Kiswahili And Other Indigenous Kenyan Languages In The Performing Arts

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It is not fashionable in Kenya to write drama in Kiswahili or other indigenous languages. There is a tendency to see English as the natural choice for the dramatist. Indeed, writing drama in Kiswahili or any other indigenous language is considered the business of writers who should really not be taken seriously. Closer scrutiny, however, shows that there are many reasons, which make Kiswahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages appropriate for drama in Kenya.

Kiswahili is the largest language in Kenya in terms of the number of speakers as well geographical spread. According to a research done by Heine and Mohlig (1980), the language was spoken as a second language by 65.3% Kenyans. The number of English speakers was much lower and stood at 16.1%. There is nothing to make us think that the ratio of Kiswahili speakers vis-a-vis the speakers of English has changed drastically in favour of English. If anything, the ratio may have tilted in favour of Kiswahili for a number of reasons. First, the language has since 1985 become compulsory school subject. This requirement in the 8.4.4 education system has created more speakers for Kiswahili in areas where in the past there were only a few or none. Second, there has been a steady growth of urban centres and an increase in the rural-urban migration with the new urban immigrants acquiring Kiswahili as a necessary medium of daily interaction especially in the multi-ethnic towns and cities. Third, transportation in the form of commuter vehicles has improved tremendously easing movement from one part of the country to the next thereby increasing the number of people from different communities coming into contact. To a very large extent, Kiswahili is the medium of communication when such contact takes place.

The three factors highlighted above must have enhanced the number of Kenyans who speak Kiswahili as a second language. The only factor to have significantly worked in favour of English is the expansion of formal education in the country. We should note, however, that this factor has also impacted positively on Kiswahili. It is also important to point out that the school dropout rate has been rising in the country. When people drop out of school, especially at the primary level, they are more likely to loose their skills in English than in Kiswahili.

in the language, one would kill two birds with one stone, namely, communicating the intended messages and creating national cohesion. The latter role for Kiswahili is of special importance in Kenya since over the last twenty years in a successful attempt at divide-and-rule politics, political elites have ran themselves hoarse reminding Kenyans of their ethnic affiliation. Some people might argue that the role of creating national cohesion in Kenya would be best played by English. Yes, English can bring together professionals and the other white-colour workers but certainly not the ordinary workers and the peasantry.

Plays written in English alienate the commoner in our society. Many workers and peasants do not speak English. Some of them might have studied the language up to Standard Seven or Standard Eight (depending on the education system they went through). However, most of them lose much of their English with time. These people are, to a large extent, shut out of drama conducted in English. Writing and staging drama in Kiswahili would enable such people to watch the performances and to subsequently discuss what they have seen on stage. In the process, the playwright would act as a catalyst and set in motion dialogue on important issues. Such dialogue would undoubtedly be good for impacting awareness and knowledge on the general population. In this way, opinion leaders and the rest of society would discuss issues such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, corruption, human rights abuses, environmental degradation and our style of governance.

At the Professional Centre, the British Council, the French Cultural and Co-operation Centre and the Braeburn Theatre – (all in Nairobi), the Little Theatre in Mombasa and Playmakers Club Theatre in Nakuru, practically all productions are in English. Whereas the situation is not as bad at the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival, plays in Kiswahili are a very small fraction of the total. For instance, in the Adjudicator Report for the 2000 National Festival published in the Official Programme for the 2001 National Festival, the adjudicators state that: -

> *We would like to point out that we are concerned with the decline in entries in Kiswahili. For instance, secondary schools presented only one play in the language. Furthermore, all the narratives were in English. We would like to encourage participants to present more oral narratives, dramatized verses and plays in Kiswahili. The Kenya*

National Drama Festival is a wonderful forum for the promotion of our national language. We should seize the opportunity and promote the language.

Kiswahili is Kenya's national language. We should therefore give the language the capacity to enable us articulate national life and culture. For this to happen, we should infuse new ideas into the language. Using it for drama will contribute towards this development. The challenge to meet the demands of the playwrights and other theatre practitioners will make the language more developed in terms of ideas and technical terms.

