

Kilwa Archipelago: The Hub of East African Coastal Heritage and Swahili Civilization

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Abstract: The East African coastal strip, including the Kilwa Archipelago has received research attention from many scholars nationally and internationally. Kilwa Kisiwani (an island) which is one of the islands forming the Kilwa archipelago was a wealthy port that served as the hub of trade between the Indian Ocean and the interior of eastern Africa. Among the areas that have attracted extensive interest is the coastal archaeological research, notably by scholars like Neville Chittick in 1960's, Mark Horton in 1980's, Felix Chami in the late 1990's, to mention but a few. Much as one would appreciate the contribution of the above mentioned archaeologists and others who followed then after, the history of Kilwa Archipelago still has a lot of untold stories. As an archaeological Swahili city-state, and a commercial entrepôt of the coast of East Africa, Kilwa remains a point of reference regarding not only the Swahili Civilization but also the heritage potential represented by the massive architectural monuments and other archaeological remains in the area. It is unfortunate that little attention has been given to other potential cultural heritage resources that depict the Swahili civilization. This paper provides a reflection on the settlement history, the heritage potential and the landscape of the Swahili civilization in the Kilwa Archipelago. The paper concludes by recommending for government's serious intervention to preserve and promote Kilwa Archipelago which is truly the hub of Swahili coastal civilization.

Keywords: Archipelago, Monuments, Settlement, Heritage, Architecture, Swahili Civilization.

1. Introduction

Kilwa is an old District along the Indian Ocean in south-eastern Tanzania. Since 1926 it was a District of Lindi Province and encompassed two sub-districts namely; Kibata and Liwale. Kilwa remained a District within Lindi Province up to 1934 when it became a District of the Southern Province until 1962. Between 1963-1970 it was part of Mtwara Region and became again a District in Lindi Region from 1970 to-date (Mesaki 2005). Other districts of Lindi region are Lindi Urban, Lindi Rural, Nachingwea, Liwale and Ruangwa. Kilwa District is roughly rectangular in shape, with its western boundary about 100 kilometres (80 miles) inland from the sea and a coastline of 150 km long. An archipelago as used in this paper refers to a chain of inter-linked islands mostly located in the same geopolitical area and do share cultural aspects. Kilwa archipelago (Figure 1.) which is the topical issue in this paper includes the islands of Kilwa Kisiwani, Songo Mnara, and the neighbouring Kilwa Kivinje and Kilwa Masoko.



Fig. 1. The map of Eastern African coast showing the location of Kilwa archipelago

2. Methodology

This paper is the result of an exploratory study that was conducted at different times in the islands of Kilwa, hereby termed as “Kilwa Archipelago”. The study approach was in the form of archaeological ethnography for the primary data complemented by review of related literature for secondary data. The main purpose of the study was to explore the history and heritage potential of the three ‘Kilwas’ namely, Kilwa Kivinje, Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara that jointly form part of the Kilwa Archipelago.

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3. Settlement History of Kilwa

There is an argument among some scholars (e.g. Chittick 1965; and Sutton 2000) that Kilwa - a Muslim town and sultanate, was first settled about 800AD and rose to prominence in the eleventh century and attained impressive wealth and power in the early fourteenth (particular around 1320, the date of the most spacious stone buildings). We cannot yet (according to Chittick, 1965) say with certainty when, in historic times, the first settlement grew up at Kilwa, as we have no written records which plainly shed light on the question. But it is probable, he says, "the origins of the town go back to the ninth, and possibly to the eighth century AD" (Chittick, 1965: 1). Although it has not been investigated beyond reasonable doubt, dating the first settlement at Kilwa to 800AD seems very much to be a typical Eurocentric way of thinking due to the reality that Africans had been there long before 800AD. To entertain these Eurocentric views means to agree that the area was vacant before the coming of outsiders, and therefore, any cultural evidence available there, is attributed to the outsiders!

4. The Genesis of Great 'Kilwas' and their Conservation Status

A. Kilwa Kivinje

Kilwa Kivinje, literally meaning 'Kilwa of the Casuarina trees', is among several historic town settlements, along the coast of East Africa, whose origins are said to date back to the 18th and 19th centuries AD (URT 2005). Kilwa Kivinje is located at the northern part of Kilwa peninsula, about 30 km by the road, North of Kilwa Masoko (Figure 2). Like other coastal, historic urban settlements, such as Bagamoyo, Saadani, Pangani and other such towns, Kilwa Kivinje is reported to have emerged as a port town, out of the lucrative slave and ivory trade that flourished along the coast of East Africa during the nineteenth century (Freeman-Grenville 1962; Nicholls 1971; URT 2005; Mapunda 2007).

