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## Rituals of Consumption and the Politics of Feasting on the Eastern African Coast, AD 700–1500

Jeffrey Fleisher

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**Abstract** Historically, the Swahili of the eastern African coast have performed feasts through which they negotiated and contested social power. Feasts draw on tradition and practice, but create the space for, and conditions of, imbalance and social debt. Drawing on this historical frame, I examine the archaeology of feasting in the more distant Swahili past, AD 700–1500, in particular looking at how feasts can domesticate distant power—the power drawn from objects and practices from elsewhere. By charting changing assemblages of imported and local ceramics alongside settlement and food preferences, I examine developments in feasting patterns and the way feasts provided a social context within which local and distant power could be translated into authority.

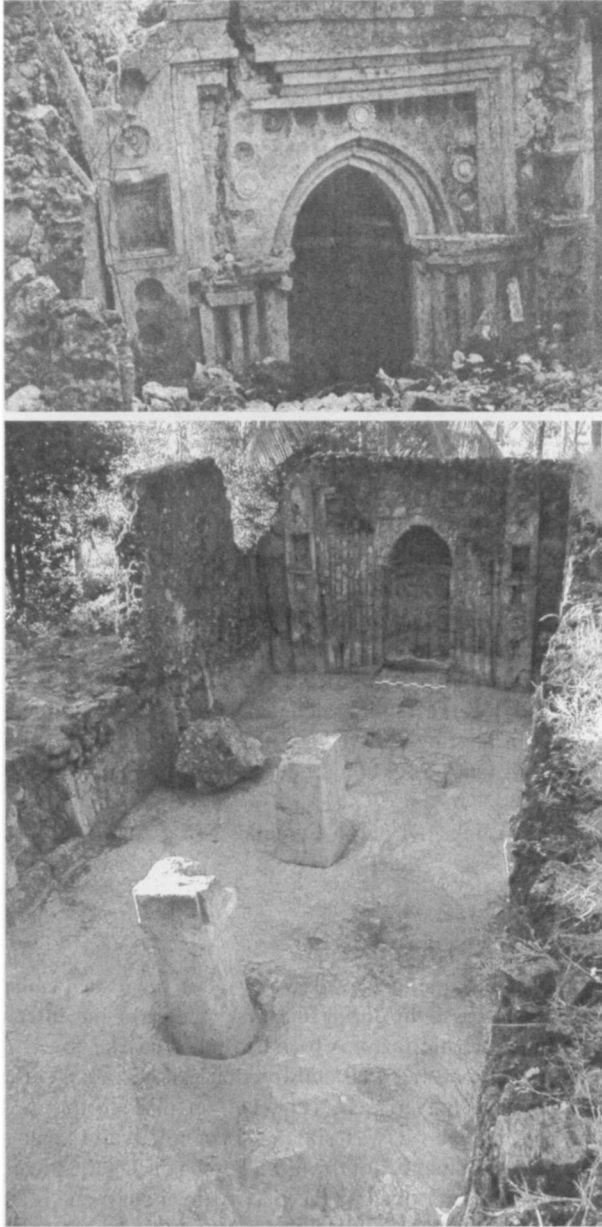
**Keywords** Swahili · Feasting · Display · Ceramics · East Africa

### Introduction

The main congregational mosque at Chwaka, a Swahili town on Pemba Island off the northern Tanzanian coast, was built during the first quarter of the fifteenth century and conforms to many of the stylistic features found in other coastal towns (Garlake 1966): triple-bayed with mortared coral-rag wall construction and elaborate cut-coral embellishments around the *mihrab* or prayer niche (Fig. 1). Yet this mosque was a particularly elaborate example, especially as it was situated in a relatively small-scale town like Chwaka. Chwaka was one of a number of towns on Pemba during the fifteenth century, and one among dozens of Swahili towns along the East African coast and offshore islands, an area extending from Somalia to Mozambique and northern Madagascar (Figs. 2, 3). These towns—called stonetowns because they contained mosques, elite houses and tombs made of coral—are the best known features of the Swahili civilization, although a great many people lived in settlements outside the towns themselves, in villages (Fleisher 2003; Fleisher and LaViolette 1999; Wynne-Jones 2007a, b) or what have been called

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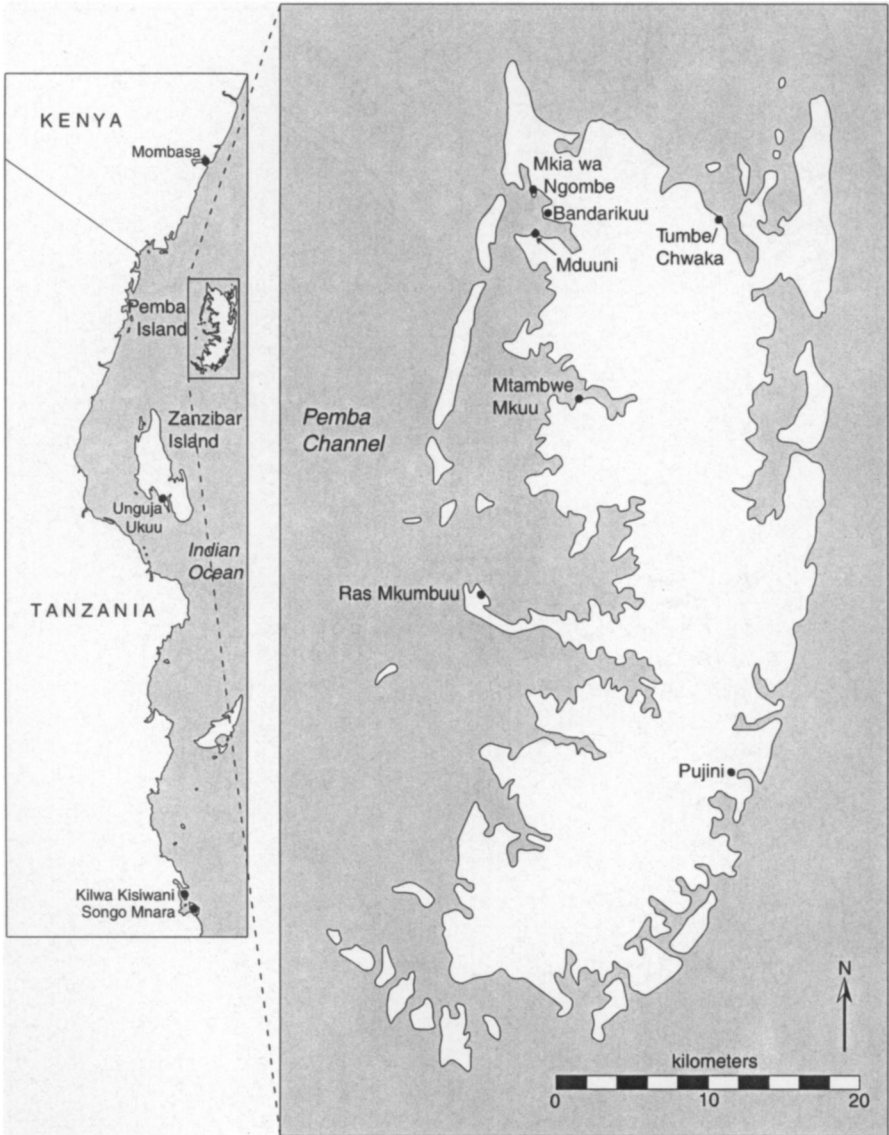
**Fig. 1** Congregational mosque at Chwaka, Pemba Island, Tanzania; *top* from Pearce (1920); *bottom* after excavations in 2004. The *mihrab* was poorly restored in the 1980s and thus now appears different from its original design

