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Global Currents, Local Complexity: Indian Ocean Trade and Small-Scale Societies around Kilimanjaro

Valence Valerian Silayo*

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Resumo

A África Oriental e Central pré-colonial caracterizava-se, em grande medida, pela predominância de sociedades de pequena escala situadas fora da influência directa de grandes sistemas estatais, como os Luba-Lunda, Marave, Lozi, Kongo, a cultura do Zimbabwe e as cidades-estado suaílis. Estas comunidades foram frequentemente consideradas desprovidas de sofisticação sociopolítica. Contudo, a evidência arqueológica relativa aos Chagga, estabelecidos nas encostas inferiores do monte Kilimanjaro, contraria esta perspectiva. Os Chagga construíram complexas estruturas defensivas, desenvolveram uma gestão cuidada dos recursos hídricos de montanha e mantiveram redes comerciais tanto locais como regionais, revelando, assim, elevados níveis de organização social.

Este estudo adopta uma abordagem de arqueologia histórica para analisar de que modo tais práticas se articularam com a expansão das redes comerciais do oceano Índico entre os séculos XVII e XIX d.C. Ao examinar as ligações entre as sociedades do Kilimanjaro e o comércio costeiro, demonstra-se que as comunidades de pequena escala contribuíram activamente para a intensificação da complexidade sociopolítica e económica no Nordeste da Tanzânia, em período anterior à intervenção colonial.

Abstract

Precolonial eastern and central Africa were largely characterised by small-scale societies situated beyond the immediate influence of major state systems such as the Luba-Lunda, Marave, Lozi, Kongo, Zimbabwe Culture, and the Swahili city-states. These communities have frequently been dismissed as lacking socio-political sophistication. Archaeological evidence from the Chagga on the lower slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, however, challenges this assumption. The Chagga constructed intricate defensive works, exercised careful management of mountain water resources, and maintained both local and regional trade networks, thereby revealing complex forms of organisation. This study employs a historical archaeological approach to investigate how such practices intersected with the expanding Indian Ocean market networks between the 17th and 19th centuries AD. By tracing the connections between Kilimanjaro societies and coastal trade, it demonstrates that small-scale communities actively contributed to the intensification of socio-political and economic complexity in north-eastern Tanzania prior to colonial intervention.

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Keywords: Social complexity, Historical archaeology, Precolonial, Chagga, Trade, Market.

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Introduction

In the precolonial period, Africa was characterised by a wide range of small-scale societies, many of which were situated beyond, or at the margins of, major state systems such as the Luba-Lunda, Marave, Lozi, Kongo, the monumental Zimbabwe Culture, and the Swahili city-states. Until relatively recently, these smaller communities were frequently portrayed as less complex, or even non-complex, in comparison to their larger state counterparts. In this context, complexity refers to the degree of socio-political organisation and institutional development within a society. Political complexity is typically understood in terms of hierarchical authority, territorial control, and the capacity to mobilise resources. In contrast, social complexity encompasses the organisation of communities through networks of exchange, collective infrastructure, and systems of cooperation that extend beyond kinship ties.

Drawing upon oral traditions and archaeological evidence from the Chagga of eastern Africa, this paper demonstrates how engagement with the Indian Ocean trade contributed to the development of both social and political complexity in the Kilimanjaro region. Scholars have argued that the power of precolonial states derived from their ability to control territory and secure access to productive agricultural land (Pikirayi 1993). Surplus production facilitated the growth of exchange and trade networks, which in turn reinforced political authority. During this period, trading centres exerted a significant influence on settlement patterns across eastern, central, and southern Africa. Evidence from Kilimanjaro indicates that the region participated in both local and regional trade, linking hinterland communities with coastal societies along the Indian Ocean. Kilimanjaro itself, in north-eastern Tanzania, reveals trading connections with the Swahili and other coastal groups. The presence of local markets and imported material culture illustrates the continuity, diffusion, and influence of Swahili culture in the area, particularly after the sixteenth century (Silayo 2017). These interactions fostered greater social complexity, as evidenced by the

emergence of stone-walled fortifications, powerful chiefdoms, and the expansion of defensive and irrigation systems. Such developments highlight the ways in which small-scale societies like the Chagga actively engaged with wider networks, thereby intensifying both social and political organisation prior to colonial intervention.

