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THE SWAHILI COMMUNITY OF MOMBASA, 1500–1900¹

BY F. J. BERG

THE *Thenashara Taifa*, or Twelve Swahili Tribes of Mombasa, were formerly one of the principal factors in the history of the East African coast. Though a minority in their own city since the beginning of the twentieth century, they have preserved a sense of group consciousness and pride despite the transformation of the community—and their place in it—by modern urban development. Even now they are locally regarded as the true ‘people of the city’, the oldest of the many elements which together constitute the present cosmopolis.

Mombasa’s emergence as a great international port is, however, of comparatively recent date and without any real precedent in the city’s earlier history. Much of the Swahili community’s cohesiveness can be attributed to collective awareness of its own past predominance in Mombasa and along a good deal of the neighbouring coast. For centuries Mombasa has been pre-eminently a Swahili town and, among Swahili towns, more distinguished than most. The history of the *Thenashara Taifa* is thus of significance not only as a single strand in the urban thread of contemporary Mombasa, but also as an exceptionally successful example of a precolonial Swahili city state. Old Mombasa, moreover, drew extensively on other Swahili settlements for its population, and in the course of time became a kind of refuge for displaced families from places as far distant as Barawa. Small accretions of population from other towns seem to have been common in many coast settlements before the colonial period, but Mombasa appears to be unique in the extent to which ‘foreign’ Swahili were adopted into the body social.

Use of the term ‘Swahili’ requires some clarification before proceeding further, since it has, over the years, acquired a variety of meanings and nuances of meaning.² Taken in the sense of a member of an ethnic group, ‘a Swahili’ is simply any Muslim Swahili-speaker of African and Asian descent who regards himself as a Swahili and not as an Arab or member of some other coastal community. This is the meaning commonly recognized in Mombasa. (Though it is true that all members of the *Thenashara Taifa* are Swahili, it is not sufficient to define ‘Swahili’ as someone who belongs

¹ I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Foreign Area Program of New York, which supported my research in Britain and Kenya in 1965–66, during which time material for this paper was collected as background to a study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mombasa. The accompanying maps were prepared by the Cartographic Laboratory of the University of Wisconsin.

² H. E. Lambert, in ‘The Twelve Tribes and the Arab community of Mombasa’, *Mombasa Social Survey*, 2 volumes (privately mimeographed, 1958), vol. I, 41–42, offers a full discussion of the evolution of the meanings associated with the word ‘Swahili’.

to the Twelve Tribes, as Swahili outside Mombasa are rarely associated with the *Thenashara Taifa*.) Some Swahili further identify themselves as 'Shirazi', a term which also has more than one commonly accepted definition. Generally 'Shirazi' implies noble or at least non-servile ancestry, and some of its present popularity on parts of the East African coast is attributable to rejection of the pejorative connotations often associated with 'Swahili'. Prior to the twentieth century, however, 'Shirazi' had the meaning of a person of Persian descent. Numerous ruling families along the coast were formerly Shirazi, and the designation seems since to have been adopted by hypothetical descendants of their retainers and subjects. It is possible that the Shirazi dynasties themselves came from primary Asian settlements on the southern Somali coast rather than direct from Shiraz in Iran.³

Considered on the basis of immigrant population, the closest affiliations of the Mombasa Swahili are with towns and islands to the north, along the coast of what is now Kenya and southern Somalia. Seven of the twelve names of the *mataifa* or 'tribes'⁴ and many of their subdivisions are in fact names of localities north of Mombasa.⁵ All but one of the remaining five *mataifa* are named after districts on or near Mombasa Island; none are named after places south of the city. Scattered instances of individuals migrating to Mombasa from Zanzibar, Pemba and the Tanzanian coast are known, but these people were without exception absorbed into an existing local or northern immigrant *taifa*. The name of one of these southern immigrants, Harb bin Athman al-Kilwi al-Shangani, who is commemorated in the oldest datable inscription in any Mombasa mosque (1793), aptly illustrates this tendency. The 'al-Shangani' added to the 'al-Kilwi' denotes absorption into the Changamwe, one of the long-established local *mataifa*, whereas the 'al-Kilwi' suggests that he was originally from Kilwa, to the south. Harb bin Athman's experience may be taken as typical of the handful of southern immigrants.

There were, none the less, close ties between Mombasa and the southern Swahili towns, particularly during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These were not only commercial, but seem also to have been dynastic. It is likely that most ruling families in the towns from Kilwa north to the Tana river were Shirazi, and were related to one another by blood or marriage.⁶ The Shirazi Sheikhs of Mombasa are known to have

³ J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in East Africa* (Oxford, 1964), 1-18, supported by H. N. Chittick, 'The Shirazi colonization of East Africa', *J. African Hist.* vi (1965), 275, 292.

⁴ *Mataifa* is the usual plural of *taifa*—a Swahili borrowing from Arabic—but the singular is always used in reference to the *Thenashara Taifa* or its two subdivisions, the *Theletha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa*.

⁵ Several lists of the subdivisions of the Mombasa Swahili have at various times been drawn up. The most complete was compiled in 1899 by A. C. Hollis and is deposited in the Kenya National Archives (hereafter abbreviated to KNA), Deposit 1, Coast Province, Bundle II, Msa/6.

⁶ 'Shirazi' origin for these sheikhly families is borne out by several Arabic chronicles and Swahili traditions; specific kinship ties are sometimes mentioned in Portuguese documents and histories.

been kinsmen of the sixteenth century sheikhs of Kilifi and Hoja. (Hoja may be the group of ruins north-east of the Tana mouth, known as Ungwana.⁷) Also, the royal family of Malindi, which governed Mombasa from 1593 to 1630, married into the Shirazi house at Kilwa long before establishing itself at Mombasa.⁸ The original Shirazi dynasty at Mombasa may also have been related to the southern Shirazi princely families. Mombasa's popularity as a place of exile—deposed rulers of Kilwa and Pemba are reported to have retired there—need not be taken as evidence of this, but it does confirm that Mombasa was in the mainstream of events along the coast.⁹

By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, most Shirazi ruling houses were either extinct or had been supplanted by the Portuguese, so that Mombasa's earlier dynastic links with other Swahili communities were broken. Whatever importance these may have had was further obscured at this time by increasing northern migration into Mombasa. As will be seen, refugees from the Galla and civil disturbances in the northern towns gradually regrouped in Mombasa as locally based 'clans' (*mbari* or *milango*) and 'tribes' (*mataifa* or *miji*). These have given the Mombasa Swahili a more northerly orientation than the one which seems to have prevailed under the Shirazi sheikhs of Mombasa—or Mvita, as it was then known. The long-term trend in the formation of the Mombasa Swahili community, therefore, was one of declining contact with their kinsmen to the south.

The relationship between the Mombasa dialect of Swahili, Ki-Mvita, and the southern and northern dialects, however, suggests that linguistically the Mombasa Swahili have no more in common with Swahili to the north than with those to the south. There seems to be little correlation here between dialects and known population movements. From a linguistic point of view, the *Thenashara Taifa* are distinct from both northern and southern Swahili. Much work has been done since Sacleux's and Stigand's pioneering surveys of Swahili dialect,¹⁰ most of it on Zanzibar, Pemba, and the north Tanzania and south Kenya coast. As a result Ki-Mvita has been

⁷ (a) J. dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, ed. L. Cordeira, two volumes (Lisboa, 1891), I, 436–40, mentions the dynastic link between Mombasa and Kilifi. J. M. Gray, 'Portuguese records relating to the Segeju', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, xxix (July 1950), 89–90, summarizes this information. (b) J. de Barros, *Da Asia*, ed. H. Cidade, four volumes (Lisboa, 1945–46), Decada II, Livro 1, 12–16, touches on the Mombasa–Hoja connexion. This is summarized in J. Strandes, *Portuguese Period in East Africa*, trans. Jean Wallwork (Nairobi, 1961), 74–5. Identification of Hoja with Ungwana has been suggested by J. S. Kirkman, *Men and Monuments on the East African Coast* (London, 1964), 78–9.

⁸ Barros, Decada IV, Livro 3, 134–6; Strandes, *Portuguese Period*, 124–5, summarizes Barros.

⁹ (a) Barros, Decada I, Livro 10, 420–2, reports the exile (about 1507) and death in Mombasa of Sheikh Hasan of Kilwa. There is a translation in G. M. Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, seven volumes (London, 1900), VI, 288–9. (b) Dos Santos, *Ethiopia*, I, 384–5, reports the deposition and flight to Mombasa (about 1585) of a 'king' of Pemba.

