

## **SPEAKING SWAHILI, BEING SWAHILI? SOME REFLECTIONS ON A SHIFTING FIELD OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY**

PAT CAPLAN

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This paper is an epistemological and reflexive account of half a century of research on the Waswahili through the medium of Kiswahili. The first section asks who ‘we’ (scholars) think ‘they’ (subjects of research) are, showing how claims to Swahili identity vary according to historical, geographical and political contexts. It also points out the dangers of orientalism and exoticism and advocates the acknowledgement of the potential for local people to be fellow intellectuals. The second section discusses who ‘they’ (subjects of research) consider themselves to be and how the claiming of Swahili identity has shifted, again according to historical and geographical contexts. In the third section there is a consideration of who ‘they’ think ‘we’ scholars are, since the success of research depends a great deal on how local people perceive us, including by race, gender and education. Importantly, such success also depends on a number of credentials including fluent Kiswahili, knowledge of Islam and familiarity through multiple visits. The final section discusses who we researchers think we ourselves are, the purpose of our research and for whom we write about it. This raises questions around the ethics of research – taking and giving back data and acknowledging that the creation of knowledge is very much a joint venture between locals and researchers.

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### **Introduction: What This Paper is About**

The theme for the 2014 conference for which this paper was originally written was ‘New Dynamics in Swahili Studies’ but the emphasis here will be rather a taking stock of what Swahili studies had been up to that date and the raising of some critical questions or caveats. I see this exercise as important because we scholars of Swahili need to learn from the past in order to go forward. Furthermore, in my own case, I am at a time of life when I ask myself what I have been doing for the last half century and why, and who has benefitted, if at all, so I hope I can be forgiven for using largely instances of my encounters with the Swahili language and its speakers.

As my readers will be well aware, ‘Swahili Studies’ is an area of changing fields and perceptions<sup>1</sup>. Just a brief list of a few of the factors at play currently include:

- Geographical widening by scholars of what is understood as the Swahili coast to include not only Tanzania and its islands and Kenya, but also Somalia and Mozambique, the Comoros and even Madagascar
- The increasing movement in the last few decades of inland peoples to the coast
- The expanding use of Swahili in inland areas of East and Central Africa (e.g. Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda)
- The spread of Swahili speakers all over the world, especially to the USA, UK, and

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve tried to grapple with some of these in Caplan 2014a.

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the Gulf states

- A new Islamisation and ‘re-Arabisation’ of the Swahili language and the Swahili people themselves

On Mafia, the site of most of my research, there are numerous development projects which I am sure could be echoed in other areas:

- a) The existence of East Africa’s first Marine National Park
- b) The creation of a large prawn farm owned by a multinational company which has closed off part of the creeks to local fishermen
- c) Explorations for gas and oil
- d) The enlargement of the airfield to take bigger planes to bring in more tourists
- e) The enlargement of the harbour

I wonder what effects such developments will have and who will benefit as well as how they will affect identity and language.

This paper, then, seeks to give a personal and reflexive account of research over half a century on the Waswahili via the medium of Kiswahili. It involves consideration not only of the construction of knowledge but also of the object or objects of knowledge; it also brings in the question of the representation of others, and finally the need for reflexivity<sup>2</sup>, which means asking some of the kind of questions I’ll be posing in this paper, namely

- Who do ‘we’ think ‘they’ are?
- Who do ‘they’ think they are?
- Who do ‘they’ think we are?
- Who do ‘we’ think we are?<sup>3</sup>

Such questions follow on from those first raised by Clifford and Marcus (1986) as a part of the ‘postmodern’ turn in which authorial authority is unpacked, and the power relations between the researcher and the researched become more visible.

### **Who Do ‘We’ Think ‘They’ Are?**

To begin to answer this question we need it to be further deconstructed. Who is this ‘we’? At first sight it is simple – ‘we’ are scholars of Swahili Studies, however defined, and whether of foreign or local origin, white or brown. Who ‘they’ – the Waswahili – are is of course an old question,

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<sup>2</sup> Davies (1999), in a book on reflexive ethnography, defines reflexivity as “a turning back on oneself, a process of self reference” (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> I have used inverted commas here to indicate that these categories are problematic, but will not continue to do so in the rest of the piece, as they are discussed and interrogated there.

