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The Indigenous Roots of Swahili Culture in Pangani Bay, Tanzania

Elinaza Mjema

Abstract

Many Zanjian settlements on the East African coast from around AD 600 were slowly drawn into larger Swahili cultural networks of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries AD. Indigenous communities along Tanzania’s coast were not left behind in this cultural transformation that transpired across the region. Evidence from Pangani Bay on the northern coast of Tanzania suggests that both cultural continuity and change occurred in the period between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries AD. The study is grounded on archaeological fieldwork conducted in the surroundings of Pangani Bay in 2012 where major Swahili cultural strata directly overlie those of the Zanjian period. The study uses the comparative approach as a tool for understanding the development of Swahili culture in the area. It compares and contrasts pottery, glass beads and fauna from both Zanjian and Swahili phases. Pangani Bay shows negligible differences of material culture and economic traditions between the late first and the first half of the second millennia AD. That is, the later local ceramic styles show only minor differences from those of the late first millennium AD, while faunal data suggest the similarity in subsistence economy between Zanjians and Swahilis. Correspondingly, glass bead data indicate that although maritime trade became distinctly sophisticated during Swahili times, early involvement in oceanic intercontinental trade began in the Zanjian period. Therefore, this study reveals that the Zanjian communities in Pangani had already developed the cultural frameworks on which the Swahili cultural system was built. The paper focuses on the analysis of ceramic, faunal and bead data.

Résumé

De nombreux établissements Zanjian sur la côte d’Afrique orientale d’environ 600 après JC ont été lentement attirés dans les plus grands réseaux culturels Swahili du 13ème au 16ème siècle après JC. Les communautés indigènes le long de la côte de la Tanzanie n’étaient pas laissées en arrière dans cette transformation culturelle qui a eu lieu dans toute la région. La preuve de la baie de Pangani sur la côte nord de la Tanzanie suggère que la continuité et le changement culturel ont eu lieu entre le 8ème et le 15ème siècle après JC. L’étude est fondée sur les travaux archéologiques effectués dans la région de la baie de Pangani en 2012, où les grandes strates culturelles Swahili
recouvrent directement celles de la période Zanjian. L’étude utilise l’approche comparative comme un outil pour comprendre le développement de la culture Swahili dans la région. Elle compare et contraste la poterie, les perles de verre et la faune verre des phases Zanjian et Swahili. La baie de Pangani montre des différences négligeables de la culture matérielle et des traditions économiques entre la fin du premier et de la première moitié du 2ème millénaire après JC. Autrement dit, les styles céramiques locaux ultérieurs montrent seulement des différences mineures à ceux de la fin du premier millénaire après JC alors que les données fauniques suggèrent la similarité dans l’économie de subsistance entre Zanjian et Swahili. Proportionnellement, les données de perles de verre indiquent que, bien que le commerce maritime soit devenu sophistiqué pendant les périodes Swahili, l’implication précoce dans le commerce océanique intercontinental a commencé dans la période Zanjian. Par conséquent, cette étude révèle que les communautés Zanjian à Pangani avaient déjà développé des cadres culturels sur lesquels le système culturel Swahili a été construit. L’étude se concentre sur l’analyse des données de la céramique, de la faune et de la perle.

Introduction

Pangani Bay (5° 25′ 60″ S, 39° 0′ 0″ E), on the northern Tanzanian coast, is located at the Pangani River mouth (figure 3.1). Excavation by the author at Pangani Bay in 2012 resulted in a series of discoveries that suggest much continuity between the communities prior to the thirteenth century AD and those of the Swahili culture. A deep stratigraphic sequence (figure 3.2) was encountered with archaeological assemblages (table 3.1) that indicated that rural communities residing in wattle and daub houses existed both at Kimu and Muhembo sites in Pangani Bay from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries AD. The pottery used by these communities belongs to TIW (triangular incised ware)/Tana traditions (Chami 1994: 13; Horton 1996: 410). TIW/Tana traditions have been redefined by Mjema (2015: 1) as a result of nomenclature problems arising through previous terminologies. Thus, this paper uses the word ‘Zanjian’ to indicate cultural assemblages with the redefined TIW/Tana pottery.

The excavation at Pangani Bay above the strata bearing Zanjian traditions encountered archaeological assemblages that indicated a cultural change in the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries AD. Parts of the settlements previously characterised by wattle and daub houses were transformed into stone buildings. Pottery with a triangular incised mark common during the Zanjian period, was replaced by neck punctuated ware (figure 3.3). Trade that ensured the acquisition of foreign items such as glass beads and imported ceramics was heightened and fishing and livestock-keeping activities were improved. The cultural assemblage associated with coral built structures has been considered to be Swahili (Middleton 1992: 36; Spear 2000: 286; Pollard 2007: 3; LaViolette 2008: 31).

