Résumé
R. L. Pouwells — La bataille de Shela, apogée d'une époque et début de l'histoire moderne de la région côtière du Kenya.
Cet article prend pour point de départ la bataille de Shela qui eut lieu entre 1807 et 1813 et mit aux prises Lamu, d'une part, et une alliance regroupant Pâté et Mombasa, d'autre part. La signification véritable de l'affrontement ne fut pas d'ordre militaire, bien que par cette victoire Lamu évita la conquête et l'occupation de son territoire. En réalité, les événements liés à cette bataille fournissent des enseignements capitaux sur les modifications que connut l'économie de la côte orientale au début du xixe siècle, sur l'évolution des relations entre villes et campagne et sur la pénétration des valeurs arabes dans les pratiques et les représentations locales du monde. Dans ce contexte, l'auteur aborde deux thèmes : sur un premier plan, il traite de la guerre comme victoire de la faction Suudi de Lamu sur la coalition rivale de Zena et ses liens étroits avec Pâté ; et, sur un second plan, il démontre que la résistance Suudi à l'hégémonie de Pâté-Mombasa était due à la réticence à accepter un nouveau mode de production.
Sometime between 1807 and 1813 an unusually ferocious battle was fought along the littoral and among the sand dunes around Shela, a village only two kilometers from its bigger and more influential island neighbor, Lamu. Ostensibly it was a simple engagement that pitted a weaker, though apparently united, Lamu against a Goliath-like alliance of two other urban rivals, Mombasa and Pate. In reality it was a convoluted struggle that entangled the sisyphean intra-urban politics and competing mainland alliances of all three city-states. By all accounts, Lamu was the victor. The significance of this was, according to existing historiography, that the winner in this case was constrained out of fear of reprisals to seek the protec-

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1. Several accounts report that for a long time afterwards the skulls and bones of its victims could be found in the sands of the battle site. The Stigand version of the “Pate Chronicle” tells that “forty men bearing one name [alone]” died; while the Werner version relates that “watu maarufu, fulani bin fulani 81 (wahid u the-manin), watumwa na wasoktwa maarufu hawana ‘idadi, kadalikuwa watu wa Mombasa hawana ‘idadi” (“[of] the important people, eighty-one so-and-so sons of so-and-so, [and] slaves and unimportant people without number; and the same for the people of Mombasa without number”) (STIGAND 1966: 76; WERNER 1915: 290).


3. In fact, the Kitab az-Zanuj claims that, in the months following the battle, the “Arabs” of Pate and Mombasa defeated Lamu “again and again”. See CERULLI 1957, I: 310-339.
tion of the Sultan of ‘Uman, Sayyid Said bin Sultan al-Bu’saidi, initiating the “modern” era of Arab (then European) colonialisst domination of the coast and, eventually, the entire East African hinterland as well.4

Only one eyewitness account has survived. a brief mention of the magic and counter-magic that was exercised by both sides, along with a few particulars of the fighting.5 Otherwise, most available information on the battle was recorded from a variety of oral sources. The earliest of these was written almost four decades following the event itself, and in most other cases about ninety years afterwards. Though these sources often differ over specific detail, they also present an astonishing agreement concerning at least the general flow of events that led up to the battle, as well as of the battle itself.6 Virtually all these narratives suggest that at the heart of the conflict was a growing restiveness with Patean domination among the elders of Lamu’s Suudi faction. However, the

4. This allowed the Busaidi to establish a foothold in the Lamu Archipelago for the first time, and it was followed up by sporadic battles for control of Pate and Siyu that lasted several decades. See POUWELS 1979: 92-131; NICHOLLS 1971: 122 sq.; YLVAISAKER 1979: 66-82. Control of Kilwa and the southern (Tanzanian) coast actually seems to have existed since the 1780s. After Lamu, Sayyid Said’s liwali of Zanzibar, Muhammad b. Nasr al-Bu’saidi, seized Pemba in 1819, while Mombasa itself was taken from the Mazrui in 1837. See GRAY 1957: 19; NICHOLLS 1971: 131.

5. STIGAND 1966: 76-77, fn. 3. Two British naval officers, Smee and Hardy, visited Pate in 1811 and only made a laconic reference to the state of war that then existed between Pate and Lamu. They did not actually witness hostilities. However, the visit did occasion a request for arms from the Pate sultan, Ahmad b. Shaykh. For an account of the visit, see BURTON 1872, II: 475-482. BOTELER (1835, I: 373-376), who visited Pate in 1824, only commented on the destruction which the war had wrought on the region.

6. The earliest source is GUILLAIN 1856 III: 567-568. Though Guillian gives details about the fighting around the walls of Lamu, he doesn’t mention the battle at Shela. The British consul at Zanzibar, Christopher RIGBY (1935: 350) also provided some brief references from contemporary sources. Written in the 1890s at the behest of liwali Abdallah b. Hamed al-Bu’saidi from information provided orally to a scribe, “Saleh”, by Shaibu Faraji b. Hamed Bakari, is the so-called “Lamu Chronicle” (HICHENS 1938: 18-27). The various versions of the “Pate Chronicle” afford far more contingent information on political developments that led up to the war, as in STIGAND (1966: 71-77), WERNER (1915: 290-292), J. W. Cusack, “History of the Nabahan Sultans of Pate”, Kenya National Archives (henceforth KNA). PC. LAMU/3/1, pp. 8-9, and HELPE (1928: 159-160). (The author hopes to provide a historiographic assessment of the Pate Chronicles in a forthcoming article.) Additional evidence was collected by various British Provincial and District Commissioners, as in J. Clive, “A Short History of Lamu”, KNA, DC. LAMU/3/1, pp. 2-39; F. W. ISAAC, “Summarized History”. KNA, DC. LAMU/3/1, pp. 114-127; and L. Talbot-Smith, “Historical Record of Tanaland”, KNA, DC. LAMU/3/1, pp. 40-112. Also, there is the Kitab az-Zamuj (CERULLI 1957, I), a compilation of oral history from the northern coast written by an unknown author. The so-called Mazrui manuscript was written in the 1930s or 40s by Shaykh al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui as A History of the Mazrui and can be found as an unpublished manuscript in Ft. Jesus Library, Mombasa. Events of the battle in this last were taken from “the works of the Lamu historian Bwana Misham ibn Kombo”.
war's more immediate cause was the kinship ties and factional entangle-
ments which induced Lamu to support a contender for the Pate sultanate, 
one Fumo Luti Kipunga, son of the preceding sultan, Fumo Madi, against 
a cousin, Ahmad bin Shaykh. While the issue of succession had remained 
unresolved, furthermore, at some point the Mazrui of Mombasa either 
intervened on their own initiative or were asked to intervene. Once 
having allied themselves with Ahmad, the Mazrui sent troops to Pate to 
enforce a decision in his favor. Many at Lamu (and Pate) refused to coun-
tenance Mazrui actions or Ahmad’s claim. A war of indeterminate dura-
tion then ensued between Lamu and the Pate-Mombasa alliance, ending 
in the decisive battle outside the walls of Lamu and at Shela, followed 
sometime thereafter with an invitation to Sayyid Said to send a garrison 
to protect Lamu. Throughout the entire affair, the decision-making and 
actions taken by Lamu were greatly influenced by one Suudi elder above 
all others, Bwana Zahidi Ngumi al-Makhzumi.

