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EARLY SWAHILI HISTORY RECONSIDERED*

By Thomas Spear

The identity and history of the Swahili-speaking peoples of the East African coast have long been contentious, and they continue to be so today. This is partly a function of the politics of history within highly diverse and stratified societies, in which people frequently invoke historical claims regarding foreign origins, social and religious status, or genealogy to substantiate contemporary political, social, or economic positions. But it is also due to claims made about complex societies by outsiders—travelers, government officials, archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists, and historians—that have long engendered diverse claims about their identity and roles in eastern African history.

Fifteen years ago, Derek Nurse and I analyzed these conflicting claims in the light of the archaeological, linguistic, and historical evidence available to propose a new interpretative framework for viewing Swahili history, largely in terms of internal forces.¹ Such a view, we felt, made better sense of the available evidence, and we hoped it would encourage others to conduct further research and modify it as needed. That has certainly happened, and some 270 books, theses, and articles have subsequently appeared.² This degree of scholarly activity is as welcome as it is unusual in African history, making this an opportune moment to review the literature and to reassess the state of coastal historiography

The Bases of Swahili Culture

The Swahili have long stressed differences between themselves and their neighbors, emphasizing their putative descent from Persian and Arab immigrants and their own “civilized” ways (*uungwana*). Swahili towns also struck outsiders as obvious foreign transplants:

The religion was Islam and the fundamental bases of the culture came from abroad. In language and the materials of everyday life local African influence was stronger. The standing architecture however reflects little African

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Oxford University, and the University of Wisconsin, where I received numerous helpful comments and suggestions. In addition, Jonathon Glassman, Richard Helm, Mark Horton, Derek Nurse, Stephen Corradini, and Jan Vansina kindly read and commented on earlier drafts, and Richard Helm generously made his unpublished research on Kenya available to me.

¹ Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800–1500* (Philadelphia, 1985).

² See Thomas Spear, “Swahili History and Society to 1900: A Classified Bibliography,” *History in Africa* 27(2000), 339–73. I was unable, however, to review *The Swahili* (Oxford, 2001), a major new synthesis of Swahili archaeology, ethnography, and history, by John Middleton and Mark Horton, as it was not yet published when this article went to press.

influence and its forms are entirely alien to those of the hinterland—its origins were outside East Africa and it is present fully fledged in the earliest known buildings.... The culture was provincial—initiative was always from abroad.³

Swahili buildings and styles, like their Muslim religion, seemed to emerge abruptly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and with no known local antecedents, archaeologists concluded that they must have originated in Persia or the Arabian peninsula. Similarly, linguists pointed to the fact that the Swahili language was first written in Arabic script and contained large numbers of Arabic words, while ethnographers noted that *ustaarabu*—Arabness—denoted the lifestyle of a sophisticated, urbane elite, many of whom bore Arab names and, some felt, appearance. Finally, historians pointed to the historical traditions of Swahili themselves claiming foreign origins. The evidence all seemed to point to the conclusion that Swahili societies developed from Arab roots, put down by merchants and clerics who began trading and settling along the East African coast during the latter first millennium AD.

By the 1980s, though, these views were beginning to change. Archaeologists like Neville Chittick and Mark Horton started to show that the Muslim stone towns did not suddenly emerge on a previously barren coast, but were preceded from the ninth century by slowly expanding local communities of farmers, fishers, and traders who capitalized on their location to trade with visiting merchants. As trade expanded from the twelfth century on, they began to build in coral and to adopt Islam, reaching their fullest development in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Throughout, local building techniques and styles developed from within, largely free of foreign influence.⁴

At the same time, linguists were exploring the African roots of the Swahili language. The Swahili dialects, now spoken from Somalia to Mozambique, are so closely related they probably developed from a single ancestral language.⁵ That language, Swahili, is a Bantu language, closely related to other languages spoken along the Kenya coast—the Sabaki languages—which are related more distantly to languages currently spoken in northeastern Tanzania—the Northeast Coast languages. Reconstructing their historical development, Northeast Coast speakers were probably present along the northern Tanzania coast by early in the first millennium AD, from whence some began to spread northwards into Kenya. By the middle of the first millennium AD, these Sabaki speakers extended along the Kenya coast, where they too began to differentiate into separate dialects and languages, and by the

³ P. S. Garlake, *The Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast* (Nairobi, 1966), 2.

⁴ James deVere Allen, "Swahili Culture and the Nature of East Coast Settlement," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14 (1981), 306–34; H. Neville Chittick, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading Center on the East African Coast* (Nairobi, 1974); idem, *Manda: Excavations at an Island Port on the Coast of Kenya* (London, 1984); Mark Horton, *Shanga, 1980: An Interim Report* (Nairobi, 1980).

⁵ For discussion of a possible alternative model, see Tom Güldemann, "Ist Swahili eine monogenetische Einheit? Betrachtungen aus der Sicht peripherer Varietäten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Verbmorphologie," *Afrikanische Arbeitspapiere* 30 (1992), 35–62.

ninth century, Swahili had emerged, along with Comorian, Ilwana, Pokomo, and Mijikenda, as a distinct language.⁶

Swahili was thus clearly a Bantu language, both structurally and lexically, but how could one account for the large amount of Arabic vocabulary it contained and its use of Arabic script in the 19th century? All languages borrow words from other languages, and Swahili speakers have borrowed extensively from Arabic. But such borrowing was largely limited to certain cultural fields where Arab influence was strongest (such as jurisprudence, trade, religion, non-indigenous flora, and maritime affairs), and it occurred relatively late in the development of Swahili, when Arab influence along the coast was increasing. Arabic's influence on Swahili was thus relatively late and restricted, and it had little impact on the development of the basic elements of early Swahili.

The new archaeological and linguistic interpretations of early Swahili history appeared to fit together remarkably well and enabled us to hypothesize that Swahili-speaking societies first emerged around the Lamu Archipelago in the early ninth century, from whence Swahili speakers spread along the coast to establish a number of maritime settlements by the eleventh century, when increasing trade and Arab influence led them to expand their settlements more rapidly, build in stone, and adopt Islam.

There were some problems with this interpretation, however, and it now needs rethinking in the light of new data. The first concerned the historical traditions of Swahili themselves. Most Swahili have their own traditions concerning their origins and subsequent development. Many tell of early immigrants from Shiraz who established the earliest settlements and ruling dynasties on the coast. It is unlikely that these traditions were literally true, however, for there is little archaeological, cultural, or linguistic evidence of Persian influence on Swahili, and the role of Shiraz in Indian Ocean trade had already declined before Shirazi began to appear in Swahili traditions. Not only that, but many of the traditions state that the Shirazi came not from Shiraz, but from Shungwaya, the legendary Swahili homeland along the Kenyan-Somali coast. Those who claimed to be Shirazi, thus, were probably early Swahili who migrated south to establish themselves as the first families, or *waungwana*, of the major towns of the coast. Given the common practice of adopting the names of prestigious places as family names, or *nisbas*, they must have taken the name Shiraz as their *nisba*, just as many were to later take names from Oman in the nineteenth century.⁷

⁶ Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 32–67; Thomas J. Hinnebusch, "Swahili: Genetic Affiliations and Evidence," *Studies in African Linguistics*, supplement 6 (1976), 95–108; Thomas J. Hinnebusch, Derek Nurse, and M. J. Mould, *Studies in the Classification of Eastern Bantu Languages* (Hamburg, 1981); Derek Nurse, "A Tentative Classification of the Primary Dialects of Swahili," *SUGIA* 4 (1982), 165–205; Derek Nurse and Gérard Philippson, "The Bantu Languages of East Africa: A Lexico-Statistical Survey" in Edgar C. Polomé and Clifford P. Hill, eds., *Language in Tanzania* (Oxford, 1980), 26–67; idem, "Historical Implications of the Language Map of East Africa" in L. Bouquiaux, ed., *L'Expansion Bantoue* (Paris, 1980), II, 685–714.

⁷ Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 68–79.

The Shirazi traditions also relate how the Shirazi paid tribute to the local inhabitants, married their daughters, and had sons by them, who then became the legitimate rulers of the town through their dual inheritance. The Shirazi traditions are thus elegant models of the historical development of Swahili societies. To be a Shirazi was to be a real Swahili who settled along the coast, paid tribute to and intermarried with the local inhabitants, and subsequently became the ruling class. Subsequent traditions expanded on this history to show how the towns then developed into complex, stratified societies with the expansion of trade from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.⁸

A second problem, not so easily resolved, concerned a chronological gap in the archaeological, linguistic, and documentary evidence between the second and ninth centuries. Linguists feel that the first Northeast Coast (NEC) speakers reached the Tanzanian coast no later than the second-third century AD, contemporary with the earliest evidence for Kwale ware pottery and associated iron working. The distribution of Kwale ware and NEC also coincides, making the association of NEC speakers with Kwale ware and the early iron age likely. The earliest attested date for the next series of settlements—those of the earliest Swahili sites associated with Tana ware (also known as Wenje ware, Kitchen ware, Triangular Incised ware, or Maore ware)—was not until the eighth century, a period linguists associate with the emergence of Swahili as a distinct language, however, leaving a gap of six centuries between initial coastal settlements associated with NEC and Kwale ware and the subsequent emergence of Swahili and Tana traditions in northern Kenya. Similarly, no documents exist between the earliest references to coastal towns in the *Periplus* and Ptolemy's *Geography* in the first and second centuries AD and those of Arab travelers visiting the coast from the tenth. While NEC was slowly evolving into Sabaki and Swahili, then, there was no archaeological data for the development from Kwale to Tana ware, if indeed they were related, or documentary evidence for other events along the coast.

Further, we associated the subsequent migrations of Pokomo and Mijikenda to their current locations with their own traditions of having been forced to migrate from Shungwaya by Oromo expanding down the coast in the early sixteenth century. There was thus an even larger gap of thirteen centuries between the earliest known Bantu settlement behind the Kenya coast and the subsequent settlement of the area by its current Mijikenda inhabitants. Was the hinterland vacant all the intervening time? Had Sabaki speakers really all gone north prior to returning south from the 9th century, or had they simply gradually expanded along the Kenya and Somali coasts, during which time their dialects slowly differentiated into the languages presently spoken in the area?⁹ In short, while the Shungwaya traditions made sense linguistically in terms of the probable historical development of the Sabaki languages and influences on them, there was a large gap in the archaeological and documentary data that needed to be accounted for.

⁸ Ibid., 80–98.

⁹ As subsequently argued by Martin Walsh, "Mijikenda Origins: A Review of the Evidence," *Transafrican Journal of History* 21 (1992), 1–18.

The Archaeology of Early Swahili Societies

A recent explosion of archaeological research has begun to fill out the historical landscape. This research has been of two types: individual site reports, which stress the internal development of individual communities, and area surveys, which show the relationship of Swahili communities with one another and with others.

Mark Horton's comprehensive site report, *Shanga*, is a modern classic, carefully reconstructing the development of one of the oldest towns of the coast from its beginnings in the 8th century to its demise in the 15th. Horton details the town's pre-Muslim origins, something that had only been implicit in Chittick's earlier reports on Kilwa and Manda, thus charting for the first time the evolution of a small coastal fishing and iron working community into a large and prosperous Muslim trading town.¹⁰ Horton's study is a model of careful stratigraphy and precise dating, based on radiocarbon and imported pottery,¹¹ though his historical inferences occasionally move beyond the bounds of his data,¹² and he sometimes comes to different conclusions in different publications.¹³

According to Horton, Shanga was first occupied ca. AD 760–780 by a small group of local fishermen and craftsmen.¹⁴ They lived in circular thatched or rectangular timber-and-daub huts within a small enclosed area, fished in the adjacent bay, worked iron, ground shell beads, and produced a characteristic early type of Tana tradition pottery typical of the coast and hinterland at the time. They also traded with merchants from the Persian Gulf, as evidenced by the presence of Persian Sassanian-Islamic wares dated to the late 8th century and by the construction of a wooden mosque and the first Muslim burials by 850. In return, Shanga exported ivory, timber, tortoise shell, ambergris, rock crystal, slaves, gum copal, and iron.

Iron production and trade increased, and the village grew in size and scale until the 10th century, when people began to use carved *porites* coral to build a new town wall, mosque, and houses outside the central enclosure. The influence of Islam

¹⁰ Mark Horton, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London, 1996). Cf. Chittick, *Kilwa*; Chittick, *Manda*; Mark Horton, "Asiatic Colonisation of the East African Coast: The Manda Evidence," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1986), 201–13.

