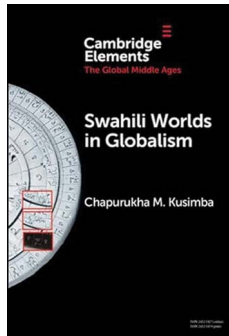




Book Review

CHAPURUKHA M. KUSIMBA. 2024. *Swahili worlds in globalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-49508-0; hardback £49.99.



The coast of eastern Africa, the islands of Zanzibar, Comoros and northern Madagascar are historically and archaeologically known as the Swahili coast. The area has attracted researchers in history, archaeology, anthropology, geography, ethnography and several other related disciplines for nearly a century. These researchers' aims have always been to understand the history, environment, people and cultures as well as the tangible and intangible remnants of what is popularly known as the *Swahili civilisation*. This civilisation—characterised by coral-stone-built monumental structures (mosques, palaces, tombs), maritime trade through the Indian Ocean, one common language (Kiswahili) and Islamic religion—

is among the many developments Africa has contributed to human history.

Several publications, including books, journal articles, poetry anthologies of Indigenous scholars, reports, etc., have been produced and are distributed widely. However, many of these are either too voluminous to read and capture the intended message or they are too longwinding for the readers to comprehend fully the extent of Swahili culture. It was these circumstances that encouraged Chapurukha Kusimba of the University of South Florida to write the *Swahili worlds in globalism*, which forms part of the Cambridge Elements series. The book is part of the broad initiative to “understand the Global Middle Ages and the interconnections that preceded the new globalisation” (p.3). Kusimba details the role of leadership, social (in)equalities and market systems in the development of the Swahili world, especially from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries AD. With 106 pages, this short book has six coherently organised sections. The volume has 22 colour and black-and-white images and 17 tables, each communicating an essential visual and tabular message for the Swahili coast civilisation. The use of tables is excellent when summarising issues such as the periodisation of coastal and inland sites (p.11), the classification of coastal settlements (p.21) and the trade commodities in the region (p.45). In fact, without tables, it would have been challenging to comprehend the intended message through the text alone.

Although the book is area specific—the Swahili worlds—the author situates the Swahili civilisation in a broader context, including comparing it with contemporary regions elsewhere in Africa and beyond, thus giving this book a wide readership. Although a significant portion of the book focuses on the ‘medieval period’ (sixth to sixteenth century), the description of the region’s environmental context during the first half of the first millennium, as well as the last half of the second millennium, makes the volume a ‘must read’ for everyone seeking to learn about the Swahili world over the past two millennia. Using the Swahili world as a prism to understand the African past, Kusimba has tackled two critical issues: identity (race) and

gender. He highlights through material culture the disregarded human population: black people of the East African coast and women. This book will, hopefully, end the myth of considering the Indigenous population incapable of championing sociocultural and economic growth. Through the text we will learn of and start appreciating that, using the advantage of geography and resource distribution and with women at the forefront, Indigenous coastal populations created the civilisations that are now marked by the ruins and archaeological artefacts scattered across the coastline of over 3000km and in the interior. Kusimba's approach of presenting his ideas in accessible language has made his work highly readable to audiences even outside archaeology, history and anthropology. This is a testament to his commitment to writing for the public and Indigenous peoples alike.

The author provides evidence from various sources, ranging from archaeology, oral history, documentary sources and ancient DNA (aDNA). Kusimba's inclusion of new and mesmerising archaeological narratives, especially the up-to-date scientific data, including aDNA, improves our understanding of ancient Swahili societies. *Swahili worlds in globalism* is a worthy successor to Stephanie Wynne-Jones and Adria LaViolette's edited volume *The Swahili world* (2018), Mark Horton and John Middleton's *The Swahili: the social landscape of a mercantile society* (2000) as well as Kusimba's first book *The rise and fall of Swahili states* (1999).

I enjoyed reading the book very much but had difficulty following all of the figures. For example, Figures 10, 13 and 17 are of low quality so it was arduous to read the texts within the images. The book also neglected a few issues pertinent to understanding Swahili archaeology and history. First, the author does not discuss the contributions of ritual practices to the development of the Swahili civilisation. A detailed exposition on the role of Kiswahili language and Islamic religion on harmonising the various business groups is provided but it fails to address the equally crucial role that ritual performances and the related taboos contributed to building intercommunity social and economic networks and friendships that enable peaceful contact of trade—a basis for building and accumulating wealth. From the colonial point of view, this is certainly a difficult task to accomplish. However, careful study of the recovered material culture—especially looking at their design, colour, associations and matrix—can reveal this complexity. Tim Insoll (2009) provides some insights into how to achieve this. For example, significant trees such as baobabs, the stone-built tombs with different decorations and various cultural materials, including glass beads, are spirituality markers. And still today businesspeople in major Swahili towns visit such places for ritual practices (Alex & Ichumbaki 2023). There is a strong possibility that such practices are not new but have continued for centuries and contributed significantly to the social and economic connections discussed in the book. Kusimba's book would have been more persuasive if it had offered some clues on how spirituality and the related immaterial practices contributed to the rise and growth of the Swahili worlds' globalism.

Notwithstanding this minor omission, *Swahili worlds in globalism* is a well-written highly readable book that will be significant for scholars working in the Indian Ocean World and beyond. It offers up-to-date, impressive scholarship about the Swahili coast and hinterlands. Despite having read hundreds of publications and reports about the Swahili coast and vicinity, I benefitted greatly from reading this book. Combining multiple, interlinked sources to

analyse and write about the Swahili worlds makes Kusimba's volume exceptional. Without any reservation, I recommend it to anyone interested in learning about ancient African globalism but with a focus on the western Indian Ocean region.

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