Chapter 1
When Did the Swahili Become Maritime? A Reply to Jeffrey Fleisher et al. (2015)

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1.1 Introduction

This chapter is a reaction to the paper by Fleisher et al. (2015) that the Swahili people were not full maritime before 1000 AD. The chapter shows several shortcomings of the paper including that of not clearly defining the concepts 'maritime society' and 'the Swahili people/society'. It is also hereby discussed that the paper is a resurrection of the colonial scholarships which seems to have had been crumbling by 1990s (e.g. see Chami 2009a). In fact, the authors' argument references scholarships of between the 1950s and 1980s which maintained that the region of East Africa was first settled by the Arabs and that it developed links with the rest of the world only after the ninth century AD. The following quotation summarizes their argument:

> …significant changes in inter- and intra-settlement patterns, subsistence, domestic spaces, and material culture indicate that the Swahili became increasingly connected to, and reliant upon, their maritime environment over many centuries—and not early in their settlement of the coast. (Fleisher et al. 2015:103)

For this reaction to be understood, two concepts raised in the paper but either left undefined or partially defined must be defined now and clarified so it will be clear about what I am refuting. These concepts are 'maritime society' and 'Swahili people'. The former concept is covered in voluminous publications which the authors also cite (e.g. see Catsambis et al. 2011; Green 2009; Lane 2005; Staniforth and Nash 2006; Westerdahl 1998). Being guided by Westerdahl's (1998) model, Fleisher and co-authors consider a society to be 'maritime' only if that society's nearby "marine environment influences and is influenced by broader patterns of sociocultural organization,

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practice, and belief within that society" including spatial–temporal demarcations. Additional to this conceptualization, which the authors left out are the material evidence indicative of maritimity–material traces; manifestations; and physical remains that signify the interactions between past humans and water bodies such as ocean, sea, lakes, and rivers (see Ichumbaki 2011:554, 2015:528). Most importantly, these material evidence indicative of 'a maritime society' need not necessarily to be either close or within the respective marine environment. As will become apparent in this chapter, these material remains could be found several kilometres away from the maritime environment but still documenting the maritime-ness of a society.

The second concept that authors did not speak about but which is important in defining the maritime-ness of the East African coast is the 'Swahili people/society'. Quoting Prins (1965), the authors consider Swahili people/society to be those who began living on the coast of East Africa during the mid-first millennium C.E. (Fleisher et al. 2015:101). For this reaction, leave alone the timing of maritime-ness of the Swahili people/society which this chapter counteracts, the timing of when the Swahili people/society began living on the Swahili coast is by itself mispresented. Because there is enough evidence that people started to inhabit the Swahili coast since the Neolithic period (Chami 2004; Chami and Kwekason 2003), for this paper, the Swahili people/society are inhabitants of the East African coast since the Neolithic period, about 20,000–30,000 years ago (Prendergast et al. 2016; Chami 2009b, c, d). Thus, what the authors call 'Swahili people/society' are actually a mixture of the Swahili descendants and 'migrants' from different parts of the Indian Ocean worlds.

Having understood the concepts 'maritime society' and 'Swahili people' it should now become easy to trace 'when did the Swahili become maritime'. This chapter uses both historical and archaeological data to argue that the maritime-ness of Swahili communities is older than estimated by authors (Fleisher et al. 2015). I argue that in their earlier settlements (c20,000–30,000 years ago), the Swahili communities were not passive players in their maritime environment. Instead, they were fully immersed in maritime culture and interacted with both the Ocean and other communities of the Indian Ocean World and the interior regions of East Africa. Some groups learnt to navigate abroad and to adopt cultural tradition which they later brought back home. Furthermore, evidence of daily utilization of ocean resources verifies that the maritime-ness of the Swahili coast societies dates well before 1000 C.E.

