



Research Article

Kikami Language Shift at Mikese Ward in Morogoro Region, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examines language shift in the Kikami-speaking community at Mikese Ward in Morogoro Region, Tanzania, with particular attention to the extent of vocabulary replacement and the reasons behind the decline in the use of Kikami. The study used a descriptive research design and collected data from 60 respondents drawn from three age groups: young adults (18–30 years), middle-aged adults (31–49 years), and elders (50 years and above). Data were collected through lexical questionnaires and interviews, and the responses were compared across the age groups to assess Kikami vocabulary retention and the use of Kiswahili and other languages. The findings show a clear decline in Kikami vocabulary retention across generations. Elders recorded the highest mean retention rate at 94.1%, followed by middle-aged adults at 78.5%, while young adults recorded the lowest rate at 55.9%. The results also show that frequently used words, particularly basic numerals and pronouns, were more likely to be retained, whereas kinship terms, geographical terms, and words associated with supernatural and traditional knowledge showed greater loss. The study further found that the growing preference for Kiswahili, limited use of Kikami in public and formal settings, migration, social pressure, and reduced transmission of the language between generations contribute to the shift. Overall, the findings indicate that Kikami is experiencing substantial vocabulary loss and reduced use among younger speakers. The study therefore recommends urgent documentation of Kikami vocabulary and cultural knowledge, together with efforts to encourage its use within families and the wider community.

Keywords

Kikami, Language Shift, Lexical Replacement, Vocabulary Erosion, Language Endangerment

1. Introduction

Kikami is a Bantu language classified as (G36) spoken primarily by the Wakami community in the Morogoro region of Tanzania (Greenberg [19]; Simons & Fennig [18]). Situated in a multilingual environment with surrounding languages like Swahili and Kiluguru, the language is experiencing an accelerating Language Shift (LS), defined as the habitual replacement of a native language with a dominant one in everyday function. Holmes [1] describes language shift as the gradual

replacement of a native language by a dominant one, especially among younger generations. Fishman [2] identifies declining intergenerational use as a key indicator of language shift.

According to the Languages of Tanzania Project [3] and Lewis [17] the country has about 164 languages, though some estimates vary. Petzell [4] notes that although many of these languages are native to the population, they are not used in

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public institutions like schools. Swahili and, in some contexts, English dominate official and educational domains. [1] notes that a language's survival depends on how broadly it is used: the more domains a language covers, the greater its chances of persistence.

Fasold [5] asserts that a full language shift involves complete abandonment of the native tongue which normally results to language death. This shows that language shift is marked by declining intergenerational use, which leads directly to the attrition of the native lexicon. This loss of vocabulary is not only a linguistic phenomenon but it also contributes to the permanent loss of historical and traditional knowledge where in Tanzania for instance, Legère [6]; Mekacha [7]; Yoneda [8] even in remote areas, the influence of Swahili is evident, and has been observed to change native languages by introducing extensive Swahili vocabulary. [4]; [8].

Rubagumya [9] estimates that only about 10% of Tanzanians speak Swahili as their first language, although this figure is growing. Batibo [10] outlined the stages of language shift in Tanzania, suggesting that many communities are already moving towards Swahili dominance, as is the case with Kikami. Later studies by Mekacha [11] and Yoneda [8] found that this shift has deepened, with many ethnic groups now using Swahili as their primary language.

African policies have been seen to be the first in line to marginalize the indigenous languages and given the rich nature and diversity of African continent in terms of language. Ohiri-Aniche [12], in countries like Nigeria many languages are moving fast to their graves or at least to the archives, like the Latin language and in the case of adopting or promoting any or some of the Nigerian languages as the national language(s), the policy has largely remained on paper. This is similar to Tanzania where in many Tanzanian communities, minority languages are confined to informal settings and lack official support.

Scholars like Shohamy [13] argue that the policy includes a statement which says that minority groups should be allowed to maintain their languages but Tanzania has over 120 languages and the policy does not specifically state which minority groups and what strategies they should follow to maintain their languages. Since independence, government policies have prioritized linguistic assimilation rather than cultural preservation. Garcá [14] highlights that Swahili has been the only officially recognized language in Tanzania, while indigenous languages lack constitutional protection. Without official status, these languages risk disappearing, along with the cultural identities they embody and since language embodies rich content and meaning and through language, individuals not only express their identities but also shape their cultural narratives, reflecting our position within society. The current study was motivated by the need to understand the structural effects of this shift in Kikami with objectives to identify the extent to which Kikami vocabulary has been replaced or altered by other external languages, and to examine the reasons

why Kikami language is shifting.

2. Literature Review

Language shift is more than a change of language used. It can also have an impact on vocabulary, language patterns, transmission to children and attitudes of speakers towards their language. Lending and code switching can be the first steps in the process of a multilingual community's transition to the dominant language. Borrowed words can increasingly and slowly supplant native words as the preeminent language expands its use in daily life. Younger speakers can then develop a lack of knowledge of their heritage language. The literature reviewed in this literature review is divided into two main themes. The first looks at language contact and lexical replacement; the second at social and institutional aspects of language shift. The themes are directly related to the present study which is investigating vocabulary replacement and the reasons behind the loss of Kikami.

2.1. Language Contact, Lexical Replacement, and Structural Change

Language contact is an interaction between the speakers of different languages that takes place on a frequent basis. This contact can result in borrowing, code switching, semantic change and in some cases in the eventual replacement of one language with the other (Aikhenvald [28]; Thomason & Kaufman [15]; Thomason [24]). The amount of linguistic change will greatly vary and be influenced by the length of time and amount of contact between the language communities, as explained by Thomason and Kaufman [15] and Thomason [24]. Speakers may pick up a few words, especially words for new objects, new technologies, or new institutions, in the few contacts they have. However, in situations of prolonged contact, the influence of the dominant language can be more complete, including its pronunciation, word formation, meaning and grammar. Lexical borrowing is in various forms. Haugen [23] makes a distinction between loanwords, loan blends and loan shifts. Some words are taken directly from the other language, others are altered to suit the sounds or grammatical structure of the language they're being used in. In other instances, a known word is given some new sense from its borrowing from another language. Different types of borrowing are important for the present study as Kiswahili might be directly replaced, phonologically adapted, morphologically integrated or semantically changed.

