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## **The Messages Behind Carved Swahili Doors: A Field Report on Pre-Dissertation Research in Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana**

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For the powerful merchants who established control along the Swahili coast of East Africa in the nineteenth century, doors held great meaning. Especially prevalent in the Stone Town district of Zanzibar are extant examples of massive, elaborately carved wooden doors that adorned the front entrances of grand buildings. These facades stood as direct messages of power, wealth, heritage, security, religious beliefs, and more. They delineated space in a myriad of ways. Who was the audience for their messages, what visual propaganda was at play, and how might this inform our understanding of cultural exchange and communications in the region today?

Keywords: *Carved Swahili Doors, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Art History*

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### **Introduction**

With the support of a Whiting Indigenous Knowledge Student Research Award, I visited the Swahili coast of East Africa and the Ashanti region of Ghana for two months in the summer of 2017. A major purpose for this travel was pre-dissertation research. This research included visits to heritage sites, architectural and archaeological sites, artist studios, art markets, archives, museums, universities, festivals, and other cultural events. Most importantly, this also included time for personal engagement, language familiarization, and casual conversations with locals in a wide variety of cities, towns, small villages, and neighborhoods in the two regions. It was important to establish contacts at universities and to gain an initial overview of the types of archives and objects that would be available to me during a longer, more focused research visit; however, the relationships I began to build with Swahili and Ghanaian people were the most valuable for future learning and efforts to construct and preserve indigenous knowledge. Since my larger project revolves around the ideas of visual communication, audience reception, and personal identification or association with specific messages and histories, I was able to gather incredible information from those exchanges. The encounters and enlightenment are already providing new possibilities for partnerships with African institutions and scholars, along with innovative fuel for my long-term research directions.

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### **Background**

As a brief overview, I started graduate school as a way to begin a second career. I earned my undergraduate degree from Miami University in marketing and international business with a minor in fine arts. For two decades I had a rewarding and successful career in marketing communications as a graphic designer and creative director for a variety of institutions. In 2014, I left the corporate world to test the waters in academia. I began my master's degree in art history as part of a search for a career that could satisfy and encompass more of the competing confluence of interests and capabilities I was hoping to engage in my professional life: design, art, language, international trade, transnational histories, communications, cultural engagement, heritage, and preservation.

Now, as a PhD candidate in art history at the Pennsylvania State University, my focus and research interests are trained on the patterns and designs of the African continent and their relationship to marketing and cultural exchange. A successful designer creates associations for his or her audience through imagery that does not rely upon a specific linguistic understanding or a particular context. It is a natural progression and logical sequence of vision that has drawn me to the study of form, pattern, and ornament in African cultures, where visual identities have been used this way for centuries. In exchanges between cultural groups that share no common language, information about a person is communicated through symbols and signs that equate to memory and identity in a variety of forms.

In many ways, the methods I use are a new approach to research in the field of traditional African art history, especially when applied to the arts and material cultures of particular groups and regions. Specific details of my findings and proprietary knowledge are not included in this brief field report because my research efforts are ongoing. What follows is primarily information that is commonly understood as general knowledge; however, I have tried to frame it in the context of my firsthand investigations and personal comparisons. Through these experiences, I was able to directly establish visual and cultural understandings from primary sources and artist visits, and to gather and preserve indigenous knowledge through oral histories.

### **Tanzania and Kenya: Carved Swahili Doors**

The Swahili coast is the narrow strip of East African coastline that stretches from Mogadishu, Somalia down to Cape Delgado in Mozambique, including the islands and archipelagos that proliferate those shores. The history of the Swahili coast is most meaningfully constructed through the development of trade accomplished by merchants who used *dhow*s, which are nimble boats with adjustable sails that easily navigated the monsoon winds that flow north for one half of the year, and south for the next half. The role of trade on the East African coast is a significant aspect of a long and influential history that contributed to the unique growth and amalgamation of the Indian Ocean Rim.



*Figure 1: Dhow at Sunset, Zanzibar*

The cumulative effect of multi-layered interactions with partners around the Indian Ocean and the African interior correlates with the formation of Swahili society— a complex aggregation of people whose robust visual culture has received little attention in art historical scholarship. The Islamic faith is a unifying facet of the population, but the Swahili brand of Islam is syncretic. The language of the Swahili people, Kiswahili, adds another layer of consideration as a Bantu African linguistic base intertwined with Arabic, European, and Asian vocabulary. The ornamental style that proliferates Swahili art and architecture is recognized as a composite blend of symbols from these diverse inputs and influences on the culture.



*Figure 2: Carved Door, Zanzibar*

Still standing throughout the Swahili coastal region are massive, elaborately carved wooden doors that adorned the front entrances of grand buildings in the nineteenth century. For the powerful merchants who established control of the Indian Ocean trade systems in the region at that time, the doors held great meaning. These facades were charged with direct messages of power, wealth, heritage, security, and political and religious beliefs. They delineated space in a myriad of ways. Could the signs and symbols that decorate the doors be the key to unlocking a better understanding of Swahili culture and syncretism?



*Figure 3: Mombasa, Old Town*





*Figure 4: Zanzibar, Stone Town*

During my visits to East Africa, I concentrated a large portion of my time in the Stone Town section of Zanzibar City on Unguja Island of Tanzania and in the Old Town region of Mombasa Island in Kenya. Zanzibar Stone Town was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000, and Mombasa Old Town was nominated for that designation and is on the tentative site list. In both locations, I walked the narrow streets and alleyways to examine as many examples of the carved wooden doors as possible. I documented the different types of designs, the variety of carving styles, and the combinations of symbols. I also visited shops and markets, spoke with artists, and spent time gathering oral histories about cultural beliefs, the neighborhoods, the trade, the politics, and the mix of religions and nationalities in the Swahili region.

