

Beyond Text: Objects as Historical Sources

Primary Source Analysis

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This chair is a *kiti cha enzi* (chair of power) made on the East African coast in the nineteenth century. Looking closely first at its form, it has a high back with a triangular cresting rail, a wide seat with armrests and a footrest at the front. It is made from a dark hard wood with twine webbed panels on the seat and footrest. Some of these elements are incomplete. The back of the chair is intricately decorated with ivory. In some places, the ivory takes the form of pegged pieces linking two sections of the back, while in others it has been inlaid to create geometric patterns. The triangular cresting rail surmounting the back has a series of stylized leaf patterns. It is larger than a normal chair – at 160 cm high, 96 cm wide and 90 cm deep – heightening its impression of power and significance. There is a small brass plaque screwed into the centre of its back below the cresting rail.

Such *viti vya enzi* (plural) were made by the Swahili community, who populate the East African coast. They were associated with power and leadership. There are several chairs like this in museum collections – you can have a look at other examples online for comparison.¹ Most *viti vya enzi* in museum collections are slightly smaller and less intricately decorated. The backs of the more standard chairs, for example, have eight webbing panels rather than this complex arrangement of ivory patterns, making this chair distinctive. Swahili leaders and elite members of society had several of these chairs in their possession.² Ivory was associated with power in Swahili communities and its use carefully restricted. The use of such chairs by local leaders was, according to Ludwig Krapf, a German missionary, restricted in the nineteenth century by the Omani rulers of East Africa, who had exerted their control over the region in the eighteenth century.³ Meanwhile, Omani

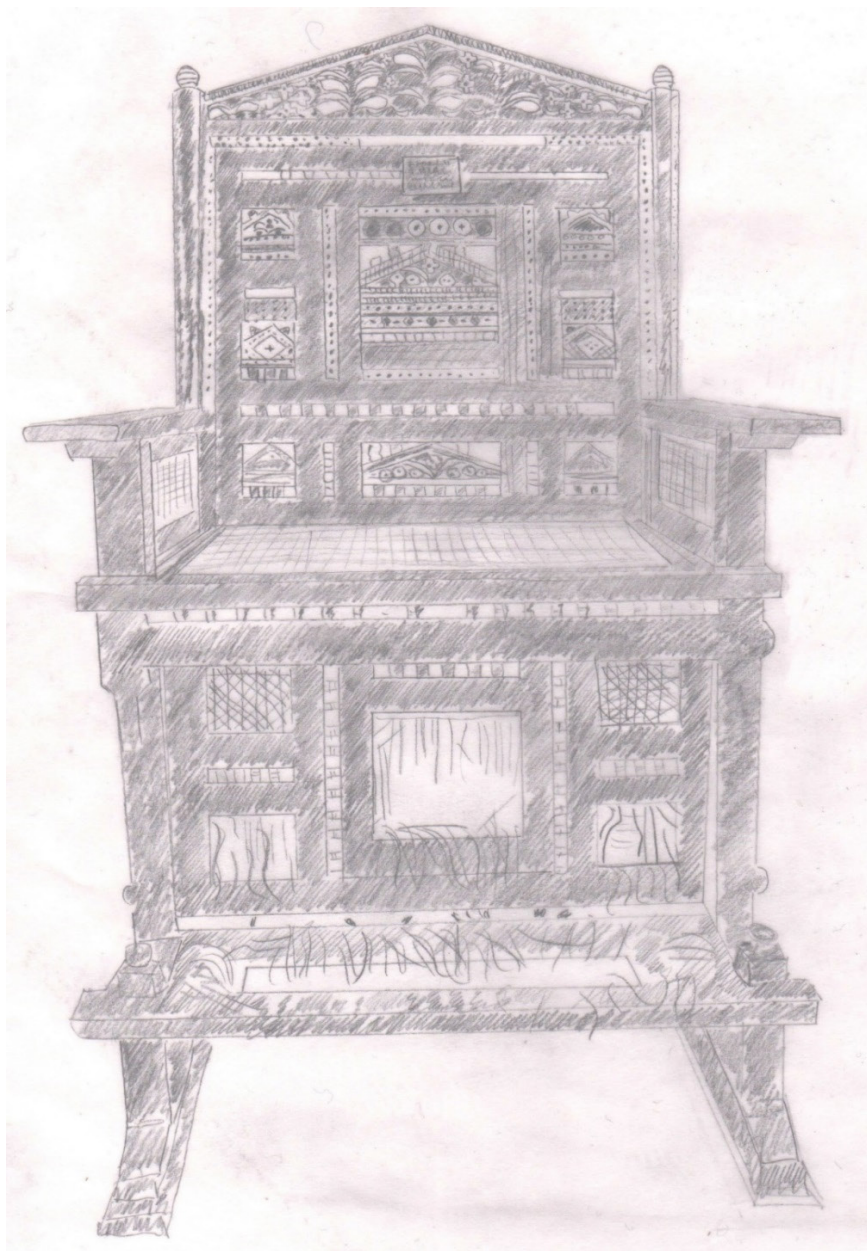


FIGURE 1 Traced hand drawing of a *kiti cha enzi* in the British Museum (object number: Af1992,05.1). Drawing by Sarah Longair.

and later British elites admired these styles of chair and began to collect and use them: these types are the less intricate ones more common in museum collections.

