

The Dynamics of African/Asian Interactions on the East Coast of Africa in Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

Scientific as well as historic explanations to the origin of man agreed that Africa is the cradle and possibly the source of dispersal of all mankind. Since the gradual dispersal of the original specie to other parts of the globe, economic imperative have made human interaction inevitable. Consequently, African and Asian have been interacting at economic and social level from ancient time resulting in mutual benefits to all and great advance in knowledge and ideas to less developed African society on the east coast of the continent. Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants have been visiting the east African coast since the 13th century BCE bringing their wares to exchange for African products. At the peak of the trade, cultural exchanges in form of knowledge and ideas could not but be mutually bought and sold resulting into what later became the glorious Swahili civilization along the East African Coast of the Indian Ocean. The civilization has endured the passage of time and residual knowledge and ideas borrowed from Asian remain a permanent feature of cultural norms on the east Coast of Africa. The paper is of the view that the benefits have surely been overwhelming and a matter of give and take.

Keywords: Dynamism, Interaction, African/Asian, Benefits, Historical Analysis

Introduction

Professor Adams B. Bodomo, then of the University of Hong Kong, in a speech delivered by him on conferment of Honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy on him by the Ansted University, Penang, Malaysia in 2001, stated among other things that African has not much conceptual space in the mind of Asians,... there is a certain kind of dualism in the minds of Asians; it is the East – West dichotomy. This accounts for the limited knowledge of Africa within Asian society in contemporary time. However, interaction between African and Asian dates back to pre-historic time and the Indian Ocean has been a theatre of commerce since man knew the benefits of mutual exchanges. This apart, archaeological evidence tells us that history of mankind and humanity began in Africa, particularly in the East Africa and the Nile valley. Homo erectus or the first man migrated out of Africa 35,000yrs ago before continuing to other parts of the world¹.

Recent genetic studies have tended to corroborate these early archaeological findings. In recent article titled “Human race emerged “from Africa” in the *Financial Times of London* (May, 10 2001), Victoria Griffith writes “scientists have uncovered the strongest evidence yet that humans share a single African ancestor...” The idea that the entire world is African is supported by powerful genetic analysis of the “Y” chromosome². The paper will not go into these details as this falls outside our area of preoccupation. However, I have tried in this article to show that there are clearly ancient historical links between African and Asian which has been of mutual benefit. Also as part of the globalised world of multinational corporations, transactions and their attendant travel, migration and relocations, vibrant African communities are beginning to emerge in megacities like Hong Kong Beijing Shanghai, Singapore, Tokyo, Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Manila. On the other hand, vibrant Asian communities have already taken shape in many African cities like Accra, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam, Cairo and Lagos. This no doubt represents a healthy and positive development that would further transform the level of economic interaction between the two largest continent on the globe.

Linguistic Connections

In addition to the above, there are obvious genetic linguistic relationships between some Africa and Asian language. The fact that there is a web of communities in Africa and Asia speaking either the same languages or similar ones belonging to the same language families constitutes clear evidence of links and inter connections between the two biggest continents of the world. While genetic linguistic relationships establish clear evidence of interconnections between adjacent parts of Asia and Africa, what is surprising is that even in regions of the two continents that are not adjacent one, finds striking typological linguistic relationships. While some languages of northern and the horn of Africa and West and South Asian are genetically related, the languages of West Africa and Southeast and East Asia have many typological similarities³.

Some of the world’s best known tone languages are West African languages like Akan, Dagaare, Ewe, Ga, Igbo and Yoruba on the one hand and South east and East Asian languages like Chinese, Thai, and Zhuang on the other

There are six tonemes in Cantonese

Tone 1 - High

- Tone 2 - High rising
- Tone 3 - Mid level
- Tone 4 - Low falling
- Tone 5 - Low rising
- Tone 6 - Low level⁴

These are strong bases for interactions between African and Asians and it has its root in History, culture and linguistic affinity.

An enduring image of Africa is that it is a collection of unchanging societies that were isolated and unaware of developments in other parts of the world. The depiction is erroneous. Africans have shared ideas and innovations with each other and been receptive to technological advances from outside the continent. The trans-Saharan trade linked West African Sudanese States to the Mediterranean and Middle East. Indian Ocean trade tied the East African Coastal City States and Southern African Kingdoms to Arabia, Persia and Asia and the Red Sea served as a bridge connecting Aksum and Ethiopia to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean⁵.

