

Chapter Three

Trade and Polity in East Africa: Re-Examining Elite Strategies for Acquiring Power

Chapurukha M. Kusimba and Rahul C. Oka

Introduction

Archaeologists use the appearance of differences in material culture and the technical skills involved in the making and distribution of cultural artifacts as evidence of societal transformations and the rise of inequality (Price and Feinman 1995). Persuasive arguments have been made supporting the notion that ranking goes hand in hand with elite control of basic resources and wealth and legitimization of this control (Fried 1967; Haas 1982; Holl 2003; Johnson and Earle 2000; Kusimba 1999a). The emergence of social complexity in Africa has historically been linked to foreign agents—Asian and European—who, it was claimed, introduced change in incremental packages during the process of migration, expansion assimilation, and colonization (Chittick 1977; Levitzion 1985; Munson 1980). Three generations of scholarship in African history and archaeology used variants of diffusionary, migrationist, and technology transfer models to explain social transformations in Africa. These models shaped our knowledge of and relationship with Africa today. They did so by minimizing the internal dynamics of African societies. Consequently, our thinking about leadership in small scale and middle range African societies remains underdeveloped (cf., Haas 2001).

Field and collection-based research in history, anthropology, geography, and archaeology has revealed that a mosaic of African complex polities developed in Africa in the early first millennia ACE. These polities followed a pattern fairly similar to other regions in the world. These polities developed out of interaction spheres of local exchange that gradually encompassed regional and interregional trade. Eventually, Africans, Asians, and Europeans developed their own transcontinental interaction sphere. Political and economic elites in Old World societies used a wide range of strategies to ensure societal stability and promote long-distance exchange. Political stability was necessary for economic expansion and accumulation of wealth and exotica that bestowed and symbolized power and status. Overall, however, the role of Africa in these nascent world systems has been neglected (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1989; Braudel 1982; Chaudhury 1985, 1990; but especially see Pearson 1998). What strategies did African elites use to manage regional and extra-regional trade in pre-colonial East Africa? In this chapter we will an-

swer this question through an investigation of (1) how African leaders developed and maintained power bases, and (2) their relationships with traders who were drawn from a small but powerful trading diasporic community from India and Arabia. We will provide archaeological evidence to demonstrate both leadership strategies and trade relationships. We will also make a break from past work that privileges external European influences on African underdevelopment in pre-colonial and colonial periods and suggest that this was a result of Afro-Asian interactions and preceded 1500 CE.

The Importance of Trade in Society

In all societies trade is a vital means of distributing risks, establishing flexible social ties, and mediating local scarcity and seasonal resource crises. Trade items often play a crucial role in establishing and signaling differences in wealth. It was one of the most significant factors in the development of social complexity in Africa. As we gain access to more archaeological examples, we are learning more about the complex means through which ancient African societies exchanged trade items, goods, services, and ideas. Trade enabled interacting partners to gain access to non-local resources. In some cases, some individual might elect to use those resources to promote self-interest rather than community interest. However, community sanctions and rules are often in place to prevent the abuse of power. When community sanctions are weak or relaxed, trade can very often encourage individual initiatives ultimately leading to social inequalities.

Trading partners ensure the constant flow of trade by putting in place fair trading rules and regulations. In ancient societies, these rules were expressed in many ways including gift exchange, affined kinship ties, and intermarriage (Mauss 2006; Malinowski 1922; Terrell 1986). Alliance networks of exchange can enable a handful of interacting partners to control the main arteries of trade, such as rivers, ports, and foreign merchants. For example, a handful of coastal elites and hinterland chiefs and kings may have controlled the bulk of long-distance trade in Eastern Africa (Allen 1993; Alpers 1975; Bakari 1981; Mutoro 1998; Pearson 1998; Robertson 1997; Thorbahn 1979). These networks enabled Swahili Coastal merchants to supply international market demand for ivory. At the same time, rare prestige-goods like Chinese porcelain, expensive fabric and beautiful glass beads were restricted only to the elites as symbols of power, status and wealth (Kusimba 1999a).

Besides the exchange of valuables, trade enables the exchange and movement of ideas. Interacting partners, usually merchants play an important role in the spread and incorporation of new ideas in society. For example, Islam became established as a religion of elites on the Swahili Coast no later than the ninth century, but became a religion of the masses only in the thirteenth century (Horton 1996; Horton and Middleton 2000; Middleton 1992; Pouwels 1987, 2000).

