



Is Kiswahili the Key to Unleashing the Full Potential of Sub-Saharan Africa?

By Stanley Gazemba



Compared to the children growing up in affluent households of the global North, the African child faces unique challenges when it comes to mental growth and development. [Statistics](#), though contested, have rated the African child as having a lower IQ (at about 60 per cent) than that of the average child of the same age in the West.

Others, however, claim that the fact that African children can speak roughly two languages (their first language or mother tongue, together with an inter-tribal trading language) by the time they enter school, they have a considerable advantage. The fact that they soon after start to learn a third official language in school (in Kenya's case this would be English, the medium of instruction) they develop higher cognitive abilities. On the other hand, their compatriots in the West will have mastered only one or two languages.

At face value, being multilingual appears advantageous. However, its drawback is that it taxes the African child with the additional burden of mastering a language of instruction at a stage when his compatriot in the West will have already started receiving practical knowledge. This means that this African child will always play catch-up, however adept he is at mastering instruction.

Even worse, the concepts he is being taught in class will always come in a foreign language, with

examples and references that in some cases are not familiar to him, leaving the African child trying to grasp what he is being taught. This probably, I would argue, is one of the reasons why world-changing innovations, especially in science, rarely emanate from Africa, not necessarily because the African child is less gifted, but because the operating environment is stifling right from the first day of school. The situation compounded by a poor learning environment.

A quick survey of all the tech and industrial giants in the world indicates that all school-going kids in these regions receive their elementary instruction in their first language. This includes North America, Western Europe, Scandinavian countries, Japan, China, Korea and Asian and South American powers, such as India, Brazil and Malaysia, which have muscled their way into this league in the past century. These countries fight to retain a hold on their indigenous languages and cultures by jealously promoting and preserving them, even as they interact with and trade with foreign cultures. This is most evident in Scandinavian countries, where lots of resources are directed at promoting the production of literature in the indigenous languages which, otherwise, would become extinct, given that numerically, the indigenes are far outnumbered on the world stage.

In Africa, vast differences appear between urban and rural school-going children. There still exists a wide gap between urban kids and those from the countryside when it comes to formal schooling. According to research conducted in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the findings of which were published in 2003 in Etienne Benson's article "[Intelligence across Cultures](#)", kids born and raised in urban households, and who have early access to television, film and video games, are more likely to score highly in Western-style Matrix-based visual intelligence tests than those born and raised in the countryside. They also do better in verbal tests. These tests acknowledge the existing cultural bias that makes it difficult to come up with a test that can be applied across the board to both kids from a rural setting in Africa and those from an urban Western setting because the two cultures perceive intelligence differently. Which further compounds the challenges the average African faces when it comes to asserting his place on the global stage.

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In this modern age of easy transport and communication between cities, it is cheaper and faster for people to communicate across borders and do business. While these changes in technology have opened up previously inaccessible places on earth for commerce, they have also ushered in a new era in which less developed economies and cultures are likely to be overshadowed by the more developed ones. It is one reason why UNESCO has been identifying and protecting more [cultural heritage sites](#) across the globe that are under threat of extinction by real estate developers as populations swell and prime land gets scarcer.

The dizzying rate at which the economies of the East African region have been transforming since the turn of the millennium in terms of infrastructure development is not only opening up the fragile hinterland to global commerce, but is also proving to be a serious challenge when it comes to preserving indigenous heritage, especially that which isn't properly documented, as is the case across most of Africa, where the arts and culture are still not perceived as a bankable asset that can generate revenue.

If there are any lesson to be drawn from the global North, it is that African countries should strive to promote learning in their indigenous languages if they hope to make the leap into the club of newly industrialised countries. This is because language is the key to unearthing and exploiting indigenous

knowledge and wealth. History has shown that there's no world power that has exerted influence and control using a foreign language. We also know that imported technologies and knowledge rarely work unless they are adapted and customised for the prevailing local environment.

The case for Kiswahili

That said, the problem with Africa is that it is not homogenous linguistically. There are an estimated [2,000 languages](#) spoken on the continent. Colourful as this may appear, it also poses a challenge in marshaling all these diverse cultures into thinking and working towards a collective goal, which necessitates the creation and promotion of a lingua franca that can be used seamlessly across political and administrative borders, and which can ultimately allow the African people to speak in a single voice. Kiswahili has proved to be a useful tool in unlocking the potential of this sleeping giant in the regions south of the Sahara.

