

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND “PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

The frame for this critical interpretation of the Kiswahili popular love song “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One (1981) is the discussion on African contributions to the making of modern Africa. The argument is that “Pili Mswahili” is an instance of the *mwananchi*’s, common person’s, agentive contribution to the establishment of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya. The song is read as an urging of non-Swahili Kenyans to accept Kiswahili – which, in spite of its being an important lingua franca in Kenya, was, after all, the language of one ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state where “tribalism” is a major political factor – as their national language. It is shown that “Pili Mswahili” complemented the efforts of the makers and executors of government policy that had nation formation as the ultimate objective. Nation formation is understood to be a key strategy in the African appropriation of the African nation-state that started life as a colonial invention.

Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the discussion on African participation in the making of modern Africa.¹ My gaze is on African appropriation of what started as a colonial imposition, the entity that is usually known as the African nation-state even though – basing on Curtin (1966) – African *state-nation* is a more accurate term for it. Curtin’s explanation of the “distinction between the state-nation and the nation-state” (1966: 143) in relation to the modern African state is especially useful in the study of Africa. As Curtin elucidates, if it were to exist, the modern African nation-state would be a state created by a nation – by a group of people that has “a common culture, a common territory, a common language, a common historical tradition, and [...] the institutions of a state to articulate these elements” (1966: 144). One struggles to find such a state in modern Africa for the African nation-state is, for historical reasons, invariably a state that does not house a nation. At inception, the modern African state was almost always a throwing into one political state of tens of different peoples who had different histories, cultures and governance structures. Many of the groups – nations, indeed – that found themselves in a nation-state were previously unaware of one another’s existence. Little surprise then that, as Atieno Odhiambo (1992) reports, at the time of the imposition of the African nation-state, those that were supposed to be citizens of these entities that they had played no role in the making of were deeply sceptical about them. Thus, the Luo sung about “their” new nation-state, Kenya, in disparaging terms:

¹ This article is the outcome of research conducted within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany’s Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1 – 390713894.

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

Piny maonge wege

Kenya Kolony

A country without owners

That is Kenya Colony

(Odhiambo 1992: 11)

Today a majority of Africans proudly identify as citizens of these nation–states. This is an outcome of African efforts to invest the phrase that routinely describes the modern African state, the nation–state, with logical meaning. An important route that Africans have taken from their earlier scepticism of the state to their embrace of it is through nation-building – the invention and consolidation of a cultural and political community defined in relation to the territory of a state through the assembling of ideas, practices and objects that sustain the imagination of the said community.

The nation-building project in Africa started in the colonial era and was significantly animated by anti-colonial sentiment. Curtin memorably captures the initial thinking behind the project: “[Anti-colonial] African leaders [...] said: ‘Here is a people, living within the boundaries of a colonial territory, under a government dominated by foreigners. This people has a right to an independent political life, *so that* it may become a nation’” (1966: 143-144, italics in the original).

In this paper I focus on the issue of the establishment of a national language as part of the project of nation-building. I am looking at the Kenyan experience of this. I am particularly interested in the participation of *wananchi*, the common people, in the project. My attention is on a strategy that Kenyan *wananchi* who are not members of the Swahili ethnic group have deployed to make Kiswahili, Swahili language, acceptable to them as their national language, namely, their prising of the language away from the clutches of ethnic proprietorship. For most of the paper, I read the 1981 Kiswahili popular song “Pili Mswahili”² by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One as an enactment of the strategy. I argue that “Pili Mswahili” urges and participates in the delinking of Kiswahili from Uswahili, the ontological issue of what makes a person, object or practice Swahili. My postulation is that this detribalization of Kiswahili – for that is what the delinking of the language from Uswahili amounts to – is a necessary step non-Swahili Kenyan *wananchi* took to make the language acceptable to them as their national language. Extrapolating Achebe, I, therefore, regard “Pili Mswahili” as an instance of a non–Swahili Kenyan *mwananchi* (singular of *wananchi*) coming to terms with a language that “history [...] forced down [...] their] throat” (1965: 28) and appropriating it, in essence saying with Achebe: “I have been given this language and I intend to use it” (1965: 30).