‘commoner’ (Horton and Middleton 2000, p. 126–7) or ‘country-towns’ (Middleton 1992, pp. 69–74). For archaeologists and historians, as well as more recent Swahili populations, the earlier Swahili were great merchants and traders, and this has accorded them a special place among the complex societies to emerge in precolonial Africa. In recent years, we



**Fig. 2** Eastern African Coast

have produced an increasingly sophisticated image of the Swahili (Horton 1996; Horton and Middleton 2000; Kusimba 1999a; LaViolette 2008; Pouwels 2002; Spear 2000; Wynne-Jones 2007a), a coastal people bound by linguistic similarity, Islam, and a mixed economy based on fishing, farming, and most importantly, long-distance trade. In roughest



**Fig. 3** Pemba Island, Tanzania with major towns noted

outline, we know that the coast was first settled extensively from the sixth to eighth centuries AD, during which time they engaged with Muslim traders from ports in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries most, if not all, coastal people had converted to Islam, and daily life for many was structured around the activities occurring in the densely populated towns and the villages that surrounded them. It is during this period that we have the first indications of social and political hierarchy, seen in both archaeological and ethnohistoric sources.

Stonetowns shared many features but were nonetheless different in scale and importance. Primary centers such as Mombasa, Kilwa Kisiwani and Mogadishu contained three or more elaborate stone mosques and tombs, and housed a large elite class who lived in dozens of stone houses (Garlake 1966). The elites were involved directly and systematically in brokering the trade between the coastal hinterland and the Indian Ocean. Secondary centers, including Chwaka and other towns on Pemba, were composed primarily of earth-and-thatch houses and a handful of elite stone houses, and also contained stone mosques and tombs (LaViolette and Fleisher 2009). Although all stonetowns were ruled independently, many secondary centers were connected to the Indian Ocean world through the primary centers and provided necessary resources to them. Local elites and merchants in secondary centers are more likely to have traded with their counterparts at other Swahili towns than directly with foreign merchants, although foreign visitors were probably not uncommon. For example, the Pemban towns sat in the shadow of nearby Mombasa, some 100 km to the north on the coast of Kenya, and by the fifteenth century were well-known as the source of rice and other food resources for that center. It is the aspiring and successful elites in these secondary centers that are of interest here, as well as the non-elite members of the towns and surrounding villages, although this feeds back into our understanding of town-based elites more generally. Non-elites lived in more humble earthen houses, farmed the land surrounding the towns and fished the shallow waters and reefs off the coast. Yet like the elite members of society, they practiced Islam and shared in a common coastal culture that looked outward to the Indian Ocean world as well as drawing ideas and traditions from the African continent itself (LaViolette 2008).

The fifteenth-century mosque at Chwaka (Fig. 1) seems to have been modeled on some of the most elaborate mosques on the coast. It contained barrel vaults and domes, a grand entrance staircase, and a series of at least 22 imported bowls mortared in the facing of the *mihrab*. The mortaring of bowls into mosques and tombs is not unique to Pemba, although the number of bowls in the Chwaka mosque is unusual; the only comparable displays can be found in two contemporary structures on the southern Tanzanian coast: at the House of the Mosque at Kilwa Kisiwani and in the Palace at Songo Mnara. In both of these examples, however, hundreds of blue and white Persian bowls were inset into ceiling vaults and domes of a portico, private rooms and a mosque (Chittick 1974 p. 138, 306–308; Garlake 1966, p. 38). The presence of imported bowls set into mosques, tombs and domestic structures has been read in quite direct ways. First, they have been seen as markers of the importance of long-distance trade to the people of Swahili towns. Understandings of the Swahili have always been framed through their participation as middlemen in the regular, monsoonal trade of the western Indian Ocean. They imported food, ceramic vessels, and cloth from the overseas ports; and exported timber, ivory, gold and other items from the coast and hinterland. This active engagement has come to define Swahili identity (Horton and Middleton 2000), and long-distance trade is often used as an explanation for how and why local changes occurred (Kusimba 1997), a common and not necessarily incorrect trope for other urban and state development in Africa (Connah 2001).

The display of imported ceramics and other exotic goods has also been interpreted as an attempt to establish and reinforce elite status (Wright 1993, p. 671). The emergence of powerful people has been linked to the control over resources from long-distance trade and in the form of land and productive capacity (Kusimba 1999b, p. 328). A common conclusion about the ancient Swahili, therefore, is that powerful leaders emerged in coastal towns because they were able to successfully manage long-distance trade and to convert those successes into local power. Long-distance trade provided certain individuals control over prestigious and rare goods, which were then used to symbolize elite local power

(Kusimba 1999a, p. 180), a strategy often referred to as the ‘materialization’ of power (DeMarrais et al. 1996).

Although all of these explanations likely have interpretive value, I argue that such displays of exotic and imported goods—specifically the bowls in the Chwaka mosque—were also, perhaps even more importantly, public references to social acts such as feasting. This moves the focus from trade to consumption. Instead of understanding consumption as part of a prestige goods economy, deploying imported goods to establish and maintain status, this essay will explore how certain imported goods were used in acts of ritual consumption (see also Wynne-Jones, this volume). Goods were thus part of the constitution of power and authority, rather than merely reflections of them. Rituals of feasting offered the possibility of binding people together in relations of equality and inequality, in a context where power could be negotiated and contested, and authority constituted (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, this volume).

A focus on the ritual practice of feasting allows a de-emphasis on long-distance trade as an explanatory framework and a focus instead on an important nexus between the domestic and political economy, linking the local sphere to long-distance exchange in the Indian Ocean world. In a sense, Swahili ritual practices ‘condensed’ or collapsed these worlds (LaViolette 2008, pp. 33–39), which was likely one of the reasons why feasting rituals became so potentially powerful for emerging leaders. The fifteenth-century mosque at Chwaka, I argue, represented a material culmination of public displays of ritual feasting: a site where ritual and religious practice conjoined in ways that effected the enactment and re-enactment of power and authority in this Swahili town.

Feasting is a social practice in which ‘people actually negotiate relationships, pursue economic and political goals, compete for power, and reproduce and contest ideological representations of social order and authority’ (Dietler 2001, p. 66). Because of this, feasts have become understood as places of commensal politics, where consumption and hospitality are crucial practices that serve to establish and reproduce social relations, similar to the role of gift-giving (Bray 2003; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Junker 1999; Mills 2007; Pauketat et al. 2002; Potter 2000; Wiessner and Schiefenhövel 1996). Following Dietler (2001, p. 67), I consider feasts to be ‘a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink.’ Feasts are often seen as the result of political and economic power: the demonstrated largesse of wealth and power accumulated. In this sense, they are epiphenomenal because they reflect the materialization of political economic power. But I would like instead to talk about feasts as sites where power was constituted, negotiated, and even lost. On the Swahili coast, I will argue, feasts were not merely reflections of power, but arenas within which power and authority became possible (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, this volume).

