Administrator, to CNC, 26th August 1913 (dated 1910 in error on original). N3/2/3.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> the more we can enter into the habit of thought of the natives, the more perfectly we shall speak their language. Words are the external expression of mental conceptions. The more exactly, then, we can represent to ouselves the ideas of the natives, the greater will be the precision with which we shall express our thoughts in their language.[6]

The point to note is that Hartmann did not propose study of the African world-view to aid mutual understanding, but to find a suitable way to introduce European ideology. There is no indication here that there is anything inherently valuable in the study of 'the habit of thought of the natives'; it is simply a means to the end of asserting white hegemony. This viewpoint was endorsed by Biehler, the compiler of the 1905 Chishawasha Jesuit mission dictionary, who added:

> The difficulty of the language, does not lie in the pronunciation..., nor in the grammar...; the difficulty lies in the way, natives have of thinking, and expressing themselves. Hence a corresponding difficulty for the European to render his own cast of thought intelligible to them. [7]

Biehler's dictionary became established as the main reference book for officials and missionaries in the Zezuru-dialect (Harare and environs) region right up until the 1950s, being particularly popular in the Native Affairs Department.[8]

The link between language and world-view was taken as self-evident amongst those influencing the NAD over the following decades. The first aim of the proposed International Institute of African Languages and Culture was 'The study of the languages and mental culture of the African native'[9]. The same year, 1925, two leading members of the administration of Northern Rhodesia published an essay which asked:

> Are we in a position to say of so seemingly simple a

---

[6] Rev A M Hartmann, SJ: **An Outline of a Grammar of the Mashona Language** (Cape Town, 1893), 2.

[7] Rev E Biehler, SJ: **A Shona Dictionary with an outline Shona Grammar** (Chishawasha Mission, 1905), 5.

[8] George Fortune: **Shona Lexicography** in Zambezia vol 7 no 1 1979, 21-44.

[9] Minutes of a meeting held at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, September 21st and 22nd 1925, relative to the establishment of an International Bureau for the Study of African Languages and Culture; forwarded from the Office of the High Commissioner for Southern Rhodesia, London, to Secretary, Ministry of Native Affairs, Salisbury, 11th December 1925. S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> thing as the ownership of an ox, that we know exactly what that ownership means,...that we could give a clear judicial explanation of what the Native mind means by that phrase?

No, they implied, not without a proper knowledge of the cultural contexts in which cattle were transferred. The following year, the NC Plumtree observed that 'A thorough knowledge of the language presupposes some knowledge of Native Life and Custom'[10]. The importance of understanding the vernacular in order to understand the world-view, and vice-versa, was well-understood.

It was, however, for hegemonic purposes that this understanding was required. The benefits of understanding the world-view in order to exercise power was a continuing theme in the NAD. It received bold and cynical expression from the NC Marandellas in 1921:

> For many generations to come the natives will believe in, will reverence and appeal to their spirits. Whether we believe in them or not, it will not affect them...For my own part I am of opinion, as ever, that as a matter of native policy, it is better to listen to these myths, stories, chicanery (whatever you like to call it) sympathetically, even though we should seem to admit their power...Sympathetic hearing and forebearance is the father of confidence; and confidence is more likely to be productive of information [about political opposition] when needed than contrariwise.[11]

Seven years later, the NC Sinoia (the ethnographer Charles Bullock) argued that the Department needed a much deeper and more systematic understanding of 'the social inheritance of Native tribes' than it currently possessed. In the tradition of Hartmann and Biehler, he argued that this was needed for the better application of power:

> it does seem to me that we shall get better results in the necessary superimposition of regulations on local culture by the application of principles based on scientific study of our primitive races, in regard, more especially, to their own conceptions of Native law[12]

---

10 NC Plumtree to SN Bulawayo, 3rd February 1926. S138/26.

11 NC Marandellas to CNC, 8th January 1921. N3/23/1.

12 NC Sinoia to CNC, report on vacation course in Bantu studies, University of Cape Town, 16th February 1928. S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

His approach was widely endorsed. The same year, the missionary and linguist, Bertram Barnes, wrote in the Native Affairs Department Annual that:

> Sound and deep knowledge of native dialects in their variety is required for the important work of the Native Commissioner and all those who have to do with making the native see the justice of the system under which he is governed.[13]

Knowledge of the vernacular was a requirement in understanding African cosmology and legal systems. This understanding, in turn, was a necessary factor in the imposition and maintenance of white control.

