

The Impact of French on the African Vernacular Languages

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*For Better or for Worse?
Gabon as a Case Study*

By

Sosthène Boussougou
and Karim Menacere

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I dedicate this book to my precious late mother Ambroisine Koumba,
my wife, Wendy, and my son Peter.

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PREFACE

This book does not record the cultural features of Gabon, nor does it explore the ramifications of the French 'exception culturelle', as a way of offsetting the threat of American cultural imperialism.

What it does is this: it demonstrates a clear link between language and culture, and explains, from a cultural standpoint, why the dominant French language and the endangered languages of Gabon can work for the good of Gabonese people. For example, lexical and linguistic items refer to specific cultural representations and signifiers in the real world, namely provision. It is argued that education can develop people's aptitude to influence the choices they make with regards to social and economic opportunities.

Thus, the very essence of the Theory of Languages is the formulation and evaluation of the potential that is embedded in equating language with culture, in a given linguistic landscape, for the purpose of wealth creation. It stems from the fact that languages are not just abstract instruments of communication. While they dictate what is to be spoken, cultures set the limits by predicating a range of possibilities. It is the combination of these two dimensions that is conducive to social progress.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to address the issue of language decline in Gabon. It sets out to examine the context of French colonialism and its impact on the language varieties of Gabon. This research examines language loss and shift, through an investigation of Gabon's history, and by assessing Gabonese people's native language use and attitudes, and their perception about the adoptive French language. In order to assess the magnitude of the impact of French on Gabonese languages, and have an understanding of the ailing linguistic and cultural traditions of Gabon, it is necessary to bring into the limelight the diverse material effects to which the phenomenon of colonialism seems to give rise.

The decline of ethnic languages has been a matter of serious concern for many linguists. Since colonial times, the status of Gabon as a developing country has not changed. Yet, the language varieties of Gabon hold the key to its development:

Languages as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (Williams and Chrisman, 1994: 441-442)

French disrupted the harmony existing between languages as speech, signs or real life, and made it difficult for ethnic languages to form a cultural entity. Also, Akinrinade and Barling (1987) have argued that, not only did the French favour a mono-linguistic approach as an effective means of asserting their power, but also, and more controversially, they abused it:

...although the educational aspect of development is undeniable, France's great stress on it has a strong "smack" of self-interest. The purpose of sending so many French teachers to (Gabon)...has undoubtedly done more to further French influence than to promote development. (Akinrinade and Barling, 1987: 176)

It is observed, in Gabon - where the *Francophone* dimension of national identity, inherited from colonisation, is so striking - that vernacular languages find it difficult to resist the onslaught of French, for there are no mechanisms to even attempt to curb this dominance. The debate among researchers, such as Williams and Chrisman (1994) and Baumgart (1982), about how much Gabonese ethnic languages have declined as a result of the overbearing influence of French, is ongoing. This study sets the following hypothesis, that the French language is a threat to the integrity and development of Gabonese ethnic languages. Then, what is the role of the French language in Gabon, and even beyond that, the impact of colonisation? The arguments are based on sound logic: the decline of ethnic languages characterises the dynamics of under-development. At first glance, it may seem incongruous to suggest that colonialism is a phenomenon that continues today, but Williams and Chrisman (1994) acknowledge a new form of colonisation aimed, ironically, at addressing the underlying issues of culture and development in Gabon. They argue that there are “...*greater continuities between the colonial and the post-colonial.*” (Williams and Chrisman, 1994: 288)

From a cultural perspective, as indicated in the following table, French people inhibited the development of literature by limiting the use of Gabonese Bantu languages, which have almost no written form, to religious rituals and orature. Many Gabonese writers like *Angèle Rawiriⁱ* and *Vincent de Paul Nyondaⁱⁱ* write almost exclusively in French. The extensive effort to teach French at school has resulted in widening the gap between generations. As far as the Gabonese youth is concerned, the traditional and secretive religion, namely *Bwitiⁱⁱⁱ*, and its artistic masks, sculptures, and folk dances, that characterise Gabon’s historical culture and established its ethnic composition, seems to be a relic of the past.

