

The hidden histories of Afrikaans

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1

Afrikaans is an African language, with its primary speech community concentrated on the African continent. Afrikaans is a southern African language. Today six in ten of the almost seven million Afrikaans speakers in South Africa are estimated to be black (in the generic sense of the word), a figure that will by all indications increase significantly in the next decade. Like several other South African languages, Afrikaans is a cross-border language spanning sizable communities of speakers in Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. In South Africa and Namibia Afrikaans is spoken across all social indices, by the poor and the rich, by rural and urban people, by the undereducated and the educated. Afrikaans is a creole language, it shares traits common to creolized languages in the Caribbean, the Malayan Peninsula, Indonesia, the northern parts of South America, and an East-African Niger-Congo (or Bantu) creole like Kiswahili.

In this contribution I have chosen to concentrate on reminding us of the varied history of the Afrikaans language. I focus mostly on the ‘black history’ of Afrikaans rather than the known hegemonic history inculcated by Afrikaner Christian national education, propaganda and the media. In the debate on language and culture we often hear only the Afrikaner nationalist version of the story of Afrikaans. The reason for this approach is simple: Afrikaans’ history is multi-faceted and many South Africans of every hue have contributed to its formation and development. Further, Afrikaans is primarily the language of poor black people and by focussing on its hegemonic history only we forget that part of its long history. While our recent sociopolitical history often casts Afrikaans as the language of racists, oppressors and unreconstructed nationalists, the language also bears the imprint of a fierce tradition of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, of an all-embracing humanism and anti-apartheid activism.

2

In 1860 one of the students in a Cape Town madrasah, a descendant of slaves, copied a prayer in his exercise book. Today the surviving fragments of that book reveal a history that somehow remains hidden to the vast majority of South Africans. The exercises in that book, also called a *kopiesboek*,ⁱ are written in ‘Cape Malay dialect’, the colloquial language of the time:ⁱⁱ ‘waarliek ouai ies ghapierais ien ies ghoeroet [...] Ja Allah viermeerdie ouai bramataghait [...] op Moegammad ien op sain faamielghie [...] niet soewals ouai ghiedaan hiet op Nabee Iebraheem’. In English translation this passage reads: ‘[...] truly Thou art praised and elevated [...] O God increase Thy blessings [...]

فَامَيِّنِي اِنَّكَ حَمِيْدٌ مَّجِيْدٌ قَامِرٌ لَكَ
اَوْ اِنَّ اِسْرَافِيْلَ اِنَّ اِسْرَافِيْلَ اِنَّ اِسْرَافِيْلَ
اَللّٰهُمَّ بَارِكْ يَا اَللّٰهُ فِرْمَانِي مَا اَوْفَى
بِرَّ مَخْلُوْقِي عَلَيَّ مُحَمَّدٍ اَوْ بِمُحَمَّدٍ
وَعَلَى اٰلِ مُحَمَّدٍ اِنَّ اَوْفَى سَعْيِيْنَ فَاَمَلِيْ
كَمَا بَارَكْتَ نَبِيَّ هُوَ النَّسْ اَوْ خِدَانُ
هَتَّ عَلَيَّ اِبْرَاهِيْمَ اَوْ بِنَبِيِّ اِبْرَاهِيْمَ

on Muhammed and on his family [...] just as Thou had done for Prophet Abraham' (Davids, 2011: 114).

