

Ngugi and Mazrui in Digitalization Policy: Practitioner Insights into The Role of Language in Decolonizing Digitalization Policy

Nanjala Nyabola

Language, digitalization, decolonization, Kenya, Kiswahili, development, developmentalism, digital technology, policy

Digitalization of public service provision has been and remains a pillar of the Kenyan government's approach to development. Kenya has explicitly linked digitalization to its ambitions for development – an approach that is echoed in the political campaign materials produced and distributed by all major political parties in the country. Yet the country's digital policy continues to be developed primarily in English, as the country continues to build and also receive digital technologies built elsewhere, primarily in English. This paper argues that in the context of postcolonial societies like Kenya and Tanzania, this has a distinct impact of deepening power differentials within the society that are rooted in 'coloniality'. Building from Ngugi's work on indigenous languages in public life, the paper argues that to properly map the terrain of decolonial praxis in technology, we must engage with the power differentials embedded in how languages are perceived and experienced in postcolonial societies.

nanjala@gmail.com

Abstract

Digitalization of public service provision has been and remains a pillar of the Kenyan government's approach to development. Kenya has explicitly linked digitalization to its ambitions for development – an approach that is echoed in the political campaign materials produced and distributed by all major political parties in the country. Yet the country's digital policy continues to be developed primarily in English, as the country continues to build and also receive digital technologies built elsewhere, primarily in English. This paper argues that in the context of postcolonial societies like Kenya and Tanzania, this has a distinct impact of deepening power differentials within the society that are rooted in 'coloniality' as defined by Grosfoguel.¹ The use of colonial languages in the creation and dissemination of digital policy is an obstacle to decolonizing the internet in postcolonial societies.

Building from Ngugi's work on indigenous languages in public life, the paper argues that to properly map the terrain of decolonial praxis in technology, we must engage with the power differentials embedded in how languages are perceived and experienced in postcolonial societies. Languages, the paper argues, are not only a key component of colonial violence as Ngugi argued, but they also perpetuate the power disparities of incomplete decolonization, including, for

example, the perception of those who speak indigenous languages as their index language as being lower class and therefore more abstract to power. The paper then summarizes a project developed by the author to create a lexicon for digital rights in Kiswahili as an example of the decolonial praxis necessary to address these power disparities in countries like Kenya and Tanzania. In this way, the paper not only proposes a theoretical argument for decolonization but also offers a practical example of what meaningful decolonial praxis of digital technologies can look like. Overall, the paper argues that the decolonization of digital technologies is imperative for addressing the coloniality embedded in digitalization policy in Kenya.

Introduction

Digitalization of public service provision is a central pillar of the Kenyan government's approach to social progress, consistent with the latter's commitment to developmentalism. The rhetoric of development as a solution to the myriad social and political challenges that face the state is echoed in political materials ranging from manifestoes to government strategy documents. For instance, Kenya Vision 2030, a multi-year development strategy that promises to 'transform Kenya into a newly industrialising middle-income country, providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by 2030 in a clean and secure environment'.² Launched in 2008, Vision 2030 repeatedly offers digital as a key method through which connection between state and citizen would be enhanced, and through which service provision would be significantly improved.³

¹ Grosfoguel, Ramón. 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms'. *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2007, pp. 211–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514>.

Kings College London

² Kenya Vision 2030 | Kenya Vision 2030. <https://vision2030.go.ke/>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2022.

³ *Ibid.*

Yet developmentalism is itself a highly critiqued philosophy that is arguably unable to produce the kinds of transformation that the Kenya government is hoping to achieve. Notably, developmental theory is criticized for engendering coloniality by any other name and entrenching the power inequalities that shaped colonial extractivism within nominally postmodern societies while obscuring their continuity.⁴ Wallerstein argues that the flattening of the aspirations of societies of the global majority to simply their economic form, while proposing extraction as the primary method through which social progress can be attained is itself a form of coloniality.⁵ Thus the Kenya government's continued embrace of this approach doesn't simply show a lag between the creation of knowledge within the academy and its dissemination into praxis. It also shows that coloniality is embedded within knowledge production itself, and frictions created when this knowledge is applied uncritically to the society tells a deeper story of incomplete decolonization and its consequences.

This paper therefore identifies one of the frictions that have emerged from Kenya's digitalization policy, that is, the role of language within the nation's digitalization policy and the subsequent discontent that is created. Specifically, it looks at the failure to translate key aspects of the digitalization policy as inevitable consequences of a policy rationale that is inherently colonial. As Grosfoguel (2007) argues, coloniality is not just about political power but about the continuation of the practices that made the projection of colonial power possible, or the persistence of 'colonial situations' that can persist in the absence of colonial administrations.⁶ The paper argues that the failure to translate digitalization policy in Kenya is not an afterthought but a predictable outcome of continued coloniality, and that to translate these materials not for the purposes of making extraction possible but on the basis of extending the role of the citizen within the digital sphere, is therefore a decolonial act. Economic systems that view nationals of the Global Majority as primarily sources of labour and their territories primarily as sources of raw materials are inherently colonial. Thus, a digitalization policy that is designed to enable the extraction of data without examining the social and economic experiences of those whose data is extracted, or the consequences upon them dehumanizes them and extends the coloniality that they experience. By using the example of a project administered by the author, the paper will demonstrate the opportunities and limitations of such decolonial praxis within a neoliberal and globalized framework of digitalization.

Developmental digitalization

'Developmentalism' refers to the dominant paradigm of social and economic transformation between the 1940s and 1990s generally applied from countries of the global minority to those of the global majority. Its central premise is that social progress is linear and characterized by a distinct set of characteristics, and that societies can be pushed forward on the path towards attaining these characteristics through a set of prescribed interventions.⁷ By extension, it also holds

that the nations of the Global Minority, particularly in Europe and North America, represent the attainment of these characteristics, and therefore the process of attaining development is the transformation of the Global Majority into replicating the socio-economic characteristics of the societies of Europe and North America.

