



The complexity of public space at the Swahili town of Songo Mnara, Tanzania



Jeffrey Fleisher*

Department of Anthropology, Rice University, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, TX 77251, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 May 2012

Revision received 8 April 2014

Available online 13 May 2014

Keywords:

Swahili

Public space

Urban space

Songo Mnara

Commemoration

Public ceremonies

ABSTRACT

Public spaces have been long recognized as integral parts of urban settings, often granted importance by the public ceremonies and spectacles that they hosted. Interpretations of such public arenas often focus on elites that use them to construct and legitimize power and authority; city residents are thought to either accept these political machinations, or reject them and the space itself. Alternately, studies of public space that emphasize more practical uses, such as for production or other domestic activities tend to focus on those spaces directly associated with houses, emphasizing the everyday life of city residents. This paper works to set aside this dichotomy by exploring the multi-faceted open spaces at Songo Mnara, a medieval Swahili town on the southern Tanzanian coast. Songo Mnara is particularly well-suited to a study of Swahili public space because of its short occupation and clear town plan understood through standing architecture; it is likely the best example of how the southern Swahili understood a planned town should be organized in the fifteenth century AD. Archaeological research directed at the site's open spaces has revealed a variety of public spaces which include a mix of deliberately-maintained areas reflecting some element of control and planning, and other less formal public spaces that seem to have been organized and maintained by non-elite residents of the town. This essay reviews literature on the archaeology of open and public space and explores how the case of Songo Mnara contributes to it, by walking the reader through what has been learned about the complex and variable public spaces of the town. The public spaces of Songo Mnara serve to broaden previous dichotomous approaches to urban open space.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

This paper explores the archaeology of public spaces and how attention to these parts of urban centers can contribute to understandings of how and why cities were configured in particular ways (Smith, 2007; Stanley et al., 2012). By public space, I refer to unroofed open spaces within a city that are publicly accessible by most, if not all, residents. Public space, as such, is a subset of 'open space' which includes a much broader range of forms and scales, some of which may be more restricted in terms of access and use (such as neighborhood plazas, houseyards, alleys/paths/streets, gardens, private cemeteries; Stanley et al., 2012).¹ By combining scientific techniques, such as geophysical surveys and geochemical sampling, with excavations and test pits, this study details how public spaces were used, and exposes their

complexity within an urban site. The Swahili site of Songo Mnara (c. 1375–1500 AD) in southern Tanzania (Fig. 1) was ideal for such investigations as it contained a variety of unexplored open spaces between the town walls and structures. In these spaces, the Songo Mnara Urban Landscape Project revealed three different types of public space: a central monumental space containing a cemetery and mosque that was the site of commemorative acts; a public space that was defined by impermanent architecture, and surrounded by domestic and productive activities; and finally a less public green space that may have contained animal pens, gardens and/or orchards.

The mosaic quality of the use of public space at Songo Mnara—settings for public performances, extra-domestic areas, individual acts of commemoration, craft production—suggests that simple dichotomies cannot be drawn between the public/performative and domestic, even in the outside world of public space. This calls into the question the way that public space is often investigated archaeologically, where its configuration is assumed to be “guided by elites” (Smith, 2003b:19) and that city residents either accept them or resist this structuring in circumscribed

* Fax: +1 713 348 5455.

E-mail address: jfleisher@rice.edu

¹ Some authors use the term “empty space” (see Smith, 2008) in ways largely synonymous with ‘open space’.



Fig. 1. Eastern African Coast.

ways—through avoidance, desecration, and/or the construction of alternative public spaces. By detailing the variety of practices associated with Songo Mnara's public space, this study seeks to set aside this dichotomy—elite structuring of public space and commoners responding—and examine how public space can contribute to an understanding of “the interplay between generative, local actions and those of powerful authorities in major central institutions” (Stanley et al., 2012: 1109).

At the core of the study presented here is a ‘walk’ through the public spaces at Songo Mnara, a presentation used to demonstrate the complexity of public space by thinking through what someone—entering the site from the shoreline—would have encountered as they moved through a series of linked public spaces. This walk is *not* meant to approximate other efforts that draw on phenomenology to think through the embodied

experience of a person (e.g., Tilley, 1994; Van Dyke, 2008). The data from public spaces at Songo Mnara represent a palimpsest, sets of recursive acts, carried out over many years. As such, they do not lend themselves to an embodied approach which requires a full knowledge of a particular time/place; at a town like Songo Mnara, where the public spaces were apparently quite complex and interdigitated, it is difficult to assess the experiences of different human bodies, of various genders, ages, and classes (Brück, 2005). Elsewhere (Fleisher, 2013), I have begun to examine the performance characteristics of monumental features at Songo Mnara, deploying historical documents and direct historical analogies to consider how practices in the central open space were involved in the negotiation of power and authority. However, I am hesitant about the way that phenomenological approaches in archaeology are often focused only on the way the experience of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1034952>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1034952>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)