

## “What’s in a name?”

### Swahili toponymy of past towns on the East African coast

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For the last century, archaeologists have surveyed and studied sites on the Swahili coast of East Africa, that represent the remains of past Swahili settlements and, in few cases, living historical towns. This paper is the first discussion of a collection of the names under which these past towns have been known, some of which may date back to the precolonial period. The present enquiry is concerned with the analysis of linguistic features, folk etymology and the conceptual content of these toponyms. It considers the recognised important themes in archaeology and history of the Swahili society, such as the political functioning of these towns as city states and the attested social and economic relevance of trade, the built environment and the role of the ocean. Utilising this knowledge, it reflects on how the names contributed to place-making and defining the identity of these towns both as individual entities and as part of the Swahili cultural sphere. The interdisciplinary approach and perspectives (linguistic and archaeological) help to elucidate the connection between the socio-historical relevance of these sites and their cultural conceptualisations.

**Keywords:** toponyms; Swahili; urbanism; archaeological sites; environment; oral history; folk etymology

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The East African coast has been dotted with urban settlements for at least a thousand years. This nearly 3000 km long littoral zone, also known as the Swahili coast, has been characterised by shared cultural

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features throughout the last millennium, as it is apparent in the preserved material culture. The study of archaeological remains is one of the most important sources of knowledge on the socio-spatial aspects of life in many of these small towns, because there is lack of other evidence that could encompass the time depth of Swahili urban past. It has been established that material culture has been involved in constituting Swahili identity and that it was actively invoked in various socio-spatial transactions (e.g. Wynne-Jones 2016). However, for gaining a more complete and multi-faceted picture of the past, we need to actively seek channels for connecting the material evidence with other sources of data, such as historical accounts, anthropological parallels or linguistic research. This is because some aspects of past social life in which material culture has been involved, including identity-building, environmental perception and dwelling in the world, cannot be fully understood without linking them to non-tangible evidence, such as oral histories (for a cross-cultural study see Bühnen 1992).

As part of oral histories there are place names, i.e. toponyms, which shed light on past people interpretation of the environment, socio-spatial associations and ascribed meanings (e.g. Evans 2015). The value of this type of evidence is especially relevant in regions with a lack of written historical accounts and other evidence reaching to the precolonial past, such as the Swahili coast. Toponyms have an established importance in various cultures around the globe, and based on studies in cognition, anthropology and linguistics, they contribute to defining, dwelling in and identifying with particular settlements as well as carry associations important for remembering (e.g. Dwyer and Alderman 2008; Evans 2015; Taylor and Tversky 1992). Juliet's quotation from *Romeo and Juliet* in the title of this paper, "What's in a name?", famously implies that names do not affect the true character of people or things. In the play, the character Juliet protests against the social custom of judging by a name. She can do so, because across human cultures, names have connotations and carry meaning that may be perceived as (not) reflective of truth. And through their symbolic role in expressing values and tactics of empowerment, names help to shape and define concepts by influencing human cognition (Myers 2009). Moreover, "toponymy can be situated among other urban symbols as a reflection of the cultural, socio-political, and economic life of a community [...]. Place-naming becomes an important tool for cultural hegemony due to extensive daily use and its potential to create a personal and collective identity and memory" (Wanjiru-Mwita and Giraut 2020: 2). On the East African coast in the era before colonialism and the modern states, Swahili towns functioned as trading city-states that, apart from smaller temporal coalitions, never formed a larger political entity (Kusimba 1999; Sinclair and Håkansson 2000). In this setting, the location, delimitation and definition of individual settlements were crucial for both representing the belonging of a town into the Swahili cultural sphere as well as constituted the unique character of each settlement in the power networks on the coast. For example, interdisciplinary studies

have facilitated findings on how particular spaces might have been perceived and remembered, including the practices of attesting status through displays of valuable items in the houses (Meier 2009) and commemoration involving stone tombs (e.g. Baumanová 2018). As archaeological and anthropological research further attests, the settlements of the Swahili have been a representation of the dialogue between social processes, traditions and the physical properties of the built environment (Horton and Middleton 2000).

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective in exploring the names of Swahili towns, as a largely untapped resource with capacity to complement studies on situated social memory in Swahili past. In our analysis, we study a collection of toponyms, most of which represent deserted archaeological sites and some still living historical towns in present-day Kenya and Tanzania, on the basis of annotated translations of these names from Swahili to English. We analyse the content of this collection in terms of linguistic aspects and the referential meaning of these names. Our aim is also to bring new insights into potential regularities in terms of conceptual/cognitive phenomena to which the names of Swahili towns refer. It cannot be determined how far back to the past the use of many of these settlement names can be traced. Still, most have been carried over by multiple generations to the present, in some cases they likely have links reaching to the precolonial period.

## 2. Defining features and built memory in Swahili towns

The Swahili have been a society of merchants that became predominantly Islamic and settled on a narrow strip of land on the coast of East Africa early in the second millennium CE (Fleisher et al., 2015). Since then, the region of the Swahili coast has displayed a level of cultural coherence in an area that extends from what is today south of Somalia, across Kenya and Tanzania to Mozambique and north of Madagascar (Fig. 1). The name Swahili comes from Arabic *sawāḥili* 'coastal.' The name of the coast borrowed from Arabic and other foreign words in Swahili including some of the toponyms discussed in this paper, support the view of Swahili history as interwoven with trade, which played a crucial role in the economic and social life of the towns. The paramount importance of trade and contact with other lands and cultures was equally reflected in the cosmopolitan nature of the littoral society and in the tendency to represent Swahili identity in material culture and oral histories (Pearson 1998). Many of the Swahili centres still settled today have a long history that stretches to the centuries before the arrival of the Europeans in the late 15th century. Others were deserted in the colonial period and the extent of knowledge about their past is dependent on the conducted archaeological research. Demarcating the character and situated settlement history of these towns resurfaces repeatedly as an

important theme in Swahili ethnography, material culture and linguistics (Horton and Middleton 2000; Suzuki 2018).

