

The Arab Influence on the Development of Settlements in East Africa

Doğu Afrika'da Yerleşimlerin Gelişiminde Arap Etkisi

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Received/Geliş Tarihi 21.02.2026
Accepted/Kabul Tarihi 13.04.2026
Publication Date/Yayın Tarihi 26.06.2026

Cite this article:

Güney, M. (2026). The Arab Influence on the Development of Settlements in East Africa. *Journal of Literature and Humanities* (77), 246-256.

Atıf:

Güney, M. (2026). Doğu Afrika'da Yerleşimlerin Gelişiminde Arap Etkisi. *Edebiyat ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi* (77), 246-256.

Abstract

Recognizing Africa in terms of settlement patterns is a historical necessity, as it is the birthplace of humanity and the starting point of its global expansion. Although it varied periodically, both the sedentary populations of the continent and elements arriving through migration influenced the formation of these settlements. Due to its geographical location, East Africa possesses a dynamic social history, a dynamism significantly bolstered by Muslim merchants from the Arabian Peninsula. The emergence of the East African subculture, known as Swahili, required a spatial manifestation. Examining the formation of cities and other settlements—which lie at the heart of social configuration—through the lens of Muslim migrants will facilitate a deeper understanding of Swahili culture. The influence of migration-induced shifts in religious belief, traditions, and economic culture on issues such as settlement formation, perception, and quality has persisted in the region from the 7th century to the present. This study specifically focuses on the transformation initiated by the initial Muslim Arab migrations between the 10th and 16th centuries. Within this analyzed period, it is observed that Muslim merchants and migrants integrated with the local population to establish a series of coastal cities. These urban centers fostered the dynamics that gave rise to Swahili culture and served as the focal points for a social transformation that would endure for centuries. Furthermore, it is evident that through the influence of Muslim Arab elites, the local populace transitioned from a tribe-centered, small-scale settlement approach toward a more extensive and complex administrative structure in the form of organized states.

Keywords: Swaili States, Arab Cities, East Africa, Urbanisation

Öz

İnsanlığın ilk defa ortaya çıktığı ve dünyaya yayıldığı yer olması nedeni ile Afrika'yı, yerleşim bazında tanımak tarihsel bir gerekliliktir. Dönemsel olarak değişmekle birlikte, bu kıtanın yerleşik milletlerinin yanı sıra dışarıdan göçle gelen unsurlar da yerleşimlerin şekillenmesine tesir ettiler. Doğu Afrika konumu itibarıyla hareketli bir sosyal tarihe sahiptir. Bu hareketliliğe Arap yarımadasından gelen Müslüman tüccarlar da katkıda bulundular. Swahili olarak adlandırılan Doğu Afrika alt kültürünün şekillenmesi, bir mekâna ihtiyaç duyacaktır. Müslüman göçerler vasıtasıyla, sosyal şekillenmenin merkezinde yer alan şehirler ve diğer yerleşimlerin oluşumunun incelenmesi Swahili kültürünün anlaşılmasına yardımcı olacaktır. 7. yüzyıldan başlayarak günümüze kadar olan süreçte dini inanç, gelenekler ve ekonomik kültürdeki göçle gelen değişimlerin, yerleşim oluşum, algı ve niteliği gibi konularda bölgeye sirayeti hala devam etmektedir. Bu çalışmada ele alınan kısım özellikle 10-16. Yüzyıllar arasında kalan ilk Müslüman Arap göçleri ile başlayan dönüşüme ilişkin kesittir. Ele alınan kesitte Müslüman tüccar ve göçmenlerin Doğu Afrika'da yerel halk ile karışarak birlikte kıyı boyunca uzanan şehirler kurdukları tespit edilmiştir. Bu şehirler Swahili kültürünü ortaya çıkaran dinamikleri ortaya çıkarmış ve gelecek yüzyıllarda da devam edecek olan sosyal dönüşümün merkezi konumundadır. Müslüman Arap elitler vasıtasıyla, siyasal organizasyon kurma ve yönetme konusunda yerel halkın kabile merkezli küçük yerleşim anlayışından devlet formunda daha büyük ve karmaşık yönetim anlayışına adım attıkları görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Swahili Devletleri, Arap Şehirleri, Doğu Afrika, Şehirleşme



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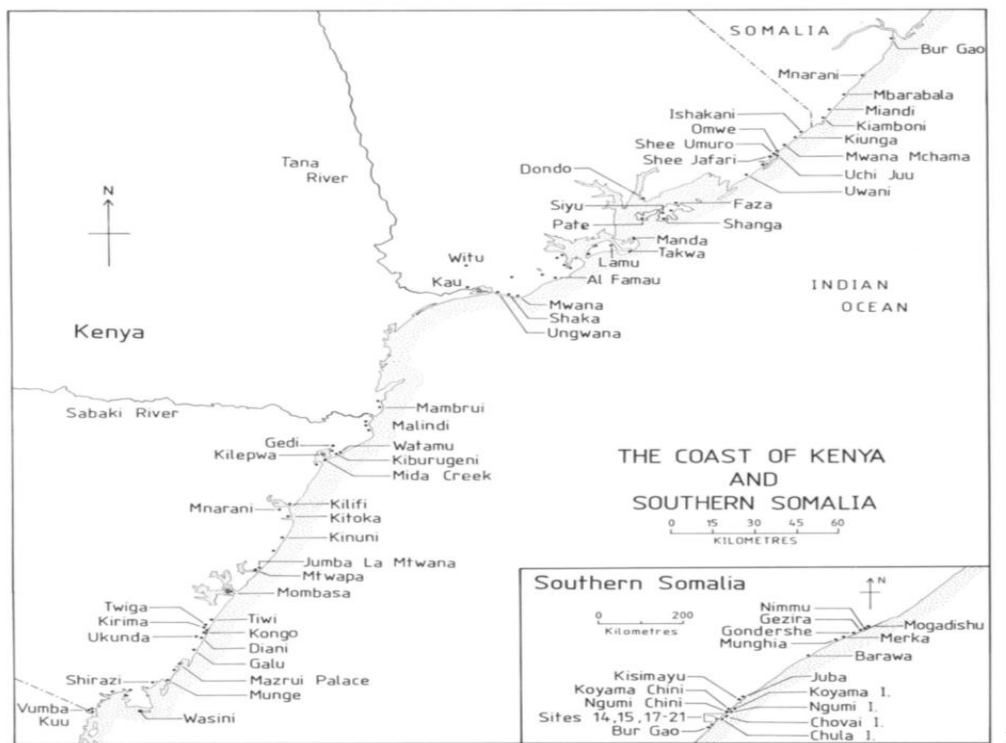
Introduction

