

The Story of Swahili

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Swahili, a Language Alive

ONCE JUST an obscure island dialect of an African Bantu tongue, Swahili has evolved into Africa's most internationally recognized language. In terms of speakers, it is peer to the dozen or so languages of the world that boast close to 100 million users.¹ Over the two millennia of Swahili's growth and adaptation, the molders of this story whom we will meet—immigrants from inland Africa, traders from Asia, Arab and European occupiers, European and Indian settlers, colonial rulers, and individuals from various postcolonial nations—have used Swahili and adapted it to their own purposes. They have taken it wherever they have gone to the west, to the extent that Africa's Swahili-speaking zone now extends across a full third of the continent from south to north and touches on the opposite coast, encompassing the heart of Africa.

The historical lands of the Swahili are on East Africa's Indian Ocean littoral, a 2,500-kilometer chain of coastal towns from Mogadishu, Somalia, to Sofala, Mozambique, as well as offshore islands as far away as the Comoros and Seychelles. This coastal region has long served as an international crossroads of trade and human movement, where people from all walks of life and from regions as scattered as Indonesia, Persia, the African Great Lakes, the United States, and four or five countries in Europe all encountered one another. Hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and farmers mingled with traders and city-dwellers. Africans devoted to ancestors and the spirits of their lands met Muslims, Hindus, Portuguese Catholics, and British Anglicans. Workers (among them slaves, porters, and laborers), soldiers, rulers, and diplomats were mixed together from ancient days. Anyone who went to the East African littoral could choose to become Swahili, and many did.



MAP 1.1 The Swahili Coast. Map by Brian Edward Balsley, GISP

The Vitality of Modern Swahili

Today, the roll of Swahili enthusiasts and advocates includes notable intellectuals, freedom fighters, civil rights activists, political leaders, at least a dozen scholarly professional societies created to promote the language, entertainers, and health workers, not to mention the usual professional writers, poets, and artists. Foremost among intellectuals advocating for Swahili has been Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian writer, poet, and playwright who since the 1960s has repeatedly called for use of Swahili as the transcontinental language for Africa.² The African Union (AU), the “united states of Africa,” nurtured the same sentiment of continental unity in July 2004 and adopted Swahili as its official language. As Joachim Chissano (then the president of Mozambique) put this motion on the table, he addressed the AU in the flawless Swahili he had learned in Tanzania, where he was educated while in exile from the Portuguese colony.³

A song in Swahili that I learned in my childhood in Nairobi spoke for all Africans about the need for a common bond, a common purpose, and a common ideal:

SWAHILI LYRIC

O Afrika nchi yetu
tunataka tuungane
tujenge taifa letu
lenye nguvu na umoja

Na lakini ni lazima
tusahau ulegevu
unyang'anyi na uchoyo
hizo zote zinadhuru

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Oh Africa, our country
we want to unite
to build our nation
having strength and unity

But it is a must
we forget sluggishness
plundering and stinginess
all those are harmful

The song spoke of Africa as *nchi yetu*, “our country,” and it implored Africans to unite (*tuungane*) in building (*tujenge*) a strong and unified nation (*taifa*). The song told Africans to shun sluggishness (*ulegevu*), plunder (*unyang'anyi*), and stinginess (*uchoyo*). The song had a great impact on my ambition and morale and in fact still does. It taps into the optimism of the 1950s and 1960s when Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of an independent African nation in Ghana, called for a united states of Africa. Nkrumah had been educated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and was also heir

to the Back to Africa movement of the nineteenth-century United States. The African Union did not adopt Swahili as Africa's international language by happenstance. Swahili has a much longer history of building bridges among peoples across the continent of Africa and into the diaspora.