The reason for the increase in the number of Gabonese speaking French may be due to the fact that, as put by Le Blanc (1990: xi), “...*more and more parents, educators, students realise that French is taught...for very important social, economic, and political, as well as educational reasons.*” This statement suggests that there is also a very good reason for having French as the official language of Gabon despite its negative effect on the language varieties. This book attempts to measure the impact French has had on a number of local languages and how detrimental their co-existence with the global French language is to respondents in particular, and Gabonese people in general.

One of the most important elements to understand within the context of post-colonialism is that there is a definite conflict between the alleged benefits of colonialism, especially in regards to education, intellectual

development, and the safeguarding of Gabonese linguistic heritage. Education and elitism have moved to negate Gabonese culture, and diminish it in the eyes of French rule, creating an internal sense of conflict, as French colonialism required the designation of racial inferiority of the Gabonese people and the positive valuation of the French rule in accordance with the theories of colonisation (Baumgart, 1982). This study takes the view that the French colonial strategy has always been *divide to rule*. This is clearly evident in the case of Gabon.

However, it is possible to instil in young Gabonese an understanding and appreciation of the importance of French in the context of internationalisation, without detracting in any way from their identity, native languages and culture. Such a theory has not yet been developed despite evidence of language endangerment in Gabon. Reasons behind the lack of initiative may include such things as budgetary constraints and concerns that it may constitute a threat to the status of French in the long run. Also, the lack of expertise in how to develop and deal with this concept has been a stumbling block for both government officials and Gabonese scholars.

There are several dimensions to this critique, perhaps the least well-developed of which is the observation that while the postcolonial era purports to comment on contemporary global reality, it has not emphasised the importance of local languages as potential development catalysts in the former French colony of Gabon. The debate has centred on the interpretation and French meaning of the concepts of globalisation and neo-colonialism (Ingleby, 2010). This process was stimulated by the work of a few key theorists, many of whom - Tomlinson (1999), Eriksen (2001), Sheurman (2004), and Schuster (2002), including former Ghana president, namely Kwame Nkrumah, for example - shared personal experience of the cultural and linguistic legacy of colonial empires.

Therefore, this book aims to provide a fresh insight into the co-existence of both French and local languages, in a non-threatening environment. The starting point for this is the intuitive feeling that the lack of a national language of Bantu origin in Gabon does not ring right from a cultural point of view. This is not how Gabon can secure its political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic future in Africa, and in the world. Thus, the process of research involves developing a new theory based on qualitative data (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Considering the theoretical framework, it is possible to argue that this study derives its originality from the way in which it draws upon, and contributes to the different research traditions: this research is clearly multi-disciplinary. Firstly, from a linguistic perspective, it seeks to assess the effect of French

on local languages and settle the debate over the importance and feasibility of the national language project. Secondly, it can be argued that this research would never have been embarked on as purely an academic exercise, without some sense of the value inherent in the end-product. This means that this study, when completed, expects to make a contribution to knowledge, which derives as much from the theoretical work, as from the possibility of creating a national language in Gabon.

To this end, this study not only examines language use and shift, but also seeks to understand, through a dialectic approach, the multidimensional and contributing factors of adopting French as an official language of the state of Gabon, from the colonial to post-colonial era. Therefore, this research assesses the struggle facing Gabonese people in attempting to reconnect with the traditions of Gabon, and their efforts to create a system of democracy and socialism that brings about unity and harmony with its multi-lingual diversity. It focuses on the functional connection between language, culture and development in order to counter language loss and Gabon's dependence on France for development purposes, and closes by constructing a new theory, that is the Theory of Languages. This theory draws on the relationship between language and culture, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and results in a better understanding of how to counter the phenomenon of language decline in Gabon.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM PRE-COLONIAL TO POST-COLONIAL GABON

There is little record of the time before the arrival of the French in Gabon. Interview data, a few oral accounts and relics of the past are left to provide a glimpse of the situation of the Gabonese people and their languages prior to colonisation. However, this study gives a thorough analysis of data pertaining to the Bantu-speaking communities who emigrated towards Sub-Saharan Africa and Gabon. Thus, the focus of this chapter is on colonial and post-colonial Gabon.

