

MAMBO! It's the classic street slang for "what's up?" in Stone Town, Zanzibar and in most of urban East Africa. It literally means, "things" or "issues"?" The upbeat term is often paired with the word *vipi* (how) as in, *Mambo, vipi?* How are things?

There are at least 20 ways to answer the popular question that I never learned in formal Swahili classes. The gap between school and street could not be wider than in Stone Town, Zanzibar's capital city, a UNESCO World Heritage site, that nearly 400,000 residents call home. Here, the *lugha ya kisasa* "slang" or *lugha ya mitaani* "street language" changes by the minute, mostly by young people who flip or shine an old word, or fashion a completely new one, inspired by hyper-local contexts, meanings, and realities.

I thought I knew Kiswahili. I'd earned an "advanced" certificate at the State University of Zanzibar. The program prides itself on teaching a kind of Swahili described as *sanifu* (standard) or *fasaha* (clean). It was rigorous and foundational, but it left me speechless (more like a "beginner") every time I left the classroom and headed down Stone Town's boisterous streets, where social greetings happen at every corner and turn. You really can't walk from point A to point B in Stone Town without getting involved in greeting loops with friends and strangers alike.

Perhaps the gatekeepers of Standard Swahili do not want to accept that Stone Town youth have been and continue to be deeply influenced by *Sheng* – a kind of Swahili 'patois' that developed by urban youth in Eastern Nairobi in the 1970's and spread, overtime, into all realms of East African life as a legitimate form of expression. While most Zanzibaris still speak a more formal Swahili, youth here are tapped into regional and global influences like music, film, and fashion that daily change the contours and textures of street Swahili. The most immediate example of that lives within the brackets of Swahili street greetings.

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Maamkizi (greetings) are a major part of Swahili culture. Not greeting someone, especially when they greet you first, is often seen as a straight-up insult, if not a totally rude and ignorant act explained only by the cruelty of a changing, globalized world. It's true, the extended greeting is old-school, a shout-out to simpler times, when everyone had and/or took the time to truly acknowledge who they were passing on the street.

Everyone learns *lugha ya heshima* – language of respect — which is a detailed, hierarchical system of greetings depending primarily on age but also on status. The official way to greet, depending on who you talk to and where, happens at least five different ways, often accompanied by hand-shaking, hand-kissing, or at least a wave.

1. Shikamoo! Marhaba

For young greeting the old

“I hold your feet” “You are welcome [to do so].”

2. A-Salamu Alaykum! Wa-alaykum Salaam

A Muslim greeting

“Peace be upon You!” “Upon You, Peace.”

3. Hujambo? Sijambo

For greeting your peers/equals

“You don't have an issue?” “I don't have an issue.”

4. Habari yako? Nzuri (sana)!

Again, for peers/equals, everyone

“Your news?” “Good (very)!”

5. Chei-chei? Chei-Chei!

An endearing exchange initiated by a child to any adult, usually accompanied by a handshake and small curtsy

These greetings all have their appropriate, predictable follow-up questions about work, home, family, and health. Enter the street-realm, though, and you hear a spicy mix of playful responses that usually get lost on the tourist, who feverishly studied the back of a guide book that couldn't possibly capture the live, changing Swahili on the streets.

Stone Town's greeting culture is an essential part of anyone's experience in Zanzibar, whether you stay for a day or a lifetime. I wanted to get it right, but every time I tried to throw down my textbook greetings, I got the pity-smile, followed by a flash word-flood, a whole slew of fresh words thrown out as a string of slang.

I often had no idea what people were saying or what they meant, until I really listened. After a while, I got used to the way words arrive fresh like bread on the street each day — you gotta grab a hunk of what's hot and speak it, share the loaf.

This is the kind of Swahili that will make your mabibi na mababu (grandmas and grandpas) cringe. It'll make your professors hang their heads down low, shaking with dismay. It'll alarm police, leaving them to think you're ballsy, disrespectful, or clueless. But for most people, it will definitely give you some cultural cache, local clout, or urban charm.

Each word is a wink-wink of belonging.

So here's my quick guide to 20 of the hottest ways to respond to *Mambo, vipi?!* next time you're in Stone Town:

1. poa

The universal way to say “cool!” but it really means “recover” “calm” or “warm” (as in food that's not too hot to eat)

Variation: *poa kichizi (kama ndizi)* — crazy cool (like a banana)

2. shwari

A nautical reference meaning “smooth/even” to describe the quality of the waves. When there are no rough waves or wind, the sea is nice & smooth, easy to travel. To say *shware* means life’s journey is smooth like the sea.

3. bomba

Means “awesome!” It could also mean “beautiful” or “nice” which some say was first used by Italian sailors (“bomb”) and then transformed over time. It literally means “pipe,” which possibly refers to an older Swahili-slang drug references like “syringe” used in Nairobi, Kenya. Here in Stone Town, it’s another way to say, “Life’s awesome, fantastic.”

4. bombom

As in “bomb,” “bombshell” or “machine gun.” It also refers literally to “influenza” or “pneumonia” but in terms of greetings can playful mean life is “killer” “hot” or “sick.”

