

# KISWAHILI LANGUAGE: A STRATEGY TO OVERCOME ELUSIVE PEACE IN KENYA

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## Abstract

*There are more than forty ethnic groups in Kenya. The largest of these is the Kikuyu, representing 22 percent of the population. Fourteen percent is Luhya, 13 percent is Luo, 12 percent is Kalenjin, 11 percent Kamba, 6 percent Kisii, and 6 percent Meru. Others, including the Somalis and the Turkana in the north and the Boran in the Great Rift Valley, comprise approximately 15 percent of the population. These ethnic categories are further broken down into subgroups. One percent of the population is non-African, mostly of Indian and European descent (Population Survey, July 2000).*

*The 2007 elections outcome may have triggered the ethnic and post-election violence, but the rate at which this degenerated into ethnic conflict showed how emotive the issue is. Today the country is trying to heal but the ethnic 'overtones' speak volumes. Many African countries have deep cleavages based on factors such as ethnicity and religion, (Assefa and Wachira, 1996.)*

*This paper purposes to examine the elusive peace and social stratification among the Kenyan people. It further explores the role and utility of Kiswahili language in national unity and conflict management.*

*The paper argues for the establishment of a language policy that would create a positive attitude toward a cohesive society, beginning with the Educational Institutions.*

*The paper argues that proper language utility can introduce, guide and catalyze the National healing process in Kenya.*

**Key words:** *language, conflict management, elusive peace, reconciliation.*

## Introduction

Hanson (2003) defines conflict as an interactive state manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or difference within or between social entities such as individuals, groups or organizations. The sources of conflict are usually rooted in incompatible goals, cognitions or emotions. According to D'Souza (2007) no organization is without conflict. Even if wise leaders solved all conflicts today, by mid-day tomorrow, new ones would come into being. Conflict has potential to turn violent if not controlled within the shortest time possible and like power or communication; conflict is not a tangible or objective entity. It is subject to the interpretation of the minds of those who are

party to it. However the outcomes of conflict, such as anger and fighting or creative planning and relationship building, are objective and real. Conflict itself is no evil, but rather a phenomenon that can have constructive or destructive effects depending upon its management.

Conflict occurs whenever perceived or real interests collide (Hanson, 2003). The collisions can result from a divergence in organizational goals, personal ambitions, group loyalties, departmental budget demands on scarce resources, ethnic expectations and demands, and so forth. This normally arises from positions taken by opposing parties or interest groups.

Some of the sources of conflict in many countries include, political differences over established interests of different groups for instance in constitutional making, poverty, where the poor consider themselves unfortunate and being exploited by the rich, land disputes for example as exhibited in Kenya since independence particularly Turbo, Burnt forest, Euosupukia and Likoni land wars, poor distribution of national resources, common border disputes, personality differences. While on the other hand the Impact of conflict includes, internal wars and loss of lives, fear, insecurity and lawlessness, lack of economic development, human injuries or physical harm, complete destruction of property in the affected areas, poverty among others.

There are more than forty ethnic groups in the country. The largest of these is the Kikuyu, representing 22 percent of the population. Fourteen percent is Luhya, 13 percent is Luo, 12 percent is Kalenjin, 11 percent Kamba, 6 percent Kisii, and 6 percent Meru. Others, including Somalis and Turkanas in the north and the Kalenjin in the Great Rift Valley together, comprise approximately 15 percent of the population. These ethnic categories are further broken down into subgroups. One percent of the population is non-African, mostly of Indian and European descent (Republic of Kenya, 2000).

## **The Elusive Peace in Kenya**

Peace has been understood to mean absence of violence (Assefa & Wachira 1996). It is a condition of tranquility in which there is no disagreement or dispute. In this condition conflicts are banished and people individually and collectively live in calm and serenity. Peace means the absence of overt physical harm to people and property that emanates from wars, riots, murders, and vandalism, among others. The concept of peace refer to the maintenance of law and order and the pursuit of stability and a relatively safe social and political order. The presence of a small amount of visible violence in society provides an indicator of successful peace. In Kenya the police force, the law courts and the prisons are usually the instruments used by the state to bring about peace and enforce law and order. However in the course of controlling overt violence it can perpetuate covert or structural violence. The structural violence is the social and personal violence that arise from unjust, repressive and oppressive national or international political and social structures (Galtung, 1969).

