

# SWAHILI

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The word *Kiswahili* is a general term for many varieties of the language spoken along the East African coast. It comes from the Arabic word *sahel*, meaning 'coast.' Ki- is a prefix referring to language. In some varieties of Swahili, the language prefix appears as chi-, as in Chimiini, which is spoken in Somalia, or shi-, as in Shingazija, a variant spoken on the Ngazija island of Comoro.

Swahili belongs to the Bantu family of languages. Nouns are grouped into different classes according to their meaning. Human beings, for example, belong to one class: *mtu* 'person'/'*watu* 'people.' Trees, on the other hand, belong to another class: *miti* 'tree'/'*miti* 'trees'. Diminutive and augmentative meanings are also expressed using the noun class system. The following forms of the word *ndege* 'bird' indicate different sizes: *ndege* (regular size bird); *kidege* (small bird); *dege* (big bird).

Swahili has been influenced by a variety of other languages, including Arabic, Portuguese and German. There are many Swahili words with foreign origins, including the following: *sita* 'six' (Arabic), *saba* 'seven' (Arabic), *shule* 'school' (German), *bendera* 'flag' (Portuguese), *kitabu* 'book' (Arabic) and *pesa* 'money' (Hindi).

All Swahili speakers share a unique way of expressing time, day or night. Sunrise or sunset are the two focal points used to tell time. The first hour of the day, therefore, comes after sunrise, not after midnight, and the first hour of the night comes after sunset. Also unique to Swahili speakers is the way they communicate with each other indirectly by use of the popular *kanga*, also known as *leso*. This multi-purpose cloth usually has a caption that conveys a proverbial message to its target audience.

## STUDYING SWAHILI IN THE U.S.

Below is a partial list of the universities in the United States that currently offer Swahili. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>

Baylor University  
Boston University  
Columbia University  
Indiana University  
Johns Hopkins University  
Michigan State University  
Northwestern University  
Ohio University  
Ohio State University  
Pennsylvania State University  
Rutgers University  
Stanford University  
University of California at Berkeley  
University of California at Los Angeles  
University of California at San Diego  
University of Florida-Gainesville  
University of Georgia-Athens  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
University of Kansas  
University of Minnesota  
University of Pennsylvania  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Washington University  
Yale University



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SWAHILI GIRL IN TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

# WHY STUDY SWAHILI?

Swahili, known by native speakers as Kiswahili, is one of the major languages spoken in Africa. It is the lingua franca of eastern and central Africa. Swahili is also used in other parts of the world. It is aired in radio broadcasts such as the British Broadcast Corporation, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and many others. It is heard in songs of famous singers such as Miriam Makeba, Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie. Swahili words are also used in many popular films. Expressions like *hakuna matata* 'no problems', from the movie The Lion King, are familiar to many non-Swahili speakers. African-Americans refer to their annual cultural festival as *Kwanzaa*, which is derived from the Swahili word *kwanza* or 'first.' Principles and symbols used in this festival are expressed with Swahili words such as *umoja* 'unity,' and *mkeka* 'mat.' The preferred greeting during *Kwanzaa* is the Swahili phrase *Habari gani?* 'What news?'

Swahili is taught in academic institutions from Japan in the east to Mexico in the west. It can be used to fulfill language requirements and to prepare researchers for fieldwork in eastern Africa. Swahili and its many varieties are of interest to linguistic researchers. The study of Swahili also provides interesting issues regarding language policies and language planning. East Africa's many ethnic groups are relevant to anthropological research. Also, the Olduvai Gorge in Kenya is important to archeologists who are investigating human origins.

Whatever the area of research, knowledge of Swahili is essential. There are many benefits of knowing the Swahili language, including the fact that it serves as a good vehicle to accessing Swahili culture. Swahili has a long written tradition and remarkable history. Finally, knowing Swahili enhances the credibility of researchers interested in East Africa.

# WHO SPEAKS SWAHILI?

## PEOPLE AND HISTORY



Over 50 million people in eastern and central Africa speak Swahili. It is widely used in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. A little over 1 million people speak it as their first language. Most others speak Swahili fluently as a second, third or fourth language. Those who speak it as a first language are found along the coast of east Africa stretching from southern Somalia to the border between Tanzania and Mozambique. There are also many native Swahili

speakers on the Indian Ocean islands of *Unguja* and *Pemba* (which together make up Zanzibar), Lamu, the Comoro Islands and the northwestern part of Madagascar. Many Swahili speakers like to refer to themselves in terms of where they come from. So Swahili speakers from *Unguja*, for example, will refer to themselves as *Wanguja* or *Wazanzibari*, those from Kenya as *Wakenya* and those from Tanzania as *Watanzania*.

The East African coast was visited by Arabs and Persians as early as the second century A.D. These visitors settled in Africa and married local people. Many local people modified and adopted the visitors' traditions. On the island of *Unguja*, for example, the traditional New Year, *Mwaka Kogwa*, is celebrated during the month of June. This celebration is similar to the Persian New Year of Neirua. Later visits by Arabs to the area also introduced the Islamic religion, and today many Swahili speakers throughout East Africa are Muslim. Travelers from Portugal, Germany, England and various Asian countries also went to East Africa. Each group left its mark on both the culture and the language.



Zanzibari youths wearing traditional 'kanzu' and 'kofia'.



Kiswahili students wearing the traditional 'kanga'.



Wedding day in Tanzania.