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The Baluchi of East Africa: Dynamics of Assimilation and Integration

ABDULAZIZ Y. LODHI

Baluchi diasporic presence in the Gulf region is well documented, but little is known about Baluchi settlements in East Africa. The Baluchis—in Swahili called Wabulushi *(singular:* Mbulushi*)—who settled in Kenya and Tanzania in the 1820s are heterogeneous Baluchi-cum-Swahili-speaking Sunni Muslim communities originating in Iran. They came to Zanzibar as mercenaries with the Omani forces, and after 1890, they joined the German and British colonial forces in East Africa. Since the 1960s, when the East African countries became independent, the Baluchis have been engaged in trade, mechanized agriculture, transportation, and skilled professions. Though many of the Baluchis of East Africa emigrated to Europe, North America, and various Gulf countries in the 1960s, new waves of Baluchis have arrived in East Africa at irregular intervals. The latest immigration was in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In Rujewa District alone, in the Iringa region of Tanzania, a settlement was established of about seventy Baluchi families who were soon engaged in modern farming.*

KEYWORDS assimilation, Baluchi, East Africa, identity, integration, Zanzibar

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the Baluchis in East Africa are concentrated in Mombasa and Nairobi (Kenya) and in Arusha, Dar es Salaam, Iringa, Mbeya, Moshi, Mwanza, and Singida (Tanzania).[1] The general tendency among the Baluchi settlers in East Africa has been integration rather than isolation or conservatism. The Baluchis have not maintained their language or preserved their traditional culture; instead, to a great extent, they have assimilated with the surrounding Muslim communities in the coastal and inland urban centers of East Africa. Recently, a tendency to rejuvenate Baluchi ethnicity has been observed in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, where the Persian New Year, *Naw Roz* (*Nairuzi* in Swahili), is celebrated in cooperation with the Iranian diplomatic corps.

The present study focuses on the dynamics of assimilation and integration among the Baluchis of Tanzania and Kenya and the factors that positively influence the cultural and political integration of this immigrant group in a changing world where ethnicity is otherwise negatively essentialized and minorities are more firmly defined and/or marginalized.

THE ZANJ AND THE SHIRAZI

Iranian presence on the East African coast is not new, and it was preceded by several centuries of purely Arabic cultural predominance, which began with the coming of Islam early in the eighth century. Much has been written and debated about Iranian cultural and linguistic influences and the identity of the legendary Shirazi people of Zanzibar and the East African coast. Most of the earlier Iranian influences in East Africa are from the Gulf region, stemming from the traders and settlers coming from both the Arabic- and Persian-speaking communities. There is much evidence of specifically *Wabulushi* and a small number of Persian-speaking Bahraini (*Mabahrani* in Swahili) from the period after 1821, though Baluchi-speaking individuals and families might have arrived in East Africa and settled there earlier.

The Swahili coast was well known to the navigators of antiquity in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. With the advent of Islam, East Africa was linked directly with Arabia and Persia; with the settlement of Omanis in Zanzibar led by Prince Hamza in 695 CE and the settlement of Arab fugitives from Mecca in Mogadishu in 740 CE, it was also linked indirectly with India. Several smaller migrations followed, and in 920 CE, a group of rebel soldiers from Basra established themselves as pirates in Socotra; their descendants later settled along the Somali coast. In 975 CE, the

[1]See A. Y. Lodhi, "A Note on the Baloch in East Africa," in *Language in Society: Eight Sociolinguistic Essays on Balochi*, ed. Carina Jahani (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2000), 91–95; and A. Y. Lodhi, *Oriental Influences in Swahili: A Study in Language and Cultural Contacts* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2000).

most notable migration in the region took place, led by Ali bin Sultan al-Hassan, the legendary deposed ruler of Shiraz in Persia. These Iranians settled in Mombasa (Kenya), Pemba (Zanzibar), Kilwa (Tanganyika), and Sofala (Mozambique); intermarried with the local people; and founded several dynasties and more urban settlements during the centuries that followed. The descendants of the Iranians and most of their subjects of mixed African, Arab, Iranian, and Indian origins identified themselves as *Washirazi* (Shirazi)—a general term used even today, especially in Zanzibar, where a large majority of the people call themselves Washirazi. However, there is much ambiguity surrounding the Shirazi ethnicity and its role in the history of East Africa in general and the post–World War II politics of Zanzibar in particular.[2] The Iranians and Arabs called the East African coastlands "Zangibar," meaning "the land of the Zanj" (i.e., the Black Coast).

