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ROOTS OF KISWAHILI:
COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM,
AND THE DUAL HERITAGE

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I

Kiswahili is one of the most successful indigenous lingua francas in Africa. Next to Arabic it is perhaps the most pan-African in terms of its transnational scope with a growing population of speakers that is estimated to be in tens of millions. With a tradition of writing that goes back centuries before European colonial rule, it has one of the richest literary heritages on the continent. It is known to have served as an important instrument of mass mobilization in the struggle against colonialism in both German and British East Africa. In addition, the language has fostered vertical and horizontal, national as well as regional, integration, and has functioned as a medium of trade, religion, education, civil administration, practical politics and collective bargaining throughout the East African region. And increasingly Kiswahili has consolidated its potential as a language of science and technology.

Partly because of these achievements of the language, it quickly came to acquire a sentimental value, in addition to its older instrumental value. Many Africans developed strong nationalistic sentiments towards Kiswahili, seeing it as a language of national sovereignty, as a possible symbol of transnational and continental unity, and as a reminder of the common origins of people of African descent now scattered throughout the globe [world].

At the intra-national level, we have the case of Kiswahili being declared the national language of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. In both Kenya and Tanzania, citizenship is constitutionally defined, in part, in terms of some degree of proficiency in Kiswahili. At the trans-national level is Kiswahili's role not only as a language of intercourse and integration across national boundaries in East Africa, but also as a potential symbol of continental pan-Africanism. Kiswahili today is taught as a subject not only in its original home in East Africa, but also in universities on the the opposite end of the continent in countries like Ghana and Nigeria. Prominent writers like Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have sometimes campaigned for Kiswahili as a language of Africa. Finally, at the trans-continental level, it is the African language that is in highest demand in the African diaspora, especially among African Americans. From the ethno-nationalist confines of its native speakers on the narrow strip of the coast of East Africa, therefore, Kiswahili has stretched its wings outward to become, albeit

with some exaggeration, the language of pan-African nationalism on a global scale.

II

The kind of political consciousness that I have termed "nationalism," however, is often a reaction to the politics of the "other." And the "other" that Africans have often reacted to in nationalistic terms in the twentieth century has tended to be the European "other," primarily because of the brutal and humiliating experiences of enslavement and colonization. As a result, the nationalist sentiments towards Kiswahili were bound to involve a rejection of any seemingly negative projection of the language which may have been engendered by colonial discourse.

One important dimension of this colonial projection was Kiswahili's presumed "dual nature," part "African" and part "Arab." Kiswahili was often defined, sometimes quite pejoratively, as a hybrid child[1] of a union between the languages of the "highest of animals," i. e., Africans, and that of the "lowest of human beings," i. e., Arabs.[2] Half-baked ethnographic ideas from Europe thus went on to create the impression that the achievements of Kiswahili would not have been possible without its presumed "more Human" Arab parentage.

In reaction to this colonial, sub-humanizing, socio-linguistic conception, therefore, African nationalists rejected not only the suggestion that Africans were less than human, but also the thesis that Kiswahili was less than *wholly* African. Kiswahili and its achievements now came to be presented as the product of the collective genius of the African people themselves who, at the maximum, just borrowed items fro Arabic—as English borrowed from French, for example—to meet certain functional needs in their expanding world. Mohamed Hyder, for example, assumed this typically nationalist position when he commented that many people

> have held the view believed to be originally from the Rev. Canon Hellier that Swahili is a hybrid of Bantu and Arab origin. The author does not share this view. . . . In biological terminology, one would say that the so called hybridization is not and never has been a genetic process which affects the form and structure of the language, but a phenotypic manifestation related to function.[3]

In reaction to the colonial stance, therefore, African nationalists have generally been inclined towards a quasi-purist position with regard to the origins of Kiswahili. Kiswahili is regarded to have evolved "purely" from an African foundation on a Bantu base. And the

supposedly "later" contributions to the language from Arabic and other languages are of a nature that has left Kiswahili's Africanity completely intact, both in form and structure.

III

One of the problems of this nationalist position, however, is the basic assumption that Arabic is *not* an African language at all. Nationalists have reacted to the thesis of Kiswahili's dual heritage partly because they have regarded Arabic as alien to Africa. If Kiswahili was a linguistic fusion of say, Chigiryama (a Bantu language of the Kenya coast) and Orominya (a Cushitic language of Ethiopia), both believed to be fundamentally and unambiguously African, the claims of a hybrid origin of the language would probably not have raised any nationalistic hostility. But precisely because Arabic is deemed foreign to Africa, and as a language belonging to the "other," suggestions of its formative role in the evolution of Kiswahili are seen to be in disharmony with the position of the nationalists.

