



**Prita Meier.** *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 230 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-01915-8.

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In today's unsettled age, when globalization has sponsored a higher degree of interaction and uprooting, and as James Clifford points out, "there seem to be no distant places left,"[1] questions concerning how "elsewheres" root "here" emerge as central and urgent to our time. How do people grapple with two seemingly paradoxical human desires—to belong both to local places, people, and ideas, and to those of faraway? And second, what might the material life embodying these values, beliefs, and attitudes reveal about how and why people negotiate multiple identities? In *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere*, Prita Meier carefully and courageously tackles these significant questions through the particular historical context of the Swahili coast in East Africa—a place where "Islamic," "Arab," "Persian," and "African" identities have intermingled and transformed for centuries. Drawing from diverse literature in art history, architecture, anthropology, and transcultural studies, Meier tells the fascinating story of the stone cities in Mombasa, Lamu, and Zanzibar and how their materiality has continuously shaped the histories, identities, values, and experiences of the people who inhabit them.

While a range of scholars have written about these stone edifices and artifacts through the analytical lens of aesthetics, policy, urban planning,

or lived experience, in *Swahili Port Cities* Meier not only brings these intellectual facets to bear upon one another, but also situates them within the complex history of the Swahili coast. Indeed, her narrative reaches back to the ninth century, when Islam became a defining element of coastal life, and ripples up through the present, with particular emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a moment, she argues, that was particularly pivotal for the ways in which various actors employed stone architecture, interior design, and aesthetic objects to reshape understandings of themselves in relation to others. For example, with the advent of the East Africa Protectorate in 1895, living, dressing, and acting like an "Arab" afforded inhabitants more privilege and protection than that accorded to enslaved and free "Africans."

By historicizing these identities as embodied in people's experiences and reflected in material culture, Meier's work not only demonstrates the mutability of what it meant and means to be Swahili, but also contributes to the vital project of destabilizing territorial categories delimiting who and what artistic traditions belong to "African" or "Middle Eastern" studies. In addition, by linking Swahili identity to European, Arab, Persian, and Indian aesthetic traditions, Meier writes against a version of African art history that posited that an

object's authenticity is traceable to a single point of origin. In so doing, she also unsettles colonial and Eurocentric models of African art history by arguing that Swahili aesthetic design sensibilities result from the complexity and longevity of cross-cultural borrowing and exchange.[2]

To substantiate these larger claims, Meier utilizes stone as an alternative, relational unit of analysis to demonstrate how people on the Swahili coast have used stonework to construct a contested world that embodies the local and supralocal, familiar and exotic, fixity and mobility, and ancient past and modernity.[3] In order to combine materiality with lived experience, Meier gathers and analyzes evidence from diverse sources such as Swahili poetry, travel memoirs, local myths, archaeological reports, architectural plans, photographs, and oral histories, out of which she crafts a clearly written, multifaceted narrative in four chapters supported by helpful imagery throughout the text and sixteen stunning color plates at its centerfold. Providing the longer history from which later chapters draw, in chapter 1 Meier tracks how the stone architecture of the distinctly Muslim community of Old Town in Mombasa signifies evolving sociopolitical forces and “the mercurial character of coastal life” (p. 35). Whereas in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries this “culture of stone” exhibited conceptions of civilization, freedom, and worldly knowledge linked to powerful mercantile family lineages, European travelers, Swahili myths, and local place-names, by the late nineteenth century racial segregation, nationalist agendas, and modernity etched new meanings upon merchant homes, mosques, and other monuments that in turn affected individual and collective experiences.

In chapter 2, Meier turns the reader's attention from urban-scale politics and geographies of elsewhere toward smaller-scale sacred spaces. More specifically, she investigates the capacity for Islamic stone minarets, mosques, and tombs to

not only recall multiple, past versions of an “authentic,” distant Islam, but to also act as material and symbolic forms of protest and claims to territory as set against the colonial authority or Arab ruling elites. For example, today inhabitants of Swahili port cities such as Mombasa, Lamu, and Zanzibar see the pillar form as an ancient Persian structure and, thus, similarly claim a Shirazi identity (and therefore Persian ancestry) in order to distance themselves from “Arabness” while remaining close to the “center” of ancient Islamic civilization. Moreover, Meier places accent on the production of multiple collective identities—African, Swahili, Arab, and Islamic—as strategically remembered and forgotten through rearticulations of architecture, policy, and law.

In chapter 3, Meier shifts focus to Zanzibar in the late nineteenth century, when the Omani Sultanate had reached its peak and gained territorial control of the entire Swahili coast. As the new seat of the Omani court and significant port in the global market, the city of Zanzibar simultaneously became part of a modern state-building project. This project sharpened colonial racial divisions through spatial hierarchies as well as constructed ostentatious monuments intended to be gazed upon by a sophisticated, worldly eye. The chapter gives particular attention to the Busaida sultan of Zanzibar's palace, “The House of Wonders,” or as Meier aptly describes it—a “spectacle of radical modernity” (p. 103)—whose architectural style, ornamental detailing, and spatial arrangements inside and out sponsored global capitalist ideals, connected to indigenous royal and sacral soil, and reflected the patron's interest in promoting both “Arab” and “European” modernities as well as a nostalgia for Egypt's imperialist past.

Lastly, in chapter 4, Meier explores the variety of ways in which “the social life of things” in this case that of porcelain, photography, and furniture design, capture the imagination of people living on the Swahili coast. More so than in previous chapters, here Meier concentrates on the inti-

mate scale of the domestic interior and how its inhabitants collect and exhibit artifacts to symbolize their transcultural ties to industrial modernity; aesthetic practices of China, India, and Europe; national heritage; and protection from the “evil eye.” Despite their ever evolving and contested meanings, she argues that these objects become a significant extension of the Swahili sense of self in their capacity to make their owners feel “at home in the world” (p. 139).

Meier’s book *Swahili Port Cities* provides an invaluable and unique contribution to understandings of the complex history intertwining places, objects, and people along the littoral fringe of present-day Kenya and Tanzania.[4] In so doing, it provides a solid foundation for scholars in any discipline investigating similar questions elsewhere. In clear and committed prose, Meier also complicates the theories of materialist thinkers by destabilizing the object’s “thing-ness” (p. 140) in her insistence on an historical and relational approach as it changes shape in dialogue with diverse people and places. She evocatively asks, “what happens to things once they stop being mobile commodities and come to rest on specific bodies, and in specific buildings?” (p. 9). While exploring how these “bodies” evolve as fixed in place is central to this narrative, what might we learn from the opposite approach—one that tracks, using Arjun Appadurai’s concept of an object’s “social life”—that which comprises its fabrication and distribution to its use and eventual decay? And along similar lines, though Meier briefly attends to the exchange of porcelain as a commodity through the perspective of buyers and sellers, what do the archives and local voices tell us about these patterns of exchange of objects—both as commodities and as gifts?[5] In other words, might this stage of circulation or other stages in the life cycle of stone on (or far away from) the Swahili coast offer other clues as to what it means to live betwixt and between?[6]

Meier gives keen attention to not only collective identity formation, but also to an individual’s personhood—his/her intentionality, agency, and sense of autonomy as negotiated through material culture. For example, in the final chapter she describes the *kita cha enzi*, a high-backed ornamental chair that has long served as a symbol of “authentic” Swahili culture on the grounds of its eclectic “faraway” style crafted locally and its connection to *waungwana* (patrician elite) power. Accordingly, the act of sitting in one of these chairs instills a sense of dignity, confidence, and freedom in bodily posture and mental state akin to a royal member of society. This detailed study of bodily comportment reveals much about affective relations to materiality and status. It would have been valuable, therefore, to more fully examine the bodily movements of people living on the Swahili coast in other contexts, such as sitting with legs crossed the floor of a mosque, picnicking at the House of Wonders, or harvesting cloves on a plantation, and in turn what such evidence might further reveal about their relational identities.

Another strength of *Swahili Port Cities* is Meier’s capacity to address not only multiple geographical scales, from that of the city of Mombasa down to the detail of an abstracted pineapple on an ornate door entry, but also the multiple vantage points (political, cultural, and aesthetic) from which to analyze material-human relations. Meier’s book is one of a rare few that, through the lens of human experience, pays serious, sensitive attention to not only the pragmatic and symbolic dimensions of material artifacts, but also to their spatial and aesthetic analysis. While she chose her stone sites/spaces of inquiry with care—a diverse set of mosques, tombs, palaces, and merchant homes—might there have been a lost opportunity to include another typology—that of the Portuguese-built fortress (e.g., Mombasa’s Fort Jesus) so as to investigate what might be another important facet shaping Swahili identity? Perhaps more so than the aforementioned structures, the fortress more explicitly in function and stylistic

form symbolizes authoritative control over enslaved people, material goods, and territory. As such, how do the histories and meanings embodied in this fortress figure into or even revise Swahili narratives of belonging? And besides the possibility of including other building types, what of the stone landscapes connecting these buildings to the soil and sea? While Meier briefly alludes to the various ways in which visitors might experience the landscape at the House of Wonders or slave plantations outside of town, she writes little about the design of gardens and public spaces and how these zones “between” might also contribute in meaningful ways to the shaping of Swahili life.

Moreover, despite her efforts to include the “interior of Africa,” Meier’s book, following established Swahili narratives, primarily orients the reader (and Swahili identity) toward the Indian Ocean and inhabitants’ connections to Europe, the Arabian Peninsula or Arab world, and Asia. On the one hand, this choice bolsters her argument that people living on the Swahili coast have combined “foreign” ideas and styles to create a uniquely Swahili identity. On the other hand, though, this move presupposes that distant (or even near) places in Africa cannot also have the capacity to feel “foreign.” Might there be an opportunity then for scholars to pay more attention to how various regions, cities, and neighborhoods shape Swahili (or other) self-understandings? In closing, this book offers a significant contribution to understandings of the complex relationships between local and global, indigenous and foreign, and old and new. Rather than an origin point beginning in one bounded category, sign, or relation and moving to another so as to make sense of the world, Meier offers up new and refreshing places to begin—those of plural and contested versions of lived experience, history, and identity constructions as bound up in the glistening white stone along the Swahili coast, where the faraway is always nearby.

#### Notes

[1]. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13-14.

[2]. For more on the deconstruction of the myth that is Africa, see Vumbi Yoka Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[3]. Other scholars who have attempted to disrupt territorial identities include Paul Gilroy, Arjun Appadurai, and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar.

[4]. Complementing her written contributions, Meier also co-curated a traveling exhibition of Swahili art entitled, “World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean.” The initial exhibition is on view at the Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion from September 2017 through March 2018. The traveling venues include the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (May through August 2018) and the Fowler Museum, University of California at Los Angeles (September 2018 through January 2019).

[5]. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2000).

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