The Shirazi colonization[3] of the East African coastlands consolidated Islam, making a formative contribution politically, economically, and culturally; supplementing the Swahili language with Arabic and Persian elements; and thus supplying essential elements for cultural unity along the coast, where the culture had much in common with other Muslim cultures of the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. This unity provided the Swahili/Shirazi with lucrative markets for their products. Trade was established with India and the Far East, and in 1071 and 1082, East African emissaries were sent to China. Much later, in 1415, a Chinese mission headed by an admiral of the Ming dynasty visited Kilwa Island in Zangistan (in present-day Tanzania).[4]

THE BALUCHIS

In 1821, the Sultan and Imam of Oman, Seyyid Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi, hired an Iranian fleet to invade the islands and ports of East Africa. The Iranian fleet leased by the Sultan of Oman consisted mostly of Baluchi and Sindhi/Cutchi mercenaries, with a few Arab, Persian, and Pathan officers from India.[5] Almost all of these, after their families had arrived from Iran

[2]J. de V. Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (London: James Currey, 1993); A. H. J. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* (London: International African Institute, 1967); T. M. Ricks, "Persian Gulf Seafaring and East Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 3 (1970): 345–50; T. Spear, "The Shirazi in Swahili Traditions, Culture, and History," *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 299–300; C. Tominaga and A. H. M. Sheriff, "The Ambiguity of Shirazi Ethnicity in the History and Politics of Zanzibar," *Christianity and Culture* 24 (1990): 1–37.

[3]N. Chittick, "The Coast before the Arrival of the Portuguese," in *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*, ed. B. A. Ogot and J. A. Kieran (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968), 100–18.

[4]Allen, *Swahili Origins*, 136–38.

[5]N. Bennett, *A History of the Arab State of Zanzibar* (London: Routledge, 1978).

and India, settled in the coastal towns in or around the forts and the newly built camps (e.g., Saa-teeni north of Zanzibar City and Fort Jesus in Mombasa—the largest fortification in East Africa), with the Baluchi cavalry settling in Zanzibar City at the site of the present Haile Selassie School.

With the expansion of Zanzibari trade and political influence in the interior of Tanganyika, Baluchi squadrons were dispatched to Tabora in central Tanganyika and Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika. In 1873, about half of the 3,000 Zanzibari troops engaged in the war in Unyanyembe in the interior of Tanganyika against the Nyamwezi ruler Chief Mirambo were mercenary Wabulushi from Iran and Washihiri from Hadramawt in South Yemen. A number of Baluchi soldiers joined trade caravans as guards and reached the Congo with the legendary Zanzibari trader Tippu Tip (Hamed bin Muhammad al-Murjebi, who had under his command 1,600 armed men—both freemen and slaves—in his caravans and depots). Tippu Tip became the first and only Zanzibari governor of the copper province of Katanga (the present Shaba Province) in Eastern Congo; he later became the first Belgian governor of Katanga for a short time when Belgium occupied the Congo after the European scramble for Africa was concluded in 1890.[6] Many Baluchis thus served in the Belgian Congo army for some years before returning to Tanganyika, Zanzibar, and Kenya just before World War I. During 1891–1919, some Baluchi soldiers also served in the German colonial army in Tanganyika; some of them later joined the British forces in Tanganyika after World War I. Earlier, the Baluchis in East Africa were known also as *Mabulushi* (singular: *Bulushi*), and almost all of them spoke Swahili as their native language. Today, some of them speak a mixture of Baluchi and Swahili because of the influx of new Baluchi immigrants. The early Baluchi settlers frequently intermarried with other Muslims of East Africa, who were themselves of diverse ethnic origin, and adopted Swahili as their native language, though often Baluchi households received "fresh blood" as new immigrants from their old country, Iranian Baluchistan, arrived to join their relatives and friends.

East Africans of Baluchi origin are Sunni Hanafi. There are no special Baluchi mosques or *jamati/jamaatkhana* (community centers), but the Baluchis usually gather at a particular Sunni mosque and socialize and intermarry freely with other Sunni Muslims. (The few Shia Iranians in East Africa socialize more with the South Asian Khoja Shia Ithna Asheria, whose mosques and community centers they use.)

For many Wabulushi in East Africa, the "Baluchi" identity is self-perceived, just as it is for most of the "Arabs" of East Africa; one is a Baluchi because of one's patrilineal descent, even if one does not speak the Baluchi language.

[6]Tippu Tip, *Kwa Maneno Yake Mwenyewe*, trans. W. H. Whitely (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1959).

The process of "Swahilization" among the Baluchis continued until the early 1960s, by which time political unrest in East Africa had already triggered a northward movement of the coastal Muslims to the Middle East and South Asia, many in the end moving to Europe and North America. This culminated in 1964–1965 in the aftermath of the republican revolution in Zanzibar and the preferential system of "Africanization" in Kenya and Tanganyika, when tens of thousands of East Africans, whose ancestors had crossed the Indian Ocean generations before, left East Africa for Europe, North America, the Middle East, Pakistan, and India. Most of those from the coastal towns of East Africa settled in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, and Yemen.

