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A Historiographic Appraisal of Kenyan Coast History

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zr5h8fr>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 9(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1979

DOI

10.5070/F792017327

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A HISTORIOGRAPHIC APPRAISAL OF KENYAN COASTAL HISTORY

By

Leslie Schaffer

I

The people and region of the East African coast are once again a subject of increasing interest to historians. In response to scholars such as Dr. B. A. Ogot, president of the Historical Association of Kenya who, in his 1970 address to the Association's annual conference, stressed "the need for historians to be concerned much more than they have been hitherto with the relations between African systems, particularly during the pre-colonial period,"¹ the history of the coast is being reevaluated today in light of its underrecognized African connection.

One of the leading spokesmen for this historical re-assessment is Dr. James de Vere Allen who has actually written a proposal for a multidisciplinary research project which would seek to "establish a correct balance in emphasis between the African and Oriental aspects of Swahili history."²

Actually, these calls for a new look at the different aspects of African history represent a reaction to the older generation of colonial and post- (or neo-) colonial historians who have tended to view "Africa as the *object* of European (and Arab) activities and policies, and to pay little attention to the dealings of African states with one another."³ These colonial-type historians relied heavily on archeological evidence and foreign historical accounts to guide them in their attempts to sort out the various migrations which to them constituted the bulk of what was or could be known about the African past.

These coastal historians have assumed throughout their researches and writings that the Swahili people are representatives of an alien (Arab) culture on African soil. As a result of "asking the wrong questions" these historians have created a distorted image of the people of the coast. They have been practically unanimous in their concern with answering questions like where did the immigrants who came to the coast, the "creators" of Swahili culture, originate? - in Shiraz, Daybul, Bahrain, Oman, Indonesia? Or, what was the extent of the trade network between Swahili civilization and the Indian Ocean complex? Also, the linking of Swahili culture with that of the Middle East through analysis of material culture (building in stone and importing pottery) and religious systems (Islam) is an often discussed theme.⁴ The resulting histories have reflected

a cultural bias which all too often have told us less about the people they were trying to illuminate than about the authors and researchers themselves. The myths thus created have done more to obscure the history of the people of East Africa than to open them to wider understanding.

The "new" historians are therefore compelled to do two things: the first is to seek out new materials, new sources of information, to look in areas hitherto ignored by the historian; the second is to sift again through the "old" evidence which was available to their predecessors, but with a new awareness of the assumptions made, not only by those who reviewed them before, but by those who compiled the references - the Arab traders and geographers, the Portuguese adventurers, the missionaries, imperialists, and explorers of the 19th century.

In other words, the historians' assumptions and values that have conditioned their inferential judgements about primary and secondary sources, the critical separation of fact from inference, the *historiography*⁵ of the coast must be re-examined, re-evaluated, and re-worked. Historians are beginning to ask "new questions" of old evidence and by asking the right questions are finding "new" evidence which had been passed over in order to present an accurate description of the history of the people of the East African coast.

The remainder of the paper will discuss the new assumptions and new questions being posed now about Swahili history. The goal of such an inquiry is ultimately the same as before - to determine who are the Swahili people. But instead of adopting a racial approach to the question, we will use an historical one - discussing the historiographic aspects of the relations between the Africans of the hinterland and the town dwellers and re-examining the relations between the East African coast and the Indian Ocean.

II

Most of those historians who accept the notion of an Arab "invasion" content themselves with discussing only in the vaguest and most speculative terms who were the African people living at the coast in this early (pre 900) period. Archeological evidence suggests the presence of late stone age hunters and gathers living along the coast from Kilwa to Kilifi, speculated variously as "Bushman types,"⁶ the Southern Cushitic ancestors of today's Sanye and Boni people of Northern Kenya and Somalia,⁷ or the Khoikhoi of Tanzania.⁸ References from the *Geography* of Ptolemy, the Roman *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Arab geographers such as al-Mas'udi and Ibn Battuta, and second hand Chinese sources have been quoted to strengthen suggestions that the "Azanians" or "Zenj" of the East African coast

were Bantu speakers, evidence of whose culture is supported by archeological finds called Kwale Ware.⁹ But some have speculated that the tall cattle-keeping people (who drew blood from the necks of their cows) described in a 9th century Chinese source¹⁰ were the ancestors of Ethiopian Cushites or even Indonesians.¹¹

