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Slavery in Northern Mozambique, trade dynamics and past interactions in India Ocean: Ilha de Moçambique, 900 AD to 1800

Abstract:

Mozambique's coast is marked by different cultural horizons that range from hunter-gatherers to the establishment of Bantu farmers, and later followed by Swahili trade settlements that were interconnected within the Indian Ocean Trade Network. Archaeological excavations and historical research at Ilha de Moçambique and Cabaceira Pequena (Nampula Province) have yielded Lumbo- and Sancul-style ceramics and other features related to local dynamics in the past, but also imported prestige items from different areas of the India Ocean. Portuguese shipwrecks identified at Ilha de Moçambique, alongside historical and archaeological evidence, highlight the importance of the ivory and slave trade in the East African economy from the sixteenth century onwards. On the other hand, trade activities within northern Mozambique also included small-scale slave trading locally and outside present-day Mozambique prior to Portuguese colonization in the sixteenth century, when commercial activities were dominated by Swahili and Arab traders. Both Swahili and Arab merchants likely sent slaves to the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and as far as India according to historical sources from the time. Specific sources about the destination and numbers of slaves that came from Mozambique are still problematic. Moreover, with the arrival of the Portuguese in East Africa, especially in Mozambique, the activity became profitable, laying the foundation for the colonial exploitation and economic development of this southern European country.

New perspectives from archaeological (terrestrial and maritime), historical and anthropological research are bringing to light a complex body of knowledge about slavery in this section of southern East Africa, which has been based mostly on Portuguese sources (customs, colonial administration archives, etc.). This exclusion of indigenous and Swahili sources has left gaps relevant to understand this process. It is, then, critical to look at different sources to better comprehend the complex past slave trade activities and its impacts in Mozambique.

Bios:

Décio Muianga has been a PhD student at Uppsala University (Sweden) since 2018. He earned his bachelors and master degrees at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa) in archaeology and heritage studies. In the past 15 years, he has worked and published on the archaeology of Mozambique, specifically on the rock art, Stone Age, early farming communities, maritime archaeology and heritage studies. He has worked since 2008 as an assistant lecturer of archaeology in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, Mozambique). Additionally, since 2012 he has been a researcher at Kaleidoscopio (Public Policy and Culture), an independent institute based in Maputo. In 2020, he was appointed as Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute for the Scientific Advisory Board of the Commission for the Archaeology of Non-European Cultures.

Diogo Oliveira

Currently a PhD student in anthropology at the College of William and Mary. He received his BA and MA in anthropology at The George Washington University. His dissertation research explores Swahili coast and Mozambican archaeology, and he is specifically interested in the intersection of the Swahili Coast, Indian Ocean, and Portuguese worlds. In 2018/19, Diogo was a Fulbright Student Scholar in Mozambique, and conducted a small excavation of a later Iron Age – Early Colonial site on the Nampula Coast. He has also participated in field work and artifact analysis in Oaxaca, Mexico.