



Book Review: Forgotten Globalization – The Swahili Coast and China¹

Chapuruka M. Kusimba, Tiequan Zhu, Purity Wakabari Kiura (eds.): *China and East Africa: Ancient Ties, Contemporary Flows*²

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It is an age-old saying that history is written by the winners. In its unique way this volume challenges deeply rooted misconceptions about African embeddedness to global trade, even if this concerns ancient times. However multiple reviews exist on this volume⁴, they approach it perhaps not coincidentally, from the angle of archaeology, since the greater part of the book is dominated by chapters introducing current archaeological work. The book is indeed a result of a conference where scholars presented their research on China and East Africa relations both ancient and contemporary. The volume is thus divided to two parts, adequately titled as Part I. Ancient Ties and Part II. Contemporary Flows, mirroring the subtitle of the book. The first part includes 10 chapters, while the second only five plus one, the last being a critical appraisal of the volume. According to the preface, the volume investigates globalisation in the context of the East, through trade relations. While it mentions the importance of the Silk Road in ancient times, it forgets to mention its contemporary equivalent, the Belt and Road Initiative. While the editors admit that the volume focuses on the mutually beneficial aspects of trade, they also question if the contemporary quasi neo-colonisation of Africa is really beneficial to the continent. They also question how the continent could fight against the second scramble for Africa and exploitation with it.

The 1st Chapter addresses the earliest possible trade connections between East Africa

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² Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Tiequan Zhu & Purity Wakabari Kiura (Eds.): *China and East Africa: Ancient Ties and Contemporary Flows*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2019, 277 pp., Hardback \$ 105.30, Paperback \$ 35.99, e-book \$ 28.79 ISBN 978-1-4985-7614-7

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⁴ Zhao, B. (2021). China and East Africa; ancient ties, contemporary flows: edited by Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Tiequan Zhu and Purity Wakabari Kiura. Lanham/Boulder/New York/London, Lexington Books, 2020, 277 pp., \$100/£77 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4985-7614-7. Also available as an eBook (\$95/£73), ISBN 978-1-4985-7615-4. Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa, 56(4), 539–540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0067270X.2021.1973766>; Mjema, E. (2022). Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Tiequan Zhu, Purity Wakabari Kiura (Eds.): *China and East Africa: Ancient Ties and Contemporary Flows*. Afr Archaeol Rev 39, 135–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-021-09466-2>; Mohrs, S. A. (2025). Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Tiequan Zhu, and Purity Wakabari Kiura, eds. *China and East Africa: Ancient Ties, Contemporary Flows*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. 277 pp. \$117.00. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-4985-7614-7. African Studies Review, 68(2), 419–420. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.199>

and China, Early Stone Age tool technology. De Weyer states that the different characteristics of the lithic assemblages in some sites in China led to different techniques adapted in the lithic industries regarding the two regions. The chapter concludes that there are both recurrences and otherness in the evidence found on the sited deriving from technical universals and cultural specificities.⁵

In the 2nd Chapter Ndiema explores prehistoric trade and economic links between East Africa and East Asia. The chapter mainly refers to archaeological data regarding trade links between East African coastal and inland areas. The chapter concludes that a down-the-line exchange took place, which needs to be investigated further.

Kusimba argues in the 3rd Chapter that Africa was not isolated from other continents as indicated previously. The author follows the track of ancient Chinese ceramics, which can be found in archaeological sites to define the nature and intensity of trade, to determine site chronologies and to understand technology transfer and cultural practices. Kusimba also argues that Islam had an important role to connect China and coastal East Africa.

Monge et al. discuss the identity of early Swahili peoples of the contemporary Kenyan coast in Chapter 4. The authors examine 118 skeletal remains from the Mtwapa and Manda samples to address the topic. They conclude that Swahili people were of mixed ancestry, which is also indicated in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 5 Kiriana writes about archaic globalization, and trade relations between China and East Africa within the context. The author follows yet again the traces of Chinese ceramic in East Africa. Kiriana concludes indirect trade started around early 200 CE between the two regions, transforming to direct ties by 800 CE. The author identifies multiple peak periods in the trade of Chinese porcelain, the most significant under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), which is suspected to be the result of state ownership in trade. The author concludes that East African Swahili city-states were part of the global trading system.