"Oh Africa, our country" no longer resonates in the current challenging economic and political realities of the continent, but its promise is maintained in the idea of a common language. The feeling of unity, the insistence that all of Africa is one, just will not disappear. Languages are elemental to everyone's sense of belonging, of expressing what's in one's heart. Chissano's historic address in Swahili marked the first time the AU had ever permitted use of a sub-Saharan language at its meetings. The organization's intention is to hold the nations of Africa together using the language as the continent's lingual glue and to express its innermost character; its distinctiveness among the world's peoples; and its place in globalized modernity conducted in English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and other international languages. The AU's decision to bless Swahili as an official language is particularly striking given that the populations of its member states speak an estimated two thousand languages (roughly one-third of all human languages), several dozen of them with more than a million speakers.⁴

How did Swahili come to hold so prominent a position among so many groups with their own diverse linguistic histories and traditions? Swahili is the eastern African language most associated with the struggle for independence from European colonialists in the 1940s and 1950s. During the decades leading up to the independence of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania in the early 1960s, Swahili functioned as an international means of political collaboration, enabling freedom fighters throughout the region to communicate their common aspirations even though their native languages varied widely. The rise of Swahili, for some Africans, was a mark of true cultural and personal independence from the colonizing Europeans and their languages of control and command. Tanzania is the linguistic standard-bearer of autonomy and respect because, uniquely among Africa's independent nations, its government uses Swahili for all official business and, most impressively, in basic education for the nation's youth. Swahili has engendered both national and continental pride—with charity beginning at home (in Tanzania and Kenya).⁵ Indeed, the Swahili word *uhuru* (freedom), which emerged from this independence struggle, became part of the global lexicon of political empowerment.⁶ The highest political offices in East Africa began using and promoting Swahili soon after independence. Presidents

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (1962–85) and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya (1964–78) promoted the use of Swahili as integral to the region’s political and economic interests, security, and liberation. The political power of language was demonstrated, less happily, by Ugandan dictator Idi Amin (1971–79), who used Swahili for his army and secret police operations during his reign of terror.

Tanzanian president Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere was foremost among these African leaders in promoting Swahili as a language of African liberation and pride. Under Nyerere, Tanzania became one of only two African nations ever to declare a native African language as the country’s official mode of communication (the other is Ethiopia, with Amharic). Nyerere personally translated two of William Shakespeare’s plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Merchant of Venice*, into Swahili (as *Juliasi Kaisari* and *Mabepari wa Venisi*), in order to demonstrate the capacity of Swahili to bear the expressive weight of great literary works. Nyerere is an icon of the dignity that Swahili has enjoyed in Africa, especially in its spillover into the African diaspora of North America. He even made the term *Swahili* a referent to Tanzanian citizenship. Later, this label acquired socialist overtones in praising the common men and women of the nation, standing in stark contrast to Europeans and Western-oriented elite Africans with quickly—and by implication dubiously—amassed wealth.

Ultimately, the term grew even further to encompass the poor of all races, of both African and non-African descent. In my own experience as a lecturer at Stanford University in the 1990s, for instance, several of the students from Kenya and Tanzania referred to the poor white neighborhood of East Palo Alto, California, as *Uswahilini*, “Swahili land,” as opposed to *Uzunguni*, “land of the *mzungu* [white person],” which was the word we used to refer to the affluent (and incidentally also white-dominated) Palo Alto on the other side of Highway 101. Nyerere considered it prestigious to be called Swahili, and with his influence, the term became imbued with sociopolitical connotations of the poor but worthy and even noble; this in turn helped construct a Pan-African popular identity independent of the elite-dominated national governments of Africa’s fifty-some nation-states. Little did I realize then that the Swahili label had been used as a conceptual rallying point for solidarity across the lines of community, competitive towns, and residents of many backgrounds, ranging from the inland hills to the Indian Ocean coast to the Persian Gulf, for over a millennium. The language was not only an outcome of a thousand years of dynamic history on Africa’s eastern coast but also a means of forging a sense of collectivity for all the diverse people who settled there.