Suffice it to say however, that such speculations are usually of only minor interest to these historians. The subject occupies their attention only as a background to the seemingly more important issue of the migrations to the coast from parts of the Indian Ocean. Where they came from and how long ago seems to be their main concern. From the time that Arab immigrants began to arrive in significant numbers (sometime around the 13th century) the African contribution to the coast civilization is practically ignored except in terms of "absorption",¹² concubinage or slavery. Chittick is very straightforward in his attitude towards this question. In his chapter on the coast before the arrival of the Portuguese in *Zamani* he concludes "Some aspects of the African culture survived and were incorporated in the whole but were always secondary to the Islamic framework."¹³ Mathews, while still convinced of the primacy of foreign influences on coast civilization concedes, "By the 14th century there was probably a great deal that was characteristically African about these towns, whatever may have been their ultimate origin."¹⁴

In addition to migrations a great deal of attention is paid to evidence of material culture in the form of ruins of stone houses, mosques, and tombs and imported luxury goods such as celadon and porcelain from China and glazed pottery from the Middle East (Islamic Wares). Allen has gazetted 173 sites of Swahili settlement along the East African coast and islands of Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania.¹⁵

A great deal of research has gone into comparing the architecture and level of construction of stone houses, mosques, and tombs with that which is known in the Middle East.¹⁶ Much that is useful in terms of coast history has come to light about the rise and fall of towns, the level of wealth and degree of trade, and general style of living due to these researches. But the conclusions that have been reached about these material finds have supported the hypothesis stated above, that these excavated remains represent evidence of a "colonial culture" by Arabs. J. S. Kirkman states this categorically in his book on *Men and Monuments on the East African Coast*, "The historical monuments of East Africa belong not to the Africans but to the Arabs and Arabized Persians, mixed in blood with the African but in culture utterly apart from the Africans who surrounded them."¹⁷ Why? Because the whole approach to studying these remains is biased. If one is looking for evidence to support

the hypothesis that Swahili culture was imported, one is sure to find it in the splendid ruins of Takwa and Gedi. This, however, is not sufficient to refute the alternative hypothesis that Swahili culture represents something which is African, or is a unique blend of both. The reason why nobody seems to know who were the African people that mixed with the early immigrants is because the Africans have not been considered an essential part of Swahili culture.

In fact, the archeological evidence to support this alternative hypothesis exists in the form of locally made pots, bowls, and jars found alongside the imports. It has simply been ignored (presumably because they were used by slaves¹⁸). Powwels points out that "after all, while towns were turning more towards trade between 1100 and 1300, and wealth was increasing, only about 3 percent of the wares found at Kilwa were imported."¹⁹ Allen also recognizes this problem in archeological research, "No archeological work has been done towards understanding the links with Africa - mud and thatch houses have not been excavated, although techniques exist; locally produced, unglazed pottery sherds from the coast have also not been compared to that of the interior."²⁰ Sutton points out that "Only the richer citizens would have lived in stone houses. In all the coastal settlements we should imagine a large proportion of the population living in wooden structures under grass or *makuti* roofs."²¹

Not only in material culture, but in political and economic history, voices are beginning to be heard claiming that the relations between Africans of the hinterlands and the Swahili of the coastal towns and villages were much stronger than has been credited.²² A recent article by Powwels represents a serious attempt to correct the image of Afro-Arab relations in the early period (pre 1300) of coastal history. He has adopted the historiographic assumptions that Swahili society is African, both physically and culturally, and that migrations from the Middle East are less important to understanding their history than the transfer of ideas about Islam. He points out that Arabs often settled in previously existing African communities such as Kilwa, Pate, Lamu, Siyu, Vumba, and Zanzibar. In this light he re-examines the historical accounts and oral traditions and concludes, "it was clear that it was the Africans who dominated matters."²³ He cites numerous historical references to Arab traders who pay tribute to Africans on the coast, Afro-Arab alliances in war, some defeats by Africans against Arabs, and intermarriage of royal families thus ensuring political dominance by Afro-Arab ruling families. Evidence from various versions of the Kilwa Chronicle suggests very early conflict between Islamic written law and African customs regarding concepts of land ownership.²⁴

