**How can nation-building progress positively through language policy?**

Nation-building is a process with the aim of increasing social cohesion between citizens of a particular geographic area. It seeks to create a common set of values and preferences that allows for effective communication and acts as the adhesive holding the nation’s citizens together. In a sense nation-building holds a goal of homogenization of the newly formed or enduring polity. This can be done through authoritarian means such as restricting dissidence against the government or oppression of certain social or ethnic groups. However, homogeneity through nation-building can also be achieved through more positive means such as but not limited to widespread education and common curriculum; access to public life and decision making; establishing and teaching a common language. This paper will explore the ways that language policy and planning specifically have the capacity to positively effect nation-building. The memo will consider the example of post-independence Tanzania and the country’s policy to adapt Swahili as the lingua franca.

Tanzania, formerly called Tanganyika, achieved independence from the British on December 9th, 1961. The British colonial administration exercised indirect rule, giving power to chiefs from the largest ethnic groups such as Sukuma and Chagga and leaving aside the smaller ones[[1]](#footnote-1). In the light of these tribal and ethnic divisions created by the British rule, the leaders of the independence movements employed associations such as the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU)[[2]](#footnote-2), with the aim of creating unity and a common goal in the establishment of a newly independent state.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The state policy came to be known as ujamaa socialism. Ujamaa called upon citizens to participate in communal activities in their villages; to get rid of ethnic divisions created during the British colonial period; to foster a sense of national unity; and to establish a government independent of religious affiliation and persecution.[[4]](#footnote-4) The implementation of the policies came through, for example, establishing ujamaa villages to promote the provision of common resources and through emphasizing the importance of community projects in creating social cohesion. The man who championed the cause was the first president of the country, Julius Kambarage Nyerere. He used the power and resources of the state to implement a top-down approach in shaping national Tanzanian identity rather than allowing it to occur naturally through the actions and interactions of people.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This is where the efforts of nation-building meet language policy and planning or LPP. According to Cooper, language planners focus their efforts on three domains: corpus, status and acquisition promotion or planning. Corpus planning deals with functions such as reforming spelling, adopting new language code and coining new terms, effectively shaping forms of spoken and written language. Status planning refers to process of allocating language use to specific functions such as medium of instruction and or national language. Finally, acquisition promotion refers to the process of disseminating the language with the aim of increasing the number of users. The acquisition process also explains the means through which a language, such as a lingua franca like Kiswahili, spreads from person to person to become the dominant language of a state or region.[[6]](#footnote-6)

First, let us consider the status promotion of Kiswahili in the context of nation-building in Tanzania. Like most of the African states, the newly established state of Tanzania had a problem with the abundance of languages spoken by the ethnic people. There were over 120 indigenous languages spoken mostly by the rural populations.[[7]](#footnote-7) There was German and English - remnants of the colonial past. Arabic was spoken by traders and Arabs of Zanzibar. A decision had to be made to choose the common language that would not upset the different ethnic groups by showing preferences, as had been done during the British colonial era. English and German were out of the question because they were the languages of the former oppressors, which made it politically unpalatable, compounded by the fact that there weren’t many people speaking the languages.

The choice of Swahili as the national language became natural, as a consensus emerged amongst academics that Swahili was actually a Bantu language, like the majority of Tanzanian ethnic languages, rather than an Arabic language. The misconception came from the fact that 40% of words in Swahili have their origin in Arabic and the language was spread through Arab merchants throughout East Africa.[[8]](#footnote-8) The rediscovery of the Swahili language as Bantu both in origin and grammar allowed for the language to become a source of common identity for all Tanzanian ethnic groups.

The status and acquisition promotion of Swahili became central components of the nation building efforts in Tanzania. One of the main policies encapsulating both was Nyerere’s direction of resources towards providing free universal primary education, where the subjects were taught solely in Swahili. The teaching of Swahili continued in secondary school although most of the subjects were taught in English. The students would take back their new learned knowledge of Swahili and spread it in their respective villages, which allowed for an effective means of dissemination of the language. This was compounded by the coinciding policy of ujamaa villages after the Arusha declaration of 1967.[[9]](#footnote-9) People were relocated into villages, where education became accessible and as people of more than one ethnic group inhabited the village, Swahili became a language considered essential for day-to-day living.[[10]](#footnote-10) The villages became centers of adult literacy and mass education through their collectivizing nature.[[11]](#footnote-11) Consequently, promoting the status of Swahili into the national language and supporting it with policies such as the ujamaa villages made it essential that people learned the language and in effect created a common language community. The acquisition function is presented by the wide-scale implementation of Swahili in schools in order to achieve a quick and large dissemination of the new national language.