A system therefore that generates repression, abject poverty, malnutrition, and starvation among some members of the society while others enjoy opulence and unbridled power inflicts covert violence with the ability to destroy life. Peace also goes beyond a preoccupation with the absence of conflict. Assefa & Wachira (1996) observes that peace is a transformation of conflicting and destructive interactions into more co-operative and constructive relationships. Peace is therefore equated with conflict transformation and resolution. The society ought to establish structures where personal and social differences can be identified and worked out. The structures should also be all inclusive because it is only when the root causes of the differences are explored and resolved that peace can be achieved.

According to Mamdani, (2002) the principles and values which have to be accounted for in search of peace include:

- Conflicts cannot be resolved or peace made unless the root causes of the conflict are identified and dealt with. Peacemakers must therefore look beyond the surface and address the substantive and emotional issues.
- It is not possible to resolve conflicts and attain peace unless attention is given to the

justice and fairness of the process as well as the outcome of the settlement because peace without justice is a meaningless concept.

- People's deeper needs are not totally incompatible. With the help of third parties those conflicting can discover a commonality of interests and objectives that can lead to mutually acceptable solutions.
- Conflict resolution and peacemaking involves a restructuring of relationships.
- In order for peace to be achieved all persons must be disarmed and actively involved.

Ethnicity is a complex issue in Kenya, which passes itself as a single nation but is still trapped in the castle of tribes. There are varying degrees of diversity and pluralism as these are reflected in policies, educational provision, geographic location and historical development since society become plural, ethnically and in a variety of ways (Modgil et al, p.1992). The national issue has been the cause of internal and international instability in many African countries. The priority given to class or group interests over national interests has led to various internal and political distortions and to the unequal status of individual ethnic entities (Abiola, 1985).

In other instances, colonial powers favored ethnic groups more systematically and deliberately. These groups became more educated in comparison with their fellow countrymen and -women, a situation that helped build resentment and frustration among the excluded groups (Platteau, 2000). Even though ethnic groups were constructed by colonial administrations, the advantage or disadvantage of belonging to a particular ethnic group soon consolidated ethnic difference into material ethnic divides.

The 2007 elections outcome may have triggered the ethnic and post –election violence, but the rate at which this degenerated into ethnic conflict showed how emotive the issue is. Today the country is trying to heal but the ethnic ‘overtones’ speak volumes. Politicians have made it worse by refusing to abandon their regional leanings and ethnic –based parties. Many African countries have deep cleavages based on factors such as ethnicity and religion. According to Assefa and Wachira (1996,) such factors include; Social harmony which may be precarious and consensus minimal on many basic issues of governance such as the nature of the state, and economic systems and the mechanisms for the control of power and accountability. The multi-party competition which tends to exacerbate rifts rather than provide resolution of outstanding .social and political issues. It can aggravate tension, for in such circumstances winning power is very lucrative, while the price of losing power can be very severe. In particular when ethnicity is an important factor in the affiliation, losing an election might mean exclusion from power for an entire ethnic group, followed by discrimination and even repression. In ethnically or politically polarized situations, the loser may not survive until the next electoral contest .although people in multiparty systems tend to recognize the maxim ‘winning is not everything,’ in deeply divided societies. The outcome of elections can lead to anguish and fear on the side of the losers and triumphant and reprisal on the side of the victors. Moreover, the results tend to be suspected and challenged by the loser, no matter how proper the election procedures may have been. In such circumstances instead of resolving contentious social issues, elections may create a new cycle of uncertainty, fear, resentment, tension, and even open hostility.

The argument by Horowitz's (1985) that in multi-ethnic, multicultural society's ethnic conflict should be considered to be the norm rather than the exception is beginning to look increasingly accurate. Brown (1989), further argues that the policies pursued in many countries have actually exuberated ethnic conflicts to an extent that ethnic and cultural diversity within and between nations can no longer be ignored in issues related to economic and political development. However, a solution to the ethnic issues cannot be expected as long as the political revolution is not also extended to the national question which need not necessarily lead to the formation of new states, even though proceeding from greater ethnic equality (Abiola, 1985).

Kenya inherited an education system that was set up to offer unequal treatment based on racial and/or ethnic criteria. The greatest national resources went to the so-called ‘white schools’, then the national schools, followed by provincial schools and, at the bottom of the table, district

schools. This was the result of biased pupil selection, teacher posting, bursary allocation and general provision of facilities. It has been a system that encouraged social stratification among students.

