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INDIAN OCEAN TRADING LINKS: THE SWAHILI EXPERIENCE

NORMAN C. ROTHMAN

1. Introduction

The Swahili people of East Africa were traders on a global scale. At one time or another, they were key players in the commerce and the economy of the Mediterranean, Europe, and Asia. (Horton 1987; Van Sertima 1985). This study examines the interaction between the Swahili culture of East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Before tracing this interaction, a paragraph on the Swahili is useful.

The Swahili society was tied together by three basic elements: language, ethnicity, and culture. As a language, Swahili or Ki-Swahili is still prominent in much of East Africa. Historically, the language, ethnicity, and culture have been centered on the coastal cities of East Africa as they are today especially in Kenya and Tanzania. Although a rather small group, the historical prominence of the Swahili people has made their language an official tongue of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. It is also widely used in other countries of East and East Central Africa (Comoros, Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Somalia, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda).

Technically, Swahili or Ki-Swahili is a Bantu or Niger/Congo language. Recent research has shown that its basic structure most closely resembles the Sabaki sub-language of Northeast Coast Bantu. (Mazrui and Shariff 1994). Ethnically, the ancestors of the Swahili were the Bantu farmers who used iron hoes and iron spears and reached the coast between 100 B.C. and 700 A.D. (see later sections of this paper). Both the language and ethnic composition of this group are basically African with admixtures from groups who came from the Indian Ocean—mostly Arabs, but also Persians, Indians, and Malays.

Even today, the Swahili people, who are mostly located in coastal cities such as Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Kilwa, and Zanzibar, have retained a cultural distinctiveness, with a separate written language using both Arabic and Latin characters in different scripts, a separate artistic tradition, and such separate artifacts as illustrated Korans, distinctive jewelry, indigenous building motifs, group-derived musical instruments, and even a distinct tradition of wood-carving. Often they are recognized through their dress, as the men often wear white gowns...
and the women wear black robes. Devout Muslims, they often send their young men to mosque schools. They tend to practice traditional occupations such as storekeeping and trading. (Mazrui and Shariff).

Before studying the role of the Indian Ocean in trade and culture of East Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans, certain questions need to be answered. First, what constitutes the Indian Ocean for the purposes of this study? Second, what do we mean by Islamic civilization? Third, what do we mean by maritime history?

The Indian Ocean as seen by the main participants in the African aspect of the Indian Ocean (Muslims and South India) was one continuum which extended from the Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean all the way to the Straits of Malacca and to the Indonesian archipelago as far as the present island of Sunda. The emphasis of both Muslims and Indians in Africa was the East Coast, which was not only part of the Indian Ocean littora, but historically was part of Islam.

Islam was unifying element in much of the Indian Ocean, especially on both sides—the east African coast and the Malay world. The east African societies relied on Islam to help create their world since their identity derived not only from commercial links with co-religionists but on specific modes of social and commercial behavior.

The Muslim religion gave prescriptions as to everyday conduct. The Koran had specific admonitions on fair practice in the market place. The Koranic injunction to have balance scales led to the appearance of a market inspector called the muhtash whose specific job was to oversee local transactions and check weights and measures among other duties. Muslims in East Africa as elsewhere had specific rules in terms of credit arrangements. There was a hierarchy of custom rates ranging from 2.5% for believers to 5% for “protected” non-believers to 10% for other non-believers. The Muslim influence was to be especially strong in building and urban space, as will be seen later in the paper as well. Overall, Muslims in East Africa believed that they belonged to the umma or jumma (a political/legal community composed of believers). (Risso 1995, 19-22)

Finally one must come to terms with the role of maritime history in which a large body of water (in this case the Indian Ocean) and its related commercial activities proved a decisive determinant in a dominant cosmopolitan culture. It was based on three factors—monsoon winds, hospitable harbors, and links to hinterlands. All of these were critical in the rise of East African Swahili culture. The monsoon winds gave the Indian Ocean a type of unity. In winter months, which go from
November through March, high pressure zones over the Asian landmass and low pressure over the ocean produced prevailing winds blowing southwest from India and China. Between April and October, this pattern is reversed. (Chaudhuri 1990, 128-130). This made cross-cultural experiences such as those between Arabia and East Africa much more likely. Also, the harbors from the Horn of Africa to present-day Mozambique were easily available even to dhows sailing back and forth across from the Arabian Sea or down from the Red Sea. In addition, the East African coast was comparatively fertile and well-watered so that vessels could get necessary supplies. (Watson 1998, 10-12).