Social relationship between the contact languages also affects the amount of borrowing. Sankoff [25] and Bamgbose [26] note that education, employment, political power, and economic opportunity languages typically exert more influence on less well-institutionalized languages. The borrowing can start in certain sectors like education, government, business and technology. However, over time words from the

dominant language can be integrated into everyday communication and used to replace simple native language words. Evidence of indigenous languages elsewhere around the world also parallels this situation. In the case of Spanish and Nahuatl, for example, Olko [27] noticed that there was borrowing, semantic change, calquing and new creation. Research in North America on indigenous languages has also found that English has impacted vocabulary in other sectors such as education, government, technology, and modern social life [31, 32]. These studies show that lexical replacement frequently has a connection to inequitable social and economic relations among language communities.

The use of borrowing does not necessarily imply language endangerment. A healthy language can take words from other languages and still retain its own structures and be passed on to children. Where the speakers no longer know the original native words, as is the case for younger speakers, the situation is made more serious. At this point, the borrower can end up with lexical attrition or language loss. The reduction, restructuring or loss of linguistic features are examples of what can happen to a language that is undergoing a decline (Dorian [39]; Mougion and Beniak [40]; Campbell and Muntzel [41]). Vulnerability of areas of vocabulary varies. Minority languages might not be commonly used in the fields of education, administration, technology and modern economic activities, and therefore, words related to these domains are often borrowed early. Usually more resistant to replacement are basic words like numerals, pronouns, words that refer to body parts, common verbs, and kinship terms, since they are commonly used in everyday life. At a higher stage of language shift, even these very elementary categories can be impacted.

The erasure of kinship terms, traditional beliefs and practices, plants and nature is particularly alarming. This vocabulary includes knowledge of the community's culture, history, relationships amongst its members and its understanding of the world. As these terms fade from use, so do parts of the cultural knowledge that are reflected in these terms. Kiswahili has become more influential in Tanzania, where there are several studies demonstrating that this development has affected the use and vocabulary of the ethnic community languages. Mekacha [7], Legère [6], Yoneda [8] and Petzell [4] demonstrate that Kiswahili has spread beyond official and public spaces into the everyday community life. The expansion has led to a rise in borrowing, code switching and swahilisation of local languages. For instance, Yoneda (2004: 115-128) reported findings on Matengo, who was contacted by Kiswahili for an extended period of time, finding that this would lead to changes in vocabulary and language use. These studies indicate that lexical change in community languages is not only a process of borrowing some individual words in these languages. Instead, it could be a general linguistic trend of change in language preference, competence and transmission.

However, most of the earlier research on community languages of Tanzania has focused on general language usage, language contact and the increasing dominance of Kiswahili.

Little research has been done on the differences between the vocabulary knowledge of generations of Kikami speakers. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the word retention of young adults, middle aged adults and elders. It also takes into account other types of words such as numbers, pronouns, family words, parts of the body, words for actions, geographical words and supernatural words. The intertextual comparison is useful to see if the replacement is restricted to specific vocabulary or has come into the basic Kikami vocabulary.

2.2. Factors Influencing Language Shift and Endangerment

Lexical replacement cannot be seen just as a purely linguistic process. It is affected by social, political, economic, demographic and institutional factors. The one of the clearest signs of language shift is the failure of the parents to transmit a language to their children, as Fishman [2] points out. Holmes [1] also notes that the survival of a language is dependent upon the number of social settings in which a language is used. A language better has a chance of being well sustained in the home, community, education and religion, cultural activities, media communication and public communication. When it is only used in a limited range of contexts - such as private or ceremonial - speakers' opportunities to build and maintain a broad vocabulary are fewer. The language fluency and confidence of speakers may decrease level by level.

One of the factors that needs to be taken into account in the study of language shift is age. Older speakers may have more knowledge of the native language as it was used more frequently in their family/community when they learned it. Middle aged speakers can be bilingual but prefer to use the dominant language in the workplace, at school and when communicating with their children. Younger speakers might know the meaning of the heritage language but may not know how to speak that language or remember the words used in that language. These disparities in knowledge of the lexicon may thus provide clues as to the successfulness of the transmission of the language. Language policy sets the environment for languages, and so does education. In a number of African states, the national languages or the former colonial languages are dominant in the formal sector of the economy, government, administration and education. The use of indigenous languages is usually confined to informal communication [21, 26]. Education and assessment in the dominant languages leads children to acquire academic and professional vocabulary in the dominant languages not in their home languages.

In Tanzania Kiswahili is an official language of communication and it is correlated with access to public services, education, mobility and national unity. English also plays a vital part in higher education and career. On the other hand, many ethnic community languages are relatively poorly institutionalized, and are used primarily in domestic and ritual settings, and in local community relations [3, 4, 7]. The imbalance in

the use of languages in social contexts can make Kiswahili and English more useful to the language speakers than their ethnic languages. Younger speakers, especially, may be more inclined to want to speak languages that allow them to access education and employment and that allow them to communicate with others from other ethnic groups. Thus, Kikami might slowly lose its status in everyday communication, including those within the family.