Indeed, growing out of Nyerere's efforts, many African Americans used Swahili during the culture wars of the 1960s in the United States to underscore the acceptance that they sought on terms independent of the racist culture that had long excluded them. Unlike some of their predecessors, they did not wish to "assimilate" and adopt values that they did not feel were theirs, and they found an inspiring alternative in the Pan-Africanism and political independence that Nyerere—and Swahili—seemed to symbolize. In 1966, Maulana Ron Karenga associated the black freedom movement with Swahili, choosing Swahili as its official language and creating the Kwanzaa celebration.⁷ The term *Kwanzaa* is derived from the Swahili word *ku-anza*, meaning "to begin" or "first," and the holiday was intended to celebrate the *matunda ya kwanza*, "first fruits" in Swahili; thus, according to Karenga, Kwanzaa symbolizes the festivities of ancient African harvests. Karenga's singular achievement was his coinage of the word *kwanzaa* (*kwanza* plus *a*)—a smart neologism that permitted a new word very closely resembling the familiar one, *kwanza*, to enter into the Swahili lexicon, bearing his name and his brand of ideas.

Celebrants were encouraged to adopt Swahili names and to address one another by Swahili titles of respect. Based on Nyerere's principle of *ujamaa* (unity in mutual contributions), Kwanzaa celebrates seven principles or pillars (*nguzo saba*, translated literally as *nguzo* [pillars] and *saba* [seven]): unity (*umoja*), self-determination (*kujichagulia*), collective work and responsibility (*ujima*), cooperative economics (*ujamaa*), shared purpose (*nia*), individual creativity (*kuumba*), and faith (*imani*). Internationally, Nyerere also became the icon of "community brotherhood and sisterhood," which distinguished the United Republic of Tanzania during his leadership, under the slogan of the Swahili word *ujamaa*. That word has gained such strong appeal that it has been used as far afield as among Australian Aborigines and African Americans and across the globe from London to Papua New Guinea⁸—not to mention its ongoing celebration on many US college campuses in the form of dormitories named *ujamaa* houses.

Today, Swahili is the African language most widely recognized outside the continent. The global presence of Swahili in radio broadcasting and on the Internet has no equal among sub-Saharan African languages—with Arabic (which is arguably African due to the extent of its currency from Egypt to Morocco in North Africa) constituting the only competition. Swahili is broadcast regularly in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan,

Swaziland, and Tanzania. In Kenya and Tanzania especially, the undisputed language of radio and television is Swahili. On the international scene, no other African language can be heard from world news stations as often or as extensively as Swahili. Swahili-language radio broadcasts outside Africa include programs on Radio Peking, Voice of America (VOA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Germany (Deutsch Welle), Radio Japan International, and Radio Moscow International. In terms of print media, Swahili has been on the scene since the nineteenth century. *Msimulizi* (Narrator), the first Swahili newspaper, initially appeared in 1888 in Zanzibar, and it was followed by *Habari za Mwezi* (Monthly News) in 1894, also in Zanzibar; both were published by the Universities Missionary to Central Africa (UMCA)⁹ to further the goals of spreading Christianity and ending slavery.¹⁰

In recent years, television and film have likewise kept Swahili in the limelight, though Hollywood's long tradition of featuring Swahili-speaking African characters on the big screen has contributed to the misimpression that Swahili is "the language of Africa." At least as far back as *Trader Horn*, a 1931 film depicting an ivory trader in central Africa, Swahili words and speech have been heard in hundreds of movies and television series, such as *Star Trek* (1966–2009), *Out of Africa* (1985), Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003), and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), to name only a few of the most popular. *The Lion King* featured several Swahili words, the most familiar being the names of characters, including *Simba* (lion), *Rafiki* (friend), and *Pumbaa* (be dazed). Swahili phrases in the animated film included *asante sana* (thank you very much) and, of course, that no-problem philosophy known as *hakuna matata* (no troubles/no problems) repeated throughout the movie. Paramount's *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, starring Angelina Jolie, had black tribesmen characters speaking Swahili.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, tourism has also increased the name recognition that Swahili enjoys around the world. Luminaries visiting Africa's Swahili-speaking regions have included Theodore Roosevelt, Sir Winston Churchill, and Queen Elizabeth II. Among Swahili's most famous music are the songs "Jambo Bwana" (Hello Sir), the quintessential tourist song, and "Malaika" (Angel), introduced in 1960 and first sung by Kenya's Fadhili Williams, then popularized by world-famous musicians Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte, and Angélique Kidjo. "Malaika" was for a time a popular song at weddings throughout East Africa. To the delight