A. I. Salim, in explaining the economic decline of the Swahili at the end of the 19th century due to British imperialism, described how "for hundreds of years the (12 Tribes) of Mombasa had held lands...on a tribal basis. They claimed these lands on a law that may be described as 'African-Muslim'...Their boundaries were fairly well defined by consent...Members of the Tribes acquired land by clearing the bush and cultivating a piece of federal land. Once the crops grew to maturity the land became the property of the cultivator, who, thereby acquired the right to alienate and sell it. Non-members...were not allowed to (alienate) land without the consent of, or offer of a present to, the elders of the Tribe. Once these conditions were fulfilled, the Muslim law of alienation was recognized... Thus the land tenure of the 12 Tribes was African in the procedure necessary to obtain lawful tenure, and Muslim in tenure once alienation was obtained."²⁵

Thomas Spear has also done much to discredit the "Arab myth" and shed some light on the early African inhabitants of the coast by examining the historical traditions of the Mijikenda peoples of the coastal hinterland. The Mijikenda peoples claim to have fled from Singwaya (Shungwaya) (thought to be in Southern Somalia) due to pressure from the Galla expansion from Ethiopia in the 16th century. Many of the Swahili town dwellers north from Mombasa also trace their origins to Singwaya.²⁶ The oral history of the Giriama tells of meeting Laa (Waatha) hunters in the hinterland behind Mombasa who taught them how to make iron arrowheads and arrow poison, how to defend themselves against the Galla by setting ambushes and who helped them find forest refuge where they could settle.²⁷

Economically Spear found the role of the Mijikenda in coast history was much more important than had been credited.²⁸ During the 17th and 18th centuries trade had been conducted on a small scale among the Mijikenda themselves and with the Swahili coast. Palm wine was traded northwards from Digo. Sorghum, eleusine, millet, maize, rice and other foodstuffs were bartered among the various *kayas* (fortified villages) and with the Swahili towns. Small amounts of ivory were exchanged for trade goods with the Swahili, too.²⁹

By the 19th century various Mijikenda groups had established fixed trading patterns with the Swahili, both direct and as middlemen for peoples further afield. The Giriama would trade sheep, goats, and poison with the Waatha for tusks. They would then trade the tusks at the coast for cloth, beads, wire and other trade goods. They would return some trade goods to the Waatha and use the rest to obtain cattle from Ukambani. In addition to ivory, the Giriama tapped copal for sale and continued to sell surplus grain to the Swahili.³⁰

The Rabai developed a different pattern of trade based on coconut palms and their proximity to Kwa Jomvu, a Swahili outpost of Mombasa. They traded copra and grain to the Jomvu (Swahili) for cloth, beads, and pots. The Rabai also acted as intermediaries for others wishing to trade with the Jomvu. Kamba hunters brought ivory from upcountry to the Rabai who arranged for its sale to the Jomvu. In return for their hospitality and brokerage, both the Kamba and Jomvu rewarded the Rabai with a share of the articles traded.³¹

The Digo were the first to establish trade with the Swahili of Mombasa. This took place at Mtawe. Periodic markets existed all along the coast at Mtongwe, Gazi, Vanga, and Tanga.³² The Duruma also brokered in Kamba ivory and sold copal at Changanwe.