Attitudes of the speakers are also essential. The greater the sense of cultural pride, identity and community solidarity with a language, the more likely it will be maintained. However, those who speak it may feel embarrassed in using it if they feel ridiculed or if their language is believed to be associated with backwardness or lack of education. According to McCarty [31] and Hinton [32] linguistic insecurity may be caused by the negative treatment of the mother tongue which is noticeable particularly among younger people. If speakers are not at ease or do not feel comfortable in their language, they will have less opportunities of practising their language. With fewer opportunities to use, there can be decreases in competence and dependence on the dominant language. Native language words can then be substituted for in everyday speech by the words of the dominant language.

Language shift can also occur as a result of migration and urbanization. Rural speakers are more likely to communicate with other language speakers when the speakers move to an urban context with multiple languages. Here they might communicate in a more widespread language in the context of education, occupational, business and social relations. Trudgill [29] and Thomason and Kaufman [30] show that demographic movements and rates of social interaction have an impact on the diffusion of linguistic forms. The close network of community support for the use of a minority language can also be undermined by migration. Kikami speakers who reside outside of a language area where the language is widely used might have limited opportunities to speak Kikami. Their children, in turn, may consequently be brought up as Kiswahili-speaking children.

Language shift can have more impact than just a reduction in the number of speakers. Indigenous languages contain the knowledge of social relations, oral history, farming, traditional medicine, spiritual beliefs and the ecosystem [21, 22]. The loss of words in the community's native language can lead to some loss of distinctions and knowledge that is not adequately captured in translation. In some cases, the absence of certain kinship terms might diminish important cultural differences among family relations, for instance. Likewise, vocabulary referring to plants, geographical features, rituals and supernatural beliefs will be lost, which will result in weaker transmission of ecological and spiritual knowledge.

As this literature reveals, therefore, lexical replacement is strongly related to limited language use, low levels of institutional support, migration, negative attitudes, and disruption of intergenerational transmission. But, there are not yet sufficient pieces of evidence that demonstrate the impact of these factors

on the vocabulary knowledge of different generation of Kikami speakers. The present study is filling this gap by showing that the retention of the lexicon differs with the age groups, and that the factors driving the preference for Kiswahili and other dominant languages are gaining increased preference by the speakers.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The paper used ethnolinguistic vitality theory which states that the language survival is dependent on three key pillars such as institutional, demography and status. Institutions involves the domains in which the language is used reflect its vitality or ability to survive in the speech community, demography indicates that the population or number of speakers of a particular language determine whether or not the language becomes endangered. Lastly status of the language in a community can contribute to higher levels of vitality and indicates that language's ability to survive among dominant languages. The status depends on various interdependent factors such as economic wealth, technological advancement, defence capabilities, liveliness of the culture, rich historic heritage, quality of life, etc. these factors called together 'the cultural mass'.

This theory was introduced by Giles et al. [33] with variation, the vitality framework has been successfully applied also in recent studies such as Kindell & Lewis, [34]; Klatter-Folmer & Avermaet, [35]; Sayahi, [36]; Yagmur & Kroon, [37] who demonstrate that ethnolinguistic vitality framework's common tread is the recognition that social networks and inter-ethnic attitudes are key drivers of vitality which often proves a more predictive language fate than objective statistics alone. Additionally, these researchers critically combined demographic and institutional data with assessment of individual attitudes and perceptions and also argue that language maintenance capacity is not merely a passive reflection of the size or status but are actively influenced by social cohesion and intergroup dynamics [35].

In the case of Kikami, demographic factors such as the number of speakers and their distribution are crucial for understanding its vitality. The presence of institutions that promote and support the use of a language is vital for its survival. This includes educational systems, media and community organizations that encourage the use of Kikami in various contexts. The effectiveness of these institutions can significantly impact the language's vitality.

The identification of which specific Kikami words such as, technical, formal, or kinship terms are being replaced by the dominant language, the study provides a structural indicator of shift, directly linking the social cause prestige of the dominant language to the linguistic effect lexical borrowing/replacement. If the study finds that the replacement involves high-prestige vocabulary like formal/traditional roles, as in the Pohnpei case, it confirms the argument that loss of status precedes linguistic loss, structurally manifesting as lexical attrition as argued by Holmes [1]. Additionally, the theory helps

to confirm whether shift is highest among educated, urbanized Kikami youth, it provides empirical validation for applying general quantitative demographic models to a specific indigenous language.

3. Methodology

This study was surrounded within a larger sociolinguistic investigation of Kikami language shift. The methodology for addressing the lexical replacement objective was primarily qualitative and quantitative, employing both techniques. The primary data collection tool was a detailed Lexical Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to test the linguistic competence of informants across various lexicosemantic domains. 60 Respondents were purposively sampled and stratified into three age groups for comparative analysis which included Youths (18-30), Middle-aged Adults (31-49), and Elders (50+). This stratification was important for capturing the intergenerational disagreement characteristic of language shift.

A total of 60 respondents who participated in the study through interviews and questionnaires where, 42 respondents were male and 18 respondents were female. This gender distribution reflects a noticeable imbalance with males accounting for 70 percent and females 30 percent. The data analysis involved assessing the informants' ability to recall and use the native Kikami term for a set of high-frequency and culturally salient English glosses such as kinship terms, terms related to supernatural phenomenon, basic numerals, pronouns, terms related to geographical phenomenon, body parts adjectives, common nouns and verbs. The outcome was a calculation of overall lexical retention rates for each assigned cohort.

A research permission was sought from the Directorate of research publications, postgraduate studies and consultancy of the saint Augustine university of Tanzania the researcher used the introduction letter from the university to get permission from the head of Morogoro region to the village chairperson

of the area understudy so as to visit the area for research studies as well as permission to talk to the people of Kami community. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as the study problem. Therefore, consent was sought from study participants and each was free to participate or to decline to participate in the study. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees the names of the participants were not disclosed instead synonyms and codes were used to avoid revealing the actual names or personal information of individuals in the study dissertation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Overview of Findings

This section presents key findings of the study and provides a comprehensive discussion and interpretation of the results. The section begins by systematically presenting the empirical data collected which directly addresses the research objectives and questions.

