Archaeological Excavation of the Earliest Known Mosque in Comoros, and East Africa

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Abstract

Majority of Comoros people conceive and considerer themselves as descendants of Persians (Shirzi), Some think they are offspring of Arabic migrants and marine merchants from the Middle -East countries who came to settle around the coast of East Africa from the early Islamic era. It has now been established that The people of Comoros have a history going back to Stone Age, and that one of their ancestors travelled to Mecca to meet Prophet Mohamed and he then brought Islam to the islands.

Introduction

This paper is a report of an archaeological investigation that took place in Ntsaouéni, on the North-western coast of Ngazidja island, on Comoros archipelago, in late 2010 (Figure1). The excavation was conducted by the first author, for the partial fulfilment of Masters Degree at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. Since this was his first excavation, the second author, his supervisor, Prof. Felix Chami, was invited to visit and advice. Sincerely the intricate nature of the excavations, as presented below, required professional expertise.

The problem of the work was to examine the oral tradition which exists in the Stone town of Ntsaouéni, and in other parts of Comoros, that the known oldest mosque

at Ntsaouéni was built by one Mtswa-Mwindza, a local king of the 7th century AD who, on the early part of that century, had heard about one prophet Muhammad who was preaching a new faith (Islam) in Arabia. He travelled thither to see him and learn his teachings. According to the oral tradition, Muhammad died while Mtswa -Mwindza was there in Arabia. In his return journey to Comoros, he was given a young Arab, who would have to escort him and help him in teaching the new religion in Comoros. When he was in Comoros, the young man died before Mtswa-Mwindza, and when the later died he was buried in the same mausoleum, built adjacent the mosque they had constructed. The Mausoleum which exist today has this record inscribed on it.

Hearing about this story since he was young, and now being at the level of scientific reasoning at Masters Degree, the first author started to question the story. Could the oral tradition be true? From the knowledge obtained in the study of East African coastal archaeology, of which Comoros belongs, he started to realize that if the story was true, then the quadrangular stone mosque of Mtswa-Mwindza is the oldest Islamic structure on the coast of East Africa, and it would have been one of the oldest in the world. Since the modern mosque, now in use, was only dated by the oral tradition of Ntsaouéni and architectural observations by early scholars, the idea developed that an excavation of the Mosque mihrab could lead us to determine its age, and hence be able to date it metrically. It was also agreed that cultural sequence running from the 7th century to modern one could be established for relative dating.

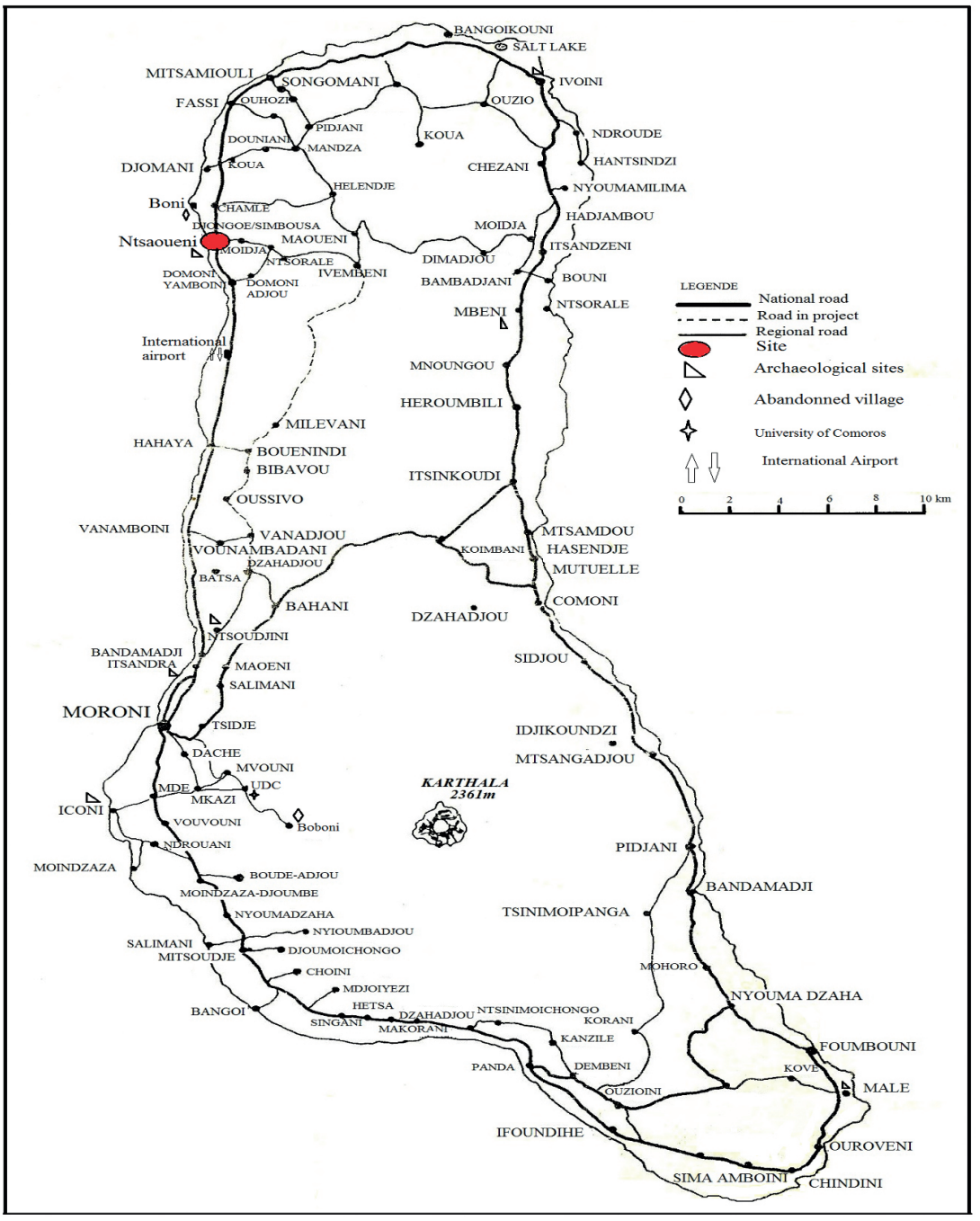

Figure1: Map of Ngazidja island showing the site

Another problem relating to the Swahili archaeology is about the arrival of lime making and using technology on the coast of East Africa. Idouay (1986) argued

that the technology was brought together with Islam by Mtswa-Mwindza in the 7th century AD. According to Mohamed et al (2008); Msahazi (2002) and Fatouma (2009), the ancient king did not learn only Islamic knowledge from Mecca but also several skills including artisanship, masonry and the making as well as the use of lime among others. Furthermore, these sources assumed that the ancient Friday mosque of Ntsaouéni, known as Mtswa-Mwindza's mosque, is the first masonry work in the whole of Comoros archipelago. However, scholars of the Swahili coast are against this idea, believing that lime was not used on the Swahili coast before the 12th century AD (Kirkman 1964).

