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Enforced migration: an Indian Ocean Africa narrative

Martha Frederiks

Introduction

Bernard Lewis opens his book *Race and slavery in the Middle East* with an exchange between the British Consul General Drummond Hay and the Moroccan Sultan Moulay ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Hishām. In a letter dated 12 March 1842, Drummond Hay inquired after the measures taken by the sultan to enforce the prohibition of the slave trade, to which the sultan replied: ‘Be it known to you, that the Traffic in Slaves is a matter on which all Sects and Nations have agreed from the time of the sons of Adam, on whom be the Peace of God, up to this day – and we are not aware of its being prohibited by the Laws of any Sect, and no one need ask this question.’¹

Slavery and the slave trade were indeed accepted social institutions in most societies and religious traditions until the mid-18th century (and often much later). Slaves were usually prisoners of war, convicts or people who had sold themselves or their relatives into slavery as a result of insolvency or famine; others had fallen victim to slave-raids.² The story of African enslavement is therefore part of a much larger narrative of slavery worldwide. Though the scale and level of organisation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the plantation economies it supplied is unparalleled in history, neither slavery nor the slave trade were new phenomena.³ However, as John Hunwick has observed, the vastness of the material on the trans-Atlantic slave trade has tended to eclipse other histories of enslavement, such as ‘the forced migration of black Africans

¹ B. Lewis, *Race and slavery in the Middle East. A historical enquiry*, Oxford, 1990, p. 3.

² Lewis, *Race and slavery*, pp. 3-4; J. Goody, ‘Slavery in time and space’, in J.L. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African systems of slavery*, Berkeley CA, 1980, 16-42.

³ For slavery in Axum and the Funj empire, see R. Loimeier, *Muslim societies in Africa*, Bloomington IN, 2013, pp. 143-4, 175; for the Sultanate of Bigurma and the Bornu Empire see G.M. la Rue, ‘Frontiers of enslavement. Bagirmi and the trans-Saharan slave-routes’, in P. Lovejoy (ed.), *Slavery on the frontiers of Islam*, Princeton NJ, 2004, 31-54.

into the Mediterranean world of Islam' and into Muslim societies in the Middle East and Asia.⁴ Robert Segal has called this 'the other diaspora'.⁵

This essay focusses on the slave trade supplying that 'other diaspora', with the aim of exploring how the trade and its aftermath affected the religious landscape and interreligious relations in what Gwyn Campbell has coined as Indian Ocean Africa, which he defines as 'eastern Africa from the Cape to Cairo', a region that includes 'the islands of the western Indian Ocean' as well as 'the landlocked regions in the interior [...] which possessed important trade outlets' to the Indian Ocean.⁶ Campbell's notion is helpful for a discussion of the slave trade; the conceptualisation 'Indian Ocean Africa' avoids artificial distinctions between 'north Africa' and 'sub-Saharan Africa' and between 'Swahili coast' and 'hinterland'.

The Indian Ocean Africa slave trade differed in many ways from the trans-Atlantic trade; it encompassed a much longer period and, with the exception of the 19th century when an estimated two million people were sold, the annual number of those enslaved was significantly lower. Also, slaves were but one of the 'commodities' traded. Until the 19th century, other items, such as ivory, tortoise shell, gold and mangrove poles, were equally important. Yet educated guesses are that, over the centuries, nearly as many Africans were deported via Indian Ocean Africa as via the trans-Atlantic routes.⁷ Thus, the story of 'the other diaspora' and its impact on the religious landscape merits attention.

This essay begins with a brief exploration of the relation between Islam and African slavery. This is followed by a paragraph on the cosmopolitan world of the Indian Ocean, with particular attention to the slave trade in Indian Ocean Africa. Then the fate of African Christians enslaved in the Muslim world is explored, after which the abolition of

⁴ J. Hunwick, 'The same but different. Africans in slavery in the Mediterranean Muslim world', in J. Hunwick and E. Trout Powell, *The African diaspora in the Mediterranean lands of Islam*, Princeton NJ, 2002, pp. ix-xxiv. See also A.G.B. Fisher and H.J. Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim society in Africa*, London, 2001, pp. 1-2.

⁵ R. Segal, *Islam's black slaves. The other diaspora*, New York, 2001.

⁶ G. Campbell, 'Islam in Indian Ocean Africa prior to the scramble. A new historical paradigm', in E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds), *Struggling with history. Islam and cosmopolitanism in the western Indian Ocean*, New York, 2008, 43-92, pp. 49, 50: 'all parts of Africa washed by the Indian Ocean or its Red Sea extension (South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Madagascar, and the Comoro, Mascarene and Seychelle Islands), as well as on landlocked regions in the interior including Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, which possessed important trade outlets to those waters.'

⁷ Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, p. 3; for estimates see pp. 55-7.

the slave trade is discussed. The essay closes with a paragraph on how indentured labour, which was introduced to meet the demand for plantation workers after the abolition of slavery, affected the religious landscape of Indian Ocean Africa.

Islam and African slavery

Although there is ample evidence that the slave trade in Indian Ocean Africa began in pre-Islamic times, that over the centuries slave traders embodied a broad ethnic and religious spectrum and that African slaves were sold as far away as India and China, the slave trade in Indian Ocean Africa is predominantly associated with Islam and 'the Muslim world'.⁸ Islam was conceived to be the religion of the majority of the slavers and the Muslim world the most important destination for slaves from Indian Ocean Africa. The title of Robert Segal's book – *Islam's black slaves* – reflects this. However, this perception is an oversimplification of what was in effect a diverse reality, with multiple perpetrators and manifold victims.

Even so, Islam was an important feature in the cosmopolitan maritime world of the Indian Ocean. Scholars such as Abdul Sheriff and Gwyn Campbell have observed that, from the 10th century onwards, the Indian Ocean increasingly became a 'Muslim lake', a territory governed by a *pax Islamica* where Islam functioned 'as the overarching milieu in which commercial and cultural relations were forged across the ocean'.⁹ When the Indian Ocean slave trade reached its apex in the 19th century and drew the attention of Western (Christian) abolitionists, Muslim traders (Omani, Swahili, Ja'alayin and Yao) dominated the scene. Hence, a brief excursion on Islam and African slavery seems called for.

