

## The Arabic stimulus to the Swahili language: A post-colonial balance sheet

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### **Abstract**

*It is generally accepted that Arabic has had a major impact on the growth of the Swahili language over the centuries. The meaning of this linguistic stimulus of Arabic, however, has been a matter of far lesser consensus in both the colonial and postcolonial dispensations. Does the Semitic influence reduce Swahili's African credentials, and does it amount to some degree of linguistic Islamization? If so, is the development an argument in favor of or against Swahili in relation to its role as a language of Christianity and, later of national belonging and expression? And can one be anti-Arab and anti-Islam but pro-Swahili at the same time without having to dis-Arabize Swahili? These are some of the central questions addressed in this article, reflecting conflicting positions of various interest groups, even as Swahili's own momentum and dynamism have increasingly neutralized the contestation over its identity.*

**Key words:** Swahili, Arabic stimulus, Islamization, Christianity, impact

Africa is home to the largest number of living languages of Semitic origin, the linguistic family that includes Arabic. Arabic itself is by far the most widely spoken Semitic language in the world, while Kiswahili is the most widely spread indigenous African language. The second most widely spoken Semitic language in the world is probably Amharic in Ethiopia. There are more speakers of the Arabic language on the African continent than in the rest of the Arab world. By some estimates over sixty five percent of people speaking Arabic as a first language are located on the African continent. It is also true that there are more speakers of Arabic on the African continent than native speakers of any other language – either indigenous or Euro-colonial.

It is now widely accepted that Arabic is to Kiswahili what Latin has been to English – a major source of loan words and the original donor

of its earliest alphabet. There is almost a terminological division of labor between the Bantu roots of Kiswahili and its Semitic legacy. The word for war (*vita*) is from Bantu, but the word for peace (*amani*) is from Arabic. North and south (*Kaskazini* and *kusini*) are originally Bantu, but east and west (*mashariki* and *magharibi*) are Arabic-derived. The numerals one to five, eight and ten are of Bantu origin, while six (*sita*), seven (*saba*), nine (*tisa*) are from Arabic. Similar Bantu-Semitic parallels can be drawn between *uchumi* (economics) and *siasa* (politics, Arabic); *ugonjwa* (sickness) and *afya* (health, Arabic); *neni* (word) and *lugha* (language, Arabic); *nyama* (meat) and *samaki* (fish, Arabic). Kiswahili has Bantu words for maternal uncle (*mjomba*) and paternal aunt (*shangazi*), but has borrowed paternal uncle (*ami*) and maternal aunt (*halati*) from Arabic. The range of possible illustrations is very wide indeed.

In the area of governance and economics (political economy) Arabic loans have played a particularly crucial role. Arabic-derived words like *raisi* (president), *raia* (ordinary citizen), *siasa* (politics), *waziri* (minister), *taifa* (nation), *dola* (state), *jamhuri* (republic), *serikali* (government) *katiba* (constitution), *sharia* (law) and so on have been virtually indispensable in Kiswahili political discourse. So have terms of Arabic origin in the economic arena of African life, including *maskini* (poor person), *tabaka* (class), *bei* (price), *biashara* (trade-commerce), *thamani* (price), *tajiri* (rich), *rasilimali* (capital), *faida* (profit), *hasara* (loss), *bidhaa* (commodity), and *soko* (market). According to Boshia over seventy percent of the Kiswahili economic vocabulary and over fifty percent of its political vocabulary is Arabic derived (Boshia, 1993, p. 31).

Conceptions of time have sometimes been linked to the economic imperative of labor. It is therefore not surprising that Arabic has also influenced the Swahili sub-culture of time and its vocabulary of periodization. Time-related concepts that were introduced to Kiswahili through Arabic loans include *saa* (clock/hour), *dakika* (minutes), *nukta* (seconds), *nusu saa* (half-hour), and *robo saa* (quarter of an hour). Arabic loans from the Swahili culture of periodization include *wakati* (time), *zamani* (past, ancient), *tarehe* (date/history), *alfajiri* (dawn), *asubuhi* (morning), *adhuhuri* (mid-day), *alasisiri* (evening), and *magharibi* (sunset). It is possible then that Arabic served as an important facilitator in the development of the Swahili society from its agrarian origins to its commercial life.

