Research note

The ‘republic’ of Barawa: a neglected historical problem

Introduction

I first encountered the problem of the ‘Republic of Barawa’ – a small town on the Somali coast that was supposed to have evolved and maintained a form of government that was unique to the region during the period c.1100-1892 – in the form of a question posted at AskHistorians, the world’s largest public history site. The problem is a rather interesting one, and, while I’d need a better command of a far broader range of languages than I possess to actually publish on this subject, I don’t think that anyone else has actually done any significant work on it, or indeed on Barawa itself in the period in which the town was part of the trading system of the Swahili coast. So it seemed worthwhile posting the summary of my investigation here, in case it proves to be of use to anybody else.

This material first appeared at AskHistorians in the summer of 2017.

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The modern town of Barawa, on the Somali coast, has a history that dates back almost 2,000 years.

Q: What was the nature of the republic of Barawa? Was it unique on the Swahili Coast? Was it a republic and, if so, how did it compare to contemporary governments in Europe?

A: This turns out to be an extremely fascinating problem, and – having made a start on it – I uncovered so many layers of assumptions, misperceptions and casual thinking that two or three days of research were needed to get to the bottom of it.

The root problem is that Barawa has never been the subject of a detailed work of history; pretty much everything that has ever been written about it comes from books and papers that are actually about something else. It's taken me quite a while to untangle the mess left by several hundred years' worth of passing references scribbled by a wide variety of travellers, historians and archaeologists. So, first of all, apologies for this very late response.

It's going to take some time to lay out the evidence I've gathered and place it in some sort of context for you, so I'll start with the short version of the answer.

- Barawa – which is also known to historians as Brava, and sometimes as Baraawe – is a small port on the southern coast of what is now Somalia, about 125 miles south of Mogadishu. Both the traditions and the local

dialect are rooted in Swahili, and the town still forms a distinct cultural enclave on the desert coast of the Horn of Africa.

- Barawa was, as you note, one of the string of two dozen or so merchantile city-states that stretched along what's known as the Swahili Coast: a 2,000 mile stretch of littoral running all the way south to Mozambique. It was, in fact, the northernmost city in the chain.

- We don't know when Barawa was founded, but the site was inhabited by the third century CE. The city appears to have been well-established by 1100,[1] and it remained a distinct polity (albeit one that enjoyed a very varying degree of independence) until it was ceded to Italy by Zanzibar in 1892.[2]

- At its height, Barawa was a significant commercial power in the Indian Ocean – so much so that merchants from the city visited China in the early 15th century. These envoys travelled in the ships of the renowned "treasure fleet" of admiral Zheng He, and they were returned to Africa several years later during another of Zheng He's voyages. In 1430, Barawa (Pu-la-wa, 不喇哇) was one of only 18 western ports mentioned by name in an imperial decree issued by the Xuande Emperor.[3]

- During the period 1100-1892, Barawa certainly *was* repeatedly described as a republic – the earliest contemporary reference to the city having such an unexpected form of government dates to around 1509,[4] and the latest to 1856.[5] This was seen as remarkable, and worthy of comment, by a string of visitors to the Swahili Coast, among them sailors from Portugal, France and Britain.

- However, a careful examination of the evidence shows that the idea that Barawa was ever "a republic" is significantly misleading.

    - The most detailed contemporary references we have were written by a 16th century Portuguese who never visited the east coast of Africa.

    - The only other significant account, which was written by a French naval officer in the mid-19th century, has practically always been taken heavily out of context. The original reference turns out to be playful, and it was extensively qualified.

- We can also say that both these influential authors would have been familiar with European concepts of “a republic” – the Portuguese writer would have known of Venice, while the Frenchman was not only aware of the earlier reference, but was writing only five years after the collapse of the Second Republic. I conclude that both were drawing on an established, but inappropriate and out of context, political vocabulary to describe a rather unfamiliar form of government.

- Finally, I note that it is actually highly debatable whether it was even possible for any Muslim state to be a republic at any time before the mid-20th century, since Islamic law recognises only two forms of sovereignty – that of a Caliph, and that of a Sultan. *Jumhur*, the classical Arabic word that’s commonly used to mean “republic”, does not seem to have been employed in this way until it began to be used by the Ottomans to describe Venice hundreds of years after Barawa emerged as an independent city-state.[6]

Let’s take a closer look.

The setting

Although the history of the earliest towns along the Swahili coast can be traced back to the period c.300-1000 CE, there is little real evidence of state formation in the region until the tenth century, and the system that then evolved did not really survive its encounter with the Portuguese from 1500. At the height of its wealth and success in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the coast was home to 20 or 25 maritime city-states – ranging from quite well-known polities such as those of Mombasa and Kilwa down to much smaller towns, including Barawa, which probably never

The city-states of the Swahili Coast.

had a population greater than 3,000 throughout this period.[7] These statelets exhibited a number of common characteristics:

- They do meet the basic definitions of city-states, having centralised institutions and defined city centres, often in the form of “stone towns”, like the famous one that still survives in Zanzibar. These housed the elites, and were usually surrounded by walls, outside which the majority of the population lived in mud-built dwellings. The inhabitants of the stone towns had the prestige and hence the power to impose law and order on their people. Finally, the populations of the ports on the Swahili coast practised some division of labour and some specialisation of function.[8]

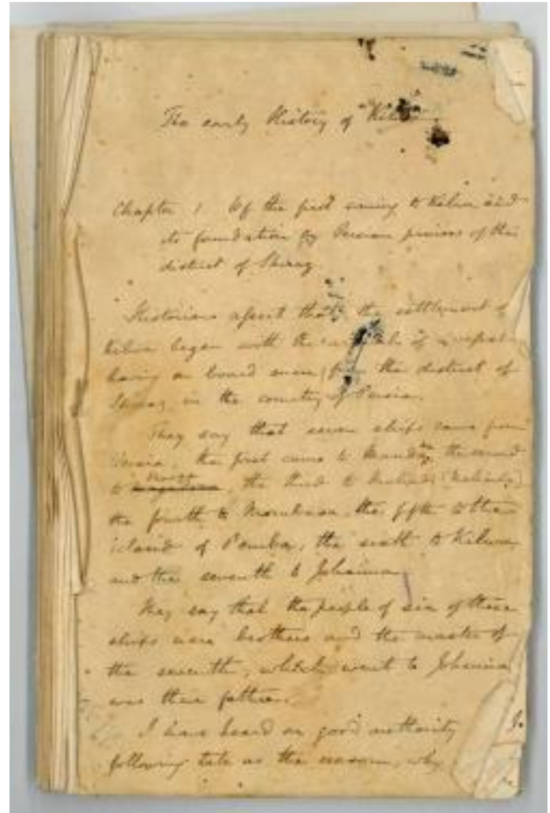
- These cities were never very substantial in size (the largest, Kilwa, was only about 50 acres in extent at its peak), but they contained cosmopolitan populations. By the early 19th century, when these things were first actually studied, these were typically made up of four classes or groups: an ethnically Arab merchant and religious elite; a set of (often manumitted) middle-ranking communities of African artisans, farmers, fishermen and soldiers; “foreigners” and recent immigrants; and a large population of enslaved people.[9] There is still considerable controversy as to the extent to which these same groups existed in earlier periods. A significant number of historians of the Swahili coast suggest that, in the period before 1500, a large proportion of the merchant elite was probably ethnically Bantu, and Swahili speaking.[10] (Most recently, archaeologists working in the area have preferred to move on altogether from attempts to parse the ethnicity of the Swahili coast.)