The Qur'an presumes slavery as a social reality. Following the Qur'an, the Hadith and contemporaneous praxis, the *fuqahā'* developed regulations for the social interaction between masters and slaves (e.g., concubines), as well as outlining the rights and obligations of

⁸ For the slave trade in antiquity, see F.M. Snowden, *Black in antiquity. Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman world*, Cambridge MA, 1970, or F.M. Snowden, *Before color prejudice. The ancient view of blacks*, Cambridge MA, 1991. For slaves in India and China see A. Sheriff, *Dhow cultures of the Indian Ocean. Cosmopolitanism, commerce and Islam*, London, 2010, pp. 230-3, and A. Wink, *Al-Hind. The making of the Indo-Islamic world*, Leiden, 1996³, vol. 1, pp. 25-64.

⁹ Sheriff, *Dhow cultures*, p. 239; Campbell, 'Islam in Indian Ocean Africa', pp. 50-70.

both slave-owners and enslaved.¹⁰ According to Islamic law, only non-believers captured during a jihad could be enslaved; Muslims – as well as non-Muslim monotheists such as Jews and Christians – were protected from enslavement by the law.¹¹

The reality, however, proved very different. In Indian Ocean Africa (and elsewhere), Muslims, Christians and ‘unbelievers’ alike fell victim to enslavement, and slave traders preferred not to inquire how slaves had been acquired. John Hunwick summarises the situation as follows:

In pre-Islamic Arab society slaves had in the main been captives of war, and, under the Islamic dispensation, war was in theory only to be fought against non-Muslims – a *jihād*; hence captives to be enslaved would, by definition, be ‘unbelievers’. This rapidly became an established rule of law: i.e. that it was legitimate to enslave only the unbelievers, and indeed it became common to justify the enslavement of such persons as a punishment for their failure to accept the religion of Islam. This was not, in fact, the way in which slaves were generally acquired in practice, but on the basis of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy, slaves could be purchased from Muslims in the borderlands of Islam on the tacit assumption that they were originally captives taken in a *jihād*.¹²

This tacit convention meant that directives in the *sharī‘a* notwithstanding, many free Africans, including many Muslims, were enslaved, especially on the peripheries of the Islamic world.¹³ A unique letter of protest, written in the early 14th century by ‘Uthmān ibn Idrīs, the ruler of Bornu, confirms this. The letter, addressed to Barqūq, the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, reads:

The Arab tribes of Jodham and others have taken our free subjects, women and children and old men of our family, and other Muslims. These Arabs have pillaged our land, the land of Bornu, and continue doing so. They have taken as slaves free men and our fathers, the Muslims, and they are selling them to the slave-dealers of Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, and keep some for themselves.¹⁴

¹⁰ F. Cooper, *Plantation slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, London, 1977, p. 25.

¹¹ J. Hathaway, *Beshir Agha. Chief eunuch of the Ottoman imperial harem*, Oxford, 2005, p. 4.

¹² Hunwick, ‘The same but different’, p. xv. Also, the trade in Georgian and Circassian girls and the *devshirme* system violated the prohibition of enslaving non-Muslim monotheists. Various Ottoman jurists wrote treatises to justify this practice; Hathaway, *Beshir Agha*, p. 4.

¹³ P. Lovejoy (ed.), *Slavery on the frontiers of Islam*, Princeton NJ, 2004.

¹⁴ H.R. Palmer, *The Bornu Sahara and the Sudan*, London, 1936, p. 218.

Yet despite these and no doubt similar protests, the practice of enslaving free Africans, irrespective of their belief, continued. Fatwas by scholars such as the Moroccan Aḥmad al-Wansharīsi (d. 1508) and the Songhai Aḥmad Bābā l-Masūfi l-Tinbukti (d. 1627) corroborate this. Aḥmad Bābā in his *Mi'raj al-ṣu'ūd* reiterates the classical position that only non-believers could legitimately be enslaved (for Aḥmad Bābā the category *kāfir* included Jews and Christians). Captives from areas that had a long-time Muslim government or from ethnic groups known to be Muslims, could be presumed to be Muslims and hence could not be enslaved.¹⁵

Not only Arabs, Berbers, Persians or Indians engaged in the slave trade; black African Muslims themselves were also selling fellow Muslims into slavery. The fact that both the Fulani *shaihu* Usman dan Fodio and his brother Abdullahi wrote treatises discussing the permissibility of enslaving Muslims is indicative that this was common practice in certain regions. Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817), closely following Aḥmad Bābā, considered apostasy to be the only legitimate reason for enslavement; nominal or 'backsliding' Muslims were to be punished and their property could be taken as booty, but they were not to be enslaved.¹⁶

Nineteenth-century European sources with abolitionist sympathies often referred to this transgression of Islamic law to vilify Islam. The explorer George Francis Lyon, who in 1818 resided for nearly a year in Marzuk, an oasis town in present-day southern Libya and once a renowned slave market, observed:

Though the Mohammedans profess and appear to be strict in obeying the ordinances of the Koran, they most grossly violate one of its principle laws relating to Unbelievers. It is expressly said, that Moslems may take or destroy all those who do not believe in Islamism; but that they should first endeavour to instruct, and on their refusing to acknowledge the Koran, then make them slaves. The same law distinctly teaches that those who are already Moslems cannot be taken captive or sold. Nothing, however, is further from the idea of a Mohammedan, than to instruct the Negroes; for, instead of converting them to his faith, he appropriates and sells them to his own advantage. This is sufficiently unjust, but the conduct of Mukni and his men is infinitely more so; for they seize on the inhabitants of

¹⁵ B. Barbour and M. Jacobs, 'The Mi'raj. A legal treatise on slavery by Ahmad Baba', in J.R. Willes (ed.), *Slaves and slavery in Muslim Africa*, London, 1985, 125-59.

