

# The Swahili City-State Culture

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## Introduction.

### City-State and City-State Culture

In view of the increased usage of the term city-state by archaeologists in general (e.g. Nichols and Charlton [1997]) and in particular by scholars in eastern Africa (Vérin [1992]; Abungu [1998]; Kusimba [1996, 1999]) the invitation by Mogens Hansen to contribute a chapter to this volume presents a timely challenge to the authors, an archaeologist and a cultural anthropologist, to investigate the appropriateness of this concept and that of city-state culture for east African archaeology in general and the Swahili towns in particular. In this essay we combine the insights of our research during recent years to a reconsideration of Swahili urbanism. Sinclair has spent the last twelve years expanding our archaeological horizons to include non-stone-built components of urban settlements and associated satellite sites, while Håkansson's current work focusses on the economic and political interaction between hinterland and coastal societies.

The concept of city-state as used by Hansen has a multicultural derivation including the Greek *polis* and the Italian *civitas* as well as the Chinese *guo*, the Malay *negeri* and the Aztec *altepetl*, and is held to be suitable for comparative studies. The wider application of this term by Hansen also includes reliance upon Weber's definition of city as an economic and political centre. In addition, Hansen develops an interdisciplinary view of state focussing in particular upon centralised government and the means of coercion of projecting legal order over a defined territory, even if this is very small. Other criteria relating to urbanisation – including size, settlement pattern and territory, as well as ethnic identity and citizenship and also economy, religion, defence and government – are dealt with by Hansen elsewhere in this volume.

The concept of city-state culture on the other hand is wider in its definition. A large area inhabited by people speaking the same language (or at least having a common *lingua franca*) is split up into a number of city-states. A number of specific criteria are used by Hansen to define the term and these include transitions

in economy and urbanisation, size, warfare between city-states, peacetime interactions and political organisation of constituent city-states. The city-states are not necessarily peer polities but are rather seen by Hansen as hierarchically organised systems of polities, some of which are hegemonic, some dependencies. Are we with Southall ([1998] 4) to believe that “the first cities were all city-states”, i.e. that all urbanised civilisations have passed a city-state phase at some point early in their history? Not necessarily at all according to Hansen (*supra* 15): “usually an early state covers a large territory encompassing a plurality of towns .. sometimes however we find a one to one correlation between urbanisation and state formation: every town is a small state comprising the town plus its hinterland and conversely every state is a micro-state controlling a small territory centred on a town. Such a state is in my opinion correctly called a city-state and whenever a whole region is split up into city-states we have what I suggest to all a city-state culture.”

To what extent are these concepts relevant for the Swahili stone towns? It should be pointed out right from the start that the conceptual developments in eastern African historiography and archaeology are only just beginning to take up these issues in a systematic way. The term town-state is used by the historians Nurse and Spear ([1985] 80) more as a descriptive than as an analytical term. Both authors of recent archaeological works using city-state in the title (Abungu [1998], Kusimba [1996]) offer no explicit definition of the concept and this is also the case for the more detailed and very interesting treatment of Swahili states by Kusimba (1999). Little discussion of the concept of village as opposed to town or city has been undertaken in east African archaeology. A recent call from anthropology has been made to shift the focus of analytical efforts from the evolution of specific city-states towards the incorporation of east Africa into macro-scale world systems in order to include outlying trading catchments and far distant sources of capital into the analytical frame (Håkansson [in preparation]). Here below we will discuss these concepts less from a typological

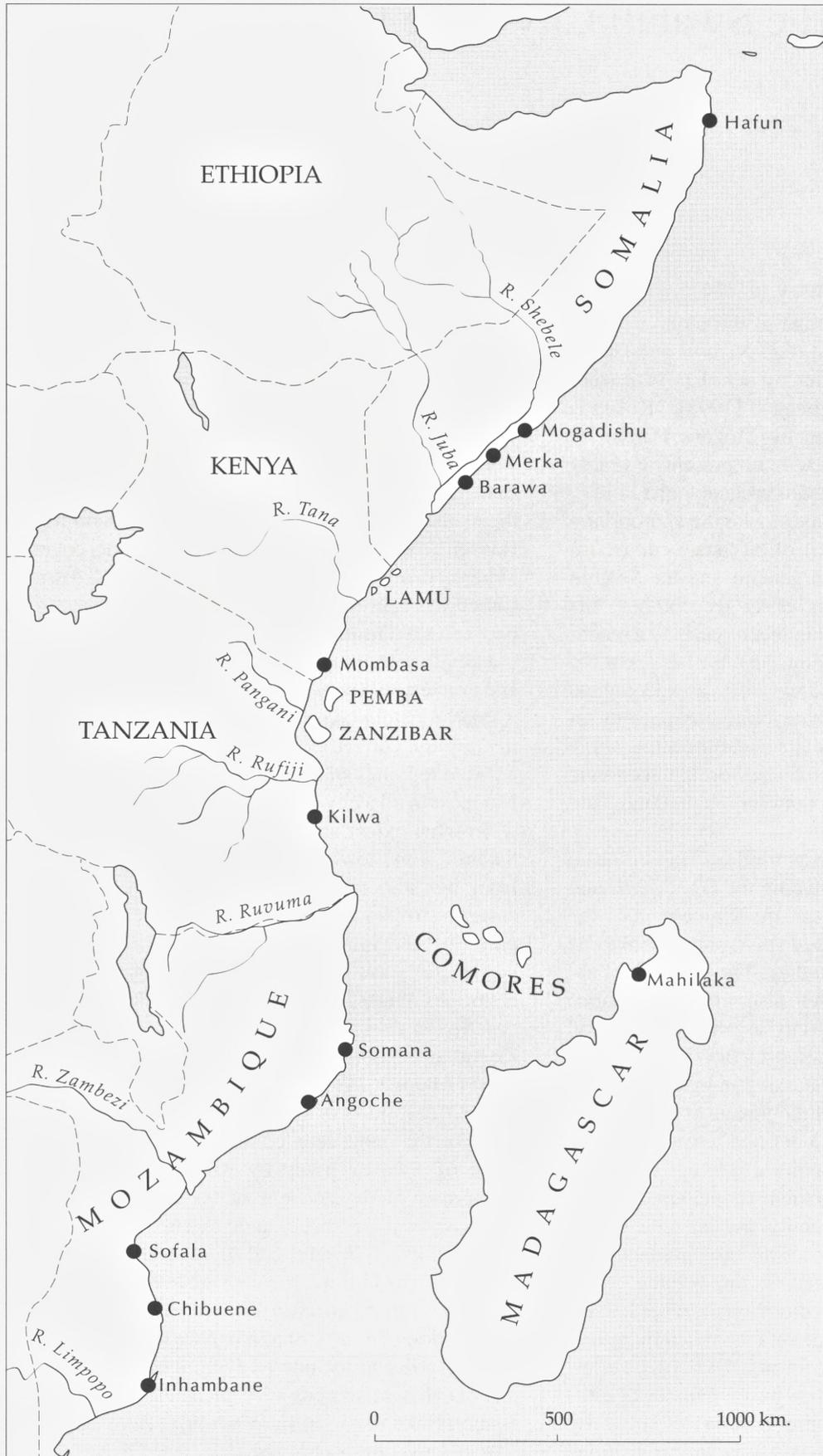


Fig. 1. The Swahili coast.

standpoint and more in terms of suggesting avenues for future research.

## Geography

The east African coast comprises a narrow coastal strip of sandy soils that support the Zanzibar-Inhambane vegetational mosaic (White [1983]) that in turn hosts the great majority of Swahili towns. In the northern region this vegetational unit abuts onto the Somali-Maasai drylands floral mosaic. Hafun near the Horn is the earliest trading site yet located on the east African coast and is dated from the early centuries BC to ca 200 AD. Southwards the coastal zone is punctuated by a series of important rivers that provide access to the interior. Trading sites are often found at their mouths and along their extent. The earliest town site in eastern Africa, that of Rhapta, known from the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (ca 1st century AD), is still not located but was probably situated on one of the river mouths of the Tanzanian coast. The existence of a town at this period might presuppose a settlement hierarchy of early farming community sites. Sites of the Kwale Matola tradition dated from the BC/AD transition to ca 400 AD are known to exist in a great distributional swath along the coastal hinterland from Kenya right down to Mozambique and into South Africa (Soper [1967]; [1971], Phillipson [1993]). The possibility that these early sites of iron-using farmers comprise a pre-state settlement system is widely accepted. The potential of this settlement system to transform into urban societies is what is at issue.

On the northern Benadir coast, the Shebele river runs parallel to the coast and three important towns of Mogadishu, Merka and Barawa have made use of the agricultural potential provided by the riverine silts as well as the marine food resources. In addition, the Benadir towns are well located to take advantage of the continental and overseas communication networks. Barawa marks the northern extent both of the Zanzibar-Inhambane floral mosaic and the distribution of Swahili language clusters. Further south a series of island archipelagos provide shallow shelving beaches, sheltered creek anchorages, patches of good agricultural soils and silvi-cultural opportunities as well as marine resources which supported the transformation to urban societies from the first millennium AD (Horton and Mudida [1993]). The Lamu archipelago is famous for Swahili urban sites such as Manda, Pate and Shanga. The near offshore islands of Pemba, Zanzibar, and Mafia also present a range of resources capable of maintaining urban life, and recent excava-

tions at Unguja Ukuu on Zanzibar have demonstrated trading contact with Roman Egypt as early as the mid 5th century AD (Juma [1995]; Horton [1996]).

