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One Text, Many Forms – A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts

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First page of an Arabic *Qas ʿida Hamziyya* manuscript, copied by Abī Bakr bin Sulṭān Aḥmad in 1311 AH/1894 CE, with annotations in Swahili and Arabic. Private collection of Sayyid Ahmad Badawy al-Hussainy (1932-2012) and Bi Tume Shee, Mombasa.

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Article

Writing in Swahili on Stone and on Paper

Ann Biersteker | Milwaukee, WI, USA

We know that manuscripts and likely collections of manuscripts existed along the East African coast during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. The leaders of East African coastal city-states appear to have seen their cities as learned communities and to have respected other such communities. In March 1497 when Nicolau Coelho entered what later became Cabaceira in Mozambique, the leader of that community asked to see Coelho's 'books of the law'.¹ Luís Vaz de Camões' *Os Lusíadas* also indicates that coastal peoples asked the Portuguese for their 'books of our laws, commandments, or faith'.² As Adrien Delmas has noted,³

Mutual recognition by respectively presenting sacred texts should not come as a surprise. For the Portuguese, the idea was to find Christian allies in their endeavour to circumvent Islam, and this ceremonial exchange was repeated along the East African coast, in Mombasa and Malindi, as well as on the way back in Mogadiscio and Kilwa, but also in other places in Africa and the Indian Ocean. For the Africans, the need to identify newcomers was obvious, and while they were hoping to size up their strength by the sound of their cannons, it was through their writings that they intended to find out their intentions.

Subsequently, during the first attack the Portuguese made along the East African coast, the items confiscated included 'books of the law'.⁴ The other items seized were distributed to the sailors involved in the looting, but the 'books of the law' were 'kept back to be shown to the king'.⁵ We do not know why these books were held separately for the King of Portugal; perhaps because of their aesthetic qualities or because they provided evidence that these were Islamic societies. Nor do we know what happened to these 'books' –

if they were eventually given to the King of Portugal and are now in some Portuguese archive or if they sank in one of the Portuguese ships lost during the journey.

Presumably, these works were written in Arabic and they were books that guided people in these societies in some sense. They may have been copies of the Qur'ān or other religious or legal texts. It is almost certain that they were manuscripts rather than printed books as the first printed Qur'ān was not produced until 1538 and it was printed in Venice for Christian missionaries (albeit with many errors);⁶ the first Qur'ān printed by Muslims for Muslims was not published until 1787 CE.⁷ There was much earlier block printing in Arabic for decorative purposes, but according to Jonathan Bloom, 'The earliest Arabic printed text that has survived is the *Kitāb salāt al-sawā'ī*, a book of hours produced in Fano by the master Venetian printer Gregorio de' Gregori in 1514'.⁸

With reference to the late nineteenth century, Anne K. Bang speaks of 'a sphere of Islamic learning that encompassed the Indian Ocean shores, from the East African coast to the archipelago of South-East Asia'.⁹ To what extent did such a sphere exist in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries? We will clearly need to study a wide range of texts written on numerous types of surfaces to have any sense of this.¹⁰

In addition to knowing a little about other types of manuscripts produced before the nineteenth century,¹¹

¹ João de Sá or Alvaro Velho 1898.

² Camões 1997, 15.

³ Delmas 2017, 182.

⁴ João de Sá or Alvaro Velho 1898.

⁵ João de Sá or Alvaro Velho 1898.

⁶ Bloom 2001, 10.

⁷ Bloom 2001, 10.

⁸ Bloom 2001, 219.

⁹ Bang 2011, 90.

¹⁰ In an earlier paper, 'The Inscribed Object: The Textures and Textuality of Writing in Eastern Africa' (Biersteker 2018), I considered the history of writing in coastal East Africa.

¹¹ The oldest confirmed Swahili writing on paper is correspondence written in the early eighteenth century (1711–1724): letters that were confiscated by the Portuguese and taken to the Portuguese archives in Goa; see Alpers, 1975; Sultan Fatima binti Muhammad Mkubwa 2007, Omar and Frankl 1994, and Ashley Lynn 2005. The dating of earlier manuscripts including 'Hamziyya,' 'Chuo cha Herkal'/'Utendi wa Tambuka,' and 'Swifa ya Mwana Manga' is disputed.