¹⁶ Abdullahi ibn Muhammad, *Tazyin al-waraqat*, ed. and trans. M. Hiskett, Ibadan, 1963, p. 122; A.D.H. Bivar, 'The Wathīqat ahl al-Sūdān. A manifesto of the Fulani jihād', *Journal of African History* 2 (1961) 235-43, p. 241. For similar examples see: Fisher and Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim society*, pp. 24-33.

whole towns where the only religion is that of the Koran, and where there are Mosques; and this without scruple or remorse.¹⁷

That 19th-century black African Muslims did not submit meekly to this violation of Islamic law is evident from the exclamations of a man who endeavoured to escape his captors. Lyon, who observed the incident, records that, just before the man was killed, he shouted to his assailants: 'Tell Muhammed el Mukni that he is a villain; Paradise is shut against him and he will die by treachery. There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his Prophet.'¹⁸

Though racism appears not to have been an explicit element in Muslim legitimisation of slavery, the tenacity of the practice of enslaving black Africans could possibly be explained by the fact that, according to Bernard Lewis, medieval Muslim perceptions of black Africans were 'on the whole negative'.¹⁹ Arab and Persian Muslim sources reiterate well-worn racist tropes: black Africans had a defective brain and weakness of understanding (al-Mas'ūdī, d. 956), were cannibals (al-Maḡdisī, d. 991) and were closer to animals than to humans (al-Ṭūsī, d. 1274; Ibn Khaldūn, d. 1406); all this seems to have legitimised their enslavement. Lewis observes that, after Islam had spread in sub-Saharan Africa, Arab and Persian Muslim perceptions of Africans became more moderate, but the conviction persisted that black Africans, including African Muslims, were somehow different from other people and Africa could be legitimately used as a reservoir for slaves.²⁰ And while in Muslim societies slaves could be both African and non-African, gradually the word for a black slave ('*abd*'), came to mean 'a black person' generally, thus firmly linking the notion of being a black African with servitude.²¹

¹⁷ G.F. Lyon, *A narrative of travels in North Africa, in the years 1818, 19 and 20*, London, 1821, pp. 200-1. For similar examples see D. Denham and H. Clapperton, *Narrative of travels and discoveries in Northern and Central Africa*, London, 1824, p. 149; B. Mayer and T. Canot, *Captain Canot or, Twenty years of an African slaver*, New York, 1854, pp. 187-8.

¹⁸ Lyon, *Narrative of travels*, p. 199.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Race and slavery*, pp. 51-3. For general works on Islam and slavery in sub-Saharan Africa, see, e.g. J.R. Willis (ed.), *Slaves and slavery in Africa*, Abingdon, 1985; M. Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab world*, Paris, 1989; Lewis, *Race and slavery*; Segal, *Islam's black slaves*; Fisher and Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim society*; W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the abolition of slavery*, London, 2006; T. Walz and K.M. Cuno (eds), *Race and slavery in the Middle East*, New York, 2010; C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco. A history of slavery, race and Islam*, Cambridge, 2012.

²⁰ Lewis, *Race and slavery*, p. 53; see also A. Muhammad, 'The image of Africans in Arabic literature. Some unpublished manuscripts', in Willis, *Slaves and slavery in Africa*, vol. 1, pp. 47-75.

²¹ Lewis, *Race and slavery*, p. 56.

Trade in Indian Ocean Africa

Much has been written on the cosmopolitan milieu of the Indian Ocean trade. Gwyn Campbell, Abdul Sheriff, Robert Kaplan, André Wink and others have all contributed to the field of Indian Ocean Studies, highlighting the long-standing commercial and cultural interconnectedness of the littoral zones of the Indian Ocean and the cosmopolitan centres it produced. Dhows connected the various shores of the Indian Ocean, linking the African continent, the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India and Sri Lanka; via the intermediary kingdom of Sri Vijaya (on Sumatra), the maritime network even included the Indonesian archipelago and China.

As noted above, the world of the Indian Ocean trade was first and foremost a Muslim realm until Portuguese and other Europeans began to contest its hegemony in their quest for spices from the 16th century onward. The actors of the maritime world of the Indian Ocean were diverse, however, both culturally and religiously. Strategic *entrepôts* such as Aden, Hormuz, Goa, Cambay, Calicut, and Kilwa had significant 'foreign' merchant communities, where Hindu, Jain, Jewish and Christian traders rubbed shoulders with their Muslim colleagues. Sheriff notes that respect for religious and cultural otherness seems to have been common in the world of trade.²²

This religious diversity was also evident on the Indian Ocean African coast. Muslim traders are thought to have settled on the Swahili coast as early as the 9th century, while Islam in the Horn of Africa and Egypt was even older.²³ In the northern region of Indian Ocean Africa, Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia were known for their longstanding Christian communities. Early Portuguese sources also speak of Christians further down the coast, in Mombasa, Malindi and Kilwa. Vasco da Gama's 1498 ship journal records that he sighted four ships of Indian Christians in the harbour of Malindi and met with the Indian Christian merchants. The journal describes how the Indians brought *pūja* to an image of Mary and child and rejected the consumption of beef. Scholars such as Michael Murrin think it most likely that da Gama's 'Christians' were Hindus or possibly Jains, though he concedes that it was hard to distinguish between Hindus and Malabari Syrian Orthodox, because the latter had acculturated

²² J. Huygen van Linschoten, *Itinerario. Voyage ofte schipvaert naer Oost ofte Portugael Indien. Tweede stuk*, ed. H. Kern and H. Terpstra, The Hague, 1955, vol. 1, ch. 33; Sheriff, *Dhow cultures*, pp. 239-58.

²³ J. Middleton, *African merchants of the Indian Ocean. Swahili of the East African coast*, Long Grove IL, 2003, 114.

