

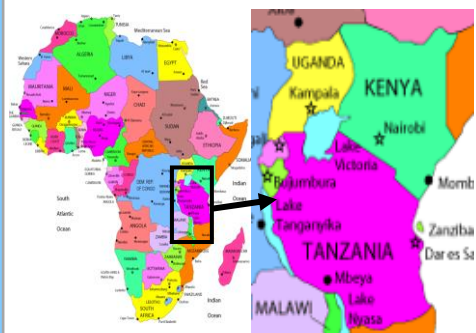
Swahili Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda

Primary Language(s): Swahili

Percent of Iowa's Population: ~3%¹³

Where are we from?



Pictured below is a group of women in traditional clothing. Women generally wear bright colored dresses, unless they are celebrating a Muslim holiday.



Traditional Clothing

Men of the Swahili culture will dress in western style clothing, consisting of shirts and pants, while women may wear brightly colored dresses. For those who practice the Muslim religion, Friday serves as a day of worship and prayer. On these days men will wear traditional clothing, including a long robe, known as a *kanzu*, and a small, rounded hat with embroidery.³ Women typically wear long black dresses, while other women will wear a hijab; a black cloth that surrounds their head and face.³

Background

The Swahili culture is not limited to just one country, but instead spans across many countries along the Eastern Africa coast including Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. The Swahili culture has a large Arab influence and the word 'Swahili' fittingly means 'coast' in Arabic.⁷ With this region being a part of the Indian Ocean trade during the 8th century, Persian, Indian, and Chinese cultures had a significant influence on the Swahili people.¹ The trade of gold, ivory, and slaves with other countries involved in the Indian Ocean trade stimulated growth of the Swahili culture and regions. This area along the Eastern African Coast has been colonized multiple times, including by the Portuguese in the 16th Century, Arabics in the 19th century, most recently the British in the 20th century.⁸ Over time all of the primary countries within the Swahili culture have gained their independence from outside rule, but the people still remain heavily influenced by Arab colonization. Though the main religion within the Swahili culture is Islam, many individuals consider themselves Christians. However, most of the Islam customs and holidays are honored and observed.

Education and Literacy

The ability to read and write is important in the Swahili culture, as many people choose to follow the Islamic religion. Due to this, it is vital that they are able to read Islam's holy book, also known as the Koran. It is also common to find people from these regions speaking in Arabic, Kiswahili and English. Although systems of higher education are available in Swahili regions, most people do not attend school beyond the primary level, with a smaller percentage finishing secondary school. Education is placed at a higher value in urban locations, as those inhabiting these areas often understand the correlation between education and employment. In many cases, men will pursue a higher education than women, although beliefs on this topic vary among families.

Holidays & Celebrations

With most of the Swahili people being a part of the Islamic religion, *Ramadan* is a significant holiday. This month long holiday, usually in late spring, is celebrated by fasting during daylight hours. Children usually don't participate in this tradition until puberty, but it can vary depending on family beliefs.⁴ *Eid al-Fitr*, the final day of Ramadan, is one of the most celebrated holidays in the Islamic religion.⁵ This celebration usually lasts for 3 days and is filled with special treats and meals to break the previous month's fast.^{6,7} Another important holiday in Swahili culture is *Maulidi*, a remembrance of the Prophet Mohammed's birth. They celebrate using song, dance, food, prayer, poems, and festivals.¹²

Swahili Culture & Foods

Health Disparities

As a race, there are a few health conditions that are more likely to be experienced by the black population. These include heart disease, asthma, diabetes, stroke and cancers. Adult black women are 2 times more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes and suffer from related complications.¹⁰ Regarding infant health, black children are 2 times more likely to pass away from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and 3.2 times more likely to die from complications related to low birth weights.¹⁰ The reason behind these disparities are unknown.

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Vegetables serve as a staple in Swahili cuisine, with the main sources of protein being fish, chicken, and goat.² Rice also serves as a foundation for most dishes and can be utilized in either sweet or savory ways. A well-known Swahili dish is called “Wali Wa Nazi”, which is rice served with coconut milk.² The Swahili culture is known for adding a variety of spices to their foods, including ginger, pepper, and lemon grass.² With the majority of individuals in Swahili culture following the Islamic religion, pork and alcohol are considered taboo and are not consumed.²

Considerations for WIC

- Be aware of your body language when speaking with a Swahili family. Facing the client while maintaining eye contact is important, but occasionally they will avert their eyes when talking to someone of a different gender, age, or status.⁹ You may also notice that they use gestures to exaggerate their point.
- Punctuality is expected within the culture, but 30 minutes past the designated start time is considered acceptably late.⁹
- Ensure that our Swahili families are aware that they can choose whatever vegetables they wish using their cash value voucher benefits for fresh produce.
- Swahili families may not have bread as a common part of their diet. Be sure to highlight rice as being an option when it comes to choosing whole grains as rice generally serves as a staple in their diet.²
- Remember that family is a central theme to the Swahili culture. There may be many individuals responsible for the care of the children at home. Multiple family members may also attend the appointments.

What's the Iowa Connection?

While some families may have entered this country through the Diversity Visa Program, it is likely that the majority of the families in our clinics are refugees or those looking for better opportunities.¹¹ It is most common to find people of this culture in larger cities, such as Des Moines, though some of these families may be located in more rural areas of Iowa.



Pictured above is Wali Wa Nazi, a traditional rice dish served with coconut milk.

How are we Living?

Family is a core value within the Swahili culture, so it is not unusual for extended families to live together in one house, including grandparents, in-laws, nieces and nephews.⁹ If there is a family member working outside of the home, it is usually the male figures while the females stay home to take care of the children.