Migration stands as one of the fundamental creative forces shaping human history. Throughout the historical process, this force has facilitated the prosperity of desolate regions, the depopulation of once-thriving areas, and the transformation of nations. In the Swahili region of East Africa, such transformation and change were realized through Arab migrations. This study examines how and in what manner Arab migrations influenced the configuration of settlements in the aforementioned region. The timeframe under analysis covers the evolution of Arab-East African relations from the 7th century to the 16th century. A chronological methodology has been adopted to track the development of these settlements. Accordingly, the initial contacts of Arab travelers and settlers initiated through trade, the subsequent primary migrations from the southern Arabian Peninsula, and the formation and characteristics of the resulting cities are addressed respectively.

It can be observed that East African settlement studies reached their quantitative peak in the 1960s, particularly within Western academia. During this period, excavations conducted by American and British academic circles—centered primarily in Kenya—allowed African studies to transcend economic and political frameworks and gain a significant social dimension. In the same period, studies regarding Africa in Turkey remained limited to North Africa and Sudan. The primary reason Turkish academics prioritized these regions was their long-standing status under Ottoman rule, which provided a wealth of written archival sources. Consequently, interest in the rest of the continent remained restricted. The intended outcome of this study is for research on East African settlements and social structures shaped by migration to receive the scholarly attention it deserves in Turkey, and to foster an understanding of the region's settlement fabric within its historical trajectory.

The general academic tendency regarding Swahili settlements in East Africa has been to treat them as isolated entities rather than as constituent cells of a holistic system. In the following sections of this study, the relationships between city-states will be analyzed in terms of their regional integration. When this method is applied, the resulting picture reveals that the local elites governing each city-state formed a complex web of relations with neighboring petty states. Indeed, this intricate network would eventually constitute one of the fundamental building blocks of the future national states. In conclusion, this study sheds light on how settlements emerged through the collaborative activities of local populations and Arab settlers, as well as the qualitative and structural transformations of existing settlements.

Figure 1
Spatial Distribution of Settlements in East Africa During the Middle and Early Modern Periods



¹ Source Of the map: THOMAS H. WILSON: Spatial Analysis And Settlement Patterns On The East African Coast, Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde, 1982, Bd. 28, FROM ZINJ TO ZANZIBAR: Studies in History, Trade and Society on the Eastern Coast of Africa, p.203.

The Origins and Brief History of East Africa Until the Arab Influence

East Africa began hosting human societies during the Miocene epoch, approximately fifteen million years ago. Significant tectonic movements elevated a forested highland by 900 meters, forming the high plateaus of contemporary Ethiopia, Kenya, and mainland Tanzania. Prior to this period, the Bantu peoples, who penetrated East Africa from the south and west, launched incursions against the region's ancient Hamitic inhabitants. Upon their arrival in the Kenyan region, they encountered invasions by Nilo-Hamitic peoples from the north, such as the Maasai, Nandi, Kipsigis, Turkana, and Suk. These groups had been occupying the inland pastures for several centuries and subsequently expanded into northern Uganda and other parts of East Africa (Oliver, 1966, p. 363).

The traces naturally left behind by these groups were pursued by archaeologists. An extensive corpus of archaeological remains pertaining to the manufacture and utilization of tools, particularly dating to the Middle Stone Age, exists within East Africa. The sites where these artifacts have been recovered are situated along the rift valley, extending from the contemporary Lake Victoria to the Red Sea, and include the localities of Olduvai, Omo, Bouri, and Hadar. (Kiura, 2019, p. 73). The initial systematic archaeological investigations regarding East Africa were inaugurated by E. J. Wayland, the director of the Geological Survey of Uganda. In 1926, during the East African Archaeological Expedition, L. S. B. Leakey explored the environs of Lake Naivasha and Lake Nakuru along the Kenyan Rift Valley, where he unearthed lithic artifacts from the Melawa Gorge that he initially attributed to Neanderthals. In his 1936 publication, Leakey dated these tools—predominantly manufactured from obsidian—to the Middle Stone Age. Concurrently, the Swedish palaeogeographer Eric Nilsson surveyed the high-altitude mountainous regions within the same geography and obtained archaeological remains consistent with Leakey's findings. (Clark, 1988, p. 240)

Another remarkable settlement is Kuumbi, one of the most significant archaeological sites of the Stone Age, represents the largest limestone cave complex currently documented. It comprises two large, naturally illuminated chambers, each measuring approximately 30 m x 20 m, which contain permanent water sources. The site is situated 3 km inland from the coastline of Jambiani town, in the southern region of Unguja Island, at an elevation of approximately 26 m above sea level. The Neolithic stratum, characterized by substantial ash deposits, indicates that the cave was utilized as a habitation site. A significant assemblage has been recovered here, including bones of numerous wild and domestic animals, fish remains, marine shells, microliths, bone tools, and ceramics. Recorded domestic faunal remains encompass chicken, cattle, sheep/goat, dog, cat, and donkey. Analysis of the lithic material indicates the presence of volcanic stone artifacts, which potentially originated from the Comoros Islands, the nearest volcanic system. This finding provides evidence for the occurrence of long-distance maritime voyages during the Neolithic period. The Neolithic layer recorded at Kuumbi is dated to the period between 4000 and 3000 BC (Chami, 2025, p. 674).

