



Investigating the Factors for the Emergence of a ‘Ugandan Swahili Variety’

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Abstract

This paper uses Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory to account for the emergence of the Ugandan Swahili variety. Swahili in Uganda is used by border and interior speech communities (SCs) in day-to-day communication and by Communities of Practice (CoPs) such as the armed forces, Swahili teachers and students. Out of the domains mentioned above, Swahili as used by the CoPs has sporadically been studied. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the emergence of the Ugandan Swahili variety spoken by interior speech communities in Uganda. The data were obtained from interviews with fifteen key informants drawn from *Omukishwahiri* Zone in Mbarara City in western Uganda, Bweyale Town Council in Kiryandongo District and Kabango Town Council in Masindi District both in mid-western Uganda, Bombo Town Council in Luwero District, Central Uganda, and Arua City in Arua District, west Nile. The Key informant data were corroborated with scholarly and theoretical insights from three academic and archives. Results show that much as multiple factors such as trade, religion, colonial and post-colonial military influences, colonial administration, the influx of refugees in Uganda, and the creation of language identity, were pivotal in the emergence of a Swahili variant unique to Uganda, the dominant influencing factor was Swahili’s long contact with non-Bantu language speakers such as the Nilotics and Nubis.

1. Introduction

In this paper I explore the factors that account for the emergence of ‘Ugandan Swahili.’ The paper is motivated by the recent proliferation of studies focusing on emerging peripheral Swahili varieties that have for a long time received less attention compared to coastal Swahili dialects (Nassenstein & Shinagawa, 2019). Nassenstein and Shinagawa (2019) show how the Swahili varieties spoken in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda have not been intensively studied. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the factors accounting for the emergence of the

Swahili variety spoken in Uganda.

Swahili is a Bantu language that spread from the east coast of Africa to Uganda by Arab trade caravans as early as the 1840s (Mbaabu, 2007, Soi, 2020; Rothman, 2007). It was mainly spoken by armed forces (military, police and prison) and ordinary people who worked as casual labourers for Indians (Mukuthuria, 2006). Before 1971, the language was highly revered by Ugandans as it was officially used for communication among the armed forces before its image was tarnished by Idi Amin's¹ (hereafter Amin) soldiers (Miina & Kawoya, 2018; Miner, 1998). For example, Soi (2020) shows how infamously Swahili was used by Amin's soldiers in 'condoism' and torture of civilians. This military brutality made Swahili an unpopular language among the civilians (Soi, 2020). As Miner (1998) stresses, in 1972, Amin signed a decree that made Swahili an official language, although it lacked strategic backup and was never fully implemented, thus denying its previous recognition as an official language. Years later, as Nassenstein and Shinagawa (2019) point out, Swahili is still considered the language of armed forces, stigmatised and often viewed with negative language attitudes.

Currently in Uganda, Swahili is used by various speech communities² e.g., in the border areas, namely, Mbale on the Uganda-Kenya border, Kasese on the Uganda-DRC border, and Mutukura on the Uganda-Tanzania border. In this study, the mentioned border communities are not categorised as speech communities because they are directly influenced by the Swahili spoken in the neighbouring countries. In official domain, Article 6 (2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda of 1995, as amended, states that Swahili is the second official language after English. Following the existing language-in-education policy that stipulates that Swahili compulsory subject for all secondary school students (see Jjingo and Visser 2020) This implies, then, that Swahili is used both in formal and informal domains.

¹ Idi Amin Dada was a Ugandan military officer who served as the President of Uganda from 1971 to 1979. He came to power through a military coup, overthrowing the government of Milton Obote. Amin's leadership was characterised by erratic behavior and brutal tactics, which led to international condemnation. His presidency ended when Tanzanian forces and Ugandan exiles invaded Uganda in 1979, forcing him into exile where he died in 2003.

² The term 'speech community' is used in the sense of Gumperz (1972, p. 16), who states that it comprises a group of speakers who share norms and rules for the use of at least one common language. They do not, however, necessarily use the same language all the time. Members of the same speech community need to share at least one common language that is governed by rules so that they can decode the social meaning carried by alternative modes of communication.

According to Trudgill (2000), a community's complex social, cultural, and historical dynamics are frequently reflected in the emergence of distinct language varieties. As a *lingua franca* in several East African nations, Swahili must have adapted to local contexts in a distinctive way. Thus this study sought to shed light on the processes that led to localised form the Ugandan Swahili variety spoken in Uganda.

2. Underpinning Theory

To explain the emergence of Ugandan Swahili, this study employs Labov's Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory (VST) (1963, 1966) as a framework for data collection and analysis. The VST asserts that language systematically varies across different social groups and contexts (Labov, 1963). A key premise of this theory is that language cannot be studied in isolation from its social environment; rather, the linguistic features of a speech community reflect its members' socioeconomic backgrounds. Against this theoretical backdrop, the study examines the historical, social, and economic factors that have contributed to the development of a sociolinguistically distinct variety of Ugandan Swahili. Drawing on two fundamental principles of the VST, data collection in naturalistic settings and the influence of social factors on language emergence, the study gathered data from five speech communities, as detailed in the methodology section.

