The Pursuit of Linguistic Unity: The Emergence of Swahili as Kenya's National Language

Eunice Sheila Waweru*

Abstract: This paper explores how Swahili emerged as Kenya's national language. Although the language initially spread from the East African coast to the interior of the country, its nationalization was a result of colonial policies that enhanced its spread and nationalist interventions that cemented its status. This paper demonstrates this linguistic history and uses it to highlight the nation-building process in Kenya from its colonial period to its post-colonial period.

Keywords: Swahili, Kenya, Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Nationalization, Linguistics

Introduction

The adoption of Swahili as Kenya's national language represents a historical journey shaped by colonial interventions and nationalist aspirations. This linguistic transformation was not a spontaneous, organic evolution, but rather the outcome of deliberate choices made by colonial settlers, missionaries, and nationalists in Kenya in the 19th and 20th centuries. This paper delves into these artificial interventions that contributed to the selection of Swahili as the national language, highlighting the interplay between colonial legacies, nationalist agendas, and linguistic dynamics.

Kenya is a country characterized by ethnic and linguistic diversity. The country has forty-three constitutionally recognized tribes and speaks about sixty languages.[1] Colonial settlers and missionaries, seeking to spread the Gospel and efficiently administer East Africa while avoiding imparting English language skills to Africans, created and implemented language policies that

---

[1] Lyndon Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya," *Language in Society* 5, no. 2 (August 1, 1976): https://doi.org/10.1017/s0047404500006990, 155.

* Sheila Waweru is a graduate student at Towson University in the Global Humanities program. As an undergraduate at the United States International University-Africa, she majored in Journalism and subsequently interned with an NGO, the Association of Media Women in Kenya.

promoted the spread and standardization of Swahili in Kenya and East Africa at large. Kenyan nationalists, seeking to unify the country and demonstrate difference from the British Empire, equally promoted and used the language until it was cemented as the country's national language by a Presidential declaration from the country's founding president and chief nationalist, Jomo Kenyatta.

The Origin and Spread of Swahili in East Africa

The history of Swahili is at least as long as the documented history of the East African coast. The earliest document we have about the East African Coast is a Persian document from 293 B.C., which mentions the King of Persia's trade relations with the King of the Zhand. Early Swahili speakers on the East African coast were certainly Bantus; however, we have no way of knowing what they called themselves. The Greeks called them "Azanians", the Persians called them "Zhand,", meaning black people and the Arabs called them "Zanj." In 1331, Ibn Batuta, a Moorish explorer who traveled the coast of East Africa, noted the main seaport cities of the coast were Malindi, Mombasa, Sofala, Kilwa, and Zanzibar. He called Kilwa the land of the Zanj and the Swahili. These coastal cities evolved from coastal trading villages and later welcomed Arab refugees, which subsequently transformed them into strongly Islamic and Arab centers.[2] Swahili, as we know it today, originated from Bantu-speakers on the coast of East Africa who were heavily influenced by these Arab refugees. Today, a lot of Swahili words can trace their origins to Arabic.

The initial spread of Swahili from the East African coast can be attributed to trade between Arab and Swahili traders and inland communities. This linguistic expansion began in points along the coast such as Bagamoyo, Saadani, and Kilwa to Tabora, from where caravans

---

[2] Beverly Coleman, "A History of Swahili," *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 6 (February 1971): https://www.jstor.org/stable/41163481, 17-18.

went west to Ujiji and north to Uganda.[3] The geographic range of Swahili today closely follows the old caravan trade routes used by inland Nyamwezi, Kamba, and Yao traders and coastal Arab and Swahili traders.[4] On the coast, Swahili served both the religious and secular interests of Arab and Swahili communities; however, in the inland, Swahili was only a vehicle for business and trade.[5] The further inland Swahili moved, the more emasculated it became, as it was stripped to a highly simplified language to serve as a means of communication between individuals of widely different groups.[6] Inland communities continued to practice their traditional cultures and speak their traditional languages ,and relegated Swahili to a language of minor importance, used for trading and business activities. This was the first time Swahili spread organically and consensually to inland Kenyan communities.

