

IS THERE SEXISM IN KISWAHILI?

Anita MacWilliam

Le sexisme des langues, si bien documenté dans beaucoup de langues indo-européennes, existe aussi dans les langues bantoues de l'Afrique. Employant le Kiswahili comme exemple, l'auteure démontre au moyen de la syntaxe et du lexique comment les idées de la passivité et de la soumission féminine sont renforcées dans la langue. Elle indique aussi certaines unités lexicales qui ont vu leur signification sémantique biaisée au cours des années, et les expressions argotiques qui dévalorisent les femmes. Cet essai, qui fut originalement présenté à un colloque pour le Projet de documentation et de recherche des femmes à l'Université de Dar es Salaam, fut aussi présenté à un atelier du Forum 1985.

This is a preliminary paper, part of an on-going research study of Kiswahili and sexism in language. These ideas were first shared with the women of WRDP (Women's Research and Documentation Project in Tanzania), whom I asked for ideas, criticisms and questions; I would like to thank them for their continued encouragement in my work on language.

In her book *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender writes:

It appears to be part of the human condition to attempt to make existence meaningful but we can only make sense of the world if we have rules by which to do it . . . Each day we construct the world we live in according to these man made rules. We select, pattern and interpret the flux of events in the attempt to make life meaningful and few of us suspect how deeply entrenched, and arbitrary, these rules are. We impose them on the world so that what we see conforms to what we have been led to see. And one of the crucial factors in our construction of this reality is language.¹

She goes on to say that "Language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity" (p. 139). We are all aware of the persuasive influence of words: witness the propaganda machines of political powers, the rhetoric spewed forth from

countless platforms, advertising in the mass media, etc.

Sexism has been amply researched in the Indo-European languages. There have been articles, books and monographs describing and analysing various aspects of sexism in English and French and, I would venture to guess, in many other European languages. To the best of my knowledge, not much has been written about the relevance of this issue for Kiswahili.

For most people Kiswahili has been perceived as a non-sexist language: I was told this back in the early '60s and I believed it.

On what evidence was this statement based? Quite simply by citing a bit of Kiswahili, for example: "*amekwenda mjini* he/she has gone to town." The only thing you can deduce from that simple declaration is that (a) the person has gone to town; and (b) the person is, therefore, not here. From the phrase itself we cannot know whether the 'person' is female or male. In order to determine, this we must resort to the context surrounding that phrase. So, if it is in answer to: "*mama yupo?* is mother here?," we know that the subject is female. Another fact used as evidence is the 3rd person singular pronoun '*yeye*,' meaning 'the person (other than you and me).' The word '*mwana*' ('child of') is another word cited to prove the 'non-sexism' of Kiswahili.

English and French, which are my native languages, are very sexist in syntax and especially in lexicon. Even a super-

ficial look at a dictionary shows the large percentage of derogatory words referring to women as compared to men – even though originally many of them referred to both men and women. Those of us working on the English-Swahili dictionary can testify to this fact as we come up against these words everyday.

I swallowed, hook, line and sinker the idea that Swahili was non-sexist. But that was before I knew anything at all and before I grew up. Then I learned the word '*-oa*' and was told it meant 'marry.'

Great! I could now formulate a sentence and proceeded to do so "*Nilisikia kwamba Rosa atamwoa Magesa mwezi ujao*" (I heard that Rose will marry Magesa next month). This brought a shake of the head, a correction "*tunasema Rosa ataolewa na Magesa mwezi ujao*" (we say Rose will be married by Magesa next month). Complete confusion: '*-oa*' meant marry, didn't it? So what was wrong with my sentence? Then came the enlightenment: '*-oa*' is used for a male subject, '*-olewa*' is used for a female subject. No one said what the meaning of that form was – it was just another vocabulary item for me to assimilate and use properly. Only when I began studying derivation in the verb did I find out that *-oa* is the base form of the verb; and *-olewa* is one of the derived forms and that particular derivation is the *passive* form of the Bantu verb. I have used the term 'Bantu' verb and not Kiswahili because the same pattern occurs in other Bantu languages:

| Language | Masculine Subject | Feminine Subject |
|---------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Kiswahili | – oa | – olewa |
| Kikwaya | – twara | – twarwa |
| Kikuria | – teta | – tetwa |
| Kipare | – ghuha | – ghuhwa |
| Kisukuma/Kinyamwezi | – tola | – tolwa |
| Kizigua | – sola | – solwa |
| Kihehe | – tegula | – tegulwa |
| Kihaya | – shwera | – shwerwa |
| Kigogo | – tola | – tolwa |

The form used for women shares the similar radical extension (-w-): "Verbs thus extended designate a situation which is effected by some agent other than the grammatical subject of the verb" (Whiteley, p.1).