In the art festivals that take place in this country audiences get very enthusiastic when a Kiswahili play goes on the stage. This happens especially when the Kiswahili play is a good production of a good script. The enthusiasm is due to two reasons. First, pronunciation and enunciation in a Kiswahili play are less challenging for the cast and the audience than it is for an English play. Second, during the performance of a Kiswahili play, the playwright and the audience are able to share a local idiom that is uniquely Kenyan and which has evolved through Kiswahili and other indigenous languages. In a nutshell, it appears that Kiswahili productions capture the attention of the audience more than English productions. If this is the case, Kiswahili is a better medium of communication on the Kenyan stage than English. This should be a good motivation for scripting and staging plays in Kiswahili.

What about other indigenous Kenyan languages? What arguments can we advance to contend that indigenous languages are appropriate media for drama in the country? The first argument concerns the importance of indigenous languages in national development. In some quarters, these languages are seen as cultural relics, which are irrelevant for national development. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indigenous languages are a national asset not only at the cultural level but also at the economic level. They are an economic resource base that can and should be tapped for the economic well-being of the country.

I have argued elsewhere that the languages are great reservoirs of knowledge and wisdom. Over the centuries the communities that use these languages have experimented in the various spheres of life. Through this real-life experimentation, they have acquired an enormous amount of knowledge in fields such as agriculture and veterinary science, human medicine, crop and animal husbandry, architecture and construction, brewery and culinary arts. A good amount of this knowledge is stored in the languages. The knowledge is embedded in riddles, proverbs, sayings, and narratives. This knowledge can and should be tapped for national development.

Given the importance of indigenous languages for the national well-being, we should individually and collectively work towards their preservation and promotion. Using these languages as media for our theatre will contribute towards their vibrancy and growth.

Literacy is very important in modern societies. This is the premise on which adult literacy is founded. Efforts have been made to give writing and reading skills to adults, some of whom are in their forties and fifties. Adult learners may not have the time to study English to a level that would sustain their newly found reading and writing skills. Writing, staging and publishing drama in the adult learners' mother tongues would provide the learners with an opportunity to sustain and improve their reading and writing skills.

We have many burning issues in our society, which we need to address. These issues include HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, alcoholism, corruption, bad governance and environmental degradation. Moreover, we need to create tolerance and peaceful co-existence. We need to struggle for a more democratic nation. Drama can be a powerful tool for discussing these issues. However, when plays are written in English, many Kenyans cannot join in the discussions, they are shut out by the language barrier. Writing drama on such issues using Kiswahili and other indigenous languages would enable the general public to engage in fruitful discussions of these problems.

Using Kiswahili and other indigenous languages to discuss serious issues raised in drama will improve the prestige of these languages. In turn, this prestige will make the speakers of the languages more confident. The enhanced confidence will enable the people to release their energies for national development. People will be more forthcoming in asking questions and making valuable suggestions concerning both their immediate environment as well as national as a whole. Our communities and the country at large will benefit from such an eventuality.

Plays in Kiswahili and other indigenous languages will help to demystify drama. Currently, drama in Kenya is practised almost wholly by people who have had Western form of education. This need not be the case. Demystifying and popularising drama will make the art form a useful tool for the general population. The fact that many Kenyans are not literate is very relevant here. Drama need not be scripted. Illiterate and semi-literate citizens can thus use it to explore and address community and societal problems. Moreover, if drama became more popular in the general population, it could provide a worthwhile pastime. This pastime will pull away people from harmful lifestyles such as routine and excessive drinking.

The relationship between drama on the one hand and Kiswahili and other indigenous languages on the other should be a symbiotic one. Drama should serve as a medium through which these languages can be promoted. In turn, these languages should help to promote drama in the general population. This way, the artists, the general population and the country as a whole will gain. Artists will gain financially from the expanded market for theatre. The general population will gain from the availability of quality entertainment and education. The country as a whole will gain from the wealth created through theatre activities. Moreover the broad dialogue facilitated by drama will be important in creating awareness which in terms is useful in the collective handling of the country's myriad problems and challenges.