The merchant towns of the precolonial period were represented and defined on multiple levels. From social and political perspectives, attested mostly on the basis of historical and ethnographical data, the towns were ruled by local oligarchies that built their prestige on access to wealth from trade networks. This hierarchical structure, that was tied to long-distance relationships with inland Africa as well as the Middle East and India, was disrupted from the 16th century by European and Omani colonialism. The later towns were described by ethnographers as divided into urban quarters where residents belonged to different clans that cooperated as well as competed over access to trade opportunities (Middleton 2004). These quarters were also identified on some archaeological sites such as at Shanga, Kenya (Horton 1996), and the character of their layout is discernible in the structure of the historical 'old towns' at the core of living cities such as Mombasa (Baumanová 2020). This socio-spatial arrangement functioned to maintain balance in a state of permanent power negotiations.

The towns sometimes formed coalitions, some of which are recorded historically, such as in the case of Malindi, present-day Kenya. Similarly to urban quarters, towns cooperated for mutual benefit, shared temporal goals in the times of conflict, but at the same time competed over access to trade networks along the coast (Suzuki 2018). As far as we can determine on the basis of data from the 17th century onwards, being an urbanite and to live an urban lifestyle was an important social status in its own right, perhaps distinguishing Swahili from the communities living in their rural neighbourhood (Ray 2018).

Individual types of structures in the built environment also actively contributed to characterising the towns. Residential architecture was the most frequent type of urban building. Houses were built on higher ground respective to the surrounding environment (Middleton 2004: 50). Although the basic principles of internal house layout did not differ significantly from one settlement to another, the houses varied greatly in size ranging from 2-3 rooms to about 50 rooms (Baumanová and Smejda 2018). Their external appearance and organisation into house blocks allowed for creating unique and potentially memorable built environment in each settlement.

Some towns were delimited by town walls. Often these did not circumscribe the entire settlement but rather divided it into segments. The walls were low and because they were built as extensions of houses, they did not represent a visually dominant element, and probably did not have a defensive function. However, they had important effects on the potential movement around and into various parts of the town. Ethnographers argued that Swahili urban patricians, known as the *waungwana*, lived in stone houses within the town walls (Kresse 2007), so it is likely that in some ways the walls played a

part as a status symbol. Boundary trees were another feature used for spatial delimitation, marking the limits of land associated with a particular town (e.g. Myers 2009).

Stone tombs were another type of built feature that could have served as a symbol and contributed to creating memorable appearance of particular towns. These were built both within the towns, next to houses, on open spaces, as well as outside residential areas. It has been argued that some were built to be visible from the sea (Sanseverino 1983). The visibility and monumentality of the stone tombs, some of which featured pillars several metres tall, undoubtedly contributed to enhancing the memorability of individual towns (Baumanová 2018; Gensheimer 2012). There were also oral histories tying particular tombs to legends of significant local personalities, settlements founders and to commemoration of their important deeds (Wilson 1980: 26-30). Similarly, mosques may have served as representative symbols of the towns, while also attesting belonging of the Swahili community to the Islamic world. As the building of mosques utilized impressive and often innovative architectural features such as domes, the mosques contributed to building a unique appearance and character of each town.

These elements of Swahili archaeology and ethnography suggest that some features of the built environment, spatial organisation and local geography were employed in processes defining social relationships within the towns, as well as in constructing situated mnemonics and status of individual towns within the Swahili world. Furthermore, it derives that economic and social associations with trade, long-distance contact, Islam, or important local personalities run as key concepts in Swahili cultural traditions for centuries. In the following analysis, we aim to consider whether and how the names of these towns, in terms of their linguistic and conceptual content, contributed to these established key themes in the representation of Swahili towns in communication and memory.

### 3. Background to the analysis

Understanding the connotations of situated nomenclatures brings us closer to localising past associations as well as evaluating the impact of past social settings and events on the present-day perception and mental concepts (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009). Naming Swahili settlements was hence undoubtedly part of socially constructing and defining these towns as well as remembering them. Swahili ethnographic evidence attests that on the coast people were known by the town they were from, for example people from Pemba were referred to as 'WaPemba' (Middleton 2004: 20). As the names of towns were part of collective memory that has become common knowledge, they contributed to the definition of collective identity in each town (Cannata 2012) as one aspect in the complexity of what constituted the Swahili communities (Caplan 2007).

It is also well established that collective memory may be seen “as a socio-spatially mediated political process” (Dwyer and Alderman 2008: 167) and place names are often invoked in reshaping political spheres of influence (e.g. Rusu 2019). On the Swahili coast specifically, names are known to have been an important part of intra-urban politics, with names of wards materially constituted in urban quarters, and names of gates associated with access to these quarters, as at Pate, a town in Kenya with 15th- 18th century buildings (Abungu 2018). Similarly to the built environment, which can serve as a ‘mental prison’ and can create both supports and obstacles of social processes (Brunfaut and Pinot, 2017: 280), place naming ascribes history to daily vocabulary (Dwyer and Alderman 2008: 167) and aids remembering on the basis of associations. In our analyses, we aim to reveal where these associations lie and what they tend to reference.

In order to do so, we produced a list of place names that have been associated with archaeological sites of Swahili settlements. The list is by no means exhaustive, but aims to include most town sites that have been recorded by survey and excavation on the coast, focusing on Kenya and Tanzania, where the record of past Swahili settlements extends along the whole coastline of the present-day countries (for most inclusive lists of sites to date see Chami 2016; Wilson 1980, 2017). The collection comprises of 104 sites, 64 sites in Kenya and 40 in Tanzania. Table 1 lists the names in Swahili, providing their translation to English and comments on the translation regarding possible multiple meanings and origin of the names. The translation and etymology was discussed with native speakers who are Swahili language experts, Dr. Jasmin Mahazi, Ustadh Mau, and Dr. Hans Mussa.<sup>2</sup> The toponyms are first analysed from a linguistic perspective, with observations on peculiar phonological, morphological and semantic features of the names. The observed patterns are then quantified showing the relative representation of the conceptual categories and patterns in the collection.