1.2 Background to the Academic Discourse on Maritime History of the Swahili Coast

The question of 'when was the Swahili coast first settled and by whom' dominated the region's archaeological and historical studies from the 1950s to the 1980s. Research efforts of the time between the 1950s and the 1980s (e.g. Horton 1984; Chittick 1974, 1980, 1982, 1984; Sinclair 1982) unearthed but did not trust evidence for human occupation predating 800 AD (Horton 1984, 1991, 1996a). Consequently, some scholars concluded that trade and cultural contact between the Swahili coast and other parts of

the Indian Ocean world was a result of Islamic influence and that human activities began after the ninth century AD. Moreover, some of the cultural materials indicating that the Swahili coast area was inhabited during the Stone Age and Neolithic period were neglected without any convincing scientific reason (e.g. Chittick 1966; Gramly 1981; Harding 1961; Isaac 1974). Along the same line, the architectural complexes that are scattered along the coastline from Mogadishu in Somalia to Sofala in Mozambique were seen as results of foreign influence and that local communities did not have any contribution (Garlake 1966). Arguably, it is in the same line of thinking that Fleisher and Colleagues (2015) are of the opinion that it was only from the tenth century when communities of the east African coast became fully maritime.

This thinking by authors appears to emanate from a colonial ideology which views the Swahili coast, a part of Africa, as a region with no history, let alone maritime history prior "foreign settlement". With this thinking, pre-colonial initiatives by local people to use the ocean for their day-to-day utilities are labelled as primitive, prehistoric and/or mythological (Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013). Some scholars suggest these former ideologies are outdated, but with this recent publication there is no doubt that the concept was rejuvenated in academic discourses. Such rejuvenation of 'colonial wisdom', however, is all the more striking because from the 1990s to present, several data sets regarding local contributions of coastal civilizations challenged these previous arguments (Gilbert 2002; Chami 1994).

New research initiatives—multiple corroborating sources including archaeology, documents, and language—have unveiled the origins of the Swahili coast to show the coastal civilizations were either local or a combination of both local and foreign tastes (Chami 2001, 2006a, b, 2009b, c, d, 2017; Moustakim 2012). Adding these insights to the already published research data, I argue that rejuvenation of 'colonial thinking' in the academic discourse denies abilities of Africans to master and control their environment in the historical narrative.

1.3 Documentary and Archaeological Evidence of Early Maritimity

There is much evidence suggesting that communities living along the Swahili coast became maritime from their earlier settlement and not after 1000 C.E. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on two forms of evidence: documentary and archaeological data. Collaboratively and interchangeably, the two types of evidence will be combined to show that Swahili communities were active of their maritime environment and not passive.

Documentary evidence highlights that maritime activities, such as navigation, began during the second millennium BC (Sorenson and Johannessen 2004; Chami 2007). During this time, many parts of the world from the Mediterranean and the Nile valley, across Mesopotamia and down the Red Sea to Arabia and the Indian Ocean, were connected to one another. According to Elliot Smith (1928:9, cited in Chami 2017), communities from the above-mentioned parts were in "great social current form of a multitude of intermingling streams that has come down from

remote ages and distant lands to carry us along with it". These interactions were an integral world system and the Swahili coast was never left behind. In fact, the Swahili coast region was very active during the second millennium BC or even earlier. For instance, the Indian Ocean Coast of East Africa was interacting with other parts of the Indian Ocean during the fifth century BC (Lacroix 1998). Also, between the 610 and before 594 BC, Saint Pharaoh Necho and his group sailed to the Red Sea, to the Indian Ocean, to the Atlantic Ocean and to the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt (Lacroix 1998). Arguably, and as shall be discussed in the next paragraphs, these voyages from the Red Sea around Africa and then back to the mouth of the Nile (Cary 1963) must have taken place along the coast of East Africa (the Swahili coast).

This assumption is buttressed by the ancient written documents such the *Periplus* and *Ptolemy* which categorically and vividly prove that the Swahili coast interacted with other world economies at least from the BC periods. A good example is the exchange of cassia, cinnamon, and metal objects between Swahili people and south-west Asians, respectively (Miller 1969). In connection with this trade, civilization in the form of cosmopolitan towns such the metropoles of *Rhapta* and *Toniki*, where various populations met, settled, intermarried, conducted trade, and flourished (Chami 1999a, b; Casson 1989; Huntingford 1980; Cary and Warmington 1963). These two Greco-Roman emporiums, *Rhapta* (located at latitude 8°S) and *Toniki* (located at latitude 4°S), were centres of trade bringing merchants together from various parts of the Indian Ocean World.

