KIDAWIDA (KITAITA): A LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

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In 2014 I was awarded a CAS Research Tutorial Abroad grant to take two undergraduate students to Kenya for a research project on small scale business women at the coast of Kenya. While visiting my home village I interacted with young children who attended the same village school I attended. I spoke to them in *Kitaita*, my mother tongue with the assumption that they knew the language since they live in the village, but to my utter shock, they responded in Kiswahili and English. They claimed that they were advised by their teachers to speak in the two languages in order to improve their understanding of them since they are examinable subjects in the school curriculum. This was my wake up call, I realized that my language and its culture was facing endangerment, particularly because the language is not being passed down to the young generation. The situation is even more dire when we consider the gradual loss of older members of the speaking community, who have mastery and extensive knowledge of the language and culture. It became clear that if we are to stem further loss, documentation of the language has to begin immediately with great urgency. The objective is to collect lexicon items with a purpose of creating a dictionary and learning materials.

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi explains that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience"—thus its loss is the loss of a heritage, knowledge and identity.

As a native speaker of Kitaita, I am a resource person for any student seeking to research the language but without printed materials my help is limited. This need for materials further motivated me to apply for professional development leave, which was granted in fall 2015. I went to Kenya and embarked on searching for printed materials in the language, making the speaking community aware of the status of endangerment and developing linkages with people who would be interested in collaborating with me in the project. The only materials I found were the Bible, a hymn book, a small pamphlet on folklore and culture, a collection of proverbs, and a devotional. There are no learning materials or even a dictionary!

Taita-speakers, with a population of 284,657 as of 2009 census, occupy the Taita Hills located in Taita-Taveta county, within which there are three distinct ethnic communities, Wataita, Wataveta and Wasagala. Although these three languages are related structurally because they are Bantu, they are not mutually intelligible. Kiswahili is the language that crosses the ethnic line. The hegemony of Kiswahili as the national language and English as the official/instructional languages is one of the contributing factors in the endangerment of minority languages like Kitaita.

In collaboration with Professor Clara Momany of the Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) we wrote a proposal to solicit funding for Bilingual Dictionary Project. She is working on the Taveta-Swahili dictionary while I work on the Taita-English. During my research, I was fortunate to meet Taita elders at Taita Cultural Center in Wundanyi, which is dedicated to the preservation of the culture and they agreed to assist in the documentation. A "google open library" document on the *Kisagala* language written by a missionary named Alfred Wray in 1894 has provided a useful format for compiling the dictionary. I will conduct a workshop with the elders and other stakeholders to help confirm, fill in the gaps or make corrections before seeking publication in the near future. I believe the completed project will be useful to learners, travelers, researchers and the speaking community itself.

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