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SWAHILI: THE INSTITUTIONS OF A MARITIME MERCANTILE SOCIETY

von

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I

This paper offers an account of the structure of a mercantile society, the Swahili of East Africa, so as to ask whether all mercantile societies of this type present the same structural features beneath cultural differences. To answer this question we need first to construct a model, in which I suggest there is a certain number of functionally related and necessary institutions.

Mercantile frontier-towns, often called ports-of-trade and to be distinguished from mere frontier settlements as such, have been found throughout the world on the frontiers between proto-capitalist and capitalist centres, on the one hand, and non-capitalist and non-industrial regions, on the other. They are usually seaports, but may be on other geographical and cultural frontiers such as the Saharan borderlands. They have developed specialized institutions as mercantile and cultural middlemen or brokers, and have observed political and military neutrality between culturally different partners who do not themselves come into direct contact, contact being indirect through the frontier towns. We know such towns have existed and still do exist, and a certain amount about their commercial activities, but we know little about their cultures and internal forms of organization.

There are three main types. One comprises settlements inhabited by colonists from metropolitan countries as nodes of trade diasporas (eg the early Cape Town), whose merchants have been colonists trading directly with peoples of the interior, as did the Cape

Dutch with the Khoi. A second type comprises outposts established by indigenous societies so as to keep colonists at a distance and themselves control trade, whose merchants have been local representatives of inland rulers, such as the Fanti coastal merchants of West Africa who represented the Fanti kings ruling a few miles inland who thereby monopolized the trade with Europe. Those of the third type are established by autochthonous peoples of the coastline itself who have adapted their geographical position to become independent mercantile and cultural middlemen between traders from the interior and from overseas. The Swahili are of this type, and there have been pre-Swahili and then Swahili settlements down the East African coast for at least two thousand years. They have formed a society sui generis, distinct from those of the partners with whom they have traded.

The roles of these various types of towns and their internal institutions have varied, as have the details of their histories of establishment, ethnic compositions, patterns of relationships with their trading partners, and their religions. Yet within each main category of mercantile town there appear to be remarkable similarities in features such as forms of internal organization and stratification, uses of ethnicity and ancestry, and moral values. These categories have changed everywhere over time by processes of indigenization, creolization, cultural absorption, variations in trade patterns, and of course by colonial and postcolonial conquest and control. Yet at least those of the third category mentioned above have persisted over long periods without marked structural change, being able to accommodate external influences and cultural pressures, and withstanding the forceful development and modernization thrust upon by them by the outside world. But they may run themselves out of business in the end: if successful, they are overcome by more powerful outside mercantile concerns and usually end by becoming little more than local commission agents for international companies.

II

The Swahili number somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000. Their settlements stretch from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, including the offshore islands. Inland they extend only a mile or two, except for a few 19th century slaving outposts near Lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa. From our earliest knowledge of the coast in the 1st century until today many of these settlements have been the middlemen in commerce between the interior of Africa and the lands of the northern Indian Ocean, although they have lost much of this position during this century. They accepted Islam during the 11th century and developed what we today refer to as Swahili culture. However, the name Swahili (from the Arabic sahel or coast) was first used by the 18th century Omani invaders to refer denigratingly to those whom they subjugated. From their earliest days they have been subject to colonial overrule, first by small states in the Yemen, then by Portugal, Oman, Germany, and Britain, and today by what they consider the neocolonial rule of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Their economic and political structures have reflected their subordinate position. They have never formed a single polity, except when forced under the Omani Sultanate of Zanzibar during the late 18th the 19th centuries, but have formed a congeries of competing yet interdependent mercantile towns or petty statelets linked only by Islam, language, commerce, and their sense of their superior and literate "civilization", *ustaraabu*, and "urbanity", *utamaduni*, as against the "barbarism", *ushenzi*, of their neighbours.

The Swahili have been on the fringes of Asian and European tocapitalism and capitalism, their commerce being that in natural or unprocessed commodities from Africa -- ivory, slaves, gold, timber, grains, and many other items -- for processed and manufactured ones from Asia -- mainly cloth, beads, porcelain, arms, and ammunition. It has followed the usual pattern of exploitative colonial trade. As high colonialism developed, their position was

increasingly taken over by international merchants and financiers, mostly Indian and European; and when colonialism waned and its commerce was taken over by national and multinational corporations, the mercantile position of the Swahili was virtually destroyed, leaving only small-scale trade with Somalia and the smaller Arabian and Malagasy ports, and virtually nothing with the African interior. In recent years they have suffered mass tourism, but the profits from that have not come to them.