The nature of the stratification of archaeological materials at Pangani Bay allowed for examination of these two cultural assemblages. Investigation focused on identifying
the continuity and change of Zanjian–Swahili traditions from the first to the second millennium AD. In my study, ceramic decorations were useful for revealing variability over time. On the other hand, faunal data provided comparative results with information on variability over time in the consumption of shellfish. Also, glass beads shed light on the change in their importation and use. Thus, from the study of ceramics, fauna and bead data, cultural traits are compared for the examination of continuity and change from Zanjian to Swahili traditions.

The prevailing view has been that the Lamu archipelago may be the cradle of Swahili culture. It is here that Zanjian tradition evolved into Swahili culture and then spread southward along the East African coast (Allen 1981: 323; Nurse & Spear 1985: 97; Chami 1994: 90, 1998: 214). This view implies that Zanjian settlements on the Tanzanian coast collapsed, with no contributions to the formation of the subsequent
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Table 3.1  Materials from all excavated trenches in 2012. Source: E. Mjema.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trenches</th>
<th>Excavation 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size (m)</td>
<td>LCM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K1 (2x1)</td>
<td>3 034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K2 (2x2)</td>
<td>2 524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K3 (2x1)</td>
<td>1 785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1 (3x1)</td>
<td>1 840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2 (2x1)</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10 122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LCM = Local ceramics, FCM = Foreign ceramics, GV = Glass vessels, GB = Glass beads, NGB = Non-glass beads, D = Daubs, SG = Slags, CS = Coral stones, S = Shells, FB = Fish bones, NFB = Non-fish bones, g = Grams.

Swahili culture (Chami 1994: 90, 1998: 214). While proponents of this hypothesis use pottery motifs to trace the spread of ceramic traditions from north to south, it is noted from other studies that similar pottery motifs and other cultural aspects such as maritime activities existed throughout the East African coast prior to the Swahili period (Fleisher & LaViolette 1999; Wynne-Jones 2005).
Before the current study, Pangani Bay and in particular the Swahili archaeological deposit was investigated and documented by Walz (2010), but the Zanjian phase there remained unstudied. Thus, the current study proceeded from where the previous work stopped. It attempted to explore the archaeology of each occupational phase (Zanjian and Swahili) separately, and to then investigate whether Zanjian traditions contributed to the origin of Swahili culture.

**Fieldwork**

The survey and archaeological excavation work, which lasted six weeks, was conducted in 2012 in the southern and northern parts of the Pangani River bank.

Excavation trenches named K1 (2×1 m), K2 (2×2 m) and K3 (2×1 m) were placed at Kimu site south of the Pangani River, and the others, M1 (1×3 m) and M2 (1×2 m), were located at Muhembo Hill (figure 3.1). Generally, trenches excavated at Pangani Bay revealed three consecutive occupational phases: Zanjian, Swahili and post-Swahili (figure 3.4). The Zanjian phase refers to strata 4–8 from trench K1 (figure 3.2). The charcoal sample from stratum five of trench K1 yielded a radiocarbon date of $942\pm 28$ BP and the sample from stratum six from the same trench is dated to $963\pm 28$ BP (table 3.2). Considering the pottery that emphasised the triangular incised mark (figure 3.3) and the radiocarbon dating from trench K1, the suggested date of the Zanjian phase was placed from c. 750 to AD 1250.

Stratigraphically, the Swahili occupational phase continues from the Zanjian phase and is seen in strata two and three of trench K1 (figure 3.2). The ceramic defining this phase is neck punctuated ware (figure 3.3) common on the East African coast and dated from AD 1250 to AD 1500 (Pollard 2007: 112). The post-Swahili phase is uncovered from stratum one of trench K1. This phase is indirectly dated to post-AD 1500.
In summary, the excavation yielded a substantial number of archaeological remains and cultural strata (table 3.1). The earliest occupation in Pangani Bay is defined as a Zanjian phase based on the characteristics of local pottery that were mainly of TIW/Tana tradition. Archaeological materials of a Swahili phase are deposited on top of the Zanjian deposits. The characteristic artefacts during the Swahili period are local neck punctuated pottery. The post-Swahili phase is the topmost deposit in the general stratigraphy of Pangani Bay (figure 3.4).

Analysis of results

The pottery analysis contained 4,641 diagnostic sherds from the Zanjian phase, which were compared with 4,520 potsherds from the Swahili assemblage. The frequency variability of pottery shapes, size, temper and decoration attributes between the two phases was examined in order to record change and continuity of pottery-making traditions over time. Beginning with pottery shape, the study recognised six distinct vessel shapes from both Zanjian and Swahili pottery assemblages (figure 3.5).

Pottery shape analysis identified types in the Zanjian assemblage that were similar to those in the Swahili assemblage (figure 3.6). Two of the most common vessel shapes produced during the Zanjian phase, open bowls and necked jars, continued to be available in the Swahili phase. The increased frequency noted in the appearance of
open bowls and bowls with beaded rims during the Swahili phase coincided with a declining frequency of necked jars. This diachronic pattern of vessel shapes supports the hypothesis that pottery traditions associated with Swahili culture are rooted in ceramic traditions found in Pangani Bay from the beginning of the eighth century AD.

