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IMAGE AND REALITY OF ARABS IN EAST AFRICA

Edward A. Alpers

ABSTRACT

The image of Arabs in East Africa has been forged through economic and social relations dating back many centuries, but particularly since the rise of the Omani Arab Sultanate of Zanzibar in the 19th century and the British decision to replicate that social order along the coastal strip of Kenya. Central to this image is the perceived role of Arabs in driving the slave trade from East Africa. The paper ends by considering how this imagined history might affect recent attempts to build an economic relationship between Gulf states, especially Qatar, and Kenya.
Relations between the Arabian Gulf and East Africa reflect a deep history that predates the rise of Islam and continues into the 21st century. As early as the first century CE the Alexandrine Greek author of the Periplus Maris Erythraei observed that “the coast of Azania” (which is usually associated with Zanj, “the name that Arabic writers gave to this stretch of coast”, according to Casson (1989), p.136) fell within the political sphere of the ruler of South Arabia”, commenting that:

The region is under the rule of the governor of Mapharitis, since by some ancient right it is subject to the kingdom of Arabia as first constituted. The merchants of Muza hold it through a grant from the king and collect taxes from it. They send out to it merchant craft they staff mostly with Arab skippers and agents who, through continual intercourse and intermarriage, are familiar with the area and its language (Casson, 1989, p.61).

In the first centuries following the rise of Islam, various dissident Muslims sought refuge in East Africa, while several Arab geographers provide brief accounts of the coast that bear witness to the steady forging of its connections with Arabia and Persia, although they also make it clear that the coast was not yet considered to be within the lands of Islam (Pouwels (1987) and (2002), pp.385-425). Further testimony to this effect comes from archaeological evidence, in particular the presence of Sassanian-Islamic pottery that bear witness to links with the important port of Siraf, surely one source of enduring claims among some Swahili families that they are “Shirazi” (Horton and Middleton, 2000). The presence of some enslaved East Africans in lower Iraq at the time of series of Zanj slave revolts in the late ninth century CE provides another form of evidence of these important linkages (Popovic, 1999).

In the early centuries of the second millennium CE, the coast experienced an economic boom that was linked to the rule of the Fatimids in Egypt. Although the Gulf was less central economically to East Africa in these centuries, it retained a kind of cultural
mystique that Egypt and the Red Sea never gained. By the time that
the Moroccan world traveler Muhammad Ibn Abdallah Ibn Battúta
visited East Africa in 1331, he had no question that the main coastal
city-states of Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa were in Dar al-
Islam. At Mogadishu where he stayed for three days, he attended
Friday services and lived with the qadi, and while he spent only a
single night at Mombasa, he noted approvingly, “the inhabitants are
pious, honourable, and upright, and they have well-built wooden
mosques” (ibn Battúta, 1983, p.112).

Ibn Battúta’s final destination in East Africa was Kilwa, which at
the time of his visit was the dominant commercial entrepôt on the
coast. Kilwa’s wealth was based on its control of the gold trade of
the Zimbabwean plateau which had its outlet at Sofala, on the southern
coast of what is today Mozambique. Profits from the gold trade
enabled the ruler of Kilwa, Abu’l-Muzaffar Hasan, to issue the only
gold coins ever struck on the coast and to undertake a program of
monumental building that included Husuni Kubwa plus expansion
of the Great Mosque (Chittick, 1974). Ibn Battúta noted that “this
liberal and virtuous sultan . . . used to devote the fifth part of the
booty made on his expeditions to pious and charitable purposes, as
is prescribed in the Koran, and I have seen him give the clothes off his
back to a mendicant who asked for them” (Ibn Battúta, 1983, p.113).

Following the intrusion of the Portuguese into the Indian Ocean at
the end of the 15th century CE, their sacking of Kilwa and Mombasa
in 1505, and their military-maritime domination of the entire coast
in subsequent decades, an Ottoman vessel under Amir Ali Bey
sailed down the coast in 1585 to liberate his co-religionists from the
oppression of the Portuguese infidel. With the exception of Malindi,
the main Portuguese ally on the coast, the northern coast respond-
ed enthusiastically to the promise of Ottoman intervention. The
Ottoman Turkish threat prompted the Portuguese in 1593 to begin
building the formidable Fort Jesus at Mombasa, which it had placed
under the rule of the compliant Sultan of Malindi. The Portuguese
continued to dominate the coast until the late 1670s when an Omani fleet signaled the beginning of the end for the Portuguese north of modern Mozambique and the first step toward Omani commercial and political domination of the region. After a lengthy siege, the Omanis captured Fort Jesus in 1698 and during the 18th century strove to become overlords of the coast from Cape Delgado to the Benaadir by establishing governors at Zanzibar and other towns. The Swahili elites of these towns were not eager to exchange one imperial ruler for another, so when the Bu Sa’idis deposed the Ya’arubi dynasty as rulers of Oman, another Omani family, the Mazru’i who had become local rulers at Mombasa, declared their independence from Oman (Al Mazru’i, 1995). Following the accession of Sayyid Sa’id ibn Sultan as Bu Sa’idi ruler of Oman in 1804, the Omani merchant state steadily extended its grip on Zanzibar and after more than a decade of struggle ousted the Mazru’i as rulers of Mombasa in 1837. In 1840 when Sayyid Sa’id moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar, it marked the end of a 150-year process of imperial expansion and the confirmation of Zanzibar as the East African commercial hub for the trade in ivory and slaves (Sheriff, 1987, pp.18-30).

