

# At the cultural interface: Colonial ideas in Zambia's contemporary early literacy policies

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## Abstract

Using the concept of the Cultural Interface (CI), this study investigated the continuity of colonial ideas in contemporary early literacy policies. The data sources consisted of semi-structured interview scripts and key documents presenting Zambia's, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) and World Bank's early literacy policy ideas. These sources were analysed using the Thought Ritual process. The analysis reveals a continuity of colonial ideas, particularly the notion that Indigenous people lack a knowledge system to foster Western civilisation or economic development. To justify colonial ideas, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) were framed as primitive, even though the term 'poverty' is used in the contemporary era. During the colonial era, civilisation was to be fostered through adapted education and mass literacy. After the colonial era, this foundation was mainly used for self-determination—to control and continue developing Western institutions after the departure of the British Empire. This manifests in simplified early literacy policies geared towards poverty reduction through gender equality, health and a heavy emphasis on the technical ability to read Indigenous languages, while sidelining the broader integration of IKS. This paper provides new insights into coloniality by highlighting the subtle but persistent ways colonial ideas are embedded in contemporary early literacy policies and their effects on IKS in Zambia.

## Keywords

early literacy policies, decolonisation, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Indigenous research, development organisations

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## Introduction

The legacy of colonial education policies remains deeply embedded in the structure and content of formal education in many Indigenous communities and former colonies, shaping how knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted in contemporary policies (Kirchgasler, 2025; Serpell, 2020). Education researchers have long highlighted this colonial legacy, framing it within the politics of knowledge through binaries such as Western Knowledge Systems (WKS)/Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), settler/Indigenous, black/white and the global/local divide (see Kirchgasler, 2025; Bhattacharya, 2011; Perry, 2008). However, such analyses in contemporary early literacy policies remain limited, especially those addressing colonial histories, unequal power relations and access to knowledge (Bartlett and Frazier, 2015; Hackett et al., 2020; Serpell, 2020). Using Zambia as a case study, I fill this gap by investigating the continuity of colonial ideas in Zambia's contemporary early literacy policies through a socio-historical lens, considering both the colonial legacy and the role of contemporary Indigenous policy actors as they intersect with organizations like United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank.

In this article, I draw from Nakata's (2024, 2007, 1997) concept of the Cultural Interface—a decolonizing concept that problematises the colonial epistemic roots of the formal education system. It posits that the first step in decolonisation is understanding how WKS establish their legitimacy and authority, helping reveal their limits, especially in positioning IKS as inferior rather than a knowledge system to be integrated in policy (Nakata, 2007). From this perspective, I view the early literacy policy process as a Cultural Interface—a lived space where Indigenous people actively engage with different knowledge systems and outsiders continue intervening, such as the British Empire in the colonial era and in the contemporary era, bilateral and international organisations (Nakata, 2007, 2024). In addition, this space is more than opposing knowledge systems, but WKS in colonial literacy policies were constituted based on IKS (Keary, 2021; Nakata, 1997, 2007). Therefore, in this article, I specifically investigate how colonial ideas as constructs of WKS, intersected with IKS becoming embedded in colonial literacy policies. I then trace these ideas from colonial policy documents to contemporary early literacy policies.<sup>1</sup> Colonial ideas refer to the motivations, attitudes and beliefs of colonial policy actors and institutions that justified interventions or positioned Indigenous people as requiring intervention through literacy policies.

The article proceeds as follows: I start with a brief explanation of the Cultural Interface. Through a literature review, I then proceed by positioning the researcher, research participants, IKS, WKS and Zambian early literacy policies in the Cultural Interface. This is followed by the methodology, where I introduce the colonial ideas as a conceptual framework and the Thought Ritual process to guide analysis. I then explain the manifestations of colonial ideas in early literacy policies from 1921 to 2013. I conclude by summarising the findings and reflecting on how colonial ideas challenge the integration of IKS in early literacy policies.

## The Cultural Interface

The Cultural Interface was initially developed based on Indigenous Islander experiences in Australia (Nakata, 1997, 2007) but has since been applied in different parts of the world

(Maakrun and Maher, 2016; Stewart and Vaughan, 2025). This interface has existed for slightly more than a century since the colonisation of Indigenous people started in the 19th century (Nakata, 2007). According to Nakata (2007: 199) the Cultural Interface is

a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation.

This definition highlights the complexity of knowledge production sites such as education systems in Indigenous communities and former colonies (Nakata et al., 2012). Therefore, the concept of the Cultural Interface challenges the view that formal education is universal, scientific and/or neutral, but instead, is deeply embedded in European culture (Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2012). In addition, once education policies are implemented within the local context, they are dynamically shaped and transformed by the surrounding IKS (Bhattacharya, 2011; Kaunda, 2022) and Indigenous<sup>2</sup> people's status of using both IKS and WKS (Nakata, 1997, 2007). Therefore, education policies cannot be seen as preserving the purity they had from their countries of origin nor is decolonizing research simply about replacing WKS with IKS (Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2012).