Background Information

The oldest date accepted for the arrival of Islam on the coast of East Africa is 750 AD, in relation to the earliest mud and wattle mosque found in Shanga at Lamu archipelago in Kenya (Horton1996). Before this date, scholars thought that Islam had been brought on the coast of East Africa in the 9th century AD, following what was thought to be a wave of Arab and Persian immigrants. It was thought that towns of the Swahili culture were built from then, with culmination in the 13th century AD. A major evidence used for this theory was the Chronicle of Kilwa which kept an oral tradition stating that a people named *Shirazi* arrived with this wave of migration with different groups, landing on different places of the coast of East Africa, including Comoros (Chittick (1974, 1977) Apart from Kilwa's chronicle, the existence of people on many Swahili towns who identify themselves as *Washirazi* and claim to be the founders of the Islamic Swahili civilization, has also been used as evidence of Islam having arrived on the coast of East Africa from the 9th century or even later (Allen1982 and 1993). Excavations on major Swahili towns like Kilwa on the southern coast of Tanzania, were meant to corroborate the oral traditions, rather than establishing the real long history of the settlement of Swahili towns (Chittick 1974 and 1984).

With this theoretical background, it has been difficult to establish any other version of the beginning of Islam on the coast of East Africa. For instance, the oral tradition that Mtswa-Mwindza brought Islam to Comoros has been refuted by scholars of *Shirazi* orientation (Said 2000). It has taken more than 10 years now for scholars to accept the theory established by Chami (1988), that the coast

of East Africa had been settled from Stone Age to Early Iron working period, about 2000 years ago, by Africans who adopted Islam since about the seventh century. The people who adopted Islam are related to what Chami identified as TIW tradition, being agricultural people who were also involved in other forms of economic activities, including husbandry and sailing (Chami 1994 and 2006).

It is from the foundation of Chami's theory that allows one to consider Mtswa-Mwintza's oral tradition as a possible story, as here is an African king who, in the time of TIW tradition, was in connections with Arabia, and he travelled thither and came back with Islam. There is also another similar story in Arabic document of Buzurg al Sharyay, showing how an African king went to Arabia and brought back Islam to the land of Sufula, South of Zanzibar (Freeman-Grenville1962,). In the same period, Arabic documents also have a story of an African scholar who could have been in Arabia and had provided the history and culture of the island of Lanjuya, suggesting that African culture had developed enough to the level of adopting Islam and related science and technology.

Scholars dealing with the archaeology and history of Comoros had totally rejected the oral tradition related to Mtswa-Mwindza, arguing that Islamic religion could not have been brought there since the 7th century AD, because the archipelago was not peopled at that particular time. Furthermore, they are strongly against the idea that an African could have gone to Mecca in that early period and brought Islamic (Villard 1971; Verin1982; 1983 and 1994; Wright 1984; Damir 1984; Abdourahim 1988; Blanchy et said 1990; Chouzour 1994; Said 2000, Blanchy 2011; and Ouledi et Ibrahime 2007). Some scholars like Kessy (2009), Chami *et al* (2009) and Moustakim (2014) talk about several préislamic cultures at Malé: Stone Age, EIW and TIW. Whereas, refusing early Islam in Comoros these aforementioned scholars have accepted Horton's (1984, 1987 and 1996) archaeological findings at Shanga on the Kenyan coast, about the arrival of Islam on the coast of East Africa in the 8th century AD. Therefore, conducting archaeological excavation inside the mosque of Mtswa-Mwindza, was inevitable so as to solve this problem.

Methodological Approaches

Ethnographic inquires

Interview results indicate that Ntsaouéni Stone Town (NST) had been occupied as far back as the pre-Islamic period. A total of seven people were interviewed in NST, out of which 2 are descendants of Mtswa-Mwindza family members who ruled NST. All informants pointed at king Mtswa-Mwindza and Mohamed Ben Othman (son of the third caliphate) to be the builders of the ancient Friday mosque of NST after their return from Mecca in the 7th century AD. According to Mzee Omar Abdou (91 years), the upstanding mosque was built in the 7th century AD, implying that it is 1310 years old. According to this source, the earliest settlements in this town were by Bantu speaking people in the North anchorage of Ngazidja at Boni (Figure 1). Ancient traders of this stone town exchanged goods via maritime way, with people who were from other areas of Africa and beyond. This took place a long time ago, before the coming of Islam. It is believed that foreign traders came to Comoros and had a strong and complex relationship with the local merchants (kings). From this relationship, some of the former decided to permanently stay, while others stayed temporarily just waiting for the right time to leave, when the monsoon winds would allow them to go back. All informants were of the view that Mtswa-Mwindza built the standing mosque and this has been passed on from the first century of the Islamic era (7th century AD). However, when I returned to the informants at the end of the fieldwork to know their views regarding their version about the discovered early mosque in the excavations, they said that nobody was ever told about it.

Archaeological Survey

Archaeological survey included systematic and unsystematic work in the littoral and the North -West of Ntsaouéni (Figure 2). Unsystematic pedestrian survey was undertaken at the eroding beach South and North-West of the aforementioned town and the legendary mosque. This covered the current Friday mosque to the eroded area on the western side of the Inazi graveyard where the study observed the presence of tombs bearing Islamic and non-Islamic scripts. The town survey laid emphasis on the eroded surfaces as well as ground cuts to check for exposed artefacts. This approach was preferred because the area surrounding the site is

too rocky. Clusters and scatters of cultural material distribution on the surface were meticulously recorded. Potsherds similar to those of Early Iron Working period and of incision motifs were collected (Figure 3). Local potteries bearing decorative elements of Mohoro and post-Mohoro traditions (Chami 2009: 114-119) were abundant near the beach and the whole North littoral. Also located in the vicinity were remains of old stone wall foundations.

