Agency of Littoral Society: Reconsidering Medieval Swahili Port Towns with Written Evidence

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Abstract

Michael Pearson has contributed greatly to maritime history in the Indian Ocean World, focusing on what he calls the "littoral society." He argues for the importance of observing how the land and the sea connect each other. Following his argument, this article explores agency in medieval Swahili port towns. Recent developments in archaeological studies have revealed the complex relationships between the land and the sea in East Africa. However, there are certain issues archaeological evidence could not explain. Drawing on archaeological studies as a reference and also studies on Southeast Asian ports for comparison, this article seeks to explore medieval Arabic literature, virtually the only available written material, to consider the case of the medieval Swahili coast.

Introduction

Many maritime historians struggle to define the borders of the maritime world. Unlike land-based concepts of space, the maritime world is not ruled and divided by specific political orders or ethnic groups. Instead, it is a historical unit connecting numerous port cities, and without clear spatial borders. What's more, the maritime world is not exclusively sea-based. Fernand Braudel states that the life of the Mediterranean

> is the sea of vineyards and olive trees just as much as the sea of the long-oared galleys and the roundships of merchants and its history can no more be separated from that of the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it.[1]

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1. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2vols. Translated by Sian Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), vol.1, 17.

Indeed, among many Japanese historians, for example, the concept of the maritime world ("kaiiki") has provided an alternative perspective to conventional land-centered histories[2]. Dynamic commercial interactions across oceans are largely driven by the diverse natural conditions of the hinterlands, and exchange across the ocean is largely dependent on land-based exchange, in terms of both demand and supply. Here, maritime historians must strive to merge their studies of land and sea, rather than attempting to separate them. To this end, one notable scholar of the Indian Ocean World, Michael N. Pearson, advocates for the concept of the "littoral society."

Pearson's concept of "littoral society" first appeared in his article for *The Great Circle* in 1985.[3] Thirteen years later, he further developed the idea of the "littoral" in his important work *Port Cities and Intruders: the Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*.[4] His third book, *The Indian Ocean*, published in 2003,[5] and his later article in the *Journal of World History* in 2006,[6] revisit this concept. His writing on this topic is conceptual and sometimes poetic, and even elusive at times. Pearson defines littoral society as "the coastal sea zone, the beach, and some indeterminate frontier on land," and he explores this ambiguous and fast-changing relationship between land and sea by focusing on this littoral society.[7] His central claim is that maritime history, without consideration of littoral societies, is fundamentally incomplete.

This article will focus upon the agency of medieval Swahili port towns. Port towns are one significant typology of littoral society. Unlike other types of littoral societies which Pearson struggles to examine due to a scarcity of sources, like those consisting of fishermen for example, port towns have left plenty of archival and archaeological materials to explore. Port towns are the nexus of the Indian Ocean World. The port town acts as a point of contact, connecting different peoples in new environments, thus giving the Indian Ocean World a sense of dynamism. Pearson, however, does not fully explore the agency of those living within littoral societies. In *Port Cities and Intruders*, he argues that the Swahili coast is a littoral society, one that interacts with both land and sea. Many scholars are further in agreement that "cosmopolitan," "harmony," and "fusion" are key terms in the characterization of port towns along the Swahili coast.[8] Yet how did this

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2. As to history, potentials and limits of Japanese maritime history ("kaiiki-shi"), see Hideaki Suzuki, "Kaiiki-Shi and World/Global History: A Japanese Perspective," in ed. Manuel Perez Garcia and Lucio De Sousa, *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System* (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 119-133.
3. Michael N. Pearson, "Littoral Society: the Case for the Coast," *The Great Circle* 7 (1985), 1-8.
4. Michael N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: the Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998).
5. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
6. Michael N. Pearson, "Littoral Society: the Concept and the Problems," *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006), 353-373.
7. Pearson, "Littoral Society," 354.
8. For example, Adria LaViolette, "Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600-1500," *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 4, no. 1 (2008), 24-49; Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 300.

region come to possess these characteristics? To answer this question, we need to explore the agency of the inhabitants.

