

Chapter 1

About the Swahili Language

The Swahili language or “Kiswahili” is discussed in relation to its history, geography, different dialects, and the spread of Kiswahili through the centuries. This chapter will also cover the status of the language in the world today and some aspects of cultural significance that the Swahili learner should be familiar with.

Kiswahili is a Bantu language that belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. The word Bantu means “people.” The languages of Baganda in Uganda, Sotho in Lesotho, Zulu in South Africa and Kikuyu in Kenya are other examples of Bantu languages. Although these languages are not mutually intelligible, they are all derived from one common ancestral language and share some basic vocabulary, word building processes and sentence structure.¹ For example, the word for person in Kiswahili is *mtu* meaning “person” or *watu* meaning “people.” Both the singular and plural forms of the word are very similar in many Bantu languages as shown in Table 1.1

TABLE 1.1
Table showing some Bantu languages

Bantu Language	Country	Singular	Plural
Baganda	Uganda	<i>omuntu</i>	<i>abantu</i>
Sotho	Lesotho	<i>motho</i>	<i>batho</i>
Zulu	South Africa	<i>umuntu</i>	<i>abantu</i>
Kikuyu	Kenya	<i>muntu</i>	<i>abato</i>

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Kiswahili was originally spoken along the East African Coast from Southern Somalia to the Northern part of Mozambique and has existed for more than 1,000 years. The word “Swahili” has been derived from the Arabic word “Sahel” meaning “coast.” The expansion of Swahili into the hinterland was facilitated by Coastal slave traders, merchants, missionaries and colonialists. The late Presidents Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda promoted Kiswahili during the struggle for independence (*uhuru*). President Nyerere promoted Swahili in many ways including the translation of two Shakespearean plays: *The Merchant of Venice* (*Mabepari wa Venice*) and *Julius Caesar* (*Juliasi Kaisari*). Nyerere also made Swahili the medium of instruction in elementary schools.

Currently Kiswahili is mainly spoken in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. In addition it is spoken to some extent in seven other countries or regions in East and Central Africa, namely, Rwanda, Burundi, the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Southern Somalia, Northern Mozambique, Malawi and Northern Zambia which together have a Swahili speaking population of roughly 50 million. Outside the East and Central Africa Region, Kiswahili is spoken in Oman, some parts of Madagascar, South Africa and Djibouti.

Kiswahili is spoken in more than 15 dialects throughout East and Central Africa. The *Kiunguja* dialect of Zanzibar has been adopted as Standard Swahili since 1935 and is used by the media, as a medium of instruction in schools and in business transactions.

Other major dialects are *Kimvita*, *Kiamu*, *Kipemba* and *Kitumbatu* based in Mombasa, Lamu, Pemba and Unguja Islands respectively. Apart from these dialects, there are other dialects of people living in the interior of East and Central Africa, which tend to reflect the tribal languages of different Bantu speaking peoples.

As a consequence of interaction between the local people and foreigners, Kiswahili has many loan words from other languages such as Arabic, English, German, Portuguese, Persian and Hindi. It has been estimated that foreign words in the Swahili language make up approximately 30% of the vocabulary, with the majority coming from Arabic.² While it is true that Swahili uses many foreign words, it is also true to say that the Swahili people have adapted foreign words to meet their own needs. For example, borrowed words that have closed vowels (i.e. ending with consonants) have been changed so that they have open vowels (i.e. ending with a vowel). Also some loan words have completely changed

their meaning. For example, the word *rafiki* (friend) is originally taken from the Arabic word “rafik” meaning “trusted one.” Furthermore, it has been shown that the origin of some loan words cannot be traced to any particular language. In addition, Swahili has contributed words to the English vocabulary such as the word *safari*, which means “journey.”