Although stone and obsidian tools were found in abundance during archaeological excavations, the history of ironworking in East Africa is not as well-known. This situation stems partly from the scarcity—or rather, the absence—of archaeological fieldwork in the region; for no more than a dozen Iron Age specialists have conducted excavations there to date. However, this is not the entire explanation. Corrosion (rusting) in the equatorial belt has undoubtedly caused the destruction of many iron objects. Additionally, the practice of "reworking broken tools to create new ones" used by poor farmers around the world has likely further reduced the number of found objects. The breaking up of furnaces to extract smelted ores seems to have been a common practice during successive East African Iron Ages, which does not make it much easier to reconstruct early metallurgical practices. Moreover, the general tendency for smelting to take place at distances away from settlements makes subsequent research even more challenging. Nevertheless, distinctive pottery fragments have been found throughout the region (Twaddle, 1975, p. 151).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of Swahili settlements are concentrated along the coastline of the Indian Ocean, with archaeological excavations serving as the primary determinant in the construction of this map. Within the region extending from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, few of the mapped settlements possess extant structural ruins that have survived to the present day. Instead, the identification of most sites on the map relies primarily on the detection of material culture—such as ancient tools and beads—alongside foundational vestiges. Notably, the visual data reveals an absence of settlement evidence between the Tana and Sabaki rivers, the two major watercourses of the region; this spatial gap may plausibly be attributed to periodic flooding events.

The political and social structures of the tribal groups in East Africa varied significantly, ranging from extreme autocracy and strong centralized organization to systems bordering on anarchy. The economies of these tribes were predominantly subsistence-based, focusing on agriculture and animal husbandry. Agriculturalists cultivated food products such as maize, millet, sweet potatoes, cassava, and bananas. A portion of the population living alongside the Maasai tribe in Lake Albert and Lake Victoria, Mount Kenya, Southern Tanganyika, and the highlands of Western Kenya engaged in ironworking. These artisans were held in high regard. Furthermore, the inhabitants on the northern shores of Lake Victoria collected and traded salt from

saline waters. However, the trade of these primary industries remained limited. Taxes were paid to chiefs in the form of food, iron tools, or weapons. In return, chiefs redistributed a portion of these taxes as compensation for labor or as gifts to their more prominent subjects. In general, the self-sufficiency of tribes and even individual families was a defining characteristic of East African society. The core regions constituting the Swahili area—Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and the island of Zanzibar—possess a history and background distinct from that of West Africa (Rashid, 2015, p. 64).

Prior to the arrival of Muslim Arabs in the region, the coastal settlement pattern appears to have been sparse. Apart from Opone, Essina, Toniki, and the metropolis of Rhapta, urban settlements are rarely encountered. It is observed that even during this period, Arabs had reached the region and conducted trade by establishing marital ties with the indigenous population. The exact location of Rhapta, the largest city of the era, remains unidentified even today. Consequently, there is a lack of concrete evidence to reconstruct the coastal settlement structure of the early period. It has been conjectured by some scholars that iron-working peoples originating from the Great Lakes region settled in the area; however, archaeological evidence to substantiate these claims remains insufficient (Kiura, 1997, p. 84).

Changes in City formation Through the Arab Migration.

The term "Swahili," or *Kiswahili* in the vernacular, is the localized East African version of the Arabic word *sahil* (coast). Over a millennium, however, this term transcended its geographical origins to become a designation for both a specific linguistic category and the national identity of its speakers. The Swahili language emerged through the synthesis of East African dialects of the Bantu language—originally of West African origin—with Arabic (Walsh, 2017, p. 121). Extensive research has been conducted regarding the linguistic evolution of this region (Broomfield, 1930, pp. 516-522; Zhukov, 2004, pp. 1-15). The fundamental question that arises is how, when, and in what manner the substantial Arabic influence on Swahili manifested itself within the region. This work specifically examines the impact of Muslim Arab settlement along the East African coasts. Settlement is a phenomenon more complex than the mere relocation and residency of a human group in a specific locale. Furthermore, when such settlement results in the creation of a unique culture, a distinct language, and the cultural transformation of the indigenous population, the subject must primarily be analyzed in relation to migration. Indeed, there is a significant body of written records documenting the migration of Muslim Arabs to the East African coast (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 28).

There is no consensus regarding the exact timeline of the initial Arab migrations to the Swahili region; indeed, a certain degree of controversy persists on this subject. Many researchers suggest that the earliest arrivals were Persians, commonly referred to as the "Shirazi." Contemporary Western scholars use the term "Shirazi" to describe the urban immigrants residing in Swahili cities. However, this designation does not necessarily imply that these migrants were of Persian origin. The term is also applied to Muslims from southern Somalia who migrated to the region (Chittick, 1965, p. 292).

