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Church and Language

A comparison between Friesland and Anglophone Cameroon.¹

Language constitutes one of the most ordinary and, at the same time, one of the most important parts of our human life. We are born in a context in which one or more languages are being spoken. We have no choice and that may be the reason why we frequently consider our language(s) ordinary. We have sucked our mother tongue in with our mother's milk. Other languages we learn and practice according to the need. For many it is a bare necessity to acquire and use other languages, e.g. because their mother tongue happens to be an 'insignificant' language. For others there is no need to do so because they have a world-language as their mother tongue. In this respect, things are quite unequally distributed on earth. In Friesland we cannot do without Dutch and increasingly we cannot survive without English. In Cameroon people are used to many different languages and are compelled to use the colonial languages French and English.

Language may be one of the most ordinary aspects of our human life, it is certainly also one of the most important aspects. As human beings we cannot imagine our life without speaking, listening and reading. Having a mother tongue and using languages for communication constitutes our humanity! All human beings and peoples, far back in history as well as today, have used languages in their lives. But the value of language is more than simply its useful value. Language shapes and patterns our thinking and all our doings. A language enables us to give utterance to our thoughts and feelings. A language is essential for our (emotional) welfare. Especially in our mother tongue we can be true to ourselves. As such, language bestows on us an identity and comprises, on a higher level, the foundation of culture. The importance of language and culture for us human beings may be compared with the function and importance of water to fish.

Our world contains about 6000 languages. When we argue that language is important for our humanity and identity, we also need to face the fact that language is a birthplace for misunderstanding and division. We only need to refer to the dangers of ethnic identity, ethnic

¹ This article was originally published in the Frisian language in Hinne Wagenaar, Ype Schaaf en Anne van der Meiden, *In eigen teology?: Afrikaanske fragen yn it Frysk en yn it Saksysk*. (KFFB, 1999), 91-100. Dutch translation: *Een eigen theology?: Friese en Saksische antwoorden op Afrikaanse vragen*. (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2000).

cleansing, racism and cultural imperialism. So, on the one hand, we are proud of our language and culture while, on the other hand, we wonder whether it would not have been better to have had one identical language. Always people have been racking their brains about the questions why there are so many different peoples, languages and cultures. In the Bible we find the famous passage of the ‘Tower of Babel’ (Genesis 11: 1-9) in which the writer(s) contemplate the question whether the Babylonian confusion of tongues must be considered a punishment or rather a blessing for humankind.²

As a matter of course, language is also in the church both ordinary and important. In this chapter I will try to make a comparison between the use of vernacular languages in churches both in Friesland³ and in Anglophone Cameroon.⁴ There are two reasons for comparing the two. The first is that in both Friesland and Anglophone Cameroon a debate is going on concerning the use and meaning of vernacular languages in church. The second reason is that I myself am born and bred in Friesland and presently live in Anglophone Cameroon and teach in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kumba, where I have a chance to study the language situation in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Perhaps some of the issues may be clarified in the comparison between these two different contexts.

Church and Language in Friesland.

Being a farmer’s son from the Frisian countryside, I naturally grew up with the Frisian language. At home we solely spoke Frisian. As child I lived in an oral culture. We did not have many books. Only when I grew a bit older, my parents used to read Frisian novels published by the KFFB, the Christian Frisian Folk Library. My father acquired a copy of the

² For further reading on the meaning and importance of language see e.g. G. Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: faber and faber, 1967); G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of language & translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); A.A. Mazrui & A.M. Mazrui, *The Power of Babel: language & governance in the African experience* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998).

³ Friesland refers here to the province in the Kingdom of the Netherlands called “Friesland”. My information is drawn from the mainline churches in this area.

⁴ Anglophone Cameroon refers to the Southern part of the former British Cameroon. During independence the Southern Cameroon joined the ‘Federal Republic of Cameroon’ while the Northern part of British Cameroon chose to unite with Nigeria. Presently, the former Southern Cameroon constitutes the North-West and South-West provinces of the Republic of Cameroon. This is the Anglophone part of the further mainly Francophone Cameroon. In this chapter my information will be mainly drawn from the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, one of the major churches in this Anglophone area.

collective works of a Frisian Christian poet, Fedde Schurer⁵ and in 1978 the new Frisian Bible translation was completed, from which my parents read (aloud) every day after the main meal.