Beyond these fairly scant political and military details, a deeper analy-
sis of some of the above sources and others reveals that this battle was the 
culmination of a war that probably had been waged on and off for more 
than a decade beforehand. More importantly, this war was both the focus 
and climax of layers of key political, religious, social, and economic forces 
that had been amassing for well over a century all along the East African 
coast, but especially on its northern end. Finally, a study of this particular 
war also offers valuable lessons concerning the organic interdependence 
of events that usually played out between the worlds of the coastal hinter-
land and the western Indian Ocean on one hand, and events in the social 
microcosm of the Swahili city-states on the other.

The First Layer of Interpretation: “Blowing the Horn of Mrio”

Lamu’s victory over Pate and the Mazrui, moreover, was a triumph for 
the city’s Suudi faction over the rival Zena faction. It represented a revo-
lution in town politics which saw a tipping of the scales of power between 
the two coalitions, previously institutionalized in local oral historical 
accounts and in a political tradition of diarchical rule. While Suudi did not 
retain its outright paramouncy once Sayyid Said responded to the call for

7. The Kitab az-Zanuj (CERULLI 1957, I: 280, 310, 339), gives the former's name as 
Fumo Luti b. Bayaye. Both RIGBY (1935: 350) and GUILLAINE (1856, III: 567-
568), however, confirm that he was the son of Fumo Madi. Some sources state 
that the latter’s name was Fumo Luti b. Abu Bakari. However, Smee reported 
his name as Ahmad (s.e. “Hammed”). See BURTON 1872, 11: 477-78.

8. In fact, in an interview with Muhammad Abdallah Bakathir at Lamu, 3 April, 
1975, it was stated that the war principally was between the factions, a war in 
which Pate and Mombasa had merely “interfered”.
protection by sending soldiers and a governor. the direction which socio-
economic change continued to take represented a triumph as well for the
forces which gave Suudi their victory at Shela. Above all else, these forces
represented the importance which Suudi’s relations with their mainland
neighbors had played in the improved commercial fortunes which the city
had come to enjoy in the eighteenth century.

To come to grips with the nature of Suudi’s nineteenth-century vic-
tory, it is best to begin with some discussion of the history of the town, as
found in local traditions, and the social composition of its two factions,
Zena and Suudi. By most accounts, it appears that Zena consisted of two
major groupings, the Mahdali, one of the coast’s oldest sharif clans, and
the so-called Waungwana wa Yumbe. The latter itself represented an
amalgamation of several noble lineages who numbered among the town’s
oldest (the Lamii and the Bakari), and the remnants of other clans who
had settled in Lamu and Shela as the result of the breakup of older neigh-
boring island towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, partic-
icularly those of the old Manda confederation.9 The Kitab az-Zanuj sug-
gests that Zena was the more senior of the two factions.10 Moreover,
Zena clearly was more inclined to be a supporter of Pate’s (hence, Mom-
basas’s) interests, most likely because of closer kinship ties.11

Two principal groupings comprised Suudi. The WaKina-Nti, as Prins
aptly stated, was an “old Swahili substratum” who are reputed in tradi-
tional history to have been the earliest pre-Islamic settlers of the town’s
south end. Hidabu Hill or Mrio, and to have introduced coconut cultiva-
tion.12 We know of at least two clans that were contained in the Kina-
Nti, the Makhzumi and the Husayni sharifs. It is uncertain whether a
third clan, the Bwene Gogo, was a part of the Kina-Nti or of the second
great Suudi coalition, the WaFamao. Also included in the Famao was

9. In the last category, I would include the Bwana Mshuti Waziri, formerly of
Takwa. In an oral testimony collected from Mzee A. M. Jahadmy in 1975, the
Mahdali were listed as Kina-Nti. For a detailed discussion, see Pouwels 1987:
45. Other sources, however, disagree with this. See the Talbot-Smith, “Historical
Record”, pp. 45-47 (see ref. supra fn. 6); Prins 1971: 6-8; 1967: 82-83.
10. See Cerulli 1957, I: 281-313, where the town leader is a Zena, Muhammad b.
Shaykh Umar al-Bauri, whereas the Suudi elder, Zahidi Ngumi, appears as a
“youth”. The greater authority of the Bakari also was elicited from discussion
with Sayyid Bahasani and Salim Kheri. Field notes, Lamu, 1 and 24 May, 1975.
11. The chronicles of both Pate and Lamu verify this; Hibbens 1938; 26; Stigand
1966: 73.
12. Prins 1971: 82-83; Hibbens 1938: 8-12, especially 10-11; Kenya National Archi-
ves, DC LAMU/3/1, p. 195 (account compiled in 1921 by Talbot-Smith after
records from former Provincial Commissioner Reddie, ca. 1898); Talbot-Smith,
“How Far Record”, p.47 (see ref. supra fn. 6). It actually appears that Mrio
might have been the Luziwa mentioned in some Portuguese accounts, a main-
land town closely associated with Lamu, perhaps as a twin village. See
Strandes (1961: 129, 186, 187, 190), as well as Kirkman’s discussion (ibid.: 296);
and Wilson (1980: 121-123). Hence, sometimes they also are referred to as the
WaKina-Mti, people of the tree.
the venerable Maawi jamaa, the traditional ritual leaders of the community and khatibs of the Friday mosque. Prins’s research indicated that the Famao consisted largely of lineage “fragments” of individuals and small groups who had been “grafted onto the main stock” from various settlements and broken clans. This would seem to be highly plausible, particularly in the case of the Maawi, in the light of facts known about the flight of large numbers of Bajun and Katwa groups from the mainland throughout the seventeenth and part of the eighteenth centuries. Berg (1968: 45-47), for example, presents convincing evidence concerning the “resorting” of northern coastal society at that time and the reconstruction of the Tisa Taifa confederation at Mombasa out of similar fragments who had fled from the northern coastal mainland. The term, WaKina-Nti, means simply people of a certain country or area. The country (nchi or nti) of their origins, then, would appear to have been the northern mainland coast.

This position is strengthened from other information which suggests that both Suudi groups had ancient ties with the mainland. Though the case for the WaKina-Nti is admittedly weaker in this regard, at least their corporate name links them to the mainland and islands north of the Archipelago known collectively as Nti Kuu (see Map). Their elder, Bwana Zahidi Ngumi, seems to have had family connections with Nti Kuu since the Ngumi are one of the “eighteen” clans of the Bajun. In their descriptions of the Bajun and the Ngumi, Barros and Elliott are remarkably alike in describing the particularly close relationships they sustained with mainland neighbors. This Bajun/Katwa connection is clinched from historical accounts collected in the Lamu area by Clive and Talbot-Smith which

13. I base this on evidence from a variety of sources, including KNA. DC LAMU/3/1, p. 195; Hollis compilation in KNA. CP, Bundle II, MSA/6, and field notes of an interview with Abdallah Muhammad Jahadhmy, Lamu, 29 Apr. 1975.