The Muslim presence on the East African coasts' dates back to the early centuries of Islam, potentially as early as the mid-seventh century, shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. It is highly probable that by this time, present-day coast of Kenya delivered Muslims from Arabia or the Persian Gulf region. Whether the first Muslim arrivals were of Arab or Persian descent, and their precise point of origin, remains a subject of historical ambiguity. Nevertheless, extant evidence suggests that they likely originated from the Persian Gulf region (Allen, 1982, pp. 9-27).

The initial arrival of Islam in East Africa occurred during the reign of the fifth Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (65–86 AH / 685–705 CE). Sulayman and Said, the sons of Abbad al-Julandi, migrated from Oman to the East African coast because of the pressure of Umayyad dynasty. This migration facilitated the emergence of Muslim settlements and dynasties in the coastal region, which played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Islam and the introduction of Arabic culture to indigenous communities (Mohamed, 2024, p. 130).

Although interactions between the Persian Gulf and the East African coast predate the Islamic era, these early relations did not fundamentally alter the region's socio-political structure. The first reliable record of maritime trade directed toward the East African coast is written in the second half of the first century CE; "*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*". This report is guide to Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade was likely authored by a Greek merchant from the Roman Empire residing in Egypt (Casson, 1984, pp. 39-47). Consequently, Arabs had reached East Africa via the Red Sea prior to their conversion to Islam. Utilizing the monsoon winds of the Western Indian Ocean, Arabs arrived as merchants for seasonal visits or temporary stays. Others arrived as refugees or migrants, settling in island and mainland towns near the shore. In contrast to the rapid and military-led expansion of Islam in North Africa, its spread along the East African coast was gradual and non-violent. The initial Muslim settlers were followed by others, and over time this migration wave caused an increase in the number of Muslim settlements over time. In some instances, Muslims integrated into pre-existing towns; for example, Shanga in the Lamu Archipelago was a pre-Islamic settlement that later underwent Islamization. In other cases, Muslims established their own settlements. Archaeological evidence indicates that the vast majority of the population in these towns was typically of African origin

(Wilkinson, 1981, p. 280). Early Arab geographers describe towns where Muslims and non-Muslims coexisted. Thus, Muslim merchants and refugees had been established along the coast of modern-day Kenya centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese, the first Christian visitors to the region (Sperling 2000, p. 164).

The early Islamic history of East Africa remains insufficiently documented. While traditional chronicles and oral histories provide a narrative for the arrival of Islam, the earliest written sources are partially of Omani origin. Awtabi's *Kitab al-Sulwa fi akhbar Kilwa*, dating back to the second half of the 12th century, offers significant insights into the relations between Oman and East Africa. Similarly, Muhammad b. Sa'id al-Qalhati's work, *al-Maqama al-Kilwiyya*, discusses the proselytization activities of the Ibadis in East Africa (Wilkinson, 1981, p. 273). Other notable primary sources include the accounts of Al-Mas'udi and Ibn Battuta. In 916 CE, Al-Mas'udi described the coastline as largely pagan, noting only a single Muslim royal family residing in Kanbalu. Conversely, during his visit in 1331 CE, Ibn Battuta depicted a devout and entirely Islamic region stretching from Mogadishu to Kilwa. In contrast, Al-Idrisi makes no mention of any Muslim communities in the region (Horton, 1991, pp. 103-116).

The waves of Arab migration were followed by significant cultural transformations within the region. Along the East African coast, Islam gradually supplanted traditional African religions and advanced toward the interior. This expansion of Islam across Africa not only led to the formation of new communities but also restructured existing African societies and empires according to Islamic models. Indeed, by the mid-eleventh century, the Kanem Empire, whose influence extended as far as Sudan, converted to Islam. During the same period, further south in West Africa, the ruler of the Bornu Empire also embraced the faith. Through time the people of these kingdoms embrace Islam in the fashion their kings has. Ibn Battuta, the famous traveler, visited the region in 14th-century, and describes the passion of the African people to Islam. He was witnessed the mosques were so crowded on Fridays that it was impossible to find a seat unless one arrived significantly early (Horton, 1991, p. 108).

Through migration, settled Muslim communities established ties with indigenous African populations through intermarriage. The progeny of these unions created a new social class known as the *muwalladun*. Instances of this phenomenon include the integration of Bantu-Arab *sharifs* in East Africa, as well as Indo-Arab or Sumatran and Javan-Arab *sharifs* in other regions. Although the children of these marriages faced certain disadvantages compared to their fathers, they gained significant advantages as representatives of local political families and descendants of the Prophet. Consequently, often with public consent, they were able to inherit existing political structures or establish new states with theocratic characteristics, including small settlements, island kingdoms, or coastal village administrations. This model recurred frequently. Even long after an ancestor had ceased to rule, his descendants, considered beneficiaries of his *barakah* (divine grace), maintained an enviable status within the local society. Most Muslim migrants, proficient in shipping and commerce, continued their mercantile activities from these new bases. This was certainly the case for the Ba'Alawis in Lamu and Pate, as well as in the Comoro Islands. There are indications that the Muslim trading empire, partially dismantled by the Portuguese after 1500, was established by *sharifs* migrating across the Indian Ocean; their social and religious prestige significantly facilitated the acceleration of trade. Frequently, foreign *sharifs* or *sayyids* validated their status in the eyes of the local populace through their perceived ability to perform miracles. As seen in the case of Habib Salih b. Alawi of Lamu, *sharifs* continued to influence the public well into the late 19th century. The privileged status among the commonalty held by Emir Abu Bakr bin Salim of Pate and the Ba'Alawi *sharifs* of Al-Masila serves as a prime example of this social standing (Martin, 1974, p. 379).

