

Muslims Socio-Cultural Activities in East-Africa before Europeans: A Historical Evaluation.

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Abstract: *History is a vital commodity in Africa fraught with politics. Until very recently Africa was a totally 'dark continent' before the Europeans, supported by the evidence of nineteenth century explorers. But in many cases it is not true. My main objective is about Muslim activities in East Africa when Europeans were not there. Muslim's political performance, trading system, social and cultural activities are described in this article in short. Because of Muslims glorious historical background in East Africa is unknown in many cases. It has also described about East-African tribal organization. I have had drastic over simplification and omission.*

I. Introduction

Well educated British administrators in colonial Africa believed that Africa had no history prior to the coming of the white men, or at any rate none worth remembering. Far from being in the back water of world history, recent research tends to suggest that East-Africa was the original home of man himself. It is Tanzania, Kenya (which was called Kilwa), and Ethiopia that archeologists have discovered the fossil remains of the earlier hominid, or man like creatures.¹ Over the centuries and particularly after 1000 A.D., a number of Arabs also intermarried with local African women. Thus the Swahili culture was developed day by day. Despite the influx of traders, immigrants and invaders throughout the centuries, the indigenous African communities were able to survive and absorb such intruders. However, when Arab colonist arrived in the nineteenth century they found the African population politically vulnerable unable to resist the establishment of an Arab colonial state. This situation existed partially because the previous centuries of contact with Persia and Arabic had acculturated the African communities in the customs and the traditions of the Middle-East, and also because they had become accustomed to accepting alien settlement without resistance. But the major source of vulnerability was the absence of political unity among the local African groups.²

Geographical Existence: At present time, territorial East-Africa means Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda- these three countries. There are few and famous islands like Zanzibar, Mozambique, Mafia, Kilwa, Mombasa, Malindi and Pemba in East-African region. We can analyze the East-Africa in geographically, Somali desert and Ethiopian mountain range in its northern side, large lakes in its western side (Albert, Kivu, Tanganyika, Nyasa etc.), Zambezi in south and Indian Ocean in east. This territory is about one million square mile. It is a densely populated area and apparently it looks like a plateau.³

By any means all Africans are not black. They are normally divided into two main categories- Negroes and Bantu. The Negroes, who came from west Africa above the line of the 'bulge' and are comparatively very dark; it was from there that the American and West Indian slaves were taken. The Bantu are thought to be a mixture of the Negroes and Hamates, the light-skinned people who probably came from Arabic and now survive mainly round the Horn of Africa. Bantu, being mixed are usually lighter than Negroes, sometimes very light, often with quite European features.⁴

Importance: Eastern Africa began preparing to receive human society during the Miocene epoch, about fifteen million years ago. Huge tectonic upheavals raised a forested upland by 900 meters (3000 ft) and created the highlands contemporary Ethiopia, Kenya and mainland Tanzania.⁵ The title Humanistic coast of Africa south of the straits of Bab-El-Mandeb as early as the first century A.D. may indicate a link between East-Africa and southern Arabia, already stretching back for several centuries.⁶ In that time or before this period, Bantu who penetrated East Africa from the south and the West, encroaching steadily upon the older Hematic inhabitants as the Bantu then began to penetrate inland into the region of what is now Kenya they came up against an invasion of Nilo Hematic peoples from the North including the Masai, Nandi, Kipsigis, Turkana and Suk who, during the last few centuries, have occupied the grazing lands of the interior. They also spread into northern Uganda and other in East Africa. These tribal groups or organization in East Africa, politically or socially, were felt, varied from extreme autocracy and strong central organization to the other extreme of democracy bordering at times almost upon anarchy. The economy of these tribes, agricultural, pastoral alike, was of a subsistence character.

