

# **The Influence of Language Ecology on the Identity and Political Participation of the Inland Swahili Communities in the Luo Region of Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

This article evaluates the influences of the language ecology of the Swahili speakers who settled in the Kenyan hinterland on their identity, coexistence, and political prospects. These inland Swahili communities in Luo Nyanza have suffered an identity crisis under various political regimes. They have also faced an unstable and asymmetrical coexistence with their host communities. Their attempts at active political participation and social integration have been hampered by their different social, cultural, religious and linguistic heritage. This has led to exclusion and labeling which has jeopardized their chances of communal advancement and self-determination thereby reinforcing local discriminatory attitudes that perceive them as immigrants expected to be subservient to their hosts. Although some have been assimilated through the school system, employment, intermarriage and community leadership, the majority remain in social seclusion only resorting to their religion, Islam, and fighting for official and social recognition from the limiting confines of their informal settlements. It is significant to examine the discourse that these Swahili communities use to negotiate for their political space, how they perceive their historical and present identity and how they navigate their myriad challenges to enhance their existential prospects.

## ***Keywords***

Identity, language ecology, political participation, social integration

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## Introduction

There are pockets of isolated Swahili people or their descendants who moved and settled in the Kenyan hinterland alongside Arab traders. These are descendants of long-distance traders and itinerant traders who brought in goods from the coast and transferred crops from the farmers and blacksmiths from the interior. The business links led to sustainable social interactions, intermarriage and eventually, physical relocation after independence, some coastal Swahili remained and started *dukas* 'shops' and small-scale eateries that became the hallmark of their settled economic activities. They operated closely with the Indian *dukawallahs* who had preceded them. Besides introducing a business culture among the Luo, the Swahili way of life rotated around their religion, Islam which promoted Arabic through the *madrassa* learning centres hosted in the mosques.

The specific Swahili settlements reported about in this article are found in Kendu Bay town in Homa Bay County, Kaloleni informal settlement in Kisumu town and Riat Hills near Kisumu. The integration of the Swahili into their Luo host communities has been lopsided given the desire of the Swahili to conform to the local dominant language. Despite the fact that Kiswahili is now an official and national language, the Luo have historically been disinterested in acquiring Kiswahili and using it for socialization purposes. The language attitude of the Luo is such that they exhibit a higher preference for English and their mother tongue at the expense of Kiswahili which they label as a language of outsiders or 'not their tongue.' Moreover, the complex noun class system in Kiswahili which is a Bantu language makes its structure perceivably difficult and is considered insurmountable to the Luo.

### 1. The historical experience of the inland Swahili communities

The school system ensures that the Luo learn Kiswahili in school because it is an examinable subject both in primary and secondary schools. These dynamic contexts portend an asymmetrical language situation whereby Kiswahili is reserved for interaction with government officials especially in public transport, with the police, and public health personnel. It is also spoken nominally in government offices but only when one faces a non-Luo official. The Luo have been labeled as characteristically poor speakers of Kiswahili with sub-standard forms and an inability to master the Kiswahili vocabulary and idiom. Given that the Swahili inland communities are few, they have taken two options. First, they strive to maintain their unique identity by promoting Kiswahili as their heritage language. Secondly, the Swahili have had to be assimilated by the host speakers who are the majority in order to integrate naturally into the local social, economic and political system. The acquisition of Dholuo makes them bilinguals who can operate effectively in Kiswahili for group identity, Dholuo for socialization and access to political opportunity such as campaigning, and Arabic for religious discourse. Dholuo therefore acts as the target language for the subsequent descendants who have Kiswahili as their first language and Dholuo as the second language that they acquire naturally from their peers, playmates and schoolmates.

## **2. The Luo attitude towards Kiswahili**

The Luo have for a long-time associated Kiswahili with the cunning business people, early Swahili travelers, who would speak a strange language and easily convince the locals to surrender their goods without comprehending the real intentions of the traders. In effect, the Luo perception was that Kiswahili was a language of conmen and swindlers. To date, a wily character is described as a Mswahili, while an argumentative person can be reprimanded and reminded to stop behaving like a Swahili speaker. This means that the Luo were hesitant and cautious to accepting and accommodating the Swahili. They consider the Swahili as a closed society culturally and economically. This perception is compounded by the fact that the Luo cannot access the Swahili mindset as encapsulated in the highly intuitive and decontextualised idioms in the Swahili sayings and proverbs.

