



The State of Swahili Studies: Remembering the Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

It would be erroneous to conclude that Irish novelist Joyce Cary's dismissal of Swahili language for supposedly having a narrow epistemic range in 1944 typifies attitudes toward the language. Indeed there were, have been, and will always be diverse attitudes and approaches within Swahili Studies. In tracing the path Swahili Studies as a field of enquiry has trodden over the years, this paper demonstrates these divergent views and opinions, and speculates about the future and its concomitant possibilities and challenges. In short, Swahili studies may be said to have traveled through three main historical and discursive phases, namely; 1) the colonial phase; 2) the nationalist phase; and 3) the post nationalist phase. However, it bears clarifying that categorizing Swahili studies into phases does not occlude or ignore the propensity for overlap between these phases. This paper will trace by way of example and in broad terms some of the key questions asked in the past and present and their implications for the future of Swahili Studies.

Key words: Swahili language; Possibilities and challenges

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INTRODUCTION: SWAHILI AT HOME AND AWAY

Nobel Literature Laureate Wole Soyinka is reputed for zealously advocating for the adoption of Swahili as Africa's continental lingua franca. This is a point

Soyinka has articulated since the 1970s; for instance, when he addressed The Union of Writers of African Peoples on February 26, 1976 and when he addressed the Second Black and African Cultural Festival (FESTAC), in Lagos during the launch of *Masaibu ya Ndugu Jero*, the Swahili translation of his hilarious play *Trials of Brother Jero* (Chimerah 1999, p.130). It is fascinating that Soyinka would choose Swahili over his own Yoruba or any other bigger Nigerian language such as Hausa or Igbo for what he has himself termed the "possible continental language" (Chimerah 1999, p.130). Soyinka has had his detractors and not surprisingly most of them Nigerians. As Rocha Chimerah has cogently pointed out Soyinka has often rested his defense of Swahili upon the language's rich history and its manifest testimony of African creativity as well as its apparent "ethnico-political neutrality" (p.130).

But Soyinka's attraction to Swahili is not unique. Indeed quite a number of Africa's literary luminaries have expressed their filiation with or affection for Swahili in varying degrees. In 1977 when Kenya's most famous writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o declared he was no longer going to use English as the medium of his imaginative productions, he indicated he would from then on use Gikuyu and Swahili. His fulfillment of the promise to use Gikuyu was immediate, notably with the writing while detained of his *Caitani mutharaba-Ini* (1980), which was later translated into English as *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi would use Swahili words in some of his works to spice them up, for instance *kupe* (tick) in his prison memoir *Detained* as a metaphor for the kleptocratic, exploitative, and extortionist leadership tendencies in Kenya.¹ His promise to Swahili remains largely unfulfilled. Yet, his words in 1977 stand as a statement of intent and a testament to his desire to see Swahili occupy, like his native Gikuyu, a position more glorious or hallowed than that of English, the language of the colonizer. It is not certain whether Ngugi envisions for Swahili a continental

reach and spread, but Swahili language is surely included in his advocacy for the use of African languages in imaginative expressions. For Ngugi, Swahili is one of the countless important African languages deserving more respect as well; for Soyinka, Swahili deserves to be *the* language of Africa.

To any number of uninformed individuals in the Western hemisphere, Swahili is more than just a possible continental language of Africa, in Soyinka's terms. In other words, to them Swahili *is* the language of Africa. Not infrequently Nigerians, Ghanaians, South Africans or Ivorians meet Americans for instance, who insist as Africans from Africa they must be speakers of Swahili. Indeed, the belief held by some in the West is that Swahili is spoken all over Africa.² The allure of Swahili in the West explains the record number of North American students enrolling in Swahili courses more than any other African language including Arabic. The question, "What is "African" about Arabic?" emerges every so often and epitomizes the unease and tension in the politics and poetics of the cultural and identitarian ties between North Africa and Sub Saharan Africa (Tageldin, 2009, p.85). For sure the question of the Africanness of Arabic is worth investigating, but it is one we should answer only tangentially here. This tangential treatment should not by any means be equated to or perceived as equivocation because, in any event, Arabic has no major direct bearing on the focus of this paper. It could well be said that Arabic is African in so far as it has been Africanized in the same way as English, Portuguese, French, and German. Yet beyond these seemingly "African languages" (African not for being indigenous to Africa but for being available to or imposed on Africans to use, misuse, and abuse), Swahili enjoys pride of place as the most taught and the most sought after African language in the Western academy. For instance, as of the time of this writing, approximately 43 universities in the United States alone offer Swahili in their curricula, compared to only 28 for Arabic, 18 for Yoruba and a paltry 11 for Hausa.³

Swahili language also seems to be a kind of critical umbilical cord linking the African American experience to the mother continent. The proliferation of Swahili names among African Americans such Imani, Amani, Nia, Maulana, Mkunjufu, Kunjufu, Maarufu, Baraka, Asante, etc, is a testament to this affective and symbolic connection between Africa and the New World that Swahili is perceived to enable and to enhance.

