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The Littoral Difference: Examining the Swahili and Malabar Coasts during the Islamic Golden Age

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Daniel Glassman
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Tabula Rogeriana, 1154 A.D.

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...over the buoy of rich black earth from which it sprang, made my heart beat like that of a traveler who glimpses on some low-lying ground a stranded boat which is being caulked and made sea-worthy and cries out, although he has not yet caught sight of it, "The Sea!" - **Marcel Proust, Swann's Way: 195**

In 1154, Muhammed al-Idrisi put the finishing touches on the *Tabula Rogeriana*, his definitive world map. A compilation of information from Arab merchants with classical presumptions, the map has its faults. Since it was conceived in Sicily, the Mediterranean is unsurprisingly recognizable. Of greater interest for us is the portrayal of the Indian Ocean as smaller than the Mediterranean and bordered by two parallel land masses. The voyagers on whom al-Idrisi relied for information told him of a body of water they could cross quickly, creating the illusion that the ocean was small.

The closeness of the East African and South Asian coasts on this map places Africa and Asia into a linked system. The Malabar Coast of Southwest India and the Swahili Coast of East Africa are the borders of al-Idrisi's Indian Ocean, the shores of the "Great Arab Lake." This notion of a "Great Arab Lake" recalls the era now referred to as the Islamic Golden Age – a period spanning from the eighth to the sixteenth century. Muslim traders in the Indian Ocean seized the long-standing avenues of exchange, dispersing Islam and Islamic culture throughout the Near and Far East. As a result, historians often use the Swahili and Malabar Coasts to illustrate the breadth of this *Pax Islamica*.

In the Malabar and Swahili worlds, investigation of Islam's arrival and diffusion enables us to test a common generalization: that coastal civilization is typically fluid, cosmopolitan,

inclusive, and heterogeneous.¹ The shore-dweller can either be viewed as the receptor of these characteristics or the facilitator. And perhaps, these two roles are not exclusive. My goal is to isolate key similarities that bind these regions to the "coastal civilization" stereotype, and key differences that arose from circumstances either endemic or extraneous to the coast.

This problem raises two related questions: how Islam was received on both coasts and how maritime endeavors shaped the respective societies. The question of Islam's reception on the Malabar and Swahili Coast is linked with the perception of these territories as marginal. While al-Idrisi saw a relatively narrow ocean - placing Africa, the Middle East and Arabia in close proximity to one another - historiography has often detached these coasts and designated them as "too far removed from the heartland of Islam with its sophisticated metropolitan centers, imperial courts, and famed seats of learning."² The dialectics that can support or undermine this line of thought are often environmental or geographical. Center-region, heartland-frontier, and coast-interior are such examples. Examining cultural and economic exchange around the Indian Ocean may allow us to challenge or maintain these dichotomies.

Al-Idrisi's map is also linked to the sea's role in shaping coastal life. While precarious, seafaring in the Indian Ocean is remarkably straightforward. The seasonal monsoon winds create a reliable timetable for reaching a destination and ensure a tail-wind to carry you back home. Muslims did not invent the monsoon, nor were they the first to grasp its potential, so the coastal polities that received Islam were already maritime-inclined. But the relationship between this new cultural force and the sea is clearly connected to the larger idea of coastal society catering to a set of cosmopolitan ideals. S.D. Goitein proposes an analogous model in the medieval

¹ Janet Abu-Lughod, G.R. Tibbetts, M.N. Pearson, and Kenneth McPherson all contribute to this generalization.

² Rene A Bravmann, "Islamic Art and Material Culture in Africa," *The History of Islam in Africa*. (Athens; Oxford; Cape Town: Ohio University Press; 2000), 489.

Mediterranean, where traders moved in and out of disparate cultures with relative ease and equanimity.³ By comparing these coasts during the golden age of Islam, and perhaps a golden age of overseas trade, we can approach the problem of whether a “littoral difference” truly exists.

While the quantity of discussion points may seem large, they are deeply connected and help inform the overall inquiry. However, I must note a few important disclaimers. Since the Islamic Golden Age spans several centuries, my analysis will focus more on persistent features and trends of the merchant communities, rather than chronological descriptions. This research does not undertake a systematic investigation of any particular body of primary materials. Travel accounts and archeological data, however, should highlight the critical issues. My sources are mainly in English, but much of the seminal work is either translated or originally written in English. In reference to the Swahili coast, John Middleton, Mark Horton, G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, Neville Chittick and A. H. J. Prins offer exceptional research. Horton and Middleton pursue an indigenous reappraisal of Swahili culture, which will advance some of my own arguments. On South India, André Wink, Ashin Das Gupta, Stephen Dale, Kenneth McPherson, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam help significantly. Wink, McPherson, and Subrahmanyam all elaborate on the complexity of cross-cultural contact in the coastal setting. In a more comprehensive Indian Ocean schema, the work of George Hourani, G.R. Tibbetts, M.N. Pearson, R.J. Barendse, and K.N. Chaudhuri frame broader conclusions. My primary written sources are accounts from Ibn Battuta, Buzurg ibn Shahyrrar, Ibn Majid, Duarte Barbosa, and others.

³ Goitein, S. D. and Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, eds. *A Mediterranean Society; the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.

I propose to compare the Swahili and Malabar coasts in three ways: as they relate to each other, as they relate to their respective hinterlands, and as they relate to the heartlands of Islamic influence. Coverage will span economic, social, cultural, and political categories. The extent to which the evidence suggests continuities between the two coasts or establishes elements of divergence will shed light, I hope, on maritime studies as a whole. As the epigraph implies, the sea is often subject to romantic exhortations, and the relevance of this sentiment may also promote the littoral difference.

Chapter 1: Shared Diaspora

In descriptions of the Swahili coast, the designation of pre-Islamic establishes a structural break.⁴ On the Malabar littoral, the spread of Islam does not prove to be a fundamental rupture, but implies systematic acculturation. From the Indian Ocean perspective, trade was the principal medium of cultural exchange. Trade, as a general rule, does not only impart goods and services, but information. While this is a simple concept, it is a complex and often understated force. Material goods confer a catalogue of cultural and social dispositions that can be absorbed, transformed, and rejected as a matter of necessity, novelty, or taste. The transfer of technical, linguistic, and other functional sets of knowledge, while a degree more advanced, is often a byproduct of material exchange. There is a wealth of material on the subject of trade and diaspora. Yet without engaging all of this scholarship, we can say that trade, in its purest form, is a transient entity. One enters the port, goods and ideas are exchanged, one leaves. A constant state of flux is inherent to exchange, and this movement leaves not only products and ideas, but often people. With the regions under examination, many merchants remained. Consequently, we are dealing with not only “influence” in an ideological sense, but also through a physical conduit. The “Islamicization” of the Swahili and Malabar Coasts is a result of a diaspora from the heartlands of Islam. Implicit in this reality are two conditions for investigation: point of departure and point of arrival.

⁴ Mark Horton (Mark Chatwin) and John Middleton. *The Swahili : The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society*. (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 55.

Islam, Commerce, and Diaspora

A common theory proposes that Islamic culture has strong capitalistic elements and this inherent predilection for commerce was the driving force for Muslim prominence in the Indian Ocean.⁵ The purely religious argument for this commercial penchant gains support from the importance of the Hajj. The holy pilgrimage to Mecca is central to the ethos of all Muslims, which to some, implies a proclivity to movement. While the ancient navigational text the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* introduces Arabs and their contacts on the Indian Ocean rim⁶, it does not imply a strong Arabian maritime community.

From pre-Islamic Arabian poetry, there are only rare allusions to the sea.⁷ George Hourani emphasizes the “landwardness” of Arab peoples even in the times of the early Caliphate. An oft-mentioned anecdote tells of the Caliph Umar warning citizens of sailing upon the “accursed bosom” of the sea.⁸ However, early Arabs were not unaccustomed to seafaring but rather hugged the coastline, avoiding the unpredictable currents of the Red Sea. Meanwhile, the assuring winds of the retreating monsoon were too much to hold back any entrepreneurial spirit.

Whereas the monsoon winds are tempting, one has to initially breach the treacherous waters of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Ibrahim’s scholarship, *Merchant Capital and Islam*, expands on the forces that compelled Arabians to extend maritime commerce farther into the Indian Ocean. Economic imperatives of aristocracies depend on environmental conditions: more specifically, the character of both climate and soil. Ibrahim reasons that the apparent weakness of

⁵ Mahmood Ibrahim. *Merchant Capital and Islam*. (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1990).

⁶ Unkown Author. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Eds. George Huntingford, Wynn Brereton and Agatharchides. London: Hakluyt Society, 1980.

⁷ George Faldo Hourani. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*. (Expanded ed. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

the merely landed aristocracy was a direct result of a relatively small “aggregate area cultivated” and the nature of the crops produced.⁹ The arid environment could sustain cash crops, such as frankincense, which required a network of traders to extract revenue.

Through these parameters, the southern Arabian Peninsula fostered a detached urban elite, compelled more by commercial profits, than agrarian surplus. They projected their power through a “hegemonic” form of merchant capital that was not abrasive to land-owning aristocrats, in so much as merchants were indifferent to the varying modes of land production.¹⁰ Thus, geographical and topographical features rather than religious predilections encouraged maritime commerce in Southern Arabia.

However, Islam contributed significantly once these merchants began reaching foreign shores. The appropriate “mechanisms” within Islam that color it capitalist or feudal are transitory, thus they are tenuous descriptions of the religion’s political and economic force. Ibrahim excellently diffuses the debate when stating:

As an ideological superstructure, it [Islam] is sufficiently inclusive that it can be appropriated by the dominant social force. Thus, during its first two centuries, when the merchants were the dominant social force, they successfully appropriated institutional beliefs within Islam to advance their interests.¹¹

Islam’s universalist character allowed anyone to enter into good faith. While Arabia possesses Mecca (both literally and figuratively), there is no hierarchical distinction in the Quran dividing Arabs and non-Arabs.¹² As a result, Persians and North Africans are no less qualified than Arabs. The pattern of conversion is comparable to a similar process: Romanization. Anyone could become Roman, and the Roman system was clearly an enticing advantage. In North

⁹ Ibrahim, 190.

¹⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹¹ Ibrahim, 196.

¹² Bravmann, 489.

Africa, the indigenous communities within the Roman province were encouraged to adopt Roman cultural institutions for the broader system offered them unparalleled political and economic benefits.¹³ The egalitarian nature of these incorporative processes serves to be the foundation of both Islam and Rome's expansionary character. The greater idea of the Roman state provided the ideological superstructure, while the higher tenets of Islam offered a centralizing framework through its doctrine. These accommodating characteristics promoted Islamic conversion around the world.

Islamic dominion, for the most part, transcends territorial and ethnic boundaries. The concept of the *ummah*, or community, asserts the universalist notion that any "true believer" could be part of the greater Islamic nation. Yet, within this universal system comes considerable divisions. The diametric world order of *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (House of War) establish a realm of harmony versus a realm of discord. Within *Dar al-Islam*, Islamic law and order prevail while in *Dar al-Harb* Muslim community is either limited or subjugated. The early medieval perspective places India and Africa into the realm of *Dar al-Harb*,¹⁴ suggesting that pan-Islamism and Islamicization were not mutually inclusive. Converting to Islam, while supported by its own universalism, did not mean that the cultural empire would accept these communities en masse.

The reason why I place great emphasis on the origin and nature of Islamic commerce is that these forces manifest themselves uniquely on the Swahili and Malabar coasts. While the military fiscalism of the later Islamic heartland became the mainstay, the coastal communities absorbed the merchant-Islamic tide of the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries. Nevertheless, the

¹³ Susan Raven. *Rome in Africa*. (London ; New York: cRoutledge, 1993.)

¹⁴ Horton and Middleton, 55.

commercially oriented characteristics I outlined do not illustrate a concrete point of departure. The Islamic Caliphates expansionary desires projected little control over the East African or South Asian coasts, and as such, Indian Ocean trade became the domain of “dissident Muslim groups”.¹⁵ While dynastic leaders had little interest in sponsoring long-distance trade, Muslim traders marginalized by demographic pressures of the heartland ventured farther away with the aid of the seasonal winds.

Main areas of departure subsequently became Yaman, Hadramaut, Shiraz, and other coastal communities on the fringe of Arabia and Persia. Diaspora literally means the scattering of seeds, yet these seeds did not fall on uncultivated terrain, but on the developed shores of the Indian Ocean rim. We must now address what lay before these Muslim traders, and how the origins of their communities reflect the ambitions of both the indigenous and foreign elements of the coastal population.