The Chagga: Historical Origins, Settlement, Complexity, Identity

The term Chagga is both complex and, at times, ambiguous. Its earliest recorded usage, particularly in written sources, appears to have signified a shared identity among the inhabitants of Mount Kilimanjaro. From the period of European exploration in the nineteenth century—by missionaries, explorers, and traders—the mountain's residents were increasingly referred to collectively as the Chagga. As Bender (2013b, 200) observes, “this designation probably stemmed from their perception of the mountain as a single, unified landscape, as well as from the similarities of the various mountain communities in agricultural and cultural practices.” In written documents, the name appears in multiple forms—Mchagga, Wachagga, Chaga, Waschagga, Jagga, WA-caga, or Dschagga—all denoting the same people. This study employs the term *Chagga* because it represents the most common usage and is preferred by the Chagga themselves.

Scholarly interpretations of the Chagga, from the eighteenth century to the present, have varied considerably (Bender 2013a; Campbell, Misana, and Olson 2004; Moore 1986; Moore and Puritt 1977; Stahl 1964; Yakan 1999). Some scholars have described the Chagga as a Bantu subculture inhabiting the fertile yet densely populated slopes of Kilimanjaro (Yakan 1999). Others have emphasised their reputation as politically active, entrepreneurial, and among the best educated groups in Tanzania (Stahl 1964). Their entrepreneurial culture remains distinctive and is still recognised across northern Tanzania and neighbouring Kenya. This tradition extends back to the precolonial era, particularly from the seventeenth century, when the Chagga actively participated in regional trade. They traded with the Kamba to the north, thereby linking to the Mazrui Empire in Mombasa. Following the decline of the Mazrui and the rise of Zanzibar, the caravan route through Ukamba collapsed (Stahl 1964). Trade routes subsequently shifted to connect the coast with Lake Victoria, once again benefiting the Chagga, who became a leading group in supplying provisions and ensuring safe passage for caravans. These developments contributed to the formation

of Chagga polities and fostered greater social and political complexity—manifested in the accumulation of power and wealth, and in a flourishing agricultural economy (Campbell, Misana, and Olson 2004, 46–50; Moore and Puritt 1977, 11–15; Stahl 1964).

Settlement patterns on the mountain have not yet been fully integrated into discussions of Chagga origins and identity. Bailey (1968, 163) contends that ancient settlement in Kilimanjaro, particularly in the Marangu area, began at approximately 3800 feet on ridges and in river ravines that were formerly part of the forest. Campbell, Misana, and Olson (2004) extend this to 6000 feet (c. 2000m asl), arguing that the Chagga exploited fertile volcanic soils and reliable rainfall. Odner (1971, 139), based on surface collections from Mwika, dates the earliest settlement to 250–300 CE, marking the onset of the Iron Age. Spear (2011, 380) maintains that the Chagga have occupied Kilimanjaro continuously from the Iron Age to the present, whereas Nurse (1977) suggests that settlement in Rombo and Siha is relatively recent. He associates this with the Ongamo, a Maa-speaking Nilotic group of pastoralists, in contrast to the Chagga's mixed pastoral and agricultural economy. He further notes significant dialectal variation in Kibosho, reflecting a long history of settlement. In contrast, Ehret and Posnansky (1982, 63) argue that the Nilotic presence in Kilimanjaro resulted from Bantu-speaking populations intruding into hunter-gatherer territories, necessitating subsistence adaptations such as the adoption of crops suited to drier climates. This may have displaced the Ongamo eastwards. If the Ongamo were indeed the earliest settlers, then settlement patterns may have developed along an east–west axis. Gray (1975) supports the view of the Ongamo as an independent ethnic group, possibly related to pygmy peoples such as the Wakoningo or Watarembo. Interestingly, despite numerous accounts of migration into Kilimanjaro, few groups exhibit unmistakable cultural resemblance to the Chagga. However, the Rabai, one of the Mijikenda peoples, preserve a tradition claiming ancestral origins in Rombo, eastern Kilimanjaro (Harries 1960; Helm 2000). Helm (2000, 29) further notes that early Mijikenda society developed defensive *Kaya* settlements, surrounded by dense bush or forest and protected by charms and fortified gateways, as a means of safeguarding against hostile neighbours.

A critical examination of Chagga society reveals that settlement patterns have long been central to the construction and articulation of identity. The Chagga distinguished themselves, both internally and externally, through the physical landscapes they inhabited (Bender 2013a; Hollis 1901; Merker 1902; Rebmann 1849; Wimmelbücker 2002). Festo Mkenda and

Mathew Bender, writing on Chagga identity in the 1880s, emphasise the “importance of geography” and settlement location, alongside shared cultural practices, in shaping what Mkenda describes as a “largely unbounded identity.” Bender’s analysis, however, suggests that this identity emerged as a natural development rather than as a consciously constructed or externally imposed category (Bender 2013a, 201; see also Bart, Mbonile and Devenne 2006; Mkenda 2009; Montlahuc and Philippson 2006).

