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The Liberalization of the Mass Media in Africa and its Impact on Indigenous Languages: The Case of Kiswahili in Kenya

Paul M. Musau

Abstract: The end of the Cold-War has ushered in a new world order in the management of world affairs. Radio and television communication in Africa has not been spared by this post-cold-War wind of change. Citing the liberalization of the electronic media in Kenya, this paper shows how this process is likely to affect the utilization of African languages as tools of national integration and modernization. It is noted that the liberalization of the mass media in many sub-Saharan African countries has not been matched by policies that encourage the spread and full utilization of African indigenous languages. It is argued that the lack of media policy that favors African languages is likely to lead to low status for these languages and perpetuation of linguistic dependency. It is further argued that the non-use of African languages in the media is likely to militate against the achievement of the twin goals of national integration and modernization. It is concluded that media policy favorable to the spread and entrenchment of African languages is needed; such a policy ought to be linked to the overall national agenda.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc has ushered in a relatively new arrangement in the management of world affairs. According to Edoho, the most prominent aspects of this transformation are the integration of the national economies into the global production system and the replacement of U.S.-Soviet bipolarism with U.S unipolarism (1997:1). This has resulted in "the shrinkage of international space and the flow of trade, services, people, values, ideas and technologies across borders with relative ease" (Edoho 1997:4).

Africa has not been immune to these dramatic changes. The impact of the new order is evident in the political, economic and social

life of many African countries. At the political front, free and fair multi-party elections are now widely regarded as the test of a government's legitimacy (Ellis 1996:6). As a result, many African countries which had single party constitutions have now been forced by both domestic and international pressures to adopt multi-party constitutions. It is, however, important to add that the experience with multi-party politics has so far not been encouraging; while few governments have been willing to be voted out of power, many incumbent regimes have remained in office by using all means at their disposal (Hameso 1997:11).

At the economic front, trade liberalization has also been embraced by African countries as a solution to their economic ills. As trade barriers are removed, it is assumed that trade will increase and with it stronger growth and economic prosperity. In a nutshell, it is generally accepted, that political and economic liberalization will bring "progress" (Ellis 1996:7).

Mass communication through print and electronic media has not been spared by the post-Cold-War wind of change that is sweeping across Africa and the rest of the world. According to Wilcox, in 1974 over 70 percent of all the newspapers that were printed in Africa were government-owned (1974:37); in the same year, almost all radio and TV stations were owned by government. In the changing socio-economic climate, however, a state monopoly of the mass media in many Sub-Saharan African countries is now a thing of the past (see for instance, Bourgault 1995). Where, for example, there used to be only one or two newspapers owned by the government or the ruling party, there now exists a plethora of privately-owned competing newspapers and other publications; and where there used to be only one sycophantic radio and TV station owned by the government, there now exists several radio and TV stations many of them privately-owned by commercial broadcasters.

The general philosophy behind the liberalization of the mass media is what has come to be called 'the freedom of speech'. According to Lichtenberg, freedom of speech engenders at least two main points:

- a) that people should be able to communicate without interference.
- b) that there should be many people communicating, or at the very least many different ideas and points

being communicated (1996:6).

Although this spirit of free speech and liberalization has caught up with the media in Africa; there are, as Bourgault says, "ominous clouds on the horizon" (1995:68). This appears to be in a sense true with regard to the liberalization of the mass media in Africa. It is not yet clear, for example, in some cases in what philosophical context the liberalization occurs. How does the liberalization of the mass media, for example, safeguard the cultural and linguistic interests of the African nations in this era of globalization? How does the liberalization of the mass media ensure the achievement of the long-term cherished goals of national integration and modernization of African countries?

Citing the liberalization of the electronic media in Kenya, this paper argues that this process in many Sub-Saharan African countries has not been matched by policies that encourage the entrenchment, spread and full utilization of African indigenous languages. It is further argued that the lack of media policy that favours African indigenous languages is likely to lead to negative consequences for the languages of Africa.