The exact number of Baluchis in East Africa—whether previous settlers and their descendants or new arrivals during the last four decades—is difficult to ascertain, since in Tanzania and Kenya, the census does not collect such data. There are, however, rather reliable statistics on speakers of different languages; in the case of the Baluchis, most of the previous settlers would be categorized as "speakers of Swahili as their first language." However, in June 2007, Sheikh Abdulrahim Pirmohamed Kamalkhan Pordelan, a prominent Baluchi leader in Mombasa, Kenya, estimated the Wabulushi of Kenya to number about 1,000,[7] with their largest concentration being in Mombasa, where there is the modern Msikiti wa Wabulushi (Baluchi Mosque), Mtaa wa Wabulushi (Baluchi Street), and Bustani ya Wabulushi (Baluchi Garden, now renamed Public Garden). For Tanzania in 2008, one Baluchi leader in Dar es Salaam estimated the Wabulushi to number between 2,000 and 3,000.[8]

In Zanzibar City, there is still one Mtaa wa Hurumzi (Hormuz Street) in a former aristocratic quarter where a couple of old large mansions have been turned into tourist hotels, and up until the mid-1960s, there was at least one Swahili-speaking family with the name Bahurmuz (from the South Arabian expression "Banu Hurmuz"—the children of Hormuz) residing in the Malindi section of Zanzibar City.

PERSIAN/IRANIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCE IN EAST AFRICA

The Persian/Iranian cultural influence in East Africa has permeated all aspects of East African life, just as the Arabian/Muslim influence has. The

[7]Sheikh Abdulrahim Pirmohamed Kamalkhan Pordelan (popularly known as Mzee Imu) and his nephew Mr. Mohamed Kheir, personal communication, June 27, 2007, Mombasa, Kenya.

[8]Sheikh Amin Kader Baksh and his cousin Mr. Suleiman Haji Kadu, personal communication, January 14, 2008, Dar es Salaam. Sheikh Kader Baksh's father was born in Iranian Baluchistan and raised in Dar es Salaam, and his mother was a third-generation Zanzibari Baluchi. He does not speak Baluchi and had visited the home district of his father in Baluchistan in 1990. He had an English-speaking Baluchi interpreter during his two-week stay in Baluchistan. He assured me that his father never went back to Baluchistan, and that is why he had to visit his father's home district to meet his relatives there.

port cities of the Swahili coast in the past resembled the mercantile cities of the Gulf region with their white buildings of coral stone "and large public spaces where poets and minstrels recited epics and poems in front of large audiences . . . . In 1498 when the Portuguese reached *Zandj* on their way to India, they were impressed by the size and cleanliness of the cities, the quality of the houses, the luxurious good taste with which they were decorated and the beauty and elegance of the women who were active participants in society."[9]

Apart from many lexical borrowings, which include mostly nominals with a few verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, no other Persian/Iranian linguistic influences can be found in Swahili or other East African languages.

The literary language of most Iranians who settled in Swahili-speaking areas toward the end of the first millennium CE and then later, about 180 years ago, was Persian. Historical data tell us that few of these individuals spoke Persian as their first language, since most of them came from the Arabic- and Baluchi-speaking regions of Iran, and when they first settled in East Africa after the coming of Islam, Arabic had already been established as the literary language of the Swahili communities. One cannot thus assume that all or most of the "Persians" spoke Persian as their primary language. Persian-speaking Iranians did not come in large enough numbers to effect deep and uniform changes in the Swahili dialects over such an extensive geographical area as the Swahili coast. The Persian elements in Swahili are too few compared to those of Arabic, though more than those of Indian origin. A majority of the Iranians who came to East Africa beginning in the 1820s were Baluchis who were mostly in the army and the police force, and Swahili was their working language.

Physical contact leading to bilingualism (whether Swahili and Persian or Swahili and Baluchi) was limited to a small proportion of the Iranian and Swahili populations (i.e., the rulers, traders, and menial workers in the urban areas); a great majority of the population, which was rural, was not influenced by the speech styles of the outsiders, who came in relatively small numbers and kept mostly to the urban areas. Iranians were gradually assimilated into the Swahili society,[10] as were the peoples of the East African hinterland, who came to the coast mostly as slaves in numbers much larger than

[9]*The World Guide—A View from the South* (Oxford: Instituto del Tercer Mundo and New International Publishers, 1997/1998), 539. Every year, each Swahili city elected a *shaha* (poet laureate), and together they would select a *shaha wa shaha* (king of poets). Their cities were ruled by a *miri* (prince, emir), who had *mawaziri* (ministers, viziers; singular: *waziri*) to counsel him and *madiwani* (councilors; singular: *diwani*) to administer his *serikali* (government). Each city or town had its own *bandari* (port) and *karkhana* (workshops, factories) for the manufacture of *sukari* (sugar), *puladi* (steel/iron goods), and so forth.