Following its establishment along the coastline, the expansion of Islam progressed toward the interior regions. Navigating through forests and marshes, Muslims carried their faith as far as the Congo Basin and the lake plateaus of Kenya and Tanganyika. As Islam spread, minarets rose in every village along the coastal route leading to Lakes Nyasa and Tanganyika. Within these regions, there was virtually no village among the Swahili and Arab communities that did not possess a significant Muslim population (Mohamed, 2024, p. 135).

This inland expansion positioned the emirs residing in central coastal trading hubs as mediators and protectors. For instance, the people of Pate were under constant attack from the Galla, a tribe from the mainland. Due to the short distance and shallow waters between the island and the mainland, the Galla were able to cross the sea to launch raids on Pate. Driven by this persistent pressure, a delegation from the local population traveled to Hadhramaut to seek assistance. The Emir of Hadhramaut agreed to send one of his sons, Sheykh, to aid the people of Pate. Upon his arrival, Sheykh wrote several verses from the Qur'an on a piece of paper, took a fragment from his father's flag, and instructed the people of Pate to bury both in a shallow location (Martin, 1974, p. 375). This occurrence serves as evidence of the efficacy of Islamic mysticism among the indigenous population in the East African region. Simultaneously, it represents an expression of allegiance toward the states in the southern Arabian Peninsula, from which the initial Muslim migrants originated. Muslim Arabs exerted a localized influence on the concept of settlement and the ideal of political unity. They began to consolidate previously disparate villages into more integrated political communities. Over time, ruling dynasties of mixed Shirazi-African descent emerged, facilitating the gradual formation of two contemporary African tribes, the Hadimu and the Tumbatu. The African population converted to

Islam and adopted numerous ceremonies and traditions from Arab-Persian culture. Indeed, the impact of this culture was so profound that today, the vast majority of Zanzibar's indigenous African population identifies themselves as "Shirazi." Despite its long-term impact, the Shirazi migration to Zanzibar actually occurred within a very brief period. The most enduring relationship between Zanzibar's African communities and any immigrant group has been with the Arabs. Arab merchants and explorers had reached Zanzibar centuries before the pre-Christian era. Even during this early period, the Indian Ocean slave trade was quite prevalent. Although Zanzibar did not possess a population large enough to justify slave-hunting expeditions, its proximity to the East African coast and the security it provided from bellicose coastal tribes rendered the islands an ideal transit point for transoceanic trade (Rashid, 2015, p. 64).

Scholars such as Nurse and Spear (1985), Spear (2000), Kusimba (1999), and Horton (1996) have argued that Swahili civilization, which established the port cities along the East African coast, evolved from African traditions and the endeavors of African culture. According to these authors, although the Arab merchant class significantly influenced the local culture and language, they constituted only a small fraction of the total population. The majority of the inhabitants remained indigenous. Consequently, at the core of Swahili culture lies a unique interpretation of Islam and the reflection of local traditions in daily life. From this perspective, these scholars contend that it is inaccurate to define Swahili culture and its people as merely "Arabized" (Gilbert, 2002, p. 25).

Formation of Settlements

The earliest concrete evidence regarding Islam and Muslims in East Africa is a mosque foundation in Lamu, where excavations in 1984 unearthed gold, silver, and copper coins dating back to 830 CE. The oldest intact structure in the region is a functioning mosque in Kizimkazi, located on Southern Unguja (Zanzibar) Island—an area predominantly inhabited by the Shirazi—which dates to 1007 CE. Consequently, it can be concluded that coastal and island settlements in East Africa had undergone Islamization prior to the major Shirazi migrations that began around 975 CE. This fact is further corroborated by the *Pate Chronicle* (Pouwels, 1996, pp. 301-318) and the discovery of a gold dinar minted by Seyfullah Jafar Yahya, the vizier of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 780–809), who organized several expeditions to Zanzibar. The gold coin, dated 798 CE, was excavated at Unguja Ukuu (the Old Zanzibar City on the main island), where Neville Chittick also discovered Sasanian-Islamic type pottery (Chittick, 1982, p. 60).

Driven by urbanization and sustained migration, Islam expanded fully along the Swahili coast between 1000 and 1500 CE, becoming the majority faith (Gilbert, 2002, p. 20). The period between 1300 and 1700 marks an era during which a significant number of new settlements were established and Muslim hegemony was most firmly consolidated. Following 1700, a decline in the formation of new settlements is observed, coinciding with the increasing Western colonial influence in the Indian Ocean and East Africa. Due to its fertility and high population density, the Tana Delta emerged as the region with the highest frequency of new settlement development (Allen, 1981, p. 324).

Recent archaeological studies conducted by the British Institute have significantly advanced the determination of Islamic chronology in the region. An eight-year excavation program in Shanga, located in the Lamu Archipelago, was followed by extensive excavations in Zanzibar and Pemba, as well as a reassessment of earlier research in Manda, Mafia, and Kilwa. The general conclusion of these investigations is that Arab merchant, who arrived via the monsoon trade systems of the Western Indian Ocean, facilitated the conversion of indigenous African coastal communities to Islam (Horton, 1991, p. 103).

The most significant evidence of the local adoption of Islam is the presence of mosques. During the excavations, eight mosques were discovered, one of which was constructed of stone while the others were timber. The oldest of these structures' dates back to the early 750s, while the most recent is dated to 1000 CE. These buildings, generally constructed in the Persian-Islamic architectural style, lacked inscriptions; therefore, radiocarbon dating was performed on pottery and other materials used during the construction process (Horton, 1991, p. 105). The presence of Yemeni influences in the stone mosque serves as evidence that migrants were instrumental in shaping the local architecture (Horton, 1991, p. 106).