In one of his numerous essays the other Mazrui, Professor Ali Mazrui has suggested that the language of “polite society and good manners in Kiswahili has borrowed disproportionately from Arabic.” Some of the examples of the relevant borrowed Kiswahili vocabulary from Arabic include: heshima (respect); adabu (manners), hisani (favor), salamu (greetings), shukuru (thank), shukrani (grateful), asante (thank you), and tafadhali (please). On the other hand, Mazrui contends that the vocabulary of abuse and hostility in Kiswahili is derived more from a Bantu source than from Arabic. Equally significant, Arabic had provided Kiswahili with many euphemisms. The basic words for sexual organs are indigenous, but in polite Kiswahili conversation is it Arabic-derived euphemisms that are usually employed (Mazrui, 2009).

Of all the areas of Arabic influence on Kiswahili, however, the most controversial has undoubtedly been the religious impact. Because Islam was such an important catalyst in its early formation, Kiswahili was long associated with an Afro-Islamic identity.<sup>1</sup> The Islamic origins of Swahili lie partly in its readiness to borrow concepts, words, and idioms from the Arabic language and from Islamic civilization, and partly from the fact that underlying many aspects of the civilization of the Swahili people has been the influence of Islam. But the impact of Arabic upon the development of Swahili is itself part of the wider impact of Islam. As Canon Godfrey Dale, the person who produced the first complete Swahili translation of the Qur’an, observed:  
...(even) the dominant ideas of the Koran found their way into the intellectual atmosphere in which the Swahili lived; and many words and phrases, especially the words and phrases constantly repeated in the Koran and in prayers, found their way into the everyday speech of the Swahili people... (1924, p. 5)

A wide range of illustrations could be provided, showing an important interplay of meaning and symbolism between the universes of religious experience in the traditions of Bantu speaking peoples and the legacy of Islam (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1999, p. 33).

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<sup>1</sup> It was not uncommon for East African converts to Islam to claim Swahili identity, appropriate the Swahili language and disclaim their own ethnic languages.

The original alphabet used in writing Swahili also added to its Islamic image. Swahili has been a written language for hundreds of years. Until the twentieth century the Swahili script, also known as *Ajami* in West Africa, was based entirely on the Arabic alphabet<sup>2</sup> with such modifications as were necessitated by the phonological peculiarities of this East African lingua franca.<sup>3</sup> And the acquisition of that script was almost invariably tied to early training in reading the Qur'an.

This presumed Islamicity of Swahili became an issue of great concern when the language began its entry into the mainstream of western formal education during the colonial period. A colonial debate then got underway about media of instruction for Africans, the comparative merits of Swahili as against what were called "vernacular languages" and the comparative merits of Swahili as against the English language. This debate, especially when it touched upon the fundamental issues of educational policy, became quite often an issue between church and state in a colonial situation.

There were, of course, differences of opinion between German colonies and British colonies of East Africa on the implications of Swahili's Islamicity for African education. Prior to the war of resistance against colonialism on the German side of East Africa, an important section of the colonial establishment regarded Swahili as a reservoir of an Islamic spirit and a potential agent of inter-ethnic African unity against German rule. According to Marcia Wright: In Germany, Director Buchner proved to be an unrelenting foe of Swahili, going so far in a speech before the Kolonialrat in 1905 as to declare that it was irredeemably mixed with Islam that every expedient ought to be employed to obstruct their joint penetration...<sup>4</sup> (1971, p. 113)

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Ajami* here is borrowed from Muslim West Africa

<sup>3</sup> The classical poems of Swahili, steeped as they were in Islamic tradition and imagery, were all originally written in this revised Arabic alphabet and preserved for posterity through that medium.

