**Swahili culture reconsidered: some historical implications of the material culture of the Northern Kenya Coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Creator</th>
<th>Allen, James de Vere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource type</td>
<td>Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage (spatial)</td>
<td>Northern Swahili Coast, Tanzania, United Republic of, Kilwa Kisiwani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Smithsonian Institution Libraries, DT365 .A992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>By kind permission of Azania (British Institute in Eastern Africa).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format extent (length/size)</td>
<td>40 pages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Swahili Culture Reconsidered:

Some Historical Implications of the Material Culture of the Northern Kenya Coast in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

by

J. de V. Allen

J. de V. Allen was until recently curator of the Lamu Museum. In this article he presents a new view of Lamu society.

Swahili culture is generally characterised as Arab culture grafted, with varying degrees of success, onto a population of mixed Arab and African stock. European writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were inclined to suggest that the degree of success depended upon the proportion of Arab to African blood, it being assumed that where the latter predominated the capacity for technological sophistication was correspondingly reduced. Though the genetic factor is seldom explicitly stressed nowadays, the presumption persists—even among many Swahili-speakers themselves—that the cultured Swahili is an Arabised Swahili, that an Arab immigrating to the coast of East Africa would be at an immediate cultural (though no longer political) advantage over longer-resident non-Arabs, and that where the veneer of Arabism is fresh or worn thin it is the culture of a rural-based African tribe that can be glimpsed beneath. FreemanGrenville has reminded us that one of the Swahili terms for culture, usta-arabu, means 'being like an Arab' (Oliver and Mathew, 1963, p. 168). Many coastal Muslims (though fewer than before the i964 Zanzibar Revolution) still disdain the appellation wa-Swahili and prefer to be called wa-Arabu. And Prins' dictum, repeated as late as 1967, that "the Swahili are a typical cultural group in which ... the East African Arabs are to be considered as bearers of the culture par excellence and sociologically speaking as an upper status group. . ." (i967, p. 21) has roused few challenges in the academic (as opposed to the political) arena up to the present day.

It is the object of this paper to present an alternative model for Swahili culture, at least for an important period of its existence. Space forbids the assembling of evidence representative of all parts of the Swahili world throughout its history. The first section of this paper consists, instead, of a study of the material culture of the period i700-i900 in the Lamu region. The second section evaluates some factors in the area's economy in the same centuries. On the basis of these two discussions it is possible, in the third

Swahili Culture

and final section, to reach some entirely different conclusions about northern Swahili culture in that period which, I suggest, can usefully be applied to other regions and other centuries as well. Many points in my re-interpretation are hardly new and some, though not all, are little more than matters of definition. Students of specialised aspects of East African coastal history and society have for some
time found it necessary to abandon a previously accepted concept here or part of the traditional terminology there in order to make sense of their material. But I am not aware that anyone has yet undertaken a redefinition of the culture as a whole, and this is conveniently done in the light of evidence from the area and period with which I am concerned. An additional reason for concentrating on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the northern Swahili world is that it is a subject which up till now has received very little attention.

I shall be using the term 'Swahili' in this article to cover all Islamised coastal peoples in East Africa whose first language is Swahili and the homogeneous culture which has evolved among them. I use 'Arabs' to mean only those, usually recent immigrants, whose first language is Arabic. The few existing studies of Swahili material culture refer primarily to the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and have been based on archaeological evidence from Gedi, Fort Jesus and the Tanzanian sites. The present survey, using principally non-excavated material referring to later centuries and being oriented to the Lamu area in the first instance, is on the whole complementary to these earlier studies, although-as I shall be suggesting in the final section of this paper-some of the facts here adduced seem to justify at least a reconsideration of earlier generalisations about the culture as a whole. It is only fair to add that my conclusions may be outdated no less rapidly than their predecessors. Swahili studies are still at the stage when a single discovery-a manuscript or document, a cache of coins, an inscription, even a single piece of pottery, such as might be turned up any day-may necessitate our rethinking tomorrow many of the ideas we find acceptable today. Still, if it proves already possible to correct some of the errors of yesterday at least something will have been achieved.

Historical Background

The fifteenth century is generally recognised as the Golden Age of the Swahili world (Kirkman, 1964, p. 28 and passim), and at that time there were a number of mainland towns-Ungwana, Mwana, Shaka and Luziwa near the mouth of the River Tana, Kiunga, Ishakani and others stretching up the Benadir coast, and also, of course, Malindi to share whatever there may have been of wealth and prestige with the island settlements of Lamu, Pate, Siyu and Faza. Just how powerful Pate was at this time is a matter of some dispute (Chittick, 1967 and 1969a). But by 1650, when the Portuguese had already entered their protracted decline and the town was in alliance with Oman and leading the

i. Most serious definitions of the term 'Arab' include Arabic as a first language. See B. Lewis, pp. 9-10. 2. Kirkman, 1956, is a locus classicus. Freeman-Grenville, 1963, pp. 142-56 and 161-8 presents an important attempt to correct earlier biases.

3. Lamu area, region or district here means the islands of the Lamu Archipelago together with the coastal strip, from the mouth of the Tana to the present Kenya-Somalia border. 'Northern Swahili world' refers to the same area but including the Benadir coast.

4. Malindi was, in dialect and other respects, part of the northern Swahili world up to about 1800 (Kirkman, 1966, pp. 7-14).

J. de V. Allen
Swahili towns against the Christian invader, there is no doubt that it was extremely powerful and prestigious. And by 1700 or 1720, when it rallied local forces against Oman itself, Pate controlled the whole of the present Kenya coast as far south as Kilifi as well as the island of Pemba, and was at least influential down to the Rufiji. The town also, in the late eighteenth century, very clearly dominated the India trade.

The exact reasons for Pate's decline are not clear, but it may have been connected with the fact that even before the Portuguese departure the harbour was silted up (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 142) and the efforts of some rulers to transfer their capital to Lamu were resisted by factions in both towns (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, pp. 261 ff), or there may have been some other ecological cause such as the drying up of the wells. At any rate, in 1812/13 the Nabahani dynasty of Pate, with their allies the Mazrui of Mombasa, attacked their former client Lamu, and were resoundingly defeated at the Battle of Shela. In the next few years Pate's power evaporated completely away. That this collapse was unexpected may be deduced from the action of the people of Lamu who, immediately after their victory, called upon the Mazrui's arch-enemy Sayyid Sa'id of Oman for support. By 1821 he had completed and garrisoned the fort in the centre of the town which had been begun by a Nabahani some years before, and for the next century and a half Lamu was technically subordinate to the Al-Busaidi family ruling first from Oman and later from Zanzibar.

The political vacuum in the Lamu region brought about by Pate's disintegration was largely filled, during the nineteenth century, by Siyu and Faza. The Famau sheikh of Siyu, Bwana Mataka, threw off his allegiance to Pate and also destroyed the longstanding arrangement whereby his family shared power with a Somali sheikh (Hardinge, 1897); and he and his son Bwana Mohamed after him, basing themselves no doubt on Siyu's fort (which appears to have been built before 18507), successfully held off Zanzibar attacks until 1864-5. And from Faza, Mzee bin Seif held defacto sway north to the present Kenya-Somalia border and even beyond for about 60 years. A new factor emerged in the 1860s when Sultan Ahmed bin Fumoluti of Pate, nicknamed 'Simba', abandoned his island capital and established a land-based state known as the Swahili Sultanate centering first on Kau, by the Tana, and then further inland at Witu. Both Mzee bin Seif and the Swahili Sultanate finally capitulated to British rather than Zanzibari might in the 1890s.

But Pate's beneficiary in the economic sphere was Lamu, which had already flourished very considerably before 1812/3 and which continued to expand right up to 1860 and perhaps for a decade or two longer, although at nothing like the same rate as did Zanzibar and Mombasa. By the 1870s Lamu had 80 Indian merchants and immigrant shopkeepers from Arabia totalling, with their families, about a thousand, although most of the large estates and politics at the parish pump level remained in the hands of local Swahili families.
6. The town had already collapsed, spiritually and to a large extent materially, by 1820, the latest possible date for the composition of the poem Al-Inkishafi, which vividly describes it (Hichens, 1939, pp. 9-19).

7. Most authorities, following the Pate Chronicle, assume that the present building was constructed by Zanzibaris about 1865 (Kirkman, 1964, p. 67); but see Wilding, 1973.

8. Sultan Ahmed Simba published several sets of stamps bearing this title (Sultaniya Swahiliya) in 1889.

9. For the Swahili Sultanate, see British Papers, Africa No. 1, enclosures in nos. i4. and 143. For Siyu and Faza, Hardinge's observations in Africa No. 7; also Holmwood's Report, 1874.

108 Swahili Culture
(Greffulhe, 1878, pp. 211, 215, substantially confirmed by local tradition). By 1885 at the very latest an absolute decline had set in, and when slavery was abolished in 1907 scarcely anyone could afford to hire wage labour to work his estates-most of which on the mainland had seriously deteriorated anyway under the alternate aggression of Somali raiders and the supporters of the Swahili Sultanate (FitzGerald, 1898, p. 353; Jackson, 1930, pp. 21, 37 and 42). By 1920 most of the Indians and many of the Arabs had migrated to more promising areas further south, and when migrants flooded into East Africa on every dhow and Indian package-steamer during the first four decades of the twentieth century10 none settled at Lamu, let alone Pate or Siyu which were already mere villages. For this and various other reasons even the minimal technological development normally associated with colonial rule in Africa-roads, communications, and a western-style drainage system in the towns-also passed the region by, so that at the time of Kenya's independence, Lamu, one of the only three or four real urban settlements in the original East African Protectorate, still had neither electricity nor wheeled vehicles, and had only recently been given piped water. In fact it is not unfair to say that, to a casual observer, the only perceptible consequences of 80 years of British rule in Lamu were a few motor boats, a large number of football teams with British names (Dundee, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspurs etc.) and a wide measure of decay in practically every sphere.

A significant point, for our purposes, is the suddenness and completeness of the collapse of Pate at the end of the eighteenth century and of Lamu and Siyu a bare hundred years later. They might almost have been overwhelmed each in turn by a volcano, leaving them like Pompeii and Herculaneum exactly as they were for future generations to inspect. The simile inevitably exaggerates. Many changes occurred, including rapid and widespread impoverishment. Much nevertheless remained which has not survived elsewhere in the Swahili world. It is the abundance and continued use of eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings, furniture and household implements, necessitated by the lack (until very recently) of resources to replace them, and the persistence of archaic social, political and economic forms and values, venerated from happier times, which make the Lamu region such an appropriate place to study earlier Swahili history. Avoiding, by
and large, the transformation, both social and cultural, imposed upon Zanzibar and to a lesser extent Mombasa by massive Asian immigration, and almost completely missed by any direct impact from the West as well, the towns of the Archipelago even today reflect with remarkable accuracy Swahili civilisation as it was before the period of late nineteenth-twentieth century Omani, Indian and European settlement.

One of the problems on which the material remains in the Lamu area throw some light is the exact extent of the northern Swahili revival after 1700. Recent writers have cast some doubt upon the greatness of Pate, except perhaps by comparison with the Swahili towns further south which were at their lowest ebb in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It has been suggested that, rather than suffering a decline in the early nineteenth century, Pate may in fact have "continued much the same" (Nicholls, 1971, p. 66). It has been asserted as if proven that Pate Town, at its height, cannot have had a population of more than 8,000 (Chittick, 1967, p. 58) and that Lamu Town, although it prospered in the nineteenth century, was of no great size or importance in the eighteenth (Martin, 1973 a, p. 8). Such suggestions can be very adequately refuted, and the picture of grandeur given in traditional Swahili literature vindicated, by a close examination of what remains, supplemented, here and there, by the memories of old men and women.