Settlement orientation and ridge occupation were closely tied to chiefdoms, which by the nineteenth century had become increasingly significant as units of social and political organisation. Chiefdom names themselves functioned as markers of identity: inhabitants of Kilema were known as WaKilema, those of Kibosho as WaKibosho, and those of Rombo as WaRombo. The growing importance of chiefdoms was linked to competition for resources beyond immediate ridges, making membership identification crucial for securing access and asserting ownership (Bender 2013a). As Bender notes, expanding clans gradually enclosed the spaces between themselves and neighbouring groups, thereby restricting access to vital resources uphill (wood, honey) and downhill (salt, iron, and trade goods from the plains) (Bart, Mbonile and Devenne 2006; Bender 2013a, 204; Wimmelbücker 2002). By the mid- to late eighteenth century, most chiefdoms had lost free access to these resources, necessitating cooperation that fostered tighter political integration and a stronger sense of collective identity (Bender 2013a, 204).

Bender further argues that the rise of a Chagga political identity can best be understood in the context of debates over resource control. Long before colonial rule, identity was linked not only to the mountain landscape but also to questions of rightful access to land and water. Clan and chiefdom membership provided entitlement to homesteads, irrigation furrows, and other necessities, while simultaneously protecting resources from neighbouring groups (Bender 2013a, 201).

The question of Chagga identity diminished under colonial rule, particularly after the 1892 conflict between Sina, chief of Kibosho, and German forces. It re-emerged some forty years later when the British sought to consolidate indirect rule in Kilimanjaro, distancing the region from nationalist movements in Tanganyika (Mkenda 2009). This was achieved through the creation of a paramount chief (Mangi). In 1952, the Chagga elected Marealle II as their first Mangi through a secret ballot. Marealle promoted Chagga identity by instituting Chagga Day, yet internal political divisions and the rise of nationalism led to the collapse of the paramount chieftaincy.

The broader question of Chagga origins, settlement, and identity requires further reflection, particularly regarding coastal connections and the development of social complexity. Extensive documentation exists, ranging from travellers, missionaries, linguists, and anthropologists to the Chagga themselves, who recorded family histories, chiefs, and traditions to preserve collective memory. These accounts consistently portray the Chagga as a complex society. Here, *complexity* refers both to political organisation—manifested in chiefdoms, resource control, and integration into wider networks—and to social organisation, expressed through entrepreneurial culture, agricultural intensification, and participation in long-distance trade.

Scholars have described the Chagga as a Bantu subculture inhabiting the fertile yet crowded slopes of Kilimanjaro (Yakan 1999). They were regarded as politically active, entrepreneurial, and among the best educated groups in Tanzania (Stahl 1964). Their entrepreneurial culture remains distinctive and is recognised across northern Tanzania and Kenya. This tradition can be traced to the seventeenth century, when the Chagga engaged in regional trade with the Kamba to the north, linking them to the Mazrui Empire in Mombasa. Following the decline of the Mazrui and the rise of Zanzibar, caravan routes shifted towards Lake Victoria, crossing the southern slopes of Kilimanjaro. Once again, the Chagga benefited, supplying provisions and ensuring safe passage. These developments contributed to the emergence of Chagga states. They intensified both political and social complexity, as evidenced by the consolidation of power, the accumulation of wealth, and the growth of a vibrant agricultural economy (Campbell, Misana and Olson 2004, 46–50; Moore and Puritt 1977, 11–15; Stahl 1964).

Methodology

This study employed a multi-disciplinary approach, combining archaeological survey, oral historical accounts, and excavation. Data were collected from three chiefdoms individually and subsequently compared during analysis in order to establish relationships and possible interactions among these entities. Particular emphasis was placed on oral histories, recognising their centrality in reconstructing collective memory and understanding the dynamics of Chagga society. Oral traditions, though often transmitted across generations, provide invaluable insights into perceptions of identity, leadership, and socio-political organisation. At the same time, the generational distance

between interviewees and the events described necessitated careful methodological reflection, as oral accounts may represent both remembered experience and reinterpreted narratives shaped by communal memory.

Oral testimony was gathered through structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives concerning the history of the Chagga in relation to specific chiefdoms, their immediate cultural landscapes, and their connections with coastal communities. Questions were framed to explore the nature of social and political complexity during the precolonial period, with particular attention to local and external trade networks. Interviewees were encouraged to describe the socio-political hierarchy, the composition of chiefdom leadership, and the participation of ordinary members of society in the chiefdom's welfare and development. These oral accounts were intended to complement archaeological evidence, offering perspectives on the emergence of social and political complexity. To ensure reliability, oral information was cross-checked against material evidence recovered during the survey and excavation.