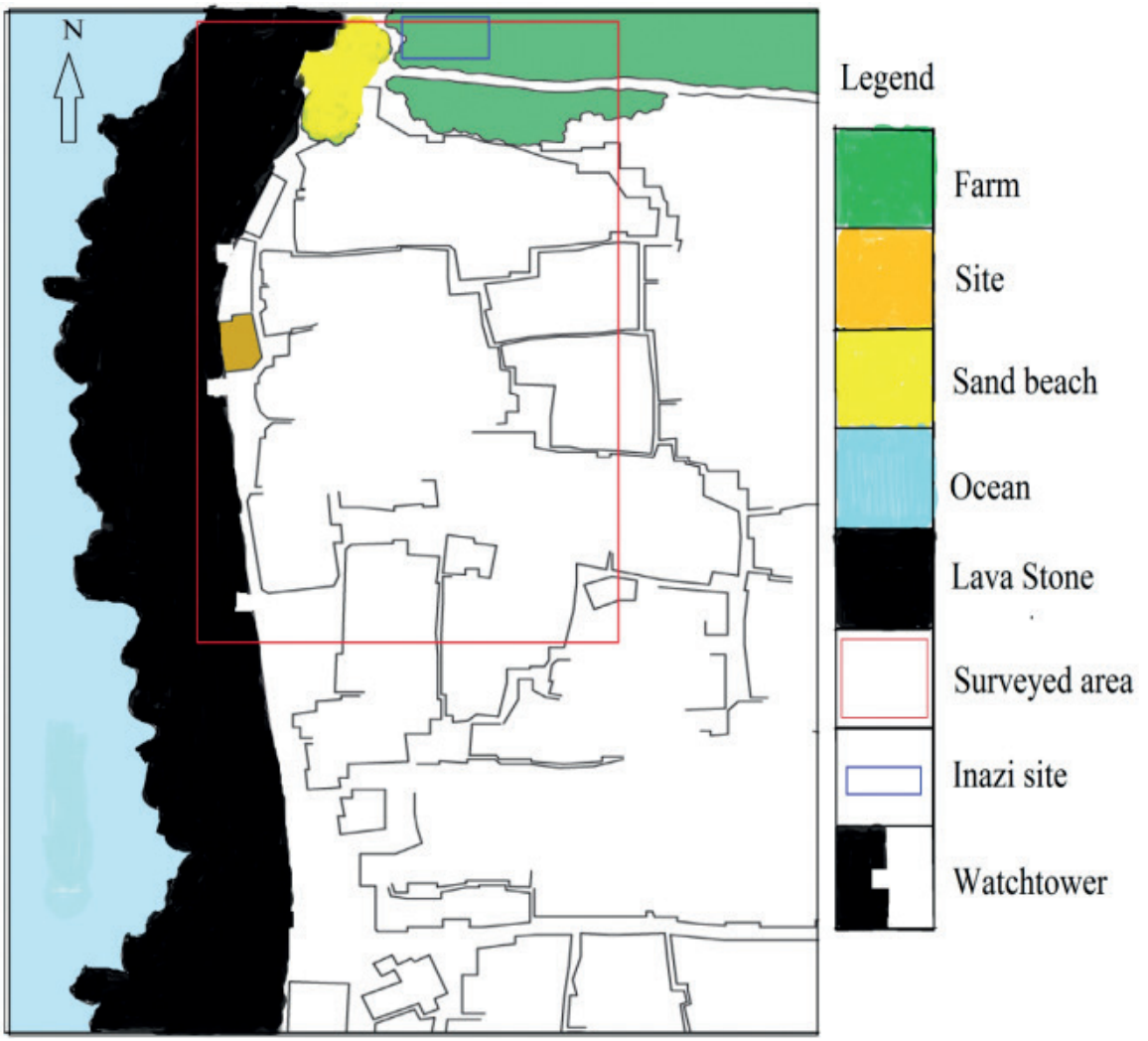

Figure 2: Ntsaouéni's Map showing the explored area

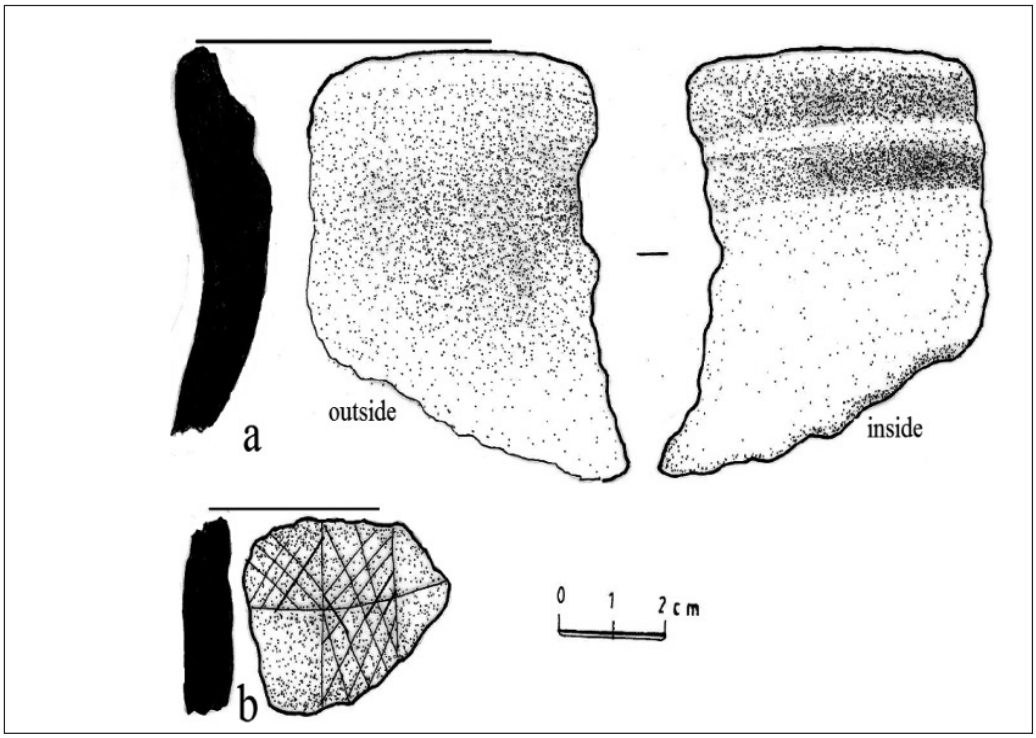

Figure 3: Early Iron Working potsherds from survey (a, beveled to the inside; b, Cross hatched)