Demography

Lamu Town today, with some 25-35 per cent of its houses empty or in ruins, with a great many others occupied only in the upper storey, and with, in its district as a whole the lowest average household size in the country (3.76), nevertheless has a population approaching 7,000. It therefore seems not at all impossible that in the past its inhabitants might have been twice or even three times as numerous, and from other evidence the higher figure seems more likely. Most of the surviving stone constructions in the town date from the eighteenth century ('eighteenth century' in this context including, for reasons which will be discussed later, the first two decades of the nineteenth), and if we include the ruins we can still count something like 1,300 stone houses, apparently rather more than half of them at one time double-storeyed. 11 Judging by the extent of the town in the same period (which can be gauged partly by the disposition of dated mosques and partly by mitaa- or ward-names)12) there were at that time at least as many mud-and-thatch houses as there are now, i.e. about 5-600. A recent study has shown that the eighteenth century stone houses were designed for an extremely high rate of occupancy (Ghaidan, 1971), and this is confirmed by old people, who generally agree that doublestorey houses had an average occupancy of fifteen or sixteen, single-storey ones eight or nine. (This figure, it should be noted, includes domestic slaves, who are generally mistakenly assumed to have lived elsewhere.) If we take five as the average occupancy rate for a mud-and-thatch house, which
is probably on the low side, this gives us a total population for Lamu at its peak of at least 18,000, although it would be difficult to say precisely when that peak was.

Eighteenth-century Pate Town covered approximately the same area as Lamu today, i.e. c. 27 hectares (Chittick, 1967, p. 58)-slightly more than eighteenth century Lamu and was estimated by Stigand, who visited the area some time before 1909, and who is normally a cautious and reliable source, to have had 1,000 to 1,250 stone houses and a population of some 20,000. This fits our Lamu estimate very well, although he could collect the names of only twenty-three mitaa or wards, whereas modern Lamu has over forty (Stigand, 1913, p. 162; Chittick, 1967, p. 58; Allen, 1974a). Siyu is harder to gauge,

ii. Personal observation. Prins gives 1,200 as the present number of houses of all types, but he is of course not counting the ruined ones (1971, p. 29). Ghaidan (1971) gives 700 as the surviving number of stone houses, and 15,000 for the total population at its peak.

12. For dated mosques, see below, pp. 112-3. Several mitaa-names survive for areas where there are now no buildings, but where there must once have been some (Allen, 1974a, pp. II-16). (Mtaa is the singular, mitaa the plural form; see fla. zo.)

13. The area between the present main street (Usita wa Mui) and the sea, covering some 2-3 hectares, is a nineteenth century addition, having been reclaimed from the sea since the Fort was completed in 1821. Other additions to the area of the town since that time on the whole make up for those which have collapsed elsewhere.

110 Swahili Culture
but it was certainly bigger than any other town in the Archipelago when it was visited by Gaspar de Santo Bernardino in 1606, and was still (or again) bigger than Pate or Faza in the 1890s (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 162; FitzGerald, 1898, p. 385). And as late as the 1870s it was reported to have a population of some 0,000, making it half as large again as modern Lamu (Administrative Report, 1873-4), although Hardinge estimated only 5,000 in 1897. Western observers were no doubt often misled by the compactness of the Archipelago towns and the seclusion of their womenfolk. It is interesting to note that the 1606 visitor described Siyu as very populous and observed that "it seemed almost impossible that [the people who came out to see him pass] should be so numerous". Probably Siyu was always larger than Pate, and was overtaken by Lamu only some time after 1865.

The total population of the whole district at its peak is more difficult to estimate because large numbers of people sometimes moved from one settlement to another within a very few years. Some mainland settlements were also purely seasonal, occupied by island townspeople crossing over to farm as they still do. But as well as Pate, Siyu and Lamu there were, as we can tell by the number and geographical spread of their mosques, at least three other settlements of some size on the islands, Faza, Tundwa, and Shela, and at least twelve smaller settlements which will be listed below; while the mainland was certainly much more thickly populated than it is now, as amongst other things the great expanses of new-grown
forest show. The Swahili Sultanate was estimated in 1884 to have a population of 14,000 (Martin, 1973a, p. 28) and although many of these were recent refugees from Pate and Siyu seeking the law and order which Sultan Ahmed Simba guaranteed them and their own towns could not, a fair number must have been longer-term residents. FitzGerald in the 1890s lists no fewer than fifty-six mainland settlements, six of them what he calls 'large'14, and yet he was constantly emphasising that the area was becoming depopulated and was already well in decline (FitzGerald, chs. xix-xxv and maps opp. pp. 378 and 502). Of his fifty-six, fewer than ten survive today, only three of them (Witu, Kipini and Mkunumbi) by any stretch of meaning 'large'. Many which are remembered as having been permanent have totally disappeared.

Altogether a reasonable estimate of the total population of the Lamu area around 1790 might be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islands</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Siyu, Lamu and Pate Towns</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other settlements</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainland</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Large' settlements</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other settlements, Boni, Galla etc.</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 102,000

Certainly the sheer volume of the material relics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is far more compatible with a population of 100,000 than with one of under 30,000, which is what the area has today.

14. Kiunga, one of FitzGerald's 'large' settlements, was estimated by Hardinge (1897) to have a population of 1,000.

J. de V. Allen

Material Culture
Stone Buildings

Before we consider these material relics in greater detail it is as well to note the implications of the high proportion of stone houses, and especially multi-storey ones, in the period. The social and cultural distinctions, in the traditional Swahili world, between those who live in a multi-storey stone house (kiungu), a stone house of any type (jumba) and a mud-and-thatch house (nyumba) have evidently long been all-important. When refugees from Manda Island wished to settle in Lamu Town, probably in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, they were authorised to do so only on condition that the houses in their quarter were built exclusively of mud-and-thatch—a condition which they rejected, and founded the stone-built settlement of Shela instead. (Local people unanimously support this version, as does the material evidence, for Shela is full of the remains of stone mansions. For slightly different versions see Stigand, p. 157 and Kirkman, 1964, p. 69). Morice reported that at Kilwa in the 1770s official permission was also required to build a stone house, it being regarded as magnificence (Freeman-Grenville, 1965, p. 117). And in 1687 an exiled ruler of Pate offered the Portuguese that if they would re-instate him he would see to it that all the houses of Pate were reduced to a single floor (Strandes, 1961, p. 208). So different are all stone-house dwellers from their mud-and-thatch counterparts that during the
colonial era it was conventional to describe them as two different races, 'Arabs' and 'Africans' respectively; but in fact individuals, families and whole communities often make the transition from one type of house to another, adjusting their values and life-style accordingly, and the notion that the two styles of building represent different racial origins and different civilisations will not stand up to scrutiny (Allen, 1974b).

Living in stone houses does, however, entail, for traditional Swahili, certain distinctive values and modes of behaviour, which are still more appropriate for double-storey dwellers. It implies an awareness of one's family descent going back many generations and a confidence in many generations to come. It implies an interest and pride in one's literary and cultural heritage. And it implies-at least in the Lamu region since about 1700-such things as excluding one's women, dressing in prescribed ways, involving oneself in certain ritual functions connected with mosques and in certain financial commitments to the community, and showing business acumen and an understanding of the importance of the long term in financial matters. People who live in mud-and-thatch either do not feel constrained to share these values and this way of life or cannot afford to, and the step from one condition to the other is a very clear and decisive one. When poverty comes to a settlement, its occupants hold out and maintain their old, 'stone house' way of life for as long as they can and then surrender suddenly or completely, either emigrating or changing their ways almost overnight, so that total collapse overtakes the place within a very few years. A consequence of all this is a lack of continuity in Swahili history and culture which is perhaps more apparent than real. Settlements which seem to have disappeared for several decades or even centuries may in fact merely have been going through a lean period, and may recover. No doubt if one had asked a stone-house dweller from a neighbouring town about Malindi in the late eighteenth century, when we know it to have been a poverty-stricken mud-and-thatch place, he would have said that he did not know of it, or perhaps that nobody lived there, using 'nobody' (in the sense that white

Swahili Culture

colonials used to use it, and old-style Swahili grandees still occasionally do) to mean 'nobody of consequence' or 'nobody of my type', for that was how stone-house dwellers felt about their neighbours living in mud-and-thatch, or about the inhabitants of mud-and-thatch 'non-towns'.

The evidence suggests, however, that there were not many 'nobodies' or 'non-towns' in the Lamu Archipelago in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although there must have been quite a number on the mainland opposite. As well as Siyu, Pate and Lamu, stone built settlements existed, at some time between 1700 and 1900, at Faza, Tundwa, Atu and perhaps also Kizingitini, Nyabogi and Bajumwali on Pate Island; at Shela, Matondoni and Kipungani on Lamu Island; and possibly also at Kiwayuu, Simambaya and Kiunga (Muini) on their own islands further north.15 It was a period of intense cultural activity. A tremendous amount of fine poetry was produced, only a small proportion of which has yet been collected and published.16 Simply illuminated manuscript books were
copied out in great numbers. 17 Woodcarvings, furniture, jewellery and other silver and gold work were manufactured in profusion, as were silks and cottons; and Siyu probably already turned out by 1700 the leatherwork and finely tempered sword- and knife-blades which are still occasionally made there today, while ironsmiths everywhere made such things as decorative chains for hanging lamps and, when it was in demand, ornamental wrought iron grillwork for windows.

Architecture

Houses and mosques were also built or rebuilt at a great rate during this period; and in connection with the rebuilding of mosques it is worth noting a Swahili practice which has misled some scholars. When a mosque is built, it is almost always from private funds, and when it is renovated, the mihrab (or qibla as it is invariably called in the Swahili world) may or may not be rebuilt too, depending upon the terms of the original bequest and upon the availability of another potential donor. Thus some mosques are structurally much younger than any date they may have on their qibla suggests while many others, especially in Lamu Town, have dates on their qiblas referring, not to their original construction but to their most recent renovation. At least seven of Lamu's twenty-two Sunni mosques can be proved, by structural evidence (and in one case from an old photograph) 1 , to have existed before the dates inscribed on their qiblas; and there is a strong similar presumption in the cases of another ten. This does not mean that qibla- dates are valueless. They represent the latest possible year by which a mosque building of some kind must have stood on that site. Thus, since four of Lamu's mosques, all dated before 1800, are well spread over the present town, we can be sure that the eighteenth century.

15. It would be necessary to excavate at the last three named places to determine whether there were stone buildings there during our period or merely mud-and-thatch ones with stone bathrooms, as was normal.

16. According to Knappert, seventy epics (tendi) alone have so far been discovered, let alone other types of poetry (1972, p. 4). The large majority of these come from the northern Swahili world between 1650 and goo.

17. The Lamu Museum has over fifty such books, most of them Korans but including works on religious and magico-religious matters, on grammar, astrology and a variety of legal topics.

18. The frontispiece of Stigand (1913), purportedly representing 'a Persian monastery' at Lamu, is in fact a photograph of the qibla of the Liwali Seif mosque, and is recognised by some old people even today. The qibla of this mosque now bears the date 1343 A.H. or A.D. 1924/5.

J. de V. Allen

settlement covered much the same area. But the fact that most of the rest have nineteenth century qibla-dates does not mean, as has been claimed (Martin, 1973a, p. 175) that most of the present buildings in the town are nineteenth century, or that all those mosques are of nineteenth century foundation. In fact, it is fairly easy to date most stone buildings in the northern Swahili world from the
bowls and plates, generally imported from China, which are usually inset into the bottom of cisterns in both mosques and private houses (Allen, 1974a, p. 19); and by this test the vast majority over the larger part of town can be shown to be eighteenth century.

The architecture appears to have undergone a considerable change about the beginning of our period and changed again, quite suddenly and radically (especially in Lamu Town) about 1820-1830. A similar change about the same date can also be observed in other sectors of the culture, and it is this that has led me to set the end of what I have generally referred to as the 'eighteenth century' period about two decades after 1800.

