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The Rise of the Swahili City-States of East Africa, Tenth-Fourteenth Century A.D.

Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries A.D., a number of city-states emerged and flourished along the coast of East Africa. A new culture, including a language, developed. It became known as the Swahili (Afro-Arab) culture, and it has survived till today. *Swahili* is an Arabic word, derived from *sahil*, which means "coast." *Swahili* literally means "the people of the coast." Due to their location, the Swahili states became the gateway to the African interior and developed as international markets that drew traders and visitors from Asia, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. Swahili society emerged in an area that had long been inhabited by the people of East Africa. "Swahili" is used to mean the following: a group of East African coastal cities whose religion and culture were Islamic; whose population included Africans and Arabs; whose cities were noted for their trading culture and economy; and whose inhabitants and language were mainly African. This chapter will consider the historical antecedents to the Swahili states and identify the features of Swahili society.

THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE AND AZANIA

Navigation on the Indian Ocean led to the development of an international trade. Sailors studied and took advantage of the direction of the monsoon winds in the western Indian Ocean. From November to March, the monsoon winds blew from the Indian coast toward Africa, in a southwestern direction. During

this period, sailors would travel to Africa. Then from May to September, the winds blew northeast, in the direction of the Persian Gulf and India, and the sailors would travel in this direction. This enabled East Africa to be integrated with traders from Southeast Asia, western India, and Arabia.

The trade began long before the rise of Islam in the seventh century. The island of Madagascar off the southeastern coast of Africa received visitors from the islands of Indonesia in ancient days. In the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., the Greeks called the East African coast "Azania." East Africa was then populated by Iron Age people, probably the descendants of the Bantu-speaking migrants. In a sailors' handbook, *The Periplus of the Erythraean*, written by an Egyptian-Greek during the first century A.D., the author mentioned a number of the cities along the coast and their trade items: In exchange for wheat, iron tools, weapons, and cotton cloths, the Azanians supplied coconut oil, ivory, and rhinoceros horn. The same source also described the Azanians as fishermen who were skilled enough to use small boats constructed from pieces of wood joined together by coconut fiber. Powerful chiefs protected commerce, governed the trading cities, and engaged in trade themselves. It was through these contacts that some food crops such as rice and bananas were brought to Africa from Southeast Asia. Many cities grew up along the coast, partly to serve as middlemen between the African hinterland and the overseas traders. The cities also absorbed foreigners, such as Arabs, who decided to settle on a permanent basis.

By A.D. 1000, the coastal cities had grown in size and wealth. Now called the land of Zanj by the Arabs, the coastal cities were notable markets visited by traders from Persia, Arabia, and India. When the Islamic capital was located in Bagdad in A.D. 750, the Persian Gulf began to enjoy more visibility in the Indian Ocean trade. This brought more Arab traders and settlers to the East African coast. The presence of the Arabs promoted trade and political relations with the Muslim world. The Arab settlers also intermarried with the African population. Mogadishu and Lamu were two of the most important cities, accessible to traders who continued to use the monsoon winds. One of the earliest written accounts, by an Arab traveler, described the area:

The sea of Zanj reaches down to the country of Sofola . . . which produces gold in abundance and other marvels; its climate is warm and its soil fertile. . . . The Zanj speak elegantly, and they have orators in their own language. . . . These peoples have no code of religion; their kings follow custom and . . . a few political rules. . . . Each worships what he pleases, a plant, an animal, a mineral. They possess a great number of islands where the coconut grows, a fruit that is eaten by all the peoples of the Zanj.¹

The trade patterns followed by the Arabs became well established. As before, they depended on the seasonal monsoon winds to cross the ocean between western Asia and East Africa. The Arabs used a sailing ship known as a dhow, and the journey was usually of long duration. Having to spend so much time on the sea, and depending on the changes in the direction of the wind, they could not

afford to stay for too long in Africa. The most convenient places for the Arab traders to stay were the islands of Mogadishu, Barawa, and Lamu. The East African traders would bring the products of the interior and those manufactured in the coastal cities to sell to the visiting Arab traders, who wasted no time in procuring them. The East African cities exported raw materials, notably gold, copper, leopard skins, coconut oil, shells, ivory, mangrove poles with which to build houses in the Persian Gulf, and slaves. Their imports comprised a variety of imported items and luxuries, such as East Asian pottery, Indian silk and cotton, and glassware.

