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## NOTES ON ASIAN PRESENCE ALONG THE SWAHILI COAST DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Tra la fine del diciottesimo e l'inizio del diciannovesimo secolo fu la bandiera rossa degli arabi omaniti che intensificò i legami nell'Oceano Indiano occidentale tra i litorali dell'Asia centro-meridionale, le coste dell'Oman e la costa Swahili da Mogadiscio a Kilwa. Questa breve nota tenta di rileggere i movimenti e le presenze asiatiche in Africa orientale - baluci - durante il diciannovesimo secolo così come le loro influenze sulle società locali.*

*La letteratura disponibile su questo tema non è generosa – la vita e gli usi dei baluci in Africa orientale intorno al 1800 rimangono oscuri e la documentazione non è facilmente reperibile. I baluci, originari dell'Asia centro meridionale, giunsero in Africa orientale condotti dagli arabi omaniti come truppe difensive; una volta stabilizzatisi, dalla fine del diciottesimo secolo sia le loro occupazioni, sia la loro cultura subirono modificazioni; gli stili di vita tradizionali si fusero gradualmente con quelli swahili. Ma questi gruppi asiatici, per quanto assimilati alle culture africane, non dimenticarono mai la loro identità. Un'identità conservata, anche attraverso la lingua, sia lungo le coste sia nell'interno est africano.*

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### **Across the sea, across the land**

**L**and and maritime realities before and after the European empires did constitute crucial issues throughout the history of the Indian Ocean. Here, I tried to focusing on more than one littoral and on more than one region, with the object of looking at different perspectives both chronological and methodological. We are aware of the role of the European empires in these seas and on these lands, as well as of the ethnocentric views (eurocentric included) which did accompany numerous studies for a long time, and sometimes still do; nevertheless, it would be interesting looking at these regions - both fluid and solid - with more open eyes, with the object to reread the history and propose new historical and historiographical scenarios. Certainly, it's a long, challenging voyage across a vast area, with many protagonists but also with many actors with no voice. The voyage could have started from Oman which was part of a global unity<sup>2</sup> that long preceded the economic unification of the world from the sixteenth century, and the more recent processes of globalisation.

Along the shores of the Indian Ocean, trade relations between the people of the Asian, Arabian and East African coasts were innumerable and stretched back to time immemorial. Such links and relationships of trade and power were to be sought in the multiple elements that constituted the equilibriums of the Indian Ocean, that is, in the monsoons, in the presence of commercial thalassocracies (the well known merchant-states), in the predominance of mercantile laws, and in the trade routes of spices, ivory and slaves. Starting from the sixteenth century onwards, the European desires for conquest of commercial monopolies in the slave trade, and in all those factors essential to the creation of several ties, contributed to the consolidation of a red thread which would link three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa.

Oman international trade activities during four centuries - 1500 to 1800 - saw numerous waves of political leaders, brave seafarers, valorous merchants and adventurers in an escalating competition between leaders and merchants from every part of Asia and Africa as well as of Europe and the newly United States. During the period that

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<sup>2</sup> Here I stress on the global dimension but not on the globalised one.

saw the rise of European powers in the Indian Ocean, according to available historiography, deep modifications processes occurred from which new actors emerged along the Asian, Arabian and African regions. Against this backdrop, the gradual emergence of new Omani dynasties resulted from the polarization that followed the struggle against the Portuguese presence in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. This gave rise to gradual and discontinuous practices of unification among the Omani groups, traditionally divided and in conflict with each other, which came to the fore in the progressive affirmation of what we could define as the international power of the Omani Arabs in the Gulf and along the east coast of Africa. The history of Oman<sup>3</sup> international trade relations has been connected to the maritime routes across the Indian Ocean: sailing the Gulf and the Indian Ocean had always been dependent on the fact that the winds occur in an annual sequence with great regularity. The balance created by the monsoons<sup>4</sup> was achieved over the space of a year with the following rhythm: from December to March the monsoon blows from Arabia and the western coasts of India in the north-east, pushing as far as Mogadishu. The winds are light and constant, the climate hot and dry. In April the monsoon starts to blow from the south-west, from Eastern Africa towards the coasts of the Gulf, the climate cooler but much more humid. The rains are mainly in April and May, while the driest months are November and December. Moreover, along the East African coasts and in the islands of the Indian Ocean, the tropical climate is always tempered by sea breezes.

Since immemorial times until the nineteenth century, sailing from Arabia in November in a south-south-westerly direction took thirty to forty days in ideal weather conditions while, in December, thanks to the stabilization of the monsoon, the voyage took only twenty to twenty-five days. Consequently, thanks to the monsoons the international trade relations of Oman had been historically through the sea; although Oman trades were intense through land as well (Nicolini, 2013: 149-157). Maritime coastal trades, as well as long distance trades, constituted the expressions of an economy that was

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<sup>3</sup> The word Oman was used by Europeans to describe all of south-eastern Arabia which lies to the east of the sands of the Rub'al Khali.

<sup>4</sup> The term derives from the Arabic *mawsin* (pl. *mawasin*), season, from the Portuguese *monção*.

already highly sophisticated, developed and organized; therefore, the necessity of control of these sea trade routes represented a crucial element: a political element.

