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Religion and Trade in the Indian Ocean: Zanzibar in the 1800s

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East Africa

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Near the coast of equatorial Africa, separated from the continent by a canal some 50 kilometres long, is the island of Zanzibar (*Unguja*). It is the largest of the coral islands of the eastern coast of Africa and forms part of a coral reef that extends from the near island of Pemba (*al-khudra*, the green, or emerald island), to the north, as far as the island of Mafia to the south. It constitutes a type of extraneous coastline to the continent. The city of Zanzibar is situated to the west of the island and its port, one of the best of Africa, allows deep anchorage for the docking of the ships. Zanzibar has always been strategically important due to two fundamentally important points: its proximity to the continent and the monsoons. The regular recurrence of these latter allows continuous contacts with India, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf; while the closeness of Zanzibar to the coast places it in an ideal position for commerce between the interior of the African continent and the Indian Ocean.

Notwithstanding a marked heterogeneity of its population – a polyethnic and a multi-religious society – south-eastern Zanzibar is inhabited principally by Bantu-speaking people known as Hadimu (Wahadimu), while the Tumbatu (Watumbatu) are found in the northern part of the island. The Wapemba tribe, however, inhabits the island of Pemba. These groups are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school, despite strong connections to animism (during times of political and economic uncertainty witches, sorcerers, and an aggressive dwarf with one eye named Popobawa played a crucial role in Zanzibar). Both the Hadimu and the Tumbatu are dedicated to fishing, agriculture and animal breeding, whilst the Hadimu women are entirely responsible for the manufacture of cord made from coconut fibre in villages in the south of the island.

According to James de Vere Allen, the spread of Islam in East Africa occurred around circa AD 1050-1150.¹ Islam undoubtedly made a tremendous impact upon the people of Zanzibar. During the late 13th-14th centuries, due to an increasing number of merchants, travellers and immigrants coming from southern Yemen, from Hadramawt and from other non-Shiite areas, a solid Sunni-Shafi'i community emerged.

The mercantile power of Zanzibar

At the beginning of the 1800s, the links between the East African Coast and the Indian Ocean opened up a great deal of commercial contacts, which then flourished. With this in mind, the hegemonic accession of the Omani tribe of Al Bu Sa'idi (Ibadhi) to Zanzibar can be seen as highly symbolic. During the 19th century, the island of Zanzibar represented one of the four terminals of Oman-Arab mercantile powers of the Al Bu Sa'idi tribe, together with the port of Maskat in Oman, the ports of the Asiatic coastal strip of Baluchistan, Makran, the mercantile centres of the coast of West India and the coasts of East Africa. There were clear power connections among the Baluch of Makran, the Arabs of Oman, the mercantile communities of West India and the Africans of Zanzibar: the Omani were the political leaders, the Baluch the military force, the Indians were brokers, financiers, bankers and tax collectors, and the Africans were slaves. The Al Bu Sa'idi and in particular their most glorious exponent, Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'idi (1791-1856), proposed a division of power – thanks also to their ethnic-religious superiority, as one is Ibadhi only through birth and not conversion. This division would not be without conflict, although the Ibadhi sultans were highly tolerant, and it has to be remembered that the centrality of Islam, together with the power of magic and ritual of

the Zanzibar tribes, decreased since the early 19th century. Inevitably, the presence of Omani governors (*liwali*) with their Baluch mercenaries, and of Indian merchants was bitterly resented by the local population.

The Asiatic community of Baluch warriors represented strength, the *shawkah*. They were Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school and, those coming from Makran, Zikris; as they were famous for their tactics and courage, the Arabs always considered the Baluch more trustworthy than the Arab mercenaries. Another essential and decisive factor for the extraordinary development of Zanzibar in the 1800s was the even more active presence of the Indian mercantile communities. The *banyan*, considered by the Arabs as *mushrikun* (polytheists), were absorbed into and protected by the institution of *aman* (protection). The first Indian merchants to trade in Maskat and in the Persian Gulf were the Bhattia (from *bhatti*, *subhatta*, Hindu warriors from the Vaishnavi caste), originally from Rajahstan. Another group of Bhattia was the Kutchi, also comprised of Hindus who enjoyed great privileges in Maskat and who were exempt from paying taxes to the Arabs. Together with this group of Hindu merchants were the *khujas* (*khwajahs*), Ismailites. They were described by explorers and English merchants of the 1800s as being slight of figure, with a lighter complexion than that of the Arabs, with long moustaches, no beards and a Chinese ponytail at the base of their shaved heads. The richness and elegance of their clothing, as distinguished by silk tunics with long, ornate sleeves, was a sure sign that manual work was foreign to them. Socially isolated from the Arabs, they observed a strict endogamy and were principally devoted to boat construction. The Ismailite Indians were numerically the largest group in East Africa. Yet at the beginning of the 19th century, it was the Hindu merchants who maintained and intensified an undisputed financial hegemony. Islam in Zanzibar was often used as a political weapon, defining hierarchical differences and ethnic origins. But, it should be stressed that profit, not power, was what counted.²

