From Shirazi to Sidi: The Evolution of Swahili Identity

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Until recently, the Indian Ocean region was largely marginalized and seen as being comprised of third world countries with little to offer. In recent decades, this idea has been tested and utterly debunked. The Indian Ocean area has some of the oldest cultural significance in the world, and there is still a great deal to discover about it. Despite the growing popularity of this field, many people still have a somewhat limited knowledge of what countries comprise the Indian Ocean. It is often forgotten that the eastern coast of Africa is also part of this region, and that it has had cultural and economic ties with other Indian Ocean countries for centuries. In this paper, I will explore the changing identity of the people of this region, which has come to be called the Swahili Coast. I will look at not only how Swahili self-identity has changed over time, but also how others have perceived them throughout the centuries and how the notion of identity can be altered due to changing political atmospheres. This examination of identity will include not only people who have remained on the Swahili Coast for centuries, but also those who have been displaced at a later time. In addition, I will discuss the place of the Swahili in the Indian Ocean and show that, historically, it has been much more than just a fringe region with little impact on the rest of the world.

Before discussing the evolution of Swahili identity, we must first identify exactly where the Swahili Coast is located. Modern historians define the Swahili Coast as the area spanning 2500-3000 kilometers from Mogadishu, Somalia to the Cape of Delagoa in southern Mozambique[1]. Several island nations are included in this region, including Zanzibar, Pembar, and the Comoros archipelago. Linguists further divide the Coast into three regions: the Bandir Coast, spanning from the Horn of Africa to the Lamu islands, the Mrima Coast, from Lamu to Kilwa, and a third region from Kilwa to Inhambane in south-central Mozambique[2]. In terms of geography and

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[1] Chapurkha M. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* (AltaMira Press, 1999), 21.

[2] Michael N. Pearson. *Port Cities and Intruders : The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. eBook Collection), 68-69.

resources, the Swahili Coast is far from being a uniform area. Towns directly on the coast were, of course, wonderful sources of fish, and provided valuable ports for trading. However, a bit farther inland, plateaus abound, and were prime hunting grounds[3]. In these areas, residents hunted a variety of large game, including elephants, leopards, and rhinos; such animals were not only useful for food, but also provided valuable trading goods such as ivory. Still, other areas of the coast hosted thick forests, lush with mangrove trees. As we see, the Swahili Coast was and still is an extremely diverse region.

As stated above, contemporary scholars have defined the Swahili Coast very specifically. Until recently, however, the coast had much more fluid boundaries, and different groups of people have held their own unique interpretations of what encompassed the Swahili Coast. For example, medieval Arab and Chinese traders referred to Africa's eastern coast as Zanj[4] . The first recorded reference of the Zanj was made by an Arab astronomer named al-Fazari, in the 780s. Though he only mentioned it perfunctorily, it was clear that Arabs used this term to refer to both the physical area of the coast, as well as the people who lived there. A later geographer known as al-Ya'qubi was much more thorough in his description of the Zanj. In his book, *Chronicals of Ibn Wadih*, al-Ya'qubi outlined one perspective on the origins of the modern Swahili. He wrote,

> The children of Kush and Ham — and they are al-Habash and aI-Sudan —divided after crossing the Nile of Egypt. One branch went to the right, between east and west (i.e. to the south). These were al-Nuba, al-Buja, al-Habasha and al-Zanj. The other part went westwards.

From this excerpt, it is evident that medieval Arabs (at least according to this source) very clearly made a distinction between Eastern and Western Africans. This passage also highlights an interesting dynamic in ethnic relations. The al-Habasha who were referenced were actually an amalgamation of African peoples living both in the Zanj and surrounding areas. They included Abyssnians, Nubians, and several other groups of people. This suggests that the Arabs of the past assigned African identity based largely on geographical spacing, rather than cultural, ethnic, or linguistic similarities. At the same time, the actual people of the Zanj would likely have had far more discriminating methods of self identification. This illustrates how variable identity can be, even within a specific time period.

Arab traders of the Middle Ages were outsiders looking in on Swahili culture. As such, it makes sense that they did not take into account certain

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[3] Chapurkha, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, 74.

