

## THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES: ORAL COMMUNITIES AND COMPETITIVE LINGUISTIC WORK IN WESTERN KENYA\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the history of efforts to create a standard written language in western Kenya. In the 1940s, the Luyia Language Committee worked to standardise one Luyia language out of a set of diverse, distinct, and yet mutually intelligible linguistic cultures. While missionaries worked to imbue translations with ideals of Christian discipline, domestic virtue, and civilisation, local cultural entrepreneurs took up linguistic work to debate morality, to further their political agendas, and to unite their constituents. Rather than subsume linguistic difference, these efforts at standardisation reveal the dynamism of oral communities, and how they encouraged a culture of competitive linguistic work. Examination of these efforts challenges previous historians' insistence on the role of linguistic consolidation in the making and unmaking of political communities in colonial Africa.

**KEY WORDS:** Kenya, colonialism, ethnicity, linguistics, missionaries.

FOR many elders in contemporary western Kenya, to be 'Luyia' is to say *mulembe*.<sup>1</sup> This word greets visitors by asking where they have been, where they are going, and entreating them to come and go in peace.<sup>2</sup> Some claim the very term 'Luyia' translates as 'those sharing the same language'.<sup>3</sup> Language and an oral culture of interpellation have been central to forging a Luyia ethnic community. And yet, as an ethnic category, the Luyia did not exist prior to the 1930s. Precolonially, and well into the colonial period, the Luyia were instead multiple distinct and discrete communities. Divergent migratory routes into the competitive and complementary ecological niches of western Kenya both encouraged the development of diverse languages and political cultures, and built wider oral communities. In the early years of colonial rule, British practices of indirect rule encouraged local communities

\* I would like to thank John Lonsdale, Derek Peterson, and three anonymous readers for their critiques and comments on early drafts. The research for this article was made possible through the generous funding of the Gates Foundation, the Smuts Fund, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Author's email: [julie.macarthur@utoronto.ca](mailto:julie.macarthur@utoronto.ca)

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Harry Wamubeyi, Butere, 5 Oct. 2007. Several competing spellings of Luyia exist. The spelling chosen here, Luyia, with the collective variation Abaluyia, was determined by a Local Native Council (LNC) vote in 1942 and accepted by the Luyia Language Committee (LLC), though Luhya and Abaluhya remain common.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Shem Musee, Kona Mbaya, 22 Oct. 2007; L. L. Appleby, *A Luluhya-English Vocabulary* (Maseno, Kenya, 1943); R. A. Snoxall, *Luganda-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mark Udoto, Ambundo, 23 Sept. 2007.

to reformulate kinship and recast their histories to contest chiefs imposed from outside. By the 1930s, however, a territorial crisis prompted local political thinkers to suppress their diverse origins and to begin imagining, for the first time, an enlarged ethnic polity in western Kenya. Naming this novel community the 'Luyia' in 1935, local cultural entrepreneurs sought to unite their diverse constituents through historical, political, and cultural work.

Writing in 1943, North Kavirondo District Commissioner F. D. Hislop pondered the future of the Luyia ethnic project: 'the greatest difficulty in the above consummation is probably that of language'.<sup>4</sup> The linguistic diversity of this compact region overwhelmed missionaries and colonial administrators attempting to translate the Bible and to carve out governable units. With the foundation of the Luyia Language Committee in 1941, local cultural entrepreneurs set themselves up as amateur linguists, seeing linguistic work as a cultural tool for advancing their political agendas. However, controversies over orthography, pronunciation, and translation revealed the competing interests of missionaries and African linguists. Such struggles prompted some to guard their linguistic autonomy as jealously as they had their political autonomy against externally imposed chiefs, and also threatened the deep history of oral accommodation and flexibility in the region. Despite the failure of the protracted attempt to standardise one Luyia language, language work in colonial western Kenya revealed self-conscious and competitive linguistic cultures.

#### WRITING AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* foregrounded the importance of technologies of writing and print-capitalism to the formation of political communities.<sup>5</sup> Although Anderson's model underestimated the importance of oral cultures and alternative forms of literacy, its attention to the written word encouraged historians to think more carefully about the transcription of African languages and the making of ethnic identities. Around the same time, scholars following the 'invention of tradition' school of thought began arguing that missionaries 'created' African languages as part of the 'cultural package' and 'pedigrees that the new "tribes" required for acceptance'.<sup>6</sup> Following John Lonsdale's call to study the moral economy of African political communities, historians have more recently explored linguistic work not only as a colonial tool of conversion, discipline, and invention but also as a site of competition and imagination, a 'crossroads' where the interests of missionaries and competing African cultural brokers collided.<sup>7</sup> For Patrick

<sup>4</sup> Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA) DC/NN/1/25, North Kavirondo Annual Report, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, CA, 1991), 11. See especially chapters by P. Harries, T. Ranger, and B. Jewsiewicki.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Lonsdale, 'Moral ethnicity, ethnic nationalism and political tribalism: the case of the Kikuyu', in P. Meyns (ed.), *Staat und Gesellschaft in Afrika: Erosions- und Reformprozesse: Jahrestagung der VAD vom 28–30 April 1995 in Duisburg* (Hamburg, 1996), 98; D. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH, 2004), 118.

Harries, missionary interventions into African languages had enduring consequences for languages of power and ethnic patriotism. While African linguists worked to mediate the terms of translation, Swiss missionaries in South-East Africa maintained control and ownership over the transcription of new languages and, by extension, the new identities they produced.<sup>8</sup> In other contexts, where missionaries proved less effective at controlling the process of standardisation, local partisans utilised transcription to discipline their constituents and to imagine new nations.<sup>9</sup> Whether through privileging missionary intervention or local patriotic work, such scholarship has insisted on the standardisation of written vernaculars as a necessary ingredient in the transformation of oral authority and the articulation of moral ethnicities.<sup>10</sup>

This literature, however, suggests a form of script determinism in the imagining of African communities. As Dmitri van den Bersselaar found in the failure of the Union Ibo language in Nigeria, the creation of a written 'ethnic' language was not always successful or particularly necessary for the construction of local patriotisms.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, the rigid insistence on written vernaculars as a badge of ethnic legitimacy obscures the dynamism, multiplicity, and cultural dissent of oral cultures. Similarly Ruth Finnegan argues, for the Limba of Sierra Leone, that linguistic diversity formed the essence of communal identity: 'Limba was in fact variously spoken, in a number of dialects, some of which were barely mutually intelligible . . . in spite of their habit of contrasting their own various dialects, they still assumed that one thing that they all shared together . . . was the Limba language.' For the Limba, as for the Luyia, comparative linguistic work generated a self-conscious oral tradition. Speakers compared terminologies, playfully mocked differences in pronunciation, and debated linguistic expressions. 'Speaking' in Limba culture was, according to Finnegan, 'an essential constituent of social order and interchange'.<sup>12</sup> In his social history of the Asante, Tom McCaskie too observed the centrality of oral rather than written communication: 'speaking and listening – the edifice of orality – has a significance in the Asante structuring of social reality that is so fundamental that its implications go to the heart of cultural practice'.<sup>13</sup> The dynamism of orality as a social practice bred communities defined not by a singular common language consecrated in the transcription of a standard written form by colonial missionaries, but rather by the ability of its people to communicate in person. Such orality allowed communities of diverse origins

<sup>8</sup> P. Harries, *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Creative Writing*; A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Lonsdale, "'Listen while I read": the orality of Christian literacy in the young Kenyatta's making of the Kikuyu', in L. de la Gorgendière, K. King, and S. Vaughan (eds.), *Ethnicity in Africa: Roots, Meanings and Implications* (Edinburgh, 1996), 17–53.

<sup>11</sup> D. van den Bersselaar, 'Creating "Union Ibo": missionaries and the Igbo language', *Africa*, 67:2 (1997), 273–95.

<sup>12</sup> R. H. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Oxford, 2007), 18 and 29.

<sup>13</sup> T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (Edinburgh, 2000), 236.

to debate morality and define civility in ways that were mutually intelligible and yet constantly reiterated their diversity.