During the sixteenth century the Portuguese presence in the Gulf did not really affect Oman trades; nevertheless, after the loss of Hormuz in 1622 Portuguese increased their influence at Muscat while the Ya'ariba threatened the Portuguese forts along the coast of Oman, as well as the trades of pearls from Julfar and of horses from Muscat.

From the eleventh to the seventeenth century the Ya'ariba dynasty empowered Oman foreign trades through an active naval policy against the Portuguese, combined with an expansion of their mercantile influence in Sub-Saharan East Africa. During the eighteenth century the Ya'ariba stood at the head of a flourishing mercantile reign which was closely linked to the coastal cities and the principal islands of East Africa. The Ya'ariba Omani domination along East African littorals, which included Mombasa and the island of Pemba, was characteristic of quite normal changes in dominion over the seas, without resulting in substantial alterations in traditional commercial organization. The presence of Arab governors was always merely so as to control trade and impose taxes; this institution had its roots in the traditional Omani system of exercising power, as well as in the political agreements with local chiefs and rulers. In this regard, the Ya'ariba often assisted by merchants from the coasts of Western India, and defended by Asian troops, carried to the coasts of Sub-Saharan East Africa the Omani power system. After centuries of relative prosperity, the traditional thalassocratic system that had developed along the shores of the Indian Ocean was shattered by the Europeans, who started to extend their mercantile and territorial ambitions from land (*terra firma*), to the seas.

The Ya'ariba society was a rich and powerful merchants and landlords society, and numerous forts were built in Oman during the Ya'ariba period. The round fort of Nizwa was started by Sultan bin Saif I (1649-80); while his son Bal'arab (1680-92) built the magnificent fort of Jabrin. Saif bin Sultan I (1692-1711) was the greatest of the Ya'ariba princes, and was succeeded by his eldest son Sultan bin Saif, who in turn was succeeded as Imam in 1719 by his son Saif bin Sultan, a boy of twelve. Unable to find any further supports for his cause in Omam, he turned to Persia for help, and his

country was soon invaded by a large Persian force. The Omanis suffered many defeats but were finally helped by Ahmad bin Sa'id, one of the small Al Bu Sa'id group who, at that time, was Governor of Sohar. He succeeded in driving out the Persians and, after having overcome the Ya'ariba tribe and their Ghafari supporters, was elected Imam and founded the present Al Bu Sa'id dynasty.

The title of Imam gave Ahmad bin Sa'id Al Bu Sa'id a certain control over Oman, and under him and his successors the country saw an expansion for more than a century. The Omanis extended their influence into the interior and into part of the present-day United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), consisting of the future states of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Al Fujayrah, Dubai, Ras al Khaymah, Sharjah, and Umm al Qaywayn. They also collected tribute from as far away as present-day Bahrain and Iraq. The Al Bu Sa'id conquered the Dhofar region, which is part of present-day Oman but was not historically part of the region of Oman. Although Ahmad bin Sa'id Al Bu Sa'id had succeeded in uniting Oman under an Ibadi imamate, the religious nature of his family's authority did not last long. His son, Saiyid Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id (r. 1806-1856), was elected to the Imamate after him, but no other family member won the official approval of the religious establishment. The Al Bu Sa'id called themselves *Sultans*, a secular title having none of the religious associations of Imam. They further distanced themselves from Ibadi traditions by moving their capital from Rustaq, a traditional Ibadi center in the interior, to the trading centre of Muscat. The result was that the traditional conflictual relationships between the coast and the interior were reconstituted. Starting from the eighteenth century, groups from the interior gradually began to settle on the coastal new centres.

With regards to international trades, during the nineteenth century, the picturesque bay of Muscat was a semicircle, enclosed by the mountains and with rocks dropping to the sea on which fortifications had been built for keeping a lookout for enemies. The town was surrounded by hills and rung round with walls and, with a green valley beyond the shore, it was a pleasant place. The hinterland of Muscat is so mountainous that, in the nineteenth century, it could only be reached on camel or donkey-back; just outside the town the coast was mainly desert, hilly and desolate. Water resources have always been scarce in Oman and, in 1800, the price of the famous sweet, clean

water of Muscat was extremely high.<sup>5</sup> A varied and vivacious world animated Muscat: merchants from all over travelled there, Arabs, Indians, Hebrews, Turks, Armenians, Africans, Persians ... The dwellings were barasti, huts with roves of palm-leaves and mud houses, although there were also some in stone and madrepora. The suq of Matrah, near Muscat, spread over a large area, almost entirely built upon with dwellings and narrow and winding alleyways. Here, every kind of merchandise could be found, silk and linen, spices, dates, coffee brought across the desert by caravans, pearls, green and black grapes, bananas, figs, butter, fowl, goats and cattle, and even delicious mangos imported mainly by sea. The rich Omani merchants wore long, wide robes of extraordinarily clean white cotton, with wide sleeves and waists bound by belts from which emerged their beautiful silver knives, the khanjar, and swords. The most imposing were the Baloch warriors, naked to the waist and armed with a knife and a double-handed sword, with fierce glares and of threatening presence. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the Al Bu Sa'id empowered the mercantile expansion towards the oceanic coasts of East Africa; therefore, within the Indian Ocean developed a cultural bow represented by continuous migratory flows. During the nineteenth century the dominions of Muscat consisted of the island of Bahrain, the coast of Makran, some areas along the Persian coast such as Chah Bahar, the island of Socotra, the islands of Kuria Muria, the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba and adjacent ports of the East African coast from Cabo Delgado to Cape Guardafui. And it was in this very period that the presence of many economic opportunities on the East African littorals was a potent factor that led the Omani Arabs more and more towards Zanzibar.