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often re-visited since the 1971 article by Eastman and continued by many scholars – historians, anthropologists and others – both local and foreign.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years the question of Swahili identity has become highly politicised, much debated by scholars of local origin, as will be seen. It is all a far cry from the simplicity of Prins who wrote in 1961: “This is a book about Arabs who have settled in Africa, together with Africanized Persians and coastal Africans. Because they share a common habitat, a common language and many common ways of life, to which all have contributed, it is possible to deal with them all in one study” (p. ix). He goes on to subdivide the Swahili-speaking population of the coast into Arabs (including what he terms ‘self-styled Arabs’), Shirazi and Swahili (p. 11).

Today, as the conference organisers have pointed out, there is little point in confining Swahili Studies to a narrowly-defined geographical entity. Rather, we scholars are increasingly realising that Swahili identity is fluid and shifting, dependent on historical, geographical and political factors. Does ‘Swahili’ include the Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique and Somalia? Certainly in the regular Anglo-French (now European), Swahili workshops in which I have been involved for many years, these countries are increasingly represented. The website ‘Swahiliweb’ includes documents from the Comoros, as well as the East Coast and islands. What about the Gulf, where there is a large Swahili-speaking population (see Valeri 2007), the Congo or Rwanda? And the Swahili diaspora living all over the world? Furthermore, the Swahili coast and its people are now also seen as part of the Indian Ocean littoral, an entity which has received increasing attention from scholars of many disciplines in recent years.

This fluidity means that we have to consider carefully our responsibilities as scholars in relation to the representation of our unit of study. Indeed, we need to discuss the very construction of that unit, which is implicit in our research and our writing, and of course in our holding of workshops. Which Kiswahili, which Waswahili, when and where? In representations of the Waswahili, their language and culture, we foreign scholars need also to beware of the dangers of ‘Orientalism’ (Said 1978, Carrier 1992) and a tendency to exoticise the coast and see its people as very different from those of the interior (Caplan 2007). But we also need to be careful in ‘giving voice’ on behalf of others.

Implicit in the relationships between scholars and their subjects of research there is sometimes an underlying assumption that we researchers are the intellectuals, equipped with high levels of education and disciplinary tools for investigating Swahili language and culture. Yet, as Steven Feierman (1990) has shown elsewhere in Tanzania, local people lacking formal education may well

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Allen 1993, Arens 1975, Chiragdion 1974, Horton & Middleton 2000, Kusimba 1999, LeGuenec-Coppens & Caplan 1981, Mazrui & Shariff 1994, Mazrui & Mazrui 1995, McIntosh 2005, Nurse & Spear 1985, Parkin 1972, 1989, 1994, Salim 1986.

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also be intellectuals in the sense of being critical thinkers, interrogating their own societies' norms and values. This is certainly what I have found in getting to know the Waswahili over almost half a century.

### **Who Do 'They' Think They Are?**

Since I first encountered the Swahili language in 1960 and the Swahili people and their culture two years later when I visited East Africa in 1962, there have been sweeping changes in the language and its place in East Africa and more widely, a topic to which I return below. Similarly, there have been enormous changes in the geographical areas of the original Swahili homeland. To some extent, these are reflected in the politics of identity and claims to or rejection of the label 'Swahili'. But identity, as has often been pointed out by social scientists, is rarely singular – people operate with multiple identities which shift according to context. Hence today people may say 'I am a Swahili and ... a Muslim, a Tanzanian, a Kenyan' or they may emphasise more localised ethnicities. On Mafia Island for example, they may claim to be Wapokomo or Wambwera.

During my first period of fieldwork on Mafia Island between 1965 and 1967, it was rare to hear people claiming a Swahili identity. Rather, it was seen as a residual category for people who had no other identity, perhaps because they were the descendants of slaves. When I first wrote about Mafia (Caplan 1975), I described the local hierarchy: those who claimed Arab status (Waarabu), 'free-born' (waungwana – in the case of northern Mafia they termed themselves Wapokomo and Wambwera), and people of ex-slave status. In this respect, my findings were similar to those of Prins who had worked much further north and wrote of the term 'Swahili': "in an actual social context anywhere on the coast or in the islands [...] its usage provokes protest [because] the term seems to imply... a number of characteristics of negative value such as slave descent, lack of pedigree, low occupation positions and a general "boorish" uncivilized behaviour and outlook on life" (1961: 11).