Criticism of developmentalism has existed as long as the theory itself has been in existence. Early postcolonial critiques pointed out that Eurocentric developmental discourses manufactured the un-modern other in the same way that colonialism manufactured the uncivilized native as a foil to necessitate colonial expansion.⁸ In this way, developmentalism is part of the genealogy of colonial power, using the same paternalistic rhetoric that justified colonial violence to justify excessive interference in the social and economic practices of the nations of the global majority.⁹ Similarly, uneven globalization is a core precept of developmentalism, necessarily demanding open borders for both people and goods from the global majority but responding to the migration of people and importation of goods from the south with hostility and as a form of invasion.¹⁰ Capitalism is embedded in the stated aims of developmentalism because the argument that unchecked economic growth can provide the material resources necessary to deliver the promises of the theory.¹¹ At the same time, where developmentalism becomes a fetish for the society in question, it demands the reorganization of social energy towards the attainment of its stated aims, often at the expense of other social imperatives like inclusion or equality.¹² Dirlik (2014) observes that commodity fetishism as defined by Marx finds expression within this paradigm because developmentalism provides an analogous fetishism.¹³ This synergy is evident in the idea that one or a menu of commodities, supported by a menu of policy interventions, can propel the 'undeveloped' society towards development.

In the 21st century, digital goods occupy this space within the developmentalist state. Development, translated as '*maendeleo*' in Kiswahili, has been central to state policy since the Moi regime of the 1980s.¹⁴ In his book setting out his philosophy and principles, former president Moi coins the term 'Nyayoism' to refer to a philosophical commitment to development with an approach that is rooted in practices 'traditional and endemic to African thought patterns and way of life'.¹⁵ Nation-building and development are stated goals but only the former is explicitly defined. This vague ontological commitment continues to shape public policy today, leaving the question 'what will our society look like when we are "developed"?' unaddressed. Thus, while developmentalism has been roundly critiqued within academic circles, it remains the dominant approach to public policy in countries like Kenya.

4 Dirlik, Arif. 'Developmentalism'. *Interventions*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 30–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2012.735807>; and Wallerstein, Immanuel. 'After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?' *Social Forces*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1263–78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2005.0049>.

5 Wallerstein, (n 4).

6 Grosfoguel, The Epistemic Decolonial Turn. (n1) p 220.

7 Temin, David Myer. 'Development in Decolonization: Walter Rodney, Third World Developmentalism, and 'Decolonizing Political Theory''. *American Political Science Review*, vol. 117, no. 1, 2023, pp. 235–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000570>.; Wallerstein, I. 'After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?' *Social Forces*, vol. 83, no. 3, Mar. 2005, pp. 1263–78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2005.0049>.

8 *Ibid.*; Blanco, Ramon, and Ana Carolina Teixeira Delgado. 'Problematising the Ultimate Other of Modernity: The Crystallisation of Coloniality in International Politics'. *Contexto Internacional*, vol. 41, Dec. 2019, pp. 599–619, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-8529.2019410300006>.

9 Grosfoguel (n 1) p 220.

10 Wallerstein, (n 4).

11 *Ibid.*, Dirlik. 'Developmentalism' (n4); See also Rist, Gilbert. *History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*. Zed Books, 2009.

12 Dirlik, *Developmentalism*.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Moi, Daniel Toroitich arap. *Kenya African Nationalism: Nyayo Philosophy and Principles*. Reprinted, Macmillan, 1987.

15 *Ibid.*, p 7.

At the same time, the concept of digitalization is cited in multiple policy documents as one of the enabling commodities that will lead to development. As stated, Kenya Vision 2030 promises to ‘transform Kenya into a newly industrializing middle-income country, providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by 2030 in a clean and secure environment’ and digital goods are identified as a key method for improving service provision from the state.¹⁶ Within this paradigm, entrepreneurship and by extension capitalism, is the primary means through which the potential of digitalization can be achieved.¹⁷ The main policy and social conditions that led to the rapid expansion of digitalization in Kenya are attributed to capitalist interventions rather than to social conditions.¹⁸ Similarly, the unchecked idea that Kenya must remain open to the kind of investments – that Wallerstein notes demand open borders from the global majority while making exceptions for closed borders in the minority – is encouraged as part of the process of unlocking the developmental value of digitalization.¹⁹

The Kiswahili Digital Rights Project

The Kiswahili Digital Rights Project is a project to influence the role of language in digitalization policy by creating, disseminating and popularizing the vocabulary of digital rights in Kiswahili in both Kenya and Tanzania. The foundational premise for the project is that to decolonize properly, power to shape policy and practice in various political domains must be vested in the populations that will experience digitalization. The project theory of change is that providing individuals, communities and civil society with the linguistic tools to understand and describe the developments in the technology space will enable them to advocate for their rights more independently and completely. The project also hypothesizes that beginning with Kiswahili, an African language well supported by institutions and research, will provide a starting point for similar initiatives in other African languages, as the leap from Kiswahili to other African languages is arguably smaller than the leap from English to other African languages.

The work was triggered by the author’s experience as a researcher and advocate for digital rights in Kenya, particularly around the *Huduma Namba* initiative of 2019. In February 2019, the Government of Kenya through the Ministry of the Interior announced the mass registration drive for a ‘single source of truth’ digital identity called the National Integrated Identity Management System (NIIMS) or *Huduma Namba*.²⁰ While the digital ID was the culmination of many attempts at reform of the national identity system, critics argued that the government had not done anything to address the historical patterns of systemic discrimination against specific ethnic groups, children of single parents, and many other groups that had major difficulty accessing the existing national identity card system.²¹ Several months of advocacy driven by various advocacy groups followed that culminated in a legal challenge brought by the Nubian Rights Forum and other partners.²² At the end of that proceeding, the High Court held that the *Huduma Namba* registration could not continue as long as the court had not addressed some of the fundamental procedural

issues, including the passing of a data protection act and the creation of the position of Data Protection Commissioner.

As an advocate working with communities in this period, I was struck by the frequency with which we were forced to rely on English words to express key concepts pertaining to digital rights. Mixed sentences like ‘*ni muhimu sana kulinda privacy yetu dhidi ya harakati za kuiba data yetu*’ or ‘*bila sheria inayopiga marufuku surveillance itakuwa ngumu kusimamisha utumizi mbovu wa data yetu*’ were common, even when speaking to audiences in sheng’. ‘Data’ is translated into Kiswahili through the efforts of institutes like TATAKI as ‘data’ (pronounced DAH-ta) but other key words like *privacy* and *surveillance* were not, and interrupted sentences dramatically. Even for us as digital rights practitioners, it was impossible to relay fully the linguistic context of the threat and the actions that needed to be taken against it. Yet the state and private sector’s surveillance capacity and incursions on the right to privacy in the country continue to grow, particularly with regards to laws pertaining to national security. For example, in 2014, the government passed the omnibus Security Laws (amendment) Act, which amongst other things, prevents suspects from disclosing publicly unusual methods of surveillance used in the process of their arrest.²³ In the absence of translation of these key terms, the growth in state surveillance is poorly contextualized for much of the country. Citizens who do not fully understand the implications of these laws are unable to effectively challenge them, and echoing the practices of the colonial state, increasingly oppressive laws are passed under the umbrella designation of ‘national security’. Arguably, without translation citizens are unable to perform the meaningful participation envisioned by the constitution.