What were described as the lucrative movement of goods traded by Oman throughout the Indian Ocean comprised every type of merchandise and spice - for the most part precious. To name but a few: rhubarb, borax, ginger, sesame, ivory, tortoise shell, rhino horn, beeswax, opium poppies, exotic animal skins, birds of prey, diamonds, vermilion, gold, horses, raffia, silk - which the Omanis regarded as having protective powers against disease and parasites - castor oil, tamarind, cloves, vanilla, curry, nutmeg,<sup>6</sup> rubber, tropical fruit, Mocha

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<sup>5</sup> P. Ward (Ed.), *Travels in Oman*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> The plant originally came from India, Burma and China (see in the Persian

coffee - very much in fashion in Europe at the beginning of the second half of seventeenth century - Chinese ceramics sometimes used as precious containers for dates in Oman, musk from Tibet and China, enormous quantities of ambergris<sup>7</sup> bought on shores of the island of Zanzibar or the nearby islands, considered a delicacy by the Omanis who even put it in the sorbets!

We know that ivory was exported from the eastern coast of Africa in considerable quantities from an early date, and also rhino-horn and tortoise shell, as was rocky crystal. In 1800 the principal products exported from the east coast of Africa and from Zanzibar were cloves, copal, ivory, hides, red pepper, sesame, copra, coconut oil, tortoise-shell, cowries, beeswax and tallow. While goods imported included cotton, arms, powder, Venetian beads, clocks, spirits, wheaten flour, refined sugar, brass wire, glassware, chintz and chinaware. Major exports from Zanzibar to Oman were: ivory, cloves, copal, sandalwood, coconuts, hippo teeth, cowries, rafters, rhino horn, beeswax and ebony. The Omani seafarers from the Red Sea carried Venetian beads, coffee, aloes, and dragon's blood; those from the south coast of Arabia sold dried fish, fish oil, ghee and onions; and those from Oman and the Gulf brought to East Africa dates and raisins, donkeys and horses, Muscat cloths, Persian carpets and silks, nankeen, crude gunpowder, almonds and drugs (mainly saffron and asafoetida). The Omanis also brought honey, waterjugs, ready-to-wear clothes, rosewater, gold and silver threads. The most important Arab purchase from Africa was slaves, then they took ivory tusks, cloves, coconuts, and rafters. Oman bartered with Europe and, starting from 1833 with the newly United States of America, coconuts, tortoise shell, red peppers, and beeswax in exchange for hardware, cotton wool and fabric.

Saiyid Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id vitalised in the Indian Ocean an important mercantile empire. The main factors of the rise of a mighty maritime trade network were constituted by the expansion of the spice trade, especially by the cultivation of cloves in Zanzibar and the

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annals under the name of Chinese bark); the Arab traders were careful not to reveal where they obtained cinnamon.

<sup>7</sup> Ambergris was floating or could be obtained from whales. The Arabs brought this precious product to the West and to China where, starting from the ninth century, was known as dragon's saliva; ambergris was also an important fixing agent for the essences extracted from flowers.

Pemba islands (*Unguja*), by the slave trade, by ivory exportation and by their implications with the European powers of the nineteenth century.

Saiyid Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id spoke Arabic, Hindi, Persian and Swahili; he had seen the island of Zanzibar for the first time in 1802, when he was only eleven years old - he had remained enchanted.<sup>8</sup> He represented the major exponent of the revaluation of the spice trade as a means of creation of power elite, through a significant expansion of the cultivation of cloves in Zanzibar. This highlights one of the first major steps towards the importance of spice. At the end of the eighteenth century the introduction of cloves (*Eugenia Caryophyllata*, from the Mirtaceae family, *kavafuu* in kiswahili) onto this tropical island determined a new perception of economic-commercial potential to the eyes of the Al Bu Sa'id. The creation of a new niche of agricultural exploitation in Zanzibar itself and in Pemba was destined to transform Zanzibar and Pemba into new centres of global mercantile interests.

Saiyid Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id died when he was 65 at the Seychelles on a dhow<sup>9</sup> that was taking him from Muscat to Zanzibar on 19 October 1856. It marked the end of an epoch, but not the end of the multiple cultural and mercantile routes vitalised by Oman across the Indian Ocean.

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<sup>8</sup> Among the numerous biographies on Saiyid Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id see for example J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Calcutta, 1915, 2 Vols., Vol. 1, 440-469; R.S. Ruete, *Said Bin Sultan (1791-1856). Ruler of Oman and Zanzibar. His Place in the History of Arabia and East Africa*, London, 1929; R.S. Ruete, *The Al Bu Said Dynasty in Arabia and East Africa*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic and Central Asian Society, Vol. 16, London, 1929, 417-432; S.A.S. Farsi, *Seyyid Said Bin Sultan. The Joint Ruler of Oman and Zanzibar (1804-1856)*, New Delhi, 1986; V. Maurizi, *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat*, London, 1819, (new ed. Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> *Daw* is a Swahili name, not used by the Arabs but adopted by English writers in the incorrect form 'dhow'. G.F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951 (rev. ed., 1995), p. 89; D. Agius, *Classic Ships of Islam: From Mesopotamia to the Indian Ocean*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2008.



