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USWAHILI INTERNATIONAL: BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

by

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Delivered at Fort Jesus, Mombasa, Kenya on July 19, 2005, as part of the launch of the Swahili Resource Centre, Coastal Branch, Kenya. The event was also a commemoration of the works of Sheikh Al-Amin Aly Mazrui, the late Chief Kadhi of Kenya.

This Resource Centre is primarily focused on Swahili culture, rather than the Swahili language.

Is there a Swahili culture apart from the language? A culture is a way of life of a people.

In order for there to be a distinct Swahili culture, there has to be a distinct Swahili people. Is there a Swahili people with a distinct way of life of its own?

The Swahili people are those who originated the Swahili language. They themselves emerged at the Coast of Kenya and Tanzania; they were originally overwhelmingly Muslim and they had strong cultural links with Coastal African tribes, on the one hand, and the Arabian peninsular, on the other.

Like medieval Islam, Swahili culture was enhanced by a spirit of *creative synthesis*. Islamic civilization was at its best when it was prepared to learn from other cultures and civilizations. In mathematics ancient Islamic civilization was stimulated by India. In philosophy Islamic civilization was stimulated by ancient Greeks. In architecture Islamic civilization was stimulated by pre-Islamic Persia. In asylum and political refuge early Muslims enjoyed the protection of Africans in the Horn of Africa.

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad himself, Arab Muslims were being persecuted by pre-Islamic Arabs on the Arabian peninsular. A group of endangered Arab Muslims crossed the Red Sea into Abyssinia (now called Ethiopia) in search of political asylum and religious refuge. They were protected by an African Christian monarch. Among the refugees was Uthman bin Affan, later destined to become the third Caliph of Islam and the protector of the Qur'an.

Islamic civilization subsequently declined when it became less and less ready to learn from other civilizations, and condemned major cultural changes as bid'a – that is, as dangerous innovations.

Like ancient Islamic civilization, Swahili culture initially prospered through a spirit of *creative synthesis* – ready to learn from other cultures.

While the basic foundation of the Kiswahili language was Bantu African, the language quite early demonstrated readiness to borrow extensively from Arabic.

Sometimes the configuration of Arabic and Bantu African concepts constituted a remarkable balancing act.

BANTU	ARABIC
North and South (Kusini and Kaskazini – Bantu)	East and West (Mashariki na Magharibi: Arabic)
Economics: Uchumi (Bantu)	Politics: Siasa (Arabic)
Parliament: Bunge (Bantu)	President: Raisi (Arabic)
Ambassador: Balozi (Bantu)	Minister: Waziri (Arabic)
Salt: Chumvi or Munyu (Bantu)	Sugar: Sukari (Arabic)
God: Mungu (Bantu)	Angel: Malaika (Arabic)
Strength: Nguvu (Bantu)	Health: Afiya (Arabic)
Slavery: Utumwa (Bantu)	Freedom: Uhuru (Arabic)
Maternal Uncle: Mjomba (Bantu)	Paternal Uncle: Ami (Arabic)
Paternal Aunt: Shangazi (Bantu)	Maternal Aunt: Khalati (Arabic)
Meat: Nyama (Bantu)	Fish: Samaki (Arabic)
River: Mto (Bantu)	Sea or Ocean: Bahari (Arabic)

One, two, three, four five: Moja, mbili, tatu, nne, tano (Bantu)

Six, seven, nine: Sita, Saba, Tisa (Arabic)

Ten: Kumi (Bantu)

Twenty to a hundred: Ishirini, thalathini, arubaini, onwards to mia (Arabic)

In interacting with both Arab and Indian civilizations, Swahili architecture and systems of decoration were affected. Elaborately carved Lamu doors, copper decorated chests, ivory decorated Lamu thrones, as well as beautiful copper coffee pots and the small coffee cups, entered Swahili decorative worlds.