In looking at the use of the two verbs -*oa* and -*olewa* in the following sentences we can begin to analyse what meaning underlies them: (a) "Ali alimwoa Pili;" (b) "Pili aliolewa na Ali." In (a) we have a simple form that translates "Ali married Pili." But in (b) we have a transformation taking

place that generates the meaning "Pili was married by Ali." Following Whiteley's statement, we can say in sentence (b) that the action of -*oa* was effected by an agent other than the subject 'she,' that is by the object of 'na,' Ali. We can thus paraphrase "Pili aliolewa na Ali" and say that Ali is the agent, he does the act of marrying while Pili receives the act of marrying.

The very terminology used by linguists for this passive -*wa* form means "being acted upon."

I spoke to an older man about this. I

mentioned that it seemed to me that the woman has no activity in this – she is the weaker part. He answered "Huelewi, tunasema ameolewa kwa sababu ni sisi wanaume ambao tunakwenda kwake kumwoa" (You don't understand, we say she is married by because it is us the men who go to her place to marry her)." His argument simply reinforces the idea of agent and recipient. All we need to do to reinforce the idea of passivity or, if you like, receptivity, is to make up a paradigm of this form with many other verbs:

Active

(1) *Petro anamtuma John sokoni*
Peter is sending John to the market

(2) *Ali alimjengea baba nyumba*
Ali built his father a house

(3) *Marwa alimpiga Mwita*
Marwa hit Mwita

(4) *Mtoto anamwangukia simba*
The child is looking at the lion

(5) *Hamisi amemwoa Adija*
Hamisi married Adija

(6) *John alimposa Maria*
John wooed Maria

(7) *Marwa alimchumbia Rosa*
Marwa became engaged to Rose

In sentences 1 – 4 the agent and recipient can be interchanged and the resultant sentences accepted:

John anamtuma Petro sokoni
Baba alimjengea Ali nyumba
Mwita alimpiga Marwa
Simba anamwangukia mtoto

But in numbers 5 – 7 we get unacceptable sentences:

Adija amemwoa Hamisi
Maria alimposa John
Rose alimchumbia Marwa

These three sentences can only be acceptable with female subjects if the verbs are in the passive form; whenever a verb has limits, it becomes classified as 'irregular' and therefore gets special treatment. The only way that reciprocity can be expressed is by using the "reciprocal" or

Passive

John antumwa sokoni na Petro
John is sent by Peter to the market

Baba alijengewa nyumba na Ali
Father was built a house by Ali

Mwita alipigwa na Marwa
Mwita was hit by Marwa

Simba anaangaliwa na mtoto
The lion is being looked at by child

Adija ameolewa na Hamisi
Adija was married by Hamisi

Maria aliposwa na John
Maria was wooed by John

Rose alichumbiwa na Marwa
Rose was engaged by Marwa

"associative" form -*ana*: *Ali na Pili wameoana*.

The reinforcement of "woman" as recipient carries through in other phrases: *amepata jiko*

he has gotten married

ameingia maafa
she has been married/inherited by her deceased husband's relative

amekaa katika kivuli cha mumeo

she sits in the shadow of her (deceased) husband

The first phrase can only be used of a man. The literal translation is "he has gotten a stove" – the extended meaning is "he has gotten a wife." So, in a figurative sense, *jiko* = *mke* (stove = wife).

In the next two phrases we enter into a cultural area. The levitic system has a long history and is not peculiar to Tanza-



Kenyan girl with child Credit: Shelagh Wilkinson

nia. Looking at it dispassionately we can see how it came about: in a society where division of labour was set, where each person had a place and belonged to someone, a widow needed to be accounted for and, if cattle or other goods had been given to her family, then it was to the benefit of both that she remain within her husband's clan. So she was inherited or married to a (usually near) relative of her deceased husband.