#### 4. Linguistic considerations

The site names included in our list are characterized by phonological features typical of Northern Swahili dialects (e.g. Kiamu, Kipate, Tikuu/Bajuni), and thus differ from Standard Swahili (henceforth St. Sw.) forms: for instance, [t] for [tʃ] and [nd] for [nj], like in Mtangawanda (St. Sw. *Mchanga + wanja*) ‘black sand,’ Tikuu (St. Sw. *-chi kuu*) ‘big land’ (alternative name for Bajuni); Manda, from *kiwanda* (St. Sw. *kiwanja*) ‘open space,’ Ukunda (St. Sw. *-kunja*) ‘wrap.’ We also notice the presence of [j] or zero for

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<sup>2</sup>Dr. Jasmin Mahazi is a researcher on Swahili anthropology specialized in Bajuni culture. Ustadh Ahmad Mahmoud Abdulkadir (MAU) is a renown Swahili poet and intellectual from Lamu. Dr. Hans Mussa is a specialist in Swahili linguistics affiliated to the Institute of Swahili Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam.

standard [j], like in Siyu/Siu, derived from the verb *-yua* (St. Sw. *-jua*) ‘know.’ Also, the consonant [l] is very unstable, as it is shown by the alternate forms *Luziwa/Uziwa* and *Lamu/Amu*.

In particular, most of the nouns in our list present sound features of Bajuni dialect, for instance alveopalatal [tʃ] corresponds to dental [t] in Standard Swahili (Nurse 2018: 132); similarly in Siu and Pate), like in *Mchama* (St. Sw. *mtama*) ‘sorghum,’ *Uchi* (cf. St. Sw. *mti* ‘tree’); [n] corresponds to [ɲ], like in *Kinuni* (St. Sw. *nyuni*) ‘bird;’ we also note the deletion of verbal subject marker and vowels, like in *Sendeni* (St. Sw. *musiende*) ‘don’t go!’<sup>3</sup>

Beside the phonological correspondences, several settlements’ nouns are related to lexical items of the Bajuni vocabulary: *I-shaka(ni)* ‘bush;’ *Shanga* ‘South-West;’ *chundwa* (passive form of *-chunda* “to gather, pick”); (*luziwa* ‘ocean;’ *kongo* ‘welcome;’ *mbweni* ‘foreigner, stranger.’ According to Nurse (2018), although Bajuni and Standard Swahili differ, the similarities are nevertheless greater than the differences: 86% of the words are cognate but many of these do not look or sound superficially the same, because of the numerous phonological (and morphological) differences between the two varieties (Nurse 2018: 125).

Bajuni, classified as Northern Swahili dialect and also known as *Tikuu* or (Ki)Gunya, is spoken by around 15.000 people on the mainland from *Kismayu* (*Kisima-yuu*, variously interpreted as the ‘High/Upper Well’ or ‘Northern Well’), in southern Somalia, down to relatively new villages just below *Lamu*, in northern Kenya; from the so-called *Bajun Islands* of Somalia, starting just south of *Kismayu*, to the Kenya islands of *Ndau* and northern *Pate Island*, where it is spoken in villages such as *Faza* (*Fadha*, in *Tikuu*), *Tundwa* (*Chundwa*), *Kizingitini* (*Kidhingichini*), and *Mbwajumali* (Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993: 6).

According to Nurse (2013) the ancestors of the Bajunis spread along the coast, in the 250 km line from *Dondo* and adjacent settlements on the Kenya coast, north as far as *Kismayu*. Original Bajuni-speaking inhabitants are those who came up from the south in the 14th century or earlier, and first settled the major islands and places on the mainland (*Kiwayuu*, *Simambaya*, *Omwe*, *Kiunga*, *Veku*, *Chandraa*, *Rasini*, *Chula*, *Chovai*, *Ngumi*, *Koyama*, maybe others; Nurse 2013). Thus, most of the settlements in our list could have been at some point settled by Bajunis, who established trade connections of with other communities living on the coast (like *waPokomo*, *waGiriama*, *waMijikenda*), even before the name *waSwahili* appeared.

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed info on the Bajuni language, see the Bajuni database (Nurse 2013): <https://www.mun.ca/faculty/dnurse/Database/> [last access: May, 2021]

The morphological structure of toponyms is a crucial aspect of the analysis because morphology is also reflected in the conceptualisation and semantic representation of the toponyms. The linguistic structure of the toponyms reflects relevant morphological features, which are typical of Swahili as well as other Bantu languages. Swahili morphology is based on noun classes; each noun belongs to a class with specific grammatical and semantic characteristics (e.g. most of the nouns in class 7/8 with the prefixes *ki-/vi-* refer to inanimate things, while nouns in cl. 1/2 with the prefixes *m-/wa-* typically include human beings).

Moreover, many toponyms have been created by adding the locative suffix *-ni* to lexical stems belonging to different semantic domains, mostly in the category of natural/geographical features and built features (see *Ishaka-ni*, *Uwa-ni*, *Mnara-ni*, *Ngome-ni*). This seems to be a common feature of Swahili place names, and in some cases, the suffix *-ni* may become integral part of the word, like the lexicalized Swahili term *pwani* (coast), from the verb *-pwa* “to ebb, dry out”); in other cases, the locative significance of the suffix *-ni* is obvious, like in *Kilwa-Kisiwa-ni*, lit. ‘Island on the island,’ where *kilwa* itself is a synonym for island. Locative classes are indeed a relevant characteristics of Bantu morphology and there are different structural ways in which the Swahili language can express location. Another way to indicate a land, country, is by adding the noun prefix *U-* (cl.11), which typically refers to abstract or collective nouns, to the name of a country, e.g. *U-turuki* (Turkey), *U-giriki* (Greece), *U-ingereza* (England). This linguistic strategy is evident in some place names of archaeological sites as well (see *U-ngwana*, *U-nguja*, *U-shongo*, *U-kunda*, *U-chi juu*).

