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A NOTE ON THE COMORO ISLANDS AND EAST AFRICAN COASTAL HISTORY¹

The Comoro Islands are located between 11°—13° S latitude and 43°—45° 30' E longitude — approximately halfway between northern Madagascar and Cape Delgado at the northern end of the Mozambique channel. There are four main islands: Grande Comore, Mayotte, Anjouan, and Mohell, plus a number of small islets. The total area of the islands is approximately 850 square miles inhabited by over 300,000 people of mixed ancestry. Today, the Comoros are a French Overseas Territory with internal autonomy and in this century they have been politically affiliated with the island of Madagascar. The islands have had important tie with the East African coast but this has been generally overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to point out some of the significance the islands have for East African historical and archaeological research.

Contrary to published statements that the Comors have little history of their own², that there were never towns of consequence on the islands³, or that the inhabitants' affinities lie largely with Madagascan people⁴ the data suggests a long and well developed

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² B. Davidson, *A History of East and Central Africa*, Garden City, 1969, p. 104.

³ J. Kirkman, *Men and Monuments on the East African Coast*, New York, 1966, p. 206.

⁴ A. H. J. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast*, London, 1967, p. 206.

Comorian history and one with important relationship to East Africa.

There are a few references to the Comoro Islands in the literature concerning the East African coast (including the offshore islands). Prins⁵ notes, for example, that Pate had frequent intercourse with the Comoros and points out that „Only after a member of the Ba-Alawi, a Sherifian line immigrated from the Comoros, was elected, changing the rulers' title into Diwani, can we speak with more confidence of Sultans of Vumba”⁶. The Portuguese, beginning in the sixteenth century, reported instances of communication between the islands and communities on the East African coast or immediate offshore islands⁷ and ties between Zanzibar, in particular, and the Comoros have been noted⁸. But it is primarily by reference to the data from the islands themselves that the significance of the Comoros to East Africa will be illustrated.

In the town of N'tsaoueni, one of several walled communities on the island of Grande Comore, are a number of ancient constructions. The Friday mosque and a tomb enclosed in a protective building nearby were, according to local tradition, constructed in the seventh century. The tradition maintains that shortly after the advent of Islam, Arab traders told the islanders of Mohammed and an islander, Said Mohammed, went to Arabia to meet the prophet. By the time arrived, however, the prophet had died but the islander remained to study the new religion. After a decade he returned with an Islamic proselytizer, Othman Affane, who successfully converted the peoples of the islands and created the base from which Islam was to spread to the East African coast and Madagascar. The proselytizer supervised the building of the Friday mosque in N'Tsaoueni and his final resting place is the

⁵ A. H. J. Prins, *op. cit.*

⁶ A. H. S. Prins, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁷ See E. Axelsson, *Portuguese in South-East Africa 1600—1700*, Johannesburg 1960 and G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast*, Oxford 1966.

⁸ J. Middleton and J. Campbell, *Zanzibar: Its Society and Its Politics*, London 1965.

protected tomb in N'tsaoueni⁹. This tradition is in accord with Stigand's report that Grande Comore was visited by Abdul Malik bin Muriani in 77 A. H.¹⁰

At the northern end of Grande Comore is a large dormant volcanic cone known as the hole of the prophet Solomon which is said to have been utilized by the ancient navigators as a landmark on their way north. Just to the west of the cone near a mosque located at the seashore is a stone wall running north-south which also is said to have been used as a navigation aid in ancient times. Oral traditions on the island of Grande Comore also relate that the earliest visitors to the Comoros were men from the time of Solomon. One myth maintains that Solomon's men came to Grande Comore to retrieve the throne of the Queen of Sheba which had been hidden in Kartala, the massive volcano dominating the island.

The veracity of the traditions and the exact age of the structures on the island remain uncertain. Early settlement of the islands is confirmed today only by a single radiocarbon analysis of material from a habitation site near the town of Sima on the island of Anjouan. Results of the analysis yielded a fifth century date¹¹. It would be presumptuous on the basis of this to state what role the Comoros played in the area before the twelfth century. The data at present permits only speculation that the Comoros were an important trade center and one from which peoples and cultural influences such as Islam spread to the East African coast. Certain conclusions concerning Comorian involvement in the early years of the ancient Indian Ocean trade and the movement of peoples in the area must await careful investigation of the numerous but as of yet unexplored sites on the islands. The data does permit,

⁹ A version of this tradition appeared in an Algerian newspaper in 1937 and was translated into English by Ibuni Salej, *The Comoro Islands: Notes of a lecture delivered at the Zanzibar Museum*, Tanganyika Notes and Records 12 (1941), p. 51—60. See also MSS 656, Swahili manuscripts. University College, Dar-es-salaam.

¹⁰ C. Stigand, *The Land of Zinj*. 1966. Originally published 1913.

¹¹ P. Verin, *Les antiquités de l'île d'Anjouan*, Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache 45 (1968), pp. 3—13.

however, a greater degree of certainty about the role of the Comoros after the twelfth century.