But subsequently, the claiming of a Swahili identity has become much more common and is widespread on the coast, including by those whom Parkin (1994) has called 'intermediary Swahili' such as Wagiriama, Wasejegu and others; some of these have become Muslim and 'Swahili-ised'. A Swahili identity is also claimed by locals in opposition to up-country people who have not only settled on the coast, but who make up the majority of the government officials, teachers and health professionals posted there. It is nowadays common, certainly on Mafia, to hear remarks about the dangers posed to Swahili culture by such incomers, most of whom are Christians. Such fears are also frequently expressed in terms of tourism. During my last visit in 2010, a projected international dance festival to be held on Mafia and attended by several thousand foreigners raised fierce debates in which 'Swahili culture' – an umbrella term which obviously meant different things to different

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people – was invoked in opposition to a very different Western youth culture which was thought to permit, even encourage, drug-taking, fornication and homosexuality (see Caplan 2011).

Being Swahili is also about being an African, not an ‘immigrant’. In the debates of 1999 and 2000 between Henry Gates, Ali Mazrui and Wole Soyinka about who can claim African status, as well as in some of the writings of Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui, the term Swahili has been reclaimed by people who a generation or so before might have vaunted their ‘Arab’ lineage. They seek to demonstrate that they are ‘real’ Africans, not just immigrants, although paradoxically, many of them actually live and work in the USA (see Caplan 2007).

Yet at the local level on Mafia, I have found that, while the old hierarchy of Arabs, free-born and descendants of slaves was rejected during the period of ujamaa in Tanzania in favour of a more egalitarian, citizenship-based identity, the pendulum has recently swung again with the rise of a politicised Islam, so that many self-identified Swahili seek to associate their culture, in certain contexts, with things Arab (see for example my comparison of two weddings on Mafia – one in the 1960s and the other in the new millennium, Caplan 2015).

### **Who Do They Think We Are?**

As an anthropologist, I would argue that the fruits of research depend very much on who you are or rather how people perceive you. For example, being viewed as a local is very different than being viewed as a foreigner, no matter how hospitably received (see Keshodkar 2004). In my own case, I arrived for my first visit to coastal Tanzania in 1962 during the immediate post-colonial period, when being an Mzungu was an even more privileged status than it is today. Nonetheless, I was seen by people on Mafia as being very young (I was actually twenty three) and this was intensified by my lack of husband or children. It was only when I went back again for the second time in 1976, this time a respectable wife and mother, that people explained that in many ways, I had previously been considered a child, and as a result there were certain issues they could not discuss with me (Caplan 1993).

Being a female researcher working on the coast, furthermore, has always had both advantages and disadvantages, as a number of scholars have pointed out (Larsen 2004, Fuglesang 1994), while being a male researcher has its inevitable limitations in a sexually segregated society (Swartz 1991, Kresse 2007, Porter 1998), although it may also mean greater access to the mosque and to male mabaraza than female scholars could obtain. What’s important here is that we recognise that such ascribed statuses do have an important effect on our fieldwork, but unfortunately many scholars either ignore these factors completely, or make only a token gesture (as in ‘I couldn’t interview women because this is a Muslim society’).

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There are also other achieved statuses which depend on the scholar's credentials, of which I would identify three in particular. The first is the kind of Swahili you speak, to whom and in what circumstances, and at what historical moment in time. The second is the length of time one studies a particular area and the third is knowledge of Islam. I'll draw briefly on my own experience to illustrate these.

In the early 1960s I studied Swahili and Anthropology at SOAS (London's School of Oriental and African Studies). We were taught Kiunguja ('Kiswahili safi') by two very different Swahili teachers: Lyndon Harries and Wilfred Whiteley. Harries' main interest was literature (Harries 1962), on which he had written classic books, yet most of the literature we read was not written in Kiunguja but in northern coastal dialects which were rather different. Whiteley was interested in the contemporary development of the language and was seconded to the University of Dar es Salaam to assist in that regard. This was the period in Tanzania of the rise of Swahili as a national language (Whiteley 1969), part of the nation-building project, and was supported not only by the efforts of scholars like Whiteley and Shaaban Roberts, but also by the government led by Julius Nyerere.