Over the past few decades, archaeologists have made great strides in the development of medieval Swahili history.[9] Conversely, written evidence has largely been ignored. Written sources for the medieval Swahili coast mainly consist of Arabic geographical literature, and the majority of these authors never visited the Swahili coast. The information in their works is largely occupied with tales of exploration and myth, including stories of exotic animals, extreme heat, and so on. It is not easy to use these materials to reconstruct the coast's past. However, in some cases, the information in these documents is reflective of the actual historical conditions on this coast, allowing scholars to explore a past that archaeological evidence cannot. This is particularly true of the activities of people in the port towns. In order to interpret sometimes subtle information in medieval Arabic geographical literature, this article uses a comparative method.[10] Indeed, the study of littoral societies requires such an approach, as Pearson states: "the shore folk have more in common with other shore folk thousands of kilometers away on some other shore of the ocean than they do with those in their immediate hinterland."[11] Following this method, this article will also look to studies of Southeast Asian port towns for assistance. In fact, Southeast Asian port towns acted as mediators between the interior hinterland and maritime visitors. The subsequent two sections will briefly review recent archaeological works to examine the process by which the Swahili coast initially established connections between the maritime world and the hinterland.

Connecting to the Indian Ocean

One of the most well-known descriptions of the Swahili coast in Greco-Roman literature is in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, which dates from the middle of the first century C.E. The text's sixteenth chapter is about Rhapta, the last commercial port in Azania, which has been identified as the Swahili coast. This chapter states that merchants from Muza (identified as present-day Mocha, Yemen) were granted the right to trade by the local king in exchange for tribute, and that the trade was conducted by "Arab skippers and agents who, through continual intercourse and intermarriage, are familiar with the area and its language."[12] This description demonstrates that as early as the middle of the first century C.E., a number of Arab sailors who intermarried with locals acted as

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9. As the latest outcome, see Adria LaViolette and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, eds., *The Swahili World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

10. Arabic geographical literature refers to geographical literature written in Arabic. See André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle: Géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050*, 4vols. (Paris: Edition de l'EHESS, 2001), Vol.1, 5.

11. Pearson, "Littoral Society," 353-354.

12. Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 60-61. See also, Yuzo Shitomi, *Eryutora-kai annaiki*, 2vols (Tokyo: Heibon-sha, 2016), Vol.1, 12.

mediators for overseas merchants.

Written evidence for this coast then dried up for nearly 800 years after the *Periplus* was composed. Furthermore, some archaeologists doubt the descriptions within the *Periplus*, since they could not find any archaeological evidence to confirm them. Indeed, some scholars claim that the Swahili coast only became "maritime" in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[13] To "become maritime" here indicates a phenomenon that occurred due to the growing interconnectivity of Indian Ocean regions, coupled with a weakening of cultural influence from the continental interior. Prior to this period, contact with the interior was significant, as relics such as "Triangular Incised Ware (TIW)" suggest. These wares characterised by triangle incision on surface were widely distributed in East Africa, including its coastal regions, from the fourth to tenth centuries C.E.[14] On the other hand, in tenth and eleventh century archaeological layers of coastal ruins, TIW tended to disappear, with locally produced pottery appearing along the coast and among close neighbours instead.[15] In addition, coral buildings became significant among the coastal ruins from this period; building techniques that used coral along the Swahili coast were likely imported from across the Indian Ocean.[16] In particular, the technique of cutting out blocks from fossil coral in the water, and then drying these blocks under the sun, was likely brought from the Red Sea.[17] Similarly, based on her archaeological investigations, Sarah Walshaw claims inhabitants switched from pearl millet cultivation to Asian rice cultivation in Pemba, and that they also began to use coconuts more commonly during the same period.[18] While pearl millet is of African origin, Asian rice and coconuts were brought to East Africa from across the Indian Ocean.

We can also observe this new maritime interconnectivity in descriptions published within Arabic geographical literature. In this literature, sub-Saharan Africa is represented very ambiguously. In general, sub-Saharan Africa was divided into several "countries" (sing. *bilad*, or sometimes "lands" sing. *ard*),[19] and the Swahili coast was referred to as

