

African Languages as a Gateway to Sustainable Development, Democracy and Freedom: The Example of Swahili

Aldin Mutembei

Abstract

The African Academy of Languages conceptualizes African integration and development through African languages. It is through African languages that the continent will restore its dignity and respect. In East Africa, Swahili resisted the waves of imperial culture to claim its rightful position. The language is growing and spreading, embracing on its way the elements of Ubuntu and 'Africanness' which makes it accepted from one country to another. Following the example of Kiswahili's linguistic and literary affluence, the paper argues that African languages demonstrate the potential not only for Africa's integration, but indeed the ability to maintain peace and mutual understanding and respect. Combining with economic prospects, African languages such as Kiswahili are likely to stand for, and boost African development. Using the Ubuntu theory as developed by Horace Campbell (2010), the paper looks into the possible reasons for the spread of Kiswahili in different nations in modern times, and the rationale for its acceptance in a multilingual African environment. The paper calls for the policy makers in Africa to give priority to African languages, paving the way to a realistic education system, freedom of expression, stimulation of innovative ideas and creativity, and the ultimate development of the African people

Keywords: Sustainable development, Democracy, Freedom, African languages, Swahili, ubuntu

Aldin Mutembei *Izilimi Zomdabu Zase-Afrika Njengesango Lentuthuko Enesisekelo, Intando Yeningi kanye Nenkululeko: Isibonelo seKiswahili*

Isifingqo

I-African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) ithola umqondo ngobumbano nentuthuko ezwenikazi lase-Afrika ezilimini zesintu. Ukusetshenziswa kwezilimi zesintu ezwenikazi lase-Afrika kuzosiza ukubuyisa isithunzi nenhlonipho yalo. Empumalanga yezwekazi le-Afrika, ulimi lwesi-Swahili lwamelana namagagasi amasiko ombuso wezizwe eziningi ukuze luthathe indawo yalo efanele. Ulimi lolu luyakhula futhi luyasabalala, lwamukela imikhuba yobuntu nesintu okusiza ukuthi lwamukelwe emazweni ahlukene. Kulandela isibonelo ngempumelelo ye-siSwahili ekukhulumeni nasemkhakheni wezokubhala, lolu cwaningo luphakamisa umbono othi izilimi zesintu azivezi amathuba obumbano kuphela kodwa kuliqiniso ukuthi ziveza amathuba okwazi ukugcina ukuthula nokuzwana emphakathini kanye nenhlonipho. Uma sibuka amathuba ezomnotho, izilimi zesintu ezifana nesi-Swahili zinakho ukuma kanye nokwengeza amazanga entuthuko. Kusetshenziswe injulalwazi yobuntu njengoba yakhiwa nguHorace Campbell (2010) ukubheka izizathu ezingadala ukuthi isi-Swahili sisabalale emazweni ahlukene esikhathini samanje kanye nezizathu zokwamukelwa kwaso izindaweni zase-Afrika ezinobuliminingi. Ucwaningo lolu luhlose ukukhuthaza abakhi benqubomgomo ezwenikazi lase-Afrika ukuthi bakhuthaze kakhulu ukuthuthukiswa kwezilimi zomdabu zase-Afrika okuzovula amathuba ohlelo lwezemfundo olwethembekile, nokukhuluma ngokukhululeka, ukukhuthazwa kwemibono emisha nemibono eyakhayo kanye nokuthuthukiswa okuphelele kwabantu bezwekazi lase-Afrika.

Introduction

Swahili is a fast growing and spreading African language with a lot of potential for bringing sustainable development in Africa. This article discusses how Swahili language has managed to promote freedom and empower its users to have a democratic voice. We follow the line of argument raised by Sunder Ramaswamy and Jeffrey W. Cason (2003); and

that of Uk Heo and Alexander C. Tan, (2001) in understanding the inter-relationship between freedom, democracy and economic growth. The experience of Swahili language is thus given as a humble example of the power of an African language in promoting democracy and freedom, while paving the way for economic growth. The article therefore, aims at inspiring all Africans to look beyond Western languages and invest in the development of African languages.

Swahili spread in East and Central Africa, despite the region having other several strong languages. Its linguistic and literary aspects with long history have developed in an environment where other languages have existed and are well established. To this end, two arguments are raised: First, that ideal and sustainable freedom and democracy could be conceptualized and realized in Africa if an African language takes the active role in public domain. Secondly, that a realistic linguistic position has to be taken by dynamic African societies, within the framework of African Unity and development. In other words, the basic argument in this paper is that besides democracy and freedom, an indigenous language is another important aspect in the development of any society.

Contextualizing the Power of Swahili as an African Language

.... We exhort all writers to apply every strategy, individually and collectively, on both national and continental levels to promote the use and enrichment of Swahili for the present and the future needs of the continent ... (Wole Soyinka Quoted in Chacha 2006:29).

The call made by the Nobel winner, Wole Soyinka, about Swahili cannot be overemphasized. Indeed ACALAN¹, supports Swahili which has been accepted by the African Union as one of its official languages. It is through African languages that the continent will restore its dignity and respect, and,

¹ African Academy of Languages is an African Union Commission whose vision is to advance Africa's integration and development through the development and promotion of the use of African languages in all domains of life in Africa.

inversely claim its rightful world economic and social position. A special attention is given to South Africa due to its economic position which remains vital in ensuring this restoration of Africa's dignity. South Africa can do so by having a stable linguistic unity.

