

THE IRANIAN PRESENCE IN EAST AFRICA

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Persian, Bahraini and Balochi presence. The important role that Iranian influence has played in the development of the Swahili civilization and culture “preceded by several centuries the purely Arabic cultural predominance which began on c.1700” (Knappert 1983:112). This predominance was mainly from Hadramaut, Oman and the Persian Gulf area.

Iranian presence on the East African coast is age old, and much has been written and debated about Iranian cultural and linguistic influences and the identity of the legendary Shirazi people of Zanzibar and the East African coast. Even the term Zanzibar (alternatively Zangibar, Zanjibar, Zenjibar, Zinjibar, Zanj, Zenj, Zinj and Zinji), originally referring to the Swahili coast, i.e. the coastlands of southern Somalia through Kenya and Tanzania to northern Mozambique, has been an issue and subject of much research and documentation, and it continues to be paid much attention even today (Akasheh and Izady 1997).¹ Some 19th century gravestones on Mafia Island in Tanzania bear the name al-Shirazi (of/from Shiraz, or of Shirazi origin)) but “No Persian inscriptions have been found in East Africa” (Strandes 1973:145).

Most of the earlier Iranian influences in East Africa are from the Gulf region, the traders and settlers coming from both the Arabic and Persian speaking communities. There is much evidence of specifically Baloch (and a small number of Persian-speaking Bahraini) from the period after 1821, though Baloch speaking individuals and families might have arrived in East Africa and settled there in earlier times.

The exact number of Iranians, whether old settlers and their descendants or new arrivals during the last four decades, is difficult to ascertain since no census in Tanzania and Kenya takes into account such information. However, rather reliable statistics on speakers of different languages are known; but in the case of the Iranians, most of the ‘older’ group would be included in the category of ‘speakers of Swahili as the first language’.

The Zanj and the Shirazi. The Swahili coast was known to the navigators of antiquity in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. With the advent of Islam, East Africa was linked properly with Arabia, Persia and indirectly India, with the settlement of Omanis in Zanzibar led by Prince Hamza in 695, and Arab fugitives from Mecca settled in Mogadisho in 740. After several minor migrations followed in 920 a group of rebel soldiers from Basra who established themselves as

¹ Ibn Batuta (1331) refers to the northern Swahili coast (Somalia and Kenya) as *sawahil* (pl. of *sahil* coast), and the southern coast (Tanzania and Mozambique) as *zunuj* (pl. of *zanj*), and adds “most of its people are *zunuj*, extremely dark” (Hamdun and King 1975:18). According to Hunwick (1970:102-8) the *zanji*, *zanjiyya*, *zanaji*, *zanajiyya* etc. were servile castes in the Mali and Songhay empires in West Africa during the period 1400-1700. They included fishermen, boat keepers and their crews, domestic servants, bodyguards and blacksmiths, along River Niger in the sub-Saharan region. See also Wansbrough 1970:97-99.

pirates in Socotra; their descendants later settled along the Somali coast. In 975 occurred the most notable migration in the region led by Ali bin Sultan al-Hassan, the legendary deposed ruler of Shiraz in Persia. These Iranians settled in Mombasa (Kenya), Pemba (Zanzibar), Kilwa (Tanganyika) and Sofala (Mozambique), intermarried with the local people and founded several dynasties and more urban settlements during the centuries that followed. The descendants of the Iranians and most of their subjects of mixed African, Arab, Iranian and Indian origins identified themselves as Shirazi, a generic term used even today, especially in Zanzibar where a large majority of the people call themselves *Washirazi*. However, there is much ambiguity of Shirazi ethnicity (Allen 1993 *passim*) and its role in the history of East Africa in general and the post-World War II politics of Zanzibar in particular (Prins 1967, Ricks 1970, Spear 1984, Tominaga and Sheriff 1990).

The Iranians and Arabs called the East African coastlands Zangibar, the land of the Zanj, i.e. the Black Coast. The Shirazi 'colonization' (Chittick 1968) consolidated Islam making a formative contribution, both politically, economically and culturally, 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 and the Middle East. This unity provided the Swahili/Shirazi with lucrative markets for their products. Trade was established with India and the Far East, and in 1071 and 1082 East African emissaries were sent to China. Much later in 1415 a Chinese mission headed by an admiral of the Ming dynasty visited 'Zangistan' (Allen 1993:136-138).