The study of African vernaculars, then, was a vital tool in the exercise of white power in Southern Rhodesia. In purely pragmatice terms, it aided effective administration and jurisdiction at the local level. It enabled police officials to carry out their tasks, particularly the taking of statements, without interpreters. More fundamentally, it helped the administration to find ways to issue its orders, outline its intentions and insinuate its worldview into the African communities.

A shortage of speakers

Despite its manifest importance, however, there was a shortage of white officials with a reasonable grasp of the non-Zulu-based vernaculars. Linguistic ability was not necessarily a consideration in making appointments to sensitive areas. In 1915, during the First World War, Mrs Condy's father, F G Elliott, was transferred for political reasons to the isolated district of Melsetter, in the south east on the Mozambique border, where there was a signficant Afrikaans-speaking community among the white settlers. He was appointed as both NC and Acting Magistrate, which gave him jurisdiction over the white as well as the African communities. However, he spoke very little Afrikaans, and no chiNdau, the local chiShona dialect. He relied upon an African messenger who had transferred with him from a previous appointment in Matabeleland, who spoke both chiShona and siNdebele, to translate for him in day-to-day interaction with Africans. In Court, Mr Louis Ferreira, a member of the Magistrate's staff fluent in both Afrikaans and chiNdau, acted as interpreter.[14] The transfer of NCs out of siNdebele-speaking areas into chiShona-speaking areas was a common event, which helped to consolidate the ex-Natal officials' control over the NAD.

---

[13] Rev Bertram H Barnes: **A Campaign Against Babel: Unification of the Dialects of Mashonaland** NADA vol 6 (1928) p46.

[14] Oral/CO1

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

The fact that the Natal officials had no knowledge of chiShona languages or of the languages used in the Zambezi valley did not, then, preclude their appointment to these districts. In the absence of formal language training, they were thrown back on the use of interpreters and on study of the language primers produced by the local missionaries. The optional Civil Service language examination, which enhanced promotion prospects, was instituted in 1910, but there was no formal language requirement in the service until 1926, and no official courses in the vernacular languages until 1934. The mission handbooks and dictionaries were the only source of language teaching for the entire first generation of NCs in Southern Rhodesia.

The paucity of officials fluent in the local vernaculars was bound to impact on the administration of justice. Court records were kept in English, so even where the NC was fluent in the vernacular, it was a challenging task for him to interrogate, translate, record and make judgement single-handed in his court. By the early 1920s, NCs were pressing for funds to employ interpreters in court, particularly in cases where both Africans and whites were involved. The Law Department, which wanted the administration of justice in rural areas to be firmly under white control, was in support of this proposal.[15] The Treasury, however, unwilling to release more funds, refused to agree to the appointment of professional interpreters, suggesting instead that educated Africans or junior white members of the NAD staff could be used as the need arose, and paid an allowance for their services.

Although there were plenty of Africans capable of doing this job, the NAD was not willing to countenance employing them. There was a strong feeling that jural matters should be kept strictly under white control. As the Secretary, Department of the Administrator pointed out,

> We have been informed more than once by the Law Department that as far as possible interpreting should be in the hand of Europeans of reliable character.[16]

The CNC concurred. While conceding that in districts with a high population of 'alien natives' (migrant workers from outside the territory), it was necessary to use 'messenger interpreters', he nonetheless insisted that:

> I do not favour the employment of educated natives as general interpreters in the "Country Courts".[17]

---

[15] SDA to the Administrator, 5th Jan 1923. N3/28/7.