Swahili was the first Bantu language to be written. It was first written in the Arabic script, there are Arabic texts from as long ago as the 10th century with Bantu words in Arabic script. Later, German missionaries in Tanganyika, enthusiastic to use the language in their evangelizing mission, translated Swahili into Roman script.[7]

Language Planning in States

Language plays many roles in nation-building processes. Firstly, language serves a utilitarian role; it is used as a mode of communication that permits the nation to function efficiently in political and economic realms. Secondly, it is used as a unifier, as it promotes cohesion and allows the nation to develop a shared culture. Thirdly, if the language is visibly

---

[3] Coleman, "A History of Swahili," February 1971, 19.
[4] Francis Njubi, *Études Africaines de Géographie Par Le Bas African Studies in Geography from Below*, ed. Michel Arrous and Lazare Ki-Zerbo Ki-Zerbo (CODESRIA, 2008), https://publication.codesria.org/index.php/pub/catalog/book/140, 111.
[5] Coleman, "A History of Swahili," February 1971, 19.
[6] Whiteley, "The Changing Position of Swahili in East Africa," *Jstor*, October 1956, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1156672, 343.
[7] Coleman, "A History of Swahili," February 1971, 20.

different from that of a neighboring group and has some measure of inner cohesion, it can be

used as an argument for a separate nation. For this reason, nationalists throughout history have

pushed for their aspiring states to adopt national languages that distinguish them from

neighboring nations and make their case for separation.[8]

Nation-states and state-nations take different approaches to language planning and

selecting national languages. In nation-states, states that emerge as a result of a process of

homogenization of language and culture,[9] the national language does not emerge naturally and is

instead selected and promoted artificially.[10] In state-nations, states that are not rooted in a shared

homogenous identity consistent with their borders, the process of identifying and utilizing a

national language is more organic. In these states, the process of electing a national language

begins with the economic and political supremacy of a group; this group's language inevitably

becomes the language of exchange and the language of the capital. The language furthermore

takes root as national laws are enacted concerning its use and national bureaucracies, education

systems, and armies adopt it.[11]

Kenya is a state-nation; it is ethnically and linguistically diverse. Even the country's

borders do not perfectly encapsulate all forty-three constitutionally recognized tribes within its

borders. Tribes like the Somali and the Maasai are split between Kenya and its neighbors,

Somalia and Tanzania, respectively. Despite this, linguistic planning in Kenya did not take place

in the "state-nation style" but in the "nation-state style," with foundations being laid by

missionaries and colonialists and final pushes from the country's founding father and other

---

[8] Sue Wright, Language Policy and Language Planning, Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks, 2004, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230597037, 42.
[9] René Grotenhuis, *Nation-Building as Necessary Effort in Fragile States* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gr7d8r.11, 109-110.
[10] Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning*, 45.
[11] Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning,* 43.

nationalists. For one, the language of the strongest political and economic ethnic community, the Kikuyu, was not selected as the national language, nor was English, another language familiar to Kenya's elite post-independence. Instead, Swahili, a language native to a minority in Kenya, was chosen.[12] Contrastingly, Kenya's neighbor Tanzania also speaks Swahili as its national language; in fact, the dialect of Swahili spoken in Kenya originates from Tanzania.[13] This shows that Kenyan nationalists did not elect the country's national language under threat of being absorbed by neighbors. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that the country's anxieties of foreign domination were not from its neighbors but from the British Empire to which it formerly belonged.

The British Colonial Administration's Promotion of Swahili in Kenya

European settlers, missionaries, and colonial administrators were perhaps the first to impose the Swahili language in East Africa among Africans. While the colonial government lacked a single coherent language policy for its colony, there were varying preferences for Swahili, English, and vernacular languages among different classes of European imperialists and different policies and initiatives enacted throughout the colonial period. These policies and initiatives saw Swahili spread to the interior of the country more than any other indigenous language or English.

Missionaries who first arrived in Kenya began using vernacular languages to spread Western education and the Gospel. At first, the missionaries saw Swahili as too Islamic to be used to spread the Gospel. This was because the Swahili language was heavily influenced by Arabic, having been originally written in Arabic script, and its native speakers were primarily

---

[12] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 156.
[13] Chege Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity," in *Language and National Identity in Africa,* ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford University Press, 2008), 248.