Within the education system, Indigenous people have always been active to be continuous with their IKS, colonial histories and postcolonial present (Nakata, 1997, 2007). Therefore, their decisions and actions make it possible to track discontinuities and continuities within policy. Evident is the adoption and modification of colonial education systems for their own benefit (Nakata, 2007). However other continuities are the consistent positioning of IKS as 'ignored', 'silenced', 'invisible' and 'other' in policy (Kaunda, 2022; Mukoboto, 1978; Nakata, 2007) despite evidence that IKS enhance literacy acquisition (Nomlomo and Sosibo, 2016).

### *The participants and researcher at the Cultural Interface*

This study includes Indigenous policy actors since they are active agents in the early literacy policy process, and not merely victims of their colonial past (Nakata, 2007). According to my findings, these actors are also engaged in the activities of USAID and the World Bank, major organisations that have influenced literacy policies in Zambia. Therefore, this study also highlights that neither development organisations nor Indigenous policy actors operate in isolation within Zambia's contemporary early literacy policy process; they are deeply interconnected. Furthermore, including these organisations grounds the understanding of the politics of knowledge that advance colonial ideas because it helps link literacy to language and economic development, a linkage that Robinson and Vū (2019) urge be examined— and coloniality (Wickens and Sandlin, 2007).

Secondly, as a researcher, I use both IKS and WKS in my way of life. I have a formal education that favours WKS, and I am also an Indigenous Zambian from the Tonga tribe and speak the Tonga language. This hybrid identity led to a desire similar to Nakata (2007), of understanding how knowledge about Indigenous people by mostly European/

Western policy actors informs early literacy policies. I hope that the results of this study will influence policy actors, development organisations and other interested parties to rethink literacy policies and advance those that include IKS.

### *Significance of IKS and early literacy policies*

IKS are a significant component of the learners' social-cultural environment in Zambia (Kaunda, 2022; Matafwali and Mofu, 2023). In this paper, IKS are considered as the diverse practices, cultures, knowledges, and languages that are intimately interconnected and inform Indigenous people's socio-cultural, political, economic and physical environments (Nakata, 2007). In Zambia, they are reflected in the diverse cultures and languages comprising of 74 tribes.

The way Indigenous people live (mbotupona in Tonga), is the content, purpose, and goal for children's learning and composed of interactions between the physical, spiritual, and human aspects (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019; Yunkaporta, 2009). The person is part of the human aspect (buntu in Tonga) and is interconnected to the physical and spiritual aspects (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019; Yunkaporta, 2009). Land hosts the physical aspect, is sentient and centre of human activities children learn (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). Every aspect whether physical or human is spiritual. These aspects are the vital connections children have with their immediate families, communities, trees, animals and inanimate objects such as land and wind (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). Therefore, Matafwali and Mofu (2023) posit that IKS are important in children's identity and meaning making of their socio-cultural environment.

The colonisation of Northern Rhodesia (now known as Zambia) in the late 19th century introduced the formal education system which became a site for producing WKS (Kaunda, 2022). WKS in this paper refer to the dominant framework for understanding and organizing knowledge in cultures that have historically been influenced by Western Europe and its intellectual traditions, values, beliefs, attitudes, technologies and knowledges (Nakata, 2007). WKS are often associated with formal institutions especially education and presented as universal and scientific (Nakata, 2007). With a reductionist and positivist perspective, WKS are regarded as objective (Chapman and Schott, 2020) and hierarchical, promoting a top-down approach not only to economic and political institutions but also people and geographical locations (Kirchgasler, 2025).

WKS transformed the ways Indigenous people organised and taught their children (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019; Kaunda, 2022). The British empire centralised formal education and largely determined its content and scope (Parker, 1964). Colonial education primarily focused on classroom-based instruction unlike Indigenous education which was largely dependent on experiential/situated type of learning that was not bound by educational structures. In addition, reading and writing were key colonising tools (Baker, 2007) that advanced colonisers' preferred education, which was formulated to reflect colonial views on race and culture (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). For instance, learner's Indigenous cultures were discouraged and instead, taught Western cultural practices such as Christianity (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019; Mukoboto, 1978). Furthermore, ideals of democracy and equality were reinterpreted to justify inferior education (Clarke, 1932) such as a deliberate focus on elementary education to produce cheap labour (Mukoboto, 1978). In contrast, in IKS, oral

narratives are primarily used to transfer knowledge emphasizing interrelatedness (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019) rather than knowledge and cultural hierarchies.