Noun compounding also seems to be very frequently employed, since many of the toponyms are formed by a noun and a modifier (usually an adjective), e.g. *Kunduchi* (*-kundu* ‘red’ and *-chi* ‘land’) ‘a land with red soil;’ *Unguja Kuu* ‘Main/big port,’ where the use of the adjective *-kuu* is common in written chronicles, referring to cities identified as capitals or perceived as ‘large’ in the sense of being important (*mji kuu*) (Tolmacheva 1995:26). Other types of compounds are formed by incorporating two words, one of which has the function of determiner/modifier describing its features, e.g. *Kisiwa Ndweo* ‘Island of Pride,’ *Mtangawanda* (*mtanga* ‘sand’ and *wanda* ‘kohl’) ‘black sand;’ *Uchi Juu* (*uchi* ‘tree, stick’ *juu* ‘above, up’) ‘big stick.’ Moreover, several compounds refer to characters/relevant people, e.g. *mwana* ‘girl’ or the Arabic loanword *Shee* from *šayh* ‘scheik(h); chieftain; chief, head; leader; master,

elder” used as a respectable title followed by a proper name (e.g. Mwana Mchama; Shee Umuro; Shee Jafari).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we can observe some loanwords, mainly from Persian (e.g. Shirazi, Hurumuzi – from the town of Shiraz and the Strait of Hormuz, respectively) and Arabic (e.g., the already-mentioned Shee, Takwa from *taqwā* ‘fear of God, godliness, devoutness, piety, religiousness’ and Saadani from *sa’āda* ‘good luck.’ Indeed, as Lodhi remarks, “Contacts that took place on the East African littoral were from unrelated streams of culture and language – between Bantu/Swahili on the one hand and Cushitic, Arabic, Persian, Indian and Indonesian on the other hand” (2000: 40). In Swahili toponyms, Arabic lexical stems often take the Bantu locative suffix *-ni*, like in Saadani and Rasini (the latter from *ra*’s ‘head; cape;’ Tolmacheva 1995: 19). In the place name Ras Kikongwe different etymologies are combined, the latter part being the Bantu stem *-kongwe* ‘old,’ which takes the noun prefix of cl.7 *ki-* with an adjectival function.

However, as further discussed below, in our analysis of Swahili toponyms, we would have expected to find more lexical items (perhaps borrowings) related to the semantic sphere of maritime life. Lodhi observes, in fact, that “despite the great dissimilarity of basic cultures and languages involved, in the beginning Swahili borrowed much from all these sources [Arabic, Persian, Indian etc.] primarily because of the common maritime activities of the people involved, and later because of the common Muslim faith that came to dominate most of the interacting peoples of the northern and western Indian Ocean” (2000: 40).

## 5. Cultural conceptualizations

Several toponyms in our corpus deserve a closer look based on their potential to reflect the relationship between language, culture and cognition. We determine the hypothetical meanings of these toponyms starting from the assumption that they represent “cultural conceptualisations, many of which have their roots in cultural traditions such as folk medicine, ancient religions/worldviews, etc.” (Sharifian 2017: 18). In other words, members of a cultural group constantly negotiate ‘templates’ for their thought and behaviour in exchanging their conceptual experiences and their worldviews:

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<sup>4</sup> *Mwana*: a name given to a woman as a sign of respect before mentioning her name: *Mwana Fatma*, Mrs Fatma/Miss Fatma (Mohamed, 2011:551). ‘Dans les DN., surtout Am. G., *mwana* est un titre respectueux envers une “dame”, en particulier de la part des esclaves à l’égard de leur “maîtresse” plus spécialement de ceux qui l’ont élevée, syn. DS. *Bibi*’ (Sacleux 1939: 639).

The choice of ‘conceptualisation’ over ‘concept’ is meant to reflect and highlight the dynamic nature of such cognitive phenomena. Cultural conceptualisations are developed through interactions between the members of a cultural group and enable them to think as if in one mind, somehow more or less in a similar fashion. These conceptualisations are negotiated and renegotiated through time and across generations (Sharifian 2011: 5)

Thus, we describe the relationship between the linguistic representation of Swahili town names and their conceptualization, in order to elucidate the role of culture and history related to these toponyms. As Bagasheva remarks, it also needs to be considered that “even though the relationship between language and culture has been of research interest for ages, there is still a missing link—the mediating human mind and how the former are projected in and from it” (2017: 191).

We remark that Swahili cultural conceptualizations associated with the names of towns belong to different categories (geographical descriptions, built features, personality, emotions etc.). The way to find out the meanings of ancient toponyms is not straightforward, since “toponymy works synchronic and evolves diachronic” (Poenaru-Girigan 2013: 156). Synchronically, toponyms exist only in relation with human society and its history. However, a diachronic approach is necessary since many of these names may be very old and such toponyms often contain elements that do not exist in the current language (Poenaru-Girigan 2013: 156).

Indeed, toponymy contains a great number of “dead” words which meanings are unclear, because there is often a tendency to keep them in use even if the speakers are no longer aware of their original meanings (Aprile 2015: 25). Most of these words often undergo the process of speakers’ “re-motivation”, that is, they tend to be transformed through interference and contamination of other existing words with a secondary motivation (Aprile 2015: 26). For example, the noun *Shanga* is associated with several meanings and has undergone different interpretations: it is an archaic Bajuni term for geographical reference, corresponding to Sw.St. *kusi* ‘South’ or ‘West’ (Nurse 2010: 39); Nurse (1994: 49) also reports *Shanga-ni* as Class 5 form of \*-*canga* ‘sand,’ with characteristic northern Swahili palatalization of \**c* to *sh* after the Class 5 prefix /*i-*; moreover, according to folk etymology, the name can also be related to “Shanghai” recalling ancient trade links with Asia. (Re)motivation seems to be a universal need among speakers of all languages.

An example of complex folk etymology is exemplified by the name of Mombasa, in Swahili *Mvita*. In his introduction to Stigand (1915), Taylor explains that the etymology of the Swahili noun *Mvita* derives from two roots: *vi* “a sinking in” and *ta* “point,” that is “The Curtained Headland,” i.e. “Hidden Isle;” he also states that, due to the restless history of the place, the inhabitants of Mombasa often

played on the words *Mvita* and *vita* (in Swahili *mji wa vita* “city of war”) that, however, has a different etymology (from the verb *-ta* “thrust, forth”, “throw out”) (Stigand 1915: ix).