The fact is that most Kiswahili sayings and proverbs were derived from the coastal lifestyle that rotates around the oceanic environment particularly the flora and fauna around the water body. This causes a dichotomy of culture and tradition that creates a clear barrier in communication thereby limiting the Luo capacity to internalize the Swahili way of life including their dress, food, kinship system and conceptualization of folk wisdom. The Luo, for instance, believe strongly in the existence of genies (mystical entities that generate wealth and control life of an individual for both beneficent and malevolent reasons). Such beliefs may increase the social distance thereby rendering the Swahili way of life unattractive to the Luo.

## **3. Literature review**

There is a need to determine how people maintain ethnolinguistic identity in minority contexts (Omenya, 2016). In order to determine their identity, individuals may be labeled according to their religious or linguistic affiliations and these may point to their backgrounds (Hansen, 1991b). The inland Swahili communities in Luo regions of Kenya are thus associated with their allegiance to Islam and their preference for Arabic as a liturgical language. They also prefer Kiswahili in their social circles despite the fact that many of their hosts, the Luo, do not speak Kiswahili as their default language of community level interaction (Ojwang, 2008).

In the context of the inland Swahili settlements, four main languages Dholuo, Kiswahili, English and Arabic, are in competition due to their varying degrees of relevance, preference, acceptability and utility. In the social, political, educational and economic contexts therefore, language is used both as an expression of power and a means of negotiating power in the society (Fairclough, 2001).

The inland Swahili came with their microculture and have strived to maintain it despite pressure and influence from the dominant Luo and Luhya hosts. A microculture is a collectivity with conscious identity and grouping coexisting within a larger culture (Dodd, 1995). For instance, Islam would be considered foreign and therefore alien to the predominant local Luo culture. A macroculture on the other hand is the larger, dominant culture (Kokole, 1985).

According to Kroskirty (2000), language has three functions namely the instrumental, symbolic and cognitive. The instrumental function enables users to manipulate language in order to control

access to power, opportunity and material resources. Moreover, language further carries an enormous political, social and economic power (Memon, 1976). The symbolic function enables language to determine identity; and in the cognitive dimension, language serves to influence the belief and thought systems of the speaker. Identity and power are often embedded in the communication system of the target community (Kiesling, 2007). According to Ndege (1992), the coming of the Swahili to the selected regions in Luo land was facilitated by the Arab traders who recruited the Swahili from the Kenyan coast as porters, tour guides, slave raiders and interpreters.

After the end of the slave trade, and with the coming of independence and greater ethnolinguistic consciousness versus nationalism coupled with changing land policies, the inland Swahili settlers have faced an identity crisis of many facets. Some of them have intermarried with locals while a few have converted to Islam. In the process, an identity dilemma or identity crisis may arise (Karega, 2006). One controversial point is whether the inland Swahili are considered alien or whether their origins are to be questioned by the locals. The heritage of the children from inter-ethnic marriages is another cause of the ensuing social dilemma. This implies that if one is asked: are you a Swahili or a Muslim, one may find it difficult to choose between his or her two important identities because affirmation of one implies denial of the other (Monaghan, 2007).

There has been a tendency to link all Muslims to Swahili yet some Luo non-Swahili converts have adopted Islamic practices such as their dress, food, furniture, Arabic language and mode of worship. There is therefore need for an identity reconstruction by the current and future generations. Language can aid the identity reconstruction process because, according to Joanna (2004), we can symbolize, in a coded way, all the other concepts that we use to define ourselves and our society. For instance, Dholuo is a Christianized culture while Swahili is an Arabized culture hence the clash of systems. The speech codes resulting from the Swahili and Dholuo contact is thus expected to reflect the reconstructed identity of the groups (Ojwang, 2011).

The religious and ethnic identities co-exist and explicitly reveal themselves in the language use of the community while the reconstruction of identity diffuses both cultures and comes up with a new culture (Rukya, 2016). The minority group such as the inland Swahili may be submissive hence this may militate against their chances of political participation. Some indicators of intergroup influence may include extensive loanwords and naming patterns (Jenkins, 2006). However, Dholuo has not been Arabized hence the slow acceptance of Islam and minimal Swahili influence (Ojwang, 2018).