The agriculturalists grew foodstuffs including maize, millet, sweet potatoes, cassava and bananas. Many of them were iron workers who lived by Lake Albert and Lake Victoria, Mount Kenya, southern Tanganyika and by the Masai in the high lands of western Kenya. These workers were held in great respect. Some of these tribes collected salt from salt water and sold it; they lived by northern shore of the Lake Victoria. These elementary industries gave rise to a limited trade. Within a tribe friends might exchange presents, and tribute would be paid to the chief in the form of food stuffs or iron implements or weapons. In their turns the chiefs might hand or some of those gifts in returns for labor or as presents for their more important subjects. In general, tribal or even family self-sufficiency was one of the pronounced features of East African society.⁷

Between the Congo and the Indian ocean, bounded on the north by Ethiopia (usually regarded as being outside 'Black Africa'), and on the south by northern Rhodesia and Portuguese East-Africa, are the four territories known as British East Africa- Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar. They have a quite separate history and background of West Africa. The coastal cities from which East Africa was developed Mombasa, Dar-es-Salam or Zanzibar- have heavy layers of Arab influence.⁸ Arab dhows still sail down with the monsoon from the Persian gulf every year.⁹ The first reliable account of external trade with the East-African coast, however, is contained in the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea. This guide to the commerce of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean was written in the second half of the first century A. D. and is probably the work of a Greek trader of the Roman Empire living in Egypt.¹⁰ This area was also important for Arabic Sailors. They brought iron implements, gifts of wine to mellow the peoples of the coast. The 'Periplus' records a variety of trade goods accepted in return, including ivory, palm oil, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell, cinnamon, frankincense and slaves.¹¹ These coasts were also a good exchange market for the Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Phoenician, Indian and Arab traders. In these time it seems likely that slaves already formed one of the chief exports of East-Africa, although the importance was too decline some centuries later before being revive in the nineteenth century. Ivory remained one of the main attractions of East-Africa's trade through the whole period.¹² When the Islamic civilizations was being spread in Asia, Europe and others; these coast were also influenced by Muslim evangelist. By the nineteenth century, Arabs and the Shirazes Persians were trading regularly with the coastal peoples; they eventually established a string of settlements on the islands of Pemba, Zanzibar, Mafia and Kilwa Kisiwani. As these out posts became permanent settlements, the Arab and Shirazes communities intermingled with the Bantu speaking mainland groups- and a new culture- the Swahili-began to emerge.¹³

Coming of the Muslims: The East-African coastal towns first felt the full impact of Islam in the late thirteenth century. Before this period a Shirazes state, stemming from Persia and said to have been founded in the tenth century A.D. with its headquarter at Kilwa. The famous medieval traveler, Ibn Battuta, who visited Mombasa in the early 1330s, wrote of the inhabitants that they were pious, honorable and upright and had well, built mosques made of wood. In fact the buildings were probably of lath and mud. He wrote also some descriptions of Kilwa.¹⁴ Attention of the Arab more firmly southward while the increasing demand for ivory and gold are not unnaturally directed the endeavors of traders towards the East African coast. During those times, the Portuguese were involved with trades of East Africa specially the minor town of Sofala.¹⁵

In the fourteenth century there was a marked expansion in the material culture of the coast, followed in the fifteenth by the full flowering of Islamic influence. During this period, greater agricultural prosperity, political and tribal movements in the Amharic and Galla territories to the north led to the abandonment of the Arab settlements along. Also the Ming king of China was interested for the trades of East-African coast because of increasing the variety of imports during the latter half of the fourteenth century.¹⁶ Until the late nineteenth century, the Arab sultan of Zanzibar controlled most of the wealth of East-Africa, including the slave trade. Zanzibar was becoming more important, as is indicated by two attempts made by the inhabitants of that island to encourage usurpers in Kilwa.¹⁷

Social Involvements with native: The great antiquity of Arab contact with the coast of east Africa is largely a result of geographic factors. Between December and early February a north, northeast monsoon blows steadily across the Indian Ocean from the Arabian peninsula and the western coast of India; this trade wind reverses itself and south, south-west monsoon blows away from Eastern Africa towards the Persian Gulf countries. This remarkable pattern of prevailing winds promoted a continuous annual ocean-going trade between Arabia and Africa long before any over land commerce would have been possible.¹⁸

