Archaeology as a test of oral traditions: a case study of the Mkunguni mosque ruin and the Digo and Tangana oral traditions

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ABSTRACT

The project is based on a study of an historical ruin, Mkunguni mosque. It is an attempt to establish a relationship between the oral traditions and the occupation of the ruin. The theme is to test the oral traditions of the Digo and Tangana people using archaeological finds from the ruin. The objective is to evaluate the validity of the oral traditions using archaeology. The mosque, built at the commercial center of the two groups of people, Mkunguni, was used by its builders, the Tangana, before they abandoned it for Pemba Island. On coming back, the Tangana rebuilt the abandoned mosque, used it, and in the course converted the Digo into the Islamic religion. Until the time of its destruction in the early 1980s, the mosque was the main religious center of the two people and hence its importance to the study. The hypothesis is traditions' account that the mosque was built in the seventeenth century, abandoned from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and rebuilt in the nineteenth century. The methodology of the study included survey and excavations of two pits, one in the mosque and the other outside the mosque. The pit dug inside provided the best test implication for the hypothesis as it had a stone wall, which was probably of the earlier mosque. The hypothesized dates are tested using the archaeological finds, mainly imported ceramic wares, from the pit. The finding shows that the mosque was possibly built between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, abandoned thereafter to the seventeenth century and rebuilt in the nineteenth century. The established relative archaeological dates do not mainly concur with the hypothesized dates. Thus, it is my observation that whereas the oral traditions are useful sources for both archaeological and historical investigations, they are relatively young and not absolute.