Before I arrived on Mafia in 1965 to carry out my research for a Ph.D. I had been told 'you speak good Swahili' – 'safi kabisa'. Yet once I got there, I realised matters were far from being so simple. While people did not really understand my interest in social matters, they were determined to improve my Swahili. My early notebooks were soon filled with vocabulary lists of the parts of coconut trees and of boats. I soon learned that there was a form of Swahili called 'ndani kwa ndani' found in songs, riddles, and jokes. This often made use of double-entendre, so knowledge of the context – the social situation which had produced it – was important for full understanding.

Further, in northern Mafia there was a dialect of Kiswahili later described by the Tanzanian linguist Ahmad Kipacha in his Ph.D. thesis (2004) which he termed 'Kingome'. This tended to be spoken more often by women than men, and more by older than younger women. I did eventually learn to follow Kingome, but never to speak it well. Then there was yet another language I encountered in northern Mafia, that of the spirits, with its own vocabulary. This esoteric language was not even well understood by many local people, and shamans when possessed would need someone to interpret their words. Small wonder then, that when the BBC employed someone from its Swahili service to transcribe the film material shot on Mafia in 1976 for their TV series *Face Values*, he confessed himself defeated, and the job was given over to me.

In spite of some limitations, my ever-growing knowledge of Swahili enabled me to function well in Tanzania until relatively recently, although occasionally people who did not know me would fail to understand me, like an old man on a ferry on Mafia in 2002, who turned to the other passengers to whom I had been talking and remarked 'I can't understand a word she says'. I

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discussed this with my travelling companion, the American anthropologist Chris Walley, who said this had happened to her too on occasion. It was as though someone who looked like me (white, Mzungu) or like Chris couldn't possibly talk intelligible Swahili!

But by the new millennium, there had been a noticeable change in urban areas from welcoming a foreigner who spoke Swahili to demanding that she speak English to them. I first encountered this in 2002 at an internet café in Dar, when the women who ran it were extremely rude to me after I had addressed them in Swahili. My driver, who spoke only Swahili and with whom I discussed this episode, remarked: 'Madada hawa hawana adabu' (those 'sisters' don't have any manners). There was a similar incident in 2010 with a waiter in a café in Zanzibar. Basically, I came to realise that, by speaking Swahili, I was implying that they did not know English, the sine qua non of modernity. Furthermore, my own Swahili was never very modern – I struggled when listening to youngsters talking in Dar. My younger 'relatives' would tease me: 'Mama, unajua Kiswahili cha kisasa?' (Mama, do you know modern Swahili?). They would insist that we greeted each other by 'Mambo? Poa' (How's things? Cool) and fall about laughing when I managed this. Nonetheless in 2010 I was complimented in a shop in Zanzibar by an elderly man who remarked to those present 'she speaks Swahili as it should be spoken'. However, even this was something of a back-handed compliment, for I still spoke the kind of Swahili I had been taught and thus it could be perceived as rather old-fashioned .

The second way to establish one's credentials is by going back to the same place and people over and over, becoming involved in people's lives and taking responsibility in that regard (see Caplan 2008). Over the years I've been re-visiting Mafia, my status has moved from that of 'mgeni wetu' (our guest or stranger) to 'mwenyeji wetu' (our local person) or, in the case of adopted kin, being assigned a kin term, with concomitant rights and responsibilities. Thus, after my village younger brother died, I attended the meeting in Zanzibar to discuss his daughter's marriage. The senior woman chairing the meeting introduced me to the potential fiancé (who had never met me before): 'This is her shangazi (father's sister), don't see her as a foreigner. She is standing in for the bride's late father, her (adopted) brother, and has the right to speak and participate in this decision'.

The third important ground for establishing one's credentials is knowledge of Islam. On arrival in Kanga village on Mafia as a Ph.D. student in 1965, one of the first questions I was asked was 'Have you read the Koran?' 'Yes? Then let's see how well you know it! How do you know at what time of day you have to start fasting in Ramadhan?' My correct answer established both my veracity and my respect for Islam, and consequently helped with my acceptability. However, like my colleague Kjersti Larsen, I never transgressed what I thought were appropriate boundaries when learning about local Islam. Although I had many conversations on the subject, including with

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learned sheikhs and other leaders, I never asked to attend mosque, nor did I go to the graveside at funerals.

