Disability Studies Quarterly
the first journal in the field of disability studies

"Negotiating Local Knowledge II: Kiswahili and Attitudes toward Disability"

Ken Walibora Waliaula

Kipofu Hasahau Mkongojo wake

The blind person doesn't forget his rod

(Kiswahili Proverb)

In "Kila Mwanadamu ni Muhimu" ("Every Human Being is Important"), one of her most enormously popular Kiswahili songs, Tanzania musician Saida Karoli recounts the story of a rich man whose selfishness, arrogance, and belligerence is ostensibly "punished" by siring children with different kinds of disability.[1] One child is blind, the other deaf, and another physically challenged. The plight of these children is accentuated by the inability of the man's opulence to fulfill each child's heart's desire — the blind child wants to see his brother play, the deaf child wants to hear, the physically challenged wants to participate in physically vigorous activities, and so on and so forth. The song that continues to entertain, enthuse, and perhaps educate the Kiswahili music audiences, particularly in East and Central Africa, confronts the issue of disability in a way that raises more questions than it answers.

Key among these questions is whether there is a link between disability and punishment from some superhuman source for some wrong done. The idea that disability is a punishment from God is attitudinal, shaping and molding how individuals and society perceive persons with disability or how persons with disability perceive themselves. There is a sense in which Karoli's song points to an implicit "criminalization" of disability and a probable tension in the interaction between the "able" and "disabled" persons. This tension is sometimes reflected in society through the somewhat "embarrassing" questions about disability, including the sexuality of

disabled persons (how do they make love? how do they beget children?), questions, often asked in hushed tones, which betray a regrettable but commonplace ignorance of the human condition called disability.

Clearly, the song echoes general attitudes towards the disabled in the Kiswahili speaking world, negative attitudes that precipitate the kind of rage that Georgina Kleege, a disabled American writer and scholar, unleashes upon the "able" in general in her provocative autobiography, *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, in order to underline and underscore the almost perpetual miscomprehension and distortions of conditions of impairment by those not impaired.[2] In general, Karoli's song raises questions such as: How much knowledge do the so-called "normal" members of society have about the condition of disability, including the thorny issue of the sexuality of the disabled? What disturbing attitudes pervade the thinking of "able" men and women? To what extent are these attitudes betrayed in the many and varied modes of expression, especially language?

In what follows I consider the interplay between Kiswahili language in general and its demeaning tendencies with regard to disability. I focus attention on the role of the "ki" prefix, as well as some Kiswahili terms and proverbs, which touch on disability. I intend to analyze the "ki" prefix as well as these terms and proverbs with a view to unearthing what they reveal or conceal on attitudes towards disability. I would like to make my point of departure the recognition of the failure of language to represent ontological reality, specifically to represent the reality of what it means to have a certain condition of disability. In this regard, I concur with Scott Simpkins who, in a different context, has cogently argued that language cannot surmount the inability to fully represent reality (Simpkins 1988: 149). Following Plato in *Phaedus*, Simpkins asserts that to tell what something *really* is remains beyond the human ken — we can only tell what it *resembles* (Simpkins 1988: 150). In light of our discussion on disability, we can then safely say: language — and not just Kiswahili or French or English or Arabic — does not have the capacity to sufficiently and accurately reflect the essence of suffering of the disabled. It therefore follows that in attempts to capture, describe, explain, illustrate, and make sense of disability, language merely succeeds in approximating, estimating, second-guessing, and sometimes distorting the reality of disability. I argue that in navigating and negotiating local knowledge, and reflecting on the political economy of disability, we have to be aware of the misreading and misleading propensity of language with regard to the presentation or representation of conditions of disability. Thus, in a general sense, it is vitally important to be cognizant of the limits of language and to desist from putting implicit trust in language as a vehicle for carrying the experience of disability. But beyond pondering on the limits of language, it is also important to reflect on the explicit and implicit attitudes that each specific language betrays in its treatment of conditions of disability. Related to this showcasing of attitudes lacking sensitivity to the sensibilities of the disabled, I come across the very nature of language as an arbitrary and illogical construct.

