



# **The Severed Tongue: Cultural Colonisation, Muting of the Mother Tongue and Self-Alienation**

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## **Summary**

This article considers the devastating intergenerational impact of cultural colonisation on a subject people, and the loss of their personal and social identity, through the muting of their mother tongue and the imposition of a colonial language. The author shares learning from clinical case examples about the evocative power of communicating in a native language, with its inherent richness and history; and conversely, from her own family experiences, the linguistic and emotional disablement, with resulting social, cultural and political disempowerment, and psychological disconnectedness that ensue when deprived of this basic human right.

## **Introduction**

In this article I draw on psychoanalytic theory and personal narrative to explore the devastating intergenerational impact of cultural colonisation and the muting of a subject people's mother tongue on their psyche and personal, political and social identities. Various colonial powers in different parts of the world have, over the centuries, imposed their own language on 'native' peoples in occupied territories as a major tool of oppression and disenfranchisement. This deliberate practice has served to disconnect successive generations of indigenous people from their racial, cultural, social, and spiritual roots and

heritage, through alienating them from themselves and their linguistic identity.

In *Muted Tongues: A Timeline of Suppressed Languages*, the three researchers – Olga Olina, Hallie Ayres and Anton Vidokle – have compiled a compelling history of language politics and warfare from 1367 (the year of the first Irish-language ban in Ireland by the English) to 2021, when the Molac Law in France – approved by the French National Assembly to protect and promote regional languages, including as a medium of teaching in schools – was rejected by the French Constitutional Council, who claimed that children would then not learn French to the required national standard. The researchers of this 'forbidden languages' timeline do not

regard theirs as an exhaustive list, nor do they assume that the phenomenon is confined to European imperialism:

It is mainly with the emergence of nation-states that some languages became designated as official while many others were discouraged, suppressed, or banned altogether. Such destructive policies towards languages and dialects seem to originate in Europe and are then spread globally during colonisation.... Linguists calculate that at the current speed, almost half of the world's 7,151 languages will disappear before the end of this century....

Language can be used as a double-edged sword: to express, connect, enhance, sustain and nurture.... It can also separate and suppress, isolate, diminish and deroot. Sujata Bhatt, a contemporary Gujarati-speaking Indian poet who experienced both positive and negative aspects of studying English in America, has described very powerfully the ensuing internal struggle for survival between her 'native' and 'foreign' tongues in a widely anthologised poem, 'Search for My Tongue'. She depicts this as a painful physical process:

And if you lived in a place you had to  
Speak a foreign tongue,  
Your mother tongue would rot,  
Rot and die in your mouth  
Until you had to spit it out.

Migration for personal, social, economic, political, cultural or religious reasons has been a reality of life all over the world for millennia. Over the past century, however, with the common use in modern warfare of weapons of mass destruction, whole populations have been forced to flee devastated war zones – as is the case more recently in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Meanwhile, tidal waves of religious and/or ethnic persecution, as well as global climate change

and more frequent natural disasters like widespread fires, drought, flooding and earthquakes, increasingly add to the vast numbers of displaced peoples throughout the world desperately seeking safer homes elsewhere. A BBC Radio 4 programme, 'Losing Your Mother Tongue' (uploaded on to YouTube on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023; see <https://tinyurl.com/yhafda4z>), estimated that there are currently 103 million refugees worldwide.

The influx by air, sea and road of refugees from other continents has highlighted more widely in their often reluctant host countries the overwhelming trauma and psychological issues that arise from enforced family separation and loss of homeland, language, culture, identity, traditional support networks and belonging – in fact, all aspects of healthy human attachment that keep us resourced and functioning well.

### **Belonging Nowhere**

Such issues are even more pertinent for child and second-generation migrants who lack their parents' solid rootedness in their cultures of origin and native tongue. Even as children, they are expected to very quickly learn the host language at school, and they soon become interpreters at home for the older generation – increasingly, perhaps, at the cost of losing their own fluency in their mother tongue, and prematurely assuming some authority in the family that rightly belongs to their parents.