4.2. Kikami Vocabulary Replacement

A minimum of 30 informants were selected in questionnaires for each cohort using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across key age groups. The analysis of the 200-item list revealed a statistically significant decline in Kikami retention rates across the age cohorts, confirming that lexical loss is not random but a structured, generational process.

The data clearly demonstrated a significant degree of vocabulary erosion and replacement, confirming the accelerating nature of the Kikami language shift. The analysis exposed a rapid and alarming breakdown of intergenerational linguistic competence. The mean lexical retention rate showed a distinct decline across the generations as indicated in the table below:

Table 1. Overall Lexical Retention Rates.

Cohort	Mean Kikami Retention Rate (%)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Average Number of Swahili Replacements
Elders (50+)	94.1%	3.5	11.8
Adults (31-49)	78.5%	6.2	43.0
Young adults (18-30)	55.9%	8.9	88.2

The findings indicate that the average youth speaker (18-30) could not recall or knowingly use a Kikami equivalent for approximately half (50%) of the essential vocabulary tested. This establishes the younger generation as largely disconnected from the lexicon required for fluency and cultural

transmission.

This paper explores how deeply this lexical shift has taken root across different age groups and social categories and how far it contributes to Kikami language shift. Additionally, it

aims to understand which external languages are most responsible for the erosion of Kikami vocabulary. The aim is to identify specific lexical domains that are most affected by this phenomenon. The researcher selected 11 categories of vocabulary in this case to analyse two variables: the extent of retention,

which included all basic terminologies, and the replaced vocabulary. The selected vocabularies are those resistant to change, such as kinship terms, to determine the extent to which the Kikami language has shifted.

Table 2. *Categories of Words Assessed in number and Percentage of Responses.*

CATEGORY OF TERMS		Response Success rate	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Basic numerals	112	33.9	33.9	33.9
	Pronouns	63	19.1	19.1	53.0
	Kinship terms	33	10.0	10.0	63.0
	Body parts	23	7.0	7.0	70.0
	Common verbs	21	6.4	6.4	76.4
	Terms related to plants	15	4.5	4.5	80.9
	Adjectives	14	4.2	4.2	85.2
	Nouns	14	4.2	4.2	89.4
	Words related to geographical phenomena	12	3.6	3.6	93.0
	Words related to supernatural phenomenon	12	3.6	3.6	96.7
	Tools and objects	11	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total		330	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field data (2025)

From the [Table 2](#), Basic Numerals had the highest frequency, 112, which corresponds to 33.9% of total responses. Where the below table shows Kikami basic numerals that were obtained from all respondents that were able to retain them.

Table 3. *Kikami Basic Numerals.*

Gloss	Kikami term
One	Mue
Two	Wiri
Three	Datu
Four	Nne
Five	Sano
Six	Mtanda
Seven	Mfungate
Eight	Mnane
Nine	Kenda
Ten	Ikumi
Eleven	Ikumi na mue

Gloss	Kikami term
Twelve	Ikumi na wiri
Thirteen	Ikumi na datu
Fourteen	Ikumi na nne
Fifteen	Ikumi na sano
Sixteen	Ikumi na mtanda
Seventeen	Ikumi na mfungate
Eighteen	Ikumi na mnane
Nineteen	Ikumi na kenda
Twenty	Mirongo miri

Source: Field data (2025)

The vocabulary loss was found to be deep and universal, affecting multiple categories. However, the rate of erosion varied significantly by semantic field and exhibited patterns where the high-frequency core vocabulary exhibited the highest retention rates. This includes categories such as basic numerals. These core items are often the last to be replaced in a shifting language. While the most significant loss was observed in categories linked to unique Kikami culture and traditional knowledge. Important domains, such as some kinship terms are becoming entirely obsolete as they are replaced by their Kiswahili equivalents thus, they are described as abandoned or replaced. Kikami Traditional Counting shows numbers 1- 20 as the basic numerals. The analysis would show that most young adults, as well as adults use Kiswahili for any number five. Additionally, the term for zero is universally the Swahili loanword, reflecting lack of a pre-contact indigenous concept for the digit, which is then contrasted with its stable neighbours.

This is similar to Yoneda [8], studying the Matengo language, who observed significant lexical borrowing from Swa-

hili and even a transformation of native languages into Swahilized forms. Similar findings were noted by Bernander in the Bena language. Mapunda and Rosendal [16] concludes that while Swahili does not outright replace ethnic languages, it transforms them by introducing Swahili vocabulary into their structure. However, these studies mainly focused on language contact and did not explore broader sociocultural consequences.

This suggests that numerals are the most retained and actively used category within Kikami, possibly due to their functional necessity in daily life, commerce, and traditional practices. This is consistent with Pagel, Atkinson, and Meade [20], who found that frequently used words tend to evolve more slowly, whereas less frequently used words undergo lexical replacement at higher rates. Their findings support the observation that frequently used core vocabulary, such as basic numerals, may be more resistant to lexical replacement than less frequently used vocabulary. The other group of words that are resistant to change are Pronouns forming 19.1% presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Kikami Pronouns.

Gloss	Kikami terms
I	Ni
We	Tiye
You	Gwe / Gwezi
He	Gye
She	Gyezi
They	Wao /Sie

Source: Field data (2025)

Table 4 evidences that pronouns are retained in Kikami with almost all the pronouns presented in Kikami except for 'they' which is presented by a Kiswahili term *wao* and *sie*. The two terms were found to be used interchangeably by the speakers. Thus, pronouns in Kikami are resistant to change, possibly because the language like Kiswahili which is spoken around the area has not such pronouns like *gye* 'he' and *gyezi* 'she'. The relatively strong retention of pronouns indicates the depth of foundational linguistic structure still present in the community.