In December 2020, I received the Stanford Digital Civil Society grant to fund the development of a project to translate key terms in digital rights and to create a context for their utilization. The initial grant funding was used in three ways:

1. **Translation:** Kiswahili language experts from Kenya and Tanzania (including Zanzibar) gathered virtually to deliberate a list of 52 pre-selected words and definitions pertaining to digital rights chosen because they reflected some of the recurring themes in digital policy making in the country. The experts represented the diversity in the standard register of Kiswahili, as well as representatives who spoke sheng.
 2. **Dissemination:** The main list of translated terms was designed as a PDF and shared freely on social media and within communities of linguistics and digital rights practitioners. A set of playing cards incorporating both the English and Kiswahili translations was also produced, in order to encourage young people to use the cards in their day-to-day life. Finally a manual for teaching digital rights was produced in English and Kiswahili, targeting educators and young people in senior secondary school and above. All of this material was made available for free in training workshops for educators and was also distributed in schools through Amnesty Kenya. Training workshops for educators were supported by the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi, as well as Amnesty Kenya as a convening partner. A total of 54 teachers attended the workshops as well as some members of the Amnesty Kenya staff. The half-day
- 23 Kenya: The Security Laws (Amendment) Act, 2014 [Kenya], 317 (e) (4) December 2014, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4df202da2.html> [accessed 31 March 2023].

16 Kenya Vision 2030 | Kenya Vision 2030. <https://vision2030.go.ke/>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2022.

17 Ndemo, Bitange, and Tim Weiss, editors. *Digital Kenya: An Entrepreneurial Revolution in the Making*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57878-5>.

18 *Ibid.*, p 3.

19 *Ibid.*, p 4.

20 ‘PRESS RELEASE: Huduma Namba Stopped!’ *Namati*, <https://namati.org/news-stories/press-release-huduma-namba-stopped/>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2022.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

workshops were bilingual as they were designed to introduce the participants not just to the key terms in digital rights, but also to their expressions or contexts in Kiswahili.

3. **Popularisation:** Funds from the grant were also used to start a literature prize in Kiswahili, the Nyabola Prize for Science and Speculative Fiction, that encouraged people to write short stories on themes that could connect to digital rights. The top story was published in a South African literary magazine. I also published opinion pieces on digital rights in Kiswahili language publications and a journal article on language and digital citizenship in Kiswahili.²⁴

These initiatives continue in various forms as the project evaluates and adapts to the post-pandemic reality.

By the end of the 18-month project cycle for the preliminary phase, the project laid the foundation for more robust engagement with emerging digital rights issues in East Africa. The key materials from the project – a set of flashcards available in print and in digital format – were widely distributed through workshops and through freely available downloads. By December 2022, efforts were already underway to replicate the initiative in Somali and isiZulu. Three workshops for teachers were held across Kenya with more planned for 2023 that further supported the distribution of the materials.

Publication was a major aspect of the project. Aside from the web presence, the project also resulted in the publication of an academic article on digital citizenship and language in Kiswahili²⁵. This article was presented and well received at the international Anticipation Conference of 2022 as an example of decolonial praxis. An opinion piece on digital rights relating to a scandal of involuntary registration at the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties was published in the *Taifa Leo*, the main Kiswahili language newspaper in Kenya.²⁶ The reception of the piece points to a key characteristic of the public sphere in Kenya that the project addresses directly: the gap between the English-speaking world and the Kiswahili speaking world in Kenya. Kiswahili is the language of mass politics and popular culture in Kenya²⁷ and there is a political interest from those who have power to maintain the cognitive gap between Kiswahili-first communities and English-first communities in order to maintain the power that is created by ignorance of key issues. The main Kiswahili language newspapers in Kenya primarily cover politics, sports and social issues, rarely straying into fraught political conversations, and not covering technology. The publication of this piece abruptly led to the end of communication between myself and the publication for reasons that remain unclear despite the offer to write for free.

A key finding of the project was that there was intense interest in deepening context for Kiswahili in Kenya but that the lack of non-academic material produced in an accessible register was keenly felt. Teachers during the workshops suggested frustration that they were

previously unfamiliar with some of the key digital developments that many of their students were facing. Participants in the workshop said that they were engaging and insightful. Parts of the project have been handed over to Amnesty Kenya as part of their Human Rights in Schools campaign in order to reach more young people. Given that at least 60% of the country's population is estimated to be younger than 35 years old, entire generations of Kenyans have emerged that have never experienced the world without internet. Thus teachers also expressed a keen interest in hosting workshops in their own schools, and many have already extended invitations to the project join them in their schools to teach the same material to students. Workshops in Tanzania were not held owing to lack of resources but planning for such workshops in subsequent years is underway, as well as follow-up workshops to examine the effectiveness of the methodology.

It is impossible to contemplate future directions for initiatives concerning Kiswahili without contemplating the place for sheng'. One study found that sheng' is the sixth most common household vernacular in Nairobi,²⁸ yet administrations have emphatically discouraged students from speaking it, arguing that it limits young people's ability to master both English and Kiswahili. Public perception of sheng' speakers is often negative, with some associating it with disrespect or even gang activity.²⁹ Although sheng' speakers were included in the initial translation workshops, the engagement was complicated by the language's precarious position within the public sphere in Kenya. One major way that the presence of Sheng' Nation in the workshop contributed to the final outcome of the translations was a review of all the words to see where there had already been efforts to develop translations into sheng', and to maintain a focus on developing vocabularies that people would use, rather than complex vocabularies that would frustrate particularly young people.