The movement of peoples, the exchange of trade goods, the political ties, and the transmission of ideas are hallmarks of this long historical relationship. However, the popular image of Gulf Arabs in East Africa today does not reflect this deeper history, focusing instead on relations from the 19th century during the height of the slave trade and profoundly influenced by British abolitionist and colonial representations of this history. In this short paper, I propose to summarize how these more recent East African images of Arabs evolved, and how they continue to resonate in contemporary East African society.

British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the steady expansion of the British Indian Ocean empire towards East Africa through a series of anti-slave trade treaties with the Omani rulers of Zanzibar opened the way for European explorers and missionaries to penetrate the interior of this part of the continent. To be sure, Arabs were deeply
involved in the slave trade, but so were Africans and Asians. For example, a 16-year old Nyamwezi woman named Hidayeh testified to the British Consular Court at Zanzibar in 1860:

*I belong to the tribe of Uniamesi [Unyamwezi, in western Tanzania], my native country is on the West (sic) shore of the Lake of Ujiji; about fourteen months ago I was seized by people of another village and sold to some Arabs. The Arabs brought me to Bagamoyo on the Sea Coast. I arrived at Bagamoyo about seven months ago, and on arriving there I was purchased by the prisoner Hurjee [bin Nassur, a Khoja] from the Arabs* (Rigby, 1860).

More than two decades later, a Nyasa boy who had been rescued from a slave dhow by the British Navy and became a student at the Universities Mission to Central Africa boys school at Kiungani, Zanzibar, recalled that he had been seized in a raid by Mpezeni’s Ngoni, sold first to a Yao in the area around Lake Malawi, sold again to another Yao in northern Mozambique, who sold him to some Arabs from Kilwa, where he was eventually sold yet again “to an Arab of Muscat, who was a very hard master.” Eventually he embarked on a dhow for Muscat on which “there were a great many Arabs, seven in all, and a great many slaves in chains” that was seized a few days later by a British Royal Navy vessel (Madan, 1887, pp. 25-27). These are but two among many similar African narratives, all of which point to the complex mixture of violent seizure, trickery, and commercial exchange involving Africans, Arabs, and Asians in the East African slave trade.

There is abundant evidence to show, however, that all who participated in the slave trade and came from the coast were generally regarded as “Arabs,” whatever their true identity. Not surprisingly, beginning with David Livingstone and continuing thereafter, European accounts of the slave trade emphasized the role of Arabs as slavers and leaders of slave caravans, often illustrating their published accounts with vivid depictions of Africans being beaten or killed by Arabs. These images were subsequently adopted and manipulated
in English and Swahili textbooks used in East Africa from the high colonial period right into the early years of independence. Christian and antislavery publications in Kenya, in particular, had a significant impact on image formation, most notably through the multiple printings of James Juma Mbotela’s Uhuru wa Watumwa/The Freeing of the Slaves in East Africa, which first appeared in Swahili in 1934 and in English in 1956. Similarly, the widely used A Short History of the East Coast of Africa (1956) by L.W. Hollingsworth, the British colonial Education Officer at Zanzibar, both attributed coastal civilization to Arab influence and blamed Arabs for the slave trade. These books were widely read by East Africans, as the testimony of two participants in the initial NYU/Abu Dhabi conference in March 2009 confirmed. Moreover, these distorted images of coastal society as being “other” and foreign are still perpetuated in Kenyan school texts and continue to plague ethnic politics in Kenya where Kenyan archaeologist Chapurukha M. Kusimba (1996) notes that it has led to the willful destruction of Swahili cultural heritage along the Kenya coast (pp.203-204).

