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East African Slave-Trade

Like West Africa, the slave-trade in East Africa became prominent and was firmly established with the advance and endeavour of the Christian Europe.

Mr. E.A. Alpers writes in *African Slave-Trade*: "Further evidence that the slave trade was by no means prominent in East Africa before the eighteenth century comes from the Portuguese. Surely the Portuguese, as the pioneers of the Atlantic slave-trade, would have tried to exploit the slave-trade in East Africa had they found it to be already flourishing. But the early Portuguese chroniclers only mention the slave-trade in passing. Much more important were the gold and ivory traders to Arabia and India. It is to these products that the Portuguese invaders turned their attention throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not only along the coast of Kenya and Tanzania, but also Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Even wax and ambergris seem to have been more important than slaves during most of this period.

For unlike the colonialist in the Americas, the Portuguese never developed any sort of plantation economy in India. The Portuguese slave–trade from Mozambique to India rarely reached as many as one thousand individuals in any one year, and was usually less than half that number. That to Brazil was illegal until 1645 and was never seriously pursued until the beginning of the nineteenth century. As late as 1753, when the foundations of the new slave–trade in East Africa were being laid, there was grand total of only 4,399 African slaves in the whole of Portuguese India.

"What were these foundations? Despite the long Arab contact with East Africa, and their notorious domination of the export trade in the nineteenth century, the Arab slave–trade formed only one pillar upon which the degrading business was built. The other was the establishment of a typical colonial plantation economy, utterly dependent on slave labour, on the French island colonies of Mauritius...and Reunion, in the middle of the Indian Ocean. This revolutionary development dates from 1735."

Alpers goes on to give the details as under: "So when La Bourdonnais (Governor of Mauritius) began casting around for a source of slave labour to work on his newly planted sugar and coffee plantations, he turned to the nearest European colonial power which was in a position to help him. His choice was also influenced by the fact that he was an old friend of the incoming Governor of Mozambique, Nicolau

Tolentino de Almeida, as corrupt an individual as ever graced the administration of the Portuguese colonial empire.

Together they inaugurated the cruel, systematic exploitation of the people of Mozambique by selling them into slavery half-way across the Indian Ocean...The French slave-trade to the Mascarene Islands really got under way during the 1770's, when new Governor General did everything he could to encourage the slave-trade with the French. According to official figures, more than 1,000 slaves were being exported each year. French, smuggling to avoid the taxes which were levied at Mozambique, probably raised the annual figure to at least 1,500. A similar figure was probably taken away from Ibo during this decade. Henceforth the Portuguese at Mozambique and Ibo (and later at Quelimane, near the mouth of the Zambezi River) were committed to a policy of slaving from which there was no turning back until abolition.

The trade became much brisker in the eighties, especially after the conclusion of the American war of independence. During the seventies a few adventurous French slavers had taken cargoes from Mozambique to the West Indies, because they were finding it increasingly unprofitable to seek their chattels along the Guinea coast. Now, in peacetime, with greater competition for slaves in West Africa, the way was opened for a massive expansion of the American slave trade from East Africa.

At the same time Portuguese vessels also began to take an active, though still secondary, part in the trade to the Mascarene Island. Official figures from Mozambique alone show that from 1781 through 1794 a total of 46,461 slaves were embarked on Portuguese and foreign ships, nearly all of which were French. Allowing for a minimum amount of smuggling, at least 4,000 slaves annually must have been leaving the Mozambique area during this period."1

It was this juncture that Arabs extended a helping hand to these Christian Slave-traders. The same author says, "After the Omani Arabs had responded to the call of some of the Swahili rulers of the coastal towns and with their help had in 1698 evicted the Portuguese from Mombassa and other outposts, they were themselves too weak to do more than disturb and rob the very people who had sought their aid. But after the Busaid family overthrew the Yorubi and established their rule in Oman in about 1744, they were able to begin effective economic exploitation of the people of East Africa. Like all previous merchants on the coast they were primarily interested in ivory, but from this point we can also detect a steady increase in the slave-trade.

"There are not, however, any accurate statistics on the volume of the Arab slave trade in the eighteenth century. The first indication which exists come from a French slaver named Jean–Vincent Morice, who traded at both Zanzibar and Kilwa, which was the most important slave port on the coast, in the 1770's. On the 14th September, 1776, Morice made a treaty with Sultan of Kilwa for the annual purchase of at the least 1,000 slaves. In three trips to Zanzibar and Kilwa before signing this treaty, he had bought 2,325 slaves for export. Morice does not tell us how many slaves the Arabs were taking away from the coast each year, but he clearly considered it to be a big business by French standards.

It seems reasonable to suggest that at least 2,000 slaves a year were involved in the Arab trade at this time. So although the French did not dominate the slave-trade here as they did at Mozambique, they acted as an important stimulus to the demand of slaves at a period when the Arab trade was still out-growing its infancy. French efforts continued through the 1780's, but by the end of the century these probably had become much less important than the Arab trade.

"Several new factors gave rise to the increased demand for slaves from East Africa during the nineteenth century. In the Portuguese coastal sphere of influence there was a sharp upswing in the slave-trade to Brazil. This was caused by the removal of the Portuguese royal family from Lisbon to Brazil during the Napoleonic Wars. Special concessions were granted to the Brazilians and soon a flourishing trade in slaves was being carried on around the Cape of Good Hope at Mozambique."2

"It is now an accepted fact among serious historians of East Africa that long distance trade routes between the interior and the coast were established exclusively through African initiative. In other words trade routes were forged by Africans from the interior going to the coast, not by the Arabs, or the Swahili, setting off from the coast into the unknown, hostile interior. Swahili traders only began to forsake the security of the coast in the second half of the eighteenth century, and travelled along well–established routes which had been developed decades before. Only after the nineteenth century was underway did Arab traders dare follow this lead."'3

"The Yao who were to become the most dedicated African slave-traders in East Africa, thus had a long tradition of carrying ivory and other legitimate goods to the coast decades before the combined French and Arab demand for slaves began to come into play."4

"In West Africa these routes were driven inland from the coast by Africans who were primarily seeking slaves. Slaves dominated the West African trade from the first. In East Africa neither of these conditions was matched. The slave–trade must be seen in the context of earlier, well–established, and profitable long distance trade which was based overwhelmingly on ivory. This is particularly important to remember for the southern region which was always the main reservoir for the East African slave–trade."5

Mr. Alpers concludes, "It should be clear by now that the old stereotyped idea that most slaves were seized by marauding bands of Arabs and Swahili traders is just another one of the myths which have grown up around the East African slave-trade. But we must not make a mistake by underestimating the role which these individuals played in this business."6

Once again, I should emphasise that my aim is not to ridicule the efforts of a handful of moralists who were engaged in the propaganda against slavery. What I want to show is that their efforts did not (and could not) succeed until the economic pressure forced Britain first to restrict slave–trade and then abolish slavery.

Of course, when Britain set out to abolish slavery it could not proclaim from the roof-tops that it was abolishing it to compete against French industrialists. It had to turn it into a moral and ethical issue

before it could hope to pressure other governments to follow suit. And so it did. We know how Britain waged wars not to protect its economic and political empire, but "to protect the Freedom of People." The same was the case with its war against slavery. Morality and ethics was an issue for a handful of impotent moralists only. The real issue, so far as the governments and the settlers and colonialists were concerned, was economy.

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Alpers, op. cit., pp. 5–6.
Ibid, pp. 7–8.
Ibid, p. 13.
Ibid, p. 14.
Ibid, p. 15.
Ibid, p. 24.
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