Apart from the phonetic spelling, any contemporary Afrikaans speaker would recognise this as near-modern Afrikaans. In this case, written in Arabic script. This is but one example of a well-known tradition of *a'jami* scripts produced in the Cape Muslim community in the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the 1950s. In fact, the exercise book that I have cited is not the oldest known copy of a *koplesboek*. Achmat Davids in his path-breaking *The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims* (2011) found a similar *koplesboek* dating back to 1806 (see Davids, 2011: 70). To give some historical perspective: this was as early as the time of the second British occupation of the Cape Colony, or when Shaka was only a young man of 19 on the verge of his evolution to a notable military leader. The best known of these Arabic-Afrikaans texts is Abubaker Effendi's *Bayān al-Din*, a guidebook to Islam, among the oldest books in Afrikaans, circulated prior to 1867 and printed ten years later in Constantinople, Turkey.ⁱⁱⁱ Arabic-Afrikaans was not only used in religious texts but was also used in daily communication, the making of shopping lists, political pamphlets, or in the case of the politician Achmat Effendi, in a letter to a friend, following his defeat in an election for a seat in the Cape Parliament in 1894 (Davids, 2011: 19, 93–97). For the Cape Muslims, a literate community, this language was the bearer of their most intimate thoughts and their religion.

Visitors and immigrants to the Cape such as Arnoldus Pannevis, M.D. Teenstra and Hubertus Elffers on their arrival quickly realised that 'the best representatives of Cape Dutch are to be found among the Malay population of the Cape Peninsula [...] and the Bastards born and bred at German mission stations where Cape Dutch forms the only medium of expression' (Elffers quoted in Davids, 2011: 86–87).^{iv} Off-shoots of the latter community of speakers were those who self-identified as 'Oorlams', 'Griquas' or 'Bastaards'. Cape Dutch was disseminated during the late 1780s and early 1800s to the northwestern Cape Colony, today's west coast of the Northern Cape and southern Namibia. It is commonly accepted that the Oorlams, i.e. the descendants of Cape Khoekhoen groups migrated to these parts, spreading their mother tongue, Cape Dutch, to the arid regions on both sides of the Gariëp (Orange) River. Along with early *trekboere* and the Rehobothers, i.e. descendants of Khoekhoe and European liaisons, who generally self-identify as 'Bastaards' or 'Basters', the Oorlams (with leaders such as Jonker Afrikaner, David Christiaan and Moses Witbooi) played a major role in the establishment of Cape Dutch as the language of trade, culture and education during the late-1800s and early 20th century (see Stals & Ponelis, 2001: 71; Stell, 2009: 86).^v

However, not everyone thought that the simplified, creolized speech with its roots mainly in Dutch, the seafarer variants of Malay, Portuguese, Indonesian and the indigenous Khoekhoe and San languages could express learning, writing or upper middle class culture. Whether known as 'Cape

Dutch', 'Cape Malay', Hotnotstaal', 'Hottentots-Hollands', 'Kitchen-Dutch', 'mongrel Dutch' or 'Afrikaa',^{vi} this creole language, spoken by the peasants, the urban proletariat whatever their ethnic background and even the middle class of civil servants, traders and teachers, was derided by the upper classes of the Cape Colony, be they Dutch or English-speaking, in the nineteenth century. The opinion of Chief Justice Lord J.H. de Villiers (quoted in Giliomee, 2003: 216) was that this language was 'poor in the number of its words, weak in its inflections, wanting in accuracy of meaning'. Such opinions were representative of views that speech and intelligence were somehow connected, and that Cape Dutch was thought to be 'incapable of expressing ideas connected with the higher spheres of thought'. From the Cape Dutch speaking (white) middle class pushback came that sought to disprove and counter such elite perceptions.

Around 1870 the first steps towards the battle between various views on the nature of Cape Dutch, or what would become known as Afrikaans, were taken. Some of the leading figures of what would become known as the 'first language movement' (1874–1890) strenuously denied the creole nature of the language. For them Afrikaans was 'a pure Germanic language', a '*landstaal*' (national language), and a language of 'purity, simplicity, brevity and vigor' (quoted in Giliomee, 2003: 217). The *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaanders* (GRA, the Society of True Afrikaners) established in 1875 in Paarl actively sought to foster a nationalism among white Cape Dutch speakers, 'Afrikaans' became their linguistic vehicle and 'Afrikaners' their label. They (and their eventual successors) sought to write a nationalist history of oppressors and victims, establishing the beginnings of a print nationalism with their booklets of children's tales, nationalist poetry and publications (see also Giliomee, 2003: 217–220).