From youth it was very clear to me that Dutch was the official language and Frisian the ordinary. In nursery class we were still allowed to use our own language, but as soon as we entered primary school this was, as a matter of course, changed into the official Dutch language. Radio and television made it quite clear that Dutch was the official, real language. But especially in church Dutch was the exclusive language. In church, where we contemplated the ‘highest’ parts of life, it became very clear that the Frisian language was not ‘high’ enough. We exclusively listened to readings from the Dutch Bible and sermons in the Dutch language. The pastor prayed in Dutch and we sung our Dutch hymns. I remember quite vividly that my father had to defend himself in the session on the issue why he had dared to make the announcements (usually made before the official beginning of the service) in the Frisian language. People were shocked! My father answered by referring to one of the poems of Fedde Schurer: ‘What God has joined together, let not man put asunder’, using the analogy of marriage for the Frisian language given by God to the Frisian people.⁶

Fortunately, a lot has changed during the past twenty years. The Frisian language has grown more and more in importance in Friesland. One of the main changes has been that Frisian has received a more official status. Frisian is being used now on radio, television and in newspaper’s. Even in church! The Frisian translation of the Bible has become more generally accepted and the translation of the complete hymnary of the mainline Reformed churches has facilitated the development of Frisian worship services. A purely Frisian service is not exceptional anymore. Almost every Sunday God is worshipped in Frisian in one or another corner of Friesland. Even Frisians outside Friesland have started to do so!

However, this does not imply that the Frisian language has received a central place in the Frisian churches. On the contrary. We can only witness that it has attained its own modest place. There are two reasons for such a statement. The first in the lack of liturgical material available in Frisian, such as prayers, songs and liturgies. And if available, they are not used commonly. Moreover, most of the liturgical material available is translated material. A good example is the above mentioned ‘Hymnary for the Churches’.⁷ It was an awful lot of work to

⁵ F. Schurer, *Samle Fersen* (Ljouwert: De Tille, 1974).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81. Dominé-hollanist. “Hwat God gearfoege hat, sil de minsk net skiede.”

get that done, but it is in its entirety a translation of the Dutch hymnary. This hymnary contains (translated) songs from the entire European ecclesiastical tradition, but not one from Friesland! The only songs by Frisian poets and theologians were written in another language than Frisian and consequently translated for the Frisian hymnary.⁸ But what about the substantial material of Frisian religious songs and poems throughout the ages? In line with African theology, we could classify such efforts as mere adaptation. The gospel is adapted to the Frisian culture, but not inculturated from within. Only when indigenous liturgical materials are being made and used generally could we infer that the Frisian language has touched ground in the churches.

A second reason for stating that Frisian has not really found a serious place in the churches is related to the frequency in which Frisian worship services are being organised. Often a congregation has one Frisian worship service a year! When I was ‘Chaplain to international students in the Netherlands’ (1990-1998), and living outside Friesland, I received frequent invitations to come and ‘preach’ in congregations in Friesland. I always answered that I would be delighted to come and lead the worship service, but in Friesland only in the Frisian language. Most often the elder on the phone would then exclaim in embarrassment that ‘they already had one Frisian service this year!’ This shows that Frisian worship services are more or less considered as folklore. Such services then become a hindrance for the real discussion on language and church. Only when the Frisian language is used normally and generally in the Frisian churches could we infer that this language has touched ground in the churches.

So we have reached a stage of having Frisian worship services, but it is still far from being generally accepted. Why, we might ask, have many Frisian people a somewhat uncomfortable feeling about the Frisian language in church? And why are those in favour so emphatic about it? Why is it not normal, ever since the inception of Christianity in Friesland (about 1200 years ago), to use the indigenous language?

We may assume that our ancestors used their version of the Frisian language in the Frisian traditional religion. One of the central features of traditional religions is the use of the mother tongue. The Frisian chiefs and priests, without doubt, used their own language in their

⁷ *Lieteboek foar de Tsjerken*. Translation of ‘*Liedboek voor de Kerken*’ (’s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1973) This hymnary contains a rhymed version of the 150 Psalms and 491 hymns.