After or shortly before 1700 we see the disappearance, in Swahili stone architecture, of finely-dressed coral mouldings around arches, on the salients of door-jambs, and in other, often primarily decorative contexts and the appearance and rapid spread of ornamental carved plasterwork. At the same time the guilloche or 'interlacing' designs which were found in earlier centuries on wood carvings and elsewhere completely disappear9, and are, broadly speaking, replaced either by excised geometrical patterns such as the diaper pattern or by a distinctive series of motifs including rosettes, chains etc. which are also found in some of the art of Persia and northern India. In many cases the two styles were mixed (Allen, 1973a, 1973b). Walls were built, as before, of mortar and coral rag and roofs were still laid flat and thick, but roof-beams were invariably of neatly squared mainland hardwood (usually mwangati or Terminalia brevipes, but sometimes muhuhu, Brachylaena Hutchinsii, or mbamba kofi, Afzelia quanzensis: never, contrary to a commonly held opinion, of ordinary mangrove), elegantly coloured crimson with strips of black and white and often arranged with flattish slabs of sandstone above. Plumbing and drainage arrangements, even more than in earlier centuries, reflect high standards of cleanliness and a great desire to beautify; and the surprising but unmistakable architectural resemblance between many of the domestic lavatories and the qiblas of mosques may reflect the link between godliness and cleanliness which is especially notable in Swahili society. Eighteenth century mosques have been fairly adequately, though unsympathetically, described by Garlake (1966, esp. chs. vi & vii). Large mosques were unknown but there were a great number of small ones in the main settlements. Lamu Town alone has twenty-five (including one in ruins, one under construction at time of writing, and three Shia) and the vast majority of these, as we have seen, probably existed through most of our period. Many of those outside Lamu Town (and probably most of those within it up to 1820) were decorated with elaborate plasterwork, including what appears to be a spear motif over the elaborate, trefoliate qibla, and rosettes, panels and decorative niches around it; and also on spandrels of arches and elsewhere. Some had exterior plasterwork too, which can still be seen in Shela, and rarely there were strips of coral carved in cable or chevron designs superimposed upon the panels around the qibla, usually in conjunction with plasterwork. There were no minarets, the so-called staircase minaret (Schacht, 19). It survives, and is indeed the commonest sort of design, on Somali wood-carving.
Swahili Culture

i961) being universal, but some mosques had small rooms on the roof or at the top of towers for meditation and private thanksgiving while one, at Sendeni on the mainland north of Pate Island, has a recessed minbar with steps up from the body of the mosque as well as an entrance through the qibla (Smith, 1973). In Lamu Town there was, during the nineteenth century, a marked tendency to simplify, and although the trefoil qiblas remain (and are still built today), all exterior plasterwork disappeared and much of the interior, including notably the spear motif—but not the other decoration on the qiblapanels, which survived. Such modifications were much more rarely carried out outside Lamu, and are not found even in nearby Shela. They may be interpreted as concessions to the Ibadhi beliefs of Lamu Town's new Omani rulers, although many of the older features might also be attributed to Ibadhism. It is worth noting, in passing, that there is no Ibadhi mosque in the district such as was constructed in towns further south to cater for the Al-Busaidi and their followers.

Garlake's account of eighteenth century houses in the northern Swahili world is, regrettably (since his is the only substantial study of Swahili architecture so far published), very inadequate. His verdict that "in the main, the standards of construction, decoration and design show the same marked deterioration on the earlier work so clear in eighteenth century mosques" (1966, p. 107) is impossible to accept in view of the fact that there are several hundred such houses left more or less intact in Lamu Town alone, none of which could conceivably merit such a judgement, for they are of considerable beauty and originality and demonstrate great craftsmanship and mastery of space. Many have fine plasterwork friezes or dadoes surrounding decorative wall-niches, and all have large panels or even walls consisting of rows of wall-niches (kidaka, pl. vidaka or in kiAmu zidaka2O), whose purpose is to add an illusory depth and grandeur to their long, narrow rooms, and whose construction predicates considerable vision and technological sophistication (Allen, 1973a, 1973b and 1974a pp. 16-19). The standard of plaster-carving (wazo, kuwaza) is generally excellent, with crisp, knife-like edges and a durable, creamy surface which is unfortunately usually obscured today by many layers of whitewash. The proportions of the rooms and use of gradations of light and shadow also betokens great competence and sensitivity. It is gratifying to be able to report that these eighteenthcentury northern Swahili stone houses are now increasingly attracting the attention of serious architectural scholars as one of the more important examples of building styles and techniques on the African continent (Ghaidan, 1971; Ghaidan and Hughes, 1973).

Nineteenth century houses, while often very fine and not infrequently larger than eighteenth century ones, lack much of their charm and uniqueness, being very similar to some found in India, the Persian Gulf, and of course Zanzibar, which is primarily a nineteenth and early twentieth century town. Unlike earlier ones, they have many large exterior windows21 and often balconies or verandas as well; and the open courtyard is generally replaced by a covered first-floor court which
is used for eating, tending to make the ground floor rooms dark and airless. Plasterwork and wall-niches disappear.

20. To avoid confusion, Swahili names will generally be given in the singular, non-dialectual form. 2t. Eighteenth century houses may have had upper storey windows and conceivably even ground floor ones opening into their sabule or guest chamber, where women would not normally go, but they had few or none elsewhere. Swahili houses further south may, in earlier centuries, have had rather more windows (Duarte Barbosa's description of Kilwa and Malindi in Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 131, 132).

J. de V. Allen completely, as does the subtle manipulation of light and shadow and the skilful division of space characteristic of earlier years. The inset porch (daka) also disappears, its place usually being taken by finely-carved doors such as were in the eighteenth century reserved for mosques and shops alone. The floor-plan of many nineteenth century stone houses corresponds fairly closely to that of many mud-and-thatch ones which are still found, such modifications as occur being commonly explicable in terms of the different roofing requirements of the two types of building. About eighteenth century mud buildings we know little, for obvious reasons, except that in some cases their bathrooms, which were (and still are) customarily built of stone, have survived, and these have plasterwork and wall niches much like their stone house contemporaries.

In one sphere, perhaps a little unexpectedly, the standard of Lamu architecture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries falls far behind that of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth, and that is in respect of tombs. These had previously been outstanding, both in size and in beauty, variety and originality of design. The eighteenth century produced a few impressive ones (if, indeed, those at Atu on Pate Island are eighteenth century and not seventeenth or late sixteenth: Wilding, 1972, p. 46) but nothing to rank with earlier tombs and none even comparable to the fine eighteenth and nineteenth century specimens at Kunduchi near Dar-es-Salaam (Sassoon, 1966). The Kunduchi ones include a pillar-tomb, but no pillar or domed tombs are found in the northern Swahili world after 1700. Indeed, the fine pillar-tomb at Takwa, with an inscription dated 1094 A.H./1882-3 A.D., and another outstanding one in Pate Town, dated the previous year, appear to be the last examples of their kind north of the Tana, and there are some grounds for believing that even these may have been built earlier. The two inscriptions are extraordinarily similar, and both are somewhat oddly affixed, as if perhaps by afterthought. Both read "Allah, Muhammad..." followed by the names of the first four orthodox Caliphs; and if, as has been suggested, pillar-tombs were at one time regarded as being Shia (Kirkman, 1964, p. 73), such inscriptions might have been manufactured en masse and affixed some time later with the object of so to speakde-Shianising them.22 If, as I have suggested elsewhere (Allen, 1974c), pillar-tombs in the Swahili world can be interpreted as a relic of a pre-Islamic pillar cult, their disappearance after 1700 may in itself be regarded as evidence of increasing orthodoxy.

Woodcarving
There is a good deal of eighteenth and nineteenth century woodcarving in the northern Swahili world, and it is possible to discern five or six quite distinct carving styles (Allen, 1973 a) although many individual craftsmen were capable of work in several or all of them. The best-known pieces are the doors, and it seems likely that most doors in the stone areas of town had carved frames (except in eighteenth century domestic buildings, where only a centre-post covering the crack between thin door-panels was

22. I am grateful to Dr. G. K. Smith for a reading of these inscriptions and for his suggestions about their possible significance.

There is a problem about Swahili nomenclature which is relevant. Lexicographers generally agree that kuba is a domed tomb and that any unroofed tomb is kaburi, but there is a strong school of thought in Lamu which holds all large and fine tombs, whether domed or not, to be kuba.

116 Swahili Culture
decorated) and a large proportion of those in mud-and-thatch as well. A specially fine door might consist of as many as ten heavily-carved pieces as well as the door-panels themselves, but most had only seven or eight. The majority were made from mbamba kofi (Afzelia quanzensis), muhuhu (Brachylaena Hutchinsii) or, in the case of a special kind of door found principally in Siyu and conceivably dating back to before 1700, of muia (Bruguiera Gymnorhiza). The two former were common in the Witu Forest but muia is an exceptionally heavy type of mangrove, some examples of which must have beeno judge from single planks used in some doors-over 50 m high. A few of the more simply-carved doors in poorer homes are of ordinary mangrove, mkoko or Rhizophora Mucronata. Apart from door-frames and mosque minbars, which are often most elaborately carved in a style all of their own, the commonest carved items are household utensils such as would usually have been used by women: circular trays used for eating off or for scrubbing washing (channo), coconut-graters (mbuzi), two types of pestle and mortar (kinu and kinu cha tambi), lavatory-clogs (mtaawanda, called after the timber from which they are most often made), and things of that sort. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, wooden items customarily used by men, such as the hinged Koran-rests or mirafaa, were seldom carved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Lamu area.

It has frequently been alleged that Swahili woodcarving, and carved doors in particular, are imported, or at least 'derived' or 'inspired' from outside Africa, from India, Persia or Arabia (Lqwock, 1971; Kirkman, 1964, p. 37). In so far as it means that an important branch of Swahili material culture is borrowed wholesale from some other culture, this assertion needs examining. Some motifs which we have noted as being shared by the art of Persia and northern India are found in one of the several door-carving styles and in some Swahili plasterwork. These are no grounds for deducing that all Swahili woodcarving and plasterwork, or even those parts of them where such motifs are found, are any less authentically Swahili than, say, Swahili poetry. Such motifs are, after all, very much part of the stock-in-trade of Islamic art. It is common for cultures to borrow artistic motifs and even techniques, especially within a larger cultural unity such as the Islamic
world. It is only if both motifs and techniques are put to use in exactly the same way, to produce objects whose whole conception and use is clearly imitated from a foreign model, that we begin to doubt whether the borrowing culture can rightly be recognised as a separate culture in its own right at all. But this is not the case with Swahili doors, which are entirely sui generis in conception and arrangement. They are, for example, practically never carved or decorated on the door-panels themselves; it is only the frame and the centrepiece, where there is one, which are decorated. This by itself distinguishes Swahili carved doors from any other type known to me. Again, until about 1880 (at least in Lamu: perhaps a decade earlier in Zanzibar) all Swahili doors were invariably rectangular, and their projecting edges, except on the centre-posts, unrounded. Thereafter a recognisably Indian influence begins to appear, though only on one type of carved door and only in Lamu Town. Semicircular, arched or parabolic lintels made their debut, and projecting edges were frequently rounded. The carving itself became shallower and more uniformly bevelled, the design more curvaceous with occasional representational touches such as a bird, a criss-crossed fruit, or a vase; and

23. Late nineteenth century Indianising influences reached Zanzibar, broadly speaking, during the reign of Sayyid Barghash (1870-1888).

J. de V. Allen
heavy, decorative brass knobs and padlock-chains appeared for the first time. Certain unmistakable Swahili characteristics remained, however, and there would be fewer than ten doors out of some hundreds remaining in the whole area of which one could fairly say that they were 'Indian' or 'Indian-inspired' without reservation (Allen, 1973a, 1974a, pp. 26-9).

As for 'Arab' doors, in the sense of doors imported from Arabia or closely modelled on Arabian prototypes, there are none. It is not reasonable to assume, in the absence of any recorded evidence, that a wood-carving tradition should have grown up in a territory so devoid of timber as southern Arabia and spread from there to the well-forested Swahili coast; and where carved doors are found in Arabia (as, for example, in the Hadhramaut, Oman or the Gulf towns) they are very likely to have been imported ready-made from India or from the Swahili world. Indeed, there are at least two doors in Muscat carved in typically Swahili styles (though one has panel-decorations in the Indian style added later) reportedly made of mbamba kofi and imported thither on a dhow from East Africa, although of course such details are not easy to check. It is interesting to note, however, that the wood-carving style involving the excision of a large number of (usually) geometric shapes, which in East Africa has been identified as Arab as opposed to Indian, has been called African, as opposed to Arab, when it appears in northern Africa and the Maghrib (Margais, 1957, pp. 13P-4o; Allen, 1973b).