For the past 2000 years, the East African Coast has been part of a much wider maritime empire that linked Africa with the Near East, India and Asia. In fact a scholar once postulated that the Indian Ocean could as well be better named Afrasian Sea to show the extent of interaction between African on the East Coast and its Asian neighbours. As human interactions involves a system of give and take not limited to goods and services but also the borrowing of knowledge and ideas from both interacting cultures, African could not but have benefitted from Asians with whom they were in constant contact for well over two millennium. However, unlike the Trans Sahara trade that opened up extensive trade throughout Western Africa, trade along the East African coast, with exceptions, did not have the same impact on the East African interior until the 19th century⁶. It is now necessary to be time and region specific in these area of interactions. We would start with the most ancient and most documented region of these area of interactions which is Ethiopia.

Ethiopia and North East African Coast

Ethiopia has been one of Africa's most enduring and richest civilizations. Indeed the region between the Nile River and the Red Sea had been recognized as a major source of trade in goods several thousands of years before the kingdom of Ethiopia came into existence. To the Egyptians, the area on the Southern Red Sea Coast was known as the land of Punt, and from the 5th Dynasty (C. 2494 – 2345 BC) on, Egypt's rulers regularly sent expeditions to trade for frankincense, myrrh, aromatic herbs, ebony, ivory, gold and wild animals. The Egyptian queen Hatshepsut's funerary temple recorded a major expedition that she sent to Punt around 1470 B.C.E⁷.

Around 800 BCE, traders from Saba, a kingdom on the Southwestern Arabian Peninsula, crossed the Red Sea, first founding trading settlements on the Eritrean Coast and later a kingdom, Da'amat. The Sabaeans tapped into the Ivory trade in the interior highlands. The Sabaean language was similar to the Semitic languages spoken in the area, and a language called Ge'ez evolved that became the basis for oral and written communication of the elites⁸.

By the start of the Common Era, a new state of Aksum, emerged to dominate the Red Sea trade. Taking advantage of its location between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, Aksum developed extensive trading ties with Ptolemaic Egypt and the Roman Empire, as well as with Asia as far east as Sri Lanka and India. Aksum's Sea Port, Adulis, prospered as the middleman for trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Monsoon winds dictated the rhythm of Indian Ocean trade. After July, when the summer monsoon winds were favourable, Adulis's traders set forth on their journeys. They returned in October when the prevailing winds reversed direction⁹.

By the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E; Aksum was at its Zenith as a trading power, conquering its rival, Meroe, on the Nile, and replacing Rome as the dominant trading power on the Red Sea after the fall of western Roman Empire in 476 AD. Aksum minted its own bronze, silver, and gold coins with Greek inscriptions. Something that only a handful of other states, such as Persia and Rome, were doing¹⁰.

Aksum's best – known ruler was Ezana (320 – 350) who converted to Christianity toward the end of his reign, about the same time as Roman emperor Constantine the great. Two Syrian brothers, Frumentius and Aedisius, have been credited with winning over Ezana to the christian faith; another clear evidence of interaction between African and Asian world. Frumentius and Aedisius were said to have been ship wrecked on the Red Sea Coast. The brothers were brought to Aksum's royal court as slaves when Ezana was a child¹¹. Frumentius became an influential figure in the royal court servicing as main adviser to Ezana's mother, the queen regent. Following Ezana's conversion, Frumentius was chosen as Aksum's first bishop, and Christianity was made the official state religion. Several centuries after Ezana's conversion a group of Syrian monks called Nine Saints played a major role in spreading Christianity among the rural people. They Nine Saints were known for their belief in the *Monophysite* doctrine, which held that Christ's human and divine qualities were inseparable¹². The expansion of Christian faith from the Middle-East to the east coast of Africa is another evidence of African/Asian interaction and Ideological patronage dating back to christian era. The enduring civilization for

which Ethiopia is known today owns much to this single very important factor.

The key to Aksum's continued prosperity was maintaining control over Red Sea trade. However, the Aksum's influence in the Arabian Peninsula ended in the late seventh century, when a Persian expedition force ousted them. In 615 C.E. the Akumite king El-Ashan gave refuge to followers and family of the prophet Mohammed who were being persecuted in Arabia. Although Mohammed directed Muslims to "leave the Abyssinians in peace", Islamic expansion late in the 8th century totally removed Aksum as a trading force in the Red Sea¹³.