Kiesling (2007) states that ideological power is the most significant because it shapes the world outlook and thought processes as a way of naturalizing a community's behaviour. This is the facet that is expected to catapult the minority Swahili into leadership positions through politics. Moreover, language can be used both as a passive means of exercising power and an active player of it (Lippi-Green, 1989). To demonstrate this utility value, language is perceived as a tool that can influence actions while the words, expressions or sayings themselves reflect the power of the speaker to tell, excite, insult, trigger, motivate, hurt and create any other feelings (Eckert, 1999).

## **4. Methodology**

Data for this paper were obtained through qualitative content analysis of historical records in the library. The second approach entailed conducting twenty personal interviews with selected community leaders in the three inland Swahili settlements of Kendu bay in Homa Bay County, Kaloleni in Kisumu Town, and Riat hills on the outskirts of Kisumu Town. The informants were identified through snowball sampling and the entry point was the mosques since Islamic affiliation was a major indicator of Swahili origins. Kendu Bay was included for its rural settings and because it hosted the earliest rural settlement of Arab and Swahili traders in Nyanza, after Kisumu town. Kisumu town was chosen as the epicenter of Swahili dispersal and early urban orientation, while Riat hills Swahili community represents a peri-urban group oscillating between rural and urban social boundaries. The selected interviewees were in the second generation of Swahili migrants as the first generation was found to have died out. The current middle age Swahili in the age group of 45-65 were therefore deemed to have experienced change and transition from the old context to the current dynamic modernized and globalized situation. In all cases, the inland Swahili settlers had minimal or no physical contact with the coastal Swahili or their roots in the Kenyan Indian Ocean coast. We undertook qualitative content analysis and data was extracted purposively and thematically from the interview transcripts and presented in form of prose.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. The social parameters of language heritage**

Our findings revealed that the first indicator of language heritage of the inland Swahili communities is their parentage and intermarriage. The primary language of the inland Swahili in the Luo region is first determined by their parentage. Those aged over 40 were born to both Swahili parents. This is the second generation. A few of the parents of this generation were Arabs married to African Swahili women. Their propensity for Kiswahili and Arabic is therefore higher than for the later generations. Their wives are in many cases, also from both Swahili parents. Linguistically, they can speak Dholuo in the market but cannot sustain an interaction in Dholuo. Their primary language for intra-group interaction, business and public networking is Kiswahili. The third generation who are under 40 are of mixed parentage where the father is Swahili and the mother is a Luo or Luhya by tribe. Some Luo and Luhya men have also married girls of Swahili parentage. The latter group consists of stable bilinguals who can switch from Dholuo to Kiswahili at will depending on the dominant language. In most contexts, this language is more often than not, Dholuo. There has been partial assimilation and dual linguistic identity in the younger generation and they can speak without a Swahili accent. This group has a higher chance of natural integration and acceptance by their peers as their proficiency in Dholuo tends to suppress their Swahili parentage in social circles. Outside their families, their kinship cannot readily be traced to the Swahili community.

Religious affiliation is the second strong indicator of the language heritage of the inland Swahili groups. In the religious context there is a clear dichotomy between Islam whose language of worship is Arabic through the Quran. All Swahili people are therefore directly linked to Arabic and children have to go through lessons in the *madrassa* in order to learn Arabic (Reusch, 1953).

Although translations of the Quran exist in writing, these teachings have conservatively been given in Arabic script. This exposes the learners to three languages namely Arabic, English and Kiswahili. The latter is also a national language while English is the language of instruction in Kenyan schools. This gives the Swahili people a triple heritage in terms of language and a broader language repertoire.

The local Luo who convert to Islam are also expected to learn how to read and write the Quran. Moreover, Islamic prayers are also recited in Arabic thereby indicating a direct loyalty to Arabic. The Luo who are dominantly Christian refer to the Muslim Swahili as *jo wakbar* due to the persistent sound of the muezzin repeatedly citing Allah. The older men also observe mosque attendance without fail five times a day as opposed to the children who are either travelling for business or in school during the day hence less exposure to Islamic teaching. The Luo mode of worship is through Sunday or Saturday service and is conducted in Dholuo in Kendu area with English interpretation, when there are visitors; while in Kisumu Town they use mainly English and Kiswahili with minimal Dholuo interpretation.

