Book Reviews

A Material Culture: Consumption and Materiality on the Coast of Precolonial East Africa, by Stephanie Wynne-Jones. Oxford University Press, 2016. 264pp. Hb. \$120.00. ISBN-13: 9780198759317.

Reviewed by Stéphane Pradines, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University, London. Stephane.Pradines@aku.edu

This book is a publication about Swahili archaeology. Mostly, the book is the publication of the past experience of Stephanie Wynne-Jones in East Africa since the last 13 years. The book covers mainly her PhD work in Kilwa in Tanzania and her research in Vumba Kuu in Kenya when she was assistant director at the British institute in Eastern Africa in Nairobi. The book is divided in eight chapters. The index is limited to a page and it would have been better to not put an index rather than that. Some places are not mentioned such as Banbhore, some authors are quoted others are not.

The first chapter is a general introduction on material culture. These very first pages give you the tone of the book. Even the author is not an historian, some mistakes could have been avoided by quoting the right sources. The references are given without page number or sometimes for some authors, such as Mark Horton, the page number and precise references are given. The references to the Periplus and the Zheng He expeditions (p. 51, 55) are done without any primary sources or even secondary sources edited in English. Some time to time, Freeman-Grenville is used but no more than that. For example, we have one reference to the “golden age of Kilwa” with John Sutton who was a former Director of the BIEA and a very famous specialist of the Iron Age pastoralists but he wasn’t an historian of the Swahili coast. This introduction shows also the framework and the ideology behind the scene. The archaeology presented here is a theoretical archaeology (‘new archaeology’) without data or very little research as we will see later.

The second chapter is about objects in the Swahili world; in fact it’s a short historiography on archaeology on the east African coast. The author describes briefly the works of Chittick in Kilwa, Horton in Shanga, and La Violette and Fleisher in Pemba. Even if Gedi (Gede) is mentioned (and also p. 102) there is absolutely nothing about Pradines excavations in Gedi despite the publication of an important monograph (Pradines 2010). Wynne-Jones explains that she prefers to use Gede instead of Gedi who was the colonial spelling. It’s of course absurd, it’s only because Gedi was associated to Kirkman that she can say that it was a colonial spelling. Gede is

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the English spelling. The same mistake was done when the author is mentioning the researches and excavations in Dembeni in Mayotte (p. 35) there is nothing about the long excavations of Claude Allibert and Daniel Liskowsky or Stephane Pradines more recently. Wynne-Jones mentions only the work of Henry Wright in the Comoros. This is probably due to some difficulties to access to the French or non-English literature by the author. In a paragraph devoted to the practice and the Swahili stone house there is nothing on the work of Leguennec-Coppens and other anthropologists. This demonstrates also the very little knowledge about the literature on contemporary Swahili despite the fact that the author claims to use ethno-archaeology.

Wynne-Jones explains that it's not possible to use present data to understand the past (p. 43–44). She assumes that in the 14th century Swahili houses and Swahili society were different from the one studied by the anthropologists today. It's partly true as the arrival of the Europeans and later the Arabs from Oman changed or modified some aspects of the Swahili society. But to say that the modern Swahili have nothing to do with the medieval Swahili is of course an exaggeration. Swahili culture was forged during the late first millenium AD. and during all the medieval period was in contact with different cultures from the Indian ocean world. It's probably more comfortable intellectually to ignore all these studies to write the Swahili history on a blank page.

