



THE DEBATE: SWAHILI HISTORIOGRAPHY: 'ARAB VS AFRICAN'

Until the middle of the twentieth century it was assumed by historians that the Swahili coastal trading culture of east Africa was primarily a product of Muslim Arab/Persian immigration, and was therefore not really 'African' at all. Apart from the fact that this suited the racial prejudices of colonial historians, it drew for its evidence upon the work of medieval Arabic writers, and the archaeological evidence of the most visible 'Muslim' architecture of certain prominent east African sites such as Mogadishu, Zanzibar, Pemba, Malindi and Kilwa. For instance, Al-Masudi (writing in the early 10th century) noted Muslims on Qanbalu (probably Pemba); while al-Idrisi (c.1150) recorded that most Zanzibaris were Muslim, with some also at Mogadishu. The tendency, illustrated by J. S. Kirkman, *Gedi, the Palace* (The Hague, 1963), was to assume that 'Muslim' necessarily meant settlers from the Arabian Peninsula or the Persian Gulf. It was known from the Kilwa Chronicle (Arabic and Portuguese versions) that a 'Shirazi' dynasty was ruling Kilwa from at least the thirteenth century, and it was assumed therefore that this was a foreign implant, especially as it was from this time that Kilwa began to rise to prominence with its access to the Zimbabwean gold trade through the Mozambican coastal port of Sofala.

In 1965 the archaeologist Neville Chittick published an influential article in the *Journal of African History* (VI, 3, 1965, pp 275-94), entitled 'The 'Shirazi' Colonisation of East Africa'. Basing his conclusion upon both the Arabic sources and his own archaeological examination of Kilwa and in particular its own minted coins, Chittick concluded that the 'Shirazi' migration to Kilwa was not, as previously assumed, direct from the Persian Gulf, but rather an indirect infiltration of Muslim immigrants from the Benadir coast of southern Somalia, possibly under pressure from renewed immigration to that northern part of the coast, the latter claiming 'Shirazi' origins. Although convincing, Chittick's article did not scotch the tendency of historians to assume that 'Muslim' on the coast meant Arab (or Persian).

Chittick went on to publish two major works on his archaeological excavations: *Kilwa: An Islamic trading city on the East African coast* (1974) and *Manda: Excavations at an island port on the Kenya coast* (1984). It took the work of



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Mark Horton (1996) on Shanga in the Lamu archipelago (northern Kenya), however, to finally lay to rest the 'Arab versus African' debate.

Horton's was part of an eight-year project on the fifteen hectare site of Shanga where more than 200 stone structures were identified besides some 300 stone tombs. He traced continuous occupancy from the pre-Islamic period of the eighth century through to the fifteenth century. Excavating below the clearly Islamic structures and down to the earliest settlements, Horton concluded that there were African peoples making Early Iron Age pottery living along the east African coast in farming, cattle-keeping and fishing settlements for some time *before* the rise of Islam. They engaged in occasional trade with visiting Indian Ocean merchants. It was thus a distinctive maritime urban culture, stretching from Mogadishu in the north to the Comoros in the south, before the expansion of Islam in the late 8th century. These early settlements were built in a distinctly African style, around a central, circular cattle enclosure. Initially, visiting Muslim traders built small wooden mosques, close to, but not within the African settlement. But as they stayed and apparently married into the local ruling family, their mosques were rebuilt, larger and within the African town, implying local conversion to Islam.

It was really only from the 10th and 11th centuries that the housing, mosques and palaces of the ruling elite began to be built of coral rock (imported from the Red Sea), and their towns to develop a more 'Muslim' cultural appearance, centred around an elaborate stone-built mosque. All of this was *before* the so-called 'Shirazi' migration of the late 12th century. Thus, whatever the input of Muslim immigrants at various periods over the centuries, the Muslim Swahili coastal trading culture that characterised the east African coast was built upon distinctly African foundations. This point is reinforced by the fact that Swahili is an African language, to which Arabic words and usages have been added, even though when Swahili was first transcribed into writing, it was through an Arabic script.

The Arab input into eastern African trading in the nineteenth century has at times been oversimplified. The issue is confused by the writings of contemporary European travellers whose 'journals of exploration' (see Chapter 22, pp. 328-331) are the principal source of evidence for interior traders at this time. They tended to refer to all long-robed Muslim traders from the east coast as 'Moors' or 'Arabs'. Tippu Tip, for instance (see Figure 18.7 and pp.286-7, 345-6), was referred to by both Livingstone and Stanley as an 'Arab', though he was in fact of mixed Swahili, Arab and Nyamwezi ancestry. There was undoubtedly a considerable increase in the number of Arab immigrants to Zanzibar and coastal towns during the nineteenth century. And some of those penetrating the interior trading networks at this time were indeed of Arab origin. But any focus on ethnicity is a distraction from the fact that the

overwhelming majority of coastal east Africans were Swahili, in both language and culture, even if many Swahili liked to trace their family lineages to Arab or Persian ancestors. So the term 'Swahili' will be used here to refer to Muslim traders of coastal origin whatever their particular ancestry. However, although coastal Swahili were often the leaders of long-distance interior trading expeditions, the vast majority of the members of their caravans — hunters, raiders and porters — were local recruits, captives or volunteers from the interior.