Swahili ocean commerce has extended as far as Indonesia, China, the Levant, Europe, and the United States, by ships owned by both Swahili and their partners. The inland commerce has been more complex, going first through intermediaries living in the hinterland immediately behind the coast -- peoples such as Mijikenda and Yao - - who have traded with the interior proper on behalf of the Swahili towns along the coast; other intermediary groups have provided the caravan transport, especially the Kamba and Nyamwezi. The main partners did not come into direct contact with each other until this pattern was broken by the Portuguese in Mozambique in the 17th century and again by the Sultanate of Zanzibar a century later. Both sent their own personnel directly into the interior; the Swahili proper have rarely done so. The pattern has been for individual overseas and hinterland traders to deal directly with individual Swahili business houses, there never being "free" markets except for the 19th century slave market in Zanzibar City. Besides making and retaining links with their partners on both sides, they have had to organize the many requirements of a port-of-trade: the safety and care of ships, their crews, and their goods; victualling and watering; credit, insurance, and policing; and so on. A crucial requirement has been to organize the import, export, and storage of goods so as to have them ready for incoming and outgoing ships, dependent on the dates of the ocean monsoons, and inland caravans, dependent on times of rains and dry seasons. A town and its merchants have had

to build up their portfolios of inland resources -- slaves, ivory, metals, grains, mangrove poles, and a vast array of other commodities -- and to make and keep individual Asian and African trading partners, as well as estimating future needs due to changes in fashion and demand from either side.

III

What has been the organizational structure of the society? It is a complex one. Most peasant societies of Africa each have their own form of organization that is reasonably uniform throughout constituent settlements; but this is not so for the Swahili. Their settlements are strung along the coastline, and their individual cultures and organizations vary greatly. Most observers have considered the Swahili as occupying a series of discrete settlements, either in cultural ruin or "detrribalized" and so "Arabises" as not to be African at all. But this is not so: there is a single underlying structure, and the settlements are complementary elements of a single oikumene.

The basic units are the towns, *miji*, *pl*, *miji*, scattered along the coastline and islands, each with its own identity, dialect, knowledge of history, sense of cohesion, and place in the international trade. There may be distinguished two main categories of town, although with much variation within each category. I call them Stone-towns and Country-towns. They are dispersed along the coast, no Stone-town being more than a few miles from one or more Country-towns. Stone-towns are densely built-up settlements, with houses of "stone" (in fact, coral), and many formerly with walls and large plantations. Country-towns are rural settlements, with widely dispersed clusters of houses of palm-leaves, and without town walls.

There are today some 25 Stone-towns and perhaps some 80 Country-towns. The populations of Stone-towns vary from c.5000 to c.15000 (some are merely parts of large modern cities such as Mombasa), those of Country-towns from c.1000 to c.6000. The Stone-towns contain the mercantile middlemen responsible for the international commerce. The Country-towns have had no international merchants but have produced foodstuffs and some labour for Stone-towns, in exchange for luxury goods and services such as religious guidance and military protection. Stone-towns held and traded in slaves until the abolition of slavery at the turn of the century, and have owned plantations, ocean-going vessels, and good harbours. Country-towns have had neither slaves, plantations, or proper harbours. The Stone-towns are ethnically heterogeneous and highly hierarchicized; Country-towns are ethnically homogeneous and minimally stratified.

All Swahili towns are divided into territorial moieties and then into wards or quarters. The former have provided the indigenous forms of internal government, each moiety ruling for a period in alternation. Today they are important only in New Year rites when moieties fight, often with swords, play football matches, or hold singing and dancing competitions. Wards provide neighbourhood solidarity. Most towns had kings or queens until the 19th century, who acted essentially as town representatives in external relations and held little internal power -- they were mostly little more than elected officials given sacred paraphernalia.

Stone-towns are stratified. The socially highest rank is that of the patricians, waungwana, below whom are descendants of slaves and of 19th century immigrants from the Hadhramaut, and many residual categories (Bohora Indians, Somalis, etc). There are also Sharifu lineages that claim direct descent from the Prophet; they are given high status but stand rather outside the mercantile system. Patricians are organized into patrilineal subclans,

most non-patricians into cognatic descent groups. Members of Country-towns also form cognatic groups. Subclans are composed of lineages, but do not form segmentary systems, a subclan having lineages that may have disparate ancestries and attach themselves by marriage or claim to similar original ancestry.