- They were based right on the coast, and in many cases (including those of Barawa, Lamu, Pate, Kilwa and Mombasa) actually on islands just off the coast that offered superior defensive positions.

- They were increasingly dependent on trade, to the point that well before 1500 most lacked the ability to support their own populations without importing food and other vital goods. This encouraged their participation in the loose but far-reaching peaceful trading networks that characterised the Indian Ocean system, especially in the period before the arrival of Europeans in the region. These networks shared common languages – Persian (for the intra-ocean trade) and various dialects of Swahili – and they had a common material culture, as well as a common religion, Islam, after about 1100.

- Probably at least in part because of this, the states on the Swahili coast were militarily very weak, certainly in comparison to the forces brought against them by the Portuguese after 1500.

- The cities of the Swahili coast controlled only rather small hinterlands, but sometimes served as the terminal points for extensive inland trade routes. This was most notably the case for Sofala, the "furthest south" point of the trading zone – which existed to export gold brought to the coast from the mines of Great Zimbabwe, 400 miles or more inland – but other cities further to the north prospered on an extensive trade in ivory. The slave trade was another important economic staple during this period.[11]



An 1870 MS copy of the Chronicle of the Kings of Kilwa, which dates back to the early 16th century.

- Barawa and its sister cities were an important part of the trading world of the Indian Ocean, which also intersected with the Mediterranean and East Asian trades to ship luxury goods from China to Italy and from the East African coast to India, Malaya and China.[12]

- The delicate and complex interdependencies of the economies of ports along the Swahili coast are best suggested by the rapid collapse of the old trading system that followed almost immediately on the Portuguese seizure of Sofala, and their diversion of the gold trade into European hands.[13]

A little history of Barawa

The most remote period of Barawa's history remains almost entirely obscure,[14] and the town has not been the subject of any significant archaeological investigation, either,[15] so we are forced to rely on what some significantly later written accounts and traditions tell us to reconstruct the early years of the Swahili coast.

Our main source in this regard is the *Chronicle of the Kings of Kilwa,* or *Kilwa Chronicle.* This is, essentially, an elaborated pedigree of the rulers of the city-state of Kilwa, which was for some time the wealthiest of the Swahili states and was located off the coast of what is now Tanzania.[16] The *Kilwa Chronicle* is incomplete and exists in two dramatically different versions (one in Arabic and the other in Portuguese), but neither of the texts dates to earlier than the middle of the sixteenth century.[17] It can be argued that the *Chronicle*'s version of events is backed up by folklore collected along the East African coast and the Comoros Islands,[18] but it is far from clear how independent that folklore is of the chronicle itself – and since the written accounts originate somewhere between five and seven centuries after the fact, they really have to be considered dubious. For what it's worth, however, the *Chronicle* contains the claim (which most authorities now consider to be no more than a foundation myth)[19] that Ali bin al-Hasan, a prince of the Shiraz dynasty of Persia, accompanied by six sons (or brothers) and a number of followers, fled the persecution of a local sultan around 870 CE and set sail for the coast of Africa.

This group, the *Kilwa Chronicle* continues, successfully made landfall, and each of the brothers, or sons, founded and ruled over a town. The ports that the *Chronicle* names do not include Barawa, but a variant of the same myth does name the town, and contends that it was one of the first founded by the Shirazi.[20] Ali bin al-Husain himself, supposedly, later travelled south to Kilwa, and founded his own dynasty there.[21] In one version of events, Barawa was thus one of a number of towns on the Swahili coast to owe its existence to the arrival of the Shirazis, and – Chittick suggests – among the most important, since it was apparently senior to the highly successful city-state of Kilwa.[22] The Shirazis brought with them their Shia religion, the tradition of building in stone, the technique of weaving cotton, and distinctive architectural and artistic styles. It was only later that this Persian elite was supplemented by the arrival of Arab traders and, eventually, settlers, along the Swahili coast.[23]

Modern historical consensus is, to put it mildly, doubtful of such claims. The archaeological evidence we have suggests that every significant trading town that was once part of the Swahili Coast was first established by Africans – except, just possibly, Manda[24] – and hence any immigrants who did arrive on the coast, whether Persian or Arabs, more likely established control by ousting existing rulers from existing towns by force.[25] The "Shirazi" myth itself has been subjected to fairly withering criticism by Allen and Kirkham, who note that documentary and archaeological evidence for *any* specifically Persian settlement of the African coast is entirely lacking before c.1750; the most we have is a pair of thirteenth century inscriptions from Mogadishu that mention Persian names.[26] Since these people could have been visiting merchants, rather than settlers or local rulers, it is

fair to say that – while the idea is still quite commonly encountered in the general secondary sources – any suggestion that Barawa was founded by Persian emigrants in the ninth century remains very much unproven, and is highly unlikely.

Arab dhows with hand-sewn, rather than nailed, planking were the staples of the intra-Indian Ocean trade before the arrival of Europeans in the region.

An alternative proposal, made by John Trimingham, is that the groups from the Banadir coast (the desert coastal area of southern Somalia that includes Barawa) that can be found in medieval records from the area, and who identified as "Shirazi" were actually "Swahilised" Bantu, whose claim to Persian origins was sociologically important but at best "suspect in its quasi-historical details".[27] In other words, the medieval leadership of Barawa was predominantly African. This position is supported by the writings of Richard Burton, who was the first westerner to hear stories of the "Shirazi" from Swahili-speaking informants in the late nineteenth century. Burton concluded that the Shirazi came from Africa,[28]and Allen takes everything a step further by suggesting that the term most probably applied to a status group, rather than one with ethnically or geographically distinct origins.[29]

All in all, then, it seems most likely that Barawa was originally an African port, which probably came into existence as a fishing village some time before 1000, and that the local elite were of predominantly African origin, albeit with the addition of some Arab merchant families. There is linguistic evidence to back this up, since the people of Barawa still speak a dialect of Swahili that has been shown to have roots in the language spoken by the Bantu peoples.[30]

I've gone into some detail here because it's important to understand Barawa's origins if we are to understand its system of government. But, if we move past the mention of the port in the Shirazi origin myth, the next evidence that we have is an inscription dating to c.940, which is the earliest definite reference to its existence.[31] Another, funerary, inscription found in the Friday Mosque in the

town, commemorates the death of a Muslim resident of Barawa named Hajj Chande in 1104-05.[32] We thus do have some evidence that the port existed as more than merely a village, that it was part of a trading network that attracted Arab merchants, and that it probably had an Arab immigrant community by the early twelfth century at the latest.