¹⁰ C. Sacleux, *Grammaire des dialectes Swahilis* (Paris, 1909), and C. H. Stigand, *A Grammar of Dialect Changes in the Kiswahili Language* (Cambridge, 1915).

tentatively classified as the principal member of a north-central dialect cluster.¹¹ Two of the twelve *mataifa* in Mombasa, the Jomvu and Changamwe (both of which have primary settlements on the mainland rather than on Mombasa Island), speak slightly differentiated subdialects of Ki-Mvita, though Ki-Mvita itself is the dominant form of Swahili from Gazi in the south to Malindi in the north.¹² Apart from Ki-Mvita and its subdialects, the only other member of the north-central cluster is Chi-Chifundi or Chi-Shirazi, a dying dialect spoken between Gazi and Shimoni.¹³ This north-central group (South Kenya) evidently differs sufficiently from the south-central group (Tanzania) in phonetic and grammatical features to merit recognition by Whiteley as a distinct group. Though little descriptive work has been done recently on the northern dialect cluster (North Kenya), older studies give the impression that it is at least as unlike the north-central cluster as the dialects of the south-central group. Ki-Amu, the northern group's most prominent dialect, has the special reputation of preserving a greater number of 'archaic' forms of speech than the more southern dialects, and of being closest to the original form of the language.

Mombasa's receptivity to northern immigration thus seems to have had little linguistic impact on its population. Whether this be due more to Ki-Mvita's strength as the locally entrenched dialect, to the disparate origins of the northern *mataifa* and to the piecemeal nature of their immigration, or to any regional dialect differentiation that may have taken place since the eighteenth century, is uncertain. The one certainty is that Ki-Mvita's status as a widely recognized and extensively spoken dialect has been a thing in which the Swahili of Mombasa have long taken pride, and, like the tradition of an honorable past, it has helped keep alive their community consciousness.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The *Thenashara Taifa* have not always been part of the social organization of the Mombasa Swahili. In recent years the concept of the *taifa* or 'tribe' has been losing ground to a more generalized idea of 'Swahiliness', contrasted with other elements in the modern city. Similarly, Swahili generally admit there was a period in the distantly perceived past when no such thing as the Twelve Tribes existed, and that these *mataifa* are in some sense successors to a more undifferentiated Swahili community governed by the almost legendary Shehe Mvita. Yet the days of the Shirazi sheikhs are hardly more than a vague memory. Most of the remembered history of the community has been enacted within the framework of the *Thenashara*

¹¹ W. H. Whiteley, 'An introduction to the local dialects of Zanzibar', Part I, *Swahili*, xxx (Dec. 1959), 41-5.

¹² H. E. Lambert, *Chi-Jomvu and Ki-Ngare, Sub-dialects of the Mombasa Area* (Kampala, 1958).

¹³ H. E. Lambert, *Chi-Chifundi, a Dialect of the Southern Kenya Coast* (Kampala, 1958).

Taifa, their subordinate clans, and the moieties of The Three and The Nine into which the *mataifa* are divided.

An understanding of how the *Thenashara Taifa* are subdivided is therefore essential to appreciating the way in which the Swahili community evolved and functioned. Among Mombasa Swahili the first level of segmentation might be regarded as 'confederational', though Swahili themselves do not describe it as such. No Ki-Mvita equivalent for 'confederation', specifically applied to either of the moieties within the *Thenashara Taifa*, seems to exist. Instead reference is made simply to the *Thelatha Taifa* (Three Tribes) and to the *Tisa Taifa* (Nine Tribes). The larger of the two groups appears, at least since Portuguese times, to have been the *Thelatha Taifa*.¹⁴ Absence of a term for 'confederation' in relation to The Three and The Nine implies that though the two groups might have had considerable political significance (as in fact they did), they existed independently of any but the most loosely structured institutional framework. During the Zanzibari period (1838-95), a spokesman or *tamim* (plural: *matamim*) for each was recognized by the sultans. *Matamim* have the appearance of being a creation of the Sultans of Zanzibar, and quite likely represent the Sultanate's solution to the problem of replacing the recently dismantled state structure of the Mazrui. Given the existence of two 'confederations' and Zanzibari preference for indirect rule, the *tamim*-ship was a logical development.

A *tamim* acted as liaison between the sultan and the moiety which he represented, was paid a salary, and was given a letter of appointment stating, most often in very general terms, his prerogatives and responsibilities. Since letters of appointment frequently touched on the rights and duties of the *mataifa* for which their recipient was spokesman, they came to be regarded by the Swahili as charters defining their status within the Zanzibar Sultanate.¹⁵ The office of *tamim*, though largely vestigial, still has a part in Swahili life at Mombasa. It is in practice hereditary, though *matamim* were nominally elected by mass assemblies and later confirmed by the sultans.

Mataifa or 'tribes' constitute the second level of segmentation. The *taifa* concept, though perfectly clear to Mombasa Swahili, who even today have no difficulty identifying the *taifa* to which they are affiliated, is not an easy one to describe. In Arabic *ṭā'ifa* (طائفة) has the meaning of 'sect', 'faction', or 'band'; in Swahili the definition shifts somewhat to compre-

¹⁴ M. Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique Orientale*, three volumes (Paris, 1856-58), III, 237-8. Also R. F. Burton, *Zanzibar: City, Island and Coast*, two volumes (London, 1872), II, 75-6. Census statistics supply no information about the subject, but general opinion in Mombasa holds that the *Thelatha Taifa* are still numerically predominant.

¹⁵ Eleven letters of appointment issued by the sultans to various *matamim* are known to exist as translations and/or Arabic copies made from originals. Some are among the exhibits of Civil Appeal 12/1913 in the archives of the Kenya High Court in Nairobi. Others are part of the records of the Mombasa Afro-Asian Welfare League. Still others are in private hands in Mombasa.

hend 'nation' or 'tribe'. There is an alternate form, *mji* (plural: *miji*) not of Arabic derivation, and having a primary meaning of 'town' or 'settlement'. In the Mombasa context, however, English-speaking Swahili also translate *mji* as 'tribe'. Thus even with regard to terminology there is a certain amount of ambiguity. On one hand a *taifa* or *mji* partakes of the nature of a political association ('a faction') with territorial overtones. On the other hand it implies kinship ('a tribe').

Both elements were in fact present in the concept. Affiliation with an *mji* or *taifa* was determined by patrilineal descent. If the clan to which a man's father belonged was considered part of a given *taifa*, the man himself was automatically a member. At the same time there is no reason to believe that all clans within a *taifa* shared a common ancestry, even a fictional one.

Clans within a *taifa* recognized a common sheikh (*shehe*), whom they regarded more as their representative to the total community than as a patriarch. They did not, excepting the clan to which he belonged, consider him the senior member of an extended kin group. The functions of a sheikh were mostly political, and sheikhships were not regarded as being hereditary within a single clan, though in practice they sometimes were.¹⁶ As a rule, actual kinship, as defined by patrilineal descent, extended no further than the clans or *mbari*. Linking several clans together in a single *taifa* seems historically to have been a matter of political convenience. Thus a *taifa* was in one sense a collection of kin groups (albeit unrelated to one another), and in another sense a political body organized to give its members an effective voice in community affairs.

The origin of all but one or two *mataifa*, as presently constituted, goes back to the end of the sixteenth century, when Mombasa became a refuge and reintegration point for dispersed populations from up the coast. A single example from the *Thelatha Taifa* illustrates how the *mataifa* came into being:

Tribe (*taifa* or *mji*): Tangana

Clan (*mbari*):

(a) Mwinyi Muli. Derived from the founder, who led his family to the mainland south of Mombasa from the town of Muli or Mole, formerly situated about 15 miles north of Mombasa near Kanamaia.

(b) Mwinyi Jaka. Derived from the founder, who led his family to the mainland south of Mombasa from the town of Mtwapa, just south of Kanamaia.

(c) Umbwi or Omwe. Derived from a town of that name formerly situated a few miles south of Kismayu in southern Somalia.

¹⁶ Information from Sheikh Hyder M. Elkindy, Deputy *Tamim* of the *Thelatha Taifa*. H. E. Lambert's findings in 'The Twelve Tribes', 60-2, are similar.

