

Islam and the Development of Kiswahili

by

Mwenda Mukuthuria, Ph.D.
mukuthuriaig@yahoo.com
Egerton University, Njoro, Kenya.

Abstract

The development of Kiswahili into an international language in the 19th century was contributed by trade, wars, colonial administration policies, linguistic advantage of this language being related to Bantu languages in the mainland of E. Africa and religion, among other factors. Most of these factors have been given prominence, including the role played by Christian missionaries towards the development of Kiswahili like using Kiswahili in their activities of preaching, teaching and doing lexicographical research in the key dialects of Kiswahili leading to compilation of dictionaries. This helped a lot in the spread of Kiswahili in the interior. However, the role of Islam, which is arguably older than Christianity in E. Africa, has not been given much coverage. Therefore, this paper intends to highlight how historical interaction between the Swahili people and Islam contributed to the expansion of Kiswahili from the coast, therefore enabling this language to establish a stronghold in the interior of E. Africa. The subject has been approached from a diachronic perspective to expound on the nature of interactions, their consequences and contribution to the development of Kiswahili.

Introduction

The development of Kiswahili language from a minority language in the 18th century to an international language can be attributed to many factors. These factors include: commerce, particularly long distance trade and slave trade, writings, religion, colonial rule, communication, wars, education and post independence government policies, just to name a few (Prins, 1967; Chiraghdin and Mnyampala, 1977; Mbaabu, 1978; Nurse and Spear, 1985; Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995; Chimerah, 1998). Most of these factors have been given exhaustive coverage by these scholars. However, the factor of religion up today portrays the role of Christianity casting a dark shadow over the role that was played by Islamic religion in the spread and development of this language. Despite the long history of Islamic religion in the coast of East Africa dating way back to 7th C. AD (see Ogutu and Kenyanchui, 1987), Christianity which set foot in this region in 15th C., seven centuries later, is given the whole credit in terms of spreading and developing Kiswahili language.

The major historical characters, whose religion was Islam, have been associated with the infamous 19th C. slave trade, forgetting the Portuguese and other Europeans who engineered the vice. The fact that these Europeans were the first to champion the abolition of this devious and immoral act has made most of the scholars to highlight their contribution to the development of Kiswahili; for example under Dr. J. C. Krapf a member of the Church Missionary Society, the first book on Kiswahili Grammar was written. The book was entitled *Outline of the Elements of the Kiswahili Language with Special Reference to Kinika Dialect*. This book was published in Tubingen in 1850; Bishop Edward Steer wrote *A Handbook of the Swahili language as Spoken in Zanzibar*. The missionaries also translated songs and compiled Kiswahili – English Dictionary. It is from the above contribution that Fredrick Johnson got a strong foundation to compile *A Standard English – Swahili Dictionary* and *a Standard Swahili – English Dictionary*. All these dictionaries were published in 1939 and they are still in use. It is important to note that this was a major contribution to Kiswahili development made by Christian missionaries and it is documented widely (cf. Chiraghdin and Munyampala, 1977; Mbaabu, 1978; Gerard, 1981; and Mbaabu, 1985). The consequence of the above missionary work had a great impact in the development and expansion of Kiswahili. Lexicography foundations of this language were set, the grammar of the language was documented and it was also possible to teach Kiswahili language as a second language beyond the coast of E. Africa where it was a native language. However, the above authors have not been categorical to identify the role played by Islam although it is clear that it was Muslim scholars who for the first time reduced Kiswahili into written text using Arabic letters (cf. Kimemia, 2001). Therefore, it is this gap that this paper intends to fill in order to bring to light the role played by Islam towards the development of Kiswahili language. It is important to note that the roles that are going to be discussed here as facilitating development of Kiswahili could be direct; for example, where Swahili and Arab Muslims established *madarasa* to teach basic literacy skills in Kiswahili and Arabic in order to understand the tenets of Islamic faith (Gerard, 1981) or indirect where Kiswahili was to be used as a medium of trade between Swahili-Arab traders and the people from the interior of E. Africa, therefore promoting the *lingua franca* status of this language (Mbaabu, 1978; Chimerah, 1988).

In as much as the Muslims of Arab and Swahili origin participated in the infamous slave trade, their contribution towards the growth of Kiswahili in the East and Central African region can not be overlooked. It should be given a fair treatment particularly in this century when transparency is a key to everything. This is because, the Europeans who ferried millions of slaves out of Africa, not forgetting their enormous scars of colonialism that they engraved in Africa, have been given a fair treatment in the history of Kiswahili language.

