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Visiting scholar brings Swahili to NSU, TCC

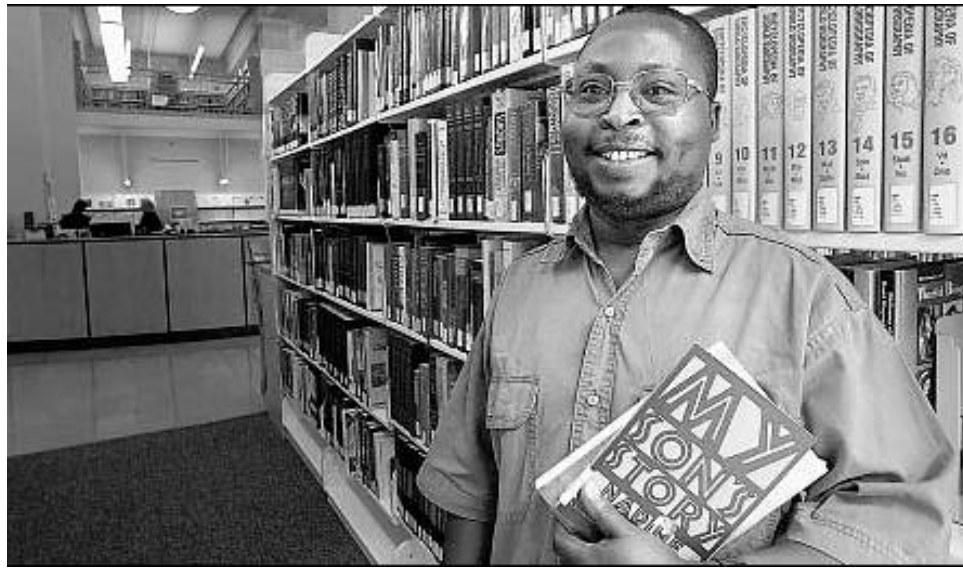
BY PHILIP WALZER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — *"It means no worries for the rest of your days."*

That, of course, is the definition of *hakuna matata*, as any "Lion King" fan will tell you.

What most fans of the movie probably don't know is that the words come straight from the African language of Swahili, not from the mind of some Disney lyricist.

The song translation is right on, says Andrew Mwenda Mbatiah, a Kenyan scholar who will teach lots more Swahili words to students at Norfolk State University and Tidewater Community College under an unusual arrangement this school year.



Andrew Mwenda Mbatiah, 40, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi, will be a visiting Fulbright scholar shared by Norfolk State University and Tidewater Community College. He will teach in the fall and spring semesters.

HYUNSOO LEO KIM
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Mbatiah, who has written novels in Swahili and compiled a dictionary of Swahili terms, will be a visiting Fulbright scholar shared by both campuses. In the fall and spring semesters, he will

teach two courses each at NSU and TCC's Norfolk campus, including introductory Swahili, African fiction and African-American literature.

"At TCC, we have students who do not have an oppor-

tunity to go abroad," said Jeanne B. Natali, the college's coordinator of international programs. "This gives them a chance to internationalize

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their education.”

Swahili – also known as Kiswahili – was born a few centuries ago in eastern Africa, said Mbatiah, 40, who arrived Monday in Norfolk. The language now permeates sub-Saharan Africa and is spoken by more than 100 million people, he said.

“It is an enjoyable language to learn,” said Mbatiah, a senior lecturer at the University of Nairobi, “but people find the grammar a little heavy-going.”

In one way, it’s not too hard: Words are often pronounced the way they look, Mbatiah said. For instance, *paka*, the word for “cat,” is pronounced *PAH-kah*. But the rules on sentence structure can be daunting.

So the sentences “This is a good thing” and “This is a good person” would come out dramatically different.

Swahili is taught at a few universities in the United States, including Yale, Princeton and UCLA, Mbatiah said. Rosalie B. Kiah, a professor of English at NSU, learned the language at Michigan State University.

Norfolk State taught it

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briefly in the mid-’90s, Kiah said. TCC never has. Hampton University will offer elementary Swahili in the fall if enough students sign up, spokeswoman Yuri R. Milligan said.

Mbatiah shrugged off any doubts about its practicality for American students.

“A university education is not just about job-seeking,” he said. “A university’s business is imparting knowledge that it deems to be useful.”

Norfolk State professors said studying African language and literature can also help connect black Americans to Africa and dispel misconceptions. The word *bwana*, for instance, is Swahili for “sir,” Kiah said. “It does not have anything to do with savages.”

“Safari” is another Swahili word, Mbatiah said. And, yes, “The Lion King” borrowed a bit more from the language, including *simba* – “lion” – and *rafiki* – “friend.”

■ Reach Philip Walzer at 222-5105 or phil.walzer@pilotonline.com