

# History of the Standard Swahili Language

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## Summary

In many ways, Swahili has become emblematic of the African continent. Taught in universities around the world, an official language of the African Union, and embraced by some members of the diaspora as a way to connect with the continent's histories and cultures, Swahili is a global language, and its most far-reaching dialect is Standard Swahili. The conventional historical narrative depicts Standard Swahili as a constructed language that was developed over the course of the 20th century by the efforts of German, British, and postcolonial governments. However, by pushing the timeline back into the mid-19th century, one begins to see that Standard Swahili can also be situated within a precolonial history that incorporates multiple constituencies involved in multiple processes of standardization, both official and unofficial, that spanned broad swathes of both space and time.

**Keywords:** Swahili, standardization, precolonial, colonial, postcolonial, Tanganyika, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar

**Subjects:** East Africa and Indian Ocean

## The Timelines of Standardization

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An argument could be made that this history begins sometime in the 9th century, when Swahili as a distinct spoken language emerged along the coast of eastern Africa from Mogadishu in the north to Sofala in the south. Already by 100 CE, when the Greek author of *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* described travels along the coast, there were bustling ports visited by Africans, Arabs, and Persians who all communicated in a local language.<sup>1</sup> By 1331, Ibn Battuta directly referenced the ethno-linguistic designator “Swahili,” the term subsequently used to describe a space, a people, and a language. The term “Swahili” (the addition of the “ki-” prefix denotes the language, Kiswahili) is of Arabic origin, but the language itself is a member of the Bantu language family. Though Swahili speakers have long borrowed words from other languages, including Persian, Arabic, Gujarati, and later Portuguese, German, and English—leading some historical observers to categorize it as non-African—linguists have definitively shown it to be a part of the northeast coastal Bantu language cluster, whose linguistic branches included a Proto-Swahili that likely emerged between 100 and 500 CE.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many of its related Bantu languages, Swahili lacks tones, and by about 800 CE, it had consolidated into two dialectical groups, northern (including Kisiu, Kiamu, and Kimvita) and southern (including Kihadimu, Kiunguja, and Kimwani), each of which was influenced differently by its neighboring speakers of other Bantu languages—and by which time Swahili of multiple dialects was being used to conduct hearty commerce with traders from around the Indian Ocean world.<sup>3</sup>

One could also begin the history of Standard Swahili in the late 18th century, as caravans carrying ivory, enslaved people, and other trade goods crisscrossed the region, using Swahili as a *lingua franca* and thereby cementing its usefulness from coast to various pockets of the interior. After reaching a peak of prosperity from approximately 1000 to 1500 CE, the Swahili coast entered a recession caused in part by Portuguese incursions; the Portuguese were only expelled in the 18th century by the Omanis. The growth of a plantation economy which drew on enslaved labor from around the region, leading to the expansion of inland trading contacts, consolidated the use of Swahili as a means of communication between people of diverse mother tongues.<sup>4</sup> But Swahili was not merely a trade language—it was also used to compose poetry both oral and written, creating a rich literary tradition. Prior to the 19th century, much of written Swahili—from poetry to letters to legal documents, in multiple dialects—was done in ‘Ajamī, the term for modified versions of the Arabic script used to write African languages. The Arabic alphabet without modifications was also sometimes used to write Swahili. Though the earliest extant Swahili manuscripts date from the 17th century, scholars agree that the written tradition is likely much longer than that.<sup>5</sup>

One could also write many other histories, following all of the language’s dialects and their speakers and writers, in ‘Ajamī and Arabic and Latin scripts, across east-central Africa.<sup>6</sup> This history of Standard Swahili, however, will begin in the 19th century and follow the various threads that wove through the turn of the 20th century, combining eventually into the dialect of Standard Swahili. The emergence of this dialect as the language, first, of colonial rule, then, of anticolonial nationalism, and finally, of postcolonial nation-building, was never a foregone conclusion. Following the various speakers and writers, linguists and missionaries, professionals and amateurs, who were involved in the standardization process for more than a century, one can begin to understand the twin sense of oppression and empowerment engendered by Standard Swahili over the course of its history.<sup>7</sup>

## The Early Years of Language Learning and Language Teaching

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### Johann Ludwig Krapf

Johann Ludwig Krapf was a German missionary who worked for a British mission society (the Church Missionary Society, CMS). In 1844, Krapf arrived in East Africa, moving to the CMS station of Rabai, outside of Mombasa. For Krapf, as for so many other missionaries around the world, religious evangelization necessitated language learning, and Krapf turned his linguistic efforts to the languages of the Mombasa region, including the Kimvita dialect of Swahili. In his linguistic studies, including a *Dictionary of the Suahili Language*, published one year after his death in 1882, Krapf made two consequential choices for the history of Standard Swahili: The first was his decision to write his dictionary and translations using the Latin rather than the Arabic script. In subsequent decades, various reasons would be given for the adoption of Latin script: that it was more “suited” to the sounds of Swahili, that it was easier to render in (European) typeset, and

that Arabic script carried with it Islamic influence—a baggage that was anathema to many Europeans.<sup>8</sup> Whether for practical or ideological reasons, however, linguists, both professional and amateur, followed Krapf's lead, thus firmly embedding Standard Swahili into the Latin script.

The missionary's second consequential decision was to base his work on Kimvita, the Mombasan dialect of Swahili. Krapf believed Kimvita to be “the best and most original dialect of Kiswahili itself.”<sup>9</sup> This choice represented the opening shot of a dialectical battle that would crop up over the next several decades in various venues of standardization, pitting Kimvita against other dialects including Kiunguja (the dialect of Zanzibar) and Kiamu (the dialect of Lamu). Yet Krapf himself recognized that his grammar and dictionary would not be the final say on Swahili, writing in the preface to the latter: “A standard Suahili Lexicon must not be expected in the present century.”<sup>10</sup> Krapf also conceded that Kiunguja “was not without usefulness.”<sup>11</sup> And, indeed, it was that dialect which had become central to another missionary community in eastern Africa: that of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA).