² The song was first released as a 45 rpm “single” vinyl disc under the title “Pili Mswahili” by Baba Gaston and Moreno. The band name given in the record is Moja Baba Gaston Band. Subsequent releases of the song, mainly in cassette format, have the title as “Pili Mswahili” and the artist as either Moreno or Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One.

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND “PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

The showing of “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One as a case of the *mwananchi* contributing to the making of modern Africa makes this study also an elaboration of “the relationship between music and politics, [...] how musicians, politicians and political communities strive to appropriate each other in different ways and contexts” (Nyamnjoh & Fokwang 2005: 253). The participation of “Pili Mswahili” in the establishment of a national language in Kenya is presented as an illustration of a relationship in which a musician furthers the objectives of politicians out of his or her volition, independent of any direct influence of the politicians, and in his or her own interest.

My relationship with Kiswahili influences my reading of “Pili Mswahili.”

Kiswahili and Me

Kiswahili has always been the language of everyday interaction for me. I was born and raised in army barracks. We spoke Kiswahili with everyone we related with outside our house as it was and still is the language of the military in Kenya (Mazrui & Mazrui 1993). In my case, Kiswahili was the primary language at home – and this despite the fact that my mothers did not speak the language very well.

Kiswahili was all around me in my childhood. I heard the language over the radio. I listened to radio a lot. Virtually everyone I know did. In those years there was only one radio station in Kenya, the government-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). At some point the station was known as the Voice of Kenya (VoK) (See King’asia 2021 for a brief history of radio in Kenya). KBC ran two national services, the English Service (at one point known as the General service) and *Idhaa ya Taifa*, which was the Kiswahili Service. At home we listened to both services. My parents only tuned in to *Idhaa ya Taifa*, and that therefore was what we mostly listened to. When the uncles that lived with us had control of the radio, they tuned it to the English Service. The music that was played in *Idhaa ya Taifa* was mainly Kiswahili language music. “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One is one of the many songs that I heard over and over on the radio in my childhood. Also constituting a significant part of the playlist in *Idhaa ya Taifa* was Lingala language Zairian music. (Back then the country known today as the Democratic Republic of Congo was called Zaire and the people were known in English as Zairians). There was the occasional English language song – but those who loved English language music could tune in to the English Service where it was the main fare. I would learn much later that the music we heard over the radio was selected to further a nation building project that had Kiswahili at its centre. John Kamau has captured this working out of government policy:

The state-run Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) bans songs in any of the country’s 40-plus vernacular languages from its two national services. The blacklist was imposed 12 years ago when the radio boss Cornelius Nyamboki insisted musicians

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

sing in either Swahili or English to curb the rise of ‘ethnic nationalism’. It didn’t affect languages used beyond Kenya’s borders: 75 percent of the national playlist are in the Lingala of the former Zaire, while Swahili lyrics now chip in a mere 20 percent (1998: 145).

The policy automatically kept the “traditional” music genres of Kenyan African peoples out of the playlist of *Idhaa ya Taifa*. One only heard “modern” guitar music genres. As a child, I did not know anything about these policies. I consumed the music.

Kiswahili was also one of the two languages that we were allowed to speak in school, the other being English. The barracks I lived in were situated in urban areas and so, in keeping with a trend that was well established by the 1960s and which would go on to be confirmed by the national language-in-education policy of 1976 (Nabea 2009, Mose 2017), Kiswahili was the language of instruction for the first three years of my schooling. Elizabeth Asewe Oluoch explains the policy:

In Kenya, the official language of instruction policy states that children have a right to be taught in the language of the catchment area [that is, the dominant Kenyan African language in the geographical location where the school is situated] in classes (grades) 1–3 [...] in schools in rural areas, during which English is taught as a subject in the curriculum. Kiswahili is used as the language of instruction in lower primary school in urban areas (Oluoch 2017: 17).

