

KISWAHILI NAMING OF THE DAYS OF THE WEEK: WHAT WENT WRONG?

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1. Introduction

Zawawi (1971:46), in her brief remarks on the days of the week in Kiswahili, has the following:

In Swahili the days of the week are named according to the order in which they follow Friday, the day of prayer.

She, however, immediately notes this to result in Kiswahili week calendar containing two "fifth days", the first of which is **Jumatano** (the fifth day from Friday) and the second, **Alhamisi** (an Arabic loan meaning 'fifth day' and a day immediately preceding Friday). Zawawi considers this second "fifth day" (i.e. **Alhamisi**) to "indicate the religious connotations that accompany the day preceding Friday, the congregational day". This is not elaborated

These remarks contain two issues which are of interest to us in this paper. The first of these is the issue of the day from which the counting of the days of the week calendar starts; and the second is the linguistic significance of what is seemingly a mislocated borrowed form (i.e. **Alhamisi**) in the Kiswahili week calendar. The first issue has had an impact on many languages in East Africa today, all of which start counting the days of the week after the day of prayer/rest which is either Friday, Saturday or Sunday. This has, clearly, created some disarray in respect of reference to the days of the week even within one language community, especially, when the interaction involves members of different faiths that observe the above-mentioned days of prayer/rest. In the area I come from in Tarime district, Tanzania, it is common to hear references such as "your second day", etc. in a discourse between members of different faiths to indicate the problem concerning the issue being raised here. Very often, as a measure to bring about harmony in counting, speakers appeal to Kiswahili calendar. This puts this calendar in the spotlight. On the second issue, **Alhamisi** (the day preceding Friday) is, in Arabic/Islamic calendar, known to be, simply, the fifth day void of any religious connotations. And in that calendar, the day following Friday is the seventh day (= **As-Sabit**). This being the case, there are two matters for us to consider. The first is that of the association of **Alhamisi** with religious connotations and if that is only specific to Kiswahili language (community); and the second is if the borrowing of **Alhamisi** is linguistically well motivated even for that purpose. For both these matters, we shall be comparing the Kiswahili calendar with that of its neighbours to determine what we think is a discrepancy, especially, with the Kiswahili borrowing of **Alhamisi**.

We shall discuss the issues above and others in this paper as follows. In the following section we shall, briefly, consider the basis of the formulation of some week calendars. This will

be followed by the consideration of the week calendars of a number of languages in East Africa. Lastly, we shall focus specifically on the Kiswahili week calendar; comparing it with the others and drawing our conclusions.

