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As Artistry Permits and Custom May Ordain
The Social Fabric of Material Consumption
in the Swahili World, circa 1450 to 1600

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*As artistry permits and custom may ordain*¹

Introduction

In March of 1498, Sheik Muhammad bin Sharif al-Alawi² emerged from a crowd gathered at Kisiwani Msumbiji (Mozambique Island) to greet the merchant ships entering the port. Al-Alawi's town was a small yet prosperous ship-building and repair station halfway between the entrepôts of Sofala and Kilwa.³ The Sheik arrived at the harbor with a great retinue, "all well dressed in silk, sounding ivory horns and other instruments." Sheik al-Alawi wore "a robe [*cabaya*] of white cotton, which is a garment open in the body and reaching to the ankles; above this he wore another of Mecca velvet. On his head was a turban of silk velvet of many colors adorned with gold."⁴

Through the medium of dress, Sheik al-Alawi communicated his high standing, his wealth, the authority of the state, and his connections to local and foreign marketplaces—the channels of circulation from which wealth derived. Moreover, the sultan's dress reflected regional styles and a particular aesthetic that bound an enormous expanse of the East African coast into a distinct Swahili civilization. "Artistry," expressed as aesthetic preferences, and "custom"—a communality of material, social, and economic existence—were prominent among the complex strands of culture forming the larger fabric of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Swahili world.

¹ Luis de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*. Oxford, 1973. Livro I, stanza 94. This phrase from Camões's epic sixteenth-century poem was taken from his description of the clothing and adornments of the Sultan of Malindi and his entourage. cf. A. Garcia, "Camões em Moçambique, 1567-1569," *Monumenta*. 2 (1969): 29-31.

² Though de Gões and de Barros refer to the Sheik as Çacoei(j)a, I believe they have confused al-Alawi's name with that of the nickname of the Malindian sultan. A letter from Sheik al-Alawi, dated 27 May 1517 [AH 923], to King Dom Manoel of Portugal implies that he was the same person with whom Vasco da Gama made the initial Luso-Mozambique treaty. "N. XXII, Carta do Xarife Mahomed Elalui de Moçambique, escrita a ElRey D. Manoel," in *Documentos Arabicos para a Historia Portuguesa*. Ed. J. de Sousa. Lisbon, 1790. 85-6.

³ Msumbiji was of primary importance as it was the last deep-water harbor on the Swahili coast and its hinterland produced sufficient timber for ship construction. "Descrição da Situação, Costumes e Produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518," in *Documentos sobre os Portugueses em Moçambique e na África Central* (hereafter *DPMAC*). Ed. R. Silva da Rego. 9 Vols. Lisbon, 1965-89. 5:364; and "Roteiro das costas sul e oriental da África, Post 1535," *DPMAC*. 6:448.

⁴ F. Lopes de Castanheda, *Descobrimientos e Conquista de Índia pelos Portuguezes*. In G. Theal, ed., *Records of South-Eastern Africa* (hereafter *Records*). 9 Vols. Cape Town, 1964. 5:313-14.

The social and economic communality of Swahili society, across thousands of kilometers of coastline, is unique in Africa. Swahili civilization developed maritime commercial hubs at various points on the coast, shifting through time but always projecting wheel-like spokes to distant towns and cities.⁵ Multidirectional spokes connecting rural regions to the major city-states crossed the entire East African coast before the twentieth century. Though no single state—except for the sultanate of Zanzibar in the 1800s—exercised military hegemony over the coastal towns, a macroscale network of commercial and social relations, facilitated by oceanic travel, functioned as a taut web of Swahili interaction in the precolonial period. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the cohesiveness of intra-Swahili socioeconomic relations and spheres of interaction was apparent in a community of material culture that remained relatively constant over 3,000 kilometers of archipelagic civilization.⁶

In this paper I will analyze how material items—cloth in particular—both reflected social attitudes and stratification and served as culturally relative instruments for maintaining or challenging status in city-states and towns along the East African littoral.⁷ Taking material consumption as an index of social interaction, I will first reassess the physical extent and socioeconomic structure of earlier Swahili society. Then I will try to answer the question of how power and status were understood, maintained, and contested in the Swahili world during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

I define consumption as the processes involved in using materials, including socially valued modes of distribution. As such, it is a phenomenon shaped and constrained by culture.⁸ The consumption of material goods can engender and sustain relationships between individuals and groups in society through mutually appreciated forms of personal adornment, display, and (by extension) exchange. As Douglas, Isherwood, Appadurai, McCracken, and others have argued, goods are often acquired not

⁵ P. Sinclair develops the idea of a “Swahili wheel” as opposed to M. Horton’s “corridor” in “The Origins of Urbanism in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Diachronic Perspective,” in *Islamic Art and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Eds. K. Ådahl and B. Salhström. Uppsala, 1995. 107.

⁶ Material culture is here defined in a broad sense (following Geary) as: material manifestations of African and extra-African ingenuity and creativity, spanning from prestige items to more accessible goods of common usage. C. Geary, “Sources and Resources for the Study of African Material Culture; Introduction,” *History in Africa*. 21 (1994): 323.

⁷ J. Perani has likewise traced the development of cultural congruities through the idiom of cloth consumption in “Northern Nigerian Prestige Textiles: Production, Trade, Patronage and Use,” in *Man Does not Go Naked: Textilien und Handwerk aus afrikanischen und anderen Ländern*. Basel, 1989. 65-76.

⁸ After Rutz and Orlove, “Thinking About Consumption: A Social Economy Approach,” in *The Social Economy of Consumption*. Eds. H. Rutz and B. Orlove. Lanham, 1989. 1-44; and J. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700*. New York, 1995.

for their simple use-value but for the complexities of what they symbolize, their associations, and their capacity to help construct or maintain identity.⁹ Because the consumption of objects can delimit categories of similarity as well as difference, one's relationship to certain objects can mark inclusion or exclusion from social groups.¹⁰ A means of creating a particular identity, consumption entails the organization of materials, as Friedman has suggested, by directing objects with inherent cultural meanings into differing relationships with people.¹¹ How goods are used often reflects their cultural meanings in addition to their measurable pecuniary or exchange-value, thereby giving rise to what has been called, in reference to the Swahili world, the "prestige-economy" of material consumption.¹² Individuals and groups use items to express categories and ideas, create and sustain lifestyles, stratify social structures, and induce social change.¹³

In the context of the Swahili coast, the consumption of goods such as cloth, porcelain, furniture, and precious metals shaped and reflected social stratification. The prestige-value of these items could either magnify or contest the influence of individuals and lineages, and their exchange-value sustained the development of transcoastal relationships in the form of commercial transactions based on culturally relative demands.¹⁴ Material possessions, most significantly cloth, reflected one's power, rank in the social hierarchy, and "culturedness," or *uungwana*. Both elites and non-elites desired access to wealth not for the sake of its accumulation but for the esteem, status, and political and social influence to be gained by displaying items broadly recognized as prestigious. Indeed, by making one's material wealth publicly readable, often as personal adornment or via redistribution, one could gain respect, power, and a reputation for piety. The creative forces of consumption constantly reconstructed aspects of culturedness in

⁹ A. Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. A. Appadurai. Cambridge, 1986; M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. New York, 1978; and G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington, 1988.

¹⁰ K. Hardin and M. J. Arnoldi, "Introduction: Efficacy and Objects," in *African Material Culture*. Eds. M. J. Arnoldi et al. Bloomington, 1996. 12.

¹¹ Friedman distills both C. Campbell and P. Bourdieu's approaches to consumption in "The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty," in *Consumption and Identity*. Ed. J. Friedman. London, 1994. 168-9.

¹² B. Jargstorf, "To Squander and Gain at the Same Time: Technology and Prestige in a Swahili City State," in *Transition and Continuity of Identity in East Africa and Beyond—In Memoriam David Miller*. Ed. E. Linnebuhr. Bayreuth, 1989. 234.

¹³ McCracken, xi. P. Martin makes similar arguments for cloth consumption on the Loango coast in "Power, Cloth and Currency on the Loango Coast," *African Economic History*. 15 (1986): 1-12.

¹⁴ J. Schneider and A. Weiner, eds. *Cloth and Human Experience*. Washington, D.C., 1989. For an analogous case of the integrative nature of the marketplace and culturally relative material consumption, see R. Goldthwaite, "The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Maiolica," *Renaissance Quarterly*. (1989): 1-32.

the Swahili world—without challenging notions of ideal material and social well-being—to the extent that dress, economic trends, and state display legitimized images of elite status throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁵

Channels of social communication—stimulated by commercial demand both within and between Swahili towns and apparent in the consumption of like materials—strengthened the social and aesthetic bonds within coastal society such that a communality of culture—a unit accurately termed *Swahili*—developed despite the absence of large-scale population movements or transcoastal political hegemony. A sign of economic dependence on both local production and foreign trade, cloth consumption integrated local and regional marketplaces, merchants, menial laborers, and rulers alike in a cohesive and distinct material sphere.

The consumption of textiles, multifarious in their uses, created and recreated social identities and empowered religious authority. Textiles enhanced ceremonial display, enshrouded the dead, served as decoration and as payment, and became an indicator of social change over time. To illustrate the importance of cloth in the social and economic relations of the Swahili world, I will first look at other material and economic forms that helped to keep the Swahili coast an integrated socioeconomic unit in the sixteenth century. After discussing the material and social structure of Swahili society, I will analyze the production and exchange of cloth, the role of individual consumption in the construction of status, the various modes of state consumption, and the use of materials in the negotiation of power.

1 • The social and material textures of the Swahili world, circa 1500

Unfortunately, histories of the East African coast addressing the period under study have neither identified nor defined the most basic themes in Swahili socioeconomic organization. Though several studies have brought to light important details of Luso-Swahili relations and quantitative data on trade involving Portuguese factories, the fundamental structures of Swahili economic, political, and social relations have largely gone unnoticed.¹⁶ In this section I attempt to define Swahili society geographically and to frame Swahili social groups and productive and commercial networks in the context of

¹⁵ The notion of material consumption as integral to the recreation of culturedness is best treated in R. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in the Italian Renaissance: 1300-1600*. Baltimore, 1993.

¹⁶ See E. Axelson, *South-east Africa, 1488-1530*. New York, 1940; J. Strandes, *The Portuguese Period in East Africa*. Nairobi, 1989; and A. Lobato, *A Expansão Portuguesa em Moçambique de 1495 à 1530*. 3 Vols. Lisbon, 1960, respectively.

East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean. By reconstructing the historical setting, I hope to highlight the social and material mechanisms that drove and defined actors in the Swahili world.

The Swahili maritime world of the late 1400s extended from Barawa in modern Somalia to Inhambane south of Sofala in modern Mozambique.¹⁷ To the west, Swahili merchants were scattered very deep into the Sofalan hinterland¹⁸ and were in significant numbers even on the Zimbabwe plateau.¹⁹ To the east, Swahili and Comorian²⁰ merchant and agricultural communities existed on both the east and west coasts of Madagascar.²¹

Historical linguists have successfully reconstructed many aspects of the Swahili world from its genesis. Linguistic studies of the coast have mapped the movement of coastal populations from the northern coast down to Mozambique and across to the

¹⁷ On Inhambane see L. Barradas, "Inhambane de Outrora," *Monumenta*. 2 (1969): 20-4. Bazaruto Island was likewise settled by Swahili in the sixteenth century. D. do Couto, *Relação do Naufragio da nao S. Thomé, 1589*, in Boxer, *Tragic History of the Sea, 1598-1622*. n.p., 957. 98. On material evidence note the close relationship between early iron-working pottery in Bazaruto and that in Zanzibar and Kilwa in P. Sinclair, *Space, Time and Social Formation*. Uppsala, 1987.

¹⁸ António de Saldanha reported in 1511 that there were 10,000 "mouros" spread out at random in the "land of Monapotapa." Though this number may be a bit high, they posed quite a threat to the Portuguese capture of the interior trade. "Sumario de cartas de António de Saldanha, capitão de Sofala e Moçambique, para el-Rei, feito por António Carneiro, secretário de Estado, 1511," *DPMAC*. 3:16. The most famous Swahili leader of the interior, according to Portuguese sources, was the Mozambican Qadi [*cacique*] Muhammad Mingane [Mingani?], who was a councilor to the Mwene Mutapa. "Carta (cópia) do Padre Jesuíta Luís Fróis, Goa, 1561 Dezembro 15," *DPMAC*. 8:48; and L. Froes, "Da Viagem do Padre D. Gonçalo ao Reino de Manamotapa e de seu felice transito, dezembro, 1561," in *Records*. 2:111. This evidence severely weakens Jargstof's conclusion that the *waungwana* did not attempt to spread Islam into the interior. "To Squander and Gain at the Same Time."

¹⁹ See, for example, de Monclaro's "Relação (cópia), feita pelo Padre Francisco de Monclaro, da Companhia de Jesus, da Expedição ao Monomotapa, Comandada por Francisco Barreto, 1573," *DPMAC*. 8:324-428; and "Livro sobre a Acção da Companhia de Jesus no Oriente," *ibid.* de Monclaro discusses Muslims at the court of the Mwene Mutapa and as far west as the modern Cabora Bassa Dam. Sena had at least 25 Muslim families by 1570 and they elected their own *Mwinyi*. M. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique*. Bloomington, 1995. 53. cf. R. Gregson, "Trade and Politics in South-East Africa: The Moors, the Portuguese, and the Kingdom of Mwenemutapa," *African Social Research*. 16 (1973): 413-43.

²⁰ The Comoro Islands, culturally and linguistically intertwined with the East African coast, are here included under the broad cultural banner of Swahili civilization. Though Comorians do not speak KiSwahili, the cultural parallels and relationship between the Comoros and East Africa are best summarized by what Nurse and Spear consider to be "common historical experiences based on traditions." *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African People, 800-1500*. Philadelphia, 1985. 91.

²¹ For the strong Swahili and Comorian presence in western Madagascar see P. Luiz Mariano, "Exploração Portuguesa de Madagascar em 1615: Relação de Jornada e Descobrimto da Ilha de S. Lourenço," *Boletim da Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa*. 5. 7 serie. (1887):313-58. On eastern Madagascar, see E. de Flacourt, *Histoire de Grande Ile Madagascar*. Paris, 1661. 108-10. Vernier and Millot estimate that the first Swahili settlement in Madagascar was founded in the thirteenth century at Vohemar. *Archéologie Malagache: comptoirs musulmans*. Paris, 1971. 29 fn160. cf. P. Verin, *The History of Civilisation in North Madagascar*. Boston, 1986.

Comoros.²² Such reconstructions have produced a picture of a remarkably unified realm of Swahili and Comorian speakers (and speakers of related dialects) comprising a far-flung and largely coastal linguistic community. While linguists have traced the movements of Swahili people as far south as northern Mozambique, the extreme southern coast—defined here as extending from Mozambique Island to just south of Sofala in the fifteenth century—has been largely excluded from linguistic analyses.²³

The linguistic communality that characterized the East African coast from Barawa to Sofala in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries until the middle of the seventeenth century is evident from contemporaneous written sources.²⁴ Portuguese sources are very clear that the language of the East African coast was not Arabic, though undoubtedly some Arabic speakers were in the region. Instead, coastal East Africans spoke what Europeans often referred to as the “language of the coast,” distinct from that of interior peoples and a “soft” language unlike the “harshness” of Arabic.²⁵ Thus Chittick’s assertion that a form of Swahili was spoken in the sixteenth century is probably accurate for much of the coast as well as the extreme southern maritime communities.²⁶ Suggestive of the relationship between the languages of the southern and central coasts—defined here as the area between the sultanates of Sofala and Malindi—the language of Zanzibar

²² The most comprehensive studies include Hinnebusch and Nurse, *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History*. Berkeley, 1993; and D. Nurse and T. Spear, *The Swahili*.

²³ The extreme south has been neglected primarily because Swahili dialects are no longer spoken south of Mozambique Island. On languages of coastal northern Mozambique, see E. Rzewuski, *Vocabulario da Lingua Mwani*. Maputo, 1979; and A. Prata, “Análise Etno-Linguística do Xecado de Sangage,” *Trabalhos de Arqueologia e Antropologia*. 2 (1987): 26-37.

²⁴ Though Merka is often considered a Swahili city in the sixteenth century, V. Grottanelli’s “The Peopling of the Horn of Africa” (in *East Africa and the Orient: Cultural Syntheses in Pre-Colonial Times*. Eds. N. Chittick and R. Rotberg. New York, 1967. 44-75.) suggests that by the fifteenth century it was largely Somali-speaking.

²⁵ The Portuguese often termed the entire Swahili coast the “coast of Melinde,” since their connections to the city-state were so strong. Luiz Mariano, in discussing Malagasy at the turn of the seventeenth century, contrasts it with the language spoken on the East African coast. P. Luiz Mariano, “Exploração Portuguesa de Madagascar.” cf. Manuel de Faria e Sousa’s mention of place names on the coast between Kirimba and Sofala. *Asia Portuguesa*. In *Records*. 1:22. Like other sources, de Figueroa noted that the language of the coast was “clearer than Arabic.” M. de Figueroa, *Conquista de las Indias de Persia e Arabia que hizo la armada del rey don Manuel de Portugal*. In *A Spaniard in the Portuguese Indies*. Ed. J. McKenna. Cambridge, 1967. 62. R. Gregson reviews the physiognomy of what the Portuguese called East African “Moors” in “Trade and Politics in South-East Africa,” 413-43. Briefly, the Portuguese distinguished between “white mouros” from the northern Indian Ocean and “dark” or “tawny mouros” (and in some cases simply “black”) on the East African coast. Indeed, Europeans often described the physiognomy of coastal Muslims in the same terms as non-Muslims of the southern African interior. J. Fryer, for example, described the Sultan of Nzwani, a “White Turbant” Muslim, as a “Wooly-pated Coffery.” *A New Account of East India and Persia*. Vol. 1. Ed. W. Crooke. London, 1909. 62.

²⁶ N. Chittick, “The East Coast, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean,” *Cambridge History of Africa*. Vol. 3. London, 1977. 218-19. cf. G. Freeman-Grenville, “Medieval Evidences for Swahili,” *Journal of the East African Swahili Committee*. 29. 1959. 1-23; and Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 49-51.