The Masjid al-Qiblatayn mosque in the Somali town of Zeila dates to the seventh century CE and is one of the oldest mosques in Africa. It gives some idea of what Barawa's Friday Mosque may have looked like in about 1100.

We now move on to the history of Barawa when the city-state was at the height of its wealth and prestige between roughly 1100 and 1500. The main items of trade in this period were most likely ivory and enslaved men, women and children. Its people also manufactured and exported cloth, hats and wooden furniture and carvings, and the profits from all these trades were sufficient to fund the construction of a stone town in the city – built, as such buildings were during this period along the Swahili coast, of coral rag.[33] In the same period, Barawa also became a noted centre of Islamic learning and jurisprudence, attracting scholars and students from along the whole Swahili coast. The city did not remain independent throughout these centuries, however. When the Nahbani dynasty, based in Pate, an island off the coast of what is now northern Kenya, became the dominant regional power from the middle of the fourteenth century, its influence extended as far north as Barawa, where (says Trimingham), Sultan Muhamad II installed a representative in about 1320.[34]

The city, then, was a significant port of call, and it was rich enough and well enough known to have sent envoys, jointly with Mogadishu, all the way to the emperor of China. Barawa was visited, in return, by units from the fleet of the great Chinese admiral Zheng He, probably in 1421 or 1422, in the course of the

seven voyages carried out on orders of the Yongle emperor and his successors between 1405 and 1433. As a result of these exchanges, we have a description of the port as it was in the first half of the 15th century, written by Fei Xin in his *Survey of the Star Raft.* Hyunhee Park points out that Fei himself never visited Barawa, and that his information must have come at second hand and may be at least partly generic and copied from earlier Chinese sources.[35] Nonetheless, while Fei's account certainly contains details that are incorrect, the *Survey* is the closest we can get to glimpsing Barawa at the height of its magnificence – though that was scarcely a height that impressed the well-travelled men of Zheng He's fleet:

The customs are somewhat simple. There is no agriculture of any kind, and the people eke out a living by fishing. Both men and women have hair of knotted fists, and wear short shirts that they sash with strips of cotton. On their ears the women sport gold coins and above their necks they wear fringe pendants. Onions and garlic they have, but they lack any sort of gourd. Civets, which resemble the musk deer; zebras, which are like the piebald donkey; leopards; antlerless deer; rhinoceroses; myrrh; frankincense; ambergris; elephant tusks; and camels comprise the native produce of this land. In trading with them, we use gold; silver; satins; silks; rice; beans; and porcelain.[36]

This prosperous and, apparently, peaceful period of the city's history came to an end early in the sixteenth century, when Barawa attracted the attentions of the Portuguese. European sailors had rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and moved steadily up the coast; between 1505-07, Portuguese ships appeared off Mombasa and Kilwa and sacked both cities. The Barawani also received a visit

A – probably highly fanciful – reconstruction of one of the huge junks that formed the fabled "treasure fleet" of China's eunuch admiral, Zheng He.

from a Portuguese flotilla and, having agreed to pay tribute to the formidably-armed westerners, its rulers made the mistake of reneging on their agreement. This resulted in the port's sack by Tristão da Cunha (the same man who gave his name to the Atlantic island of Tristan da Cunha) in 1506.[37]

Barawa was rebuilt relatively quickly after the Portuguese sack, but it does not appear to have regained much independence. It may well have come under the at least occasional control of the Arjuan sultanate, an inland Somali state, with an hereditary Geledi sultan, which rose and fell between c.1500 and c.1625 and had a major outlet to the sea at Mogadishu.[38] The Portuguese apparently considered it a vassal state for most of the period until the 1580s,[39] but in 1581 an Ottoman corsair by the name of Mir Ali Beg appeared in the region, and his activities resulted in several attempted local uprisings against the over-stretched Portuguese, during which many of the ports along the Swahili coast attempted to regain their independence.[40] From 1585, the town, along with much of the rest of the North-East African littoral, was contested between the Ottomans and the Portuguese until the late seventeenth century.[41]

By 1600, then, Barawa – in common with the other ports along the Swahili coast – had entered into a period of relative decline, which was probably in large part the product of the diversion of most of the lucrative long distance trade that passed along the Swahili coast into European hands.[42] Because the town became relatively insignificant, and was so far from the centres of either Portuguese or Ottoman power, however, it seems likely that the city was never really fully under the control of either empire. This created the conditions in which the rising regional power of Zanzibar – part of a seaborne state that also incorporated Muscat and Oman – was able to lodge its own claims to suzerainty over the port.

Two key dates in this regard were 1758, when Barawa first came into the orbit of the sultans of Zanzibar,[43] and 1840, when it was sacked by an African army from Bardera – a neighbouring Somali sultanate based in a town best known nowadays for producing onions.[44] In between these dates, Barawa seems to have been pushed and pulled in several different directions by the shifting balance of power

