

A HISTORY OF THE SWAHILI COAST

CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

By

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ACTIVITY 1: DISCUSSION AND ESSAY

HOW DO HISTORIANS ORGANIZE TIME AND INFORMATION?

The nation-state as a unit of analysis has dominated the historical profession since the emergence of history as a professional discipline in the nineteenth century. Another traditional method is to look at “eras.”

For example, the period 1492-1800 is organized into a framework called the "Age of Exploration." European events and patterns are the focus, while earlier and later explorations by other civilizations are ignored.

DISCUSS: WHAT OTHER EXPLORATIONS COULD BE CONSIDERED?

The early Pacific voyages of the Polynesians; the movement of Malay sailors around the Indian Ocean; the Chinese visits to East Africa; undersea and space exploration; Egyptians' journey around Africa

Societies are as diverse in their interpretation of the nature of time as they are in their belief systems and histories. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is an emphasis on linear, progressive time that will result in the coming of the Messiah. Other cultures view time cyclically.

DISCUSS: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF VIEWING (EAST AFRICAN) HISTORY AND TIME

THEMES

Civilizations – political and economic organization

War – conflict and control of areas and resources

Trade – systems, transportation, requirements

Migration – people, animals, goods

Disease – appearance, treatment, science, belief

Environment – use and abuse

Systems – belief systems, financial systems, family arrangements, land ownership

Area studies – regional, not country or state - geographical

Sea and ocean basins – resources

ESSAY: EXAMINE YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY FROM A SPECIFIC THEMATIC ASPECT. HOW DOES IT FIT INTO WORLD HISTORY?

ACTIVITY 2: USING MAPS TO STUDY THE INDIAN OCEAN BASIN THEMATICALLY

WORKING IN GROUPS, USE THE WEB TO FIND MAPS THAT ILLUSTRATE:

- a) physical features of the East African coast and interior
- b) the Indian Ocean basin and the geographical and political location of the East African /Swahili coast in relation to the Indian Ocean, the African continent, and the Indian Ocean dhow ports
- c) various habitats of people in East Africa - interior, hinterland, coast – Massai, Kikuyu, Gyriama, Swahili, Buganda, Mijikwenda, Yao, Ruanda, Burundi
- d) trade routes into the East African interior, across the Indian Ocean and Asia
- e) the spread of Islam in Africa
- f) the location of East African kingdoms before the colonial era
- g) the location of Portuguese East Africa
- h) areas of colonization in East Africa by British, Germans
- i) contemporary political boundaries in East Africa

EACH GROUP MAKES A SPOKEN AND WRITTEN PRESENTATION OF ITS AREA OF STUDY.

THE MAPS ARE PINNED ON A WALL IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER AS REFERENCE THROUGHOUT THIS COURSE

EACH STUDENT RECEIVES THE MAP COLLECTIONS AND USES THEM TO:

- describe geographic features of the Indian Ocean – shores, islands, winds, bordering nations, important ports, gulfs, estuaries, etc.
- describe the influence of the monsoon winds on maritime trading patterns in the Indian Ocean before 1500
- assess the desirability of certain areas on the East African coast as trading ports
- assess why the East African coast was desirable to colonizers
- assess available resources for trade
- assess how the Swahili Coast relates to Islam in West Africa and elsewhere

ACTIVITY 3: HOW SWAHILI CULTURAL FACTORS ATTRACTED TRADE

STUDENTS WORK IN GROUPS REPRESENTING:

- a) **African people from the interior: THE SOURCE OF VALUABLE RESOURCES**

GROUP READS: LUO, MAASAI and AGIKUYU, The Heritage Library of African Peoples

**Who are the people of the interior?
What are their lifestyles: clothing; housing; artifacts; music
What marketable resources do they have?
What resources do they lack?
What cultural/belief systems do they practice?**

- b) **Pre-Swahili Indigenous People of the coast: LOCAL TRADERS**

GROUP READS: MIJIKENDA, The Heritage Library of African Peoples

**Who are the indigenous coastal people?
What is their lifestyle: clothing; housing; artifacts; music
What marketable resources do they have?
What resources do they lack?
What cultural/belief systems do they have that promote trade?**

- c) **The Swahili: THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE BROKERS**

**GROUP READS: AFRICAN KINGDOMS OF THE PAST – ZENJ
AFRICAN MERCHANTS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN**

**Who are the Swahili people?
What is their lifestyle: clothing; housing; artifacts; music
What marketable resources do they have?
What resources do they lack?
What cultural/belief systems do they have that promote trade?**

GROUP A): WHAT DID PEOPLE OF THE INTERIOR CONTRIBUTE TO THE SWAHILI TRADING EMPIRE:

Resources to trade – such as?
Skills and manpower to harvest/collect resources
Communication system – Kiswahili language
Recognition of need for trade items elsewhere – travel, history
Desirability of other items for trade coming from elsewhere – such as?
Transportation – animals, slaves
Food and shelter on the way – bought, stolen, conquered, traded
Trade treaties for safe passage – written, oral
Knowledge of time and distance needed to get to coastal location –
experience, guides, maps
Preservation of market goods on the way – wrappings?

