

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 186

(7R 50 S 186 P)

ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we investigate the study of Kiswahili on the island of Zanzibar.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

As you know, Kiswahili, a language widely spoken in East and Central Africa, has been suggested as the future lingua-franca or official language of Africa. Because Kiswahili is thought by most African linguists to be the most widely spoken language on the continent. At the moment Kiswahili is an official language in Kenya, Uganda and Zaire and is the official language of Tanzania where the language is now being extensively studied and researched. There is an Institute of Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam and a new Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages is soon to open on the Island of Zanzibar.

We asked the new Institute's deputy director, Ahmed Mgeni, about the idea of the Institute.

AHMED MGENI:

I think you are aware of the fact that Kiswahili is growing in importance as an African language to the extent that it has even been suggested that if there should be a language for Africa, Kiswahili should be that language.

So Zanzibar, I think it is commonly agreed, is the traditional home of Kiswahili, and it has been felt that at a time when Kiswahili is growing in importance, at a time when the need has been expressed for Kiswahili to be used as a language in political, economic, cultural and scientific matters, at this time, it has been felt that Zanzibar, as the home of Kiswahili, should play an active role in the development of the language for the purpose.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, it's rather suprising that there is already a similar Institute in Dar es Salaam and that that should have been the first place to

have set up this thing, instead of Zanzibar, as you were saying. But tell me, what is the difference between Swahili and Kiswahili ?

AHMED MGENI:

I have a feeling that the word Swahili to describe the language, was originally used by the Europeans. In Kiswahili we normally use the prefix 'ki' to describe any language. So that English is in Kiswahili Kingereza, French is Kifaransa, Portuguese is Kireno, Arabic is Kiarabu and so on. So the correct form should be Kiswahili. And this European influence has been very great in the past. So that even if you look at a Swahili magazine, Swahili Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Dar Es Salaam, it used to be called Swahili but now it has been changed into Kiswahili as a recognition of the correct form.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What sort of things do you do in the project, the actual details of the work you are doing ?

AHMED MGENI:

Interest in Kiswahili is only one of the preoccupations of this department. We don't call it an institute, we call it a department of Kiswahili and foreign languages. I think it is important, as you realise, that we should be well versed in the major languages of the world and the establishment of this institute is an attempt to answer this need. So this institute would be devoted not only to Kiswahili but also to French, Arabic, Portuguese and English as the major languages of the world. So Kiswahili is really only one of the languages to which this new department would direct its attention.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, but surely Kiswahili is an African language, Therefore I would expect that naturally you at least would be more interested in that particular language than the European languages, which are in any case very well known and developed ?

AHMED NGENI:

Oh yes indeed. Yes, I think one of the functions of this institute of the department is going to be development of Kiswahili. I said earlier that Kiswahili has grown in importance and there is a desire to develop it further so that it could be used as a tool in cultural, scientific and other fields. So one of the functions of the institute is going to be to try to develop the vocabulary of Kiswahili, to try to coin new words and phrases, so that when the language is to be used for these various purposes I've just mentioned, it could prove equal to the task before it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now who is going to undertake to coin new words for the use in scientific teaching ?

AHMED MGENI:

In fact at the moment there are committees already engaged in the task in mainland Tanzania and they come out periodically with a list of newly coined words for people to comment on and the rest of it, in an attempt to meet this need.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I see, and who finances this research project ?

AHMED MGENI:

It's partly the institute of Kiswahili research and probably some other organisations I'm not aware of.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now how did it suddenly dawn on you that Kiswahili is becoming something of such major importance ?

AHMED MGENI:

is
I think, first of all, Kiswahili/more widely spoken in Africa than any other African language and this is a fact which probably we did not realise before. Again a number of Universities have taken a lot of interest in Kiswahili recently. I believe a number of American universities are teaching Kiswahili at the moment. And in Dar es Salaam, there is even a degree course in Kiswahili.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is there much literature written in Kiswahili ?

