

# **Marehemu Julius Kambarage Nyerere and Kiswahili\***

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## **Abstract**

The article takes a survey of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's contribution and commitment to the development and recognition of Kiswahili as a *lughu ya wanyonge*. It shows Nyerere's personal contribution that enabled the language to overcome the critical years when and where the political climate was much in favour of consolidating the position of English in Tanganyika/Tanzania. While Nyerere is shown to have been a pragmatist who understood well the linguistic situation in his country, it is indicated also that at times Mwalimu had some biased attitude towards English or against Kiswahili, especially with regard to the use of the latter as a medium of instruction in secondary schools and at tertiary levels of education. The stance of the article though, is that such shortcomings are of minor importance in the light of Nyerere's overall personal impact in the implementation of a commendable language policy for his country, which is still the best choice in terms of national and international experiences.

## **Introduction**

The late Julius Kambarage Nyerere (henceforth JKN) has always been praised for his endeavour to foster one national language in a country with nominally 120+ ethnic groups and nationalities. When JKN passed away in October 1999, his outspoken commitment towards Kiswahili being the national language of the United Republic of Tanzania was unanimously pointed out in a number of obituaries. Among those who refer to Mwalimu's dedication to the cause of the "common (wo)man's language" (*lughu ya wanyonge*) is Derek Ingram (founder and former editor of Gemini News Service). He had this to say about JKN:

"One of his great contributions was to push the growth of Swahili in East and Central Africa. He believed, with good reason, that Swahili could promote African unity, just as it had done in Tanzania" (Ingram 2000:27)

And J. Derrick (1999:16) wrote:

"The use of a Swahili name for the party (i. e. CCM - K. L.) confirmed the importance attached to that language which, while not the first language of most Tanzanians, is understood all over the country. Nyerere developed the use of Swahili, in the educational system for example.

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Whether the existence of a generally spoken and written African language helped save Tanzania from the ethnic problems affecting many other countries of Africa can be questioned..."

As obituaries tend to be short and are supposed to cover a vast area of contributions made by an individual, this short quotation (and probably many others in obituaries) does not exhaust the topic. That's why we are making an attempt in this paper, to provide and comment on some facts, which are directly or indirectly related to the JKN and his way of using, propagating, promoting and, in doing so, empowering Kiswahili.

### **Pre-independence period**

JKN came formally into contact with Kiswahili back home in Musoma while attending the Mwisenge School: "He began to study Swahili at twelve and English at fifteen..." (Smith 1973:45). The formal exposure to Kiswahili continued at Tabora Government School where Kiswahili was taught as a subject. However, schooling in Tabora might have been rather a period of cramming and consolidating English among those pupils who were selected for further training by the colonial administration.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the predominant position of English could be inferred from what was *inter alia* stated during the work of the Commission for Closer Union in East Africa (1930/1) and several documents issued by the British administration.<sup>2</sup>

As President of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA) elected in April 1953), JKN was fundamental in reviving the Association. In this capacity he prepared a draft constitution, which was subsequently discussed and adopted at the TAA territorial conference in Dar es Salaam (from 7-9 July 1954) where also the new party name, i. e. Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) came into existence. Accordingly, it is legitimate to say that the then TANU constitution is mainly JKN's product. As reflected in the minutes of the Conference, the founding members of TANU discussed in Kiswahili<sup>3</sup> a multitude of issues, which were crucial to the political and socio-economic situation in Tanganyika.<sup>4</sup> Kiswahili itself was focused on with regard to two aspects. The first aspect was in support of Kiswahili becoming a language for legislative purposes and Legislative Council deliberations: "It was ... agreed that Kiswahili should be the second language to be used in the Legislative Council meetings..." (TANU 1954:3).

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<sup>1</sup> The Superintendent of Education in Tanganyika, R. L. Mason, wrote in 1938 that "... the brightest pupils (in Standard IV - K. L.) become students of English, the less bright vernacular teachers..." (Mason 1938:4).

<sup>2</sup> After Tabora (1937-1942) at Makerere (1943-1945) JKN is described to be trying to pick up some Luganda, while he helped people to improve their Kiswahili competence (as reported in "The New Vision". Oct. 23, 1999:19).

<sup>3</sup> This language had been the medium of communication within (T)AA since its foundation, comp. e. g. the AA Constitution (given in Kiswahili) as well as the decision of the 1947 Territorial Conference held in Zanzibar (4th to 7th April 1947) to reinforce the position of Kiswahili inside the association. e. g. in meetings (Tumbo 1976:56).

This resolution took into account earlier initiatives by various organisations and individuals. It goes back to the time shortly after the 2nd World War when Africans were admitted to the Legislative Council as nominated members. As a consequence, in 1948 TAA handed over a petition to a UN Visiting Mission where the adoption of Kiswahili as a second Legislative Council language was suggested.<sup>5</sup> Abdu Kandoro (a TAA activist and subsequently also a TANU founder member) composed in 1948 the following poem:

Baraza la Tanganyika, ambalo la serikali,  
Ndilo tunalolitaka, litumika Kiswahili,  
Tupate Waafrika, kuendesha serikali,  
Kitumike Kiswahili, Baraza la Tanganyika...<sup>6</sup> (Kandoro 1972:142)

The Trusteeship Council commented on this issue as follows:

English is the only language used in the Legislative Council. This factor was cited by Government officials as one of the major difficulties in finding suitable African representatives for the Council... it was suggested by the Mission that the administration might consider adopting Kiswahili as a second official and working language in the Legislative Council, so that Africans would not be penalized because of their lack of knowledge of English. The reply was given that English was the language best suited for debate... (UN 1949:12/3).

Later on, a tribal organisation like the Hehe Council (the Hehe Chief Adam Sapi was a nominated member of the Legislative Council which might explain the motive) demanded the introduction of Kiswahili for Legislative Council purposes.<sup>7</sup> Even the conference of the Provincial Commissioners recommended in June 1950 in minute 44 "...that Swahili should also be introduced as an official language in Legislative Council, making English and Swahili the two official languages" (TNA 32528:22). A number of other statements (including interventions by the Governor Sir E. Twining) in favour of or against Kiswahili were subsequently made.