Examination of the Mosque

We finished the task of surveying the North-western side of Ntsaouéni by conducting careful archaeological examinations over the Mtswa-Mwindza's mosque architecture. The major purpose was to note down its architectural characters, particularities and weaknesses, so that the we could decide and determine where to excavate (inside the mosque) particularly the right place to establish the first trench (Figure 4). As it had been decided from the beginning of the project, the area at the Mihrab, and the North-western walls, which had shown that they were still in their original constructions were earmarked for excavations. The subsequent rebuilding of the Mosque after that of the 7th century could not have touched or changed this area probably due to the Mihrab's veneration as a holy place. Any reconstruction of the mosque of Mtswa-Mwindza would have continued to maintain the original shape and appearance, particularly the place used by an *imam* while leading collective prayer in Islamic religion. Thus the architectural observations on this mosque found that all corners were disturbed except the North western's one.

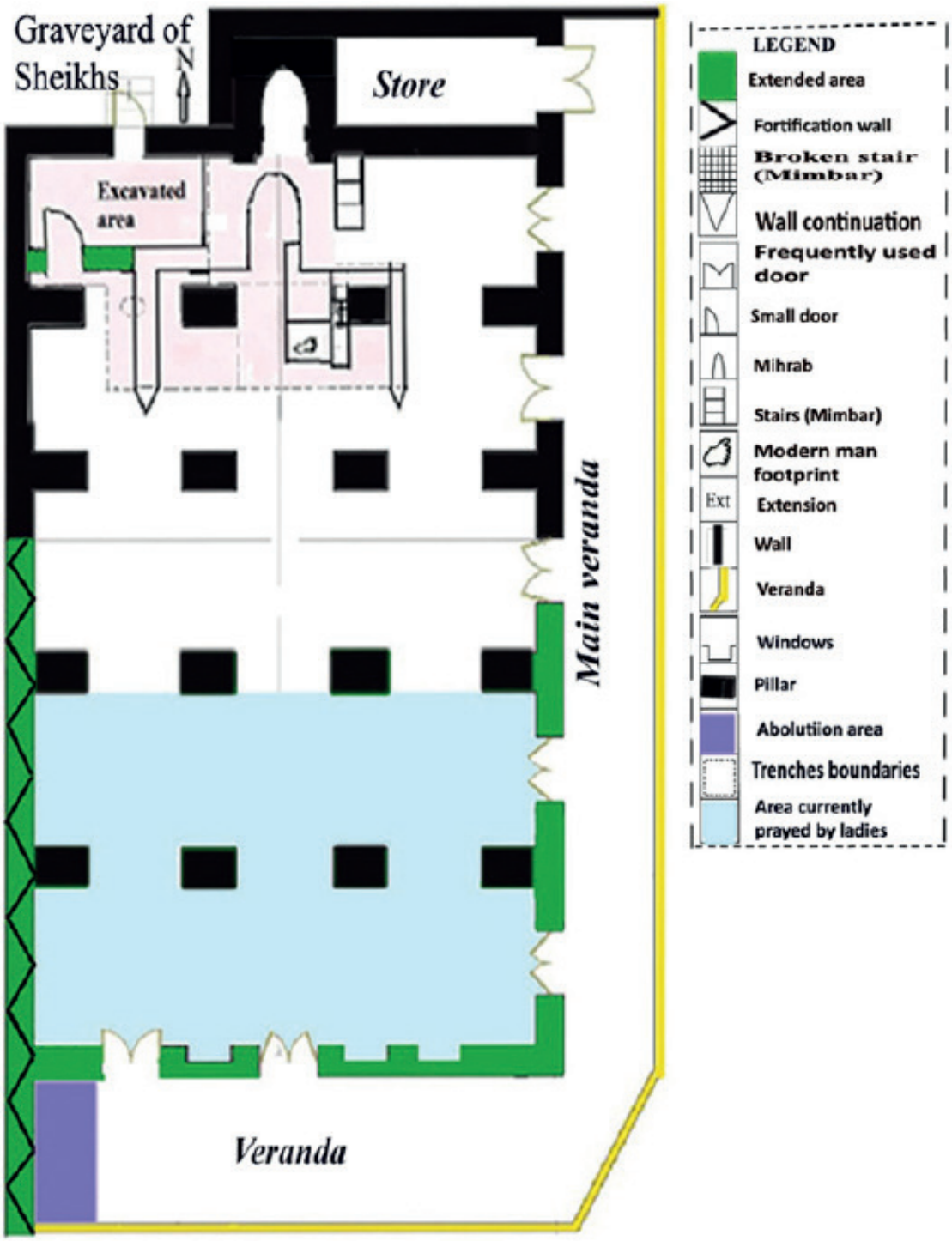

Figure 4: Map of the mosque showing the excavated yellowish zone

Excavation Results

Three trenches of different dimensions were test excavated inside the mosque particularly in the most North-western corner (Figure 4). The first trench was 350 x 230cm and 70cm deep (Fig 5). The second one was 290 x 230cm and 100cm depth. Finally, the third was 150 x 150 wide and 125cm deep (Figure 7). The stratigraphic profile of these trenches were comprised of 9, 7 and 5 layers and produced a wide range of imported and local cultural materials, particularly pottery including that of Triangular Incised Ware (TIW), Plain Ware (PW), Swahili and Mohoro tradition (Figure 6) and a Tang dynasty potsherd. A variety of fauna vestiges of different spaces, marine and terrestrial, were found comprising human molars, animal and shark teeth (Plate 1 and 2). Several ornamental objects such as local and imported beads made out of mollusk, coral, glass and cornelian materials are among the assemblage (Plate 3). Furthermore, the findings suggest that the lowest layer, the layer in which the earliest lime floor (mosque) was found, had pottery of TIW dated elsewhere from the 7th to 9th centuries AD (Chami 1994 and 1998). The mosque had a major reconstruction in the period between the 12th and the 14th century at the time of Swahili tradition. The top most floor is of 19th century and was made of cement. Surely it could not have been made before the colonial period, while the three floors made of coral lime discovered below the first one dated from the 7th to the 14th c AD (figure 7).