In addition to these two towns, there were also islands (although it remains unknown which ones exactly) on which people settled, practiced crafts, fished, and hunted various animals (Chami 2001). The narrative of Iambulus (in Chami 2001:92–93), who visited one of the Islands,[1] of the Indian Ocean along the Swahili coast by around 300 BC provides a good example of how the Swahili coastal people were maritime. With this summarized documentary evidence, the authors still maintain that before the thirteenth century communities of the Swahili coast remained passive of their environment including not recognizing the sea, for example:

> What we [Fleisher and co-authors] know through the documentary record is that coastal elites invested in long-distance voyages at least as early as the 13th century and that a small number of ships owned by Swahili patricians sailed as far as Arabia and, from the 16th to mid–18th centuries, Western India…. (Fleisher et al. 2015:107)

In addition to documents, there are several archaeological data sets which firmly indicate that coastal communities were active maritime participants in their environments. The archaeological evidence is incontrovertible that some of the coastal communities, if not all, were established maritime communities hundreds of

[1] Tanambelo Rosolondrainy thinks that this Island named by Iambulus as 'Island of the Sun' is Madagascar. The assumption emanated from discovering rock paintings at Ampasimaiky rock shelter located in South-western Madagascar. These rock paintings, which have been dated from between the third and fifth centuries BC, according to Rosolondrainy are probably what Iambulus reported as vertical writing systems practiced by islanders. For a broader discussion of this, see Rosolondrainy (2012:173–195).

years before the tenth century, the time suggested by the authors where there was a change towards maritime life. The economic activities of these communities were not limited to coastal areas but also spread to further parts in the interior. An understanding of the complexes in which the maritime cultures of the coastal areas and the hinterland evolved and grew to spread into the interior is here by presented within a chronological framework. The history of the Swahili coast is available in voluminous publications, but a summary provides a contextual foundation for this argument.

Archaeological materials indicate that the establishments of maritime communities along the Swahili coast can be traced back from the Middle Stone Age (MSA). Such timing follows the discovery of several MSA and Later Stone Age (LSA) sites and assemblages at various coastal areas (Kwekason 2011; Kessy 1997, 2009a, b; Knutsson 2007; Chami 1996a, b, 2006a, b; Chami and Kwekason 2003; Chami and Mapunda 1998; Chami and Kessy 1995; Thorp 1992; Gramly 1981; Isaac 1974; Sasi 2006; Harding 1961; Chittick 1966). With these investigations, it is now clear that the coast of East Africa was inhabited from at least 30,000 BP (Chami 2009d). During this habitation period, Stone Age people managed to master their environments (using the sea for their day-to-day lives) and also interacted with other communities from islands of the Indian Ocean and those further inland. As Kessy (2010:53) explains, 'the importation of intrinsic volcanic rocks [from either Kilimanjaro or Comoro Island] for artefact making in the Kuumbi cave–Unguja Island–clearly reflects this situation [the interaction between and among the island dwellers and mainland communities]'. An importation of intrinsic rocks from the mainland to the island was accompanied by exchange of other materials such as beads. For example, after working on a 'stone bowl' burial mound in Ngorongoro crater—North-eastern Tanzania, Louis Leakey (1966) and H. Sassoon (1968) reported beads made of faience and carnelian materials and cowry shells. Although the source of carnelian and faience-made beads is uncertain (as their origin could either be North Africa, Asia, or both), the beads made of cowry shells must have originated from the coast of the Indian Ocean, possibly along the present-day coast of Kenya and/or Tanzania.

Scholars have reported numismatic evidence at both the coast and the interior, all of which came via the Indian Ocean. At the coast of Tanzania in Tanga region, both Neville Chittick (1966) and Mark Horton (1996b) reported various coins described as Roman, Hellenistic, and Byzantine, all dating from between the first and the sixth centuries AD. Moreover, similar coins and others belonging to the empires of Indian Kushan and Roman (of Antoninus Pius and Claudius Gothicus) have been recovered from Zimbabwe dating to between the first and third centuries AD (Horton 1996b). Zimbabwe is very far from both India and Rome meaning that transporting of these beads must have been through the Swahili coast.

