

The swahili people wa swahili history essay



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The Swahili people (Wa-Swahili) primarily live along the coastal plain of Kenya and Tanzania. While some inhabit the rural areas of this coastal strip, most of them live in the urban areas of Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, and Dar-es-Salaam. They extend to Zanzibar, Pemba, and Pate Islands. The term Swahili derives from Arabic sahil, “ people of the shore”.

Kiswahili, the language spoken by these people, has been adopted by millions of other non-Swahili communities in East and Central Africa, as well amongst the Islander communities of the Indian Ocean. However, the true Swahili-speaking peoples inhabiting the coastal strip of Kenya and Tanzania could be as few as 1. 5 million.

These Swahili emerged as a result of inter-marriages between the African Bantu and the Arab and Persian traders and immigrants (the Shirazi). The Swahili are both light-skinned and dark, a manifestation of the fusion of the Shirazi and the Bantu peoples. The initial area of interaction between these outsiders and the Sabaki-speaking Bantu people is believed to have taken place during the ninth century at Shugwaya, probably on the northern Kenya’s coast. After 1000 CE, the Swahili founded and dominated towns that developed into East African city states, such as Mombasa, Mogadishu, Brava, Merka, Kilwa, Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia. While Arabs and Persians had been frequent visitors to the East coast, the emergence of the above city states expanded the commercial and cultural contact between this part of Africa and the Indian Ocean World, as far as China and Indonesia. The Swahili exported ebony, ivory, slaves, copal, and gold, and received glassware, swords, jewelry, beads, and cotton cloth. Apart from trade, the Swahili were also artisans, fishermen, and farmers. The elite owned large

estates outside of the city on which slaves produced millet, vegetables, and fruits. More often than not, food and other commodities were acquired from non-Muslim communities such as the Mijikenda that lived in the immediate hinterland.

The introduction of Islam after 700 CE enriched the Swahili culture as it became the dominant religion of the community that was expressed in new architectural and literary forms such as Swahili poetry. Furthermore, social stratification increased due to wealth accumulation based on trade, as well as the quest by some families to claim links with the Shirazi. Very few would claim such ancestry, thereby illustrating the extent to which the Swahili are dominantly an African Bantu people. Equally true, a few Swahili claimed Indian heritage from Indians who came to settle and intermarry with Bantu Africans in the East African city states. The establishment of Portuguese hegemony over the East Coast for two centuries after 1500 was marked more by Portuguese commercial exploitation devoid of a cultural revolution, except for few architectural structures that did not completely supplant the already existing Persian, Arabic, and Islamic architecture. While Christianity did not take root during the Portuguese period, the abolition movement and anti-slave trade campaigns in Eastern and central Africa by Christian missionaries such as David Living Stone opened the way for the establishment of Christian Missions amongst the Swahili, especially after about 1870. However, Islam has remained the dominant religion.

Politically, the city states were independent of each other and ruled by sultans assisted by wazirs (high officials). Marriage was a means to perpetuating social status, but was also used by the political elite to expand

and consolidate their power. Islamic law, often complemented by customary law, assured social order. Following the end of the Portuguese period in the late seventeenth century, these rulers owed loyalty to the Sultan of Oman, an allegiance that was transferred to the Sultan of Zanzibar after 1800 CE.

The enduring legacy of the Swahili has been their language, Kiswahili. It is a hybrid Bantu language that has borrowed from Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, and Hindi. Most recently, English words have also found their way into Kiswahili. From Shungwaya, Kiswahili spread into all the city states that came under Swahili control. Kiswahili speakers were evident from as far north as Mogadishu in Somalia to Sofala on the coast of Mozambique in the south. Various dialects of Kiswahili evolved in each of the areas settled by the Swahili, but provided a medium of common identity for the speakers. By 1200 CE, Kiswahili was widely spoken along the East African Coast.

Gradually, the language was adopted by non-Swahili people on the East Coast such as the Bajuni, Mijikenda, Somali, and Vumba, thereby giving rise to different dialects of the language. By the onset of colonialism in the late nineteenth century, the language had gradually spread into the immediate hinterland and even as far as Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria, mainly by Swahili-Arab traders from Zanzibar. The Germans (and later the British) in Tanganyika, and the British in Zanzibar and Kenya, adopted Kiswahili as a colonial working language widening the geographical scope. The use of Kiswahili in colonial administration in the Eastern African territories legitimized Swahili claims as to the superiority and non-African origins of their language. During the colonial period and following independence in Kenya, communities such as the Kikuyu, Luyia, Luo, and Kamba that

migrated and settled at the coastal towns especially Mombasa, adopted Kiswahili as their vernacular.

After independence in the early 1960s, political leaders in Kenya and Tanzania sought to recover the African roots of Swahili culture and language. Kiswahili was particularly harnessed as a national language in the two nations. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania went a step further and decreed the use of Kiswahili as a medium of educational instruction in public schools. Kiswahili was also adopted by governments of these two countries to promote national integration given the ethnic diversity of the new nation states. Consequently, Kiswahili has become a second language to the majority of people that live in Kenya, Tanzania, as well as Uganda. In eastern Democratic Republic Congo, Kiswahili has long been associated with the Wangwana, who are linked to the Arab-Swahili traders who ventured into this region for slaves and ivory.

Today, Kiswahili is widely spoken in that part of Congo, as well as in Rwanda and Burundi. Furthermore, African communities in northern Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique are well acquainted with Kiswahili. Consequently, slightly over 50 million people in this region speak Kiswahili. Thus, the Swahili community has bequeathed a popular language to larger communities in East and Central Africa and the use of the language is bound to expand beyond regions where it has been adopted. The pan-African use of Kiswahili became evident when, at the African Union meeting in July 2004, African leaders adopted Kiswahili as the African working language for the Union.

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Further Reading

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Middleton, John, The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.