It is well-documented that Kilwa Kivinje was a major transit port for the southern caravan route, serving in that capacity a wide hinterland, including what is today southern Tanzania, northern Mozambique, the whole of Malawi and northern Zambia (Nicholls 1971). Furthermore, it is consistently reported that the growth of Kilwa Kivinje was stimulated by the decline of the two formerly prosperous city-states of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara (African Urban Heritage Foundation Ltd 2004), and that by the 1840s Kilwa Kivinje was already the most important port and trading center in the region, having absorbed many of the inhabitants of the two collapsed city islands (African Urban Heritage Foundation Ltd 2004).

B. Kilwa Kisiwani

The ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani, which date from the 9th to the 18th centuries are the remains of the most important and famous medieval City State of the whole of the East African coast (Chittick 1974; Sutton 2000) which prospered and reached its peak in the 13th and 14th centuries (Abungu 2004; Kamamba *et al.* 2001; Mapunda 2005; Moon 2005; Sutton 2000). This cultural heritage site is special in reminding us of our ancestor's

prosperity, their trade contacts with the outside world especially Asia and the Far East, strong political organization and architectural technology during what is generally termed as the Swahili civilization (Abungu 2004; Kamamba, *et al.*, 2001; Mapunda 2005; Moon 2005; Sutton 2000). Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara heritage sites were designated World Heritage Site due to their outstanding universal significance, which is embraced in the historical, archaeological, architectural, spiritual and educational values.

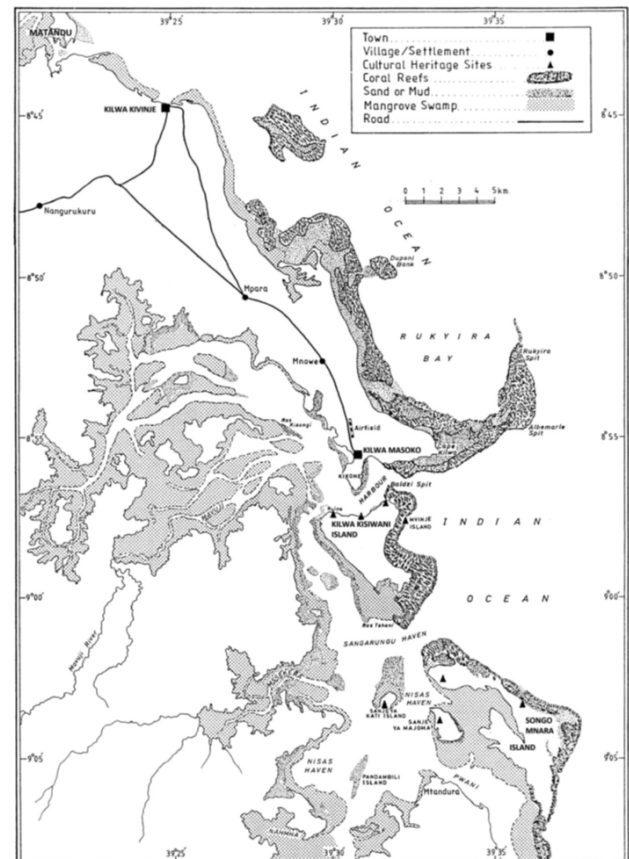


Fig. 2. A map of Kilwa showing Kilwa Masoko

During the medieval times, which for the sake of this paper dates from the 9th C to the 18th C, Kilwa was the most important port town on the coast of eastern Africa. Its civilization, (Swahili Civilization), produced an impressive and unique stone-masonry monuments (Abungu 2004; Moon 2005; Kimaro 2006). Such monuments occur at Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara Islands located adjacent to one another, off the Kilwa coast (Figure 3).

The landscape of monumental remains in the Kilwa Archipelago is the most important historical, cultural and architectural symbol on the Tanzanian coast. On account of that, and because of the need for their long-term conservation and management, these sites were gazetted during the colonial period, in 1937. After independence, these and other sites were protected under the Tanzania Antiquities Act of 1964. In 1981, UNESCO declared them as World Heritage Sites (WHS). Apart from the monumental resources, Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara WHS are also very rich in other archaeological resources

(Chami 2005; Chittick 1974; Pradine 2005; Kimaro 2006).

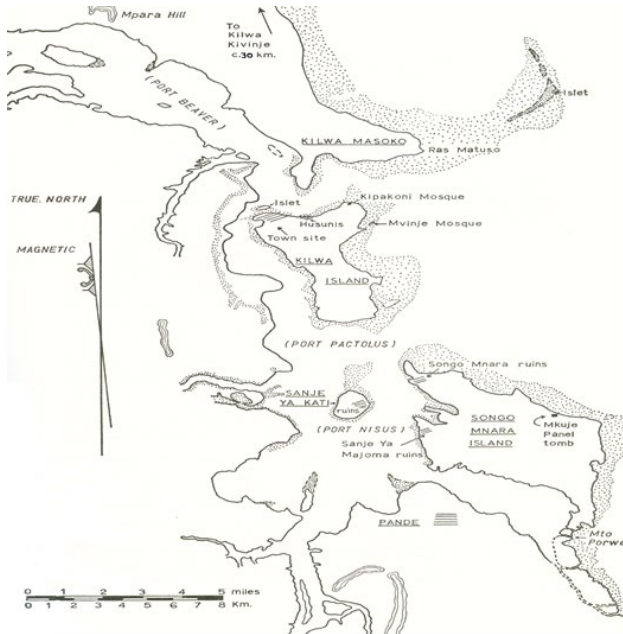


Fig. 3. Map showing the world heritage sites of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara (Adopted from Mapunda 2005)