Kiswahili in the Public Sphere in Kenya and Tanzania

Over 140 million people speak Kiswahili in Eastern and Southern Africa and it is the most widely spoken African language in the world. In Africa, Kiswahili has functional and instrumental utility and is often offered as a symbol of pan Africanism.³⁰ The linguistic origin of the language is complicated and has been the subject of some debate, with scholars like Mazrui (1988) arguing that it is an Arabic language with a Bantu superstructure,³¹ and others like Habwe (2009) arguing that it is a Bantu language that borrows from Arabic grammar.³² The language has its origin on the Swahili coast, a relatively narrow strip of territory stretching from present day Kismayu in Somalia to northern Mozambique and including several large towns like Dar es Salaam and Mombasa, as well as islands like the Comoros, Zanzibar and Lamu.³³

28 *Ibid.*, p 59.

29 *Ibid.*, p 77.

30 Mazrui, Ali A., and Pio Zirimu. 'The Secularization Of An Afro-Islamic Language: Church, State, And Market-Place In The Spread Of Kiswahili.' *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 24–53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26195666>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022., p 37.

31 Mazrui, Alamin. 'Roots of Kiswahili: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Dual Heritage'. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1992, <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7203016758>., p 90.

32 Habwe, John. 'The Role of Kiswahili in the Integration of East Africa.' *Journal of Pan African Studies* (2009).

33 Herman Batibo, The Growth of Kiswahili as the Language of Education and Administration in Tanzania, in *Discrimination Through Language in Africa? : Perspectives on the Namibian Experience*, edited by Martin Pütz, De Gruyter, Inc., 1995. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kcl/detail.action?docID=3049972>.

24 Nyabola, Nanjala. 'Uraia, Lugha Na Haki Za Kidijitali: Umuhimu Wa Lugha Katika Harakati Za Kuondoa Ukoloni Katika Teknolojia'. *Foresight*, Oct. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1108/FS-11-2021-0222>.

25 *Ibid.*

26 NANJALA NYABOLA: *Vyama Vilikiuka Sheria Ya Faragha-Data, Viadhibiwe – Taifa Leo*. <https://taifaleo.nation.co.ke/vyama-vilikiuka-sheria-ya-faragha-data-viadhibiwe/>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

27 Githiora, Chege. *Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili Vernacular*. NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2018, [doi:10.2307/j.ctv1ntfvm](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ntfvm)., p 46.

Today, Kiswahili is an official language in Kenya and Tanzania (meaning its use is supported by legal acts and official documents),³⁴ a national language in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (meaning it is widely used and recognized by the state) and is widely spoken amongst a significant population in Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi because of the region's history of conflict and trade. Beginning in February 2022, Kiswahili is also a working language of the African Union³⁵ and the East African Community, as well as an official language of the Southern Africa Development Community,³⁶ further enhancing its regional reach. It is therefore also spoken within specific regional populations with large concentrations of migrants and refugees in countries like Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Similarly, efforts are underway to explore offering Kiswahili in the school curriculum in South Africa and Namibia,³⁷ further enhancing the reach of the language.

Despite these developments, the status of Kiswahili in public life in the region is mixed and rooted in the complexities of the colonial encounter. It is perhaps best rooted in Tanzania, where it is the official language and where all the major institutions for the research and promotion of the language sit. Although it is one of the most linguistically diverse countries on the continent, with only three of its estimated 120 indigenous languages spoken by more than one million people, generations of public policy have consolidated the position of Kiswahili as the language of administration and education in Tanzania.³⁸ The language entered the Tanzanian hinterland first through the long-distance caravan trade, including the Indian Ocean slave trade, that established kernels of speakers all the way to Lake Victoria.³⁹ Missionaries who subsequently arrived in the territory then used these kernels as entry points for their work, learning and relying on Kiswahili speakers to help them navigate the territory and win converts.⁴⁰ and through official colonial policy. When the German East Africa Company established a presence in the territory in 1885, colonial administrators decided to make Kiswahili the official lingua franca of the territory they controlled, with primary education delivered in Kiswahili while German was reserved for secondary education.⁴¹

This policy remained relatively unchanged after independence, with only English substituted for German at secondary school level after the Germans lost control of their African colonies following the Second World War. Significantly however, after independence the Tanzanian government continues to make significant investments in the expansion of Kiswahili in the public sphere, including continuous efforts to offer technical translations in legal and judicial contexts.⁴² Mazrui

(1990) argues that this policy accelerated the independence of Tanzania's education sector from the kind of external involvement that continues to affect similarly situated countries like Kenya and Senegal.⁴³

Similar efforts to entrench Kiswahili in public life in Kenya achieved mixed results. As in Tanzania, the language entered the hinterland first through trade, then through colonial language policy and subsequently through state-led efforts at promotion and popularization.⁴⁴ To be sure, minimal fluency in the language is an integral part of economic and social progress in Kenya, but the language in its standard form (*Kiswahili sanifu*) seems to have more political than practical utility. One major difference between the two countries is that while Kenya is officially bilingual, since 1962 Tanzania has only had one official language in Kiswahili.⁴⁵ Public policy in Tanzania has generally therefore been more supportive of the development of a standard register of Kiswahili that can keep up with contemporary developments in order to maintain its utility as the main language of public-facing interactions.

In contrast, Kiswahili enjoys legal protection in Kenya, which has given it a measure of public utility, but this utility is constrained by haphazard implementation of this policy. The Constitution of Kenya recognizes English and Kiswahili as official languages in Kenya in Article 7(1) which also creates an obligation to 'promote and protect the linguistic diversity of the country'.⁴⁶ As such, Kiswahili is part of the entire school curriculum, and translation into Kiswahili is in theory a mandatory requirement for all government documents. In practice, the average Kenyan is more likely to speak sheng', a patois or dialect of the language depending on the researcher exploring it,⁴⁷ and many government offices no longer adhere to the requirement for translation. For example, even though it is the supreme law of the land, there is no official translation of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) into Kiswahili. Similarly, laws and official declarations like the Kenya Gazette, the official notice and register of government appointments are not translated into Kiswahili.

This has a knock-on effect on the place of technology in public life. English is the default language of digital technologies in part because of the hegemonic position of private capital emanating from English speaking countries like the United States, and the desirability of English-speaking audiences as markets. On one hand, in Tanzania there is considerable momentum towards keeping the language current through spaces like the TATAKI (Taasisi ya Taalamu za Kiswahili) at the University of Dar es Salaam, which is charged with conducting research that updates the standard register of Kiswahili.⁴⁸ As such, many of the technical terms for various aspects of digital technology have been translated. However, many of the legal developments in the space of digital rights have not been advanced in Tanzania, in part because there have not been major legal challenges to digital rights violations like internet shutdowns or privacy violations. For instance,

OF KISWAHILI.' *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 24–53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26195666>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022., p 45.