Trade in rare, highly desirable prestige-goods almost inevitably requires control and management of exchange networks. Elites may conquer the area of desirable resources—arable land, cattle, precious metals, obsidian or ivory, for example—and bring it under political control (Kusimba and Kusimba 1999). If successful, they sometimes gain control of the region's wealth as well as its labor to help exploit the resources. For example, the European colonies in Africa and the Americas were not only exploited for raw materials but cheap human labor as well (Blaut 1994; Gunder-Frank

1969; Ringrose 2001; Rodney 1969; Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003). However, political control also required that the infrastructure be developed and skilled and loyal administrators be deployed to ensure that the resources reached their destination. The other solution is for chiefs to negotiate with their counterparts to secure access and protection of trade routes and free trade (Casson 1989; Abungu 1998). They develop networks of alliance and friendship formalized through elite marriages, gift exchange, and ritualized kin-networks (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Renfrew 1986; Terrell and Welsch 1997).

In *How Chiefs Come to Power*, Timothy Earle argues that proximity to the centers of authority determines the social and political rank and status of that individual and ultimately determines access of that individual and his/her family to other sources of power—economic and ideological power: “cultural relationships of kinship determine rights and obligations that represent power over people, and political individuals manipulate these relationships (by strategic marriages, adoptions, godfathering and the like) to centralize and extend power” (Earle 1997:5). Elites achieve power by monopolizing the production, procurement and distribution of a wealth-creating resource. Resources that successfully become endowed with economic power tend to be rare so that their ownership elevates the status of the owner. One way of controlling access to a power-laden rare item is to control the system of production and/or distribution. If the desired item is locally available, one can control its supply and demand by exercising control of the craft specialists. If, however, the desired item is non-local, then one can gain control by monopolizing the process of procurement. Elites therefore can gain control of local spheres of knowledge and its production by financing crafts or becoming patrons (real or symbolic) of a particular craft in order to commission production of a particular wealth- or status-creating item (Kusimba 1996; Maret 1985). On the other hand, elites can also monopolize long-distance sources by building and maintaining networks of power through alliance-building and friendships. Such friendships often foster elite competition for access to desired items (Malinowski 1922; Terrell and Welsch 1997).

The East African Coast

An African urban civilization emerged along the East African coast (EAC) from Somalia to Mozambique around 600 C.E. The residents of the EAC included farmers, fishers, traders, scribes, rulers, and enslaved persons. Wealth from Indian Ocean trade was the main catalyst for the rapid development of urbanization on the EAC. Equally important in its emergence was the commercial and cultural dialogue maintained between the EAC and hinterland African peoples. The residents of these towns and city-states were initially drawn from different language groups, but in time, one language, Kiswahili, became the dominant language. Kiswahili is one of more than 800 Bantu languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa. Introduced on the ECA around 800 C.E., Islam gradually expanded to become the primary religion and means of elite cultural expression by the time of European contact in early 1500 C.E. To the Swahili, the *Mji*, or town, was the basic social unit also comprising land, which was the exclusive property of its citizens (Allen 1993; Kindy 1972:46–52; Kusimba 1999a; Middleton 1992; Prins 1961). Swahili polities’ leaders were responsible for the control of town affairs and external relations with other towns. Each polity had access to, and claimed ownership of,

large tracts of land resources, areas of sea coast, mangrove forests, and stretches of sandy soil for palms (Middleton 1992:89).

Archaeological research along the coast, adjacent islands, and in the hinterland have established that economic and social interaction amongst disparate groups who made their living from hunting, fishing herding, farming, and iron working laid the foundation from which international trade exchange systems interlocked in later years (Chami 1994, 1998; Horton 1996; Juma 1998; Kusimba 1999a; Horton and Middleton 2000). By the end of the first millennium C.E., the EAC had become a regular partner in the millennial old long distance exchanges that reached as far as the Arabian Peninsula, India, Sri Lanka, and China. By the thirteenth century there had emerged an African urban elite that financed, managed, and controlled local, regional, and interregional trade and communications along the East African seaboard (Middleton 1992; Mitchell 2005; Mutoro 1998; Pearson 1998; Robertshaw 2003). Innovations in ironworking aided agricultural intensification and specialization in hunting, fishing, and herding (Kusimba and Killick 2003). These changes improved the quality of life and precipitated population growth and economic prosperity for some 200 years. In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the EAC became embroiled in long standing conflict between Christendom and Islam, represented by the Portuguese and Omani Arab mercantile interests. The Portuguese and Muslim rivalry for control of Indian Ocean commerce was economically crippling for East Africa.

The post-sixteenth century African contact with Europe and Southwest Asia weakened local African enterprises and precipitated economic decline, which gradually paved the way for Europe's colonization of Africa in the late nineteenth century. Economic decline and the ceding of sociopolitical power to foreigners was a region-wide phenomenon. Legitimate and mutualistic regional trade gave way to the now-infamous ivory and slave caravans, financed by overseas merchant groups. Coastal slave raiding expeditions weakened long-standing alliances among peoples, cut off traditions of herding and farming and decimated populations (Benjamin 2002; Cooper 1978, 1983; Glassman 1983, 1992; Kusimba 2004; Kusimba and Kusimba 2005; Ringrose 2001). Today, the ruined walled towns of the EAC and in the African interior suggest the magnificence of East Africa's achievements and contributions to world history (Benjamin 2002).

