

# The Role of Kiswahili in the Integration of East Africa

by

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## Abstract

*This paper is about Kiswahili and its role in the integration of the East African diverse communities. It is argued in this paper that there is an evolving social-cultural matrix unique to East Africa. This culture is finding its expression in Kiswahili, which is a popular lingua franca in the region. This lingua franca enjoys goodwill not just as a communication tool but also as a symbol of regional identity and integration of the East African peoples and cultures.*

*Kiswahili's role as one of the inner agents of East Africa faces great challenges by the mere fact of globalization enforcing on the spread of major world languages like English, French, German, Spanish and others. Globalization is likely to spark off even more of the allegiance of the East African inhabitants to their native languages. All these factors, not withstanding Kiswahili's ability to reinforce the East African integration is extremely significant.*

## Introduction

Kiswahili, the subject of this paper, is assumed to have originated on the East African littoral. Most scholars have therefore argued that it is a Bantu language, although there have been claims to the contrary. Some researchers have claimed it is a mixed language of Arabic dialects and Africa languages, or Arabic dialect or even an Arabic creole (Mazrui & Mazrui 1988). As a Bantu language, it has spread to many parts of East Africa and the rest of Africa through informal and formal trade, governance, education and religion (Whiteley 1968). It now serves as a lingua franca of the East African geo-political area. It is used in Tanzania as both official and national language. In Kenya it is used as a national language and has been suggested in the evolving constitution as a twin-official language with English (Chiraghdin and Mnyampala 1977; Chimera 1998; Whiteley 1969).

The East African region has itself many other languages- being defined as heavily multi-lingual. Tanzania alone has 100 indigenous languages, Uganda having nearly as much as Tanzania and Kenya having more than 40 languages. The Various languages represent and express multi-faceted cultures with varying divides. The classification of languages is complicated by problems of drawing a dichotomy between a language and a dialect.

Although East Africa as a region has had some integration like political co-operation, economic linkages and cross cultural linkages, the role Kiswahili has played as a micro-cultural element in reinforcing the macro- elements cannot be overstated. Such linkages are like common colonial powers, geo- political cooperation and economic vestiges like Breweries, Coca Cola, Total and Bp Shell. The East African Regional Co-operation saw members of the East African countries move from one individual East African country to integrated members of one regional economic block.

Mazrui & Mazrui (1998) argue that Kiswahili and English are the most influential trans ethnic languages in East Africa. They proceed to argue that the two languages are used in many activities ranging from sacred to secular. Kiswahili is a symbol of identity and heritage to most East Africans. To a large extent, it symbolizes cultural liberation from the Western World (Ngugi 1993) and a means through which they can engage themselves in the processes of globalization with the outside world.

## **Border Links**

One of the ways in which Kiswahili establishes and reinforces unity among the diverse ethnic groups of East Africa is through cross border trade. There is a high volume of trade between border groups in all the countries. This border trade is largely conducted in Kiswahili which is a language common to the communities of the region. The border trade is both formal and informal. Besides the trade, we have many similar linguistic groups that have an attachment to one another. However, they are separated by political boundaries. Kiswahili becomes a means of re-forging them as one. The language also helps minimize border conflicts in the East African region. It does so because the language repertoire common to all helps them to view themselves as a people belonging to one large divided but linguistically united region.

## **Music**

Music is another domain that offers a conduit of unity as expressed through the Kiswahili medium. The East African lyrics, melodies and tunes find expression in Kiswahili language. Most important of these is gospel music. Gospel music is sung by the East Africans and they provide market for it. For example, Tanzanian music is in most Ugandan and Kenyan stalls. Secular music is usually composed and sung using contemporary themes as experienced by the communities and is marketed across the region. Tanzanian and Ugandan music is often produced in Kenya.

Many Kenyans also produce their music which has ready market within and without the country. Kiswahili is a great facilitator of this music. One such outstanding type of music is taraab. Although it is mainly sang by natives and near native speakers of Kiswahili language, it is marketed throughout East Africa. Various *Taarab* bands perform in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania with no restriction.

It can be said that a music legacy expressed in Kiswahili is evolving in the region which is giving East Africans a heritage unique to them. The music industry reinforces that bond of brotherhood and belonging.

## **Literary Tradition**

Closely related to music is the literary tradition. East Africa does have literary works in English and some, to a minimal degree, in indigenous languages. However the bulk of literary works; poetry, drama, prose and essays are now in Kiswahili. The literary works like the music pieces we have discussed above are cultural artifacts of the East African people. A lot of experience is shared through these works throughout the region. Sometimes it is not easy to say where a work has been written. Although most of these works are written in Kenya and Tanzania, their market covers the entire East African region, including Uganda. Some of the leading writers in Tanzania include Said A. Mohamed, Shafi A. Shafi, Kezilahabi and Emmanuel Mbogo. In Kenya some of the leading writers in Kiswahili include Mwenda Mbatiah, Kyallo Wamitilla, Katama Mkangi, among others.

