

The way of the Arab Sea

Sufis and scholars of the Sea

BOOK REVIEW AND PROFILE BY IRENA KNETLE FOR THE YEMEN TIMES

Indian Ocean had a profound influence on the lives of the people who lived on its shores. Fishermen, sailors, and merchants traveled its waters linking the worlds earlier civilizations from Africa to East Asia in a complex web of relationship. Trade under-pinned these relationships but the Ocean was also a highway for the exchange of religions, cultures and technologies, giving the Indian Ocean an identity as a largely self-contained world. It was the expansion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam helped to define the boundaries of the "world" which by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was one of the most prosperous and culturally complex regions on earth. By the sixteenth Century Europeans were part of this "world" as partners in trade with the indigenous peoples. But from eighteenth Century this economic relationship changed as the economies of the Indian Ocean "world" integrated with the capitalist economies of the West. The change from commercialism to capitalism ended the insularity of the Indian Ocean "world" and began its integration, as a region, into the global economy and its territorial division among various European powers. This transition altered the ancient web of regional of cultures. The Ocean was no longer a major force binding the peoples on its shores in a self-conscious entity, but the legacy of the past is still evident in their common religious, cultural, and historical experience.

Mwambao is the Swahili name for the East African Coast, the chosen habitat of the Swahili people. The Swahili were called Coast People by the Arabs, and the Swahili Coast was being referred to as "Murudi alDahab" or Golden Pastures. Numerous bays, creeks, and inlets, resulting from coral rock being eaten away by the sea provide excellent harbours e.g. near Mtwapa, Kilifi, Mombasa and Vanga, while the majority of the rivers are in Mozambique. The entire coast is composed of coral rock and most of it provides soft beaches, useful for landing of small crafts. The presence of water in Lamu, for example, helped to cool the hot coast climate; the choice of site ensured a maximum of fresh breeze from the sea upon the sandstone rock. Regular rainfall has given the coast and the islands south of Equator rich Vegetation, unlike the arid Somali coast north of it. Regular trade winds brought sailors in search of resins, and gums for carpentry, furniture making, cosmetics, perfume etc. Mangrove poles growing abundantly in the Lamu archipelago were used for ship building and roof beams. Of the animal products, ivory, rhino horn and tine cat

perfume were the most sought artefacts already in antiquity. Of mineral products it has been export market for gold, while Ethiopia exported gems such as emeralds, and after year 1100 also coffee. Arabs were travelling to East Africa with the monsoon from South Arabia and Gulf even in pre- Christian times. The earliest inscriptions were found on the island of Zanzibar, and date c. 1070 AD. There is also the oldest datable discovery of a mosque in East Africa. Arabs continued to visit the Coast and to settle there throughout the centuries as individual traders, or as empire builders accompanied by large families, or establishing themselves as independent rulers. The Arabs were known by their family names, some of which they have planted in African soil. They were identified by the region, Yemen, Oman, Hadramawt or even by the town of Muscat, Shihr, Mukella, Aden from which they sprang, even though they may have lived in Africa for generations. They made Pate, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa and other towns their home.... Mombasa, in the land of the Zanji, boasted wonderful orchards which contained lemons and banana trees, all of which still grow in the Island and rose apples. Carpets lay on the floors of the guest house. The meal consisted of rice, cooked or fried in butter dishes of meat, fowl, fish and vegetables, pickles, lemons, bananas, ginger, and mangoes. Similar meals are still served in all the Swahili towns to the present day. There were mosques built in coral stones. The Arabs functioned as teachers, and preachers, traders in all the ports along the Swahili Coast bringing their own Arabic textbooks for prayer sessions, and hymns to be sung in the mosques.

The once numerous elegant dhows connected all the colourful ports of the Swahili Coast. Then the creeks were filled up with dhows blown down by the monsoon, dhows of all shapes and rigs: from Lamu, Bombay, Persia, Gulf, and from Arabia, some high and dry, some in repair. The dhows known also as the silent Wanderers of the sea, were patiently awaiting the southern breezes to blow them back to their homes.

Long ago petrol-um was discovered in the Middle East, incense fragrant resins, spices and per-fumed woods dominated Arab trade. Southern Arabia, and Yemen as the centre of trade prospered and its maritime history is the subject of tales. The talk would be in- complete with-out mentioning the Yemeni era, which was an intensely human and cultural civilization that promoted and enriched various facets of social, economic and political life in East Africa. They participated actively in various dimensions of the emerging civilization, including domestic and international trade, underpinned by their vast experience in travelling the world seas. .

"Sufis and Scholars of the Sea" is an important text which synthesizes chronological and historic graphical range into its compact frame. The work researches the directly relevant histories of Hadramawt, Oman and East Africa during 1980 – 1925 through the life of one of the most influential Hadrami-East African scholars of that period Ahmed B.

Sumayt.

