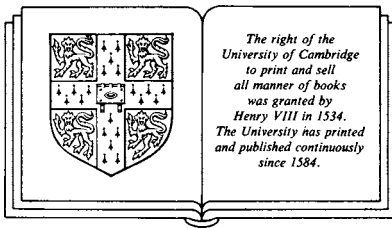


HORN AND CRESCENT

Cultural change and traditional
Islam on the East African coast, 800–1900

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Contents

| | | |
|--|-------------|------|
| <i>List of illustrations and maps</i> | <i>page</i> | vi |
| <i>Preface</i> | | vii |
| <i>List of abbreviations</i> | | viii |
| Introduction | | 1 |
| 1 The roots of a tradition, 800–1500 | | 6 |
| 2 The emergence of a tradition, 900–1500 | | 17 |
| 3 A northern metamorphosis, 1500–1800 | | 32 |
| <i>Appendix</i> | | 55 |
| 4 Town Islam and the <i>umma</i> ideal | | 63 |
| 5 Wealth, piety, justice, and learning | | 75 |
| 6 The Zanzibar Sultanate, 1812–88 | | 97 |
| 7 New secularism and bureaucratic centralization | | 125 |
| 8 A new literacy | | 145 |
| 9 The early colonial era, 1885–1914 | | 163 |
| 10 Currents of popularism and eddies of reform | | 191 |
| <i>Notes</i> | | 209 |
| <i>Glossary</i> | | 253 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | | 256 |
| <i>Index</i> | | 269 |

Illustrations

| | <i>page</i> |
|--|-------------|
| 1 <i>Mwinyi Mkuu</i> of Zanzibar c. 1850, from Otto Kerston's <i>Baron Carl Claus von der Decken's Reisen in Ost-Afrika in den Jahren 1859 bis Leipzig and Heidelberg</i> : C. F. Winter'sche, 1871, vol. II, p. 89 <i>1865</i> | 107 |
| 2 Sayyid Ahmad bin Sumayt. Reproduced by courtesy of the late Chief <i>Qadi</i> of Kenya, Shaykh Abdallah Salih Farsy | 153 |

Maps

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 1 The Western Indian Ocean | xiv |
| 2 The Northern coast | 43 |

Introduction

The history of coastal culture outlined in this work differs significantly from past interpretations. Prior to the nineteenth century, at least, coastal urban culture and religion were uniquely local phenomena essentially dominated by their African physical and intellectual ambience, while remaining open and responsive to transoceanic intellectual stimuli. This, of course, implies certain things about coastal Africans and Islam. It means, for one thing, that their intellectual and cultural traditions were substantial enough to continue having 'meaning' for them even when and where pressures for change were greatest. It means that these people and their traditions were sufficiently strong and supple to respond positively to new opportunities while maintaining control over potentially destabilizing changes they brought with them. It means that monotheism (in the form of Islam) presented supplementary doctrines and symbols to which local traditions could be adapted and which were suitably representative of this changing intellectual environment to an extent that cannot be ignored. In the end, it also implies that 'Arabs' were rarely, if ever, in a position to *impose* change so much that local peoples more frequently *adapted* to it.

Exactly what were the 'origins' of coastal culture and when they emerged are contentious issues among scholars. It is admittedly a matter of definition, for example, to say just when coastal towns were 'founded'.¹ One obvious approach is to note when and under what conditions various features usually associated with this culture can be said to have manifested themselves. Done this way, then, the 'origins' of coastal culture began when humans first occupied and adapted themselves to the coastal environmental niche – as is outlined in Chapter 1. The 'cultural history' of the coast, at this level of analysis, simply involved the successive introductions of increasingly complex and varied modes (and therefore relations) of production, each of which somewhat more efficiently exploited this environment than the previously dominant mode(s). Each successive socio-economic configuration was introduced into areas physically capable of supporting it and the larger populations that went along with it. 'Older', simpler forms were increasingly confined to areas less amenable to more complex modes of production. The coast proper presented a rich variety of marine, agronomic, topographic, and hydrographic settings. A mode which initially emphasized cultivation, with limited secondary skills in herding, hunting, and fishing, accompanied the introduction of Sabaki Bantu speech. Evidence presently on hand indicates that by the end of the first millennium AD, a distinctly

Swahili language and economy based on cultivation of specifically coastal products, a sophisticated maritime technology, potting, and iron-making had emerged which was fully adapted to this complex physical environment. Given this information, a substantial case can be made that a (recognizably) coastal culture already was in place by that time.

