

Kiswahili and Its Expanding Roles of Development in East African Cooperation: A Case of Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Kiswahili is an indigenous African language whose origin is the coast of Kenya. In the 20th C. it was readily accepted in Kenya and Tanzania where it has played key roles of national development. However, in Uganda Kiswahili language was not accepted. Probably, the role of this language in the organization and mobilization of the liberation forces in the 1980s is what made this language to find favor in the eyes of the leaders of National Resistance Movement, therefore, giving Kiswahili new lease of life and impetus of fresh development in this country where it has been down looked for along time with a lot of suspicion. This paper therefore intends to explicate the dynamics of Kiswahili development in Uganda giving a keen attention to the reasons why the current leadership is frantically putting a lot of effort to popularize Kiswahili, though belatedly relatively compared to other East African countries.

Keywords: development, politics, Swahili, Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of Kiswahili language from a minority language in the 18th C. to an international language can be attributed to many factors. These include commerce, particularly long distance trade, writings, religion, colonial rule, communication, wars, education and post-independence government policies, just to name a few (Prince, 1967; Shihabdin and Chiragdin, 1977; Mbaabu, 1978; Nurse and Spear, 1985; Mazui and Mazrui, 1995; Chimera, 1998, and 1999). Today, there is no doubt that Kiswahili is one of the greatest indigenous languages in the continent whose role in development cannot be gainsaid. The countries that embraced the use and development of this language like Tanzania and Kenya stand an edge over other countries that have not made such a bold step; among them being Uganda. Today, the whole of East and Central African region is using this language for wider communication, improving literacy, galvanizing unity, commerce and many other roles. However, Uganda as a country squandered the opportunity of developing Kiswahili early enough to reap the benefits that the sister East African countries are enjoying. It is in the light of this failure that this paper intends to explicate the factors that led to the status quo as it is today and examine the efforts that Uganda is putting though belatedly, relatively compared to Kenya and Tanzania. Reasons for this late

entry will be expounded and the benefits that this effort might reap will be viewed in the light of the future that Kiswahili has in this country.

1.1 GROWTH OF KISWAHILI IN UGANDA AND MIXED FORTUNES IN DEVELOPMENT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is estimated that Kiswahili reached Uganda in the 18th C. (Gerard, 1981; Sunday Monitor, Dec. 26, 2004: 15). By 1862, the Waswahili and Arab traders from the coast had reached Uganda. This language was introduced to the Kabaka royal court. According to Mukama (1995) Kabaka Mutesa of Buganda who was ruling around this time had a high proficiency of Kiswahili language. As it is the case with many areas in the East and Central African region, commerce was the major activity that spread Kiswahili that far. By the first decade of the 19th C. Kiswahili had gained root in Uganda. By the time the missionaries like H.M. Stanley arrived in Uganda in 1864, the use of Kiswahili in this country was not different from Kenya and Tanzania (Gerard, 1981). It is with this regard that they chose it for their philanthropic missions and the spread of Christianity in this multilingual country. However, this did not last for long. As soon as they learnt the local languages, they started prejudicing Kiswahili which was associated with Islamic faith.

Before 1894, many kingdoms were flourishing in Uganda. They included Bunyoro, Toro and Busoga. Nevertheless the dominant kingdom was that of Buganda whose superiority was not only in expanse but also in their language which had gained strength as a *lingua franca* among the many communities under the sovereignty of this kingdom. Therefore, Kiswahili language from the onset was viewed as a competitor and hence the hostility meted to this language up today. Therefore, though the potential of Kiswahili was evident quite early, the Buganda Kingdom would not let this for the sake of their superiority and pride in the region.

Reinforcement to this attitude came with the Buganda Agreement of 1900 which among other things recognized Luganda and English language. Though it has been argued by some scholars that Kiswahili was the official language of the government, especially between 1900 - 1912 (cf. Mukama, 1995: 12-25), this language was not recognized at all. Another setback to Kiswahili which came with this agreement was the recognition of Buganda people as administrators of other colonized regions of Uganda. This was duly considered as a result of their early submissiveness and collaboration to colonial rule and the subsequent acceptance of western education. This move made them stubborn. So, when they assumed the role of administrators, a golden opportunity was in their hands to enforce their language to fellow colonial subjects to perpetuate their glory, therefore undermining the role of Kiswahili as a language of wider communication. Together with all this, the strength of their colonial masters and his unquenched thirst of expanding his empire had bewildered them to the extent

that there was phobia among the Baganda leaders that the entire East African region will be galvanized under British rule, therefore, rendering them redundant. For example, in 1933 King Daudi Chwa teamed with the C.M.S missionaries to exert pressure to promote Luganda language (Mbaabu, 1991).