Overall, we did not find case of a pedigree Swahili who had converted into Christianity in all these areas. The two religious groups, however, coexist peacefully. Thirdly, the age and socialization patterns of the Swahili speech community also determines their language choices and exposure to input from the dominant Luo. This goes hand in hand with the observed variations in socialization patterns. Whereas the older generation prefer to congregate in their *kambis* 'clustered dwellings' or centralized *barazas* 'open shades' either chatting, reflecting on current affairs, or playing *ajua* 'the game of bao' while chewing *miraa* 'khat.' This group physically and behaviorally represents the sedentary Swahili lifestyle which the local Luo community considers as a sign of laziness. In contrast, Swahili children are more mobile and have created more opportunities of interacting with Luo children in town centres, video houses where they go for entertainment, fields where they watch football and at funerals of their Luo friends and schoolmates. In these environments, they acquire more Luo words and become ambidextrous using Dholuo and Kiswahili.

The fourth factor is gender. Among the older Swahili, women have a higher propensity to acquire and use Dholuo because they interact at a closer interpersonal level with Luo women. Moreover, such interaction is repeated, frequent and predictable. In rural Kendu Bay, Luo and Swahili women fetch water and firewood together. In Kisumu's Kaloleni, the Luo and Swahili women attend the same ante-natal and child care health facility together and engage in petty trade of household groceries and charcoal. The Swahili women specialize in cooking *mahamri* 'fried cakes' and their main clients are the Luo who also dominate the population of Kisumu town. In Riat Hills Swahili village, the Swahili women mainly work as farmhands in Luo homes while some have formed catering groups and are hired to cook at Luo functions. These provide data rich contexts and there are quite a few stable bilinguals whose language heritage cannot be readily discerned by a stranger to the area. In contrast, the male spend most of their time attending mosque committee meetings and political functions where they are mainly exposed to Arabic and the local variety of Kiswahili which they frown upon as Kiswahili *haramu* 'bastardized Kiswahili'

Finally, the school system acts as the major avenue of implementation of the language policy. In Kenya's education system, English is the language of instruction from primary class four to university except when teaching Kiswahili and other languages. The lower classes 1-3 are however, taught using the local vernacular or mother tongues (Simala, 2006; Republic of Kenya, 1964). This

means that the children of Swahili parentage are exposed to the dominant local vernacular of the catchment area. In Kendu area, all school-going children are therefore taught in Dholuo from lower primary. In Kisumu Town, Kiswahili is the language of instruction in primary school classes 1-3 while English is the language of instruction in upper primary school. This exposes both Swahili and Luo children to the same level of linguistic input although the Swahili children acquire a third code through their religion.

## **5.2. Language and reconstruction of identity of the inland Swahili**

The inland Swahili settlers have had an identity crisis that has hampered their political participation. The obstacles have been of a historical, social and religious nature. In Kendu area for instance, the progenitors of Islam in the Kendu area were an Arab trader who settled there around 1904 and his Gwe counterpart who was the first convert. Currently, the Muslim community in Kendu Bay comprise the Luo, Gwe and a mixture of groups generally known as the '*Waswahili*'. The identity was influenced by movements between the Muslims in Kendu Bay and Kenya's coastal towns that informed the context for example, the lifestyle and the wider adoption of Kiswahili as the *lingua franca*.

The inland Swahili have attempted to change their identity at various times to suit their needs. For instance, during land adjudication, some attempted to present themselves as close relatives of the locals in order to be allocated land but their places of birth on their national identity cards proved that they were not indigenous. Moreover, their mode of dress including the *kanzu* and caps for the men and colourful *kangas* worn by their women were clear indicators of their foreign origins. They also could not speak Dholuo fluently enough to convince the land surveyors. They therefore remained in cramped and overpopulated quarters close to their mosques in rural market centres and have essentially been isolated as squatters. Due to the rise of the money economy and national integration after independence, some Swahili who became teachers and civil servants have acquired their own land in the Luo villages but they maintain contact with the original inland settlements and they continue to practise Islam actively. According to one informant in Kisumu town:

We are still seen as outsiders even if we marry from around. The way we dress appears strange to the locals but we inherited it from the Arabs and we cannot change this overnight. [Personal Communication, 2019]

