



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Language as a bridge: Exploring the role of Kiswahili in fostering inclusion

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ABSTRACT

The study broadly conceptualises humanities as the study of human interactions, experiences and human transformations which occur at both the individual and collective levels. I argue that at the center of diverse human interactions is the tool of language which plays an important role of bridging the communicative gaps which occur across multifarious communities. In an attempt to make sense of the intimate correlation between the humanities and the democracy project in Africa, I make a case for the study of the role played by language to foster democratic features of inclusivity and diversity. Particularly, the study investigates the role of the Kiswahili language in bridging and connecting individuals, academics, communities, cultures, nations and cultivating a sense of inclusivity. Kiswahili is the most widely spoken and studied African language and this makes it a strategic tool for creating inclusive societies. Specific reference is given to Kiswahili academic Associations across Africa which are formed by students, teachers, lecturers and other stakeholders, with the primary goal of promoting research and the development of Kiswahili in Africa and beyond. Therbon's framework of inclusivity and the Social Role Valorisation theory are the guiding analytical frameworks of the study. The study reveals various dimensions of inclusion and exclusion in Kiswahili academic associations as well as its underlying intricacies. I argue that while Kiswahili is strategic in promoting inclusive societies, barriers of inclusion still exist as a result of socio-cultural and political institutions. The study provides recommendations and conclusively emphasises the significant role of Kiswahili as a strategic language in fostering inclusivity of African citizenry as well as bridging communication by connecting individuals of diverse cultures, religions, ideologies and languages

Key words: language, Kiswahili, inclusion, exclusion, democracy

INTRODUCTION

There has been a global increase on the attention given to the concept of inclusive societies, its nuances and dynamics, in response to systemic inequalities that continue to disproportionately affect individuals from various demographic groups (World Bank, 2013; Madzima & MacIntosh, 2021). Despite the multiplicity and diversity of attempts to define an inclusive society, many schools of thought seem to converge on the notion that inclusive societies are premised on creating conditions for equal opportunities and equal access for all. Demographics such as age, gender, location, financial literacy, religion and education can be used to measure and promote inclusivity (Kebede et al., 2021). Researchers, scholars, organisations, governments, practitioners and policy makers continue to search for sustainable ways in which societies can become more inclusive and democratic. Studies have shown that more inclusive societies reap many benefits ranging from sustainable socio-economic development to peace and sustainable political development (Carter, 2015). While there are no concrete and comprehensive global estimates of inclusion and exclusion, an estimated 32% of the world's population is at risk of facing exclusion based on identity, circumstances, or socio-economic background, with the highest incidence of about 52% in sub-Saharan Africa (Cuesta et al., 2022). As such, the need to achieve more functional inclusive societies where everyone enjoys equal participation in all facets of life is imperative especially in the context of Africa in order to address and reduce incidences of exclusion.

Despite there being numerous efforts and initiatives committed to addressing global challenges of exclusion, the fundamental role

of language in promoting inclusive societies is no exception and can never be overemphasized (Ackah-Jnr et al., 2020; American Psychological Association, 2022). Essentially, language is the means by which human beings express and communicate ideas and emotions. Likewise, language has the potential to reduce barriers which emanate from cultural, political, religious and socio-economic differences. Undoubtedly, a shared and common language is an indispensable tool in fostering inclusivity and acting as a bridge of communication among individuals. Accordingly, the place of and the case for an inclusive language in fostering inclusive societies and bridging communication becomes central. In this study, special reference is given to Kiswahili as that inclusive language and an agent of bridging communication on the African continent. The study adheres to a humanities disciplinary trajectory by assuming the nexus of language and inclusive societies and showing how Kiswahili academic associations have used Kiswahili language to foster inclusive societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Inclusive Societies

While the idea of inclusion can be loosely tracked back in history through various developments and movements, the concept of “inclusive societies” was primarily conceptualised at The World Summit for Social Development in March 1995 where participants lobbied for social integration through “a society for all.” (UNDESA, 2009 p. 4). Since then, the concept of inclusive societies has been defined by many schools of thought from different perspectives. However, in order to grasp the concept of inclusive societies, I will start by looking at the basic terms associated

with this concept which are; inclusion, exclusion and diversity.