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13. Recent works on this subject include Jeffery Fleisher et al., "When did the Swahili become Maritime?," *American Anthropologist* 117, no. 1 (2015), 100-105; Matthew Pawlowicz and Adria LaViolette, "Swahili Historical Chronicles from an Archaeological Perspective: Bridging History, Archaeology, Coast, and Hinterland in Southern Tanzania," in ed. Peter R. Schmidt and Stephen A. Mrozowski, *The Death of Prehistory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135-138.
14. Felix Chami, *The Tanzanian Coast in the First Millenium AD* (Uppsala: Societas Archaeoologica Upsaliensis, 1994), 69. Triangular Incised Ware is also known as Kitchen Pottery or Tana Ware. For more details, see Chami, *The Tanzanian Coast*, 13 & 69-82.
15. Pawlowicz and LaViolette, "Swahili Historical Chronicles from an Archaeological Perspective," 135-136.
16. LaViolette, "Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa," 37-38; Adria LaViolette and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "The Swahili World," in *The Swahili World*, 8-9.
17. Mark Horton, "Asiatic Colonization of the East African Coast: the Manda Evidence," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1986), 205-206. For an architectural analysis of coral buildings in the Red Sea, see Shinichi Nishimoto, Yoshifumi Yasuoka and Aya Ando, "Sangozou kenchiku-hou," in ed. Shinichi Nishimoto and Hiroshi Nawata, *Arabu no nariwai seitaikei 5: Sango-sho* (Osaka: Rinkawa shoten, 2015), 69-113.
18. Sarah C. Walshaw, "Converting to Rice: Urbanization, Islamization and Crops on Pemba Island, Tanzania, AD 700-1500," *World Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2010), 137-154.
19. André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*, 4vols. (Paris: Edition EHESS, 2001), Vol.2, 131.

bilad al-zanj (the country of Zanj). While earlier literature was largely influenced by Greco-Roman mathematical geography (the work of Ptolemy, for example), Arabic geographers after the tenth century acquired their information about the Swahili coast from individuals who had actually visited *bilad al-zanj*. Thus, they could describe Swahili port towns in detail, and as a natural consequence, many place names in this literature can be identified as modern geographical locations.[20] This change reflects the fact that more Middle Eastern people travelled to Swahili ports, and connections between Swahili port towns and the Middle East strengthened. However, this does not necessarily mean that coastal peoples lost their connections with their interior neighbors. Archaeologists have recently discovered evidence of trade between the coast and much deeper interior regions than previously thought, as we will explore in the following section.

Connections with the Interior

Until the development of long distance caravan trade at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was conventionally believed that goods were imported to the Swahili coast by neighboring regions, except for gold, which was brought from Monomotapa.[21] As such, it has been generally understood that the interior hinterland for the Swahili port towns did not extend into the deep interior. However, archaeologists have recently found evidence of Indian Ocean trade that stretched much further into the interior and across much vaster areas than previously assumed.[22] For example, a large number of artifacts related to Indian Ocean trade have been found at several sites in Tsavo national park in Kenya.[23] Among them, Kathuva, located some 100km from Malindi, was used intermittently more than 2500 years ago. In Kathuva, archaeologists also found cowry shells along with evidence of iron slag, as well as of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. According to David W. Wright, groups in this location established trading links with the coastal region by the mid-seventh century.[24] Further evidence can be found in a study by Jonathan R. Walz, who conducted his research at Kwa Mgogo, an area downstream of Ruvu River in Tanzania,

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20. Hideaki Suzuki, "Kyoui toshiteno afurika tairiku: cyuusei arabiago chiri bunken ni mieru zanjyu chihou," in ed. Yuriko Yamanaka, *Kyoui no bunka-shi,* (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2015), 290-305.

21. Juhani Koponen, *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Development Studies, 1989), 55; Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987), 78; Rene J. Barendse, *Arabian Seas 1700-1763*, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), Vol.1, 112.

22. Peter R. Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 62-65. In addition, James de Vere Allen points to the importance of considering the relationship between the interior and the coast in the early 1990s, in James de Vere Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (London: James Currey, 1993), 55-74.

23. Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Sibel B. Kusimba, and David K. Wright, "The Development and Collapse of Precolonial Ethnic Mosaics in Tsavo, Kenya," *Journal of African Archaeology* 3, no. 2 (2005), 243-265.

24. David W. Wright, "New Perspectives on Early Regional Interaction Networks of East African Trade: A View from Tsavo National Park, Kenya," *African Archaeological Review* 22, no. 3 (2005), 123. See also, David W. Wright, "Environment, Chronology and Resource Exploitation of the Pastoral Neolithic in Tsavo, Kenya," (doctoral thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2005), 305-328.

