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## RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

*The peoples of the Kenya Coast follow a variety of religious traditions. Whereas Islam has been present in the region for centuries, the beginning of Christianity in modern times only goes back some 150 years. African religious beliefs and practices existed long before the coming of Islam or Christianity. This chapter examines the religious traditions of the Kenya Coast, looking first at their historical origins and development. Rather than attempt a detailed description of the tenets and practices of each of the traditions, the chapter seeks to explain how they have influenced and interacted with each other. At the same time it assesses their overall importance, their relation to the social life and political economy of the region, and what their general circumstances are today.*

### ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Most people of the Kenya Coast belong to one of the three main religious traditions present in the region: Islam, Christianity, or African traditional religion. By and large, one finds all three religions in all parts of the coast, though in varying proportions. Among the Swahili and the Digo peoples, for example, Islam predominates. The Swahili, resident mainly in towns and villages on or near the coastal shore, have been Muslim for so long that their very ethnic identity has come to be Muslim. The Digo, who inhabit the eastern part of Kwale District, south of Mombasa, are predominantly Muslim; they are the only Bantu-speaking people of Kenya who have adopted Islam on a large scale. Among other coastal peoples, such as the Taita, Giriama and Pokomo, it is

not possible to identify a single dominant religious tradition. Rather, one finds some persons who are Muslim, others who are Christian, and others who follow African traditional religion (that is, religious beliefs and practices indigenous to Africa).

Though the geographical distribution of religions is often quite marked, as for example among the Pokomo, where the Pokomo of the upper Tana River tend to be Muslim and the Pokomo of the lower Tana River tend to be Christian, one should not imagine religious identities to be rigidly exclusive. Religious change, which has taken place gradually and over long periods of time, has not usually implied the wholesale substitution of one system of beliefs for another. Not only do a variety of religious beliefs exist among a particular people or in a specific

place, but also within a homestead or an individual family, where some members may be Muslim, others Christian, and still others continue to follow their African religious traditions. Such mixing can also take place at the level of individual persons, who may live as Muslim or Christians while residing in an urban centre, and nevertheless continue to take part in traditional practices when staying at their rural home with their non-Muslim and non-Christian relatives. In such instances the practice of a particular religion may become as much a social as a religious phenomenon, and it is not always possible to distinguish between the two spheres of life. Thus, a distinct feature of coastal society is the intermingling of religious traditions within a general atmosphere of tolerance and respect.

#### MIGRATION, URBANISATION AND RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Of the total population of the coast some 25% live in the city of Mombasa, another 7% live in urban centres of more than 2,000 inhabitants, while the remaining 68% live in rural areas. These statistics indicate that the proportion of urbanised people on the coast is considerably higher than the national average with 18% (Kenya 1996a; 1996b). The relatively high level of urbanisation at the coast is not a new phenomenon. The region has a history of urban settlement, by the Swahili people, going back many centuries. When looking at urban growth and change in more modern times, we need to distinguish between the smaller pre-colonial urban centres, such as Lamu, Mamburi and Vanga, which have retained their Muslim character and are still populated almost entirely by Muslims, and the larger towns of Mombasa and Malindi which, because of in-migration by non-Muslims, have experienced a steady decline in the proportion of Muslim inhabitants since the beginning of colonial rule in 1895. When Sir Arthur Hardinge, the first Commissioner General of the British

East Africa Protectorate, carried out his survey of Mombasa District in 1895-97, he found that the population of Mombasa town was 99% Muslim.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the Swahili, who have always lived in urban or semi-urban settlements, most indigenous coastal peoples originally lived in rural areas. Only in modern times have they migrated in large numbers to urban centres, where there is a general mixing of peoples and of religions. The traditional resource base of the rural peoples of the Coast was either agriculture, animal husbandry or, in some remote areas, hunting. This classification is imprecise because many peoples straddled more than one category but it helps to understand the potential influence of Islam and Christianity on indigenous African societies. Hunting societies by their very nature have not come under strong Muslim or Christian influence, some pastoral societies are strongly islamised (the Somali being the best example in East Africa), while agricultural peoples have been influenced by both Islam and Christianity.

The proportion of persons affiliated to each religion, as well as the geographical distribution of the religions themselves, has been affected by the movement of peoples, particularly by the migration of up-country Africans (from the interior of Kenya) to the coast. This process of migration, which goes back to pre-colonial times, intensified during the colonial period (1895-1963), when large numbers of up-country Africans came to the coast to work, on plantation farms, at Mombasa port, in the railways and in various administrative posts, both government and private. And migration from up-country has continued since Independence, one of the main stimulants to this being the growth of the tourist industry at the coast during the past three decades.

Most up-country migrants to the coast live in one

1 "Report by Sir A. Hardinge on the condition and progress of the East Africa Protectorate from its establishment to the 20th July 1897", Accounts and Papers (Parliamentary Papers), LX, 1898.

of the urban centres, but some have settled in rural areas, for example, in the Shimba Hills settlement scheme of Kwale District, in the Bura and Hola irrigation schemes of Tana River District, and in the Lake Kenyatta and Hindi/Mahogoni settlement schemes of Lamu District. The influx of up-country people has added to the ethnic diversity of the region, but more importantly for the subject under review in this chapter, it has greatly increased the Christian population. Most up-country Africans working at the coast are Christian, and much – though by no means all – of the Christian presence at the coast, particularly in urban centres, can be attributed to them. For example, the census of 1989 shows that 34% of the population of Mombasa is made up of persons of up-country origin (Kenya 1994). Though the population census does not show religious affiliation, we can estimate that over 90% of these immigrants are Christian.