[4] Marina Tolmacheva, "Toward a Definition of the Word Zanj," in *Azania: Archeological Research in Africa volume 22 issue 1*, 105-106.

nuances of identity which only a native would be aware of. With this in mind, we must now consider how Swahili self-identity has changed over time.

Heavy population of the Swahili coast did not begin until the middle of the first millennium B.C.E[5]. People from farther inland began to move to the coast in larger numbers in order to take advantage of trading opportunities with the greater Indian and Mediterranean Oceans. Using monsoon wind patterns, the people of the coast were able to circumnavigate the entire Indian Ocean in around fifteen months, allowing for multiple voyages throughout a lifetime. Adria LaViolette argues that the active pursuing of such cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, fostered by this oceanic mobility, is the defining characteristic of Swahili identity. Though strong arguments can be made for the importance of other aspects of the Swahili, it is true that this cosmopolitan lifestyle was paramount during the early centuries. The importance of international trade can be seen in artifacts from the Swahili Coast. Goods such as Chinese porcelain, Sasanian ceramics, Indian jewelry, and glass from the Mediterranean all evince that very early on (specifically from the 7th to 9th centuries), international trade was a major component of Swahili life.

Closely connected to cosmopolitanism is the concept of maritimity. Maritimity is not only the use of water passages for food and trade, but for "broader patters of sociocultural organization, practice, and belief within a society"[6]. Jeffrey Fleisher argues that the close connection that the Swahili had with the sea was one of their most defining traits, and as such, is vital to Swahili identity. According to them, true maritmity, and its implications on identity, did not arise until the 11th century. It was during this time that many changes can be seen in Swahili society. For example, rather than looking primarily to coastal waters for seafood, people began fishing farther into the oceans. Animal remains from several Swahili towns imply that the hunting of sharks became common after the 12th century, showing an increased willingness to go offshore. Also, an Arab scholar of the late 10th century noted that the people of the Zanj used boats specifically engineered to hunt and transport sperm whales. And concerning navigation, the end of the first millennium brought with it the adoption of the Chinese magnetic compass, which insinuates voyages farther into the ocean were being attempted.[7]

Aside from hunting larger sea animals, the Swahili people also began to orient their lives seaward during the early second millennium. Mosques were moved from the center of a city to the shoreline, giving the ocean

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[5] Adria LaViolette, "Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D 600-1500" in *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archeological Congress vol.4 iss. 1*, 27-34.

[6] Jeffrey Fleisher et al., "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?", *American Anthropologist*, 2-9.

[7] Norman C. Rothman, "Indian Ocean Trading Links: The Swahili Experience", in *Comparative Civilizations Review issue 46*, 81.

religious and not just economic significance. Also, the use of coral and lime to build the fabled "stone towns" of the Swahili coast illustrates how oceanic materials were being incorporated into everyday life. All of this, combined with the fact that long distance trading did increase greatly after the 11th century, does seem to suggest that maritimty did become an important part of Swahili identity. But the question remains, why did it take so long for the Swahili to become genuinely maritime? The answer to this can be found by looking at the prevalence of Islam along the coast.

The rise of Islam brought a new and complicated dynamic to Swahili identity. Though there is evidence of Islamic influence as early as the 8th century, it was not until the 12th century that Islam became truly dominant on the coast. The expansion of this religion is complicated because it both lessened and bolstered previous notions of Swahili identity. As Islam rose in prominence along the coast, I believe it replaced cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism as the single most important factor in Swahili identity. However, with Islam came Arabization. This included an increase in the use of the Arabic language, dress, and trade with other Arabic and Muslim areas. As such, the Swahili Coast became integrated in an international system of Arab culture, which furthered their sense of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. This trading with far off lands also facilitated the growth of the Swahili into a maritime society, which may be why they did not achieve true maritimity until Islam and Arabization were in a crescendo.

