

■ KENYA

Fugitive Slave Communities in 19th Century Kenya: A Preliminary Report on Recent Archaeological and Historical Research

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Introduction

My dissertation research centers on the creation of new communities by people escaping slavery in 19th century Kenya. This paper briefly outlines the results of a year of archaeological and historical fieldwork I conducted in 2007 and 2008 on this topic. Fugitive slaves or *watoro* (Swahili, pl.) in Eastern Africa have been the subject of few historical studies; they have also suffered from a more general neglect of historical archaeology in the region. My dissertation project aims to illuminate the specific strategies by which *watoro* created and maintained communities. My research also encompasses two broader purposes. First, I hope to enable productive cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons to better-studied fugitive slave or maroon communities in the Americas. Second, in its emphasis on cultural plurality and cohesion, this project seeks to broaden anthropological insight into processes of community creation and maintenance.

Project Background

The majority of people who became *watoro* fled plantations on the Eastern African coast. These plantations were owned by two populations: indigenous Swahili, who had long been the dominant population on the coast, and colonizing Omani Arabs. Oman began its incursion into Eastern Africa in the late 17th century and, by the 19th century, had established a firm territorial grip over the coast. Upon absconding, most fugitive slaves retreated to the hinterland of the coast, which provided open territory away from dominant slave-owning groups (Glassman

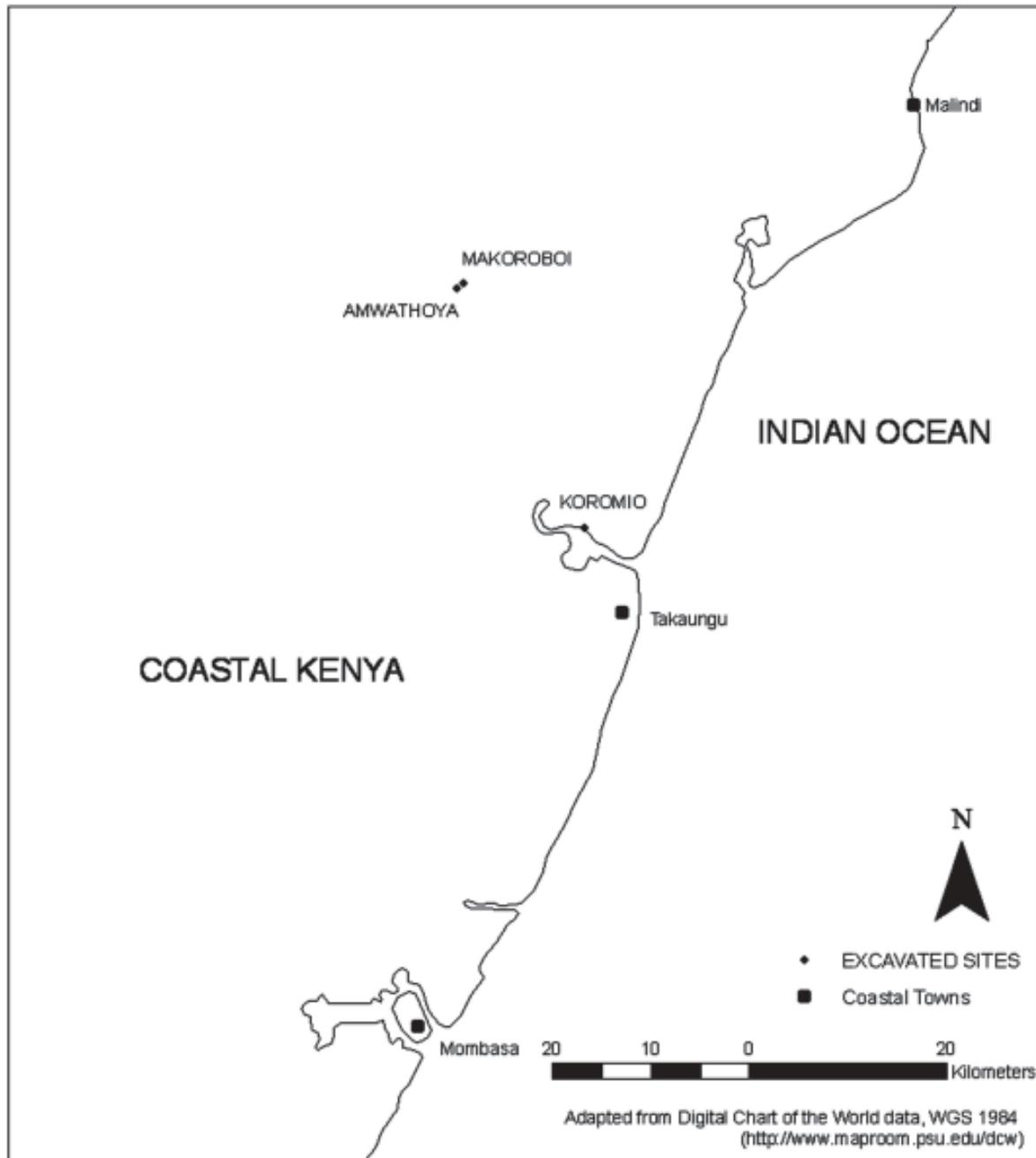
1995; Morton 1990). My project investigates the creation of *watoro* communities in the coastal hinterland through a dual focus on inter- and intra-group relationships as reflected in the archaeological and historical records. First, it explores how *watoro* groups navigated regional economic and social networks. Data on trade or intermarriage, for example, may elucidate how *watoro* constituted themselves as groups in their interactions with outsiders. Secondly, the project investigates whether *watoro* communities developed shared socio-cultural norms or maintained long-term cultural heterogeneity. An analysis of cultural heterogeneity or plurality will help reveal *watoro* community formation processes and clarify what held these newly formed groups together in the absence of long-shared traditions and practices.

In collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), I undertook a 12-month archaeological research program in 2007-08. Following a house-centered excavation strategy, I excavated two fugitive slave sites, the 1840s settlement Koromio and the 1880s settlement Makoroboi (Figure 1). These were initially identified through written historical descriptions (e.g. Krapf 2002 [1853]) and their identification was later confirmed through supporting archaeological evidence and oral history. With the assistance of Mr. Kaingu Kalume Tinga of the NMK, I recorded approximately 40 interviews focused on oral history with elders living near the excavated sites. These interviews not only assisted in site identification but also provided insight into how fugitive slave communities interacted with, and eventually integrated into, neighboring groups.

To better understand these communities, I wanted to compare them to their hinterland neighbors. As there is little existing comparative archaeological material for the 19th century coastal hinterland, I chose to create my own comparative data set. With this goal in mind, I excavated a third site, Amwathoya, a homestead physically close to and contemporaneous with Makoroboi. Amwathoya, is associated with the Giriama, one of the most populous ethnic groups in the 19th-century coastal hinterland. While presuming neither cultural stasis nor homogeneity in 19th century Giriama communities, I believe that comparisons with such groups may clarify how *watoro*'s position as refugees from enslavement shaped the communities they formed.

The excavations for my dissertation thus en-

Figure 1: Location of excavated sites.



compassed three sites. While my research relies on *watoro* and Giriama site identifications, I also recognize the problems involved in thinking of these labels as closed or pure categories. Despite its majority fugitive slave population, Makoroboi was founded by a Giriama man, David Koi, a recent convert to Christianity who sought to form a Christian commu-

nity (Morton 1976: 183). Further, the Giriama homestead, Amwathoya, very likely included *watoro* residents. Local oral history attests to the integration of *watoro* from Makoroboi into neighboring Giriama homesteads through intermarriage. Notwithstanding these complications, I believe identifying sites as *watoro* or Giriama is defensible and of considerable

Figure 2: An intact fallen burnt daub wall, Koromio.



research value. While the Amwathoya homestead may have included *watoro* residents, the settlement is considered Giriama by descendants of former inhabitants, a place of their fathers and grandfathers. Despite their potentially diverse populations, Koromio and Makoroboi were identified as fugitive slave villages by the European missionaries who visited them, and the coastal Omani Arab and Swahili slave owners who eventually destroyed them (Morton 1976, 1990).

Project Results

Excavations at all sites were highly productive. Historical records indicate that both Koromio and Makoroboi were destroyed and burnt during attacks by coastal slave owners and their supporters (Krapf 2002 [1853]: 90; Morton 1976: 210, 1990: 12-13). Wattle-and-daub houses often leave little trace

after abandonment (Fleisher and LaViolette 1999). However, burnt daub, which preserves, greatly simplified the identification of house areas at both *watoro* sites. Many pieces of recovered daub displayed house-pole impressions. One house at Koromio included an intact fallen wall (Figure 2), where several parallel lines of pole impressions marked a wooden house framework long since disintegrated. At Makoroboi, the base of one daub wall remained intact and standing, with preserved burnt house poles encased inside. Besides strong evidence of burning, both *watoro* sites also presented signs of rapid abandonment, such as whole pots broken in place in indoor and outdoor activity areas. Most remarkable was a maize-processing and cooking area located outside a house at Koromio. Here we were able to reconstruct several vessels that had been broken in place (Figure 3). We also noted multiple ceramic bases, right side up and presumably once sitting on

Figure 3: A reconstructed cooking lid from a maize-processing and cooking area, Koromio.