Apart from stones and mortar, other materials that were used to construct the stone-masonry monuments in Kilwa archipelago were mangrove poles. It is very unfortunate that many times, archaeologists concentrate more on imperishable materials distributed on the surface or buried underground (Mturi 1996, 1998) while missing materials that existed in the past, but that can no longer be found today due to their perishable nature. A good example of this are wooden materials such as mangrove timber that were part and parcel of the Swahili architecture and civilization. The evidences are the postholes and beam holes in the walls of the still standing monuments such as those of Kilwa Kisiwani and the sister Kilwas namely; Kilwa Kivinje, Kilwa Masoko, Songo Mnara and Kipatimu (Eg. Figure 4). As it was so common in the past, wooden poles are still in use for houses construction among the coastal Swahili communities (Figure 5).



Fig. 4. Makutani palace monument in Kilwa Kisiwani with mangroves postholes



Fig. 5. The mangrove poles ceiling in the contemporary Swahili house in Kilwa Kisiwani

Scholars (e.g. Chittick 1974, Sutton 2000) appreciate that mangrove timber had a great contribution in house construction. So far, the only archaeological investigation that was conducted specifically to establish the use of mangroves in Swahili house construction was a study by Festo Gabriel (2007). This study (M.A.-Archaeology research), among other things investigated on why mangroves were more preferred than other tree species in the Swahili architecture.

5. Discussion

In order to engage the term heritage, one must view it as an applied humanity (Howard, 2003). It is a thing which a past generation has preserved and handed on to the present and which a significant group or population wishes to hand on to the future generation (Herbert, 1995). Drawing on the idea of an inherited legacy, heritage has its roots in the past and continues to be meaningful to contemporary people. In this regard, heritage transcends time, drawing on the 'past' to create a 'present' to be protected for the 'future' (Watkins and Beaver, 2008). Heritage is engagement with the past in the present. Looking at the monuments

Archaeological researches that have so far been conducted along the coast of East Africa have paid little glance on other colonial legacies on the coast of East Africa, far from monumental and other artefactual remains. This leaves a deep silence on the impact that the colonial powers exerted to the coastal people in the process of construction of the currently standing monuments and forts along the coastal strip including the Kilwa Archipelago. Paying attention to these monuments does allow us to see the points at which colonizers attempted to assert their power through the creation of large structures, which must surely have seemed imposing to local populations, whatever the relations between those living and working within the forts and other local residents. Further examples analogous to Kilwa Archipelago are Bagamoyo, Fort Jesus, Zanzibar, and Chake Chake - Pemba.

Monumental remains and other structures also help us to understand how colonial rulers attempted to impose power upon the landscape. For instance, the logic behind the location of Tongwe Fort as a demonstration of negotiations of power between Omani and local East African rulers (Walz 2010) shows that thinking about these types of building can be instructive in understanding how colonizers were forced to

work within local East African power dynamics, and how they were sometimes used by local rulers to increase the latter's power. Fort structures were also a feature of indigenous East African communities, particularly in response to the intensification of slave raiding and caravan trading. Indigenous fortifications that appear to be a response to the upheavals of the colonial period have been documented archaeologically in several locations in eastern Africa, including western Tanzania (Wynne-Jones and Croucher 2007), Uganda (Sutton 2006), and both eastern (Kusimba 2004) and western Kenya (Scully 1969, 1979)

6. Conclusion

It has been found in this study that the East Africa coast, including the Kilwa Archipelago has a long and rich history about the interaction and relationship between the coastal communities and the outside world. The area is also very rich in cultural heritage resources especially the architectural monuments of Kilwa Kisiwani, Kilwa Kivinje and Songo Mnara. Apart from a number of archaeological researches that have been conducted in Kilwa, and the scholarly debates on the findings from these researches, there are issues which are still controversial. As more research efforts are put in, a lot is likely to be discovered and may refute previous understanding of a particular issue. For instance, although long recognised as an Indian Ocean port, it is now clear that Songo Mnara grew from a village of earthen and thatched houses into a well-defined Swahili town (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2015; Fleisher 2013). Furthermore, ceramics and coins demonstrate ties between Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara (Perkins *et al.* 2014). There is therefore, a need for expansive and interlinked research projects that would provide a picture on how the islands including the Kilwa Archipelago, related to and the manner they influenced one another's growth or decline.

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