

Swahili People and Language

The Swahili people number approximately half a million, inhabiting a string of small settlements along the East African coast in parts of Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania.

It is believed that around 500 A.D. the Swahili people began to trade and migrate along the coast establishing settlements both on the coast and adjacent islands in the Indian Ocean. Knowledge of the Swahili language spread as far afield as Madagascar and the United Arab Emirates. Later trade inland spread the language to countries like Uganda and Rwanda with Swahili traders travelling into the interior in search of slaves and ivory for the Arab market.

From an early date, merchants from the Arab peninsula, Persia, and India settled among and intermarried with the Swahili people. By the 12th century Swahili culture exhibited Arab and Asian cultural influences. Houses made of coral rag and coral stone had replaced the circular mud-and-wattle buildings found in parts of inland East Africa.

The Swahili language is of Bantu origin with borrowed words from languages such as Arabic, Persian and Portuguese. The word "Swahili" was used by early Arab visitors to the coast and it means "the coast". Ultimately it came to be applied to the people and the language. The number "sita" = six as borrowed from Arabic, "chai" = tea from Persian, and "pesa" = money from Portuguese.

During the colonial time, Swahili was used for communication with the local inhabitants. Hence the colonial administrators pioneered the effort of standardizing the Swahili language. Because Zanzibar was the epicentre of culture and commerce, colonial administrators selected the dialect of the Zanzibar as the standard Swahili.

Swahili now contains many English words and has become the lingua franca of much of East Africa, spoken by more than 130 million people. It has featured in Western media like the well-celebrated Disney movie, "The Lion King", for example, words like "simba" = lion and "rafiki" = friend, and the Swahili phrase "hakuna matata" = no troubles or no problems.

1. Are the Swahili speaking people the majority in the Kenya?
2. How did the language of Swahili reach Madagascar?
3. Why did Swahili traders travel to Rwanda?
4. What is ivory?
5. Explain the phrase "cultural influences" with examples.
6. What is a peninsula?
7. What materials were used to make houses inland in East Africa?
8. Which years are in the 12 century – 1145, 1230, 1189 and 1270?
9. How did the Swahili people get their name?
10. Where is the language Persian spoken?
11. Why was it necessary to standardise the Swahili language?
12. Explain the phrase "lingua franca".

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