The negative attitude of the British administration towards the TAA petition, UN Visiting Mission and other suggestions was fiercely criticised in a statement by the representative of the Soviet Union in the United Nations Trusteeship Council:

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<sup>4</sup> See TANU (1954) or Kandoro (1978) who gives a Swahili version of the minutes which is signed by JKN.

<sup>5</sup> Dated 20 Sept. 1948, see United Nations (1949:199).

<sup>6</sup> The Council of Tanganyika, which is of the Government, what we really want, it uses Kiswahili, so that we get Africans, to run the government, Kiswahili be used. (in the) Council of Tanganyika.

<sup>7</sup> Comp. also what the UNO Visiting Mission was told in Bukoba: "It was thought the difficulties of adequate African representation could be solved, if Swahili - the lingua franca of East Africa - was adopted as the official language" (Times. 17 August 1951. TNA 37681/1).

... in line with the Administering Authority's policy of racial discrimination and crude violation of the rights and interests of the indigenous population, it had rejected the request made by the African Association that ... Swahili... be made a second official language of the Legislative Council" (UN 1951/52:38).

Not least in light of the TANU position quoted above, Governor Sir Edward Twining felt compelled to make the following concession:

The question of whether Swahili should be allowed as a second language in the proceedings of the new Legislature has been raised again during the past few months. This is a matter to which Government has given very thorough consideration and I have already announced that Swahili would be permitted in debate with the permission of the Chair. (Tanganyika 1954/5, 29:288).<sup>8</sup>

Suffice it to note here what ultimately Whiteley (1969:64) reports in this respect:

... the important step was taken in 1955 of introducing simultaneous English/Swahili interpretation at the sittings of Legislative Council, members being also permitted to speak in Swahili where the Speaker was satisfied that they would otherwise be hampered.

The second reference to Kiswahili during the 1st TANU Conference had to do with its status in education. In order for the British administration in East Africa in general and Tanganyika in particular to undermine Kiswahili's growing importance in mobilizing the masses for socio-economic and racial equality and against foreign domination after World War II, the emphasis on English as a school subject and medium of instruction was intensified by colonial educationists. This policy alongside an orientation towards supporting languages other than Kiswahili was recommended in the Report of the Binns Mission in 1953.<sup>9</sup>

Aware of this situation, which could have been detrimental to the status of Kiswahili, TANU urged:

"... Swahili language should be an important language in schools: it should be taught and used in the lower schools as well as (in) the higher schools" (TANU 1954:3).

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<sup>8</sup> But comp. further the depreciative statement on the same occasion: "I may say that Government considers it to be quite out of the question for Council papers to be translated into Swahili as the language is not suitable for the intricacies of legal documents" (Tanganyika 1954/5, 288).

<sup>9</sup> "As a medium of instruction, neither Swahili nor Luganda is useful beyond an elementary standard, and the only possible alternative is English... the teaching of English should begin in as low a class as possibly..." (Great Britain 1955:184). In this respect, an interesting comment was made by J. W. T. Allen in answering a letter written by the Member, Social Services in the British Administration of Trusteeship Tanganyika: "It should be remembered, however, that the interest taken in vernacular tongues by Tanganyika is on the political rather than the educational side..." (TNA 12454, vol V:367). See also Cameron&Dodd (1970:110).



However, obviously no policy revision was achieved before independence with regard to language use in schools. Even an official document admits:

Kwa kuwa mafundisho ya Kiingereza huangaliwa sana tangu Standard V na katika madarasa ya mbele, kazi nyingi hufundishwa kwa Kiingereza, lugha ya Kiswahili imekuwa haitiwi maana sana... (Tanganyika 1955:43).<sup>10</sup>

Both the TANU constitution and the minutes were written in English, although Kiswahili had been firmly established as the medium of communication in TANU's predecessor TAA. One might ask: Why this preference for English? The answer could either be that TANU wanted to become known beyond the traditionally Kiswahili speaking community which was strongly supporting TAA or to comply with the instructions of the Registrar of Associations which might have prescribed English texts for registration purposes.

Immediately after the birth of TANU in 1954 its president JKN launched himself into numerous activities to propagate and implement the political ideals developed by TANU and mainly by himself. The language he used for communicating with the party members and the people at the grassroots he addressed whenever touring the country was Kiswahili. JKN himself once stated that he failed to be understood in Kiswahili by people only on three occasions thus requiring an interpreter for translating his speech. This happened among Maasai, Iraqw and Sukuma speakers whose Kiswahili competence was (and to a certain extent still is) known to be low.

An episode should be included here. The text which is extracted from Smith (1973:57) indirectly sheds also light on Kiswahili and how the language was taken by JKN as a model for describing Zanaki:

In April 1955, Nyerere took his family back to his Zanaki home-land... In Musoma, he accepted a job as translator and tutor, at 700 shillings a month, from the Maryknoll Fathers, who were preparing to establish a mission in Zanaki. 'I asked him if he would help me with the tribal language, Ki-Zanaki,' Father Wille, who was to direct the new mission, has said, 'and so he moved into Musoma; he stayed with Oswald Marwa, and he taught me every day. He translated some catechisms and a teachers' manual for the catechism. He offered to try to do a translation of the New Testament into Ki-Zanaki. No, there still isn't one. What he did translate was a reading from the Gospels for every Sunday in the year. And he taught me – oh, from nine until twelve-thirty, and from one to five. He used to exhaust me, he has tremendous intellectual energy. We were using the *Teach Yourself* book on Swahili as the basis for the Zanaki grammar.

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<sup>10</sup> As the teaching of English has been a priority from Standard V onwards, many activities are taught in English, Kiswahili has not been properly paid attention to.

