

## 4 The East African Diaspora: The Problem with Slaves

Nik Petek (mailto:np8465@bris.ac.uk)

Today, people of African descent are present all over the world. This is mostly due to the slave trade that was active from the 16th until the end of the 19th century AD. The dispersion of Africans and their descendants across the world (the African Diaspora) aroused interest in archaeology in the 1970s. The most studied regions today are the Caribbean and both Americas. Substantial investigation has also been conducted in western and southern Africa (Kusimba 2004; Orser 1998). But the African Diaspora remains an enigma in east Africa. Only a few individuals have done any archaeological investigations on this topic in the region. Fortunately, historical studies can provide us with some information (Cooper 1977; Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990).

The East African diaspora can be traced back to three causes: (1) the migration of ethnic groups, like the Zulu, (2) to the slave trade and (3) to climatic changes, which caused wars and forced ethnic groups to abandon certain areas (Kusimba 2004; Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990). Because of the slave trade, which reached its peak in the 19th century, East Africans are now present on the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, Pakistan, India and even as far as Bengal (Harris 1971). The major slave traders were the French, Portuguese and the Omani. The Omanis were the main distributors of slaves and almost had a monopoly of this trade on the East coast from Kilwa to the African Horn. Even though slaves were dispersed around the Indian Ocean, most of them remained in Africa. The slaves were brought from the coast's hinterland to towns on the coast, like Zanzibar, Malindi and Mombasa. They worked on plantations, in craft shops or the docks. They were used as administrators, soldiers, eunuchs, concubines or domestic slaves (Cooper 1977; Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990). Thus, the East African Diaspora is mainly associated with the dispersion of different ethnic groups within Africa.

Here I am going to concentrate on what archaeology may expect to find of the diaspora caused by the slave trade in East Africa. I am going to give an account of how this phenomenon has been approached in the Americas, and then I am going to refer to other objects and features that could be evident in the landscape because of the slave trade. Discerning slavery in East Africa has been elusive and in the end a few points will answer why this is so.

### Archaeology and the evidence of the diaspora

In both Americas and the Caribbean the archaeology of African Diaspora has been practiced for a few decades now and is quite successful in discovering archaeological sites and providing adequate interpretations for them and the material excavated. This type of archaeology is divided into the archaeology of identity, archaeology of freedom and archaeology of race (Orser 1998).

Archaeology of identity looks for material evidence of continuation of cultural traits. These were used by slaves as representation of otherness to empower themselves. In the western diaspora, pots provided the representation of otherness. They provided a pan-African sense of syncretic culture as opposed to the white American. The pots may also be seen as a form of resistance and cultural

boundary maintenance between Africans and whites. Other clues pointing to identity are hidden in graves and in the objects buried with the dead (Alexander 2001; Orser 1998). Archaeology of race, drawing from the archaeology of identity, searches for tangible aspects of identity as ethnic markers (Orser 1998). One aspect is spatial arrangements of plantations and houses. Fortunately, one such study has been done by Donley (1987), where, by looking at the spatial arrangement of Swahili houses in Lamu, she concluded that slave quarters were on the ground floor, while their masters' rooms were located on the first floor. Another aspect is the artefacts. Artefacts, rather than being simply static containers of ethnic self-identity, can serve as symbols of group identity whose meanings can be manipulated, while at the same time they promote a sense of peoplehood. Mullin's study (1996, as cited in Orser 1998, 75-76) showed how a simple objects like knickknacks were used by non-African Americans to cement the power relations over African Americans. For the African Americans receiving this item signified redefinition of their material circumstances, as knickknacks were out of reach for them before 1850. In Zanzibar, it can be said that land had been used in the same way. After the revolt in the 1820s slaves could use a small portion of land for their own purposes. This satisfied the slaves. But they were bonded to the plantation even more and the likelihood of running away was diminished (Cooper 1977; Manning 1990). Slave masters therefore saved money on buying new slaves.

Archaeology of freedom studies the material conditions of freedom (Orser 1998). This study is mostly associated with Maroon villages. Maroon villages offer information about syncretic cultures (since slaves took up cultural features of their masters, while interacting with the natives), the creation of diverse social connections, and the preservation of economic, political and spiritual life (Harris 1996). Palmeras in South America was the biggest Maroon village and is now a symbol of resistance. In East Africa, the Maroon settlement of Fulladoyo was the biggest, but no site has been found (Cooper 1977). Even though Maroon sites are difficult to locate, they have the potential to provide information about how slaves maintained their traditional culture in alien environments.

