

Early Globalization in the Indian Ocean World: An East African Perspective

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Prologue

Since April 2013¹ a sensational story has been reported of five copper coins originating in the once powerful East African city state of Kilwa, in modern Tanzania, believed to date back to the 1100s, found in a remote part of Australia's Northern Territory.

In 1944 towards the end of WW 2, the Australian soldier Maurie Isenberg was manning a radar station on Elcho Island, one of the uninhabited but strategically positioned Wessel Islands in Mission Bay, Cadell Strait. One day, while fishing on the beach, he discovered nine coins in a pouch buried in the sand. Isenberg saved them in a tin until 1979, when he sent them to Mr. Bill Mira, a respected numismatist in Sydney, to be identified. Four of the coins were identified as belonging to the Dutch East India Company, with one of them from the late 1600s.² The other five were identified as from Kilwa, believed to date back to the 1100s. The sultanate of Kilwa founded in 975 CC had started minting its own currency in the middle of the 11th century.

During the 12th and 14th centuries, the city-state of Kilwa (*Kilwa Kisiwani*) rose to become the most dominant trading center on the East Coast of Africa. It was the most prominent port on the East African littoral, bigger than Beira, Malindi and Mogadishu, while Mombasa and Zanzibar were still in the making. The Kilwa sultanate was founded by the legendary Shirazi who migrated to East Africa from Persia in the year 975 CC; and it was nearly destroyed by the Portuguese in 1505. Weakened by the ruthless Portuguese invasion and subsequent mercantile control, it

¹ See Mary Banfield (*Source of the News*, April 4, 2013), Kristen Butler (*UPI* May 20, 2013), Teo Kermeliotis (for *CNN* June 27, 2013) etc for details.

² The first European known to have visited Australia was the Dutch navigator Captain Willem Janszoon in 1606 – about 164 years before the British Captain James Cook who arrived at Australia's south-eastern coast in 1770 and “discovered” the continent and claimed the “terra nullius” for the British Crown.

gradually declined and was eventually abandoned in the early 19th century with the rise of Zanzibar.

During its heyday, the island city was a major trading centre for gold, ivory and hides from south-central Africa and Gujarati cloth, Arabian dates and pottery, Chinese porcelains, Cutchi and Maldivian cowrie shells, metal-ware, perfumes and spices from the northern regions of the Indian Ocean and the Far East, controlling much of the Indian Ocean trade with the hinterland of eastern Africa. Today, the site is covered by the standing remains that survived of the ancient city, including several mosques, a Portuguese fort and the famed *Husuni Kubwa* and *Husuni Ndogo* palaces. The Great Mosque of Kilwa Kisiwani is the oldest standing mosque on the East African coast, and in 1981 it was declared by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, its ruins offering today a glimpse of its glorious past. The great domes of the mosque, some of which were decorated with porcelain from China, date from the 13th century. Ancient graveyards similarly decorated with chinaware are found in several other places on the coast, e.g. in Paje on the south-east coast of Unguja Island in Zanzibar. Chinaware from the 6th century has been found in Unguja Ukuu in south-west of Unguja Island together with many Roman gold coins.³

Kilwa coins have been found outside of the Kilwa region only on two occasions: one coin was found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and one in Oman, but nowhere else. The story of the five Kilwa coins found in northern Australia has been received as astonishing news raising many questions.

How did the coins from distant Kilwa in East Africa end up on a beach in the isolated Wessel Islands in northern Australia? Are they from an old shipwreck? Did they belong to some Dutch, Portuguese, Arabian, Persian, Indian or Swahili sailors from Kilwa or some other port in East Africa? Sailors from old Kilwa, and indeed from all over the north-western Indian Ocean corridor, were renowned as expert navigators all across the sea route between Africa and China. Or were they East African, Arabian, Persian or India navigators hired by traders from the Far East to navigate their vessels, or were they hired by the Portuguese or the Dutch, like the Cutchi

³ Juma, Abdurahman (2004): *Unguja Ukuu on Zanzibar: An archaeological study of early urbanism*. Uppsala University, Sweden.