In looking for linguistic unity, the paper argues that a Bantu language has more chance to attain this vision in Africa than the rest of other linguistic groups². As a leading economic power in Africa, South Africa should equally develop an African unitary linguistic culture that will elevate its image, and especially promote her social and economic potentialities. This culture is important to South Africa as it is to the whole of African development. It is a culture that will unfold the civilization of an African mind. Let us borrow the argument raised by Frantz Fanon concerning the power of language in relation to self-esteem: *'to speak means ... above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization'* (1986: 8). On one hand, it is important to realize the kind of civilization and culture that Africans would want to demonstrate. On the other hand, however, it is imperative to understand the implication of clinging to the use of Western languages. Fanon cautions us by noting that it is *'implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other'* (Fanon *ibid*). What is this other part, which an African would speak to exist? For Africa to realize its aspirations, Africans need to respect African values and promote those languages through which an African being exists.

There is indisputable evidence that former colonial tyrants were, and continue to be, in constant struggle against the development of African languages (Roy-Campbell 1992; Rajabu & Ngonyani 1994; Brock Utne 2013, Qorro 2013). Martha Qorro, herself a professor of English, writes in affirmative of this stance:

... The former colonial powers, in this case Britain, are likely to be behind the choice of English as LOI (language of Instruction). Many Tanzanians still remember that the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) funded the English Language Teaching Support Project (ELTSP) from 1986 to 1996 on condition that English remained LOI in post primary education (2013:40).

² Batibo Herman M (Ed). Language decline and death in Africa: Causes, consequences and challenges. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005.

The suppression of African languages by westerners started with the advent of colonialism and has continued to this day. Each colonialist favoured his own language and suppressed all other languages. Concerning the development of African languages in the Congo for example, Fabian (1986:71) writes: ‘... *There was, however, one area of agreement: English, and African languages associated with British interests (especially in Katanga), were to be kept under control.*’ By so doing, Belgians, like other colonialists were consolidating their powers while at the same time attempting to erase the African culture (Kezilahabi 2012) and obliterate Africa’s history (Brock-Utne 2005). While this is the case with the larger part of the linguistic landscape of Africa, Swahili was slightly different (Choge2012). Its resistance against the waves of imperial culture and the encroachment of manipulative Western attitudes in opposition to eventual Africa’s self-reliance and development, saw Swahili Language and Literature growing, spreading, and embracing on its way elements of Ubuntu (Obuntu) and ‘Africanness’ – a fact that makes it acceptable from one country to another. According to Campbell (2010) Ubuntu is a core value of the unification of Africa. He continues that [anybody] who understands languages as a source of wealth will cease to delink language from society and the impossible task of entrenching European languages as the language of African society. Thus, Swahili embracing the philosophy of Ubuntu, slowly spread to become the largest spoken language in the eleven countries that make the Great Lakes Region (Mwansoko, 2002), where, as Reuben says (2005), it is considered as constituting a cultural foundation.

It follows then, that Swahili demonstrates the potential not only for Africa’s integration, but indeed the ability to maintain social development and mutual understanding and respect. Chacha explains the prospects of Kiswahili in Africa through Nyerere’s vision saying:

Mwalimu’s linguistic nationalism traversed national boundaries, and its ultimate objective was to secure continental unity, linguistic unity and solidarity for all Africans, for greater growth, development and security. It has been amply demonstrated that Kiswahili has been successfully used in social integration and national unity in Tanzania, and can therefore, do the same for Africa (Chacha 2006: 23).

In the Great Lakes Region for example, Swahili has played a major role in

nation building and conflict resolution (Mpangala 2004). Swahili has demonstrated its potential for unifying eleven countries and attempt to resolve their differences.

The Spread of Swahili

Swahili's movement from the East African coast to the interior of Africa has been sturdy and unique. While spreading, Swahili adjusted to the circumstances of the time and space. Sometimes, the recipient societies adopted it or modified it to suit their respective local needs. Thus the language has had three major transformations. The first was its change from oral to written mode. It was at this stage where Arabs, eager to communicate with the indigenous people, wrote Swahili using Arabic script. The second, was a change from Arabic 'scripts' to Roman 'letters.' The third transformation – and still occurring, is that Swahili has been – and continues to be, a recipient of several lexicons from other African and non-African languages. To the-would be colonizers, the change from Arabic to Roman letters was strategically aimed at Europeanization of the African language. Concerning this, Fabian quotes Jerome Becker, a Belgian 'explorer' – and a self-appointed Swahili teacher saying:

I teach Sef bin Raschid to read and write Ki-Souahili in European characters' (1887: II 199). By September 1882 he notes that his Swahili associate 'now perfectly reads and writes Ki-Souahili in our characters' (1887: n350-1). He is convinced that literacy in Swahili is a step on the way to Europeanization. Because this development was expected to go in the direction of French, Becker, like his predecessor Dutrieux and others, decided on an 'orthography' that would make it easier for French-speakers to pronounce Swahili (Fabian 1986: 25 – 26).

As seen from the above quotation, the second Swahili transformation aimed at more than just Europeanization. Swahili encountered several agents of change in its physical and mental travel. On its way, Swahili 'fought' against 'Arabicalization' only to face two competing European powers: the French and the Belgians. The deliberate change in its orthography was a conscious reflection of this competition. The two external agents of change

from Europe were competing between each other to have more control and influence over the language. What these Europeans did not realize, or chose to ignore, was the power of ‘Africinity’ inherent in Swahili.

Despite its ‘Romanization’, Swahili never succumbed to Europeanization. The stages from oral to written, and later from written Arabic to written Roman do not justify its being Europeanized. During what we call the third stage of transformation, we find that Swahili accommodated new words from different linguistic backgrounds including Hindi, Persian, Indo-Germanic and several other African languages. The external agents of change over Swahili, mainly Arabs, Germans, Belgians and French did contribute to the growth and internationalization of the language but not Europeanization.

Besides the external agents’ linguistic tussle to have control over the language, the internal agents too had their own perspective on whose version of Swahili should be taken as the right one. Thus we see the two evolving camps of the ‘pure’ Swahili of ‘ours’, as opposed to ‘diluted’ Swahili of ‘theirs’. In other words this was the perspective that set boundaries of what is, and is not Swahili. To capture this argument, let us give one example concerning the experience of Swahili as it continued to travel away from the coast.

