

Chapter 20

Telling the Time in Swahili

In this chapter, we will learn about the basics of telling the time in Swahili and other important vocabulary related to telling the time.

Section A: The Basics of Telling the Time in Swahili

In order to learn how to tell the time in Swahili it is important to know a little about the geography of Swahili speaking East Africa which lies close to the Equator. There is very little variation throughout the year in the time that the sun rises and sets.

The sun rises between 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. and sets between 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. This naturally divides a 24 hour day into two equal 12 hour segments, day and night. This division of a 24 hour day into two halves is the key to telling time in Swahili. 7 a.m. is considered by the Swahili people to be the start of the first full hour of daylight, and so it is called *saa moja*, literally “hour one.” The Swahili people count forward starting from *saa moja* (7 a.m.) until *saa kumi na mbili* (6 p.m.) literally “hour twelve.” After 6 p.m. darkness starts to set in and so the Swahili people consider 7 p.m. as the start of the first hour of darkness and so they begin counting again starting with *saa moja* until *saa kumi na mbili* (6 a.m.).

Below are the times in Swahili and its equivalent in English. Note that the word *saa* must always be used when telling the time in Swahili.

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saa moja – 7 o'clock
saa mbili – 8 o'clock
saa tatu – 9 o'clock
saa nne – 10 o'clock
saa tano – 11 o'clock
saa sita – 12 o'clock
saa saba – 1 o'clock
saa nane – 2 o'clock
saa tisa – 3 o'clock
saa kumi – 4 o'clock
saa kumi na moja – 5 o'clock
saa kumi na mbili – 6 o'clock

As you can see from above, the difference between the Swahili time and the English time is exactly 6 hours. As stated above, the Swahili people use *saa moja* to mean either 7 a.m. if it is daytime or 7 p.m. if it is nighttime. Since the words *saa moja* could mean either 7 a.m. or 7 p.m., it is necessary to use additional words for clarification. English uses the convention of a.m. or p.m. to clarify what “7 o'clock” is being spoken about, but Swahili instead uses specific adverbs of time that describe the time of day. Below are the most important examples.

asubuhi – morning – 6:00 a.m. to 11:59 a.m.
mchana – daytime – 12:00 p.m. to 4:59 p.m.
jioni – evening – 5:00 p.m. to 6:59 p.m.
usiku – night – 7:00 p.m. to 5:59 a.m.

One of the above adverbs of time must be combined with a specific time in order to give the proper time in Swahili. For example, if the time was 8 a.m. one would say *saa mbili asubuhi*.

More Examples:

11:00 a.m. – *Saa tano asubuhi*.
 2:00 p.m. – *Saa nane mchana*.
 5:00 p.m. – *Saa kumi na moja jioni*.
 8:00 p.m. – *Saa mbili usiku*.

Certain periods of day and night are denoted by special words that are derived from the Islamic prayer times. They begin with the phrase *wakati wa* which means “time of.” These periods are:

wakati wa alfajiri – dawn prayer time – between 5:45 a.m. to 6:30 a.m.

wakati wa aduhuri – noon prayer time – between 12:00 p.m. to 12:45 p.m.

wakati wa alasiri – late afternoon prayer time – between 4:00 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.

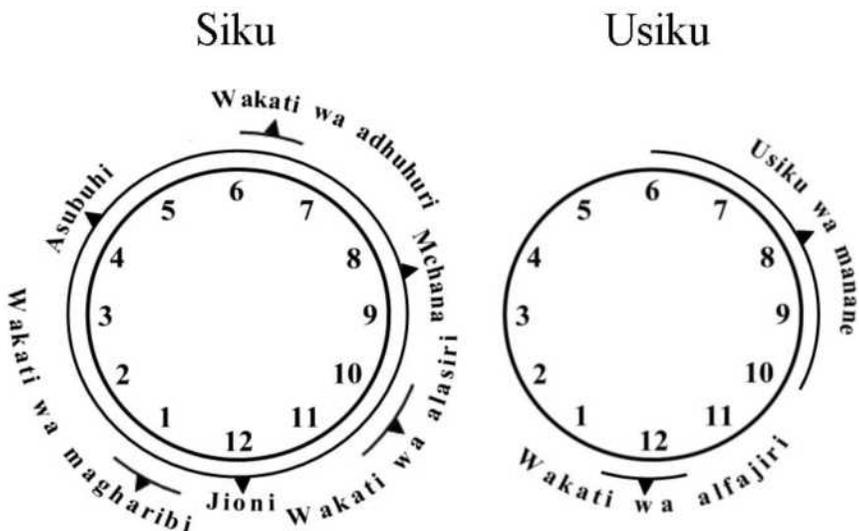
wakati wa magharibi – late evening prayer time – between 6:30 p.m. to 7:15 p.m.

The above phrases cannot be used in combination with *saa moja*, *saa mbili* etc. as learned previously. These phrases represent a certain time of day and are sufficient by themselves to indicate the approximate time.

Also, there is a certain period of night that is denoted by special word:

usiku wa manane – late at night – between 12 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. (figuratively “dead of night”)

FIGURE 20.1
Swahili Clocks



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Practice Exercise A

Translate these times into Swahili.