(KiUnguja) was close enough to that of Mozambique Island²⁷ to allow speakers of the “language of Moçambique” to converse easily with KiUnguja speakers.²⁸ Portuguese sources are more explicit in regard to the linguistic situation south of Mozambique Island. While Mozambique residents were reported to “speak the language of the land,” they also had “the same language and customs as those of Angos [Angoche].”²⁹ Further, Mozambicans had “the same language and customs as the *mouros*³⁰ of Çoffalla [Sofala].”³¹ Such linguistic unity on the southern coast is probable, considering that both oral and written traditions record that settlers from Kilwa founded all the major towns from Mozambique to Sofala.³² Even into the 1500s this close connection was evident as most towns on the extreme southern coast paid yearly tribute in goods and kind to the Sultan of Kilwa. A final bit of linguistic evidence, surviving in a Portuguese account of the coast and attesting to the presence of Swahili in the south, is a proverb documented by Nurse and Hinnebusch to be the first recorded version of Swahili.³³ It is quite probable,

²⁷ Possibly a dialect related to modern KiMwani. Duarte and Meneses assert that the language of modern Mozambique Island is Naharra, which is closely related to KiMwani. “The Archeology of Mozambique Island,” in *Aspects of African Archaeology*. Eds. G. Pwiti and R. Soper. Harare, 1996. In the early nineteenth century, KiMwani was certainly known on the island judging by Rzewuski’s report of a letter in KiMwani dated to the period in the Biblioteca Nacional, Lisbon. Rzewuski, “Mother Tongue/Father Tongue Convergence: On Swahilization and Deswahilization in Mozambique,” in *Akten des 7. Esseneur Kolloquiums über “Minoritätensprachen/Sprachminoritäten.”* Eds. J. Dow and T. Stoltz. Bochum, 1991. 285. For other discussions of Swahili in northern Mozambique, see P. Afido, et al, *Relatório do I Seminário sobre a Padronização da Ortografia de Línguas Moçambicas*. Maputo, 1989. 9-17; and R. da Conceição, “L’aire Swahili comme facteur de détermination des sociétés côtières du nord du Mozambique: L’exemple de sociétés de Cabo Delgado,” *Swahili Language and Society/Notes and News*. 7 (1990): 47-56.

²⁸ João de Barros, *Ásia: Dos Feitos que os Portugueses fizeram no descobrimento e conquista dos Mares e Terras do Oriente*. 4 Vols. Lisboa, 1945 (orig. 1615). 4:133.

²⁹ “Descrição da Situação, Costumes e Produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518, Edoard Barbuse,” *DPMAC*. 5:376.

³⁰ This term is used consistently throughout Portuguese documents for Muslim people residing on the coast—those whom I term Swahili—as opposed to those of the African or Madagascar interior.

³¹ “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:364.

³² See the tradition of Sofala’s founding as recorded by João de Barros in *Da Asia* (in *Records*. 6:273-4.) as well as E. Do Couto Lupi’s tradition of Angoche in *Angoche: Breve memoria sobre uma das capitánias-môres do Districto de Moçambique*. Lisbon, 1907. 161-65; and M. Newitt, “The Early History of the Sultanate of Angoche,” *Journal of African History*. (13) 3 (1972): 398.

³³ The proverb “Gombe zuco virato, ambuze capana virato” was recorded south of Sofala in the early sixteenth century. A modern standard Swahili transliteration renders the proverb, “N’gombe huko viatu, mbuzi hapana viatu,” or “Cattle (leather) make sandals, but goat (skin) does not.” “Carta do Padre André Fernandes para os Irmãos e Padres da Companhia de Jesus em Portugal,” in *Records*. 2:131-2. What is particularly intriguing about this proverb is that it was collected in Inhambane among people who do not appear to be native Swahili-speakers, suggesting that the language was in wide usage. For a discussion of this aphorism, see G. Liesegang, “Spuren von Kontakten durch Handel, Herrschaftsbeziehungen und Wanderarbeit in den Sprachen Mosambiks,” in *Sprache Geschichte und Kultur in Afrika*. Eds. R. Voblen and U. Chandi. Hamburg, 1984.

therefore, that by the end of the fifteenth century a discontinuous but coherent linguistic community had emerged over long stretches of the East African coast as far south as Inhambane. Close ties between Swahili-speaking areas bolstered a linguistic and material community over time, and archeological findings, when joined to the linguistic record, add much weight to the theory of an interconnectedness among all points on the Swahili continuum.

Archeological excavations on the East African coast have yielded findings that seem to point to a communality of material consumption. The evidence includes ceramics, items of personal adornment, and building material, as well as similar forms of architectural design, decoration, and spatial organization. The production and consumption of ceramics and architecture are perhaps the most striking indicators of material and aesthetic networks on the early East African coast. Pottery excavated from sites as seemingly disparate as Chibuene in the south of modern Mozambique, Domoni in the Comoros, and Manda in the Lamu archipelago shows striking similarities in form, use, and production technique.³⁴ Indeed, much of the coast shares a common ceramic tradition.³⁵ This “vast sphere of ceramic communality,” in Wright’s words, may not denote homogeneity from very early periods, but it does at least imply either the exchange of materials over a considerable distance or the movement of craftspeople. Certainly, commercial networks in the fifteenth century were sufficiently integrated to sustain Liesegang’s assertion that shards found in Sofala are imports from a more northerly part of the coast.³⁶ According to early Portuguese sources, certain towns or regions specialized in the production of material goods, as I shall examine below,³⁷ and this applied to

³⁴ H. Wright, “Trade and Politics on the Eastern Littoral of Africa, AD 800-1300,” in *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, metals and towns*. Eds. T. Shaw et al. London, 1993. 660. Wright notes that the common elements of these wares are ring-built restricted jars or pots with scraped surfaces and often decorated with zigzag or triangular incised motifs, as well as ring-based bowls with in-turning rims with red-slipped burnished surfaces with regular silvery graphite decorations. cf. P. Sinclair, “Chibuene—An Early Trading Site in Southern Mozambique,” *Paideuma*. 28 (1982): 51-65; and R. Dickenson, “Archeological Investigations at Nova Mambone, Moçambique,” *Monumenta*. 7 (1971): 23-7.

³⁵ Though northwestern Madagascar might not share a common ceramic tradition with the Swahili world, other material items, like building materials and architectural styles, mirror those on the East African coast. Vernier and Millot, *Archéologie Malagache*; and P. Verin, *The History of Civilisation in North Madagascar*.

³⁶ G. Liesegang, “Archeological Sites on the Bay of Sofala,” *Azania*. 7 (1972): 154.

³⁷ Examples include cloth in the Kirimba Archipelago, iron in Mombasa, ocean-going vessels in Mozambique Island, and raffia household wares in the Comoros. De Monclaro, 348. For an excellent ethnoarcheological study of iron production see C. Kusimba, “The Social Context of Iron Forging on the Kenya Coast,” *Africa*. (66) 3 (1996): 386-409.

ceramics.³⁸ Yet it is equally probable, as Sinclair has argued, that significant local production on the southern coast employed techniques and materials indistinguishable from those of the north.³⁹ In either instance the similarity of archeological finds implies close relationships between disparate points on the coast and suggests cultural communality.

Other material evidence for a communality of material consumption on the coast includes domestic structures, tombs, and mosques. The building materials, spatial organization, and architectural techniques that were first seen in Manda and Shanga⁴⁰ on the northern coast—here defined as spanning from Malindi to Barawa—proliferated south of the Lamu archipelago from Mombasa to the Comoros in the late sixteenth century. Mosque design in Domoni, Kilwa, and Lamu all show similarities in structural as well as ornamental design.⁴¹ Though the southern coast (modern Mozambique) is generally excluded from discussions of Swahili architecture because of minimal excavation (of mosques or houses) in the extreme south, Portuguese sources describe coral and noncoral structures of the south in the same terms as buildings in northern regions. For instance, dos Santos reported after his visit to the southern Kirimba archipelago that there “used to be a great quantity of mouro, the ruins survive today, because there are doorways and window frames of many houses fortified with columns very finely worked.”⁴² Though stone construction south of Mozambique Island was rare, other early sources do make

³⁸ R. Wilding identified multiple areas of ceramic production on the northern coast prior to the seventeenth century by tracing potter’s marks. “Coastal Bantu: Waswahili,” in *Kenyan Pots and Potters*. Eds. J. Barbour and S. Wandibba. Nairobi, 1989. 104. cf. H. Mutoro, “Locally-made Ceramics from the Coastal Site of Takwa,” *MILA: A Journal of Cultural Research*. (7) 1 (1978): 44-61. Mutoro excavated three million shards in the Takwa area.

³⁹ Since potting is generally dominated by individual women and not cooperatives, the similarity of style and technique of pottery, if locally produced, suggests a remarkably consistent technology and aesthetic along the coast. Wilding, “Coastal Bantu.”

⁴⁰ N. Chittick, *Manda: Excavations at an Island Port on the Kenya Coast*. Nairobi, 1984; and M. Horton, “Swahili Architecture, Space and Social Structure,” in *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space*. Eds. M. Pearson and C. Richards. London, 1994. 147-69; and “Early Muslim Trading Settlements on the East African Coast: New Evidence from Shanga,” *Antiquaries Journal*. 28 (1986): 290-323.

⁴¹ The literature on these similarities is immense. See, for example, P. Garlake, *Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast*; N. Chittick, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast*. 2 Vols. Nairobi, 1974; T. Wilson and J. de Vere Allen, *Swahili Houses and Tombs of the Coast of Kenya. Art and Archeology Research Papers (Special Edition)* 1979; M. Horton, “Swahili Corridor and Southern African Iron Age” *Staff Seminar Paper*. (3) University of Nairobi. (1986/87); J. Kirkman, “The Culture of the Kenya Coast in the Later Middle Ages,” *South African Archeological Bulletin*. (11) 44 (1956): 89-99; and G. Connah’s abstract of many of these and other sources in *African Civilizations: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa, An Archeological Perspective*. Cambridge, 1987.

⁴² João dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*. 2 Vols. Lisbon, 1609. 1:274.

reference to mosques and large houses in Sofala, Ngoji (Angoche),⁴³ and Kilimani.⁴⁴ Additionally, those structures that have been surveyed on the southern coast and in the Comoros display matching building materials and other resemblances to northern and central coastal ornamental and structural design.⁴⁵

From the written record it is clear that the material culture and linguistic coherency of towns and city-states in the Swahili world were ensured by close relationships between urban areas, the ease with which travel could be accomplished by sea, and an overarching agricultural base. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Swahili society is that it was very much a maritime and mobile civilization. Cultural coherency was possible over extreme distances because transportation was relatively easy and inexpensive. Oceanic travel was highly integrative, connecting city-states on the coast to each other and to the wider Indian Ocean. Indeed, merchants from Kilwa, Malindi, and Mombasa

⁴³ I have elected to use the term *Ngoji* instead of the Portuguese word *Angoche* because *Ngoji* conforms to the original Swahili orthography. See A. de Mello Machado, *Entre os Macuas de Angoche*. Lisbon, 1970. 165-6; E. Rzewuski, "Origins of the Tungi Sultanate (Northern Mozambique) in the Light of Local Traditions," in *Unwritten Testimonies of the African Past*. Ed. S. Pilaszewicz. 2 (1991): 207, 209 fn4. Rzewuski identifies Ngoji as the local (Swahili and Kóti) names for the island. Early Portuguese references to the town use the terms Angoji, Angoje, Angoja, Angosha, Angoxe, etc. The letter /A-/ is common before double consonants in Portuguese transcriptions of Swahili words and Bantu terms generally. There also seems to have been another Ngoji near modern Palma whose history records the first Shirazi Sultan of the island as Ahmadi Hassani—the nephew of female immigrants from Ngoji to the south. Rzewuski, "Mother Tongue/Father Tongue." 277. Rzewuski records that another local name for Ngoji is *Kilwa*, or "the island." Though the linguistic similarities between Swahili and e-Kóti have not been thoroughly drawn out, Sacleux reported in the early twentieth century that the two languages were not mutually intelligible. *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français*. Paris, 1939. 8.

⁴⁴ "Carta de [João Velho, que foi feitor de Sofala,] para el-Rei, [Post 1547]," *DPMAC*. 7:172-4. The earliest remains identified south of Mozambique Island to date are those of Sancul. According to M. Guerreiro, an inscription dating 713 AH (1313-14 CE) appears on a tomb attributed to a descendant of 'Ali b. al-Hasan, the first Shirazi ruler at Kilwa. N. Chittick's note in P. Vérin, "Observations Préliminaires sur les sites du Mozambique," *Azania* 5 (1970): 187. Vérin also notes that Islamic (Swahili style?) tombs have been found as far south as Chiloane (called *Kilwani*—an archaic Swahili form of "island"—by Ibn Majid). 188. Early Portuguese sources record Kilwani as a Swahili settlement ten leagues south of Sofala. "Regimento de Cide Barbudo, 1505 Setembro," *DPMAC*. 1:275.

⁴⁵ A. Rita-Ferreira, "Alguns Aspectos Materiais da Civilização Suahili em Moçambique," *Leba*. 7 (1992): 319-24; P. Sinclair, "Um Reconhecimento Arqueológico do Norte de Moçambique: Província de Cabo Delgado," *Trabalhos de Arqueologia e Antropologia*. 3 (1987): 23-82; A. Monteiro, "Vestiges Archéologiques du Cap Delgado et de Quisiva (Mozambique)," *Taloha*. 1970. 155-64; "Pesquisas Arqueológicas nos Estabelecimentos de Kiuya, M'buezi e Quisiva," *Monumenta*. 2 (1966): 51-6. Plasterwork similar to northern examples can be seen in modern Mozambique. R. Teixeira Duarte, *Northern Mozambique in the Swahili World*. Uppsala, 1993. On Somana Island, which was settled no later than the thirteenth century, see idem, "Moçambique e o Índico: Evidências arqueológicas," *Trabalhos de Arqueologia e Antropologia*. 3 (1987): 5-20. On the Comoros, see H. Wright, "Early Islam, Oceanic Trade and Town Development of Nzwani: The Comorian Archipelago in the Xth-XVth Centuries AD," *Azania*. 27 (1992): 81-128; P. Vialard, "Les Antiquités de la Grand Comore," *Taloha*. 4 (1971); and S. Blanchy, D. Ben Ali, and M. Saïd, *Comores: Sur les Traces de l'Histoire*. Moroni, 1989.

established themselves in other Swahili towns and as far east as Melaka.⁴⁶ Mombasa, Kilwa, Malindi, and Pate, however, enjoyed more regular and direct relations with many other western Indian Ocean ports, though none was more economically important than Gujarat.

Highly accessible during the monsoons and less than two weeks away by boat from Malindi,⁴⁷ the ports at Cambay, Diu, and Surat supplied the Swahili city-states with the largest share of the one exchange commodity that was not only essential for extracting gold from the southern interior but also was extremely significant culturally: cloth.⁴⁸ In return, Gujarati ships took “much ivory, copper, [and] *cairo* [rope manufactured on the coast],” as well as gold and silver.⁴⁹ Gujarati vessels of 200 to 300 tons⁵⁰ frequented the deep-water ports of East Africa, and each year merchants in Malindi, Mombasa, and Pate sent merchant ships to Gujarat.⁵¹ As recorded in the Pate Chronicle for the fifteenth century, Mwana Mkuu, the ruler of Pate, constructed a fleet expressly for trading in Gujarat where Pate merchants, “made much profit.”⁵²

While long-distance trade proved lucrative for many, the wheels of Swahili society were greased by agricultural production and the exchange of foodstuffs.⁵³ The agricultural infrastructure of Swahili towns and city-states is often overlooked in historical literature,

⁴⁶ T. Pires, *Suma Oriental*. London, 1944. 46-7. Malindians, for example, gained very high political positions in both Kilwa and Mombasa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See Freeman-Grenville, *French at Kilwa Island*, and E. Axelson on Mombasa, *The Portuguese in South-East Africa, 1498-1600*. Johannesburg, 1968. *Passim*.

⁴⁷ F. de Canstanheda, *Extractos do Descobrimento e Conquista da India pelos Portuguezes*. In *Records*. 5:391. J. Huyghen van Linschoten puts the distance between Mozambique Island and India at thirty days “more or lesse.” *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies. Vol 1*. London, 1885. 33. The trip from Sofala to Mozambique Island usually took no more than eight days when winds were favorable. Dos Santos, 2:262.

⁴⁸ E. Alpers, “Gujarat and the Trade of East Africa, 1500-1800,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. 9 (1) 1976. 22-44.

⁴⁹ “Diogo Lopes de Siqueira para el Rei, 1518,” T. T., *Cartas dos Vicereis da India*, 1-12. In Axelson, *South-east Africa, 1488-1530*. 261. East African rope was in demand because of its utility in ship-building. “Cabral, 1500,” in *The East African Coast: Select Documents* (hereafter *SD*). Ed. G. Freeman-Grenville, ed. London, 1973. 61.

⁵⁰ *The Voyage of Pedro Álvarez Cabral to Brazil and India from Contemporary Documents and Narratives*. Ed. W. Greenlee. Liechtenstein (1967) mentioned Cambayan ships coming from Malindi carrying more than 200 men and women in addition to stores of trade goods. 89.

⁵¹ “Informação de Jordão de Freitas para el-Rei, Goa, 1530 Setembro 17,” *DPMAC*. 4:425. On trade routes between the East African coast and the wider Indian Ocean and Red Sea zones, see Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi, *Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al-bahr wa'l-qawa'id*. In *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean Before the Coming of the Portuguese*. London, 1971.

⁵² “Stigand Version,” *The Pate Chronicle*. Ed. M. Tolmacheva. East Lansing, 1993. 59.

⁵³ When its agricultural base is recognized, the fact that the entire Swahili coast occupied a single vegetational zone is another factor in the spread and limits of Swahili civilization. P. Sinclair, “Archaeology in Eastern Africa: An Overview of Current Chronological Issues,” *Journal of African History*. 32 (1991): 181.

but intensive agricultural production yielded considerable surpluses of consumable commodities and provided the requisite wealth-base for a complex and urbanized society. “There is no memory of any famine there,” reported Francisco Barreto in 1571,⁵⁴ and with the exception of periods of extensive conflict⁵⁵ this observation holds true for the majority of the Swahili world. The mainland coast was highly productive, and the Comoros, northwestern Madagascar, Mafia, Zanzibar, and Pemba produced enough surplus to export foodstuffs to distant points on the Swahili continuum. Kilwa even exported rice to Aden in the fifteenth century.⁵⁶

Among agricultural commodities the coconut palm yielded the largest profits for agriculturalists as its fruit, timber, and fronds could all be marketed. Attesting to the variety of coconut palm products, a visitor to Nzwani noted that the residents sailed to Mozambique in vessels “of 40 tons made of Cocor, sowed instead with Pinns, Cawked, tackled, and wholly fitted with that universal tree.”⁵⁷ Ownership of palm trees was considered a sign of wealth. Dos Santos described the Lamu archipelago town of Faza as “very rich and very prosperous, and with the best buildings, of all the cities of the coast,” having over 8,000 palm trees on its plantations (*mashamba*).⁵⁸ Dos Santos recalled that these were “the principal property and sustenance of these mouros; such that [after the Portuguese leveled the palm groves] there remained nothing there but a flat plane, where there once was the pride of the city of Ampaza.”⁵⁹

Immense agricultural surpluses decreased the demand for labor in the service of food production and allowed a majority of town-dwellers to become, for example, specialized exchange agents, skilled artisans, and religious practitioners—all highly developed spheres of activity by the 1500s. Thus Swahili society was underpinned by not only its agricultural economy but also its long-distance trading partnerships, political concern with economic arrangements, and specialization in the production of cloth, ships, monumental

⁵⁴ “Lembrança da Carta de Francisco Barreto, Capitão-mor da Empresa do Senhorio de Monomotapa, para el-Rei, Moçambique, 1571 Agosto 5,” *DPMAC*. 8:206.