One of the key results of the arbitrariness and illogicality of Kiswahili in its linguistic structure is the multifarious functions of the "ki" prefix. My concern here will be limited to its bearing on disability. I will proceed by discussing some aspects of the prefix "ki." I will analyze how these aspects interact with disability or how they impact on how disability is conceived of, commented on, conveyed, described, characterized, or portrayed in the language. The epigraph at the beginning of this section "Kipofu hasahau mkonjo wake" (The blind person doesn't forget his rod) is a famous Kiswahili proverb. I have quite deliberately chosen this proverb to foreground how problematic the depiction of disability is in Kiswahili language. The proverb seems to be predicated on a fairly obvious fact; because of the centrality of the rod in the mobility of the visually impaired person and its enabling capacity, he or she will always ensure they have it everywhere every time. In a deeper sense, the point of the proverb is that we must never forget our essentials without which we cannot function, or without which we cannot function well. On the surface it comes across as a proverb that is friendly to the visually impaired, presenting or representing them as exemplary, as role models in matters of self-sufficiency and preparedness. I will return to proverbs presently, but for the moment I am concerned with the problematic prefix "ki" in the word describing visual impairment, namely "kipofu" in this proverb.

It is imperative to mention at this juncture that I have not always viewed the "ki" prefix as problematic. Like most "able" Kiswahili speakers, I was lulled into a false sense of security by what I may characterize as the putative "innocuousness" of this prefix. I was absolutely unaware of the scope of negativity inherent in the "ki" in "kipofu" and any number of words referring to disability until a disabled caller drove the point home to me almost close to a decade ago, while I was a stand-in host of "Kamusi ya Changamka," a now defunct call-in radio program on what was then Nation FM Radio.[3] It is significant that it was a disabled individual who enabled me and millions of listeners to notice the inherently negative attitude in the seemingly innocuous syllable "ki." The caller intimated that the obnoxious syllable "ki" was demeaning and belittling since it was often appended to nouns to stress diminution or smallness. For instance, whereas "mzee" is the ordinary term for an elderly person, affixing the prefix 'ki" on the root "zee" to make it "kizee" suggests an elderly person of small stature or size, and perhaps miserable. The prefix "ki' renders the mzee in diminutive terms, and is therefore derogatory and demeaning. The caller then proceeded to list Kiswahili words referring to disability, all of which began with what we may now call the notorious "ki" syllable or prefix. These included kiziwi (deaf), kiwete, (lame) kilema, (disability), kichaa, (mentally ill), kigugumizi (stutterer), kitembe (lisp), kiguru (one legged).

I forget the details of my response, and it is disingenuous for me to attempt a word for word recollection of what I said then. But what I do remember is the misguided, all-knowing attitude that guided my role as radio program host and as the master of Kiswahili language, as I then thought myself to be. I had then published a number of Kiswahili fictional works, one of which at that time was being studied in all Kenyan secondary schools as a Kiswahili literature set

book. The temptation to consider myself an authority, conflating authorship with authority as it were, was real.[4] I will try to reconstruct my "logical" reasoning then, and how I saw the caller's claims as baseless. I reasoned that, after all, there are numerous positive attributes to the odious "ki" prefix, in words such as kiongozi (leader), kinara (chairperson), kiranja (head prefect), kijana (young person), kisima (well), kichana (comb), kisura (beautiful girl or woman) or even kimanzi (from which Sheng masters have derived manzi for girl). I saw "ki" as serving multiple linguistic functions over and above that of diminution. For instance, it is an endearing address, such as when one calls someone "kipenzi changu" (my love). The "ki" in "kipenzi changu" makes the former expression outweigh "mpenzi wangu" (also my love) in capturing the magnitude of affection and the depth of aesthetic value.

That was then, before my moment of "epiphany" or, to use Raymond Williams's phrase, before "radical doubt" deformed and destroyed my confidence (Williams 1977: 11). I now know that the caller's assertions were not baseless. It is not for nothing that discerning and inquisitive Kiswahili language learners keep wondering why there is the preponderance of the "ki" prefix in words describing disability when most words describing humans such as mtoto (child), mtu (person), mwanamke (woman), mwanamume (man) all begin with "m"? They often ask why we do not say simply mpofu, mziwi, muwete, mlema, mchaa instead of kipofu, kiziwi, kiwete, kilema, kichaa? Why? Also, another question begs for an answer: why is it that, besides words referring to disability such as kichaa and kilema, there are no words that describe both the person and the condition of that person? It seems to me that purveying the logic of the illogicality of language is the only way of *making sense of the nonsense of language*.