In a paragraph called “cosmopolitanism and wealth,” Wynne-Jones adds that the display of imported objects can be traced as far as the earliest stone houses (p. 44). This is incorrect the display of imported objects can be traced before the stone houses and / or it shouldn't be associated exclusively to the stone houses. It's incredible to read this kind of statement from someone who claims strongly to do archaeology of the “invisible majority” far from the Swahili elite and the stone houses. All the imported ceramics and glasses found in Dembeni (9th–10th century) predate the stone house architecture and many Swahili sites have imported material that are not connected to the elite of the Swahili society. Thinking that the imported ceramic was reserved to the rich is already an assumption and an interpretation. Wynne-Jones quotes Fleisher's idea about the mosque of Chwaka saying that the imported bowls displayed in the Swahili mosques might refer to the social life in the town like communal events (p. 45, 113). That's of course a simplistic conclusion about the Muslim world and beyond. I doubt that Fleisher and Wynne-Jones know about the *baccino* in Italy or the tiles and bowls used in the Seljuk architecture in Persia during the same period (Pradines 2011, 131–149). Another story that ignores completely facts and data about the Muslim world : the author mentions some secondary sources about the construction and the renovation of the great mosque in Kilwa (p. 70). For Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, these works are proofs of Sultan's generosity and donation to the community. Well it's true... in fact it's the norm in the Muslim world. Generosity and donation are symbols of piety done by the rulers, Sultans, emirs... Every specialist of the Muslim world knows that. It's not specific to the Swahili and these social and religious facts have to be connected to a bigger picture. It's difficult to write about a Muslim culture or a society without the codes and knowledge about Islam in African society. At the end of this chapter, Wynne-Jones provides a short listing of Swahili material culture including ceramics, metal and beads (p. 46–54). Unfortunately for a book on material culture the iconography is very limited and fairly poor. The narrow selection of imported ceramics and the few drawings of African ceramic show the little interest of the author for this important topic and her little knowledge about this important part of the Swahili material culture.

The third chapter is about Wynne-Jones excavations in the Kilwa region, especially in Songo Mnara. The fifth chapter should have been connected to chapter three as it is about Wynne-Jones PhD work in the Kilwa archipelago and the hinterland. Wynne-Jones quotes Vernet's article on Swahili town wall instead of quoting the original source on Swahili fortifications (Pradines 2002, 2004).

The recurrent problem with this book and Songo Mnara's chapter is that there is no mention of the recent researches done on the site including the new map and architectural study and the conservation works that we did on the site (Pradines and Blanchard 2005). Nevertheless Wynne-Jones dedicated one page on our excavations in Sanje ya Kati, a 10th–12th century site on the Kilwa archipelago, not far from Songo Mnara (p. 72–73). Unfortunately this page looks like an attempt to demolish all the previous researches done rather than write something useful for the readers. The second problem is that our publication is not understood by all. It's difficult to say if it's a problem of the author who cannot access to French literature or an attempt to deny all the publications who present a different story on the Swahili. First, the date 1277 is wrong, it's not the date of the battle of Shagh, it's the date when the Shirazi dynasty was replaced by the Mahdali, a Yemeni dynasty established in Kilwa Kisiwani in 1277. The battles between Shagh and Kilwa took place around 957 to 1131 (Pradines 2009, 56). Then Wynne-Jones wrote about Sanje ya Kati "It must be assumed that the entire enclosed area was previously covered by wattle and daub structures" (p. 72). Well in archaeology we don't assume we investigate and draw conclusion after a fieldwork. Nothing was visible on the ground before our excavations and the whole site was covered by ground and vegetation (including the stone house and the great mosque (cleared by Chittick). Finally it is said that we didn't care about the local / African ceramic on the site (p. 73) but few pages later, Wynne-Jones mentions the reference works of Noémie Martin who was my student on the site in charge of the study of this local ceramic and did an MA and a PhD on this topic under the direction of Professor Claude Allibert (p. 151–153). Finally the most important part of our discoveries in Sanje ya Kati were totally ignored : we demonstrated that coral stone architecture was used indistinctively for houses and mosques and the apogee of this technique was the 11–12th centuries due to the other cultures in the Indian Ocean and not as a local evolution as it was claimed before.