⁵⁵ For example, in the early seventeenth century internal rivalries between Sultan Omari and Mwana Khadija in Pate led to attacks on contenders’ coconut and fruit trees, destroying the local economy. “Stigand Version,” *Pate Chronicle*. 77.

⁵⁶ N. Chittick, “The East Coast, Madagascar, and the Indian Ocean,” 217.

⁵⁷ William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619, as narrated in his Journal and correspondence. Vol.1*. Liechtenstein, 1967. 21.

⁵⁸ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*. 1:385-6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 1:397.

architecture, pottery, and beads.⁶⁰ These factors in turn shaped social relations.⁶¹

In Swahili towns of the late 1400s, group distinctions could be fluid. However, observations made at the time show that discernible distinctions effectively defined three broad social conglomerations: the *ungwana*,⁶² or the “cultured” aristocrats; royalty, or the political elite closely related to *ungwana*; and the non-*ungwana*, or the people of low social status including slaves. The social hierarchy of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Swahili towns was defined by wealth or access to modes of obtaining wealth. Any merchant group that constantly reinvested its profits in trade and items of prestige⁶³—the “cultural capital” of a prestige-economy—reaped profits from investment in agriculture and exchange.⁶⁴ This group—the *ungwana*⁶⁵—generally enjoyed a level of access to material

⁶⁰ Though this discussion will primarily concern cloth, beads were also a significant aspect of local material production and consumption. A considerable diversity of beads has been found in archeological sites in coastal East Africa as well as the southern interior. Beads range from marine shell at very early levels, semi-precious stone (particularly before the fourteenth century), and glass. Glass beads, both drawn and wound, were common on the coast from the fourteenth century. The majority of beads were of Cambayan manufacture and quite colorful, coming in yellow, blue, green, gray, and red. “Mandado de Cristóvão de Távora, Sofala, 1517 Novembro 27,” *DPMAC*. 5:356. In a Portuguese treatise on trade at Sofala in the early sixteenth century, it was reported that “[Sofalans] want nothing save cloth from Cambaya and beads from Malindi.” “Carta de Duarte de Lemos para el-Rei, Moçambique, 1508 Setembro 30,” *DPMAC*. 2:298. cf. N. Chittick, “Early Beads in East Africa,” *Kenya Past and Present*. 6 (1975): 4-8. Do Couto discusses the trade and uses of beads in *Da Asia*, Decado IX, *DPMAC*. 5:272.

⁶¹ On the intersections of economic existence and social stratification, see S. Plattner, in *Economic Anthropology*. Stanford, 1989. cf. F Berdan, “Trade and Markets in Precapitalist States,” *ibid.* 83.

⁶² I have chosen to use only the root */-ungwana/* (though *uungwana* and *waungwana* are correct Standard Swahili appellations for the idea and people respectively) because of the variety of prefixes possible in early Swahili. There are no sources to prove that */u-/* or */wa-/* were the accepted modifiers of the root word in this period, though I contend that the root */-ungwana/* was in existence (see below). Allen defined */-ungwana/* as the “quintessence of Swahili-ness.” “Swahili Culture Reconsidered,” 134.

⁶³ Though I have not employed the term “mercantile-capitalist” here, it is worth noting that most merchants accumulated significant capital in the form of gold, cloth, and ivory from trade and reinvested that capital in trade.

⁶⁴ J. de Vere Allen has argued that the command of agricultural production was more prestigious a position than mercantilism, but I would suggest that these occupational-economic roles were not so clearly divided. Those who had access to significant capital from agricultural surpluses also invested heavily in trade, and indeed, landowners often became mercantilists as agricultural surpluses found markets across the coast. “Swahili Culture Reconsidered,” 26. Portuguese sources are replete with references to the agriculturally productive land of wealthy urban merchants.

⁶⁵ Even though the Portuguese sources do not employ the term, I have used the root */-ungwana/* throughout this paper. The term *waungwana* was and continues to be used on the northern and central coast to refer to free, high-status individuals. See especially R. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800-1900*. Cambridge, 1987. 72-4. The case for the southern coast, particularly south of Ngoji where Swahili is no longer spoken, is a bit more tricky. As for the modern Swahili dialects of Mozambique, the root */-ungwana/* is still used in the same way I have defined it for the northern coast. See A. Prata, *op. cit.* 76. (Prata discusses the use of */-ungwana/* in Eskatji, Ekhingwa, Emujinkwari, and Ithwani). Evidence for the use of */-ungwana/* on the extreme southern coast (Sofala) in the same fashion as outlined above comes from eighteenth

wealth that was second only to that of the royalty, with whom they were closely related. Also, the ungwana probably constituted a high percentage of urbanites, at least in Mombasa, since it was known that the “principal mouros” occupied over 900 houses in the 1540s.⁶⁶ Yet there also existed a relatively wealthy and influential group of non-merchant artisans, skilled laborers, and religious elite⁶⁷ who can be considered ungwana. Shipwrights, precious-metalsmiths, architects, masons, and some ship captains were highly skilled and therefore able to command wages in gold coins and expensive cloth, unlike their less skilled or unskilled neighbors, enslaved or free.⁶⁸ The ungwana generally defined themselves and urban culturedness as: dressing in a Swahili fashion, having a genealogy extending back many generations on the coast, living in an urban area and maintaining certain kinds of housing, speaking Swahili or “the language of the coast,” adhering to the precepts of Islam and being learned in Islamic discourse, being creditworthy, practicing circumcision for males,⁶⁹ and (not) eating certain kinds of food.⁷⁰

“Pleasure for a man,” records a Swahili song reflective of ungwana attitudes, “is food and clothes,” suggesting that, like the consumption of materials, food consumption

century records. In *Resposta das Questoens sobre os Cafres: ou notícias ethnográficas sobre Sofala do fim do século XVIII* (Ed. G. Liesegang. Lisbon, 1966), Africans in the Sofala area remembered that “Mulunguanas” were the Muslim elite of the coast. Since there were few, if any, Swahili speakers in Sofala at this late date, it is doubtful that the word was of recent introduction. The use of an /l/ before vowels such as /u/ was common only until about the seventeenth century elsewhere in the Swahili world. See, for example, *elupe* (white), *elusi* (black), and *mulungu* (God) in *Hamziya*, c. 1652. J. Knappert, “The Hamziya Deciphered,” *African Language Studies*. 9 (1968): 79-80. Further evidence for Swahili self-identification as ungwana can be found in Swahili literature and words adopted elsewhere by non-Swahili speakers to denote people of the coast. See J. Knappert’s “Social and Moral Concepts in Swahili Islamic Literature,” *Africa*. (60) 2 (1976): 128.

⁶⁶ De Barros, 4:146. Portuguese sources use the term “Moors of distinction” quite often as well. See the anonymous narrative of the first voyage of Vasco da Gama in *SD*, 51.

⁶⁷ Pate was referred to as a religious center, “the mouro *caciz*, [Qadi] greatest on the coast, resided there.” de Monclaro (1573). *DPMAC*. 8:354. Qadis also had mercantile interests and even trafficked cloth. “Livro da ementa de Pedro Lopes, escrivão de feitoria de Sofala, Sofala, 1515 Janeiro 1,” *DPMAC*. 5:28-30, 44, 50, 60.

⁶⁸ On the payment of masons in cloth (Indian *bespyças*), see “Mandado de Nuno vaz Pereira, Capitão de Sofala, para o feitor de Quíloa, Fernão Cotrim, Quíloa, 1507 Janeiro 11,” *DPMAC*. 2:30. For payment in gold coin, see “Mandado de Nuno vaz Pereira, Capitão de Sofala, para o feitor de Quíloa, Fernão Cotrim, Quíloa, 1507 Janeiro 20,” *DPMAC*. 2:78.

⁶⁹ See dos Santos’s description of a Kirimban circumcision ceremony in *Ethiopia Oriental*. 2:243-6. cf. M. Abdurahman, “Anthropological Notes from the Zanzibar Protectorate,” *Tanganika Notes and Records*. 8 (1939): 63-6.

⁷⁰ J. de Vere Allen, “Town and Country in Swahili Culture,” in *Symposium Leo Frobenius*. UNESCO. Paris, 1973. 298-316. Though Allen’s analysis concerns later periods, the early records show a very similar structural stratification. It is interesting to note that Sheikh Hemedi bin Abdullah’s 1914 “History of Africa” defines those who prospered under German colonial rule in terms of their better clothes, silver adornments, rice, beef, stone houses, and better shipping—the hallmarks of ungwana town life. *Tanganika Notes and Records*. 32 (1952): 80-1. cf. C. Kusimba, “Material Symbols among the Precolonial Swahili of the East African Coast,” (forthcoming). My thanks to Dr. Kusimba for graciously allowing me an advance copy.

signaled who was ungwana and who was non-ungwana.⁷¹ Foods ubiquitous in the Swahili world included millet, roots (yam), wild fruit, and fish.⁷² However, the diet typical of the ungwana was often much more complex, and the disparities between ungwana and non-ungwana eating habits amplified the social distance between the two groups. Having dined at the house of an ungwana carpenter, Sir Thomas Roe remembered that

a boorde was sett vpon tressells couered with a fine new Matt; benches of stone about yt likewise couered, on which they satt. First water was brought to euerie man in a Cocor shell, powered out into a wooden Platter, and instead of a towell the rinds of Cocor. Then was sett boyld rise and roasted Plantens, upon the rice quarters of henns and Peeeces of goate broyld. After grace said, they fell to their meate with honny and soe fryed, and Palmeto wyne and Cocor milke for drinke.⁷³

Similarly, only the “honored mouros” enjoyed chewing betel (*utasi*) “with specially prepared limes.”⁷⁴ Likewise, only elite patricians could afford wheat, a commodity imported from India at great expense.⁷⁵

The material trappings of culturedness also included highly prized clothing styles, elaborate jewelry (for women), ornate furniture, large houses, and richly worked doors and plasterwork. Roe, having praised the lavish dinner placed before him, also remarked that the same Mwalian carpenter, “a Cheefe man of that towne,” owned a “howse . . . built of lyme and stone, Playstered with Morter or whyte lime . . . Roofte with rafters of woode couered with Cocor leaues, the outsides watled with Canes.”⁷⁶ In larger cities like Kilwa, the ungwana created an urban landscape dotted by flat-roofed houses (*majumba*) built of coral blocks and lime plaster.⁷⁷ It is likely that building a multistory coral rag house took the bulk of an ungwana family’s disposable resources; as such it signaled the family’s investment in urban society and, in a most substantial and enduring fashion, attested to the owners’ culturedness.

Every respectable ungwana exhibited the requisite social and cultural “patina,” or the

⁷¹ J. Knappert, “Swahili Proverb Songs,” *Afrika und Übersee*. (59) 2 (1976): 110-11.

⁷² De Barros, 1:235, and “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:358.

⁷³ William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*. 20.

⁷⁴ Mawr, 1505, in E. Axelson, *South-East Africa, 1488-1530*. 233.

⁷⁵ Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants, Vol. 1*. Ed. M. Dames. Millwood, 1967. 132. Muyaka bin Haji’s poem of the eighteenth century, “Itakapo Kukutana,” also records the pleasures of wheat. *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry*. Ed. M. Abdulaziz. Nairobi, 1979. 160.

⁷⁶ William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*. 20.

⁷⁷ De Barros, *Da Asia*. 1:liv. 9 cap. 3.

outward marks of social status. A coral house—a sign of permanence and economic confidence—served as a patina for its owner, and a family’s coastal ancestry and knowledge of its society were seen as yardsticks Swahili respectability (*heshima*). The surviving records show that a man was denied political office if he “had not been long in the country and had no relations there.”⁷⁸ Indeed, in most royal succession disputes the “greater and lesser mouros,” as described in Sofala, elected an “heir of the land,” so that in the Sofalan case the nephew of the Sultan became the new ruler.⁷⁹ Those having *heshima* were not constant as a social group. On the contrary, respect and station in society could be won and lost, as witnessed by the fact that lower-status individuals could “Swahilize” by gaining the physical and social trappings of coastal society or conversely “de-Swahilize” by losing such distinctions. By displaying belongings rich in cultural meaning, such as prestigious cloth, *ungwana* defined and proclaimed their position in society.⁸⁰ In the fifteenth century, *ungwana* displayed wealth through personal adornment and sumptuous living in order to concentrate clientele. As circulators of large accumulations of cloth, the *ungwana* empowered their political voice to the extent that many successfully challenged the royalty’s claims to authority or carved out political niches of their own.

Royal personages—generally sultan(a)s, their family, and a core of officials—were the most materially endowed and politically powerful figures in Swahili society.⁸¹ Though

⁷⁸ “Arabic History of Kilwa, c. 1520,” in *SD*, 85. This aspect of *ungwana* society was of great importance in the sixteenth century. Numerous Swahili chronicles demonstrate that remembering a lineage’s history and “placing” a family on the coast from a certain period of time was a strong legitimating factor in its claims to power or political saliency. For example, Hajj Muhammad Rukn al-Din, the notary of the Sultan of Kilwa’s treasury, was backed by the Portuguese as the new Sultan of Kilwa in 1505; yet, since he was a recent immigrant and had few familial relations in the town, he had to work very hard to gain the respect of the “principal mouros of the land.” After his death it was “declared that it was not conducive . . . that such a man of low origin as the son of Mohamed Ancony [Hajj Muhammad] should reign.” In the end, the cousin of Sultan Ibrahim (the Sultan of Kilwa when the Portuguese arrived) was favored by the “chief men of the land” as he was “of the royal line of kings who founded and populated the town.” De Barros, 1:liv. 10, cap. 4.

⁷⁹ “Auto passado por Pero Sobrinho e Diogo Homem, escritvões da feitoria de Sofala, Sofala, 1512 Abril 15,” *DPMAC*. 3:244. Sobrinho calls this person “Quyunbe,” or *kiyumbe* (*jumbe?*)—an administrative official.

⁸⁰ After M. Weber’s “Class, Society, Party” in *From Max Weber*. Eds. H. Gerth and C. Mills. New York, 1946. 189.

⁸¹ In large city-states like Kilwa, the offices of *amir*, *wazir*, and *qadi* were hereditary. See G. Freeman-Grenville, *The Medieval History of the Tanganyikan Coast*. Berlin, 1964. Also, it was not uncommon for women to occupy the office of sultan. Faza and Zanzibar both had very famous female rulers and there did not seem to be any restriction against women in powerful state positions anywhere on the coast in this period. J. Strandes, *The Portuguese Period in East Africa*. In 1615, Nzwani was governed by “an ould woeman Sultanness . . . to whom they repayre for Justice both in Ciuill and Criminall causes.” Three of the Sultana’s children, one of them a woman, were “Subsultans” at Mwali. William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*. 18. Less than fifty years earlier (1567-8), the ruler of Domoni had been a man. G. Freeman-Grenville and B. G. Martin, “A Preliminary Handlist of the Arabic Inscriptions of the Eastern Coast of Africa,” in *The Swahili Coast, 2nd to 19th Centuries: Islam, Christianity and Commerce in Eastern Africa*. London, 1988. 122.

ultimate political power routinely shifted between lineages, the head of state, whose position was commonly balanced against ungwana influence in most cities, had primary access to sources of wealth. Royals were guaranteed unusual access to material items like cloth and agricultural surpluses by taxing trade and collecting tribute. Ruling houses accumulated vast material resources by marketing the agricultural tribute extracted from other Swahili-speaking regions, as was the case with Kilwa's hegemony over Mafia and Pemba's tributary status to Mombasa. By first extracting, accumulating, and then redistributing both agricultural and commercial resources, states preserved power; yet the perennial bind afflicting royal families was that for their activities to yield further dividends, accumulated goods had to be exchanged for gold, ivory, or cloth—all items that could find a wider market through ungwana traders. To ensure the circulation of such commodities, merchants who knew the marketplaces best had to be employed by the ruler's treasury. As a result of such royal dependence on merchants, traders were able to exert control over the commercial relationships of the state—a partial mode of its livelihood—and at the same time use their personal or familial accumulations to challenge the head(s) of state. Thus the royal houses of city-states like Kilwa and Pate were at times usurped, as we shall see, by upwardly mobile mercantile lineages.

Slaves and other people of low socioeconomic status constituted a third and equally fluid group.⁸² Since an individual could gain status as a coastal dweller by adopting Islam and Swahili modes of living, the boundaries between Swahili and non-Swahili were permeable. Indeed, several early accounts mention “cafres mouros”—or Africans who became Muslim and integrated into coastal society through association with Swahili-speakers—and dos Santos recorded that many Makua along the Loranga river (northeast of Kilimani) Swahilized during the late 1500s.⁸³ Generally, both urban and nonurban non-ungwana were employed as fishermen, farmers, menial laborers, and as crewmen aboard ships. Lacking the access to wealth enjoyed by the ungwana, this group nonetheless consumed a variety of material goods, especially cloth. “Though they may be

⁸² This paper will not address slavery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as there is a general dearth of evidence. While it is clear that slaves made up a large percentage of the workforce on mashamba and served as soldiers, their relations with free people in Swahili society are unclear. See *Calcoen: A Dutch Narrative of the Second Voyage of Vasco da Gama to Calicut (printed in Antwerp c. 1504)*. Ed. J. Berjeau. London, 1974; Da Gama, in *SD*, 51; and “Sumário de uma carta de Pero Ferreira Fogaça, Capitão de Quiloa, para el-Rei, 1506 Agosto 31,” *DPMAC*. 1:619. The most detailed account of slavery is de Monclaro's report of a major slave rebellion on Zanzibar in 1507. In brief, he wrote that “There were here some cafres of the mainland, who had risen in revolt and kept the land in such turmoil that the inhabitants, being so weak, dare not go out to their farms because of them.” 346.

⁸³ See, for example, M. de Figueroa, *Conquista de las Indias de Persia e Arabia*, in *A Spaniard in the Portuguese Indies*. Ed. J. McKenna. Cambridge, 1967; and dos Santos, 1:309.

very poor and have not even sufficient food to eat during their lives,” a sixteenth-century observer remembered, “[they] use every endeavor to have a piece of fine cloth or *canequim*⁸⁴ to serve as a shroud when they die.”⁸⁵ Therefore, more than any other manufactured material, cloth became an item of mass consumption in the Swahili world, joining producers, the *ungwana*, non-*ungwana*, and the state in a web of social relations, revealing culturally defined undercurrents of mutual aesthetic sensibility and culture-made-material claims of status.