1.1 Pre-Colonial Gabon

1.1.1 Historical background

Fleeing aggression and conflicts with the *Tuaregs*, who wandered beyond the desert, towards the more fertile region of the Niger River and Lake Chad, Bantu-speaking populations, settled on the coast of Gabon which was later named *Gabao* by the Portuguese navigators. They came into the area from the Congo, by means of the *Ogooue* River, which runs through Gabon, and the *Nyanga* valley in the south.

They moved down the western side of Africa and reached modern Gabon, as families and small groups, to form villages. They expanded throughout the southern half of Africa, settling in a well-watered valley permitting cultivation of crops, thanks to their agricultural techniques and farming traditions. They added to their agricultural skills a range of food-producing activities which required a great deal of communication between clans and villages.

1.2 Languages of Gabon

The Bantu-speaking people of Gabon had common words which mostly referred to their natural habitat and livelihood: their languages

existed in oral form. Because of the proximity of their villages and the need to communicate and survive, they enhanced their languages through trade, sedentary activities, and developed their genetic and linguistic homogeneity through the borrowing of linguistic elements between the existing family groups or villages. Much of their technical vocabulary was adopted. The resulting languages were related in terms of the commonness of root words, and linguistic referents related to their farming activities. However, linguistic divergence occurred when some broke away inland and carried their languages throughout Gabon. There are over 40 Bantu languages in Gabon.

1.3 Colonial Gabon and the use of the French language

1.3.1 Colonial times

One of the major historical periods that concern the Gabonese is the colonial era. Specifically there exists a phenomenon that results from language contact between French colonists and the different ethnic language groups of Gabon. The first step towards understanding language contact in Gabon involves recognising the complexity of the contact situation with respect not only to the motives for French colonisation but also Gabonese languages. In colonial times, the French contemplated a Gabonese workforce: tribesmen

...sold blacks during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries...Europeans exchanged alcohol, fabrics, tobacco, salt, earthenware, and other cheap goods for slaves with the coastal chiefs. The sale of slaves in America brought great profits which were reinvested in gold, other precious metals, spices, or cotton. In turn, these were carried to Europe at a substantial profit. (Aicardi de Saint-Paul, 1989: 7)

Language contact with Europeans, including French people took place as a result of such human trade which contributed to depopulate Gabon. Secondly, despite the abolition of the slave trade in 1792 in France (Aicardi de Saint-Paul, 1989), its practice continued illegally. But, the implementation of the anti-slave policy, and the will to look for trade opportunities and deal with local chiefs, brought about French language contact and influence in Gabon.

Moreover, French colonial officers found justification for their presence in Gabon as part of a civilising mission. When the French first established control over the territory of Gabon, there appeared little prospect, at least in their eyes, of development; which meant the use of

French language as a way of breaking the communication barrier. Subsequently, the superiority of the French language was made obvious. Of course, this process was made much easier by the difference between a language that is transcribed into standard orthography and dialects. The essence of this is the recourse to scientific explanations of language differences to rationalise an exploitative situation to the benefit of French colonialists.

1.4 The official status of French

French was meant to become the language of communication of Gabonese people. It was necessary to find a means of communication between the colonised and the colonisers. There were political as well historical reasons. In fact, the demographic situation of Gabon, the low number of Gabonese speakers, played an important role in the decision to only officialise the use of French. In fact, a systematic analysis of the languages of Gabon reveals that they are limited in space and time. The term *space* denotes the fact that Gabon had a small population, and there were very few speakers, while the term *time* is used because Gabonese languages remained spoken in a limited geographical area and were not systematically transcribed. Therefore, the French colonialists found a vacuum to fill. Thus, the French language, the official language of Gabon, imposed itself by virtue of French colonialism.