But how un-African, in fact, is Arabic? We may determine the Africanness, or otherwise, of a particular language in terms of the demography of its speakers and/or its historical-linguistic origins. If a language is spoken as a native tongue by a significant population of people *indigenous* to Africa, then there is a case for regarding it as an African language. If English, for example, were to be spoken as as a mother tongue by sections of the Ibo, Zulu, or Gikuyu people, then we could claim that English is an African language in a demographic sense. This, of course, would not preclude the fact that English is, at the same time, an American language, a Caribbean language, or a European language. A language could conceivably *belong* to a number of regions or continents at the same time.

With regard to Arabic, specifically, over seventy per cent of the lands in which it is spoken as a native tongue, and a larger proportion of those who speak it as a mother tongue are, in fact, in Africa. In addition the majority of these African speakers of Arabic are not migrants from the Arabian peninsula; rather, they are indigenous to the continent of Africa. They are people who, in a sense, became Arabized by a process of linguistic assimilation. There is an ethno-linguistic principle among the Arabs that anyone to whom Arabic is a first language is automatically an Arab regardless of his/her national or "racial" origin. Through this linguistic conversion many people became Arab to a point where Arab identity today has become a truly "multiracial" and "multinational" phenomenon. As Erskine Childers put it:

> The Arab world . . . comprises very many widely varying races or historical groups. The short list is bewildering, and

distinguishing racial definitions are themselves treacherous. From west to east, the list must include Berbers, Carthaginians, Romans, Vanddals, Arabians, Turkomans, Egyptians, Nubians, Haemites, Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, Babilonians, Hittites, Sumarians, Kurds, Persians, and a small host of ancient migratory infusions who it is safer to describe simply as Semitic.[4]

The acquisition of Arabic as a native tongue by Egyptians, Berbers, Nubians, Tuaregs, and the Sudanese, therefore, constitutes one important credential that makes Arabic an *African* language.

It is possible, of course, to go a step further by questioning the very boundaries of the continent we call Africa. There is no reason why Africa should end at the Red Sea and not at the Arabian/Persian Gulf, given that the Arabian Peninsula itself formed part of a common land mass with Africa before the great rift. As Ali Mazrui reminds us, the decision to make Africa end at the Red Sea rather than at the Arabian/Persian Gulf was made neither by Africans nor by Arabs, but by European map makers and cartographers.[5] Even geologically, it has been argued that there is good reason to regard the Arabian Peninsula as part of the continent of Africa. In the words of Paul Bohannan, "Geologically, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula must be considered as unitary with the African continent."[6]

In the final analysis, however, we are now all bound by these boundaries imposed by Eurocentricists for mainly imperialistic reasons. Nonetheless, the possibility alluded to by Ali Mazrui and Paul Bohannan does lead us more naturally to the proposition that Arabic may be an African language in an historical-linguistic sense in addition to being one in a demographic sense of the word. And it is to this historical parameter of Africanity that we must now turn.

Arabic belongs to a group of languages classified as Semitic and which had long been regarded to be Asiatic in origin. The supposed Asiatic roots of Semitic languages, however, may be a thesis that was, initially, inspired by the Eurocentric conception that equated language with "race." Semitic languages were seen to belong to lighter skinned race in Asia which had no "genetic" links with the darker "Negroid" peoples of Africa. This racial classification of languages served well to reinforce the Eurocentric tendency to claim for its "self" the achievement of "others." Ancient Egyptians were once "white-washed" so that their achievements could be appropriated as part of a putative European heritage. In the words of Martin Bernal:

For 18th- and 19th-century [European] Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely

as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have
been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing
Africans and Semites. Therefore, the Ancient model had to be
overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.[7]

In a similar way, European racists may now have found the racial
differentiation of Arabic speakers from the darker skinned and accursed
"Nigritic" speaking peoples of Africa necessary in order to come to
terms with the Arab contribution to world civilization in the more recent
era of Islam. It is this kind of politics of racism, then, that may have led
to the persistence of a Eurocentric tradition that regards Arabic as
fundamentally non-African.