The Segeju (Mossegeju of the Portuguese) seem to have figured significantly in political and military alliances, particularly the alliance between the Segeju and the town of Malindi in their attack on Mombasa in 1592.³³ Spear considered the political relationship between the Mijikenda and the Swahili to be one of equality and interdependence as well. Salim records that "the so-called *Nyika* (Mijikenda) helped in the final expulsion of the Portuguese from Mombasa in 1728 and in the restoration of Mazrui rule in 1746...As a result of such close ties, the neighboring African tribes found themselves represented in a delegation to Oman and enjoyed a special status in the metropolis of Mombasa where they came to trade and attend the installation of its *Liwali*."³⁴ The Galla and Zimba, and later the Iloikop Masai (WaKwavi) were most often described as pillaging invaders and, in the case of the Zimba (who moved up from the Zambezi in the 16th century), cannibals, who sacked towns all along the coast.³⁵

Although less serious work seems to have been focused on the connection between Swahili and African political institutions, Sutton was able to state that "commerce, exterior contacts, and territorial expansion...doubtless encouraged fairly centralized and bureaucratic forms of government. But clear traces remained of family and clan and the leadership of clan-heads and elected chiefs that would be more typical of the North-Eastern Bantu peoples of the coast and hinterland."³⁶

Berg's description of the political structure of the *Thenashara Taifa* (12 Tribes) of Mombasa, with the divisions between the *Thelatha Taifa* (3 Tribes) and *Tisa Taifa* (9 Tribes), each *taifa* implying a 'faction' with political boundaries and a 'tribe' with kinship affiliations, further divided into *mibari* (clans), and represented by a *shehe* (sheikh), certainly suggests a strong African influence, if not dominance.³⁷ Indeed, Salim considered the similarity of the Swahili federal organization

to that of neighboring African tribes as being "no mere coincidence."³⁸

Aside from material culture, and political and economic systems, it has been argued that linkages between African and Swahili culture concerning intellectual history have been underestimated and ignored as well. This includes religious syncreticism, language, and concept of history.

In the style and meaning of the Shirazi traditions (which form a part of the oral history of certain of the Swahili people) Pouwels finds reflected a strong African character. "In the case of general African attitudes towards history, only that which is real is worthy of memory, and that which is real is that which has meaning in the present (or at the time the tradition is collected), and that which is meaningful in the present is that part of the past which fits the traditions."³⁹ Seen in this context the Shirazi traditions represent the collective memory of an entire era which marked a departure from an older tradition and civilization and which saw the evolution of a new civilization.

Pouwels has characterized the dominant historiographic approach to religious change in Swahili society as assuming that "presumably White Muslims (so-called Shirazi from Persia and Arabs from Arabia), upon their arrival conquered or converted local black indigenes." According to this view Africans are "a subdued race whose cultures are passive and whose religions are inferior to that of the Arabs, and who, therefore, contribute little of any worth to coastal civilization."⁴⁰ This assumption is also noted by Aziz Esmail, "One of the dangers of seeing the history of Islam in East Africa as simply part of the history of its (Islam's) expansion in general is that one may thereby be led to see Islam as the active, adaptive force, with the local traditional religions as a passive recipient party."⁴¹ In fact, this is precisely the view that Trimmingham held about Islam on the East African coast: "...The formation of a new Muslim community like the Swahili...comes about through the interplay of the aggressive culture, as expressed by Muslims from particular cultural areas, upon people have been molded in very different ways."⁴²

Another criticism leveled against historians of Islam in East Africa is that they set up a model of classical, or pure Islam to be that which developed in the Middle East and Mahgreb. When this model of orthodoxy is compared to the Islam which developed in East Africa as a result of the syncretistic interaction of Islamic beliefs and practices with their traditional African counterparts, the conclusion reached is that the Islam found in East Africa is less pure, less orthodox, diluted.⁴³ (Trimmingham does not fall completely into this category because

he believed that "immigrants from overseas formed what were virtually closed-class communities based on settlements."⁴⁴)

The alternative hypothesis states that "urbanization, urban institutions, and widespread conversion to Islam took place...due to expansion of trade and a balanced blending of old local traditions and new, immigrant cultural traits."⁴⁵ One obvious link between the religious culture of the Swahili and that of the Africans of the hinterland (Mijikenda, Pokomo, etc.) is the presence of spirit possession and accompanying cults. Local Lamu historians have long recognized the connection as did Spear, who studied the history of the Mijikenda.⁴⁶

The "Africanness" of the Swahili language is now generally accepted. Spear claims that the Swahili dialects adjacent to Mijikenda show considerable Mijikenda influence;⁴⁷ the names for the local dialects also are clearly indigenous (e.g. Ki-Amu, Ki-Mvita, Ki-Unguja, etc.). Although the myth of Ki-Swahili being merely a pidgin or bastardized form of Arabic has generally been discredited, there is still uncertainty and speculation about the origin of the Swahili language as a clue to understanding the origin of the culture.

