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Runaway Slaves and the Aftermath of Slavery on the Swahili Coast

New Perspectives from Witu in the 19th Century

Clélia Coret | ORCID: 0000-0003-0061-745X

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Clelia.Coret@UGent.be

Abstract

Along the East African coast, marronage increased in the 19th century as a consequence of the intensification of the slave trade and the development of a plantation economy based on slave labor. Research on the fugitive slaves on the Swahili coast has been conducted since the 1980s and has mainly highlighted the ambivalent relationship (between rejection and belonging) of maroons with the dominant coastal culture—that of the slave owners, shaped in particular by Islam and urbanity. This article goes beyond the existing interpretations by showing that the aftermath of slavery often consisted of a range of options, less static than those described so far and less focused on opting either into or out of coastal culture. Relying on a case study in present-day Kenya and drawing from European written sources and interviews, I examine what happened to escaped slaves in the Witu region, where a Swahili city-state was founded in 1862. Their history is examined through a spatial analysis and the modalities of their economic and social participation in regional dynamics, showing that no single cultural influence was hegemonic in this region.

Keywords

East African coast – Witu city-state – runaway slaves – patron–client relationships – 19th century

1 Introduction

This article examines what post-slavery meant in practical terms for escaped slaves in their relations with African societies near the East African coast in the 19th century. Earlier research on the relations between ex-slaves and their former owners often admitted that the former maintained strong attachments to the latter: economically, culturally, and socially. In these accounts, the culture of the owners therefore continued to be dominant in spite of the rupture caused by the flight. Uprooted, definitively cut off from their region and culture of origin, the runaway slaves (*watoro* in Kiswahili) had no choice but to adopt the characteristics and values of the world they had been brought into so violently. While such conclusions certainly apply in some regions of the Swahili coast, this article examines a context in which they require qualification. It concerns itself with the region of Witu, in the north of present-day Kenya, which had a particular history. In reaction to the dominance of the Sultanate of Zanzibar, a Swahili city-state was founded in 1862 about 20 km inland with the support of African populations and fugitive slaves. Without denying the constraints they faced, I argue that the runaways here had various options for participating in existing political, economic, and social networks, which they contributed to transforming. This article aims to prolematize our understanding of the aftermath of slavery by examining the options available to former slaves in a world not only characterized by constraints and a need for protection and survival, but also one where the balance of power was sometimes in their favor given their numbers and the military power they embodied.

Research on the East African coast since the 1980s has demonstrated the importance of marronage as well as its varied forms. From Somalia to Mozambique, fugitive slave groups played a decisive historical role on the Swahili coast, at the crossroads of the West Indian Ocean and the East African continent. Lee Cassanelli's work, and later that of Francesca Declich (with a particular focus on gender), studied these numerous settlements along the Juba River in southern Somalia. The Gosha region received between 20,000 and 40,000 escaped slaves. Some groups with diverse origins rallied around powerful leaders—for example, around the freed slave Nassib Bunda (of Yao origin) circa 1890. Others, such as the community of Avai (about 3,000 runaway slaves) on the Shabeelle River, established alliances with Somali clans. Thus, the Somali patterns of social organization had a stronger influence in Avai than in Goshaland.¹

1 Lee V. Cassanelli, "Social Constructs on the Somali Frontier: Bantu ex-Slave Communities in the Nineteenth Century Somaliland," in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *Internal African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 214–238;

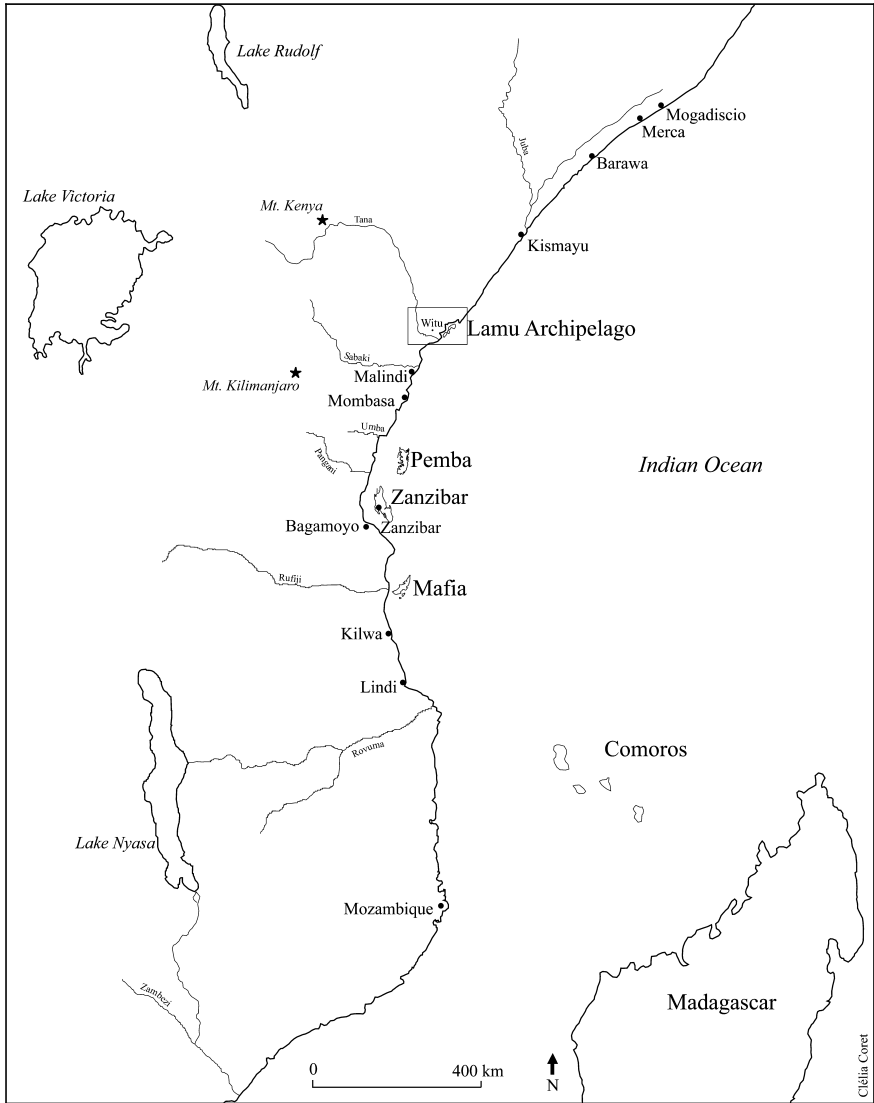


FIGURE 1 East African coast in the 19th century

On the Kenyan coast, Fred Morton offered a useful first factual overview.² Adopting a sympathetic perspective, he observed the aftermaths of slavery

Francesca Declich, “Gendered Narratives, History, and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara,” *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 93–122.

2 Fred Morton, *Children of Ham: Freed Slaves and Fugitives Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873 to 1907* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

mainly through the contact that fugitives had with missionaries (in the abolitionist context), other African populations, and rebel chiefs in conflict with the Sultanate of Zanzibar. About 5,000 escaped slaves settled in the Witu region in the 1870s, according to historian Marguerite Ylvisaker.³ Further south, in the hinterland between Malindi and Mombasa, the work of Justin Willis and Suzanne Miers showed how former slaves integrated into Mijikenda societies. This research was complemented later by that of Lydia Wilson Marshall, who conducted archaeological excavations on the dwellings and consumption practices of the escaped slaves, followed by the work of Herman Kiriamu, Marie-Pierre Ballarin, and Patrick Abungu, who focused more on the contemporary issues arising from this servile past.⁴ On the Tanzanian coast, marronage was also an important resistance practice, as studied by Jonathon Glassman in Pangani and its hinterland.⁵ Finally, in the Zambesi Valley, the former Chikunda slaves negotiated their position among the interior people through a number of services to the land chiefs, as shown by Allen Isaacman.⁶

This overview shows the abundance of scholarly literature, which offers solid factual data for interesting comparisons; therefore, throughout this paper, regular reference will be made to these previous studies to place Witu's originality and similarities in perspective.⁷ On the one hand, these studies share a

3 Marguerite Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century: Land, Trade and Politics* (Boston: Boston University, 1979), 92.

4 Justin Willis, Suzanne Miers, "Becoming a Child of the House: Incorporation, Authority and Resistance in Giriama Society," *The Journal of African History* 38, no. 3 (1997): 479–495; Lydia Wilson Marshall, "Spatiality and the Interpretation of Identity Formation: Fugitive Slave Community Creation in Nineteenth-Century Kenya," *African Archaeological Review* (2012): 355–381; Herman O. Kiriamu, "The Landscapes of Slavery in Kenya," *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* 7, no. 2 (2018): 192–206; Marie-Pierre Ballarin, "L'esclavage en héritage et l'émergence d'une mobilisation sociopolitique au Kenya," *Politique Africaine* 140, no. 4 (2015): 41–59; Patrick Abungu, Clélia Coret, "History, Memory, and the Heritage of Slavery on the Kenyan Coast: The Witu and Shimoni Cases," in Marie-Aude Fouéré, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, Christian Thibon, ed., *Kenya in Motion 2000–2020* (Paris–Nairobi: Africae Studies, 2021), 345–348.

5 Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot, Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Porthmouth: Heinemann, 1995).

6 Allen Isaacman, "Ex-slaves, Transfrontiersmen and the Slave Trade: The Chikunda of the Zambesi Valley, 1850–1900," in Paul E. Lovejoy, ed., *Africans in Bondage. Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 273–309.

7 Comparisons were initiated in Nairobi in 2014 during the conference "Slavery in Africa: Past, Legacies and Present" in the panel "New Insight into the 'Children of Ham': Runaway Slaves on the 19th Century Swahili Coast".

common observation about the ambiguities inherent within the former slaves: they were both useful to the African and then colonial powers and at the same time were feared by them.

On the other hand, the literature suggests diverse perspectives to understand how ex-slaves dealt with the culture of the masters. Depending on the political and social situation in the different societies studied, previous research offered different interpretations. These debates first concerned the slaves themselves, and *a fortiori* the escaped slaves: what relationships, ranging from rejection to bids for belonging—the latter expressed through an attachment to the community of believers and their conversion to Islam—did they maintain with the culture of their masters on the Swahili coast? A first pattern emerged, as historians such as Fred Morton stressed: the independence of the slaves. Whenever possible, slaves sought to sever ties with their owners through flight, to determine the course of their own lives more fully, to escape punishment, to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and to control their family relationships.⁸ Then, other interpretations developed. According to Cooper and Glassman, the slaves integrated some of the social and cultural norms of the owners, to obtain a stronger position in their social institutions. This means slaves aimed at obtaining greater personal autonomy primarily by seeking to re-adjust existing social relationships, thereby becoming clients or dependants of their former owners in the process.⁹ Finally, Jan-Georg Deutsch summarized these two main patterns between “autonomist” and “hegemonist” historians.¹⁰ However, when we adopt a local perspective through case studies wherever runaway slaves settled, these two trends often appear to be at work alongside each other, without being mutually exclusive.

Following the hegemonic approach, while highlighting the negotiations at stake, Jonathan Glassman provides a thought-provoking reading of the relationship that fugitive slaves had with the Swahili cultural frame of reference. At first glance, his statement is provocative: “Flight did not express a desire to break with urban society, but a desire to become more fully integrated into it.”¹¹ Glassman analyzes the conflicts in Pangani, on the Mrima Coast in Tanzania at the end of the 19th century, between slaves and urban elites in a context marked

8 See Morton, *Children of Ham*.

9 Frederick Cooper, “The Problem of Slavery in African Studies,” *Journal of African History* 20, no. 1 (1979): 103–125; Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*.

10 Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa, c. 1884–1914* (Athens: Ohio Press, Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 6.

11 Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 107.

by an intensive exploitation of workers in a slave-based plantation economy. The tensions between slaves, or individuals with a low status in general, and patricians (*waungwana*) found its origins in the hope of the former to participate more in the institutions of the latter. According to Glassman: “the most common forms of slave resistance were struggles for citizenship, struggles for inclusion in the community life of the Muslim towns.”¹² He summarizes the inherent paradox of the escape of slaves from the Swahili coast as being far from a rejection of this urban society based on slavery but rather a strategy to claim more integration:

Although the *watoro* and their former masters differed over the particular nature of relations of servitude, they shared an underlying ideological framework in which the ideal community was Muslim, commercial, and—perhaps above all—governed by interlocking networks of patrons and clients. Slave rebels sought community, not “independence.” [...] Accordingly, after running away from their masters, *watoro* sought other patrons who could help them participate in the institutions of coastal urban society.¹³

Glassman’s proposal provides an insight into the complex interplay of identity in the ambivalent relations of fugitive slaves with the culture of their former masters, but the proposition is challenged in regions less affected by the intensity of slavery, such as in the plantations of Pangani.

In other coastal regions, when the Swahili influence was less pronounced or was shared with mainland populations, the relationship of the slaves to the culture of their masters developed differently. Observations of this kind have been proposed for the Kenyan coast. In the hinterlands of Mombasa and Malindi, Justin Willis nuances the analysis formulated for Pangani: “there is no sign that these runaways sought to maintain any ideal of Muslim culture.”¹⁴ Indeed, other options arose, such as the alternative of being integrated into Giriama societies through marriage or joining Christian missions. Lydia Wilson Marshall’s archaeological research pursues these reflections by focusing on whether runaway community cohesion was predicated on a suite of shared cul-

12 Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 95.

13 Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 107–108.

14 Justin Willis, “Running Away: Maroon Culture and Hegemony on the Kenya Coast in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in Henri Médard, Marie-Laure Derat, Thomas Vernet, Marie-Pierre Ballarin, ed., *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l’océan Indien* (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 311.

tural practices, or these groups remained culturally pluralistic on a long-term basis. In her conclusions she focuses mainly on the plasticity of identity among fugitive groups.¹⁵

The diversity of outcomes of the relationship between fugitive (ex)slaves and coastal cultural milieus requires more attention. My contribution on the aftermath of slavery in the Witu region looks at the diversity of the fugitive slaves' interactions with cultures other than those of their former owners. With its specific characteristics, the historical situation is nevertheless part of the larger patterns of politics of factionalism and patronage on the Swahili coast.¹⁶

The re-foundation of a city-state in Witu (approximately 1862 until 1890, when it was destroyed by the British), was an act of resistance by the Nabahani dynasty against Omani rule and a reaction to the decline of the city over which they ruled, Pate, a prosperous center between the 16th and 18th century in the Lamu archipelago. This mainland re-foundation is evident from the enclosure around the city, the stone house of the sultan, and the stone mosque, which together represented the preservation of the Nabahani power and the permanence of the patrician clans of the city. Lying between a forested area and the Tana River, the territory of Witu was organized through interdependent military and trade relationships with the surrounding populations through alliance and clientele and kinship networks. These relations changed considerably during the second half of the 19th century, especially because of the conflicts provoked by the mobility of Somali pastoralists and the weakening of the Orma population, historical allies of the Nabahani. In fact, the Sultan of Witu had to rely on military alliances with the escaped slaves, who were themselves looking for a powerful leader. Some of the fugitives settled in villages near the town and seem to have been particularly loyal to Witu, while others, located further away in the forest, were more independent. The latter settled among Boni hunter-gatherer groups and Katwa populations of Somali origin, with whom they developed intermarriage relationships. Fugitive slaves also reached the banks of the Tana River and the Pokomo farmers living there. Many had client–patron relationships with the Swahili of Witu. The territorial organization of this region should be considered in light of these complex and rapidly changing relationships. Far from dominating this diverse territory, the Swahili of Witu (the Nabahani and their allies) had to deal with and depended on the populations who lived there.

15 Wilson Marshall, "Spatiality and the Interpretation of Identity Formation," 369.

16 Clélia Coret, *La refondation d'une cité swahili à Witu. Écriture de l'histoire et légitimation du pouvoir au nord de la côte est-africaine (1812–1895)*, Dissertation (Department of History, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2016).

The historiography on Witu has highlighted the key role of the runaway slaves in the history of the region. In the late 1970s, relying on British sources, Morton documented their military contribution in defending Witu from repeated attacks by the Omani governor (*liwali*) of the rival city of Lamu, until the destruction of the city in 1890.¹⁷ Their participation in local agricultural production and that of other populations on the continent was emphasized by Ylvisaker by combining interviews with German and British written sources.¹⁸ As farmers who sent part of their crops back to Witu, the former slaves made the area one of the most productive along the coast in terms of rice, millet, and various fruits. The issue of their relationship with Swahili culture (the *waungwana*/patricians of Witu were slave owners that welcomed the fugitives, to increase the number of their dependants) was explored by Glassman in an MA study that prefigured his work on Pangani.¹⁹ He discussed the motivations of fugitive slaves to join the political rebellion of the Swahili of Witu.

The aim of my article is to connect these reflections by showing that the runaway slaves did not have only one option after slavery—participating in Witu's forces—but several, since they managed also to build relations with and sometimes to integrate into neighboring African societies. Therefore, I aim to challenge Glassman's paradox, mentioned earlier, by questioning the fact that the former slaves had to determine themselves only in relation to the dominant Swahili culture. Indeed, the coastal framework reference is only one option among others, because the relations formed with the non-Swahili mainland populations represent other ways of dealing with the aftermath of slavery. My hypothesis is that it is not just a question of hegemony or negotiation of coastal terms of reference but rather the junction of potential alliances between them. Thus, the study of a mainland sultanate that was militarily and economically dependent on the involvement of fugitive slaves forms the backbone of my discussion on the post-slavery literature. While dynamics similar to those in Pangani may be observed for some groups of former slaves close to the Swahili of Witu, this cannot be generalized to the whole region. Indeed, relationships with non-Swahili African populations in the hinterlands of Mombasa and Malindi can be compared to the situation in the forest to the north of Witu. The diversity of the former slaves' situations should therefore be highlighted through a reading of the social and spatial geography of the region.

17 See Morton, *Children of Ham*.

18 See Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century*.

19 Jonathon Glassman, *The Runaway Slave in Coastal Resistance to Zanzibar: The Case of the Witu Sultanate*, MA Thesis (University of Wisconsin, 1983).

For this reading, I analyze some twenty interviews conducted in Kenya in 2011, along with European sources (e.g. travel accounts, diplomatic reports). During the second half of the 19th century, the British and Germans opposed each other in order to establish themselves in this region. On the one hand, the Germans wished to form an alliance with the Swahili Sultan of Witu Ahmed Simba and portrayed him as an abolitionist ruler who welcomed all former slaves. Their strategy briefly succeeded as, between 1885 and 1890, a German protectorate was established over a small territory sold by the Sultan of Witu. This situation angered the British, Zanzibar's allies, who wanted to eliminate Witu because this "rebellious" city was perceived as a haven for the "bandits" who would have been the fugitive slaves. In this article, a discussion of the sources and their biases is followed by an analysis of their content and what they tell about the settlement sites, the origins of the former slaves, their economic activities, and the nature of their relationship with the populations living in this territory.

In the first two following sections, I discuss the terms used to refer to fugitive slaves. First, I examine the general words (*mtooro/watoro*, *mkenge/wakenge*) found in 19th century European sources, to highlight how they are not neutral and how they influence our understanding of the history of former slaves, whose voices are not easily accessible. Then I identify and analyze the names and identities in the written documentation and in my interviews, in order to understand the processes of identification at work. The third section proposes a geography of marronage, through a spatial and social reading of the sources. The diversity of situations is apparent in the inhabited spaces and in the economic and political activities of former slaves. Finally, the last section focuses on one of the options followed by fugitive slaves, the one most visible in the written documentation: developing a client relationship with the Swahili Sultan of Witu.

2 Naming the Fugitive Slaves

Following the Hellenist Moses Finley, Paul Lovejoy distinguishes between African societies where slavery was marginal and societies where it became a central institution in a fully articulated mode of production.²⁰ On the Swahili coast,

20 Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery. A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1983]), 9.

slavery long remained modest and not central to the economies of coastal city-states. Indeed, the labor force could come from the close clientship relations with mainland communities. But slavery changed from the end of the 18th century onwards, with the expansion of long-distance trade and merchant capitalism. The expansion of the Sultanate of Zanzibar, settled by Omani merchants, completely transformed the economy of the western Indian Ocean. A plantation economy, with the growth of clove production, was introduced and required an accumulation of slaves. International markets for grain, spices, and oil expanded; then the plantation economy spread onto the coast and raised the demand. Slaves were captured in the Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika regions and brought to the coast by caravans. Along the journey, some were absorbed into the regional economies. Once at the coast, some were exported to the regions around the Indian Ocean and others were used in the plantations on the coast, where they could also hold other positions (e.g. as concubines). According to Thomas Vernet, “on the Kenyan coast, the peak of the plantation economy was reached in the ten years from 1875 to 1884, when around 45,000 slaves were reported to have populated the area.”²¹ However, the slave mode of production developed unevenly on the coast, and the intense plantation economy was particularly prevalent in specific regions, such as the Zanzibar archipelago, Mombasa, Malindi, and the Lamu archipelago, where the slave owners were Omani Arabs and Swahili. The diversity of slavery was also characterized by the fact that other African societies owned slaves, as in the case of the Mijikenda near Mombasa. In addition, there were other bonds of dependence apart from slavery—for example, client relationships, debt bondage, and pawnship. In fact, when examining the sources, the distinction between a slave and another dependant is often difficult to determine, as they may have carried out the same functions, such as working on plantations. To define a slave, Alain Testart’s broad definition is appropriate: a dependant marked by the exclusion from a fundamental dimension of society (e.g. the community of believers, membership of a lineage system). He/she is most often a foreigner denied his/her honor, with very few rights and of whom the master takes advantage.²²

21 Thomas Vernet, “East Africa: Slave migrations,” *Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration* (Oxford and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3. See also Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar. Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770–1873* (London: James Currey, 1987).

22 Alain Testart, *L’esclave, la dette et le pouvoir: études de sociologie comparative* (Paris: Ed. Errance, 2001), 25.

In the 19th century, slavery became a central institution in the social organization on the Swahili coast. In reaction, flight was often a common form of resistance. Among the plantation slave workers, some were born into slavery, while others had been captured by raids and brought recently. Returning to their home region was impossible, but escape made it possible to reach the hinterlands, which were generally not controlled by the Omani or Swahili slave owners, but by the populations of the continent. Sometimes the masters tried to recapture their slaves. The Mazrui, a major coastal family owning many slaves,²³ attacked Koromio (between Malindi and Mombasa) in 1852 and Fuladoyo in 1883, where fugitive slaves were living.

To better understand who the former slaves were, we first need to examine the terminology used in European sources. As they themselves left no written traces, this external documentation is crucial to access their history. It was produced by explorers, missionaries, and diplomatic representatives who travelled in the region and who owed their knowledge to their local interlocutors (e.g. political authorities, guides, interpreters, porters). Runaway slaves on the mainland across from Lamu were designated by various names. These names should be analyzed with caution because they were probably not used by the runaways themselves. Europeans often did not even name them and only sketchily mention the presence of “escaped,” “fleeing,” or “runaway” slaves. Moreover, one term appears regularly in these sources, whatever the nationality or function of the traveler, during the final third of the 19th century. *Watoro* (sing. *mtoro*) was used by the German traveler Gustav Adolf Fischer in the 1870s, the British vice-consul John Haggard in the mid-1880s, and the French Spiritan missionary Alexandre Leroy in the 1890s.²⁴ Furthermore, *mkenge* (sing.) / *wakenge* (pl.) appears only twice, from a British and a German traveler.²⁵ John Haggard translated it as the “restless people,” but this is more a subjective judgment of how these groups were perceived by the local Omani political authorities: “troublemakers” destabilizing the region. Indeed, Haggard traveled through the contacts of the Omani governor of Lamu and therefore perceived Witu and its

23 The Mazrui were governors of Mombasa since 1690 and represented the Yarubi dynasty of Oman. When the Yarubi were driven from power by the Busaidi in 1749, the Mazrui did not recognize the new rulers.

24 Gustav Adolf Fischer, “Über die jetzigen Verhältnisse im südlichen Galla-Lande und Wito,” *Mitteilungen der Geographischen in Hamburg* (1876–1877):4; National Archives-London, FO/84/1678, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 25 August 1884; Alexandre LeRoy, *Sur Terre et sur l'eau: Voyage d'Exploration dans l'Afrique Orientale* (Tours: A. Mame et fils, 1894), 122.

25 Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, 22 August 1884; Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R1001/8868, Toeppen to Hohenlohe-Langenburg, Lamu, 13 January 1888.

allies as rebels. Finally, although this term does not occur in the sources, a fugitive slave could also be referred to as a *mkimbizi*.²⁶

An explanation of these linguistic uses is facilitated by Swahili dictionaries, especially those published by the missionary-linguists Johann Ludwig Krapf and Charles Sacleux between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th centuries.²⁷ The three terms may be used to refer to a runaway slave (Table 1).

According to these entries, their definitions, and the examples, the word *watoro* is used mainly for slaves, but not exclusively. In the first instance, it means departure, flight, leaving. And still today *watoro* retains this meaning, without necessarily being related to slavery. As several people interviewed in the Witu region in 2011 explained, “a refugee from political clashes or natural disasters can also well be named *mtoro*.”²⁸

The main difference between *mtoro*, *mkenge*, and *mkimbizi* is dialectal, the first word being used more in the Kiswahili dialects spoken in the southern part of the coast (Zanzibar) and the other two more in the north (Mombasa and Lamu). In addition, Sacleux states that *kutoroka*, the verb denoting the act of escaping, “was recently introduced,” which indicates a change in linguistic usage. It is important to point out that many different Kiswahili dialects existed along the coastline and varied for each town and even for each village.²⁹ In the 19th century, with the political and economic hegemony of the Sultanate of Zanzibar, Kiunguja (the dialect of Unguja Island where Zanzibar town is located) spread at the expense of other languages. It is likely that some words from this dialect, such as *watoro* and *kutoroka*, were integrated into the local ways of speaking in that period. In addition, because of the importance of this dialect, it was chosen as the reference for standardized Swahili (*kiswahili sanifu*) in the first half of the 20th century. Finally, if the word *watoro* is more likely to be found in European written sources, it is because British and German travelers were generally more familiar with the dialect spoken at Zanzibar. The fugitive slaves may have been designated by another term in the Witu region, but the Europeans preferred to use a word that was more familiar to their readers (other travelers) and understood by all. Another possibility is that the informants (Swahili, Arabs) of the travelers may have preferred to use the

26 Dr. Salvatory S. Nyanto, personal communication.

27 See Johann Ludwig Krapf, *A Dictionary of the Suahili Language* (London: Trübner, 1882); Charles Sacleux, *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français Tome I et II* (Paris: Institut d’Ethnologie 1939–1941).

28 Interview with Abdallah Ali Kassey, Kau, 14 July 2011; Dabale Dabo, Witu, 19 July 2011; Tuyu Gelgelo, Golja, Wariyo Bada, Hussein, Tinau, Pandanguo, 24 July 2011.

29 Derek Nurse, Thomas J. Hinnebusch, *Swahili and Sabaki. A Linguistic History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

TABLE 1 Terms* related to runaway slaves in dictionaries of Johann Ludwig Krapf and Charles Sacleux

	<i>Mtoro</i> (name)	<i>kutoroka</i> (verb)	<i>Mkenge</i> (name)	<i>Mkimbizi</i> (name)	<i>kukimbia</i> (verb)
J.L. Krapf	a fugitive a robber in Kiunguja [dialect of Zanzibar]	to escape, run away from a master, from home, business, etc. <i>mtuma anaitòroka</i> [the slave has run away]	a robber = <i>mtòro</i> (in Kiunguja) or <i>mkimbizi</i> .	1) one who runs away, fugitive. 2) one who causes people to run off from the road, to escape, because he endeavors to rob them or to lay hold of their persons to sell them into slavery. A robber highwayman, a vagabond or thief. He never has his hair cut, carries about a large knife, a bow and many arrows, and stays in the woods.	to flee, escape, to run away, to go quickly. <i>kukimbizia</i> (vb) to cause to run away from one <i>ame-ni-kimbizia watu-mawangu</i> , he caused my slaves to run away from me.
C. Sacleux	Deserter, runaway, maroon: said especially about a runaway slave. Southern dialect [from Gasi to Mozambique] Proper name of child slave.	Escape (<i>-kimbia</i>), escape from somewhere, desert, run away (slave, child, soldier, prisoner, pet or captive), escape from sb. (with the person complement, <i>mtumwa amèmt. Bwana wake</i>). Application form of <i>-toka</i> .	Fugitive, deserter. in <i>kimvita</i> and <i>kiAmu</i> [dialects of Mombasa and Lamu] Synonym Southern dialect: <i>Mtoro</i> .	1. Fuyard, fugitif, poltron; syn. of <i>mtoro</i> . 2. Slave running in front of his master's donkey.	to run away, to flee, to escape (<i>-toroka</i>); escape; flee from sb. or sth., avoid. [Ki-Amu; dialect of Lamu] <i>-kimbia</i> still retains the meaning of "to escape" of <i>-toroka</i> recently introduced.

* The nouns and verbs, looked up jointly, are formed from the same root. My precisions are in square brackets.

word *watoro* to make sure they were well understood by the Europeans, who, they knew, were more familiar with the dialect of Zanzibar.

Beyond these linguistic aspects, it is useful to consider the subjective meanings, mentioned earlier, and the positive or negative perceptions of escaped slaves. Among Europeans, reference to fugitive slaves was never neutral and often went hand in hand with a more general intention to either discredit or promote these groups and the political organizations they belonged to, in this case the city of Witu and the Nabahani dynasty. For their part, the Germans referred to the fugitives as unlucky, oppressed slaves who came to look for protection from the Sultan of Witu, who was himself described as the only African ruler who abolished slavery. This idea is expressed by the Prussian traveler Richard Brenner, who in 1867 wanted to sign a trade and friendship treaty between his country and Witu.³⁰ He portrayed the city as a haven of peace for escaped slaves. Later, other German travelers repeated this image of a sanctuary for mistreated slaves. The political issue for those who gave a positive view of Witu—as a flourishing city struggling against a repressive Zanzibar Sultanate—was to engage Bismarck in East Africa. In contrast, the British authorities, as well as French travelers, had a very different perception. As allies of the Sultans of Zanzibar, the objective was only to eliminate Witu. For example, the escaped slaves near the Swahili city, who formed an alliance with the Sultan, were described as robbers by John Haggard in 1884.³¹ Thus, colonial rivalries are reflected in the terminology and the images projected, aiming to provoke the support or the rejection of the Sultan of Witu and his fugitive allies.

3 Diversity of Relationships through Plural Identities

Besides the general terms for naming escaped slaves, ethnonyms referring to formerly servile groups can be found in the written sources during the second half of the 19th century. These names should be considered with caution, as it is difficult to ascertain whether the former slaves used these names themselves or whether they came from external groups (Witu authorities, Europeans' guides). Therefore, it is important to contextualize these terms in order to understand what they say about identity constructions after slavery. I first distinguish names that refer to the home regions of the escaped slaves, then those showing that identification occurred with the regions of settlement, and

30 Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R 1001/422, Brenner to Prussian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Witu, 1 August 1867.

31 Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, April 1884.

finally, I compare the names from the written documentation with those found in the interviews. By analyzing these, we can reflect on the diversity of the social relations around Witu.

A first case that can be observed in the European sources is the use of names from the interior of the continent. The first observer to give information about the inhabitants of the Witu region was the Prussian Richard Brenner in 1867, five years after the foundation of the city.

Furthermore, the Wadoé have left their previous residence opposite Zanzibar and now live in hordes distributed from 3° S. Br. to the equator among the Galla [Orma], the latter tacitly acknowledging them as masters. One says that the Wadoé have left their country as a result of the slave hunts frequently undertaken from Zanzibar. I myself have often met the Wadoé between Sabacki and Juba [rivers]; although they were hard-working farmers in their homeland, they live here only off hunting and occasional robbery, and are particularly feared by the Arabs and Swahili traders. The chiefs of the Wadoé, like the chiefs of all the Galla and Waboni tribes in the Dana [Tana] region, have joined Sultan Zimba [Simba] in Witu and form a dangerous and feared force against the Arabs.³²

Brenner reported that the Wadoé originally came from a region “opposite Zanzibar” but were deported as slaves. He added that they fled from the Swahili and Somali towns and plantations (Merka, Barawa, and Mogadishu) and settled around Witu. Others could have been sailors who took advantage of the opportunity of a stop at Lamu to disappear.³³ It appears that Sultan Ahmed Simba’s reputation incited the fugitives to set out for Witu. Moreover, Brenner’s writings can help us to estimate the number of runaway slaves in this area, even if these

32 “Ferner haben die Wadoé ihren bisherigen Wohnsitz gegenüber Zanzibar verlassen und leben jetzt in Horden vertheilt vom 3° S. Br. Bis zum Äquator unter den Galla, letztere stillschweigend als Herren anerkannt. Man sagt, dass die Wadoé ihr Land in Folge der von Zanzibar aus häufig unternommenen Sklavenjagden verlassen haben. Ich selbst habe die Wadoé zwischen Sabacki und Juba häufig getroffen, sie leben—obgleich sie in ihrer Heimath fleissige Ackerbauer waren—hier nur von der Jagd und gelegentlichen Räubereien, von den Arabern und Suaheli-Händelern sind sie besonders gefürchtet. Die Chefs der Wadoé haben sich eben sie wie die Chefs sämtlicher Galla- und Waboni-Stämme in Dana-Gebiet an den Sultan Zimba in Witu, von dem ich seiner Zeit Mehreres berichten werde, angeschlossen und bilden eine gefährliche und gefürchtete Macht gegen die Araber.” Richard Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” *Petermann’s Mitteilungen* (1868): 177.

33 Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” 459.

figures remain dubious. He wrote that approximately 10,000–16,000 fugitives were around Witu. He may have overestimated this population on purpose, to capture the attention of the Prussian state and initiate a treaty with the Sultan of Witu. In fact, Witu itself was a small town, which included only 6,000 inhabitants.³⁴ In comparison, the number of runaways was less numerous than those settled on the banks of the Juba River in the same period, who may have numbered around 30,000 or 40,000.³⁵

In October 1890 other names appear in British reports on the punitive expedition. Provoked by the killing of nine Germans by the Sultan of Witu's soldiers in September, this was a brutal intervention. It followed several events that had already weakened Witu, in particular the tensions between the sultan and several powerful allied chiefs; the Anglo-German "Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty," which placed Witu in the British zone of influence and meant the end of the German protectorate; and the anti-slavery decree of 1890, which affected Witu's slave owners.³⁶ Witu was plundered and burned to the ground by the British troops. The inhabitants then fled to the northern forest, where their allies welcomed them, and continued the armed conflict against the British forces. In the report of the expedition, one "Ali France," about whom we have no information but who was most likely a local intermediary, provided an extensive list of the identity and number of the Witu fighters: "700 Vitu, 300 Sulimabin-Abdalla, 500 Mazarui, 800 Waboni, 400 Aftula, 1000 Azigna, 2000 Katawa, 500 Wapakomo, 600 Dukalu, 1500 Watoro, 500 Gallas."³⁷ In total, he counted 8,800 individuals, of whom 4,000 were "fighting men" with 1,500 firearms. In this list, chiefs allied to the Nabahani can be identified, such as the Mazrui (formerly a leading family in Mombasa, exiled to Takaungu and Gazi since the 1830s because of their opposition to Zanzibar) and the Katwa forest leader Avatula. There are also names of African populations living close to Witu (Boni, Pokomo,

34 Fischer, "Über die jetzigen Verhältnisse," 2; Clemens Denhardt, "Deutsch-Wituland. 1 Geschichte des Deutschen Einflusses und der Denhardt'schen Erwerbungen" *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (1886), 430.

35 Henri Médard, "La plus ancienne et la plus récentes des traites: panorama de la traite et de l'esclavage en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien," in Henri Médard, Marie-Laure Derat, Thomas Vernet, Marie-Pierre Ballarin, ed., *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 89.

36 The decree prohibited the sale of slaves, the inheritance of legitimate children, required the release of slaves in case of mistreatment, allowed slaves to have rights in the justice courts, and provided for the redemption of their freedom. Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century*, 148.

37 National Archives-London, FO 881 6024X, Fremantle to the secretary of Admiralty, Mombasa, 1 November 1890.

Galla/Orma, Katwa/Katawa), as well as names referring to the servile origins of these groups, such as the Watoro and Azigna.

“Azigna” may designate populations who used to live in the northern part of current Tanzania, across from Unguja Island. This area was particularly affected by the slave trade. Around 1840, “Wazigua” slaves rebelled against their masters in Zanzibar, managed to escape, and resisted for several months before the sultan repressed their uprising.³⁸ Further north, close to the Juba River, groups of runaways also called themselves “Zigula.”³⁹ Similarly, in the Lamu archipelago, “Wazigua” became a generic name to designate people of servile origins.⁴⁰ This widespread use of the ethnonym is suggestive. It is possible that these groups tried to keep their identity distinct from those among whom they settled, or that local populations preferred to call them by names that emphasized their servile origins. Moreover, it is also possible that both these motivations applied.

This observation points to broader debates among historians about the choices of collective identity made by slaves or former slaves themselves. Cooper argues that, in some circumstances, slaves developed a collective identity “responding to the vast influx of their number into coastal plantations, their shared experience of regimented and arduous labour, and their common religious and cultural subordination.”⁴¹ For example, the fact that slaves called themselves “*wanyasa*” (people from Nyasa) indicates their cultural solidarity. Thus, their foreign origin, not their status or role in coastal society, was a source of common identity.

By contrast, other ethnonyms used by runaway slaves suggest an effort to associate themselves with the localities where they settled, indicating they were developing a collective identity based on their community of residence in a way that paralleled established Swahili towns. These observations were made in the hinterland of Mombasa and Malindi by Lydia Wilson Marshal, who stresses that “many formerly enslaved people subsequently adopted ethnic affiliations from neighbouring communities in the coastal hinterland.”⁴² In this vein, in Witu, an association with the city seems to have been desirable for the former slave groups settled in the area. Indeed, in August 1884, the British vice-consul John Haggard, travelling from Lamu to Witu, learned from an informant, one Ali bin Mohammed, that:

38 Gabriel Akindele Akinola, “Slavery and Slave Revolts in the Sultanate of Zanzibar in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 2 (1972), 223.