In her 1983 linguistic study, Rachel Kanyoro declared that ‘Luyia is a non-existent language.’<sup>14</sup> And yet, like the Limba, Luyia patriots insisted on language as central to their formulations of community. Though the flexibility and immediacy of orality proved difficult to reproduce in the new ‘world on paper’, the technologies of writing penetrated and created new contexts for linguistic work.<sup>15</sup> While missionaries and African patriots alike worked to order their constituents through linguistic work, local concern over the creation of a standardised Luyia language revealed more the multiplicity of oral cultures and the political disputes among them, and tensions between the priorities of transcription and the dynamism of oral communication.

#### LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN WESTERN KENYA

The immense linguistic diversity among the communities north-east of Lake Victoria confounded early explorers, missionaries, and administrators. In 1906, one missionary linked this diversity to the lack of centralised political structures: ‘the multiplicity of territorial divisions, . . . the unsettled state of the country, have had their inevitable influence on the language. Bantu Kavirondo has *no common language*.’<sup>16</sup> Missionaries encountered a vast array of local spiritual terminology. The terms for ‘God’ were as varied as the religious systems: *Nyasaye* was common among southern dialects, *Khakaba* among the Wanga while the northern Bukusu prayed to *Were*. Early administrators noted the contrasting forms of political authority, from the Wanga *nabongo* king and the strong military leadership of the Bukusu *omugasa*, to the more amorphous authority of Logoli clan elders or *weng’oma* (‘the one of the drum’), referring to the practice of beating a drum to gather clan heads in times of war.<sup>17</sup> While colonial officials and missionaries interpreted this multiplicity as proof of an ‘unsettled’ political landscape, the variety of languages and political cultures in western Kenya reflected more the complex migrations, niche settlements, and social exchanges necessitated by varied environments.

Centuries of migrating settlers brought a plurality of linguistic influences to western Kenya.<sup>18</sup> In the 1930s, German anthropologist Gunter Wagner mapped migratory routes penetrating the region from all sides, carrying a variety of Bantu, Dholuo, and Maa language stocks.<sup>19</sup> In his 1949 history, *Habari za Abaluyia*, Makerere graduate and teacher at the Alliance High

<sup>14</sup> R. A. Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity: A Linguistic Survey of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya* (Vienna, 1983), 1.

<sup>15</sup> S. Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The Encounter between the LoDagaa and the “World on Paper”, 1892–1991* (Toronto, 2002), 10; see also J. A. Draper (ed.), *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Southern Africa* (Leiden, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Uganda National Archives, Entebbe (UNA) A22/1, N. A., ‘Kavirondo, a comparison and a contrast’, *Uganda Notes*, 4, Jan. 1906.

<sup>17</sup> G. S. Were, *Western Kenya Historical Texts: Abaluyia, Teso, and Elgon Kalenjin* (Nairobi, 1967), 9.

<sup>18</sup> G. S. Were, ‘Ethnic interaction in western Kenya: the emergence of the Abaluyia up to 1850’, *Kenya Historical Review*, 2:1 (1974), 39–44.

<sup>19</sup> G. Wagner, *The Bantu of North Kavirondo, Volume I* (London, 1949), 23.

School, Joseph Otiende, used linguistic differences in pronunciation and vocabulary to support claims to divergent origins and patterns of inter-penetration.<sup>20</sup>

In some cases, diverse terminologies reflected not different meanings but rather defensive cultural practices. While the various terms of *enyumba*, *indzu*, and *eshiribwa* all translated as both lineage and the physical enclosure of the homestead, local communities used their unique vocabularies to identify and call together members of their extended clan networks.<sup>21</sup> The variety of terms for clan, from *oluhia* and *olugongo* to *ibula* and *ehiri* suggest, as Neil Kodesh has argued for the wider Great Lakes region, that ‘the ideology and practices of clanship developed along different lines in various settings’.<sup>22</sup> In other cases, common terms were found to contain different meanings or refer to entirely different concepts. *Laama* translated in many dialects as ‘to pray’, but in others as ‘to curse’, a grave theological challenge for missionary standardisers.<sup>23</sup> Such linguistic differences revealed the diversity of political thought and of local moral economies in western Kenya.

While linguistic diversity revealed multiple forms of social and political organisation, niche ecological settlements bred economic specialisation and interdependence that encouraged common languages of exchange and interaction. From a Logoli elder, Wagner traced a lengthy history of precolonial markets: ‘the people of many different tribes assembled there... And in those years everybody who wished to obtain anything he liked could go to that market’.<sup>24</sup> Gestures, common terms, and the increasing use of Kiswahili throughout the nineteenth century facilitated transactions among Luyia groups and with their Nandi and Luo neighbours.<sup>25</sup> From their new agricultural Bantu-speaking neighbours, Kalenjin-speaking pastoralists adopted a number of terms for cultivation and food production, including ‘beans’, ‘flour’, and ‘to weed’.<sup>26</sup> Bantu and Dholuo speakers shared terms for crops including beans, maize, and sorghum as well as for homestead and wooden hoe. Margaret Hay argued that these similarities between Bantu and Dholuo economic terms testified ‘to a close and prolonged contact’.<sup>27</sup> Multilingualism, code-switching, and extra-linguistic expressions

<sup>20</sup> J. D. Otiende, *Habari za Abaluyia* (Nairobi, 1949).

<sup>21</sup> A. Anangwe and M. Marlo (eds.), *Wanga-English Dictionary*, <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/mmarlo/files/wangadictionary.pdf> (2008); Appleby, *Luluhya-English Vocabulary*; Wagner, *The Bantu I*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> N. Kodesh, ‘Networks of knowledge: clanship and collective well-being in Buganda’, *Journal of African History*, 49:2 (2008), 201, fn.11.

<sup>23</sup> L. L. Appleby, ‘Luyia Old Testament translation: I. Unifying the written form of the language’, *Bible Translator*, 6:4 (1955), 180–5.

<sup>24</sup> G. Wagner, *The Bantu of North Kavirondo, Volume II: The Economic Life* (London, 1949), 162–5.

<sup>25</sup> International African Institute, London (IAI) Malinowski\_7/18, Gunter Wagner Field Notes, Sept. 1934.

<sup>26</sup> B. A. Ogot, ‘Historical portrait of western Kenya up to 1985’, in W. R. Ochieng’ (ed.), *Historical Studies and Social Change in Western Kenya: Essays in Memory of Professor Gideon S. Were* (Nairobi, 2002), 25.

<sup>27</sup> M. Hay, ‘Local trade and ethnicity in western Kenya’, *African Economic History Review*, 2:1 (1975), 7.

all facilitated wider regions of mutual intelligibility without sacrificing cultural distinctiveness or political autonomy.

MISSIONARIES, LANGUAGE WORK, AND THE LIMITS  
OF INDIRECT RULE

The colonial preoccupation with the scientific categorisation of African peoples into primordial ‘tribes’ relied heavily on linguistic perceptions. Colonial officials in western Kenya lamented the difficulty of finding a ‘name’ for a people who spoke such ‘widely differing dialects of the same language’.<sup>28</sup> According to one administrator, the inhabitants of the region were named ‘Bantu of Kavirondo... for lack of a better term’.<sup>29</sup> Colonial administrators mapped the district of North Kavirondo ostensibly to contain all Bantu speakers northeast of Lake Victoria, and to separate them from their Dholuo-speaking southern neighbours. Within North Kavirondo, perceived dialect groupings guided mappings of administrative divisions.

| Tribe                                  | Dialect             | Population |
|--|---------------------|------------|
| Bukusu (including some Tachoni)        | Lubukusu            | 56,000     |
| Logoli                                 | Luragoli            | 49,000     |
| Isukha                                 | Luisukha            | 33,000     |
| Banyore                                | Lunyole or Lunyore  | 32,000     |
| Wanga                                  | Luwanga             | 30,000     |
| Marama                                 | Lumarama            | 18,000     |
| Hayo                                   | Lukhayo             | 18,000     |
| Tiriki                                 | Lutiriki            | 17,000     |
| Marachi                                | Lumarachi           | 14,000     |
| Kisa                                   | Lukisa              | 13,000     |
| Kabras (including some Tachoni)        | Lukabrasi           | 11,000     |
| Batsotso                               | Lutsotso            | 10,000     |
| Idakho                                 | Luidakho            | 7,000      |
| Banyala                                | Lunyala             | 5,000      |
| Samia and Banyala in Central Kavirondo | Lusamia and Lunyala | 22,000     |

Fig. 1. Lee L. Appleby, ‘Sketch of Dialect Groups in North Nyanza’, c. 1942. *Source*: British and Foreign Bible Society Archives, Cambridge (BFBS) BSA/E3/3/324.