we know that local rulers in East Africa composed correspondence during the period of Portuguese control, presumably mostly in Arabic, but also possibly in Portuguese, given that there were Swahili in the employ of the Portuguese who translated from Swahili to Portuguese.¹² According to Randall Pouwels citing Olfert Dapper, the King of Malindi employed scribes who managed his correspondence in Arabic.¹³ After the destruction of Mombasa in 1505 CE, the King of Mombasa wrote a letter to the King of Malindi describing in vivid detail what had happened in Mombasa.¹⁴ We do not know whether the King wrote the letter in Arabic or in Swahili, but the letter is evidence that the rulers of these city-states communicated with each other in writing in the early sixteenth century. Jeremy Prestholdt also cites letters written by the kings of Malindi to the King of Portugal,¹⁵ and Liazzat Bonate mentions these as well as ‘a letter from the ruler of Mozambique [Mozambique Island], Sharif Muhammad al-Alawi, to the king Manuel dated May 27, 1517’.¹⁶ Correspondence continued throughout the sixteenth century. According to Thomas Vernet,

In 1596 or 1597 Sultan Muhammad, king of Malindi and Mombasa, wrote to Philip II of Spain to ask him, among other things, for his ships to sail freely and tax free to the fortresses of the Portuguese Empire. He also asked [for] the right to send a ship of pilgrims to Mecca (i.e. Jeddah), presumably each year, on the basis that this right had already been granted by the Portuguese Crown to the Muslim rulers of India.¹⁷

¹² See Alpers 1975, 98–99.

¹³ Pouwels 2002, 397.

¹⁴ The letter read: ‘May God protect you Sayyid Ali. I have to inform you that we have been visited by a mighty ruler who has brought fire and destruction amongst us. He raged in our town with such might and terror that no one, neither man nor woman, neither the old nor the young, nor even the children, however small was spared to live. His wrath was to be escaped only by flight. Not only people, but even the birds in the heavens were killed and burnt. The stench from the corpses is so overpowering that I dare not enter the town, and I cannot begin to give you an idea of the immense amount of booty which they took from the town. Pray hearken to the news of these sad events, that you yourself may be preserved’, Strandes 1968, 64. Strandes cites Mayr fol. 10a ff.; Mayr was a German representative who traveled with Francisco de Almeida. A Portuguese translation of his account was included in a manuscript Strandes found in Munich (Strandes 1968, 56, n. 7).

¹⁵ Prestholdt 2001, 397. Prestholdt cites Sousa (1790, 123–125) and Silva da Rego (1962–1989 [6], 44–46).

¹⁶ Bonate 2016, 65.

¹⁷ Vernet 2015, 167.

Since there is no evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that this correspondence was on paper, although there is no documentation of East African sources of paper until the eighteenth century.¹⁸ We do know that paper from Europe was available in Malaysia by the early part of the sixteenth century¹⁹ and that paper-making technology and paper itself seem to have diffused with the spread of Islam.²⁰ Early evidence of letter exchanges makes it seem likely that paper was in use in East Africa when the Portuguese arrived and may even have been in use there much earlier.

Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, aside from these letters and the Portuguese and Arabic versions of the Kilwa Chronicle, there are no surviving manuscripts from this period or until nearly two centuries later.²¹ Our evidence of writing in East Africa during this two-century gap is found in the extensive stone and wood carvings still extant along the East African coast. The question in this essay is whether consideration of these carvings might contribute to our understanding of later Swahili manuscripts, and how this might be done.

Arabic is used in most inscriptions on tombs and in mosques in Eastern Africa and is the only language employed in quotations from the Qur’ān on these structures. Arabic was also used on coins minted in East Africa even earlier.²² Delmas claims that ‘[t]he earliest Swahili *‘ajamī* dates to the seventeenth century’,²³ yet Swahili occurs quite often in epitaphs that were written well before that. The first Swahili inscription on stone may actually be on the *mihrab* of the mosque in Kizimkazi on Zanzibar. This 500 AH / 1107 CE inscription refers to Sayyid Abi Imran Mfahamu al-Hasan b. Muhammad as the builder of the mosque.²⁴ Abdul Sheriff comments that ‘the middle title Mfahamu’ is probably ‘among the earliest evidence of a Swahili term for ruler, *mfaume/mfalme*’.²⁵ Professor Sheriff also observes that this ‘may be the first inscription of a Swahili word on stone’.²⁶ Aldrick has observed that the inscription on this

¹⁸ Digby 1975, 54; see de Sousa 1788 as well.

¹⁹ Jones 1993, 477.

²⁰ Burke III 2009, 176–177.

²¹ See Saad 1979, 177–207 and Delmas 2017, 181–206.

²² Perkins, 2015.

²³ Delmas, 2017, 194. Presumably he is referring to manuscripts.

²⁴ Sheriff 2009, 181.

²⁵ Sheriff 2009, 181.