In the face of their identity crisis, the Swahili community in Luo region has tried to reconstruct social, linguistic and religious identity while some sections of the Luo have contested such attempts and strived to maintain the historical image of the Swahili as foreigners. These attempts at reconstruction are evident in the discourse of interpersonal talk and group perceptions. The explicit manifestations of reconstructed identity aim at portraying the Swahili as social and cultural insiders. This is seen in Swahili initiated expressions such as:

- 1.a. *An ng'atu* 'I belong to you'
- b. *Wan kanyakla* 'we are together'
- c. *An ng'ama ung'eyo* 'I am someone that you know'

- d. *An jirani* 'I am a neighbour'
- e. *An ja Kenya wadu* 'I am your fellow Kenyan'
- f. *An ng'ama or* 'I am your son-in-law'

The above self-descriptions present the Swahili as actively seeking social acceptance. Their discourse here encodes their acknowledgement of their hitherto foreigner tag and moves towards narrowing the differences based on separation by physical and kinship dichotomies. For instance, the Swahili utterances labelled 1. a-f emphasize a sense of belonging, communal bonds, familiarity through closer interaction and kinship ties with the Luo through intermarriage. It is worth noting that the Luo treat a son in law with great respect and ready acceptance and is sometimes referred to as 'our son.' This means that the Swahili men who have married Luo wives have effectively redefined their identity regardless of their heritage language which is foreign to Luo land and their continued practice of Islam.

Apart from the explicit expressions in Dholuo that the Swahili use to negotiate and reconstruct their identity and enhance acceptance, there are indications of social and cultural identification with the host Luo community. These include adoption of Dholuo music, local building patterns, food and eating habits, dress and farming practices and some funeral rites. In the words of one Swahili interviewee in Kendu Bay:

'Nowadays there is no big difference between us and the Luo. Our children go to the same schools, we eat the same food, attend burials and dances together and swim in the lake and we understand their language too. Our children can today speak Dholuo and understand everything said' [Personal Communication, 2019]

In reaction to the Swahili push for social appreciation, the host Luo speakers have exhibited some ambivalence in their perceptions of the Swahili as seen in their discourse. These social attitudes denote either acceptance or cautious rejection as illustrated by the following excerpts:

- 2.a. *od wadu* 'your brother's house'
- b. *wuon mogo* 'provider of maize meal'
- c. *wuod mwambao* 'son of Mombasa'
- d. *wuod ja Coast* 'son of the man from Coast'
- e. *ja kinda ka Abdul* 'industrious like Abdul'
- f. *nyathiwa* 'our child'
- g. *jakindu* 'man of Kendu bay'
- h. *jaboma* 'town dweller'
- i. *japesa wang'e lando* 'the one with money and has a brown face'

The Luo discourse in data set 2. a-i portray the Luo attitude towards the Swahili in ways that demonstrate a degree of acceptance for instance by describing them as 'our child', it indicates total adoption of the Swahili offspring as part of the Luo social system and by extension, they are treated as cultural insiders. The expression 'man of Kendu' and 'your brother's house' mean that the Swahili are now regarded as indigenes. The Luo even acknowledge the business acumen of the Swahili through the expressions 'provider of maize meal' and 'industrious like Abdul.' The



reference to Abdul here is a general name synonymous with all Swahili traders in Kisumu. It was derived from the name of the first Swahili trader to set up shop in Kisumu town. Likening the Swahili with one who possesses a lot of money that gives him a brown face is a metaphorical reference to the Arab skin colour more so because the Swahili were their close business associates and employers. According to the Luo, The Swahili have maintained the business skills of the erstwhile Arabs.

On the other hand, there are expressions by the Luo that are conservative, exclusionist. Such expressions are pejorative in nature. They magnify the outsider tag on the Swahili and portray them as different and intruders. These perceptions are derived from the adversarial historical encounters with the Swahili as slave raiders and exploitative middlemen who served the interests of the Arab traders and colonial administrators:

3.a. *jaoko* ‘one from outside’

b. *jamwa* ‘cultural and linguistic outsider’

c. *jabuoro* ‘sojourner/sleeping in a place for one night’

d. *jowakbar* ‘those who shout (Allah) akbar’

e. *jopecho* ‘tax collector/property seizer’

f. *jojinni* ‘people who keep and use mystical beings/ genies’

The discourse extracts in 3. a-f encode an uneasy relationship with social, religious and economic tensions as well as mistrust between the Luo and the Swahili groups. Despite coexistence for over a century, a section of Luo people still considers the Swahili as essentially outsiders. The latter are also perceived as sojourners, economic exploiters, noisy worshippers, and untrustworthy. These adversarial portrayals may negate the attempt at identity reconstruction by the Swahili as they cannot be seen as reformed and more proactive to the Luo *modus operandi*.

