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The Limitations of an Ecumenical Language

The Case of Ki-Swahili

Frans Wijsen and Ralph Tanner

Western social scientists have found the concept of homogenisation useful in their endeavour to understand cultures other than their own. It made more sense for them to give the title "The Nuer" or whatever to the results of their fieldwork than to give their work a title such as "Some Aspects of Nuer Life as Seen through the Cooperation of a Small Number of Informants and from a Limited Range of Personal Observations," which would possibly be more appropriate.

However, there are no homogenous societies, except maybe for such rare cases as the inhabitants of Easter Island and other islands in the Pacific who became isolated into extinction. But even in the former case, their current language shows traces of its Polynesian origin (Diamond 2005: 77–135).

East Africa with which we are concerned here has never been isolated to a degree which would have led to cultural homogenisation. Men have always wandered about beyond their natal areas, and as far as we know there have been cultural or physical invasions of Nilo-Hamites from the North and Bantu from the South. In addition, there have been substantial internal migrations which account, for example, for Sukuma communities in the South as well as many who have worked in the South African mines or visited Asia in the army during World War Two.

The concept of homogenisation developed quite recently by creating geographical boundaries and giving those inside such boundaries a title, as it was in the case of the Sukuma of Tanzania who until the 1950s did not consider themselves to be an ethnic group (Wijsen and Tanner 2002). Large numbers of Sukuma and Nyamwezi men worked as porters between the Great Lakes and the coastal ports. And the coast itself has been influenced by a succession of seaborne outsiders from India, Indonesia, China, Portugal, and Oman.

It may well be that those involved within their natal cultures see themselves in homogenous terms although it contains innumerable imported elements. This is the case with the copper bracelet in Sukumaland which is interpreted by the Sukuma as an indigenous ornament, whereas historical evidence shows that the copper bracelet was brought from the coast by Sukuma porters. Of course, the

social scientist may choose to simply reproduce the native's point of view. But it is questionable whether such an approach can explain the complexities involved in intercultural communication.

We have to accept that any culture is in the continuous process of being invaded by outside facts and ideas from visitors, advertisements, newspapers, television, wireless, and so on, over which people have no objective control. These media do not have to be used actively to be influential.

We are always dealing with the degrees in which new ideas and practices are used according to demographic and social factors. Even the simplest and most commonplace terms will give comprehending difficulties for those at the lower end of possible intellectual understanding and to those who are recent immigrants.

Thus, we have to accept that most if not all cultures are composite and that there is an interconnectedness of cultures which Hannerz (1992: 218) calls the "global ecumene." There is a constant process of communication and translation both within and between cultures. The aim of this article is to assess critically the notion of ki-Swahili as an ecumenical langue (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995; 1998: 171) in the light of our studies on religion and society in Usukuma (Tanner and Wijsen 1993; Wijsen and Tanner 2000, 2002). According to Mazrui and Mazrui, the use of ki-Swahili as a lingua franca in East Africa facilitated convergence between people of various tribes and religions.

The Constant Inevitability of Translation

Translation is a multistage process which involves initially the meanings which people attribute to their natal knowledge. There is a problem already in ki-Swahili as ecumenical language as there are only few monolingual ki-Swahili speakers. So to most ki-Swahili speakers the understandings of their natal language will undercut the very concept of monolingualism in contemporary Tanzania.

Of course, any language is a hybrid from its very origins. But ki-Swahili particularly so because not only is it a Bantu language grammatically but its first written form was in Arabic script, and much of its vocabulary is based on Arabic. Of the six nouns recorded in the dictionary for "belief," five are based on Arabic. Currently, English words are used to circumvent ki-Swahili words which may not have the same meaning; the word "to develop" has been turned into a verb *kudevelop*; *amebenziniwa* is "to be corrupt."

Many coastal Swahili will have some relic knowledge of German and possibly some Hindi, certainly a substantial amount of English and probably a tribal language as well, all of which will become allied to the overall Bantu structure. This means that the purveyors of ki-Swahili as the lingua franca of Tanzania will themselves have been subject to substantial linguistic influences way outside any basic Bantu semantic understandings.

Those who learn ki-Swahili are creatures of other cultural systems which do not accept or share the quasi-Arabic understandings of that language, as they have been brought up in social environments which have little in common with that of native ki-Swahili speakers. An extreme example of this would be those who have learnt ki-Swahili as a professional requirement to the extent that they are accepted as bilingual. However, this is in speech and writing but not in understandings. The ways in which they use this new language reflect their own culture. Intellectually and emotionally they will still be Sukuma, Haya, or indeed English.