Yet to leave an interpretation of the emergence of coastal civilization at that point would be inadequate from several perspectives. First, such a position denies that imported, non-African ideas influenced the nature and direction of change in coastal societies – as extreme a position as the old one which viewed coastal culture essentially as ‘Arab’. It ignores the historical predicament of the seaside towns as heavily immigrant communities which stood on the frontiers of continental African and trans-oceanic cultures. As such, cultural change was an inescapable fact of life which imparted its own stamp on the fundamental character and traditions of these communities. The towns were geared for change; if nothing else at least so that they could control it. Their physical arrangements, institutions like the *ngoma* ‘parties’, even local small-scale street battles, combined to help maintain a rough equilibrium between local peoples and strangers (‘Arab’ or African), old and new, status quo and change. Yet this was a swinging equilibrium which tilted in one direction or the other according to the extent of immigration towns were experiencing. Thus, the thirteenth through fourteenth centuries, covered in Chapter 2, saw extensive southern Arab immigration and Islamization. A sixteenth-century migration led to the further spread of Islam among the yet unconverted (for example, WaTikuu), while it temporarily (at least) re-established the prestige of a more literate Islam identified with Arab immigrants, as shown in Chapter 3. In between times, many such immigrants – even *shurafa*² – became partially ‘Africanized’ through intermarriage and cultural fusion with local peoples. In these interstices between the great periods of large-scale Arab immigration, literacy in Arabic waned, intellectual contacts with the great southern Arabian centres of scholarship abated, and a semi-literate religious leadership and orally based religious traditions, like those described in Chapters 4 and 5, predominated.

In retrospect, too, Islamization of the coast and the ‘origins’ of coastal culture were related phenomena. This is readily apparent if one starts with Clifford Geertz’s definition of culture as a ‘locally perceived system of significance’, representing the sum total of all locally meaningful symbols. Although, as argued by the Rationalists, conversion to Islam/monotheism did not require that local Africans totally repudiate their intellectual past and the symbols into which it was distilled, their conversion and profession of faith (*shahada*) would have amounted to a wilful act by which they rededicated their lives to an altered concept of the divine (one God without partners), new rituals to worship that divinity, new symbols embodying what is sacred and holy (the Quran, religious texts, etc.), and new sources of guidance for righteous living (Muhammad and the ‘*ulama*’).² Conversion to Islam was a psychologically overt act taken by coastal Africans which made them distinct from their neighbours, if not from their ancestors. With this

wilful act, or series of acts which probably spanned generations, coastal culture became reoriented not away from Africa so much as towards many new symbols, images, and outward trappings of what local peoples perceived to be genuinely Islamic. The Islamic civilization which emerged obviously was greatly influenced by its African setting. Yet the fact that at least some elements of this civilization (for example, mosque features, house design) were taken from Asian models indicates that there was an openness to imported ideas and symbols, so long as coastal Africans could be convinced that these represented a greater (or more useful) truth than that known to their neighbours.

This truth and the symbolic system which encapsulated it separated coastal Muslims from their neighbours in the most crucial way. If indeed the appearance of a distinct coastal economy and language were important beginnings in the evolution of coastal culture, it appears certain that to whatever extent coastal peoples had begun to experience a psychological separation from neighbouring cultures with these developments, their conversion to Islam consummated this process. This position is supported by coastal traditions, even where a pre-Islamic past is remembered vaguely (and grudgingly). In most of these, the fundamental importance of Islam to local identity is evident from the frequent equation made between the 'founding' of coastal communities and the legendary arrival of Muslim immigrants. And, as Thomas Spear has argued most cogently, no serious history can ignore local peoples' own perceptions of their past.³

In various ways, the nineteenth century represented a major departure from the past equilibrium that had existed between local and imported influences on coastal life. For the first time the ideal of a civilized lifestyle became associated explicitly with foreign, especially Arab, cultural traits. A number of factors accounted for this. The first, of course, was the rapid acceleration in trade which started in the eighteenth century and reached its zenith in the nineteenth. It was this, along with growing European involvement in the Indian Ocean, which led to the assertion of Omani claims in East Africa and, finally, to the founding of the Zanzibar Sultanate. Under this Sultanate, and its success in making Zanzibar the most important entrepôt in the western Indian Ocean, East Africa experienced an unprecedented expansion of scale and, consequently, unparalleled celerity of change which were swept along mostly on Indian- and European-generated commercial revenues.

As demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7, the direct beneficiaries of this new wealth were the Arabs, particularly the Omani clans of Zanzibar and the ruling Busaidi house. It was they who (initially anyway) were the middlemen between coastal exporters and the Zanzibar market, who benefited from additional tax revenues, who controlled the western Indian Ocean carrying trade, and whose plantations produced the valuable cloves for export. Outside Zanzibar, these Arabs and their Sultans were not welcomed along the coast at first. They were viewed as threats to local sovereignty, as an alien presence only to be tolerated (as in the past) so long as they did not interfere with local customs and as long as they could benefit local trade.