The ethno-regional disparities created by the colonial and the early post-colonial periods are still significant in Kenya, and students in Provinces with little or no political power in Kenya have been disadvantaged at the expense of those where the ruling elite came from. The crisis in the schools continues to worsen even as the government spelt out tough measures to contain the situation. It was apparent that the riots have taken a political dimension after the ministry of education reported that there was a clamor to replace the schools management with people from the regions where the schools are located. It is through ethnic and regional disparities in education, often compounded by, other socio-economic disparities. Some provinces, like the North Eastern and Coast Provinces, have fewer secondary schools, which are widely scattered and thus more difficult to access, and attendance is further restricted due to lack of transport facilities. It is also difficult for children to go to school if their parents cannot afford to pay their school fees, which are particularly high for secondary schooling. Education, then, acts to perpetuate economic disparities rather than bridging them, as parents in less endowed provinces, like the North Eastern and Coast Provinces, have a higher incidence of poverty than their counterparts, for example in the Rift Valley Province (Kimalu, et al, 2002).

The effects of the ethnic violence were adverse, these included:-Altering Kenya's political and economic landscape. The violence created fear among the non-Kalenjin communities in the rift valley owing to the situation of lawlessness and loss of lives and property. It led to displacement of many people from their farms while others were forced to dispose off their farms at low cost hence the Kalenjin capitalized on the state of insecurity for their own political and economic advantage. The violence also engendered a growing atmosphere of hatred and suspicion among communities that hitherto lived peacefully together and many lives were shattered as people were reduced to destitute. Ayot (1995) adds that the displaced persons were compelled to live under harsh and squalid conditions in unhygienic camps, churches, and trading centres without proper sanitation and shelter. Children were psychologically traumatized after witnessing the killing of their relatives, the burning of houses and the wanton destruction of property and Education for most of the children was disrupted or terminated Tourism which was a major foreign exchange earner was affected forcing the government to intervene by sending the military.

It is evident that there are deep seated antagonism emanating from the skewed distribution of resources and the marginalization of some groups from the political process. They are also a manifestation of bad governance where incumbent political regimes have failed to govern justly and in the interest of common good. Although the risks of post-election violence had been evident, no one, Kenyan or international, anticipated the scale or speed at which it would erupt. In essence, the handling of the election results and the manner in which it was done - combined with other structural and proximate causes - created a 'perfect storm'.

Unlike the relatively peaceful 2002 election, in 2007 there was a direct polarization of the main contenders and their support from their ethnic groups'. The excessive constitutional powers enjoyed by the president raised the stakes for all sides in a closely fought election. At the same time popular distrust and a lack of independence – notably of the Electoral Commission and judiciary - rendered these crucial public institutions unable to mediate and respond effectively to the electoral dispute.

The ethnic and post election violence was a sign that many things needed to be addressed for Kenyans to coexist. Promises are made during the campaigns that corruption will be a thing of the past but it still remains. Patronage politics, the political manipulation of ethnicity and sharp horizontal inequalities have reinforced an undercurrent of ethnic tension in Kenya. Less obvious prior to 2008, these tensions were brought to the surface by the post-election violence, ethnicity has now become the dominant identity in Kenya, even amongst the middle class, leading to high levels of fear and mistrust between communities.

Unlike the clashes of 1990s this time round leaders among the displaced are becoming visible, articulate and recognizable. While the youths perpetrated violence, they were largely engaged at the tail end of the chain. The report adds that other forces were involved in planning and financing violence and only used the youths to execute harm.

The government has set aside KShs.300 million to reconstruct schools destroyed in the post

election violence. The education minister announced that forty institutions were flattened during the skirmishes. Some of the schools were destroyed at the height of the poll violence with learning delayed in some of the institutions, some of which served as those who were displaced. According to the minister the government set aside the money so that learners in the affected institutions could resume studies. All these need to be communicated clearly for all to understand as part of the reconciliation process.

## Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution

Assefa & Wachira (1996) define reconciliation as the act by which people who have been apart begin to march together. It means restoration of broken relationship resulting from conflicts. Reconciliation also refers to a situation where one comes to terms with self as a result of internal conflict with self. A peace making process therefore enables the parties to reflect on the spiritual implications of the behavior especially their hatred, contempt, self-centeredness, and on their destructive actions in general.