(d) Mwinyi Ngwisa. No known derivation; possibly an offshoot from one of the three preceding clans.¹⁷

A tradition collected by Captain Guillain in 1848 states that the first three clans consolidated as the *Taifa* Tangana near Mombasa Island. Later the Tangana took up residence on the island in company with the other two *mataifa* belonging to the *Thelatha Taifa* after being menaced by the Galla at an unspecified date. Their joint foundation of Kilindini Town on Mombasa's south-western shore is the traditional beginning of this 'confederation'. A more recent tradition (1956) states simply that the Tangana are a mixture of 'Wamola' (presumably *Mbari* Mwinyi Muli) and 'Washirazi' (presumably *Mbari* Mwinyi Jaka and *Mbari* Umbwi).¹⁸ At present the Tangana are regarded by other Swahili as having a larger percentage than usual of Shirazi ancestry, which agrees well with what Guillain was told and thought he observed in 1848.¹⁹ The *tamim* of the *Thelatha Taifa*, moreover, has always come from a Tangana family designated al-Shirazi.

Other *mataifa* are also composed of clans whose founders were of varying origin. Several belonging to the *Tisa Taifa* had such diverse origins that a third category, midway between a *taifa* and an *mbari*, the *kabila*,²⁰ has been said to exist. Segmentation at this level would then follow this pattern:

'Confederation' → *Taifa* → *Kabila* → *Mbari*.

Kabila is a straight-forward borrowing from the Arabic *qabila* (قبيلة), meaning 'tribe' in the sense of kin or ethnic group, and would seem to add further confusion to Mombasa Swahili social structure. This category, however, is not currently recognized in Mombasa, and may never have been so recognized. It may merely be a logical construct to get round the fact that there are not enough *miji* or *mataifa* in the *Tisa Taifa* to accommodate every city and ex-city contributing to its membership. Several must be encompassed within a single *mji*, as in the case of *Taifa* Pate, which is host to clans from Lamu, Manda, and Shela, among others. Adoption of the vague and institutionally meaningless term *kabila* (there is no record or recollection of there ever having been any sheikhs of a *kabila*) may have originated to avoid slighting clans whose town of origin could not claim status as a full-fledged *taifa* at Mombasa.

Mataifa, however, had considerable institutional significance. Their sheikhs sometimes received letters of appointment and a stipend from the Sultans of Zanzibar.²¹ They regularly took part in 'confederation' councils

¹⁷ *Taifa* and *mbari* names come from the Hollis compilation in the KNA. Details as to origins come from *Thelatha Taifa* traditions collected by Guillain and summarized in *Documents*, III, 242-3.

¹⁸ Lambert, *Chi-Yomvu*, 12-13.

¹⁹ Guillain, *Documents*, III, 246.

²⁰ Hollis's compilation, KNA; later taken up and elaborated by A. H. J. Prins, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* (London, 1961), 80.

²¹ Three letters of appointment issued to *taifa* sheikhs have come to light in the files described in note 14 above.

conducted by the *tamim*, could travel to Zanzibar to lay a grievance before the sultan, and are recorded as going on embassies to the Imams of Muscat prior to the Zanzibari period.²² Today many Mombasa Swahili have forgotten the name of their *mbari* or clan, but almost all remember readily enough the *taifa* to which they belong.

ORIGINS, 1500–1700

The existence of a Swahili community at Mombasa antedates the *Thenashara Taifa* by several centuries. Three or four principal phases in its development—possibly even three quite different cities—are distinguishable. The first is associated with a queen, Mwana Mkisi, whose city was known as Kongowea, sometimes called Gongwa. The second phase is associated with the Shirazi dynasty founded by the Shehe Mvita, whose name was thereafter applied to the city. The third and last precolonial phase was shared out amongst Portuguese governors and a new Shirazi dynasty from Malindi; a local Omani dynasty, the Mazrui; and a foreign Omani dynasty ruling from Zanzibar, the Busaidi. During this period the city became known as Mombasa, though use of the term ‘Mvita’ has only now begun to die out in the city itself. The last of these phases is the one in which the *Thenashara Taifa* came into existence, an existence becoming gradually more tenuous in the post-colonial era, which, together with the colonial period, might be regarded as the city’s fourth or ‘modern’ phase.

Evidence for the pre-Shirazi dynasty represented by Mwana Mkisi consists of fragments of tradition and literary references. The oldest known mention of Kongowea and its queen is found in a poem by Mombasa’s most famous Swahili poet, Bwana Muyaka bin Mwinyi Haji, who lived during the first half of the nineteenth century.²³ A short manuscript history written in 1914 by a member of the *Taifa Bajuni*, Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi al-Bauri, elaborates on Bwana Muyaka’s work, explaining that Shehe Mvita, a foreigner who ‘came from the Shirazi towns’, settled in Kongowea after being refused permission to live in cities to the north of it.²⁴ According to Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi, Shehe Mvita was ‘given’ the city by the Sultan of Mtwapa, a town a short distance up the coast. Previously it had belonged to Mwana Mkisi. Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi’s tradition is reiterated in another unpublished manuscript, *Khabari ya Ngozi*, which appears to have been in possession of the late William Hichens, translator of the Lamu Chronicle.²⁵ The bare memory of Mwana Mkisi and her town

²² Some of these embassies are discussed in the Mombasa Chronicle, translated by Guillain and James Emery in Guillain, *Documents*, I, 614–22, and in W. F. W. Owen, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia, and Madagascar*, two volumes (London, 1833), I, 414–22.

²³ ‘Kongowea’ in W. E. Taylor, *African Aphorisms or Saws from Swahili-Land* (London, 1924), 80–3. Text in Ki-Mvita and English.

²⁴ ‘News of Mombasa’ in Arabic-script Ki-Mvita and English translation, KNA, C.P. I, Bundle II, Msa/14.

²⁵ W. Hichens, ‘A chronicle of Lamu’, *Bantu Studies*, XII (1938), 3–33. Hichens summarizes Juma bin Rashid’s *Khabari ya Ngozi*—undated—in a footnote on page 9.

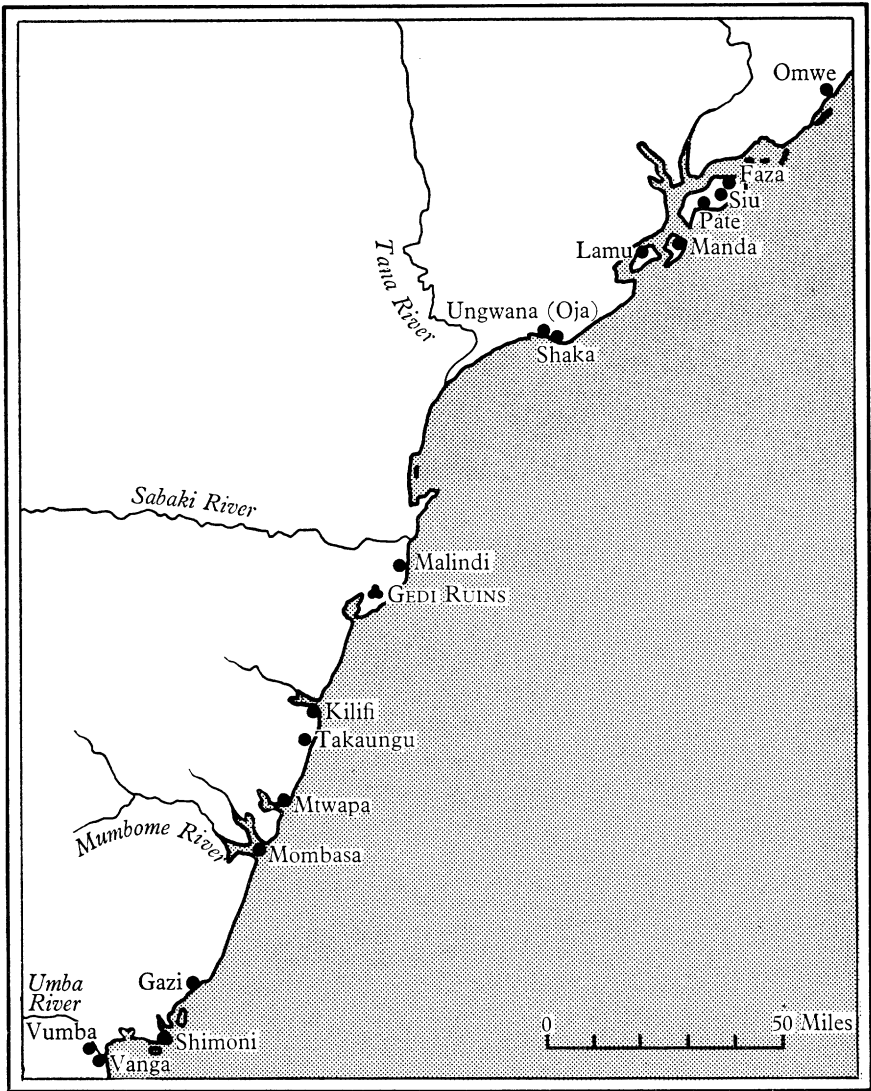


Fig. 1. Historical sites on the Kenya coast.

of Kongowea survives to this day among Mombasa Swahili, probably because it has been immortalized by the often-quoted poetry of Bwana Muyaka. Old men in the *Mji wa Kale* or Old Town, however, can point out her town's traditional location in *Mtaa* (Quarter) Mzizima, somewhat to the north of the present Old Town, and beyond the bridge joining the island to the Kisauni-Nyali mainland.

