

SWAHILI LESSONS:

Q. What can the West learn from this part of the world?

Perhaps the most important thing that I hope readers will learn from my book on the Swahili is that there are as many different shades of Islam as there is of the Judeo-Christian culture. The Swahili culture is Moslem but it has nothing in common with the actions of radical Moslem groups that dominate today's headlines. The Swahili worldview includes African shamanism and Swahili Sufism with Islamic beliefs. My experiences with the Swahili proved that you cannot judge a worldview without examining the local context within which it is practiced. It is a mistake to make rash generalizations about any group of people and it is particularly dangerous if that is the basis for domestic or foreign policy.

Q. What single aspect of the Swahili culture that impressed you most?

A. One of the fundamental values of the Swahili is 'utamaduni' or cosmopolitanism. That is the acknowledgement that we, as human beings, have an obligation to explore foreign cultures so that even if we don't agree, at least we can understand each other. Without understanding other cultures and environments, we can't act as responsible world citizens working together to protect our endangered planet.

'Utamaduni' is has been an key value of the Swahili for 2,000 years. While Europe was in the Dark Ages, the Swahili Stone Towns were important entrepots in the busy maritime trade of the Indian Ocean network. Swahili emissaries traveled to the royal courts in China and the Chinese sent delegations to the Swahili sultanates. The Swahili also interacted with African chiefs, Arabian traders, Indian merchants, American whalers and European explorers. In order to operate in their role as middlemen in the Trade Wind trade route, they had to understand all these nationalities which is why cosmopolitanism has always been an attribute of the Swahili.

Q. Is that why the Swahili style is the first *true* fusion style.

A. Yes, because it doesn't just blend East and West. Because of the constant cultural exchange, the Swahili style incorporates influences from the Bantu cultures of Africa with Arabia, India, China and even Italy. Both India and China had interior design philosophies – vastu shastra and feng shui respectively – which the Swahili absorbed. By the time the Portuguese arrived, the Swahili were living a sophisticated, literate lifestyle far exceeding that of the European invaders. Because the Swahili style is essentially an eclectic traveler's style with a minimalist slant, it is a style that can be incorporated by anyone who wants to celebrate the cultural diversity of the global tribe we are becoming. In the last chapter I show how designers from New York to California embrace the Swahili style in modern Western homes.