15. See NURSE 1980: 40. That Zahidi Ngumi was a Suudi and a Makhzumi is evident from the Kitab az-Zanuj (CERELLI 1957, I: 280, 313); also field notes from interviews at Lamu with Abdallah Muhammad Bakathir (11 May 1975), Salim Kheri and Amina bti Salim (24 May 1975), Bibi Zena Bakan (Apr 1975).

16. Barros’ mid-16th century statement describes the Emozaydy as “Moors” who inhabit the offshore islands, who combine herding and cultivating, who “have intercourse” with the mainland “Kaffirs”, and who intermarry with them (FREEMAN-GRENVILLE 1962: 83-84); ELLIOTT (1925-26: 255) depicts the Ngumi Bajun as Muslim converts who historically remained on good terms with mainland peoples.
Map. The Northern coast of Kenya.
state that groups of Wa(n)tikuu Bajun had originally “settled” Suudi-quarter.17

And what were these mainland alliances? Looked at in terms of its deep history (second millennium B.C. et seq.), and as part of the old Shungwaya community, the entire Lamu neighborhood had a long record of close contact with a wide range of Bantu- and Cushitic-speaking peoples. The region included several peoples who spoke Sabaki Bantu languages related to Kiswahili, such as Pokomo and Elwana. In the early first few centuries A.D., moreover, groups of Thagicu Bantu-speakers preceded Sabaki-speakers into the area. Some have theorized that they, quite possibly, were responsible for the Kwale wares that have been found nearby.18 East Africa’s earliest food-producers, Southern Cushitic-speakers ancestral to modern day Dahaloans, appear to have expanded into the area north of the Tana River sometime in the second millennium A.D., later influencing the development of Northeast Coastal Bantu, proto-Sabaki Bantu, Mijikenda, Pokomo, and northern Swahili in succession.19

The towns of the Lamu Archipelago had closer dealings in “recent” centuries with various Eastern Cushitic cattle and camel herders. Christopher Ehret and Muhammad Nuuh Ali provide evidence that Tunni Somali moved down from the mid-Jubba River area into the coastal hinterland between Kismayu and Lamu around the eleventh century, then later shifted northwards to settle in the area around Barawa.20 However, Nurse (1985a) provides evidence that it was Garree Somali who had the greatest impact on speakers of northern coastal languages. As did the Tunni, the Garree expanded from the middle Jubba into the Jubba-Tana hinterland, 900-1000, where they encountered Southern Cushitic-speakers, the Aweer-Boni, who gave up their language for Garree, and the aforementioned Thagicu-speaking communities.21 Between 1000 and 1500, these Garree-speakers split into two groups. The northern division in southern Somalia was called the Aweer Kili and southern division was located in the hinterland north of the Tana River. This evidence from ethnolinguistic studies made by Ali and Ehret fits in turn with and Ibn Idrisi’s and Ibn Said’s 12th-13th centuries sightings of Garree in the Shungwaya-Nti Kuu region.22

17. Talbot-Smith, “Historical Record”, p. 51; Clive, “Short History”, p. 7 (ref. supra fn. 6). The relationship between Wa(n)tikuu and Katwa Bajun is an interesting one. It would seem likely that the latter would be subsumed under the former, since Bajun of Katwa, i.e. Somali, origins would have been found in Nti Kuu.
Local histories indicate that these Garree-speaking Aweer-Boni and other pastoralists played a major part in the history of Shungwaya, ca. 1500-1800. Reverend Wakefield was told stories, for example, of the country of Wama in the middle Jubba region, which was said to have been the homeland of old Garree. There the stone town of Keethi or Keyrthie was located, built by the Garree and Kilio (Aweer Kili?). These two groups, after having fought, abandoned Wama, and then settled various places along the coast where they became known as the Wabunya (i.e. Boni), or “robbers”. Many Bajun traditions exist which tell both of quarrels and alliances that have existed over the centuries with the Kilio-Garree. The mysterious Katwa Bajun, who figured so prominently in the history of the region, also could have been Garree in origin. According to traditions, they settled many towns north of Malindi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and are credited apocryphally with introducing camels, cattle, goats, millet, and the fish taboo to coastal civilization.

Movement of the Oromo into the region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries threw the entire Lamu hinterland into considerable chaos. Soon afterwards, too, groups of Middle-Northern Somali began percolating into the area from northern Somalia. As a result, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a period of massive “resorting” of northern coastal society which drove large numbers of refugees to the relative safety of coastal and island towns like Mombasa, Lamu, Pate, and Siyu (Berg 1974: 48-51; Brown 1985: 200-201; Ali 1985: 134, 139, 166). This greatly altered the economic and political situation on the islands themselves. Pate’s rise as a regional power was tied to the fact that she formed a close alliance with the Oromo, whereas Lamu in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained closer to her old Bajun, Dahalo, and Somali allies and clients.

The eighteenth century seems to have seen a return to more peaceful mainland conditions for Lamu. Despite the Oromo and Somali incursions, large remnants of uprooted Garree, Katwa, Bajun, and Dahalo were left on the coast, many of whom came to Swahili town dwellers in various

23. Ravenstein 1884: 266-267. Many renderings of the Shungwaya tradition—the myth of common “origins” in the northern state of Shungwaya shared by various Swahili, Mijikenda, and Pokomo communities—begin with a “war” between the Oromo and the mysterious Kilio.

24. For example, see Elliott 1925-26: 354-356; Shigano 1966: 168; Clive, “Short History”, p. 3 (see ref. supra fn. 6).


states of dependency and clientage. Several Oromo and Boran clans as well settled as refugees among coastal peoples in the eighteenth century (Bunger 1973: 13). Ylvisaker (1979: 38-40) also hypothesizes that the civil wars that disturbed Pate in the 1720s, 1730s, and 1770s might have forced many of her erstwhile mainland clients to shift southwards into Lamu's bara (cultivable hinterland).

With their traditionally strong mainland ties, these changed conditions would have favored the ascendancy of Lamu's Suudi clans to a position of greater wealth and power at the partial expense of Zena and Pate. Zein (1974: 27) reports that, after the turmoil of previous centuries, Lamu was able to move back onto the mainland in the eighteenth century to cultivate farms within her bara. Allen, too, (1974: 129-131) presents a convincing scenario on how many of these neighbors of Lamu might have been converted from hunters and pastoralists into a reliable client class of mainland cultivators. This eighteenth century "mainland seepage", he argues, permitted a materialistic "renaissance" at Lamu based upon an older, pre-slave productive mode which emphasized communal patron-client, town-barra clearing, burning, and harvesting under the direction of a town-based overseer (jumbe ya wakulima). Under this system, patrons and clients alike shared the fruits of their combined efforts, while benefitting from the nearby large island settlement as a place of refuge.