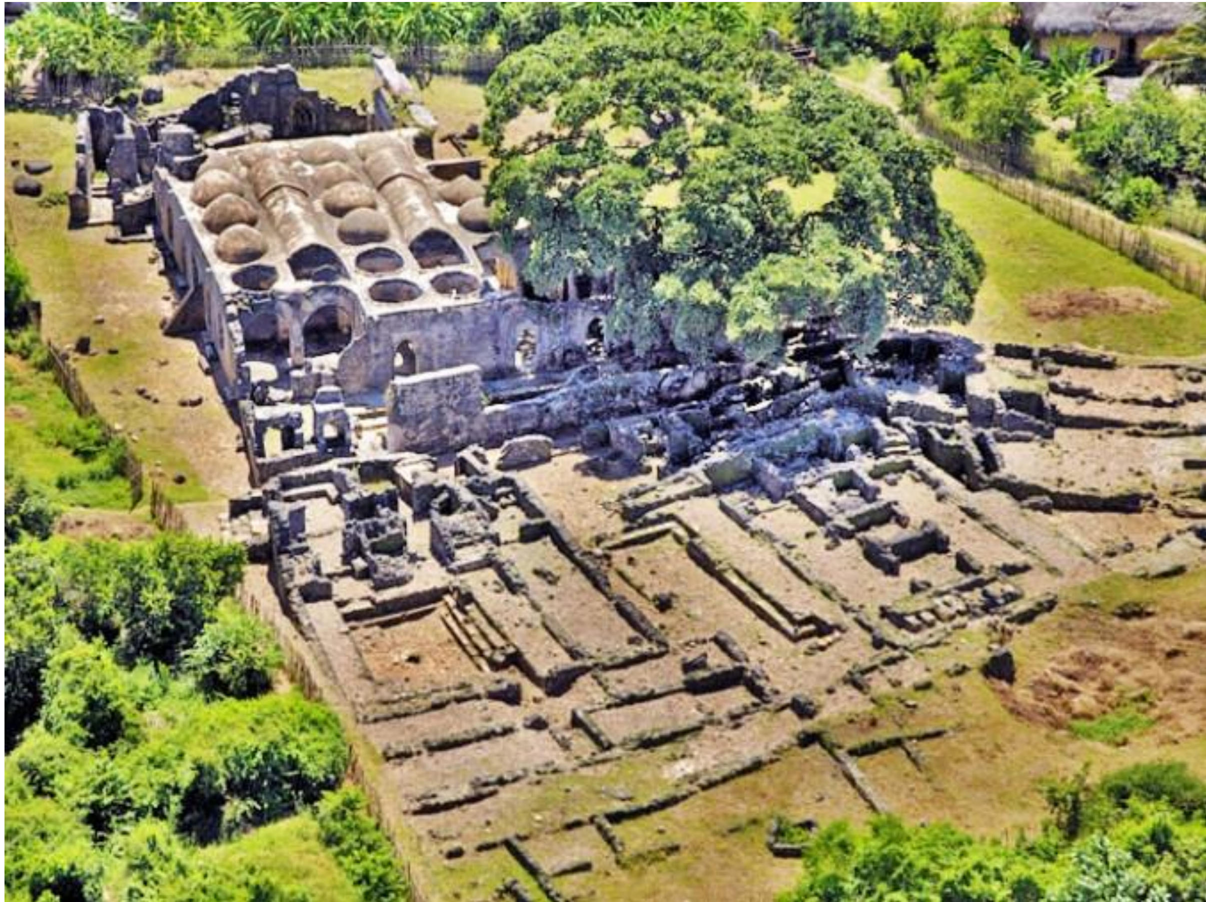
in the region. It had a Zanzibarian governor and a Zanzibiarian garrison.[45] But, although it is stated to have regularly paid tribute to Zanzibar, it attempted to wrest its way free of the Omani orbit during the 1840s by despatching deliberately provocative "gifts" consisting solely of weapons of war – a mail coat, gunpowder and musket balls.[46] There is also a reference to its paying off the Portuguese with a fairly token tribute payment worth £20 a year. This would be remarkable if true, since the Portuguese had exerted practically no influence over the Somali coast since 1698.[47]

Our last glimpse of the old town comes from the writings of a French naval captain, Charles Guillain, who was sent to the Horn of Africa in the mid-1840s to improve French influence in the region. Guillain's lengthy cruise not only took him to Barawa – he is mainly interested in offering a detailed breakdown of the contemporary import-export trade – but also allowed him to build up a detailed knowledge of local power politics. Among other things, he noted the influence that the tribes of the Somali hinterland were able to exert over the port.

According to Guillain, in the decades leading up to Barawa's incorporation into Italy's ramshackle overseas empire, the rulers of the town were still struggling to navigate – as they must have done for centuries – the safest path between the competing demands of local strongmen, meaning the most powerful of the tribal chiefs of the interior; the Zanzibarian governor; and the Sultan of Zanzibar.[48]

The sources and their problems

With this background sketched in, we can turn to the specifics of your query – the governance of Barawa and the sources that can tell us about the ways in which it was organised. These are so scanty that it is actually usual to discuss governance on the Swahili coast as a whole, as though what happened in one if its city-states can tell us something about how things worked in another – and all too tempting to look at the tiny collection of information that we have available for the whole of the – 2,000-mile-long – littoral across almost a millennium and assume that if things worked in such-and-such a way in Town "A" in 1300, then they probably worked in much the same way in Town "B" in 1840. The reality is that town "B" was probably a thousand miles away from "A", had a different ethnic mix and a different relationship with its hinterland, and also faced a unique set of challenges from the major imperial powers of the period. It's inherently risky to draw broad or firm conclusions from static models that, when inspected, turn out to be constructed from scanty, and often late, source material.



The excavated ruins of the great merchantile city-state of Kilwa, on an island off the coast of what is now northern Tanzania

Very broadly, however, we need first to grasp that there were many different "levels" of power involved in the politics of the Swahili coast. At minimum, we know that these included

- Relations between the different tribes represented in the towns along the coast
- Relations between the different classes who made up the population of the towns
- Relations between the secular and religious leaders of the towns
- Relations between the elders of the towns and the local rulers, or strongmen, or regional powers who wanted to extract tribute, and frequently an acknowledgement of suzerainty, from them

This recognition has some significant implications for any attempt to label Barawa "a republic", since even if we could prove that the town had an elected, collective leadership, that is hardly the same thing as showing that this leadership was

unchallenged or free to act as it saw fit, even at the height of the city's power. To make matters worse, the truth is that we simply do not have a sufficient wealth of sources to know for sure exactly how these different levels interacted with each other over time. The information that we have gives us little more than snapshots, taken more or less at random, and over several centuries.

Many of the most useful, and most neutral, accounts of the Swahili coast have been written by archaeologists. Unfortunately, these are generally of very little help when it comes to understanding local politics. The sources that do offer the information that we need fall broadly into three categories, which are

- *Accounts compiled by travellers and geographers*. These date back further than any other sources that we have, but many are fanciful and based on little more than hearsay. Many apparently useful accounts, such as those written by Chinese who served Zheng He, are not actually first hand. Even those travellers who we can be fairly certain did visit the region – the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta is by far the best known – spent only a little time there, and usually in ports other than Barawa.

- *Swahili chronicles*. There are several, including not only the *Kilwa Chronicle* but the *Chronicle of Pate*. However, they are predominantly concerned with establishing pedigrees, and the texts that have come down to us are very late versions of what is often orally transmitted folklore, and are of uncertain provenance.

- *European accounts*. These cover the period from 1500 and several are first hand accounts by sailors (Portuguese, British and French) who actually did call at Barawa. Unfortunately, most spent little time in the region, and their descriptions of the political structures of the cities of the Swahili coast tend to be superficial at best, and often actively misleading.

As I pointed out above, we really only have a small handful of references that tell us anything about the way in which Barawa was governed for the whole of the period from 1100 to 1840. Since almost everything that I will say about the town's "republic" depends on these, it's well worth setting them all out before we take things any further.