Reaching the Shore

Environmental similarities between the two coasts extend beyond the oft-mentioned, but never overstated, commonality of the monsoons. The Malabar Coast is a narrow strip of shore line that is determined in a variety of ways. For this study, we will investigate the coast south of Goa to Cape Comorin, the southern tip of the subcontinent. Calicut, Cochin, and Quilon are the major cities which are historically integral to Indian Ocean trade as a whole. Ambiguities exist while defining the Swahili coast as well, but for our purposes, it lies roughly from Kenya to Mozambique. The urban centers of Mombasa, Malindi, Lamu, Zanzibar, Pate, and Kilwa are the dominant nodes of trade in East Africa.

¹⁵ Ibid, 73

The topography of both coasts follows an analogous pattern. Fertile coastal strips are bordered by a varying degree of unfavorable elements that restrict inward expansion and agronomy. In Malabar, the Western Ghats emerge from the lush pepper fields to provide a formidable partition between the inner subcontinent and the coastal regions. Consequently, Malabar was relatively isolated from the interior Indo-Islamic sultanates as well as from the later Mughal presence. While not as physically imposing or intractable, the Nyika desert separates coastal Kenyans from interior empires. Nevertheless, there existed a tangible boundary between coast and interior.

The coastal communities before Muslim influence were not regressive backwater locales. Nor were they unfamiliar to the Arab trader. The *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* confirms Arab presence in the Indian Ocean causeways. From this nautical itinerary, Middle and Near Eastern peoples were actively trading with the coasts of East Africa and Western India well before the time of Muhammad.¹⁶ The ultimate points of interest for Mediterranean markets were the southern Chinese ports boasting some of the more desirable goods in the world. The vacillating seasonal winds necessitate intermittent ports of call en route to facilitate efficient exchange. The birth of several important entrepôts, such as Calicut, Goa, and Quillon was a direct result of this East-West exchange.

The structure of power in the Malabar Coast and its hinterland shifted between the regional Hindu kingdoms du-jour. Both the Chola and Vijayanagara Empires held suzerainty over Malabar in pre-modern times, but their control of the coast itself was tenuous.¹⁷ Direct and sustained involvement in maritime trade emanating from the political center was an obscure

¹⁶ *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*

¹⁷ Ashin Das Gupta and Uma Dasgupta. *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500-1800 : Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta*. (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.)

feature of early South Asian governance. The upper class was landed and, while unopposed to trade, allowed marginal groups to reap the littoral bounty. Interior administrative standards of Vijayanagara were highly bureaucratic and depended on agrarian revenue.¹⁸ However, while the coast was not the beneficiary of state-sponsored mercantile interests before Muslim presence, it possessed the economic framework to support the burgeoning East-West trade route.

Similarly, we cannot claim that the East African coast was an uncultivated market. Yet, in contrast to the Malabar Coast, the strip of land known as the Swahil has a more pronounced longitudinal, or north-south, orientation. Concomitant with its larger area is its larger ecological range. From Lamu Island to Kilwa we have several different climactic and topographic zones. Unsurprisingly, there is no central product existing in all zones. In the Malabar region, the pepper fields of the interior dominate the landscape and thus encourage more collaboration between local elites and more deference to over-arching authority. We do not have a unified agrarian expanse in East Africa and consequently the environmental conditions for a central political entity did not exist.

Within this decentralized sphere we know very little about what came before the emergence of Swahili proto-states. The highly contentious mythical birthplace of the Swahili is known as *Shungwaya*. Scholars argue between Bantu, Chushite, and other groups as the rightful founders of Swahili civilization.¹⁹ In this work, I will not engage the debate of these specific origins for it requires intensive archeological research and dialogue. Rather, I think it is important to note the general nature of these early East Africans. Pre-modern conflict between agriculturalists and pastoralists played out in varying forms along the coast. For the most part,

¹⁸ R. Champakalakshmi, "The Medieval South Indian Guilds: Their Role in Trade and Urbanization." in *Trade in Early India*, edited by Chakravarti, Ranabir. (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 328-333.

¹⁹ This argument is discussed in detail by J.E.G Sutton in "The Early Settlement of East Africa."

those educated on the subject deem the relationship more complimentary than antagonistic. But as J.E.G Sutton states in his chapter “The Early Settlement of East Africa”,

There do arise circumstances in which tensions develop, or in which the pastoral wing, ranging further and further afield in search of grazing in the dry season, will eventually break entirely away from the agricultural nucleus to form a separate tribe living as exclusively pastoral life. It is then that pastoralism may become almost fanatical, a religion unto itself.²⁰

Neville Chittick’s research indicates that the movers in early East Africa reigned supreme and that pre-Muslim pastoralists possibly controlled a depressed rural population.²¹ The notion of mobile groups dominating the landscape translates well to the itinerant communities that would later inherit the seats of power. Whether or not this analogy is overly speculative, as trade grew, it is reasonable to assume groups in control would appropriate this activity. Regardless of who was in power, we know firmly from sources like the *Periplus* that East Africa was part of a larger market. The introduction of Muslim merchants did not signify the introduction of maritime trade.

Pinning down the exact dates of Islam’s appearance on both coasts is very challenging. Commercial ties between these coasts and Muslim traders are visible in the ninth centuries. The earliest surviving mosques are usually dated between the tenth and eleventh centuries.²² There were two distinct Muslim migratory patterns: one of Shirazi or Persian origin, and one from Arabia. The Malabar and Swahili Coasts incorporated both groups, which to this day, preserve

²⁰ J.E.G Sutton. “The Settlement of East Africa.” In *Zamani : A Survey of East African History*. Eds. Bethwell A. Ogot, and Historical Association of Kenya, (Kenya: East African Pub. House, 1974), 74.

²¹ Neville Chittick. “The Coast Before the Arrival of the Portuguese.” In *Zamani : A Survey of East African History*. Eds. Bethwell A. Ogot, and Historical Association of Kenya, (Kenya: East African Pub. House, 1974.), 107.

²² Mark Horton. “East Africa.” In *The Mosque : History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, edited by Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Mohammad Al-Asad, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 199.

unique traditions. In East Africa, the Shirazi immigrants settled mainly in Kilwa and Malindi, while Arabian immigration is seen predominantly in Pate, Lamu and Mogadishu.²³ Meanwhile, there were areas where both communities existed. The Arabian constituency on both the coasts mainly emigrated from Hadramaut.

In Malabar, there political and social structure was more developed before the arrival of Muslim traders. The merchants of the regional kingdoms, though, were not members of the social elite.²⁴ The hierarchical cast system had warrior-cum-landowners in the position of social supremacy. The tenth century Jain author Jinasena Suri illustrated the upper caste *vaisyas* as “exploiters of farmers.”²⁵ A foreign entity could easily usurp the local merchant role, marginalized traders occupied these positions.

In relation to the spread of Islam, there is often a specific narrative invoked by both Hindus and Muslims as a decisive moment in Malabar. The story asserts that the eighth century CE Chera ruler, Cheraman Perumal converted to Islam after meeting the Prophet Muhammad and embarking on the infamous last Hajj with him.²⁶ The impetus for the King to leave India in the first place, is said to originate from Muslim traders describing the wonders of the Prophet. The 16th Century Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa describes this association further.

And for some years these Moors continued their voyages to this country of Malabar, and began to spread themselves through it, and became so intimate and friendly with said

²³ A. H. J. (Adriaan Hendrik Johan) Prins. *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast: Arabs, Shirazi and Swahili*. London: International African Institute, 1967), 43.

²⁴ Ilias, M. H. "Mappila Muslims and the Cultural Content of Trading Arab Diaspora on the Malabar Coast." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 35, (November 2007): 434-456(23).

²⁵ V.K. Jain. “Trading Community and Merchant Corporations.” In *Trade in Early India*, edited by Chakravarti, Ranabir. Oxford in India Readings. Themes in Economics. (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 345.

²⁶ Ilias, 447.

king, that they made him turn Moor, and he went away with them to die at the house of Mekkah, and he died on the road.²⁷

The linking of “Moor” traders in the eighth century with the incumbent royalty has significant implications for the perceived caste restrictions of Hindu society. Merchant influence evidently could reach the court culture of the region. While this anecdote surely did not provide the stimulus for widespread conversion in Malabar, it attached legitimacy to conversion which appealed to all castes.²⁸

The Swahili case of incorporation was slightly more nuanced. In contrast to Malabar, conversion to Islam was more rapid and pervasive in East Africa. The most compelling argument for this level of transformation comes from a culturalist perspective. Randall L. Pouwels discusses the notion that “Africans perceive the ethnic group to which they belong partly in terms of the natural environment in which they live in and by the language they speak as a unique instrument in understanding this environment.”²⁹ The East Africans who resided on the coast before Muslim arrival must have, through the lens of this model, a particularly coastal ethnicity. Their forms of exploitation of shore-life ultimately integrated with their cultural identity. Pouwels describes the early Swahili as constantly adapting to opportunities of the littoral, so when a new group of coastal peoples arrived with greater commercial prospects, they “were ready for them culturally as well as materially.”³⁰

While Malabaris reference the Cheraman Perumal tale of conversion, several Swahili communities have their own foundation stories which elaborate on the introduction of Muslim

²⁷ Duarte D. Barbosa, d.1521 and Henry Edward John Stanley. *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995), 102.

²⁸ Ilias, 447.

²⁹ Randall Lee Pouwels. *Horn and Crescent : Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800-1900*. (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press), 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

merchants and Islam. From these accounts, we can immediately determine that there was not one monolithic emigration and settlement of Muslim merchants and that there were varying forms of Islamicization. The Pate and Lamu Chronicles assert that Syrians sent by the Umayyad Caliphate in the late 7th century were the source of Arab origin.³¹ The history of Kilwa claims that a Shirazi Sultan emigrated with his sons after he received ominous warning of his region's decline.³² The tenth century Persian ship captain Buzurg Ibn Shahriyar of Ramhormuz tells the tale of how the King of Sofala was kidnapped, sold into slavery in Arabia and eventually fled back to Africa as a Muslim.³³ While many of the chronicles and foundation myths have apocryphal elements, they all strive to establish a connection with Arabia or Persia in one way or another. The underlying motives for creating a cultural continuum will be explored more closely in subsequent chapters.

The myths and accounts from both the Malabar and Swahili chronicles have an interesting current of similarity. The prime movers of faith and community are predominately portrayed by individuals. Whether it is Cheraman Perumal or the King of Sofala, several specific characters invoke the tenets of Islam and are seen as the foundation of a greater conversion. It is true that the nature of Indian Ocean immigration consisted of the individual merchant, relocating for either reasons endemic to their homeland or incentives abroad. Andre Wink claims "frontier society was the domain of the individual, of the individual leader and his mobile resources..."³⁴

³¹ Neville H. Chittick. "Peopling of the East African Coast" in *East Africa and the Orient : Cultural Synthesis in Pre-Colonial Times*. eds. Neville H. Chittick and Robert I. Rotberg, Harvard University. Center for International Affairs, British Institute in Eastern Africa, and University of Nairobi, eds. (New York: Africana Pub. Co., 1975), 33-35.

³² "Anonymous: An Arabic Kistory of Kilwa Kisiwani c. 1520." in *East African Coast Selected Documents*. ed. G.S.P.Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 35-36.

³³ "Buzurg Ibn Shahriyar of Ramhormuz: A Tenth Cenutry Slaving Adventure." In *East African Coast Selected Documents*, ed. G.S.P.Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 9.

³⁴ Andre Wink. *Al-Hind, the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 182 .

The frontier dynamics in question are bilateral: the coasts of the Islamic heartland meet the coasts of Indian Ocean rim. In this cauldron of trade and exchange we must examine foreigners and locals who helped to form Malabar and Swahili society. It is said that war and trade are the fundamental state builders. In relation to the Swahili and Malabar states, the latter is certainly the root of power and authority. And within this economic state-building model, the merchant is the main actor and coast the main stage.

Chapter 2: The Wealth of Coasts

When Rome burned, the highways of international trade could have crumbled with it. While exchange was still present, the dynamism of East-West communication lost a powerful locus. The reality of early world economics suggests that pre-industrial cities were marketing centers.³⁵ The magnetic pull from a prominent marketing center such as Rome in early and late antiquity was not only due to the city's needs. The regions under Rome's influence all served to stimulate demand for Eastern products. A relatively secure system provided by the Roman framework freed the supply lines. Travelling along these routes, well before the time of Muhammad, were Arabs, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and the like. As a result of this Roman, and then Byzantine demand, the Indian Ocean had the developed urban market centers required to sustain world empire.