That the EAC was a major component of a network of ancient maritime trade in the Indian Ocean is evident from the travel accounts written around the beginning of the Christian era, the most authentic being the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. In the last two decades, several coastal sites such as Kilwa, Manda, Shanga, Ungwana, Mtwapa (Abungu 1989; Chittick 1974, 1984; Horton 1984, 1996; Kusimba 1993) have been excavated and many more located on the EAC (Stigand 1913; Freeman-Grenville 1958; Kirkman 1964; Wilding 1987; Wilson 1978; 1980). The archaeological material, particularly pottery and beads, recovered from these sites attest to the interaction of East Africa and Eurasia at least from the eighth century up to the eighteenth century. While the Islamic and Chinese pottery exhibit a large network of the maritime trade between East Africa, Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Far East, the presence of the Indo-Pacific beads produced in India (Casson 1989; Junker 2000; CDG 1962), the occurrence of typical Indian pottery, and to some extent, potable cooking stoves in archaeological contexts on the EAC indicates definite maritime trade between India and East Africa. This trade involved bi-directional migrations and technological transfers such as metal working, food plant and animal husbandry (Carney 2000; Kusimba and Bronson 2000; Kusimba and Killick 2003; Kusimba et al. 1994).

A Hypothesis for the Rise of Political Elites on the East African Coast (EAC)

In order to understand how Swahili society was organized, it is necessary to know how the region's resources were managed. Subsistence resources included water, arable land, grazing land, and fishing areas. Export resources included mangrove poles, ivory and rhinoceros horn, cat skins, sharks, shells, pearls, ambergris, iron and gold. The exploitation of subsistence and export resources was managed and controlled by an elected team of lineage elders (Prins 1961). Election to office was strictly controlled by the Council of Elders, who constituted the oldest resident families of the polity (Kusimba 1999b:328; Middleton 1992:203).

The Council of Elders manipulated rules to gain, control, and restrict access to economic and political power bases. They alienated others from the most critical areas of economic power. Ownership of fertile land and boats was confined to the oldest families of the towns. Everyone else could use the land as a sharecropper but could neither own nor transfer use rights without permission from the council. Ownership of large fishing and sailing boats was also restricted. According to A. H. J. Prins (1961:57), "On the northern Kenya Coast from Malindi to Shakani, the big fishing and sailing boats, requiring a large capital for building, upkeep, and fitting out, were owned by comparatively wealthy men, usually merchants, who have manned them with crews, working on a share basis, the shares being based on the net return."

The system of land tenure and the restricted ownership of boats established a landowning elite possessing large tracts of fertile land, labor, and other services. The council levied taxes on commoners and exacted labor and compliance for communal projects. The elite maintained control of basic resources in their polity through a complex system of patronage (Nicholls 1971:65; Willis 1993). They also forged alliances with the hinterland and other coastal communities, which were mutually beneficial, guaranteeing a peaceful environment for regional and interregional trade (Benjamin 2002; Parkin 1970; Kusimba 1999a, 1999b).

Oral traditions recorded in chronicles explain the foundation of many Swahili polities in terms of the initial settlement, interaction, and integration of a trading diasporic community into local society (Chittick 1965; Freeman-Grenville 1962:221–222; Nurse and Spear 1985:71–72; Tolmacheva 1993). Numerous versions of the foundation of Swahili polities detail the intermarriage of Persian or Arab traders to African princesses. While emphasizing the elite natal ties to the land and portraying themselves as descendants of the matrilineal Swahili princesses, the chronicles claimed relationship to Arab and Persian traders and Muslim clerics (Zein 1974). The chronicles established elite legitimacy and close kin ties with the commoners, but also portrayed them as "preordained" rulers and legitimate trading partners with foreign merchants. Relationships to both the ancient founders of settlements and overseas trading partners were exhibited through the stone houses, tombs, dress, literacy, and exotic trade goods.

Elite privileges included rights and access to: (1) scholarship; (2) property such as fertile farmland, stretches of beach land, mangrove forests, and fishing areas; (3) cattle ownership; (4) stone houses in one's own town ward; (5) receive, entertain, and trade with foreign traders; (6) elect town and mosque officials; (7) use the royal horn at wed-

dings; (8) hold hereditary offices of prison warden, keeper of the town treasury, warden of the sea, and Khatib [Friday preacher]; and (9) slaughter the expiatory ox after the cleansing ritual of *kuzinga mui* [going around the town in a procession] (Kusimba 1999a:329; Pouwels 1987; Prins 1961:103, 1971:18).