I think there are seven classes of verbs in Swahili, and he would say, 'My language has twelve classes – this class in Swahili is similar to this one in Zanaki,' and so on. I used to be amazed he could remember it so well, because he had left tribal life when he was twelve and had never really gone back to it. He might say, 'I'll have to ask my mother,' or Oswald."

JKN is described to be the author of many articles in Kiswahili which were published in the TANU mouthpiece "Sauti ya TANU".<sup>11</sup> For one article he was even fined, as the British administration felt insulted.<sup>12</sup> In addition, in those years before Independence, JKN wrote various pamphlets in Kiswahili such as "Mali ya Taifa"<sup>13</sup> as well as widely used the language for internal party matters.<sup>14</sup> Slogans in Kiswahili like "Uhuru na TANU" or "Uhuru na Nyerere" were extremely popular. In fact, the Kiswahili coinage "Uhuru" has meanwhile become a synonym for the independence struggle in the rest of Africa.

JKN was always praised for his rhetoric that classified him as a splendid speaker of Kiswahili whose listeners were delighted to follow his argumentation presented in a simple, colourful language. In his speeches JKN drew from the rich Kiswahili vocabulary supplemented by occasional reference to concepts and images found in his mother tongue Zanaki. His way of speaking and addressing an audience in Kiswahili is said to have helped in winning people's hearts and support and certainly facilitated the way to Uhuru. Ngh'waya (1991:34) mentions an example where under difficult circumstances (i. e. to make a decision whether to take part in the 1958 Elections or to boycott them) JKN convinced the Annual TANU Conference in Tabora of the need to register its own candidates and to support European and Indian nominations. In doing so JKN referred to an axe and its handle where the former is produced overseas, the latter locally. When both things are put together the result is an axe, which could cut down huge trees as well as split trunks. TANU should support those non-Africans who are known for their cooperation with TANU.

Bühlmann (1962) reported that in 1955 JKN initiated a "national study group" for Kiswahili. Its aims were the study of Kiswahili and the development of this language to become Tanganyika's national language.<sup>15</sup> So far, neither the existence of this study group nor its composition has been proved.

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<sup>11</sup> There is unfortunately only indirect reference to what Nyerere wrote in "Sauti ya TANU", since the newsheet could not be traced by the author in Tanzania or elsewhere. One sample of JKN's contribution therein is partly reprinted in Ngh'waya (1991:51), English translations are included in Nyerere (1966: 48-52, 59/60 and 61/62) which is from No. 18 (16 December 1957), No. 29 (27 May 1958, see footnote 10) and No. 32 (20 June 1958) respectively. For "Sauti Ya TANU" comp. also Omari (1972) and Ngh'waya (1991) who reports that about 200 copies of this TANU mouthpiece were printed and posted to TANU branches as well as addresses abroad.

<sup>12</sup> See e. g. Smith (1973:71/2), the article is reproduced in Hungu (1971:20-22) as well as in Ngh'waya (1990) who describes the whole court case.

<sup>13</sup> An English extract is included in Nyerere (1966:53-58)

<sup>14</sup> Such as his circular to "Wakuu wote wa TANU" of 16 Dec. 1958 (quoted in Iliffe 19:558, footnote 5).

Finally, it should also be noted that JKN was even prepared to delay the independence of Tanganyika until other East African countries were independent to enter with them into a Federation. In this context JKN foresaw the unifying role of Kiswahili in a wider East African perspective. He argued in 1960 at the University of Duquesne (USA):

...Shirikisho la nchi za Afrika ...litawezekana kwa kuungana kwa nchi moja moja... nchi za Afrika ya Mashariki zina lugha moja ambayo ina nguvu ya kuziunganisha nchi hizi, nayo ni lugha ya Kiswahili. (Hungu 1971:32).<sup>16</sup>

The widespread use of and commitment to Kiswahili by JKN set an example which made other TANU militants proud and confident of using and developing the language to suit the political argumentation. Although sometimes the shortcut to express a political concept was to adopt an English loan, in many other ways its users creatively expanded the vocabulary of the language. A number of new terms were spontaneously coined, thus reflecting the political struggle for independence at its various stages. This is an aspect that still needs a profound linguistic analysis, as details of how JKN and other militants formed political concepts via Kiswahili are virtually unknown.

The unifying role of Kiswahili in the anti-colonial movement and the liberation struggle worried the British administration in Tanganyika. Apart from shifting the focus of language use and teaching in education towards English away from Kiswahili, officials initiated a campaign to undermine its status and prestige among the population. Amri Abedi<sup>17</sup> (1963:14) summarized these aspects as follows:

It was interesting to note that a campaign to decry 'Swahili' as the language of the slave trade had been launched by Lord Twining... at this time when politicians were proclaiming that it should be declared the lingua franca for Tanganyika. A parallel scheme to teach English in Standard III of the Primary Schools, without making similar provision for teaching Swahili, was also introduced to weaken the language still further.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The term "national language" is ambiguous and relates to four different meanings (comp. Brann 1994); probably the status of Kiswahili as a future official language in the country is envisaged.

<sup>16</sup> ... the federation of African countries will be possible by country after country uniting... the East African countries have one language which is powerful enough to unite these countries, and this is the Swahili language.

<sup>17</sup> A. Abedi was a well known poet and after independence Minister of Justice.

<sup>18</sup> Comp. also the following observation: "During the past two decades the official attitude to Swahili has been more and more to disregard and despise it, to relegate it to the position of one of the many 'vernaculars' whose use it is assumed will disappear with the spread of knowledge of English" (Editorial 1959:5 - as the editor is W. H. Whiteley, his criticism of British colonial policy is to be appreciated).

Needless to say, all attempts to turn the time back and implant hatred for Kiswahili mostly failed. However, various derogatory comments about Kiswahili dating back to colonial times and propagated, in particular, in schools were rather tenacious. Some public servants were brought up and indoctrinated in this way of thinking negatively about Kiswahili. This attitude towards Kiswahili in society was difficult to eradicate after independence.