Estimating the total Muslim population of the Kenya Coast, however, let alone of the whole country, is a particularly vexing problem since religious affiliation has not been included as a question in a national census since 1962, when a 10% sample of the African population were asked to state their religious affiliation. The results showed considerable variation from one coastal district to another in the proportion of the three main religious traditions. Muslims were a majority in Kwale, Lamu and Tana River Districts, Christians a majority in Mombasa and Taita Taveta Districts, while the followers of African traditional religions were a majority in Kilifi District (Holway 1970). In the absence of more recent data, we can only assume that the present-day proportions of Muslims and Christians are not greatly changed. Since both Islam and Christianity are known to be growing steadily (not just on the Kenya Coast but throughout Africa) at the expense of African traditional religious practices, the proportion of persons practising African traditional religions has

no doubt declined since 1962, but it is not possible to know the extent of this decline. Estimates of the current Muslim population of Kenya (usually made verbally and without reliable demographic data) range between 6% and 30%. As might be expected, Muslim sources tend to quote higher (and non-Muslim sources lower) figures. The great majority of Muslims in Kenya are Sunni, with only a minority of Shi'a Muslims, most of whom are immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants, from India and Pakistan.

Though Muslims constitute a minority population in Kenya, a high proportion of them live at the coast, where several districts and towns (Lamu, Mamburi and Vanga) have a majority Muslim population. The presence of the Swahili (mainly in urban centres) and the Digo (in Kwale District), together with many smaller Muslim communities scattered throughout the coast, gives the region a marked, though not exclusively, Muslim character quite distinct from other parts of Kenya.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the large number of Christian immigrants to the coast, the dominant religion of the coastal strip continues to be Islam. The more inland areas such as Taita Taveta District and the uplands and hinterland of Kwale and Kilifi Districts have only experienced Muslim influence in the twentieth century and to a lesser extent than the more immediate hinterland of the coastal towns.

Finally, we should note the presence of a relatively small number of non-African immigrants (mainly Indians and Arabs), who live mostly in urban centres. The peoples of Indian origin are a mixture of Hindus, Muslims (both Shi'a and Sunni) and Christians, depending on their place of origin, while the Arabs are almost all Muslim. Whereas the latter generally intermarry with local Muslim families, and over time become at least partially integrated, the former tend to marry within their own communities. Whatever their origin or religious affiliation, immi-

2 Together with North-East Province which is also predominantly Muslim.

grant peoples who have been at the coast more than one generation often come to adopt the manners and ways of coastal society and to identify themselves as 'people of the coast' (though not necessarily perceived in this way by the coastal peoples themselves).

#### AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The term 'African traditional religion', used to refer to indigenous religious observances, is not altogether appropriate. It connotes a static unchanging reality, when in fact there is ample evidence that African religious practices and beliefs have changed and adapted to new circumstances over time. Moreover, the term implies a certain uniformity, belying the enormous diversity of African religions. Indeed, their variety is as vast as the number of African peoples, for each ethnic group tends to have its own array of religious practices and beliefs. Thus, looking at the Kenya Coast, one can speak of 'Taita religion', 'Pokomo religion', and 'Giriama religion'. And the study of the religions of these peoples reveals cults, rituals, and ceremonies specific to each of them, and therefore generally restricted to the area where that particular group lives.

One of the difficulties in studying African religions is that African societies have been exposed to Christian and Islamic influence and ideas for such a long time that it is extremely difficult to separate out what is originally African. Another related problem arises from the fact that African religious practices before the twentieth century are not well documented, and few known sources written by Africans during this period survive. The early accounts of European missionaries, travellers and colonial officials give us some insights, but at the same time we need to keep in mind their lack of understanding of many of the local traits and customs.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe the religious traditions of each of the peoples of the

coast in detail. Still, it is possible to distinguish shared characteristics of these traditions, just as one can identify features of Christianity or Islam common to their many schools and sects. If we contrast, for example, Christian and Muslim ideas of a Supreme God with African beliefs about divinity, indeed some societies had quite a clear concept of a supreme all-powerful God. Other African societies seem to have had only a vague notion or no notion at all about a single God. In 1864, one of the early Christian missionaries at the Ribe Methodist Mission in the hinterland of Mombasa, wrote:

The notions (of the Ribe people) about a Supreme Being are so exceedingly vague ... in speaking to them about God, you have to use a term *Mulungu*, which conveys to them ideas which are altogether opposed to the Divine Being; indeed it is a question whether they do not often mean, by this term, nothing more than the material heavens or thunder.<sup>3</sup>

Even where the idea of divinity did exist, the African concept was usually quite distinct from that of Christianity or Islam. The supreme being of African religion was often perceived as being distant and far away, not overly concerned with human affairs. There is generally no tradition of contemplative prayer as is found in some Christian communities or the *sufi* mysticism found in the Muslim world. No regular communication takes place between *Mulungu* and human beings; people do not relate to *Mulungu* personally, nor does *Mulungu* take a particular interest in people. A study of the religious beliefs of the Taita people, for example, concluded that *Mulungu*, for the Taita, was some kind of a supra-personal being (Harris 1978).

