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## SWAHILI CULTURAL HERITAGE: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT AND INFLUENCES\*

### INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage of the Swahili of East Africa is diverse and complex. It is the product of a long history and interaction of the Swahili with their maritime environment and the outside world. Tangible cultural heritage includes the built historical landscape, evidence of which survives in fabulous ruins of ancient urban centres,<sup>1</sup> as well as in areas inhabited continuously since their founding.<sup>2</sup> This cultural heritage includes ruined houses built of coral blocks cemented with lime mortar. These feature a rectangular design, partitioned into chambers that serve different purposes. The cultural heritage also includes carpentry, in the form of carved doors and boats, and the Swahili dress that comes in various forms. This paper also addresses a selection of elements of intangible cultural heritage, such as dance, music, cuisine, as well as literature and communication.

The Swahili not only occupy the coast of Kenya but are widespread along the entire East African or *Azania* coast, where they acted as middlemen in the Trans-Indian Ocean trade. The name *Azania* was used by the Graeco-Romans before the 7th century CE. Earlier authors such as Tuan Ch'eng Shih (9th cent.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark HORTON, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa*, The British Institute in Eastern Africa Memoir 14 (Nairobi: The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Ibrahim B. NAMUNABA, "An Archaeological Study of Siyu Old Town on the North Coast of Kenya from the 10th to the 19th Century AD: An Exchange Systems Perspective" (PhD diss., University of Nairobi, 2020).

CE) and Burzug (10th cent. CE) described the coastal people of East Africa as of black complexion and well-built. There is no indication of the kind of language these people spoke during or before the 7th century CE.

The first use of the word *Swahili* is credited to Ibn Batuta, an Arab sailor who gave a vivid, eye-witness description of the East African coast in 1331. According to Namunaba, Ibn Batuta did not intend to create a tribal identity, but used *Al Sahil* or *Sawahel*, Arabic for ‘people of the coast’, to refer to those who occupied the territory between the southern coast of Somalia and the northern coast of Mozambique.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the word Swahili acquired its cultural and economic connotations from the need to contextualize and analyse earlier scripts. Archaeological studies have placed the Swahili in coastal settlements, particularly on shorelines, islands and creeks.<sup>4</sup> They conducted regional and interregional trade with the Kamba, Oromo, Taita, Waata and Mijikenda peoples.<sup>5</sup> Trade relationships were facilitated through fictive kin ties called “blood brotherhoods”, with rituals legitimizing such partnerships beyond the family and in the wider trading community.<sup>6</sup> As noted in a 10th-century account by Tuan Ch’eng Shi, coastal peoples engaged visiting merchants from the Arabian Peninsula in blood brotherhood rituals, as well. Such rituals allowed people otherwise unknown to each other to engage in trade. According to Middleton, the Swahili carved a niche as middlemen in the African-Asian trading system, playing the role of brokers with cultural links to both Africa and Asia. The people of the Indian Ocean have for centuries subsisted economically in part through international trade relations.

## 1. WHAT IS CULTURAL HERITAGE?

Cultural heritage can be understood in a broad sense as encompassing the signs and material substances that represent the actions and achievements of a people over time. The signs and materials may be movable or immovable, yet they represent socioeconomic strategies people use or used in adapting to

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<sup>3</sup> NAMUNABA, “Archaeological Study of Siyu Old Town,” 17.

<sup>4</sup> Chapurukha M. KUSIMBA, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Chapurukha M. KUSIMBA and Rahul OKA, “The Archeology of Trading Systems, Part 1: Towards a New Trade Synthesis,” *Journal of Archeological Research* 16, no. 4 (December 2008): 339–95.

<sup>6</sup> KUSIMBA and OKA, “Archeology of Trading Systems,” 241.

their environment.<sup>7</sup> Cultural heritage is both the means and outcomes of interactions of a people with their holistic environment. Some cultural heritage consists of different types of tangible property, such as monuments, historic places, works of art and objects. Others are intangible, such as legends, myths, music and dance.<sup>8</sup> To a larger extent, cultural heritage epitomises the behaviour of a society.