I never interacted formally, in a school situation, with any other Kenyan African language, as my peers who grew up in the rural countryside did. Unlike other Kenyan African languages, Kiswahili was also a taught school subject, and my formal learning of it only came to an end in junior secondary school.

Kiswahili continues to be the primary language at home for me and, since I live in an urban area, it remains the most important language of everyday interaction. And yet, despite the importance of Kiswahili in my life, I have never at any time thought myself a Mswahili, a Swahili person. At its most obvious level my non-identification as a Mswahili is a simple and straight forward acknowledgement that even though I speak Kiswahili I do not live the culture of the Waswahili. As argued by Shariff (1973: 69), to “share the common culture” of the Waswahili makes one a Mswahili. And so, I have self-identified or been identified by others as Jalu or Omusamia (Luo or Samia person) at diverse places and times, and this is a comment on the fluidity and multi-layered character of ethnic identities, but never as a Mswahili.

A second reason for my non-identification as a Mswahili, and one that is of import in this paper, is that beyond being a descriptor of a specific ethnicity “Mswahili” in Kenya is a figure that I would not identify with. At best, the Mswahili is lazy and untrustworthy. More regularly, he or she is a conman or woman. The Mswahili stereotype is ubiquitous. It circulates even in “innocent” phrases like “kumpiga mtu Kiswahili” that are part of everyday speech. “Kumpiga mtu Kiswahili” (literally, “to beat one (with) Kiswahili”) means to use one’s wit to advantage, whether that entails

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND
“PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

conning somebody out of money, “explaining” one’s way out of a sticky situation or just telling lies.

Whereas I do not identify as a Mswahili, I am at the same time keenly aware that Kiswahili is the language to which I attach my identity as a Kenyan. My Kenyan-ness has always been important to me. I am, after all, the son of a man who as a soldier literally signed up to put his life on the line for the idea of Kenya.

In “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One I read an argument for the acceptance, by Kenyans like myself who are not ethnically Swahili, of Kiswahili as their national language.

“Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One

“Pili Mswahili” is a love song in the style of Congolese guitar music that was wrought by the youth orchestras that arose in that country at the end of the 1960s/start of the 1970s. The songs usually have a three-part structure: a slow “rhumba” opening that is dominated by choral singing, followed by a faster second section that ordinarily has a call and response chorus, which leads to the even faster “sebene,” the long instrumental segment meant for dance. The harmony of a higher countertenor voice (sometimes a falsetto) and a lower, baritone second voice that characterizes the singing in a lot of the music of the Zairian youth orchestras of the end of the 1960s/start of the 1970s is also found in “Pili Mswahili.” (See McGuiness 2011: 109-115) for an elaborate description of the form)

The lyrics in “Pili Mswahili” are the words of an unnamed speaker, “I”, who is an exasperated man. His addressee is a woman character named Pili with whom he is in a romantic relationship. The reason behind the speaker’s frustration is that he has lately been unable to raise Pili. The speaker suspects that this apparent ghosting is motivated by Pili’s having intimate relationships with multiple partners. He also suspects that Pili is sleeping around for money. Pili’s perceived cheating ways lead to her characterization as a Mswahili, a Swahili person. It is this characterization that lends the song its title:

Pili eh eh	Oh Pili
Pili mtoto wa Tanzania	Pili of Tanzania
Pili we Mswahili	Pili you are a Mswahili
Ujanja mingi oh	You are too cunning

The speaker’s frustration with Pili can be read to direct attention towards social problems – the rise of the permissive society, the commodification of sex – and thereby lift “Pili Mswahili” beyond being a “mere love song.” This is a reading one would expect from those who hold that *funzo*,

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

teaching, is a core function of African popular music – and they are many. (Oludare 2017 reviews a few).