If God was distant and remote for many African peoples, the same was not true of spirits and the spirit world. African societies had, and continue to have, a strong belief in the pervasive presence and

3 Missionary Notices, Eastern Africa, Letter of C. New, 23d April 1864, VII, 612.

power of all kinds of spirits, both human and non-human. Foremost among these are the ancestral spirits of departed relatives. But the term 'ancestor worship' is quite incorrect. The relationship to one's ancestors (whether living or dead) is rather one of respect, deference (in a positive sense) and, when appropriate, obedience. The Ribe viewed the spirits of deceased persons to be equally important, if not more important than Mulungu: "(...) they do not think Mulungu more than equal, if not inferior to, the spirits of the departed." (New 1873: 612). Unlike Mulungu, the ancestral spirits are deeply interested in what goes on among the living members of the society to which they belonged when they were alive. Krapf, the first Christian missionary to work on the East African Coast in modern times, lived among the Rabai people and noted that ancestral spirits (*koma*) were deemed to have a very real power. As a result the Rabai people were constantly turning to them for help:

This morning we were called upon by a woman who carried a small vessel in which there was a mixture of corn, rice and water to make a dedication to the *koma* (the ancestral spirit) on the grave of a dead relative. On pouring out the mixture, she implored the *koma*, "O *koma*, I offer you this that you may make rain, and cause the seed I have sown in my plantation to grow, for it will not grow without you ..." The people believe that the *koma* stays in the grave, or in the clouds and elsewhere, and that it has the power of causing rain and other temporal blessings. They believe that having left the body, it has a somewhat supernatural power and must be implored and appeased by an offering before it will give rain. Some say that the *koma* does not eat or drink what is placed before it, but is satisfied with merely seeing it, and with the readiness of the offering relatives.<sup>4</sup>

Not only do ancestral spirits have the power to grant 'temporal blessings', as Krapf puts it, but more importantly they are the guardians of the moral and

social orders. In the African world-view these two orders are so intimately associated with one another that it is not possible to separate them. A person who behaves immorally thereby commits an offence against the social order, that is, against the community (including the ancestors). When the living members of a society commit 'social evil' by failing to follow traditional customs and norms, it is the ancestral spirits, the so-called 'living dead', who act to enforce social morality. They usually do this by bringing about some kind of natural disaster or hardship, be it sickness, drought, famine, or a combination of these or other misfortunes. It then becomes necessary to appease the ancestors, which is usually done by offering an appropriate sacrifice. Such traditional rituals of sacrifice are normally organised along kinship lines. For example, among the Digo of the south-eastern coast, sacrifices were always offered by the *mwanatsi*, that is, the senior elder, a descendant of the original founder of a village or clan. In exercising social control, the ancestors do not act vindictively; rather, by administering corrective punishment, they ensure the restoration of social harmony and propriety.

In addition to a belief in ancestral spirits, African peoples also have a strong belief in non-human spirits, called *pepo* in Swahili. Interestingly, this African belief corresponds to the Islamic belief in the existence of a genre of intelligent spiritual beings (called in Arabic *jinn* and *shaitan*) distinct from men and angels. *Pepo* are invisible, though able to appear, if they want, in a variety of forms. They live in the world, with a propensity for cool places such as caves or the shade of large trees. Though not human, they have human characteristics and exhibit a range of human-like behaviour. Among the Giriama, who live north of Mombasa, spirits may have an ethnic or religious identity, which must be taken into account when dealing with them. A non-Muslim Giriama who is possessed by a 'Muslim' spirit will often be-

<sup>4</sup> Krapf Journal, entry for 4th August 1847, Church Missionary Society Archives, CA5/016/172.

have or dress like a Muslim, or even convert to Islam, in order to appease the spirit. Spirits have power over all facets of life, and are able to cause sickness, even such things as a headache, and all kinds of other problems. They are not necessarily evil, but may be somewhat capricious, and one must keep them happy by recognising their presence and placating them with offerings. Indeed, one frequently finds such offerings left in the caves that dot the coastal shore north of Mombasa.

One important attribute of African societies, and of their religions, is their openness to new ideas and practices. Islam and Christianity, revealed scriptural religions, tend to be dogmatic and unwilling to tolerate practices contrary to revelation. African religious traditions, more reliant on the observation and interpretation of the natural world, are generally non-dogmatic and ready to accommodate aspects of other religions that are perceived as useful and efficacious. In this regard we can speak of the vitality of African traditional religions, in that they are readily able to assimilate other religious traditions and practices. A striking example of the inclusive character of African religious practice on the Kenya Coast is the request made in 1880 by the elders of the Ribe people (in the hinterland of Mombasa) to the Methodist missionaries who had settled among them, to build a church inside *kaya* Ribe, the centre where all the important sacrifices and religious ceremonies of the Ribe people took place. The church did not replace traditional Ribe shrines, but simply became one more ritual edifice within the *kaya* (Sperling 1988). Even the person of Jesus Christ is liable to be incorporated into traditional African ceremonies and prayers. The author was present in 1995 when the senior elder of *kaya* Kauma, the ritual centre of the Kauma people, who live in the coastal hinterland west of Kilifi, included the name of Jesus Christ among the Kauma ancestors whose blessing he was invoking. In such circumstances, a

kind of indigenization of Christianity (or Islam) takes place, what Sanneh (1980) calls 'domestication', whereby African societies incorporate alien religious practices selectively and on their own terms, investing these practices with their own identity.

African traditional religions are eminently pragmatic, concerned more with this world than the next. They seek to resolve the problems of everyday life, and to bring solutions. The perceived moral order is one in which the good are rewarded and the bad are punished here and now in this life, not in some nebulous afterlife. Thus, African religion is concerned more with happiness and well-being on earth than with an undefined future state of eternal bliss. In fact, in most African religions there is no clear concept of a reward in a life after death. The dead continue to exist as ancestral spirits, living out their immortality in the vicinity of their original home on earth. Departed spirits are tied to this world, and their happiness, like that of their living relatives, is connected to the village or place where they enjoyed life before death. As Krapf wrote about the Rabai people:

They have a faint idea of man's immortality since they believe that the departed father or mother or relative lives somewhere in the sky, or in the grave, or in a grove, or in their former plantations; and that he must be appeased with food.<sup>5</sup>

#### PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

One way of understanding the three main religious traditions of the coast is to describe how Islam and Christianity have come to be present, or absent, where they are today. From this perspective the religious history of the region can be viewed as the gradual penetration of Islam and Christianity into areas and among peoples where there had previously been no Muslim or Christian presence. Thus, we can

<sup>5</sup> Krapf Journal, entry for 17th January 1847, Church Missionary Society Archives, CA5/016/172.

speak of a 'chronology' of Christianity and Islam, looking at their progressive spread throughout the coastal region, and of a 'geography' of Christianity and Islam, based on their present-day distribution. To understand this religious chronology and geography, we need to consider the factors (geographical, economic and political) that have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the process of religious change.

Though most of the interior of Africa was isolated from the outside world for many centuries, the coastal regions of Africa, approachable as they were from overseas, experienced numerous external contacts. More specifically, the coast was the first part of East Africa to experience outside influences coming across the Indian Ocean. These influences have not affected all parts of the coast, however; their impact has always been stronger in the low-lying plains of the littoral than in the coastal hills and the interior further inland. Indeed, during the period before modern overland road and transport communications, there existed a clear inverse relation between the extent of overseas influence and distance from the ocean shore. For centuries, for example, the influence of Islam, coming as it did from overseas, was confined to settlements on the coastal islands or close to the ocean shore, and did not penetrate into the coastal hinterland or interior.

Similarly, the earliest European (and Christian) influence on the coast, that of the Portuguese, which arrived from across the seas at the end of the fifteenth century and lasted until the beginning of the eighteenth century, was confined to the littoral. There is no evidence that the Portuguese ever went into the coastal hinterland, unless perhaps on the briefest of reconnaissance expeditions. Rather, they remained resident in the coastal towns, which by the time of their arrival were strongly Muslim. To understand this more fully, we now turn to look at the arrival and growth of Islam on the East African Coast.

#### THE RISE AND GROWTH OF SWAHILI ISLAM

The presence of Muslims on the East African Coast dates back to the first centuries of Islam, possibly as early as the middle of the seventh century soon after the death of Muhammad (632 AD). Most likely by this time Muslims from Arabia or the Persian Gulf region had already reached what is now the Kenya Coast. Whether the first Muslims to arrive were Arabs or Persians, and exactly where they came from, may never be known. Present evidence indicates that they were probably from the Persian Gulf region. Some came as traders for seasonal visits, or a temporary stay, following the monsoon winds of the western Indian Ocean. Others came as refugees or immigrants and settled in island and mainland towns, always near, though not necessarily on, the coast. In contrast with the rapid militant expansion of Islam throughout North Africa, the spread of Islam in the coastal region of East Africa was gradual and peaceful. The first Muslim settlers were followed by others, and as time passed, the number of Muslim settlements along the coast increased.

In some instances the towns where Muslims settled were already in existence. Shanga in the Lamu archipelago was a pre-Islamic settlement which later became Muslim. In other instances Muslims would have founded their own settlements. Archaeological evidence shows that African inhabitants often made up the bulk of the population of these towns, and early Arab geographers refer to towns where Muslims and non-Muslims live together. Thus, Muslim traders and refugees lived along the present-day Kenya Coast many centuries before the Portuguese, the first Christian visitors, arrived at the end of the fifteenth century. After the thirteenth century, immigration from the Arabian peninsula seems to have increased. By that time Muslim towns had come into existence along the entire East African Coast, from Somalia to Mozambique, and they formed a cultural unit, generally

termed by historians the 'Swahili Coast'. In this context the coast of Kenya is considered part of the northern Swahili Coast. A few of the early and mediaeval Swahili towns have continued to be inhabited until the present day, but numerous ruins tell us of the towns which did not survive.

Gradually and in varying degrees, towns became centres of Islamic influence. With the passing of generations, immigrant Muslim settlers and their descendants intermarried with Africans and came to adopt the Swahili language and many local customs. Thus, over time, they became more or less indigenised and independent of — though often in contact with — their original overseas homeland. Hadhrami *sharifs*, who settled on the coast in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, played an important role in shaping local Muslim culture. Thus, Islam on the Swahili Coast continued to be strongly influenced from Arabia. In the early fourteenth century Ibn Battuta observed that the inhabitants of Mombasa were Sunni Muslims: "They are Shafi'ites in rite, pious, honourable and upright." (Gibb 1962: 379). The Shafi'i school of law, one of the four traditions of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, still prevails on the East African coast.