The important factor is the identity of corporate groups within a town. In Country-towns it is the ward, a local territorial group in which are vested rights over stretches of land and sea, and which has its own "purse", spirit shrines, and various administrative and ritual officials. Among the Stone-town patricians it is the patrilineal lineage, which acts as a mercantile corporation. The patrician subclans are ranked in order of superiority and prestige, mostly claim to be segments of clans in Arabia, and recognize ties of clanship with similarly named subclans in other Swahili towns. The ward in these towns is of little importance except as an address, and lineage and ward are not coterminous.

I have said that Stone-towns recognize patrilineal and the Country-towns recognize cognatic descent. These terms are too rigid for the actuality: there is a continuum from one to the other. In some Country-towns many descent groups recognize patrilineality for the inheritance of property. For example, the members of the many Hadimu Country-towns of Zanzibar Island recognize only cognatic descent. Their economy is based on gardening and fishing, rights in both of which are vested in the wards. They have not been permitted to own clove trees, on which wealth of the island has depended. Until some sixty years ago the situation was the same among the Pemba of Pemba Island, which is richer in cloves. But certain families acquired the right to own cloves by marrying daughters to Omani Arabs, who were allowed clove trees, and who thereby acquired rights in return to Pemba land. These Pemba groups now recognize patrilineal descent as corporate lineages; those without cloves retain cognatic descent.

In the Stone-towns the main items of property are the great two and three storey houses, the mosques, ocean-going dhows, former plantations, and formerly slaves. Virtually all of them have been entailed for the perennial use of the lineages that own them, and they cannot be sold or given away. I come here to a crucial factor in Swahili organization, the process of privatization. Property that has high financial, productive, or ritual value is placed under private ownership by the institution of waqf, by which an individual or group possessing property can legally place it under a form of everlasting entail, which cannot be broken and is under the supervision of waqf commissioners in the larger towns.

IV

The Swahili patricians face three perennial problems, that affect all such middleman mercantile societies. One is to ensure their security and identity and to maintain commercially profitable ties with the trading partners between whom they act as mediators and brokers. The Swahili have never had any great military or naval power (the exception was the 19th century Sultanate of Zanzibar) and have had to balance one set of partners and would-be conquerors against others by providing essential commercial services and making alliances. They developed and have maintained mercantile contacts that the colonial powers that subjugated them have been able to take over and use, and so they could long keep their privileged mercantile position.

The second problem is the dilemma of their ethnic origins that give the subclans and other groups identity, defined in geographical and moral terms as between Asia and Africa, and expressed especially in terms of ancestry, religious belief and practice, and the moral qualities of purity and honour. All of these may be seen as subject to the process of

privatization -- these people are after all merchants and may utilize anything, material or not, as a commodity.

Patrician subclans claim primary ancestry in either Arabia or in Shungwaya, the original homeland near the mouth of the Tana River; most descent groups use the place name Shiraz, in Persia, to represent Shungwaya so as to claim a Muslim origin. Most lineages, as business corporations, conceive their links with their Asian trading partners essentially as those of common ancestry and origins in Arabia. The claims to Arabian ancestry are almost all without historical foundation, although most lineages can produce a genealogy descending from a single Arabian visiting trader of long ago. But it is clear that in historical fact almost all descent groups, whether patrician or not, originated in Shungwaya, a region rather than a single place. There is much ambiguity here, since origin in Shungwaya would actually be older than one in Arabia and so more prestigious in that dimension; but during the overrule by Omani Arabs of Zanzibar a claimed origin in Arabia became politically more rewarding, as well as implying Islamic piety.

Links are also necessary with African partners, mainly with the nearby hinterland mediators but also with representatives of peoples of the interior proper. Here common ancestry is not used, but relations of clientship, blood brotherhood, joking, and formally arranged concubinage. In addition, the indigenous governing bodies of the Stone-towns have usually included representatives of the hinterland intermediaries which thereby have influence upon the mercantile projects in which they are indirectly involved.

There is a third problem, that of differences in individual ability and personality. For a peasant society this may not be of much importance, but for a mercantile one competence in financial and organizational matters is crucial. The headship of a business house, a lineage, is decided by ability and not only by genealogy. People with high ability are known

as *milozi wa mji*, pillars of the town, a non-hereditary status open to both men and women and formerly often to slaves. All patricians have been and still hope to be merchants: but the highest prestige is given to scholarship and literary competence, expressed in the ability to compose the complex forms of Swahili poetry, to have technical and mathematical skills and an encyclopaedic knowledge of every side of life, especially of Islam and of commerce. A good poet, the highest category of "pillar", is known as *shaha* or *shah*, and there are other titles for other forms of competence. These skills are said to be due to particular origins in the remote past, and secondary ethnic claims may be made to explain the skills; a segment may claim an early origin in Andalusia, or Persia, or Egypt, with the migration to the Swahili coast via Arabia, which added Islamic piety to the line. Ancestry is seen in terms of migration as much as in those of genealogy.