The pre-independence image and prestige of Kiswahili as language of “Uhuru” is widely attributed to JKN. The latter not only used it with exemplary perfection as a political weapon, but also set an example of how he as one of those rare Tanzanian intellectuals vigorously and eloquently handled a language, which was discredited as “uncivilized” and “primitive” by a few British officials who probably did not even know enough Kiswahili to ask for water.

In retrospect, JKN and his contemporaries unanimously expressed time and again their deep appreciation of the role of Kiswahili in the pre-independence year. JKN himself stated:

Lugha hii (Kiswahili - K. L.) ya watu wote ilikuwa na thamani kubwa sana katika juhudi za kupigania uhuru na katika kuliunganisha Taifa letu changa. (Nyerere 1971:ii).<sup>19</sup>

Mwanjisi (1961:10-11) summarized it thus: “The great unifying factor, however, absent from Uganda and Kenya, was our common language, Swahili. It was not one man’s but everybody’s tongue. ...Swahili has joined us all”. With particular reference to JKN, Patrick (1978:3) argued:

“Rais Julius K. Nyerere kwa kutumia Kiswahili alipoanza pale panapoeleweka na walio wengi ndiyo maana ikawa rahisi kukubalika na kupata wafuasi wengi. Angetumia lugha ya kigeni basi wananchi wasingeona utofauti wowote na mzungu na ingechukua muda mrefu kuupata huo uhuru.”<sup>20</sup>

In academic contributions, similar assessments were made, such as the one made by (Glickman 1972:132), “The use of Swahili permitted the rapid extension of TANU to remote regions of the country. The ability to transact political business in a language other than that of European imperialism or of a particular tribe and yet one that is African can be very important to the nationalization of loyalties”

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<sup>19</sup> For the English version see Nyerere (1973).

<sup>20</sup> By using Kiswahili President Julius K. Nyerere started there where there was an understanding by the majority, as it was simple to find recognition and many supporters. If he would have used a foreign language, the population would not have made any difference to the White man, thus it would have taken much longer to become independent.

## 2. The years after 1961

In September 1962, the then Prime Minister of Tanganyika announced that “Tanganyika’s first President will deliver his speech to the National Assembly in the national language” (Tanganyika Standard 7 Sept. 1962:1).<sup>21</sup>

One day (10th December 1962) after Tanganyika became a Republic, JKN addressed the National Assembly in Kiswahili.<sup>22</sup> This recognition of an African language at such a formal level left a deep and lasting impression in Tanganyika<sup>23</sup>, in Africa and elsewhere in the world. A language, which was blamed for not being suitable and equipped to express modern concepts, was used with a high degree of sophistication. JKN’s speech substantially stimulated the use of Kiswahili and promoted its image as a viable instrument of political argumentation. This step could be compared to similar initiatives in other parts of the world when low status languages (frequently spoken by colonially oppressed people) were gradually penetrating into domains hitherto reserved for then high status languages such as Latin, French, German or Russian.

To address the National Assembly in Kiswahili was possible for JKN in his capacity as Tanganyika’s President (since he was not a member of parliament), whereas parliamentarians’ language use was stipulated by the Constitution as well as the rules and orders of the National Assembly. Hitherto the following rule applied:

The proceedings of the Assembly shall be conducted in the English language, provided where the Speaker is satisfied that a Member’s knowledge is inadequate to this purpose, he may permit him to address the Assembly in the Swahili language. Such permission may at any time be revoked by the Speaker” (Tanganyika. National Assembly 1961a:4).<sup>24</sup>

It is very clear that JKN’s option for Kiswahili paved the way for a general move away from English which subsequently took place not only in the National Assembly but elsewhere too. This symbolic act is praised by Khamis (1974:288) as “a revolutionary step considering the linguistic climate that prevailed at the time”. In fact, it changed the status of languages. Although English was never abolished as a second official language in Parliament, the example set by JKN created a moral responsibility for the MPs for using the national language and stimulated an almost complete abstention from speaking English in Bunge.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> He went on to say: “After that ... Members of Parliament will be able to use in the National Assembly either English or Swahili as they wish... ‘We have made this decision because it is important that the mass of people feel that their Parliament is part of them; they cannot really do this while it is conducted exclusively in a foreign language’” (Tanganyika Standard 7 Sept. 1962:1).

<sup>22</sup> Hotuba ya Rais wa Jamhuri katika Baraza Kuu la Taifa (Brauner&Bantu 1973:166-175).

<sup>23</sup> See Tanganyika (1963, 5th meeting:32) for comments by parliamentarians, also a newspaper report (“Kiswahili katika Baraza”) on JKN’s historical speech and parliamentarians subsequently speaking Kiswahili in Parliament (Brauner&Bantu 1973:179-180).

<sup>24</sup> Another version which dates back to 1961 states: “12. The proceedings of the Assembly shall be conducted in the Swahili or English language” (Tanganyika. National Assembly 1961b:3). This discrepancy with the other text may be due to the amendment, as announced by R. Kawawa. Accordingly, prior to JKN’s speech MPs normally did not speak Kiswahili in parliamentary sessions.

For the post-independence period, JKN's role in using, propagating and promoting Kiswahili is manifold and needs substantial research and more attention than could be offered in this paper. Hence, the following section is based on some impressions, which highlight JKN's commitment to Kiswahili, but is unable to cover all aspects that bear relevance to the topic. Accordingly, the approach is rather selective with focus on some important issues touched upon by Mwalimu in independent Tanganyika/Tanzania.<sup>26</sup>

In various ways JKN underscored the importance of Kiswahili for Tanzania (and in some cases beyond). For him "Kiswahili ni moja katika lugha mbili za Taifa" (Nyerere's foreword in Temu 1966:v). An interpretation of this statement that deals with "two languages of the Nation" leads to an understanding of Kiswahili being the official language in Tanzania (alongside English). In other words, Kiswahili and English are those languages, which are prescribed as media of communication for legislative, executive and judiciary purposes. This opinion coincides with a number of similar statements made by other political leaders and personalities in Tanzania. Thus, Kawawa (1970:4) similarly spoke of Kiswahili as the "language for all our politics and for almost all our administration".