But recently there has been a move from being a welcome *mgeni*, even *mwenyeji*, to a more questionable status in some contexts and by some people. During my last 2010 visit, I interviewed a man from Mafia who now lives outside Dar. He remembered me as a young student. We were discussing the changes in Islam (see Loimeier & Seesemann 2006) which had taken place since that time, and he told me ‘If you had come here now as you came then, many people would never have accepted you. You couldn’t have done the work you did’. I got an inkling of this on a visit to relatives on Zanzibar where I had an encounter with a bookseller on the street. He had some beautiful Korans and I wanted to buy one for the *mwalim* in our village. The bookseller asked me if I was a Muslim: ‘No, but I respect Islam and have studied it. This is for a *mwalim* who is a friend of mine.’ He replied: No, I won’t sell one to you, you are not a believer.’

So the answer to the question ‘who do they think we are?’ may well change, sometimes painfully so .

### **Who Do We Think We Are?**

Who are our peers? Are they mainly those who study Tanzania or Kenya, or those who study the Swahili language and culture and the Waswahili? Or both? How do we present ourselves to other scholars? By discipline, by area or by audience? I’ve been acutely aware of this when discussing who should attend the interdisciplinary Swahili workshops which have been taking place in Europe since the 1970s, initially in London or Paris, then more widely. Should X who is studying *taarabu* in Nairobi be included? Or Y who works on Swahili in the Congo? And Z who is a Madagascar expert also wants to attend... Where do we draw the boundaries?

On my bookshelves I have two sections: one for Tanzania, one for Swahili language, literature, culture and society, yet of course these literatures overlap, indeed they must do so or otherwise we risk a depoliticised, overly cosy form of cultural studies. After all, Swahili cultures exist within political entities such as states. When we write about economics, politics and development, is the Swahili element irrelevant? Of course not since it is a contested and negotiated term, the claiming or rejecting of which is a highly political act.

We Swahili-ists think of ourselves as scholars who carry out research using a variety of methods:

- Interviews, conversations, observation
- Documents, archives, censuses, reports
- Newspaper, radio and TV websites, blogs
- Novels and poetry, diaries, letters, life histories



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And then we write it up. Yet who are we writing for? And in what language? Is it for locals, for other scholars, for lay audiences outside of the field? For most of our academic lives, we give less time and effort to writing for local people and other Africans than we do for our academic peers who determine our relative success or failure in our chosen areas: jobs, tenure, promotions, scholarly reputation. Here we come up against some questions of the ethics of research: taking and giving. How may we ‘give back’ data to the people from whom we have taken it in the first place? For example, surprisingly few of us have published in Swahili, although there are some important and notable exceptions (Erdstieck 2001, Mirza & Strobel 1989). This is something which has been urged upon us by people like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2012) who has long argued that scholars of Africa should publish their work in local languages as well as their own .

In my own case, since retirement from teaching, I am freed from the requirement to produce publications which ‘count’ in terms of research assessment exercises in the university sector and have thus been able to engage in projects which count in a different way. I’ve made a film about Mafia in both English and Swahili and also put up a website about the island, again in English and Swahili.

In 2014, I published a book which is the historical biography of my late village brother Mikidadi. I tried to write it in accessible and jargon-free language and it was brought out by a Tanzanian publisher. It was my hope it would go some way towards doing what Shaaban Roberts tried to do in his autobiographical writings: “talking about oneself [or in this case someone else] in order to act in the world” (Garnier 2012), because my aim was to show the protagonists as actors and agents, not victims, both to themselves as well as to outsiders. I sought to show how the recent macro-changes in Tanzania had affected ordinary people by telling the story of his life and that of his family members, often using his own words from diaries, letters and our conversations, as well as other people’s memories of him. This book was published in Swahili, thereby enabling the people of Mafia and other East Africans who do not know English to any large degree to read it.

So it is my hope that even as we scholars continue to develop our specialist interest for our disciplines and our academic peers, we may also ensure that we make time and find appropriate ways to ‘give back’ some of what we have received from those who have enabled us to do our research in the first place. In my experience, much of what I have tried to do in this regard has involved the help of and collaboration with not only Swahili scholars of local origin such as Farouk Topan, Ahmed Kipacha, and Simeon Mesaki, but also local intellectuals such as ‘Mohammed’ and Mikidadi Juma. In short, the dichotomy between ‘us’ researchers and ‘them’, the researched, has lessened. This does not mean that it has disappeared, for there remain important differences of race, class and education. A reflexive approach of the kind adopted in this paper enables some of the complexities of this situation to be revealed.

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