The further offshore islands of the Comorian archipelago in some cases comprise active volcanoes. Although the soils are very young indeed, the high rainfall supports luxuriant vegetation and a range of food resources are known to have been exploited on the slopes of the volcanoes from ca 8th-9th century AD onwards. The Comorian archipelago is an important focus of east African urban development. On Mwali island, Mro Dewa (with widespread finds of Sassanian Islamic imported ceramics reminiscent of Unguja Ukuu on Zanzibar) and the hilltop settlement of Mwali Mjini provide examples of extensive early proto-urban or urban settlements. Sites of the widespread Dembeni phase dating from the 9th century has characteristic ceramic traits which have been recognised in trading sites along the length of the east African coast from Inhambane and Chibuenne on the south Mozambique coast to Ungwana and sites along the Tana river in northern Kenya. Early mosque architecture can be studied at Sima on Anjouan and later developments at sites such as Domoni, while on Ngazidja the spatial layout of walled towns such as Itsandra is becoming increasingly well known. These provide exciting new insights in Swahili urban development and organisation (Wright [1984, 1992, 1993]; Allibert, Argant and Argant [1990]; Chanudet [1989]; Chanudet and Vérin [1983]; Sinclair [1995]).

On Madagascar two vegetation zones are predominant: the eastern wet zone and the western dry one. The sheltered bays of the north-west coast provide safe haven for traders and fishermen, while the well-watered coastal plain provides opportunities for rice cultivation and the hinterland forests grazing for cattle and tradable forest products. In addition to the classic studies of the trading *echelles* of the north-west coast by Vérin (1986), of particular importance is the newly found evidence for the town of Mahilaka in Ampisindava bay (Radimilahy [1998]). Here four phases include an initial 9th century one and a walled town 2 km<sup>2</sup> in extent in the 13th-14th centuries and with evidence of glass bead manufacture and a variety of imported trade goods and the exploitation of a wide range of food resources. The interior has iron, copper and gold, as well as workable micaceous schist used for stone bowls. The highland zone saw the development of complex settlement systems known to have been in contact with the Indian Ocean trading networks from ca 1100 AD onwards culminating in the Merina kingdom of the 18th and 19th centuries (Vérin

[1986]; Raharijoana [1988]; Wright and Rakotoarisoa [1990]).

Far to the south on the east African coast in Mozambique, the coastal vegetation of the Zanzibar-Inhambane floral mosaic fingers into the vast Zambesian miombo woodland systems, which host the powerful state systems of the Zimbabwe tradition. The northern Mozambique coast has maintained a number of Swahili towns and settlements, particularly in the Querimba archipelago and near Nacala (Duarte [1993]) and further south at Angoche (Isendahl [forthcoming]). In Vilanculos Bay the off-shore islands of the Bazaruto archipelago provide safe settlement locations, such as at Ponta Dundo. On the mainland where the Govuro river runs parallel to the coast, water and grazing are available for cattle and tall rushes for building material as used at Chibuene, a first millennium AD settlement and trading station (Sinclair [1982, 1987]). Chibuene had contacts from ca 650 AD onwards deep into the interior as far as Palapye in eastern Botswana, with its extensive iron-working activities and imported pottery and glass beads from the Persian Gulf dated to the 7th century AD. The later development of the first town in southern Africa, at Mapungubwe in the Limpopo valley, took place from ca 1000; extensive evidence for ivory production was found (Huffman and Hanisch [1987]). Later still, shifts in the focus of power on the southern edge of the Zimbabwe plateau saw the rise of Great Zimbabwe state, ca 1250-1450 AD. In the southern section the Butwa state developed from ca 1450-1700, centred on Khami and Danamombe, and the Mutapa state on the northern part of the Zimbabwe plateau and eastwards through the Manica mountains to the coastal plain of Sofala (Sinclair [1987, 1995]).

### Archaeology and History

The early historiographical emphasis on foreign invasion by Coupland (1938) mirrored early colonial ideology and was replaced by an attempt by Oliver and Mathew (1963) to produce a "history of Africa and not only that of its invaders". Subsequent historical research drew upon available documentary sources, and interpretations favoured foreign influences and colonisation, particularly by the Shirazi, with external trade the prime-mover in urban developments. However, this did not deter Mathew (1963) from putting forward a hypothesis that "trade had caused gradual development of town life among the negroid populations of the coast before the towns became really islamized and their rulers began to build in masonry."

The pioneer archaeology from the 1950s through the 1970s on the eastern African coast and the off-shore islands of the Comorian archipelago and Madagascar was mainly concerned with visible architectural remains. The tombs, temples and palaces of the Swahili coast were located stratigraphically through archaeological excavation, with chronology based on imported ceramics and architectural comparanda with better-known building styles from the Middle East and India. A cultural historical paradigm or mind set characterised these often very impressive efforts, but a perceived need for ethnic definition was not far below the surface, whether expressed in terms of "African", "Arab" or "Austronesian" groupings. On the Kenya coast limited excavations of stone buildings of "the Arab city of Gedi" and Ungwana (Kirkman [1954, 1966a,b]) were superseded by extensive excavations of mosques and palaces at Kilwa (Chittick [1974]). On Madagascar, Pierre Vérin (1986) carried out wide-ranging surveys of the trading *echelles* of the north-west coastal area and on the central highland area. Work on the Comores was also initiated (Chanudet and Vérin [1983]), as well as along the coast of Mozambique by Gerhard Liesegang (1972) among others.

From the 1980s more recent ethno-historical research based upon oral as well as written sources has contributed a wealth of detail about the stone towns or *mji* (the same word denotes clan and state). Internal spatial units such as wards (*mtaa*) are linked with family groupings and craft specialisation, and are in turn grouped into binary moiety divisions or demes (*mikao*) (Allen [1993] 224) which shift as the town develops. The internal *mitaa* divisions of the town formed nuclei of urban development, they could have different social characteristics reflecting patrician and commoner membership, and they were linked as small scale federal structures (Allen [1993] 223). The previous focus upon stone towns shifted to *kitongoji*, the non-stone-built quarters and "country towns" and village clusters (*mukowa*) of the near hinterland (*bara*), as on Zanzibar, Pemba and Mafia (Middleton [1992] 57-8). No longer is it possible to view the stone towns in isolation from their context of local farming community settlement areas (*mashambani*) and villages (*kijiji*), or – as near Mombasa – of major hinterland *kaya* settlements (see especially Allen [1993]; Spear [1979] and Mutoro and Abungu [1993]; Willis [1996]. Swahili terms after A. Lohdi [pers. comm.]). The abiding interest in origin myths has played itself out in the long discussions about the location of Shungwaya (Allen [1993]) and more recent discus-

sion has focussed upon pastoral or cultivator influence on urban origins (Horton [1996], Chami [1998]). Hardly surprisingly, the former is favoured in the northern Swahili coast, while the latter is preferred in the south.

Interregional trading networks have been seen as fundamental for the growth of towns in East Africa (Horton [1987]; Middleton [1992]; Wright [1993]; Kusimba [1999]). What is more difficult to document is the role of local production (e.g. Kusimba [1993]; Haaland [1994-5]; Sinclair [1995]) but area specialisations have been identified, e.g. the grain-producing cities such as Mogadishu and Merka exploiting the riverine silts of the Shebele (Jama [1996]); cloth production in the southern Benadir coastal town of Barawa and Siyu in the Lamu archipelago; and iron in Malindi (Horton [1996]; Kusimba [1999]). The possibility of a southern trading circuit including Mozambique, the Comores and Madagascar was put forward by Shepherd (1982). In addition, the lattice of trading networks on the east African coast was found to extend far into the interior as the initial pioneer research dichotomy between coast and interior began to crumble with the progress of historical and archaeological research focussed upon local production and exchange (Mutoro [1998]; Radimilahy [1998]). Commodities included slaves, ivory and salt, rock crystal, animal skins and iron, as well as gold from the south.

In the 1980s extensive archaeological excavations by Chittick (1984) at Manda in the Lamu archipelago were followed by those at Takwa (Wilson [1980]; Wilson and Omar [1996, 1997]). Detailed stratigraphic sequences at Shanga by Horton (1996) provided fine resolution chronological sequences and spatial layout of mosque construction and house forms. Abungu (1989) working at Ungwana extended previous work by Kirkman (1966a, b), and followed the settlement pattern inland up the Tana river. Work at Pate by Wilson and Omar (1996, 1997) produced new insights into urban spatial layout. On the southern coast, work by Wilding and later by Kusimba (1995) at Mtwapa was carried out in conjunction with investigations at Mombasa. On Zanzibar and Pemba a series of surveys focussed on stone-built sites have been carried out and followed by excavations (e.g. Clark and Horton [1985]; Juma [1996]; La Violette and Fleisher [1995]). In general, excavations at major settlements of the east African coast often comprising long stratigraphic sequences dated with imported ceramics go some way towards providing a general framework for assessing changes in stone town urban development and building styles.