Tables (Fig. 1) reduced the complicated spectrum of dialects into neat columns of speakers. Other linguistic studies, however, contested this ordering by increasing the very number of dialects anywhere from 15 to 26.<sup>30</sup> Some colonial officials argued that the linguistic differences between Luidakho and Luisukha were insufficient to support claims to separate dialects. Other dialects, such as Tachoni, were completely elided by particular

<sup>28</sup> KNA PC/NZA/1/18, Nyanza Province Annual Report, 1923.

<sup>29</sup> KNA DC/NN/1/9, North Kavirondo Annual Report, 1928.

<sup>30</sup> British and Foreign Bible Society, Cambridge (BFBS) BSA/E3/3/324, Appleby’s linguistic breakdown. n/d., but 1942; Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity*, 4.

missionary groups, confused administrators, and competing local activists seeking to bolster demographic numbers, secure locations, and justify claims to political representation. What constituted a separate language or dialect was a deeply political question, complicated by the blurred and overlapping boundaries of communities (see Figs. 2 and 3).

While Luyia and European linguists disagreed on the terms of linguistic classification, all remarked on the influence of diverse migrations, the importance of speech, and the pattern of dialects becoming 'progressively different from north to south'.<sup>31</sup> Linguistic diversity in North Kavirondo resisted colonial mappings and complicated language work from the earliest missionary publications.

Missionary 'spheres of influence' superimposed yet another layer of mapping onto this complicated linguistic picture. North Kavirondo was unique for the sheer number of missionary groups that gained footholds – up to ten by the 1920s – and for their geographically non-contiguous spread across the district. The most important – the American Quakers of Friends African Mission (FAM), the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Protestant Church of God, and the Catholic Mill Hill Mission – all arrived at the turn of the century.

FAM missionaries were the first to establish a mission station at Kaimosi in 1902 and to begin work in a local language. Although based in a Lutiriki-speaking area, FAM focused on Luragoli as most of their early converts came from the populous Logoli region, publishing the first Luragoli reader in 1907.<sup>32</sup> By 1940, FAM had published over twenty educational and religious booklets in Luragoli. As FAM expanded its missions, it used Luragoli texts as means of conversion among Kabras, Banyala, Bukusu, and Tachoni populations.

Arriving from Uganda, CMS missionaries contrasted the relative ease of implementing a standard Luganda language policy in Uganda with the complex linguistic picture in North Kavirondo. In 1912, Reverend W. Chadwick began language work around the CMS mission stations at Butere and Maseno, creating a 'union' language called Luhanga. Although predominantly formed from Luwanga, the CMS persistently claimed that Luhanga amalgamated elements of Lumarama, Lukisa, Lutsotso, Lusamia, Lukhayo, and Lumarachi. By 1938, the CMS had completed a Luhanga translation of the New Testament and sponsored the writing of folktales.<sup>33</sup> According to Reverend Kilgour, over 63,000 copies of the Luhanga gospels circulated in the district.<sup>34</sup>

Although FAM and the CMS dominated missionary publications, two other missions also produced important translations during this period. The

<sup>31</sup> Y. Bastin, 'The Interlacustrine Zone (Zone J)', in D. Nurse and G. Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages* (London, 2003), 510 and 645; P. A. N. Itebete, 'Language standardization in western Kenya', in W. H. Whiteley (ed.), *Language in Kenya* (Oxford, 1974), 93.

<sup>32</sup> Friends United Mission Archives, Richmond (FUM) Language and Translation Committee Report, 1923.

<sup>33</sup> Church Missionary Society Archives, Birmingham (CMS) G3/A5/3, Minutes of the Kavirondo District Missionary Committee, 1935–45.

<sup>34</sup> Anglican Church of Kenya, Nairobi (ACK) CMO/BSK/3, R. Kilgour, 'Bantu Kavirondo Languages', 1936.





Fig. 2. Map of locations in North Kavirondo. *Source:* R. A. Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity: A Linguistic Survey of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya* (Vienna, 1983), 9–10.



Fig. 3. Map of dialects in North Kavirondo. *Source:* R. A. Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity: A Linguistic Survey of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya* (Vienna, 1983), 9–10.



Church of God mission arrived in Bunyore in 1905 and quickly produced a Lunyore orthography for religious and instructional texts. By 1929, the Church of God completed their translation of the Lunyore New Testament. The Roman Catholic Mill Hill Mission, unlike the others, produced materials in various dialects as they extended their sphere of influence, though focusing mostly on Luwanga prayer books, catechisms, and hymnals. The lack of coordination, non-contiguous geographic spread, and outright competition among these mission societies led to an abundance of language work and multiple orthographic systems.

Language policy existed at the intersection of three colonial enterprises: administrative communication and propaganda, mission proselytising, and education. In 1915, the CMS debated the relative value of choosing one dialect or promoting the use of Kiswahili as a *lingua franca*.<sup>35</sup> The vocal CMS Archdeacon W. E. Owen advocated the use of Kiswahili for official and educational purposes.<sup>36</sup> Administrators hoped the promotion of Kiswahili would curtail conflicts over discrimination and educational advantages in mixed schools.<sup>37</sup> However, Kiswahili also presented certain disadvantages. Many local intellectuals in Kenya were wary of Kiswahili, seeing it as a 'political threat' to their own linguistic and political work.<sup>38</sup> Many missionaries criticised Kiswahili for its connections to Islam. Muslim traders from the coast and pockets of Somali settlers led to the emergence of a small, but influential, Islamic community in western Kenya, particularly worrisome to missionaries as members of the Wanga royal family converted in the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> Despite its wide use in multi-ethnic schools, in urban centres, and in social exchanges that predated colonial rule, Kiswahili proved too risky in the eyes of colonial officials, who privileged 'vernacular' languages as part of theories of 'adapted' education.<sup>40</sup>

With the rejection of Kiswahili, missionaries and administrators agreed in 1920 to work towards a 'Union Version for the Bantu Kavirondo'.<sup>41</sup> It would take another twenty years before the Luyia Language Committee would be formed. While missionaries and converts at Tumutumumu started work translating the Bible into standard Gikuyu as early as 1912 and the Luo Language Committee officially began its work in 1927, work on a standardised Luyia language did not gain momentum until well into the 1940s.<sup>42</sup> While the linguistic diversity of western Kenya certainly daunted

<sup>35</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/246, Editorial Sub-Committee Minutes, 3 Nov. 1915.

<sup>36</sup> CMS G3/A5/0 G1, W. E. Owen, 'Laws into Swahili', 1922–7.

<sup>37</sup> CMS G3/A5/0 G1, Butere Meeting Notes, 1934–53.

<sup>38</sup> D. Peterson, 'Writing in revolution: independent schooling and Mau Mau in Nyeri', in E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and J. M. Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority, and Nationhood* (Oxford, 2003), 80; D. Peterson, 'Language work and colonial politics in Eastern Africa: the making of Standard Swahili and "School Kikuyu"', in D. L. Hoyt and K. Oslund (eds.), *The Study of Language and the Politics of Community in Global Context* (Lanham, MD, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> CMS G3X A5/25, J. E. Chadwick to Miss Magowan, 4 July 1918.

<sup>40</sup> T. Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH, 2004), 41–9.

<sup>41</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/246, Editorial Sub-Committee Minutes, Kampala, 7 Jan. 1920.

<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 65–85; M. P. Carotenuto, 'Cultivating an African community: the Luo Union in 20<sup>th</sup> century East Africa' (unpublished PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2006), 200–2.

missionaries, it was by no means unique. CMS Reverend Leonard Beecher, who gained a reputation for language work in central Kenya, pointed to similar levels of diversity in other parts of the colony: 'as many and as varied forms exist in the Kikuyu tribal areas as appear to exist in Kavirondo'.<sup>43</sup> The relatively late process of creating one language in North Kavirondo reflected defensive linguistic traditions, the profusion of competing missionary groups, and the particularities of indirect rule in western Kenya.