My ability to communicate with Tanzanians and Kenyans in the lingua franca for those countries, Kiswahili, was an enormous advantage in these activities. I studied Kiswahili at Penn State for two semesters. Then, in 2016 I was the recipient of a Critical Language Scholarship from the U.S. Department of State. With that award, I spent two months of intensive language study and cultural immersion in Arusha, Tanzania. That experience most definitely fueled my interest in East African societies and Indian Ocean trade. CLS students make a pledge to speak no English during their time traveling in their chosen country, and I held myself to that same commitment again during this pre-dissertation research trip. As a result, my language skills continued to improve enormously, and I was able to converse in Kiswahili with individuals who may not otherwise have been open to speaking with me in English.

The standard construction of the carved doorways consists of a center post and lintel, frames on either side, and two doors. The doors are understood to have male and female sides by the Swahili.



*Figure 5: Zanzibar Door*

The oldest doors have rectilinear frames. The styles of doors commonly known as either Omani or Indian became more popular at the end of the nineteenth century, when we start to see more curvilinear forms in the carvings. The carved door was a declarative statement about the person who owned the house to

which it was attached. The greater the owner's social position and wealth, the larger the construction, and the more elaborate the carvings and designs. A few examples of motifs that represent this type of economic-related symbolism include squares, wavy lines, ropes, vines, and chains.



*Figure 6: Chain and Rope Motifs in Swahili Woodcarving*

Geometric designs heavy with squares have been linked to accountants, while wavy lines and ropes conveyed that the merchant behind the door owned fishing vessels or made a living by the sea. The presence of chains in a carved door design is often linked to slave trade. Chains might also have been a symbol of security or protection.

### **Ghana: Accra and Ashanti Region**

For comparative purposes, I also made a short research trip to visit museums, architectural sites, political centers, and artist or textile studios in the Ashanti region of Ghana. This trip was organized by a group of



African art historian colleagues in collaboration with Ghanaian artists and scholars. The opportunity to engage in an informed and meaningful dialogue with Ghanaian community members about historical artist-patron-political relationships was an extremely valuable addition to my understanding of indigenous practices. There are historic parallels between the Ashanti region and the Swahili coast, including the centuries of trade and exchange systems built with a wide variety of partners.

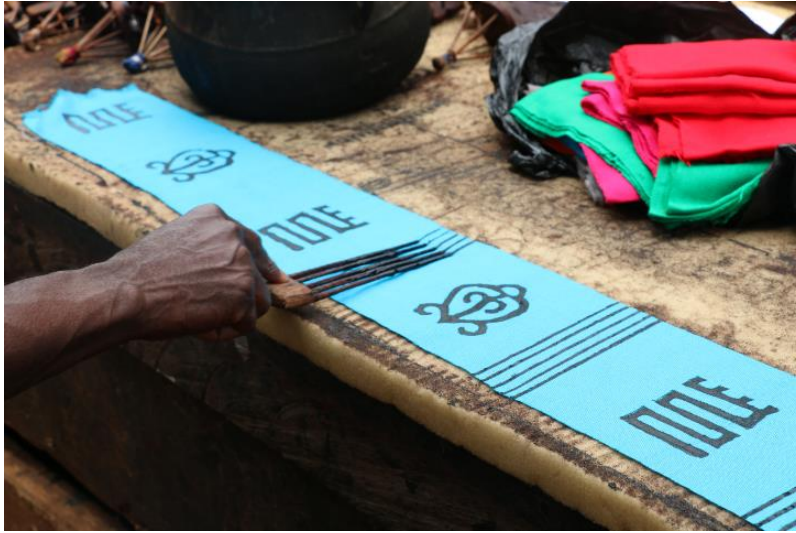
In the city of Accra, Ghana, I met with contemporary artists who talked about the ways they incorporate a variety of symbols and historical messages related to cultural identities into their current work. The artists I met in Accra work in a variety of mediums: painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphic design, industrial design, graffiti, and fibers or fashion. The chance to learn about the motivations behind such breadth and variety in these different forms of cultural expression was immensely valuable as I consider what must have been similar approaches taken by the artists who created historical art forms.

A highlight of my visit to the Ashanti region of Ghana was the chance to visit studios in the town of Bonwire, which is the historical center for *kente* weavers and *adinkra* cloth production. Symbols and visual messages figure prominently in both types of textiles. Artists were generous with their demonstrations of production methods, historical traditions, and the use of *adinkra* symbols, which are visual markers that are used extensively throughout Ghana to represent aphorisms, historical motifs, or specific concepts.



Figure 7: Carved Adinkra Stamps, Bonwire, Ghana

I was taught how to carve stamps for the symbols out of dried calabash gourds, and I stamped my own strip of *adinkra* cloth. The *adinkra* symbols I chose were representations of the concepts of “flexibility/adaptability” and “the power of love.”



*Figure 8: Adinkra Stamp Printing, Bonwire, Ghana*

A *kente* weaver tried to teach me how to use a loom, but I could not come close to learning how to master the coordinated efforts of the four different motions simultaneously required by hands and feet.



*Figure 9: Janet Purdy on the Kente Loom, Bonwire, Ghana*

*Kente* cloth and *adinkra* symbols continue today as important visual representations and graphic messaging forms in Ghana and throughout the world.

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