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THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN LANGUAGE NATIONALISM
--THE CASE OF KISWAHILI IN KENYA

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1. Introduction

Theoretical discussions on language nationalism in Kenya have so far focused on examining the national-language potentiality of one or the other of the African languages, the English language and the Swahili language¹ along the lines of two basic criteria--namely, ethnic neutrality and (socio-economic) class neutrality. In very simplistic terms, when these languages are viewed along the lines of ethnic neutrality, the African languages seem inadequate due to their ethnic/cultural boundedness; and when viewed along the lines of class neutrality, the English language appears inadequate due to its association with the elite. So all in all, Kiswahili (Swahili language), with the popular misconception that it is a language belonging to no autonomous definable unit, emerges as the most neutral in these respects, and it is partly these factors that led to its declaration as the national language of Kenya on July 4, 1974.

Depending on specific socio-political settings, however, the religious factor can be equally sensitive in the national language question, as evidenced by the Hindi/Urdu case, for example; and this factor has not been given much attention in Kenya except in an historic sense. It is this aspect, then, that this paper aims at investigating, with the question: how does each of the languages mentioned above fare when weighed against a religious neutrality scale? The religious factor is not, of course, independent of the socio-economic relations that have existed in contemporary Kenya, but neither is the ethnic/regional aspect. For all practical purposes, linguistic "ethnicism" and linguistic "religiosism" are significant only to the extent that they are expressions of the material conditions and relations within the Kenyan society. Hence, the religious factor in this paper will be treated strictly with this consideration in mind.

¹The Swahili language is, of course, itself an African language, but due to its status as a lingua franca it has different implications. The distinction between African languages and the Swahili language has, therefore, been made with only this consideration in mind.

Bearing this in mind, then, it will be proposed here that each of the afore-mentioned languages is religious in its own sense. The scope of possible ways in which a language can be considered religious is obviously too wide for the purpose of this discussion, and we need only identify two of these--namely, extrinsic religiosity and intrinsic religiosity of a language.

1.1 Extrinsic religiosity. This level of linguistic religiosity may derive from:

i. the relative religiosity of a people and the culture which that language reflects and expresses. So, to the extent that an individual regards members of a particular community as being dominated by religious mores and values, he is also likely to perceive its linguistic medium as religious and react to it as a consequence of that religiosity.

ii. the relative confinement of a language to members of one religious group. If all, or a large majority of, the members of a society S are affiliates of a religion R, then the language L of S may be psychologically associated with R; L, then, becomes religious in this instance.

Both these senses of extrinsic religiosity are, by and large, perceptions of the outergroup, that is, views that outsiders may hold towards a language used by members of, seemingly, one cultural or religious group. Under certain conditions, however, and especially under conditions of group conflict with outer groups, members of one society may also come to be conscious of the extrinsic religiosity attributed to their own language.

1.2 Intrinsic religiosity. Intrinsic religiosity can be either overt or covert.

i. Overt intrinsic religiosity is predicated upon the linguistic substance contained in the language. This level is, again, a possible perception of both the outer and the inner group. But, while overt intrinsic religiosity, if perceived by the inner group, normally remains at a sub-conscious level, it emerges to a more conscious one under certain conditions --again, especially under conditions of conflict with outer groups.

ii. Covert intrinsic religiosity stems from the association of the language as one symbolic whole with divinity. By implication, the overt and covert levels of intrinsic religiosity are, of course, inter-related, but there is a sense in which they can be thought of as autonomous levels to some extent. Consider the case of Arabic, for instance. Its overt intrinsic religiosity is clearly confined to what is called classical Arabic, in terms of linguistic substance, in contrast to other varieties of the language. At the covert level, however, it is the language whole, not characterized by any specific sub-set of linguistic material, that is significant. This distinction will become clearer as we proceed. For now let us note that unlike the previously mentioned cases, covert intrinsic religiosity is almost solely a feeling or a perception of the inner group.