3. Methodology

The data presented in this paper are part of a larger qualitative, exploratory and historical study (Nsereko 2025) whose objective was to account for the emergence of the Ugandan Kiswahili. Data were collected from fifteen key informants and three academics. The key informants were drawn from five speech communities namely, *Omukishwahiri* in Mbarara City in Western Uganda, Bweyale Town Council in Kiryandongo District and Kabango Town Council in Masindi District both in Mid-Western Uganda, Bombo Town Council in Luwero District, Central Uganda, and Arua City in Arua District, West Nile. They were engaged to establish their perspectives about the factors that have shaped Swahili use in their communities. Their views were triangulated with theoretical and academic perspectives of the academic. The data were generated using interviews. Additional data were generated from archives that were accessed from the National Records Centre and Archives of the Ministry of Public Service and Africana Section of Makerere University Main Library. The archival materials were sources of pertinent historical information. Interview data were analysed using NVivo programme from which themes and case

summaries were generated which are presented in the next section. The archival data were analysed using READ Approach (Dalglish et al., 2020). The distilled information were integrated in the next section to corroborate findings from interviews. This study was approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology with Research REF. No: SS2348ES. Equally, I obtained oral and written consent from participants. The study observed confidentiality by anonymising the key informants using *Bweya* for Bweyale, *Mba* for Mbarara, *Bom* for Bombo, *Aru* for Arua, and *Bango* for Kabango. The academic were pseudonymised using *Akademika*. This was intended to conceal their identities. Further, to eliminate biased responses, I used probing statements, carried out member checking for validation of themes, and used thick descriptions to enhance the transferability of the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

For coherence purposes, the findings are presented in an order where interviews are presented first and thereafter triangulated with archival data where necessary. In this regard, the factors for the emergence of Ugandan Swahili are structured into seven different but somehow related themes, as will be explored in their respective subsections below.

The Trading factor

The trading factor was one of the fundamental aspects for the emergence of the Swahili varieties spoken in Uganda. Thus, for clarity purposes and given its contribution in that direction, it is important to divide its occurrence into two (i.e., pre- and post-colonial periods), as will be discussed in the following subsections.

Trading in the Pre-Colonial period

It should be emphasised that precolonial trade was fundamental to developing, spreading, and influencing Swahili in Uganda. As I will explain later in this paper, it should be noted that the Arab merchants who started trading with East Africa's interior, such as in present-day Uganda, as early as the 1840s, spoke Swahili from the East African coastal societies of the Indian Ocean. Thus, during their trading activities, the Arabs primarily communicated in Swahili with the indigenous tribes, assisted by interpreters (see Jjingo and Iddi, 2022). *Mba 1* and *Mba 2* attributed the Swahili spoken in the area to the arrival and settlement of Zanzibari traders in Kakoba in Mbarara City. They further stated that, the place name, Omukishwahiri, was coined from the dominance of Swahili-speaking persons who were pulled by the trading opportunities in the area and later settled permanently. Similarly, the

academics acknowledged the influence of Arab traders on the emergence of Swahili. The academics revealed that the Arabs arrived in Uganda, they first visited the court of the King of Buganda before other chieftaincies across Uganda. Like Zanzibaris traders, the Arabs played a key role in the emergence of the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda. *Akademika B* revealed that the Arab traders had stayed along the coast for both trading and spreading Islam. To succeed in their mission, they worked through trusted local interpreters. This compelled them to learn Swahili and become fluent speakers with time. *Akademika B* reiterated that when the Arab traders entered the interior of East Africa, they used a similar approach of recruiting local interpreters. As time went by, the local people helped in spreading Swahili language in many parts of Uganda. The above submissions by *Akademika B* are summarised by the following verbatim.

...Swahili was brought into Uganda by Arabs who were trading mainly in slavery and ivory. While the Arabs' primary motive was trade, they also preached Islam to the places they passed through and those they purposely visited. In this way, Swahili was developed along the routes (mainly slave trade routes) that the Arabs used and in the towns they visited. The same development also occurred in the societies to which the Arabs preached Islam. It should be noted that in both circumstances (i.e., in the trading and evangelical activities), the establishments, e.g., the Buganda, Toro, Bunyoro, and Ankole Kingdoms, had well-established indigenous languages that served as intertribal means of communication. The use of Swahili in such areas led to the emergence of particular Swahili variety as a result of language contacts. All this is attributed to the trading and evangelical activities carried out by the Arabs in Uganda, which can be considered an initial factor in the emergence of Ugandan Swahili. (*Akademika B*, interviewed in Kampala on 13th August 2023).

In consonance with the above, *Akademika A* stated that when the Swahili-speaking Zanzibari traders came to Mbarara, they could not communicate easily with the Banyankole and filled this gap by recruiting influential local people as their allies. After a period of about 10 years, the Zanzibaris traders and their allies influenced the close native people learn Swahili. *Akademika A* further asserted that the lucrative trade attracted many people from neighbouring areas such as Bushenyi, Kabale and Masaka. These native people and Zanzibaris traders later intermarried and produced a new generation of Swahili speakers. This led to the creation of the nucleus of Swahili-speaking villages that are alive to this day. *Akademika A* emphasised this

argument by his argument below.

... the Arab Muslims who moved to trade in places like Mbarara (Ankore Kingdom) decided never to go back home. They stayed around, forming Islamic-Swahili-speaking villages. A similar situation occurred in the Buganda Kingdom, especially in Lungujja, where the Zanzibaris resided. Therefore, the Kampala suburb called Lungujja was named so because the Zanzibaris stayed there and called the place Unguja, as an identity construction of the Unguja town back home, in Zanzibar. (*Akademika A*, 13 August 2023).