2. Week calendars

Week calendars in Africa seem to have been influenced by two week calendar systems, namely, the (northern) European and the Middle Eastern. These two week calendar systems apparently differ on the basis upon which they are formulated. The European system, for example, is, according to Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (unabridged, second edition, 1979), shown to have the days of the week named after certain members of the Solar system which are mythologically associated with deities. Thus, Sunday (the first of the week) is "the day of the sun", Monday (the 2nd day), "the day of the moon", Tuesday (the 3rd day), "the day of Tiw (northern Mars)", Wednesday (the 4th day), "the day of Woden or Odin (a supreme deity)", Thursday (the 5th day), "the day of Thor (the god of thunder, war, strength; son of Odin)", Friday (the 6th day), "the day of Venus (a goddess; wife of Odin)" and Saturday (the 7th day), "the day of Saturn (goddess of agriculture)". The Middle Eastern week calendar system, on the other hand, is, by and large, numeral. The numbering appears uninterrupted in the Hebrew/Jewish calendar in which the day of prayer/rest is the Sabbath (= the 7th day). However, in the Arabic/Islamic calendar, the sixth day, which is the day of prayer, is provided a non-numeral reference *Aj-Jumaa'* (= the day of congregation). The day following it is, as we had indicated above, the seventh day, *As-Sabit*. A full Arabic/Islamic calendar, therefore, stands as follows: *Al-Ahid* (the 1st day), *Al-Ithniin* (the 2nd day), *Ath-Thalaatha* (the 3rd day), *Al-Arbaa'* (the 4th day), *Al-Khamiis* (the 5th day), *Aj-Jumaa'* (the day of congregation) and *As-Sabit* (the 7th day). In both these Middle Eastern calendars, there are no indications of the special status of the day preceding the day of prayer/rest. The idea of starting to count after the day of prayer/rest may, however, be attributed to the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Now, while Kiswahili only partially borrowed from the Arabic/Islamic calendar above, its main West African counterpart, Hausa, fully borrowed from that system. A semblance of the European week calendar system is also attested in Akan and Ewe calendars. In Ewe, for example, (in similarity with Akan), the days of the week have been named after deities as follows: *Kwasida* (Sunday), *Dzoda* (Monday), *Brada* (Tuesday), *Kuda* (Wednesday), *Yawoda* (Thursday), *Fida* (Friday) and *Memleda* (Saturday) where *da* is Akan for 'day' and the preceding forms names of deities. This shows the week calendars in the West African languages cited to be more straightforward in that they are either a direct borrowing or deploy some consistent notion in naming the days. The situation with the East African languages to be considered below appears to be different. These show consistency only with regard to the issues raised above i.e. the day for starting to count and special labels for the day of prayer/rest and the day preceding it. However, while the former issue depends on which one among the three such days as noted above, the notions associated with the latter issue appear to vary

somewhat. We intend to examine these latter to determine their linguistic significance and how they compare with the Kiswahili borrowed form, **Alhamisi**.

3. Some week calendars in East Africa

As has already been indicated, our purpose in this section is to examine week calendars of a few East African languages in respect of the issues raised above. We believe that the samples to be considered fairly represent the situation relating to week calendars in the region. We will be considering week calendars in six East African languages, namely, Amharic (in Ethiopia), Luo (northern Tanzania and south-western Kenya), Kihacha (northern Tanzania), Kinyakyusa (south-western Tanzania), Kihaya (north-western Tanzania) and Kingwana (eastern Zaire). We note generally that week calendars in all these languages, by and large, deploy the numeral system as the Middle Eastern calendars. Secondly, with the exception of Kihacha, all the calendars have a special label for the day of worship/rest and, for the good majority, the day preceding it. Of all these calendars, the Amharic one looks more complex for having two days of worship, namely, Saturday and Sunday. We will, therefore, start by discussing it first.

Amharic, which is geographically much closer to the Middle Eastern languages referred to in the preceding section, has its week calendar standing as follows: **Ihud** (Sunday), **Sanno** (Monday), **Maksanno** (Tuesday), **Irabu'** (Wednesday), **Hamus** (Thursday), **Arb** (Friday) and **Kidame** (Saturday). Of these days, only **Irabu'** (Wednesday) is, probably, closer to the number 'four' (= *irat*) in this language. However, this **Irabu'** and the other two days in the calendar, namely, **Hamus** (Thursday) and **Ihud** (Sunday) also, clearly, show relationships to **Al-Arbaa'**, **Al-Khamiis** and **Al-Ahid**, respectively, of the Middle Eastern calendars although the latter two have nothing to do with the numbers 'five' and 'one' in Amharic. So, here we are witnessing a partial borrowing from the Hebrew/Jewish calendar. Another distinct aspect of this calendar is that both Saturday and Sunday are days of worship as has already been mentioned above. The name **Kidame** (Saturday) is, clearly, indicative of the day of worship that comes first ahead (*kidame* = in front; cf. Arabic *qaddam*) of the other. Given this, and considering its position vis-a-vis **Irabu'** (the 4th day), the borrowed form **Ihud** (Sunday) which, although also a day of prayer/rest, is, indeed, the first day of the week in spite of its non-direct linkage with the number 'one' in Amharic. So, the notion of starting to count after the day of prayer/rest is still attested in this calendar and thus comparable to the others in the region.