GROUP B): WHAT FACTORS ENABLED COASTAL SWAHILI TO ACT AS BROKERS IN INDIAN OCEAN TRADE?:

Communication system – Kiswahili language for interior; Arabic for exterior
Warehouses – storage and preservation
Manpower – slaves and slavery
Monetary or bartering system – shells, coins
Counting and accounting – Indians
Legal structure – Muslim/African
Markets – local, national, international – buildings
Transportation to foreign markets – ships, overland
Unifying belief system – Islam – connection to eastern world
Development of Swahili culture – courtesy, gentlemanly

GROUP C) DISCUSS: HOW DID FOREIGN TRADERS PARTICIPATE IN INDIAN OCEAN TRADE?:

Desirable trade goods – such as?
Communication system – Arabic
Transportation – ships, overland
Monetary or bartering system – shells, coins,
Belief system – Islam

EACH GROUP DEVELOPS ILLUSTRATED COMPARATIVE CHARTS

CLASS DISCUSSIONS OR ESSAYS:

How did Islam help to build the Indian Ocean trade system?
How did the Swahili differ from their African neighbors?
Why did coastal people adopt Islam?
How was Islam a key factor in developing Swahili identity?
a) Intermarriage increased social standing
b) Advantages in international trade, society
c) Protection against enslavement
What is the situation of Indian Ocean trade today?

ACTIVITY 4: TIMELINE

Students will develop a timeline to help them understand the various forces both within and outside Africa that led to the Swahili role in Indian Ocean Trade.

- a) Development of technology from pre-historic times: bone, stone, copper, iron
ships – trade, exploration
weapons – spears, arrows, shields, guns, cannon, bombs
construction materials – mud, cow dung, wood, coral stones, stone,
cement, concrete
- a) Arrival of new waves of immigrants/conquerors – Why? How? Influences?
- b) Growth of wealth - slave trade
- c) Migration – ancient and modern

THE TIMELINE SHOULD BE LARGE ENOUGH FOR ALL TO SEE AND PINNED ON A WALL WHERE ITEMS CAN BE ADDED AT ANY ITEM. IT SHOULD BE ILLUSTRATED WITH TEXT AND IMAGES ARRANGED THEMATICALLY AS ABOVE.

STUDENTS CAN WORK INDIVIDUALLY OR IN GROUPS TO RESEARCH AND ADD VISUALS AND TEXT AS APPROPRIATE.

ACTIVITY 5: KISWAHILI LANGUAGE – STUDENT RESEARCH

WHAT WORDS OR PHRASES DO STUDENTS ALREADY KNOW?

African-Americans refer to their annual cultural festival as **Kwanzaa**, a coined word from Kiswahili **kwanza**, meaning **'first'**. Principles and symbols used in this festival are expressed with Kiswahili words like the principle **umoja**, meaning **'unity'** and the symbol **mkeka**, meaning **'mat'**. The festival's preferred greeting is **Habari gani? 'What news?'** The Kwanzaa principles are modeled after similar principles set for Tanzania's Arusha Declaration conceived by the late [Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere](#) (1967), the first president of the Republic of Tanzania.

THE LION KING – Hakuna matata! No problem!

a) Its origins as a Bantu language: what is meant by "Bantu"? Bantu languages are used as markers to trace the migrations of peoples across Africa.

b) The Swahili are literate people because of Arabic/K'Oran.