One reason archaeologists are drawn to the analysis of feasts is because they are a social activity that has the potential to leave a decipherable archaeological signature. Archaeological evidence of feasting activities includes special food items in relative abundance (Pauketat et al. 2002), special facilities or locations for feasting (Mills 2007; Moore 1996), associated public prestige items, and preparation and serving vessel types (Junker et al. 1994; Mills 2007). By focusing on bowls as a vessel category both temporally (tracking increasing numbers of bowls in imported and local ceramics assemblages) and spatially (as they become objects of public display at Chwaka), I explore how they potentially indicate the emerging importance of feasting in this and perhaps other Swahili towns. Additional lines of data—ethnographic and historical evidence, changing food preferences and cuisine, as well as settlement changes—support this interpretation. I argue that in the tenth to eleventh centuries, feasting became an important process through which individuals

established power within Chwaka, and other towns, and it was one of the avenues through which leaders emerged by the twelfth or thirteenth centuries AD. Although critical to the emergence of power, this pattern shifted as the demands on the powerful changed. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a number of forces led to an increasingly unstable political economic climate (Fleisher 2004): this included heightened competition between towns, the increasingly less central role of Pemban towns within the coastal milieu, and the growing power of non-elite or rival patrons within the town. I argue that this led to a flowering of public demonstrations of feast symbols—like the bowls embedded in the Chwaka mosque—which, rather than reflecting the strength of a powerful leader, were likely the savvy acts of a leader who knew the challenges that he faced.

### Modes of Feasting in the East African Ethnohistoric Record

It is somewhat surprising that the issue of feasting has not been raised previously for the ancient Swahili, given that generosity and hospitality are referred to in early ethnohistoric texts, and feasting is recognized as a central ritual practice for Swahili communities from the seventeenth century onwards (Glassman 1995; Horton and Middleton 2000). This evidence suggests that feasting was an important part of the general hospitality offered to merchants and guests in Swahili towns (Fleisher 2010a), based increasingly on Islamic standards of generosity and hospitality. It was also a crucial element of rites of passage ceremonies, including weddings, funerals and the installation of new leaders. And finally, it was a part of the negotiations of power and authority, through feasts of competitive generosity.

The observations of famed Moroccan scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited the East African coast in the fourteenth century, include a number of references to feasts, generosity and hospitality. When he visited the court of Mogadishu in the 1330s he was treated to an elaborate feast consisting of multiple dishes of rice, meat stews, vegetables and fruit. He describes the complex process through which he met the Sheikh of Mogadishu, which involved special clothes given to him by the Sheikh's men, a procession that followed the Sheikh from the mosque to his house, and finally, a feast served in the Sheikh's audience chamber, surrounded by his judges, religious leaders, and other prominent men of the community (Freeman-Grenville 1962, pp. 27–30). This sort of hospitality was a way of demonstrating the power and wealth of a coastal leader to an important guest, but also was understood as a basic quality of an Islamic leader, as Ibn Khaldun (1967, p. 292–293) described in his fourteenth-century *Muqaddimah*, in which 'generosity' and 'hospitality toward guests' were foremost in a list of the 'qualities of leadership.'

Hospitality and generosity, moreover, were standard practice for the ancient Swahili, based on both traditional and Islamic concerns. A traditional Swahili poem, 'Ten days of a guest's stay' (Jahadhmy 1977, p. 13) indicates the relationship of food to hospitality in describing the first 3 days of food cooked for a guest (by the fourth day, the guest is given a hoe to cultivate). In the medieval Islamic world, of which the Swahili were an active part, it was not just leaders that acted generously, but merchants, heads of households, and anyone else that was concerned 'to maintain a network of urban or inter-urban contacts over the longer term' (Waines 2003, p. 576). The preparation and presentation of luxury and feast foods were a topic of great concern, documented in culinary manuals and dietetic texts (Marin 2002; Waines 2002, 2003; Van Gelder 2000).

The public feasts that Ibn Battuta described, concerned with pomp and ceremony, are also what Dietler (2001, p. 82–85) has termed 'patron-role' feasts in which leaders in



‘institutionalized relations of asymmetrical social power establish and maintain patron/client relationships through commensal hospitality.’ Ibn Battuta also recounted his interaction with the Sultan of Kilwa, one of the most important Swahili towns located on the southern Tanzanian coast, through which we get a sense of the necessity of public generosity as a crucial process of restating and legitimizing asymmetrical social power. While at Kilwa, Ibn Battuta witnessed an exchange between the Sultan and a beggar in which the latter, in a public context, asked the Sultan for his clothes. The Sultan retreated to the mosque, changed clothes, and gave his finery to the beggar. Ibn Battuta marks the public importance of this act when he says ‘those who stood by thanked the Sultan most warmly for the humility and generosity he had displayed’ (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 32). For such acts, the Sultan was known as Abu al-Mawahib, ‘the Giver of Gifts’ (Fleisher 2004).

This parallels closely other expectations of chiefly or kingly authority in Africa (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), where leaders are expected to be continual and generous hosts for the community. Those who participate in the feasts or other acts of beneficence acknowledge symbolically their subordinate status in their relationship with the host. The images of Swahili patron-role feasts confirms the assessment of Jonathon Glassman, a historian of the nineteenth-century Swahili, that a ‘good [leader] did not merely display his wealth; he gave it away’ (Glassman 1995, p. 144). Generosity, therefore, was crucial to the effective rule of the Sultan. In fact, when Daud, the brother of the Giver of Gifts, succeeded him, he was regarded as relatively powerless because of his miserliness; Daud is quoted as saying, ‘the giver of gifts is dead, and has left nothing to give’ (Freeman-Grenville 1962; see also Fleisher 2004). Ibn Battuta commented that his lack of action made it so that ‘eventually no one came to visit him’ (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 32). Public generosity was thus evidently part of the negotiation involved between ruler and ruled as well as between ruler and would-be competitors.

A second type of feasting, called empowering feasts, was perhaps the most common form of feasting practiced on Pemba and the coast in general. The term ‘empowering feast’ is also borrowed from Dietler (2001, p. 76), who defines it as ‘commensal hospitality toward the acquisition and maintenance of certain forms of symbolic capital, and sometimes economic capital as well.’ This category of feasting actually encapsulates a wide range of events, including those where gains of symbolic capital and the competitive element are quite small (such as feasts held on market days), but also rituals within which rank is negotiated and established, as in the series of feasts that mark progression through specific ranks or age-grades. As ritual activities they work through an economy of symbols and performances (Bell 1992; Kertzer 1988) and can be understood as ‘forces for the reproduction and transformation of relations of power’ (Dietler 2001, p. 71; Insoll 2004; Kyriakidis 2007; McIntosh 1999). This practice-oriented approach offers the possibility that feasts may not achieve their political ends, or that they may seek to propose desired relations of power rather than those already established. An ethnohistoric description of feasting from Vumba Kuu, a seventeenth-century town on the southern Kenyan coast, depicts such an empowering feast. Any man in this polity who wanted to achieve any sort of rank was judged by his ‘ability to proceed with a series of increasingly expensive ceremonies with large feasts, from circumcision, to marriage, to another feast and becoming an *mtenzi* [or a person of high status, literally, “one who does things”]’ (Horton and Middleton 2000, p. 168; see also Hollis 1900; Robinson 1939).