1912 – 1924, Luganda language succeeded in replacing Kiswahili as the official language of the protectorate (Sunday Monitor, Dec. 26, 2004: 15). This came in the wake of individual sentiments like those of Governor Gowers who had recommended to the colonial secretary that Kiswahili should be used to harmonize the language of wider communication in East Africa. However, this was vehemently resisted by the Western Kingdoms and Northern Province of Uganda.

Under the shadow of this agreement, English language also got a chance to root itself in Uganda in the name of imparting the western education so adopted then. In particular, the missionaries played a key role to this when they tagged baptism with the ability of their converts to master the basic literacy skills. By 1920, the British government took charge of education in Uganda. This development followed by the outcome of Phelphstokes commission was not in any way favoring Kiswahili (Marshad, 1993). The fact that the outcome of this commission was not in favor of development of Kiswahili in British colonies endeared it to Baganda. However, later in the British colonial governors meeting that took place at Mombasa in 1928, it was agreed that the use of Kiswahili be allowed. On his return, Gowers who was the colonial governor of Uganda then emphasized the need of teaching Kiswahili as language of workers. Nevertheless, this did not change the status quo of the attitudes of the missionaries and Buganda people. Therefore, these fossilized attitudes and emphases of the use of mother tongue became the chief impediment to the development and spread of Kiswahili. The evidence to this was realized much later in 1937 when the Secondary School Education Committee of East Africa stressed the teaching of English and mother tongue, going even to the extent of inspecting the resources in place to develop these languages for example textbooks.

All the same, it is worth noting that even though the Bugandans were against the development of Kiswahili, Uganda as a country was represented in the meeting of the Inter-territorial Committee which was held in 1930 to standardize Kiswahili. During the Second World War 1939 – 1945, Kiswahili was used by the colonial forces that fought side by side with the British. The role of this language at the time was to unify, mobilize and propagate war propaganda among the soldiers and other British colonial subjects in East Africa. During this time, many Ugandan soldiers learnt Kiswahili.

The Makerere Conference of 1944 which discussed the language issue in Uganda came with a devastating blow to Kiswahili. Local languages like Luganda, Acholi, Lunyoro, Teso and Lugbara were given prominence as regional languages. It was in this meeting that English was given the role of *lingua franca* for the purpose of wider communication. In 1947, minutes from the colonial office in Uganda emphasized the teaching of mother tongue from

standard one up to standard four (Mbaabu, 1991). Again, development of teaching materials for local languages was stressed. Despite such a move, Kiswahili fortunes never dwindled. As a stroke of luck, they resurfaced in 1948 after the formation of the East African High Commission. This body was put in place to take care of East African Posts and Telecommunications, East African Railways and Harbours, Meteorological Department and the Department of Civil Aviation. The headquarters for this commission were at Nairobi, Kenya. As a condition, the employees of the commission were required to learn Kiswahili. This move created a need to learn Kiswahili in Uganda and East Africa as a whole. The same year, Kiswahili was allowed in the education system in Uganda, though the Kabaka rule was against. Until 1952, it was one of the recognized vernaculars in Ugandan schools and it was the official language of the armed forces.

However, De Bunsen Committee later banned Kiswahili from the languages which were being taught as vernaculars. This move, followed by King's Commission of 1953 which also banned the use of either Kiswahili or Luganda language among the Uganda Police promoted English language at the expense of Kiswahili and other indigenous languages. The move was ushered as an aftermath of realizing the potent in Kiswahili and other local languages as a tool for unifying Africans politically (Mbaabu, 1978 and 1991).

All the same, the strength of Kiswahili did not pass away. New role of political unification ushered in as independence approached. Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) under Milton Obote stressed the use of Kiswahili with the intention of promoting it as a national language. This way, Kiswahili thrived in the Northern parts of Uganda and the Eastern region where it had no opposition.

Finally, Uganda attained independence in 1962. From 1961 – 1971, there was no policy on Kiswahili language in Uganda. English was adopted from the colonialists. However, studies carried out by Ladefoged and others 1968 and 1970 had identified three potential languages which could be adopted as national languages; they included English, Luganda and Kiswahili (cf. Ladefoged et al, 1971).

On August 7, 1973, following the national debate on national language in which eight districts out of twelve voted in favor of Luganda as a national language, Idd Amin, the then ruler of Uganda, declared Kiswahili as a national language. However, neither him nor his successors did anything to reinforce this decree although it has not been repealed.

To communities of other regions away from Buganda, the taking over of Uganda through military coup in 1971 meant that the political muscle of Baganda people was no more. Consequently, they were hated, more so by northerners who were supporters of Kiswahili though the government had no policy for this language.