Furniture
There are a number of indigenous furniture styles, although at least some pieces, as well as several motifs and techniques, were imported even during the eighteenth century; and in the nineteenth the proportion of imported pieces in
Lamu Town rose very sharply. Most eighteenth and nineteenth century Swahili houses were furnished almost exclusively with beds and chairs. Heavy, decorated wooden curtain-poles across the rooms, wooden chests (very rarely decorated with brass plates or studs) and a scattering of three- or four-legged stools (on which trays of sweetmeats could be stood) usually completed the household fittings.

Beds and chairs were extraordinarily numerous. I know of one nonagenarians' establishment today with fourteen large beds, eight small ones and eight pairs of chairs in the living-quarters alone—that is, not counting whatever there may have been in the harem or ndani: and I am assured that this used not to be untypical. Even humble mud-and-thatch houses in Siyu still generally have two or three beds and three or four chairs in each of their three or four rooms. Tables were unknown before about 1890, and are still relatively rare. Meals were taken off communal dishes on mats on the floor, and beds were used for putting things on as well as for members of the household and guests to sleep in. Of the latter there are still often a surprising number, the safari or journey out of one's own town on some commercial, political or family business remaining an important and typical part of the Swahili way of life. The beds were stacked in 'nests', smaller ones below the larger, behind curtains at the ends of the long rooms, and anyone wishing to sleep simply selected one and pulled the curtain across in front of it. Chairs, albeit numerous, were and still generally are reserved for guests and other important members of the family. Others sit on the floor, on beds, or on the solid benches (baraza) built in the porch of eighteenth century houses, on the verandah or in the front room of nineteenth century ones, and outside under the eaves of mud-and-thatch dwellings.

Beds with no canopies but with their turned wooden legs rising above a well-squared frame closely strung with coconut fibre cord (ulili, dim. kilili) and large, square chairs with arm-rests and, very often, foot-rests as well were typical of the eighteenth century period. Both were made of local timbers such as ebony or mpingo (Dalbergia melanoxylon), mkunazi (Zizyphus Mauritiana) or mtaawanda (Markhamia Zanzibarica), or more rarely of muia or, in poorer homes, mkoko. Many were simply inlaid with square or round pegs of another wood, of bone, ivory or silver, but on some chairs the inlay decoration was wholly or partly replaced by ornamental holes cut out of the back. All were decorated with restrained rows of delicate parallel grooves. In nineteenth century Lamu Town the beds went out of fashion and were used only for the ritual of washing dead bodies, while the chairs, even the finest of them with foot-rests and expensive inlay, were dubbed 'Slave Chairs' and relegated to back rooms: but both styles retained their popularity elsewhere in the region. Another type of chair closely related to the former did, however, develop in Lamu Town in the nineteenth century (also in Mombasa and Zanzibar, but not elsewhere in the Lamu Archipelago) and that was the kiti cha enzi, literally 'Chair of Power' and so 'Grandee's Chair' or perhaps 'throne'. This had the same square shape, high back, arms and foot-rests, but the back had strung panels and was detachable while the whole was made of ebony.
with rather more ambitious inlay in bone and ivory (in designs sometimes faintly reminiscent of nineteenth century Gujarati work). They were found in great numbers, and every reasonably wealthy home would have had four or more pairs. There were also, in the eighteenth century, beds inspired by imported models and sometimes made in imported timber, as well as some that must have been imported readymade. Two quite distinct types of bed are known as kitanda cha hindi or 'Indian bed'. One has turned legs, high head and footboards (besera) decorated with turned pins, and a canopy-frame above, the whole being covered with lacwork, a process resembling lacquering and originating in India or Ceylon: a partly-solidified vegetable dye is applied while the timber is still on the lathe, giving strips of orange, green, black, gold and very rarely pale blue. Teak (msaji) takes lac better than any other wood, and since the process is also insect-proof, the finished product is practically indestructible. Many of the beds, including some that are known to have been made in Siyu, are of teak, which must have been imported as timber. Others are made of a local mangrove-type tree known as mtu (Avicennia marina), as are the stools and many of the curtain-poles, which are also lacdecorated; and it is probably this teak-like timber which is mentioned as being available for export near Kilwa in 1777 (Freeman-Grenville, 1965, p. 208). Siyu was a great centre for lacwork, possibly the only one, until the late nineteenth century, and the technique is still remembered and very occasionally used there. The other kitanda cha hindi was usually made of Bombay blackwood, shisham or shishum in Swahili as in several

24. These are often nowadays miscalled kiti cha nipingo. Other types of large square chair are indeed known by the wood of which they are made-kiti cha mtaawanda, kiti cha mkunazi etc.; and those in the older, simpler style which are made of ebony are correctly known as kiti cha mpingo. But those with a stringpanelled removable back are definitely kiti cha enzi.

25. Another possible candidate is mwangati or Terminalia brevipes, which is excellent for building. Pace Freeman-Grenville (1965, p. 208n), teak, tectona grandis, is not native to East Africa. Nor is mvule, a mediocre timber, likely to have been described in such glowing terms.

J. de V. Allen
Indian languages (Dalbergia latifolia). It was also canopied, with carved openwork besera decorated with revolving spindles, and fluted legs. Some very opulent models were extremely high with a 'fence' of spindles all round and a gate to get in, the legs being carved with lions' feet and an eagle's head. These, which are by no means restricted to the Swahili world, were known as pavilau. Local models of a slightly more modest type were made of mgurule (Combretum Schumannii), a timber very similar in appearance to Bombay blackwood which is still plentiful in the Witu Forest. So were Swahili versions of what is indisputably a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century European style of chair with graceful proportions, sabre legs and an elegantly curved back and arms. Literally thousands of examples of these chairs, and of the shisham or mgurule beds, of all sizes, can still be seen in Lamu today, where they probably still outnumber the humbler modem wooden chairs and roughly-hewn charpoy-type beds common
along the rest of the East African coast. The chairs are strung, like ulili, through rows of perforations around the frame, but the beds, like their lacwork counterparts, are covered with a webbing made of miaa, plaited doum-palm leaf, which encircles the entire frame.

Other Items
Other items surviving from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Lamu region confirm the impression of great wealth and intense productivity which is given by the architecture and the furniture. The same impression is given by Swahili traditional literature and especially the poetry of the period. There are, it is true, a few discrepancies between the testimony of the poetry and that of the material relics in one or two minor respects: thus porcelain is mentioned only once (Hichens, 1939, pp. 80-1), yet we know it was plentiful, for a good number of glazed bowls and plates from Persia and China (and, in the nineteenth century, Europe) have come down to us, and the beaches adjacent to the settlements of the Archipelago are without exaggeration littered with their sherds. Pearls, on the other hand, which are frequently mentioned in poetry, are hardly ever to be found today. But in general the literature provides a remarkably exact account, so far as we are able to check, of daily life and its appurtenances, even when there is most temptation to suspect artistic licence. Doubt has been cast, for instance, on the story of people climbing into bed up silver ladders (Werner and Hichens, 1934, pp. 28-9; Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 256), but small kilili placed under pavilions or other beds to assist old people to climb into them are remembered occasionally to have been made of solid silver, or at any rate to have been heavily silver inlaid. While the Pate Chronicle's account of an era when rich men studded the walls of their houses with pegs of silver and gold does at least seem to fit the aesthetic ideals of the society, for it is simple silver studs that we still find in some eighteenth century chairs. Nor should we underestimate the real wealth of Pate's leading citizens. There is an elderly Nabahani lady living in Lamu who refuses to this day to wear jewellery made of silver: jewellery, in her world, is made of gold, and she can list unhesitatingly twenty-five different sorts of personal ornaments that were made of it, although by no means all of them survive. This is no place for an itemised account of all the products of northern Swahili society in this period. It remains to mention one category of things which recent writers have tended to ignore, and to comment on an unexpected lacuna. Fabrics are seldom mentioned today as a traditional Swahili product, yet the Portuguese used greatly to admire Pate silk (Dos Santos in Ethiopia Oriental, Lisbon, 1609, I.v. ch.i; cp. the footnote to Monclaro's account quoted in Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 142), and from the few pieces that are now in the Lamu Museum this is understandable: the thread was presumably imported, but it was evidently locally woven, for some looms survive, and it is heavily encrusted with silver and gold thread. Cotton, on the other hand, was locally grown and spun as well as woven, for export as well as home consumption, though Pate characteristically disdained it (Freeman-
The cotton-weaving industry was not quite dead as late as 1965, and still persists among Swahili in some towns of south Somalia. Ivorywork is unexpectedly absent. We know that it could be superbly carved from the example of the Pate siwa, a side-blown regalia-horn over two metres long dating, most probably, from shortly before 1690 (Kirkman, 1964, p. 60), and it was skilfully inlaid in the nineteenth century kiti cha enzi, but there is otherwise less of it, even in inlay-work, than we might have expected. It may have been a royal prerogative, and the rulers preferred to monopolise the profits from exporting it in its raw state rather than sharing them with local craftsmen. Or it may simply have been less highly esteemed before the nineteenth century than during and after it, and in this context a passage about ivorywork in India from Sir George Watt's encyclopaedic Indian Art at Delhi (Calcutta, 1903, pp. 172) is relevant. Watt had visited all the best-known centres of ivory carving and visited most of the palaces of the leading rulers and nobles of India in connection with preparations for the exhibition of Indian art held in connection with the 1903 Durbar. His finding—unexpected, apparently, even to himself—was that ivory carving was neither a common nor a prestigious art form, and that even where it was relatively common, antique examples of it were unknown. If this is true of India, it is perhaps not surprising if it is also the case in East Africa. There are, however, a very few exquisite daggers with ivory handles elegantly shaped and inlaid with gold, known as msu (of which the diminutive form ki-su is better known) or as kisu cha mdodoki or 'loofah knives', from the longitudinal ridges in their handles which are said to resemble that vegetable. And there are also similar locally made swords. Both were probably made well before 1700, and are remembered as a speciality of Siyu craftsmen.

**THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 'RENAISSANCE'**

Enough has been said to show that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Lamu were a period of more than average prosperity, creativity and productivity. We can plausibly speak of an economic and cultural renaissance, after the comparatively sterile period of the Portuguese occupation (Kirkman, 1964, pp. 28-9) beginning between 1650 and 1700, and accompanying Pate's political ascendancy. There was such a dense concentration of population as must have been unusual anywhere in East Africa before the present century, many of the people being town-dwellers; and these large urban societies are an example in the Fort Jesus Museum.

26. A very plain ivory knife-handle was excavated in the earliest levels at Manda. And Monclaro mentions ivory-handled knives sold in Mombasa in the mid-sixteenth century (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 14on) called musios. This word may be connected with msu, or possibly with m-Siyu, a man of Siyu'. It is possible that some or all of these knife handles may turn out to have been made, not of ivory but of whale teeth, whose shape lends itself well to the purpose.

**Plate 1**

(a) Wall-niche of ornamental design surrounded by panel of carved plasterwork c. 2m. high. Such panels are typical of eighteenth century houses in the Lanu region. (Photo: Irene Sedgwick).
(b) Small panel of wall-niches with plasterwork border from eighteenth century house, Shela, Lamu Island.  
(Plate II)  
(123x726) (a) Carved door with Perso-Indian motifs and Koranic inscription, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, Lamu. Koranic inscriptions are far less common in Lamu than in Zanzibar doors of this type.  
(123x557) (Photo: Ann Dill)  
(b) Carved door, Lamu Town, late nineteenth century, showing Indianising influence. The emblem above, recognisable to most western observers as a stylized peacock, is always described as a cashew nut. (Photo: Ann Dill)  
(c) Part of carved door from Siyu now in Lamu Museum. Eighteenth century or earlier. (Photo: Vic Tomasyan)  

Plate III  
(a) Two eighteenth century Swahili beds, one under the other. Wealthier models are sometimes inlaid with bone, ivory, ebony or silver, possibly even gold. (Photo: Ann Dill).  
(b) Eighteenth or nineteenth century Swahili chair of ebony and mkunazi (Zizyphus Mauritiana), inlaid with bone. Chairs of this type, many inlaid with ivory, silver and other woods, others simpler with decorative holes, are common in the Lamu region. (Lamu Museum collection. Photo: Jill Morley-Smith)  
(c) Ebony chair inlaid with bone and ivory and strung with cotton cord (kiti cha enzi). Nineteenth century. Lamu Museum collection. (Photo: Jill Morley-Smith)  

Plate IV  
(a) Ivory knife handle of msu or kisu cha mdodoki inlaid with gold. L. 14 cm. (Photo: R. E. Beatty)  
(b) Late eighteenth century manuscript book in Arabic from Faza. (Photo: J. de V. Allen)  
(c) Decorated gold ear-plugs (kuta); both sides are decorated. (Lamu Museum collection. Photo: R. E. Beatty)  
(d) Brass siwa of Lamu (top) and ivory siwa of Pate, tentatively dated to late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. The bla section in the inscription on the brass siwa represents a recent repair. Ivory siwa is c. 2.15 in in length. (Lamu Museu Photo: Vic Tomasyan)  

J. de V. Allen  

&.  
manufactured many of their own material requirements to high standards of beauty and opulence. Imports were by no means unknown during the eighteenth century, and much of what was imported was both expensive and fine: but they were adapted and used within the framework of a typically Swahili culture, and the impression one gets is of a self-confident, creative and by and large self-reliant society setting its own fashions and catering to its own tastes, and well able
to deal with the various political and economic challenges which must periodically have confronted it.

