

## Swahili Creolization and Postcolonial Identity in East Africa

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What are the origins of the Swahili phenomenon? A perennial debate in Swahili studies pits the creole hypothesis against the Sabaki hypothesis. The creole hypothesis suggests that Swahili emerged as a language of contact when Arab traders arrived and began to interact with the people of the east African coast. Linguistic studies show that situations of contact where two linguistic communities lead to the emergence of pidgins (simplified registers) that allow the two or more distinct linguistic groups to communicate. European explorers of the nineteenth century who traveled to the region observed that Swahili was a hybrid language with elements of both Arabic and Bantu languages. They speculated that Swahili emerged as an Arabic-based pidgin that became a creole through a process of indigenization. This process of indigenization occurred because the Arab traders were forced to spend months in east Africa as they waited for seasonal monsoon winds. The absence of Arab women in the vicinity led them to take local women as concubines eventually creating a mixed-race population that spoke Swahili as a first language.

In response to the colonial hypothesis, the nationalists of the 1950s and 1960s countered with the claim that Swahili is a Bantu language, not Arabic-based creole. Nurse and Spear (1985), for instance, argue that Swahili is part of a subgroup of Bantu languages known as the Sabaki complex after the Sabaki River. Sabaki languages are spoken in Kenya and Southern Somalia. In addition to Swahili they include languages such as Mijikenda, Giriama, Pokomo, Malakote and even Comorian on the Comoro islands. Hinnebusch (1996) argues that Swahili is “inextricably” tied to its Sabaki “relatives in complex and intricate ways” (ibid., 85). The Sabaki hypothesis is that Swahili, Pokomo, Giriama and other Sabaki languages split off from a proto-language as the population grew and migrated around the east African coastal region. Some of these groups remained inland while others moved to the islands where they developed a maritime culture. These island dwellers eventually became known as the Swahili.

Scholars such as Mazrui, Shariff and Bryceson have recently revived the creolist hypothesis albeit minus its racial overtones. Mazrui (1992) argues that Swahili emerged as an Arabic-based pidgin that evolved into a creole before going through a process of decreolization (*ibid.*, 95–98). As we saw above, a pidgin becomes a creole when it becomes the first or native language of a speech community. This process is referred to as indigenization. Mazrui speculates that Swahili pidgin emerged with an Arabic lexis and Bantu grammatical structure (*ibid.*, 98). The pidgin then creolized and *decreolized* towards Bantu languages in structural terms while continuing to absorb lexically from other languages. Following Mazrui, Bryceson (2009) also places Swahili “prominently within the category of creole languages” (*ibid.*, 364–65). Bryceson defines creole as a socio-historical rather than a linguistic term. Thus the emergence of Swahili from the experience of slavery, displacement and migration defines it as a creole language. Bryceson, however, refutes Mazrui’s argument that Swahili genesis was pidgin Arabic. She argues that Arabic men were a small minority in Swahili society and that Arabic loan words are restricted to ritual and institutional purposes. Most of the vocabulary comes from Bantu languages.

Bryceson also claims, however, that “east African coastal culture is neither Arab nor African” (Bryceson 2009, 364). She argues that Swahili coastal culture is a “fusion culture” that has all the elements that together define a “creole society.” This comes awfully close to the colonial perspective that suggested a duality between Arab and African. Mazrui (1992), for instance, argues that Arabic can be considered an African language because the overwhelming majority of Arabic speakers reside on the African continent. Stating that Swahili is neither Arab nor African suggests an exceptionalism that is anathema to African scholars. Like other creole languages, Swahili is defined by its traumatic history of slavery, displacement and migration that led to cultural change and innovation. Mufwene (2000) traces the myth of creole exceptionalism to the nineteenth century racist ideology of language purism. For Mufwene, creole language genesis is not exceptional but instead reflects the natural evolution of human languages. Mufwene suggests a theory of language ecology that takes into account the history of contact, the value attached to available dialects and the “specific ethnographic circumstance.” This chapter will first examine the history of Swahili creolization before exploring its contemporary postcolonial ethnographic context including the massive refugee and diaspora flows that impact its expansion. The essay concludes with an analysis of the *Sheng* phenomenon, a youth subculture that epitomizes the meaning of identity in postcolonial east Africa.