Linguistic Secrecy and Its Individualism

The range of individual thinking is presumably unlimited in how it works for the benefit of human beings. Individuals are only handicapped by physiological and psychological incapacities of which they may not be aware. Thinking is usually in their native tongue that is almost certainly more adequate for recounting simple facts than for expressing emotions. When it comes to writing, the possibilities of adequate representation are further reduced by various personal inadequacies and probably the sheer impossibility of translating mental complexities into words.

While there is always a possible intellectual assessment of spoken and written words in terms of some assumed shared meaning, their importance to the individuals themselves is entirely personal. There is a constantly changing "working misunderstanding" in which individuals interpret words and phrases in ways that satisfy them in their privacies but are often not what the communicator intended (Tanner and Wijsen 1993). They have been understood in entirely private ways, which allows individuals to keep themselves psychologically and socially secure, while at the same time getting at least some of the advantages that come from assumed conformity. This is not a conscious duplicity but one of the complex paradoxes which allow people to exist socially while maintaining their individuality.

The Nature of Abstract Thought

It is a fallacy of Western social science to assume that the thinking patterns of nonliterate or partially literate cultures and individuals therein are less complicated and less capable of abstract thinking than those of cultures which have had literacy available, at least for the elite, for millennia.

The Sukuma traditional songs have short verses individually composed and longer choruses which in their brevity and symbolic illusions are just as complicated as the Japanese *haiku*, virtually impossible to translate and explain except at great length. Ki-Sukuma is a complicated tonal language with no less than seventeen tenses which, in the ways it can be used to express personal feelings, must rival Romance languages (Batibo 1985).

Fernandez's study of Bwiti religious imagination (1982: 528f.) has two successive sections with significant headings: "One Word, Many Meanings; One Voice, Many Understandings," and "Elements in Folklore; Edification by Puzzlement." This would suggest – and there are no reasons for suggesting that East African thinking is less complex – that rather than appreciating simplicity in religious affairs the Bwiti may well prefer to be intellectually challenged.

To think in abstract terms may be an individual ability, and such thinking is provided for in ki-Swahili by the addition of the prefix *u* to a noun. While there may be the possibility that this particular form of thinking is a result of intellectual development, it may also be a result of having the time to think independent of the demands of subsistence farming.

It seems more likely that the Sukuma put considerable symbolic content into commonplace objects, and that they impute "magical" power to a range of objects so that they can understand the Roman Catholic dogma of the Real Presence of Christ in the mass more easily than other aspects of Christian belief. We have to assume that abstract thought in symbols is commonplace.

The Transfer of Concepts through Language

Can concepts be transferred from one cultural setting to another through the medium of language, either spoken or written? We can assume that some transfer is possible between languages which are in the same linguistic group. Whatever the Arabic background of ki-Swahili may be, in grammar it is a Bantu language and theoretically there should be no difficulties in transferring its ideas into other Bantu languages but not into the Nilo-Hamitic language of the Maasai or into the "click" language of the Sandawe. But parts of languages are not transferred in the abstract; they are communicated. It is a social process.

We are considering here ki-Swahili, which is spoken by some fifty million people in various linguistic codes along the East African coast and inland, in Uganda, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, and Malawi. This language in its purist form can be heard and read in Zanzibar where there is a well-established literature of some antiquity written in Arabic script. In Tanzania, it is the national language developing from its version established as the language of administration by the German colonial government.

In its purist form it is spoken by the self-styled Swahili elite living along the coast as shown in the phrase *mwenyeji wa pwani, washenzi wa bara*, which could be translated as "we are the civilised inhabitants of the coast, and the uncultured live inland." So there is a feeling of cultural superiority among natal ki-Swahili speakers without any understanding of its grammar and semantic range.

As it spread inland because of its political, administrative, and commercial usefulness, it came up against an almost endless series of cultures which had their own linguistic understandings that they attached to their use of this language. Of course, some of these cultures are small in terms of population and perhaps insignificant in terms of their ability to remain more or less intact, such as the Digo, Zigua, and Sandawe. Others, on the other hand, are supported by large populations whose languages are seen as inferior only because their written forms are confined to recent translations of the Bible. The Nyamwezi-Sukuma-speaking group now number at least ten million people, and both the Haya and the Chagga are not only numerous but contain an increasing number of intellectuals.

So ki-Swahili, as it extends its range, is becoming semantically entangled with other well-established languages and cultures. What will then become of this language that is increasingly stressed politically and which may be seen by many as part of an assertion of coastal dominance, and with it an association with Islam?

The Bias of Documentation

Any spoken language is elusive and consists of sounds which disappear as soon as they have been spoken. With this their meanings also disappear. Its ephemeral nature makes it difficult for it to be a fac-

tor in sustaining political pressure and maintaining its cultural status overall.