This three-fold approach to the diaspora could also be used in East Africa. The approach is mostly concerned with identity and how it is perceived through material evidence. But it does not provide data about everyday slave life and the extent of slavery. Remains of plantations and slaves' houses can shine a light on these two issues.

Plantations took up approximately one quarter of Zanzibar Island and two thirds of Pemba. 31,000 acres of plantations surrounded Malindi and there were extensive plantations around Mombasa (Cooper 1977). By employing the techniques of landscape archaeology, we could precisely define the extent of the plantations and recognize boundaries between them (lines delineating Iron Age fields in Britain are still visible on aerial photography (Renfrew and Bahn 2008). Old maps and documents could also be of assistance (Renfrew and Bahn 2008). The information, these techniques can provide us with, in addition to recognising slave houses that were situated on plantations, can give a more precise estimate of the number of slaves working on plantations than we have now from inaccurate historical records.

Slaves' houses can illuminate the everyday life of slaves on plantations. On Zanzibar slaves tended to live in small groups in a small house. Attached to the house was a small garden. In Malindi gang labour was employed, thus a

bigger plantation site would have a small slave village (Cooper 1977; Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990). Preferably, garden tools, pots and other essential utensils would be unearthed.

The death rate among slaves was high, at around 15 percent (Manning 1990). In Zanzibar this meant that some 12,000 slaves had to be replaced each year (Cooper 1977). The dead were either buried in mass graves or in a cemetery. The artefacts with which they were buried (if they were buried with any) could provide information about ethnicity and identity. Furthermore, by using stable isotope analysis we would have the potential to see patterns of migration and the origin of individuals.

Slavery did not only affect the places where slavery was practiced, but also the coast's hinterland, where slaves were captured. Kusimba's case study (2004) of Tsavo confirms this. Tsavo is an area in Mombasa's hinterland. It was home to an array of diverse ethnic groups, which were interconnected by relationships of trade and intermarriage. Members of these ethnic groups were kidnapped or captured by the Arabs and Swahili and sold as slaves. Thus, the groups sought safety on Mount Kasigau, around which they built a ring of rockshelters. They are hard to reach but easily defensible. Kusimba (2004) excavated three of them. All were dated to the 18th and 19th century when, according to oral accounts, the demand for slaves and ivory increased. This fortification was likely to be the response to slave raiding, and acted as refuge for people and livestock when threatened by enemies.

Oral and historical accounts show that 18th and 19th century East Africa was punctuated by insecurity and instability, as a consequence of slave trade, warfare and drought. This also affected the regional trade and alliance networks. Destruction of indigenous settlements, depopulation of whole regions, fortification buildings, Muslim artefacts in indigenous villages and slave quarters can all be traced back to the slave trade (Alexander 2001; Kusimba 2004).

The accumulation of a large number of people can also be preserved in the archaeological record, either through artefacts or features (Renfrew and Bahn 2008). A large number of slaves would be such an accumulation of people. It is probable that slaves in East Africa formed communities, as the Afro-Americans in both Americas and the Afro-Asians in Hyderabad did (Harris 1971, 1996; Orser 1998).

Slaves on some East African plantations had 2 days a week off and the amount of time spent working depended on the time of the year. In addition, slaves were allowed to go to town and to do what they wanted if the time allowed it. During their spare time slaves socialised with each other. Slaves had festivities and meetings, where they would dance and perform rituals (Cooper 1977; Harris 1996; Manning 1990). They were creating their own culture and society.

The culture of the slave community would be syncretic between that of their masters and the array of cultural backgrounds from which the slaves came. Slaves' masters were obliged to teach their pagan slaves Islam. Some slaves accepted Islam freely or under pressure, but in the end the religion and the language (Arabian) became the common denominators of the slave community, since slaves' religion and mother tongue were all different (Cooper 1977; Manning 1990). The same instance happened in the Caribbean and in the southern states of North America, where slaves converted to Christianity and made Creole their common language (Orser 1998). Islam was reinforcing

the brotherhood among the slaves and acted as a pacifier, as it justified slavery and facilitated the control of a dominant group (Cooper 1977; Harris 1971).

Archaeologically visible traces of such a community would be community buildings like mosques or simple halls. Emigrants in America and India had them (Harris 1971, 1996; Orser 1998). If there were not any visible structures, the community had to have a designated space where they would have gathered. Instruments for dancing at festivities and symbols with which they would signalise their affiliation to a certain group were essential to that community. Also, a different expression of religious affiliation must be visible between the slave and the master, since Islam allows a degree of syncretism. The different take on Islam would have been evident in practice.