A clue to this object's history and provenance lies in the brass plaque screwed into its back. This text states: 'State Chair of the Sultan of Witu taken at the destruction of Witu October 17th 1890 by Vice Admiral the Hon'ble Sir E. R. Fremantle, K.C.B.C.M.G.' with the name of Fremantle in the largest lettering. The Sultan of Witu, Fumo Bakari, was a leader of a Swahili community who, in the late nineteenth century, resisted the incursions of a German mercantile company in his territory (after ending a previously made treaty with them). The Germans appealed to the British to take action and in November 1890, Sir Edmund Fremantle led a combined force of the Royal Navy, troops of the Imperial British East Africa Company and others. Fremantle's papers (now in the Royal Museums Greenwich archive) and newspaper reports from the time describe how the troops marched on Witu and found most of its inhabitants had fled by the time of their arrival. They seized this chair, a tusk of ivory (to be presented to Queen Victoria), two German guns, a portrait of the Kaiser, and some papers, and then burned the town to the ground.⁴

It is likely that the plaque was added to the chair when Fremantle displayed it at the Royal Naval Exhibition at Chelsea in 1891. This large-scale event, attended by more than 2 million visitors, sought to celebrate the achievements of the navy and rouse support for it. Much of the exhibition celebrated the historic victories of the navy in the Napoleonic wars and iconic heroes such as Nelson. In the late nineteenth century, East Africa was a region in which the navy were most active in anti-slavery patrols. The catalogue to the exhibition listed all the boats present at the attack on Witu, drawing attention to the role of the navy, with little information about the Sultan of Witu.⁵ The name alone served to indicate that this was a foreign ruler over which the British had achieved a notable victory and plundered this spoil of war. Fremantle kept the chair in his possession until his death in 1929. It was presented to the Royal Naval Museum and became part of the National Maritime Museum collection on its establishment in 1937. In 1992, the chair was accessioned into the British Museum, where it now lies in storage.

This *kiti cha enzi* is a useful example for considering objects as primary sources. While several elements of this story must be supplemented with textual sources, the object itself yields much information. It is clear, by comparison with other examples, that it is more intricate and complex, representing the power of the charismatic Sultan. In the nineteenth century, such items were seized and restricted by Omani leaders wishing to diminish the status of local rulers. This is a rare surviving example which seems from the evidence to have direct provenance linking it to a named Swahili ruler. Many *viti vya enzi* in museum collections are in excellent condition and were acquired by collectors and may not even have been used by Swahili or

Omani elites. As such, this *kiti cha enzi* is even more significant as a symbol of precolonial leadership in East Africa.

The plaque attached to the chair is a clear example of the violence – both physical and cultural – of the expansion of British power in Africa. Sultan Fumo Bakari attempted to negotiate with the Germans and exert his own power in playing the European powers off against each other. Ultimately, there was little resistance and the seizure and razing of Witu was a sign of British power in the region rather than a triumphant victory in battle. The chair was then presented to the public in the context of the Royal Naval exhibition as a spoil of war – testament to the navy’s involvement in the Scramble for Africa and the subjugation of East African peoples. The movement of the object is also illustrative of the way in which objects change meaning: the chair initially represented the power of the Sultan in Witu; it was then a symbol of victory in the exhibition context; in Fremantle’s home it is likely to have signified the status of that individual and his overseas imperial career; in the maritime museums it spoke to the extent of the Royal Navy’s activity in the nineteenth century; and its move to the British Museum locates it alongside other examples of *viti vya enzi* and African art. In this context, its importance lies in its status as an example of Swahili artistry, though far from its original and intended context. The *kiti cha enzi* remains a potent symbol of Swahili culture. Flipflop – a Swahili coast charity which specializes in recycling plastic from the ocean – presented King Charles III with a recycled plastic *kiti cha enzi* in 2023 on his royal visit to East Africa.

Works cited

- Sarah Longair, ‘Seats and Sites of Authority: British Colonial Collecting on the East African Coast’, in Matthew Ingleby and Matthew Kerr (eds), *Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 116–34.
- Prita Meier, ‘Objects on the Edge: Swahili Coast Logics of Display’, *African Arts*, 42:4 (Winter 2009), pp. 8–23.
- Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).
- Royal Naval Exhibition Committee, *Royal Naval Exhibition, 1891: Official Catalogue & Guide* (London: W.P. Griffith & Sons, 1891).

Notes

- 1 You can view another example of a *kita cha enzi* in the British Museum here: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1962-03-1.

- 2 Prita Meier, 'Objects on the Edge: Swahili Coast Logics of Display', *African Arts*, 42:4 (Winter 2009), pp. 8–23; Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).
- 3 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, p. 160.
- 4 Sarah Longair, 'Seats and Sites of Authority: British Colonial Collecting on the East African Coast', in Matthew Ingleby and Matthew Kerr (eds), *Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).
- 5 Royal Naval Exhibition Committee, *Royal Naval Exhibition, 1891: Official Catalogue & Guide* (London: W.P. Griffith & Sons, 1891).

Further reading

- Sela Adjei, Yann LeGall and Peju Layiwola (eds), *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2024).
- Tim J. Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- Zulfikar A. Hirji, 'Dispersal, Decolonization, and Dominance: African Muslim Objects from the Swahili Sultanate of Witu (1858–1923)', in Ashley Miller (ed.), *Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa: New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2024), pp. 21–54.
- Henrietta Lidchi and Stuart Allan (eds), *Dividing the Spoils: Perspectives on Military Collections and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
- Prita Meier and Allyson Purpura (eds), *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).
- Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
- Nancy Um, 'The Many Narratives of the Kiti Cha Enzi: Unresolved Strands of Dispersal and Meaning Around the Indian Ocean', in Prita Meier and Allyson Purpura (eds), *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), pp. 146–62.