So there is an inevitable focus on what has been printed, and in the case of ki-Swahili what has been written are translations of the Bible, religious and secular pamphlets, poems as well as newspapers, and they all show the influence of the coastal culture which sustains it as the natal language of coastal people. Of the fourteen producers of the Swahili dictionary, only three come from outside this coastal belt (Khamisi 1981), and yet it is certainly a lingua franca which has been in wide use for a century.

People who write and print are usually in the higher intellectual group, and most of them use the more formal aspects of ki-Swahili so there can be little doubt that what is printed will be better understood in Bagamoyo than in Ujiji on Lake Nyasa, five hundred miles inland. Between these to poles, there is substantial differences in how this language is used and understood.

Translations of the bible into ki-Swahili have produced a linguistically acceptable document, according to the committees of intellectuals who produced it and their confreres who have read it critically, but it is not the ki-Swahili which is used and understood away from the coastal belt that is largely Muslim (Tanner 2005). The equivalent translation of the Koran by the Ahmaddiya is not regarded by orthodox Muslims as having the sanctity of the original which records Allah's words in classical Arabic, and these alone are Holy.

The Translation of Secular Understandings

The spreading of ki-Swahili is an official policy, which involves an immediate concern for national unity rather than escalations of ethnocentrism that have hindered development in neighbouring countries. It has been the language of administration for over a century, and probably it has been used for low-level business transactions for even longer. British administrators were required to be bilingual as a precondition for their confirmation in the Tanganyika Administrative Service. This has meant the use of ki-Swahili in schools and the lack of any official support for tribal languages even when spoken by large numbers of people.

So there have been immediate benefits in terms of political unity, which allowed the use of civil servants anywhere in the country with no regard for their tribal origins. Without doubt, it has got the country over the immediate consequences of independence, without any civil war or any overconcern

for tribal balances in political institutions (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995).

The downside is that this language when it is learnt in school leads nowhere. Literature in ki-Swahili is difficult to read, and there is no range of books which would contribute to national development. As such, it is of no use for learning agricultural, medical, or engineering sciences any more than Gallic and Welsh languages would be in Britain. Few if any would think of studying ki-Swahili to improve their careers as it opens few doors for advancement.

East African society is a mixture of cultures which is now more invasively global and accompanied by uncertainties. The retention of some quasi-traditional tribal identity provides them with the protection against disappointments (Wijsen and Tanner 2000: 152; 2002).

The cultural consequences of globalisation are complex. On the one hand, people continue to blend beliefs and practices of various cultures. On the other hand, people define narrow-minded identities (retribalisation) and fight a "holy war" against other tribes. Thus, to what extent can Swahili as a ecumenical language de-tribalise religious and ethnic affiliations? (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995: 1–7)

Ki-Swahili is part of Tanzanian national identity, but it is not known how long it takes before individuals give personal priority to their national affiliations rather than their regional and tribal preferences. In the meantime, most people, especially the men, are bilingual, using ki-Swahili when it has a short-term purpose while expressing their privacies and their domestic lives in their tribal languages. Ki-Swahili may have an overt usefulness in their public lives when approaching government officials, in local government externally oriented, and within their regions political activity, and, of course, in urban business when they meet people from other communities.

The further one goes from the core areas of natal ki-Swahili speakers the more attenuated becomes its grammatical content. What was called *kisettla* in Kenya was the language which the settlers used to communicate with their mainly Kikuyu workers. It was a linguistic code without tenses or the enclitics of place or noun classes. It grated on the ears of those who spoke the language correctly, but this linguistic code was used to communicate successfully with generations of workers.

It was also used widely in the Jamaa movement (Tanner 1968; Fabian 1971) as well as in the military in both Kenya and Uganda where it was turned into a professional requirement. So formal grammatical ki-Swahili became watered down to the

minimal requirement for material communication, and it was not used for the expression of emotion for which it was semantically inadequate.

The Translation of Religious Understandings

There are two aspects to translation. First, there is the search for equivalences in traditional languages and the assumption that these will represent patterns of thinking which can then be integrated into Western-oriented Christian theology. And secondly, the search for equivalences with other major religions, Islam in particular, for which the search is based on existing printed sacred or theological literature.

Since traditional East African religious ideas and practices are expressions of situations in which individuals or groups find themselves within the broad parameters of their cultural understandings, it is both difficult to analyse while at the same time relatively easy to find points of similarity with Christian ideas. What constitutes religion in Africa is very much more an individual affair than it might be in Western cultures. But even this is questionable when we realise how much Western practices and ideas vary within denominational orthodoxies.

