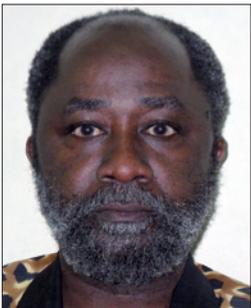


Kiswahili as a unifying force

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As we commemorate the tenth anniversary of the death of Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the people of Tanzania and Africa remember his great contribution toward uniting the people of Tanzania through the use of an indigenous language, Kiswahili. When Tanzania won its independence from Britain on 9 December 1961, there were more than 120 languages spoken throughout the country under different ethnic groups. The abolition of chiefdoms and the declaration of Kiswahili as the national language of Tanzania in 1962 paved the way for the long journey toward building a nation.

The memory of Julius Nyerere as both President and a great man manifests itself in various ways, but most importantly through his speeches and writings. People across different age groups agree that his eloquently delivered speeches were convincing to audiences. The introduction of Kiswahili, both as official language and the medium of instruction in all government primary schools (covering the first seven years of education) in 1967 was a decisive move that translated Mwalimu Nyerere's vision into reality in the sense that it removed the multi-linguistic communication barrier among the countries different tribes.

Nyerere, like other distinguished statesmen, used the power of language for the socio-cultural and economic development of the people effectively. Kiswahili plays a significant role as a unifying force for the people of East Africa and Africa as a whole. Kiswahili is currently spoken and understood by every citizen of Tanzania, including those living in remote villages. The sense of nationalism and patriotism among the people of Tanzania is very high. Most people now identify themselves as Tanzanians rather than by their ethnic affiliations. This state of affairs is mainly credited to Nyerere.

Looking back to the 1970s, the introduction of literacy adult education proved a major contribution. To enhance maximum participation in literacy classes by all targeted citizens, Nyerere launched a nationwide campaign highlighting the importance of adult education to national development. His speeches on adult education instructed relevant institutions and educational practitioners that both the language of instruction and the learning and teaching resources should be in Kiswahili. This instruction enforced not only the use of Kiswahili by adult learners but also

removed ethnic barriers to national unity.

Under the leadership of Nyerere, Kiswahili went from being a language of the coast to being the language of the whole of Tanzania. Furthermore, Kiswahili extended its domain to cover the workplace, recreation, the market, sports, public meetings, primary education, and the home. The current challenge is whether to consider extending the use of Kiswahili to tertiary education.

Although Nyerere deliberately promoted Kiswahili for socio-economic and educational purposes, he was cautious not to undermine the importance of English for socio-economic development. In one of his speeches, Nyerere boldly declared: *Kiingereza ni Kiswahili cha Dunia* (English is the Swahili of the World) By this, Mwalimu Nyerere meant that with the help of Kiswahili, the people of Tanzania are now able to interact freely with members of the 120 ethnic language groups without problems. This is because Kiswahili unites our diverse ethnic language groups. Likewise, with the help of English, the people of Tanzania can communicate freely with other nations in the world without the help of interpreters. Like Kiswahili in Tanzania, English unites other nations in the world, Tanzania included.

The above shows how Nyerere used Kiswahili for encouraging nationalism and Pan-Africanism and English for internationalism. As evidence of this point, Nyerere translated Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Julius Caesar into Kiswahili. He did this for two important reasons. Firstly, he wanted to prove to Tanzanians that Kiswahili, like any other world language, is capable linguistically of handling and expressing complex ideas. Secondly, he wanted to share our global heritage, especially to those who could not read and understand English.

In brief, Nyerere was an excellent promoter who used language effectively to promote unity, nationalism, cultural identity, equity, justice, political stability, universal education, adult literacy, health education, and national cohesion. Nyerere used Kiswahili as a communication tool to educate the people of Tanzania through radio, television and public meetings. When delivering speeches, he used his skills as a teacher so well that he captured the attention and mind of his audience. The title bestowed on him during his lifetime, *Mwalimu* (teacher) reflects the importance his guidance meant for the nation as a whole. ■