AHMED MGENI:

Not much. But there is quite a bit of literature and at the moment there are a number of budding authors coming up and I think among the tasks of this institute would be to try to discover and encourage new talents.

At the moment in Zanzibar there are a number of potentially good writers who could be taken advantage of.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now can you give me a couple of examples of authors in Kiswahili ?

AHMED MGENI:

Recently we've had very brilliant authors appearing. One of

them is called Mohammed Said Abdullah. I don't know if you've heard of him. He writes detective fiction with a character bwana musa, modelled out of Sherlock Holmes and other great detectives in literature. So although some of these authors are partly influenced by foreign literature yet there is a lot that is indigenous and original in their writing, their manner of story telling, the type of characters they portray, the scenes they describe and so on, Mohammed Abdullah is one of these authors and there is another brilliant young man who has just emerged, he's called Mohammed Suleiman, one of whose books "Kioo" has won a number of literary awards in East Africa and has been prescribed for the General Certificate of Education examination. About a month ago, a new book of his came out which was published by the Oxford University Press of East Africa and which some people believe, is one of the best books ever written in Kiswahili.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And these writings are in novel or story form rather than poetic ?

AHMED MGENI:

We have poetry as well, although in the case of Zanzibar, most of the poets are old people who are not familiar with literature and with the method of getting their compositions into print. So that they will write a poem, circulate it among friends and that's the end of it. In fact, there are some old people who are really good and whose work ought to have a wider audience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, but in that case I think you should make an attempt to have all these things collected together. That would be very interesting reading.

AHMED MGENI:

I think this will be one of the things that the department of Kiswahili will be working on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Have you got oral tradition, oral literature tradition ?

AHMED MGENI:

Yes, we do. So far it's just been handed down from generation to generation. I'm not aware of any serious attempt so far to preserve this in a more permanent form.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That should be probably one of the tasks you will also address yourself to ?

AHMED MGENI:

Well, I suppose it should be !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

LA

Now you mentioned that the vocabulary wasn't big enough. Is it the sort of vocabulary which you would need to use in the teaching of science or are you talking about the language as a whole even including writing culturally, say literature.

AHMED MGENI:

I think in every field you take, you would find that Kiswahili is inadequate, in science, in mathematics, even in cultural activities. We are often aware of our lack of an adequate vocabulary. Take literature for example, there are so many literary terms in other languages which we don't have the equivalent of in Kiswahili. There are rhetorical terms, there are poetic terms, all of which don't have any equivalent in Kiswahili. So it is necessary to develop the language also for cultural purposes I think.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Can you give me an example of any words, scientific words which have been coined so far?

AHMED MGENI:

Yes, some words are actually not absolutely new coinages. Some words are slightly "Swahilised" versions of Arabic or English words. For instance, contract, they say kontrakti. So sometimes you get words which are slightly modified from other East African languages and sometimes words which are entirely new. Let me give an example, we don't have a Kiswahili equivalent, for, let's say 'state house' (that's not science I'm afraid, I'm just giving you an example!) I think one of the East African languages, there is the word ikulu, which they use for the house of a Chief. So nowadays we use the name kulu for state house. So there are times when we borrow from neighbouring East African languages. There are times when we borrow from Arabic, there are times when we borrow from English and there are times when we actually coin a word. Take the word "registrar" for example, we do not have a Kiswahili word for registrar, but there is the Arabic word msajil from which we have derived our msajili which means registrar. Sometimes actually words are coined.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Presumably you are going to have to compile them all into a directory for people to be able to learn.

AHMED MGENI:

In the end yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It seems to me that it is going to take quite some time before it can be accepted as the lingua-franca of Africa.

AHMED MGENI:

I'll have to make a start !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes quite. Well, thank you very much Ahmed.

Ahmed Mgeni, deputy director of the New Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages which is just about to open on the Island of Zanzibar.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that's all for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and hoping you'll join me again next week for more Arts and Africa.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR
USE IN BROADCASTING OUTSIDE
BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION.

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE FOR
USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE BRITAIN
IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION.