Introduction: Swahili Worlds – A Medieval African Urban Civilization

Most African nation-states attained political independence from European colonizers and began the slow process of emancipation. The few books they inherited from the colonial governments painted an image of an unchanging Africa awakened from its deep slumber by European missionaries and colonists who saved Africans' souls and gradually guided them to "salvation" and "civilization."

The East African coast, a region where my life and career would later become entangled, was different. Yes, it was in Africa, but we were taught that life on the coast was unlike that of inland Africa. Its culture and civilization were those of Muslim invaders who colonized the region and enslaved millions from inland Africa. These disruptions to African lives were stopped thanks to the work of European antislavery activists and missionaries who risked their lives at sea and in the far inland reaches of Africa to end slavery – the Arab scourge. These teachings are still part of the memory of many East Africans and adversely influence present-day interactions of resources distribution and sharing in modern East Africa. Our textbooks had colorful images of caravans led by ferocious, bearded, whip-wielding men leading chained gangs of emaciated men and women bearing whole ivory tusks to the coast. The teaching was clear: blame Muslims and Arabs for the predicament of Africans.

My first visit to the coast was in 1984 when, as a history student at Kenyatta, I went on a tour of the coast's historical and archeological heritage sites. A second trip followed in 1985, this time with a Swahili language group. These trips impressed me with the richness of coastal history while also exposing the colonial misinformation campaigns. Gedi's majestic ruins, the vibrancy of Swahili poetry, and the rich history of resistance against Portuguese, Omani, German, and British colonization by coastal peoples emerged in stark contrast to notions of a static African past. Historians and archaeologists were challenging these perspectives (Walz, 2013). Historian James de Vere Allen, who began serving as the first curator of the Lamu Museum in 1974, argued that Swahili culture in the Lamu Archipelago of Kenya had revived during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries despite a drastic decline in maritime trade. Towns succeeded through cooperation with their immediate hinterlands. "[I]t is hard to believe," he emphasized, "the same was not true of earlier periods" (Allen, 1974:138). He elaborated:

> [Trade items] are unlikely to have been brought from the coast without some simultaneous spread of Swahili language and ideas. Iron-working and jewelry styles are among other things that need further investigation before we can deny coast-interior links with any certainty. Nor need it to be assumed that unglazed pottery styles and techniques, iron-smelting, and jewelry fashions

> must necessarily have spread from the coast to the interior, rather than vice versa. The very word "Swahili" derives from the Arabic Sahil denoting, in maritime usage, a port serving as an entrepot for its hinterland's goods. (135)

In his dissertation, which was later published as a monograph, Mark Horton (1984:235–248, 1996:378–406) posited a more specific link between pastoral communities in the interior and early coastal populations, through which hinterland items reached Indian Ocean traders. He wrote, "It is more likely [that] coastal societies obtained their pottery from an inland source as they do today, and subsequently traded it along the coast. This pottery could have come from the Tana, Sabaki, or the Usambara hills" (Horton, 1984:296–297). Although they disagreed, both the historian (Vere Allen) and the archaeologist (Horton) drew from contemporary analogies to propose and test alternative interpretations of the idea of a seaward-oriented Swahili and a coast-hinterland dichotomy in the region.

Understanding a culture, especially one like that of the medieval Swahili of East Africa, requires unscrambling half a millennium of colonization: conquest by the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century, rule by the Omani Arabs who followed in the eighteenth century, and occupation by Britain and Germany after the Berlin Conference of 1884 partitioned Africa. Colonization led to an influx of immigrants. Some stayed temporarily; others intermingled with locals. Many made money and returned to their homelands. The medieval towns of the East African coast were inhabited by people from the diverse places with which these towns interacted.

In the recent history of the East African coast, members of the elite, no longer in power, conspired against one another, allying with colonizers in numerous ways, including intermarriage. Climate change and conquest led to large-scale abandonment, migration, and flight to safer regions. The institutionalization of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries revealed the trauma of coexistence. These experiences present us with the ominous task of writing a history informed largely by an archaeological landscape of only standing ruined architecture and colonial descendants' accounts. This Element represents my humble attempt to unscramble aspects of the experience of the proud people who gave East and Central Africans a language to unite them.

