One of the most enduring oral traditions on the southern Kenya coast is the story of Mwaozi (or Mwana Ozi) Tumbe, the daughter of a local ruler who betrayed her people to their enemies and was then betrayed by the latter in turn. Several versions of this popular tale of treachery have been documented since the 1920s. Anthropologist Martin Walsh summarises the content of all available texts and traces their evolution over the years.

Like many traditions of its kind, the legend of Mwaozi Tumbe appears to hang between history and myth. The historical details included in early versions make it clear that the legend of Mwaozi Tumbe has its origins in events that took place in the first half of the 17th century. In later accounts, this history is increasingly condensed into clichés that are shared with other oral traditions and folktales in the region. Versions collected in Mkwiro on Wasini Island also provide more information about the fate of Mwaozi Tumbe and the rites that used to take place in the village and at her nearby grave. In this local context the legend resembles a
The legend of Mwaozi Tumbe: History, myth and cultural heritage on Wasini Island

charter for ritual action, though the rites have since fallen foul of religious authority. Instead, the latest versions of Mwaozi Tumbe’s tale have been collected and compiled for a very different purpose—to promote community-based tourism in the village, with her gravestone as the focal point for a cultural tour.

The legend of Mwaozi Tumbe as history

The earliest version that I know of was collected by Harold Lambert when he was working as Assistant District Commissioner at Shimoni in 1923-24. Lambert studied the Chifundi and Vumba dialects of Swahili spoken on the southern Kenya coast and later wrote at length about them. His version of the Mwaozi Tumbe legend was published in 1953 under the title ‘The Taking of Tumbe Town’. Lambert notes that the story is in the sub-dialect of the Chifundi living on Wasini Island, but does not say where or when or how he recorded it. This variety of the Chifundi dialect is mainly spoken in Mkwiro at the eastern end of Wasini Island, though Lambert does not refer to the village by name. As well as reproducing the Chifundi original, he also provided a close translation of the story in the Unguja dialect of Swahili as spoken in Zanzibar. These two texts are accompanied by an introduction and notes, but no English translation of the tale.

Lambert described the story of Mwaozi Tumbe as “the traditional account of a historical event”, namely the capture of the Chifundi capital Tumbe by the Vumba of Vumba Kuu under Mwana Kyambi Kyandi Ivoo, an event he dates to about 1640 AD. The recorded text opens with the statement that Ivoo had conquered seven other Shirazi towns along the coast, but had struggled unsuccessfully for nine years to overcome the Chifundi under their ruler Guo Kuu Mwatumble. Ivoo’s chance came when Mwatumble died leaving no male heir. Mwatumble’s daughter Mwaozi claimed the throne but was rejected by the Chifundi because she was a woman. She responded by making a secret pact with Ivoo to deliver Tumbe to the Vumba in return for being made queen. The text then goes on to describe at length how Mwaozi deceived the people of Tumbe by lulling them into a false sense of security. On two separate occasions she came out of her house at night to warn that war was upon them, ranting and raving until the morning. Assuming that rejection had made her mad, the townspeople took no notice when she did this a third night. This time, however, she called the Vumba army in, and Tumbe was captured with relative ease.

Ivoo received the submission of the Chifundi, but because they had been the last of the Shirazi to submit to his rule he decreed that they should sit by the doorway and not in the main hall whenever the Vumba held feasts. Reminding him that she had delivered her half of the bargain, Mwaozi Tumbe then asked Ivoo for the throne that he had promised her. He told her to return home, and that he would call...
her back to be installed as the ruler of her people. But Ivoo wondered what Mwaozi might do to him, given what she had done to her own relatives. So he wrote her a letter calling her to come to him, and when she arrived he tied her up and took her to the (uninhabited) islet of Kisite, where she died. However, around the same time the rains failed, and the ensuing drought saw people reduced to dire straits. The elders interpreted this as a consequence of their discarding an owner of the land. So they went to Kisite to gather the bones of Mwaozi Tumbe and bury them at Bogoa on Wasini Island, whereupon it poured and poured with rain. As a result the Vumba will always visit Mwaozi Tumbe’s grave and pray to God there.