During the times of the debate concerning ‘traditional’ Swahili poetry – that followed meters and rhymes, versus ‘modern’ Swahili poetry of free verse, one ‘traditionalist’ represented this perspective saying:

Theirs is not pure Kiswahili. The language has travelled from the coast, to Morogoro, and by the time it reached Dodoma, it had acquired enough dust to the extent that one could not recognize it as being Kiswahili; and as it travelled further interior, the language lost its (coastal) identity (In Mbinu za Kiswahili. RTD Swahili Programme, 1989).

Such aspects on the travel experience of Swahili reflect not only the central meaning of this language across different societies in the African interior, but mainly its characteristics as a true cross border, intercultural and inter ethnic African language. Its travel to the interior of Congo gives it even more weight as a language for African continent.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo Swahili soon became the largest 'national' language among the major four languages. Fabian gives the following narrative on the travel of Swahili in the Congo:

Swahili - or, to be precise, several varieties of Swahili - grew from a small basis of perhaps only a few hundred speakers to acquire several million, virtually the entire urban and a great portion of the rural population of southeastern Zaire. Phonological, syntactic and lexical developments occurred as Swahili turned from a lingua franca into the principal, and sometimes the only, African medium of verbal communication (Fabian *ibid*: 3)

The growth and eventual 'branching' of Swahili in Congo was a manifestation of the colonial policies. It was both social and, especially, political policies, which ultimately saw Swahili growing, notwithstanding the fact that the colonial intention had been to suppress African languages. Swahili in the Congo was too hard to quash, the success of which would have been 'suicidal' to colonialists. Thus they found themselves left with no option but to support it in order to maintain their power. Fabian gives the following argument concerning this:

Maintaining such power was the foremost concern in policies regarding Swahili in Katanga. ... we found Swahili being used as a symbol of political 'reorientation'... From the point of view of the colonial administration and of industrial-commercial interests in Katanga, Swahili was above all, a means to implement certain labor policies. As methods of procurement changed from short-term recruitment to stabilization, it became expedient to stress the symbolic value of Swahili as a vehicle of a Katangese regional and social identity (1986: 137).

To stress the role of Swahili in influencing unity and maintaining harmony, Fabian adds:

Besides demonstrating unity where there was little or none, Swahili served multiple purposes that were indeed practical, albeit in different ways to different speakers. Only some of these were directly controlled by the colonial powers (*Ibid*).

The above travel experience of Swahili serves as a background to the role Swahili played in socio-political development and stability of African societies during colonial times. It is an important background upon which the current wave of the spread of Swahili should be understood.

Spread of Swahili in Connection to sustainable African Development, Democracy and Freedom

Today, Swahili studies are being introduced in different Universities in Africa. What could be the reason(s)? The paper then calls for the policy makers in Africa to give priority to African languages, paving the way to a realistic education system, freedom of expression, stimulation of innovative ideas and creativity, and the ultimate development of the African people. Our languages are repositories of our culture, values and beliefs, and it is only through such languages that we can ensure our being and survival as Africans. There is a connection between African culture, values and beliefs on one hand; and African freedom and democracy on the other. Swahili has proved to be in the forefront in realizing this connection as we will argue shortly.

The concept of African sustainable development has to be put into a wider context. It should be linked to the access to education and information; and be seen as fostering democracy. Let us elaborate more on **freedom** and **democracy** two concepts which are central to social development. To deny people of their language, their voice, is to erase their creativity and innovative ability. Indeed it is to mute their mental growth and, thereby, dispossessing them of their being. Fanon looks at this phenomenon from a different angle worth our attention: '*A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language*' (Fanon op.cit:9). What then is the relationship between language and democracy?

Democracy combines two Greek concepts: *demos* (δῆμος) meaning people and *kratos* (κράτος) meaning power. By *demos*, the Greek referred to the enlightened people. These were people with knowledge, who knew what was happening, and why it was happening. Due to that knowledge, people developed the power to decide. Thus 'kratos', emanates from their being knowledgeable. On the other hand, by *kratos*, the Greek had three senses signifying the power. One sense of the power was the ability to know, which

is accrued from being exposed to education. It is the power that one acquires after getting knowledge. Another sense of the word *kratos*, is information. Access to information gives one the power that is needed to decide democratically. The saying: 'information is power', comes from that sense of what the Greek meant for power. The last sense of the word *kratos* is 'the power to make things happen'. We will come back to this argument in due course.

It is obvious, therefore, that the two concepts, i.e. 'information' and 'knowledge,' are related, and, in a way intertwined, and could be looked upon as being the end results of education in a scientific sense. It is for this reason, that the concept of democracy cannot be detached from the process of education. To be fully incorporated into the democratic activities of their society, individuals ought to get access to education. Education is not a privilege, but a fundamental human right in any democratic society.

In a democratic society, *kratos* is the power to make things happen. To acquire this power, one needs knowledge, not miracles. It is known, that due to their limited knowledge, early Western explorers and anthropologists, thought that Africans did not have knowledge, they had miracles. Both historical and archaeological facts inform us today, that the renowned Greek philosophers for example, received their education from Africa. They came to Africa to get knowledge and be educated. Numerous scholarly works authored by world celebrated academicians notably Ben Jochannan (1974); Cheikh Anta Diop, (1974 and 1991); to mention but a few; have researched and documented these facts. Westerners came to Africa to be taught, and indeed they received African education in one of the languages of Africa. There is no education without language.

