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# History, Memory, and the Heritage of Slavery on the Kenyan Coast The Witu and Shimoni Cases

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*Translated by Stephanie Horsford*

Despite their different trajectories, the Witu and Shimoni cases are interesting to compare as they provide a contrasting perspective on the history of slavery and trafficking on the Swahili coast, as well as on the way this past has been variously understood by the contemporary coastal society and by the Kenyan state and its institutions. Today's Witu and Shimoni are two villages: one is situated to the north of the coast, on the mainland facing the Lamu archipelago, and the other is seventy-five kilometres to the south of Mombasa. The history of these two places is linked to slave trafficking at its height in East Africa in the nineteenth century.

Many runaway slaves (*watoro* in kiswahili) settled in the Witu region in the middle of the nineteenth century, after having, for many of them, escaped from plantations in Lamu. Their settlement around Witu can be explained, in part, by the formation of alliances with the Aweer hunter-gatherer populations. It can also be explained by the presence (from 1862) of a Nabahani rebel chief—sultan Ahmed Simba<sup>1</sup>—whose influence enabled him to oppose masters seeking to recover their slaves. These *watoro* are estimated to be around several thousand in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some lived in the villages surrounding Witu and negotiated patron-client relationships with the sultan, but others, further from the town and more autonomous, recreated their kinship and alliance networks with non-Swahili populations.

The Shimoni site has a different history: it was a major step in the slave trade. The freshly captured slaves were held there before being put on the Zanzibar market. In kiswahili, the term *shimoni* means “a place in the hole” or “inside the hole,” which accurately conveys the use that was made of the caves in that area. Naturally created by the tides, these caves extended over

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1. The dynastic Nabahani clan was in power in Pate from around the end of the seventeenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century. At that time, they suffered political pressure from the Omani imam (who became the sultan of Zanzibar in the 1840s) and from his allies in Lamu. Part of the Nabahani family fled to the mainland and re-established a city-state in Witu.

almost five kilometres and were divided into multiple tunnels. Oral sources indicate that they were used to hide the slaves when British ships, looking to break up the trafficking networks, attempted to intercept boats in the Indian Ocean that were transporting human cargoes.

By crossing the available written documentation (especially the German and British archives) and the oral sources, it is possible to sketch an approximative map of the *watoro* villages around Witu. Many villages no longer exist and their population was displaced following violence in the region, particularly during the Somalian *shifita* raids in the 1970s. Furthermore, the ethnonyms used at the end of the nineteenth century to define these *watoro* groups (such as Wadoe, Wazigua and Watu wa Witu) are no longer in use today. It seems that, amongst the descendants of the escaped slaves, there is no pride in having ancestors who rebelled against their masters by fleeing and founding new villages. Thus, it is extremely difficult to study the memory of the former slaves' arrival, especially since research is still to be done to determine where the history of marronage and slavery situates in local memories—unlike the Shimoni case where oral investigations could be carried out thanks to the heritage making of the site.

In Shimoni, archaeological excavations contributed to demonstrating that the caves were used as warehouses to keep the slaves. Interviews have revealed differences in memory interpretation about the historic usage of the caves. While certain testimonies refer to a warehouse for slaves departing to Zanzibar, others speak of a place used to secretly hide the local slaves in order for them to serve on the coastal plantations after the closure of the Zanzibar market (in 1873). Moreover, those whose ancestors were involved in slave trade deny the existence of any slavery practices, whereas the families of the victims of slavery confirm its historical existence, although it is still rare to admit to a servile ancestry. Thus, unlike other regions affected by trafficking and slavery, these themes are discussed in Shimoni, in different versions, which gives a particularly illuminating example of the way in which these societies “tinker” with memory to construct their heritage and their identity.

Yet, Kenyan institutions have not initiated much heritage initiatives about the history of slavery and marronage on the coast. In the case of Witu and of Lamu region, the heritage-making of the Swahili “civilisation” and its history largely ignores slavery. The history of slavery does not yet have its place in heritage development, which is linked to the tourism industry that generates the highest income for the archipelago. The history and culture of the coast are at the heart of the heritage initiatives, to the extent that the Lamu archipelago is generally considered to be one of the birthplaces of the Swahili “civilisation.” The Swahili House Museum as

well as the exhibitions at the fort and at the Lamu museum unambiguously reflect the prominence given to certain aspects the coastal history—its trade culture, dhows, Islam, city-states, etc.—while they neglect the long-term contacts that the coastal cities maintained with the non-Swahili mainland populations through trade, patron-client relations, migrations between the coast and the mainland, etc. The same partial perception of history is found in the way heritage is showcased in the rest of the archipelago (e.g. the ruins of the ancient city-state in Pate) and at the mouth of the Tana river (in Ungwana for example), where archaeological excavations have been carried out since the 1960s.

However, in Shimoni, actions towards a better visibility of the history of slavery have been taken for many years. Protected under the *Museums and Heritage Act of Parliament* of 2006, the gazetted Shimoni heritage landscape covers over fourteen hectares of land, and the slave cave was opened for tourism in 2001 as a place of memories of slave trade and slavery. The caves were used earlier by the local inhabitants to hide from raids by hostile communities, then as a warehouse for holding slaves by the traffickers, and later a local shrine by the local community. In general, Shimoni heritage landscape is place of multiple memories, and apart from the slave caves, also hosts some colonial buildings and a cemetery where a British soldier, Captain Frederick Lawrence, was buried after he was killed while leading an antislavery expedition around Gazi, near Shimoni. In 2014, a museum entirely dedicated to the issue of slavery was inaugurated in one of the colonial buildings, making the Shimoni Slavery Museum one of a kind in Kenya. This place of memory for trafficking and slavery has made it possible to generate income which is used locally for social ends.

Despite differences in the history of slavery in Witu and Shimoni, these two regions have both been marked by major constraints on mobility which still have an impact on the coastal societies of contemporary Kenya. Moreover, the heritage development of these sites is unequal: while Shimoni, through the 2000s, has become a place of memory for slavery, the regions of the Lamu archipelago and Witu have not, for the time being, prompted any such initiatives from the state. Yet, the involvement of state institutions in these sensitive historical and memory questions cannot be achieved without a profound reflection on the impact of their actions on the populations concerned by the heritage of slavery.

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