According to Chittick, the formation of significant settlements engaged in maritime trade on the East African coast began with the spread of Islam in the region; prior to this, most settlements were terrestrial in nature (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 23). Settlements in the Swahili region were governed by elites who monopolized international trade. The relationships between these coastal cities and the hunter-gatherers, sedentary peasants, and nomads of the interior were complex. Consequently, the Swahili region can be characterized as being dominated by geographically constrained city-states that controlled coastal trade—a situation that persisted until the Portuguese invasion (Monroe, 2013, p. 24).

The cities stretching along the Indian Ocean coast from Somalia to Mozambique flourished between the 8th and 15th centuries, including Gedi, Kilwa Kisiwani, Manda, and Shanga (Monroe, 2013, p. 24). In many instances, Arab merchants did not establish entirely new settlements on the African coast; instead, they seized and maintained existing ones. These locations were specifically selected for their proximity to natural resources, particularly along rivers, trade routes, and areas where travel

was facilitated (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 34). Swahili villages that emerged during the Middle Ages formed the foundation of contemporary cities. However, due to their pre-industrial nature, these cities required adjacent agricultural land for sustenance. Chronologically, Swahili settlements can be classified into ancient, pre-colonial, Islamic, and colonial periods (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 2).

Swahili cities were once thought to be Arab or Persian colonies established from scratch. Since then, archaeologists and linguists have significantly revised this assessment, demonstrating that Swahili cities were a natural extension of earlier coastal developments. Archaeologists point out that the Swahili cities emerging between 1000 and 1250 CE were the result of several centuries of growth along the East African coast and the Western Indian Ocean, rather than being founded as entirely new entities (Allen, 1981, p. 313). This growth began with settlements that transformed into established trading towns and cities, rather than being initiated by visiting merchants who gradually spurred urbanization. In the case of Shanga, one of the most thoroughly excavated sites, it is evident that the first Muslims encountered a pre-existing settlement. Furthermore, archaeologists have shown that the inhabitants of Swahili towns possessed the same cultural and physical characteristics as the people of the coastal hinterlands. Pottery known as "Tana tradition" ceramics, found in the precursors of Swahili cities, has been discovered in hinterland regions rather than just the coastline. This implies that the populations of Swahili towns and cities consisted of local coastal peoples who occupied a region extending hundreds of miles inland. The analysis of skeletal remains found in coastal city cemeteries further supports the conclusion that the earliest urban inhabitants in East Africa were indigenous populations rather than migrants (Gilbert, 2002, pp. 7-34).

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, the city-state of Kilwa (Kilwa Kisiwani) became the most dominant trade center on the East African coast through the activities of merchants. As the most significant port along the East African coastline, Kilwa surpassed Beira, Malindi, and Mogadishu in size, while Mombasa and Zanzibar were still in their formative stages during this period. The Kilwa Sultanate was established by the legendary Shirazi, who migrated from Persia (Oman) to East Africa in 975 CE. However, the city was nearly destroyed by the Portuguese in 1505. Weakened by the Portuguese invasion and subsequent commercial control, the sultanate gradually declined and was eventually abandoned following the rise of Zanzibar in the early 19th century (Lodhi, 2013, p. 4).

The penetration of Arabs into the interior of East Africa occurred via two primary routes. The first was the southern route, connecting the coastal towns of Malindi and Kilwa to the Lake Malawi region; the second was the trade route linking Zanzibar to the coastal towns of Dar es Salaam, the Manyema region, and Buganda. Utilizing these connections, Arab and Swahili merchants supplied local chiefs with firearms in exchange for commodities such as slaves. Through this process of contact, Islam was adopted by several interior leaders who established small Muslim states; Tippu Tip and Muteesa I of Buganda serve as prominent examples of such leaders (Aisha, 2020, p. 42).

Most of the commodities sold by the Swahili people—such as ivory, rhinoceros horn, timber, slaves, turtle shells, and ambergris—were products that could be sourced relatively close to the coast. The sole exception to this was gold. The wealthiest Swahili cities were those that controlled the gold trade, and this gold originated not from the coast but from Monomotapa, located far up the Zambezi River. Consequently, the impact of long-distance trade extended as far as 400 miles into the interior, at least in south-central Africa. Nevertheless, there appears to have been no significant effort by the Swahili people to establish an empire, nor was there any substantial migration from the coast to the interior or vice-versa. Even the forced migration associated with the slave trade appears to have been a relatively minor occurrence in this context (Gilbert, 2002, p. 21).

The Commercial Structure of Cities

Nearly all cities of the Swahili "classical age" were situated along the coastline. The most notable exception is the city of Gedi, located approximately twenty miles from the sea, although it may once have been closer to the shore. The fact that these towns functioned as ports underscores the central importance of commerce in Swahili life. Indeed, being a merchant was the standard profession for the Swahili nobility (Gilbert, 2002, pp. 8-12). Almost every Swahili town possessed a harbor, whether on a large or small scale. A harbor was a fundamental requirement for protection against seasonal monsoon storms, and some ports provided the necessary conditions for vessels to be beached in shallow areas (Allen, 1981, p. 325).

Arab merchants navigating to the region brought iron tools for sale and wine as gifts to build rapport with the coastal populations. Records from the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* indicate that various commodities, including ivory, palm oil, rhinoceros horn, turtle shell, cinnamon, incense, and slaves, were subject to trade. These shores also served as significant commercial hubs for Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Phoenician, Indian, and Arab merchants. Throughout all periods, ivory remained the primary export commodity of East African trade. As Islamic civilizations expanded across Asia, Europe, and other regions, these coasts were also influenced by Muslim missionaries. By the nineteenth century, Arabs and Shirazi Persians had established regular trade with coastal peoples, eventually founding a series of settlements on the islands of Pemba, Zanzibar,

Mafia, and Kilwa Kisiwani (Rashid, 2015, p. 63).

