

Ben Ross

Global Development Studies '24

2023 Aigrain Global Scholarship Report



GLOBAL STUDIES PROGRAM

A special note: thank you to the donors and faculty who made this trip possible.

My summer experience studying and immersing myself in Kenya has been profoundly beneficial, contributing to my academic, personal, and future career growth. The opportunities I seized to explore Kenya authentically lead to unique and amazing experiences, ones that will remain with me throughout my lifetime.

To encapsulate some of the highlights of my journey, I embarked on cultural explorations, visiting significant sites such as the National Museum of Kenya, the Nabongo Cultural Centre Shrine, an ancient burial site, the Mandhry Mosque (recognized as the oldest mosque in East Africa), and the Mekatilili Wa Menza elder sanctuary village. These experiences deepened my appreciation for the rich diversity among Kenya's people and their beliefs.

I also engaged with organizations that left a lasting impact on me. I visited a special needs school and worked with Khuweza for the Children, an NGO dedicated to disability rights and advocacy in Kilifi County. Furthermore, I had the privilege of teaching at Best School Academy in Kakamega County and Kulimo Primary School in Kilifi County, both of which had class sizes significantly larger than what I had encountered in my American public school experience. During these interactions, I discussed topics such as American independence and its parallels with Kenya's struggle for independence in the 20th century, as well as the critical issue of climate change, which the students were already aware of.

Building connections with Kenyan individuals was a pivotal aspect of my journey. My stay with Mama Rosemary's family for a weekend, where I attended a Swahili church service and engaged in conversations about politics, entertainment, sports, and more, was a heartwarming experience. Additionally, I formed valuable relationships with student partners at both Pwani and Daystar Universities, and continue to maintain contact through WhatsApp. Returning to the Mekatilili Wa Menza elder village for a second and third time allowed me to delve deeper into their traditional religious beliefs and how these beliefs intersect with conservation. The elders' history of being ostracized for their traditional beliefs resonated with me, as my own ancestors in Eastern Europe faced oppression and persecution for their Jewish faith.

During my stay, I had the unique opportunity to speak on two radio shows and participate in a live interview on national television, all conducted in Swahili. These experiences granted me a degree of celebrity, and I met some real celebrity figures such as Governor Gideon Mung'aro of Kilifi County, with whom I conversed in Swahili about the warm welcome I felt in his county. I also had a glimpse of President William

Ruto giving a speech in Swahili at a local primary school, a speech I could understand very easily as it was geared toward young children.

In alignment with my academic interests, this program enabled me to visit historical sites along the Swahili coast. I explored the ancient Swahili cities of Gede and Mnarani while learning about the history of Indian Ocean trade and the cultural influences stemming from interactions between groups from the Middle East, South Asia, and even China, which enriched Swahili coastal culture.

My confidence in traveling and residing in the region grew significantly, especially after navigating long distances using local public transportation buses known as matatus. This newfound confidence has spurred my interest in pursuing postgraduate opportunities in Kenya, including the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant positions and the Peace Corp.

Regarding my research, after I arrived, I quickly became intrigued by the linguistic origins of the Swahili language. As a Germanic Indo-European speaker (English), Swahili represented not just a new language but an entirely different language family, Bantu, accompanied by a unique culture and history. My exploration of the language and East African history revealed that modern Swahili reflects the colonial influences that external groups exerted on East African inhabitants. I was fortunate to be guided by experts in the field of Swahili such as Professor Chimera of Pwani university who has published a book on the History of the Swahili language.

The Swahili language began to evolve around the 8th century on the coast as a trade language between Arabs and Africans. While contact between Arabs and East Africans predated the 1st century, the centuries following the 8th century saw Arabs settling on the African coast and intermingling with local populations, resulting in mixed cultures and a new language predominantly influenced by coastal Bantu languages like KiTaita and KiGiriama, as well as Arabic from the Arabian Peninsula. Swahili experienced a surge in popularity during the Omani rule of the East African coast between 1700 and 1850 when it played a central role in the Indian Ocean slave trade. During this period, the language became widespread in coastal trade communities from Somalia to Madagascar.

Another wave of popularity occurred with European missionaries at the start of the 20th century, who sought a language for their schools and Bible translations. Being Arabic speakers themselves, they chose the Arabic-dominant dialect spoken by the elite of Zanzibar Island, Kiunguja, as the basis for modern standard Kiswahili. They also

replaced Bantu words deemed immodest with ones inspired by Latin, English, and other European languages.

Swahili experienced a surge in popularity in the mid-20th century with the independence of East African nations. Both Kenya and Tanzania adopted it as their national language in the 1960s. In Tanzania, Swahili became both the national and official language, while in Kenya, it became the national language alongside English, which remained the official language.

Previously, most East Africans primarily spoke their mother tongues, which were rooted in their respective ethnic groups such as Luhya, Gikuyu, and Maasai. Nowadays, many Kenyans are not learning their ancestral languages and are instead taught Kiswahili and English as their first and second languages. In the Kenyan school system, all instruction after the 4th grade is conducted in English.

Today, Swahili has spread to many more parts of East Africa as a first language and lingua franca. In eastern Congo, particularly in areas like Goma and Kisangani, many children grow up learning Kiswahili as their first language. Populations in all other members of the East African Community, including Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and South Sudan, also speak Swahili, especially in urban areas. Some estimates place the number of Swahili speakers as high as 150 million, and both the African Union and United Nations have accorded it special status. Despite its widespread use, Swahili is still considered a low-resource language. This poses a challenge for Swahili speakers in the 21st century, especially as technology plays an increasingly significant role in our lives and the global economy. A glaring example of this challenge is the limited number of Wikipedia articles written in Swahili, which currently stands at less than 70,000, in stark contrast to languages like Swedish, which boasts over 2.5 million articles despite having only 10 million speakers.

I believe in the bright future of Swahili as it continues to expand across East Africa, but there is much work to be done to equip it for the demands of the 21st century.



Mama Rosemary, her son and I at their home in Kitengela.



Members of the AIC (African Inland Church) Nazareth congregation after Sunday services.



Me being interviewed on radio 47 in Nairobi.



A delicious Kenyan meal that I enjoyed in Malindi including pilau and kachumbari.



Selfie with president William Ruto (grey shirt with white pants holding the microphone).



Teaching a class at Kilimo primary school in Kilifi.



Meeting students at the Gede special school in Gede.



Me with Giriama elders at the Mekatilili Wa Menza elder sanctuary village outside Malindi.



Helping teach a class at best school academy in Kakamega county.



My live TV interview in Mombasa (captions read: international day of Swahili, more than 200 million people speak Swahili).



Doing an interview at the Governor's mansion in Kilifi after meeting him.



Me with my friend Bruce who studies at Pwani University.



Talking with an elder at the Mekatilili Wa Menza elder sanctuary in Kilifi.