Later Wynne-Jones mentions the site of Sharma in Yemen (Rougeulle 2015) and she says, I quote, "Sharma was a true entrepot" (p. 187). This is fascinating for me, Sharma was a true entrepot in Yemen but saying this for Sanje ya Kati in Tanzania would be a colonial statement. Is it a British a post-colonial complex? Well to me Sharma and Sanje ya Kati are from the same period, they were both settlements and entrepots. And this statement will remove nothing of the prestigious Swahili past!

The fourth chapter is about Wynne-Jones excavations in Vumbaa Kuu. Vumba kuu is the story of a non-story, few years of excavations to say that some areas were used for specific activities... Wynne-Jones and Fleisher are working since many years now on the hidden majority in the "Swahili trading society" and develop "methods of studying the inhabitants of wattle-and-daub architecture" (p. 111). Hidden majority maybe, hidden results for sure. One of the theories developed in this chapter is to see consumption as the evidence for feasting in Swahili society (p. 113). It's very simplistic about it's not wrong if we look at contemporary practises for example with the Vule in Mayotte. The problem is that there is absolutely no reference to the literature about the modern Swahili. It's a total deny of the anthropology

and ethnology done since the last fifty years. Why Wynne-Jones didn't connect her researches with the modern Swahili? Is it to avoid compiling an abundant and complex literature or just to reinvent simple and established facts? It is possible to find a bit of ethno-archaeology in the chapter 6 which concerned about community and identity in material culture on Pemba Island (p. 154–159). The ethno-archaeology & study about ceramic productions stay very superficial as the other chapters of this book. We learn that Swahili like to boil things and it is the reason why a lot of ceramics have lids.

The part devoted to Swahili architecture avoids all the recent researches on this very important topic (p. 160–167). There is absolutely no mention of the French studies on the architecture of Gedi (2010, p.160–171), on the Swahili mosques (Pradines 2003, 2011) and on Swahili urbanism (Pradines 2002, 2014). The fact that stone architecture started with mosques and tombs was debated and proved as wrong by Pradines (2009). Stone architecture was introduced and used for religious and domestic architecture as well. Finally Wynne-Jones speaks about Songo Mnara architecture (p. 165–166) but she didn't see the late occupation of the site during the 18th century, reoccupation also mentioned in oral tradition (Pradines and Blanchard 2015).

The chapter 7 is a good essay to understand other cultures and sites in the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately it's the weakest part if it's possible. First the selection of sites presented is very limited, there is nothing before the Islamic / Medieval period. There is no mention about the Roman and Sassanian harbours. It's difficult to understand from an author who claims the pre-maritime, the pre-Islamic side of the Swahili... There is also nothing on the Red sea and it's difficult to understand why some sites of the Persian Gulf are presented and not the others... The same comment is true for the Sind and India (p. 183), the descriptions are very superficial and there is nothing about the research and publications of Kervran (1994, 1999) on the Indus delta since the last thirty years. Of course there is very little about the history of maritime trade. When Wynne-Jones mentions contacts between cultures and the bronze lion found by Horton in Shanga. It evokes for her "the possibility of Indian craftspeople spending time in this port" (p. 175). What a simplistic way of thinking. Yes the bronze tiger (?) is a proof of connection with India or Indians sailors or Indian merchants. But to say that an Indian artisan came to East Africa to make this lion is absurd and not documented. What about the marble stones exported from Gujarat to East Africa? They were made in Africa? About East African copal gum (p. 187), Wynne-Jones should read Gedi monograph (2010, 235, 270) and she will see that copal gum was present and produced in Malindi region.

The last chapter on the Swahili material worlds comes back to the first chapter on theory. The final statement of the author is to talk about the "Swahili as a material culture" (p. 199–200). It's the final proof that the Swahili are an object of study but not a reality for the Wynne-Jones. Then it is possible for her to write anything because the Swahili are a material culture, a concept far from anthropology and social history. Finally this book is somehow interesting because it demonstrates the lack of knowledge of some archaeologists working in East Africa nowadays. On a sadder note, I regret that the author didn't use all the recent excavations and the publications on the Swahili coast to write her monograph.

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