The Goals of Media Communication in Kenya

In Kenya, like in many other African countries, there is no overall communication policy that has been explicitly formulated. But as Lang argues for Tanzania, it is reasonable to assume that the media policy in Kenya should have at least three major concerns:

- a) National integration: this is the integration of the individual into a supraordinate political system, the reduction of strivings for separation and segregation, the building of national awareness.
- b) Cultural self-identification: preservation of cultural identity by revival of the values of traditional culture and creation of a national culture.
- c) Socio-economic modernization: this includes innovations of material and immaterial infrastructures, e.g., the dissemination of technical information, new agricultural products, building the infrastructure, propagation of education and

The above-stated goals neatly elaborate the broad philosophy of nation-building that has guided many African countries since independence (see for example, Rivkin 1969, and Wilcox 1975). "Nation-building" simply means the process of building a modern nation-state with a sense of national identity and unity. In the words of Rivkin, nation building has as one of its objectives the "welding of the multiple, disparate, and noncohesive groups to be found in all the new states of Africa into identifiable and integrated nations within their respective borders" (1969:12). Nation building also involves the building of a modern economy (modernization), i.e. giving the new geopolitical entities material development. Now, to achieve material development, other ingredients such as formal education, a good health infrastructure, political participation etc. are also useful.

One might be tempted to ask whether nation building, as it was conceptualized after independence by the first generation of African leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere, is still a relevant philosophy for African countries at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The answer to such a question is clearly in the affirmative. The twin goals of national integration and modernization are as relevant today for most African countries as they were in the nineteen sixties when most of these countries gained their independence. Nation building, therefore, remains a realistic and a legitimate rallying framework for the culturally-pluralistic, conflict-prone and underdeveloped African countries. It appears to be still a noble goal to which African countries should aspire.

If nation building is to become a reality, it appears then that a common indigenous language, among other things, is important. It has been suggested (see for instance, Fishman 1972:198) that in the modern nation states, a common language is likely to be a powerful factor for unity. This is because it promotes a feeling of single community and it makes possible the expression and development of social ideas and cultural identity. As Mazrui and Tidy explain, the use of a national and a regional African language could promote integration at two levels: horizontally, among the masses of different ethnic groups, and vertically, narrow the gap between the masses and the elite (1984:300). This is a task for which a European language would be ill-equipped. Similarly, it has been argued (see for

example, Mazrui 1996:115) that other things being equal, an African language of wider communication would favor economic development to a greater extent than a situation of linguistic diversity. Information is likely to be disseminated easily with less distortion. For example, information on agriculture, which is the mainstay of most African economies, could be disseminated easily through a common African language. In a nutshell, a common indigenous African language might, other things being equal, be one of the tools that should be employed in the service of integration and modernization of the African state.

Fortunately for Kenya, unlike many other African countries where there might be no indigenous languages of wider communication, there is Kiswahili, an indigenous African language. In a country that is linguistically diverse with over forty languages (Mbaabu 1996:1) Kiswahili comes in handy. This is the language of cross-ethnic communication. In post-independence Kenya, Kiswahili has also been seen as an emblem or symbol of national unity and identity. It was for this reason that Kiswahili was declared, in 1974, the national language of Kenya by the ruling party. The main advantage of Kiswahili in Kenya, unlike, for instance, the choice of Amharic in Ethiopia which has been fiercely resisted (Hameso 1997:3), is that it is considered "ethnically neutral" (Mazrui 1984:300). It is not associated with any particular ethnic community numerically or politically strong enough to arouse the linguistic jealousies of other groups. This is a particularly important advantage in a country where there are few, but large, ethnolinguistic groups, some of them with over a million speakers.

If Kiswahili is to play the important role of national integration and economic modernization of Kenya, it appears that there is need for deliberate development and promotion of the language. This could involve the modernization of the language to enable it to cope with modern discourse. This could also, more importantly, mean helping the language to spread by allocating it more roles, improving peoples' attitudes towards it, and generally enhancing its status. In other words, an effort should be made to increase and sustain the advantages of the language. One way of doing this would be by the consistent use of the language in the mass media.