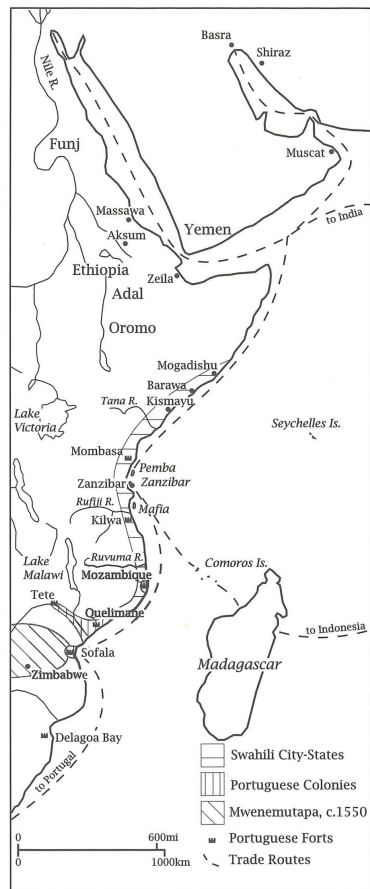
As the trade expanded and became more steady and lucrative, a number of Arab Muslims began to settle permanently along the coast in order to derive more profit from African products and serve as middlemen. The Arab settlers intermarried with the local populations and developed colonies that hosted foreign traders. By A.D. 1000, many towns including Arab immigrants had developed on the islands of Lamu, Kilwa, Comoro, and Zanzibar. Trade and wealth transformed small settlements into large Swahili city-states.

THE SWAHILI CITY-STATES

By the late tenth century, a new culture and society was already emerging, a multicultural mix of people and ideas from three sources—African, Asian, and Islamic. While people from Indonesia settled in Madagascar, waves of Arabian and Persian Muslims arrived on the East African coast as permanent settlers. The intermingling between settlers and Africans resulted in the formation of Swahili society.

The Swahili states were located along the coast. They were all trading cities. Kilwa, Mogadishu, Sofala, and Mombasa were some of the leading Swahili cities. The economy was dominated by the trade across the Indian Ocean. From the tenth to the mid-eleventh century, the trade grew, due in part to the increasing demand for African gold and ivory in Egypt and Europe. The trade reached its peak during the fourteenth century, the cities prospered, and some produced specialized products for export. For instance, at Sofala, dyed textiles were produced to exchange for gold from the interior. Wealthy traders minted their own coinage in silver and copper for local exchange while using gold (the Fatimid dinar in the tenth and eleventh centuries) for international transactions. The most successful of the cities was Kilwa, which grew in prosperity between the late eleventh century and the fifteenth century. Kilwa controlled the trade of the southern interior, where its merchants were able to obtain gold brought from around the Zimbabwe plateau and the Limpopo valley. A regular supply of gold ensured active participation in the overseas trade and a visible role for the wealthy merchants.

Altogether, there were about forty Swahili city-states, small and large. The small states contained small populations, mainly Africans who were not Muslims and who were treated as subject people. The small states contained a few



Swahili states and Portuguese control.

Muslims, including the ruling family. The cities included a mosque and some stone houses. The large states, Kilwa, Mogadishu, Mombasa, Pate, Zanzibar, and Malindi, were prosperous, and the majority of the houses were built of coral. Relations among the various Swahili states were peaceful, in spite of the competition for trade.

Whether small or large, the cities had their own rulers, largely drawn from Muslim dynasties that claimed Arab or Persian ancestry. The cities also generally enjoyed political autonomy, although there was a moment in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries when the sultans of Kilwa controlled a number of small cities. All the cities had to maintain relations with African states in the interior. The primary interest was commerce. From the interior came key products, gold, ivory, and skins. Without these products, the coastal cities would not have been prosperous. Imported goods were carried from the coastal cities to the interior, mainly luxury goods including cloth, beads, and pottery.

Commercial interests could also lead to complicated rivalries and wars. In the search for goods, cattle, and slaves, the wealthy merchants and rulers of the coastal cities often organized raiding expeditions into the interior. A Kilwa sultan in the early fourteenth century was notorious for raiding the interior for war booty, some of which he kept to himself and some of which he gave as gifts to his friends and guests. However, relations were generally more peaceful than antagonistic.

THE SWAHILI CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Kiswahili evolved as a language, growing to become the most widely used language in East Africa, not just along the coast but also in the interior. Today, it is the official language of Tanzania. Kiswahili is a Bantu language with many Arabic loan words. The Arab settlers along the coast donated the Arabic words. Originally, they would use Kiswahili in their oral transactions but Arabic in written communications. In due course, Kiswahili became a written language, using the Arabic script.

More and more Arabs visited the East African coast, and they acquired influence in politics and religion. In the twelfth century, a number of Arabs were becoming rulers. Islam spread, not just among the settler populations but also among Africans. Islam became the most important religion. It spread peaceably. As the religion of both foreign merchants and Swahili rulers and merchants, Islam appealed to those who wanted to emulate their lifestyles or engage in trade. It was also a religion that defined identity: For those who wanted to avoid appearing to be members of the lower class, the adoption of Islam made it possible.

A new architectural style became popular—a rectangular design built of blocks made from coral. The cities grew in size and wealth. Part of the wealth was spent on building mosques. Houses of two or three stories were also built. Interior decorations included Persian and Chinese porcelain used to adorn vaults and cupolas. Ceramic lamps were used, and furniture included mats, carpets, stools, and beds adorned with gold, silver, and ivory.