Crucial to the framework proposed above, however, is that it does not claim a generic relationship between any particular language and spirituality or divinity. Rather, this is strictly a statement of a state of mind, of the attitudes that people may have towards certain languages in relation to certain religions, universal or local, as a product of their collective beliefs and/or experiences.

Granted, then, that each of the afore-mentioned languages is or has been religious in one or more of the defined senses above, we can regard their beginning as essentially non-neutral in the religious sense. But within the course of its history the religiosity of a particular language may come to be replaced by a non-religious symbolism; and, in general, it may be that--given some more explicit definition and taxonomy of religious languages--the ease with which a religious symbolism gives way to another kind of symbolism will depend on, among other factors, the kind of religiosity which is psychologically attributed to the language. Whatever the case, one of our tasks here is to explore this phenomenon--the replacement of a religious symbolism by a socio-economic symbolism--in the context of African languages, the English language, and the Swahili language.

Approaching the situation from this perspective the argument will be advanced that the religiosity of Kiswahili seems relatively more resistant to dominance by a purely socio-economic symbolism than is the case with the African languages and the English language and that the impact of Islam and Arabic, as a religious language, has been crucial in the resistance of Kiswahili in losing its religious symbolism.

From this point on the issue that will have to be addressed is, why did this religiosity (or religious non-neutrality) of Kiswahili not contribute to its reduced success at the national level, as would have ethnic non-neutrality, for example? This, I believe, can be explained in terms of a "split" that has taken place within Kiswahili, whose reality has to be seen in the light of psychological categorization--whose emergence can be traced to the historical background of standard Kiswahili--rather than linguistic differentiation, such that we seem to have a version which is associated with the predominantly Muslim coastal community of Waswahili and another version which is associated with non-Waswahili. Suffice it to say here that standard Kiswahili, as it exists today, will fall under the category of non-Waswahili Kiswahili. So, to the extent that standard Kiswahili, a non-Muslim version, if you will, is promoted as the national norm, this split implies a kind of situation in which non-Swahili/non-Muslim Kenyans may find the "national language Kiswahili", that is, standard Kiswahili as the national norm, as religiously neutral, while the Muslim Waswahili may find it religiously non-neutral.

At this juncture we can turn to a more detailed discussion of religiosity as it relates to the linguistic cases mentioned above and to the implications that seem to emanate from this.

Since our main focus is on Kiswahili, and owing to space limitations, suffice it to say here that both the African languages and the English language (in the African context) can be shown to have been religious in both senses of extrinsic religiosity. From a historical perspective it can then be argued that the religiosity of these languages is dictated by material conditions and relations and, ultimately, capitulates to a socio-economic symbolism. This, then, renders the African languages and the English language religiously neutral in the long run.

2. Religiosity and the Swahili Language

Kiswahili could, less so now than some years ago, be regarded as both extrinsically and intrinsically religious. The extrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili derives from its being a native language to members of a predominantly Muslim community, the Swahili community. So, Kiswahili becomes religious, in this case, by its association to Islam, and to many Kenyans, in fact, the spread of Kiswahili is considered tantamount to the spread of Islam and vice versa.

Yet, despite this extrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili the language has been able to transcend its original borders at an amazing rate. What could account for this fact? Could it be correlated with the spread of Islam in East Africa? In Tanzania, where Kiswahili is very wide-spread, we also observe that Islam is widespread. But I think it would be wrong to conclude from this that the expansion of Kiswahili in Tanzania is explainable only in terms of the spread of Islam. The history of Kiswahili in Tanzania certainly entailed crucial factors other than just the religious one. One important aspect was that Tanzania initially fell under German rule, whose administration actively promoted the use of Kiswahili at all the lower administrative levels of its colony. Second, due to the predominantly trade/economic relations between the coastal Swahili/Muslim society and the non-Swahili/non-Muslim societies of the African hinterland prior to and during German rule, the extrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili came to be dominated by its socio-economic significance, rendering it less objectionable to acquisition by non-Muslims and eventually, therefore, to its becoming a lingua franca.