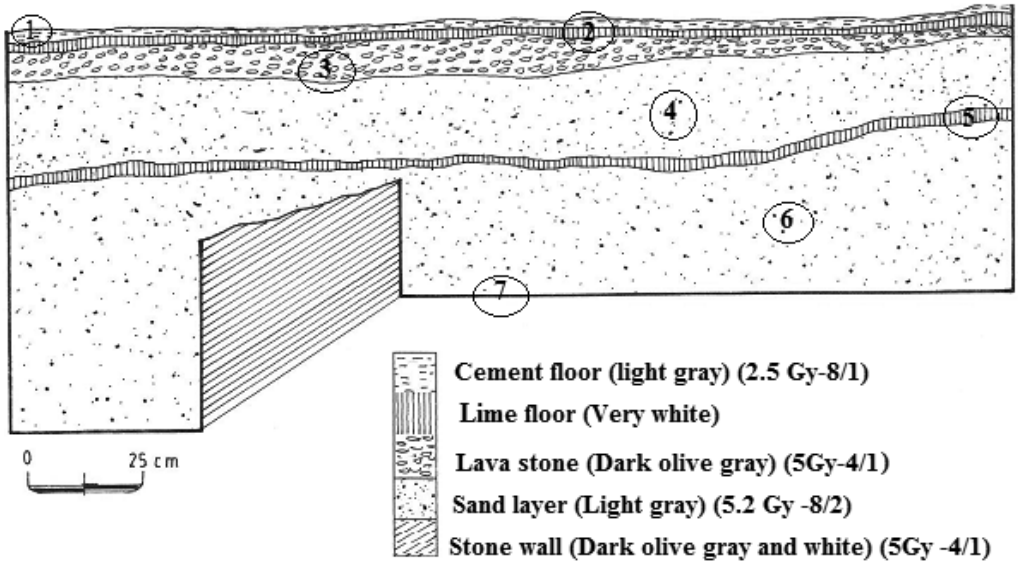

Figure 5: Western wall profile of trench1

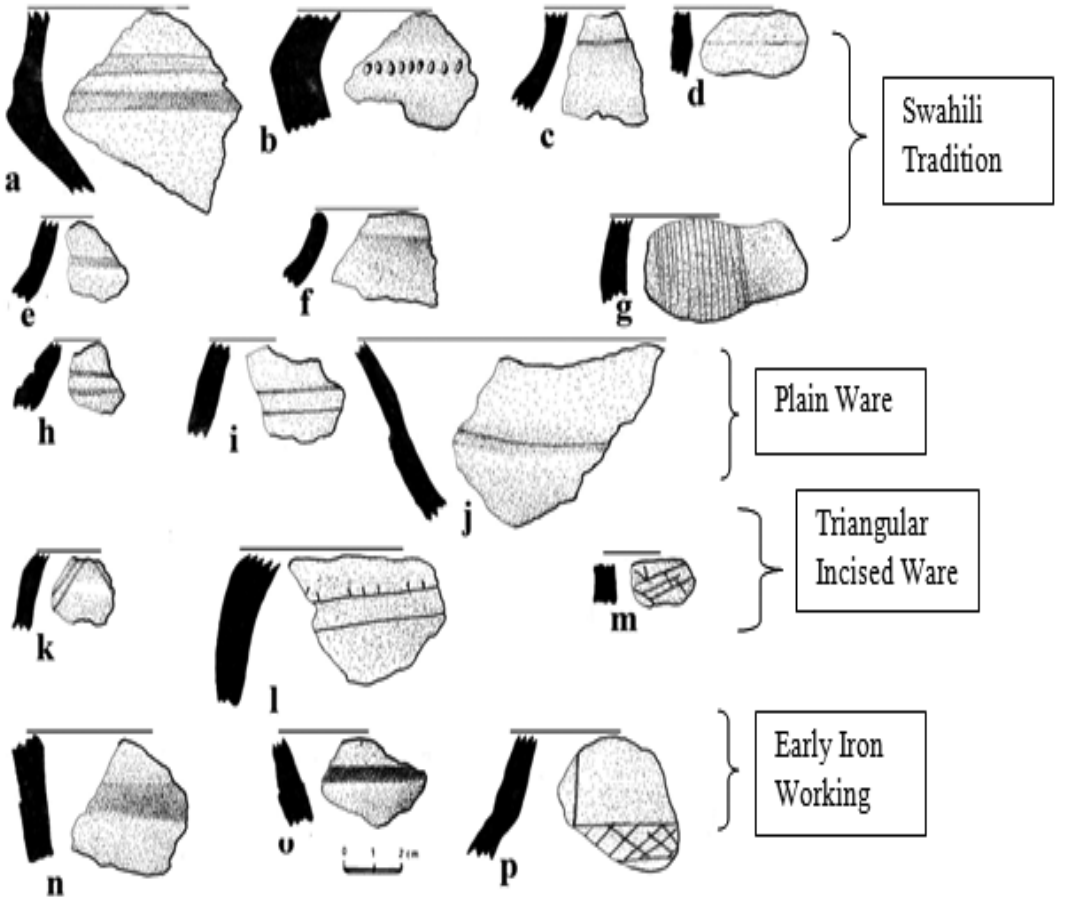

Figure 14: Pottery illustrations (Field data)

a. A carinated jar with a single grooved horizontal line above the carination.

i. Jar with deep double incised horizontal lines on the shoulder.

i. High neck, everted jar.