The three instances cited above—the commitment of Cape Dutch to Arabic script, the migration of the language into the northwestern Cape Colony and the establishment of the GRA—are illustrative of processes of organic language expansion. These three communities of Cape Dutch speakers reacted very differently to the expansion of their common tongue. The imams of the Cape formulated among themselves appropriate ways of writing the language and making it accessible to the faithful, at one point even changing to roman script to accommodate new adherents—mostly young white women—to the faith (Davids, 2011: 209ff). The Oorlams were outward-looking and regarded Cape Dutch as a bridge between communities rather than their exclusive domain and used it without any obvious political intent. The first two groupings did not seek to mould a language, common to the Cape's lower and middle classes, into a 'possession' but used it as a resource of communication and outreach. None of them, except the ethnic entrepreneurs, the nationalists of the GRA, sought to actively demarcate 'their language' to the point of diminishing and stigmatizing other speakers' claim

to it, declaring their own version of Cape Dutch as prestige *Burger Afrikaans*, the distinct 'white man's language'.

The imams of the Cape actively modified and standardized the writing of Afrikaans in Arabic script. Achmat Davids's major contribution to Afrikaans language studies is indeed his elaboration of the 'orthographic innovation' these men brought about in their representation of spoken Afrikaans in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. Looking back at Afrikaans historically, there is much to be said for the dogged manner in which the early Afrikaner language nationalists and their successors have modified, standardized and modernized a spoken language. They took an unscripted argot, a creole even if denied, and through their activism forged it into a modern written language. They used a common patois, and in the face of prejudice, have chosen to ennoble it, using written Dutch as the basis for its codification. Yet, the racial prejudice and middle class bias underlying many of their choices had far-reaching implications. In denying the commonality of their fellow Afrikaans speakers who were descendants of slaves, indigenous people or simply poor, they were elevating the language to a narrow ethnic nationalist cause. Through a web of actions and policies that influenced education, cultural and economic policies well into the 20th century, Afrikaans was constructed as a 'white language', with a 'white history' and 'white faces'.

From early on, the divide between linguists who advanced views that suggested that Afrikaans is a creole language and those denying this assumption, became fiercely contested. D.C. Hesseling argued in his pioneering study *Het Afrikaansch* (1899) that the language was indeed 'mixed' while D.B. Bosman (in *Oor die ontstaan van Afrikaans*, 1916) argued equally strongly that Afrikaans is 'no mixed language, certainly not a mixed language that originated with Dutch-speaking the Malay-Portuguese of the slaves' and that its structure and vocabulary was due to 'spontaneous evolution' (quoted in Willemse, 2012: 69). Hesseling's theory of Afrikaans as a creole language fell into disrepute, its advocates were ridiculed, and for much of the 20th century learners and students were dissuaded from supporting such views. I and other researchers have pointed out that Afrikaans language textbooks after 1948 promoted Afrikaans's development as a myth and actively co-created an Afrikaner nationalist paradigm (see Esterhuyse, 1986; Willemse, 1991; Willemse, 2012).

Notwithstanding their fancy theories and their wide acceptance within university, college and school curricula, Bosman and his followers could not deny the language's creolity. For example, Neville Alexander tells an interesting, illustrative anecdote in an interview which surprisingly sheds light on the language and its creole history. As a student in Germany during the 1950s, Alexander and his international friends often sang folk songs together, and he continues:

One day they asked me to sing something from Cape Town and I sang 'Suikerbossie', 'Sugarbush', a very simple little song. When I was sort of getting into it, the Indonesian said, 'Stop, but that's not a Cape Town song, that's our song.' I said, 'What do you mean, it's your song? No, I'm singing in Afrikaans.' And he said, 'No, that's an Indonesian song.' So I thought well, there must be an explanation, and the only explanation I can think of is that it came with the slaves. It was funny because he was outraged—'How can you claim the song for yourself, it's our song; and I said, 'As far as I know it is our song.' (Alexander in Busch et al., 2014: 66)