The Islamic Religion

Before exploring the role played by Islam in the development of Kiswahili, it is important to understand the word Islam. The word Islam is of Arabic origin, which means peace, cleanliness and submission. Therefore, Islamic religion can be viewed as the state of any human being devoting himself/herself and accepting the teachings and the guidance of Allah. A Muslim is any person who accepts the teachings of this religion and submits himself/herself before Allah. Allah delivered the guidance of this religion to his Holy Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) in 610 AD. This divine message was delivered through Arabic language. It is, therefore, important to note that Arabic language still remains the key language which is used for worship. However, other languages may be used for the purpose of interpreting the Holy Quran. Therefore, when the Arabs arrived in the East African coast, they started interacting with the Swahili people. The cultural contacts between the two groups had enormous impact on the Swahili spiritual and material culture. Most of the Swahili people got converted into Islam. This way, they could not avoid learning Arabic language in order to understand the Holy Quran. Besides, Arabic culture was rich in material things than the Swahili culture. Again, this made it to be adopted quickly. Consequently, Swahili culture had a lot to borrow from Arabic culture; this contributed to Arabic language influencing Kiswahili language. According to Chiraghdin and Mnyampala (1977) the language received a lot of foreign influence from Arabic language. However, this should not be taken to be the case today. The advancement of western technology has made this language to borrow a great deal from English language. However, Chiraghdin and Mnyampala's argument that Kiswahili received a lot of Arabic language influence as a result of adoption of Islam is true. This is evidenced by religion related lexemes which are common in Swahili language even today; for example, *Allah, Mola, Subana, Maulana, Karama* etc. The name for the Holy Book *Quran* has also been borrowed and adopted into Swahili as *Kurani* and many more covering the activities of worship and places of worship like *tawadha, ramadhan, swali, msikiti, kaaba, kibla, bisimilahi* etc. Culturally, Swahili people have also been influenced in their way of dressing. Women wear *Hijab*, head scarves, and men wear long gowns known as *kanzu*. Their laws of marriage are governed by the Islamic law (*sharia*). In all, Islam and its culture have been embraced by the Swahili people. Consequently, to many people, Swahili language is synonymous with Islam (cf. Massamba 1986). Today, Islam is one of the biggest religions in the world with its followers spread in every corner of the world. It started in Arabian subcontinent and spread to the rest of the world.

Swahili Contacts with Muslims

The East Coast of Africa has had old and long contacts with visitors from Middle East and Far East. For this reason, the Arabs and Swahili contacts along the East African Coast cannot be associated with the spread of Islam; however, the meeting of Swahili and Muslim Arabs can be estimated to have taken place during the period following the first *Hijira*, which took place in the year 622 AD. Hijira means scattering, spreading or migration of human beings from one place to another. The reason for hijira, particularly to Muslim Arab converts, around this time was caused by animosity directed to them by non-Muslims. This caused a lot of persecutions to Islamized Arabs. Consequently, many Arabs migrated from Mecca, which was the hub of this religion and dispersed to various parts of the world. Many Muslims targeted for persecution, due to their religious faith, fled to Africa particularly to Egypt, Ethiopia and others came to East Africa. The notable group of Muslims who first appeared in E. Africa fleeing religious persecution includes King al Husain ibn Ali with his six sons. They founded their safe heaven along the East African coastal towns of Manda, Pate, Tanga, Mafia Kilwa, and the Comoros. A number of reasons made these Arabs to come to East Africa with a lot of ease: firstly, there was improved marine technology. Dhows using sails, facilitated by monsoon winds, made it easier for these Arabs to come to East Africa. To some of those who were being persecuted, it was not their first time to come to Africa; there were those who had known Africa as businessmen, tourists or as scholars. Therefore, for them to turn to the coast of East Africa for safety was easier. Besides, Arabian sub-continent is close to the Coast of East Africa; therefore, many Arabs who were escaping persecution came to East Africa. It is here that they came into contact with the Swahili people.

When these newcomers stepped in East Africa, they were given a warm reception by the Swahili, who are historically known to be a courteous society (Chimerah, 1998). During their stay along the coast, these foreigners interacted with the Swahili. This led to intermarriages between these groups. The Arabs learnt the Swahili culture and language. In turn, the Arabs introduced the Swahili people into Islam. New Arab-Swahili settlement proliferated along the East African Coast, particularly in Lamu, Mombasa, and other coastal settlements. As they continued to stay, commerce as an activity started developing. This led to the Arabs expanding their activities and even interacting with the mainland communities. Muslim-Arabs and Muslim-Swahilis teamed up and all were entrenched into the activities of trade. The main commodities of trade, particularly around this time, were cloth from India, beads, spices, and other items of trade made of metal like swords and daggers.