The general characteristic of post independence period regarding the language question was that, the multilingual orientation of this country made it difficult for any one language to be chosen for promotion. Tribalism and linguistic prejudice played a major role to this. Luganda could not be selected

bearing in mind the past history of domination by Buganda Kingdom. On the other hand, Kiswahili was tainted by post independence misrule by Amin, from the North. All this together with varied resentments from other communities overrode the national interest when it came to the selection of the national language, and therefore, all through English has taken the day as an official language.

The toppling of Iddi Amin in 1979 by Tanzanian forces was a blessing in disguise for Kiswahili. On one hand, many people made efforts to learn Kiswahili so that they can communicate with the occupation forces. On the other, the brutality of the occupational forces was devastating to the image of Kiswahili. It was associated with dictatorship, abuse of human rights, thieves and looters (Mukama, 1995). Immediately after Amin, Obote was reinstated. His period as the president emphasized the use of Kiswahili though it was short-lived. Negative attitudes towards Kiswahili gained strength up to 1987 when the National Resistance Council (NRC) under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over the leadership. This was because of the nature of instability in leadership and the subsequent destruction of lives and property caused by the liberation forces, whose language of communication incidentally was also Kiswahili.

2. KISWAHILI UNDER THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENT (NRM)

Although Kiswahili was associated with brutality during the Iddi Amin dictatorial regime, Tanzanian forces of occupation 1979, and anarchy caused by protracted wars waged by liberation forces, still Kiswahili was seen as a language which could benefit Uganda as a nation. Its role in the army training colleges became conspicuous. Indeed, after Yoweri Museveni, the leader of the NRM took over the leadership in 1985, Kiswahili was declared as a language of communication among the armed forces. It should not be forgotten that Museveni had used this language widely in the bush while organizing his rebel troops that finally took over leadership in December 1985.

Besides, Kiswahili was used in the media though not with a lot of emphases. It is during this period that apart from Makerere, which started teaching Kiswahili from 1974, other institutions came in like Kakoba TTC 1986, Islamic University 1998 and later Kyambogo University 2004. Generally, Kiswahili development has been progressive with the climax being the year 2002 when it was given prominence in the education system. However, the declaration of this language as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools has not been enforced. Nevertheless, this is no mean achievement for NRM.

2.1 NRM AND KISWAHILI LANGUAGE IN UGANDA

Unlike other post-independence governments, the NRM government has a language policy which is embedded in the Uganda Government White Paper (1992). According to the government, Kiswahili has got strong local and regional cultural base cutting across the East African region. It is argued that the strengthening of Kiswahili as Uganda's main language will promote rapid and solid regional cooperation and lead the country to development and unity. With the rebirth of East African Community (EAC), it is obvious that it would not appear as if the government is in favor of Kiswahili for no reason. Ultimately, if this is going to succeed a universal language will be attained without fanning animosity from the ardent supporters of other indigenous languages. The likelihood of this happening is high so long as the East African Community continues to thrive. If it happens, then Uganda will be a study case where an international need will have helped to solve the quest for a universal language in a highly volatile multilingual state and consequently, dictating the choice of an indigenous national language.

Though arguments have been advanced that Kiswahili is not widely spoken, it is costly to teach and above all labeled as a language which was used to violate human rights, the current positive attitude towards Kiswahili is meant to popularize it through teaching so that it can become the language of integration. After all, all these arguments holds no water bearing in mind the investment that the government has put in primary, secondary and universities to train high caliber manpower to address the current Kiswahili needs. Above all, the fact that Kiswahili is a national language of Tanzania and Kenya waters down the attitude associated with human right abuse. More over, human rights abuse is not a trait of language the way brutality cannot be associated with a language. If it was the case, then Uganda or any other country which underwent the atrocities of British colonial rule could not be using English.

Apart from the Government White Paper (1992), the constitution also gives a leeway for Kiswahili to proliferate. This is because in as much as it stipulates that English is the official language, it also provides for any other language to be used as a medium of instruction in schools or other educational institutions, or for legislative, administrative or judicial process as may be ordered by the law (Sunday Monitor, Dec. 26, 2004: 15). This way, it is open that Kiswahili can assume a wider role with regard to national development.