One question about the origin and spread of the Swahili language which would reflect the nature of the culture is whether it represents "different coastal Bantu tongues, subsequently welded together into a single, perhaps geographically composite language by continuous commerce and a common heritage of Islamic urbanism, or did (it) originate among a single, perhaps geographically compact group whose influence later spread..."⁴⁸ The latter possibility has been accepted by some as suggesting the Lamu region as the birthplace of the language.

Although the Swahili language is said to have existed before the 10th century, questions still remain as to whether the term Swahili was in use before the Arabs brought it into circulation. Marina Tolmacheva traces the evolution of the term from the Arabic word 'sahil' (pl. sawahil) which was used to describe that part of the coast north of Mombasa up to Saif Tawil on the Somali coast. She finds that by the 14th century the Lamu Chronicle uses the word 'Sawahili' in reference to a population rather than a territory. "This change in the meaning of 'sawahil' in the historical context at different stages shows how the term becomes separated from its Arabic background and starts its independent development."⁴⁹ The conclusion is echoed by Jim Allen's rhetorical question, "Is Swahili culture no more than a pale or colonial-type reflection of Arab, Iranian, or Indian culture (or some combination of them) or...is it sufficiently spontaneous and original to be regarded as a culture in its own right, wholly independent and representing one of

Africa's more important contributions to the history of civilization?"⁵⁰

III

The above discussion of the multifaceted historical links that Swahili society shares with Africa is not meant to contradict the legitimate claim it has to being a part of the Indian Ocean's history as well. Rather, we are simply reiterating the suggestion that the historical development of coast civilization represents a unique blend of both, and has produced a culture which reflects African values and institutions on an equal footing (at least) with Arab ones.

Yet the "Arab myth" of origins and development of Swahili society still persists, even after the continent wide rise of nationalism and Black consciousness of the 1960's. It represents an explanation for the prejudice which many people (particularly in Kenya) feel against fully accepting Ki-Swahili as a national language. "It has also contributed largely to the failure to identify earlier what is now beginning to be called 'Swahilization', that is urbanization in East Africa according to a pre-colonial, non-Western, and broadly Islamic model."⁵¹

The root of understanding the tenacity of the "Arab myth" in East Africa is two-fold. On the one hand, it has been shown that the historical accounts are highly vulnerable to misrepresentation of actual historical circumstances and equally liable to induce distorted interpretations of historical events. In particular, the reliance on Swahili and European sources calls into question the social ability of the witnesses and the historians to observe and record events without great bias.⁵²

For example, by the mid-19th century (with the rise of the Busaidi dynasty on Zanzibar) the balance of power between the Mijikenda and Swahili groups had shifted in favor of the latter. The writings of European missionaries, explorers, and military officers reflect this fact, but later historians have inferred from these accounts that the influence of the Mijikenda was always negligible and so they do not record the important economic and political interdependence which existed between the groups for three centuries prior to the age of Imperialism.

The second reason for the perpetuation of the "Arab myth" lies in the collective and individual Swahili perception of self as has been molded by their historical experience, particularly under colonialism. It is crucial at this point to view the period of Busaidi rule, followed by British colonialism (a total period of about 140 years) as marking a major *discontinuity* with the much longer past, particularly insofar as

the distinction between Arab and African becomes very pronounced and takes on a racial connotation. Under Seyyid Said the gulf between Arab, Swahili, and African widened as slavery and the slave trade took on a new dimension due to the injection of Indian and European capital. The rapid immigration of Arabs who could not (due to their large numbers) immediately assimilate into Swahili society further marked this period as representing a major break with the past.

