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Remapping Kiswahili: A Political Geography of Language, Identity and Africanity

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The great majority of those who speak the Swahili language are not themselves Waswahili. [But] since Kiswahili is still expanding in East Africa [...] there will come a time when future generations of those who are today non-native speakers will themselves be new native speakers (Mazrui and Mazrui 1999:32).

We chose Swahili as the most appropriate cultural language in 1965 for African Americans for three basic reasons. First it is 'non-ethnic' or 'non-tribal' [...]. Secondly [...] it is Pan African in character and so are we, African Americans, who claim all the people and the whole continent of Africa rather than one people or place on the continent. Finally, we chose Swahili as a matter of self-determination (Karenga 1997:123).

This chapter examines the erosion of a set of religious, racial, ethnic, national and class boundaries in East Africa as reflected in the diffusion of Kiswahili, a grassroots lingua franca that continues to spread despite the resistance of westernized elites and cultural nationalists. As Ali and Alamin Mazrui note in the quote above, a growing number of East Africans in the new multiethnic spaces created by the rapid urbanization of the late twentieth century are becoming 'native' Waswahili based on their use of Kiswahili as a first language. This process is most evident in Tanzania, where millions of postcolonial Africans now speak Kiswahili as a first language. As we shall see below, some Tanzanian scholars even believe that the distinctions between Waswahili and non-Waswahili have

been erased completely in Tanzania — even though the core group of Tanzanian ‘Waswahili’ themselves do not seem to accept this total erasure of boundaries.¹

The chapter argues that Kiswahili has facilitated both horizontal and vertical integration by fostering trade and popular-culture links across ethnic boundaries at the grassroots level. The language has facilitated vertical integration, not by eliminating class differences, but by making the socio-economic curve or hierarchy more gradual, rather than abrupt. The diffusion of Kiswahili goes against the grain of the dominant paradigms of globalization, panafricanism and regional integration schemes that seek to impose change from above rather than articulating policy to the reorganization of spatial and temporal relations spreading from below. This reformulation of cultural geographies is creating new linguistic and multiethnic spaces that may foreshadow a dramatic reordering of ethnic, class and state boundaries in East Africa and beyond.

How did Kiswahili become the most widely spoken African language in Africa and the African Diaspora? What is the source of the enthusiasm for Kiswahili in the African world? Why did this language travel from the Indian Ocean coast to the Atlantic coast and across the Atlantic into the African Diaspora in the United States? To answer these questions, we will examine the emergence of Kiswahili in East Africa and trace its evolution from the language of Islam and trade into the language of decolonization and Pan-Africanity. But first, we will examine a controversial question, one which illustrates the relationship between geography from below and the deconstruction of ethnic clichés: who is a Mswahili?

Who is a Mswahili?

The Kiswahili speaking peoples occupy a peculiar position in postcolonial Africa. Numerous groups on the Indian Ocean coast from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique have traditionally referred to themselves as ‘Swahili’. In Kenya, Tanzania and the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a growing number of urban dwellers use Kiswahili as a first language and they too refer to themselves as Waswahili. The self-identification of the latter as Waswahili stands in stark contrast to the appeal to geography, ancestry or religion that characterized Swahili identity in the past. The result of such a ‘detrribalization’ and secularization process is that Kiswahili would be the unifying bond of a broad linguistic community without clear cut ethnic boundaries, not to speak of an ethnic background.

‘In’ and ‘Out’ Groups

Linguistically we can define anyone who speaks Kiswahili as a first language/mother tongue as a Mswahili. This continues to be a minority in eastern Africa. A minority within this minority, the traditional ‘Swahili people’, who have been speaking Kiswahili for generations, constitute the core group of Kiswahili speakers.

The setting of their communities extends approximately from Lamu to Kilwa for a minimalist appreciation, and from Mogadishu to the city of Mozambique for a maximalist one. However, these Kiswahili speakers tend to choose other identification terms than Swahili:

Nowadays, the term 'swahili' is rarely used by those who are the true members of the coastal mercantile society [...]. Instead identification terms derive from their towns and islands (e.g. waAmu, the people of Lamu, waTumbatu, the people of Tumbatu), more limited ethnic terms such as Bajuni or Hadimu, or ones based upon a shared origin myth, such as Shirazi (Horton and Middleton 2000:17).

Within the core group of native speakers, the term Mswahili has residual racial and class connotations. For many within this 'in' group, a Mswahili is a native speaker of the language who is not known to have any (especially paternal) Arab ancestry and who is a member of the historically underprivileged group of Africans — who were formerly slaves of those with Arab ancestry. The social construction of a negative perception derives:

from the need to label those of slave origins living on the coast and increasingly becoming Muslims. These groups of Muslim Africans came [...] to be known as 'Swahili', especially during the British colonial period when the Christian missionaries and colonial administrators drew 'ethnic' maps of Africa, marked boundaries around groups that appeared to have a single language and some kind of named identity, and then incorrectly assumed that these groups were primordial, stable and unchanging. No African societies have been so and the Swahili are no exception (ibid.:16-17).

Islam remains an important accompanying characteristic of mother tongue speakers. Yet, Islam is not a defining characteristic. In East Africa today, there is a substantial population of mother-tongue speakers of Kiswahili that are not Muslim in religious faith.

For many 'out' group individuals in Kenya, i.e. second or third language speakers, a Mswahili is any African who is, at the same time, a Muslim — even those recently converted to Islam. Islam seems to feature less in the 'out' group definition of Mswahili in Tanzania.² Overall, there is a genuine identification with the legacy of Kiswahili in Tanzania's nationhood without the Islamic qualification. Scholars like Fikeni E.M.K. Senkoro or Saidu D. Kiango, for instance, have repeatedly argued that the term Waswahili refers to all Tanzanians, not to an ethnic group. Kiswahili, they insist, is not the language of an ethnic group but the language of Tanzania and of all Tanzanians.

The diffusion of Kiswahili, a Bantu language, has actually led to the emergence of four groups of Kiswahili speakers:

- the core group, the traditional Swahili people who trace their heritage to the Swahili coast, though they may have migrated to other parts of the region;
- a second and larger group that uses Kiswahili as a second or third language but does not self-identify as Swahili;
- a younger postcolonial generation of East Africans who grew up speaking Kiswahili as a first language and are increasingly self-identifying as Swahili;
- and people of African descent in the United States who have adopted Kiswahili as the language of ritual and Pan-African solidarity.