An archaeological survey was conducted in regions selected for their cultural features, including stone fortifications, underground tunnels, and the historical locations of early royal compounds. Surface survey, a crucial precursor to excavation, involved the collection of artefacts and ecofacts and the identification of extant features visible on the ground surface. These provided preliminary indications of subsurface deposits. The survey was extensive, covering broad areas in order to record and document the Chagga landscape and the spatial extent of chiefdoms. Attention was given to defence mechanisms, land-use patterns, market sites, and resource management strategies. Mapping enabled the identification of key features such as ditches, underground bolt-holes, stone forts, ritual and cultural sites—including royal compounds and marketplaces—burial grounds, and irrigation systems. Augering was employed to detect sub-surface deposits, including foundation structures and stratified cultural layers.

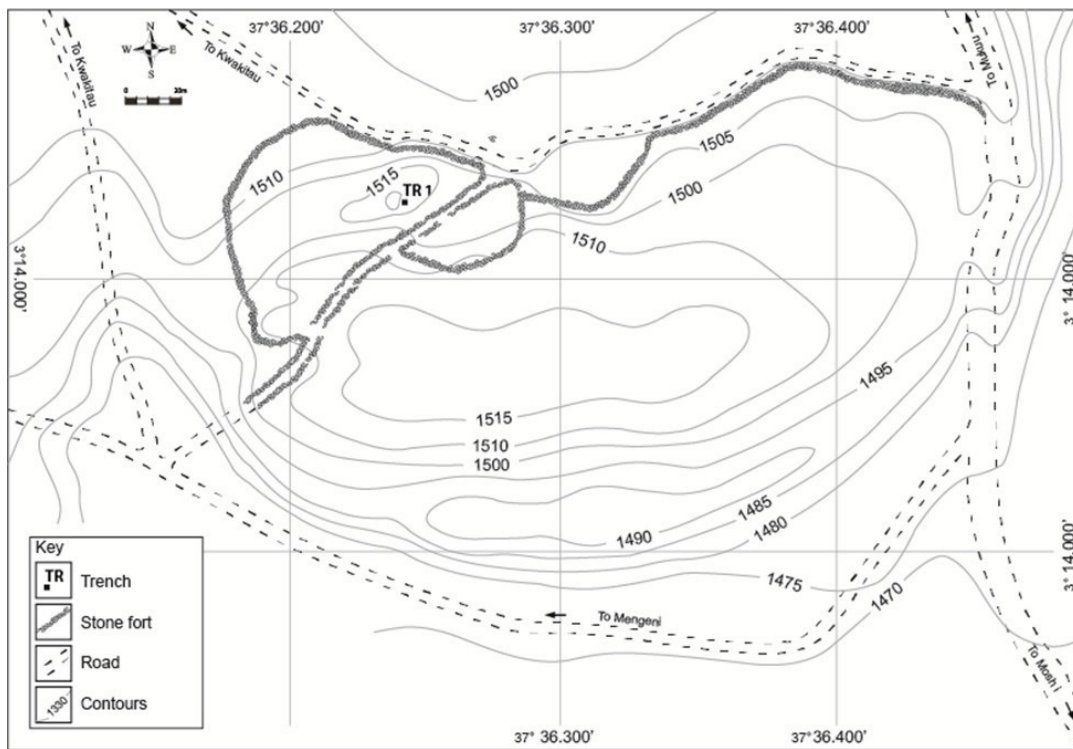
Three sites were subsequently selected for excavation: Horombo fort, the Mamba smithing site, and the Kilema royal compound. Excavation aimed to recover subsurface data corroborated by survey and ethnographic evidence. Standard excavation procedures were followed, with careful recording of provenance, context, and association. Trenches measuring between two and four square metres were opened to expose artefacts and establish their occurrence patterns. The discussion in this paper focuses specifically on materials that demonstrate direct connections between the Chagga and external communities, particularly those along the Indian Ocean coast.

Precolonial Markets, Trade, and Interethnic Interactions as Catalysts for Social Complexity