The love complaint in “Pili Mswahili” fascinates for other reasons. It cannot be lost on any keen consumer of the song that the speaker does not proffer any indication that he has evidence of Pili’s alleged sexual adventures. His whole case is a suspicion based on Pili’s apparent ghosting, a suspicion that seems to rise from and to express masculine insecurities and anxieties that he is himself oblivious to. The unsuccessful search for the beloved strikes me as an attempt at monitoring that is consistent with a sexist man’s desire to dominate, even own a woman. The ghosting indicates that the woman has a life that is not controlled by the man, and this deeply frustrates him. Since his opinion of the woman – and women in general – is low, the only way he can make sense of the suggestion that he is not in complete charge is by assuming that other men are involved. The raising of the possibility of monetary motivation for the woman’s real and imagined actions is part of the man’s insecurities: there are out there men who are “better”, more powerful than himself, who can take “his” woman away from him. It is possible that sexist men struggling with masculine insecurities and anxieties in the group of fans that enjoyed the music of Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One would have vicariously enjoyed, through identification, the speaker’s expression of those attitudes and hopes and fears.

My interest in this paper, however, is in the function that the characterization of Pili as a Mswahili plays in what I read as the argument for the acceptance of Kiswahili by non-Swahili Kenyans as their national language.

The Uswahili of Pili in “Pili Mswahili”

Pili’s (imagined) cheating ways seemingly make her an embodiment of the Mswahili stereotype. A contextualization of the stereotype makes it easier to follow the rhetorical use to which the characterization is put in the song.

All indications suggest that the figure of the Mswahili as at best lazy and untrustworthy and more regularly as a conman or woman, which was fairly commonplace in Kenya in the 1980s when “Pili Mswahili” was produced, has its foundations in two aspects: Firstly, the role of the Waswahili in the Arab slavery that flourished in eastern Africa between the 17th and 19th centuries (Waswahili were part of the slave raiding parties) and; secondly, in the use of Kiswahili to their own advantage by those who were competent in the language in the colonial state that was established in the last decade of the 19th century (as a *lingua franca* the language was preferred in situations that brought people of different ethnicities together). From the time of the founding of the “nation-state” at the end of the 19th century, Kenya’s politics has been largely “tribal” or ethnicity-based (Ajulu 2001). Swahili ethnic identity, like all other ethnic identities in the country,

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND
“PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

has thus been embroiled in the “tribal” struggles for the control of (the resources of) the Kenyan state. Not surprisingly, notions of “ungwana”, cultural refinement, hence superiority over their “washenzi”, savage, compatriots from *bara*, the mainland, integral to the Uswahili of Kenyan Waswahili from before colonial conquest (Burton 2022), have been consolidated in the modern era. On their part, the non-Waswahili on the mainland meet the Waswahili with a disdain whose roots in history – as pointed to above – are long forgotten. Little wonder, then, that in the colonial era also, apparently instigated as part of the divide and rule strategies of the colonizer, the sense of the Mswahili as a con was circulated via the figure of Abunuwasi. Waswahili were as a group referred to as Abunuwasi after the “sly, undesirable, but still lovable trickster” (Mukuria 1995: 37) of Arabian fairy tales.

As the language of Waswahili, whose deeply Islamized and Arabized coastal culture is markedly different from the cultures of their compatriots on the Kenyan mainland, Kiswahili, and the ethnicity that it helps constitute (what I am in this paper, following Shariff (1973), referring to as Uswahili), was deeply involved in the country’s tribal politics. It thus was a great surprise to everyone when in 1964 Kenya’s first President Jomo Kenyatta declared Kiswahili the national language of Kenya. The surprise was despite the fact that the language already was an important *lingua franca* in the country. Those charged with translating the presidential pronouncement into praxis had a sociolinguistic challenge in their hands: how to get the language of one ethnic group to find acceptance as the national language in a multi-ethnic state where “tribalism” – politicized ethnicity – is a major political factor. It was clear that implicated in “tribal” politics that have gone on for a long time, the Kiswahili of Kenyan Waswahili was not automatically viable as a language of self-identification for the non-Swahili Kenyan. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s position that “language [...] has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (1986: 13) hints at an explanation why. The Kiswahili of Waswahili was inscribed with attitudes and prejudices that made it unfriendly to non-Swahili Kenyans. Like the policy makers, the non-Swahili Kenyan *wananchi* had to negotiate an acceptable settlement with the language. The first obstacle was the relationship with their ethnic Swahili compatriots. The character of Pili in “Pili Mswahili” engages this problematic.