Despite Aksum's decline, some Ethiopian products such as perfume and coffee were still highly sought after. A highly prized musk was made from the glandular secretions of the civet cat. Coffee originated in Ethiopia – the coffee bean was initially chewed as stimulant but then was made into a drink by brewing the coffee plant's leaves and berries in boiled water. Another quick energy snack was a blend of ground coffee beans and animal fat. Finally, after some one came up with the idea of grinding roasted beans, the drink rapidly spread to Arab-cultures. Muslim monks drank coffee to stay awake during long periods of meditation and prayer, and coffee houses were popular gathering places throughout the Muslim world. *Qahwa* is the Arabic word from which the name coffee is derived¹⁴. Coffee is a product of African origin, popularised by the Arabs, it is one product that has gained international acceptance and an evidence of the positive impact of the syn-biotic relationship between African and the Asian world.

African/Asian interactions on the east coast of Africa did not end with Aksum's decline. The new dynasty that emerged from the 12th century, the Zagwes, from the highland nobility, claimed that they were descendants of Moses and encouraged the faithful to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Palestine. However, they also dramatized their distinctiveness from Aksum by recreating the Holy City of Jerusalem at Roha. The legendary Emperor Lalibela (Law-lee-Bay – lah; C 1185 -1225) commissioned the construction of 11 cathedrals of Roha. These awe inspiring architectural feats were carved from solid rocks. Lalibela's reign was the high point of Zagwe rule. Yikunno-Amlak, a southern noble once imprisoned by the Zagwes, led the rebellion that overthrew them in 1270 and founded a new dynasty the Solomonids¹⁵. Like the Zagwes, the Solomonid emperors (each known as *negus*, or "King of Kings") legitimized their rule by claiming a direct tie to the Aksumite past. In their royal chronicle, the *Kebr Negast* ("Glory of the kings") they gave an epic account of their dynasty's direct descent from the Old Testament King Solomon¹⁶. The tale related to how *Makeda*, the queen of Sheba (Saba) had visited Solomon to learn his techniques of rule. Instead, Solomon seduced Makeda, who bore him a son, Menelik. When Menelik later visited his father's court, he tricked Solomon and spirited the Ark Covenant out of Israel to Ethiopia – which church officials claim is in the church of St. Mary of *Seyon* (Zion). This story was interpreted as a sign of the covenant God was establishing with Ethiopia. Thus to the kings of the Solomonid dynasty, it was an article of faith that they were direct descendants of Solomon¹⁷.

The visit of the Queen of Sheba to Judah during the reign of King Solomon is Biblical account of one the earlier record of interaction between African and Asian. The enduring impact of this was the establishment of a ruling dynasty that survived the passage of time up to the reign of Ras Tafari (King Haile Selassie)

THE Chinese in Africa

The Swahili Coast attracted trading expeditions from as far away as China. In the early 1400s, a Chinese fleet under the command of Admiral Zheng He (JUHNG HUH) visited Swahili towns such as Malinda and Mogadishu, bearing porcelain, silk, lacquerware and fine art objects and exchanging them for ivory, rhinoceros horns, incense, tortoise shell, rare woods, and exotic animals such as ostriches, zebras and giraffes¹⁸. Zheng He's ship also took back African envoys that stayed at the Chinese Court for several years. This was a period well in advance of European Exploration of the coast of Africa, seeking a sea route to India through the Southern tip of the continent.

East Africa was tied to the wider world through an extensive Indian Ocean trading network that linked Africa with regions as far away as East Asia. Swahili masons and craftsmen were celebrated for building ornate stone and coral mosques and palaces, adorned with gold, ivory, and other wealth from nearly every major ports in Southern Asia. Most of these were borrowed from the Middle East and this greatly impressed the famous Muslim scholar traveler Ibn Battuta in 1331 that he described Kilwa as the most beautiful and well constructed city he had ever seen. Archaeological excavations have confirmed the extent of borrowing from the Islamic South Asia of the architectural designs on the Coast of East Africa¹⁹. Excavations have revealed the ruins of enormous palaces, great mansions, elaborate mosques, arched walkways town squares and public fountains. The Husuni Kubwa palace and trade emporium at Kilwa, built on the edge of an ocean cliff, featured domed and vaulted roofs and contained over 100 rooms, with eight to ten apartments for visiting merchants as well as their goods, and an eight sided bathing pool in one of its many courtyards. These no doubt depicting an extensive borrowing from the Asian civilization of the Middle East. Of course the extent of export across the Indian Ocean in terms of gold, Ivory, Rhinoceros horns, rare woods and exotic animals compensated for the Arab influence on the Coast of East Africa²⁰.