Such reversal of family roles is likely to cause them considerable psychological confusion, with alienation of self and resulting social rootlessness. These are almost inevitable concomitants of cultural colonisation and

imposition of the host language on migrant children, who are thus encouraged to assimilate and cease using their native tongue. They can end up feeling like ‘cultural nomads’ who belong nowhere, although some may comfort themselves with the belief that they can now choose to be ‘citizens of the world’.

## Language and Identity

Mother tongue is one of the most powerful tools used to preserve and convey culture and cultural ties. Children who are unaware of their culture, their language, and their history will lose confidence in themselves, the family, society and the nation to which they belong and will have no other option than seeking an alternate identity. (Guvercin, 2010, online)

We co-construct our identity through the language(s) we use to communicate and interact with others. In her chapter ‘How to tame a wild tongue’, Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana activist and radical scholar, poet and novelist living on the Mexican American border, makes the unequivocal claim that ‘... ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language’.

Monica Macias describes her own disorienting experiences of racial, cultural and linguistic displacement in her memoir, *Black Girl from Pyongyang: In Search of My Identity*. The daughter of the first President of Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, she was sent to North Korea at the age of 7 to be educated there. After her father was assassinated, her Spanish mother returned to West Africa, and Monica became the ward of the President of North Korea. She attended a military boarding school, where she recalls spending a very harsh childhood. She stopped speaking Spanish, her mother tongue, and

became fluent in Korean, learning to identify as Korean. Monica left North Korea as a young adult and travelled to China, and then to the West. She relearned Spanish, the colonial language of Equatorial Guinea, which she revisited for a while as an adult, but felt no immediate connection with the land of her birth. She moved to Spain and then America, before settling in England.

## Multilingual Therapy... or not

In this article I utilise personal learning from my own family experiences of emigration, and disabling cultural and linguistic colonisation as expatriate Goans of Indian origin, settled in the mid-twentieth century in Kenya, then a British colony in Africa.

I grew up in a bilingual (Portuguese and English-speaking) Goan family in Nairobi, to where my parents had moved in the early 1930s from Goa, then a Portuguese colony in India. In my early twenties I emigrated to England and gradually progressed through work and study to developing, in the 1990s, a clinical practice in London and Essex as an attachment-based psychoanalytic psychotherapist. I worked with multilingual clients from different cultures, and also with those who were linguistically and psychically deprived, like myself, through not knowing their own mother tongue and so spoke only English.

I vividly recall my early experiences of failure and shame as a trainee therapist in London when older Indian women clients mistakenly expected me, because I looked like them, to communicate with them in their native language. However, very gradually, I then discovered that as a therapist, I could help

culturally colonised clients, like myself, who wanted to explore and own their full heritage.

### ‘Cultural Nomads’

‘She’s a cultural nomad!’, my English colleague, Jane, exclaimed in some frustration after seeing Z, a new therapy client. ‘She moved to London from America last year, and before that lived all over the place. I don’t understand people like Z.... I’ve always lived in England’, Jane added a little smugly. I looked at her in some surprise, thinking that I would feel completely comfortable working with a client like Z, since I too am a cultural nomad.

My extended family straddled four continents: Africa, Asia, Europe and South America. I felt proud of having widespread multi-cultural roots, giving me such a rich and varied heritage. But despite this cultural osmosis, I suddenly now wondered, where did I myself belong?

It was the early 1990s, and Jane and I were trainees on placement at a pioneering therapy centre in North London, especially set up to offer low-cost therapy to women who would not otherwise have been able to afford it. We each saw three clients a week for short-term counselling; they all happened to be migrant women, and many indeed were cultural nomads like me.

A few, however, were rooted firmly in their cultures of origin, and although I looked like some of my Indian clients, we dressed and spoke very differently. I wore Western-style clothes while they had retained the use of traditional Indian women’s clothing, *sarees* or *salwar kameez*. Our counselling sessions would usually start off well, as they felt

reassured by my apparent sameness. However, lulled by that security, about halfway through the first session my clients would tend to drop their guard and slip into their familiar mother tongue – Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati or Urdu – usually to explain their troubling home situation and relationships to me, and I would then look at them blankly. They would stop talking mid-track, quickly realising that although we looked similar (dark skin, hair and eyes), I was not one of them. Their disappointment and sense of betrayal, and mine of shame for not understanding their vernacular, were almost palpable in the room. They seldom returned for a following session, seeing me as a ‘cultural coconut’ – brown outside and white inside, since I did not know any Indian language, and spoke only English. And I felt even worse when I realised that some of these Indian women would then choose to see a white counsellor who clearly did not know their culture or language, rather than someone like me whom they had mistakenly expected to think and speak like them.