## 2. WHO ARE THE SWAHILI?

There are several perspectives from which to view the Swahili. The first is from the perspective of Swahilis themselves. Most Swahili consider themselves of African descent but different from other African communities because of influences from hinterland Bantu groups, as well as from immigrant populations from the Arabian Peninsula, namely: the Hadhrami, Masharifu, Albaury and Omani. Kiriama categorizes the Swahili based on parentage.<sup>9</sup> First are those born of Bajuni parents and who could easily pass as indigenous Swahili from the Lamu archipelago. Second are those born of immigrant Arab fathers and Swahili mothers. Finally, there are those from non-Swahili parentage but who have adopted the Swahili culture. Before their disruption by the Portuguese in the late 16th century, the Swahili populated multiple fortified city-states. The people living in these settlements shared a common language that is now the *lingua franca* of the East African region, as well as a similar system of beliefs and reliance on maritime economy. Kiswahili is a member of the Bantu language group, with Spear classifying the Swahili as among the group of Northern Sabaki Bantu speakers. Although this language shares a number of cognates with Arabic and other foreign languages, it remains an indigenous African language (see table 1).

In Kenya, Kiswahili has a number of dialects. For instance, *Ki-Siyu* and *Ki-Pate* dialects are spoken in Siyu and Pate, respectively, while the *Ki-Amu* dialect is spoken on Lamu Island and its environs.

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, “World Heritage List,” *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, 2013. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/&order=year>.

<sup>8</sup> Herman KIRIAMA, Ishanlosen ODIAUA, and Ashton SINAMAI, *Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment in Africa: An Overview* (Mombasa, Kenya: Centre for Heritage Development in Africa, 2010), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Herman KIRIAMA, “Archeological Investigations of Shimoni Slave Caves,” in *Slave Routes and Oral Traditions in Southeastern Africa*, ed. Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers, and Allen Isaacman (Maputo: Filsom Entertainment, 2005), 157–69.

**Table 1.** Comparative cognates Kiswahili shares with other languages

<b>Other languages</b>	<b>Swahili vocabulary</b>					
<b>Swahili and other Bantu cognates</b>	moja, moya (one)	mbili, mwana (two, baby)	tatu (three)	nne (four)	tano (five)	kenda (nine)
<b>Arabic</b>	sita (six)	saba (seven)	tisa (nine)	kumi (ten)		
<b>Persian</b>	chai (tea)	achari (prickle)	serikali (government)	diwani (councilor)		
<b>Portuguese</b>	meza (table)	gereza (prison)	peso (money)	leso (wrapper)		
<b>English</b>	baisikeli (bicycle)	basi, skuli (bus, school)	penseli (pencil)	mashine (machine)		
<b>German</b>	shule (schule)	hela (money)				

The Swahili are urbanite people who lived close together in towns situated within walled enclosures that are reminiscent of Europe's medieval settlements. The walls set boundaries for political sovereignty, even as townspeople farmed the land outside these enclosures. Built twice as wide as those for housing, walls around these towns were fitted with bastions, guardrooms, and strategically placed gates. They served as protection from threats by neighbouring states.<sup>10</sup> Built of stone, these towns feature narrow, winding streets with occasional bridges.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. SWAHILI CULTURAL HERITAGE

In existence for nearly two millennia, the Swahili civilization boasts a trail of ancient and living cultural heritage. While it is impractical to present the elements of this heritage in their entirety in a single paper, aspects of Swahili heritage discussed here include historical architecture, woodcrafts,

<sup>10</sup> KUSIMBA, *Rise and Fall*.

<sup>11</sup> KIRIAMA, "Archeological Investigations."

visual arts and communication, dress and music. Boats and boat construction are also discussed as they exemplify the Swahili mercantile maritime economy.

Most Swahili towns and their ruins are ancient places, protected by law as national monuments and cultural heritage sites.<sup>12</sup> Examples include Mnarani (old Kilifi), Gede and Mtwapa. Others are Takwa, Manda, Shanga and Mbui in the Lamu archipelago on Kenya's northern coast.<sup>13</sup> Many of these urban settlements were abandoned following successive conquests by Omani Arabs and the Portuguese during the 6th and 16th centuries CE, respectively.<sup>14</sup> By the time Kenya was declared a British colony in 1920, the Swahili city-states had lost their economic bases and political sovereignty. With the declaration of national independence in 1963, their ruins came to memorialize a civilization whose legacy populace was integrated into the Kenyan republic.