More significantly, drawing from Swahili the nomenclature of the African American spiritual and cultural Kwanzaa ceremony makes Swahili the linguistic crystal through which the African American community looks at its putatively lost African self. But in another sense, it is a language whose centrality in the African American cultural and communicative terrain is sometimes characterized by distortion and

misapprehension as it is augmented by overestimation. For instance, calls by influential Africans such as Soyinka to elevate Swahili to the status of the official language of the continent seem to have been sometimes interpreted as already accomplished realities. In appearance, therefore Swahili's place is enviable—enviable at home in the East and Central Africa, its cradle, and enviable away, with other African languages largely unable to supersede its supremacy in the Western academy.

However, Swahili has not always enjoyed pride of place, at least not in the Western world. Irish novelist Joyce Cary's devaluing and demeaning of Swahili in 1944 is illustrative of the distance the language has had to travel to gain some modicum of respect away from home over the years. He wrote: "For many great men books have been the only university. Suppose such men had been confined to Swahili or Hausa, how many books would they read, and how much would they have learnt?" (Whitely, 1969, p.10). Joyce Cary was commenting on the symbiosis between language and knowledge and cited Swahili and Hausa as supreme examples of what he perceived to be the narrow epistemic range of African languages. Swahili and Hausa therefore were granted the privileged notoriety of standing in for the rest of African languages, seen under Western eyes as typically deficient carriers of thought, knowledge, and experience. Joyce Cary wrote those words in 1944, and by that time he was convinced that he had accumulated enough knowledge about Africa. Had he not served in the British colonial service in Nigeria and fought in Cameroon during World War I? Had he not already published African stories namely *Mr. Johnson* (1939) and *The African Witch* (1936), evidence of his deep knowledge of Africa and rich first-hand African experience?

Joyce Cary's question is ostensibly a rhetorical question, requiring no answer from the audience. The epistemic handicap of Swahili and Hausa is self-evident, to him at least. Yet we could also say Joyce Cary did what researchers in his time, before him and after him, did and still do, that is ask questions about Swahili—the language, the people the culture. In trying to remember the past, present, and future of Swahili studies one cannot help but wonder whether the kind of questions asked have been the right questions? Moreover, Joyce Cary's questions betray the ideological baggage and divergent attitudes that inform and are informed by Swahili Studies. This paper will trace by way of example and in broad terms some of the answers these key questions asked in the past and present have yielded and their implications for the future of Swahili Studies.

It would be erroneous to conclude that Joyce Cary's dismissal of Swahili language typifies attitudes toward the language. Indeed there were, have been, and will always be diverse attitudes and approaches within Swahili Studies. In tracing the path Swahili Studies as a field of enquiry has

trodden over the years, I will demonstrate these divergent views and opinions and speculate about the future and its concomitant possibilities and challenges. In short, Swahili studies may be said to have traveled through three main historical and discursive phases, namely; 1) the colonial phase; 2) the nationalist phase; and 3) the post nationalist phase. Categorizing Swahili studies into phases does not occlude or ignore the propensity for overlap between these phases. The colonial phase encompasses the period between the mid-19th century and the 1960s. In which case, Joyce Cary's statement appears in the heyday of the colonial phase, the period within which the African presence in Swahili Studies was virtually excluded. But it bears mentioning that although not being at least a trained linguist or at best a Swahilist, Joyce Cary's view on Swahili is propounded from a position of privilege, poised to be embraced heartily by admirers in Europe, as was most opinion that denigrated Africa and every thing African at the time. If his viewpoint enjoyed pride of place, it exemplifies the epistemic violence perpetuated by what Paul Zeleza has termed as "academic tourists" in the broader arena of Africa Studies of which Swahili studies is a player. The obvious superficiality of his knowledge did not seem to have bothered Joyce Cary. There was a danger in the case of his intriguing remark of confusing authorship with authority.

1. COLONIAL PHASE

In 1844, exactly a century before Joyce Cary's devaluing and dismissal of Swahili, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established a station at Rabai on the Kenyan coast. German missionary Dr. Ludwick Krapf, was quick to underscore the importance of the Swahili language to anyone interested in fully apprehending the interior and coastal region of the East and Central Africa region. Krapf saw Swahili as an important instrument in scholarly investigation of any kind in the region—whether in the hard sciences or soft sciences or humanities. Any and all investigators would have to have a working comprehension of Swahili to facilitate their interaction with the peoples inhabiting the region and therefore to carry out their scholarly enterprises. But Krapf's validation of the Swahili language marks and typifies the spirit of the earliest scholarly interest in Swahili Studies. As a missionary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in East Africa, Krapf did not simply view the language with disinterested and detached scholarly curiosity; he envisioned Swahili as a veritable evangelizing tool. That is not to suggest that all missions in East Africa concurred on the need to use Swahili as an evangelizing tool. As Marcia Wright explains the German Lutherans who operated in south-western Tanganyika did not buy the idea of Swahili as a tool for winning the souls of the indigenous population for Christ: "The African must be

reached first emotionally, through his tribal existence.... Tribal languages were the key to this evangelism and the enemies were the detribalizing influences and subversive religious tied up with Swahili" (Whitely 1969, p.11).

The earliest formal scholarship in Swahili studies, therefore, may have begun with the activities of Christian missionaries with the evangelizing mission as their centerpiece. Following extensive research and with the help of locals, Krapf produced the first systematic grammar of Swahili (1850). Moreover with the help of locals again and his missionary colleague Johannes Rebmann, Krapf completed writing in 1848 and published in 1882, what has been touted as the first Swahili dictionary albeit with some heavily value-laden commentaries on Swahili culture. I will be returning to this presently. But I should mention here that, what has not often been said enough is that Krapf's publication was essentially a translation into the Roman script of an already existing dictionary in the Arabic script. Rev. Edward Steere of the University Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) collected *Swahili Tales of the people of Zanzibar* and published the first edition of *A Handbook of Swahili Language as Spoken at Zanzibar* (1884). That was later enlarged and updated by A.C. Madan.