Members of the postcolonial generation of East Africans and Diasporic Africans constitute the future of the language and are the primary focus of this paper. These new Kiswahili speakers are located in towns and cities that stretch from the Indian Ocean in the east to the Atlantic Ocean and the United States in the west, southern Ethiopia and Sudan in the north to Mozambique and Madagascar in the south. They occupy new multiethnic spaces that reflect both the evolution of regional integration at the grassroots level and the re-evaluation of africaness in the Diaspora.

Since the 1970s, Kiswahili has been used in Kwanzaa, an African American harvest celebration designed to reconnect Diaspora blacks with their African roots. Kwanzaa is observed by over 28 million people of African descent in the United States.³ Dozens of African American universities and colleges teach Kiswahili as a second language to black students (Mulokozi 2002:8). According to Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa, Kiswahili was chosen as the most appropriate African language for African Americans because it reflects the syncretic nature of African Americans who claim all of Africa 'rather than one people or place'. Such a borderless claim of Africanity was a 'matter of self-determination', Karenga added. It is this agency that links the adoption of Kiswahili in the Diaspora to the diffusion of Kiswahili on the continent. Postcolonial East and Central Africans have adopted Kiswahili as an act of self-determination. They have adopted the language as an instrument of decolonization, trade and cross-cultural communication in spite of its historical association with slavery and colonialism.

Becoming Waswahili

Who is a Mswahili, then? Since the 1970s, there has been a major East African debate over the meaning of 'Kiswahili' and 'Mswahili'. The debate split Kiswahili scholars into two camps: the 'purists' who insisted that the Waswahili are a distinct ethnic group, and those who claimed that the term 'Mswahili' refers to a language community, not a distinct ethnic group. Scholars who trace their origins to the core group of Kiswahili speakers on the Indian Ocean coast tend to identify with the first category of 'purists'.

Shihabuddin Chiraghdin maintains that the Waswahili are a specific ethnic group. In two major articles titled 'Kiswahili ina Wenyewe' ('Kiswahili has owners') and 'Kiswahili Ubuntu na Ki-Standard Swahili', ('Bantu Kiswahili and Standard Kiswahili'), Chiraghdin (1974a; 1974b) insists that although many groups in the region use the language, it is nevertheless the language of a particular group. Like other 'purists', Chiraghdin claims that 'standard' Kiswahili was a creation of European colonialists and based on an 'underdeveloped' dialect, Unguja, the dialect spoken in Zanzibar. Another purist is Tigiti S.Y. Sengo who deplores the domination of Swahili scholarship by 'foreigners' and what he calls the 'corruption' of the language through de-Islamization and de-coastalization (Sengo 1987).

Among the second group of scholars who consider the Waswahili a linguistic community is Ibrahim Noor Shariff of the University of Dar es Salaam who argued in the early seventies that Swahili identity is based on culture and language use, not ethnic origin. The various Swahili groups, in his pluralistic understanding, include Swahili people of Indian, Arab and even European descent (Shariff 1973). Shariff's definition of Mswahili can be compared to the definition of the term 'Arab' which refers to a linguistic community that includes many 'races' and ethnic groups. This linguistic definition of community can also be seen in Latin America where people of many nationalities and 'races' refer to themselves as Hispanics based on the use of Castilian (Spanish). Thus Shariff defines the Swahili as a diverse community brought together by the use of the language and a shared cultural and political space. His perspective is typical of the nationalists who appropriated the Kiswahili language as a tool of mobilization and resistance during the independence struggle.

A nuanced perspective comes from Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) who argue that Kiswahili is an ecumenical language as opposed to a communalist one. Ecumenical languages, like English, are spoken by people of many nationalities or 'races' while maintaining racial exclusivity. Millions of African Americans speak English as a first language although they are not ethnically or racially 'English'. Communalist languages like Arabic are, in comparison, more inclusive. There are Arabs of many nationalities and colours because Arabism is based on language use and the Islamic religion rather than racial or ethnic origin. Yet it seems that Kiswahili has evolved from an ecumenical to a communalist language. Thus, although the core group of Kiswahili speakers tends to be insular and exclusionary, the growing numbers of first-language speakers of Kiswahili in Kenya, Uganda and the DRC are increasingly self-identifying as Swahili.

Swahili identity, like other African identities, is fluid and assimilative, in comparison to European identities that are race-based and exclusive. The disparate eastern African groups that have adopted Kiswahili as a first language become Swahili in a few generations while the Black citizens of the United Kingdom, who have spoken English as a mother tongue for centuries, cannot become English because Englishness is colour-coded. A Mswahili may simply be defined

today as one of the dozens of millions of Kiswahili speakers in eastern Africa and the Diaspora, among whom are many Christians.

Race, Religion and Patriarchy

Although Islam is a key element within the 'in' group of Waswahili, this religious identity is fractured by the caste implications of race and class. The Arab settlers in Kilwa, Lamu, Mombasa and Zanzibar were slave traders and slave masters who regarded their captives as unfit for the status of Islam. The slave masters nevertheless kept African concubines and considered their male offspring Arabs and Muslims. The female children remained in slavery and were not converted to Islam. Most of the famous Muslim missionaries in the region are not Arabs but former African/Black slaves who appropriated the religion from their unwilling masters.

Postcolonial dynamics have undermined both the racial and class dimensions of Swahili identity but there continues to be a residual racial caste system within the 'in' group that privileges families who trace their ancestry to 'Persian' settlers, the Al-Shirazi. This group of families ruled the region for centuries and maintains its identity through intermarriage. The Al-Shirazi consider themselves 'Persian' even though they are thoroughly integrated with Africans. Their imagined 'Persian' identity stands in contrast to the 'ethnic' identities of the former slaves and the hybrid identities of most Swahili people. The strong identification of the upper caste of Swahilis with Arabs and Persians waned during the immediate postcolonial period but there has been a powerful resurgence associated with the aggressive Islamic proselytization of the last two decades.

Despite this complexity, Swahili cultural studies tend to assign geography a determining role in the emergence of Swahili identity and the Kiswahili language. A closer investigation into this geographic determinism shows that the dominant school of Swahili studies, predominantly located in the West, focuses on the proximity of the Swahili coast to the Arabian Peninsula while marginalizing the actual cultural and geographic affinity of the majority of Kiswahili speakers to the continental mainland.

The case of gender is particularly revealing. During the slavery era, females were brought from the interior to the coast and islands to become the wives and concubines of the slave-trading elite (Eastman 1988). In the early period, the elite group was generally of Arab or Omani origin. The male offspring of these unions, following the ethnicity of their fathers, were thus free, and so adopted an Afro-Arab identity. The females generally remained in slavery although they continued to play the roles of wives, concubines and mothers to the free males. Over time, the paucity of 'pure' Arabs and the demographic predominance of African women led to the complete Africanization of the Swahili elite in complexion, behaviour and culture. As early as 915 AD, the Arab geographer Al

Masud who visited the region noted that the Swahili Muslims of East Africa were ‘very black’ (Nurse and Spear 1985:29).

