

MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY
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For a good start, pupils should learn in the mother tongue

Today, as we celebrate the International Mother Language Day, which is observed on February 21 every year throughout the world, we should also mark the first ever doctoral dissertation in a Kenyan mother tongue.

Gatua wa Mbugwa made history this month when he submitted his PhD thesis, written in Gikuyu, to the department of plant sciences of the University of Wyoming, the US.

Mr Mbugwa teaches the global impact of African cultures and agriculture rooted in diversity at the university. His dissertation focuses on a self-regenerating plant species known as *Laramie*, a pasture legume that enriches soils and improves livestock nutrition and productivity. He translated the thesis into English and attached the translation to the original Gikuyu version.

Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o, currently the professor of English and comparative literature and director of the International Centre for Writing and Translation at the University of California in Irvine, says Mr Mbugwa's thesis was written in standard Gikuyu. He added that Mr Mbugwa has "almost single-handedly invented scientific Gikuyu language, thus proving that scientific research can be reported in an African language without loss of scientific content and value. It should prove an inspiring model for other African languages."

Mr Mbugwa, a native of Mutunguru village in Gatundu District, also earned his masters degree in agriculture from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, by writing his master's thesis in Gikuyu language. The thesis was on the effects of bio-intensive cropping with a focus on Kenyan collard greens.

His achievement demolishes the myth



Pupils should first learn in the mother tongue. Photo/FILE

that our local languages cannot express modern concepts. All languages can develop new terms and structures as needed. Léopold Senghor, better known as a poet and first president of Senegal, showed this by translating Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* into Wolof, his mother tongue. Any language, as many linguistic experts have observed, can be "intellectualised" and developed through writing and publishing.

To promote local languages, UN agency Unesco proclaimed the International Mother Language Day — also called the International Mother Tongue Day — in November 1999. It has been observed since February 2000 to promote cultural diversity and multilingual education, among other things.

The day recognises the sanctity of all vernacular languages, promotes mother tongues and creates greater awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions. It recognises that mother tongues help to preserve and develop our heritage, and strengthen the unity and cohesion of our societies. It is part of Unesco's drive to protect and preserve mother tongues.

Kenya, with as many languages as it has

tribes, needs to observe the day with special interest. We need to preserve all our mother languages, for to lose them is to lose our cultural heritage.

The day is also a reminder that learners who are first taught through the medium of their mother tongue have a greater chance of scholastic success. It has been established through extensive research on mother tongue tuition in Africa and elsewhere.

Researchers have established that learning is most efficient when the mother language is used. The vernacular is the best medium of instruction in the formative years. However, many African countries, Kenya included, continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate learning.

Learning through a language that students do not speak in their natural environment has been called by experts "submersion" because it is like holding a learner under water without teaching him how to swim. Submersion makes teaching and learning extremely difficult particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Mother tongue-based education, on the other hand, uses the learner's first language to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. Learners gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one.

The mother tongue should be used at least in the early years so that students may acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in class. It offers significant teaching advantages.

Learners who are first taught in the mother tongue for at least six years have a greater chance of education success.

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