A few of the former Swahili city-states remain settled by the descendants of successive generations since ancient times. Lamu Old Town is such a place. Inhabited for over 700 years,<sup>15</sup> Lamu is located on an island of the same name some 350 km north of Mombasa. It is one of the oldest and best-preserved examples of Swahili settlements in the country. Lamu is cited in the UNESCO World Heritage List for its outstanding universal value, showcasing a unique architectural history and urban structure that sports cultural influences from Europe, Arabia, Persia, and India. The Lamu World Heritage Site incorporates the tangible and intangible cultural attributes that are reminiscent of Swahili civilization. The old towns in Siyu and Pate on the north coast and in Mombasa in the south also are cited in the UNESCO World Heritage List for their historical value.

Each Swahili town often had six to ten mosques, depending on their population. Each urban set-up had a congregational mosque, known as *Msikiti wa Jumaa*, located at its centre to accommodate the populace at Friday prayers. Most mosques featured an elaborate *Mihrab* built of coral *Porites* quarried from the sea bed and finely carved into desired shapes.

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<sup>12</sup> GOVERNMENT OF KENYA, "National Museums and Heritage Act," *National Laws of Kenya* (Nairobi: Government Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> NAMUNABA, "Archaeological Study of Siyu"; HORTON, "Shanga."

<sup>14</sup> KUSIMBA, *Rise and Fall*.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO, "World Heritage List."

#### 4. ARCHITECTURE AND BUILT HERITAGE

Pre-colonial Swahili architecture is characterized by fossilized blocks of coral mined on coastal shores. The built heritage of the Swahili comprises ruins of old houses, mosques and town enclosures, usually of large blocks bound in lime mortar.<sup>16</sup> Rectangular in shape and with complex internal designs, the houses stood between one and three stories high; some with wooden balconies, depending on whether their builders were influenced by Arabs or Indians. These windowless dwellings take their light from a *kiwanda*, or central courtyard. Their double doors of carved and decorated wood indicate the social status and wealth of the owner. These main doors are set inside a porch with a pair of opposing benches, called *baraza*, where the owner traditionally meets visitors for chatting and consultation. Rarely are visitors allowed beyond the *baraza*, unless they are close relatives and staying overnight. All the rooms are built in a gallery style and there might be two or more galleries; one behind the other. Each gallery is set a step higher than the one in front as they move toward the *kiwanda*. The inner gallery is the compartment used by the man of the house and his spouse, followed by the upper gallery for other household members. The gallery next to the common room, called a *sebule*, may be used by visiting friends and relatives. The back wall of the inner gallery has a double door that opens into another gallery, known as a *ndani* and used as accommodation for daughters of the house. Behind the *ndani* are two doors, one opening into a room known as *nyumba ya kati* or “middle house”, and another to an inner water closet. The middle house is used for sacred activities such as childbirth and the washing of the corpse after the death of a family member. Beds are placed at the ends of the galleries as there are no separate rooms for that purpose. While there are no tables in Swahili houses, basic furniture includes chairs, traditional stools and a floor mat called a *mkeka*. The houses of wealthier owners may include a separate *sebule* for guests on a first or second floor; away from private compartments but which could be accessed from the *kiwanda*.

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<sup>16</sup> HORTON, “Shanga.”

## 5. CARVED WOODEN DOORS

One of the most distinctive features of Swahili heritage is carved wooden doors that can be found in Swahili towns both in Kenya and Tanzania, including Lamu, Pate, Siyu, Mombasa and Zanzibar. In 1991, Zanzibar's Stone Town boasted 500 antique doors; Lamu over 200; while Mombasa had fewer than 100 such doors.<sup>17</sup> The numbers have increased with enactment in Kenya of relevant laws<sup>18</sup> and ratification of the UN Convention on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage that created incentives for the restoration of built heritage sites. These laws have enabled the listing of built heritage, including old towns, antique palaces, houses and mosques, both as national monuments and as UNESCO World Heritage sites.<sup>19</sup>

Although wooden carved doors are reported in the old Arabian trading ports of the Persian Gulf and the Western coast of the Indian subcontinent, only in East Africa does one find such a large number of antique doors and the continuing tradition of carving. Skills necessary for making the doors are taught in Mombasa, Lamu and Zanzibar, where new doors are regularly produced for commercial outlets such as hotels and banks, and for wealthy home owners.