Furthermore, in the schools attended by the Gabonese, classroom learning and practices of communication, including language socialisation, were conducted in French. The implications for monolingualism were evident since standards were administered by the French with some say in matters of policy. This was the usual way for the French to impose the use of the French language, and ensure that their language policy was followed in different sectors of activity.

Given the influence of the French language, it is now clear that, just as colonisation was imposed on Gabonese autochthone populations, so was the use of the French language. French was seen as a real tool for trade and eventually sustained its domination over local languages. This situation seems to be a good illustration of the fact that there were historical reasons:

An important stimulus to what turned out to be a veritable race for the colonies was France's protectionist policies of the 1850s, which sought to defend its markets and access to overseas resources. (Webster, 1990: 74)

These policies meant the imposition of a system of administration that suited French colonialists. Politically, this was the result of the competition between colonial powers. Subsequently, this also meant the gradual destruction of local languages. This implies that Gabon has been subject to a socio-economic experience, the impact of which is being assessed in this study.

At the end of World War II, the international pressure on France to reform was great because nationalist sentiment was running high after British colonies were granted independence. The pressure was on France to follow suit. It can be argued that, in 1956, as the pressure on France to grant freedom and autonomy to its colonies mounted, the French adopted in 1956 the Defferre Law^{iv}, which granted broad autonomy to Gabon and other African countries. This meant that Gabon could elect a local legislature and also appoint a council of government, including the position of vice-president which was held notoriously by Paul *Yembi*^v.

1.5 The premises of decolonisation

1.5.1 The exploitation of the Gabonese

The position of the French language, however, came under threat in the late 1950's when the wind of decolonisation from the British Empire, granting freedom to its colonies, pressurised France to act likewise. To understand the process of decolonisation, it is important to investigate how the colonies were organised: in general, the colony of Gabon was organised according to France's mainland administrative structure. However, the difference lay in the relationship between the colonial officer, the Gabonese administrator, and the people, which was effectively that of master and slave. The mentality borne out of this complex of inferiority persisted long after the slave trade was abolished, as Gabon was administered like an overseas French department. This political organisation changed when Gabon entered the federation of French Equatorial Africa. As a French territory under French rule, Gabon still did not benefit from the slave trade which presented a real downside to its social perspective. In fact, it led to economic disadvantages as local chiefs enriched themselves to the detriment of the Gabonese people. In fact, the financial organisation of Gabon was regulated by article 33 of the Financial Act of 13 April 1900. Under this text the colonial budget was administered by the colonial office, and Gabon had to pay for all civil expenses to the central government in Paris (Walsh, 2009). But, in protest

to this system of administration, the movement towards Gabon's independence got underway.

1.6 Motives for seeking independence from France

Although, the French language was firmly established as the only official language of Gabon, French assimilation policy was threatened because of its failure to encourage the emergence of self-sustaining growth in the agricultural sector, for instance, geared to local needs. This has led many, eventually, to question the appropriateness of such a policy. A number of problems could be identified:

- 1) Since this policy only benefitted France and French people, Gabonese people found themselves worse off.
- 2) The elite did not have the political influence to get France to play an active role in the development of Gabon. For instance, Gabon depended on the exploitation of oil to earn 15% of its export revenue (Yates, 1996). The profits that were made allowed France to accumulate wealth which was funnelled back to France.
- 3) It has also been argued, by Aldrich (1996) in the book entitled *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, that French colonialists took land from African people. This was purposely intended to make sure that Africans could not compete with French nationals, and also to impoverish them so that they were forced to work for French people. Although the slave trade was formally abolished, the French were concerned not only with obtaining raw material and agricultural produce, but with obtaining them at a very low cost. Therefore, the wages paid to Gabonese workers and peasant producers had to be as low as possible. Such hardship, from the point of view of Gabon's elite was not sustainable, and this explains why the Gabonese elite were keen to rule Gabon.