In support of the views above from the archival lens, while drawing from Emin Pasha's Diaries, Lulua (1979) mentions that the Asian merchants from Zanzibar not only arrived at the Buganda Kingdom for trade but also got involved in directly and indirectly spreading Islam and Swahili, respectively. Lulua adds that the Asian merchants taught the indigenous people to write in Swahili, a language with Arabic orthography. The above quotations show how a language's role in the communities is key in determining its uptake and the nature of the language used.

Trading in the Post-Colonial period

As has been observed in the previous section, even in the post-colonial era, trading activities contributed to the development of the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda. According to *Akademika B and C*, East African countries, i.e., Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, have been trading amongst themselves since Uganda's independence of 1962. The epitome of this trade occurred when the East African countries formed a trading bloc referred to as the East African Community in 1967. *According to Akademika A, the growth and development of inter-territorial trade led to the emergence and use of Swahili in these towns, as well as some light usage of Swahili in the surrounding areas.*

In agreement with *Akademika A's* views, *Bom 1, Mba 2, and Bweya 1* revealed that, within a radius of 40 kilometres from town, there are people who speak some broken Swahili.³ Because of their high degree of interaction with the plying long hauliers,

³ During interviews, I noticed that the non-standard Swahili variety spoken in Uganda is labelled with "bad Swahili" or sometimes "Ugandan Swahili." For instance, there is little Swahili, poor Swahili, broken Swahili, and Ugandan Swahili (*Swahili ya Uganda*). Similarly, in some archival materials, the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda was referred to

Bweya 1 mentioned that he has always interacted with drivers and their co-drivers for a long time. Indeed, in Bweyale and Migyera towns along the Kampala- Gulu highway, one of the languages used in day-to-day communication is Swahili. This has compelled many service providers in the surroundings to learn what they have termed as *Swahili kidogo*, literally meaning, ‘little Swahili,’ from people around them so that they can make a fortune from the trading businesses that have sprung up in and around the parking centres or lots of the long-distance cargo trailers.

In an interview with *Bweya 1* and *Bweya 2*, it was established that some young adults who speak Swahili could have acquired it from the long time spent dealing with the long-distance cargo truckers that make stopovers in Bweyale Town. *Bweya 1* and *Bweya 2* both from Bweyale Town, operate a restaurant and guest house, respectively. They mentioned that learning Swahili from their neighbours was the top priority on the list of procedures they followed to establish these business units. On this matter, *Bweya 2* said,

...you see, before I established the guest house. I realised that most of the clients were linked to the businesses attracted by the long-distance cargo trucks that stopover in this area, with some spending two weeks to a month... I discovered that they communicate in Swahili... I thought that even with lots of money and a big, well-decorated place, one cannot win the battle of wills without fluency in Swahili. I had to learn Swahili from my neighbours, one of whom operated a restaurant and the other a laundry service point. It took me a few months to master the basics of the language, but as of now, I try to speak my broken Swahili. It is, therefore, right to conclude and say that the impact of the long-distance truckers has played a key role in the Swahilization of our communities...

Several factors influenced general trade and the use of Swahili language during Amin's regime. A key factor is the expulsion of the Indians from Uganda in 1972. According to *Akademika C*, when Amin expelled the Asians, many of their businesses were redistributed to Ugandans, particularly soldiers from the Nubi ethnic tribe. They were already well-versed in the KiKAR Swahili of the army and

as Kitchen Swahili, Upcountry Swahili, and debased Swahili. This study has collectively referred to all these labels as the emerging Swahili variety spoken in Uganda.

continued using it in their trade endeavours. Later, these traders started moving to countries like Kenya and Tanzania to shop more. In an almost similar development, the Nubis who were favoured by Amin also started involving themselves in smuggling goods from Kenya which increased their exposure to Sheng, a pidgin Swahili spoken in informal circles. *Akademika B* provided complimentary views that the expulsion of Indians and the consequent allocation of the trading businesses to the Nubis gave them mailage in trading. The Nubis, for example, moved to the neighbouring countries where Swahili is widely spoken. This exposure increased the usage of non-standard Swahili among the Nubis and later with their customers back home. It is therefore appropriate to infer that the Nubis greatly influenced the emergence of Ugandan Swahili.

The Influence of the army and police on the emergence of Ugandan Swahili

The study participants expressed that the army influenced the development and spread of Swahili in Uganda as shown in the sub-themes below.

Army and police under the Colonial Administration

Participants revealed that the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda could have originated from the colonial armies who participated in World Wars I and II. According to *Bom 2*, an elderly Muslim Nubi man, 'Swahili was used by my grandparents, who participated in World Wars I and II.' He narrated further that when the fighters returned, they communicated in Swahili most of the time firstly as an expression of pride and secondly as a symbol prestige that would differentiate them from other community members for the rest of their lives. Similar views were raised by *Aru 2*, *Bom 2* and *Mba 2* and essentially, this development led to the emergence of a Ugandan Swahili variety. *Bom 2* emphasised this influence in the following words.

We, Nubis, are descendants of the former soldiers of the King's African Rifles, and we have kept our Swahili as our language to this day. You go to Jinja; our people are there; they speak Swahili. You go to Hoima; you go to Fort Portal; all of us know Swahili very well, and we are proud of our Swahili...