Archaeologically, carved doors existed as early as the 14th and 15th centuries in Swahili settlements. As the East African coast became an important hub for Trans-Indian Ocean trade, production grew due to the availability of quality timber and accomplished craftsmen. This enabled Swahili households, ordinary and noble alike, to be fitted with wooden doors. However, carved doors remained a luxury item in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. The 19th century saw a revival in the production of doors for export to the Middle East.

Typically, a Swahili door is comprised of a pair of shutters that slide together in a frame with a central post. Brass bolts, locks and studs that adorn them represent dignity and offer protection for what lays behind. They can be transported in pieces and assembled at their site of installation. The doors are fashioned from an indigenous hardwood called *mwangati* (*Terminalia spinosar*) that is native to coastal lands. The styles and forms of Swahili doors depended on both tastes and traditions. Adrik identified two geographic

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<sup>17</sup> Judith S. ALDRIK, "East African doors," *Kenya Past and Present* 23 (1991): 14–19.

<sup>18</sup> GOVERNMENT OF KENYA, "National Museums and Heritage Act."

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, "World Heritage List," *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, 2013, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/&order=year>.

locations as the major sources of carved doors.<sup>20</sup> The Tana River was a line of demarcation between the doors that came from the Lamu archipelago and those made in the south coast; through Mombasa and down to Zanzibar. The latter bore influences of Indian and Arabian settlers who came to East Africa in the 19th century. Using Adrik's survey, the following is a brief description of door types.<sup>21</sup>

1. **Lamu style doors.** This is a simple type in fashion in 18th-century Lamu. Characteristic features are the absence of frames and lintels, and placement that is set back in the entrance porch.

2. **Siyu style doors.** A northern variation produced by renowned craftsman from the town of Siyu early in the 19th century. Characteristic features include the absence of a centre-post, as well as an extended lintel that holds the framing beams together in the wall. There are light carvings on the frame and lintel and the doors may bear geometric designs painted in black and white.

3. **Framed doors/rosette style.** In this style, the lintel features insignias and is occasionally inscribed in Arabic and dated. This type was associated with the Al Busaid Sultans of Zanzibar. One of the earliest doors of this type in Lamu dates from 1797, where craftsmen copied the style and left the Arabic inscription.

4. **Bajuni doors.** This style is derived from the Siyu door, featuring a unique mark and use of geometric roundels on its panels.

5. **Unframed doors/wavy line styles.** This door type sits in a heavy, undecorated frame, while its lintel is carved with a running design of palmettes and rosettes.

6. **Gujarati style doors.** This door style is made of teak wood imported from Cutch, in India, and arrived at the coast with traders at the end of the 19th century. A typical feature of the Gujarati door is the corbel that marks the connection between an inner and outer frame. The best examples are found in Mombasa and Zanzibar.

7. **Indian neo-classical doors.** Made of teak wood and featuring a rounded head with spokes or cartwheel decorations, these doors arose in India before appearing in Mombasa with the introduction of the British colonial administration in 1887 and their continued import thereafter.

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<sup>20</sup> ALDRIK, "East African Doors."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16.

8. **Late Zanzibar style doors.** Featuring a heavily decorated centre-post, frame and round head, this design was introduced by Sultan Bargash, who ruled Zanzibar from 1870 to 1888. According to Aldrik,<sup>22</sup> this type is influenced by Kashmir designs and first carved by Punjabi carpenters in Bombay (now Mumbai). One of the most elaborate door styles, it remains popular today.

## 6. SWAHILI DRESS

Due to long contact with Arab peoples and widespread adoption of their religion, dress indicates the influence Islam exerts on Swahili culture. There is a clear distinction between women's and men's clothing in the Swahili community.