<sup>4</sup> Buchner's opposition to Swahili was adopted and expanded by Julius Richter, a member of the Berlin Committee. Richter delivered a diatribe during the Kolonial Kongress in 1905 against the pernicious influence of Islam everywhere in Africa. Isolating East Africa as the scene of the worst danger, he envisaged a mosque alongside every coastman's hut, and took the official support for Swahili to be blatantly pro-Islamic. (1971, p. 113)

According to another colonial ideologue of the time, H. Hansen, Islam and Swahili together constituted not only the mortal adversaries of Christianity, “but also, in Africa, the unrepentant enemies of colonial politics” (quoted by Pike 1986, p. 231). The existence of *An-Najah* (The Redeemer), a Swahili journalistic venture using the Arabic-derived *Ajami* script openly agitating against German colonial rule was seen as a vindication of Hansen’s position.

On the other hand, Carl Meinhof, a prominent German linguist of that time who saw the adoption of Swahili as a very practical aid to German administration in its East African colony, suggested that Swahili could be purged of its Islamicity. Towards this end he proposed the replacement of the Arabic-based script with the Roman script and Arabo-Islamic loan words with Germanic ones (Pike 1985, p. 224).<sup>5</sup> Through this process, Christian missionaries were thus assured that the Islamicity of Swahili would no longer be in the way of conveying the good Christian word of the God.

A missionary of the German Lutheran Church who was particularly attracted to this idea of dis-Arabizing the Swahili of Christianity was Dr. Karl Roehl. Roehl argued that “the Arab expressions (in Swahili) are linked up with Moslem ideas, which are very often strongly divergent from the corresponding Christian ones...” (Roehl, 1930, p. 197). Noting that in its natural spread into the interior the language was already being “released from its Arabo-Islamic isolation”, Roehl concludes that the final aim of this historical trajectory ...should be a pure, noble – if the expression is permitted – re-bantuized Swahili. This should be the programme in view of the unprecedented rapid spread of Swahili in Eastern and Central Africa: to restrain the too exuberant growth of Arabic words, which after all are a foreign element in the language, and to use instead genuine Bantu words. (1930, p. 199)

And so, at a 1914 meeting of representatives of four different German missions, it was resolved finally that a new Swahili translation of the Bible be produced that would be suitable for the whole of German East Africa. A main objective of this exercise was “to purify Swahili as a Bantu language, by eliminating the majority of the Zanzibar

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike the French and the British, the Germans did not find it necessary to impart their language to the “natives” in their East African colony.

Arabic words, which are either not used, or imperfectly understood, by the natives of the coast, and are quite unintelligible to those in the interior” (Mojola, 2000, p. 516).

To Roehl the presence of Arabic influence in Swahili was a cultural affront to both Africa and Europe. It denied Africa of its linguistic authenticity and self-determination and, ironically, subverted colonial efforts at inscribing a Euro-Christian ethos on the African soil. Under the circumstances, the dis-Arabization of Swahili became an important prerequisite for the success of the modernization project of European colonialism in the whole of East Africa. A dis-Arabized Swahili not only offered “the possibility of translating the highest scientific knowledge into practical (African) life” (1930, p. 201), but also transformed the language into a more formidable medium for “introducing African peoples into the modern mental world of Europe” (1930, p. 200).

In British colonies (of Kenya and Uganda), on the other hand, the Christian opinion was more divided. A number of missionaries felt that since both Islam and Christianity were monotheistic religions drawn from the same Middle Eastern ancestry, and sharing a considerable number of spiritual concepts and values, Swahili would serve well for the conversion of Africans to Christianity precisely because Swahili could already cope with the religious universe of Islam.

As early as 1850, the Reverend Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf of the Church Missionary Society, for example, was already campaigning for Swahili as a language of Christian evangelism. Though himself a German, Krapf was then based in the British colony of Kenya. Swahili’s status as a lingua franca and its rich reservoir of religious concepts relevant to Christianity, made Swahili in the eyes of Reverend Krapf an ideal language for East African Christianity. The only aspect of the language that Krapf found objectionable was its use of the Arabic script which, if left to continue, would leave a wide door open to “Mohammedan proselytism among the inland tribes which may hereafter be Christianized and civilized” (Krapf 1850, p. 170). It was partly due to this fear that Krapf pioneered the use of the Roman script in writing Swahili. And since Swahili was already spoken widely as an additional language among non-Muslim East Africans, the shift from the Arabic to the Roman script essentially

symbolized Christian appropriation of the language. Otherwise Krapf was among the missionaries who not only championed the use of Swahili for the Christian gospel, but also made substantial contributions towards the systematic study of the language (Mazrui & Mazrui 1999, p. 74).