This finding is alluded to by *Akademika B*, who says that the recruitment of colonial troops from different parts of the country following the Nubi mutiny of 1897, favoured the development of Swahili in the army. According to *Akademika B*, around the 1890s, the colonial army consisted of only Sudanese Nubi troops because of their stature and experience acquired from serving Emin Pasha. As ex-service men, Captain Lugard preferred them and were recruited into his military force that was

deployed suppress Bunyoro Kingdom. Based on their experience, the Nubis demanded for higher pay and dominance in the army ranks. The failure of Capt. Lugard to budge to their demands resulted in a mutiny. *Akademika B* explains further that, Capt. Lugard later opted to recruit service men from different parts of East Africa to cushion against similar incidents in the future. This was another pathway through which Swahili speaking became common in different parts of East Africa. The birth of a pidginised variety of Swahili known as KiKAR/Kikeya, meaning, Swahili of the King's African Rifles, is alluded to the above as highlighted in the archival data sourced from Lulua 1976⁴. The continued KiKAR/Kikeya and the lack of classes to teach the army "the standard Swahili" could be partly responsible for the emergence of Ugandan Swahili variety. To sum up the discussion, Amone (2014) observes that the choice of men and women from Acholi region as recruits in the colonial army and the subsequent use of Swahili as an official language of command greatly influenced Swahili, to what leaves on today as 'Ugandan Swahili.'

Post-Colonial Army

After Uganda's independence in 1962, the official status of Swahili in the army was recognised, and KiKAR/Kikeya continued to be used. Contrary to the period when colonial armies were recruited from all parts of the country and beyond, Obote and Amin's regimes preferred recruiting individuals Nilotics and Nubis (see Amone 2014). According to *Akademika A*, following the previous standard in which the army used Swahili for official communication, this continued to be the practice during the Obote and Amin's regimes. Further, *Akademika A* explained that the source areas for these soldiers became fertile grounds for the emergence of Ugandan Swahili variety on two grounds. Firstly, the gazetted zones such as Bombo, in Luweero, Prison, Congo, Kenya and *Pangisa* Cells in Arua became centres of dispersal of Swahili to the surrounding environs. Secondly, on retiring from service, the retired soldiers became conduits through which Swahili spread to their families, friends and relatives. The Ugandan Swahili variety owes its origin from these historical precedents.

Another avenue through which the Ugandan Swahili variety emerged is impact of the liberation bush war struggle of President Yoweri Museveni. Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) adopted Swahili as a *lingua franca* during the war. To build trust in the masses, Museveni adopted a non- sectarian doctrine by recruiting fighters from all parts of Uganda. To forge unity, he advocated for use of Swahili for training, communication and command. In an interview with *Mba 2* and *Bom 1*, a section of civilians learnt some 'little' Swahili from the Bush War songs and through direct

⁴ Chapter 10: "The King's African Rifles"

collaboration with the fighters.

The Role of Religion in the Development of Swahili in Uganda

To gain a deeper understanding of religion and Swahili in Uganda, I asked the academics. The findings show that religion was key in developing the Swahili variety spoken in the interior communities in Uganda. According to *Akademika A* and *B*, two epochs explain the influence religion has had on the socio-cultural milieu of Uganda. Epoch 1 captures the period from 1844 to 1889, which, according to *Akademika A*, was marked by an influx of Arab and Swahili traders in the interior of East Africa and Uganda, inclusive. The Arabs came along the East African coast and learnt Swahili, which became their main language for communicating with the people of the interior. *Akademika B* and *C* equally revealed that much as the Arabs had come to Buganda for trading purposes, they equally engaged in spreading Islam. This process provided a pathway through which Swahili spread in different parts of Uganda. For example, *Mba 3* strongly believes that the spread of Islam, rather than trade, is primarily responsible for the emergence of Swahili in what is now Mbarara City. In an interview, this degree of influence was summed up by *Akademika B* as follows:

The Swahili language is closely linked to Islam. Every community that interacted with Arab Muslims learnt the Swahili language. At the same time, those who converted to Islam prioritised Swahili to identify with the Arabs and the Swahili people... In Buganda, for example, there were informal connections between the Lacustrine Area (Buganda region). However, these became more formal and cemented with the coming of the Arabs and Swahili traders who used the following route: Bagamoyo-Tabora-Karagwe-Buganda. (*Akademika B*, Kampala City, 13 August 2023).

Regarding this topic, Akademika A revealed that although the most recognised influence of foreign powers on the spread of Swahili in Uganda was the merchants who travelled through the Eastern Route in 1876, it is important to remember that there was also an influx of Arabs and Swahili traders, which led to the eventual conversion of many native people to Islam. As noted earlier, the converts emulated the linguistic traits of the Arabs and adopted Swahili as a means of communication.

