



Title	Traces of Indian Ocean Trade in the Swahili Language
Author(s)	Yoneda, Nobuko
Citation	Currents of Metamorphosis across the Indian Ocean. 2025, p. 3-18
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/101089
rights	
Note	

The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

Traces of Indian Ocean Trade in the Swahili Language

Nobuko Yoneda

1. Introduction

Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa, is a language that uniquely blends the grammar of the indigenous Bantu languages with a significant number of loanwords from various external sources, primarily Arabic. These linguistic features are a testament to Swahili's rich contact history with diverse cultures, facilitated largely by the Indian Ocean trade network. It is believed that the Bantu-speaking peoples, who began migrating from their homeland (the border region between present-day south-eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon) 5000 years ago, reached the Indian Ocean coast approximately 2000 years ago.

Over time, their interactions with traders and settlers from Arabia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent, led to the development of ancient Swahili as a distinct language. Although more than a dozen centuries have passed since then, traces of Indian Ocean trade continue to be observed in Swahili today. This study highlights the traces of Indian Ocean trade within Swahili, focusing on loanwords and nautical expressions embedded in the language. By examining these linguistic remnants, we can acquire a deeper understanding of the historical connections between East Africa and the Indian subcontinent and the lasting impact of these interactions on the development of Swahili.

2. The background history

This section provides the historical background of the Swahili language, both as a Bantu and a contact language.

2.1. Bantu expansion

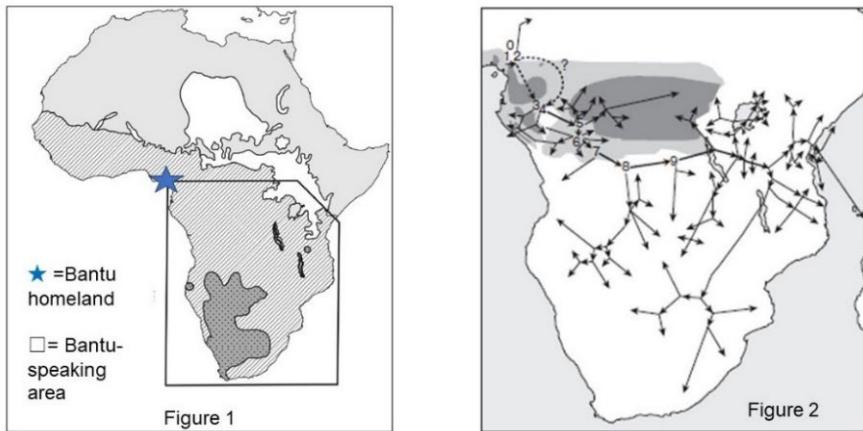
Swahili is a Bantu language belonging to the Niger-Congo phylum. The Bantu language group comprises approximately 500 to 600 languages (e.g. Yoneda et al. 2012; Van de Velde et al. 2019) and is the largest language group among African languages.

The Niger-Congo phylum has an estimated age of 10,000–12,000 years. A ‘Bantu languages’ branch emerged 6000–7000 years ago from the Benue-Congo language group, a subgroup of the Niger-Congo phylum. After several offshoots, the ancestral group of the Bantu people formed in the border region between present-day south-eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon (Bostoen 2018).

Approximately 5000 years ago, Bantu-speaking people began migrating from their homeland, across most of central, eastern, and southern Africa. Bantu languages are now widely distributed south of the Equator across the African continent (e.g. Bostoen 2018; Watters 2018; Yoneda 2022), as presented in Figure 1.1. This distribution area spans more than 20 countries, with migration distances of up to 4000 km (Bostoen 2018). It is roughly equivalent to the distance from Zanzibar in Tanzania across the Indian Ocean to Mumbai in India.

Several hypotheses have been proposed regarding the migration path; Figure 1.2 illustrates the hypothesis proposed by Grollemund et al. (2015).

This widespread migration was an important cultural event in the African continent, as it facilitated the spread of not only languages over a large area but also a new sedentary way of life based primarily on agriculture (e.g. Grollemund et al. 2015; Diamond and Bellwood 2003; Bostoen 2006/7; Yoneda 2022).



Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are from Yoneda (2022).