By contrast, African “vernacular languages” were deemed too saturated with associations and connotations drawn from an indigenous religious experience much further removed from Christianity than Islam was. The utilization of these languages for Christian proselitization supposedly carried the risk of conceptual distortion greater than that posed by Swahili. It is against this backdrop that Bishop Edward Steere concluded: “Neither is there any way by which we can make ourselves so readily intelligible or by which the Gospel can be preached so soon or so well than by means of the language of Zanzibar” (1870, p. ii).

Even among the supporters of the language, however, the Swahilization process was pursued very selectively. The Union Version of the Swahili Bible, for example, readily employed the Arabic-derived Swahili names for religious figures of the Old Testament, including Suleimani (Solomon), Musa (Moses), Yusufu (Joseph), Daudi (David) and Haruni (Aaron). It refers to the Torah, the Psalms and the New Testament by their respective Swahili terms (*Taurati*, *Zaburi* and *Injili*), all drawn from the Arabo-Islamic experience. As a general practice, Swahilized renderings of Latin or English names – like Marko (Mark) or Mathayo (Mathews) – are used only when no pre-existing Swahili equivalents are known. But aware of the fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam on the divinity of Jesus, for example, the Swahili Bible is careful not to use the Swahili *Isa*, but introduces into the language instead the English-derived *Yesu Kristo*. As a concept, *Yesu Kristo* is seen to have no real equivalent in the Swahili-Islamic experience. On the other hand, because Muslims share with Christians a belief in the virgin birth of Jesus and in Jesus as Messiah, the Bible translators had no objection retaining the Swahili equivalents for the holy mother of Jesus, Mary (*Mariam*) and Messiah (*masihi*), respectively. In the final analysis, then, translation “prescribed as much as it proscribed the language with which the natives were to receive and return God’s word” (Vicente 1988, p. 21).

There was also a feeling of using Swahili as a transitional medium for the Gospel, linking European Christian vocabulary with African ethnic languages. There were attempts to teach many Baganda catechumens the skill and art of translating from Swahili into Luganda for devotional purposes. This was certainly the great transitional period, using Swahili as a linguistic medium which would gradually modify and influence the religious vocabulary of “vernacular languages” and bridge the conceptual gap between European theological language and the indigenous spiritual universe in Africa.

Other missionaries, however, disagreed with the pro-Swahili position, regarding the association of Swahili with Islam as a liability rather than an asset. Bishop Alfred R. Tucker, for example, was very critical of his missionary colleague, Bishop Alexander Mackay, for his advocacy of Swahili. In Tucker’s words:

Mackay...was very desirous of hastening the time when one language should dominate Central Africa, and that language, he hoped and believed, would be Swahili...That there should be one language for Central Africa is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but God forbid that it should be Swahili. English? Yes! But Swahili, never. The one means the Bible and Protestant Christianity and the other Mohammedanism...sensuality, moral and physical degradation and ruin. Swahili is too closely related to Mohammedanism to be welcome in any mission field in Central Africa. (Tucker 1911, p. 262).

Islam was thus seen as the ultimate religious other and its linguistic conveyor, Swahili, as anathema to the very spirit of Christianity.

In spite of this opposition, Swahili enjoyed the support of a sufficiently large and influential constituency within the Christian missionary community to continue having a widening role in East African Christianity. Furthermore, the language’s role as a medium of economic transaction and urbanization had given it its own spontaneous momentum for rapid expansion to populations beyond the East African Muslim community. These developments were accompanied by colonial efforts to create a “Standard Swahili” that would be promoted as the norm above and beyond the pre-existing dialects of the predominantly Muslim native-speakers of the language. This process of standardization included, among other things, the complete adoption of the Roman script in written

Swahili and of the principle that as far as possible lexical borrowing in Swahili would henceforth draw more from English than from Arabic as was traditionally the case. The process of dis-Islamizing Swahili was now perceived to be in full swing. As Errington rightly concludes, to appropriate native tongues missionary and colonial linguists “reformed and deformed them with practices of literacy which let them remove words and meanings from native speech and speakers, before ‘giving them back’ in their own religious discourses, and as symbols of their authority” (2008, p. 45).