Inclusion is the policy or practice of making sure that everyone in society has access to opportunities for participating in economic, social and civic activities to amplify their chances of pursuing ambitions, goals and realising their creative potential (Okolo, 2015). It aims to provide equal opportunities for all individuals irrespective of their background. As a result, at the very center of inclusion is full participation in all aspects of life, access to resources and equal opportunities. Conversely, exclusion refers to a situation whereby not all individuals have equal access to the opportunities and services that allow them to live a decent and happy life. This may include not being able to contribute to and have their voice heard on the norms of the society in which they live. Generally, exclusion is birthed from exclusionary practices which destroy the much-needed bond of solidarity and places some members of society beyond the margins, who then cease to be a cause for concern for those within the margins. Over time, the enhanced homogeneity and sense of shared identity among the insiders reinforce the social exclusion of those outside (UNDP, 2011, p. 11). To that end, at the core of social exclusion is limited participation in all aspects of life, limited access to resources and unequal opportunities. Finally, the term diversity simply entails recognising the differences among members of a society (UNDESA, 2009). While the nuances of understanding diversity and inclusion may seem complex, the two are complementary. Diversity is the practice of recognising differences in a society while inclusion is the practice of making sure that everyone in society has equal access to resources and equal opportunities despite their background.

Consequently, an inclusive society is “one that rises above differences of race, gender, class, generation and geography to ensure equality of opportunity regardless of origin, and one that subordinates military and economic power to civil authority” (UNDP, 2011, p.75). Other scholars define an inclusive society as a society that embraces diversity and the fundamental equality of all individuals (Lutfiyya & Bartlett, 2020). Based on these definitions, it is clear to see that an inclusive society is a society that values and respects diversity and promotes equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity. However, there seems to be no general consensus on what exactly an inclusive society should look like (Muzondidya, 2023) because inclusivity is deeply contextual and is largely shaped by socio-cultural norms of each society.

Arguably, this reveals that promoting inclusion is simpler in principle than it is in practice since there are multiple conscious and unconscious biases towards marginalised and vulnerable groups such as women, individuals of alternative genders and persons with mental and physical impairments. Essentially, throughout African history, these groups have been victims of the patriarchal society, the majority, the physically strong and the ruling classes. In the face of such exclusionary practices and institutions, there have been various attempts to push back against these practices and institutions and one of the ways of pushing back has been through academic research associations. The following section provides a snapshot view of the correlation between academic associations and inclusivity.

Academic Associations and Inclusivity

Academic associations are societies or organisations made up of individuals by virtue of shared interest in a particular academic discipline (Harvey et. al, 1995). These associations serve as a platform for researchers, educators, students, practitioners and stakeholders to converge and advance knowledge in their respective disciplines. There are many and varied purposes of academic associations which include but are not limited to organising academic conferences and events, promoting research, academic publishing and advocating for members' best academic interests (Speight, 2014). Typically, academic associations are non-profit and non-state funded organisations. As such, their activities rely on membership subscriptions or donations. Furthermore, academic associations may focus on a particular discipline, or, they may be multidisciplinary, focusing on multiple disciplines. This study focuses on academic associations which represent the promotion of research and education of Kiswahili language and culture. Kiswahili academic associations engage in a broad range of activities and events which may involve yearly conferences, symposiums, publishing in academic journals and books, poetry anthologies, training workshops, visiting tourist destinations and places of attraction. These associations' membership largely consists of educators, university lecturers, university students as well as language and cultural practitioners and stakeholders across and beyond Africa. Ordinarily, an individual can be a member of more than one academic association.

The role of academic associations in promoting inclusivity has become topical in recent years. Academic associations engage in activities and initiatives which have the potential to foster

diversity, equity and inclusion within and beyond academia (Tzovara et al., 2021). In light of this truth, the present study critically explores the particular ways in which Kiswahili academic associations promote inclusive societies. However, before these may be fully explored, it is important to contextualise Kiswahili language and culture within the rhetoric of inclusion.

