

KISWAHILI (Swahili) - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

Spoken by an estimated 50 million people, Kiswahili (Kis-swah-HEE-lee, sometimes referred to as Swahili) is, after Arabic, the most widely understood language in Africa. It is the official language of Tanzania and Kenya and is used extensively in Uganda and the eastern provinces of Zaire. Kiswahili is also used by some people in Congo Brazzaville, Southern Sudan, the Comoro Islands, the northern part of Malagasy Republic, and the Persian Gulf states.

LANGUAGE

Both the Arab and Persian cultures have influenced the Swahili language. The Portuguese control of the coastal towns also imprinted upon the language. Words such as *eso* -handkerchief, *meza* - table, *gereza* - prison, *pesa/peso* - money. Remnants of the colonisation of the East African coast shows the use of both English and German words. Swahilized English words include "baiskeli - bicycle, basi - bus, penseli - pencil, mashine - machine, koti - coat. The Swahilized German words include shule - school and hela - a German coin.



RELIGION

It is believed that Islam arrived in Africa with the Islamic refugees who were fleeing the persecution in the Arab peninsula. Islam's tolerance of traditional values was more appealing than Christianity in accepting polygamy. The majority of Kiswahilis are, therefore, Muslim.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

For Muslims, the most important holidays are religious.

EID AL-FITR - marks the end of the month of fasting called Ramadan.

EID AL-HAJJ - celebrates the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca. Each Eid is celebrated by praying, visiting relatives and neighbours, and eating special foods and sweets. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.

MAULIDI - or the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, is widely celebrated by Muslims.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: The common greeting of Swahili people with one another is the Arabic greeting *Asalaam Aleikhum*. They might also say *Jambo*, a Kiswahili greeting. People who know each other exchange a string of greetings inquiring about the health of family members and the latest news. Children show older people respect by kissing his or her hand. Modesty in behavior and dress is adhered to. Men and women lead segregated lives and are not

permitted to mix freely. Dating is generally non-existent. Most people pursue their daily activities with others of the same sex. Women mix with other women at home, while men go out into public places.

MUSIC AND DANCE: *Taarab* music, with its distinct Arabic origins, is performed at weddings and concerts. Other instruments played are keyboards, flutes, brass instruments and drums to accompany singers. Many Kiswahili lyrics are double entendres (having double meanings) that hint at romantic love.

Dance troupes of all women perform for all female audiences. They dance *chakacha*, like belly dancing, and also *lelemama*, a very subtle dance with tiny hand movements.

CUISINE

Swahili cuisine is influenced by African, Middle Eastern and Indian foods and is very spicy. Rice is the staple food. Dishes are often cooked in coconut milk and served with meat, bean or vegetable stews. Meals incorporate locally available vegetables and fruits and spices. Fish is also central to the diet. Chicken and goat meat are popular for holiday meals. Sweet tea with milk is served several times a day. Like all Muslims, Swahili people are prohibited from eating pork or drinking alcohol. The members of one clan from Northern Kenya observe a taboo on eating fish. The cooking is undertaken by the women who usually prepare three meals a day. The men are served and generally eat separately without the women. Women and children eat after the men. Very occasionally the women join the men.

REFERENCES

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