The Swahili House Revisited

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Swahili stonehouses are much discussed, as key aspects of Swahili society from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, but have been little investigated beyond the illustration of room plans for the periods before the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. As well as providing living quarters for the ancient Swahili, stonehouses were integrated into the structures of daily life and international trade. The widespread adoption of building in stone, occurring in the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries along the coast, is thought to have provided a very particular setting for international trade.

“This house [the stone house] was not just the badge or symbol of its owner’s status, it was also simultaneously its manifestation and its guarantee. It embodied, in its permanence and within its thick, solid walls, his cultural acquisitions and those of his ancestors before him”

Allen, J de V. 1979 *The Swahili House*, p.5.
A system of patronage and sponsorship was achieved through hospitality towards visiting merchants that allowed wealthier Swahili to manage the commerce which was such a key part of local urbanity. The move to construction in stone (or more accurately coral and lime) can therefore be seen as a significant shift in the ways that social interaction – and thereby society – was structured. The process of elite definition that is often associated with the advent of building in stone can also be viewed in the context of a period in which the domestic setting became paramount – the focus of monumental activity and investment – and as a turning inwards of the previous focus on display and ritual that centred on the earlier tombs and mosques (Fleisher and LaViolette 2007).

“...when a ship comes into port, it is boarded from sanbuq, that is to say, little boats. Each sanbuq carries a crowd of young men, each carrying a covered dish, containing food. Each one of them presents his dish to a merchant on board, and calls out: “This man is my guest.” And his fellows do the same. Not one of the merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men...when a merchant has settled in his host’s house, the latter sells for him what he has brought and makes his purchases for him. Buying anything from a merchant below its market price or selling him anything except in his host’s presence is disapproved of by the people of Mogadishu”


“By the fourteenth century, the surviving architecture provides traces of specially constructed guest rooms which are found in the outer courtyards of stone houses. “

Songo Mnara is a particularly rich example. Garlake (1966) saw the town as the progenitor of the coastal style of domestic architecture, and the buildings here as that tradition’s most sophisticated expression. Not least because of their wonderful state of preservation, the houses across the site give a picture of investment in an elegant and elaborate urban environment. The houses are built largely of coral rag and lime mortar, but the builders made abundant use of porites coral for the doorways, niches and decorative features.

Over 40 domestic structures are spread across the spaces of the town, a much denser arrangement of coral-built houses than that found at neighbouring Kilwa Kisiwani.
In the exploration of activity and space at Songo Mnara, we need an understanding of this massive investment in the elaboration of domestic architecture in the Kilwa archipelago. This was clearly linked to a realignment of spatial practice and symbolism (mirrored on a smaller scale at Kilwa Kisiwani), and potentially to the ways that public and private were constructed in this world.

*Songo Mnara's domestic architecture*

The architecture at the site is roughly divided between the house complexes, which make up the majority of the southern side of the town, their back walls forming the perimeter, and the more singular structures to the north. As elsewhere, the structure known as the palace is one of these compound structures, actually made up of several room blocks, sharing adjoining walls and at times adjoining courtyards. Although the most elaborate, the so-called palace is not that much larger than House 15, to the south of the mosque. All the houses are raised up above the level of the surrounding open areas, adding to their sense of grandeur.
As at Kilwa, Gedi, Shanga, and Tumbatu the houses are based around a courtyard, although unlike those other sites the courtyard is not excavated into the ground; because the houses are raised they can be sunken without being excavated – this may be a response to the hard coral bedrock that lies almost immediately beneath the floors; perhaps the raising of the houses is a response to the need to sink the courtyards.