The Media Practice in Kenya

According to Carver, "freeing the airwaves" means the liberalization of broadcasting laws and the licensing of private broadcasters (1995:5). This generally means breaking the government monopoly in communication, whether of news, advertisements, sports news and the like. This kind of liberalization has taken place in Kenya, like in many other Sub-Saharan African countries. This statement, however, needs to be qualified. Firstly, it is important to point out that the media in Kenya, like in many other African countries, reflects a pro-urban concentration and bias. For example, besides what are called "rural newspapers" (see Mbaabu 1996:167), which are funded through UNESCO and distributed in the rural areas, most of the newspapers are published in Nairobi the capital city and mainly distributed in urban centers (this also applies to the emerging publications in ethnic languages). The circulation of newspapers is also mainly limited to educated people who live in urban areas. Secondly, as Carver rightly points out, "the process of license allocation in many African countries for radio and TV stations and for the mass media in general, is often shrouded in secrecy and determined according to criteria which are largely unknown and which are not subject to any public debate" (1995:5). This statement applies to Kenya as well. It is not clear to many interested parties and critics (see, for instance, *Daily Nation*, May 24, 1997, 6) upon what justification new radio and T.V. stations are licensed.

Urban concentration and the licensing mechanism notwithstanding, it is certain that there has been an increase in radio and TV stations in Kenya since 1990. Before the advent of political pluralism, there used to be only one radio station owned by the government. The situation is now different; at least six more radio stations have been licensed to operate. Similar developments have also taken place with regard to television stations. While before 1990 there used to be only two TV stations, one owned by the government and the other one by the ruling party, there now exists at least five stations. In brief, the number of new radio and TV stations that have been licensed has increased, and this trend is certainly likely to continue.

The Kenya Broadcasting Co-operation (KBC) Act of Parliament prescribes the use of two languages for broadcasting,

i.e. English and Kiswahili. The Act further permits the Co-operation to broadcast in any other language other than English and Kiswahili. Following this Act, radio broadcasting is in Kiswahili (in the Kiswahili Service Station), English (in the English Service Station) and other local languages such as Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo, etc. (in the Vernacular Service Station). The KBC television too broadcasts in English and Kiswahili (in 1980, it was estimated that 65 percent of its transmissions were in English and 35 percent were in Kiswahili (Bourgault 1995:125). The Kenya Broadcasting Co-operation appears to be the only broadcasting concern for which the law provides the languages to be used in broadcasting. It also appears to be the only broadcasting house that promotes Kiswahili and other Kenyan African languages. The newly emerging radio and T.V. stations do not seem to be guided by any government regulation with regard to the languages that ought to be used in broadcasting. Nearly all of them broadcast mainly in English. These stations also play music that is predominantly in English. Listeners to the radio stations are at times linked up with foreign stations such as the Voice of America (VOA) for news, music programmes, and sports news. This also happens with the new TV stations, where viewers are often hooked up to foreign stations such as Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Co-operation (BBC) or SKY NEWS. Although no one knows for sure what the situation will be like in the coming years, the tendency at present shows that English is clearly the preferred language of broadcasting for the emerging radio and TV stations. This trend is likely to continue especially with the predominance of foreign programmes on the newly licensed TV stations.

The predominance of foreign programmes (mainly British and American) and the use of English in the TV stations is the subject of concern to some observers and often attracts sharp criticism in the print media as this letter that appeared in the *East African Standard* on March 16, 1995, shows:

It is surprising that after more than 30 years of independence, ...all the programmes are Wazungu (European) in origin. This is shameful and discouraging. Look at Tushauriane (a locally produced soap opera that is in Kiswahili). It is educational and entertaining and promotes our culture. The value is great.... Why feed us with foreign films alone, are we inferior? (6)

Although the writer of this letter is questioning the relevance of foreign programmes to Kenyan viewers, he is also raising language issues. He seems to see immense value in the use of Kiswahili in the media; that is probably why he advocates for more locally produced programs in the language.

Several reasons have been advanced in the popular press (see, for instance, *Daily Nation*, May 1, 1995) for the dominance of foreign programs in local TV stations (7). Some of them include the following:

- a) that sponsors hold sway over televised programs
- b) that the stations lack funds to produce their own programs, hence the preference for cheap imported ones
- c) that Kenyans prefer foreign programs to locally produced ones

While some of these arguments are plausible, others cannot stand closer scrutiny. For instance, it is not clear how in the absence of a survey, one would conclude that Kenyans prefer foreign programs to locally produced ones. In fact one sees a lot of enthusiasm for locally produced programs in the local media. Whatever reasons are cited for the dominance of foreign programs and the continued use of English on radio and TV stations, however, one thing appears certain: there is no overall policy that secures and promotes national interests with regard to language and culture in the Kenyan mass media. This state of affairs is likely to have several consequences as far as the spread and utilization of Kiswahili in Kenya is concerned. It is to these implications that we shall now turn.