[16] Ibid

[17] CNC to SDA, 16th January 1923. N3/28/7

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

This policy was confirmed in a resolution passed at the Superintendents of Natives' Conference of 1923, which stated that, "where the conditions justify it, European interpreters should be utilised in preference to Natives."[18] Apart from arguments that Africans were incapable of impartiality, and that white parties to a case were entitled to a white interpreter whom they could easily understand, the CNC argued that interpreting work in court was good training for clerks:

> every facility should be offered to junior members of the department to render themselves efficient as interpreters, and to become practically acquainted with criminal processes...The experience thus gained would make them better officials when promoted.[19]

There seemed, then, a clear-cut case that appropriate language skills were necessary in the NAD to guarantee white control over the exercise of judicial power.

However, enquiries by the administration revealed that few of the young men employed as clerks in NCs' offices were competent linguists, capable of interpreting in court. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, clerks were spending less and less time in direct contact with Africans, as

> natives are being increasingly used for clerical work where the official comes into direct touch with natives. This gives less opportunity for European Clerks to learn native languages.[20]

Given this decreasing direct contact with Africans, it seems inefficient to have relied upon learning 'on the job'. Surprisingly, however, there had developed in the NAD a deep-seated prejudice against recruiting people who were already competent in the vernacular. This extraordinary prejudice was apparently founded on a suspicion that boys who had found time to acquire a local vernacular had probably not spent enough time at school:

> A youth who is able, when he begins life, to speak Dutch and a native language may, possibly, not be

---

18 CNC to the Administrator, 10th September 1923. N3/28/7.

19 CNC to Secretary to Minister of Native Affairs [previously SDA], 4th October 1923; CNC to SDA, 16th January 1923. N3/28/7.

20 marginal note for the Premier (also Min of Native Affairs) by his Secretary, written on a letter from CNC to Sec to Minister of Native Affairs, 4th October 1923. N3/28/7.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> otherwise mentally well equipped.[21]
> Under our system of selection of candidates where we gain in a higher standard of education we lose in an imperfect knowledge of Native languages, even where Rhodesian-born candidates are appointed.[22]

The new recruits into the NAD may thus have had an exquisite grasp of Latin and Greek grammar, but the Department seemed thereby doomed to have an ever-declining pool of those with a comparable grasp of chiShona or siNdebele grammar; and this implied an ever-declining ability to exercise power effectively.

An obvious solution to this difficulty would seem to have been to introduce teaching of the vernaculars in white schools. In 1926, the Headmaster of Plumtree School in Matabeleland asked whether it would be possible for pupils to take the Civil Service Native Languages Examination[23]. The principle of schoolboys learning the vernacular was endorsed by both the NAD and the Director of Education. The NC Plumtree commented that:

> every encouragement should be given to Rhodesian scholars, the majority of whom are Rhodesian born, to thus fit themselves for opening in the Civil Service of Rhodesia.[24]

However, the CNC, wary as ever of autodidacts, emphasised that tests should only be taken by those who had actually been taught the subject in school:

> as otherwise it would simply mean that lads who had acquired a knowledge of the languages in their homes, from tenants, from servants and so forth would use the Government examination as a vehicle to obtain a certificate[25]

In addition, the CNC proposed that a new examination, specifically for schoolboys, be introduced. The existing test was, he suspected, within a schoolboy's scope in terms of depth of language knowledge, but might be too broad in range. Presumably he meant by this that it might require too great a

---

21 SDA to the Administrator, 5th January 1923. N3/28/7. I think we may safely assume that 'life' here is intended to imply 'working life'.

22 SN Bulawayo to CNC, 5th March 1923. N3/28/7.

23 which had remained as a single entity, despite the proposal that an easier test should be available for police officers

24 NC Plumtree to SN Bulawayo, 3rd February 1926. S138/26.

25 CNC to Sec, Dept of Colonial Secretary, 9th February 1926. S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

knowledge of African lifestyle - about which, of course, the best scholars should be ignorant, not having strayed too far from their studies in their leisure hours.