In Uganda most of the works are written in English. However, quite a number of them have been translated into Kiswahili. Such translations include *Mizigo (the Burdens)* by John Ruganda and *Wimbo wa Lawino na Ochol (Song of Lawino and Ochol)* by Okot P'Bitek. Similarity, in Kenya a number of works originally in English have been translated. Such include: *Usaliti Mjini (Betrayal in the City)* by F. Imbuga, *Usilie Mpenzi (Weep not ,Child)* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o among many others. In Tanzania we have even translations of works which had been originally written in English. Such include works by William Shakespeare like the *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Ceaser*.

These works which in a sense re- write the East African experience and give critical evaluation to the East African communities, are expressed in Kiswahili. The language is then used to re-enforce East African values through the literary tradition and subsequently unifying the people.

## **Politics**

East African people have had joint political ventures. Some of the political activities go back to colonial time. They jointly agitated for independence as members of the Pan African movements but also as East Africans who spoke the same language: Kiswahili. Even after independence there is a lot of link politically. Uganda leaders attend national celebrations in Kenya and Tanzania and vice versa. Sometimes one country would give support to another; like when the Tanzanian government helped Museveni and Okello strike a balance of understanding. Chief among the initiatives is the East African Community. It was first established in 1967 but broke up in 1977 owing to different political ideologies pursued by the three countries. Kiswahili is now one of the optional languages of the East African community and has been declared the lingua franca of the region. Political activities are motivated by the desire to develop a common East African market and hence an economic understanding, among others reasons. In these activities, Kiswahili is a facilitator and a reinforcing agent.

## **Work**

Kiswahili in East Africa has been associated with general work. This is a language one uses when one is at work. The language is used in industries, farms, small scale businesses and other working negotiations. Different work places would usually have people from diverse backgrounds who need a language to communicate. Kiswahili becomes handy in this kind of exercise. Some work as shop attendants, farm workers, construction workers and drivers, away from home. Kiswahili links and breaks any possibilities of communication break down. English is more entrenched in Uganda and Kenya but is mostly spoken among the educated elite. In Tanzania, the level of English is considerably low. The masses of the population who form the highest percentage of the workforce interact in Kiswahili and as a result, the language gives the citizens some commonality.

## **Religion**

Religion presents yet another domain through which Kiswahili facilitates East African integration. There is a lot of evangelistic movement in East Africa. These evangelistic groups come from all these countries. For these religious groups to evangelize successfully, they use Kiswahili. It can be argued therefore that the language that is successfully used in the East African evangelization is Kiswahili. Sometimes when this evangelization is offered in English or any other language by preachers, for example, in most cases it is interpreted into Kiswahili on the spot. This wave of activity that has facilitated a high mobility in East Africa, whose main agent is Kiswahili, helps to integrate the East African people. (Habwe 2001).

Islam in East Africa has a great implication for Kiswahili language. The spread of Islam in East Africa has been an automatic spread for Kiswahili as well. Kenyan Muslims communicate with Ugandan and Tanzanian Muslims by means of Kiswahili language. There is a sense in which East African Muslims, because of this language, are closely knit together than other non Swahili speaking Muslims in the world like in Nigeria, Gambia, Djibouti, Ghana or even Sudan. The availability of Kiswahili facilitates rapid communicational code. The language is used in madrassa, sermons, writing and the Holy Book, the Koran. The East African Muslim community is largely defined, not just by Islamic faith, but by Kiswahili language as well. This is why Mazrui and Mazrui (1995; 127) argue that: *There is a sense then, in which even as a second language, Swahili came to have a strong sentimental value as a symbol of East African Islamic identity.*

The sentimental value of Swahili can be seen during Muslim Festivities and occasions. Entry into Islam is a matter of fact entry into the Swahili speaking world in East Africa. Kiswahili and Islam are so inextricably that Muslim groups in the East Africa region –In Uganda, Kenya and even Tanzania are referred to as Waswahili. Kiswahili as a language factor is so strong that there is no way one would be Muslim without being Kiswahili-speaking.

## **Language Development**

There is a deliberate attempt to develop Kiswahili in order to cope with its modern demands. As a result, there is an upsurge of borrowed words mainly from Arabic and English. However there is a lot of borrowing from local languages across East Africa. Even when borrowings come from elsewhere, there is a lot of agitation among East African Kiswahili scholars that the language should be developed from within, which means from East Africa. Some of the words borrowed from the East African languages include, Ngeli (Noun class), Ikulu (State House), githeri (particular food which is a mixture of maize and beans), ng'atuka (abdicate power through one's volition), among others.

This contribution of lexical items from local languages into Kiswahili has not only made it gain greater acceptance, but has also facilitated different linguistic groups to identify themselves with it. At this point it has been argued that Kiswahili has ceased to be a coastal language and become an East African language. The contribution is not just lexical. We have many aspects of culture like idioms, proverbs, poems, metaphors and riddles that have found their way into the language.