This is not the forum in which to discuss the intricacies of the various theories save to state that by the late-1980s the 'spontaneous evolution' theory was largely on the retreat. Today, the creole language theory is on the ascendancy. The leading linguists in this respect are mostly non-South Africans, among them the Dutch author, the late Hans den Besten whose writings were collected in the book *The Roots of Afrikaans* (2012). He convincingly proved that Portuguese Creole, Malay varieties, and most significantly, Khoekhoe, played a significant role in the formation of the language. He even argued that were it not for the agency of the 'indigenous Khoekhoen and imported African and Asian slave labor [...] there would be no Afrikaans' (quoted in Van Rensburg, 2012). Considering the dominance for much of the 20th century of the 'spontaneous evolution' theory this point of view is as close to heresy as it gets.

3

The construction of language as 'an international language', or 'a tribal language,' or 'a language of love,' or 'a language of the oppressor' has little to do with the language itself. It says more about the social environment where language serves as a metaphor for a variety of ideas, images, aspirations, emotions, orientations, and most crucially economic, political and social power. One of the major ways in which colonialism affected the subjugated is the denial of their being, their psyche: often the subjugated see themselves as becoming fully human only when they act or behave like the colonialists, i.e. to imitate their speech, their institutions and their behaviour. Often people formulate an anti-colonialist stance countering such colonial institutions. In the past century, the development of language policy and institutions often reflected such perspectives.

When the Afrikaner Christian nationalists came to power in 1948 they brought with them a set of ideas about society, social organisation, the economy, culture and language that have developed over the preceding century, under the direction of successive waves of nationalist thought. Among these decisions was the introduction of mother-tongue education which in progressive societies

would have been a signal of independence, the empowerment of vast numbers of indigenous speakers, and a certain sign of postcolonial achievement. However, under apartheid rule language was deployed as a tool of tribalism, in the service of the divide-and-rule policy, and instead of empowerment it became a marker of under- and miseducation. One of the unintended consequences of the apartheid policy and Bantu Education was the level of self-loathing that speakers developed around indigenous languages which they perceived as having little or no value in a contemporary business or educational environment.

Contrast in this regard, the situation of Afrikaans. In the first half of the 20th century the language has developed into an impressive anti-imperial achievement in terms of its codification, the development of its literature, the modernization of wide-ranging language resources from subject and general dictionaries to increasing numbers of language educators, the establishment of cultural and language institutes, and the development of printing and media industries. By the time that the nationalists came to political power in 1948 Afrikaans' position was further bolstered and it gained a foothold in all sectors of society, including the civil service and the economy. In a disastrous policy decision, the Department of Bantu Education enforced its 50-50 (50% Afrikaans-50% English) language policy, thereby imposing Afrikaans as a language of instruction on non-Afrikaans speakers. The impact of such coercive power on Afrikaans was the point of ignition for the uprising of 1976 and along with it, suspicion of its speakers.

The advancement of Afrikaans in the 20th century, mostly under the aegis of Afrikaner nationalism, meant that the other constituent histories and stories of the language and its speakers were either neglected or suppressed. Rather than viewing Afrikaans through a single lens it is today acknowledged as an amalgam consisting of a variety of expressions, speakers and histories. For example, historical linguists often base their research on the meticulous exploration of texts and corpora which in itself prejudice the illiterate and those who do not produce or retain written traces of their lives in language. Quite often, those people on the margins only find their way into history through the gateways of state institutions be it the courts, prisons or the passages of a health system. Increasingly, black speakers are demanding the 'restandardization' of their language, the recognition of regional varieties and the collection and acknowledgement of their linguistic and cultural expressions, taking into account alternative ways of gathering information, and the acknowledgement of alternative histories (see Boesak, 2009: 158–160; Hendricks, 2012; Van den Heever, 1988; Willemse, 2012). One such history, is the history of resistance.^{vii}

Permit me some self-indulgence to illustrate my point. I took the decision to study the Afrikaans language, literature and culture in its fullness in the wake of the tragic events of the second half of 1976. It was a decision rooted in the uprisings in which Afrikaans was labelled ‘the language of the oppressor’. The slogan was rightly an emotive, visceral response to Afrikaner ethnic, nationalist hegemony and its concomitant coercive state power, but it also obscured the experiences, lives and histories of black and non-nationalist Afrikaans speakers. To my mind, we needed to understand language (in this instance Afrikaans) as not only a matter of racial and tribal construction but also, at base, as a matter of social class.