⁸ Menno Simons (1496-1561), hymn 405. Fedde Schurer (1898-1968), hymn 330.

prayers, rituals and sacrifices. And the ordinary people will also have used their own language at their shrines and in their prayers to the gods. When the Christian faith was first preached in the Frisian lands, the missionaries will have tried to use the vernacular in their efforts to bring Christ to the people. But we know that the established (Roman) Church used Latin as her language.⁹ Most of the time ordinary people could not follow the mass in church.¹⁰

Latin was the official church language in the whole of Europe. But that was fundamentally changed during and after the Reformation in the sixteenth century. One of the characteristics of the Reformation was the introduction of the vernacular in churches. The Protestants protested against the use of Latin as church language and started using their own mother tongues for worship and religious writings. William Tyndale made the first English Bible translation in 1535. He met bitter opposition and was accused of wilfully perverting the meaning of the Scriptures. In 1536 he was publicly executed and burned at the stake. Martin Luther used, beside Latin, German for his Bible Translation (Old Testament, 1532), but also for his books, speeches and sermons. It was this fundamental change which led to the famous translations of the seventeenth century, such as the King James Bible (1611) and the ‘Statenvertaling’ (translation in Dutch, 1637). We find the Bible being translated into almost all the European languages in that period after the Reformation: Czech (1488), Danish (1550), Dutch (1522), English (1535), Finnish (1642), French (1530), German (1466), Hungarian (1590), Icelandic (1584), Irish (1685), Italian (1471), Polish (1561), Slovenian (1584), Spanish (1553), Swedish (1541), Welsh (1588).¹¹

When I contemplate the year of the first complete Frisian Bible translation (1943), then it becomes obvious that the Frisian language completely missed this vernacular Reformation. In that period we lost the historic chance of expressing our religion again in our own language, as it had been before the dawn of Christianity. It took about four centuries before the complete Bible was available in the Frisian language and could be used in church. So we should not be surprised that the introduction of the Frisian language in church sounded

⁹ I explicitly talk of the Frisian lands. The geographical area of the Frisian lands was at that time considerably larger than the present Friesland. These Frisian lands formed no political unity.

¹⁰ See Y. Schaaf, “The Role of Language in the Inculturation of the Gospel in the minority Situation in Friesland (the Netherlands)”, *Exchange* 29/2 (2000), 135-146.

¹¹ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), Appendix C: “First complete printed Bibles in languages”, 246-249.

harsh and impious in the ears of the faithful. Since the introduction of Christianity in the Frisian lands this had not been practised. The somewhat uncomfortable feeling with and sometimes even latent opposition of Frisian Christians against the use of the vernacular may be understood against this background. We had to make up for an omission of 4 centuries. Or even better, we still had to start straight from the beginning.

Church and Language in Anglophone Cameroon.

One of the first things that strikes an outsider at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kumba (in the South-West Province of the Republic of Cameroon) is the great diversity in languages and the ease with which students switch from one language to the other, even within one sentence. About 150 people live on campus. The students come from all corners of (mainly) Anglophone Cameroon. Out of the roughly 60 students only a few have the same tribal backgrounds and are consequently able to communicate in their own languages. The diversity of mother tongues is vast and the keen observer will be able to identify many languages, especially in the married students quarter when parents address their children. This diversity in languages implies that there is a great need of a common language. And these are indeed available, namely Pidgin English and English. A pidgin is a marginal language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language.¹² Cameroon Pidgin (Kamtok) developed during the encounter between the English language of the British Empire and a multitude of local languages. It is quite distinct from the so-called 'grammar-English'. The French language is furthermore always present, being the main colonial language in Cameroon. Quite a diversity of languages is being used in a relatively small community of 150 people. The fact that we, as a family, add another 2 languages to this number is hardly of interest. But to us it is quite special that our Cameroonian colleagues and students do not wonder about the fact that our children mix 4 languages (Frisian, Dutch, English and Pidgin) while in the Netherlands we already had to explain and even had to account for the use of two languages in our family (Frisian and Dutch).

About 200 languages exist in Cameroon, not taking into account the many dialects which are usually not counted. The dean of the seminary, Rev. Dr. Jonas N. Dah, used to say that the Tower of Babel stood in Cameroon. This number of languages is quite extraordinary,

¹² L. Todd, *Pidgins and Creoles*, 2nd ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 1990),

even for Africa! In this diversity the colonial languages, just as in other parts of Africa, functioned very easily as the common language in the colonized area. German became the first colonial language, when Cameroon was allotted to Germany during the Conference of Berlin (1884). After the first World War, when Germany lost her colonies, Cameroon was partitioned between Britain and France. Since that time, English became the colonial language in British Cameroon while French became the colonial language in the rest of Cameroon.

The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) stems from the missionary endeavours of the Basel Mission. This church, earlier called the Basel Mission Church, became independent in 1957 and is mainly active in Anglophone Cameroon. It has a strong Anglophone touch, even to such an extent that PCC parishes in the Francophone part of Cameroon worship in English and Pidgin.