Several other factors during the late pre colonial period and the 20th century served to heighten East African perceptions of Arabs as unwelcome outsiders. First was the British decision to administer Zanzibar as a protectorate with a socio-political structure that preserved Arab privilege, a social model that they transferred to the coastal strip of Kenya. The complexity of the racialized identity politics that developed from the 1930s as a consequence of these colonial decisions is fascinating, but the main point here is to emphasize the negative effect they have had on Arab-African relations in modern East Africa. In Zanzibar, the result of maintaining the Bu Sai’idi sultanate in power was the revolution of January 1964; in Kenya, a country that became increasingly Christian over the past century, the perception that coastal residents were not truly African, whether Arab or Swahili, and that Muslims were not fully members of Kenyan society became widespread.
The worst example of Arab otherness and suspicion comes from Uganda. The first Arabs arrived as traders at the court of Kabaka Suna of Buganda in the 1840s. During the reign of Kabaka Mutesa I, their presence took on important religious and political dimensions when Mutesa observed Ramadhan from 1867 to 1877, although he never converted to Islam. By this time both British Protestant and French Roman Catholic missionaries contributed to the volatile mix of politics and religion at the court of Buganda. During the 1870s and 1880s, all three religions became major elements in court intrigues as Mutesa’s health declined and his son and successor, Mwanga I, was unable to manage the different political factions. Concurrently, Arabs coming south from the Sudan were also entering Bunyoro and exploiting the violence that dominated the last decade of the 19th century before the establishment of British rule in what became the Uganda Protectorate (Doyle, 2007, pp.231-251). Although colonial Uganda did not experience the same feelings of Arab otherness as Kenya, the brutal reign of terror of Idi Amin Dada who ruled Uganda from the beginning of 1971 into 1979 gained international attention for the expulsion of Asians, another East African community of “others” (Mutibwa, 1992, pp.92-97). Under Amin, Arab nations – especially Libya – came to occupy a central position in Uganda’s foreign relations (pp.91, 100, 109-110). As a Muslim Nubi (Leopold, 2007, pp. 124-144), Amin was an outsider to the majority of Ugandans and forged a close relationship with Muammar Gaddafi of Libya; when he was driven into exile, he fled to Libya until he found a safe haven in Saudi Arabia in 1981, living in Jiddah until his death in 2003. Since the early 1970s, during Amin’s regime and extending right up to the present, Sudan’s civil wars and Uganda’s involvement in supporting South Sudan in its protracted struggle against the Arab-dominated government of Sudan further heightened Ugandans’ wariness of Arabs. At the same time, it should be noted that in March 2008 Uganda hosted the second Afro-Arab youth festival and President Gaddafi was invited to appear at the closing ceremony (Granger, 2008).
Today, a vivid legacy of the Arab slave trade in East Africa lies at the root of popular images of Arabs. I have argued that both the reality and the depiction of “Arab” domination of the slave trade and its portrayal in abolitionist propaganda, translated into late colonial history textbooks, left an indelible imprint on popular thought in East Africa. Furthermore, in the cases of Zanzibar and Kenya where British policy emphasized racial categories as a fundamental instrument of colonial administration, the modern political ramifications of this policy and the degree to which the local elites exploited ethnic identities were major factors in violent communal politics. In Uganda the terrifying regime of Idi Amin and the spillover of Sudan’s civil wars affected attitudes towards Arabs. This is true even in mainland Tanzania, which did not suffer the same degree of colonial racialization as Zanzibar and Kenya nor the trauma of Idi Amin’s brutality in Uganda, and where the non-racist orientation of the Tanganyika National Union (TANU, now the Chama cha Mapinduzi or CCM) clearly has had a positive effect on peoples’ attitudes. Nevertheless, as James Giblin (2005) observes, “Outside the walls of academia in Tanzania, however, the slave trade is heavily racialized as a story of ‘African’ slaves victimized by ‘Arab’ slave dealers (p.254)”.

The decision to designate The Central Slave and Ivory Trade Route stretching from Bagamoyo at the coast to Ujiji on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika as a UNESCO World Heritage site unfortunately emphasizes the role of Arabs in the slave trade and thus has the potential to exacerbate the kinds of sentiments to which Giblin testifies.

It is difficult to predict how these historical factors may affect the way in which Arab business is conducted in East Africa or the ways in which East Africans will view the presence of increasing numbers of Arabs from the Gulf in their countries. The increasingly close relations between Kenya and Qatar provide an example of what could go right and what could go wrong. In November 2008 President Kibaki of Kenya made an important visit to Doha, the capital of Qatar, during which he announced that because of the
growing number of Kenyans residing in Doha, Kenya was planning to open an embassy there (China Economic Net).