Contextualising Kiswahili and Inclusion

Kiswahili is a trans-border African language with over 150 million speakers solely in Africa and about 200 million speakers across the globe (Dzomba et. al, 2023). As such, it is the most widely spoken and studied African language on the continent spoken by an estimated 12% of Africa, followed by Hausa with an estimated 6.6% and Yoruba with an estimated 2.5%. Kiswahili is one of the ten most spoken languages in the world. Originating from East Africa, Kiswahili is the lingua franca of more than eight countries in East Africa including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (Ndiritu et. al, 2016). It is also spoken in Southern Africa in some parts of Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Somalia (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1995). Following UNESCO's 2022 pronouncement that the World Kiswahili Day falls on the 7th of July of each year, the language has continued to thrive not just in Africa, but globally. While Kiswahili is already one of the official working languages of the East African Community (EAC) and the Pan African Parliament Union, it was in 2019 nominated as one of the four working languages of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and in 2022 was adopted as one of the working languages of the African Union (Nhongo, 2019). Kiswahili is now being taught in countries outside East Africa such as Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia.

From a historical perspective, Kiswahili played a fundamental role in the attainment of independence in a number of African polities. In East Africa, during the decades leading up to the early 1960s when Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania gained their independence, Kiswahili served as a shared inclusive language amongst various ethnic groups, thus, facilitated communication and political cooperation. It was the language of political rallies, mass mobilisation, speeches and publications and educating the masses about their shared aspirations despite the fact that their first languages were different. Kiswahili music and literature were also instrumental tools in disseminating nationalist democratic ideologies and the agenda of fighting for freedom. In the ensuing years, Kiswahili served once more as a unifying language in the liberation of Southern African polities of Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, when liberation fighters were expatriated to East Africa for military training (African Union, 2022). Not only did Kiswahili contribute to the unification of Tanzania, it also played a significant role in advancing Julius Nyerere's "Ujamaa" philosophy which aimed at achieving economic and social equality in Tanzania upon the attainment of independence from British colonial rule in 1961 (Delehanty, 2020). Undeniably, Kiswahili became a linguistic and cultural symbol of African liberation, unity and democracy. Based on this background, the privileged status of Kiswahili becomes apparent and I present the argument that this privileged status affords Kiswahili many opportunities for fostering inclusivity and democracy and this may be achieved through the work of academic associations involved in research and teaching of Kiswahili.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This study places Therbon's framework of inclusivity in conversation with the Social Role Valorisation concept so as to theoretically explore the role of Kiswahili in fostering inclusion. Therbon's framework outlines the actualisation of inclusive societies as a five-step incremental process characterised by visibility, consideration, access, rights, and resources (Lutfiyya & Bartlett, 2020). Therbon posits that these five steps are critical in creating environments that are conducive for the promotion of inclusivity, diversity and social cohesion. Therbon's framework is premised on the view that these five incremental steps are key to fostering participation and equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of their characteristics or background. In common parlance, inclusivity cannot be achieved in an environment where one or more of the five steps are absent.

On the other hand, the Social Role Valorisation theory is an analytical framework that explores social devaluation by focusing on the negative experiences faced by marginalised individuals in society, including experiences such as rejection, negative roles, stigmatisation, and distance from society. Often times, these experiences may unconsciously and systematically cause damaging and hurtful outcomes to victims of marginalisation especially in environments where norms of exclusion continuously persist (Therbon, 2007). As such, the Social Role Valorisation theoretical framework lays emphasis on recognising the significance of the unique roles of marginalised individuals despite

their inability or disability; hence it aims to create a comprehensive roadmap for promoting inclusion, diversity and social cohesion.

