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IDENTITY OF 'ABORIGINAL' PEOPLE IN ZANZIBAR: AN OVERVIEW

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Present identities of what are historically regarded as the aboriginal people of Zanzibar are generally viewed as unchanged from the past. In the light of history, recent archaeological discoveries and the concept of identity, this paper suggests that identities are changeable, bearing some immediate relevance and even political implication for limited periods. It concludes that the earliest inhabitants of the islands might never have associated themselves with the present identities.

Les identités actuelles de ce qu'on tient historiquement pour un peuple aborigène du Zanzibar sont considérées comme n'ayant subi aucun changement depuis les temps passés. À la lumière de l'histoire, de récentes découvertes ainsi que du concept de l'identité, ce journal suggère que les identités sont sujettes à des changements, car elles ont une incidence immédiate et même une conséquence politique pendant des périodes bien limitées. Le journal conclut que les tout-premiers habitants des îles ne se seraient jamais associés avec les identités actuelles.

INTRODUCTION

The core inhabitants of the Zanzibar Islands consist of the agricultural Bantu speakers who are also distributed almost everywhere in the central, eastern and southern parts of Africa. Some Arab geographers, who visited the East African coast (Land of Zanj, Fig. 1) after the 7th century AD, reported their presence in the area. Studies indicate that the community interacted with Bushmen and Khoisan hunter-gatherers who survive today in pockets within the region, and with pastoral Cushitic speakers. Longstanding social interactions between these communities living on the East African coast and those in the interior have cemented their ancestral links, though each community has developed distinctive ways of life largely dictated by local geographical factors and the nature of cultural contacts.

Ethnographers and historians have used oral traditions to divide the African core of inhabitants of the Zanzibar Islands (4° 80' and 6° 30' S; 39° 35' and 39° 50' E) into three principal groups, the Wahadimu, the Watumbatu, and the Wapemba (Gray 1977). The tagging of the groups as 'aborigines' of the Islands has given a pervasive impression that their communal identities also survive from antiquity. In this review, I sketch out historicity of the identities and emphasize the transient nature of self categorization constructs and that they represent stages in societal struggle. Finally, I draw from results of archaeological research carried