Of the remaining languages, those having a fixed day of prayer/rest are Kihaya, Kingwana and Kinyakyusa. That day is Sunday¹, and is labelled **Olubinika** (=Dominika) (or **Eilimansi** (=Dimanche) in areas first arrived at by French Missionaries), **Siku ya Mungu** (**Siku ya Jenga**) and **Unndungu**, respectively, in these languages. Thus, the week calendars in these languages stand as follows:

¹ These have been provided by informants who are Christians. It is possible members of other faiths have their own counting systems.

Day	Kihaya	Kingwana	Kinyakyusa
Sunday	<i>Olubirika</i>	<i>Siku ya Mungu</i>	<i>Unndungu</i>
Monday	<i>Otwokubanza</i>	<i>Siku ya Kwanza</i>	<i>Ikilembela</i>
Tuesday	<i>Otwakabili</i>	<i>Siku ya Pili</i>	<i>Ikibili</i>
Wed'day	<i>Otwakashatu</i>	<i>Siku ya Tatu</i>	<i>Kitatu</i>
Thursday	<i>Otwakanai</i>	<i>Siku ya Ine</i>	<i>Ikinna</i>
Friday	<i>Otwakatanu</i>	<i>Siku ya Tano</i>	<i>Ikihano</i>
Saturday	<i>Otwamukagai</i>	<i>Siku ya Posho</i>	<i>Umpyagilo</i>

In these calendars, while Kihaya borrowed the name for Sunday, the day of prayer/rest, from Latin (and French), in the other languages that day is given names indicating it is God's day. Secondly, while counting after the day of prayer/rest in Kihaya is uninterrupted, in the other languages, the day preceding that day is given special labels. These are *Siku ya Posho* (= day of (distributing) the portion, i.e. day for receiving a share of meal or pay) in Kingwana and *Umpyagilo* (=day of sweeping/cleaning) in Kinyakyusa. These are the forms which, in our judgement, are linguistically well motivated, as they refer to some specific function or activity associated with the day. Of these, the former indicates a socio-economic function while the latter implies preparation for the following day of prayer/rest.

In Kihacha and Luo, we encounter situations which are a bit fluid. Kihacha, whose speakers are surrounded by Muslims who observe Friday as well as by Christians who observe both Saturday and Sunday as days of prayer/rest, uses numeral labels for days of the week. However, since this language has no special label for the day of prayer/rest, its counting is left open to accommodate the interests of members of any of religious groups around. So, a day's numeral label (e.g. *Urwakamwi* (the 1st day), *Urwakabiri* (the 2nd), *Urwakatatu* (the 3rd), etc.) will depend on who one is talking to and the knowledge of his or her faith. This amounts to having no fixed week calendar. It is quite common, therefore, for Kihacha speakers to refer to Kiswahili calendar. Luo, on the other hand, refers to the day of prayer/rest as *Odira* (from *diro* 'to throw', associated with the notion of waiting (for a catch) after throwing/laying bait). Those observing Sunday as a day of prayer/rest often label it as *Odira maduong'* (=big day of prayer rest). Saturday, the day of prayer/rest for minority Seventh Day Adventists, is also labelled *Odira* (or *Odira Matin* (=small one) by neighbours of other Christian faiths). So, after anyone of these days counting starts and proceeds as follows: *Wuok/Chak Tich* (the day of starting work), *Tich Ariyo* (the 2nd day (of working)), *Tich Adek* (the 3rd day), *Tich Ang'wen* (the 4th day), *Tich Abich* (the 5th day) and *Nyongesa* (from Kiswahili *nyongeza* i.e. an additional or extra (day)). Thus, here too, as it is the case with Kingwana and Kinyakyusa above, the day preceding the day of prayer/rest has a special label bearing yet another notion - that of being 'extra' (for preparations).