The Baloch.² In 1821, the Sultan and Imam of Oman, Seyyid Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi hired an Iranian fleet to invade the island and port states of East Africa. The Iranian fleet leased by the Sultan of Oman consisted mostly of Baloch and Sindhi/Cutchi mercenaries with a few Arab, Persian and Pathan officers. Almost all of these, after their families had arrived from Iran and India, settled in the coastal towns, in or around the forts and the newly built camps, e.g. Saa-teeni outside Zanzibar City, Fort Jesus in Mombasa (the largest fortification in East Africa), and the Baloch cavallery in Zanzibar City at the site of the present Haile Selassie School.

With the expansion of Zanzibar trade and political influence in the interior of Tanganyika, Baloch squadrons were dispatched to Tabora in central Tanzania and Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika. In 1873, about half of the Sultan's 3000 Zanzibari troops engaged in the war in Unyanyembe in the interior against the Nyamwezi ruler Chief Mirambo were *Bulushi* (Baloch) and *Shihiri* (Hadrami) mercenaries. Some Baloch soldiers joined the trade caravans as guards and reached the Congo with the legendary trader Tippu Tip (Hamed bin Muhammad al-Murjebi, who is said to have had under his command 1600 armed man in his caravans and depots, freemen and slaves). Tippu Tip became the first and only Zanzibari governor of the copper province of Katanga (the present Shaba Province) in Eastern Congo, and later he became the first Belgian governor of Katanga for a short time after the European Scramble of Africa was concluded in 1890.

The Baloch in East Africa are generally known as *Bulushi* (pl. *Mabulushi*), and almost all of them spoke Swahili at home until recently; nowadays, some of them speak a mixture of Balochi and Swahili because of new Baloch immigrants. The early Baloch

² See Lodhi (2000) for further details on the Baloch in East Africa.

settlers frequently intermarried with other Muslims of East Africa of diverse ethnic origin and adopted Swahili as their home language, though it was common that Baloch households received 'fresh blood' from new arrivals from their old country, the Iranian Baluchistan. For many Bulushi in East Africa, their 'Baloch' identity was self-perceived, as for most of the 'Arabs' of East Africa – one was a Baloch because of one's patriline, even if one did not speak the Balochi language.

The process of Swahilization continued until early 1960s when political unrest in East Africa had already triggered a northward movement of the coastal Muslims to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. This culminated in 1964-5 in the aftermath of the Zanzibar Revolution and the preferential system of Africanization in Kenya and Tanganyika when tens of thousands of East Africans, whose ancestors had come over the Indian Ocean generations ago, left East Africa for Europe, North America, the Middle East, Pakistan and India, many of those coming from the coastal towns settling in the Persian Gulf region.

The Bahraini. The Bahraini are called *Bahrani* (pl. *Mabahrani*) in East Africa. They were settled mostly in Zanzibar City and other major urban areas on the mainland where they worked as Imams of the Shia Imami (Ithna-asheri) community and were known as Agha or Aghaa. Some of them with western education were employed in the civil service and a few were in private business. They were trilingual in Swahili, Persian and Arabic, and their younger generation spoke mostly Swahili at home. They were mainly endogamous which led to the much publicised half a dozen 'forced marriages' in 1967 between Bahrani females and 'African' males in the aftermath of the 1964 republican Revolution in Zanzibar.³

The Aghas had arrived in Zanzibar 1892 as Mullahs and the first one was Syed Abdulhussein Marashi who was later joined by many members of his family and friends who benefited from the "khums" ('one fifth' or 20% of savings) money paid by the Ithna-asheris to their mosque.