READ: Swahili Poem

[Swahili](#) poetry was largely derived from [Arabic poetry](#). The earliest known original Swahili work, the epic poem *Utendi wa Tambuka* (Story of Tambuka), is dated 1728. Swahili writers of epic verse borrowed from the romantic traditions surrounding the Prophet Muhammad and then freely elaborated on them to meet the tastes of their listeners and readers. By the 19th century, Swahili poetry had gone beyond Arabic themes and taken up such indigenous [Bantu](#) forms as ritual songs. The greatest religious poem, *Utendi wa Inkishafi* (Soul's Awakening), written by Sayyid Abdallah bin Nasir, illustrates the vanity of earthly life through the account of the fall of the citystate of Pate. The oral tradition of Liyongo, a 13th-century contender for the throne of Shagga, is preserved in the epic poem *Utendi wa Liyongo Fumo* (Epic of Liyongo Fumo), written by Muhammad bin Abubakar in 1913.

c) The language has absorbed words from other languages, eg Portuguese, English, Arabic, German – itself a timeline of new invasions.

d) Discussion of the spread of Kiswahili as the lingua franca of the East African coast, from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique and west to the Congo, Ruanda.

TRACE THE KISWAHILI DIASPORA:

... **HOW MANY CITIES/COUNTRIES HAVE KISWAHILI LANGUAGE COURSES?**

... **HOW MANY COUNTRIES/CITIES HAVE KISWAHILI BROADCASTS?**

... **FIND KISWAHILI AUTHORS ON THE WEB – WHERE DO THEY LIVE?**

MAKE A MAP TO ILLUSTRATE THE SPREAD OF KISWAHILI TODAY.

Spreading through trade

Spreading through missionaries and explorers

Spreading beyond East Africa to other countries as modern-day Suaheli people settle elsewhere in a broad Diaspora

Developing new forms – eg Sheng blog

Pronunciation: One of the reasons Kiswahili is not a difficult language is that it is very grammatical and pronunciation never changes from word to word.

A as the 'a' in 'father'

E as the 'e' in 'best' or the 'a' in 'hay'

I as the 'ee' in 'bee'

O as the 'o' in 'cold'

U as the 'ou' in "you"

Dh as the 'th' in 'this'

Ng' as the 'ng' in 'sing'

Greetings and Civilities:

Greeting is extremely important in Kenyan culture. Before talking to anyone, it is polite to greet them first. After a greeting, some Kenyans may even carry on with small talk for a good ten minutes before getting to the topic at hand.

Welcome

How are you (greeting a singular person)?

I'm fine

What is your name?

My name is _____

Thank you very much

Yes

No

Goodbye

No problem

White person (foreigner)

Karibu

Habari yako? or Habari gani?

Nzuri

Unaitwa nani?

Ninaitwa _____

Asante sana

Ndio

Hapana

Kwaheri

Hakuno Matata

Mzungu

Sheng is a [Swahili](#)-based [patois](#), originating in [Nairobi](#), [Kenya](#), and influenced by the many languages spoken there. While primarily a language of urban youths, it has spread across social classes to the halls of the Kenyan parliament and geographically to neighbouring [Tanzania](#) and [Uganda](#).

Like all slang, it is mainly used by the youth. It also evolves rapidly, as words are moved into and out of slang use. It is finding broad use among East African [hip hop](#) artists, such as [Kalamashaka](#) and [Nonini](#), whose music helps spread the language and contribute to rapid changes or shifts in Sheng vocabulary, but also among university and secondary-school students. Although the grammar, syntax, and much of the vocabulary are drawn from Swahili, Sheng borrows from [English](#) and from the languages of the various ethnic groups in Kenya, including [Gĩkũyũ](#), [Luo](#) and [Kamba](#).

Some examples of popular sheng words are "manzi" which means girl, "beste" which means friend, "muenjoyo" which means having fun, "hare" which means to go out at night and "waka" which means to get drunk.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Origin of Kiswahili

The Swahili language, is basically of Bantu (African) origin. It has borrowed words from other languages such as Arabic probably as a result of the Swahili people using the Quran written in Arabic for spiritual guidance as Muslims.

“Swahili” from the Arabic word “swahil” meaning “the coast.”

Regarding the history of the Swahili language, the older view linked to the colonial time asserts that the Swahili language originates from Arabs and Persians who moved to the East African coast. Given the fact that only the vocabulary can be associated with these groups but the syntax or grammar of the language is Bantu, this argument has been almost forgotten.

Words from Other Languages

Numbers in Kiswahili: "moja" = one, "mbili" = two, "tatu" = three, "nne" = four, "tano" = five, "nane" = eight, "kumi" = ten, are all of Bantu origin. On the other hand there is "sita" = six, "saba" = seven and "tisa" = nine, that are borrowed from Arabic. The Arabic word "tisa" actually replaced the Bantu word "kenda" for "nine". In some cases the word "kenda" is still used. The Swahili words, "chai" = tea, "achari" = pickle, "serikali" = government, "diwani" = councillor, "sheha" = village councillor, are some of the words borrowed from Persian bearing testimony to the older connections with Persian merchants.