They still fall short of providing clear estimates of the volume and spatial extent of non-stone-built residential areas and the relation of the country towns to the archaeologically better known stone towns. First steps towards investigating the role of symbolic values in shaping architectural features, especially Swahili houses, were implemented by Donnelly (1982) on the Kenya coast. This cognitive approach was extended elsewhere to the settlement level by Kus (1982) working on highland Madagascar.

Investigations of parameters of settlement location and the spatial analysis of settlement size by Allen (1980) and Wilson (1982) pointed out that Swahili town sites are not only situated so as to facilitate trade but also in terms of local agricultural potential. Five classes were identified, ranging from isolated structures, hamlets, small settlements of less than 2.5 ha usually clustered around a mosque; medium-sized sites from ca 2.5-5 ha; and two final classes of large sites greater or less than 15 ha in extent. It is the settlements of the two final classes which are traditionally called stone towns. More recent assessments of spatial parameters of Swahili sites (e.g. Stiles [1992]; Kusimba [1996]) still use Wilson's classification. On the northern Mozambique coast a better understanding of the locational parameters of Swahili sites has been obtained from work by R. Duarte and from Angoche (Isendahl [forthcoming]). Spatial analysis by the present author is based on wide-ranging surveys on the Comores by V erin and Chanudet (1983) and Wright (1984) that located a range of settlement types. The excavations by Wright have provided detailed information on subsistence preferences, while on the north-west coast of Madagascar, work by Radimilahy (1998) at Mahilaka has produced a very detailed model of urban establishment growth and contraction as well as evidence for rice cultivation from the 10th century.

Various attempts have been made to delimit and periodise Swahili civilisation. The historian Pouwel (1987) divides his account of the Swahili into three phases: an initial one (800-1100), followed by a development in phase two (1100-1300), and a golden age (1300-1600) in phase three. Kusimba, an archaeologist, has a longer time frame using four divisions: 100 BC-AD 300-1000, 1000-1500 and finally 1500-1950. The different chronological divisions reflect the differential weight given to internal developments versus external influences. The development of the coastal societies and those of the off-shore islands exhibit a rapid expansion of early farming community

settlement from the early centuries AD, followed by settlement consolidation and the growth of towns, and a tremendous increase in material wealth in the form of stone architecture and imported goods. According to linguistic and archaeological evidence, around 800 AD a population of proto-Swahili speakers lived in the Lamu region on the northern Kenyan coast. By the 11th century the Swahili speakers were apparently established along the East African coast and islands. Their settlements extended 3,000 km along the coastal strip from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, with more than 400 sites occupied before the 16th century (Horton [1987]). The settlement system also encompassed the Comorian archipelago and the north-west coast of Madagascar (Vérin [1986], Wright [1984]). Their subsistence economy was based on fishing, cultivation and livestock. Local crafts included pottery and iron-working. After an earlier initial phase (see, for example Horton [1996]), the 1100s and 1200s saw a widespread adoption of Islam based on social and economic relations rather than political dominance. This period is marked by a near fourfold increase in known settlement area (Wright [1993]).

While most settlements remained small villages, several towns expanded greatly in size and population. The larger towns exceeded 10 ha and consisted of a mixture of buildings of coral rag stone and a larger settlement of mud huts. All the settlements were fairly small by modern standards. The earliest settlements were small villages. Even at their peak in the 15th century, few were larger than 20 ha and most were much smaller. Their populations must have been small, the larger not more than the 10 000 reported for Mombasa in the 16th century (Allen [1993] 213; Strandes [1971, 1899] 79). For example, the important town of Shanga in the Lamu archipelago had, in the 14th century, 220 masonry houses within 7 ha and an estimated population of ca 3,000 (Horton [1996] 58), while Takwa had 137 in an area of ca 3 ha (Wilson [1980]). Even allowing for multi-storied buildings and a larger number of less permanent dwellings, the overall population could not have been more than a few thousand.

The Swahili settlements were thus established initially as small local farming and fishing villages developed at a number of different places along the coast. With the growth of overseas trade they underwent major expansion, culminating in the Muslim towns of the 14th and 15th centuries. The main towns developed into city-states which had very little political control over their hinterlands. These major towns,

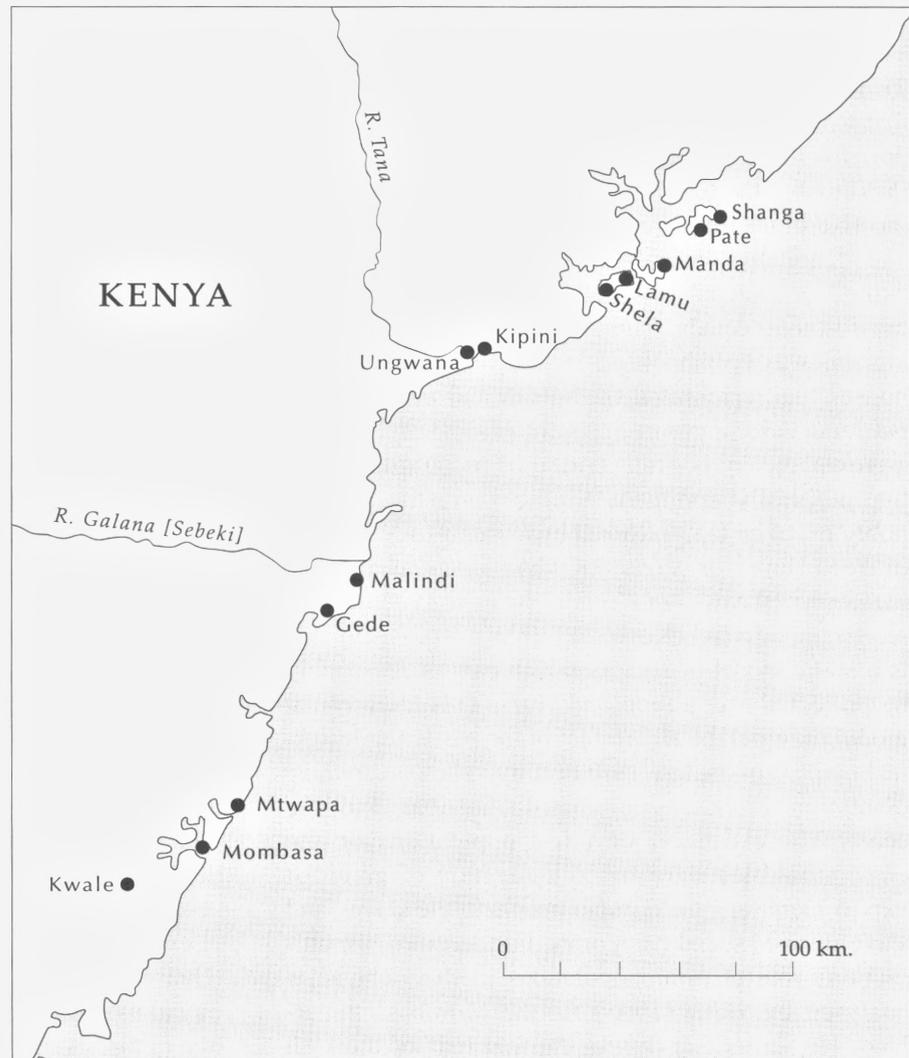
from the Lamu archipelago, Ungwana on Tana, Malindi, Gedi, Mombasa, Tongoni, and the towns on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, represented larger population nucleations on a densely populated coast, with numerous smaller villages in between.

On the Comores small fishing and farming communities of the Dembeni Phase were widely established in the late first millennium AD (Wright [1984]; Allibert *et al.* [1990]). These maintained trading contact with Mozambique and southern Tanzania, and more widely in the northern Indian Ocean trading system (Blanchy [forthcoming]). Early settlements with stone mosques e.g. at Sima on Anjouan and developed into a network of stone-built trading towns. In north-western Madagascar beginning with traces of human activity at ca 770 AD the settlement of the northwest coast developed. A number of settlements were established and these were at first labelled trading *echelles* by Pierre Vérin (1986), later discussed in terms of being city-states or part of larger states (Vérin [1992]). At least at Mahilaka in Ampisindava Bay, such a settlement established ca 900 AD grew to be a large town ca 20 ha in extent in the 13th-14th century; it had extensive trading contacts with the east African coast. And an upper estimate of its population is ca 3500, before declining in the 15th century (Radimilahy [1998]).