Given the evangelizing mission of the missionary scholarship then, the recognition of Swahili as a crucial vehicle for disseminating the message of the gospel did not go hand in hand with warm and unreserved appreciation of the culture from which the language emerged. The perceived paganism of the indigenous African dimension of Swahili culture, together with the pervasive influence of the distinctly Islamic religious heritage, meant that missionary scholarship of the Swahili world was bound to be necessarily filtered through a highly judgmental prism. This explains, for example, Krapf's value-laden commentaries. To illustrate Krapf includes Swahili songs of initiation but yet resolutely refuses to translate them into English on grounds that they were too pagan, too repugnant for the sensibilities of his European Christian audience.

Krapf was probably entrapped by the prison chains of the ideological baggage underwriting his outlook toward the study of Swahili. Like many of his ilk he had seen Swahili language as the only redeemable element of the Swahili culture; otherwise the culture in its totality was at best questionable and at worst repugnant and reprehensible. The language that would be a usable or useful tool for winning souls for Christ was the sole reason for not throwing away the Swahili baby with the bathwater.

If Christian missionaries are credited with inaugurating serious and sustained study of Swahili language and culture, they also had the support and sponsorship of their imperial metropolis. We shall not attempt to split hairs here between the imperial desire that motivated the interest of the European imperium in the Swahili

world and the evangelizing/ civilizing mission that was seemingly the driving force behind missionary interest in that world. Suffice it to say here that both the missionaries and the colonial administering played a complementary and pivotal role in formulating administrative, political and educational policies that determined the direction seminal Swahili Studies were to take. As Whitely aptly points out, “during the hundred years prior to independence, the three most important factors affecting the official use of Swahili—and indirectly its unofficial use—[were] the attitudes of the administrators, educators, and missionaries”(p.12). Indeed, in most if not all cases, the missionaries were also the educators. We might add that attitudes and actions combined to give research in the Swahili world the impetus that it needed. As Whitely further states, Europe and its missionary and administrative representatives in the colonies undertook the most zealous foray into Swahili Studies.

Building on the seminal dictionary and grammar efforts of Krapf, Steere and Madan, researchers of European extraction continued to make their contributions to “the vast body of knowledge” of Swahili studies, “augmenting it, adapting, and refining it” (Whitely 1969, p.13). Italian cleric Father Pick wrote Swahili grammar (1953) and a dictionary (1964). By the middle of the 20th century interest in Swahili had sprung up beyond the dominant colonial countries. India, itself recently a colonized country, began offering courses in Delhi (now New Delhi) in 1955. Secular interest in Swahili, that is unrelated to winning souls for Christ, emerged in Scandinavian countries, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia. Russian scholar D. A. Olderogge’s *Swahili-Russian, Russian-Swahili Dictionary* (1961) was particularly a significant achievement. Olderogge’s students and colleagues at Leningrad made significant research in Swahili phonology, morphology, and syntax. Interest spread to China too, with Chinese intensive Swahili instructions and widespread translation of key Chinese texts such as Chairman Mao’s sayings and Chinese folktales into Swahili.

Research by British scholars, which begun with Steere and Madan, and was followed by the contributions of W.E. Taylor. The direct role of colonial administrators would soon wane as the University of London in general and the School of Oriental and African Studies in particular, now assumed the position of the nerve-center of British research in Swahili Studies. Nonetheless the role of missionaries continued to be huge until the mid 20th century. The British Swahili roll of honor would include names such as Burt (1910), the Werner sisters (1927), Ashton, Broomfield, Allen, Bull, Snoxall, Lambert, Hollingsworth, Haddon, and secretaries of the Inter-territorial Language (Swahili) Committee, Frederick Johnson and B. J. Ratcliffe. Johnson would also have his Swahili-English and English- Swahili dictionary, a

work that relied heavily on Krapf’s and Madan’s earlier works and which was published posthumously in 1939. The point is, despite the cynical and scornful disposition expressed by the Joyce Carys of the colonial phase, interest and research in Swahili continued unabated, even in the United States, as I will soon elaborate.

Evidently, by the mid 20th century African scholars were still missing from the Swahili Hall of Fame remaining largely unnamed, unknown, and unrecognized. The formation of the Inter-territorial (Swahili) language committee in East Africa in the second quarter of the last century was quite a pivotal milestone in Swahili research. The British colonial administration established the committee with the express mandate of harmonizing and standardizing Swahili use in Eastern Africa. It was largely made up of colonial administrators and Christian missionaries. Nevertheless, even then, there was for decades no indigenous Swahili or African representation. This absence of African representation was absurd for a body that would soon make decisions on Swahili with far-reaching ramifications to the indigenous population. The committee first supposedly elevated the Zanzibar Swahili to standard Swahili out of more than fifteen other Swahili dialects. Secondly, it established the first Swahili research institute in Dar es Salaam. A leading center for Swahili research for nearly a century, the institute has undergone several name changes, including a more recent one from Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili (Institute of Swahili Research) to Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili (Institute of Swahili Studies). The semi-autonomous Zanzibar would also subsequently set up its own Swahili Center. But it is not until the 21st century that Kenya would have its own research institute devoted to Swahili Studies, first a short-lived Swahili institute at Kenyatta University and the emergence of Research Institute of Swahili Studies (RISSEA) on the Kenyan coast. The University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and Moi University have meanwhile been starting and stopping in their bid to establish Swahili institutes of their own due to fluctuating and nebulous political and institutional will.