Even the version of Islam practiced on the Swahili coast was Africanized under the influence of the African women in the upper caste of Swahili society. These women were responsible for introducing various traditions of spirit worship and possession associated with the interior. They also maintained their traditional naming practices, cuisine and dress particularly because only the elite, free Arabized Swahilis could afford the BuiBui (burqa) worn by Muslim women. In addition to this, the Maulidi Festival of Lamu, an annual celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday has no counterpart in the Middle East and is not accepted as an Islamic tradition by Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia.

Unlike other Muslim cultures around the world, Swahili Islam is not based on the adoption of Arabic as the language of worship and instruction. Instead, Kiswahili became the language of proselytization throughout the region. The Swahili elite developed an Arab identity without the Arabic language, which is ironic because both the Arab and Swahili peoples share peculiar language-based identities that transcend boundaries of race, ethnicity and nationality.

The Dynamics of Kiswahili Diffusion in Eastern Africa

Throughout its history, Kiswahili has been a language of trade — a language of contact that allows trade across ethnic boundaries. This vehicular function has been the most effective mode of diffusion for the language. It is also the most spontaneous one, requiring no government, religious or educational encouragement from above. However, the advent of European colonization introduced a new dialectic, which made Kiswahili both the language of colonialism and the language of resistance. The language, therefore, is not value specific. That the language may serve many purposes has been confirmed after independence, with the adoption of dramatically different attitudes towards Kiswahili in Tanzania, Kenya and the Great Lakes region.

The Caravan Trade Routes

The geographic range of Kiswahili today closely follows the old caravan trade routes used by the Nyamwezi, Kamba, Yao and Swahili traders since the tenth century. These trade routes were greatly expanded by the nineteenth century slave and ivory trades. They formed the basis of European penetration into the interior after 1875 with Christian missionaries and colonial administrators setting their posts along the ancient paths. Both the Uganda railway and the modern roads built during and after World War I followed the same routes. The missionaries and colonial administrators depended on Kiswahili-speaking guides. Eventually the missionary schools, often built along the ancient trade routes, became portals for the diffusion of the language. Today, the geographic reach of Kiswahili closely resembles maps of the ancient trade routes.

The early diffusion of the language into the interior was facilitated by the trade in slaves, gold and ivory that flourished in the Indian Ocean perimeter tying East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and India into one economic system. The Swahili were the middlemen of this trade system travelling into the interior of the continent to trade guns, ceramics and textiles for gold, slaves and ivory and delivering these commodities throughout the Indian Ocean region in their sail boats.

Kenyan archaeologist Chapurukha M. Kusimba (1999) shows that the Indian Ocean trade was already well established in the first century AD, when trade between the East Coast, Egypt and Ethiopia was mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.⁴ Archaeological evidence from eighth century sites, which includes cowry shells and pottery, testifies that the coastal region was in trade contact with the interior. By the ninth century, gold, ivory and slaves were being exchanged for cloth, ceramics and guns.

From the eleventh century onwards, trade between the interior, Madagascar and the Middle East increased, with pots, cowry shells, textiles and cereals being exchanged for cattle, honey, gold and ivory (Kusimba and Kusimba 2003). Cereals like rice were also being exported from East Africa to India and China. The twelfth century Arab geographer, Al Idrissi, claimed that Indians preferred East African iron. By 1300, Islam was a major dimension of the East African coastal culture connecting the Swahili peoples to the wider Islamic world. The years between 1300 and 1500 are considered the peak of East African civilization with city-states like Mogadishu, Pate, Lamu, Mombasa and Kilwa serving as cosmopolitan centres on the Indian Ocean rim.

It is this trade system that led to the widespread diffusion of the Kiswahili language and Swahili culture, including Islam, throughout the coastal region of eastern Africa between the seventh and sixteenth centuries. Swahili culture, however, never gave rise to a unified Swahili nation. The decentralization of the various city-states worked against their attempts to resist colonization by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. The Portuguese introduced new and more destructive tactics that included scorched earth policies of burning villages and the enslavement of entire groups. This new colonial power disrupted the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade and led to the decline of the East African civilization.

The Omani Arabs who replaced the Portuguese as colonial powers in the region in 1682 continued this destructive process of violence and the enslavement of entire communities. They established clove plantations and greatly increased the slave trade. By the mid-1800s, about 50,000 Africans were being sold in Zanzibar's notorious slave markets every year. The slave trade was so lucrative that the Sultan of Oman moved his capital to Zanzibar in 1832, establishing a dynasty that would last till 1964.

The sultan's agents penetrated deep into Central Africa, establishing outposts as far inland as Ujiji, on the shore of Lake Tanganyika. Non-Swahili traders

from groups like the Kamba, Mijikenda and Nyamwezi adopted Kiswahili as a language of trade and spread the language deeper into the hinterland. By mid-nineteenth century, when the German, British and other European colonial powers were moving into the region, Kiswahili was already the lingua franca from Mogadishu to Sofala on the north-south axis, and from the Indian Ocean to the Shaba Province in the present-day DRC on the east-west axis.

Colonial Codification and Its Failure

The spread of the Kiswahili language in eastern Africa during the colonial period illustrates the complex relationship between language and power. The missionaries initiated this process by learning Kiswahili and employing Kiswahili-speaking catechists in their proselytization efforts. German missionaries in Tanganyika territory transliterated the Kiswahili language from Arabic to Roman script and produced the first Kiswahili dictionary and grammar (Wright 1965). Codification served two purposes. One was practical: Kiswahili provided a means of communication between the missionaries and Africans. The other was ideological: by writing it down, the missionaries attempted to control the language and the discourse between them and the Africans.

The codification process went through a succession of genres. The earliest manuals were merely parallel lists of words in Kiswahili, several other African languages, and their English, Belgian or German translations. Such lists reflected the functional needs of geographic expeditions and military campaigns. The consolidation of colonialism in the twentieth century led to a shift, from descriptive appropriation to prescriptive imposition. Missionary educational systems and colonial administrations became established, and the purpose of Christian indoctrination in schools and churches was to create a subservient labour force for the colonial government. The missionaries were critical instruments of colonial hegemony. They constituted the propaganda brigades of the colonial government, charged with indoctrinating Africans through schools, churches and hospitals. Indoctrination was an important ideological component of the colonization process. As a 1924 report of the Ministry of Education in the Tanganyika Territory put it: 'the school is the centre of all government propaganda work'.