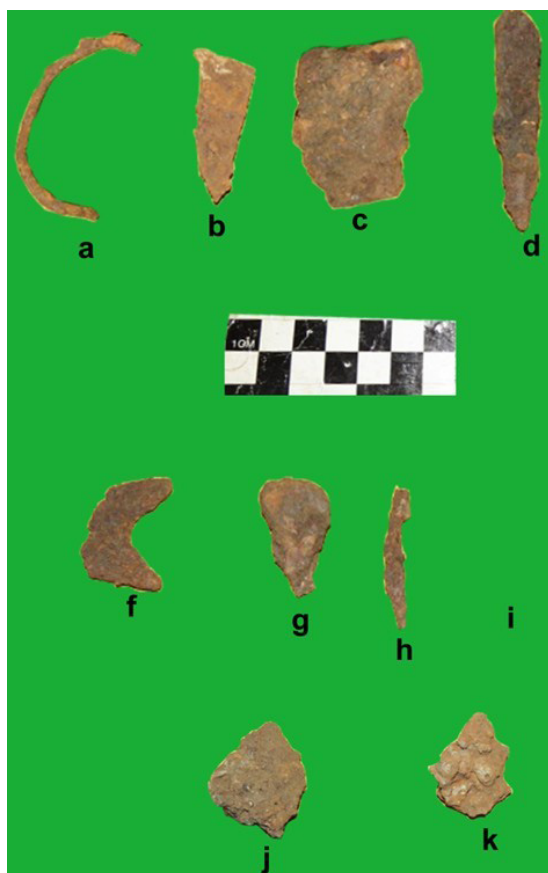
Archaeological research has long demonstrated the role of markets and trade in exposing communities to external influences and integrating them into wider networks. Tim Insoll's work (1996; 2000) on Gao, the capital of the Songhai Empire, illustrates how long-distance trade linked Western Asia, the Mediterranean basin, and sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, Magnavita and colleagues have highlighted the importance of markets in diffusing exotic prestige goods into remote rural areas, as evidenced by richly furnished tombs in northern Burkina Faso containing copper artefacts, cowry shells, weapons, and beads of carnelian and glass dating to the first millennium CE (Magnavita 2003; 2013; Magnavita et al. 2002). Such studies underscore how material culture, burial practices, and technologies reflect the progressive integration of societies into broader exchange systems (Mayor, Huysecom, Ozainne and Magnavita).

In Kilimanjaro, analysis of Chagga local markets and market centres reveals their foundational role in shaping socio-economic and political complexity. These markets connected the Chagga to coastal communities and embedded them within the precolonial caravan economy, thereby defining their social and political power (Owens 2012). Recent studies (Silayo 2017; 2018) confirm that by 1800 CE the Chagga had developed distinctive systems of agriculture, trade, and governance. Over centuries, they integrated diverse populations into a society characterised by intensive farming, long-distance trade, and a relatively stable political order. Their achievements included the construction of one of East Africa's most complex irrigation networks and the organisation of regular, well-structured markets (Campbell, Misana and Olson 2004; Olson et al. 2004).

Archaeological excavations provide tangible evidence of this complexity. At Horombo fort (**fig. 1**), defensive ditches, stone walls, and underground bolt-holes reveal a sophisticated system of fortification designed to protect communities and regulate access to resources. At the Mamba smithing site, imported beads, slag deposits, and iron tools (**fig. 2**) attest to advanced metallurgical practices and the production of weapons and agricultural implements that supported both subsistence and trade. The Kilema royal compound yielded ritual artefacts, illustrating the political authority of chiefly households and their role in mediating external contacts. These finds demonstrate that Chagga society was not only agriculturally productive but also militarily organised and technologically innovative, with material culture linking them to wider Indian Ocean trade networks.