A tempting notion is that during the period after Roman hegemony and before the introduction of Islam there was a commercial vacuum in the Indian Ocean. However, the fundamental causeways between East and West - Rome and China - had been opened, navigated, and entrenched into a greater exchange system.³⁶ This system, while perhaps lacking the demand of the periods preceding it, was certainly still trafficking products.

Pre-modern trade in the Indian Ocean can be catalogued in a variety of ways. Some scholars reference a structure of powerful port cities emanating varying degrees of influence. Others delineate the ocean by ethnic or "national" barriers. R.J. Barendse provides the most

³⁵ Albert N. Cousins and Hans Nagpaul. *Urban Man and Society; a Reader in Urban Sociology*. (New York: Knopf, 1970), 31.

³⁶ Janet L. Abu-Lughod. *Before European Hegemony : The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

convincing schema; one in which merchant capital flowed through a “complex of overlapping maritime zones.”³⁷ In this model, Western India and East Africa share a common link with the Arabian maritime zone. The Malabar Coast acted as a hinge between the Middle East and Chinese ports. The general inability to sail the whole length from Aden to Malacca, or Shiraz to Fukien, necessitated certain entrepôt that could reap the benefits of their geographical position.

While we have the tripartite zones of Arabia, India, and China, trade also linked a less recognized continuum between the African interior, Swahili coast, and Indian Ocean world at large. The primary job of merchants on the Swahili and Malabar coasts was to act as middlemen.

Power of Commodities: Spices and Minerals

While the Malabar Coast was an ideal stopping point on the way to and from China, it also provided perhaps one of the most desirable goods in the history of pre-modern trade: pepper. Moisture-laden monsoons drench the fertile strips of interior in South India and provide the ideal climate for pepper cultivation. South India, as result, became the hub of the classical and medieval spice trade. Pliny seemed rather perplexed by its importance when stating:

Whereas pepper has nothing in it that can plead as a recommendation to either fruit or berry, its only desirable quality being a certain pungency; and yet it is for this that we import it all the way from India!³⁸

Even to this day, the International Pepper Exchange resides in the Malabar port of Cochin.

Pepper was, and to some extent still is, the central commodity of South India. The need for an exchange network inherent in the distribution of luxury goods allowed incumbent Indian Ocean

³⁷ R. J. Barendse. *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth*. (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 69.

³⁸ H. Rackman. *The Natural History of Pliny the Elder*. (Cambridge, 1960), 12.14.

powers to appropriate its benefits. As a result, Muslim merchants who gained increasing control over the Arabian Seas possessed the majority of the pepper trade.

Pepper was the central commodity, but not far behind it in value and popularity was Malabar teak.³⁹ The tropical hardwood was ideal for the construction of sailing dhows, the primary means of maritime mobility. To possess perhaps the finest product in shipbuilding offered immense possibilities. Teak's significance to the Muslim merchants of Malabar can be most readily seen in their mosque construction, which predominantly employs this wood.⁴⁰

While lush in some areas, water is significant obstacle to East African agronomy.⁴¹ The relatively unpredictable rainfall could not support a booming agricultural industry like that of Malabar's. Moreover, the desirable goods produced in the interior were material commodities. Peter Robertshaw furthers the argument when claiming that in marginal environments, "trade in prestige goods and the development of an international style may be a more feasible power strategy than any attempt to promote and appropriate surplus production of staples."⁴² Thus, the prized African products arriving in the Swahili port-cities were iron, gold, and ivory. The Abbasid, Chinese, and Byzantine markets all lusted for African ivory, yet it seems iron was the commodity that sparked the initial growth in long-distance trade.⁴³ Also, the Swahili exported mostly raw materials; they exchanged minimal amounts indigenous crafts. Of the major Swahili

³⁹ Das Gupta, 35.

⁴⁰ Mehrdad Shokoohy. *Muslim Architecture of South India : The Sultanate of Ma'Bar and the Traditions of the Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa)*. (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 144.

⁴¹ J.E.G Sutton. "The Settlement of East Africa." In *Zamani : A Survey of East African History*. Eds. Bethwell A. Ogot, and Historical Association of Kenya, (Kenya: East African Pub. House, 1974), 74.

⁴² Robertshaw, Peter. "East African Archeology." *The Archaeology of Africa : Foods, Metals, and Towns*, edited by Thurstan Shaw and First World Archaeological Congress, One World Archaeology ; 20. London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 159.

⁴³ Chapurukha Makokha Kusimba. *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999), 181.

imports, significant amounts of overseas cloth, beads, and porcelain show up in the archeological record.⁴⁴

Similar to the relevance of teak in Malabar culture, the Swahili incorporated mangrove wood into their daily operations. Mangrove timber was the main component of their small boats and a commodity in itself. Additionally, Swahili stone houses were constructed with coral rag, lime mortar, and mangrove poles for support.⁴⁵

The Swahili Coast began minting coins late in the historical timeline, evidence for widespread monetization suggest around 15th century.⁴⁶ Gold for the Swahili was largely a commodity. Most of the gold was produced south of Kilwa in Sofala, but Kilwa was able to control the distribution of gold and concurrently linked the southern Swahili coast with other economic zones. Through these conditions medieval Kilwa became the most important town on the coast. Calicut's economic ascent follows a similar trajectory. Its position as both an entrepôt between Arabia and China, and as the main pepper depot of the region, created significant opportunity for growth. The rise to prominence for both Calicut and Kilwa underscores the economic hierarchy existing in the Indian Ocean world

In this pecking order, the coastal urban market is in an ideal position to reap the benefits of supply and demand. The resulting power structure in these varying zones is what K.N. Chaudhuri calls a "hierarchical rank in the order of space."⁴⁷ Kilwa and Calicut, in this model, represent Chaudhuri's primate city, a political and economic center that is positioned above

⁴⁴ Horton and Middleton, 89

⁴⁵ Ibid., 123

⁴⁶ M.N. Pearson. *Port Cities and Intruders : The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 105.

⁴⁷ K. N. Chaudhuri. *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean : An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750.* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 347.

surrounding polities. The conditions in which primate port cities emerge are evidently analogous. With Calicut and Kilwa we have a convergence of economic pathways. Kilwa linked the inland Mwene Mutapa with Muslim trade, controlled the north-south gold exchange, and harbored long distance trade to Arabia and beyond. Calicut too acted as a commercial crossroads, in this case, between the Middle East-Chinese exchange, interior pepper trade, and its own overseas commerce.

Through this spatial relationship and the emergence of primate cities we begin to see the coast not as frontier territory, but rather as a central pivot in the larger economic system. From the geographical evidence, most of the ports in question were *échelles*, meaning they lay at the critical junction where “where maritime trade met land routes.”⁴⁸ The intensity of exchange in these regions ultimately encouraged the formation of proto-states revolving around market centers. Understood by scholars as the peer-polity mode of state formation, “trade promoted inequalities between communities, leading instability and conflict, which in turn promoted the rise of states through competition.”⁴⁹ This formulation directly relates to state growth in the Swahili context, but it can also be applied to Malabar. While there was an overlay of control emanating from the Hindu Rajas, the growing autonomy of the port-city in South India was the result of wealth accumulated through economic competition.

The emergence of new powerful markets cemented the position of coastal middlemen as essential commercial actors. Underlying the common perception of these medieval merchants are the perceptions allocated to all traders. While we will come to see that much of the port ethos was heavily imbued with economic and fiscal imperatives, the ambitions of the individual

⁴⁸ Barendse, 69.

⁴⁹ Robertshaw, 155.

merchant cannot be categorized as purely a maximization of profit.⁵⁰ Nor can we depict the Indian Ocean entrepreneur as a “marginal trader” struggling to sustain a hand-to-mouth existence. These two characters surely existed, but the aspirations of the Indian Ocean merchants were more complex than simply reaping the greatest yield.

Existing somewhere on this spectrum between subsistence and maximization, the Swahili and Malabar trader are active in a distinctive commercial environment. Chaudhuri observes that “a central contradiction in all Asian economies was the co-existence of non-market and market relations.”⁵¹ While it seems that this “contradiction” exists in all economies, it strongly applies to both the Swahili and Malabar situation. The correlation between these non-market and market forces reveals itself through the nuance of the patron-client relationship.

Middlemen - Home and Abroad

Initially, there is a bilateral dynamic that needs to be examined for both coasts: economic relations with the overseas traders and economic relations with the communities of the interior. For the Swahili, their relationship with Arab merchants has always been an intricate matrix of ancestral, religious, and commercial associations. The *Book of Zanj* provides insight into the early Arab-Swahili commercial connections: “So each tribe of the Zanji associated itself with a tribe of the Arabs.”⁵² There exist significant cultural implications to this liaison, but for now, we must deal with strategic issues; both economic and political. As Neville Chittick relates, “if an

⁵⁰ Tapan Raychaudhuri. “The Commercial Entrepreneur in Pre-Colonial India: Aspirations and Expectations.” in *Emporia, Commodities, and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, C. 1400-1750*, eds. Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund. (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1991), 351.

⁵¹ Chaudhuri, 39.

⁵² Chittick, “The Peopling of the East African Coast,” 42.

Arab came to a town of the Zanj and happened to have a dispute with another Zanji, he would be under the protection of his patron and of his patron's tribe. On the other hand, the Arabs protected the Zanji in war against common enemies."⁵³

These early encounters depict a very delicate balance between the urban middleman and overseas trader. Ibn Battuta tells us of the Swahili *sanbuqs*, or small boats, that "greeted" the incoming ships: "Not one of these merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men, save frequent visitors to the country."⁵⁴ The individual relationships that undoubtedly emerged became essential mechanisms of acquiring economic advantage. To account for the drive towards this type of patron-client relationship, we need look no further than the nature of immigration and settlement. Chapurukha M. Kusimba points out that immigration encouraged more condensed family units and thus "primary allegiances needed to be forged between those of mutual economic or religious interests, rather than between those of a common lineage."⁵⁵ Channeling the trade through these personal associations would have significant effects on the formation of Swahili culture.

The other front that required strong relations was the hinterland-cum-interior. Much like the strategy with overseas traders, the coastal urban elite undertook a more personal, non-market tactic to fulfill market needs. However, while the Swahili became more apt to petition the Arab merchants on the basis of their growing *religious* familiarity, the peoples of the interior did not share that bond. Thus, we observe indigenous forms of association and connection being employed. Exchange modes with the Swahili merchant's hinterland and interior clients began to

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁴ "Ibn Battuta: A Visit to Zeila, Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa Kisiwani in 1331" in *East African Coast Selected Documents*, ed. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 27-28.

⁵⁵ Kusimba, 130.

resemble clanship and kinship ties.⁵⁶ These associations gradually became ritualized and since the interior, for much of this period, resisted Islamicization, rituals resembled something similar to African rites. Horton and Middleton state that, “because the Swahili towns were military weak, they needed their hinterland clients for their protection, and kinship was a method to bind these groups into the coastal polities without having to convert them to Islam.”⁵⁷ The strategic imperatives of the Swahili, however, are inconsistent with the socio-cultural perspectives of non-coastal Africans. In middleman trade, there are definite problems to overcome. Indeed, it was the individual who could participate in different modes of exchange who ultimately came to succeed on the Swahili coast.

Examining the Malabar Coast’s relationship with overseas exchange and interior trade is slightly more problematic. The situation is more complex owing to the historical haziness of the political and social institutions in South India. While reserving most of the political remarks for later, it is established that Malabar was semi-autonomous under the general overlay of Hindu Raj dominion. Issues of endemic religion and social stratification serve to underline a diverse economic scene.

The composition of merchants in the ports of Malabar varied greatly. The two most powerful groups, though, were both of Islamic affiliation. The Paredsis and the Mappilas controlled the bulk of overseas trade. The Paredsis, or Paredys, which roughly translates in the Mayalali dialect to “foreigner”, represented a culturally distinct group of merchants from Arabia and Persia dealing in the overseas exchange. The Mappilas, were of Arabian descent as well, but became more incorporated into Malabar society and enticed a significant amount of Muslim

⁵⁶ John Middleton. *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 22.