Muslims. Missionaries, through the Commission on Education in East Africa of 1919, opposed

the use of Swahili by claiming it carried the spirit of Islam and therefore could not be used for

the Christianization of Africans. When using vernacular languages proved difficult due to the

sheer number of indigenous languages spoken in Kenya, the missionaries adopted Swahili and

employed it in their schools and used it to spread the Gospel. Their decision was driven by the

language's wide use across the country.[14]

The colonial settler population, on the other hand, promoted the use of Swahili in East

Africa and opposed teaching Africans English from the get-go ,because it gave them a sense of

difference between the local African population and themselves, thus keeping them at arm's

length. [15] The Swahili these settlers used was a thin version of the language, containing a very

limited and simple vocabulary, that came to be known as KiSsettla, "the settler dialect," and was

primarily used to instruct local African workers in basic tasks. Their preferred use of KiSettla led

to the misconception that the rural folk – also non-native Swahili speakers – could only grasp a

simplified version of the language.[16] The settlers also viewed Swahili, much like Kenyan

nationalists, as an instrument of detribalization necessary for the formation of a proletariat, since

the language was spoken across the many tribes present.[17]

Colonial efforts to standardize Swahili in Kenya began after World War I. The colonial

administration, having just acquired neighboring Tanganyika from the Germans, realized that a

standardized version of Swahili was necessary for education and inter-territorial cooperation. In

1928, an Inter-Territorial Conference was held in Mombasa (Kenya), where all British East

---

[14] Ayub Mukhawana and Priscah Jerono, "Language Attitudes in Colonial Kenya: An Historical Perspective," *International Journal of Education and Research* 2, no. 3 (March 3, 2014), https://www.ijern.com/journal/March-2014/31.pdf, 2-3.

[15] Njubi, *Études Africaines de Géographie Par Le Bas African Studies in Geography from Below*, 113.

[16] Whiteley, "The Changing Position of Swahili in East Africa on JSTOR", 349.

[17] Alamin Mazrui and Ali Mazrui, "Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa," *Jstor*, July 1993, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1601194, 279.

African colonial governments agreed upon the views of the Acting Colonial Secretary of Kenya, which expressed a need for inter-territorial cooperation in the preparation of education materials and a committee that would select, revise, and translate these texts. The resulting committee was the Inter-Territorial Language Committee, created in January of 1930, whose central aim was the promotion, standardization, and development of Swahili. The Inter-Territorial Language Committee selected the Zanzibar dialect, KiUnguja, as the standard dialect of the language for Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.[18] This dialect had been initially promoted and transliterated by the Germans in Tanzania and was not native to Kenya. The Kenyan dialect, KiMvita, was relegated while KiUnguja was taught in schools across the three countries. Today, the KiUnguja dialect is still taught in Kenyan schools as the "Kiswahili Sanifu" or "standard Swahili."[19]

The colonial administration was not motivated by the increase in literacy that standardizing Swahili would bring about, but by its need for literate Swahili-speaking Africans who could communicate broadly in the country and with colonial administrators to form part of its workforce. These literate Swahili-speaking Africans were to work in the colonial administration's district offices, police stations, and the military.[20] In the military, The King's African Rifles East African Battalion, the colonial administration, used Swahili as a "compromise language" between African soldiers who had little to no training in English and Swahili, and British officers who similarly lacked training in African languages. Swahili was the trade language of the region and served as the language for inter-ethnic interactions. Swahili was further used by the colonial administration to foster a distinct identity in the military out of the diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds of the African soldiers. As a result, the dialect KiKAR,

---

[18] Whiteley, "The Changing Position of Swahili in East Africa on JSTOR", 345.

[19] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 248.

[20] Njubi, *Études Africaines de Géographie Par Le Bas African Studies in Geography from Below*, 117.

"language of the KAR," emerged, which was relatively simple and had a distinct lexical borrowing of military terminology.[21] These colonial language policies and preferences led to the further development and spread of Swahili in Kenya, which solidified Swahili as a pan-ethnic language, positioning it as the most suitable language for decolonization and nationalization.