Up to that time of my life I had lived in small towns in the southern and western regions of the then Cape Province, in the southern Cape, the Boland, the Little Karoo. By the time I was eighteen, I was fortunate to have travelled north to the Northern Cape, to the Free State, Natal and Transvaal, and even further to Botswana, Mozambique and Rhodesia. On those travels I had witnessed deep poverty in isolated rural homesteads. The people that I had met in the far-flung villages of today’s southern Namibia and Northern Cape were as desperately poor as I have seen elsewhere and they were mostly Afrikaans-speaking. How could they, these people—the poorest of the poor—be ‘the oppressor’? Why were their stories not told? How could those people struggling in the townships of the towns that I’ve lived in or the people in Cape Town’s townships where I helped out as a paralegal in the University of the Western Cape’s student Law Society be ‘the oppressor’? Why were their stories not told?

In 1976 UWC became the hub of the student uprising in the Western Cape and we as students sang revolutionary songs in isiXhosa, English and in Afrikaans (see Thomas, 1997: *passim*). We performed plays and poetry in Afrikaans and a young, eloquent firebrand named Allan Boesak whipped us all into rousing Black Consciousness fervour—in Afrikaans (see Boesak, 2009: 21).^{viii} This is an example of Afrikaans in resistance; it is also an example of a counternarrative unknown to those outside the sphere of Afrikaans speakers (see also Boesak, 2009: 158ff). There are many such tales in the distant past and even closer to our time.

One of the undoubted successes of Afrikaner Christian nationalist hegemony was the creation of the myth that the nationalists, and only they, spoke for those identified as ‘Afrikaners’, and that their worldview was the only significant expression of being Afrikaans-speaking. Not only did nationalist functionaries and culture brokers suppress oppositional and alternative thought within the Afrikaner community, they also minimised the role and place of black Afrikaans speakers in the broader speech community. In all of this, language historians, nationalist politicians, the media and school

curricula have chosen to tell one story, and it was this story that non-Afrikaans speakers—individuals, communities and institutions outside the Afrikaans speech community—have accepted as the only story. Afrikaans became indelibly identified with Afrikaner nationalism—‘the oppressor’.

In the process, the place and relevance of black Afrikaans speakers have been denied. The constituent sides of the broader Afrikaans speaking community, of black Afrikaans speaking people in particular, today’s numerical majority, have been silenced effectively. As young Black Consciousness-inspired academics we understood that a different story needed to be told. At the very least, one that tells of a more encompassing history, a history that explored the life and culture of those marginalised, i.e. the neglected histories, language, literature and culture of black Afrikaans speakers.

At the University of the Western Cape, where I was appointed in 1979, we increasingly came to understand our historical duty in writing up the silent and silenced histories of Afrikaans. Our curriculum in Afrikaans studies at the UWC, like elsewhere, initially reflected very little of any significance of the history of black Afrikaans speakers, their culture or their literature. By 1987 we had gradually reshaped the UWC curriculum to include black authors and introduced language dialect studies which included the study of black Afrikaans speech. That department, at one point the largest department of Afrikaans, contributed to reshaping academic thinking around Afrikaans literature and language, and along with a younger generation of linguists elsewhere increasingly explored the language’s diverse and vibrant history (see de Jong, 1989; Hendricks, 1978; Links, 1989; van de Rheede, 1983; Smith et al. 1986; Willemse et al., 1997; Willemse, 2015; Willemse & van Wyk, 2015).