⁵⁷ Horton and Middleton, 177.

converts. While the Mappila community also engaged in long-distance trade, their apparent integration into South Asian society allowed them to establish strong contacts with interior Hindu merchants.

The coastal relations with the interior, through an economic lens, appear to be fragmented. The dominant communities inland were the Nairs, a powerful military upper caste with large landholdings.⁵⁸ The Nairs exerted direct control over the agricultural producers in their territories. Interior exchange networks established to distribute these goods were appropriated by South Indian merchant guilds. The twelfth century, under the stability of Islamic world trade, reignited demand for pepper and cotton. With agricultural commodities rising in importance, merchant guilds strengthened their ties with the producers.⁵⁹

The coalescing of individuals in these groups was a tactful strategy in dealing with the organizations of powerful agriculturalists. While these guilds' practices never became fully adopted by Muslims, there were foreign guilds established by Jews and then later by Muslims.⁶⁰ However, the Mappila community appeared content with not having hegemony over intraregional trade. Moreover, the growing commercial strength of the Mappilas influenced them to appropriate fiscal modes more similar to the Nairs than the merchant guilds. Barbosa, in the sixteenth century, marvels at the prosperity of the Mappilas when stating, "They call these Moors Mapulers, they carry on nearly all the trade of the seaports; and in the interior of the country they are very well provided with estates and farms."⁶¹ The extent to which they immersed themselves into local agronomy is not clearly defined and Barbosa's description comes late in the timeline of the story. Additionally, it is hard to tell how Barbosa came to develop this notion of interior

⁵⁸ V.K. Jain, 330.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 336.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 330.

⁶¹ Barbosa, 44.

“estates and farms.” Since most of his travels were located on the coast, his conception of the interior may be reserved for the immediate hinterland, an area probably not as closely connected with Nairs.

For the most part, Muslim intervention in the overland-interior trade was tangential. While Muslims occasionally participated in the predominantly Hindu guilds, and perhaps their own independent organizations, the commercial focus of the Mappilas and Paredsis was on external trade. The integration of Mappilas within the indigenous Hindu community must have introduced them to interior Hindu traders. But the Muslim groups, which were clearly the minority, probably could not leverage out the Hindu merchants traversing the rural-urban continuum.

Hindu merchants from the Malabar region seemed to engage little in overseas exchange. But this cannot be attributed to their religious affiliation. The Vanias from Gujarat and the Chettis from the Coromandel were two prominent Hindu groups trading in ports along the Malabar Coast.⁶² Thus, Muslim merchants did not possess monopoly control over the long-distance trade. From the Swahili experience, converted middlemen and Muslim merchants conducted much of the overseas commerce. But the Indian Ocean as a whole was not a Muslim monopoly area. Sanjay Subrahayman categorically rejects any such inference: “to exercise a monopoly, even the Muslims must have acted en bloc, something that is simply undemonstrable.”⁶³ While no purely indigenous groups controlled the coastal trade, there was room for external groups to work within the exchange networks fortified by Islamic presence.

⁶² Stephen Frederic Dale. *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier : The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922*. (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1980), 23.

⁶³ Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. "Of Imarat and Tijarat: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western

This notion of an Islamic superstructure, or Islamic framework, though, is an abstract concept. Robertshaw claims that “Islam promoted a cultural and ideological unity that counteracted divisive economic competition.”⁶⁴ Ibn Battuta prayed in the mosque of Mogadishu and the ruling Sultan embraced him enthusiastically.⁶⁵ Of the traveler accounts describing the medieval Malabar and Swahili Coasts, one will not find mention of internecine Muslim conflict. The obvious byproduct of Muslim maritime prominence was the appeal of Islamic community. However, economic factors, rather than cultural and ideological reasons, often stimulated conversion.⁶⁶

In the mid-15th century, the lack of religious commitment by many of the port leaders repulsed the Arab navigator Ibn Majid.⁶⁷ Conversion offered a form of cultural awareness and credibility which allowed all levels of coastal communities to reap the benefits of the Muslim system more effectively. Thus, we have communities that revel more in the commercial prospects of conversion rather than the ideological notes, which would undoubtedly lead to the impious groups Majid encountered. Islam’s universal tenets ultimately fostered the “transition from these Arab Muslims to local converts controlling the trade.”⁶⁸ Incidentally, Islam appears to assume the role of a trading community.

However, through this model we can see how economic forces could undermine the “cultural unity” of Islam. S.D Goitein described the nakhuda, (typically a Muslim ship captain)

Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 (Oct., 1995: 750-780), 757.

⁶⁴ Robertshaw, 155.

⁶⁵ “Ibn Battuta: A Visit to Zeila, Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa Kisiwani in 1331” in *East African Coast Selected Documents*, ed. G.S.P.Freeman-Grenville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 27-28.

⁶⁶ Patricia Risso. *Merchants and Faith : Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean*. (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1995), .

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁸ M. N. Pearson. *The Indian Ocean*. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 95.

as one “who demonstrated more concern for his Jewish business associate than the latter’s coreligionists.”⁶⁹ Despite the seemingly strong framework of Islamic commercial dominion, the evidence from these traders points to a less discerning spirit. This ethos is intertwined with the coastal character of the period, where the allure of profits abroad subsumed ethnic and religious predilections. Perhaps, these cultural forces were somewhat sequential. By that, I suggest Islam provided the initial means of association and trust, but the same economic imperatives that made Islam appealing, ultimately made religious and ethnic tolerance in the best interest of the trader. Robertshaw reveals the overriding goals of the Indian Ocean merchant:

The challenge that successful individuals must meet is to attract followers and institutionalize their authority at home, while maintaining monopoly ties with other elites abroad so that they alone have access to the sources of wealth.⁷⁰

This statement illustrates the two-fold approach of coastal traders. Both forms of affiliation, between clients abroad or at home, required mechanisms of trust and credit. Islam proved to be vital in opening doors to foreign capital. Simultaneously, merchants could use indigenous social, political and cultural models to “institutionalize authority” domestically. It is in this context that we can explore the political culture of the Malabar and Swahili coasts.

⁶⁹ S. D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman. *India Traders of the Middle Ages : Documents from the Cairo Geniza : India Book, Part One*. Études Sur Le judaïsme médiéval. Vol. 31. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2008), 55.

⁷⁰ Robertshaw, 159.

Chapter 3: Social Charter and Coastal Politics

It is helpful to note Gabriel Almond's comparative politics model of structural functionalism. Political structures vary between societies, whereas all political bodies possess the same "functions". Indeed, we will see on both coasts the need to assert power through dominance relationships; however the nature of these relationships can diverge. The economic functions endemic to these coasts were apparently exclusionary rather than corporate, and thus "wealth financed rather than staple financed."⁷¹ The classical binary between redistributive and network-capital based societies, though, may not be mutually exclusive. Both the Swahili and Malabar port authorities regulated supply and distribution of foodstuffs. For redistribution, strong central rule allows government to harness agrarian surplus. Within a capital-centered network economy, political structures need to accommodate wealth based relations, and often operate with dispersed decision making. In this context, the opportunity emerges for a political strategy that can balance the coast's corporate and capital needs.

The Politics of Reciprocity

As mentioned before, Malabar was ostensibly under the dominion of a central authority for much of this period. The degree to which Vijayanagar or the Cholas exerted control over the coast is unclear. The "Orientalist" perspective would deem them wholly negligent of coastal trade and focused on agrarian politics. Yet, under Vijayanagara authority the commercial

⁷¹ Robertshaw, 157.

environment became significantly monetized,⁷² which indicates that the central elite had an interest in facilitating commercial efficiency.

Despite the evidence of monetization, the predominant view is that the coast became increasingly autonomous during the fourteenth century. Moreover, the power of the Hindu court elite was tenuous and dependent on local subordinates. The strength of the landed Nairs called into question the precise sovereignty of the local rulers and also limited their ability to tax the agrarian surplus.⁷³ With perhaps limited day-to-day involvement on the part of Hindu Rajas, one would believe that Raja power resided in a transient, ceremonial idea. However, notions of a governing spirit larger than the state itself did not exist in South India. André Wink, in reference to South Indian political culture, asserts that “neither individuals nor the community were in any way attached to an abstract notion of ‘the state’ as separate from the persons who constituted its administration.”⁷⁴ The motives of those with direct, tangible power forged the governing principles of the region.

While the Nairs maintained authority in the interior, the urban coastal enclaves were becoming increasingly controlled by commercial interests. Much of what we know about coastal life revolves around the prominent port-cities of the littoral. But this does not mean the merchants were in control. The rival regional dynasties of our period were the Kolattiri Rajas, the Zamorins of Calicut, and the Tiruvadis of Venad. They were rivals for both trade and territory until the Portuguese threat unified them. The Zamorins of Calicut, though, provide the most helpful case on the Malabar Coast.

⁷² Jain, 341.

⁷³ Dale, 16.

⁷⁴ Wink, 183.

Zamorin is the anglicized corruption of Samudri or Samudrāthiri, which roughly translates to “Ocean King” or “One who has sea for his border.” The implied seaward orientation was linked to the prosperity Calicut receives from overseas trade. Under the Zamorin, the port retained an unparalleled level of prestige among traders and travelers alike. Abd al-Razzaq, the ambassador to Timur’s son, Shah Rukh of Herat, reported on the wellbeing of the city in the 15th century:

Security and justice are so firmly established in this city, that the most wealthy merchants bring thither from maritime countries considerable cargoes, which they unload, and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking in the meantime of any necessity of checking the account or of keeping watch over the goods. The officers of the custom-house take upon themselves the charge of looking after the merchandise, over which they keep watch day and night.⁷⁵

It was the imperative of the Zamorins, and for that matter the imperative of most port rulers of this time, to foster an environment appealing to Indian Ocean traders. Economic and physical security, low tariffs, and accessible ports were the desirable features that attracted merchant business. Since territorial and political realities restricted land revenue, the ruling port elite were highly interested in commercial gains. From both the Malabar and Swahili perspective, one can grasp the importance of appealing to the mercantile community.

The general strategy of the Zamorins and other Malabar rulers was rather *laissez-faire*. Customs duties were perhaps the most significant intrusion on behalf of the political sphere, but these were commonplace in most, if not all, ports of the Indian Ocean.⁷⁶ Yet, the direct administrative standards of the Zamorins did not unsettle the merchant groups. The Paredsis, who represented the most distinct community in Malabar, were practically autonomous from local governance. Barbosa provides the most acute detail on mercantile independence of this

⁷⁵ Abu-Lughod, 276.

⁷⁶ Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, 50.

period and in reference to the Paredis maintains that the Hindu ruling elite “did not venture to dispute with them.”⁷⁷

The Mappilas, as well, experienced leniency in terms of administrative intrusion. Both Muslim communities were left to a certain degree of self-governance which manifested itself in the form of councils and managerial organizations.⁷⁸ In this respect, the Muslim merchants were able to leverage their commercial strength in an effort to conserve self-rule. Ultimately, the formalization and legitimacy of this power, by the 16th century, rivaled that of the feudal aristocracy.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the privileges of this economic structure did not only apply to those of Islamic affiliation. Members of the Hindu merchant guilds, who also consolidated their power with growing demand, possessed significant weight in local politics. V.K. Jain states, “The king was also expected to honour the commerce conventions of the guilds. He could intervene only when guild rules were found either contrary to the sacred law of the land or prejudicial to the interests of others.”⁸⁰ The ruling class was mainly interested in extracting revenue from the commercial transactions; concern for the nature of the merchant institutions was almost entirely left up to the discretion of the merchant. An intraregional trading community that Barbosa calls Brabares experienced similar independence. Barbosa introduces this group by saying, “They enjoy such freedom in this country that the kings cannot sentence them to death, but the chief men of these brabares assemble together in council...”⁸¹

⁷⁷ Barbosa, 147.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ V.K. Jain, 364.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Barbosa, 134.

The prosperous merchants of the Mappila, Paredsis, and guild communities were not subject, as some would assume, to a degraded status in light of the indigenous Hindu hierarchy. While the small traders perhaps endured caste discrimination, the dominant brokers could maintain high social standing. In Jinasena Suri's eleventh century scholarship, which I mentioned in the first chapter, the "big traders" were positioned a rung right below kings.⁸² Apparently, there was a social precedent, one based on wealth accumulation, which provided kings the legitimacy to relinquish some of their powers to the prevailing mercantile actors. Thus, burgeoning commerce on the coast acted as vehicle for social and political mobility. By surrendering elements of control, the incumbent royalty could enhance the desirability of the port. As much as the Muslims needed the Hindu Raj, the Hindu Raj clearly needed these merchants to secure their political status. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese would lobby for merchant support, rather than appealing to the Malabar port-rulers directly.⁸³ Simply put, the Malabar Zamorin had to use much more carrot than stick.