That Lamu did, indeed, enjoy such a "renaissance" beginning in the eighteenth century is indisputable. The town grew significantly in size, eventually reaching a population estimated at 15,000 to 21,000 by the time of the war with Pate and Mombasa (ibid.: 109, Ghaidan 1975). Thus, Allen's study of Lamu's material culture indicated that quite a large number of stone houses were constructed in the eighteenth century, and that new styles of art and architecture were introduced. This, he observes, was an obvious sign of the city's growth in wealth and prestige at that time (Allen 1974: 111-115). Moreover, where Pate formerly had been the leading commercial power in the region, due to her special relations with the Oromo in their years of ascendancy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by the late eighteenth century Lamu had eclipsed Pate. This is suggested by the fact that several seventeenth and eighteenth century Pate sultans married and resided at Lamu because of her superior harbor facilities. By 1811, Smee reported that Pate had "no trade at present", while Lamu's commercial fortunes were improving "annually" (Burton 1872. II: 513). Likewise, eleven years later. Owen (1833. I: 364-365) remarked that Lamu had "much commerce" and had become "decidedly one of the best stations upon the coast". Evidence provided by Boteler reveals that it was

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27. TURTON 1975: 530-531; BROWN 1985: 200-201. JACKSON (1976: 221) cites extensive Oromo-Kamba battles near the end of the eighteenth century which drove many refugees to seek the relative security of the coast.
Lamu’s mainland relations, above all, which lay at the root of her soaring commercial fortunes.28

Several sources indicate that until the early nineteenth century Lamu was governed as a republic. A council, the Yumbe, consisted of the principal elders representing each of the city’s wards. It was presided over by an “executive” variously called the Mingwana wa Yumbe or (most plausibly) the Mwenye Mui. The position of Mwenye Mui was alternated between the two paramount elders of Zena and Suudi as a mechanism to sustain political balance, if not social equivalence.29 As pointed out by Brown (1985: 88-89), power in Swahili society was determined by relative wealth and numerical strength. As such, her alliances with mainland peoples succored Suudi’s hand in city and regional politics and clearly altered the previous balance between the “didemes”.

That this actually occurred is suggested by the way the available sources present and explain the rise of the Suudi elder Bwana Zahidi Ngumi to a position of preeminence in the Yumbe. In some narratives, at one point he is mentioned simply as a “youth” who merely represents his clan (the Makhzumi) or his faction (Suudi). Later however, as the war with Pate and Mombasa unfolds, he appears as leader for the entire town.30 Most revealing, however, is the reason several interviewees adduced to explain Zahidi Ngumi’s and Suudi’s ascension to power. Bwana Zahidi, the informants said, possessed a huge “slave” army; Suudi, especially the Maawi, won the war because they were “more numerous” than the Bakari (Zena clan).31 It is most likely that where these informants referred to “slaves”, the older form of client servitude was intended. Certainly, this is implied where they mention that Suudi was “more numerous” than Zena, since, presumably, intermarriage and concubinage with mainland “pawns” was an integral part of life in all coastal towns (Cerulli 1957, I: 254-255). As they worked together in the field, though, both

28. Ivory was traded which was being obtained from the Oromo and Dahalo, while from the mainland they were exporting musk-melons, coconuts, bananas, plantain, cashew apples, pawpaws, dholl, rice, peas, and beans (Boteler 1835, I: 387-388).

29. Interview with Sayyid Ahmad Adnani Ahdali, Lamu, 19 Apr. 1975; and Isaac, “Summarized History”, p. 121 (see ref. supra fn. 6), state that it was rotated, but do not specify how often. The “Lamu Chronicle” (Hichens 1938: 12) suggests that it was rotated annually. Prins 1971: 48; Talbot-Smith, “Historical Record”, pp. 50-51; and Clive, “Short History”, pp. 8-9 (cf. ref. supra fn. 6), all claim the Mwenye Mui’s tenure was four years. Though Zena might have been slightly “senior” to Suudi due to the social pedigree of old Swahili clans like the Bakari and the Ahdali (the old ruling family of Kilwa), it should be remembered that Suudi included some of the oldest families in Lamu who enjoyed ancient mainland ties that still mattered even through the “dark” sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.


townsmen and slave-clients fought side by side against a common enemy since both had a vested interest in a victory over Pate and Mombasa when threatened with invasion (Hichens 1938: 24-25; Prins 1971: 184). Thus, in the end the victory was over Zena as much as over Pate and Mombasa. It was a symbolic and fitting conclusion when, as indeed Talbot-Smith claims was the case, it was celebrated with a blowing of the siwa of Mrio, the antique ceremonial horn of antediluvian Suudi.32

The Second Layer of Interpretation:
"God will judge between us..."

Aside from reflecting new social and economic realities in the internal politics of Lamu, the war against Pate and Mombasa was, ironically and poignantly, the death throes of an old coastal order defending itself against outsiders who threatened to introduce a different way of life. The "old coastal order" in question included a curious blend of small-town religious tradition, dialect, productive mode, land use, and local notions of social justice.

Commonly, all along the coast Islam served as an ideological mold in which local social economy and politics were cast. Business and religion went hand-in-hand, and this principle could be witnessed nowhere more appropriately than the case of Lamu’s Utukuni ("Marketplace") mosque. The mosque, along with the Pwani and Mna Lalo mosques, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was located in the market south of the present "pedigree line" in what was then Suudi (Ghaidan 1975: 76-77). According to information obtained by Zein, the market originally was built to accomodate trade, while the mosque served as a Friday mosque for all merchants trading in mainland grains and timber. Appropriately enough, the Maawi clan from the Suudi faction traditionally provided the khatibs for the mosque.33

Moreover, leadership in coastal towns like Lamu was inseparably inter-digitated with forms of Islamic law and practices (mila) which were strongly influenced by local oral tradition and social arrangements.34 Islamic law, locally interpreted, characteristically was very much a part of the power structure at Lamu in the nineteenth century, and probably earlier. Several Lamu informants pointed out that one of the requirements for an elder wishing to serve on the town council was that he had to be thoroughly

32. KNA, LAMU/PRB/3, p. 195.
33. El-ZeIN 1974: 38-39. It should be recalled that the Maawi were one of Suudi’s leading clans.
34. For a detailed discussion, see POUWELS 1987: 63-96. For the respective roles of mila (local custom) versus Shari‘a (recorded law) in coastal communities, see CAPLAN’s excellent contribution (1982); also LIENHARDT (1966).
learned in (traditional) Islamic law. The same was true of the Mwenye Mwit.\textsuperscript{35}

Lamu long has had a reputation for social and religious exclusivism. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that when battle was joined between Lamu and her enemies, though those enemies likewise were Muslims, God was invoked by Lamu’s elders to pass judgement in their favor:

“God will judge between us and save us.
By the help of the Blessed One who is highest and richest.
By following this [indeed], by following we shall triumph”\textsuperscript{36}

Though God was invoked, in characteristic fashion both sides made use of local religious scholars (\textit{walimu}) to work magic against the other according to Stigand’s source (1966: 76-77). Perhaps more than any other, this simple fact stands in mute testimony to the truly parochial nature of Islamic beliefs and practices in the Lamu Archipelago.