1 Foundations of a Medieval African Urban Civilization

What was it like to build and sustain community life and to interact with one's neighbors in the sixth through fifteenth centuries CE in coastal Africa? What resources existed, and how were they used to build and maintain communities? This Element examines factors crucial to a state society's rise and sustenance in

a region dominated by non-state societies (e.g., Stanish, 2017). Its core questions are: How did leadership emerge, sustain itself, and transform society? Why and how did social inequalities evolve, persist, and diminish, and with what consequences? How did market systems emerge, continue, and change? How did the organization of Swahili communities at varying scales emerge from and constrain their members' actions? What evidence is there for the relationships medieval Swahili forged with their inland and coastal neighbors and Indian Ocean partners?

This Element is part of a larger effort initiated by Geraldine Heng and Susan Noakes to understand the Global Middle Ages and the interconnections that preceded the new globalization. Through a series of advanced seminars, workshops, and conferences, the Global Middle Ages Consortium – the East African component of which I directed – of scholars drawn from the humanities and social sciences has collected a huge database that is unraveling the everyday experiences of previously anonymous human communities who engaged in early global interactions.[1] The emerging picture reveals complex extra-regional interaction spheres that connected people, enabling the multidirectional migrations of people and ideas, and the circulation of resources. These interactions shaped the course of history and in many ways preceded later forms of unequal relationships that characterize global relationships today.

The foundations of coastal urban society are owed to interactions among foraging, fishing, pastoral, and agricultural communities who inhabited the coast between 100 BCE and 500 CE (Mathew, 1956:65). The urban polities that emerged in this region during the medieval period were politically autonomous, oligarchic, matrilineal, and mercantile in character (Chami, 1998; Horton and Chami, 2018; Middleton, 1992:100; Figure 1). Like in many regions in the broader world of the Indian Ocean, the emergence of globalization coincided with the sociopolitical and economic transformations that occurred during the Tang-Sung-Yuan-Ming and Islamic dynastic times, 600–1500 CE (Beaujard, 2019; Kusimba, 2017). Steward Gordon (2009) refers to this as the era "when Asia was the world." The East African coast was the gateway into and out of eastern Africa for Asians and the rest of the world. Today, the Swahili language is spoken from Mombasa in East Africa to Kinshasa in Central Africa, affirming the interregional connectivity (Fabian, 1991). Coastal residents, both urban and rural, have embraced Islam as their religion, but both the African and Muslim ethos play significant roles in their daily lives.

[1] http://globalmiddleages.org/project/early-global-connections-east-africa-between-asia-and-mediterranean-europe.