Epoch 2 captures the period when Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894. *Akademika B* revealed that the famous slogan that the flag followed the cross meant that the missionaries assisted colonialists. One of the challenges that faced

missionaries and British colonists in Uganda was the language barrier. This accounts for why the duo chose to use agents. *Akademika A* and *B* revealed that the Kabaka of Buganda invited the missionaries and British colonialists, leading them to choose Buganda over other regions as their close ally. This choice meant they used Baganda chiefs and their pages as agents to extend their influence in other parts of Uganda. The remnants of this 'marriage of convenience' are visible in the Sebei Region in Kween, Bukwo, and Kapchorwa, where several men aged 50 years and above have Mwanga as their middle name. *Akademika A* and *B* revealed that using Luganda in these ethnically diverse communities caused another language barrier problem because few people speak it. The realisation by missionaries and British colonialists that Swahili is spoken in different parts of Uganda made them switch from Luganda to Swahili in 1925. This development gave Swahili credibility, especially after dropping vernaculars and opting for it as a Language of Instruction (LoI). Many parts of Uganda, under the direct influence of Baganda agents, seamlessly switched to Swahili. *Akademika A* argued that since there were no training programs for teaching people in these localities (Swahili), the only available opportunity was to teach them informally through interaction. Consequently, Swahili became a means of communication in several communities because of incidental interactions.

In addition, *Akademika B* points out that the sour relationship that was there between Islam and Christianity became a big test for Swahili in that Christian missionaries saw it as closer to Islam than to Christianity. This jeopardised the language's involvement in the language policies. This made Swahili miss out on the school system and, therefore, was left on the streets. People who used it were picking it from the street, explaining its simplistic nature and avoidance of strict grammatical structures as observed in standard Swahili.

British Colonial Administration

British colonial governments are key in the story behind Swahili infusion, spread and use in Uganda. As I will explain in the sections that follow, Governor Gowers is highly mentioned in literature as well as archival information as key in the use, spread and growth of Swahili in Uganda. In the sections that follow, I give an analysis of the role the colonial administration played in the life of Swahili in Uganda either consciously or unconsciously.

Policies on Language

The policies implemented by British colonial administrators played a crucial role in the spread and use of Swahili in Uganda. According to *Akademika A* and *B*, whereas

at first Swahili had been the official language of the Protectorate from 1900 to 1912 and the official language of the military, this stance would later change and be substituted for Luganda as interests changed. According to *Akademika C*, *although Swahili was initially preferred, perceptions changed over time, and it came to be viewed as unfit for use by Christian missions, especially the Anglican Church Missionary Society of London, due to its associations with Arabs and Islam.*

Archival data in one of the correspondences by Governor Gowers points to the intentional choice of the simple and semi-standard Swahili variety in their communication with Africans:

The argument is that the form of Swahili used in Uganda is so debased as to be unworthy of being treated as a vernacular. If this is true, it is due to our actions. We have degraded the language; we can rehabilitate it. When a Bantu-speaking native learns another Bantu language, it is natural for him to speak it grammatically. If he is habitually addressed in a jargon parallel to the "Kitch Kaffir," I fancy that thirty years ago, the Baganda chiefs spoke more correct Swahili than is generally spoken in Uganda today. They prided themselves on the knowledge of a language that extended far beyond the boundaries of their tribal language. They were right.

The statement by Gowers highlights Ugandans' intentional use of a simplified version of Swahili, which became more established long after the colonial period.

Another important issue about language policies by the colonialists was that they were not as firm as the policy suggested now and would change overnight under the directive of different colonial leaders. For example, in 1932, the Joint Secretary to the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Sir Hanns Vischer, wrote that:

The fundamental issue is that the various missions have consistently viewed Luganda as the sole language for the entire protectorate, a view that aligned well with the government's general policy some years ago. On the other hand, this policy has since been changed. The governor looks on Luganda as the vernacular of the Buganda only and wishes to make Swahili the lingua franca for the whole territory."

Such ever-changing policies meant that Swahili's use was always in balance, as the policies suggested would change before they were actually implemented and their impact felt.

In the 1920s, in an attempt to balance and reach an agreement on their policies, the

missionaries and Buganda, the government of the British Protectorate, suggested using Swahili as a *lingua franca* outside Buganda in the Eastern and Northern Regions of the Protectorate, the so-called “mixed language areas.”

This is reflected in several education commissions from 1925 that included Swahili in the curriculum of Uganda as a LoI up to the late 1940s. Swahili gained traction in many communities, and even though it lost fame, especially in Buganda in the 1950s, it has already spread to different parts of Uganda. *Akademika A* confirmed this submission, saying that Swahili couldn't be lost because it was taught after it was adopted as a colonial language. Besides, the number of people participating in trade with Arabs meant that the language spread beyond the business centres. This process led to the convergence of Swahili with regional dialects, minority dialects, and sociolects. Consequently, the Swahili that emerged from this convergence became a local *lingua franca*. This argument was corroborated by *Akademika C*, who revealed that, although Swahili was adopted as a LoI, it was never recommended as a taught subject by the colonial education policies. Therefore, much as it was a LoI, its sheer influence on the number of people speaking the language by then cannot be wholly attributed to its adoption as the language of instruction but rather to social interaction, given that schools at that time never produced students with basic subject matter knowledge of the language. *Akademika C* supported her argument by insisting that when the British realised that Swahili had more of an Arabic connection and, therefore, Islam, there was no way they could allow the language to proliferate throughout the entire education system, which was based on Christian ethos.