Swahili Islam remained an essentially urban phenomenon, and the islamisation of non-Muslim Africans during these early centuries came about through a process of urban assimilation. Swahili towns, like Lamu, Pate, Malindi and Mombasa, attracted non-Muslim Africans, some of whom became urbanised and adopted Islam. Quite a bit of assimilation to Islam took place through marriage between non-Muslim women and Muslim men. It is this intermixing that is considered to have given rise to the Swahili people of today, all of whom are Bantu-speaking Muslims. In contrast to the towns, much of the interior remained largely unaffected by Islam until modern times. Indeed, there is no evidence of a Muslim presence among the African

peoples of the coastal interior or even in the immediate rural hinterland of the towns until well into nineteenth century.

#### THE GROWTH OF HINTERLAND TRADE AND AGRICULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By the early nineteenth century, most peoples of the coastal region had experienced no foreign religious influence, and they continued to follow their traditional African religious practices. A string of urban Muslim settlements, inhabited mainly by the Swahili people, dotted the shore and offshore islands. The topography of the region, combined with the general insecurity further inland, had kept all but the narrowest part of the coastal plain quite secluded from the outside world. As the nineteenth century progressed, the isolation of the coastal hinterland and interior gradually lessened. A combination of economic and political factors brought an end to the isolation, but in so doing increased the presence, first of Islam, and later of Christianity, in areas where there had been little or no Muslim or Christian influence before.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muslims were settled mainly on offshore islands in three areas: the Lamu archipelago, which included the Bajun islands to the north; with the main towns of Lamu on Lamu island, and Pate, Siyu and Faza on Pate island; Mombasa island, which was governed at this time by the Mazrui Arabs, with some dependent agricultural settlements on the mainland; the Shirazi-Vumba (modern Shimoni-Vanga) area of the southern coast near the present-day border with Tanzania, which included settlements on Wasini and Funzi islands. Most of the Muslims living in these areas were Swahili, though some Omani Arab traders were already resident in Lamu, as was a small Bohora Indian Muslim community.

Quite close relations did exist between the Muslims of the coastal towns and some of the non-



Muslim peoples of the rural hinterland; relations that had developed along lines of geographical proximity. For example, the Pokomo and Oromo people of the hinterland of the Lamu archipelago had close contacts with the Swahili of Pate and Lamu. Trade dominated these relations and was the main occasion for contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, the nature of that trade, mainly a carrying trade by which rural peoples brought their goods into the towns and then returned to their rural homesteads, had not created conditions conducive to the spread of Islamic influence.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the pattern of trade began to change under the influence of two related phenomena. East Africa, including what is today the Kenya Coast, was being incorporated, in varying degrees and ways, into the growing commercial and political empire of the Busaidi Arabs centred at Zanzibar. At the same time the East African economy was expanding, as international economic forces created an unprecedented demand for such local goods as ivory, slaves, gum copal, and grain (Sheriff 1987). The quantity of goods reaching the coastal towns from the hinterland, and interior, was insufficient to meet regional and international demand. As a result, there occurred a virtual 'economic invasion' by Muslim traders, no longer content to wait for trade goods brought to them by rural peoples, as in the past, but who sought to increase their supply, and profit, by venturing inland in search of goods at their source.

Economic growth was accompanied by Busaidi political expansion. The concerted effort by the Omani Arabs to dominate the northern Swahili coast, more specifically, the Busaidi take-over of Lamu (1813), Pemba island (1822), Pate (1824) and Mombasa (1837) displaced many Muslims and caused them to emigrate from island towns to the rural mainland, where they started new settlements. From Pate, those displaced were Nabhany Swahili and their supporters, who settled at Ozi in the Tana

River delta area (Ylvisaker 1979). In the case of Pemba and Mombasa, those emigrating were for the most part Mazrui and their Swahili and slave followers. The Mazrui formed new settlements, at Takaungu, north of Mombasa, and at Gasi to the south (Koffsky 1971), and the Tangana from Pemba settled on the coastal plain south of Mombasa in the area of Mtongwe (Sperling 1988). As a result of this widespread redistribution of population, Muslims found themselves living far closer to non-Muslim rural peoples (the Pokomo south and west of the Lamu archipelago, the Mijikenda north and south of Mombasa, and the Segeju in the Vanga region). The potential for contacts between Muslims and non-Muslim Africans was substantially increased.

Expansion of trade was accompanied by a corresponding increase in agricultural production in response to the increased demand for grain from Arabia, Pemba and Zanzibar. Muslims expanded existing farms and also established commercial agricultural plantations, particularly in the Vanga region, on the Shimoni peninsula, around Gasi, on the mainland north and south of Mombasa, and in the Mazrui-dominated areas between Takaungu and Msabaha. Further north, Malindi prospered as a plantation town, as vast tracts of land in the rural hinterland were brought under cultivation (Cooper 1977). There was also a general increase in agricultural production on the mainland coast of the Lamu-Tana River area.

Thus the presence of Muslims in rural areas grew in several ways: greater initiative on the part of Muslim traders, the general expansion of agriculture, including the development of plantations, and the emigration of Muslims from established towns to found new settlements. Increased economic activity affected different parts of the coastal hinterland in varying ways, but the net overall effect was to bring Muslims and non-Muslims into closer, more frequent contact with each other and to increase the

number and kinds of transactions between them.