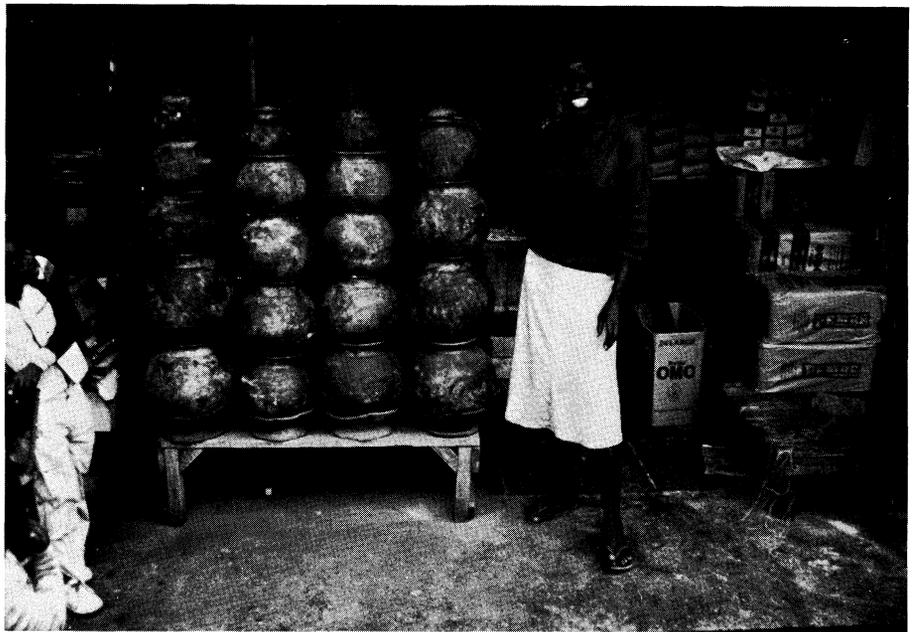
The last phrase can be interpreted to show the freedom exercised by the woman; I agree with the analysis. To say she remained in the shadow of her husband means she refused to be inherited. This has its good points but can also result in great hardship. I give you two personal experiences. My friend Teresa's father died when she was two,

leaving her mother with eight children. Mama refused to go with any other relative and raised her eight children herself. However, the circumstances were favourable – he had left a large herd of cattle and a well-established *kaya*. Also, and this may be a very important factor, mother was a stranger, a Muganda married to a Sukuma. My other friend, Maria, lost her husband when her youngest child was just a little over a year old (she had three others). He had been headteacher of our local primary school. His family insisted she come home and be married to his older brother, who already had two wives, Maria refused. So the children were all taken from her and she was left destitute.

In the realm of verb forms there is a form used in Mara; my research indicates that it seems to be peculiar to that area. Up there we say "Nyangeta ameachika kwa bwanaake" to mean "Nyangeta has been divorced/thrown out by her husband." In this phrase only a female can be the subject. Even if Nyangeta were to throw Magesa out because he is a drunken slob the phrase would not be changed. I tried it with the UWT group I belonged to in Mwisenge and was laughed to scorn – even after talking about the new marriage laws.

Naming in all Tanzanian ethnic groups is a very important aspect of life. Circumstances prevalent at the time of birth may give the person a name – for example, Nyanjera "she born on/beside the road," or Hitra "born at the time of Hitler" As a girl grows she is known as: Ng'wana Eliasi (daughter of Elias) mkewe Makoye (wife of Makoye) Mama John (Mother of John). I realize that these are all used to show respect and it is good: Eliasi was a well-respected man and his daughter shares his praise; Makoye is her husband and John is her son. But underlying this is the fact that her identity was sub-summed under her father, husband or child. She could only be explained in terms of some male figure. A person's name is important, it gives identity, personality and it is exclusive. So always to be known by someone else's name means to share that person's identity; a woman is thereby either losing her own peculiar identity or at least "sitting in the shadow."

Lexical items in this sphere are usually



Kenyan woman selling pots at market

Credit: Phyl Kohut Sereda

found in slang, colloquial expressions and jargon. First of all, there are terms of endearment such as: *kibonge cha mtoto* (This, according to a young male informant, is the ultimate compliment for a good-looking young woman). The terms *kisura*, *kidosho*, *kipusa*, *mtoto*, and *mrembo* would be equivalent in English to such terms as "knock-out," "gorgeous," "beauty," etc. In context – between intimate friends or lovers – they are a way of expressing affection. There is a tendency, however, for them to be used by young men as a commentary on the girls going by. Secondly, there are terms which are regular lexical items applicable to both men and women, but in regular speech are used primarily for women. An example of that would be the term "malaya" ("prostitute") which has as its first meaning "woman or man with the habit of fornication;" only secondly is the meaning given "a woman who sells herself to a man in order to make money." If the word "malaya" is thrown out to a group and they are asked "what picture do you get?" the answer from about 99% of the audience is "a bad woman."

Finally, there are terms which are primarily derogatory. Among University students the following are heard: *anatembea sana* (she walks a lot) *amekuwa handauti* (she is a handout). The meaning received is "easy to be taken by a man" (English "she is an easy lay"). Among the

military a woman is called *kitu*, *chombo*, *mashine* (thing, vessel, machine), meaning = *uke* = vagina.