### Universities' Mission to Central Africa

Bishop William Tozer and Reverend Edward Steere arrived on Zanzibar in August of 1864, where they set themselves up in a home rented from the Sultan and began the work of rebuilding the organization. Established originally to evangelize in central Africa, as the mission's name would suggest, the UMCA had suffered a disastrous start in the Shiré River valley, losing followers to disease and violence. Zanzibar, with its British consulate and robust steamship connections to India and Europe, seemed an apt place to regroup before reattempting the interior. Zanzibar was also a potentially difficult place to headquarter a Christian missionary society, with its majority-Muslim population. The missionaries held to a tacit agreement with the Sultan that their presence would be tolerated so long as they did not evangelize among his Muslim subjects. This forced the UMCA to target a broader audience from its very first days on Zanzibar, turning to the population of “liberated Africans” brought to the island by the Royal Navy.<sup>12</sup> For the first two decades of its existence, the mission filled its schools and its pews with former slaves. These individuals spoke a variety of mother tongues, but most would have encountered some Swahili along their journeys from interior to coast, and they constituted one important group of language teachers and pupils on whom the UMCA relied.

The missionaries' other interlocutors included members of the local intelligentsia, including most famously the legal scholar Abdul Aziz, as well as household servants and other Zanzibaris who worked within the mission's orbit. Steere would spend Saturday mornings, for instance, with a man named Muhammad bin Khamis, and the priest attributed to him “all that is best in my knowledge of African tongues.”<sup>13</sup> Steere was also assisted by a Zanzibari man named Hamisi wa Kai, “a very intelligent young Swahili, who always comprehended better what a foreigner wanted to know, and explained more clearly what was difficult, than any one else I met with while on Zanzibar.”<sup>14</sup> Hamisi wa Kai also worked closely with Reverend Lewin Pennell, Steere's colleague, on translations.<sup>15</sup> There was also the cook and house steward Masasa who assisted Steere with his

1870 publication of *Swahili Tales*.<sup>16</sup> Through their conversations and regular translation sessions, this diverse group of interlocutors set the foundation for the written version of Swahili that would eventually be adopted as standard.

The early process of standardization proceeded in several steps: After discussing a passage of the Bible with, for instance, a local Muslim legal scholar, the missionaries would print an initial translation on the mission press. They then brought that printed translation into the classroom to see how well the students understood. Pennell taught at the mission high school and later theological college—Kiungani—and he reported back to Steere on his students' reactions to various translations. George Farajallah, Francis Mabruki, and John Swedi were three of the most advanced students at Kiungani; they had been among the first five students taken in “from a piratical dhow” in 1864.<sup>17</sup> Bishop Tozer began reading and possibly translating with these students as early as 1869, writing to Steere: “I am reading the Acts now daily with George, John, and Francis, and it is refreshing to see how well they take it all in.”<sup>18</sup> The missionaries would adjust their translations based upon feedback from their young scholars, printing version after version until any misunderstandings had been ironed out. Some publications were ultimately printed on the Zanzibar press, while others were sent to European publishing firms.

### Swahili Handbooks and Lesson Plans

In this incremental way, the version of Swahili used in UMCA schools and publications moved toward a standard lexicon and, more slowly, orthography. In this period, the mission printed multiple books of the Bible, leading to a complete translation of the New Testament (*Kitabu cha Agano Jipya la Bwana na Mwokozi Wetu*) published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1883, as well as translated collections of stories from both East Africa and England.<sup>19</sup> While all of these works contributed to the linguistic uniformity of the Swahili used at the mission, the publication most important for the history of Standard Swahili was Steere's *A Handbook of the Swahili Language as Spoken at Zanzibar*, printed in multiple editions, the first in 1870. Steere's *Handbook* became a foundational text of Standard Swahili, as it was utilized by missionaries and, later, colonial officials for decades to come.

As the title makes clear, Steere was well aware that his *Handbook* outlined a specific dialect of Swahili, namely, the Kiunguja of Zanzibar. His justification for focusing on Kiunguja was its widespread use across the region—a potentially powerful tool for a mission headquartered on Zanzibar but with its eye on the interior of east-central Africa. Steere also regarded Swahili's association with Islam as a positive characteristic, giving the language “a hold on revealed religion” that, the priest believed, Christian missionaries should use to their advantage.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the publications of the UMCA were intended for use in mission schools, particularly at the Kiungani school on Zanzibar. Kiungani was a Babel of a boarding school; students and teachers who spoke various languages lived together and, especially in the early years, worked toward a mutually intelligible Swahili. The mission's students, most of whom were formerly enslaved children from east-central Africa, would have spoken a variety of native languages, but quickly found means of communication, whether in shared first languages or with Swahili. We can read the linguistic flexibility required of these formerly enslaved students in their conversion

narratives which were collected and periodically published by the mission. During their forced marches to the coast, they would have heard any number of languages, Bantu and non-Bantu, learning some along the way, as one student who remembered learning Yao while living in a town on the shores of Lake Nyasa.<sup>21</sup> As for Swahili, this same student recounted trying to learn it at Kilwa, while another explained that when he arrived at Kiungani, “I understood [the other students] speaking in Swahili, and now I have forgotten my own language.”<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to establish what language the students would have spoken to one another in private conversations, or what kind of code switching went on at the mission schools. But it is clear that, though mother tongues no doubt survived—one Kiungani student translated the gospel of St. Luke into the Zaramo language, which he had spoken as a child—students very quickly incorporated the mission’s Swahili standard into their repertoire, even as they informed its standardization through their reaction to the missionaries’ translations and their daily conversations.<sup>23</sup> As the Kiungani student Yohanna Abdallah wrote to an English correspondent in 1894: “We are so many boys in this house, and of different tribes, Yaos, Makuas, Boondeis and Nyasas; but we all speak Swahili language; I myself is a Yao boy.”<sup>24</sup> These early years of standardization went beyond the production of foundational texts; in multilingual spaces such as Kiungani, interlocutors sought a shared linguistic baseline and mutual comprehensibility. This phase of standardization was driven by the desire of missionaries to evangelize and of formerly enslaved students to create new social ties.