African Sustainable Development and Renaissance in Modern Times

African sustainable development in connection to freedom and democracy need to be contextualized within the contemporary globalization processes; the central link in these processes being African languages. When the Western powers were planning for the globalisation of the world, they did not lose track of the importance of language. As Manuel Castells implies, the dimensions of globalisation include information and knowledge in the

measurement of economic productivity and competitiveness (2001:2-20). As we have demonstrated, information and knowledge are rudiments of democracy that are realized and controlled through language and education. Although this is logically the case, Jean-Michel Severino and Olivier Ray (*Africa's Moment*, 2011) have not considered any contribution of language in the process of both democratization, and the giving voice to freedom. In Africa, the classical imperial powers, have made Africans believe that democracy can only be realized through Western languages. It is only in those 'boxes', Africans are told, that they can get access to information. Africans are told that, education can only be processed within the parameters of those boxes; and that, knowledge is only acquired from those boxes called French, English or Portuguese. Consequently, to most westerners, it is emphasized that we only have Francophone, Anglophone or Lusophone Africa!

Although a name matters to an African, those labels do not make sense to Africans. For more than fifty years those languages have failed to make any significant contribution toward making Africans understand the linguistic connection to democracy, freedom and development. Recognizing and emphasizing the link between language, freedom, democracy and development, Mwalimu Nyerere said, it was important for independent Tanzania to develop Swahili, maintain unity and support the cause to development. The realization of the role and importance of an African language in bringing about development was a very credible idea.

To discuss the contribution of African languages towards African development at this material time, we need to reconsider what is happening at the global level. The globalization process has taken a surprise turn so much so that, the 'classical imperial powers' and the new 'economic tricksters' are finding it hard to ignore Africa. Let us quickly remind ourselves of what Africa was considered to be, before the eyes of the classical imperial powers.

During and immediately after the second imperial wars, otherwise known as WW2, the USA was busy planning for global hegemony. The move to globalize the world or rather to 'Americanise' it, was thought to be a well planned idea. To a greater extent, they succeeded, but fell short of realizing the ultimate importance of Africa's space in the global economy. In fact, they did not only ignore Africa, but intentionally and systematically omitted Africa as an equal partner. The State Department planner in the US, assuming supremacy, assigned parts of the world their 'functions'. Noam Chomsky,

one of the great American thinkers of this century, writes in his book: *Hegemony of Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*:

Thus South East Asia was to provide raw materials to the former imperial masters, crucially Britain but also Japan, which was to be granted 'some sort of empire towards the South ... Some areas were of little interest to the planners, notably Africa, which Kennan (then Head of State Department's Policy Planning Staff) advised should be handed to Europeans' to 'exploit' for their reconstruction (2003: 150).

So Africa was 'given' to Europeans. (In fact, Tanganyika, now Tanzania, was under the British protectorate). And so the Europeans, following the master's call, used language to continue erasing Africa's culture, values and beliefs. They used language to dismantle Africa's dignity. Of all the sins the colonialists committed, the gravest one was to systematically deconstruct the African mind to the extent of despising its own linguistic make up, and denying its being African. It is like constructing the shadow of one self, and continuing to support it as being real. Aimé Césaire explains this humiliation as he so aptly says:

I am talking of millions of men who have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, and abasement (From *Black Skin White Masks*. 1998:1).

What, and how they did it, are historical cadence, and it does not constitute the main arguments in this paper. It avails to say here that, such degradation was not going to last among progressive Africans. The language issue was one of the strategic aspects that independent African states gave it a serious thought. So, immediately after its establishment in 1963, the then Organization of African Unity, recognized the importance and role of African languages in rebuilding independent Africa. The efforts culminated in the launching of the language academy as a mark of the linguistic renaissance.

The choice to add Swahili in the official languages of the AU was to recognize the power of this language in bringing Africans together. Examining this power, Lioba Moshi (2006) wrote: 'There is no doubt that Kiswahili has gained ground as a language of choice by millions of people in

East Africa and its neighbors.’ (2006:167). The ‘inclusiveness’ nature of Swahili has given the language the status of humanity. It is this humanity nature inherent in the language that saw it moving from one society to another without being rejected. Supporting this argument, John Habwe (2009: 3) writes:

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.

Swahili has managed to do so because it carries alongside with it the qualities of unity and harmony. Chacha adds more potentials saying:

It has a rich literary tradition, it is wide spread with more than one hundred million speakers, it is non-tribal with no political overtones, and it has an overwhelming capacity for modernity, science, technical and complex philosophical concepts... Kiswahili is therefore the social force that can build the Africa of the future (Chacha 2006: 34-35).

Of these Swahili qualities the important one is Ubuntu, the African philosophy of humanity.

Swahili and the Ubuntu Philosophy

Elaborating his theory on Ubuntu and its place in contemporary Africa, Horace Campbell (2012: 2) writes:

...the challenges of the 21st century necessitate a retreat from many of the philosophical tenets of the European Enlightenment and an embrace of Ubuntu. The African philosophy of Ubuntu emphasizes linked humanity and our intrinsic connection with a complex universe. Ubuntu opens a space for us to understand how different parts of the universe fit together, with an understanding that ‘everything is connected to everything else’. As temporary

inhabitants of the physical space on earth, we begin to appreciate the reality that the biosphere is the global ecological system integrating all living beings and their relationships, including their interaction with the elements of the cooperating systems. A philosophical re-orientation anchored on Ubuntu is required to humanize the universe, away from the destruction and dehumanization caused by centuries of the hegemonic Enlightenment thoughts.

As a Bantu word, Ubuntu, - suggests that through their language, people ought to live in harmony and respect of one another. In other words, people are connected to one another through a language that avails this connectivity. As a Bantu language Swahili has succeeded to connect people from the coast to the hinterland. In Southern Africa, Swahili would very much be understood by majority who are Bantu themselves.

The relationship and connection that Ubuntu eventually establishes cannot exist outside a language. African people have existed in this philosophy through their languages. Bishop Desmond Tutu (Quoted in Campbell 2010: 9) explains the principles of Ubuntu in the following words:

the principle of caring for each other's well-being and a spirit of mutual support. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people.