One contentious feature of what President Kibaki refers to as the Kenyan diaspora is that Qatar has purchased the services of several world class Kenyan distance runners who have become citizens of Qatar and won Olympic medals for their new country. In 2003 Stephen Cheruno and Albert Chepkurai accepted major contracts (US $1,000 per month) to become Qataris, Cheruno being renamed Saif Saeed Shaheen and Chepkurui adopting the name of Abdulah Amad Hassan (CBS Sports). Two years later another promising Kenyan distance runner, David Nyaga, changed his citizenship to Qatari and assumed the name Daham Najim Bashir, joining a group of nine Kenyan runners who had preceded him. When the Athletics Kenya Secretary General David Okeyo received this news, he exclaimed, “I am very worried at the rate at which Kenyans are moving to the gulf. (Mbaisi, 2005)”. In a 2008 interview, Isaiah Kiplagat, president of the Kenyan Athletics Federation, said, “It is exploitation.” Commenting that many of the runners attracted to Qatar are as young as 15, he added, “Young people who aren’t qualified to represent themselves are being deceived into changing nationality for a few shillings (Slot, 2008).” Even if some official Kenyan complaints are self-serving, Kenyan sports fans who have delighted in the international success of their countrymen over the past two decades cannot have a very positive attitude to a country which is depicted as raiding its up and coming distance runners.

Kenya and Qatar have two other projects under way that will have a much deeper impact on their relations and economies. In January 2009 after three years of negotiation, the Kenya Airports Authority (KAA) and Qatar’s Afro-Asia Investment Corporation (AAIC) signed a US $350 million agreement to make Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi a regional hub. The plan includes construction of a major hotel, convention, and trade center on a 90 acre parcel of land leased to AAIC for 80 years. Kenya would
receive a percentage of the gross earnings generated by the project, plus concession fees of US $1 million for the first five years.

In addition to increasing the importance of Nairobi in international air travel, the plan, according to KAA, will create 5,000 Kenyan jobs and increase demand for local building materials and goods (Afrik, 2009). Without questioning the environmental impact of such expansion, this would appear to be a positive deal for both parties. But a second Kenya-Qatar deal in the making has already raised some serious questions about the benefits for Kenya.

During his visit to Doha, President Kibaki initiated negotiations for Qatar to lease 40,000 hectares of land in the Tana River delta to grow crops, mainly fruit and vegetables, for export to Qatar. The deal would also involve Qatar providing £2.4 billion to construct a new port at Lamu that would serve the northern interior and South Sudan and Ethiopia. A previous arrangement to cede land to Mumias Sugar Company for growing sugarcane and establishing a refinery drew heated opposition from environmentalists while local cattle farmers consider the land essential for grazing their cattle. A government spokesman commented, “We will have to ensure that this new project is properly explained to the people before it can go ahead,” while a representative of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations worried that this sort of arrangement could become “neo-colonial” (Rice, 2008). As reported by the BBC (2009), Kenya already faces a national food emergency, which makes this particular project more sensitive in the eye of the public. As the Kenyan press noted at the announcement of the plan, “Questions have been raised on why the Government has chosen to lease the land instead of engaging local farmers to boost food security in the country” (Mathenge, 2009). According to a brief report in the Daily Nation, Eastern African Farmers Federation Union leader Philip Kiriro objected to the Qatar deal while Kenya still suffers from its own food crisis. He asked, “Are we saying that a foreign government can produce food here and feed its own people and the Kenya Government cannot support us to feed ourselves?” (Kumba, 2009).
In June 2009 a journalist reported on the continuing opposition to the project: “The furore surrounding the Tana River Delta is perhaps an ominous example of just how difficult it is proving for Gulf states to find food security abroad and especially in Africa.” Although Gulf investors have had a relatively free hand in both Ethiopia and Sudan, led by Kenya’s conservationists, “Kenya is a messier place to do business.” As Hadley Becha, Deputy Director of the East African Wildlife Society, exclaimed with reference to Kenyans’ persistence, “they don’t know some of us, we are like sniffer dogs” (Wadham, 2009). Although none of these reports indicate that there have been any expressions of anti-Arab sentiment in the public debate about the leasing of land for agriculture to Qatar, in view of how the coast has been regarded throughout Kenya’s history and the way in which political discourse is shaped, one should not be surprised if such attitudes lurk beneath the surface of what is said in public. Despite the negative history and image of Arabs in East Africa, the hope remains that by working together in a rapidly changing global environment, the nations and peoples of East Africa and the Arab Gulf will succeed in forging new mutually beneficial relationships.
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