

Swahili Tales, As Told by Natives of Zanzibar, with an English Translation

Original Authors: Edward Steere and Various Zanzibari
Co-Authors/Co-Creators

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Publisher: *One More Voice*

Date: 2023

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File Description

This file collects plot summaries and relevant keywords for selected stories in *Swahili Tales, As Told by Natives of Zanzibar* (1870) by Edward Steere and various Zanzibari coauthors/co-creators. Indu Ohri's students developed these materials for an introductory survey course on literature and the visual arts from Romanticism to the modern day during summer 2022 at Boston University.

As part of a class assignment, students created these materials about the folklore collections on the *One More Voice* (OMV) website. Each student read one folktale and devised a short plot summary of important events and characters and 3-5 keywords indicating the folktale's major concepts, themes, or Indigenous terms. In addition, some students contributed extra materials such as keyword definitions, long plot summaries, and an essay that contextualizes the folktale "How Kimyera Became King of Uganda" more fully in terms of social hierarchy.

These collections were frequently the first vehicles for sharing people of color's voices with western readers because colonial administrators would gather folklore from local coauthors/co-creators who they often failed to acknowledge. The materials are meant to guide a general scholarly audience of educators, graduate students, and college students who may be unfamiliar with these folktales as well as to enrich the public's knowledge about Indigenous folklore.

Cite Original Source (MLA):

Steere, Edward, ed. *Swahili Tales, as Told by Natives of Zanzibar, with an English Translation*.

Translated by Edward Steere. London: Bell & Daldy, 1870.

<https://archive.org/details/swahilitalesasto00stee>.

“The Story of the Washerman’s Donkey”

Original Narrator: Hamisi wa Kayi

Student Developer: Michael Li

Plot Summary: Once, a monkey and a shark were good friends, and they ate fruits from the tree mkuyu together. After several months, the shark invites the monkey to his home in the deep sea, but as they are on their way, the shark tells the monkey to take out his heart to save the Sultan. The monkey knows he is going to die anyway, so he decides to fool the shark and says the heart is not on his body. He needs to go back to the tree to get it, but as the monkey returns to the tree, he refuses to leave. The monkey tells a story about Washerman’s Donkey to the shark. In the story, a foolish donkey is hurt by a lion, but goes back again to find the lion and see her “love,” but she finally kills him. The monkey uses this story to explain that only those without a heart and ears will be fooled again, and he is certainly not a fool.

Keywords: Friendship, Embedded Narrative, Analogy, and Personification

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“Sell Dear, Don’t Buy Cheap”

Original Narrator: Masazo

Student Developer: Yingqi Li

Plot Summary: Ali’s father, a businessman, leaves him a lot of money after his death, but Ali spends it all very quickly. Many people ask him how he spent the money so quickly, and Ali only replies, “He who does not know the meaning of it, will not be told.” When Sultan asks him the meaning of this sentence, Ali replies that he has divided the property into four parts: one was thrown into the sea, one was put into the fire, one was lent out and not to be repaid, and one was used to repay the debt, though not all of it yet. Vizir gives all his possessions to Ali, hoping that he will tell Vizir what the conversation between him and Sultan meant. Ali explains the meaning to him. Vizir knows and tells it to Sultan. But Sultan tells Vizir to understand Ali’s words himself instead of asking Ali, thinking that Vizir has broken the agreement, so he lets Ali replace Vizir.

Keywords: Integrity, Property, and Metaphor

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“The Story of Liongo”

Original Narrator: Hamisi wa Kayi

Student Developer: Anna Li

Plot Summary: There is a man named Liongo who faces whatever evil comes his way, and he goes to war to end war. Liongo is compassionate towards others, and he stays faithful to God, as he believes in him. This young lion accepts death because he does not want to be a disgrace or seem weak to his enemies. Liongo puts all of his faith in God to be the best. Liongo remains the top apex predator no matter what form he takes or how small and fragile he seems. He feels good about himself when he fights because he argues that fear is useless, whereas courage helps win fights. Liongo thinks that trusting in God leads to protection and strength. In addition, death is inevitable, and God ultimately decides your death, so fearing it gets you nowhere. The main takeaway is that anyone can embody a lion, despite outside appearances.

Keywords: Lion, Faith, God, Death, and Bravery

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“Poem of Liongo”

Original Translator: Hassan bin Yusuf

Original Revisionist: Sheikh Mohammed bin Ali

Student Developer: Morgan Doyle

Plot Summary: Liongo of the city of Shanga oppresses people so harshly that they plot to imprison and kill him. They successfully capture him and make him sing songs, which are incomprehensible to everyone except to himself and his mother. Liongo successfully escapes prison by plotting with his mother through the coded songs. The townspeople try to kill him by sending crafty people to fool him. However, Liongo sees through their plan of shooting him when he climbs up the Koma tree. The townspeople then ask Liongo’s nephew to kill him and promise the nephew that he will inherit the kingdom after Liongo is dead. The nephew learns from Liongo that his weakness is a copper needle. The nephew stabs Liongo with the copper needle and he dies beside the wells the following day. Liongo is found dead by his mother after three days. The townspeople kill his nephew in the end.

Keywords: Plotting, Betrayal, Family, Music, and Language

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.

“Gungu Dance Song”

Original Translator: Hamisi wa Kayi

Student Developer: Mildred Orellana

Plot Summary: In “Gungu Dance Song,” the story begins from the perspective of a master and his wife. Their servants cook with spices like curry, and their slaves comply with their other desired wishes. From the viewpoint of the slave, the master seems to be an impatient figure who demands certain duties from them and is easily irritated. After the master sees a slave girl, he prays for her, and then she goes about her obligations to feed him and help him to bed with a betel leaf. Towards the end, the child of the master asks to see the other children who wear distinct jewelry. Then, the song finishes with a response from the Indigenous people claiming they will continue to put on their distinguishable jewelry and clothing just as their ancestors did while guarding their town against those who choose to interfere.

Keywords: Slave, Child, Dish, Strife, and Adorned

Keyword Definitions: There are no definitions for this item.