2.2. Swahili ancestor

The Indian Ocean is the eastern edge of the Bantu expansion. Limited information exists regarding the history of the first appearance of Bantu-speaking people in East Africa in the first millennium BC until the earliest putative date for the emergence of Swahili around 800 A.D. (Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993: 2). However, it is estimated that Bantu-speaking people arrived on the Indian Ocean shores approximately 2000 years ago. Nurse and Hinnebusch (1993: 23) describe the divergence leading to Swahili: ‘An approximate date around or slightly later than 1 A.D. would seem reasonable for Proto-Northeast Coast, perhaps five hundred years later for Proto-Sabaki, shortly after that for Proto-Swahili’.

Beginning around 800 A.D., the Indian Ocean trade facilitated contact with Bantu languages and those from outside Africa, including Arabic, Persian, and Indian languages, resulting in the ancestral language of today’s Swahili. Therefore, Swahili can be considered a ‘product of the Indian Ocean trade’.

The name ‘Swahili’ is Arabic, however, the origin of the community of speakers of the language, prior to the name being given, is untraceable; they are believed to comprise various ethnic groups (Miyamoto 2009: 36). Miyamoto (2009) stated that it would be natural to assume that the Africans of various ethnic groups, who were used as slaves by the Arabs, were the core of the ‘coastal people’, where a common language emerged.

3. Features of Swahili

This section describes the characteristics of the Swahili language.

3.1. Swahili as a Bantu language

Swahili shares grammatical features of Bantu languages, such as the noun classification system and agglutinative verb structure.

Swahili nouns are divided into 15 groups called ‘noun classes’, which forms the basis of grammatical agreement in Swahili. As presented in Examples (1) and (2), modifiers such as ‘good’ and ‘my’ appear in different forms depending on the noun class to which the head noun belongs. For example, in Example (1), *kitabu* ‘book’ belongs to Class 7 and *kalamu* ‘pen’ belongs to Class 9, therefore, the adjective *-zuri* ‘good’ appears with the prefix *ki-* agreeing with Class 7 and *n-* agreeing with Class 9, respectively. The same applies to Example (2), wherein the prefix agreeing with Class 7 is *ch-* and that agreeing with Class 9 is *y-*. Additionally, as Example (3) presents, depending on the noun class to which the subject noun belongs, a different prefix called ‘Subject Marker (SM)’ is attached to the verbs, which comprises a stem and affixes.

(1)	a.	kitabu 7.book	<i>ki</i> -zuri 7-good	‘a good book’
	b.	kalamu 9.pen	<i>n</i> -zuri 9-good	‘a good pen’
(2)	a.	kitabu 7.book	<i>ch</i> -angu 7-my	‘my book’
	b.	kalamu 9.pen	<i>y</i> -angu 9-my	‘my pen’
(3)	a.	Kitabu 7.book	hiki <i>ki</i> -na-som-w-a 7.this SM7-PRS-read-PASS-FV	na watoto wengi. by 2.children 2.many ‘This book is read by many children.’
	b.	Kalamu 9.pen	hii <i>i</i> -na-tumi-w-a 9.this SM9-PRS-use-PASS-FV	na watoto wengi. by 2.children 2.many ‘This pen is used by many children.’

These features are common to Bantu languages, confirming that Swahili is a ‘Bantu language’.

3.2. Swahili as a contact language

Swahili has another unique and important feature: it has borrowed considerable vocabulary from languages outside Africa. As aforementioned, Bantu-speaking people began to migrate and spread from the current Cameroon-Nigeria border area approximately 5000 years ago and repeatedly diverged. This migration must have led the Bantu languages into repeated contact with neighbouring languages or the languages of the indigenous peoples. Therefore, some Bantu languages have borrowed words from other languages within the Bantu family, as well as from non-Bantu languages such as Nilotc or Cushitic.

However, the loanwords of Swahili differ from those of other Bantu languages in terms of both number and source. Many loanwords in Swahili are not from ‘neighbouring languages’, and the number of loanwords in Swahili is much larger than that in other Bantu languages. Although the grammar of Swahili undoubtedly belongs to the Bantu family, 40% of its vocabulary is of non-Bantu origin (Miyamoto 2009: 37). The next section closely examines Swahili loanwords.

4. Loanwords in Swahili

As discussed in the previous section, the Swahili lexicon contains several loanwords. This section examines Swahili loanwords more thoroughly.

4.1. Overview

Table 1.1 presents Schadeberg’s summary of the languages with which Swahili came into contact and their contact periods.

Most Bantu languages came into contact with and borrowed from other languages within the Bantu family as well as from non-Bantu languages during migration (Table 1.1, Periods 1 and 2). In addition, most Bantu-speaking countries were once controlled by other countries (Table 1.1, Period 5), resulting in most Bantu languages encountering and borrowing from European languages during modernisation (Table 1.1, Period 7). However, Table 1.1, Period 3, which

refers to language contact through the Indian Ocean Trading network, is unique to the Swahili language and led to its formation.