Colonial language policies in East Africa tended to change dramatically depending on time and space. In the British-controlled regions, the Europeans had very different ideas about the use of Kiswahili depending on whether they were administrators, settlers or missionaries. The settlers in Kenya strongly opposed the teaching of English to the Africans because they wanted to use language as a means of maintaining social distance. They insisted on using Kiswahili in dealings with Africans even in cases where the Africans were more proficient in English. In contrast to the settlers, the colonial administration felt the need to teach Africans rudimentary English because they needed literate workers to

maintain records in the schools, courts, police stations and other government offices. The Germans in Tanganyika were more consistent in their conviction that Africans must not be allowed to acquire European languages. As a result, the Germans promoted Kiswahili use as the language of administration more aggressively than the British.

Thus, European colonization de-coupled the language from its erstwhile association with Islam and Arabism. At the same time, the indirect rule system of colonialism established by the British elevated the Arabic-speaking Swahili minority a notch above the African Kiswahili speakers: the colonial ideology of racism re-inscribed the Arab identities of the elite Swahili families. This policy led to a reduction in the number of core Kiswahili speakers in the region because Swahili identity was associated with ex-slave status.⁵ Ironically, the use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca was expanding just as the core-Swahili identity was shrinking.

In addition to the emphasis on Kiswahili in colonial schools, churches and administrations, the language was adopted as a lingua franca in urban areas that became new multiethnic spaces during the colonial period. Rural-urban migrations were driven by the seizure of Africans' land by colonial settlers, the imposition of taxes and the emergence of a money-economy that forced former subsistence farmers to seek cash incomes. This new form of remuneration was available in the growing urban areas where the colonialists needed cheap labour in their homes, service industries and mines. One major challenge that faced the colonialists and the migrants, however, was the hundreds of languages that East Africans spoke. Kiswahili, a local language closely related to the Bantu languages spoken in the region, became the language of choice in the urban areas.

The case of Shaba Swahili, sometimes called Kingwana or Congolese Copperbelt Swahili,⁶ epitomizes this process. Kiswahili reached the Congo with Arab trade caravans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the colonial period, thousands of workers from present-day Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda migrated to the region to work in the copper mines. New multiethnic spaces emerged in mining communities (now cities) like Lubumbashi, Likasi and Kolwezi. Kiswahili was chosen as the solution to the linguistic diversity of the workers in the region, giving rise to Copperbelt Kiswahili, which was heavily influenced by local languages including Kiluba-Shankadi, Ciluba-Kasai, Kisanga, Kibemba and Kihemba.

In his study of Belgian attempts to regulate the introduction of Kiswahili in the Shaba province, Johannes Fabian (1990) argues that the manuals and vocabularies put out by the colonial government codified a language spoken by no one; not the Africans, who instead spoke a wide variety of context-specific versions of Kiswahili, and not even the whites, who quickly discarded the rules and vocabulary of the textbooks for individualized pidgins. The manuals themselves were not consistent. Some presented crude pidgins that allowed colonialists to shout orders at Africans while others presented a purified and

rationalized Kiswahili that was equally alien to Africans. Thus, the colonial attempts to control and domesticate Kiswahili through codification were a comical failure.

By 1910, Kiswahili had established itself as the lingua franca in the Katanga region. The Belgian colonizers gave it official recognition partly in an attempt to differentiate the region from the British territories in the south. Attempts to create language manuals to teach incoming Europeans resulted in varieties of Kiswahili ranging from the crude pidgins of the early years to complicated and improved forms of the 1930s.

This experience of the Belgians demonstrates that language is extremely difficult to control. Whatever the writers of the language manuals thought they were doing, they failed to impose their version of Kiswahili even on the white settlers.

Decolonizing the Language

After independence, Tanzania aggressively promoted Kiswahili as the language of national unity and the vehicle for its Ujamaa (self-determination) policies. Kenya also adopted Kiswahili as a co-national language along with English, but the government was much more ambivalent. Uganda is still a different case: while this country has never implemented a formal language policy that includes Kiswahili, the military regime of the 1970s used it as the language of command and the current government led by Yoweri Museveni also promotes the use of Kiswahili at every level. Beyond these policy differences, however, Kiswahili continues to spread in the region. Even in Uganda, where the language is associated with the military, Kiswahili's role as the lingua franca of the masses remains unchallenged. Indeed, the language has expanded its geographic reach into Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC, where it has become the language of the political elite in Kinshasa over the last decade. In the following pages, we examine the role of Kiswahili as the lingua franca of the masses and the ways in which this has forced postcolonial politicians and administrators in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda to use it as the language of mobilization despite their preference for English as the language of prestige and education.

Kiswahili in Tanzania

The selection of Kiswahili as the national language in Tanzania and Kenya was unique on the African continent (Mazrui and Mazrui 1999). Yet, rather than being visionary, this selection was merely realistic because Kiswahili was already the lingua franca in the region. What was visionary was the decision by TANU⁷ (later Chama cha Mapinduzi) to articulate Kiswahili to Ujamaa, the innovative policy of socialism for self-reliance articulated in the Arusha Declaration of January 1967 (Nyerere 1968:231-50). The link between language and self-reliance was to prove critical for the hegemony of both Ujamaa and Kiswahili in the

postcolonial history of Tanzania (Pratt 1976). Here, we have a clear connection between language policy and the development of an indigenous African knowledge system that sought to 'decolonize the minds' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986) of Tanzanians while delinking the country's political economy from the clutches of neo-colonialism.

The policy of Ujamaa enlisted the power of culture to advance the cause of liberation from neo-colonial economic structures. This holistic strategy of both cultural and economic liberation was discussed elsewhere under the rubric of 'national culture' but only implemented in Tanzania. While other countries like Kenya, Uganda and the Congo focused on the promotion of symbols of national culture such as flags, national dresses and patriotic songs, Tanzania's program of self-reliance actually plunged into the difficult process of building a 'national culture' and promoting a new way of life through the use of an African language.

Among the most successful of Tanzania's language programs, was the promotion of Kiswahili as the language of literature and popular culture. Tanzania has developed a vibrant indigenous literature and literary community that is unique on the African continent. This literary culture tapped into the centuries-old tradition of dialogic verse in the African communities of East Africa and built it into a national treasure. The poetic tradition of Mashairi, for instance, was appropriated by the anti-colonial forces and honed to perfection as a tool of decolonization. It was also used to promote Ujamaa after 1967 but had, by then, taken on a life of its own and become a dialogue between the poet and the politician. Thus, the poetic tradition mobilized to promote self-reliance became the conscience of the movement. In a tradition forged by the test of time, critics of Ujamaa programs turned to Mashairi to express the perspectives of the targets of government policies from above.