Kenyans' Responses to the Colonial Administration's Promotion of Swahili

The colonial administration's introduction of Standard Swahili as the medium of instruction in schools in Kenya was met with varying reactions. In the coastal region, where most native speakers are found, there was little objection. In Nyanza province, the Western part of Kenya, Bantu speakers and the Luo were opposed to the use of Swahili. The Kikuyus were indifferent and antagonistic towards the language policy and instead set up African Independent schools where they taught in Kikuyu. This reaction, however, can be seen as an opposition to all things introduced by Europeans and not so much as a reaction to Swahili itself.[22]

The reactions of inland communities in Kenya reflected broader frustration with the colonial administration and Kenyans' eagerness to learn English to acquire greater access to material success.[23] A report from the East African Royal Commission (1953-1955) refers to English as the "gate of entry to a new world" and records sentiments from Kenyans regarding their desire to learn the language. The report records Kenyans expressing statements like, "If I were English-speaking, I should be able to live in a new house", "I plan to buy… when I finish my English exams", and "If only I could speak English, I should get more pay."

Kenyans were opposed to learning Swahili because they saw it as a colonial linguistic intervention aimed at restricting their access to the world and its material wealth. Swahili, while

---

[21] Mungai Mutonya and Timothy Parsons, "KiKAR: A Swahili Variety in Kenya's Colonial Army," *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 25, no. 2 (July 27, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1515/jall.2004.25.2.111, 111-112.
[22] Whiteley, "The Changing Position of Swahili in East Africa on JSTOR", 348.
[23] Whiteley, "The Changing Position of Swahili in East Africa on JSTOR", 348.

being popularized in East Africa by colonial administrators, was not used internationally nor was it used in the economic world. According to Mukhwana and Jerono, Swahili was a political weapon the British colonial administration used to keep Kenyans ignorant about themselves and the world, and to inhibit their economic empowerment.[24]

Swahili as a Pan-ethnic Political Language

Because of its early use as a trade language and colonial policies, Swahili solidified as a pan-ethnic language. After the Second World War, towns and cities became centers for African nationalism, and a growing race consciousness was spreading among black East Africans. Black Kenyans were no longer only sensing their ethnic identities as Kikuyus, Luos, and Kambas, but were beginning to recognize and articulate their shared experience of exploitation and domination as black people.[25] Swahili played a key role in this new consciousness, as speeches agitating for independence were made in Swahili. The new movement and the role Swahili played in it was no doubt aided by the returning soldiers who fought for the King's African Rifles. As Chebet-Choge puts it, "Soldiers from East Africa in the two world wars returned with two knowledge weapons; that of warfare and the ability to speak Kiswahili."[26] Politics became national and more inclusive with the communicative facility of Swahili as the lingua franca. It was in this way that Swahili also acquired its sentimental value as a language of African nationalism.[27]

---

[24] Mukhawana and Jerono, "Language Attitudes in Colonial Kenya: An Historical Perspective", 4 & 6.

[25] Mazrui and Mazrui, "Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa on JSTOR", 279.

[26] Susan Chebet-Choge, "Fifty Years of Kiswahili in Regional and International Development," *The Journal of Pan-African Studies* 4, no. 10 (January 1, 2012): 172, https://www.jpanafrican.org/docs/vol4no10/4.10FiftyYears.pdf, 176.

[27] Mazrui and Mazrui, "Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa on JSTOR", 279.

By the 1950s, Swahili was the language of multi-ethnic independence mobilization. According to Francis Njubi, politicians, songwriters, and journalists chose Swahili as the medium of nationalism.[28] Many freedom movements also adopted Swahili as their vehicle for independence. The Mau Mau resistance, originally Muthungu Athii Ulaya, Mugikuyu Ahoote Uthamaki, translated its acronym from Kikuyu to Swahili to 'Mzungu Aende Ulaya Mwafrika Apate Uhuru' (let the white man go to Europe, and let the African get independence).[29] On a more inclusive note, while undergoing translation, Mugikuyu (Kikuyu person) was changed to Mwafrika (African). This was a push from nationalists to become more inclusive and consolidate African agitation for independence. In 1960, the Kenya African Union (KAU), (Kikuyu based, led by Jomo Kenyatta), the National People's Convention Party (NPCP), (Luo based, led by Tom Mboya, but with a good following from workers) and the Kenya Independent Movement (KIM), (mixture of Luo and Kikuyu, led by Oginga Odinga and Julius Kiano) merged to form the Kenya African National Union, (KANU), and chose Swahili as its language of operation.[30] This merger cemented Swahili as the language for political struggle.

