

## **Early Globalization in the Indian Ocean World (An East African Perspective).**

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### **Prologue**

Since April 2013, a sensational story has been reported of five copper coins originating in the Tanzanian island of Kilwa, believed to date back to the 1100s, found in a remote part of northern Australia.

In 1944 towards the end of WW 2, an Australian soldier discovered nine coins buried on a beach. He saved them until 1979, when four of the coins were identified as belonging to the Dutch East India Company from the 1600s.<sup>1</sup> The other five were identified as from Kilwa, believed to date back to the 1100s. The city-state of Kilwa founded by the Shirazi from Persia in 975 rose to become the most dominant trading center in East Africa. It was destroyed by the Portuguese invasion in 1505. It gradually declined and was eventually abandoned in the early 1800s with the rise of Zanzibar.

During their heyday, East African port-cities were trading centres for gold, ivory and hides from south-central Africa and pottery, porcelains, cloth, cowrie shells, metal-ware, perfumes and spices from Arabia, Persia, India and China, controlling much of the ocean trade with the hinterland of eastern Africa.

Today, many ancient coastal sites are covered by monumental ruins offering a glimpse of their glorious past. Some ancient mosque domes and graveyards are decorated with 13th century porcelain from China, e.g. in Paje, Zanzibar. Chinaware from the 6<sup>th</sup> century has been found in Unguja Ukuu, Zanzibar, together with many Roman gold coins.<sup>2</sup>

This astonishing news of Kilwa coins found in Australia has raised many questions. How did the coins from distant East Africa end up on an isolated island in Australia? Are they from an old shipwreck? Did they belong to East African, Asian or European sailors? Were they from Arabian, Persian or Indian navigators hired by European traders to sail their vessels to the Far East? Were the ancient African and Dutch coins brought there by Portuguese sailors? Similar questions have been raised about the presence of ancient Chinese coins in East Africa.<sup>3</sup>

### **Muslim Polities in the Rim of the Indian Ocean and the East Indies**

Islam was common in the Indian Ocean by 1300 AD, spread mainly by the Hadhrami diaspora from southern Yemen. Muslim polities were established there about a millenium ago by traders from Arabia and India. Many sultanates in the Malay Archipelago had been founded jointly by local rulers and South Arabian merchant houses. Islam arrived in today's Philippines in the late 14th century. Starting in 1380, Arabian traders and their followers from sultanates in present day Malaysia and Indonesia established Islam in the country through trade and settlement. Islam spread quickly to the rest of the Philippines reaching Manila by 1565.

By 1400, most of the Philippines and Mindanao islands were ruled by Muslim sultanates of Borneo. The decline of Muslim communities started when the Spanish arrived and unsuccessfully invaded them in 1521. Finally in 1570, the Spanish conquered the country and forcefully spread Catholicism.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch visited Australia in 1606 – about 164 years before the British Captain James Cook in 1770 and “discovered” the continent claiming it for the British Crown.

<sup>2</sup> Juma, Abdurahman (2004): *Unguja Ukuu on Zanzibar: An archaeological study of early urbanism*. Uppsala University, Sweden.

<sup>3</sup> Erin Conway-Smith (GlobalPost, June 8, 2011.)

With the spread of Islam in the Indian Ocean, ethnic and cultural divisions were blurred among the Muslims by the unifying force of their religion and the common language Arabic before the ‘Columbian’ period which in the Indian Ocean started in 1498 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).

The spread of Islam and Arabic through North Africa to Iberia had laid the foundations in 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 the Atlantic voyages of Columbus beginning 1492.

The *Islamic Period* in the Indian Ocean world was followed by the *Columbian Period*, bringing about great and lasting changes throughout the world, evolving 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 drastic worldwide spread and exchange of animals, plants, cultures, human populations including slaves, communicable diseases, and ideas between the American and Afro-Eurasian hemispheres.<sup>4</sup> Exchange of a wide variety of new crops and livestock easily supported population increases in all parts of the world and changed drastically the lives of many native populations, affecting their economic activities, staple foods, cuisine and eating habits.