Everyday clothing for women comprises a pair of wraps made from cotton or silk, known as *leso* (from Portuguese) or *khanga* (from Gujarati). One is fitted around the waist and the other covers the head and shoulders. The modern *khanga* developed late in 19th-century Zanzibar and Mombasa, spreading to the Comoro Islands, Madagascar and the Lamu archipelago.<sup>23</sup> This kind of dress also is worn by Mijikenda women who are not necessarily Muslim. As will be discussed in the section below on literature and communication, the appeal of the *khanga* is primarily in the messages they carry. Otherwise, fabric selection varies with the purchasing power of the buyer. Colour is a secondary consideration as many pieces come in an array of shades and prints. Another prominent dress for women is the long black gown, called *buibui*, and the *hijab*, an accompanying veil that is wrapped around the head and face. These were introduced in Zanzibar by Omani Arabs and made compulsory for Muslim women in public places. While at home, the majority of Swahili women dress in modern, European wear.

Menswear is very distinct. Swahili men wear a long, white, embroidered robe called *kanzu*, and a round cap made of cotton or silk, called a *kofia*, or a turban. Caps come in many forms and feature different patterns of sites sacred in the Islamic faith. It is common to see men wearing a European-style jacket over the *kanzu*, a product of British influence.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Chris SPRING, "The Printed Cloth: Kanga," in *Hazina: Traditions, Trade and Transformations in Eastern Africa*, ed. Kiprop Lagat and Julie Hudson (Nairobi: Oakland Media Services, 2006), 32.

## 7. VISUAL CRAFTS AND ARTS

The Swahili are very artistic, expressing themselves visually through painting, sculpture, embroidery, weaving, pottery, plasterworks and masonry. In art of these types, almost all forms of phenomena are featured in their material remains and objects, except for human figures. This is a bow to Islam's prohibition of human faces and figures in artistic representation.

The *kofia*, mentioned in the previous section, is often embroidered with patterns that represent a message to a specific person. For instance, it is noted that women will send a special message to their husbands using designs and patterns embroidered in the *kofia*. By wearing them, the bearer invariably offers silent counsel to his peers and youths. The addition of a *kindani* (a pendant usually of ivory or cowrie shells) on the *kofia* symbolizes great appreciation for the recipient.

## 8. POETRY, PROVERBS AND COMMUNICATION

Poetry, or *ushairi*, is the most prominent literary form and the Swahili use it to expound on their feelings and their culture. It follows a set of rules handed down for generations and expresses thoughts, joy, the desire for peace, and even for warfare. *Utendi* or *utenzi* are poetic verses used for recording historical events, and for counselling youths about proper behaviour. These poetic or proverbial sayings are useful for historians and archaeologists alike, especially for authenticating claims made in oral history. A good example is a proverb used in Kipini, a member of the Swahili complex of settlements at Ungwana Bay near Tana Delta on the north coast of Kenya: "Do not marvel at the boat sailing across the bay, below was a great city called Ungwana" (*Usione zombo kupita, ungama uliua mui*). The proverb is used to warn people of the fate of a "lost" city, destroyed by Allah for the immoral lifestyles of its inhabitants. This appeared as legend until archaeological studies revealed that Ungwana was among the complex of city-states, along with Mwana, Shaka, Wanawali Saba and Liziwa, once situated in the Tana Delta. *Inkishafi* is a form used to guide people in their relationship with God and the afterlife. People draft poems to express their condolences, asking God to preserve in eternal peace the soul of the departed.

Middleton observes that though the use of proverbs is commonplace in most African societies, the Swahili have perfected this art in two distinct

ways. First, proverbs are used in everyday language to make speech elegant and to avoid vulgarity. Second, they use proverbs to pass messages to specific recipients without having to speak to them directly. As such, school-age children are encouraged to use proverbs in their speech, and when writing poetry.

Besides being an important form of attire among Swahili women, the *khanga* is a vehicle of visual communication through the pictures and captions the fabrics bear. The words written on the *khanga* can be classified as advice from God—the creator and giver of life and wealth. For instance, one *khanga* seen in a Kilifi street bore the following text: *Mungu atakuongoza kwa kila jema ufanyalo*, which translates as “God will guide you in every good thing you do.” This message encourages people to do good deeds in society as guided by Allah. The text highlights the religiosity of the Swahili, who look down upon those that do not appear to respect God. Prayers also are printed on *khanga*, with one example reading *Mungu rehema zako ziwe nasi sote milele*, which translates as “God, have mercy on us always.”