*In clothing of cotton weave they fare*⁸⁶

2 • Swahili cloth production and transcoastal exchange

The production of cloth on the Swahili coast is particularly relevant to this study because the circulation of locally produced cloth enabled the Swahili not only to supplement foreign trade to the Zambezi region but also to meet the diversified demand of inter-town markets. These markets in turn facilitated closer relations between centers of production and areas far removed from production sites. The circulation of Swahili cloth exemplifies how textiles of local manufacture could be created to suit wider regional tastes and how demand for them defined a cultural unit, incorporating and differentiating consumers from every socioeconomic level.

Textiles were produced in many East African towns, from Mogadishu in the north to Sofala in the south. Though Mogadishu is excluded from this study, it is worth noting that it was exporting cloths to the Persian Gulf and Egypt before the sixteenth century. But the most sought-after and technologically sophisticated cloths were coming from Pate Island in the modern Lamu archipelago.⁸⁷ Cloth originating in the Pate area was both plentiful and particularly high in quality, and much of the town’s economic strength derived from its distribution of prestigious silk cloths made with thread unraveled from foreign textiles. According to de Monclaro:

⁸⁴ A coarse calico, still called *kaniki* in Swahili, usually dyed blue or black—very similar to the *bafta*. J. Irwin, “Indian Textile Trade in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of Indian Textile History*. 1 (1955): 26.

⁸⁵ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:111.

⁸⁶ L. de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, stanza 47.

⁸⁷ The most comprehensive survey of the cloth industry in southern Somalia is E. Alpers, “*Futa Benaadir*: Continuity and Change in the Traditional Cotton Textile Industry of Southern Somalia, c. 1840-1980,” in *Actes du Colloque Entreprises et Entrepreneurs en Afrique (XIXe et XXe siècles)* Tome 1. Paris, 1981. 77-98. On Mogadishu cloth in Egypt, see H. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta. Vol. 2*. Cambridge, 1962. 374. On Mombasan cloth, see “el Rei para Gonçalo Mendez, 28/2/1520,” in Axelson, *South-east Africa, 1488-1530*. 262.

In it [Pate] trade is different because there are many rich silk fabrics . . . there being none in other Moorish towns because only in this town of Pate do they make them, spreading them from here to the others. The Portuguese trade these fabrics against iron, beads and cotton cloth which they have not. Naos [ocean-going vessels] from India resort to this town.⁸⁸

Pate received Gujarati vessels and dispatched ships to the Indian subcontinent in order to procure cloth, silks in particular, to be unraveled and locally rewoven.⁸⁹ By dismantling silks manufactured in Gujarat and China, the weavers of Pate maintained a supply of valuable silk thread from which they created textiles that conformed to local ideas of beauty.⁹⁰

Pate's success in the cloth industry over multiple centuries is remarkable. Because weavers avoided the most time-consuming stages of textile production by using imported thread instead of spinning their own, cloth-making at Pate was extremely efficient and the output high.⁹¹ It is possible that Pate cloth owed its stability in the marketplace to its symbolic meaning as a product of native workers who were intimately familiar with the local market—a meaning that Indian-produced textiles lacked.⁹² On the coast the consumption of Pate cloth was the preserve of the *ungwana*. On products indigenous to the Lamu archipelago, dos Santos wrote that “they make in these islands many vessels, much *cairo* . . . hats of fine grass, many and good cloths of silk, and cotton, and particularly on the island of Pate, where there are great weavers, and in this respect are named Pate cloths, of which the people of rank wear, the kings of the coast, as well as the women and some Portuguese.”⁹³ The consumption of Pate cloth, particularly silk, was thus indicative of high status.

Silk Pate cloth was conspicuously consumed by coastal and even noncoastal elites at the turn of the sixteenth century, and Patean merchants scattered across the coast were distributing cloths as far as the court of the Mwene Mutapa on the Zimbabwe plateau.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ De Monclaro, 354.

⁸⁹ “Informação de Jordão de Freitas para el-Rei, Goa, 1530 Setembro 17,” *DPMAC*. 4:425.

⁹⁰ N. Chittick mentions that silk was produced in Pate (“The East Coast,” 217). I have not found any reference to the actual production of silk anywhere on the East African coast with the exception of Madagascar.

⁹¹ McAdams and Howman’s “Notes on the Handspinning and Weaving of Cotton” (in *Nada*. 17 (1940): 96-100) is one of the few studies of cotton carding and spinning in East Africa. It is possible that Swahili weavers practiced many of the techniques recorded on the southern Zambezi in the early twentieth century. cf. P. Davison and P. Harries’s, “Cotton Weaving in South-east Africa: Its History and Technology,” in *Textiles of Africa*. Eds. D. Idiens and K. Ponting. Bath, 1991.

⁹² This phenomenon is mirrored in seventeenth-century Southeast Asia. See K. Hall, “The Textile Industry in Southeast Asia, 1400-1800,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. (39) 2 (1996): 105-9.

⁹³ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:380.

⁹⁴ “Carta régia para o Vice-rei da Índia, Lisboa, 1612 Novembro 7,” *DPMAC*. 9:262.

In the early 1500s Pateans were bringing cloth directly to Ngoji, and the southern region enjoyed sustained contact with Lamu, Barawa, Mogadishu, Malindi, and Mombasa as well.⁹⁵ As late as the seventeenth century, the Portuguese, in an attempt to dominate Swahili channels of exchange on the Zambezi, discovered that to trade on the river, the factory first had to send merchants to Pate to purchase both “the cloth required for the *curvas* [*kurua*-tribute⁹⁶] and presents customarily sent to the neighboring kings.”⁹⁷

Pate produced and distributed highly prized cloths on the coast, but it was not alone in textile production. Artisans in Sofala, Kilwa, Ngoji, and the Kirimba archipelago wove cotton cloths in the sixteenth century for both local use and long-distance trade.⁹⁸ Much like weavers at Pate, Sofalans unraveled foreign textiles and wove imported thread into cloth for local consumption and trade with the Sofalan hinterland. In 1518, a Portuguese observer wrote:

Now the mouros once more make in this land quantities of cotton, much of which is gathered here, they spin it and weave it into white cloth and, since they do not know how to dye or because they do not have the dyes, they take blue dyed cloths from Cambia, unravel them and gather the thread into a ball and, with their white weave and with the other they make the cloths colored, from which they obtain a great sum of gold.⁹⁹

The same source mentioned that Sofalans, like Pateans, wove both silk and cotton cloths.¹⁰⁰ The technique of unraveling cloths to get choice threads, as we have seen at Pate, was common in the Shire valley as well, especially where dyes were unobtainable. The lack of dye on the coast is surprising, as we shall see, considering the extensive

⁹⁵ Carta de Afonso de Albuquerque para el-Rei, Goa, 1514 Outubro 25,” *DPMAC*. 3:558. cf. “Alfonso de Albuquerque, Cochim, 10 Dezembro, 1514,” in *Records*. 3:147. In 1517, Cristóvão de Távora estimated that in Ngoji “they give their merchandise for less than half of its price in Sofala, and the greater part of these merchants are Mombaçan.” “Carta de Cristóvão de Távora, Capitão e Governador de Sofala e Moçambique, para el-Rei, Moçambique, 1517 Setembro 20,” *DPMAC*. 5:202. Pate sustained direct relations with the Kirimba Archipelago into the late eighteenth century. See n.a., “Memorias da costa d’Africa Oriental e Algumas reflexoes uteis para estabelecer melhor, e fazer mais florente o seu commercio, 1762,” in *Relações de Moçambique Setecentista*. Ed. A. de Andrade. Lisbon, 1955. 214.

⁹⁶ On the *kurua*, or the annual tribute paid to a ruler to trade in his/her kingdom, see Dos Santos, 1:64-7.

⁹⁷ “Alvará régio sobre o contrato dos resgates dos rios de cuama por Rui de Melo de Sampaio,” *DPMAC*. 9: 353.

⁹⁸ Judging by the level of cotton cloth production in the eighteenth century, it is possible that Siyu was also growing cotton and weaving in this period. See H. Brown, “Siyu: Town of Craftsmen, A Swahili Cultural Centre in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Azania* (23) 1988. 104-6.

⁹⁹ “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:358.

¹⁰⁰ “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518, Edoard Barbuse,” *DPMAC*. 5:374.

processing and use of indigo in the Kirimba archipelago.¹⁰¹ Though not fully substantiated by available evidence, it is possible that Kirimbas jealously guarded their stocks of indigo.¹⁰²

Almost a thousand kilometers away, Kilwa also produced cloth in the fifteenth century for both local consumption and the interior trade.¹⁰³ The diversity of spindle whorls found at Kilwa suggests that there was substantial cotton cloth production in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰⁴ Cotton cultivation and weaving diminished in later centuries, but at the beginning of the sixteenth century (at least) there was a “great amount of very good cotton . . . grown and planted on the island.”¹⁰⁵ The same source also discusses the variety of cotton cloths available in Kilwa and the construction of “well shaped shields made strong with palm woven with cotton.”¹⁰⁶

The fourth major textile production center on the Swahili coast was located in the the Kirimba archipelago, where cotton cloths were “woven by mouros [who were] great weavers.”¹⁰⁷ Weavers of the Kirimba Islands created mass quantities of dark blue cloth that came to be known simply as “Milwani cloth”—after the river whose banks grew congested with refugees following Zimba incursions in the late sixteenth century. In the

¹⁰¹ I have found no reference to indigo production outside of the Kirimba archipelago in the sixteenth century; yet J. Crassons de Medeuil’s report on Kilwa in 1784 noted that the “country” produced indigo and good cotton, “silky even than the cotton produced on Ile de Bourbon.” “The French Slave Trade in Kilwa, c. 1784-5,” in *SD*, 196. William Keeling, without visiting Mogadishu, likewise noted that the city-state exported indigo in the early seventeenth century. *The East India Company Journals of Captain William Keeling and Master Thomas Bonner, 1615-1617*. Eds. M. Strachan and B. Penrose. Minneapolis, 1971. 94. Strandes (17) notes that one of the ships captured by da Gama in 1498 was loaded with pigeon’s dung “to be bound for Cambay, where this was said to have been used in the dyeing of cloth.” Strandes cites Correa’s history.

¹⁰² Although the Kirimbas may not have distributed indigo, T. Pires mentions that it was among the commodities traded to East Africa from Cambay. Pires, in *SD*, 126.

¹⁰³ Chittick, “The East Coast,” 217.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* and *idem*, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast. Vol. 2*. Nairobi, 1974. 428-31.

¹⁰⁵ “Descrição da Viagem de D. Francisco de Almeida, vice-rei da Índia, pela costa oriental de África, 1507,” in *O Manuscrito ‘Valentim Fernandes.’* Ed. A. Baião. Lisbon, 1950.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*. Ingram’s *Zanzibar: Its History and its People* (London, 1931, 326) quotes a nineteenth-century account of shield-making on Zanzibar Island describing a very similar design. Shields are also depicted in an early twentieth-century postcard from Ngazija, Comoros. *Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art. Historic Postcard Collection: Madagascar*.

¹⁰⁷ Dos Santos, 1:279. The Portuguese suffix /-o/ denotes that at least some (if not exclusively) men were involved in the cloth production process. Among weavers on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century coast (now mainly in Somalia), weaving has been a male occupation, yet in northwestern Madagascar women were certainly weaving in the sixteenth century.

Kirimba Islands¹⁰⁸ indigo was grown primarily on Kirimba and Kiswi at the mouth of the Milwani river (*Miluâne* or *Melluane* in the Portuguese sources).¹⁰⁹ Dos Santos wrote:

In these lands [Kirimba Islands] there are many plants of which they make blue dye . . . This plant is picked by the mouros of the island . . . And after they have been picked and trampled well, then [it is] laid out in bundles in a wooden trough of water, where it is dissolved into a liquid . . . which they throw in other troughs, or basins of stone, and [then] put in the sun to dry, where they are curdled and dried and are gathered . . . And then extracted in fragments dry and hard like rock.¹¹⁰

Following extraction of the indigo solids which could be redissolved, the dye blocks were used for soaking the cotton thread near Milwani, and subsequently the colored thread was exported to weavers on neighboring islands. There “rich cloths [were] made for women’s clothing, Portuguese as well as Mouras [Swahili women], and important Mouros [Swahili men].” Indeed, the reputation of the cloths was so great that Milwani textiles were sought by non-Swahili aristocrats in the Sofala hinterland and on the Zambezi. The whole Kirimba archipelago came to be referred to simply as “Melluane” in the 1500s because of the commercial importance and primacy of cloth.¹¹¹

Dos Santos makes it clear that Milwani cloth was prestigious, owned generally by “important Mouros” and “highly esteemed by the cafres kings of Sofala and Rios de Cuama.”¹¹² This broad appreciation on the coast and in the southern interior for cloths from the Kirimba archipelago fueled a constant demand for regional textiles even though (or, for the elite, because) their prices were high. Milwani was also of major significance in the cross-Mozambique channel trade—a web of commercial networks integrating the

¹⁰⁸ It is worth noting that dos Santos says two of the islands of the archipelago were named Shanga and Malindi, presumably by settlers to the region. 1:275. cf. H. Leitão, ed., *Dois Roteiros do século XVI, de Manuel Monteiro e Gaspar Ferreira Reimão, atribuídos a João Baptista Lavanha*. Lisbon, 1963.

¹⁰⁹ The Kirimba Islands were also agriculturally productive. Between them, the islands grew enough rice and millet for export. Dos Santos, 1:288-92. The Milwani area was heavily engaged in trade with the Comoros and northwestern Madagascar. “Carta de Sebastião de Sousa para el-Rei, Moçambique, 1521 Setembro 17,” *DPMAC*. 6:66. On the cartography of the mid-sixteenth century Kirimba archipelago, see da Couto, *Decado 10, DPMAC*. 8:264-6; G. Randles, *The Kingdom of Monomotapa on Selected Maps of the Sixteenth Century*. London, 1962; and Leitão, *Dois Roteiros*.

¹¹⁰ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:279.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese at Mozambique traded heavily in local cloth. After six years in office as Factor of Mozambique, Diogo Vaz had received 2,871 yards of narrow “cloth of the land.” “Carta de quitação de Diogo Vaz, fietor de Moçambique, 1513 Julho 13,” *DPMAC*. 3:472. An indigo cloth used by the Mijikenda on the northern coast is still called *musumbiki*, and it is possible that Kirimban indigos were exported to the north until relatively recently. See R. Trillo, “Fashion and Fabrics: The Symbolic Use of Cloth in Swahili Society,” n.p., 1984. 36.

¹¹² Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:279.

mainland, Comoro archipelago, and northwestern Madagascar. Milwani is specifically mentioned in accounts of trade involving northwestern Madagascar; it seems that merchants from the Kirimba archipelago not only frequented Milwani, but many kept permanent trading houses there.¹¹³ As B. de Sousa noticed in 1531, “On this northern part of the Island of Sam Lorenço [Madagascar] there is trade with all these Islands of the Comaro and of Melluane, and many other places on the coast of Melinde.”¹¹⁴

As integral players in the cross-Mozambique channel circuit, the Comoro Islands both trafficked cloth from the mainland and produced cotton and raffia cloths.¹¹⁵ Cotton was grown and woven at Mutsamudu in Nzwani, among other towns.¹¹⁶ Much like weavers in Mafia and Ngoji, artisans (*mafundi*) of the Comoros used raffia fiber to make mats, sails, and headwear,¹¹⁷ but they also used raffia to weave fine textiles, a product not common on the Swahili coast.¹¹⁸ At the extreme end of the Mozambique channel commercial zone, western Madagascar produced raffia cloths for selling to the East African coast, as well as striped cotton and silk cloths for buyers in the Sofala hinterland.¹¹⁹ According to dos Santos the raffia cloths were “very good and fine cloths.”¹²⁰ Cotton was grown on the western coast of Madagascar, and possibly many of the cotton textiles

¹¹³ P. Luiz Mariano, “Relação da Jornada e Descobrimento da ilha de S. Lourenço,” 317-9, 350. Mariano (351) also discussed the massive amounts of cloth from Malindi in Madagascar. G. de San Bernadino discussed Comorians and coastal Swahili in western Madagascar, in “l’Itineraire de Frère Gaspar de San Bernadino: Une Visite Portugaise à la Côte Ouest de Madagascar en 1606,” Ed. V. Belrose-Huyghues. *Taloha*. 9 (1982): 70-87. cf. “Livro Incompleto de Receita e Dispensa de Cristovão Salema, Agosto 26, 1516,” *DPMAC*. 4:30.

¹¹⁴ Carta de Sebastião de Sousa para el-Rei, Mozambique, 1521 Setembro 17,” *DPMAC*. 6:67.

¹¹⁵ It was common for merchants from the coast to travel to the Comoros and for Comorians to trade in the Kirimba archipelago. Written traditions of Zakatji (*Sangage* in Portuguese texts) even discuss contestations between the two areas. A. Prata, “Análise Etno-Linguística do Xecado de Sangage,” 75-99, and M. Newitt, “The Southern Swahili Coast in the First Century of European Expansion,” *Azania* 13 (1978): 120.

¹¹⁶ R. Temple, ed., *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667. Vol. 3 Part 1*. London, 1919. 38.

¹¹⁷ G. de San Bernadino mentioned raffia use in the weaving of very high quality headwear in Malindi. Women wove “straw hats so perfectly finished that the Portuguese bring them out on feast days.” *Itinerario da India ate este Reino de Portugal*. in *SD*, 157.

¹¹⁸ M. Newitt, “East Africa and the Indian Ocean Trade: 1500-1800,” in *India and the Indian Ocean Trade, 1500-1800*. Calcutta, 1987. 206, and idem, “The Comoro Islands in the Indian Ocean Trade Before the 19th Century,” *Cahiers d’études africaines*. (23) 89-90 (1983).

¹¹⁹ “Livro incompleto de receita e despesa de Cristovão Salema, feitor de Sofala, 1516 Agosto 26,” *DPMAC*. 4:308, 143. António Gomes describes cloth woven in Madagascar in the 1620s in “Viagem que fez o Padre António Gomes, da Companhia de Jesus, ao Império de de [sic] Monomotapa; e assistência que fez nas ditas Terras de ang’us annos,” ed. E. Axelson, in *Monumenta*. 5 (1969): 62.