The linguistic and literary contribution of the Iranians. Persian words in Swahili have been borrowed both directly and also through Arabic and north Indian languages. Since Persian was the literary language of the Baloch in East Africa, later replaced by Arabic and Swahili, only one direct Balochi loanword in East Africa has so far been identified, viz *braza* (brother), a term used by Baloch soldiers to address one another.⁴ Indirectly, the Baloch (and Indian) soldiers introduced Perso-Turkic words into Swahili, mostly military terms, which are used all over East Africa today, e.g. *jemadari* (commander), *singe* (bayonet), *Afande!/Afendi!* (Yes sir!, Greek via Turkish), *bunduki* (gun, rifle) and *Habedari!* (Attention!, from the Arabic-Persian *khabar-dar* (Be alert!, Watch your tongue!))

Quite a few of these Persian words were introduced in the Indo-Aryan languages after the Turkic-Mongol invasions of North India started by the 'slave king' Amir Sakubtigin of Ghazni in AD 997. Some of the Persian elements probably arrived in East Africa

³ Most of the Bahrani have now emigrated to the Gulf states and the West. One of the Bahrani girls involved in the 'forced marriages' of 1967, now settled in Denmark, was married to Dr. Salmin Amour, the fifth President of Zanzibar who is a "Shirazi".

⁴ This is not to be confused with the late 20th century English loan *braza* or *bro* used by some urban youth in Zanzibar and Daressalaam.

early during the advent of Islam in the eighth century and through the Shirazi period starting in the tenth century up to the Omani invasion of 1652, while other Persian and Turkish elements probably arrived and/or were more firmly established with the final invasion of Seyyid Said of Muscat in the 1820s when the Omani forces, both the fleet, the cavalry and the body-guard, were predominantly Iranian mercenaries from the Makran coast and Baluchistan, presumably all of whom were Sunni Muslims and had Persian as their literary language. The descendants of these people in East Africa are today almost completely swahilized.

The Bulushi might also have consolidated the use of certain Persian items already found in Swahili and East Africa but which were not that common earlier, e.g. *shali* (shawl), *cherehani* (sewing-machine, any machine with a pedal) and *karkhana*, *karakana* (factory, workshop). Other Persian items related to aristocratic and patrician lifestyle were probably imported or brought into common use by the Iranians who came to Zanzibar with one of the queens of Seyyid Said, the Persian Princess Sheharzadeh, a daughter of Shah Muhammad Ali Mirza of Iran.

However, the scholarly contribution of the Iranian Baloch to the Swahili language and literature is considerable. The late Sheikh Shihabuddin Chiraghdin of Mombasa and the late Maalim Mohamed Kamal Khan of Daressalaam produced a number of Swahili essays and school books. Both these scholars were staunch advocates of adopting Swahili as the national language of Kenya. They were also the founding members of the Kenya Kiswahili Association. Kamal Khan was also active in several language and literature bodies in Tanzania before he moved back to Mombasa, his birthplace. Their colleague Nurjahan H. Zaidi was the first Swahili poet(ess) to be honoured with the Presidential Kenya Award for Literature in 1974.

Commenting on monorhymes and quatrains, Knappert (1979:35, 61) suggests certain Persian influence in Swahili in the development of rhyming long poems. "Swahili literary culture was inspired by Persian (and Indian) prototypes rather than Arabian ones" (Knappert 1979:59, Lodhi 1980a:101-102).

The Iranians and their descendants in East Africa. East Africans of Iranian origin are normally Sunni Hanafi. There are no special Iranian mosques or community centres, but the Sunni Iranians usually gather at a particular Sunni mosque and socialize freely with other Sunni Muslims. The few Shia Iranians socialize more with the Asian Shia Ithnaasheria whose mosques and community centres they use. There are also occasional bulletins in Persian published by the recent Iranian immigrants in Tanzania, dealing with their social affairs such as news about weddings, births and deaths, and change of address and telephone numbers. And there is at least one Tanzanian of Iranian Baloch origin born in Tanzania, Mr. Aziz Rostam, who is a prominent Member of Parliament and also a member of the Executive Council of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM, The Revolutionary Party).