Zanzibar's future, an island off the Coast of present day Tanzania, thus was shaped by its geographical position, right in the middle of the Indian Ocean trade routes. It is a place of winding alleys, bustling bazaars, mosques and grand Arab houses, whose original owners vied with each other over the extravagance of their dwellings. It boasts not only natural beauty, rich culture, and breathtaking architecture. Zanzibar during Ibn Sumeyt time emerged as an important centre of learning in East Africa eclipsing previous centres like Lamu and Mombassa.

Today Zanzibar is also the name of a town in southern Yemen while Yemeni jewellery is sold in the shops of Zanzibar. Unlike Oman, Hadramawt does not have a history of a colonial power in the Indian Ocean. Hadramawt is known for its continuous export of people to the land of the Indian Ocean, including the East African coast. They were religious scholars, traders, cultural brokers, whose impact on both recipient and home country is a topic which has aroused much interest in recent years.

To them the Ocean was no barrier rather a long established arena for cultural and intellectual exchange. With them travelled goods and ideas, word of mouth, and word in writing, fashion, habits, linguistic patterns, and seeds for new agricultural crops and for They left their imprint on the place, the most notable being the religion of Islam, and absorbed cultural elements that were not Arab in origin, very much a two way nature of exchange. The Indian Ocean ports were not distant exotic cities, but actual real places, and where the human chain "silsila" extended through space and time. This is the "world" into which we enter with Bangs "Sufis and Scholars of the Sea".

The topic of this fine scholarly study is the scholarly exchange of ideas between Hadramawt the East Africa.

It is the history of Islam during the nineteenth and early twentieth Century. The study beautifully reconstructs the channels through which "Alawis", a Sufi tariqa, originated in the South-Yemeni region of Hadramawt spread along the coast of the Indian Ocean. It discusses and focuses on the life of one of the most influential Hadrami-East African scholar of the period Ahmed b. Sumayt. Thru Ibn Sumayt life it explores how links were maintained, and reinforced, how their "world" related to other ideas emerging at the same times. How they formed a tight knit, a transoceanic network of individuals linked together by blood, and common experience, which remained open until well into the twentieth Century when colonial frontiers came to be decisive factors, when the peoples actually transformed themselves into nations.

It researches what the "Alawis" actually thought in East Africa, what inspired their teachings; it explores their scholarly links, and further the impact of Hadrami Alawis on nineteenth Century East African scriptural Islam. It places the highly scriptural widely travelled and deeply learned

tradition of Hadramawt in East Africa in the frame work of Islamic learning.

The Alawis were travelling widely for seeking out knowledge beyond their local communities, and in for example Ibn Sumayt case, in his mature years he travelled equally wide to spread knowledge. As result families became not only transoceanic, but also transregional.

Time flies and things change: As nineteenth Century drew closer, the Alawis in East Africa, like their fellow residents in the Indian Ocean shores were exposed to European colonial-ism.

The central figure of this research Ahmed B. Abo Bakr b. Sumayt (1886-192) was one of the most prominent Hadrami-East African scholar of that period. Born in the Comoro Islands to a father who had immigrated from Hadramawt, Ibn Sumayt returned to his father's homeland. He achieved his greatest fame in East Africa, as a pious man, a scholar, and as Qadi in Zanzibar. As East Africa came under colonial rule towards the end of the great respect from those British administrators who came into contacts with him. In their words " it was he who made them appreciate the true Arab reactions to foreign rule". Through focusing on the life of Ibn Sumayt and his life within a network, it presents the life in the middle of a "man in the middle". Ibn Sumayt is the link between sail ships and oil tankers, between the empires of the monsoon, via the period of European imperial-ism, and the ear of the notion states. Especially the later half of the nineteenth Century when he saw mountain European influence in East Africa and British influence in Zanzibar.

Ibn Sumayt was also a reformer and teacher, at the same time fully aware of developments in the Middle East. We meet him as propagator of improved agricultural methods, and even discussing .new breeds of crops with friends. Ibn Sumayt importance in his works as Qadi, however, lies how the Ulama found their place in the "colonial space" as active partners Ibn Sumayt is here being presented as pious and learned man yet intensely human, and who possessed a reputation which extended far beyond the limits of Zanzibar.

Sufis and Scholars of the Sea is a fine scholarly work. It is well researched, focused in excellent presented. It deserves attention for its original approach, for the wealth of unto now unpublished Information. It will be of special interest to scholars, researchers, students but also as general reading to all those interested in the role and contribution of the Yemeni Hadrami Arab scholars to the history and culture of the Indian Ocean. "Sufis and Scholars of the Sea" is also a tribute to Yemeni Hadrami scholars and to Yemen. It should be made available also to the Arabic speaking audience.

Anne Katrine Bang is on her way to become also an acclaimed novel writer. She just published her second novel under the title "Roots in Reality" which is - of course - set in Tarim, in Yemen. On the occasion of presenting both of her books to the Norwegian public recently, the

leading Norwegian newspaper "Aftenposten" published a lengthy interview with Bang under title "Yemen 2 x".