This contribution has broadened Kiswahili base not only as a language of the people of East Africa but the rest of the world.

## Media

Media, both electronic and print, has been a strong cord for holding the region with a common united approach to life. It is Tanzania where we have many newspapers which use Kiswahili as their language of expression. Some of these newspapers are government owned while others are owned by private proprietors. In Kenya it is only 'Taifa Leo', published by the Nation Media Group that still remains as a Kiswahili newspaper. Although no single Kiswahili newspaper is published in Uganda, Tanzanian newspapers like 'Nipashe, Mzalendo and others continue to swarm Ugandan and Kenyan streets. The papers carry political commentaries, economic reviews, stories, etc. Like other domains, this print media is instrumental in establishing a cord of strong bond amongst the East Africans.

Radio and television networks are part of the media. They too, like print media, contribute through Kiswahili in forging one culture for the diverse communities. The East African radio stations that have gained very sentimental listeners include *Redio Dar es Salaam, Redio Zanzibar, Idhaa ya Taifa ya Kenya*, Nation and Citizen Radio and voice of Uganda. Some of these radio stations broadcast using other languages other than Kiswahili. However, others like *Redio Dar es Salaam*, and *Idhaa ya Taifa ya Kiswahili ya KBC*' broadcast exclusively for Kiswahili audience. The same sentimental attachment to these radio stations is extended to Kiswahili radio station or programs outside Africa like the BBC, which air Kiswahili programs and broadcast for the East African region. These have won a large volume of followers. Most East Africans believe that these Radio stations break East African news explicitly; hence the attachment. Media, therefore, reinforces the oneness of these communities in geo-political region which shared historical and cultural values. There is a sense in which one can speak of an East African media experience which is different from any African country. Such experience is facilitated, expressed and sustained by the use of Kiswahili.

## Challenges

Although Kiswahili serves a vital role in the East African integration, it faces a number of challenges as a language. It is interesting to note that one of the East African countries, Tanzania, has given Kiswahili more social-political goodwill. Explicit policies have been articulated and to a reasonable extent implemented through the use of this language. The Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) which is the dominant political party has supported the growth and spread of Kiswahili by forming institutions for its growth and spread like Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa (National Kiswahili Council). However, with Tanzania embracing capitalism and the challenges of globalization, there is inclination towards learning English which, it is believed, would ensure jobs for their children both at local international levels.

In Kenya Kiswahili has been made a compulsory subject up secondary school level of education (Chimera 1998). As a result, the publishing industry has tremendously favoured the growth of Kiswahili. However, Kiswahili is faced with stiff competition from major native languages like Kikuyu, Luo, and Kamba besides English and other foreign languages.

Although Kiswahili is used as a national mobilizing language, the native languages are also important for local mobilization. Ethnic languages are used in forming political blocs which are later used in political bargaining for presidency and power.

Unlike Tanzania where Kiswahili has successfully toned down ethnic membrane, ethnic languages in Kenya are still the single factor for reinforcing cultural belongings, adherence and in making political decisions.

Another major challenge is Sheng'. This kind of communication medium presents a big challenge to Kiswahili especially in Kenya. As it spreads through the country, as an informal language of the youth, the latter fail to embrace Kiswahili effectively. This means that the allegiance to Kiswahili is even more challenged amongst the youth. Sheng' is rapidly spreading in schools and complicating the code –shifting situation already existing in Kenya (Abdulaziz and Osinde [1997]). Sheng's influence has even permeated parliament, hospitals, churches, banking systems, among others. With more and more institutions that used to oppose Sheng' beginning to be gullible, the threat of Sheng' in Kenya is now not only felt in Kiswahili but also in English language.

Uganda has had a perennial challenge to Kiswahili largely emanating from the Baganda who resist the language as foreign and one which would replace the dominance of their own Luganda. However, with the increasing East African co-operation, the challenge is likely to be played down in favour of wider co-operation hence more embracing of Kiswahili as the lingua franca.

English, German, French and other major languages in the East African Region are receiving funding from home countries. This funding factor has provided an extra incentive for people to learn these languages. Whereas it is not correct to argue that Kiswahili needs to be funded from outside East Africa, the absence of even local funding for Kiswahili in most spheres is a big challenge to its growth as an African language.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed some of the outer forces of integration that are facilitated by Kiswahili language. Such factors are music, literary tradition, media both print and electronic, border links, religion, work and political institutions. I have argued that without Kiswahili's strong cord the integration of East Africa would remain a mirage. However, Kiswahili does not only provide an avenue for this integration but it also sustains the integration while providing identity, common thought and vision.

I have also discussed the challenges facing Kiswahili such as opposing languages like Luganda in Uganda, major Kenyan languages and of course, sheng'. Lack of both local and non-local funding for Kiswahili is also a setback. Tanzania has had political good will for Kiswahili. However, the quick process of capitalization is making most of the Tanzanians now seek good local and international working knowledge of English at the expense of Kiswahili.



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