Period		Label	Donor languages
1	Before 800 CE	Pre-Swahili	South Cushitic
2	800–2000	Hinterland neighbourhood	North Eastern Coast Bantu: Sambaa, Zaramo, Zigua, etc.
3	800–1920	Indian Ocean Trading network	Arabic, Indian languages, [Persian], [Chinese], Malagasy, Malay
4	1000–2000	Arabic-dominated Islamic culture	Arabic
5		Foreign political dominance:	
a	1500–1700	• Portuguese	Portuguese
b	1600–1920	• Omani	Arabic
c	1800–1960	• Late colonialism	English, German, French, Italian
6	1800–1900	Caravan trade	Nyamwezi
7	1960–2000	Standardisation & modernisation	English, Arabic, Neo-Latin

Table 1.1: History of Swahili language contact (Schadeberg 2009a).

4.2. Loanwords from Arabic

As mentioned above, approximately 40% of the Swahili vocabulary comprises non-Bantu loanwords (Miyamoto 2009: 37), with many originating from Arabic. A considerable number of loanwords of Arabic origin are used probably unconsciously as ‘loanwords’ in Swahili. The words presented in Examples (4)–(8) are only a few examples from Schadeberg (2009b) that are used daily by people in Tanzania, without the realisation that they are loanwords.

	[Swahili]	[Arabic]
(4)	jamaa ‘family’	ğamā‘a

(5)	samaki	'fish'	samak
(6)	damu	'blood'	dam
(7)	homa	'fever'	humma(t)
(8)	sahani	'dish, plate'	sahn

Nouns used in Examples (1), (2), and (3), *kitabu* 'book' and *kalamu* 'pen', are also loanwords from Arabic.

Lodhi (2000: 98) states that Swahili adjectives of Arabic origin outnumber those of Bantu origin. Examples (9)–(11) from Lodhi (2000: 98) present adjectives of Arabic origin.

(9)	ghali	'expensive'
(10)	laini	'soft'
(11)	safi	'clean'

As Table 1.1 presents, Swahili adopted loanwords from Arabic not only through Indian Ocean trading, but also owing to Islamic influence and Omani rule (of Zanzibar). The exact period when many Arabic loanwords entered Swahili remains unknown.

4.3. Loanwords from other languages

It is well known that Arabic is the primary donor language for Swahili loanwords during its formation, whereas English is the primary donor language for today's modern Swahili. However, it is not well known that Swahili also contains many loanwords from languages other than Arabic, such as Indian languages or Persian, through Indian Ocean trading.

According to Lodhi (2000), more than 600 words in the common Swahili lexicon are rooted in Indian languages. Below are examples from Schadeberg (2009b).

	[Swahili]		[Hindi]
(12)	bangili/ bangiri	'bracelet'	bangli
(13)	gundi	'wood gum'	gond

(14)	patasi	‘chisel’	patāsi ² , p̄āq̄sī
(15)	taa	‘lamp’	diyā

Importantly, the word ‘Hindi’ in Swahili documents does not specifically refer to the ‘Hindi language’ defined as an official language in the current Indian constitution, but refers to ‘Indian languages’ more broadly. Lodhi (2000) states that only a few loanwords are borrowed from Hindi; instead, other Indian languages such as Cutchi, Sindhi, and Gujarati are the main donors of most loanwords from Indian languages. Interestingly, however, the names of typical Swahili dishes, such as *chapati*, *biryani*, and *sambusa*, were borrowed from the Hindi language, along with their cuisine.

	[Swahili]	[Hindi]
(16)	chapati	capātī
(17)	sambusa	samosā
(18)	biryani	biryānī

Behnam (2015) lists 78 Swahili loanwords from Persian. Examples are presented in (19)–(22):

	[Swahili]	[Persian]	
(19)	kaka	‘elder brother’	kākā
(20)	dada	‘elder sister’	dādā
(21)	pamba	‘cotton’	panbe
(22)	darubini	‘microscope’	dūrbīn

4.4. Loanwords whose donor language is ambiguous

The examples presented above refer to a specific donor language. However, as Schadeberg (2009a: 84) explains, in the context of the Indian Ocean trade network, it is often impossible to trace a loanword back to a specific donor language. Therefore, the sources of many Swahili loanwords remain unclear. For

² The reviewer commented that ‘patāsi’ may be a mistake for ‘patāsī’. However, I have retained it as it is in Schadeberg (2009b).

example, *hewa* ‘air’ in Example (23) could be from Arabic *hawa* or Hindi-Urdu *hava*. Another example is *meza* ‘table’ in Example (25), whose possible sources are Arabic, Persian, Hindi-Urdu, or Portuguese, however, the specific donor language cannot be determined. Examples (23)–(28) are taken from Schadeberg (2009b).