- The earliest of these sources is the writings of Muhammed al-Idrisi (1100-1165), an Arab geographer and traveller who lived much of his life at the court of the Norman kings of Sicily. His *Kitab Ruyar*, commissioned by

Roger II and completed in 1154, mentions Barawa as a town ruled by "pagans" who worshipped standing stones smeared with fish oil.[49]

- Next, we have the evidence of Joao de Baros, a highly-respected contemporary historian who was the principal chronicler of the first years of Portugal's Asian empire. His *First Decade of Asia*, based extensively on contemporary journals and letters found in the Portuguese archives, appeared in 1552. After giving the Swahili Coast foundation myth referred to above, he adds two passages on Barawa:

> The first settlement they made in this land of *Ajan* [that is, Zanj, the name then given to the coast and peoples of southern Somalia, Kenya and northern Tanzania] was the city of Mogadishu, and the next at Brava, which even at the present time is governed by twelve chiefs in the manner of a republic, and they are descendants of the seven brothers.[50]

Portuguese ships in the Indian Ocean, 1521

The second passage summarises events of 1503, and discusses the experiences of Captain Ruy Lourenço, who was patrolling off the coast of Mombasa when

> it happened that at different times he captured two ships and three *zambucos* [small, fast ships most often used in the Islamic slave trade], in which were twelve Moors who were some of the chief noblemen of the town of Brava… As this town is governed by a corporation, these twelve moors being the principal heads of

> government, they not only paid ransom for themselves and one of the captured ships, saying that it belonged to the town, but in the name of the said town they made it a tributary of the King of Portugal, paying a tribute of five hundred *miticals* [an Arab measure of gold dust] of gold per annum, and asked for a flag that they might navigate in safety as vassals of the king, which Ruy Lourenço gave them with good will.
>
> The principal reason why these Moors had immediately made themselves vassals was because they were expecting to be followed by a very rich ship, the property of Brava, in which each of them had a large quantity of merchandise. As soon as the ship arrived, Ruy Lourenço understood this prudent conduct, and delivered it over to them entirely and freely, having ascertained that it was theirs, which proceeding filled them with astonishment, seeing that the riches of the ship did not arouse the covetousness of our men because of the protection they had promised them, although they comprehended the precautions that had been employed to save it.[51]

- Another very helpful description – albeit one of no more than 10 lines, in the printed edition – is supplied by the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (1480-1521), who visited the Swahili coast in about 1514, and compiled a description, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa,* which describes the towns he saw. We have no information about how the entries in this itinerary were compiled, or how much was based on eyewitness evidence. Thus, while there is no obvious reason to doubt that Barbosa was at least present in the area at the time, and in a good position to collect reasonably reliable information, we cannot be at all certain that he was ever actually in Barawa. Barbosa describes the city as a town of the Moors, well walled, and built of good houses of stone and whitewash… It has not got a king; it is governed by its elders, they being honoured and respectable persons. It is a place of trade, which has already been destroyed by the Portuguese, with great slaughter of the inhabitants, of whom many were made captives, and great riches in gold, silver, and other merchandise were taken here, and those who escaped fled into the country, and after the place was destroyed they returned to people it.[52]

- We then have a significant gap in the record, which is ended only with the appearance of the French naval officer Charles Guillain in Barawa in 1846-47. His later account of this voyage, published a decade later, was based on a fairly lengthy stay in the vicinity, and as such is worth quoting at length, even though it is so late:

> The population of Brava reaches about 5,000, including slaves. It is made up of Somalis and descendants of the Arabs. The Somali are divided into five distinct tribes – the *Dafaradi*, the *Ouarileh*, the *Hhadjoua*, the *Dakhetera* and the *Gougïal* [all actually sub-clans of the Tunni]; the descendants of the Arabs are made up of two – the *Bidda* [Barawi] and th*e Hhatt'em*ia [Hatimi]. During our stay in Brava, the sheikhs of these tribes were, in the order I just listed them, Sheikh Hhadi-Aouïça, Mehadi-Heraou, Adballah-Abdi, M'hammed-Otsman, Ali-ben-Ibrahim, for the Somalis; and for the Arabs, Déra-ben-Omar and Sheikh Abouki. These sheikhs all enjoyed an equal authority on the council.

So far so good – but Guillain then throws a rather enormous spanner into the works with a quite remarkable passage that reads almost as if it was excerpted from James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, then still 35 years from seeing publication:

Next to this quasi-republican government, it seems there is a species of small-scale monarch. He is elected for seven years; the election takes place in Brava, and is then proclaimed from the coast into the interior. I was seriously assured that he is put to death at the end of the seventh year; but as it seemed to me ridiculous that there would be people willing to accept the title of sultan with such prospects, I believe it is a canard of Idrisi's concerning the inhabitants of Brava.

The present incumbent lives in this land and is called Ali Hap'hénou; they told me of his power, [but] I do not believe that Youceuf [the most powerful tribal leader in Barawa's hinterland] leaves him much to do in the interior; as for the city, it is certain that power is exercised by the sheikhs.

Guillain concludes his passage with some rather heavy-handed humour:

One of the most curious peculiarities of what some geographers call the Republic of Brava is its multiplicity of sovereigns. There are three that I could mention. First Sultan Ali Hap'hénou; then Youceuf, who the people of Brava have good reason to look on as their lord and master; and finally Saîd [Seyyid Said, better known as Said b Sultan, the sultan of Zanzibar, Muscat and Oman], who, again, took all the authority he was allowed to take.[53]

Discussion of the primary sources

Charles Guillain (1808-1875)

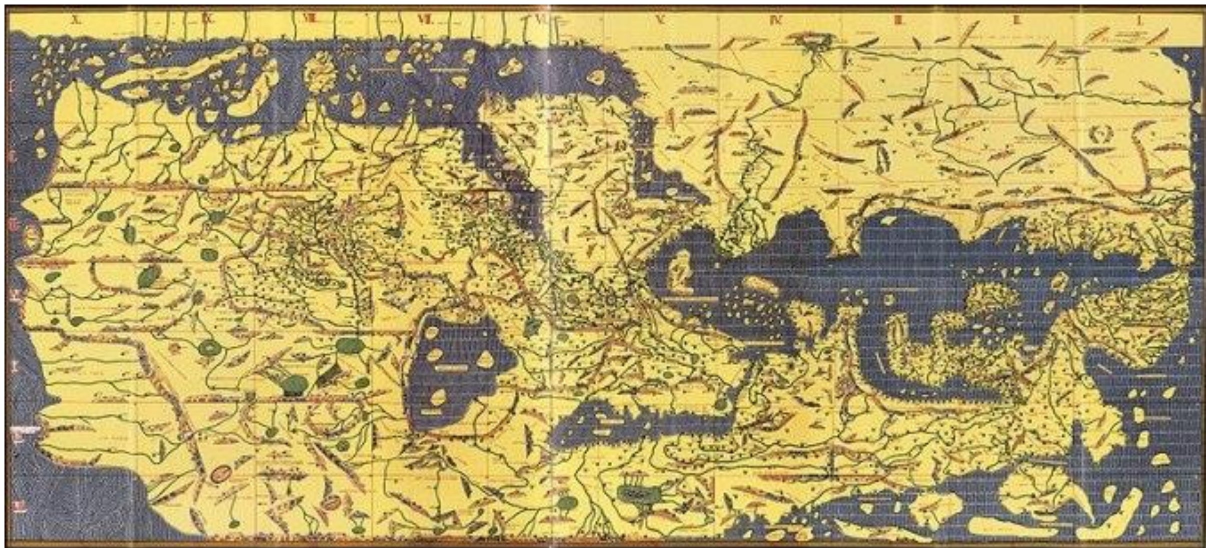
At first glance, then, we appear to have recovered a set of primary sources that are in broad agreement with each other and which cover the whole period from the first European contact with Barawa in 1503 all the way to the 1840s. These sources describe a city-state that "does not have a king", but is governed by a number of "elders" or "sheikhs" who all have "equal authority" on a "council" – and it's easy to see how Barawa could have come to be thought of as a "republic" in these circumstances. Several of the historians of the East African littoral actually use the term, among them Nurse and Spear, who suggest that the "underlying political structure" along much of the Swahili coast was the "oligarchic republic."[54]