Several years ago I would have argued logically about the illogicality of language in response to the first question. After all, there are also any number of words in the realm of disability in Kiswahili which do not bear the "ki" prefix, such as kengeza (cross-eyed), chongo (one-eyed), bubu (mute), tasa (sterile). But over time, the things that were always certain to me back then have become increasingly less and less certain. This uncertainty has also prompted me to reconsider my grasp of the significance and implication of certain Kiswahili proverbs.

In another famous proverb, "Mungu hakupi kilema akakosesha mwendo" (God will never give you disability and at the same time hamper your mobility), one notices a paradoxical situation, in which the invocation of God's hand in the distribution of disability is accompanied by an awareness of his willingness to enable the disabled persons to navigate their world. In a sense the immutable, if disquieting, belief that God is responsible for one's state of disability is mollified by the belief that he does not entirely leave in the lurch those to whom he subjects to disability. This proverb is often used to console people disabled or bereft of certain privileges, positions, expectations, or functions in society. It would therefore perhaps seem unfair to discount the proverb's power of consolation, the sort of consolation that millions need in our tumultuous times. However, the proverb tends to take away responsibility from individuals and society as far as causing and dealing with disability is concerned. For one, it attributes

everything, fortunate or unfortunate, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, to God. Hence, the proverb either does not account for cases of disability that have human causes, such as deliberate grievous bodily harm and injuries from accidents caused by carefree and careless attitudes and actions, or it situates these occurrences within the matrix of the hand of God.

It is tempting to claim that, as a society, we are adequately accepting of our disabled members. However, such a conclusion is an exercise in self-delusion. If significant parts of our infrastructure, such as skyscrapers, telephony, public transport, roads, shopping malls, school and college buildings, stadiums, are designed without consideration for the disabled, not to mention the curious stares to which the impaired are often subjected, the exclusion of the disabled is heightened and intensified by the cruelty and insensitivity of language towards them. The thrust of the argument here is what language does *to* the impaired rather than what it does *for* them. Still, others may insist that there are indeed aspects of Kiswahili that shape and mold positive attitudes and actions towards the disabled. One may cite proverbs such as "Achekaye kilema hafi hakijamfika" (He who laughs at a disabled person won't die before being disabled himself). It is a proverb that apparently dissuades individuals from taunting or looking down upon the disabled. However, the implication is rather foreboding; disability is a punishment for laughing at disability. One is bound to ponder and wonder whether those who are disabled are in that state as a punishment for laughing at someone else who is disabled or for committing some other sin of commission or omission. The previous proverb, "Mungu hakupi kilema akakukosesha mwendo," suggested God's hand in dispensing disability among humans. "Achekaye kilema hafi hakijamfika" seems to provide a clue as to the determining factors that God takes into account in "handing out" disability. Beneath the fatalistic philosophy and the sense of pity, sympathy, and empathy that underpins these proverbs, there lies an implicit tendency to blame the victim. The fact that generations of Kiswahili speakers have been, like me, oblivious to this implied condemnation of the victim is disturbing, but not at all surprising. No further elaboration is necessary on why such revelation is disturbing, apart from stressing what I perceive as the insidious depersonalizing and dehumanizing of disabled persons that is inherent in these proverbs, as well as others like them. We shall briefly address a few more demeaning proverbs before returning to the discussion on the element of surprise.

Indeed there are other proverbs that do not say very kind things about disability. "Ukila na kipofu usimguse mkono" (If you eat with a blind person don't touch his/her hand) is one such example. I am not entirely certain about the logicality of this proverb, particularly its admonition to not touch the blind person while eating with him, as if it suggests sighted people normally touch one another while eating. But there is no doubting its foregrounding of difference between sighted people and the visually impaired. The first thing the proverb does to highlight this difference is to exclude the disabled person from address, as most proverbs touching on disability do; the "you" addressed here is evidently by implication a sighted person, an intimate addressable *subject*, while the blind person is at very best the Other, and at the very worst an untouchable *object*, at least in the course of a shared meal. In whose interest is the touching

prohibition; is it in the interest of the addressee or the blind Other? What is at stake or may suffer jeopardy when and if the blind person is touched during a meal? Is the blind person so dirty that to touch him or her renders one's food dangerously contaminated? Some commentators have suggested the view that the blind person is likely to misread and misinterpret the touch, were that to happen. But if that is the case, regardless of the deeper meaning of the proverb, what is achieved by suggesting the deficiency of the sense of touch in someone already bereft of the sense of sight?