The major Kiswahili language newspapers publish local poetry in each issue. As early as 1967, a study found that the poetry was one of the major reasons for their popularity, with themes ranging from politics and moral or philosophical commentaries to observations of daily life (Condon 1967). The study showed that the level of awareness of the policies and meaning of Ujamaa was very high in the popular poetry published in the Kiswahili newspapers (ibid.:350-54). Poems are also read and sung on the radio and used in schools as a teaching tool.

According to Jan Blommaert, the attempt to control literature from above was ambiguous and contradictory (Blommaert 1997:5). Many Tanzanian intellectuals were committed to the radical course of Ujamaa and involved in nation building but were also critical of the implementation of the programs. Some of these intellectuals became a major source of annoyance to party officials. At the same time, however, the ideals of Ujamaa and African socialism struck a chord in the non-elite popular culture. The charismatic Julius Nyerere was himself a master in Kiswahili,⁸ and this skill has facilitated his communication with the populace.

Despite the limited success of Ujamaa in delinking Tanzania's economy from neo-colonial structures, the country's attempt to decolonize its culture and construct a new way of life based on indigenous African knowledge systems was much more successful than other Kiswahili speaking countries in the region. Its language for self-reliance program was also much more successful in forging national unity and horizontal integration across ethnic groups compared to Kenya, Uganda and the DRC. Tanzania has managed to avoid the ethnic frictions that have marred the independence era in the other three major Kiswahili speaking countries, even though it continues to face religion-based challenges in its federation with the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba.

Kiswahili in Kenya

In contrast with Tanzania, Kenya's elite is firmly Anglophone. Leaders tend to deride indigenous traditions and institutions and openly flaunt western lifestyles. Since the colonial period, Kiswahili in Kenya has remained a second-class language, used in the informal economy and to give orders to subordinates. The British settlers even developed a childish pidgin derisively called 'KiSettla' with a limited vocabulary and syntax that they used to communicate with Africans. They insisted on using KiSettla to maintain social/racial distance even when the Africans they were addressing were educated and spoke better English.

The British also tried to control the evolution of Kiswahili by codifying 'Standard Swahili', a process that stunted the growth of the language by favouring certain dialects and overlooking others (Marshad 1993). Even more disturbing is the intellectual insecurity of indigenous Kiswahili scholars who have been forced to defer to so-called 'experts' of the Kiswahili language from Europe and the United States. Thus, we find Kenyan scholars of Kiswahili language refusing to use authentic Kiswahili words because they do not appear in the Johnson Dictionary — a standard dictionary published in 1939 by the Inter-Territorial Language Committee of the East African Dependencies under the direction of its Secretary, Mr. Frederick Johnson.

The colonial intervention in the structural development of Kiswahili in Kenya was contradictory, episodic and self-serving. Language policy was adjusted frequently according to circumstances. The use of Kiswahili as the language of instruction in schools was not motivated by a need for mass literacy, but by the administration's need for literate workers in district offices, police stations and the military. The missionaries also adopted Kiswahili because they found a language already rich in religious lexicon and the settlers used it, as already mentioned, to keep Africans at a distance. Kiswahili seemed like a natural choice for the colonialists until they realized that the Africans were using it as an instrument of multiethnic mobilization against colonial rule. Determined to deny the Africans this tool of integration and resistance, the British reversed their language policies and introduced English as a mandatory language in schools.

Kiswahili became the language of multiethnic mobilization during the independence movement. Politicians, songwriters and journalists chose it as the medium of nationalism. After independence, however, the leadership embraced English in all spheres of Kenyan life. The expected social, political and linguistic changes relevant to the African heritage and environment never materialized. Instead, the independence era politicians adopted the parallel development schemes of the colonialists. They promoted English as the language of the educated elite and Kiswahili as the language of the masses, the result being that most Kenyans understand and speak Kiswahili but only the privileged speak English.

The position of the elite is that Kenya has been forced by circumstances to hold onto its colonial linguistic heritage because English is the language of technology, international trade, diplomacy and education. Thus, English is the language of instruction in schools with Kiswahili being taught as a subject. After decades of the promotion of English in Kenya, there is incontrovertible proof that students have been severely handicapped by the misguided choice of English as the medium of instruction. Millions of Kiswahili-speaking Kenyans have also been denied meaningful participation in the affairs of the state because of this linguistic barrier. They are forced to obey laws they cannot understand, sign documents they cannot decipher and live on streets with names they cannot pronounce.

The ambivalence displayed by Kenyan leaders in the promotion of Kiswahili has been a source of concern for nationalists. Although Kiswahili is spoken by over ninety per cent of the population and has been the national language since 1975, the political leadership has shown a profound ambivalence in its language policies. It is because of pressures from below that an English-speaking elite has been forced to learn and promote Kiswahili as the language of national integration.

At independence, the government of the late president Jomo Kenyatta strongly endorsed Kiswahili on both political and ideological grounds. Mzee Kenyatta's Kiswahili was superb. He gave most of his speeches outside the capital in Kiswahili. As a rhetorical device, his Kiswahili was more developed than his English (Mazrui and Mazrui 1999:205). Other politicians in Kenya followed suit. Kiswahili was, and remains today, a necessary requirement if one seeks national political office in Kenya. Yet the promotion of Kiswahili in Kenya was not motivated by egalitarianism as in Tanzania. Kenya promoted Kiswahili as a tool of horizontal integration and political expediency. The gap that English continues to create between the elite and the masses was acceptable to a regime that sought to develop a competitive African entrepreneurial class. Kiswahili was seen only as an instrument of 'political penetration and socio-economic intercourse at the grassroots level' (Ibid.:206).

Nevertheless, the Constitution of Kenya requires that members of parliament be bilingual in Kiswahili and English. This requirement did not increase the

number of non-English speakers in parliament, but it did strengthen Kiswahili by excluding those who only spoke English. In 1985, the Moi government made Kiswahili a compulsory examinable subject in the country's primary and secondary schools. This linguistic policy has strengthened Kiswahili's position in the nation and is likely to promote both vertical and horizontal integration.

Kiswahili in the Great Lakes Region

Kiswahili is widely understood and spoken in Uganda especially among Muslims in major urban centres. Its status is complicated, however, by religious (Christian-Muslim) and regional (north-south) conflicts, the latter having both ethnic and religious connotations. Kiswahili ran into resistance from the Baganda, the dominant ethnic group in Uganda, shortly after its introduction by the missionaries. Kabaka Daudi Chwa, the King of the southern kingdom of Buganda, declared:

It is quite unnecessary to adopt the Ki-Swahili language as the Official Native Language in Buganda, and I am entirely opposed to any arrangements which would in any way facilitate the ultimate adoption of this language in place of, or at the expense of, their own language (quoted in Whiteley 1969:70).

