

Swahili Language & Culture

Swahili History and Its Origin

Swahili is a people, a culture, a civilization and a Language. Swahili Language is spoken by an estimated 100 million people in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. Swahili Language is one of the most widely known and understood language in Africa.

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.

Swahili Language also is one of the few African languages that have a pre-colonial 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 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.