Indian captain Malam Kanji who had piloted Vasco da Gama's ship to Kalikat in India in 1498? Or were the coins brought by the Portuguese, who had reached the Australian shores with East African and Dutch coins in their possession? Similar questions have been raised about the presence of ancient Chinese coins in East Africa.⁴

Islam on the East African coast

The earliest concrete evidence of Islam and Muslims in eastern Africa is a mosque foundation in Lamu where gold, silver and copper coins dated AD 830 were found during an excavation in 1984. The oldest intact building in eastern Africa is a functioning mosque at Kizimkazi in the predominantly 'Shirazi' region of southern Unguja (Zanzibar) Island dated AD 1007.

This implies that the coastal and island settlements in East Africa were Muslim before the Shirazi settlement took place starting 975 CC, a fact which is supported by the Pate Chronicle and the excavated gold coin of dinar, struck by Seif Ullah Jafar Yahya, the Vizier of Khalifah Haroun bin Al-Rasheed (780-809), who sent several expeditions to 'Zangibar'. The gold coin dated 798 was excavated at Unguja Ukuu (Old Zanzibar City on the main island of Zanzibar), where Neville Chittick (1968 and 1974) has excavated pottery of the Sassanian Islamic type.

Recent archaeological excavations carried out at Unguja Ukuu at this site have added more to our knowledge of the early history of Unguja Island. A stone well at Unguja Ukuu together with several other early monuments of the East African coast that survive on the site have been attributed to the *Wadebuli*, claimed by early Swahili orature and Western scholars to be people of Arab descent from their colony in Daybul in India, or from *Udiba* or *Madiba* (the islands of the Maldives) in the Indian Ocean.⁵

It appears that Islam was common in the Indian Ocean by 1300 CC, mainly spread by the Hadhrami diaspora in South East Asia and the Far East.

⁴ Erin Conway-Smith (GlobalPost, June 8, 2011.)

⁵ Unguja Ukuu is a large site of about 17 ha, and it was a major center of an East African iron using farming community who occupied it from c. 500 AD. This settlement prior to its final abandonment in around 900 AD was a key urban centre built of mud and timber structures. It was engaged in regional trade with the opposite mainland, and indirectly as far away as Roman Egypt and the northern ports of the Indian Ocean. Radiocarbon dating and pottery have provided the basis for this chronology. See Abdurahman M. Juma (2004) for details on Unguja Ukuu. For the East African presence in the Indian sub-continent, see A. Y. Lodhi (2008), Linguistic Evidence of Bantu Origins of the Sidis of India, in *TADIA: The African Diaspora in Asia – Explorations on a less known fact*. Bangalore, India. p. 301-313.

Islamic polities were established about a thousand years ago in South-east Asia by Muslim traders from southern Arabia, the Gulf region and southern India. Many of the sultanates in the Malay Archipelago had been founded jointly by local rulers and South Arabian commercial families. Islam arrived in today's Philippines in the late 14th century and was spread by Muslim traders from several sultanates in present day Malaysia and Indonesia. In 1380 Karim ul' Makhdum, the first Arabian trader, reached the Sulu Archipelago and Jolo in the Philippines. He and his followers established Islam in the country through trade and some Muslim settlement. Within a couple of generations, Islam had spread to the southern tip of the Philippines reaching the Manila area by 1565.

By the beginning of the 15th century, most of today's Malaysia and Indonesia, northern Philippines and the islands of Mindanao in the south, were ruled by various Muslim sultanates of Borneo and much of the population was Muslim. However, the decline of Muslim communities started with the arrival of the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in March 1521 leading a Spanish expedition and his unsuccessful invasion a month later in which he was killed. Finally in 1570, the Spanish managed to conquer the country and forcefully convert most of the people to Catholicism.