The Swahili language also absorbed words from the Portuguese who controlled the Swahili coastal towns (c. 1500-1700AD). eg "leso" (handkerchief), "meza" (table), "gereza" (prison), "pesa" ('peso', money), etc. The Swahili language also borrowed some words from languages of the later colonial powers on the East African coast - English (British) and German. Swahilized English words include "baiskeli" (bicycle), "basi" (bus),

"penseli" (pencil), "mashine" (machine), "koti" (coat), etc. The Swahilized German words include "shule" for school and "hela" for a German coin.

Spread into the Hinterland

For centuries, Swahili remained as the language for the people of the East African coast. Long-time interactions with other people bordering the Indian Ocean spread the Swahili language to distant places such as on the islands of Comoro and Madagascar and even far beyond to South Africa, Oman and United Arab Emirates. Trade and migration from the Swahili coast during the nineteenth-century helped spread the language to the interior of particularly Tanzania. It also reached Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Central African Republic, and Mozambique.

Christian missionaries learnt Swahili as the language of communication to spread the Gospel in Eastern Africa. So, the missionaries also helped to spread the language. As a matter of fact the first Swahili-English dictionary was prepared by a missionary. 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. Zanzibar was the epicenter of culture and commerce, therefore colonial administrators selected the dialect of the Zanzibar (Unguja) town as the standard Swahili. The Unguja dialect (Kiunguja) was then used for all formal communication such as in schools, in mass media (newspapers and radio), in books and other publications.

Now Swahili is spoken in many countries of Eastern Africa. For Tanzania, deliberate efforts were made by the independent nation to promote the language (thanks to the efforts of the former head of state, Julius K. Nyerere). Tanzania's special relations with countries of southern Africa was the chief reason behind the spread of Swahili to Zambia, Malawi, South Africa, and other neighbouring countries to the south. Swahili is the national as well as the official language in Tanzania - almost all Tanzanians speak Swahili proficiently and are unified by it. In Kenya, it is the national language, but official correspondence is still conducted in English. In Uganda, the national language is English but Swahili enjoys a large number of speakers especially in the military. As a matter of fact, during the Iddi Amin's rule Swahili was declared the national language of Uganda. However, the declaration has never been seriously observed nor repealed by the successive governments.

International Presence

Thus, Swahili is the most widely spoken language of eastern Africa and many world institutions have responded to its diaspora. It is one of the languages that feature in some world radio stations such as, the BBC, Radio Cairo (Egypt), the Voice of America (U.S.A.), Radio Deutschewelle (Germany), Radio Moscow International (Russia), Radio Japan International, Radio China International, Radio Sudan, and Radio South Africa. The Swahili language is also making its presence in the art world - in songs, theatres, movies and television programs. For example, the lyrics for the song titled "Liberian girl" by Michael Jackson has Swahili phrases: "Nakupenda pia, nakutaka pia, mpenzi we!" (I love you, and I want you, my dear!). The well-celebrated Disney movie, "The Lion King" features several Swahili words, for example "simba" (lion), "rafiki" (friend), as the names of the characters. The Swahili phrase "hakuna matata" (No troubles or no problems) was also used in that movie.

ACTIVITY 6: SWAHILI HISTORY AND IDENTITY

COMPILE A CLASS LIBRARY OF AS MANY HISTORY BOOKS ON SWAHILI /EAST AFRICA AS YOU CAN OBTAIN, FROM AS MANY DIFFERENT ERAS AS POSSIBLE. HAVE STUDENTS WORK INDIVIDUALLY OR IN GROUPS TO FIND ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

a) Interpretation of history changes over time

What factors contribute to changing views of the same history?

- Political agenda – eg colonialization
- Racism – feeling of superiority/inferiority
- Incorrect information
- Lack of written records
- Developing oral histories
- History as memory
- Science of archaeology/anthropology- methods improve
- Building on what is known or assumed
- Lack of physical structures in interior of East Africa
- Exterior point of view vs interior point of view
- Interpretation of changing cultural identity at any one time

b) Identity changes over time

What factors contributed to the “Swahili” identity?

- Intermarriage
- Conquest
- Colonization
- Changing belief systems – indigenous, Muslim, Christian
- Political identity as related to power and importance
- Tourism
- Capitalism
- Internet/globalization

STUDENTS CAN DISCUSS THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY. HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM THEIR FAMILY IDENTITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, HISTORICAL IDENTITY?

THE SWAHILI COAST

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