Figure 6: Local potteries

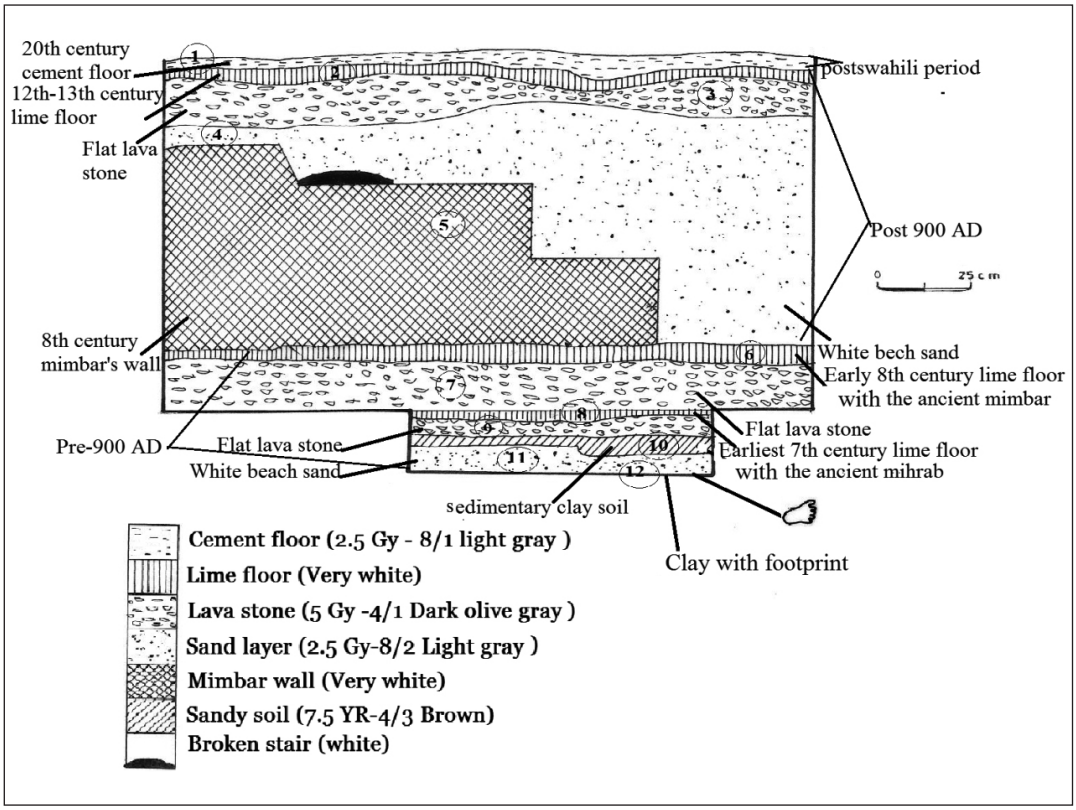

Figure 7: Eastern wall profile of trench 3 showing all layers

		Local Pottery				Imp/material			Bones		Teeth		
Level	Depth/cm	Swahili	P. ware	T I W	EIA	Sherd	glass	Beads	Shark	Animal	Human	Animal	Shark
1	0-20	8	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
2	20-25	1	10	-	-	-	-	-	1	6	-	-	1
3	25-30	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	-	-	1
4	30-35	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	1	-	1
5	35-40	-	1	1	-	1	5	22	1	16	-	-	-
6	40-45	-	-	-	1	-	-	17	1	2	-	-	-
7	45-50	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	3	-	-	-
8	50-55	-	-	-	-	1	2	21	4	-	-	-	-
9	55-70	-	-	5	-	1	7	6	3	7	-		-
Total		9	19	6	1	4	14	67	10	58	1	-	3
%		4.68	9.89	3.12	0.52	2.8	7.29	34.89	5.20	30.20	0.52	-	1.56

Table 1: Material Inventory of trench 1

		Regional Pottery				Imp/material			Bones		Teeth		
Level	Depth	Swahili	P. ware	T I W	EIA	potsherd	glass	Beads	Shark	Animal	Human	Animal	Shark
1	0-20cm	5											
2	20-25cm	4						2					1
3	25-30cm	5			1	1		5		3			
4	30-35cm												
5	35-40cm							12		3			
6	40-55cm		3		1					5			
7	55-70cm		2			1				17			
Trench1 and 2													
	70-100cm			2		2	6	11		92	1	1	
Total		14	5	2		4	6	28		120	1	1	1

Table 2: Material Inventory of Trench 2 and Trench 1

		Pottery				Imp/material			Bones		Teeth		
Level	Depth	Swahili	P. ware	T I W	EIA	potsherd	glass	Beads	Shark	Animal	Human	Animal	Shark
1	0-20 cm												
2	20-70cm												
3	70-100cm												
4	100-110cm			3									
5	110-125cm												
Total				3									