If Lamu was defending local custom and social arrangements, then against what were they defending themselves? The “Lamu Chronicle” itself provides the most important clues. At one point in the narration of events that led up to the battle at Shela, the reader is presented with a rare and fascinating peek at the internal debate and decision making that went on among the town elders. Though the verbatim account of the narrative is, of course, open to question, the authenticity of the oration dance (\textit{gungu}) and the poetic fragments said to have been composed by Bwana Zahidi Ngumi and others are relatively probable.\textsuperscript{37} The key part is as follows.\textsuperscript{38} In the words of Zahidi Ngumi:

\textit{1. Tuna kori za aswili tusizoyuwa mipaka}
Since our origins we have had gardens without boundaries.

\textsuperscript{35} Interviews in Lamu, 1975, with Sayyid Bahasani (14 Apr.), Ahmad Adnani (19 Apr.), Harith Swaleh Maawi (19 Apr.)

\textsuperscript{36} Clive, “Short History” and Talbot-Smith, “Summarized History”, pp. 76-77 (see ref. supra fn. 6).

\textsuperscript{37} First, it should be remembered that the narrative was written down from an oral account only about 70 years after the war. Secondly, since the lines in question are in verse form, it is likely that the words had not been altered much since they were first composed. A third factor which makes the account of the \textit{gungu} convincing is the rare detail it provides of the give-and-take, again preserved in verse form, among the various elders and factions. Finally, as will be seen, the version of events they present fits well with some of the circumstantial evidence to be presented below. The most questionable aspect of these lines would be, not the accuracy of the circumstances of the conflict which they relate, but the chronology of their composition. Were they composed during the conflict or afterwards?

\textsuperscript{38} The original would be in Arabic script; hence there is some ambiguity in the transliteration, as evident in my own translation, as well as from the two versions given by HICHENS (1938: 24-25); and KNAPPERT (1979: 183-84). I have noted the range of differences by including variations in brackets. The translation is a combination of Hichens, Knappert, and my own.
2. *Hulima sute wajoli tukivuniya shirika*
   We all work as fellow slaves, sharing the bounty. 39

3. *Kuna nokowa jamali utashiyi kitabuka*
   There [now] is an elegant slave driver 40 wanting to bring us grief.

4. *Kunyamaa tumetoka mwatupa shauri gani?*
   Having spurned mute acquiescence, what advice do ye give?

5. *Mula shoko[wa] la Pemba* 41 na hapa ataka kul[la]
   The devourer of forced labor at Pemba, here too he wants to feed.

6. *Uyao/kaya kutiwambawamba na kutwingish/za madhila*
   Coming to lord over us and make us low.

   Equally interesting is the rejoinder of Sh. Ali b. Ahmad al-Asafiyyan
   (using the Hichens’ transliteration and translation):

1. *Lakutenda situuze; situuze lakutenda!*
   What to do you need not ask us; you need not ask us what to do!

2. *Metufunda mwanamizi; mwanamizi metufunda.
   He would treat us like hermit crabs; like hermit crabs he would treat us

3. *Kiwa punda tayizize; tayizize kiwa punda.
   We decline to be pack asses; to be pack asses we decline.

   For us to be harnessed with pack-bags and driven to work, that is just what he
   will not achieve!

Finally, Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Lamui speaks:

1. *Tukiriziye hathiri watumwa na waungwana;
   That to which we agree, both slaves and freeborn, is plain...

   It is patently clear from these verses that their greatest fear, “slave”
   and “freeborn” alike, is abasement and loss of personal freedom to the
   Nabahani sultans of Pate and the Mazrui. At first glance, where slaves are
   concerned anyways, this would seem to be gainsaying. Yet, of course,
   these lines make perfect sense if the type of servitude meant is the form of
   production based on town-mainland clientage described in the preceding
   section. The sort of “slavery” they fear is one which abases all to the level
   of “hermit crabs” or “pack asses”, i.e. chattels. Of course, there are some
   who seem to question the appropriateness of using the term slave to mean

39. A less literal translation, and one seemingly closer to the intended meaning
    would be: “We [i.e., both] with fellow slaves cooperating, we share the bounty”.
    My thanks to Pr Eastman for this suggestion.

40. HICHENS (1938) translates this simply as overseer; however, the implication is
    that the *nokoa* is an overseer on a plantation. Hence, in this context, he is a slave
    driver. Moreover, a *nokoa* usually is only the second-ranking slave on a planta-
    tion, below the master. Thus, the choice of this term implies that the slave-driver
    in question (i.e. Sultan Ahmad b. Shaykh of Pate) is himself a slave acting for his
    master (Ahmad b. Muhammad Mazrui of Mombasa).

41. HICHENS (1938) writes this as *pemba* = millet husks. I prefer the Knappert ver-
    sion, but the reader should heed the double meaning intended here.
little other than chattel. In their criticism of Meiers and Kopyttoff (1977), Klein (1978) and Cooper (1979) emphasize slaves as producers, purchased to extract their labor. Yet, it is important to note that, despite Cooper's investigations (which were confined to the later nineteenth century and specifically to the evolution of paternalistic plantation slavery), others have focused on the broader uses of the term in the context of (particularly pre-nineteenth century) coastal communities. A growing amount of literature in recent years, for example, has given important clarification to the crucial role female slaves played as reproducers, as much as producers, contributing offspring to their masters' kin networks as well as to their profits (Strobel 1978, Eastman 1988).

Eastman observes importantly that the most commonly used term in East Africa for a slave, mtumwa, simply means "one who is given work or employed" which, she notes, could apply to a broad range of interpretations. Both she and Glassman further suggest that the term mtumwa could denote "many categories of subordinate, including personal dependents who would not fulfill most common definitions of 'slave'." The evidence given here would seem to support Glassman's suggestion that the institution of slavery in East Africa indeed arose "as a variant of local concepts of clientship". Glassman's observation (1991: 289-292) that, among the four forms of slavery he describes, the one thing that every slave had in common with all others was his/her introduction to Swahili society "as a non-person, a kinless outsider totally reliant on and subordinate to his master" (emphasis is mine, RLP), could have applied equally well to uprooted mainland settlers. The term used for a "raw" slave, mshenzi, for example, was used by townsmen universally for all unacclimated "barbarians" of non-Swahili origins, whether they had been purchased, pawned, or made dependent for any number of reasons. Slavery, as it is normally used, has only social and economic connotations. In the case of the Swahili coast, its cultural and religious meanings served to justify various degrees of exploitation, culminating in the highly labor-extractive forms of later nineteenth-century plantation slavery variously described in the work of Cooper, Glassman, and Sheriff. Moreover, another term for slave used in Bwana Zahidi Ngumi's address above, mjoli, has the connotation of one who is a member of the same household.