Recovery of these materials (beads, coins, and volcanic rocks) from both the Swahili coast and the interior regions indicates that between the last centuries of BC and early centuries of AD, there were interactions between and among communities living on the islands of the Indian Ocean, along the present-day coast of

Tanzania and Kenya (the Swahili Coast) and the interior regions of the same places. Finding materials of coastal origin from the interior (e.g. beads made of cowry shells) and those of interior or Comoro Island origin (e.g. volcanic rocks) from the coast furthermore indicates mutual interactions between and among the involved communities. Moreover, coins belonging to the Roman and the Indian Kushan period are strong evidence that the Swahili were part of the global maritime interactions.

There are other several sources of archaeological evidence that indicate Swahili communities were maritime from an early period.[2] These archaeological material remains indicate the interaction among these communities, proving that they were cognizant of the ocean surrounding them and could navigate to neighbouring mainland and islands. Similarly, sharing cultural affinities and technologies—especially ceramic of the TIW tradition between the interior parts of mainland of eastern Africa (Walz 2005, 2015; Mapunda 1991, 1995, 2001; Haaland 1994/1995; Haaland and Msuya 2000; Soper 1967, 1971), the coastal areas (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2011; Chami 1994, 1999a, b; Kusimba 1999; Horton 1996a) and several islands of the Indian Ocean (Moustakim 2012; Chami 2004; Juma 2004; Radimilahy 1998) during the first millennium AD signify that none of the communities lived in isolation. Instead, there was a continuous link between the Islands and the coast, the coast and the interior, and probably the island and the interior as well (Walz 2005; Horton and Middleton 2000; Soper 1967). The archaeological data now show clearly that island communities such as Unguja Ukuu and Tumbe on Zanzibar and Pemba Islands, respectively, interacted with their colleagues in the mainland. This interaction means that navigating the ocean was common. The authors confirm this in the explanation:

> Unguja Ukuu … on Zanzibar Island dates to C.E. 500–900 and is the earliest documented coastal settlement with Early Tana Tradition (ETT)–Triangular Incised Ware (TIW) pottery. This pottery is found at similarly dated sites on the coast and in the hinterland, and it exhibits a high degree of homogeneity in forms, decoration, and assemblage composition…. By C.E. 750, Unguja Ukuu grew to 17 hectares of earth-and-thatch houses. The settlement was abandoned in the tenth century …, perhaps due to fluctuating sea levels …, with sporadic reoccupation from the late 11th century. Chibuene … on the southern Mozambican coast, has a similar history: from C.E. 700–1000 it was a busy coastal village, the entry point for glass beads from India, the Middle East, and possibly South Asia with destinations to the interior …. Tumbe on the north coast of Pemba Island, Tanzania, covered 20 to 30 hectares, with earth-and-thatch houses, evidence of diversified subsistence, and a rich material culture of local and imported goods from the seventh to tenth centuries C.E.… (Fleisher et al. 2015:104)

In summary, there is a need for Fleisher and co-authors to address the contradictions that arise with these acknowledgements and to rethink the timing of the Swahili maritimity. Unquestionably, residents along the Indian Ocean in eastern Africa used

[2] Among others indicative of early maritime-ness of the Swahili communities is the evidence of domesticated animals such as goats, sheep, cattle, dog, and cat as well as birds such as chicken from the limestone caves within the Indian Ocean (Chami 2009a, b, c; Mbasa and Assey 2009).

and continue to exploit the ocean and its shore. Uses include extraction of the shoreline resources such as sand and rocks for building. Other uses are raw materials for traditional medicines and culinary activity, and of course, fishing. All of these observations (and certainly others that scholars engaging in maritime studies have failed to capture) did not begin from 1000 C.E. Indeed, they are as old as the Swahili people themselves who began to inhabit the region during the Neolithic time.