While the Malabar Coast experienced an uncertain degree of control from dynastic powers, the Swahili were by no means subject to a central political entity.⁸⁴ One of two political bodies controlled the Swahili for much of this period: hereditary dynasties or oligarchies. The dynasties were remnants of pre-Islamic political entities, with many of the figureheads converting to Islam. For example, in 1150 the Kilwan ruling house experienced a dynastic shift to Muslim rulers.⁸⁵ Despite the variety of dynasties existing along the coast, there are only a few

⁸² Jain, 345.

⁸³ "Khwaja Shams-ud-din Giloni: A Sixteenth Century Entrepreneur in Portuguese India" In *Emporia, Commodities, and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, C. 1400-1750*, eds. Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund. (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1991), 371.

⁸⁴ Horton and Middleton, 15.

circumstances of a ruler controlling more than one town. Territorial expansionism was not a mainstay of the port-polities.⁸⁶ The prevailing political ambitions were to gain wealth through the aforementioned corporate and network strategies.

The dynastic kings on the Swahili coast were Islamic, but in terms of political mobilization, “the Swahili kings were essentially African kings, and many of the underlying structures reflect African practice.”⁸⁷ These practices manifested themselves in predominantly ceremonial and spiritual forms. Their political influence was generally no greater than that of the merchant class, while magical qualities consecrated their authority.⁸⁸ Qualities that asserted sacred and spiritual power safeguarded mercantile interests and established kinship rites with inland Africans. Thus, the royal dimension of Swahili port life was more indigenous than imported. The fact that these royal lineages did not dissolve completely in the face of emerging merchant power is perhaps a testament to their willingness to adapt conventional modes of authority to the realities of the Indian Ocean economy.

The rising tide of commercial influence necessitated a comparable degree of leniency and autonomy. Urban elite controlling the middleman trade held the real political strength. The pre-Islamic political constructions centered on occupational and environmental conditions. Early East African coastal towns often had two functional rulers, a *Fundi Wa Bahari*, or Master of the Sea, and a *Fundi Ya Konde*, or Guardian of the Soil.⁸⁹ The designation of *Fundi Wa Bahari* reminds us of the Calicut ‘Ocean King’, or Samudri. These two power structures linked their

⁸⁵ J. Spencer Trimingham. “The Arab Geographers and the East African Coast” in *East Africa and the Orient : Cultural Synthesis in Pre-Colonial Times*, eds. Neville H. Chittick and Robert I. Rotberg, Harvard University. Center for International Affairs, British Institute in Eastern Africa, and University of Nairobi, eds. (New York: Africana Pub. Co., 1975), 68.

⁸⁶ Horton and Middleton, 157.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 158.

⁸⁹ Kusimba, 86-87.

vital roles as arbiters of economic, spiritual, and social issues. As their wealth and power grew, organizations of patricians usurped the positions of Master of the Sea and Guardian of the Soil. The political muscle in the port-towns became known as the *Baraza Ya Wazee*, which is Kiswahili for ‘council of elders’.⁹⁰

These councils, when operating in dynastic cities, worked in concert with the kings. Administratively, they probably asserted more direct control than the kings themselves in every day Swahili life. In the oligarchic polities, the “council of elders’ may have operated as the political body themselves. The requirements to become part of the ruling merchant elite were twofold: wealth and Islam. Islam provided legitimacy by way of cultural superiority and “international” affiliations. The wealth-based mobility within Swahili political institutions invokes the notion of a plutocracy or corporatocracy. Indeed, the system of control rested on corporations of merchants, usually bound by descent lines and other familial connections.⁹¹ The affluent middleman families could become politically relevant through the plutocratic councils and organizations. Thus, power in the Swahili case is horizontal, spanning the legitimated members of the patrician class and not truly extending throughout the complicated hierarchy.

The Malabar and Swahili city-centre could not feasibly appropriate the influx of wealth because the network of exchange necessitated powerful trading communities. Competition between royalty and merchants, though, never arises in the primary sources. Colin Renfrew maintains that “where the trade is at a level of fairly sophisticated market exchange, order is maintained by what may be viewed as reciprocity.”⁹² In practice, this reciprocal relationship allowed merchants to organize and independently govern. If the ports were ostensibly governed

⁹⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Renfrew, 11.

by royalty, the traders would undoubtedly offer them some sort of tribute in exchange for political and economic security. The growing freedom and mobility of the coastal merchant underscores the opportunities engendered by the coast.

Chapter 4: Class and Caste

The leverage of the Indian Ocean trader to encourage these favorable conditions was clearly economic, but the consolidation of power and privilege also depended on social and cultural conditions. Authority was cemented on the Malabar and Swahili Coasts through forces of class and caste. Examination of the structures that helped these societies grow is the best approach to the study of their social and cultural institutions. In Malabar's situation, the Mappila and Paredsis communities represent exogenous growth. We have a model that resembles Renfrew's concept of "implantation", where an enclave exists "whose inhabitants are foreigners with respect to their neighbors – which continues to interact strongly with its parent community"⁹³ Renfrew's theories, though, are not comprehensively applicable. He views "implantation" as wholly intrusive with little cultural exchange between foreigner and host. While intra-communitarian tension clearly existed, the cultural boundaries were permeable, as in the case of the Mappilas.

While Renfrew's model cannot entirely be applied to Malabar, its core principles are instructive. An external force residing domestically facilitated Malabar's economic prosperity. The implications of a foreign community within a greater indigenous environment loom large. For the medieval history of both coasts, the most glaring tension was religious. Cultural friction could arise between the egalitarian principles of Islam and hierarchal Indian Hinduism and

⁹³ Colin Renfrew. "Trade as action at a distance: questions of integration and communication," in *Ancient Civilization and Trade*, eds. Jeremy A. Sabloff, C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, and School of American Research. School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series. 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 33.

African animism. However, the Hindu caste system was more fluid than previously presumed, and African animism could be appropriated by Islamic cultural practices.

Religion, Commerce, and Prestige

Several scholars assert the remarkable social mobility in Southern India at this time.⁹⁴ An interesting rationale for this mobility employs the concept of *apaddharma*. The religious dogma maintained that in times of “distress” any varna or sub-caste could adopt trading practices.⁹⁵ This resembles an apologia for upper caste Hindus who joined the “cult of wealth”. Even more compelling than the idea of *apaddharma*, is the undeniable appeal of the commercial system. While V.K. Jain discusses *apaddharma*, his concluding comments speak to the lure of trade.

Those who had no land could turn to trade or other activities connected with it and, by dint of wealth earned through personal efforts, they, irrespective of their caste or class, could command respect in society.⁹⁶

Hindu hierarchy was not unyielding enough to impede commerce and trade. Moreover, low-caste communities were able to appropriate the spiritual traditions of a higher caste with accumulated wealth and influence.⁹⁷ The opportunities of the coast weakened the caste system. While Muslims had strong connections with land holding elite, their largest group of partners and converts were the socially downgraded shore folk.⁹⁸ These fisherman, navigators, and coastal traders converted at a high frequency. The convergence of economic demand into such a concentrated area forced cultures to adopt new strategies for exploiting the abundant prospects.

⁹⁴ Dale, Gupta, Jain.

⁹⁵ Jain, 347.

⁹⁶ Jain, 352.

⁹⁷ Chaudhuri, 56.

⁹⁸ Wink, 279.

But perhaps even beyond the commercial opportunities for these low class shore folk, was the coastal parallel they shared with the sea-oriented Muslim traders.

Some of these new tactics were also meant to shore up communal relations, specifically between Muslim and Hindu groups. André Wink introduces a telling anecdote that informs our perspective of a shared society.

A fifteenth century Chinese observer says that the two communities had agreed to abstain from the consumption of beef and pork, and that respect for the cow was a condition for settlement of the Muslims. The latter were not only guaranteed, in return, the free exercise of their own religion, but also exemption from land taxes, while their residences were protected from unauthorized entry.⁹⁹

The seemingly amicable Hindu-Muslim relationship, though, was probably borne not out of pure kindness and tolerance, but rather necessity. The mutual dependence which we saw on the political level translated to cultural areas. These are the roots of what can be called cosmopolitanism. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse promote the definition of cosmopolitanism I subscribe to: “an idea of being part of broad social project that exists outside the confines of kinship, ethnicity, or nationality.”¹⁰⁰ This word is an idealistic conceit, more utopian than practical. But the basis for its widespread usage is nevertheless relevant. The equanimity between Muslim and Hindu communities, evinced in the passage above, indicates that there are utilitarian imperatives for tolerance. Within this comprehensive community, diversity is temporarily surpassed by overarching functions of modernity and urbanity.

If one were to argue against the status of cosmopolitanism on the Malabar Coast, the orientation of the Paredsis community would be the source of contention. The Portuguese distinguished the Paredsis and Mappilas with the designations of “Mouros da Meca” and

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse. *Struggling with History : Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean*. Society and History in the Indian Ocean. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

“Mouros da terra”¹⁰¹ The Paredsis privileged this attachment to the Islamic heartland and their lifestyle mirrored that of their Arabian and Persian counterparts. Barbosa, when discussing the Pardesis, states, “they go well dressed, and adorned with silk stuffs, scarlet cloth, camlets, and cottons: their head dress wrapped round their heads.”¹⁰² Their status as the affluent foreigners is reinforced by their choice of clothing, which resembles the wardrobes of their homeland’s elite. Communal interests went so far as economic needs required, cultural transmission was thus not a prominent feature of this group.

Conversely, the Mappilas engaged the indigenous Hindu society as “assimilators.” Barbosa maintains that “They go bare like the nairs, only they wear, to distinguish themselves from the gentiles, small round caps on their heads and their beards fully grown.”¹⁰³ This strategy seems to have been remarkably effective. By emulating the Hindu aristocracy, and not Arab or Persian elite, the port-citizens could immediately recognize their power and influence. Indeed, we will see this same tactic in Malabar mosque construction.

The convergence of culture also acquired a particularly maritime flavor. Pearson supplies some interesting research on the matter.

Her [Dr. Varadarajan’s] account makes clear that littoral location, and occupation, transcend religion. On the ‘narial prunima’ day both Hindus and Muslims take part in the ceremonies when the forces governing the sea are worshipped, and boats are symbolically taken out to mark the beginning of the season”¹⁰⁴

‘Narial Prunima’ day illustrates a cultural event distinct from an Islamic or Hindu background and centered on the sea. Maritime expeditions clearly played an important role in the collective mindset and even infiltrated religious anecdotes. The transcendental conventions of Sufism,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 278

¹⁰² Barbosa, 148.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰⁴ Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, 40.

which was gaining prominence on the Malabar Coast, coincided with the maritime ethos of the region: “So closely associated were the saints of Dech with the sea that they were regarded as being personally protected by whales and sharks.”¹⁰⁵ The connection between Muslim saints and the sea did not stop with this allegorical tale. An interesting story of a Muslim saint in South India points to another maritime relationship - “He is seen helping Hindu merchants recover cargoes previously lost at sea and aiding a poor local boy in a contest to complete the Hajj more quickly than a wealthy Arab trader with his own ship.”¹⁰⁶ The saint’s aide is most appreciated in this arena of seafaring.

The interfacing of commercial interests with the realities of maritime movement and communication produced a distinct community in relation to anything inland. Religious and secular tradition of littoral civilization seems inevitably enmeshed in the sea. Before mass Portuguese intervention altered their methods, the Mappila community represented the cosmopolitan forces emerging on the Malabar Coast. The challenges of the coastal life engendered a unifying situation of inclusiveness and common ambition. But as seen with the Paredsis, there are exceptions within this rule.

Similar to the Paredsis, the Swahili held the Islamic heartland in high esteem. Converted Africans often claim Arabian or Persian origins. Moreover the relative closeness of one’s lineage to the heartland proved to be a basis for social stratification.¹⁰⁷ The founding stories of the each polity appeal to Arab or Shirazi traditions. But unlike the conditions on the Malabar Coast, the growth of Swahili states was primarily endogenous. There was no foreign “implantation” leading to a distinct enclave. The immigrant communities were incorporated en masse within the port-

¹⁰⁵ Simpson, 131.