The existence and scale of these courtyards mean that the room plan is slightly more complicated than that suggested for the ‘ideal’ Swahili house, in which the courtyard is the northernmost point of the house which proceeds southwards from this point. At Songo Mnara, a more chaotic system of rooms proceeding off courtyards in multiple directions is more akin to the Great House at Kilwa, or the unplanned jumble that Horton describes at Tumbatu.
The archaeology of Songo Mnara’s houses

The function of these spaces and the ways that they were implicated into the practices of life can only really be explored through full excavation and comparison across the site. Luckily, after an initial season of fieldwork, we’re optimistic that we will find preserved remains that will speak to the uses of the various internal spaces. Across and beneath the floors of the houses we found well-preserved deposits, which we were able to record spatially, and then to augment with geoarchaeological, phytolith and micromorphological data, to begin to get an insight into the activities associated with the different rooms and begin thinking through the ways people structured their lives between public and private.

In 2009, we excavated one complete example of the simple house structures on the northern side of the site (House 44) and put some test trenches into one of the larger complexes to the south (House 23). It is difficult to make quantitative comparisons between these two, since one of the first obvious conclusions is that the artefacts at Songo Mnara are concentrated within the domestic spaces.
House 44, as the most completely-excavated structure, therefore has a disproportionately large share of all the finds at site, and until we have comparable information from other structures, it’s probably wise not to overemphasise its richness.

What we currently have, therefore, is a series of qualitative comparisons and observations that nevertheless raise some interesting issues. As I mentioned, the floors of the houses yielded some largely intact deposits, quite midden-like in appearance, but often sitting on top of the floors in otherwise clean rooms. Clearly, these are the artefacts and debris left behind when the houses were abandoned, and so there is necessarily an emphasis on waste and those objects not deemed important to be taken, but there is a surprisingly rich assemblage amongst this rubbish, particularly in the rooms that did not have plaster floors. This seems comparable with the situation at Kilwa, where Chittick reported that the houses were full of small collections of artefacts, including complete vessels, although he does not record the locations or the variation between spaces.
House 44

With House 44 we have a layout which corresponds quite neatly with the ‘ideal’ Swahili house, although it is far from the standard for the site as a whole. It does not, for example, have a courtyard, but just a series of rooms extending backwards from a northern entry. The house was chosen as a starting point as it was thought it would be simple and quick, and in the end it was neither. It was, however, a good place to begin in order to get a clear handle on the deposits.
The entirety of House 44 was raised above the surrounding surface, with what turned out to be a platform of very white beach sand, brought in as packing underneath the plaster floors. This compares with the Great Mosque, which has a similar foundation (Pradines 2005) but is actually at odds with House 23, which I’ll come to in a moment. This difference in the materials used beneath the floors is something I don’t currently understand, but perhaps will become clearer in broader comparisons.
On entering the house, then, you step up into the northern room which, like all except the back room, has lime plaster floors. There was also a foot scrubber set into the floor to the right of the door, and a fingo pot containing shell immediately inside the doorway.
From this room, there are three plaster-floored rooms extending back towards the southern end of the house. At the rear, is a large room which had only a packed earth floor, and in fact seems to have had a _makuti_ roof. This might have been a feature elsewhere among the northern houses, also, as the side walls at the rear of some houses slope as if to suggest a sloping roof at the back.
In each room, there was a particular area associated with discard and with evidence for burning. Interestingly, these seem often to have been on the northern side, to the west of the door, suggesting a sense of the appropriate position for this rubbish. Each is represented by a concentration of ceramics, and more cohesive sediment created by ash, decomposing bone, and a moister micro-environment. This is thrown further into perspective by the micromorphological analysis of the plaster floor, which shows episodes of wetting and drying consistent with floors that were kept clean and often washed down. The piles of rubbish were therefore specific areas, rather than a general level of dirt within the house.
The midden in SM10 at the rear of the house is particularly noteworthy. It was incredibly rich, overlain by some kind of collapsed burned daub structure, which may have hemmed it in somehow, and spread across a large area of the room. This midden was definitely associated with the preparation of food, and was full of bones, shells, and fragments of ceramics *jikos* or stoves. In amongst these remains were also some of the richest sources of less mundane objects, such as beads, coins, and spindle whorls. SM10 also turned out into a more complicated unit, because it had no plaster floor.
Instead, the top midden was underlain by a packed earth floor on a sandy fill, which itself overlay a lower midden. The lower midden was even richer than the one above, and gave us – for example – more coins than any other context on site – 50% of our 64 coins came from this layer. The lower level also yielded the evidence for a latrine in this rear room, which had later been filled in and covered up to produce the higher floor level.