3. REASONS WHY AUTHORITIES ARE DETERMINED TO DEVELOP KISWAHILI

Uganda as a country has not solved the question of official and national language since the days of the British colonial rule. Today, 43 years down the line after independence still this is a nagging question. Therefore, any

opportunity to solve such a problem can be a relief. While underscoring this fact, Mulokozi (2000: 72) observes that language is fundamental to peoples identity (cf. Nsibambi, 2000: vii). This means that most African countries using foreign languages feel lacking in cultural identity and hence are ready to take the slightest opportunity to have a language that can express their cultural diversity and ostensibly to address the needs of majority who do not speak, read or understand the foreign languages. From this perspective, the use of foreign language can be viewed as a wanton abuse of human rights to the entire non literate citizenry. This is because the people are alienated by foreign languages, therefore, making them to lose creativity. Probably, this is the reason why Mulokozi (ibid: 75) categorically states that, "...using foreign language as your official language is the surest way to erode your identity not to mention your respect as a nation." Therefore, from the foregoing, this is a proof that the quest for an indigenous language is critical in Uganda at the moment.

Secondly, even with the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE), it has dawned to the government that majority of Ugandans who drop out of school at primary level have no proficiency in English (Sunday Monitor, Dec. 26, 2004: 15). However, curiously enough they can speak in Kiswahili. As for those others who can hold a conversation in English while they are in school, their proficiency lapses and soon disappears after school due to lack of regular use.

Above all, cultural discrepancy between English and the diversity of African cultures renders English useless in expressing their ways of life. This is what Mulokozi (ibid) refers to as 'alienation.' It makes it more difficult for the rural folk to learn this language. Hence, in Ugandan villages, you can hardly hear anybody speaking in English the way Kiswahili is freely used in all villages in Kenya and Tanzania.

3.1 WHY KISWAHILI STANDS OUT TO BE THE BEST LANGUAGE

So far, Kiswahili has a well established grammar and written literature as opposed to many indigenous languages in Uganda. Besides, its neutrality, the fact that it is not associated with any community to provide negative feelings, and abundant personnel within Uganda can make it easy to teach. As it has already been mentioned, higher institutions of learning in Uganda are currently investing heavily in the teaching of Kiswahili. This with personnel support from Kenya and Tanzania makes it to be ahead of other indigenous languages.

3.2 THE ROLE THAT KISWAHILI IS PLAYING IN UGANDA

Kiswahili is a language of the mass media. Today, the upcoming television stations are using Kiswahili for their broadcasts. Examples of the radio stations that have embraced Kiswahili for their broadcast are *Radio FM OPG, Mbale FM* etc. These, together with the national radio station *Uganda Radio* are promoting Kiswahili in the whole of Uganda. However, Uganda is yet to start newspapers reporting in Kiswahili. This way, the media houses have succeeded to educate the masses and enlightening them on the crucial matters affecting them. A case in point is the time when ebola virus was spreading rapidly in Northern Uganda. This time, Kiswahili came handy in educating the citizens the basic hygiene and appropriate measures to curb the spread of this deadly virus. Besides, Kiswahili is also used in the campaign against HIV virus together with fighting other diseases.

In politics, the armed forces are using Kiswahili to foster unity and to tone down tribalism. In the northern part of Uganda, it is the language that is used to fight the crime and insecurity caused by insurgency. This way, it is a tool of inter-ethnic unity which Uganda aspires.

Today, politicians representing Uganda in East African Parliament use Kiswahili language. Even at home, most parliamentarians from the North, East and Western regions use Kiswahili in their political campaigns. Above all, presidential race in Uganda today cannot be complete without contestants addressing the people in Kiswahili. This means that very soon, Kiswahili will assume the role of democratizing the citizens in Uganda, and therefore it will come handy in civil education as it is in Kenya and Tanzania.

In trade, Kiswahili role can not be quantified. It should be noted that this language was introduced in Uganda as a language of commerce and it has contributed a lot nationally and internationally. This also applies to religion where Muslims are associated with Kiswahili. This language has succeeded very much in spreading of Islamic faith across ethnic groups. Christianity is not exceptional. Today, open air masses are common in all corners of Uganda using Kiswahili as a medium of communication.

Above all, this language is a key language of socialization. It is used in theatres and along the streets by comedians for entertainment though with specks of negative attitude and so on.

4. THE FUTURE OF KISWAHILI IN UGANDA

Though Kiswahili has had mixed fortunes in Uganda for the last three centuries, today it is a language with a story of success. The political and socio-economic dynamics of globalization makes it viable as a key language whose benefits cannot be gainsaid.

Firstly, Kiswahili has now been recognized as one of the official languages of the African Union. This status gives this language a new lease of life to compete favorably with English and other non indigenous *lingua franca* like English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. This action of elevating Kiswahili to the continental level is partly attributable to relentless effort, lobbying and sensitization undertaken by linguists and great scholars in Africa who see the irony of not having an African language at the continental forum. A case in point are Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ali Mazrui who have since 1960s proposed adoption of Kiswahili as Africa common language. Going by the advocacy of such great sons of Africa, indeed there is no great forum held under the African sun that can boast of identity without giving an indigenous African language a chance.