### The Urban Milieu: Ideology, Politics and Trade

While archeological and documentary evidence gives a fairly good picture of the physical characteristics of the Swahili towns, we still know very little of their political, social, and economic organisation before the 19th century. Most of what we know about political organisation comes from scattered travellers' accounts written in Arabic, such as al Masudi (10th century), al Idrisi (12th century), Yaqut (13th century) and Ibn Battuta (14th century), supplemented with Portuguese accounts of the 16th and 17th centuries, e.g. Gaspar Correa and Duarte Barbosa. Using ethno-historical and ethnographic sources, numerous authors have attempted to reconstruct aspects of political institutions, social stratification, and local and regional economic relationships (Nurse and Spear [1985]; Kusimba [1999]; Allen [1993]; Middleton [1992]). These models are of heuristic value but are often formulated as static representations applicable to several centuries of dynamic history. One exception is Allens (1993) bipartite model of "Shirazi mode of domination" and the "Arab-Wangwana mode of domination"

Fig. 2. The stone towns along the coast of Kenya.



which supplanted the former on most of the Swahili coast during the 15th and 16th centuries, leaving the Shirazi mode intact on the northern Tanzania coast. In her treatment of the political organisation of the northern and southern Swahili coasts, Nichols pointed to the *jumbe* system of authority (Allen's Shirazi mode) with an overall leader (*jumbe*) supported by other officials with ceremonial functions *shaha*, *waziri*, *mwenyi mkuu mwenyi mkubwa* and the *amiri*. One of their important functions was to organise bodies of armed men. The position was formalised by a process of acceptance and possession of regalia. The succession was determined as in most Swahili towns by a combination of heredity and consensus. This form of government is seen by Nichols as a fundamental Swahili cultural trait that survived the attacks of the Portuguese from ca 1500 and also the imposition of Omani power from the early 1700s.

By the beginning of the 19th century little formal

control of the Swahili towns was exercised by the Omanis: local leaders remained in office and the Swahili system of government was only gradually eroded (Nichols [1971] 43). Allen (1993), on the other hand, claims that the Shirazi or *jumbe* system was based on an earlier quasi-feudal system with a hierarchical system of ranked titles, the hereditary *jumbe* at the top, that could be obtained only through the redistribution of wealth within the Swahili community. Each rank had certain sumptuary, ritual, and economic privileges associated with it. This old elite and its political system was overthrown by the growing, wealthy merchant community that formed a system of corporate patrician groups of equals based on patrilineal descent. However, while overt ranking of persons was anathema, clans and lineages were ranked according to prestige and individuals according to descent seniority. He links the change to the identification by Omani merchants in Pate with

Ibadite Islam, which abhors overt ranking of the type associated with the Shirazi mode (Allen [1993] 201-3). If we interpret Allen correctly, he seems to mean that this form of Islam provided the ideological support for the new elites and a counter part to the old. Presumably the feasting and redistribution as well as the fixed ranking were at variance with a more fluid and “capitalist” orientation of the merchants. The “king” or “sultan” was nothing more than the foremost among equals. The Arab-Wangwana mode, he argues, was accompanied by the building of stone houses that represented the wealth and power of the patrician descent groups.

Town society is often portrayed as stratified with the politically dominant *waungwana* (the free or nobly born) on top, followed by *wazalia* (descendants of freed slaves, or parents of whom one was a slave), *watumwa* (slaves), and finally *wageni* (visitors and recent immigrants) (Kusimba [1999] 140). Again, this is a static model of society which cannot reasonably be projected over a thousand years. This hierarchical model may well be an artefact of the particular historical context of the late 19th century, when a capitalist plantation economy dominated Zanzibar and the coast. The expansion of urban populations on the coast stimulated slave-based cultivation of grain for export increasing the number people in the slave-, and slave-derived social categories. Furthermore, the ambiguous role of rural populations in this scheme is analysed by Willis (1993) for the Mombasa hinterland. He shows that during the first half of the 19th century, the *Nyika* population on the coastal ridges behind Mombasa was in some contexts regarded as members of the *waungwana* clans of Mombasa. Hence, more sophisticated and complex models must be developed that are dynamic and can take into account processes of change that are observable in the archaeological and historical record.

Although the character of the sources limits models based on ethno-historical material, they are crucial for the development of new interpretations of existing archaeological data, as well as in directing new investigations.

The developments in history and archaeology outlined above provide a new basis for assessing the socio-political and economic organisation of the Swahili towns. New hypotheses on urban development raise the possibility of an early emergence of urbanism based upon local production, followed by expansion and the formation of politically powerful dynasties based upon merchant families who control foreign trade. In addition, as mentioned above, the

processes of Islamisation continued throughout the period of urban development. The dates of the arrival of Islam in east Africa are being pushed backwards and it is no longer acceptable to equate this with the start of stone architecture from ca 1000 AD. Horton (1996) has argued for the existence of pole and plaster mosques underlying the later stone built ones. The development of religious leadership must have been closely intertwined with mercantile power and was quite possibly cemented with familial ties. Forms of urban government previously characterised *inter alia* as oligarchies, corporations, republics or monarchies were seen diachronically by modern historians from an evolutionary perspective in the period 1100-1500 as changing from government by an individual ruler surrounded by a court to more stratified societies with hierarchical political structures as wealthy traders took control of town politics (Nurse and Sear [1985] 85).

To what extent can we claim the contemporaneity of state and city? Recent archaeological evidence points to the emergence of urbanisation taking place by 800 AD, and even if we take al-Masudi's 10th century reference to kings (*mfalume*) (Nurse and Spear [1985] 93) as evidence for early statehood, urbanisation seems to be either earlier than or contemporaneous with state formation. Such a sequence is known elsewhere to have resulted in city-state formation (Hansen, *infra* 610). An examination of the ethno-historical evidence for the political and social organisation of the Swahili towns reveals a pattern that is characteristic of a clan-based organisation of the state. For example, both Mombasa and Lamu were organised into two sets of *waungwana*, free-born or noble, clan alliances usually called the three and nine “tribes” or “nations” which appointed members to a council with great power over political affairs and over the sultan or governor as well. In Mombasa the Omani family Mazrui ruled between the beginning of the 1700s until 1836, when they were overthrown by the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar. The Mazrui governors seem to have been in the same position as the earlier Swahili “kings” i.e. dependent on the powerful descent groups, each with their appointed leaders. Although frequently at loggerheads, the Mombasa *waungwana* elected a chief as leader, and as the British commandant of Mombasa between 1824 and 1826, Lieutenant Emery, observed when meeting with the Mazrui leaders, they had to wait for the chief “without whose sanctions nothing could be finally adjusted” (Nichols [1971] 55). This system of government based on descent groups alliances may be reflected in an earlier

Portuguese source which states that the [Swahili] King levied duties from ships coming into the harbour, of which “a third was paid to the headmen of Mombasa” (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 178). The *waungwana* clans were ranked according to a system of prestige and reputation which was quite fluid, and each clan alliance contained both wealthy merchants and regular farmers (Ylvisaker [1979] 50). While members of different clans were appointed to different government positions by the sultan or governor, few specialised political and economic institutions seem to have existed. Indeed, matters of taxation, trade, justice, and military organisation were in the hands of the clans. Subclans, clans, and clan alliances were the backbone of the Swahili states, which were organized into kin groupings reflected in ward organisation. For example, the custom dues from the island of Pemba, a dominion of Mombasa, were in the hands of the “Three Tribes” clan alliance (Bin ‘Ali Al Mazru’i [1995] 48). Similarly, military mobilisation and deployment was not only dependent on the clans (Bin ‘Ali Al Mazru’i [1995] 52) but also on their “Nyika” allies in the hinterland of Mombasa (Willis [1993] 25).

The tension between collective clan-based government and hierarchical kingship seems to permeate historical and archaeological analyses of the coastal polities. A recent account of northern Swahili urban political organisation is provided by Horton ([1996] 423-7) who describes the establishment of early Shirazi dynasties represented by six brothers. According to the History of Kilwa, they established themselves at Manda, Shanga, Pemba, Kilwa and the Comoro islands in the 11th century. Later communities identifying themselves with the Shirazi based their claims in part on having a complex court, an elected ruler and use of elaborate tombs and religious facilities (Horton [1996] 423; Allen [1993]; Pouwel [1987]). Horton also details the minting of coinages in Kilwa and Pemba, and these underline the economic sophistication of the towns of the Swahili coast at the beginning of the second millennium AD. Following a break in the later 11th century, more information is available on the political organisation of the coast. On the Benadir coast, Barawa is said to have had a republican form of government and Mogadishu had a government of clan elders. Further south, at Siyu in the Lamu archipelago, a similar form of rule was evident but in this case by elected elders. Horton ([1996] 426) based his account of forms of political authority on the northern coast on a limited number of historical sources, including Freeman-Grenville (1962) and

Trimingham (1975). The sources are patchy and the extent to which the “*waungwana*” system of government as described by Nurse and Spear ([1985] 88-92) can be taken as a generalised form based on control of trade remains the subject of debate.

The establishment of a sultanate at Kilwa Kisiwani, which eventually included the island of Mafia, is indicated from the 11th century AD. Coins have been found bearing inscriptions attributed to Ali b. Al-Hasan, and the validity of the relationship to Siraf and Shiraz in the Persian Gulf have been discussed. There followed a series of expansions and contractions of the wealth of the sultanate of Kilwa. In the 14th century, under al-Hasan bin Sulaim, the mosque at Kilwa was expanded, with arched and domed extensions held by Sutton (1990) to be “an attempt to induce a more Shafi Islamic image”. The Husuni palace complex dates to this period and it is widely believed that a good part of the wealth derived from control of the gold trade from the Zimbabwean plateau far to the south. Kilwa was visited ca 1331 by Ibn Battuta who was well impressed with the town. Despite the slump of the late 14th century, building in coral rag at Kilwa continued, especially in the first part of the 15th century and also at the nearby island of Songo Mnara. Later in the 15th century Kilwa’s pre-eminence was apparently taken over by Mombasa and Malindi, and building in coral rag was apparently discontinued. In a broadening of the historical perspective, Blanchy has pointed to the role of Indian traders in the downfall of Kilwa’s fortunes (Blanchy [forthcoming]).