which had been used between the middle of the first millennium CE and the middle of the following millennium CE. Here, a large quantity of beads made of terrestrial snail were found, along with beads made of shell and glass, which are thought to have been made along the coast.[25] Similar findings were made by Walz at Gonja Maore, close to the Pare Mountains in the upper stream of the Mkomazi River.[26] Thus, in the deep interior, evidence of a trade connection with the coast has been found; yet, this is not proof of a direct long distance trade. It is widely accepted that direct long distance caravans began to appear at the turn of the nineteenth century when the demand for ivory and slaves rapidly increased.[27] Prior to this period and even later to a certain degree, the so-called relay system, which combined short distance caravans, connected the coast and the interior.[28]

The Positionality of Mediators

As noted above, inhabitants of the Swahili coast established connections with both the interior and the maritime world. How were these links established? Indeed, port towns acted as mediators. A triadic trade relationship formed between port towns, interior peoples, and overseas merchants. The latter two groups communicated through this relationship alone, in other words, without port towns as mediator, interior people and overseas merchants could not communicate. If buyers and sellers (in this case, people in the interior hinterland and visiting overseas merchants, and *vice versa*) contacted each other directly, or without the use of a mediator (in this case, the Swahili port town), both would have omitted the intermediate costs taken by the port towns. This would have been profitable for both buyers and sellers. Of course, if this had been the case, Swahili port towns, as mediators, would have lost their *raison d'être*. Thus, the inhabitants of Swahili port towns stopped interior peoples and overseas merchants from meeting directly. Therefore, once this triadic relationship had been established, the port towns worked closely to maintain it. They tried to keep their role as mediator within the established triadic relationship, and it prevent neighboring rival port towns from subverting. Here, we can get a clue to find out the agency of port towns. The following section considers how port towns managed such relationships, following the historical debate of the "asymmetry" of information.

Recently, the concept of the "asymmetry" of information in the market has attracted

25. Jonathan R. Walz, "Route to A Regional Past: An Archaeology of the Lower Pangani (Ruvu) Basin, Tanzania, 500-1900 C.E.," Ph.D. thesis, University of Florida, 2010, 210-224 & 254-272.

26. Walz, "Route to A Regional Past," 254-272.

27. John E.G. Sutton, *Early Trade in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi: East African Publication House, 1973), 25.

28. Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Pattern of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 159-160; Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, 159; Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa, c.1884-1914* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 37; Stephen J. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006), 1 & 35-52. For a detailed bibliography of related works, see Rockel, *Carriers of Culture*, 248.

both economists and economic historians. In the field of economics, it has been widely held that the information possessed by subjects who join the market economy is homogenous in nature. However, debates about the "asymmetry" of information in the market tend to doubt this preposition, revealing that the knowledge and information possessed by buyers and sellers, about traded goods, is typically inhomogeneous. Today, this asymmetry is widely accepted within the field of marketing.[29] The influence of information on economic activity is similarly explored in anthropology with, typified in models like Clifford Geertz's "bazaar economy". According to Geertz, in North African markets, the efforts of those within the markets were principally concentrated on obtaining trading information.[30] Kazuko Furuta, following Geertz, analyzes the work of early twentieth century mediators in the sale of raw silk at production center found on the lower Yangtze River in China.[31] At that time, there were more than 100 mediators buying and selling raw silk in this region, and they introduced farmers with raw silk for sale to merchants. Mediators typically knew both the farmers (sellers) and the merchants (buyers), which resulted in the farmers and merchants commonly forming anonymous relationships with one another. These anonymous relationships benefitted both the buyer and seller. Both could avoid the risks that often emerged from fixed customer relationships, such as losing business to more competitive trading partners, and so on. Simultaneously, both buyers and sellers generally knew the mediator, thus avoiding opportunistic behavior, like price hikes and unfair bargaining. Furuta also points out that farmers who recognized an asymmetry of information, and regarded themselves as not possessing enough information about the market economy, were much more likely to use mediators.

While Furuta's analysis focuses mainly on the buyer and seller in this triadic relationship, the relationship can be viewed somewhat differently through the mediator. Here we will call the mediator A, the seller B, and the buyer C. When A creates a relationship between B and C, as Furuta points out, B and C are connected through an anonymous relationship. For B, A is representative of C, and simultaneously, A plays the role of B for C. For A, B and C are two of many customers, while B and C do not know each other. Thus, the relationship between B and C can be formed only when A mediates between the two. That is, only A (the mediator) can create a relationship between B (the seller) and C (the buyer). This would be the basic preposition in the triadic relationship we are discussing with a focus on the mediator.

This explanation gives readers the impression that it is truly a mediator's market.