One example of the demeaning nature of proverbs is what I may call the "callous comparison" of two different conditions of disability in the proverb "Akipenda chongo, huita kengeza" (Whoever loves a mono-eyed person, calls him/her cross-eyed). In this proverb, which recalls the English proverb "love is blind," the condition of being mono-eyed and of that being cross-eyed, conditions related to visual ability or disability, are juxtaposed. If the English proverb equates love to "blindness" or to failure to see, its Kiswahili counterpart perceives love as synonymous with failure to see well, a failure predicated on a propensity towards misreading, the consequence of which is the embracing of wrong *name calling* or anomalous nomenclature. Since the deeper meaning of the proverb does not concern us here, it does not matter to us which one is better between being cross-eyed and being mono-eyed. What matters and what is perhaps also baffling is how in English as in Kiswahili, a seeing impairment is used as vehicle for advancing a certain philosophy on the nature of love.

Another proverb that is connected to visual impairment is "Ukienda kwa wenye chongo funga lako jicho" (If you go among the mono-eyed people, close one of your eyes). Clearly, this proverb is not about love and how "blinding" it can be, even if it bears close resemblance to "Ukila na kipofu usimguse mkono," (If you eat with a blind person don't touch his hand), especially in its didactic properties and structure. Like the previous proverb, it exhibits the habitual exclusion of the disabled in the address, in this case not the "blind" person but the "mono-eyed." Here again the addressee is presumed and assumed to be someone without a visual impairment, a subject who is required to pretend to by mono-eyed like "them," the Other, the object or objects. I reiterate yet again that it is not our business here to unravel the proverb's deeper meaning. We are interested in how, at the superficial level, this proverb portrays the mono-eyed as either too envious to stand in front of someone with two eyes or as gullible enough to be easily hoodwinked into believing that someone closing one eye is like one of them. There is a sense in which the maturity of the one-eyed persons is questioned or their intelligence undermined.

Our final example, "Kumwashia pofu taa ni kuharibu mafuta" (Lighting the lamp for the blind is wasting fuel), is even much more daunting. Granted we encounter in this proverb "pofu," alluding to blindness without the demeaning "ki." Further, the proverb seems to hinge on cold hard logical reasoning that since the blind cannot see, what is the point of lighting a lamp for them? Nevertheless, regardless of what the deeper meaning of the proverb might be, what

image of the blind is it trying to convey? Does it not implicitly suggest viewing the blind as an unpleasant burden to society? Is it not tragic that, even in the absence of the notorious "ki" to which a disabled caller drew my attention, there is still something nefarious and odious about some aspects of Kiswahili language and disability?

As we stated earlier, these observations about proverbs may be both disturbing and surprising. We have already mentioned, albeit briefly, why this modified reading of proverbs may be disturbing, how it exposes the dehumanizing and depersonalizing attributes of these proverbs. It is now time to elucidate on the surprise element. It is perhaps surprising that someone can have the temerity to unsettle and disrupt the erstwhile uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of language from the mainstream society of the able. To question a language viewed as given, as this essay attempts to do, to demonstrate how certain aspects of the language tend to belittle "a portion of the human race" (as Chinua Achebe would put it (12)), is to swim against the current. That is what may be surprising to some. What is not surprising is the ignorance of the able regarding the harm that language inflicts on people with disability. I have made my confessions about how ignorant I had been in this regard.

This ignorance seems to hinge on experiential factors. In her authoritative book, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry has theorized the impossibility of comprehending what we do not experience ourselves. She stated: "To have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear pain is to have *doubt*" (Scarry 1985: 13). Although Scarry's theory is anchored on the perception of pain — and I want to believe that not all bodily dysfunction results in pain — her model is quite illuminating, as it draws a clear distinction between a lived experience and merely "hearing" about the experience. In the light of this probability or possibility of doubting an experience that we have not undergone ourselves, the thought of able people experiencing vicariously the condition of disability is negated. The only condition of possibility for the able to grasp what it means to be disabled is to be disabled themselves.