¹²⁰ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:288-93.

traded to the East African coast were produced in western Madagascar.¹²¹ From da Costa's visit to an island off northwestern Madagascar comes the most detailed description of weavers in the Swahili world. Da Costa met women weavers just north of New Masalajem, a town founded by Kilwan descendants, who used vegetable dyes that produced "a thousand different colors" and wove both silk and cotton cloths.¹²² Labor was organized in such a manner that textiles could be woven-to-order and production was quite rapid. In general, production seemed to be a cottage industry, relying on the output of many horizontal looms typically occupying the length of extended corridors in the houses of non-ungwana.¹²³

As regionally produced cloths found a growing number of commercial outlets, cloth production and distribution integrated the Swahili world. Textiles made for the coastal marketplace, like colorful silks or striped cloths, conformed to Swahili aesthetic ideals and often appealed to the extremely wealthy in the Swahili world. Thus, contrary to Jarstorff's argument that the Swahili preferred imported items to locally manufactured ones, regional ideas of quality and beauty helped sustain a thriving Swahili textile industry.¹²⁴ Indeed, regional textile production even reinforced existing cultural currents that could be discerned in the demand for certain types of cloths. Residents of the coast demonstrated their culturedness by consuming Swahili cloth. In fact, production and consumption of both high prestige-value and more affordable cloths, like those of Pate and Sofala respectively, entered importantly into the determination of individual status or claims to status in the Swahili world. It is to the modes of consumption among individual actors in the Swahili setting that we now turn.

¹²¹ Cotton was spun, dyed, and woven in southwestern Madagascar. R. Temple, ed., *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia*. 372.

¹²² P. Rodrigues da Costa, "Diário de Paulo Rodrigues da Costa," in *Os Dois Descobrimentos da Ilha de São Lourenço, Mandados Fazer pelo Vice-Rei D. Jerónimo de Azevedo nos Anos de 1613 a 1616*. Lisbon, 1970. 65-67.

¹²³ Unfortunately, the type of loom in use is not discernible from da Costa's brief description. All that can be said is that it was not a vertical loom. In all probability, the looms were either single or double heddled horizontal. See K. Schaedler's treatment of East African and Malagasy cloths in *Weaving in Africa South of the Sahara*. Berlin, 1987. 399-441. Elsewhere it seems that cotton weaving may have been organized along clan lines. The *Waswahili* clan of Siyu were known as formidable weavers and J. de Vere Allen has suggested that the early use of the term "Swahili" could derive from the popular cloth. This is not evident from any sources known to me. See R. Trillo, "Fashion and Fabrics."

¹²⁴ Jarstorff's assessment may be more accurate for later periods, but this topic deserves greater attention. "To Squander and Gain at the Same Time," 240.

*The turban repletes all attire*¹²⁵

3 • Social status and material differentiation in the Swahili world

On the East African coast cloth covered the body and adorned walls, watercraft, and tombs. It served as an immediately recognizable instrument of diplomacy, a medium of exchange, and a means of enrichment for individuals and state treasuries. As a signifier of an individual's socioeconomic status or claim to status, cloth was central to the daily social interaction of the Swahili. Moreover, clothing was ultimately definitive in the practice of social differentiation.¹²⁶ An individual or family's capacity to display wealth in the form of personal adornment and demonstrate piety by contributing to larger social conventions was a major factor in the pursuit of respectability, power, and prestige.¹²⁷

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen argued that material items make statements of status by signifying wealth, thereby becoming visual evidence from which others may draw social "inferences."¹²⁸ Things, particularly cloth, acquired deep meanings when woven into the "complex cultural conversation" of society, in Breen's words.¹²⁹ Style and design of dress carried culturally specific meanings that could reflect social attitudes toward wealth, incorporate actors into the various strata of society, or actively construct "Swahili-ness"—an overarching, identifiable group aesthetic. In Veblen's sense, clothing, more than any other material item in Swahili society, proclaimed status and stature within the social hierarchy. The fabric, color, design, and number of cloths worn was an easy-to-read social statement. More than merely covering the body, the type of cloth worn reflected personal taste, which by itself linked the individual with others on the coast, both past and present.¹³⁰ The array of cloth available to Swahili ungwana was immense and the choice of material and mode of dress were elemental in the reproduction of taste and style—in the creation of identity, in effect. Since the coast imported and produced a considerable diversity of cloth, a taste reflecting the more subtle aesthetics driving the

¹²⁵ E. Taylor, *African Aphorisms; or Saws from Swahili-land*. London, 1924. 47.

¹²⁶ Clothing has the unique quality of presenting the self in an easily noticeable manner. See C. Hendrikson, *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town*. Austin, 1995. Note similarities to Friedman's arguments for the application of Bourdieu's *Distinction* to sixteenth-century Kongo. "The Political Economy of Elegance."

¹²⁷ M. Swartz examines the idea of "respect" and "honour" in the Weberian sense in "Shame, Culture, and Status among the Swahili of Mombasa," *Ethos*. 16 (1988): 21-51.

¹²⁸ M. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. London, 1912; and McCracken, 37.

¹²⁹ T. Breen, "The Meanings of Things: Interpreting the Consumer Economy in the Eighteenth Century," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*. Eds. J. Brewer and R. Porter. London, 1993. 250.

¹³⁰ See E. Renne, *Cloth that Does not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bùnú Social Life*. Seattle, 1995. 5.

consumption of regional and foreign cloth was the measure of culturedness.¹³¹ Therefore, taste and the broader aesthetic appeal of variety both unified and stimulated competition among the inhabitants of the East African coast.¹³² Cloth consumption allowed even the most marginalized people to be incorporated into Swahili society. Indeed, cloth was the most important “social skin” of the Swahili at all socioeconomic levels because it was accessible, albeit at radically different, socioeconomically determined levels.¹³³ Thus the widespread use of cloth by all segments of Swahili society made it a unique instrument in the development of a sociopolitical hierarchy.¹³⁴

I share McCracken’s belief that cloth consumption was a means for inscribing culture in the material world and for visually communicating status, identity, and taste.¹³⁵ Therefore, since status (or claims to status) hinged on the possession of cloth for display and personal adornment, cloth gave culture and “ungwana-ness” a concrete form.¹³⁶ It was the understanding of one Portuguese observer that dress was a vehicle, perhaps the most important one, by which people could “show their superiority over their neighbors.”¹³⁷ In Swahili society, culturedness as expressed in one’s style of dress was important for legitimating and maintaining social status, and one could vie for a better position in the social hierarchy by displaying wealth. Indeed, the ultimate aim of wealth accumulation was not so much continual wealth reproduction as it was the attainment of a cultured mode of life. Commerce and agriculture were avenues to social status and political access; thus merchants and other accumulators of wealth saw intrinsic value in

¹³¹ In the Braudelian tradition, J. Thornton argues that it is essential to study trends in fashion and cloth consumption to understand the economics of textile production. Since many of the same areas of West-central and West Africa that produced significant amounts of cloth also imported more foreign textiles than their neighbors, it is probable that desire for variety and style promoted increasing consumption. “Pre-colonial African Industry and the Atlantic Trade, 1500-1800,” *African Economic History*. 19 (1990): 18-9.

¹³² P. Bourdieu develops the ideas of “meaning” and “taste,” or the yardstick by which cultural potency is measured, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London, 1984.

¹³³ T. Turner conceptualizes adornment, including jewelry and body painting, as a “social skin” in “Social Skin,” in *Not Work Alone*. Eds. J. Chefras and R. Lewis. London, 1980. 112-40.

¹³⁴ J. Schneider and A. Wiener, “Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience,” *Current Anthropology*. (27) 2 (1986): 178-84.

¹³⁵ McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, 132.

¹³⁶ Douglas and Isherwood call materials “the visual part of culture” in *The World of Goods*. E. and J. Goody argue that in western Gonja (Ghana), the number, style, and newness of cloths are still considered the best index of a woman’s social position, not simply her wealth. “The Naked and the Clothed,” in *Cloth of Many Colored Silks*. Eds. J. Hunwick and N. Lawler. Evanston, 1997. 77.

¹³⁷ Gaspar de San Bernadino was referring to the residents of Pate. *Itinerario*, in *SD*, 163.

the use and display of materials such as cloth.¹³⁸

Differentiation in the use and exchange of cloth was obvious in the sixteenth century. Generally, the more costly silks or highly ornate cottons remained on the coast, and the Swahili traded the less elaborate but still colorful textiles to the interior. Though Swahili merchants included some coastal textiles in their cross-cultural trade, the vast majority of cloth sent to the interior consisted of the dark blue or black Gujarati cotton called *vespiça*. For consumers in the Zambezi valley, Indigo and black textiles, more than those dyed beige or brown, gained popularity because they were strikingly different in color from the undyed cloths woven on the Zambezi and Zimbabwe plateau. In exchange for gold and ivory, Swahili merchants provided *bertangi* and *barnaje* (two other Cambay-manufactured striped or fully dyed cloths), as well as the very dark indigo Gujarati cloths known as *matazes* and the striped cotton/silk blends called *tafeciras*.¹³⁹ Buyers on the coast seem to have coveted red and other brightly colored silks, and these, as well as richly embroidered or checkered cottons, were by far the most costly and impressive textiles available. Since a diversity of imported cloth found its way to Swahili marketplaces, the available symbolic and expressive vocabulary of cloth was extensive.

The most humbly attired of Swahili townspeople were the agricultural and manual laborers, both slave and free. Slaves at Kilwa, according to Mawr, wore “a cloth from the waist to their knees, all the rest is naked.”¹⁴⁰ From other sources it seems that the single cloth, usually a blue or white *bertangi* or a similar locally produced cloth, was the most common form of vestment for slaves and free people of meager economic means. Very poor people also wove with coconut husk fiber, though this seems to have been unusual.¹⁴¹

Mawr further noted that the “masters” of the slaves described above wore much

¹³⁸ L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641*. London, 1965. Though addressing Elizabethan and Stuart conspicuous consumption, Stone’s arguments have relevance for East Africa. cf. E Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, 1959.

¹³⁹ De Monclaro, 392; and J. Irwin, “Indian Textiles Trade,” 30. Many of these cloths were certainly consumed on the coast. On the varieties of cloth, see J. Sarkar, “Two Years of the Cotton Industry and Trade of Gujarat (1622-23),” *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*. (4) 4 (1954): 416-46; S. Gopal, “Form of Textile Production in Gujarat in the XVII Century,” in *Proceedings—Indian History Congress*. New Delhi, 1965. 219-22; and idem, *Commerce and Crafts in Gujarat: 16th and 17th Centuries*. New Delhi, 1975. Portuguese accounting receipts are excellent indicators of the types of cloth in demand in the sixteenth century and the prices of each. See, for example, A. Lobato’s synthesis, *A Expansão Portuguesa em Moçambique de 1495 à 1530, Livro III*. 142-7, 153-7, 361-5. cf. “Carta de Pero Ferreira Fogaça, Capitão de Quíloa, para el-Rei, Quíloa, 2506 Dezembro 22,” *DPMAC*. 1:759.

¹⁴⁰ “Descrição da viagem de D. Francisco de Almeida, Vice-Rei de Índia, pela costa oriental de África,” *DPMAC*. 1:528.

¹⁴¹ De Figueroa, *Conquista de las Indias de Persia e Arabia*, 38.

more elaborate and costly clothing, generally in accordance with Islamic standards.¹⁴² The ungwana wore two seamless cotton or silk cloths, one wrapped around the waist and reaching to the feet—what would today be termed a *kikoi* or *shuka*¹⁴³—and another wrapped across the torso and over one shoulder covering the waistband of the former, as well as a turban or embroidered cap.¹⁴⁴ Castanheda, writing in the late 1500s, described the merchant elite at Sofala as having “silk turbans on their heads” and “girt below [their waist] with cotton and silk cloths, and similar cloths over their shoulders and under their arms.”¹⁴⁵ De Gões also described the ungwana of Sofala as “covered from the waist downwards with silk and cotton cloths, with similar cloths over their arms, silken turbans on their heads, pieces of amber on their wrists, and in their girdles naked knives with ivory handles ornamented with gold.”¹⁴⁶ Knives and swords (*upanga kule*) were associated with “honored mouros” only; often ornamented with ivory and gold, they were items of symbolic value based on their association with interregional commerce.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, Mawr and others noted, “All persons of quality carry prayer beads” (*tasbihi*) and most wealthy men wore leather sandals.¹⁴⁸

The double cloth style of dress described in the early Portuguese sources is no longer extant on the coast, though the *shuka* is still worn.¹⁴⁹ While the double cloth has been replaced in the last 150 years by the ever-popular long and loosely fitting shirt called the *kanzu*, the draping of particularly costly and ornate fabric over the shoulders (*kashida*) or wrapping a *shuka*-type cloth around the torso and over one or both shoulders while wearing a *kanzu* is still common in many Swahili towns, particularly in areas less affected

¹⁴² The clothing of the elite was in many ways reminiscent of compulsory dress at Mecca. The only exceptions to Islamic proscriptions for male dress were that Swahili men often wore silk and jewelry. This seems to have been a common infraction in the Indian Ocean region. See K. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge, 1990. 307.

¹⁴³ The sixteenth-century terms for these cloths are not known, but it is telling that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the term *doti*, or the name of a specific type of Indian cloth, is also substituted. A. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast*. London, 1961. 112.

¹⁴⁴ “Descrição da viagem,” 528.

¹⁴⁵ Castanheda, 387.

¹⁴⁶ D. de Gões, *Historia, in Records*. 124.

¹⁴⁷ De Barros, 1:liv. 2, cap. 10. “In their belts they wore naked . . . which they call *quifios*.” It is also probable that gold and copper rings were also common for elite males. See Chittick, *Kilwa*. II:452-3.

¹⁴⁸ “Descrição da viagem,” 531.

¹⁴⁹ I know of only three photographs (taken in the Lamu Archipelago) showing men dressed in a fashion similar to that which sixteenth-century Portuguese observers describe. See “Men of Faza, 1902” (26), “Men of Siu” (23), and “Tomb of Twaka, Lamu, 1904” (45), *W. Hichens Collection: Photographs relating to the history of the East African Coast*, Herskovits Africana Library, Northwestern University.

by Omani aesthetics.¹⁵⁰ The Omani aesthetic, partially informed by Ibadi notions of simplicity and modesty, is most recognizable in the introduction of the *joho*, a long dark-blue (almost black) overcoat worn by men; and the *kanzu*, which became desirable in the nineteenth century as power was centralized in the BuSaidi state of Zanzibar.¹⁵¹ By the turn of the twentieth century, the Omani-inspired male aesthetic was popular in all but the most conservative of Swahili towns. Though earlier analyses claim otherwise, both the multicolored turban and the *kofia*,¹⁵² a cap stitched with silk or gold thread, were not Omani-inspired innovations; they seem to have been a constant feature of Swahili fashion from at least the fifteenth century.¹⁵³ I will return to this power/adornment praxis later.

Clothing material warrants further investigation since fabrics often reflected social position or aspiration. Velho observed that on Mozambique Island “clothing is made of cloth of linen or of cotton, very finely woven with many colored stripes, rich and embroidered, and they all wear *toucas nas cabeças* [similar to modern *kofia*] with silk ornaments and embroidered with gold thread.”¹⁵⁴ Silk and gold thread, above all else, signified a person’s buying power, and it seems that only the most wealthy could afford silk, and only rarely did they purchase entire garments of the material. Indeed, throughout the Indian Ocean world, silk produced in India, China, and southeast Asia was the property of the elite alone.¹⁵⁵ The immensely wealthy patrician men of Sofala wore silk and a variety of other cloths around their waist and “thrown over [their shoulders] in the manner of overcoat . . . and some of them wear little skull-caps of a

¹⁵⁰ M. Abdulaziz mentions that the shawl, or *kashida*, was worn in Mombasa until recently. *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry*. 36. On modern styles of Swahili dress in Tanzania, see S. Hino, “The Costume Culture of the Swahili People,” *Kyoto University African Studies*. 2 (1968): 109-45.

¹⁵¹ According to Morice, the styles of dress of “Moors” and “Arabs” at Kilwa in the late eighteenth century were sufficiently different that when “Arabs” ventured into the interior, they had to disguise themselves as “Moors.” *French at Kilwa Island*, 137.

¹⁵² Within the range of what I define as *kofia* are a wide variety of designs and appropriate types for specific areas of use. See Prins, *Swahili-speaking People*. 112.

¹⁵³ Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 130. The *kilemba*, or turban, was quite common among the wealthy in the sixteenth century. The white *kilemba* was also, as F. Pearce references in *Zanzibar: The Island Metropolis of Eastern Africa* (London, 1920. 228-9), a particular status symbol in the sixteenth century, though it is unclear whether its status was related to piety as Pearce explains for the twentieth century. This does seem reasonable since, as Trillo has pointed out, white is symbolic of purity both in Islamic and Bantu cosmographies. 37. Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari listed the cloths used for turbans, including a Barawan cloth (*barawaji*), in *The Customs of the Swahili People: The Desturi za Waswahili of Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari*. Ed. and Trans. J. W. T. Allen. Berkeley, 1981. 159.

¹⁵⁴ “Descrição da viagem de Vasco da Gama pela costa de Moçambique, 1497,” *DPMAC*. 1:18.

¹⁵⁵ On silk in the wider Indian Ocean zone, see Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*. 184-90; S. Sangar, “Silk Cloth in the 17th Century,” in *Proceedings—Indian History Congress*. New Delhi, 1969. 233-40; and S. Gopal, *Commerce and Crafts in Gujarat*.

quarter of a length a cloth, others narrow woolen cloths of many colors, and of camlets [*chamalotes*], and other silks.”¹⁵⁶ Mombasa boasted a “large quantity of rich silk and gold embroidered clothes” as well as imported carpets.¹⁵⁷ Royal attendants at the court of the Maore sultan, much like elsewhere in the Swahili world, were “richly appareled . . . with long silk garments embroidered, after the Turkish manner.”¹⁵⁸

Silk cloth was produced on the coast, as already seen, but the importation of the raw material necessary to produce it drove up its price. However, enough Swahili were able to afford it that the silk industry of Pate thrived until the late 1600s. Small amounts of silk were used to weave turban cloth, and imported cloth in general—if not destined for interior markets—was fashioned into locally usable garments. When Kilwa was plundered in the early sixteenth century, de Almeida’s soldiers went to great lengths to carry away “beautiful garments” as well as gold and silver.¹⁵⁹ Malindian ungwana wore “rich turbans of silk cloth,”¹⁶⁰ and many observers immediately understood the significance of headwear and the prestige-value of silk in the social stratification of Swahili society.

The skull-cap, kofia, and turban were exclusive to coastal society and marked Swahili identity. The style and use of cloth in men’s headwear, however, reflected distinct social categories. De Monclaro keenly observed the stratification of Swahili society and understood it, roughly like the Swahili themselves, through the idiom of men’s headwear. He recorded that three social groups in Swahili society could be discerned by their personal adornment, the first group being “those of the *carapuça*” or skull-cap. This classification probably denotes the non-ungwana, or those generally lacking the capital to invest in the richly worked kofia. He continued that there were “others of the *barretinho*,” probably referring to the kofia, the embroidered circular cap which, as described earlier, was the preserve of the ungwana. Finally, speaking of the political elite, Monclaro recognized that “others wear a *toque*,” or highly ornate turban. The term “mouros de *touca*” is commonly found in early Portuguese narratives and consistently refers to the most wealthy and politically powerful in Swahili cities—wealthy landowners, merchants,

¹⁵⁶ “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:358.

