



Participation of Kutch Merchants in the East African Trade in the 19th Century

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Abstract

One interesting facet for the Indian Ocean trade network in the nineteenth century was the involvement of Kutch traders in the East African trade. Seafarers, particularly those of the Kharwa & Bhatia tribes, who participated in the marine commerce thrived in the Kutch area of western Gujarat, India. These sellers were instrumental in bridging the gap between the Indian as well as East African marketplaces. Cotton textiles were among the most desired goods by African markets, while spices were staples in Kutchi cuisine as well as medicine, and metalware was used for various tools in the garden and at home. In exchange, they brought in priceless items in East Africa, such as the highly sought-after material for producing jewellery as well as additional decorative items, gold, which was internationally recognized as a means of exchange as well as a store of value, and, regrettably, slaves, which were a component of the economy at the time. Thanks to Kutch's advantageous position near the Arabian Sea as well as the entrepreneurial spirit of its traders, who set up a web of trading stations all along the coast of East Africa, commerce flourished. The success of the traders depended on the solid connections they established among the local African populations. As they helped to integrate East Africa into the global commercial network as well as contributed to the region's prosperity, Kutchi merchants had a substantial influence on East African business in the 19th century. Their influence may be observed in the thriving Indian villages that dot the East African coast. These communities are deeply rooted in the region's history and economy, and their legacy lives on.

Keywords: *East African Trade, Legacy, History, And Economy, Zanzibar*

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, the actual transport of trading articles was largely in the hands of Swahilis and recently arrived Omanis who owned boats and manned them with local people and slaves, but many of the middleman activities were performed by Indians especially Kutchi merchants. Indians had been able to enter East African commerce because Indian cloth was a staple article of barter in East Africa.



Omanis created real opportunity for Kutchi on the East Africa coast during the second half of the eighteenth century. By this time, Kutchi merchants were well and truly embedded in both Muscat and Bombay. Zanzibar was to become the fourth leg of the Kutchi quadrilateral, as direct visits by ships from the west coast of India to Zanzibar became more common. Kutchi gradually began to dominate Zanzibar's Indian trade. The Sultan Saiyid Said encouraged Omani Arabs and Kutchis to settle in Zanzibar, its adjacent islands, and even on the African mainland. Kutchis were given a protected status and were permitted to use the Sultan's flag. After some initial difficulties, the Kutchis obtained, by 1828, the privilege of paying a low, 5 percent duty on imports. They were also allowed to trade in the prime economic zone, the Marima coast, which was reserved for Sultan himself. The exchange at Tanga was wholly in the hands of Kutchi merchants. As the century progressed, the number of Indian residents on Zanzibar island shot up from 200 in 1819 to 1000 by the 1840s. In 1860, the Khojas and Bohras moved into a new quarter of Zanzibar town, and their numbers rapidly increased. Each Bagela from Kutch usually brought a number of settlers. Their departure from Mandvi and arrival at Zanzibar are part of written and unwritten Kutchi memories. The Royal Register had a list of the names of Kutchi families who were long-time residents of Zanzibar. They were the 'Sultan's Hindees'. Until 1845, they were the Sultan's subjects. After the appointment of a British consul, some of them sought British protection (Goswami, 2016).

At Zanzibar, the Hindus established their separate residential quarters and attempted to create a little Mandvi in Zanzibar. They lavishly celebrated occasions like the birth of a child, weddings or the occasion of their sons joining the business. Diwali was an important festival. Kutchis in Zanzibar were known for their feasting, fireworks, music and dance. But in their daily living they preferred to maintain a regimen of simplicity and frugality. In the late 1840s, Captain Loarer, a French naval officer, estimated that Hari Bhimji, one of the principal Indian merchant at Zanzibar, whose commercial transaction with just one American firm averaged about \$10,000 a year, sent only about \$25 a year on house rent, food and living expenses. He added that most other Indian merchants subsisted on \$5 at Zanzibar and \$2-3 on the mainland. Unlike their Hindu-Bhatia counterparts, the Muslim Khojas were in the custom of displaying their wealth. They adorned their wives with expensive jewellery (Delf, 1963).

In ivory trade, the Kutchi financiers played a decisive role in raising capital and assembling goods that would be eventually exchanged for ivory. In his narrative, Joseph Osgood sheds light on some aspects of the ivory trade. People from the interiors would bring the ivory to the coast in caravans after making a three-month journey. At the coast, these people would approach Kutchi Banian traders from Zanzibar town. Between them then commenced the tug of trade. In financing the ivory trade, the Kutchis were perforce financing the slave trade too.



Mandvi was the centre of the ivory trade in India. In the 1830s, Mandvi imported ivory amounting to about 450 candies annually. By the 1870s, Bombay too had become important. Good quantities of ivory were exported to the Bombay market by 1873-74. From Mandvi, ivory went principally to Marwar, transported on bullocks by the nomadic Charan community in return for grain and coarse cloths. As a luxury item, ivory was subject to economic cycles. In 1895-96, famine conditions in India resulted in a drop in ivory imports by about a third. But at Zanzibar, all important Western merchants obtained their ivory requirement through the Kutchis. The Kutchis exploited the fact that ivory had grown to triple the size of the traditional clove market. They continued to view the Indian Ocean almost as a Kutchhi lake as they kept control of various commodities trade there. It was the Kutchhis – Thariya Topan and Ratansinh Bhimji – who were known as the Ivory Kings of Zanzibar (Goswami, 2016).