Both empowering and patron-role feasts are subject to challenges by rivals and other status-seeking persons. This is less likely for patron-role feasts and the institutionalized authority that they imply, but the competitive element is central to empowering feasts. Such competitive giving is seen clearly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of

empowering feasts along the northern Tanzanian coast, as described by Glassman (1995, p. 58), who suggests that ‘feasting frequently took on an openly competitive form, as rival[s] sought to humiliate one another through aggressive exchanges of hospitality...’ One particularly memorable oral tradition describes the following:

Sometimes, if one of the guests is a well-known person who has not himself sponsored a large feast, the host will take bowl of curry...and pour it over the guest, openly, intending for all to see. He will empty the entire bowl, ruining the guest’s clothes, and then will present the guest with a suit of beautiful new clothes. Now the guest will take those clothes which had been ruined with curry and will keep them until the day that he gives a feast of his own... (Glassman 1995, p. 166).

This example reminds us of the polysemous nature of feasts where simultaneous multiple audiences participate and engage the ritual. In this case, there is a competitive component, where rivals vie for status, but the other participants in the feast also participate and jockey for their own, if subservient, position in these social events.

Competitive feasts also served a social function between towns, as a way of engaging in local power relationships, and are often memorialized in chronicles as definitive moments in the power relations between towns. The most well known story involves the rivalry between the towns of Kua and Kisimani on Mafia Island. In this story, the King of Kua seeks revenge on the people of Kisimani by inviting them all to a ‘great banquet’ (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 298) in which they eat and socialize for 7 days before the people of Kua exact revenge. The story makes it clear that political rivalries were commonly played out in the context of competitive feasts.

It is important to recognize that the feasts in question are not tied to particular types of social formations, akin to an evolutionary development of feasting behavior. Different modes of feasting—patron-role, empowering—occurred simultaneously within a society. In fact, the institutionalized power of patron-role feasts very likely drew upon traditions of feasting at play in the society at large (e.g., Joyce and Henderson 2007). As Glassman (1995, p. 155) notes for Swahili feasts: ‘Thus the public rituals that affirmed the [leader’s] domination of the community echoed intimate patterns of paternal domination that most citizens experienced and conceded in their daily lives.’ The competitive feasts of rival leaders, therefore, relied upon the presence of more generalized feasts within society at large. So, for example, empowering feasts might be part of the general landscape of ritual acts for the general population, marking and celebrating life-crisis events, changes in social status, or the performance of work parties, while patron-role feasts worked to legitimize more institutional forms of power and authority.

Glassman’s discussion of feasting among the nineteenth-century Swahili of the northern Tanzanian coast provides an end point of the long-term development of Swahili feasting activities. He describes in detail the way that a traditional Swahili elite sought to use competitive feasts as a way negotiating a changing economic world in which new sources of global power were ascendant. The importance of his work is not that it represents a timeless image of Swahili feasting, but rather that feasting was a central social practice, the intensity and uses of which were sensitive to political and economic changes. As Glassman (1995, p. 165) explains for the nineteenth century, competitive feasting became ‘racked with conflict’ as older elite families became saddled with growing debts and threatened by the political power of a newly ascendant Omani state. Archaeological data from Pemba offers a way of historicizing the role of feasts in the deeper Swahili past, based on an understanding of feasts as a central social practice. Changing imported and local vessel types suggest the emergence of feasting as an important social practice in the constitution

of power and authority, and allow for a tentative reconstruction in the way that feasting came to dominate Swahili social and political life.

### **The Development of the Feast on Pemba Island, Tanzania: Changes in Settlement and Cuisine**

Pemba is a lush, tropical island that lies approximately 30 km off the northern coast of Tanzania (Fig. 3). Although we have only a few ethnohistoric references to Pemba, these give us a sense of the political organization of its towns, as well as the towns' marginal position in the coastal milieu at these times. A Portuguese account from 1517 describes the 'Moorish kings' of the island as well as its rich agricultural and animal resources. The document goes on to say that '[s]ome of [the Pembans] deal in their stock of flesh and fruit with the mainland in very small, weak, ill-found and undecked boats...' (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 133). The products for which Pemba was well known were rice, cattle, fruit, and mangrove poles. Similar to the Kilwa example, the documents also emphasize the opulence of the Kings of Pemba, who lived in great luxury, wearing fine silk and cotton clothes. These descriptions and others also suggest that political authority in the Pemban towns was something similar to that of the later Vumba polity described above. For example, symbols such as the side-blown horn, which represent the royal power of kingly political organizations, are found on important public monuments such as tombs (Horton and Clark 1985).

The data presented here are based on research at a set of stonetowns and associated villages in the northern part of Pemba (Fig. 3; Fleisher 2003; LaViolette and Fleisher 2009). The island was first inhabited in the seventh century AD; archaeological surveys reveal a relatively dense settlement pattern in the seventh to tenth centuries, dispersed across the landscape, from coast to interior (Fleisher 2001, 2003, p. 138–142, 2010b). There were no towns in the northern region during this period, and places that were to become stonetowns were not yet inhabited. There was one large, sprawling earth-and-thatch settlement called Tumbe, from which we have the earliest, seventh-century dates. Around AD 1000, the settlement system underwent dramatic reorganization. At this time, nearly all of the village settlements in this part of the island were abandoned, and three separate stonetowns were founded within the next 50 years. Tumbe was also abandoned, but the area adjacent to it sees the founding of a town by AD 1050; this is the town site called Chwaka. Based on surveys and excavations at a number of towns and villages (Fleisher 2003), it appears that the founding of these stonetowns was predicated on a centripetal movement of populations toward the center, leaving the countryside sparsely populated (Fleisher 2010b). I have interpreted this settlement shift and the emergence of Pemban stonetowns as a coalescence of community life, structured for the first time around the communal ritual practices of Islam, and composed of populations from surrounding countryside and beyond (Fleisher 2010b).

Accompanying these sweeping settlement changes were new crops and foods that ultimately transformed the cuisine of Swahili towns (LaViolette 2008; Walshaw 2005, 2010). Although archaeobotanical data are rare from Swahili coastal sites, the work of Sarah Walshaw in northern Pemba has documented a dramatic shift from a pearl millet-based subsistence economy to one focused on Asian rice. From the seventh to tenth centuries, her data demonstrate that the residents of Tumbe relied heavily on pearl millet, an indigenous African cultigen used throughout sub-Saharan Africa. This was a 'local' crop. However, Tumbe residents also were consuming Asian foods, including coconut,

which were moved to the East African coast through the Indian Ocean trade system. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, the residents of northern Pemba, now largely having moved from their villages to Chwaka and other towns, were consuming Asian rice, likely cultivated in the wet valleys throughout the island. This was more than simply the addition of new foods to a local diet, but rather a shift in which rice likely became a preferred food, and one of the markers of an urbane Swahili lifestyle. Surely this is the case by the fourteenth century, when Ibn Battuta visits the East African coast; during his visit to Mogadishu, he remarks ‘the food of these people is rice cooked with butter,’ served with side dishes of stewed chicken, meat, fish and vegetables (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 29). It is clear from this text—as well as the preponderance of rice in archaeobotanical samples that post-date AD 1000—that rice was an anchor starch in the local diet, and likely the most prestigious if it was being served in great amounts to an important visitor. This transformation of food preference is significant on a number of fronts: it meant new forms of agricultural production, privileging of ‘foreign’ food resources, and changes in the presentation and consumption of food. As I turn to a consideration of ceramic vessels, I focus on the latter two issues.