1 Horombo site map showing the stone fort (Silayo 2017). Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.



2 Metal objects (Silayo 2017).
Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.

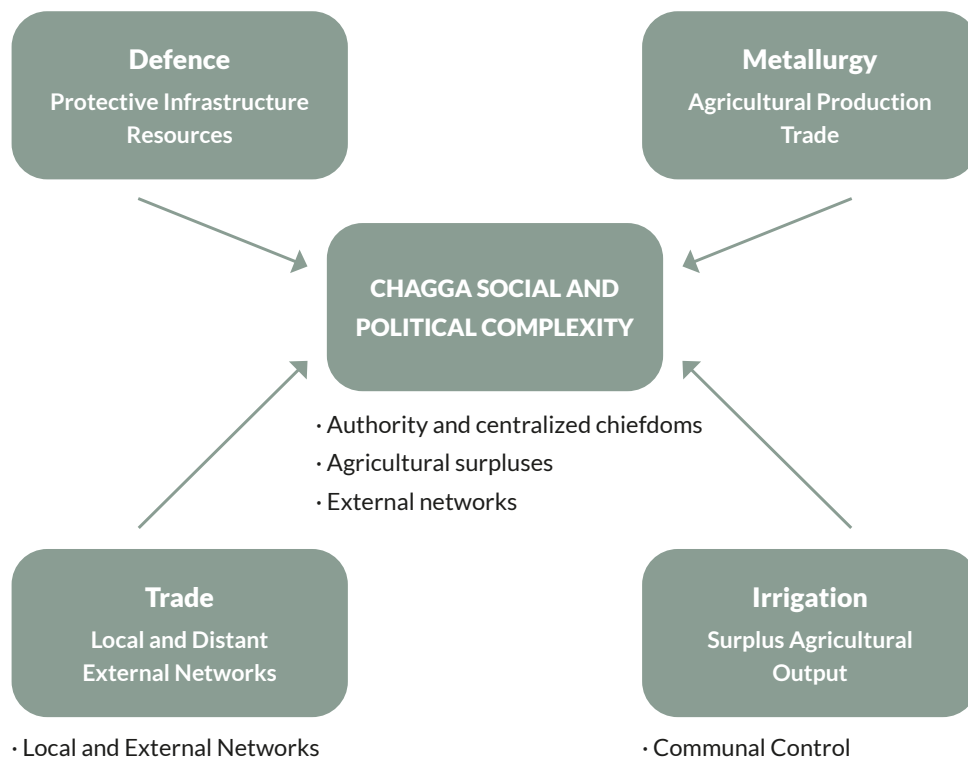
The broader archaeological record from Kilimanjaro includes large quantities of pottery, metal objects, faunal remains, and beads (Silayo 2017). These materials indicate continuous occupation and sustained interaction with neighbouring groups such as the Pare, Maasai, and Meru, as well as coastal Swahili and Kenyan communities, including the Kamba, Taita, and Kikuyu (Owens 2012). Imported wares, likely originating from India or the Far East (Chami 2002), alongside pottery styles from the Usambara and Pare mountains, further attest to extensive contacts. Beads, frequently recovered from excavation contexts, appear to have functioned as currency; indeed, historical accounts note that Rebmann distributed beads as food allowances to his porters in 1849 (Krapf [1860] 1960; Rockel 1997; 2000).

Historical sources corroborate this archaeological evidence. Travellers and missionaries such as Burton (1872), Burton and Speke (1858), and Krapf ([1860] 1960) observed regular markets in Kilimanjaro where foodstuffs and craft products—including pottery and iron objects—were exchanged even before the nineteenth-century caravan trade. Oral histories collected during this study recall prominent market centres such as *Manorowa* in Kibosho and Kinyange in Marangu. The existence and distribution of such markets imply a high degree of social organisation, since effective market operation requires political authority to regulate trade, maintain order, and collect levies (Good 1973).

The Chagga case parallels other African polities, such as the Shabe kingdom of Benin, where decorated pottery, non-local artefacts, and fortified settlements reflected prosperity and external connections (Gurstelle, Labiyi and Agani 2015). In Kilimanjaro, the coordination of land management and irrigation systems (**fig. 3**) illustrates how political and social economies were intertwined. Traditional irrigation not only ensured agricultural surplus but also sustained the weekly markets that underpinned Chagga economic life. Control of irrigation was mediated by *mfongo* elders under the authority of the *Mangi*, thereby reinforcing centralised leadership. As Billman (2002) argues, political control of irrigation systems provided leaders with opportunities to consolidate power and strengthen centralised states. In Kilimanjaro, this dynamic is evident in the way irrigation networks, defensive structures, and market organisation collectively fostered both social and political complexity. This system can be further explained with an illustrative diagram (**fig. 4**).



3 Irrigation furrow (Silayo 2017). Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.



4 A diagram illustrating interconnected systems driving Chagga social and political complexity. Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.

The Indian Ocean Coast and the Emergence of Social Complexity in Kilimanjaro

By the early nineteenth century, the Chagga had emerged as one of the most distinctive communities in East Africa. Their society had developed over several centuries through the integration of diverse populations, resulting in a complex socio-political structure characterised by intensive agriculture, long-distance trade, and a relatively stable system of chieftaincy. The formation of chiefdoms as central political units appears to have intensified during the eighteenth century, as competition over land, water, and trade routes necessitated more formalised leadership and resource management (Silayo and Pikirayi 2023). Oral traditions and archaeological evidence suggest that by the late eighteenth century, the institution of the *Mangi* (chief) had become a defining feature of Chagga political organisation.

