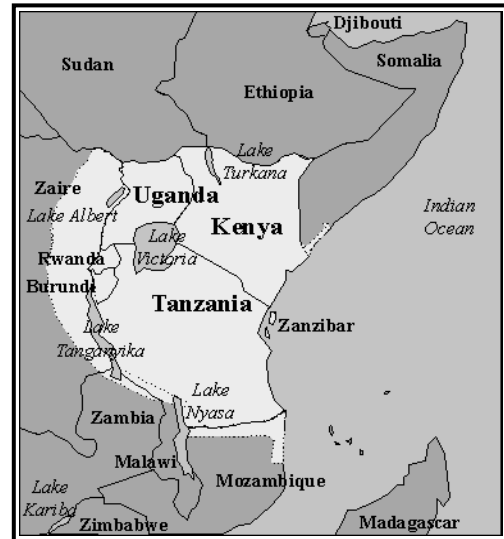


INTRODUCTION

Swahili (also, and more properly, called Kiswahili) is an African language spoken mainly by the people of eastern and central Africa. That is, people who live in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, eastern Zaire, northern Zaire, northern Malawi, northern Mozambique, northern Zambia and Somali Republic. Although not widely as in the above mentioned countries, 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.

Swahili is spoken by an estimated 50 million people and, after Arabic, is 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. In Burundi and Rwanda, it is known and used in major urban centers, but is not widely known or extensively used in the monolingual countryside.

In countries that flank the area where Swahili functions as the common mode of communication, use of the language does spill over the border areas in small towns and villages along major transportation arteries, for example, in northern Mozambique, northern Zambia, and southern Ethiopia. Along the East African coastal strip from well into Somalia and as far south as northern Mozambique there are communities of Swahili speakers. Of less significance are small and declining communities in the Comoro



Islands, where local Swahili related vernaculars and French are the rule, and along part of the northwestern coast of Madagascar.

In spite of its large number of speakers and the huge area in which the language is spoken, Swahili has less than two million native speakers, most of whom live along the east African coast of southern Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, northern Mozambique, and on the off shore islands of Lamu, Zanzibar, and Pemba. Most speakers in Tanzania and Kenya acquire Swahili as a second language, being native speakers of other African languages. Many speakers of Swahili, especially those further into the interior of the continent (up country) speak two or more other languages, and use Swahili as a lingua franca. A growing number of first language speakers, however, live in the urban areas of East Africa, where inter-ethnic communities prevail.

ROLE IN SOCIETY

Although English is still an important language in post independence East Africa, Swahili plays an increasingly vital role in the daily commercial, political, cultural, and social life of the region at every level of society. This is especially true in Tanzania, where the language is used throughout the country in government offices, the courts, schools and mass media. It has, in fact, become a more important language than English and, in some cases, is replacing English as the language of choice among the educated. In Kenya, this is less the case, and English still enjoys virtual equal status with Swahili. In

Uganda the popularity of Swahili as a national or official language often reflects the attitude of the political faction that is currently in control. Swahili has never enjoyed high status among the major Christian oriented Bantu ethnolinguistic groups of southern and western Uganda, but was an important lingua franca in the northern areas of the country and has always been an important language among the military and police. For a period shortly after the Tanzanian Ugandan conflict the status of Swahili received a boost because people observed how effectively it functioned as the language of their liberators, the Tanzanians. In eastern Zaire it remains an important lingua franca and is spoken by growing numbers of native speakers in parts of the region.

HISTORY

Swahili spread through eastern Africa beginning in the nineteenth century when Arab/Swahili trade expanded along the East African coast, on Zanzibar, and in trading centers in the interior. Long before the arrival of European colonizers, it was the Swahili dialect of Zanzibar Town (Kiunguja) that spread inland and eventually became the basis for Standard Swahili in colonial and post independence East Africa. Furthermore, Swahili is one of the few African languages that has a precolonial written tradition. A thousand years of contact between Indian Ocean peoples and Swahili resulted in a large number of borrowed words entering the language, mainly from Arabic, but also others such as Persian and various Indian languages. At different periods Swahili also borrowed vocabulary from Portuguese and English. Such borrowing is comparable to the proportion of French, Latin, and Greek loans used in English. Although this proportion for Arabic loans may be as high as 50 percent in classical Swahili poetry (traditionally written in Arabic script), it amounts to less than twenty percent of the lexicon of the spoken language.

The oldest surviving documents written in Swahili date from the early 1700s. They are written in an Arabic script, reflecting the influence of Islamic culture on Swahili society. Most of these documents are transcriptions of Swahili epic poetry, recording on paper an oral tradition of works intended for chanting or singing. The most common of these poems are called Utenzi (Utendi), drawing upon conventions of both Arab verse and Bantu song. Its earliest composers most likely worked in Kenya, in the Lamu Archipelago, using one of the northern Swahili dialects. The tradition later spread south to Mombasa and Pemba, where the focus of the verse shifted from religious legends to social commentary, which continues to be a theme used by contemporary Swahili poets. The classical poetry still plays a major role in Swahili culture; it is recited on special occasions and regularly quoted; newspapers often devote space to poetry that has been submitted by their readership.