²⁶ Personal communication.

tomb ‘has foliate scroll work within the calligraphy’ and that this ‘is an exception and is quite different from the later tomb inscriptions found in East Africa.’²⁷

According to G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville and B. G. Martin,

At Kunduchi, a little north of Dar es Salaam, the tomb of Sultan Shaf la-Hajji, dated a.h. 1081/a.d. 1670–1, in giving the name of his father Mwinyi Mtumaini, is the first wholly certain record of Swahili words that we possess [...].²⁸

They recorded many earlier Swahili examples themselves, though, such as ‘Sayyida ‘A’isha bint Mawlana’ on a 1360 or 1550 tomb in Kilwa, ‘Mwana wa Bwana’ on a tomb dated to 1462 near Kilindini, and ‘Mwinyi Shummua [*sic*] b. Mwinyi Shomari’ on a 1664 tomb in Kwale.

Numerous additional epitaphs on later tombs found in East Africa include Swahili honorific titles and other Swahili terms. Those recorded by Freeman-Grenville and Martin (F&M) are as shown in Table 1.

It is significant that many of these honorific titles are Swahili phrases (*Bwana Mkuu*, *Bwana She*, *Nana She*, *Mwinyi Mui*, *Mwinyi Mkuu*, *Mwinyi Mtumaini*, *Mtu Mkuu*, *Mkuu Mtumaini*). The epitaphs also include names that are Swahili words, such as Simba [‘Lion’], Mauwa/Mawa [‘Flowers’?], and Mwinyi Sawa²⁹ [‘The Fair Ruler’]. The use of ‘la’ as a possessive in descriptions of lineages is of linguistic interest; there is one example of a ‘wa’ possessive (*Mwana wa Bwana binti Mwidani*), but ‘la’ is used in the following cases:

1. Malwana bint Sultan Shaf la-Mtu Mkuu b. Sultan Shaf Muhammad al Barawi
2. Sultan Shaf la-Hajji b. Sultan Shaf la-Muhammad b. Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini
3. Mwinyi Mkuu b. Mwinyi Kab b. Mwinyi Khamis Kab b. al-Sultan Shonvi la-Muhammad
4. Sultan Diwan La Simba b. Mwinyi ‘Amiri
5. Mas’ud b. Sultan Shonvi ‘Ali b. Sultan Shonvi la-Muhammad al-Barawi
6. Mwinyi Mkuu Mwinyi Abu Bakr b. Lamta ... Mkuu ... Sultan Shonvi la-Mtu Mkuu al-Hatimi al-Barawi

²⁷ Aldrick 1988, 38.

²⁸ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, 99.

²⁹ This might also be ‘Sawakal’, the meaning of which is uncertain.

Sometimes the ‘la’ precedes a name (la-Muhammad) and at other times a Swahili phrase (*la Mtu Mkuu*) or a Swahilicized version of an Arabic term, e.g. ‘Haji’. This use of ‘la’ probably has its source in augmentative usages of Class 5 and refers to the status of the person to whom reference is made. It is noteworthy that these ‘la’ examples are all found on tombs located in Kunduchi or elsewhere on the Mrima Coast or on Zanzibar or Pemba, while the only ‘wa’ example is from Kilindini on Mombasa Island. Many of the usages are associated with the clan or family name ‘Shonvi’ and/or with ‘al-Hatimi’ or ‘al-Barawi’, all of which are associated with people who came to the Mrima Coast from Yemen via Brava.³⁰ The widespread and long-standing use of both ‘mwinyi’ and ‘mwana’ is also of significance, as is the use of ‘maulana’.

Some of the epitaphs are almost entirely in Swahili, such as *Sultan Diwan La Simba b. Mwinyi ‘Amiri*³¹ and *Mwana Mauwa bint Mwinyi Sawa Kal(?) b. Mwinyi Hajji*. Most are in a mixture of Swahili and Arabic, but Swahili readers still understand them. Examples of Swahili/Arabic code-mixing and -shifting clearly have long and extensive histories in East Africa.

The epitaphs also make it clear that many of those memorialized, including a number of women, had made the *hajj* (Table 2).

³⁰ Pouwels 2002, 419.

³¹ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973.

Table 1: Swahili terminology in tomb inscriptions.