When Zambia gained independence from Britain, it retained the colonial policy structures mainly because the Indigenous elites educated in the colonial era were now influencing policy (Lungu, 1985). As a result, IKS were largely excluded in the first postcolonial education policy of 1977 titled *Educational Reform*, a consequence of the policy continuity Lungu (1985) describes. Subsequent early literacy policies such as the Primary Reading Program (1999–2014), Primary Literacy Program and Zambia National Literacy Framework (2014–2024) have seen an increased influence of multiple actors, especially development organisations such as the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, the World Bank and USAID. These donor driven interventions have been criticised for neglecting the local social-cultural context (Bartlett and Frazier, 2015) and local people’s perspectives (Iversen et al., 2023). Furthermore, they promote the autonomous model that emphasizes technical skills in reading and writing (Chibamba et al., 2018) which has been critiqued. While presented as neutral, this model serves as a primary vehicle for transferring Western values and technologies (Bhattacharya, 2011) emphasising singular views of economic development (Lauwerier, 2018). Consequently, literacy is positioned as a pre-requisite for Western type of economic and social development (Baker, 2007).

## Methodology

I drew from documents and eight semi-structured interviews with Indigenous policy actors to analyse the continuity of colonial ideas in early literacy policies with the guidance of these questions:

- (1) How were colonial ideas interpreted in colonial early literacy policy problems and solutions in Northern Rhodesia?
- (2) How did colonial ideas in early literacy policies position IKS?
- (3) How have Indigenous people repositioned themselves in contemporary early literacy policies making themselves susceptible to continuing colonial ideas and
- (4) How have colonial ideas evolved in contemporary early literacy policies?

Most of the analysed documents cover various areas in education. Therefore, in this paper, I focus on sections relating to literacy. The analysed colonial-era documents spanned from 1921 to 1962, while the contemporary documents spanned from 1963 to 2013. I ended document selection in 2013 because then, Zambia adopted USAID led early literacy policies which have continued to influence policy to this day, as reflected in the current Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (see Ministry of Education (MOE), 2023: 16). USAID provided technical and financial support to these policies until early 2025 when it was dismantled.

During the colonial era, analysed documents included two reports by the African Education Commission (1925, 1922) which elucidated policy actors’ ideas behind policy problems and solutions. Reports by the General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia (1939, 1931) provided a contextualised understanding of colonial ideas in

Northern Rhodesia. The report by the [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office \(1953\)](#) and two policy documents by the [Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies \(1944, 1935\)](#) presented the evolution of colonial ideas over the years.

In the contemporary era, this study focused on Indigenous policy actors' interviews and these interviews guided document selection. These documents provided an indispensable background and context of Indigenous policy actors' interviews and early literacy policies. Documents included, two National Education Policy documents ([MOE, 1992, 1996](#)), the Zambia National Literacy Framework ([MOE, 2013a](#)) and the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework ([MOE, 2013b](#)). These documents showed Indigenous policy actors' and development organisations' influence on contemporary early literacy policies. In addition, the [World Bank's \(1999\)](#) and [USAID's \(2011\)](#) education strategies elucidated focus areas and ideas in literacy education.

I interviewed eight Indigenous policy actors involved in formulating the Zambia National Literacy Framework and/or Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, with five participating for over a year. Lasting 40–75 minutes, semi-structured interviews included government officials, lecturers, experts, and those involved in USAID's and the World Bank's activities. To protect anonymity, specific affiliations are omitted, and pseudonyms (INFO1-INFO8) are used. The research received ethical approval in April 2023 and interviews were conducted later that same year.

### *Colonial ideas as a conceptual tool*

I analysed the data through the lens of the Cultural Interface with a specific focus on colonial ideas as they intersected with IKS. Therefore, I conceptualised colonial ideas to help identify and trace their embeddedness in contemporary policies. I also highlight that colonial ideas were rooted in WKS' notions of difference that viewed European culture and knowledge as superior to those of the colonised ([Keary, 2021](#); [Nakata, 2007](#)). They were often the entry point or justification for implementation of other constructs of WKS in colonies such as education systems, languages and governance structures and the political exploitation of the colonised ([Nakata, 2007](#)).

These ideas were largely rooted in evolutionary theories that positioned Indigenous peoples as being of the 'past' with words describing this status such as savage and primitive, while Europeans were considered as civilized and advanced ([Nakata, 2007](#)). Several ideas reinforced this view, such as the concept of the "lost soul" and the belief in psychological and physiological differences ([Nakata, 2007](#)). The "lost soul" idea depicted Indigenous peoples as lacking a civilised culture, particularly in their failure to adopt European norms like Christianity. Similarly, psychological and physiological differences were used to compare Indigenous peoples to animals, positioning them as inferior to Europeans ([Nakata, 1997, 2007](#)). These ideas aimed to justify power dynamics and human stratification through binary oppositions like "savage versus tame" and "uncivilized vs. civilized". Ultimately, Indigenous people were framed as children, disadvantaged, lost, and inferior, with the colonizer as the "saviour" ([Nakata, 2007](#)). This positioned Indigenous people as apolitical—disinterested and incapable of making decisions in the education system ([Nakata, 1997](#)).