Recent scholarship stresses the role of regional trade and production in the origin of the Swahili civilisation. Whatever the original conditions for the growth of settlements, it is clear that by 1500 they were highly integrated and indeed dependent on foreign trade. When this transformation into a mercantile economy and society took place is not clear, but it was gradual. When the Portuguese arrived at the end of the 15th century, they were faced with a network of towns and cities linked mainly through their maritime connections. Are these best thought of as city-states?

According to Gaspar Correa’s description of Kilwa in 1502 (quoted in Nurse and Spear [1985] 84), “A moor ruled over this city, who did not possess more country than the city itself.” In the same account we hear that the town had ca 12,000 inhabitants living within the walls.

Also in 1502, “Mombasa is a very large town on an island from one and a half to two leagues round. The houses are of the same type as those of Kilwa: some are three storied and all are plastered with lime. The

streets are very narrow. The town has more than 600 houses which are thatched with palm leaves. In between the stone houses are wooden houses with porches and stables for cattle.”

In 1517-18, Duarte Barbosa described the coast (Freeman-Grenville [1962]): “[Mombasa]... is a land full of food. Sheep, cows in great plenty. Much millet, rice, sweet, bitter oranges etc. The men thereof carry on trade with mainland... honey, wax and ivory (132). [People in Malindi] ... are great barterers, and deal in cloth, gold, ivory, and other wares with the moors and heathen of the great kingdom of Cambaya; and to their haven come every year many ships with cargoes from which they get great store of gold, ivory and wax. (132). The kings of these isles [Pemba, Mafia and Zanzibar] live in great luxury; they are clad in very fine silk and cotton garments which they purchase at Mombasa from Cambaya merchants (133).”

In 1512 the following description was given for Pate and Lamu: “These carry on trade with the inland country and are well walled with stone and mortar in as much as they are often at war with the heathen of the mainland” (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 134).

In 1569 Pate was said to have had “a large commerce with Mecca and other parts. The city is very large and has many fine edifices. The Moorish priest was the chief of all the coast. It is a very large Moorish city and a different trade is carried on, for there are very rich silk cloths from which the Portuguese derive great profits in the other Moorish cities where they are not to be had, because they are only manufactured at Pate and are sent to the others from that place. The Portuguese exchange iron ware beads and cotton cloth which the people of Pate do not possess for these silks. Ships from India resort to this city. It is a separate kingdom” (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 142).

Although these observations support the idea of the polities as city-states, it is important to keep in mind the biases of documentary sources which provide outsiders' rather than local residents' views. If *mji* means both town and state, then city-state is not just the outsider's classification of an African polity. City-state is then our term for what the Swahili themselves took to be an important aspect of their own civilisation. It is also worth noting that the name of the towns are identical with the names of the states, e.g. Kilwa, Mombasa, Malindi, Lamu.

From an archaeological point of view, the above considerations will only be brought into sharper relief when the spatial layouts of the stone towns are archaeologically compared to those of the outlying country-towns. Long-term archaeological research aiming at

addressing this question has been initiated by Mutoro and Abungu (e.g. [1993, 1998]) on the Kenyan coast and also on the north Mozambique coast (Duarte [1993]; Sinclair *et al.* [1993]). As pointed out by Nichols (1971) settlements contemporary with Kilwa, and in its immediate vicinity, such as Lindi, Mongallo and Gangarra, also need to be investigated.

## Trade and Towns

The expansion of overseas trade was explosive. The earliest archaeological evidence from the towns in the Lamu archipelago show small nucleated settlements of mud houses and cattle enclosures. Their inhabitants lived off fishing, livestock husbandry and agriculture. By the 10th century these communities obtained Middle Eastern and Chinese porcelain. Trade increased in volume during the subsequent centuries and the number of towns and villages grew along the coast from Somalia to Mozambique. The basic exports were ivory, rhino horn, tortoise-shell, ambergris, slaves, leopard skins, gold (from the southern coast deriving from the Zimbabwe area), iron, gum and myrrh, cotton cloth (Wright [1993]).

What was the origin of the wealth that supported the towns? While we know the sources of imported goods, very little is yet known of the source of the indigenous goods from which this civilisation prospered. Despite the fairly rich documentary material, and archaeological investigations of the coastal cities, the relationships between these towns and their hinterlands are still shrouded in mystery. In the absence of much evidence, scholars have tended to view the coastal civilisation as isolated from the interior. Many authors suggest that ivory and other export goods were procured from the coastal belt itself (e.g., Koponen [1988] 55; Sheriff [1987] 78) and that a great portion of the commerce was based on trans-shipment of ivory and gold from Kilwa and the south. That is, the northern towns such as Pate, Malindi, and Mombasa derived their prosperity as trans-shipment points for resources obtained in the coasting trade from Kilwa and the Mozambique coast (Dato [1970]). This was because the monsoon is more favourable in the north, hence the goods had to be traded before continuing to the Middle East and India. When the Portuguese had destroyed Kilwa and occupied Sofala, the northern area lost its lucrative trade. While it is true that many ships from Malindi and Mombasa traded to Mozambique, this is not evidence that this was their main trade route.

Although archaeological evidence is still sparse

there are a few unequivocal documentary indications that the northern settlements also traded with people in their own hinterlands. The problem with the Portuguese sources is that while they mention the warehousing and trade of ivory in Malindi and Mombasa, they seldom specify where it came from. Despite this problem there are a number of documents pertaining to the centuries before 1800 that indicate direct trade with the hinterland. In the *Geography of Duarte Lopez* it is stated that: "the kingdoms of Kilwa, Mombasa and Malindi bordered to the west on the great country of Monemugi (Unymawezi) whose ruler lived in peace with the coastal states, for they had mutual interest in trade and he required an outlet to the sea" (Strandes [1971, 1899]). Duarte Barbosa points out that the people of Mombasa traded with the people on the mainland for honey, wax, and ivory (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 132). In 1634, another record mentions that "Of the revenues, which come from the coast of Mombasa, the principal are ivory, amber[gris] and civet, which are obtained from the caffres. All these are exported to India, but a great deal is often taken to Mozambique." Here it is important to note that the products are sometimes taken to Mozambique, not the other way around as the transshipment argument would have it. Thorbahn ([1979] 153) recounts the case of Portuguese trading company founded in 1692 that shipped ivory from Mombasa. When Fort Jesus and Mombasa were lost to the Portuguese, the company unsuccessfully tried to find alternative sources of ivory in Mozambique, indicating that Mombasa was the primary source of the ivory rather than a re-export point.

### Archeological evidence for Relationships between Coast and hinterland

So far the direct archaeological evidence for interaction between the coastal settlements and the hinterland is scarce and concentrated along the Tana and Pangani river basins, and far to the south in Vilanculos Bay, as well as in north-west Madagascar inland from Mahilaka. The dominant domestic ceramics found at the large town site of Ungwana in the Tana delta are also found at various sites along the river basin, indicating cultural relationships and communication. However, there is, by coastal standards, a scarcity of exotic trade items in the interior sites. Only one imported sherd was found *in situ* at Wenje on the Tana but glass beads, copper chains, aragonite beads have also been recovered (Abungu and Mutoro [1993] 703).

In the Pangani valley, which would become one of the most important ivory sources for 19th century caravans, only a few sites have turned up artefacts of coastal and foreign derivation predating the last century. But then only a few investigations have been made by Soper (1967) in South Pare and Usambara, Odner (1971a,b) in Kilimanjaro and North Pare, and Chami (nd) in North Pare. In South Pare, a few glass beads, shell beads, cowries, and copper were found that date to the first half of the second millennium. In North Pare, Chami (nd) made surface finds of a small blue glass bead of unknown date and two potsherds with coastal decorations that date between the 8th and 13th centuries. To our knowledge no imported coastal artifacts pre-dating the 19th century have been collected on Kilimanjaro, and such material is also surprisingly absent on Usambara, which is close to the coast. However, some of the Usambara pottery has close affinities with coastal Tana Ware (Horton [1996]).

The character and quantity of archaeological evidence must be considered in the light of the peculiar history of East African archaeology, which has to a great extent ignored the coastal hinterland during the time that we are discussing. While much work has been done in the more spectacular coastal urban sites, few researchers are working in the rural areas (e.g. Chami [1994, 1998]; Haaland [1994-5]) and with sites later than the 12th or 13th centuries. This makes it imperative to discuss the possible theoretical implications of later political economic processes in order to encourage new research. Such ventures should cover regions and local developments as well as their links to the global systems of trade and cultural interactions.