When Ibn Batuta of Morocco visited the East African coastlands in 1332, all the way down from Somalia to the present border between Mozambique and South Africa, almost all of the coastal settlements were Muslim, and Arabic was the common literary and commercial language spoken all over the Indian Ocean - Batuta worked as a Kadhi, Supreme Muslim Jurist, in the Maldivian Islands for one year using Arabic as his working language; and Maldivian, an Indo-Aryan language, is still written in the Arabic script. Varieties of the Arabic script are also used widely in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, and by Muslim minorities in China, Burma, Kambodia and Thailand for their different mother tongues.

Islam thus seems to have arrived quite early to East Africa through traders. It certainly did not spread through conquest, but through trade contacts and some settlement, and it remained an urban and coastal phenomenon for quite long. Later it spread to the interior after 1729 when with help from Oman, the Portuguese were pushed beyond the Ruvuma River that forms the present Tanzania-Mozambique border. Intensive and extensive contacts of all kinds had given birth to the dynamic Swahili civilization of the period that thrived up to the arrival of the Portuguese at the

end of the 15th century, which in fact ended the eight centuries long *Islamic Period* in the Indian Ocean lands.

It would be erroneous to consider Islamic practices in eastern Africa as Arabic practices, and associate East African Islam with Omani Arabs, since Islam did not arabise East Africa; on the contrary, Islam and Islamic/Arabic practices got africanised or swahilised, thereby developing Islam as an indigenous African religion! This is also linguistically evidenced by the fact that Arabic-speaking immigrants of all social classes became Swahili speaking, adopted the Swahili dress, food and eating habits and other Swahili cultural elements.⁶

Islam is therefore not a foreign but rather a local religion on the coast, and along the old trade/caravan routes to the interior of eastern Africa. It is more of an urban religion also in the interior (as in Tabora, Morogoro, Moshi) and inland ports (Kigoma, Ujiji, Mwanza) of Tanzania and the rest of East Africa.

The Swahili coast was known to the navigators of antiquity in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. With the advent of Islam, East Africa was linked properly with Arabia, Persia and India, with the settlement of south Arabians in Zanzibar led by Prince Hamza in 695, and Arab fugitives from Mecca settled in Mogadisho in 740. After several minor migrations followed in 920 a group of rebel soldiers from Basra who established themselves as pirates in Socotra; their descendants later settled along the southern Somali coast. In 975 occurred the most notable migration in the region led by Ali bin Sultan al-Hassan, the legendary deposed ruler of Shiraz in Persia. These Iranians settled in Mombasa (Kenya), Pemba (Zanzibar), Kilwa (Tanganyika) and Sofala (Mozambique), intermarried with the local people and founded several dynasties and more urban settlements during the centuries that followed. The descendants of the Iranians and most of their subjects of mixed African, Arab, Iranian and Indian origins identified themselves as Shirazi, a generic term used even today, especially in Zanzibar where a large majority of the people call themselves *Washirazi*. However, there is much ambiguity of Shirazi ethnicity (Allen 1993 *passim*) and its role in the history of East Africa in general and the post-

⁶ For a history of the (Omani) Arabs in Eastern Africa, see Lodhi, A. Y. (1986), The Arabs in Zanzibar – from the Sultanate to the People’s Republic, *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, VII 2:404-418.

World War II politics of Zanzibar in particular (Prins 1967, Ricks 1970, Spear 1984, Tominaga and Sheriff 1990, Lodhi 2007).

The Iranians and Arabs called the East African coastlands *Zangibar*, the land of the Zanj, i.e. the land of the dark-brown people, the Black Coast. The Shirazi ‘colonization’ (Chittick 1968) consolidated Islam making a formative contribution, both politically, economically and culturally, supplementing the Swahili language with the Arabic script, thus supplying essential elements for forming a cultural unity along the coast which had many common denominators with other Muslim cultures of the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. This unity provided the Swahili/Shirazi with lucrative markets for their products. Trade was established with India and the Far East, and in 1071 and 1082 East African emissaries from Kilwa were sent to China. Much later in 1415 a Chinese mission headed by an admiral of the Ming dynasty visited ‘Zangistan’ (Allen 1993:136-138).