Secondly, I drew from aspects of the Thought Ritual process by Yunkaporta and Moodie (2021), a data analysis method rooted in Yunkaporta's (2009) relational responsive analysis—a framework influenced by Nakata's concept of the Cultural Interface. This analysis method is a means to structure and decolonise data analysis by highlighting the complexity of Indigenous people's lives as relations between IKS and WKS. Since I am interested in a socio-historic lens of coloniality in early literacy policies, focus is on the interrelations and networks of colonial ideas as they position IKS as Western Knowledge constructs. The Thought Ritual process utilises constant comparisons and divergences, to identify points where data or patterns seemed to intersect/diverge, inter-relate, and/or correlate and these are major areas of revelation helping identify areas of increase (Yunkaporta and Moodie, 2021) or themes.

Colonial ideas in contemporary policies were identified by areas of increase (similar themes appearing in documents) and decrease (a theme left unsaid by contemporary actors) like IKS. The areas of increase (e.g., Literacy as a predominantly Western practice) were treated as sentient and tracked through history with the help of mind maps. The Thought Ritual process values diversity (Yunkaporta and Moodie, 2021), so data was read several times to identify every piece of datum from individual policy actors to 'health' and how they merge and create networks through history such as 'uncivilised', of which in contemporary early literacy policies, is translated as poverty, creating wholes that position IKS as inferior. Throughout the analysis, reflexively acknowledging and questioning my ontological position to the datum using Indigenous pronouns of 'we' regardless of one or more variables such as we (meaning I) and we (all) (Yunkaporta and Moodie, 2021) helped acknowledge other's way of being which reduced biases and improved rigour.

## **Explaining the continuity of colonial ideas in Zambia's contemporary early literacy policies**

The empirical analysis is divided into two sections. The first examines how colonial ideas, as constructs of WKS, intersected with IKS in the formulation of colonial literacy policies and became embedded in these literacy policies. The second investigates how these colonial ideas continue influencing contemporary early literacy policies. In both sections, the themes used such as *Literacy as a predominantly Western practice* and *Literacy for economic development* reflect the resulting interpretation of literacy after the intersection between colonial ideas and IKS.

### ***Section 1: Colonial ideas intersecting with IKS in the formulation of colonial literacy policies***

In the colonial documents I analysed, the African Education Commission created in 1920 begun the process of *formally* integrating colonial ideas in education policy in Africa. The recommendations in the two reports by the African Education Commission (1922, 1925) were so significant, that they established the foundation for a uniform centralised education system and formal literacy policies in Northern Rhodesia. Subsequent colonial literacy policies largely maintained those developed by the African Education Commission. Given the similarities between colonial-era literacy policies, the

presentation of findings, will focus less on their chronological progression and more on how colonial ideas intersected with IKS.

*Literacy as a predominantly Western practice.* Colonial literacy policies were shaped by the colonial idea of fostering Western civilisation. In this context, documents would ground literacy in European education. From the onset, Europeans would be presented as providers of education because they had the right ‘education’. Meanwhile, policy required natives to acquire advanced European education aligned with Western thought to influence policy ([African Education Commission, 1922, 1925](#); [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office, 1953](#)). However, since natives largely adhered to Indigenous customs, they were seen as unprepared to receive advanced education ([Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, 1935, 1944](#); [African Education Commission, 1922, 1925](#)). Natives’ way of educating children such as extended family members bearing responsibility of raising young was characterised as misguided ([African Education Commission, 1925](#)). Such views positioned natives as apolitical. Consequently, policy reserved decision-making roles for Europeans such as director of Native Education and education supervisors. This paternalistic dynamic was vividly captured by missionaries who were the main policy actors during the colonial era:

[Regardless of the son’s wisdom, a father is always superior]. Europeans are fathers and guardians of the Natives and [invite natives] to work for any improvement. [After the son has grown, he builds a house] of his own [but not with intent to break away] from his father. ([General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia, 1931](#): 126–127).

To further align literacy with European education, the purpose of literacy in Africa was positioned as similar to Europe. Reports like the [African Education Commission \(1922, 1925\)](#) argued that, like Europeans, natives needed education that addressed individual and communal needs. The reports proceeded to state that ordinary subjects like reading and writing were too informational and needed to reflect these needs. Meanwhile, the [Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies \(1944\)](#) influenced by developments in England, such as technological advancements and dissatisfaction with authority shifted the focus to mass literacy as a universal right to be achieved within two to three decades.