By 1952, the anti-colonial movement had blossomed into a violent struggle that agitated the British. In October of that year, the British government declared a state of emergency in response to the Mau Mau uprising, initiating a seven-year state of emergency in Kenya. In the same year, a government commission recommended that Swahili be eliminated from the school administrative system except in regions where it was the mother tongue; in place of this, select "tribal vernaculars" would be used in a bid to preserve them.[31] Within a few years, the Prator/Hutasoit commission ushered in the "English Medium Approach" to primary instruction,

---

[28] Njubi, *Études Africaines de Géographie Par Le Bas African Studies in Geography from Below*, 118.
[29] Chebet-Choge, "Fifty Years of Kiswahili in Regional and International Development", 176.
[30] Chebet-Choge, "Fifty Years of Kiswahili in Regional and International Development", 176.
[31] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 241.

that endorsed English as the only language of instruction. This nipped linguistic nationalism in the bud and stunted the use of Swahili by Kenyans; as a result, nationalist ideas had to be spread in ethnic languages limiting their reach and impact.[32]

Swahili as a Nationalist Language Post-independence

Immediately after Kenya gained its independence in 1963, the new leaders adopted Swahili to express national ideals, political aspirations, and optimism about the future, returning the language to the forefront of national discourse. Swahili was used at political rallies and in public broadcasts. The first post-independence commission of 1964, which saw national unity as the state's main aim, called for Swahili to be recognized as the language of national unity. As a result, Kenya's vernacular languages were relegated to a few teaching hours weekly and were only taught in the first three years of school.[33]

While English's value in nation-building was limited to being purely instrumental, Swahili carried both sentimental and instrumental value.[34] Nationalists like founding President Jomo Kenyatta capitalized on this currency and used Swahili to express their nationalist ideals and aspirations for the country long before the language was gazetted as the state's national language. Kenyatta, for instance, invented "Harambee," meaning togetherness or together we pull, an ideology that whipped Kenyans into collective nation-building. In the spirit of Harambee, Kenyans came together to fundraise for the construction of schools and healthcare centers, raised fees for needy students, and paid medical bills for needy patients. After independence, he also described the enemies of Kenya as 'Ujinga, Umaskini, na Ugonjwa' which are ignorance, poverty, and disease. He created a sense of familiarity and togetherness in the

---

[32] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 241.
[33] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 242-243.
[34] Mazrui and Mazrui, "Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa on JSTOR", 280.

country by calling Kenyans "ndugu zangu," which means my brothers and sisters, and came up with the slogan "uhuru, kazi, na maendeleo" (freedom, work, and development).[35]

Aside from adopting Swahili, nationalists also openly and directly promoted the use of the language by expressing their preference for it. In 1969, Kenyatta, in a speech to parliament, declared Swahili a "national language" and English an "imperialist language," which Kenyans should free themselves from, and urged parliament to make Swahili the national language as a sign of identification and pride.[36] In 1970, the governing council of the ruling party KANU, led by Kenyatta, announced plans for radical linguistic changes in the country. The party called for all Kenyans to always speak in Swahili to both fellow Kenyans and foreigners in official, non-official, political, and social settings. This policy did not exempt the president, ministers, and government officials, who were required to also address all people, including foreigners, in Swahili and use a translator when necessary. This policy was maintained up until 1974. Additionally, all candidates for political office were required to be able to address a group of people in good Swahili for not less than ten minutes. All civil servants and diplomats were also required to pass an oral and written Swahili test.

Since most cabinet ministers would have had significant difficulties in passing a Swahili test above an intermediate level, the statement was not taken seriously. However, in education, the statement signaled that Swahili should be given more prominence in the syllabus.[37] Beyond this, the party's resolutions held no legal standing and were seen as an exhortation to give Swahili more prominence, as well as a warning of future developments.