In the East African scene, the countries are working towards a common language policy. This comes with the understanding that uniformity in language will lead to unfettered flow of information, people and capital across the borders. Out of this need, article 19 (d) of the treaty of establishment of the East African Community provides for the development and promotion of indigenous languages, especially Kiswahili as a regional *lingua franca*. Consequently, the 3rd East African Tripartite Commission held in November 2001 directed the secretariat to facilitate the formation of East African Kiswahili Council basically to oversee language issues like harmonization of vocabulary, promotion of Kiswahili literature, and advocacy of indigenous languages in the international forum. As a result, the East African Community is supportive of the idea of each country forming National Kiswahili Council. Though this move has not succeeded in Kenya and Uganda, it is hoped that soon these countries and others like Rwanda that are bound to join this community will address this matter. This, way, Kiswahili will be addressed as a discipline in all these countries.

In education, Kiswahili has unlimited horizon in Uganda. Currently, the language is taught as a subject in the key institutions in the country. It is also a tool of research at university level where it is used to study and document other indigenous languages. Above all, it is being used to disseminate research information. Also at university level, programs can be initialized to train high caliber manpower to address future needs of this country in research and teaching at the university level. This way, shortage of Kiswahili personnel can be addressed in Uganda.

Currently, the Inter-university Council of East Africa is emphasizing the exchange of Kiswahili curriculum at university level to facilitate students and staff exchange program through CHAKAMA (Kiswahili Association of East Africa). This move will make all the countries of East Africa to be at par in development of Kiswahili in general. Also, one of the major objectives of CHAKAMA is to organize joint research. This will go along way in reducing the disparities that have afflicted the higher institutions of learning for a long time. For example, in Uganda today, there is need to provide guidelines on what is supposed to be taught in schools, how to train teachers and the development of curriculum. All this can be achieved through joint research.

At this point in time, when there is need to develop Kiswahili in the system of education, Kiswahili language can be handy when it comes to developing teaching materials for learners at all levels. It can as well be considered as a language of instruction in cosmopolitan areas. This way, wider inter-ethnic communication can be fostered and children can be taught with a language which is carrying the symbols of their culture. If such a move is implemented in the education system in Uganda, then Africans will never be alienated by foreign languages and Kiswahili will be cultured as a language of national identity. Besides the country will protect infiltration of foreign cultures which are diluting African cultures. This way, it will be possible to preserve our cultural diversity hence solidifying our cultural identity.

Through Kiswahili, decimal levels of literacy can be addressed. For example, the use of Kiswahili in Tanzania has made this country to be an edge over the other East African countries in the levels of literacy. In this case, if well developed, it can be used to prepare the youth for life by training cheap labour as it is in Tanzania or the way it is used to train *Jua-kali* artisans in Kenya.

The use of Kiswahili as an indigenous language can expand readership and publication of new ideas. With over one hundred and fifty million users (Shihabdin and Chiragdin, 1977) high levels of literacy in Kiswahili means an expansive market for Kiswahili books and bottomless reservoir for readers. If literacy has to be improved, reading and acquiring skills should be imparted using a language that is readily understood by people: Kiswahili can provide for this medium together with addressing adult education needs. If this is taken seriously in Uganda, it will go along way in realizing the goals of the world education forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000 by ensuring that the learning needs of the people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and achieving 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults.

When it comes to trade, there is no doubt that uniformity of the language across the border will increase cross-border trade. This will widen access to services, especially for rural people and increase community involvement. Promotions and advertising will contribute to competitive trade and access to services which is a key aspect of globalization. Probably, it is because of the above reasons that a common consensus was reached on 6th July 2005 to declare Kiswahili as a 2nd official language through an act of parliament. Again, NRM has pulled a surprise for this language. A promising future awaits Kiswahili in Uganda.

5. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Kiswahili language will witness rapid development in Uganda this century unlike in the last three centuries. The globalization needs of

wider communication, education, commerce, regional galvanization, etc. have anchored the importance of this language in Uganda and, therefore, no other administration in future will take these forces for granted. The bold attempt to declare this language as an official language of this country through an act of parliament attests to the value with which this language is held at heart in Uganda today. Time has come for Ugandans to overstep tribal polemics in search of higher morals in order to forge ahead with national development issues. It is with this ray of hope that Kiswahili growth and development in this country banks its future to enhance its roles in Uganda.

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