The affirmation of the ethnic stereotype of the Mswahili as a congenital con through the character of Pili in “Pili Mswahili” is only apparent as there is no suggestion in the song that Pili is an ethnic Mswahili. The name, not being “Muslim,” of Arabic origins, suggests that she is not. Regardless, the focus is on Pili as an individual. Indeed, a most obvious reading of “Pili Mswahili” is that it exhorts *individuals* in romantic relationships to love truly and sensibly through a presentation of a love situation in which the individuals involved fail to do so. Pili’s “Uswahili” is not social, communal. It is chicanery, the (im)moral choices individuals make and act upon. There is thus no contradiction in the perception by the speaker in “Pili Mswahili” that the Mswahili Pili’s

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

parents are not themselves Waswahili. For this reason, they are likely to be shamed by the actions that make their daughter a Mswahili:

Roho ni ngapi, unapenda wangapi	How many hearts do you have, how many men do you love?
Sababu ndiyo pesa	And it is all because of money
Mapenzi gani, shirika ni ya nini	What kind of love is this? Why this cooperative society of lovers?
Waleta aibu kwa wazazi wako	You bring shame to your parents
Umenitoa hamu ya kukupenda	You have discouraged me from loving you.

Pili, then, is not a Mswahili by *kabila*, ethnicity, but by behaviour. With its amplification of the truism that not every deceitful person is an ethnic Mswahili (on the flip side, not every ethnic Mswahili is a deceitful person), this presentation of character destabilizes the ethnic stereotype of Waswahili. Ethnic Waswahili are people like other people. With this simple manoeuvre “Pili Mswahili” neutralizes the use of the perceived character, even “nature,” of the original owners of Kiswahili as a reason for resisting the language’s use as a national language. (The manoeuvre also makes room for the welcoming of ethnic Waswahili into the Kenyan nation).

Along these lines, it is worth noting that the language the speaker uses to address Pili is Kiswahili. Following Achebe (1965), I say that the point here is the recognition that there is a de facto state on the ground where the language is in use as a *lingua franca*. The awareness is buttressed by the hailing of different non-Swahili Kiswahili-speaking audiences in a final wrenching of Kiswahili from Uswahili that removes the last hindrances to the acceptance of Kiswahili as a national language by non-Swahili Kenyans.

“Ca c’est la voix baritone de Moreno / This is the baritone voice of Moreno”: hailing multiple Kiswahili-speaking audiences in “Pili Mswahili”

“Ca c’est la voix baritone de Moreno”, Moreno Batamba announces in French in the “sebene” of “Pili Mswahili.” He immediately thereafter translates the phrase into English: “This is the baritone voice of Moreno.” What might come across as a statement of self-identification is indeed an act of self-praise, the confident singer calling attention to his vocal abilities. That Moreno praises himself in French and English in a Kiswahili song is an indication of the multiple audiences he had in mind for his song. The use of these originally European languages points to two broad audience groups: Kiswahili speakers who also speak French and Kiswahili speakers who also speak English. The name of the band that performs the song, L’Orchestre Moja One, with its yoking together of French, Kiswahili and English further point to the three possible publics not only for the song “Pili Mswahili” but for the music of the band in general.