### **A working hypothesis**

The challenge is here represented, while many trace the African elements in Asian cultures and societies in general, and in Baloch culture and society in particular (During, 1997: 39-56), by trying to re-examine the role of the Baloch elements into East African culture and society. Thanks to research carried on in the Balochistan Archives combined with research in the British Archives, and field work conducted in Pakistani Balochistan, in the Sultanate of Oman, in the United Arab Emirates, in Ethiopia, in the United Republic of Tanzania, and in Mozambique, Baloch presence in the Persian Gulf and throughout the Indian Ocean was apparently closely historically and politically connected with military, piracy, and measures taken by the British authorities against slave trade during the nineteenth century (Nicolini, 2007: 384-396).

Starting from the nineteenth century, the level of influence on trade routes controlled by Muslim merchants in the Persian/Arab Gulf and in the Indian Ocean was high (Sweet, 1964: 262-280; Risso, 1995; Shariff, 2001: 301-318). The growing geo-strategic importance of the Indian Ocean as a watering highway was soon to becoming the focal point of world politics, making the region the pivot of world affairs. The promotion of trade and its influence has been not only a source of complex relationships between different people and different cultures and religions, but also played an important role in searching for peace among all the littorals of the Swahili coast.

The coastal region of Balochistan, Makran, since ancient times, did hold an historical strategic position as the most direct route between the Middle East and the riches of the Indian Subcontinent. Covering an area of 62.000 squared kilometres, Makran forms the southern most strip of Balochistan province. As there is hardly any rain, the few villages and settlements depend on spring water and wells (*qanat/kariz*) (Piacentini & Redaelli, 2003). The coast has several small fishing villages while main ports like Gwadar, Ormara, Jiwani and Pasni have fishing harbours where the fishermen can be seen coming in with their catch every morning and evening; and where Makrani Baloch used to trading with all the maritime world of the past in the Indian Ocean. The port of Gwadar lies on the coastal area of

Makran (Nicolini, 2013: 69-80).<sup>10</sup> Its dry climate combined with the natural geographical features make one of the most daunting environments for successful human habitation. Therefore, it is sparsely populated. Makran was - and partially still represents today - a place of refuge for innumerable dissidents, rebels and fugitives. Among the first were, as stated above, the Omanis, who gradually imposed their power on the main coastal centres. The case of Gwadar was of particular interest as the town, its port and the surrounding territory were granted as a *jagir* (a temporary grant of land exempted from taxation) from the *khans* of Kalat to the Al Bu Sa'id of Oman. From a *jagir* Gwadar soon assumed the *status* of an enclave of the Sultanate of Oman.<sup>11</sup>

As close connections always existed between the two countries, the Omani presence in the Makran region eased the control of the local trade and of the regional and tribal mechanisms of power. The geo-strategic role played by the port of Gwadar in the trade coming from Europe to the Persian/Arab Gulf and directed to East Africa had been essential. So essential that during the second half of the nineteenth century, Sir Olaf Caroe did write: “*The strategic value of Balochistan, the desolation of the region is a resource. It offers what Tucker called space power*” (Brobst, 2005: 82-83). It's here interesting noting that, once in East Africa, and once consolidated their military power on

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<sup>10</sup> Since 1964, the *Gwadar Deep Sea Port Project* was a dream of Pakistani President's governments; after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the newly formed Central Asian republics - together with the rich trans-Afghan pipelines - China finally largely financed (\$200 millions) and built the Gwadar Port Project first phase in January 2006 (Axmann, 2008, pp. 268-274). Although the Pakistani Gwadar should become a twenty-first century reality equipped with a highway and oil and natural gas pipelines (Kaplan, 2010, pp. 64-94), connecting both “horizontal” (Iran, Pakistan, India, China) and “vertical” (Afghanistan, Central Asia) strategic and economic interests, the traditions of the Makrani and Baloch groups, still remain politically but not culturally divided. B. Nicolini, *Maritime Indian Ocean Routes: the port of Gwadar/Gwātar*, Quaderni Asiatici, Milan, n. 102, 2013, pp. 69-80.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the British Commissioner for the joint Anglo-Persian Boundary Commission: F. Goldsmid, *Eastern Persia: An Account of the Journey of the Persian Boundary Commission, 1870-1890*. London. 1876.  
Goldsmid, F.J. 1863. Report by Col. Goldsmid on the Claims of Persia, Kelat and Muscat to Sovereign Rights on the Mekran Coast, Political Department. Bombay. 19 December.

behalf of the Omani Sultans along the Swahili coast, some elements among these groups while remaining soldiers had started trading activities; Baloch settled and gave life to different activities linked to the slave and ivory trade: the main merchandises of the time (Lobo, 2000: 25; Kusimba, 1999). Therefore, Baloch role along the Swahili coast throughout 1800 was destined to a considerable impact on local societies, and to significant modifications in its main motivations and objects: the result was an important contribution to Swahili culture and society, and to relevant changes within Swahili traditional customs (Spear, 2000: 339-373).<sup>12</sup> Obviously, it must be noted that Baloch activities did not make them that wealthy according to the legendary prosperities described by most of the available literature. The great wealth of the Sultans of Zanzibar, as well as the luxury of their court, was far from reality; probably it was a legendary richness together with a good political issue. Consequently, Baloch role has been, poorely, studied as closely, and often exclusively, related to the

