

An African Liberation Language's Entrance in the United States

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Abstract

Fragments of Tanzanian nationalism have appeared in black print since 1959; one of the first articles, "Freedom Now!" Tom Mboya," in the New York Amsterdam News introduced the term uhuru spoken by an East African Nationalist.¹ Elements of this East African language surfaced on black radio and television commercials during the transition from Negro to black to African American in the mid-1960s. In 1966 the chant was modified and adopted as the name Lieutenant Uhura for a character, played by African American actress Nichelle Nichols, in Star Trek, one of the earliest and most popular science fiction series in the United States.² The appearance and incorporation of the chant Uhuru! in black America serves as an example of racial Pan-Africanism that rises from black solidarity between African Americans and Tanzanians through the power of the black press.

Keywords: Pan Africanism, liberation, (Uhuru)/freedom, black press

Introduction

A generation of African Americans grew up concomitantly with the civil rights movement and the African liberation struggles.³ The Kiswahili rallying cry *Uhuru!* stretched far beyond the African shores thanks to the black press, black internationalism, and a newfound racial consciousness in the African diaspora. Kiswahili served as a political language in East Africa and was a key factor in the formation of unity for Tanganyika's anticolonial movements.⁴ Equally significant was the adoption of Kiswahili by black America to establish an African identity within the formation of black cultural nationalism. The impact of Tanzania's implementation of African socialism on the black community in the evolution of the civil rights movement had major international ramifications.

¹ Georgia Barner, "Freedom Now!" *New York Amsterdam News*, April 25, 1959,

² Nichelle Nichols, *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memoirs* (Tecumseh: Boulevard Books, 1995).

³ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 297–298.

⁴ Lionel Cliffe, "From Independence to Self-Reliance" *A History of Tanzania*, ed. I. N. Kimambo and A. J. Temu (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969), 239.

African Americans began to look to Africa for identity and answers to overcoming the long racial struggles in the United States. A decade of interaction between Tanganyikan nationalists and US Pan-Africanists created a strong bond that allowed African Americans a space in Africa through Tanganyika to contribute to the building of a nation and the mission of total African liberation in Sub-Saharan Africa. This article traces the entry of Kiswahili into the United States from the rise in African American/Tanganyikan linkage's black internationalism which triggered the extension of Tanganyikan nationalism from the black elite to the masses in the early years of Tanganyika's independence.

A liberation language surfaces in the United States

Between 1959 and 1961 the Kiswahili term *uhuru* was referenced in numerous *New York Times* articles. *Uhuru* was quoted in these *Times* articles as the chant from public anticolonial rallies in Tanganyika, Kenya, and the Congo. In the article "Self-Rule is Set for Tanganyika," Leonard Ingalls defined *uhuru* as a word for freedom and the rallying cry of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU).⁵ But in the publishing of "Africans Display a Desire to Rule," it is evident that *The New York Times* correspondent could not perceive the reality of Pan-Africanism from his coverage of events at and prior to the independence of Kenya and Tanganyika. No mention was made of the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East and Central Africa (PAFMECA)⁶ or the possibility of any connection between Kenya and Tanganyika in the 1961 articles.

Only one short paragraph from UPI in the *Times* in 1958 announced the formation of PAFMECA. In two sentences it reported that political leaders from five British territories—"native leaders of Uganda, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, Kenya and Zanzibar"—joined together to combat imperialism and "coordinate non-violent nationalist efforts."⁷ By 1959 PAFMECA also represented the Belgian Congo. A common concept of liberation emerges in three *New York Times* articles referencing member countries of PAFMECA and the usage of the slogan *Uhuru*. Ingalls had not recognized the common political language of Kiswahili that linked these three countries or the formalization of PAFMECA through which they practiced Pan-Africanism.

In 1959 the *New York Amsterdam News* printed the translation for *Uhuru* on the front page in an article highlighting an appearance by Tom Mboya in New York. "'Freedom Now!' – Tom Mboya," provided coverage of an Africa Freedom Day commemoration.⁸ Mboya spoke to a filled Carnegie Hall audience of 3,000, "made up of 30% whites." *Uhuru! Uhuru! Uhuru!* roared through Carnegie Hall, a symbolic gesture of empathy with the "cause of 150,000,000 Africans still under European rule." Granger's commentary in the *New York Amsterdam News* on Tanganyika's independence described Julius Nyerere, Tanganyika's first president raising his hand for the *Uhuru* greeting,⁹ indicating a signal of action with which this Pan-Africanist personally connected. Whereas the mainstream *New York Times* literally translated this term as "freedom," the US black press understood that *Uhuru* went beyond the simplified definition of this singular translation.

⁵ Leonard Ingalls, "Self-Rule Is Set For Tanganyika: British Trust Territory Will Get Internal Autonomy in '60—Africans Rejoice" *The New York Times*, December 16, 1959.

⁶ PAFMECA was a political Pan Africanist organization formed for coordinating regional activities to gain independence from colonial and white minority rule for territories in East and Central Africa. Countries in this organization included: Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. Kiswahili was widely used as a lingua franca in Central, Eastern and parts of Southern Africa.