Swahili society was stratified into at least three classes. On the lowest rung of the ladder were the slaves, who were also non-Muslims. They were taken from the interior, either through trade or as war booty. They worked as domestics and as factory workers, producing glass and cotton cloth.

Next were the free Africans, lacking claim to any Persian or Arab ancestry. They constituted the majority, used the Kiswahili language, and practiced Islam. They could be found in a variety of occupations, many of which revolved around trade or production. Many worked as artisans, craftspeople, administrators, and clerks.

At the very top were the wealthy merchants and men of power and status. These were Kiswahili- and Arabic-speaking people. They were generally of Persian or Arabian ancestry and Muslims. Among them were the members of the ruling families, merchants, successful Muslim preachers, visiting Muslim traders, and diplomats. Among the symbols of wealth were expensive cloth made of silk and cotton, imported porcelain from China, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, silver and gold jewelry, and large stone houses and palaces. The rulers collected import and export dues, which ran as high as 50 percent, on all goods that passed through their cities. Trade was the primary occupation of the members of the wealthy class. In Mombasa and Kilwa, a number of wealthy merchants also organized the production of items sold to the African hinterland, notably glass, shell beads, and cloth. Many among them took to farming as well, on estates where their slaves grew millet, cotton, fruits, and vegetables.

THE END OF SWAHILI CIVILIZATION

From our ships the fine houses, terraces, minarets, with the palms and trees in the orchards, made the city [Kilwa] look so beautiful that our men were eager to land and overcome the pride of this barbarian, who spent all that night bringing into the island archers from the mainland.²

The above quotation is from the opening account of a Portuguese eyewitness to the destruction, in 1505, of Kilwa, the most important Swahili city-state. Like the Songhay empire in West Africa, the glory of the Swahili was brought to an end by external invaders.

The Portuguese sailed along the East African coast in 1498, the first Europeans to take a southern route to the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese were seeking an alternative route to India, via the south, in order to avoid their powerful Muslim rivals in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. The Portuguese had no knowledge of the trade and prosperity of the Swahili states, and their original goal was to replace their Muslim rivals in controlling the rich trade with India, in highly valued goods such as silks, perfumes, spices, and other luxuries.

It was in the process of traveling to India that the Portuguese discovered the Swahili cities. Their ambition changed, as they decided to seize control of these prosperous states and their trade. The Portuguese decided to attack and plunder the Indian Ocean trade, force the city-states to pay heavy tributes, and seize the valuables of the wealthy merchants and the ordinary people.

The Portuguese deployed a strategy that left few or no diplomatic options for the Swahili city-states to pursue. The Portuguese would arrive in the harbors of the Swahili, heavily armed. An ultimatum was then presented to the rulers demanding unreasonable annual tributes to the king of Portugal. A refusal would be met with an attack, regarded as a "holy war" of Christians against Muslims: The Muslims who resisted would be killed, the city would be destroyed, and its valuable possessions would be confiscated. The Portuguese were successful because the Swahili city-states had not previously cooperated to fight external aggression, and they had not been faced with an enemy coming from the sea.

Except for Malindi, all the Swahili city-states refused the conditions set by Portugal. In 1503, Zanzibar became the first to suffer an attack and to be forced to accept the payment of an annual tribute. In the same year, the Portuguese became pirates on the Indian Ocean: They seized ships and forced them to pay ransom in gold. Two years later, it was the turn of Kilwa. The city was plundered of its valuables. Then the Portuguese moved to Mombasa, where they started a fire that destroyed many houses. An eyewitness reported on the event:

Once the fire was started it raged all night long, and many houses collapsed and a large quantity of goods was destroyed. For from this town trade is carried on with Sofala and with Cambay [located in western India] by sea. There were three ships from Cambay and even these did not escape the fury of the attack. It was a moonless night.³

Many of those who escaped the inferno were killed by the Portuguese on the following day. Mombasa was raided by an angry Portuguese mob with a desire for wealth:

The Grand-Captain ordered that the town should be sacked and that each man should carry off to his ship whatever he found: so that at the end there would be a division of the spoil, each man to receive a twentieth of what he found. The same rule was made for gold, silver, and pearls. Then everyone started to plunder the town and to search the houses, forcing open the doors with axes and iron bars. There was a large quantity of cotton cloth for Sofala in the town, for the whole coast gets its cotton cloth from here. So the Grand-Captain got a good share of the trade of Sofala for himself. A large quantity of rich silk and gold embroidered clothes was seized, and carpets also; one of these, which was without equal for beauty, was sent to the King of Portugal together with many other valuables.⁴

The Portuguese built stone fortresses at Kilwa, Sofala, and Mozambique to protect themselves on their journeys to their colony of Goa in India. In 1529, they completed the construction of Fort Jesus at Mombasa in order to control the Indian Ocean trade. The Swahili city-states were destroyed, but their culture, especially the Kiswahili language, has survived till today.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Basil Davidson, *African Civilization Revisited* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991), p. 133.

2. Quoted in Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (New York: St Martin's, 1999), p. 134.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 136.

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