42. As Glassman points out in personal correspondence, however, there is no sharp distinction one can make between slavery as clientship and slavery as economic exploitation. Conflicts existed even between patrons and clients.
43. Eastman 1988: 16, and also "Service (Utumwa) as Contested Concept of Swahili Social Reality", forthcoming.
44. Glassman 1991: 289, fn. 31; Eastman (ftheg), "Service (Utumwa)."
45. Glassman 1991: 288; Sheriff 1987: 48-76. In currently fashionable anthropological jargon, it was an "Essentially contested concept", "encoded with multiple layers of cultural meanings" (Eastman [ftheg], "Service (Utumwa)").
a "fellow servant". The case being made here, that "slaves" in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Lamu context meant mainland clients living and working in a "pre-slave productive mode" rather than as chattels, something closer to Glassman's model or Meillassoux's "Sudanic" form of slavery (1975: 63-64), where slaves constitute a part of a lineage production unit, we know did indeed exist on other parts of the coast, as noted by Shepherd. In the Comoro Islands slaves, without reference to their sex, were grafted onto their master's lineage. As such, they sometimes stood in historical opposition to other alliances of masters and slaves as concubines or as soldiers and workers. Evidence provided by at least one oral informant and the verses above suggest that something very much like these models of service, clientage, and "slavery" was part of the social universe in Lamu at the time the battle at Shela was fought.

By the early nineteenth century both the Nabahani of Pate and the Mazrui of Mombasa long had been implementing more extractive forms of servitude and property relations in their domains. It appears likely that it was the powerful, slave-holding Mazrui which especially worried the Lamuans and their mainland clients. Both of these clans were Arab in origin, relatively newly arrived on the coast, and had experienced considerable local Swahili opposition to their alien presence throughout the

47. SHEPHERD 1980: 89-90. Up until now, most (feminist) literature on household slavery have concentrated perhaps too narrowly on domestic slavery, per se, thus emphasizing the natural likelihood of female slaves' descendants being socialized, Swahiliized, and brought into the master's kin group. Evidence more recently adduced, like Shepherd's, indicates that male slaves, under somewhat different conditions, also became members of a townsperson's family. Another example comes from the testimony of the former slave, Bi Kaje. She gives considerable evidence that Mijikenda boys, at least by the late 1800s, were being sent by their families to Swahili households to learn to be a Muslim and to receive training in work socially acceptable to a mwungwana (civilized townsperson). Not surprisingly, these "slaves" often "joined the social networks of their owner as dependents" while they still maintained ties with their own kin" (MIRZA & STROBEL 1989: 21).
49. See ROSS 1986: 319, 341-344; JENSON 1973: 46. The Zahidi Ngumi poem (line 5) specifically refers to "The devourer of forced labor at Pemba..." This could refer either to the Nabahani or the Mazrui because both had shared possession of Pemba since the reign of wali Masud b. Nasr al-Mazrui (1753-73); q.v. STIGGAND 1966: 56. But the reference to a "slave driver" by Zahidi Ngumi (as explained in fn. 39) seems to be the Mazrui since the Mazrui governors were behind the Nabahani in Pate politics by the time of the Battle of Shela.
50. The first "permanent" Mazrui wali of Mombasa was established in the 1730s. From the Pate Chronicles, the Nabahani claim to have been in Pate since the twelfth century. However, as will be argued in a future publication, it appears the Nabahani might not have gained control of the Pate Sultanate before the late seventeenth century, as per the dynastic quarrels that started under Abubakar b. Bwana Mkuu. GUILLAIN (1856, III: 534) relates that the first Nabahani, like the first Mazrui governor, was installed by the Ya'arubi Imam Sayf b. Sultan, ca. 1700.
previous century. For example, the unpopularity of the Mazrui with the old Swahili Nine Tribes “owners of the land” at Mombasa, as well as with the Bu’saidi later, had forced them to seek allies among the Malindi clan and the Three Tribes. Likewise, many Arabs had been killed at Pate, including a whole generation of Nabahani we are told, as a result of a general uprising that occurred at various locations along the coast sometime between 1727 and 1745.51

Yet, as Arabs, the Mazrui sometimes could capitalize on a reputation for religious scholarship. In Mombasa and Pate they had been respected well enough in the eighteenth century to receive invitations to mediate the political rows in both towns.52 At Pemba, for example, local informants related that it was the Mazrui and other Omani Arabs who specifically were sent by Imam Sayf b. Sultan Ya’arubhi to expel the Portuguese infidels.53 In this vein, Pembans recall that Islam was introduced by the Shirazi long ago, but that their religion was “weak” since they had been influenced by the Portuguese to live with pigs and because their literacy (kisomo) was “small” (kidogo).54 Though local people had had the Qur’an previously, they claim, it was Omani Arabs like the Mazrui who came to teach religion to the Shirazi, introducing literacy on an enhanced scale, thus driving out the “jinnis” of ignorance and false belief.55 This reputation is reflected in the fact that the second and third Mazrui governors of Mombasa, the brothers Muhammad and Ali b. Uthman, long were remembered as “qadis” who applied the Shari’a to restore harmony among the Twelve Tribes after years of Portuguese meddling and local dissension (Lambert 1958: 94; Freeman-Grenville 1962: 217; Pouwels 1979: 110).

Such “mediation”, however, sometimes led to naked intervention or the introduction of new social usages that made the more literate ‘Umani (Ibadhi) variety of Islam locally ill-favored. It was interference of this sort

51. GUILLAIN 1856, III: 547; STRANDES 1961: 242. This happened at Pate sometime during the reign of Bwana Tamu Mtoto, the second Nabahani Sultan, according to the HEEPE (1928). WERNER (1915), Cusack (see supra fn. 6), and STIGAND (1966) versions of the Pate Chronicles.

52. GUILLAIN 1856, III: 551-552 and the STIGAND version of the Pate Chronicles (1966: 56, 59, 61-63) indicate that they were asked by one faction or another to settle Pate’s political woes of the disastrous civil war of 1763-1777.

53. Interviews with Muhammad Bakari Hamadi (Wete, Pemba, 8 June 1988); Masudi Hamisi (Makongwe, Pemba, 12 June 1988); also, see Kitab az-Zanuj (CERULLI 1957. 1: 272). These traditions are undoubtedly telescoped, and represent Omani actions against the Portuguese that occurred throughout most of the second half of the seventeenth century. It is natural that most of these memories would focus on Sayf since, as in the case of the Kitab az-Zanuj’s description of him as especially “observant, learned, pious, and fearful of God” (ibid.: 303-336), Sayf was the most renowned of the Ya’arubhi Imams, remarkable for his “policy of waging incessant and invictive war” against the Portuguese heathen. See MILLS 1966: 225.


