

SLAVE TRADE IN THE EAST AFRICA AND INVOLVEMENT OF INDIAN MERCANTILE CLASS

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Abstract

A tragic but significant aspect of the history of the trade network in the Indian Ocean is the involvement of the Indian mercantile class with the institution of slavery in East Africa. Slavery in East Africa was once centered around the Swahili Coast, which encompasses modern-day Mozambique, Tanzania, and Kenya. The Arab slave trade also occurred along this coast. As East African coastal communities like Zanzibar became major hubs for the slave trade, they played a crucial role in transporting enslaved Africans. The wealthy merchants of India, particularly those from the states of Kutch and Gujarat, significantly impacted this trade in a roundabout way. Indian traders mostly dealt in textiles, spices, and ivory. Because the commercial routes and networks in the Indian Ocean were so interdependent, slavery happened along the same lines as commodity trafficking. Slavery was intrinsic to the economic framework of the Indian commercial elite, making Indian merchants indirectly participating in the slave trade. Note that Indian merchants did not play a major part in these savage enterprises; Arab and European merchants in the region were the primary drivers of the slave trade. However, the presence of Indian merchants in East African ports and their involvement in wider commercial networks contributed to the economic factors that maintained the slave trade. When European nations led the charge to outlaw slavery in the 1800s, a dark period in East African and Indian Ocean history came to an end. Historians and philosophers continue to delve into the slave trade's legacy and the roles played by other trading groups, such as the elite of Indian merchants.

Keywords: *East Africa, Indian mercantile class, Mozambique region, coastal caravans*

Introduction

The arrival of Europeans in Africa resulted in a significant increase in the demand for slaves. Additionally, Indian traders saw prospects for successful commerce as a result of this circumstance. Newly arrived French in the Mascarene islands, consisting Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues islands, caused an expansion of the slave trade on the East Africa coast in the late eighteenth century. Historically, there was probably just a consistent minor demand from Arabs, Indians, and Portuguese. This demand had been quite low. During the eighteenth century, the French established colonies on the islands of Ile de France (now known as Mauritius) and Bourbon (now known as Reunion), where they grew sugar cane. Initially, they

were able to get the slaves that they need in order to operate their plantations on the Portuguese territory. In addition, purchasing directly from the Portuguese would be more cost-effective than purchasing via them. When the French shifted their attention to the port of Kilwa, they formed deals with the authorities there on the price of slaves and the regular supply of slaves. It was claimed by Seton, a British resident in Muscat in the year 1802, that between Zanzibar and Ile de France, there were between five and ten slave ships with their tonnages ranging from one hundred to two hundred tons. Even late into the nineteenth century, there remained a continued need for slaves from the Ile de France and Bourbon regions. In addition, there was a demand for slaves from the Portuguese and Spaniards, although a somewhat smaller one. The majority of the slaves that the Portuguese need came from the territory of Mozambique; but, Arabs and Indians also brought some slaves from Kilwa.

The desire for slaves from Europe must have been a driving force behind the commercial activity that occurred along the coast of East Africa. Before the entrance of the French, there was already a commerce from the north to Arabia and India that included the transportation of slaves. In 1776 Morice, a French slave trader, reported that Indian vessels arriving in Zanzibar, whence Swahilis went to buy goods which they subsequently exchanged for ivory, provisions and slaves. The conventional merchants, on the other hand, grew more concerned in the management and organization of the supply of slaves. The ruler of Muscat was therefore aware to the potential value of the East African coast and before the 1820s Saiyid Said had begun to stress his authority there. But it is difficult to separate the Indian demand from that of Arabia because in many cases slaves reached India via Muscat. The acquisition of slaves was arranged by Indian slave traders from Bombay who traveled to Muscat to make the arrangements. In addition, there was a thriving commercial exchange between Muscat and Sind and Kutch. A further difficulty encountered when attempting to estimate the number of East African slaves absorbed in India is that some Arab boats would take slaves directly from Zanzibar to India but their destination would be unknown to observers at Zanzibar. The numbers involved cannot have been large because guile had to be resorted to in order to introduce the slaves into British Indian territory. Every year, 400 to 500 slaves from Zanzibar were brought into India, according to the British agent in Muscat. (Bhacker, 1992).

In spite of this, Abdul Sheriff maintained that the demand for slaves in India, a country that had a huge population and a significant number of people living in poverty, was probably not particularly great. He said this because India had a vast demographic population. The village of Mandvi, which was the principal port of Kutch and was subsequently supplanted by Bombay, only received twenty-six slaves in the year 1838. Mumbai eventually became the dominant port in Kutch. Indian traders brought back from East Africa the vast majority of slaves, the bulk of them were of the domestic slavery kind. According to a study that was published in 1841, "in previous years, the number of slaves imported into the three Portuguese settlements... averaged from 250 to 300 per year." The year 1809 saw the transfer

of five hundred slaves from Mozambique to the three Portuguese territories and colonies in India. Henry Salt was there throughout this event. On the other hand, it would seem that this commerce saw a downturn, given that the number of slaves imported annually had reduced to 35 by the time the 1830s brought an end to the trade. The relatively minor scale of the slave trade that took place between East Africa and India may be attributed to the many Africans who resided in Indian regions that were situated in close proximity to the coast of East Africa. This was the driving force behind the trade. In the year 1837, there were only 550 individuals of African heritage residing in the Kathiawar region. On the other hand, in the year 1841, the Portuguese port of Diu had a population that ranged from 200 to 225 people. Between the years 1848 and 1881, there were a number of records and censuses that spanned the whole of the Presidency of Bombay. These records and censuses show that the African population, which is also referred to as the "Sidi," was only between 700 and 1,200 people. (Sheriff, 1971).