In Kenya, however, the situation was radically different. In the first place there was not a colonial administration comparable to that of the Germans in Tanzania with respect to favouring the spread of Kiswahili. Moreover, the socio-economic relations between Waswahili and non-Waswahili in inland Kenya were so minimal (geographically and ethnically) because of various impediments, that the religious aspect of Kiswahili remained quite pronounced. Hence, its substantial spread was limited to those Africans who had adopted Islam, and most often, these were Africans who were themselves coastalists living in close proximity to the Waswahili.

The factor that contributed to a rapid change, in the Kenya situation leading to the spread of Kiswahili, was the birth of standard Kiswahili.

But in what sense did the birth of standard Kiswahili make a difference? First, we know that Christian missionaries played a prominent, indeed, a central role in the standardization of Kiswahili. Second, it was the Christian missionary who became the main exponent of standard Swahili in the schools, whose initial function was to develop in the African the reading skill for Biblical studies. Third, in Kiswahili translations of the Bible and in other Christian writings, it was standard Kiswahili that was often utilized. And finally, it was standard Kiswahili or its "offshoots" that came to be used in those churches whose services were conducted in Kiswahili.

All these factors, then, if they did not cause the Christianized African to regard standard Kiswahili as the language of African Christianity, at least caused him to regard it as a non-Muslim brand of Kiswahili, as a religiously neutral brand. And any form of Kiswahili that came into being during or after the birth of standard Kiswahili was merely regarded as a "rustic" off-shoot of standard Kiswahili, an off-shoot of non-Muslim Kiswahili. Here, then we see the emergence of a cleavage within Kiswahili along religious lines, along Muslim/non-Muslim lines.

But even if standard Kiswahili in Kenya did not initiate the neutralization of the extrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili, the later promotion of Kiswahili at the administrative level, and its subsequent importance in geographical mobility, a factor that is directly tied to socio-economic conditions, would have obscured its extrinsic religiosity. So, whatever the case, the extrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili would, eventually, have been neutralized.

More precarious in this respect is the intrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili. This religiosity, which is basically overt, is historically a product of its lexical and phonological influences from a language, Arabic, which is itself considered religious. In other words, the intrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili emanates from its internal expression of Arabic as a religious language. But before we can elaborate on this it may be worthwhile here to consider, for a moment, the religiosity of the Arabic language.

Like Kiswahili, the Arabic language can be considered religious in both senses of the word, that is, extrinsically and intrinsically. The extrinsic religiosity of Arabic is due to its significant confinement to members of one religion. It is, certainly, not true that all who use Arabic in their daily interaction are Muslims, but it is still a substantial claim that the preponderant number of those who use it are Muslims.

The intrinsic religiosity of Arabic, on the other hand, unlike that of Kiswahili, is covert in nature and stems from the Muslims' belief that Arabic is the language of divine (Koranic) revelation. This covert intrinsic religiosity of Arabic also gave rise to ideas of overt religiosity, to regarding the linguistic substance, particularly that of the Arabic of the Koran, as divine and religious in itself. Hence, in this sense, the intrinsic

religiosity of Arabic became compounded, and its significance to the Muslims accentuated.

In Kenya, specifically, the assertion of the religiosity of Arabic came to be most highly pronounced with the establishment of schools where English was both a subject and a medium of instruction. For example, Sheikh Al-Amin bin Ali became particularly outspoken in championing the cause of Arabic and condemned the colonial government for "suppressing" the teaching of Arabic in government schools. Actually, the teaching of Arabic never was an extensive endeavour among the Muslims themselves. Yet, interestingly enough, here was a Muslim leader condemning an administration that would not undertake or support that same project which was only marginally undertaken in the Muslim communities. The point here is that, even though Sheikh Al-Amin was quite radical, for his time, to even encourage the learning of English to the Muslims, he could not emotionally dissociate himself from this community which equated English with Christianity and Christian civilization. His position was, understandably, that of ambivalence. And to him the only way that the colonial administration--that administration which promoted English, a Christian language, in the schools --could reduce its burden of guilt, was to institute the teaching of Arabic.

