



African Merchants of the Indian Ocean: Swahili of the East African Coast

By John Middleton

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This short new monograph serves as an authoritative introduction to an unusual people of eastern Africa known as Swahili. Middleton, who has known these people for a half a century, describes their highly stratified, merchant society and civilization, documenting their importance both for anthropologists and for others interested in Africa. Swahili continue today their centuries-old role as merchants in long-distance international trade, a role that has led them to form a society very distinct from any other in Africa. Middleton's brief, personal treatment discusses Swahili recorded history as an integral part of their rich tradition and civilization. He clears up past confusions and mistaken assumptions without trying to define a single "Swahili" identity. His lucid approach unravels contradictions about Swahili being merchants and yet fishermen, who live in both cities as well as small villages, and who reckon various kinds of kinship and marriage. Swahili are often considered by non-Swahili as being both Africans and Arabs, but Middleton shows that they remain African despite having long adopted Islam and many aspects of Arab and Asian cultures.

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