### **Serving the Feast: Imported and Local Ceramic Vessel Assemblages**

#### **Empowering Feasts: Evidence from the Seventh to Eleventh Centuries AD**

One way archaeologists have sought to reconstruct ancient feasting activities is through an examination of ceramic vessel forms. Serving vessels have long been recognized as crucial parts of the feasting ritual through their size, style, and elaboration (Blitz 1993; Junker 1999; Junker et al. 1994; Mills 2007; Pauketat et al. 2002; Potter 2000). Of importance to the argument here are serving vessels, which are viewed as centerpieces to the ritual performances of feasts, making the feast host’s wealth ‘visible’ (Cook and Glowacki 2003, p. 197), through the presentation of special or labor-intensive food, but also through the control over and use of specialized vessels. Junker et al. (1994), for example, look at distributions of imported and local ceramics in Philippine chiefdoms, arguing that the disproportionate numbers of imported serving vessels indicated elite feasting patterns. On Pemba, changes in food preferences, and the period of new community construction provide a context in which feasting may have become an important social practice. The first evidence for what may have been the emergence of empowering feasts comes in the changing types of imported pottery vessels from the seventh to tenth centuries. Imported ceramics have long been a focus of coastal archaeologists, because they offer excellent opportunities for dating deposits and provide clues to the trade patterns within which the Swahili participated. In general, imported ceramics come from four locations (Horton 1996, p. 271–310): the Far East, featuring glazed bowls and jars from Chinese kilns; glazed mono- and polychrome bowls, and glazed and unglazed jars from the Persian Gulf; glazed polychrome bowls from the Red Sea; and finally, unglazed storage jars from the Indian coast. Although much effort has been expended on dating imports, much less attention has been paid to the morphology of imported vessel types and why these might have been of particular importance to local consumers. When alterations in the frequency of different vessel forms are examined, a number of important patterns emerge that may relate to the nature of consumption at coastal sites.

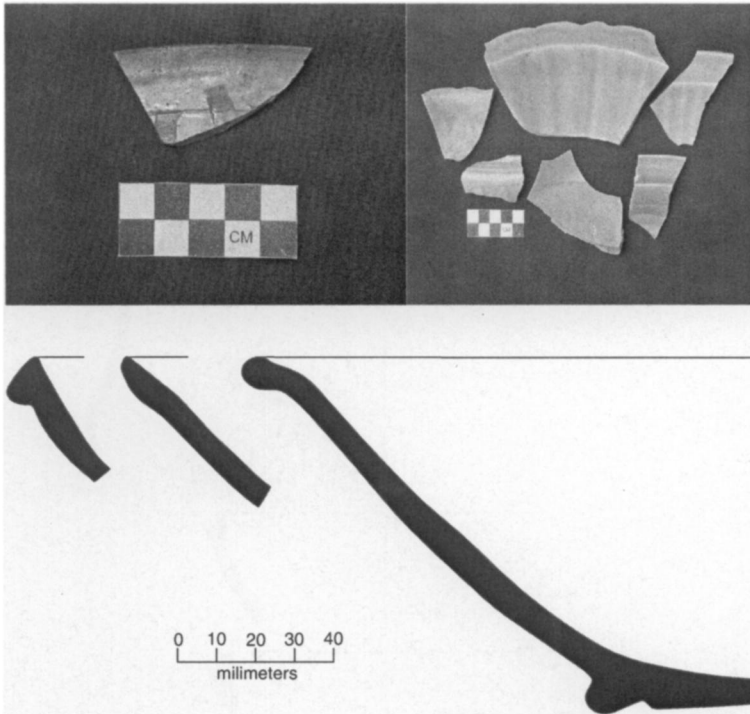
During the seventh to ninth centuries on Pemba, most imported pottery consisted of very large jars from the Persian Gulf, including both glazed (Sasanian–Islamic) and



**Fig. 4** Sherds of Siraf (*left*) and Sasanian–Islamic jars (*right*) from Tumbe, eighth to ninth century AD

unglazed (Siraf) storage jars (Fig. 4; Horton 1996), as well as relatively few small bowls. Beginning at about AD 1000, this pattern changed dramatically with the import of large numbers of sgraffiato and, later, celadon, bowls, from the Persian Gulf and China, respectively. The bowls in question are medium to large (220–360 mm diameter; Fig. 5), with elaborate incised and chromatic decorations, or pale green glaze in the case of celadon. These bowls must have been imported in response to local demand since they were not useful as containers for shipping, unlike Sasanian–Islamic and Siraf storage jars from the seventh to tenth centuries, which often carried oils and other liquids (although there is some evidence that jars were used to transport bowls as well, see Flecker 2001). This dramatic shift alone—from jars containing useful food items, to large bowls—might be enough to suggest that imported ceramics were being used in novel ways in local contexts. The rapid increase in imported serving vessels might be the first indication that more communal and publicly-oriented consumption was taking place in emergent Swahili towns. During the tenth and eleventh centuries there were significant disparities between the amounts of imported goods found in emerging towns on the one hand and villages on the other, with, not surprisingly, few imports located in village contexts, and high concentrations in stonetowns (Fleisher 2003, p. 391–393). It is possible, then, that the social acts associated with imported bowls were carried out by those attempting to convert their privileged trade relations into local symbolic capital, akin to what I have described previously as empowering feasts.

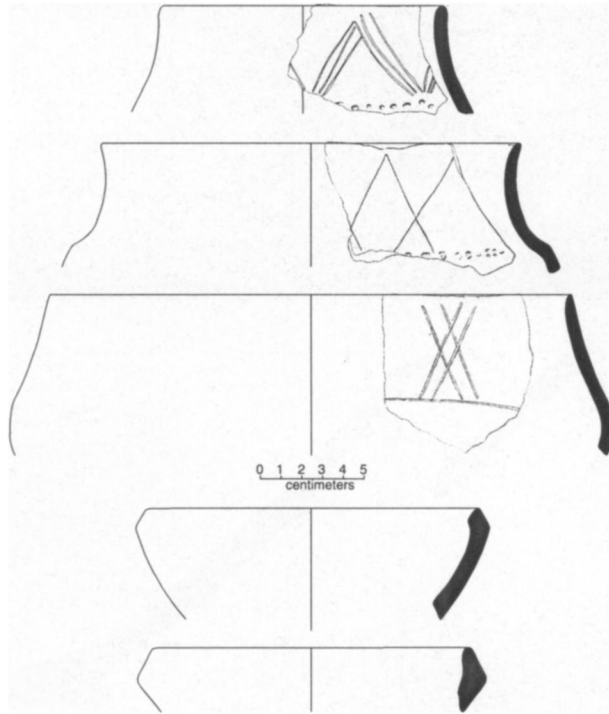
Alongside the shift from jars to bowls in imported pottery are equally significant changes in local pottery. Like imported pottery, prior to the eleventh century, local ceramic



**Fig. 5** Sherds of sgraffiato (*top left*) and celadon (*top right*) bowls, from Chwaka, thirteenth century AD; profiles of sgraffiato bowls (adapted from Horton 1996)

assemblages were composed of many large jars—ceramic vessels likely used for storage or cooking—and a limited number of small bowls. The jars are large, bag-like forms with rounded bases, part of what is referred to as the Tana Tradition or Triangular Incised Ware (Horton 1996; Chami 1998; Fig. 6). Alongside these larger forms were smaller bowls (Fig. 6), also with rounded bases, and frequently showing graphite burnishing on the interior and exterior rim. Chittick (1984, p. 120) referred to these as ‘graphited bowls’ (see also Fleisher 2003, p. 248–249).

