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# REVIEW

## *Swahili in Spaces of War: A Sociolinguistic Odyssey*. Alamin Mazrui & Kimani Njogu. 2023. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 232 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-27337-7.

There has been a growing interest in scholarly writing on the relationship between language and war (e.g Kregel 2022; Footitt 2012; Galtung 1987). African languages have had their share of scholarly attention on the issue especially how languages influence and are influenced by war and conflicts. Mutonya & Parsons 2004 for instance have discussed the evolution and use of KiKAR, a Swahili variety used by African soldiers conscripted into the colonial army. This approach continues in Kevogo & Kevogo 2014, who focus on Swahili development of military terminology from the pre-colonial period to the era of globalization and how it is intertwined with the sociolinguistic realities and historical events in the region. In relation to the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya, Achieng 2014 illustrates how language has been used to forment and resolve conflicts and its role in maintaining peace and security in both Kenya and Rwanda.

Against this background of language and war, *Swahili in Spaces of War: A Sociolinguistic Odyssey* is an examination of different scenes of conflict with Swahili at the center stage. From its use in mobilizing Africans resisting colonial domination, its deployment as a martial language during the two World Wars, the ideological wars during the cold war era to the ongoing war against terrorism, the authors illustrate how Swahili has served in local, international and global war arenas and how different war situations have impacted Swahili language.

The major issue that dominates in the literature on languages and conflict, such as McIntosh 2021, Donahue & al. 2020 and Cohen 2001, is how languages shape the rhetoric that appeal to their target populations' psychology designed to influence certain outcomes. The authors of *Swahili in the Spaces of War* adopt a similar approach in demonstrating the convergence and the symbiotic relationship between literature, history, local and regional and global conflicts. Swahili is shown to have been impacted by historical events as much as it has played an agentive role in shaping important historical events. Not only has Swahili been used as a tool for interethnic communication amongst the military personnel in the region, but the wars on their part have inspired literary creation in songs, poetry, drama and prose.

Moreover, the military, through various wars, has acted as an important agent in the spread of Swahili in the East African and the Great Lakes region. The authors have also discussed how military operations and other forms of conflicts have not just exploited the popularity of Swahili while also acknowledging that these conflicts have created a bigger arena for Swahili which has

resulted in the enrichment of its vocabulary and elevated it to a prominent global language. The rush by foreign countries and multinational organizations to adopt Swahili, either as an ideological or economic tool opens a different front for conflict. This front is mostly driven by transnational actors while local users of Swahili only play a marginal role. Africans are shown to align with the opposing political, economic and ideological orders manifested in military and ideological cold war, economic war between China and the West and the ongoing war on terror.

The book is organized into eight chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. The introduction by Alamin Mazrui lays the foundation of the book by providing the background of the topic from a global perspective, though with a keen attention to Africa. This background differentiates "language wars" and "languages and conflict". Although both might overlap in certain areas, language wars are viewed as those debates that revolve around policies that allocate different functions to languages while languages and conflict looks at how languages have been used in conflict situations and the role that they have played. The chapter cites how pre-colonial conflicts in African states were characterized by court poets using language to inspire soldiers before going to war and how the same poets composed praise songs to celebrate the heroes after successful military adventures.

The nationalism struggle is also viewed as another manifestation of conflict where Swahili was deployed as a tool for awakening mass consciousness among Africans in the struggle against colonialism. It should be noted that the UNESCO's World Swahili day is held on 7$^{th}$ July in recognition of the late President Nyerere, then a Tanzania Nationalist leader's declaration that Swahili was the language of the independent struggle. Policies surrounding the language of administration and education in East Africa is shown as another site of conflict that brought to the fore the masked ideology on the language hierarchy where African languages were marginalized. A good example is the bloody struggle by South Africans who resisted the imposition of Afrikaans on them. There are many similar cases where imposed foreign languages went against the aspirations of local Africans, including in Swahili speaking regions.

In chapter 2, Kimani Njogu opens with a discussion of the use of Swahili in resisting German East African Society (Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft) DOAG, during the Maji Maji war. The background on the activities of DOAG in Tanzania which was a precursor to German colonial administration sets the background for the politics surrounding language choice. Shorn of its 'Islamic influence', Swahili whose roots were already entrenched became the language of administration thus eased administrative logistics while facilitating interethnic communication. The chapter also dwells on the literary work that was inspired by the Maji Maji resistance such as *Kinjeketile*, a play by Ebrahim Hussein and epic poetry like *Utenzi wa Jamhuri ya Tanzania* by Ramadhani Mwaruka and *Utenzi wa Vita vya Maji Maji* by Abdul Karim Jamaladin among others.

