

Empowering the Grassroots through Local Language Literacy: Perspectives from Kom, Cameroon

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Social structures and organised groups interact and control themselves through power relations. These power relations are built around certain hegemonies ranging from cultural, to political and economic hegemonies. The colonial experience has not only demised local cultures in African but redistributed the symbolic capitals of most social values and activities. In this complex picture, African linguistic identities and practices are consequentially influenced and conditioned by external agents and powers. And the post-colonial African societies have had to adjust their social vision and activities to fit in an international agenda dictated by external instances acting through their local hegemonic constituencies. The school education structures, the public communications and media, the ‘modern’ systems of values are all sustained by these agendas rooted in the power of European languages and heritages.

Yet some grassroots communities are struggling on a daily basis to restore a different picture of themselves and their values. Not with any military weapons but linguistic tools: local languages. Such is the case with the Kom community. Kom is a Grassfields Bantu language spoken in the North-West province of Cameroon. The perseverance of local literacy activities in that language epitomizes these struggles against some socio-cultural hegemonies established since colonial times. Based on an ethnographic approach and using ethnographic data collection techniques, this paper examines on the one hand the Kom contemporary system of values and cultural determinations, looking briefly at the holes and clash created in their cultural tapestry by the colonial encounter and heritage. On the other hand, the author analyses the vibrancy and perseverance of local literacy activities in Kom, looking at how the local literacy programme is a tool to re-establish slowly but determinedly a new system of values whereby the current exclusive hegemonies of colonial languages and cultural globalisation are challenged.