The Psychological Factor

Although establishing a causal connection between radio listening and television viewing, on one hand, and the formation of attitudes and beliefs, on the other hand, is not an easy matter, the predominant view, is that mass media exerts great power not only on economics or politics but also on how people think about the world (see, for instance, Lichtenberg 1990:9 and Bourgault 1995:236). In the words of Lichtenberg (1990:9), "the media provides not only information,

but also conceptual frameworks within which information and opinions are ordered, not just facts, but a worldview." In other words, the mass media might be used to spread a society's view of the world, their values and their ideology. It has, for example, been claimed that the Western World's mass media could influence world consciousness so that the world economic order that favors the West seems "natural" (Bourgault 1995:236). If this line of reasoning is valid, then the lack of media policy that favors African languages could have implications for the way in which Africans perceive their languages and cultures.

A viewer who is repeatedly exposed to foreign programs on TV is likely to be persuaded to think it is only the culture shown on TV that matters. Similarly, the continued use of English, or any other foreign language for that matter, on radio and TV, is likely to influence attitudes in favour of the foreign language but negatively against the indigenous languages such as Kiswahili. Indeed, it has been shown that European languages that have been assigned greater communicative functions than African indigenous languages are held in esteem, prestige and evaluation (Adegbija 1994:114). This state of affairs is likely to lead to a situation in which Africans denigrate their own languages and cultures. This in turn might lead to the continued loss of prestige and status for African languages. It is unlikely that languages that lack esteem will spread and develop to serve as important tools of nation building. In such a scenario, one possible consequence for the African peoples is the continued linguistic dependency upon European languages.

The Language-Spread Factor

It is a commonly known fact that languages change. Most of the factors bringing about language change are unplanned (Wardhaugh 1987:2). Some changes are, however, planned. For example, when a government decrees that one language should be used for certain functions, that is a conscious change in the course of a language. In the same vein, when the mass media deliberately chooses to use and promote a certain language, that can also be considered to be a deliberate intervention in language matters that can affect the development of a language. To be sure, deliberate intervention in language matters such as enactment of laws, reward systems, and the like may not necessarily affect the fortunes of a language (Wardhaugh:1987:6). As the popular saying goes, the horse could be

taken to the river but refuse to drink water! Having said that, it is necessary to state that the language policy of a state can be directed to increasing the advantages enjoyed by a language (for example, the case of Kiswahili in Tanzania) (Massamba 1987:186). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that the status planning of a language (the deliberate efforts which are made to influence the allocation of functions to a language) might help to spread it, i.e. to increase its users (Cooper 1989:33).

In order to help indigenous African languages spread, policy on the mass media could be particularly used to increase the advantages of those languages. In Kenya this could mean putting in place a policy that would require radio and TV stations to devote a certain percentage of their airtime to broadcasting in Kiswahili. This step would help to further popularise the language and to spread it. The present scenario where emerging stations broadcast in English only could, in the long run, hamper the entrenchment and spread of Kiswahili. As Ammon and Mercator argue, a policy which has as its objective the spread of a specific language or languages must try not only to entrench it more deeply in its speakers, but also try to improve attitudes towards it besides enhancing its status and extending its functions (1997:51). This is an objective that the mass media in African countries can help to achieve.

In the sections above, we have briefly seen how the lack of a coherent mass media policy can impact African indigenous languages generally and Kiswahili in particular. In the remaining part of this paper, we shall consider briefly the implication of the lack of media policy that favours African languages for the broader societal goals, i.e., national unity and identity, and national mobilization and modernization.

The National Unity Factor

It is well known that many African countries, Kenya included, are arbitrary European creations, largely the product of the European scramble for Africa in the late 1800s. The colonial powers divided the peoples in the territories they claimed according to administrative convenience rather than social or political arrangement. The Maasai are, for example, to be found in Kenya and Tanzania, the Hausa are scattered all over West Africa, while the Somali are located in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia. Most of the African countries

are therefore split by things like language, ethnicity, religion and the like. Given this fact, and assuming the current territorial borders will remain, there appears to be need to strive to minimize differences and to find unifying methods. The aim of doing this would be to ultimately integrate the peoples into new identities within the current borders.