55. Interviews with Ali Bakari, Sultan Shela, and Sulayman b. Salim (Mizemiumbi, 11 June 1988); with Muhammad Bakari Hamadi (Wete, 8 June, 1988); and with Masudi Hamisi (Makongwe, 12 June 1988).
that produced local opposition similar to that alluded to above, and which also finally moved Sultan Fumo Madi (1776-1807) to expel the Mazrui from Pate’s domains in the later 1700s. Sectarian differences undoubtedly had a lot to do with Lamu’s rejection of Mazrui mediation in the succession dispute after Fumo Madi’s death, since an old Swahili proverb states that “Kucha Mungu si kilemba cheupe” (“Fear of God is not a white turban”). As already mentioned, religious law, interpreted and applied by small-town elders, could be a most touchy affair.

Moreover, the Mazrui and Nabahani record gave these Lamu Swahili families reason for fear. From evidence given by Rezende, it is certain that the basis of plantation production at Pemba had begun with the Portuguese at least as early as the seventeenth century. However, in the eighteenth century, both of these Arab clans took control of Pemba and imposed the ‘ushr tax, while the Mazrui did the same at Mombasa (supposedly to defray the expenses of defending the city) (Stigand 1966: 56; Cerulli 1957. I: 242. 275). What is significant about this is that, in Ibadhism, the ‘ushr is specifically a tax on land, per se, which often is collected as a tax-in-kind. Evidence from both Mombasa and Pemba strongly suggests that new taxes were imposed by the Mazrui on alienated and demarcated land units called mila. Clearly, the arrival of the Nabahani and the Mazrui on the coast had signalled the introduction of a new “mode of production” to many townsmen and their clients.

The final piece that fits into this puzzle was the Pate’s (and Mombasa’s) demand for payment of the kikanda tax from Lamu. Previously levied by the Mazrui at Mombasa and Pemba, the imposition of the kikanda, like the ‘ushr, implied the arrival of such a change in productive mode since it was assessed on the number of slaves (watumwa or wajoli) and/or land (mila) units held by the owner. It is given in the Pate Chron-

56. Collected by the Rev. W. E. Taylor, School of Oriental and African Studies (London), MS 47752, No. 168. The white turban refers to Ibadhis. Coastal Swahili were, of course, Shafi’i Muslims. Again, though, this fact would seem to have been less important than the differences between local, orally-dominant, legal traditions (and, by implication, productive modes) and the more literate legal tradition familiar to learned ‘Umanis scribes, walis, and qadis.

57. Rezende’s report of 1636 in STRANDES 1961: 191. See also observations made by Kirkman, ibid.: 309.

58. RISSO 1986: 29. GUILLAIN (1856, II: 259-260) relates that payment was in millet at Mombasa, and in rice, seed, and cattle at Pemba.

59. The unit involved, the mila, was 810 x 200 footlengths in area. The system was administered in both Pemba and Mombasa, according to GUILLAIN 1856, II: 260. Sources at Pemba relate that it was specifically the Mazrui and their followers who established the idea of land alienation and boundaries, while they took the most productive land for themselves. Interviews with Masudi Hamisi (Makongwe, 12 June 1988); and with Sultan Shela, Ali Sagafu, Ali Bakari, and Makam Bakari (Mizemiumbi, 11 June 1988).

60. GUILLAIN (1856, II: 259-260) relates that the tax was on grain, “fixe, pour chaque propriétaire d’après le nombre de ses esclaves, à raison de 12 kilos par tète”.
nicles as one of the immediate causes of the 1807-1812 war. But, in fact, Stigand indicates that it was first imposed during the reign of Sultan Fumo Madi. Even this powerful and assertive sultan, however, ran into considerable difficulty collecting this type of levy, and there were several instances of rebellion that occurred during his reign because, as one source explains, "it was not customary with them in the time of their forebears". Therefore, judging by the words of Zahidi Ngumi, it was the conversion of customary, localized law (ada) to literate law (Shari‘a), from a kinship and clientage based system (mjoli) of land tenure and labor to one based on land alienation (shamba) and chattel slavery which mostly seems to have disturbed the Lamuans. Their desire to defend those "gardens without fencing lines", to defeat the "devourer of forced labor at Pemba" were yet additional motives that compelled them to resist the Nabahani-Mazrui alliance. And in defending this old social order, they were fighting for long-established religious laws and customs, locally evolved and applied to those uniquely small-town social forms and property relations.

Societies and civilizations, of course, constantly are in flux. Even within single civilizations change is spread unevenly, coming sooner and more readily to parts that have more intensive and sustained contacts with the outside world, be it through immigration, trade, or war. This seems especially to have been the case with the city-state confederations of the East African coast throughout their entire history, spread as they were along a frontier that joined two worlds, the African and the Asian, along an elongated littoral more than 2,000 kilometers in length. It is true that these communities shared a common language and culture. Yet, differences in the physical and human geography that was part of the environment of each coastal village, town, and city made the historical "experience" of each somewhat unique.

Frederick Cooper has shown already how changes to a different productive mode was uneven in the later nineteenth century, conforming to a considerable extent to patterns of Arab and Indian immigration and the ability of the Bu’saidi Arab administration at Zanzibar to extend its political sway over coastal communities (with Mombasa and Malindi representing somewhat different extremes, it seems). By all the (admittedly

61. Mazrui MS (see supra fn. 6); Stigand 1966: 67-68; Toeppen indicated that the tax had, in fact, been paid for only one year; q.v. Kurt Toeppen, "Aus Deutsch Witu-Land", Deutsch Kolonialzeitung, 1889, p. 327, in Ylvisaker 1979: 69, fn. 13.
scantier) evidence presently available, much the same seems to have been true of earlier centuries. The so-called slave mode of production (meaning a combination of land alienation and forced extraction of labor from captive human beings, along with attendant cultural, political, and legal systems that sustain it), seems to have been exogenous to East Africa, introduced by Asians and Europeans. Exactly when and where this first occurred is a matter of conjecture. Indications are, though, that at least some slavery was practiced at the great gold and ivory emporium of Kilwa in the fifteenth century. Furthermore, evidence cited above shows that the Portuguese introduced slavery to Pemba (see fn. 57), while Pate's rise to commercial preeminence on the northern coast created some demand for slaves there in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, expulsion of the Portuguese north of Cape Delgado and the realization of 'Umani power, sporadic and uneven as it was, intensified and extended a shift to the slave mode at Pemba, Zanzibar, Kilwa, and possibly also at Pate. 'Umani clans like the Mazrui, the Nabahani, and others were very much behind this shift.

Historically, most Swahili city-states developed as confederations which included a major cultural and trading center located on the littoral (e.g., Kilwa, Mombasa, Manda, and Pate), and various less consequential farming (mahonde) or fishing towns and hamlets, frequently located at various distances in the mainland interior. Butting up against lands inhabited and worked by neighboring farming and herding groups, as they did, they lacked marches which could be demarcated easily, and so they varied greatly. Ethnic boundaries likewise flexed considerably, and social and cultural distinctions were a matter of local definition which constantly were in dispute. Given the fact that most Swahili town dwellers (wawangwana) ultimately were related by blood, and somewhat less so by culture,

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62. See the account of the runaway women, apparently concubines, from da Gama in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 71-73; and the reference to slaves in Documentos... 1962, I: 525. It should be noted here that Kilwa flourished as a commercial hub, after having existed for at least four centuries previously, after the arrival of the Mahdali Arab sultanate in the late thirteenth century. See Barros' account in Theal 1898, III: 274. Being of apparent Yamani extraction, and practicing Shafi'i Muslims of good standing, it would seem likely that they would have introduced at least limited land reforms based on Shafi'i written law. Such indications can be found in Ibn Battuta's comments in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 32; and in the Arabic version of the "Kilwa Chronicle", ibid.: 38-39.