The Baganda have been resisting Kiswahili because it was the language of the northern dominated army during the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods. The resistance of the Baganda is also based on nineteenth century power struggles when Christians lost power to Kiswahili-speaking Muslims. For many Ugandans, Kiswahili was the language of the military and police.

There also remains a gender divide in Uganda where the majority of Kiswahili speakers are males because of their role in the colonial and postcolonial military structures. Kiswahili was the lingua franca of the King's African Rifles, an African army led by European officers that the British used to maintain their hegemony in the region (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:16). During the postcolonial period, Kiswahili has continued to be associated with the military in countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In postcolonial Uganda, the military government of the 1970s gave Kiswahili a national status and expanded its use in administration, schools and the mass media. The remarkable relationship of the language to the Ugandan military continues today with its adoption as the official language of the National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni.

Kiswahili became increasingly important in the NRA not only because many of the soldiers already had a command of the language, but also because of the secret participation of fighters from the Rwanda Patriotic Front, an Anglo-phone and Kiswahili-speaking army which is now the ruling party in Rwanda. The role of Kiswahili in the realignment of military and political power in the region is further underlined by its adoption as the language of command in the

multiethnic army of former president Laurent D. Kabila and eventually one of the official languages in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Recent events in the DRC have seen a dramatic remapping of language in the region. The defeat of the Mobutu regime in 1998 by easterly opposition forces brought the language to the west and elevated it to a national status once enjoyed by Lingala. Kiswahili is now the language of the military and political administration. The current and former presidents of the DRC and their closest advisors are more comfortable with Kiswahili than either Lingala or French. Even the new currency in the DRC is issued in Kiswahili, French and Lingala.

The strengthening of political and military ties in the Great Lakes region has influenced the linguistic remapping process. These ties have brought political and military advisers and business relations with countries like Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda increasing the influence of Kiswahili speakers in the DRC. Thus, by historical accident, Kiswahili has played a prominent role in the current realignment of political forces in the region and the undermining of political boundaries inherited from the colonial period.

The Number Issue

The remarkable counter-penetration of Kiswahili in an era of globalization dominated by European languages is an unlikely story that has largely slipped below the radar of social scientists, in both Africa and the West. This ignorance is all the more stunning when one considers the number of people speaking Kiswahili.

Most studies of the language tend to underestimate the number of Kiswahili speakers. It was suggested in the 1980s that native speakers were about 5 million (Holm 1989) but none of the major studies of Kiswahili identity (Eastman 1971; Nurse and Spear 1985; Middleton 1992; Allen 1993; Caplan 1997; Mazrui and Mazrui 1999) gives any estimate of the total number of Kiswahili speakers. While this may be due to the fact that Swahili identity is always in a state of flux, the consensus in the West seems to be that there are no more than 50 million Kiswahili speakers worldwide. This figure is outdated because it does not take into account population movements since the 1970s. Kiswahili scholars in Dar es Salaam argue that Kiswahili speakers are 'about 80-100 million' (Mulokozi 2002:6). A re-examination of census data and secondary sources shows that the figure is actually closer to 120 million:

- Polome (1967) claimed that over 90 per cent of Tanzanians were competent speakers of Kiswahili. In mid-2003, Tanzania's population was estimated at 35.4 million.⁹ This means about 31.9 million Kiswahili speakers in Tanzania alone.
- Assuming that the same percentage applies in Kenya, a country with an estimated population of 31.6 million in 2003, there would be about 28.4 million Kenyan speakers of Kiswahili.

- In Uganda, it was suggested about three decades ago that 35 percent of the population could hold a conversation in Kiswahili (Ladefoged et al. 1972:35). If Uganda's population is now about 25.3 million, then we are talking about an estimated 8.9 million Kiswahili speakers in this country.
- Regarding the DRC, Mazrui and Mazrui (1999:15-16) note what follows: 'as independence approached, a quarter of the population [...] could speak Kiswahili at one level or another. Thirty years later the proportion is nearer a third of the population'. If the population in 2003 is 56.6 million, Kiswahili speakers in the DRC are about 18.8 million.

These four countries alone — Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and the DRC — are thus host to about 88 million Kiswahili speakers. If we add at least another 30 million Kiswahili speakers (my estimate) in countries like Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros, Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique and Malawi, the total number of Kiswahili speakers increases to 118 million.

Most of the figures used in this rough survey are from the 1960s and 70s. Given the fact that the last two decades have seen massive population displacements and repatriation — especially from Tanzania and Kenya to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC — the population of Kiswahili speakers has continued to grow. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, over one million Rwandans and Burundians spent decades in Tanzania and Kenya before being repatriated in the 1990s (UNHCR 2000). With another million refugees from countries like Ethiopia and Sudan, the total number comes to at least 120 million Kiswahili speakers in eastern Africa.

Add to this the growing numbers of Kiswahili speakers in the United States. As will now be seen, the spread of the language to the African Diaspora raises new and interesting questions about the nature of Africanity and its contributions to global culture in an era of globalization.

Return to the Source: The Language of Pan-Africanism

During the 1960s, the African Diaspora was rejuvenated by what Ronald Walters calls the 'new' or 'modern' Pan-Africanist movements (Walters 1993). Walters argues that the independence of African countries led to a re-evaluation of blackness in the United States. African American youth began to explore their cultural heritage in Africa and to adopt a Black/Pan-African identity.

This new generation was influenced by the African Consciousness of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. Malcolm X had visited many independent African states, became the first African American to address an OAU Summit at Cairo in July 1964. He called on Africans to take on the African American cause at the United Nations and told Black Americans to join Africans in their fight for freedom. By 1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers had become anti-imperialist and

Third Worldist. Stokely Carmichael, for instance, emphasized the African dimension of the SNCC and defined the Black Power movement as a part of the Pan-African struggle for liberation. Bob Moses attended OAU meetings in 1965 and 1966. Cleveland Sellers also attended OAU meetings and was invited to organize the Dar es Salaam Pan-African Congress of 1974.

In this last part of our chapter, we will assess the role played by Kiswahili in the African American quest for an African identity.

'Bigger than Tanzania'

In the academic arena, the turn to Black Power led to a confrontation with liberal white-led organizations like the African Studies Association (ASA). In 1969 Black activists, scholars and students disrupted sessions at the ASA convention to underscore their demand for proper representation on the association's board. The group also wanted the ASA to take a more public and radical stand on apartheid and the situation in Southern Africa. When the ASA rejected their demands, the Black Africanists formed a separate organization called the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSAs). Led by John Henrik Clarke, the AHSAs adopted a radical, anti-apartheid and pro-armed struggle position from the outset. Africans and African Americans were re-establishing radical ties that had been severed by anti-communism in the United States. The theories and activities of African revolutionaries like Julius Nyerere, Amílcar Cabral, Agostino Neto, Nelson Mandela and Eduardo Mondlane heavily influenced African American activists (Walters 1993).