### **From Zanzibar to Lake Nyasa: Expansion and Dissemination of the Standard**

Over the course of the 1880s, the East African slave trade very slowly ground to a halt. Smuggling no doubt continued, but without the regular patrols to “liberate” enslaved people, fewer and fewer came under the care of the Universities’ Mission on Zanzibar. Meanwhile, the UMCA had begun to establish stations on the mainland of East Africa, starting in 1869 with the founding of a station at Magila, in what would become northeastern Tanganyika. The next major settlement was Masasi, in the southeast, built in 1876. In 1885, the UMCA finally reached Lake Nyasa (Lake Malawi), setting up a station on Likoma Island—this represented the westernmost reach of the mission. Around these three main sites sprang up a network of stations of varying size and staying power.

Along with the geographic expansion of the mission came a demographic shift in the classrooms so that, by the late 1880s, the majority of students were not formerly enslaved but were rather recruited from the communities surrounding the mission’s mainland stations. If the first generation of UMCA students can be regarded as the “standardizers,” this second, never-enslaved generation might be considered the “disseminators”—for it was in this period that students, teachers, clergymen, and others carried the mission’s standard written version of Swahili throughout the region. As with the formerly-enslaved slave students, those of the 1880s and 1890s also spoke a variety of mother tongues; but it was Swahili that defined their literate life. The UMCA did publish in languages other than Swahili, and competency in other East African vernaculars was considered a major advantage to the recruitment of local clergy and teachers. The mission also used English at the upper levels of its educational offerings, including its theological colleges at Zanzibar and Likoma.<sup>25</sup> In its education system, the UMCA operated with a two-

pronged language policy: Initial, oral evangelization, as well as very early schooling, were conducted in local languages as much as was practicable; but, as soon as possible, Swahili was used as the medium of communication in classrooms and between stations. Indeed, Swahili was the connective tissue of the mission: the bulk of its published materials were written in that language; Swahili was the medium of education, as well as the local vernacular on Zanzibar, the central hub of the mission; it was the language learned by all of the European clergy; and it would become the most useful language for interacting with the increasingly intrusive colonial regimes of first Germany and then Britain.

### **“Msimulizi” or “The Narrator”**

That Swahili had become the written vernacular of the mission community across its far-flung stations is suggested by one publication in particular, the periodical *Msimulizi* (“The Narrator” or “The Reporter”).<sup>26</sup> *Msimulizi* was a bimonthly magazine that was written, printed, and read by the African members of the mission, circulating between the stations from Zanzibar to Lake Nyasa. The first edition issued from the printing press on Zanzibar in October of 1888, and the last appeared in August 1896. Students and teachers on Zanzibar and the mainland divided the work of compiling the magazine: each station chose a Mletaji habari (a “supplier of news” or a correspondent). This individual was tasked with collecting the news of his or her area and sending it on to Zanzibar. Their correspondence was collected by the Mtengenezaji wa *Msimulizi* (the “arranger of *Msimulizi*” or the editor) on Zanzibar where the magazine was printed and then sent out via one of the mail steamers or other transport boats plying the coast.

The periodical was at heart a newsletter, reporting on school exams, teaching appointments, and football matches with the same diligence as religious rituals, services, and holidays. The contributors to the magazine also kept careful track of one another’s movements, often reporting when someone had left one station and arrived at another, noting communal holidays or the visits of priests, and expressing particular pride when local students went on to continue their education at Kiungani. The everyday content of *Msimulizi*, moreover, guaranteed that the mission’s version of written Swahili permeated the everyday life of the readers and contributors. Swahili was also the language used to expand that community, to convert and educate other nonnative speakers of the language. In this sense, the UMCA was unusual in its approach to language and evangelization: The mission intentionally chose to utilize a language that was not strongly associated with any one ethnic group in order to reach out to speakers of different mother tongues. The choice came partly because of timing: Swahili was available as a potential “supra-ethnic” language because of its extensive use along the caravan trade networks of the 19th century. Location also played a crucial role in the decision to use Swahili, and specifically the Kiunguja dialect: The mission was headquartered on Zanzibar and therefore its initial pool of potential converts were formerly enslaved people from all over the region, while the vernacular of Zanzibar was undoubtedly Swahili. These circumstances recommended the adoption of Swahili, and through the power of the mission’s printing press and the movement of its adherents, specimens of the UMCA’s written standard permeated east-central Africa, readily available for appropriation by the colonial regimes.

## The Turn of the 20th Century

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### The German Colonial Period

At the turn of the 20th century, two more foundational texts for Standard Swahili appeared—namely, a pair of dictionaries compiled by the lay teacher Arthur Cornwallis Madan, who served the Universities' Mission between 1880 and 1896. Clarendon Press published Madan's English–Swahili dictionary in 1894, and his Swahili–English dictionary in 1903.<sup>27</sup> Among other translations, Madan also revised the third edition of Steere's *Handbook*, which was published in 1884. Madan's career bridged the missionary and governmental worlds: he retired from the UMCA in 1896, remaining for a time on Zanzibar to keep up his study of Swahili.<sup>28</sup> By 1904 he had made his way to Fort Jameson in North-Eastern Rhodesia, where he worked for the British South Africa Company as resident linguist, surveying the languages spoken in the colony—work he described as “prospecting for dialects.”<sup>29</sup>