¹⁰⁶ Pearson *Indian Ocean*, 132.

¹⁰⁷ Horton and Middleton, 19.

towns. While we see a degree of emulation on the part of the Mappilas and Hindus, this was a significant feature of Swahili society. Examining those elements that were “imported” and those that were indigenous developments will help us more closely understand Swahili culture.

A scholar of Swahili society must look at linguistics. Horton and Middleton have done the most extensive work on the several socio-cultural idioms that define early Swahili perspective. The words *ustaarabu* (civilization), *utamaduni* (urbanity), *uungwana* (civility), are the symbols of perceived Swahili superiority.¹⁰⁸ They are deeply related to each other and to their Islamic and Arabian identity. Indeed, identity in the Swahili context is extremely hard to define. The challenge for the patrician class was to reconcile their African heritage with their Arabian affinity. Ideals of civility and urbanity could selectively incorporate cultural characteristics from both traditions.

Academics vacillate between which culture truly illustrates the identity of the Swahili. Those who say the east coast of Africa was more or less an Asian colony are rebuffed by evidence of African traditions and structures. Critics of those revisionists say these scholars are just post-modern apologists, who are haplessly fighting against the view of African “backwardness.”¹⁰⁹ We need to address evidence of both arguments in light of our comparative study.

Islamic knowledge and custom on the Swahili Coast acquired a certain currency that legitimated social standing. Horton and Middleton put it best,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Spear addresses this debate fully in his work "Early Swahili History Reconsidered." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 257-290.

The Swahili elite found it in their class interest to adopt a foreign world-view, convincing themselves of the superiority of Islam and Islamic culture. It melded them into a world view and a status apart from those adhering to traditional ritual practices.¹¹⁰

These remarks underscore the wealth attained by the merchant elite. The Swahili expected to enjoy the cultural apparatus of their economic prosperity. Whether they were Islamic immigrants or African converts, important Islamic rituals remained. When in Mogadishu, Ibn Battuta witnessed a ritual procession for the Sheik's dead son and remarked, "In doing this they observed the same customs as are followed in the Yemen."¹¹¹ The fact alone that the ruler referred to himself as a "Sheik" implies an Islamic import. Moreover, Islam became a prerequisite for achieving *ustaarabu* (civilization), *utamaduni* (urbanity), or *uungwana* (civility). From this evidence, for one to ascend the Swahili social ladder three conditions had to be met: wealth, conversion, and some anecdote connecting ancestors with the Islamic heartland.

Yet, there is support to counter the notion of imported culture. Surprisingly, Swahili traders rarely married their children into powerful Arabian or Persian merchant families. Moreover, they were often betrothed to prominent families of the interior.¹¹² Additionally, their modes of exchange with people of the hinterland and interior centered on non-Islamic rituals and kinship ties. Islamic rituals on the coast validated or protected mercantile and maritime interests. Similar to the situation in Southern India, the Swahili brand of Islamic mysticism would safeguard trading ships and merchants from the real and supernatural perils of seafaring.¹¹³ Islam could adapt to local realities, and in this case, coastal realities.

Overall, the indigenous cultural and social strategies the Swahili enhanced their strength as middlemen. As Horton and Middleton assert, their commitment to both modes of association

¹¹⁰ Horton and Middleton, 144.

¹¹¹ "Ibn Battuta: A Visit to Zeila, Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa Kisiwani in 1331," 29.

¹¹² Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 76.

¹¹³ Horton and Middleton, 195.

“has reflected their commercial and moral roles as cultural mediators, believed possessors of secret knowledge linked both to Africa and Asia while living on the boundary between them.”¹¹⁴

However, the elements of Islam that made it possible for the Swahili to convert were not adopted. The Swahili employed the religion not in its “universalist” form, but as a basis for greater social stratification. Swahili middlemen initially used Islam to elevate their trading privileges in relation to other coastal peoples. The cult of wealth which was seemingly morally lower than the cult of civility or urbanity transcended these cultural dispositions. A common Swahili aphorism goes, “Uungwana haufai, bora ni ndarama” or “Gentle birth avails not, the important thing is dollars.”¹¹⁵ Thus, Swahili Islam became a symbol of cosmopolitanism through connotations of an international community, but was not derivative of its incorporative and egalitarian nature.

While on the Malabar Coast economic opportunities facilitated *inclusiveness*, the Swahili example shows that these same opportunities engendered modes of *exclusion*. This deduction runs counter to the cosmopolitan designation often attributed to the Swahili. In the Malabar case we have Jews, Muslims and Hindus all competing for prominence through predominantly economic mechanisms, while the Swahili privilege their position on the coast through means of cultural distinction and discernment.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196

¹¹⁵ William Ernest Taylor. *African Aphorisms: Or, Saws from Swahili-land*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1891), 126.

Chapter 5: Mosques and Material Culture

Geography deems the Malabar and Swahili coast as part of a fringe territory in relation to the seats of Islamic power, and thus provincial importers of Islamic material culture. As a merchant civilization, it can be argued that a concern for profits exceeded any interest in cultural exchange. Yet, regardless of intent, mercantile societies are not completely sheltered from cultural exchange. Chaudhuri expresses this sentiment when stating, “Merchants as a rule are disinterested in cultural transmissions; the transplantation of external cultural values and the appreciation of luxury objects obtained through long-distance trade is a diffused and adaptive social process.”¹¹⁶ This “diffused and adaptive social process” acquires greater complexity in the regions we are discussing. Privy to the middleman exchange, Malabar and Swahili people had to assess products from dramatically different value systems. This position facilitated an indigenous appraisal that reflected their ambitions as both an Islamic, commercial, and coastal society.

Ritual Space on the Coast

The purest expression of Islamic material culture can be seen in the mosque, the central space of Muslim faith. Both coasts proved to possess their first mosques of some form or another between the ninth and tenth centuries. The Malabar example provides the richest source of Islamic architecture. Mehrdad Shokoohy’s study of merchant communities in Kerala is the leading art history scholarship on the region.

The mosque, mainly patronized by the merchant elite, assumes the majority of Shokoohy’s investigation. Before delving into descriptive forces, we must not overlook the

¹¹⁶ Chaudhuri, 58.

previous mention of these mosques' patrons. While in the Delhi Sultanate and other centers of Islamic control the courtly rulers enacted programs of religious architecture, it was the upper-class merchants who held this role in Malabar. Accordingly, the mercantile class had a different code of ethics, different cultural obligations, and so forth. The overall ambitions were probably similar, both the court ruler and the merchant in some respect wanted to curry favor and prestige, but more subtle motives were nonetheless involved. To grasp the imperatives of the coastal patron, one needs to first approach the excellent example of the Nakhuda Mithqal or Mithqalpalli mosque in Calicut.¹¹⁷



Fig. 1 Nakhuda Mithqal Mosque, Calicut, Re-Built in the 15th Century, Saudi Aramco World. Vol 59. January/February (2008)

The Nakhuda Mithqal mosque, which is named after a 14th century merchant-mariner, exhibits several qualities shared by other Kerala mosques (and to a lesser extent Swahili) which are distinct from central Islamic examples. The merchant Nakhuda Mithqal is mentioned by Ibn Battuta as being a remarkably influential character in Calicut society.¹¹⁸ The mosque's design is highlighted by the wooden framework, sloped tiered roofs, and decorative wooden minbar and mihrabs. An especially refined minbar, or pulpit, was a hallmark of Malabar mosques. As Shokoohy explains, "early Muslim geographers often refer to the status of the city by mentioning

¹¹⁷ Shokoohy, 140.

¹¹⁸ Ross E. Dunn. *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century [Electronic Resource]*. Rev. ed. with a new pref. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46.

if it had a minbar or a Jami.”¹¹⁹ The importance of the minbar in the urbanizing process, lends reason to its refined decoration within the coastal mosque.

In relation to mosques of the Delhi sultanate and Islamic heartland, the mosques of Malabar are almost unrecognizable. We are confronted with no domes or minarets which are featured monuments in the dynastic states of the Islamic world. The Indo-Islamic fusion of the Delhi Sultanate, too, took a much more centrist direction in their architectural programs. The Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque (see fig. 2) shows that the Sultanate approached mosque construction much like its Mediterranean brethren. The stone pillars of the mosque are remnants of a Hindu temple they razed to the ground. This architectural program is similar to that of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which was built with remnants from a church.

The connotations of the Malabar strain of Indo-Islamic architecture perhaps are more nuanced. What is the rationale for such a particular form of construction and decoration? Several explanations are worthy of note. Sebastian R. Prange, a scholar of Oriental and African studies, offers us an excellent lead when he notes the structural similarities between these mosques and “vernacular houses and local Hindu temples.”¹²⁰ Indeed, Hindu temples are densely dispersed throughout Kerala. Concurrently, the merchant patrons may have appropriated a similar design to help ease the transition of new converts.¹²¹ Within this similar ritual arena, the native population would be less averse to the practicing of a foreign faith. Furthermore, there not only was a need to attract new converts, but also to alleviate the tension created by the external commercial imperatives. It seems highly unlikely that the relationship between the foreign mercantile community and the larger Hindu population was thoroughly amicable. The Hindu

¹¹⁹ Shokoohy, 144.

¹²⁰ Sebastian R. Prange. “Where the Pepper Grows.” *Saudi Aramco World*. Vol 59. (January, 2008), 17.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 17

Rajas could view the imposition of visibly dominating structures like domes or minarets as hostile to their religious authority.

Yet, while Muslim groups were reserved in not bringing abrasive parts of their material culture, we should also note a hesitation to adopt too many native artistic institutions. Wink observes that “mosques in Kerala, while in most respects virtually identical to neighboring temples, lack decoration of any kind of human or animal representation in sculpture, frieze, or painting.”¹²² The appropriated temple pillars of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque of Delhi (Fig. 2) have their animal and human representations intact. In content, the mosques of Malabar seem to strictly observe a non-figural dimension.¹²³



Fig. 2 Hindu Pillars in the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque of Delhi, 1190 A.D.

But to look at this solely from the perspective of the patron limits the investigation substantially. While these Muslim merchants were admiring of their cultural heritage, they were more focused on products and profits. Moreover, foreign traders probably did not import foreign

¹²² Wink, 316.

¹²³ Non-figural forms, for the most part, are a supra-ethnic theme of Islamic art. See *The Mosque : History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, eds. Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Mohammad Al-Asad. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994),75.

craftsmen. Therefore, the actual craftsmen of these mosques were invariably local.¹²⁴ This idea of local craftsmen manipulating foreign structures is also relevant to Swahili mosques. Horton notes that, “Foreign influences were always modified to a Swahili idiom by local, rather than foreign craftsmen.”¹²⁵ Part of the Muslim architectural program allowed the local craftsmen to impute some of their own stylistic techniques. The interfacing of ambitious but tactful merchants, and the local constituents who formed their cultural edifices, indicates two-fold participation and contribution.

Prange also has studied Shokoohy’s findings ultimately to conclude that “Malabar’s mosques are a fitting manifestation of the remarkable extent of the medieval Muslim trading world and its spirit of cross-cultural stimulation and exchange.”¹²⁶ While I enjoy the overall implication of his conclusion, it seems to gloss over the active agenda of the Muslim merchants and native Hindus in forming the ultimate identity of each city and region. There is no mention of the expected tension that occurs in a mixed society, and how form and medium are not merely borrowed, but manipulated by both sides of exchange to serve new situations and realities. In the case of Malabar, the mosques perhaps represent the purest form of Indo-Islamic architecture, one which is purposefully driven towards syncretism.

Whereas medieval Malabar represented a relatively small Muslim community balancing itself in the local sphere, the Swahili Coast integrated foreign traders from very early points in this continuum. The levels of integration can be seen in several facets of Swahili history. For the most part, Swahili towns trace their genealogical lineage to honorable merchants from Arabia and Persia. These forms of ancestry translated into the social identity of the East African coastal

¹²⁴ Shokoohy, 147

¹²⁵ Horton, *East Africa*, 199.

¹²⁶ Prange, 17.

town. Whether a merchant was a direct descendent of a Muslim immigrant or a convert mattered less than the apocryphal story of origin they would inevitably create. These stories helped supplant the patrician-merchant ethos of Swahili society, which linked urbanism and civilization with Islamic culture.