29. Kazuko Furuta, "Keizaishi ni okeru jyouhou to seido," *Shakai-Keizai-Shigaku* 69, no. 4 (2003), 11-13. Ei Murakami emphasizes the superiority of the mediator in terms of information, and that this enabled mediators to manage small-scale dealings and to control individual relationships. See Ei Murakami, *Umi no kindai chugoku* (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2013), 449-450.
30. Clifford Geertz, "The Bazaar Economy: Information and Search in Peasant Marketing," *The American Economic Review* 68, no. 2 (1978), 30.
31. Kazuko Furuta, "Chuka teikoku no keizai to jyouhou," in ed. Tsukasa Mizushima, *Gurobaru hisutori no chousen* (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppan sha, 2008), 116.

However, buyers and sellers can change mediators if they are unsatisfied. While interior peoples were not necessarily able to choose which port towns they dealt with due to the limited location of land routes, maritime merchants could decide more freely which ports they wished to disembark at. For instance, according to nineteenth century records, dhow sailing between Zanzibar Island and Mombasa took only three days, with short stops at Pangani and Tanga.[32] Thus, maritime merchants were able to use both ports interchangeably. Yet, inhabitants of both port towns needed to maintain their roles as mediators. The following section will examine how port towns tried to attract maritime merchants by employing three different strategies.

Survival Strategy One: Narratives in the Port Towns

The historical narratives passed on by port town inhabitants illustrate a clear dichotomy between the idea of port towns as "safe spaces", and the surrounding hinterland which was understood as dangerous. The following is one example from a description of Malindi, written by al-Idrisi, a twelfth century geographer whose work was dedicated to Roger II of Sicily:

> They (the inhabitants of Malindi) possess mines where people dig and produce iron. It is the centre of their profit and commerce. The locals say that they cast a spell upon dangerous beasts not to attack those who do not intend to go there (the mine). And they say that Lions and Jackals do not harm them because of their spell.[33]

Though one may claim that this is a fictitious description created by al-Idrisi, in the same document, his description of the country of Zanj suggests that he obtained information from those who actually visited the region.[34] Moreover, his citing of local terms is one of the earliest pieces of evidence for linguists who study the history of Kiswahili.[35]

Given that this information about the mine came from local inhabitants of Malindi, if indirectly, and taking the following debate on Southeast Asian port polities into consideration, the description above can be understood as a strategy to prevent visitors from going to the mine which was "the centre of their profit and commerce." In other words, the spread of these kind of stories was a method employed by the people of

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32. Johann Ludwig Krapf, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours during an Eighteen Year's Residence in Eastern Africa* (London: Trübner, 1860), 120-121.

33. Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Idrisi, *Kitab nuzha al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq*, 9 vols., ed. Alessio Bombaci et al. (Cairo: Maktab al-Thaqafa, 1994), 59.

34. al-Idrisi, *Kitab nuzha al-mushtaq*, 59-65.

35. Wilfred Whitely, *Swahili: the Rise of a National Language* (London: Methuen, 1969), 28-29; John M. Mugane, *The Story of Swahili* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 24.

Malindi to maintain their position as mediator. In the context of maritime Southeast Asia, during the middle ages and the early modern period, historian Jeyamalar Kathilitamby-Wells has conceptualized the notion of the "port polity,"[36] or trading activity that directly contributed to the foundation of power. A number of polities based around ports emerged and competed with each other in maritime Southeast Asia. The circumstances in maritime Southeast Asia during this period were similar to those of the Swahili coast: visiting merchants were interested in items produced in the hinterland, and port towns played the role of mediator in these transactions. The overseas merchants who visited Southeast Asian port towns left detailed observations of flourishing port towns, while interior peoples were described as being warlike and sometimes even cannibalistic. Masashi Hirosue concludes that the rulers of port towns tried to hinder direct communication between visiting merchants and interior inhabitants. Furthermore, inhabitants of the port towns told narratives that warned of fatal dangers in the interior, as the foundation of their power and wealth was upheld by this mediator role.[37]

Survival Strategy Two: Islam

Recent archaeological studies often emphasize that the spread and gradual embracing of Islam gave Swahili society its maritime character, and under these circumstances, the locals began to connect with the rest of the Indian Ocean World. However, these same studies do not explain why locals embraced Islam in the first place. As far as the spread of Islam is concerned, previous studies have examined this topic much more thoroughly.[38] Yet, the claim that the Islamization of the Swahili coast was a direct result of Arab-Persian conquest is not strongly supported by evidence, and this claim is strongly criticized today, as these arguments can conceal what may actually have been racial prejudice against the Bantu.[39] The point here is that both arguments equally miss how the agency of the local inhabitants interplayed with the spread of Islam.