If the formation of the Inter-territorial language committee created added impetus to the Study of Kiswahili, it also set off an acrimonious debate amidst the Swahili nation on the validity of selecting the Zanzibar dialect as Standard Swahili. It is significant that it is at a meeting in Mombasa in 1928 that the language body made its decision on Kiunguja. Notable among opponents of the adoption of Kimvita included Mombasa resident Sheikh Alamin bin Ali Mazrui who asserted that it was the height of folly for the coastal people to use a Swahili corrupted by the Europeans (Mazrui & Shariff 1994, p.73).

Moreover, the choice of Kiunguja also tended to deepen an already existing rift between Mombasa-based European scholars affiliated to the CMS and those of Zanzibar affiliated to UMCA. But standardization took

Swahili to another direction not quite anticipated by the native Swahili in Zanzibar and beyond. As early as 1934, it had become apparent that standardization had created a “new language” from the Zanzibar variety for which even the Swahili of Zanzibar would have to be taught afresh. The entire process suffered from little or no native involvement. If the proponents of Kimvita as a superior variety for its long standing poetic tradition were dismayed by their dialect being passed over, the people of Zanzibar, like the rest of East Africans, would contend with learning afresh “British Swahili” as Ibrahim Noor Shariff puts it. He writes: “As a young man growing up in Zanzibar, I could never understand why it was that in the course of taking school certificate examinations we had to take “Swahili” concocted in Cambridge, England,” (70). Swahili students in Zanzibar as elsewhere in East Africa, found themselves in the absurd and untenable situation of sitting for alien Swahili examinations set in England and quite far removed from Swahili as they knew it. At any rate, the notion of deriving Standard Swahili from Zanzibar was based on a spurious linguistic homogeneity of the Indian Ocean Islands. Notably, several distinct Swahili dialects such as Kihadimu, Kimakunduchi, Kipemba, and Kitumbatu are spoken in Zanzibar and Pemba, which begs the question which Zanzibar Swahili dialect begot the so-called Standard Swahili.

But the United States of America also became infected with the disease of Swahili. America’s entry into the Swahili bandwagon is curious because it was really driven by rivalry with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union with which United States was vying for global supremacy had shown considerable interest in the study of Swahili as exemplified by efforts of the Leningrad scholars led by Olderogge and the establishment of the Swahili service Moscow radio. Swahili Studies in America therefore, directly profited from grants and endowments from the National Defense Education Act. By the 1960s, the expansion of Swahili studies in the United States would be described as “the most remarkable” (Whitely 1969, p.16). Having no Swahilists of its own at the time, America initially relied heavily on British and European scholars for running their Swahili research and teaching agendas. Over the years America has minted its PhDs which expertise in Swahili, culture, and literature. What remains to be said is whether the expansion of the last century is still being sustained now or whether the “remarkable expansion” then and now has to be gauged in terms of quantity alone or quantity and quality as well.

Nonetheless, it ought to be mentioned that African American nationalism, which demanded a connection to Africa in the academy and was expressed through the Black Power movement of the 1960s, provided tremendous impetus for the introduction of Swahili Studies in the US. This Black Nationalism and its attendant connection or reconnection with Africa, aided by

the fierce rivalry of the communist block, was therefore, principally responsible for the Swahili zeitgeist of the time. But things have changed tremendously since the 1960. It would seem, now that the cold war is over, the continued presence of Swahili Studies in the US is now heavily reliant on the African American nationalism and its identification with Swahili as the veritable language of the home continent. It may well be also that the Black Nationalist fervor and ferment has apparently waned in vigor. But this is not to say either the centrality of Swahili in the American identity and its filiation with Africa has died out. As mentioned earlier Swahili remains the symbolic bridge in the African American imagination, linking the African American with a receding Africa essence or presence. This is a fact we hold self-evident from the naming of some of their ceremonies with Swahili names such as Kwanzaa and the widespread adoption of Swahili personal names in this diasporic polity. It is therefore cogent to conclude that the nationalist phase of Swahili Studies emerged in East Africa and in the United States at about the same time in the post-world war II era.