Other early travelers and traders in the Indian Ocean, these Persians served ties with their own homeland, the principality of Shiraj in Persia, and planned to settle permanently in Africa. The Persian immigrants became observed into the local population and gradually disappeared as a separate group, but their influence on the native village communities was considerable. The Persians began to unify the hitherto disparate native villages into slightly more consolidated political communities. Ruling dynasties of mixed Persian-African descent gradually emerged. These provided focal points identity leading to gradual formation of two contemporary African tribes- the Hadimu and the Tumbatu. The African population converted to Islam and

adopted numerous ceremonies traditions from Persian culture. Indeed, Persian impact was so great that today the vast majority of Zanzibar's indigenous African population calls itself "Shirazi".¹⁹

In spite of its long range effect, Persian immigration to Zanzibar actually occurred during only a very short period. The most persistent relationship between Zanzibar's African communities and any immigrant race has been with Arabs. Arab traders and explorers come to Zanzibar centuries before the Christian era, for even at this early date the Indian Ocean slave trade was well established.²⁰ Though Zanzibar lacked a large enough population to warrant slaving expeditions its proximity to the East African coast and the safety it offered from war like coastal tribes made the islands and ideal stopping point in the ocean going commerce. After the founding of Islam in the seventh century, there was a marked intensification of Arab contact with East African coast. Exiles from religious and persecutions and from internal dynastic conflicts joined traders in the stream of immigration.²¹ the result of this Arab African interaction was the growth of a wholly new language, culture and people, all of which are known a Swahili. Specially, Swahili culture was town based, for up and down the East-African coast there developed a number of largely independent Swahili city-states. Mombasa founded in the 12th century, was one of them and today Kenya's major seaport. Swahili culture was a African-Arab mixture, perhaps best represented in the language. Basically, a Bantu African language in its grammatical structure, Swahili incorporated a large number of Arabic words and was written in Arabic characters. The religion of Islam was another Arab contribution to Swahili culture though it too was inevitably mixed with local African customs.²²

Now-a-days the heart of Zanzibar's economic and political life is Zanzibar town, located on a triangular peninsula at about midpoint on the western coast of Zanzibar island. The town is divided into two sections; Stone town, at the extremity of the peninsula and the Ngambo (African Quarter). The stone town area has become internationally known for its Middle-Eastern appearance, its massive white stone buildings in an Arab architectural style, its narrow winding streets and its endless labyrinth of alleys. The stone town area also contains a spacious, a major reasons for the development of this side as the contemporary capital of Zanzibar was its ability to offer safe accommodation to large ocean going vessels. In addition to the Middle Eastern Character of its architectural style, Stone town also differs from Ngambo in creating image of economic prosperity.²³

Coupland points out that Swahili civilization attained a high level of material abundance but the Arab colonist failed to bring to the East-Africa the literary and artistic achievements of the medieval Arab world. In his words "..... by the end of the fifteenth century the Arab colonist in East-Africa attained a high level of material civilization..... But it was not, it seems a cultured life. In other countries, Arabs not only preserved and passed on to their Christian enemies the legacy of Hellenism; they made their own contribution to the literature, art and science of the world. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the centre of Arab learning at Cordova, Toledo and Seville illumined the darkness of medieval Europe..... But in East-Africa, no trace of this higher life appears."²⁴ But it was not true in many cases. Because Arabians introduced many socio-cultural activities to the East-African society, Example; Shiraji, Swahili culture, new trade system, new architectural style.

II. Conclusion

In the 7th century A.D. the Arab armies of Arabia began their conquest of on area that was to become known as the Arab world. Under the brilliant leadership of a young soldier, Khalid-Ibn-Al-Walid, they conquered Damascus in a spirit of generosity.²⁵ even if 19th century, Arabian cultural activities was there. But the conflict which developed between Europeans and Arabs in the late 19th century was increasing day-by-day. Portuguese interference was moved against Arabians. But the nationalist movements on East-Africa were influenced by Arabians. Except slave trade for the 1st time, the Arabian culture effects introduced a new socio-economic-political structure on East-Africa. And East-African local people accepted this culture. Denis Osadebay, Nigerian poet wrote:

"Dont's preserve my customs,
As some fine curious
To suit some white historian's taste"²⁶

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