In the tenth century, driven by the increasing demand for luxury goods at the Buyid court in Shiraz, Shirazi captains began to organize more frequent expeditions to the East African coast, the lands of Sofala, and the Madagascar Strait (*Khalij-al-Qumr/Khalij al-Waqwaq*). During this period, geographers began to challenge traditional concepts of Africa, and in subsequent centuries, they produced more detailed reports concerning gold and iron resources, as well as the indigenous populations in the Southern Cape Delgado region. The later emergence of "stone towns" between Malindi and Cape Delgado was partially linked to the explorations and commercial activities of these tenth-century mariners and merchants (Ricks, 1970, p. 351).

During the tenth century, trade from the Persian Gulf to East Africa generally consisted of spices, cotton textiles, perfumes, and kitchenware. In exchange, ivory, gold, and slaves were acquired. Ibn Hawqal reported meeting a merchant named Ahmed ibn Umar al-Sirazi in Basra in 961 CE, noting the merchant's immense wealth and that his vessels transported spices, precious stones, and perfumes along the East African coasts, particularly Zanzibar. In addition to foodstuffs such as rice and wine, timber including beech, mangrove poles, and teak was also traded. While rice and wine were imported from the Persian Gulf, timber was sourced from East Africa. Historical records frequently mention the procurement of teak from Zanzibar (*Sawahil-i Zanj*) and gold from Sofala (Ricks, 1970). Furthermore, commodities such as gold and ivory produced on the Zimbabwe Plateau in East Africa were in high demand within Swahili cities (Monroe, 2013, p. 25).

In the *Kitab al-Rawd* (1461 CE), records indicate that the cities of Banas, Daghwata, Dandama, and Sayuna, located in the lands of Sofala (*bilad Sufala*), engaged in the iron and gold trade with merchants and traders from India, Oman, and elsewhere. Between the 12th and 15th centuries, interest in trading with this region grew significantly among the coastal areas of the Red Sea and India (specifically the Gujarat and Malabar coasts). Commerce on the East African shores flourished due to the increasing cargo capacity of vessels, more accurate maps, and advanced maritime techniques. Over time, visiting merchants began to develop intentions for settlement and colonization. Simultaneously, traders from various nations in the Persian Gulf entered into a competition to secure a share of the East African coastline (Ricks, 1970, p. 356).

This competition and the diversity brought by trade were vividly depicted by the Portuguese who arrived in the region during the subsequent period. On Mozambique Island, as in all Swahili city-states, the Portuguese encountered Muslims dressed in "fine linen or cotton fabrics with various colored stripes and rich, elaborate craftsmanship." Muslim vessels docking at the ports arrived from other anchorages in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, carrying "gold, silver, cloves, pepper, ginger, and silver rings, as well as all the items used by the people of the Swahili region" (Levi, 2008, p. 450).

Certainly, there was no large state governed by a strong centralized system on these coasts. Instead, the Swahili region consisted of independent city-states that only rarely formed alliances when confronted by external powers. In this region, maritime activities were predominant, while agriculture remained secondary. The groups that lives in the interior—such as the Pokomo (known locally as *Wankiya*) in the Lower Tana region who engaged in grain cultivation—supplied the Lamu coast with cereals. Similarly, groups such as the Digo and Mijikenda supported Mombasa, while the Segeju and Zaramo provided sustenance for Zanzibar. Fertile lands were situated along the narrow coastal strip stretching from the Juba River to the Rufiji River in the south. The Shebelle, Tana, and Pangani rivers in this area served as essential channels for communication with the interior. Until the 19th century, interior groups such as the Pokomo, Segeju, Mijikenda, and Zaramo continued to practice their indigenous beliefs without falling under the direct cultural influence of the coastal region; they only underwent Islamization during that century. For their part, the coastal inhabitants focused on their own crafts, gardening, and maritime affairs, showing no inclination toward establishing political authority over the interior regions (Loimeier, 2013, p. 211).

Social Structure of the Cities

The social structure in the Swahili region prior to Portuguese colonization was tripartite, consisting of the Muslim aristocracy, foreign merchants, and the pagan indigenous population of the interior (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 26). While there was no evidence of ghettoization between the local population and Arab merchants, a degree of social cohesion was present. In addition to the architectural concepts introduced by the Arabs, a local architectural style emerged after the 13th century through the synthesis of indigenous forms. This approach prioritized simple structures and functionality, shaped by the specific climatic characteristics of the region. These dwellings, constructed by local artisans using available materials, proved to be more resilient to harsh climatic conditions than modern houses (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 26). There were significant differences between Islamic architecture and indigenous African architecture. While cities in regions like Sudan took shape around the mosque and the marketplace, settlements in East Africa were organized around the residence of the tribal chief. This was due to the chief being the epicenter of religious, political, and economic power. Consequently, these cities were often transient and unstable. Factors such as the death of a chief, the drying up of wells, seasonal water supply issues, or the use of non-durable building materials (such as mud and clay) frequently led to the eventual disappearance of these settlements (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 27).