In 1952, Swahili language was removed from the list of African languages taught in Uganda. The removal of the Swahili language from the school curriculum in 1952 dealt a final blow to what I would call 'good Swahili', leaving it to fight for its own visibility. Additionally, a few years after gaining independence, Uganda stopped being a member of the interterritorial language committee of East Africa. It even stopped remitting subscription fees to the committee. The consequence of such actions is that Swahili was left as a street language. People who learnt and spoke *a little Swahili primarily acquired it from the streets; as a result, the standard form of Swahili, often referred to as correct Swahili, did not thrive. Akademika A*

Based on the previous information, the preference for Luganda instead of Swahili, along with the ongoing conflict between religious and political factions, hindered the development of Swahili. In other words, the final blow to Swahili's growth in Uganda was scrapping it from school subjects. In this way, the language was left to flourish independently. Such a self-marketing

struggle diminished the standard characteristics of Swahili, resulting in a simplified variety that has still survived.

Post-Independence Political Space

The study found that the developments after independence were equally cited as factors behind the emergence of the Swahili variety, spoken in Uganda. *Akademika A* mentioned that much as Swahili lost grip immediately after independence, it was revived after the 1971 coup. Amin signed a decree in 1972 that sought to make Swahili the national language. Amin was a Kakwa, a Sudanic-speaking Nilotic ethnic group in the West Nile. However, he identified himself as a Nubi-Kakwa. *Akademika B* supplemented the above observation and mentioned that Nubis have a long history in Uganda. Due to their long stay, they fused with host tribal groups such as the Lugbara, Kuku, Baganda, Batooro, and Acholi, which changed their identities to Nubi-Lugbara, Nubi-Kuku, Nubi-Baganda, Nubi-Batooro, and Nubi-Acholi. These changes gave them an advantage over a wider part of Uganda, which, according to *Akademika A*, provided fertile ground for the emergence of Swahili. *Akademika A* summed up the above argument as follows:

The Nubis have a complex history in Uganda, as they were present during the early days of colonial rule. They played a fundamental role in the fight against colonialism by allying with Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro. Their actions won them some favour that was later to see them allocated land by the Omukama of Bunyoro. More than this, they were also adjustable to any place they were called to serve and spread everywhere. They were so ubiquitous, and so was their influence on the host communities... (*Akademika A*, Kampala City, 26 October 2023)

The missionaries and British colonialists had their headquarters in the Buganda Kingdom, mainly in present-day Kampala. This led to a lopsided development. The Eastern, Central, and Western parts of Uganda benefited most from the development plans of the colonialists compared to northern and north eastern Uganda and West Nile, leading to imbalanced development. *Akademika A* revealed that as a compensatory measure, the British ring-fenced a large proportion of slots in the armed forces (prisons, army, and police) to non-disabled men from the northern half and West Nile such that the development-choked regions could also benefit from the national cake. By coincidence, for almost 3 decades after independence, the sitting presidents of Uganda (Obote I, Amin, Tito Okello Lutwa, and Obote II) were from Northern Uganda. Both *Akademika A* and *B* revealed that, without any doubts, this precedence of ring-fencing most slots to people from the northern half of Uganda

was galvanised.

Cultural Identity Construction

Swahili creates 'selfing' and 'othering' identities in most speech communities in Uganda. In some parts of Uganda, such as Mbarara, where Swahili was spread mainly by Zanzibaris, these came as traders and agents for spreading Islam in the area. According to *Mba 2*, these have since lived in Mbarara and have become natives. At present, *Mba1* revealed that the current crop of Zanzibaris were born here, have grown here, and have never interfaced with people in their lineages back home. Both *Mba 1* and *2* said that Swahili became a community language in the areas occupied by Zanzibaris and the surrounding areas. *Mba 2* said speakers learnt the language through interaction and continue to spread it orally among their children. The language is not passed on to children through text or formal means. As observed elsewhere in other speech communities, the double advantage is the Nubi factor. Mixing the Nubis and Zanzibaris in Mbarara led to permanent settlements in the current *Omukishwahiri* zone. I observed that when Nubis speak to fellow Nubis, they only do so use Swahili. However, given that several other tribes native to the surrounding areas speak Runyankore, the Zanzibaris and Nubis also speak light Runyankore, although there are scores who are fluent in both Swahili and Runyankore.

It was found that Swahili is emerging as a language that conceals different linguistically identified social identities. The identities associated with the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda included religious, economic, military, and historical identities. Sociolinguists have shown that language use plays a role in constructing and expressing social identities. People create, negotiate, and conceal identities through the use of language. Observation of the Nubis in Uganda has maintained the use of Swahili and Nubi languages as their social identity wherever they are geographically distributed in Uganda. For instance, in Bombo, a community of the Nubis uses Swahili as their ethnic label. When I reached West Nile, I discovered that the Nubis there spoke Swahili, which was the language that identified them. In Bombo, I found a family meeting after the burial of a relative. People had come from as far as Kenya and Tanzania. I was made to understand that the Nubi extended families had congregated there to celebrate the funeral rites. In the family, Swahili was used, and I could interview a few family members. They take pride in speaking Swahili, which has helped to maintain unity in the group. The interviewees showed how the Nubis in all parts of Uganda use and speak some Swahili to negotiate their identity amongst non-Nubi communities. Since the majority of Nubis are Muslims,

they consider the use of Swahili to be a label that distinguishes them within the various communities where they reside. Historically, Nubis have a connection with Swahili because they participated in both World War I and World War II, during which Swahili served as a characteristic *lingua franca*. *Bom 1* mentions that after the war, fighters came back with two things: knowledge of the gun and knowledge of Swahili.