Apart from the potential recruitment benefits to the NAD, one of the main reasons why the CNC supported the idea of more widespread knowledge of local languages among whites was that his department was frequently required to deal with the messes created by misunderstandings:

> The ills which daily flow from ignorance of each other's language (I am speaking of master & servant, landlord and tenant and other relations of the races) are evident in our Police Court Records, and no means of preventing these misunderstandings should be omitted.[26]

Complaints about an employer's behaviour were brought to the NC, and the CNC was aware that 'Every European lad in Rhodesia is the future employer of Native servants.' It was, he said,

> consequently the duty of the state to train him for such duties of citizenship as are involved.[27]

This duty extended, presumably, also to girls, since, as the CNC pointed out in 1933:

> In the case of domestic service, it is the European lady who is most concerned, and there can be no doubt that in this field many avoidable misunderstandings occur throught the language difficulty.[28]

The benefit of white women speaking the local vernaculars is also born out by a study of the primers and dictionaries produced by the missions up to 1931.[29] The intended audience is clearly the employer of domestic labour, and many of the phrases and words are directed towards women in conversation with domestic staff.

It appears, then, that by the 1920s, the white administration stood to benefit from a widespread knowledge of vernacular among white settlers. Greater fluency among officials would help in

---

[26] CNC to Secretary, Dept of Colonial Secretary, 9th February 1926. This sentiment was repeated in CNC to T G Standing Esq, 9th March 1928. S138/26.

[27] Ibid.

[28] CNC to Director of Education, 30th May 1933. S138/26.

[29] D Jeater: **The Way You Tell Them: Language, Ideology & Development Policy in Southern Rhodesia.** Paper presented to the Journal of Southern African Studies 25th Anniversary Conference, York, September 1994.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

administration, particularly in justice; and overall the state had an obligation to promote better employment relations at the grassroots. The case for school tuition seemed clear.

'An unedifying culture'

However, although the idea of High School tuition in local vernaculars was agreed in principle, no such programme was ever effectively implemented. Initially, there were doubts about finding suitable teachers. Once again, people outside missions and the NAD who were proficient in vernaculars were treated with suspicion. As the Secretary of the Rhodesian Teachers Association put it in a 1928 letter to the CNC, asking for his help in identifying potential tutors:

> The Education Department approves of the idea in principle, but fears that it would prove impossible to find competent and willing teachers. It is pointed out that proficiency in Native languages does not necessarily connote a taste for teaching them.[30]

Little progress in finding teachers was made, although in 1930 the CNC agreed (in a non-official capacity) to a request from the Director of Education to set an examination in siNdebele for the boys of Plumtree School, where a local missionary had conducted classes.[31]

Before these staffing difficulties could be resolved, other objections to increasing white settlers' knowledge of vernaculars began to emerge in the NAD. One reason why the Department was not keen for language knowledge, and thereby cultural knowledge, to become commonplace in the white communities was that it was growing jealous of its status as the source of expert advice about African communities. The decades of enquiries regarding African 'law and custom', and the years of responses to circulars from the CNC requesting further details and clarification, had produced an extensive body of knowledge within the department. This hard-won knowledge was not to be surrendered easily.

Ironically, the NAD was finding that, for its own purposes, it was becoming a better source of information about African 'traditions' than many Africans. As early as 1919, concerns were expressed about the impending loss that retirement by senior officials would entail:

> For years it has been necessary for Native Commissioners to

---

[30] T G Standing, Actg General Secretary, Rhodesian Teachers Association, to CNC, 27th February 1928. S138/26.

