SWAHILI AS A RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE*

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Introduction

In an article published recently, Mazrui and Zirimu (1990) examine the status of Swahili in Eastern Africa, focusing on what they term the process of 'secularisation'. A four-stage development is postulated, beginning with the role of Swahili as an Afro-Islamic language when it borrowed vocabulary and concepts from Arabic and Islam. Next came the 'ecumenical' stage when the language was also used by missionaries as an important, thought not the sole, medium for the spread of Christianity in the region. The third stage is a product of the modern era. Swahili is seen not simply as a lingua franca but, in a further development of this role, as a language that is being secularised: vocabulary and concepts from science and other fields of learning are being added to Swahili through borrowing and fresh coinage. This has led Swahili finally to its current 'nascent universalistic stage' (p. 50).

My interest lies in the first two stages of this process as they occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of this century. How did Swahili function as a religious language? In what sense was it ecumenical? It is a vast subject, and even an exploratory consideration of the questions attempted in this paper requires an understanding of the way in which Swahili was adopted by Islam and then Christianity for the transmission of their message. The process, as will be seen, went beyond an exercise in translation; it involved the creation of a

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vocabulary to suit particular doctrinal needs as perceived on the East African coast and, separately, on the mainland. The underlying aim, however, was the same: to use Swahili as a religious language. To place in perspective the use of Swahili as such, the paper begins with a consideration of what is meant by 'religious language' in this context.

Religious Language

An examination of religious language cannot be divorced from an understanding of the society in which it functions and of the culture of which it is a part. This is particularly important when one considers man, to use Crick's phrase, 'as a semantic creature' (1976:104) whose interaction with reality, including the divine, is conducted with and through meaning.

A survey of some works on religious language reveals various aspects which have been explored by scholars, encompassing the thoughts of linguists, theologians, philosophers and other social scientists. Several problems have been highlighted, foremost among which are issues related to the definition of religious language; the verification of its assertions; its 'descriptive' and 'non-descriptive' status; and, of interest to us here, the use of ordinary words to convey transcendental meaning.

This last problem has been given special attention by Ramsey (1957) in relation to the language of Christian theology. He demonstrates, through a series of steps, the way religious language is derived from what he terms a 'characteristically odd situation' which, in turn, is itself reinforced as such through that language. It might be useful to state briefly Ramsey's thesis so as to provide a framework for our discussion later.

The language used in what Ramsey calls a religious situation is different from ordinary language because the situation itself is not ordinary. It involves a relationship between an individual in the material world and the divine in the non-material. Language is used to express the inexpressible. In so doing, meaning is created for its words and phrases which, though they might appear 'odd' to those outside the situation, do—in large measure—fulfil the needs of the participants. The language enables an individual, for whom the religious situation is a personal one, to derive insight through a process of disclosure.