Who Speaks Swahili?

There are over 50 million people in East and Central Africa who speak Swahili. It is spoken in 13 countries of East and Central Africa. A little over 4 million people speak Swahili 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. Swahili speakers also known as Waswahili 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 Watanza.

Some Famous Speakers of Swahili

Julius Nyerere - first president of Tanzania
Shaaban bin Robert - poet
Christopher Mwashinga - poet
Mathias E. Mnyampala - poet
Tumi Molekane - poet
Euphrase Kezilahabi - poet and author
Lupita Nyong’o - Hollywood actress
Ken Walibora - scholar and author
Ngugi wa Thiong’o - novelist
Shafi Adam Shafi - novelist
Muhammed Said Abdalla - novelist
Ali Mazrui - scholar, political scientist and pan-Africanist

Interesting Facts about Swahili Culture

- Kanga is a light cloth of bright colorful patterns with Swahili proverbs and other indirect messages printed on it. This traditional cloth is worn widely, and it has many uses. It is used as a wrapper, scarf, baby carrier among many other uses.
- Swahili-speaking countries like Tanzania and Kenya attract tourists due to their safari reserves and their coasts.
- Swahili originally used Arabic script before it changed to Roman alphabet and 35% of Swahili vocabulary comes from Arabic.
- Taarab music is usually performed at weddings in Swahili-speaking communities.
- Ruins of Gedi in Kenya are the remains of a medieval Swahili-Arab coastal settlement.
- Fort Jesus is a Portuguese-commissioned fort on the island of Mombasa built between 1593 and 1596.
Why Study Swahili?

Swahili (or Kiswahili as it is called when one is speaking the language) is the most important and widely studied African language. It is the national and official language of Kenya and Tanzania. It is the official language of Uganda and Rwanda. It is also the lingua franca of East and Central Africa, and the working language of the African Union.

It is aired in radio broadcasts such as British Broadcast Corporation, Voice of America, and Deutschewelle. It is heard in songs of famous singers such as Miriam Makeba and in popular films like Lion King. African Americans refer to their annual cultural festival as Kwanzaa, which is derived from the Swahili word, kwanza ('first' in English).

Swahili is taught in academic institutions from Japan in the east to the United States and Mexico in the west, and in various countries in the African continent. The study of the language provides interesting platforms for discussing sociocultural, linguistic, political, and economic issues of the region. There are many benefits of knowing the Swahili language, including the fact that it serves as a good vehicle to accessing Swahili culture and other African cultures in the region. Whatever the area of research one is in such as linguistics, anthropology, geography, archaeology, or even sociology, knowledge of Swahili and its many varieties is essential if one is working in East and Central Africa. Knowing the language enhances the credibility of researchers interested in the region. Most importantly, Swahili is a critical language in promoting development in the lives of the people of eastern and central Africa.

Learn these everyday Phrases!

- **Hello!**: **Jambo!**
- **Shikamoo!** (greeting to an elderly person)
- **Welcome**: **Karibu**
- **How are you?**: **Habari gani?**
- **Fine or Peace**: **Nzuri** or **Salama**
- **What is your name?**: **Jina lako ni nani?**
- **My name is _____**: **Jina langu ni _____**
- **Goodbye**: **Kwaheri**
- **Morning greeting**: **Habari ya asubuhi**
- **Afternoon greeting**: **Habari ya mchana**
- **Evening greeting**: **Habari ya jioni**
- **Good luck**: **Kila la kheri**
- **Travel safely**: **Safiri salama**
- **Excuse me**: **Samahani**
- **Sorry!**: **Pole!**
- **No worries**: **Hakuna matata**