In the early decades of colonial rule, political life in North Kavirondo fractured over internal struggles regarding chiefly authority and land rights. The Wanga, the only community with a recognised precolonial history of monarchy, provided the British with identifiable political authorities or, in the words of Mahmood Mamdani, 'decentralised despots' who they imposed over non-Wanga subjects.<sup>44</sup> Colonial officials consecrated this relationship in 1909 when they anointed Wanga *Nabongo* Mumia 'paramount chief'. And yet, the limits of this form of governance soon became evident. The constituent communities of North Kavirondo had a long history of decentralised political life. From their very instalment, Wanga chiefs faced local opposition to their rule, ranging from uncoordinated and reactive confrontations to large scale mobilisations of civil disobedience. In the 1920s, the sporadic protests against Wanga chiefs transformed into a widespread anti-Wanga movement.<sup>45</sup>

Anti-Wanga campaigns prompted local communities to reframe divergent accounts of the past, mobilise kinship networks, and invent mythical founding fathers. Whether through the reformulation of names or defence of linguistic difference, language proved a site of argument and political strategy for forwarding claims to cultural distinctiveness and political sovereignty. In Marama, a location fusing together 42 clans of diverse origins under the rule of Wanga Chief Mulama, clan heads invented a mythical common ancestor, Mulafu, to claim shared kinship.<sup>46</sup> Isukha leaders in the 1930s claimed their name also came from a founding ancestor to defend their historic right to a chieftaincy, despite the term's translation as 'forward' or 'in front'.<sup>47</sup> Local representatives used the opportunity of the 1930 North Kavirondo Native Land Tenure Committee to secure their position as the rightful guardians of their community's customs, insisting on their specific terminologies of land tenure, political authority, and kinship.<sup>48</sup> This creative work reflected the centrality of language to larger political projects and formulations of community.

While, by the 1930s, the Wanga had outlived their political usefulness and were replaced by chiefs with greater local recognition, new threats emerged that prompted many of these same young activists to subsume their

<sup>43</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Beecher to Smith, 8 Aug. 1941.

<sup>44</sup> M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London, 1996), 52.

<sup>45</sup> Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Dobbs Papers, MSS.Afri.s.515, C. M. Dobbs, 'History of Wanga Domination', 23 June 1930; K. P. Lorhenthz, 'The campaign to depose Chief Mulama in Marama location: a case study in politics of kinship', *Kenya Historical Review*, 4:2 (1976), 249–57.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with James Ojala Opuka, Butere, 5 Oct. 2007.

<sup>47</sup> KNA DC/NN/8/1, North Kavirondo NLTC, 1 July 1930.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

differences and imagine an enlarged ethnic polity in western Kenya. In 1931, the discovery of gold near Kakamega prompted British officials to reverse the 1930 Native Lands Trust Ordinance that declared land in the Native Reserves 'for the use and benefit of the native tribes of the Colony forever'.<sup>49</sup> This territorial crisis prompted local political thinkers to consolidate their diverse practices of land tenure, to suppress recent internal debates over political authority, and to defend the boundaries of the reserve against British bureaucrats and incoming European miners. A year after the discovery of gold, representatives from North Kavirondo stood before the Kenya Land Commission and declared themselves representatives of 'the tribe': a tribe as yet unnamed.<sup>50</sup>

Building on the new political consciousness sparked by the gold rush, young mission converts and teachers formed the North Kavirondo Central Association (NKCA) to create a new regional polity.<sup>51</sup> While these young cultural entrepreneurs embarked on a variety of social and political projects, first among them was the naming of their constituents. Although its origins remain contested, in all its translations *Kavirondo* was a derogatory and foreign-imposed name.<sup>52</sup> In a rare demonstration of unity, the disparate communities of North Kavirondo rejected the colonial epithet 'Bantu of Kavirondo' and campaigned for a locally articulated name.

As during anti-Wanga campaigns, naming proved a crucial terrain for defining and debating the political ethos of community. District Commissioner C. B. Thompson viewed this campaign as an assertive process arising from comparative patriotic work: 'as their Nilotic brethren had a generic term Luo by which to call themselves, it behoved the Bantu to exhume from the past, or invent for the future, a name for themselves too'.<sup>53</sup> Heated debates over the early failed suggestions of *Abakwe*, people of the east, and *Abalimi*, a common term for agriculturalists or 'common peasants', point to the complex bargaining, and different political and social priorities at stake in the selection of a name.

In 1935, the NKCA seized the opportunity to name its constituents, announcing their candidate in a pamphlet entitled 'Abaluhya – Kinship'.<sup>54</sup> A relatively common term, *oluhia* referred to the 'fire-place on a meadow', where the 'old men of the clan community meet every morning'.<sup>55</sup> The *oluhia* served as a sort of assembly site for initiation rituals, political negotiations, and the burial of clan heads: it was a 'microcosm... the place of practical

<sup>49</sup> For a full discussion of the Native Lands Trust Ordinance, see P. M. Shilaro, *A Failed Eldorado: Colonial Capitalism, Rural Industrialization, African Land Rights in Kenya, and the Kakamega Gold Rush, 1930–1952* (Lanham, MD, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> *Kenya Land Commission Evidence, Volume III* (London, 1934), 2221–3.

<sup>51</sup> For the political history of the NKCA, see J. M. Lonsdale, 'Political associations in western Kenya', in R. I. Rotberg and A. A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), 589–638.

<sup>52</sup> For debates on the origins of *Kavirondo*, see H. Elphinstone, 'The origin of "Kavirondo"', *East African Standard* (Nairobi), 20 Nov. 1928; A. J. Oyugi, 'The origin of the name Kavirondo', *Makerere Journal*, 2 (April 1938), 157–8.

<sup>53</sup> KNA DC/NN/10/1/2, Thompson to Field Jones, 1 May 1929.

<sup>54</sup> NKCA pamphlet, 'Avaluhya – Kinship', 1935 as quoted in J. M. Lonsdale, 'A political history of Nyanza: 1883–1945' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1964), 539, fn. 59.

<sup>55</sup> Wagner, *Bantu I*, 55.

everyday life'.<sup>56</sup> Unlike Kikuyu or Luo cultural entrepreneurs who drew their constituents in direct descent from a mythic founding father, NKCA writers instead chose a name that privileged a horizontal drawing together of disparate, autonomous clans into one discursive and political space. Much as Carol Summers has argued regarding young Ganda activists who rudely appropriated and reworked the concept of *bataka* from a hierarchical group of elders into 'something close to a concept of universal citizenship', the young men of the NKCA wrested the *oluhia* from the hands of their elders and reconfigured the term as an expression of common kinship.<sup>57</sup> Through relentless local campaigns and a narrow win in the Local Native Council (LNC), the NKCA propelled the 'Luyia' name to common currency by the late 1930s. According to Bethwell Ogot, the NKCA's pamphlet reflected not only the 'beginning of Luyia cultural nationalism and the invention of the imagined Greater Luyia Community', but also an important part of the 'untold story' of Kenyan nationalism.<sup>58</sup>

The work of these young ethnic entrepreneurs gave renewed energies to the creation of one unified language. In 1940, the American Bible Society approached Reverend Leonard Beecher to conduct a 'factual appraisal' of languages in North Kavirondo. Beecher was at the time charged with creating an African broadcast using vernacular languages for the Information Office in Nairobi. Radios were becoming increasingly popular not only as a means of government propaganda but also as a vehicle for local political projects.<sup>59</sup> By 1941, the Information Office regularly broadcasted in Kiswahili, Kikamba, Dholuo, and Gikuyu.<sup>60</sup> In 1942, the North Kavirondo LNC voted 32 to 9 that all broadcasts should be in 'luluhya', a language as yet unwritten.<sup>61</sup>

#### THE LUYIA LANGUAGE COMMITTEE

The creation of the Luyia Language Committee in 1941 reflected not only missionary and colonial interests but moreover the social work of African cultural entrepreneurs. Language work in western Kenya was a site of contestation and creativity, where the different priorities of missionary linguists and African translators collided. The strongest initial advocates of a standard Luyia language emerged from a new generation of African graduates. The first Luyia graduates from the important Makerere College in Uganda returned to the district in the 1930s to high-ranking posts in

<sup>56</sup> O. A. Olumwullah, *Dis-ease in the Colonial State: Medicine, Society, and Social Change among the AbaNyole of Western Kenya* (Westport, CT, 2002), 71.