The second class of messages address unkind people, or neighbours who interfere in the affairs of others. Such messages allude to the kind of relations among people in crowded cities and villages, as once was common in closely knit Swahili cities. These crowded urban settlements were sure cauldrons of conflicts between households, especially those involving women. As such, an offended woman might take a form of revenge by wearing a *khanga* with the following message: *Naishi kiungwana sitaki malumbano*, which translates as “I am a noble, I do not want quarrels”, or *Usijaze masusu kwa mambo yasokuhusu*, which translates as “Do not wade in other people’s affairs.”

The third class of messages consoles the heartbroken. These may appeal to various socioeconomic and livelihood imbalances. For instance, one text reads *Japo sipati tamaa sikati*, which translates as “Although I do not get what I want, I do not give up.” It is a message of self-encouragement that also deters those endowed with wealth from looking down upon the less-fortunate. Sometimes, such texts are accompanied by visual images.

## 9. BOAT CONSTRUCTION

Being a maritime people, the Swahili construct various kinds of sailing vessels for trade and fishing. The *mtepe* (and the plural *mitepe*) is probably

one of the earliest crafts to appear on the East African coast. This boat is made of timber planks fastened with rope. Another type of vessel is the *jahazi*, often known by its Arabic name, the *dhow*, in Western literature. The *jahazi* has a characteristic wooden “eye” attached to each side of the craft that is intended to protect sailors from malignant spirits whilst at sea. The third type is a double-outrigger dugout canoe known as an *ngalawa*, which is used mainly for the installation of fish traps in creeks and rivers. Another dugout canoe commonly associated with the Swahili is *mtumbwi*. This is constructed often of a mature mango log and may have a flat base.

#### 10. MUSIC AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

Another category of Swahili cultural heritage is music. While closely related to literary arts and communication, music is discussed alone in this section due to the unique performance, specialized equipment and ethnographic materials associated with it. Today, there are a variety of traditional music genres that characterize Swahili cultural heritage. For instance, there is drum and dance, usually accompanied by songs of a special type depending on the occasion: a wedding, a religious function, a local welfare meeting, spirit associations, or simple public entertainment.

For the purpose of this paper, I shall confine the discussion to a particular type of music known as *Taarab*. Owing to its origin, style and public performance, *Taarab* signifies cultural identity more than any other type of Swahili music. *Taarab* is a mosaic of different influences and styles from the coast of East Africa, Egypt, Arabia, the Indian Subcontinent and beyond. It typifies the lifestyle, belief system, subsistence, politics, intimacy and day-to-day activities of the Swahili whenever it is performed.

The word *taarab* comes from an Arabic cognate, *tarba* ‘be mollified’. Other sources hold that *Taarab* comes from the Swahili, *ustaarab* or *ungwana*, meaning gentle or honourable, as for the “noble owners of power” or the rulers in Swahili city-states.

*Taraab* refers to a particular style of music that can be necessarily distinguished from other music of the East African coast, such as local *Ngoma* and the popular music and dance that is associated with Western origin. *Taarab* is a distinct musical form that blends Arabic and African musical traditions, with a varying degree of Egyptian, Goan, Gujarat, Indonesian and European stylings. The Egyptian Arabic influence is historically significant and is as-

sociated with the view that *Taarab* originated in Zanzibar. This is tenable for the Zanzibar variant of *Taarab*. For instance, it is documented that Egyptian forces in 1875 invaded a region near the mouth of the Juba River in present day Somalia, which was then a part of Zanzibar territory. Instead of leading to a hegemonic, territorial conflict, the invasion marked the beginning of an official interaction between the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Khedive of Egypt. Sultan Said Barghash visited Egypt for the purpose of notifying Khedive Ismail of his claim on the territory. The Sultan of Zanzibar would later invite an Egyptian musical orchestra, *Takht*, to perform at the palace in Zanzibar. He also sent to Egypt a talented young man by the name of Mohammed Ibrahim to study *Taarab* and acquire the necessary instruments for the first *Taarab* band at the Sultan's court; with Said Barghash himself as patron. This effort led to the establishment of *Taarab* as a music style for royalty to be performed only at the palace and, as such, to symbolize the power, affluence and nobility of the ruling class.