The situation began to change after 1820, when Pate had finally collapsed and the political leadership in Lamu Town passed to the ruler of Oman. There was a clear and important turning-point in the development of the material culture as well. In Lamu Town itself there was frantic competition to adopt foreign styles: eighteenth century houses perforce remained, but no new ones were built in the former style and in smaller items such as furniture and kitchen utensils there was a scramble to acquire the Indian or Indian-type models which the Al-Busaidis brought with them to Zanzibar, while in jewellery and personal ornaments Omani styles were imitated.

Outside Lamu, and especially in Siyu ("town of craftsmen", as one version of the Pate Chronicle calls it, and unquestionably the greatest centre for most locally manufactured goods up to 1865) these new trends were not unnaturally resisted. Old men still recall the Omanioriented merchants of Lamu sneering at their Siyu counterparts who were not interested in 'the latest thing' from Bombay or the Gulf, and Siyu townsmen in their turn scorning Lamu for its affectation of foreign ways. And no doubt the people of Pate affected to despise both equally (as to some extent they still do) with that peculiar jealousy reserved for their more prosperous successors by the proud but bankrupt adherents of an ancient regime. Whereas previously the initiative had been with the people of the Lamu region themselves, and cultural unity transcended political divisions, after 1820 this was no longer the case. And although productivity and standards of taste and comfort remained high for a while, cultural self-confidence and self-reliance, of the type associated with the double-storey stone-house dwellers of Pate in the eighteenth century, was steadily ebbing, so that one can speak of a Silver Age shortly replacing the Golden one that had preceded it.

The Economic Background to the Northern Swahili Renaissance

What was it that enabled such relatively large urban populations to enjoy such a high standard of living? Western sources throw very little light on this problem. Indeed, they are almost silent about the northern Swahili world in the eighteenth century, and it is easy to see how some writers, relying unduly upon them, have come to believe that no significant revival took place at all. Very few westerners recorded visits to the Lamu

28. For example, no plasterwork is found in the nineteenth century section of Lamu Town described in n. 13.

29. Eighteenth century wooden utensils, such as are still used up and down the coast by rural-dwellers and a few poor townsmen, were replaced in the nineteenth century (except for the carved pieces) by brass and copper pieces made in India. At the same time the kisu cha mdokoki (if, indeed, it was ever widely worn) gave way to the Omani-style lambia, a curved dagger in a heavily-decorated silver sheath, and such items as the large, heavily-buckled silver wedding belt with bells were also adopted from Oman. Such pieces were often, however, not imported ready made but, in many cases at least, the work of Swahili smiths.

Swahili Culture
area between Fra Gaspar de Santo Bernardino, who wrote glowingly of his visit in 1606, and Owen and Boteler in the 1820s (Owen, 1833, i, pp. 356-434). One of the more perceptive of East African travellers in the interim, Prior, who landed at Kilwa in 1811, provided a possible explanation for this when he wrote that "Melinda and Brava, to the north of Mombasa, have not been visited by navigators of the nineteenth century; and all the information we have gained is, that they are independent and, wishing to remain so, cordially detest and exclude strangers. I commend their wisdom..." (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 212). He cannot have meant Malindi, which did not exist as an international port at that time (Martin, 1973a, pp. 44-5), but he may have had in mind the area between Malindi and Barawa (Brava), that is, the Lamu Archipelago: in which case his confusion is a measure of their success in keeping themselves to themselves.

Further evidence that the Lamu towns wished to conceal their wealth may possibly be found in the eighteenth century domestic architecture. Exteriors are generally uncompromisingly bleak, the high, windowless walls of rough coral and mortar blackened by age giving no intimation of the splendours and luxury within. Even a welcome houseguest would not necessarily have seen the plasterwork, the profusion of carving and inlaid furniture and the gold- and silver-embroidered silks hanging from teak poles which adorned the wealthier homes, for the guest-room (sabule) with its own toilet was, in most such homes, divided by a high wall from the inner courtyard and the rest of the house to secure the seclusion of the women; and it often even had its own separate entrance. This perhaps explains why, even when commercial agents from Western countries began to visit Lamu (the British and French sent agents before, the Americans shortly after 1850; Nicholls, 1971, pp. 339-40) relatively little became known about it in the outside world, although to judge from the ubiquity of European and American trade goods after 1850, Lamu had some acquaintance with this world outside. Among the commonest pieces are wall clocks from America, wall mirrors from Germany, and French, Dutch or Italian plates; while until recently no self-respecting woman of Pate would be seen without a U.S. gold dollar, minted in Philadelphia in 1851, 1852, 1853 or 1854, in one of her nostrils.

Cowries

The apparent ignorance in Europe of Lamu's wealth and the secretiveness of the Archipelago towns in the eighteenth century require some explanation. Perhaps there was some sort of trade which they were anxious to keep from Western eyes. Cowries are a strong possibility. The money cowrie, cypraea moneta, has been the subject of some strange delusions among western writers. As recently as 1972 it was claimed that it was not indigenous to the African continent at all (Mauny, 1970), and even Marion Johnson in her exhaustive work on the cowrie currencies of western Africa insists that money cowries have always come from the Maldive Islands, and that they are smaller than, and quite easily distinguishable from, the East African cypraea annulus (pp. 18, 21). Cypraea moneta is in fact quite common in the Lamu region, where it is if anything larger than cypraea annulus, but juveniles are often found, and it is difficult for any but the wariest expert to distinguish between juveniles of the two types, especially when they have
been first buried in the sand and then bleached in the sea—the normal procedure for those being exported to West Africa or Bengal. Both types, too, are very easily found, and just across the Kenya-Somalia border are still being ‘trapped’ by the same method that is described as having been used in the Maldives, that is, by floating rafts of coconut foliage or beach grasses. Bearing all this in mind, a good case can be made for the suggestion that many cowries bought by western merchants in the Maldives had previously been secretly shipped thither from the northern Swahili coast in Arab or Swahili vessels.

The evidence is inevitably circumstantial, since we are discussing a trade which was secret, but it is worth reviewing nevertheless. Cowries of both types had already reached West Africa via North Africa before the Portuguese period (Johnson, 1970, p. 18; Monod, 1969, pp. 286-320), and there is a certain amount of rather tenuous evidence that the Swahili world and the Maghrib may have been in contact somewhere before our period, perhaps through the Ibadhi community who had an important commercial empire in the latter place. The development of the cowrie trade in East Africa might be connected with the Hatimi of Barawa, a group said to have originated in Andalusia, whose wealth and grandeur secured a mention in the Pate Chronicle for their arrival in Pate, perhaps around 1600 (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 258). They subsequently founded Kunduchi, Mboamaji and Dar es Salaam (p. 233; Freeman-Grenville, 1963, p. 147), all in good cowrie territory. In any case, whatever the source, by the eighteenth century cowries were big business. In 1720 some 400 million shells per year were leaving Europe for the West African trade, let alone what was going to Bengal: a rate of export which, as Johnson herself admits, could hardly have been maintained by any single fishing-ground for long (Johnson, p. 21). It is hard to think where they could have come from if not from East Africa and the other Indian Ocean islands, for the Dutch would surely have discovered them if they had come in any great numbers from the East Indies. We know that Barawa, at least, had early trade links with the Maldives, for Ibn Battuta mentions sheep imported to the islands from the Benadir coast (Gibb, 1929, p. 247). Cowries from East Africa could either have been packed alive on the rafts used for trapping them (which would have been sprinkled with sea-water on the way and dumped overboard at some Maldivian port) or used as ballast, to be reburied until needed on arrival. In either case they could have been easily concealed from Westerners. They probably also went from Pate to the Comoros, with which the Nabahanis had close links (Nicholls, 1971, p. 120) and on some of whose chango (carved wooden lamp-stands for hanging on a wall) cowrie designs appear.

By the 1770s the trade was no longer entirely secret, for British and Indian vessels were taking between two and three hundred tons (something like two hundred million shells) per year from the Archipelago (Nicholls, 1971, p. 91), but no doubt local vessels were also carrying them. Morice claimed that these cowries were
usable only in Bengali meaning, presumably, that West Africa insisted on Maldivian ones—but this may have been just the story he was given (Freeman-Grenville, 1965, p. 120). The West African cowrie market collapsed in the years 1800-1820 (as, apparently by coincidence, did Pate).

3. For the possibility of a link between Swahili plasterwork and that of the Maghrib (and thence possibly Andalusia), see Allen, 1973a, p. 8.

32. Johnson, 1970, p. 17n quotes a Dutch source as saying that many cowries were found ready buried in the ground.

Swahili Culture

but revived thereafter, and in the 1820s Boteler described cowries as the chief cargo in local boats on the Swahili coast (Johnson, p. 22; Owen, 1833, i, p. 391). Between 1836 and 1844 the British and, more especially, the Germans started taking East African cowries direct to West Africa, and it is noteworthy that by then any objections to them which may previously have existed among West Africans had completely disappeared, and they were bought in enormous quantities—4,000 million between 1851 and 1869 (Johnson, pp. 23-5). But by this time the situation which Pate and her clients had sought to avoid before 1820, if I am correct, had come about: Zanzibari and western merchants were deeply involved in the commerce and little if any of the profit percolated back to the Lamu area. Already before 1850, according to reports by Guillain and Loarer, the export of cowries from the Archipelago had ceased (Nicholls, p. 374).33

Ivory and other Natural Products

Ivory is another candidate for the role of mainstay of the Lamu region's economy in our period. Once again, statistics are rare before the mid-nineteenth century, by which time an insatiable western market had been added to the traditional Indian and Chinese ones, but there are also more western and Zanzibari businessmen to skim off the profits. In 1849 Guillain and Loarer reported that ivory from the Lamu region was recognised as being of the worst quality on the coast but that still about 2,000 frasilas or rather more than twenty tons were sold in a year. This, at an average price of between $25 and $35 perfrasila for poor ivory, would have brought in some $50-75,000 annually (Nicholls, p. 355). A century before things might have been better. The poor ivory is said to come from the lower Tana and the Tana hinterland; better quality was to be had further inland among the Kamba. By 1850 the Kamba were beginning to bring their own ivory down to the coast near Mombasa themselves, but there was also a 'Pokomo route' for ivory (Administrative Report, 1873-4), and it is possible that during the eighteenth century the inland tribes sent far more down by this way. This is as yet very hypothetical. What is certain is that the ivory was brought either along the Tana by the Pokomo or across country by the Galla. There was never any question of the Lamu Swahilis themselves going to collect it (Nicholls, p. 355).

Some of the luxury items the Lamu Archipelago has always exported—hippo teeth, tortoiseshell, beeswax and rhinoceros horn—would have come from the same or similar mainland sources, as would gum copal, gum arabic and calumb a root (of which Isaacs was able to purchase 90 frasilas or nearly fifteen tons in Lamu:
Isaacs, 1836, ii, p. 323); while a few others—orchella weed, tobacco, ambergris and civet musk—\(^{34}\) the Swahili were able to collect for themselves. It is impossible to say what proportion of the region’s wealth came from such items in early years, but it is worth noting that in 1634 Rezende listed ivory, ambergris and civet as the principal sources of Portuguese income for the whole coast from Mafia to the Benadir (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 184).