As Madan traveled between the various British East African territories, other parts of the region were coming under an increasingly consolidated German colonial rule. The German administration conducted much of its administration in Swahili, utilizing “*akidas*” and “*askaris*” to enforce its bureaucratic and policing presence—some of whom were Swahili speakers from the coast, while others were recruited from the Sudan, southern Africa, or the central regions of German East Africa.<sup>30</sup> For the history of Standard Swahili, however, the influence of German colonial rule was ambiguous. Over the approximately three decades of German administration, Swahili speakers and Swahili-language publications were brought to places they had never been before, and the language was endowed with political and, in some circles, social power. German ideas about administrative efficiency through a single language also influenced subsequent colonial language policies. German colonial language policy from the 1880s through the First World War, however, vacillated between the promotion of German and of Swahili, dividing the linguistic attention of administrators, teachers, students, and colonial subjects. German academics—including Carl Büttner, Carl Meinhof, Carl Velten, and Diedrich Westermann—were among the most influential European Swahili scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, tensions between the aims and methods of politicians in Berlin and officials in Dar es Salaam precluded concerted government standardization efforts; Derek Peterson has described German colonial attempts to codify Swahili orthography and spelling as “desultory.”<sup>31</sup>

The most unambiguous consequence of German colonial rule was official insistence on the use of Latin rather than Arabic script in writing Swahili.<sup>32</sup> The strongest promotion of the language took place in German government schools.<sup>33</sup> Here, Swahili was the medium of instruction, and Swahili speakers staffed the teaching positions in government schools across the country. Despite occasional nationalistic protestations to the contrary, Swahili-medium schools in German East Africa initially relied on the texts of Steere and the Universities' Mission. By the late 1890s, linguistically minded German officials and schoolteachers began producing school primers and



subject specialty books of their own, and many of them continued to use Steere's orthography.<sup>34</sup> Swahili became the default language of governance on the ground, with relatively little official German thought given to its present or future shape.

For their part, officials in Britain's East African colonies became increasingly convinced that the Kiunguja dialect was the "universal" Swahili dialect, in part because of their familiarity with the language of the economic hub of Zanzibar. Following the First World War, when Tanganyika joined British East Africa (Kenya), Uganda, and Zanzibar under British colonial rule, this would be the dialect chosen as the basis of Standard Swahili—in order to put in place their own version of efficient administration and "civilization."<sup>35</sup>

### Swahili beyond the Classroom

Before turning to the British colonial period, however, it is worth emphasizing that colonial language policy was not the only influence on Standard Swahili in the early 20th century. As the linguist Salikoko Mufwene reminds us, languages can and do change internally, without the influence of a contact language or other external influence, simply because the idiolects of a language are not uniform. It is the entirety of the linguistic ecology that directs change over time for any given language or dialect, including formal and informal interactions.<sup>36</sup> In this way, speakers and writers are daily formulating new experiments with language, testing them, and reformulating their assumptions based upon feedback—in real time, in every marketplace interaction, or conversation at school or with friends. Such experimentation with language is not, however, anarchic, because interlocutors are operating with overlapping linguistic databanks, including various dialects of Swahili, and communication is created within and through these interactions.<sup>37</sup>

### British Colonial Rule and Official Standardization Efforts

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#### The 1925 Education Conference

Following World War I, the League of Nations handed over the territory of German East Africa to the British as the mandate of Tanganyika. In the same period, Britain's East African Protectorate became the Crown Colony of Kenya, while Uganda and Zanzibar maintained their protectorate statuses. Political cooperation between these British territories was never seamless, and the linguistic landscapes (and resultant language policies) also varied greatly; but the potential usefulness of Swahili in terms of administrative efficiency could not be ignored. Starting in 1925, Britain's four colonial administrations in eastern Africa held a series of meetings in order to choose a common dialect to be used in all official capacities. The first of these took place at a conference hosted by the Department of Education in Dar es Salaam, setting the stage for subsequent British colonial language policy.



Before anything else could be determined, the meeting needed to advance a dialectical decision. Kimvita and Kiamu enjoyed the reputation of their storied literary and legal histories, while most British observers (and many Swahili users) regarded Kiunguja as the dialect of economic and political power. All three had advocates for their adoption as the standard dialect, the strongest camps being for Kimvita and Kiunguja—and it was the latter that triumphed on the day. In the report of the standardization subcommittee, the delegates' first resolution proposed: "That the Zanzibar dialect with such modifications as may be required be adopted as the Standard form of Swahili."<sup>38</sup> Specifically, they resolved that "the Exercise book and Hand book (grammar portion only) by Bishop Steere would be the most suitable for adoption as a standard grammar, and Madan's Dictionaries as a standard work."<sup>39</sup>

Why the Zanzibar dialect? The first resolution went on to explain: "that the Zanzibar dialect either in its pure or modified form was undoubtedly spreading practically over the whole of the three territories, Tanganyika Territory, Kenya Colony and Zanzibar, and also over the Congo."<sup>40</sup> As for the standard reference works, Swahili, as written by the UMCA, had risen to a position of prominence for several reasons, including the productivity of the mission's printing press, the gradual but continuous dispersal of its adherents across the region, and its focus on Swahili as opposed to other vernaculars. Likewise, the longtime connections between the British establishment and the island of Zanzibar cannot be overlooked: Many officials would have been familiar with the Kiunguja dialect and have used UMCA materials in their own efforts at language learning. Some attendees, however, were upset; when the decisions of the 1925 conference were confirmed at a meeting in Mombasa in 1928, one CMS missionary purportedly "had to be led from the room in tears."<sup>41</sup>

### The Inter-Territorial Language Committee

Over the course of these meetings, the colonial administrations created the Inter-Territorial Language Committee (ILC), charged with codifying Standard Swahili. The ILC began meeting in 1930 under the secretaryship of Frederick Johnson, who had previously served as the superintendent for education in Tanganyika. The initial committee consisted of sixteen members—two official and two nonofficial from each territory. The ILC did not welcome any African members until 1939 when each territory nominated a single non-European member to begin attending the committee's annual meetings, and it was not until after World War II that these new members were able to attend a full committee meeting.<sup>42</sup> The first African members included Sheikh Mbarak Ali Hinawy, Sheikh Abdulla Muhammad el-Hadhramy, and Stephano Mgalawe; and even those East Africans appointed to the committee were not given voice to direct its decisions.<sup>43</sup> It was not until the eve of independence that East Africans held leading roles in the committee. And yet the ILC relied throughout its existence upon input from a wide group of interlocutors, from lexical data to be included in its planned dictionaries, to assistance with translations of schoolbooks or the editing of manuscripts, to contributions for the ILC's annual *Bulletin*.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, after the death of Johnson in 1937, while the committee scrambled to find a replacement, work on the standard dictionaries was carried on by Pedro Msaba, the ILC's longtime clerk and proofreader, who was thanked along with his colleagues Rawson Watts and

Sayyid Majid Khalid in the acknowledgements of the published Swahili–Swahili dictionary. Even this most top–down project of standardization, that is, could not deny the assistance provided by East Africans.