In addition to fostering multiculturalism, Islam was the single most important aspect of Swahili identity because it influenced how trading and economics functioned.[8] Scriptures from the Koran dictated "fair practice in the market place." And due to passages such as, "Shu'aib' told them to use honest scales and to give just measure and weight,"[9] every major market had overseers called *muhtash*, who were in charge of scales were weighted properly and transactions were being carried out fairly.[10] Apart from this, religious affiliation also affected tariffs. Customs duties began at 2.5% for Muslims, 5% for "protected" non-Muslims, and 10% for all others. It is this pervasiveness of Islam, not only in religious settings, but also in the secular arena, that made it such a vital component of what it meant to be Swahili.

The Arabization of many parts of the Indian Ocean increased trade, but it was not the only reason for Swahili Coast prosperity. The "Golden Age" of the Swahili, spanning from the mid-12th through the 15th century was contributed to by many factors, including the skill of the Swahili. The people of the coast were some of the most proficient metalworkers in the world. They mastered the art of annealing (superheating a metal and then cooling it slowly in order to improve ductility) and oxidizing (used to rid metal of impurities),

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[8] Norman C. Rothman, "Indian Ocean Trading Links: The Swahili Experience", 80-86.
[9] Koran 7:85.
[10] Norman C. Rothman, "Indian Ocean Trading Links: The Swahili Experience", 80.

which made their metal exports highly valuable. They sold their finished products primarily to India and along the Persian Gulf; however, the quality of these metal exports was so high that Indian merchant resold them to parts of Europe, making Swahili craftsmanship sought throughout much of the then-known world. Women from all over wore gold, silver, and bronze jewelry from cities such as Kilwa and Mogadishu. This circulation of precious metals from the coast made it so that Swahili gold was one of the most important factors in maintaining a stable Indian Ocean economy. Also, the 15th century brought more direct trade with China. In 1417, the imperial Chinese fleet sailed to the coast, and they visited again in 1435. With the strengthening of this relationship, the two ends of the Indian Ocean were brought together, creating an even more integrated oceanic system.

The prosperity of the Golden Age of the Swahili leads us to a very important topic in the identity of those on the coast. Many of the raw materials which were used by the Swahili came from regions farther inland, which makes one wonder about the relationship between the Swahili and other Africans. Though there is a notion that coastal people largely kept to themselves and did not interact with people in the interior of Africa, scholarly research has proven otherwise. As of late, the term "umland", once used only in European contexts, has been adopted by scholars of other areas.[11] This term refers to the area directly outside a city or town which is culturally and/or economically tied to that town or city. The fact that this term has been applied to the Swahili Coast shows that coastal peoples did indeed interact with those farther inland. Coastal cities depended on their umlands for crops (the sandy soil of the coast was not good for agriculture) and other raw materials. In his novel, "Port Cities and Intruders", M.N. Pearson makes an important comparison between the economic systems of India and those of the Swahili Coast. In the former, brokers were extremely important in facilitating trade and commerce. As such, the transfer of goods from the umland to a port city would largely be handled by this third party. Pearson noted a lack of such brokers on the Swahili Coast, meaning that people that lived inland interacted directly and regularly with coastal Swahili. In fact, studies on several Swahili areas, such as Pate and Lamu, have shown that many plantations inland were actually owned by Swahili businessmen on the coast. This frequent interaction led to intermarrying between the two groups, ensuring that they always had closes ethnic ties.

From their interactions with people of the interior, it becomes clear that for most of their history, the Swahili did not see themselves as completely separate from their fellow Africans. However, this perception began to change as Oman gained more influence in the 18th and 19th centuries. Prior to Omani colonization, the Swahili Coast has been under the rule of the Portuguese since

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[11] Michael N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders : The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)), 63-73.

the beginning of the 16th century. Despite having occupied the coast for over a century, the constant uprisings from the Swahili made it so that the Portuguese were never able to fully integrate it into their empire. In the 1720s, Oman took advantage of this weakness, and helped the Swahili rid themselves of their European ruler. This assistance was not completely magnanimous, and soon the Swahili Coast had been absorbed into the Omani Sultanate. In fact, in 1840, Sultan Seyyid Said moved the capital of Oman to Zanzibar. This colonization by Oman created a new social structure in Zanzibar, and all over the Swahili Coast. Native Omanis were of course at the top of this structure, and in order to ally themselves with the new ruling class, Swahili elites began to manufacture their own origin stories.[12] According to this newly created story, the Swahili are descended from seven merchant princes from the Shiraz area of modern-day Iran. Each of the princes was said to have sailed down the Swahili Coast and established a town which they ruled over. The proliferation of this origin tale emphasized a clear shift in Swahili self identity (at least among the upper classes). Now, their identity was inextricably connected with being of foreign descent, and this differentiated them from people who lived in the interior.