Ironically, the clients with whom I did connect best were cultural nomads like myself, who felt rootless and alien – outsiders often even in their families of origin, as well as in their host community. The more I learned about and was willing to acknowledge my own difference, the better I could understand and mirror such clients, helping them to slowly forge a new and positive personal, cultural and social identity.

But first, I had to go on a long voyage of self-exploration for a while, with the help of my then therapist and supervisors who could also draw on their own painful experiences of being ‘othered’. Coincidentally, they all happened to be white South Africans who had

left their country of birth during apartheid, having become outsiders there politically, and then both socially and culturally in their ‘mother country’ when they moved to England.

Mostly, though, I had to learn on my own, often painfully through journalling and self-reflection, and gradually exploring my complex family history in the former Portuguese and British colonies of Goa and Kenya. Our parents’ cultural colonisation by both European powers had left me and my younger sister, Rose, completely rootless – outsiders even in our own Goan community, as we did not speak or even understand our native language, Konkani,<sup>1</sup> unlike most of our peers.

Primary schoolchildren in Goa now routinely learn four languages: Konkani, Marathi and the two official languages of India – Hindi and English. If their parents are migrant workers from a different state, these children will also be fluent in their own regional language. At secondary-school level, they can usually choose between French, German, Russian or Goa’s former dominant colonial language, Portuguese.

### **Rose’s Story**

This is a poignant example of the severing of a child’s mother tongue, which resulted in lifelong social and functional disablement for Rose amongst her own people. Like many ‘cultural nomads’, she then sought unsuccessfully to develop a compensatory sense of ‘belonging everywhere’ by defining herself as ‘a citizen of the world’.

Rose had spent her first six years of life with our grandparents in Goa, and was fluent in

Konkani. However, when she rejoined our family in Kenya, then a British colony, my father forbade her to use our native tongue as he wanted her to learn English instead, which was our colonial language. He himself had never been allowed to learn Konkani when growing up in Goa as his internally oppressed family spoke only Portuguese, the language of their colonisers. He had probably then struggled to learn English when he later emigrated as a young man to Kenya to seek employment there. The best of motives, perhaps, for the cruellest deprivation – denying his small child, Rose, the basic human right to speak in her own mother tongue, and so for ever disabling her linguistically, socially, culturally and psychologically, even as an adult.

Rose returned to Goa at 19, but found it difficult to get suitable employment without the use of Konkani, or to socialise with her peers as she spoke only English – by now an American slang variant which she affected, so unconsciously emphasising her felt difference. Her muted child-self felt completely unable as an adult to relearn Konkani. Even decades after our father died, now as an older woman living in a care home in Goa and socially free to speak in Konkani to her peers, Rose dared not allow herself to relearn her mother tongue and communicate with them in the language she had once spoken so fluently. Her child self still painfully remembered her long dead father’s strict injunction to speak only in English, and her adult self dutifully obeyed, so compounding her lifelong difficulty in reintegrating among her own people who, understandably, regarded her preference for a foreign language as an affectation. Such linguistic disablement affects not only individuals but also institutions and whole

populations in former colonies. Independent India still retains English as its official language, alongside Hindi. And just as the Portuguese-speaking minority in Goa were encouraged – forcibly or otherwise over four centuries of colonial rule – to give up their Hindu practices for Catholicism (introduced to Goa by its Spanish-born patron saint, Francis Xavier),<sup>2</sup> the spiritual and religious beliefs of linguistically subjugated peoples everywhere are undermined by those of their rulers. Christian and other missionaries have often, intentionally or otherwise, paved the way for colonisation of the countries they have proselytised.

African slaves in the Americas were not only forbidden to use their own native tongues, but were also prevented from learning to read and write in English so as to limit their ability to communicate with others and so keep them enslaved. Similarly, indigenous children in America, Canada and Australia, amongst other colonised territories, were forbidden to speak their mother tongue at school or in the institutions where they were ‘brought up’ by white religious or other teachers or with foster parents, in deliberate campaigns to de-root them from their native culture and keep them mentally enslaved.