Throughout the apartheid era and the dominance of what Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink called ‘Apartaans’ the other (non-Afrikaner nationalist Afrikaans) stories have continued to exist (see Breytenbach, 2015: 16; Brink in van den Heever, 1988). Here, I have elected to focus on the lesser known side of language and literature studies but there continue to exist hidden histories of Afrikaans speaking people in many other spheres of South African life, be it as cultural expression, in the worker movement, the media or perhaps more spectacularly in reformed theology, where the very ethos of anti-apartheid and liberation theology was shaped by black Afrikaans speaking theologians (see e.g. Boesak, 2009: 93–99, *passim*).

Today Afrikaner nationalism has been severely diminished and along with it the standing of Afrikaans in the public sector. Nonetheless, in the private spheres of culture, private education, the media and subscription television Afrikaans has seen an exponential growth. As suggested earlier, the very nature of contemporary Afrikaans, the white speaker bias of its media products and dominant institutions remain under constant discussion, and we still have to recognise the multi-faceted nature of the Afrikaans speaking community, the numerical dominance of its black speakers, and the need to advance Afrikaans in a multilingual, all-inclusive antiracist environment, as an example and as part of the development and intellectualisation of African languages. We also have to recognise that Afrikaans is at the core of many fellow South Africans' sense of identity, and they are not necessarily white. It is in this spirit that the debate on the medium of instruction at universities such as Stellenbosch has to be conducted. It is obvious that the administrators and the constituent bodies at that institution have to find ways to continue to advance Afrikaans without the perceptions and experiences of racist behaviour associated with early and ruling Afrikaner nationalist practices. Our sense of diversity in our nationhood will have to be forged so that all South Africans will see themselves reflected in our public sphere.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The *kopiesboek* refers to the notebook in which students committed their exercises to writing, and from which they memorised their school work (see Davids, 2011: 67).

ⁱⁱ For the concept 'Cape Malay dialect' see Rochlin in Davids (2011: 89).

ⁱⁱⁱ The unavailability of an appropriate printing press that could handle publications in Arabic script clearly influenced Effendi's decision to have the book published in Constantinople (Davids, 2011: 89, 115ff).

^{iv} For an example of the 'Cape Dutch' on the Moravian mission stations see Jerzy Koch's *A History of South African Literature. Afrikaans Literature 17th-19th centuries* (2015: 241-271).

^v My treatment here concerns the Cape communities that could be considered the original Cape Dutch speakers, rather than the extended Afrikaans community where millions of South and southern Africans use the language as an additional or acquired language. I also exclude several examples of relatively isolated first language Afrikaans-speaking communities in other parts of the country. Among these are the community of Buysdorp in the far northern part of the Limpopo Province, the Thlabane's in Northwest Province, the van der Merwe's in Namibia and the people of Onverwacht, northeast of Pretoria. Some of these communities were established following the migration of the Voortrekkers, and during the latter decades of the 20th century some of them shifted their first language status to other languages, including Setswana. See Beukes and Pienaar (2014).

^{vi} Abdurahim Muhammed al Iraki compiled his extraordinary glossary *'n Vaifstelige woordelais en kort sinnetjies in Arab, Farsi, Hinistani, Afrikaa en Engels* (Bombay: Kalzar Husna, 1905) in which the name 'Afrikaa' referred to the language Afrikaans (see Davids, 2011: 139). Achmat Davids (2011: 139) observes that Cape Muslims at the time 'regarded themselves as "Afferkaners"' and their language as 'Afrikaa'.

^{vii} See my articles in *Mayibuye* where these matters have been discussed for a popular readership (Willemse, 1992a and 1992b). See also my article on the role of the rural newspaper *Saamstaan* based in Oudtshoorn in the resistance struggle during the 1980s (Willemse, 2015a).

^{viii} Jonathan Jansen (1991: 128) said of that experience: 'I was never so entranced in my life as when Allan Boesak, mainly in Afrikaans, spoke to the growing anger and resentment that I felt as a black person.'