The other group of words include kinship terms 10% with words such as *kaka* 'brother', *sekula* 'grandfather', *lumbu* 'sister', *inyelela* 'last born', *muana* 'child', *muko* 'a married woman', *muenga* 'sister-in-law', *muemba* 'youngest child', (*Muemye*) 'aunt' show a moderate retention. Kinship terms, though often highly resistant to change in many communities, appear to be under pressure, which signals a possible weakening of family-structure-related cultural expressions. For instance, a kiswahili term for brother is being used while *dada* (Kiswahili) and *lumbu* (Kikami) are used for sister interchangeably also other Kiswahili words like *mama* 'mother', *baba* 'father', *mjomba* 'uncle', *bibi* 'grandmother', *mama mkwe* 'mother-in-law' and *baba mkwe* 'father-in-law' are used for those respective Kikami kinship terms.

The vocabulary alteration primarily displays as complete replacement of the indigenous Kikami term by a Kiswahili loanword and in many cases, the original Kikami term is so obsolete that even older, highly proficient speakers resorted to using the Kiswahili equivalent for common terms. For instance, indigenous Kikami kinship terms such as *Ndugu*, 'sibling/relative', *kaka* 'brother', *muana* 'child', *baba* 'father', *bibi* 'grandmother' and *mama mkwe* 'mother-in-law' were found to be universally replaced by the generic Kiswahili terms, indicating a semantic simplification of the indigenous kinship system on the other hand, kinship terms. This suggests that the loss is eliminating linguistic resources necessary for articulating the distinct Kikami identity. Even though this category is relatively stable after numerals, but the replacement mechanism observed is semantic contraction. For example, original Kikami terms for aunt that differentiated a maternal aunt from a paternal aunt are often merged into a more general Kiswahili loanword *shangazi* 'aunt'.

On the other hand, terms related to body parts like *chidole* 'fingers', *mukono* 'hand', and *gulu/magulu* 'leg/legs' exhibit Swahili adaptation, which makes them appear extremely similar to the Swahili terms *kidole*, *mkono*, *mguu*. This suggests the terms are either old loans that were phonetically adapted or native terms being slowly Swahilized through the replacement of noun class prefixes for instance, Kiswahili *ki-* being replaced with Kikami *chi-* for example in words like *chidole* 'finger', *chifua* 'chest', *chidefu* 'chin', *chijiji* 'vilage'.

Nouns (4.2%), and Geographical Phenomena with (3.6%) show the lowest response frequencies. These categories are

more context-specific and seem underrepresented due to either reduced traditional usage or complete replacement by Swahili equivalents. The category supernatural phenomena (3.6%) is particularly notable, as this domain is tightly linked to indigenous belief systems and oral tradition, suggesting that language shift in this area could indicate cultural erosion and loss of ethnolinguistic identity. Geographical terms such as *dunia* 'earth/world' (Arabic loan via Kiswahili), which were filled by most of the respondents in the Kikami column, show a loss of abstract and cosmological lexicon. The absence of a Kikami word for a large-scale concepts like world, river or hill which are replaced by Kiswahili terms '*dunia*', '*mto*' and '*kilima*' while only terms such as 'mountain' *digongo*, 'spring water' *ichemchem* are still in maintained in Kikami. Also, Kikami terms like *Alidhi* 'land', *bwawa kulu* 'lake' and *chisiwa* 'island' are totally replaced by Kiswahili. This hinders the ability to discuss non-local, modern or abstract concepts without switching languages, restricting Kikami to the local domain.

This sustains the argument that research has demonstrated that endangered languages tend to undergo simplification in both structure and usage as they begin to decline Maher; Silva-Corvalán, [38]. Additionally, contact with other languages introduces variation by incorporating foreign linguistic elements alongside native forms Dorian, [39]; Mougeon & Beniak, [41]. Research has demonstrated that language contraction and obsolescence can be accompanied by structural changes, including reduction, loss and restructuring of linguistic features Campbell & Muntzel [41]. These structural and stylistic modifications are often early indicators of language death.

Additionally, most advanced stage of borrowing and alteration is seen in verbs, where the Kiswahili infinitive prefix *ku-* is added to the kikami roots or borrowed Kiswahili roots to form new verb equivalents in Kikami, such as *ku-koga* 'bathe', *ku-bakala* 'spread', *ku-bangusa* 'wipe', *ku-befa* 'bend', *ku-bena* 'bend', *ku-beya* 'shave', *ku-bokela* 'receive', *ku-bwela* 'return', *ku-deka* 'vomit' and *ku-fagila* 'sweep'. Kikami traditionally used more bare stems without an infinitive prefix however, most speakers in the young adult cohort now attach the Swahili *ku-* to kikami verbs to form hybrid kikami verb equivalents whereas elders give the verb as the root only for example *koga* 'bathe' *befa* 'bend', *bokela* 'receive' in the examples above. This demonstrates a morphological integration of the dominant language. The high level of replacement, even in fundamental vocabulary, points to a language that is rapidly ceasing to function as a complete, independent linguistic system. In this paper, both partial and total borrowing were observed in the language, with more Kiswahili-related terms than the original language's terminologies. This led individuals to code-switching and codemixing words. In the younger generation, the retention of native terms was significantly lower, resulting in code switching, code-mixing and borrowing from the dominant language, Kiswahili. This high level of core vocabulary replacement justifies the decline of Kikami,

as even language universal terms that are rarely replaced have been replaced in this language. Borrowing has occurred in significant categories, with some words being replaced with

sounds, morphemes and modifications from the dominant language. The following table indicates the levels of retention based on the primary function role of each age cohort per age group.