Data Collection

A mixed methods approach was used to collect the primary data for this study. Data was collected using online interviews, open ended questionnaires and observation methods. Open ended questions were designed to allow interviewees to answer in the way that they prefer, to agree or disagree and to raise new issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Generally, the questions sought to gather information on the participants' perspectives on how Kiswahili academic associations promote inclusion and/or exclusion and the possible solutions to the problem of exclusion within Kiswahili academic association. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom. A sample of 16 participants, who are members of various Kiswahili academic associations and based in different African countries was selected. The study sample was obtained using purposive random sampling. Five participants were in leadership committees while 11 participants were members of academic associations. Due to time constraints, 2 participants were available for online interviews while 14 participants managed to respond to the questionnaire. For the reason that the researcher is a member of some of the academic associations under study, the observation method was also used to elicit relevant data from the academic associations' WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp is one of the communication platforms widely utilised by Kiswahili academic associations. Interviews and questionnaires were drafted in Kiswahili, therefore, the researcher first translated collected data into English, classifying it into themes according to research objectives. The

following is a sample of academic associations represented by research participants:

Table 1: Sample of academic associations under study

Name of Association	English Gloss
UKUTA (<i>Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania</i>)	Kiswahili Poetry Association in Tanzania
CHAKAMA (<i>Chama cha Kiswahili Africa Mashariki</i>)	Kiswahili Association in East Africa
CHAWAKAMA (<i>Chama cha Wanafunzi wa Kiswahili Africa Mashariki</i>)	Kiswahili Students' Association in East Africa
CHAUKIDU (<i>Chama cha Ukuzaji wa Kiswahili Dumiani</i>)	Kiswahili World Association
CHALUFAKITA (<i>Chama cha Lugha na Fasihi ya Kiswahili Tanzania</i>)	Kiswahili Language and Literature Association in Tanzania
CHAKITA (<i>Chama cha Kiswahili cha Taifa</i>)	National Kiswahili Association (Kenya)

Hereon on, this research will refer to the English titles of the Academic Associations under study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The collected data is analysed and discussed thematically by exploring the possible dimensions of inclusion as they appear based on the opinions of research participants and those of the researcher.

Economic Inclusion

While there has been increasing awareness and attention given to the issue of economic inclusion in academia (Rocha et al., 2021), the integration of inclusive economic practices has gained traction in academic associations by going beyond the traditional roles of research and supporting economic development and innovation. As such, in the context of Kiswahili academic associations, economic inclusion seeks to foster equal opportunities and participation in income generating academic initiatives. When asked to elaborate on the ways in which Kiswahili associations achieve economic inclusion, Participant A, who is a member of the Kiswahili World Association and Kiswahili Language and Literature Association in Tanzania had this to say:

“ Kiswahili associations have also transformed into income generating platforms. On our WhatsApp platforms we share so many opportunities such as teaching and lecturing jobs in Africa and beyond, translation jobs, dictionary making projects especially for lexicographers. In some instances, when clients approach us we simply refer them to our members with the relevant expertise. We also conduct seminars to orient upcoming poets and writers on writing and publishing.

Resultantly, such inclusive initiatives promote carrier development as well as financial independence, especially at individual and community levels. Participant A provided concrete examples of academic activities conducted by his association to advance economic inclusion. Particularly, he made reference to a scholarship fund by the Kiswahili Language and Literature Association in Tanzania

which is used to educate underprivileged students wishing to study Kiswahili at university level but have no financial means to do so. The funding is also used for Kiswahili related academic journal publications.

Social Inclusion

Academic associations play a critical role in advancing social cohesion and inclusion by providing members with opportunities to build new social ties and develop a sense of belonging. These associations create a platform for collaboration and interaction among educators, students, researchers and stakeholders from diverse social backgrounds. Hence, social cohesion is fostered in Kiswahili academic associations by engaging in an array of multifaceted activities relating to the social fabric of members and the community at large. Ten research participants expressly elaborated that academic associations have also transformed into social platforms where people interact both physically and virtually without geographical limits. When asked about social inclusion within Kiswahili academic associations, Participant B who is a member of the National Kiswahili Association, explained how social experiences continue to be shaped in the interactions of Kiswahili academic associations. He alluded to how, for instance, sympathising and comforting each other during difficult times is a common practice within these associations. It is driven by Kiswahili cultural expressions of care and kindness for those in need. Thus, when a member loses their immediate family, fellow association members organise financial contributions towards funeral expenses and such organising transcends national boundaries. However, the same participant raised an issue that he thought was a cause for concern and deserved rethinking.

He expressed that while it is good for associations to extend financial support to the bereaved, he felt that more could be done in terms of helping members and non-members who are facing various social challenges. However, he also acknowledged such efforts may be limited by the financial constraints typically affecting most members.