Similarly, Tolmacheva notices the history of the settlement of *Siu/Siyu* as reported by the chronicles and oral tradition, that is, equating *wa-Siu* (people from *Siu/Siyu*) with the “unknown” people (from the verb *-yua* ‘know’), who were originally from *Shanga* and came to Pate; the chronicles narrate that some of these people run away from Pate and went to hide in the forest; afterwards, when the Sultan discovered them, he returned them to a place of their own, and that was the origin of the town *Siyu* (1995: 34). Another folk interpretation refers to *Siu* as a popular Chinese name for boys meaning ‘thinking of the world,’ due to the presence of many Chinese in that area, where people still visit the tomb of *mwana Tao*, a Swahili-Chinese female religious figure. Also, the name of the town of *Faza*, originally called *Rasini* before Portuguese colonization, is explained according to oral history as based on the custom of drawing water at sunrise, so the people of *Faza* were called “those of the mounting (sun)” (from the verb *wapatha* in Pate Swahili) (Tolmacheva 1995: 35).

Other etymologies of the toponyms reflect cultural conceptualizations based either on the memory of popular anecdotes, like the description of *Lamu (Kisiwa Ndeo)* as “the city of Amon” (from the name of an Egyptian God), or on the historical relevance of some settlements; for example, the area of *Bagamoyo* (the name comes from *-bwaga* ‘drop’ and *moyo* ‘soul’) grew in prosperity by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, acquiring the name *Bagamoyo* along with its importance on the caravan routes. The meaning of the name (translated variously as ‘be quiet, my heart;’ ‘lay down the burden of your heart;’ ‘rest your soul (here);’ ‘free the heart;’ ‘rest the mind, throw off melancholy, be cheered’) is therefore associated with the slave trade, when slaves knew that although they were to be shipped to distant lands, their hearts would forever remain in their beloved homeland (Brown 2016: 39). Reconstructing the etymological history of the word *Bagamoyo*, Brown (2016: 38), also reports other interpretations of this toponym: ‘into the heart’ or ‘Heart of Africa,’ from *baga* or *bana* ‘interior’ and *moyo* ‘heart,’ or from *paka (mpaka)* ‘until’ and *moyo* ‘heart.’<sup>5</sup> Other toponyms reflect on the past economic and social power of some coastal cities, for instance *Malindi*, which is probably a contracted form for *mali* ‘wealth’ and the emphatic copula *ndi* ‘a lot of wealth,’ while *Unguja* ‘place of waiting’ (from *ngoja* ‘wait’) recalls the image of a central harbour, especially one influenced by monsoon navigation where ships have to wait for the wind (Tolmacheva 1995: 30).

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<sup>5</sup> Different interpretations of these translations have been developed. According to Brown (2016), the most feasible is the *wapagazi* theory: *Bagamoyo* was named by *wapagazi* “porters” who felt that they had successfully completed their journey from the interior (usually the Tabora area and westwards). They were in the habit of congratulating themselves – “now cease from worrying, cease from care and anxiety.” [...] (Brown 2016: 39).

Thus, we observe that most of the toponyms seem to have got in common use on the basis of analogical associations, where an element, usually a natural feature, has been metonymically extended to signify the whole town area. According to El Fasi (1984: 18)

A knowledge of place-names (towns, mountains, rivers, lakes, springs and other geographical sites), the study of which is called toponymy, can be of great help to history because place-names seldom change. Even their phonetic evolution hardly ever leads to radical modifications and seldom affects the old pronunciation and spelling. It is for this reason that the study of place-names can reveal facts relating to the past and so yield information concerning the history, religion and civilization of the first occupants of the places concerned.

Semantic extension is evident for some of the names clearly derived from geographical features, like rivers, e.g. *Hurumuzi*, a narrow water way in Iran well known worldwide for the passage of vessels, or *Pangani*, a city situated on the left bank of the river Pangani from which it derives its name (Sacelux 1939: 730). Other patterns in folk etymology (see for instance *Siu*, *Mvita*, *Faza* etc.) seem to project complex cultural conceptualizations, which meanings and interpretations have changed over time, derived from several semantic categories (such as things, events, actions, emotions).

## 6. Conceptual analysis

Conceptual analysis of the toponyms allows us to understand the meaning and potential mnemonics that were carried in the names of towns. Such analysis, however, is inevitably to a certain degree prone to error, as the names can sometimes have multiple meanings. Comments on these are provided above and in Table 1, which also presents the main meaning of each toponym that we have established on the basis of linguistic analysis, their hypothetic translations and etymologies.

We divided the toponyms in categories, which are based on some cognitive and conceptual principles (see also Evans 2015; Taylor and Tversky 1992), depending on whether the meaning of the toponyms refers to the description and emotions of people, actions, natural and built features, or objects. In the case of some names, we were not able to determine their possible meaning, and hence we classify these separately as 'other.' Table 2 quantifies the number of toponyms represented in each category.

The largest category is that of natural and geographical features, where names are twice as represented than in any other category. Among these, there are names related to trees, birds or plants. The second most numerous category refers to sensory perception, feelings and emotions. This includes

notions of sensory perceptions such as smell, taste and vision, and also many strong emotions such as disorder, excitement and illness. On the other side of the spectrum, the least frequent are references to things and portable objects, perhaps surprisingly in a society of traders. The table shows, that the ratio in which each category is represented, is approximately the same for present-day Kenya and Tanzania. This suggests that in the past there were similar tendencies in place-naming along the coast. The fact that similar patterns are observed in the north and south of the coast and in whole collection may serve to check that the observed trends are potentially meaningful.

