

Opinion

Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality: Afrikaans and Kiswahili

Part II: Unpacking Their History and Context

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In Part I, I located rather broadly, the two main issues underpinning my view: the historical and decolonial context of Afrikaans and Kiswahili, and the conceptualization of decoloniality. Now, I seek to unpack both.

Heinrich Willemse in *The hidden histories of Afrikaans* reminds us of the multi-faceted history of the Afrikaans language with specificity on the black historical narrative of Afrikaans often silenced by the hegemonic tale inculcated by Afrikaner Christian national education, the media and propaganda. (See J. Netshitenzhe (Ed.), *Whiteness Afrikaans Afrikaners: Addressing Post-Apartheid Legacies, Privileges and Burden*, 2018).

Although Afrikaans is often cast as the language of racists and oppressors, Willemse claims Afrikaans also bears a fierce tradition of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid activism. The nature of Cape Dutch or later known as Afrikaans became a matter of contention during the 'first language movement' (1874-1890) strenuously refuting the creole nature of the language; arguing that Afrikaans is 'a pure Germanic language' and a language of 'purity, simplicity, brevity and vigor' according to the white Cape Dutch speakers.

D.C. Hesselning in *Het Afrikaansch* (1899) argued that Afrikaans is 'mixed' while D.B. Bosman in *Oor die ontstaan van Afrikaans* (1916) asserted that Afrikaans is 'not a mixed language that originated with Dutch-speaking the Malay-Portuguese of the slaves' and that its structure and vocabulary is due to 'spontaneous evolution' theory henceforth dominating much of the 20th century.

Besides the debate on the nature of Afrikaans, the language developed into an anti-imperial success regarding its



Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Apollo Milton Obote of Uganda.

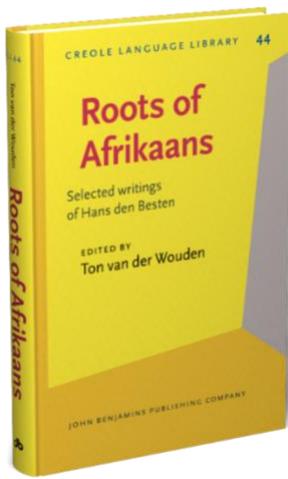
codification, development of its literature, modernization of wide-ranging language resources from subject and general dictionaries, establishing cultural and language institutes but also the development of printing and media industries during the first half of the 20th century.

The main point advanced by Willemse is that Afrikaans has a varied historical narrative unlike its predominant construction as a 'white language' with a 'white history' and 'white faces'. Furthermore, Willemse asserts the need to advance Afrikaans in a multilingual, all-inclusive anti-racist environment as constituting the development and intellectualization of African languages thus the medium of instruction debate at Stellenbosch should craft ways of advancing Afrikaans without the previous racist behavior of the ruling Afrikaner nationalists.

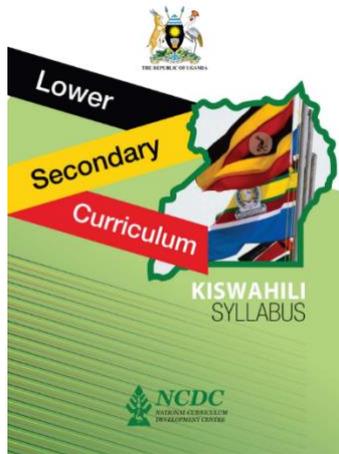
Conversely, John M. Mugane in *The Story of Swahili* posits that Swahili, a formerly island dialect of an African Bantu tongue, has developed into Africa's most internationally recognized language. Tracing its origins to the Swahili coast stretching a 2,500-kilometer chain of coastal towns from Mogadishu (Somalia) to Sofala (Mozambique) and offshore islands like the Comoros and Seychelles, this coastal region has long been characterized by trade and human movement.