In addition, JKN defined Kiswahili as the national language of Tanzania ("Kiswahili ni lugha ya Taifa Tanzania", Nyerere in Nsekela 1971:5). This is an understanding, which coincides with the description of various authors who deal with this term with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa, e. g. Heine and especially Brann (1994). The latter has listed four different uses of the term "national language" of which the central connotation is consonant with JKN. Accordingly, a nation-state is equated with a unique language. Or, in the current case, "national" implies to be spoken by the majority of the Tanzanians all over the country.<sup>27</sup>

In the post-independence period, JKN (such as reported by Rutayisingwa 1984) spoke of Kiswahili being a great asset and an important factor in nation-building by supporting and bringing along national unity. At the end of his tenure as CCM Chairman JKN underscored this fact which he commented upon in the light of the linguistic situation in Tanzania. This experience encapsulated in a simple statement could be a lesson for most other African countries which did not succeed in empowering an autochthonous language to become a national language:

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<sup>25</sup> When in 1967 the Minister of Finance and a MP spoke English in Bunge and were subsequently criticised for this use, a debate started in which the former referred to the official status of English. Others, however, argued that there is a moral obligation to fully speak the national language (Majadiliano 1967:9,1, 994). It seems that gradually days the pendulum swung back to English, as the Finance Minister's speech in July 1999 was probably given in English (at least the internet version was in this language).

<sup>26</sup> The most comprehensive account of JKN's thoughts of Kiswahili in recent years may be found in a newspaper report on the opening of a six days seminar in Dar Es Salaam to celebrate the 20th anniversary of UKUTA (Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania) from 27 October to 1 November 1984 (Rutayisingwa 1984:1). The author of this paper was a participant in the seminar and occasionally refers to his own notes taken during JKN's speech. See below.



Making Kiswahili Tanzania's language helped us greatly in the battle against tribalism. If every Tanzanian had stuck to using his tribal language or if we had tried to make English the official language of Tanzania, I am pretty sure that we would not have created the national unity we currently enjoy... we have... an enormous duty to continue to promote and enhance Kiswahili. It is a great weapon for our country's unity" (quoted in Laitin 1992:91/2).

At the same time Kiswahili was earmarked as the symbol of Tanzanian identity. JKN praised the fact that the whole population of Tanzania across more than 120 ethnic groups and languages or varieties uses it.

In the sixties Kiswahili became perfectly embedded in the emerging egalitarian concept, which ultimately led to the proclamation of the Ujamaa policy and the self-reliance principles. Needless to say that JKN's strong belief in grassroots' democracy and development could not have been approached would these ideas have been proclaimed in a language which had not been well known to the ordinary wo/man. In fact, Kiswahili fulfilled a substantial ideological function of spreading and making the population aware of ideas, which were plausible to them, although subsequently manipulated and discredited. JKN is credited with this consistent use of Kiswahili, as he personally sought the contact with the people who appreciated his humble character and the language he used to identify himself as one of them.

Given the important status of Kiswahili recognized by Mwalimu and his political followers in Tanzania, it was logical that JKN urged all Tanzanians: "... *ni wajibu wetu sote kujaribu kama tunavyoweza kuikuza lugha yetu katika kuandika, kusema na katika kuwaza*". (Nyerere in Nsekela 1971:5).<sup>28</sup>

He was aware that an optimal use of this language should go along with the latter's introduction into domains of communication in which English was firmly established. Hence, JKN welcomed Peter Temu's book about economic issues (Temu :1966). In his preface of this publication in Kiswahili, he also attacked those who were against Kiswahili by claiming that the language is not suitable for being used beyond a certain elementary level. JKN observed:

Wapo watu wasiosadiki kwamba jambo lolote la maana linaweza kuandikwa kwa Kiswahili... Lakini si kweli kusema kuwa Kiswahili kilichopo hakiwezi kikatumiwa katika uandishi wa vitabu mbali mbali kuhusu mambo ya utaalim" (Nyerere 1966:v).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "...several African States have tried to associate their "national" identity, i.e. statehood, with one language - particularly where there was a clear dominant or homogeneous ethno-linguistic majority..." (Brann 1994:130), comp. Heine (1979) and Legère (1973).

<sup>28</sup> It's the duty of all of us to attempt as much as possible promoting our language in writing, speaking and in thinking. - For an almost similar statement see Nyerere (in Temu 1966:v). In view of JKN's way of thinking in terms of the African continent this appeal is certainly also meant for people in other parts of East Africa and beyond.



From a linguistic point of view, any language is potentially gifted for any role in communication it is expected to play. Well known linguists have given time and again ample proof for the fact that language as a social phenomenon is a mirror of the society's achievements, hence arguing that there are no underdeveloped languages. However, a language's role is strongly determined by factors like empowerment or marginalisation. As long as status matters and corpus development are not properly decided upon, the common people (and in particular politicians) believe that an African language is inferior to the ex-colonial languages - English, French or Portuguese. As the result of people's indoctrination by the colonial education system (sometimes even perpetuated in post-independence years) and the then colonially-minded mass media, the languages of the former rulers were and often are still associated with superiority, technological and scientific progress and better life. African languages on the other side are stigmatised as symbols of backwardness and stagnation. Suffice it to note here that in many part of Africa not very much has changed in attitudes towards Africa's own languages. Thus JKN's statement remains as relevant as ever.

JKN is a shining example for a creative, complex contribution towards enhancing the status of Kiswahili in Tanzania. Being aware of criticism and negative attitudes persisting in Tanganyika/Tanzania he became active and took a variety of efficient steps that underscored the importance of Kiswahili in several domains. Thus, Mwalimu is always remembered as the author of masterly produced translations for books of world stature such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*".<sup>30</sup> In addition, as before independence, JKN went on writing poems that were included in publications like those of Mathias Mnyampala or Abdu Kandoro. However, he is of course most of all the author of many political texts in Kiswahili in which the pre-independence skills of blunt political argumentation coupled with subtle political indoctrination were produced at their best. Not all published speeches and written documents were originally drafted in Kiswahili. Smith (1973:171) reports:

"Many of Nyerere's formal speeches are polished and translated, usually from English into Swahili, by his State House staff, which includes Joan Wicken, an Englishwoman who serves as a personal assistant, and Paul Sozigwa, his press secretary."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> There are people who pretend that nothing of importance can be produced in Kiswahili... But it is not true saying that the current Kiswahili cannot be used in writing various books of an academic nature.