In Britain itself, English has remained an imperial language even in its provinces of Wales and Scotland, as well as in its former colony of Ireland, for almost seven centuries. An English psychotherapist, Sue Wright (personal communication), sent me this poignant example from Wales, where she now lives:

In the 1940s in some of the primary schools, if a child used Welsh they had to wear a board round their neck which said ‘Welsh NOT’. When another child then spoke in Welsh the

board was passed on, and so on until the end of the day, when the last holder was beaten. Sometimes, if it was a girl, one of her brothers would use Welsh in order to take the punishment.

The Irish theologian, Vincent D. Twomey, quotes Martin Heidegger’s poetic line from his ‘Letter on Humanism’ (1947):

*‘Language is the home of being. In this house man dwells.’* The result of the adoption of the English language (and the decline of Irish) by a largely impoverished nation was to make Irishmen and women in effect culturally rootless, exiles in their own country. (Twomey, 2003, p. 52)

In considering the nature of Catholicism in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Republican Ireland, Father Twomey regrets the erosion of its rich Celtic heritage: ‘Irish gave the Christian man, priest or pauper, a unitary world view, at once natural and supernatural, which had not suffered from the reducing influences of Puritanism, rationalism or cultural insularity *a l’anglaise...*’ (ibid.).

Twomey adds in his footnote 27, p. 182 (Chapter 2, ‘How Catholic is Irish Catholicism?’), ‘According to Sean de Freine’s penetrating analysis, the first consequences of the loss of Irish were a radical break with tradition, the loss of an enormous amount of knowledge and wisdom, and a sense of uprootedness (*The Great Silence*, 75–85).’

These are universal losses for people deprived of the use of their mother tongue, with resulting social isolation and economic and political disempowerment. Bengali-speaking Bangladesh (Bengali land) instituted Mother Language Day on 21 February 1999 following its own bloody struggles as ‘East

Pakistan' in 1971 to achieve linguistic, political and economic independence from Urdu-dominant West Pakistan. In November 1999, UNESCO adopted the date the 21 February as International Mother Language Day to celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity and to promote multilingualism, and, with that, greater inclusivity.

While looking up internet descriptions of the difference between 'mother tongue' and 'first language', I came across the following expressive distinction by Henry Chan at 'The SocioLinguistics of Globalization' conference held at the University of Hong Kong in June 2015.

Mother tongue is the in-born language, which a baby has already familiarised even in the gestation of mother before it was born. The first language is the language which a child acquires either through schooling or socialisation such as family. (Chan, in Goebel, 2015)

I link Chan's reference to an 'in-born' mother tongue with Julie Sedivy's description of her own experiences in her book, *Memory Speaks: On Losing and Reclaiming Language and Self*. She had been fluent in Czech as a small child, but then forgot it after moving at the age of 4 with her family to Canada, where she grew up learning to speak French and English instead. Going on to train as a professional linguist, Sedivy became particularly interested in research studies of international adoptees who relearned, as adults, their native tongue on revisiting their country of origin much more quickly than adults who had never been exposed to that language when small. She herself relearned Czech some decades later with relative ease, on re-exposure to her mother tongue.

I have two poignant examples from elderly English friends who were child evacuees during the Second World War, resulting in speech confusion and disablement for one, and long-lasting emotional trauma for both. One was a young Jewish boy from South London who was sent to Wales at the age of 10, and then moved from foster home to foster home eight times. The other was a 3 year-old girl from the East End of London who was evacuated to Yorkshire for three long years to keep her safe from German bombs. She returned to her family at the age of 6 with a stammer and 'speaking funny', as she recalls, completely alienated from herself and her peers, and growing up a loner and truanting from school.

It seems that at some level, our body/brain does remember what it knew in the womb or early life, that first language we heard spoken by our mother or others around us. Unlike Rose in my family, Sedivy had no family injunction to forget her mother tongue and so can write of her linguistic choices: 'I live in multiple perspectives; I live in multiple homes.' This helps her to enjoy the freedom of not having to make 'either/or' choices.