Although the Swahili built their houses using a variety of materials, and the majority of the residents lived in mud and thatch homes, the elite built stone houses, often at great expense. The stone house functioned as a place to live and a symbol to manipulate the existing sociopolitical and economic order in one's favor. The stone house symbolized permanence, credit-worthiness, trustworthiness, and economic power (Allen 1979:5; Kusimba 1999a: 330). According to James Allen:

The stone house ... was not just the badge or symbol of its owner's status, it was simultaneously its manifestation and its guarantee. It embodied in its permanence and within its thick, solid walls, his cultural acquisitions and those of his ancestors before him; and he would expect to pass it on to the next generation in a way that the mud and thatch house owner never would. Again, since it represented a major investment, he would not easily go away and leave it, and this made it secure for those thinking of doing business with him, and its magnificence a gauge of his credit-worthiness.

Despite its unquestionable African appearance and uses of space (Garlake 1966), the interior décor of the stone house bore some typical Islamic elements such as niches and arches. These elements conveyed to the commoners elite access to rare, foreign cultural elements and knowledge, while simultaneously addressing their association to a pan-Islamic cultural domain (Zein 1974).

Elite identity, history, and claims to status were partly symbolized in the tombs of its ancestors (Horton 1984: 131; Zein 1974:133). Tombs reinforced prestige and validated the authority of the deceased's family. They were symbols of hereditary succession and supernatural authority, the foundations upon which rested the leadership systems of the coastal communities (Wilson 1979:34). Elite privilege, status, social, and political power depended upon ancestral status.

Elite identity was characterized by formal Islamic religious regalia worn in public and on special days, often during visits to the Friday congregation mosque. The model dress included a long white robe (the *kanzu*), a sword and dagger, a turban, and sandals made of hide. Handles of swords and daggers were often made of ebony and inlaid with ivory (Nurse and Spear 1985:83). Knowledge of the exotic was publicly displayed through literacy and the written word of Allah and, in some cases, claims to direct ancestry to the centers of such knowledge and power (Pouwels 1987; Tolmacheva 1993). Such external sources of power were inaccessible to commoners. The association of exotic and powerful knowledge with the wealthy symbolized and encapsulated the elites' divinity and legitimacy (Nurse and Spear 1985). The elite monopolized access to rare and expensive exotica including Near Eastern and Chinese ceramics that were displayed in their homes in specially constructed niches called *zidaka* (Allen 1979; Donley-Reid 1990:121). Elite tombs were decorated with expensive porcelain.

The Elite Power Strategies on the East African Coast

Strategies theory in archaeology rose from the basic dissatisfaction with overly structural and materialist approaches of the 1960s and 1970s and the political economic hegemony of the 1980s and 1990s (Earle 1997). Strategies theory holds that complexity is the result of interactions guided by strategies used to maintain, alter, or reject status quo (Oka and Kusimba in Review). To show how strategies theory might be applied to the EAC, we will give brief background. In a seminal article, archaeologist Colin Renfrew argued that there were two types of socio-political organizations seen in archaeological or ethnographic examples of chiefdoms: group-oriented and individualizing chiefdoms (Renfrew 1974). Group-oriented polities are characterized by shared activities such as public rituals, communal organization of labor and public display of communal solidarity through monumental architecture (Renfrew 1974). At the same time, individual gains in wealth or power were mediated and regulated through actions on the community through leveling mechanisms, denial of access to communal resources, etc. Individualizing polities showed significant differences in wealth and power, definite elite groups having political power and privileges, self-aggrandizing public architecture or rituals, and larger access to exotic prestige goods and crafts production (Renfrew 1974). The emergence and development of each polity hence was a result of the dominance of individualizing versus group-oriented strategies within that polity.

Renfrew's ideas were influential in Gregory Johnson's division of early societies into sequential-ritual and simultaneous hierarchies, in which Johnson directly addresses decision-making behavior and hence social strategies (Johnson 1982). Decision-making strategies that dominate simultaneous hierarchies result in individualizing polities while those that dominate sequential ritual hierarchies result in the emergence of group-oriented polities (Johnson 1982).

In their 1996 article, Richard Blanton and colleagues argued that in every society, regardless of the presence of absence of social stratification, both corporate and network strategies are used by members of that society to negotiate power (Blanton et al. 1996). Corporate strategies overlap the decision-making processes in sequential ritual hierarchies or group-oriented polities while network strategies overlap those in simultaneous hierarchies or individualizing polities (Feinman 1995).

The major difference between the corporate-network approach and earlier work by Renfrew and Johnson lay in the fact that "corporate" and "network" are strategies and not forms or types of social organization (Feinman 2001). These strategies were used simultaneously in human societies and also worked in different sections of society, whether laterally or vertically (see also Feinman and Nicholas 1992). Gary Feinman (1995) further suggests that the relative importance of each strategy might differ within and across societies and give rise to social diversity and also the development of complexity along non-unilineal pathways. Hence, Renfrew's group-oriented polities would show a relative importance of corporate strategies but that this was subject to historical, environmental or social change that reverses the former strategic dominance and encourages network strategies (Feinman 2001). In the corporate-network approach, social evolution is best seen through the variation of relations between these structurally opposed strategies through time and across societies (Blanton et al. 1996).

