

Evolution of identity along the swahili coast

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In every community, there is always a basis of identifying and distinguishing one community from the other. The basic identity or distinctiveness of a community from the other is the language it uses in speaking and writing.

Another identity is the culture, physical appearance, and the behavior of the people in a particular community. There are factors that affect and influence the development of such identities. Culture for example changes over time, the roles of women as well as the way of living, occupation and religion changes as a community develops.

The focus of this paper is the evolution of the Swahili language used in the Swahili communities which is also called as Swahili. The paper discusses the origin and development of the language to prove that Swahili did not originate from the Arabic language but from the local African language and has evolved and underwent changes due to the different significant factors.

Influencing Factors

The Swahili communities include the Swahili speaking countries including Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and other countries located near the eastern coast of Africa near the Indian Ocean. These countries are also near the Arab countries like Oman, Yemen, Iran (Persia), and Kuwait.

Approximately 20, 000 years ago, according to Nurse & Spear (32), people living in the eastern and southern part of the Africa who lived by hunting spoke a language called Khoisan.

Then some people from Ethiopia, whose language was definitely different from Khoisan since they were from different place, drove away the Khoisan-speaking community. In the year 250, came the Bantu-speaking people who

were as civilized as the people from Ethiopia. By 500 A. D., small Swahili communities emerged in east Africa.

That started the absorption and borrowing of different words from these languages and developed the Swahili languages.

Between the years 800 to 1100 (9th to 12th century), the people of this part of Africa depended much of their livelihood in the sea. They also created products such as pottery, cloth and iron products, ivory, gold, timber, and shells, dyes and perfumes to be traded with trading partners such as Romans, Chinese, Persian and Arabs.

The last two traders composed largely the traders that went to Africa during that time. In order for the trade to be successful, the traders from the Arab countries must develop a way to communicate with the Africans. Therefore, there was already a language existing in the Swahili countries even before trading began.

However, the African has learned to borrow some of the Arabic words as they interact with them.

According to Nurse & Spear (13) borrowing usually happens when speakers of different languages interact closely or converged with one another and the intensity of convergence significantly influence the borrowing of words.

Close interactions or convergence happens when two communities with different language come in contact like during trade, intermarriage and bilingualism, promoting similarities between the two languages (Nurse & Spear, 14).

The last two, intermarriage and bilingualism were also the result of trading like the case of the Swahili countries. By the 13th century, Arab and Persian began settling in the Muqdisho in Somalia and other parts of east Africa and settlements would mean having its married some of the women in the place. They even created buildings that were obviously based on the Arab civilization and culture.

In 1505 until the late 17th century, Portuguese conquered the countries along the coast in order to monopolize the trade. Even being under the Portuguese for about two centuries, there is no significant findings on the influence of the Portuguese in the Swahili language.

By the late 17th century, Oman, an Arab country, won the dominance over the Swahili countries, continuing the linguistic influence of the Arab in that particular region of Africa because Arab countries did not only trade with the Swahili communities but also ruled over these particular communities.

Conclusion

Due to the many influences of the local African language used in the Swahili communities before the Swahili language achieved its identity and become a distinct language, it has gone a lot of changes first. That is, the vocabulary may not change but the sounds and spelling changed.

This is because as African borrowed words from the Arab, they borrowed words that they understand the meaning but did not know how to pronounce and write such words correctly. That is, “ when a language absorbs loan words, they become eligible for any sound changes that occur after their absorption”, (Nurse & Spear, 14).

However, it does not necessarily mean that when a language absorbs loan words, the language itself was originated from the language where the borrowed words are from. This is noticeable in what we called rural or regional dialects.

Today, there is actually northern and southern Swahili which reflect that the Arab influence was regional and was more intense only in some place but not within the entire region where Swahili is used. In other words, there was an African language which already existed even before the trade from foreigners took place, contrary to the statement that the origin of the Swahili language is the Arabic language. It was just not clear where in Africa Swahili originated but definitely not from the Arabs.

Reference:

Nurse, Derek and Spear, Thomas, The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language

of an African Society, 800-1500, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1985