Table 5. *Informants Cohort Selection and Grading.*

Cohort	Age Range	Primary Function/Role	Expected Retention Rate
Cohort 1 (Elders)	50+ Years	Monolingual/Dominant Kikami Speakers	Highest Retention
Cohort 2 (Middle Generation)	31-49 Years	Bilingual (Kikami/Kiswahili) - Parents	Mixed Retention
Cohort 3 (Youth)	18-30 Years	Dominant Kiswahili Speakers	Lowest Retention

Source: Field data (2025)

The data collected from different age groups reveal varying levels of Kikami vocabulary retention. Generally, older speakers (aged 50 and above) demonstrated the highest levels of vocabulary retention. Respondents in this group consistently recognised and accurately translated a majority of the traditional Kikami words. Participants in the adult group showed a mixed pattern in vocabulary retention. While they maintained knowledge of commonly used and practical words, their retention of culturally specific and traditional vocabulary was weaker compared to the older group. This suggests a decline in exposure to specialised or heritage vocabulary among adults. Younger speakers (aged 18-30) displayed significant gaps in vocabulary knowledge across all categories of words. Borrowing has occurred in significant categories, with some words being replaced with sounds, morphemes and modifications from the dominant language.

There is a high rate of youths shifting towards English and Kiswahili. These observations were based on language retention and erosion which were used to measure the extent of vocabulary shift. This indicates an intricate vocabulary shift

leading to the Kikami language shift by the speakers, depending on the dominant language's terms, thus showing obsolescence of some Kikami terms. In Kikami, even for basic vocabulary, it is disappearing because respondents, including older generations, cannot recall the original word and instead use the Kiswahili equivalent, and this is because of the language preference, which stimulates individuals to favour the language that eases their communication and eventually replaces the native terms.

The preference for Kiswahili is the mechanism that drives both vocabulary obsolescence and borrowing. Language preference is not a random choice but a strategic decision based on social and economic factors, directly affecting the domain of language use in this context Kiswahili is preferred for its practicality and as the language of ease of communication and public life. English is highly preferred in formal and educational settings as shown in Table 6, which summarises the domains of use of Kikami brought about due to language preference.

Table 6. *Frequency of Kikami use in different settings (KEY - √ = used, X = Not used).*

S/N	PUBLIC SETTINGS	FREQUENCY OF USE			
		Always	Often	Not very often	Never
	School	X	X	X	√
	Work	X	X	X	√
	Church	X	X	√	X
	Mosque	X	X	X	√
	Rituals	X	√	X	X
	Greetings	X	X	√	X

S/N	PUBLIC SETTINGS	FREQUENCY OF USE			
		Always	Often	Not very often	Never
	Ceremonies	X	X	√	X
	Media	X	X	X	√
	Political Events	X	X	X	√
	Casual settings	X	X	X	√

Source: Field data (2025)

Table 6 displays the frequency of the Kikami language usage in different social contexts. It classifies usage into four categories: Always, Often, not very often, and never in settings such as school, work, Church, Mosque, Media, Politics, and Casual interactions. Kiswahili is preferred for its practicality and as the language of ease of communication and public life. English is highly preferred in formal and educational settings and is seen as an aspirational language that confers the status of being in school settings; there is no usage of Kikami, indicating a significant shift towards languages like Kiswahili or Luguru. However, Kikami is still utilised in rituals and ceremonies, particularly in rituals (Always) and ceremonies (Not very often), highlighting its importance in traditional and spiritual contexts. This suggests that Kikami is maintained as a symbolic language associated with tradition and identity, with some vocabulary reserved for sacred or traditional purposes.

Although greetings in Kikami They are still used, but it is not very frequent, suggesting a partial retention of the language. The constant preference for the Kiswahili equivalent over the native Kikami term leads to domain shrinkage and generational language loss. When a Kikami speaker opts to use the Kiswahili word for one term instead of the native term (as listed in your previous table), the Kikami term is not reinforced and begins to fade from the mental lexicon. Since Kikami is excluded from domains like School, Media, and Political Events, it often lacks native terms for concepts related to these domains.

The speakers borrow the Kiswahili words directly and incorporate them into Kikami speech, often without modification, rather than coining a native term. This is because borrowing is accelerated by the preference for ease. It is easier to borrow a well-known Kiswahili word than to recall a little-used native word, leading to the Kiswahili term replacing the native Kikami term entirely, thereby contributing to the obsolescence of the original vocabulary. This indicates a significant generational language loss and domain shrinkage, as the memory of the native lexicon fades and is replaced by that of the dominant. In Latin America, similar studies have been conducted on languages such as Quechua and Nahuatl. [27] Studies have shown how Spanish has altered the vocabulary of these languages and this is necessitated by language contact.

This shift results in Kikami being consigned to fewer domains of use, such as interactions with elders or at home, while languages like Kiswahili and English dominate public settings. Over time, Kikami may become a passive language understood but not actively spoken, especially as younger speakers cease its use even at home. This language shift aligns with the theory of Language Contact Weinrich [42], where sociopolitical and economic factors favour dominant languages like Swahili and English, leading to an identity shift among Kikami speakers. This shift influences language selection campaigns in various settings and impacts the frequency of Kikami usage. Furthermore, the obsolescence of basic Kikami vocabulary is a direct, measurable consequence of domain restriction and language preference. This preference acts as the ultimate mechanism of loss, as speakers consistently opt for Kiswahili equivalents, leading to the generational attrition of native terms.

4.3. Reasons for Kikami Language Shift

This section explores the key factors contributing to Kikami's decline based on data collected from respondents from interviews, including both internal and external influences. The reasons are categorised thematically to show the complex interplay between psychological, social, historical, legal and cultural forces affecting language use across generations.