Christianity to a Hindu context. Some 50 years later, João de Barros also recorded that there were merchants from a variety of backgrounds – Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jain – in Malindi.²⁴ Whether da Gama encountered Indian Christians or Hindus in Malindi, therefore remains uncertain.²⁵

Da Gama's contemporary, Gaspar Correia, reported that there were also Christian traders further down the coast, in Quiloa (Kilwa Kisiwani), residing in a special quarter of the town.²⁶ Their presence is confirmed by other sources, but Correia's identification of them as 'Armenian' is contested. They may have been Abyssinians or Assyrian Christians from Socotra, who conducted trade along the Swahili coast.²⁷ These accounts demonstrate that the ports of Indian Ocean Africa were profoundly cosmopolitan. With the arrival of Europeans, the cultural and religious scene became even more diverse.

The merchandise transacted along the Indian Ocean routes was wide-ranging. Slaves were only one 'commodity' among many; ivory, tortoise-shell, mangrove poles, slaves and gold were traded for silk, Cambay cloth, beads, pearls, spices, salt and porcelain.²⁸ The diversity as well as the relatively small scale of the trade until the 19th century make a reconstruction of the Indian Ocean Africa slave trade difficult. Textual evidence older than the 19th century is comparatively scarce and fragmentary; the dhows that transported slaves rarely kept records. Materials from the 19th century onwards are abundant, but problematic. Tax records of the Indian Ocean ports offer a clue of the numbers of enslaved deported;²⁹ but the bulk of the 19th-century materials were written by Europeans (missionaries, colonial officers and explorers). Their descriptions of the atrocities of the trade and vilifications of the slave traders often served political and religious purposes: the representations of the cruelty of the slave trade and its perpetrators were used to legitimise interventionist

²⁴ A. Wink, *The making of the Indo-Islamic world*, Leiden, 2004, vol. 3, pp. 179-84.

²⁵ G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (ed.), *The East African coast. Select documents from the first to the earlier nineteenth century*, Oxford, 1962, p. 55; for a full discussion, see M. Murrin, *Trade and romance*, Chicago IL, 2014, pp. 109-31.

²⁶ C. Correia, *The three voyages of Vasco da Gama and his viceroyalty*, ed. and trans. H.E.J. Stanley, London, 1869, pp. 97-8.

²⁷ J. Teles e Cunha, 'Armenian merchants in Portuguese trade networks in the western Indian Ocean in the early modern age', in S. Chaudhury and K. Kévonian (eds), *Les Arméniens dans la commerce asiatique au début de l'ère modern*, Paris, 2007, 197-252, p. 198.

²⁸ G. Mathew, 'The East African coast until the coming of the Portuguese', in R. Oliver and G. Mathew (eds), *History of East Africa*, London, 1963, vol. 1, 94-127, pp. 102-9.

²⁹ These figures only give an indication. Many enslaved were transported illegally or died on the way to the slave-markets.

politics.³⁰ The writings of David Livingstone, with their elaborate descriptions of the horrors of the slave caravans, might serve as an example of this genre.³¹ First-person accounts of enslavement are few, brief and mostly recent (from the late 19th century onwards).³²

There is textual evidence that there was some form of organised slave trade in eastern Africa as early as the 1st century CE. *The Periplus of the Erythraean sea*, a document describing the emporia of the Arabian Sea trade, characterises Opone (present day Ras Hafun in Somalia) as a place to buy slaves 'from the better sort, which are taken to Egypt in increasing numbers'.³³ The text mentions that Arab merchants who had settled on the coast were intermarrying with indigenous people, thus possibly indicating the beginnings of Swahili culture.

Gervase Mathew has hypothesised that slave trading was probably 'a constant factor' in East Africa from the first century CE onwards, but the scarcity of sources documenting the period between the 4th and 7th centuries makes it difficult to substantiate this claim. By the time Islam emerged in the 7th century, Arab traders had overhauled Sassanid maritime hegemony and seized control of most of the Indian Ocean trade-routes, an involvement that continued well into the colonial period.³⁴ From this period onwards, there is documented evidence that the slave trade from Indian Ocean Africa via trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Ocean routes had become structural.

The demand for slaves seems to have been constant. African slaves seem to have been 'acquired' for a variety of purposes; many were put to work in plantations, others served as soldiers, concubines, domestics or sailors on the dhows.³⁵ André Wink has demonstrated that, as early as the 8th century, India was an area of distribution for black African slaves.³⁶

³⁰ P.V. Kollman, *The evangelization of slaves and Catholic origins in East Africa*, Maryknoll NY, 2005, pp. 68-71.

³¹ D. Livingstone, *The last journals of David Livingstone, in Central Africa. From 1865 until his death*, New York, 1875; J.E. Harris, *The African presence in Asia. The consequences of the East African slave trade*, Evanston NY, 1971, pp. 53-4; R.W. Beachey, *The slave trade of Eastern Africa*, London, 1976, pp. 95-7.

³² See e.g. Harris, *African presence*, pp. 129-37; Hunwick and Trout Powell, *African diaspora*, pp. 199-220. For Indian involvement, see Harris, *African presence*, pp. 62-4.

³³ G.W. Brereton Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Travel and trade in the Indian Ocean by a merchant of the first century*, London, 1980, p. 28 (ch. 13).

³⁴ Mathew, 'East African coast', pp. 98-101. For a discussion of the role of Arab slave traders, see J.A. Azumah, *The legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa. A quest for interreligious dialogue*, London, 2001 (esp. ch. 4).

³⁵ Mathew, 'East African coast', pp. 94-100.

³⁶ A. Wink, *Al-Hind*, vol. 1, p. 31; Harris, *African presence*, p. 34.