An analysis of mosque form in the medieval Swahil is slightly more difficult for few mosques remain intact from this period. But there are broad inferences into mosque design that are insightful, as well as other religious and secular artistic developments to explore. The urbanizing effect of a congregational mosque, as we saw in Kerala, can be similarly translated to the Swahili. Middleton and Horton provide us with the congruent social impact of a mosque.

A settlement without a mosque is not considered a ‘town’ in the sense of being a place of ‘civilization, *ustaarabu*, and especially of ‘urbanity’, *utamaduni*, the two qualities considered to be at the base of proper Swahili society.¹²⁷

This ecclesiastical linking of civilization with urbanism, and ultimately, to Islam, represents a timeless Swahili conceit. However, while we know mosques signified the essence of *ustaarabu* and *utamaduni*, we must look more closely at the form, content and mood. There are two aspects that one can safely relate to early Swahili mosques: location and a generalized sense of local identity. Swahili patricians constructed all early mosques, and for that matter tombs as well, in close proximity to the shore, more precisely, within 1000 meters.¹²⁸ The fact that there were no outlying religious or funerary edifices may suggest the singular perspective of the medieval Swahili patrician, one who only faced the sea. But knowing that an intricate relationship with hinterland and interior civilization existed proves that there was no unilateral outlook.

¹²⁷ Horton and Middleton, 129.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

Nevertheless, the importance of the sea, the source of their arrival and their continuing prosperity, clearly was a unifying image with their coreligionists. To use the Indian Ocean as a backdrop for their ritual environment ascribes an exterior aesthetic surely appreciated by the congregation. Whereas the mosques in Malabar were built with their prized teak, the Swahili mosques were made from coral rag and mangrove timber.¹²⁹ Constructed from these different types of wood were the infamous sailing dhows that carried the bulk of their overseas trade. This material's importance in the seafaring arena certainly accorded it merit within the coastal consciousness.

Other areas of material culture acquire a maritime aesthetic as well. James De Vere Allen argues that the sloping corners of a Swahili tomb may reflect an Arab sailing dhow.¹³⁰ Similarly, the wooden door panels, which will be discussed later, may exhibit maritime motifs of waves and fish. Indeed, these craftsmen integrated Islamic content in into particularly African or coastal forms. None of these examples though are universal, which portends strongly the individualistic character of every Swahili town. Within this cosmopolitan realm, merely copying a neighboring style was not enough, the patron needed to approach syncretism with unique angles.

Allen notes than in Swahili mosques the mihrab is often obscured by pillars and functional means of support. Whereas in a mosque or church in the Mediterranean one has a focal point in a mihrab or crucifix, Swahili mosques often have undifferentiated layouts. Allen's argument, describes the layout as being anti-hierarchical.¹³¹ While social status was integral in Swahili society, the patrician-merchants exhibited egalitarian ideals within their own rank.

¹²⁹ Horton "East Africa," 199.

¹³⁰ James De Vere Allen. "Swahili Architecture in the Later Middle Ages." *African Arts* 7, no. 2 (Winter, 1974), 66.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Authority in a Swahili town was spread amongst the upper-class evenly, often in the form of a ‘council of elders’.¹³² Yet, while this egalitarianism was within the ranking class and not necessarily between a greater cross section of the society, it imputed the same needs within a communal function. The medieval Swahili mosque was “domestic in scale” while paying absolute homage to “social relevance and usefulness.”¹³³

However, more research proves that the fusion of indigenous and traditional style is a universal Islamic phenomenon, and one that we cannot solely attribute to coastal regions. In a contributing chapter of *The Mosque*, Ismail Serageldin points out that every mosque in the Islamic world is shaped by its environment and “it is precisely the typology of the mosque that remains immutable – only the styles, materials, technologies and contexts change.”¹³⁴ To be sure, the Malabar and Swahili coast do not represent the sole locales of mosque regionalism. But, from the evidence at hand, it seems that the diversity within the coastal town accelerated the need for syncretism and established a precedent for impressing foreigners with local variations on a universal theme.

Status and Religion in Material Culture

We can also observe the mercantile culture from material evidence in the secular sphere. Swahili art historians like Allen and Ghaidan emphasize the prevalence *zidaka*, or wall niches. These niches, which resemble a scaled-down mihrab, are a ubiquitous feature in the stone towns of the littoral.

¹³² Horton and Middleton, 159.

¹³³ Allen, 66.

¹³⁴ Ismail Serageldin. “Introduction: Regionalism,” in *The Mosque : History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, eds. Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Mohammad Al-Asad. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994),75.



Fig. 3 Niches from Lamu, James De Vere Allen Collection, archnet.org

While they were aesthetic features in their own right, they more prominently possessed different luxury products like beads, ceramics, porcelain, decorative lamps, prayer books, etc. These niches often contained objects from either the interior or from across the Indian Ocean. . Horton and Middleton relate the niches, and their function as a receptacle for luxury goods, to the notion of *uungwana*.¹³⁵ *Uungwana*, the term that represents civility, is a moral conceit related to the interfacing of commercial, religious, and communal currents. Concurrently, these niches exuded the manifold principles that established their status and identity as patricians.

While I mentioned the horizontal nature of power earlier, there is a vertical element that can be addressed in this section. This vertical grouping ranked people “by how wealth was earned and the types of wealth possessed.”¹³⁶ The goods represented in the niches established their status via tangible wealth. While clearly advancing their social interests, objects of wealth also strengthened the middleman’s perceived level of creditworthiness.

Use of the niche design feature was also present Malabar. A stone panel from a funerary monument in Quilon is “carved with a row of niches or mihrabs with lobed arches, each framing

¹³⁵ Horton and Middleton, 112.

¹³⁶ Pouwells, *Horn and Crescent*, 76.

a disproportionately large lamp.”¹³⁷ The Quranic verses on the panel, however, are clearly more localized. As Shokoohy informs us, “the verses promising eternal torment to non-believers may be relevant to the tomb of a Muslim in the land of the ‘infidels’, but these verses are not commonly chosen for tombstones elsewhere in the Islamic world.”¹³⁸ The overall form and design of the panel is related to similar objects found in Gujarat, a coastal province north of Malabar. This connection should not be overlooked for it underlines the exchange of not only Indian Ocean products but also material culture. Moreover, both niche models in the Swahili and Malabar context demonstrate how Islamic artistic traditions, in this case the mihrab, are manipulated differently by the host community to serve the various religious and secular objectives.

The door carvings of many Swahili homes, too, represent refined examples of social identity informing aesthetic. In the dense urban center of a Swahili town, with stone houses enclosing narrow streets, there was little room for an elaborate façade. Usam Ghaidan, in his work “Swahili Art of Lamu” uses the coastal town of Lamu as a parable for a greater commentary on the art of the Swahili Coast. He pays special attention to these wood carvings which he separates into two distinct categories: a deeply carved Indian type (Fig. 3) and a shallow geometric African style.

¹³⁷ Shokoohy, 139.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 139.



Fig.4 Carved Swahili Door (Indian Style), Lamu, "Swahili Art of Lamu."

African Arts 5.1 (1971)

He notes that since decorative facades on Swahili houses are implausible, "the carved external door stands out as the one important outlet for asserting the house's special identity."¹³⁹ In the urban setting, a merchant or patrician's home possesses significant social and economic importance. The Swahili house was the center of purity in the disorder of port life. The homes also often acted as a meeting place for merchants and their clients. Though, as Horton and Middleton state,

The wealth is not often shown openly, nor should it be: it is represented by the houses themselves, by their interior displays of heirlooms and treasures, and by their purity amidst the bustle and pollution of surrounding streets.¹⁴⁰

Thus, the carved doors, while not representations of wealth, indicate more aptly a configuration of the merchant's knowledge of both local and supra-local traditions. The carved Indian style door in a Swahili setting could potentially impute notions of the patron's cosmopolitan contact within the Indian Ocean system. Yet, the existence of an African type also shows an interest in indigenous culture, perhaps reaching towards the interior instead of a reaching towards the

¹³⁹ Usam I. Ghaidan. "Swahili Art of Lamu." *African Arts* 5.1 (1971), 57.

¹⁴⁰ Horton and Middleton, 126.

Indian Ocean at large. For in this system, the African interior is as equally a part of the trading continuum as India or Arabia. Moreover, perhaps *both* these doors illustrate a “cosmopolitan” quality since they are multicultural fashions.

Indo-Islamic material culture in Malabar is the function of Muslim groups producing an identity congruent with not only their own interests, but the interests of the local Hindu population. In the case of the Swahili, we see a singular community which actively pursues a program of amalgamating both local and foreign traditions into a thoroughly Swahili, and thus distinct, convention. The notion that Swahili social and cultural institutions are *sui generis* perhaps privileges their action too much. But we cannot couch the Swahili artistic and architectural developments as purely derivative of the prominent Arabian-Islamic traditions. Rather, the Swahili community probably perceived these developments as a logical progression of their coastal civilization. The disjunction between Malabar and Swahili material culture is not an expression of different ambitions, but rather the result of the means in which they pursued these goals.

Chapter 6: Port-Town and Country

The goal of this chapter is to cultivate a greater understanding of coastal urban culture - its formation and orientation. From the previous chapter, we learned that a mosque, on both coasts, had an urbanizing effect. The importance of the mosque in elevating a town's status implies the importance of Islam. For Muslims on the Malabar Coast, the mosque could have represented a link to Mecca and Medina.

Yet, mosques in Malabar anointed the towns as havens for trade, commerce, and movement. In a world where coastal identity and urban identity were intrinsically related, commerce, especially maritime commerce, was imbued with a spirituality and communality that only merchants knew. The blending of Hindu and Arabian architectural motifs seen in the Malabar mosques asserted principles of inclusion and cosmopolitanism. Part of the appeal of urban entities is their capacity for heterogeneity and tolerance. For the Malabar Muslims, the challenge was to institutionalize Islam in a local context, so as to attract both acceptance and assimilation.

For the Swahili, mosques emphasized even more the status of towns as entities apart from the rural polities. The distinction is no more apparent than in the appearance of the mosque, which was made of stone rather than the mud-brick buildings predominant in the interior.¹⁴¹ The mosques represented monuments of urbanity. Their significance falls within Renfrew's concepts of that of a central space, whether positioned in a home, town, city, or region.¹⁴² For both coasts, the point at which a mosque was built signified the coastal city's symbolic translocation from

¹⁴¹ Horton, *East Africa*, 199.

¹⁴² Renfrew, 11.

geographical eccentricity to spiritual centrality. Horton and Middleton assert that the introduction of Islam was the moment when the Swahili Coast no longer shared a common spiritual bond, thus they were culturally distinct.¹⁴³ As Islam did not penetrate the interior for centuries, the Swahili used religion as a mechanism of exclusiveness. But their growing attachment to urban life proved to be a more powerful element of division. The concepts of *ustaarabu*, *utamaduni*, *uungwana*, while strong in religious connotations, also reflected their position on the coast. The Swahili were privy to both an international style and international economy.

The foundation story of Kilwa perfectly illustrates these dispositions. A Persian prince comes to Kilwa, confronts the African king, and annexes the region by wrapping cloth around the peninsula. The covering of cloth transforms the peninsula into an island, and an Islamic urban entity.¹⁴⁴ Cloth, for much of the Swahili experience, was the main foreign import, arriving generally from India. In the story, the commodity is a tool of urbanization and separation from the tribal kingship. The attitude of the urban port-cities towards the interior draws from this superiority and privilege, crystallized in the word *ushenzi*. *Ushenzi* directly translates to “non believer” and the Swahili conceptualized the term as a form of barbarism surrounding and threatening *ustaarabu* (civilization), *utamaduni* (urban life) and *uungwana* (civility).¹⁴⁵ This barbarism was non-Muslim, non-urban, and non-coastal. The conceit was applied most vigorously to the rural tribes and clans, people of the bush-land.

¹⁴³ Horton and Middleton 48

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 18.

Chaudhuri discusses an historical disjunction separating ‘umran badawa’, tribal nomadic civilization, and ‘umran hadara’, sedentary-urban civilization.¹⁴⁶ The two are deemed to be in constant tension and conflict. In the Swahili case, they are not irreconcilable, but certain cultural dispositions point to this distrust. As Randy Pouwels states, “Swahili townsmen imagined all sorts of monsters and demons haunting their hinterlands: creatures in the form of chickens or owls, Kibwegu spirits with their white faces and red beards....”¹⁴⁷ These supernatural notions further the Swahili belief that their towns possess the morality, both physical and spiritual, to protect themselves from outside forces typified by *ushenzi*.

