Urban Space, Social Memory and Materiality on the 15th- and 16th-century Southern Swahili Coast

Introduction

The 2009 field season at Songo Mnara, a Swahili site of the 15th and 16th centuries AD, is conceived as the first stage in the preparation of a three-year research program, and will assess the potential of Swahili urban centers to yield information on public and private social practice. Archaeological investigation that explores the uses of materiality and space in Swahili urban centers will be an important new direction for archaeology in the region and will situate it within a broader anthropological literature stressing practice-based understandings of past social structures (Dobres and Robb 2000; Meskell 2005; Inomata and Coben 2006).

The Swahili are known to archaeologists and historians as great merchants and traders, brokering exchanges of gold, ivory, and other natural products with Muslim merchants from ports in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and the west coast of India. In recent years, archaeologists have developed an increasingly sophisticated image of the Swahili, a coastal people bound by linguistic similarity, faith in Islam, and a mixed economy based on fishing, farming, and, most importantly, long-distance trade. In roughest outline, we can trace a development from the earliest coastal settlements involved with Indian Ocean trade, around the 6th – 8th centuries AD, through to the explosive growth of dozens of Swahili stonetowns - named for their monumental architecture built of coral rag - between the 13th and 16th centuries. It is during this latter period that the first indications of social and political hierarchy emerged (Nurse and Spear 1985; Kusimba 1999a; Pearson 1999; Horton and Middleton 2000). The emergence of powerful people has been linked to control over resources from long-distance trade. This trade provided certain individuals control over prestigious and rare goods, which in turn were used to symbolize first their emergent power and then as an important part of their local power strategies (Kusimba 1999a:180, 1999b; Wynne-Jones 2007a). However, there has been little consideration of how social power was maintained in daily practice, and how elite groupings constructed social identities in public and private urban spaces.

Swahili Houses and Central Spaces

Ethnoarchaeological and historical research from northern Swahili towns suggest that a focus on daily practice might be useful. These studies have provided models of the ways that historically known Swahili stone houses acted as symbolic representations of corporate groups across generations, provided for the safe-keeping of tangible and intangible possessions, and played a crucial role in the negotiation of status and power in the private and public realms (Allen 1979; Donley-Reid 1982, 1987). The performance of social roles in these private places, or 'structuring structures,' is argued to have been critical to the constitution and reaffirmation of Swahili social realities (Donley-Reid 1990). Although these insights have been shown to apply to 17th- to 20th-century Swahili houses, few studies have investigated whether similar practices existed in earlier centuries (cf. Fleisher and LaViolette 2007) or in different parts of the eastern African coast. The spatial organization of southern stonetowns (those along the Tanzania coast and south) suggests that a distinctive, more hierarchical social organization dominated these urban centers (LaViolette and Fleisher 2005). Thus, insights from 19th- and 20th-century northern towns (such as Lamu) may not be directly analogous. Investigation of chronological and geographical variation is required if we are to understand the ways that private spaces were used and experienced locally in Swahili towns.
Private practice can only be understood by comparison with public, and yet there have been no efforts to examine the social uses of public central areas. In many Swahili towns, central areas were enclosed by domestic architecture, and contained either the main congregational mosque of the settlement (Horton 1996) or smaller mosques with adjacent tombs, graves, and open space. Such open areas may have had prosaic uses, such as locations for market exchanges (Horton 1994; Fleisher, n.d.), but also may have been important locations where prominent members of society could publicly establish and reinforce their local power, perhaps through the performance of public feasts. Recently, Smith (2008:228) has argued that archaeologists need to take seriously ‘empty spaces’ in urban settings as these were often as meaningful and managed as inhabited ones. Investigation of the archaeological remains of these open spaces may reveal the changing uses of space through time, or quite possibly the intentional and active maintenance of cleared and open space at the most visible and central part of the settlement.

Cemeteries, in particular, are places for the living as well the dead, and often serve as highly-charged contexts in which townspeople could attempt to reinforce their status through reference to the prestige of ancestors (Bradley 1991, 1998; Rowlands 1993; Dietler 1998), perhaps through practices of public commemoration (Gillespie 2001:96-97). Thus, mortuary monuments (like Swahili tombs) and the spaces that surround them may have been active sites of memory-making—contexts of “strategized manipulation in the past of more ancient pasts on the basis of monuments, material culture, and mortuary behavior” (Silverman 2002:5). Swahili tombs seem to hint at these practices, including offering niches and incorporating symbols of authority, such as imported ceramics and sumptuary goods (Fleisher and LaViolette 2007). Although some typological work has been completed on coastal tombs (Wilson 1979; Horton 1996:63-76), there has been no research to investigate the spaces that surround the tombs to understand the possible social practices that accompanied them.