---

[35] Chebet-Choge, "Fifty Years of Kiswahili in Regional and International Development", 175.
[36] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 243.
[37] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 154.

The Need for a National Language

After independence, Kenyan nationalists felt the country needed its own national identity, to distance themselves from its former colonial master. This explains two of Jomo Kenyatta's earlier-mentioned statements after independence. The first from 1974, when Kenyatta declared, "A nation without a culture is dead, and that is why I decreed that Swahili would be the national language,"[38] and the second declaring Swahili a "national language" and English an "imperialist language" which Kenyans should free themselves from.[39]

According to Kembo-Sure's analysis of African countries' post-independence linguistic policies, African nations were anxious to hold their new polities together, and therefore wanted a language that would unify and link all their countries' regions together ensuring intranational interaction uninhibited by linguistic differences. They also wanted a standardized language that would symbolize distinctiveness from other speech communities and a language that would facilitate their participation in the global systems of communication, technological races, and cultural modernization.[40] Different African countries went about their linguistic policies in one of four ways, choosing to either adopt an indigenous language as the sole official language, adopt an indigenous national language and a foreign co-official language, adopt a foreign language as the sole official language, or adopt more than one foreign language.[41] In Kenya, English was maintained as a co-official language to ensure the country's access to global systems, while Swahili was adopted as a national language to satisfy the need for linguistic difference with the British Empire and linguistic unity in the country.

---

[38] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 155.

[39] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 243.

[40] Kembo-Sure, "Linguistic Standardization and State Rationalization in Kenya: A Move towards Nation-Building," *The Journal of Third World Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=P00054467&DB=p, 191.

[41] Kembo-Sure, "Linguistic Standardization and State Rationalization in Kenya: A Move towards Nation-Building", 190.

Kenya Elects Swahili as its National Language

The choice to elect Swahili as Kenya's national language after independence was not an organic democratic choice, but rather the product of an unconstitutional Presidential decree that was ill-received by the English-speaking political class. After independence, Kenya's constitution designated English as the official language, specifically the language in which the National Assembly conducted its business, and did not refer to any national language, including Swahili.[42] On 4 July 1974, Kenya's founding President, Jomo Kenyatta, announced that from that day forward, Swahili would be the national language of Kenya and that Parliament would conduct its proceedings in the language.

The unfavorable news was not, however unexpected, as the status of Swahili as the national language had been asserted as an eventuality on many occasions at least in the prior decade by the President and his Party, KANU.[43] As early as 1969, President Jomo Kenyatta was reported saying "We are soon going to use Swahili in Parliament, whether people like it or not."[44] In the same year, he urged parliament to make it the national language, emphasizing that Swahili was "a national language" and that English was an "imperialist language," as mentioned earlier.[45] Additionally, and as earlier outlined, KANU's governing council decreed ambitious linguistic plans that were centered on the adoption of Swahili.[46] Kenyatta's 1974 pronouncement was not well-received by the Members of Parliament, some of whom pointed out that such a change contravened the Constitution and that not even the President had the right to amend the Constitution without following the right procedure. Nevertheless, to remove any suggestion of

---

[42] Kenya Const., Ch. IV, sec 55.
[43] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 154.
[44] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 153.
[45] Githiora, "Kenya: Language and the Search for a Coherent National Identity", 243.
[46] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 154.

disloyalty to the President and the ruling party, parliamentarians legally amended the constitution to make Swahili the only official language of the National Assembly.[47]

Parliament's Adoption of Swahili

Traditionally, in state-nations, the elite of the country choose their language as the national language and then enact laws to establish it as such.[48] What Kenyatta did with his 1974 declaration was almost the complete opposite of this expectation, since Kenya's elite after independence, and especially at the time of the 1974 declaration, were firmly Anglophone and were among the first to be affected by the decree. According to Francis Njubi, since Kenya's independence era, the political elite promoted English as the language of the educated elite and Swahili as the language of the masses, which is not to say that it was entirely understood by many, but limitedly understood by lower-class citizens.[49] Most members of the political elite found it difficult to speak Swahili, especially in their professional capacities, and argued that the language's vocabulary was limited. Kenya's Attorney General at the time, Charles Njonjo, scorned efforts to make Swahili Kenya's national language, stating that it "was a concoction of Arabic phrases with an inadequate vocabulary," a criticism the language endured from critics with inadequate command of the language.[50]