Traditions relating to the Shirazi dynasty and to its founder are not very

much more informative. One, collected by J. L. Krapf at some time during the 1840s, treats Shehe Mvita as first occupant of the island and ignores Kongowea altogether.²⁶ The Mombasa Chronicle (*ca.* 1824) has little to say about the dynasty, simply remarking that it was Shirazi and that the last of its sheikhs was named Shehe bin Misham.²⁷ This Shirazi dynasty has none the less left an indelible imprint on the consciousness of the Mombasa Swahili. Shehe Mvita, rather than Mwana Mkisi, is regarded by them as the founder of their community. His grave has long been the object of an annual Solar New Year's Day (*Siku ya Mwaka*) pilgrimage and ceremony, which is still performed, though its observance is no longer the great event it was formerly.²⁸ The most detailed traditional information is supplied by the Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi and the Hichens manuscripts, which describe the first Shirazi sheikh's progress down the coast and his occupation of Mombasa Island with the aid of the ruler of Mtwapa. Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi viewed the event as involving actual deposition of Queen Mwana Mkisi by the Sheikh of Mtwapa; conceivably this bit of detail can be read as an alliance between two Shirazi dynasts against a non-Shirazi principality during the early days of Shirazi expansion along the coast.

The question of who the Shirazi were and where they came from has yet to be given a definitive answer, but such evidence as is available from Mombasa suggests that the hypothesis advanced by Trimmingham and Chittick, and anticipated nearly a century ago by Burton, may be correct.²⁹ Briefly stated, the hypothesis holds that the Shirazi were Swahilized descendants of Asian settlers on the Banadir coast of southern Somalia who may, in Chittick's opinion, have begun to occupy settlements beyond the Banadir coast toward the end of the twelfth century A.D. Mbwana bin Mbwarafundi's reference to Shehe Mvita as coming from 'the Shirazi towns' (and not direct from Shiraz in Persia) lends credibility to this view. Other traditions of origin common to Mombasa Swahili, notably those of the Kilindini of the *Thelatha Taifa*³⁰ and the Jomvu of the *Tisa Taifa*,³¹ make reference to having lived earlier at Shungwaya, identified with Bur Gao in southern Somalia. Likewise the Umbwi clan of the Tangana (*Thelatha Taifa*) reportedly came from a town near Kismayu.³² None of these *mataifa* are associated with Shehe Mvita's clan, but most are reputed to have Shirazi elements in them, and a common Somali coast origin may be of some significance.

By 1500 the dynasty of Shehe Mvita emerges somewhat more fully into

²⁶ J. L. Krapf, *Dictionary of the Suahili Language* (London, 1882), 270, entry under 'Mvita'.

²⁷ Guillain version: *Documents*, I, 614. Emery version: *Voyages*, I, 414.

²⁸ Sacleux, quoted by J. M. Gray in 'Nairuzi or Siku ya Mwaka', *TNR*, xxxviii (March 1955), 21, identifies the grave as that of Shehe bin Misham, the last Shirazi ruler, but this is incorrect. Krapf, *Dictionary*, 270, identifies it properly.

²⁹ Trimmingham, *Islam in East Africa*, 1-18, and Chittick, 'Shirazi Colonization', 275, 292. Cf. Burton, *Zanzibar*, II, 76: 'they [the *Taifa* Kilindini] migrated to Shungwaya alias Shiraz and eventually to Mombasah'.

³⁰ Guillain, *Documents*, III, 240-3.

³¹ Lambert, *Chi-Jomvu*, 70-3.

³² Guillain, *Documents*, III, 242-3.

the light of history through Portuguese accounts. Its capital was a relatively populous and powerful city during the sixteenth century, as attested by consistent recoveries from devastation by the Portuguese in 1505, 1526 and 1589. On the last of these occasions Mombasa was pillaged by the Zimba, whose appearance coincided with the arrival of a Portuguese fleet. Evidently the cannibalistic prowess of the Zimba, which contemporary Portuguese and later writers have dwelt on at length, has been overrated, since the city proved sufficiently resilient to mount an expedition against Malindi a year later.³³

This campaign against Malindi, long the major East African ally of Portugal, ended in disaster. The Mombasans and their African auxiliaries were surprised at an encampment on the road to Malindi by Segeju friendly to the Sheikh of Malindi. During the ensuing battle Shehe bin Misham and his three adult sons were killed. Shortly afterward the Segeju occupied Mombasa, eventually surrendering it to the Sheikh of Malindi and the Portuguese. This debacle brought to an end the second, or Shirazi phase in the city's history. Descendants of the original Shirazi settlers still survive in the guise of two *mataifa* within the *Tisa Taifa*, the Mvita and the Jomvu.³⁴ Shehe Mvita's town is now partly occupied by the northern portion of the present *Mji wa Kale* and partly given over to ruins and cemeteries south of Nyali Bridge.

The first century and a half or so (about 1590–1730) of the post-Shirazi phase was characterized by several factors making for instability: frequent changes of government, intermittent invasions and sieges, occupation of the hinterland by new and, in the case of the Galla, hostile populations. Yet because Mombasa suffered less from these disturbances than many other coast settlements, these very circumstances proved favourable to a new wave (or rather a series of waves) of Swahili colonization. Out of the confusion of the seventeenth century emerged the *Thenashara Taifa* and an approximate equivalent of the Swahili community as it exists today.

It seems likely that the first beneficiaries from the extinction of Shehe Mvita's dynasty were the Swahili of Malindi, whose sheikh moved to Mombasa in 1593. Mombasa's situation on an island compared favourably with that of Malindi—a mainland town surrounded at the time by Segeju, who, though allies, were likely to have been uncomfortable ones—and it appears that a good part of Malindi's population accompanied the royal clan to its new home.³⁵ Since then the Malindi group has amalgamated with the *Taifa* Mvita, and at present is counted as three of the six *mbari* that compose it. The royal clan itself survives as the Banu Shaha.³⁶

³³ Details of the third sack of Mombasa are given by dos Santos, *Ethiopia*, I, 245–8 and 408–18, and summarized by Strandes, *Portuguese Period*, 152–7.

³⁴ The Mvita and Jomvu *mataifa* of the *Tisa Taifa* currently claim to be descended from these Shirazi and the Portuguese. Information from Sheikh Hyder M. Elkindy.

³⁵ P. de Rezende, 'Descripsam da fortaleza da Mombasa', translated by J. M. Gray, 'Rezende's description of East Africa in 1634', *TNR*, xxiii (June 1947), 14.

³⁶ Hollis's compilation, KNA.

Other Swahili townsmen, particularly those allied to the Shirazi polity, seem to have moved onto the island at approximately the same time. For a while there was some doubt whether the old dynasty's kinsmen in the royal family of Kilifi or the rival dynasty of Malindi would be first to take possession of Mombasa. Correspondence on this subject between the King of Portugal and the Viceroy of the Indies is still extant.³⁷ The issue was resolved in favour of Sheikh Ahmad of Malindi, but it seems likely that some inhabitants of Kilifi and also of Mtwapa none the less took up residence on Mombasa at this time. Kilifi had earlier been sacked by the Segeju, and neither it nor Mtwapa enjoyed much security from the Galla during the next two centuries. At present there are Kilifi and Mtwapa divisions within the *Tisa Taifa*. Together with the Mvita and Jomvu they comprise what might be termed the 'senior section' of the 'confederation', descendants of Swahili who had occupied settlements closely associated with the dynasty of Shehe Mvita.

Thus the older Shirazi population formed a nucleus around which immigrants tended to cluster. Though each incoming group or agglomeration of groups retained some individuality as a *taifa*, most identified themselves with the 'founding fathers' of the city,³⁸ and were content to be known collectively as Wa-Mvita, 'People of the Old City'. In this manner the *Tisa Taifa* gradually evolved, acquiring new *mataifa* as more clans settled in the town, regrouped, and forged a local identity.