Although the Swahili used in Tanzania has its origin and roots in the Bantu languages, it has taken on a completely new form of expression through corpus planning. As mentioned before, Swahili was considered an expression of Islamic culture and a lingua franca. However, these functions have seen subordinated in the aim of not only for the creation of a new African culture, but also as the medium of achieving the new culture.[[12]](#footnote-12) Corpus planning describes the deliberate changes made to the written and spoken language in order to adapt it to a specific cause. The Swahili used in Tanzania resembles little of the original. Lyndon Harries (1969) writes:

“The direction in which Swahili is moving is towards an approximation of English

expression and idiom and thought. The substance of most of what is written today

in modern Swahili bears no relation whatsoever to traditional Swahili culture, nor to

any tribal culture as we have known those cultures in the past. Swahili literature must

be excluded from this revolution in Swahili usage because its central characteristic

is its rigid conservatism.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Swahili language was changing due to deliberate efforts of formulating a new national identity through a common lingua franca, but equally due to a lack of sophistication of Swahili in expression of complex and societally new ideas to East Africa. Swahili had to catch up to the developments natural to recurring phenomena in the nation-building process – the language lacked the vocabulary to express certain ideas and thus the language had to develop, bringing in a host of anglicisms.[[14]](#footnote-14) This is an advantage to a newly independent nation with a nation-building strategy of a unifying national language. As the country developed new political, social and cultural terms can be created to shape the thought and expression of the people speaking or writing the language. The corpus promotion has the deliberate effect of homogenizing the population through the language policy and planning, creating a more unified national identity rooted in the adapted Swahili language.

However, one has to be aware of the effects that the adaptation of one language over other has on the continuation of indigenous or heritage languages. Although the adaptation of Swahili as the national language of Tanzania allowed for a development of a united national identity through language policy and planning, the fact that Swahili came to be a language needed to be able to adapt to the life under ujamaa socialism and Nyerere, a whole host of cultural heritage could be lost over generation as one language changes from being an A language into a b language and will eventually die out. This can be viewed as decadence or cultural degradation, but it doesn’t have to directly conflict with success of nation-building. It might be a calculated loss in order to achieve a greater cause, such as national unity. This is also one of the reasons why English was not chosen as a national language after independence. Although the technical capacities of English far surpassed those of Swahili, it wouldn’t have been able to create such a sense of a unified people as Swahili did. English subjects were still taught in secondary school, however, there was no active promotion of English as the main tongue.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In conclusion, the nation-building efforts of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania progressed positively through the use of deliberate language policy. Status promotion raised the Swahili language into prominence and to be used as an official language. Corpus promotion adapted the language to the technical context when necessary by formulating new words in Swahili and or by borrowing from foreign languages. The acquisition function was fulfilled by making Swahili the main language taught in primary school and by collectivizing villages where the language could easily spread between different ethnic groups.

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1. Leander Schneider, “Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Authoritarianism in Tanzania: Connects and Disconnects,” *African Studies Review* 49, no. 1 (2006): 93–118. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Formerly called the Tanganyika African Association (TAA) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Katariina Holma and Tiina Kontinen, eds., *Practices of Citizenship in East Africa: Perspectives from Philosophical Pragmatism*, Routledge Explorations in Development Studies (London ; New York: Routledge, 2020). P. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Holma and Kontinen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sabastiano Rwengabo, “Nation Building in Africa: Lessons from Tanzania for South Sudan,” 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert L Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4638193. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lyndon Harries, “Language Policy in Tanzania,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39, no. 3 (1969): 275–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/1157997. P.275 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kessler, I.R., “What Went Right in Tanzania: How Nation Building and Political Culture Have Produced Forty Four Years of Peace” (Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Services of Georgetown University, US., 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Holma and Kontinen, *Practices of Citizenship in East Africa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kessler, I.R., “What Went Right in Tanzania: How Nation Building and Political Culture Have Produced Forty Four Years of Peace.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rwengabo, “NATION BUILDING IN AFRICA.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Harries, “Language Policy in Tanzania.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Harries. P.276 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Harries. P.277 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Harries. P.275 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)