Epitaph Translation	Location	Date	Source
'Hajj 'Umar b. Bwana Mkuu b. Bwana b. Bwana 'Umar b. Bwana Mkuu b. Bwana Daya (locally pronounced Dayo) b. Bwana She [<i>sic</i>] Hajji'	Chovai, Somalia	n.d.	F&M, 108 ³²
'Sultan Bwana' (on a mosque)	Pate	n.d.	F&M, 109
Sultan Abu Bakr b. Sultan Bwana Mkuu (?) (on a mosque)	Pate	n.d.	F&M, 109
Nana She of Jum'a (?) b. Shaykh 'Idi b. Hamad b. Shaykh Ahmad b. Shaykh Husayn b. Shaykh Abu Bakr b. Salim	Pate	n.d.	F&M, 109
Malwana bint Sultan Shaf la-Mtu Mkuu b. Sultan Shaf Muhammad al Barawi	Kunduchi	n.d.	F&M, 118
Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini b. Mwinyi Jum'a b. Ka . . . b. Sultan al-Shonvi la-Muhammad al-Barawi	Kunduchi	date erased	F&M, 118
Sayyid Abi Imran Mfahamu al-Hasan b. Muhammad	Kizimkazi	1107	Sheriff ³³
Sayyida 'A'isha bint Mawlana Amir 'Ali b. Mawlana Sultan Sulayman	Kilwa Kisiwani	1359–60 or 1553–54	F&M, 120
Mwana wa Bwana binti Mwidani	Tuaka near Kilindini	1462	F&M, 114
Mwinyi Shummua [<i>sic</i>] b. Mwinyi Shomari	Kwale	1663–64 or 1664–65	F&M, 120
Sultan Shaf la-Hajji b. Sultan Shaf la-Muhammad b. Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini	Kunduchi	1670–71	F&M, 118
Mwana (Miyani) b. Mwana Madi b. Mwana Sa'id al-Malindani	Kilwa Kisiwani	1712	F&M, 120
Mwinyi Mkuu b. Mwinyi Kab b. Mwinyi Khamis Kab b. al-Sultan Shonvi la-Muhammad	Ukutani, Pemba	1712–13, 1825–26, or 1845–46	F&M, 118
Hajjiya Bibi bint Muqaddam Hajj Muhammad	Mogadishu	1726	F&M, 104
Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini b. Sultan Shaf la-Muhammad al-Barawi	Kunduchi	1748–49	F&M, 118
Mwana Siti bint Diwan Hasan (on a mosque)	Wasin	1749	F&M, 115

³² References are to Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, 98–122

³³ Reference is to Sheriff 2009, 181.

Shaykh b. Mwinyi Mui al-Khazraji al-Ba Urii [Bauri], name of the carver of the epitaph above	Wasin	1749	F&M, 115
Sultan Shonvi la-Hajji Abu Bakr	Kunduchi	1754	F&M, 118
Mwinyi Saqafu b. Diwan Ruga	Vumba	1786–87	F&M, 115
Sultan Diwan Nungu (?) b. al-Walid Mwinyi 'Amiri b. Sultan Diwan La Simba (on a mosque)	Kipumbwe Mji Mkuu	1789	F&M, 116
Sultan Diwan La Simba b. Mwinyi 'Amiri	Kipumbwe Mji Mkuu	1789–90 or 1823–24	F&M, 116
Mas'ud b. Sultan Shonvi 'Ali b. Sultan Shonvi la-Muhammad al-Barawi	Mbweni, Zanzibar	1791–92	F&M, 117
Mahalimu [Mwalimu] Abu Bakr bin Mkandi	Pate	1792	O&W
Mwana Majid bint Ma'adi b. Wabi al-Kindiya	Mombasa?	1793	F&M, 114
Mwana Jub bint Mabwana Hajj [sic] 'Umar b. Shaykh b. Da'ud al-Mustafi	Provenance not known	1799	F&M, 119
Tammam (? Tamim) bint Mwinyi Jum'a	Mbweni	1802–03	F&M, 117
Sultan Muhammad b. Abu Bakr b. Sultan Bwana Mkuu al-Nabhani al-Barawi	Pate	1809 or 1616 or 1624	O&W F&M, 108
Mwana Mauwa bint Mwinyi Sawa Kal(?) b. Mwinyi Hajj	Mbweni	1813 or 1832–33	F&M, 117
Bwana Musa	Kidonge, Pemba	1817–18	F&M, 121
Mwana Furno (?), the daughter of Sultan Muhammad bin Sultan	Pate	1824	O&W ³⁴
Mawa ³⁵ Ghamr bint al-Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini al-Barawi	Kunduchi	1832–33	F&M, 118
Mwinyi Mkuu . . . Mkuu Mtumaini Kab b. Sultan Shonvi la-Muhammad al-Hatimi al-Barawi	Kunduchi or Mrima Coast	1838–39	F&M, 119
Mwinyi Mkuu Mwinyi Abu Bakr b. Lamta . . . Mkuu . . . Sultan Shonvi la-Mtu Mkuu al-Hatimi al-Barawi	Perhaps Kunduchi or Mrima Coast	1843	F&M, 119

³⁴ Reference is to Wilson and Omar 1997.

³⁵ It is uncertain if this is a proper name or a shortening of 'mwana wa'.

Table 2: Swahili terminology in tomb inscriptions containing the honorific title Hajj.