In Swahili, two idioms exist to support this Ubuntu philosophy. One says: **Mtu ni Utu** (lit. A person is the personhood). The second says: **Mtu ni Watu** (Lit. A person is the People). These two idioms simply confirm that there is no an individual without the other. We speak to show that we are connected. So, again: to whom do we speak to exist?

The Swahili saying **Mtu ni Watu**, underscores the importance of using a language in making an individual become part of the other. It suggests that a person becomes a meaningful being when he or she communicates and connects to the other through speaking. As quoted above, Campbell's theory of Ubuntu, weaves neatly this article on the African languages as a gateway to sustainable development. The problem however is that, some Africans do not live within the African languages' framework of

Mtu ni Watu. They live individual lives, and deny their Africanness, and systematically are ceasing to exist. The following example of this trend proves the case in point.

As argued earlier, in any democratic society, education is not a privilege, but a right to every individual members of that society. By continuing to provide education in foreign languages, Africa is not only denying its people their right to grow as Africans, but more importantly, such education systems ruin creativity and ability to innovate. What the Western system of education has done to Africans is to uproot them from their base. Ultimately, these will neither be Africans nor anything else. We are afraid; the creation of academic zombies are in the making. While this is the fate of education in Africa, the image of the continent and its economic potentiality is in the change.

The Current Image of Africa in the World

About three years ago, a study published in the *Harvard Business Review* suggested that Africa was growing as an important market that drew a serious consideration. The study by Mutsa Chironga, Acha Leke, Arend van Wamelen, and Susan Lund (May 2011), is worth taking into consideration as we debate and deliberate on the importance of African languages in this era. In December of the same year (2011), *The Economist*, published an article titled: ‘Africa’s hopeful economies: The sun shines bright: The continent’s impressive growth looks likely to continue’. The article says: ‘Since *The Economist* regrettably labelled Africa ‘the hopeless continent’ a decade ago, a profound change has taken hold. Labour productivity has been rising. It is now growing by, on average, 2.7% a year. Trade between Africa and the rest of the world has increased by 200% since 2000. Inflation dropped from 22% in the 1990s to 8% in the past decade. Foreign debts declined by a quarter, budget deficits by two-thirds. Moreover, Horace Campbell quotes an analysis by Howard French writing: ‘The Next Asia Is Africa: Inside the Continent’s Rapid Economic Growth’ (2012:8). The report by Charles Roxburgh et al., ‘*Lions on the move: The progress and potential of African economies*’ also makes a similar testimony on Africa’s growing potential (McKinsey Global Institute Report, June 2010).

We can continue proving that the image of Africa in the world, in the

21st. century has changed. Both the classical imperialists, using their multinational corporations and the new ‘world economic tricksters’ mushrooming all over the world, are engaging in the second scramble and partition of Africa. We would be safe to say that the unpopular ‘Berlin conference’, aimed at cultural erasure through the imposition and obligatory use of their languages. Now after the Lusophone, Anglophone and Francophone confusion, the focus of the second scramble and partition is on economy. The history of such plans and movements have been researched and written by several scholars and from different perspectives. What we want to put as a challenge is to reconsider, at least through languages, the meaning of our African being.

The Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University in one of his speeches (2013) suggested that without transforming education, and indeed democratising access to knowledge, Universities remain with no meaningful contribution to the wellbeing of the people. Although we agree with his conclusion, he falls short of making a bold suggestion that, it is only through African languages that African Universities will be able to make a momentous and lasting impact to the people, and to the sustainable development of Africa.

Now having said that, and going along with the Ubuntu philosophy, in the following section I examine the position of Swahili as a potential language to claim Africa’s rightful place in the socio-economic, and scientific world order.

Can Swahili be the African Language in the Globalized World?

Swahili’s struggle against western linguistic attitude towards African languages saw it growing and spreading. It became the language of diplomacy and unity as Yoka Liye (Kambale 2004) in Kinshasa would have it. Swahili soon was to become a favoured language for Africans in Africa and in the diaspora. Discussing Swahili as a globalized language, Lioba Moshi (2006: 166) says:

There is a difference between developing a language for global use and developing a language as an ideological tool. Global usage of a

language enhances global understanding... A shared language should be a bridge between cultures, a bridge that connects speakers and allows people to share cultural values, diverse views and knowledge, and promotes a global understanding and a polycentric society.

Swahili moved steadily from one society to the other without threatening the survival of other ethnic languages. It was never used as an ideology against other societal cultural values. It was therefore well received, and as said earlier, adopted to suit the local use. At a national and international level, Swahili proved to be above other African languages in discussing socio-political issues.

In Tanzania, for example, Swahili broke the myth attached to African languages' incapacity to engage in meaningful philosophical, social, economic and political discussions. In early 1962, Mwalimu Nyerere strategically decided to use Swahili in the then Tanganyika's parliament, where initially English was the language of the House. This was the first time for an African language to be used in such a high profile legal platform. Mwalimu Nyerere's conviction over the capabilities of Swahili grew out of its successful usage in the campaign and struggle for African independence. Looking at Swahili from a Pan-African point of view, Chacha (2003: 5) writes:

In fact Mwalimu was cognizant of the Euro-centric cultural tyranny that was imposed on Africa during the colonial era and the need to provide a framework which indigenous cultural practices could be safeguarded. It is no wonder that he personally spearheaded pursuits aimed at authentic African cultural expression and liberation. This he did by adopting a language policy, which recognised African culture. Right from the time of TANU's inauguration in 1954, the constitution of the party gave Kiswahili, an indigenous African language, a special place and role. Deliberate steps and measures were taken to develop, promote and popularise Kiswahili.

In the Swahili language, Nyerere saw its unifying force in a situation where Africans were fragmented. Given its wide spread, linguistic maturity and ability to tackle issues, it was logical to adopt Swahili language for a

wider communication, commerce and political awareness across the country (Whiteley 1969; Chacha 2003). Having a kick start in the parliament, Swahili was to expand to the education sector starting at primary school level and later to Adult education, where the language was to be used as a medium of instruction. This was a significant attitude change in the history of this African language and an ideal contribution to African education.