39 Declich, “‘Gendered Narratives’, History, and Identity,” 95.

40 Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century*, 93.

41 Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 265–266.

42 Wilson Marshall, “Spatiality and the Interpretation of Identity Formation,” 358.

Simba's people call themselves the Watua-Witu (not Watoro) and that the inhabitants of the Watoro villages, Katowa, Balo, Balana, call themselves Wakengi, which means literally "the wandering people" or the "unsettled people."⁴³

Kurt Toppfen, a German agent of the *Witu Gesellschaft* (Witu Company), in charge of the administration of the German protectorate, made the same observation in 1888.⁴⁴ The term *watu wa Witu* ("people of Witu" in standard Swahili) therefore appears to have been used by ex-slaves and other people at Witu themselves, rather than only by outside observers. Arguably, this designation highlights both the common interests of the Nabahani and the runaway slaves facing the same enemy in Zanzibar and its Lamu-based allies, and the desire of the fugitives to belong to the city-state of Witu. Such a self-designation referring to a town or a village was common on the 19th-century Swahili coast.⁴⁵ For instance, the missionary Charles New noted that the inhabitants of Mombasa called themselves "Wamvita," those of Pate "Wapate," and those of Lamu "Waamu."⁴⁶

The diversity of terms used for people in and near Witu increases further when we consider those collected during fieldwork on the Kenyan coast in 2011, which included several not present in the written sources. Within a 20-km radius of Witu, various names referring to people of servile origins were mentioned. The area between the Tana River and the forest to the north of Witu appears to have been a meeting zone for slaves of various origins. In 2011, a Pokomo elder explained:

There were Washambara who were staying at the very place you have been told. Then the Goshi ran away from Somali; they came there; they met these Washambara. When they met these Washambara, they negotiated with these people. They say, "We know how to cultivate, how to do about the shambas. Can we stay here?" So the Washambara allowed them to stay there.⁴⁷

43 Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, 22 August 1884.

44 Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R1001/8868, Toppfen to Hohenlohe-Langenburg, Lamu, 13 January 1888.

45 Randall Lee Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 65; Françoise Le Guennec-Coppens and Sophie Mery, "Les Swahili: une singularité anthropologique en Afrique de l'Est," *Journal des Africanistes* 72, no. 2 (2002), 60.

46 Charles New, *Life, Wanderings, and Labours in Eastern Africa* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1873), 55.

47 Interview with Mzee Mandisa, Witu, 21 July 2011.

The term “Washambara” (field-dwellers) appears to be a likely designation for people who had formerly worked plantations. Another informant said:

Washambara were people from Tanzania and Tanganyika [...]. These people had been sold like cows and goats. They were taken from there in the steam ships and brought here from there and they were sold by somebody. These are Washambara.⁴⁸

Another added: “I knew and I heard that the tribe of the Shambara were here, and they were workers, and they were brought from Tanzania.”⁴⁹ These informants attributed a servile origin to the Washambara. Moreover, during the 1910s, the ethnologist Alice Werner remarked that in the Lamu archipelago the name *mshambara* was interchangeably used with *mzalia* (slave) to indicate the servile origin of someone born of foreign parents.⁵⁰ Similarly, in recent oral research near the Juba River, this name also appeared among the Wag-*osha* groups to designate descendants of slaves, soldiers of colonial powers, and farmers who migrated.⁵¹ Thus, the association of the term “Washambara” with servile origins is well established, though not universal.

The name “Goshi,” mentioned by one informant in Witu, similarly oscillates between overtones of former enslavement and refugee status, but with different geographic reference points. It was also found in Kau, to the south of Witu. Pokomo interviewees used “Goshi” to refer to the inhabitants of a *mtaa* (district) in Chara village, located a few kilometers away.

Right away we had other tribes that we called the Goshi. They are also *watoro* because they are refugees from other places; they are not from here [...]. The Goshi, they spoke Somali [...]. The Goshi are from Somalia [...].⁵²

Gosha means “forest” for the Somali. This name could refer to the communities of fugitive slaves on the Somali coast, which would support the observations of Brenner in 1867 that pointed to this area as a place of departure, as mentioned previously for the Wadoe. The Gosha is actually an area along the Juba River,

48 Interview with Mahadi Mohammed, Witu, 19 July 2011.

49 Interview with Abderahmane and Ali Omar Atik, Witu, 20 July 2011.

50 Alice Werner, “Some Notes on East African Folklore,” *Folklore* 25, no. 4 (1914): 462.

51 Declich, “‘Gendered Narratives,’ History, and Identity,” 95.

52 Interview with Abubakar Sheikh Omar, Bakari Said Boya, Abdallah Ali Kassey, Kau, 14 July 2011.

covered by forest, where a large group of runaways settled in the second half of the 19th century. The inhabitants of this region in Somalia, ex-slaves as well as Boni groups, were first designated as *watoro* in the colonial sources and later called “Wagosha.”⁵³

The lack of concordance between the ethnonyms used for runaway slave descendants today and those in written documentation from the 19th century raises two points. First, it suggests a great deal of diversity and fluidity in both self-identification and mutual identification among the mobile populations around Witu. Identities were negotiable and probably often difficult to assert. There are indications that some groups of slave descendants have not integrated into local identities; consequently, no single ethnic identity has become hegemonic in these locations. Secondly, it should be noted that the naming of ex-slave populations was socially quite a hot political item. Thus, this lack of concordance suggests that the social negotiation continued during the 20th century and shows a continuing effort by slave-descendant populations to reduce their stigma by way of adopting different names.⁵⁴

4 Towards a Marronage Geography

This section develops a geography of marronage in the Witu region, to elaborate the idea that emerged from our analysis of denominations: there was no single, uniform way of constructing belonging in the aftermath of slavery, but rather several. This means that no single cultural influence (e.g. that of Swahili culture through the city of Witu, or of rural populations nearby) was hegemonic in this region. On the contrary, different influences coexisted and the escaped slaves appear to have had different settlement options, albeit all under the pressures of their servile origin.

Across the world, fugitive slaves usually settled in places where their ex-masters could not easily recapture them. In the Americas, the maroons settled in isolated swamps or impenetrable jungles.⁵⁵ On the Swahili coast also, runaways resided in fortified sites some kilometers inland. They aimed to distance themselves from coastal towns and the cultivated mainland areas where they had previously lived and worked. But some groups did not find well-protected

53 Declich, “‘Gendered Narratives’, History, and Identity,” 93–122.

54 I am grateful to Felicitas Becker for her help in formulating these interpretations.

55 Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies. Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996 [1973]), 5.

places. For instance, in the area between Malindi and Mombasa, Lydia Wilson Marshall showed that, during the 1840s, ex-slaves occupied a still vulnerable site at a higher elevation but near the plantations of their former owners. They were unable to go further because local hunters stopped them and pastoralists did not permit them to settle among them.⁵⁶ In Witu, however, the fugitives managed to take part in both kinship networks and commercial exchanges with indigenous residents.

In the following, I identify three main areas in the mainland region near Witu where fugitive slaves settled (Figure 2); furthermore, they connect this spatial interpretation to the chronology of their arrival. The first and most ancient area was formed by a conglomerate of villages located in the forest to the north of Witu, where Boni hunters lived along with Bajun and Katwa groups (the villages of Katawa, Balawa, Jongeni, and as far as Safareh). The second comprised hamlets close to the Swahili city; these were more recent, founded in response to the foundation of Witu in 1862. The third site was situated on the banks of the Tana River where the runaways joined Pokomo farmers (between Ngao and Kinyadu).

From the second half of the 1860s until the end of the century, the arrival of successive waves of ex-slaves on the northern Kenyan coast near and north of the Lamu archipelago is documented by European travelers. The huge and well-forested space north of Witu was an ideal refuge, as it was situated far beyond the hinterland where the city-states of the archipelago exercised their influence.⁵⁷ Another factor attracting ex-slaves was a Katwa leader, named Avatula or Futula bin Bwana Hero. The Katwa were pastoralist groups of Somali origin, who practiced pastoralism at first but gradually acquired a sedentary lifestyle.⁵⁸ Some clans lived on the island of Pate and slowly gained political and social power. The leader, Avatula, was born on this island and, after a military defeat against an opposing clan, fled to the mainland into the forest, where he managed to gather fighters among the local people. He recognized the authority of the Sultan of Witu by paying him an annual tribute. At first, he settled in

56 Wilson Marshall, "Spatiality and the Interpretation of Identity Formation," 364.

57 The Lamu archipelago is composed by the islands of Lamu, Manda and Pate, where several city-states developed very early. These cities exercised their influence on the adjacent mainland, a territory named *bara*, whose limits were vague and porous according to the development of the grain plantations (rice and maize) and their relations with the continental populations. Thomas Vernet, "Les cités-Etats swahili de l'archipel de Lamu, 1585–1810. Dynamiques endogènes, dynamiques exogènes" (PhD diss., University Paris 1, 2005).

58 Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century*, 88.