### **5.3. Language ecology, the politics of language and political participation of the inland Swahili**

It is imperative to examine how the inland Swahili have negotiated their acceptance and sought recognition in the political space. The language situation, the Luo social attitude, government policy, and ethnic loyalties have influenced the nature and extent of political participation in the selected regions. The Swahili are politically inclined (Simala, 2006). However, they constitute a minority in their inland settlements and command few votes, yet Kenya’s electoral system is largely determined by ethnic affiliations and bloc votes. For candidates from the majority Luo tribe, the votes are almost guaranteed. This requires the minority candidates to campaign widely among the larger tribes.

Language is at the core of political loyalty building, persuasion, and acceptance. The main language of campaign at the local level is Dholuo especially at the county level where the Swahili mainly contest for Member of the County Assembly (MCA) but rarely for area Member of Parliament (MP). In Kendu area, only one Swahili has served as an MCA while in Kisumu town and its environs a Swahili has only served as a nominated MCA on affirmative action to represent women as a special interest group. The only leadership roles that the Swahili have managed to attain are in

school committees and locational development taskforces. These abysmal leadership opportunities demonstrate the implicit subjective treatment of the inland Swahili. One interviewee in Riat Hills noted that:

We live well with the Luo but they do not want to give us votes. They think we will overpower them politically but we are fine because they are the majority. We will continue to campaign and hope for an attitude change. They will soon see us as fellow Kenyans' [Personal Communication, 2019]

The political scene exposes the simmering social, religious and linguistic tensions and polarizes the Luo and Swahili into the 'them' versus 'us' syndrome. Campaign period is often dramatic and rife with conflict. In this context, the language competence of a Swahili candidate endears them to the Luo electorate while a contestant who speaks broken Dholuo or code-switches and code-mixes a lot is frowned upon and may be heckled in Dholuo. In Kenyan politics, it has been established that campaign messages are more appealing and relevant when conveyed in the voter's mother tongue and even presidential candidates have exploited this avenue to influence the electorate (Ojwang, 2018).

Some extracts from political discourse involving the Luo and Swahili speakers include:

- 4 a. *Kiswahili mang'eny ok kony* 'speaking a lot of Kiswahili is of no use'
- b. *Kiswahili iko na wenyewe* 'Kiswahili has its owners'
- c. *Kiswahili waweyo ne jo Islam* 'Kiswahili is left for Muslims'
- d. *Dholuo maliu ema tucho wa gi siasa* 'pure Dholuo entices us politically'
- e. *waislam ywayo kura gi jinni* 'Muslims attract votes using genies'
- f. *kendo nyarwa ok kel telo* 'to marry our daughter does not guarantee leadership'
- g. *telo ok riw gi ohala* 'business and leadership should not mix'
- h. *jadak ok mi telo* 'a sojourner cannot lead'
- i. *wayiero mana rembwa* 'we shall elect only our blood'

The above utterances indicate the expectations of the Luo that limit the chances of leadership and political participation by the Swahili. Utterances 4. a-d refer explicitly to language as a determinant of leadership potential and prospects. The dominant Luo attitude towards Kiswahili as a language of out-group members with a low preference among the locals is activated during political campaigns and this serves to pour scorn on Swahili candidates and on urban dwellers proficient in Kiswahili who return home only to contest. Despite the fact that the candidates have to present documents to prove their language proficiency in English and Kiswahili before clearance to vie by the electoral commission (Karega, 2006) on the ground, the local vernacular carries the day. This could be because ethnolinguistic affiliation bequeaths a sense of belonging thereby enhancing chances of being elected into political office.

Whereas utterances 4. f and i allude to kinship by marriage and kinship by blood, the latter is regarded as a stronger bond and gives the Luo contestants a sense of entitlement hence priority candidates against the Swahili. Even among the Luo themselves, the dominant clan consider themselves more entitled to produce leaders than smaller clans that are expected to be subservient in the political equation. These are described as providing the 'swing vote' (Simala, 2006). The

Swahili have thus been seen as a rich ground for fringe candidates who are often manipulated to surrender and support the so-called mainstream candidates from the Luo tribe.