Several scholars have written on the plan and efforts to use Swahili as the language of instruction in Tanzania. Although the debate towards realizing this plan had some hiccups, (Qorro 1997; Roy-Campbell & Qorro 1997; Brock-Utne 2005); research shows that it has taken a new momentum in the recent past (Brock-Utne, Desai & Qorro 2006; Desai, Qorro & Brock-Utne 2010; Brock-Utne 2013; & Qorro 2013). The current drive towards Swahili though not similar, echoes the positive attitude which was in the country at the time for independence in 1960s up to 1970s. Two recent incidents need to be mentioned here as examples of this positive outlook towards the language. In the on-going debate towards having a new Constitution in Tanzania, people rejected the English version of the Bill and demanded that all be translated into Swahili to enable all the citizens contribute their opinions toward a new Constitution.. This demand made Swahili language succeed in giving the majority a democratic voice.

The second incident happened in the parliament session in October 2012. For the first time since 1962, a submission to the House was rejected simply because it was in English. Progressive members of parliament demanded that the submission ought to be done in Swahili to go in harmony with the expectations of the majority of the people. Once again, this was a testimony of the relationship between Swahili language, freedom and democracy.

Another equally significant change is reflected in the First draft of the new that has just been submitted by the Commission for Constitution Change. Swahili has officially been recognised in this Draft. The legal back up of Swahili in Tanzania has intensified probably after the New Kenyan Constitution has done the same (Kenya Law Report 2010).

In Chapter two, Section 7, sub section 1, The Kenyan Constitution states that ‘The national language of the Republic is Kiswahili’. In the New Constitution, both Swahili and English are recognised as official languages. This gives Swahili language a chance to be legally used in different circumstances including discussion in the Kenyan parliament (Part 3 section

120). A similar positive change towards the attitude over the language is echoed in Uganda and Rwanda.

In both countries, Uganda and Rwanda, Swahili has been made a compulsory subject in all primary schools. In Rwanda, the Director of Curriculum Production Materials Department in Ministry of Education and Culture urged all Rwandan people to seriously learn the language saying: ‘Nobody can underestimate the role of Swahili in Rwanda as well as in the EAC’. (Jean d'Amour Mbonyinshut 2013). Indeed the East African Cultural Festival in Kigali (JAMAFEST, February 2013) stands as an impressive testimony of the commitment of the Rwandese Government to embrace Swahili and encourage its use by all the people. During the festival, Radio Rwanda continuously broadcasted in Swahili with a live coverage of events at the festival.

In Uganda, Idd Amin had declared Swahili to be the National language of Uganda (Mukuthuria 2006), ironically the decree did not take its roots as such. Strong opposition from the Baganda, among other reasons could be said to damage the dictator’s intention to promote Swahili. However, John Nsookwa’s study (2008) examined the development of the language in Uganda and concludes that recently Swahili has acquired the status of a national language. In his study, Nsookwa traces the history of Swahili in Uganda over the last 100 years. He shows that there have been ups and downs in favouring the usage of Swahili in Uganda. Nevertheless he points out that Uganda would very much benefit by embracing Swahili as a national language. The same conclusion is echoed in Christine Mungai’s Online article (2011), where she writes concerning the future of Swahili in East Africa. In Uganda such a linguistic change towards a rather ‘neutral’ language, would mean a true national unity among Ugandans.

At another level, and following the wave of change towards accepting Swahili in East Africa, the East Africans Swahili teachers association saw it wise to create a platform from where they would pull their strength together towards the development and spread of Kiswahili in schools and universities across the region. To this end, the establishment of CHAKAMA in 2003 was well received and members keep on increasing in numbers each year. With this in place, students in East African colleges were inspired to start their association (CHAWAKAMA) to join hands in making sure that Swahili is the language of their communication, academic cooperation and friendship. CHAKAMA has been campaigning for Swahili

to be accepted as a language of instruction in secondary schools. Brock Utne's recent publication (2013) confirms CHAKAMA's appeal. In her study, she looks into the success behind Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Tunisia in science and technological advancement. She says: '*Examples from Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Tunisia show that it is especially important that the teaching of science is done in a familiar language, the language children normally speak.*' The reality of meaningful education through the familiar language cannot be overemphasized. Although Swahili has not reached the level most people would want it to be, its spread and development give it more credibility.

The development of Swahili and its spread beyond the region of East Africa was recognised by the ACALAN as a cross-border vehicular language. As shown earlier, the positive attitude towards Swahili saw, Universities in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Cameroon and Senegal requesting to establish a bachelor's degree in Swahili to give students a chance to better understand this language and be able to use it for a wider communication.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Swahili is spreading with a new zeal. Today the debate in the DRC is not about which language should be chosen to represent the Congo people (Bakongo), but rather which variety of Swahili should be adopted to give the Bakongo an African voice. It may not be a similar argument with Swahili language in Madagascar or Comoro, but certainly it will not take long before we have a testimony of the spread and acceptability of the language in these areas of Africa. The Swahili dialects of Madagascar and Comoro would make the people become part of the African linguistic unity. What then is in Swahili language to qualify as an African lingua franca?

As argued earlier in this article, Swahili is a Bantu language and, therefore, most Bantu in Africa would find Swahili understandable. As a Bantu language, a similar attitude towards Swahili's 'Africinity' would be seen in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Angola and Swaziland. The same is also the case in Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and in the Congo. In east Africa, it has taken roots in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Southern Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania. Secondly, Swahili would be accepted and taken as the language that speaks for Africa because it does not belong to a geographical 'ownership'. In Lubumbashi for example, the citizens consider Swahili as the language of their ancestors. The great lakes region comprising of eleven countries find Swahili a language that would present their cultural

values collectively. Swahili is indeed a leading cross-border vehicular African language.