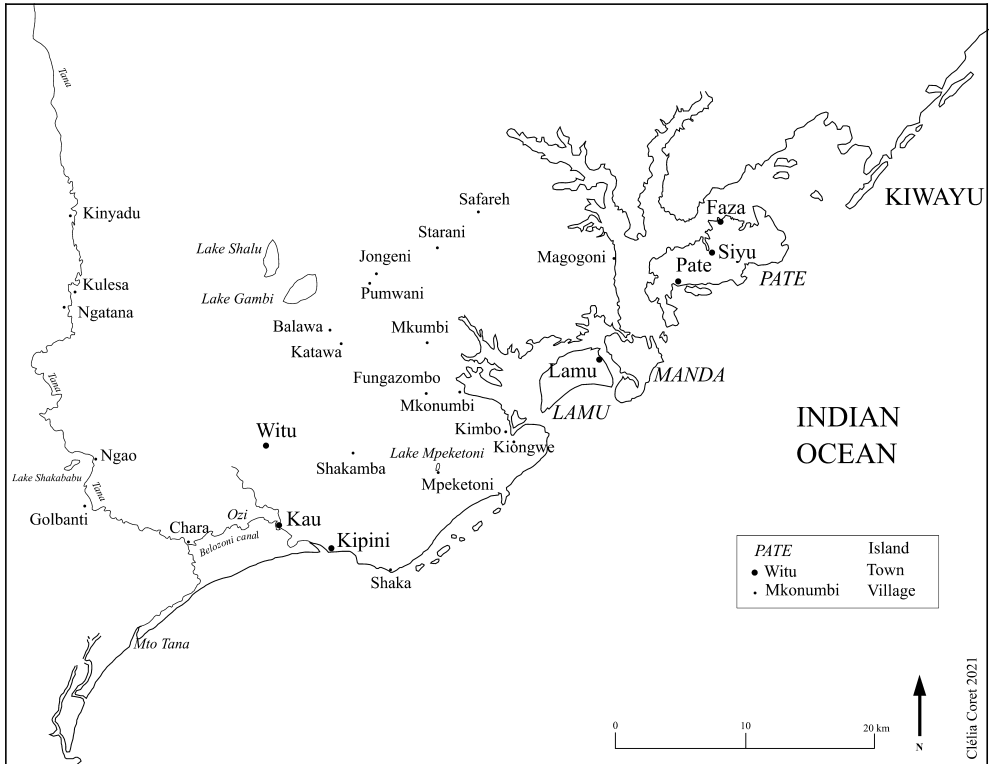


FIGURE 2 Witu and the Lamu archipelago in the 19th century

Balawa, with Boni clients and maroon slaves, but later he established himself further north in Starani, supported by his fugitive slave allies. By 1889, according to German sources, he was more independent, controlled five other large villages, no longer paid tribute to Witu, and had an army of 1,000 armed soldiers.

Balawa was a conglomerate of villages with about 5,000 inhabitants. Other sites in the forest, such as Balo, Katawa, Mtangamakundu, Starani, Jongeni, and Pumwani, welcomed or were created by fugitive slaves.⁵⁹ There the runaway slaves also managed to build alliances with more ancient inhabitants of the area, such as the Boni⁶⁰—hunter-gatherers and nomads—who played

59 National Archives-London, FO/84/1678, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 25 August 1884; FO/107/14, Rodd to Rosebery, Witu, 5 August 1893; Kurt Toeppen, “Aus Deutsch Witu-Land,” *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (1889), 325–328.

60 Boni is a name given by Orma and Somali to these groups of hunter-gatherers, who pre-

an important role in the ivory trade. These alliances between the Boni, the Katwa, and the fugitive slaves made the forest impenetrable to anyone who was not welcome to these groups. For instance, in 1887, slave owners from Lamu attempted an incursion to recover their slaves but were beaten back by the forest's coalition.⁶¹

These runaways' settlements built during the first half of the 19th century encouraged the arrival of the dissident Nabahani at Witu in the 1860s. In this sense, they were recognized as part of the political geography of the region. Facing dynastic conflicts as well as the political and economic hegemony of the Omani rulers headquartered in Zanzibar, a party of the Nabahani clan was expelled from the city of Pate around 1810. They temporarily took refuge in the trading village of Kau, near the river, where Pate had had influence for several centuries, before being driven out by the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar, Sayyid Madjid, in 1862. The Nabahani and their followers first sought refuge in the forested village of Balawa near their allies, before they went to Witu, a two-day march away.⁶² They had probably explored this area while based at Kau, from where it was accessible during seasonal river flooding.⁶³ The choice to settle in Witu was therefore largely due to the proximity of the allies in the forest (Avatula and the runaway slaves) as well as that of the Orma.⁶⁴ These latter pastoralists had been living on the mainland near the Lamu archipelago and near the Tana River for several centuries. The city of Pate had ancient relations with them, particularly military alliances. The Orma were powerful in the Kau region because of their participation in commercial exchanges, as intermediaries in the ivory trade. They obtained ivory both by hunting and through their client relationships with the Boni hunters, who had to give a tusk to their Orma patrons for each elephant killed.⁶⁵ Orma people also supplied the East African coast with skins, wax, honey, rhino horn, and cattle. According to oral sources, Witu may have begun as a former *manyatta* (Orma "camp") because the Orma used to regularly visit this area to lead their cattle to the river to drink.⁶⁶

ferred the name "Aweer." Daniel Stiles, "Hunters of the Northern East African Coast: Origins and Historical Processes," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 54 no. 4 (1981), 848.

61 Toeppen, "Aus Deutsch Witu-Land," 326.

62 New, *Life, Wanderings, and Labours*, 257.

63 Fischer, "Über die jetzigen Verhältnisse," 1.

64 The Orma belong to the larger Oromo group in Ethiopia and Kenya.

65 Thomas Boteler, *Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery to Africa and Arabia. Vol. 1* (London: R. Bentley, 1835), 387, 393.

66 Interview with Warede Dela, Didewarede, 16 July 2011.

Gradually, the alliance between Witu and the Orma weakened, opening the way for one with the fugitives. Indeed, from the 1860s these allies faced the arrival of other pastoralist populations: the Masai and the Somali. The Somali migrations were a result of a series of human and environmental pressures that are not discussed here.⁶⁷ The Orma engaged in important battles but were finally defeated and found refuge on the banks of the Tana, in areas where they had not usually lived.⁶⁸ These battles caused many deaths, and a smallpox epidemic in the late 1860s also contributed to a drastic decrease in the Orma population.⁶⁹ In January–February 1887, a violent offensive was launched on the villages and fields west of Witu, as well as on the Pokomo villages along the river, causing hundreds of deaths and the stealing of several thousand cattle. Other attacks on Pokomo villages were recorded at the end of August 1887 and between March and May 1888.⁷⁰ These major offensives involved between 1,500 and 3,000 Somali. The establishment of Witu and the Boni and escaped-slave villages in the forest to the north of the town provided a solid defense against the Somali advance.⁷¹ The Maasai and Somali offensives contributed to a significant decrease of the Orma population in the Tana region, affecting their political and social organization and increasing the supply of Orma slaves on the slave market.

Witu was directly affected by the situation, firstly because of the stealing of Swahili cattle, and secondly because the Orma, long-time allies, were considerably weakened. This also threatened the political and social balance sought by the Sultan of Witu, which consisted in placing himself at the head of an extensive network of multiple dependencies, from the forest to the Tana River. In this context, fugitive slaves became essential allies. The Orma villages around Witu disappeared and were replaced by those of the former slaves attracted by the reputation of the Sultan of Witu. The presence of the Nabahani sultan, as a powerful chief, had encouraged the arrival of other fugitive slaves who were looking for a protector. In 1867, the traveler Richard Brenner reported:

67 See Peter Thomas Dalleo, *Trade and Pastoralism. Economic Factors in the History of the Somali of Northeastern Kenya, 1882–1948*, Dissertation (Department of Philosophy, Syracuse University, 1975).

68 Brenner, "Richard Brenner's Forschungen in Ost-Africa," 177; Clemens and Gusav Denhardt, "Bermerkungen zur Originalkarte des unteres Tanagebietes," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* 19 (1884): 139.

69 Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century*, 90.

70 Bundesarchiv, R1001/8867, Denhardt to German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Berlin, 22 August 1887.

71 Bundesarchiv, R1001/8868, Michahelles to Bismarck, Zanzibar, 3 May 1888; Carl Peters, *Au secours d'Emin Pacha, 1889–1890* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1895), 44.

For five years numerous trains of slaves have arrived [...] every week, more or less, from the North and South, who have escaped from their Arab masters on the coast and are seeking and finding asylum and their freedom here.⁷²

By the middle of the 1880s, six large villages were established in areas formerly dominated by Orma: Hamasi, Mohonda, Mawani, Chanja, Gongoni, and Mominini. They had a combined population of around 6,000.⁷³ According to an informant interviewed at Witu in 2011, Mawani still exists today, while Hamasi and Chanja are hamlets almost abandoned. They are situated around two or three kilometers from the current centre of Witu town. However, Mohonda and Mominini were not recognized as geographical names by the same informant.⁷⁴

The Tana River banks formed the third area where the runaway slaves settled near or in the villages of the Pokomo. They specialized in agriculture and used the flood waters to produce cereals (rice, sorghum, maize). Fishing and, occasionally, elephant hunting were also a significant part of their activities. They traveled on the river, navigable for about 350 kilometers at the time of the floods, in light wooden boats (*mau*), which they used to carry goods (ivory, grain) and people between the interior and the coast. The Sultan of Witu maintained a client–patron relationship with the Pokomo populations, expressed in a tribute of cereals for the closest villages from the Swahili city. A part of the harvest—200 bags of rice, 30 bags of maize, and 30 bags of sorghum—was supplied twice a year.⁷⁵

These exchanges were part of an ancient interdependent relationship, dating back to when Pate increased its influence over the lower Tana region in the second half of the 18th or early 19th century. They were far from unilateral, and reciprocity included military protection in exchange for the payment of the tribute so the Pokomo did not have to maintain a military force.⁷⁶ Some fugitive slaves settled among them on the banks of the Tana River. They were, however,

72 “Seit 5 Jahren kamen und kommen [...], allwöchentlich mehr oder minder zahlreiche Züge von Sklaven aus Nord und Süd an, die ihren arabischen Herren an der Küste entlaufen sind und hier ein Asyl und ihre Freiheit suchen und finden.” Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R 1001/422, Brenner to Prussian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Witu, 1 August 1867.