We need to note four things here, however. The first is that neither De Baraos, nor Barbosa, nor Guillain actually tell us that the port *was* a republic; De Baraos says it is governed "*in the manner* of a republic" and Guillain – the only one of the three witnesses who actually spent significant time in Barawa – is careful to call the place a "quasi-republic": that is, a state that seems rather like a republic, but which isn't. In other words, both writers are introducing the *idea* of a republic as a comparison in order to explain the city's system of governance to readers familiar with European republics such as Venice, but unfamiliar with the ways of the Swahili coast. Moreover, De Baros is careful to add that membership of the council is open only to descendants of the original – Shirazi – inhabitants of Barawa. As such, it would seem that it was also to a significant degree hereditary.

Alessandra Vianello, who lived in Barawa for two decades in the 1990s and early 2000s, and is the only outside scholar who has ever actually written about the town at any length, is likewise careful to be precise with her description, and avoids suggesting that it was ever actually a republic:

> Brava… was one among those Swahili centres where internal administration had always remained in the hands of a council of elders, without ever having individual rulers.[55]

The second point to bear in mind is that, as soon as we start digging beneath the surface, we find evidence of the hidden complexities and layers that I outlined above. Al-Idrisi describes a state that is still run by pagans at a time when we know that Barawa had already acquired its Friday Mosque; if his description (which may well have reached us via a fairly long chain of informants) can be trusted at all, it suggests – quite plausibly, I think – that in this very early period the city had more than one religious authority, and hence very possibly no single locus of power. Barbosa describes a town left in turmoil by its sack by the newly-arrived Portuguese. And Guillain explains that Barawa's council has to deal with several competing would-be power-brokers, one actually based in the port, one in the hinterland surrounding it, and the third on an island a thousand miles to the south.



The Tabula Rogeriana – a version of al-Idrisi's world map, drawn in 1154

A third point is that we have some evidence, even in this small selection of sources, that the government of Barawa was far from unchanging in this period. Pagan stone-worshippers give way to Muslim tribal elders; these "elders" – a description that, in this place and at this time, surely refers to religious leaders – are conflated with "noblemen" who apparently wield some secular power; the number of seats on the town council shifts from 12 to seven; the people of the hinterland begin to exert political power within the walls of the port (so that the all-"Shirazi" council described by De Baraos in the 16th century turns into the council dominated by Swahili-speaking Somali clans 400 years later); and an odd sort of sultanate apparently emerges. And the white-haired, land-based Islamic elders described by Barbosa and Guillain seem a pretty poor sort of fit with the wily seagoing merchant consortium encountered by Ruy Lourenço.

This last dichotomy is perhaps the most startling of all, since Ruy Lourenço met his group of Barawani elders in 1503, while Barbosa was on the Swahili coast a

mere seven years later. Islam has always been more respectful of commerce than most other religions, and indeed merchant capital played an important part in the rise of the religion.[56] But, even so, it seems at the very least unlikely that these two men were encountering the same group of rulers.

To go further than this, we need to consider a fourth point, which is that we do have other evidence, from other places up and down the Swahili coast, to help us understand how Barawa's sister city-states were run. Potentially dangerous though it is to draw too many comparison and links between what were often very different polities, it can be illuminating to look in more detail at this set of evidence, and it is to the city-states surrounding Barawa that we now turn.

Governance elsewhere on the Swahili coast

Sayyid bin Sultan, the sultan of Zanzibar from 1806 to 1856

To the Portuguese, newly arrived on the east African littoral, the Swahili city-states were a type of polity whose governance – however superficially exotic – could be explained in perfectly familiar terms. Mogadishu had a "king";[57]Mombasa had "a king" who was also "a Moor", meaning a Muslim,[58] just as "a Moor ruled" in Kilwa, further down the coast.[59] Malindi was ruled by a "wealthy sultan,"[60] Sofala by a "king",[61] and Zanzibar by a "lord of the land."[62]

Even the slightest actual acquaintance with these states, however, very rapidly introduced complications. Thus the rulers of Kilwa's dynasty of hereditary sultans turn out to be advised by a council representing the main clans on the island,[63]and this council, in turn, was led by one designated "chief man".[64] Those who were more fully acquainted with existing forms of Islamic rule spotted additional cogs in what were often actually quite complex governmental machines. Thus, a century and a half before the Portuguese appeared, when the Swahili coast was at its height, it was visited by Ibn Battuta – a Moroccan, a vastly experienced traveller, and also an Islamic legal scholar – who spent some time in Mogadishu and noted that its ruler was supported by groups of clerics, elders and military commanders, and had an elaborate "royal court".[65]

Present-day scholars continue to debate how government in the Swahili city-states actually worked. The detailed examination of governance offered by Sinclair and Hakansson (which I should point out is far from uncontested) builds on the earlier work of Allen to break down these various forms of government into two broad types, the "Shirazi model of domination" and the "Arab-Wangwana mode of domination" (in which "*wangwana*" or "*waungwana*" is an Arabic term meaning free or nobly born). The former draws on African ideas – though it also borrows the old legend of a founding dynasty of Persian migrants from Shiraz to lend legitimacy to its rulers. This model, which is also known as the *jumbe*system, places power in the hands of a single overall leader (*jumbe*) but supports him with a wide variety of officials, some of whom have advisory powers, while others are responsible for raising and commanding troops, and others again are purely ceremonial. The sultans who ruled under the Shirazi model generally had some hereditary claim to lead, but their accession was subject to "a process of acceptance" that was not quite so clear cut as an actual election; Sinclair and Hakansson describe it as "a combination of hereditary and consensus." For Allen, the Shirazi model was quasi-feudal and was erected on a hierarchical system of ranked titles, each of which came with sumptuary, economic and ritual privileges attached.[66]

In this view, the Shiarzi model was the dominant one along the Swahili coast before the arrival of the Portuguese, and survived the considerable shock of the Europeans' appearance, only to be replaced by the "Arab-Wangwana model" during the ascendancy of the sultans of Zanzibar during the eighteenth century. In this new model, the overt and hierarchical ranking of people that had existed under the Shirazi model became anathema, and significant power devolved into the hands of a system of corporate patrician groups of equals based on patrilineal descent. However… clans and lineages were ranked according to prestige and individuals according to descent seniority.[67]

In Allen's view, the "Arab-Wangwana model" was the product of the Ibadite Islam practised in Oman, "which abhors overt ranking", and it produced the stone towns of the Swahili coast; these consisted of homes that "represented the wealth and power of the patrician descent groups." Under this form of governance, even the sultan was merely a first among equals.[68]

Medieval Mombasa in 1572.

