

A Cultural Window into East Africa

Remarks to Students of Swahili at Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

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Introduction

It is a surprise to me as a citizen of East Africa to witness the kind of enthusiasm shown by the Chinese on East Africa. One notable aspect of this interest is the enhanced presence of Swahili studies in Chinese institutions of higher learning, as exemplified by the Great Beijing Foreign Studies University, where I stand before you this afternoon. I am making brief remarks on interactions between East Africa and China on the cultural front. In the process the interfaces of the relationship should be explored or inferred.

Swahili as an Opportunity

Swahili in many dialects is spoken by more than 160 million people in the greater East Africa, including Congo, Malawi and Mozambique. Thus it is by far the single most important language indigenous to Africa. And I am proud of myself as a Swahili speaker.

Evidently, the responsibility of teaching Swahili in China and teaching Chinese in East Africa is the sole responsibility of the Chinese Government and the Chinese people. While it is arguably clear that it serves China's interests in both ways, it is also true if the roles are reversed and charged with East African Governments and people - there shall be many opportunities presented by promoting Swahili in China and Chinese in East Africa by funding from the public coffers.

This scenario has the double effect of promoting the other cultures of East Africa and encouraging research and cultural diffusion, which in turn shall enhance the dignity of the East Africans. Translations and publishing shall be undertaken by East Africans. Research shall be guided by East Africans. Thus it is much less of a waste of money than of an investment if the Governments in East Africa fund all Swahili-related activities in China.

Access to Information

No one understands the challenges that stand in the way towards the advancement of East Africa as an industrial hub that can even supersede China than the East African and Chinese elite because they do business together. Vibrant democracy in East Africa has expanded access to information by allowing freedom of expression so that we can hear others' points of view and make judgments accordingly. However, this has worsened instead of enabling industrial progress in the region.

Access to information is a liability if a population is not enabled to process it properly. This begs for a policy framework towards a useful and directed foundational education. One of the Chinese compatriots said to me a few days ago, "Africa is backward because it lacks the *necessary* education." I agreed with him absolutely. However, most of the problems in East Africa are blamed on poor democratic political leaderships that make the poor people of East Africa bicker over nothing – but the devil is, by and large, improper educational orientation (both practical and philosophical) that subverts the cause for democracy and access to information; but still there is need for an appropriate political system in that region.

The Meaning of Work

The Chinese with limited access to per capita natural resources are predisposed to work because it serves their two major agendas: (1) improving material well-being, and (2) supporting the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which is the most fundamental unwritten dream of modern China. Consequently, unlike East Africans who do not experience the vagaries of weather or are not entirely conscious of any form of humiliation imposed on them except in the case of colonialism, the Chinese have solidly established why they should work.

Elite in East Africa, especially in Kenya, steal from their own generations by condoning the culture of corruption. Corruption is everywhere, even in China, but it is excessive in some East African economies. If the East African elite decide to go on the correct path of offering service to their people and build legacies out of that, then East Africa should be economically at par with China. Rwanda has led in this quest for service delivery in East Africa. Hopefully, the other East African economies shall follow suit.

Conclusion

I would like to end by saying that the prevailing cultural dynamics in East Africa and in China are brought about by the differences in the nature and quality of practical and philosophical education

offered to their people. In East Africa this situation can be ameliorated by attaching importance to the advancement of Swahili as a major carrier of the cultures of the people of East Africa.