Part of this influence also brought Quaranic schools, market places, central mosque, palaces, government buildings and a great deal of urbanization to the coastal area.

Asian Influence on East Africa Coast

The Bantu communities in their early migration moved to eastern and southern Africa. They acquired knowledge of iron working and adopted new food crops such as banana and the Asian yam brought to Africa by Sailors from Malaysia and Polynesia who settled on the Island of Madagascar several thousands of years ago. This is a clear evidence of African borrowing from Asian Agricultural advancement. However the relationship was complex rather than one-sided²¹.

The historical and cultural development of the East African Coast was intimately linked to the creation of a coastal culture that dates from 100 BC to 300 AD with the establishment of Bantu speaking communities along the Coast North of Tana River. The region from very early times attracted the attention of merchant adventurers from Southern Arabia, India and China²².

The coast of East Africa witnessed the coming and goings of merchants from Arabia and western India. In continental Africa the Bantu had made their way to East Africa, to be followed by other linguistic groups called the Nilo – Hamites, the Cialla and the Somali. No precise details are available concerning the early movement of peoples in East Africa, but there can be no doubt that Bantu Africans made their ways to the Coast, and that through them, the trade of the hinterland flowed to the Coast where Asians exchanged lances, hatchets, glass etc for African ivory, tortoise – shell, rhinoceros – horn, gold and slaves²³.

The earliest known record of the East African trade is the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, a navigational guide written by a Greek trader in Alexandria Egypt around the first century A.D. The periplus gives details of shipping ports of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and identifies a string of market towns on the “Azanian” (East Africa) Coast that actively participated in the Indian ocean trade especially with Arabia. The most was a port named Rhapta²⁴.

The Indian ocean trade continued between 300 and 1000 A.D., but it was given a great stimulus by the spread of Islam and settling of Muslims from Arabia and the Persian Gulf along the East African Coastline from the 9th Century onward. Muslim from Arabian countries intermingled with African communities and helped expand trading links with the Arab world. The immigrants learnt the language of Africans, married local women and were increasingly absorbed by the people among whom they settled. In time commercial communities emerged. These were neither Arab nor African; they were a mingling of many peoples – Arab, Bantu, Indian and even Persian. The east Coast of Africa came to be known as the land of the Zinj and the earliest available accounts of its people tell us that they were black or dark –skinned. The upheavals which followed the death of Mohammed in Arabia led to the flight to the Coast of East Africa of many refugees from Arabia. These refugees undoubtedly gave the settlements in East Africa an increasingly muslim if not Arab complexion and many writers have therefore, wrongly described the towns of East Africa as Arab colonies. Through inter marriage and social amalgamation a distinct culture known as Swahili emerged, with a language that was basically Bantu though drawing many words from Arabic. The Swahili civilization which developed was neither wholly African nor wholly Arab. It was a synthesis of both. The word Swahili is taken from an Arabic word “Swahili”, meaning Coast. As the language evolved, it adopted Arabic loan words especially after the 17th century²⁵.

Contact across the Indian Ocean dated back to at least the 2nd Century BC. From Indonesia or Malaya, Seaborne immigrants settled in the large island of Madagascar and from there introduced foods such as bananas and coconut to the African Coast. These were widely adopted and spread rapidly along the coast and into central Africa. Small Coastal villages of fishers and farmers, making rough pottery and working iron, dotted this coast²⁶. By the 8th and 9th centuries visitors and refugees from Oman and Persian gulf had established themselves at some of these villages, attracted by the possibilities of trade with the land of zing; the Arabic word for the East African Coast²⁷.

By the 13th Century, a string of urbanized east African trading ports had developed along the Coast. These towns shared the common Bantu – based and Arabic influenced Swahili²⁸.

The chief settlements which grew along the coast and its islands included Mogadishu, Pate, Lamu, Mahindi, Kilifi, Mombasa, Pemba, Zanzibar, Mafia, Kilwa, Mozambique and Sofala.

