



African Studies Program
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Swahili Discovery Box

Item & Photo

Description

Cowrie necklace and bracelet



The cowrie shell may be the world's oldest currency. People often transported cowries by stringing them together—making them both an adornment and a visual testament to a person's wealth. This cowrie jewelry may look like simple decorative items, however, they also provide material reminders of Africa's longstanding economic ties to the rest of the world.

Tanzanian flag



Swahili is the national language of Tanzania and an important part of Tanzania's national identity. Although there are over 100 different languages spoken in Tanzania, nearly every Tanzanian also speaks Swahili. Tanzania's first president Julius Nyerere (also known affectionately as *Mwalimu* or "Teacher") promoted Swahili literacy, opening many libraries and investing heavily in education. Check out the [Pinterest board](#) for some Tanzanian music videos in Swahili and more information about music in Tanzania.

Uganda hat



Swahili has a complicated history in Uganda because of its association with military rule during Idi Amin's brutal regime from 1971-1979. Swahili was first spoken in parts of Uganda in the 1800s by caravan merchants from the coast who brought imported goods like cloth, guns, and gunpowder to trade with the Buganda Kingdom. Early in the colonial period, Swahili was the language of the police and military and was taught in schools, however, English

was the official language and Luganda was the most widely spoken African language.

After taking control of Uganda by coup in 1971, Idi Amin issued a decree in 1973 declaring Swahili as the second official language. Since Swahili was the language of Amin's brutal military, it retained a negative stigma, even after Amin's ouster from power in 1979. More recently, there has been a push in Uganda to promote Swahili since it is the language of the East African Community. Beginning in 2013, Swahili became a compulsory subject in Uganda's primary schools.

Large spoon



Large wooden spoons such as this one are used for cooking popular rice-based Swahili meals like pilau and biryani. [Watch this video to learn how to make pilau](#), a dish made with spiced rice and meat. Swahili cuisine reflects the longstanding connections between East Africa and the Indian Ocean world. You can learn more about [other popular Swahili foods here](#).

Winnowing tray



This winnowing tray, called *uteo* in Swahili, is used to separate chaff (the dry protective casings of seeds for cereal grains) from grains so that the grains can be used for cooking. [This video](#) (not from East Africa) demonstrates how a winnowing tray is used. The *uteo* is made by braiding the dry bark of a coconut palm.

Kitenge



Kitenge is the Swahili name for a type of popular wax fabric found all over Africa. Check this art and culture blogpost to view the diverse fashion designs made from vitenge (plural of kitenge) in Kenya. Your students also might enjoy searching for kitenge on social media platforms like Instagram or Pinterest.

Kangas



Kangas are a popular multi-use fabric from East Africa. Women in East Africa wear the *kanga* as a wrap as well as a sling for carrying [babies and young children](#). *Kanga* fashion originated during the 1800s along the Swahili coast. All *kangas* contain sayings in Swahili—often proverbs, called *methali*. Women use the sayings on the *kangas* to communicate messages to each other and often to gossip. All of the *kangas* in this Discovery Box contain different messages with translations listed below. What types of messages do you think the wearers of these *kangas* were trying to communicate?

Follow this link to learn more about [the history of kangas](#) or watch this video clip to see some of the [many uses of kangas](#).

Kanga



Jagoo wa shamba hawiki mjin

Translation: “A country rooster will not crow while in town.”

Meaning: A person from the county will be very challenged to excel in town. You are more comfortable and successful in familiar surroundings.

Kanga



Heri neno kuliko minongono

Translation: “A blessing is better than whispers”

Meaning: It is better to be happy for someone’s success than whisper about them behind their back.

Kanga



Mungu akupe heri daima

Translation: "God bless you always"

Kanga



Kila muomba salama mungu humparehem

Translation: "Whoever prays for peace, God gives them mercy"

Kanga



Majonzi tunayo Tanzania

Translation: "Tanzania is grieving"

Note: This *kanga* was created to commemorate the death of Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania.

Kanga



Tunaipenda Africa yetu

Translation: "We love our Africa"

Note: The map shows the countries of East Africa. This *kanga* was created to express pride in being from East Africa.

Kanga



Mtangulize Mungu kwa kila la heri

Translation: "Prioritize God for good luck"

Kanga



Najivunia kuwa Mkenya

Translation: "I'm proud to be Kenyan"

Note: The design on this kanga is Kenya's flag.

Kanga



Hayo ni ya kawaida hayanipi shida

Translation: "This is common, it doesn't give me any problems"