Epitaph Translation	Location	Date	Source
1. This . . . 2. for the imam of God 3. GodHajji4. . . .to all. . . 5. made it for him. . . .6. [May] God most High love him!	Mogadishu	n.d.	F&M, 102
Hajji Mahmud (plate, not tomb)	Mogadishu	n.d.	F&M, 105
Hajj 'Umar b. Bwana Mkuu b. Bwana b. Bwana 'Umar b. Bwana Mkuu b. Bwana Daya [. . .] b. Bwana She	Chovai, Somalia	n.d.	F&M, 108
Hajj Shanid b. Abi Bakr 'Umar b. 'Uthman b. Husayn (on a mosque)	Barawa (Brava)	1105	F&M, 108
'Umar b. al-Hajj Sharif b. Abi Bakr b. Hajj Da'ud	Mogadishu	1269?	F&M, 103
al-Hajj Sa'id al-Khazraji	Mogadishu	13th c.	F&M, 103
Abu Bakr b. al-Hajj Yaqut al-Hadrami	Mogadishu	1358	F&M, 104
Abu Bakr b. Muham mad b. Hajj Ahmad al-Madani	Mogadishu	1364	F&M, 104
Hajj Yusuf b. Abu Bakr b. Hajj Da'ud	Mogadishu	1365	F&M, 104
Shaykh al-Hajj . . . b. al-Shaykh 'Uthman b. Isma'il	Mogadishu	1368–9	F&M, 106
Abu al-DIn [sic] b. al-Faqih al-Hajj al-Qahtani	Mogadishu	1607	F&M, 104
Sultan Shaf la-Hajji b. Sultan Shaf la-Muhammad b. Sultan Mwinyi Mtumaini	Kunduchi	1670–71	F&M, 118
Hajjiya Bibi bint Muqaddam Hajj Muhammad	Mogadishu	1726	F&M, 104
al-Hajj 'Ali b. Ahmad al-Sadiq al-Bakri (on a door, not a tomb)	Mogadishu	1738	F&M, 107
Sultan Shonvi la-Hajji Abu Bakr	Kunduchi	1754	F&M, 118
Hajj 'Umar al-Thani Ibrahim (plate, not a tomb)	Mogadishu	1778	F&M, 105
Dedicatory inscription in Arabic in the Shikely Mosque, stating that it was built at the time of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Mazru'i's pilgrimage to Mecca	Mombasa	1793–4	F&M, 118
Inscription in black ink on the wall of the Mazru'i Audience Chamber in Fort Jesus, recording the pilgrimage of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Mazru'i to Mecca in 1208 AH/793–4 CE.	Mombasa	1793–4	F&M, 113
Mwana Jub bint Mabwana Hajj [sic] 'Umar b. Shaykh	Unknown, but in the National Museum, Dar es Salaam	1799	F&M, 119
Mwana Mauwa bint Mwinyi Sawa Kal(?) b. Mwinyi Hajj,	Dar es Salaam	1813 or 1832	F&M, 117
Hajja bint Hajj Shah	Kunduchi	1847–8	F&M, 118
Hajj 'Abdallah al-Balushi	Kaole	1848	F&M, 117

It seems likely from the epitaphs that many people made the *hajj* in family groups that probably included servants or slaves. We can safely assume that those memorialized for having made the journey were only a small percentage of those who actually undertook the arduous trip. Because their journey by ship was dependent on the monsoon winds, this would have meant them having to spend months on the Arabian Peninsula where they no doubt met up with other pilgrims from elsewhere in the Islamic world. Citing Jomier, Russell King states that 15,000 people from Africa south of the Sahara made the *hajj* in 1324 CE. King also indicates that a major route to Mecca from East Africa was by dhow to the coast of Yemen and then via Sanaa through the highlands to Mecca.³⁶ Kenneth McPherson has suggested that most of those who made the *hajj* from Indian Ocean regions ‘carried trade goods to help defray the heavy expenses of the pilgrimage’.³⁷ Some of these people may have engaged in study and have copied or purchased manuscripts during their journey. In his thesis, Usam Isa Ghaidan mentions a qadhi from Lamu, for example, who is commented upon in the work of the Arab historian Al-Maqrizi:³⁸ the Lamu *qadhi* who visited Mecca in 1441 CE ‘impressed the Arab historian by his scholarship.’³⁹

There is only one case we know of in which the name of the person who carved an inscription has been preserved: the author of an inscription made on a mosque in Wasin in 1749 CE was ‘Shaykh b. Mwinyi Mui al-Khazraji al-Ba Urii (??)’.⁴⁰ We can assume at least in this case that the carver was someone with religious knowledge and the son of a ruler, but we cannot generalize beyond this except to say that his background seems quite similar to that of another much later carver about whom we know a great deal: Muhamadi Kijuma. Kijuma, who was a poet, musician, calligrapher, scribe, and carver, was from an elite ruling family, studied Islam with leading scholars, and made the *hajj* at least four times.⁴¹ As Clarissa Vierke has observed, ‘[t]he Swahili term *nakshi* refers to all kinds of ornaments, no matter whether inscribed in wood, modelled in plaster or drawn on paper’⁴² (or carved in stone, as in this case). She

also notes the resemblance between Kijuma’s design work on different surfaces. Presumably, this was also the case for earlier artists. This little piece of information raises some intriguing questions about who the carvers were and how they were trained, which materials were used, and what kind of relations existed between carvers, scribes, and authors.

