

THE PROBLEM OF MANY TONGUES

By J. M. NHLAPO

IN his comment on the urgency of the problem of international communication, the late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch once said: "The want of some common 'world language' is, I assume, pretty generally admitted; certainly it has been felt by educated Europeans ever since Latin faded out as the common language."

With the shrinking of the earth as a result of modern transport and communications, and the multiplicity of international assemblies, no one can contradict Professor Guillard when he says: "the language obstacle is most emphatically not a theory but a condition."

Linguistic barriers do not only constitute an international but an intertribal problem. It is the latter with which I am just now specially concerned.

In South Africa ours is to suggest a solution to the linguistic barriers, whereas in other parts of Africa, the problem was foreseen and prevented from growing and ossifying.

When the question of reducing Ibo in Nigeria to writing, the multiplicity of its dialects reared its head. Each tribal group wished to have its dialect written. The writer of the language decided on 'Union Ibo' which was a fusion of the various dialects whose vocabularies became contributions to the combined language. Union Ibo was taught in schools and was used in the translation of the Bible. While the adults outside raised their voices in protest against this hybrid Ibo, the little one, silently absorbed it in the classroom.

The adults died and the combined language obtained a permanent place as the literary and standard language of the Ibo family of tribes. The same thing was done with the Shona dialects in Southern Rhodesia.

The Analogy of Swahili.

In East Africa Swahili which belonged to one coast tribe was adopted, and reinforced with words from Arabic etc. All tribes in Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya and other regions can understand one another through this *lingua franca*.

In South Africa the Ibo and Shona process was reversed. Xhosa and Zulu were forced apart and written as two different languages each with its own orthography. Tswana and Southern Sotho were treated in the same way while the difference in orthography was made even wider. After the use of Southern Sotho literature in the Transvaal, someone introduced written Pedi with an orthography that differed from that of Southern Sotho and Tswana in certain glaring respects.

In the Northern Transvaal, Venda and Tsonga each followed its own way.

The mixing of tribes has thrown the problem of linguistic barriers into sharp relief. A few years ago, when I proposed the unification of Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele, Baca etc. into one Nguni language, and Tswana, Pedi, Southern Sotho, Kgatla etc. into another, and that we begin building a bridge across the two, I found myself turned into a target of bitter criticism.

My idea was pronounced preposterous and impracticable. It is, in spite of

all this noise, gratifying that bridges are being built. The absurdity of spelling the same words differently just because of tribal difference has almost been removed. One education department has instructed its examiners to refrain from penalising a candidate just because he has, in his composition, employed a word from another dialect.

The free borrowing of words is taking place in large industrial centres in the teeth of harsh protests by the linguistic "purists." Xhosas are importing many Zulu words, and vice versa. Tswana and Pedi speakers use Southern Sotho words and expressions to an increasing extent.

All this is as it should be. This mixture is a good thing and we should all encourage it. A conference should be summoned and a standard process of unification agreed upon. Nguni words should be freely Sothoised and Sotho words freely Nguniised. There is nothing revolutionary in this. It has been going on for a century in the Eastern part of the Orange Free State.

Transvaal Ndebele spoken at and around Potgietersrust is a combination of Nguni and Sotho which is spoken fluently by the Ndebeles of that region.

In my suggestions, I am not unaware that there may yet be another way out of this linguistic tangle. Unity among non-Europeans which is so essential in this country renders my proposed solution merely partial. English is our non-European Esperanto. The question is: "Should English be among us in South Africa what Swahili is in East Africa?"

This should be left for future discussion. Our job just now should be the throwing of our Bantu languages into one pot, and the putting of fire under the pot. For a start, however, two separate pots might be necessary.

THE ROAD TO SLAVERY

LONG before the Nationalist Party came to power they made it clear in their programmatic declarations that the system of collective bargaining would have to be substituted by a system of State supervision and "State responsibility."

This picture of a benevolent "State" settling the workers' troubles for them was drawn in order to persuade the workers to drop their independent vigilance in defence of their own rights, to give up the idea of free class organisation, to weaken the Trade Unions.

Since coming to power the Nats have gone a long way in implementing their labour programme. Skillfully playing on the colour prejudices of the white