As long as the extrinsic religiosity of English prevailed, therefore, it can be said that the Muslim's demands for the teaching of Arabic also persisted. But, once the socio-economic symbolism of English came to dominate its religious symbolism, this insistence on Arabic receded. This is not to say that, at this point, Arabic ceased to be religious. Certainly not; the religiosity of Arabic just became less articulated. Material conditions changed, the socio-economic relations and statuses altered, but to that Muslim community, as to others, the Arabic language remained religious.

Let us now return to Kiswahili. With this ardent attachment to Arabic as a consequence of its religiosity, it was almost natural that the material influence of Arabic on Kiswahili be interpreted as religious influence. This intrinsic religiosity that Kiswahili came to acquire was, in fact, an object of great suspicion and rejection in certain Christian missionary circles. They opposed the very use of Kiswahili in missionary activities claiming that Kiswahili carried the spirit of Islam and could not, as such, be used in the christianization of the African. Kiswahili and Christianity were, to them, mutually exclusive entities. This notion sprouted, in part, from the predominantly Islamic background of the Swahili community, but also, importantly, from the existence of many terms of Arabic origin in Kiswahili which were regarded as being, directly or indirectly, related to Islamic institutions. To both the missionaries and the Swahili people, therefore, any attempt to "de-Arabize" Kiswahili implied its "de-Islamization", the elimination of its intrinsic religiosity.

At this point one may ask: if this material influence of Arabic on Kiswahili was considered religious, why did it not result in the rejection

of Kiswahili by non-Muslim Africans? I think the answer to this is simply that the African was unaware of this level of religiosity. Awareness of the overt intrinsic religiosity of Kiswahili depended, of course, on two factors--namely, the association of Arabic with religion and awareness of the material influences of Arabic in Kiswahili. But since this latter factor requires some knowledge of both languages and probably some linguistic sophistication, and since this was certainly not the case with the non-Muslim Kenyan, Kiswahili's intrinsic religiosity was non-existent as far as he was concerned.

But the point may be presented that even the Mswahili did not have the linguistic sophistication to enable him to know of the existence of words of Arabic origin in Kiswahili, and without this, the Mswahili could not possibly react against the "de-Arabization" of Kiswahili. This claim is partly true; the common Mswahili is often unable to identify words of Arabic origin in Kiswahili. But the common Mswahili is also exposed to sufficient doses of Arabic during his lifetime to be able to associate at least a few Kiswahili words to Arabic origin.

More important, however, is that the Mswahili's association of Kiswahili to Arabic influence is based less on the lexical level than it is on the phonological level. Through educational socialization in Islamic madrassas and in the society at large the linguistic expression of Arabism in Kiswahili became an element of sophistication which came to be partly measured by one's ability to articulate any known Arabic borrowing as articulated in Arabic speech. So, in his reaction to Standard Kiswahili, Sheikh Al-Amin bin Ali [1932] had this to say:

It is indeed a great loss on our part to speak this Kiswahili that has been tampered with by Europeans. Kiswahili is the language of the coastal people, and it is not pure save by (retaining) its mixture with Arabic.

It is, of course, paradoxical that linguistic purity should be seen in terms of linguistic mixture, that the purity of Kiswahili should be seen in terms of its mixture with Arabic. But Sheikh Al-Amin was reacting primarily to the extracting of what is considered prestigious in Kiswahili, the implication being not only that Arabic is Kiswahili's "purifying" force, but also that to extract what has been absorbed into a language by a natural process, and especially if it becomes a mark of prestige, is as much a linguistic "impurity" as the introduction of new and foreign material. And so, in citing examples of the linguistic "pollution" that has been introduced into Kiswahili by Europeans, Sheikh Al-Amin [1932] indicates that there are:

many Arabic words in Kiswahili...and part of the sophistication in using these words derives from pronouncing them as the Arabs do; the Europeans have changed these words by pronouncing them crudely in a way that is not considered sophisticated speech in Kiswahili such as khabari being written and pronounced as habari, khamsini becoming hamsini, -ghali becoming gali, harufu becoming herufi, ilmu becoming elimu, kuhisabu becoming kuhesabu, not to mention other words that cannot be represented by the European letters.