63. For the case of Kilwa, not discussed above, see Alpers 1975: 150-151, 159, 192-193.

64. Though I disagree with some of his conclusions regarding the character of Swahili civilization, James Allen (1981: 318 sq.) presents important reminders about the rural facet to Swahili civilization.

65. This led to considerable difficulties for the major ethnic groups of Lamu in staking out and "legalizing" hereditary claims to approximately 275 sq miles of bara land under colonial administration in the 1920s. All this is quite apparent in sorid accounts of the legal proceedings that took place for more than a decade. See KNA, DC, Lamü/3/2, 176-83; and KNA, CP, 54/1425.
to these neighboring non-Swahili, some *modus operandi* of mutual support seems usually to have been in effect between city and country, cultured Swahili townspeople and non-Swahili rural dwellers. Seniority in the partnerships between town and country, likewise, changed hands, favoring the town in times of unstable hinterland conditions when it could extend protection to displaced mainland clans and families. In turn, towns relied upon mainland allies to defend them against outside aggressors or to help impose peace when internal discord could not be resolved by other means.

While the towns often threw up walls to defend themselves against mainland aggressors, these walls were never social and cultural barriers. These city-states were economic dynamos in which entrepôts like Mombasa, Lamu, and Pate often stood at the heart of “going” farming, fishing, handicraft, extractive, and commercial concerns which mobilized the productivity and specialized talents of entire coastal-hinterland regions. As such, they were magnets to mainland peoples who came for the relative safety and comfort offered by their walls and sophisticated way of life (*tuungwana*). While the town itself was dominated by the *tuungwana* ideal of the cultured Swahili *par excellence*, the rural area was virtually a social, economic, and cultural no-man’s land where Swahili met and mixed with non-Swahili. It was in this no-man’s land, the *bara*, where groups of African “foreigners” settled to farm within a few kilometers of the walled city. Frequently they lived and worked under the direction of a town overseer, in partnership with townspeople, in the service of a particular clan or patron as clients, and often in various stages of acculturation to a lifestyle thought by their Swahili patrons to be the ideal of civilization (*tuungwana*). Once acculturated, many of their descendants ended up being grafted onto their patrons’ lineages and living as *waungwana* in the entrepôts themselves. Though their status in coastal society was always disputed, time worked to their advantage and their non-Swahili origins usually were forgotten (sometimes even buried under a myth of Arab or Persian origins!). As for the townspeople, the relaxed nature of these relations reflected their own ancient kinship ties to these rural dwellers as well as the delicate balance of power between the town and the mainland. The power of the individual town clans and factions in town politics usually bore a direct relationship to the (literal) manpower they could muster from among the extended networks of kin and clients (and reproductive power from among their women) of their households. Thus, as alluded to by Bwana Zahidi Ngumi, the city’s (*bara*) gardens truly were without boundaries, while *mwungwana* patrons and mainland clients could have worked together as “fellow slaves” to share their bounty in a pre-industrial Lamu.

The battle that was fought at Shela, however, illustrates how all that had to change as city-states rose to positions of commercial supremacy, how indeed it had begun to change in Lamu’s case by the late eighteenth century. Eighteenth-century developments presented Lamu with an unpa-
ralleled opportunity, but they also invited further changes the *waungwana* of Lamu and their clients did not want to countenance, and, in fact, chose to resist. The politics of their resistance gave voice to religious feelings, particularly in defense of local orally-based traditions against literate ‘Umani law, and reified economic and social realities. Treated as an independent republic by the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Lamu nevertheless had remained allied with, and economically secondary to, Pate. More settled mainland conditions in the eighteenth century allowed the return of the Lamu *waungwana* to farming the mainland and the renewal of long-standing client relations with Bajun, Garree, Dahalo, and Aweer groups who had been fragmented and displaced by centuries of Oromo incursion. The rise in productivity of mainland cereals and mangrove at the very time Pate was experiencing civil war, some loss of *bara* land, destruction of island property, and a substantial decline in harbor facilities greatly worked to the commercial advantage of Lamu. By the early nineteenth century Lamu surpassed Pate as the premier shipping facility and supplier of food and timber exports on the northern coast. Suudi seems especially to have benefitted. Moreover, Suudi and Suudi elders like Zahidi Ngumi enjoyed a tipping of the political balance in their favor with the greater military muscle they could command from mainland clients and allies.

Lamu’s war against the Mazrui and the Nabahani has to be understood on several levels. It represented a renewed Nabahani assertion of control over Lamu that had probably been established unequivocally for the first time, despite claims made to the contrary in the “Pate Chronicle”, by Sultan Fumo Madi only in the last decade or two of the eighteenth century. (While power and wealth had been slipping from Pate’s grasp, Pate’s answer was to co-opt and extend control over Lamu’s rising fortunes through the imposition of a new kind of tax, the *kikanda*, that reflected a new productive mode, slavery.) Intermarriage with Lamu families (probably Zena) was one option that had been followed by some Pate sultans who had foreseen the advantages Lamu enjoyed. This involved many Lamuans in Pate’s civil disputes. Suudi and their clients, however, rebelled against the *kikanda*, not only because it was a new imposition on their wealth and independence but seemingly because it implied the alienation of *bara* property and the reduction of clients who lived on it to chattel status.

Following Lamu’s victory, the city continued to prosper. Ironically, though, in the months and years just afterwards, perhaps realizing that time was on their enemies’ side, the city elders were forced to invite in a new set of Arab masters to protect them from the retributions that surely

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66. Lamu’s political independence of Pate is evident from Portuguese treaties in which Lamu, Pate, Siyu, and Faza were treated as separate, sovereign entities. See, for example, the treaties in BIKER 1881-87, II, IV; STRANDES 1961: 184, 186 sq.
would follow. Lamu was the first foothold Sayyid Said al-Bu’saidi succeeded in establishing on the northern coast when he completed the construction of Lamu’s fortress and manned it with a permanent garrison and sent his first governor around 1814. As Lamu became part of the Zanzibar commercial network, she herself became a major importer of slaves in the decades that followed.

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67. No doubt, they had drawn lessons from an earlier conflict with Pate. A Lamu victory during the time of Sultan Bwana Tamu Muto (ca. 1747-1765), was followed by Pate’s reprisals. Q.v. Stigand 1966: 57; Werner 1915: 289; Heep 1928: 158; and Cusack, “History of the Nabahan Sultans of Pate”, p. 178 (see ref. supra fn. 6).

68. The best currently available summary is Ylvisaker 1979: ch. IV sq.
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