<sup>30</sup> Another manuscript which is unpublished so far is JKN's translation of Plato's "The Republic". Abdulaziz Lodhi of Uppsala University saw the Kiswahili text in 1994 in JKN's house in Msasani, where JKN promised to send a copy for checking the translation, but he never did. In addition, A. Lodhi also saw JKN's translation of the Bible which similarly remained unpublished (p. c. Abdulaziz Lodhi who refers to various interviews he had with the late JKN).

<sup>31</sup> JKN went through all the translations before they were published (P. c. Abdulaziz Lodhi).

This implies that P. Sozigwa (who comes from Uzigua) and others were assisting JKN in producing a Kiswahili version of such documents as the *Arusha Declaration* or *Education for Self-Reliance*. In many cases JKN's authorship in Kiswahili is firmly established, in particular when his speeches were tape-recorded, transcribed and finally edited.<sup>32</sup>

JKN's mastery of Kiswahili both in speaking and writing is reflected in various terms and expressions he has coined or activated. The essay "Ujamaa" was published in 1962. From that year onwards this term which subsequently expanded its meaning as discussed by Pataman (1980), Bromber (1992) and others goes back to an entry in Johnson's dictionary (Johnson 1939:148) where it stands for English "relationship, kin, brotherhood" (together with "ujamii").

JKN and his concept of an egalitarian Tanzanian society, based on the principles of Ujamaa, spread the Kiswahili word "Ujamaa" all over the country and abroad. It became a loanword to explain Tanzanian development. This word and the idea for what it stands is still what most people remember and have heard of. Similarly, "Self-reliance" or *Kujitegemea* was another term, which was coined, in that actual meaning by JKN. Or, to quote a third example, the term "kung'atuka" (to step down) was borrowed by JKN from his mother tongue Zanaki, when he argued with elders that, while age and experience is much respected even in modern Tanzania, there should be a point in time when party veterans decide on their own to vacate a post. There is no privilege or honour to remain on a post forever. Needless to say that this verb was often plagiarized and quickly entered the Kiswahili dictionary. JKN himself acted on this principle when he stepped down as the Tanzanian president in the eighties and subsequently in the nineties as the CCM Chairman.

The way Kiswahili was empowered after 1961 is a rather popular topic both in society and among scholars. Recurrent issues that regularly came up in papers of an academic profile, but also in discussions in the media included inter alia, the excessive use of English and frequently literal translation from English (or even code-mixing) which resulted in untypical Kiswahili utterances and texts; and the development of Kiswahili and its efficient introduction into domains of language use which were a stronghold of English.

In particular Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa or, as popularly known by its acronym BAKITA (The National Kiswahili Council), which was established as the supreme guardian of authentic Kiswahili and responsible for its standardization, contributed to this discussion in its weekly radio programme "Lugha ya Taifa", or the now

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<sup>31</sup> See a tentative list of Kiswahili documents by JKN in appendix.

<sup>32</sup> See a tentative list of Kiswahili documents by JKN in appendix.

obsolete journal “Lugha Yetu”, and in publications like “Ten Years of BAKITA” and “Jifunze Wenyewe”. In addition, the University of Dar es Salaam’s Institute of Kiswahili Research’s journals like *Kiswahili* and *Mulika* also took part in commenting on what is correct Kiswahili. At the UKUTA Seminar in 1984, JKN also added his voice against erosion of Kiswahili standards. In a rather impromptu way he elaborated on some examples he observed in current Kiswahili speech or texts.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, JKN did not always convince the participants (including the author of this paper) with his examples and arguments. In fact, English language interference is not stopped by appeals (even if made by the President), but by improving someone’s Kiswahili competence by making her/him aware of existing or new terms. Thus, the production of an acceptable Kiswahili text from an English source is a complex, difficult task especially in domains where terminology and practical experience is still young. Somebody who is not a trained interpreter/translator tends to fail, since s/he lacks skills (and often adequate terms), which are required to do this job. That’s why rather strange and unintelligible Kiswahili texts were printed. Such material was also the focus of JKN’s criticism:

Mwalimu alieleza kwamba wasomi wanapoandika Kiswahili hutumia maneno magumu kwa sababu mara nyingi wanafikiri katika lugha ya Kiingereza na kutafsiri sentensi za Kiingereza katika Kiswahili ambazo badala ya kuleta maana inayostahili huwa ni sentensi za Kiingereza zenye sura ya Kiswahili”<sup>34</sup> (Rutayisingwa 1984:1).

This was a direct attack targeted at intellectuals or educated people, although the majority support the promotion of Kiswahili. This kind of sweeping criticism was rather strange for JKN who was otherwise moderate in his views.

Further on, JKN focused on what he understood to be difficult words. He suggested that Kiswahili writers should properly take their target group into account and avoid using words and expressions which people are not familiar with. He went on to complain:

“Siku hizi nikisoma Kiswahili lazima nitafute kamusi. Ni vigumu kuyaelewa makala ya Kiswahili ninayoyasoma bila kutumia kamusi. Hii inaonyesha kwamba kuna watu wanaopenda kuonyesha kuwa wanakijua Kiswahili. lakini hawatusaidii kuelewa wanasema nini” (Rutayisingwa 1984:1).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Earlier he had mocked Tanzanian graduates who imitated the British way of life to an extent that “... akitoka kusoma Oxford, basi lazima aseme kama mtu wa Oxford. Mwisho hata Kiswahili anapotaka kusema husema kama Mwingereza. ‘Nyasa’ hutamka ‘Nayasa’” (Nyerere 1973:45)

<sup>34</sup> “Mwalimu explained that when intellectuals write Kiswahili they usually use difficult words, as they often think in English and translate English sentences into Kiswahili. Instead of producing the expected meaning are these English sentences with a Kiswahili outfit.