Bilingualism is considered to help people get away from either/or thinking, and to promote flexibility and inclusivity as well as cognitive development in children, helping them to develop their critical thinking and literacy skills, while also slowing down cognitive decline in older people (Cummins, 2001).

UNESCO makes this important contribution on its website to the mother tongue debate:

And most importantly, multilingual education based on the mother tongue empowers all learners to fully take part in society. It fosters mutual understanding and respect for one

another and helps preserve the wealth of cultural and traditional heritage that is embedded in every language around the world. (UNESCO, 2023).

## Clinical Work

I remained unaware of the emotional power of the mother tongue, and how my family and I had been effectively muted from a very young age, until one of my first therapy clients shared her own painful learning with me. An Italian migrant in London in the early 1990s, Lucia worked as a waitress, but was hoping to become an actress. Her knowledge of English was good enough to secure her an audition for the role of Nurse in the Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet*. She had thoroughly rehearsed a long speech by the Nurse and so went to the audition feeling well prepared for it.

However, at our next therapy session she told me, not meeting my eyes, of her devastating experience at the audition. She had begun confidently – but perhaps a little woodenly – to recite the carefully prepared speech in English when the director suddenly interrupted her in mid-flow. ‘Is Italian not your mother tongue?’, he asked her unexpectedly. ‘Yes’, she replied, surprised. ‘Well then, say it in Italian’, he directed her.

Lucia began to automatically translate the English words spoken by the Nurse into her mother tongue, gathering strength and passion as she continued with that speech, until she suddenly broke down in tears. The emotional power of speaking those words in Italian had so many personal and family resonances for her that she could not continue with the speech, or indeed with the audition. She ended it abruptly and left.

I heard her relate this experience as if I were a visitor from another planet, totally unaware until then of the emotional impact of using the mother tongue. As if intuitively aware of my linguistic disablement, Lucia decided soon after to end her therapy sessions with me, and returned to Italy to try and resolve her long-standing conflict there with her mother.

I learned from that experience to revalue ‘native’ speech, including what is often disparagingly referred to as ‘broken English’ or even ‘pidgin English’, although each variant has its own rich resonances, colourful idiom and inherent syntax. I could now better empathise with the linguistic, social and cultural difficulties experienced by clients who had arrived from the Caribbean as older children to rejoin their emigrant mothers in England, and new younger siblings who spoke fluently in Cockney or London variants of English. These clients had learned a rich Creole language from their grandmothers in the Caribbean, with its own grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that were now totally devalued and derided by their new families and peers at school. Not surprisingly, many of these young migrant pupils ended their formal education in England as soon as they could, and with no marketable qualifications or skills with which to earn a living.

My most profound learning, however, came from a young Muslim mother in Essex struggling to parent her male toddler effectively while feeling completely isolated from her disapproving family, and totally unsupported in a hostile white environment. She vividly described to me her visceral and disorienting experience of having to be two different people while growing up in England, of daily switching language and identity –



literally on the threshold of her home – in an attempt to fit in socially and culturally with her English peers at school. She would change in the morning into Western-style school uniform before leaving home to join her friends on their way to school, and then converse in English all day.

On returning home in the evening, she would immediately change back into traditional Pakistani dress, *salwar* and *kameez*, and simultaneously switch from English to Urdu when speaking to her mother and grandparents. Her daily double-transformation was complete; but while clothes could be simply swapped, the switch from using her mother tongue to speaking in English and then back again in Urdu was far more profound and longer lasting in its impact on whom she felt she was allowed to be in the two conflicting cultures. This impacted negatively on her confidence at school and when growing up and dating, especially when she became pregnant and ended up with no family or social support as a new and struggling single parent of an Anglo-Pakistani boy child. ‘Mother tongue schooling can therefore help to make education more inclusive, and help address the multiple disadvantages faced by girls and women belonging to linguistic minorities.’ (Romaine, 2013, online)

Searching online, I found graphic descriptions of the literal importance of the tongue to human beings. These now have added metaphorical resonance for me: ‘The tongue is an essential muscle for key human functions, such as breathing, eating, and speaking. It is quite common for a person to bite their tongue by accident.’ (Dresden, 2023)