Particularly under British colonial rule the administrative distinction between "native" and "non-native" at the coast exacerbated the split between Africans (including those classified as "Swahili") and Arabs. This distinction was made, from the administrative point of view, to determine the voting, representation, and tax status of the colonized.⁵³ It also accorded with the British belief in racial categorization to reflect level of civilization (this proved tricky at the coast though, due to the completely mixed ethnic heritage of most people).

The coast people adopted the colonial designation of native or non-native to signify social status in the community. Thus, to be classified as an Arab by the colonial authorities meant not only the right to vote with special representation (albeit token), but also heightened one's social standing in the community, since natives (including "Swahili") had by far the least rights and lowest social status under the British. When A.H.J. Prins wrote *The Swahili Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* in the 1950's, the label Swahili had the pejorative implication of "slave descent, lack of pedigree, low occupational position, and a general boorish, uncivilized behavior and outlook on life."⁵⁴

It was from this period that historians such as N. Chittick derive their classification of social strata among coast people based on "blood ties": "First, pure-blooded Arabs, the *Manga* (from Oman) and the *Shihiri* (from the Hadramaut) in Swahili....Second, Afro-Arabs, the *Arabu* of Swahili. Of mixed blood, these have in the past usually constituted the ruling section of the population. Third, Islamized Africans with some Arab blood, known as *Swahili* to the Europeans; these are the contemporary *Shirazi* of Zanzibar. Fourth, the African tribesmen, outside the settlement or recently arrived in them, and little affected by Islamic culture."⁵⁵

Under the British the 12 Tribes of Mombasa (the *Shirazi* of ancient times) were classified as natives, while the people who could trace Arab descent of a more recent origin (from the Hadramaut, or, the least integrated, the Omani Arabs, who still were linked politically and socially to the royal Busaidi dynasty) were classified as non-native Arabs.⁵⁶

It is interesting to note the changing connotation through history of a word such as *Shirazi*. Prior to colonialism, Berg recounts, the term referred to a person of Persian descent; today it implies a person of noble or at least non-servile descent, in contrast to its pejorative connotation along with Swahili during colonial times.⁵⁷

Those who gained the "distinction" of being classified as Arabs clung tenaciously to their few privileges and actively lobbied to exclude their less fortunate kinsmen from sharing this classification. Meanwhile, some elements from the disenfranchised "native" groups organized (the 1927 Afro-Asian Association, and the 1945 Afro-Asian Welfare League) and tried in many ways to convince the colonial authorities of their "Arabness".⁵⁸

So it becomes clear that the activities and beliefs of certain Swahili elitists (which were a direct reflection of the peculiar historical circumstances of the 19th and 20th centuries) contributed (and still do) to the perpetuation of the myth of Arab culture and origins.⁵⁹ Acts of political and economic expediency took on the added legitimizing weight of social ranking to solidify the schism between African and Swahili culture. Whereas Pouwels recognizes that it is certain of the coast people themselves who contribute to the problem by their claims of Arab antecedence, he weakly ascribes it to Middle Eastern prejudice against Blacks.⁶⁰ In point of fact however, it is much more instructive to interpret this phenomenon in its historical context as described above.

IV

How then, can we answer the elusive question of who are the Swahili people? Are we to adopt the narrow colonial definition of "a descendant of one of the original Arab or Persian-Arab settlers on the East African coast",⁶¹ and accept the colonized Swahili self-designation of being 'a notch above' their darker countrymen (as expressed in the *Mshenzi* epithet)?