Some people have argued against the use of Kiswahili and other indigenous languages in drama alleging that theatre-goers prefer plays in English. On the contrary, there is evidence to show that plays in local languages can pull big crowds. In the seventies, *Ngahika Ndenda* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Mirii aroused much excitement and enthusiasm among audiences at Kamirithu, Limuru. The play was so popular that not only was it banned but the structures where it was being staged were pulled down by the Government. In the early eighties, the "rehearsals" of *Maitu Njugira* again by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, attracted enormous crowds to the Education Theatre II at the University of Nairobi. This writer attended the "rehearsals" twice. The attempt to attend the "rehearsals" on the third day flopped. On this occasion, not only was the auditorium fully parked, the entrance was tightly blocked by a standing crowd. This was the state of affairs at 3.00 p.m. although the show was scheduled to begin at 5.00 p.m.!

Those who see little of value in our indigenous languages might want to hypothesise that the immense popularity of *Ngahika Ndenda* and *Maitu Njugira* had more to do with Ngugi's name as a highly respected writer than with the appeal of the Kikuyu language. There is no denying it, Ngugi's fame as a committed no-odds-barred writer partly contributed to the plays' popularity. But we are also convinced that the language played its part in pulling the crowds. Evidence to support his contention comes from the popularity of other plays in Kikuyu authored by people other than Ngugi wa Thiong'o. These popular plays include *Ciaigana ni ciaigana* (a Kikuyu translation of *Enough is enough* which in turn is a translation of a play in French by Protais Asseng), Wahome Mutahi's *Mugathe Mubogothi* and Wahome Mutahi and Wahome Karengo's *Mugathe Ndotono, Makaririra Kioro, Ngoma cia aka* and *Ngoma cia Arume*.

During one of the *Makaririra Kioro's weekend* shows at the Kenya National Theatre, this writer was forced to stand for the entire duration of the performance. The stalls and the balcony were full to capacity. Moreover, from one edge of the stage, all along the auditorium wall to the second edge of the stage, the space was fully occupied by standing patrons.

This writer's *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* had a long, long run for a Kenyan play. The play recorded more than 110 shows. After the premier performance and a number of shows at the Kenya National Theatre, the play was taken to various parts of Kenya.

Moreover, the play travelled to Tanzania on three occasions reaching as far away as Bagamoyo, Dar-es-Salaam and the refugee camps in Ngara, Western Tanzania. It was performed in halls, church compounds and market places. In some of the venues the play drew as many as 1000 patrons per show. If Kiswahili is as unviable for theatre in Kenya as some detractors would like to make us believe, the cast and the production team of *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* would have been demoralised by low audience numbers and probably given up the venture within the first few shows. They did not. On the contrary, they immensely enjoyed themselves on stage right through the last show of the production.

There are those who would rather advise that we should not write and stage drama in local languages. Such people have argued that English is the undisputed international lingua franca and that writing and staging drama in Kiswahili and other indigenous languages is tantamount to consigning ourselves to the periphery of the international community. These people have found the cliché about the world becoming a global village very attractive. Apparently, for them, only languages such as English and French are suitable for the village!

Using local languages for domestic communication does not marginalise a country. Countries such as Japan, Germany, the both Koreas and China use their respective local languages for domestic affairs. And yet none of these countries can be said to be marginalised on the world stage. Indeed, even small countries have used their local languages to conduct their national business and yet they are very visible internationally. Thus, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland which use their respective local languages are not any more marginal in the world arena than Nigeria or Kenya which use English as an official language.

It might also be claimed by some that writing in indigenous Kenyan languages will deny playwrights wider exposure and international recognition. This claim

is not necessarily valid. Writing in German has not denied Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Bertolt Brecht international recognition. And, although Henrik Ibsen wrote in Norwegian, a tiny language in comparison with English, he is one of the world's best known writers. One can go on enumerating names of playwrights who are known internationally although they wrote or write in languages other than English and French. A few more examples will suffice. These include Dario Fo, Nikolai Gogol, Rabindranath Togore and Chekov.

A playwright writing in an indigenous language in a small Kenyan town will become internationally known if the writing is of an excellent quality. Their plays will some day be staged in Paris in French, Berlin in German, Jerusalem in Hebrew, London in English, Copenhagen in Danish and Madrid in Spanish. If the play does not go beyond the playwright's backyard we should blame, not the indigenous language, but the quality of work in question or inadequate promotion or a combination of the two. This writer first encountered at Alliance High School the play by the Brothers Capek which was originally written in Czek!