¹¹ Horton, *Shanga*, 14–16, 274–310, but cf. idem, "Early Muslim Trading Settlements on the East African Coast: New Evidence from Shanga," *Antiquaries Journal* 67 (1987), 295–96.

¹² E.g., the extent of putative Southern Cushitic influence on early Swahili speech and economy (Horton, *Shanga*, 410–11) or the reputed similarities between Mijikenda *kayas* and Swahili central squares [Horton, *Shanga*, 8, 85; idem, "Swahili Architecture, Space and Social Structure" in Michael Parker-Pearson and Colin Richards, eds., *Architecture and Order* (London, 1994), 153–54]. See below for further discussion of these points.

¹³ While some of these differences, such as the nature of Southern Cushitic influence on early Swahili (cf. Horton, "Early Settlement" and Horton, *Shanga*, 410–11), clearly represent developments in his own thinking, others, such as changes in overall dating and periodization (cf. Horton, "Muslim Trading Settlements," 303–08, and Horton, *Shanga*, 394–406), pass unnoted and unexplained.

¹⁴ I draw here largely on Horton, *Shanga*, 87–148, 394–427. Note differences in dating and periodization in Horton, "Muslim Trading Settlements," 303–12.

continued to expand, and by 1050, the community had built a new Friday mosque large enough to accommodate all the adult men in the community for the first time. They also began to produce textiles, developed more refined variants of Tana ware, and imported greater quantities of white glazed, sgraffiato, and Chinese pottery. Shanga was becoming a prosperous Muslim trading community.

The town was destroyed shortly thereafter, when the Friday mosque was burned and the site leveled, but it began to recover by 1075. A new larger mosque was built, new stone houses constructed, and imports continued. By 1250–1325, Shanga had shifted its trade to southern Arabia (as indicated by a shift from Persian sgraffiato to Arabian black-on-yellow pottery), largely abandoned textile and iron production, and become a developed mercantile economy. People now built in coral rag, using mud mortar. Shanga reached its peak between 1325 and 1375, as people built new houses and two new mosques of coral rag and lime, and imported pottery became more plentiful. Thereafter, the town went into slow decline, and by 1400–1425, it was in ruins, its Friday mosque burned, and its houses abandoned, as its inhabitants left for Siyu and Pate.

Horton stresses the evolutionary nature of the town's development throughout. Building plans and styles evolved *in situ* as people adapted new materials and techniques to older forms. New stone houses were built on older mud foundations; their roofs continued to be pitched and thatched until late in their development; the overall town plan was retained even as individual mosques, tombs, and houses were slowly reoriented to Mecca; and the first small timber mosques built by foreign merchants were repeatedly redesigned, rebuilt in coral, and enlarged to accommodate an expanding local Muslim population. In the meantime, older style thatched roof, timber-and-daub buildings predominated throughout the poorer parts of town.¹⁵

Archaeological excavations elsewhere along the coast expand Horton's picture.¹⁶ Surveys west and east of Cape Guardafui in northern Somalia confirm Roman accounts of earlier coastal trade, from the 1st century BC to the 5th century AD, long before the advent of Islam.¹⁷ Further south, Mogadishu, Gezira, and Barawa may date from the 8th or 9th century, based on the presence of Sassanian-Islamic pottery, while Merka, Munghia, Kismayu, Bur Gao, and the Bajuni Islands date only from the 11th century or later.¹⁸

¹⁵ Horton, *Shanga*, 26–62, 83–85, 170–229, 235–42. For an attempt to reassert the alien nature of Swahili architecture, see Linda W. Donley-Reid, "A Structuring Structure: The Swahili House" in Susan Kent, ed., *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space* (Cambridge, 1990), 114–26, and Horton's response, "Swahili Architecture."

¹⁶ Capably summarized by Chapurukha M. Kusimba in *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 1999), 90–140, and Middleton and Horton, *The Swahili*.

¹⁷ H. Neville Chittick, "An Archaeological Reconnaissance in the Horn: The British Somali Expedition, 1975," *Azania* 11 (1976), 117–33; Matthew C. Smith and Henry T. Wright, "The Ceramics from Ras Hafun in Somalia: Notes on a Classical Maritime Site," *Azania* 23 (1988), 115–41.

¹⁸ H. Neville Chittick, "An Archaeological Reconnaissance of the Southern Somali Coast," *Azania* 4 (1969), 115–30; idem, "Mediaeval Mogadishu," *Paideuma*, 28 (1982), 45–62; Hilary

Early Roman trade is also attested in Unguja Ukuu on the southeast coast of Zanzibar from the 5th century, followed by Persian trade in the 8th–9th. The site terminates in the 9th century, however, and like the comparable period at Shanga, it contains plenty of local Tana ware similar to that found elsewhere but no mosques or stone buildings of any sort. Subsequent sites on Zanzibar and Pemba—Mkokotoni, Kizimkazi, Ras Mkumbuu, Mkia wa Ngombe, Mtambwe Mkuu, Zanzibar town, and Tumbatu—all date from the 11th and 12th centuries and are Muslim sites lacking early local pottery, but with Sassanian, sgraffiato, and early Qingbai glazed stoneware imports.¹⁹

Within the Lamu Archipelago and on the adjacent mainland, Manda, Pate, and Ungwana were all contemporary with Shanga, based on the common presence of early Tana ware and Sassanian-Islamic pottery, and all became Muslim commercial centers, producing iron and copper work, timber, ivory, beads, textiles, Tana ware, and lime for local consumption and export.²⁰

Sites as early as these also occur at the southern end of the coast at Kilwa, Chibuene, and the Comoro Islands. The early finds at Kilwa, ca. 800–1150, are remarkably similar to those at Shanga and Manda, including early Tana tradition pottery (termed “Kitchen Ware” by Chittick), rectangular timber-and-daub houses, extensive fishing, bead grinding, ironworking, and weaving, and occasional imported Sassanian and sgraffiato pottery. While Chittick concludes that the early settlement was not autochthonous, the close parallels with Shanga and Manda and the absence of Muslim influence indicate that this too was an early pre-Muslim Swahili town, initially established at the same time as those in the north.²¹ This was followed by a period of increasing prosperity in 1150–1300, with the first coral and lime buildings, more imported pottery (sgraffiato and Chinese porcelain), the first imported glass beads and locally struck coins, a profusion of spindle whorls, and the first mosques

Costa Sanseverino, “Archaeological Remains on the Southern Somali Coast,” *Azania* 18 (1983), 151–64.

¹⁹ Abdulrahman M. Juma, “The Swahili and the Mediterranean Worlds: Pottery from the Late Roman Period from Zanzibar,” *Antiquity* 70 (1996), 148–54; Mark Horton and Catherine M. Clark, “Zanzibar Archaeological Survey,” *Azania* 20 (1985), 167–71; idem, *The Zanzibar Archaeological Survey, 1984–85* (Zanzibar, 1985); Mark Horton, H. W. Brown and W. A. Oddy, “The Mtambwe Hoard,” *Azania* 21 (1986), 115–23. We await further reports on Horton’s recent work on Zanzibar.

²⁰ Chittick, *Manda*; Horton, “Asiatic Colonisation”; H. Neville Chittick, “Discoveries in the Lamu Archipelago,” *Azania* 2 (1967), 37–67; idem, “A New Look at the History of Pate,” *Journal of African History* 10 (1969), 375–91; Thomas H. Wilson and Athman Lali Omar, “Excavations at Pate on the East African Coast” in G. Pwiti and R. Soper, eds., *Aspects of African Archaeology* (Harare, 1996), 543–54; idem, “Archaeological Investigations at Pate,” *Azania* 32 (1997), 31–76; George Abungu, “Pate: A Swahili Town Revisited,” *Kenya Past and Present*, 28 (1996), 50–60; James S. Kirkman, *Ungwana on the Tana* (The Hague, 1966); George Abungu, “Communities on the River Tana, Kenya: An Archaeological Study of Relations between the Delta and the River Basin, 700–1890 AD” (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1990).

²¹ H. Neville Chittick, “Kilwa: A Preliminary Report,” *Azania* 1 (1966), 5–25; idem, *Kilwa*, I, 17–24, 235–45. For a recent overview of the archaeology and history of Kilwa, see J. E. G. Sutton, “Kilwa: A History of the Ancient Swahili Town,” *Azania* 33 (1998), 113–69.

and Muslim graves. Kilwa had become "a substantial and prosperous town." Finally, there was a period of marked growth between 1300 and 1500, with further increases in imported pottery (now mostly Chinese celadon) and extensive building in stone, dramatic new building styles, marked changes in local pottery, and a decline in weaving and ironwork, just like Shanga.

Chibuene, more than 1,500 km. south of Kilwa in southern Mozambique, was also first occupied in the 8th or 9th century, as indicated by a range of imported materials, local pottery identical to that found in Manda, Shanga, Kilwa, and the Comoros, and extensive bead and iron manufacturing. Unlike the others, however, the early settlement did not prosper, and it was abandoned ca. 1000 and not reoccupied until ca. 1450.²²

Extensive discoveries in the Comoro Islands confirm the simultaneous development of towns along the length of the coast. While not Swahili-speaking, Comorians speak a closely related language to Swahili and their island communities, 300 km. off the southern Tanzanian coast, developed in parallel with those of the coast itself. The earliest period of Comorian development, the Dembeni phase (9th–10th century), was characterized by the establishment of a single main village on each of the four islands. People lived in rectangular pole-and-mud houses; fished extensively with hook, line, and net; raised goats; cultivated rice, millet, coconut, legumes, and probably bananas and taro; produced iron; made plain and red-slipped pottery often identical to Tana ware at Manda, Kilwa, and Chibuene; and imported some Sassanian-Islamic pottery. The Dembeni sites were, then, classic early Swahili sites, and with the firm discovery by flotation of domesticated seeds for the first time, we can now say that coastal communities subsisted on both fishing and farming.²³

Trade and towns in the Comoros expanded in the 11th–13th centuries and a number of smaller rural villages grew up. Trade was conducted with the Middle East and Madagascar (as established by the presence of Sassanian-Islamic, opaque white glaze, and sgraffiato pottery from the Persian Gulf and chorite-schist vessels from Madagascar). People began to raise chickens and they continued to make local pottery similar to that at Manda and Kilwa. The first stone mosques were built early in the period, possibly over earlier timber ones, and later rebuilt and enlarged.

²² Paul J. Sinclair, "Chibuene: An Early Trading Site in Southern Mozambique," *Paideuma* 28 (1982), 149–64; idem, *Space, Time and Social Formation: A Territorial Approach to the Archaeology and Anthropology of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, c. 0–1700* (Uppsala, 1987), 86–90. Sinclair has subsequently suggested pushing the date of Chibuene back to the mid-1st millennium based on a single fragment of green glazed ware, dated at Hafun from the 1st c. BC–5th c AD, but this is problematic given the prevalence of local ceramics similar to those at Kilwa and associated radiocarbon dates: Paul J. Sinclair, "Archaeology in Eastern Africa: An Overview of Current Chronological Issues," *Journal of African History* 32 (1991), 190.

²³ Henry T. Wright, "Early Seafarers of the Comoro Islands: The Dembeni Phase of the IXth–Xth Centuries AD," *Azania* 19 (1984), 13–59; idem, "Early Islam, Oceanic Trade, and Town Development on Nzwani: The Comorian Archipelago in the XIth–XVth Centuries AD," *Azania* 27 (1992), 81–128; Claude Allibert, *Mayotte* (Paris, 1984); Claude Allibert, Alain Argant, and Jacqueline Argant, "Le site de Bagamoyo (Mayotte, Archipel des Comoros)," *Études Océan Indien* 2 (1983), 5–40; idem, "Le site de Dembeni (Mayotte Archipel des Comoros)," *Études Océan Indien* 11 (1990), 63–172.

Comorian towns then entered their "Classic" period in the 14th–15th centuries as mosques were elaborately remodeled, small hamlets grew up around the larger towns, and new building revealed marked social differentiation.

Similar Swahili- and Comorian-speaking communities also developed along the northern Madagascar coasts during the same periods. Many of the earliest settlements were mere shelters established for the annual trading seasons, but permanent trading towns were well established by the 12th century.²⁴

While developments in the Comoros and Madagascar have been largely neglected in earlier studies of the coast, the strong parallels between their development and that elsewhere along the coast make it clear that the islands played an important role in the overall history. Far from lying remotely off the coast, they lay astride the main sailing route from Mozambique (and the gold fields of Zimbabwe) to Kilwa and the northern coast, as vessels followed the winds and currents flowing out to Madagascar and the Comoros before turning back toward the coast to Kilwa.²⁵

Coast and Hinterland

Archaeologists have augmented site reports detailing the internal development of individual communities with area surveys exploring the external relations among Swahili communities and their neighbors. Such surveys were initially inspired by the wide distribution and general similarities between two different traditions of pottery found along the coast: (1) Kwale ware and related styles associated with the earliest ironworking and farming sites in northeastern Tanzania and southeastern Kenya in the early centuries AD and (2) Tana tradition wares found ubiquitously on early Swahili sites and throughout the hinterland from the 8th or 9th century.²⁶

These traditions have been explored within the context of the spread of ironworking, agriculture, and Bantu languages throughout eastern and southern Africa over the past two or three millennia. Indeed, the three are often linked in a single phenomenon, the Early Iron Age Industrial or Chifumbaze Complex,²⁷ but it is now thought that the different elements spread separately and only came together in

²⁴ Henry T. Wright et al., "The Evolution of Settlement Systems in the Bay of Bueny and the Mahavy River Valley, North-Western Madagascar," *Azania* 31 (1996), 37–73; Robert E. Dewar, "The Archaeology of Early Settlement of Madagascar" in Julian Reade, ed., *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity* (London, 1996), 471–86; Pierre V erin (David Smith, tr.), *The History of Civilisation in North Madagascar* (Rotterdam, 1986), 67–69, 143–47, 380–97; Marie de Chantal Radimilahy, *Mahilaka* (Uppsala, 1998).

²⁵ Felix Chami, *The Tanzanian Coast in the First Millennium AD* (Uppsala, 1994), 37.

²⁶ Paul J. Sinclair et al., eds., *Urban Origins in Eastern Africa* (8 vols) (Stockholm, 1988–1993); Adria LaViolette, William Fawcett, and Peter R. Schmidt, "The Coast and the Hinterland: UDSM Field Schools, 1987–88," *Nyame Akuma* 32 (1989), 38–46; Peter R. Schmidt et al., *Archaeological Investigations in the Vicinity of Mkiu, Kisarawe District, Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam, 1992).

²⁷ David W. Phillipson, *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), 102–39, 145–50; idem, *African Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1993), 187–98.

different areas at different times.²⁸ Jan Vansina has hypothesized that the parallel expansion of ironworking and farming may have led to dramatic population growth, expansion of local industries and long-distance trade, development of large-scale territorial polities, and greater differentiation in local cultural traditions throughout eastern Africa between AD 800 and 1100. This was precisely the time when the earliest Swahili towns were beginning to develop, thus linking their development to events taking place within eastern African as well as to those taking place across the Indian Ocean.

At the same time, if one could establish continuous links between Kwale ware and Tana ware, then one could also link the initial development of Swahili societies to earlier ironworking ones, and the problem of the chronological gap between the two would be lessened. That is tempting, but there has been considerable disagreement on the relationship between the two ceramic traditions. For scholars like David Collett, who has developed a systematic stylistic comparison of the two traditions, they are unrelated, leaving the gap unbridged, the fate of early Bantu farmers and ironworkers unknown, and the antecedents of the Swahili a mystery.²⁹ Following Collett, others, such as George Abungu, James de Vere Allen, Richard Wilding, Randall Pouwels, and Mark Horton, have looked to the Southern Cushitic Pastoral Neolithic rather than Kwale for the stylistic antecedents of Swahili Tana tradition wares. But most scholars working in Tanzania (such as Felix Chami and his colleagues at the University of Dar es Salaam, Randi Haaland, William Fawcett, Peter Schmidt, Kurt Odner, Carolyn Thorp, Neville Chittick, and Robert Soper) as well as some working in Kenya (Chapurukha Kusimba, Athman Lali Omar, Thomas Wilson, Richard Helm, and David Phillipson), see Tana and Kwale wares as closely related, with Tana evolving directly from Kwale.³⁰

While general stylistic classification of different ceramic traditions remains fairly subjective, systematic comparison of specific stylistic features, their distributions, and the sites where they are found in association provide more principled bases for analysis. Kwale ware, the earlier of the two traditions, has a fairly limited distribution focused on the northeastern highlands, extending from Mt. Mwangea in the north (with possible occurrences further north in Barawa and on the Tana River) through southeastern Kenya (Shimba Hills, Taita Hills) and northeastern Tanzania (Kilimanjaro, Pare, Usambara, and Ngulu) to the Rufiji Delta (Kilosa, Limbo, and Mafia) in the south between AD 100 and 500.³¹ Tana tradition, by contrast, is more

²⁸ Jan Vansina, "A Slow Revolution: Farming in Subequatorial Africa," *Azania* 29–30 (1994–95), 15–26. See also David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place* (Portsmouth, NH, 1998); Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age* (Charlottesville, 1998).

²⁹ David Collett, "The Spread of Early Iron Producing Communities in Eastern and Southern Africa" (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1985).

³⁰ See discussion and sources below.

³¹ Robert C. Soper, "Kwale: An Early Iron Age Site in Southeastern Kenya," *Azania* 2 (1967), 1–17; idem, "Iron Age Sites in North-eastern Tanzania," *Azania* 2 (1967), 19–36; Collett, "Iron Producing"; Kurt Odner, "Usangi Hospital and other Archaeological Sites in the North Pare Mountain, North-eastern Tanzania," *Azania* 6 (1971), 89–130; idem, "A Preliminary Report on an Archaeological Survey on the Slopes of Kilimanjaro," *Azania* 6 (1971), 131–49; Schmidt et

widely distributed. It is, as we have seen, the diagnostic tradition for the earliest Swahili sites the length of the coast, but it is also found up the Tana River, in Mijikenda, on Kilimanjaro, and in Taita, Pare, the Usambaras, and Ngulu.³²

The distribution of Kwale thus forms the core of the wider distribution of Tana, suggesting that the later tradition evolved from the earlier. In many cases the two traditions are found on the same or nearby sites. In South Pare, for example, a related style to Tana, Maore, is closely related to Kwale stylistically and succeeds it, while in North Pare and southern Kilimanjaro, Kwale and Maore wares are found mixed on the same sites and sometimes on the same shards. On Kilimanjaro there is a close stylistic resemblance between the two and a clear evolutionary sequence from Kwale to Maore and later styles. In Ngulu, Kwale, Tana, and a later tradition follow one another in logical sequence.³³

Chami and his colleagues working in Tanzania have now greatly expanded the number and distribution of sites where the transition from Kwale (termed Early Iron Ware, or EIW, by Chami) to Tana (termed Triangular Incised Ware, or TIW) can be seen in areas south into the Rufiji Delta and inland up to 200 km. from the coast.³⁴ These include a number of new sites in central Tanzania (Kisarawe, Bagamoyo, Lugoba, Kilosa, Limbo, Dakawa, Misasa, Dar es Salaam, Mpiji, Kaole, Kiwangwa, Masunguru, Mkadini, Kwale Island, Nkukutu, and Kivinja) in addition to early TIW sites previously explored in Mozambique (Matola, Chibuene, Momapo, and Nampula), the Comoros and Madagascar (Dembeni, Sima, Mro Dewa, Mbeni, Mbashili, and Irodo), mainland Tanzania (Kilwa, Amboni, and the northeast), Zanzibar and Pemba (Unguja Ukuu and Mkokotoni), and Kenya (Kwale, Tana, Wenje, Ungwana, Manda, Shanga, and Mijikenda). Several of the new sites, including Limbo, Misasa, Dakawa, Kwale Island, Nkukutu, and Kivinja, contain

al., *Archaeological Investigations*; Carolyn Thorp, "Archaeology in the Ngulu Hills: Iron Age and Earlier Ceramics," *Azania* 27 (1992), 21–44; Chittick, *Kilwa*, I, 106, 110. Kwale may extend south into Mozambique and South Africa, where a similar style, known as Matola, dates from the 2nd–6th century; Paul Sinclair et al., "A Perspective on Archaeological Research in Mozambique," in Thurston Shaw et al., eds., *The Archaeology of Africa* (London, 1993), 417–18.

³² Henry Mutoro, "An Archaeological Study of the Mijikenda *Kaya* Settlements on the Hinterland of the Kenya Coast" (Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, 1987); Odner, "Kilimanjaro"; Soper, "Iron Age Sites in North-eastern Tanzania"; Thorp, "Ngulu Hills"; Felix Chami, "Limbo: Early Iron-working in South-eastern Tanzania," *Azania* 27 (1992), 45–52; Sinclair, "Archaeology in Eastern Africa"; Henry T. Wright, "Trade and Politics on the Eastern Littoral of Africa, AD 800–1300 in Thurstan Shaw et al., eds., *The Archaeology of Africa* (London, 1993), 658–72.

³³ Odner, "Kilimanjaro"; Soper, "Iron Age Sites in North-eastern Tanzania"; Thorp, "Ngulu Hills"; Wilson and Omar, "Archaeological Investigations at Pate," 62; Chami, *Tanzanian Coast*; idem, "A Review of Swahili Archaeology," *African Archaeological Review*, 15 (1998), 199–218; William Fawcett and Adria LaViolette, "Iron Age Settlement around Mkiu, South-eastern Tanzania," *Azania* 25 (1990), 19–26.

³⁴ Differences in nomenclature, frequently site-specific, further confuse the overall situation. While Kwale ware and EIW are the same style, as are Tana and TIW, those working in Kenya tend to retain the earlier geographic referents, while those in Tanzania prefer the less specific stylistic terms. I use both Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW interchangeably throughout, as shown in Figure 1.

EIW from the 1st to 4th century and early TIW from the 4th–5th on the same or adjacent sites, thus linking the two temporally as well as stylistically.³⁵

Early TIW sites are characterized by ironworking, beadmaking, weaving, extensive fishing and gathering shell fish, raising goats and chickens, farming, and trading. What is most characteristic of the early TIW phases is that similar style pottery is found all along the coast, that these were often preceded by EIW, and that many characteristic EIW features continued to appear on early TIW, including lines of punctates, comb-stamping, cross-hatched bands, zigzag double incisions, and bevels, flutes, and thickened rims, while new TIW elements, such as incised triangles, begin to appear on late EIW before it was eclipsed and its features lost on later TIW. Chami has now classified these sites to posit a clear evolution throughout the coast and hinterland from EIW to TIW and later forms: Plain Ware (PW), Neck Punctating (NP), and Swahili, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Classification of Early Coastal Pottery (after Chami)

<u>Tradition</u>	<u>Alternative Names</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Area</u>
Early Iron Ware (EIW)	Kwale	1-5 th c.	NE high
Triangular Incised Ware (TIW)			
early/transitional		4-6 th c.	
middle	Tana, Wenje, Maore	6-8 th c.	all
late	Kitchen, Dembeni	8-10 th c.	
Plain Ware (PW)	Early Kitchen	10-13 th c.	south
Neck Punctating (NP)		11-14 th c.	north
Swahili		14-15 th c.	all

TIW began to succeed EIW, retaining many of its features, between the 4th and 6th centuries at the earliest sites (Mpiji, Kaole, Kiwangwa, Masuguru, Misasa, Dakawa, Unguja Ukuu, Pemba, and the Rufiji Delta), sites associated with iron smelting, beadmaking, and some pre-Islamic green- and blue-glazed Sassanian pottery. By the 8th century, most of the EIW features had been lost, however, as the

³⁵ Chami, *Tanzanian Coast*, 13–23, 43–69, 90–93; Felix Chami and Paul Msemwa, “A New Look at Culture and Trade on the Azanian Coast,” *Current Anthropology*, 38 (1997), 673–77; Chami, “Review of Swahili Archaeology”; Fawcett and LaViolette, “Iron Age Settlement around Mkiu”; Schmidt, *Archaeological Investigations*; Randi Haaland, “Dakawa: An Early Iron Age Site in the Tanzanian Hinterland,” *Azania* 29–30 (1994–95), 238–47; Wright, “Trade and Politics”; Felix Chami and Emanuel Kessy, “Archaeological Work at Kisiju, Tanzania, 1994,” *Nyame Akuma* 43 (1995), 38–45; Adria LaViolette and Jeffrey Fleisher, “Reconnaissance of Sites Bearing Triangular Incised (Tana Tradition) Ware on Pemba Island, Zanzibar,” *Nyame Akuma* 44 (1995), 59–65; Emanuel Kessy, “Archaeological Sites Survey from Kisiju to Dar es Salaam,” *Nyame Akuma* 48 (1997), 57–69; Felix Chami and Paul Msemwa, “The Excavation at Kwale Island, South of Dar es Salaam,” *Nyame Akuma* 48 (1997), 45–56; Felix Chami and Bertram Mapunda, “The 1996 Archaeological Reconnaissance North of the Rufiji Delta,” *Nyame Akuma* 49 (1998), 62–78; Kusimba, *Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, 90–100.

formative phase in the development of the coastal towns began. TIW continued to develop internally during the succeeding PW phase on the southern coast (at Kilwa, Kaole, Changwechela, Kwale Island, Kivinja) and NP phase on the northern (Horton's Tana B & C; Wilson and Omar's Tana II & III), where it ultimately came to define a new "Swahili" phase as a style all along the coast.³⁶

Richard Helm has now affirmed similarly close relations between Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW on the Kenyan coast as well through careful stratigraphic analysis and meticulous stylistic comparison of individual features of the two. After conducting a survey of sites associated with inland Mijikenda, he excavated five sites. One, Mgombani, contained EIW, transitional EIW-TIW, and TIW, revealing a clear transition from EIW to TIW and a later phase of TIW between the 7th and 9th centuries. Two other sites in Kwale (Chombo and Mteza) were late EIW/early TIW sites (8th–10th century) with some PW (9–10th century) in the later stages. Mtsengo in Kilifi displayed a transition from late TIW to PW in the 14th–15th century. And Mbuyuni in Kwale contained late TIW dating from the 15th to the 17th century. Helm concludes that there was continuous occupation of the coastal hinterland from the early stone age through the modern period, with considerable mutual influence and development between LSA and EIW as well as between EIW and TIW sites. EIW sites were clustered in the most fertile zones around Mombasa and date from 100 BC to AD 600, while transitional and early TIW sites occupy the same area from AD 600 to 1000; later TIW sites extend north and west into the drier uplands and hinterland from 1000 to 1650; and modern sites cover the hinterland, from 1650 to the present.³⁷

Given the overlapping distributions and stylistic patterns of Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW, Chami's classificatory schema establishing a clear transition from the earliest iron producers on the coast to later Swahili sites now appears fundamentally correct. If so, Swahili is now firmly linked with earlier EIW and TIW traditions and ultimately back into the earlier history of the Bantu-speaking peoples.

Scholars working in northern Kenya have challenged these conclusions, however, and look for Swahili's antecedents to the Pastoral Neolithic traditions of central Kenya associated with Southern Cushitic speakers instead. Based largely on what they see as stylistic correspondences between Pastoral Neolithic and Tana tradition pottery and the earlier presence of Southern Cushitic-speaking pastoralists along the Tana River and northern coast, they posit that Southern Cushites traded along the coast long before the first Bantu speakers arrived early in the 1st millen-

³⁶ Chami, *Tanzanian Coast*, 11–18, 90–93; Chami and Msemwa, "Culture and Trade"; Chami, "Review of Swahili Archaeology"; Wright, "Trade and Politics." Chami's classification parallels that for Shanga by Horton: *Shanga*, 243–264.

³⁷ Richard Helm, "Conflicting Histories: The Archaeology of the Iron-working, Farming Communities in the Central and Southern Coast Region of Kenya" (Ph.D. thesis, Bristol, 2000), 115–39, 146–208, 224–27, 275–94; idem, *Conflicting Histories: Archaeology and Identity on the Swahili Coast* (forthcoming). In earlier surveys, Henry Mutoro and Chapurukha Kusimba also found early Tana/TIW throughout the area, dating perhaps from the 7th or 9th century, but their radiocarbon dates are problematic and neither found any evidence of earlier EIW. Mutoro, "Archaeological Survey of the Mijikenda Kaya"; Chapurukha M. Kusimba, "The Social Context of Iron Forging on the Kenya Coast," *Africa* 66 (1996), 386–410.

nium and thereby became the nucleus of a dynamic multiethnic, multilingual society that eventually gave rise to the Swahili. Further, they claim that a Pastoral Neolithic cultural substratum underlies Swahili sites, as seen in the reputed presence of cattle kraals and bones at their lowest levels and the putative prevalence of Southern Cushitic vocabulary in Swahili.³⁸

While Southern Cushitic speakers did inhabit the northern coast before the first Bantu speakers appeared, they had little apparent cultural influence on early Swahili. The closest Pastoral Neolithic site, Marangishu, is 300 km. from the coast and dates from the 1st century, too far away and too early to influence Swahili significantly. Further, Swahili is a Bantu language and contains little Southern Cushitic vocabulary, particularly at its earlier stages, and there is no evidence of its emergence as a mixed language or pidgin.³⁹ Nor is there any archaeological evidence of a pastoral substratum in early coastal sites; there are no kraals, very few bones of goats or sheep, and virtually none of cattle before AD 1000 at the earliest.⁴⁰ Rather, the early Swahili subsisted largely on fish and shellfish, both abhorrent to contemporary Cushites. In sum, Southern Cushitic influence on early Swahili societies was minimal, as has been that of Eastern Cushitic Oromo and Somali since.⁴¹

Stylistic comparisons of pottery without direct archaeological evidence are limited, and we can now probably disregard the claims for more than limited Southern Cushitic influence on the development of Swahili in the light of clear and direct evidence of the evolution of TIW from EIW.⁴² If so, we can see a continuous pattern of development from the early iron age to the present, but that leaves further problems in its wake. What do we make, for example, of the emergence of the earliest Swahili communities nearly simultaneously at opposite ends of the coast? As a

³⁸ Abungu, "River Tana," 114–75, 248–55; James deVere Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (London, 1993), 28–35, 43–52, 99–112, 120–132; Richard Wilding, *The Shorefolk: Aspects of the Early Development of Swahili Communities* (Fort Jesus Occasional Papers No. 2, Mombasa, 1987), 43; Horton, "Early Settlement," 315; idem, "Early Muslim Trading Settlements," 315; idem, "Early Maritime Trade," 443–46, 454; Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge, 1987), 9–22; but see Horton, *Shanga*, 243–70, 407–11 and Pouwels, "East African Coastal History," *Journal of African History* 40 (1999), 290–91, both of whom have now become critical of this view.

³⁹ For a breakdown of Southern Cushitic vocabulary in NEC, Sabaki, Swahili, and other Sabaki languages, see Derek Nurse and Thomas J. Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History* (Berkeley, 1993), 306–29, 577–691.

⁴⁰ Horton, *Shanga*, 243–70, 407–11.

⁴¹ Chami, *Tanzanian Coast*, 97; Wilson and Omar, "Archaeological Investigations at Pate," 63–64; Sinclair, "Archaeology in Eastern Africa." While Horton now accepts that there is little direct archaeological or linguistic evidence of Southern Cushitic influence on early Swahili and is critical of Allen's arguments, he still stresses the multiethnic, multilingual nature of earlier coastal society: Horton, *Shanga*, 410–11.

⁴² In fact, according to Abungu's comparative schema, Tana/TIW shares only one less motif with Kwale/EIW (15/21) than it does with PN (16/21), hardly enough to claim exclusive PN-Tana connections: Abungu, "River Tana," 148. Kusimba, *Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, 90–140, provides a good overview of this transition.

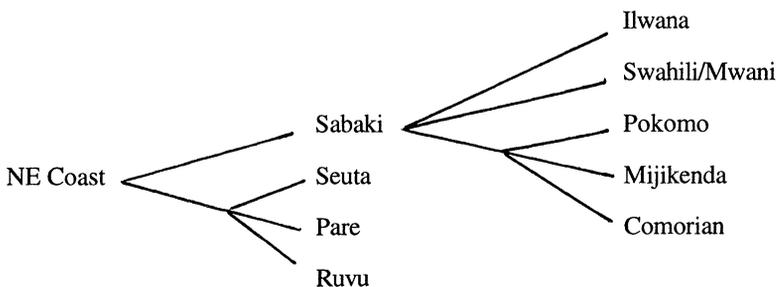
maritime society, Swahili could quickly traverse great distances and easily make the whole coastal environment their home, but such a sudden development demands explanation. And it reopens the question of where Swahili's antecedents lie: in northern Kenya, as we claimed earlier; on the southern Kenya coast, as Walsh and Helm argue; or on the central Tanzanian coast, as suggested by Chami? We need a clearer delineation of the early phases of TIW to answer these questions, but the slow transition from one cultural phase into another makes sense in terms of the linguistic evidence. Languages change in the same way.

Historical Linguistics

While the linguistic history of early Swahili has become well known since 1973, it continues to be widely misinterpreted. It is not clear why this is so, but Derek Nurse and Thomas Hinnebusch's monumental new study, *Swahili and Sabaki*, now makes it difficult to ignore. A rigorous application of the comparative method, *Swahili and Sabaki* carefully classifies Swahili and related Sabaki languages, reconstructs proto-Swahili, traces its genetic development, and explores a wide range of outside influences on it. While much of the book is technical linguistics, there is much valuable material here for historians as well.⁴³

According to Nurse and Hinnebusch, the linguistic history of Swahili is fairly straightforward. Far from being a mixed Afro-Arab pidgin or creole, as commonly believed, Swahili is a Bantu language whose linguistic history was thoroughly conventional. It is an Eastern (or Savanna) Bantu language, closely related to other Bantu languages of the coastal area. Its closest relatives are the Sabaki languages of the coast and Kenyan hinterland (Comoro, Swahili, Ilwana, Mijikenda, and Pokomo), while it is more distantly related to the Northeast Coast (NEC) languages scattered down the Tanzanian coast and its hinterland, as shown in Figure 2.⁴⁴

Figure 2: Northeast Coastal Bantu (after Nurse and Hinnebusch)



⁴³ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*. Nurse has also provided an excellent introduction to historical linguistics for historians: Derek Nurse, "The Contribution of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa," *Journal of African History*, 38 (1997), 359–91.

⁴⁴ In addition to Sabaki, the NEC languages include: Seuta (Bondei, Shambaa, Ngulu, and Zigula), Ruvu (Gogo, Kaguru, Kami, Kutu, Doe, Nhwele, Luguru, Sagara, Viduna, and Zaramo), and Pare (Pate and Tuβeta): Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 271–83.

There are few innovations of any sort in NEC, Sabaki, or Swahili that set them apart from one another, showing that these languages experienced few external influences and flowed fairly rapidly from one into another in the course of their development.⁴⁵ Swahili retains a high degree of inherited vocabulary, grammar, and sounds. Of a 100 word list of basic vocabulary, for example, 72–91 percent is inherited, while only 4–17 percent are loans from other African languages and 2–8 percent from non-African languages.⁴⁶ Arab influence was particularly limited and relatively recent. There has been little Arabic impact on Swahili morphology or phonology over 1,000 years of contact, and while Swahili has adopted a large set of Arabic loan words, they are mostly fairly recent and limited to fields where Arabic influence was greatest during the 17th–19th centuries, such as religion, law, administration, trade, sailing, measurement, and kinship. By contrast, there are only 12 Arab loan words presently reconstructed for proto-Sabaki and 16 for proto-Swahili.⁴⁷

Swahili, then, must have developed in place in association with the other NEC and Sabaki languages. The NEC languages today center on the highlands of north-eastern Tanzania and southeastern Kenya—Taita, Kilimanjaro, Pare, Usambara, and Ngulu—and extend south into the Rufiji Delta. This is both a relic area of great linguistic diversity and a highland area suitable for early Bantu farming. Only the Sabaki languages extend outside it, making it probable that the earliest NEC speakers initially settled here some 2,000 years ago.⁴⁸

Comparing the archaeological and linguistic evidence, the distribution of NEC correlates closely with that of the Kwale/EIW tradition, and both date from the 1st–5th centuries AD, thus making it likely that early ironworkers and farmers in this area were NEC speakers. The subsequent development of the Tana/TIW tradition between the 4th and 8th centuries would then have occurred simultaneously with the slow differentiation of NEC into Sabaki, Pare, Seuta, and Ruvu. Local cultural differences remained minor during this stage, however, as both the TIW tradition and the NEC languages remained remarkably homogeneous.⁴⁹ Through it all, individual cultures and languages slowly changed and gained new elements from others, leading to the development of new cultures, dialects, and languages. No sharp boundaries marked these developments, and the changes were no doubt imperceptible to people at the time. It is only in retrospect, when we artificially differentiate between archaeological cultures or languages, that such changes appear disjointed or discontinuous.