Figure 4: A burnt preserved cob from a maize-processing and cooking area, Koromio.



the ground surface, during excavation. Additionally, we recovered 13 burnt preserved corn cobs (Figure 4), many with kernels still attached and some unshucked, apparently abandoned during the village's attack by slave owners.

Beyond providing evidence of rapid site abandonment, archaeological materials at the *watoro* sites yielded evidence of house design and construction methods, diet and food procurement strategies, participation in regional trade networks, and personal adornment practices. Materials collected include carbonized seeds, animal bone, local and imported

pottery, metal and stone tools, glass, coins, and beads. At Koromio, we also recovered a pot intact in a shovel-test pit abutting a baobab tree; the pot's poor construction indicates it was made by a non-specialist and its location and intact condition suggests it was a ritualistic offering.

House identification at the Giriama homestead Amwathoya was more challenging than at either *watoro* site. No burnt daub was recovered, which is unsurprising given the site's lack of history of attack or burning. Also, oral history and ethnohistory suggests Giriama inhabitants likely built grass-thatched rather than wattle-and-daub structures (e.g. Fitzgerald 1898). Though no postholes were detected during the investigation, we used standardized subsurface testing to identify two areas of higher artifact concentration, which we excavated. The most remarkable find from Amwathoya is a jewelry assembly area. Three thousand nine hundred and sixty eight shell, glass, and copper alloy beads were recovered, in addition to copper alloy jewelry items including chains, ear pendants, rings, and a single folded hair or clothing ornament. Beads recovered were strongly dominated by small shell cylinders painted a variety of colors; a few dozen disc and ring shell beads of similar size were also found. Giriama elders called all of these beads *dhaa* and noted during their own lifetimes they were primarily used for body decoration (Figure 5). However, we also recovered two more rare bead types, the larger shell *mwambo* (Figure 6) and the cowry shell *ngutu* (Figure 7), which were used exclusively for healing and divination in local Giriama communities, at least from the mid-20th century onward (see also Deed 1964: 12, 76, 81; Taylor 1891: 90).

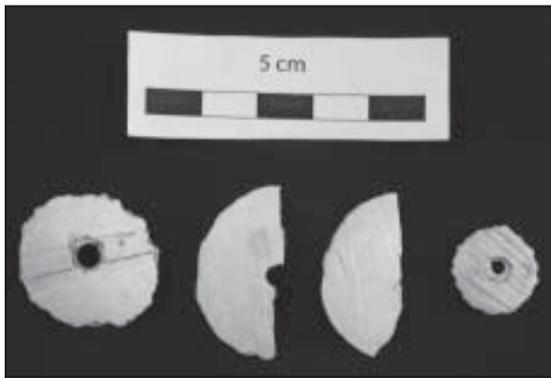
Preliminary Conclusions

A preliminary application of recovered archaeological data to my research questions has been promising. Insight into *watoro* integration into regional networks is possible. At Koromio, recovered faunal material is dominated by domestic animals, such as cow, goat, and sheep. This finding begs the question, where did refugees obtain livestock? Domesticated animal remains at Koromio may reflect trade with neighboring groups, such as Oromo pastoralists. Excavations at the site also yielded several iron tools, including a few knives and a point (Figure 8). Though the point suggests hunting, the absence of support-

Figure 5: *Dhaa*, a shell cylinder bead type used primarily as decoration in local Giriama communities, recovered at Amwathoya.



Figure 6: *Mwambo*, a shell bead type used exclusively for healing and divination in local Giriama communities, recovered at Amwathoya.



ing faunal evidence raises the possibility of its use as a defensive weapon. Koromio's elevated location, on hills overlooking the Rare River as it empties into Kilifi Bay, suggests defensive planning in settlement placement.

At the later site Makoroboi, an 1881/1882 Omani colonial coin from Zanzibar (Figure 9) not only suggests that *watoro* residents traded with their hinterland neighbors but also that trade extended, even if indirectly, to coastal Omani Arab and Swahili groups.

Local oral history and other imported archaeological materials such as glass and European ceramics, also suggest Makoroboi residents were considerably integrated into the regional economy. Several elders informed us that both Makoroboi residents and their Giriama neighbors grew and sold sorghum to coastal traders, who would come periodically to purchase the crops. While I have not yet clarified differences between Giriama and *watoro* participation in regional trade, further examination of imported materials promises to illuminate the issue. I also plan to address what the greater amount of imported pottery recovered at earlier Koromio as compared to later Makoroboi may indicate. Koromio was located closer to the coast. I want to consider whether the greater amount of imported pottery at Koromio reflects only this physical proximity or may also be indicative of a closer economic and social relationship with coastal groups.