To give an example of the absurdity to which this reasoning can be carried we quote the linguistic researcher C. Eastman, who got so confused trying to unravel the mystery that she found herself explaining: "Non-Muslim Swahili tend to refer to Muslim Swahili speakers as 'Arabs' while the Muslim-Swahili call the non-Muslim Swahili 'Africans'. The non-Muslims confuse Arabs with other Muslims since many Muslims descend from Arabs or call themselves Arabs. The Muslims call the non-Muslims Africans, implying that they have no Oriental background."⁶²

I. Noor Shariff deals a final deathblow to the racial

classification of Swahili peoples when he asserts that the linking of one's ancestry to Persian or Arab origins does not reflect one's culture or one's race. "While we have today amongst the Waswahili a few who are called *Al-Jahadhmy*, *al-Busaidy*, *Al-Marhubi* (arabs), and those who are still the *Washirazi*...most of these people today have so little Persian or Arab 'blood' or cultural heritage in them that one would consider it negligible."⁶³ The problem, he continues, of viewing Swahili as a racial category stems from a cultural bias on the part of the European and American scholars - they are reflecting the assumptions about ethnic categorization which prevail in their own societies (such as "Black" and "White" Americans). In Arab culture, anyone who can claim an Arab patrilineal ancestor may be considered an Arab, while in the United States, for example, any non-White parentage excludes one from being considered White.⁶⁴

J. Allen gets closer to a clear understanding of Swahili society when he suggests that the difference between "Arabs" and "Africans" is really the difference between town dwellers and country dwellers and that, although different, both rural and urban people are components of a single Swahili culture.⁶⁵ Aspects of the culture which have been used to support the notion of urban Swahili culture being alien or Arab, such as building in stone as opposed to mud and thatch, attention to pedigree (*nisba*) by tracing one's ancestors to Arabia, or distinctive conduct or economic attitude, do not, he argues, reflect an alien culture so much as the peculiar differences between urban and rural dwelling Swahili speakers.⁶⁶ Shariff actually states much the same thing when he argues "the Waswahili are those people who live the *Uswahili* (way of life) and Waswahili is, therefore not a racial, but a cultural term."⁶⁷

This idea, that Swahili represents a *cultural* category rather than a racial or ethnic one, is best captured in Allen's discussion of certain words in Ki-Swahili generally associated with culture and its opposite. A term like "*ustaarabu*, meaning 'behaving like an Arab' and usually translated 'culture' is not a word which has been used for long among Swahili speakers. It is very much a product of the Zanzibar era, and there is no record of it before 1900."⁶⁸ A word like "*uungwana* today means primarily 'one who is freeborn' as opposed to 'of slave stock'. But in Lamu it has largely retained its original meaning of 'undevious' (especially in financial matters), 'impeccable' (in conduct), and 'well-educated' (in carving, dancing, and versifying as well as everything else). Essentially *uungwana* was the characteristic of a Swahili townsman. Indeed, in earlier centuries the urban dwelling Swahili-speakers called themselves, not *Wa-Arabu* or *Wa-Swahili*, but *Wa-Ungwana* or *Wangwana*, so it may be represented as the quintessence of Swahiliness."⁶⁹ Its opposite is *shenzi*, a term which has once again been perverted in Zanzibar

and the South to carry a racial connotation akin to 'half-breed' but which originally meant something much more like 'barbarism', someone who had no culture and did not know how to behave."⁷⁰

The history of the Swahili people has been subject to the same treatment as the mystery of the Great Zimbabwe ruins. In both cases it was simply inconceivable to the scholars to imagine that these evidences of stone civilization could be the work of African peoples. In the case of Zimbabwe, researchers went to truly great lengths to concoct a version of history that would fit both the evidence and their racial concept of history (thus the Hamitic hypothesis); in the case of the Swahili coast, there already existed a great deal of evidence to support a notion of foreign origins and culture, thus the exploitation of select archeological, historical, and oral evidence which supported the assumption.

Hopefully this paper has contributed to exposing the racist assumptions which have governed coastal historiography in the past by suggesting their historical origins and evidences for an alternative hypothesis. It is only after such a theoretical foundation is correctly established that one may begin to answer the questions that have been raised all along concerning migrations, trade, urbanization and the role of Islam, as well as to seriously consider the largely unasked questions of Bantu origins, and relations between town and country on the Swahili coast.