Omani rule also contributed to the reformation of Swahili identity by introducing large scale slavery. Slaves were often brought from the inland, which further made the Swahili see themselves as being different, and, in this case, superior. Now, rather than business partners or comrades, non-Swahili Africans were looked down upon. Michael Pearson notes this change in attitude in the following passage:

> Newly imported slaves were despised as 'barbarians' or as uncultured 'ignoramuses'…those [slaves] who were most successful in such struggles were slaves who had been born into coastal culture and religion…these slaves commonly attained social positions that had been denied to their 'barbarian' forbearers.

This passage highlights an interesting double standard in the valuing of multiculturalism. As previously stated, the rise of Islam and Arabization allowed the Swahili Coast to be part of a greater network of international Islam. And Omani colonization only reinforced that willingness to take part in foreign cultures. However, native African culture was excluded from this multiculturalism, and systematically repressed throughout the colonial period. This identification with foreign powers, and the apparent rejection of African culture would later prove to be detrimental to the Swahili people.

Omani colonization was highly influential for the Swahili, but European rule illustrates how they were perceived by outsiders in the mid-

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[12] Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888 (*Heinemann), 85-86.

modern era. The "scramble for Africa" in the late 19th century divided this continent among European nations, and the Swahili Coast was not exempt from this power struggle. England and Germany ended up with primary control over eastern Africa, and their initial encounters with the Swahili set the foundation for the Colonial Theory.[13] This theory asserts that the complex civilizations found on the Swahili Coast are a product of Arab colonization, and not of African ingenuity. This idea was so widely asserted, that the 1911 version of Encyclopedia Britannica stated "The energy and intelligence derived from their Semitic blood have enabled them to take a leading part in the development of trade and the industries."[14] In the racially insensitive world of the early 20th century, Swahili identity was seen as being a mix between a superior Arab culture, and an inferior and primitive African culture. It is partially due to this line of thinking that until the 1980s, most people believed that the Swahili language (called Kiswahili) was a genuine mix of Arabic and Bantu languages. Like the Colonial Theory, this would too be disproved.

Scholars now know that the Colonial Theory was very heavily flawed. Though there had been Arab influence prior to the 18th and 19th centuries, it was not until this time that the Omani actually colonized the Swahili Coast. As such, the buildings, trade routes, and technology created on the coast prior to this were largely due to the work of the Swahili, not outside forces. As addressed previously, one of the defining characteristics of the coast is the extensive use of coral and lime. Mosques and tombs using these materials date back as early as the 11th century, long before any colonization, and before Islam has even reached its peak on the Swahili Coast[15]. Even later religious buildings have architectural features that are distinctly African. Tombs dating back to the 13th century have been found, and were ornately adorned with decorative panels (sometimes made of Chinese porcelain), and other valuable goods[16]. The extravagance of these gravesites is not found anywhere else in the Islamic world during this time; this is likely because Muslim graves are traditionally supposed to be very modest. However, the ornate nature of tombs is not uncommon in traditional African culture. Thus, the idea that native Africans could not be responsible for the creativity and architectural ingenuity of the Swahili Coast has been debunked.