Freeman-Grenville and Martin have observed that ‘[i]t is noteworthy that no dated inscriptions are known in Mogadishu between 1365 and 1607.’ There are also significant gaps in other places, and the majority of the inscriptions in many sites have become unreadable. Freeman-Grenville and Martin saw their ‘handlist’ ‘only as a beginning’ and encouraged readers to contribute to future publications so as to create a corpus of ‘Islamic epigraphy of the coast’.⁴³ This is a project that has yet to be undertaken, but it continues to be a worthy goal. They recorded 249 inscriptions in all. One hundred and two of those are illegible, partially illegible, or not yet deciphered. Thirty-three of those that are readable contain Swahili terms.

Most of the inscriptions on tombs and mosques were on coral rag, but at least one inscription was on sandstone. Marble was also imported from India to Mogadishu and Kilwa. Elizabeth Lambourn suggests that inscriptions on marble found in East Africa were commissioned and argues that it is likely artisans traveled from Cambay in India to Mogadishu and Kilwa to carry out this work because of the differences between carving on coral rag and carving on marble.⁴⁴ Of course, it is also possible that artisans traveled from Mogadishu and Kilwa and learned to carve on marble in Cambay, or that texts were sent from East Africa to Cambay to be carved on marble slabs.

Two woodworked minbars [steps used as a platform in a mosque] with inscriptions from the early sixteenth century have also survived: one in Siu dated 1523–1524 and one in Lamu dated 1511–1512.⁴⁵ Both include decorative carving in addition to inscriptions in Arabic. Aldrick describes the carving on these doors as being in an ‘interlaced strapwork pattern called guilloche, which is seen particularly in Ethiopian and Somali art’.⁴⁶ In addition, Freeman-Grenville and Martin refer to an ‘unread inscription on an ivory horn

³⁶ King 1972, 65.

³⁷ McPherson 1988, 50.

³⁸ Al-Mas’udi 1964.

³⁹ Ghaidan 1974, 46.

⁴⁰ Possibly ‘al-Bauri’.

⁴¹ Vierke 2010, 41–42.

⁴² Vierke 2010, 44.

⁴³ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, 98.

⁴⁴ Lambourn 1999, 61–86.

⁴⁵ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, 105, 108, 109; photograph of the Siu minbar inscription. Also see Aldrick 1988.

⁴⁶ Aldrick 1988, 37.



Fig. 1: 'Heading Sura 36' taken from Digby 1975, eighteenth-century Qur'an from Witu.

or siwa, made in Pate in A.D. 1696'.⁴⁷ Presumably, the differences were not as great in carving on coral rag and carving on wood or on ivory as the differences between carving on these surfaces and marble, but were there specialists in particular materials? And did many of those who carved on these surfaces also copy or write manuscript texts? In his description of an eighteenth-century Qur'an from Witu, Simon Digby observed the following (Fig. 1):

On the central field of each rectangular panel, reserved against a black background with rounded corners, is set the name of the Sura in a compressed *thuluth*-like hand with some cursive contractions, a hand which recalls that of stone epigraphs. At the rounded corners red-coloured spandrels complete the rectangle. The rectangular field is enclosed within a guard strip with red ruled lines on either side. In the first heading

the guard-strip is decorated in reserve against black with lacing rope ornament, in the second, also in reserve against black with a chain of lozenges.⁴⁸

The similarities between tomb inscription designs and manuscript design are also evident in the design of the fourteenth-century tomb near the Mosque by the Sea in the Jumba la Mtwana ruins (Fig. 2),⁴⁹ in the design of the sixteenth-century Siu minbar (Fig. 3),⁵⁰ and in the design of the epitaph of Mwana wa Bwana binti Mwidani, who died in 1462 CE, on her tomb in Tuaka near Kilindini (Fig. 4).⁵¹ The inscription design on each of these tombs consists of a border design surrounding a text, which is remarkably similar to that described by Digby.

⁴⁸ Digby 1975, 52.

⁴⁹ *Jumba la Mtwana Guide* n.d., 9.

⁵⁰ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, plate 1.

⁵¹ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, plate 5.

⁴⁷ Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, 110.