Another participant [Participant C] who is also a member of the Kiswahili World Association similarly highlighted that Kiswahili academic associations have taken it upon themselves to influence policy on social issues, such as the adoption of Kiswahili language on road signs. This was not only a strategic move towards the promotion of the language but also an inclusive initiative to accommodate populations illiterate in the English language, ensuring that a wider audience is reached. Participant C reiterates how social inclusion has been advanced particularly through activities such as the participation of Kiswahili Poetry Association in Tanzania in the 16 days against Gender Based Violence Campaign which took part in Lindi, Tanzania. Kiswahili poetry was used as an inclusive linguistic tool to disseminate information against gender based violence and the use of Kiswahili meant that this important message reached a wider audience.

Religious Inclusion

Faith plays an important part in the lives of many Africans. Conceptually, religious inclusion is a practice which appreciates diversity of individuals from diverse religious traditions as well as non-religious individuals (Mokotso, 2022). It generally emphasises equity and respect for all religions and beliefs. Diversity of religious and non-religious individuals is characteristic

of Kiswahili academic associations and this has succinctly been explained by Participant D, a member of Kiswahili Association in East Africa and the National Kiswahili Association when he highlights that Kiswahili academic associations are home to religious and non-religious individuals sharing the same space in harmony. Religions which are represented by various Kiswahili academic association members are predominantly Muslim, Christianity and African traditional religion, with Muslim and Christianity having the most members.

Notably, the researcher observed that among Kiswahili speakers, one is quick to identify a Muslim by dressing and speech accompanied by linguistic overtones such as “Assalam aleykum” (Greetings) or “In Shaa Allah” (God willing). Similarly, Christians commonly identify themselves with linguistic overtones such as “Bwana Yesu asifiwe” (Praise be to Jesus) as a greeting. While religious inclusion fosters urgency to know more about others and better appreciate their religious or non-religious values, such overtones can be sensitive in shared spaces and tend to promote exclusion rather than inclusion¹. Moreover, some religions may avoid handshakes and direct physical contact with the opposite sex in public spaces, a situation which can be equally confusing to those of different faith or to the non-religious. Such situations can be difficult to manage but the use of neutral and inclusive language may be an alternative solution (Workhuman, 2023). From the interviews, I gathered that religious diversity sometimes comes with some kind of discord, but, Kiswahili academic associations actively promote religious tolerance through activities such as religious tours during conferences so as to allow members to appreciate religious differences.

1. Born and raised in Zimbabwe where Christianity and African traditional religion are predominant, these were some of the researcher’s observations and experiences when he moved to Tanzania for his studies in MA Kiswahili.

Academic Inclusion

The core business of academic associations is centered on advancing academic development and excellence. Ideally, academic environments where diversity is visible and appreciated potentially foster academic inclusivity. As such, academic inclusion refers to practices which are centered on increasing participation in learning, research and career development in a secure environment where all members are valued and respected (Talavera, 2022). All 16 participants echoed the sentiment that Kiswahili academic societies inspire academic inclusion by means of engaging in a variety of academic activities such as seminars, collaborative publications, workshops, training sessions and related scholarly dialogues. Central arguments gathered from participants highlighted that such activities bring together academics from diverse backgrounds and provides them an opportunity for exchanging ideas, professional development, collaborative research, networking, skills development and staying abreast with latest and current trends in the field.

However, Participants E and F raised contrasting concerns when they exposed instances of academic exclusion whereby Kiswahili academic associations focus only on higher education activities at the exclusion of primary and secondary school learners who are still in the lower levels of academia. The two participants argue that these young learners' lived experiences, perspectives and knowledge equally matter, and are central in shaping and advancing the agenda of promoting Kiswahili as an inclusive African language. In the same vein, Participant G pointed out that while Kiswahili has gone beyond the borders of East Africa, opportunities such as scholarships

and employment are largely accessible to East African citizens, therefore, it is also important to avail equal accesses of opportunities in every region where Kiswahili is adopted and taught. When asked how this kind of challenge may be resolved Participant G suggested that Kiswahili academic associations must get involved in work that influences policy so that policymakers can come up with inclusive policies on equal access to academic opportunities.