Was the rise of urban polities in Africa a result of elite use of network or corporate power strategies, or both? On the Swahili Coast, subsistence resources were confined to a narrow strip of land separating arid hinterlands from the Indian Ocean. The circumscribed landscape and the paucity of arable land made use of corporate strategies unlikely, since they are usually based on the elite appropriation of a large agricultural surplus. Urban centers never fully controlled the hinterland, occupied by a diverse group of pastoralists, agriculturists, and hunter-gatherers, and its abundant grazing lands and game animals. However, the coast was rich in marine resources and, along with farm products, continued as key parts of the subsistence base. The exploitation of these resources was controlled by the elites. The elites controlled all the wealth-creating resources, including long-distance trade networks, to appropriate surplus to finance public ritual or the construction of corporate projects; the building of a mosque may have been such a project. Thus, network based strategies were probably the most likely elite means to gain and maintain power.

From the archaeological record, the EAC's involvement in interregional trade with the hinterland and in international maritime trade with the outside world predates that of the *Periplus* (Chami 1998; Chami and Msemwa 1997; Horton and Middleton 2000; Middleton 1992). The emergence of social complexity on the Swahili Coast may closely follow the rise of network-based trade strategies like those proposed for Mesoamerica (Blanton et al. 1996; Robertshaw 2003). The gradual but consistent increases in technological specialization and cultural sophistication at all coastal sites investigated, points to elite leadership in exploiting resources. By recognizing the importance of regional resources, including iron, gold, ivory, rhino horns, cat skins, cereals, fish, and shells to the regional and international economy, the elite used their strategic geographical location on the coast to gain control of their production and exchange. The wealth they accumulated was converted into exotica, including textiles and fine ceramics, which were displayed both in public and private spheres (Horton 1996).

The data from architecture, settlement archaeology, and subsistence patterns demonstrate increasing technological specialization and social sophistication. The emergence of a regional architectural style and the adoption of Islam point to the elite manipulation of network strategies to forge a truly internationalist image—one that brought them closer to their elite trading partners in the Islamic world. Having a pan-Islamic and exotic image fostered the forging and maintenance of exclusive relationships with foreign merchants. In later times, this relationship was beneficial in protecting local Muslim elite from enslavement because the Holy Qur'an prohibited the enslavement of fellow Muslims (Alexander 2001; Zein 1974).

Significant structural, spatial and social transformations occurred on the Swahili Coast between 1000–1200 C.E. Robertshaw (2003:164) recently suggests that a shift from network-based power strategies to corporate-based power strategies occurred during this period. He suggests two lines of evidence, a universal conversion to Islam and greater investment on public architecture and monumental buildings. The economic boom encouraged the migration of hinterland peoples and foreign traders to the EAC. Improved quality of life would also have promoted natural population growth. Between 950–1100 C.E., Islam was a minority religion: mosques were small and rare, and found mostly in northern Kenya in the Lamu archipelago. However, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries conversion to Islam for the entire region was almost completed. Islam had indeed become a symbol of corporate identity. There was also greater investment in public architecture and monumental building in this period. Larger and more permanent congregation mosques were built, such as the great mosques of Ungwana, Mogadishu, Gede,

and Kilwa. They served as symbols of corporate Swahili urban identity while at the same time displaying Swahili membership in the pan-Islamic community led by the Caliph in Baghdad or Cairo. Despite these changes, coastal urban society continued to be distinctly classed. The elite held on to their wealth, power and resources while also becoming more entrenched in their ways of displaying wealth. They built large multi-roomed houses, which they lavishly furnished. They erected large elaborate tombs for their dead. They even sought to separate themselves from their commoner brethren by building private mosques where they and their trading partners and visitors would pray and quietly do business. They erected walls to surround their towns, protecting themselves from external attack, and fortified their residences with minor walls as a measure against internal attack and to invasions of privacy. They further distanced themselves from commoners by instituting an intimacy gradient, which ensured social as well as physical distance with strangers (Donley-Reid 1984, 1986, 1990). Elite residences were separated from commoner residences, which in most cases were located further from the sea and outside the town wall. In short, by the late twelfth and thirteenth century, elites had begun to differentiate themselves from their commoner brethren, such that network and corporate strategies were employed in different contexts.

By the fourteenth century, elite focus had shifted to long-distance and international maritime trade at the expense of local craft industries, which had initially promoted trade with the interior. Coast-hinterland relationships began to weaken, particularly after coastal peoples got involved in long-distance caravans that sought ivory and slaves in the interior. It is still unclear whether the rest of the coast was also experiencing an economic decline that predated Portuguese conquest (Kusimba 2004).