Swahili has a significant number of Arabic words. It goes without saying that the Arab Africa will accommodate it as representing their 'Africanness'. In the Arab world, Swahili is the most taught African languages besides Arabic. It is a popular language program in Universities in Algeria, Libya, Sudan and Egypt. Its closeness to Arabic makes the language popular to most Muslims. What the Hausa in Nigeria has in common with Swahili is that both languages share the Arabic influence in their languages. A linguistic research done by Professor Baldi from University L'Orientale, Naples testifies that the two languages have more in common. The teaching of Swahili in West African Universities especially in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon takes advantage of this fact.

Moreover, Swahili has an inclination of borrowing and accommodating words from other languages. This is not unique to Swahili. All world languages have this tendency. To borrow a word from non Bantu African language makes Swahili less a threat to the donor language. The ability to borrow and 'Swahilize' words has worked as an advantage to the spread and development of Swahili. The existence of several Swahili dialects all over Africa is another credit that makes the language accommodated in many African societies.

In contemporary Africa, the youth has realized the importance of a common lingua franca that cuts across borders; hence Swahili becoming a music hub. The Kwaito dance from South Africa for example, has become a very popular music genre in East Africa. Youths use Swahili language to dance the melody and create Swahili lyrics of the Kwaito. In other words, Youths are dancing into their bright future where they envisage Africa as having music in one language. Kwaito is one of the examples where Swahili has succeeded to penetrate. Besides Kwaito, Tanzanian and Kenyan church choirs are singing the songs that were originally sang in isiZulu, IsiXhosa, Shona and Ndebele just to mention a few South African languages. Such songs have been changed into Swahili and are sang as if they are originally from East Africa. In other words, one finds Southern African melodies in East Africa through Swahili language. Some freedom fighters' songs and tunes for campaigns against apartheid have been translated or adopted in the Swahili speaking world. The melodies have been retained but the lyrics are in Swahili.

Swahili has entered in the performing arts. What this means is that Southern African music culture has been accommodated in East African region through Swahili. This fact could be looked at from a different perspective. Youths in Southern African region are spreading Swahili through music. In other words, while Swahili brings Southern African music to East Africa, in turn the music brings Swahili language to countries like South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia. In both directions, Swahili becomes a hub connecting people and their culture.

Conclusion

To Africans, Swahili language would make more sense as an African voice than German, French, English or Portuguese. Writing from a Pan African perspective in relation to Swahili Chacha rightly says:

The full realization of our being lies in our collective as Africans. Our freedom, strength, dignity, survival and prosperity as a people depend on our unity as Africans, for only in unity can strength be found. Having already proved itself as a resilient tool for integration, Kiswahili is the ideal instrument to bridge the linguistic barriers which retard pan-Africanism (2006: 29).

Swahili has more African roots than the Western languages would have it. It does not make any sense, for example, to write African stories in any of western languages and expect to retain the African humanism. Humanity in Africa through the Ubuntu philosophy will only be realized through African languages. While the article has not discussed the science and technology as they relate to African languages, we are aware that there are efforts to deconstruct the myth that African languages cannot be used to develop scientific thoughts and arguments. Absurd, as it may sound, and it really is, such thinking ought to know the reality about Africa. Africa is not only the cradle of modern human species but also of human science. The library information science has its origin in the ancient Egypt known as Kemet.

The earliest human civilization has been recorded in Africa and African languages were in the middle of such civilization. In fact, the use of

western languages retarded African progress. In his article, Ademowo (2010) argues that using indigenous languages lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking early in a child's learning process. He rightfully elucidates that the introduction of the sciences and technology to a child is best done in a language of immersion. The truth in Ademowo's approach was observed earlier by Paulo Freire. Commenting on Freire, Birgit Brock Utne (2013) says: '*Paulo Freire defined the practice of imposing a foreign language upon the learner for studying another subject as a violation of the structure of thinking.*' A child's own language enables one to form ideas which stay with him or her through life. With these ideas, a child is introduced to empirical ways of thinking. Most importantly, a child's language makes science available to all without considering their economic or social backgrounds. All these evidences are emphasizing the importance of indigenous languages; they stress the use of African languages in Africa.

With the use of Swahili as an African language, Africans would retain their freedom to think and speak as independent creative minds. Be it in classrooms or in the court rooms, Africans would be free to express their thinking. Such a step would give them opportunity to have a democratic voice and contribute ideas towards shaping their future. There would be more freedom of the press and a fair representation of African societies. Chacha (2006:29) summarises our arguments saying: 'With Africa looking into itself to seek solutions to the myriad of problems beleaguering the continent, Kiswahili is the language of re-awakening, renewal, unity and solidarity'. It is only when Africa starts using her own languages that a true development in its broadest sense would be attained.

References

- Ademowo, AJ 2010. Teaching Science and Technology: The Employment of Indigenous African Languages. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* (June). Retrieved from <http://www.readperiodicals.com/201006/2132847131.html#b#ixzz36sfZ0aLL>. (Accessed 22 April 22 2013.)
- Ben Jochannan, J (ed) 1974. *The Black Man's Religion*. New York: Alkebu-Lan Books.
- Brock-Utne, B 2013. Language and Liberation. In Benson, C & Kosonen, K (ed): *Language Issues in Comparative Education: Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Non-Dominant Languages and Cultures*. Comparative