Comparatively, in Southeast Asia, it is widely accepted that early Islamization

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36. For the concept of "port polity," see Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, "Introduction: An Overview," in ed. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells and John Villiers, *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), 1-5.

37. Masashi Hirosue, *Tounan ajia no koushi sekai: chiiki shakai no keisei to sekai chitsujyo* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2004), 65-96; Masashi Hirosue, *Hitokui no shakai shi: Kannibalizumu no katari to ibunka kyouzon* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2014), 76.

38. For example, Chauncey Hugh Stigand, *The Land of Zinj: Being An Account of British East Africa, Its Ancient History and Present Inhabitants* (London: Constable, 1913); Francis Barrow Pearce, *Zanzibar: The Island Metropolis of Eastern Africa* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920); William Harold Ingrams, *Zanzibar: Its History and its People* (London: Witherby, 1931); James Kirkman, *Gedi: The Palace* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963); James Kirkman, *Ungwana on the Tana* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966).

39. For example, Kusimba*, The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, 27-66. Moreover, African archaeologists have recently criticized African historical studies for containing racial prejudice. See Felix A. Chami, *The Unity of African Ancient History: 3000 BC to AD 500* (Dar es Salaam: E.D. Limited, 2006), 49-53.

spread from port to port along maritime trading routes.[40] Though it is also widely held that trading alone did not lead to the spread of Islam, we cannot ignore trade as one of the strong factors in the early Islamization of Southeast Asia.[41] On the Swahili coast, mosque ruins prior to the nineteenth century are exclusively concentrated on a narrow, one kilometer strip between the inland and the beach,[42] and only from the nineteenth century onwards do we have clear evidence that Islam extended into the interior.

One clue pointing to the agency of local inhabitants on this issue is found in the *'Aja'ib al-hind*, which collected stories narrated by sailors and merchants in Siraf. Siraf was located along the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf, and it was one of the foremost trading ports until a major earthquake struck in the mid-tenth century. One story is about a sailor who survived a ship wreck, and floated to an unknown region within the country of Zanj. He described a hopeless situation:

> When I looked around the place I perceived that I arrived at the country of Zanj who eat human's flesh. We were convinced we would die. Then, we cleaned ourselves, burnt incense, and shrouded.[43]

Medieval Arabic geography is more or less a reflection of contemporary understandings of the world, and in these texts, the country of Zanj is characterized by a number of dangerous stories.[44] We cannot confirm if such stories of cannibalism, gigantic ants, man-eating birds, or fatal heat-related diseases necessarily reflected reality; however, the peoples of the Middle East believed these myths about the country of Zanj and its people, and these beliefs were confirmed by locals in Swahili port towns, as shown in the previous section. The gap between Islamized Swahili port towns – where Muslim travelers could find people sharing their faith which guaranteed their safety– and the regions that surrounded them is also clearly illustrated in terminology used by Ibn Battuta, who visited the Swahili coast in the early fourteenth century. He called Islamized Swahili port towns "the country of Sawahil," while the rest of East Africa was referred to as "the country of

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40. Hirosue, *Tounan ajia*, 36-42; Anthony Reid, S*outheast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680,* 2 vols., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), Vol.2, 133.

41. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol.2, 110-111; Anthony H. Johns, "Islamization in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations with Special Reference to the Role of Sufism," *Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1993), 49; Hikoichi Yajima, "Isulamu nettowaku no tenkai," in ed. Yoneo Ishii, *Iwanami kouza tounan ajia 3: Tounan ajia no kinsei no seiritsu* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001), 23; Damodar R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia: Past and Present* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2003), 60; Masashi Hirosue, "Tounan ajia koushi to sono shihaisya," in ed. Rekishigaku kenkyukai, *Shirizu minatomachi no sekaishi 3: Minatomachi ni ikiru* (Tokyo: Aoki shoten, 2006), 301-302.

42. Garlake, *The Early Islamic Architecture*, 3. See also Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: the Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 48.