Related developments in the above situation were navigational breakthroughs and relevant ships based on materials available to East Africans. The earliest sailing vessels, dhows, were boats sewn together with coral made from coconut fiber and with rectangular sails made from woven palm leaves. These boats were very sturdy and became the dominant mode of seaborne transportation by the eighth century A.D.

Even today, these dhows are in use. These boats were guided by wooden hulls nailed together and fitted with movable cloth sails or lateen sails which allowed for sailing against the wind and were in use centuries before European adoption. In addition, outrigger vessels and canoes with ski-like apparatus attached parallel to each other were borrowed from the Malay peoples who had settled in Madagascar before 500 A.D. (Watson, 22).

The most typical sailing vessel identified with the Swahili was the mtepe. Its material came from the East African coast and immediate hinterland. Its hull was built from planks of timber derived from teak or mangrove while its rope (coir) was made from coconut husks. The vessel was 15 meters long and may date from the first century A.D. (Horton, 88). These types of vessels allowed trade among the Swahili cities in addition to Indian Ocean trade. By the end of the first millennium A.D., the magnetic compass had been adopted from the Chinese and the astrolabe was also in use. The enabling conditions were thus in place for inter-oceanic contact. (Watson, 24).

2. The Setting

The historic Swahili Coast extends from present-day central Somalia (just north of Mogadishu) 2,000 miles southward to Cape Delgado in southern Mozambique. It includes a number of islands and archipelagos in the Indian Ocean such as the Comoros, Zanzibar,
Pemba, and Mombasa. It extends 20 miles to 120 miles inland. (Kasimba 1999, 2).

The area which eventually included 400 urban settlements received its name from a Bantu language initially written in Arabic script (and later written in its own script using Arabic letters). As will be seen in Chronology, it came to be seen as an intermediary between the African hinterland and the Indian Ocean trading system. In reality, this coast—parts of which were called Zanj and Azania by the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans—had been part of international trading systems before the Christian era. Trading records, pottery artifacts, and coinage give support to the role of this area in addition to the Greek document, The Periplus of the Erytheum (Red) Sea, and the biblical record of the land of frankincense and myrrh. (Horton 1990, 95-99).

Throughout the period under discussion (defined as 100 B.C. to 1650 A.D.), the “Swahili Coast” was divided into three sections. The northern section was called the Benadir Coast—the southern part of today's Somalian coast; the central portion was known as Zanj and corresponded to the coasts of modern-day Kenya and Tanzania; and the southern sector was called the Sofala Coast after its largest mainland port and can be roughly equated to today's Mozambique Coast.

Along the Benadir Coast, the most important ports were (and still are) Mogadishu, Merca (Merka), and Barawa (Brava). Although the coast had long protected anchorages, the major inland river, the Shabeele, provided enough fertile land so as to grow food thereby making these cities self-reliant. Off the coasts, the presence of small islands created sealanes between the islands and the coasts which were ideal for small boats. The Zanj coast began in what is today the northern coast of Kenya. There the islands of the Lamu archipelago were a proper environment for boats, fishing, building materials, and plentiful plant and animal material. In central Kenya, there were a number of towns at or near the mouths of rivers or creeks. In the south, Mombasa, situated on an island, then as now dominated that part of the coast. The southern section of the Zanj coast corresponds to present-day coastal Tanzania. The major towns in this area were also located on islands off the coast—Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia. However, the most important town at this time was the island city of Kilwa which was to dominate the gold trade from the state of Zimbabwe and its successors in south central Africa between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

The winding coast of Mozambique was the southern portion of the Swahili Coast. Its major port of Sofala (hence its name) was under the
political control of Kilwa. Overall, the other harbors were not as favorable for sailing. However, it was located across from the Comoros Islands and Madagascar, so short-term trading did occur. (Watson, 13-17). Each of the sections acted as an entrepot for different parts of the African continent. The northern cities tended to act as an outlet for ivory and rhinoceros horn obtained from the African lake states of the Great Rift Valley. The central cities acted as an outlet for products from the Congo basin, especially Kasai and Katanga, such as copper and iron. The southern cities were the urban areas which exported gold from the southern savanna regions of northwest Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe. (Kusimba, passim).

3. Chronology

The historical periods of the Swahili culture are based on archaeological excavation and are classified as Period 1 (100 B.C. to 300 A.D.); Period 2 (300 A.D. to 1000 A.D.); Period 3 (1000 A.D. to 1500 A.D.); and Period 4 (after 1500 A.D.)