Within a couple of decades this new Standard Swahili and its Roman script had become so established, and so much a part of the colonial school structure, that it began to cause ripples within the ranks of East African Muslim clergy. In 1931, for example, Sheikh Al-Amin bin Ali (1891-1947), the leading reformist Muslim scholar of the region in the first half of the twentieth century, expressed great suspicion that the entire colonial project was intended to “dis-Arabize” and subsequently “dis-Islamize” Swahili. In his words:

It is indeed a great loss on our part to speak this Swahili which has been tampered with by Europeans. Swahili is the language of the coastal (Muslim) people, and it is not pure except by its mixture with Arabic. (*Al-Islah*, June 20, p. 1932)

Linguistic purity is usually conceived in terms of filtering out what is linguistically “foreign.” But here was Sheikh Al-Amin celebrating a concept of purity based precisely on (selective) hybridity – the mixture between the indigenous (Bantu) and the foreign (Arabic) – emphasizing once again the perceived centrality of Arabic and Islamic civilization in the construction of Swahili. And using his reputedly fiery periodical, *Al-Islah* (The Reformer), he urged his community to boycott this “school Swahili” that came with colonialism and the Christian mission.<sup>6</sup>

In the final analysis, however, neither Christian reservations about the Islamicity of Swahili nor Muslim fears about its seeming dis-

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<sup>6</sup> Though what has come to be known as Standard Swahili was based on the Zanzibar dialect of Swahili, the colonial administration left its own linguistic imprint on the language to a point where Zanzibaris themselves do not recognize it as a variant of their dialect.

Islamization in the hands of Europeans were sufficient to arrest the spread of the language beyond its traditionally Muslim borders. As European missionaries promoted Christianity they also sought to constrain the spread of Islam. Yet, ironically, many turned to the Afro-Islamic language of Swahili to spread the Gospel of Jesus. Even when some Christian missionaries preferred ethnic-bound languages to Swahili,<sup>7</sup> as many did in Uganda, they still looked to Swahili for neo-Islamic loan words of Arabic origin. And so Swahili continued to expand its ecumenical and secular roles either directly or indirectly throughout East and Central Africa.

In the post-colonial period the debate about Kiswahili's Arabicity and Islamicity assumed a trans-continental dimension partly because the language itself became more globalized. More and more radio stations throughout the world adopted it in their transmissions. It became very visible in the corridors of the American academy as a result of African American pressures, and began to be offered in several African universities. Its adoption as the national and official language of Tanzania inspired several nationalists to advocate for its adoption as the language of Africa and the Organization of African Unity/African Union. And the world experienced a new wave of migration from the Swahili-speaking world. This conjuncture of post-colonial factors has contributed not only to the internationalization of the language, but also to the debates surrounding its development in general and the Arabic impact in particular,

Here we can distinguish between various strands of post-colonial responses. There is, first, the position of Swahiliphobe Anglocentrists. These are people who essentially prefer English over Kiswahili but decided to advocate their preference by invoking the Arabic impact on Kiswahili as an argument against it. In a parliamentary debate about the possibility of adopting Kiswahili as the national language of Kenya, for example, Charles Njonjo, then Kenya's Attorney General, is reported to have said the following:

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<sup>7</sup> A substantial section of Christian missionaries – the so-called Livingstonians – were guided by the principle that spiritual communication with Africans was best achieved within the context of their “tribal” milieu and media. They insisted on using the native languages of the African groups they encountered in their proselitization and evangelical activities.

Swahili is derived from Arabic. (It) is a language which originated from the Arabs...Swahili is not our language and it is not our mother tongue. It is a foreign language just as much as English is a foreign language. (Quoted by Marshad, 1984, p. 79).

