UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

SPEECH BY PROF. PETER M.F. MBITHI, VICE CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI DURING INTERNATIONAL MOTHER TONGUE DAY CELEBRATIONS HELD ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2018 AT ED BUILDING AT 9.00 A.M.
Invited guests

Staff and students of the University of Nairobi

Distinguished ladies and Gentlemen,
I greet you this morning: Hamjambo!

It is a great honour to me to have been invited to grace this auspicious occasion, the *International Mother Language Day* celebrations, and to participate in the recognition of our mother languages. I am happy to participate in these celebrations which remind us of a God-given heritage to humankind, our mother languages.
The Mother Language Day was proclaimed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1999. In its declaration, The United Nations General Assembly called upon Member States “to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world.” International Mother Language Day has been observed on the 21st of February of every year since
February 2000 in order to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism.

The General Assembly recognizes that languages are the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our identities. The identity of a person is portrayed through language and therefore the promotion of mother tongue languages help to raise the awareness of our different identities.
The appreciation of the people’s diverse identities promotes peace and solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue.

The role that language plays in the development of persons’ identity cannot be ignored. A person’s identity is primarily linked to the languages that he/she speaks which in turn place him/her in various kinds of relationships.
The promotion of the use of mother tongue in promoting multiple identities to a person helps to promote an all-inclusive knowledge society which is critical in ensuring sustainable development.

The Government of Kenya has shown full support for the growth and development of our indigenous languages. This is clearly articulated in the Kenya Constitution 2010 (Chapter 2, Article 7) where the
government has made a commitment to ‘promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and to promote the development and the use of indigenous languages....’ In recognition of the important role played by the mother languages in the development of the nation and identity, the Government has not only supported the growth and development of the languages but has gone further to create space for nurturing them.
The opening of the airwaves and the introduction of the vernacular broadcast stations has put Kenyan mother languages on the map locally and across our borders. These stations help in the shaping of the nation’s identities as well as contributing to the economic and social development of the country. This has been seen through the jobs created and avenues of interaction amongst people of similar identity.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Kenya, a number of organizations are complementing the government’s effort to ensure the preservation and promotion of local languages. These organizations include Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL), SIL International, among others.
The University of Nairobi which is a world class university committed to scholarly excellence realizes the importance of mother languages in individual and national development. It is with this regard that besides offering courses in international mother languages such as German, French, Arabic, Kiswahili Korean and Chinese, The University of Nairobi through the Department of Linguistics & Languages
provides an avenue for studies and documentation of various aspects of the African mother languages.

Through the Department of Linguistics and Languages, the University has continued to offer training opportunities for students to study their mother languages at Masters’ and Doctorate level.
I urge our development partners, corporate entities and the private sector, to continue supporting the government and the University of Nairobi especially in this area of research in order to raise the status of local languages in the cultural, social and economic development of our people.
Today, we also celebrate the coming together, yet again, the partnering of University of Nairobi with UNESCO and BTL to mark the International Mother Tongue Day. We laud and encourage partnerships and projects that promote the development of indigenous languages.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I want to remind all of us that we have a moral responsibility and a duty to educate society and the world at large on the benefits of developing our mother languages, of using them and of preserving them for posterity.
With those few remarks, I wish you happy and fruitful deliberations during these celebrations of the 2018 International Mother Language Day.

God Bless You.

Thank you.

PETER M.F MBITHI, PhD, EBS
VICE-CHANCELLOR
AND
PROFESSOR OF VETERINARY SURGERY