Although Period 3 is considered to be the classical era with the greatest period of international contact, contacts existed earlier. From Period 1, coastal settlements played an important role in the export of goods from the African hinterland to dhows waiting to transport local commodities to markets across the sea. Boat building in Africa goes back to 600 B.C. as evident from excavations on the East African coast. The coast had huge amounts of fish; the area also yielded mangroves useful for building materials and firewood. There are also some remains of iron artifacts if not iron smelting. Toward the end of this period, slag found at some sites indicated some degree of mining. There is also evidence of early farming. Archaeological excavations have shown ceramics, glassware, and pottery from Greece, Rome, and Egypt in coastal sites of what is today Kenya and Tanzania. The Periplus of the Erytheum Sea (Horton 1990; Kusimba, 68), published at this time, listed a number of trade items exported from Zanj.

By the time of Period 2, the former name of Azania had given way to Zanj—Arabic for “land of Black people.” There is greater evidence of imported goods from Iran, India, China, and Egypt. Iron production (both for local use and export) had begun in what is today southern Tanzania and Northern Mozambique. By 800 A.D., the coast was producing a great diversity of products. In addition to iron and copper goods, artifacts, ivory, amber, leopard skins, turtle shells, and gold were
exported. Textiles, ceramics, beads, glass, and other goods were imported from throughout the Indian Ocean. Some raw materials imported from abroad were now converted into finished products such as textiles into cloth at workshops and warehouses in towns such as Kilwa. (Kusimba, 34-35; Watson, 20).

It was in the area of metallurgy where Swahili craftsman achieved such a high level of expertise that their products were in demand throughout the Indian Ocean trading area. Craftsman now produced all aspects of smithing including smelting, melting, and forging so as to produce cast-iron and carbon steel. The resultant product was achieved through such advanced processes as annealing and oxidation and through open crucibles. The high quality result was obtained for use in the form of nails and knives, Copper products were also produced from the copper imported from the interior. They were then exported to places such as India and the Persian Gulf to high praise. Various observers, such as Al-Masud in the 10th century and al-Biruni, the most renowned Arab scientist of the 11th century, praised Swahili iron for its malleability. In fact, India re-exported iron products from the Swahili coast to Europe because of its superior quality.(Kusimba, 36,101-106, 112).

By 1000 A.D., a two-tier system had emerged. The Swahili obtained products from the African interior to use and to sell overseas which include gold, ivory, rhinoceros horn, rock crystal, animal skins, timber, frankincense and myrrh. They also traded with both the interior and the Indian Ocean markets the products produced on the coast. These included metal products, cloth, tortoiseshell, ambergris (from whales used to produce perfume), mangrove poles, grain and other farm products, salt, and jewelry. The Swahili cities continued to import glazed ceramics, silk and cotton cloth, glassware, beads, metals, and other articles of trade. (Watson, 20).

Period 3 is often called the Golden Age of the East African city-states in terms of international contact and trading links. By this time, the Swahili towns had become the main purveyors of gold as well as building materials from South Central Africa and Madagascar. New luxury items that were imported from the littoral of the Indian Ocean became quite common. These included sprinkler bottles and bowls in all colors as well cobalt glass. Women of all classes possessed bronze mirrors, kohl sticks, and rock crystal beads(from a mineral produced in Kenya). It was common to wear jewelry made from bronze, gold, and silver. There was now a cash economy based on the minting of copper and silver through mints located in cities such as Kilwa and Mogadishu.
By 1300, major trading partners were Egypt—a source of glassware, China—a source of silk, India—raw textiles, Ceylon and Persia—kohl sticks and beads. Ceramics and pottery came from throughout the Indian Ocean. Exports such as timber went to Yemen, ivory to the Arabian peninsula, and cereals, fruits, iron, and copper continued to go to the Indian sub-continent. (consult Middleton 1992 for details). The 15th century saw the emergence of China as a major commercial contact. The imperial fleet sailed to East Africa in 1417 and 1435. Chinese lacquerware became common. Islamic pottery and ceramics were partly superseded by Chinese porcelains, Chinese celadons such as Tongan and Longquan, Indonesian containerware including Sawankhalok and Sisatchanalai jars, and pottery made from kilns located as far away Thailand and Vietnam.

The taste for exotic pottery and other consumer goods was supplemented by local producers of materials from local kilns and spindle whorls used for weaving and textiles. (Kusimba, 37; Watson, 29).