The great explorer, Sir Richard Francis Burton, who visited the East African Coast in the middle of the 19th Century, had this to say about the language:

Kiswahili is both rich and poor. . . . It abounds in names of sensuous objects; there is a term for every tree, shrub, plant, grass, and bulb, and I have shown that the several ages of cocoa-nut are differently called. . . . Abounding in vowels and liquids, the language admits a vast volubility of utterances; in anger or excitement, the words flow like a torrent, and each dovetails into its neighbour until the whole speech becomes one vocabule.³

Kiswahili has attained an international status. The African Union, formerly the Organization of African Unity (OAU), has adopted Kiswahili as one of the official languages of Africa. For many years, major radio networks have been broadcasting Swahili programs. They include the BBC, Voice of America, Radio South Africa, Deutschewel (Germany), Radio Cairo, Radio Japan, Radio Beijing, All India Radio and Radio Moscow International. Many universities and colleges in Europe, Asia, North America and other parts of Africa have Swahili programs. Also, Swahili has been used in some North American movies such as *Hotel Rwanda*, *the Last King of Scotland*, *the Lion King* and *Darwin’s Nightmare*. There are also several popular Swahili songs known throughout the world such as *Hakuna Matata* (No worries), *Malaika Nakupenda Malaika* (Angel, I love you Angel) and *Jambo Bwana* (Hello Mister). In addition, some English songs such as *All Night Long* (by Lionel Richie) and *Liberian Girl* (by Michael Jackson) have Swahili phrases in them.

Furthermore, there are hundreds of websites that deal with Swahili grammar, culture history and current news. The most ambitious initiatives to promote Kiswahili have been started in the United States including the world famous *Kamusu* Project which is managed by the Swahili Department at Yale University. Both Google and Microsoft have launched Swahili language Internet search engines to make Kiswahili accessible to the world.

Let us now discuss some cultural aspects, which anyone interested in studying the Swahili language should be familiar with. These aspects are Swahili greetings (see Chapter 4), oral traditions, expressions of gratitude, hospitality and clothing.

Unlike in the Western world, the Swahili people take their greetings very seriously, especially in the rural areas where the majority of the population resides. It is considered impolite to pass by someone without greeting him or her even though the person may be a complete stranger. However, this courtesy is not as commonly practiced in the cities. After initial greetings, information can be exchanged about other things such as work, school, family, business and so forth.

Greeting is a form of socialization designed to inform, educate and entertain especially in a countryside where there are only a few newspapers, radios, televisions and telephones. Furthermore, greetings help the community to conform to rigid social conventions. Just as each member of the community is pleased to hear good stories told about him or her, so one was sure that a disgraceful story would find the same treatment—the story of shame would inevitably be heard in every group and may be talked about as if it was an inquisition in a court of law.⁴ Greetings are accompanied by a handshake using the right hand. The left hand is never used for a handshake while greeting. Neither can it be used for giving or receiving things because it is associated with cleaning oneself after visiting the bathroom (*choo*). If for some reasons one must use the left hand, due to a disability or if the right hand is occupied, one must apologize by saying *samahani*, which means “sorry.”

The Swahili people have strong storytelling traditions since many rural residents do not have frequent access to books, newspapers and the internet. These stories are designed to teach good morals, pass customs and traditions from one generation to the next, inculcate speaking skills and for entertainment purposes.

Since many rural Swahili people live a communal lifestyle, everyone is expected to provide a helping hand to other community members. Therefore, it is less common for rural Swahili people to use expressions of gratitude when favors are exchanged. On the contrary, if they do not fulfill their responsibilities or if they misbehave, they are chastised, blamed and sometimes even punished. The word for expressing gratitude in Swahili is *asante* when thanking one person or *asanteni* when thanking more than one person.

Visitors to East and Central Africa always remember the hospitality of the Swahili people most of whom go out of their way to assist complete strangers. They invite visitors (*wageni*) not only to share meals (*karibu chakula*) but also to have tea (*karibu chai*). When a guest bids farewell, he/she is welcome to visit again (*karibu tena*).

The type of clothing used by the Swahili people varies from place to place depending on the weather. On the coast where it is hot, women wear *kanga* (a rectangular piece of cloth) and men wear *kanzu* (loose-fitting garments). Some traditional Muslim women cover themselves with *baibui* (a black loose-fitting garment which covers the entire body except the eyes). The *kanga* cloth is of particular significance because it has writings in Swahili which are designed to educate, inform and pass on words of wisdom from one generation to the next. This is why the *kanga* is referred to as “the cloth that speaks.”

Notes

1. Thomas J. Hinnebusch, Sarah M. Mirza, *Swahili: A foundation for speaking reading and writing*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), xvi.
2. Hinnebusch, Mirza, xvii-xviii.
3. Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton* (New York NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990), 282.
4. G. Balamoan, *The Blue Nile Boy* (London, UK: Karia Press, 1989), 119.