4. Kiswahili week calendar

As has already been mentioned above, the Kiswahili week calendar has Friday as its fixed day of prayer/rest and the day after which counting of the week calendar starts. The name for Friday, *Ijumaa*, as well as the name of the day preceding it, *Alhamisi*, are, as has been indicated, borrowed from Arabic/Islamic calendar. And like the Arabic/Islamic calendar,

Kiswahili also deploys the numeral system in labelling all the days of the week except Friday. This led to this calendar containing two 'fifth' days as had been pointed out above. We note also that in spite of its borrowing of the names **Alhamisi** and **Ijumaa** as well as the numeral system of labelling the other days of the week, Kiswahili has had its own interesting innovations. The most important of these is its deployment of the borrowed form *juma* (Arabic for 'week') which it combines with the words for numbers to produce names of the first to the fifth day. This has no similarity in any language in the region including its dialect, Kingwana. The form *juma* seems to give a sense of coherency to the week calendar probably in a much better way than *siku* 'day' in Kingwana which sounds rather "isolative". Furthermore, Kiswahili's start of counting after Friday, is a marked departure from the Middle Eastern calendar system save for the notion of "starting to count after the day of prayer/rest" which we associated with the Hebrew/Jewish calendar. This notion has, as we have noted above, been very critical in the formulation of week calendars in many languages in the region. However, in spite of all these, Kiswahili's borrowing of **Alhamisi** remains questionable both socio-culturally and linguistically. As for the former, we have the following to say. Had we been certain that this borrowing, indeed, bears some religious connotations as claimed above, then we would have hailed it as another Kiswahili innovation since it would have marked a break from Islamic traditions which, as we generally know, provide no special status for the day preceding the day of prayer. Again, as a numeral reference, **Alhamisi** also fails to capture any socio-cultural notions closer to those associated with the days preceding days of prayer/rest such as in Kingwana and Kinyakyusa. The closest it could come is, probably, to Luo's **Nyongesa**, that is to say, as an "extra fifth day".

Finally, we are aware that linguistically, a word which has been accepted in the language by speakers is legitimate irrespective of the manner in which it has been coined or adopted. However, the issue at stake here is not so much that of acceptability or legitimacy but rather of options that are open to Kiswahili or any language for that matter, in obtaining lexical forms with sound opacity and logic. In our opinion, in the absence of some critical religious notion associable with the day preceding the day of prayer, an uninterrupted numeral labelling system such as that in Kihaya and in a number of other East African languages could have been a viable option to Kiswahili naming of its sixth day of the week. But most important to us is that the use of two forms with the same meaning in a single context seems to contradict usages of the same nature in Kiswahili itself. For example, in a number of, especially, its poetic texts, Kiswahili users have been known to deploy both the local and the borrowed forms of a word with the latter intended mainly to provide a structural support and not necessarily a new meaning. Such usages appear in the following examples in a poem cited by Chiraghdin and Mnyampala (1971:13) showing the alignment of the local and the borrowed forms: "... *nyingi kathiri*", "*Thaniya mara ya pili*...", "... *usiku laili*", etc. In the first of these examples, both forms mean "many", while in the second, both *thaniya* and *mara ya pili* mean "second"; and both words in the last example mean "night". Our assumption here is that no extra meaning is introduced by the borrowed form except, probably, emphasis. Now, although occurring in a different context, the alignment of **Jumatano** and **Alhamisi** in a week calendar is susceptible to such an interpretation. If this is the case, the sixth day of the week in Kiswahili calendar would not have been properly accounted for. This, in our opinion, implies something is wrong

with the borrowing of *Alhamisi* to name the sixth day of the Kiswahili week calendar. It needs to be noted the Kiswahili week calendar system is distinct from this language's system of counting *mwongo/miongo* which are ten day units counted continuously and used for locating or planning various seasonal communal activities.

References

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