Other politicians like G.G. Kariuki and Mark Mwithaga joined Njonjo in expressing similar views. Njonjo's position is not against Arabic as such; Arabic is merely a convenient tool to build a case against Kiswahili in favor of English.

On the other extreme we have Swahiliphile Arabocentrists, people who, like Seikh Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui, continue to consider Kiswahili to be at its best precisely when it is most affected by Arabic. This tendency has been triggered in part by western demonization of Islam and people of Muslim faith in the aftermath of the Cold War. Recent US pressures on East African governments to enact anti-terrorist – read by many as anti-Muslim – legislation have all intensified local fears of negative Othering on grounds of Islamic identity. All this comes at a time when Muslims in East Africa have long felt marginalized by their own respective governments. With the re-emergence of the politics of pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s, this conjuncture of global and local developments seem to have fueled Muslim resolve in East Africa to promote alternative initiatives that would give fresh momentum to their Afro-Islamic identity and inscribe an Islamic voice in the space of national and regional politics. This reaction has sometimes stimulated a certain Arabocentric consciousness, seeking to re-inscribe Kiswahili's Arabicity as a way of reaffirming an Islamic identity. There is strong evidence that East African Islam is becoming less Arabocentric, less dependent on the Arabic language, and more Swahilicentric in certain areas of Muslim life. Yet in the process of this linguistic shift it is not uncommon to find the more Arabized versions being privileged over less Arabized styles of Kiswahili speech.

Yet another category of actors may be designated as Arabophobe Swahiliphiles. These are usually people who love the Swahili language and its heritage but wish to distance it from Arabic influence. What is involved in this enterprise is the dis-Arabization and re-indigenization of Kiswahili. The people concerned may be pro-Swahili but anti-Arab/anti-Arabic. The two positions are systematically related.

A particularly good example of Arabophobe Swahiliphilia is Abdallah Khalid, though Khalid's position is essentially confined to "Standard Swahili" which he regards as a "lingua franca of the Zanzibari Arabs taken over and refashioned by Europeans" (1977, p. 192). Particularly telling of Khalid's Arabophobia is Appendix B of his book, *The liberation of Swahili from European Appropriation* in which he provides a list of examples of what he regards as "True Swahili" as against "Arabic Swahili." Instead of the Arabic-derived laki (welcome), saliti (betray), tajiri (wealthy person), maskini (poor person), and halafu (then), for example, Khalid proposes the use of the more indigenous equivalents, kongowea, tongea, mkwasi, mkata and kasha, respectively (Khalid, 1977, pp. 216-7). Khalid is clearly echoing the sentiments of his German compatriot Karl Roehl expressed almost eighty years ago.

Continentially, Arabophobe Swahiliphiles may include people like Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah. There is strong if guarded evidence of Arabophobia in some of the writings of both artists. But there is even stronger evidence of Swahiliphilia, especially in Soyinka who has come out in support of Kiswahili as the language of continental pan-Africanism. But Arabophobe Swahiliphilia is expressed even more passionately by Kwesi Otabil. Castigating Africans for being all too hypocritical to acknowledge Arab oppression of Africans, he continues to condemn "the even more damning scandal" in the Organization of African Unity where "Arabic enjoys the privilege of a summit language, along with the Euro-colonial languages, while Swahili – a potential African lingua franca – has never seriously been considered for a similar role" (Otabil, 1994, p. 81). Elsewhere he takes to task the then Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity, Salim Ahmed Salim, for proposing Arabic as a possible candidate for an Africa-wide lingua franca. Otabil sees Salim's recommendation as treasonous, attributing it to "the sway of the Afro-Arab unity lobby as well as Salim's own Muslim, hence Arabized, background" (Otabil, 1994, p. 128). Clearly, Otabil is one of those pan-Africanist thinkers who sees little distinction between Islam and Arabism. To him one is systematically related to the other.