In contrast with the earlier NEC and Sabaki phases, the development of Swahili and related languages extended over a longer period of time to produce more markedly defined languages. This period is also more difficult to reconstruct, as one must take account of successive genetic developments brought about by population

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–23, 61, 203–15, 463–78, 501–03.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 324–28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 308–28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 33, 491.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 490–549. See also Helm, “Conflicting Histories,” 275–94.

shifts, numerous external influences caused by interactions with others, and the distribution of the languages today. Accordingly, early Sabaki speakers probably lived fairly compactly along the narrow Kenyan-Somali coastlands. By the middle of the 1st millennium AD, a core group of linguistic innovators (consisting of Comorian/Mijikenda/Pokomo) were probably surrounded by a number of more conservative languages (Swahili, Ilwana, and Mwani), and by AD 800, that group probably split between Mijikenda/Pokomo speakers and Comoro speakers. About the same time, Swahili speakers began to disperse along the coast to the Lamu Archipelago, Zanzibar, Kilwa, and Chibuene, and subsequently to Barawa and Mogadishu, dividing into northern and southern dialects in the process. At the same time, Mombasa/Chifundi, Mwiini, and Tikuu progressively broke away from the northern group, leaving Siu/Pate/Amu as a conservative and strongly defined dialect cluster. In the south, Pemba/Unguja, Tumbatu/Makunduchi, and Vumba/Mtang'ata all diverged from one another, but the subsequent southern dialects were isolated, not strongly defined, and experienced considerable influence from adjacent languages. Subsequently, Ilwana speakers moved up the Tana River, Mwani down the coast to southern Tanzania, Pokomo along the Tana, and Mijikenda south of the Sabaki River.⁵⁰

The association of successive groups of Bantu speakers with the development of the Kwale/EIW, Tana/TIW, and subsequent traditions does not exclude other influences, however. These were probably numerous, judging from widespread phonological and morphological changes and the presence of loan words from Southern Cushitic languages, Dahalo, Oromo, Somali, Malagasy, and Arabic, as well as extensive influences from other Bantu languages.⁵¹ Such influences were facilitated by continual contact among the NEC languages; the small size of most language communities; the presence of larger, more prestigious communities; and structural similarities among languages and widespread multilingualism that made linguistic transfers easy.⁵²

The apparently continuous development of Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW; that of Northeast Coast, Sabaki, and Swahili; and the probable association of individual phases of each with those of the other, all make it likely that Bantu-speaking, iron-producing, and farming peoples settled near the coast in the early 1st millennium and subsequently developed during the 2nd millennium into the peoples, cultures, and languages of the coast, hinterland, and islands from southern Somalia to Mozambique today.

⁵⁰ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 490–549. See also Wilhelm J. G. Möhlig, “The Swahili Dialects of Kenya in Relation to Mijikenda and the Bantu Idioms of the Tana Valley,” *SUGIA* 6 (1984/85), 296–303.

⁵¹ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 288–89, 329–33; Möhlig, “Swahili Dialects,” 296–303; Ehret, *African Classical Age*, 75–97, 172–73; Derek Nurse, “South Meets North: Ilwana = Bantu + Cushitic on Kenya’s Tana River,” in Peter Bakker and Maarten Mous, eds., *Mixed Languages* (Amsterdam, 1994), 213–22; idem, *Inheritance, Contact, and Change in Two East African Languages* (Cologne, 1999).

⁵² Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 33–34.

Such conclusions have been questioned by some linguistically influenced historians, however. In a recent survey of early East African history, Christopher Ehret sees the development of the Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW traditions as separate and discontinuous, with the Kwale traditions associated with an earlier presence at the coast of Upland Bantu speakers (Chaga/Dabida/Thagichu), who were then supplanted by NEC speakers responsible for the Tana tradition. Ehret's interpretation is based on five main points: (1) that the Tana tradition was "much too different to be directly derivable from Kwale," (2) that Upland represented a separate linguistic sub-group, (3) that Upland speakers preceded NEC speakers on the coast, (4) that the distribution of Kwale ware corresponded with that of Upland speakers while that of Northeast Coast speakers did not, and (5) that Northeast Coast speakers should thus be associated with Tana ware, not Kwale.⁵³

None of these assertions can be sustained, however. While the relationship between Kwale and Tana wares has been the subject of much debate among archaeologists, as we have seen, most now agree that the two traditions were indeed continuous. Second, the sub-grouping of Upland is neither justified by Ehret nor supported by others.⁵⁴ Third, the assumption of an earlier presence of Upland speakers on the coast is based on a few Thagichu loans in Northeast Coast, but Nurse and Hinnebusch interpret these loans as post-15th century; Tana now appears to succeed Kwale everywhere from the 4th century; and there remains a sizable unexplained chronological gap between Ehret's posited settlement of Upland speakers along the coast and the earliest presence of Thagichu in central Kenya in the 12th century.⁵⁵ Fourth, the distribution of Kwale/EIW (stretching from the Sabaki to the Rufiji River) is much larger than that of Upland (cloistered in the Pare-Kilimanjaro-Taita-Central Kenyan highlands). Its distribution corresponds more closely with that of the NEC languages, making their association more probable, while that of Tana matches that of the successor languages to Northeast Coast. The limited evidence Ehret adduces thus does not sustain his wider conclusions.

Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Sheriff go further to interpret Swahili as an Afro-Arab pidgin that first developed in the 1st century AD and subsequently evolved into a local creole that ultimately shed its Arabic forms and replaced them with Bantu ones.⁵⁶ While they cite the *Periplus* as evidence for their early dating of Swahili, it does not, in fact, identify either the people living along the coast at the time or the language they spoke. Nor is there any linguistic evidence that Swahili first developed as a pidgin or creole, as Mazrui and Sheriff themselves admit. If it was originally a pidgin (based on an Arabic acrolect and a Bantu basilect), its oldest and most basic vocabulary would be derived from Arabic and reflect all subsequent sound changes, while words of Sabaki origin would be later, not reflect earlier sound

⁵³ Ehret, *African Classical Age*, 183–92.

⁵⁴ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 19–20.

⁵⁵ Ehret, *Classical Age*, 206n; Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 281–83, 287, 293, 329, 332–33, 541, 577–655; Chami, "Review of Swahili Archaeology."

⁵⁶ Alamin M. Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Sheriff, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (Trenton, 1994), 64–67.

changes, and limited to non-core cultural vocabulary. In fact, just the reverse is true. Arabic derived vocabulary is mostly late, does not reflect earlier sound changes, and is limited to selective cultural fields, while Sabaki lexis is early, reflects all sound changes, and constitutes most core vocabulary. Swahili is thus a Bantu language whose historical development as a genetic member of the Sabaki family was conventional, as already noted. Its grammar is not “universal” as Mazrui and Sheriff claim; phonological changes in Swahili are representative of Sabaki and Northeast Coast generally; and its lexis is largely inherited. Arabic never was a dominant influence on other languages along the coast, and most Arabic speakers were absorbed locally.⁵⁷

While few historians have attempted to reinterpret the linguistic evidence so broadly, many have failed to appreciate its implications. Allen dismisses comparative linguistics out of hand as “insufficiently evolved ... to enable us to unravel the linguistic complexities ... of peoples such as the historical Swahilis” and “largely incomprehensible to non-specialists,” while at the same time constructing his own model of a complex multilingual language-switching society that defies linguistic logic to assert Southern Cushitic origins for a Bantu language.⁵⁸ Following Allen, Abungu accepts the reputed role played by Southern Cushitic speakers in the formation of Swahili.⁵⁹ Pouwels prefers Ehret’s claims over Nurse and Hinnebusch’s better substantiated ones, and he wrongly claims that “virtually all linguists” accept Tanzania as the natal zone for Sabaki.⁶⁰ And Willis neglects to consider linguistic data.⁶¹

Middlemen Societies

Just as earlier writers viewed the stone towns and the Swahili language as evidence of foreign origins, so they saw contemporary, urbane, Muslim Swahili society as a immigrant “civilization,” divorced from the “primitive” societies of the coast, a view often endorsed by Swahili themselves. Again, we argued that Swahili societies developed along the coast, becoming progressively more economically differentiated, socially stratified, and Muslim with the expansion of international trade, increasing wealth, and immigration from Arabia and India.⁶²

Detailed historical ethnography has been a weak point in Swahili historiography, however, forcing us to rely on contemporary ethnographies and to seek to historicize them by paying careful attention to dynamic elements in Swahili cultural practice. John Middleton’s detailed processual ethnography, *The World of the*

⁵⁷ Thomas J. Hinnebusch, “What Kind of Language is Swahili?” *Afrikanische Arbeitspapiere* 47 (1996), 73–95; Nurse, pers. comm.

⁵⁸ Allen, *Swahili Origins*, 17.

⁵⁹ Abungu, “Tana River,” 150–61.

⁶⁰ Pouwels, “East African Coastal History,” 287–88, 292–96.

⁶¹ Justin Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford, 1993), 28–36.

⁶² Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 68–98.

Swahili, is thus especially welcome. Middleton views Swahili society as comprising a single *oikumene*, or maritime civilization, with marked regional and temporal variations brought about through differing historical experiences, trade relations, descent and marriage patterns, and religious beliefs. It was a middleman society composed of commercial and cultural brokers who mediated between the commercial world of the sea and the productive one of the hinterland. Like precapitalist port cities everywhere, Swahili towns were polyglot, multiethnic frontiers, composed of Arab merchants and ship owners; Indian financiers; Swahili middlemen, traders, ship builders, sailors, iron and leather workers, weavers, furniture makers, and fishermen; slave laborers; and neighboring farmers, herders, hunters, and traders. Each town had its own particular economic resources, specializations, and exchange systems within the overall ecology of the coast. Market relations were based on personal trust and kinship; kings were merchant princes; lineages acted as corporate trading houses; social identity was forged in intense competition; and status rested on shifting foundations of wealth, exchange, honor, and prestige.⁶³

Middleton's is a dynamic model, attuned to Swahili historical traditions, social processes, and the differences between inclusive country towns and the exclusive mercantile stone towns that emerged from them. Most Swahili lived in impermanent mud-and-wattle houses in small country towns where they worked as subsistence farmers or fishers. Country towns were open, inclusive, and egalitarian. There was a minimum of a division of labor or social stratification. Marriage was exogamous, extending kin links out to others in wide-ranging cognatic bilateral descent. All who resided in a town were regarded as its owners and were presided over by egalitarian councils of elders.⁶⁴

Stone towns, by contrast, were complex, economically differentiated trade emporia whose residents performed a wide range of different functions—hosting and provisioning foreign traders, bulking export cargo and breaking imports, warehousing trade goods and supplies, financing commercial transactions, and building and repairing ships. Individuals worked as farmers and fishers, sailors, house and ship builders; wood, iron, and leather workers; and financiers and traders. Surrounded by stone walls, stone towns were closed to outsiders and people of lesser rank. Internally, they were subdivided by occupation, status, and putative descent into distinct moities and wards (*mitaa*), and individual stone houses turned inward on their upper-class inhabitants and themselves. Membership in the community was restricted and ranked by origin; marriage was endogamous; kinship was restricted and exclusive; and hereditary kings and elders ruled.⁶⁵

Historically, stone towns rose from rural roots and returned to them on the vagaries of trade, while their patrician elites often struggled to maintain their posi-

⁶³ John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, 1992), viii–ix, 1–26. Cf. Michael N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1998), 38–45, and Middleton and Horton, *The Swahili*.

⁶⁴ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 58–73, 83–88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–25, 41–44, 54–80, 90–95, 198–200.

tions against newcomers. Each stone town served as the focal point of an exchange network comprising a number of country towns and hinterland areas linked with one another through ethnicity, language, kinship, and patron-client relations. Country towns and hinterland areas produced basic foodstuffs and export commodities for a stone town entrepôt in exchange for locally produced crafts and imports.