More subtle, and less easy to evaluate, is the evidence that the nature of contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims was beginning to change. As Muslim entrepreneurs sought out reliable trading partners among rural African peoples, relations that had previously been group-oriented came to be more personal and individual (Sperling 1988).

#### THE SPREAD OF ISLAM INTO THE RURAL HINTERLAND

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, some non-Muslim Africans who had adopted Islam continued to reside in their rural villages, what we might call the beginnings of 'rural islamisation'. This marked a turning-point in the spread of Islam. Previously, the emigration of islamised Africans to Muslim towns had removed elements that might otherwise have proved innovative, if not disruptive, to their own societies. Now, the presence of indigenous African Muslims in rural villages created new conditions and the potential for change. Rural islamisation first began in those places where non-Muslims had developed particularly close relations with Muslims, as a result either of Muslim agricultural expansion or of prolonged and intense trade. Rural islamisation also occurred by re-migration, that is, by the return of Muslim Africans from the towns where they had been residing to their original rural homes.

Some of the earliest evidence of rural islamisation comes from the Vanga-Shimoni area, where Islamic influence was already spreading among the Segeju people indigenous to the area, before 1850. The Segeju had especially close contacts with the Vumba Swahili of Wasini island who established farms on the mainland peninsula opposite the island. Land was plentiful on the peninsula, and the Segeju are said to have allowed the Vumba to settle there. Most Vumba continued to reside on Wasini island (and in Vanga town), and farmed on the mainland seasonally. Some settled near or in Segeju villages,

took Segeju wives, and became permanent mainland residents. Eventually the whole Shimoni area came to be regarded as joint Vumba-Segeju land (McKay 1975). The children of mixed marriages were brought up as Muslims, and other Segeju, not related to the Vumba by marriage, were attracted to Islam. Thus, the Segeju were among the first indigenous people of the coastal hinterland to adopt Islam on a large scale, not so much because of trading contacts, but as a result of interspersed settlement and inter-marriage. They were also the first to build their own mosques, in such villages as Kibiga Kirau (Kidimu) and Hormuz (Ormuz), in the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Sperling 1988).

Relations developed in a similar way between the Digo and the Tangana Swahili who settled at Mtongwe, south of Mombasa. The Tangana began to cultivate land near the Digo, and to marry Digo women. By 1860, the Tangana and Digo were collaborating in many ways. Some Digo had taken up residence among the Tangana for purposes of trade or to work, and the Tangana elders knew and met regularly with their Digo counterparts. By the 1870s some of the Digo of Mtongwe had begun to adopt Islam, and from then on the number of Digo Muslims increased, gradually but steadily. Muslim converts continued to live in their villages, and would go to pray in the Tangana mosques in the area (Sperling 1988).

Further north, in the Tana River area, re-migration was responsible for the beginning of islamisation. In the 1880s, a number of young men from upper Pokomo migrated to settle at Chara in lower Pokomo country, where they began trading with Muslim traders at Kau. Under the influence of these traders, some of the men became Muslim. Had they continued to reside at Chara, they might have remained nothing more than a community of islamised immigrants. However, in 1910 they began to return to their homeland. There they began to spread Islam

together with Muslim traders who were then entering upper Pokomo country for the first time (Bunger 1973).

By the end of the nineteenth century, most Africans in the immediate coastal hinterland had experienced the impact of Islam in one way or other. They may not have formally adopted Islam, in particular far fewer women than men had become Muslim, but they would have had kinsfolk who had done so. A high proportion of the first African converts were village elders and chiefs, and by all accounts many of them were men of forceful character and prestige. Abdallah Mwapodzo, the *mwanatsi* (senior elder) of Diani (south of Mombasa), is said to have been the first Muslim Digo in the area, and to have been instrumental in bringing other Digo elders into Islam. By this time, too, other forces had begun to strengthen Islam in the coastal region. The Qadiriyya order (Arabic *tariqa*) was active, and several Qur'an schools had been started in rural villages, mainly for the children of the first generation of African Muslims. In the hinterland of Mombasa, the Qadiriyya spread among African Muslims where it attracted some new converts. Its greatest impact seems to have been to encourage African Muslims, including second-generation Muslims, to live their faith more enthusiastically and with greater conviction (Spierling 1988).

Thus, by the time the British assumed colonial power in 1895, the extent of Muslim influence had increased greatly and Muslim communities had come into existence in many villages. They lived interspersed and surrounded by their non-Muslim neighbours, with whom they mixed freely and had constant friendly relations, and whose language they shared. Already by this time the influence of Islam was far stronger in the southern rural hinterland among the Digo people. They were resident in much larger numbers in the coastal plain and had more frequent contact with Muslim urban centres,

than the other Mijikenda people to the north of Mombasa, who continued to live on higher land in the range of hills further inland. These rural Muslim communities inherited the dominant attributes of Swahili Islam, and over time came to adopt aspects of Swahili culture, including Swahili cuisine and dress. They also came to use Swahili as the language of communication with other Muslim people. At the same time they continued to speak their vernacular in daily village life, and in dealings with non-Muslim Africans, with whom they usually had more frequent relations than with other Muslims.

#### THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY: THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY MISSIONS

The arrival of Portuguese ships in 1498 marks the first known European, and Christian, presence in the region. The Portuguese visited Mombasa and Malindi in that year. Christians from Ethiopia, a region with a tradition of Christianity dating back to the fourth century, may have visited the East African Coast before the fifteenth century, but there is no evidence to confirm this. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Augustinian friars from Portugal established mission stations in several places, including Faza in the Lamu archipelago and Mombasa, which became their main residence. Few details are known about these missions, whose work was primarily directed, not towards the Swahili Muslim people, but towards non-Muslim Africans resident in the coastal towns. In 1729, the Portuguese withdrew from Mombasa to Mozambique south of the Ruvuma river, and their missionary work on the East African Coast was discontinued, leaving no permanent Christian presence during the remainder of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

The second coming of Christianity to the East African Coast, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, is best understood as part of a growing European (especially British) presence in the

region, which ultimately culminated in the imposition of colonial rule at the end of the century (in 1895 the British established the British East Africa Protectorate over an area which included much of the present-day coastal region of Kenya). Unlike the Portuguese, whose intentions were mainly political and commercial in nature and for whom missionary work was a complementary and subsidiary activity, the European Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century came with the specific purpose of evangelisation. Thus, most of the early missions were established among non-Muslim African peoples in the coastal hinterland or interior, away from the Swahili towns and other predominantly Muslim areas.

The beginning of Christian missionary work is synonymous with the name of Johann Ludwig Krapf, a German pastor who had been trained and employed by the Church Missionary Society (the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church) in England. In 1846, Krapf founded a mission at Rabai, some twenty kilometres inland from the town of Mombasa. Krapf had earlier visited the Sultan of Zanzibar, who held nominal sovereignty over much of the East African Coast, in order to get permission to begin his missionary work. Though a scholar who had an intense academic interest in languages, Krapf was largely motivated by religious considerations. For him, knowledge of Swahili, and other African vernaculars, was an essential tool for evangelisation. He was the first person to transcribe the Swahili language in Roman script and to describe its syntax and grammar systematically. His Swahili-English dictionary, first published in 1882 after his death, is a pioneering work. Interestingly, he was helped by Muslims in Mombasa to translate the Bible into Swahili.

In 1862, a second Christian mission was founded by the United Methodist Free Church at Ribe, some ten kilometres north of Rabai. In 1875, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established a mission and

industrial training centre on the mainland, just north of Mombasa island. The Freretown mission marked the first significant Christian presence in what had been up until then a predominantly Muslim area. The work of the missionaries was not directed towards the Muslim people of Mombasa and its surroundings, however, but to the communities of freed slaves who came to be settled there. One of the features of the CMS mission stations beginning in the 1870s was their reliance on 'Bombay Africans', freed slaves who were taken to Bombay, India, for training, and later returned to help in the work of teaching and evangelisation (Strayer 1978).

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, mission societies also moved to establish stations in the far interior of the coast. In 1883, the Church Missionary Society started work among the Taita at Sagalla, more than 150 kilometres inland from Mombasa. Initial missionary work at Sagalla was notably unsuccessful. The Taita people attributed the ensuing drought to the presence of the missionaries and the station had to be abandoned in 1885. The CMS also began mission stations at Jilore on the Sabaki River, forty kilometres west of Malindi, in 1890, and at Mahoo in Taveta in 1892. The first Christian mission in the Tana River region was established by the United Methodist Free Church at Golbanti in 1884, but came to a rather abrupt end with the murder of Houghton, the first missionary, and his wife when Maasai attacked the mission station. Subsequently the Neukirchen Mission Society (of Germany) started a mission station among the Pokomo people at Ngao in 1887 (with further mission stations opened at Makere in 1898, at Kulesa in 1901, and at Hola in 1912). The first Christian converts at Ngao, seven in number, were baptised in 1894, and by the early 1920s there existed a small Christian community of some 350-400 Pokomo. An attempt by the French Catholic community of Spiritains (Holy Ghost Fathers) to start a mission

among the Pokomo in 1890 was unsuccessful and had to be abandoned. The mission station started by the Spiritains at Bura among the Taita at the end of 1892 met with more success, and within a year some fifty boys were said to be schooling.

In general the nineteenth century pre-colonial Christian missions had rather meagre success. One must not imagine large numbers of missionaries well endowed with material resources. There were usually no more than two missionaries, and often only one, at a mission station at any given time, and for lengthy periods missions might be abandoned altogether, for reasons of expediency, lack of security or ill health. For example, in order to begin the mission at Golbanti the Methodists had temporarily to leave their Ribe mission without any missionary. Other factors may have played an important role in the lack of missionary success. Krapf concluded that Mijikenda resistance to Islam and Christianity stemmed from the integrity and cohesive nature of their traditional society, and it is evident that the strength of their own religious beliefs and practices did much to contribute to their resistance. Such resistance only began to break down with the increasing European and missionary presence, and in particular with an increase in the number of Africans exposed to formal Western education at mission and secular government schools as the twentieth century progressed.