[10]A. Y. Lodhi, *The Institution of Slavery in Zanzibar and Pemba* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1973); A. Y. Lodhi, "African Settlements in India," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 83–86.

those of the Iranians or "Persians," but who also did not make substantial linguistic contributions to Swahili and did not even prevent Swahili from losing the tone distinctions that were characteristic of their own native languages. Instead, they also became Swahilized, and many of them adopted the ethnonym "Shirazi."

However, today, there are occasional bulletins in Persian published by the recent Baluchi immigrants in Tanzania that deal with their social affairs, such as news about weddings, births, and deaths, and changes of address and telephone numbers; there is also at least one Tanzanian of Baluchi origin born in Tanzania, Mr. Aziz Rostam, who is a prominent member of parliament and also a member of the Central Committee of the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (the Revolutionary Party).

LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE BALUCHIS

Persian words in Swahili have been borrowed both directly and through Arabic and northern Indian languages. Since Persian was the literary language of the Baluchis in East Africa (later replaced by Arabic and Swahili), only one direct Baluchi loanword in East Africa has so far been identified: *braza* (brother), which was a term used by Baluchi soldiers to address one another. Indirectly, the Baluchi (and Indian) soldiers introduced Perso-Turkic words into Swahili. These words are mostly military terms, which are used all over East Africa today: for example, *jemadari* (commander), *singe* (bayonet), *Afande!/Afendi!* (Yes, sir! From Greek via Turkish), *bunduki* (gun, rifle), *Habedari!* (Attention! From Arabic-Persian), and *khabar-dar* (Be alert! or Watch your tongue! From Arabic-Persian).

Quite a few of these Persian words were introduced into the Indo-Aryan languages of North India after the Turkic-Mongol invasions there that were begun by the "slave king" Amir Sabuktagin of Ghazni in 997 CE. Some of the Persian elements probably arrived in East Africa during the advent of Islam in the eighth century and through the Shirazi era starting in the tenth century up to the first Omani invasion of 1652. Other Persian and Turkish elements probably arrived and/or were more firmly established with the second Omani invasion of Seyyid Said of Muscat in the 1820s, when the Omani forces—the fleet, the cavalry, and the bodyguards—were predominantly mercenaries from the Makran Coast and the interior of Baluchistan and were presumably all Sunni Muslims who spoke Persian as their literary language. The descendants of these people in East Africa are today almost completely Swahilized.

The Baluchi might also have consolidated the use of certain Persian items already found in the Swahili language and used in East Africa but that were not very common earlier: for example, *shali* (shawl), *cherehani* (sewing machine or any machine with a pedal that might be used to, for example,

sharpen swords, knives, axes, and scissors), and *karkhana* or *karakana* (factory or workshop). Other Persian items related to the aristocratic and patrician lifestyle were probably imported or brought into common use by the Iranians who came to Zanzibar and settled there during 1840–1856 with one of the wives of Sultan Seyyid Said bin Sultan—the Persian princess Shehrazadeh, a daughter of Shah Muhammad Ali Mirza of Iran.

However, the Baluchis' scholarly contributions to the Swahili language and literature are considerable. The late Sheikh Shihabuddin Chiraghdin of Mombasa and the late Maalim Mohamed Kamal Khan of Dar es Salaam produced a number of Swahili essays and schoolbooks. Both of these scholars were staunch advocates of adopting Swahili as the national language of Kenya. They were also the founding members of the Kenya Kiswahili Association.[11] Kamal Khan was active in several language and literature bodies in Tanzania before he moved back to Mombasa, his birthplace. Their colleague Nurjahan H. Zaidi was the first Swahili poetess to be honored with the Kenya Presidential Award for Literature in 1974.

CONCLUSION

The process of "Swahilization" (and "Shirazization," as James de Vere Allen calls it) was instrumental in the rise of the East African port city-states, the centers of Swahili civilization in the past.[12] Today, renewed contacts with Iran are increasingly influencing Muslim self-consciousness in East Africa after the political marginalization the Muslims suffered during the British colonial rule. This has also resulted in a slight rise of Shia Islam in East Africa—organized under the umbrella of the Bilal Mission headed by Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir of Mombasa, who is of mixed Indian-Arab-African descent—though Iranian immigrants to East Africa are mostly Sunni Baluchis.

[11]Latifa S. Chiraghdin, *Life Journey of a Swahili Scholar* (Mombasa: Jor's Publishers, 2012).
[12]Allen, *Swahili Origins*, 136–64.