Archaeologists, anthropologists, and other specialists of heritage studies should investigate the physical nodes at which intangible and material elements intersected one another through time. Such studies will reveal ancient locales and maritime activities such as river crossings, communal washing and swimming spots, rock shelters with historical value for traditional healing, and favoured patches of medicinal plants. It is difficult for scholars to reconstruct an entangled set of mnemonics and experiences for the early maritime communities that lived along the coast of East Africa. Such difficulties emanate from the fact that we are not dealing with monuments where physical loss can be mitigated or preserved. The challenge is to synthesize all available evidence, pursue mediating contemporary social relationships, and revise social history to improve understanding of the areas' maritime history with greater clarity.

1.4 Conclusion

The paper investigating 'when did the coastal communities become maritime' rejuvenates a colonial thinking about Africa and its pasts. It is no different than the thinking that 'the whites' discovered both Mount Kilimanjaro and Lake Victoria, as if societies that lived surrounding these places considered them something else. This kind of thinking, however, is not striking and it is a duty of scholars to correct that historical narrative. As Peter Schmidt (2009:2) emphasizes, 'because postcolonial thinkers have crafted important ways of seeing and understanding how colonial influences continue to manipulate the ways in which postcolonial world is constructed, it is only fitting that we examine our own practices, now and over the last few decades through a postcolonial lens'. Against such a scenario, the view of this rebuttal is that authors of the paper did not pay any attention to key works of several scholars working in the region, research that underwrites that coastal communities did indeed interact with several communities living within and outside the Indian Ocean World[3] before the ninth century. Felix Chami puts this very well when he states:

> In ancient times, between about 3000 BC and about 500 AD, people from the old world civilizations sailed the Indian Ocean to visit the coastline of East Africa in search of various resources. People of the Eastern and Southern African region were in what scholars define

[3] Neglecting to recognize these scholars' works is also not surprising because, in some cases, western scholars tend to ignore African intellectuals (e.g. see Harrison 2009; Mafeje 1997).

> as their Neolithic and Early Iron Age periods. They were active in the acquisition and production of materials which were required by the visitors. They also sailed on the Indian Ocean and probably beyond, sometimes in reciprocity of the foreigner's visits and in search of what materials were needed by them. Connections with the African interior were also established for the spread of various resources that were in demand (Chami 2017).

Although the timeframe differs, authors, in essence, support Chami's idea when they say:

> Based on the integration of archaeological, linguistic, and historical sources, it is generally accepted that during the late first millennium B.C.E. to early first millennium C.E., peoples from the near [and far] interior moved into the coastal niche to establish mixed-farming, earth-and-thatch villages, interacting with and likely either absorbing or displacing pre-existing hunting-gathering-fishing communities. Some—perhaps even many—of these early villages had contact with merchant vessels sailing the Indian Ocean on annual monsoon winds and, with them, traded goods and ideas; this pattern continued throughout Swahili history, growing in scale and contributing to their wide spread reputation for mercantilism and as being a maritime society'. (Fleisher et al. 2015:103)

Nevertheless, Fleisher and colleagues (2015:104) maintain that '…. [a maritime society] … is surely more than just living by the sea, using boats, and eating fish [meaning that there should be some kind of complexity]'. While author's argument as stated earlier resonates with other interpretations, one question remains unanswered: how complex should a society be for it to qualify to be a 'maritime' and what scale(s) would be used to measure such complexity. For example, what kind of fishing practices should they had have? What kind of navigation skills and techniques should they develop and have?

In my view, if the authors agree that aspects of Swahili practice and tradition [intangible heritage such as Swahili language, poetry, and music] undoubtedly have deep historical roots, [but which they failed to link up with the material expressions of what they call "a distinctly maritime orientation"], then, they should not be reluctant to accept that societies of the coast of East Africa were maritime from early periods. Indeed from their onset (about 20,000–30,000 years BP) communities of the Swahili coast were maritime. However, levels of maritimity are fluid, changing and transforming from simple to complex and vice versa (Cooney (2003); Hviding 1996). These transformations reached a higher volume between the tenth and fifteenth century before interruptions by the Portuguese, as Kusimba (1999) argues. The resurrection of a colonial wisdom that, because there was a considerable expansion of maritime activities along the Swahili coast beginning the eleventh century, then, the maritimity of the region be traced from that period, as authors have done, needs to be challenged. This chapter sets a good start and I hope more reactions are underway.

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