SM10, the back room of the house, therefore seems to have been used for cooking, which could explain the makuti roof. Allen claimed that cooking was normally conducted in courtyards so as not to stain the plaster walls of interior spaces with soot, and in the absence of a courtyard a partially-open back room could have fulfilled a similar purpose. The deposits through the rest of the house certainly suggest consumption, with soil chemistry attesting to the in situ decomposition of fish bone in these deposits. The burning does not seem to have been related to cooking, except in SM10, but the ash is suggestive of low-temperature burning of woody and non-food plants.
The story of House 44 is not all about food, however. As I said, SM10 was also the richest deposit in terms of coins, beads and imports, and we can speculate that these were much more common around the house – in all spaces of the house – with only rare examples becoming incorporated into the midden. This also suggests that (if we can associate cooking and domestic labour with women) these objects were also owned and used by women, and were not restricted to the male population.

Women are an interesting issue at Songo Mnara, in fact. Much of my interest in studying how the domestic spaces intersect with the public activity is to abolish the divide that has been built up in previous studies between the arena of women inside the house, and the arena of men in the outside world. The work of Linda Donley-Reid, which explicitly sought to illustrate women’s experience in the Swahili world, had the unintended side effect of relegating them to the arena of ritual, stuck in the back room of the house and engaged in avoiding pollution, rather than as social actors in the broader life of the town. I see no reason to believe, as she did, that the seclusion of women in 19th century Lamu was representative of all periods and all parts of the coast, and the data from House 44 certainly suggest a broader role. Unfortunately, I have had to rely on the assumption that women were associated with cooking on order to glimpse their worlds, but in association with that cooking debris we find coins, suggesting their participation in financial transactions at some scale, beads and imported ceramics, implying access to these valuable objects, and a large number of spindle whorls. The spindle whorls suggest integration into the productive economy of Songo Mnara, where the production of cloth seems to have been an important enterprise. This mirrors the importance of this industry at Kilwa, where the archaeology was also replete with ceramic spindle whorls suggestive of a large economy of household production.
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I deliberately chose an ornamental room, with a trench directly beneath a *porites* niche, presumably used for display or for a lamp. As I mentioned, these niches are a common feature of the buildings at Songo Mnara and—as at other sites of this time period—are distributed between the rooms of the house, rather than focused on the back room like in the later Lamu town examples.
Excavations in the courtyard served mainly to demonstrate that this space was kept extremely clean. This was true at a macroscopic level – with very few artefacts found in the deposits that covered the steps – and at a microscopic level, as the samples taken from here were noticeably sterile and free from even phytolith evidence. Unlike in Allen’s models, in which the courtyard served as a hive of activity, with cooking and domestic activity conducted here in the more public space, the courtyard of House 23 seems to have been maintained as a more pristine area at the entrance to the house.
Inside House 23, I was surprised to encounter no plaster floor. In this more elaborate house with ornamental carved porites and plasterwork on the walls, it seems strange that there was a packed earth floor. Nevertheless, this was the case. Excavations came down onto a compacted surface of bright red earth. This red earth also comprised the fill which built up the house to its elevated position, contrasting with the white sand used in House 44. The unit was also filled with a surprisingly rich midden deposit across the area in front of the niche, and focused around a small pit, dug into the earthen floor, and filled with the remains of burning (apparently of wood and non-food materials) and full of ceramic sherds, spindle whorls, and beads.