The island of Anjouan is mentioned in East African coastal histories as the place to which went the father (and presumably the leader) of the men of the early Shirazi migration. The Arabic history of Kilwa Kisiwani reports the event as follows:

*Historians have said, amongst their assertions, that the first man to come to Kilwa came in the following way. There arrived a ship in which there were people who claimed to have come from Shiraz in the land of the Persians. It is said there were seven ships: The first stopped at Mandakha; the second at Shauu; the third at a town called Yanbu; the fourth at Mombasa; the fifth at the Green Island (Pemba); the sixth at the land of Kilwa; and the seventh at Hanzuan. They say that all the masters of these (first) six ships were brothers and that the one who went to the town of Hanzuan was their father*¹².

In „Hanzuan” (the island of Anjouan), tradition also records the coming of the Shirazi. It tells of the founding of several communities by these migrants. One of these communities is Domoni, a walled town of approximately four thousand inhabitants, on the east coast of Anjouan. At least three hundred and seventy-five years old, since it is probably Domoni that John Davis saw in 1599¹³, it contains several buildings, including a mosque near the seashore, that are still in use today and said to have been constructed by the original Shirazi migrants. The tradition in Domoni states that forty years after the death of the Shirazi leader there arose a quarrel among his sons. Some left Anjouan to start or join communities in other islands of the Comoro archipelago, Madagascar, or along the East African coast. One of the sons fled to Mayotte and started a town on its west coast. There, today, is the reputed tomb of this son and a mosque whose mihrab is similar to one in the mosque near the seashore in Domoni, said to have been constructed under his supervision. A document, written in the local language with Arabic script, records the history of the town including the story of the Shirazi migration to the islands and gives the date of the start of the mosque's construction.

¹² Quoted in G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹³ A. and G. Grandidier (Eds.), *Collection des ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar*, Paris (1903—1920), Volume I, p. 256.

The date is the 14 Rajab 644 A. H. (November 25, 1246 A. D.)¹⁴. The document and the accompanying tradition thus place the coming of the Shirazi to the Comoro Islands in the late twelfth century. This is in full accord with Chittick's criticism and reevaluation, based on archaeological evidence, of the previously proposed tenth century date for the Shirazi migration¹⁵.

The Comorian version of the Shirazi migration not only is in accord with the archaeological evidence from the East African coast but can explain what apparently is an error in the Arabic version of the Kilwa chronicle. Freeman-Grenville¹⁶ has translated the site of the stop of the fourth Shirazi son as „Mombasa” although the chronicle states „Mafia”. That the chronicle is in error is an understandable conclusion under the assumption that the chronicle lists the consecutive north-south stops made by the Shirazi along the East African coast before the father arrived at Anjouan. But the Comorian version makes clear that one need not assume a north-south movement of the landing of the ships of the sons. Consequently, to conclude that Mafia is not what was intended in the Arabic version of the Kilwa chronicle is unnecessary. Furthermore, accepting the Comorian version and not assuming a north-south listing of the sites mentioned in the chronicle means that „Yanba could be Jambe (Yambe Island, off Tanga harbour)”¹⁷.

The Shirazi movement and contact between the Comoros and East Africa is probably not the earliest form of Comorian inter-relationship with East Africa and definitely not the last. In the sixteenth century, coastal merchants left Kilwa for the Comoros to escape Portuguese control¹⁸ and, more recently, people fled Zanzibar for the Comoros. The interrelationship between the islands and the coast is evidenced also by De Barros' statement

¹⁴ This and all following conversions from the Muslim to the Christian calendar are from G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Muslim and Christian Calendars*, London 1963.

¹⁵ N. Chittick, *The Shirazi Colonization of East Africa*, *Journal of African History* 6 (1965), pp. 275—94.

¹⁶ G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Medieval History of the Coast of Tanganyika*, London, 1962, p. 75.

¹⁷ G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *op. cit.*, p. 75, note 3.

¹⁸ B. Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

that Kilwa at one time controlled the Comoros¹⁹ and in the Sultan of Zanzibar's nineteenth century claim to the islands²⁰. The Comoros, however, cannot be considered simply having been, for the last several centuries, havens for refugees from the East African coast or outlying dominions of coastal powers. The Comoro Islanders often played a positive and influential role in East African affairs. This is exemplified by the creation of the line of Sultans of Vumba by Comorians and by the influential role by Comorians in Zanzibar before the revolution in 1964 and the more recent expulsions in 1968.