Political Inclusion

Political inclusion generally emphasises freedom of expression and participation for all. It encourages the community's involvement in political spheres such as running for office, voting, civic education and offering input in the development of policies and legislation, hence, creating a sense of agency and belonging (German Marshal Fund, 2019). While political inclusion recognises the ways in which civic and political rights are exercised (Sivalo, 2023), it is also central in promoting democracy. Kiswahili academic associations potentially contribute towards achieving politically inclusive and democratic environments, from leadership of association to national and international politics of the day (Atchison, 2017). Participant H explained that academics exercise freedom in expressing their political views through journal publications and academic and creative book anthologies where they are free to interrogate, to support and to critique political issues of the day. Participant I, a member of Kiswahili Poetry Association in Tanzania, supported the idea of academia as a viable political activist space by giving the example of how since the 1950s, poetry associations such as Kiswahili Poetry Association in Tanzania published anthologies that questioned colonial rule and pushed

nationalist ideologies. Therefore, Kiswahili academic associations are untapped sources for giving voice to the voiceless in oppressive societies.

Gender Inclusion

Gender equity is equally imperative to peaceful societies and human rights (UNFPA, 2005) and one of the most significant ways of achieving gender equity is through gender inclusive practices. Significant efforts have been made to increase participation of women in the labor force in Africa. Gender inclusion is stemmed on equal rights and access to opportunities to all genders without gender bias, discrimination and prejudice. However, research reflects that gender disparities continue to bedevil African societies (Siziba & Wood, 2015), influenced by underlying social, cultural, religious, legal, regulatory and institutional barriers. On the issue of gender inclusion, Participant J, a member of National Kiswahili Association shared that Kiswahili academic associations generally have a supportive framework that gives preference to leadership positions for women. However, another Participant H a member of Kiswahili Association in East Africa expressed the view the terrain of gender inclusivity in Kiswahili academic associations is uneven. This is because the subject of alternative gender identities still remains excluded and at the margins of the works of many Kiswahili academic associations. One of the major reasons for this is that members feel that alternative gender identities such as those of LGBTQI+ individuals are in contrast to the norms and cultural values of most African societies. While this may be the general sentiment shared amongst many African cultures and societies, it is also a reality that the exclusionary practices against alternative gender identities impose

a huge barrier on the achievement of gender inclusion within Kiswahili academic associations. Resultantly, Kiswahili academic associations collude with prevailing social norms and legal institutions to strip alternative gender identity individuals of their civic and democratic rights.

Disability Inclusion

Disability inclusion is the practice of affording access to equal opportunities, human rights and fundamental freedoms to persons with disabilities (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In this study, all 16 participants agreed that in Kiswahili academic associations, people with disabilities are underrepresented. Participant K who is a member of Kiswahili Association in East Africa shared the view that many times, the lack of support systems for people with disabilities and those with special needs promotes exclusion. Provision for special arrangements such as sign language interpreters and braille materials is essential but financial constraints limit the funding for these arrangements. The same participant also explained that although disability exclusion is a cause for concern, it is mostly done unconsciously because of the small number of individuals with disabilities in these associations. It was recognised that this was not a justifiable cause for underrepresentation of disabled individuals in academic associations. Additionally, Participant L who is a member of the Kiswahili Language and Literature Association in Tanzania felt that it is good to promote the participation of disabled persons and other minorities in academic associations but it is also prudent to assess the significance of a certain group in line with the vision and mission of an association as some associations believe that issues of people with disabilities are outside the mandate and vision of their core activities as an

association. In light of this, it is imperative for Kiswahili academic associations to come up with alternative sources of funding and partnerships to create disability friendly environments when carrying out academic activities in order to attract and accommodate all persons including those with disabilities. It was also agreed that it is important to identify and include persons with disabilities and incorporate them in leadership positions so that they can take part in decision making processes and make sure that their needs are met.