⁷ "Pan-African Group Formed," *The New York Times*, September 21, 1958.

⁸ George Barner, "'Freedom Now!' –Tom Mboya," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 25, 1959, 1, col. 5.

⁹ Granger, "Manhattan and Beyond," December 23, 1961.

As with any term in a given society's language, there exists more than one meaning for a word. As such, *Uhuru* when translated from Kiswahili to English, could mean independence, freedom, or liberty. In this instance liberty is the more appropriate usage. African nationalism's terminology deemed liberation an indicator that initiatives were taken by African nationalists.¹⁰ *Freedom or independence* for African countries in the 1950s and 1960s were terms that were considered passive.¹¹ G. C. K. Gwassa's reflection on *Uhuru* through the epic Maji Maji war, East Africa's first rebellion between 1905 and 1907, expanded the meaning of this term.¹² The Maji Maji war, Gwassa explained, was part of the initial "process towards Uhuru." In this case, usage of *Uhuru* by Gwassa was not visualized as a single action but a process of transition from colonial oppression to self-rule. *Uhuru* for East African nationalists extended well beyond the declarations of independence in their countries. Pan-Africanist writers for the black press understood this process, for African Americans were in the same battle, seeking human and civil rights seized from racial oppression in the United States.

Africa Today, the journal begun by American Committee on Africa (ACOA), published Nyerere's article, "It's Up to Us: *Uhuru na Kazi*," in December, the month of Tanganyika's independence.¹³ The literal translation of *Uhuru na Kazi* is "freedom and work." Independence for Tanganyika, Nyerere declared in this article, brought "with it only one thing—an opportunity to build."¹⁴ The nation's new arrival in the global arena comes forth which Nyerere readily admitted would not change at Tanganyika's independence. Education was paramount, as it was extremely important that the future citizens be educated as quickly as possible.

The creation of an infrastructure was equally as imperative. It was in this publication that Nyerere chose to announce to the United States that Tanganyika was to become an African Socialist country. To achieve this end Nyerere's goal was "to build on past African tradition in which every family was responsible for all its members and every member responsible for the family."¹⁵ His hope was the development of an attitude which looked to the needs of the country rather than to the desires of the individual. In this instance, *Uhuru na Kazi*, literally meant "liberation is work."

A parallel was drawn between the Underground Railroad during US slavery and the recognition of Dar es Salaam as the "so-called 'freedom railroad' extending northward from Cape Town."¹⁶ In addition to the numerous liberation organizations from other countries, especially South African organizations, based in Tanganyika, the United Nations and the International Labor Organization also maintained offices in Dar es Salaam. France, England, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, West Germany, Poland, Australia, India, and most African states were all represented by embassies in Tanganyika at this time. After the establishment of the OAU, the US black community perceived that Tanganyika was in place to vie "with Ghana for the vanguard position in African nationalism and its capital."¹⁷ Through the constant black media coverage of political Pan-Africanism in Tanzania and East African nationalists' continuous visits to the United States, African Americans were exposed to and grew familiar with the strongly charged Swahili political vocabulary.

***Uhuru* spreads through the black internationalism of East African nationalists**

As Tanganyika pushed forward as a frontline country in Africa, black college and high school students in the United States began their proactive actions with the sit-in. The first sit-in occurred at the Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, where students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College simply sat at the lunch counter reserved for whites on February 1, 1960. This civil right non-violent practice rapidly spread to other students across the state.¹⁸

¹⁰ Timothy Welliver, *African Nationalism and Independence* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² G. C. K. Gwassa, "The German Intervention and African Resistance in Tanzania," in *A History of Tanzania*, ed. I. N. Kimambo and A. J. Temu (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969), 114.

¹³ Julius Nyerere, "It's Up to Us: *Uhuru na Kazi*," *Africa Today* 8, no. 10 (1961): 4-5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, 244.

¹⁸ SNCC Project, "SNCC 1960-1966: Six Years of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," www.ibiblio.org/sncc/timeline.html.

The idea spread to campuses throughout North Carolina and in less than two weeks had begun outside the state to Hampton, Virginia. By the end of April, the practice of this direct action had reached every Southern state, attracting approximately 50,000 students. At a conference held at Shaw University in Raleigh in April 1960, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed.