In September 1970 Imamu Amiri Baraka convened the Congress of African Peoples (CAP) which he linked to the long tradition of Pan-African congresses going back to the London conference of 1900 (Baraka 1972). He was one of the new black nationalists who were redefining Black identity in the Diaspora. As one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, Baraka was a product of the 1970s Black Nationalism when playwrights, novelists, songwriters and artists reflected the rediscovery of Africa and their radical political critique.

The Congress of African Peoples was an expression of this Pan-African sensibility in the Diaspora. It included a remarkably diverse group of African American radicals, liberals and nationalists. Among the speakers were Guinea's Ambassador to the United Nations El Hajj Abdoulaye Toure, Whitney Young, Louis Farrakhan, Julian Bond, Mayor Richard Hatcher of Gary, Breadbasket's Rev. Jesse Jackson, Imari Omatere from the Republic of New Africa, Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Kenneth Gibson newly elected mayor of Newark.

The theme of the congress was 'Unity Without Uniformity' bringing together activists and legislators of disparate ideological orientations. The participants were divided into eleven workshops discussing technology, economics, education,

communications and politics. An 'ideological statement' adopted by the delegates on 6 September asserted that 'all black people are Africans', and that 'as Africans, we are bound together Racially, Historically, Culturally, Politically and Emotionally'. The statement focused on the need to develop a program to ensure unified action in the Pan-African world. To achieve this unity the ideological statement outlined the 'Four Ends of Black Power':

- (1) self-determination and the development of alternative political and economic institutions;
- (2) self-sufficiency through cooperative economics (UJAMAA);
- (3) self-respect by building a global revolutionary culture;
- (4) and acceptance of the need for self-defence (Baraka 1972:vii).

Thus, the CAP manifested a new kind of Diasporic Pan-Africanism that was nationalist rather than the traditional liberal/reformist posture that had been adopted by the Pan-African Congresses organized by Du Bois. As Baraka indicated in his introduction to the proceedings, the coordinating committee of CAP wanted to move beyond the 'radical' perspectives influenced by Marxism. Its search for an 'African perspective' was heavily influenced by Julius Nyerere's theory of Ujamaa, a form of cooperative economics based on the tradition of collective ownership and work patterns of some African ethnic groups.

According to Charles E. Cobb Jr, many of those who had been involved in the southern civil rights movement were running out of ideas in the late 1960s. The white establishment in the United States had co-opted movement leaders and marginalized the more radical spokesmen. Meanwhile, African countries were forging ahead with decolonization and experimenting with exciting ideas about racial equality, human rights and economic development. Within this rubric of African thought, it was Julius Nyerere's ideas about Ujamaa and Pan-Africanism that most influenced African American activists (Cobb 2001). Although there were ideas and processes specific to Tanzania underway, it was Nyerere's commitment to Pan-African liberation movements, the Africanness of Tanzania, that reached out to African Americans. Nyerere's ideas about African socialism and education for self-reliance (Nyerere 1968:267-90) deeply influenced the new generation of African American activists. As Cobb puts it:

Self reliance, a term that reached many of us via President Nyerere's important writings on Education for Self Reliance, seemed bigger than Tanzania. And relevant to my neighborhood, too. Ujamaa seemed more than a Swahili phrase defining rural cooperative efforts in Tanzania. These two terms, 'ujamaa' and 'self reliance', became for a time part of the African American political lexicon (Cobb 2001).

Scores of African American activists travelled to Tanzania where they found a highly politicized nation that hosted several Pan-African liberation movements, opponents of neocolonial African regimes and progressive intellectuals.

Kiswahili and the Kwanzaa Movement

It is no surprise that African American activists chose Kiswahili as the language of contact with Africa. Kiswahili was chosen for Kwanzaa celebrations, says Maulana Karenga (1997:1), in an attempt to 'create, recreate and circulate African culture as an aid to building community, enriching black consciousness, and reaffirming the value of cultural grounding for life and struggle'. At the heart of the Kwanzaa celebrations of community and cultural heritage, are seven principles based on Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's philosophy of *Ujamaa*. These seven principles, or *Nguzo Saba*, are taught and discussed in Kiswahili. They are: *Umoja* (unity), *Kujichagulia* (self-determination), *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *Nia* (purpose), *Kuumba* (creativity) and *Imani* (faith). In addition to the seven principles, the Kwanzaa celebrations include several symbols for each principle and the use of Kiswahili for greeting and rituals during the celebration.

Kwanzaa is based on a creative cultural synthesis of continental African and African Diasporic cultures. The continental African elements are syncretic in that they are a synthesis of various cultural values and practices from different African peoples across the continent. The choice of first-fruits celebrations was based on the fact that such celebrations were prevalent throughout Africa and thus had a Pan-African character. These celebrations were also relevant to building community, family and culture because of their common aspects of ingathering and recommitment. Finally and most importantly for our purposes Kwanzaa is based on 'self-conscious commitment to tradition and reason' (Karenga 1997:13). Karenga stresses that the selection of Kiswahili, a 'non-tribal' and 'non-ethnic' Pan-African language, for Kwanzaa celebrations, rituals and naming practices is a matter of self-determination (Ibid.:123). This self-conscious selection of Kiswahili is rooted in a critical reason that enables Kwanzaa adherents to shape their future in conjunction with the most progressive trends on the African continent.

Kwanzaa emerged in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s. It reflected a desire among African Americans to resolve the crisis of 'double consciousness' by maintaining their identity as Africans. As Amilcar Cabral once put it, in a different context though, it is only through a spiritual and physical 'return to the source' that Africans in the Diaspora can build an 'identity with dignity in the context of national liberation' (Cabral 1973). This dignified identity is what Du Bois was referring to when he wrote that he wanted to merge his 'double self into a better and truer self' (Du Bois 1903). Du Bois

managed to build this dignified identity through Pan-Africanism and the commitment to the liberation of all people of African descent whether in the Diaspora or on the continent. The Kwanzaa celebrations and the adoption of Kiswahili as the language of Pan-African identity have taken this self-reflective and symbolic 'return to the source' one step farther (Warren 1990; Temu 1992). Kwanzaa has reconnected African Americans with both the past and the future of African cultural landscapes.