Fig: 2: Jumba la Mtwana mosque inscription. The *Jumba la Mtwana Guide* (n.d., 6) gives the following description: 'The inscription itself consists of a finely carved slab of coral. The surrounding text is from the Koran, Chapter 3, verse 185 and may be translated: "Every soul shall taste death. You will simply be paid your wages in full on the Day of Resurrection. He who is removed from the fire and made to enter heaven, he it is who has won the victory. The earthly life is only delusion."'



Fig. 3: The Siu Minbar; Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, plate 1. 'Inscription on the wooden minbar in the Friday Mosque A.H. 930/1523-1524 CE. This is the earliest known inscription on wood in Eastern Africa.'



Fig. 4: Epitaph of Mwana wa Bwana binti Mwidani, Freeman-Grenville and Martin 1973, plate 5. 'd. 29 Rajab, 866 A.H. / 29 April 1462 CE, from Tuaka, near Kilindini, Mombasa Island'.

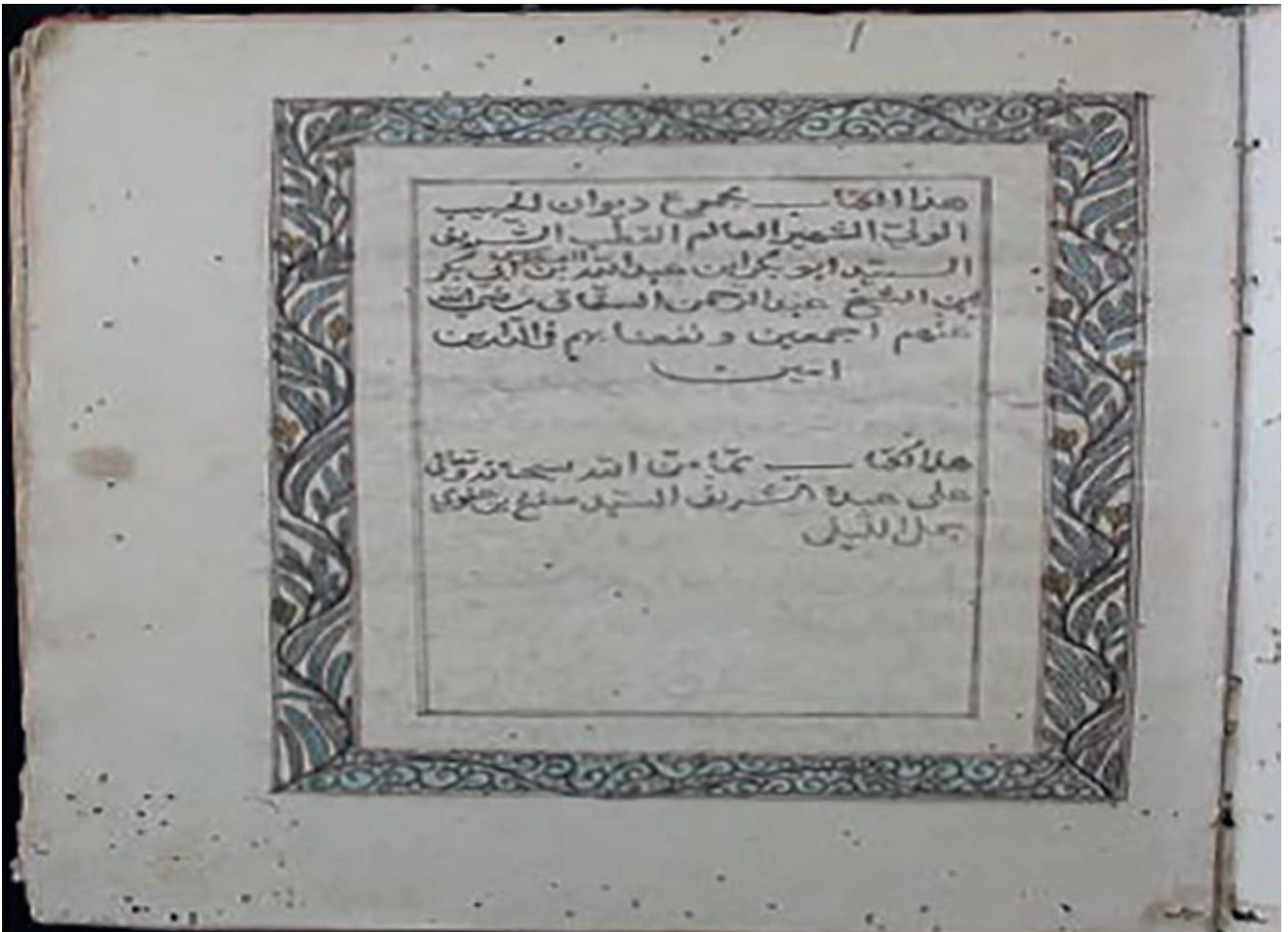


Fig. 5: *Diwān al-'Adanī* [The Collected Poetry of Abū Bakr al-'Adanī], copied by Sālim b. Yusallim b. 'Awaḍ Bā Safar for Habib Saleh in 1927 CE (EAP466/1/19, image 2).