<sup>57</sup> C. Summers, 'Young Buganda and old boys: youth, generational transition, and ideas of leadership in Buganda, 1920–1949', *Africa Today*, 51:3 (2005), 110; C. Summers, 'Radical rudeness: Ugandan social critiques in the 1940s', *Journal of Social History*, 39:3 (2006), 741–70.

<sup>58</sup> B. A. Ogot, 'Mau Mau and nationhood: the untold story', in Odhiambo and Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> G. Lynch, *I Say To You: Ethnic Politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (Chicago, 2011), 35.

<sup>60</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/324, 'Broadcasting to the Bantu-speaking people of Kavirondo', n/d., but 1941.

<sup>61</sup> KNA PC/NZA/2/1/158, Minutes of the North Kavirondo LNC, 17 Sept. 1942.

government schools and on local boards.<sup>62</sup> At Makerere, these men had written extensively in the *Makerere College Magazine* on political developments and social change back in their home locations. After the disbanding of the NKCA at the outset of the Second World War, Makerere graduates returned to take up the Luyia ethnic project and promoted language work as a central tool for uniting the compatriots they had imagined from afar.

Foremost among these young Makerere graduates, W. B. Akatsa was an accomplished writer and emerging educational leader in the district. At Makerere, Akatsa won numerous prizes for his poetry and essays.<sup>63</sup> In 1941, he sent an open letter to the newly convened Luyia Language Committee entitled 'An Appeal for Linguistic Unity among the Abaluhya'.<sup>64</sup> In this eloquent tract, Akatsa sketched an oral community of mutually intelligible speakers in western Kenya: 'go where a Muluhyia may in North Kavirondo, he is understood, and is at home, and speaks to his fellow Abaluhya in no other medium than his own particular dialect'. Rather than support any particular dialect, Akatsa appealed to the committee to call upon expert linguistic knowledge to settle the profusion of 'Lu-whatever languages' and create a 'scientific' uniform language. Fellow Makerere graduates and local teachers Ephraim A. Andere and Solomon Adagala echoed this technocratic disposition. Andere pushed for the 'complicated and delicate' work of linguistic consolidation to be conducted in conjunction with educational committees.<sup>65</sup> Adagala warned the committee not to rely on illiterate elders 'who have no idea of the present day changes', but rather to privilege teachers and other 'intelligent members of our Community'.<sup>66</sup> The views of this small but influential cadre of teachers and leaders reflected a new political ethos that privileged technocratic skill, youth, and an urbane culture.

Throughout Kenya, language committees provided a common training ground for burgeoning political leaders. In 1947, all three nominations for the Legislative Council from western Kenya, Philip Ingutia, Paul Mboya, and B. A. Ohanga, played significant roles in their respective Luyia and Luo language committees.<sup>67</sup> The Kalenjin Language Committee similarly included future politicians Daniel arap Moi and Taita arap Towett.<sup>68</sup> Well into the 1960s, future Luyia politicians wrote of linguistic work as central to kinship and political development in the pages of the Abaluyia Makerere Students' Union's quarterly magazine, *Muluyia*, founded in the mid-1950s. For Luyia cultural entrepreneurs, linguistic work offered an opportunity to exercise their technocratic ethos and to forward their political agendas.

<sup>62</sup> Luyia students ranked third among Makerere graduates from Kenya throughout the colonial period, J. E. Goldthorpe, *An African Elite: Makerere College Students, 1922-1960* (Nairobi, 1965).

<sup>63</sup> *Makerere College Magazine* (Kampala), 1:7 (May 1940).

<sup>64</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/324, W. B. Akatsa, 'An appeal for linguistic unity among the Abaluhya', 1941.

<sup>65</sup> ACK ACSO/CPN/1, E. A. Andere to Secretary of African Education Board, 7 Mar. 1951.

<sup>66</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Letters in response to proposed orthography, Aug. to Oct. 1943.

<sup>67</sup> KNA DC/KMG/1/1/73, North Nyanza District Commissioner to the Nyanza Provincial Commissioner, 10 Mar. 1947; Carotenuto, 'Cultivating an African community', 201.

<sup>68</sup> Lynch, *I Say To You*, 38.

Although these Makerere graduates formed the *avant-garde* of Luyia language advocates, European missionaries provided the material backing and main personnel for the committee, positioning themselves as linguistic brokers in the consolidation of a Luyia language. Representatives of FAM, the Church of God, the Mill Hill Mission, and the CMS all attended the committee's first meetings on 4 April 1941, with CMS Archdeacon Owen at the helm. CMS missionary Lee L. Appleby became the only member dedicated to full-time linguistic work. Appleby brought a particular sensibility and set of experiences to this work. Throughout the 1930s, she had worked on Luhanga translations, passing her Luhanga exam in 1934.<sup>69</sup> As principal of the CMS Girls School in Butere, she experimented with Luhanga publications of folktales, concluding that previous Luhanga publications had failed to gain wide audience due to their 'prosy style and Anglicised Luhanga'.<sup>70</sup> For her new Luhanga folktale publication, Appleby enlisted a young Wanga woman with very little English to write in the 'real Luhanga'. For Appleby, linguistic work in Africa was about finding the 'authentic' African voice, unspoiled by modern education and ripe for conversion.<sup>71</sup>

The Luyia Language Committee had a rocky beginning: their first meetings ended in the committee's resignation due to disagreements over orthography and the importance of each dialect.<sup>72</sup> Early discussions focused exclusively on Luhanga, Luragoli, and Lunyore. As Harries has argued of South-East Africa, standardisation was often less the consolidating process missionaries claimed and more an exercise in creating linguistic hierarchies, elevating one dialect over others.<sup>73</sup> While each mission vigorously defended the wide intelligibility of their own particular dialect, the non-contiguous spread of missionary work in western Kenya meant that 'missions now overlap in the dialect areas. The size of the respective spheres of influence of the three missions could only be assessed by a census of their Church membership.'<sup>74</sup> Mission groups counted their numbers and mapped their converts to promote their own linguistic work and further their strategic positions within the district.

Other linguistic endeavours throughout Africa provided inspiration and direction. Beecher drew on his continuing work with the Gikuyu language to advocate the use of one central dialect: 'In Kikuyu... we have refused to recognise any dialect but one.'<sup>75</sup> Beecher recommended that Appleby consult the work of Ida Ward on 'Union Ibo' in Nigeria as a blueprint for standardisation. As in North Kavirondo, the profusion of Ibo dialects, according to Ward, reflected 'the smaller unit organisation of the Ibo people'.<sup>76</sup> She argued that 'Union Ibo', created for Bible translation in the

<sup>69</sup> ACK ACSO/CP/2, Kavirondo Ruridecanal Council, 31 Aug. 1938.

<sup>70</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Appleby to Richards, 9 Nov. 1938.

<sup>71</sup> L. L. Appleby, 'Luyia Old Testament translation: IV. Translation and people', *Bible Translator*, 7:3 (1956), 101-4.

<sup>72</sup> KNA DC/KMG/1/4/29, Meeting of the Sub-Committee on Bantu Orthography, 13 Apr. 1942; KNA DC/KMG/1/4/29, Owen to the D. E. B., 4 Oct. 1942.

<sup>73</sup> Harries, *Butterflies*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Beecher to Dr. North, 3 Dec. 1941.

<sup>75</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Beecher to Smith, 8 Aug. 1941.

<sup>76</sup> I. C. Ward, *Ibo Dialects and the Development of a Common Language* (Cambridge, 1941), 8.



early 1900s, failed to become a locally relevant language as it was 'too randomly mixed'.<sup>77</sup> Ward recommended standardisation around one central dialect to ensure consistency and comprehensibility. Appleby quoted Ward's work to defend the elevation of one central dialect in pursuit of a 'living language with nothing artificial about it'.<sup>78</sup>

With these examples in hand, Beecher and Appleby steered the committee towards Luhanga, much to the frustration of Church of God and FAM missionaries. In an open letter, retired Paramount Chief Mumia defended Luhanga as the language of the district and he 'unhesitatingly recommended Luhanga, as being the root and as it were mother language of all the rest'.<sup>79</sup> He further argued that the inhabitants of North Kavirondo never required interpreters in public or private life, referencing a long history of cultural interpenetration: 'these tribes also were in frequent communication... about such matters as Dowry and Case shauris, which were matters of discussion and settlement between them'. While echoing Akatsa's emphasis on spoken culture and mutual intelligibility, Mumia privileged Luhanga as the natural mother tongue of the diverse communities his Wang'a chiefs had briefly ruled.

