# THE SWAHILIZATION OF KENYA'S
# SOCIO – POLITICAL CULTURE[1]

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Although it has spread mainly as a lingua franca, Kiswahili, Kenya's national language, is increasingly becoming the language of intercultural communication. Most interestingly, Kiswahili is catching up as the medium of intra-group conversation in many rural up-country areas in Kenya. Not only do most Kenyan women wear *lesos* and *kangas* bearing Kiswahili proverbial sayings but the youth form different language communication almost invariably converse and interact through the medium of share or just Kiswahili.

This brief paper sets out to speculate on the nature of Swahili lexical diffusion in up-country Kenya. Observation is made of the plorification of common Swahili names in both urban and rural areas far from the Swahili speaking coast. The paper argues that given the ever-growing tendency for non-Swahili speaking Kenyan up-country communities to adopt and use Swahili names represents a forum of intercultural communication. There seems to be a deliberate socio-cultural and political preference for Swahili names not just to denote borrowed Swahili concepts in the up-country communities but to forge a 'nationalistic' culture as opposed to a localized and ethnic culture.

The above assertion invalidates the conventional reasons given by socio-linguists to account for the spread of languages in society (Mmalavi 1977:64 – 82; Wardhaugh (1990). These reasons include trade, travel, evangelism, exploration, pilgrimage, education, administration, migration, political, labour or war-inspired movement or re-location intermarriage and media influence.

In Kenya the use of Kiswahili has been growing and expanding steadily and the areas using this language for ordinary and in formal communication have increased significantly …. far from the traditional Coastal home of the language. (Mlacha 1995). Examples of some of the commonly used Kenyan Swahili names is provided here below:

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**The data**

**1. Place names**

**Kitale:**

*Bondeni*

*Milimanai Shauri Moyo*

*Machinjoni*

*Pangani*

*Majengo*

*Kambimiwa*

*Kiungani*

*Laini Memba* (Members Estate Line)

*Pombo*

*Ghorofani*

**Baringo:**

*Kambi ya Moto*

*Maji Mazuri*

*Landi Mawe Landi Baridi*

*Kambi Samaki*

*Shauri Yako*

**Nairobi:**

*Maringo Madaraka*

*Umoja*

*Bahati*

*Marikiti*

*Fedha*

*Makuti Park*

*Soko Mjinga*

*Ufunguo*

*Akiba*

*Shauri moyo*

*Pumwani (Pumwani)*

*Laini Saba*

*Jogoo Road*

*Peponi*

*Imara Daima*

*Baba Ndogo*

*Biashara*

*Starehe*

*Uhuru*

**2. Other common Up-Country place names**

*Maji Matamu*

*Kona Mbili Kona Mbaya*

*Kilimani*

*(Kambi* Compounds)

*Kambi Lindi*

*Kambi Mawe*

*Kambi Nuru*

*Pangani Magarini*

*Makutano*

*Kula Mawe*

*Umoja,*

*Madaraka*

*Makadara*

*Mlolongo*

*Kivumbini*

*Majengo*

*Daraja Mbili*

**3. Swahili – English compounds: Names of office buildings**

*Kilimo House*

*Afya House*

*Utumishi House*

*Magereza House*

*Ulinzi House*

*Jogoo House*

*Herufi House*

*Nyayo House*

*Rehema House*

*Kilimo House*

*Ufanisi House*

*Uchumi House*

*Utalii House*

*Hazina House*

*Ushirika House*

Similar names are used for most co-operative societies in various government ministries.

## 4. Diffusion of Swahili Cultural Materials and Practices

**Foods**

*chai*

*chapati*

*sukuma wiki*

*nyanya*

*mchele*

*sukari*

*kahawa sukari*

*nyama choma*

*majani – chai*

*kitumbua*

*mkate*

*mandazi n.k*

**Dress**

*nguo*

*koti*

*bangili*

*mshipi*

*shati*

*suruali*

*rinda*

*kiatu*

*kamisi*

*kitambaa*

*fulana*

**Household Goods**

*meza*

*bakuli*

*kikombe*

*sahani*

*taa*

*kioo*

*umma*

*kijiko*

Although it may be argued that these Swahili words got into up-country languages because they represent borrowed Swahili culture, the fact is that in many cases, the words represent concepts already existing in these languages prior to the diffusion of Swahili culture into up-country Kenya.