The area of present-day Iraq and Iran was another market. According to Ronald Segal, there is evidence from the 7th century onwards that Bantu East Africans (*zanj*),³⁷ were set to work on date, cotton and sugar plantations, to harvest salt in the salt-pans, to drain marshlands and dig irrigation canals. Due to the harsh circumstances, a number of revolts occurred. The most successful was a prolonged uprising from 869 to 883 which even threatened the capital city of Baghdad. Though the rebellion was eventually suppressed, it allegedly left more than a million people dead and the economy disrupted. As a result, there was – at least temporarily – a sharp decline in the demand for African slaves; large groups of African slaves on agricultural plants were considered dangerous.³⁸

From the mid-10th century onwards, Muslim sources again document a steady slave trade. The Mamluk expansion, the ascent of the Delhi Sultanate and the acceptance of Islam by Mongols in the region of Iran and Iraq all contributed to the dominant Islamic influence in the Indian Ocean. According to Mathew, from the 13th century onwards, the East African coast, too, increasingly became part of this ‘Islamic sphere’ and Muslim trading towns emerged along the coast, though East African chronicles, such as the *Chronicles of Pate, Lamu and Kilwa* and the *Kitāb al-Zunūj*, tend to antedate the ascendancy of Islam on the East African coast to the 8th or 9th century. Because of a growing demand for gold, ivory and slaves, the East African littoral prospered, with Swahili culture reaching its heyday in the 15th century.³⁹ Hans Mayr, who visited Kilwa in 1505, claimed one of Kilwa’s mosques was as beautiful as the Mezquita in Cordoba.⁴⁰

Numerically, the Indian Ocean African slave trade reached its peak in the 19th century, when it not only supplied the demand for slaves in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia, but also met the European demand for slaves for the Americas.⁴¹ Omani Arabs, Afro-Arabs and Africans such as the Ja’alayin (Nubia), the Yao (Mozambique), Nyamwezi (Tanzania) and Baganda (Uganda) collaborated in the twin trade of slaves and ivory, often pre-financed by Indian merchants. African chiefs also cooperated, hunting large numbers of slaves in exchange for fire arms and

³⁷ Lewis, *Race and slavery*, p. 50.

³⁸ Segal, *Islam’s black slaves*, pp. 42-4; S.M. Muhammad, ‘The Zanj revolt (869-883) in the Abbasid era’, Tucson, 1981 (PhD Diss. University of Arizona); <http://hdl.handle.net/10150/557872>.

³⁹ Mathew, ‘East African coast’, pp. 110-12.

⁴⁰ Freeman-Grenville, *East African coast*, p. 108.

⁴¹ Due to the impact of the Act of Wilberforce in 1807, slave trade from the West African coast decreased.

luxury goods.⁴² Estimates are that, during the 19th century alone, more than two million people were sold via the Indian Ocean Africa trade routes; guesses are that many more died during the journey.⁴³ Kilwa, Bagamoyo and Zanzibar, from 1840 onwards the seat of the sultan of Oman, who controlled most of the trade, were the main coastal outlets; Egypt was the main market in the north. The figures are staggering: in the 1850s, Zanzibar alone had a slave-population of more than 60,000, most of whom worked on Zanzibar's clove plantations, while Bagamoyo is thought to have exported between 30,000 and 40,000 slaves annually and Zanzibar between 20,000 and 30,000 slaves annually.⁴⁴ Similar numbers arrived each year in Egypt via the Sahara and the White Nile.⁴⁵ Eye-witness accounts testify that whole areas were depopulated during the 19th-century slave-raids: complete villages were ransacked and the inhabitants enslaved to satisfy the demand.

Christian Africans enslaved in the Muslim world

In recent decades, much research has been conducted into the history of Muslim Africans enslaved in the Americas.⁴⁶ A parallel yet forgotten history seems to be the history of Christian Africans enslaved in Muslim societies. This story seems even more difficult to trace. There is only sporadic evidence that Christian Africans were enslaved and it is frequently circumstantial. Even more exceptional is documentation on what happened to Christians who were enslaved. To complicate matters, slaves were usually renamed, making it difficult to track Christians who were enslaved in the archival materials.

However, it is likely that there were substantial numbers of Christians among the enslaved. There was a longstanding Christian presence in certain parts of Indian Ocean Africa; Coptic Christianity dates back to the 1st century. From the 4th century onwards, the Kingdom of Axum also embraced Christianity, declaring it the state religion in 341,

⁴² N. Levtzion, 'Slavery and Islamization in Africa', in Willes, *Slaves and slavery in Africa*, vol. 1, pp. 182-99.

⁴³ Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Beachey, *Slave trade*, pp. 121-30.

⁴⁶ A.D. Austin, *African Muslims in antebellum America. A sourcebook*, New York, 1984; S.A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah. African Muslims enslaved in the Americas*, New York, 1998; M.A. Gomez, *Black crescent. The experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, Cambridge, 2005.

with Christianity continuing to be the predominant religion of its successor states ever since. The Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makurra and Alwa became predominantly Christian from the 6th century onwards.⁴⁷ A treaty (*baqt*) with the Muslim rulers in Egypt negotiated in 651 secured Nubia's political and religious independence well into the 13th century.⁴⁸ Nubian Christianity gradually declined as a result of intermarriage with Muslim migratory groups, and of Mamluk southward expansion, which resulted in the sacking of Dongola in 1276 and the forced conversion of its inhabitants to Islam. Nubian Christianity ceased to exist sometime in the late 15th century.⁴⁹ Only shortly afterwards, new Christian communities began to emerge along the East African coast as a result of Portuguese – and more generally Western – missionary work, gradually moving from the coast towards the hinterland.⁵⁰

Wars and slave-raids continuously afflicted the Horn of Africa and the Sudan. There were clashes between Ethiopia and neighbouring Muslim states (e.g. Ifat and 'Adal) from the 12th to the 16th century, between the Mamluks and Nubia in the 13th and 14th centuries, and between rival warlords in Ethiopia during the Zemene Mesafint (Age of Princes) in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Such wars, as well as incessant slave-raids in the region by, for example, the Sultanate of Bagirmi, the Bornu Empire and Ethiopia led to large numbers of people being enslaved, amongst whom were tens of thousands of Nubian and Ethiopian Christians.⁵¹

Occasionally, textual evidence is available to confirm that African Christians were indeed enslaved. Cornwallis Harris in *The highlands of Aethiopia* (1844) records an oral tradition according to which towards the end of the 15th century 'Mafoodi, the bigoted king of Hurrur, unfurling the green banner of the Prophet' organised yearly raids into Ethiopia during Lent when people were weakened, and 'slew without mercy every male who fell in his way, driving off women and children, selling some into foreign slavery, and presenting others to the Sheriffe of

⁴⁷ J. Hill, *Zondervan handbook to the history of Christianity*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 106-9.