**Songo Mnara**

Songo Mnara was one of the more prominent Swahili stonetowns, nestled in the Kilwa archipelago on the southern coast of Tanzania. Despite excellent preservation, only cursory recording of architectural features has been conducted at the site (Garlake 1966). Most research in the region has been focused on the more famous and well-known site of Kilwa Kisiwani (Chittick 1974; Sutton 1998; Fleisher 2004; Wynne-Jones 2007b). Songo Mnara is dominated by the well-preserved remains of more than 40 large domestic room-blocks, five mosques, and numerous tombs. Room blocks wrap around and enclose an open, central area of the site where tombs, a walled cemetery and a small mosque are located. Compared to the 800-year occupation of nearby Kilwa, the relatively short, 200-year occupation of Songo Mnara makes it an ideal candidate to examine household and public spaces from a discrete period in time.

**Field Work and Methodology**

A six week field season will be conducted from June 7th to July 19th, 2009. The overall goal of the field season is to construct baseline data for future research, and to determine the integrity and dating of the archaeological deposits. Project activities will be as follows:

**Weeks 1-2:**
- Electronic Distance Meter survey of standing structures and site boundaries. This work will provide baseline GIS coverage of the architecture, topography, and natural features of the site (coastlines, creeks); this GIS will serve as a foundation for all future work on the site.
• Geophysical surveys of the site, including open areas, spaces between house blocks, and areas directly surrounding the settlement. Primarily, magnetometry surveys will be conducted, which take continuous magnetic readings below the ground surface, revealing possible archaeological features like pits, graves, hearths, and production areas.
• Soil samples will be taken on a grid across open areas of the site, and extending beyond the area of standing architecture. These samples will be use for soil chemistry and archaeobotanical analyses. Soil chemistry values can be used to delineate certain types of human activities; mapping various chemical traces against the baseline EDM survey and geophysical surveys will provide an initial overview of the possible activities that were occurring across the site.
• Shovel-test excavations will be conducted beyond site architecture, to test the spatial and temporal limits of the site

Weeks 3-6
• House-based excavations in two separate room blocks, including soil samples that will allow for a characterization of domestic activities through archaeobotanical and microstratigraphic analysis and soil chemistry.
• Test excavations in the central area of the site, based on geophysical surveys. A series of small excavations will be conducted to understand the overall stratigraphy of the central area, Additionally, two larger units, each five by five meters, will be excavated; one located in the near the small central mosque and cemetery, and one based on anomalies located through the geophysical surveys. This work includes the cleaning, processing, and analysis of artifacts.
• The final week will be devoted to finishing excavations, backfilling units, curating and storing archaeological materials, and shipping samples to be processed to the UK and US.

This field season will provide a strong foundation on which to write a multi-year grant proposal to be submitted to the National Science Foundation. By the end of the season, we will have a spatial and temporal understanding of the site, as well an overall sense of the integrity and promise of the archaeological deposits. Additionally, we will have tested a battery of archaeological techniques to determine which provide the greatest resolution of archaeological data to address the issues developed above. The NSF proposal will expand the results of this exploratory research, providing funds for more intensive excavations in areas found to be promising. It will also ask for funds for survey across the island, in order to contextualize the site in its regional setting. Finally, the proposal will also extend to two other archaeological sites, Kalole and Chwaka, both located in northern Tanzania, each containing stone houses and central open areas.

Research team
The 2009 field season at Songo Mnara will be directed by Dr. Jeffrey Fleisher and Dr. Stephanie Wynne-Jones (Leverhulme Fellow, University of Bristol). Dr. Fleisher will oversee testing and excavations in the central areas and cemetery, while Dr. Wynne-Jones will direct stone house excavations. Dr Wynne-Jones conducted her Ph.D. research (Cambridge University) in the Kilwa area, and has since then spent three years as Assistant Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa in Nairobi. In addition to local workers, three graduate students will assist with fieldwork: Babatunde Abidemi (Rice University), Jack Stoetzel (UVA), and Andrea Seligman (Northwestern University).
East African Coast; Songo Mnara is adjacent to Kilwa Kisiwani
References