### “Standard” Dictionaries

The ILC published both a Swahili–English and an English–Swahili dictionary in 1939—nine years after commencing work on the revisions to Madan’s versions. In the interim, the ILC had published a Swahili–Swahili dictionary, the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili yaani Kitabu cha Maneno ya Kiswahili*.<sup>45</sup> Two points must be made here: First, the rhetoric of “development” or, later, of the “modernization” of Swahili implied that the language as spoken around the region was somehow “underdeveloped.” Such viewpoints were connected to the hierarchical thinking about race and civilization that was prevalent during the colonial period, and the centrality of “modernity” in the nation–building rhetoric of postcolonial period.<sup>46</sup> Second, the publication of a dictionary does not bring linguistic change to a standstill—languages change as speakers and writers use them, sometimes in ways that are (consciously or unconsciously) “nonstandard.” The production of the ILC dictionaries was driven by a kind of idealism, and the committee members threw themselves into it with enthusiasm. The revision of the dictionaries also necessitated reaching out to a broader range of experts beyond just those members of the ILC, including missionaries, colonial officials, and Swahili speakers and writers from across the territories. To that end, in 1930, the committee sent out a circular letter addressed to the territories’ four directors of education, requesting assistance with the dictionaries. The directors were asked to forward the appeal for help to any knowledgeable individuals, directing them to collect Swahili words and definitions from across the region. Of course, this crowdsourcing effort of the ILC was limited to a minority of the total Swahili speakers in the territory, made up almost entirely of Europeans. The committee did recognize this shortcoming and asked contributors to poll the African users of Swahili around them—an incorporation, albeit limited, of linguistic “expertise” of all kinds. And though the long-awaited publication of these Standard Swahili dictionaries represented a foundational moment of sorts, the ILC immediately began preparing for future revisions, well aware that languages change perpetually as they are used by speakers and writers.

### Contemporary Criticism of the ILC

The ILC did not escape contemporary criticism. Critiques ranged from disagreement with the decision to use the Latin rather than Arabic script, the choice of Kiunguja as a dialectical basis, and some commentators even questioned whether Europeans should be making any decisions about the language at all. The ILC occasionally published these critiques in its *Bulletin*. Issue 7 of January 1934, for instance, opened with the question: “*Is the Inter-Territorial Language Committee working on the right lines?*”<sup>47</sup> It was followed two critical articles, the first written by a colonial officer in Kenya who accused the ILC of insisting upon a version of Swahili “which is at its best lifeless, though intelligible, at its worst both lifeless and unintelligible.”<sup>48</sup> Following that article was an excerpt from *Al-Islah*, a Swahili- and Arabic-language newspaper founded by Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui in Mombasa.<sup>49</sup> Mazrui was particularly critical of the committee’s insistence that writers of Swahili use the Latin script, and he warned that this harmed Swahili-speaking

schoolchildren who were suddenly penalized for using their own dialects or orthography.<sup>50</sup> In the face of such criticism, the members of the ILC defended their work, often on the grounds of pragmatism and necessity. Yet there were retrospective admissions by some in the early ILC leadership that, initially, too much emphasis may have been placed on uniformity—that “we and the Committee were both young,” and “at the time it all seemed so tragically final.”<sup>51</sup> But, as Ronald Snoxall argued in his final year as ILC secretary, decisions had to be made, and the committee was best placed to do it—an unsatisfying answer to these important critiques of standardization.<sup>52</sup>

### The East African Literature Bureau

In the late 1940s, the idea of a literature bureau for East Africa began to be seriously considered in official circles. The aims of such an organization would be to promote reading in both vernacular languages and English, as well as to encourage East African authors to write and publish their work—an impulse born of the post-WWII spin on the “civilizing mission,” when colonial powers around the continent turned to “development” as a means of resolidifying their hold over colonial territories. During the war itself, Swahili had been the lingua franca of Britain’s East African troops, further solidifying its centrality to interterritorial administration.<sup>53</sup> After about three years discussing scope and organization, the East African Literature Bureau (EALB) came into being in 1948, under the leadership of Charles Granston Richards, who served as director of the bureau until 1963. The creation of the EALB marked an expansion in the official mindset about language standardization, shifting focus from codification to the “production of literature” in languages, including Standard Swahili.<sup>54</sup> The ILC continued its work, which became more focused on linguistic studies, including that of other Swahili dialects.

The literature bureau consisted of five branches: textbooks, general literature, libraries, periodicals, and distribution and business management. It focused initially on printing books in Swahili, English, Luganda, Luo, and Gikuyu, with more languages added as time went on. For this brief history of Standard Swahili, the work of the general literature branch is perhaps most pertinent. Between 1948 and 1953 the bureau reported that Swahili represented 41 percent of the total volumes printed under EALB auspices, while Swahili books represented 40 percent of the total sales. Luganda was the next highest, with 14 percent and 20 percent, respectively.<sup>55</sup> The EALB did not have its own printing press, but it did control an imprint known as the Eagle Press. The bureau also ran a library service in all four territories, supplying books to borrowers through book boxes that rotated between community centers, as well as through a postal borrowing service. Kenya and Uganda had the fastest-growing library networks, though readers in the latter generally preferred books in Luganda or English.