This remark was met with criticism not only from the participants, but also from outside Kiswahili experts. An argument against JKN was that he did not adequately account for the process of lexical elaboration where normally newly coined terms and expressions take some time to become known. It was not clear either for which texts JKN had to use a dictionary. New terms were normally not found in dictionaries. Accordingly, were these words originally from Zanzibar so that they were already recorded in the dictionaries; or did he mean standardized terms coined by, say, BAKITA? In any case, the sheer complaint did not properly address a situation whereby the dynamic development of Kiswahili required an allround exposure to the then on-going endeavours in corpus development.

Whatever reasons JKN had in mind when he spoke about English-Kiswahili interference among the *educated* or lexical elaboration of Kiswahili, the heterogeneous speech community does normally not care about purist advices as long as they are not supported by viable alternatives. For example, word coinage at the colloquial speech level is practically impossible to control, as day by day new expressions, words and meanings are informally and spontaneously created. Whether one likes it or not, this is language development at the grassroots. The speech community certainly filters out what is thought to be relevant and what is a short term product. The examples quoted and criticized by JKN in 1984 for their negative connotation could be checked now after almost 20 years have elapsed to see whether they are still there.

It is obvious that the process of utilizing Kiswahili in various domains, which were a stronghold of English, or in discussing topics of academic, scientific or technological relevance required the coinage and standardization of appropriate terms which, of course, often differed from the well-known vocabulary of everyday usage. Accordingly, this Kiswahili for specific purposes could not be expected to be understood or known at once by all speakers of the language as long as the latter were not familiar with the subject and the latter's terminology development.

Despite several deficiencies, shortcomings and difficulties in coining and spreading new terminologies (points of criticism were e. g. the coexistence of an impressive number of synonyms, the disappearance of useful lexical elements), this process exerted a positive influence on the status and corpus of the standard variety of Kiswahili. Thus, the language was equipped with the lexical prerequisites peculiar to any standard variety such as a high degree of stylistic differentiation, acceptability and active use in as many domains as possible as well as a growing stability of its lexical stock.

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<sup>35</sup> When I read Kiswahili these days, I have to look for the dictionary. It is difficult to understand a Kiswahili article without consulting a dictionary. This demonstrates that there are people who want to show that they know Kiswahili, but they don't help us to understand what they say.

A landmark in the history of Kiswahili was certainly the launch of the monolingual Kiswahili dictionary in December 1981. JKN was indirectly involved in this publication, since through his office he generously supported the work with a subsidy which covered the editorial work and printing. In the years from 1980 onwards, this publication has been the most outstanding achievement in Kiswahili studies conducted by Tanzanian experts. In the presence of the Ministers of Education as well as of Information and Culture, the Deputy Ministers and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam, the first copy of this book was handed over to JKN in his dual capacity then as Chancellor of the University of Dar Es Salaam and a committed Kiswahili scholar.

There is a tendency to present a rather uncritical view of the development of Kiswahili before independence. Whiteley (1969) claimed for instance that TANU could succeed in the liberation struggle by making country-wide use of a national language that the British administration had developed. Unfortunately, even JKN repeated this argument which lacks firm evidence for its relevance. JKN commented on the foreign administrators for their alleged contribution to promoting Kiswahili in Tanganyika as follows:

...pamoja na wakoloni kuelewika kwamba hawakufanya jambo zuri, hapana budi kukiri kwamba nchini Tanzania walifanya jambo zuri kwa kuimarisha na kuendeleza Kiswahili..." (JKN quoted by Rutayisingwa 1984:1).<sup>36</sup>

This quotation would need a long discussion that could not take place here within the framework of this paper. Details of the author's views of how much (or how little) was really done by colonialism to develop Kiswahili are found in Legère (1981, chapter 2). Suffice it to sketch some facts:

- German colonialism stopped the use of the developed writing system for Kiswahili based on the Arabic alphabet and forced the literate speech community to use the Latin alphabet;
- British administration was not interested to introduce Kiswahili in any domain where English was prescribed;
- Lexical elaboration in Kiswahili was kept at an elementary profile to cater for textbooks, which supported an efficient use of Kiswahili in all four East African territories under British administration (for economic reasons) and not beyond;
- When the unifying role of Kiswahili was felt to be a threat to British imperialism, the principles of *divide et impera* were re-enforced by focusing on a wide range of languages other than Kiswahili as well as on the imperial language – English.

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<sup>36</sup> Although it is understood that colonialists did us not good, it must be admitted that in Tanzania they did well in strengthening and developing Kiswahili.

JKN may not even be honest to TANU's position in 1954 where for obvious reasons the status of Kiswahili was put on the Conference agenda to save it from discrimination by the British administration. In short, a more balanced version of how colonialism dealt with Kiswahili might have been expected from an authority like JKN.

A landmark in the development of education in Tanzania was JKN's booklet, *Education for Self-Reliance*. This document specified the cornerstones of an education system that should support the socio-economic strategy as outlined in the Arusha Declaration and other papers. It was assumed that for many years to come, the Tanzanian society would mainly remain rural and that primary school leavers (that's what the country could afford) should "serve the communities from which they come". Accordingly, JKN defined the objectives of his education vision by emphasizing that people "should be able to read and write fluently in Swahili". In addition, learners were also expected to acquire basic competence in English ("the beginning of English").<sup>37</sup>

Although a strong supporter of Kiswahili in Tanzania, JKN was scared about the future of English in the country. In particular, he was worried about any discussion of its status at secondary level in education that focused on replacing English as the medium of instruction by Kiswahili. He described his vision time and again, as he did in 1974:

Our ambition is to become bilingual in Swahili and English. We have no ambition to cut out English. In the primary schools Swahili is a medium of education and English is taught as a subject. In the secondary schools English is the medium of education, but Swahili continues to be taught as a subject. Certainly at the University level English is going to continue as a language of education for a long time. Tanzanians would be very foolish to reject English" (quoted in Kihore 1976).