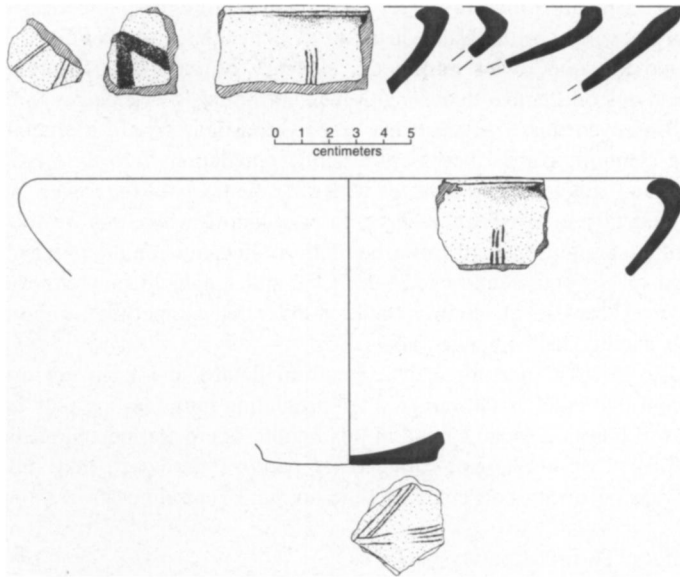
However, during the eleventh century, Pembans began to use a new ceramic form: finely crafted large bowls burnished with red hematite (Fig. 7). Such vessels are both larger than bowls in previous centuries, and fancier in their decoration. They are completely covered in burnished hematite, were often decorated further with graphite lines on the interior of the vessel, and have a flattened base which allowed them to be set on the ground, an absolutely new feature in local pottery (Chittick 1974, p. 322–324; Fleisher 2003, p. 249–250). Such features—larger size, shiny and often polychrome decoration, and a base—seem to be emulations of Persian imported forms and may recall the presentational function of such ceramics. However, by including burnished graphite decoration, albeit in novel ways, these decorations draw upon past, local decorative practices. It is possible that the presence of both the new imported and local vessel types signals the earliest acts of empowering feasts where commensal hospitality offered the possibility of acquiring and maintaining forms of symbolic capital. The vessels I have described were clearly special forms (Fleisher 2003, p. 249; Horton 1996, p. 253) and, at the very least, represented a



**Fig. 6** Tana tradition/TIW jars (*top*), graphited bowls (*bottom*); all from Bandarikuu, eighth to ninth century AD

significant change in the way people were consuming food. The larger vessels indicate communal acts of consumption, as one bowl would contain food for a number of individuals who would sit in a circle around it. With their elaborate finishing, decoration and bases, they are a stark contrast to other roughly-made contemporary vessels. Overall, these vessels comprise a relatively small proportion of the pottery assemblage, even though the numbers of imports grew substantially.

The decoration may also have been implicated in the process of the feast, as the revealing of the decoration through consumption of the contents would have been one of the ways that participants would experience the materiality of the occasion. A growing literature on ceramics, consumption and display within the context of feasting has begun to tease apart the relationship between the visibility of ceramics and ceramic designs and the ritual performative contexts within which they were used (Dietler 2001; Mills 2007). Thinking about material culture use within the proxemics of ritual, archaeologists have begun to explore the visual performance characteristics of artifacts (Mills 2007; Schiffer and Skibo 1997). This literature, including Mills's (2007; see also Bowser and Patton 2004; DeBoer 2001) excellent recent contribution, stresses the way that the visibility of decorations on ceramic vessels used in feasts can help archaeologists understand the scale at which feasts were operating. Mills's study demonstrates (2007, p. 233) how restricted ritual spaces correlated with less prominent exterior designs on serving vessels, and how shifts to larger spaces in later periods were accompanied by bolder, larger decorations. Understanding the visibility of feasting vessels is important, as it 'can be used to assess



**Fig. 7** Graphited red-slipped bowls: rim and body sherds (*top*); reconstructed bowl from rim and base sherds, (*bottom*); all from Bandarikuu, eleventh century AD

how widespread participation in feasting was, the social relationships of hosts and guests, and at what scales social identities were being expressed during feasting activities' (Mills 2007, p. 212).

However, I would argue that the literature on display and feasting has focused on particular aspects of the performance of feasts to the detriment of others. Based on the idea that display is a key characteristic in feasting ritual (Wiessner 2001), a number of studies have focused on ritual proxemics (Bowser and Patton 2004; Moore 1996), leading to an emphasis on visibility of ritual material culture (or spaces), often from the standpoint of participants in crowds ('public near' and 'public far,' Hall 1968). This leads invariably to discussions about exterior decorations on ceramics and other containers, visible from near or far, and how those vessels were a part of the performance of the feast, the issue that lies at the heart of Mills's analysis. Yet, by focusing on the exterior elements of vessels used in feasts, only certain performative elements are emphasized—the visual representation of the feast from a distance (with bowls perhaps on benches or pedestals) and the introduction and conclusion of the feast as food moved into and out of ritual spaces (perhaps on the heads of participants). However, the ceramics that I examine in this essay are open bowls, both imported and local types, with decorations primarily on the *interior* of the vessels only; in both imported and local ceramics, the decoration (glazing or burnishing) actually stops just below the exterior rim. These bowls, then, would have offered little in the way of exterior views during a feasting performance. Yet, imported bowls become important objects of display that were often mortared, *interior* facing out, into the most prominent public monuments in Swahili towns—congregational mosques and honorific tombs. Thus, the important display qualities of these imported and local ceramics may not rest in the overall visual presentation of the feast, but rather in the acts of consumption in which the interiors of vessels were slowly revealed. I return to this point in the discussion below.



In sum, the transformations in vessel forms and consumption practices prior to the twelfth century occurred in the wake of the settlement transition I outlined above—rural populations moving into towns during the eleventh century. The founding and rapid expansion of towns on Pemba, therefore, comes on the heels of changes in consumption and cuisine. Based on this, I suggest that empowering feasts were a crucial element in providing the symbolic capital necessary to draw populations into the newly ascendant towns, and to bind people in relationships with elite members of the towns. Although this process was evidently successful at emergent towns like Chwaka, this was not always the case: Bandarikuu, a site inhabited from the ninth to eleventh centuries, which contains a rich collection of eleventh-century red burnished and graphited bowls, never became a prominent town. These data are an important reminder that competitive, empowering feasts do not always achieve their intended goals.