Although this "melting pot" or "assimilationist" argument appears attractive, it is a gross oversimplification of matters. It assumes that unity cannot be achieved in diversity. It also makes the questionable assumption that identity is necessarily singular and not flexible and dynamic. This hypothesis also assumes that a common language can promote unity, an assumption that may not necessarily be valid if one remembers the recent history of Somalia and Ruanda. Nevertheless, as Hutnik argues, in an increasingly multi-ethnic society, a concerted effort needs to be made not merely to accept or tolerate cultural heterogeneity but to appreciate and affirm it, while always maintaining a sense of essential unity among people of various ethnicities (1991:169).

One way of minimizing differences and achieving unity and national consciousness in African countries generally would be by the promotion of nationhood. Now, according to Norbu, this refers to the ever-sharpening of social self-hood embedded in the superstructure of a particular society that differentiates in most significant ways one nationality from generalized others of the same social category (1992:2).

Nationhood as defined above needs to be buttressed by certain key factors. One of these factors is a common language. To be sure, the recent African history is replete with examples which show that speaking a common language might not be the only necessary factor in national integration. Nevertheless, as Wardhaugh states, a common language is generally regarded as a potent unifying force (1987:7). This is because it appears to offer, for people living together under one government, a medium to pursue their daily activities.

With the above background in mind, it appears obvious that the media in Kenya, and other African countries, has an important role to play in promoting nationhood. This they can do by broadcasting in African languages such as Kiswahili. By so doing, the radio and TV stations would be helping Africans to integrate and to shape their own identity as nations. The lack of media policy that favors African languages does not allow these languages to effectively

play their role as agents of promoting nationhood.

The Mobilization Factor

As stated earlier, one of the major objectives of African governments is the "modernization" of the African state. This modernization process includes economic development which has as one of its objectives the narrowing of the technical and the scientific "gap." between the industrialized countries and the developing ones (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995:104). For modernization to take place, there is need for communication between the African expert who has acquired scientific and technological expertise and his or her countrymen. For example, an expert on agriculture will need to pass his knowledge to the African farmer who in all probability might not be a fluent speaker of a European language. If communication between these two people is to succeed, a common African language will be necessary. This is also true if the African expert wants to reach more farmers through the mass media.

The use of foreign languages in the African media does not, therefore, make possible the participation in communication by the majority of the people. Their use tends to alienate many Africans who do not speak these languages. This is because these languages are understood by the few who are in a socio-economic class of their own. For example, in Kenya it was estimated in 1980 that Kiswahili was spoken by over 65 percent while English was spoken by only about five percent of the total population (Heine, quoted in Mazrui and Mazrui 1995:19). If this is still the situation, the continued use of English in the media does not favor mass mobilization in the quest for modernization. Information is unlikely to be transmitted faster with least distortion and this is likely to promote mutual incomprehension, hence making it impossible to mobilize the people for development. In sum, media practice that does not utilize a common Kenyan language is likely to impact negatively on mass mobilization and modernization efforts.

The media in Kenya, if it will help in the modernization efforts, will need to broadcast in a language that is understood by the majority of Kenyans. That language is Kiswahili. The status quo, where emerging radio and TV stations seem to prefer English, does not facilitate the participation of Kenyans in media communication. The lack of participatory communication does not,

in the long run, serve the causes of both mobilization and modernization.

Conclusion

Although it is undeniable that some significant gains have been made by the government owned radio and TV stations as far as the use of Kiswahili is concerned, a closer look at the electronic media in Kenya generally shows that the country, like many other African countries, does not have a clearly spelled out national media policy that protects and promotes language and cultural interests in this era of liberalization and globalization. Matters pertaining to language and culture seem to be left to individual media stations and are not regulated by a national conceptual framework.

This lack of media policy with regard to Kiswahili language is not without significance. It perpetuates linguistic dependency and continues to give Kiswahili low status and prestige. This in turn may impact negatively on the development of the language in Kenya. This state of affairs is likely to further militate against the much desired national integration and identity. It, moreover, leads to non-participation in media communication by the majority with attendant difficulties in mass mobilization for national development.

Media policy is an important aspect of national life that should not be left to chance. There is need to regulate the media in African countries so that it can serve better the broad societal goals and aspirations. There is need for a national media policy that favors indigenous African languages. This should be true in Kenya as in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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