The first Basel missionaries arrived in Cameroon (Douala) in 1886 and came across the work of their predecessors, Baptist missionaries who had been working there since 1844. These Basel missionaries also met a complete translation of the Bible in Duala. This translation had been made by Alfred Saker and was printed and published in 1872! The new missionaries continued in the same direction and tried to preach the gospel in vernacular languages. The Duala language became the central church language in the southern missionary area, while they selected the Mungaka language as the main church language in the northern part.¹³ Almost all church services and activities were held in these languages.¹⁴ If necessary, translation was made into Pidgin, English or a vernacular language. Very often the sermon was translated into Pidgin English or into one or even two other native languages.¹⁵ A Duala hymn-book with 160 hymns was published in 1893. The Mungaka New Testament was finalized in 1931 (the complete Bible translation in 1961) and the Mungaka hymn-book in 1939. Many schools were instituted by the Basel Mission and native languages were used

¹³ See note 3. The South-West province is the coastal area, and is mainly made up of tropical forest. The North-West province stretches out to the north and is generally referred to as “Grasslands”. Besides these differences in natural environment, the two areas have quite different cultural traditions, which constitutes today one of the main tensions within the PCC.

¹⁴ For more information on the history of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon see: W. Keller, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon* (Victoria: Presbook, 1969) and W. Keller, *Zur Freiheit berufen: Die Geschichte der presbyterianischen Kirche in Kamerun* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981).

¹⁵ W. Keller, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon*, 107.

in teaching. The German colonial government (and later on the British) were not at all happy with the language-policy of the Basel Mission and insisted that German (English) should become the main language in the schools. However, the language-policy was not changed. Even after the independence of the PCC this policy, to bring the gospel as close as possible to the people, remained, and consequently a positive attitude towards native languages.

These facts illustrate that, in the process of spreading the gospel, Cameroonian native languages have been used from the very beginning. But it implies, at the same time, that straight from the beginning there has been quite a bit of diversity in the church. There was no uniformity in liturgy, there were no common and established customs. And there were several languages and tribal identities. Through this diversity it seemed sometimes that more than one church existed. This was especially the case with the 'Mungaka-church' in the north and the 'Duala-church' in the south. This is exactly one of the main worries of the present leadership of the PCC. They fear diversity in the church because it may lead to disunity. Because it might lead to the development of tribal and/or regional identification in the church. Everything is being done in order to create unity in the church, especially through a strong hierarchical and centralistic leadership. Ethnic identity is not favoured but rather uniformity in worship, language and tradition throughout the PCC. The faithful must be able to attend church in any parish and find no difficulty in feeling at home. Students are, after their studies, never sent to their own tribal area. Only towards the end of their career may pastors be sent home.

This contemporary policy has its repercussions on the use of languages in the PCC. Emphasis has increasingly been given to the use of English in the liturgy. Furthermore Pidgin English has been a blessing to the church because this language is generally used in the whole of Anglophone Cameroon (and beyond). With the introduction of the official Book of Divine Services (in high-brow English) in the 1980s, which all congregations are supposed to use, the liturgical language has become exclusively English.¹⁶ Almost all of the sermons are, apart from English, conducted in Pidgin English. Hardly any of the students presently undergoing training in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary is able to communicate in Mungaka or Duala.

This does not mean, however, that there is no diversity in languages left in PCC. Everywhere in the PCC a great frankness can be observed in using several languages in one church-service. The liturgy is indeed usually conducted in English. But then see what follows. The announcements are done in a language closest to the people. The Bible-lessons

¹⁶ PCC, *Book of Divine Services: Volume I - VI* (1984).

are often read in more than one language, again depending on the composition of the congregation. In a city-congregation, for example, one of the readings is often done in French, but in an ordinary village setting that would make no sense. The sermon is normally in Pidgin English and, if necessary, translated into other languages. Then most of the language variety can be found in the songs sung during the worship service. In many cases one song is sung in several languages at the same time. The pastor will then announce the numbers in the English, Duala and Mungaka hymn-book. Almost every congregation has choirs and these choirs are often singing in a diversity of native languages. In this way we can still witness quite a diversity of languages in the PCC.

Conclusion.

We may conclude that a rather big dissimilarity concerning ‘church and language’ exists between Friesland and Anglophone Cameroon. One would think the churches in Friesland and Cameroon have started at opposite ends. In Friesland the native language has been excluded from the church since the very beginnings, emphasising the unity with the church at large (using Latin in the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation) and unity with the national churches (using Dutch in the churches after the Reformation). Twelve hundred years after the conversion of the Frisian people to Christianity, we still discuss the question whether the Frisian language is acceptable in church! In Anglophone Cameroon some native languages have been used from the very beginning with a Duala Bible already existing in 1872. But now, more than 100 years later, the main worries are about too much diversity and emphasis is given to unity and uniformity.