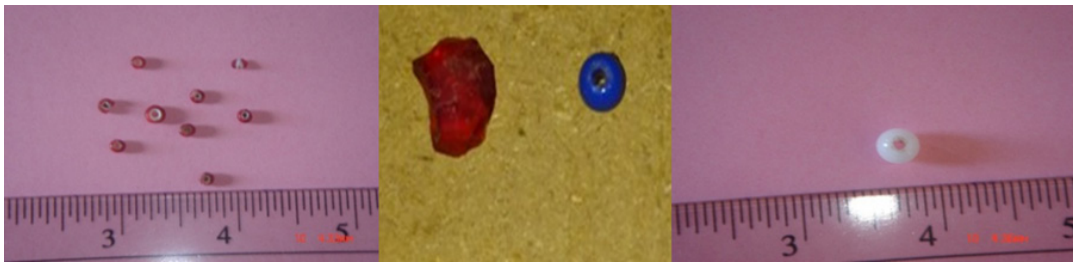
The Chagga's connection to the Indian Ocean trade network likely began in earnest during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Historical accounts and oral histories indicate that by the 1820s, Kilimanjaro was regularly visited by coastal traders, including the Swahili merchant Bwana Kheri, who is recorded as having traded in the region in 1825 CE (Stahl 1964). The Chagga became key suppliers to caravans travelling between Pangani, Mombasa, Taveta, Tanga, and Lake Victoria, providing agricultural produce, water, and safe passage. This role was particularly pronounced during the nineteenth century, when increased demand for ivory and other goods led to the expansion of caravan routes through Kilimanjaro.

The provisioning of caravans placed considerable pressure on local food systems, prompting the Chagga to intensify agricultural production. This was achieved through the development of sophisticated irrigation networks (Pike 1965; Masao 1972), which enabled surplus cultivation and supported both local markets and external trade. The management of these irrigation systems was closely tied to political authority. Chiefs exercised control over water allocation and land use, and their power was reinforced through their ability to redistribute resources, including war booty and trade goods. Oral accounts describe the *Mangi* as responsible for ensuring the welfare of their people, particularly during times of scarcity. Failure to do so could result in the loss of legitimacy and, in some cases, deposition (Mkenda 2009).

The political authority of the *Mangi* was further expressed through the selection of close advisors (*Njama*), the hosting of daily feasts, and the regulation of market activity. Markets played a central role in Chagga society, serving as catalysts for interethnic exchange and economic integration.

Highland markets, often dominated by women, facilitated the trade of agricultural and dairy products, while lowland markets—frequented by men—enabled the exchange of livestock, crafts, and imported goods. These regional markets were strategically located along economic borders and were often consecrated and taxed by local chiefs (Baumann 1891).

The Chagga's long-standing engagement in trade is evident in both historical and archaeological records. Missionary Rebmann, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, observed that Chagga markets transcended clan and chiefdom boundaries, enabling unrestricted social and economic exchange (Krapf [1860] 1960). Festo Mkenda (2009) similarly notes that market rotation and caravan nodes formed vital points of connection between the Chagga and coastal communities. The presence of exotic materials—such as earthenware, salt, soda ash, and imported beads (**fig. 5**)—suggests that the Chagga regularly traded with neighbouring groups, including the Pare, Maasai, Meru, Kamba, Taita, and Kikuyu. Gutmann's observations of Chagga traders returning with non-local goods further support this conclusion (Swai 2010).



5 Imported beads (Silayo 2017). Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.

The expansion of trade and the rise of chieftaincy were mutually reinforcing. As agricultural surpluses grew and markets flourished, chiefs consolidated their authority through control of resources and redistribution of wealth. Scholars such as Earle (1997) and DeCorse, Monroe, and Ogundiran (2012) argue that leadership in such contexts was sustained through reward systems, personal charisma, and strategic alliances. These traits were exemplified by prominent Chagga leaders such as Sina of Kibosho, Mandara of Moshi, and Marealle of Marangu, who played pivotal roles in shaping the political landscape of Kilimanjaro during the nineteenth century.

The Chagga's sustained interaction with external communities exposed them to wider economic and cultural networks and necessitated the development of strong socio-political structures. These structures not

only supported the economy and trade networks but also ensured internal stability, security, and order within the chiefdoms. Such an organisation reassured caravans and neighbouring groups that they could safely interact and trade with the Chagga. Notably, while warfare was a feature of Chagga society, neither oral traditions nor historical and anthropological accounts record attacks on marketplaces. Raiding occurred within Kilimanjaro and beyond its borders, yet markets appear to have remained protected spaces, underscoring their centrality to social and economic life.