of many Swahili speakers, African American musicians also have sprinkled Swahili into their lyrics. Michael Jackson's song "Liberian Girl," for example, includes the Swahili sentences "*Nakupenda pia*" and "*Nakutaka pia, mpenzi!*"—"I love you too" and "I want you too, my love!"—despite the fact that Liberia is in far-off West Africa where Swahili is not spoken. The "Hakuna Matata" song was originally titled "Jambo Bwana" (1982).

Although Swahili lacks the numbers of speakers, the wealth, and the political power associated with other global languages such as Mandarin, English, or Spanish,¹¹ it is distinctive in being primarily a second language for close to 100 million speakers. Its popularity is growing tremendously, and it has rapidly spread throughout eastern and central Africa in particular as a *lingua franca*—that is, a second language that speakers of any number of home languages use to communicate with one another informally, particularly in public settings. Swahili appears to be the only language boasting more than 100 million speakers that has more *second-language* speakers than native ones: indeed, for every native speaker of Swahili, there are about one hundred nonnative speakers! By comparison, English and French both have approximately one native speaker for each nonnative speaker, and Spanish has about five native speakers for every person who speaks it as a second language.

By immersing themselves in the affairs of a maritime culture at a key commercial gateway, the people who were eventually designated *Waswahili* (Swahili people) created a niche for themselves. They were important enough in the trade that newcomers had little choice but to speak Swahili as the language of trade and diplomacy. And the Swahili population became more entrenched as successive generations of second-language speakers of Swahili lost their ancestral languages and became *bona fide* Swahili—much as Spanish-speaking Mexican families take three generations on average to fully assimilate into American culture (including losing their Spanish).¹² Nearly all of the people from overseas arrived with greater wealth than the people of eastern Africa possessed, and they had military strength that was superior to that of the indigenous population. Furthermore, these migrants came from linguistic backgrounds in some of the world's most widely spoken languages: Arabic for over a millennium; Portuguese since the sixteenth century; and German, English, and Hindi since the end of the nineteenth century. Yet Swahili speakers took in these newcomers, borrowing strategic parts of their vocabularies and integrating them into their own evolving language.

The key to understanding this story is to look deeply at the Swahili people's response to challenges; at the ways in which they made their fortunes and dealt with misfortunes; and, most important, at how they honed their skills in balancing confrontation and resistance with adaptation and innovation as they interacted with arrivals from other language backgrounds. These adaptations produced steady developments in the language itself long before the label "Swahili" came about in the fourteenth century. Consequently, a full historical account must go back more than a millennium before that point. Despite high traffic from every corner of the world, the people of the coast managed to maintain a Bantu tongue.

The Story to Follow

The story of Swahili is a narrative about the human condition in a maritime world at the confluence of the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean, told from the perspective of the dynamism of language. Swahili resilience rests on three core factors: cosmopolitanism (the willingness to navigate differences), geography (the setting, in terms of both times and places), and Islam (the capaciousness of a monotheism with universalist ambitions). Swahili scholars hold the last factor as the most pivotal. Chapter 2 uses the Swahili language as a means by which to explore the history of Swahili society. It introduces the peoples who developed the language, the individuals who had a deep and dynamic history through a cosmopolitan ethos at the crossroads of social and trading networks traversed by Africans from the interior of the continent and transients and settlers from overseas.