33. However, cowries were still being collected near Kiunga in the 1890s (FitzGerald, 1898, pp. 439, 441) and along the Benadir coast in the 1960s (Travis, 1967, p. 56). 34. According to a seventeenth century Portuguese source, civet cats were bred on Pate Island for their musk (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 1x).

J. de V. Allen

**Slaves**

It is now generally agreed that slave trading did not play an important part in the northern Swahili economy before the nineteenth century. Slavery as an institution of course existed, but the local hinterland populations were not good slave material, and when Lamu expanded its mainland estates in the nineteenth century it was necessary to import more slaves from the south in order to do it. From about 1840 to 1885, to be sure, a freak circumstance enabled the townsfolk to profit from the slave trade. British pressure on the Zanzibar Sultan to permit no slaves to be exported from his territories encouraged the die-hard traders to move their cargoes to Lamu, usually on foot, disguised as their own personal slaves, and then to export them from a little further north, which was de facto independent territory. And Lamu merchants did not miss the opportunity to act as middlemen (Coupland, 1939, pp. 221-2). But this late boom was irrelevant to the general economic revival, unless perhaps it helped briefly to postpone its end.

**Mangrove Poles**

It seems unlikely that the mangrove industry was of any great significance either, although it has generally been assumed that it must have been. As already noted, mangroves were not used for the roofing of stone houses in the eighteenth century nor except in the special case of muia—were they used for any but the humblest doors and furniture. Morice, writing of Kilwa in the 1770s, makes no mention of the mangrove trade, nor does Guillain some eighty years later, although he was in general an extremely reliable reporter. Finally, and to my mind conclusively, it has been convincingly shown that Arab and Swahili vessels were too small, before 1850, to carry them in economic bulk. Between 1850 and 1950 the average size of these vessels swelled from about 50 to about 130 tons, and the growth of the mangrove export industry is the best and almost only plausible explanation for this development (Prins, 1965/6, pp. 4-5). Fine hardwood timber like mwangati may, of course, have formed an occasional cargo, and this is probably what was referred to in the 1873/74 Administrative Report as ‘Zanzibar rafters’. 35 Carved doors, too, and furniture may well have been taken to the Persian Gulf by dhow-sailors= large, ornate beds are still sometimes taken today. But for a regular and a
significant trade in mangrove poles, which had to be extremely cheap even when they reached their destination, the older boats were simply not large enough.

Agriculture and Livestock
Trade in cowries, ivory and various other non-cultivable commodities which were either brought from the interior or collected in the Archipelago and along the beaches of the mainland must, then, have accounted for much of Lamu district's wealth. It did not account for all of it, and agricultural products, whether ultimately exported or consumed, were also economically important. (Millet is widely recalled as having been used almost like currency, being bartered for everything both in the country and in the towns.) There is some evidence for this in the social values of Lamu Town today. Members of long-established families are loath to admit that they are or ever have been shopkeepers or merchants-roles they hold to be more suitable for parvenu immigrants from India or Arabia-and insist that they are traditionally the owners of estates. The claim is in many cases open to question, but the mere fact that it is made is significant for it suggests 35. Seen. 25.

Swahili Culture
that estate-owners (i.e. townspeople owning and drawing their income from farming land, not rural-dwellers) had a higher status than merchants during the golden past. Certainly during the nineteenth century each of the Archipelago towns had its reserved mainland sphere where many of the established families, along with other townspeople of more recent origin, staked their claims. Crops included various types of millet, simsim or sesame, maize, rice and cotton as well as cashews, coconuts, mangoes, bananas and other fruits and vegetables. All sources agree that Lamu's agricultural exports were considerable, although from 1870 onwards insecurity, resulting from the operations of the Somalis, of the Swahili Sultanate of Witu, and of the semi-independent villages of runaway slaves (watoro) is constantly being cited as a reason for the decline and abandonment of estates (Piggott, 1889, p. 130; Gedge, 1892, pp. 515-6; Administrative Report for 1873-4; FitzGerald, 1898, p. 353; Jackson, 1930, p. 21).

The question arises, how far back in time may we assume this agricultural prosperity to have begun? In order to show that it could have begun by 1700 or shortly after, it is first necessary to dispose of two objections. First, was not the mainland dominated, between about 1650 and 1820, by fierce nomadic Galla, who destroyed places like Malindi and Gedi and who prevented the islanders from settling there? Secondly, how were mainland estates farmed if not by slaves? And where, in the eighteenth century, did the slaves come from, for in the nineteenth they had to be shipped in from Tanzania and beyond?

We have no very clear record of what the raids of the Galla and, in the later nineteenth century, the Somalis were like, but it is a reasonable assumption that they were not very different from the activities of the Somali so-called shifita guerillas in the same territory in the first few years after Kenya's independence, when the land down to the Tana was claimed by the Somali Republic. The following account of these activities is derived from first hand oral and visual evidence. Swahili settlements, hated by the nomadic pastoralists for all that they
represented, were subjected to a series of short, sharp attacks, seldom lasting more than a few hours but repeated time and again until their inhabitants fled to the islands, in which the raiders were not interested: the settlements were then looted, destroyed and abandoned. What the aggressive newcomers sought was, first and foremost, water and grazing for their cattle, but also living-space for themselves, and they mercilessly eliminated all but the most cowed of forest-dwellers south to the Tana and beyond. There is, however, a limit to the time such activities can persist if they are successful. Once secure in sufficient territory, the raiders inevitably become less aggressive. Perhaps corrupted by the loot taken from towns, perhaps made soft by the absence of serious opposition, they begin to acquire more than a minimum of permanent possessions and to seek still more. They visit the island towns peaceably, at first out of curiosity, later to trade. They stay around them for days, months, years, and remarkably quickly, perhaps within five or ten years of their first appearance on the scene, they have working arrangements with the merchants to market their cattle and hides in exchange for luxury and trade goods. Some of their children may actually settle and become permanent townsmen. Certainly when the next wave or 'tribe' of invaders arrives, pressed down inexorably by overpopulation and chronic dessication in the Horn of Africa, the earlier ones find themselves classed, by their property and way of life, among the enemy, and so pre-committed to the townsmen's cause. Somali in almost every stage of this transformation can still be encountered in Lamu district today.

J. de V. Allen
This must have happened many times in the history of the northern Swahili world. Some mainland settlements have corresponding island villages to which their inhabitants have always fled when raiders from the north appeared (Chittick, 1974, p. 105). There are many historical references to Galla and Somali, not attacking the Swahili towns but rather helping to defend them—Pate had a Galla town guard in 1687 (Kirkman, 1964, p. 59) and Siyu had its Somali sheikh from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. And there is still a large section of the Bajun people, known as the wa-Katwa, who in the Galla-Somali tradition refuse to eat fish and who by their physiognomy frequently suggest a large admixture of Galla or Somali blood. Even during the 1870s, at the very time when so-called 'bush Somalis' were terrorising the mainland from Kau to Kiunga, Shela, a few miles along the beach from Lamu Town, was being described as "a regular Somali suburb" (Administrative Report, 1873-4), and there is a mosque known as the Msikiti ya wa-Katwa, founded or re-founded in 1857, there to this day. A close relationship has also long existed between Somali cattle-owners and Lamu merchants, who look after their affairs and money for them while they return to Somalia.

Another sort of evidence for the absorption of Galla and Somali into northern Swahili society, or at least into the economic networks of Pate, Siyu and Lamu, is provided by constant references to cattle and to trade in hides. Some cattle may have been entirely Swahili-owned—there was certainly livestock in Pate Island in the second half of the nineteenth century (Administrative Report). But many
things suggest that the herds were much larger than the islands could ever have sustained. There was a Pate ruler who was known for his great love of his herds, and the brother of another was nicknamed Mwenye Ngombe or 'Lord of the cows' (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 158; Chittick, 1969a, p. 381). Swahili myths refer to Pate men rich in cattle (Knappert, 1970, pp. 122 if). And there is the odd story in the Pate Chronicle of a famine so severe that people had to eat the (leather) tops of stools (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 265)-strange, in an island surrounded by seas rich in fish, unless the people of Pate at that time would not eat fish, in which case pastoralist values must have penetrated Pate society far more deeply than has generally been realised. As far as the hide trade is concerned, no statistics are available before the nineteenth century, but by then the Swahili coast was selling a large and increasing number (28,000 in 1849, 35,000 in 1856 and 95,000 in 1859) and of these the bulk seem likely to have come from the northern Swahili world (Nicholls, p. 366), and the vast majority from Somali and Galla settled on the mainland nearby.

As regards crop agriculture, there is no evidence that it depended, in the eighteenth century in the Lamu region, upon slaves. It has sometimes been assumed that it must have done so, by analogy with what happened in the late nineteenth century estates belonging to Lamu Townsmen. But it is much more logical to suppose that nineteenth century Lamu Town was, in this matter as in almost everything else, exceptional because it followed the Omani-Zanzibar lead, and to look at nineteenth century practice in the

36. Sacleux, 1939, p. 1013, describes the wa-Katwa as "a Swahili tribe of Siyu" and adds that they "form a special clan of the wa-Gunya or Bajun. They are found on Pate Island, but their principal abode is on the mainland opposite, where the wa-Boni live among them in a state of bondage. They have a taboo against eating fish." This might well describe the Galla. Wa-Katwa are also mentioned in the Pate Chronicle (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 261; cp. Strandes, x961, p. 298, 'Maracatos'). 37. This ruler is mentioned in the Cusack version of the Pate Chronicle.

Swahili Culture

Siyu and Pate mainland areas for evidence of how the eighteenth century system is likely to have worked. The following account is once more substantially based on oral tradition and visual experience.38

Let us compare the two nineteenth century systems, that of Lamu on the one hand and those of Pate and Siyu on the other. Lamu's mainland sphere was more or less opposite Lamu Island, centering on Hindi and Mkunumbi. Her rich men (tajiri) lived all the year round in town, visiting their mainland estates (konde) only occasionally to give orders or check up on the supervision. All the work was done by slaves living together more or less permanently in villages and supervised by senior or trusted slaves (nokoa). Each slave usually had his own plot which he could farm for two days each week, but sometimes his owner would rent out the whole konde to individual slaves, who kept the produce in return for a 'rent' which was fixed when their owner saw the size of the harvest. It is clear that this system was, in fact, dependent upon slavery as an institution. Slaves obeyed the nokoa
who drew his authority ultimately from the tajiri, and it was the tajiri who decided what was to be done and how the slaves would be rewarded. The slaves' only sanction against him was to flee and join one of the runaway slave villages inland, as many did: if they had all done so Lamu's mainland sphere could not have been cultivated at all.

A very different system prevailed in the Pate sphere south of Lamu's and in the Siyu and Faza ones to the north of it. Pate islanders had farms on Pate Island known as shamba, but many had mainland interests as well. They usually lived in their island towns but crossed seasonally to farm. Each group was led by a ritual 'farm leader' or jumbe ya wakulima, one for each settlement (or three or four for a large settlement, in which case families tended to group together). This man might be a freeman or he might be a slave for he was appointed solely for his skill and good fortune in judging the seasons to burn, clear, sow and harvest. Everybody, whether tajiri or nokoa, freeman or slave, worked on the communal tasks and everybody obeyed the jumbe ya wakulima. Even Mzee bin Seif, ruler of Faza, who took some five hundred slaves to the mainland with him, buckled down to work beside them when ordered to do so by the jumbe ya wakulima, and dared not disobey his orders even to greet important visitors (FitzGerald, p. 392). Slaves' plots were grouped separately from freemen's plots, but everybody co-operated in the communal tasks of clearing, burning, and harvesting, everybody lived in the same temporary village, and everybody contributed to a common stock of meat and grain. This system clearly did not depend, in the way that Lamu Town system depended, upon the slavemaster relationship: on the contrary, the institution of jumbe ya wakulima cut right across it. The Pate-Siyu system had a number of other features which further distinguish it from the Lamu Town one and which have an indigenous and traditional aura about them. A great ngoma or processional dance was held each year on the last night before the townsmen crossed to the mainland, and during it all those who were to cross visited and were entertained by each of the tajiri in their homes. The fields were then cleared, and on the night before they were burned, all took part in a traditional song, the wawe or wawe, of considerable antiquity, some of whose words were almost certainly already archaic by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

38. I am much indebted to Marguerite Ylvisaker who has done detailed work on this subject, for some of this information, which has been confirmed and amplified by local informants.