My excavation data also provides insight into the internal cultural diversity of *watoro* communities. I was able to excavate three houses at the earlier *watoro* site, Koromio, and two at the later Makoroboi. These houses offer important insight into internal settlement cultural dynamics. While all houses excavated at both sites appear to have been both earthen and rectangular, other house types may have existed. In a sketch made during an 1882 missionary visit to Makoroboi, three settlement leaders posed before a round grass-thatched Giriama-style house (Price 1882:91). That all houses excavated at both fugitive slave sites were wattle-and-daub is likely related to archaeological visibility. Nonetheless, such earthen

Figure 7: *Ngutu*, a bead produced from a cowry shell and used exclusively for healing and divination in local Giriama communities, recovered at Amwathoya.

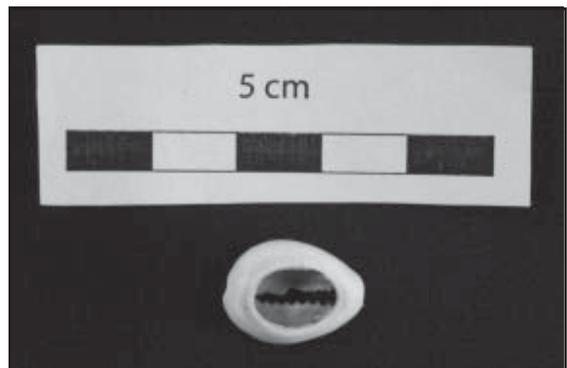


Figure 8: An iron point recovered at Koromio.



structures appear to have been a dominant house form. Through systematic surface survey, we identified and mapped 140 burnt daub surface concentrations at Makoroboi, likely representing a similar number of earthen houses burnt during the settlement's attack. As British missionaries estimated Makoroboi's population peaked at 700 (Morton 1976:196), these structures may have housed most of the settlement's inhabitants.

The earthen, rectangular design of the excavated houses distinguishes them from contemporaneous houses of neighboring groups in the area. Further, while some interior groups from which captives were extracted and enslaved built wattle-and-daub structures, a rectangular rather than round house-orientation was unusual in most of 19th century Eastern Africa (McKim 1985). This house shape strongly suggests influence from Swahili coastal dwellers, many of whom were slave owners.

While the wattle-and-daub houses excavated at the watoro sites were similar in their style and construction, differences in artifact types and distribution at each house became evident during excavation.

For example, we recovered 22 beads at Structure 1 at Makoroboi by water-screening all soil from house-related contexts through a 2 mm sieve. Though employing the same screening methodology at Structure 2, we recovered no beads there. There are several possible explanations for this distinction. Structure 2 appeared less disturbed after its burning and collapse; perhaps beads were somewhere in this house, just not in the area we excavated. However, beads are items easily dropped and lost, so the distinction remains surprising. Alternatively, the distinction between the two house areas in bead numbers may point to different (perhaps gendered) composition of households at the settlement. Oral histories strongly suggest that Makoroboi was a male-heavy settlement, with many *watoro* men eventually integrating into neighboring Giriama groups through intermarriage and adoption of their new wives' ethnic and clan affiliations. It thus seems entirely possible that some houses at Makoroboi may have included no women and that a male-only household might be reflected archaeologically through lack of beads, which were predominately associated with women in the area. Nonetheless, as Makoroboi's

Figure 9: An 1881/1882 Omani colonial coin from Zanzibar, recovered at Makoroboi.



watoro residents were newcomers, their use of beads may have differed from their neighbors'; alternate explanations for the distinction in bead distribution will also be considered.

Beads are also useful in considering the relationship between Makoroboi and neighboring settlements such as Amwathoya, the Giriama homestead. While Amwathoya yielded an impressive 3968 beads, bead types there overlapped little with types recovered at Makoroboi, a close by and contemporaneous settlement. As mentioned previously, the bead collection at Amwathoya is dominated by shell cylinders. The most common bead type at Makoroboi, a dark blue glass oblate, was not recovered from Amwathoya. This distinction may speak to separate trading networks and perhaps even reflect a period of broader non-interaction between the settlements. The relationship between the sites will become clearer with further analysis of other evidence, including imported items and dietary data.

In conclusion, as analysis progresses, I hope to better illuminate the specific strategies by which *watoro* created communities in the face of ongoing

threatened and actual violence against them. My research will also enable cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons to better-studied fugitive slave or maroon communities in the Americas (e.g., Orser and Funari 2001; Sayers 2007; Weik 2002). Although 19th century Eastern Africa has received considerable attention from historians, archaeologists have only begun studying this period in the region (see Croucher 2004, 2006, 2007; Kiriama 2005; Kusimba 2004, 2006), and I am glad to contribute to this new body of research. Finally, *watoro* groups offer researchers across disciplines broad insight into processes of community creation and maintenance. Improvised under stress by people of dissimilar cultural backgrounds and social experiences, such communities can help build broader anthropological understandings of how groups form and sustain themselves.

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