By 1400, the largest towns such as Pate, Mombasa, Malindi, Merca, Kilwa, and Lamu had established merchant fleets so as to exert more control over overseas commerce. The largest cities also reinforced their role as middlemen between the Indian Ocean and interior Africa by establishing trading partnerships with interior states and even built watercraft to sail the Zambezi and Tana rivers. This was done to reinforce the two-way role of the coastal cities as exporter of African goods from the interior and importer of Indian Ocean goods to the interior. Routinely, coastal cities made clothing from imported cotton and silk (there were large warehouses, for example, in the city of Sofala) for sale in the interior. By this time, the interior trade had reached even further into southern Africa in the Kalahari Desert. At various sites, archaeological evidence suggests that the San (Bushmen) traded ivory and gold for glass beads from the coast. One source estimates that as much as 20 million ounces of gold were taken from south central Africa during the period of approximately 800–1600 mostly through Swahili ports. (Horton 1987, 93).

At this time, the Swahili had taken additional steps to secure their trading networks in the interior. They had a monopoly of seashells used for a variety of purposes in the interior such as adornment and currency. They also monopolized the salt trade since they converted it from the sea off the coast and traded it with inland people. Their advanced use of technology especially in finished iron and textiles which their warehouses made from African cotton and silk imported via the Indian
Ocean was a factor at this time. In fact, they utilized their giant mtepe boats to transport camels and cattle down the coast. The camels would be utilized sometimes for the interior trade. (Horton 1987, 92).

By 1500, the Swahili city-states were exporting their own finished goods to the Gulf region as well as Red Sea and Arabian Sea areas, (water pots, cooking stoves, serving pots, cooking pots). In addition, they had become central to the functioning of the whole Indian Ocean economy. Gold from interior states such as Great Zimbabwe, Monomutapa, and Changamire via the East African coastal states constituted one metric ton annually and was the most important component of the financial basis of the Indian Ocean trade. (In fact, along with West African gold from the fabled sites of Wangara and Bouake, African gold dominated the world economy until large-scale exports of silver and gold from the Americas began to arrive in the 1550's). (Kusimba, 35–40; Curtin 1984, 21–24; 122, 141, 57–59).

The coastal cities were now at the apex of wealth and power. They established trading sites at towns such as Zuama and Angoche on the Zambesi. In these towns, gold, copper, and ivory were exchanged for cotton, silk, and beads. Ungama on the Tana River linked the coast to the Kenyan and Tanzanian interior. Here, goods from both the coast and the Indian Ocean were exchanged for millet, rice, and bananas for local coastal consumption as goods that were to be transshipped overseas including rock crystal, ivory, and rhinoceros horn. Each town now imposed tolls on goods entering and leaving from both the Indian Ocean and the interior. In fact, the towns also imposed custom duties on goods coming from other towns. (Kusimba, 130–140)

This period saw the final triumph of Islam. In part, this was due to the increasing importance of slaves as an item of trade from the interior. There was a market for slaves (permitted in the Koran) especially in the Arabian peninsula and Sind (now part of Pakistan). A common faith proved to be an inescapable integrative mechanism. By the middle part of the 14th century, virtually every large settlement had one or more mosques (very often the most important building in the town). (Chittick 1984, 2–9; 57–64).

The first part of Period 4, approximately 1500–1650, saw the decline and final fall of the Swahili city-states. There were a number causes for this development. First, there was internecine warfare among the towns. Pate competed with Lamu in northern Kenya; Malindi competed with Mombasa in southern Kenya; Zanzibar was at odds with Pemba; while the gold and ivory trade of the Zambezi basin put Sofala
and Kilwa at odds. The arrival of precious metals from the Americas diminished the utility of East African sources. Most fatally, the arrival of the Portuguese beginning in 1498 on the voyage to India, saw destructive consequences. Enamored of a blue water policy which had its as its objective control of strategic trading points from Portugal to the Spice Islands and antagonistic to Islamic communities because of their own struggles against Muslims, the Portuguese attempted conquest and conversion. They also attempted treasure hunting expeditions to Zimbabwe/Monomutapa in an attempt to pursue their bullionist/mercantilist fixation with precious metals.

The cumulative result of these sundry activities was the disruption of the Swahili economy which was based on trading links and the undermining of their Muslim-based culture through the attempted imposition of Catholicism. Beginning in 1644, the rulers of Oman gradually took over the remnants of the Swahili city states in coastal Kenya and Tanzania while the Portuguese remained in coastal Mozambique, and the Benadir coastal states coalesced with the nascent Somali culture. In 1839, the Omani ruler moved to Zanzibar and attempted to impose a new coastal trading network based on trading. This last chapter ended in 1890 when colonial rule began. (Curtin, 34–77).