In contrast to Mesoamerica, a shift from network-based strategies of the first millennium to the corporate-based power strategies of second millennium C.E. was not accompanied by a shift from wealth-based finance to staple-based finance (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996). Instead, the prestige-goods economy expanded and continued to dominate. Why was this the case? Like most polities and states around the Indian Ocean, EAC polities were linked to a wider regional and international economy and responded to political and economic forces of supply and demand. Although the archaeological record shows a clear shift to a more corporate-based ideology, in reality, the elite still monopolized economic and political power by manipulating their relationship to the wider local community through gift giving. Such strategies promoted local loyalties and regional alliances.

The coastal elites maintained relationships with their counterparts in the hinterlands and across the Indian Ocean. Their middle position, while advantageous, made them over-dependent on long-distance exchange. Thus for the EAC, a purely network or corporate mode was not possible. In reality, both strategies were opportunistically applied. For example, despite the council's control of arable land, no large storage buildings existed on the EAC prior to 1650 C.E., suggesting that both elite and commoners continued to farm in small family holdings for subsistence. Thus, neither the network nor corporate mode alone is sufficient to explain the development of social complexity on the Swahili Coast. What we see is a combination of both, with the modes alternating in dominance through time. In all periods, elites control arable land, trade routes, productive industries, and labor. This and the use of the prestige-goods system are manifestations of network-based societies. However, elites also maintained control by sharing work, religion and religious symbols, and materials culture. The Swahili Coast example illustrates, as do other complex societies, that the formation of societal inequality is not entirely dependent on high levels of political centralization as was proposed by processual archaeologists.

Elite Alliances with Trading Communities

Though regional trade had been important on the coast well before the Early Common Era, direct coastal interactions between Asians and Africans increased in intensity and significance only after 600 C.E. (Ehret 1998; Chami 1994; Casson 1989; Horton 1996). The rising Islamization among the coastal political and economic elite was paralleled by an increase in trade, and the growth of cosmopolitan urban centers on the coast. Traders from West, South and South East Asia invested in the coastal economic infrastructure of cities from Mogadishu to Mahalika (Juma 1998; Kusimba 1999a; Horton 1996; Radimilahy 1997). They also settled in significant numbers, as reported by Ibn Battuta, the early Portuguese chroniclers and by the available archaeological evidence of utilitarian imported pottery such as chatti ware and cooking stoves from India and non-glazed buff ware from Persia and Fustat (Strandes 1968; Kusimba 1993; Horton 1996).

Trading communities of Asia and Africa are traditionally apolitical or develop discrete alliances with political elite to further their own businesses (Markovits 2000). In our ethnographic work on prominent trading groups in India, many aphorisms and narratives talk about the role of traders vis-à-vis politics and how traders should stick to trade (Oka n.d.). These aphorisms and narratives illustrate the uneasy relations between trading and political groups. Merchants' narratives from the earliest times of trade abound with tales of unjust treatment meted out to merchants by greedy kings or noblemen (Cohen 1971; Jain 1990; SPK 1998). To counteract possible collapse of trade due to political instability, merchant groups developed a tool kit of strategies to adapt to variable political environments and also invest heavily in relational networks and alliances that allowed them to trade, expand, or relocate with minimal damage to the network (Falzone 2004; Oka n.d.; Steensgard 1987).

These alliances are not fully economic and trading communities will accept short-term losses, minimal profits, or even drain on their capital to maintain their co-operative networks (Gudemann 2001; Kingdom 2000; Mauss 1990; Oka n.d.). This included gift-exchanges, in which merchants gave exotic prestige-value commodities to their political patrons, acted as intermediaries or ambassadors of friendship between two polities, entered into marital relationships or cemented formal friendships and blood brotherhoods with local traders and political elite (Herlehy 1984; Kusimba 1999a; see Faulkner and de Rond 2000; de Rond 2003 for a good summary of alliance network studies). In the East African case, trader-ruler alliances were especially important and raise some questions: how did the foreign and local trading groups interact with the political rulers or city elite who controlled markets, trade routes, and port facilities? How did traders respond to EAC elite over-dependence on long-distance trade and changes in political landscapes of the Indian Ocean littoral between 1400–1600 C.E.?