By the turn of the twentieth century some linguists had begun to
reject this equation of language with race. It was not until Joseph
Greenberg[8] came up with a new "family tree" of African languages,
however that the racial pardigm of language classification in Africa was
challenged altogether. In particular, Greenberg posited an Afro-Asiatic
family which subsumed Ancient Egyptian, Berber, Chadic, Cushitic,
and Semitic groups of languages. For the first time, therefore, the
Semitic languages of Asia, like Arabic and Hebrew, were seen to have
some linguistic affinity not only with the Semitic languages of Africa,
like Amharic, Gurage, Tigre, and Tigrinya—which happen to be
significantly greater in number than those in Asia—but also with the
almost two hundred non-Semitic African languages of the Afro-Asiatic
family. Greenberg's work, complemented by other evidence, ultimately
led some linguists to speculate, in the words of Philip Curtin et. al., that
Semitic languages may originally have spread from the African
continent, adding that "the unity of the Afro-Asiatic language family
does not support any theory of Asian influence on African historic
times."[9]

If this thesis about the origins of Semitic languages is correct,
therefore, we would have some historical reasons for regarding Arabic
as an African language. In addition to the demographic characteristic of
having the majority of its lands and native speakers situated in Africa,
Arabic would also qualify as an African language on the basis of its
historical linguistic links with the continent.

IV

Proceeding, then, from the possibility that Africa is where
Semitic languages were founded, Asia can be regarded as a continent
where they became sacrilized. With regard to Arabic, in particular, the
advent of Islam marked the beginning of its transformation into a sacred

language of the religion. Arabic now became intrinsically religious not only because it is the chosen language of Islamic ritual, but, more importantly, because it is regarded by Muslims as the language in which Allah revealed the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. Reading the Qur'an *in Arabic*, even when one does not understand its meaning is, in itself, considered an act of piety. That is why the Qur'an is perhaps the most widely read book in its original form in human history.

Having sacrilized the language, Islam then gave Arabic a new momentum of spread. As the religion continued to expand in Asia and across a large section of Africa, it carried with it the Arabic language. And the encounter between this language of Islam and other African languages ultimately gave rise to what may be described as Afro-Islamic languages like Kiswahili, Nubi, and Somali in East Africa, an d Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri, and Mandinka in West Africa.

Afro-Islamic languages may be defined as those whose native speakers are predominantly Muslim and whose vocabulary, especially its religious idiom, is heavily influenced by Arabic. Ethnic groups bound by Afro-Islamic languages are virtually al neo-Islamic in a *cultural* sense. This does not mean that their individual members are necessarily Muslim in religious faith; but it does mean that they have a strong Islamic orientation in their cultural ethos. Not all Arabs in Lebanon, for example, are Muslim in faith. But even the country's Christian Arab population betrays a strong Islamic inclination in its cultural predisposition. It is in this cultural sense, then, that ethnic groups like the Hausa, the Mandinka, and the Swahili, for example, can be said to be neo-Islamic. And it is partly this deep-rooted culture of Islam which has rendered their languages Afro-Islamic by our definition.

In more linguistic terms, Afro-Islamic languages have a large proportion of items of Arabic origin. In some cases there is almost a "balancing act" between the Arabic and other local linguistic elements at the level of lexis. In Kiswahili, for example, the words for both north and south (*kusini* and *kaskazini*, respectively) are Bantu, while the terms for east and west (*mashariki* and *Magharibi*, respectively) are Arabic-derived. In both Hausa and Kiswahili, the general terms for God are local (*Ubangiji* and *Mngu*, respectively), whereas the terms for the devil (*shaidan* and *shetani*, respectively) are originally from Arabic. These linguistic connections with Arabic are by no means limited to the lexical fields of the religious and the spiritual, but they also extend to the spheres of politics, economics, education, and beyond. And precisely because Arabic at its macro level is regarded as a religious language, its micro level influences on other languages can also be taken as manifestations of a religious imprint to some degree.[10]

V

Compared to other Afro-Islamic languages, however, Kiswahili may have much older and more fundamental historical connections with Arabic that may even predate the coming of Islam. As intimated earlier, there has long been a raging debate regarding the origins of Kiswahili that has pitted nationalist scholarship against colonial scholarship. While colonial scholarship, based mainly on ethnographic methods tended to promote the theory of the "dual nature" of Kiswahili's roots, nationalists have insisted on its exclusively Bantu origins.

The more advanced methods of linguistics, in contrast to those of ethnography, however, came to challenge the idea that Kiswahili is a linguistic hybrid. Historical linguists argued that the language was African, and specifically Bantu, in form and origin, and that its supposed Arabness was merely a product of linguistic borrowing, a phenomenon that is no more an attribute of Kiswahili than it is of any other language.