¹⁵⁷ “Descrição da Viagem,” 110.

¹⁵⁸ “The Voyage of Captaine John Davis to the Easterne India, Pilot in a Dutch Ship; Written by himselfe [1599],” in *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*. Ed. A. Markham. London, 1930. 137-8.

¹⁵⁹ A. Vespuccius, *The Voyage from Lisbon to India, 1505-6, being an account of the journal by Albericus Vespuccius*. Ed. C. Coote. London, 1894. 26.

¹⁶⁰ “Descrição da Situação, Costumes e Produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:368.

and royalties.¹⁶¹ The “turbaned mouros,” according to da Couto, were “men of position and rich.”¹⁶²

Ungwana women’s clothing was even more luxurious than men’s, though references to women’s styles are much more rare.¹⁶³ Women’s silk clothing and beads seem to have been pervasively consumed.¹⁶⁴ Ungwana women generally wore multiple ankle-length silk cloths over their shoulders and around their waist but did not necessarily cover their head.¹⁶⁵ In many of the smaller towns, particularly where there were few extremely wealthy ungwana women, nothing was worn on the head. It also seems that very wealthy ungwana women at Kilwa and elsewhere used kohl, as evidenced by the discovery of locally designed copper and silver kohl sticks at multiple excavation sites.¹⁶⁶

In city-states such as Kilwa, ungwana women followed *pardah*, which dictated clothing styles in general and the degree of concealment of the body in particular.¹⁶⁷ *Pardah* was one of the most significant signs of prestige in Swahili city-states, implying a woman’s ability to forego work outside the home and own servants or slaves to aid in public and private activities. Lopez wrote that “out of doors,” Malindian women “are

¹⁶¹ “Relação (cópia), feita pelo padre Francisco de Monclaro, da Companhia de Jesus, da expedição ao Monomotapa, comandada por Francisco Barreto (1573),” *DPMAC*. 8:348. An eighteenth-century account of Nzwani also described “common people” as wearing a coarse wrapper and a “skull-cap, of any sort of stuff,” while only those of “great distinction” wore tubans. M. Grose, *A Voyage to the East Indies, Vol. 1*. London, 1772. 22-3.

¹⁶² “Relação da viagem q fizeram os pes da Companhia de Jesus com Francisco Barreto na conquista de Monomotapa no anno de 1569,” in *Records*. 3:235. This version is similar to the copy noted above but varies in limited ways. El Zein reported that the turban continued to be in use until fairly recently in Lamu wedding ceremonies (*Sacred Meadows*. 67) as was the case in the Comoros. M. Ottenheimer, *Marriage in Domoni: Husbands and Wives in an Indian Ocean Community*. Salem, 1995. 59-79.

¹⁶³ I have yet to uncover a detailed description of non-ungwana dress for women. Generally it seems they wore either one or two *kaniki*, or the blue cotton cloths still considered the clothing of low status. Trillo, “Fashion and Fabrics,” 36-7. P. Caplan reports that the *kaniki* is used for working in the fields. *Choice and Constraint in a Swahili Community*. New York, 1975. 31.

¹⁶⁴ European and Swahili sources do not generally discuss beads worn by women of both higher and lower socioeconomic status, yet the high concentrations of beads in archeological investigations implies both locally-made and imported beads of various material were in wide use. See, for example, Chittick, *Kilwa*. I. For an ethnography of beads, see L. Donley-Reid, “The Power of Swahili Porcelain, Beads and Pottery,” in *Powers of Observation: Alternative Views in Archeology*. Washington, D.C., 1990. 51-3.

¹⁶⁵ “Descrição da Situação, Costumes e Produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:366.

¹⁶⁶ Chittick, *Kilwa*. II: 450-1. Kusimba has recently excavated copper-alloy kohl sticks at Mtwapa near Mombasa. “Indigenous and Imported Metals at Swahili Sites on the Kenya Coast,” *MASCA Research Papers in Science and Archaeology*. Ed. T. Childs. Philadelphia, 1994. 66.

¹⁶⁷ Correa, in *SD*, 71.

covered with a thin silk veil.”¹⁶⁸ In seclusion, Malindian women dressed “with great display, wearing silk robes, and on their neck, arms, and feet, chains of gold and silver.”¹⁶⁹ While it is clear that the seclusion of women was common, it is unclear whether or not politically powerful women followed *purdah*. Sultanas may have been subjected to seclusion near the end of the sixteenth century, as an English report of 1599 recorded that the Sultana of Domoni “would not be seene.”¹⁷⁰

While rich silk and cotton clothing was a status symbol in the Swahili world, most visitors to the coast noticed women’s jewelry, such as gold (*makazi wa thahabu*) and silver (*makazi wa fetha*), more than any other adornment. An anonymous description of Kilwa reported that women were “well appareled wearing a lot of gold and silver in chains and many bangles which they wear on their arms and legs.”¹⁷¹ Barbosa commented that Kilwan *ungwana* women were not only “finely clad in many rich garments of gold and silk and cotton” but wore “much gold and silver in chains and bracelets . . . on their legs and arms, and many jeweled earrings in their ears.”¹⁷² A participant in the plunder of Kilwa in 1505 recalled, “We found therein such great booty of gold, of silver and pearls, of golden pieces, and of sundry precious wares, that it was impossible to reckon their value.”¹⁷³ Yet almost fifty years later Kilwan women were again described as wearing “ornaments of gold and jewels on the arms and neck, and hav[ing] large quantities of silver vessels,” a testament to the wealth of the city-state even in its decline.¹⁷⁴

On Pemba, Zanzibar, and Mafia, women could likewise “adorn themselves with gold and jewels brought from Çofala”¹⁷⁵ since the islands’ direct trade in foodstuffs with much of the coast underwrote considerable *ungwana* material accumulation. Among Zanzibari women, the “wealthier [went] about perfumed with amber and musk” and generally dressed “in the manner of Malindi,” reported one visitor.¹⁷⁶ Barawan women,

¹⁶⁸ F. Pigafetta, *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo and of the Surrounding Countries drawn out of the Writings and Discourses of the Portuguese Duarte Lopez*. London, 1881. 123.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ “The Voyage of Captaine John Davis to the Easterne India, Pilot in a Dutch Ship; Written by himselfe, [1599]” in *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*. Ed. A. Markham. London, 1930. 137-8.

¹⁷¹ “Descrição da Situação, Costumes e Produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518,” *DPMAC*. 5:366.

¹⁷² Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 26-7.

¹⁷³ A. Vespuccius, *The Voyage from Lisbon to India, 1505-6, being an account of the journal by Albericus Vespuccius*. Ed. C. Coote. London, 1894. 29.

¹⁷⁴ F. Pigafetta, *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo*, 120-1.

¹⁷⁵ “Descrição da situação, costumes e produtos de alguns lugares de África, ca. 1518, Edoard Barbuse,” *DPMAC*. 5:380.

¹⁷⁶ G. de San Bernadino, *Itinerario*. in *SD*, 156.

who were widely known for their personal adornment, appeared “rich and handsome with seven or eight bracelets on each arm, and just as many, thick and valuable, on their legs.”¹⁷⁷ As in Barawa, Sofalan women wore multiple bracelets on their legs.¹⁷⁸ Clearly, by symbolizing high status and connoting the modes of life that yielded wealth, jewelry was crucial to asserting elite identity.¹⁷⁹

As an expression of shared aesthetics, the consumption of cloth by individuals continually recreated and reinforced Swahili culture. Pate and Milwani textiles were marketed to the wealthy, and the ownership of such cloth commodities affirmed social standing. By the same token, wearing cheaper varieties of cloth from Sofala, the Comoros, and Madagascar, as well as certain Indian textiles, “placed” one in the social hierarchy. But regional styles were not as static as once imagined and, like other items in the symbolic vocabulary, textile design and demand adapted to the tastes and styles of the coast, reflecting local impulses and influences from the greater Indian Ocean cultural unit.¹⁸⁰

Understanding the dynamics of style, dress, personal adornment, and cloth consumption is useful for mapping Swahili social change over time. Political power influenced aesthetic sensibilities, as readily seen in the nineteenth-century popularization of the joho and kanzu, both of which became attainable symbols of wealth closely tied to the Zanzibar state.¹⁸¹ It may be impossible to discern the dynamic origins of many of the modes of dress seen in the 1500s, but the aesthetic praxis of taste and power significantly predates the rise of Zanzibar, according to Sheikh Hemedi. In fact, Hemedi’s *History* attributes the popularization of the kofia to the flowering of Shirazi political domination centuries earlier.¹⁸² Even in the present century the acceptable color, design, and ornamentation of men’s clothing has changed significantly over relatively short time

¹⁷⁷ De Figueroa, *Conquista*, 72, 74.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 42. Gold and silver jewelry is still often used as a form of elite personal adornment and multiple photographs from the early twentieth century show styles of jewelry very similar to those described by early European visitors. *Hichens Collection, Northwestern University*. “Ladies of Faza, 1902,” (48) and “Women of Faza (1902),” (24). See P. Romero, “Possible Sources for the Origin of Gold as an Economic and Social Vehicle for Women in Lamu,” *Africa*. (57) 3 (1987): 364-73.

¹⁷⁹ On later styles of women’s dress in Mombasa see M. Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975*. New Haven, 1979. 74-5, 123-5; and Trillo, “Fashion and Fabrics.”

¹⁸⁰ Much of the Indian Ocean rim has suffered from the notion that fashion trends remained static over the *longue durée*. See Chaudhuri’s critique in *Asia before Europe*, 186-90.

¹⁸¹ J. Perani’s study of the extension of the Fulani-inspired embroidered gown as a material representation of the Sokoto Caliphate bears close similarities to the spread of Omani aesthetics in the nineteenth century. “Northern Nigerian Prestige Textiles.” Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari also gives unique insight into the willingness of younger Swahili men to incorporate foreign styles into their vocabulary of dress. *Customs of the Swahili. passim*.

¹⁸² Hemedi, “History,” 82.

spans.¹⁸³ By the same token, the most popular modern style of dress for women, the *kanga* or *leso*, seems to share similarities with earlier manners of dress, but it lacks a direct design antecedent and has itself been modified since its introduction.¹⁸⁴ The impetus for these modifications is useful as a mirror of larger social change, particularly since fashion remains a measure of respectability to this day. Aesthetic choices and ideas of beauty were (and are) in constant motion, adjusting to a wide range of interactive internal and external dynamics and incorporating varying themes and designs. The resulting fashions have remained discernibly Swahili in character even while changing in time and space.¹⁸⁵

Predictable patterns of consuming cloth—both domestic and foreign—bound the Swahili world together and revealed the parameters of its taste, style, and notions of status. The result was a generalized Swahili-ness that varied only by the level of consumption.¹⁸⁶ Swahili aesthetics pertaining to culturedness (*uungwana*) have changed radically over time, but the idea of a culturedness has never been challenged. Throughout, cloth has stood out in the world of goods as an essential ingredient in maintaining, reproducing, and recreating identity.

*Who in their splendor shone like the sun itself*¹⁸⁷

4 • Swahili rulers and the symbolic vocabulary of state consumption

The state—comprised of the sultan(a) and his/her wazir, amir, and counsel—consumed cloth and other items of prestige on a grand scale.¹⁸⁸ Royalties within

¹⁸³ See Trillo's treatment of revolving male attitudes towards the ornamentation of the *kanzu*. 22-4.

¹⁸⁴ On the popularization of the *leso/kanga* see Trillo, "Fashion and Fabrics," 18-22; D. Amory, "The Kanga Cloth and Swahili Society: *Mke ni Nguo*," *Paper Presented to Yale University, Scholar of the House Program, 1985*; and Strobel, *Muslim Women*. 174.

¹⁸⁵ I would extend this notion of selective aesthetic incorporation to include all items of material culture, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Swahili material culture was incorporating an unprecedented number of foreign stylistic variations. J. de Vere Allen frames plasterwork and woodwork in this light in "Swahili Culture Reconsidered: Some Historical Implications of the Material Culture of the Northern Kenya Coast in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Azania*. 9 (1974): 105-38.

¹⁸⁶ For dress as non-verbal communication of identity, see J. Eicher, "Dress as an Expression of Ethnic Identity," in *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*. Ed. J. Eicher. Oxford, 1995. 1-6

¹⁸⁷ Sayyid Abdalla bin Ali bin Nasir, *Al-Inkishafi, Catechism of a Soul*. Trans. J. de Vere Allen. Nairobi, 1977. 63.

¹⁸⁸ The most recognizable beacons of royal power were the sultans's palaces of the major city-states. The largest structure on the Swahili coast in the fifteenth century was *Husuni Kubwa*, the palace of the Sultan of Kilwa. J. de Barros (*SD*, 85-6) described it as it was in 1505:

at one part of the town . . . his palace, [*Husuni Kubwa*] was built in the style of a fortress, with towers and turrets and every kind of defense, with a door opening to the quay to allow entrance from the sea, and another large door on the side of the fortress that opened to the town. Facing it was a large open space where they hauled the vessels

the Swahili world were distinguished by the hereditary nature of their succession, their supreme judicial and administrative powers, and their rights to collect customs and tribute and to declare monopolies. Though integrally related to the ungwana via Swahili systems of cognatic descent—a means of tracing lineage that maximizes the number of individuals belonging to a descent group by defining the group through a distant (and often mythic) ancestor—royal families formed a body of powerful accumulators and prestige-holders quite distinct from the ungwana. Official power, according to the model proposed by Cannerdine and Price, regularly derives from social and material relationships in society; and a royal family's consumption patterns, as seen in the redistribution and display of wealth, preserve its ability to wield power and authority.¹⁸⁹ The social and material relationships that underscored royal power were, moreover, always evident in ceremonial displays.¹⁹⁰ In the Swahili world, cloth used for personal adornment symbolized individual prestige, and its use in such items as umbrellas, flags, canopies, wall hangings, and gifts amplified state potency. Since fitness to govern was to a certain extent measured by access to prestige items, various icons of state authority—including certain types of clothing, flags, *siwa* (ivory horns), *ngoma* (drums), and umbrellas—magnified governing power and prestige. Because of the importance of materials in the expression and exercise of power, the royalty constantly endeavored to have a larger and more diverse symbolic vocabulary than the wealthy ungwana.

The personal adornment of Swahili rulers was by design costly and impressive. On da Gama's visit to the Malindi court in 1498, Sultan Saidi Ali "wore a robe of damask trimmed with green satin, and a rich *touca*."¹⁹¹ A century later, dos Santos recorded that the Sultan of Malindi "was dressed in a *cabaia* of purple damask, wearing on his head a white turban, bordered with yellow, outlined in gold, . . . Portuguese trousers, rich sandals on his feet and a silver gilt belt which the King of Portugal had sent to his forefathers."¹⁹²

up.

Symbolically, the Sultan had access to both the city and the beach where traders would enter his palace for customs payments. Moreover, the building had over 100 rooms, many of them employed in the storage of commodity accumulation. Chittick, "The East Coast," 212; and *Kilwa*, I. For solid studies of the structure of royal regimes, see Freeman-Grenville, *Medieval History of the Coast of Tanganyika*. Berlin, 1964; and A. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples*. 94-103.

¹⁸⁹ D. Cannerdine and S. Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge, 1987. cf. S. Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," in *Essays in Social Theory*. Ed. S. Lukes. London, 1977; and M. Harris, "The Royal Cloth of Cameroon," PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1985.

¹⁹⁰ M. Gilbert, "The Person of the King: Ritual and Power in a Ghanaian State," in *Rituals of Royalty*. 330; and M. Helms, *Craft and Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power*. Austin, 1993.

¹⁹¹ Da Gama, in *SD*, 54.

¹⁹² Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:398-9. N. Hafkin identifies the *cabaia* as *kanzu*, but it could mean clothing from Cambaya generally. "Trade, Society, and Politics in Northern Mozambique, c. 1753-1913," PhD

The Sultan of Malindi's attire communicated his piety (via his white turban) and his access to gold, and he even expressed his relationship to a foreign power by adorning himself with a gift representing their long-standing political alliance. Just as fashions reflected changing power relations on the coast in the nineteenth-century, many Swahili rulers who formed alliances with Portugal in the 1500s dressed in a manner that blended prevailing local tastes with aesthetic reorientations prompted by economic contact with the Portuguese.

The appropriation of power and its intersection with material expressions of identity are nowhere better represented than in the case of the revolving allegiances of Yusuf bin Hasan, the early seventeenth-century Sultan of Mombasa. Hasan's intimate relationship with the Portuguese administration aroused so much distrust among the local Swahili *ungwana* that he later regained a measure of respect from his Swahili countrymen, according to one observer, only after he "was dressed in the sort of clothes worn only by Moors, having laid aside . . . the dress customary of Christians."¹⁹³ Since Hasan had constructed a previous identity by donning clothing reflective of his loyalties, restoring his credibility with Swahili elites required that he prove his claims—of ending his Portuguese allegiances and resuming a Swahili identity—by changing his style of dress, or his "social skin."

Modes of royal dress in the smaller Swahili cities were very similar to those in the larger urbanized areas. Sultan Yusuf of Sofala, the first ruler to refuse Kilwa's tributary extraction, was described as wearing clothes "in the same fashion" as the *ungwana*, "except that the cloths he wore [were] more valuable."¹⁹⁴ The opulence of Comorian royal dress mirrored Sofala's. For example, the Sultan of Domoni in the late sixteenth century "was richly appareled" in silk and "so were his followers."¹⁹⁵ Having met with a provincial governor of the Sharifian Sultan Omar-Adil at Fomboni (on Mwali Island), Roe described the town official as sitting on a "Matt of Strawe" [a sign of dignity], clothed in "a Mantell of blew and red Lynen wrapte about him to his knees, his legges and feete bare: on his head a close cap of checker woork."¹⁹⁶ Concerning Sultan Omar-Adil's clothes Roe simply

Dissertation. Boston University, 1973.

¹⁹³ "Goensis Trium Martyrum Augustinianorum," in *The Mombasa Rising against the Portuguese, 1631: from Sworn Evidence*. Ed. G. Freeman-Grenville. Oxford, 1980. 116-17.

¹⁹⁴ Castanheda, in *Records*. 5:387.

¹⁹⁵ "The Voyage of Captaine John Davis," 137-8. Morice describes the entourage of the Kilwan Sultan in the eighteenth century using very similar terms. *French at Kilwa Island*. 37.