These three factors explain the failure of the French assimilation policy as well as the absence of a politically and economically independent class in Gabon that would take Gabonese people's interests seriously, and go a long way to explaining why independence from French rule was the only way.

1.7 The main objectives of the Conference of Brazzaville

With this struggle for independence came the awakening of the African elite which signalled the end of the policy of assimilation as France envisaged it. Thus, recognising the urgency of this matter, De Gaulle called overseas territories to become members of the *French Community*^{vi}, at the Conference of Brazzaville, in 1958, thus paving the way towards a prospective independence. Two ideologies clashed: the Anglo-Saxon ideology and the French ideology. France had to *sell* the idea that it was in the interest of African countries including Gabon to emancipate within the French sphere of influence. However, President Léon Mba of Gabon was not eager to push for independence. He saw Gabon as an extension of France, an overseas French territory. It did not matter, one way or another, to Léon Mba whether he became president or not. Yet, Gabon achieved international sovereignty in August 17th, 1960, as France ceded to the independence movement.

Therefore, it was beneficial for France to open its door to political leaders and the elite: trade and economic activities were on the cards. It was a sign that France feared industrial competitiveness from other colonial powers. This substantial exercise of political and economic force, which was the process of colonisation, opened up Gabon as a new market for France. But it resulted in European powers fighting each other, in order to obtain protected markets in Africa.

Thus, despite Charles De Gaulle's attempt to specify the future orientation of French colonial policy in Africa, the Brazzaville Conference, unwittingly, set into motion the decolonisation process.

1.8 The concepts of neo-colonialism and bilateral relations

As a result, France has developed with Gabon a relationship based on cooperation. But the temptation to describe it as a new form of colonisation, or neo-colonialism, is great, especially when it involves a nomenclature such as economic and cultural cooperation, monetary and financial cooperation, and military cooperation (France's watchdog in Africa). Economically speaking, the majority of respondents believed that there are two major reasons why neo-colonialism is apparent. Firstly, Gabon has no viable industrial facilities. So neo-colonialism exists by default. Secondly, Gabon needs France in the context of internationalisation, because, just as it is the case within its boundaries, France's support is essential for its development.

In fact, neo-colonialism has at least two consequences for Gabon. Firstly, it is likely that it has had a significant impact on the development of Gabon, in that had it not occurred, the development of Gabon would have been much slower than it seems to have been. This implies that the industrial activities of *COMILOG*^{vii}, *COMUF*^{viii} are important factors encouraging social and economic development in Gabon. Secondly, French cooperation has continued to have a particularly harmful effect on the social structure of Gabon, albeit to a lesser degree of visibility, but nonetheless equally, if not more damaging than French colonialism because of its nature of “invisible colonialism”. For example it has driven a wedge between the literate and the illiterate, the rich and the poor. It has encouraged the emergence of a Gabonese elite with the agenda of fulfilling their own ambitions and that of French cooperatives.

Cooperation meant a re-orientation towards the exterior, with France as the only major beneficiary: it made Gabon highly dependent on the export of natural resources in exchange for the import of manufactured goods:

...cooperation accords granted exemptions from custom duties on Gabonese exports to France and on French imports to Gabon. The accords were made a sine qua non of independence. In a letter dated July 15th 1960, French Prime Minister Michel Débré made this point quite clear to Léon Mba: Independence is granted on condition that the state, once independent, undertakes to abide by the cooperation agreements...one does not go without the other. (Yates, 1996: 43)

So, over the years, these transactions were carried out in French. As an instrument of economic and financial control, the French language fragmented the family structure that had been built up over many decades.