Chapter 3 examines the lexicon—the vocabulary—of Swahili as the cultural DNA, the genetic heritage, of the modern language. Swahili words and phrases today mark the encounters between the residents of the coast and diverse other visitors. Speakers of Swahili borrowed words from other languages, and those words reveal the nature of their contacts, much as a visitors' book at a wedding contains the names, signatures, and dates of all who were there. To cite one example, the names of the wares in a simple rural shop, or *duka*, are a veritable archive of the trade and social contacts among a wide variety of peoples speaking different languages who brought the wares to the shelves. The people of Africa's eastern coastal bays and islands have been in contact with persons from all corners of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds for two thousand years: Greeks of the Ptolemaic era, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Malaysians, Portuguese, Turks, French, Germans,

and the British. The coastal people traded with and learned from all of them, building up an ever more complex and nuanced lexicon from historical ties among the peoples and cultures of the vast Indian Ocean region.

Chapter 4 draws on the vistas of the past in the language of today to look at the Swahili-speaking region from 1000 to 1500 CE. During these years, the cities of the coast enjoyed their greatest commercial prosperity and political autonomy, with their heyday in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Using the image of the *mnazi* (coconut tree) and the *sambo* (*chombo*) (ship/vessel) as the icons of Swahili cosmopolitanism, the chapter details the core values of the Swahili culture and the ways that East Africa's independent city-states negotiated foreign trade and diplomacy, both separately and as confederations. Swahili patricians grew wealthy during this time of relative peace and considerable prosperity, increased their knowledge and observance of Islam, and built cities of coral stone that were filled with mosques and elaborate tombs. They patronized artists and architects who, together with traders in the markets and along the shore, worked creatively in the idioms of the imported traditions. The chapter reveals the Swahili language and culture as cosmopolitan, infused with the Islamic enlightenment of the era, urbane, and possessing a rich material culture drawn from numerous places near and far. During this period, Pan-Swahili culture came to dominate East Africa's Indian Ocean littoral, from modern Mogadishu in Somalia to what is today northern Mozambique. It is noteworthy that the earliest known use of the word *Swahili* comes from the fourteenth-century zenith of coastal prosperity, in a report from the famous Moroccan Berber Muslim traveler and writer Ibn Battuta. At that time, an integrated Swahili commercial society was going about the business of conducting East Africa's Indian Ocean trade. The ways in which that society used the *mnazi* and the *sambo* reflect the development of indigenous knowledge at its best, showing how the people employed local initiatives to solve problems and to adapt to changing circumstances. A close look at the Bantu etymology of words describing various parts and uses of the *mnazi* and the *sambo* leaves little doubt that the Swahili culture has always been a vibrant system of give-and-take whose whole has always been greater than the sum of its parts. The concepts the words represent show a full elaboration of marine technology and nautical know-how, with the terms in the lexicon being mixed between Bantu and visiting languages, especially Arabic.

Chapter 5 looks at the unexpected arrival of the Portuguese and their military occupation of the east coast of Africa beginning around 1500,

followed by the Omani Arab occupation of the coast from around 1700 to the 1850s. Diverse Swahili religious, political, and social networks literally exhausted the Portuguese in their attempts to dominate the coast militarily. The coastal residents finally forced the Portuguese into a compromise, by which they submitted to the continuing role of the Swahili as middlemen in eastern Africa's Indian Ocean trade. The Swahili-Portuguese toleration nonetheless led to an eventual economic downturn that prompted the departure of the Portuguese around 1700. The ruling house of the sultanate of Muscat, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, took advantage of the vacuum of external power to settle on the island of Zanzibar and establish a plantation economy growing cloves. The Swahili towns of the coast slowly shifted from their reliance on trade to grain agriculture from the 1840s and to sugarcane along the northern coast of Tanzania from the 1860s. This new plantation economy resulted in thousands of slaves being forcibly transported from inner Africa in order to provide free labor to the sultanate, with Swahili patricians, inland warlords, and Indian financiers all profiting at the slaves' expense. Many other captives were sold abroad, especially in the Arab world and in India. By 1700 CE, the Zanzibar dialect of Swahili was already a trade language spoken on the lengthening caravan routes between the coast and the far interior. Swahili also became the language of diplomacy among various slave-raiding warlords there. Many of the individuals who were enslaved and taken to the coast subsequently converted to Islam and pragmatically adopted Swahili as their primary language over time.