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND
“PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

When added to the recognition that the musical tradition in which the song belongs is Congolese, the fact that its composer Moreno Batamba was originally from Zaire holds out the possibility that Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One were singing primarily to people “back home” in Zaire.³ Kiswahili was one of the four national languages of Zaire, the others being Lingala, Kikongo and Tshiluba. The language structure that obtained in Zaire continues in the Democratic Republic of Congo. French has always been the official language in the Democratic Republic of Congo, even in the country’s materialization as Zaire with the national slogan of Authenticité. The point that the primary audience for “Pili Mswahili” was Zairian is underscored by the fact that the calling attention to self by Moreno is first done in French before being translated into English.

The addressing of Zairians brings to view Kiswahili-speaking communities whose relationship to the language is different from that of the coastal Waswahili of Kenya and Tanzania. It would appear that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, all speakers of Kiswahili are Waswahili by default, regardless of the dialect of Kiswahili they speak, regardless of whether Kiswahili is their primary language or not. There does not seem to be a state-sponsored standard or “good” Kiswahili. The absorption of musical idioms from other traditions, say, Lingala, into a Kiswahili song like “Pili Mswahili” are not seen to be inconsistent with Uswahili in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Such absorptions mirror and explain the dialects of Kiswahili in the country. And, of course, Uswahili is not equivalent to citizenship of the nation. There are, after all, four national languages in the country.

The translation of “Ca c’est la voix baritone de Moreno” into “This is the baritone voice of Moreno” raises the possibility that the song also targets Kenyan and Tanzanian audiences as English is an important language in the two countries. The reasons for addressing the Kenyan audience are obvious. Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One were based in Nairobi. Kenyans in that city were, therefore, the primary consumers of the group’s live performances and first buyers of their records. The Kiswahili in “Pili Mswahili” also lends weight to the assumption that the song is directed to a Kenyan audience, for it is the plain unornamented Kiswahili that is spoken by the majority of Kenyans – who are not ethnic Swahili. The use of “bibi” for “wife” in the lyrics is in this vein a giveaway, as other Kiswahili speakers, with the possible exceptions of the speakers of the Kiswahili dialects spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo, generally do not use the word in this sense. Then there is the ethnic stereotype of Mswahili that is at the centre of the song’s lyrics, and which is distinctly Kenyan.

³ Moreno Batamba was one of several Zairian musicians who found their way to Kenya in the 1970s in search of greener pastures and stayed. He assimilated and made a home in the working-class neighbourhood of Dandora, Nairobi. Kenyans considered and still consider his music Kenyan. Moreno Batamba was buried in Nairobi when he died in 1993.

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

Kiswahili has been an important *lingua franca* in Kenya from before the colonial times. In the early 1980s when “Pili Mswahili” was a standard feature in the playlist of *Idhaa ya Taifa*, Kiswahili was the country’s national language. It was declared one in 1964. Today, in 2022, Kiswahili is both the national language and one of the two official languages of the country, the other being English. But, as has been noted above, Kiswahili is also integral to the Uswahili of ethnic Waswahili in the country. In the context of the “tribal” politics of Kenya, the fact becomes the reason behind the effort to detribalize the language with a view to making it acceptable to non-Swahili Kenyans as their national language that I am arguing in this paper that Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One engage in in “Pili Mswahili”.

The Tanzanian audience is gestured towards by the use of English, which is also an official language in the country, but is more forcefully picked out through other strategies. There is the identification of the character Pili as a Tanzanian from Dar es Salaam (this is later enhanced by giving her a second name that pins her identity, as it were: Mikendo), and the setting of the story of the speaker’s frustrating search for her – by mentioning of actual place names – in the Tanzanian city in the lyrics of “Pili Mswahili.” Since Tanzania attained her independence, a Kiswahili Sanifu that is based on the Kiunguja dialect is vigorously promoted by the state as the language of the country’s African nationhood, which is interchangeable with a notion of Uswahili that seems to have currency in the country. It would appear that in Tanzania Kiswahili’s link with ethnicity is weakened. And so it is that a Tanzanian can identify both as a member of an ethnic group, say, Makonde, and also as a Mswahili. There seems to be yet another, class-based understanding of Uswahili in Tanzania. When the speaker in “Pili Mswahili” goes searching for Pili, he combs “Magomeni, Mapipa, ..., Changombe”, working class neighbourhoods that fall under the category of Uswahilini. Pili is therefore a Mswahili also both in the sense of being a Tanzanian African and of having a working-class background.