Abdul Sheriff, commenting on N. K. Chaudhuri’s second *magnum opus* of 1990 on the Indian Ocean, questions the limitation Chaudhuri imposes on East Africa as being in the periphery of the Indian Ocean, and that after having convincingly argued for a treatment of the “Indian Ocean as a cohesive world system based on common means of travel, movements of people, economic exchange, climate, and other historical forces” (Sheriff 1997b:2). The East African Swahili coast formed not only the western rim of the Indian Ocean but also the western part of its “bazaar nexus” that stretched from Zanzibar to Djakarta, from long before the arrival of the Portuguese well into the twentieth century, and remnants of this compradorial system in East Africa still survive in Zanzibar, Mombasa and Daressalaam which continue to serve the huge hinterland with Asian commodities from Dubai, Muscat, Karachi, Bombay, Singapore and Hongkong, or European commodities for the past five decades mostly passing through the emporia in Dubai and Muscat. Sugata Bose (1996) has questioned both Asian and African scholars and historiographers for ignoring these continuities and unities that persist in the Indian Ocean trade system.

The civilizations of the north-western Indian Ocean “were recognised by their respective members in their own time-frame to be separate and distinct from one another. The limits and boundaries were established at several levels of perceptions and often the structural unities and disunities lay below the level of collective awareness. People who ate rice, fish and the

derivatives of the coconut, to take only one example, sharply distinguished themselves from those who lived on bread, meat and dairy products. This was a separation largely mapped by climate and geography onto social habits and traditions. But the rice-eating communities were themselves divided by language, religion, culture and ethnic identities” (Chaudhuri 1990:32-33).

However, after the coming and spread of Islam, these divisions were blurred by the unifying force of the Islamic religion and the Arabic language before the ‘Columbian’ period starting in 1492, which in the Indian Ocean started in 1497 with the penetration of the Portuguese. Moreover, the trade connections developed during the Portuguese period “not only entailed an exchange of products between [all the] continents but also fostered by sea and river the spread of commodities which until then could only take place overland....” (Mota 1978:15).

“As an exercise in comparative economic and social history” of the Indian Ocean and to “locate the outer and inner limits of the different civilizations,” Chaudhuri (1990:34) divides further his “two ‘sets’ of ‘housing’ and ‘food’ into ‘sub-sets’ and ‘elements’ associated with food habits, food production (techniques of rice growing), styles of housing, building materials and construction methods The outer limits of the two sets of ‘food’ and ‘housing’ are fixed in the first instance by the linguistic sense of the words, and in the second by the expression Indian Ocean.”

Contrary to the claim in Chaudhuri (1990:36) that “In spite of its close connection with Islamic world, the indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean,” the Swahili cuisine, for example, as described by Lodhi (2000, Chapter 8) and Amidu (2009), shows clearly that the Swahili people were and still are an integral part of the Indian Ocean chain of civilizations and the Indian Ocean food cultures, and in fact the most inclusive of all the cuisines found in the rim of the Indian Ocean, since the Swahili have blended well elements from the kitchens of the African, Middle Eastern/Islamic, Indian, Indonesian and Far Eastern members of the Indian Ocean food complex. This is clearly seen also in the history, language, literature, dress, architecture and music of the Waswahili people and other Muslims of Eastern Africa which they share with the other peoples of the Indian Ocean world. These Oriental loans and cuisine influences are spreading deep into the heart of Africa, from the Indian Ocean to the Lakes, with the spread of the Swahili language and its urban mode of life.

Contacts between the Arabic, Persian, Indic and Indonesian speaking peoples of the northern and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean and the coastal peoples of East Africa resulted in the growth of what we know today as the Kiswahili language, the traditional language of the coastalist Waswahili. The northerners introduced writing to East Africa and formal education in the madrasa with the arrival of Islam spread literacy to the masses. Hence Kiswahili is necessarily associated with Islam and Muslims, though the vast majority who today use Kiswahili in and out of Eastern Africa are not Muslim. And Kiswahili continues borrowing freely words from Arabic!