### **Problems of interpretation**

Nonetheless identifying slave remains is much harder than described above. Taphonomy, the current residing population of the site under question, and past and present influences on people can all distort the interpretation of archaeological data.

A major influence on the slave's life was the experience of enslavement and life as a bonded person. These experiences caused slaves to forget their mother tongue, to learn Arabic and to modify their traditional way of life. Slaves took some of the Arabian culture as their own and syncretism between many African cultures and Islam is hard to identify (Alexander 2001; Harris 1971, 1996; Kusimba 2004; Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990). This is because African slaves remained in Africa and the stylistic differences of artefacts would not be as prominent as when comparing a European and a Chinese culture. Furthermore, since Islam was the common denominator of the slaves, Islam's presence in the new syncretic culture would be dominant. Slaves also had enough freedom to go to town and conduct business with their own products, which resulted in an even further assimilation with the foreign culture (Cooper 1977; Manning 1990). In towns like Malindi and Mombasa some aspects of culture between the slaves and their master did not differ at all. Slave owners were Africans and the owner's slaves were captured as close as 150km from the town, in villages where trade with these towns was of prominence (Cooper 1977; Kusimba 2004).

Muslims distinguish between many forms of slave statuses (Cooper 1977). It does matter if a slave was captured as a mature person, if a baby was born to slaves or freed individuals, or what kind of slave an individual is. Along with the status came the duties and rights. Children of slaves and slaves with a higher status had more liberty and better opportunities to gain material wealth. The result would be the neglecting of the native culture and identifying with the foreign one.

Some forms of slavery would be almost impossible to recognise in the archaeological record. Eunuchs, concubines and domestic slaves were almost identical to their Muslim masters material-wise. They were part of the Muslim household and were thus more likely embraced by the family. These slaves were in constant contact with the Islamic culture and could therefore not disaffect themselves from that culture in the same degree as plantation slaves. The option to join or form a community as the plantation slaves was thus also inhibited and some slaves had greater affection for the master than other slaves. With the master's death eunuchs, concubines and domestic slaves were often freed. They also had

several privileges. Gain in material and status was made easier for them. They were fully submerged in the Islamic culture (Alexander 2001; Cooper 1977; Manning 1990). Soldier slaves were also fully assimilated with the Muslim culture, since they were, apart from their skin color, undistinguishable from other soldiers (Harris 1971).

A big obstacle archaeologists always encounter is how to interpret the data. Although most and the biggest slave owners on the coast and islands were Muslims, there were also Christians and native Africans who were slave owners. The Christian and Muslim concept of slavery, both defined in different legal systems, interacted with a variety of indigenous forms of slavery (Alexander 2001). What is then Muslim, Christian or indigenous?

Even evidence that can clearly point to slavery and slave trade can be interpreted in many ways. Muslim objects at indigenous sites can occur because of slave trade or trade. Destruction and abandonment of settlements, and the depopulation of a whole region can come about because of droughts and food shortage. In the 19th century, when the slave trade was at its peak on the East African coast, several droughts befell the land, some causing major migrations of ethnic groups. Some buildings can be interpreted as either dungeons or slave quarters (Alexander 2001). Thus, data pointing to one solution, one clear interpretation, is hard to find.

Cemeteries could contain a pool of information about slaves and their identity. Unfortunately, the Muslim religion does not allow the excavation of graves. Also, since the slaves converted to Islam, it is possible that Muslim slaves were buried in Muslim cemeteries. The question arises if there were different cemeteries for slaves and their masters or did both use the same one (Alexander 2001).

Slavery in East Africa lasted until after the Great War (Lovejoy 1983; Manning 1990). Thus, at least some descendants of slaves are still alive and their memories are an invaluable resource to the explanation of archaeological remains. Archaeological projects, like Catalhoyuk or District 6, successfully used natives' accounts to complement their data. Furthermore, Cooper (1977) wrote a great book about the plantation slavery, using historical data and informants. Adding anthropological methodologies to the research of the East African Diaspora could dispose of insecurities in interpretation of the data.

In archaeology, the East African Diaspora remains an untackled topic. Many new things can be discovered. The methodology of how to study diaspora in the Americas can serve as the basis, but should be tailored to the East African region. I also think that studying the East African Diaspora can contribute to the archaeology of identity in a major way, as slave identity was much more intertwined with that of his master than in the Americas. Thus, a big chunk of African past remains to be researched, and this research can contribute to archaeological studies overall.

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