Probably these are exactly the two sides that play a central role in this discourse. On the one hand we have the side of our native language, culture and identity. This is the side of particularity. On the other hand we have the value of unity of people(s), of togetherness across borders, of not being excluded. This is the side of universality. The discussion on church and language ‘moves’ between these two sides of particular identity and universal unity. We should always remain open to these two sides of the discourse. As soon as one side is being ignored, danger is at hand. Both in Friesland and Anglophone Cameroon we increasingly live in multicultural societies. It is impossible to live our lives cocooned in our particular cultural context, separated from others. It is naive to long for earlier times when life was less mixed up and purer. But at the same time we cannot ignore the cultural identities. We are not universal people. We are born and bred in a specific context with its

own customs, traditions and languages. We are cultural creatures. And I want to believe that it is very possible to be very particular about our own identities and be perfectly in harmony with other people being different. Unity can never be found in uniformity, but only in diversity. Ignoring cultural identities will lead to even more dangers. This could be seen in the developments of the former communist countries in central and eastern Europe after the changes around 1990. In countries where a forced communist unity and uniformity, and consequently a repression of particular identity, had been the order of the day, an explosion of cultural awareness and ethnic radicalism could be observed. The former Yugoslavia became a tragic example of how decades of cultural repression exploded into ethnic cleansing.

I am not in favour of a biased emphasis on (Frisian) particularity. The dangers of excluding others and ethnic pride are too severe. But I am equally not in favour of a one-sided emphasis on universality, forgetting and ignoring the specific cultural identity of people. In situations of being ashamed of our own language and culture, as has been the case for so long in Friesland, I prefer to emphasize the side of particularity in order to recover dignity and self-esteem.

I am of the opinion that we, churches in Friesland, might learn a lot from the colloquial frankness of dealing with languages in churches. We, in Friesland, are often so strict and narrowminded. A 'normal' worship is conducted in Dutch, and only Dutch. And a Frisian worship service can only be done in sound Frisian. It would be a great step forward when we would learn to be less precise and become more easy-going with languages. To have some more linguistic diversity within one worship service. I am not against Dutch in Frisian churches. On the contrary. But I am in favour of the Frisian language in church! And furthermore I don't care which other languages may be used. That would only be dependent on the make-up of the particular congregation and event. It is important to accommodate those who have their own specific (cultural) identity. During summer time, when Friesland is awash with German tourists, it might be good to use German in church. And why not use the Frisian and the Dutch language together in one worship service? Why not use a greater variety of songs from a variety of traditions and languages? This would reflect quite closely normal life in Friesland, namely a mix of languages. We might learn from the churches in Cameroon the frankness and joy of using our languages in church. It is not necessary to choose between languages, but languages may complement each other.

On the side of the churches in Anglophone Cameroon, especially the PCC, it might be important to reflect on the developments concerning the use of native languages in church. It

is quite significant that the missionary history, more than 100 years ago, started with a serious effort towards vernacularisation, while presently the church is predominantly using the colonial language English and the lingua franca Pidgin English. Perhaps something may be learned from the experiences in Friesland, where the Church always stressed on the unity of the church at large at the expense of the particular identity of the Frisian people. In that way the church became a manifestation of outside forces, a representative of cultural imperialism, a supporter of cultural alienation. This danger is not imaginary in the context of the PCC. Of course, this church has rightly fought against cultural imperialism from Europe. But I wonder whether the leadership is aware of the same danger within the PCC in Anglophone Cameroon. Now the church itself introduces worship and church life in languages which are not native. It introduces uniform church-practices in any corner of the country. It does not allow, or at least not actively support, for ethnic or tribal developments in the church. On the contrary, it tries to solve the problems of tribalism and regionalism by ignoring or downplaying the importance of diversity in languages and cultural identity. The question is whether it would not be more beneficial to allow a development of unity in diversity.¹⁷

Diversity in language and culture, in the world at large and in the church, may result to ethnic pride, racism and exclusion of others when used in an exclusivist manner. In such cases cultural diversity is like a punishment to humanity. However, inclusive use of cultural diversity will enhance the search for genuine unity and become a blessing for people and peoples.

¹⁷ I must acknowledge here the keen awareness of Mbua, Gaius in his thesis, *Translatibility: The Hallmark of Christian Mission* (B.Th. Thesis, Presbyterian Theological Seminary Kumba, 2001).