From the above quotation we may conclude that the issue is not so much "delexification", but rather, the deletion of certain sounds from the phonological system of Kiswahili as a phenomenon in its de-Arabization. And, to the common Mswahili, it is this phonological aspect as a linguistic value, more than anything else, that accounts for the split within Kiswahili.

Before concluding it is important to note here that within the inner group, that is, within the Swahili society itself, the linguistic Arabisms are purely a mark of sophistication, and an Mswahili who does not articulate these Arabisms is merely considered unsophisticated in his speech. Now, if for the moment we can ideologically agree that norms of sophisticated behavior are socio-economically determined, it can be said that in the context of the inner group the Arabisms in Kiswahili are more socio-economically than religiously significant. This becomes understandable if we consider that by the very nature of Arab-Swahili contact, the Arab has existed as socio-economically superior in the mind of the Mswahili.

When we are dealing with a supra-local situation, however, a situation in which the Swahili community finds itself in confrontation with other ethnic groups, then the use or non-use of these linguistic Arabisms also comes to acquire a religious interpretation. And this is precisely because, within the inner group, a person who does not articulate the Arabisms as he should is simply considered as not having succeeded in acquiring the norm of speech which he, like every Mswahili, values, while similar orientation in the outer group is seen as a conscious or sub-conscious case of deviance from the norm that has been defined by a Muslim community.

3. Conclusion

What has emerged from the above analysis is that precisely because African languages and the English language more readily capitulate to a socio-economic symbolism they are religiously neutralizable with greater ease than Kiswahili. In view of this impediment to religious neutralization, Kiswahili took the course to psycho-linguistic differentiation when called upon to assume the national role. As a result, however, we seem to have ended up with two categories of Kiswahili speech each of which is, seemingly, religiously non-neutral to the outer group--the Kiswahili of Waswahili is not neutral to non-Waswahili/non-Muslims, while standard Kiswahili is not neutral to Waswahili. And the selection of standard

Kiswahili as the material base for the national norm, therefore, necessarily implies a choice of a Kiswahili that is religiously non-neutral to Waswahili.

The Waswahili are, potentially, one of Kenya's greatest resources in terms of the need to promote standard Kiswahili. How, then, are we to go about neutralizing standard Kiswahili in a religious sense so that this resource can be fully exploited?

It is obvious that it is not politically nor practically possible to reinstate some of the Arabic elements in standard Kiswahili so as to make it more appealing to Waswahili. In other words, even though I believe that some constraints have to be imposed on the codification of standard Kiswahili the solution to this particular problem does not lie in tampering with the present form and substance of standard Kiswahili. I believe, rather, that it lies in the Waswahili converts to the idea of a standard Kiswahili.

It is obvious that the process of codification has proceeded only to the extent of formalizing a set of rules that will make possible the generation of structures that can be considered grammatical. The norms of acceptability, however, are rather ill-defined. And the absorption and active participation of these Waswahili converts in the levels of formulation--along the lines of norms of appropriateness that already exist in the Swahili community--and implementation of such norms will be a significant step towards the reduction of Waswahili's ambivalence to the standard/national norm.

It is most likely that, with time, a wider variation in speech within Kiswahili will emerge, and, as a result, appropriateness will take on a different form in each of these varieties. Due to this it has been suggested (see, for example, Harries [1976]) that norms of appropriateness should be allowed to emerge as a natural phenomenon, and whatever set of norms that manages to establish itself over others would be integrated into the standard norm. But in my opinion, this argument misses an important point. In fact, a similar argument could have been presented with regard to the choice of a base dialect for standard Kiswahili. What is important here is that a specific region which has been faced with specific language problems has resorted to language planning to solve these problems under the given conditions. If natural phenomena are allowed to take precedence then we have no use for language planning.

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