



Swahili
Colloquium
Bayreuth



UNIVERSITÄT
BAYREUTH

38th Swahili Colloquium

Bayreuth, from 15th May to 17th May 2026

Dear Colleagues,

We would like to cordially invite you to celebrate the 38th Swahili Colloquium with us in Bayreuth!

The Swahili Colloquium has come a long way since its inception in 1987, when it was held to celebrate 100 years of academic Swahili teaching in Germany. It is now a well-established forum hosted annually at Bayreuth University, which brings together a large international community of scholars and researchers from different disciplines, who work on various aspects of the language and the respective culture(s) in Eastern Africa and the diaspora. The multidisciplinary approach and the wide range of contributions from linguistics and literary studies to anthropology and history particularly account for the appeal of the colloquium. We are always looking forward to welcoming both old and new participants to the Swahili Colloquium.

Topic of the Colloquium

The 38th Swahili Colloquium will have the topic **“Sauti za Maana”** (“Voices/Sounds of Meaning”/ “Meaningful Voices/Sounds”). The manifold translations of the Swahili title point at the three dimensions of voice which the Colloquium will seek to explore.

Firstly, how do the large variety of Swahili music genres function as sites of creative and alternative meaning-making? In contrast to printed text, sometimes perceived as stifling, mostly tied to normative impositions, like formal school education, and only read by a small part of East African society, it is music – be it taraab, Bongo fleva or hiphop – where Swahili as a creative language flourishes. It is in the lyrics that voices – sauti – of protest against hegemonic claims, social ills and dreams of social otherwise come to the fore as much as existential philosophical reflections. Moreover, music also provides an alternative archive of knowledge besides uniform narratives of history and cultural memory.

Secondly, besides analysing the lyrics and hence the language in music, the Swahili Colloquium particularly seeks to explore sound and music as forms of reflexive inquiry and creative engagement

themselves. Music generates meanings not necessarily through language only but through its sound – also *sauti* – which speaks directly to the senses. It is through its sounds that music provides powerful means of voicing people’s understanding of their identities, belongings, space and time. How do musical performances create new socialites? How do affinities of Swahili music with other genres of, for instance, the Indian Ocean create senses of belonging?

Thirdly, we seek to question the divide between the written and the spoken text and put an emphasis on reciting and listening to literature – from the oral tale to the recited slam poem. In many East African contexts, with long histories of oral traditions, it is the recited, spoken and sung, rather than the read and written word that is most esteemed as verbal art as well as a form of knowledge production. For instance, the Swahili coast but also many mainland cultures have cherished forms of dialogic verbal exchange which have been adapted to various media and genres, from the *ngonjera* poetry hailing *ujamaa* ideology of the 1960s to *malumbano* on radio programs, cassettes and, nowadays, social media. Each medium has opened up new ways for reciting, speaking, singing and performing as well as hearing and listening. Inspired by the recently increasing creative effort to link book projects and analysis with recitations and music, we invite contributions which explore the oral and the aural as aspects of meaning-making in Swahili debates and texts -- be they literature, religious sermons or political speeches.

Hence, for the 38th Swahili Colloquium, we invite contributions which critically and creatively engage with *sauti* and its various ways of making meaning. The role of media, genres, actors and forms of adaptation and borrowing of musical styles will play important roles. We believe that the Swahili Colloquium as an interdisciplinary forum, can offer an ideal platform to discuss *sauti* as voice (in the sense of standpoint) and sound beyond the binary of language or text, on the one hand, and music or sound, on the other.

Registration

We would like to ask you to give your paper either in Swahili or English. Each contribution will be granted 30 minutes (including ten minutes of discussion). Please register via email (to swahili@uni-bayreuth.de) and send us a provisional title of your presentation or a panel proposal along with a short abstract of 250 words until 10th January 2026. If your presentation is going to be in Swahili, we kindly ask you for a short English summary. Please also register if you merely intend to participate without giving a paper.

Location/time

The conference will take place from 15th May to 17th May 2026 at the University of Bayreuth.

We will be back with more details soon. In case, you have any questions, please, do not hesitate to contact us via swahili@uni-bayreuth.de

Yours sincerely,

The organizational team

Serena Talento and Clarissa Vierke,

Swahili Colloquium

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