There is a reason why native languages are called mother tongues, as mothers or nursemaids or other females everywhere—at least until recent years—have been the primary residents of the households or villages where children are born and learn to speak. This was certainly the case for Swahili, where Bantu-speaking women conducted daily life within the compounds in which city residents lived. Meanwhile, foreign men—Arab or Persian, Indian, and Portuguese traders; colonial officials; and the officials of Islamic sects—brought foreign vocabulary to discussions of business, politics, and other public affairs. Chapter 6 follows the distinctive roles Swahili women have played in maintaining the Bantu heritage of the language in domestic and family spheres, whatever the Muslim veneer of public religion. I will look at their contributions to teaching the language to men in the interior of the continent, for they often served as companions in the coastal trading caravans moving there. I will discuss their literal wearing of the words in the colorful *kanga* cloths that bear Swahili proverbs. And I will explore their

roles as protagonists in Swahili literature. The men wrote down modern standardized languages for public affairs, but it was the women of the coast who were pivotal in preserving the vital qualities of Swahili.

There is a canon of verbal aesthetics that exists without writing. Although we cannot call it a literary canon, given the absence of writing, it offers a panoramic view of Swahili poetry, illustrating how oral compositions were remembered verbatim for centuries until they were finally written down in the 1800s. Thus, we recognize as false the divide between the oral and written works of Swahili—and elsewhere by extension. Swahili traditions of oral composition and performance were blossoming long before the Kenyan cities of Lamu and Mombasa became centers of scholarship and authorship in the nineteenth century, writing Swahili poetry in Arabic script. Chapter 7 follows the extension of a Swahili oral canon of proverbs and poetry into written prose, chronicles, and epic narratives, with the literary character of this verbal art deeply embedded in the Arabic Ajami script in which it is written. The corpus of thought, indeed wisdom, and the intricate, condensed, and allusive style of this verbal aesthetic come from the deep and intimate traditions of oral performance and listener collaboration along the coast, and these elements of shared familiarity have been adapted in the written style that developed more recently, perhaps over the last four centuries. Swahili is thus at the same stage of expressing orality in writing—a world very different from the literate world of anyone reading this page. It has paralleled and crossed the points and periods where the poetry of Homer became the theater of ancient Greek writing, en route to the fully prose-styled works of Aristotle and Plato; where the poetry of medieval English moved through Shakespeare's plays toward the modern novel; and where Dante's *Inferno* defined modern Italian or Cervantes's *Don Quixote* became the paradigm of modern Spanish. The chapter uses classic Swahili motifs, stories, and writers to contrast the world of orality and the literate world through performance, visually and audibly, as well as the ideas expressed.

Chapter 8 studies Swahili documents written in Arabic script, often referred to as Ajami. The Ajamization of Arabic script so that it could be used to write Swahili reveals that the Swahili people went beyond adaptation to innovation and ultimately ownership of a syncretic writing system as they built a most important archive of memory unique to Swahili. The value of the written documents is revealed by the content of what has been authored and bequeathed to future generations. Much of the poetry mentioned in chapter 7 as well as Swahili chronicles on various city-states,

correspondence between rulers and traders, records of deeds, and a host of other things are all written in modified Arabic script. Such writing still persists in many Swahili households in places such as Zanzibar and Pemba, recording the various issues and concerns of the authors.