⁴⁸ J. Spaulding, 'Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic world. A reconsideration of the *baqt* treaty', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28 (1995) 577-94; P.M. Sijpesteijn, 'Baqt', EI3.

⁴⁹ R. Loimeier, *Muslim societies in Africa*, pp. 137-40; R.A. Lobban, *Historical dictionary of ancient and medieval Nubia*, Oxford, 2004, pp. 103-15.

⁵⁰ C. Alonso, *The history of the Augustinians and the martyrs of Mombasa (1598-1698)*, Nairobi, 2007; M. Regyendo, *A handbook of African church history*, Limuru, Kenya, 2012.

⁵¹ Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab world*, p. 131; D. Ayalon, *Outsiders in the lands of Islam*, London, 1988, pp. 67-124.

Mecca'.⁵² In the mid-16th century the Dutch merchant Jan Huygen van Linschoten commented on the large number of Ethiopian Christian slaves he encountered in Goa, recognizable by the crosses tattooed on their faces.⁵³ From the early 17th century there is a detailed report of the 1631 attack on Fort Jesus and its adjacent town by the king of Malindi and Mombasa, Yusuf ben al-Hassan.⁵⁴ According to the report al-Hassan ordered 288 Portuguese and African Christian men, women and children to be killed because of their faith (the Mombasa martyrs); the remaining African Christians were sold in the slave-markets.⁵⁵ In 1634 the Jesuit Manuel Barradas reported that in Aden, Raza and Laga he had met 'many slaves of the Portuguese from Mombasa whom the tyrant king had bought and sold as captives'. Among them, according to Gonçalves, were some 400 Christians, all of whom had been forcibly converted to Islam.⁵⁶ And mid-19th century accounts report that thousands of Christians (mainly Oromo) a year were sold in the slave-markets of Gondar and Gallabat and shipped to Egypt, Turkey and Arabia.⁵⁷

Detailed accounts of the enslavement of Christian Africans, such as can be found in the inquiry-report regarding the Mombasa martyrs, are rare. More numerous, however, are general references to Nubian and Abyssinian women being sought after as concubines because of their beauty and loyalty; for similar reasons, Nubian and Abyssinian boys were popular as eunuchs, serving as soldiers or palace officials. Jane Hathaway hypothesises, for example, that Beshir Agha, the Abyssinian chief eunuch of the Ottoman imperial harem from 1717 to 1746, may have been a Christian before his enslavement.⁵⁸

If Burckhardt's observations in the early 19th century are indicative of practices in earlier times, then Christian boys and men were forcibly

⁵² C. Harris, *The highlands of Aethiopia*, London, 1844², vol. 2, pp. 53-4.

⁵³ Van Linschoten, *Itinerario*, p. 29 (ch. 40).

⁵⁴ In 1632, Rome sent a commission to Mombasa to investigate the attack, following a proposal for the beatification of the martyrs. See G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Mombasa rising against the Portuguese 1631*, London, 1980, which is an edited translation of its report.

⁵⁵ See also M. Cullen, *The martyrs of Mombasa*, Nairobi, 1997; Alonso, *History of the Augustinians*.

⁵⁶ Alonso, *History of the Augustinians*, p. 79; G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, 'The coast 1498-1840', in R. Oliver and G. Mathew (eds), *History of East Africa*, London, 1963, vol. 1, pp. 129-168, p. 140.

⁵⁷ Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, p. 154.

⁵⁸ According to Hathaway, *Beshir Agha*, pp. 51-4, by the 17th century East African eunuchs were the main guards at Muḥammad's tomb in Medina and the Great Mosque in Mecca.

converted, with circumcision as the initiation rite, though Christian girls and women seem to have had more freedom to retain their faith. In his *Travels to Nubia* Burckhardt writes:

As soon as a slave boy becomes the property of a Mussulman master he is circumcised and has an Arabic name given to him. They are seldom honored with a true Mussulman name [...] It very rarely happens that any uncircumcised boys come from the west; and I never knew any instance of a Negro boy following the pagan worship of his father, and refusing to become Mussulman; though I have heard it related of many Abyssinian slaves, who, after having been converted from idolatry to the Christian religion, by the Abyssinian Copts, were sold by them to the Mussulman traders. I have been told of several of these slaves, particularly females, so steadily refusing to abjure their faith, when in the harem of a Mohammeden, that their masters were finally obliged to sell them, in the dread of having children born of a Christian mother, which would have been a perpetual reproach to the father and his offspring.⁵⁹

The continuous demand for Nubian and Abyssinian eunuchs in the Islamic world produced a rather repulsive form of 'cooperation' between Muslims and Christians. According to Burckhardt, since castration was forbidden in Islamic law, Muslim slave traders delivered young boys to Coptic priests in southern Egypt, who performed the operation. After the children had been mutilated in this way, they were handed back to the traders and sold as eunuchs to wealthy Ottoman officials.⁶⁰

Abolition

The abolition acts in Western Europe and the United States, which led to a gradual suppression of the West African slave trade in the 19th century, ironically resulted in an increase of demand on the Indian Ocean Africa markets. Numbers, and also cruelty, reached a gruesome apogee as slavers eagerly supplied Asian markets as well as European plantation colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Americas, with Kilwa, Bagamoyo and Zanzibar as the most important coastal outlets and Cairo as the main market in the north. This upsurge of the trade in Indian Ocean Africa produced a shift in the attention of abolitionists from West Africa to this region; publications and reports on the brutality of the raids, the

⁵⁹ J.L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Nubia*, London, 1822, pp. 293-4.