The early relations (c. 1000–1300 C.E.) between the East African political elite and foreign traders began as a patron-client relationship. African products such as gold, ivory, rock crystals, iron bloom, and animal hides were heavily in demand in Asia and Europe and traders actively sought political patronage from the city rulers through gifts and relational alliances (Kusimba 1999a; Robertshaw 2003; Udovitch 1970). As most of these traders were Muslim and had alliances with powerful political and economic groups in the Middle East and North Africa, rulers encouraged these alliances and placed themselves within the Islamic world center through Middle Eastern Origin myths (Tolmacheva 1993; Horton and Middleton 2000; Kusimba 2003). Reports by

Arab travelers mention that the local political rulers and traders jealously guarded their access to hinterland products and made sure that they were the only conduits for trade. Increasing demand led to increasing trade and led to an inflorescence of trading centers all along the East African littoral (Wilson 1982).

The increase of players in the coastal markets led to intensified competition between cities for the hinterland supply routes and for attention from foreign traders. Since policing the hinterland was beyond the political and economic abilities of the coastal city-states, they developed military and trade alliances with the peoples in the Nyika, a parallel strip of land used by agriculturalists such as the Mijikenda and the Giriama (Ogot 1979; Spear 1978). The increase in the number of interacting partners in the coastal hinterland further intensified the need for coastal elite to maintain strong ties with local and foreign traders. Much of these alliances with hinterland peoples were cemented by regular gifts of cloth, beads, finished iron products, as well as grain, and marine products (Kusimba and Kusimba 2001–3). The bulk of these prestige items were only available through foreign trade, such as beads and cloth from India, East Asia, or the Middle East (Gogte 2003). As coastal cities Mombasa and Malindi fought each other for foreign alliances and hinterland trading routes, the local elite began to over-emphasize and depend upon their foreign connections to maintain regional legitimacy (Strandes 1968). This reversal of the earlier (coastal elite) patron-client (foreign trader) relationship allowed foreign groups increased access to their markets, hinterlands, and political infrastructure. This also led Omani Arabs, Ottoman Turks, and the Portuguese to enter local conflicts and presaged the way for the later Portuguese and Omani occupation of the coast (Kusimba 1999a).

The period between 1500–1600 also witnessed an increasing stability of political landscapes of the Indian Ocean littoral states, namely the emergence and détente politics of three Islamic empires: Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal. Between 1550–1600 C.E., the proto-industrial zones of Bandar Abbas and Shiraz (Safavid), Aleppo, Fustat and Cairo (Ottoman) and Bengal, Gujarat and the Northern Konkan coast (Mughal) were undergoing a long period of political stability and benign patronage (Pearson 1998; Chandra 1987). It has been argued that there was a drastic increase in production of export-based commodities such as cloth, silks, and beads at Gujarat (Moosvi 1987). How did this affect East Africa? Excavations at Mtwapa, Shanga, and other areas reveal that local cloth weaving activities, evidenced by spindle whorls and loom weights, declined heavily during this period (Kusimba 1999a). Newitt (1987) reports that Gujarati merchants increasingly dumped cloth on the East African market and intensified their demand for raw materials. The initial attempts in controlling EAC markets soon gave way to formal monopolies by the end of the seventeenth century C.E. Through their networks and the increased dependence of coastal elite on these alliances, Indian merchant groups cornered the market in cloth and ivory and strangled the coastal weaving complex (Oka et al in Press).

Hence, the particular evolution of trading networks, and trader-elite alliances on the EAC, and the changing political landscape of the Indian Ocean resulted in a shift away from local and regional manufacture and value-adding activities in iron, cloth, ivory, and animal skins production. The overseas demand for ivory, gold, and slaves, coupled with inter-polity conflicts and a growing elite group politically and economically dependent on their foreign trade alliances, led to the dominance of an import-based economy in which cities imported finished products, including food grains and cattle, from Asia in exchange for raw materials from the East African hinterlands (Newitt 1987).

Summary and Conclusions

The Elite use different strategies to develop and maintain social, symbolic, economic, and political power. Both ancient and modern elites artfully and skillfully manipulate material symbols to maintain the privilege of power (Reid 1996; Wrigley 1993). Political and cultural control over resources provides the basis for accumulation of wealth (Earle 1997; Haas 1982; Helms 1993:166; Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Kristiansen 1991). The intensity of interaction amongst coastal and hinterland communities increased beginning in the eleventh century. Local chiefs expanded their role to negotiate with foreign merchants establishing trade relationships with East Africa. The introduction and eventual establishment of Islam benefited both merchants and local rulers. Islam helped establish brotherhood and trust among diverse peoples, similar to blood brotherhood rituals amongst disparate African groups (Bakari 1981; Herlehy 1984; Linton 1933).

International interest and demand for African products, the circumscribed nature of the East African littoral and adjacent islands, and the concentration of primary resources within the ten-mile coastal strip, created the conditions necessary for the development of local control over resources. Long-distance maritime trade allowed members of the elite to exploit both local and external symbols of power to legitimize and maintain control over the wealth they had accumulated.