The purposes of literacy stated above had to ultimately promote peace by reducing inter-racial conflicts since the development of these colonial policies was largely influenced by the World Wars ([African Education Commission, 1925](#); [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office, 1953](#)). Peace was to be achieved by fostering equality/sameness among races through European civilisation which involved eradicating disease, superstition, prejudice and ignorance ([African Education Commission, 1925](#)).

*Literacy as a means to eradicate IKS.* Once the purpose of education was framed as similar to Europe’s, it was then differentiated based on the perceived stage of Indigenous people’s civilisation. In colonial documents, natives were believed to be at the bottom of the civilisation hierarchy—primitive and backward. According to the [African Education Commission \(1925\)](#) this was a normal stage in human civilisation, one which Europeans

had passed through, thus positioning Indigenous people in Europe's historical past. The African Education Commission proceeded to state that (1925: 16):

Primitive society is notably lacking in the institutions required to supplement the influence of the school, [unlike advanced societies that had families and churches to support formal education. In the Western world the school is one of the institutions of education.]

Policy actors considered Northern Rhodesia as a unified state/nation with Western institutions, but natives had independent tribes with Indigenous institutions. Therefore, [Loram \(1936: 3\)](#), one of the influential policy actors during the colonial era mentioned that "the school in Africa becomes the totality of the new civilization which is being thrust upon the Africans". This implied that natives' Indigenous institutions were not considered as vital components of literacy. In all colonial documents, IKS were considered as incapable of sustaining themselves because they lacked the foundation to withstand the inevitable domination of Western civilisation.

The adapted education model developed in the United States of America for Black Americans was selected to develop Western institutions. Adapted education was a means to control literacy and its meaning. The model was deemed suitable for the intellectual capabilities and primitiveness of Indigenous people ([African Education Commission, 1922, 1925](#)). Most of the education provided was to be limited to the 4th grade as it was believed most natives' intellectual capacities did not extend beyond this level ([African Education Commission, 1922, 1925](#)). Basic literacy skills, that is the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetics), were a vital component of this elementary education.

Adapted education had key ideals or elements which were health, agriculture, industry, home life, recreation and, above all, character and were the basis to create European institutions. Reading and writing were fundamental in imparting knowledge and building up of practice of these education ideals or elements ([African Education Commission, 1925: 8](#)). Furthermore, due to their interrelatedness, any ideal could be the purpose, instructional content and objective of literacy. For instance, the [Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies \(1935: 7\)](#) explained that poor health is a problem that affects intellectual and moral growth, slowing down natives' progress. With regards to agriculture and industry, documents illustrate that physical activity was vital for social (character building and health) and economic development. Overall literacy advanced Christianity as the missionaries favoured 'character' building.

In all documents, IKS were consistently being referred to and then historicised as a precursor for the ideals of adapted education. This is evident in varying degrees and forms such as claiming Africans lacked a knowledge system, to identifying and condemning specific Indigenous cultural practices when they conflicted with Western ideals. In claiming that Indigenous people lacked culture, natives' education problems were viewed as relating to the physical body by reducing IKS to innate survival instincts, undermining natives' intellectual capabilities. For instance, policy texts pathologized Indigenous life, referring to "excessive sex interest" ([African Education Commission, 1925: 34](#)) or a lack of instinct for cleanliness and self-control ([General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia, 1931: 28](#)). Meanwhile, cultural practices such as spiritual traditions were labelled pagan, barbaric, and cruel, while community celebrations such as moonlight orgies were dismissed as forms of indiscipline or lack of character ([African Education Commission, 1925; General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia, 1931, 1939](#)).

Furthermore, Indigenous gender roles were also problematized. For instance, women's household responsibilities were considered as preventing girls from attending school ([Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, 1944](#)). These would be followed by a suggestion such as character building to develop acceptable behaviours.

Consequently, the gaps between school and Indigenous communities emerged as the school was educating learners on Western institutions that were often dissimilar to their IKS. This was especially problematic in Northern Rhodesia, one of the most underdeveloped British colonies, where this type of literacy could not be effectively applied ([African Education Commission 1925](#); [General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia, 1931, 1939](#)). To address this, the [Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies \(1935\)](#) focused on how communal education could reflect similar content to the school, in particular, health and agriculture. Meanwhile the [Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies \(1944\)](#) refocused this on eradicating illiteracy from elementary education to local communities. Literacy was to include economic activities to help learners adapt and apply literacy skills in their communities ([Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, 1944](#); [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office, 1953](#)). The [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office \(1953: 104\)](#) recommended “[activities related to industry such as agriculture and stock keepers which] are most valuable means of relating literacy to economic welfare and need to be expanded and developed, since they lead to a continuously developing education.” Furthermore, the technical ability to read and write was also highlighted as an objective unto itself and an important foundation for future learning.