In the creative synthesis Swahili culture helped to Africanize the tabla (Indian drum) for events which have ranged from tarabu (Swahili concert) to maulidi (celebrating the Prophet's birthday), alongside matari (dancing drums with small bells attached).

Arabic music also provided the ud to Swahili culture – an Arabian Nights guitar.

The Swahili flute was influenced by both Middle Eastern and South Asian orchestration.

Creative synthesis also incorporated into Kiswahili several food cuisines. Swahili cuisine seeks to incorporate such South Asian dishes as pilau, biriani, and chapati – none of which are identical with the Indian varieties.

Some of the spices carry Arab names rather than Indian – such as bizari for curry powder and thumu or thomo for garlic.

Swahili architecture in places like Lamu and the ruins of Gedi in Kenya continue to reflect this responsiveness to the cultures of other societies.

This Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Kenya was built by the Portuguese. It was from time to time Swahilized, especially when the rulers of Mombasa were for a while either Swahilized Arabs or Arabized Waswahili.

The Portuguese brought maize to East Africa. Most Europeans at the time called maize “Indian corn”. The word “Indian” refers to Americo-Indians (Red Indians, rather than Hindustan). To the present day, the name for maize in Kiswahili is hindi (singular) or mahindi (plural). A salute to Montezuma, the Emperor of Mexico.

Words we have borrowed from Portuguese include the big one – pesa, meaning money. It is borrowed from pesos, the Iberian currency.

Other Portuguese words: sapatu (slippers), shimizi (female undergarment), kandirinya (water kettle).

The Germans gave Kiswahili such educational words as shule (school). The Arabs gave us elimu (scholarly knowledge), the Africans gave us chuo and chuo kikuu (educational institution and university), and the British gave us words which range from profesa to sayansi, from baiskeli to dimokrasi, and from manuwari (man of war – or battleship) to sinema (cinema).

This readiness to respond to other cultures and languages makes Kiswahili very similar to the English language. Both languages have been spectacularly successful. English words which the British have borrowed from Arabic include algebra, tariff (from taarifa), admiral (from emir), and, surprisingly, alcohol (al-quhl).

The most famous English loan word borrowed from Kiswahili is the word safari. In English the word means “hunting trip in Africa” – though in Swahili usage safari refers to any kind of traveling.

Kiswahili borrowed the word from Arabic and then loaned the word to the English language. *Creative synthesis* in all its intricate interconnections.

We must conclude that although the Swahili language is the legacy of words, the Swahili culture is a much wider phenomenon – including marriage customs, the traditions of child rearing, cuisine, architecture, dress code.

Kiswahili has greatly influenced neighboring African cultures and languages. The kanzu in Kenya is associated with Swahili culture, and most wearers of the kanzu in Kenya are Muslims.

The kanzu in Uganda is not associated with any religion. The Kabaka (king) of Buganda – a leading member of the Anglican global community – often wears the kanzu on ceremonial Christian occasions.

The word for religion in Luganda is dini. “Dini” also serves the same purpose in a large number of other East African indigenous languages. The word comes from Arabic via Kiswahili.

Today we start an enterprise about Swahili culture as a whole. We have also honored Sheikh Al-Amin Aly Mazrui (my father) because he was one of the most influential writers of the Swahili language and a major expert of the manners, customs and beliefs of the Waswahili.

May this enterprise be blessed by our ancestors, supported by our people, served by our community, protected by our government and helped to grow to full maturity and triumph by the Almighty God. Amen.

Kila tunapomsheherekea mtu mwema, huwa na sisi tuna wema ndani ya nyoyo zetu.

An American playwright [John Drinkwater] has captured the same spirit in the following words about Abraham Lincoln:

**When the high heart we magnify,
And the sure vision celebrate,
And worship greatness passing by,
Ourselves are great.**

On a day like this I am proud and grateful that my father's high heart has been magnified, his sure vision celebrated, and his greatness suitably recognized.