The Arabic and Islamic influences in Swahili are in all aspects of life in the Swahili society in particular, and the Eastern African region in general, as noted by Ružička (1953) and Effat (1997). The south Arabian contacts however refer particularly to parts of a ship and shipbuilding, more common among the northern Swahili who are geographically closer to the Hadramaut coast of Yemen and who have mixed very much with the Hadrami people. Emigration from the Swahili coast to the Gulf region and Oman, immigration from Hadramaut and Iran to East Africa, and Arabian and Iranian integration with the Swahili people continues even today (Fuglesang 1994, Lodhi 2000). Contacts between various peoples of the north-western parts of the Indian Ocean are numerous; only in the second half of the twentieth century the movement of the people has been mainly from East Africa to western and south-western Asia. An estimated one million East Africans and their descendants of diverse ethnic origins are today living and working in the Middle East (Lodhi 1986c and Sandberg 1994).

The general level of culture contact between communities can be determined to an appreciable extent from a study of the stratification of the vocabulary of the languages involved. The older layer of vocabulary which is less productive and less regular, includes mostly words without stem forming roots and having particular kinds of meanings. This may be assembled in five groups:

1. stars, time, the weather and the natural world,
2. animals and their products,
3. trees and plants,
4. parts of the body,
5. the family, home and tools.

In Swahili, there are many loanwords of Arabic, Persian and Indic origin pertaining to group 4. parts of the body (and body liquids). As for groups 1. and 5., most of the loanwords are of primarily Arabic origin, and secondarily of Persian and Indic origin, whereas in groups 2. and 3. many of them are of mixed oriental origin. A large proportion of the neologisms of the last five decades in all types of registers of terminology are based on ‘international’ or European (Greco-Latin, French or German) terms indirectly borrowed from English.

There is little Arabic grammatical intrusion in Swahili, but which is further spreading to the other languages of Eastern Africa, not regarding the abundant Arabic indirect lexical borrowings in these languages (Lodhi 2000b and 2005b).

Persian and Indian words show a wide range of cultural activity, but they are prominent for maritime terms, tools, architecture, textiles and garments, food and spices, and they generally depict the patrician life style of the urban Swahili upper class. As for Swahili and Indic loans from East Africa in the Hadhrami variant of Arabic, Al-Aidaros (1996, 1997 and 1998) has prepared three studies which describe one northward movement of East African influences in the western Indian Ocean. There is hardly any such study of East African elements in the Arabic language use of Oman and the Gulf States.

Muslim oriental cultures have influenced greatly East African societies; a linguistic consequence of these influences has been lexical borrowings. Oriental items have been entering for more than two millennia now, and European items (other than a few Greek and Latin early indirect loans) started with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, but mostly in the second half of the twentieth century.

Some of the Persian and Indic loans have very high frequency and so they are ‘everyday words’, e.g. *serikali* (government), *ankra* (bill, invoice), *bepari* (merchant, capitalist), *ubepari* (capitalism), *bima* (insurance), *embe* (mango), *gari* (vehicle, wagon), *godoro* (mattress), *hundi* (cheque, promissory note). Some of them, e.g. *godoro*, appear in classical Swahili poetry such as the A1-Inkishafi of 1750 CC and some wedding songs.

The Persian and Indian contribution to the material culture of the Swahili including Comorians, and the East Africans in general, can be appreciated from the long lists of Persian and Indic elements in Swahili (Lodhi 2000). Similar influences of Arabic are found in the languages of South Asia (Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives), South-East Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei) and northern Madagascar to some extent.

The spread of Islam and the Arabic language through North Africa to the Iberian peninsula laid the foundations in Western Europe of modern science including geography and deep-seafaring which resulted in the era of explorations and discoveries, the European Atlantic Slave Trade and widespread colonization that solidified the foundations of the Christian Western civilization and its dominance with Christopher Columbus crossing the Atlantic in late 1492 and returning to Spain in early 1493.