[31] HMG Jackson to Director of Education, 4th April 1930. The Director of Education had previously confided to Jackson, in a note dated 1st March 1928, that 'I don't think that there is very much in the RTA's idea but...It won't lead to any broken heads (or hearts anyhow).' S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> administer justice in terms of the charter and order in council of 1898 which require that regard should be paid to native laws and customs. As a result there are many of them who have acquired a great deal of knowledge on this subject ...I agree with the Attorney-General in thinking that the time has come when some one should be appointed to prepare [a standard work on the native laws and customs of this Territory] in collaboration with the senior officials of this and other Departments, the results of whose experience might otherwise be lost to us.[32]

Although the standard work was never produced, the NAD still felt that it had a greater claim to understanding than newer arrivals in the field.

By the mid-1920s, the new discipline of anthropology was posing an implicit challenge to the NAD's authority. An uneasy relationship existed between the academics in the Union of South Africa and the NAD in Southern Rhodesia. On the one hand the academics provided training and expertise to Native Commissioners; on the other hand, they were despised for their cushioned and limited involvement with day-to-day administration.[33] This prejudice emerged clearly in 1928, when Bullock proposed a more systematic study of African legal systems.[34] The CNC duly forwarded the suggestion to the Premier, but added that:

> It may be doubted whether the discoveries of modern anthropological science will for a very long time prove a better illuminant for our path than a combination of "horse-sense", justice and sympathy, added to a first-hand knowledge of Native needs[35]

This championing of NCs' knowledge against that of academics was endorsed by the Premier[36]. However, Bullock's basic argument, that detailed knowledge of African approaches to legal issues was necessary for effective administration, was conceded by all concerned. As the imminent retirement of 'old hands' created a

---

[32] CNC to SDA, 3rd January 1920 (dated 1919 in error on original). N3/23/1.

[33] This point was made frequently by officials. It was particularly stressed by the six junior officials who in 1935 attended the first run of a special four-month diploma course at UCT, intended specifically for administrators rather than academics. S1542/E8/2.

[34] See pages 5-6 above. NC Sinoia to CNC, 16th February 1928. S138/26.

[35] CNC to Secretary to the Premier (Native Affairs), 22nd February 1928. S138/26.

[36] Minister of Native Affairs to CNC, 1st March 1928. S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

sense of insecurity within the NAD, it was increasingly determined to claim a unique insight into African affairs - including the vernacular languages.

Nonetheless, this wish to protect the NAD's status, as the source of authoritative advice on control over Africans, was not the only - or even the most important - reason for official ambivalence about encouraging widespread knowledge of vernaculars in the white communities. Another, more profound, issue was causing disquiet. This objection was based on the perceived link between knowing a language, and understanding the worldview of its speakers.

As Hartmann and Biehler had indicated, this link was one of the reasons why it was important for white officials to know the local language: it was part of the process of establishing hegemonic control. But however important that knowledge might be to the NAD, it was not necessarily a knowledge that should be spread too profligately in the white population as a whole. Put bluntly, the largely unspoken fear was of whites 'going native'. If, as Hartmann had asserted, 'Words are the external expression of mental conceptions', then white people were in danger of absorbing the mental conceptions inherent in the local African vernaculars. NAD officials and missionaries had a duty to understand local world-views, and to exploit that knowledge. People without such duties were more vulnerable. It was this fear which underlay the suspicions about the 'mental equipment' of applicants to service in the NAD, and the misgivings about the 'range' of the Civil Service examination in siNdebele.

This fear was never wholly acknowledged, and the official view within the NAD was by no means consistent. However, even while the CNC was advocating High School tuition in local vernaculars, the Native Affairs Department Annual was publishing articles on 'the language question' which argued that ordinary settlers did not really need to speak them.[37] A kind of 'cordon sanitaire' around too much knowledge was effectively instituted. The NCs were to carry out the 'solid work in the study of native customs and native thought'[38], with help from missionaries and anthropologists. The rest of the white community was better kept clear.

This exclusion even applied to other government officials. In 1929, Bullock proposed that junior officials in Magistrate's offices should be required to pass the Native Administration examination, again in the interests of more effective control:

---

[37] Tudor G Trevor: **Native Education from an Employer's Point of View** NADA vol 5 (1927) 97-99; Rev Bertram H Barnes: **A Campaign Against Babel: Unification of the Dialects of Mashonaland** NADA vol 6 (1928) 45-50.