People move in and out of particular religious frameworks according to their circumstances and local popularities. They are not used to being questioned about their beliefs or anything else for that matter, and most would have a very limited vocabulary to express complicated ideas. As in other cultures, they are likely to have different linguistic codes to cope with different situations. How can you search for religious equivalences when Tanzanian languages even do not have a word for "religion"? A traditional Sukuma being asked what his religion is might well reply "I am just a Sukuma" (Wijsen and Tanner 2002), stating that he has not joined any seemingly imported way of relating to the divine.

The absence of orthodoxy in East African religious thought and practice is not a sign of its simplicity or cognitive inadequacy but a consequence of the absence of literacy and printed theology largely independent from social functions. It is a practical syncretism in which there are geographical and cultic concentrations focused on charismatic individuals.

While elsewhere religious orthodoxies developed on the grounds of longevity of theological documentation, with the mass of religious behaviour being carried out parallel to or indifferent to orthodoxy, in Eastern Africa individuals create their own mixture of religious practices and ideas. Descriptions of this "do-it-yourself" way of dealing with the divine may be largely a result of social scientists' looking for a system and in a sense creating it within their own linguistic and religious parameters. To describe religion they use *dini*, which is a ki-Swahili word derived from Arabic and associated with Islam. Fieldworkers may give the heading "propitiation ceremonies" and list them by descriptive titles. But when such ceremonies are observed, and most ethnographers will only see half a dozen ceremonies at most, they find out that they have little in common except propitiation.

So it seems that these localised and individual religions do not have systematised practices. To an extent all their religious ideas and practices are individual and parallel if not predate the "sheilaism" of the American sociologists who established that each person who was not affiliated to a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, still considered himself to be religious in his own ways, even though he felt no need to formulate the specifics (Bellah et al. 1985: 221).

Ecumenism as a Need and Ki-Swahili as the Means

Both Christianity and Islam, almost from their start, have claimed that they are global faiths, and that there is a potential unity of all men's beliefs in their understanding of the Divine. Islam, apart from the Sunni-Shia divide and the contempt of the orthodox for the Ahmaddiya, has never involved itself in the complexities of ecumenism since its own dominance is divinely self-evident and aided perhaps by the clarity and simplicity of the Five Pillars of the Faith.

Christianity, on the other hand, has been preoccupied with denominational divisions and ecumenism as the way for healing these morally inappropriate theological and institutional differences.

Most of the Christian denominations in Eastern Africa which are not just tribally based use ki-Swahili in their writings, and this offers the theoretical basis for unification in a religion which has always been denominational because it is based on abstractions which are impossible to define in ways that parallel the simple and clear requirements of Islam.

Most Christians would probably accept the right of other Christians to worship in ways that are denominationally different. But ecumenists are forgetting that for reasons that are not necessarily religious, Roman Catholics do not want to be Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists are not interested in discussing even the possibility of unity. Ecumenism

for most would mean the loss of a socioreligious identity and security which they appreciate in an increasingly globalising world.

Ecumenism seems to be an exclusively Christian activity for the unification of denominations. Christians assume that there should be some sort of rapprochement with Muslims and Jews, in which these other faiths are not particularly interested. It would appear to be a preoccupation of those with high institutional religious status who would prefer to conduct these negotiations in English, which is the language in which they express their theological status. To conduct these complicated issues in ki-Swahili would seem to them to be retrogressive, and whatever agreements might be reached would inevitably mean the expensive retranslating of their literature and its reprinting; behind theology lurks the costs of change (Tanner 1973).

The Christian Churches in East Africa have long based their popularity on a combination of regional and tribal exclusivities and in the Roman Catholic Church until Vatican II this was the combination of Latin, which was understood by very few of their members, and the use of local languages in ancillary prayers and sermons.

Conclusion

The change to the use of ki-Swahili is more than anything else a political necessity, as no social group wants to be associated with an increase in or maintenance of tribalism or religionism. But for reasons given above, it seems likely that people will use this largely imposed language in ways other than prescribed by political and religious correctness. Thus, whereas the use of ki-Swahili facilitated understanding between people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995; 1998: 171), we nevertheless hold that this understanding is only partial.

There is a working misunderstanding in which individuals create their own meanings out of words in correspondence with their needs (Tanner and Wijsen 1993; Wijsen and Tanner 2000: 34). On the institutional level the keywords have been defined in ki-Swahili dictionaries. Their meanings have been accepted and at the same time ignored because the traditional ways of thinking about political and religious matters do not correspond to the formalised dogmas of religious institutions or political parties. Whereas the world is a "global ecumene," we may not underestimate its complexities in terms of communication and understanding (Hannerz 1992).

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