



**SWAHILI, PAN-AFRICANISM AND THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM:  
A LANGUAGE OF LIBERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**P**ART 1. THE RAPID RISE OF THE SWAHILI language to global reach and significance reflected in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designating July 7, 2022, as World Kiswahili Language Day brings with it a profound sense of elation and satisfaction of work well done to all those in Africa, the U.S. and around the world who worked hard to achieve this rightful recognition of it. Certainly, Swahili has attained the global presence and importance that requires international recognition and engagement for its contribution in communications, education, culture, economics, politics and diplomacy. It is the most widely spoken language in Africa, spoken in 12 countries (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, South Sudan, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Comoros) and is being introduced in the educational systems of various other African countries, i.e., South Africa, Botswana and Namibia.

Moreover, it is also spoken in Yemen and Oman and is considered one of the 10 most widely spoken languages in the world with over 200 million speakers. And my organization, the African American Cultural Center (Us) and I are greatly honored, proud and pleased to be a significant part of the world-encompassing efforts that achieved this historic recognition and moment having studied, taught, advocated and spread Swahili across the U.S. and advocated it at national and international conferences and various other venues, formally and informally since the 1960s. And we also

inspired numerous African American scholars and activists to embrace, learn, teach and share it in various ways. Thus, it became the most widely used continental African language in the U.S. in speaking, naming and the practice and promotion of projects and programs organized around *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba*.

My interest in and embrace of Swahili begins in the context, consciousness and practice of liberation. In Tanzania, Mwalimu President Julius Nyerere had established Swahili as a unifying national language. And he gave asylum and support to freedom fighters from other African countries and they learned Swahili and Swahili in the process became a language of liberation. Likewise, it was for us in the U.S., especially in the Kawaida Movement among organizations such as the organization Us, Uhuru Sasa, The East, The Institute of Positive Education, Ahidiana and others. And we spoke it and taught it in our homes, organizations and independent schools and used it in formulating Kawaida concepts of culture, community, liberation and struggle.

Coming into consciousness as an African person and searching for cultural grounding in how best to understand and assert myself in liberating, liberated and life-enhancing ways, I turned to the study of Africa. I was a student at Los Angeles City College when I began to immerse myself in the independent study of Africa, its peoples, history and cultures, and its leaders and liberation movements and social thought. Here the Swahili word used by Mwalimu Nyerere to urge deep

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engagement, *jitumbukiza*, is most appropriate. For it speaks to a self-conscious and committed throwing oneself deeply into thought and practice to achieve an objective.

As a student and activist intellectual deeply involved in the Black Freedom Movement, as an African and as part of coming into African consciousness, I reasoned I should know a continental African language. It was for me a means of recapturing a lost heritage, not simply the language, but a distinctly African way of knowing, thinking, relating and being in the world which was embedded in the language and reflected in the views, values and practices that the language yielded. For me that was a communitarian way to understand and assert ourselves in the world, a relational way that taught interrelatedness, mutual respect, reciprocity and shared good in our lives and the world.

Here, I chose Kiswahili and immediately I was questioned about this choice instead of other African languages. My choice of Swahili rather than another African language as our major heritage language was first of all because I saw it as pan-African, the most widely spoken African language spoken in several African countries. And I reasoned we, African Americans, are a pan-African people, a new nation or national community derived from and composed of numerous ethnicities, peoples and nations of Africa. Secondly, as a pan-African language, Swahili is not tied to one ethnic group, as other African languages and thus did not involve for me choosing one ethnic language over another, but of choosing the most far-reaching and inclusive African language, again with a pan-African character and meaning for us.

Moreover, choosing Swahili was for me, for us, an act of freedom, of self-determination, a practice of resistance. It was part of our choosing to be African in spite of the dominant society's schizophrenic practice of on one hand calling us African to demean us and then denying we were African when we defiantly claimed or reclaimed our identity as an African people. It is no accident, then, but because of a decisive and defining historical moment that our turn toward Africa and Swahili began in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement, the African Independence Movements, and similar liberation movements all around the world. As Haji Malcolm taught, we were "living in an era of revolution and the revolt of the (African American) is part of the rebellion against the oppression and colonialism which has characterized this era." And Swahili became a fundamental ground of building, pursuing and interpreting that resistance to various forms of oppression, i.e., racism, colonialism and imperialism.

At LACC, I had studied Arabic and continued my study of French but there were no Swahili classes. So, I studied independently until I transferred to UCLA where I took classes and intensified my study, benefitting greatly from exchanges with Swahili speaking students, especially from Tanzania and Kenya. Having grounded myself in the language, I began to teach it, not only as a skill, but also as a cultural experience, an African way of understanding and engaging others in the world. This included teaching culture, proverbial wisdom, the Abunuwas narratives, and related cultural and philosophical concepts from throughout the world African community.

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Having chosen Swahili as the heritage language of choice, I taught it in community venues and on TV as early as 1963 and 1964 respectively and privileged it in my varied lectures on history, community, culture and struggle. Also, in 1964, I introduced and taught classes in Swahili at Fremont Adult School in Los Angeles. The class was scheduled for two nights a week, but it overflowed with 100 students and had to be rescheduled for two classes and four nights. The principal reported that a third of the students were college students, a third college graduates, and the other third everyday people interested in learning an African language to recapture a sense of heritage. Some were interested in visiting East Africa, others in preparing for foreign service like the Peace Corp and others again were interested in learning the language as a way to relate meaningful to their African heritage and learn the worldview and val-

ues embedded in and expressed by the language.

ALWAYS, I STRESSED THE COMMUNITARIAN character of the language and culture. Thus, I would contrast saying in English, "I'll see you later" to saying "*Tutaonana*," which means "we will see each other (later)" in Swahili emphasizing the collective and reciprocal character of the Swahili statement. Or I would create a discussion around why we would use "*kwetu*," our place, home stead of "*kwangu*," my place, even if you live alone, again stressing the relational character. And again, this stressed the relational character of this African language and culture and the foundational concept of the person as a person-in-community, rich in relations and corresponding responsibilities of bringing and sustaining good in the world. ▲

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