43 *Ibid.*, p 37.

44 Mazrui, Alamin M., and Ali A. Mazrui. 'Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa.' *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1993, pp. 275–92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1601194>. P 276.

45 Batibo, The Growth of Kiswahili, (n 23), p 62.

46 Constitution of Kenya Article 7 (3) (b).

47 Githiora, *Sheng* (n 27)., p 59.

48 *University of Dar Es Salaam - Institute of Kiswahili Studies*. <https://www.udsm.ac.tz/web/index.php/institutes/ijs>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2022.

34 Smoleń, Rafał. 'Language Policy in Postcolonial Africa in the Light of Postcolonial Theory. The Ideas of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o'. *Studies in African Languages and Cultures*, no. 50, Dec. 2016, pp. 115–48, <https://salc.uw.edu.pl/index.php/SALC/article/view/159>, p 121.

35 *African Union Adopts Swahili as Official Working Language*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/african-union-adopts-swahili-as-official-working-language/2498467>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2022.

36 sarnoiiv. *SADC Adopts Kiswahili as 4th Working Language*. 30 Aug. 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/education/knowledge-centre-interpretation/en/news/sadc-adopts-kiswahili-4th-working-language>.

37 'Kiswahili in Namibia Classes by 2021'. *The East African*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/kiswahili-in-namibia-classes-by-2021-1435068>.

38 Batibo, The Growth of Kiswahili as the Language of Education and Administration in Tanzania, (n 23).

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 Mazrui, Ali A., and Pio Zirimu. 'THE SECULARIZATION OF AN AFRO-ISLAMIC LANGUAGE: CHURCH, STATE, AND MARKET-PLACE IN THE SPREAD

Tanzania does not have a data protection law, and while privacy is recognized as a general principle under article 16 (1) of the Constitution of 1977, in the Kiswahili translation it is not articulated as a named right but as a broad recognition that individuals have the right to keep things secret.⁴⁹

On the other hand, while there are institutes conducting research into Kiswahili at various public and some private universities in Kenya, most of the research in the country is geared towards training Kiswahili teachers and translators rather than developing the language on a broad scale. Kenyan speakers of Kiswahili generally depend either on translations from Tanzania, or for the most part substitute English words where Kiswahili words are missing. Githiora (2018) argues that this dynamism is a positive reflection on the linguistic plurality of the country, labelling the emerging language 'Kenyan Swahili'.⁵⁰ English, in this register, plays a similar substitutive role to French in Eastern DRC. Mainstream Kenyan teachers of Kiswahili would disagree and suggest that it is a symptom policy failure to ground Kiswahili in the country's context, where for example the curriculum for all subjects taught in Kenya is developed and disseminated in English – including Kiswahili.⁵¹

At the same time, there has been significant development in law and policy around digital rights in Kenya in part because of deliberate government policy, and in part because there have been so many legal challenges to the absence of clear regulation in the space. For instance the Digital Economy Blueprint (2019) a policy document from the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology summarizes the opportunities and challenges of the digital space in Kenya.⁵² This policy documents champions a whole-of-government approach to digitalization, including digital government, digital business, investments in digital infrastructure, innovation driven entrepreneurship, and promotion of digital skills and values.⁵³ Similarly, the legal challenge to the *Huduma Numba* digital ID escalated the implementation of the Data Protection Law (2020), which activists argued was a crucial precursor to rolling out such large-scale data collection in the country. Yet, despite the fact that these policies target the entire population, none of these laws or policies have been officially translated into Kiswahili or any other languages in the country, and even advocacy efforts around digital rights protection in key moments like the data protection challenge struggle to offer concepts in Kiswahili.

Language and Coloniality

'The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe,' writes Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his seminal treatise 'Decolonising the Mind'.⁵⁴ This paper examines the terrain of digital rights as a cultural and not a purely technical process, and Ngugi's work in literature and decolonization is instructive to understanding the cultural implications of language. In 'Decolonising the Mind', Ngugi argues persuasively that language was not an afterthought in the colonial process but a central method for undermining and reorganizing colonized

societies. He also argues persuasively that the path to decolonization in Africa runs through efforts to restore the use of indigenous languages in public life in formerly colonized societies.

This approach is not without its critics. It raises the question of whether any one African language can sufficiently carry the burden of decolonization, given the linguistic diversity of the continent.⁵⁵ The approach triggers anxieties about replicating the dynamics of imperialism within the context of regional contexts, as with the imposition of Amharic on other nations within present day Ethiopia.⁵⁶ Smaller regional hegemonies are also part of the expansion of certain languages in Africa, and it is ahistorical to suggest that there were imperial dynamics between nations prior to the arrival of Europeans. Some critics argue that elevating some of these dominant languages in cultural production further perpetuates their histories of violence. Moreover, some critics argue that language is not static: and the Africanization of European languages means that these languages are no longer colonial artifacts per se but have enough variations within them to constitute distinct dialects of the same language of origin.⁵⁷ Thus Makoni et al. argue that language policies in Africa tend to ignore the proliferation of non-standard forms of European languages reflecting an ongoing inability of national language policy to develop African agency.⁵⁸

Yet none of these critiques undermine Ngugi's central point that the violent imposition of European language on indigenous populations across the global South was not incidental to the physical violence, but part and parcel of the broader violence of colonization. Fanon (1965) reminds us that part of the intellectual project of colonialism was to convince the colonized that there is an essential intellectual quality to the colonizer's terrain of knowledge that survives despite the toxicity of the colonial enterprise.⁵⁹ To 'decolonize' literally means to remove colonial approaches, methods or philosophies in social and cultural practices, and meaningful decolonization can only occur if the violence is adequately addressed. Fanon also reminds us that 'decolonisation is a process of complete disorder': that it is not a peaceful process but a disruptive one. Thus, any attempt to study the role of language in public life in postcolonial societies must engage with the question of violence if it is to illuminate a programme of action and policy that contributes towards the broader interest in decolonization, even while it admittedly introduces a measure of chaos or misalignment.