In *No Easy Victories*, Charles Cobb Jr. recounts the era, which for him began in 1961 as a Howard University student and continued as an expatriate in Tanzania in 1970. From Cobb's reflections, the spontaneous nature of black nationalism in the United States emerges.¹⁹ It was not atypical that Cobb became caught up in the SNCC movement on a college campus. By 1962 Cobb left Howard to work as a SNCC field secretary in the Mississippi Delta. Interest in Africa heightened among his comrades in SNCC, and in 1963, Cobb and a "whole bunch" of others who worked within SNCC decided to visit Oginga Odinga, Kenyan Minister of Home Affairs while he was in Atlanta, Georgia. Cobb stated there was nothing political in nature about their visit; it was simply because of what Odinga represented as an African leader, a political power that they had never seen.²⁰ Odinga did talk with Cobb and his SNCC friends. Cobb recalled that Odinga shook their hands, which "was a big thing" for them.²¹

After the brief meeting, Cobb and his friends decided to have coffee at the restaurant next door to the hotel in which they had seen Odinga. They were refused service. On a mental high from the prior meeting with Odinga, Cobb and friends refused to leave the restaurant, which resulted in their arrest. The *Atlanta Daily World* front page headline read "21 Students Bound Over by State Court."²² The actions of these SNCC members resulted in charges of violating the state's anti-trespass law.²³ Judge R. E. Jones pointed out to their attorney Howard Moore that there were "two members of the group who refused to give their right names." "To the laughter of the 40 members of SNCC that filled the room and many others in the courtroom, the judge stated that the two gave their names as "Freedom Now" and "Feeda Now,"²⁴ no doubt influenced by the translation of *Uhuru* as "freedom now." Songs were written about the incident, and as a tribute to Odinga, the SNCC Freedom Singers sang this song at rallies.²⁵

Oginga Odinga

I went down to the Peach Tree Manor
 To see Oginga Odinga
 The police said "Well, what's the matter?"
 To see Oginga Odinga.
 Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga
 Oginga Odinga of Kenya.
Uhuru, Uhuru
 Freedom now, freedom now
 The folks in Mississippi
 Will knock you on your rump
 And if you holler FREEDOM
 They'll throw you in the swamp.

¹⁹ Minter et al., *No Easy Victories*, 100–101.

²⁰ Ibid; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, 1995), 134.

²¹ Minter et al., *No Easy Victories*, 101.

²² "21 Students Bound Over by State Court," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 24, 1963, 1, col. 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Howard Rudnick, "A Coincidental Cup of Kenyan Coffee: SNCC and Malcolm X Recast the Struggle in Nairobi,"

http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/filmandmedia/images/Rudnick_William_Miles_Prize_winner_2011.pdf.

Patricia Hill Collins proposed that “despite the fact . . . the majority of African Americans mostly can define neither Black Nationalism nor its major ideological strands,” this incident demonstrates “the ideas themselves [did] circulate in everyday life as a template for African American ethnicity.”²⁶ Although *Uhuru* is an East African nationalist term, African Americans instinctively understood that its meaning inferred black liberation.

The Assimilation of Kiswahili in Black Cultural Nationalism

In a speech titled “Definition of a Revolution” given to the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference on November 10, 1963 at the King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, Malcolm X demonstrated that he understood and related to the Kiswahili term *Uhuru* just as the elite Pan-Africanists had, listening to Mboya at Carnegie Hall only a few years earlier. One must note that Malcolm had spent years visiting the Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library on 135th Street and often visited with African nationalists who were at the United Nations. He was consequently quite knowledgeable on the history and cultures of Africa.²⁷ In linking the black revolution of Africa to the Negro revolution in the United States, Malcolm also spoke of the *Mau Mau*’s, who brought forth again the term *Uhuru* to the international front.²⁸ At a rally at Williams Institutional Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem where SNCC members attended, Malcolm X stated that African Americans needed a *Mau Mau* movement rather than just continue to sit around singing “We Shall Overcome.”²⁹

African Americans’ familiarity with the rallying cries of *Uhuru* in the evolution of its struggle emerged through language. It is in the adoption of Kiswahili as a symbolic language in African American cultural nationalism and the establishment of self-identity in education that the continuation of the relationship between Tanzania and African Americans came forth in the United States. Concepts introduced upon the implementation by Tanzania of the Arusha Declaration in 1967 were appearing in the American black community.³⁰ Swahili training became a must in newly developing African and African American studies programs on American campuses, as well as in black community centers. Moreover, African Americans joined Tanzanians in numerous educational, human rights, and cultural Pan-African projects in Tanzania and the United States.

Conclusion

The English language in the United States embodies borrowed words derived from immigrants and its association with other cultures. The entry of a *Kiswahili* liberation term indicates the connection between Africa and its Diaspora during the simultaneous racial struggles of segregation and colonialism. The cries of *Uhuru* first travelled from Africa to the black masses through the pages of black print.³¹ This slogan needed no translation for the African American community in the late 1950s when introduced by print, for these African cousins were fighting for the same human rights denied by colour. Tracking this rallying call in the United States gives insight to the relevance it held for the community. Black print in the United States gives evidence of the path of language transmission gained from African Americans’ inclusion in the African racial political identity of Tanzania

²⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Nationalism and African American Ethnicity: The Case of Afrocentrism as Civil Religion,” in *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*, ed. Stephen May, Tariq Modood, and Judith Squires (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 102.

²⁷ Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 105–106.

²⁸ Malcolm X, “Definition of a Revolution,” in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 275.

²⁹ “Malcolm X Speaks with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (1966; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1994), 106.

³⁰ Walters, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora*, 66.

³¹ James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be African: Black Americas and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism 1937-1957* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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