The hailing of these diverse Kiswahili-speaking audiences makes the point that Kiswahili is not fused to the Uswahili of the ethnic Waswahili communities of coastal Kenya. It need not, therefore, be part of the “tribal” politics of the country. The non-Swahili Kenyan has no reason not to accept it as a national language. It is, after all, already the *lingua franca* she uses in her everyday interaction with compatriots of other ethnicities.

Conclusion

Jomo Kenyatta’s declaration that Kiswahili was the Kenyan national language triggered several actions by policy makers in his government – the development of a school curriculum, the construction of a playlist to be broadcast by the national radio, etc. – that sought to ensure that the presidential pronouncement was realized in actuality. It is the opinion of many scholars that this government support for Kiswahili as a national language was weak (Harries 1976, Mukuria 1995,

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND
“PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

Weber 2009, Burton 2022). Fortunately for the project of establishing Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya, the *wananchi* also set about creatively coming to terms with the changing cultural and political realities. The showing in this paper that in their song “Pili Mswahili” Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One participate in the establishment of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya is an instance of how this creative adaptation can happen.

I have isolated two levels at which “Pili Mswahili” participated in the establishment of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya. The first level is that simply by being, that is, as a Kiswahili song whose musical characteristics made it a suitable item for the playlist of *Idhaa ya Taifa*, “Pili Mswahili” was one of the many songs that normalized the language to non-Swahili Kenyan ears. The point that the criteria for the suitability or otherwise of a song for the playlist was determined by policy makers is moot. One can perceive the motivation for the *mwananchi* musician to make Kiswahili music. If this was the music playing over the radio, and the radio was the most powerful marketer of products, it only made sense to adapt. The second level at which “Pili Mswahili” participated in the establishment of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya is that, as I have argued for most of this paper, “Pili Mswahili” urged non-Swahili Kenyans to accept Kiswahili as their national language. This was a choice on the part of the *mwananchi* musician, as there was no requirement that a song had to be seen to be supporting government policy in order for it to enjoy radio airplay. This interventionist impulse in “Pili Mswahili” is therefore a creative (re)production of the new reality, a Kenyan nation.

Like the politician, the Kenyan *mwananchi* was aware that the nation was being imagined/performed and constructed at this time. In the case of the politician (Jomo Kenyatta in this instance), Harries explains:

In a speech in State House, Mombasa, President Kenyatta is reported as saying, ‘a nation without culture is dead, and that is why I decreed that Swahili would be the national language’ (*Standard*, Nairobi, 14 September, 1974). Since the President can hardly have meant that he intends Swahili culture, that is, the Islamic culture of the East African coast, to become the national culture, his statement can only have reference to a political intention, rather than to an existing reality. The intention would appear to be that Swahili should become both the instrument for achieving, and the medium for expressing a developing national consciousness. The reality is that Kenya’s national culture is made up of about sixty different ethnic communities and as many different languages. The question is whether the political promotion of Swahili to the status of Kenya’s national language is a necessary condition for fostering a spirit of national unity and purpose among such differentiated communities. President Kenyatta and the Governing Council of [the ruling party] KANU believe that *it is necessary*. (1976: 155, italics in the original)

The *mwananchi* was similarly conscious that nation-building was a project of construction and not a fact of nature. Their participation in the construction of the nation in songs like “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One therefore was frequently playful and at once

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

reinforced a sense of Kenyan identity while destabilizing the identity of the nation as something that is a neatly bound-up given. Indeed, one perceives that the *mwananchi* brings in an aspect of cosmopolitanism into the nation-building project. This is a conclusion I arrive at when I bring together the following points. “Pili Mswahili” by Moreno Batamba et L’Orchestre Moja One is a love song in the style of Zairian (Congolese) rhumba. The lyrics are in Kiswahili, a language that is spoken over a large swathe of the African continent, and which has different meanings in relation to national identity in different locations. The song is performed by Zairian musicians based in Kenya and the lyrics narrate the tale of a romance that happens in Tanzania. “Pili Mswahili”, then, also offers avenues into creating a Kenyan national identity which at its creation is also part of a wider network of regional identities.