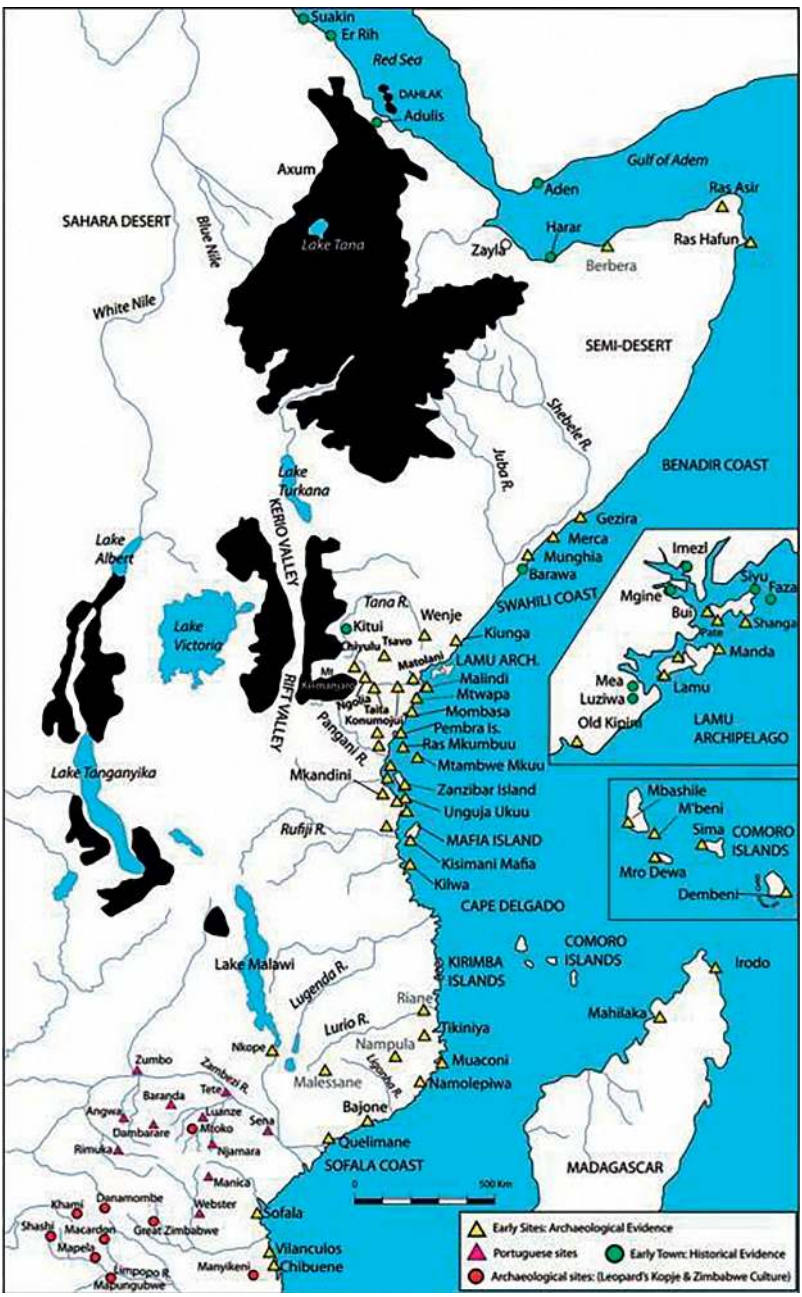

Figure 1 Map of eastern and southern Africa showing known towns that engaged in global trade (Credit: Foreman Bandama, the Field Museum, Chicago, IL, USA)

The Swahili people's agency and unique characteristics cannot be singularly seen through Islam's prism (Becker, 2018). State societies display a recognizable group of diagnostic features, including urbanism, ethnic diversity, social stratification, political organization, specialization, and long-distance exchange. While each state has its unique history, each rose through the combined action of the same small set of factors (Carneiro, 2012:6).

The East African coast was one of the bridges over which early Africans left the continent to form a diaspora inhabiting the rest of the world. Since the Bronze Age, East Africa has served as one of the major gateways through which people, ideas, domesticated plants and animals, and other innovations reached or left Africa (Boivin et al., 2014; Fuller et al., 2011; Rowlands and Fuller, 2018). Located on the western edge of the pan-Indian Ocean, the Swahili coast shares all the contemporary cultural accouterments of the wider Indian Ocean world: an expanse of trade networks, religious persuasions, cuisine, and fashion (Walshaw, 2015). This Element highlights how towns, cities, villages, and hinterlands along the coastline adjusted to integrate into the global networks of the medieval period.

The Politics of Identity and Invention of History

Today the multiple ethnic groups who have collaborated in shaping the coastal region's landscape and cultural history over the past two millennia belong to two dominant language groups: Bantu and Cushite (Table 1). In coastal Kenya, for example, the Bantu speakers referred to as the northeast coast Sabaki subfamily include the Swahili, Mijikenda, Pokomo, and Malakote (Nurse and Spear, 1985). The Cushite speakers include the Somali, Oromo, and several foraging communities (Stiles, 1981). The founding and sustenance of the medieval towns and polities of the East African coast must be credited to the contributions of these groups. Coastal urbanism arose in locales inhabited predominantly by people who spoke Kingozi, which later became popularly known as Swahili. As Swahili is one of the few written precolonial languages in East Africa and widely adopted as a lingua franca, its dominance and popularity in East and Central Africa are unmatched. Today it is one of the most widely spoken languages in East and Central Africa (Fabian, 1991).

Swahili culture is as much a consequence of geography as it is of human agency. The coast's unique location on the western end of the Indian Ocean made it a natural gateway and point of exit for people, ideas, goods, and services. The coastal peoples have interacted with partners in inland East Africa, the Persian and Arabian Gulfs, the Indian subcontinent, and Indonesia for much of the past three millennia (Beaujard, 2018). During this period, a multitude of items in high demand across Europe, Asia, and Africa were

Table 1 Communities of the East African coast

Coast	Ecological zone	Community
Benadir coast	seashore	Swahili, Bantu of the Shabelle and Jubba valleys, Somali
	hinterland	Somali, Orma
northern coast	lowland forest	Boni, Dahalo, Waata
	dry rangelands	Orma and Somali
	river valleys	Pokomo and Elwana
	islands	Swahili
Nyali coast	Nyika	Segeju, Mijikenda
	seashore	Segeju, Mijikenda
	islands	Swahili
Mrima coast	Nyika	Kwere, Shambaa, Zaramo, Zigula, Doe
	seashore	Bondei, Doe, Mijikenda Segeju, Swahili, Zaramo,
	islands	Swahili
Mgao coast	Nyika	Makonde, Ndengereko, Ngindo, Yao
	islands	Swahili
Kerimba coast		Mwani
Comoros	islands	Maore, Ngazidja, Ndzuwani Mwali

exchanged, ranging from spices, ivory, frankincense, myrrh, silks, sandalwood, and other exotica to grains, cattle, metal ores, goods, and other commodities (Oka, 2018:334). These trade pursuits simultaneously created great wealth and inequities.