## **Discussion**

The findings reveal that the inland Swahili tribes continue to face challenges of recognition at various levels particularly political rejection due to their triple heritage, mixed parentage, language attitudes, and historical background. These facets of identity militate against their existence and deny them equal opportunity on the political scene.

The access to leadership through political participation is hampered by strong conservative views and their minority status. Moreover, Kiswahili remains unattractive to many of the Luo due to historical, attitudinal, social and political factors. Despite the recognition of Kiswahili as a national and official language in Kenya's constitution (2010), proficiency remains low among the Luo as the Luo prefer English in official contexts and speak Kiswahili nominally to transact business in markets with multilingual setups, in public transport, in some churches and in school.

The Luo also interact with Kiswahili through the mass media but the influence of national Kiswahili news broadcast by the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation has since been diminished by the proliferation of vernacular radio stations (Ojwang, 2008). This liberalization has further reinforced the language preference and ethnolinguistic loyalty towards Dholuo with the expanded domains of Dholuo to convey advertisements, evangelization, public health awareness and general education. Apparently, the status of Kiswahili as an examinable school subject bolstered by government policy has not boosted its functionality in the daily interaction of the majority inland Luo (Ndege, 1992). It emerged that even in a multilingual town such as Kisumu, Kiswahili has a low preference. It is only a lingua franca that facilitates business transactions with non-Luo traders. The shift towards Dholuo is stronger and there are Indian and Arab traders and settlers who have acquired Dholuo by interacting with their staff and clients. They therefore speak Dholuo to gain the confidence of their Luo clients and to reduce the racial distance between them (Omenya, 2016). This demonstrates that language enhances acceptance and a local language can also function as the main language of trade despite the presence of a wider lingua franca such as Kiswahili.

Language and identity are intertwined and identity has many facets including race or ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender and age. Identity is fragmentary and in flux (Monaghan, 2007). The flexibility of identity has enabled the inland Swahili to project diverse public images in an attempt to reconstruct their identity. The religious stability of Islam as a community institution and Arabic as its main code of communication has remained their in-group identity marker (Ojwang, 2011). However, they have moved out of these traditional confines to seek acceptance through intermarriage, acquiring Dholuo, participating in Luo cultural activities and sustained social interaction. This affirms the contention by Joanna (2004) that identities are dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk and changing from one occasion to the next. Moreover, the meanings of master identities such as ethnic and regional origins may change across time and space. It has been noted that identities, whether on an individual, social or institutional level, is something that we are constantly building throughout our lives through our interaction with others (Joanna, 2004).

The conscious adoption of Dholuo for pragmatic purposes and the Luo tendency to foreground language as a measure of quality political campaigns and potential leadership by the inland Swahili captures both the agency of speakers and views language as social action as envisaged by Kroskrity (2000). The continued stable use of Swahili culture including naming patterns shows that identity can be demonstrated through strong loyalty to one's heritage language.

The Luo insistence on *Dholuo maliu* 'authentic variety of Dholuo' in political rallies presupposes the low recognition of code-switching and code-mixing that could accommodate non-Luo speakers. This notion is held despite the fact that code-switching implies some degree of competence in the two languages even if bilingual fluency is not yet stable and that in many multi and bilingual communities, code-switching is and should be seen as the norm (Rukya, 2016).

## Conclusion

The Luo and inland Swahili communities have coexisted in spite of their religious, linguistic and cultural orientations. However, the Swahili have adapted to local social standards and practices and this has been facilitated by language. The national status of Kiswahili has not played a significant role in the acceptance of its speakers in the Luo political domain. Moreover, strong perceptions by sections of the Luo towards Islam, Swahili character and entrepreneurial skills have maintained an inter-group distance and distinct identity for the two groups. The moves towards social integration through intermarriage and boundless interaction of the Luo and Swahili youth as well as the physical dispersal of the Swahili from the clustered settlements further into rural Luo zones to acquire land will in future minimize the distinct identities leading to greater inter-cultural tolerance, cross-linguistic accommodation and increased opportunities for significant political participation.

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