Later developments saw the incremental strengthening of government support for Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya. Today the language is spoken by the vast majority of Kenyans who also accept it as their national language. In my reading, the *mwananchi*’s willed and agentive contribution continues to complement that of the policy makers in the effort to appropriate the African nation-state that started life as a colonial invention. In such ways have Africans participated in the making of modern Africa.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. 1965. English and the African Writer. *Transition* 18: 27-30.
- Ajulu, Rok. 2001. Politicized Ethnicity, Competitive Politics and Conflict in Kenya: A Historical Perspective. *African Studies* 61(2): 251-268.
- Baba Gaston and Moreno and Moja Baba Gaston Band. 1981. *Pili Mswahili*. Nairobi: Doromy DM 86.
- Burton, Eric. 2022. Civilisation under Colonial Conditions: Development, Difference and Violence in Swahili Poems, 1888-1907. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34(3): 244-261.
- Curtin, Philip D. 1966. Nationalism in Africa, 1945-1965. *The Review of Politics* 28(2): 143-53.
- Harries, Lyndon. 1976. The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya. *Language in Society* 5(2): 153-164.
- Kamau, John. 1998. Singing in Tongues. *Index on Censorship* 6: 145.
- King’asia, Martin Nyongesa. 2021. 125 Years of Radio: Agile, Portable, Affordable. *The Mast* (June): 35-36.

THE KENYAN *MWANANCHI* AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE: KISWAHILI AND
“PILI MSWAHILI” BY MORENO BATAMBA ET L’ORCHESTRE MOJA ONE

- Mazrui, Alamin M. & Ali A. Mazrui. 1993. Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa. *International Political Science Review/ Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 14(3): 275-292.
- McGuinness, Sara E. 2011. *Grupo Lokito: a Practice-based Investigation into Contemporary Links between Congolese and Cuban Popular Music*. PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London.
- Mose, Peter Nyakundi. 2017. Language-in-Education Policy in Kenya: Intention, Interpretation, Implementation. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 26(3): 215-230.
- Mukuria, Davies. 1995. Kenya’s Language Policy Developments: Kiswahili. *Creative Use of Language in Kenya*, ed. by Kwadzo Senanu & Drid Williams. Nairobi: The Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.
- Nabea, Wendo. 2009. Language Policy in Kenya: Negotiating with Hegemony. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3(1): 121-138.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis B. & Jude Fokwang. 2005. Entertaining Repression: Music and Politics in Postcolonial Cameroon. *African Affairs* 104(415): 251-274.
- Odhiambo, Atieno. 1992. From Warriors to Jonanga: The Struggle over Nakedness by the Luo of Kenya. *Matatu* 9 (Sokomoko: Popular Culture in East Africa): 11-25.
- Oludare, Olupemi. 2017. Preserving History Through Popular Music: A Study of Ebenezer Obey’s Juju Music. *West African Journal of Musical Arts Education* 4(1): 51-65.
- Oluoch, Elizabeth Asewe. 2017. Language of Instruction in Kenya: Focus on Lower Primary in Schools in Rural Areas. *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development* 5(1): 17-23.
- Shariff, Ibrahim Noor. 1973. Waswahili and Their Language: Some Misconceptions. *Kiswahili* 43(2): 67-75.
- wa Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ. 1986 [1981]. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Weber, Anke. 2009. The Causes of Politicization of Ethnicity: A Comparative Case Study of Kenya and Tanzania. *Centre for Comparative and International Studies (CIS) Working Paper* 47: 1-35.