After Ngugi, the question of the role of language in postcolonial societies has received significant treatment from various national and theoretical perspectives. Ngugi's seminal work was first published in 1981 in the aftermath of a major pan-African conference on African literature that significantly excluded those writing in French and in African languages.⁶⁰ Subsequently, Ngugi notes, writers like

49 Constitution of the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, 1977, Article 16 (1).

50 Githiora, Sheng', (n 27) p 41.

51 See generally Republic of Kenya: Ministry of Education, *National Curriculum Policy*, December 2018.

52 Republic of Kenya, Ministry of ICT, *Digital Economy Blueprint: Powering Kenya's Transformation*, 2019.

53 *Ibid.*, p 26.

54 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Reprint., Transferred to digital print, Currey [u.a.], 2005., p 4.

55 Parker, Emily (2004) 'Response to Ngugi wa Thiong'o,' *Macalester International*: Vol. 14, Article 10. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol14/iss1/10>.

56 Hameso, Seyoum Y. 'The Language of Education in Africa: The Key Issues.' *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908319709525237>.

57 Mesthrie, Rajend. *Africa, South and Southeast Asia*. Mouton de Gruyter, 2008.

58 *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*, edited by Bernard Spolsky, Cambridge University Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kcl/detail.action?docID=833377>.

59 Fanon, Frantz., *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Reprinted, Penguin Books, 2001., p 36.

60 Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* (n 54) p 6.

Ezekiel Phandlele and Leopold Senghor argued that African writers had 'Africanized' European languages and had as much stake in their promotion and utilization as their European counterparts.⁶¹ Writing after the same conference, Chinua Achebe observed that the use of European languages in this way offered postcolonial African nations the opportunity to develop 'national literatures' because African nations are a construct of European colonial powers. Government policy in several countries proposed the use of European languages as a shortcut towards development, suggesting that as the momentum towards formal education was already with European languages, there was no reason to disrupt it.⁶²

On the other hand, scholars looking beyond tensions within the use of European languages to the independent potentials that African languages offer suggest that national literatures without European languages are not only possible, they are necessary. Mazrui (1990) argued explicitly that Kiswahili in particular can be the language of Africa's post-colonial future.⁶³ Mazrui and Mazrui (1993) postulate that colonial language policy did paradoxically create room for African language like Kiswahili because of the need for a lingua franca that made it possible for Africans to communicate with each other across ethnic boundaries.⁶⁴ They recognize that the use of Kiswahili in East Africa cannot be characterized as purely organic, but at the same time, because it is a product of momentum that exists beyond the colonial encounter, the place of Kiswahili in public life in East Africa offers a possible alternative to the use of colonial languages.⁶⁵

This debate continues in contemporary African sociolinguistics and literature, but all positions are bound by the same underlying premise: that the use of European languages in Africa is a project of colonial force rather than organic uptake. Ngugi argues that the point of imposing African languages on African populations was to redirect both the physical and intellectual labour of indigenous cultures towards the enrichment of the culture of the colonizing society.⁶⁶ Thus, indigenous people are doomed to inferiority relative to the colonizing culture, where their cultural contributions will always be hyphenated contributions to the mainstream – Indian-English, Senegalese-French, Brazilian-Portuguese – rather than ever building a cultural corpus rooted in their indigenous context. The consensus is that the use and necessity of European languages in African cultural production is a product of colonization, and this logically sets up the argument that decolonization must somehow involve using indigenous languages.

Indeed, the place of European languages in the colonial project and in perpetuating coloniality is clear. Grappling with the role of language in public life in postcolonial societies is therefore foundational to the process of decolonization. Galtung (1990) uses the concept of

'cultural violence' to specify the nature of linguistic violence further, defining it as aspects of culture that are used to justify direct or structural violence.⁶⁷ The point of cultural violence, he argues, is to make direct or structural violence look right, either by diminishing the value of the culture and portraying it as inferior and unworthy of preservation, or by legitimizing the use of force against the bearers of that culture by suggesting that it might have an inherent toxicity that must be rooted out. Language and violence remain intimately connected in the postcolonial society, particularly where government policy continues to celebrate the place of colonial languages and fluency in colonial languages as an indicator of development.

As long as English remains the primary language of digitalization policy in the global majority, the question of decolonization will remain live. English occupies this place in part because of the economic relations of globalization, which, as Wallerstein argues, occurs within the genealogy of coloniality. Western technological companies that dominate the digital space explicitly influence policy in order to protect their capacity to extract data, labour and other inputs of capitalism from these markets. European governments have developed explicit policies in resistance to this state of affairs, championing local languages through translation initiatives and projects, e.g. in France.⁶⁸ Similarly, groups like the Localisation Lab have developed initiatives to support Natural Language Processing or Artificial Intelligence in order to make it easier for speakers of African languages to interact with the internet in translation.⁶⁹ However, until the project discussed in this paper was launched, there were no large-scale efforts to create a vocabulary that explicitly focused on the dimension of digital rights in Kiswahili, that is, empowering African language speakers to engage with the ideational rather than the technological aspects of digitalization in their own languages.

Coloniality within Kenya's Digitalization Policy

In his analysis of the development of Kenya's ICT sector, former Cabinet Secretary for ICT, Dr. Bitange Ndemo notes that policy making in Kenya is shaped primarily by the 'vision and political agenda of the incoming administration'.⁷⁰ As such, policy documents like Vision 2030 are critical to understanding the policy landscape in the country, and the location of digitalization within such documents can illuminate the country's orientation towards the concept. The commitment to digitalization as a pillar of service provision and improved government in Kenya has manifested primarily in the digitalization of core government functions, especially those focused on revenue collection and allocation. For instance, The Kenya Integrated Tax Management System (ITMS) was an integral part of the government's improvement of tax collection under Vision 2030, leading to the site that is today known as iTax.⁷¹ Similarly, road licence procurement and vehicle

61 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

62 Mazrui, Alamin. 'The World Bank, the Language Question and the Future of African Education'. *Race & Class*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1997, pp. 35–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639689703800303>. P 36.

63 Mazrui, Ali A., and Pio Zirimu. 'THE SECULARIZATION OF AN AFRO-ISLAMIC LANGUAGE: CHURCH, STATE, AND MARKET-PLACE IN THE SPREAD OF KISWAHILI.' *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 1, 1990, pp. 24–53. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26195666>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022., p. 5.

64 Mazrui, Alamin M., and Ali A. Mazrui. 'Dominant Languages in a Plural Society: English and Kiswahili in Post-Colonial East Africa'. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1993, pp. 275–92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1601194>.

65 *Ibid.*, 276.

66 Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, (n 54).

67 Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005>.