#### THE PATTERN AND IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY

By the early twentieth century, Christian missionary activity had started in many parts of the coast. Unlike Islam, which spread through the activities of Muslim traders and settlers, the beginnings of Christianity were the result of conscious evangelical planning – albeit not fully informed – and as such displayed a marked geographical bias. Most missionary activity was confined to the region corresponding to the present-day districts of Tana River, Kilifi and Taita

Taveta, with little or no activity in the southern- and northernmost districts of Kwale and Lamu. There are plausible reasons to explain this imbalance. The coastal plain south of Mombasa (corresponding roughly to the eastern part of present-day Kwale District) was already under strong Muslim influence and for this reason had little appeal to most missionary groups. Indeed, when in the 1920s the colonial government requested the Holy Ghost Fathers to manage a technical school at Waa (south of Mombasa), the Fathers discovered that parents in the area were reluctant to send their children to the school for fear they would come under Christian influence. Eventually the school had to be transferred to Kilifi District, north of Mombasa. Most missionary groups had limited capacity, and were looking for places and peoples where they had the highest chance of success. The western part of Kwale District, inhabited mainly by the Duruma people, had yet to experience a strong Muslim presence, but the region was remote and inaccessible, and so less inviting and viable for missionary work. The CMS tried to start a mission station near present-day Kwale town in the 1880s but after a short time had to abandon the mission for lack of personnel. As for Lamu District, the coastal towns were largely Muslim, and the coastal hinterland was inhabited mainly by hunting and pastoral peoples, among whom missionary work was known to be especially difficult.

As the twentieth century progressed, Christian churches experienced continuing difficulties in their missionary efforts at the coast, particularly in the rural areas. With the building of the railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, completed in 1901, and the transfer of the capital of the Protectorate to Nairobi in 1907, missionary societies extended their work into the far interior. The positive response of other peoples in the interior encouraged missions to transfer their priorities away from the coast. Missionary work at the coast continued, but did not ex-

pand significantly. The industrial training scheme at Freretown, for example, was greatly hampered by financial problems and did not realise its initial promise. In general, it was not until the 1920s when the missions began to receive large educational grants from the colonial government that they found themselves on a relatively stable financial footing (Strayer 1978). By the time of Independence in 1963, the coast remained one of the regions of Kenya least influenced by Christianity with the exception of a few areas like Taita Taveta and the eastern parts of Kilifi District, where missionaries had concentrated their efforts. Since Independence, however, there has been a steady growth of Christianity among coastal Africans and the absolute number of Christians in the coastal region has increased even more rapidly due to the immigration of up-country Christians.

Perhaps the most striking development in recent times has been the growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, such as the Baptist Church, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God and the New Apostolic Church. They can be found even in such areas as eastern Kwale District whose population is predominantly Muslim, be it in small numbers. Some of these churches receive extensive funding and missionary personnel from overseas and are able to construct modern church buildings. The revivalist charismatic approach of these churches is generally more informal and less structured than the mainstream churches, which tends to make them quite appealing. At the same time, it leaves them susceptible to fragmentation into smaller breakaway 'independent' churches, many of which now exist at the coast and whose numbers appear to be growing. The independent churches, with such names as the Redeemed Gospel Church, the Light of God and the Victory Power Tabernacle, represent an assortment of trends. Some are branches of churches based in Nairobi or elsewhere up-country, and attract congregations

made up largely of up-country Africans resident at the coast. Other independent churches are of coastal origin and are attended mainly by indigenous coastal people. A few of the independent churches, like the Redeemed Gospel Church, attract mixed congregations of up-country and coastal people together. Such evangelical and independent churches exist in most of the main towns of the coast. Thus, for example, one can find more than thirty different Christian churches (counting mainstream, evangelical and independent churches) in a town like Malindi.

#### RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND COASTAL IDENTITY

The balance and distribution of religious affiliation on the Kenya Coast has undergone distinctive change during the past fifty years or more. One of the main reasons for this, as explained above, has been the migration of up-country peoples to the coast. Another major reason has been the large-scale conversion of African peoples to Islam and Christianity, a phenomenon occurring not just on the Kenyan coast but throughout East Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa as well.

One of the main factors fostering conversion, according to the model proposed by Horton (1971), has been urbanisation. Traditional beliefs and practices, well suited to the 'microcosm' of village life, are inadequate in coping with the stresses and problems of a multi-ethnic urban 'macrocosm', or even in rural circumstances where the wider modern world is encroaching. In such conditions, the universal nature of Christianity and Islam is extremely appealing, and these religions offer a new focus for life. Nevertheless the characteristics of traditional religion still retain a strong influence on fundamental beliefs and values. Following Horton's model, African religious beliefs and practices are gradually being incorporated into appropriated forms of Christianity and Islam.

Though divided by other sources of tension and conflict, the indigenous coastal peoples have tolerated religious diversity for centuries. In modern times, too, there are some quite remarkable instances of inter-religious co-operation and recognition. Examples are the home run by the Catholic Little Sisters in Mombasa for all destitute persons — without discrimination, including Muslims — and the recent initiative of Muslim imams to form a joint Muslim-Christian alliance to monitor human rights abuses.

What is particularly striking about religious traditions on the coast is how they continue to be subsumed within what we might call a 'common coastal identity'. The indigenous coastal peoples share certain historical and cultural origins irrespective of their religious affiliation. Whether Muslim, Christian or African traditionalist, they feel the common bond of being 'coastal', an identity that arises out of the perception that they are different from the up-country people of Kenya, as indeed they are in many respects.

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*Photo 5* Slope cultivation in the Kilifi Uplands. A mixture of crops is cultivated.  
(see also Figure 12.2, p. 184).  
(Piet Leegwater)