It is quite evident that the motives for engaging with Swahili Studies in the past, as now, have differed from country to country, from institution to institution, and from individual scholar to individual scholar. The individual, institutional, and country motives for Swahili studies have often had direct impact on the questions that researchers pose and attempts to answer them. Whitely has postulated that, “the desire to learn another’s language springs very rarely from a disinterested wish to communicate with other humans” (13). It is to the kind of questions and approaches that have informed research over the years, particularly in the nationalist phase in Swahili studies that we now turn.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE NATIONALIST PHASE

Writing in 1973 Ibrahim Noor Shariff remarked: “Who is a Mswahili? To which race does he belong? What nationality is he? Where does he live? Which dialect does he speak? These questions could only be asked by someone ignorant of their implications and of the complexity and extent of the subject” (p.75). If Shariff’s assertion opens a can of worms, it is because it suggests that in Swahili Studies wrong people have been asking the wrong questions and hence eliciting the wrong answers. Unlike Joyce Cary’s question on the disconnect or incongruity between Swahili and knowledge, the questions that Shariff finds obnoxious are not directly related to the language; at the core of these troubling questions is the very identity of the Swahili people. In other words, the identity of ethnic Swahili speakers itself has been a bone of contention among Swahilists for as long as Swahili Studies has existed as a field of enquiry. The question has

preoccupied countless scholars, “ignorant,” in Shariff’s terms and those not so ignorant; and as expected, the answers accruing from the research have been different and conflicted. Generally speaking, there have been two positions on Swahili identity; on the one hand there are those who claim Swahili is a language without a people, whereas on the other hand there have been those who claim the Swahili people exist as an ethnic unit along the East African coast and the Indian Ocean islands.

Wilfred Whitely, Shihabudin Chiraghddin, Alamin Mazrui, and Ibrahim Noor Shariff, were some of the notable proponents of Swahili ethnicity in the nationalist phase. Typical of this category of scholars was the argument that there cannot be a language without a people, notwithstanding the existence of numerous variations in their articulation of this position. In this group belonged those opposed to the idea of the Swahili being a product of inter-racial marriage between Arabs and indigenous Africans, insisting the Swahili are a pure African ethnicity that existed before the Arabic encounter with Africa. These intellectuals vehemently discount the notion of Swahili as “a bastard, hybrid child of an unholy African-Arab union” as well as the more pernicious claim such as the one by the Kenyan ministry of tourism that Swahili as a people do not exist (Mazrui & Shariff 1994, p.59). Chiraghddin in “Kiswahili na Wenyewe” (Swahili and Its Owners) offers one of the most compelling and ardent propositions for the existence of the Swahili. He argues that the Swahili people fulfill five key attributes of a *kabila* (the Swahili equivalent for ethnic group); namely, 1) they claim the same origin on the Kenyan coast; 2) they are bound by the same traditions and customs; 3) they inhabit the same geographical location; 4) they have a unique language; 5) they are known or recognized by other *makabila* (ethnic groups). Thus Chiraghddin presents the various Swahili clans along the coast such as Wajomvu, Wachangamwe, Wakilindini, Wasiu, Wapate, Waamu, Wamtwapa, and Wakilifi as concrete proof of a collective Swahili identity.

Following, Chiraghddin, Alamin Mazrui and Shariff, ascribe to the Shungwaya hypothesis of the Swahili nation, but these scholars tend to stress the malleability of Swahili identity and its ready admissibility of individuals of non-Swahili origin.⁴ In other words, they hinge Swahili identity on the embrace of a uniquely Swahili culture of which Swahili language and the Islamic worldview are core components. Mazrui and Shariff have gone as far as to suggest that pegging identity on skin pigmentation is alien to Swahili identity and that it is a racial imposition by the Germanic European capitalism and imperialism. They argue that the Germanic identitarian tradition, which eventually concretized its influence in the United States, stressed race over culture. On the other hand the Latin identitarian tradition privileged culture over color with the French assimilation policy being its most remarkable instance. In their view, identity for the Swahili people

is contingent on culture rather than skin pigmentation, thus explaining why there are people of Arabic, Indian, and African ancestry or varying mixtures of these entities belong in the category of the Swahili. What is contradictory about Mazrui and Shariff’s postulate is their insistence on the Swahili not being a hybrid product even as they gesture toward the flexibility of Swahili identity and admit that Swahili ethnic purity is fallacious and inconceivable.

The question of Swahili identity remained a hot-button issue in the nationalist phase of Swahili Studies. Even the etymology of the term Swahili remained (and perhaps still remains) contentious. One group claims Swahili derives from the Arabic term “*Suahi*” meaning “people of the coast,” while others claim it is derived from the Swahili expression “*Siwa hili*,” meaning “this island.” But two things remain immutable over the path Swahili studies has trodden regarding this identity; 1) almost all scholars are agreed that the people now called the Swahili did not always call themselves that, and it is not only after the British colonial presence that we have documentary evidence of people calling themselves Swahili (as in H. Salt’s 1814 travelogue *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels* in which he claims he met people calling themselves Soahili); 2) studies on Swahili culture continue being undertaken by universities across the globe in varying degrees and diverse approaches.

It bears stating that those who study Swahili culture have been compelled to operate on the premise that indeed Swahili people exist regardless of their conception of who the Swahili are. This is particularly evident in anthropological and archeological studies of the Swahili. Studies that acknowledge Swahili peoples and delve into the architecture and archeology of the Swahili world, include J. V. Allen and T. H. Wilson in “Swahili Houses and Tombs of the Coast of Kenya” (1974b) and “Swahili Architecture in the Later Middle Ages” (1974); M.C. Horton in “Closing the Corridor: Archaeological and Architectural Evidence for Emerging Swahili Regional Autonomy,” C. M. Kusimba’s in *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* (1999) and “Kenya’s Destruction of the Swahili Cultural Heritage” (1996). All in all, studies in the more than four hundred archeological sites along the East coast of African point to a distinct cultural orientation of the Swahili people, how they built their houses, how they worshipped, and basically how they lived and died. And as some scholars argue, there have been political attempts to falsify the Swahili past, to deny the existence of the Swahili as a people in order to dispossess them of not only their language, but their entire cultural heritage.

As would be expected the muddle regarding Swahili identity, the definition of Swahili culture in general and Swahili literature in particular has equally often culminated in contentious and endless debates. Regarding literature, the debate has often revolved around whether or not to include literature in Swahili by non-ethnic Swahili

into the corpus or canon of Swahili literature. Farouk Topan poses a serious of related questions:

“Is Swahili literature that literature written only by the Waswahili? If, so who is Mswahili? —itself a controversial question. Is Swahili literature that literature that deals with the Swahili or the East African way of life? Or is it literature written by East Africans? (p.161)

Topan’s question extends the politics of identity and identity politics beyond the people to include Swahili culture in its entirety, of which literature is an integral part. In response to these questions, Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Shariff contend that it would be untenable to base the definition of Swahili literature only on linguistic or nationalistic terms. They hold the view that what has long been perceived as Swahili literature is properly speaking literature in Swahili. This would imply that upcountry Kenyan and Tanzanian writers like Euphrase Kezilahabi, Mugyabuso Mulokozi, K.W. Wamitila, Mwenda Mbatia, Omar Babu, John Habwe, and Ken Walibora would hardly qualify as Swahili writers. It is interesting that in discussing Walibora’s novel *Kufa Kuzikana*, Italian scholar Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková was quick to clarify that the novelist was not ethnically Swahili, which in Mazrui and Shariff’s terms situates his work in the category of literature in Swahili. But for sure, Walibora is in good company since Swahili’s first most prolific author Shaaban bin Robert, presumably the Swahili Shakespeare or Swahili Pushkin, was a Myao and not ethnically Swahili. Mazrui and Shariff therefore dismiss Tigit Sengo and Seif Kiango who claim a Mswahili is a Tanzanian and so Swahili literature consists of the entire corpus of Tanzanian literature (Sengo & Kiango, 1972, p.10). Interestingly, Sengo and Kiango’s definition of Swahili literature excludes those writing in the language outside Tanzanian national borders. Another Tanzanian scholar Senkoro seems to offer a corrective to Sengo and Kiango’s apparent nationalist myopia by asserting that Swahili literature encompasses the entire East African literature region and is not confined to Tanzania alone (Senkoro 1988, p.11).

The nationalist phase of Swahili Studies also witnessed acrimonious debates about the nature and structure of Swahili poetry that reached its pinnacle in the 1970s. The bone of contention was whether poems that deviated from traditional Swahili prosody would be accepted into the corpus of Swahili poetry. On the one hand advocates of free verse saw it as an act of liberating Swahili poetry from the suffocating chains of prosody. On the other hand, the proponents of free verse in Swahili poetry viewed it as “tampering with the Swahili poetic organism” (Mazrui 2007, p.108). The debate became increasingly divisive when it became evident that proponents of free verse such as Kezilahabi, Kahigi, Kithaka Mberia, and Mugyabuso Mulokozi, were predominantly non-Swahili or those alienated by Eurocentric scholarship, whereas proponents of prosody were mainly the Swahili nationalists such as

Chiraghddin, Sengo, Hassan Mbega, Jumanne Mayoka, and Abdilatif Abdalla. The debate reached a point whereby each camp accused the other of being contaminated by foreign influences.

3. POST-NATIONALIST PHASE

Generally-speaking the post-nationalist phase of Swahili Studies seems to have begun at the dawn of the 21st century and continues until now. The tensions, contentions and questions of the colonial and nationalist phases may not have completely disappeared, but they have somewhat dissipated. This is in part because of new forces in operation on the ground, particularly globalization that has opened new ways of perceiving hybridity and purity as socio-cultural realities. Questions such who is an Mswahili no longer generate as much steam and heat as they did back in the days nor is there as much debate between prosodists and proponents of free verse in Swahili poetry. Present scholarship on Swahili culture is not as inhibited by moralistic considerations as the seminal work of Dr. Ludwig Krapf. For example, A.C. Caplan has quite recently translated ostensibly *unyago* (girls’ initiation) songs, characterized by overt mention of sexual body parts and sexual activity. In the national phase of Swahili studies this would have naturally have been read by Swahili nationalists an anthropological insistence on the sexual, the Eurocentric portrayal of Swahili culture as essentially erotic and sensual. In other words, they would have viewed as unwarranted and decontextualized exposure smacking of the Western obsession with the prurient, leading to distortion, misreading, and misrepresentation of Swahili cultural texts.

But the wind of change that has been blowing over Eastern Africa, as it has done in the rest of the world, has brought with it new, complex, and shifting dynamics of modernity in the Swahili world. The frequent demolition of traditional Swahili houses on the Coast to replace them with modern ones, the relentless influx of upcountry peoples to the Coast, the transformation of Swahili *taarab* music into more openly erotic forms, and the ubiquitous presence of modern technology; cell-phones, internet, cable TV, —all these are forcing Swahilists to ask new questions. There is today increasing focus on, for instance, not only what Swahili culture was, but also what it is now. Pat Caplan and Farouk Topan’s edited volume, *Swahili Modernities*, Mohamed El-Mohammady Rizk’s *Women and Taarab*, as well as the plethora of studies on Bongo Flava, an emerging popular music genre in Tanzania, exemplify this awareness.