Coastal peoples were thus immersed in dense webs of production and exchange, ethnicity, kinship and descent, and residence. They were also joined by Islamic (*dini*) and customary (*mila*) religious practices that linked them with the wider Muslim community (*umma*), on the one hand, and with local African communities, on the other. Hadrami scholars settled in East Africa, while local scholars studied in the Middle East, and local Muslim scholars devised their own *maulidi* celebrations of the Prophet's birth, which immigrant scholars often condemned as unwarranted innovation.⁶⁶

Nowhere is this dynamic better demonstrated than in Linda Giles' insightful and wide ranging analysis of spirit possession among Swahili and their neighbors. Swahili embrace an array of spirits—Arab, Swahili, and African—each of which “represents a different symbolic universe, which is refracted into a number of variant combinations ... to form complex symbolic interactions.” Each has its own symbolic language, music, colors, dance, and food, reflecting different aspects of local historical experience and encapsulating that history in a distinctive performative tradition. The prototypical *kipemba* spirit world “provides the most powerful statement of Swahili self-identity,” giving “symbolic expression to a Swahili history and identity that reaches far into the past and out into the fields and villages. It transcends the ideology of the urban elite and the historical period of Arab cultural ascendancy to reclaim an older, more syncretic, more indigenous tradition. It is, in fact, a counter-hegemonic statement of what is ‘truly Swahili’.” Different “Swahili possession cults generate ... different symbolic texts” through which “the cult complex gives dialectical expression to a whole range of contradictory elements which have formed the socio-cultural universe of Swahili coastal society throughout its history.” Possession cults are thus both products of the diverse array of Swahili historical experiences as well as testaments to those experiences.⁶⁷

Middleton's and Giles' comparative ethnographic surveys are complemented by a number of detailed studies of individual Swahili communities that further enrich our understanding of their complexity and diversity. Pamela and Leif Landberg provide fascinating accounts of Kigombe, a small, obscure Mtang'ata town that is complemented by new studies of the Comoros, Mafia, Mombasa, Malindi, and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 162–81. See also Pamela Landberg, “Kinship and Community in a Tanzania Coastal Village” (Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Davis, 1977), 532–68; David Parkin, “Swahili Mijikenda: Facing Both Ways in Kenya,” *Africa* 59 (1989), 161–75.

⁶⁷ Linda L. Giles, “Spirit Possession and the Swahili Coast: Peripheral Cults or Primary Texts” (Ph.D. thesis, Texas, 1989), 493–97; idem, “Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast: A Reexamination of Theories of Marginality,” *Africa* 57 (1987), 234–58. Cf. Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* (Toronto, 1993).

Lamu.⁶⁸ And processual studies of “Intermediary Swahili” and “Swahilization” by David Parkin and others are demonstrating the complex ways Mijikenda, Hadrami, and other outsiders negotiate ethnicity to become Swahili.⁶⁹

Kigombe is merely one of eighteen small rural towns between Tanga and Pangani that once formed the Shirazi Mtang’ata confederacy in the 13th to 15th centuries. As such, it is representative of many coastal fishing and farming villages, especially those of the lesser-known Mrima coast. Kigombe was a rather typical fishing village, whose inhabitants lived in mud-and-wattle houses divided into local neighborhoods, or wards, surrounding the local mosque. While its inhabitants thought of themselves as an egalitarian community of kinsmen, “brothers under Islam,” who shared moral values and operated by consensus, the community was divided between proprietors (*wenyaji*) and strangers (*wageni*), men and women, kin and non-kin, and free and ex-slave, all of whom competed with one another for status and power in rounds of weddings, funerals, dance competitions, and *maulidis* throughout the year.⁷⁰

New ethnographic studies thus provide us with a range of possibilities for interpreting Swahili traditions, cultures, and historical events in the context of dynamic social and economic universes. And yet our picture is far from complete, most notably in the lack of detailed analyses of the roles of slavery and gender in Swahili societies and how these fit into historical patterns of economic differentiation and social stratification. While the rise and fall of plantation slavery in the 19th century and the ensuing struggles over new forms of labor have been extensively covered by Frederick Cooper and others,⁷¹ we have very little idea of the roles slaves

⁶⁸ Landberg, “Kinship and Community”; Leif Landberg, “Men of Kigombe: Ngalana Fishermen of Northeastern Tanzania” (Ph.D. thesis, UC-Davis, 1975); Martin Ottenheimer, *Marriage in Domoni* (Prospect Heights, 1985); Martin and Harriet Ottenheimer, *Historical Dictionary of the Comoro Islands* (Metuchen, 1994); Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte*; Pat Caplan, *African Voices, African Lives: Personal Narratives from a Swahili Village* (London, 1997); Marc J. Swartz, *The Way the World Is: Cultural Processes and Social Relations among the Mombasa Swahili* (Berkeley, 1991); Susan F. Hirsch, *Pronouncing and Persevering: Gender and the Discourses of Disputing in an African Islamic Court* (Chicago, 1998); Françoise Le Guennec-Coppens, *Les femmes voilées du Lamu* (Paris, 1983). See also Susan Beckerleg, “Maintaining Order, Creating Chaos: Swahili Medicine in Kenya” (Ph.D. thesis, London, 1989); Allyson Purpura, “Knowledge and Agency: The Social Relations of Islamic Expertise in Zanzibar Town” (Ph.D. thesis, City College of New York, 1997).

⁶⁹ David Parkin, “Being and Selfhood among Intermediary Swahili,” in Joan Maw and David Parkin, eds., *Swahili Language and Society* (Vienna, 1985), 247–60; idem, “Swahili Mijikenda”; David Parkin and François Constantin, eds., “Social Stratification in Swahili Society,” special issue, *Africa* 59 (1989), 143–220.

⁷⁰ Landberg, “Kinship and Community,” 407–29, 353–54, 391–404, 483–519, 532–68.

⁷¹ Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977); idem, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (New Haven, 1980); idem, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, 1987); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770–1873* (London, 1987); Fred Morton, *Children of Ham: Freed Slaves and Fugitive Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873 to 1907* (Boulder, 1990); and Willis, *Mombasa*.

played within Swahili societies themselves.⁷² Similarly, while there are some good earlier studies of modern gender roles,⁷³ few suggest how such roles might have worked historically, especially in the case of women slaves or ex-slaves.⁷⁴

Historical Documents

Contemporary ethnographic data is of little historical use without historical documentation. While documents from as early as the 1st century AD have long been available, two new scholarly editions and a historiographic commentary remind us of the importance of reading such sources critically. Lionel Casson's new edition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* combines meticulous translation with informed commentary to make this often obscure source more instructive.⁷⁵ A first-hand account of the East African coast by an Egyptian Greek merchant, now dated to AD 40–55, the *Periplus* details the main trading sites and their place within Indian Ocean trade as far as the Azanian (Tanzanian) coast. Casson's retranslation of *oratoi* (previously translated enigmatically as "pirates") as "tillers of the soil" alone has already encouraged vibrant discussion from Horton, Vansina, and Wrigley in the continuing debate over the identify of the inhabitants of the coast at the time.⁷⁶ But we still lack firm archaeological, linguistic, or social correlates for "Rhapta" and other places mentioned in the text that would enable us to make more effective use of this source.

In another new scholarly edition, Mariana Tolmacheva collects, retranslates, and discusses seven versions of *The Pate Chronicle*. In the process, she establishes that all seven emerged from the fertile historical consciousness of Muhammad bin Fumo 'Umar Nabahani, popularly known as Bwana Kitini, in the early 1900s, thus limiting their usefulness as independent sources.⁷⁷

Finally, John Shen has provided an admirable analysis of seven Chinese accounts, dating from the 8th to the 17th centuries, including the famous Starry Raft expedition to East Africa in 1405–33. Most, he finds, are successive court redactions

⁷² But see Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1995) for an excellent historical study of slavery and class on the northern Tanzanian coast in the 19th century.

⁷³ Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890–1973* (New Haven, 1979); Françoise Le Guennec-Coppens, *Les femmes voilées de Lamu: variations culturelles et dynamiques sociales* (Paris, 1983); Ottenheimer, *Marriage in Domoni*; Pamela Landberg, "Widows and Divorced Women in Swahili Society," in Betty Potash, ed., *Widows in African Societies* (Stanford, 1986), 107–30; Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, 1989).

⁷⁴ But see Margaret Strobel, "Slavery and Reproductive Labor in Mombasa," in Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), 111–29; Giles, "Spirit Possession"; idem, "Possession Cults."

⁷⁵ Lionel Casson, trans. and ed., *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton, 1989).

⁷⁶ Mark Horton, "The *Periplus* and East Africa," *Azania* 25 (1990), 95–99; Jan Vansina, "Slender Evidence, Weighty Consequences: On One Word in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 393–97; Christopher Wrigley, "The *Periplus* and Related Matters," *Azania* 32 (1997), 112–17.

⁷⁷ Mariana Tolmacheva, trans. and ed., *The Pate Chronicle* (East Lansing, Mich., 1993).

of original accounts since lost and many have suffered from poor and misleading translations, as he notes tellingly in criticizing Allen's reliance on Freeman-Grenville's flawed collection of documents.⁷⁸

While we thus need to approach the existing documents more critically than we have in the past, there is also a vast trove of Portuguese and other documents that have barely been explored but contain a vast wealth of information, especially for the southern coast, as demonstrated by Jeremy Prestholdt in his detailed study of textile trade in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁷⁹

East Africa and the Indian Ocean

The widespread existence of Egyptian, Arab, Chinese, and Portuguese documents alerts us to the important roles the eastern African coast played in the wider Indian Ocean, but these roles have only been rarely explored in the Swahili literature, in spite of their significance in the development of the coastal towns. Egypt dominated Red Sea trade from 2500 BC to 200 BC, acquiring myrrh, frankincense, cinnamon, laudanum, and ebony; slaves; cattle; gold and electrum; elephants and ivory; leopard skins; tortoise shell; and rhino horn from Ethiopia and the Horn via Punt, DM'T, and Aksum. Aksum became the focus for such trade with the transition to Greco-Roman dominance from the 2nd century BC to the 3rd century AD, and it continued to be dominant in the Red Sea following the decline of Rome until the 6th century. This correlates with the trading sites at Ras Hafun, and it was also the period when the first Kwale ware ironworking sites appeared along the coast, suggesting, perhaps, that it was visits of early Greco-Roman traders, as described in the *Periplus* and Ptolemy's *Geography*, that initially drew Northeast Coast speakers to the coast to lay the foundations for Swahili towns to come.⁸⁰

Persia played an increasing role in Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade following the decline of Rome and the Persian conquest of Yemen and Egypt in 570 and 616. Mangrove poles, gold, ivory, slaves, and ambergris flowed from East Africa to Siraf and Sohar and on to China in return for Persian Sassanian-Islamic, opaque white glaze, and sgraffiato wares; Chinese Qingbai glazed stoneware; and beads, cloth, and iron wares. It was probably this trade that sparked the development of the initial pre-Muslim coastal towns that emerged between the 8th and 10th centuries at Manda, Shanga, Pate, Unguja Ukuu, Kilwa, Chibuene, and the Comoros.

Fatimid Egypt then gained control over the Red Sea from the 10th century, importing rock crystal, ivory, and gold from East Africa. At the same time, southern Arabia began to play an increasing role in Indian Ocean trade, accounting for a shift

⁷⁸ John Shen, "New Thoughts on the Use of Chinese Documents in the Reconstruction of Early Swahili History," *History in Africa* 22 (1995), 349–58.

⁷⁹ Jeremy Prestholdt, "As Artistry Permits and Custom May Ordain: The Social Fabric of Material Consumption in the Swahili World, circa 1450–1600" (Program in African Studies Working Papers, No. 3, Evanston, Ill., 1998).

⁸⁰ Jacke Phillips, "Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa," *Journal of African History* 38 (1997), 423–58; Stuart C. Munro-Hay, "Aksumite Overseas Interests" in J. Reade, ed., *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity* (London, 1996), 403–16.

to Yemeni black-on-yellow ceramics and an increase in Islamic influence on the East African coast from the 12th century. Trade also increased markedly, especially along the southern coast, leading to the dramatic expansion of Muslim towns from the 12th to the 16th century.⁸¹

By the time the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the 16th century, it was already an integrated commercial complex, as revealed by Michael Pearson in his insightful and broad-ranging book, *Port Cities and Intruders*. Here we see the peasants of Gujarat producing the cotton and cloth on which much of Indian Ocean trade was based; the Indian brokers and financiers who facilitated trade; the Muslim traders, religious scholars, and pilgrims who integrated the Indian Ocean into an “Islamic World System”; the littoral societies of the coasts that mediated between the sea and the interior; and the peoples of the African interior who produced the ivory and gold that fueled the trade. Together with Middleton’s analysis of middleman societies, we now see Swahili towns not as exclusive foreign transplants nor as solely local developments, but as dynamic cultural and commercial entrepôts in an Indian Ocean world stretching from East Africa to Malaya.⁸² The debate over the rise of Swahili towns can thus no longer be seen in exclusively foreign or local terms, but must take account of the dynamic interaction between local and international forces in an expansive maritime world.