The *Thelatha Taifa* were an important exception to the assimilationist trend. Their willingness and ability to stand aloof must have been due to their numerical strength, though they may already have developed their own group-consciousness before occupying the south-west side of the island. Their traditions, reported by Guillain, suggest that they clashed earlier with the Shirazi polity and had strong reservations about becoming part of it.³⁹

Thelatha Taifa traditions assign to the Kilindini the honour of being first in the vicinity of Mombasa. Their arrival is undated, but it occasioned an invitation from the 'Sheikh of Mvita' to join him on the island. At this point the Kilindini were in possession of Ukunda, a mainland district considerably to the south of the city. For unspecified reasons they rejected the Shehe Mvita's overture, though Guillain offers the suggestion that they wished to preserve their independence. They later moved northward to the mainland immediately south of Mombasa Island. There they encountered the Tangana and Changamwe clans (which were coalescing into *mataifa*

³⁷ Letter of 15 February 1593 to Viceroy Mathias de Albuquerque. A translation forms part of the collection in the library of the museum of Fort Jesus National Park, Mombasa. I am indebted to Mr J. S. Kirkman for access to it.

³⁸ Mwana Mkisi, as noted earlier, has been superseded as spiritual founder of the city by Shehe Mvita.

³⁹ Guillain, *Documents*, III, 240-6. Summaries appear in A. H. J. Prins, *Coastal Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (London, 1956), 46, and in an unpublished MS. by J. S. Kirkman, 'The Jumaa of the Three Tribes of Mombasa: a Swahili mosque' (1957), Fort Jesus museum library.

after fleeing from towns up the coast), and with their aid founded Kilindini Town on the island. This move occurred while the Portuguese were in control of Mombasa, since they obtained Portuguese consent before occupying the site facing Kilindini Harbour.

The most likely dates for establishment of a *Thelatha Taifa* colony on Mombasa are 1593 or 1632, dates which mark the end, respectively, of the Old Shirazi and Malindi dynasties. The significant factor was a breakdown in the Mombasa state system that enabled the *Thelatha Taifa* to feel a sense of autonomy on the island. Until this condition was met, the Kilindini refused to leave the mainland. The experience of one of the Changamwe clans (*Mbari Kitue*), which made an abortive attempt to live in Mombasa that was frustrated by quarrels with the earlier inhabitants, may have confirmed the Kilindini decision. Portuguese government evidently was more acceptable. Also, by the time the Kilindini linked up with the Tangana and Changamwe, pressure from the Galla made an island stronghold seem desirable. But the founding of Kilindini Town did not mean an end to settlements on the mainland. Despite the Galla threat, members of the *Thelatha Taifa* continued to occupy villages there, notably at Likoni (Kilindini), Mtongwe (Tangana), and Ngare (Changamwe).⁴⁰

Though it is easy enough to date approximately the *Thelatha Taifa*'s co-operative movement onto Mombasa Island, estimating when they arrived separately on the adjacent mainland is more difficult. This is a matter of some importance, for the Kilindini claim to have been part of the exodus of Nyika and other groups from Shungwaya. Information about this event has always been scanty. By their own account, the Kilindini were a kind of advance guard in the movement, and were accompanied by elements of the Segeju, who are stated to have followed them as servants.⁴¹ These lived with them for a time at a place called Kirao, situated 'to the west of Malindi', before drifting further south.⁴² If this is correct, they must have been in the area well in advance of 1571, when the main body of Segeju was first reported near Malindi.⁴³ In any event, Kilindini tradition is explicit in insisting that the Kilindini, if not the other members of the *Thelatha Taifa*, were in the neighbourhood of Mombasa before any Nyika tribes had reached it. This contention is supported by the patron-client

⁴⁰ All three villages exist today. The British Museum's Rezende Map of 1634, published in C. Boxer and C. de Azevedo, *Fort Jesus and the Portuguese in Mombasa* (London, 1960), 81, indicates settlements at Likoni and Mtongwe; the Ngare area is not part of the map. An island settlement is marked out slightly south of the one occupied by Kilindini Town in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁴¹ Guillain, *Documents*, III, 240–41. Several Nyika and Segeju traditions claim that the Segeju were one of the first (most say the very first) groups to abandon Shungwaya: Kwale and Kilifi District Books, KNA, C.P., I, KWL/1 and KFI/1.

⁴² According to a tradition collected by H. B. Sharpe, the Segeju and Digo were formerly known as 'Wakirao' ('How the Wasegeju received their name as told to me by an Msegeju elder', KNA, KWL/1). Kirao, however, is stated by Hollis to be the left bank of the Tana River, and thus might be considered a part of Shungwaya: A. C. Hollis, 'Notes on the history of Vumba, East Africa', *J. Roy. Anthropol. Inst.* xxx (1900), 276–7.

⁴³ Father Monclaro, *Relação da Viagem*, trans. Theal, *Records*, III, 214.

relationship that developed between the *Thelatha Taifa* and the Digo and Duruma Nyika.⁴⁴ Being first on the Mombasa coast enabled the Kilindini and their 'kinsmen' to mediate thereafter between the outer world and more recent arrivals in the coastal hills.

'Senior division' members of the *Tisa Taifa* also acted as patrons of the Nyika. These relationships, like the parallel relations between the *Thelatha Taifa* and Digo and Duruma, were conducted through the *taifa* sheikhs. The Mvita, Kilifi, Mtwapa, and Jomvu sheikhs were responsible respectively for the external affairs of the Giriama; a combination of Kauma, Kambe and Ribe; the Chonyi; and the Rabai. The head of the Malindi subdivision of the Mvita (i.e. head of the Malindi royal family) shared jurisdiction over the Rabai with the sheikh of the Jomvu.

It seems likely that the sheikh's privileged position was established before their people migrated to Mombasa: the geographical locations of their original towns are not far distant from the principal *kayas* of the related Nyika tribes. This, of course, would have occurred before the fall of the Old Shirazi dynasty in 1591–92. These considerations, together with what remains of Kilindini tradition, make plausible a late sixteenth-century presence at the coast for the Nyika, and a mid-sixteenth-century arrival for the Kilindini.

The last group of Swahili immigrants to Mombasa also came from the north Kenya coast and Somalia. Their movement differed from previous ones in that it was gradual, and seldom involved wholesale migration of clans and towns. Hence it is difficult to trace; individuals and families from the Lamu archipelago, and from a few mainland settlements which survived the Galla, drifted into Mombasa without either depopulating their places of origin or upsetting the political balance of their adopted city.⁴⁵ On reaching Mombasa they joined the Mvita group of *mataifa*, whose headquarters overlapped with the southern portion of the Shirazi town and extended south in the direction of Fort Jesus. Mombasa still receives a trickle of immigrants from the north, so the process has never really come to an end. Nevertheless, by mid-eighteenth century, if not earlier, the *Tisa Taifa* had acquired most of its full complement of *mataifa*: Mvita, Jomvu, Kilifi, Mtwapa, Pate, Shaka, Paza, Bajun and Katwa.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Guillain discusses the Swahili–Nyika alliances in detail (*Documents*, III, 244–5). Prins, relying heavily on Guillain, summarizes them in *Swahili-Speaking Peoples*, 98–9. Prins sees the *Thelatha Taifa*–Nyika relationship as being conducted through the *tamim*; Guillain regards it as concentrated in the *taifa* sheikhs. Guillain is correct (information from Sheikh Hyder M. Elkindy and from a MS. history by the former Chief Kadhi of Kenya, Sheikh Al-Amin bin Ali al-Mazrui, 'The history of the Mazrui dynasty of Mombasa', as yet unpublished, but translated and mimeographed by J. M. Ritchie, lately of Mombasa).

⁴⁵ An interesting migrant Swahili family history, misleadingly titled 'Memoirs of Bwana Shehe wa Stambuli Abala', is filed in KNA, C.P., I, Bundle III, Msa/14. Though undated, it evidently covers the period 1830–1900, and describes various difficulties with the Galla, marriage and other relationships with the Nyika, and local intrigues on Pate and in Mombasa. It unfortunately exists only in the form of a half-literate translation.

⁴⁶ Hollis's compilation, KNA. The *taifa* names of some of the most recent *Tisa Taifa* adherents have varied slightly from time to time, as Hollis points out.