As Sinclair and Hakansson very reasonably point out, these models – while conceptually useful – are too static to apply to the shifting circumstances of the Swahili coast over nearly a thousand years; in addition, they certainly break down when it comes to the histories of ports such as Barawa and Mogadishu, which were reported to have elements of the *Wangwana* model as early as the 12th or 13th centuries, well before the shock caused by the Portuguese or the arrival of Omani power in the region.[69] Nonetheless, understanding the ways in which the *Wangwana* model of governance actually worked offers considerable insights into the government of Barawa, and allows us to identify several significant "nodes" that appear to match the descriptions that European observers have left us of the Somali port. Sinclair and Hakansson describe the 18th and early 19th century government of Mombasa in this way:

> Mombasa was organised into two sets of *waungwana*, free-born or noble, clan alliances, usually called the three and nine "tribes" or "nations" which appointed members to a council with great power over political affairs and over the sultan or governor as well. In Mombasa, the Omani family Mazuri ruled between the beginning of the 1700s until 1836, when they were overthrown by the Omani sultanate of Zanibar. The Mazuri governors seem to have been in the same position as earlier Swahili "kings", i.e. dependent on the powerful descent groups, each with their appointed leaders. Although frequently at loggerheads, the Mombasa *waungwana* elected a chief as leader, and the British commandant of Mombasa between 1824 and 1826, Lieutenant Emery, observed when meeting with the Mazuri leaders [that] they had to wait for the chief, "without whose sanctions nothing could be finally adjusted."

The *wangwauna* clans were ranked according to a system of prestige and representation which was quite fluid, and each clan alliance contained both

wealthy merchants and regular farmers. While members of different clans were appointed to different government positions by the sultan or governor, few specialised political and economic institutions seem to have existed. Indeed, matters of taxation, trade, justice, and military organisation were in the hands of the clans. Subclans, clans, and clan alliances were the backbone of the Swahili states, which were organized into kin groupings reflected in ward organisation. For example, the custom dues from the island of Pemba, a dominion of Mombasa, were in the hands of the "Three Tribes" clan alliance. Similarly, military mobilisation and deployment was not only dependent on the clans but also on their "Nyika" allies in the hinterland of Mombasa.

The tension between collective clan-based government and hierarchical kingship seems to permeate historical and archaeological analyses of the coastal polities.[70] Here, then, is a description of a model of government that matches what we hear of Barawa – with its councils of elders, its seven distinct tribal groupings (two "Arab" and five "Swahili"), its notable absence of departments of government, and its fractious relations with the more powerful and more warlike tribal groupings of its hinterland, and which falls down only in terms of its periodisation – the "council of elders" reported from Barawa was apparently in existence about two hundred years before the Omanis came to dominate the Swahili coast. This need not, however, be an insuperable problem; the location of the port – on the Somali coast, much closer to Arab influences than most of the other city-states of the Swahili littoral – suggests that it must have had extensive contacts with Oman from an early date, as, in fact, the story of the Barawan delegation that visited China suggests; the merchants of the port are supposed to have encountered Zheng He's fleet while visiting Hormuz.[71] Ibadi Islam, moreover, was already dominant in Oman by the time that Barawa emerged as an Islamic state.[72] So perhaps it was natural for the *waungwana* model of government to make inroads on the Somali coast from quite an early period.

Lapidus summarises the situation by saying that little is known of the political systems of these towns, but it may be surmised that they were composed of lineages. Each town may have had a council of clan chiefs, although such councils were probably superseded by a dominant lineage or by an outside Arab or Persian chief who became ruler and mediator among the local clans. The rulers were legitimised both in terms of hereditary succession and of African symbols.[73]

Given everything that we have learned so far, this makes a considerable amount of sense. Nonetheless, before trying to draw the various parts of this enquiry together in a general conclusion, it's worth mentioning that we do have more detailed (albeit very late) accounts of at least one Swahili polity that existed during this period and which the ethnographer AHJ Prins identified as "a

republic", and his evidence also opens up some unexpected windows on the position in Barawa.[74]

Prins's "republic" is Lamu, another island port located less than 10 miles south-east of Pate on what is now the coast of Kenya. Even at its peak, the town controlled no more than about 140 square miles of territory in its hinterland, but it did boast plenty of fresh water and one of the best deep-water, all-weather ports on its stretch of coast. Like Barawa, it also benefitted from being contested, in this case between neighbouring Pate and the Omani sultans of Zanzibar, who established a small garrison in the port in 1813.[75] Since the Omanis were relatively powerful, but distant, while Pate was weak, but very close, the result (as Blanton and Fargher explain it) was the hesitant flowering of a state that was never fully independent, but which nevertheless retained significant real control over its affairs.[76]

The modern port of Lamu

Lamu, like Pate and like most other Swahili maritime towns, was dominated by a small group of tribes, but the key to its system of government – at least in the 19th century, which is the only period for which we have good evidence – was that the balance of power in the port was uniquely delicate. Thus, while Pate was dominated throughout the eighteenth century by the Nabahani clan, from whose ranks a line of sultans was chosen, Lamu (so Ylvisaker explains), was divided into two halves called Zaina and Suudi – the former of which claimed precedence because it was closer to Mecca, while the latter did so on the grounds that its territory incorporated the town's economically vital port.

All of the noble families were affiliated with one or the other. The halves elected leaders from the heads of their constituent families and, alternately, the elected leaders from the two sections ruled the whole town for four-year periods. Even

though the elders of the leading families acted as advisers to the *mngwana wa yumbe*, as the ruler was called, this form of government tended towards division. That the military regiments were also drawn from the two halves did not lessen this tendency.[77]

Here, too, then, we can hear echoes of the situation in Barawa, with its council divided between elders who claimed Arab descent, and those who were Swahili, and its "elections" – a word that carries with it quite significant republican baggage, but which we surely need to understand, rather, as a process of selection via discussion and consensus.

Perhaps the most significant parallel between Lamu and Barawa, though – certainly from our perspective – is that both states enjoyed fairly lengthy periods of peace and stability in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the case of Barawa, Vianella says,

> the different ethnic groups living in Brava … achieved a remarkable balance of power and a community of interests that led to a sustained peaceful coexistence. Inter-clan clashes were unheard of in Brava during the whole nineteenth century, as witnessed by all the foreigners who visited the town, for whom the situation appeared so exceptional in the Benadir [south Somali coast] context of the time as to warrant particular remarks. Law and order was also maintained in Brava by checking the daily influx of people from the countryside at the town gates, where they had to leave their weapons until the time they left in the evening, after they had sold their goods or transacted their business.[78]

Perhaps it is here, then – in this delicate stability that nonetheless succeeded in producing an enduing peace – that we can root Barawa's unusual, if not quite unique, system of government: one that attained a state of equilibrium based on a combination of consensus backed by the influence that tribal elders had over their tribes without requiring a local sultan to take charge and lead the state against its enemies.