Thus ends Lambert’s version of the tale, which describes Mwaozi Tumbe’s betrayal of the Chifundi as the final episode in the Vumba conquest of their Shirazi neighbours. ‘Shirazi’ is an ethnic label that is still widely used on the coast and islands south of Mombasa; it incorporates a claim to Persian origins that is shared by many of the oldest groups of Swahili speaking settlers, as well as by others who have assimilated with them. The Chifundi count themselves as Shirazi, but have also retained their own separate identity.

Under Mwa Kumbi Kyandi Ivoo, the Vumba of Vumba Kuu engaged in a programme of aggressive expansion, forcing the submission of all the Shirazi communities between Gasi in the north and Tanga in the south. All available accounts agree that the Chifundi were the last to submit to Vumba rule. We know very little, though, about Mwaozi Tumbe, her father Guo Kuu Mwatumbe, and earlier rulers of Tumbe, which is now a ruined site to the north of Msambweni. We know rather more about the rulers of Vumba Kuu and their successors, who claimed descent from the Prophet and thereby distanced themselves further from their Shirazi and other subjects.

The exact dates of Ivoo’s reign are unknown, though he is generally agreed to have ruled in the first half of the 17th century, when the Portuguese held sway over much of the coast. He was the last of the Vumba rulers to be buried at Vumba Kuu, which was abandoned in subsequent conflicts (later Diwans ruled from Vanga and/or Wasini). Ivoo derived both his name (which denotes a ceremonial arm-
bracelet) and much of his military strength from the Segeju, renowned merchants and mercenaries from central Kenya who had recently migrated down the coast. In return, the Segeju were allowed to settle on lands that they had conquered for the Vumba.

Most Segeju now live on the Shimoni peninsula in Kenya and in a string of villages along the northern Tanzania coast, where they speak Vumba and related varieties of Swahili. The Daiso, a small community at the north-eastern edge of the Usambara Mountains, still speak a Central Kenya Bantu language that is directly descended from the speech of the historical Segeju.

In his doctoral thesis, William McKay gives a Segeju version of Mwaozi Tumbe’s betrayal, part of a longer account of Segeju history and relations with the Vumba. In this version of the legend, Mwaozi Tumbe is married to a Segeju ironsmith living and working among the Shirazi during a break in hostilities, and it is he who persuades her to betray her people to the Vumba. This is the main point of difference with the Chifundi tradition recorded by Lambert. Otherwise Mwaozi is reported to have employed the same ruse to deliver her town to the Vumba, and she meets the same fate — exile to Kisite and death from starvation.

This Segeju version was provided by an informant from limbo, close to the Kenya-Tanzania border. In the English translation given by McKay it is shorter and less detailed than Lambert’s text.

McKay also recorded a version of the legend from a Shirazi (presumably Chifundi speaking) informant from Bodo, but notes that this merely repeated the tradition published by Lambert, minus the part about Mwaozi Tumbe’s fate. It is easy to see why Segeju versions might give them an active role in Mwaozi’s story, though we can only speculate on the significance of her husband’s identification as a smith.

The legend of Mwaozi Tumbe as moral tale and myth

In February 1986 I tape recorded another Chifundi version of Mwaozi Tumbe’s tale in Mkwiros village on Wasini Island. This was different from earlier versions in a number of ways, not least in that it was recounted by a local woman, Mwanamize Haruni, nicknamed Madudua. Her account lacked the historical references given to Lambert in 1923/24 and incorporated a number of clichés and topographical anachronisms that suggest that earlier knowledge of the setting of the story was in the process of being lost. As well as describing Mwaozi Tumbe’s betrayal of the Chifundi to the Vumba, Mwanamize’s version gives equal weight to its consequences: Mwaozi’s ongoing treachery, her exile to Kisite, the events which led to the burial of her bones on Wasini Island, and the institution of an annual rain-making ritual in her memory.