73 National Archives-London, FO/84/1678, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 25 August 1884.

74 Interview with Mahadi Mohammed, Witu, 19 July 2011.

75 Ferdinand Würtz, “Die Liongo-Sage der Ost-Afrikaner. Kleine Mittheilungen,” *Zeitschrift für Afrikanische und Ozeanischer Sprachen* 2 (1896): 88–89.

76 David Lawrence Miller, *Social Formations in Transitions: Social and Economic Change in the Lower Tana Valley, Kenya, 1850–1939*, Dissertation (University of Syracuse, 1981), 86–87.

less numerous than those in the forest or near Witu, according to travelers in the late 19th century.⁷⁷ They were allowed to cultivate and settle in exchange for a part of their harvest. Some informants told historian David L. Miller in the 1970s that the Pokomo prohibited marital unions with ex-slaves.⁷⁸ However, marriages did occur, and Ndera—one of the largest villages on the Upper Tana in the 1890s—was inhabited largely by the descendants of these unions, according to an investigation by a colonial employee of the British administration, himself of Pokomo origin, who further explains that the fugitives also formed their own villages, as at Kinyadu, close to the river.⁷⁹ The sources, therefore, suggest ambivalent attitudes to the integration of fugitive ex-slaves in Pokomo society, but also that such integration occurred to an extent.

In the three areas mentioned, between the forest and the river, the former slaves played a very active role in the development of agriculture. According to Brenner in 1867:

The lazy and arrogant slaves of the Arabs became, here at Witu, quiet, simple and hardworking men who have built homesteads and live happy and satisfied lives in freedom and legality and with an average workload.⁸⁰

In fact, a much more complex reality lies behind this moralizing judgment. The landscape was transformed by the settlement of fugitive slaves. Their numbers increased continuously over the century, requiring more intensive agricultural production. Thousands of fugitives cleared the forest using fire, and the excellent quality of the soils allowed the cultivation of rice, millet, maize, and sesame.⁸¹ Millet cultivation had to be shifted to newly cleared fields every two or three years;⁸² in consequence, the continual establishment of new plots was a necessity, particularly considering the constant influx of new ex-slave refugees to the area from the plantations of Lamu and from southern

77 J.R.W. Pigott, "Piggott's Journey to the Upper Tana 1889," *Proceeding of the Royal Geographical Society* 12, no. 3 (1890), 131.

78 Miller, *Social Formations in Transitions*, 56.

79 Mikael Samson, R.G. Darroch, "A History of the Pokomo by Mikael Samson," *Journal of The East Africa Natural History Society* 17, no. 5–6 (1944), 374–376.

80 "Aus den faulen und unverschämten Sklaven der Araber sind hier in Witu stille, nüchterne und arbeitsame Männer geworden, die sich eine eigene Häuslichkeit gegründet haben und in Freiheit bei mässiger Arbeit und Gesetzmässigkeit glücklich und zufrieden leben." Brenner, "Richard Brenner's Forschungen in Ost-Africa," 460.

81 Bundesarchiv, R1001/8870, Toeppen to the *Witu Gesellschaft*, Lamu, 28 August 1889.

82 Clemens Denhardt and Gustav Denhardt, "Bermerkungen zur Originalkarte des unteres Tanagebietes," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* 19 (1884), 153.

Somalia. Runaway slaves' agricultural strategy led to the increase of cultivable areas at the expense of the Utwani forest, whose surface area was significantly reduced.⁸³ Former slaves, therefore, settled into an agricultural way of life that, while not inimical to them, owed little to an urban, Swahili lifestyle.

Some fugitive slaves, however, mainly those who lived in the forest, also participated actively in the slave trade. This phenomenon is not unique to refugees from slavery in the Witu area and has been studied in other parts of Africa.⁸⁴ It was often even essential for the survival of these groups. The former slaves organized raids with their Boni allies on the cultivated areas of the mainland across from Lamu town, capturing slaves who worked there as well as cattle. In the 1870s and 1880s, several attacks took place on the villages of Mpeketoni and Mkumbi near Lamu. In 1881, in reaction, slave owners attempted a counterattack against their assailants without waiting for the military support promised by the Sultan of Zanzibar; however, they had to retreat after seven of them were killed.⁸⁵ As a consequence of these raids from the forest, the number of slaves remaining in the mainland plantations of Lamu was small by the 1880s. Fearing the raids, the enslaved used to live together in villages far from the plantations.⁸⁶ It is worth noting that the women and men captured by the runaways and Boni already had a servile status. Thus, these slaves were doubly enslaved, as earlier in their lives they had experienced a first enslavement in their region of origin or been born into servility. This new enslavement brought them back to the "beginning of the chain." They became captives, removed from the social links they had established in slavery, were forced to walk on the slave trade roads again, and were sold to a new master. These individuals, with double (or even more?) enslavements, may have been common in East Africa, where it was not rare for a slave to have had several masters during a lifetime.⁸⁷ In Pemba, for instance, Elisabeth McMahon noted that it was a "usual event" for freed slaves to become re-enslaved by kidnapping.⁸⁸

83 Toeppen, "Aus Deutsch Witu-Land," 326.

84 Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 210; Gwynn Campbell, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), 7.

85 Henri Greffulhe, "Voyage à Lamoo," *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Études Coloniales de Marseille* 2 (1878), 330; Parliamentary Papers, 1882, LXV C.3160 n° 244, Miles to Earl Granville, Zanzibar, 17 November 1881; Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, 4 and 6 April 1884.

86 Zanzibar National Archives, AA/10/1, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 8 July 1884.

87 See Marcia Wright, "Women in Peril: A Commentary on the Life Stories of Captives in Nineteenth-Century East-Central Africa," *African Social Research* 20 (1975), 800–819.

88 Elisabeth McMahon, *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44.

The slaves captured by the Boni and fugitive slaves' raids were regularly brought back to Somali traders. They usually went to forest villages where slaves were kept before they were exchanged, most typically for cattle, according to the British traveler John Haggard in 1884.⁸⁹ The captured slaves were also offered to the Sultan of Witu. He sometimes chose to sell them back to their ex-masters in exchange for a ransom, in order not to exacerbate tensions with them. Indeed, during the second half of the 19th century, the sultan tried to maintain stable relations with the governor of Lamu, the representative of Zanzibari power on the northern coast.

This socio-spatial account of *watoro* settlement patterns around Witu shows the ex-slaves to have been active participants in several different networks of authority and reciprocity, including those focused on Avatula and the Nabahani sultans, but also the less hierarchical and more diffuse ones associated with the agricultural settlements of the Pokomo and with Katwa pastoralists. Ex-slaves' social and political affiliations were multiple, overlapping, and negotiable, resembling a network with many nodes rather than the spokes of a wheel with Witu at its centre.

The final part of this article explores further the nature of the relationship between runaway slaves and the authorities in Witu, through client relationships. This option after slavery is one among others, as I have argued, and is also the most well documented in European sources.

5 Witu and Runaway Slaves

Fugitive slaves often joined powerful chiefs who were themselves slave owners. As patrons, these chiefs protected and allowed them to settle in exchange for different kinds of services. By doing so, uprooted runaways without kin ties entered subtle hierarchies of dependency, arranged according to the obligations of various slaves, debtors, pawns and patrons.⁹⁰ As Frederick Cooper has noted, the "pragmatism" of escaped slaves in their political alliances met the need for dependants for leaders who tried to defy the authority of Zanzibar.⁹¹

89 Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, 4 April 1884.

90 Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 14–15; Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 258; Justin Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993), 8; Alain Testart, "L'esclavage comme institution," *L'Homme* 145 (1998), 55–56.

91 Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 206.

Before looking at these client relationships between the sultans of Witu and the fugitive slaves, it is necessary to consider them in the political environment as the Swahili rebuilt a specific urban framework. Witu was founded around 1860 by a faction of the Nabahani clan, expelled from Pate city-state where dynastic conflicts had occurred since the end of the 18th century. Despite the modest size of the settlement, estimated at 3,000 to 6,000 inhabitants, its founders preserved the political independence of the city to establish urban civilization (*uungwana* in Swahili) as conceived by the patricians (*waungwana*).

Like Pate, Witu was surrounded by an enclosure, partly built of wood, and used the forest as a retreat. While this stockade evokes the traditional defense and symbolic uses of Swahili city-states, this kind of construction was also common among the neighboring non-Swahili populations living in the forest, as described by European travelers.⁹² This small town had only two stone buildings and thus did not look like the stone towns of Lamu or Zanzibar. The sultan's house was built of coral stone.⁹³ This and the Friday mosques were the buildings made permanent and visually contrasted with the rest of the urban landscape, composed of houses of perishable materials.⁹⁴ The presence of these buildings in stone is a strong indication that the patricians wanted to present an image of continuing power, despite their retreat to the mainland and abandonment of the stone houses of Pate. In this idea of maintaining social status, the clothing styles of the sultans also reflected the norms of the Swahili patricians. During official meetings, Fumo Bakari, Ahmed Simba's successor, wore

a long, snow-white shirt held around the hips by a belt richly decorated with silver and gold, which also holds a magnificent, crooked dagger. As an overcoat he wears a long, black kaftân, open at the front and reaching down to his bare feet, to which sandals are attached. His head is covered with a grey-blue turban (kilemba), the edges of which are dyed light blue and decorated with fringes.⁹⁵

92 Gustav von Hörnecke, "Deutsch-Wituland 4," *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, 1886, 484.

93 Adolf von Tiedemann, *Tana, Baringo, Nil: Mit Karl Peters zu Emin Pascha*, Walther & Apolant, Berlin, 1892, 50; Peters, *Au secours d'Emin Pacha*, 42.