¹⁹⁶ William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*. 19. Roe also noted that the Sultan's interpreters were Mogadishuans "that spake Arabique and broken Portuguese."

noted that “they were of better stuffe.”¹⁹⁷ At Vumba on the central coast, the *Diwani*, or sultan, was deemed legitimate only if he wore the heavy silver chain of office.¹⁹⁸

The aesthetic features of Swahili courts also conveyed a ruler’s power. The regalia used solely by the sultan(a) and his/her court included materials of both local and foreign manufacture. The Sultan of Pate, Benegogo [*bin Ngugu* or *Bwana Gogo*], owned “costly carpets” and when holding court was “seated on the ground in the manner of the Moors, . . . robed in white.”¹⁹⁹ Sultan Yusuf was observed “reclining on a catel, or couch with a seat of interwoven thongs . . . covered with a silken cloth.”²⁰⁰ Though royal thrones were common, sultan(a)s often conducted official meetings while sitting on a silk carpet, described as the “custom” in Zanzibar.²⁰¹ Wall hangings also were popular with royals. As in the houses of wealthy ungwana, the interior walls of palaces were decorated with multiple silk hangings of foreign and local origin.²⁰² After Hajj Muhammad Rukn al-Din al-Dabuli’s coronation as Sultan of Kilwa and its dominions, “a representation of the ceremony of coronation . . . decorated the houses of several princes.”²⁰³ Sultan(a)s often used cloth, particularly red cloth, in their public regalia and in the adornment of their entourages. At occasions outside the palace, attendants carried the Sultan of Malindi on a palanquin and he had his royal *zambuku*, a double-masted ocean-going vessel, outfitted with “its canopy spread, and its people well armed under their garments, which were of very fine scarlet.”²⁰⁴ At an official meeting in 1498, the sultan sat shielded from the sun “beneath a round sunshade of crimson attached to a pole.”²⁰⁵ The sultan’s creative, destructive, and judicial authority—as well as his unique consumer privileges—was expressed in visual terms by the use of richly symbolic red cloth.²⁰⁶

Sultan(a)s also controlled the literal seats of power: the thrones of office.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ A. Robinson, “The Shirazi Colonization of East Africa: Vumba,” *Tanganyika Notes and Records*. (7) 1939. 103.

¹⁹⁹ G. de San Bernadino, *Itinerario*, 159.

²⁰⁰ D. de Goes, *Historia do melhor fortunado Rei Dom Manuel do Glorioso Memoria* in *Records*. 3:124.

²⁰¹ “Ruy Lourenço Ravasco in Zanzibar, 1503-4,” in *SD*, 78.

²⁰² G. Correa, *Lendas da India*, in *Records*. 2:34; and on *Husuni Kubwa*, see Chittick, *Kilwa*. I:244-5.

²⁰³ The account continues, “as we see by several pieces of tapestry which were exhibited in the palace of King Dom Manuel on feast days which he commanded should be observed in memory of the discovery of India and of this victory at Kilwa.” De Barros, 1:328. A silk carpet from Mombasa was also recorded in the possession of Dom Manuel in 1525. “Inventory of D. Manuel’s Wardrobe, 15/3/1525,” in Axelson, *South-east Africa, 1488-1530*. 263.

²⁰⁴ “The Voyage of Pedro Alvares Cabral,” in *SD*, 62.

²⁰⁵ Da Gama, in *SD*, 54. Note similarities to Ibn Battuta’s fourteenth-century visit to the Sultan of Mogadishu.

²⁰⁶ See Trillo, “Fashion and Fabrics,” 38.

Reportedly, in 1498, Malindi's sultan "was seated on two cushioned chairs of bronze;"²⁰⁷ almost a century later the sultan held state meetings and "sat in a skillfully wrought chair of mother-of-pearl."²⁰⁸ This latter chair design was very similar to the *kiti cha enzi*, or "chair of power," of the nineteenth century. The chair's ornately carved frame, inset with ivory or mother-of-pearl, connoted its occupant's access to channels of wealth production and the employment of high-wage skilled artisans. These chairs are remembered as serving in Siyu as the ruler's "throne" at *baraza*, or town meetings.²⁰⁹ While the office of sultan had been liquidated in most Swahili city-states by the mid 1800s, the *kiti cha enzi* is still reserved only for those with significant resources.²¹⁰ Such chairs in the sixteenth century were designed to exalt the position of the sultan(a) and to humble petitioners entering the sultan(a)'s court. Sultan Yusuf of Sofala received guests while seated on an Indian couch covered with silk cloths, while all visitors—even the wealthiest merchants of the town—sat on "low triangular three-legged stools, the seats of which were of undressed hide."²¹¹

Large ivory horns, or *siwa*, were for the exclusive use of the sultan(a) and his/her lineage, as documented on numerous occasions in accounts of Swahili courts.²¹² These horns embodied state power, and numerous oral traditions from Kilwa, Vumba, and Pate attest to their importance in public functions. The Sultan of Malindi in the late fifteenth century was always preceded by "many players of *anafils* [metal horns]"²¹³ and two trumpets of ivory, richly carved, and of the size of a man, which were blown from a hole in

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ G. de San Bernadino, *Itinerario*. in *SD*, 157.

²⁰⁹ H. Brown, "Siyu: Town of Craftsmen," 108. (Brown's oral history was given by Husein Omari, 1981.) Brown notes that the chairs are still used during wedding ceremonies. This seems very similar to the use of umbrellas and chairs in the weddings of *Shirazi* families of Domoni. Personal Communication, M. Ottenheimer, 1996. cf. idem, *Marriage in Domoni*.

²¹⁰ See J. de Vere Allen, "The *Kiti Cha Enzi* and Other Swahili Chairs," *African Arts*. (22) 3 (1989): 54-63; and "Swahili Culture Reconsidered," 118.

²¹¹ Castanheda, 387.

²¹² Similar *siwa* which still exist are made out of bronze, wood, as well as a combination of ivory and bronze. H. Sassoon, *The Siwas of Lamu: Two Historic Trumpets in Brass and Ivory*. Nairobi, 1975, and J. de Vere Allen, "The *Siwas* of Pate and Lamu: Two Antique Side-Blown Horns from the Swahili Coast," *Art and Archeology Research Papers*. (1976): 38-47. cf. A. Dickenson, "The Regalia of the Wa-Vumba," *Man*. (21) 1921. 33-5. It is also worthy of note that side-blown ivory horns are not unique to the Swahili coast. Items of similar form and function can be found throughout the East African interior. J. de Vere Allen, "Two Antique Ivory Musical Instruments from Central Kenya," *Kenya Past and Present*. 8 (1977): 11-13.

²¹³ Short and thin metal horns were still called *fili* on Ngazija in the early twentieth century. Fontoynt and Romandahy, "La Grande Comore," *Mémoires de l'Académie Malgache*. (23) 1937. Pl. XII. It is also possible that the *anafils* described by Portuguese observers are similar to the modern *zumari*, or short horns of metal, ivory, or wood. See A. Boyd, "The Musical Instruments of Lamu," *Kenya Past and Present*. 80 (1977): 5-6.

the side, and made sweet harmony with the *anafils*.”²¹⁴ Portuguese observers noted similar horns associated with the Sheik of Mozambique Island, and a smaller ivory horn, probably from the 1500s, has been excavated at Sofala.²¹⁵ The large siwa, often as big or bigger than its player, was strictly reserved for the sultan(a) and his/her lineage, and even the *mwenyi kupija siwa*, the musicians trained to play the instrument, had to be in line for hereditary state positions.²¹⁶ The siwa was so important as a material embodiment of state power that it was often used to contest state authority and challenge an official’s fitness to rule.²¹⁷ Indeed, Allen has argued that the siwa had to be played at major functions in order for a regime to maintain rule at Vumba.²¹⁸ Because of the ritual importance of the siwa, seventeenth-century Vumba conquerors on the central coast demanded that indigenous rulers abstain from using symbols of high status, including the siwa, without the Vumba sultan’s approval. In Pate, siwa-playing was compulsory at the circumcision of royalty or any ungwana who was expected to hold high political office.²¹⁹ Given the extreme importance attached to the function of these material objects, intense contests arose over who could use the siwa and other musical instruments of state, and, as we shall see, the use of the state siwa was understood as an idiom for transferring or challenging authority.

The Swahili court’s repertoire of musical instruments included large drums called *ngoma* that were owned exclusively by the sultan and were used both in installation ceremonies and as signaling devices. An observer in Sofala noted that the sultan effectively administered a territory of over 10,000 residents, of whom 7,000 would answer the state *ngoma* overnight.²²⁰ The Sultan of Domoni in the late 1500s greeted visitors “with many people, having three Drummies beating before him.”²²¹ Drums, like siwa, had multiple functions, and they were high in prestige-value and expertly crafted, as shown by

²¹⁴ Da Gama, in *SD*, 54.

²¹⁵ B. Fagan and J. Kirkman, “A Carved Ivory Trumpet from Sofala, Mozambique,” *Ethnomusicology*. 15 (1967). On Mozambique, see Strandes, *Portuguese Period*. 18.

²¹⁶ “MS 371,” in *Pate Chronicle*. 333.

²¹⁷ J. de Vere Allen, “Swahili Regalias,” *Paper Presented to the Historical Association of Kenya, Annual Conference, 1976*. On Kilwa, see idem, “The Siwas of Pate and Lamu.” 38-47.

²¹⁸ “Swahili Regalias,” 13.

²¹⁹ “Stigand Version,” *Pate Chronicle*. 67.

²²⁰ “Carta de Diogo de Alcáçova para el-Rei, Cochim, 1506 Novembro 20,” *DPMAC*. 1:397. In 1506, the Sultan of Kilwa was able to similarly summon all Sheiks between Zanzibar and Mozambique Island. “Sumário de uma carta de Pero Ferreira Fogaça, Capitão da Quíloa, para el-Rei, 1506 Agosto 31,” *DPMAC*. 1:617.

²²¹ “The Voyage of Captaine John Davis,” 137-8. Morice described the entourage of the eighteenth-century Sultan of Kilwa in very similar terms (*French at Kilwa Island*. 37) as did Ibn Battuta at Mogadishu in the fourteenth century.

those still extant. Moreover, they were unique in their capacity to announce the presence and extend the will of a ruler over great distances. De Barros wrote in the sixteenth century that when the Sultan of Malindi's siwa sounded, "the mountains and valleys repeated with their echo [the sultan's] pleasure."²²² Because of their associations with nodes of power, the instruments of office, much like cloth, became materials of extraordinary political power and often functioned as symbols of political contention.

Royalties invested great amounts of wealth in public display, typically in the form of festivals or performances of ritual sacrifice. Upon exiting his palace, the Sultan of Malindi was greeted by the "richest and most honorable people [who] had a sheep, and when the king mounted the horse they slaughtered the said sheep, and the king rode over it on horseback."²²³ One Portuguese visitor reported that "they did [this] for ceremony and enchantment, and the custom is thus in Zambochob [the coast of East Africa, or Zanzibar]."²²⁴ Aromatics were used at ritual sacrifices, in a fashion similar to that of incense-burning at royal tombs, to enhance the purity of office. An observer at Malindi noted that "the king . . . came down to the shore and ordered the priests to sacrifice a sheep, over which he passed accompanied by a great number of people carrying perfume pans."²²⁵ And in 1500 the Sultan of Malindi ordered "many women . . . to meet [visitors] with vases full of fire, in which were placed so many perfumes that the odours pervaded the land."²²⁶ At Kilwa, "when the King came out from his court, they threw water and small branches over his head, and they were very merry and clapped their hands, and sang and danced."²²⁷ Further, the Sultan of Domoni in Nzwani sponsored "large and hospitable" public festivals, "at which a whole town [would] at one time be treated."²²⁸ Royal power was publicly affirmed through ritual purification and by funding public display.²²⁹

²²² G. de San Bernadino, *Itinerario*, in *SD*, 157.

²²³ The rarity of horses in East Africa made them symbolic of the unique capabilities of the state to consume. Muhammad al-Rukn rode through Kilwa on horseback after his coronation. *DPMAC* 1:527. Horses were also used in "sham fights" at Malindi in 1498. Da Gama, in *SD*, 54-5. On the trade in horses to Kilwa, Malindi, Barawa, and Mombasa see T. Pires, *Suma Oriental. Vol.1*. London, 1944. 14.

²²⁴ Cabral in *SD*, 62. P. Caplan, in *Choice and Constraint*, discusses the slaughtering of sheep before the launching of a ship in Mafia.

²²⁵ *Da Gama's Second Voyage*, in *SD*, 73.

²²⁶ Cabral in *SD*, 62.

²²⁷ *Calcoen: A Dutch Narrative of the Second Voyage of Vasco da Gama to Calicut (printed in Antwerp c. 1504)*. Ed. J. Berjeau. London, 1874.

²²⁸ J. Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt*. New Delhi, 1975. 54.

²²⁹ See the *Pate Chronicle* (multiple versions) for the use of festival sponsorship as a tool for power negotiation. On aromatics and Swahili notions of ritual purity in general, see L. Donley-Reid, "Life in the Swahili town house

Distributing material goods and contributing to public works also demonstrated a sultan's fitness to rule. The mid-fourteenth-century Sultan Abu al-Muzaffar Hasan, or Abu al-Muwahib [Father of Gifts], was held in high regard by the people of Kilwa because of his redistributive tendencies. His charity, recorded both by Ibn Battuta and the *History of Kilwa* (c.1520), was so great that he once gave a beggar the very clothes off his back. In fact, he was given the name "Father of Gifts" because of his "numerous charitable gifts."²³⁰ In a gesture revealing the prestige of the clothes of office, the sultan's son bought the clothes back from the beggar and in return gave him ten slaves.²³¹ If we understand written traditions as encoded moral and ethical standards, a ruler could earn public favor of enormous, even historic, proportions through the redistribution of material goods.

Sultans could gain respect through the savvy use of material things and, conversely, arouse indignation in their subjects by failing to deploy materials wisely. The mid-fifteenth-century Sultan of Kilwa, Sulaiman ibn Al-Malik al-'Adil, was exemplary in his use of the material realm to preserve royal prestige. As a result of his massive taxation of foreign trade, Sultan Sulaiman was able to finance the restoration of the Great Mosque of Kilwa,²³² an enormous vaulted structure featuring multiple domes that had collapsed almost one hundred years earlier. The job was completed by the turn of the sixteenth century, when d'Almeida reported, "Here there are found many domed mosques and one is like that of Cordoba."²³³ Judging from the restored mosque's immense size, masonry work, and lavish ornamental plasterwork and inset porcelain,²³⁴ these alterations, for which the Sultan contributed a thousand *mithkali*, were quite costly. By the same token, rulers could be seen as poor heads of state if they did not use their wealth properly. This double-edged sword of wealth accumulation and power was occasionally mishandled, as in the case of Amir Ibrahim ibn Sulaiman, a powerful member of the Sultan's cabinet, who was deemed "not a good man in spite of his possessions."²³⁵

reveals the symbolic meaning of spaces and artefact assemblages," *African Archaeological Review*. (5) 1987. 181-92; "A Structuring Structure: the Swahili House," in *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space*. Ed. S. Kent. Cambridge, 1990. 114-26; and "The Power of Swahili Porcelain."

²³⁰ Ibn Battuta, in *SD*, 31, and "Arabic History of Kilwa c. 1520," in *SD*, 38-9.

²³¹ Battuta recorded in the fourteenth century that "the majority of presents are ivory." *ibid.*, 32.

²³² The "Arabic History of Kilwa c. 1520," outlines both the collapse of the mosque and its restoration. 40. cf. N. Chittick, *Kilwa*. I:66-75.

²³³ "Descrição da Viagem de D. Francisco de Almeida, 1506 Maio 22," *DPMAC*. 1:527.

²³⁴ On the decoration of the Great Mosque at Kilwa, see Chittick, *Kilwa*, and P. Garlake, *Architecture of the East African Coast*. London, 1964. The vast majority of the porcelain lining the domes of the mosque was Ming celadon ware—signifying prestige and access to foreign marketplaces.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

The ruling elite could translate wealth in materials, or the production of broadly appreciated items of prestige, into political saliency and status; but the same means could also be used by the ungwana to challenge the authority of the state. Indeed, the reconstruction of Kilwa's Great Mosque can be understood differently when we consider that a challenger to the throne, Said Hajj Rush (or Hasha Hazifiki), had initially offered a large sum of gold towards the restoration of the mosque, and the sultan only funded the project after realizing the threat to his prestige inherent in Hazifiki's offer.²³⁶ The next section focuses on other uses of materials as tools for contention between groups in Swahili society.

*They who strive for their rank, their hearts are right*²³⁷

5 • The poetics of power negotiation:

Commercial exchange and the acquisition of status

There is little question that material culture played a significant role in contests over power in the precolonial Swahili world. Donley and Jargstorf have effectively shown that the spatial organization of houses reflected and sustained on the microlevel the social stratification of Swahili society.²³⁸ Other material items were instrumental in negotiating power and authority in coastal towns. Access to accumulations of cloth, more than any other surplus, was crucial to the maintenance of the state for economic and social purposes.²³⁹ The extraction of tribute in the form of cloth and the taxation of foreign trade (or one might say "administered trade," invoking Polanyi's notion of trade as a state affair) underwrote much state pageantry and the redistribution of wealth by political

²³⁶ Ibid, 40.

²³⁷ From "Mashairi ya Liongo," in *Swahili Tales as told by the natives of Zanzibar*: Ed. E. Steere. Liechtenstein, 1967.

²³⁸ B. Jargstorf, "To Squander and Gain at the Same Time," 225-41; and L. Donley, "Swahili Material Culture," in *Transition and Continuity of Identity in East Africa and Beyond—In Memoriam David Miller*. Ed. E. Linnebuhr. Bayreuth, 1989. 55-63.

²³⁹ In this respect, cloth often served to defend Swahili towns. This was the case in Mombasa and Malindi, whose inhabitants were "like prisoners of the Mozungullos Cafres, because they have to pay them a large tribute in cloth in order to be allowed to live in security." P. de Rezende, *Livro do Estado da India Oriental*. in "Rezende's Description of East Africa in 1634." Ed. J. Gray. *Tanganyika Notes and Records*. 23 (1947): 12. Kilwa was "purchased" using cloth, and relationships negotiated through the medium of textiles were crucial to Swahili/non-Swahili African diplomacy into the nineteenth century. See "The Ancient History of Kilwa Kisiwani," in *SD*, 221-2; and Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*. 61-2.

regimes.²⁴⁰ By accumulating large supplies of cloth, rulers operated much like clearinghouses, exchanging excess cloth for labor, public works, and items of export value such as ivory or gold. But as mercantilists, rulers were dependent on their subjects for the carriage of long-distance trade. Consequently, ungwana merchants could manipulate the state's dependence on their services to the extent that some rulers were deposed and the power of the royal lineages was often held in check.

The very nature of large-scale mercantile activity challenged the royalty by giving rise to an upwardly mobile elite. The wealth that a single merchant or merchant-house could accrue in the Zambezi trade and, more specifically, in the contraband trade empowered a substantial stratum of non-royal patricians to accumulate clientele and prestige. Indeed, numerous merchants, like Muhammad Dau of Sofala, were even in a position to advance credit to Portuguese factors in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁴¹ Others who rose through the social ranks by winning a share of the accessible wealth of the southern trade both challenged established aristocracies and carved out new units of overlordship on the coast.