5. rasmi

Means “official” — as in, everything’s good because they’re in order.

6. safi

To say things are safi is to say you have a clean heart, life’s good, no dirty business going on in your life. It literally means “clean,” “clear” or “pure.” It also might be used to say that things are “correct/in order.”

7. salama

Means “peace,” as in, all’s well, peace prevails, no fighting with anyone or anything. The word itself is derived from the Arabic word, salam.

8. mzuka

Literally means “worry,” “desire” or “moral.” As a figure of speech, it’s been associated with the sudden, pop-up appearance of a spirit or ghost. Oddly enough, through various hip-hop lyrics, the word has a totally different meaning: it’s now used on the streets to mean “excellent” or “fantastic.”

9. freshi

Slang for the English word “fresh,” sort of related to safi. It’s derived from global hip-hop vocabulary, whereby anything “fresh” is really new and good.

10. hamna noma

A favourite with Stone Town youth, it means, there is no “obstacle” whatsoever — no problems at home or anywhere.

11. kama kawa

Shorthand for “kama kawaida” that translates to “like usual.”

12. kiasi

The word means “size” or “moderate amount” and is often heard in the markets or when talking about a purchase. To say kiasi in a greeting means eh — I’m fine.

13.wastani

Similar to kiasi, meaning “standard” or “average” as in, eh — fine, not good or bad, just here.

14. mabaya!

Means “bad!” as in, truly, things are not going well, or playfully, things are going so bad, they’re good. In a culture that doesn’t officially permit the expression of negative feelings in public, this slang is a playful chance to vent without being taken too seriously.

15. mzima

Usually refers to the body's state of health and well-being, literally meaning "full" or "whole." This is actually a "standard" response but if you say it with enthusiastic pop, it takes on a street flavour.

16. mpango mzima

Means "full plan" as in, "I have my act together" or "I've got it all figured out."

17. fiti

Literally comes from the English word "fit" as in physically healthy, but is used to mean that life itself is fit and strong.

18. shega

Another way to say "cool" literally meaning "fine" or "nice."

19. kamili

"Complete," "perfect," "exact" or "precise."

20. hevi

Literally means, "heavy" as in the English word, to signal life's intense, deep, or a burden.

If you tag the word *sana* (very) or *sana, sana* (very, very) to the end of most of these words, you'll stretch their power and sentiment. Example: *Bomba sana!*

Hitting the word with *kabisa* (totally) will punctuate the sentiment, giving it some verve. Example: *Freshi kabisa!*

Adding the word *tu* (just) to the end of most words will cut the effect a bit, sending the message that the state you described is just that, nothing more, nothing less. Example: *Poa, tu* or *Freshi, tu*.

Doubling some words will give your sentiment extra power. Example: *poa-poa, freshi-freshi, or bomba-bomba*. You should probably save this, though, for when things really are going extremely well for you.

Mambo! reigns supreme as the number one way to strike up a street-and-greet. But usually, if time allows, people end up showing off a kind of linguistic fireworks where, through the prompting of various other ways of saying “what’s up,” they get to rattle off two, three ad infinitum questions and answers in a single breath. It’s kind of like greetings-acrobatics.

So, beyond the initial *Mambo!* here are a few other ways to keep the conversation rolling naturally (that also hold their own as conversation kick-starters):

1. Hali, Vipi? Hali? or Vipi, hali?

Literally means, “condition, how?” or “how’s your condition?”

2. Je/How forms:

Inakuwaje? – How is it?

Unaendelaje? – How’s it going?

Unaonaje? – How do you see things?

Unasemaje? – How do you say it?

Unajisikiaje? – How do you hear/feel?

3. One-word prompts:

Vipi! Literally means, “how?”

Habari! Literally means, “news?”

Sema! Literally means, “say!”

4. Lete/Bring forms:

Lete habari! – Bring the news!

Lete mpya! – Bring what's new!

Lete stori! – Bring the story!

Lete zaidi! – Bring more!

5. Za/Of forms:

Za saa hizi? – [of] the moment?

Za siku? – [of] the day?

Za kwako? – [of] your place?

This greeting thing could go on and on, spiralling into story-sparring and reminiscing, politicking and lamenting. If you really have to wrap up a long loop, though, there are a few classics that have withstood the test of time.

Take a deep breath in, sigh, offer out your hand for a shake or a Rasta-style fist-pound, and then say *haya*, *baadaye* (okay, later!) or *haya*, *tutaonana!* (okay, we'll see each other!). If you need to offer an explanation, simply saying *niko busy* (I'm busy) or *nina haraka* (I'm in a hurry) usually does the trick. And then you're off! That is, until you meet someone else on the street, and the greeting game starts all over again with an equally upbeat, *mambo*, *vipi?!* By the time you read this, it's possible that 20 new words are flip-flopping around, going through try-outs and show-times.

The most popular end-phrase in a greeting loop on the island of Zanzibar is the timeless:

Tuko pamoja – We're [in this] together.

The heart-felt sentiment, echoed back and forth between greeters at the end of any Stone Town street-and-greet, really does say it all.

Tuko pamoja.

Haya, niko busy – baadaye. ③

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