### **Swahili Islamic Civilization 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 830 CC were found in 1984. The oldest intact building in eastern Africa is a functioning mosque at Kizimkazi in southern Unguja Island (Zanzibar) dated 1007 CC. The coastal and island settlements in East Africa had become Muslim early which is supported by the Pate and Kilwa Chronicles and the excavated Abbasid gold coin of dinar dated 798 excavated at Unguja Ukuu together with Sassanian pottery.

Recent archaeological excavations in East Africa have added more to our knowledge of the early history of the coast where several early monuments have been attributed to the *Wadibuli*, a legendary people of Arab-Indian descent from Daybul in India, or the *Wadiba* from Maldives.<sup>5</sup>

The Iranians and Arabs called the East African coastlands *Zangibar*, the land of the Zanj, i.e. of dark-brown people, the Black Coast. The Shirazi ‘colonization’ (Chittick 1968) consolidated Islam making a formative contribution, 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, North Africa and the Middle East. Trade was established with India and the Far East, and in 1071 and 1082 East African emissaries were sent to China. Later in 1415, a Chinese mission headed by an admiral of the Ming dynasty visited ‘Zangistan’ (Allen 1993:136-138).

When the great Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta of Morocco visited East Africa in 1332, almost all 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 in Maldives for one year

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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).

using Arabic as his working language - Maldivian, an Indo-Aryan language, is still written in the Arabic script.

Islam arrived early to East Africa through traders and spread through trade contacts and commercial settlement. Contacts of all kinds had evolved the dynamic Swahili civilization that thrived up to the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century, which ended the eight centuries long *Islamic Period* in the Indian Ocean lands.

### **Concluding remarks**

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 13th century, 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 Eastern Europe and Central Asia to the southernmost shores of East Africa.

When the Portuguese appeared in 1498, Islam was firmly established along the East African coastal belt and the coastlands of the Indian Ocean including most of Malaysia and Indonesia; most 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 various parts of the ocean.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 spearheading Christian European colonialism, Muslims of all origins controlled all ports and trade in the Indian Ocean world, sharing their Islamic faith and the Arabic language, by then the most widely spread international language of religion, trade and learning. They shared also art and architecture, cuisine, dress, music and literature.<sup>6</sup> The Arabic script was used to write many languages which until then had been only oral, and it was even used by several literary languages spoken by both Muslims and non-Muslims in India and South-East Asia. To Ibn Batuta during 1330s, the Indian Ocean seemed to be “a Muslim sea” where Muslims controlled all trade and ruled all over the ocean, pledging allegiance to the Caliph in Baghdad. This was early globalization in the Indian Ocean World!

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

For a history of the Arabic language in Eastern Africa and its influence on Swahili in particular and other East African languages in general, see *Encyclopedia of the Arabic Language and Linguistics* (EALL, 2005), Brill, Leiden. pp. 379-384.

For a history of the Persian/Iranian presence in East Africa, see Lodhi, A. Y. (2007) ‘Iranian Presence in East Africa’ in *Haft kongere wa haft murraka (Elegant Message and Eternal Beautitude)*, Essays in honour of Professor Habibullah Amouzegar, (Eds.) M. A. Khajeh-Najafi & M. Assemi. Uppsala. p. 267-274.

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## Other sources

Literature on the history and peoples of the Indian Ocean lands is in abundance. Of particular interest to the topic of this paper are the several illuminating works of Professors Edward E. Alpers, Randolph L. Pouwels, Neville Chittick, G.S.P Freeman-Grenville, Abdul Sheriff, John E. G. Sutton, Philippe Beaujard, Thomas Spear and James de Vere Allen which contain a wealth of sources and references.

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Summary of paper originally presented at the International Symposium on the History and Culture of the Islamic Civilization in Eastern Africa, Zanzibar, Tanzania. 2-4 September 2013. University of Oman & State University of Zanzibar (SUZA).