One such attempt was made by Thorbahn (1979) who, frustrated by the lack of direct evidence for ivory trade on the northern Swahili coast, built a computer model based on 16th-19th century data on tusk sizes and the known historical fluctuations in ivory supply. This computer simulation indicated that even with low export volumes, the immediate hinterland (300 km from the coast) of any East African port would have been completely exploited in 200 years. Considering that the trade has been going on for millennia, there would have been few elephants left for the 19th century unless a much larger area had been exploited during the last 500-1000 years. This kind of exercise is of course fraught with pitfalls based on a host of assumptions and poorly known conditions of both elephant ecology and economic relationships during this time. But although the amount of ivory extracted

from East Africa between 900 and 1500 is not known, it must be remembered that already in the 10th century Swahili traders handled ivory, rock crystals, and gold from the inland. Muslim merchants transported them to the Mediterranean world and by about 960 AD Europe was flooded with magnificent examples of carvings in elephant ivory (Horton [1987]). Hence, a new interpretation and new research must take into account a long-standing exploitation in relation to the ecology and biological characteristics of the animals that provided the ivory.

The slow accretion of new models and evidence has moved a growing number of scholars to consider the possibility that the trade network extended into the interior, especially along the river valleys (Sutton [1990]; Feierman [1974]; Thorbahn [1979]; Horton [1987]; Allen [1993]; Kusimba [1999]). Once such contacts are recognised it becomes possible to formulate hypotheses about the character of the coastal hinterland relationships for further archaeological investigation. In this context it is imperative to consider the kind of trade goods that were exchanged for ivory and other products from the hinterland. What was given in exchange? Archaeologists looking for trade links with the coast have understandably focussed on preservable items such as beads. However, beads were not popular in the 19th century, and there is another article that stands out both in 19th century records and in medieval sources namely cloth. Cloth was a major article of barter in the 9th century (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 8 [Tuan Ch'eng-shih], in the 1200s (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 21 [Chao Ju-Kua]) and 1500s (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 110). Cattle have been recognised as an important component of early urban economies in eastern Africa (e.g. Allen [1993], Sinclair [1995], Horton [1996]).

Another important item that the coastal merchants used in exchange was probably cattle. The importance of cattle as a medium of exchange and prestige good was ubiquitous in 19th century East Africa, and documentary evidence of large numbers of cattle abounds in historical sources. In addition, linguistic evidence supports the assumption of a similar economic and social role of cattle in the centuries before (Ehret [1998] 179). The earliest mention of cattle being imported from India for trade is in the 19th century (Koponen [1988]). However, sources mention large numbers of cattle being maintained on the coast perhaps for purposes of exchange (Håkansson [forthcoming]), for example there are reports stating that there was plenty of cattle in Mombasa and Malindi in the 1500s (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 110, 132), Pem-

ba and Zanzibar (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 133, 155).

Prior to the 1800s, little is known about the economic and political relationships between the towns and the interior societies. The Swahili polities along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coast did not extend any political power inland. It is clear that these towns were militarily very weak and had to rely on alliances with their hinterland neighbours for defence and protection. Indeed, the evidence shows clearly that it was peoples inhabiting the coastal hinterland that held the military advantage, to the extent that since the 1500s they had to transfer annual gifts of cloth to secure the peace and continuous supply of food and trade goods. Even such a prosperous and powerful city as Mombasa under the Mazruis in the 18th century and even into the first half of the 19th century could not impose any decisions on its neighbours (Willis [1993]). The era of caravan penetration into the interior did not begin in earnest until the middle of the 19th century, and before that the trade in ivory and other goods was in the hands of the interior societies (Lamphear [1970]).

To what extent can the trade be termed unequal? Some authors such as Sheriff (1987) suggest that this trade impoverished populations, for instance the ivory-trading Kamba in Kenya, who were among the foremost ivory traders. Such a view is based on dependency theory and notions of unequal exchange. From a world systems perspective the coastal towns were semi-peripheral ports of trade that linked eastern Africa to the Indian Ocean system. The urban areas exhibited features that define them as cores in relationship to the interior. They had higher population densities, a complex division of labour with occupational specialisations, access to others' labour in the form of slaves, servants and labourers, more wealth per capita in the form of valuable imported goods, and an elite that lived in labour-intensive habitations, and hence probably nascent class formation. The interior was mainly kinship based, with less personal wealth per capita, less access to others' labour, lower population densities, and a simpler division of labour with few specialists. These differences represent what world systems theorists may call "core/periphery differentiation" (Chase-Dunn and Hall [1997]).

But was there a core/periphery hierarchy? Core/periphery hierarchy is a central theoretical concept in world-systems approaches. It is an exploitative relationship in which the core extracts wealth from the periphery without equal compensation. Exploitation may be direct, through institutions such as property

relationships, the extraction of tribute or taxes or the application of direct force. Or it may be more indirect, such as through unequal exchange. In the case of the East African coastal core/periphery, the absence of any of these criteria indicates that there was no such domination. Evidence shows that the towns exercised little if any political military domination on the interior – in fact it seems that the interior populations had the upper hand in potential military strength. Thus if there was a core/periphery hierarchy, it was not pronounced. Unequal exchange could possibly have taken place because the coastal core could have exchanged something with little labour per unit, such as cloth, for such comparatively labour-intensive interior goods as foodstuffs, metals or ivory. However, such an analysis is made difficult because of a discrepancy in their economic systems, where cloth and beads were valued as media of exchange in the interior while ivory was worthless. There is evidence to suggest that this trade actually stimulated and diversified local food and craft production (Kjekshus [1977]; Jackson [1976]). An alternative view is given by Duarte of the situation on the north Mozambique coast where the effects of trading activities seem to have undermined the risk-buffering networks of the farming communities (Duarte [1993]). The dynamics and effects of the coastal trade on the interior societies remain to be explored.

### The Decline of the Swahili City-States

Most archaeological effort has been expended in understanding the gross chronology of the periods of classical Swahili civilisation and its origins, as well as details of the layout and stratigraphy of its most important sites. Relatively little has been achieved in the later periods following the arrival of the Portuguese. Exceptions to this of course exist and include work at Fort Jesus (Kirkman [1974]), underwater archaeology of the wreck of the *St Antonio de Tana* in Mombasa harbour and in the upper levels of excavations at sites such as Mtwapa and Takwa (see also bibliography by Wilding [1976]). One is left with the impression that clusters of urban and associated sites occur at intervals down the coast (see for example maps in Wilson [1982] and Abungu [1998]) but these were not necessarily occupied at the same time. The best source for assessing the possible contemporaneity of these sites, both between and within settlement clusters, is the chronological study of 96 sites on the Kenya coast by Wilson (1982). This is based on ceramic finds and shows clearly that certain sites such

as Pate, Lamu, Siyu, Faza, Malindi, and Mombasa were occupied for a number of centuries while other mainly smaller sites were only short-term occupations (Wilson [1982] 217-18). Particular lacunae can be noted at the early to mid 17th century and new beginnings in the late 18th century.

From the mid 16th to mid 17th century the Swahili towns experienced increasing difficulties in maintaining their trading networks. This appears to have been primarily because of the disruptive influence of the Portuguese. During the period between ca 1550 and 1650 the Swahili mercantile economy went into a steep decline. Trade diminished in volume, towns and villages became depopulated or abandoned. During the 1600s the building of stone mosques apparently ceased, a large number of mosques were abandoned and fell into ruin. Of ca 49 extant coastal sites between the Somali border and the Pangani River, ca 40 were abandoned or significantly reduced in size, and decayed during this period. Most of these sites that dotted the coastal strip were quite small, with a stone mosque and graves probably surrounded by mud-walled buildings. Several were large comprising around 15 ha, such as Gede, Pate, Ungwana, Tongoni that were left in ruins; Malindi too, was significantly reduced in size and dilapidated during this period. The effects of this downturn of fortunes must have had a strong effect not only on coastal social and economic conditions, but on the interior as well. The impact on the whole region is not well understood partly because of the scarcity of documentary and archaeological information (Kusimba [1999]).

By the end of the 16th century the Swahili wealth and commerce had been broken. In 1606 Bernardino writes about Mombasa: "Their (the houses') inhabitants are Moors who, although formerly rich, now live in utter poverty" (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 157). Later an English observer noted in 1667: "It is a place of no great traffiq, the evidence of which is I imagine the poverty of the inhabitants are so squeezed perpetually by the governor that they seldom or never come to be worth anything of an estate. Nor are they suffered to trade for 20 peeces 8/8 without governors licence. Mombasa itself seldome sens anything considerable, their only trade consisting in their small boates with which the goveenor sends down to Quilo, Pembah and Zanzebar ... for gold, amber, ivory etc" (Freeman-Grenville [1971] 190). Malindi, despite being an ally of Portugal, also declined since the king of Malindi had been made king of Mombasa and moved to that city. By 1634, "The kingdom of Malindi... has now decreased to a third part of the size

it was. The viceroy appointed a trusty moor and ordered him to be given 25 scores of linen cloth and two candils of iron to disperse to the Mossegeju yearly who continually infest them. There is nothing else of interest in the kingdom" (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 182).

To the north, in the Lamu archipelago, the city of Pate seems to have fared better than Mombasa. In 1634 it was reported that: "A custom house was placed here by the viceroy, the Count de Linhares, for the ships, which are unable to proceed to Mombassa to pay their dues to His Majesty's treasury. The King of Pate is thereby placed in a particularly favourable position by reason of the trade which comes to his territory. The customs house is like that of Mombasa and has four Portuguese officials, whose expenses are paid by his majesty's treasury" (Freeman-Grenville [1962] 181).