1. 6:00 a.m.
2. 12:00 p.m.
3. 4:00 p.m.
4. 10:00 p.m.
5. 1:00 a.m.

Section B: Minutes, Quarters and Half Hours when Telling the Time

In Section A, we were able to tell time in Swahili to the nearest hour. Now we will learn to tell time in Swahili to the nearest quarter or minute. The words for minute, quarter and half hour are listed below.

dakika – minute

robo – quarter (of an hour in this case)

nusu – half (of an hour in this case)

Minutes, quarters and half hours can be either added to the hour or subtracted from the following hour using the words below:

na – and (used to add minutes, quarters and half hours to a whole hour)

kasoro – less (used to subtract minutes and quarters from a whole hour)

Note that when *kasoro* (less) is used with the word *robo* (quarter), it can be contracted into the single word *kasorobo* (less a quarter).

With the terms you have just learned in Section B, you can now tell the time in hours and minutes as shown below.

Examples:

3:15 p.m. – *Saa tisa na robo mchana.*

9:55 a.m. – *Saa nne kasoro dakika tano asubuhi.* OR
Saa tatu na dakika hamsini na tano asubuhi.

12:21 a.m. – *Saa sita na dakika ishirini na moja usiku.*

11:45 p.m. – *Saa sita kasorobo usiku.* OR *Saa tano na dakika arobaini na tano usiku.*

Practice Exercise B

Translate the following into Swahili.

6. 7:45 a.m.
7. 2:11 p.m.
8. 6:30 p.m.
9. 10:49 a.m.
10. 5:05 p.m.
11. 3:12 p.m.
12. 1:01 a.m.
13. 4:40 a.m.
14. 9:58 p.m.
15. 8:35 a.m.

Section C: Other Important Vocabulary

The following words are used in connection with telling the time in Swahili.

Saa ngapi? – What time is it?

Saa ngapi sasa hivi? – What time is it right now?

kamili – exactly

kama – about

mpaka – until

tangu – since, from

karibu – near

baada ya – after

For example:

Saa kumi kamili mchana. – Exactly 4 p.m.

Ni kama saa kumi na mbili jioni. – It is about 6:00 p.m.

Alipika mpaka saa nane mchana. – He/She cooked until 2:00 p.m.

Alingoja tangu wakati wa aduhuri. – He/She waited since the time of noon prayers.

Ni karibu saa mbili asubuhi. – It is near (almost) 8:00 a.m.

Ni baada ya saa moja na nusu usiku. – It is after 7:30 p.m.

Practice Exercise C

Translate the following sentences into Swahili.

16. Mohammad will dig a trench from exactly 1:00 p.m. until about 5:30 p.m.
17. The engineer finished the model at about 2:15 p.m.
18. The manager surfed the Internet after 7:50 a.m.
19. What time will the technician fix the railroad crossing?
20. What time will the sailors visit the nightclub?

When measuring a period of time, as opposed to telling the time, the phrase “*muda wa*” meaning “a period of” must always be used to avoid confusion. For example:

Lima shamba kwa muda wa saa tatu. – Cultivate the farm for a period of three hours.

Lima shamba saa tatu. – Cultivate the farm at nine o'clock.

When using quarters and half hours with the phrase “*muda wa,*” the word order is reversed so that the word *saa* comes after the word *robo* or *nusu*. For example:

Muda wa robo saa. – A period of a quarter of an hour.

Muda wa nusu saa. – A period of half an hour.

Muda wa robo tatu ya saa. – A period of three quarters of an hour.

Other examples:

Muda wa dakika saba. – A period of seven minutes.

Muda wa saa nne na dakika ishirini. – A period of four hours and twenty minutes.

Finally, if telling the time down to the nearest second is required, the word *sekunde* (second) is used:

Dakika tano na sekunde ishirini na tano. – Five minutes and twenty-five seconds.

Practice Exercise D

Translate the following sentences into English.

21. *Juliet alisoma shajara kwa muda wa saa saba.*
22. *Sherehe iliendelea kwa muda wa saa tatu.*
23. *Ataanza kutoa hotuba saa saba mchana.*
24. *Kijana alifanya mazoezi ya viungo kwa muda wa robo tatu ya saa.*
25. *Mwogeleaji yule anaweza kuzuia pumzi katika maji kwa dakika tano na sekunde kumi.*
26. *Mkutubi alitumia kikompyuta kwa muda wa saa mbili na robo.*
27. *Walifunga bwawa la kuogelea kwa muda wa siku mbili.*
28. *Sala ziliendelea kwa muda wa dakika ishirini.*
29. *Ametajirika kwa sababu aliweka akiba ya pesa kwa muda wa miaka mingi.*
30. *Mbwa alibweka kwa muda wa dakika kumi.*

Section E: Dialogue Practice

Mama: Habari za asubuhi?

Baba: Nzuri sana.

Mama: Unatarajia kwenda kazini saa ngapi?

Baba: Nitaondoka saa mbili kamili asubuhi. Je, watoto waliondoka kwenda shuleni saa ngapi?

Mama: Waliondoka saa moja na robo asubuhi.