Barbosa also interpreted the concept of the barbarian as the rural, inland neighbors. When discussing the hinterland off of Mozambique he describes the inhabitants as “brutish people who go naked and smeared all over with colored clay, and their natural parts wrapped in a strip of blue cotton stuff, without any other covering; and they have their lips pierced....”¹⁴⁸ This clear sense of aversion, though, can be interpreted as the Portuguese perspective and may not parallel the Swahili perception. The town-dweller’s mistrust did not necessarily arise from the inlanders’ appearance, but rather from their commitment to an indigenous lifestyle highlighted by their rejection of urban civilization and Islamic faith.

While this cultural suspicion informs some of the Swahili prejudices, it does not fully explain physical conflict between interior peoples and the Swahili. In Ibn Battuta’s report of Mombasa he claims that, “The inhabitants at times are at war with the people of the continent, and at other times are at peace, and trade with them, and obtain much honey and wax, and

¹⁴⁶ Chaudhuri, 50.

¹⁴⁷ Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ Barbosa, 10.

ivory.”¹⁴⁹ Conflicts were not simply culturally motivated, but rather were the function of limited resources. The reality of urban coastal life was that it was impossible to be self-reliant. Interior resources needed to be secured and the supply lines stabilized. Despite the opportunities of the Swahili port-cities, their inhabitants were “far more dependent on rural advance or decline than vice versa.”¹⁵⁰ Inevitably, the Swahili themselves could not escape their attachment to landed events and situations.

The cultural evidence implies a seaward orientation, the Swahili facing towards the Indian Ocean at large. Pouwels contends that they were “self-consciously insulated from the world beyond the coastal fringe.”¹⁵¹ Yet, while this may apply to their temperament, the reality of their situation suggests they had to engage those in the hinterland and interior. But this process was selective; Swahili patricians determined which production areas could be feasibly incorporated into the exchange process or worth the investment of conflict.

While orientation in itself is a suspect term, the most important dimension for the Swahili was the north-south orientation of the coast. The middleman trade was an essential and defining characteristic of the Swahili, but the relationship of each port town to others possessed special significance in facilitating commerce at large. Supporting this claim is that when the East Africa became monetized, the usage of coins was limited to the coast, and assisted exchange between traders along the shore.¹⁵² Furthermore, the Swahili Coast was expansive and diverse, but the coastal patrician ethos bound it, making it a single zone of exchange. The culturally sanctioned differentiation of the Swahili from their hinterland counterparts did not prevent the exchange of

¹⁴⁹ Battuta, 12.

¹⁵⁰ R. J. Holton. *Cities, Capitalism, and Civilization*. (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 116

¹⁵¹ Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 28.

¹⁵² Horton and Middleton, 94.

the means of life between cities and countryside, but it did strengthen the unity of Swahili urban civilization.

The chapter so far has made little mention of the Malabar Coast and perceptions there of the hinterland and interior. Evidence for the Swahili disposition far outweighs that which can be found for Malabar. But that fact may be of significance in its own right. Muslims arrived in Malabar, where urban markets were emerging in concert with the power of lords whose domains encompassed towns and countryside. Tensions between the local equivalents of ‘umran badawa’ and ‘umran hadara’ were not as pronounced or incisive. Thus, differentiation between coast, hinterland, and interior in South India was not as culturally dramatic.

Nomadic neighbors of the Swahili, those living under ‘umran badawa’, were fundamentally self-sustaining, while the movers in South India were part of a “specialized activity.”¹⁵³ Specialization amongst the pastoralists and other itinerant populations involved them in the larger exchange system. Those South Indians not partaking in nomadic ways of life were either the privileged feudatories or their suppressed peasants. Indeed, most communities in South India were closely connected in one way or another. The absence of peculiarity and unfamiliarity between town and country engendered diffuse cultural transmissions unlike what we find in East Africa.

Furthermore, since the bulk of the Swahili were converts, they retained facets of their African heritage. I would like to restate Pouwels’s point that “Africans perceive the ethnic group to which they belong partly in terms of the natural environment in which they live in and by the language they speak as a unique instrument in understanding this environment.” This theory

¹⁵³ Barendse, 68.

colors Swahilis' sentiments towards their neighbors as being the "other." Malabar Muslims, both emigrants and converted Hindus, did not possess comparable instincts.

Yet, where the evidence of coastal-interior contrasts is lacking, we can still refer to urban-rural distinctions. The Nairs were an agricultural aristocracy - whom Jinasena Suri calls the "exploiters of the farmer." Of the castes and communities in South India, the Nairs held the most direct and enforceable power. Their social status was equal to that of the Hindu Raj, as both were vaisyas and warriors. Yet for all the prosperity emerging on the coast during 13th century and beyond, the Nairs did not step into the towns.¹⁵⁴ There could be several reasons for this self-imposed limitation, but I presume that the aversion was twofold. These towns were the urban encampments of a growing mercantile elite, over whom the Nairs could not enforce their hegemony over. Secondly, beyond any economic need, the coastal towns imputed a sense of chaos and disorder wholly anemic to the cultural predispositions of the Nairs. The stability of the Raj dominion as a whole relied on rigid organization and on landed wealth. Additionally, the attraction of the port-town as a vehicle for low class mobilization was detrimental to the fiscal concerns of the landowners. Bustling multicultural ports of the Malabar Coast posed a threat to the economic, spiritual, and practical legitimacy enjoyed by the Nairs. The urban-rural divide could be felt most vividly in the Nairs restraint to enter the town. While the Swahili insulated themselves culturally from the interior, the landed elite of South India erected barriers to the coast.

Qualifications to this conclusion are possible, perhaps necessary. On both coasts, urbanization had positive effects on the interior. In Malabar, port-cities augmented the strength

¹⁵⁴ Barbosa, 133.

of the rural, agricultural communities with increased demand from urban markets.¹⁵⁵ Foodstuffs, while not destined for overseas trade, were needed to sustain the burgeoning coastal polities. On the Swahili Coast, the cities' demand for commodities such as minerals, ivory, and slaves, engendered a "centralization of production of items and the rise of more powerful economic and political leaders in the interior."¹⁵⁶ Thus, the great economic pull from the urban sector solidified the influence of their inland clients who were supplying foodstuffs and luxury commodities.

While much of the evidence depicts it as polarizing, the coast can be seen as one partner in a symbiotic relation. Braudel and Pearson have emphasized that maritime civilization is much more land orientated than originally presumed.¹⁵⁷ Coastal life is intimately tied with the land, both its people and its bounty. Evidence surely exists of Swahili and Malabar shore folk practicing farming techniques and partaking in traditionally rural crafts. In a similar current of thought, one often attributes to the urban entities an outward looking viewpoint attracting, albeit selectively, those who are not urban. But in the Swahili case, the urban port is more inward looking than anything else. Its cultural impulse is self-regarding and self-rewarding: the Swahili merchants want to remain the sole members of a unique class.

For the port-cities of the Malabar Coast, their established connections with the rural interior prescribed a less selective strategy on the part of urban merchants. Yet, the homogenous agrarian aristocracy remained separate from the heterogeneous ports. The Mappila assimilation and inclusion was an element of a larger cosmopolitan community emerging in most of the ports along the Western Indian coastline.

¹⁵⁵ Jain, 336.

¹⁵⁶ Horton and Middleton, 96.

¹⁵⁷ Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 38.

Pre-modern urban and coastal life faced the same central challenge. Successful individuals needed to establish relationships with the ‘outsider’ while simultaneously advancing their own social interests – which might contradict the non-urban or non-coastal society. The archetype of this urban, coastal entrepreneur is thus a “fusion of identities as merchant and privileged patrician or ‘trader’ and ‘gentleman.’”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Holton, 116.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, I use terms like fusion, synthesis, and assimilation. The act of blending and amalgamating disparate peoples is understood most directly in language. The Malayali and Kiswahili dialects represent a lingua franca originally deriving from a “port language” employed for simplified contact. Not surprisingly, both languages share a common link with Arabic. A Swahili couplet highlights the importance of this connection.

Kiswahili halawa, lugha yake sawa sawa
M dai bingwa hajawa, Kiarabu kutofahama

(Kiswahili is sweetness, it is a sweet language,
But no one can claim he is an expert of it if he does not understand Arabic.)¹⁵⁹

This quote reminds us of the Swahili foundation stories, which invariably establish an association with Arabia or Persia. The dilemma is settling this affinity for Arab heritage with notions of Swahili Islam’s indigenous roots. Middleton and Horton believe that “part of the problem has been that to many African and Africanist scholars, Islam = foreignness, and even Islam = Arabs, and thus attempts to identify early African Islam diminish local cultural achievements.”¹⁶⁰ However, the medieval Swahili patrician probably did equate Islam to both a foreign and Arab identity. Furthermore, the Mappila community, while integrated in the Malabar environment, still could trace its important cultural institutions back to the heartlands of Islam.

These permanent links, though, were not absorbed passively. Moreover, their assimilation spoke to the dynamism of the coastal populace in actively shaping their social and cultural

¹⁵⁹ Kusimba, 23.

¹⁶⁰ Horton and Middleton, 48.

structures to the realities of a more integrated Indian Ocean world. M. N. Pearson, in his work *Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems*, states “Coastal people especially found their indigenous beliefs, localized and very specific, to be inadequate as their world expanded.”¹⁶¹

The Swahili incorporation of Islam and Islamic culture was the conscious decision on the part of port-citizen to enhance their once parochial image. The appearance of foreign elements distinguished the Swahili from the interior, but these elements were consistently synthesized with African traditions.

The situation in Malabar, while appearing to undermine Pearson’s theory, actually supports it. Ostensibly, Muslim groups attempted to *localize* their traditions to appeal to the indigenous Hindu environment. But this was a result of both communities wanting to integrate the Malabar Coast into the greater Indian Ocean world. While the circumstances differed between the two coasts, the overall ambitions of those living in the port-towns were largely the same. Indeed, all of the cultural achievements on the Malabar and Swahili coast were “local” by way of the reasons for their formation. The ambition for wealth and prestige made the economic opportunities in the Indian Ocean irresistible, but also malleable. The Swahili and Malabar merchants manipulated the cosmopolitan ideals of a universal community to increase their profits and prestige.

This vibrant social patina was strengthened by the prevailing maritime and mercantile ethos. The tales of seaborne ventures immortalized in the *Arabian Nights* and other Indian Ocean oral and textual traditions romanticize the dangers inherent in seafaring. The tenuous nature of

¹⁶¹ M. N. Pearson. "Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems." *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006), 366.

the port economy rests on the success and failure of the individual merchant. An account from *Shipwreck to India* confirms the eventual threat to the process:

Among the victims was the captain [al-rubban] of our ship, Ahmad, whose name has remained celebrated. The loss of these ships and their cargoes of goods contributed to the decline of Siraf and Saymur, because of the great quantity of wealth and the number of important shipmasters and captains and merchants in them.”¹⁶²

The maritime danger engendered a communal spirit wholly different than the threats to agrarian success in the interior. Nevertheless, the universality of this sentiment amongst those living on the coast can be questioned. Unlike the affluent Malabar merchants, the Swahili patricians sponsored the long-distance trade without partaking in the venture directly. Exceeding a purely maritime connection, was a shared understanding of the *market* risks of overseas trade.

Since this romantic image of the adventurous maritime community is hard to confirm unconditionally, we must dig deeper to uncover a littoral difference. The direction of the answer may be more straightforward than the subtle literary conceit. Intense communication between disparate communities forces people living in coastal civilization to reconcile the old and new in a much more immediate way than anything in the interior. J.C. Heesterman, author of *Littoral et Intérieur de l'Inde*, asserts that “The littoral forms a frontier zone that is not there to separate or enclose, but which rather finds its meaning in its permeability.”¹⁶³ This permeability creates a significant challenge for the coastal inhabitant. To be successful, the aspiring patrician must project power and privilege through both indigenous and foreign structures. Thus, adherence to these varying modes of exchange was more strategic than normative. While the Malabar and

¹⁶² Hourani, 120.

¹⁶³ J.C. Heesterman. “Littoral et Intérieur de l'Inde.” In *History and Underdevelopment*, eds. J.L. Blussé, H.L. Wesseling and G.D. Winius (Leiden, 1980), 87.

Swahili merchants address this challenge differently, the problem binds them to a coastal archetype which is defined more by contact and less by composition.

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