Scholars argue that the Chagga possessed a longer precolonial trade history than many other regions of Tanzania, sustained by regularly held markets (Pietilä 2007). By the eighteenth century, these markets had become integral to Chagga society. Sally Moore (1986) notes that the Chagga exploited the ecological diversity of Kilimanjaro to produce surplus agricultural goods. While fertile soils supported intensive farming, the Chagga lacked key resources such as iron ore, clay for pottery, and soda ash (*mbala*), which were essential for cooking and cattle husbandry (Moore 1977). This scarcity encouraged exchange with neighbouring communities. In South Pare, Isariah Kimambo (1969) observed that local economies were based on complementarity, with periodic markets connecting different ecological zones. Archaeological evidence and oral histories from Kilimanjaro suggest a similar scenario: markets linked chiefdoms, enabling people to cross boundaries and trade peacefully.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Chagga markets offered a wide range of products. Locally produced goods included agricultural and livestock products, pottery, honey and wax, dairy products, hides, and craft items such as basketry and wooden utensils. Imported materials—iron ore, beads, lead wires, soda ash, and clay—were acquired from neighbouring Pare and Usambara traders and from Swahili caravans. The presence of both local and imported pottery (**fig. 6**), beads, and obsidian tools in the archaeological record confirms long-standing trade connections with surrounding regions (Wimmelbücker 2002; Fosbrooke and Sassoon 1965). Kilimanjaro thus functioned as a provisioning hub within the regional economy, supplying caravans with ivory, slaves, crafts, and agricultural produce (Wittenberg 2004). In return, the Chagga obtained clay pots, soda ash, cloth, and beads.



6 Imported pottery (Silayo). Credits: Valence Valerian Silayo.

By the mid-nineteenth century, coastal traders had become familiar with Chagga preferences. Hans Meyer (1891) observed that Venetian beads were highly valued, with small pink or light-blue beads preferred over the crimson, dark-blue, or white beads favoured by neighbouring groups such as the Taita, Taveta, Gweno, Kahe, and Maasai (Von Clemm 1963; Wittenberg 2004). The Chiefs played a pivotal role in fostering these exchanges. Stahl (1965) records that Mangi Sina of Kibosho actively promoted trade, exchanging ivory and slaves with Arab merchants for cloth, copper, lead, beads, and firearms. He also traded cattle and cloth with neighbouring chiefdoms in return for ivory, which he resold at considerable profit. Such practices highlight the centrality of chieftaincy in regulating trade and consolidating political authority during the nineteenth century.

Archaeological finds, including imported beads and potsherds, reinforce the interconnectedness of Chagga society. These materials demonstrate participation in complex trade systems that extended beyond Kilimanjaro, linking the Chagga to coastal and regional economies. The evidence suggests that by the eighteenth century, markets had become a defining feature of Chagga social organisation. By the nineteenth century, chieftaincy and caravan trade had firmly embedded Kilimanjaro within the Indian Ocean world.

In sum, the integration of Kilimanjaro into Indian Ocean trade networks from the late eighteenth century onwards, coupled with the consolidation of chieftaincy, contributed significantly to the emergence of social and political complexity among the Chagga. Markets, irrigation, and defence systems were not merely functional structures but expressions of a society adapting to external pressures and internal transformations, forging a distinctive highland polity deeply connected to regional and global currents.

Conclusion

What, then, does this evidence suggest about monumentality and social complexity in small-scale societies? Among the Chagga, complexity manifested in distinctive forms that did not rely upon the monumental stone architecture familiar from other African polities. Instead, royal capitals and community centres expanded in size and function, becoming ‘monumental’ through their scale, organisation, and symbolic significance. The compounds of leaders such as Mangi Sina, Mangi Marealle, and Mangi Horombo illustrate this process: proportionally large palaces with clear spatial and functional divisions that embodied political authority and social hierarchy. Monumentality here was expressed through settlement organisation, ritual space, and the concentration of population, rather than through massive stone walls.

Equally significant were the extensive networks of markets and trade connections, which both sustained prosperity and generated internal frictions. These tensions contributed to the development of defensive systems—bolt-holes, ditches, and stone forts—that reveal the adaptive strategies of Chagga chiefdoms in the face of competition and conflict. As Thomas Håkansson (1998) has argued, the regional exchange of cattle and exotic goods interacted with other social processes to produce political change in societies experiencing incipient centralisation and heightened competition for power. In Kilimanjaro, external networks of trade, combined with internal innovations in irrigation, defence, and political organisation, transformed the community into one characterised by multiple levels of social and political complexity.

It is important to recognise that the Chagga were not an isolated case. Across East and East-Central Africa, other kingdoms such as the Shambaa in the Usambara mountains, and the Great Lakes polities of Ruanda and Buganda, developed politically complex systems marked by

centralised authority, monumental capitals, and integration into regional trade. Kilimanjaro is unique in its ecological setting, its reliance on irrigation, and its distinctive forms of fortification, yet it belongs to a broader regional pattern in which small-scale societies evolved into complex polities through the interplay of local resources, external exchange, and political innovation. The Chagga experience thus demonstrates that monumentality and complexity in African societies were not confined to large empires or stone-built capitals, but could be expressed in diverse ways that reflected local conditions while participating in wider regional traditions of political and social organisation.

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