The commercial prosperity that came with their arrival, however, benefited many townspeople who found Zanzibar a place with a growing demand for coastal and mainland African products. Thus, a new leisured class was created, led by the Arab planters of Zanzibar but including also many Swahili traders and planters of coastal towns from Lamu to Kilwa. Many people saw the Arabs as the most successful in this new age of plenty and not surprisingly came to emulate the Arab 'gentleman planter' as representing the model of how a civilized person should live.

In addition to Omanis, many southern Arabs were attracted to Zanzibar and East Africa as a result of the region's growing prosperity. Hadramis from all socio-economic backgrounds came to the coast, as they had in previous centuries, without their women and seeking employment. Among these were some from the Hadhramawt's clans of 'ulama' and *shurafa'* whose arrival helped establish coastal links with southern Arabia's scholarly traditions. As in the sixteenth century, Arabic literacy once again was available to those who had the right social background and the leisure time necessary for serious study. Learning in the religious sciences, especially Ibadī, but Shafīī too, received some succour from the Busaidī Sultans who employed 'ulama' as counsellors and *muftis*. Sultan Barghash, particularly, appointed Ibadī and Shafīī *qadis* and subsidized learning.

While coastal people often were willing to accept new fashions in such things as clothing, furniture, and house styles from wealthy Arabs, such acceptance did not extend to Arab attempts at intellectual browbeating. This is not to say that *waungwana* were not willing to learn from the more literate Arab 'ulama'. The two greatest obstacles to this, however, were the unwillingness of the Arabs to open their *darasa* to 'blacks' and the continued Swahili confidence in the merits of their own cultural and religious traditions (even where they were subtly being Arabized). A few Swahili did manage to obtain training in the sciences under Arab masters, especially those who were scions of the established religious leadership of the towns. Among these were people with clan names like Husayni, Mahdali, Maawi, Mandhry, or Mazrui – people who claimed, in short, to be from the 'old' Arab families of the coast – or the occasional person with a name like Mungwana, or Mkilindini, or Mshirazi. The latter situation, however, was rare.

Even where the occasional local person managed to obtain such training, this did little to bridge the gap of intellectual tolerance between literate Islam and Islam as it was locally understood and practised. The fact that the established social system did not itself provide such opportunities to all comers drove many Swahili with the leisure and the desire for learning to look elsewhere. Some, of course, already had some training in the local 'little' Islamic tradition as *walimu*. With nineteenth-century extensions of commercial involvement into the African interior and greater opportunities for contact with the Arab 'little' tradition, for many such people new knowledge simply meant adoption of Arab pseudo-sciences like geomancy (*raml*) and astrology (*falak*). Others, women in particular, found their opportunities through involvement in one or another of the new *Mawlidis* or recently introduced religious brotherhoods (*tariqas*).

The age, as shown in Chapters 9 and 10, with its money economy, cash-dropping, and wage labour, also fostered rejection of values and ideas associated with the old order, *uungwana*. For those traditionally excluded from access to wealth and status, the new order represented a welcome change towards individualism and the chance to 'get ahead' (*kuinuka juu*). If anything, this trend accelerated during the early years of colonial rule. European capital investment, new educational opportunities, the mushroom-like growth of the cities, and finally the freeing of slaves encouraged the appearance of a new socio-economic order and an alternative system of values.

While the Busaidi and colonial administrations embraced the 'orthodox' (literate) Islam of the *ʿulama*², the real future of Islam in East Africa lay with the *tariqas*. The brotherhoods, of course, provided an alternative system of instruction in the Islamic sciences and Arabic literacy where the usual channels were closed to most. They, along with the *Mawlidis*, served as useful vehicles for anti-Government and anti-establishment (usually Arab *qadis*, *liwalis*, etc.) propaganda among low status and upwardly mobile Muslims. It was the Islamic *tariqas*, therefore, which proved to be the most popular instrument for the conversion of the African victims of colonial abuses.

As the twentieth century began, Islam was on the rise among many East Africans, and Muslims of all backgrounds were facing the new era in different ways. Some, both Arabs and Swahili, were withdrawing into a shell of conservatism and orthodoxy, as they respectively understood it. Others, new converts mostly, sought conversion and membership in the Islamic community as an alternative to the more oppressive aspects of colonialism. Many of the younger generation began to question the values and beliefs of their elders. They sought their answers in the ways and beliefs of their colonial masters, sometimes being seduced by the worst features of Western civilization. A few individuals, too, felt that if Islam was going to survive the onslaught of technological superiority of the Imperialist Powers, it had to discard the ethical edifice created between the eighth and tenth centuries and be totally reconceptualized, retaining only the basic, core message of their Prophet. The consequences of these different roads taken are still being experienced in contemporary East Africa.