The mechanism for the acquisition and sale of the slaves became more complex in order to maintain a steady supply. This means that caravans to the interior had to be organized along more formal lines than in the earlier periods. Before the 1830s most of the slaves were brought to the coast by the people of the hinterland and interior.

But coastal caravans gradually pushed further and further inland in search of cheaper slaves and ivory as prices in the interior rose. However, most of the capital to finance the caravans was provided by Indian merchants. The increasingly attractive economic opportunities of the East African coast encouraged Indians to come to the region. They then provided capital and banking and lending facilities without which the economic development of the East African coast could not have progressed so rapidly. Indians did not personally participate in caravans to the interior, which were conducted by Arabs and Swahilis. However, they were prominent in the middleman activities of buying and selling on the coast. The slaves brought to the coast by peoples of the interior or the hinterland were purchased mainly by Indian merchants. The slaves would then be stored on the coast prior to shipment to Zanzibar in boats which were chartered from Arabs and Swahilis by Indians or which were owned by the Indians themselves. On reaching Zanzibar the slaves would be sold in the slave market. Although, after the 1830s, Arabs, Swahilis and Indians all participated in the organization of the slave trade but it was the Indians who would have been hardest hit financially had the trade diminished (Nicholls, 1971).

After assessment of total value of the exports of the region, slaves accounted for a fifth of Zanzibar's exports of local produce. But the value of the slave trade to the East African coast was diminished by the fact that some of the profit from it drained away to India. Being agent of Indian firms and only temporarily resident on the coast, many Indian merchants sent their profits regularly to India. Specie, mainly brought in by Americans, was the third highest of Zanzibar's exports, and most of it went to India. Therefore, it would be possible for the authorities in Zanzibar to contemplate the limitation of the slave trade.

The British had initiated the campaign to stamp out the slave trade. Their attack on the trade was a very gradual affair. It originated when on 1st January 1808 the Act for the Abolition of the British Slave trade came into force. This act was applied equally to British subjects in India and the Eastern Seas. It soon became obvious to the British in India and Mauritius that it might be worth while trying to prevent slaves leaving their places of origin. It was Farquhar, the governor of Mauritius, who first tried to do this. The subject was first broached with the ruler of Muscat in 1812. Bombay told Said the slave trade had been prohibited in British India, asking him to proclaim this throughout his dominions so that his subjects would not sell slaves to British subject. But Saiyid Said had to review his political and economic position before he decided whether it was worth while agreeing to the British proposal. Having decided to submit to the combined pressure from Farquhar and Bombay, said sent a directive to his governor in Zanzibar to prohibit the sale of slaves to 'Christians' (Sheriff, 1987).

When Moresby negotiated the treaty, it was established that the instruction was correct. He fought for the end of the practice of bringing slaves from East Africa to the southern parts of the globe as a crusader against slavery from the UK. The Moresby treaty of 1822 definitively outlawed the transportation of slaves east and south of a line established from Cape Delgado to Diu Head in western Indian, thereby ending the practice. Western Indian to Cape Delgado is the starting point of this route. On the other hand, the Arabic and English versions of the treaty had a great deal of inconsistencies. In addition, the treaty did not include any provisions that would have prohibited the selling of goods to British subjects who did not adhere to the Christian faith, such as British Indians. (Sheriff, 1987).

An further agreement about the slave trade was signed between Saiyid Said and the United Kingdom in the year 1845. This agreement was related to the trafficking of slaves. It was planned to go into force at the beginning of the year 1847, according to the timetable. Said was to make use of his influence with leaders in Arabia, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf in order to prevent the importation of slaves from Africa into their respective kingdoms. In addition to this, he was to forbid the export of slaves from his African dominions as well as the importation of slaves from any area of Africa into his territories in Asia. All of these things were to be done, as said. The treaty failed to have much effects because Saiyid Said was unable to enforce its conditions, even had he wished to do so. Even, in 1850 Hamerton, British consul at Zanzibar, reported that the Sultan did more than ever before to see the treaty was obeyed. Despite these measures, the trade continued (Nicholls, 1971).

However, the 1845 treaty did not touch one problem at Zanzibar that of the possession of slaves by British subjects at Zanzibar. Jairam, the custom master, had 200 slaves. In a state of concern, he went up to the Sultan and urged him to have all of the Banians living in Zanzibar to sign a document stating that they were subjects of Zanzibar and not of Britain. However, many of them declined since they continued to reside in British India with their families and possessions. Following this, however, a great deal of change had occurred in the standing of

Indians as well as the actions taken by the British government against them for owning slavers.

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