Persian cultural influence in East Africa. The Persian cultural influence in East Africa has permeated through all aspects of life, just as the Arabian/Muslim influence. The port-cities of the Swahili in the past resembled the mercantile cities of the Gulf region with white buildings of coral stones "and large public spaces where poets and minstrels recited epics and poems in front of large audiences ... In 1498 when the Portuguese reached Zandj on their way to India, they were impressed by the size and cleanliness of the cities, the quality of the houses, the luxurious good taste with which

they were decorated and the beauty and elegance of the women who were active participants in society” (*The World Guide - A view from the South* 1997/1998:539). Every year each Swahili city elected a *Shaha* (Pet Lurate) and together they would select a *Shaha wa Shaha* (King of Pets). Their cities were ruled by *Miri* (Princes, Emirs) who had (*Ma*)*waziri* (Ministers, Viziers) to counsel them and (*Ma*)*Diwani* (Councillors) to administer their *Sarikali* (Government). Each city or town had its own *bandari* (port) and *karkhana* (workshops, factories) for the manufacture of *sukari* (sugar), *puladi* (steel/iron goods), etc.⁵

Though the Persians and other Iranians settling in East Africa during the early Islamic period were Sunni, there have been many Shia connections. Seyyid Rizvi (1975:84-88) convincingly argues for a strong Shia Ithnaasheri presence among the Swahili/Shirazi patricians whose numbers have undergone attrition due to the predominance of Sunni and Ibadhi groups, intermarriage and change of dynasties. There is documented evidence of this in for example *Utenzi wa Seyyidina Huseni bin Ali* (The Epic of the Lord Hussein son of Ali) by Hemedi Abdalla el-Buhri (Allen 1971) and *The Kilwa Chronicle* (Freeman-Grenville 1962).

Persian linguistic influence in East Africa. Apart from lexical borrowings, which include mostly nominals with a few verbs, adverbs and adjectives, no other Persian/Iranian linguistic influence can be traced in Swahili or other East African languages.

The Iranians, who settled in Swahili-speaking areas towards the end of the first millenium AD and later about 180 years ago, had Persian as their literary language, historical data tells us that few of them were Persian speaking since most of them came from the Arabic and Balochi-speaking regions of Iran, and when they first settled in East Africa after the coming of Islam, Arabic had already been established as the literary language of the Swahili communities. One can not thus assume that all or most of the ‘Persians’ had Persian as their primary language. Iranians did not come in large numbers to affect deep-going and uniform changes in Swahili dialects over such an extensive geographical area as the Swahili coast. The Persian elements in Swahili are too few compared to those of Arabic, though more than those of Indian origin.

Physical contact leading to bilingualism between Swahili-Arabic, Swahili-Persian, Swahili-Indian and to some extent Swahili-Portuguese was limited to a small proportion of the Swahili population, i.e. the rulers, traders and menial workers in the urban areas – a great majority of the population, which was rural, was not influenced by the speech styles of the outsiders who were in small numbers and mostly urban. Iranians were gradually assimilated into the Swahili society (Lodhi 1973 and 1992), just as the peoples of the hinterland of Eastern Africa who came mostly as slaves to the coast in numbers much larger than those of the Iranians or ‘Persians’ and who did not make substantial linguistic contribution to Swahili, not even stopping Swahili from losing tone distinctions which were characteristic in their own native languages; instead they also became swahilized, and many of them adopted the ethnonym ‘Shirazi’ .⁶

⁵ See Alidina (1993) for an interesting description of the Persian influences in a day in the life of a Swahili gentleman. Alidina uses altogether 89 Persian loans in his text of only two magazine pages.

⁶ In 1887, an estimated 23% of the populaton of coastal Kenya was slaves or their descendants (R. F. Morton 1976 quoted by F. Morton 1990:1).

Concluding remarks. The process of Swahilization (and “Shirazization” as de Vere Allen calls it) was instrumental in the rise of the Great Shungwaya and its successor states, the centres of Swahili civilization in the past (Allen 1993:136-164).⁷

Today, renewed contacts with Iran are increasingly influencing Muslim self-consciousness in East Africa after the political marginalization which the Muslims suffered during the British colonial rule. This has also resulted in a slight rise of Shia Islam in East Africa.

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⁷ See Allen (1993:38-54) for details on the Shungwaya Complex.

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