## The Work of Shaaban Robert

Perhaps the most famous author to have written in Standard Swahili is Shaaban Robert, who worked with both the ILC and the EALB over the course of twenty-six years. Robert's work has been examined by scholars across the disciplines, and his prolific use of Standard Swahili demonstrates the possibilities for creativity within a standard framework; it also made him an occasional object of criticism.<sup>56</sup>

Robert was born in 1909 near Tanga. He worked for his entire adult life within the colonial administration, first in the Customs Service at Pangani, then the Department of Game Protection at Mpwapwa, and he retired as a clerk in the Tanga District Office.<sup>57</sup> Robert first entered the orbit of the ILC in 1936 with his submission to an essay competition; he won first prize in the set essay section, as well as the prize for best overall submission.<sup>58</sup> His writing career only grew from there, and Robert wrote numerous poems as well as work in multiple genres: novels including *Kusadikika* (1951), an autobiography (of two parts which are often combined as *Maisha Yangu na Baada ya Miaka Hamsini*, 1966), and a biography of the Zanzibari singer Siti Binti Saad (*Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad*, 1958). When he died in 1962, the ILC *Bulletin* published an extensive "In Memoriam" section, which included poems submitted by admirers, as well as his final speech delivered at Makerere College in November 1961 titled "Swahili as Unifying Force in East Africa."<sup>59</sup>

Yet even this champion of Standard Swahili recognized that language standardization was a process that was never truly complete, that languages change to meet the needs of their users. In his examination of prose writing titled *Kielezo cha Insha*, published in 1954, Robert declared: "*Hapana lugha iwezayo kuwa kamili.*"<sup>60</sup> ("No language can be made perfect.") As Robert's own body of work makes clear, dictionaries and essay contests alone could not shape a language—that takes the creativity of writers and speakers from all walks of life. The standardizers of Swahili—whether for the purposes of evangelization, community building, colonial administration, or anticolonial resistance—sought to bring together a shared version of the language that was rooted in the past but linked to the present; a standard that was immediately available while also looking toward its future usefulness for scenarios both anticipated and unknown. By the 1950s, this shared version was being taught, learned, and utilized as *Standard Swahili*—a dialect based on Kiunguja but incorporating features of other dialects as well as other Bantu and non-Bantu languages; it had an expanding reach through periodicals, schools, literary publications, court systems, and speeches. Though daily use is more difficult to measure, by the mid-20th century, Standard Swahili became increasingly important in nationalist movements that demanded independence from colonial rule.

## Independence and Ujamaa

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### From Interterritorial to National

Cracks had begun to show in interterritorial cooperation on language policy almost as soon as the ILC had been established. In 1933 the government of Kenya was already threatening to withdraw its financial support of the committee.<sup>61</sup> A year later, the government of Tanganyika agreed to

shoulder a higher percentage of the cost of running the ILC, “in view of the special importance of the Swahili Language to Tanganyika.”<sup>62</sup> The EALB, too, found itself juggling the varied interests of the territories. The government of Uganda consistently pressed for control over Luganda publications, expressing much less interest in Swahili-language publications and policies, and the Zanzibar government felt that readers there required both more “literary type” Swahili than the Bureau generally published, as well as concessions to Arabic-language teaching and publication.<sup>63</sup> These divisions began to outline a new era in the history of Standard Swahili, an era of anticolonial nationalism and postcolonial nation building. And while the interterritoriality of Swahili remained undeniable, Tanzania became central to the story of standardization from the founding of TANU in 1954 through the retirement of Julius Nyerere from the presidency in 1985.

### TANU and Standard Swahili

As African politics in Tanganyika grew more and more nationalized—a transition that slowly subsumed other scales of organization such as the ethnic, interterritorial, or pan-African—Nyerere and other anticolonial activists recognized the need for a political party that could organize the multiple branches of the extant African Association. These discussions resulted in the formation of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), which held its first executive council meeting in August of 1954. Soon thereafter, Nyerere (along with fellow organizers Bibi Titi Mohamed and Elias Kisenge) embarked on an effective “political safari,” giving speeches and encouraging people across Tanganyika to join TANU.<sup>64</sup>

This is the period in which the “double-edged” nature of Standard Swahili became widely apparent, when the language of colonial administration began to be used as an organizing tool for an anticolonial movement—indeed, colonial administrations in East Africa had begun deemphasizing Swahili soon after the Second World War in fear of just such an eventuality.<sup>65</sup> Of course, speakers and writers had been using Swahili, in its standard and nonstandard forms, for many different reasons over the course of many years—the political activism of the 1950s did not suddenly imbue the language with the capacity for resistance. It was the use of Standard Swahili by Nyerere and TANU, however, that linked the language inextricably to a *nationalist* cause. Nyerere proudly reported, for instance, that during his multiple speaking circuits around Tanganyika, he only needed to use an interpreter two or three times.<sup>66</sup> TANU agitated for the use of Swahili in the Legislative Council, a movement that grew more powerful once party members began to be elected to the council in 1958.<sup>67</sup> In Kenya, too, the anticolonial nationalist movement utilized Swahili; the Kenya African National Union embraced the slogans of “Harambee!” (“Pull together!”) and “Uhuru na Kazi” (“Freedom and Work”) to mobilize its constituents. The language would not, however, become a focal point in Kenya’s postcolonial nation-building as it did in Tanzania.