Table 3: Inventory of trench 3

Plate 1: Fauna materials

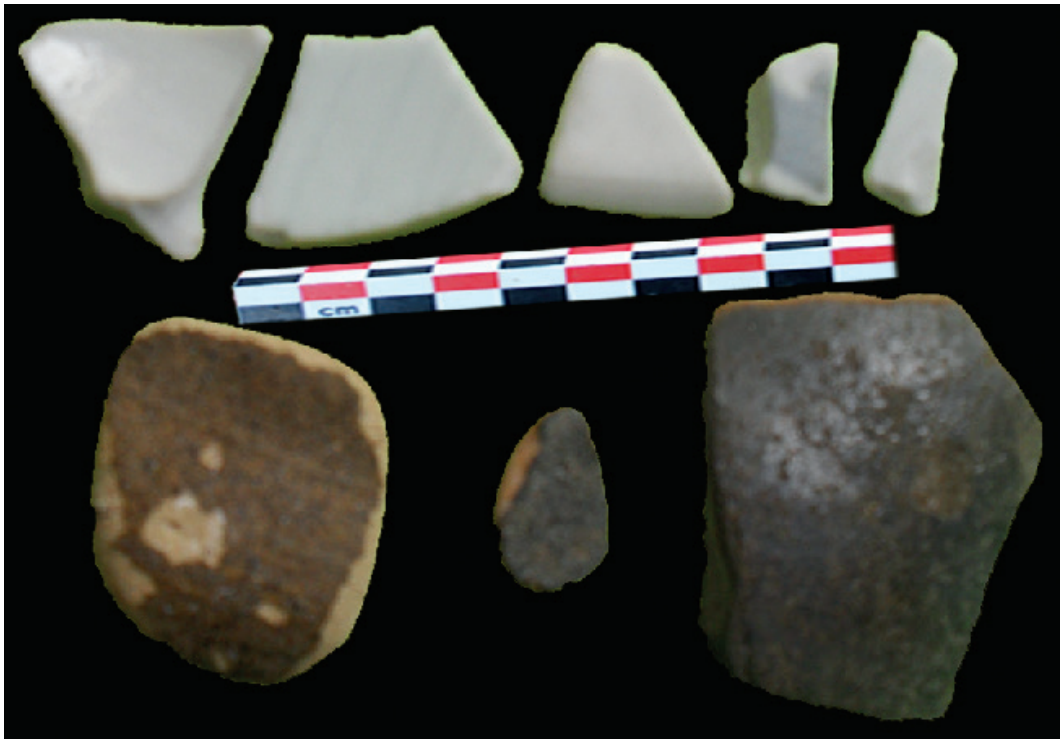

Plate 2: Imported potteries

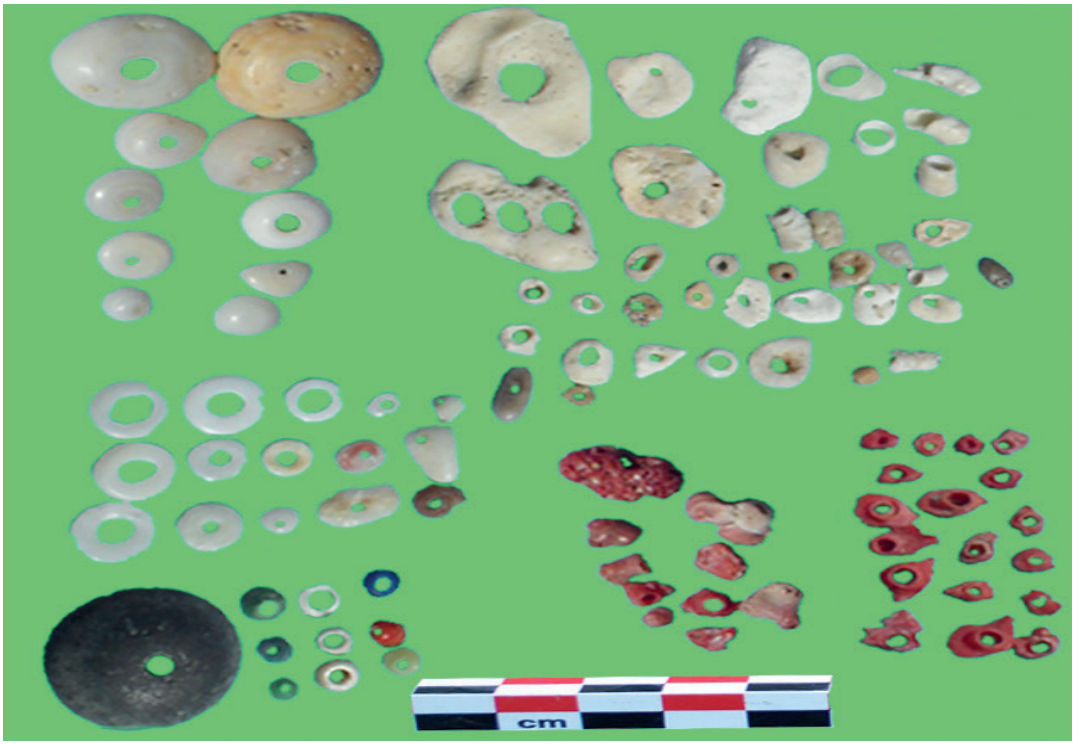

Plate 3: Local and imported beads

Discovery of the Mtswa-Mwinza's Mosque

This happened in the second trench that was excavated at the modern *Mihrab* in search of the earliest one. It was at 40-60cm, where the plastered walls of the earliest mosque was found, and at 100 cm was also discovered the second mosque's lime floor, showing a very well plastered and conserved un-contestable *Mihrab* (Plate 4). On the Southern part of this observation was also observed a plastered wall and then the rest of the earliest *Mimbar* (Plate 5). This confirms that the discovered mosque was not a mere mosque but a Friday Mosque.

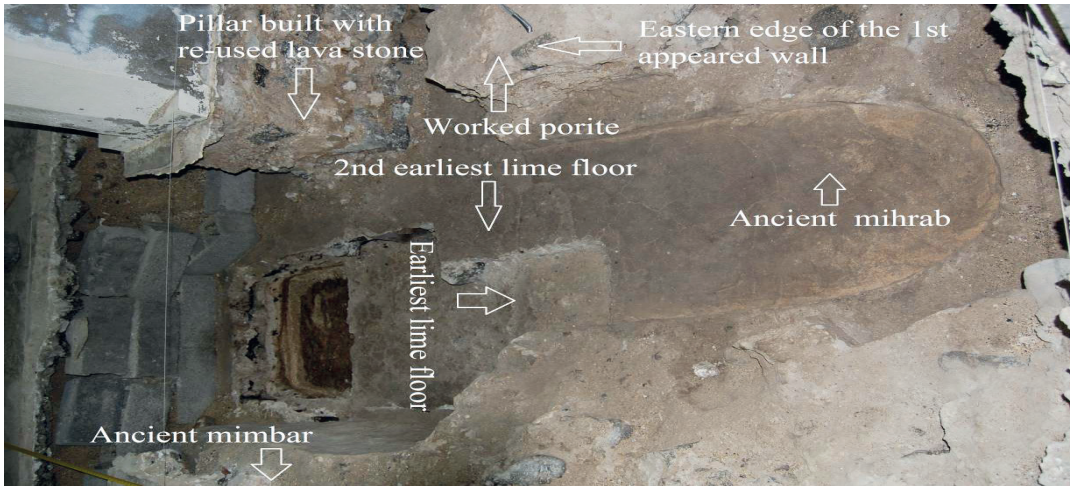

Plate 4: View of the Mihrab from the Eastern side

Since these structures were rising above a plastered floor, it was questionable whether it was the floor of the earliest mosque or whether there was another earlier floor beneath it. The floor near the *Mimbar* was broken in order to get further down. There was indeed another built floor, so the one broken was not the oldest construction. The new floor brought to light a lime floor which was very soft and fragile compared to the other compact floors found above this (Figure7). After breaking this, no more floors came up. However, below the broken floor, was a moist layer of sandy clay with a lot of calcareous humus. This was an ancient beach on which the mosque was built. The modern mosque which we were excavating is still on the beach line (Figure 7).

On the sandy mud/clay beach layer was observed a foot print (Plate 6), probably of the people who either built the mosque or who lived in the area by then. It was from this layer, a charcoal/ humus material was collected for absolute dating.