CONSOLIDATION, 1700-1900

Between the end of the Shirazi dynasty and the beginning of the Mazrui hegemony, Mombasa was ruled by an uneasy condominium administered by the Sheikhs of Malindi and the Portuguese Captains of Mombasa (1593-1631), by the Captains of Mombasa alone (1632-98), and by various representatives of the Imam of Muscat (1698-1735), with a brief reversion to Portuguese control in 1728-29.⁴⁷ During the south-west advance of the

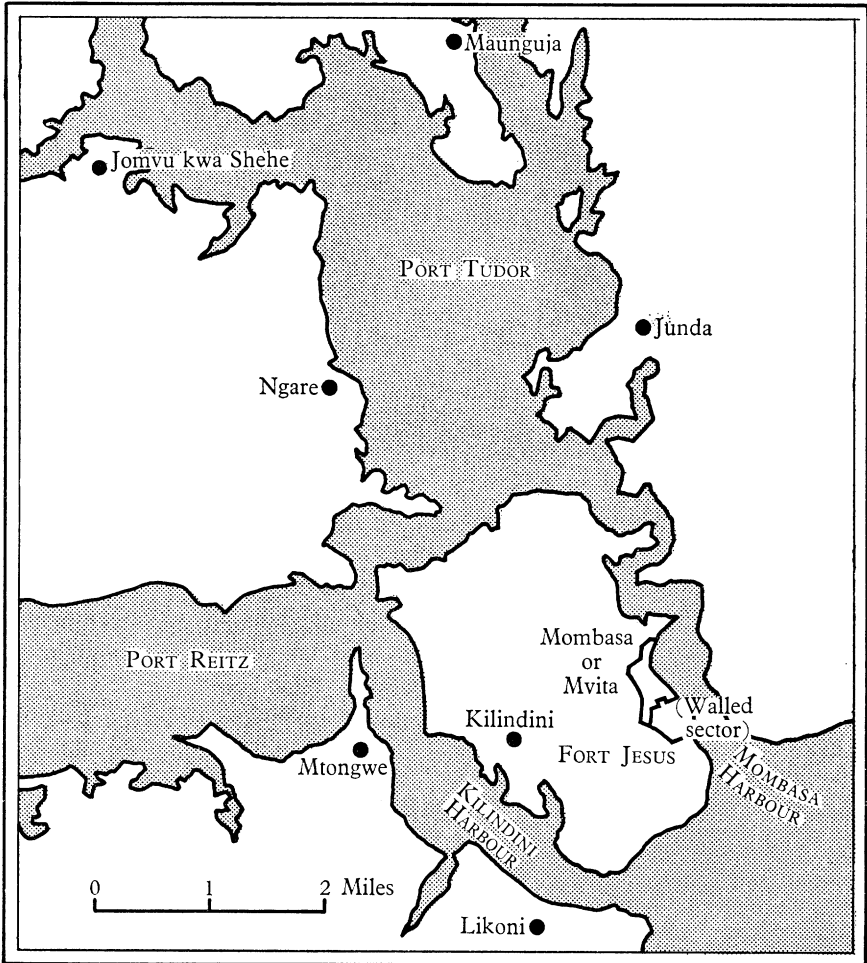


Fig. 2. Mombasa and environs in the nineteenth century. Mombasa-Mvita: *Tisa Taifa* settlement. Kilindini: *TheIatha Taifa* settlement. Likoni: Kilindini (*TheIatha Taifa*) settlement. Mtongwe: Tangana (*TheIatha Taifa*) settlement. Ngare: Changamwe (*TheIatha Taifa*) settlement. Jomvu kwa Shehe, Maunguja, and Junda: Jomvu (*Tisa Taifa*) settlements.

⁴⁷ Strandes, *Portuguese Period*, chs. 12-18, summarizes events during these years.

Galla, which seems not to have begun much before 1650,⁴⁸ Mombasa succeeded—despite an often disruptive Portuguese presence—in keeping alive enough semblance of urban life to collect a substantial refugee Swahili population. The following two centuries proved as favourable to consolidation of the immigrant community as the preceding one had been for its assemblage. Comparatively stable government, first under the Mazrui dynasty of local Omani Arabs (about 1735–1837) and later under the Busaidi Sultans of Zanzibar (1837–95), provided a suitable framework for a re-sorting of Swahili society.⁴⁹

This process was at first a turbulent one. Ultimately the Mazrui, who first came to Mombasa as governors (*maliwali*) representing the Yarubi Imams of Muscat, were successful in constructing a small state whose influence extended far up and down the coast from Mombasa itself. Their first problem, however, was that of establishing order at home.

Until the very end of the Mazrui regime, division within the Swahili community between *Thelatha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa* was expressed not only by confederal distinctions and the existence of separate settlements on the island—Mombasa and Kilindini Town—but by continual jockeying for power and occasional armed clashes. In recent years these have been mostly forgotten and tend to be glossed over, but they were in fact the basis for an independent Mazrui government. Though interconfederal rivalry seldom threatened to destroy the Mazrui state, it created tensions within it that were resolved only by considerable decentralization of public life and by the mediating role of the Mazrui.⁵⁰ Against other towns and peoples the two ‘confederations’ usually drew together, but bridging the gap between them required 150 years and a foreign dynasty.

An initial sense of exclusiveness was reinforced by political conflicts which at first burst out in civil wars. The most violent outbreak occurred before the Mazrui had consolidated their authority, and is recorded in the Mombasa Chronicle. On this occasion, probably between 1730 and 1735, *Livali* Salah bin Muhammad al-Hadhrami, in alliance with the *Tisa Taifa*, drove the Kilindini group off the island and into their mainland villages.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Since the Segeju were reported to be ‘infesting’ Malindi as late as 1634, it is unlikely that the Galla made their presence felt in the region till a decade or more later (Rezende-Gray, ‘Description’, 44).

⁴⁹ The most complete account of the Mazrui is the Sheikh Al-Amin MS. The Mombasa Chronicle is mostly concerned with the early *maliwali*. Guillaing is informative for all periods (*Documents*, III, 258–62, 544–5, 601–9).

⁵⁰ The core of the Mombasa polity consisted of Mombasa and Kilindini Towns, the mainland settlements of the *Thelatha Taifa*, and two or more mainland villages occupied by the Jomvu, notably Jomvu kwa Shehe and Maunguja. For the earlier secession of the Jomvu from the Mvita see Mwidani bin Mwidadi, ‘Khabare za Kale za Jonvu’, trans. L. Harries, *Swahili*, xxxi (1960), 140–9 and ‘Usulu wa WaJomvu’ in Lambert, *Chi-Jomvu*, 76–9. Since Shirazi times, Mombasa has always consisted of several settlements in addition to the principal built-up area facing Mombasa Harbour.

⁵¹ Mombasa Chronicle: Owen, *Voyages*, I, 418–19; Guillaing, *Documents*, I, 618–19. The Sheikh Al-Amin MS. discusses the matter in detail, mentioning that the *Thelatha Taifa* and Nyika sacked Mombasa Town at one point in the war.

The *Thelatha Taifa*, significantly, received support from the Malindi element of the Mvita, a group of clans which shared an obvious 'foreign' origin with the *Thelatha Taifa* and which was doubtless resentfully remembered by the Mvita and Jomvu Shirazi as being responsible, with the Portuguese, for the overthrow of the Shehe Mvita dynasty. Appointment of the second Mazrui *liwali*, Muhammad bin Athman, brought the civil strife to an end. The new *liwali* invited the *Thelatha Taifa* back to Mombasa and re-established cordial relations with the Malindi clans, into one of which the first Mazrui *liwali* had married.⁵²

The incident was not unique. In 1745-46 it was repeated when the *Thelatha Taifa* and Nyika affiliated to them helped to restore the Mazrui to power after *Liwali* Muhammad bin Athman had been assassinated by agents of Imam Ahmad, the first Busaidi to rule Oman.⁵³ These Busaidi agents had been aided by the *Tisa Taifa* and opposed by the Malindi clans, which once again aligned themselves with the *Thelatha Taifa*. Once more the struggle was terminated by the accession of a Mazrui *liwali*, Ali bin Athman. It seems to have been the last occasion on which *Thelatha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa* fought openly, though intrigues were never far from the surface. As a rule the Mazrui sided with the *Thelatha Taifa* and the Malindi clans when the need arose, for which they were much hated by some leaders of the *Tisa Taifa*. At one point the *Taifa* Kilifi and others among the *Tisa Taifa*, themselves unwilling to risk another civil war, called in allies and kinsmen from Pate, who took the Mazrui and the *Thelatha Taifa* by surprise and burned Kilindini Town before sailing home to safety.⁵⁴ Songs mocking the *Thelatha Taifa* for this defeat are still current among older members of the *Tisa Taifa* and the people of Pate.