43. Ibn Fadl Allah 'Umari, *Masalik al-absar fi mamalik al-amsar*, Süleymaniye Library, Ms. No. 2227, 181.

44. Suzuki, "Kyoui toshiteno afurika tairiku."

Zanj."[45]

While Islam in Swahili port towns was characterized as being "open" towards the ocean, intended to attract overseas Muslim merchants, it worked in the opposite direction with the interior. In other words, while Islam created a shared character between inhabitants of Swahili port towns and Muslim merchants, the locals in Swahili port towns seemed to resist sharing this character with peoples in the interior. The location of Islamic religious monuments acts as clear evidence of this, as mentioned above. The concentration of these monuments on a one kilometer, very narrow strip of coastal land is quite a strange phenomenon considering the wide distribution of trading goods to the interior.

Of course, we need to consider the possibility that interior peoples resisted Islam. However, contemporary medieval sources do not give us any clues to this effect. Anthropological arguments suggest that the agency of Swahili port towns prevented Islam from spreading towards the interior. Several anthropologists argue that being Muslim was an important identifier used by coastal peoples to identify themselves with "the Swahili" and distinguish themselves from the interior people[46] Combining this idea with the positionality of mediators, the inhabitants of port towns needed to convince overseas merchants of their superiority as trading partners, above that of the interior peoples. Ibn Battuta left interesting accounts of the inhabitants of Swahili port towns in this regard. While he described the peoples surrounding these Swahili port towns as barbarians, the inhabitants of Mombasa were "religious, virtuousness and godliness people,"[47] and at Kilwa, inhabitants were "people of *jihad* (holy war)," and most of them were "religious and godliness."[48] Furthermore, he observed that a group of Yemeni darwishes, whom Battuta called "mendicant darwishes," rather arrogantly requested a cloak from the sultan of Kilwa, which the sultan granted. Needless to say, Battuta remarked upon this and praised quite highly the generous behavior of the sultan.[49]

For Swahili port town dwellers, being a good Muslim differentiated them from the interior peoples who did not or were not allowed to adopt Islam. Thus, Islamicized port towns held a strong appeal, and were viewed as superior trading partners for overseas Muslim merchants, in comparison to the towns and peoples of the interior. Moreover, being much better Muslim would have been a crucial point in the competition among

45. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla Ibn Battuta*, ed. Darwμsh al-Jawμdμ, 2vols. (Bairut: al-Maktaba al-Assrya, 2006), Vol.1, 232-233. See also, Charles Defrémery and Beniamino Raffaello, *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, 4vols. (Paris: L'imprimerie impériale, 1877), Vol.2, 191.

46. For example, Shun'ya Hino, "Higashi afurika ni okeru suwahiri ninshiki no chiikiteki kouzou," in *Swahili Shakai Kenkyu*, ed. Yoshihito Shimada and Ryo Nakamura (Nagoya: Shimada Yoshihito kenkyu shitsu), 439-445 (Originally published with the same title in *Afurika shakai no keisei to tenkai: chiiki, toshi, gengo*, ed. the Institute of Language and Culture of Asia and Africa (Tokyo: Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1980)); Shigeo Kikuchi, "Religious Articulation in the Swahili Coast, 18-19th Centuries," in *African Urban Studies III*, ed. Shun'ya Hino, (Tokyo: Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1993), 111-113.

47. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, Vol.1, 232; Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages*, Vol.2, 193.

48. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, Vol.1, 232; Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages*, Vol.2, 193.

49. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, Vol.1, 233. Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages*, Vol.2, 194-195.

port towns.

Survival Strategy Three: Individual Relationships with Maritime Visitors

Competitive relationships existed not only between separate port towns, but also within the port towns themselves. It was of the upmost importance for local merchants in port towns to create strong and lasting relationships with visiting merchants. One would imagine that, within this setting, merchants could frequently steal customers from their rivals. However, contemporary sources reveal that this did not happen easily, and that certain regulations were set in place to prevent conflict of this kind. A detailed description of these rules was written by Ibn Battuta, who visited Mogadishu in the 1330s:

> Ships arrived at that port, several small barges called *sunbuq* approached the ship. Each *sunbuq* contained a group of lads and they hold a plate with food. And they extended it to one of the merchants on board the ship and said "this gentleman is my customer" and other lads did the same. Except those regular merchants who visited often, merchants on board the ship needed to stay at the house as a guest where these lads took him.[50]