There are therefore many surprising things about the contents of House 23. The very clean courtyard contrasts with the surprisingly rich midden dug into an earthen floor beneath a painstakingly-rendered carved niche. The phytoliths from this room also suggest a storage function, since the majority of the grass phytoliths here were of the leaf/culm type, as in the outdoor areas, and in contrast with the pooid food-related phytoliths found in House 44.
Revisiting the Swahili House

These results do not completely revolutionise our understandings of activity in Swahili towns, but they do begin to contextualise those understandings within the houses. Although a full comparison across the site is not yet possible, they do also suggest that it is not possible to create a standardised model of activities according to a spatial map of stonehouses, even between two houses in sight of each other, let alone for the entire coast and every time period. The idealised models developed for Swahili stonehouses in Lamu are insightful and useful, but have had the consequence of reducing possibilities for chronological variation, as well as the capacity for individual and group variation.
Allen was the first to emphasise the importance of the Swahili stonehouse, and he drew on ethnographic analogy from twentieth-century Lamu to support his contentions for the uses of the different rooms. Although he referred back to houses from the fourteenth century onwards, his examples rely on the contemporary northern Kenya coast. Amusingly, he critiques Chittick’s interpretations at Kilwa for being ‘largely archaeological’, by which I think he means mainly descriptive rather than interpretive. It was, however, with the practice-based models of Linda Donley-Reid that the notions of space in houses really became reified. Donley-Reid drew on Allen’s mention of the world of domestic ritual and Ghaidan’s notion of an ‘intimacy gradient’ to create a notion that the Swahili house was an important site of ritual and of protection against pollution. Women, secluded in the interiors of houses in nineteenth century Lamu, were relegated to these rooms for all time, and the economic functions of the house that Allen stressed were left at the front door.

By exploring the houses at Songo Mnara we hope, of course, to bring in an element of change over time to these understandings, as well as an appreciation of diversity within and between sites. This seems particularly pertinent in considering women, whose increasing marginalisation during recent centuries on the coast has been documented by many scholars and whose lives in the 14th and 15th centuries might reasonably be imagined as rather different. I particularly like the evidence of spindle whorls on this score, as they are found almost exclusively within the houses, suggesting a household economy of cotton production on a fairly extensive scale. The spaces associated with cooking are also associated with this activity, which winds the production of cloth for trade into the world of women’s work, and begins to provide a route for integrating the economic understandings of the houses as settings for trade with the domestic activities that have previously been seen as part of the world of the social and ritual. The integration of the domestic spaces into the larger economy is also supported by the lost coins and beads that litter the domestic middens.
In thinking through the world of public and private activity at Songo Mnara, this glimpse into spatial practice is also valuable. The courtyards are the first rooms encountered within many of the houses, and the suspicion that they were kept very clean might suggest that they had a slightly different meaning than that suggested by Allen. For him, the courtyard was a space for the more public activities that had to be kept away from the more sanctified areas of the houses within. Cooking, washing, and other domestic activities went on here, keeping the ornamental interior spaces pure and white. At Songo Mnara, the same sense of courtyards as public spaces might have applied, but with almost the opposite connotation. If these were the spaces in which visitors were welcomed, and perhaps stayed, these public spaces might have been the places kept clean, with dirtier activities conducted within and behind the houses. This is also suggested by the more public arrangement of ornamental stonework and decorative niches at Songo Mnara, frequently in and around these courtyards. In the palace, a barrel vault with dozens of inlaid bowls is found in the entrance to the courtyard. A focus on the purity of internal spaces might have developed later, together with the turning inwards of the decoration and the concurrent seclusion of women to these arenas. At Songo Mnara, the evidence instead speaks to domestic structures as fully integrated into the economy and life of the town, with notions of public and private that place more emphasis on the public importance of display, and the creation of spaces for hospitality.
These conclusions are necessarily tentative, and will be subject to revision in the seasons of research that follow. Hopefully, though, the evidence of House 23 and 44 have demonstrated the rich potential for archaeology within stonehouses to explore spatial meaning in the Swahili past, as part of a complex, historically-situated world of public and private experience.