The analysis of pottery motifs suggests a slight variation between the Zanjian and Swahili phases. The line motif formed by punctuation (motif K in figures 3.3 & 3.7)
and grey slip (motif R in figure 3.7) are seen in the Zanjian phase, and are the most common motifs in the Swahili assemblage.

On the other hand, the analysis of glass bead typology indicates that most of the bead shapes existing in the Zanjian assemblage continue in the Swahili phase. For example, the predominant bead shape in both the Zanjian and Swahili phases is a cylinder (figures 3.8 & 3.9).

Furthermore, faunal data shed much light on the continuity and change of food economy from the Zanjian to Swahili periods. The analysis of diachronic patterns in the Zanjian–Swahili shellfish exploitation pattern is indicated in table 3.3. The data suggest that the shellfish species *Terebralia palustris*, *Cerithidea decollata* and *Chicoreus ramusus* (figure 3.10) were present in the Zanjian phase, but were common in the Swahili phase (table 3.3).
Figure 3.9  Frequency of major bead shapes in Zanjian and Swahili phases. Source: E. Mjema

Figure 3.10  Shellfish common in Zanjian and Swahili phases. a = *Terebralia palustris* (mud whelk), b = *Cerithidea decollata*, c = *Saccostrea cucullata*, d = *Anadara* spp., e = *Cypraea annulus/moneta*, f = *Polinices mammilla*, g = *Achatina* sp. (landsnail). Source: E. Mjema
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Shellfish species including *Saccostrea cucullata*, *Anadara* spp., *Haliotidae* spp., *Achatina* sp., and *Oliva* spp. were common in the Zanjian phase but experienced a sharp decrease in the Swahili phase. However, shellfish species types such as *Cypraea annulus/moneta* and *Polinices mammilla* showed similar percentages of accumulation in both phases.

Discussion

In the second millennium AD, the inhabitants of Pangani Bay continued with local ceramic styles that exhibited minor differences to those used by their local ancestors. In the earliest occupation level, there was minimal application of punctuation marks as a decorative motif (figure 3.3) and the only motif that appears to have been preferred is the triangular incision mark. In contrast, lattice design, graphite-red burnished and comb-scraped wares were present from the earliest levels and may have provided design options and choices of motif for potters until the thirteenth century AD, during Swahili times.

The increased exploitation of shellfish species such as *Cerithidea decollata* and *Chicoreus ramusus* – used as bait by fishermen rather than for their meat – during the Swahili period probably indicates the stabilisation of a fishing tradition that was established during the Zanjian period. The decrease of shellfish species in the Swahili phase, such as those of *Anadara* spp. – used for beads – relates to the notable decrease in shell bead making after the increased importation of glass beads. The decrease of the shellfish species *Saccostrea cucullata* – collected for their meat – in the Swahili phase perhaps indicates some change in dietary behaviour as a result of the introduction of the Islamic religion, which discouraged the use of shellfish.

The glass beads showed slight variation through time, presumably indicating a continuity of similar culture. From the beginning of the Zanjian culture, beads provided a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shellfish species by letter</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zanjian phase</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total weight (13 975 g)</td>
<td>2 652</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>2 854</td>
<td>1 038</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>2 887</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Swahili phase</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total weight (6 163 g)</td>
<td>1 578</td>
<td>2 156</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.3  Variability of shellfish exploitation from general Zanjian to Swahili phases. Source: E. Mjema
means of body adornment, trade and ritual practices for Pangani inhabitants until the thirteenth century AD, during Swahili times. A similar continuity of cultural patterns defined by beads, fauna and pottery has been found from other archaeological sites on the coast, such as Shanga (Horton 1996). This demonstrates that the past community in Pangani Bay grew by itself parallel to other coastal sites of the time, such as Manda (Chittick 1984), Pate (Abungu 1996), Bandari kuu in Pemba Island (LaViolette 1999) and Chibuene sites on the Mozambique coast (Sinclair 1987).

**Conclusion**
The research data suggest that Zanjian traditions in Pangani Bay were the foundation of the later Swahili culture. Local inhabitants kept most of their pottery, trade and food traditions in continuity from the Zanjian to the Swahili periods. Minor changes are also recognisable, probably as a result of continuing contacts with neighbouring groups along the coast. Pottery with similar form and decoration was used from the Zanjian into the Swahili period. Food-gathering patterns and the type of food gathered, as revealed by shellfish, suggest some change and continuity. The long maritime trade traditions in Pangani Bay are confirmed by the recovery of Sasanian Islamic wares from the Persian Gulf during the Zanjian period, and black on yellow ceramics from the Red Sea during Swahili times. Apart from the observed internal cultural continuity, the pottery in Zanjian and Swahili communities in Pangani Bay shared similar features to that found in other sites on the East African coast (Shanga, Kilwa and Kaole) and its hinterland (Mombo). Such evidence insinuates a continuing regional connectivity of the inhabitants of Pangani Bay with other communities in East Africa.

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**References**