Despite continuing concerns, Appleby worked towards an orthographic system based largely on Luhanga. The committee adopted the 1930 International Institute for African Languages and Culture Bantu orthography, following the models of Luganda and Kiswahili and avoiding diacritical marks.<sup>80</sup> Wagner suggested orthography should follow the most 'progressive drift': the unconscious change in natural language towards common usage.<sup>81</sup> The committee aimed to base their choices on the 'actual pronunciation of the majority of people'.<sup>82</sup> However, standardising spelling proved controversial as did pronunciation (for example, the 'k' versus 'kh' distinction), the use of noun class prefixes, and the sounding of plosives. Standardised spelling threatened the oral distinctiveness of dialects, glossing over the importance of pronunciation and patterns of speech to political and cultural meaning. Kanyoro sketched the problems encountered with 'emotive' pronunciations: *omurwi*, a common term for 'head', if pronounced by Luragoli speakers translated as 'anus'.<sup>83</sup> Differences in pronunciation and, what one scholar of Luyia linguistics describes as, 'sound realizations' were pervasive and self-conscious; speakers in western Kenya simultaneously drew together and set themselves apart through their 'characteristic articulation' of sounds.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Ward, *Ibo Dialects*, 10; B. Fulford, 'An Igbo Esperanto: a history of the union Ibo Bible 1900–1950', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32:4 (2002), 457–501.

<sup>78</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Appleby to Hoyt, 23 Oct. 1943.

<sup>79</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Paramount Chief Mumia, 'Common Language', 7 Apr. 1942.

<sup>80</sup> International African Institute, *Practical Orthography of African Languages, Memorandum I*, (London, 1930).

<sup>81</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, G. Wagner, 'Bantu orthography', n/d., most likely 1941; E. Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York, 1921).

<sup>82</sup> Appleby, 'Luyia Old Testament Translation: I', 183.

<sup>83</sup> Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity*, 135.

<sup>84</sup> L. Kisémbé, 'Dahl's Law and the Luyia Law in Luyia dialects spoken in western Kenya', *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7:4 (2010).



In 1943, the committee produced a circular to test the appeal of their proposed orthography.<sup>85</sup> Written in Luhanga, the circular tabulated the differences among Luhanga, Lunyore, and Luragoli in pronunciation, spelling, and grammar, placing them alongside the proposed Luluyia orthography. Andere used his linguistically mixed students at Nyang'ori Primary School to test the committee's orthography against vernacular mission texts, by giving two Bukusu boys the Luragoli New Testament and the committee's circular to read. Despite being accustomed to Luragoli texts, both boys preferred the circular, finding they 'understood it better and also it was easier to read'.<sup>86</sup> These students unconsciously highlighted a central tension of Luyia linguistic work: their Lubukusu dialect was indeed closer to the Luhanga used in the circular as Lubukusu and Luragoli represented the most distant dialects in the district.<sup>87</sup> But for the Logoli and others, as will be seen, this orthography proved troubling, both linguistically and politically. Standardising orthography imposed a linguistic hierarchy that threatened the flexibility of oral communications and revealed the instrumental use of language in competing political arguments. The committee accepted Appleby's orthography in March 1944 and publicised it widely through articles in the vernacular press, instructional booklets, and leaflets.<sup>88</sup> Luhanga, like Wanga political history, was thereby made 'Luyia'.

#### FINDING THE WORDS: TRANSLATING POWER AND DISSENT

Despite this orthographic victory for Appleby and Luhanga, the work of translation revealed the more complex bargaining between diverse local vocabularies and the priorities of missionaries. Appleby concluded that all terms would be accepted with two provisos: the committee would only recognise one spelling and would avoid publishing terms not widely known, using explanatory footnotes and Kiswahili or English terms where necessary.<sup>89</sup> The committee set to work translating grammars, dictionaries, and, most ambitiously, a Luyia Old Testament. In the late 1940s, the district social welfare officer headed a major literacy campaign, using pamphlets, articles, and film.<sup>90</sup> The CMS bookshop in Nairobi reported that of the 5,000 Luyia Readers published, 4,964 had been sold and that the Luyia Primers were very popular.<sup>91</sup>

To find the words of this new language, Appleby convened meetings with elders throughout the district.<sup>92</sup> Despite the controversy these meetings often entailed, Appleby maintained a romantic vision of the work of translation. In an article for *Bible Translator*, Appleby mused about the leisurely pace necessary for accessing African cultural life.<sup>93</sup> She idealised the lack of local

<sup>85</sup> KNA DC/KMG/1/4/29, 'Obuhandichi Bwa Oluluhya', 19 July 1943.

<sup>86</sup> ACK, CMO/BSK/3, Andere to the LLC, n/d., but 1943.

<sup>87</sup> Wagner, *Bantu I*.

<sup>88</sup> ACK BFBS, Correspondence File, Appleby article on history of the Language Committee.

<sup>89</sup> Appleby, 'Luyia Old Testament translation: IV', 183.

<sup>90</sup> KNA DC/NN/1/27-42, North Kavirondo Annual Reports, 1945-60.

<sup>91</sup> CMS G3/A5/0 E11/1, CMS Bookshop Nairobi, Literature Report, 1945-6.

<sup>92</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Appleby to Beecher, 11 Nov. 1943.

<sup>93</sup> Appleby, 'Luyia Old Testament translation: IV', 103.

terms for 'neighbour', reminding 'us of a society where people never just "happen" to live side by side'. Although Appleby repeated the necessity of a 'large African contribution' in translation work, much of this contribution came from only six Marama and Wanga elders from the CMS base. While the committee occasionally included representatives from the Samia, Batsotso, and Banyore, their input was limited and representatives from the numerous Bukusu and Logoli were rarely invited to attend meetings. This method of linguistic investigation risked being incomprehensible to wider audiences. For the tricky translation of 'pray', the committee eventually settled on *saba* despite its inadequate meaning of 'to ask'. In the same vein, for the term 'curse' the committee ironically supported the use of *laama* despite its translation as 'to pray' in many dialects. With limited African input, translations often suppressed the divergent modes of thought that produced competing vocabularies. As Solomon Adagala had worried, the young intellectuals whose early political work had created the conditions for the consolidation of a Luyia language were now being sidelined in favour of the 'illiterate elders' of Appleby's romantic vision.

Language work offered a window into the processes by which colonial and missionary agents reconfigured ideals of domesticity, morality, and community into local terms. Appleby clearly aimed the 1947 *First Luyia Grammar* at the European community, whether missionary, settler, or administrator. As Derek Peterson argued in his analysis of successive Gikuyu dictionaries, translators embedded ideas of gender roles, power, and colonial subject-positioning in their lessons.<sup>94</sup> Translation exercises often focused on domestic values and moral conduct: texts instructed readers to translate such phrases as 'that is a bad custom' and 'bread is good food'.<sup>95</sup> Appleby's translation exercises provided a glossary for missionaries to encode gendered domesticities and civilise their African converts through linguistic discipline.

While infusing grammar lessons with proper domestic behaviour, local gender terms proved difficult to match with the committee's ideas of gender relations. The committee used *omukhasi* for 'woman', yet its Luwanga translation referred specifically to a married woman.<sup>96</sup> The term 'concubine' also proved tricky as local words tended to imply the position of junior wife or voluntary relationships. In this case, the committee opted for the Kiswahili word. Many of the committee's earliest publications focused on nutrition, proper household conduct, and childcare, and encouraged African women to stay within the confines of the home.<sup>97</sup> The movement of women outside the district was a growing concern among missionaries, administrators, and African men seeking to control the social reproduction of the tribe. *Achendanga obubi*, translated as 'she is living an evil life', linked the immoral behaviour of *obubi*, often translated as 'evil', with *chenda*, the term for

<sup>94</sup> D. Peterson, 'Colonizing language? missionaries and Gikuyu dictionaries, 1904 and 1914', *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), 257–72; see also K. E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic*, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900 (Portsmouth, NH, 1993).