68 étrangères, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires. 'Stratégie internationale pour la langue française et le plurilinguisme'. *France Diplomatie - Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères*, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/francophonie-et-langue-francaise/engagement-de-la-france-pour-la-diversite-linguistique-et-la-langue-francaise/strategie-internationale-pour-la-langue-francaise-et-le-plurilinguisme/>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2023.

69 'Home'. *Localization Lab*, 11 Nov. 2022, <https://www.localizationlab.org>.

70 Ndemo, B. (2017). Inside a Policymaker's Mind: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Policy Development and Implementation. In: Ndemo, B., Weiss, T. (eds) *Digital Kenya*. Palgrave Studies of Entrepreneurship in Africa. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57878-5_11.

71 <https://itax.kra.go.ke/KRA-Portal/>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2022.

registration have been digitalized through the National Transportation Safety Authority (NTSA) on websites known respectively as NTSA and TIMS. Passport services are partially digitalized, with applicants still required to print out forms and submit them to the relevant passport office for processing, although the process now requires a computer as the point of initial contact. Government services in Kenya that have gone digital, and by extension that rely on digital services like mobile money and bank transfers, have increased dramatically since 2013, seemingly making good on the promise of digital government.

This digitalization has generated several frictions that speak to the coloniality of digital goods as fetishized commodities within the developmental state. While these systems are mandatory for accessing government, there has been little notable effort to make them accessible beyond the imagined able-bodied user, fluent in English and connecting on a personal computer. For example, the iTax website fails the accessibility tests for screen readers or persons with disabilities.⁷² According to one survey, only 6 out of 10 users are able to successfully navigate the site independently.⁷³ The site only allows taxes to be filed on personal computers, yet only 18.2 % of Kenyans surveyed in the last national ICT survey owned a personal computer.⁷⁴ Kenya is not alone in this: disability activists point out that failure to account for their experiences of digital systems occurs even in countries of the Global Minority.⁷⁵

Language policy is of the frictions embedded in Kenya's digitalization policy that makes the coloniality of the policies evident. Simply, none of the key websites in the country have been translated into the country's second national language, Kiswahili. Government websites in the country are exclusively made available in English, even while fluency in English is largely restricted to urban and peri-urban contexts. This practice of uncritical exclusion is often echoed in the praxis of those working in human rights more broadly, and digital rights more specifically. Until 2022, when the project referenced in this paper was produced, almost no digital rights materials in the country were regularly disseminated in Kiswahili. Indeed, an extensive reading list on digital rights in Kenya can be produced exclusively in English, with none of the reports available in any other language.

The outcome of this absence is that while digitalization is a central pillar of government policy, underlying social inequalities compound pre-existing inequalities. The National ICT Survey of 2022 affirmed a strong correlation between access and usage on one hand, and gender, education, and age on the other.⁷⁶ Language further entrenches these inequalities by layering urban-rural and class dynamics onto the issues. Indeed, the failure to translate Kenya's digitalization policy extends far beyond the practice of website building. It is embedded in the nation-wide praxis of digitalization. The process of making digital policy in Kenya is primarily an anglophone endeavour that does not

reflect the linguistic pluralism of the country, and this creates significant difficulties in the process of mobilizing mass awareness and collective responsibility for digital rights.

Examining the legal dimension of digital policy making illuminates the ways in which colonial language policies can reproduce coloniality. For example, Kenya's Data Protection Act (2020) has never been translated into languages other than English, including Kiswahili – nominally the second official language in the country. In its early stages the law was criticized for falling well below the best practice standard set out by regional institutions, and the process of passing it was marred under the shadow of a constitutional challenge and widespread protest.⁷⁷ The long absence of such a framework to govern the country in light of a long history of surveillance and privacy encroachment and despite a protection for privacy contained in the constitution reflects the interests of the country to turn citizens primarily into sources of data within a digitalization framework rather than protect their rights.^{78,79} But even though it has implications for citizens across the linguistic divides within the country, there has been no effort to include non-English speakers in the process of developing or disseminating the law in its final form. This is coloniality in praxis, where the social implications of the law are subsumed under its economic imperatives, even while the law aims to address significant social outcomes of the process of digitalization.

Yet the advantages of translation at the very least into Kiswahili can be quickly seen, for instance, in the country's experience with mobile money. Launched in 2006 with the partially government-owned mPesa, mobile money initially allowed users to send small amounts of money to other mobile phone users using USSD codes.⁸⁰ Today, the service is available through three service providers in the country (mPesa, TKash and Airtel Money) all of which have smartphone-based apps to enable transactions.⁸¹ Notably, because all mobile companies allow users the option of using their SIM card in English and Kiswahili, users are able to access mobile money in either lingua franca. The success of this approach is reflected in the popularity of mobile money in the country, in which transactions in 2017 amounted to the equivalent of 33% of the country's GDP.⁸² While mobile money is often touted as evidence of the potential that digitalization offers Kenya, the linguistic approach has not been translated into other aspects of the national digitalization policy.

72 Gabriel KAMAU, James NJIHIA, Agnes WAUSI, E-government Websites User Experience from Public Value Perspective: Case Study of iTax Website in Kenya In Cunningham, Paul, and Miriam Cunningham, editors. 2016 *IST-Africa Conference: 11-13 May 2016, Durban, South Africa*. IIMC International Information Management Corporation Ltd., 2016.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Communications Authority of Kenya, *National ICT Survey Report* (2018) <https://www.ca.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/National-ICT-Survey.pdf>.

75 Holmes, Hannah, and Gemma Burgess. 'Digital Exclusion and Poverty in the UK: How Structural Inequality Shapes Experiences of Getting Online'. *Digital Geography and Society*, vol. 3, 2022, p. 100041, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2022.100041>.

76 Communications Authority, National ICT Survey (n 74).

77 Makulilo, Alex B., and Patricia Boshe. 'Data Protection in Kenya.' *African Data Privacy Laws*, Springer International Publishing, 2016, pp. 317–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47317-8_15, p 218.

78 *Ibid.*, p 321 - 324.

79 Mukiri-Smith, H., and R. Leenes. 'Beyond the 'Brussels Effect'? Kenya's Data Protection Act (DPA) 2019 and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018.' *European Data Protection Law Review* (Internet), vol. 7, no. 4, 2021, pp. 502–19, <https://doi.org/10.21552/edpl/2021/4/7>, p 505.