I should also be clear that these data are from Pemba and I am not using them to generalize about the wider coast; rather, I am presenting how feasting may have been an important part of building social capital in this region. There are indications that although vessel assemblages were changing along other parts of the coast, they did not mirror exactly what was occurring on Pemba and the northern central coast.

#### Feasting from the Twelfth Century Onwards

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a number of towns grew to prominence and dominated the landscape of Pemba, each with a central stone mosque built at great local labor expense, including Chwaka, Mkia wa Ngombe, and Ras Mkumbuu. During these centuries, the ceramic assemblage contained an increasing number of bowls, suggesting that the type of consumption indicated by the bowl forms of the eleventh century had become the dominant practice in these later towns and villages. Whereas bowls made up just 16% of the vessels from the eighth to tenth centuries, they accounted for more than 55% of the vessels in the assemblage in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. This number grew to almost 70% of the assemblage by the fifteenth century. This evidence suggests that bowls were being used commonly in domestic settings in towns and villages. However, alongside these large quantities of undecorated local bowls, there continued to be small percentages of specially decorated red-burnished local bowls, as well as an expanding range of imported ceramics, most of which were medium to large serving vessels. Finds such as these in limited quantities in earth-and-thatch houses at Chwaka suggest that empowering feasts may have become part of the life-cycle of all or many households at the site, where feasting rituals would accompany life-crisis events and transitions in social status (LaViolette 2008).

There is no solid evidence of the emergence of patron-role feasts—the feasts of generous kings and chiefs—prior to the fifteenth century because we have not yet found any special-use contexts that can be differentiated from the more general consumption taking place at the site. However, the construction of a few stone houses among the dominant earthen architecture of the site, alongside ethnohistoric sources that refer to the Kings of Pemba, suggests that there were institutionalized social inequalities in Pemban stonetowns by at least the fourteenth century, and probably earlier.

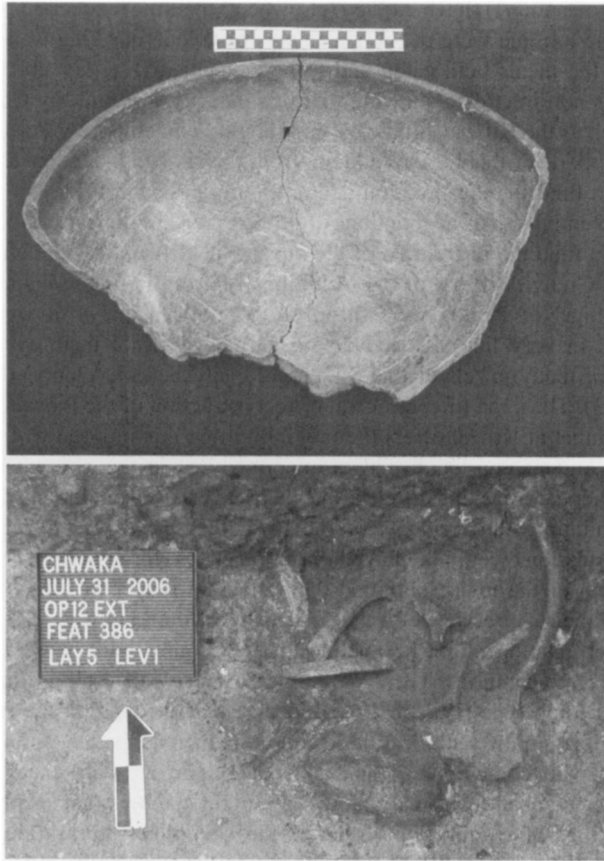
It is during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that there are possible indications of the negotiations involved in patron-role feasts, suggesting that feasting rituals may have become more central to the increasingly competitive climate on Pemba, and possibly the East African coast more generally. I can finally return to the fifteenth-century congregational mosque at Chwaka with its 22 imported bowls fixed around the prayer niche, to

contemplate its meaning. I have argued elsewhere that the exuberant imported bowl decorations on the mosque were public statements of a generous king—an advertisement, so to speak, for the meals both eaten and to be consumed (Fleisher 2003: p. 416–419). Although there is no direct data showing that this mosque was built by Chwaka's leader, local sources such as the Kilwa Chronicles, and roughly contemporary Portuguese sources, provide some support for this idea. We know from the sixteenth-century Kilwa Chronicle that the ability to fund the construction and/or alteration of the Friday or congregational mosque was a potential site of negotiations of power; the Chronicle describes efforts by an elite townsman to fund the restoration of the mosque at Kilwa, only to be rebuffed by the Sultan (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 40). Additionally, from Portuguese sources, we know that that the 'Kings' of Pemba were disposed to public displays of wealth, the kings themselves 'clad in very fine silk and cotton garments' while their wives 'go bravely decked, they wear many jewels of fine Sofala gold, silver too in plenty' (Freeman-Grenville 1962, p. 133). Thus, the fifteenth-century reconstruction of the mosque at Chwaka, in a style similar to that at Kilwa, offers the possibility that this mosque was also funded by the town's ruler. And the unusual display of imported bowls in the great mosque at Chwaka might be understood as seeking to enshrine this leader's hospitality in a public venue, continuously reminding the residents of the town that they were engaged in unequal relations. These relations would be played out in practice—through feasts—over and over again. As the men of the town submitted themselves in prayer to Allah, they were also tacitly accepting their subservience to the generosity of the king.

A similar interpretation might be applied to stone tombs built at Chwaka during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There were at least ten so-called pillar tombs at Chwaka, a unique Swahili tomb type (Wilson 1979), in the area surrounding the mosque. Tombs would have provided a powerful location to call upon the past greatness and generosity of previous leaders who contemporary leaders could claim as their ancestors. Tombs at Chwaka and other Pemban towns carry some important symbols that seem to suggest this role: relief drawings of regalia items such as the side-blown horns (Horton and Clark 1985), similar inlays of bowls, offering-niches within the tombs, where food could be left for the ancestors, and shallow symbolic niches on the exterior (Fleisher and LaViolette 2007).

A feature excavated in the space between a fifteenth-century earth-and-thatch house and possible ruins of a tomb may represent the debris from a feast event. A series of pits contained a large and well-preserved assemblage of bowls, primarily with red burnished finishes, along with large fragments of cattle bones (Fig. 8). This feature is striking in that many of the discarded bowls were intact. A number of the bowls are oversized, well beyond the norm for even the largest bowls I have described above: some more than 50 cm in diameter (Fig. 8). That so many bowls would have been destroyed and discarded in the context of this presumed feasting event may reflect the competitive nature of the feast itself.

