

Second Draft:
February 2010

**SHOULD AFRICAN POLITICAL PARTIES BEAR
AFRICAN NAMES? SHOULD AFRICAN
CONSTITUTIONS BE TRANSLATED INTO AFRICAN
LANGUAGES?**

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The Africanization of the political process on the eastern seaboard of Africa has often been closely inter-connected with the Swahilization of politics. Languages like Luganda looked to Kiswahili for words like taifa (modern nationhood). Other Bantu languages borrowed from Kiswahili words like serikali (government), waziri (minister) and dini (religion).

The political vocabulary of Kenya and Tanzania relied heavily on Kiswahili for such basic words as siasa (politics), raisi (president), askari (policeman or soldier), jamuhuri (republic), chama (party), and bunge (parliament). The Swahili language had been developing into the main linguistic currency for national business in large parts of East Africa.

No language has shaped the politics of East Africa in more diverse ways than Kiswahili. During the colonial period it was often the language of nationalist mobilization against colonial rule in Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. It was also the language of trade unionism in Uganda as well as elsewhere in East Africa. Throughout the region it was also often the language of command in the King's African Rifles (in the postcolonial armies in East Africa). It was the medium of communication not only between ethnic groups but also between the elite and the masses, between the rulers and the ruled.

In education, Kiswahili in Kenya and Tanzania is a potential means of intellectual decolonization – an instrument for reducing mental dependency on Western concepts and culture.

In the politics of postcolonial Africa one resolution to be taken for these opening years of the 21st century is not only to translate the Constitution of

each Country carefully and idiomatically but to give the indigenous language text of each Constitution equal standing with the French or English text before the 20th year of this 21st century.

At the moment the people of each African country are subject to the provisions of a Constitution written in an alien language without an adequate rendering in an African language. Politicians are often asking for a new Constitution in the European language. How about asking for an indigenous Constitutional language – the Supreme Law in an African language?

What are the new frontiers for Re-Africanization? In former British East Africa, Uganda was the first country to have a political party with an African name – Kabaka Yekka (the King Alone). Between its formation in 1960 and its banning in 1966, Kabaka Yekka was the passionate voice of the Baganda people. Milton Obote later mishandled the Baganda and plunged the country into years of political tensions.

Kabaka Yekka had an African name but it was not a national party. Unlike Kenya and Tanzania, Uganda did not have an African national language acceptable to all ethnic groups.

But there is no reason why Swahili names should not be used for political parties in Kenya. The stage has been set by Tanzania with Chama cha Mapinduzi. At independence the leading party's name was in English (Tanganyika African National Union). But after union with Zanzibar it adopted a Swahili name (Chama cha Mapinduzi), Party of the Revolution.

Safina was indeed the first major political party in Kenya to adopt a Swahili name. This was in 1995. People exaggerated the religious significance of the name Safina – the association with Noah’s ark. The word “safina” did not need to have religious meaning at all. It could simple mean “sailing vessel”.

But even more significant than the religious issue was the linguistic implication of the name. Yes, indeed, a major Kenyan political party – even if it was yet unregistered – hand chosen a Swahili name for itself. This was in contrast to Kanu – the acronym for the English name, **K**enya **A**frican **N**ational **U**nion.

Certainly the name safina was also in contrast to the name of the Democratic Party, which was officially in the English language for twenty years in Kenya. Safina was also linguistically in contrast to the **F**ront for the **R**estoration of **D**emocracy – the two FORD parties – both of which were acronyms of names formulated in the English language. Kenya was slower than either Tanzania or Buganda in giving an indigenous name to a registered political party.

It took a split in the FORD ranks to give Kiswahili a subsidiary role as a qualifier – one FORD became “FORD Asili”, “Asili” and the other FORD became “FORD Kenya”. The qualifiers were African (“Asili” and “Kenya”) but the main names were an acronym of a name in the English language.

As we indicated earlier, mainland Tanzania’s ruling party was for a long time the Tanganyika African National Union. It took a union with the Afro-

Shirazi Party to Swahilize the nomenclature of party politics in Tanzania. The Swahili name Chama cha Mapinduzi [CCM] was born. More recently in Tanzania leading opposition parties have experimented with a name like mageuzi (change).

After the 1992 election in Kenya, KANU had a historic opportunity to change its name quite simply to CHAMA CHA TAIFA (Party of the Nation). The shortened version should be “Chama-Taifa” instead of “Kanu”.

The word “democrasi” is now part of the Swahili language and other indigenous tongues. (The British also borrowed democracy from the Greeks). The Democratic Party’s official name in Kenya should have become CHAMA CHA DEMOKRASI [CCD instead of DP]. FORD-Asili should simply have become CHAMA CHA ASILI (the party of origins – shortened to “Chama-Asili”) and FORD-Kenya should have become “CHAMA CHA KENYA” (“The Kenya Party” – shortened to CCK).

The Swahilization of Kenya politics has come a long way already. But there is still an additional distance yet to be covered. The Swahilization of the names of political parties to bring them closer to wananchi could be one important next move.

We also need official Swahili Civil Service titles for Provincial Commissioners, District Commissioners and District Officers. We also need official titles for our Permanent Secretaries.

There is no reason why the official name of State House should not now become NYUMBA YA RAISI (The Presidential House). And Parliament should

be popularly known as BUNGE, with a large sign at the entrance calling it precisely that for all visitors and tourists to familiarize themselves with.

As for our armed forces, should we not start thinking about Swahili titles for our Brigadier-General Lieutenants and Colonels? What about Swahili titles for our Captains at sea and in the air?

Our main political and social institutions need to be Gandanized, Africanized or Swahilized in name as well as in content.

Above all, every African constitution needs to be carefully translated into an African language. And the indigenous text needs to be given equal legal standing with European versions long before the middle of the 21st century.