In this connection the most extensive study is perhaps that of Nurse and Spear[11] in which they classify Kiswahili as a Sabaki language belonging, with many other languages like Pokomo, Zigula, Pare, and Zaramo, to the Northeastern Coast Group of the Eastern Bantu Family. Descriptive linguistics has also demonstrated that Kiswahili, like virtually any other language, is divided into several regional dialects like Chimiini, Kibajuni, Kisiu, Kipate, Kiamu, Kimvita, Kivumba, Kipemba, Kiunguja, etc., all of which are, to one degree or another, mutually intelligible. To some extent, then, the historical linguistic evidence came to support the nationalist thesis about the exclusively African origins of Kiswahili.

Where historical linguists and some nationalists seem to part ways is on the question of the longevity of Kiswahili. In addition to establishing the Bantu origins of Kiswahili, linguists also tried, less successfully perhaps, to put a date on its historical point of emergence as an independent language. The idea is that there existed a hypothetical (reconstructed) parent language, so to speak, which, together with other hypothetical "parents" and hypothetical "grandparents" belonged to a hypothetical family of Eastern Bantu languages. These hypothetical linguistic parents, or proto-languages as linguists would call them, were more like amoebas than humans. The amoeba would reproduce essentially by splitting into tow. Each of these parts would now have a life of its own, grow, and eventually reproduce, again by splitting into two. The same principle applies to linguistic reproduction, and a language is said to have come into being at the point at which its parent splits into two or more independent languages.

For historical linguists, then, the task was one of determining at exactly what point Kiswahili, Pokomo, Mijikenda, etc. separated from a hypothetical umbrella Sabaki parent to become independent languages. According to Ohly[12] the language originated sometime before the tenth century. Somewhat in agreement with Ohly, Nurse and Spear place the birth of Kiswahili sometime after Ad 500 and proceed to suggest that by the ninth century "an early form of Swahili was probably spoken in these coastal settlements, not merely in the north but at least as far South as Kilwa."[13]

Swahili nationalists, however, are bothered by this Eurocentric tendency to ignore oral sources from the traditions of the Swahili society itself in connection with the history of their language—and of course their people. To them, this is tantamount to European appropriation of Swahili history. Chiraghdin, for example, recounts the local version of the history of Kiswahili as having originated from a pre-existing Kingozi supposedly at one time around the Lamu archipelago on the northern coast of Kenya.[14] Using arguments based on observations contained in the second century document, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Chirghdin further suggest that there is no reason to believe the "Kiswahili" could not in fact have existed prior to the second century of the Christian era.

Chiraghdin's arguments are certainly not based on any scientific *data*; they are merely based on scientific *reasoning*. The problem with linguistic reconstruction as a method of tracing the origins of languages is that it makes allowance for only one process of language formation, the process by which hypothetical parent languages break up into two or more linguistic siblings (which are at the same time potentially new linguistic parents). But, of course, this is not the *only* means by which languages come into being. Important for our purposes is the linguistic process which with a *pidgin*, which may become a *creole*, and which may end with a phenomenon that linguists call *decreolization*. Let us now look at what all this really means.

A *pidgin* is essentially an auxiliary language which develops to fulfil a narrow range of linguistic functions. It arises in a situation in which there are several linguistic groups of people who need to communicate with each other for reasons of trade, for example, but lack a common medium of communication. Precisely because of its limited functions which usually do not involve the necessity of expressing abstract and/or complex though, a pidgin would normally have a small range of vocabulary drawn, to a very large extent, from one language. Its grammatical structure would also be somewhat "simpler" and would be based, to a large extent, on some universal features of the grammar of human languages.

In time, a pidgin may acquire extended functions as areas of interaction between peoples from different linguistic groups increase. Slavery, the emergence new administrative structures in a community, a high incidence of intermarriages among ethnic groups are some examples of the human experiences which could diversify the functions of a pidgin. This functional diversification of a pidgin not seldom leads to its gradual acquisition as a first, and sometimes the only language by a significant group of people. Eventually it may become a first language to members of an entire society. Once this happens, once a pidgin becomes the first language of a speech community, then it is said to have become a *creole*. There is evidence, for example, that what is today called Nigerian Pidgin is already becoming a creole as an increasing number of Nigerian children are growing up speaking Nigerian pidgin as their first or only language.

The central difference, then, between a *pidgin* and a *creole* is that the latter has what we may call native speakers, while the former does not. The vocabulary and structure of a pidgin are generally carried over into a creole. But because a creole is expected to perform many more functions than a pidgin it gradually acquires an expanded lexicon and a more elaborate grammar. In such cases, the substratum languages, the languages that exist within the immediate environment of the creole, become the main source of its elaborated lexicon and grammatical system. In lexis, however, a creole, like any other language, may continue to borrow from various other sources.