Conflict resolution involves the process of reconciliation, building trust, calling round table talks, appointment of independent arbitrator, negotiations and compromise. In an institution stress can occur between groups and within the individuals. Lack of harmony in place of work can be harmful and lead to wastage. Teacher stress is the unpleasant experience, negative emotions, and distress that exists when the problems confronting teachers threaten their well-being, and surpass their ability to resolve them (Litt and Turk, 1985)

The Bible on the other hand makes reconciliation with neighbors a prerequisite for prayer to God. Matthew 5: 23-25 (RSV) contains a clear prescription: 'so if you are offering your gift at the altar [as a gesture of seeking reconciliation with God], and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar and Go, first be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift'. This implies therefore that God does not require gifts from those who are not reconciled with their brothers. D'Souza (2007) adds that leaders need to learn the skills involved in managing and resolving conflict constructively. Unresolved conflicts have caused individuals to flounder and organizations to fail.

The choice of political system is not the decisive factor of political stability. What is important is the political practice that exist and whether they have been able to evolve mechanisms of political processes which take into consideration local traditions (Abiola, 1985). This can be possible when leaders who are objective emerge.

There is need for charting out the way forward in establishing institutions that will oversee the grievances. There is need for political re-socialization which has to synthesize past political behavior and the negative ramifications it has created as a way of purging the past political misdeeds and charting out a new course for redeemed political behavior in the forward march in political development (Okoth and Ogot, 2000).

Equality of all groups should be ensured with more emphasis laid on civil liberties including equality before the law among others. Okoth and Ogot (2000) add that political equality to be supplemented by economic and social equality while social integration process must aim at narrowing the gap between the poor and the rich.

Abiola (1985) points out that, lasting security and stability of any nation implies its active and equal participation in the life of its immediate and wider international setting, a situation in which it can gradually evolve stability, territorial integrity and social growth, mobilization of the broad masses of the population in the attainment of peace. This cannot be achieved to the exclusion of education.

## Theory and Concept of Language in Conflict Management

A language is focal to any form of development or changes in the society since communication in any society is mandatory and significant to all who are involved. Language can be in

varied forms (written, spoken, and /or sign) and we cannot function without it. Language enables the individuals to understand themselves and appreciate the role they play in the development of humanity. Language determines what we think of ourselves and our place in the society. Language creates a major bond that links people together and binds them to their beliefs and culture. Language is however dynamic and constantly changes depending on certain factors like interaction with the outer world, the status of the user, the function, some of the factors that bring change are unconscious and/or unplanned ones.

To be in use, deliberate intervention in language matters such as enactment of laws, employment of sanctions and rewards may affect the spread of the language and its use.

Language is not just a tool for development but a component of development .With no common language people remain largely strangers to one another .They remain isolated to one another ,no matter how close they may be physically. Further more, identity of language means a similarity of many other basic values and norms which are vital in conflict management

Language is Significant as a means of communicating Peace and enhancing coerciveness through public awareness in Kenya. Education is about exploration and therefore about relationships. Exploring and establishing contact with people can be equally a power game or an experience of delight which, in this case, is best described as communion (Reeves, 1988) .Literacy must be considered a basic right precisely because it is a virtual prerequisite to political participation in social life. The illiterate population in a country is normally concentrated among groups and in demographic areas which have been systematically deprived of political resources and access to social power.

Historically, literacy has been a prime force in the development of those forms of popular consciousness, social solidarity and political awareness, upon which the effective exercise of political influence depends. Education therefore socializes the individual either into a moral and responsible or an irresponsible citizen and in the process imparts values into the individual that either build or destroy. People can be used and people can be enjoyed but here, it also becomes clear that use and delight can become deadly enemies of each other, though not necessarily so. The nature of political life facing individuals and groups becomes a critical ingredient in determining whether literacy programmes will be implemented or if implemented will be of long-term success. The imbalance is harmful to individuals, to industry and to society. Individual satisfaction stems from doing a job well through exercise of personal ability as the acquisition of this capability is inhibited by the present system of education which stresses the importance of analysis, criticism and the acquisition of knowledge and generally neglects the formulation and solutions of problems ,doing ,making ,and organizing constructive and creative activity of all sorts (Reeves,1988 ).

Issues of politics and power are always central to the learning process. The political aspects of educational training are more likely to be recognized in a progressive society which is so organized as to be threatened by the full development in its citizens of the personal capacities to control their collective destinies and which does not fear the power and knowledge of a literate citizenry. Reeves (1988 ) adds that politicians and economists say that to keep up in the technological race we must reap a proper return from investment in education in terms of people equipped to use their skills and knowledge in practical ways.