Derived from the Pokomo, Taita and Mijikenda languages of the East African coast, alongside other Bantu languages of the interior, Kiswahili has [borrowed heavily](#) from Arabic, English, Greek, Chinese, French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Latin, Portuguese, Turkish and Indian languages and cultures in the course of its development.

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From its origins on the East African coast in the AD 1200 period, the language was largely spread inland by the adventurous Swahili and Arab traders, reaching as far north as Barawa in Somalia where a dialect known as Chimiini is spoken, the Great Lakes to the west where a dialect known as Kingwana is spoken, and further south as far as Mozambique, where a dialect known as Kimwani is spoken.

Along the East African coast itself there are various dialects spoken, with the Kiamu spoken in Lamu and Kingozi further north being amongst the oldest. The Kibajuni dialect is spoken north of Lamu up to Kismayu in Somalia and Kimvita in Mombasa. To the south are Kimtang'ata as spoken in the Tanga region of Tanzania, Kimrima spoken in Mrima and parts of Dar es Salaam and Kingao in Kilwa further south and in parts of Mozambique.

The islands off the coast have a whole stew of dialects, among them Kimakunduchi as spoken on Zanzibar island, Kipembaas spoken in Pemba, Kipate spoken in Pate, Kitumbatu spoken on Tumbatu island, Kingazija spoken on Ngazija island, and Kivumba as spoken in Vumba, Vanga and the northern Tanga region.

Although it started out as a lingua franca, Kiswahili has over the years grown in stature as the speakers seek to assert their identity in global geopolitics and break away from the dependence signaled by the continual use of colonial languages, especially in official circles. The language has increasingly received official status in diverse regional bodies, signaling its growing importance.

Of late, Kiswahili experts have been grappling with terminology relating to the rapid changes taking place in information technology, which have to be incorporated into the language. It is a task that has rested squarely with the Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa (BAKITA) in Tanzania, who are charged with sieving the emergent vocabulary in order for it to gain acceptance for use in standard Kiswahili widely used in schools in East Africa. Dar es Salaam University's Taasisiya Taaluma za Kiswahili

(TATAKI) is playing a crucial role in the “Swahilisation” and standardisation of this new vocabulary. The other factors shaping the direction the language takes are political, legal, administrative and trade; all of which impact the language’s development.

In July 2004, Kiswahili was declared the official language of the 55-member African Union (AU), with the then chairperson, Joaquim Chissano, delivering his entire speech during the AU Heads of State and Government Summit in the language. It is also the official language of the 6-member East African Community. Kiswahili was also adopted as one of the official languages of the South African Development Community (SADC) in 2019, alongside English, Portuguese and French.

By 2012 Kiswahili had an estimated [150 million](#) native speakers spread across East Africa, and stretching south as far as parts of Zambia, Malawi, Madagascar and the Comoros islands. It enjoys official status in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, DR Congo and Rwanda.

In January this year, South Africa became the first southern African country to offer Kiswahili as an examinable subject in its schools, in addition to German, French and Mandarin. Piloted in 90 schools across the country, Kiswahili became the first African language from outside southern Africa to be taught in the country. This was partly in a bid to stem the rising xenophobia attacks perpetrated on other African nationals living in the country since the mid 1990s, which had resulted in up to 600 deaths by then. The government believed that teaching the language was one way of encouraging cohesion between black South Africans and other African nationals living within South Africa, and ultimately integrating South Africa - which had endured economic and social isolation during the long Apartheid era - fully into the trading blocs of the region.

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Although the growth of Kiswahili has been phenomenal in the regions south of the Sahara, penetration in the north has been slow. Even though Kiswahili is heavily shaped by Arabic and Arab culture, the Sahel countries have preferred using Arabic. One of the reasons could be cultural. The northern peoples are mostly pastoral, and their Cushitic languages are distinctly different from Bantu, which forms the root of Kiswahili, and which is steeped in the Bantu people’s background as farmers and iron-workers. So in order to gain wider acceptance there, Kiswahili might have to adapt more to Cushitic language forms and structures, and incorporate more of its vocabulary. The same applies to the Nilotic peoples, whose uptake of the language has been equally slow, partly because of the phonetic dissimilarities between Kiswahili and, say, Lang’o or Nuer. To the immediate north is the Amharic culture that is as old as the continent itself, and which culturally has always remained distinct.