(23) *hewa* ‘air’

<i>hawā?</i>	Arabic
<i>havā</i>	Hindi-Urdu

(24) *bara* ‘continent’

<i>barr</i>	Arabic
<i>bar</i>	Persian

(25) *meza* ‘table’

<i>mēz</i>	Arabic
<i>mez</i>	Persian ³
<i>mez~mīz</i>	Hindi-Urdu
<i>mesa</i>	Portuguese

(26) *pesa* ‘money’

<i>paisa</i>	Hindi-Urdu
<i>peça</i>	Portuguese

(27) *rangi* ‘colour’

<i>rang</i>	Persian
<i>rang</i>	Hindi-Urdu

(28) *bahari* ‘sea’

<i>bahr</i>	Arabic
-------------	--------

³ The reviewer pointed out that the examples were the other way around, that is, ‘mez, mīz: Persian; mez: Hindi-Urdu’. However, here I have left them as they appear in Schadeberg (2009b).

bahra	Persian ⁴
bahr	Hindi-Urdu

Many Swahili loanwords cannot be traced to a single-donor language. Behnam (2015: 215) makes a similar point. He states that the following routes are possible when Persian words are borrowed into Swahili:

(29) a. Persian --> Swahili
 b. Persian --> other language(s) --> Swahili
 c. other language --> Persian --> Swahili

Behnam (2015) lists 78 loanwords from a Swahili-Japanese dictionary containing 10,000 words that he considers to belong to Examples (29a) or (29b). He concludes that only 33 of them are loanwords from ‘pure’ Persian (see 4.3.). However, even among these 33 loanwords, some were considered by Schadeberg as ‘loanwords of ambiguous etymology’ (2009b).

Schadeberg (2009a: 85) lists possible combinations of donor languages of Swahili loanwords whose donor language cannot be identified as a specific single language in Example (30). The following list demonstrates that a wide range of combinations is possible.

(30) (Indian Ocean) Arabic or Hindi
 (Indian Ocean) Arabic or Persian
 (Indian Ocean) Arabic or Persian or Hindi
 Arabic or Persian or Hindi or Malagasy
 Indian Ocean Arabic or Persian or Hindi or Portuguese
 Arabic or Portuguese
 Persian or Malagasy
 Persian or Hindi
 Hindi or Portuguese

⁴ The reviewer pointed out that it must be ‘bahr: Persian; bahr,bahar: Hindi-Urdu’. However, here I have left them as they appear in Schadeberg (2009b).

Hindi or Malay or Malagasy

Schadegerg (2009a: 85)

Let us consider the phenomenon in which many Swahili loanwords cannot be narrowed down to a single donor language.

Although Arabic was the dominant language in the Indian Ocean trading network and the most important donor language for Swahili, it also served as an important donor language for languages other than Swahili. Additionally, as Arabic functioned as the lingua franca of the Indian Ocean trading network, it must have borrowed words from other languages spoken there. Therefore, most of its vocabulary may have been influenced by the several languages involved. Thus, vocabulary of Indian origin may have entered Swahili via Persian, or vocabulary of Persian origin may have entered Swahili via the Indian languages. Moreover, it is possible that vocabulary borrowed from Arabic originally entered Swahili through another language.

The inability to identify the etymology of Swahili loanwords is a clear indication of the linguistic situation during the Indian Ocean trade. Although Arabic was the dominant language, many other languages were also used and naturally borrowed from each other. This language contact during the Indian Ocean trade enriched all the languages involved.

5. Trace of Indian Ocean trading in Swahili expression

So far, we have discussed traces of Indian Ocean trading in lexical borrowings; however, this can also be observed in expressions in Swahili.

The Swahili words *pandisha* and *shusha* are transitive verbs that mean ‘to raise (something)’ and ‘to lower (something)’, respectively, as presented in Example (31). However, in Zanzibar Swahili they are also used to describe travelling on the sea as intransitive verbs, meaning ‘go up’ and ‘go down’.