From the mainland African communities, the main items of trade included leopard skins, tortoise shells, rhinoceros horns, ostrich feathers, wax, ivory, etc. By 18th and 19th C., slaves, cloves, and gold from Central Africa were among the popular items used in the international trade, which was basically dominated by the Swahili and Arabs from the East African Coast (Khatib, 1983; Ogutu and Kenyanchui, 1987; Chimerah, 1998).

According to Khatib (1983) when feudalism was at the peak in Arabia and Far East between 10th and 18th C., luxurious commodities were in high demand and, therefore, this fuelled the trade along the East African Coast. Also, by 18th C. mercantilism was at the peak in Europe. Due to industrial revolution, raw materials from countries far away from Europe were in great demand.

In East Africa, there was an increase in Muslim-Arab traders. The coast region was attractive to all the people. It became even more vibrant when the Busaidi monarchy from Oman led by Seyyid Said established a settlement in Zanzibar in 1832. Later in 1840, he transferred the capital of his sultanate from Oman to Zanzibar. Due to the growing importance of Kiswahili as a *lingua franca* and as a language of international trade along the East African Coast, all the Arabs who arrived in Zanzibar had to learn Kiswahili for the purpose of communication. Besides, this language was also used in the sultanate to spread Islamic religion. The fact that the Sultan learnt Kiswahili and used it for communication elevated the status of Kiswahili, therefore, making it a language of the ruling class. This time, the trade along East African Coast was under total control of Arabs who were Muslims and the Swahili middlemen, who were also Muslims. Therefore, when the long distance trade convoys started penetrating the East African mainland, the chief guides were the Swahili in partnership with their rich Muslim-Arabs, who had converted them.

One of the famous Arab traders of this period in East Africa is Hemed Mohammed El Murjebi, popularly known as *Tipu Tip*. During his period, 1840 – 1905, Kiswahili spread as far as Congo in Central Africa. It was during his time that Kiswahili was referred to as *Ki(u)ngwana* (language of the civilized), while the speakers of *Ki(u)ngwana* were referred to as *Wa(u)ngwana* (the civilized). The *Wa(u)ngwana* were the Swahili who had converted into Muslims. They were trading in partnership with the rich Arab in the business of buying ivory, rubber, and slaves. Generally, it was mandatory for the porters and other servants of the Swahili, who were Muslims, learn Islam. The language, which was the medium, for this purpose was mainly Kiswahili. This strengthened Kiswahili as a language of communication along the trade routes in the whole of East Africa. Besides, along the same routes followed by the long distance traders, settlements started mushrooming. These acted as centers for exchange of goods. The language of commerce was Kiswahili. Examples of the famous settlements which came up around this time include: Bagamoyo, Tabora, Kigoma, Tanga, Shinyanga, etc. They all acted as trade centers and points of rest and replenishment after long distance of travel. Within these centers, mosques were built for the purpose of prayers. Besides, Islamic schools, *Madarasa*, were built to teach the locals how to read, write, and the fundamentals of Islamic religion. The language of instruction in these schools was Kiswahili.

On the other hand, in the mosques, Arabic and Kiswahili languages were used as languages of communication. This way, Kiswahili language got appreciated by the locals; therefore spreading far and wide in the mainland of East Africa.

The growing centres also acted as social places. Porters, guides, and other servants interacted with the mainland people in various activities like gathering the commodities of trade. The language of communication was Kiswahili. Kiswahili was therefore spread along the trade routes from the East African coast to Central Africa and some parts of Southern Africa.

Due to the fact that Kiswahili was used to spread Islamic religion, it was influenced at the cultural and lexical level by Arabic language (Bosha, 1993; 1994). Imams, who were of Arab origin, particularly contributed a great deal in influencing Kiswahili language through their sermons to the congregation. In most cases, they switched to Arabic words where the local languages like Kiswahili could not readily get equivalent words to translate Holy Quran. This way, many Arabic words were used during prayers and sermons to avoid incorrect translation. The loan words that entered into Kiswahili from that time are still being used in the standard Kiswahili. This influence expanded Kiswahili on the side of vocabulary. This way, many religious Arabic words entered into the mainstream Kiswahili (Bosha, *ibid*).

As Islamic religion continued to spread in East Africa, also Kiswahili was spreading. According to Shabani (1983), the use of Kiswahili for religious activities by the Muslims led to the spread of this language in Rwanda when the Rwandese allowed the Germans to enter their country in 19th C. The Muslim Swahili who accompanied them as porters and interpreters finally found their way there. Consequently, they introduced Kiswahili language through the context of preaching and later in the traditional school system. Shabani (1983) reports that the traditional ruler of Rwanda at the time, Yuhi Musinga, accepted to learn Kiswahili together with the members of the royal court in order to improve human relations with the Germans. From this time, Kiswahili language started to be taught in traditional royal schools. This way, Kiswahili gained root here and started spreading in Rwanda.