Baba: Je, utapika chakula gani leo jioni?

Mama: Nitapika ugali na mchuzi wa kamba.

Baba: Chakula kitakuwa tayari saa ngapi?

Mama: Inategemea, utarudi saa ngapi?

Baba: Nitarudi baada ya saa kumi na moja na robo jioni.

Mama: Sasa hivi ni saa mbili na dakika mbili. Basi fanya haraka usije ukachelewa kazini.

Baba: Kwa heri mpenzi. Tutaonana jioni.

Practice Exercise E

Answer the following questions in English.

31. What time did the father say he would leave for work?
32. Did the children leave before the father left?
33. What time did the children leave?
34. What did the mother say she would cook for dinner?
35. What time did the father say he would return?

New Vocabulary

- adhuhuri*: noon(s), midday(s)
akiba: saving(s), deposit(s)
alasiri: late afternoon(s)
alfajiri: dawn(s)
ambaa: surf
baharia/ma-: sailor(s)
basi: enough, stop, well, then, so
bwawa/ma-: pool(s), swamp(s)
bweka: bark
chimba: dig
fundisanifu/ma-: technician(s)
funga: close, lock
handaki/ma-: trench(es), tunnel(s)
haraka: quick, quickly, rush
hotuba: speech(s)
jioni: evening(s)
kamba: prawn(s), rope(s)
kamili: exactly
kasoro: less, lack
kasorobo: less a quarter
kikompyuta/vi-: laptop computer(s)
klabu: club(s)
magharibi: late evening(s)
mchana: daytime(s), afternoon(s)
mchuzi/mi-: curry(ies), sauce(s)
meneja/ma-: manager(s)
mfano/mi-: model(s), example(s)
mkutubi/wa-: librarian(s)

mpaka: until, as far as, up to
mtandao: the internet
mwogeleaji/wa-: swimmer(s)
ngoja: wait
ondoka: leave, depart
panda: crossing(s), fork(s)
pumzi: breath(s)
reli: rail(s), railway(s)
saa: time(s), hour(s), clock(s)
saa ngapi?: What time is it?
sala: prayer(s)
sekunde: second(s) (unit of time)
shajara: diary(ies)
sherehe: celebration(s), party(ies)
tajirika: become rich
tangu: since, from
tarajia: expect to
tegemea: depend, rely on, expect
tengeneza: fix, repair, manufacture
toa: give, deliver, remove
usiku wa manane: late at night, dead of night
weka: keep, save, set aside
zoezi/ma- la/ya viungo: physical exercise(s)
zuia: hold, stop, prevent

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Saa kumi na mbili asubuhi.*
2. *Saa sita mchana.*
3. *Saa kumi mchana.*
4. *Saa nne usiku.*
5. *Saa saba usiku.*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

6. *Saa mbili kasorobo asubuhi. OR Saa moja na dakika arobaini na tano asubuhi.*
7. *Saa nane na dakika kumi na moja mchana.*

8. *Saa kumi na mbili na nusu jioni.*
9. *Saa tano kasoro dakika kumi na moja asubuhi.* OR *Saa nne na dakika arobaini na tisa asubuhi.*
10. *Saa kumi na moja na dakika tano jioni.*
11. *Saa tisa na dakika kumi na mbili mchana.*
12. *Saa saba na dakika moja usiku.*
13. *Saa kumi na moja kasoro dakika ishirini usiku.* OR *Saa kumi na dakika arobaini usiku.*
14. *Saa nne kasoro dakika mbili usiku.* OR *Saa tatu na dakika hamsini na nane usiku.*
15. *Saa tatu kasoro dakika ishirini na tano asubuhi.* OR *Saa mbili na dakika thelathini na tano asubuhi.*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

16. *Mohammad atachimba handaki tangu saa saba kamili mchana mpaka kama saa kumi na moja na nusu jioni.*
17. *Mhandisi alimaliza mfano kama saa nane na robo mchana.*
18. *Meneja aliambaa kwenye mtandao baada ya saa mbili kasoro dakika kumi asubuhi*
OR *saa moja na dakika hamsini asubuhi.*
19. *Saa ngapi fundisanifu atatengeneza njia panda ya reli?*
20. *Saa ngapi mabaharia watatembelea klabu ya usiku?*

Answers to Practice Exercise D

21. Juliet read the diary for a period of seven hours.
22. The celebration lasted for a period of three hours.
23. He/She will begin to give a speech at 1:00 p.m.
24. The youth did physical exercises for a period of three quarters of an hour.
25. That swimmer can hold his/her breath underwater for five minutes and ten seconds.
26. The librarian used the laptop for a period of two hours and fifteen minutes.
27. They closed the swimming pool for two days.
28. The prayers continued for a period of twenty minutes.
29. He/She became rich because he/she saved money for a period of many years.
30. The dog barked for a period of ten minutes.

Answers to Practice Exercise E

31. The father said that he would leave at exactly 8:00 a.m.
32. Yes.
33. The children left at 7:15 a.m.
34. She said she would cook ugali (corn meal) and shrimp curry.
35. The father said he would return after 5:15 p.m.