Examination of Comorian data reveals, furthermore, that Comorian life has strong affinities with that of the East African coast. Since Thomas Herbert, an English traveler, first noted some words of the Moheli dialect in 1626²¹, it has been recognized that, linguistically, the Comoro Islands are closely related to East Africa. Analysis of the Comorian languages can reveal important information concerning the historical and ethnographical interrelationship between the islands and East Africa as well as the development of the languages of the area²². Besides the languages, however, there are many aspects of social behavior, from household life through community rituals, that demonstrate the relationship between the islands and East Africa, especially the coastal regions. In Anjouan, for example, one finds tales recited of which one was reported in the History of Pate. One of the calendrical systems in use on that island — consisting of three hundred sixty-five days divided into three one-hundred day periods and a remaining sixty-five day period — is calculated without recourse to astronomical phenomena and the name of the year is taken from the name of the day of the week on which the year started. This calendar, with its associated ritual New Year celebration (*Suku ya Mwaha*), is the same as the one in which the „Nairuzi” or „Siku ya Mwaka”

¹⁹ G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

²⁰ R. Coupland, *The Exploitation of East Africa, 1856—1890* London 1939, pp. 472—6.

²¹ H. Johnston, *A Comparative Study of the Bantu and Semi-Bantu Languages* Oxford 1919, p. 2.

²² H. and M. Ottenheimer, *Languages of the Comoro Islands*. (In preparation).

was calculated and which was in wide use along the East African coast²³. Many other similarities could be presented but it is by reference to details of domestic structures and domestic life that the significance of the interrelationship between life in the Comoro Islands and history of the East African coast will be best illustrated.

In Domoni, the ancient capital of Anjouan, domestic structures were, and in many cases still are, constructed with irregular blocks of volcanic rock or coral without regard to coursing or bonding. The blocks are cemented with lime prepared by placing coral rubble on top of a circular mound of wood, then setting the mound on fire. A technique well used along the East African coast. The domestic buildings have stone-lined pits for latrines, interior washplaces, plastered floors, walls, and ceilings, niches for displaying porcelain, carved doorways, courtyards, interleading rectangular rooms, and flat roofs of cemented stone or coral supported by cross beams with occasional second story dwellings. One of the older and larger of the houses also has porcelain plates set into the ceiling for decorative purposes. Two of the largest structures in Domoni, old palaces, have many interconnected rooms with large ground floor storage areas, evidence of the days when some Comorians were wealthy participants in the western Indian Ocean trade. The dates of construction of these two structures is unknown at present but one of the palaces contains within its walls a tomb inscribed with the date A. D. 1707.

The architecture of the domestic structures resembles that of the buildings from archaeological sites, such as Songo Mnara and Kua of the East African coast. It follows that an attempt to reconstruct the nature of the social organization that corresponds to this type structure can benefit from the ethnographic data of the Comoro Islands and, in particular, from the relationship between household composition and house type as found in the town of Domoni. In this town the domestic structures with their complex of households center around the domestic life of consanguineally related women. At the time of a woman's marriage, her father will provide the household for his daughter and her husband.

²³ See Sir J. Gray, *Nairuzi or Siku ya Mwaka*, Tanganyika Notes and Records 38 (1955), pp. 1—21.

If a man can afford to do so, he will build a separate stone structure for his daughter but will build it large enough to house the families of other daughters yet to be married and possibly their mother as well. More often, because of space considerations and the desire to have mother and daughter(s) in close proximity, the new structure will abut the mother's house with the two structures sharing a wall and courtyard. In finances do not permit the construction of a separate house or a new addition to the mother's house, the father will renovate a portion of his wife's house to accommodate her daughters' households. In all cases the structures include a complex of households with a common courtyard and kitchen area shared by a woman and her daughter(s) or by sisters. Since sororal polygyny is not practiced, furthermore, no sister is the co-wife to another. Each household has its own separate and distinct male head.

Because of the similarity in domestic structures between the Comoro Islands and the medieval sites of the East African coast it is reasonable to assume that aspects of Comorian social organization can be related to the medieval sites of the East African coast. The identity in form between the domestic structures intimates that the social organization of the medieval sites of the East African coast shared the characteristic feature of household composition — a focus upon consanguineally related women — found in the Comoro Islands. The „double houses” of Kua were more probably therefore the households of sisters or the households of mother and daughter than „the households of the two wives of the owner”²⁴. Comorian data, as can now be seen, by providing information such as the above concerning the nature of social life that existed in towns along the East African coast during medieval times, can aid in developing a better understanding of the historical changes that have occurred in the area in language, society, and culture.

The task of comparing the data from the Comoro Islands with that of the East African coast is only its infancy at the present time but from the seeds of data now available it is evident that

this will prove to be a most fruitful endeavor. Although the Comoro Islands, since the 1800's, until recently have been politically affiliated, through France, with the island of Madagascar, both historically and culturally they have significant affiliations with East Africa. At present it can only be speculated that the Comoro Islands were one of the important sites of commercial activity of the western Indian Ocean prior to the twelfth century with significant relationships to the East African coast. It can be asserted, however, with some certainty, that following the Shirazi migration important influences upon African coastal life emanated from the islands and that historical research of the East African coast will benefit profitably by reference to the ethnographic and historical data from the Comoro Islands.

²⁴ P. Garlake, *The Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast*, Oxford 1966, p. 108.