4. Cosmopolitan Influences in the Swahili Culture

The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the cities reflect the Indian Ocean links in the areas of myth of origin and family heritage, religious observance, clothing, and architecture. As was related earlier, the Swahili-speaking inhabitants were mostly of African origin (with an admixture of immigrants from the Middle East). As was noted earlier, Swahili is a Bantu language or more properly a Niger-Congo language—albeit with an Arabic script and alphabet—but the inhabitants, especially the elite class, had very little trouble appropriating symbols from the Indian Ocean.

Ruling families and upper-class families routinely claimed descent from wealthy Persian, Indian, and Arab emigrants of noble descent. Most famously, for example, the rulers of Kilwa claimed descent from the fabled Shirazi family of Persia. (Chittick 1974). As an extension of the myth of origin, upper class families called themselves Waungwana or freeborn or original owners descended from "African princesses" and high-born foreigners. Therefore, they claimed entitlement privileges denied to most others.

Families lacking this eponymous imprimatur were classified as
commoners and were to be restricted in their access to exotic trade goods, access to foreign merchants, and the right to live in or build stone houses. Because of their "external origin," the Uungwana (the Swahili noun object equivalent of Waungwana which is the people equivalent) claimed these exclusive privileges. The elite also made sure the source of their wealth in Indian Ocean trading—access to trees for the building of boats and ships was forbidden to commoners through their control of town councils. (Middleton, 89ff; 203ff). Their stone houses exhibited features associated with Islamic house motifs as arches and niches. (See Chittick 1974; 1984).

In general, the influence of Islam, not only as a religion but as a way of life, thoroughly permeated Swahili culture. In addition to literacy in Swahili based on Arabic script, literacy in Arabic was a sign of culture and upper class. By the fourteenth century, the mosques were the most important buildings in town and in many places they became the dividing line between patricians and commoners. They exhibited typically Muslim features such as mehrabs and kubilu as well as the ubiquitous minarets. They faced in the direction of Mecca and Medina. (Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Islamic tombs were often decorated with Chinese porcelain (see Chittick 1974, chapter 7) and the Swahili language shows foreign influence such as muhindi (Hindi for wheat).

Dress also reflected external influence. The elite wore Muslim ceremonial clothing on special days and in public. The costume would include such traditional items as the long white robe, a turban, a sword and dagger, and sandals made of animal hide. In contrast, commoners were forbidden to wear ceremonial robes or religious footwear, or even to carry ceremonial weapons such as the sword and dagger in public. (Kusimba, 146–148).

Most visually, architecture and social space tended to mirror the Muslim world. Not only did the mosque divide many towns into upper and lower sections, but the architecture reflected ritually influenced habitations. In addition to the mosques and tombs, the grandest buildings were the great palaces which combined living quarters and governmental functions modeled on Baghdad and Cairo. The grandest building was the sultan's palace in Kilwa, which was over an acre in size and contained more than a hundred rooms in the Muslim style. In contrast, the quarters of the commoners in most Swahili cities were small and built from coral and sun-dried clay, sometimes with a lime overlay.

Conversely, the houses of the upper classes were similar (but not identical as Swahili architecture has distinctive elements) to that of
wealthy families of the Middle East as they were often multi-storied with a front portico and an inner courtyard. Unlike the one or two room clay and coral structures, there were private rooms as opposed to public rooms specifically preserved for the families and households. In all, the differentiated status in various aspects of life was meant to convey a "special" external origin which, in this case, derived from cultures predominantly but not exclusively Muslim, and which had come through the Indian Ocean. (see Chittick, 1974;1984).

5. Conclusion

Fernand Braudel has posited that there are certain unities in time, space, and structure which can unify a region. (Chaudhuri, 1985, Chapter One). If one takes the Indian Ocean as a unit, one can see certain patterns in architecture, clothing, housing, literacy, religion (and by extension food since Islam implies Muslim dietary habits) and patterns of urbanization beyond the obvious nexus to trade and economic activities.

In the Swahili instance, identity derived from the very concept of "foreignness." The myth of origin led to a construct of specialty derived in part from an external origin. This construct was then combined with Islam in a thoroughly syncretic manner which indeed served to organize time, space, and structure. The dominant activity of international and internal commerce connected with the Indian Ocean conferred a certain "exceptionality" on those engaged in this enterprise. It was analogous to those who corresponded with the realm of the supernatural beyond the lot of commoners.

The Swahili elite was able to use the idea of apartness in origin coming from the Indian Ocean (which was only partially true) and to combine it with Islam so as set itself apart and reinforce its special position in society. Islam along with foreign contacts gave this class an aura which it tried to replicate in as many facets of society and culture as possible. Ultimately, this culture created itself from disparate elements from the Indian Ocean. It is perhaps an irony of history that the same body of water brought in the elements which eventually destroyed this culture.

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