In this modern transformation of the tradition, Mwaozi Tumbe’s story has become a cross between a moral tale and a charter for (past) ritual action. This no doubt reflects in part the circumstances of its telling — by a woman in Mkwiros who had participated in the ritual, to an audience comprising an anthropologist who was evidently interested in these matters.

In Mwanamize’s version it is the Vumba of Wasini Island who are at war with the Chifundi, who live on the mainland. The young men of Wasini persuade Mwaozi
Low tide on the shore at Bogoa, Wasini Island, where Mwaozi Tumbe’s grave lies.

Tumbe to betray her fellow Chifuindi, using the ruse of false alarms to let them into the town in which she lives, so that they can steal its beautifully carved and well-preserved drums. Despite promising her a great reward in return, they conclude that she cannot be trusted, so bring her to Wasini along with the stolen drums. After some time on the island she marries and her new husband (whose identity is not given) moves in to live with her. But she continues to behave treacherously, luring visitors from Shirazi (on the mainland) into her house, welcoming them to sit on a fine mat which covers the frame of a bed, below which there is a deep pit into which they fall and are left to die. Fearing what she might do to them, the people of Wasini therefore trick her into sailing to Kisite, where she is abandoned and starves to death.

Following Mwaozi’s disappearance, the annual rains fail on both Wasini and the mainland. The islanders turn to divination for a solution to the drought and are told that they must bring Mwaozi Tumbe’s remains back and bury them properly. So they sail to Kisite and gather up her bones. On their way back to Wasini, however, a storm casts them ashore at Bogoa, at the opposite end of the island. Here they solicit the help of the villagers of Mkwiro, who provide a coffin, dig a grave, and place a small stone over it. After a while the visitors return to Wasini. But there is still no sign of rain on the island, so the elders of Wasini and Mkwiro return to Bogoa, sweep the grave, and pray to God there. Before they reach home it begins pouring with rain, and continues raining until the end of the season.

The next year and every year after that they did the same, praying for rain at Mwaozi’s Tumbe’s grave. In Mkwiro, after the evening prayers, adults and children used to go through the village singing the following song at every door:

“Mwaozi Tumbe give us our rain; If you’re going to send it — then send it; If you’re not, then take this rubbish!”

In response the owner of the house would throw water over them — whoosh! soaking them through. This happened at every house until they had been round the whole village.

This brief description of the village ritual ended Mwanamize’s telling of the story. I was led to believe that these rain-making rites were abandoned in the late 1960s, following conflict with the religious authorities in Mkwiro. But Mwaozi Tumbe’s gravestone could still be seen at Bogoa, close to the beach. It looks like a small hemispherical boulder, about 30 cm in diameter, with two deep round holes cut into it at one side. These are said to represent Mwaozi Tumbe’s eyes, and when the annual ritual was performed women would rub this anthropomorphic stone with oil and daub kohl around the eyes. In 1986 I could see that one of the eye sockets was chipped and disfigured, and was told that this was the result of an act of vandalism by young men from the mosque in Mkwiro, incensed by its un-Islamic associations.

The tale itself had certainly changed since it was first recorded by Lambert. Historical detail has been converted into clichés: the theft of the Chifuindi drums is evidently a shorthand for the seizure of power by the Vumba, and the story of Mwaozi Tumbe’s continuing treachery and concealed pit is an adaptation of a widespread motif which is also found in other historical traditions on the coast.
At the same time, locations have been muddled — the setting of the legend is being progressively shifted from the mainland to Wasini Island, where it holds greatest contemporary relevance. Although Shirazi claim to have been settled there earlier, the Vumba did not move to Wasini until the first half of the 18th century; the mainland village of Shirazi did not become the Chifundi capital until after the fall of Tumbe. The first Chifundi settlement on the eastern end of Wasini Island is said to have been at Bogoa: Mkwiro was not founded until Bogoa was abandoned following a cholera epidemic in the second half of the 19th century.