They became substantial towns laid out in regular streets and possessing impressive houses of stone with large windows, terraces courtyards and garden. There were also mosques, exquisitely decorated .

When the Portuguese arrived towards the end of the 15th cent they were astonished at the spectacle of flourishing trade, prosperity and the level of civilization hardly inferior to that of Europe²⁹. Throughout the period of zinj prosperity, Southern Arabia was the great centre of maritime trade which brought prosperity to all the countries west and east of the Indian Ocean. From here fleets of ships continued to sail down to the East African Coast to carry on trade. Ivory, gold, iron, slaves and exotic animals were exported from these ports in exchange for silks from Persia and porcelain from China for the ruling Muslim families³⁰.

The Arab traveler Ibn Batuta was impressed with the beauty and refinement of these towns. He described

Kilwa as “one of the most beautiful and well constructed towns in the world” Kilwa was particularly wealthy because it controlled the Southern part of Sofala which had access to the gold produced in the interior near Great Zimbabwe) and because of its location as the farthest point South at which ships from India could hope to sail and return in a single monsoon season.

From the 13th to the 15th centuries, Kilwa flourish in the context of international trade, but it was not alone; about 30 of these port towns eventually dotted the Coast. They were tied to each other by an active coastal commerce and in a few places to the interior by a Caravan trade, although it was actually Africans who brought the goods to the Coast. Some Chinese Ports sent goods directly to Africa in the 13th Century and as late as 1417 and 1431, large, state-sponsored expeditions sailing directly from China stopped at the East African Coast to load Ivory, gold and rare woods. The Chinese discontinued such contact after 1431, and goods from China came to the coast there after in the ships of Arab or Indian traders³¹.

Islam is known to be of Asian origin and Arab migration to the east coast of African has firmly established the religion among African along with the lucrative trade that flourished on the Coast for over 1000 years. Part of the benefits of this trade was the permanent impact of Asian knowledge and ideas that have been established among African people symbolized by what is known as Swahili civilization. Islamic influence promoted long distance commerce deep unto the interior of east African coast³². The 13th century was a period of great Islamic expansion, and as that faith spreads eastward to India and Indonesia, it provided a religious bond of trust and law that facilitated trade throughout ports of the Indian Ocean. The ruling families in the east African trading ports built mosques and palaces; the mosque in Mogadishu was begin in 1231. Meaning of these ruling families claimed to be descendants of immigrants from Shiraz in Persia because the Persian Empire had once been an Indian Ocean trading power. The institutions and culture of the Muslim world operated in these Coastal cities³³.

Interaction with Muslim Arabs and Asian brought literacy into the Coastal society Swahili language was written in Arabic Script sometime before the 13th Century. A culture developed that fused Islamic and traditional elements. For example, family lineage was traced both through the maternal line, as was the Muslim customs. Swahili culture was a dynamic hybrid, and the Swahili people spread their language and culture along the Coast of East Africa³⁴.

Asian interactions with African have not always been positive and advantageous to Africa. Apart from the country behind Mombasa where the Arabs could completely dominate the weak and fragmented Nyika, there were two notable areas where Arab settlements,

Caravans and raids crisis – crossed the life of the indigenous Africans³⁵. The Coast between Bagamageoyo and the Ruruma River and the hinterland as far west as lakes Nyasa and Tanganyika have been described as the ‘slave hunters’ paradise. The African groups encountered here, including the Yao, the Maravi, the Hehe and so on, were divided into small group.

Conclusion

The paper has been able to show clear evidence of age long interactions between African and Asian on the East Coast of African continent. Dating back to ancient past this interactions which took economic and social pattern was of mutual benefit to both parties. The high point of this encounter was the emergence of Islam as a world religion on east African coast and the development of Swahili civilization as enduring relics that is still discernable today.

While interaction bred friendship and mutual cultural exchanges, the consequences of the meeting of two diverse cultures cannot be said to be always positive but rather of mix value. Slavery and slave trade formed part of the ugly face of the trans-Indian Ocean economic interactions which saw thousands, if not millions, of Africans shipped across the sea to Asia. The demographic effect of this is better imagined. The enduring impact of African Asian interaction on the east coast of Africa is what we have in Tanzania today where Swahili language is adopted as official language.

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