If cut, your tongue can heal as well as any other muscle. If you split it like a snake's tongue, the split halves will heal but stay split. If you cut off two thirds of it, the nub end will heal but you will only ever after have a third of a tongue. ([quora.com](https://www.quora.com))

## Reclaiming My Mother Tongue

Amy Tan, the renowned Chinese American author, grew up learning to speak on her mother’s behalf, just like children of migrants do the world over. From a young age they are expected to act as interpreters for their often linguistically deskilled parents, who lack the children’s acquired proficiency in speaking the language of their new host country, or with the ‘right accent’. So migrant parents may often be misunderstood or, worse still, ridiculed or ignored by local officials and service providers, as Amy’s mother sometimes experienced in the USA.

Over the years, even when grown up Amy was often required to be her mother’s voice, and speak in standard American English when dealing with outsiders on the ‘phone, in order to be understood by them and taken seriously. As a writer, however, Amy was gradually able to revalue her mother’s colourful and idiosyncratic use of the English language, and appreciate its emotional richness and creativity as having also informed her own way of seeing the world:

But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

The essay ‘Mother tongue’ explores Amy Tan’s relationship with the English language,

her mother, and writing. This non-fiction narrative essay was originally given as a talk during the 1989 State of the Language Symposium; it was later published by *The Threepenny Review* in 1990.

I feel inspired by Amy Tan's tribute in her essay to her Chinese mother's creative and colourful use of the English language, to acknowledge my own mother's quiet rebellion in insisting on speaking to us as children in Portuguese (a Goan colonial variant), when forbidden by our culturally colonised father to teach us Konkani, our mother tongue, as he did not want us confused when learning English, the colonial language of Kenya.

Ironically, it was our mother who taught us to read and write in English, and even prepared me for an informal entrance test at the age of 5 for the Goan primary school in Nairobi by teaching me the English nursery rhyme *Jack and Jill!* As a treat in the early evenings, she would often read to us from two magical sounding storybooks – Andrew Lang's *Green Fairy Tales* and *Stories from the Arabian Nights* – both of which expanded our narrow little worlds beyond imagination. Yet always self-conscious about her pronunciation, my mother remained diffident for decades about speaking in English to outsiders in Kenya until, after emigrating to England in her fifties, she was obliged to communicate directly with local shopkeepers and neighbours. I recall, however, that she had a nuanced understanding of spoken English that I still admire.

She somehow managed to get round my father's tyranny of language by continuing to speak to us in Portuguese, while we conversed with her in English. So although

we never formally learned her colonial language, and she dared not disobey my father and teach us Konkani, she made sure we were exposed to more than the English language – thus fostering in me a lasting interest in diversity.

I had the disconcerting experience recently of visiting Portugal for the first time and hearing the language as spoken by its natives, so quickly and with different accents that it was unrecognisable to me as the Portuguese of my childhood. However, when spoken more slowly, I could recognise familiar words and, deciding to buy an 'English to Portuguese' phrase book for tourists, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I could read the phrases with ease, and was familiar enough with the pronunciation to not need the phonetic version. This then reminded me of a chance discovery I had made after moving to the west of Ireland four years ago: among my many forgotten treasures was a faded old book with 'Portuguese to English' words and phrases for self-instruction, and my mother's name, Olivia, and a date, 1936, written in my father's handwriting on the brown paper cover. It was the year they had married in Goa and later travelled by ship to Mombasa for their new life together in Kenya. Along with her treasured Singer sewing machine, he had gifted her with this key to the English language.

My search for identity, coherence and continuity seemed to have come full circle.

### **Reflections on Portuguese Colonisation of Goa Following My Visit to Fatima in May 2023**

In 2022 while visiting a charity shop in Clifden, County Galway, on the west coast of

Ireland, I happened to see a large illustrated book titled *Country Manors of Portugal*. On impulse I bought it, and leafing idly through the book I noticed that it had a map of Portugal which was completely unfamiliar to me. I recognised only three place names on the map: Lisbon, Fatima and Algarve. I was shocked to suddenly realise that I knew nothing of Portugal's geography, history or literature, despite its colonisation of my parents' homeland, Goa, for almost four centuries until 1961, when India reclaimed that territory in a bloodless coup.