According to JKN, English is for the world what Kiswahili is for Tanzania: "*Kiingereza ni Kiswahili cha Dunia. Ni makosa kukiachia Kiingereza kikafa. Kukiachia ni ujinga, siyo uzalendo.*"<sup>38</sup>

As a consequence JKN was known to be against any attempt to expand the role of Kiswahili in secondary schools. If Kiswahili would gradually replace English as the medium of instruction (MOI) in secondary education and the latter would subsequently be reduced to the status of a simple subject, the language would definitely lose even more of its influence in Tanzania.

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<sup>37</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from Nyerere (1967:27).

<sup>38</sup> "English is the Kiswahili of the World... To give it up is foolishness, not patriotism." This quotation as well as the whole paragraph comes from Rutayisingwa (1984:1).

In those days JKN was certainly well aware that changes were overdue. For years Tanzanian educationists, sociolinguists and language planners had been arguing against a further delay to implement earlier decisions (e.g. 1969 in the 2nd Development Plan where Kiswahili was earmarked to replace English as MOI in secondary schools by 1974) that were corroborated by the report of the Presidential Education Commission in 1982. Meanwhile the Ministry of National Education had also proposed to use Kiswahili in Form I in 1982 and then to continue to use it up to University level by 1992. However, the 1984 Government Plan for Education did not make provision for any status change. It made clear that English would be further consolidated at all levels of education (Tanzania 1984:19). This was strange decision, as the country was short of both of human and financial resources for efficient use of English in classroom teaching and learning. The poor students' performance and examination results drastically illustrated the complicated situation in many secondary schools. Most learners demonstrated just a smear of English when they left school after Form four.<sup>39</sup>

It is also imperative to say that the continuous postponement of status changes has tremendously affected Kiswahili corpus development, in particular lexical elaboration. After 1969 when there was hope for far-reaching change, BAKITA produced valuable terminology lists for use in compiling text books for secondary school and in classroom subject teaching. As it turned out soon, this was a futile exercise, for the 1969 strategy of teaching in Kiswahili in secondary schools by 1974 was never implemented. As a consequence, nobody made appropriate use of the material, let alone started writing books for secondary school subjects. This negative experience clearly demotivated BAKITA and its staff.

The situation facing Kiswahili in Tanzania after JKN stepped down as the Tanzanian president was aptly summarized in an editorial published in "Kiswahili" (the journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, University of Dar Es Salaam):

Uongozi wa 'Awamu wa Kwanza' uliweka mwongozo na vyombo vya kukuza lugha ya Kiswahili kitaifa. 'Awamu' hiyo ilikifanya Kiswahili kiwe lugha halisi ya taifa na ya kimataifa. Hata hivyo mwishoni mwa 'Awamu' hiyo pamekuwa na kulegalega katika juhudi za kukuza Kiswahili. Sera 'mpya' ya elimu ya juu haikukipa nafasi Kiswahili, bali imesisitiza zaidi matumizi ya lugha ya Kiingereza. Kiswahili kimelaumiwa kuwa kimesababisha kushuka kwa kiwango cha elimu nchini... hakuna sera kamili ya lugha ya taifa. Wakuzaji wa Kiswahili hawajaelezwwa sababu wala kupewa malengo ya kufikia katika shughuli zao. Kila siku wanaunda istilahi na kuandika vitabu vya kitaaluma, lakini hawaelezwi istilahi na vitabu hivyo vitatumiwa lini na wapi! Ukosefu wa sera ya lugha nchini ndicho kikwazo kikubwa cha maendeleo ya lugha ya Kiswahili leo" (TUKI 1985:vii).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> More about Kiswahili vs. English in Kihore (1976:50-55).



This is a rather frustrating observation by a highly competent institution with regard to the status quo and the inconsistencies of JKN's role in the full empowerment Kiswahili.

## Conclusion

In the long history of Kiswahili JKN was a blessing for the language. His commitment to *lughaya wanyonge* and his personal contribution enabled the language to overcome the critical years where the political climate was much in favour of consolidating the position of English in Tanganyika/Tanzania. It goes without saying that JKN was a pragmatist who understood well the linguistic situation in his country. English was a minority language (in quantitative terms - and still is, probably even to a higher extent), but some of those educated by British colonial institutions would certainly have ignored this fact and consolidated the position of English after independence. Kenya and Zambia are such cases where earlier positions were thrown overboard, when English was made **the** national/official language *per se* after independence. Fortunately enough, Tanzania did neither lose time in experimenting with the medium of instruction in primary school nor retain the ex-colonial language in domains where the national language Kiswahili was in a privileged position of facilitating effective dialogue between the people and leaders or administration. Under Nyerere Tanzania just took the best choice language-wise. The country empowered and upgraded Kiswahili from a hitherto neglected and disregarded language to a respected medium of communication for Tanzanians and people in other parts of Africa and the world. JKN's contribution towards this achievement is an ever-lasting merit. *Shukran, Mwalimu.*

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<sup>40</sup> The leadership of the "First Phase" (i. e. JKN and his Cabinet, the 2nd Phase being President Ali Hassan Mwinyi - author) drew up the guidelines and established institutions for the promotion of Kiswahili at the national level. This "Phase" made Kiswahili a true national and international language. Nonetheless, at the end of this "Phase" the promotion of Kiswahili lost momentum. The "new" policy for higher education has given Kiswahili no chance, but puts more emphasis on English. Kiswahili is blamed for falling standards in education in the country... There is no comprehensive policy for the national language. Kiswahili promoters ..... constantly coin terms and write educational books, but they are not told when and where the terminologies and books will be used! The lack of a language policy in the country is indeed the major obstacle for the development of Kiswahili today.

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