1.9 The French monopoly of the linguistic marketplace

Considering the factors that lie behind the emergence of French as the official language of Gabon, three main categories were identified above: economic, social and cultural factors. Each accounts for the genesis of French in Gabonese society, its proliferation through culture and its transmission to past, present and future generations. The reason for this continuing French impact on several generations of Gabonese is as follows: once the French language emerged within Gabonese culture by way of colonialism, it became established as the official language of Gabon and widespread. These three factors became important agents in the continuance of French dominance on Gabonese languages. For instance,

the French language took root in Gabon through French colonial enterprise, and pervaded its institutions, languages and social structure, and its cultural productions. It also entered the very fabric of Gabonese traditional customs. As a result, the simple process by which French culture is transmitted, the socialisation process, became a factor of French influence in Gabon, for it reached all sections of the population, including children and adults. Social factors affect the incidence of French influence within ethnic groups and therefore equally affect children's attitudes toward French.

There are two different views that not only provide theoretical explanations for the problems associated with neo-colonialism, but also open the debate on Gabon's economic and social development. One such view is associated with the fact that the Gabonese economy depends on France. Some would argue that the existence of French capitalism is characterised by the exploitation of Gabon's natural resources, like oil, by Elf Gabon, and also the continuing dependence of Gabon on French expertise in the oil industry. However, it can also be argued that colonialism is relic of the past. In reality, in the context of internationalisation, Gabon has been integrated into the world economy by France. This is important for Gabon's economic development which ultimately results in the improvement of the Gabonese people's living standards and social progress.

It is undeniable that Gabon has been touched by the phenomenon of globalisation. In fact, the last few years have seen a swing of the theoretical pendulum, not only to identify these new developments, but also to sweep away the notion of neo-colonialism. The new phase of bilateral co-operation between Gabon and France is welcome. What is less welcome is that some history with France is being re-written in the very context of internationalisation. The debate is controversial because it centres on the issue of dependency. There are two points to note here: firstly, in the current globalisation context, Gabon cannot do without France. So the notion of neo-colonialism is in that sense long over, or at least unimportant: secondly, an important source of criticism concerns the monopoly by France of the Gabonese trade market. France and Gabon share the use of the French language, but this does not detract from the fact that other countries have signed trade agreements with Gabon:

Looking at the direction of registered foreign trade between 1960 and 1966, for example, we find that in 1960 France accounted for 6,051,000,000 CFA out of a total of 11,826,000,000 CFA francs of exports; or, in other words, France purchased 51% of all Gabonese exports, almost twice the amount exported to the United States...The

French also continued to dominate Gabonese imports in 1966. (Yates, 1996: 43)

The structure of post-independence Franco-Gabonese relations suggests that there is a tendency, on the part of France, to monopolise international trade markets. The United States of America is one of its major trade partners. Yet, the balance of payments places France far above its competitors.

1.10 Conclusion

Pre-colonial Gabon did not exist as a state. The Bantu Group, from which Gabonese languages originate, was as a stateless society; different ethnic languages produced different societies with different traditions and customs. Yet their organisational structure, which fitted the environment they were living in, was regarded by the French colonialists as backward. By virtue of the abolition of the slave trade, they imposed the French language as the language of administration and employed Gabonese people in order to perform administrative duties under French rule.

There are very few written records of the history of Bantu-speaking populations prior to the arrival of the French. Oral memories, however, are the indirect traces of their past. They suggest that Bantu-speaking communities had common lexical items which served the purpose of communication. Language contact with the French took place as a result of human trade. At the beginning of the colonial period, the French found it important to use French as the medium of communication, in line with colonial policies. Thus, the imposition of French as the official language of Gabon was borne out of necessity, that is, for business and trade partnerships.

Because the Gabonese people found themselves worse off, they sought independence from France. As the British government granted independence to its colonies; France was forced to acknowledge the movement towards independence, and pressurised into letting its colonies emancipate. Indeed, it was in the interest of France to convene the Conference of Brazzaville in order to lay the foundations of a new political framework. Thanks to the movement of independence which swept French colonies, Gabon became independent on August 17th, 1960. This represented a new stage in relations between France and Gabon.