*Literacy for the lost native.* In colonial documents, policies urged Indigenous people to adopt Western civilisation, while simultaneously criticising them for losing touch with their indigeneity. This was described as the indiscriminate adoption of European culture that was undermining “the character and spiritual life of the African” ([General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia, 1939: 57](#)). As a consequence, Indigenous people were considered as “lost in civilisation” ([African Education Commission, 1922](#); [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office, 1953](#)).

Literacy had to resolve these issues by providing the best kind of what Western civilisation could offer, which was the ideals of adapted education. Additionally, according to the [African Education Commission \(1925\)](#) and [Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office \(1953\)](#) tribal languages presented an opportunity to include Indigenous cultures and thought in literacy learning and preserve native identity and heritage. Unfortunately, as language is indispensable to reading and writing, it was a tool for advancing adapted education rather than African thought as explained by the [African Education Commission \(1925: 8\)](#) “the appeal to the Native mind cannot be effectively made without the adequate use of the Native language, nor can the essentials of sound character be taught nor interest in agriculture or industry be developed without its use”.

## *Section 2: Embeddedness of colonial ideas in contemporary early literacy policies*

The colonial idea of “civilizing” Indigenous people continues to shape early literacy policies, albeit with evolving interpretations due to political and economic changes.

Following the end of Britain's colonial rule, between the 1960s and 1980s Indigenous people positioned literacy as central to self-determination and governance. Kenneth David Kaunda, the first president of Zambia explained this continuity by stating that "the African mind does not find it easy to think in terms of Either-Or. It is open to influences which make Both-And seem desirable" (Kaunda and Colin, 1966: 30). Kaunda rejected the idea that natives needed Western education to rid themselves of primitiveness because each knowledge system had its use. He valued literacy as crucial in national and international political mobility because natives could read and write English, the language of politics.

As Zambia transitioned into an independent state, literacy became foundational for building institutions and developing the much-needed Indigenous workforce (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1963). Concurrently, literacy policies aimed to address past injustices, such as the denial of most native children to education under British rule. To address these issues, mass literacy and English as the primary language of instruction became policy (UNESCO, 1963). In these steps, Indigenous people focused on assuming the positions occupied by the British, adopting and understanding WKS while engaging less in IKS. In fact all postcolonial documents analysed, lack explicit explanations on the value of IKS to literacy. However, INFO1 also provides another perspective why IKS are marginalised and WKS prioritised:

Being colonized is something you do not recover from very easily. There are a lot of people who still think to progress, is to be like Western or European. Not necessarily what is African. Mainly because things like [Indigenous] value systems are not really being properly explained to our people in relation to policy.

In the process of self-determination, Zambia had no intention of severing ties with the international community (Kaunda and Colin, 1966), but sought technical and financial support from bilateral and international organizations (MOE, 1992, 1996). These organisations are critical partners and provide services such as capacity building and developing teaching aids (INFO1, INFO2, INFO3, and INFO4). Meanwhile, INFO7 highlighted the power dynamics between organisations and Zambia by stating that "These organizations dictate our policies, and we just follow." INFO1 verbatim explains further:

Somehow as Africans, we haven't been very assertive. We have allowed others to dictate things to us and we follow blindly. Because somehow the colonial thing made us believe that we are sort of inferior. It was something that was very, very strong.

INFO7 and INFO1 verbatims not only reflect the diminished complex position which Indigenous policy actors have to navigate in the policy process but also that organisations may have taken on a similar paternal role to that of the British Empire.

*Literacy for economic development.* Between 1990 and 2013, the colonial idea of "civilizing" Indigenous people shifted towards economic development through market-based economies. This shift is evident in national policy documents like the 1992 *Focus on learning* developed with the World Bank's support and 1996 *Educating the future* which

adopted market-based principles such as liberalisation, decentralisation, equality and equity (MOE, 1992, 1996). These policies promoted mass literacy in English through a liberal approach because English is the language for commerce (MOE, 1992). The policies also emphasised functional literacy skills for the labour market as a means for learners to earn a living if they do not continue their formal education (MOE, 1992, 1996). Furthermore, bilateral and international organisations were to provide education with minimal government intervention to improve efficiency, education quality, and access (MOE, 1992, 1996).

Zambia's shift to economic development was driven by two key factors: its economic development largely relied on the World Bank loans which required adherence to market-based principles (World Bank, 1997) and the 1990 Education for All conference, co-organized by the World Bank. Both the World Bank (1997) and USAID (2011) view literacy as essential in a market economy, considering it a key foundation for human capital development and a precursor to socio-cultural and political development.