Medieval East African coastal urban society was maritime with a subsistence economy centered on fishing, farming, craft production, and trade (Sarathi, 2015). The market economy was based on mixed farming and cereal agriculture, as well as millet, sorghum, and rice farming. People kept cattle, goats, and donkeys. Mangrove poles, dried fish, skins, hides, cereals, ivory, and rhinoceros horn formed the bulk of significant exports (Table 2). Social and economic disparities are reflected in the spatial organization of these medieval settlements. Islam was introduced in the ninth century, and by the end of the medieval period, it had become the dominant religion. Many anonymous individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, both Muslim and non-Muslim, lived side by side in the East African coast's medieval settlements. Reconstructing these medieval experiences is the task of this Element.

Table 2 Coastal ecological zones, rainfall distributions, and subsistence economy

Ecological zone	Annual rainfall	People	Subsistence
Northern Somalia (Guban)	80 mm	Somali	pastoralists, foragers
Oogo mountain range	500–750 mm	Somali	pastoralists, foragers
Nugal valley	400–500 mm	Somali	pastoralists, foragers
Hawd plateau	250–300 mm	Somali	pastoralists, foragers
Shabelle and Juba river valleys		Ribi and Boni, Reer Shabeelle, Gosha, Hawiye, Raxanweyn	farmers, fishers, pastoralists, foragers
Southern Somalia (Banaadir and Kismaayo regions)		Eyle, Somali	farmers, fishers, sailors, artisans
Lamu Archipelago	1,000 mm	Boni (Aweera) Orma, Swahili	foragers, farmers, fishers, pastoralists, sailors, artisans
Tana delta	800–1,200 mm	Pokomo, Malakote, Swahili, Dahalo	farmers, fishers, sailors, artisans
Nyali coast	1,000 mm	Mijikenda, Swahili, Waata	farmers, fishers, sailors, artisans
Nyali hinterland	800–1,200 mm	Mijikenda, Waata, Orma, Wakyankuru	pastoralists, farmers, foragers
Interior		Kamba, Orma, Taita, Walyankuru	farmers, pastoralists, foragers, hunters
Mrima coast	1,000 mm	Swahili, Mijikenda, Seutu	farmers, fishers, artisans
Mrima hinterland	800–1,200 mm	Kutu, Kwere, Doa	farmers
Zanzibar	1,400 mm	Swahili	farmers, fishers, artisans
Pemba	2,000 mm	Swahili	farmers, fishers, artisans

Swahili is a Bantu language and Arabic is a Semitic language. Because of centuries of interaction and conversion to Islam, standard Swahili has borrowed words from Arabic that reflect cultural values, religious-moral values, and literature (Mkilifi, 1972:197). The influence of Arabic on Swahili is illustrated in a popular couplet attributed to elite Swahili during the colonial period:

> *Kiswahili halawa, lugha yake sawa sawa*
> *Mdai bingwa hajawa, Kiarabu kutofahama.*
> Kiswahili is sweetness, it is a sound
> language but no one can claim he is an
> expert of it if he does not understand Arabic.
> (Salim, 1985:224)

The historical and political context of this couplet points to the broad question of identity. Social distancing from things African, which, at the time, connoted inferiority, contributed to the invention of ancestry traditions that credited a medieval Swahili founding to foreign diaspora immigrants from the Muslim world in the Persian Gulf (Ray, 2003). As part of the wider Muslim world, elite African families sent their children to be educated in Muslim universities such as al-Azhar University in Egypt. Nineteenth-century elite Swahili households were bilingual. Arabic, Hindi, Persian, and Urdu were often spoken in the homes of a growing Omani and Yemeni diaspora. Fluency in Arabic and Kingozi (classical Swahili) were crucial for understanding Swahili poetry and other historical renderings. Then the elite read widely and understood multiple languages through which they interacted as members of the Indian Ocean trading diaspora. Sayyid Abdalla bin Ali bin Nassir's epic *Al Inkishafi* (*Catechism of a Soul*) lamenting the decline of Pate, written circa 1800 CE, captures the intertwined histories of Islamic culture and art in the Swahili cultural system:

> *BISMILLAHI naiqadimu*
> *hali ya kutuga hino nudhumu*
> *na AR-RAHMANI kirasimu*
> *basi AR-RAHIMI nyumba ikaye*
>
> *Nataka himdi nitangulize*
> *ili mdadisi asiulize*
> *akamba himdi uitusilize*
> *kapakaza illa isiyo nduye*
>
> *Ikisa himdi kutabalaji*
> *ikizagaa kama siraji*
> *sala and salamu kiidariji*
> *tumwa Muhammmadi nimsaliye*
> *Na alize thama banu Kinana*
> *na Sahaba wane wenyi maina*

tusalie wote ajmaina
sala and mbawazi ziwaaliye

Let us first invoke the Mighty Name of God: Allah Ar-Rahman
Ar Rahim God merciful, God Benign!
Thus, let us open, that none be denied
The virtue to be gained from saying His Name
Nor do the critics blame us for omitting it
That were, indeed, a sin unparalleled.

Once made, this invocation is a lamp
To light our way: next follow prayers and Peace.
For our prophet Mohammad, let us pray

And his kinsfolk of the Qinan tribe
And for the four companions of the Name:
For all of them we pray and ask God's peace,
May our prayers and fealty sustain them all.
(Allen, 1977:25, 51)

Medieval East Africa, to which the Swahili belonged, was a complex world – a product of dynamic interactions of coastal peoples – occupying a central position geographically and culturally, with both other African and non-African cultures. Its history cannot be understood solely through one lens or the other, be it Islamic or African, coastal or hinterland, foreign or local (Kusimba et al., 1994:51). This Element narrates how this dynamic and resilient African civilization came into being and how it sustained itself.

2 The Rise of the Medieval Swahili State

Introduction

In this section, we discuss the factors that contributed to the rise of state societies in eastern and southern Africa, the regional connections that these African states developed and maintained, and the consequences of cooperation between the regions for the state's sustenance. We show that without these earlier regional relationships, the wealth exhibited in the East African coast's medieval cities would have taken on a different trajectory.

The Rise of the Medieval Swahili State

Between 800 and 1500 CE, towns and city-states arose on the East African coast, replacing non-state societies that had existed in the region during the Early Iron Age (ca. 500 BCE–500 CE). These transformations from non-state to state societies were regional in scope and have been tied to the restoration of stability in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf following the rise of Islam. Early and Late Iron Age non-state societies in East Africa interacted through

Table 3 Major food crops grown in Africa

Indigenous	*Non-Indigenous*
yams, pearl/bullrush millet, cowpea, guinea millet, gourd, sesame (West Africa)	maize (New World)
African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*)	cassava (New World)
sorghum (numerous kinds), fonio, African rice, legumes such as pigeon peas, garden greens (Sahel, Ethiopia)	wheat (Southwest Asia)
finger millet (East Africa)	bananas (Southeast Asia) flax (Southwest Asia)
Teff, Ensete coffee, Noog (Ethiopia)	

regional trade networks (Kusimba, 1999:2). However, during the medieval period, there was expansion in trade and interaction to include the wider Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and regions beyond, as far as East Asia.

The medieval landscape of East Africa reveals the richness and diversity of connections with the African interior that provide new ways of viewing the global economic, social, and political order between 800 and 1500 CE that became dominated by the Silk Road commercial complex (Broadman, 2007; Comas et al., 1998; Elverskog, 2011). For example, the food served today across the region tells the triumphant story of these interactions, connections, and contributions. Contributions from archaeobotany, which were long absent in the interpretation of relationships, are beginning to provide an excellent prism through which to view the interactions in the Afrasian world (Fuller et al., 2011; Rowlands and Fuller, 2018; Table 3). It is unlikely that the full list of exchanged goods and the precise time they crossed the seas out of or into Africa will ever be known. What we do know is that human agency was a prime mover of agricultural innovation, and these early attempts to move domesticated animals and plants were complex endeavors that point to the nature, scope, and intensity of first connections and interaction spheres.

The Chronological Context of Medieval African Society

Accurate determination of the time at which past events occurred is the cornerstone of archaeology because without this, interpreting the material evidence becomes deeply flawed and problematic. The use of other dating methods – for example, relative dating – is not only because the radiocarbon method is expensive but because relative dating is sometimes more accurate and refined and provides tighter chronologies. In this Element, I use five broad periods to discuss the evolutionary process of urbanism, illustrated in Table 4. I briefly discuss each period and its associated sites along with general implications.