## 5. Political organizations

*Safina*

*Shirikisho*

*Muungano wa Mageuzi*

*Ford Asili*

*Sabasaba*

## 6. Commercial Organisations

*Mashariki Motors*                    *Rehema Investiments*
*Juhudi Studios*                      *Baraka Auctioneers*
*Bidii Studios*

Many other commercial institutions and organizations bear names compounded with words like

*Uhuru*                               *Wananchi*
*Kwetu*                               *Furaha*
*Maisha*                              *Jamaa*
*Amani*                               *Nyumbani*

## 7. Other common institutions names

### Schools:
*Bidii*                               *Amani*
*Busara*                              *Upendo*
*Baraka*                              *etc.*

### Sports Clubs:
*Umeme*                               *Stima*
*Ulinzi*                              *Utalii*
*Magereza*

### Titles of Journals:

A number of academic and general publications in form of journals in many varied disciplines have been deliberately given Kiswahili names. This, again, is a pointer to the emerging tendency to Swahilize the national communication culture. Here are some examples:

*Umma* (a journal of Literature at University of Dar es Salaam and Nairobi).
*Chemchemi* (a Faculty of Arts Journal, Kenyatta University)
*Utafiti* (an American Black Studies Journal)
*Baragumu* (a Maseno University Journal for Social Sciences)
*Mwamko* (a UON student journal)
*Taaluma* (a CHAKITA mooted journal).
Titles such as Kioo cha Lugha, Mulika and Kiswahili, have already become a household name in East Africa.

## 8. Swahili influence on the political culture

As noted above, a number of mainstreams political parties bear Kiswahili names. This is a pointer to the fact that Kiswahili is the language that best ensures inter- and intra- societal

communication. For instance, even parties with English names still select Kiswahili party symbols such as *taa, simba, jogoo, tinga tinga* etc. Naturally party mottos are also in Kiswahili:

**National mottos**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Harambee* | *Nyayo* |

**Other mottos: Utumishi kwa Wote**

| | |
|---|---|
| *DP. Ukweli na Haki* | *SDP Mwanzo Mpya* |

**Clandestine movements**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mwakenya (> Mwana – Kenya)* | *Pambana* |

**Lobby groups**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mvumo (the roar)* | *Ufungamano (unity)* |
| *Muungano wa Mageuzi (unity for change)* | |

## 9. Professions

**Compounds with 'fundi', eg. fundi gari**

| | |
|---|---|
| *fundi cherahani (mshoni)* | *fundi mngungu (mghanga)* |
| *fundi bao (seremala)* | *fundi viatu (cobbler)* |
| *fundi mawe (mwashi)* | *fundi rangi (painter)* |

**Compounds with 'mama', eg. mama maziwa**

These names refer to lady traders e.g.

| | |
|---|---|
| *mama maziwa* | *mama matumbo* |
| *mama mboga* | *mama sukuma* |
| *mama mayai* | *mama mahindi* |

**Common names of trades (Commercial / industrial)**

| | |
|---|---|
| *jua – kali* | Inclusive of all manner of trades – small entrepreneur; new meaning: informal sector |
| *mitumba* | inclusive of not just used clothes but also used cars, machinery, electronics, shoes etc. In fact any second rate or ideas is referred to as *mtumba* |
| *manamba / makanga* | touts, brokers, street urchins etc |

## 10. Swahili-derived personal names up-country

Swahili personal names abound in many parts of rural Kenya. Here are a few examples:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mwalimu* | *Dereva* |
| *Karani* | *Baraza* |

*mtafta* (corruption of Swahili *mtafsiri* – court interpreter)

*mnyapala* (corruption of foreman)

**11. Brand names of common products**

Many household products have been given and continue to receive Kiswahili names.
Examples:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Imara Kama Simba* | *Simba* |
| *Ushindi* | *Mamba* |
| *Jamaa / Jamii* | *Buni* |
| *Uji Tayari* | *Shujaa* |
| *Kifaru* | *Mara Moja* |
| *Ndovu* | *Baada Ya Kazi* |

**Language Prejudice Theory**

In most cultures of the world, language is revered emotionally valued and defended. This is because language is believed to have a divine origin and an invincible power to control and shape human thought and behaviour. The famous anthropologist and linguist, Bronislan Malinowski stated that, "words are used to control events and become sources of power when chanted over and over." This observation means that words have intrinsic power to shape social reality (Belsy 1980; Fromkin & Rodman 1983; Lodge 1997).