Cultural Inclusion

Cultural inclusion is the practice of recognising, respecting and valuing diverse cultural identities and traditions in a society. Cultural inclusion essentially places emphasis on creating environments where individuals from different cultural backgrounds feel respected, included and afforded equal opportunities to fully participate in an organisation's activities. Participant L a member of National Kiswahili Association had this to say on cultural inclusion:

“ Even though we do not have an explicit policy on diversity and inclusion in our constitution, however, we do appreciate and acknowledge that every culture represented in our association is important and unique in its own way, be it a minority or a majority group. This is why our doors are open to everyone who wishes to join or participate in our activities at any given time. So far, we have members from various countries in and outside the continent who attend our annual conferences. We have also published many great works in our journal from people of various cultural backgrounds.”

The presence of diverse cultures in these

academic spaces fosters cultural pluralism whereby identities of underrepresented subcultures remain visible and valued, hence creating a healthy, equitable and harmonious cultural ecosystem for all (Ziółkowska, 2020). While the Kiswahili culture remains more predominant in many aspects such as language, dressing and food, minority subcultures in Kiswahili academic associations remain visible. Simultaneously, a more culturally inclusive Pan African identity is established, where all represented African cultures have equal opportunities to influence Afro-centered research and policy making.

OUTCOMES

Results of this study have established that there is inclusion as well as exclusion of certain individuals and populations within Kiswahili academic associations occurring in various forms. While the dimensions are intersectional, the degrees of inclusion and exclusion vary. Nevertheless, inclusion and exclusion occur at the individual, group, national and regional levels. The study's analysis revealed that although complexities of inclusion and exclusion are intricate; cultural, social and academic inclusion are more predominant while gender and disability inclusion are the less prevalent. Additionally, the results have shown that although Kiswahili academic associations do not have explicit diversity and inclusion frameworks; inclusion is implicit as evidenced by efforts made to promote inclusion in various ways. However, as highlighted in the case of disability inclusion, associations appear to choose who they want to target for inclusion in line with their vision and mission. Therefore, it seems there is no uniform blueprint for inclusive initiatives and so, there is

urgent need for Kiswahili academic associations to come up with a long term plan for addressing issues of diversity, inclusion and equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Intentional inclusion seeks to include all excluded individuals at whatever cost. It is focused on systematically identifying and targeting marginalised and underrepresented groups in order to increase diversity, equity and participation (Grill, 2020). Considering this, Kiswahili academic associations ought to conduct a thorough survey of underrepresented individuals in order to establish and understand their barriers to inclusion. Following this, support systems should be put in place to accommodate such groups and individuals. Inclusion is not only a question of moving those in the margins into the center, it equally involves a change of perspective by governments, non-state actors and individuals. As such, raising awareness on diversity and inclusion is critical and key in educating non-marginalised individuals in leadership spaces to enhance their awareness, eliminating unconscious bias and understanding of the intricate issues affecting minority and excluded groups (Madzima & MacIntosh, 2021). Various initiatives such as academic seminars, workshops and calls for personal commitments are central in creating platforms for discussion, policy framing and implementation towards inclusion of marginalised groups. It is also imperative for Kiswahili academic associations to design explicit diversity and inclusion frameworks in order to promote inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Seeking alternative sources of funding is also

critical for Kiswahili academic associations to amplify inclusion initiatives which largely depend on funding. Academic associations can engage organisations, stakeholders and government agencies which advocate for the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalised groups. In the same vein, there is need for Kiswahili academic associations to influence policy positions among African governments, stakeholders and organisations to lobby for an inclusive open door policy for economic opportunities to all individuals, not on the basis of their nationality or geographical location, but, on merit or expected qualifications.

CONCLUSION

This study was an exegesis of inclusion in Kiswahili academic associations specifically focusing on dimensions of inclusion within these associations. Discussion and outcomes of the study established the intricacies and intersectionality of inclusion within Kiswahili academic associations and how these persist in shaping inclusive and exclusive perspectives in Kiswahili academic activities. Nevertheless, the study has revealed the potential of Kiswahili as a language that can promote inclusion and diversity in Africa. The study also showed the ways in which Kiswahili language can act as an African bridge for common understanding as it is a shared inclusive language which connects individuals of different nationalities, cultures, religions, ideologies and languages through Kiswahili academic associations.

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