Footnotes

1. B.A. Ogot, "Toward a History of the Relations Between African Systems," in *Hadith 3*, ed. B.A. Ogot (Nairobi: E.A.P.H., 1971), p. 1.
2. J. Allen, "East Africa and the Indian Ocean - A Multi-disciplinary Research Project," unpublished monograph, Dr. Ochieng, UCLA.
3. Ogot, p. 2.
4. see: J.S. Kirkman, *Men and Monuments on the East African Coast* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964); N. Chittick, "The Coast Before the Arrival of the Portuguese," in *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*, ed. B.A. Ogot (Nairobi: E.A.P.H., 1974); N. Chittick and R.I. Rotberg, eds., *East Africa and the Orient - Cultural Synthesis in Pre-Colonial Times* (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1975); G. Mathews, "The East African Coast Until the Coming of the Portuguese," in *History of East Africa*, Vol. I, eds R. Oliver and

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23. Pouwels, "Medieval Foundations...", p. 211.
24. Ibid.
25. A.I. Salim, *The Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast 1895-1965* (Nairobi: E.A.P.H., 1973), pp. 125-126.
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28. Berg, "The Swahili Community...", *JAH*, pp. 51-52. He characterizes the relations between the Mijikenda and Swahili of Mombasa as "a junior-senior partnership."
29. Spear, p. 275.
30. Ibid., p. 276.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., pp. 275-277.
33. Berg, *Zamani*, pp. 121-123.
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40. Ibid., pp. 201-202.
41. Aziz Esmail, "Towards a History of Islam in East Africa," *Kenya Historical Review*, 3, No. 1 (1975), p. 149.

42. J.S. Trimmingham, "The Phases of Islamic Expansion and Islamic Culture Zones in Africa," *Peoples and Cultures of Africa*, ed. E.P. Skinner (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 704.
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44. Trimmingham, p. 710.
45. Pouwels, "Medieval Foundations..."
46. Supporting evidence for this hypothesis will hopefully become available soon; see forthcoming Pouwels article, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11, No. 3 (1978); also, Anthony Lee, "Cultural Change on the Coast and Hinterland of Southern Kenya from the 19th Century to the Present," research proposal, n.d., Dr. Alpers, UCLA.
47. Spear, pp. 279-280.
48. Allen, "East Africa and the Indian Ocean," p. 11.
49. Marina Tolmacheva, "The Origin of the Name 'Swahili'," *Tanzania Notes and Records*, No. 77 and 78 (1976), p. 33.
50. Allen, "East Africa and the Indian Ocean," pp. 21-22.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
52. "The historian is interested in lies as well as truth, but he must be able to distinguish between them. It is the task of internal criticism to determine the *credibility* of evidence." (my emphasis), p. 141 in R.J. Shafer, ed. *A Guide to Historical Method* (Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1974), p. 146.
53. A.I. Salim, "'Native', or 'Non-Native'? The Problem of Identity and Social Stratification of the Arab-Swahili of Kenya," in *Hadith 6*, ed. B.A. Ogot (Nairobi: E.A.L.B., 1976), pp. 65-85.
54. quoted in Carol Eastman, "Who Are the WaSwahili?," *Africa*, 41, No. 3 (1971), pp. 228-236.
55. Chittick, "The Peopling of the East African Coast," in *East Africa and the Orient*, pp. 42-43.
56. Salim, *Hadith 6*.
57. Berg, *JAH*, p. 35.

58. Salim, *Hadith 6; The Swahili Speaking People*.
59. Salim's works must also, despite their undeniably informative contents, be placed in this category.
60. Pouwels, "Medieval Foundations...", footnote 4, p. 202.
61. quoted in Eastman, from Stigand, *The Land of Zinj*, 1913.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
63. Ibrahim Noor Shariff, "Waswahili and their Language," *Kiswahili*, 43, No. 2 (1973), p. 72.
64. *Ibid.*
65. J. Allen, "Town and Country in Swahili Culture," Frobenius Centenary Symposium, Youande, 1973.
66. *Ibid.*
67. Shariff, p. 74.
68. Allen, "Town and Country in Swahili Culture," p. C12.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*, pp. C12-C13.

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