Three kinds of social knowledge are expressed through language according to Hudson (1993). These are:

(1)    Cultural knowledge – handed down through generation (traditional)

(2)    Shared non-cultural knowledge – shared by people within the same community or geographical area but not inherited.

(3)    Non-shared non-cultural knowledge – unique to an individual.

The examples of Swahili concepts discussed above represent the second category of knowledge. However, these names are unique only in the sense that they are to be found in far – thing non-Swahili speaking communities. Otherwise the naming system represents a shared socio-linguistic and cultural view.

One can therefore argue that giving Swahili names to places, buildings, organizations or institutions in contemporary Kenya represents a form of linguistic creativity rather than a conventional practice. However, these names bear certain actual or connotative semantic properties. This kind of meaning implies that the names communicate, an external or additional meaning apart from being a proper name referring to a definite place or item.

Naming is a form of coding whose meaning it involves the encoding and decoding of language symbols in form of a 'name' or 'names' which, when decoded, symbolize or signify a desired social message.

The spread of the socio-linguistic awareness and appreciation of Kiswahili language in up country Kenya should be seen in the context of what Fishman (1964: 32) expressed as an interest in language maintenance and language shift. It is an aspect of acculturation, which relates to social interrelationship and interaction between language use on one hand and psychological, social and cultural changes on the other. Language development and cultural change go hand in hand.

People use language in order to locate themselves in a multi-dimensional socio-cultural space. The labels or signals people use form an important way of communicating information about who they are or would like to be. Correspondingly, the general public may draw conclusions about the users' characteristics and place in society (Hudson 1993: 195; Grabbe 1970).

In this sense, therefore, names maybe regarded as socio-cultural labels used by the society to 'advertise' its identity. With regard to Kenya's multilingual and multi-cultural situation, the preference for Kiswahili names may be taken to symbolize Kenyans' natural choice and acceptance of the language as their national or trans-cultural medium.

The fact that the Swahili address names have been fully localized and domesticated means that some form of cultural and linguistic assimilation has taken place. It also signifies a situation in which there is little if any, socio-cultural competition or power-struggle between Kiswahili and the local up-country languages (Chiraghdin & Mnyampala 1977). This is attested to by the absence of local alternatives to the adopted Swahili names.

## Conclusion

The Swahilization of up-country names in Kenya should be seen in terms of what Soyinka (1990: xii) has described as the effort of Africans by to elicit from their world view and social structures a self-fulfilling and defining philosophy (cf also Potter 1966). It is the beginning of a prescriptive validation of an African self-apprehension at the national or regional level. Names give both form and moral force to people, places and society. Naming is not just labeling of existing or new concepts but a dynamic way of making phenomenon intelligible.

The naming system reflects a form of social realism in that the names are constructed out of what is familiar, relevant and desired.

Being so far physically from the Swahili Coast, the creation and use of Swahili names by up-country language groups conveys and symbolizes their embrace of nationalist values and attitudes. The trend represents the entrenchment of multicultural and multilingual situation which recognises the role of a Kiswahili, for translingual. The language choice expressed in the naming process underlies the preferred and expressed socio-political and cultural identity of the communities concerned.

In brief, one may state that:

(1) Swahili lexicon forms a significance percentage of everyday vocabularies in up-country languages.

(2) The fact that these Swahili loans have become adopted into the borrowing languages, and in cases, replaced native lexicon means that Swahili cultural concepts have, to some extent taken root in these language communities.

This phenomenon definitely underlies a dynamic intercultural and cross-cultural communication. It marks a step in the formulation of a unique Kenyan pluralistic national culture expressed in a common national language, Kiswahili

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