(31) a. Ni-li-pandisha bendera.
 SM1sg-PST-raise 9.flag
 ‘I raised the flag.’

 b. Ni-li-shusha bendera.
 SM1sg-PST-lower 9.flag
 ‘I put down my flag.’

(32) April to Sept. *Kusi* (south wind)

- a. Ni-na-pandisha Dar es Salaam.
SM1sg-PRS-raise Dar es Salaam
'I am going (up) to Dar es Salaam.'
- b. Ni-na-shusha Tanga.
SM1sg-PRS-lower Tanga
'I am going (down) to Tanga.'

(33) Nov. to March. *Kaskazi* (north wind)

- a. Ni-na-shusha Dar es Salaam.
SM1sg-PRS-lower Dar es Salaam
'I am going (down) to Dar es Salaam.'
- b. Ni-na-pandisha Tanga.
SM1sg-PRS-raise Tanga
'I am going (up) to Tanga.'

Example (32) is used when travelling from the island of Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam and Tanga on the mainland during the southerly monsoon season. Travelling to Dar es Salaam, which is located south of Zanzibar, is a headwind movement; thus, *pandisha* 'raise' is used as an intransitive verb that means 'go up'. However, travelling to Tanga, which is located north of Zanzibar, is a tailwind movement; thus, *shusha* 'lower' is used as an intransitive verb that means 'go down'. The verb is reversed when the wind direction changes, as presented in Example (33).

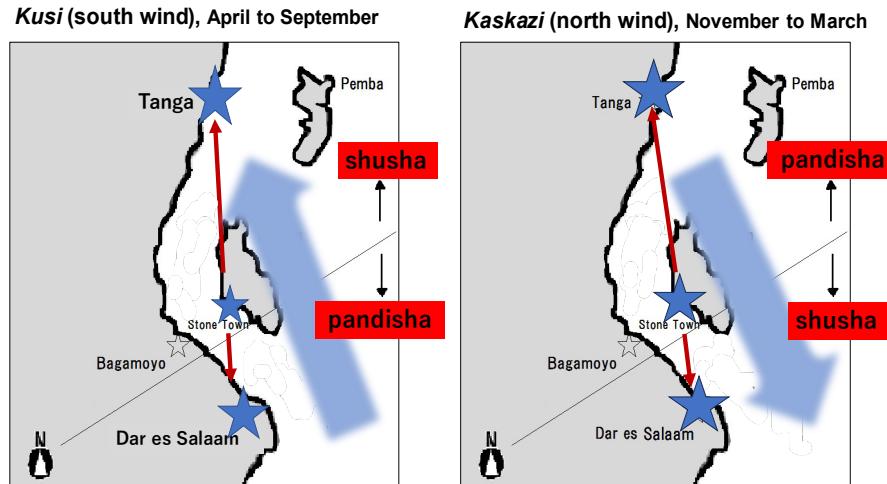


Figure 1.3: Relation between the monsoon and the verb alternation (Yoneda and Hatsuda 2018).

The use of ‘up’ and ‘down’ for conditions other than physical up and down can be found in many languages, including Tutuba (Naito 2009) and Lamaholot (Nagaya 2014). In Japanese, ‘up’ is used for travel to Tokyo and ‘down’ for travel from Tokyo. When referring to something other than physical up and down, ‘up’ is usually used to describe the movement towards a political or economic centre, whereas ‘down’ is used to refer to movement from the centre. However, in Swahili in Zanzibar, ‘up’ and ‘down’ are distinguished by headwind and tailwind, respectively.

The use of ‘go down’ to move with the ‘natural current’ of a tailwind and ‘go up’ to move against the current of a headwind appears to have originated during the Indian Ocean trade conducted through dhows. Indian Ocean trade was dependent on the monsoon winds of the *Kusi* ‘south wind’, which blew from the south from April to September, and the *Kaskazi* ‘north wind’, which blew from the north from November to March.

Furthermore, this distinction applies to the expression of land movement. *Shusha* ‘go down’ is used for movement towards Stone Town, the centre of Zanzibar, while *pandisha* ‘go up’ is used for movement from Stone Town to the

villages. This is the opposite of ‘up’ and ‘down’ in Japanese or other languages. However, in this case, the movement from the villages to the centre is considered ‘down’ as it is a ‘tailwind’ movement, which is a natural flow, similar to going south in a north wind.

Although this expression may be confined to the Swahili dialects of coastal areas, it can be considered a unique expression of Swahili, formed during the monsoon trade in the Indian Ocean.