Cities dispersed across islands exhibit similarities in urban planning as a reflection of a shared cultural heritage. Gedi and Takwa, which are among the prominent Swahili settlements, demonstrate significant parallels in terms of their urban layouts. Archaeological excavations reveal that the central residence of the religious leader, the mosque, and the orientation of the streets follow a consistent plan. Generally, domestic structures consist of two or three rooms. Nevertheless, each city possesses distinctive architectural characteristics. For instance, in the city of Gedi, houses feature both internal and external courtyards, suggesting that the inhabitants placed a higher emphasis on privacy. During its zenith, this city was wealthier than other settlements in the region. Indeed, the presence of single-room granaries located on the ground floors for commercial purposes serves as an indicator of this economic prosperity. (Wilson, 1982, p. 211)

Although mosques were present in almost all cities along the Swahili coast, they were typically constructed without courtyards, unlike those in Arabia. This architectural style is primarily of Yemeni origin (Allen, 1981, p. 310). In pre-colonial Islamic settlements of the Swahili region, the ruling sheikh or sultan was responsible for municipal affairs. As a result, there was strict oversight regarding house construction. Several houses would be built adjacently using shared walls by families connected by close kinship. Thus, even in the absence of a formal tribal structure, extended families-maintained control over the urban block. This practice was particularly prevalent among the upper class who were capable of constructing stone houses (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p. 38).

The Swahili settlement where Medieval-Early Modern Islamic architecture and urban planning concepts are best observed is Zanzibar Island. The capital, Zanzibar Town, serves as the heart of its economic and political life and is situated on a triangular peninsula approximately at the midpoint of the island's western coast. The town is divided into two distinct sections: Stone Town, located at the tip of the peninsula, and Ng'ambo (the African Quarter). Stone Town is internationally recognized for its Middle Eastern aesthetic, characterized by massive white stone buildings in the Arabic architectural style, narrow winding streets, and intricate alleys. The Stone Town area occupies a significant expanse, and one of the primary reasons for its development as Zanzibar's contemporary capital was its ability to provide safe anchorage for large ocean-going vessels. In addition to the Middle Eastern character of its architectural style, Stone Town is distinguished from Ng'ambo by its projection of economic prosperity (Rashid, 2015, p. 34).

Conclusion

The Arabs, who had initiated their involvement in the Indian Ocean trade and subsequent relations with East Africa at an early stage, exerted a significant influence on the region in terms of settlement following their adoption of Islam. This interaction, which began through commercial ties, paved the way for the emergence of temporary or seasonal Muslim Arab settlements. From the 9th century onwards, permanent settlements known as "Stone Towns" began to appear. These stone towns transformed the local population's perspective on residential construction. While tribes living in small settlements like villages utilized materials such as mud and thatch, the transition to masonry (stone) signified the permanence of the settlement. Consequently, urban life began to proliferate across East Africa.

While stone towns were essentially symbols of new type of settlements which Muslim African and Arab population lives together, they primarily signified the regional emergence of state structures. Prior to the Arab migrations, the coastal regions, in particular, lacked centralized urban centers, with only a few exceptions. The population was predominantly sparse and concentrated in the agricultural hinterlands of the coast. By the 10th century, stone towns evolved into symbols of centralized administration and pivotal milestones in the process of state formation. Consequently, the most significant aspect of these settlements is that they heralded the transition from a dominant tribal governance toward a multi-ethnic, centralized, and systematized political organization.

As steps toward political integration were taken, the Islamic faith, propagated by Arab settlers, became the central will uniting the people. Indeed, a mosque was situated at the heart of every stone town. Over time, Muslim missionaries in the region integrated with the local populace, and the faith they spread became an inseparable component of the Swahili city-states' identity. Historical sources indicate that the dissemination of the belief system among the local people was peaceful, which fostered an atmosphere of tolerance toward these migrants arriving from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Accordingly, the spread of Islam in the region was rapid, a fact corroborated by the numerous mosques remains uncovered during excavations in Swahili cities. However, the comprehensive penetration of Islam into the interior regions and its adoption by the folks that lives inland would only gain significant momentum in the 19th century.

From the 10th century onward, the foundations of the Swahili language were laid through the convergence of Arabic and indigenous languages. In particular, the religious obligation within the Islamic faith to learn and teach the Quran accelerated the widespread adoption of this language. It is highly probable that religious instruction was conducted within the courtyards uncovered during archaeological excavations. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that the faith and commercial endeavors brought by Arab merchants would exert a significant influence on local architecture. In addition to mosques, the

harbors—which served as the heart of commerce—stand as a direct architectural manifestation of the culture introduced by these migrants.

Nearly every coastal city possessed a harbor, through which goods arriving from the hinterland were transported across the extensive coastline of the Indian Ocean. Thus, these urban settlements facilitated the integration of East Africa with the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. As this integration necessitated regulation, it required an administrative class, and the cities became hubs for the ruling elite. Over time, despite not constituting the majority of the population, the Swahili culture—of Arab-East African origin—emerged from these settlements. Within the framework of this culture, unique characteristics of the settlements evolved, the most prominent being their status as maritime bases and their distinct commercial identity. Furthermore, through trade and migration, local populations in East Africa grew accustomed to the idea of political unity, transitioning from tribe-centered thinking to semi-autonomous entities formed around a central authority. The cities stretching along the Swahili coastline would eventually serve as the headquarters for this centralized authority.

In conclusion, through the agency of Arab settlers, the previously sparsely populated East African coastline flourished, and the existing limited settlements underwent a profound transformation mediated by Islamic culture. These newly established settlements, serving as the epicenters for local elites, attained a strategic position as crucial crossroads within the Indian Ocean trade network.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Use of Artificial Intelligence: The author declared that no artificial intelligence tools were used at any stage of the preparation, writing, analysis, or evaluation of this study.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı: Yazar, bu çalışmanın hazırlanması, yazımı, analizi veya değerlendirilmesi aşamalarında herhangi bir yapay zekâ aracı kullanmadığını beyan etmiştir.

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