We would like to make it explicitly clear that we are not suggesting that English is not important in our lives. It is indeed very important for international communication as well as for accessing science and technology. Nor are we saying that Kenyans should not write and stage drama is the language. Rather, we are arguing that English is not the most appropriate language for mobilising the broad mass of Kenyans for national development through drama. Not only is Kiswahili and other indigenous languages understood by more people but using these languages is the only option we have if our intention is to reach out and mobilise people at the grassroots level. Furthermore, Kiswahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages have another advantage over English. They have an emotive dimension for the local communities, which the English language does not have. This emotive attribute gives Kiswahili and other indigenous languages a communicative superiority in local drama.

The arguments we have advanced for the role of Kiswahili and other indigenous languages in drama and theatre hold true for other performing arts such as the oral narrative, poetry and songs. Fortunately, unlike in theatre, Kiswahili and other indigenous languages have fared well in other performing arts. Indeed, narratives and songs in the rural areas are almost wholly in the indigenous languages.

In the yesteryears, Kiswahili played a key role in Kenyan music. Prominent Kenyan musicians such as Mwachupa, Fundi Konde, Daudi Kabaka, Fadhili Williams, John Nzenze and George Mukabi sang in Kiswahili. Their songs had a wider appeal than many of the contemporary Kenyan songs in English. And this appeal has proved

to be enduring. The songs of those musicians, which today go under the name *zilizopendwa* are still popular among Kenyans. Part of this popularity has to do with the songs' authenticity. One of the most important elements in espect to this authenticity is the language in which they are sung, that is, Kiswahili. The musicians' pronunciation and intonation of Kiswahili is so natural that we do not have problems understanding the words they utter and we fully appreciate the intended meaning. Furthermore, we enjoy not only the melodies and tunes of these songs but also the fine figures of speech and the rich nuances of meaning employed by the musicians. In short, these musicians had a better command of Kiswahili than the contemporary Kenyan musician has of English. The natural pronunciation, enunciation, intonation as well as the familiarity with the Kiswahili idiom enables the Kenyan listener to be carried along by the musicians. This is also true of songs in other indigenous languages. Listeners from the various ethnic groups in whose language the musicians sing grasp the full meaning of the songs without the agony of trying to decipher the words coming out of the musicians mouths.

One of the contentions made by Kenyan musicians singing in English is that they do so, so that their music may have an international appeal. We would like to point out, however, that what gives a song an international appeal is not the mere fact that it is sung in an international language. Artistic quality and promotional rigours are crucial factors in the international music market. The Democratic Republic of Congo has produced numerous musicians of international repute. Most of these international music stars sing in Lingala, a language spoken by fewer people than Kiswahili. The fact that Lingala is one of the indigenous languages of the Congo Basin has not prevented songs by the likes of the late Franco Luambo Makiadi, Pepe Kalle, Kofi Olomide, Tabu Lay and Lokassa ya Mbongo from doing well not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world.

Regarding songs in indigenous languages with great artistic appeal, I am reminded of a song tilted "Elongi". Some years back the song used to be played over the radio. I used to enjoy listening to it. Indeed, "Elongi" is one of the sweetest songs I have ever come across. And yet, I did not understand a single word of the lyrics - not even the title word. In my opinion, this is an excellent example to show that a good song in any of our indigenous languages can be enjoyed by people in other countries. They really need not know the language or even where it is spoken. It is only recently that I learnt that "Elongi" is sung in Duala, a language of the Cameroon.

Let me conclude this paper by reiterating what I said in a Television Programme Production Workshop held in Nairobi in April, 1999. Today's African is a person with a battered cultural identity. The battery started with the arrival in Africa of the new religions. Then came colonialism. The process is still continuing today, almost unabated, although in more subtle forms. Almost on a routine basis, there is innuendo to the effect that African culture is inferior compared to its Western counterpart. This innuendo lurks in books, television and radio programmes and films. This battery of the African psyche has created in the African a low self-esteem and lack of confidence. In some cases, it has led to a ridiculous aping of things Western.

It appears to me that in regard to low self-esteem and lack of confidence, we Kenyans are a pathetic lot. It may well be that utilising Kiswahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages in the performing arts will contribute towards reversing this pitiful state of affairs.

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