Considering the importance of the ocean, in whose neighbourhood all Swahili past towns were located, it was paramount for fishing as well as long-distance trade and maintaining contacts across the Indian Ocean, we also looked for any references to the ocean context among all the toponyms. We were able to detect it in eight cases: Kipungati/Kipungani ‘wave,’ Luziwa ‘ocean,’ Mkunumbi ‘fish,’ Humuruzi ‘current,’ Vipingo ‘wooden peg for ships,’ Unguja (U)kuu (Zanzibar)<sup>6</sup> ‘big port,’ Mbuamaji (from *maji* ‘water’) and perhaps Kilifi if we consider its possible secondary meaning as ‘safe anchorage.’ The fact that there are only eight such names among the 104 analysed is surprising for a coastal culture with close ties to the ocean for trade and subsistence. This may be compared to the nine names that may be related to trees (Ishakani – large brushwood, Uchi Juu – big tree, Shaka – large brushwood, Witu – forest, Kilifi- tree, Kisikimto - trunk, Mkwaja – tree, Buyuni - tree, Mikindani - young palm trees). The similar frequency of names referring to trees may perhaps be explained, when considering that trees have played an important social role in claiming ownership of land (Middleton 2004: 49). The popularity of land-related features is even more pronounced if we consider the category of built features, which contains names associated with houses, towers (possibly tall buildings), walls and thresholds. It suggests that perhaps references to features associated with land carried more weight in processes of place-naming and dwelling in a landscape compared to those associated with the ocean.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of folk etymology and conceptual categories of Swahili toponyms confirm that language is an important source which reflects people’s beliefs and their imaginary world. An interdisciplinary

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<sup>6</sup> It probably derives from the word *Zanj* (sometimes *Zinj*), a collective noun frequently employed as an ethnonym and occasionally as a toponym, which occurs in mediaeval Arabic texts with reference to Africans. According to the description of the term given by Tolmacheva (1986), in the Caliphate the word *Zanj* usually refers to slaves and consequently sets the people called *Zanj* in a separate socioeconomic category, entailing connotations of dependence and inferiority; whereas in the East African context, to the contrary, the reference is generally to free inhabitants of the area, where they are implicitly recognised as a majority, if not the sole population group (see Tolmacheva 1986).

approach combining linguistic, anthropological and archaeological approaches can help to elucidate the connection of socio-cultural and historical relevance of these sites on the Eastern African coast, with speakers' worldview and linguistic representations.

The linguistic analysis of Swahili toponyms has revealed that there is a relevant number of nouns which manifest typical features of Bajuni dialects (and of Swahili northern dialects in general), thus showing that the presence of this community, who first settled the major islands and places on the mainland, was established at least in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. It further shows that the origin of some of the town names may be quite old.

The most common morphological structure of Swahili toponyms consists of adding the Bantu locative suffix *-ni* to Bantu (or non-Bantu) lexical stems, belonging to different semantic fields, mostly in the category of geographical and built features (e.g. *Ishaka-ni*, *Uwa-ni*, *Mnara-ni*, *Ngome-ni*). There are relatively few loanwords, and most of them are from Arabic referring to religious life. The numerous references to natural and built features may signify that these features commonly played a significant role in constituting the identity of the individual towns.

The names of towns represented repeated references to specific places, and as such they were important cultural conceptualisations. From archaeological and ethnographic sources it is already known, that trade and maritime links were significant for Swahili economy and power negotiations. Nevertheless, as the presented analysis shows, the relatively few references to these themes may mean that they were not crucial for situating identity, dwelling and in mnemonic references to the towns. Rather, references to the physical appearance, as well as sensory and emotional perception of these places were more popular in defining the urban experience and situated mnemonics specific to each of these settlements.

Figures and Tables

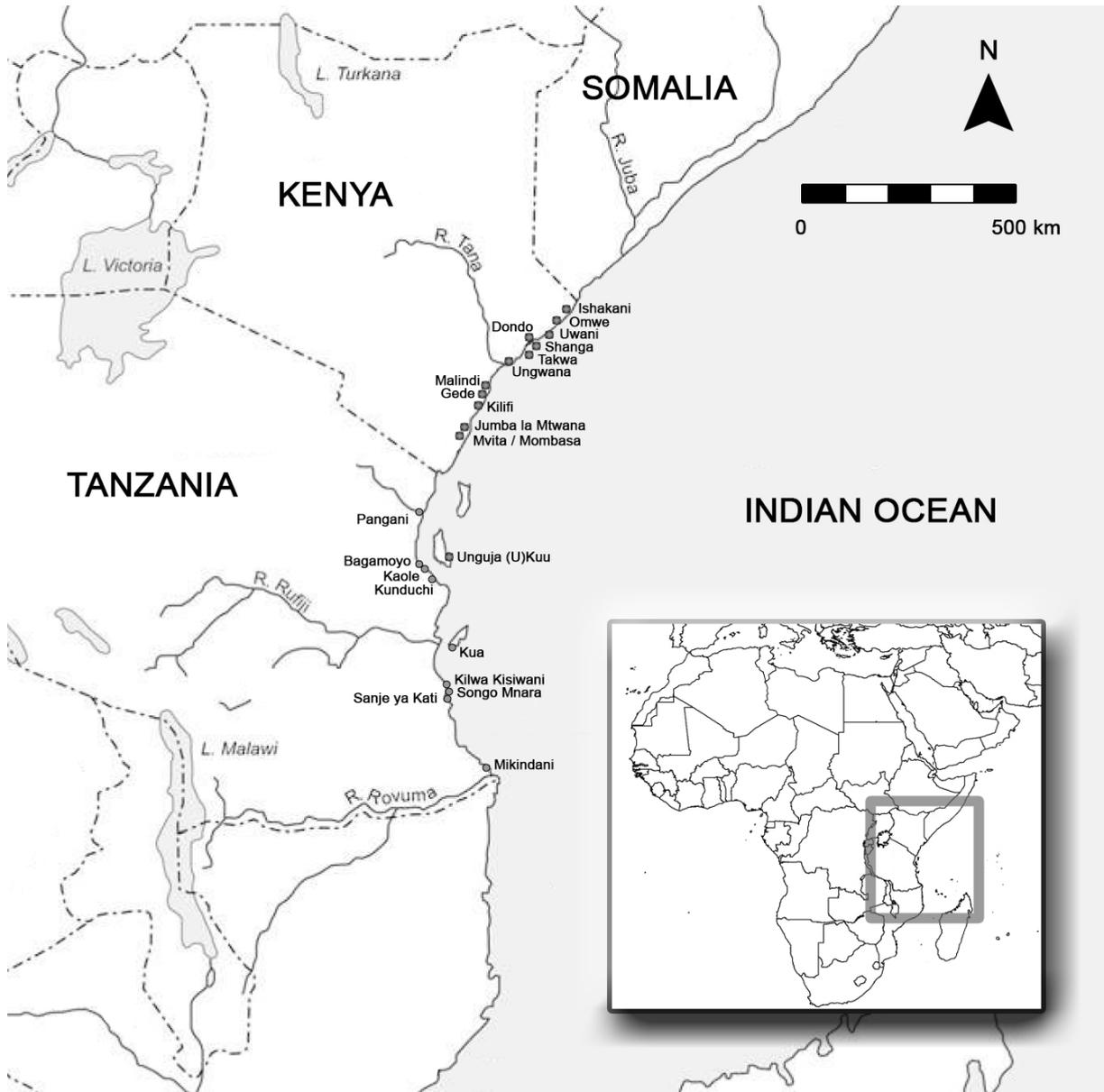


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Swahili sites discussed in the text (map by the authors; MB).