Consequently, the Omani dynasty of Al Bu Sa'idi respected the Hindu merchants' wide-ranging connections in the western Indian Ocean, which allowed them to enjoy the functions of both mediators and lenders in the various Indian mercantile communities present in Zanzibar, and also to benefit from their widespread presence within Swahili society. It was this emergence of a politically powerful elite, in contact with native population that gave rise to the commercial splendour of Zanzibar. The lucrative trading of the West Indian Coast constituted all types of merchandise and spices, which in most cases were valuable.

Slavery in Zanzibar

The most important 'product' brought by the Arabs in Africa, however, were slaves. Bearing this in mind, the growth in the demand for sugar cane from the Mascarene islands and for ivory and cloves from East Africa fired the continual demand for slaves



ZANZIBAR NATIONAL ARCHIVE MUSEUM.

Portrait of Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'idi (1791-1856)

on the plantations (*shamba*) in Zanzibar and for manual labour for the transportation of goods. This caused a widespread migration of slaves from the interior of the African continent towards the coasts and the islands. Slavery did not only occur as a result of direct capture, but also resulted from misleading contracts between the tribes of the interior – among others, the Yao and Nyamwezi – and the slave merchants. Furthermore, there were the recurring periods of drought along the Mirima coast, opposite the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. Slaves that came from areas not influenced by the Swahili culture were not Muslims (Islam was the religion of all free Swahilis within the Arab dominion); these slaves were the property of their owners. They represented a closed caste not yet absorbed into the coastal population, either having been transported in their childhood within the borders of Zanzibar or born into slavery. The most privileged were naturally the domestic slaves. The demand for slaves came from various quarters: from Arabia, foremost, where the cultivation of dates demanded a high influx of man labour at zero cost; from India, where they were used on oases, on sugar and tea plantations; from Central Asia, where they started the practice of cotton cultivation; from various areas of the Ottoman Empire; and from America. Another 'speciality' was the eunuch, especially appreciated in the Ottoman Empire. The organ mutilation was carried out in totally unhygienic conditions, resulting in a survival rate of one in ten of those eunuchs transported from Africa.

Zanzibar, however, remained undisturbed, almost non-existent to the Europeans, until the French arrived at the close of the 18th century. The influence of the French in Zanzibar was exerted through commercial treaties and agreements with the Arabs present on the island concerning trade in slaves and African ivory – both flourishing and lucrative commodities. Very soon, however,

fascination for the blank spaces on the world map, together with the archetype of the 'exotic island' which Zanzibar represented (rich in spices, perfumes, luxuriant vegetation, with drinking water, fruit and good money-making prospects through the commercial trading of slaves, ivory and spices and other commercial temptations) opened the door to a new world scene. The centre of this scene was to take the shape of Anglo-French rivalry for strategic control and political-commercial supremacy over the Indian Ocean – a rivalry that developed from the predominance of Great Britain, which virtually transformed the waters of the Indian Ocean into an English lake. Britain's impact on Zanzibar during the 1800s undoubtedly interfered with the social and religious composition of the island; its strategy was based on commercial-political control of local mechanisms of power, mainly through the banning of slave trade. The power of Al Bu Sa'idi in Zanzibar in the 1800s was inevitably destined to decline. ♦

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Notes

1. J. de Vere Allen, (1993), *Swahili Origins. Swahili Culture & the Shungwaya Phenomenon*, London, Currey, p. 16.
2. J. Middleton, (1992), *The World of the Swahili. An African Mercantile Civilization*, Yale University Press, p. 44.