Outside the Swahili zone in Mbarara city, *Mba 1* intimated that the Zanzibaris equally live in Fort Portal, Arua, Jinja, Hoima, Kampala (specifically in *Lungujja* and *Kibuli Mutajazi*), and Masindi. Both *Mba 1* and *Mba 2* provided evidence to support this claim. In either locality, memorial or remembrance trees were planted by their ancestors, who visited these environs on Islamisation missions. *Mba 2* mentioned palm trees as the dominant symbol and giant mango trees that are not native to Uganda. *Mba 2* revealed that some places, such as *Lungujja* in Rubaga, were named after the Zanzibari town *Ungujja*, which again happens to be the source of *Kiunguja*, currently the standard variety of Swahili. I verified this data when I visited Bombo. In the Nubian village, there were also a few Zanzibaris. These have meshed with Nubis on account of religion. Through an interview with *Bom 2*, I established networks between the Zanzibaris in Bombo and those living in Kibuli Mutajazi in Makindye Division, Kampala City. The female participant said,

Every year, especially when we have Muslim festivities such as Eid and *dua* [supplication or prayer] it has become a norm that the Kibuli Mutajazi family visits us, and we also reciprocate by earmarking a festivity and moving as a family to celebrate... we are in Uganda, mirroring what our ancestors were and what the current generation in Zanzibar is. We only differ from them because our Swahili reflects the experiences of our children in every aspect of life. Ultimately, this connection shapes our identity in Uganda, reflecting both our ancestral heritage and the current generation in Zanzibar. We only differ from them because our Swahili differs from theirs in pronunciation.

This statement was made by an informal conversation participant from Bombo Town on 18th April 2023.

Mba 1 mentioned that the motivation for the continued use of Swahili among their group and with the Nubis is due to their shared ancestral backgrounds. Among the Zanzibaris and Nubi families in Omukishwahiri, the quest for identity is even upheld by the children. *Mba 2* and *3* provided consenting views and said their children are implored to keep Swahili as their first language. I interviewed *Mba 2* from his home.

I verified that the views of *Mba 1* and *Mba 2* were not hearsay. Bundling the pre-interview, interview, and post-interview sessions together, I was at *Mba 2*'s place for 2 hours. I sat near the entrance to the seating room and observed that his children watched some channel based in Tanzania on Star Times Satellite Television. To prove beyond doubt, I asked *Mba 2* whether the choice was incidental or purposeful. I was told that the family Tanzanian channels are inclined to engender linguistic purism among the children so they can become stewards of sowing similar cultural traits amongst their children at a future date.

This position was echoed by *Akademika B*, who provided backing evidence and revealed that throughout the historical accounts of Swahili language growth and development, especially along the East African Coast, palm trees are mentioned as distinct objects with a long history extending to the beginning. Therefore, it is unsurprising that localities with Zanzibari settlers in Uganda are dotted with patches of palm trees. *Akademika A* stated that the presence of the Zanzibaris was not merely a matter of chance. The Zanzibaris engaged in negotiations to determine suitable locations for settling and planting palm and mango trees, which indicates mutual collaboration between them and the native population. *Akademika A* and *B* submissions were summarised by *Akademika C* and *Mba 3*, who conceded that *Swahili was the medium*, so it spread through such interactions.

The Influx of Refugee Communities Refugees from outside Uganda

Uganda is home to refugees from different countries. This attribute featured in the voices of most key informants. For instance, *Akademika B* said that the instability in most neighbouring countries, such as the DRC, Rwanda, Kenya, and most recently, South Sudan, has brought about an exodus of refugees to Uganda. Because of the multilingual nature of the refugees, the Swahili tongue has always been chosen as a *lingua franca* in the refugee settlements. The use of Swahili in the refugee camps creates a speech community that exhibits recognisable structural characteristics. For instance, in the Panyandoli refugee settlement Camp in Kiryandongo district, UNHCR has been bringing refugees from the DRC, Rwanda, Kenya, and South Sudan. In the camp, the refugees and the host communities interact with each other through Swahili. A 'cocktail' of the refugees and host communities' contact accounts for the emergence of a unique variety of Swahili influenced by each group's languages. *With a smiling face*, *Bweya*, one of the community leaders in Bweyale, acknowledged the importance of refugee communities in developing the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda.

... Our place here is like the 'United Nations' of Uganda. We have Congolese here; they speak their broken Congolese Swahili. We have Kenyans here; they speak Kenyan Swahili. We have Rwandese here; they also speak their broken Rwandese Swahili. We have South Sudanese of recent; they also try to speak Swahili. All these speak broken Swahili. Now, this is the mixed negative Swahili spoken here. You cannot equate this dialect with the good Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania. This is Ugandan-bad Swahili.

Internally Displaced Persons

Apart from refugees from neighbouring countries, there are also a set of refugees from within Uganda. According to *Bweya*, after the Bududa landslides that killed many people in 2010, the government of Uganda settled over 3000 survivors at Panyandoli, Kiryandongo District. According to *Bweya*, these landslide survivors come from the border Swahili-speaking communities. In Kiryandongo, they also preferred to speak Swahili to communicate with the host communities and other community occupants. This implies that certain lexical items are introduced into Swahili, thereby leading to a speech community that identifies with a unique Swahili variety.