After Kenyatta's 1974 declaration, the move to make parliament conduct its business in Swahili was not realized swiftly but abruptly. On July 5, the day after Kenyatta unconstitutionally declared Swahili the national language, Parliament was still debating in

---

[47] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 158.
[48] Kembo-Sure, "Linguistic Standardization and State Rationalization in Kenya: A Move towards Nation-Building."186.
[49] Njubi, *Études Africaines de Géographie Par Le Bas African Studies in Geography from Below*, 118.
[50] Derek Peterson, "Charles Njonjo: Ruthless Defender of Entrenched Inequality," *The Elephant*, March 11, 2022, accessed November 19, 2023, https://www.theelephant.info/features/2022/03/11/charles-njonjo-ruthless-defender-of-entrenched-inequality/.

English. While discussing a motion concerning the proposal to set up an impartial body to

oversee land transactions, Speaker Fred Mati ordered Mr. Mutiso Muyu, a member of the house,

to respond to his colleague in Swahili. The speaker stated:

> Before Mr. Mutiso Muyu stands to reply, I have an important announcement to make. I have spoken to His Excellency the President on the question of this House switching from English to Swahili. I have explained to him the difficulties we have in switching over to Swahili but it is his feeling that we should as an experiment start straightaway, but we shall in due course start sorting out our difficulties. He is going to listen to what Hon. Members are going to say in Swahili. So, all the other problems which we have, like the question of our palantypists and the Constitution, are taken into account. However, he would like to hear Swahili spoken right away, to see that we make a start, so, as from now, I am afraid Mr. Mutiso Muyu will have to reply to his Debate in Swahili.[51]

Fred Mati's statement derides three things: first, parliament's reluctance to adopt Swahili as their

mode of communication; second, the lack of proficiency among members of parliament in

Swahili; and third, Kenyatta's adamant stance that the country adopts Swahili as its national

language.

Many Members of Parliament faced challenges expressing themselves in Swahili after

Kenyatta's declaration. During the same debate on land transactions, Hon. George Anyona, said

he had difficulties expressing himself in Swahili, to which a member shouted that he should then

speak his mother tongue, Gusii. The same happened to Hon. Wachira Waweru who was equally

advised to speak his mother tongue, Kikuyu, which he obliged, only to be cut short by loud

laughter.[52]

Given the difficulties these Members of Parliament found in expressing themselves in

Swahili, Kenyatta's declaration faced some opposition. The Hon. Martin Shikuku of Butere, for

---

[51] "The Place of Kiswahili in Legislative Work," Parliament of Kenya The National Assembly, 2021, http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2022-08/FS21%20The%20Place%20of%20Kiswahili%20in%20Legislative%20Work.pdf, 5.
[52] Parliament of Kenya The National Assembly, "The Place of Kiswahili in Legislative Work", 7.

instance, suggested that the Members of Parliament were breaking the law by debating in

Swahili since the constitution still stipulated that debates in parliament should be held in English.

Hon, G.G. Kariuki responded to him by saying:

> The President, as we all know, is above all laws, now, he has already decided that we must speak in Kiswahili. We agreed yesterday and now, Mzee is demanding to know why we are not speaking in Kiswahili, I would like us to go on as planned even though some words are hard to pronounce.[53]

This further illustrates the difficulty the parliamentarians found in using the language and its

imposition upon them.

Why Swahili and Not Other Languages?

Seeing as Kenya was a multi-lingual state after independence, Swahili was certainly not

the only choice for a national language in the state. Technically speaking, Kenyan nationalists,

Jomo Kenyatta and KANU governing council members, could have opted for any of the

languages spoken in the country. English and Kikuyu, specifically, would have been their first

and second choices, as both were spoken in the capital and by the political elite, with the first

being ethnically neutral. However, due to practical and political realities, these languages were

not viable options.