Members of Country towns do not make these claims, but an entire town may claim origins in either Shungwaya or Shiraz (which implies early Islamic adherence). Those of slave ancestry can choose only an African interior origin, of course, but claims may be made to pre-slavery royalty or high rank.

V

I turn now to consideration of the notion of purity, a quality owned in particular by patrician descent groups. It is linked to marriage. Swahili marriage is complex, there being several marriage strategies. In Country-towns most marriages are between cross-cousins, the explicit aim being to extend networks of cognatic kinship throughout sets of towns that recognize a shared identity, such as those Hadimu towns of Zanzibar Island. Land there is poor and fertile areas few, and the guiding strategy is to have as many ties as possible over a wide network of towns so as to convert them into rights of residence and gardening. There divorce rates are high (up to 90%). In the Stone-towns the patrician strategies are twofold.

The lineage must be both highly exclusive, to retain its wealth, property, and its commercially valuable ties of common ancestry with Asian trading partners; but it must also be highly inclusive so as to make networks of allies throughout the coastal towns. Patricians marry only one another and spouses must be as similar in rank as possible. The eldest daughter of a lineage is expected to be married to a paternal parallel cousin. The cousin chosen is he who has already been selected to succeed to her father's position as lineage head (the business corporation, the lineage, includes several closely related segments). At the wedding many gifts are exchanged, and her father gives her right of residence in a lineage house, often that in which he lives himself and residence rights in which are already vested in his wife, her mother. Her marriage is therefore uxorilocal. This is not matriliney, although it has been said to be so: the house belongs to the lineage and is subject to lineage waqf, so that she can never dispose of it herself. Other daughters are typically married to more distant cousins and residence for them is virilocal. The first category of marriage, which may be said to be endogamous, is always monogamous and divorce is rare (although the husband may take "secret" wives and concubines). Marriage in the second category, however, which can be called exogamous, may be polygynous (although this is uncommon), and divorce is frequent.

The first-born daughter is expected to be a virgin at marriage, and her wedding bestows purity upon her. She undergoes the process of "to cultivate her beauty", a sign of her inner moral purity which may now "grow". After the groom has penetrated her, without ejaculation, at the rite of "to put him inside", the bride is displayed ostentatiously to her female kin, and today to a wider audience of women, at the rite of "to show the soles of her feet": she is heavily made up, richly dressed, her hands and feet painted with henna. After that, full consummation is effected, and after the honeymoon she is again displayed publicly

as a fully married woman. She should then properly live a life of seclusion within her house, going out only under cover of darkness, although today there can be no patrician wives who accept such seclusion.

This all takes place within her lineage house (that of her father). Such a patrician house has two or three storeys, is enclosed from the impure streets and world outside by windowless walls (light comes from the internal courtyard), and has only a single large and elaborately carved double door. Its internal structure is that of a series of transverse rooms that increase in privacy and purity the farther inside the building. It should be kept plastered and whitewashed, and so pure, by a senior woman known as mpambaji or "adorners", who also decorates the bride at her wedding and supervises the wives' giving birth, the widows while secluded, and the preparation of lineage corpses for burial (today there are only one or two wealthy families who have "adorners"). This house is itself a place of purity, a house of pure women (slave women did not count), a sign of lineage identity, integrity, and creditworthiness, the centre of lineage life and commerce. Visiting Asian traders would stay in the houses of their Swahili partners, store their goods there, and were often married to a junior daughter who lived there with her children. African partners stayed in the hinterland intermediary settlements immediately behind the coast.

Men are not given purity but heshima, honour or reputation, first from the purity of their wives and also from their piety and oratorical skills at the mosque and their commercial probity. They live much of their lives in the impurity of the town, acquiring honour from their houses and mosques, both of which are subject to lineage waqf. These forms of purity and men's honour are therefore also commodities, subject indirectly to waqf. The process is simple: the profits from commerce are transformed into property, that into purity, that into male honour and reputation, and that into high status from charity to the living and devotion

to God. Because their families do not own and so cannot be married in stone houses, other women cannot acquire purity as do patrician daughters, and so their men cannot acquire honour from their wives, but only from their own behaviour and piety.