Additionally, advances in the study of linguistics in recent decades have made it very clear that Kiswahili is indeed a Bantu language. In the 1980s, linguists began exploring the nuances of the Swahili language, and found that it is closely related to Sabaki, a group of languages that are spoken

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[13] Chapurkha, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, 27.
[14] "Swahili", *The Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 26 , 11th ed.*, 177.
[15] Jeffrey Fleisher et al., "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?", in *American Anthropologist*, 9 .
[16] Felix Chami, "Cities and Towns in East Africa*",* in *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures 2nd ed*., 109-113.

in Kenya.[17] These Sabaki languages are in turn related to languages prominent in northeastern Tanzania (appropriately called the Northeast Coast languages); by studying these tongues scholars have been able to show how they spread throughout eastern Africa. Supposedly, people speaking the Northeast Coast languages were living along the coast of northern Tanzania in the early first millennium. From Tanzania, they migrated north to Kenya, when their language splintered and evolved into a Sabaki language. Throughout the next several hundred years, the Sabaki language too splintered, until several languages, including Swahili and Comorian emerged. Swahili itself does have significant Arabic influence; however, most of the words borrowed from Arabic have to do with subjects such as religion, law, and trade. Arabic arrived too late for it to have an effect on grammatical structure, or other fundamental aspects of Kiswahili. This linguistic analysis is highly important because it exemplifies the foreign influence that the Swahili received due to their interregional trading networks. Simultaneously, it firmly marks Kiswahili as fundamentally African, couching the identity of the Swahili people in Africa, rather than abroad.

We have now seen how Swahili identity has changed through the early 20th century, but how do modern Swahili combat issues of identity? Jeffrey Fleisher has been studying the archaeology of the Swahili Coast for several years, and while excavating there, he has asked local peoples about their origins.[18] According to him, many Swahili still claim that they originate from the seven Shirazi merchant princes. Additionally, a fair amount sees themselves as fundamentally different from other Africans. This ideology led to significant problems for the Swahili during the 1960s and 1970s. It was during these decades that African territories began gaining their independence, and forming their own states. As this occurred, countries with significant Swahili populations (such as Somalia and Tanzania) began to question whether the Swahili were truly African.[19] The Swahili had been associating themselves with foreign origins for over a century at this point, and they had now come to be associated with colonial powers. This sense of otherness made them a target for political violence during the opening years of independence, and made it more difficult to attain citizenship in the newly formed nations. As such, the Swahili began to re-brand themselves once more, this time, seeking to accentuate their African roots. The actual term "Swahili" became more popularized and "Shirazi" was used less. This shows a trend away from being associated with the Middle East.

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[17] Thomas Spear, "Early Swahili History Reconsidered", in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies vol. 33 no. 2*, 257-290.
[18] Jeffrey Fleisher, "Who are the Swahili" (lecture, Rice University, Houston, TX, March 25, 2015).
[19] Pearson, M. N. *Port Cities and Intruders : The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era*, 17.

Perhaps the best example of how changes in identity and politics interact is the Zanzibar Revolution in 1964. The year before the revolution, Tanganyika (modern-day Tanzania) and by extension Zanzibar, had been given its independence by the British. Until this point, the Arab minority on the island had managed to hold onto the power that it had gained during the Omani Sultanate. They held a monopoly on most business ventures, despite being less than 20% of the population. Zanzibar chose to be governed by a constitutional monarchy, led by Sultan Jamshid bin Abdullah When the first parliamentary elections were held upon independence, ethnic tensions increased exponentially and political parties were based largely on race. Three separate elections had to be held due to accusations of fraud, and in the end despite winning 54% of the popular vote, the majority African party only won thirteen out of the thirty-one seats in Parliament (less than 42%). A coalition government led by the majority Arab party won the remaining eighteen seats, and thereby the most power in the government, much to the anger of the African population.

Early in the morning on January 12, 1964, between 600 and 800 - mostly African- revolutionaries attacked several police stations and armories, gaining possession of an assortment of weapons. The rebels took over important government buildings, eventually forcing the Sultan and other top members of the government to flee. The number of people who died due to the revolution has been highly contended. The interim government that was created claimed that only fifty to sixty people were killed, while other, more fantastical sources say that 20,000 people died. According to a CIA report by the U.S. government, "competent authorities put the figure at approximately 4,000", most of who were Arab.[20] The fact that Zanzibar went from the capital of the Omani Sultanate, to the site of a massive slaughter in barely a century, shows the extreme shift in Swahili identity in Zanzibar in particular, and to a lesser degree, in the Swahili Coast as a whole.