⁶⁰ Burckhardt, *Travels in Nubia*, pp. 294-6.

callousness of the slavers, the horrors of the slave-caravans and the lewdness of the buyers produced by missionaries, explorers and colonial officers and aimed to stir European hearts, proliferated.

From the early 19th century onwards, Britain endeavoured to curb the trade by negotiating treaties and exercising pressure on rulers, but its means to do so were limited; Asian rulers considered 'the efforts to curtail the slave trade as threats to their religious, political and economic sovereignty'.⁶¹ Soon the sultan of Oman, who resided in Zanzibar and controlled much of the sea-borne routes from eastern Africa as well as areas that imported slaves in Arabia and the Persian Gulf, became the pivot of British abolitionist diplomacy. A series of treaties with successive Omani sultans (1822, 1845 and 1873) led to the gradual curbing of the trade. Sea-borne trade continued for a while, as Indian vessels and ships sailing under the French flag continued to work, but they faded out in the early 20th century. Slavery was banned in Zanzibar in 1897, and on the Omani-controlled mainland 10 years later.⁶²

Cairo and Ottoman-controlled Red Sea ports were the main slave outlets in the north, with Jeddah, Mecca and Medina serving as important intermediary markets, especially during the *hajj* season; these formed another focus of abolitionist diplomacy. British pressure on the Egyptian government resulted in the 1877 Anglo-British convention, which banned the import and export of slaves from Ethiopia and the Sudan, but laws to suppress the trade were not enforced until the British occupation of Egypt in 1883. In the Ottoman Empire, African slave trade became a legal offence in 1871. Ethiopia, another main source of slaves, did not abolish the slave trade until 1903 (and slavery until 1942).⁶³ Also in the Sudan, the slave trade thrived until well into the 20th century. John Speke recorded in 1863:

The minds of the Kurrum people seem greatly discomposed about the various rumours that they heard. One was that the English intended to suppress the slave trade, and they wished me to tell them if such was not a fact – saying that it was unjust for us to do so, as slaving was an acknowledged right given to them in the Koran, and handed down by their Russool Mahamed.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Harris, *African presence*, p. 51.

⁶² Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, p. 162; Harris, *African presence*, pp. 51-64.

⁶³ Segal, *Islam's black slaves*, pp. 149-57.

⁶⁴ J.H. Speke, *What led to the discovery of the source of the Nile*, London, 1864, pp. 116-17. The slave trade bourgeoned during the Mahdist period in particular.

The British quest for abolition and subsequent interception of slave-ships led to close cooperation between the British government and missionary organisations, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Universities Mission to Central Africa and the Holy Ghost Fathers. Modelled after the Sierra Leone example, captured runaways rescued from slave-ships and liberated Africans were brought to mission-run settlements in Aden, Bombay, Nisak (India) or the Seychelles, and aided to find an apprenticeship or earn an independent living.⁶⁵ The children among them were placed in Christian orphanages, and where possible were assigned to live with Christian families. In line with Livingstone's conviction that Christianisation and legitimate commerce would eventually eradicate the slave trade in the interior, British government officials, abolitionists and missionaries liaised to establish Christian villages in eastern Africa, aimed at spreading Christianity and producing merchandise. Financed by the British government, the CMS established the Liberated African settlement in Freretown near Mombasa (1875), and in the 1880s changed the mission station at Rabai into a refuge for escapees and liberated Africans.⁶⁶ In Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, the French Holy Ghost Fathers established institutions for manumitted children with the aim of evangelising them and training them to become exemplary Christians. Other organisations followed suit. This close cooperation between colonial powers and mission organisations firmly linked Christianity with European interventionist policies in the minds of many in Indian Ocean Africa. In particular, the settlements for liberated Africans caused much tension between the missionaries and local people; the latter conceived of them as sanctuaries for (rightfully purchased) fugitive slaves.⁶⁷

That liberated Africans were not merely passive objects of Christian benevolence is clear from the fact that some of the Muslim children in Bombay refused to live with Christian families. And both Robert Strayer and Paul Kollman have described the tensions in settlements of liberated Africans, with protests against the strict regime and the prevailing European racism and condescension, which resulted in many Africans

⁶⁵ Beachey, *Slave trade*, pp. 86-91.

⁶⁶ S. Miers and R.L. Roberts (eds), *The end of slavery in Africa*, London, 1988.

⁶⁷ R.W. Strayer, *The making of mission communities in East Africa*, London, 1978, pp. 14-29; [anonymous], 'Freretown et la question de l'esclavage dans Zanguebar septentrional', *L'Afrique Explorée et Civilisée* 2 (1880) 202-7; Beachey, *Slave trade*, p. 92.

leaving the villages.⁶⁸ The none too successful experiments with liberated African settlements came to a close when British policy changed; colonial intervention and occupation ended the trade, making the settlements for liberated Africans redundant.

Enforced migration to Africa: slaves, political exiles
and indentured labourers

Enforced migration did not merely encompass people being taken from Indian Ocean Africa to the rest of the world; enforced migration movements also brought slaves, political prisoners and, in the 19th century indentured labourers, from the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia to Indian Ocean Africa. Along with these people travelled their religion, resulting in the emergence of Muslim and Hindu communities in new areas such as Mauritius, Reunion, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa.⁶⁹

Mauritius might serve as an example of how enforced migration changed the religious landscape. The island was colonised by the Dutch in the early 17th century and populated with European convicts as well as Malagasy and Indonesian slaves. Most of the Indonesians and probably also a number of the Malagasy were Muslims. However, this community did not endure. It was only after the British occupation of Mauritius in 1810 and the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1834, that a sizable Muslim community began to emerge. To secure labour for public works and the sugar-cane plantations, the British recruited large numbers of indentured labourers, many of them Muslim, from India, notably Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal. The Indian indentured labourer community in turn attracted entrepreneurs, many of whom were Gujarati Muslims, who had been long-time participants in the Indian Ocean commerce. These merchants took the lead in the institutionalisation of Islam, so that Mauritius now has a population that is more than 17% Muslim.⁷⁰ Similar processes took place on Reunion, to

⁶⁸ Harris, *African presence*, p. 71; Strayer, *Making of mission communities*; Kollman, *Evangelization of slaves*.