Chapter 9 explores the colonial century from the 1850s to 1960, the year of African independence. The abolition of slavery in Europe in the 1840s prompted European missionaries, naval commanders, and diplomats to demand and enforce an end to slaving in the Indian Ocean world. Abolition brought the plantation economy of the Swahili sultans tumbling down. During this period, the British and Germans weakened the Arabo-Swahili sultanates, and the Germans occupied the Swahili country militarily, used Swahili as their language of command, and established a language standardization regime that demanded official Swahili be written and spoken only in the manner approved by the colonizers. In this period, the multidialectal literary tradition fell into the hands of that standardization regime. From then on, the Swahili used in published literary products had to be approved by a board known as the Inter-territorial Language Committee (ILC), and Shaaban Robert emerged as the undisputed Shakespeare or the poet laureate of Standard Swahili. Those who used this new Swahili effectively were promoted, whereas those who maintained the integrity of their own dialects were marginalized. Indeed, the twentieth century saw repeated colonial and national efforts to “purify” the Swahili language based on the Zanzibar dialect and rid it of its Arabic vocabulary. After World War II, Swahili nationalists sought to create Kiswahili Mwafaka, “Swahili agreed upon by consensus,” by substituting Bantu or Afrocentric bases for all the many foreign words borrowed into the language. But could Swahili, a language that had resulted from change and open engagements with outsiders, really be stabilized and controlled by anyone? Based on the discussions in the final three chapters, the answer would be no.

Chapter 10 tells the story of how people of diverse cultures and languages in Kenya make themselves comfortable using Swahili by infusing it with their own vernacular influences. This situation has historical roots further back into the colonial era of KiSetla (Swahili as spoken by settlers), KiHindi (Swahili as spoken by Indians), and KiKAR (Swahili as spoken in the colonial military). This chapter recounts the consistent failure of various attempts to control Swahili. Members of today’s young generation in Kenya and to a certain extent Tanzania use some form of nonstandard Swahili, in which they inflect the language with new words and expressions to distinguish

themselves from their elders and from the guardians of the official form of the language. Perhaps the best example is the modern urban form of Swahili known as Sheng. City life and its attendant freedoms gave birth to this creative Swahili pidgin. The chapter sees mobile texting in Kenya and Tanzania as heralding the ultimate nightmare to the users of the standard form, especially the school system, as pidgins go literate (become written) in digital spaces through computers and mobile devices (in Twitter, e-mail, and the blogosphere), the most vibrant of all communication modes.

Chapter 11 describes the ways in which African Americans used Swahili in the culture wars of the United States. In making Swahili their own by slanting the meanings of words or embellishing them, African Americans joined the historical tradition of personalizing Swahili and suiting it to individual circumstances. Thus, we observe in the diaspora a versatile adaptation of Swahili not unlike that in its East African homeland. Swahili has appealed to African Americans in particular, and it has become the most widely taught sub-Saharan language in US institutions of higher education. The language was central in the US black liberation struggles of the 1960s, as well as in subsequent community-building efforts among African Americans. Swahili's cultural appeal for this community is reflected in the celebration of Kwanzaa. It is also expressed in the taking of Swahili personal names, as when Ron Karenga adopted the name Maulana (Swahili for "Master" but used to refer to "God" in ordinary Swahili); when his wife adopted the name Tiamoyo Swahili (for "encourage" but literally meaning "put heart" or "add courage"); and when the name Amiri Baraka was taken (*amira* meaning "commander" and *baraka* meaning "blessing"). The fact that Swahili was the language used in the independence struggle in Tanzania and Kenya had symbolic cachet as an identity-rallying concept in the formation of the kind of black community Karenga had in mind. The chapter views Nyerere's efforts in Tanzania as part of the historical conditions that led African Americans to become adapters and learners of Swahili in the 1960s, even as other equally expressive and widely spoken African languages—such as Hausa in modern northern Nigeria or Zulu in South Africa—have not experienced the same rise in popularity.

In closing, chapter 12 speaks of Swahili as a language for the living. Although it is a modest language compared to its extrovert peers in the top dozen international languages of the world, it will be supremely well placed in the future if it continues to be guided by its centuries-old cosmopolitan dispensation.