Modern Swahilis still face issues with balancing their African and Arab identities. One major battle has been between *dini* (religion) and *mila* (local culture). *Mila* is said to encompass "ritual practices involving dancing, healing, spirit possession, invocations, and offerings which are associated with the 'Bantu heritage' of the Swahili culture."[21] Such traditions can often be in contradiction with orthodox Islamic values. For example, the manner in which *maulidi*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, is celebrated has been highly contested. The recitation of certain prayers is complimented by small drums and tambourines in some areas of the coast (particularly in northern Kenya), and the actual prayers supposed to be said in an intonation that almost sounds melodic. This combination has caused the ire of orthodox Islamic scholars for

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[20] Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence Study- Zanzibar: the Hundred Days' Revolution*, May 2007.

[21] Kai Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (Edinburgh University Press 2007), 82-84.

years, some saying that it is against, or at the very least undesirable the eyes of Sharia law. In this situation, we see an expression of local culture, the use of indigenous instruments, can be religiously provocative. And we also see that despite this conflict, many Swahili are maintaining their connection with traditional African culture, which again, illustrates how their allegiances have shifted from the 1800s to today.

So far, this paper has traced the change in identity of Swahili people who have remained on the Swahili Coast. However, there is a significant population of people who claim Swahili origin, but find themselves thousands of miles from their ancestral homeland. These people are called Sidis. They are the descendents of Africans, mostly from eastern Africa, who were brought to India at as early as the 13th century.[22] The reasons for these migrations varied immensely. Arab merchants often traded in slaves; these slaves could be sold for a variety of purposes, from doing housework, to being soldiers in an army. In the mid 16th century, it is thought that one of the kings of Bengal had an army of up to 8,000 Africans. Swahili men also willingly served in Indian armies, further bolstering the number of African in the subcontinent. When the Portuguese forced their way into the coast at the beginning of the 16th century, the slave trade increased dramatically. Thousands of slaves were taken not only to Portuguese colonies in the Americas, but also to India. This is because in 1505, Portugal gained control of several coastal areas of India, including Goa, Daman, and Diu, and these new colonies became "Portuguese India". As such, the European power had easy access to slave markets in India.

The Sidis of today are certainly different from their predecessors. Many of the original Africans married with local Indians, giving their offspring a dual identity. However, despite being several generations removed from their African ancestors and being surrounded by a different culture, Sidis have managed to retain their Swahili identity surprisingly well. Edward Alpers notes that people perform a *dammal*, which is modeled after a traditional African drum dance, at certain Islamic rituals, showing their dedication to their culture. In his experience, "the Sidis took pride in their African descent and felt confident about the intrinsic worth of their culture". In addition to this, it seems that the Sidis of Gujerat had very different "self perceptions, worldviews, and lifestyles" than the Indian Muslims around whom they lived. According to Alpers, "the Sidis are neither religiously rigid nor too deeply concerned with flaunting their religious identity as Muslims". The attitudes of the Sidi toward their African heritage and toward Islam have created a fair amount of hostility among other Muslims; their practices are seen as almost heretical, and in need of the pruning of orthodoxy. As can be imagined, the Sidis are an extremely marginalized group in India. In total,

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[22] Edward A. Alpers, Forward to "Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians" (Rainbow Publishers, 2004), xi-xiii.

there are only about 50,000 Sidis in the entire country, less than .004% of India's total population. And many of the Sidis are scattered in small pockets throughout the country, making them even less visible. This, combined with the fact that they have not assimilated to the dominant culture, has caused widespread poverty and very little governmental representation.

The current state of the Sidi is indeed tragic; however, it has forced a fascinating dynamic of identity. As previously stated, most Sidi ancestors were from the Swahili Coast, or at least near it. As such, they were primarily Muslim upon arriving in India. However, throughout the years, this changed; some likely converted to Christianity due to the influence of the Portuguese, and others have taken up Hinduism, the dominant religion in India. Whatever the reasons, the ethnic Sidi population is now comprised of followers from all three religions, *and they are okay with that*. The fact that they been have so heavily marginalized has made it so that the Sidis define themselves primarily along ethnic and historical lines, rather than those of religion. This is a significant contrast from their Swahili ancestors. I have argued that Muslim identity evolved to become the single most important aspect of Swahili identity. But now, even though the Sidis live in a country with a large Muslim population, their identity has shifted. Why is this? It could be because of how they are perceived as "other" by non-Sidis. Since Sidis are religiously diverse, they occupy more than one place in the religious composition of India. Thus Sidis that are Hindu are in the majority religion, those who are Muslim are in the large minority, and those who are Christian are in the smaller minority. If the discrimination of Sidis was due completely to religious differences, it would stand to argue that those who were a part of the majority religion would not be subject to it. However, Sidis are fairly uniformly marginalized, which means that they are seen as different due to their ethnic origin.