Place-name	English translation (dominant meaning)	Proposed etymologies, folk etymologies and comments
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- Kenya

- Mainland

Ishakani	large brushwood	<i>shaka</i> ‘large brushwood’ (St.Sw. <i>Kichaka</i> )
Kiunga	joint, link	<i>ki-ungu</i> ‘very tall building’ (Nurse 2010: 18) <i>kiunga(ni)</i> ‘the top of the mountain’
Mwana Mchama	Miss Mchama	<i>mwana</i> ‘girl;’ prefix used to form words denoting people of different professions, membership or classes <i>mchama</i> ‘sorghum’ (St. Sw. <i>mtama</i> )
Omwe	seed (of a tree)	
Shee Umuro	Sheik Umuro	<i>Shee</i> from Arabic <i>šayh</i>
Shee Jafari	Sheik Jafari	(as above)
Rubu	God, deity	
Uchi Juu	big stick	<i>uchi</i> ‘tree, big stick’ <i>juu</i> ‘upon, above, over, top’
Sendeni	(You pl.) don’t go!	St. Sw. <i>musiende</i>
Uwani	fence, stockade	1. ‘fence made of trees or stones constructed around the house to delimit and protect the field’ 2. ‘washroom,’ the space behind the house where people sit and do several occupations
Luziwa/Uziwa	Ocean	St. Sw. <i>wanja</i>
Kimbo	pit, mine	<i>-chimba</i> ‘to dig, excavate, bore’
Kiponozi	Relief	<i>ki-</i> noun prefix cl.7 from <i>-pona</i> ‘to heal’
Mea	Plant	<i>-mea</i> ‘to grow (as a vegetable or plant)’
Mkunumbi	Fish	<i>numbi</i> ‘a sp. of blue-lined round short fish’
Mwana	child, girl	also prefix used to form words denoting people of different professions, membership or classes
Shaka	large brushwood	‘large brushwood’ (see <i>ishakani</i> )
Ungwana	civilization	‘condition of a free and civilized human being’
Witu	Forest	St. Sw. <i>wanja mwitu/msitu</i>
Tumbe	being, organism	St. Sw. <i>wanja kiumbe</i>
Shirazi	from Shiraz	
Hurumuzi	from Hormuz	
Pongwe	very old	St. Sw. <i>kongwe</i> ‘very old’
Vanga	to count	St. Sw. <i>-wanga</i>
Diani	Ransom	1. <i>dia</i> ‘fine for murder; ransom paid to save one’ life’ 2. <i>Ndia-ni</i> (St. Sw. <i>wanja njiani</i> ) ‘on the way’

Kirima	Hill	St. Sw. <i>wanja, kilima</i> or <i>mlima</i>
Twiga	giraffe	
Kongo	welcome	1. (arch.) an expression used to welcome a foreigner ( <i>mgeni</i> ) who comes from abroad' (Sacleux 1939) 2. <i>K'ongo</i> 'bushbuck; <i>korongwe</i> ' (Nurse 2010: 19)
Ukunda	to wrap	Sw.St. <i>-kunja</i> 'to fold, bend, furl, tangle, wrap'
Mombasa/ Mvita (Mji wa vita)	city of war	1. <i>mji wa vita</i> ; <i>mji</i> : 'city:' <i>mvita</i> : 'war,' from the verb <i>-ta</i> : 'to thrust, throw out' 2. <i>mfiti</i> 'one who hides'(Tolmacheva 1995: 35)
Magugu	weeds	
Vumba Kuu	smell	<i>vumba</i> 'fish smell' <i>kuu</i> 'big'
Mtwapa	"the one who took this place"	1. <i>-twaa</i> : 'to take,' <i>hapa</i> 'here' 2. <i>mtu wa hapa</i> 'the person from here' 3. <i>mto wa hapa</i> 'the river of here' 4. <i>mutwa</i> 'termites' ('where termites are,' often indicating fertile ground)
Jumba la Mtwana	Slaves' house	
Gedi/Gede (Giriama)	?	
Kilepwa	?	
Mgangani	traditional doctor	<i>-ganga</i> 'to cure, heal, repair'
Kilifi (Giriama)	type of tree	'deep waters' (in the sense of safe anchorage; Mohamed 2011: 326)
Mnarani	at the tower	<i>mnara</i> 'tower'
Kitoka	Out	<i>-toka</i> 'to go out, exit'
Kinuni	Bird	St. Sw. <i>nyuni</i>
Vipingo	wooden peg	<i>kipingo</i> : 'wooden peg or bolt to fasten, shroud or anchor on the gunwale'
Kiburugeni	disorder	St. Sw. <i>-vuruga</i> 'to stir up; to sabotage, ruin'
Watamu	sweet	<i>tamu</i> : adjective
Malindi	a lot of wealth	1. <i>Mali Ndi</i> : 'a lot of wealth' 2. <i>Lindi</i> : 'deep pit/whole in the earth'
Mambrui	?	
Ngomeni	at the fort	<i>ngome</i> 'escarpment; fort, castle'
Kibirikani	cattle	

○ Island

Wasini	disobedience	<i>wasi</i> 'disobedience, insubordination, rebellion'
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○ Lamu archipelago