Rise of the Swahili Towns

Adopting Horton’s detailed chronology for Shanga, Randall Pouwels has periodized Swahili history in terms of the dominant motifs of Swahili traditions. The “Shungwaya” period, extending from 800 to 1100, saw the cultural genesis of Swahili in the north, the beginnings of trade with the Persian Gulf, and the emergence of the first pre-Muslim towns along the coast. As trade and wealth grew between 1100 and 1300 and trading contacts shifted to the Red Sea a number of new towns were founded, foremost among them Mogadishu; coastal dwellers began to convert to Islam in increasing numbers; and Yemeni *sharifs* became prominent in Mogadishu and Kilwa in a period characterized by increasing “Islamization” of Swahili societies. Trade and wealth reached a climax between 1300 and 1600, the “Shirazi” period, causing prominent families along the coast to claim prestigious Shirazi origins to distinguish themselves from both immigrant Arabs and mainland Africans, adopt exclusive paraphernalia and dress, build elaborately decorated stone houses and pillar tombs, and endow new mosques. The coast then declined under Portuguese rule, while it subsequently came under increasing Arab influence in the 16th and 17th centuries and Omani in the 18th and 19th, as evidenced by the rise of new Sufi orders; the adoption of Arab-style *nisbas*, architecture, dress, and

⁸¹ Horton, “Early Muslim Trading Settlements”; Mark Horton, “The Swahili Corridor,” *Scientific American* 257/3 (Sept. 1987), 86–93; Horton, et. al, “The Mtambwe Hoard.”

⁸² Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*. For an innovative study of labor in the Indian Ocean, see Janet Ewald, “Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 69–91. Malagasy traders and immigrants were also active in the southern Indian Ocean world from the 7th or 8th century, but we know little of their activities.

vocabulary; and the eventual shift from Swahili *uungwana* to Arab *ustaraabu* as the mark of civilized behavior in the 1870s.⁸³

This broad overview has been developed in fascinating detail by Howard Brown in his history of Siyu, a town on Pate Island, from the 11th to the 19th centuries. While not extensively involved in trade, Siyu was a thriving community of weavers and embroiderers, woodworkers, leatherworkers, metalworkers, copyists, and book binders. It was, in short, a prosperous though ordinary town, overshadowed by its wealthier neighbors, Pate and Lamu. As neither a local fishing village nor an international trading center, Siyu was a middling middleman society of the sort that probably predominated along the coast and can tell us a great deal about Swahili societies in general.

While Siyu's historical development followed the general Swahili pattern, it was also intensely local, reflecting its own particular social composition and neighbors. Siyu was probably founded in the 11th century as a mud and thatch village, but by the 16th century it had grown into a large stone town, perhaps the largest town on Pate Island, with extensive farms on the adjacent mainland. The local Wasahili clan was dominant, but soon it was displaced by immigrant Famao and Somali Katwa, who came to constitute the two moities that vied for hegemony in the 18th century. Such internal competition was also reflected in external politics as Siyu allied with the Turks against the Portuguese in the 1580s, but then joined the Portuguese against Pate in the 1630s and 1640s until the Portuguese were finally defeated by combined Pate and Omani forces in 1652. At the same time, on the mainland Siyu allied with Garre Somali against Oromo and Pate, on the one hand, and Bajuni and Faza, on the other, during which Famao agreed to share power domestically with Katwa, who had been increasing in power, wealth, and prestige and were gradually being absorbed into the *waungwana*. But conflict between the two continued, and Famao eventually allied with the exiled Nabahani rulers of Pate to displace Katwa allied with the Omanis and Pate in the 19th century.⁸⁴

A number of studies have also expanded our view of the little-known towns of the Mozambique coast, where small, autonomous Swahili towns scattered among off-shore islands, inlets, and inland trade fairs were easily overwhelmed by their neighbors and, after 1505, by the Portuguese. Both Swahili and latter Portuguese communities were numerically small and depended on extensive intermarriage with Africans to maintain their economic and political positions.⁸⁵ While we still lack

⁸³ Horton, "Early Settlement"; idem, *Shanga*; Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 72–73, 129–32; idem, "The East African Coast, c 780 to 1900 CE" in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, 2000), 251–71.

⁸⁴ Howard Brown, "History of Siyu: The Development and Decline of a Swahili Town on the Northern Kenya Coast" (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1985); idem, "Siyu: Town of Craftsmen: A Swahili Cultural Centre in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Azania* 23 (1988), 101–13.

⁸⁵ Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington, 1995); Ricardo Teixeira Duarte, *Northern Mozambique in the Swahili World* (Stockholm, 1993); Joseph F. Mbwiliza, *A History of Commodity Production in Makuani, 1600–1900* (Dar es Salaam, 1991); Nancy Hafkin, "Trade, Society and Politics in Northern Mozambique, c. 1753–1913" (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1973).

detailed studies of individual towns, the extensive Portuguese documentation should yield rich results and allow us to follow up Pearson's intriguing suggestion of greater integration between coast and hinterland on the southern coast than along the northern one.

Finally, a number of histories of individual towns, especially Jonathon Glassman's magisterial *Feasts and Riot*, provide insightful comparative analyses of more recent Swahili history.⁸⁶ Taken together with the detailed archaeological studies of Shanga, Manda, Ungwana, Gedi, Kilwa, and the Comoros, and ethnographies of Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Kigombe and the Mrima coast, Mafia, and the Comoros, we probably now have more extensive, subtle, and deeper historical knowledge of the East African coast than we have for any other area in Africa south of the Sahara. Unfortunately not all new accounts inspire confidence, especially James de Vere Allen's long-awaited and ultimately posthumous book, *Swahili Origins*. Allen deserves major credit for his pioneering work reorienting the historiography of the coast from concerns over foreign origins to the exploration of domestic historical processes. His book represents an ambitious attempt to consolidate this earlier work, but unfortunately it strays far from the historical evidence to erect new myths in place of older ones. Allen's cavalier use of evidence conflates references far removed in space and time and piles conjecture on conjecture to create wholly imaginary multilingual, multiethnic states and cultures. When his tottering edifice threatens to fall in the face of linguistic evidence to the contrary, he simply denies the validity of historical linguistics, and when archaeological sites fail to confirm his expectations, he imputes new evidence to them.⁸⁷

If Allen was concerned largely with the views of foreigners, two eminent Swahili scholars, Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Sheriff, have been moved by ongoing debates regarding Swahili identity within contemporary East Africa.⁸⁸ In the process of building an eminently reasonable historical argument for the indigenous development of a dynamic, urbane, Muslim Swahili culture, however, they overstate the case for an unbroken line of Swahili cultural history from the time of the *Periplus* in the 1st century AD to the present. The references from the *Periplus* are simply too vague to assert that people specifically known as Swahili inhabited the coast at the time, and they ignore the archaeological evidence for the development of recognizably Swahili towns and culture only from the 9th century. They also deny the linguistic evidence for the development of the Swahili language from earlier

⁸⁶ Margaret Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century: Land, Trade and Politics* (Boston, 1979); Peter Koffsky, "History of Takaungu, East Africa, 1830–1896" (Ph.D. thesis, Wisconsin, 1977); Frederick J. Berg, "Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1971); William McKay, "A Precolonial History of the Southern Kenya Coast" (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1975); and Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*.

⁸⁷ These problems have been extensively aired in reviews of *Swahili Origins* by Randall L. Pouwels, *Journal of African History* 34 (1993), 518–20; Martin Walsh, *Azania* 28 (1993), 143–47; Justin Willis, *African Affairs* 93 (1994), 147–49; Adria LaViolette and Thomas H. Wilson, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27 (1994), 439–40; and Mervyn Hiskett, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 5 (1994), 139–41.

⁸⁸ Mazrui and Shariff, *The Swahili*.

Bantu languages spoken on the coast during the 1st millennium, as we have seen, and they underplay the significance of internal divisions within Swahili societies that are often expressed by Swahili themselves in ethnic terms, thus neglecting the internal bases for Swahili exclusion.

While earlier debates over Swahili identity and history usually turned on racialized interpretations of culture, contemporary ones often focus on constructivist views of the “invention of tradition” or “creation of tribalism.” Rightly pointing out that the people labeled “Swahili” by scholars rarely identify themselves as such, choosing identities based on their own town, putative origins, status, or descent group instead, critics have gone on to argue against the development of a common Swahili-speaking coastal culture. Such a view informs Justin Willis’s *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*. A perceptive study of changing forms of labor and social relations in 20th century Mombasa, Willis views modern ethnicities as products of colonial rule, thus playing down local and foreign historical accounts of earlier identities. While identities are certainly socially constructed and change over time, a narrowly instrumentalist view underestimates the limits of invention by neglecting local agency, overlooking the complex ways traditions and identities are reconstructed from earlier historical artifacts, and denying the very historicity that gives ethnicity its raw social and political power.⁸⁹ Such a view thus begs the very historical questions it asks and invalidates all but contemporary historical analysis.

While the debates over early Swahili history are a welcome sign of historical vitality, we must be careful lest new interpretations are uncritically accepted as the new conventional wisdom. An innocent example is provided by Pearson’s *Port Cities and Intruders*, discussed earlier. A newcomer to East African history, Pearson read widely in the specialized literature and gained a sophisticated understanding of it, but he often refers to secondary and tertiary accounts instead of original monographs, thus missing the subtleties of the original studies and risking becoming a victim of others’ readings of them.⁹⁰ This is not an idle risk. Several writers have too readily accepted Allen’s deeply flawed interpretation of Shungwaya,⁹¹ while others continue to criticize an earlier flawed analysis of the linguistic

⁸⁹ See my review of Willis in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27 (1994), 630–34. Willis (*Mombasa*, 28–36) confines his analysis of the invention of the Shungwaya tradition to the Mijikenda, while Pouwels (“East African Coastal History,” 293–294) extends it to the Swahili. On the limits of invention more generally, see idem, “Introduction” in Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai* (London, 1991), 1–24; T.O. Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa” in T.O. Ranger and O. Vaughan, eds., *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa* (Houndmills, 1993), 79–83; Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, 1998); Jonathon Glassman, “Sorting out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar’s Newspaper Wars,” *Journal of African History* 41 (2000), 395–428; and Jamie Monson, “Memory, Migration and the Authority of History in Southern Tanzania, 1860–1960,” *Journal of African History* 41 (2000), 347–72.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 19–21 (fns 47, 52, 55), 73 (fns 34–35), or 82 (fns 72–74).

⁹¹ See fn. 38 above.

evidence for Shungwaya traditions, while ignoring subsequent corrections,⁹² or accept earlier arguments regarding the alleged invention of Shungwaya traditions while neglecting later critiques of them.⁹³

Mazrui and Sheriff argue that academic interpretations can and do have historical consequences for the people concerned. The Swahili have long been affected by what was written about them, whether in the differential application of colonial taxation and law to those deemed “Arabs” and “Swahili” or in their political and economic displacement by ethnic politics. Furthermore, Swahili themselves have a deep sense of history and evoke it constantly in internal struggles for status and power. Such internal histories have frequently been influenced by external ones. Swahili claims to “Shirazi” (i.e., Persian), “Arab,” and now “African” identities have all been strongly influenced by the play of external political forces on domestic politics and vice versa.⁹⁴ Thus, historians’ debates are not, and never have been, strictly academic.

Toward a New Historical Synthesis

In appraising the contributions of the new work as a whole, we are presented with two contrasting images of early Swahili history. The one, continuous and inclusive, flows from archaeological and linguistic analyses that link Kwale/EIW to Tana/TIW and subsequent traditions as well as NEC to Swahili and related languages. Seen in these terms, Swahili appear to share a common cultural tradition, language, and history and to constitute a single maritime civilization the length of the coast. The other image, however, is discontinuous and exclusive, conveyed in the diverse traditions, histories, and ethnographies of polyglot, stratified, urbane port communities, as different groups of people adapted to the coastal environment; learned how to work iron, fish, raise new crops, and build in stone; interacted with others; incorporated neighbors and overseas visitors alike; and slowly adopted Islam. Seen

⁹² E.g. Willis, *Mombasa*, 29; and Pouwels, “East African Coastal History,” 287, 294. For the full debate, see Thomas Spear, “Traditional Myths and Historians’ Myths: Variations of the Singwaya Theme of Mijikenda Origins,” *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 67–84; Thomas J. Hinnebusch, “The Shungwaya Hypothesis: A Linguistic Reappraisal,” in J. T. Gallagher, ed., *East African Culture History* (Syracuse, 1976), 1–41; Thomas Spear, “Traditional Myths and Linguistic Analysis: Singwaya Revisited,” *History in Africa* 4 (1977), 229–46; idem, *The Kaya Complex* (Nairobi, 1978), 16–43; idem, *Traditions of Origin and their Interpretation* (Athens, 1982), 3–17; Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 490–96, 542–43, 547–49.