Battuta continued that overseas merchants could stay at a host's house as long as they wished, and that the host sold the merchant's goods on the latter's request. The host would also buy items at the local market at the merchant's request. If a third party intervened in this relationship, for example, to represent the merchant instead of the current host, it would be regarded as fraudulent according to local customs, as Battuta noted.[51] Hikoichi Yajima regards this relationship as a type of frontier trading pattern called "kyaku-to-shujin tono keiyaku kankei (contract relationship between guest and host)."[52] Interestingly, similar relationship was reported in the nineteenth century.[53]

Yajima understands this sort of trade relationship as one in between "silent trade," which prevents direct communication between the seller and the buyer, and "controlled trade," which is organized and initiated by political powers.[54] In the case of Swahili port polities, political powers were indeed quite involved in trade relationships. Specifically, they attempted to "enclose" visiting merchants in order to maintain continuous relationships

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50. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, 229; Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages*, Vol.2, 181.
51. Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, 229; Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages*, Vol.2, 181.
52. Ibun Battuta, *Dairyokouki*, 8vols. Translated and noted by Hikoichi Yajima (Tokyo: Heibon sha, 1998), Vol.3, 417.
53. Lee Cassanelli, *Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600 to 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 156-159, and Edward A. Alpers, "Muqdisho in the Nineteenth Century: A Regional Perspective," *The Journal of African History* 24, no.4 (1983), 445; Edward A. Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2009), 61.
54. Ibun Battuta, *Dairyokouki*, Vol.3, 417.

with them. One notable example is the so-called "Shanga enclosure" analyzed by Mark Horton. After detailed excavation and analysis, Horton argues that an area enclosed with a wooden cage at the center of the Shanga ruin, located on the Lamu Archipelago, was used both for rituals and as a trading spot between the local inhabitants and the overseas merchants. The "Shanga enclosure" had four entrances, and each was directly connected to a habitation area of the major clans. Access to the enclosure was only permitted to members of these clans and the overseas merchants who had trading relationships with these members.[55] Following Horton's analysis, the overseas merchants were required to maintain relationships with one of these clans, and in this way, overseas merchants could gain access to the enclosure in order to join the trading activity in Shanga. There exists a similar case in the South Court of Husuni Kubwa, in the Kilwa Kisiwani ruin, which was encircled by several compartments made of coral blocks. Neville Chittick, who conducted excavations at Kilwa, suggests that Husuni Kubwa functioned as a market place and as lodges for the overseas merchants.[56] Excavation reports do not suggest the existence of a market close to the mosques in Kilwa, and the South Court seems to be the largest marketplace in this widely known trading emporium along the medieval Swahili coast. This is in clear contrast with Siraf. In Siraf, the main market place was attached to the Friday Mosque.[57] Husuni Kubwa literally translates to "large castle" in Kiswahili, and it has been identified as the sultan's residence.[58] Therefore, sultans of Kilwa set up marketplaces within their own residences. As such, access was carefully controlled by the sultan, and only those with permission could join the trading activities. Political powers both provided trading opportunities and controlled them to maintain this important position of mediator.

What emerges from these cases is the active agency of port town dwellers in the monopolization and maintenance of the triadic trade relationship. This active agency was not limited to individual actors either; the cases of the Shanga enclosure and the South Court in Kilwa Kisiwani suggest that political powers were equally involved in trade competition and the development of infrastructure in port towns.

Conclusion

Beginning with the concept of "littoral society," this article has explored the agency of port towns along the medieval Swahili coast. A port town's success was dependent upon the efforts of its inhabitants. In the context of the triadic relationship between port towns,

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55. Mark Horton, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London: The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996), 413. Horton finds the origin of such enclosures among the Mijikenda and the Pokomo living in the hinterland of the Swahili Coast, Ibid., 85.

56. Neville Chittick*, Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast*, 2vols. (Nairobi: The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1974), Vol. 1, 187-192.

57. David Whitehouse, "Excavations at Siraf: Third Interim Report," Iran 8 (1970), 8.

58. Chittick, *Kilwa*, Vol.1, 174.

overseas merchants, and interior hinterlands, port towns needed to actively secure the position of mediator, otherwise, this triadic relationship would have proven very fragile. Furthermore, these towns were consistently in competition with neighboring port towns, as maritime merchants could very easily choose new trading partners. We can locate struggles between different port towns and within the port towns themselves, among rulers and ordinary merchants alike. Within studies of littoral societies, the agency of port towns and port town inhabitants must be considered, as these groups worked tirelessly to maintain crucial trade relations between land and sea.