Yet the universality of Standard Swahili, even in Tanganyika, should not be overstated. The concerted literacy drives conducted by TANU in the post-colonial period indicate that the ability to read Swahili was anything but widespread, estimated at around 16 percent of the population in 1961.<sup>68</sup> As the symbolic national language, however, the importance of Swahili only grew after Tanganyika achieved independence; and though English retained its place in the upper echelons

of education and economic and social life, Swahili became the unrivaled language of politics, from Parliamentary debate to campaigning, and the 1964 union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar only reinforced its political centrality.<sup>69</sup>

### The Arusha Declaration and Elimu ya Kujitegemea

One can perceive the symbolic alongside the practical functions of Swahili as a nation-building tool in Nyerere's Elimu ya Kujitegemea ("Education for Self-Reliance") initiative, which included literacy campaigns and universal primary education—both conducted in Swahili.<sup>70</sup> Though TANU had been organizing literacy campaigns for years, this work was given clear political-ideological language in February 1967 with the circulation of Nyerere's Arusha Declaration and its elaboration of the concept of Ujamaa—familyhood or, as it is often glossed, "African socialism."<sup>71</sup> In terms of language, the Arusha declaration reiterated the central place of Swahili in Tanzanian political, cultural, and social life. It also committed the government to educating citizens in Swahili, focused on creating a terminal primary school curriculum in that language—a policy that only began to unravel in the 1990s. This reformulation of the national school curriculum was followed up by adult literacy campaigns which, between 1972 and 1975, enrolled some 5.2 million Tanzanians in literacy courses, with a subsequent two million passing the national literary test.<sup>72</sup>

### Swahili and Contemporary Politics

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Language policy remains a contemporary political issue in eastern Africa. Certain coastal communities in Kenya, for instance, feel disenfranchised by the designation of their dialects as "nonstandard," many viewing Standard Swahili as a colonial construction that continues to be imposed upon speakers of different dialects and users of the Arabic script. In a different vein, some citizens of Kenya and Tanzania have called for more English-medium education. In 1995, amid a host of fundamental economic and political changes, the government of Tanzania passed the Education Act that legalized the establishment of private primary schools; in response, there has been a flourishing of private, English-medium schools.<sup>73</sup> English, moreover, was and remains the language of secondary and higher education in Tanzania—the language has thus become a marker of high socio-economic status. Swahili remains the official language of primary schooling and of Parliament, and debates about language policy in multiple realms continue to interest both politicians and the public.<sup>74</sup>

The governments of Kenya had always been less set on Swahili, and starting in the 1950s, English began to hold sway in official capacities.<sup>75</sup> In 1975, President Jomo Kenyatta declared that Swahili was the national language of Kenya and that it should be used in Parliament, and Swahili was and is the language of a great deal of popular culture and politics. Kenya's revised 2010 constitution officially named Swahili as the national, as well as one of two official, languages of the country.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, Parliamentary debates generally continue to take place in English, and Alamin Mazrui has described the struggles necessary to procure a Swahili translation of that same constitution.<sup>77</sup>

In Uganda, English does in a sense reign supreme; as a protectorate, the government of Uganda had committed to developing English as the territory's lingua franca, alongside vernacular languages including Luganda.<sup>78</sup> This policy continued into the postcolonial period, with Swahili as the language of the police force and military—an unhappy association after the violent rule of Idi Amin.

The emphasis on English as the language of international business and diplomacy, tourism, and science and technology is the stated reason for its persistence in the highest levels of education and politics in all three countries; Swahili, by contrast, is considered by some to be lacking in technological and legal language, despite attempts to “develop” it in both Tanzania and Kenya.<sup>79</sup> Proponents of Swahili-medium instruction argue that students receive a better quality education in that language which, while the mother tongue of few, is more familiar to both students and most teachers.<sup>80</sup> They decry the abrupt transition to English-medium instruction in secondary schools. These policy debates do not dislodge Swahili from its position as a national language, and commentators on all sides make frequent rhetorical connections between education, language, and the nation, particularly in Tanzania.

Alongside these official debates about the place of Standard Swahili in the political and social life of East Africans, people all around the region continue to go about using it in their own ways, from the “Campus Swahili” spoken by faculty members at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), to the Sheng with which an increasing number of Kenyans conduct their business of daily life.<sup>81</sup> As the sociolinguist Jan Blommaert has described the expansion of Swahili usage in the postcolonial period: “While the ‘language’ Swahili spread all over Tanzania [and beyond], penetrating even the remotest villages and towns, the spread of *specific registers* obeyed very different rules.”<sup>82</sup> Swahili as spoken in Nairobi might differ from that spoken in Zanzibar, both of which differ again from the Swahili heard in Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of the Congo yet Standard Swahili, as a point of comparison to be either embraced or rejected, lends its example to them all.

Meanwhile, the institutional side of standardization continued to evolve in response to the political and financial contexts of East Africa: the ILC changed its name to the East African Swahili Committee (EASC) in 1952, moved offices from Nairobi to Makerere under the auspices of the East African Institute of Social Research, reduced its membership, and began restricting its activities to research. Funding continued to be a problem throughout the 1950s, and though by the early 1960s there were more East African members than ever, most of the EASC's money came from private foundations.<sup>83</sup> Finally, in 1964, the EASC dissolved, to be rebuilt into the Institute of Kiswahili Research (Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, or TUKI) housed at the University College of Dar es Salaam. Uganda had ceased its financial contributions, but Kenya kept its up until 1974, by which point the University of East Africa had been divided among its constituent campuses, leaving the institute in the sole care of the UDSM.<sup>84</sup> The establishment of the Institute marked a recommitment to official processes of standardization, in contrast to the more broad-based research that had characterized the later years of the EASC—a commitment marked by the 1981 publication of a *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu* (“Standard Swahili Dictionary”), meant to encompass the language in all of its various new capacities. TUKI lives on as the Institute of Kiswahili Studies at UDSM.



If TUKI took over the standardization and research branch of the original ILC, its policy-advising role in Tanzania was revived by the National Swahili Council (Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa, or BAKITA). The Kenyan government created a similar body in the National Kiswahili Association (Chama cha Kiswahili cha Taifa, or CHAKITA), established in 1998 and whose secretary Professor Clara Momanyi was central to the translation of the 2010 Kenyan constitution into Swahili.<sup>85</sup> The reality of language policies in East Africa, however, are still largely bilingual, emphasizing English alongside Swahili (or, in the case of Uganda, Luganda). This is even so in Tanzania, where Swahili is still nevertheless central to the national imagination; in 1984, the year before Nyerere's retirement, the Ministry of Education officially set aside government "Swahilization" projects, cementing the bilingual status quo, though there have been efforts to put Swahilization back on the table.<sup>86</sup>

## Discussion of the Literature

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The decades between 1960 and 1990 were filled with literary debates between "traditionalists," who argued for the use of classical poetical forms and dialects, and "modernists," who championed secular, free verse poetry in Standard Swahili. The debaters had to carefully balance arguments about the autochthony of their preferred linguistic tools, the "imposed-ness" of the competing form (whether by Arab or European invaders), all while stressing the suitability of Swahili to represent a pan-ethnic East African culture.<sup>87</sup> Time and history became fundamental matters of debate: whether to seek inspiration in the "classical" forms and language or to look forward toward the future "development" of the language.