Pate still held dominance but was rivalled by the expanding Lamu, which was going to become the most important port in the north. Other settlements declined as well as cities like Ungwana and Gede that were abandoned during this time. While the force that the Portuguese concentrated on Mombasa greatly contributed to the disenfranchisement of its local population, military attacks alone could not have destroyed the economy of the whole coast. Malindi declined without any military intervention, as did most of the small settlements and larger ones like Gede. Pate, on the other hand, which was also subject of many attacks and devastations, managed to hold its own until it was outcompeted and vanquished by Lamu.

To the south of Mombasa, depopulation and economic depression was also occurring. Tongoni or Mtangata was an ally of Portugal; it was probably established in the 13th century and abandoned in the 17th century. There are still ruins remaining of a fairly large settlement with stone houses, a mosque and pillar tombs (Kirkman [1966a]). Nothing is known about the economic and social relationships of this town with the interior of the region, but judging from its alliance with Portugal it may have been politically subservient to Mombasa, as Tanga was in the 18th century. An alliance with the foreign invaders may have been seen as an opportunity to rid themselves from Mombasa's dominance. There are a number of smaller settlements such as Toten Island in the Tanga harbour, whose age is unknown but occupation seems to have ended by the 1600s. The evidence also indicates that after 1600 there was a possible depopulation at a number of these sites and then later reoccupation. It is possible that these settlements were

outlets for ivory from the Kilimanjaro-North Pare region and beyond. A few scraps of evidence are the presence of Swahili among the Chagga around the 1840s, and an oral tradition pertaining to the 1700s. As it did later, this region probably also supplied Mombasa directly with ivory. It is also possible that somewhere in that region there was a collection point or a market where ivory and other goods were exchanged and transported to Mombasa and the Pangani/Tongoni. Gonja in South Pare is a good candidate since it is equidistant from Kilimanjaro and Mombasa and Tongoni.

The reasons for the coastal economic decline are only partly clear. According to the latest discussion of this problem (Kusimba [1999]), two different explanations have been proposed. One view is that climatic conditions changed, and drought caused water shortages, forcing people to move. Those who remained overused the existing wells, which in turn increased the spread of waterborne diseases, causing widespread epidemics. A mass migration from the coast followed which resulted in conflicts over land and water in the hinterland, and warfare with the pastoralist Oromo. Kusimba ([1999] 176) does not support this hypothesis that presupposes violent conflicts and population movements before Portuguese times. He argues that warfare on a systematic regional scale would have left traces in the archaeological record, but there is no such evidence in the form of, e.g., burned houses, wrecked villages, or skeletons with marks of violent death. Instead he supports the second and most widely accepted view, *viz.* that the Portuguese conquest caused the abandonment of the coast and the decline in the Swahili commerce. This explanation, which seems to have much in favour of it, has been suggested by several authors (Sheriff [1987]; Pearson [1998]; Freeman-Grenville [1963]). However, while many authors put forward the effects of Portuguese activities on commerce and politics along the coast there is also doubt about how much impact the thinly stretched naval power could have had along the long coast of the western Indian Ocean (Pearson [1999] 138; Wallerstein [1974]).

The Portuguese arrival in 1502 spelled the beginning of a decline in trade on the coast that would become especially severe from the end of the 1500s to the end of the 1600s. The Portuguese main objective in entering the Indian Ocean was to capture the spice trade and to divert it though their maritime artery around the Cape of Good Hope. They captured Goa in western India and Malacca in Southeast Asia. These harbours were used as a basis for an ocean empire,

and through the conquest of Hormuz and Muscat in Oman they established themselves on some of the critical centres of the Indian Ocean trade system. The Portuguese tried to prevent any sort of traffic between India and the Red Sea. There was a pronounced drop in the volume of goods passing to and from the East (Strandes [1971, 1899] 48). In addition, from their colony in Goa they managed to gain far-reaching control over the spice trade (Chaudhuri [1985] 66), establishing bases in Malindi and Sofala, and for a short period in Mombasa.

A combination of factors affected the coastal settlements. The Portuguese attacked and looted several cities on many occasions. Trading vessels were captured and their cargo routinely confiscated. Attempts were made to centralise trade through Portuguese hands by giving trading monopolies in ivory to their officials. Taxes and levies were extracted from trade where possible, and trade in certain goods like beads and cloth were prohibited since they were used by the Portuguese to exchange for gold in Sofala. Activities elsewhere in the Indian Ocean must have been ruinous for many merchants who could therefore not raise capital for trade in East Africa. Political instability was also unleashed on the coast, where the Portuguese enlisted allies like Malindi to attack others like Mombasa, and exploited old enmities between city-states. The Portuguese first established themselves in Malindi and tried to capture Mombasa. The first storming of Mombasa was in 1505. Much loot was taken, i.e. gold, silver, ivory, ambergris, Persian and Indian fabrics, rice, millet, butter honey, butter, cattle and goats, and 1,200 prisoners. The prisoners and much of the booty were left behind because the ships were overloaded. Mombasa's influence on the economy was broken for "a number of years" (Strandes [1971 = 1899] 64). Two more attacks took place during the 16th century, when the city was ransacked and looted until the Portuguese got a more stable foothold and begun constructing Fort Jesus as a stronghold on the northern Mrima coast (Kirkman [1974]).

More general and widespread changes in the economic conditions must be looked into. The Swahili towns and their mercantile contacts with the Indian Ocean were fragile. The towns were militarily weak and politically fragmented. Although small, the Portuguese presence quickly had an impact on commercial activities. They tried to control sea traffic with a pass system, and granted monopoly over certain commodities to the captain of Malindi. The Portuguese also tried to cut out the Swahili from the Sofala trade.

Trade in both gold and ivory declined (Strandes [1971 = 1899] 119; Sheriff [1987] 16). The Portuguese efforts centred on excluding Arabs from India and making it impossible for them to obtain spices or to ship them in their accustomed way through the Red sea and the Persian Gulf and Syria. These efforts were never wholly successful – but they did succeed to the extent that the Arabs could only bring small quantities by stealth into the Red Sea. Portugal was able to become the major supplier of the goods from the east to Europe (Strandes [1971 = 1899] 101). In order to control the Sofala gold trade, commercial transactions in goods such as cloth used by the Portuguese to obtain gold in Sofala were prohibited along the whole coast, i.e. cloth and beads. Two ships patrolled the coast to enforce this prohibition (Strandes [1971 = 1899] 93).

While attempting to exclude the Swahili from the formerly lucrative ivory trade, the Portuguese themselves do not seem to have been able to derive much profit from their trading monopoly. In 1634 when a customs house had been established in Mombasa no merchants came to trade and the revenues could not pay for the upkeep of the administration and garrison. The Captain of Mombasa continued to have a monopoly on trade. But in the second half of the 17th century these privileges were gradually taken over by a trading company. The goods mentioned included ambergris, ivory, and tortoise-shell. The greater resources of the company did not lead to an increase in trade, for during the few years of its existence, only one ship annually arrived at Mombasa. In Portuguese sources Mozambique is spoken of as the only source of wealth left in their eastern colonies (Strandes [1971 = 1899] 211-12).

With the decline in trade and settlement on most of the coast, it is remarkable that the Lamu archipelago remained to a great extent unaffected by this trend. Apparently trade continued here and in the mid 17th century it was the greatest market for ivory on the coast. This condition can be attributed to two things. First, the Lamu archipelago was on the periphery of Portuguese influence; and second, they carried on trade through the Red Sea with Arabia (Mecca), and the Ottoman Empire. The Comores and Madagascar although known to the Portuguese, were not perceived as the objects of their direct interest and accordingly the towns were able to develop autonomously until falling under Omani influence (Vérin [1986, 1992]).

Obviously not only the coastal Swahili trading houses had been destroyed but the whole western Indian Ocean trade with East Africa had sharply

declined. Whether or not this decline was the result of Portuguese marine and commercial activities is a matter of discussion. Sheriff ([1987] 16) writes that although the power of the Swahili merchant class was broken, the Portuguese lacked resources for effective control of transoceanic commerce. Frank ([1998] 178-9) maintains that the Portuguese influence over the Indian Ocean trade was quite small and their participation limited compared to the overall volume of trade. By the end of the 16th century Portugal lost control over the spice trade and the trade between India and the Middle East (Chaudhuri [1985] 66). This does not contradict that for a while they may have had a devastating effect at least locally on the coast and the western part of the ocean. However, it is difficult to see how the Portuguese with their limited naval resources stretched from East Africa to China could have single-handedly disrupted the ivory trade. They probably had some help from global economic processes that took place during the 17th century in Europe and Asia. During that time Europe experienced a recession and demand for imported products must have suffered. More importantly Asia was suffering from a shortage of silver and a monetary crisis which must have affected the ability of traders to obtain credit for the East African trade as well (Frank [1998] 243). There was also a famine in India in the 1630s which may have affected its commercial ventures (Frank [1998] 238).