<sup>95</sup> L. L. Appleby, *A First Luyia Grammar, with Exercises* (Nairobi, 1947).

<sup>96</sup> ACK Genesis File, Minutes of the Luyia Old Testament Translation (LOTT) Committee, Apr. 1952.

<sup>97</sup> KNA DC/KMG/2/8/42, Luyia Publications, Aug. 1957.

travelling outside the home. The committee created a lexicon of morality later mobilised by political associations in campaigns against errant women and runaway wives living in urban centres.<sup>98</sup> Through these translations, missionaries and African translators inscribed norms of domesticity and moral conduct into local vocabularies of gender and work.

A greater concern for Luyia standardisers emerged in the renderings of territory and political community. With no local terms for the compass points of North, South, East, and West, the committee settled on the strangely pidgin terms *notsi* and *sautsi*.<sup>99</sup> This 'phonological' adaptation proved quite common, particularly for terms related to the church, to education, and to government.<sup>100</sup> The translation of 'nation', central to readings of Proverbs, prompted debates over whether the term referred to a people or a territory.<sup>101</sup> Several translations considered implied vertical hierarchical understandings of community while others conflated tribe and nation, and contained more fixed geographical references. In 1943, Appleby chose *lihanga* to translate 'nation', defining the nation as those 'taken collectively'. Wagner, however, translated *lihanga* as 'the community of clans organised under the political rule of the Wanga chiefs'.<sup>102</sup> Choosing *lihanga* to render 'nation' problematically positioned the concept of nationhood as an extension of Wanga political hierarchy. These translations inscribed the local into biblical narratives. As ethnic associations like the NKCA regularly invoked religious examples in their political imaginings, quoting biblical verses at the outset of petitions and narrating biblical proverbs in public meetings, these translations contained important implications for the languages of patriotism.

Translation work revealed not only the attempt to infuse local terms with British morals but also the competing values within divergent dialects. Standardisers, whether missionary or African, were divided by self-interest. For supporters of a Luyia language, linguistic work provided a vehicle for uniting their constituents and disciplining their neighbours. And yet, Appleby's insistence on *Luhanga* and the committee's selective African membership alienated many of these early advocates. For dissenters, the Luyia language increasingly represented a threat not only to cultural distinctiveness and political sovereignty but also to the very oral community described by Akatsa and others as the essence of 'being Luyia'.

#### LUYIA DISSENTERS: DEFENDING LINGUISTIC AUTONOMY

Despite the early support of Makerere graduates and other local political thinkers, the work of the Luyia Language Committee prompted the dissent and eventual departure of many key African leaders, missionaries, and whole dialect groups. From orthography to translation, dissent arose from local representatives who sought to defend their linguistic autonomy and protect their cultural distinctiveness. The predominance given to *Luhanga* raised

<sup>98</sup> K. Mutongi, *Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya* (Chicago, 2007), 139–48.

<sup>99</sup> ACK Luyia Old Testament File, Minutes of the LOTT, Sept. 1952.

<sup>100</sup> L. Kitembe, 'Linguistic effects of English on Luyia languages', *Estudios de Lingüística Aplicada*, 21 (2003), 53–70.

<sup>101</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/324, Minutes of the LOTT, 1954.

<sup>102</sup> Wagner, *Bantu I*, 55.

concerns for those who had fought against Wanga political domination. The proposed orthography failed to account for the importance of pronunciation and patterns of speech: mutual oral intelligibility did not ensure mutual comprehensibility when translated to the page. The most fervent voices of dissent emerged from the two largest linguistic groups: the southern Logoli and the northern Bukusu.

Although the Logoli produced the founding fathers of the NKCA, Luyia language work ignored their political importance and pitted their Quaker missionaries against the Anglican leaders of the committee. The timing of the Luyia Language Committee was indeed conspicuous: the CMS vigorously campaigned to commence the committee's work before FAM completed its Luragoli Old Testament.<sup>103</sup> Luragoli was a particularly distinctive dialect, especially in matters of pronunciation as already noted, and very early proved a challenge to the promotion of Luhanga as the dominant dialect.

When the committee's 1943 orthography sidelined Luragoli, Logoli teachers and politicians protested their cultural suppression under the weight of Luhanga. Although an early supporter of Luyia language consolidation, Solomon Adagala now denounced the committee's attempt 'to force the whole of North Kavirondo... to turn to Luhanga'.<sup>104</sup> Adagala complained that the committee had 'taken no steps to invite a Logoli member to join the Committee'.<sup>105</sup> A group of Logoli teachers from Kaimosi protested that the 'majority system' for determining spelling and word usage unfairly disadvantaged the Logoli: 'all dialects should be taken into account and difficulties shared'.<sup>106</sup> In 1945, a Logoli soldier in the South East Asia Command wrote to the Information Office in Nairobi that Appleby was 'trying to divide North Kavirondo'.<sup>107</sup> These protesters blamed denominational biases for internal disunity and the severing of the Logoli from linguistic and political development in the district.

These protests came at a time of political integration, as the two Logoli locations united under Chief Agoi in 1940. In these letters, teachers and politicians positioned themselves not only as the guardians of a distinctive Logoli cultural heritage, but also as progressive, educated, and urbane representatives of a larger civil society. The Maragoli Society, formed in the early 1940s to defend and promote Logoli cultural and political work, petitioned for the Luragoli language to 'form a greater part of the unified language', due to the numerical importance of the Logoli and FAM's reach across different dialect areas.<sup>108</sup> These were not protests against the principle of unification or the importance of literacy but rather demands for a reassessment of linguistic hierarchies.

<sup>103</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Beecher to Owen, 12 Oct. 1942.

<sup>104</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Letters in response to circular on orthography, Aug. to Oct.

1943.

<sup>105</sup> KNA PC/NZA/3/1/79, Minutes of the North Kavirondo LNC, 22 Nov. 1944.

<sup>106</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, Letters in response to proposed orthography, Aug. to Oct.

1943.

<sup>107</sup> KNA DC/KMG/1/4/29, South East Asia Command to Kenya Information Office, 8 Oct. 1945.

<sup>108</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, LLC draft reply to Maragoli Society, n/d., but 1943.

Logoli opposition prompted the committee to remap North Kavirondo based on a complicated linguistic arithmetic.<sup>109</sup> In 1943, the committee published a memorandum distancing Luragoli from Luluyia, claiming it was closer to Gikuyu than to any Luyia dialect.<sup>110</sup> In 1946, the Kenya Advisory Committee of the BFBS in Nairobi granted that Luragoli was 'clearly in a different linguistic category'.<sup>111</sup> The Luyia Language Committee collaborated with government bodies to undermine and isolate Luragoli language work. In 1949, the LNC emphasised that their 'orthography grant' was available only for the promotion of Luluyia and not 'the Luragoli language which some people were trying to introduce as the lingua franca'.<sup>112</sup> Over protests from the Maragoli Education Board, the government insisted that 'Luyia is suitable for use in Maragoli schools . . . and therefore school and adult development should not be retarded by the clamour of a Nationalistic minority.'<sup>113</sup> Appleby believed that if the committee published 'enough attractive literature, with carefully chosen vocabulary, we will have the whole of Bantu Kavirondo with us except for a handful of Maragoli extremists'.<sup>114</sup> Despite this environment, FAM continued to publish in Luragoli, with the first complete Bible appearing anywhere in the district in 1951 – a version that remains an important vehicle for the expression of Logoli political thought and cultural production.<sup>115</sup> The exclusion of the populous and politically active Logoli dealt a serious blow to the legitimacy of the committee's work and encouraged the growth of a competitive linguistic culture.