<sup>12</sup> The intense debate on the role of the Swahili culture and civilization is not the main focus of this study. Amongst the many, see for example T. Spear, 2000, *Swahili History and Society to 1900: A Classified Bibliography*, *History in Africa*, Vol. 27: 339-373; D. Nurse & T.J. Hinnenbush, 1993, *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History*, University of California Publications in Linguistics, No. 121, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press; M. Horton, 1996, *Shanga. The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa*, *Memoirs of the British Institute of East Africa*, No. 14, London, The British Institute in Eastern Africa; T. Spear, 2000, *Early Swahili History Reconsidered*, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2: 257-290; R.L. Pouwels, 2001, *A Reply to Spear on Early Swahili History*, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3: 639-646; C.M. Eastman, 1971, *Who Are the Waswahili?* *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 41: 228-236; P. Caplan & F. Topan (Eds.), 2004, *Swahili Modernities. Culture, Politics and Identity on the East Coast of Africa*, Trenton N.J., Africa World Press; F. Shami & G. Pwiti (Eds.), 2000, *Southern Africa and the Swahili world Studies in the African Past*, Dar-es-Salaam University Press; J. Middleton, 1992, *The World of the Swahili. An African Mercantile Civilization*, New Haven, Yale University Press; E. Gilbert, 2002, *Coastal East Africa and the Indian Ocean: Long-Distance Trade, Empire, Migration, and Regional Unity, 1750-1970*, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 36, No. 1: 67-on; C.M. Kusimba, 1999, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, Walnut Creek, Altamira Press; T. Vernet, 2009, *Slave Trade and Slavery on the Swahili Coast, 1500-1750*, B.A. Mirzai, I.M. Montana, P. Lovejoy (Eds.), *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, Africa World Press, Asmara: 37-75.

military and defensive role within the groups of Oman. It is believed that Baloch groups were found only along the Swahili coast littorals and in the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba; but they developed trading relationships into the hinterland of East Africa; if few Arabs ever went to the interior of Africa, only Swahili traders like for example Tippu Tip (ca. 1840-1905, or Hamed bin Mohammed bin Juma bin Rajab el Murjebi) and his father who claimed to be Arabs.<sup>13</sup> Swahili settlements were also viewed as Arabs mainly due to the Islamic nature of their behaviour. The close connections between the Omani Sultans and their Baloch soldiers and body guards represented the crucial issue: the loyalty was the prerequisite for the recognition by the Arabs of Oman to their soldiers, and from the nineteenth century onwards, descendants of Baloch soldiers were absorbed into new realities and played new roles within Swahili society and economy (Middleton, 1992: 97).

Starting from the end of the eighteenth century and for all of the nineteenth, as already stated above, it was the warriors of these South-Central Asians groups who protected, hid, supported and faithfully defended the Al Bu Sa'id tribe of Oman, thanks also to the tribal structure and clan-family relationships of their society which, traditionally nomadic, could count on both Makran, encompassing today's Iranian and Pakistani coasts, as well as peninsular and continental solidarity. From the accounts of travellers, explorers and European officials of the time, were emerging among other groups of Baloch along the Swahili coast the Hot, the Rind and the Nousherwani. (Miles, 1881: 94) These three groups were identified in archival available sources, although we assume that other Baloch groups were present on the field and in battles both in Arabia and in East Africa.

The Baloch from the coastal Asian region of Makran were pushed from the extreme misery of their country towards Persia and towards the coasts of Arabia. Here, they offered themselves to the Omani Sultans as soldiers, sailors, pearl divers (only for the Makrani of the coast), and bodyguards for pay that, though even modest, could represent the difference between life and death for them and for their families (Zdanowski, 2008: 23; Carter, 2005: 139-209).

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<sup>13</sup> R. Oliver, R.A. Oliver, A. Atmore, 2004, *Africa since 1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

During the nineteenth century the condition of life of these people in Makran was so hard that the British explorer Sykes vividly described their terrible and miserable life conditions (Sykes, 1902: 108); life conditions in the nowadays Makran region of Balochistan that did not see relevant changes throughout the centuries.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Baloch in East Africa**

Near the coast of equatorial Africa, separated from the continent by a mere fifty kilometres, lies the island of Zanzibar. It is the largest coral island of East Africa and forms part of a coral reef that stretches from the island of Pemba in the north to the island of Mafia in the south, creating a kind of coastline detached from the continent itself. Zanzibar is 20 – 30 kilometres wide and roughly 85 kilometres long. The city of the same name lies on the western side of the island and its port, one of the best in Africa, provided good anchorage for deep-sea fishing vessels.

The island of Pemba (*Djazira Al-Khadra*, the green or the emerald island) is roughly 75 kilometres long and 20 wide, an area of approximately 984 square kilometres, and is found 56 kilometres from Zanzibar.<sup>15</sup> Consisting mainly of coralline rock, it is hillier than its sister island, Zanzibar. Pemba was equally well-known for its cloves, still the main source of income today. Despite the extremely heterogeneous nature of its population, Pemba is inhabited by the homonymous Bantu group, the Wapemba.<sup>16</sup> The largest town on the island, Wete, in the west, has an imposing square-plan fortress built by the Portuguese which looms over a bay of mangroves.