The decline in trade together with political insecurity created by Portuguese attacks and fuelling of inter-city enmities caused a large-scale depopulation of the coast. It is of course impossible to know without detailed archaeological information the number of people involved. Mombasa is reported to have had a population of 10,000 in 1500, but that may be an exaggeration. Mombasa is ranked by Wilson (1982) with Lamu, Malindi, Pate, Ungwana, and Gede as similar in size. The latter two were abandoned and Mombasa and Malindi were substantially reduced. Including the abandonment of 30 smaller settlements, we approach a figure in the tens of thousands of persons leaving the coast for the interior during the 1600s. It may be supposed that later traditions found among coastal and interior populations about large-scale migrations could be memories from this period.

The economic depression and depopulation of the coast lasted until the beginning of the 1700s. In the 17th century Oman had become a powerful trading nation and sea power; it ousted the Portuguese from their territories in an attempt to gain control over the Indian Ocean commerce. By 1652 Omani raiders

were common in the coastal waters attacking the Portuguese. In 1698 they were finally able to expel the Portuguese from Mombasa and from any political and economic importance on the coast north of Mozambique. The Omani sovereignty was to be short-lived and the area became once again politically and commercially independent. Omani merchants established themselves on the coast and began their own trade exchanging Indian cloth for ivory and transporting Indian and British manufactured goods to the Persian Gulf (Sheriff [1987] 21). The 1700s provided an almost century-long period of relative freedom from outside domination and a commercial and cultural renaissance of the Swahili coast, with a revival of building activities (Sheriff [1987] 18).

The period between 1700 and 1850 would see a steady increase in commerce and expansion of the ivory trade. This is also an important period, in that trade to a great extent was to be in the hands of the interior populations. The revived coastal cities and commerce did not venture inland and existed as entrepôts to which the interior populations delivered ivory. Unfortunately there is very little contemporary documentary information available for the 1700s that could shed light on the historical developments on the coast.

## Conclusion

In this contribution we have tried to outline the political and economic characteristics of the Swahili city-states through a period of almost 1000 years. Naturally such an exercise will be schematic and in some aspects superficial. Our aim has been to emphasise recent trends in research and to suggest new agendas rather than in this short space attempt a coherent and comprehensive treatment of this subject. Before addressing substantive conclusions it is imperative to discuss the character of evidence and analysis that have so far been carried out in this area.

It is clear that any accounts of the Swahili city-states suffer from the near complete lack of archaeological investigations of both their immediate hinterland and the time period after the 16th century. The interpretations of the Swahili urban civilisation before the 1800s are usually based on static models derived from late ethno-historical material. While such scenarios are important and useful for heuristic model-building, few researchers have produced models that address historical change. It is therefore imperative for future research to address the dynamic character of Swahili city-states and investigate the political economies of these from a diachronic perspective (cf

Sinclair [1995]). The expansion of archaeological research on the coast and the formulation of new theoretical and topical problems allow us to highlight some positive conclusions and some answers to the questions: is it legitimate to describe Swahili civilisation as a city-state culture, i.e. as a system of city-states? And in what way is our understanding of the Swahili civilisation furthered by applying the concepts of city-state and city-state culture?

Although comparatively small, the Swahili *mji* was a city in the Weberian sense (see Hansen *supra*, 11-12). It had a large nucleated and often walled centre whose inhabitants practised some division of labour and specialisation of function, e.g. iron workers. It had markets where inhabitants acquired a substantial amount of what they needed and the town had an important involvement in long distance trade. It is no obstacle that a number of the inhabitants could have been direct producers of foodstuffs, e.g. fisherman and farmers who had their fields outside (and sometimes inside) the walls (*Ackerbürger*).

Without entering the voluminous literature on state formation, we would like to stress that the Swahili *mji*, as it is historically known, exhibited state-like structures. It was a state in the sense that it had a centralised and institutionalised government in possession of the necessary means of coercion by which the legal order could be enforced over the population in the territory (see Hansen, *supra* 12-13). True, a Swahili town had rather weak military and coercive institutions but they seem to have been sufficiently developed for the classification of state rather than stateless society to be appropriate. It is no obstacle to this classification that the political organisation was based upon descent corporations such as sub-clans and clans.

From a political economy perspective, the distribution and appropriation of social labour is also crucial as an indicator of state organisation in which a class of people is able to control others' labour outside kinship ties (cf. Wolf [1982] 99). Large populations of slaves and other social categories who produced a surplus that was appropriated by the patricians clearly existed. It is important to note that much of the wealth controlled by the merchant class derived not from direct exploitation of subordinate classes but from gains in trade. This particular means for extracting wealth must have been an important factor determining the particular political-economic processes in these towns over time.

The Swahili *mji* was either independent or, when dependent upon a foreign power, in possession of

autonomy to such a degree that it must be classified as a polity rather than a municipality. The town was also a military unit which could wage war against other towns and often did. As a corollary it can be added that a town could enter into an alliance with other towns or with other states (Kusimba [1999] 143).

In the 14th and 15th centuries there were altogether some 20-25 polities, most of them centred on a stone town, but the traditional equation of stone town with polity may be an oversimplification. Occasionally a stone town might have been just an urban centre without being a polity (Somana in northern Mozambique is one possible example) and conversely some of the major country towns, e.g. on the north Kenya coast, may have been the centres of city-states. Some of the larger towns, such as Mombasa, were able to, politically and economically, dominate other smaller settlements on the coast. During the 18th century Mombasa controlled the coast down to Tanga and Pangani who sent their ivory through that port (Mazrui [1995]; Emery's journal).

The Swahili *mji* were micro-states. For instance, Kilwa's core territory was confined to the island. Even including a number of settlements on the mainland, its territory is unlikely to have reached more than 1000 km<sup>2</sup>. Zanzibar, covering ca 2,500 km<sup>2</sup>, was split up into a number of states, some centred on stone towns and some perhaps on country towns. On the Lamu archipelago, towns on Lamu, Pate and Manda are so close to one another that each must have had a very small territory, even considering hinterland extensions.

These micro-states were in fact city-states each consisting of a town and its immediate hinterland dotted with a number of other settlements, the *mji* being the political and religious centre and an important entrepot for long-distance trade. All the *mji* together form a city-state culture having, notwithstanding local variations in each case, the same religion (Islam), the same language (Swahili), a common architectural tradition and material culture, and the same kinship-based political organisation, often with elected kings and a significant component of decision-making by consensus. All these *mji* constitute an interacting network covering ca 3,000 km of coast and with extensions to the off-shore island archipelagos of Zanzibar and the Comores and northern Madagascar. Communication was mainly by sea along the coast, but also by land especially between neighbouring communities.

Each city-state consisted of a cluster of nucleated settlements of which one was usually a stone town,

the others country towns, villages and hamlets. The stone town was the political and religious centre where the king resided and the major mosques were found, especially the Friday Congregation Mosque (e.g. Kusimba [1999] 147). Some of the country towns, however, were substantial urban centres, sometimes more populous than the stone town, e.g. Bajun, Faza and Kizingitini on Pate (Middleton [1992] 79-80). Such clusters are distributed widely along the coast of east Africa from Somalia to Mozambique, on the off-shore islands including the Zanzibar and Comorian archipelago, and also judging from available evidence the north-west coast of Madagascar. At least on the east African coast each city-state apparently had its own distinctive dialect (Kusimba [1999] 139) but the dialects were mutually intelligible (Kusimba [1999] 154). The linguistic situation pertaining to the towns of the Comores and north-west Madagascar is currently under research. The relationships between the towns of the Benedir coast with those of the coast further south needs to be further investigated, as does the relationship between the towns of north-east Madagascar and the Comores with those of the east African mainland. How far can we consider these Swahili?

Subject to the reservations pointed out above about sources, there appears at least in the 19th century to have been four social classes: (1) The elite class, the *waungwana*, (2) manumitted commoners, (3) slaves and (4) foreigners and recent immigrants. The *waungwana* are comparable to the citizens in oligarchic city-states in other city-state cultures. Their privileges included the right to own landed property, the right to build and live in a stone house in one's own ward (*mtaa*), the right to trade with foreign merchants, and the right to elect town and mosque officials (Kusimba [1999] 140). Most *miji* were "monarchies", but councils of elders and other corporative and kinship-based institutions were so important that the classification of many *miji* as oligarchies seems more appropriate.

From a political point of view the following periodisation for city-states can be suggested. (1) 300-1000 AD: farming communities developing into towns, but with little if any evidence of state formation. (2) From ca 1000 AD or perhaps earlier: the emergence of independent city-states, fully developed by 1331 (ibn Battuta) and flourishing until ca 1500 AD. (3) Ca 1500-1650 AD: mostly dependent city-states dominated by the Portuguese but continuing e.g. in the Lamu archipelago and the Comores as still largely autonomous city-states. (4) 1650-ca 1800: dependent city-states dominated by the Omanis who

exercise a form of indirect rule so that each city-state is still in possession of a discernible amount of autonomy, especially in the second half of the 18th century. (5) In the period after 1804 the former city-states become municipalities in the Zanzibar empire ruled by Sayyid Said.

Like the Malay *negeri* (see Reid, *supra* 417-29) the Swahili *mji* differed from the Islamic towns of the Near East by being polities rather than towns integrated into much larger political units. A probable explanation for this is the active indigenous African contribution to cultural, economic, political organisation combined with Islamic traditions.

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