Recently, Sidis of all backgrounds have been attempting to alleviate their centuries-long suffering. At the *Sidis at the Millennium: History, Culture, and Development,* conference in 2000, Sidis from Gujerat, Bombay, Karnataka, and all over India came to voice their concerns and appeals. Many called for some type of pan-Indian Sidi union to be formed. And others addressed the hypocrisy of the Indian government in their treatment of the Sidi people[23]. Sidi dance performances are used in official celebrations, and in recent years, Sidi people have been hired to perform for representatives from African countries. In this way, the Indian government uses the Sidi to make itself appear a more diverse and culturally accepting entity. However, at the same time, very little is being done to address the issues of Sidi poverty. On the contrary, government documents of the past have claimed that the Sidi remain impoverished due to their own refusal to adapt to modern life. And despite fevered attempts, the Sidi have only been given the title of "Scheduled

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[23] Prita Sandy Meier, "Performing African Identities: Sidi Communities in the Transnational Moment", in *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians (Rainbow Publishers, 2004),* 86-99.

Tribe" in one province, Gujerat. Groups placed in this category often receive educational and economic subsidies, which many of the Sidi desperately need. However, this is a double-edged sword because this designation has certain negative connotations, and may serve to further alienate the Sidi from their Indian neighbors. Once again, we see how identity can be significantly impacted by social, political, and economic forces. And just as the Swahili had to fight to be seen as truly African in their postcolonial nations, so do modern Sidi have to assert themselves to become full and equal citizens of India, rather than just a fringe group.

The evolution of the Swahili Coast identity was century's or centuries' long endeavor. The people of the coast went from being fishermen, subsisting on was nearby and living in tiny villages, to traders and merchants who helped the growth of a trading network which spanned three continents. In the case of the Sidis, one can see how identity is a very real and pressing issue, but for the Swahili, why is the history of their changing identity important? Fully understanding how a group of people identify themselves, and how their past has shaped their present is vital in today's political environment. In the West, mass media almost constantly reports on conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, often between opposing ethnic groups or religions. And like a parent scolding their bickering children, we try to implore different groups of people to live harmoniously without completely understanding the depths of their conflict. If there is fighting in Kenya between Muslim Swahilis and Christians, we may see this purely as a religious conflict without looking at the broader implications of what religion means to the identity of the combatants. For the Swahili, Islam was a significant component in creating their "Golden Age"; it provided them with connections across vast expanses of space and it gave them a defining quality which made them unique from people on the interior. As such, any perceived undermining of Islam by outside forces would not only be religiously unacceptable, but would also challenge a major component of their identity. This line of thinking may also help us understand that Western models of governing are simply not going to be applicable in all regions. We promote a kind of democracy which values a separation of church and state, but for many people around the world, there is no clear differentiation between secularity and religion. Religion is prevalent in their everyday activities, so to ask them to separate the two may border on heretical. Comprehending these nuances of identity may therefore add a greater depth of understanding to international negotiations, which could not only end conflicts more quickly, but even prevent them altogether.

Identity is not a static concept. It is akin to a living organism, forced to adapt to changing political and social atmospheres. And in fact, it is not a single organism, but a colony, filled with individuals who make up a larger body. The colony that is Swahili identity is comprised of their African roots, Arab influence, history of multiculturalism, legacy as a great trading empire,

and a thousand other characteristics that make the Swahili so unique. In a world that seems to be nurturing the growth of one unified global identity, the Swahili (and their Sidi relatives) have remained distinct, and will no doubt remain so for many years to come.