

The Medieval East African Diaspora

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I came to the University of Florida with a strong interest in studying various aspects of the Medieval East African Diaspora and the impact that Islam has had on the east African coast in terms of the rise of the Swahili as a culture and civilization. In summer 2010, I made tangible progress on my research through a Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA) language and cultural immersion grant to study Kiswahili in Tanzania. I was able to make connections with scholars and community leaders, and associate myself with the archives in the coastal cities of Dar es Salaam, Kilwa, and Bagamoyo along with the Island of Zanzibar.

It is one thing to be on vacation in Tanzania, but to actually be involved with the people and their culture is entirely different. I made it my mission to be

immersed in the latter. What I found to be of high interest was that the people of Tanzania, and I suppose all throughout East Africa, were very welcoming. However, there is a large difference between being welcomed as a tourist/guest and as a friend. There is a culture of tourism that is provided to and promoted by the majority of visitors and then there is the culture of real life, which is obvious but still unnoticed by many. I was shocked to hear, witness, and be subjected to this, but it gave me an even deeper understanding and appreciation for the vast complexities that exist within Swahili culture. I was able to identify the multiple socio-cultural layers constructed by the people and I hope to be able to peel back those layers in an attempt to look into the past; one that is too often overlooked.

My research requires a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, history, and archaeology

and having the chance to situate myself culturally in East Africa was critical due to the nature of my project.

In the near future, I plan to return to Tanzania to conduct archaeological fieldwork in the northwest part of the country. In November 2010, I presented a paper on Islamic colonization at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting. I will be using the information that I was able to gather this summer along with research I have done for my MA thesis to discuss an aspect of Islam in Africa that is rarely addressed. I see a bright and very interesting future of research ahead of me in the dynamic culturally heterogeneous area of the world that is the East African Coast.

Noah Isaiah Sims is a master's student in the Department of Anthropology. He was a Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA) fellow in Swahili during summer 2010 and is a FLAS fellow in Arabic (2010-11).