The newly built fifteenth-century mosque, the presence of honorific tombs, and evidence of feasts in the area around a tomb, all suggest that patron-role feasts, and thus the practices through which town leaders sought to legitimize and extend their powerful positions, may have been occurring at Chwaka. The remaining question, however, is why the leaders of Chwaka needed such demonstrative statements about their ability to be generous. One answer might be that local elites and the leader of Chwaka began to have less control over the imported goods that had become so central in ritual feasts, and therefore required more publicly powerful statements that wedded the religious authority of Islam with the generosity of the king. Some intriguing evidence that addresses this issue



**Fig. 8** Feature containing multiple bowls and faunal material (*bottom*); large red burnished bowl fragment (*top*), Chwaka, fifteenth century AD

comes from excavations in an earth-and-thatch house at Chwaka. Excavations revealed a palimpsest of houses dating from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. The fourteenth- to sixteenth-century house levels contain a surprisingly rich assemblage of imported bowls and jars, especially imported Chinese celadon bowls (Fig. 5), the same style that adorned the congregational mosque. Additionally, this house contained many fragments of hematite, necessary in the production and finishing of the special-purpose local bowls I have argued were part of a feasting assemblage. Might these data, found in a relatively humble earth-and-thatch house, suggest that empowering feasts by non-elites were becoming more competitive through the emulation of elite patron-role feasts? And what effect would this emulation have had on the potency of the imported goods used in patron-role feasts? However, in the near absence of elaborate stone houses at Chwaka, it may be that local elites were themselves living in earth-and-thatch houses. It is difficult to answer conclusively, based on the evidence at hand.

What is clear is that the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were competitive ones, if not *within* towns, then at least with other towns on Pemba and those of the longer coastal corridor (Fleisher 2004; Fleisher and LaViolette 2007). On Pemba alone, an island of less than a thousand square kilometers, there were five prominent towns in these centuries, each

with elaborate congregational mosques, tombs, and stone houses, not to mention a half-dozen smaller towns and an unknown number of villages. It is easy to imagine that competition among the towns was significant for people, resources, and trade contacts off the island. I have already mentioned that Pemba fell increasingly under the economic control of the nearby coastal city of Mombasa. I am suggesting, therefore, that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a period of heightened competition between stonetowns, where leaders harbored fears about their ability to continue trade relationships, retain positions of power, and fight their decreasing autonomy and growing marginalization within the Swahili coastal world. It is in this context that Chwaka erected its most elaborate and expensive monument, heavily decorated in the symbolism of feasting and generosity. Perhaps the most telling part of this narrative is that by the middle of the sixteenth century, a little more than a 100 years after the construction of the mosque, Chwaka and all other prominent towns on Pemba were abandoned or greatly depopulated, never to be reinhabited.

## Conclusion

Refocusing questions of the emergence of social differentiation on a ritual practice like feasting—of which there is surprisingly good evidence in both the archaeological and ethnohistoric records—allows us to capture some of the historical process and negotiation involved in establishing and maintaining power and authority in Swahili towns. This requires us to begin analyzing and thinking about ceramic assemblages as more than simply the results of social acts. All too often in Swahili archaeology, imported ceramics are used only to gauge the nature and direction of long-distance trade (Chittick 1974, 1984). Thus, the frequencies of imported pottery, relative to local, are taken as a measure of the intensity of trade, or origin of long-distance traders themselves. With local ceramics, analyses are locked within a cultural historical framework, used as markers of ethnicity and identity only, and produced as evidence for the emergence of a cohesive coastal culture (Chami 1994, 1998). These types of interpretation have been crucial in turning back colonial narratives of the foreign origins of Swahili society and therefore are not to be casually dismissed. However, if we go further and begin to examine the materiality of ceramics, we can speak to the way that social status and power were constructed through the *use* of certain ceramics; we can begin to view them as more than reflections of a priori qualities or powers, but active parts of the constitution of them (Croucher and Wynne-Jones 2006; DeMarrais 2005; Meskell 2005; Miller 2005). In recent discussions of feasting, this has been accomplished by thinking about feasts as ritual performances, where concerns with food preparation, presentation, choice and taste all become key aspects of the power of the feast (Bray 2003; Dietler 2001).

As discussed above, the display qualities of ceramics have become an important way for archaeologists to gauge the scale and intensity of feasting (Mills 2007). Yet this seems to leave out an important part of the performative aspects of the feast—by emphasizing a very particular definition of ‘display’: the actual consumption of food, and the relationship of visibility to those acts. In this part of the feast, when food was consumed out of open vessels, people are quite close to them, and thus the interior portions of vessels become as important as the exterior. And, in fact, one might argue that interior decoration is at least equally important since it is what is revealed during the act of consumption, the act that lies at the heart of the feast. As I have discussed above, the performance of the feast itself—the mode of consumption and the amount of food consumed—is integral to the negotiations of

power enacted in feasting rituals. And so the performance of consumption will produce another set of visible surfaces that are all involved in the ‘public near.’ And thus, the bowls set in the fifteenth-century mosque at Chwaka would have surely been visual reminders of the feast, as well as displays that invoked parts of these ritual performances, what might be called the display of consumption or completion. Thus the display of local and imported ceramics on the Swahili coast, in the context of feasting, may be much more complex than simply references to things foreign, exotic, or prestigious. These were displays of both future and past feasts: they served as enduring reminders of the meals eaten and feasts yet to begin—empty bowls can simultaneously invoke the promise of food to be presented, and also the moment of food consumed. Thus, the link between ceramics, feasting and display might be more complex than previously granted by archaeologists.

By looking at changes in settlement and cuisine, the changing quantities and formal qualities of imported and local vessels, and their relationship to the forms of political differentiation in towns, I have begun to describe how ritual acts of feasting were crucial parts of the establishment, maintenance, and negotiation of social power and authority in Swahili towns. This interpretation provides a locally-constituted way of re-examining the symbolic meaning of Chwaka’s richly adorned fifteenth-century mosque. In the process, I have worked to complicate the way archaeologists of the Swahili—and other archaeologists as well—have connected prestige goods with local power. In Swahili towns, where new ideas were regularly encountered through traveling holy men, merchants, and others of renown, power was something that required local legitimacy, and not simply the presentation of distant knowledge and goods. If local people were drawn to emerging Swahili town leaders through their connections to overseas trade and prestige goods, there must have been ways of making those connections locally relevant and important. Feasts can domesticate distant power by creating a context that draws on tradition and practice, but also the space for, and conditions of, imbalance and social debt.

I have also sought to highlight the importance of looking at non-elite contexts to understand how power was negotiated among the ancient Swahili. I would argue that links between patron-role and empowering feasts are not spurious, in that, as rituals, patron-role feasts likely derived meaning and power by calling up and borrowing symbols that were significant and common in the lives of the general population (Dietler 1999, p. 139; Joyce and Henderson 2007). That is the symbolic power of food and drink: while they are a basic form of human sustenance, they are also what Appadurai (1981, p. 494) would call ‘a highly condensed social fact’ that invokes and circumscribes relations of production and exchange, power and authority. Jonathon Glassman (1995) found just this in his look at the nineteenth-century Swahili coast, where he argued that the power gained in public feasts drew on paternal relations established and experienced in the homes of ordinary people.

Finally, I have attempted to add some depth to our understanding of how power was negotiated in Swahili towns, and to complicate the standard view of this society. Research on the ancient Swahili has successfully demonstrated their importance as a complex society. Specifically, this has involved drawing comparisons between Swahili urbanism and urban societies across the world, work that has been a central part of my own research. Yet this work has also had the effect of establishing a standardized view of the Swahili, a narrative that leaves little room for the exploration of the negotiation or limits of power in Swahili towns and regions. By exploring social acts of feasting I have tried to capture some of the historical process involved in establishing power in Swahili towns and, with a close look at Pemba Island, begin to expose the limits of that power.

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