The interrelationship between Kiswahili, Arabic and Islam has also featured in the thinking of Diaspora Africans, especially in the USA. Here we can distinguish two main currents: Islamophile Afrocentricity and Islamophobe Afrocentricity. Islamophile Afrocentrists have

regarded Arab Africans as fellow Africans and accepted Islam as part and parcel of the African heritage. A 19<sup>th</sup> century Black pioneer in Islamophile Afrocentricity was indeed Edward Wilmot Blyden, the Diaspora African who eventually relocated to Africa. Though himself a Presbyterian minister, Blyden took great interest in Islam, partly because he was concerned about religion and partly because he was a philologist who became curious about the Arabic language. He spent some time in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria in 1866 partly in order to improve his command of Arabic which he intended to introduce in his department of classics at Liberia College where he was professor. Overall, Blyden celebrated Arabic as an enriching experience to African condition. In his words, “Already some of the vernaculars have been enriched by expressions from Arabic...” (Lynch, 1971, p. 279). This sentiment is certainly one that prevails among many African Americans today, especially those of Muslim faith. They see Swahili’s Islamicity as a linguistic facilitator of their quest for an African identity.

The nationalist current that is hostile to the Islamic presence in African cultures is Islamophobe Afrocentricity which, by extension, also tends to be Arabophobic. Islamophobe Afrocentrists regard the arrival of Islam as a negation of its Africanity. They also associate Arab participation in slave trade in Africa with Islam and, as a result, regard both Arabism and Islam as a stigma on languages like Kiswahili and Hausa. Islamophobe Afrocentrists like the late John Henrik Clarke and Molefi Kete Asante have been profoundly ambivalent about Kiswahili’s links with the Arabic language and with the legacy of Islam.

Between the two Afrocentric currents, of course, are the many liberal-minded Swahiliphiles, Africans who simply love Kiswahili and feel very comfortable with the Arabo-Islamic impact on the language. Their position cannot be easily framed in terms of categories like Islamophilia and Islamophobia or Arabophilia and Arabophobia. Like Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, they see the unfolding of Africa in terms of a new inter-cultural harmony that includes the indigenous tradition, the Arabo-Islamic legacy and the Euro-Christian impact.

This reminds me of a recent request that a close friend of mine made to Dr. Kimani Njogu, another close friend of mine. The friend had

composed a beautiful Gikuyu poem which he now wanted Kimani to translate into Kiswahili, but with a condition: That Kimani should use an Arabic-free Kiswahili. As you would expect, Kimani never attempted the task not only because he thought it was an impossible linguistic feat, but also because it went completely against his linguistic ideological grain. I consider Kimani as a good example of a liberal Swahiliphile.

The challenge of translation that Kimani was asked to face, brings me to the conclusion of my presentation. At one time Kiswahili borrowed primarily from the East, especially from Arabic. Today it borrows primarily from the West, especially from English. An important transmission belt in this process of linguistic borrowing has been translation. Is this the right direction for Kiswahili? The development of the Arabic language may have some useful lessons for us.

Underlying the phenomenal growth of science under the Islamic dispensation from about 750 to 1250AD was the power of language – the rise of Arabic as a trans-ethnic, trans-racial means of communication. The scientific movement itself inspired a good deal of linguistic engineering, whereby Arabic became scientified, especially through adaptations of and borrowings from already scientified languages. On the other hand, the currency of a rapidly scientifying Arabic served as an important stimulus to the growth of a scientific culture within the Muslim world itself.

Many important works were produced directly in the Arabic language. But there also arose a conscientious effort to translate works of various kinds from a variety of languages like Persian, Hindi and Greek, fostering new levels of exchange between cultures and civilizations. These translations contributed not only to the growth of scientific knowledge available in Arabic, but also to the formation of a scientific limb in the language – a terminological legacy which, of course, ultimately found its way into the languages of the West in the form of words like algebra, alchemy, alcohol and zero. The language of poetic elegance and Qur'anic revelation had now become the medium of scientific discourse.

The point to note here is that the development of Arabic responded to the stimulus of a range of languages and civilizations. This

strategy of diversification of the sources from which a language draws its borrowings is one that needs to be adopted for Kiswahili. If Kiswahili now abandons Arabic, for example, and borrows only from English it may indeed become “modernized”, but also excessively westernized. And if it limits itself to only Europe and Arab civilizations, Kiswahili would deny itself the potential enrichment which can only come from more diverse stimulation.

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