The skillful manipulation of symbols of the Swahili elite's descendency from matriarchal princesses helped maintain legitimacy and close kin ties with the commoners who may have accepted them as their "natural" rulers (Nurse and Spear 1985:92). At the same time, alliances with neighbors were maintained through redistribution of exotic items, gift exchange, and friendships (Nicholls 1971; Prins 1961). In this manner, the elite ensured the continuous flow of trade items from the interior and the loyalty of their commoners and hinterland neighbors. Such relations often involved assistance in times of crisis (Kirkman 1974; Prins 1961). On the other hand, the appropriation of foreign symbols of power, wealth, and identity by the Swahili elite made good economic sense. Foreign symbols linked the Swahili Coast to the wider Islamic world, then to the major political and economic power in the circum-Indian Ocean world, making it possible for them to exploit and benefit from international commerce.

Though it would be tempting to use this example of trade-centered complexity to assert that Africans had a direct influence in the Indian Ocean trade prior as suggested by Jesse Benjamin (2002), we would argue that the politics and realities of distance made any influence of Asia over Africa and Africa over Asia equal only to the influence that foreign trading communities, whether Arab, Indian or East African, had over local elites (Stein 2002). Hence unlike the African Siddi of Janjira, who as naval warfare specialists were *de facto* rulers of the naval lanes of the northwest coast of India (Oka and Kusimba, this volume), most Afrasian traders existed as clients to their local elite patrons, wielding just enough influence to sustain their commercial activities. The demand for and supply of foreign products was economically and socially mitigated by the traders as were diplomatic missions. Efforts by any ruler to control another overseas polity were usually interpreted as unrealistic and transmitted as offers of alliance as opposed to allegiance (Oka and Kusimba in Review). The *realpolitik* of distance and the pragmatism of trader economics make groundless the arguments that Asian polities controlled the EAC or that African polities had overt influence in Asia prior to 1400 CE (Stein 1999, 2002).

However, the elite appropriation of foreign symbols of wealth coupled with the increase in the flow of these commodities between 1300–1400 C.E., introduced a new value system that linked East Africa to the Persian Gulf and Indian sub-continent. The new value system of reckoning wealth affected the local elites' vision for developing a balanced development strategy. In short, wealth-creating activities undertaken by commoners, such as iron production and textile making, became less important relative to export of primary products including ivory, rhino horn, cat skins, and slaves. To construct a polity, leaders had to unite and control labor (Earle 1991:4). By dealing in the export of slaves, the coastal elites were creating a labor vacuum, which contained the germs of its collapse (Kusimba 1999b; 2004; Kusimba et al in Press). Although the greatest structural expansion occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a marked decline in wealth creating activities, including the decline and eventual collapse of craft production centers at major Swahili settlements at Kilwa, Malindi, Pate, and Ungwana in the sixteenth century (Oka et al in Press). The collapse of local craft production centers led to economic dependence on external powers. This dependence increased inter-polity rivalry and competition. These conditions only served to empower foreign merchants to manipulate the relationships and further dominate coastal commerce. These conditions preceded European arrival and made it possible for Portuguese and Omani colonialists to find allies within the Swahili polities and served to accelerate the destruction of pre-colonial Swahili society. The post 1400 C.E. reversal of patron-client relationships on the EAC leaving traders in dominant positions with respect to the political elite was soon followed by similar relations between trading communities and political elite in other parts of Africa and Asia (Rodney 1971). This reversal can be seen as basic to dependency and as a significant property of the modern colonial and post-colonial world system (Gunder-Frank 1969).

The study of the trading communities on the EAC is crucial to understand past and contemporary socio-politics of urban development in East Africa. Urban decline, as archaeologists and historians have noted, is a very complex topic that needs to be understood as a part of social complexity. Individuals and groups with vested interests will make and take decisions that will impact urban development. The process of urban decline in Afrasia, hitherto understood as a result of European induced shock, should be seen as a result of complex processes in which local trading communities changed rules and shifted loci of interest, whether this was trading partners, mechanisms, or places. This process can only be understood by a combination of ethnographic work in understanding merchant decision making, ethno-historic work to see what changes took place in East Africa, and archaeological work that studies the process of changing elite-merchant networks and migration to and from trading centers. This is the work that we are engaging in East Africa and Western India (see Oka and Kusimba, In Press).

To visit a restaurant in urban or rural East Africa is to engage in a cultural terrain that reminds one of the long established relationships between Asia and Africa but most particularly, that of India and East Africa. It is an experience that unfolds stories of the origins of domestication, of international flows, of migrations, and of bidirectional transfers of technologies, ideas, and in some cases of people. These connections are very much visible in the daily experiences of East Africans who as they drink their *chai* and eat their *chapati*, *wali*, *samosa*, *biriani*, and *kachumbari* reinforce the long established bond, the Afrasian bond. This paper illuminates this relationship from the archaeological perspective. It discusses how trade, economy, and technology combined to shape political culture in pre-colonial East Africa.

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