This was in complete contrast to our learning at our Goan school in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Kenya, then still a British colony, only about English colonial history, geography and literature; nothing about the rich cultures and varied heritage of the East African peoples of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar, and certainly nothing about the slave trade, unless to mention Arab culpability.

I suddenly began to question my complete ignorance of Portugal, the small European country that had ruled Goa for almost 400 years with impunity and had left its cultural imprint on the small Catholic minority – including children of the diaspora like myself – for a further 60 years. How could I have grown up in a Portuguese-speaking Goan family in Kenya learning nothing about our colonisers, even though we had fully imbibed their cultural values, and forfeited our native language, religion and customs for theirs?

Speaking to my younger brother about such insidious acculturation, we initially wondered whether the Portuguese had been more 'benign' colonisers than the British in India. But this was clearly not true, recalling St Francis Xavier's colonising mission, and the

much more forceful Portuguese conquests in Africa and Brazil. Their relatively minor acquisitions of Goa, Damau and Diu had primarily provided strategic refuelling stops in India for Portuguese sailors who were initially much more interested in following the prized spice trade route to China.

But as Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Mask*, 'Culture is everything'. So colonisation by the Portuguese of Goan culture over four centuries had permeated our very soul, robbing us of our spiritual essence – our religion and language. A recent visit to Portugal confirmed both my feelings of alienation and the seductiveness of its language which had become, when growing up in Kenya, my mother tongue, because my mother spoke it to us while we replied in colonial English.

I could not understand Portuguese spoken too quickly for me by the natives, but I found intriguingly that I could read and understand written Portuguese, even though I had never formally learned the language in Kenya – osmosis, after all?

### **The Jacaranda Tree**

A postscript, perhaps, and healing solution to my multiple transplanted identities? While in Portugal recently with an Irish group, we went on excursions to a few places considered to be of interest to tourists. One was Coimbra, and I especially remember it because, in a large square, there were two flowering jacaranda trees. I could scarcely believe my eyes, as I had last seen the pretty purple blossom when living in Kenya 55 years ago. Our Portuguese guide confirmed that these were, indeed, jacaranda trees.

While I was reflecting on their emotional significance for me, a woman in our group had already decided she could grow one from seed in her greenhouse at home, well-stocked with seeds or cuttings from wherever she travelled. She was a seasoned plant collector, with a single-minded focus on acquiring new species wherever she went.

I was torn between envy, dismay and amusement as I observed her conscript the tallest man in our group to pluck a seed pod from a tree, as the one she had found lying on the ground nearby looked withered already, not fit for purpose. I have no doubt that, if a jacaranda seed can germinate and grow and blossom in the cold and wet west of Ireland, this green-fingered collector will succeed.

It suddenly felt like a healing possibility for me, too: that the beautiful jacaranda trees I had so loved in Kenya could also flourish in Portugal, and perhaps someday perhaps even in Ireland, my new adopted homeland. Like plants, people too can be transplanted and nourished and blossom, even in foreign soil, like native tongues which, though severed, might grow back again, if nurtured and loved.

## Afterword

It has indeed turned out to be a journey of healing for me since I began writing this article well over a year ago, with unexpected twists and turns, and surprising new discoveries. The biggest irony, however, must be my recent realisation that my marriage (and two children) arose through my Irish husband's and my own interest in English, our shared colonial language. We met as undergraduate students at Birkbeck College, London University, some 50 years ago.

## Notes

1 Goa's official language, Konkani, is the only Indian language that is written in five scripts: Devanagari, Roman, Kanada, Malayalam and Perso-Arabic script. Devanagari is the official script used to write Konkani in Goa and Maharashtra.

2 According to Wikipedia, St Francis, a zealous Jesuit missionary in Asia, wrote a letter to King John III of Portugal in 1546 proposing the establishment of a Goan Inquisition. This would have resulted in religious persecution in that small Portuguese colony, as it had in his native Spain. Within a few years of proselytising in India, Francis claimed to have 'converted' between 30,000 and 40,000 Indians, many of them children.

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## About the contributor



**Alexandra Maeja Raicar** is of Kenya Goan origin and worked in London and Essex for five decades, before moving to the west coast of Ireland in 2019. She trained in the early 1990s as an Attachment-Based Psychoanalytic

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