In some ways the association between Mombasa Swahili and the Nyika was more cordial than feelings between the two 'confederations'. On the basis of available information, the Swahili emerge as senior partners in a series of bilateral alliances beneficial to both parties. Swahili were able to obtain military aid from the Nyika and were recognized by them as their liaison with the outer world.⁵⁵ The Nyika in turn enjoyed a sort of associate status in the Mombasa polity, being allowed to come into the city to trade and being given representation on delegations to Muscat and, later, at installations of Mazrui *liwalis*.⁵⁶ Understandings between Nyika and

⁵² Mombasa Chronicle: Owen, *Voyages*, I, 419-21; Guillain, *Documents*, I, 619-21. Also Sheikh Al-Amin MS.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Guillain, *Documents*, I, 548-9. Sheikh Al-Amin has a slightly different version, but in essentials the two agree.

⁵⁵ One example of the kind of service performed for the Nyika by the Swahili sheikhs is still remembered in Mombasa. The *Tamim* of the *Tisa Taifa*, Sheikh Khamis bin Kombo al-Mutwafy, appealed to Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar to intervene on behalf of the Giriama, who were being harassed by the Mazrui of Takaungu. I am indebted to Masoud A. Mohamed (al-Mazrui) for this information.

⁵⁶ J. Emery, entry for 15 October 1825, 'A journal of the British establishment at Mombasa', PRO, Adm. 52/3940, records Nyika participation in the installation of *Liwali* Salim bin Hemed.

Swahili did not preclude occasional disputes, just as common citizenship was insufficient to prevent bouts of hostility between the two Swahili 'confederations'. The senior–junior partnership between Swahili and Nyika none the less survived Mazrui rule, and lasted till the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite frequent misgivings about being ruled by Mazrui Arabs, Mombasa Swahili took pride in their city's independence during the Mazrui government. Not since the days of the Shirazi sheikhs had the city been so powerful. Under Mazrui leadership, the coast from Tanga to the Bajun Islands became subject to or dependent on Mombasa. Pemba passed under its control, and even the ancient Nabahani dynasty of Pate submitted for a short time to a Mombasan garrison. Swahili patriotism during the early nineteenth century was eloquently expressed in the poems and sayings of Bwana Muyaka bin Mwinyi Haji, friend of *Liwali* Salim bin Hemed; years later it was still evident in nostalgia for the days of the Mazrui, observed by European visitors after Mombasa had become part of the dominions of the Busaidi dynasty of Zanzibar and Muscat.⁵⁷

Swahili discontent, however, increased in proportion to factional disputes among the Mazrui themselves. The end of Mazrui rule came soon after the death in 1835 of *Liwali* Salim bin Hemed, whose brilliant defence of the city against Sayyid Said bin Sultan owed much to his sensitivity to the feelings of the Mombasa Swahili.⁵⁸ Both successors lacked Salim's talent for inspiring confidence among the Swahili, and both were discredited by the atmosphere of intrigue that permeated their brief tenures of office. Even the Mazrui *kadhi* had a hand in the *coup* that ousted Salim's brother Khamis in 1836. Khamis's successor, Rashid bin Salim, alienated the sheikh of the Kilindini, Maalim bin Mwinyi Shafi, a former partisan of Khamis. Consequently the Kilindini sheikh decided it was time for the *Thelatha Taifa* to break with the Mazrui, and organized a conspiracy which enabled Sayyid Said to occupy the city in 1837.⁵⁹

Though Maalim bin Mwinyi Shafi's plot is most often remembered as the betrayal that broke the power of the Mazrui, it had equal importance as the beginning of a *rapprochement* between the two Swahili factions. Henceforth *Thelatha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa* were no longer divided by disagreement about the Mazrui. Their solidarity was further strengthened when the *Thelatha Taifa* decided not to rebuild Kilindini Town, which had been burned during the final struggle between Sayyid Said and the Mazrui. Now they consented to transfer their island headquarters to Mvita (Mombasa).

⁵⁷ Guillain, *Documents*, III, 262–3; Burton, *Zanzibar*, II, 78.

⁵⁸ *Liwali* Salim's friendship for the poet Bwana Muyaka is only one example of this; others are mentioned in the Sheikh Al-Amin MS.

⁵⁹ Guillain, *Documents*, I, 601–5; J. L. Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labors... in Eastern Africa* (London, 1860), 536–7. Cf. the Mazrui couplet against the Kilindini quoted by Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales* (London, 1889), xi: Wakilindini si watu ni punda milia, / Walikuza nti yao kwa reale mia. (The Kilindini are not men but mere zebras; / They have sold their country for a hundred dollars.)

basa), in which they maintained well-defined neighbourhoods until a generation ago. This did not mean that the *Thelatha Taifa* were willing to accept incorporation in the *Tisa Taifa*, but it did indicate that their old antagonism was weakening.

Sayyid Said prudently chose to govern the Swahili through their own

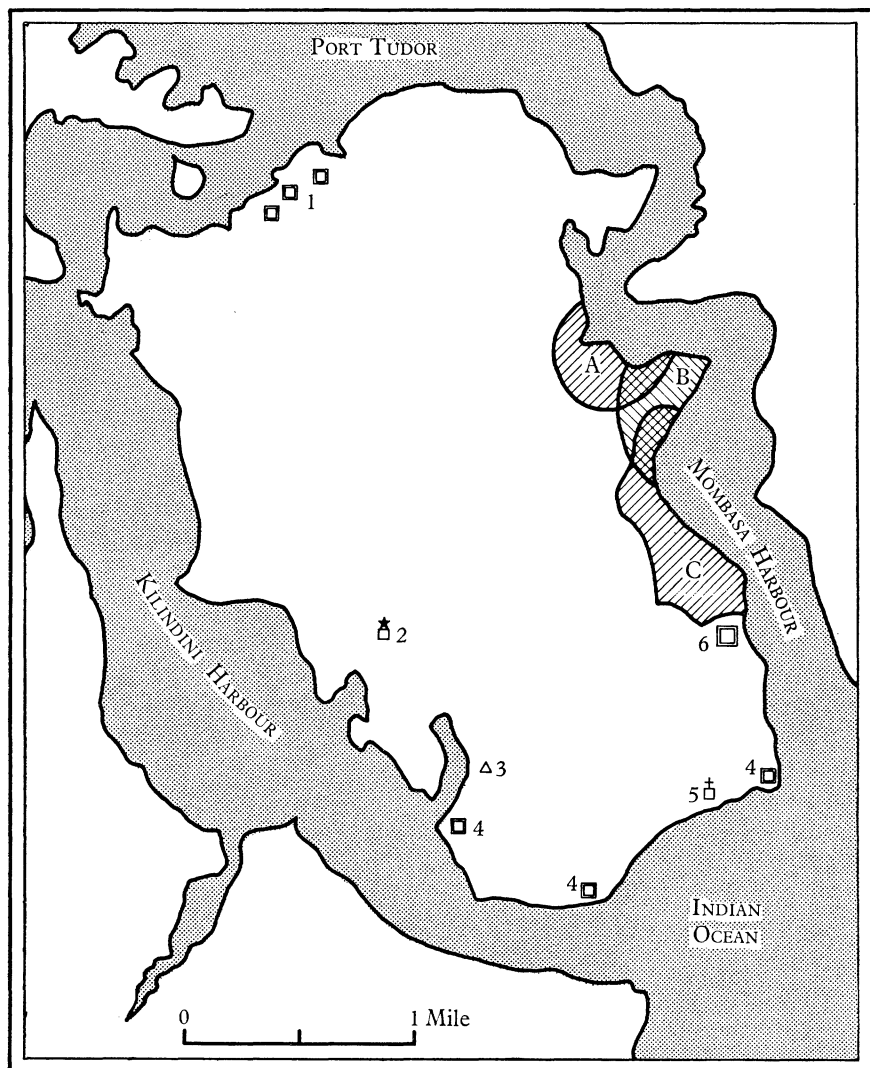


Fig. 3. Old Mombasa. (A) Kongowea, Mwana Mkisi's Town. (B) Mvita, Shehe Mvita's Town. (C) Mombasa-Mvita, the Portuguese-Malindi dynasty, Mazrui, and Busaidi Town. (1) Small Portuguese forts at Makupa. (2) Ruined mosque of the *Thelatha Taifa* at Kilindini. (3) Mbaraki Pillar. (4) Portuguese forts. (5) Ruined Portuguese chapel. (6) Fort Jesus de Mombasa.