More recently, Kiswahili has been adopted in the commemoration of the 'Maafa' (Kiswahili for mass killing, destruction), an annual reflection on the impact of the slave trade on global Africa. Maafa ceremonies include music, plays and the placement of monuments in the Atlantic Ocean in memory of the lives lost during the Middle Passage. This association of Kiswahili with Africanity and its role as the carrier of memory and identity is among the most fascinating of the language's functions in the African world. The enthusiasm for Kiswahili reflects a need for Pan-African solidarity, a desire for reconnection with the homeland and with other people of African descent. In addition to its adoption as the language of ritual, Kiswahili has become the second language of choice in Black, Pan-African and Africana Studies programs throughout the United States. Over 37 universities in the United States are offering Kiswahili as a subject at both undergraduate and graduate level.

This interest in Kiswahili in the Diaspora has gone full circle with Kiswahili speakers in East Africa expressing intense interest in the study of Kiswahili in the Diaspora. At a recent Swahili cultural festival in Lamu, for instance, a renowned Kiswahili scholar and poet Sheikh Ahmed Nabhani warned that the centre for learning Kiswahili was shifting from East Africa to the Diaspora. 'If we are not careful, we might end up sending our own children to study Kiswahili in the US', Sheikh Nabhani warned.¹⁰ This transcontinental dialogue over the language marks a new stage in the evolution of Kiswahili into the language of Africanity.

Conclusion

In its formative stages, Kiswahili was the language of the Swahili people and East African Islam. This close identification with Islam soon waned, however, as Kiswahili became the language of trade and cross-cultural communication. The postcolonial governments of Kenya and Tanzania made Kiswahili an official language because it was widely spoken and understood in the region. From the outset, therefore, a geography from below has undermined colonial or postcolonial boundaries. In both Kenya and Tanzania, there were national elites who resisted the adoption of Kiswahili for a variety of class and nativist reasons. However, the language was useful on a day-to-day basis and its usefulness transcended its historical baggage as the language of the slave raider and the colonial administrator.

Since independence, the governments of Kenya and Tanzania have continued to use Kiswahili as the language of administration and political discourse. In some respects, therefore, the language continues to be implicated in the circuits of power. At the same time, however, it continues to be used by rebels in the Great Lakes region as a language of multiethnic mobilization. We argued in this chapter that the language is not value specific. Its standardization and use in the educational system has forged a national identity and contributed to political stability in Tanzania, a country that boasts 140 languages. In Kenya, Kiswahili is the language of government, commerce and popular culture.

The role of Kiswahili as the language of inter-ethnic trade and employment has been the most spontaneous of its historical functions because it depends on little formal education and government policy (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998:172). This economic role is closely related to the role of Kiswahili as the language of migrant workers and urban dwellers in the region. In the mineral-rich Shaba Province of the DRC, for instance, Kiswahili was adopted as the practical solution to the multiethnic spaces created by the establishment of mining towns.

Kiswahili has helped the horizontal integration of disparate ethnic groups at the grassroots level. This is a trend that is likely to continue in the years to come. The diffusion of Kiswahili across all sorts of boundaries is facilitated by transnational (often-illegal) trade and migrations. Rural-urban migrations and the massive refugee migrations of the 1970s and 1980s have made Kiswahili speakers of millions of urban dwellers and former refugees in Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia who spent decades in Kenya and Tanzania before returning home in the 1990s.

The rapid diffusion of Kiswahili from below is most evident in the multiethnic spaces created by the urbanization of the last few decades. The first generations of urbanized East Africans learned Kiswahili as a second language, as the language of work and multiethnic communication. Many of their children, however, were born in the cities and grew up speaking Kiswahili as their first language. Thus, a new postcolonial generation in the urban areas has been Swahilized. Islam and Arabism no longer circumscribe this new Swahili identity (Mazrui and Shariff 1994). Instead, we have a Swahili identity that goes beyond the boundaries of religion and geographic location. It is an identity based on a complex foundation of amalgamated traditional and popular cultures that is rapidly constructing a new language-based polity in the eastern African region.

Kiswahili evolved from the language of slavery and colonialism to the language of Pan-Africanism, migration and postcolonial national liberation movements. Kiswahili has continued to spread during the postcolonial period reaching the Atlantic coast of the DRC and across the ocean into the African American and African immigrant communities of the United States. In July 2004, the African Union's Council of Ministers endorsed Kiswahili as one of the official languages of the AU.

The uniquely African phenomenon of Kiswahili diffusion challenges common assumptions about the sources of social change. It interrupts the neat linear progression from pre-colonial to colonial to postcolonial posited by Western temporal theory. The diffusion of Kiswahili in East Africa, the Great Lakes region and the African Diaspora demonstrates the limitations of state-centred theories of identity and Africanity. The fact that ordinary East Africans have continued to adopt the language despite the emphasis on English in schools, businesses and government exposes the alienation of the westernized, English-speaking elites in contrast to the dynamic cultural evolution of the majority of the population.

Both Kenya and Uganda have emphasized the use of English in schools and government service while Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC have emphasized French. Even Tanzania, which promoted Kiswahili as the language of popular culture, education and government in the 1970s, continues to use English as the language of instruction in higher education (Roy-Campbell 2001:10-13). Yet Kiswahili has continued to spread because of its utility as a vehicular language — a language of trade and cross-cultural communication across ethnic, national and class boundaries for millions of people.

This parallel cultural evolution has profound social, economic and political consequences for postcolonial East African society. It suggests that social scientists and development agencies need to reconnect with the grassroots in an effort to understand how and why the culture of the ordinary East African has evolved at variance with the policies of postcolonial African governments and their international sponsors. The widespread adoption of Kiswahili at the grassroots level suggests that cultural processes are at least as important as political and economic factors in undermining colonial boundaries. The emergence of a new regional language community that transcends state and ethnic boundaries, calls for a renewing of research perspectives that could potentially transform scholarship in Africa and beyond.

Notes

1. The term Kiswahili refers to the language while Mswahili (singular) and Waswahili (plural) refer to the people.
2. Personal interview with Alamin Mazrui, 6 June 2000.
3. See www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org
4. The *Periplus* is a shipping guide written by a Greek merchant based in Alexandria (Vincent 1998).
5. Adriaan Prins (1961), for instance, argued that by the 1930s Swahili had become a euphemism for former slave, causing census figures in Kenya to plunge from 34,000 in the 1920s to 2,000 in 1931.

6. *Shaba* means copper in Kiswahili.
7. Tanganyika African National Union.
8. He translated two of Shakespeare's plays, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, into Kiswahili (Mazrui 1996).
9. All population numbers in this section are taken from the *World Population Data Sheet 2003* of the Population Reference Bureau (2003:5).
10. *Daily Nation* [Nairobi], 8 November 2001.

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