I believe that this is the best explanation for the Barawa described by Guillain – at least if the town is stripped of the bizarre and impotent seven-year "sultan" that the French naval captain describes – particularly if we conclude that it was, perhaps, the razing of the city by the forces of a neighbouring town in 1840 that began the process of destabilisation and the rise in the influence of the heavily-armed tribes of the hinterland that Guillain witnessed.

This does not, admittedly, explain why we have no references to Barawa (apparently uniquely among all the city-states of the Swahili coast) having *ever* had a genuinely influential sultan at any time in its history, nor how a consular form of government could have survived the seismic impact of the sack of the city by the Portuguese in 1506-07 apparently unscathed. That is why I draw attention to the considerable gap in our records of the city. The Portuguese records of Barawa's government date to the period before, and immediately after, the sack; we then have no real idea of how the city was governed until the peaceful days of the early 19th century.

Barawa seen, as it should be, from the sea.

It does seem possible that the port underwent changes of government during this period, and that perhaps we simply have no record of the rise and fall of one or more sultans in the city who based their claims to legitimacy at least in part on military prowess. We may never know the solution to this problem, but, whatever the answer is, we know enough, now, about Barawa to realise that even though the city-state was never in any real sense a "republic", it did have a rather remarkable, very unusual – and apparently effective – government for much of the time that it existed as an independent polity.

Notes

1. Cerulli, *Somalia: Scritti Vari Editi ed Inediti,* I, 37. It's worth noting that we have no photograph of this inscription, and its content has never been verified. Cerulli himself never visited Barawa in more than two decades in Somalia (an indication of the town's remoteness and perceived unimportance nowadays), and had his information from a local correspondent.
2. Omar, *The Scramble in the Horn of Africa* p.20.
3. Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China* pp.97-8; Ma Huan, *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* pp.18-19
4. Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar* (London, 1866)
5. Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de L'Afrique Orientale*, II, 170-1.

6. Lewis, "The concept of an Islamic republic," pp.1-5.
7. Jama, *The Origins and Development of Mogadishu,* p.87.
8. Sinclair and Hakansson, *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* p.463.
9. Ibid p.468
10. Horton and Mudida, "Exploitation of marine resources" pp.673- 75; Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* pp.154-55.
11. Sinclair and Hakansson, op.cit. p.473.
12. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* p.34.
13. Nurse & Spear, *The Swahili* p.85.
14. Vianello, "Nineteenth and twentieth century Brava," p.51.
15. Ibid p.50. But see also Jama, op.cit. pp.41-48. Jama notes a core problem for anyone with an interest in medieval Barawa: a dynamic local environment has left very few traces of the old port, and "most of its old buildings are now buried underneath deposits up to 6 m deep."
16. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents* p.34; Chittick, *Kilwa* I, 14.
17. Chittick, "Kilwa and the Arabic settling of the East African Coast," p.251.
18. Freeman-Grenville, op.cit. pp.34, 89.
19. Allen, "The 'Shirazi' problem in East African coastal history," p.183.
20. Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa* VI, 240.
21. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents* pp.35-36.
22. Chittick, "Medieval Mogadishu," p.51.
23. Hrbek, *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, p.292.
24. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent* p.214.
25. Allen, *Swahili Origins,* pp.114-15.
26. Ibid.
27. Allen, "Shirazi problem," p.183.
28. Allen, *Swahili Origins,* p.115.
29. Allen, "Shirazi problem," pp.183-85; Wynne-Jones, *A Material Culture* p.370.
30. Vianello, op.cit. p.51.
31. Lewis, "Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa," p.218
32. Cerulli, op.cit. I, 37. More work would need to be done by specialists in the region to confirm the ethnicity of this person. Cerulli comments: “I was unable to go personally to Brava to carry out direct research on the remains of the Arab medieval antiquities that undoubtedly exist there. A Bravanese ... sent me the copy of another (I believe funerary) inscription, which reads thus: Hajj Shanid, son of Abu Bakr, son of Umar, son of Uthman, son of Hasan, son of Ali, son of Abu Bakr; and he passed into that (?) tomb in the year 498, the month being Rabi’ al Akhir.” The lineage sounds distinctively Arabic, but Nurse, in his *Bajuni Database*, adds that the correct transliteration of the name "Shanid" is Chande, which is Swahili, and is "written as is usual for Swahili/Chimiini with Arabic letters shin-alef-nun-dal)." Perhaps this is an example of an Arab immigrant family integrating with the local Bantu community?
33. Sinclair and Hakansson, *Comparative Study* p.467; Nurse & Spear, *The Swahili* p.16.
34. Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa* p.13.
35. Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds* p.176.
36. Quoted in Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China,* pp.103-04.
37. D'Alòs-Moner, "Conquistadores, Mercenaries, and Missionaries," p.8.

38. Allen, *Swahili Origins,* pp.148, 160.
39. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* pp.152-80.
40. Ibid.
41. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas,* pp.15-17.
42. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara,* p.198.
43. Mukhtar, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia* p.51.
44. Guillian, *Documents*, II, 38.
45. Vianello, op.cit. pp.57, 59.
46. Guillian, op.cit. II, 569.
47. Brooks & Marshall, *New Universal Gazetteer*, p.121; Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa* p.20.
48. Guillian, op.cit. II, 571.
49. Allen, *Swahili Origins,* p.71; Jama, *Origins and Development of Mogadishu* p.37; Freeman-Grenville, *East African Coast* p.87; Trimingham, op.cit. p.5. We should note that al-Idrisi's account does not mention "Barawa" or "Brava" – it describes a town that he calls "Bedouna, at the extremity of the country of the kaffirs". It is usually assumed that his description actually refers to Barawa, but it would be dangerous to assume that this is absolutely confirmed.
50. Theal, *Records*, VI, 233.
51. Ibid pp.219-20.
52. Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa*, p.15.
53. Guillian, op.cit. II, 570-571.
54. Nurse & Spear, op.cit. p.85.
55. Vianello, op.cit. p.52.
56. Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital,* pp.76-125.
57. Freeman-Grenville, *East African Coast* p.33.
58. Kusimba, *Rise and Fall of the Swahili States* p.93.
59. Corea, *The Three Voyages of Vasco da Gama*, p.292.
60. Nurse & Spear, op.cit. p.93.
61. Kusimba, *Rise and Fall* p.167.
62. Freeman-Grenville, *East African Coast* p.76.
63. Ibid p.36.
64. Corea, op.cit. p.293.
65. Freeman-Grenville, *East African Coast* pp.28,30.
66. Sinclair and Hakansson, op.cit. pp.468-69.
67. Ibid, pp.469-70
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid pp.470-71.
70. Ibid.
71. Wyatt, op.cit. p.97.
72. Staples, "Oman and Islamic maritime networks," pp.81-115.
73. Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, p.481.
74. Prins, T*he Swahili-speaking peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast*, p.48.
75. Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar,* pp.82-83.
76. Blanton & Fargher, *Collective Action in the Formation of Pre-Modern States* pp.48.
77. Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century* p.67.
78. Vianello, op.cit. pp.53-54.

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