These tomb designs look remarkably like pages, although I have not seen any similar border designs on Swahili manuscripts. The closest design of which I am aware is the twentieth-century border of a signboard that Muhamadi Kijuma made for Ernst Dammann.⁵² Another similar border design is found in an early poetry manuscript in the Riyadhha Mosque collection (Fig. 5).

There is certainly a need to study the styles of carved writing in a similar way to carving styles.⁵³ Are there any regional differences? Did expert carvers travel as we know later scribes and translators did? To what extent were the styles used in epitaphs and inscriptions consistent across Swahili-speaking areas?

Comparisons of the epitaphs found on tombs from the eleventh to mid-nineteenth century with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Swahili names recorded as authors' names

in manuscripts and in legal and *waqf* [inheritance dedication] documents suggest that the use of Swahili in such formal naming contexts may have declined rather than expanded during this more recent period. For example, Anne K. Bang records only one author, scribe, or *waqf* name containing a Swahili term ('Qadi Hisham b. Abi Bakr b. Bwana Kwab [or Kub] al-Lami') in her provisional catalogue entries for the 43 nineteenth- and twentieth-century manuscripts discovered in the Riyadhha Mosque to which she refers in her article.⁵⁴ The *waqf* documents examined by John O. Hunwick and Rex Sean O'Fahey⁵⁵ (which are also from Lamu) contain more Swahili terms, but none of the 'wa-' or 'la-' constructions found on epitaphs on tombs further south. The names that include Swahili terms are the following:

⁵² Mische and Vierke 2010, 532.

⁵³ Athman 1996, 11–29. Also see Aldrick 1988.

⁵⁴ Bang 2015, 164–172.

⁵⁵ Hunwick and O'Fahey. 2002, 1–19.

Amina bint bani/a [= bwana?] (p. 10)
 Bwana Mkubwa b. al-Shaykh b. Abi Bakr al-Khatimi (pp. 11, 13)
 Mwana Amina bint bwana Sa°d (p. 15, 17)
 Bwana Sa°d b. bwana °Aliyu (p. 15)
 Bwana Sa°d b. bwana Ubu (p. 17)
 Yayi bint bwana °Aliyu (p. 17).

In his recent study of nineteenth-century contracts made in Zanzibar, Thomas F. McDow also records a number of names that include Swahili terms that were used in contracts or other official contexts:

Diwan Makambi (or Mwekambi) Juma bin Ahmad (p. 52)
 Binti Bana (Bwana) Waziri al-Mufazii (p. 52)
 Bwana Heri bin Juma al-Mafazii (p. 52)
 Mwinyi Kidogo (p. 99)
 Mwinyi Kheri (p. 141).

Again, these are honorific titles and there is no other evidence of Swahili usage.

Writing on other surfaces provides even less evidence. While ninth- to fourteenth-century Swahili coins were unique in that writing on the coins ran from right to left around the coins and from front to back, the writing was always in Arabic; there is no evidence of Swahili names, titles, or grammatical features on Swahili coins⁵⁶ or on other types of artifacts until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Epitaphs on tombs seem to provide evidence of early and continuous writing in code-mixed Arabic and Swahili and solely in Swahili along the East African coast. The evidence they provide is limited in that it consists primarily of Swahili honorific titles and proper names that are also Swahili words. The strongest evidence of early Swahili writing is the use of the possessive forms 'la-' and 'wa-' as this is evidence of use of Swahili grammatical structures, but these seem to be associated with honorific titles. There are clearly some regional differences in the extent to which Swahili forms are used in epitaphs since the possessive forms are only used in some areas. Further analysis may also reveal regional differences in styles and decorative features as well as differences across time periods.

The epitaphs additionally indicate that at least some elite East Africans, including scholars, traveled extensively. Epitaphs of this kind challenge the assumption that texts were exclusively or primarily brought to East Africa by outsiders, because they make the extensive travel and scholarship of East Africans from 1200 onwards clear as well as their extensive contact with other Arabic speakers. Epitaphs of this type also raise questions concerning the intellectual and artistic work of carvers and the extent to which they were composers and/or commissioned to create works using specific materials. Design parallels in different materials are evident, but require additional study.

⁵⁶ See Perkins 2015; Perkins, Fleisher, and Wynne-Jones 2014, 102–116; Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012.

⁵⁷ See Biersteker 2018.

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