According to Gerard (1981), Kiswahili language reached Uganda through long distance trade before 1862. The Swahili, who were Muslims in company of their Arab merchants, introduced this language to this country. Initially, this language was received in the royal court by the Kabaka of Buganda. By 1889, this language was widely used for the purpose of communication. According to Khatib (1983:31) Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda was fluent in Kiswahili language to the extent that he used it to communicate with the British administration, which was then based in Zanzibar. It is worth noting that, Islamic culture has greatly influenced the culture of Baganda people, particularly in their mode of dressing. Therefore, Kiswahili language started spreading alongside Islam in Buganda kingdom. Today, Islam in Uganda is in the forefront of developing and spreading Kiswahili. Islamic University in Uganda is among the institutions, which are teaching, researching, and training Kiswahili manpower. The achievements by this institution is a tall order achievement taking into consideration that Kiswahili is at the lowest level of development in Uganda due to the British colonial underdevelopment of this language and the subsequent lack of proper government policy in relation to this language up today.

In the central African country of Burundi, Marcel (1983:55) confirms that it is the Arabs who spread Kiswahili in this country. However, he has not mentioned how these Arabs executed this role. Also, he is crediting the Arabs alone forgetting the Swahili people who were in partnership with the Arabs particularly in the activities of trade in the mainland of East and Central Africa. Neither the activity of trade nor religion has been associated with this spread. Therefore, Islam which contributed to interaction between the mainland people and the traders has been ignored.

As it was in the case of Rwanda, the Germans played a major role particularly when they colonised Burundi in the beginning of 20th C. Marcel (1983) points out that even after the departure of Germans, Kiswahili continued to be used by the Arabs, particularly, in teaching the Islam. Although the Catholic Belgians who took over after Germans were discriminating the Muslim Arabs, who were speakers of Kiswahili, their efforts did not yield anything in obstructing the spread of Kiswahili and Islamic religion. Their attempt to confine Muslims in an isolated reserve in Usumbura (present day Bujumbura) strengthened Kiswahili in the sense that this language managed to survive in a closed group communication made of Muslims. Later when restriction was relaxed, this language was used freely for interaction by these Muslims in all facets of life. This way, it gained strength and started spreading despite the hostility.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that religious persecutions, trade, tourism and scholarship were some of the factors that made the Arabs to come to E. Africa. Consequently, cultural contacts between Swahili people and Arabs enriched Kiswahili language in terms of material culture and linguistic influence. Linguistic influence of Arabic language into Kiswahili came as a result of Arabic language being used for the purpose of worship by the Swahili people who had converted into Islam. Besides, it is also notable that Kiswahili was used for commerce and other social interactions; all this enriched Kiswahili with terms in these domains. It is important to note that the lexemes borrowed since then are still in use today.

Culturally, the Swahili people have been influenced in their ways of life by Islam. Their religious belief is dominantly Islam. As a result, the Islamic culture of marriage, inheritance, burial, and many other rites have enriched the traditional culture of the Swahili people in all facets of life. It is from this reservoir that Kiswahili language has drawn terms that have developed it to become a *lingua franca* in East and Central Africa.

The Swahili and Arab traders, who were Muslims, were the ones who penetrated the interior of East and Central Africa in big numbers in 19th C. While carrying out their activities of trade, they used Kiswahili widely as a *lingua franca* for commerce, social interactions and for the purpose of worship. In order to enhance the understanding of the Quran, Kiswahili language was used to train basic literacy skills in *madarasa*. This together with preaching contributed to many people learning this language and therefore spreading it far and wide in the interior.

Though the Swahili and Arabs have been associated with slave trade in the 19th C. (cf. Ogutu and Kenyachui, 1987), their contribution to the expansion of Kiswahili was phenomenal. In this century, the issue of the infamous slave trade of 18th and 19th C. should not be tagged to any religion. Indeed, it was centered on personalities and not the whole society. This is because recent historical research has proved that African chiefs of the time were central to this vice. In Kenya, particularly, Chief Gutu wa Kibetu, from Central Kenya, and other tribal chiefs actively contributed to this trade (cf. Mwonera, 1994).

