Literacy in Sango, introduced by Catholic and Protestant missionaries as early as the 1920s, was in the colonial period merely tolerated, not encouraged. Legally, the language could be used only for religious purposes, although this was rather generously interpreted. For example, arithmetic could be taught to catechists on the ground that they had to keep an account of weekly church offerings. French policy being what it was, there was no attempt to use literacy for any reason whatsoever.

Centralafricans, at independence, broke with the colonial past by making Sango the "langue nationale," beside French, the official language. This was obviously a political act, but to this day no one has demonstrated historically what may have been its motivation. (At a time when the leaders depended so much on French bureaucratic, technological, and economic help, did the leaders make in this manner a mild statement of cultural independence — of "authenticity"?)

At independence, therefore, Sango was not politicized, nor has it been since then. In a nation where political rule has been autocratic there was no opportunity for any kind of group to use Sango in advancing its claims and achieving its goals. Since, however, there was always clandestine opposition for one reason or another, it is surprising that political tracts were not published. The fact that they were not published in either French or Sango suggests that people in opposition did not have — and still do not have — the resources for publishing political tracts or posters. This being accepted as reasonable, given the poverty of the country, it is still surprising that neither in French nor in Sango has one seen graffiti; even popular, non-political graffiti is nonexistent. This fact can be interpreted as revealing that Centralafricans are not a functionally literate people; the culture is not yet a literate one.

If the last observation is taken as valid, one will not find it surprising that all governments since independence have virtually ignored Sango. This is true for another reason that must be noted: public education has, as far as we have been able to determine, been supported by (and in the early years even supervised by) the French. Depending on foreign aid for its education, no government could entertain the development of Sango.

Contradicting, at first glance, what has already been said above are certain events in the nation's history. To start with the most recent, making Sango co-official with French (1991). No information has yet been obtained regarding the motivation of this act. Did it start at the top, with President Andre Kolingba, or did it start with someone like Michel-Marie Koyt, the Director of the Institut of Applied Linguistics? The reasons would be very different for each of them.

It would appear that every attempt to develop Sango — and in the process develop literacy — originated with an initiative from outside the nation. To take, once again, the most recent example. A highly placed Centralafrican civil servant said that it was because of the international conference in Thailand convened by Unesco in 1990 that Sango will be used in the lower grades in a selected number of schools, starting in 1993 or 1994. One can justifiably assume that some foreign agency or government is going to finance this program.

There was an earlier attempt to do this very thing, of which there are bureaucratic vestiges, that is, bureaus. Similarly, there were experiments in literacy campaigns in selected sites throughout the country. These lasted for only a short time.

An assessment of all attempts through the Ministry of Education to encourage literacy and education in Sango appear to have been initiated from outside the CAR and and to have been short-lived. An exception would be the creation of the tone-marked orthography that was adopted as official by the President. According to M.-M. Koyt, it was a group of Centralafricans, without any consultation with religious organizations, Centralafrican or foreign, that was responsible for this orthography. (The role of Marcel Diki-Kidiri, a Centralafrican researcher employed by the CNRS (France), has yet to be determined.)
There is, of course, the Institut of Applied Linguistics, linked with the University of Bangui. It has an office and work space, a director, and several so-called researchers. Their salaries come, it would appear, directly from the government. It is in this context that, it is claimed, a grammar and dictionary of Sango in Sango are being written by Centralafricans. It is doubtful that they would ever be published without financial assistance from abroad. (The Sango-French dictionary prepared by Luc Bouquiaux and others, published in 1978 with the help of Unesco, has never made an impact on the country, not even among missionaries and other expatriates who learn Sango. Its high cost may have discouraged its sale in Bangui.)

Although all missionary organizations appear to recognize the importance of Sango in the CAR, which is spreading more and more to all ends of the country, they have not been recruited by the government for the development and spread of literacy. In fact, as has already been illustrated, they have been ignored. Whereas it might be understandable that expatriates might not be consulted, out of national pride, there is no reason why Centralafrican religious leaders (such as priests, pastors, chairmen of denominations, the director of the Centralafrican Bible Society) would not have been consulted.

The exception to the foregoing statement is the relationship that has been established between the Ministry of Education and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The latter is a missionary organization whose stated goal is to provide speakers of minority languages all over the world with portions or the whole of the Bible in their own languages. (SIL is its academic name [read in French as the Societe Internationale Linguistique] and Wycliffe Bible Translators its religious name.) SIL signed an accord with the government in 1990 with a mandate to "develop" the Sango language, it being understood, apparently, that SIL could also develop ethnic languages (now officially known as "langues nationales." One concludes, therefore, that SIL has become an arm of the above-mentioned IAL. An example of this fact is that whereas other missions and the Centralafrican Bible Society are fearful that tone marking is going to discourage people from learning to read, SIL is using the 'official' orthography. Indeed, at the International Colloquium on the Status and Role of Sango, Cologne, September, 1992, it was announced that SIL was teaching people that there is an official orthography. Certainly an understanding of the economics of literacy in Sango will have to take into consideration the fact that Protestants abroad are financing some aspects of the development of Sango, since SIL has, as far as is known, an entirely Protestant constituency.

One other comment about the economics of Sango literacy must be made. In spite of the impoverished state of the CAR, although not quite as bad as that of Zaire in many places, and in spite of literacy's still being limited almost entirely to religious subjects (although Catholic literature, quite impressive in its variety, includes booklets on health and such matters), printed matter is in great demand. Centralafricans are willing to spend some of their precious resources for something they can read.