4.3.1. Psychological Reason

The erosion of Kikami is closely linked to the psychological experiences of its speakers. Feelings of discomfort, a sense of detachment from the language and social stigma are driving language shift, pushing speakers towards dominant languages like Kiswahili and Kiluguru. The ways in which these psychological factors contribute to language abandonment can be demonstrated through established sociolinguistic factors. These factors are deeply intertwined with psychological aspects. Stigma, in particular, has played a significant role in the decline of Kikami. Data collected from interviews indicate that the stigma associated with speaking the language has led to its decline and a decrease in the number of speakers, as they do not perceive the importance of speaking Kikami. For instance, one respondent stated:

'Yes, there is social pressure. When people hear someone speaking Kikami in public, they sometimes laugh at them or consider them "uneducated" or "primitive. This makes many people prefer Kiswahili or English in public because they are the more respected languages. (Participant A, Interview, July 2025).

In many cases, the use of the home language in public is uncomfortable for the Kikami speakers. This frequently stems from negative responses, such as ridicule, and the belief that minorities using minority languages are primitive, uneducated and socially inferior. Dominant-language ideologies can lead to linguistic hierarchies where other non-dominant languages are considered less valued or less suitable for public use (as seen in previous research). These attitudes can lead to discrimination and a sense that the speakers' language is socially unacceptable. Also, research on the language varieties of minorities and indigenous groups reveals that the language user may undervalue his or her own linguistic competence when his or her language is regarded as an incorrect or inferior variant of

the dominant language. These experiences can contribute to linguistic insecurity, meaning anxiety, self-consciousness, or lack of confidence speakers might have about their language, accent, and/or way of speaking. Consequently, speakers might not use Kikami in public places, use it in private places only, or abandon it altogether and switch to Kiswahili and English, which are considered more prestigious. This is reflected in this account, that public ridicule and negative social judgement may discourage the use of Kikami.

4.3.2. Political Pressure

Participants' responses to the questionnaire questions revealed that those political factors contribute to the Kikami language shift. Frequencies of the table below indicates frequencies of response related to the matter based on some of the political factors influencing language shift, to which they were subjected to respond to in the questionnaire questions.

Table 7. Political Factors Influencing the Kikami Language Shift.

Political Factor	Number of Responses for each Factor	Percentage of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Unity	3	4.3	10.0
National language policy	7	10.0	23.3
Lack of support	10	14.3	33.3
Valid Urban migration	13	18.6	43.3
Legal Restrictions	16	22.9	53.3
Education system	21	30.0	70.0
Total		100 (%)	233.2

Source: Field Data (2025)

In this factor (28.6%) of the respondents revealed that formal education policies prioritise national or international languages, such as Kiswahili and English, overrode the Kikami. This results in children learning and being tested in dominant languages, diminishing the use and importance of Kikami in educational and intellectual contexts, leading to language abandonment. (14.3%) of the respondents revealed that the absence of support for minority languages contributes to their overshadowing by national language policies. (9.5%) of the respondents revealed that National language policies tend to prioritise major languages, marginalising minority languages like Kikami. (4.8%) of the respondents revealed that promoting a common language like Kiswahili is sometimes viewed as a means to maintain national unity, which can weaken the status of smaller languages like Kikami. Indigenous languages are closely linked to specific economic activities, such as

farming, fishing, or hunting, with specialised vocabulary associated with these activities.

Urban migration, accounting for 19.0% of the language shift, plays a significant role in the decline of Kikami. As Kikami speakers migrate to urban areas, they are exposed to Swahili-dominant environments, leading to pressure to assimilate linguistically for economic or social reasons. Government-led resettlement programs, infrastructure projects, or urban expansion often result in the relocation of communities, displacing people and their language. In urban settings, speaking Swahili/English provides access to resources, while sticking to Kikami may lead to isolation, creating political and legal pressure on Kikami speakers to adopt Kiswahili in public domains. Legal restrictions, accounting for 23.8% of the language shift involve government laws that prohibit or limit the use of Kikami in official domains, labelling it as promoting favouritism. This delegitimises the language, making it seem

less valuable or even risky to use, discouraging intergenerational transmission.

4.4. Consequences of Kikami Language Shift

When a language undergoes shift or loss the effects go beyond its linguistic structures and extend into the general consequences. This section presents the impact of ongoing shift from Kikami to other dominant languages and the analysis focuses on how this shift influenced different aspects through both qualitative accounts and observations of the key aspects of community life that are impacted both negatively or positively.

4.4.1. Disruption of Intergenerational Transmission

The intergenerational transmission of Kikami has broken down. Traditionally, grandparents would speak Kikami to parents, who would then pass it on to their children. The elders, who are the last fluent generation, rarely teach Kikami directly to their grandchildren. Even if grandparents speak Kikami to

children, the children often respond in Kiswahili or do not fully understand. Parents do not usually enforce the use of Kiswahili at home, either due to their own lack of confidence or because they believe Kiswahili is more advantageous. Field data confirms this trend no young adults reported speaking Kikami. Parents and adolescents view Kikami as a heritage language that they do not fully master. Language shift often begins at home. If parents stop speaking Kikami to their children, either because they themselves are not fluent or because they believe other languages offer better prospects, the language fades. The proficiency levels in the table below suggest this breakdown is well underway.

4.4.2. Lower Level of Native Language Proficiency

Language shift typically starts within the home. When parents cease speaking Kikami to their children, either due to their own lack of fluency or the belief that other languages provide better opportunities, the language gradually diminishes. The proficiency levels in Table 8 indicate that this decline is already in progress.

Table 8. Decline in Level of Proficiency.

LANGUAGE	PROFICIENCY LEVEL				
	Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low
English	3	6	8	6	7
Kiswahili	15	11	4	0	0
Kikami	0	2	9	8	11
Others	0	2	10	3	15

Table 8 reveals that English has a balanced distribution across all levels, suggesting widespread exposure but varying degrees of mastery. The Kiswahili language shows high fluency overall, with the highest concentration in the average category, with 26 people rating themselves high or very high. This reflects its role as a national and regional lingua franca and the influence it has on other languages in the area. Kikami shows low proficiency dominance, with 19 people at low or very low, indicating a minority or regional language with limited use. Other Languages, like Kiluguru, Arabic, and French, were also used by fewer respondents. Some of these respondents showed some level of proficiency in one of the mentioned languages. Even though minimal proficiency, with 25 people at low or very LOW, which suggests limited exposure or relevance of other languages in this group.