Leading up to the selection of Swahili as a national language, English was so dominant in

the country that it was the chief reason many Kenyans thought Swahili would never be decreed

the national language.[54] However, as a national language, English would not have been a viable

choice for three reasons. Firstly, selecting English as Kenya's national language would have

been a rejection of the African ethos, and while the Nairobi elites were steeped in Englishness,

Kenyans had a strong desire to embody an African country. Secondly, opting for English would,

---

[53] Parliament of Kenya, The National Assembly, "The Place of Kiswahili in Legislative Work," 6.
[54] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya," 155.

in Harries' words, be "tantamount to making a public declaration in favor of what is foreign."[55]

Thirdly, while Kenya was not trying to argue separation from its neighbors, much like nation-

states previously mentioned, it wanted to forge a national identity separate from the empire it had

belonged to and stave off imperialism.

Kikuyu, after independence, was one of Nairobi's most spoken languages. When

President Kenyatta would communicate in public, he would sometimes switch to Kikuyu to

reiterate a point or make a joke, and his audience, being a Kikuyu majority, would respond to

either of these immediately. It was the language of the politically and economically strongest

ethnic community and the native tongue of the president. It is for this reason that Kikuyu was not

a viable option. However, opting for Kikuyu would have been seen as a Kikuyu attempt to

dominate other ethnic communities in the country and would have incited ethnic rivalry. This

was reflected in the University of Nairobi's Student Union election in 1972, when a Kikuyu

candidate was defeated by a Luo candidate who received support from non-Kikuyu students. The

union was banned by the government, and, according to the students, the ban was a result of the

election's outcome.[56]

Opting for English was politically unsound while opting for Kikuyu was politically

explosive. Other indigenous languages were either not widely spoken or spoken by groups large

enough to signal their dominion over other ethnic communities in the country. Kenyan

nationalists were not willing to pay the price for either of these options and therefore saw Swahili

as the better choice. Opting for Swahili (as it is an African language) was seen as a promotion of

"Africaness" as it originated from Africa and had since managed to rid itself of its colonial

stench during the struggle for independence. On the other hand, Swahili was the native tongue of

---

[55] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 156.
[56] Harries, "The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya", 156.

a small and politically inconspicuous ethnic community, rendering them devoid of the potential for dominance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of Swahili as Kenya's national language is a historical phenomenon shaped by a combination of colonial interventions, nationalist aspirations, and linguistic dynamics. The selection of Swahili was not a result of organic evolution, but rather deliberate interventions and choices made by colonial settlers, missionaries, and Kenyan nationalists.

The colonial administration played a pivotal role in promoting Swahili, especially through missionary efforts and language standardization policies. The missionaries initially hesitated due to Swahili's Islamic connections, but practical considerations led to its adoption. The colonial government's preference for Swahili over English and other indigenous languages promoted its spread. The colonial administration also foreshadowed Swahili's nationalization when they designated it the language of inter-territorial cooperation between Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika colonial territories. This made it the language of resistance, and later on a viable choice for a national language.

Kenyan nationalists, seeking to unify the country and assert independence from British rule, embraced Swahili as a tool for national cohesion and sovereignty. This was possible despite Kenya's ethnic and linguistic diversity due to Swahili's pan-ethnic spread. Nationalist movements, including the Mau Mau resistance, employed Swahili in their struggle for independence, contributing to its status as a political and nationalist language. In the post-independence era, Kenyan nationalists continued to use Swahili to express their nationalist

aspirations and promoted its use until chief nationalist and founding President Jomo Kenyatta

declared it the national language.

Although Kenya is a state-nation, its linguistic planning mirrors those of nation-states.

Kenya's language planning since before its independence has been artificial and intentional on

both colonial and nationalist parts. The artificiality of colonial linguistic planning is

understandable as colonialists were trying to fashion a new colonial state out of an artificially

demarcated territory inhabited by multiple ethnic communities. Nationalists' linguistic planning,

however, is not as neatly explained. The reason nationalists' linguistic planning in Kenya mirrors

that of nation-states has been explained as a European colonial legacy by the likes of Sue

Wright.[57] What I propose in this paper instead is that Kenyan nationalists were conscious of their

African/black identity and were determined to succeed and remain sovereign from the British

Empire. In this endeavor, Swahili played the vital role of carving an identity separate from

"Englishness" that would promote the country's sovereignty and unify it.

---

[57] Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning*, 69.