This debate about autochthony has trickled from the public, political, and artistic spheres into the academic, shaping historiographic engagement with Standard Swahili. The central question of this literature has not been whether or not Standard Swahili was a colonial-era creation—this was assumed to be the case. Rather debate centered on whether or not this origin made Standard Swahili a negative, or inappropriate, or inherently oppressive force. Some authors indeed described Standard Swahili as inauthentic, imposed, and its continued usage as a mistake; a rather polemic example of this argument can be seen in Abdallah Khalid's *The Liberation of Swahili from European Appropriation*, published by the EALB in 1977. Less severe but nonetheless critical are the arguments of scholars such as John Mugane, Alamin Mazrui, and Ibrahim Noor Shariff who have championed the breadth of Swahili in all of its forms, particularly its nonstandard dialects, expressing unease about the sociopolitical consequences of language policies that took their cues from colonial-era ideologies.

On the other side of the debate have been those who defended the work of bodies such as the ILC, beginning with the oft-cited *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language* by Wilfred Whiteley, ILC secretary from 1952 and 1959.<sup>88</sup> Some East African authors such as Ireri Mbaabu, Shihabuddin Chiraghdin, Mathias Mnyampala, Rocha Chimera, and David Massamba strike a note somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the coloniality of Standard Swahili and criticizing the process by which it was policed, but also celebrating the power of the dialect as a tool of

postcolonial nation-building and even regional cooperation.<sup>89</sup> The sense from standardization's defenders is that the value of what it created outweighs any negative ideological or racial motivations.<sup>90</sup>

The tenor of this central historiographic debate makes clear the tensions within the history of Swahili's standardization, and indeed within processes of language standardization more broadly: These are the tensions between oppression and empowerment, between imposition and requests for assistance, and between rigidity and flexibility. The global stories of standardization are so often described with one or two words, attributed to a single motivating factor, whether this be "modernization" (as with Modern Turkish), religious revival (as with Modern Hebrew), or colonial legibility (as with Malay or, as many argue, Swahili).<sup>91</sup> In other cases, language standards are seen to arise from long-term, almost "natural" processes of political, economic, and cultural consolidation.<sup>92</sup> Both perspectives, however, fail to capture the full story. Language standards are neither natural, nor can they be completely controlled by any one entity or group of people. For Standard Swahili, this means it is time for historians to begin challenging the very historiographic premise that the language was wholly "created" or "developed" in the colonial era; yes, the colonial states of East Africa did influence the language that would become standard, but scholars also need to look back into the 19th century and take seriously both informal and formal processes of standardization, and the multiple constituencies involved.

Parallel to the academic and public debates about the suitability of various forms of Swahili to serve as artistic, political, economic, and academic media, some speakers have invested in studiously *nonstandard* forms, the most well-known example perhaps being Sheng, spoken in Kenya.<sup>93</sup> If second-language Swahili speakers outnumber first-language speakers by nearly one hundred to one, then it is not at all surprising that dialects and pidgins of Swahili can be placed along a wide spectrum of adherence to the dialect of Standard Swahili.<sup>94</sup> The designation of one variety as *standard*, with all its implications of correctness, privilege, and power, has left some nonstandard speakers feeling disenfranchised—these are sociopolitical and sociocultural questions of great complexity. Meanwhile, millions of people in east-central Africa simply do with language what speakers of all languages do: choose appropriate registers for a given situation, trying to make themselves understood. This can take the form of interweaving vernacular languages into Swahili, borrowing from English or other non-African languages, or any number of ways in which "people make the language their own."<sup>95</sup> None of this, however, is new—as Mugane has demonstrated, Swahili has undergone various forms of vernacularization from its very origins as a distinctive language.<sup>96</sup> And indeed, Standard Swahili, like all of a language's dialects, is simply another example of "the long history of the malleability of eastern Africa's principal linguistic framework."<sup>97</sup>

Yet standardization has facilitated Swahili's global reach, giving the language a form that is teachable around the world, a form of mutual intelligibility within which speakers of all walks of life can manipulate the language to suit their own needs, whether these be artistic, political, communicative, or otherwise. This global reach includes members of the African diaspora, from anti-apartheid fighters from southern Africa who learned the language while training in Tanzania, to African American communities that have embraced Swahili as a way to connect with the continent, its cultures, and its histories. Swahili is a national or official language in Tanzania,

Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda; it is a working language of the African Union, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community. The language is spoken by over two hundred million people and is taught at universities around the world. One can be sympathetic to the worries that Swahili is in the process of overpowering certain vernacular languages without demonizing it or its speakers, for linguistic repertoires are rarely zero-sum games. Swahili is, and has always been, constantly borrowing from other dialects and languages, both officially and unofficially. Standard Swahili, for its part, was always a goal that drove action, but that its standardizers knew would never be “complete.” Standardization spanned the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras and drew on the knowledge of a diverse array of interlocutors, complicating any notion of its being simply top-down or bottom-up, created or organic—the history of Standard Swahili has always been something in-between.

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Because of the relatively broad span of time covered in this essay, a researcher could target their search for primary sources in multiple ways. The records of the UMCA are housed at the Zanzibar National Archives and in the Commonwealth and African Collections of the Weston Library, a part of the Bodleian library system at Oxford University. Various records pertaining to the German and British colonial periods can be found in the Tanzanian National Archives in Dar es Salaam, the British National Archives at Kew, and the Special Collections at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

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