Through ethnographic investigation. It was confirmed that the loss of Kikami creates a severe intergenerational gap (May, 2012), fundamentally breaking the social mechanism for transmitting core values and cohesion. Gumperz & Hymes

[43]. More crucially, this objective will provide concrete examples for the theoretical claim of cultural distortion (Brenzinger, 2007). By documenting how Kikami folktales, sacred rites, and ecological knowledge become unintelligible or meaningless upon translation, the study will demonstrate that the loss of the language is not a neutral event, but an epistemological disaster that eliminates a unique human knowledge system and erodes the community's cosmological identity. Cru, 2015 [44] The findings will advocate for the preservation of Kikami by linking its fate directly to the survival of its distinct cultural wisdom.

The global crisis of language endangerment is acutely felt within Tanzania, a nation characterized by profound linguistic diversity where the majority of indigenous native languages are currently endangered. This study focuses specifically on the Kikami native language, spoken within the greater Tanzanian context. As an indigenous tongue, Kikami is a vital vessel for the cultural, ecological, and historical knowledge systems

of its speakers. The language's continued existence is fundamental to the community's identity, social cohesion, and the effective transmission of customs and values (May, 2012). Despite the consensus in sociolinguistic theory that language shift is a significant cultural event, While general models of language shift exist, such as the Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) Framework Kraemer & Olshtain, [45] and quantitative demographic analyses. Abtahtian et al., [46], very few studies have been conducted concerning language shift and death explicitly in Tanzanian indigenous languages, where the socio-political and economic dynamics present a unique set of pressures.

The urgency of this work stems from the understanding that language loss is irreversible and catastrophic. The theoretical arguments of Brenzinger and Harrison [47] that unique knowledge systems are lost and sacred practices are diluted cease to be abstract concepts when applied to one's own community. By focusing on Kikami, my research aims to close the contextual gap in the literature and provide the comprehensive evidence necessary to make the public aware of dying languages not just as a global statistic, but as a local cultural emergency. Ultimately, the goal is to furnish targeted data to inform grassroots initiatives Fishman, [48] that can support the preservation of the Kikami language and its associated cultural wealth.

The study concludes that lexical decay is profound and systemic, indicating that the language shift is not a superficial phenomenon but a deep-seated structural erosion. The findings demonstrate that vocabulary loss is not confined to specialised or ceremonial terms, but extends to basic, high frequency, and culturally essential word categories. This includes terms related to the physical environment, social interactions, and even basic concepts, which are typically resistant to replacement in less endangered languages. This decline is systematically driven by replacement with terminology from dominant regional languages, primarily Kiswahili and Kiluguru. This conclusion confirms the first objective that the shift is fundamentally altering the linguistic structure and expressiveness of Kikami, as younger generations lack the native lexicon to fully articulate traditional life and knowledge.

5. Discussion

Results indicate that there is a definite intergenerational decrease in the retention of Kikami vocabulary. The elders had the most vocabulary compared to the middle aged and younger speakers, which suggests a lower level of intergenerational transmission of the language. This is in line with Fishman [2] who argued that one of the biggest indicators of language shift is the interruption of intergenerational transmission. The items that were used more often, such as numerals and pronouns, were retained fairly well, whereas the items that were used less often, such as kinship terms, geographical terms, and terms relating to supernatural and traditional aspects, were lost more. This indicates that language change poses a danger to both the general language and the culturally

specific knowledge.

The results also corroborate the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory [33]. Kikami is less supported, less visible and has a lower status than Kiswahili and English. It is used in a limited way in schools, workplaces, media and public events, which limits opportunities for younger speakers to learn and practice it.

6. Recommendations

The words, oral histories, songs, proverbs, rituals, and traditional knowledge of Kikami should be captured from fluent elders. There should also be a Kikami-Kiswahili-English Dictionary and simple learning materials developed. Parents should be encouraged to speak Kikami to their children and the community language clubs, storytelling programmes and community media should encourage the use of Kikami among the youth.

The limitations of the study were that only a small number of students participated and that the study was based on vocabulary recall. Expanding the sample size, conducting natural conversations, and comparative linguistic analysis should be explored in future studies.

7. Conclusion

Lexical alteration in Kikami is not a homogeneous process. The analysis of the collected vocabulary items reveals distinct linguistic mechanisms from total replacement to subtle semantic shift that collectively drive the language towards obsolescence. This categorizes Kikami terms that are either explicitly marked as no longer known or used, or those where their function is universally taken over by a Kiswahili equivalent. This represents the terminal stage of lexical decay. The vocabulary loss is profound in kikami, extending to high frequency words, and critically compromising the lexicon associated with traditional culture. The data establishes that the language has lost its functional integrity as a complete, independent system for intergenerational communication. The findings highlight that this linguistic decline is directly resulting in the permanent loss of historical and traditional knowledge. Based on the severity of the lexical erosion observed which will then hinder intergenerational communication by disrupting greetings kinship terms which are closely tied to daily practices of the language culture and traditions. A concentrated effort is required to capture the oral tradition and lexicon from the oldest cohort before their knowledge is permanently lost.

The current investigation conducted a detailed inquiry into language shift affecting the kami community specifically isolating the reason for this change quantifying the extent of vocabulary replacement and the resulting consequences. The results confirm that the extent of vocabulary replacement and the resulting consequences and Kikami's critical endangerment attributing its rapid decline and a combination of multifaceted factors. The research fundamentally explored forces

driving lexical obsolescence and concluded its objectives by establishing core findings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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