These literary creations may be regarded as products of war similar to *Sozaboy* by Ken Saro Wiwa (Uwasomba 2010), though they differ in the language used.

Alamin Mazrui in chapter 3 examines the Swahili military contexts focusing on World War I and World War II. The conscription of African soldiers from multilingual backgrounds promoted the use of Swahili as a martial language amongst soldiers in King's African Rifles (KAR) in terms of mobilization, morale boosting in marching songs and spreading of war propaganda. The establishment of the Inter-territorial Language Committee which was charged with the standardization of Swahili was one of the outcomes of the First World War, and its activities and fortunes were greatly affected by the Second World War.

After examining the two wars, Mazrui in chapter 4 delves into the language war that manifested in language policies and the dilemma of the colonial government on whether to promote English, Swahili or local languages. The author illustrates how Africans subverted the colonial administration's intention of using Swahili to serve colonial goals by recasting it as a tool for independence struggle. Due to different historical realities, the use of Swahili was more effective in Tanzania's Independence struggle as compared to Kenya.

In chapter 5, 'Swahili and the Wars of the Great Lakes', both authors examine various post-independence conflicts in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the role Kenya and Tanzania, the two stable countries that have been intimately associated with the emergence and expansion of Swahili. These wars span from the 1978 Kagera war to the current state of conflict especially in the Eastern part of the DRC. The political upheavals in Uganda led to an influx of exiles into Kenya and Uganda, the two Swahili speaking countries. It is in those countries that political and military strategies took place which the exiles carried with them back to Uganda, whether in political organizations or military campaigns. Swahili is shown to have been heavily used in the National Resistance Army (NRA) a military movement that was an off-shoot of a military outfit formed in Tanzania. Within the NRA were Rwandese refugees who later formed the Rwanda Patriotic Front that took power in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. The authors have also discussed the use of Swahili amongst the Burundi Army and the resistance movement led by Laurent Kabila that dethroned Mobutu Sese Seko in the DRC.

In all these situations, the proliferation of Swahili, mostly from Tanzania solidifies its place as a martial language. Equally important is the way these wars have led to a movement of people within the region and spread Swahili in the process. Somalia and South Sudan have not been included in the discussion though the authors acknowledge how the wars in these countries have added another dimension of the debate on Swahili in wars and conflict.

Moving away from the military scene, the focus of the book shifts to the ideological wars exemplified by the cold war and the war on terror in chapter 6. The cold war is framed on the basis

of the hostility between the United Stated and its allies on the one hand and the Soviet Union and allied countries on the other. Appropriation of Swahili by the media organization representing these two fronts is seen as expanding the use of Swahili while also shedding light on the exploitation of Swahili as a tool for propaganda. The chapter also addresses the racial cold war that saw Swahili being embraced by Pan Africanists who saw Tanzania as a symbol for African liberation. Swahili's prominence is attributed to Tanzania's active promotion of it which resulted in its acceptance as the language that symbolized African identity, in spite of the fact that the majority of African Americans traced their roots in West Africa. The chapter also touches on the cold war between China and the United States which is now framed in economic rather than ideological terms. As part of the new economic approach, China continues to expand its language and culture and it is not yet clear whether the clamor for economic benefits will see Chinese competing with Swahili within the East African region.

Currently the war on terror has become one of the most prominent dimension of war since the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Chapter 7 looks at the unfolding reality as the USA and its allies who have vowed to fight and weaken the terror networks realized that military action alone is insufficient. The new tactic to win hearts and minds of East Africans was aimed at preventing them from being targets for recruitment by terrorist organizations. The target has mostly been in Muslim speaking areas where America seeks to change the perception amongst Muslims that it is hostile to Islam. Given that there is a large Muslim population in Tanzania and Kenya (Vittori & al. 2009), Swahili naturally becomes the most effective language to engage East African Muslims with the aim of propagating a positive image about America to the Muslim population. This is well justified given that al-Shabaab have used Swahili to radicalize East Africans and recruit them to terrorism.

The last chapter of the book is a short conclusion that mostly summarizes the major issues discussed in the preceding chapters though at times reinforced with the contextualization of the issues discussed in the chapter within the contemporary discourse such as the M23 movement and the war in Ukraine.

This book is definitely comprehensive in its coverage of various scenes of conflicts. My only criticism is that given the increase in cyber terrorism, more could have been covered to show how Swahili is impacted by cyber terrorism. If this is not manifest in the literature, then there needs to be a good discussion on why these issues have not been covered. However, this is not a weakness and should be regarded as a gap that opens a new front for research on languages in war and conflict.

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