elders rather than through a *liwali* with the usual executive powers. While employing an Arab *liwali* as his own personal representative in the city, he dealt with the *Thelatha Taifa* and *Tisa Taifa* by means of the *matamim*.⁶⁰ This arrangement probably had a slightly different meaning for the two contracting parties. Swahili have always regarded a *tamim*'s installation as being subject to popular ratification; the sultans clearly looked upon a *tamim* as their own appointee. The charters leave no doubt about this. *Matamim* were frequently given quite arbitrary authority to appoint and discharge *taifa* sheikhs, and to imprison fellow Swahili at their own discretion: 'Whomever he wants to be fettered shall be fettered, and he shall not be asked the reason why.'⁶¹

Day-to-day conduct by the *matamim* seems to have been more in accord with traditional Swahili usage than the charters envisaged. And some of the sheikhs of the *mataifa* were given charters of their own, guaranteeing them an authority rather more limited than that of the *matamim* as well as a measure of independence. Rights conceded to the Swahili through their sheikhs and *matamim* included limited compensation for customs collected by agents of the Zanzibar farmers of revenue,⁶² recognition of jurisdiction by the sheikhs and *matamim* over the Nyika, maintenance of separate *makadhi* for each 'confederation', jurisdiction over disputes within their own *taifa* or 'confederation', and guarantees against 'interference' in their affairs by the sultan's *liwali* or the Sheikh of the Arabs.⁶³ These charters regulated the position of the Swahili *vis-à-vis* their nominal sovereign far more precisely than in the days of the Mazrui and, if only in this respect, represented an advance over the Mazrui regime. Relations between sultans and civic leaders remained good, cemented by annual excursions to Zanzibar on the part of the *matamim*, and by occasional visits from sheikhs who had particular problems or grievances to discuss. Though distant, the Busaidi sultans were accessible, and allowed the Swahili the best of both worlds: rulers far enough away not to be a nuisance, who could yet take cognizance of their subjects' wishes.

The Busaidi period in one sense represents a continuation, even a further consolidation, of traditional Swahili life. In another sense it was a preparation for deep-seated changes during the twentieth century. On the one hand, the Busaidi formally acknowledged Swahili home rule, and indirectly reinvigorated the agricultural and commercial economy on which

⁶⁰ It is possible that *taifa* notables wielded *tamim*-like powers before the sultans began appointing *matamim*. Descendants of the Sheikhs of Malindi, whom the Mazrui made their wazirs, may have occupied such a position: Guillaín, *Documents*, III, 260-2.

⁶¹ Said bin Sultan to Sheikh bin Mshirazi, *Tamim* of the *Thelatha Taifa*, 29th Safar, 1257 (A.D. 1841), files of the Mombasa Afro-Asian Welfare League. I am indebted to Sheikh Hyder M. Elkindy for access to these papers.

⁶² Guillaín tells how the customs compensation was, by 1848, reduced to a fraction of its former value: *Documents*, III, 261. This is corroborated by Consul John Kirk, *Parliamentary Papers* (1874), lxii [c. 1064], p. 100.

⁶³ Said bin Sultan made provision for a government-recognized Sheikh of the Arabs of Mombasa, whose position was analogous to that of the *matamim*.

Swahili society had subsisted for centuries. On the other hand, they deprived the city of its independence and were the opening wedge for an influx of Asians, Europeans and, eventually, up-country Africans. Busaidi suzerainty came to an end in fact, though not in theory, when a British protectorate was declared in 1895. Its greatest virtue, perhaps, lay in its negative qualities: unassertiveness and tolerance of local eccentricities. The new regime partook of neither.

Proclamation of the Protectorate coincided with a succession dispute in the Mazrui successor state of Takaungu between the nephew and son of Sheikh Salim bin Khamis al-Mazrui, who died early in 1895. Normally a quarrel of this sort between Mazrui Arabs at Takaungu would have been discreetly ignored by the Mombasa Swahili. This time, however, the Imperial British East Africa Company and its successor, the Protectorate Government, intervened in the matter.⁶⁴ Those who felt aggrieved involved the Mazrui colony at Gazi and its leader, Sheikh Mbaruk bin Rashid, in a rebellion against the Protectorate, which was welcomed by numerous Swahili as a means of halting the drift toward European control. The later years of Busaidi rule had been full of ominous portents in which missionaries, abolition of the slave-trade, and the coming of the IBEA Company all had a part. Hence the opportunity seemed too good to ignore. Soon after it became clear that the Gazi Mazrui were committed to action, the aged *Tamim* of the *Tisa Taifa*, Khamis bin Kombo al-Mutwafy, and his son Muhammad declared for the rebels.⁶⁵ Muhammad bin Yunus al-Shirazi, *Tamim* of the *Thelatha Taifa*, held back, but the Sheikh of the Tangana, Mwinyi Jaka, became one of the Mazrui commanders.⁶⁶ In less than two years their worst fears were realized. Divisions within Arab and Swahili communities prevented the revolt from becoming a full-scale anti-colonial resistance movement, and British military forces crushed Sheikh Mbaruk of Gazi. Khamis bin Kombo and Mwinyi Jaka died as exiles in Dar es Salaam.⁶⁷ With them perished all hope of banishing foreign influence from Mombasa.

Armed resistance to British rule was not repeated, and by 1900 it had lost even the most distant prospect of success. The colonial administration not only secured acquiescence in the new order, it unconsciously hastened dissolution of the old. Commissioner Hardinge's 1897 census of Mombasa Island was the last in which Swahili were a clear majority of the popula-

⁶⁴ The IBEA Company, by appointing one of the contestants, might be said to have caused the dispute. But Mazrui traditions make it clear that the IBEA Company was merely the catalyst in a situation that had been taking shape for many years. I am indebted to Masoud A. Mohamed, formerly of Takaungu, and to his family for this information.

⁶⁵ 'Correspondence respecting the recent rebellion in British East Africa', *Parliamentary Papers* (1896), lix [c. 8274], pp. 87, 103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 106.

⁶⁷ List of proscribed persons (marginal note), Kwale District Book, KNA, C.P., 1, KWL/1.

tion.⁶⁸ Economic forces set in motion by the Uganda Railway, having attracted the first colonial wave of Asians and Europeans, steadily encouraged immigration from up-country and abroad. It was the railway, as much as foreign administration, that dealt traditional society its death blow. By shifting Mombasa's economic focus up-country and away from the dying plantations of the coast—whose reliance on slave labour rendered them increasingly moribund⁶⁹—the railway linked the city's destiny to the interior. After 1900 Mombasa ceased to be predominantly a centre of Swahili culture and became a cosmopolitan port with an international population. The Swahili community, only one ingredient among many, began a slow transformation which constitutes, by comparison with the past, an entirely new and in many ways less satisfying chapter in its history.

SUMMARY

The Swahili community of modern Mombasa is composed of an amalgam of the descendants of the city's early 'Shirazi' settlers and more recent immigrant Swahili groups, most of which migrated south to Mombasa Island during or after the sixteenth century. It appears likely that the 'Shirazi' dynasty and its retainers were themselves derived from older Swahili settlements along the southern Somali coast.

After the 'Shirazi' polity was destroyed by the Portuguese and their local allies in 1591–93, Mombasa's accretions of foreign Swahili gradually reorganized themselves into twelve *mataifa* or 'tribes'. These twelve *mataifa* grouped themselves into two separate and sometimes hostile confederations, the *Thelatha Taifa* (The Three) and the *Tisa Taifa* (The Nine). Political unity was maintained by means of a loosely structured state system in which foreign dynasties of Omani Arabs, first the Mazrui and later the Busaidi, bridged the gap between the two confederations.

During the Mazrui period (approximately 1735–1837), Mombasa was an independent city-state which enjoyed political hegemony over much of the Kenya and north Tanzania coasts. Under Busaidi rule (1837–95) the city lost its independence and was incorporated in the Zanzibar Sultanate. Differences between the *Thelatha Taifa* and the *Tisa Taifa* slowly faded during the Busaidi period and have almost disappeared since 1900. Though precolonial social and political structure is still perceptible in the modern Swahili community of Mombasa, it has for the most part become vestigial.

⁶⁸ 'Condition and progress of the East African Protectorate... to 1898', *Parliamentary Papers* (1898), lx [C. 8683], p. 8.

⁶⁹ Slavery, as distinct from the slave-trade, was not abolished on the coast until 1907.