80 Oluwole, Victor. 'M-Pesa: Kenya's Mobile Money Success Story Celebrates 15 Years'. *Business Insider Africa*, 7 Mar. 2022, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/m-kesa-kenyas-mobile-money-success-story-celebrates-15-years/srp9g9ne>.

81 Nyabola, Nanjala. *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era Is Transforming Kenya*. ZED, 2018., p 65.

82 *Ibid.*

Overall, the interim outcomes of this project affirmed that the linguistic gap between the terrains created by English-first and Kiswahili-first digital spaces was more than a linguistic one. It overlaps closely with distinctions in class, and therefore access to power and policy. It reproduces coloniality by vesting the power to explain the law and what it means solely with the state. In a state with a majority youth population that has never experienced life without digital technology, it means that the vast majority of the population is experiencing the legal context related to a central element of their country's national policy in abstraction and translation. Teachers in Kenya are often called to bridge this gap for their students but are not offered sufficient resources to remain engaged with new developments in language, particularly in the digital sphere. This is only deepened by the lack of discussion about these subjects in Kiswahili language publications. Meanwhile, English remains the primary language for the development of digital policy and rights advocacy, inherently excluding Kiswahili-first, and even sheng-first communities who make up the majority of the country's populations. Inequality and exclusion is thus preconfigured into Kenya's digitalization policies because of the failure to account for the linguistic plurality of the nation, where the experience of language is intimately connected to the colonial encounter. Praxis that shifts the linguistic context of digitalization in the country therefore offer a significant step towards decolonizing digitalization policy.

Conclusion: Ngugi and Mazrui in the Digital Age

'If you wanted to hide knowledge from an African child, put it in English or French. Or if you wanted to hide the keys to the future, hide them in the dominant European languages'⁸³ writes Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The decision to use European languages to advance digitalization in African contexts has a material impact on how African societies experience digital technology. Similarly, in 1990 Mazrui observed that Kiswahili and Amharic are the two languages on the continent that have been fastest to acquire scientific vocabulary and that 'the computerisation of Kiswahili is on the horizon'.⁸⁴ Today, isiZulu and Somali can be added to that list, owing to considerable efforts within those languages to produce a corpus of technical information in them. The Kiswahili Digital Rights Project exists on the foundation of efforts already underway in the region to keep the Kiswahili language current, producing a specific subset of vocabulary that responds to an urgent challenge that lies between the technical and the social and therefore risks being forgotten.

Initiatives like the Kiswahili Digital Rights Project that are focused on creating relevant language materials in easily accessible formats are not merely about creating tools to improve the performance of technology. As Musyoki (2020) asserts, African languages are central to reclaiming African agency and there is tremendous decolonial value in translating key terms in digital rights into African languages.⁸⁵ Projects like the Kiswahili Digital Rights Project function as an invitation to African language communities to display their agency in shaping their digital realities: to position African language communities as

agents within the digitalization sphere and not merely recipients of technology that is not developed with them in mind. In their work on creating scientific and space related lexicon in Kiswahili, Ndiritu et al. (2016) point out that such efforts in translation is an invitation to African students and scholars to engage with this crucial aspect of science and technology.⁸⁶

Notably, the Kiswahili Digital Rights Project does not hypothesize that stopping with the translation of work into Kiswahili will mark the completion of decolonization praxis. In fact, it posits it as the beginning, recognizing that the social status of Kiswahili itself is a product of the colonial encounter and loaded with political complexity. The project hypothesizes that [the core of] decolonial praxis is shifting the priorities of digitalization away from developmentalism and disrupting the 'coloniality of power'— particularly around the idea of universality embedded within developmentalism.⁸⁷ Providing linguistic diversity in the question of rights gives people the power to shape the role of digitalization in their lives rather than leaving it up to the state or to the priorities of the global minority.

More importantly, efforts specifically at translating the language of rights versus the purely technical terms in technology are also about empowering individuals to demand a digitalization context that is appropriate to their needs and interests. It goes to the heart of the coloniality embedded in a purely developmentalist approach to digitalisation, shifting the gaze from data and its economic potential to the human experience of digitalization and shaping its social realities. For example, Odhiambo and Mars (2018) found that the failure to translate key technology terms into Kiswahili created material obstacles in engaging with telemedicine for Kenyan patients, even though telemedicine offers tremendous opportunity for improving primary healthcare.⁸⁸ The patients involved in the study were not able to give their informed consent to the study. Fanon (1965) observes that colonization trains the African intellectual to think of themselves primarily as an individual and to pursue knowledge creation as an individual pursuit. In contrast, decolonization demands the reinstatement of forms of organizing knowledge that see communities and societies first.

The Kiswahili Digital Rights Project continues in both Kenya and Tanzania through the dissemination of the project materials and the implementation of the workshop. Knowledge production also continues in opinion pieces and papers like this. Beyond mere symbolism, the Kiswahili Digital Rights project found that the place of language in public life in postcolonial societies is indeed deeply connected to how power is distributed in the states. Language, even with regards to digital technology, is not merely a technical aspect. It is an integral part of the cultural milieu in which technology is developed and deployed. Particularly in relation to the legal context, people cannot organize to defend rights that they do not understand, and providing the tools to understand these rights is crucial to a successful decolonial praxis.

83 Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2012, 'The Challenge – Ndaraca ya Thiomi: Languages as Bridges', in: V. Rapatahana, P. Bunce (eds.), *English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures*, Bristol – Buffalo – Toronto: Multilingual Matters, p 14.

84 Mazrui, and Zirimu. 'The Secularization Of An Afro-Islamic Language: Church, State, And Market-Place In The Spread Of Kiswahili.' (n 32) p 53.

85 Mũkonzi Mũsyoki, John. 'Role of Kiswahili in Furthering an Afrocentric Ethos'. *Connections: A Journal of Language, Media and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, Nov. 2020, pp. 12–20, <https://doi.org/10.29173/connections15>, p 13.

86 'Kiswahili Translation on the Scientific and Space-Related Terminology'. *Acta Astronautica*, vol. 128, Nov. 2016, pp. 330–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actaastro.2016.07.034>. P 331.

87 Grosfoguel, The Epistemic Decolonial Turn, (n 1) p 221.

88 Odhiambo, Rachael, and Maurice Mars. 'Patients' Understanding of Telemedicine Terms Required for Informed Consent When Translated into Kiswahili'. *BMC Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, p. 588, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5499-1>. P 6.

Copyright (c) 2024, Nanjala Nyabola.



Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.