The Influence of Permanent Migration

Migration is a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon that has been happening since time immemorial. In this study, I focus on both emigration and immigration. On the one hand, emigration refers to the process by which a person relocates permanently from their ancestral home to a new locality without crossing national borders. On the other hand, immigration denotes the permanent relocation of a household or an individual from their ancestral country to another country. Participants raised this issue as one factor that has shaped the spread of Swahili in their communities. According to *Akademika A*, Uganda has been an area of attraction for immigrants since Uganda's independence. He cited the example of Yemenis. He said most Yemenis who migrated to Uganda passed through Mombasa, where they acquired Swahili. Although they are not ethnically Swahili, upon arriving in Uganda, these migrants have continued to use Swahili in their daily transactions and interactions with the local Ugandan population. Relatedly, *Akademika B* revealed that the case of Nubis and Somali migrants in Uganda further underlines the influence of migrants on the emergence of Swahili in Uganda. *Akademika B* noted that Nubi and Somali migrants have made their ecological settings Swahili-speaking belts, citing the example of the Kisenyi suburb in Kampala (for Somalis) and the Bombo and Kabango Trading Centre (for Nubis). By insisting on speaking Swahili, the

neighbouring natives were compelled to learn it, leading to the emergence of the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda.

Regarding immigration, *Akademika B* revealed that initially, the Nubis were settled in Buganda and West Nile. However, some later migrated to other areas, such as Acholi Land in Northern Uganda, although a small proportion migrated there. The Nubis' in-migration, which contributed to the spread of the Swahili language in Northern Uganda, continues to be a significant factor to consider today. Another aspect of in-migration mentioned by the participants involved the movement of natives of border communities such as Busia, Mutukula, Malaba, and Mpondwe, among others. *Mba 1* and *Bango 2* revealed that in their communities, there are native people whose roots are in the border communities of Mpondwe and Busia, respectively. To this effect, therefore, their interactions with the natives of Mbarara and Masindi influenced the emergence and growth of Swahili speaking in these communities. Probing further, I established that in both *Omukishwahiri Zone* and Kabango Trading Centre, these families have lived for the last 30 years and have become natives.

The Influence of Migrant Labour

The flocking of Ugandans from different areas for employment-generating ventures or magnets equally accounts for the emergence of Swahili in some communities. As noted earlier, Kabango Trading Centre and Bweyale Town Council are near Kinyala Sugar Works and Budongo Forest. The two geographical locations have been sites for job searching and employment, especially for casual labourers. Due to the nature of the job market, most job seekers are illiterate, and many others lack functional literacy. As a result, they are inclined to use their local dialects. *Bango 2* and *Bweya* noted that every newcomer to these establishments, especially Kinyala Sugar Works Limited, learns the Swahili language to acquire the basics to enable them to communicate with fellow workers. *Bango 1* revealed that newcomers are challenged to make an inquiry or communication in Swahili, which presses them to learn Swahili quickly and become versatile in the communities. Following this development, *Bweya* and *Bango 1* revealed that Swahili is a *lingua franca* in such workplaces. *Bweya* noted that workers in Kinyala originated from the Buganda, Busoga, Teso, Lango, West Nile, Kigezi, and Acholi sub-regions. Despite this mix, a large percentage originates from the Northern and West Nile regions. Their dominance is attributed to two major factors: first, their stature makes them naturally stronger and resilient to drudgery, and second, since colonial times, their regions had been sidelined from socio-economic development. Therefore, they had few lines of

employment. This disadvantage compelled the natives to move to nearby employment sources, including Kinyala. This legacy has remained up to date. By implication, therefore, Kinyala Sugar Works Limited is one of the communities where Swahili language use is a *lingua franca* and part of the linguistic repertoire of the community.

During interviews, I posed a question to *Bango 2* seeking understand how they managed to learn the Swahili they spoke. In their response, the issue of acclimatisation to the environment through Swahili was mentioned. I shared my thoughts with a participant who operates a healthcare facility, but I have withheld his name for ethical reasons. He is a Rwandese that has lived in the area for 4 years. He speaks the Swahili spoken by natives appropriately and is a fluent Swahili speaker. Green was compelled to learn Swahili to boost service performance because all his clients largely use Swahili. Beyond this, he even rebranded from brand name Q (not real name) to brand name Y (not real name) because the latter is a Swahili word. In Arua City, five of the participants in sentence elicitation interviews from *Pangisa Cell*, *Congo Cell*, *Kenya Cell*, *Prison Cell Ward*, and *Congo Ward*, respectively, revealed that casual workers in most of the workplaces in and around Arua City succeeded in changing from one place of work to another when they could speak Swahili. The rebranding of the clinic to a Swahili name in Kabango Town Council demonstrates how the Swahili language has influenced the socio-economic lives of the local speech communities. This scenario coincides with the case of Arua, where administrative units have been named in Swahili. A case example is *Pangisa ward*, a Swahili word.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the development of the non-standard Swahili variety spoken in Uganda. Drawing on interviews with key informants, archival research, and document analysis, it has identified several factors that have contributed to the emergence of this unique Swahili variety. I have argued that the primary factor behind the development of the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda is the prolonged historical contact between Swahili, a Bantu language, and speakers of non-Bantu languages, particularly Nilotic languages such as Acholi, Lango, Lugbara, and Kinubi. These interactions, which took place mainly through colonial and post-colonial military activities, trade, and migration, have significantly influenced the linguistic structure of Ugandan Swahili. It has further been noted that the Swahili spoken in Uganda does not become standard because the way it evolves is largely circumstantial depending on the area and thus becomes a variety unique to Uganda.

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