However, the growth south and westwards has been steady, thanks to the huge swathe of Ngoni-speaking people who populate most of southern and central Africa from the Cape upwards into modern Tanzania, Congo and Kenya, thanks to the migratory patterns of the seventeenth century occasioned by the expansionist *Mfecane* wars, the slave trade and the arriving settler communities from Europe. Westwards, Kiswahili found fertile ground in the vast Congo interior because of trade in ivory, slaves and gold, and also thanks to the close cultural ties between the Congo and the East Coast.

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For a while Rwanda, a former colony of Belgium, together with her neighbour Burundi, operated from an awkward position as French-speaking nations in a region that was predominantly English-speaking. This came with its complications when the East African Community started taking shape. There was also the effect of the Rwanda genocide of 1994 that dispersed a considerable number of Rwandan and Burundian refugees into neighbouring East African states. This meant that by the time Rwanda had stabilised enough to welcome them back home, a sizeable number of the refugees had not only been born in exile, but had attended English- and Kiswahili-speaking schools in neighbouring Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, with very few of them speaking French.

It was only a matter of time before French was dropped in favour of English, thanks in part to the awkward diplomatic falling-out between Kigali and Paris in the aftermath of the genocide. And as the East African Community took shape, it soon became apparent to the leadership of the member countries that the only language that cuts across their borders was Kiswahili in its various dialects. The little charcoal and banana traders at the Goma and Uvira border crossings were not communicating in English or French but in either their native tongues, or the lingua franca: Kiswahili. It is only the trade conferences in Nairobi, Arusha and Kigali that were being conducted in English and French. It is little wonder that Kigali officially made the [switch](#) to English and Kiswahili, alongside Kinyarwanda, in 2017.

A large trading bloc

There is no doubt that Kiswahili has the potential to forge strong trading ties between the people of eastern, central and southern Africa and to promote cultural cohesion that already exists amongst them. If widely promoted in these regions, the language can single-handedly break the barriers imposed on the people by imperial European powers at the Berlin Conference in 1884. Instead the language will remind the people of sub-Saharan Africa that they share a common heritage, and encourage them to look at their neighbours as partners and family, and not as foreigners. It succeeded in doing this in Nyerere's Tanzania in the 1960s, so it can be replicated elsewhere if the political will is there. If this works, then the existing national boundaries will be reduced to administrative boundaries, more or less like states within a larger confederacy. A currency and a universal passport will naturally follow, introducing the seamlessness that is crucial for commerce in a large trading bloc, as has been the case lately in the European Union.

Enough man-hours have already been expended by politicians and bureaucrats at forums in the region's cities to try and knock together trading blocs in the wake of the realisation that it is the only way to go for African countries if they hope to catch up with the newly industrialised countries, especially in Asia, which were at par with them barely 50 years ago. And although they realise the urgency of building these blocs, in most cases the member countries have foot-dragged and even made surprise about-turns, mostly occasioned by deep-seated suspicions carried over from previous attempts.

This foot-dragging may end up being very costly for the region in the near future; especially so after the giant infrastructural projects currently underway are completed and the interior is suddenly opened up fully to products churned up by Chinese mills. Unless the plan is to turn the region into a market for imported industrial and other goods from across the seas down to the matchstick used to light the breakfast stove in the morning, then the only option is to speed up inter-country collaboration in industry and commerce and to forge a well-trained workforce that can serve anywhere within the region to spur growth. The best and easiest tool to help the region towards this

goal is a common language and a standardised schooling system across the bloc. The only language I can foresee playing this role in sub-Saharan Africa right now is Kiswahili.

The push to do away with the borders drawn up by the colonial powers may seem alarmist to those holding onto patriotic sentiments embodied in their individual national flags and anthems, but the truth is that the Pan-Africanist ideals envisioned by Nkrumah, Nasser and Nyerere, among others, in the early 1960s will simply not go away; and they are especially relevant at this time when Africa is standing at the precipice. The migratory patterns of the African peoples over centuries, especially during times of crises — both natural and man-made — attest to this.

The same is still happening today, even with the borders in place. It is the reason that eventually forced the Kenyan government in 2017 to grant [citizenship](#) to the Wamakonde people who had lived along the Kenyan coast for decades after relocating there in the 1930s from Mozambique to work on British-owned sisal farms. Industrial developments in other economies elsewhere in the world leave the region - and by extension the continent - with no choice but to forge a working relationship or be eclipsed. It is time for the continent's leadership to pay attention to the role that Kiswahili can play in determining the face of the continent in the immediate future.

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