In the nineteenth century, Pemba had no harbours suitable for large ships. With its shallow waters and dense vegetation, the island had limited reserves of drinking water. However, since the reef protects their coasts, Zanzibar and Pemba were the only islands of strategic

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<sup>14</sup> The political struggles in the region between the Pakistani central government and the Baloch groups and movements have become serious during recent years. See for example G. Pipes, *The Baloch-Islamabad Tensions: Problems of National Integration*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California Thesis, 2010; J.R. Murtha, *The Strategic Importance of Balochistan*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California Thesis, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> G.P.S. Freeman-Grenville, "Pemba," *E.I.*, VIII, p. 292a.

<sup>16</sup> J. Middleton, *World of the Swahili, passim*.

predominance thanks to two variables of fundamental importance: the monsoons and their proximity to the African continent. One of the reasons of their commercial success during this century was that the islands offered better services compared to other cities of the East African coast. The fleets of the Arab Sultans, moreover, protected the merchants' ships, taxes were low and, not least, Zanzibar had drinking water. The intense traffic of the Indian Ocean shores related to all kinds of goods and spices, principally of great value. Another particularity of the island of Pemba was the presence there of powerful magicians, witch-doctors and magical spirits. The island was renowned as the seat of numerous individuals with paranormal powers, and tales are still told of the existence of an invisible city *Gining'i*, in the south of the island, believed to be home to the greatest gathering of wizards and magicians. At that time the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba were administered by governors representing Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id (r. 1806-1856), and exercised all power on his behalf. The military support furnished by these representatives with extensive authority over the islands and their affairs, consisted of special troops of proven trustworthiness, that is to say, Baloch corps closely tied to the Al Bu Sa'id by fundamentally economic agreements.

The loyalty these Baloch soldiers had for the Omani ruling family at a time when there was much anarchy amongst the groups of Oman earned them lasting trust with the Sultan who deployed them to guard all his palaces and interests in the region.

The first settlers on the East African coast were, as already stated above, the Baloch soldiers, who until the establishment of the Sultanate in the 1840s, maintained army posts in the major centres of Mombasa, Zanzibar and Pemba. These men inter-married with the local *waswahili* and were gradually assimilated into their culture and society. They were later followed by whole families who left Balochistan in the hope of finding a better life along the Swahili coast, which arose at the time as an important manufacturing centre and only later became the hub of international maritime trade with Asia (Kusimba, 2008: 22). Most of the Baloch came from Kasarkand, although their brothers later followed them in from Sarbaz, Lur and Muscat. It must be considered that the life and times of Baloch on the Swahili coast during 1800 is quite obscure; it seems however that

Mombasa was the major Baloch settlement at the time, also witnessed by the presence of a Baloch mosque. According to Lane, it is believed that the first non-African to go into Maasailand was a Baloch, so too was the first non-African to be welcomed into the royal court of the Kabaka of Buganda (Lane, 1993: 133-141). As they moved inland, the Baloch founded cluster communities in Djugu and Bunia in the Congo; Soroti, Arua and Kampala in Uganda; and Iringa, Tabora, Mbeya and Rujewa in Tanzania; probably there was a Baloch family in almost every main Swahili town.

The Baloch settled in Mombasa and developed a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, preferring to engage in small real estate ventures and trade, or keeping employment with the Omanis and later, the British. Those who lived in the fertile hills of Uganda and Tanzania flourished in the farming and trading industries. The mercantile skills and business acumen of the Baloch earned them high regard amongst the various communities they settled. This can also be said of the small but vibrant Nairobi community.

Since the first half of the nineteenth century, the *Bulushi* (pl. *Mbulushi*) Swahili communities - according to Lodhi studies mainly from Persian origins - settled in Saa-teeni, outside Zanzibar town, in Fort Jesus in Mombasa, and later on in the Unyanyembe. The introduction of military terms such as *jemadari*, commander, *singe*, bayonet, *bunduki*, rifle, *habedari*, attention have been identified into Kiswahili from Persian Baloch (Lodhi, 2000: 62; A. Lodhi, 2013: 127-134).

With regards to the political leadership along Swahili coast, during the nineteenth century the Omani-Arabs governors of main East African trading ports often enjoyed the support of the local, autochthonous Swahili aristocracy, mainly merchants. They were tied to the Omani elite by mutual interests in the exploitation of the resources offered by the eastern African shores (Glassman, 1991: 277-312; Lodhi, 2000).

European rivalry in the Persian/Arab Gulf and in the waters of the Indian Ocean from the start of the nineteenth century on, combined with related upheavals in power and strategy, had a decisive impact also on the deviation of the maritime routes followed by slave trade. Clearly, however, the ability of the Omani Sultan in exploiting such political contingencies was also to carry a certain weight.

These, therefore, were some of the causes on which Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id and the Asian mercantile communities, both Muslim and Hindu, built their commercial emporium in the face of inevitable conflict with the British in the Persian Gulf over the question of piracy (Davies, 1997; Risso, 1995; Nicolini, 2012).