- and International Education Series 1. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Brock-Utne, B, Z Desai & M Qorro 2006. *Focus on Fresh Data on the Language of Instruction Debate in Tanzania and South Africa*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Brock-Utne, B 2005. The Continued Battle over Kiswahili as the Language of instruction in Tanzania. In Brock-Utne, B, & RK Hopson (eds): *Educational Language Contents and Issues in Postcolonial Africa*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.
- Campbell, H 2010. *Barack Obama and Twenty-first Century Politics: A Revolutionary Moment in the USA*. New York: Pluto Press.
- Campbell, H 2012. Kiswahili as a Language of Liberation and Unification in Africa in the next 50 Years: Lessons Learnt from the Last Fifty. A Paper Delivered at the International Conference on 50 years of Kiswahili as the Language of Liberation, Unity and African Renaissance. October 2012, University of Dar es Salaam.
- Chacha, DM 2003. Julius Nyerere: The Intellectual Pan-Africanist and the Question of African Unity. Unpublished Paper presented at CODESRIA's 30th. Anniversary Conference, Dakar, Senegal, 08-11 December, 2003.
- Chacha, DM 2006. Kiswahili and the African States: The Legacy of Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere. *Kiswahili* 69: 22-36
- Chacha, L 2009. The Adaptation of Swahili Loanwords From Arabic: A Constraint-Based Analysis. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2,8: 46-61.
- Choge, SC 2012 *Fifty Years of Kiswahili in Regional and International Development*. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4,10: 172-203.
- Desai, Z, M Qorro & B Brock-Utne 2010. *Educational Challenges in Multilingual Societies: Loitasa Phase Two Research*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Diop, CA 1974. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* Chicago: Laurence Hill and Company.
- Diop, CA 1991. *Pre-colonial Black Africa*. Harold Salemsen (trans). New York: Wesport: Laurence Hill & Company.
- Fabian, J 1986. *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880-1938*. California: University of California Press.
- Fanon, F 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann Charles Lam (trans). London: Pluto Press.

- Heo, U & AC Tan 2001. Democracy and Economic Growth: A Causal Analysis. *Comparative Politics* 33,4, 463-473.
- John Habwe 2009. The Role of Kiswahili in the Integration of East Africa. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2,8: 2-10.
- Kambale, J 2004. Congolese Welcome Swahili as Official African Language. Inter Press Service (Johannesburg), 9 August. Retrieved from www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/35/281.html (Accessed 16 April 2013.)
- Kenya Law Report 2010. *The Constitution of Kenya*. Revised Edition. Kenya: Published by the National Council for Law Reporting with the Authority of the Attorney General.
- Kezilahabi, E 2012. Erasure and the Centrality of Literatures in African Languages. *Kiswahili Journal* 75: 104-117.
- Moshi, L 2006. Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics. In Arasanyin, OF & MA Pemberton (eds): *Cascadilla Proceedings Project*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla.
- Mpangala, GP 2004. Origins of Political Conflicts and Peace Building in the Great Lakes Region. Unpublished Paper Presented at a Symposium Organized by the Command and Staff College, Arusha, 23rd February 2004.
- Mukuthuria, M 2006. Kiswahili and its Expanding Roles of Development in East African Cooperation: A Case of Uganda. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 15, 2: 154-165.
- Mungai, C 2011. *Kiswahili's Future Lies in Borrowing from English*. Retrieved from <http://www.afroarticles.com/article-dashboard>. (Accessed 30 March 2013.)
- Mwansoko, JM 2002. *Swahili Standardization as Vital Factor in Consolidating the Great Lakes Region Unity*. Kampala: Symposium of the Great Lakes Region, MNF.
- Nsookwa, J 2008. *Promote Kiswahili as a National Language*. Retrieved from <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/459/619780>. (Accessed 30 March 2013).
- Qorro, M 1997. The Role and Place of Language in Education: The Case of Kiswahili and English in Tanzania. In Smeija, B (ed): *Proceedings of the LICCA Workshop in Dar es Salaam*. Paper No. 2 Dusborg: LICCAP .
- Qorro, M 2013. Language of Instruction in Tanzania: Why are Research Findings not Heeded? *International Review of Education* 59, 1: 29-45
- Rajabu, R & N Deogratius 1994. Language Policy in Tanzania and the

- Hidden Agenda. In Rubagumya, CM (ed): *Teaching and Researching Language in the African Classroom*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Raswamy, S, R & JW Cason (eds) 2003. *Development and Democracy: New Perspectives on an Old Debate*. University Press of New England,
- Reuben, M 2005. Regionalism Agenda in Africa in an Era of Globalization: Who are the Actors and for Whose Interests? The Experience of the Great Lakes of the African Continent. Unpublished Paper presented at the Conference 'Regionalism and the Taming of Globalization' (CSGR, CIGI, UNU-CRIS), held 26-28/10/2005. University of Warwick, UK.
- Roxburgh, C, N Dörr, A Leke, A Tazi-Riffi, A van Wamelen, S Lund, M Chironga, T Alatovik, C Atkins, N Terfous, & T Zeino-Mahmalat 2010. Lions on the Move: The Progress and Potential of African Economies. A Report. In *McKinsey Global Institute*, June 2010. Retrieved from http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/africa/lions_on_the_move. (Accessed 16 April 2013.)
- Roy-Campbell, ZM & MAS Qorro 1987. *A Survey of the Reading Competence in English of Secondary School Students in Tanzania*. IDRC Sponsored Research Report. Dar es Salaam: University of Dar es Salaam.
- Roy-Campbell, ZM & MAS Qorro 1997. *Language Crisis in Tanzania: The Myth of English versus Education*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers
- Roy-Campbell, ZM 1992. The Politics of Education in Tanzania: From Colonialism to Liberalisation. In Campbell, H & H Stein (eds): *Tanzania and the IMF: The Dynamics of Liberalisation*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Said, EW 1983. Traveling Theory. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Said, E 2000. Traveling Theory Reconsidered. In *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Severino, J & O Ray 2011. *Africa's Moment*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Zawawi, S 1979. *Loan Words and Their Effect on the Classification of Swahili Nominals*. Leiden: EJ Brill.

Aldin Kai Mutembei
Associate Professor & Director
Institute of Kiswahili Studies
University of Dar es salaam
Mutembei@yahoo.com