[38] Barnes, ibid, p46

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

> Natives are concerned in a very large percentage of cases in the Magistrates' Courts; and...there has recently been repeated expressed Native opinion that they should be tried by judicial officers who understand them.
>
> Such complaints are likely to increase as the Natives become more articulate and, it may be, organised[39]

The proposal was very firmly rejected by the Public Services Board, which feared that:

> the result of the proposal would tend to weaken the legal side of the Magistrates' Courts in strengthening the native side, possibly to the detriment of the European population.[40]

The Attorney General also weighed in against the proposal, and in favour of keeping knowledge of African affairs as the preserve of the NAD:

> real knowledge of a subject can only be derived from long experience...A little knowledge is a dangerous thing and a Magistrate encouraged to think that...he had become an expert in that subject might, and probably would in some cases, allow his judgement to be unduly influenced by an imperfect knowledge of, e.g., a native custom, to the exclusion of a proper application of legal principles and evidence.[41]

The fear that 'undue influence' exerted by a 'little knowledge' of the African worldview could destroy the entire edifice of European legal practices helped to ensure that, by 1933, as observed by one parliamentarian, 'there is not too much known by the public at large' of 'understanding of the Native mind.'[42]

It is against this background that we can understand the decision of the CNC in 1933 to oppose categorically any further proposals to introduce tuition in African vernaculars to the High Schools.[43] While he conceded that early tuition might be advantageous for recruitment purposes, he did not see that this justified the appointment of an entire staff of teachers. His recruits, he insisted, 'are generally men of superior education

---

39 Actg SN, Victoria, to CNC, 22nd July 1929. S138/26.

40 Actg Secretary, Office of the Public Services Board to Secretary to the Premier (Native Affairs), 7th August 1929. S138/26.

41 Attorney General to the Premier, 15th November 1929. S138/26.

42 L Cripps, MLA, to CNC's library, 24th April 1933. S138/26.

43 CNC to Director of Education, 30th May 1933. S138/26.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk

with a special bent for Native work', or alternatively, had a special gift for languages which work in the NAD seemed ready to utilise. In either case, no case could be made for school tuition.

However, the crux of the CNC's argument comes at the end of his letter. He observed at the outset that learning a foreign language 'opens the door to the culture of another Nation.' It was this which had made such study valuable to his department. However, it was also precisely why it should not be taught irresponsibly to all and sundry:

> a knowledge of Native culture has a sociological value to those concerned with Native policy etc. It is not otherwise edifying

The very act of learning an African vernacular was thus presented as a potentially polluting experience:

> I deprecate the introduction of any innovation which may tend towards increasing association between the Natives in their present state and our young children.

Moreover, the additional threat of introducing such study as a school subject was that it would encourage young people to take undesirable steps to improve their school performance:

> A boy (or girl) studying to pass an examination in a Native language would, I think be tempted to perfect his knowledge by association with Natives.

Faced with such a possibility, it is not surprising that arguments about the potential benefits of High School tuition in the African vernaculars faded away.

Clearly, then, by the 1930s, there was official opposition to spreading knowledge of the African vernaculars. There had been a longstanding suspicion of those with 'unsanctioned' fluency in local vernaculars, but suggestions in the mid-1920s that this might be overcome by instituting formal school tuition were finally rejected by 1933. The perceived link between knowledge of the vernaculars and knowledge of African world-views made such tuition dangerous. Such exposure was acceptable within certain limits where the point was to use the insights to influence and control Africans more effectively. However, the interaction was deemed too risky if the influence might become two-way, and where 'the habit of thought of the native' became a matter of interest for its own sake. Only NCs, missionaries and anthropologists were to have this knowledge. White schoolchildren, in particular, were not to be exposed to it. The learning of African languages might bring great insights. Like the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, however, it also seemed to entail damnation for all but the elect.

History School, UWE, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.
e-mail: d-jeater@wpg.uwe.ac.uk