It is often argued that Brazzaville marks the beginning of a new form of colonisation. However, proponents of neo-colonialism fail to identify the world as a global market, where bilateral or multi-lateral relation open up new avenues in term of breaking trade barriers for development purposes.

Despite its monopoly of the trade market, France faces fierce competition from the United States and other Gabonese trade partners, in the context of globalisation.

However, despite freeing itself from French rule, the French linguistic influence is often related to factors that have contributed to the current decline of Gabon in its process of development. Is this a coincidence or the manifestation of French capitalism? What the research questions found out, though, was a firm indication that local languages are dying as a result of French language supremacy. Similarly, data from the fieldwork showed, in many respects, that the colonial era was a critical phase in Gabon's history for the simple reason that it has determined the situation of Gabonese languages today, in relation to the French language, in terms of culture, global markets, and socio-economic development.

CHAPTER TWO

LANGUAGE POLICY AND DEPENDENCY THEORY

2.1 Introduction

The intention in this chapter is to analyse the relationship between French language policy, the impact of French on local languages, and its consequences on Gabon's development. This chapter analyses other arguments in particular the social and economic benefits of having French as the official language of Gabon, and ends with the question of how ability in French as well as in local languages could be more economically significant as the number of Gabonese with some degree of proficiency in both French and local languages increases.

The problem of language policy in Gabon is that, following Gabon's accession to international sovereignty, it has not emerged as a major focus of successive Gabonese governments, as evidenced by the preponderance of the French language in Gabon (Mabik-ma-Kombila, 2001). Among Gabonese policy makers the term *language policy* has often been linked to two other terms - *linguistic diversity* and the lack of a *national language* of Bantu origin - and it is all three terms which form the subject of discussion here. This chapter discusses the usefulness of language policy, linguistic diversity, and a national language by examining and analysing the Gabonese government's policy initiatives. This chapter goes on to highlight the position of the Gabonese government in response to the changing political, social and economic context over the last five decades in order to provide an historical framework within which to set the current debate on language policy. What emerges from this discussion is that there are different perceptions of the problem of creating a national language in Gabon, which often lead to different and potentially conflicting policy proposals for tackling the problem of cultural identity. The chapter concludes by arguing that despite the Gabonese government's evident lack of commitment to dealing with these problems, there is a general

consensus that the absence of a national language in Gabon does not seem right, from a cultural viewpoint.

2.2 Colonial policies

As a result of the competition between colonial powers, in the 1850s, France's protectionist policies sought to defend its markets and access to overseas resources (Webster 1990). These policies meant the imposition of a system of administration that suited the French (Likaka et al. 2009, King 1990).

The Republic of Gabon, a country mostly covered by rainforest, straddling the Equator, is bordered to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, and to the east and south by Congo.

According to Mackenzie (2005), its capital

...Libreville was established by France as a settlement for freed slaves in 1849...and remained part of the French empire until independence in 1960. The country came to incorporate around 40 Bantu-speaking peoples, including the Fang, (Punu) and Téké...French is the official language and is the sole language of educational instruction. France also dominates the economy and cultural life of the country. (Mackenzie, 2005: 195-196)

Until the French arrived in Gabon at the end of the 19th century, village rule was the most common political system in Congo (Bakaly, 2006). Although Bantu-speaking societies were remarkably diverse, their institutions, values and aesthetic styles reflected a common pattern. Usually, authority was strongest in the village, where it was exercised by elders of extended families (lineage), who claimed descent from a great ancestor. Both customs and traditional religions supported this system. Traditional rules governed an individual's social functions and activities, which were often performed within his or her age group. Respect for the community was paramount, while speculative innovation was suspect and selfish behaviour was discouraged or severely punished. However, political authority beyond the village was most effective where it depended upon local loyalties or village rule. For example, kings based their right to rule on descent from divine ancestors, but did exercise such rights within the limits of customary law in the Sub-Saharan region of Congo where some Bantu-speaking populations, including Gabonese, had migrated and settled.