Let me now turn to the state of Swahili Studies in the United States for a moment. Back in the 1960s Whitely would speak with confidence about America’s remarkable expansion in Swahili Studies. Indeed up until now American may be seen to be brazing the trail in Swahili studies. But is it? Whitely noted for instance in terms of approach in the

1960s, American scholars consistently gave more weight to analysis and competence in various linguistic methods while the British stressed operational competence.

Today Swahili still remains one of the most popular foreign language offerings and at least the most popular African language in American Universities with more and more students registering at the elementary level. It is also true that the United States has trained more Swahilists than were there in the 1960s. But the students pursuing advanced Swahili and graduate level studies, students who would be groomed to spearhead Swahili Studies are abysmally few and far between. There could certainly be funding matters coming into play here given that the cold war is over and the impetus for state funding of Swahili Studies is no longer in place. Further, Arabic is increasingly becoming a formidable competitor against Swahili despite the linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical proximity between the two African languages. Federal or State funding for Arabic Studies has increased mainly due to the realities of the post-911 era, whereby the threat of attacks from the Arab world has necessitated the desire to acquire knowledge of “the language of the enemy” in order to preempt attacks. Yet so far Swahili remains unsurpassed in the number of programs that offer it in schools in the United States and the number of students that enroll for it. This is not to mean that Swahili language acquisition here is particularly exemplary. One could advance the view that perhaps students are most often not sufficiently prepared or persuaded to wholly embrace Swahili Studies besides making cameo appearances in class for purposes of earning foreign language credits. The result is really a very hazy and rudimentary and sometimes not even operational competence, which dissipates and disappears a day or two after the semester in which the Swahili was taught.

A number of schools in the United States offer Swahili to beginners with Teaching Assistants as the instructors. Some have instructors with remarkable ability. But there are also cases in which a Teaching Assistant qualifies to teach only by virtue of coming from East Africa, which is a worrying trend. Frankly, some of the so-called Swahili instructors indeed need to be taught first the basics of Swahili themselves. They come to graduate school to study in fields unrelated to Swahili such as History, Public Health, Education, and are compelled to turn to teaching Swahili for funding purposes. Like hospital cleaners operating patients, the quack Swahili instructors in American universities mislead the students as they mislead themselves. Driven by expediency and lacking proper knowledge of the language and its potential, these TAs can hardly nurture potential Swahilists for America’s future. There is a need, in my view, to reinvent and redefine priorities and strategies to encourage scholarship in Swahili Studies in the United States to be at par with the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

In 1961, a year before his death, Swahili author Shaaban bin Robert asserted: “Anyone in East Africa who denies himself or herself the knowledge of the Swahili language is casting aside and away an obvious advantage in life” (Sengo, 1999, p.33). Swahili has always enjoyed pride of place as the lingua franca of millions of East African at home and in the diaspora. But nearly fifty years later Robert’s statement is truer now than when it was first made. Swahili has since not only become the national and official language Tanzania and Kenya, and the de facto official language of the revived East African community whose new members include Rwanda, Burundi and possibly Sudan and South Sudan soon. It is now one of the official languages of the African Union beside English, Portuguese, French, and Arabic. The level of scholarship in Swahili Studies has increased with more and more experts being minted from year to year, particularly in Kenya and Tanzania. For the peoples of East Africa, in books, universities, and social arena, Swahili is carrying the full range of knowledge above and beyond what Joyce Cary would have imagined in 1944. For East Africa-based scholars there are financial and institutional challenges to overcome. Kenyan Swahili scholars have, for example, to contend, with the flip-flopping of their universities on the matter of establishing viable and vibrant institutes of Swahili research. Also, like their counterparts in Asia, Europe, and America, scholars based in Eastern Africa have to learn overcoming occasional or frequent silent turf wars between the disciplines claiming a stake in Swahili Studies. The turf wars may pit linguists against literary scholars, historians against anthropologists, sociologists against linguists and literary scholars, home-based-scholars against those overseas, native Swahili scholars against their non-native counterparts, and Tanzanians against Kenyans, between the Arabizing and de-Arabizing Swahili factions, etc.

But East African scholars have the one indispensable advantage of proximity to Swahili, their object of study whose pulse they can feel day by day. Even more importantly, the renewal of pride towards Swahili language in Eastern Africa, coupled with tremendous transformation in institutional and governmental policy may translate into more rigor and expansion of Swahili Studies in the region. The recent elevation of Swahili to official status in Kenya, the making of Swahili a compulsory subject in primary schools in Uganda and its promotion in South Sudan, are cases in point. In laying strategies to create abiding Swahili study programs in the North America, as elsewhere, there is need to acknowledge the role of these scholars in the equation, to collaborate with them, to engage with them. Tanzanian Swahili scholar Sheikh Mohamed Ali put it more eloquently and succinctly in 1990 when he said:

What we are trying to emphasize is that it would be better for the non-Swahili experts of the language to work closely with the native Swahili, to find out how particular concepts and constructions are expressed in the language....This is the state of Swahili today. But the future looks bright. Both the Swahili themselves and the non-Swahili take interest in its study. I am sure Swahili will advance and I see its advancement as positive. (Mazrui & Shariff, 1994, p.83).