Apart from few cases of Arab and Swahili personalities who participated in slave trade, it should be understood that like their European counterparts, there were Muslims of Arab and African origin, who genuinely participated in humanitarian activities that led to the development of Kiswahili language overtly. These are the people who introduced the Swahili to Islamic religion as well as teaching them how to read and write. We should appreciate that the development of Kiswahili language did not start during the time of slave trade. The evidence to this effect is the fact that the earliest Kiswahili classical literature was preserved in Arabic writing with a lot of moral themes from Islamic religion; for example, the role of hard work, importance of religion to human beings and the importance of the institution of the family are some of the major themes that have been covered in the classical Kiswahili epics like *Hamziyya*, *Herakali*, *Inkishafi* and *Utenzi wa Mwanakupona*, just to name a few. Some of these epics date way back before the advent of slave trade in East Africa. For example, Herakali epic, also known as *Utenzi wa Tambuka* dates to 1728. Therefore, this historical contribution associated with Islamic civilization cannot be overlooked. Also, it is unfair to judge the role of Islam in East Africa in a span of one century forgetting more than thirteen centuries, which the Muslims were harmoniously co-existing with the Swahili people and other Africans in East Africa.

In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, Islamic religion has greatly helped in spreading Kiswahili together with spicing this language with a unique culture, which makes this language to stand conspicuously in East and Central Africa today as a language of international discourse. As a result, this has endeared and entrenched it to enormous Islamic congregation. In status today, Kiswahili is second to Arabic as a main language which is used for teaching Islamic religion in East and Central Africa. It is important to note that a lot of literature concerning this religion is written or translated into Kiswahili, including The Holy Quran.

References

- Bosha, I. 1993. *Taathira za Kiarabu Katika Kiswahili Pamoja na Kamusi Thulathiya*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press
- Bosha, I.1994. Athari za Kiarabu katika Kiswahili Sanifu. Tasnifu ya Uzamili (Isiyochapishwa), Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam
- Chimerah, R.1998. *Kiswahili: Past, Present and Future Horizons*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press
- Chiraghdin, S. na Mnyampala, M. 1977. *Historia ya Kiswahili*. Nairobi: O.U.P.
- Gerard, Albert 1981. *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa*. Harlow: Longman Burntmill (pp. 93 – 153)
- Kimemia, J. N. 2001. *Kiswahili: The Dilemma of Developing The National Language*. Egerton University Press
- Khatib, M. S. 1983. Historia na Maendeleo ya Kiswahili Zanzibar. Katika: TUKI. *Lugha ya Kiswahili. Makala za Semina ya Kimataifa ya Waandishi wa Kiswahili I*. Dar es Salaam: Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam (uk. 19 – 50)
- Marcel, B.1983. Lugha ya Kiswahili Nchini Burundi. Katika: TUKI. *Lugha ya Kiswahili. Makala za Semina ya Kimataifa ya Waandishi wa Kiswahili I*. Dar es Salaam: Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam (uk. 55 – 61)
- Massamba, D. P. B. 1986. “On the Influence of Local Languages on Kiswahili: The case of Mara Region in Tanzania.” In: *Kiswahili: Juzuu 53/1 na 53/2* (pp. 67 – 83)
- Mazrui, A.A. and A. Mazrui, 1995. *Swahili State and Society: The Political Economy of an African Language*. Nairobi: East African Education Publishers
- Mbaabu, I. 1978. *Kiswahili Lugha ya Taifa*. Nairobi: K.L.B
- Mbaabu, I. 1985. *New Horizons in Kiswahili*. Nairobi: K.L.B
- Mbaabu, I. 1991. *Historia ya Usanifishaji wa Kiswahili*. Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd.

- Mukuthuria, M. 2001. Matatizo Yanayokabili Kiswahili Karne ya Ishirini na Moja. Katika: *Islamic University Journal*, Vol. 2 No.2, Mbale – Uganda (uk. 135 – 142).
- Mwongera, N.S. 1994. An Economic History of the Imenti of Mt. Kenya, 1800 – 1945. [Unpublished M. Phil. Thesis] Moi University.
- Nurse, D. and Spear, T. (1985) *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800 – 1500*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ogotu, M. A. and Kenyanchui, S. (1987) *An Introduction to African History up to 1885*. Nairobi: College of Adult and Distance Education, University of Nairobi.
- Prins, A.H.J. (1967) *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast*. London: International African Institute.
- Sengo, T. S. Y. (1998) Kiswahili na Uislamu Afrika Mashariki. Unpublished Semina Paper, Islamic University in Uganda.
- Shabani, Mujiyambere, H. 1983. Lugha ya Kiswahili Nchini Rwanda. Katika: TUKI. *Lugha ya Kiswahili: Makala za Semina ya Kimataifa ya Waandishi wa Kiswahili 1*. Dar es Salaam: Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam (uk. 51 – 54).