Similar to USAID and the World Bank, in this spectrum of economic development, the Government of Zambia (2006) positioned the country as low income. In this context, the Government of Zambia (2006) used the World Bank's Gross National Income per capita classifications as frameworks for its target of achieving middle income status by 2030. This shows Zambia's awareness of being in a development continuum that positions most Western countries at the apex. Instead of describing this developmental stage as primitive or backwards, the USAID, Government of Zambia and the World Bank framed it as poverty.

Through economic development, it is hoped poverty could be reduced. Reduction of poverty is believed to enhance equality among peoples of the world, thereby fostering peace (USAID, 2011; World Bank, 1999). INFO3 also alluded to a desire for peace influencing literacy policies:

the policy agenda is set by world conferences where we discuss, debate and agree on how humanity is supposed to get along. In our country, this agenda helps us envision how we would want to be in maybe 20 or 30 years, for example in terms of reading and writing in literacy.

As noted from INFO3 verbatim, conferences symbolised willingness to work for a common good and created shared ownership of ideas, standards and goals among Indigenous policy actors, USAID and the World Bank. This ensured that policies advanced by USAID and the World Bank were not competing with Zambian policies but were compatible and mutually reinforcing. For instance, the Zambia National Literacy Framework (MOE, 2013a) aligns with USAID (2011) and the World Bank (1999) education strategies by considering literacy as a basic tool in achieving targets such as the Education For All. These targets created a cycle of interdependence between USAID, the World Bank and policy actors, cementing the influence of both organisations in early literacy policies.

*Literacy for poverty reduction.* Early literacy policies for poverty reduction focus on increased access, emphasize reading skills and integrating crosscutting issues like gender equality, sexual health, and nutrition. The World Bank supported literacy access and

quality by funding teaching materials, teacher salaries, and the construction of primary schools. It also advocated for improved reading skills in Indigenous languages in the first 2 years of elementary education (World Bank, 2007) a shift from English, through initiatives like the Basic Education Sub-Sector Improvement Program (BESSIP). This program, a collaboration between the Government of Zambia and the World Bank, prioritised literacy in the first 4 years of elementary education (World Bank, 2007), contributing to the development of the Primary Reading Program (1999–2014) (Arden, 2012).

Similarly, subsequent policies influenced by USAID such as the Zambia National Literacy Framework (MOE, 2013a) and Primary Literacy Program of 2013, focused on simplified reading in Indigenous languages (extended to the fourth grade), aligning with USAID's (2011) education strategy for clear, measurable, and effective policy priorities. USAID played a key role through projects like *Time to Learn* (2012–2017), *Read to Succeed* (2012–2017), and *Let's Read* (2019–2025) (INFO2). The emphasis on the technical ability to read Indigenous languages influenced policy discussions, such as one noted by INFO7, who criticized a policy-making session meant to include the learners' socio-cultural environment, but instead, focused on technical aspects of reading.

Indigenous policy actors, however, viewed native languages as vital for integrating IKS. INFO1 explained that “the use of native languages creates meaning since it is connected to things learners already know, so they are connecting to the socio-cultural context.” INFO2 adds, “You are transferring some of the skills from home to school.” These perspectives highlight the belief that reading Indigenous languages naturally integrates IKS. However, INFO8 and INFO5 disagreed, with INFO5 noting, “the cultural influences from those [Indigenous] languages are more evident in the family, where the child is immediately introduced to them at home.” Despite differing views on cultural integration, INFO1, INFO4, and MOE (2013a) agree that the primary reason for reading Indigenous languages is to build a strong foundation for learners to later read English. It is important to note that in the 2023 Zambia National Curriculum Framework, English was reinstated as the main medium of instruction.

Documents also placed literacy as pre-requisite for integrating gender, sexual health, health and nutrition and referred to these as cross-cutting themes reminiscent of the colonial ideals/elements of education. Comparable to the World Bank and USAID, the MOE advances health education to promote vulnerable children's and girls' learning, proper nutrition and appropriate sexual behaviour to combat HIV/AIDS. Concerning gender, INFO4 states, “when developing curriculum, we add these issues such as gender because it [curriculum framework] has to consider the [modern] times because some of our cultural practices separate men and women leading to inequality.” Similar to the colonial era, INFO4's verbatim and contemporary documents hope the inclusion of gender and health related issues can change the social structures of communities.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper investigated the embeddedness of colonial ideas in contemporary early literacy policies. The main colonial idea influencing early literacy policies is fostering Western civilisation which encompassed other ideas such as primitive, apolitical and the ‘lost’

native. These ideas were justified in colonial literacy policies through comparing and contrasting them with IKS (Keary, 2021). Meanwhile, the intersection of colonial ideas with IKS is less apparent in the contemporary era, this may be due to Indigenous people assimilating colonial literacy policies and adopting literacy policies which were advanced by USAID and the World Bank. However, both colonially and contemporarily, IKS are believed to be a hindrance to achieving the economic and technological advancements associated with Western countries (Nakata, 2007).