John Mukonzi Musyoki in *The Role of Kiswahili in Furthering an Afrocentric Ethos* adds that heterogeneity is a foundational feature of the language's origin thereby creating the possibility of a Pan-African sensibility amongst the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. In the early 1960s leading to the independence of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, Swahili served as a means of political collaboration thereby enabling freedom fighters within the region to communicate their common aspirations despite differences in their native languages. Presidents Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (1962-85) and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya (1964-78) encouraged the use of Swahili as pivotal to the region's political and economic interests thus the language symbolized cultural autonomy from the hegemonic European languages. Tanzania, during Nyerere's era, became one of only two African nations to declare a native African language as the national mode of communication (the other being Ethiopia with Amharic). This typifies Kiswahili as an emblem of politico-cultural liberation within the scheme of Africa's decolonization project.

Relatedly, Ali Mazrui conceptualizes Kiswahili as a language of resistance during the colonial era positing three wars that significantly shaped the history of Kiswahili in East Africa. That is the Maji Maji Resistance of 1905 in German Tanganyika,



the second being World War I and the third is World War II. German indirect rule made Swahili the language of colonial administration in Tanganyika despite their loss of World War I along with their overseas territories but nonetheless, the linguistic foundation for subsequent British rule had been laid.



However, the aforementioned wars were not the only ones to influence the history of Kiswahili. The Abushiri (Arab) rebellion (1888-89), the Hehe rebellion (1891) in the south, the Gogo and Nyamwezi uprisings (1892-94) but also the Chagga rebellion (1892-93) drew from a mixture of

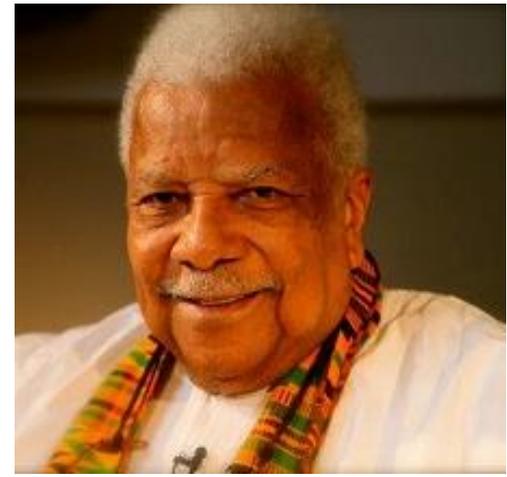
indigenous languages, phrases, words and pronunciations in their speaking of Swahili. Mazrui claims that Kiswahili promoted “inter-ethnic African unity” amongst East and Central Africa against colonial powers. Hence this Afrocentric consciousness can be articulated as an attempt to detribalize the rigid ethnic markers framed by British imperial rule particularly Indirect rule.

The above historicity advances a crucial point that Kiswahili or Swahili for that matter is a language of colonial resistance deployed by the colonized as much as it was also an administrative language of German Tanganyika. In addition, the missionaries used Swahili to establish Christianity with publications such as the Swahili Bible, Swahili grammar books and dictionaries.

In light of decoloniality, is there any fundamental difference between Afrikaans and Kiswahili? Mamdani engages this question asserting that Kiswahili is a language of primary and secondary education but not of university education for at tertiary level, Kiswahili functions as a foreign language with its own department of Kiswahili Studies, however, “Kiswahili is not the bearer of either a scientific or a scholarly tradition.”

Unlike Kiswahili, Afrikaans developed from a folkloric language to “a bearer of an intellectual tradition in less than half a century” due to the institutional network ranging from schools, universities, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses etcetera lifting Afrikaans from a folkloric to a language of science and scholarship thus “Afrikaans represents the most successful decolonising initiative on the African continent.”

This means the fundamental difference between Afrikaans and Kiswahili is the former has an intellectual tradition while the latter lacks a scholarly tradition, however, the implicit meaning is that the vast institutional network framing Afrikaans is the main distinction from Kiswahili rather than merely understanding



Ali Mazrui

this conceptual difference as an inability to philosophize in Kiswahili which has aptly been exemplified by Julius Nyerere who extensively theorized both in English and Kiswahili seeking to dismantle the language barrier between cultural and ideological philosophy: the latter being disproportionately in European languages as regards to Black Africa while the former (cultural philosophy) as the sphere for indigenous languages.

The writer is Ph.D. Fellow at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), Makerere University. These thoughts, originally titled: *Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality: A Synthesis of Afrikaans and Kiswahili* were first shared with the Cultural Studies Institute, Kampala. In Part III, we will attempt to decipher *Decoloniality* as a conceptual category.

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