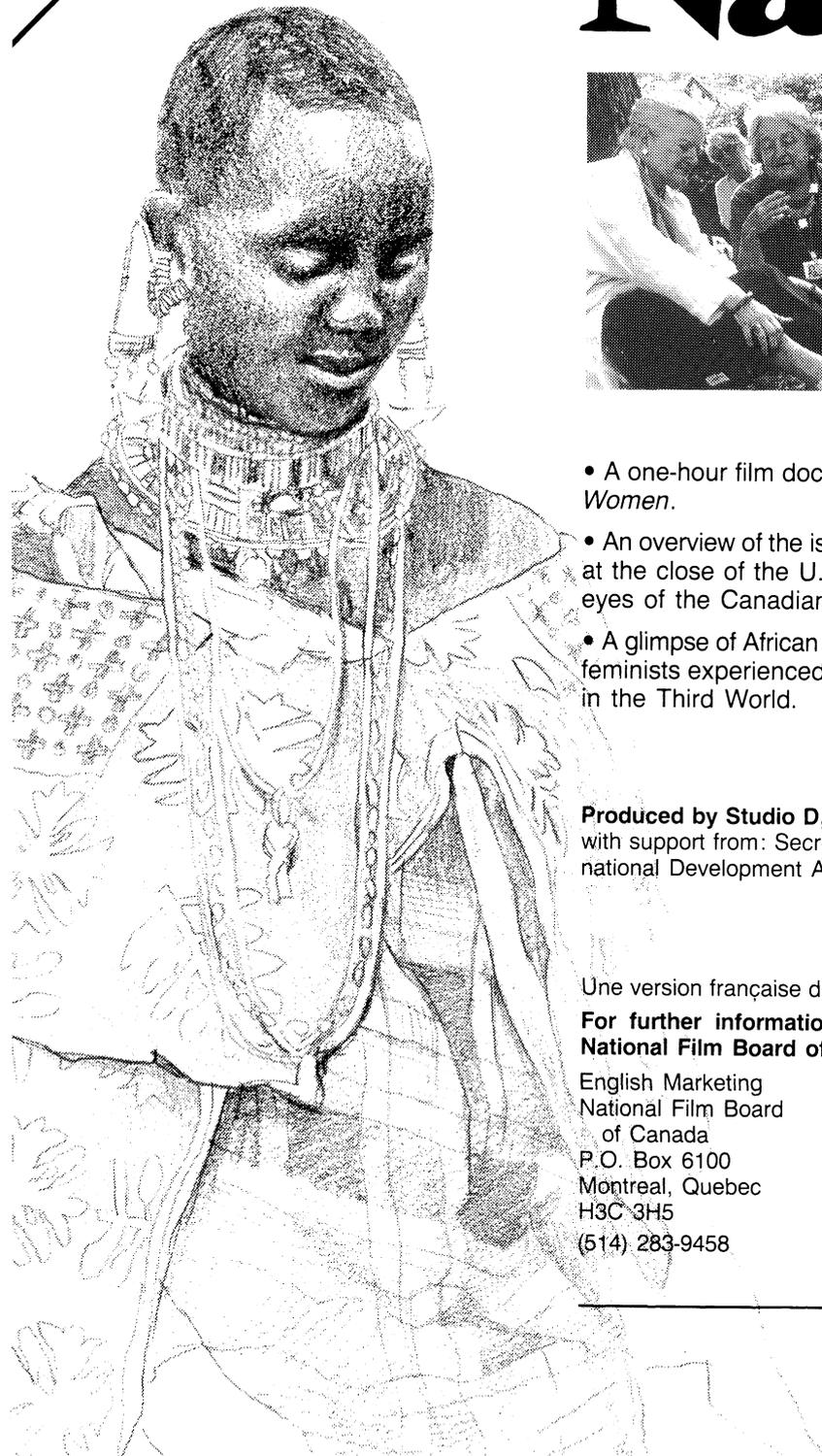
Sexist language is present in Kiswahili and we women are also guilty of using it. We call each other "bwana." In the Kiswahili dictionary the primary meanings are: 1. name of respect for a man. 2. husband 3. the man for whom you work. The extended meanings are: 1. word used to get a person's attention. 2. to startle a person, for example "E bwana huyajui mambo haya we?" ("Hey, mister, don't you know those things?"). It is fine to use *Bwana!* as an exclamatory but we should be aware that in doing so we are once more showing the primacy of the male. It is inconceivable to think that we could start saying to a man "E bibi huyajui mambo haya we?" ("Hey madam, don't you know those things?").

¹Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p.2.

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