The Swahili have been Sunni Muslims since the 11th century. Besides adherence to orthodox Islamic teaching and practice, most Swahili accept the presence of many kinds of spirits, both good and evil, and there are cults of local spirits in every Swahili settlement. Spirit possession affects women more than men, and acts as a means of resolving much of the ambiguity and uncertainty in their roles. Women do not enter mosques, although they may assemble outside them to hear ritual performances. Adherence to spirit cults balances the situation and gives them a unique spiritual identity separate from yet linked to that of the men, as the cults claim allegiance to Islam and so to Arabia despite seemingly originating in Africa.

VI

It is clear that at least certain institutions have been at the basis of -- I suggest necessary for -- Swahili mercantile society of its particular type: the process of privatization of property and persons; the exclusivity and inclusivity of lineage corporations and their links to trading partners that are effected by claims to ancestry and by marriage strategies; forms of clientship; the notions of purity and honour; Islam; the complementary forms of production and exchange by Stone-towns and Country-towns; and domestic slavery.

Let me set what I have been saying in a different pattern:

1/ The Swahili form an oikumene of several complementary parts: at the centre are Stone-towns and Country-towns; then the mainland intermediary groups; and at its edges the trading partners both of the interior and across the ocean. The varying identities of corporate groups fit here, as do forms of marriage that are crucial elements in long-term mercantile

strategies of the patricians who have carried on the actual commerce on which the entire oikumene has depended.

2/ Only patricians held and traded in slaves. Slavery permitted extensive plantation production for export, enabling patricians to make much commercial profit unavailable to non-patricians and Country-towns, and to spend much time on cultural and religious activities to buttress their high moral status.

3/ Unilineal descent groups have been rigorously exclusive, and protective of their rights in many forms of material and immaterial property. The use of both endogamous and exogamous marriages by patricians has been a necessary and successful strategy.

4/ At the basis of patrician exclusivity are claim to good ancestry and the notion of purity of women and houses, and their control by men who acquire honour from them. Men face the moral pollution of commerce and the town; women, if first-born daughters, acquire purity within their pure houses. The men are the controllers of mercantile and political matters and possess formal lineage authority. The women have the complementary and equally important role of acquiring purity and exercising domestic authority within the house. There is a balance between the "dominant" patrilineal descent line and the submerged matriline, one dealing in material commerce and the international world of Islam, and the other dealing in the mystical quality of purity and connected with spirit possession by local spirits.

5/ The process of privatization lies at the heart of rights in property (houses), piety (mosques), and purity (women and houses). Without the legal institution of waqf the Swahili mercantile economy could never have worked as it has done.

6/ The patricians have not been landed aristocrats even though they have owned plantations for export crops. They have been merchants and financiers, dealing in money and profit.

7/ The institution of "pillars of the town" and the prestige accruing from technical, commercial, religious, and scholarly skills (in Islam seen as linked) are crucial factors.

8/ With the importance of hierarchy and ancestry has gone that of nuances of sumptuary behaviour (in food, dress, adornment of house and person, speech, gesture, and behaviour toward others) and of religious belief and practice.

9/ This total system and its moral landscape have persisted until the final stages of exploitative international capitalism, with its technologies and financial practices that have made the Swahili system obsolete.

V

There are or have been many middleman mercantile settlements elsewhere with these same or extremely similar features and institutions. Our information about mercantile and technological factors is fairly good, but there is little published on internal organizational and cultural features. Many accounts by historians and anthropologists have ignored them, as marginal to wider groups, as culturally idiosyncratic or "detrified", and so on. The immediate question is to ask how many of the Swahili institutions are necessarily elements of the culture and organization of all middleman mercantile societies (taking into account differences in cultural idioms and styles). I think that most of them are so, and I am now making a comparative study, even though the sources are very uneven. The first area to look at is the eastern part of the Indian ocean, from ports along the western Indian coast to those of Sumatra and elsewhere in Indonesia. But the phenomenon is historically more widespread than the Indian Ocean: I need mention only the Niger Delta in Nigeria, the Mzabi in southern

Morocco, the prazo system in Mozambique, and perhaps mediaeval Venice, all of which have had at one time or other many of the same basic institutions as have the Swahili. This is due not to diffusion but to the functional prerequisites of this category of commercial and cultural middlemen societies: the cultural idioms may vary but most of the institutions are structurally similar.

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