Out of necessity, official decisions were managed through merchant counsel and agreement. Though direct challenges through wealth display—such as the competitive redistribution Glassman describes for nineteenth-century Pangani²⁴²—are not always readily discernible in the available sources for the sixteenth century, ungwana insertion into royal policy concerning the exchange of materials was a common way of gaining access to political power. Sultans²⁴³ enjoyed monopolies over certain items like ambergris²⁴⁴ and controlled local mints of silver, gold, and copper coinage. However, since its commercial activities helped preserve state power by generating taxable foreign trade, the mercantilist

²⁴⁰ The intersections of cloth exchange and the state were important in Inka society as well. Although large stores of cloth in Swahili towns were not regularly used to fund military expeditions, the parallel uses of cloth for the maintenance of the state are noteworthy. J. Murra, "Cloth and Its Function in the Inka State," in *Cloth and Human Experience*. Eds. A. Weiner and J. Schneider. Washington, D.C., 1989. 275-302.

²⁴¹ "Carta de [João Velho, que foi feitor de Sofala,] para el-Rei, [Post 1547]," *DPMAC*. 7:168-83.

²⁴² J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888*. Portsmouth, 1995. cf. idem, "Festive Ritual and Struggles for Citizenship in 19th Century Swahili Towns," *Paper Presented at the African Studies Workshop, Duke University, November 22, 1988*.

²⁴³ It is important to note that some Swahili city-states did not have a single head of state. Barawa, like Lamu, was a gerontocracy "governed by a corporation . . . twelve moors being the principal heads of government." "Ruy Lourenço Ravasco in Zanzibar, 1503-4," in *SD*, 78-9.

²⁴⁴ At Mecca in 1441, a Shafi'i Qadi of Lamu explained to Abu Al-Mahasin that all ambergris found in the Lamu area had to be delivered directly to its ruler(s). *SD*, 33. The *Pate Chronicle* also records that ambergris was considered royal property. "Stigand Version," 52.

community shared a complex interdependency with the royalty.²⁴⁵ Examples of such tenuous power-balancing relationships can be drawn from most of the city-states on the coast, but the Sofalan case is noteworthy since the town's commercial economy was expanding at the turn of the sixteenth century and immense amounts of wealth were passing through the region. At Sofala, merchandise from across the Indian Ocean region was traded for gold, ivory, and other commercially valuable items. The traders who frequented Sofala, while almost wholly Swahili,²⁴⁶ came from virtually every Swahili town. De Freitas noted that the cloth came to Sofala "by the Moors of Mombasa, Malindi, [and] Pate, since all of them trade in Cambay."²⁴⁷

The ritual of exchange reveals much about the dynamics of authority and the political leverage available to ungwana and royal lineages. Trade relations between external merchants and the Sofalan community were superficially negotiated through the office of the sultan, who could thus maintain a balance of power in the region. Indeed, the sultan was often called upon to mediate interior disputes.²⁴⁸ Caravans entering Sofala from the interior were greeted by the sultan; yet it was the local merchants who entertained caravan leaders, granted them accommodation, and carried out the business of exchange.²⁴⁹ Thus accumulations of interior goods were negotiated through the ungwana with little official regulation.

The poetics of power negotiation were played out in a highly symbolic drama in the coastal trade. Any merchant arriving at Sofala by sea was obligated to approach the sultan, and, as recorded for exchange relations at Mozambique and Sofala, when traders met with the ruler, each one had to take "a present with him in accordance with a custom that no stranger should appear before the ruler without bringing him something."²⁵⁰ After speaking with the potential trading partner, the sultan conferred with his advisors—the ungwana. If his advisors agreed to allow the new trader access to Sofala's market, a gold

²⁴⁵ Cattle was recorded as a royal prerogative in Mwali. R. Cocks explained that the Sultan acted as the sole distributor of cattle because he "had been to Mecca and knew the value of silver." "R. Cocks to Sir Thomas Smith, Bantam, 12 January 1612," in *Letters Received by the East India Company. Vol. 1*. Ed. Danvers. London, 1896. 213-4.

²⁴⁶ An exception to this is the merchant from Fez to whom Vasco da Gama's western Sudanese interpreter, Fernão Martins, spoke in Mozambique. *Records*. 6:177.

²⁴⁷ "Informação de Jordão de Freitas para el-Rei, Goa, 1530 Setembro 17," *DPMAC*. 3:425. De Freitas obtained most of his information from Swahili merchants in Malindi and Mombasa.

²⁴⁸ In their attempt to wrest the interior trade from Swahili merchants, the Portuguese were often frustrated by the fact that the Sultans of Kilwa and Sofala were so often necessary for the mediation of disputes between interior kingdoms. "Diogo de Alcaçova."

²⁴⁹ Dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, 1:105-9.

²⁵⁰ G. Correa, *Lendas da Índia*, in *Records*. 2:26.

ring was given to the merchant to symbolize the solidification of the relationship.²⁵¹ Correa explained that the sultan would then seal the alliance by “swearing by the sun, the sky, his head, and his belly that he would fulfill his part as long as he lived, and would buy all the merchandise brought to him, and would pay for it, as he paid to the other merchants, what had long been the settled price.”²⁵²

As confirmation of his counsel’s blessing, the sultan touched the right hands of all counselors present, the “important mouros” of the town.²⁵³ The balance of power between the royal and merchant groups is most obvious in the final exchange. Correa explained that the last stage in the process of commercial exchange at Sofala commenced when

everything was brought before the king, and he sent for the merchants of the country, who sorted all the goods, placing each kind apart from the rest; and having estimated all, they weighed the gold in small scales and on every heap of goods they laid the price which it was worth in gold. Then the king said that those goods were the worth the gold that was laid on them, and they might take it, for his dues were counted in the weight and were paid by the merchants . . . there was no bargaining.²⁵⁴

The poetic of the sultan’s posturing as the prestigious head of the state, even though he depended on the approval and collaboration of the merchant elite, demonstrates the delicate balance of power in the commercial sphere of Swahili society.

One remedy for the dilution of royal autonomy by ungwana insertion into commercial affairs, at least by the fifteenth century, was to levy heavy taxes—in cloth for imports, gold and ivory for exports—in high-traffic ports like Mombasa and Kilwa.²⁵⁵ By instituting such revenue-generating measures, royal families were assured of constant surpluses for maintaining state institutions and paying officials. Additionally, they gained capital that could be used to accumulate prestige goods—items like siwa and other regalia that, as constituents of the symbolic and ritual language of prestige, helped to ensure public allegiance.²⁵⁶ But the use of taxes as protection by heads of state did not negate all

²⁵¹ Ibid. A ring was also given to preferred visitors by the sultans of northern cities as a safe conduct. 27. cf. da Gama, in *SD*, 51.

²⁵² Correa, in *Records*. 2:30.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. Numerous fifteenth-century weights have been found in Kilwa. Surviving weights are made of lead covered with copper and ornamented with incised decoration. M. Posnansky, ed., “The History and Archeology of the East African Coast,” in *Prelude to East African History*. London, 1966. 134-5.

²⁵⁵ For a complete treatment of taxes in the major city-states in the early sixteenth century, see “Carta de Diogo de Alcáçova para el-Rei, Cochim, 1506 Novembro 20,” *DPMAC*. 1:396-8.

²⁵⁶ In terms of maintaining control of taxation and tributary extraction, Polanyi’s model of the tribute-based state can be partially applicable to large Swahili city-states such as Kilwa, Malindi, and Mombasa. *Dahomey and the Slave Trade*. Seattle, 1966. cf. L. Valensi, “Economic Anthropology and History: The Work of Karl Polanyi,” *Research*

threats to official power. Ungwana could still ascend to the office of sultan by virtue of their access to and trade in cloth and other prestige-value materials. The *History of Kilwa* records various incipient disputes over authority in the fifteenth century, and it is clear that sultan(a)s were generally unable to hold power for more than a few years. Kilwa accumulated immense wealth, in de Barros's words, "after becoming the sovereign of the mine of Sofala;" but such wealth circulation, even when restricted, pluralized access to accumulation and resulted in the "divisions" which, de Barros noted, "arose upon the death of some of its kings."²⁵⁷

One of the best examples of material manipulation serving as a means to power is the case of the sultan's poor treatment of Mwana Darini of Pate, the wife of a wealthy merchant. The *Pate Chronicle* records that the use of the siwa—a symbol essential to sustain any credible aspiration to political power—was disallowed at the circumcision of Mwana Darini's son. As a result, she and her followers invested considerable wealth to construct a new horn. This new and more aesthetically pleasing siwa was played for the town on a festival day, embarrassing the sultan and diverting local power to Mwana Darini's son and to those who funded the creation of the horn. Thus the son of a deported merchant-elite gained office because his mother, fully aware of the metaphorical power of the siwa, skillfully manipulated a prestige-value material.²⁵⁸

The elite and the state struggled over power and its requisite access to stores of cloth and other valuables. The elites's capacity for high consumption diluted the sultan's power. Indeed, a figurehead was in deep political jeopardy if channels of material access and exchange were closed. Moreover, those who profited by evading state taxes and customs could set themselves up as "new" rulers elsewhere. Such subversive behavior expanded apace well into the period of Portuguese intrusion into the Indian Ocean region.²⁵⁹ Contraband trade to the Zambezi region, channeled through Ngoji and Kilimani, could make the fortune of any merchant with just enough capital or creditworthiness to outfit a zambuku.

The extent of Swahili trade bypassing the custom houses on the central and southern coast was so great that a Portuguese observer in the Zambezi region exclaimed,

in *Economic Anthropology*. 4 (1981): 3-12.

²⁵⁷ De Barros, *Da Asia*, 1:liv. 7, cap. 4.

²⁵⁸ *Pate Chronicle*, Heepe and Stigand versions.

²⁵⁹ Newitt's "The Southern Swahili Coast," covers the Portuguese "contraband" trade and develops a model of Swahili reorientation of commerce following Portuguese restrictions in the mid-sixteenth century. cf. E. Alpers's seminal work, *Ivory and Slaves in East Africa: Changing Patterns of International Trade to the Nineteenth Century*. London, 1975. 39-49.

“There is so much cloth throughout the land.”²⁶⁰ Cloth accumulated in towns on the southern coast as immense stores were brought from the north or produced locally during the sixteenth century. Said Abubakr, an “honored man” of Malindi and another ungwana merchant, single-handedly brought over 10,000 cloths to Ngoji in 1509. From Ngoji, the Malindi merchants sent “factors” throughout the land, “a great number to Quama [the mouth of the Zambezi] . . . which they say is another Çofala.”²⁶¹ The early sixteenth-century Zambezi market seemed insatiable, and towns intimately involved with the contraband trade north of Sofala, like Ngoji, cultivated “new” elites who could display and distribute broadly appreciated symbols of wealth.

In pursuit of status, many new elites chose names reflective of royalty. *Mwinyi* (and its derivatives), generally meaning prince or of very close relation to the sultan, was normally used by hereditary royalties. Mwinyu Mohammad, for example, was the son of the Sultan of Malindi.²⁶² Similarly, Mwinyi Ng’ombe was described as a “moorish prince” of Pate.²⁶³ But among those jockeying for clientele, Mwinyi could be an appropriated designation, functioning much like siwa or cloth as a legitimating symbol for those who had no claim to state office by virtue of lineage. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon comes from the extreme southern coast, the area of the greatest commercial opportunity. The power Mwinyi Muhammad gained as a very wealthy merchant of Nyanzatu Island (just outside of Sofala) was immense and impressive. Though he had no ties to the state, Muhammad, like many merchants attempting to gain heshima and political power, used the title Mwinyi because of his clientage and “immense riches.” Muhammad’s following was so substantial that a mosque was built in his honor (probably with his funds) and decorated with silks, and his grave, a coral monument, became the site of pilgrimage and petition for residents of the region.²⁶⁴ Access to accumulation empowered Mwinyi Muhammad, like many non-royals who adopted the title elsewhere on the coast, to garner respect and exercise influence—in life as well as after death—in the shadow of the Sofalan state.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁰ “Carta de Diogo Vaz, [feitor de Moçambique], para António Carneiro, Secretário de Estado, Moçambique, 1509 Setembro 4,” *DPMAC*. 2:380.

²⁶¹ “Carta de Diogo Vaz, [feitor de Moçambique], para Estêvão Vaz, provedor das Casa da Índia e Guiné, Moçambique, 1509 Setembro 4,” *DPMAC*. 2:374.

²⁶² De Barros calls this person “Munhu Mohamed.” *Da Asia*, 4:139. In modern Swahili, *mwinyi* can also connote “owner,” but it seems to have had greater implications in the sixteenth century.

²⁶³ De San Bernadino, *Itinerario*, 158.

²⁶⁴ Dos Santos calls him “Muynhe Mohamed.” 2:216. Sailors often left personal articles at the mosque before embarking on a journey to ensure safety.

²⁶⁵ See also the case of Muhammad Juani of Kwangani, who gained immense wealth from setting up a trading house in the Zambezi delta. “Carta de [João Velho, que foi feitor de Sofala,] para el-Rei, [Post 1547],” *DPMAC*.

Access to culturally significant and/or commercially valuable materials—such as clothing, as documented here—was not the preserve of the elite, although there were attempts to restrict ungwana consumption of materials like coral houses and certain types of clothing.²⁶⁶ Non-ungwana generally did not enjoy regular access to large stores of goods, but some, like porters and sailors, could capitalize on their unique positions as traffickers between marketplaces. The non-ungwana who benefited most in this way were likely to be the crews on cargo ships. These captains, masters, pilots, and lower-status mariners amassed as much cloth as possible on their voyages to the south. Much like low-status Swahili involvement with the caravan trade in the nineteenth century, the sixteenth-century non-ungwana sailor “from the largest to the smallest” would bring “what he [could] for himself and for those who are in the land,” and “all of them [in the ship] allow it and hold their tongues due to the interest each one receives.”²⁶⁷ Thus social mobility, even for the manual laborer, was possible thanks to direct access to disparate marketplaces.²⁶⁸ Sailors enjoyed such access, and a single *bertangi* purchased in Cambay for 66 *reis* could be sold in the Sofala area for 1147.5 *reis*, turning a handsome profit for an independent trader.²⁶⁹ In this way, access both to marketplaces and other production areas could lead to upward social mobility for a semi-skilled laborer involved with the southern trade.

Trade could be financially and socially rewarding for anyone involved in carriage, particularly if customs were evaded. The construction of status through material accumulation was a powerful force in sixteenth-century Swahili society and proved to be a double-edged sword for many seeking to occupy the highest political offices. Thus it is not surprising that royal lineages in many of the city-states were frequently challenged in

7:168-83.

²⁶⁶ Similar in function to the sumptuary laws of Europe and Asia, restrictions on consumption by upwardly mobile Swahili were generally not codified by law. In eighteenth-century Kilwa, official permission was necessary to build with coral, and ethnographic evidence suggests that there was socially restricted access to some ungwana materials and political positions as late as the early twentieth century. Freeman-Grenville, *The French at Kilwa Island*. 117. On ethnographic evidence, see A. Hamid el Zein, *The Sacred Meadows. A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town*. Evanston, 1974. There does not appear to be any evidence from before the eighteenth century that sumptuary restrictions were legalized, though they may well have been enforced. But the high cost of many ungwana materials insured that few could access them.

²⁶⁷ “Cristóvão de Távora, 1518,” *DPMAC*. 6:3. On nineteenth-century caravan porters, see Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 172-4.

²⁶⁸ On the social mobility of slaves and free people of humble origin in the nineteenth century caravan trade, see J. Glassman, “The Bondsman’s New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast,” *Journal of African History*. 32 (1991): 295.

²⁶⁹ “Informação de Jordão de Freitas para el-Rei,” 425-7.

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁷⁰

Access to cloth or other materials of socioeconomic value was empowering in the Swahili world. Royal families attempted to preserve their place atop the social hierarchy by demanding cloth or gold in taxes and extracting agricultural surpluses as tribute. By the same token, the ungwana could use their accruals of cloth, gained from commerce and then conspicuously displayed, to contest the power of state figureheads. At times royal lineages faced the very real threat of losing their political power and clientele to the merchant-elite; but state powers attempted to assure their own survival by collaborating with local and foreign merchants. In fact, the “polar divisions” between rulers and ruled that Nurse and Spear argue were inherent in coastal society seem to have been mediated by influential ungwana to a greater extent than was earlier imagined.²⁷¹ To be sure, clashes and unrest were not rare, but such disputes were due to the social and material proximity of the ungwana to royal families and the constant, if sometimes turbulent, symbiotic negotiation of power between them. Alternatively, in places such as Sofala, a balance of power was maintained over multiple successive administrations. Therefore, a model of a more fluid, cross-group interaction seems more accurate, one that frames the often amorphous ungwana alternatively as integral partners of the state or as challengers to royal authority by virtue of their acquisition and manipulation of prestige-value objects.

6 • Conclusion

In the Swahili world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, material consumption was both integrative and empowering. Consumption—the processes of use, accumulation, and circulation—developed and reflected both social and commercial relationships. The study of regional cloth production and distribution, individual and state consumption, and materials as power negotiators helps to tease out the strands that bound Swahili social, economic, and political life. Cloth consumption engaged the whole of Swahili society in a culturally reproductive process and acted as an instantly recognizable sign of the communality of much of the East African coast. Indeed, because material consumption was a tangible manifestation of the interactive internal and external dynamic of culture recreation on the coast, an analysis of modes of consumption can yield a map of social change over time. Access to and distribution of items of exchange and

²⁷⁰ I suspect that areas oriented more towards agriculture, like northwestern Madagascar, Pemba, and Zanzibar, did not see the same sort of intense royal struggles during the expansion of the Zambezi trade that the major city-states experienced since wealth was concentrated in the hands of a smaller number of land owners and surplus distributors in major agricultural zones.

²⁷¹ Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*, 97.

prestige-value were crucial to the accretion and preservation of power in coastal society, and thus debates over leadership were often argued in a language of material symbolism. Power in Swahili society could be contested through the consumption of materials, and although group boundaries were fixed, they were not impermeable, as shown by the fact that those with access to foreign and regional marketplaces were able rise in rank.

Material consumption serves as a lens through which the socially defined contours of status, authority, consumer demand, and taste in Swahili society can be discerned. Plotting Swahili modes of consumption not only offers a snapshot of the “artistry” of the Swahili world but also exposes the social realities of mundane and extraordinary existence, or how the Swahili essentially ordered life: the “custom” of Camões. This paper has attempted to map materials through arenas of Swahili experience, and I hope that it has thereby exposed enough of the complex strands (to borrow a rather appropriate metaphor from Nurse and Spear’s seminal study of Swahili society) of Swahili social history to provide an idea of how the whole fabric might have appeared.