Language acts as a means of contact for both the literate and the illiterate. It enables the two to co-exist as members of the society. It enables individuals to share information and exchange ideas, the special needs education can best be welcomed by the society members only after they have been made to understand its significance. Man by nature is a social being and since the disabled form part of the society it is imperative that the socialization process has to be extended to them, this cannot be done without language.

Language is a means of expressing feelings, perceptions, attitudes and ones thoughts, since disability is not inability it is possible to have valuable ideas from both the able and the disabled members of the society. People can be convinced and persuaded about an idea or methods of doing things using a language- the inclusive education policy included.

Language facilitates the conceptualization of social reality or worldview by members of a community or social system. It enhances national integration and lessens ethnic diversity among a

people. When the society understands the significance of the inclusive education policy, it would help in changing the attitude of the pupils, the parents, the Administrators and the policy makers hence its success would ensure both economic, social and political development of the nation. It is important that those with whom an individual interacts, particularly for young children have the command of a language in order to develop self esteem based on factual feedback received.

Language use will determine the kind of attitude that will develop especially in the teaching /learning situation, It will also determine the prejudices based on the social groupings.

Development is change in a desirable direction Implicit in this definition is the multifaceted nature of development that requires eclectic and multidisciplinary approaches and strategies. Within this broad definition, language is an important player.

### **Why Kiswahili Language in Particular?**

The language chosen can amount to a denial of the right to participate in societal affairs. This can happen when the language chosen is not spoken by some sections of the society. In the Kenyan context, the choice of Kiswahili as the language of social mobilization allows the participation of a large number of Kenyans in our societal affairs. English is known as a language of the elite and would thus leave out a large section of the society. Kiswahili is a language that meets the communication needs of a society hence an essential tool for propagating peace in Kenya.

Kiswahili as a national language (lingua franca) solidifies the people's national cohesion since strong bonds are developed among the people it has so far managed to limit ethnicity among the people of Kenya and can also be used as a tool for development. It is intelligible to speakers of many other indigenous languages due to the common Bantu origin. One of the goals of education is national unity. Kenya has forty languages belonging to different ethnic groups whose interests do not tally hence fragmented loyalty. Kiswahili can assist greatly in the achievement of National unity for both special needs children and the able children.

As a non ethnic language, Kiswahili gives a large speech community to both Kenyans and the East African region. Kiswahili enables the people to communicate both technical and cultural information without distortion. Taking the interests of the largest number of Kenyans into consideration and also considering the need to transmit our cultural values, Kiswahili becomes the logical choice as a language for communicating the needs of the children and participation in nation building. Inclusive education require the participation of the entire community, Kiswahili will ensure increased production amongst the members of the society, once they have understood the merits and demerits if this policy. Kiswahili bridges the gap between the holders of knowledge and production skills and those who need the knowledge and skills for production of goods and services.

Kiswahili can help to free man from the nature servitude, from economic backwardness and oppressive technological institutions, from unjust class structures and from political exploiters, from cultural and psychic alienation -in short from all life's inhuman agencies. Kiswahili will facilitate the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the reorientation of technology, development and institutional changes are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.

### **Conclusions**

There are no better tools in life than knowledge and skills, and there is no worse enemy than ignorance. Let us resolve to work harder and develop programme that shall ensure peace and conflict management. We should prepare the students adequately to be patriotic at all times. Therefore the time to adopt the philosophy of peace love and unity in our society and the entire education system is now. The emphasis of the education policy is on equality, access, and opportunity to education. Without a common language people remain largely strangers to one another. Kiswahili language can propel Kenyans toward peace and conflict management into a reality.

## Recommendations

The use of the Kiswahili language in enhancing peace and creating a cohesive society in Kenya will involve: - training and in-service of the teachers in Kiswahili language in order to facilitate the communication of new ideas and innovations to the communities for improved and accelerated dissemination of ideas these include the adult educators. Carrying out research to find out the attitude of the Kenyans toward Kiswahili as a language of instruction in Kenyan social institutions such as schools, hospitals churches among others. There will be need to translate the existing government policies and develop new terminology in Kiswahili for use in the society and schools to improve communication of new ideas and innovations and to help in the adaptations of new strategies of peace and conflict management. Attempts should be made to seek gender balance in the use of Kiswahili language as research has shown that women are bound to lag behind men in nearly all spheres of life including the use of Kiswahili as a tool of communication and development. Finally this paper recommends a strategic government involvement and commitment in the establishment of a language policy for communication and development at school and after school in all spheres of life of Kenyans.

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