The legend of Mwaozi Tumbe as cultural product

In 1986 Mkwiro was a relatively quiet village with no facilities for visitors. It is still a comparative backwater, but now hosts a dive operation that takes tourists to Kisite Marine National Park and the neighbouring Mpunguti Marine National Reserve. Since January 2006 it has also provided a local base for the UK-registered company Global Vision International (GVI), which organises volunteer expeditions to Kenya focusing on wildlife research, marine mammal studies, and community development. GVI’s community work in Mkwiro has included working with the Mkwiro Youth Conservation Group to develop a village cultural tour.

One of the highlights of the proposed tour is a visit to Mwaozi Tumbe’s grave at Bogoa, where fee-paying tourists will be told her story. To this end volunteers have helped to compile different English versions of Mwaozi’s story and other local legends. The most recent of these compilations draws in part on the version that I recorded in 1986. It also incorporates an apparently independent tradition that was collected at the start of the project.

According to this version, Mwaozi Tumbe was a king’s daughter who came to East Africa with the first Shirazi (Chifundi) immigrants. They sailed from Persia in seven dhows under the leadership of Hassan bin Ali, and each dhow landed at a favourable location. The boat which carried Mwaozi Tumbe came to rest in the Diani-Msambweni area, and the village in which the Shirazi settled was named Tumbe after her.

Thereafter the Shirazi spread down the coast, where their closest neighbours were the Vumba of Vumba Kuu and Wasini Island. Fishermen from the Funzi area later settled at the eastern end of Wasini, at a place that they called ‘Six Palms’, now known as Bogoa. But the Vumba of Wasini became jealous of the beautiful drums that the Shirazi carved on the island and the magical rhythms that they made, and so plotted to steal them. They pretended to be at peace with the Shirazi, and one of the Vumba married Mwaozi Tumbe and persuaded her to use the trick of false alarms so that they could take the village and its drums. Once they had succeeded, Mwaozi went back with them to Wasini. But the Vumba were now afraid that she might betray them in turn, and when they asked her whether she could, she replied in the affirmative. And so they took her to Kisite...

The rest of this account is a simplified version of the tradition about the gravestone and rain-making ritual that I recorded in 1986. The first part is fascinating because it represents a further stage in the mythologisation of Mwaozi Tumbe. Her tale is woven into a version of the Shirazi origin myth — the story of seven ships — variants of which are told all along the East African coast. Mwaozi is no longer merely the aggrieved daughter of a local ruler, but a Persian princess who founds a new settlement in her own name. After this
royal beginning, the action shifts to Wasini Island, where the Vumba are envious of the drums and music that her people make. As in the Segeju version of the legend, her deception of the Chifundi is prompted by a husband, in this case a Vumba man. And as in all versions of the tale that we know, this deception is said to have been carried out by means of a clever ruse. The latter is surely a motif borrowed from folklore, a relatively early addition to the tale which gave it much of its original narrative power.

In the absence of independent sources, we may never know the truth or otherwise of Mwaozi Tumbe's alleged betrayal. But we can be sure that it has evolved in response to the changing circumstances of its telling. The tale is now set to become a new kind of product, a bricolage of oral and written versions that serves the multiple purposes of cultural heritage, a legend for our contemporary world.

PHOTOS ARE THE AUTHOR'S OWN UNLESS INDICATED

Acknowledgements

In addition to everyone acknowledged in my 1993 paper, I am very grateful to Graham Corti for providing me with up-to-date information on Global Vision International’s activities in Mkwiro, including the unpublished versions of Mwaozi Tumbe’s legend that are discussed here. Thanks also to Rowana Walton and Amy Collins at GVI for facilitating this. Further details of GVI’s work are available on their website at www.gvi.co.uk.

Notes and references

3. WF McKay, A Precolonial History, pp. 276-278.
8. In early 1987 I made a copy of my tape recording of Mwaozi Tumbe’s tale and returned this to Mkwiro, and in January 1990 I wrote to the curator of Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa about her gravestone, enclosing the draft of my 1993 paper. GVI volunteers and community members visited Fort Jesus in 2006 to research the legend and its background.