Like the current mosque, the foundations of the discovered ancient mosque show that it was extended toward the Western side (Figure 8). One of the reasons of this mosque extension could be based on Muslim population increase, but further study shall confirm this idea. It is observed that the current mosque architectural design does not differ from the ancient vis-à-vis the location of features, such as *mihrab, mimbar* and door (Figure 8).

Plate 5: The very well polished wall (Mimbar)

Plate 6: Fossilized modern man footprint

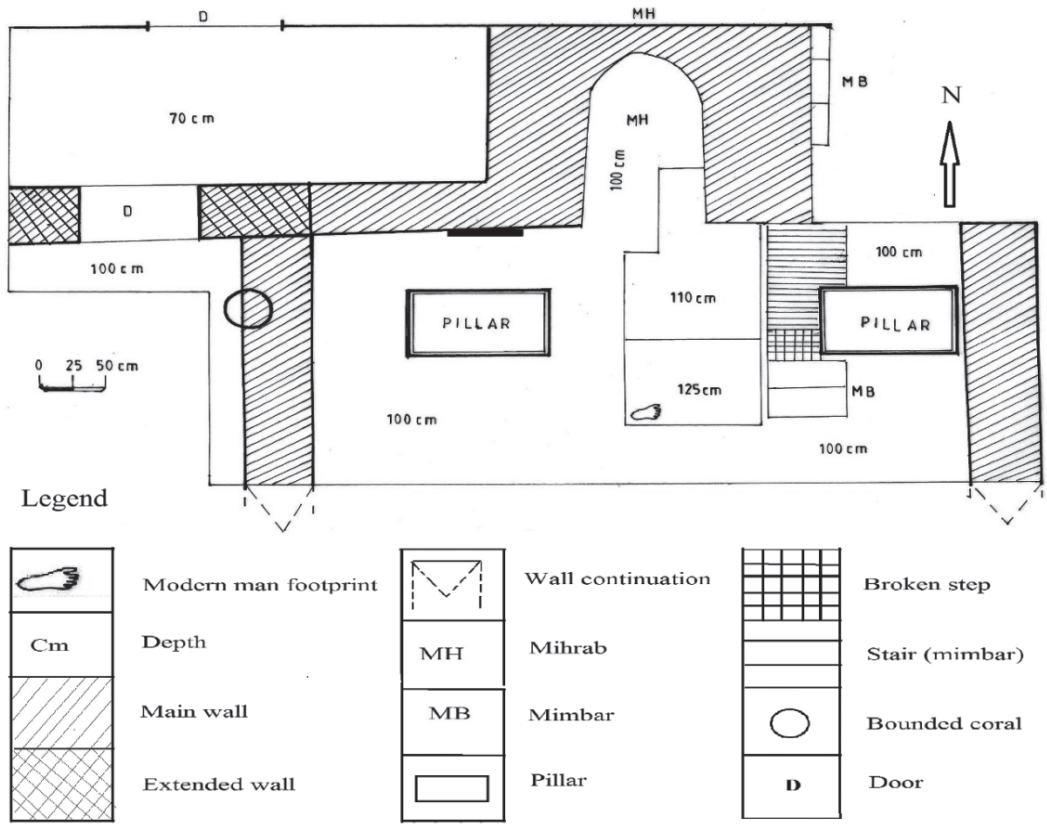

Figure 8: Floor plan of the discovered mosque

Carbon fourteen results

Dating the mosque by absolute dating method was indispensable in this study because the determination of its construction date has been the subject of several archaeological and historical debates, relating to the coming of Islam in Comoros. The sample collected for dating from the footprint noted above provided a calibrated date of 1000-1100 AD. Since the charcoal was from the beach sand, it is obvious that the material had been affected by marine water,that may add 400 years to the sample (Chami 1994). In this case, the discovered earliest mosque must have had been built in about 600-700 AD. Is this not the 7th century of Mtswa-Mwinsa's visit to Mecca? Is this also not the date of Prophet Mohamed who was visited by the former? And by the way is this not the date of the TIW pottery collected from the lower layers?

Discussion

The first issue to be discussed here is the arrival of Islam in Comoros. The oral tradition about Mtswa-Mwindza, establishing the arrival of Islam in Comoros seems to be true. The King built a mosque in the seventh century, after returning from Mecca. The *Mihrab* and *Mimbar* of the mosque have been established archaeologically. The earliest known mosque on the coast of East Africa, is therefore, not that of Shanga on the Kenyan coast, excavated by Mark Horton (1996). It is that of Comoros as reported here.

It should also be noted that oral tradition does not mention the king to be *Shirazi,* but an African king. Hence Ntsaouéni was first settled by Africans, whose king went to Mecca to bring Islam. The people claiming to be *Shirazi* and having brought Islam to East Africa, could have come later, in the 10th century, according to Chitick (1975). But truly, they did not found towns, particularly Ntsaouéni, as speculated by Damir (1984) also quoted in Chouzour (1994). The former believed that Ntsaouéni was among the Comoros' towns that were firstly settled by Umayyad people in the late 8th century AD.

However, on the issue about lime technology, it is obvious now that lime was used in East Africa from the 7th century AD at the time of TIW tradition, as proved by the discovered limed mosque at Ntsaouéni dating back to this period.

Dating methods, relative dating and absolute dating were employed in this work in order to secure the result. Pottery of TIW found at the level of the lowest floor of lime is dated elsewhere to 7th century AD (see above). Absolute dating of charcoal samples from clay layer below the last lime floor where the footprint was meticulously unearthed is of the 7th century.

Conclusion

This paper has presented results of an archaeological investigation,undertaken inside the Mtswa-Mwindza's mosque. The major purpose was to verify the oral tradition which asserts that an African king in Comoros went to Mecca in the 7th century, to see Prophet Muhammad and hear his sermons. The king came back and started to teach Islam and he built the earliest mosque probably in Africa.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Professor Felix Chami, Who not only assisted in the research, but also accepted to be the second author of this article. Thanks also to Dr. E. T. Kessy, Mr. Ali M. Gou, Mr. Ibouroi A. Tabibou, the Comoros University, my sponsor, the African Archaeology Network, the University of Dar es Salaam Archaeology Unit, the Ntsaouéni community, all informants and my fellow friends who accompanied me in many ways during the investigation.

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