Language constructed, as it were, by the able generally pays little or no heed to the sensibilities of the disabled. In a sense, language suffers from a certain disability — a disability that renders it incapable of capturing the essence of what it means for someone to be in a state of disability. I therefore suggest that harnessing local knowledge for the implementation of disability programs must entail a more nuanced understanding of the local community by assessing the views and attitudes of both the able and the disabled. It would be foolhardy to ignore the insight of the disabled whose experiential realities make them better qualified to articulate their positions. G. Thomas Couser has cogently argued in his *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*, that persons with disability are more in need of the creation of an "inclusive world," rather than having sympathy, empathy, or pity extended towards them. The able — like the language they construct — should not abrogate to themselves the task of single-handedly advancing the course of disability.

Yet the need for us to collectively ransack the hidden closets of our languages for evidence of attitudes that hamper the creation of a more inclusive world has never been greater. The balance needed is to create and use words that do not betray crass callousness towards disability, and at the same time to avoid being sticklers for words by demanding exactitude. There also remains the other danger of over-utilizing distorting and misleading euphemisms that hinder rather than help communication and comprehension.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of the African: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1975] in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1989.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*. Madison: University Press of Wisconsin, 1997.

Kleege, Georgina. *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University, 2006.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York/ London: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Simpkins, Scott: "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism" in *Twentieth Century Literature* 34:2 (1988): 140-54.

Waliaula, Ken Walibora. "In Service of Kiswahili with Pen, Microphone, and the TV Screen" in *Journal of African Language Teachers' Association* 9 (2007): 81-94.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Endnotes

1. In this paper, disability and impairment will be used interchangeably to refer to a condition that affects an individual's life activity, such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, or feeling. I owe this understanding to Georgina Kleege's presentation at the Ohio State University on February 27, 2007, during the Disability Workshop.

Return to Text

2. It could well be that the sighted people, like Oedipus, the eponymous hero of Sophocles' classic tragedy, cannot see. In a sense, Kleege's autobiography *Blind Rage* expresses her ability to see what sighted people cannot see, like the blind character in the Athenian drama. It is what Kleege sees that enrages her, a reaction that the suggestive title of her autobiography and the text in its entirety embody. In her apostrophized conversation with the late Helen Keller, "Consciousness on Trial," she expresses her anger at "the prejudices of some seeing-hearing people still hold about us 'sense cripples'" (Kleege 6). In the dialogue, Kleege vilifies the seeing-hearing for casting "doubt" on Helen's ability to write a prize winning story and for which they accuse her for plagiarism. In her analysis of the phony plagiarism charges against Helen, Kleege sees absurdity, prejudices, *doubt*, and imprudence exhibited towards the innocent disabled girl's ability and disability by the "seeing-hearing" adults. In her reference to Helen's account, Kleege also foregrounds the abuse to which sighted people subject the life narratives of the visually impaired.

Return to Text

3. I have since established that disability activist Phitalis Were was the caller who made me aware of the negativity inherent in both the "ki" prefix and other semantic and morphological and semantic elements of Kiswahili.

Return to Text

4. For more information on my contribution to the advancement of Kiswahilim, see my "In Service of Kiswahili with Pen, Microphone, and the TV Screen" in *Journal of African Language Teachers' Association* 9 (2007): 81-94.

Return to Text
Return to Top of Page

About the Journal

Disability Studies Quarterly (*DSQ*) is the journal of the Society for Disability Studies (SDS). It is a multidisciplinary and international journal of interest to social scientists, scholars in the humanities and arts, disability rights advocates, and others concerned with the issues of people with disabilities. It represents the full range of methods, epistemologies, perspectives, and content that the field of disability studies embraces. *DSQ* is committed to developing theoretical

and practical knowledge about disability and to promoting the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society. (ISSN: 1041-5718; eISSN: 2159-8371)

Make a Submission

DSQ Social Media

Tweets by @DSQJournal

DSQ Instagram

Disability Studies Quarterly is published by The Ohio State University Libraries in partnership with the Society for Disability Studies.

If you encounter problems with the site or have comments to offer, including any access difficulty due to incompatibility with adaptive technology, please contact libkbhelp@lists.osu.edu.

ISSN: 2159-8371 (Online); 1041-5718 (Print)