The Swahili Coast

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> I travelled from the city of Aden by sea for four days, and arrived at the city of Zaylaʿ, the city of the Barbara.... We sailed on from there for fifteen nights and came to Mogadishu, which is a town of enormous size. Its inhabitants are merchants possessed of vast resources; they own large numbers of camels, of which they slaughter hundreds every day [for food], and also have quantities of sheep. ... The sultan of Mogadishu is ... by origin of the Barbara and he speaks in Swahili, but knows the Arabic language. ... I then sailed from the city of Mogadishu, making for the country of the Swahili, with the object of visiting the city of Kilwa in the land of the Zanj people. We came to the island of Mombasa, a large island two days' journey by sea from the Swahili country. ... We stayed one night in this island and sailed on to the city of Kilwa, a large city on the seacoast, most of whose inhabitants are Zanj, jet-black in color. ... I was told by a merchant that the city of Sofala lies at a distance of half a month's journey from the city of Kilwa. ... The city of Kilwa is one of the finest and most substantially built towns.[1]

Like the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta whose words appear in the epigraph, Amina al-Sirafi inhabits a complex and multilingual Islamicate world, one where Muslims interact with people from other religious and cultural traditions, with people from throughout the Indian Ocean region and beyond, and with beings both human and mystical.[2] Although Shannon Chakraborty never names it as such, the Swahili Coast plays a prominent role in *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi.* Born on Pemba, a Swahili island that is today part of Zanzibar, Amina herself is far more complex than most readers will expect: a Muslim

1. Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325-1354*, ed. and trans. H. A. R. Gibb, vol. II (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1959), 373–80. Spellings have been silently corrected.

2. The term *Islamicate* was coined by historian Marshall Hodgson to describe cultural practices, artifacts, and social norms that are associated with regions where Muslims are culturally dominant, but not necessarily directly related to the religion of Islam itself. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 57–60.

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woman pirate who has, according to one of her interlocutors, "slept with sailors in every port from Aden to Kilwa"[3]—that is, from Yemen in the northern Indian Ocean to what is today southern Tanzania.

By the time Ibn Battuta arrived in Mogadishu, about a century after Amina's tale, Swahili—a Bantu language with many Arabic borrowings and today an official language in both Kenya and Tanzania—was already spoken there. Although the word *Swahili* does not occur in the novel, we hear of many of the same places Ibn Battuta visited: Mogadishu, Mombasa, Kilwa, Sofala, Pemba, and Zanzibar, all part of the Swahili Coast, which stretches from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique. Today, Kilwa is a natural heritage site with fewer than 2000 residents, but in the Middle Ages, when the novel takes place, it was a beautiful Swahili city-state with some 10,000 residents at the center of a sultanate[4] and was considered "the gateway to the Zanj coast."[5] In the novel, we learn that Amina's one-time friend Majed is a cartographer who grew up in Kilwa and once worked for the Sultan, whose authority eventually stretched along the entire Swahili Coast. When we meet Majed, he is living in Mogadishu, which Amina describes as "a genuinely fantastic city to visit … cosmopolitan and exciting."[6]

Sofala and Zanzibar are other important Swahili city-states mentioned in the novel. As Amina tells Majed's wife, "You'd be surprised how fickle a partner the wind can be. Sometimes it conspires with the current to take you in an entirely different direction from which you intended. Majed and I once set out from Zanzibar for Muscat and ended up in Madagascar."[7] Zanzibar was a crucial hub in the Indian Ocean trade network where Amina and Majed travel. Zanzibari merchants acted as intermediaries for traders and pirates from Persia, India, and Arabia, who sought goods from the East African mainland, like gold and ivory.[8] Zanzibar's strategic position significantly contributed to the wealth and cultural development of the Swahili city-states along the coast, fostering the evolution of Swahili culture, which included an Arabic-script literary tradition (now replaced with Roman script) and a language enriched with Arabic loanwords. Thus, some of the Arabic words in the novel—*nakhudha* (captain), *jahazi* (dhow), *Mashallah* ("God has willed it")—will be familiar to Swahili-speakers (and probably others whose languages have borrowed from Arabic),[9] adding to the novel's multiculturalism and multilingualism.

3. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 144.

4. H. Neville Chittick, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast* (1974; repr., Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1992); Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "Creating Urban Communities at Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania, AD 800–1300," *Antiquity* 81, no. 312 (June 2007): 368–80; "Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Ruins of Songo Mnara" (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2024).

5. François-Xavier Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, trans. Troy Tice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 144.

6. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 160.

7. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 182.

8. Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

9. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 1:3.

While we only get hints of that multilingualism in the novel, it enriches the fullness of the characters. Describing a group of sailors of "mixed coast heritage" like herself as she frees them from prison, Amina says, "They were a diverse crew like the majority that ply these shores, their garments and tongues suggesting homelands in Ethiopia and India, the most southern reaches of East Africa and north to Aqaba."[10] While we are meant to understand that the characters speak Arabic to one another—the language of Islamic scripture and of regional trade—Amina can guess where they are from by their accents.[11] Even the supernatural avian peri speak Arabic, though Amina is surprised that these "gentle winged maidens of uncommon beauty" from Persian fables do so, and she doesn't know how they learned it.[12] Only the djinn she ends up marrying speaks with an accent she cannot quite place, a hint of his otherworldliness.[13]

Amina's adventures transport us to a vibrant world where diverse cultures, languages, and traditions intersect, enriching the story and offering a deeper understanding of her coastal heritage. This intricate blend of history and fiction not only enhances the novel's authenticity but also celebrates the enduring legacy of the Swahili Coast in the broader context of the Indian Ocean's maritime and otherworldly history.

10. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 96.
11. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 97.
12. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 376, 386.
13. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 220.