⁶⁹ R.B. Allen, *European slave trading in the Indian Ocean 1500-1850*, Athens OH, 2015, pp. 5-7; H. Tinker, *A new system of slavery. The export of Indian labour overseas 1830-1920*, Oxford, 1974; M. Carter, *Voices from indenture. Experiences of Indian migrants in the British Empire*, London, 1996.

⁷⁰ M. Emrith, *The Muslims of Mauritius*, Goodlands, Mauritius, 1967; B. Benedict, 'Slavery and indenture in Mauritius and the Seychelles', in J.L. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African systems of slavery*, Berkeley, 1980, 135-68; J.-L. Miège, *Indentured labour in the*

where indentured labourers from the Comoro Islands, Madagascar and India brought Islam after the abolition of slavery.⁷¹

In South Africa, the history of the Muslim community is also intertwined with narratives of displacement; its history is even more diverse and complex than the history of Islam on the Mascarenes. The earliest Muslim community in South Africa was established by an amalgam of Ambonese free Muslims (Mardijkers), political exiles and convicts from the East Indies, and slaves, brought or bought there by the Dutch.⁷² The Mardijkers and other free Muslims were allowed to practise their religion in private, but all forms of public religious display were prohibited. In 1657, governor Joan Maetsuyker, in anticipation of the arrival of the Mardijkers, re-issued a Dutch East India Company placate (*plakaat*) from 1642, which read: 'No one shall trouble the Amboinese about their religion or annoy them; so long as they do not practise in public or venture to propagate it amongst Christians and heathens. Offenders to be punished with death, but should there be amongst them those who had been drawn to God to become Christians, they were not to be prevented from joining Christian churches'.⁷³

Soon the Mardijkers were joined by other Muslims, such as the Malay servants of Dutch officials who opted to stay on the Cape. Also among the enslaved on the Cape there were Muslims, while other slaves also converted to Islam while on the Cape.⁷⁴ Yet another segment of the early Cape Muslim community was formed by people from the East Indies who had resisted colonial rule. Among these 'convicts' (*Bandieten*) who were deported to the Cape colony was a significant number of 'Mahometanese priesters'; after completing their sentence at Robben Island, they began to organise Islamic education and made converts among the slave population. Also among the political exiles there were highly educated

Indian Ocean and the particular case of Mauritius, Leiden, 1986; A.D.W. Forbes, 'Mauritius', in *EL2*; M. Emrith, *History of the Muslims in Mauritius*, Vacoas, Mauritius, 1994.

⁷¹ M.-F. Mouregot, *L'Islam à l'île de la Réunion*, Paris, 2010, pp. 27-35.

⁷² For Muslims in South Africa, see R.C.H. Shell, 'Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998', in N. Levtzion and R.L. Powells (eds), *History of Islam in Africa*, Athens OH, 2000, 327-48; R.C.H. Shell, 'Between Christ and Mohammed. Conversion, slavery and gender in the urban Western Cape', in R. Elphick and R. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in Southern Africa. A political, social and cultural history*, Berkeley CA, 1997, 268-77; R.C.H. Shell, 'The march of the Mardijkers. The toleration of Islam in the Cape colony' *Kronos* 22 (1995) 3-20; R.C.H. Shell, 'Rites and rebellion. Islamic conversion at the Cape, 1808 to 1915', in C. Saunders et al. (eds), *Studies in the history of Cape Town*, Cape Town, 1983, vol. 5, pp. 1-45.

⁷³ E.M. Mahida, *History of Muslims in South Africa*, Durban, 1993, p. 2.

⁷⁴ A.J. Böesenken, *Slaves and free blacks at the Cape 1658-1700*, Tafelberg, 1977.

Muslims, the most famous of whom was Shaykh Yūsuf al-Maqassārī, who was forcibly exiled to Zandvliet in 1694.

Since Muslims were prohibited from practising their religion in public, they began to organise themselves secretly. Muslim scholars, such as Shaykh Yūsuf and Tuan Guru clandestinely educated slaves in their private homes.⁷⁵ Thus, the early Muslim community grew in opposition to colonialism; because Christianity was considered the religion of the colonial oppressors, Islam gained a reputation as the religion of the oppressed. Ironically, Dutch slave owners also actively contributed to the growth of Islam among the enslaved. By law prohibited to hold Christian slaves, owners encouraged their slaves to become or remain Muslims so that they were not obliged to manumit them.⁷⁶

After the British annexed the Cape colony in 1806, the Muslim community expanded further and the first mosques were built: East African liberated slaves, known as *Zanzibari* were put ashore on the Cape, later followed by Indian indentured labourers (Christians, Hindu and Muslims), who settled in Natal and Indian traders. Present-day South African Muslims trace their spiritual heritage to this culturally diverse community.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See further, A. Davids, *Mosques of Bo-Kaap. A social history of Islam at the Cape*, Athlone, Cape Town, 1980; Y. da Costa and A. Davids, *Pages from Cape Muslim History*, Pietermaritzburg, 1994; J.L. Cilliers, 'Christians and Muslims at the Cape of Good Hope 1625-1795. A study of interreligious relations and their power-based dynamics', Cape Town, 1997 (Ph.D Diss. University of Western Cape); Loimeier, *Muslim societies in Africa*, pp. 248-66.

⁷⁶ Cilliers, 'Christians and Muslims at the Cape', p. 143.

⁷⁷ C.A. Quinn and F. Quinn, *Pride, faith and fear. Islam in sub-Saharan Africa*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 126-46; Loimeier, *Muslim societies in Africa*, p. 250.