However, the *Islamic Period* in the Indian Ocean world was followed by the *Columbian Period*, bringing about great and lasting changes throughout the world. It is the period we are living in, in a world civilization which is a direct product of the *Columbian Exchange* initially carried on by the Portuguese and the Spanish. The Columbian Exchange was a worldwide spread and exchange of animals, plants, cultures, human populations including slaves, communicable diseases, and ideas between the American and Afro-Eurasian hemispheres.⁷

The contacts between these two regions of the earth circulated a wide variety of new crops and livestock which easily supported population increases in all parts of the world. Seafarers returned to Europe from the Americas with maize, potatoes, and tomatoes, which became very important crops in Europe; and Europeans introduced cassava, yams and peanuts from the Americas to tropical Africa and Asia where they flourished and supported population growth in areas that otherwise would not produce large yields. This exchange included also a variety of beans, vetches and lupins, squash, mangoes, coconuts, pineapples, cashew to name only a few. By the middle of the 1800s, some of these items had replaced traditional European and African crops as their most important staple food crops, e.g. potato in Europe and cassava and maize in Africa.

One of the earliest European exports of Asiatic origin to the Americas, the horse, changed drastically the lives of many Native American communities on the Great Plains, allowing them to shift to a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting bison oxen on horseback. Tomatoes and tomato sauce, originating in Mexico, are spread all over the world, originally via Italy, while coffee from Africa and sugar cane and bananas from Asia have become the main commodity crops of extensive Latin American plantation economy. Introduced to India by the Portuguese,

⁷ The term “Columbian Exchange” was coined in 1972 by the historian Alfred W. Crosby, University of Texas at Austin, in his eponymous work of environmental history *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30th Anniversary Edition, 2003.

chili/paprika from Central and South America is today an integral part of many South Asian, South-East Asian and African cuisines.

Summary

Islam was embraced early by most of the people living around the rim of the Indian Ocean and its islands who soon developed further the various regional cultures, based on their mercantile networks of long standing. This was facilitated by their common faith Islam and their common religious and trade language Arabic. By the end of the 13 century CC, almost all communities in the Indian Ocean world were active participants in this Islamic Civilization, which extended from the Atlantic and West Africa to what later became the Philippines in the Far East, and Bulgaria in Eastern Europe and the northern districts of Central Asia to the southernmost shores of the East African littoral.

By the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, Islam was firmly established all along the East African coastal belt and the northern and eastern regions of the Indian Ocean including most of Malaysia and Indonesia; and almost all the ruling families of the coastal towns, islands and city states had Arab, Persian, Indian, Indonesian and African blood ties because of their maritime contacts and political connections between the northern, western and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean. Muslim or Arab colonization or conquest of non-Muslims, as in northern and western Africa, did not exist in Eastern Africa or South-Eastern Asia.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 CC spearheading Christian European colonialism, Muslims of all origins controlled almost all ports and trade in the Indian Ocean world, sharing not only their Islamic faith and the Arabic language, by then the most widely spread international language of religion, trade and learning, but sharing also to a great extent architecture, cuisine, dress, music and literature.⁸ The Arabic script was used to write many languages which until then

⁸ For details on the language situation along the East African Coast, see Lodhi, A. Y. (2005), 'Convergence of Languages on the East African Coast', in *Linguistic Convergence and Areal Diffusion – Case studies from Iranian, Semitic and Turkic*. Eva Agnes Csato, Bo Isaksson & Carina Jahani (eds.), RoutledgeCurzon, Oxford & New York pp. 349-364.

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had been only oral, and it was even adapted and adopted by several literary languages spoken by both Muslims and non-Muslims especially in the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia. To the great Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta, who visited East Africa at the beginning of 1332, the Indian Ocean seemed to be “a Muslim sea” where Muslims controlled all the trade and ruled all over the Indian Ocean world, pledging allegiance to the Caliph in Baghdad. This was early globalization in the Indian Ocean World!

Sources and References

Literature on the history and peoples of the Indian Ocean lands is in abundance. I have found my data in the following list of references. I have felt it to be inconvenient, unnecessary and, as Prins (1965) states in his Preface, “impracticable to always quote my sources”. Most paragraphs would have consisted of numerous and redundant footnotes if I had done so. However, sources have been quoted wherever it has been found meaningful to do so.

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