Dondo	shell / tiger cowrie	
Shanga(ni)	South	1. Sw.St. <i>kusi</i> 'South; 'south, southerly wind, monsoon' (Nurse 2010: 20; Tolmacheva 1995: 11) 2. *- <i>canga</i> 'sand, beach' (Nurse 1994:49)
Rasini/Faza	on the cape	from Arabic <i>ra's</i> 'cape'
Pate	to weave	- <i>pata</i> (kibajuni) 'to weave' (St .Sw. <i>kusuka</i> )
Bui/Mbui	female friend	
Chundwa /Atu	where many fruits are	<i>Atu</i> : old name of Chundwa town - <i>chundwa</i> : from - <i>chunda</i> (Sw.St. - <i>tunda</i> ) 'to collect, pick up (fruit)' (Nurse 2010: 7)
Kisingitini	on the/at the threshold	<i>kizingiti</i> 'bottom part of a door'
Mtangawanda	black sand	<i>wanda</i> (St. Sw. <i>wanja</i> ) 'kohl; eye liner' <i>mtanga</i> (St. Sw. <i>wanja mchanga</i> ) 'sand'
Siyu / Siu	unknown (people)	- <i>yua</i> (St. Sw. - <i>juu</i> ) 'to know; referred to people originally from Shanga' (Tolmacheva 1995: 34)
Matondoni	disease	
Kipungati/ Kipungani	swing, wave	- <i>punga</i> 'to swing, to wave'
Shela	veil	
Manda	open space	1. <i>kiwanda</i> (Sw.St. <i>kiwanja</i> ): 'open space' 2. <i>wavaa ng'andu</i> 'wearers of gold' (Tolmacheva 1995: 35)
Takwa	fear of God	from Arabic <i>taqwā</i>
Lamu (Pokomo) / Ki(si)wa Ndeo	Island of pride	<i>Kiwa Ndeo</i> ( <i>Kisiwa ndweo</i> ) 'Island of pride' (Sacleux 1939: 61; Tolmacheva 1995: 30)

• Tanzania

○ Zanzibar archipelago

Tumbatu (Kitumbatu)	coral stone	from <i>tumba</i> 'stone'
Mikokotoni	carts	<i>mkokoto</i> 'dragging, pulling, the mark made by something dragged along'
Unguja (U)Kuu	place of waiting	1. <i>ngoja</i> 'to wait,' <i>kuu</i> : main, big, 'place of waiting, port' (Tolmacheva 1995: 34) 2. <i>ki-ungu</i> 'very tall building' (Nurse 2010: 18)
Kizimkazi	inhabitant	St. Sw. <i>mkazi</i> 'inhabitant, resident, occupant'

Pemba	?	known in Arabic as “green island” (Tolmacheva 1995: 32; Sacleux 1939: 740)
Chake	?	

o Mainland

Kwale	?	
Tanga	outside	
Ndume	strong person	
Tongoni	ground	1. St. Sw. <i>udongo</i> ‘soil, earth’ 2. St. Sw. <i>chongo</i> : ‘one-eyed person’
Pangani	cave	1. <i>panga</i> ‘cave, hollowed out space’ (Sacleux 1939: 729) 2. a city situated on the left site of the river Pangani (Sacleux 1939: 730)
Ras Kikongwe	old cape	from Arabic <i>ra’s</i> ‘cape, peninsula’ <i>kongwe</i> ‘old’
Mbweni	stranger	St. Sw. <i>Mgeni</i>
Ushongo	curse	
Kipumbwi	?	
Saadani	luck	from Arabic <i>sa’āda</i>
Utondwe	?	
Kisikimto	trunk	<i>kisiki</i> ‘stump of a falled tree, trunk’ <i>mto</i> ‘river’
Mkwaja	tree	<i>mkwaju</i> ‘tamarind tree’
Buyuni	tree	<i>mbuyu</i> ‘baobab tree’
Uzimia	faint	from <i>-zimia</i> applicative form of <i>-zima</i> ‘to switch, turn off’
Winde	hunt	<i>-winda</i> ‘hunt’
Bagamoyo	throw down the heart	<i>-bwaga</i> ‘to throw down, drop,’ <i>moyo</i> ‘heart, soul;’ ‘drop your soul (here)’
Kaole	see	from the verb <i>-ol</i> : ‘to wee’ (St. Sw. <i>-ona</i> )
Mbegani	shoulder	<i>bega</i> ‘shoulder’
Kunduchi	a land with red soil	<i>kundu</i> ( <i>nyekundu</i> ‘red’) and <i>chi</i> ‘land,’ ‘a land with red soil’
Msasani	plant	<i>msasa</i> ‘a plant with rough sandpaper-like leaves used for smothering wood’
Mbuamaji	? water	<i>maji</i> : water
Kimbiji	run away	from the verb <i>-kimbia</i> ‘to run’
Kilwa Kivinje	Island with plants	<i>Kilwa=kisiwa</i> (island) <i>mvinje</i> ‘place with plants of filao’
Mtitimira	shake, excite	<i>-titimua</i> ( <i>tutumua</i> ) ‘to shake; to excite’
Lindi	deep pit	(see Malindi)

Mikindani	young palm trees	<i>mi=miti</i> ‘trees,’ <i>kinda</i> ‘young’
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○ Mafia Island

Chole	blackbird	
Kua	grow	
Jibondo	? work hard	

○ Kilwa archipelago

Kilwa Kisiwani	island of (in the) island	<i>kilwa=kisiwa</i> ‘island’
Songo Mnara	(king of the) tower	<i>songo</i> ‘garland, crown’ <i>mnara</i> ‘tower, monument’
Sanje Ya Kati	? central	<i>ya kati</i> ‘central’
Sanje Majoma	government	

Table 1. A list of the 104 analysed toponyms referring to Swahili towns with their translation in English.

Conceptual categories	Kenya	Tanzania	Totals
1. a) personalities and personal characteristics	9	4	13
b) sensations and emotions	13	7	20
2. actions, events, activities, practices	6	4	10
3. a) natural and geographical features	21	16	37
b) built (human-made) features	7	3	10
4. objects, things, items	5	1	6
5. other	3	5	8

Table 2. Quantification of the toponyms in each conceptual category.

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