Namunaba introduces in Chapter 6 East Africa's connectedness through the case study of Siyu. As the result of analysing excavated materials from 4 trenches, the author concludes that Siyu was connected not just to the East African coast but was also part of the trading networks of the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. However interconnected, the proportion of trade pottery is small within the excavated material which suggests that it was controlled by only a small proportion of the population. The author states that Siyu is an example on how trade can shape culture and taste.

Ichumbaki explores links between Tanzania's coast and China in Chapter 7. This section again adopts a case study design, exploring the history of Kunduchi. The settlement was one of the most important sites along the Tanzanian coastline. As archaeological material shows the settlement was inhabited from the pre-Islamic (6th – 7th centuries CE) times and was connected too to the trade networks of the Indian Ocean. Kunduchi was isolated from this extended trading network between the 16th and

⁵ Kusimba et al. (2019). p. 15.



18th centuries, indicated by the lack of trading goods among the excavated material.

Chapter 8 analyses early globalization links between China and East Africa through the analysis of Chinese porcelain. Zhu and Kusimba argue that European presence in the region from the late 15th century was the reason behind rivalry for controlling Indian Ocean trade. This presence meant a crippling competition, and later on it led to the European colonization of the region. The authors employed a case study research design, this time examining 32 Chinese porcelains found in Mtwapa Kenya. The authors conclude that the city elite could certainly afford trade luxury goods and porcelain. Mtwapa was also beneficiary of early globalization and Chinese porcelain from multiple kilns.

Chapter 9 explores the sources of East African Chinese Longquan and imitation Celadon based on the analysis of trace elements in ancient ceramics. Wang et al. selected 5 representative ceramic shards for their analysis from the most commonly used celadon in Manda. The authors conclude that multiple sources of Longquan celadon were consumed in Manda, with Zhejiang and Guangdong Dapu kilns being the strong candidates.

Oteyo and Kusimba explore the consumption of glass beads in ancient Swahili East Africa in Chapter 10. The research focuses on 227 excavated glass beads at Manda. The authors state that bead production in Manda was a continuous craft, as beads were desirable as personal body adornment. Along these lines, beads were not only crafted locally but were among the trade goods as well originating from West Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and South Asia.

The first section of Part II, Chapter 11 provides a bridge to connect the two parts of the volume. However, the pledge, Li does not fulfil the task of presenting the six hundred years of harmony.⁶ Instead of rigorous scientific research, the author presents a rather biased picture of the Chinese engagement, ancient and contemporary with East Africa. The author forgot to address the Beijing's role in the non-Aligned Movement. Li claims that there is continuity in the giving more for less policy since Zeng He's travel to East Africa.⁷

Chapter 12 draws a more sober picture of China's involvement with East Africa. The author employs Kenyan examples. Kabiru also points out the bias of the previous chapter. The author concludes that China indeed increased its influence on the African continent and became one of its biggest trading partners and donor. But they also caution that Chinese engagement is viewed with increasing suspicion. The chapter lists unconditional loans versus debt trap, infrastructure projects, like the Tanzam railway, versus the lack of employment of locals. The author also highlights educational efforts by China and cooperation on it between China and Africa.

Chapter 13 explores second-hand clothing trade between China and East Africa. Ma argues that East Africa provides a significant market to the trade of used clothing, but a

⁶ Ibid. p. 167.

⁷ Ibid. p. 174

certain quality must be provided to be accepted on the local market.

In Chapter 14 Bitá discusses the importance of preservation and possibilities related to underwater cultural heritage. These options include the opening of museums, creating underwater cultural trails and educating ordinary people. Bitá also lists major underwater heritage sites along the Swahili coast, and claims that they have potential role as tourist attractions.

In chapter 15 Changfa argues the importance of better cultural heritage management. In their section the author approaches sustainable economic development and cultural heritage protection and preservation as mutually reinforcing issues. In this light the author criticizes the vague Chinese national approach towards protection of cultural relics and sites and strongly disapproves their profit-oriented utilization as well as private ownership.

Chapter 16 is a critical appraisal of the book. Holl praises the volume as it has the opportunity to correct the distortions in world history.

While the chapters are well written, clear and informative, the volume delivers what is expected from the title. The timeframe of the book is over stretched, and the gap between the two parts of the book is too wide. The chapters and their topicalities follow each other organically, sometimes even building on and reflecting to each other.

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