Ali expresses cautious optimism and raises legitimate concerns about the future of Swahili Studies, in view of the past and present. Sidelining the native speakers and native organic experts such as Hamisi Akida, Sheikh Ahmed Nabhany and Hassan Mwalimu Mbega who had little more than basic formal education, but are or were outstanding scholars in their own right, is suicidal for Swahili Studies. Tigiti Sengo has also echoed this concern in his essay “Usongo katika Taaluma ya Kiswahili” (2000). Tanzania was prudent in tapping for decades the expertise of Akida at the Institute of Swahili Research (TUKI). Kenya has been less enthusiastic about embracing the insight of these organic Swahili intellectuals. For example, Nabhany has a string of honorary degrees from universities the world over except his native Kenya. When Nabhany was co-opted in the translation of Microsoft internet programs into Swahili, he lamented about how his suggestions which took into account Swahili cultural considerations were almost always rejected, and as Mazrui has hinted, that could be the reason behind the failure of the project to significantly attract the use of Swahili internet-users⁵. When Mbega, who was born in Tanzania but lived most of his life in Kenya, died in abject poverty in 2007, a massive library or museum of Swahili epistemology died and was interred with him, because Kenya and the world paid little or no attention at all. It is as Amadou Hampate Ba, an eminent scholar of African folklore once remarked, “In Africa, each time an old person dies, it’s a library that burns down,” (Irele 2001, p.82). Mbega’s passing as an unsung hero was emblematic of the Swahili scholarly world’s apathetic attitude toward such vast depositories of organic knowledge as it was a tragic reminder of opportunities lost.

Given the new forces on the ground, there cannot be more need for collaboration and cooperation in perhaps reframing research questions or revising and refining the answers. And more rigorous local and global stock-taking too, as Mugyabuso Mulokozi (1987, 1985a, 1985b) and Paul M. Musau (1997) have attempted with regard to Swahili literature and the teaching of Swahili in Tanzanian and Kenyan universities respectively. This introspection must entail examining and reexamining the researchers’ positionality, and how this impacts the questions we ask and the answers at which we arrive. Granted academia may have little influence on the choices government make regarding languages, whether to endorse or fund the study of this or that language and its related culture. But

Swahili is a field that continues to scream for attention, screaming for questions and answers now even more than ever before. It therefore behooves Swahilists everywhere to be constantly auto-critical of their own individual and institutional investment in the Study of Swahili. How, for instance, does one balance or reconcile between the European appropriation of Swahili-ness and the Swahili-ness of the cultural nationalism of those calling themselves the Swahili or are called so by others? What does the continued disappearance of Swahili architectural structures on the Kenyan coast and their replacement with Western-style buildings mean for the future of Swahili culture? How will Swahili fare in the wake of the totalizing forces of globalization? What are the odds that Swahili will become, as Soyinka dreams for it, a truly continental language or even a global language? This and other pending issues remain to be addressed. Yet one wonders whether or not the academic tourist in Swahili Studies of the Joyce Cary variety should be allowed to have a place in the scheme of things.

For sure the potential for a bright future for Swahili Studies in view of the past and present is great. Sheikh Mohamed Ali’s remark; “the future looks bright” is as cogent today as when it was first made in the 1990s. It is little wonder that every so often big and small businesses take steps to invest in the lucrative Swahili market. The unprecedented number of publishing houses issuing Swahili titles in all genres, the proliferation of Swahili radio and television stations broadcasting in Swahili, including the Qatar-based media network Aljazeera’s intended, albeit abortive launch of a Swahili news channel in East Africa, and Microsoft’s translation of its portals into Swahili, exemplify the recognition of the commercial value of this language. What this means, however, is that the work of Swahilists, present and future, emic and etic, is cut out for them because Swahili, their inexhaustible object and subject of study, continually expands, defines and redefines itself in intriguing ways. What tends to remain constant is the ability of Swahili to retain its incredible epistemic range and cultural resilience, despite or because of the Joyce Carys of this world, past, present and future. I dare say, because of its growing importance studying Swahili and everything that helps apprehend the Swahili world—enriches the totality of our human experience, and is one way of building bridges across linguistic and cultural barriers. It is another way of creating a more inclusive world.

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APPENDIX

1. See also Chinua Achebe's use of *kabisa*, (the Swahili term for "absolutely" or "completely"), in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*.
2. This is not to say Swahili is not spoken beyond its East African cradle. On recent visits to Johannesburg (South Africa), Gaborone (Botswana), and Harare (Zimbabwe) I was pleasantly surprised to meet people speaking Swahili in public spaces. But I would often discover upon inquiring that they are East African immigrants or visitors. Swahili is, thus, spoken in these places as Dinka or Hausa or Zulu would be spoken in Bangkok or Tokyo, Toronto, or New York, namely by a significantly small number of people, mostly immigrants and visitors who travel along with these languages.
3. Email communication with Akinsola Ogundeji of the Wisconsin-Madison-based National African Languages Resource Center on October 12, 2011.
4. The Shungwaya hypothesis is the proposition that the Swahili originated from Shungwaya on the Kenya coast (Mathias Mnyampala & Shihabudin Chiraghdin's *Historia ya Kiswahili*, 1977).
5. These remarks are contained in Alamin Mazrui's keynote address, "Tafsiri na Maendelezi ya Lugha" (Translation and Language Development) presented at the CHAKITA international annual conference at Pwani University, Kilifi, on August 11, 2010.