J. de V. Allen

Both systems shared one important trait: no konde-land was permanently owned. Long-term crops like fruit trees were usually planted on the islands, or very near to permanent settlements on the mainland, and these areas were known as shamba and could be private property in the usual sense. But the konde was for short-term cultivation only. Once the land was cleared and planted, it was regarded as belonging to the cultivator, but only so long as he made use of it. And since most cultivators practised shifting agriculture, leaving one year's fields to lie fallow until the bush grew tall again, and often moving to a completely new area every five or six years, this meant that the boundaries of the islanders' estates were
always changing, and that there was always empty land in any of the towns’ mainland spheres where there was no objection to outsiders, even those from other towns, settling for a while. 

Here other mainland peoples—the Boni and Sanye or Dahalo (who were mostly hunters and gatherers, but sometimes settled to farm a little: Boteler’s Journal in Owen, 1833, II, p. 392; Salkeld, 1905, pp. 168-70; Elliott, 1913, p. 557) and the Pokomo, who lived by the Tana and regarded their own land as stretching an unlimited distance back from the river banks (so that even when the river was flooded they would have somewhere to plant) could come into contact with the Swahili and be absorbed by them. So too could the pastoralists. There was, for example, a large Galla settlement at Msanga near Mkunumbi (Clive’s ‘Short History of Lamu’ in Lamu District Office Files), and some old Mkunumbi families who today call themselves Swahilis have a tradition of cattle-keeping and land-owning in that precise spot. The Pate-Siyu cultivation system, in particular, offered considerable opportunities and even incentives to outsiders to join in. All they had to do was to obey the jumbe ya wakulima and they could reap all the benefits of communal clearing and harvesting and enjoy the relative security of a large settlement. It is not hard to imagine how, when fresh raids began, many such mainlanders would have gone back to the islands with their hosts and so completely lost their former identity. This would explain how some Pate townsmen, for instance, came to be known as the wa-Ozi and bear a marked physical resemblance to the Pokomo, who lived along the banks of what used to be the Ozi and is now the Tana River adjoining Pate’s mainland sphere. (There is also a mosque called Msikiti wa wa-Pokomo at Pate, tentatively dated to the early eighteenth century: Chittick, 1967, p. 60). It would also help to explain the population density on the islands in the eighteenth century, which would otherwise have to be accounted for by a soaring birthrate or immigration from overseas. There was, to be sure, some such immigration: it is only reasonable to assume that families like the Hatimi and the Nabahani did not arrive alone, and several Lamu families trace their original arrival from Oman back to about A.D. 1700. But there is no tradition of massive migration much before 1820, while the total sum of the evidence for continual ‘seepage’ from the mainland onto the islands is quite impressive. 

In short, we can, I think, assume that mainland agriculture was not entirely curtailed, from one end of the eighteenth century to the other, by Galla and Somali raids. The picture is much more one of a patchwork of Swahili and non-Swahili cultivators, with an occasional sprinkling of semi-Swahiliised pastoralists among them, all drawn together by their common interests and common fear of fresh Galla or Somali aggression, and all-or almost all-being forced to withdraw to the islands periodically, for two, three, four or five years at a time (but probably not often longer) when a new wave of invaders arrived. The towns grew and flourished, not least on account of the regular supply of

Swahili Culture

fresh manpower. But they were not (or not at first), like modern towns, parasitic, dependent upon a permanent rural population for their food-supplies—much less
upon a regular supply of slaves. The townsmen themselves went out, whenever possible, to grow their own crops; and in good years it is not inconceivable (though we cannot for the moment put it more strongly than that) that they grew sufficient grain for export, to supplement the wealth of the Archipelago as a whole.

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NORTHERN SWAHILI RENAISSANCE

We have established, largely on the evidence of the surviving material culture, that there was an important renaissance in the northern Swahili world between c.1700-1860, and have come to some rather more tentative conclusions about its economic base. Let us now briefly consider our findings in the context of what has previously been written about Swahili culture and East African coastal history generally.

There is a fairly well-established view of Swahili history and society which can, for the sake of brevity and at the risk of oversimplification, be reduced to four general propositions which I shall consider seriatim.

(i) It is a seafarers-facing society, both spiritually and economically more a part of the Near and Middle East than of the African continent. More specifically, it draws its wealth almost entirely from foreign and entrepôt trade and its cultural inspiration, if not the whole culture itself, from overseas. It is sustained by its links with India, Arabia and the Persian Gulf: when these decline, both prosperity and quality of life decline with them.

This was certainly not true of the northern Swahili world in the 1700-1900 period. Trade with Asia and (later) the West was, of course, important, but only a proportion of the items traded came from the coast itself. Others came from the interior, and the severance of these inland trade routes which occurred, effectively, in the colonial period was quite as disastrous as the cutting of overseas links, arguably more so. Mainland agriculture and relations with the hinterland peoples were also important factors governing the district's general prosperity. At a rather different level it is possible to argue that, in the eighteenth century when Pate was dominant and the Lamu region made its own economic decisions and decided its own tastes and fashions, it enjoyed a Golden Age. When in 1812/3 Oman got a foothold in Lamu Town, and the Indian and Western merchants who followed in the train of the al-Busaidi dynasty began to interfere with the region's trading patterns, decline set in and a Silver Age was rapidly followed by a total collapse.

According to Garlake, "The culture was provincial-initiative was always from abroad... " (1966, p. 2). This notion that there was some sort of umbilical cord leading back to Asia through which Swahili culture was nourished is incompatible with the evidence provided in the first section. Eighteenth century northern Swahili architecture was, pace Garlake, so different from anything recorded in Arabia or India that it must be regarded as a spontaneous local phenomenon. Some designs, some techniques were, of course, imported from abroad, as they were in wood-carving, in furniture-making and in other sectors of the material culture; but there were many things that did not come from abroad; while those that did were invariably subjected to the Swahili mode. We
J. de V. Allen

have examined this process in some detail in connection with door-carving, and the same can be shown to have applied in every other sector of the culture.

(ii) Swahili society stems from two technologically disparate and racially discrete sources: from the Arab and Persian colonists who, as founders of the coast towns, entered the social pyramid at the top, and from the Africans, who entered it at the bottom, generally as slaves. And, in spite of extensive intermarriage, the social and cultural gap between the two has never quite closed.

This is not the place to consider theories regarding the origin of the East African coastal towns, although it may be noted that the view that they were founded by Muslim immigrants from Asia is not above dispute. An alternative theory mentioned over ten years ago by Mathew (Oliver and Mathew, 1963 pp. ii5-6) that they started as coastal settlements of Africans for trading purposes and were joined by Asian immigrants only later finds a certain amount of supporting evidence in the Lamu region where it merits further research.

The notion that the elite of northern Swahili society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should be identified as Arabs, and were quite distinct from the 'African' masses is hard to sustain. In Kilwa in the 1770s Morice identified three groups - mainland Africans, whose number included the King; a large number of island-dwellers with their own leader or vizier whom he called 'Moors' (and whom I, with Freeman-Grenville, would call 'Swahilis'); and an island minority who were clearly newcomers from Oman and who had recently tried, without success, to overthrow the other two, to whom they were for the moment subordinate (Freeman-Grenville, 1965, pp. 39-52). Adhering for the time being to these categories, it is clear that 'Moors' were generally supreme in the Lamu region. Rezende reported in 1634 that Lamu had a 'Moorish' king although the inhabitants were "for the most part Arabs and regard themselves as more noble than those of Pate and Ampaza" (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, p. 181). The 'Moorish' ruler subsequently disappeared and Lamu was ruled by a council of eminent families, but as we have seen, Greffulhe in the 1870s regarded these eminent families as 'Swahilis' as opposed to (Omani) Arabs, and there are several elderly members of Lamu families who can still remember when to have been called an Arab would have been an insult. The Nabahani of Pate might be thought to be Arabs, since their ancestors ruled Oman as the Nabhan dynasty, but in the 1860s they specifically called the state they had set up around Kau and Witu the 'Swahili Sultanate', and in the first decade of this century Stigand chose the Nabahani as the classic example of an old Swahili family (1913, p. 11S). Another leading Pate family at one time, the Hatimi, are said to have come from another Swahili town, Barawa, and before that from Andalusia. Mzee bin Seif of Faza was variously described as having Turkish ancestry and being 'a cadet of the Sindi house, one of the three ruling clans of Faza' (Holmwood's Report, 1874; Hardinge, 1897) but is nowhere said to be an Arab. While Siyu, large and culturally important town that it was and at one time described as "the pulse of the whole district" (Administrative Report, 1873-4), was ruled first by a Somali sheikh from the
mainland and a sheikh of the Famau clan (who never even in the colonial period pretended to Arab blood), and later by the Famau alone. It was only during the British period that it became fashionable and indeed, in many cases, almost obligatory for any Swahili with claims to social standing to adopt the title 'Arab' in order to qualify for the long list of administrative and other favours offered.

Swahili Culture

Swahili exclusively to 'Arabs' under the British administration (Hyder Kindy, 1972, ch. iv & passim). This does not mean that before 1900 we cannot speak of an 'arabising tradition' in Swahili society, to which I shall return below. But the social and (except where the Omanis took power) political establishment was probably never, between 1700 and 1900, for any long period in the hands of Arabs as such. Nor was traditional Swahili society immutably divided along any sort of racial or cultural lines. Cultural divisions there were. The division between townsmen and countrymen ran very deep and in the minds of the Swahilis themselves was fundamental. To this too we shall return below. There was also the division several times referred to between those who lived in stone houses and those who lived in mud-and-thatch, which affected behaviour, dress and values, as it does today, both in the Lamu region and elsewhere in East Africa (Hino, 1968 a, b, c and 1971). But one of the reasons why it was so important was precisely because the gulf that divided the two groups could be and often was crossed in either direction.

Yet the artefacts used by both groups were unmistakably in the same tradition. There were fine beds for the rich and humble ones for the poor but they were all either ulili or one of the two types of kitanda cha hindi (the pavilau being no more than a variant of the latter). Likewise there are large chairs with foot-rests and expensive inlay for important people and smaller ones without foot-rests and with only a few ornate holes carved in the back for those of humbler station, but all belonging unmistakably to the same category which is found in stone and mud-and-thatch houses alike. The picture is the same in every sector of the material culture. Even the houses are more similar than has often been assumed, mud-and-thatch ones usually having stone toilets (which, in the eighteenth century, were decorated with wall-niches and plasterwork) while so-called 'stone' ones often turn out to have a remarkable amount of mud in their walls (Allen, 1974a, p. 20).

(iii) The history of Swahili civilisation is a history of townsmen, who, if they were not actually Arabs, were at least in different degrees arabised. First it is necessary to define 'arabising'. It is, of course, primarily a cultural phenomenon not necessarily tied to race, so that it was almost as easy for a Swahili to be an 'arabiser' without having any Arab blood as it was for him to have an 'indianising' taste in furniture and jewellery without having any Indian forebears. All Muslim societies have arabising traditions, that is, people behaving in what they regard as an Arab manner and boasting of real or imagined Arab ancestry, because throughout Islamic history Arabs have tended to claim to be primi inter pares in the Muslim world. On the East African coast the tradition was especially strong because of its propinquity to southern Arabia and ancient
commercial and political links with it, and also because as it happened much of the population genuinely had Arab forebears. New immigrants from Arabia naturally tended to swell the ranks of the arabisers, for they were automatically accorded by them high social standing. Even so we find relatively little evidence, before the second half of the nineteenth century, of Swahilis claiming that their culture and civilisation was entirely Arab. That, as we have seen, was primarily a colonial invention. On the contrary, as families became longer-established in the East African coastal towns, even those of impeccable Arab origins began to resent the newcomers' pretensions which, in truth, if unchecked would

J. de V. Allen

have made the society dangerously fluid and unstable. Thus we see regular and growing opposition to these same newcomers from groups who had themselves been amongst the chief arabisers. The case of the Nabahanis has already been noted. The Mazruis, sent to Mombasa by the Ya'ربي dynasty which had supplanted the Nabhan one in Oman, likewise found themselves opposing subsequent Omani immigrants. Even the al-Busaidis, though theoretically the spearhead of political arabisation in the nineteenth century and early twentieth, soon began to be 'Swahili-ised'; for they are reported to have spoken Swahili at home long before 1900 (Nicholls, pp. 279-80). And the oldestablished Lamu families, although politically linked with the al-Busaidis, strongly resented a challenge to their local supremacy in the 1880s by a group of newcomers from the Comoros, the Jamal al-Lail sharifs (Lienhardt, 1959, passim). Under the circumstances it was only natural that an important social institution should have been the family genealogy (nisba, nasaba or ukoo). The importance of genealogies has been quoted to show how strong Arab influence in Swahili society was (Ghaidan, 1971). On the contrary, the lengthier (and so more admired) genealogy was intended, like boasts of 'Norman blood' in Britain or an entry in the Social Register in New York, to emphasise primarily that its owner came from a family long-established in the land, not that he came from outside it in the first place.