A complex exchange network soon developed between the East African hinterland and the Swahili coast, leading to the introduction of rice cultivation in the interior in those areas under Arab presence and dominion such as Tabora, Nungwe, in modern-day northern Congo, and in nearby Kasongo. On the coasts of the continent, on the contrary, local societies experienced significant changes due to the massive influx of slaves from the interior and of Arabs and Asians from abroad - Tabora - a key site on the commercial route towards the heart of the continent - practically became an Arab town, with a considerable Baloch presence (Reid, 1998: 73-89). Thus, considerable differences developed between the cultural identities of the coast and the islands, on the one hand, and the interior of the continent on the other, where, from the third decade of the nineteenth century onwards, the opening up of caravan routes wrought a revolution in economic, social and cultural terms.

Maritime ports of the Swahili coast had always been sustained by intimate interaction with the non-Muslims of their rural hinterlands, and this contributed also to the consolidation of the coastal identity (Glassman, 1994: 33).

Nevertheless, Rockel stressed that Unyamwezi, the heart of the ivory trade and the home of most male caravan porters, was not a major source of slaves. Rather, it was a region that imported slaves. Caravans arrived to the coast usually in September and porters announced their approach by blowing horns and beating drums (Rockel, 2000: 173-195; Rockel, 2006).

Another important item destined to alter the power balances was represented by firearms. During the first half of the nineteenth century matchlocks began to appear in the hands of Omani troops - composed also of Baloch - who imported them from the Ottoman Empire and from Europe. As is well known, Omani interests did not converge only on the island of Zanzibar and on the seaboard of the mainland in front of it; the Al Bu Sa'id, and their Baloch troops, moved down to Mozambique (Hawley, 1982: 29-39; Pouwels, 2002: 385-425). In this



regard, a clear sign of the consistency of the Omani military aspirations along the coasts of East Africa during the first half of the nineteenth century was constituted by the political and diplomatic initiatives between the Portuguese and Oman. In 1830 the representatives of the Lisboa Crown in Lourenço Marquez (the present city of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique) sent to the Sultan of Oman what follows:

*“27 de Março de 1830,  
Relação dos artigos enviados para o imamo de Mascate, com  
indicação do respectivo valor: 1 espingarda de 2 canos e um par  
de pistolas também de 2 canos (150 pesos), uma bengala de  
abada con castão de ouro (70 pesos), una moldura com vidro  
para o retrato do rei (10 pesos); para embaixador do imamo  
havia sido dispensado o valor de outra bengala (20 pesos) e de  
um par de pistolas de um cano (12 pesos)”.*<sup>17</sup>

Tabora, near the heart of Unyamwezi, as we have seen above, became an Arab town together with Ujiji. Here Baloch soldiers settled, intermarried, and soon became powerful figures. There were obviously considerable modifications in the traditional elites patterns of power relationships, where client-patronage perspectives never were to be the same, and where new actors were destined to emerging on the new Indian Ocean scenario in its connections with the East African hinterland. Everybody could share this ambition but at the same time new tensions were introduced between Swahili rich families, struggling to preserve their precarious domination, and the demand of the parvenus on whose support they relied (Glassman, 1991: 277-312).

Throughout the nineteenth century the shame and humiliation of slave trade in East Africa had been imposed and exploited by numerous social groups for many lucrative purposes mainly originating from southern Arabia and Western India. Baloch were naturally part of this framework. To this regard, the British explorer Stanley wrote:

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<sup>17</sup> F. Santana, 1967, *Documentação Avulsa Moçambicana do Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*, II, Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, Lisboa, No. 63: 683.

*“... this personage with a long trailing turban, was Jemadar Esau, commander of the Zanzibar force of soldiers, police, or Baluch gendarmes stationed at Bagamoyo. He had accompanied Speke and Grant a good distance into the interior, and they had rewarded him liberally. He took upon himself the responsibility of assisting in the debarkation of the Expedition, and unworthy as was his appearance, disgraceful as he was in his filth, I here commend him for his influence over the rabble to all future East African travellers ...” (Stanley, 1872).*

And from another British testimony by Lieutenant General R.S.S. Baden-Powell:

*“... The first visitor from the outer world to come into the Uganda was a Baluch soldier, named Isau bin Hussein, of Zanzibar, who, in 1849 or in 1850, flying from his creditors, finally reached the court of Suna, King of Uganda. On account of his beard they named him ‘Muzagaya’ (‘The Hairy One’), and he became a power in the land. Through him the people there first heard of the Arabs and of white men, of whose existence only vague reports, treated as fairy tales, had hitherto reached them. The rumour arose among them that they too were originally descended from a white race ...” (Kirkland, 1998).*

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the growing effectiveness of British measures aimed to abolition resulted in a reduction of East African slaves. This lack was, however, partly compensated for by Asiatic slaves, as shown by the commerce in Asian people from the coast of Balochistan destined to be sold in the squares and in the ports of Arabia. And this was one of the alternative slave routes in the Indian Ocean.