In the contemporary era, rather than positioning IKS as primitive, the term ‘poverty’ is preferred because according to Nakata (2007) cultural diversity is now acceptable. This positioning implicates Indigenous people and their IKS as history or ‘past’, naturalising colonial ideas in literacy as inevitable for economic development (Kirchgasler, 2025). Consequently, during the colonial era, the colonial ideas laid the foundation for Western civilisation through adapted education and mass literacy. After the colonial era, a continuity is noted where this foundation was mainly used for self-determination—to control and continue developing Western institutions after the departure of the British. This desire also contributed to positioning literacy in market-based principles, in line with the World Bank’s requirements.

While literacy is viewed as pre-requisite for economic development/civilisation this connection is loosely coupled as the emphasis is on access, technical ability to read, gender equality and health. It is questionable that the purpose of early literacy policies, instructional content and objectives limited to these areas is adequate to imbue necessary skills for economic development, when learners’ social-cultural environment is largely excluded. This approach defeats the purpose of reading for comprehension, restricts the development of critical literacy skills (Bartlett and Frazier 2015), polarises literacy ideas and leads to oversimplification of literacy policies (Nakata, 1997). Therefore, these findings enhance understanding of how Indigenous policy actors and development organisations continue colonial ideas and lead to what Lauwerier (2018) states as singular views of economic development and according to Wickens and Sandlin (2007) contributes to coloniality.

In both the colonial and contemporary era, an inclusion of IKS is attempted through Indigenous languages. As literacy policies primarily advance values associated with civilisation, the presence of Indigenous languages serve a symbolic role and has limited pedagogical impact. The silence on IKS is counterproductive because it increasingly favours Eurocentric education policies denying the Indigenous and multicultural nature of Zambia that has the potential of transforming early literacy policies. Perceived Indigenous ways of life are often simplified as subsets of European culture, with Zambia’s education system functioning as a micro-organism of WKS. This raises a critical question: Has Zambia overvalued literacy as a WKS construct that rethinking other ways of doing literacy become impossible?

Marginalising IKS and positioning Indigenous people as primitive/poor portrays them as unknowing and inferior, justifying the need for perpetual intervention by Western actors since according to Nakata (1997) they are seen as experts in literacy policies. “[Indigenous policy actors have found a way within these positions to deploy] certain strategies to uphold their own interests, to continually affirm their presence, to provide continuity with their own historical past” (Nakata, 1997: 315). They become literate in the English

language because WKS position policy actors as knowers (political) and embed themselves in policy making structures like MOE, USAID and/or the World Bank. This explains the limited resistance to colonial and developmental organisations' ideas.

Finally, the persistence of WKS in Zambia engenders a continuous interplay between IKS and WKS that is not bound by space, time or processes, even if early literacy policies often marginalise IKS. This historical and contemporary interplay subtly reflects that early literacy policies are political because they position knowledge and people.

### *Limitations and further research*

Though Zambia shares a similar colonial history with some Indigenous people, more research is needed to explore coloniality in other contexts to advance generalisable Indigenous theories and findings. Additionally, this study tried to illustrate the complexity of literacy policies among Indigenous people and thus, suggests that research should consider this complexity when seeking to decolonise literacy policies.

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### **Ethical considerations**

This paper is part of a doctoral thesis and has gone through an ethical review process. The Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku approved the research plan in April 2023. The research methodology and data collection methods are ethical and follow good scientific practice as outlined by the Finnish Board on Research Integrity TENK ([https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical\\_review\\_in\\_human\\_sciences\\_2020.pdf](https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical_review_in_human_sciences_2020.pdf)). The participants experienced no harm in physical, psychological, social, or financial way.

### **Consent to participate**

Information sheets and data management plans were given to all the participants, ensuring that they provide an informed consent. Participants provided verbal consent which was recorded using an audio recorder.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data collected through interviews may include sensitive data and will therefore be kept closed. Only anonymised data will be published in international peer reviewed journals. Qvain will be used to archive metadata and will be accessible through Etsin-service. This metadata will be stored for 10 years since it may be reused. All participants were informed of the potential of the data being reused and GDPR and EU data protection and protocols will be observed. European Union guidelines and University of Turku regulations on data protection and policy will be adhered to.

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## Notes

1. Early literacy policies refer to policies targeting grades 1 to 4 (6 to 9 years old) in elementary or primary education.
2. Indigenous is used synonymously with 'native' to avoid confusion since some analysed documents refer to Indigenous people as 'native'.

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