94 The religious practices of the fugitive slaves are not documented.

95 "[Fumo Bakari] trug das gewöhnliche Kostüm der vornehmen Wa-Suaheli: ein langes, schneeweißes Hemd, das um die Hüften von einem reich mit Silber und Gold verzierten Gürtel zusammengehalten wird, welcher zugleich einem prachtvollen, krummen Dolch Halt giebt. Als Obergewand trägt er einen langen, schwarzen Kaftân, vorne offen und bis auf die nackten Füße reichend, an denen Sandalen befestigt sind. Der Kopf ist mit

These different aspects—the city wall, stone buildings, and clothing, as well as the political organization of the city—attest to the wish to recreate common and prestigious references for these elites and distinguish them from neighboring populations. The client relationships were established in this context.

The historiography on wealth in people has documented how the accumulation of slaves or other dependants became the yardstick for measuring social status, prestige, political influence, and wealth. Justin Willis and Suzanne Miers studied the processes of differentiation and accumulation involved in the rise of the “new men” among Giriama in the hinterland of Mombasa. They demonstrated that these accumulators exercised a level of control over the produce of their dependent followers and prevented the disgruntled from seeking new patrons.⁹⁶ Choosing and controlling the number of dependants was also apparent in Witu when Sultan Ahmed Simba returned the fugitive slaves to their masters in exchange for a ransom.⁹⁷

I conceive the patron–client relationship broadly as a reciprocal aspect between unequal partners, such that patron and clients share gifts or provide services. In Witu, from the perspective of the sultan as patron, the gifts usually consisted of wives. For the slave and the fugitive slave, acquiring a partner was a step towards ensuring a new kinship network. In fact, these marriages should be understood as a reaction to a concrete situation of gender imbalance, as the fugitives were mainly men. In 1867, the traveler Richard Brenner used only the word “men” (*Mann*) to designate the runaway slaves and emphasized the “the lack of women” (*der Mangel an Frauen*) which led Ahmed Simba to arrange marriage with women who belonged to his other clients: Boni, Pokomo and, more rarely, Orma groups.⁹⁸ The Prussian traveler also observed several cases of theft of children, mostly girls, by the Pokomo, who sold them to the Swahili. In addition, slave raids organized by the ex-slaves and the Boni on the cultivable mainland of Lamu were also secondarily a way to obtain women, who became companions or wives. Historical studies showed that female slaves on the Swahili coast rarely chose to escape, perhaps because of the presence of dependent children. Escape as a form of resistance was most typical for adult men, though most slaves in East Africa were girls and women.⁹⁹ This situation highlights the vulnerability of women, similar to

einem graublauen, an den Rändern lehaft gefärbten und mit Fransen verzierten Turban (kilemba) unwunden.” Von Tiedemann, *Tana, Baringo, Nil*, 50.

96 Willis, Miers, “Becoming a Child of the House,” 481.

97 Greffulhe, “Voyage à Lamoo,” 330; Fischer, “Über die jetzigen Verhältnisse,” 3.

98 Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” 460.

99 Campbell, *Abolition and Its Aftermath*, 7; Jan-Georg Deutsch, “Prices for Female Slaves and

what Marcia Wright has documented; but inasmuch as wife exchange is a very widely used form of alliance building, it also shows that these were reciprocal relationships.¹⁰⁰

Fugitive slaves were also given a parcel of land, which they cultivated for themselves, but they were required to pay a portion of the harvest to the Sultan of Witu, as in the case of the Pokomo clients. Moreover, in exchange for a weapon, they had to defend the city. Every two days they had to patrol on the roads and paths between Witu and the coast.¹⁰¹ The ex-slaves were involved in the armed conflicts between Witu and its enemies. As mentioned earlier, the weakening of the Orma by Somali attacks led Ahmed Simba to look to ex-slaves to reconstruct his military pool.¹⁰²

These client relationships included a personal aspect, as they were founded on a voluntary act, which meant that they were not transmissible—unlike slave status. This is visible in the sources describing the meetings between the sultan and fugitive slaves who had just arrived in Witu. At the end of the 1860s, Brenner noted that “the newcomers were presented to Sultan Zimba [Ahmed Simba], then they were scattered in the plantations and hamlets of the country.”¹⁰³ However, as fugitive slaves were very numerous around Witu, this personal relation could have been limited or expressed through intermediaries or “brokers.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, according to the Prussian traveler: “in every little colony ruled a countryman of the sultan as a Djemmedar (military governor), and at his side an old and honorable negro or a Waboni as Mse [*mzee*] (oldest and judge).”¹⁰⁵ These agents recognized the authority of the sultan, who punished them if they did not obey.¹⁰⁶ This political organization was probably effective

Changes in their Life Cycle. Evidence from German East Africa,” in *Women and Slavery. Vol. 1: Africa, the Indian Ocean World and the Medieval North Atlantic*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 131.

100 See Wright, “Women in Peril”.

101 Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” 460; Fischer, “Über die jetzigen Verhältnisse,” 4–7; A. Rochus Schmidt, “Deutsch-Witu-Land,” *Globus* 54 (1888), 133.

102 National Archives-London, FO/84/1678, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 25 August 1884.

103 “Neue Ankömmlinge werden dem Sultan Zimba vorgestellt und alsdann auf die Lande zerstreut liegenden Plantagen und Weiler vertheilt.” Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” 460.

104 Henri Médard, “Croissance et déclin de la relation de clientèle,” in *Clientèle guerrière, clientèle foncière et clientèle électorale. Histoire et anthropologie*, ed. Valérie Lécivain (Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2007), 92–93.

105 “In jeder dieser kleinen Kolonien regiert ein Landsmann des Sultans als Djemmedar (militärischer Gouverneur) und ihm zur Seite steht ein alter ehrbarer Neger oder Waboni als Msee (Ältester und Richter).” Brenner, “Richard Brenner’s Forschungen in Ost-Africa,” 460.

106 National Archives-London, FO/84/1678, Haggard to Kirk, Lamu, 25 August 1884.

only in the villages closest to Witu; those in the forest were more independent because of their distance from the town, and they also took part in other social dynamics with the Boni and Katwa.

The patron–client relationships were key aspects of the development of the Swahili city of Witu and its resistance, more passive than active from 1862, against Zanzibar. They reveal the interdependency between the Nabahani and the runaway slaves, two groups who knew different types of forced mobility.

These relationships, which contributed to the integration of fugitive slaves into the regional human landscape, brought with them certain limitations. Various elements suggest that the patricians of Witu made strong efforts to maintain a social distance from the fugitive slaves and marginalize them. According to Haggard in 1884: “the Watoro [...] are much suspected and more than one or two are never allowed in the town at a time.”¹⁰⁷ The runaways were very numerous in comparison with the number of inhabitants of Witu *intra muros*; therefore, they represented a potentially dangerous and uncontrollable group—because by coming to Witu and fleeing their masters, they also sent a very strong message regarding their choice of autonomy and self-determination. By preventing them from reaching the heart of the city, the Nabahani also excluded the ex-slaves from certain social institutions. Hence, even if the ex-slaves provided continued support for Witu, at the same time they represented a potential threat. A fragile balance was thus in play between maintaining the force of the alliance while negotiating social status. In this context, the demonstrative efforts of the Nabahani sultans to assert their role as patrons through public meetings and the provision of arms, land, and wives, while routinely extracting military service and agricultural produce, subtly combined aspects of exploitation and alliance.

The reciprocity in the relations between the Nabahani sultans and the fugitive slaves were the basis of a new alliance. While the Nabahani needed strong allies to resist the sultans of Zanzibar and their partisans, the ex-slaves were looking for patrons to protect them through social and economic networks. They built patron–client relationships which involved mutual advantages and interdependency. Tensions were also at play. In this process, some runaway slaves expressed the wish to belong to the new community of Witu (the *watu wa Witu*), while the patricians tried to limit their influence. As observed elsewhere on the coast, the runaway slaves recreated relations of dependence while staying close to the culture of their former Swahili masters.

107 Rhodes House-Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 465, Journal of Haggard, 14 August 1884.

It must be stressed, however, that these relationships between the former slaves and the patricians of Witu took place in the context of larger and diverse networks. The fugitives did not at all form a homogeneous group; they were related to the urban culture and politics of Witu, but this was not the only configuration. Some were clients of the sultans, while others—perhaps the same ones, the client relationship not being exclusive—related to patrons among the Somali and Katwa pastoralists in the forest or the Pokomo farmers close to the Tana River. This complexity of relationships in the Witu region illustrates the diversity of the relations of dependence that prevailed around Swahili city-states and the shifting historical dynamics more broadly observable on the 19th-century Swahili coast.

These observations resonate with Jonathon Glassman's foundational account of social life and popular politics in late, pre-colonial Swahili towns, while also posing questions about Glassman's characterization of the relationship between town and countryside. Glassman emphasized the internal social diversity of Swahili towns, the importance of palm-frond-roofed mud huts alongside patrician mansions and of rootless "plebeians" in the towns, and the intense factionalism that arose from this diversity and drove patricians' public displays of wealth and status. The history of the ex-slaves around Witu confirms this image of diversity and divergence. Like urban plebeians, runaway slaves had choices to make concerning the way they positioned themselves towards patrician coastal culture. On the other hand, Witu's former slaves also showed that the "hinterland" of this town had dynamics of its own, dynamics that arguably were less exclusively geared towards the expanding influence of urban-based trade networks than Glassman at times seems to suggest. He speaks of the "commodification of the countryside": its increasing integration into networks of value, consumption, and exchange radiating outwards from the towns. Around Witu, however, the Pokomo and Katwa presented options of affiliation to the ex-slaves that, while not insulated from the towns, presented genuine alternatives.

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