This process may not stop here. A creole may now be *decreolized*. It may draw more and more from its substratum languages to eventually acquire all the features, all the complexities, the depth and breadth of the "average human language." In essence a decreolized language will have lost virtually all traces of its pidgin and creole genesis. And it is in connection with this process that linguistic reconstruction as a historical method is likely to fail. The chances are that historical linguistic reconstruction and the comparative method would trace the decreolized language to the same origins as one or more of the languages of the substratum.

But how does all this relate to Kiswahili specifically? As early as A. D. 100, the anonymous Greek author of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* who travelled to east Africa, could already talk of Arabs who frequented the region for purposes of trade with 'mainlanders of all the places" who, it is reasonable to assume, were from different linguistic backgrounds. Sociolinguists would agree that this socioeconomic configuration meets the ideal description of a situation from which a pidgin could emerge. This anonymous Greek goes further by suggesting that these Arabs "knew the language of the people." The assumptions of this statement are that (a) the peoples of the area were *not* Arabs, that (b) they spoke *one* language which was

creoles, however, linguistic evidence for this Kiswahili genesis is not
easy to find. But the hypothesis would certainly explain Kiswahili's
substantial proportion of Arabic words, its lack of a tonal system that is
characteristic of virtually all other neighboring African languages, and
the fewer distinctions in its concord system.

Clearly, the views expressed here are somewhat in accord with
those of early European ethnographers insofar as both Arabic and Bantu
languages are regarded as instrumental in the formation of Kiswahili.
Kiswahili is today classified as a Bantu language less because of its
vocabulary and more because of its grammatical structure. As
suggested already, while the pidginization of Kiswahili may have relied
almost exclusively on an Arabic lexis, its grammar was based
predominantly, not on Arabic grammar, but on more primary, universal
patterns. This is probably why in contemporary Kiswahili we can still
find overwhelming evidence of an Arabic vocabulary but little evidence
of Arabic grammatical patterns. From its pidgin base, according to our
hypothesis, the language creolized and decreolized in the direction of
Bantu languages in structural and lexical terms, even though it probably
to borrow lexically from Arabic as well as from other languages, both
local and foreign.

Where we differ with the Eurocentric ethnographic scholarship
concerning the genesis of Kiswahili, then, is in the conception of the
linguistic process by which the language came into being. The
"ethnolinguists" based their views on the existence of many words of
Arabic origin in the language, a phenomenon that could be explained, as
linguists now do, by the rather universal phenomenon of "lexical
borrowing." In addition, the ethnolinguists remained unclear about the
nature of the putative linguistic mixture in the origins of Kiswahili. This
created the condition for the application of essentially racist notions like
"bastard" and "hybrid" to an otherwise natural process of linguistic
formation which may, in fact, explain the evolution of many languages
throughout the world.

VI

In conclusion, then, we have seen how, as a result of the
colonial and neocolonial experiences, Kiswahili became entrapped in a
Eurocentric racial equation that posits a "tow-nature theory" of the
language, polarized between its supposed "Arabness" and supposed
"Africanness." Arabic is said to belong to a Semitic race, other African
languages are said to belong to a "Negroid" race, and by implication,
Kiswahili, because of its duality, is seen as *sui generis*, neither Semitic
nor African.

In response to this colonial definition of Kiswahili, African
nationalists were inclined to the other extreme of linguistic purism,

denying "external" contributions to the formation of the language. While this nationalist position ultimately received the support of historical linguistics, its sentiments of "purism" betray what are essentially Eurocentric terms of reference. The European racist fixation with "Western" civilization as "purely" European in origin was now counteracted with African nationalist fixation with "African" achievements as "purely" African in origin. Following in the footsteps of European racists, African nationalists now also came to trek the dangerous path of ethnocentricism in quest of "racial" and linguistic purity.

Our discussion in this paper has[, hopefully,] demonstrated that the historical linguistic evidence that proposes an exclusively Bantu origin of Kiswahili can be counter-balanced by linguistic evidence, in the study of pidgins and creoles, that recognizes Bantu-Semitic roots of the language. This latter position does not make Kiswahili any less African. It is African not only because the language was born in Africa and came to "maturation" as an organic product of a multi-cultural African experience, but also because Arabic can itself be regarded as African. Against this backdrop, then, Arabic's possible role in the fertilization of Kiswahili could be seen not as an aspect of a trans-African duality, but as an organic part of an African dual heritage with both Bantu and Semitic contributions.

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