⁹³ E.g. Willis, *Mombasa*, 28–36; Pouwels, “East African Coastal History,” 293–294. For the overall discussion, see R. F. Morton, “The Shungwaya Myth of Mijikenda Origins: A Problem in Late Nineteenth Century Kenya Coastal History,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5 (1973), 397–423; Spear, “Traditional Myths and Historians’ Myths”; H. Neville Chittick, “*The Book of Zanj* and the Mijikenda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9 (1976), 68–73; R. F. Morton, “New Evidence Regarding the Shungwaya Myth of Mijikenda Origins,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10 (1977), 628–643; Spear, *Traditions of Origin*; Spear, review of Willis, *Mombasa*.

⁹⁴ Mazrui and Sheriff, *The Swahili*, 17–53, 131–63. Cf. Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 30, 74–75.

thus, each town was distinctive and autonomous, the product of its own particular history, environment, and social influences.

Of course, these two images are not irreconcilable. Just as Swahili all speak different dialects of a common language, so each community represents variations of common cultural patterns and historical experiences. In the transition from Kwale to Tana traditions, from Sabaki to Swahili speech, or from one town to another, distinctive local variations emerged that later led to different cultural traditions, dialects, and societies. Members of a highly mobile culture, Swahili traveled up and down the coast, participating in a maritime culture that embraced a diversity of dialects, ethnicities, and occupations in the cultural practices of each town and village.

Over the *longue durée*, the fundamental outlines of Swahili history are now well established. Taking the archaeological and linguistic evidence together, it now seems probable that the transition from Kwale/EIW to Tana/TIW throughout the coast and hinterland was accompanied by a parallel transition from Northeast Coast to Sabaki and Swahili over the course of the 1st millennium AD. That later ceramic traditions and languages remained fairly homogenous suggests that these cultures remained compact, but in fact both TIW and the Swahili language spanned the length of the coast by the end of the millennium, the product of a maritime culture that, though widely scattered, remained tightly knit and remarkably homogeneous.

While coasting trade was conducted from early in the 1st millennium, permanent settlements only began to develop during the 8th–10th centuries, when such towns as Mogadishu, Manda, Shanga, Pate, Ungwana, Unguja Ukuu, Mkokotoni, Kilwa, Dembeni, Sima, and Chibuene all emerged. Small fishing and farming communities, they obtained ivory, timber, tortoise shell, ambergris, rock crystal, slaves, gum copal, and iron from their mainland neighbors, which they then exchanged with Gulf merchants for Persian and Chinese pottery, cloth, and iron ware. By the 11th century, the towns were prospering, people were building elaborate stone houses, and Islam was beginning to establish a presence in coastal communities. Mogadishu, Kilwa, and then Mombasa subsequently rose to wealth and fame as major entrepôts, but new towns were emerging all along the coast, fueled by the expansion of trade with southern Arabia and India, bringing increased immigration, socioeconomic differentiation, and cultural diversification in its wake as the coast participated fully in the wider Indian Ocean world.

If the broad outlines of Swahili development are now clear, however, they continue to conflict with Swahili traditions regarding their own history. For if, as we posited earlier, proto-Sabaki speakers had expanded north and were clustered in “Shungwaya” along the Kenya-Somali border by the beginning of the 6th century, proto-Swahili speakers had begun to move back down the coast by the 9th century, and Mijikenda and Pokomo speakers only occupied their current homelands in the 16th century, the Kenya coast and hinterland would have been devoid of known inhabitants for 6–13 centuries, in spite of now abundant archaeological evidence to the contrary.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Helm, “Conflicting Histories,” 275–94.

This is not a new problem, though it is still a perplexing one. Earlier, we found that traditions regarding the putative establishment of coastal towns by immigrants from Shiraz to be historical metaphors for the establishment of hegemony by leading *waungwana* families from the north, or Shungwaya.⁹⁶ But how can one account for the alleged dispersal earlier of Swahili, Mijikenda, and Pokomo from Shungwaya between the 9th and 16th centuries, long after the settlement of the coast and hinterland by peoples making Kwale/EIW and Tana/TIW and speaking Sabaki and Swahili languages? This lack of congruence between archaeological data and the traditions has led many to dismiss the Shungwaya traditions as inventions, but that fails to take account of the linguistic data and possibly fails to appreciate the deeper meaning of the traditions.

According to Nurse and Hinnebusch, proto-Sabaki first developed as some Northeast Coast speakers expanded to the north and began to differentiate from their fellows. Channeled along the narrow Kenyan coastal plain, they occupied the coastal area of Kenya, where by the middle of the 1st millennium they were beginning to differentiate into Swahili, Ilwana, and Comorian/Mijikenda/Pokomo. By ca. AD 800, the later group also began to split, with Comorian speakers moving south along the coast before settling in the Comoro Islands. About the same time, Swahili speakers also began to disperse along the coast, eventually differentiating into northern and southern dialect clusters, leaving Ilwana speakers on the upper Tana River, Pokomo along the lower Tana, and Mijikenda south of the Sabaki River.⁹⁷

Such a hypothetical migratory pattern, based on the theory of least moves, makes the most logical sense of the genetic affiliations and mutual interactions observed among the Sabaki languages, but it is not the only possible explanation. As Jan Vansina has found, positing migrations to account for the development of languages depicted in tree diagrams in this way may not represent the best historical solution. Taking Eastern Bantu as an example, Vansina hypothesizes that it developed in waves, with proto-Eastern Bantu originally covering most of eastern and central Africa. Over time, it began to be adopted by autochthons and to differentiate at the southern and northern extremes into Southern, Makuan, and Kilimanjaro, respectively, while later the central group split into Central, Great Lakes, and (North) East Coast, thus accounting for the development of the Eastern Bantu languages and their present distribution.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 70–79; Thomas Spear, “The Shirazi in Swahili Traditions, Culture, and History,” *History in Africa*, 11 (1984), 291–305. See also Randall Pouwels, “Oral Historiography and the Problem of the Shirazi on the East African Coast,” *History in Africa*, 11 (1984), 237–67.

⁹⁷ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 490–549.

⁹⁸ Vansina, “New Linguistic Evidence and ‘The Bantu Expansion’.”

Such a wave model might also be used to account for the development and distribution of Northeast Coast, Sabaki, and Swahili in an economical way.⁹⁹ Under such a scenario, following the splits within Eastern Bantu noted above, Northeast Coast speakers would have been distributed throughout the coast and hinterland from the Rufiji River in the south to southern Somalia in the north. The earliest differentiation within this group would then have occurred at its northern extremity, resulting in the development of Sabaki, with subsequent differentiation producing Pare, Seuta, and Ruvu in the south. Sabaki-speaking communities would then have been relatively strung out and isolated along the Kenya coast, where the more peripheral groups—Swahili and Ilwana—differentiated first, followed by the disintegration of the Comorian/Mijikenda/Pokomo cluster.¹⁰⁰ According to the wave model, then, the Kenyan coast and hinterland would have been inhabited throughout, most Sabaki speakers would have remained in place and their languages developed *in situ*, and only some Swahili, Comorian, and Mwani speakers—all highly mobile seafarers—would have had to move away.

While different from the previous model, the wave model still requires that the earliest Swahili (and Comorian) speakers emerged in the north and subsequently spread along the coast from there. Given Swahili's and Comorian's close linguistic relationships with Ilwana, Pokomo, and Mijikenda, it would be hard to envision a plausible alternative in any case. Thus, it would seem that we still have to accord temporal priority to northern Swahili sites over southern ones, but not much, for Zanzibar, Kilwa, and Chibuene (along with the Comoros) were virtually contemporaneous with the earliest northern settlements and dialects. The rapid dispersal of Swahili speakers would have been a factor in Swahili's differentiation from other Sabaki languages, while the close maritime connections maintained among coastal towns would have kept Swahili relatively homogeneous internally as separate dialect clusters slowly emerged among the northern and southern communities. The argument for northern vs. southern origins of Swahili may thus be less significant than previously thought, as new Swahili communities developed more or less simultaneously at widely scattered points along the coast after the 8th century. While the immediate antecedents of early Swahili language and culture probably lay in the north, then, the incorporation of Swahili speakers, local peoples, and overseas immigrants in individual towns, each with its own physical and social environment, meant that each also developed along its own lines thereafter.

Regardless of whether we choose the tree or wave model, then, it seems obvious that Eastern Bantu speakers inhabited the Kenya coast continuously from early in the 1st millennium, simultaneously with the development of the Kwale and Tana traditions, thus causing us to reassess earlier debates regarding the Shungwaya

⁹⁹ Alternatively, Sabaki speakers may have simply continued to slowly expand up the coast, differentiating as they went, as envisioned by Walsh, "Mijikenda Origins" and Helm, "Conflicting Histories."

¹⁰⁰ Nurse and Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki*, 476–80.

tradition of Swahili, Mijikenda, and Pokomo origins. In analyzing the Shirazi traditions earlier, we concluded that they represented the prototypical Swahili, formed of movement from the northern towns, interaction with people among whom they settled, and integration into their societies. The central metaphors were those of migration, exchange, and marriage as Shirazi arrived from the north, exchanged cloth with the local inhabitants for the right to settle, and married local elders' daughters to establish prestigious lineages that joined the wealth and powers of each.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Pouwels sees the Shirazi traditions as expressing local social structures and processes, especially the conflicts between local farmers and herders, fishermen and traders, locals and immigrants, and Swahili and Arabs.¹⁰² And Middleton concludes that Swahili traditions represent "the shaping of Swahili identity" and "the continual reformations of that identity over the centuries" as people sought to understand and resolve "the basic structural processes and ambiguities within Swahili society." "The validation of the Swahili position as middlemen is the main message, using ethnicity, moral superiority, and divine will to show the legitimacy of their mercantile activities and aspirations."¹⁰³ The Shirazi traditions thus represent complex historical processes by which diverse groups were incorporated into what became Swahili communities.

The key to understanding the traditions may lie, as Pouwels has noted, not in the historical period the traditions purport to be about but in the period and conditions that gave rise to the traditions themselves. While it is not possible to establish the provenance of the Shirazi traditions, Pouwels hypothesizes that they relate not to the period from the 8th to the 11th centuries when traders from Shiraz were active and the earliest towns were formed, but to the period from the 13th to 17th centuries when Arab immigrants challenged Swahili hegemony and local Swahili sought to distinguish themselves by claiming prestigious Persian origins.¹⁰⁴

Viewed in this way, the Shungwaya tradition may also have played a central role in Swahili mythology. Seen as the area where Swahili identity was forged in the earliest trading settlements of the northeastern coast, from which the first Swahili spread to establish other trading towns along the coast, it encapsulates the incorporative nature of Swahili society in a series of social processes and interactions that were to be repeated in other settlements. The Shungwaya tradition thus establishes the Swahili as a people socially and culturally of the mainland, while the

¹⁰¹ Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 70–79; Spear, "The Shirazi," 291–305.

¹⁰² Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 32–37; Pouwels, "Oral Historiography," 242–54. See also Horton, *Shanga*, 423–26.

¹⁰³ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 27–35.

¹⁰⁴ Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 10–21, 35–37; Pouwels, "Oral Historiography," 242–54.

later Shirazi traditions explain how they subsequently became identified religiously and historically with the wider world of the Indian Ocean and Islam.¹⁰⁵

Far from being an invention of the late 19th century,¹⁰⁶ an early 1st millennium Cushitic state,¹⁰⁷ or the homeland of the Sabaki-speaking peoples,¹⁰⁸ then, Shungwaya may connote the northern focus of early Swahili society and the complex social processes by which that society emerged from its TIW and Sabaki roots. Reconciling the different histories conveyed by Swahili traditions, on the one hand, and archaeology, linguistics, and history, on the other, thus requires us to interpret the complex mythopoeic idioms that Swahili themselves employ to resolve the contradictions of their own history. Only when these are analyzed rigorously in the light of all the archaeological, linguistic, and documentary data will we achieve a convincing new understanding of early Swahili history.

¹⁰⁵ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 14–15; Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 54; Steven Feierman, “Economy, Society and Language in Early East Africa,” in Philip D. Curtin et al., *African History* (London, 1995), 126–27.

¹⁰⁶ See fn. 93 above.

¹⁰⁷ Allen, *Swahili Origins*.

¹⁰⁸ See fn. 92 above.