Another view holds that *Taarab* originated on the northern Kenya coast around the Lamu archipelago, otherwise known as *Uswahilini*, and translated as Swahililand. The Lamu archipelago is claimed as the home of the Swahili before the mid-16th century. It is not clear whether the invasion by Egyptian soldiers had a direct influence on the northern variant of *Taarab*. Although ethnographic materials in Pate and Siyu seem to point to a multifaceted contact with Suakin Java-Indonesia, Bombay-Gujarat and Arabia, none have been linked to Egypt. The Lamu variant seems to retain more Arabian influence than any other. It is attributed to Muhamadi Kijumwa (1855–1945), a famous poet from Lamu who visited Arabia and learned music composition. Kijumwa is believed to have imported *Taarab* and promoted it all over East Africa using his *kinanda*, a musical instrument first invented in Lamu. *Taarab* was subsequently performed during competitions as a mode of entertainment. With time, it became a mouthpiece for the British through which to articulate colonial administrative policy.

Despite the multiethnic mix, contemporary *Taarab* manifests an Africanised content since it was first popularized in the early 20th century. *Taarab* utilizes genres of oral poetry and its formulation (*ushairi* and *utendi*) featured in most public gatherings of the Swahili community and beyond. It reflects the pragmatism of Swahili cultural heritage and its influence on other spheres of life. This type of music has become an important channel through which the Swahili community expresses emotions and attitudes towards political establishments and on all aspects of life.

## 11. INFLUENCES

The Swahili exerts a profound influence on societies around them and in several ways, though mostly through language. As the region's *lingua franca*, Kiswahili is spoken in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ruanda and Burundi. Its use also extends to parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, the Central Africa Republic, Mauritius, Mozambique, Sudan and South Sudan. The language is spoken in the island nations of Comoros, Madagascar and the Seychelles. All told, an estimated 250 million people speak Kiswahili on a daily basis. Kenya and Tanzania have institutionalized legal provisions that recognize Kiswahili as a national language alongside English, with government communications, including judicial and parliamentary proceedings, conducted in both languages. Public documents, national laws, mottos on national symbols, policy guidelines and action plans are translated and made available in Kiswahili. Further, the language has a significant presence in major cities of the world. It is spoken in London, Paris, Washington D.C., New York and the Gulf states; all places where East African diaspora communities work and live.

In school curriculum, Kiswahili is a compulsory subject in Kenyan and Tanzanian primary and secondary school systems. Many universities across the world offer degree courses in Kiswahili studies, among them, the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, where graduate and post-graduate degrees may be pursued, and the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Harvard University in the US offers Kiswahili at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels.

Government broadcasters around the world operate Swahili services. Notable are the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Deutsche Welle of Germany, the Voice of America, Radio China, Vatican Radio and South African Broadcasting Corporation. These services are a reflection of Swahili influences. For instance the BBC through the British government can be singled out as having provided the platform that has amplified the development of Kiswahili in the East African region and beyond. Following the upsurge of interest in wireless broadcasting in the 1950s, the British government envisaged a master plan for the coordinated political, economic, and social development of its African colonies. The British government was determined to promote and develop broadcasting in the colonies as a public service. During the colonial period, Cable and Wireless, Ltd., leased airtime to the Department of Information for African programming in Kiswahili and other

local languages. Later developments saw the launch of three main national broadcasting services from Nairobi; namely, in English and targeting a British audience; in Hindustani, targeting the immigrant Hundi community, and in Kiswahili with some English that targeted Africans. A regional service from Mombasa broadcasts Kiswahili and Arabic programmes as far as Tanzania and the Comoros.

At this juncture, it is worth identifying milestones in the development of Kiswahili. The first is that UNESCO has recognized Kiswahili as a beacon for peace and multiculturalism.<sup>24</sup> During its 41st session, UNESCO implemented resolution 71/328, which proclaimed July 7 as World Kiswahili Language Day. Second is that Kiswahili is the official language of the East African Community (EAC).<sup>25</sup> The EAC conducts all political, judicial, and legislative processes in Kiswahili.<sup>26</sup> In 2019, Kiswahili became the only African language to be recognized by yet another regional body, the Southern African Development Community (SADC).<sup>27</sup> The organization adopted Kiswahili at Council and Summit levels, first as a language of oral communication and later for official communication. Following the adoption of Kiswahili by SADC, South Africa and Botswana introduced Kiswahili in their school curricula.