Among the Bukusu, controversy over language consolidation only emerged as the translation of Luyia texts reached into the northern territories. Before the 1950s, the Luyia Language Committee barely acknowledged the distinctive nature of the Lubukusu dialect, despite the significant number of people who spoke it. Since the Catholic Mill Hill Mission used Luwanga texts in the area and the FAM used their Luragoli texts, the committee assumed Bukusu readers would easily adapt to any new orthography. In 1952, the committee conducted its first serious investigations into Lubukusu and the comprehensibility of their Luyia translations in the northern locations. Investigations by Appleby and her assistant Jared Isalu quickly revealed that differences in vocabulary were more significant than originally assumed. While Bukusu elders petitioned both the Kenyan and Ugandan governments to join their linguistically similar Bagisu neighbours on the Ugandan side of Mount Elgon, the committee remained determined to maintain a contiguous Luyia territory.<sup>116</sup>

Bukusu resistance challenged colonial boundaries and forwarded Bukusu political campaigns of the 1940s. Like the Luyia language project itself, local concerns over the Lubukusu dialect first manifested in calls for a self-articulated name. In 1946, a committee of northern representatives sent a

<sup>109</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, 'Luhya orthography and Ragoli', n/d., but 1943.

<sup>110</sup> ACK CMO/BSK/3, 'A further memorandum on Luhya orthography', n/d., but 1943.

<sup>111</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/246, Kenya Advisory Committee of the BFBS, 29 Nov. 1946.

<sup>112</sup> KNA PC/NZA/3/1/80, Minutes of the North Kavirondo LNC, 16–19 Aug. 1949.

<sup>113</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/324, Frank Bedford to Mr. Bradnock, 21 Feb. 1951.

<sup>114</sup> ACK ACSO/CPN/1, Appleby to Beecher, 23 Oct. 1943.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with J. D. Otiende, Mbale, 9 Oct. 2007.

<sup>116</sup> BFBS BSA/E3/3/324, Appleby to Bradnock, 25 Feb. 1953.

letter to the LNC demanding *Kitosh*, the name given to them by their Maasai neighbours and translated as ‘enemy’, be replaced with their own term, *Bukusu*.<sup>117</sup> Demands for new ethnonyms were often the first step in political campaigns for better education and representation.

Lubukusu posed the greatest difficulties to a Luyia vocabulary. The committee sought creative solutions to the translation problems illustrated in the previous section. On Appleby’s second visit to Bukusu territory, the ‘Chief’s Language Committee’ submitted a list of terms that would require explanation. For the Book of Genesis, the committee addressed these issues by adding explanatory footnotes and providing Bukusu readers with alternative Lubukusu terms. These marginal notes and substitute terms made a mess of these texts, rendering them unpleasant for Bukusu readers who were forced to constantly interrupt their readings and adjust their linguistic framework. In 1954, the Bukusu Locational Council at Sirisia refused to cooperate further with Appleby’s work.<sup>118</sup> By 1957, Bukusu chiefs refused to use Luyia texts in their schools.<sup>119</sup> In 1958, Bukusu political leaders, helped by the Mill Hill Mission, formed the Lubukusu Language Committee.<sup>120</sup> Bukusu politicians used language work as a declaration of their ethnic separateness from the Logoli who taught them in FAM schools, the Wanga who had ruled them, and the Luyia standardisers who ignored their cultural distinctiveness.

Competing linguistic projects challenged and, in the end, defeated the goals of Luyia standardisers. The four numerically dominant dialects – Luhanga, Lunyore, Luragoli, and Lubukusu – remained divided among the four dominant missionary bodies and highly dependent on their support, both financial and intellectual: when Father Rabanzer of the Catholic Mill Hill Mission left Kenya in 1961, the Lubukusu Language Committee became all but defunct.<sup>121</sup> Although this lower level ethno-nationalism reflects patterns described in the historical scholarship on ethnic consolidation, missionary-led language work in western Kenya extended across non-contiguous territories and diverse linguistic groups, reflecting more the multilingual, self-conscious, and competitive nature of such work.

#### CONCLUSION

Although the Luyia Language Committee did standardise a language they called Luluyia, most viewed it as merely a variation of Luhanga and the new language neither suppressed the multiplicity of linguistic cultures nor became a vernacular language of discourse and ethnic argument. Appleby continued to work on the Luyia Old Testament well into the postcolonial period, finally publishing the first official Luyia Bible in 1975 to great local enthusiasm. However, only a year later, Bible House in Nairobi reported sales dropping to

<sup>117</sup> KNA PC/NZA/3/1/80, Minutes of the North Kavirondo LNC, 28 Feb. 1946; Interview with Paul Wamatuba, Musikoma, 25 Sept. 2007.

<sup>118</sup> Kakamega Provincial Archives, Kakamega (KPA) DH/1/1, Meeting of the LLC, 12 Mar. 1954.

<sup>119</sup> KPA DH/1/1, Meeting of the LLC, 23 Feb. 1957.

<sup>120</sup> KNA PC/NZA/1/53, Nyanza Province Annual Report, 1958.

<sup>121</sup> KPA DH/1/2, Bungoma D. E. O. to Educational Materials Adviser, 5 Jan. 1961.



dangerous levels.<sup>122</sup> Complaints revolved around vocabulary and comprehension. Unsurprisingly, Wanga, Marama, and Kisa readers registered the fewest complaints. Bukusu readers suffered the greatest disadvantages, as reflected in complaints sent to the committee and in the text itself: 'over half of the indexed "dictionary" at the back of the Bible... are in fact Bukusu words'.<sup>123</sup> Linguistic work in western Kenya encouraged local communities to present themselves as speakers of distinct linguistic traditions, strategically emphasising their uniqueness and difference, and even denying their very understanding of other dialects in the region. As Kanyoro noted during her linguistic research in the 1980s, people in western Kenya decided 'to understand or not to understand one another by interpreting the political scene of the time'.<sup>124</sup> Local communities in western Kenya adapted linguistic strategies at times to extend and at others to defend the limits of their political communities.

While the language work of the 1940s encouraged this competitive culture, linguistic plurality also informed new political values that emphasised the multilingualism and technocratic mastery envisioned by Makerere graduates. In 1947, Chief Agoi recommended Joseph Otiende to the Legislative Council for his 'broadminded and cosmopolitan' nature, based on his mastery of several Luyia dialects, Dholuo, Kiswahili, and English.<sup>125</sup> In the late colonial period, urbane and federally-minded Luyia leaders wrote their patriotic literature in the national languages of Kiswahili and English. In 1949, Otiende published the first history of the 'Luyia' in Kiswahili.<sup>126</sup> The Abaluyia Peoples Association, founded in 1952 by many of the same young cultural entrepreneurs who supported language work in the 1940s, instituted a revealing linguistic policy: English would be their official language, Kiswahili would facilitate wider understanding, and any Luluyia dialect 'would be optional'.<sup>127</sup> Quotidian cultural exchanges, political meetings, and public rallies reflected this multiplicity of languages and a fiercely oral political tradition.<sup>128</sup>

Despite the failure of the Luyia language project, the idea of linguistic unity remained central to the political ethos of the Luyia community; as Ruth Finnegan found among the Limba, 'being Luyia' was often equated with 'speaking Luyia'.<sup>129</sup> Linguistic work and the imagining of the Luyia community in the late colonial period reflected not, as much previous scholarship would suggest, the enduring influence of missionary interventions or the cultural suppression of dissent and difference by enterprising African patriots, but rather the dynamism, plurality, and continuing salience of oral communication in the making of African political communities.

<sup>122</sup> Kanyoro, *Unity in Diversity*, 52.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>124</sup> R. Kanyoro, 'Post research experience: the Abaluyia of western Kenya', *Proceedings of the Round Table on Assuring the Feasibility of Standardization within Dialect Chains* (Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands, Sept. 1988), 103–4.

<sup>125</sup> KNA DC/KMG/1/1/73, Agoi to Nyanza Provincial Commissioner, 15 Mar. 1947.

<sup>126</sup> Otiende, *Habari za Abaluyia*.

<sup>127</sup> KNA DC/KMG/2/1/147, Abaluyia Peoples Association Meeting Minutes, 4 Dec.

1955.

<sup>128</sup> W. H. Whiteley, 'The classification and distribution of Kenya's African languages', W. H. Whiteley (ed.), *Language in Kenya* (Nairobi, 1974), 38–47; see also W. A. Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1997), 338–9.

<sup>129</sup> Finnegan, *The Oral*, 19; Interview with Mark Udoto.