It may be pointed out that the genealogies of the Nabahanis, Mazruis and many of the older Lamu families did ultimately lead back to Arabia all the same. Yet those of other leading 'Moorish' families did not. The cases of the Hamiti and Mzee bin Seif have been mentioned. Further south many pre-Omani aristocrats claimed 'Shirazi' parentage. It is arguable that such claims should be interpreted as referring, not so much to physical descent as to culture. A comparable example is the case of the Famau of Siyu, who are commonly alleged to have Chinese and Portuguese as well as Persian ancestors (Prins, 1971, p. 8). If they are cross-questioned about this matter it often emerges that what they are in fact seeking to prove is that they belong to some more ancient and respectable civilisation than that of the Arabs. Questions of historical veracity apart, this claim is significant because it clearly reflects a reaction to Arab and arabisers' presumptions over the centuries. It is, as it were, an attempt to meet and beat the Arabs with their own weapon, the genealogy.
What we appear to have, then, is a highly respectable, urban, and possibly very old tradition within Swahili society which was opposed to the Arabs and arabisers. It is no less an integral part of Swahili culture as a whole than the arabising tradition - nobody would wish to deny that the Famau were Swahili and that Siyu was a Swahili town and its adherents were no less creative: Siyu in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented, from the point of view of material culture, a high point in Swahili history. If we accept this, then we are obliged to modify the traditional view of Swahili culture as simply a number of different levels of arabisation (Freeman-Grenville, in Oliver and Mathews, 1963, p. 168). We can no longer think in terms of a spectrum with arabised townspeople at one end and 'Africanised' rural-dwellers at the other. The new model is, so to speak, three-dimensional: if one is not a simple countryman, one may yet be a highly sophisticated town-dweller without being in any sense arabised. No doubt this 'anti-arabisising' tradition was much more easily perceived before the colonial period.

(iv) Swahili culture never spread to the interior before 1850, and had little or no effect even on Africans living outside the towns. This is conclusive proof that it was always an alien or colonial culture, not a product of the African continent at all. To Swahili themselves, 'culture' is the prerogative of townspeople. As in many other Islamic societies (and not only Islamic ones, as the English terms 'civilised', 'courteous' and 'urbane' show), culture is interpreted as a social patina, a way of life and a knowledge of how to behave which can only be learned, indeed can only be practised, by those living in towns - it is nothing to do with rural folk-dances and the rustics' ways. The Swahili language throws some light on this. One of the words translated 'culture', utamaduni, is derived from the same root as the Arabic word for a town, medina. A second word, usta-arabu, means, as has already been mentioned, 'behaving like an Arab', and is pre-eminently the word to describe urban culture in the arabisers' tradition. Significantly, perhaps, it seems to be quite a modern term: it does not appear in Krapf's dictionary, published in 1882, and is not often heard in the Lamu Archipelago even today. A third term, and the only one of the three of undoubtedly antiquity, is u-ungwana. A mu-ungwana is often translated as 'a freeman' (as opposed to one of slave descent), or occasionally 4a gentleman', 'a man of good breeding': but I have heard a group of old men of Pate referring to a former slave as mu-ungwana; and a Nubhani informant defined u-ungwana to me as "the sort of undeviating behaviour, especially in financial matters, which befits a member of a long-established town family", and asserted that the non-slave implication was a modern and, as he put it, ki-Unguja (Zanzibar dialect) overtone, and not inherent in the old 'real' meaning of the term. A mw-ungwana, by this definition, is strikingly similar to the 'freeman' of northern European commercial centres, not free-born as opposed to slave, but a man of unimpeachable (financial) reputation in an urban context, someone who has the 'freedom of the city'. The point is of some importance because Swahili customarily referred to themselves as wa-ungwana in their
traditional literature, so the root -ungwana may be defined as the quintessence of Swahili-ness. It contrasted them, on the one hand, with the Arabs or wa-Arabu (a term which is sometimes used pejoratively with an implication of financial deviousness, and just the sort of reproach that would be levelled against a merchant newly immigrant from Arabia in traditional Lamu society) and on the other hand with country dwellers, people who did not have the townsman's sheen. U-ungwana was the Swahili term for the 'anti-arabising' urban cultural tradition. The fact that its original sense has almost been lost in modern Swahili reflects the extent to which the arabisers' concept of Swahili culture was victorious after the imposition of British colonial rule.

Since the rural dweller was regarded as devoid of culture, it is not surprising that what the Swahilis regarded as the essentials of their culture—the stone houses, the clothes, the special treatment of women, even Islam itself—did not spread to the interior before the middle or late nineteenth century. It was not till then that towns, created by Swahilis and Arabs (but largely populated by others) grew up around the great lakes. Stone houses, not permitted indiscriminately to all townsman, would certainly have been unthinkable to country-dwellers in the hinterland even if the nomads had allowed them to be built. But as soon as Ujiji, for instance, appeared as a substantial settlement on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, an authentically Swahili society sprang up there, stone houses and all, which has survived quite easily and naturally to this day (Hino, 1968a, b, c and 1971). 39. For an example of antithetical use of -ungwana and -arabu, see Tippoo Tib's autobiography. See also Knappert, 1969, p. 114 for comments on the same antithesis in other Bantu languages.

J. de V. Allen
It may be questioned, however, whether Swahili culture as Western academics understand the term is really an exclusively urban phenomenon. A single culture may have two very different faces for its town and country populations respectively but on investigation will prove to be one and indivisible in the last resort. Swahili-speaking townsman may think of themselves as different from Swahili-speaking country-dwellers, but not in the same way that they regard themselves as different from non-Swahilispeakers; and the countrymen for their part share many of the same customs and traditions as well as subscribing to the same religion, collaborating within the same economic framework (though with different roles) and, of course, speaking the same language as their town counterparts. Probably the strongest single argument for including Swahilispeaking rural-dwellers within the framework of a regionally-based Swahili culture is that when towns decline (as so many in the Lamu region have since goo) those of their inhabitants who do not emigrate seem to experience no difficulty in turning into countrymen within a short space of time. They move into a rural type of mud-and-thatch house, cease to seclude their women, adopt a different form of dress and daily routine, and take up just those rustic dances which they recently disdained. It does not make sense to classify such people as anything but Swahili (though many in the Lamu region are now registered as
Bajun) even though in general they possess only a few of the items of material culture which are common among even the poorest townsmen. It is because relatively few such items, especially imported porcelains and stonewares but also carved wooden objects, stone buildings and so on, are found in archaeological sites in the interior that many writers have asserted that Swahili culture did not spread before the late nineteenth century. It would be more appropriate to consider the locallymade unglazed pottery such as Swahili rural-dwellers used, and also such things as cowries which are positive proof of at least commercial links with the littoral. A fair number of cowries are in fact found in inland sites, yet the claim made by Copley (1946, p. 51) that Kipini at the Tana mouth was the centre of a cowrie industry spreading throughout East and Central Africa remains, so far as I know, untested, nor is there any clear record of how old cowrie-currencies in this part of Africa are. Certainly cowries of all types were used for ornamental purposes in many inland societies before the introduction of beads, and these are unlikely to have been brought from the coast without some simultaneous spread of Swahili language and ideas. Iron-working and jewellery-styles are among other things which need further investigation before we can deny coast-interior links with any certainty. Nor need it be assumed that unglazed pottery styles and techniques, iron-smelting and jewellery fashions must necessarily have spread from the coast to the interior, rather than vice versa. The very word 'Swahili' derives from the Arabic Sahil denoting, in maritime usage, a port serving as an entrepôt for the goods of its hinterland. The products which came to the Swahili world from the interior would have been accompanied by ideas and technical skills just as were those which came from outside the African continent.

Swahili Culture
Administrative Report
Allen, J. de V.
Boteler, T. Chittick, H. N.
Copley, H. Coupland, R. Elliott, F. FitzGerald, W. W. A. Freeman-Grenville, G. S. P.
Garlake, P. S. Gedge, E.
Ghaidan, U. Ghaidan, U. and
Hughes, R.
Gibb, H. A. R. (ed.)
Greffulhe, H.
Hardinge, A.
Hichens W. (ed.) Hino, S.
Holmwood, F.
Hyder Kindi Isaacs, N. Jackson, Sir F.
REFERENCES
1873-4 Administrative Report of the Political Agent and Consul General at Zanzibar
for the years 1873-4.
1973a 'Swahili ornament: a study of the decoration of the eighteenth century
plasterwork and carved doorposts in the Lamu region', Art and Archaeology Research Papers, 3.
1973b 'A further note on Swahili decoration', Art and Archaeology Research Papers, 4.
1974c 'Swahili architecture in the later middle ages', African Arts, Los Angeles.
1835 Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery to Africa and Arabia, 2 vols, London.
1966 The Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast, B.I.E.A./O.U.P.
1892 'A recent exploration under Captain F. G. Dundas, R. N., up the River Tana to Mt. Kenia', R.G.S. Proceedings, VIII.
1878 'Voyage de Lamoo A Zanzibar', Bulletin de la Soci6t6 de Gjographie et d'Etudes Coloniales a Marseilles, II.
1897 Blue Book: Africa No. 7 (Report by Sir Arthur Hardinge on the conditions and progress of the East African Protectorate from its establishment to the 20thJuly, 1897).
1939 Al-Inkishafi, London.
1968a 'Social stratification of a Swahili town', Kyoto University African Studies.
J. de V. Allen
Johnson, M. Kirkman, J. S.
Knappert, J.
Lamu District
Office File Lewcock, R.
Lewis, B. Lienhardt, P. Marqais, G.
Martin, E. B.
Mauny, R. Monod, T.
Nicholls, C. S.
Oliver, R. and
Mathew, G. (eds.) Owen, W. F. Piggott, J. R. W.
Prins, A. H. J.
Rowlands, J. S. Sacleux, C. Salkeld, R. E. Sassoon, H. Schacht, J. Smith, G. R.
Stigand, C. H. Strandes, J.
Travis, W. Villiers, A. Werner, A. and Hichens, W. (eds.) Wilding, R.
Kenya National Archives DC/LAM/3 ii. An almost identicalset of papers is in mss. in the Library, S.O.A.S.
Proceedings, III.
Summary

There was a major economic and cultural renaissance in the northern Swahili world between c. 1700 and 1885 coinciding with Pate's political supremacy and declining when Oman asserted itself in the region and Indian and Western commerce began to intrude. Evidence for this renaissance can be found not only in the abundant architectural remains but in the opulence of the material culture generally. It must have been financed from three sources: from products found in or near the coast towns; from natural products brought from the interior; and from large-scale agriculture and trade in livestock when political conditions on the mainland permitted. An examination of the material remains and of the eighteenth and nineteenth century economy reveals that Swahili society was at this time far more homogeneous and Swahili culture far less dependent upon Arabia and India than has generally been assumed. So much so that it is hard to believe the same was not true of earlier periods also, since this latest great flowering of the culture is unlikely to have occurred in conditions totally antithetical to those of any previous Golden Age.
1974

British Institute in Eastern Africa
law. Nairobi, Kenya
or c/o The British Academy, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London
0 The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1974
Made and printed in East Africa