6. Conclusion

The vocabulary and expressions of today’s Swahili provide an insight into its history of contact with the outside world. Swahili has been the pre-eminent contact language, not only during the Indian Ocean trade, but also throughout history, as presented in Table 1.1. The history of contact with the outside world plays a crucial role in the identity of Swahili-speaking people. Unlike English, loanwords from the Indian Ocean trade are part of the formation of the Swahili language, many of which are used today without the awareness that they are loanwords. In conclusion, the influence of the Indian Ocean trade is fully integrated into Swahili.

Lodhi (2000:1) notes that ‘Swahili on the East African coast is a successful blend of Persian, Arab-Islamic, and West and South Indian elements’. However, Swahili is no longer ‘the language of the East African coast’, but ‘the language of the East Africa’. Moreover, the Indian Ocean rim, which influenced Swahili vocabulary through Indian Ocean trade, had a strong impact on both the coast and interior of Africa, particularly East Africa, through the Swahili language. Considering the extent and speed at which Swahili is spreading, this will undoubtedly continue across Africa in the near future.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a presentation at the INDOWS International Symposium: Currents of Metamorphosis across the Indian Ocean, held in Osaka in December 2023. I am grateful for the valuable comments and suggestions made at the symposium, as well as those of the reviewers. All errors and misinterpretations are the author’s own.

References

Behnam, Jahedzadeh 2015. Persian words in Swahili. *Journal of Iranian Studies*, 11, 209–223.

Bostoen, Koen 2006/7. Pearl millet in early Bantu Speech communities in Central Africa: A reconsideration of the lexical evidence. *Afrika und Übersee*. 89, 183–212.

Bostoen, Koen 2018. The Bantu expansion. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Diamond, Jared and P. Bellwood 2003. Farmers and their languages: The first expansions. *Science*, 300, 5619.

Grollemund, Rebecca, Simon Branford, Koen Bostoen, Andrew Meade, Chris Venditti and Mark Pagel. 2015. Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals. *PNAS*. 13296–13301.

Lodhi, Abdiaziz Y. 2000. *Oriental Influences in Swahili: A study in language and culture contacts*. Göteborgs Universitet.

Miyamoto, Masaoki 2009. *Swahili-bungaku no Fuudo: Higashi-Afrika kaigan-chiho no gengobunka-shi* [The climate of Swahili literature: The history of language and culture of the East African coastal area]. Tokyo: Daisanshokan.

Nagaya, Naonori 2014. Spatial frames of reference in Lamaholot: A pilot study. *KLS Proceedings*, 34, 193–204.

Naito, Maho 2009. Motion verbs and space divisions in the Tutuba language. *Gengo Kenkyu*, 136, 153–176.

Nurse, Derek and Thomas J. Hinnebusch 1993. *Swahili and Sabaki: a Linguistic History*. California: University of California Press.

Schadeberg, Thilo 2009a. Loanwords in Swahili. In: Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor (eds.) *Loanwords in the World's Languages. A Comparative Handbook*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Gmb H & Co. 76–102.

Schadeberg, Thilo 2009b. Swahili vocabulary. In: Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor (eds.) *World Loanword Database*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, 1830 entries. (Available online at <http://wold.clld.org/vocabulary/1>, Accessed on 2025-1-25.)

Van de Velde, Mark, Koen Bostoen, Derek Nurse, and Gérard Philippson (eds.) 2019. *The Bantu Languages*. Second edition. Oxon: Routledge.

Watters, John R. 2018. East Benue-Congo. In: John R. Watters. (ed.) *East Benue-Congo: Nouns, Pronouns, and Verbs*. Berlin: Language Science Press.

Yoneda, Nobuko 2022. Rekishigengogaku kara mita Bantu-kei minzoku no idou [Bantu expansion from the perspective of historical linguistics]. In: Yoko Nagahara (ed.) *Afurika-chiiki 20 seiki*. [Africa ~20 Century]. Tokyo: Iwanamishoten. 201–220.

Yoneda, Nobuko and Baku Hatsuda 2018. ‘*Pandisha* and *Shusha* in Zanzibar-Swahili.’ The 55th Annual Conference of Japan Association for African Studies. Hokkaido University.

Yoneda, Nobuko, Junko Komori, Toshiro Kamiya 2012. Bantu-shogo gaisetsu [Overview of Bantu languages]. In: Katsuhiko Shiota (ed.) *Afurika-shogo Bunpou-Youran* [Grammar Handbook of African Languages] Hiroshima: Keisuishisha. 151–155.