In conclusion, Kiswahili's influence over the years cannot be overstated. The language is now a major factor in political and economic integration within the regions of eastern, central and southern Africa, as well as the entire continent. With the proclamation of World Kiswahili Day by UNESCO, it is testimony both to Kiswahili's utility as a language for communication at international level, and that Kiswahili will continue to influence other aspects of life the world over.

<sup>24</sup> UNESCO, *World Kiswahili Language Day* (Permanent Mission of the United Republic of Tanzania to the United Nations, 2022), accessed February 1, 2023, [https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/upload.teamup.com/908040/qJMTcEvMQh6y0FaFkQiw\\_Flyer\\_Agenda-20World-20Kiswahili-20Language-20Day-20Jul2022.pdf](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/upload.teamup.com/908040/qJMTcEvMQh6y0FaFkQiw_Flyer_Agenda-20World-20Kiswahili-20Language-20Day-20Jul2022.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Patrice NTAWIGIRA, "The Role of Kiswahili in the Process of National Development in Rwanda," *Kiswahili* 72, no. 1 (2009), <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ksh/article/view/79051>.

<sup>26</sup> John HABWE, "The Role of Kiswahili in the Integration of East Africa," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 8 (2009): 1–10, [http://jpanafrican.org/docs/vol2no8/2.8\\_RoleOfKiswahiliInTheIntegration.pdf](http://jpanafrican.org/docs/vol2no8/2.8_RoleOfKiswahiliInTheIntegration.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> K. NHONGO, "SADC Council Recommends Adoption of Kiswahili," *Southern African Research and Documentation Centre*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.sardc.net/en/southern-african-news-features/sadc-council-recommends-adoption-of-kiswahili>.

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SWAHILI CULTURAL HERITAGE:  
ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT AND INFLUENCES

Summary

This paper examines the cultural heritage of the Swahili of East Africa based on an analysis of archaeological, historical and anthropological literature. The intricate history of Swahili interaction with the maritime environment, their immediate neighbours and the outside world since the last quarter of the first millennium BC produced a distinct cultural heritage. Coupled with internal dynamics, these interactions led to the rise and fall of a civilization characterized by a unique socio-cultural, economic and political pattern on the East African coast. Swahili cultural heritage reflects this interaction. This examination analyses a selection of tangible and intangible aspects, including ruined buildings, wooden crafts, and Swahili modes of dress, literary art and communication, music and dance. The paper concludes by examining the influence of Swahili cultural heritage on world culture.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; development; influences; visuality; literature; performance

DZIEDZICTWO KULTUROWE SUAHLI:  
POCHODZENIE, ROZWÓJ I ODDZIAŁYWANIE

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę dziedzictwa kulturowego Suahili z Afryki Wschodniej, dokonaną na podstawie badań literatury archeologicznej, historycznej i antropologicznej. Zawiała historia interakcji kultury ludzi wybrzeża Afryki Wschodniej z ich bezpośrednimi sąsiadami i z dalszymi krajami, która rozpoczęła się w ostatniej ćwierci pierwszego tysiąclecia p.n.e., doprowadziła do wytworzenia się odrębnego dziedzictwa kulturowego Suahili. W połączeniu z wewnętrzną dynamiką interakcje te doprowadziły do powstania i upadku cywilizacji charakteryzującej się unikatowym wzorcem społeczno-kulturowym, gospodarczym i politycznym na wschodnim wybrzeżu Afryki. Przedstawione w artykule badania przywołują wybrane materialne i niematerialne aspekty tego dziedzictwa kulturowego, w tym historyczne budowle, wyroby rzemieślnicze, a także sposoby ubierania się, literaturę, muzykę i taniec. Na zakończenie autor przedstawia wpływ dziedzictwa kulturowego Suahili na kulturę światową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziedzictwo kulturowe; rozwój; oddziaływanie; sztuki wizualne; literatura; taniec