### **Conclusion-Discussion**

In the Indian Ocean million of people of African origin may have moved to Asian coasts, to India and to the Persian/Arab Gulf as free people as well as slaves - more than 70% (about 1,500) of soldiers in Oman were African from East Africa - and Asians were moved to Africa and South East Asia as slaves or moved as traders or indentured labourers (Mujitaba, 2000; Da Silva Jayasuriya &

Angenot, 2008). While the Baloch moved as soldiers, and as body guards to the Omani Sultans, and represented with their firearms their military and defensive strength in East Africa. Later on, they settled and started different economic activities; the Baloch did acquire a social status and considered themselves “better than the Africans”, while on the South-Central Asian coasts they were enslaved themselves by other groups in a much more powerful positions (Nicolini, 2007: 384-396).<sup>18</sup>

With the expansion of Zanzibar trade and growing 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 Omani Sultan’s 3000 troops engaged in the war in Unyanyembe against the Nyamwezi ruler chief Mirambo were “Bulushi” and Shihiri (Hadhrami) soldiers. Some Baloch soldiers joined the trade caravans as guards and reached the Congo with the legendary slaves and ivory trader Tippu Tipp.

As a result of the scramble and colonization of East Africa, the former armed forces of Zanzibar were integrated into the British forces in Kenya and Zanzibar, and the German forces in Tanganyika. The British had as early as 1876 used a *Bulushi* contingent on a British warship to help the third Omani Sultan Sayyid Barghash Al Bu Sa’id of Zanzibar (r. 1870-88) to put down a rebellion in Kilwa further south on the coast caused by decree to forbid the slave trade in the Sultan’s Dominions. Since Kenya was a British Protectorate on the coast, leased from Zanzibar, and a Crown colony in the interior, Baloch soldiers remained in service mostly on the coast, concentrated in Mombasa and Zanzibar. In German Tanganyika, however, Baloch squads were moved to Iringa and other centres after violent resistance and uprisings against German rule. Some Baloch in German service are said to have fought against the British India army during the First World War, whereas other defected to the British. During the inter-war years 1920-39, most Baloch in Kenya and Tanzania were self employed as traders or civil-servants of all kinds, though they continued to live mostly in their old traditional Baloch quarters which

<sup>18</sup> Quetta Archives H.S.A. – Agent to the Governor General Office (A.G.G.) Office - Essential Records. Balochistan Archives. *Complaint about existence of Slavery in Balochistan, from Capt. P. Cox, Consul and Political Agent, Maskat to Lieut. Col. C.A. Kemball, Agg. Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 17th September, 1901, Political 5-2/57.*

had now become urban dwelling areas because of the expansion of towns. During this period, some Baloch also moved to Uganda with the Indians/Asians, and there were only a few dozen of them who served in the British army or the police forces of East Africa. By December 1963 when both Kenya and Zanzibar became independent, only about a dozen Baloch were in uniform there. And today, there is hardly any Baloch left in the armed professions in East Africa.

Political unrest in East Africa had already triggered a northward movement of the coastal Muslims to the Persian/Arab Gulf and to the Middle East. This culminated in 1964-65 in the aftermath of the Zanzibar Revolution and the preferential system of Africanisation in Kenya and Tanganyika when tens of thousands of East Africans, whose ancestors had come over the Indian Ocean generation ago, left East Africa for Europe, North America, the Middle East, Pakistan and India. Many of these coming from the coastal towns settled in the Persian Gulf region. The East Africa Baloch settling in the Middle East partially integrated with their kinsmen already living there, and become more effectively bilingual in Swahili and Baloch.

The rejuvenation process among the Baloch continues even today both in East Africa and the Persian Gulf States. It gained momentum after the Islamic Revolution in Iran when several hundred rather well-to-do Baloch families migrated to Kenya and Tanzania. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s there was a marked increase in Baloch settlement around the Tanzania Mainland towns of Iringa, Mbeya, Tabora and Nzega, about 200 families arriving in 1958. In 1972, for example, in the villages along the Dar-es-Salaam highway outside Iringa in south-west Tanzania, there were 90 Baloch families newly arrived from Iran, with the village of Rujewa being exclusively a Baloch settlement. They were all self-employed as modern farmers, truck and bus owners/drivers and shopkeepers. Some of them later moved further to Namibia. Today the largest concentration of Baloch in East Africa is old town Mombasa where there is the famous Baloch street and the Baloch mosque next to the general Post Office. It's worth noting that the exact number of Baloch, whether old settlers and their descendants or new arrivals, is difficult to acquire since no census in Tanzania and Kenya takes into account such information.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude, the role of the Baloch on the Swahili coast was

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.albalush.net/union/archive/index.php/t-16414.html>.

initially deeply interconnected with the role played by the Omani Sultans; therefore, they were soldiers within the slave trade along Swahili coast during the nineteenth century, generally controlled by Omani-Arabs and represented by many diversified groups. It was the endless process of power relationships within slave societies in the Indian Ocean, while the conservation of Baloch cultural identity in East Africa is a peculiarity of some descendants of the nineteenth century courageous Asian warriors although restricted to few small enclaves. On this regard, the Baloch presence and influence on East African societies and cultures remain an inspiring, fascinating, and open research issue.

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## Abbreviations

### Quetta Archives - Balochistan - Pakistan

A.G.G.: Agent to the Governor-General

B.A.: Baluchistan Archives

H.S.A.: Home Secretariat Archives

## Documents

- Quetta Archives H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office - Essential Records. Baluchistan Archives. *Complaint about existence of Slavery in Baluchistan, from Capt. P. Cox, Consul and Political Agent, Maskat to Lieut. Col. C. A. Kemball, Agg. Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 17th September, 1901.* Political 5-2/57.
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