Between 1830 and 1880, rare natural product copal gained prominence in the trade of Zanzibar. The nineteenth century witnessed a ‘copal boom’. Small quantities of copal found a market in Bombay in 1802. The following year, ten times that amount was fetched at Bombay, doubling again by 1815. In the 1840s, some 420,000 pounds of copal was shipped to Bombay annually. This was perhaps its peak level. As is to be expected, the Kutchis of Zanzibar were the principal intermediaries in this trade.

The twin islands of Zanzibar and Pemba stood for cloves in the worldwide network of Spice Islands. Sultan Saiyid Said made it obligatory for landowners on the islands to introduce at least three clove trees in place of one coconut palm. Like the booms in ivory and copal, the boom in cloves benefited Zanzibar greatly. Captain Loarer refers to a clove mania. By 1840, Captain Loarer found Kutchis owning small clove plantations. Ibji Shivji, brother of Jairam Shivji, acquired a new clove plantation in 1844, and another merchant had three plantations when he went bankrupt in 1846. Yet another Kutchi, Kanu Munji, owned a plantation situated six miles from the town of Zanzibar. By the 1870s, Kutchis were busy purchasing cloves for which they had made crop advances to Arab growers. Arabs were the principal cultivators.

According to Abdul Sheriff, the Arabs felt that as clove cultivation was distinct from clove trading, they did not face much competition from Kutchis. Dried cloves were bought by Kutchi dealers, who retailed them to English and German clients. Crops on the Arabs’ estates were generally mortgaged to the Kutchi financiers who had advanced money for cultivation. By 1888, about two-third of the clove plantations in Zanzibar were mortgaged to Kutchi merchants. Norman Bennett argues that since Indians were restricted and forbidden ‘from slave holding, the plantation owners normally left in control of their property, the moneylenders profiting from the settlements regarding crop marketing imposed upon their debtors’. Bombay largely imported cloves from East Africa via Muscat and Kutch (Hollingsworth, 1960).



There was a division of labour between Kutchi Hindu merchants and their Muslim counterparts when it came to articles of trade. The Hindu stayed away from the cowrie trade as cowrie collection resulted in the death of molluscs, which was considered unacceptable according to the non-violent traditions of Kutchi Hindus. Cowries, like ivory and copal, were collected on the African mainland, brought to Zanzibar and then exported to Hamburg and to India by Indian Muslims dealers. Kutchi Hindus also opted to give a miss to trade in livestock and meat. At Mandvi, rhino horns were used to make snuff boxes, knife and sword handlers and other ornaments. Kutchi Hindu Banian traders did not patronize these articles.

Kutchi merchants gave mainland Africans as item mainly cloth, manufactured textile, in exchange for ivory, copal, cowries and livestock. But at Zanzibar, the shifts in competitive advantage started taking place from the 1830s when American cloth started dominating. Initially, Indian cotton cloth had been in demand. But soon, American cloth was preferred over Kutch and Bombay textiles. However, Kutchhi merchants had no hesitation in importing and selling American textiles in Zanzibar. Curiously, while American textiles displaced textiles from places like Daman and Diu, who saw a decline in their market share in Mozambique from the 90 percent levels to 25 percent levels by the 1850s, Kutchi kaniki fabrics seem to have retained reasonable popularity and market share. Reason behind their popularity was the finely inscribed design, vibrant range of colours and substantial circulation of a variety of Kutchi textiles withstood the western inroads. The sizeable knowledge of the East African local market and control over the exchanges of other commodities also helped Kutchis to keep up the important of their piece goods (Hollingsworth, 1960).

Kaniki was coarse white cloth of the country thread, partly made in Kutch and partly in Marwar, and finally dyed in Kutch. Other varieties of coarse cloth from Kutch in demand in Zanzibar were the purin, fallin and dabola. The cheapest kind of cloth was barsati. African called it kitambibarsati. It was a favourite article of wear among the poorer freeman, slaves and women. The shazar was another cotton fabric from Kutch. The khesi, an infrequent import, was a scarlet silk made in Thane in India. Its customers were Kutchi Hindu Banians and Kutchi Muslims of Zanzibar. So, Kutchi-Indian cloth supply may have slipped to second place in the face of increasing demand for American cloth, but it was never completely out of the market. In 1860s, Rigby reported that 46 percent of the cotton in this African region came from India and 47 percent from the America. Things reversed substantially in the 1860s. During this period, the American firms faced difficulties because of the civil war. After the civil war, the Americans never quite recovered their position in Zanzibar. Textile from the new mills established in India, along with British textiles and Kutchi kanki cloth, flooded the Zanzibar and East African markets (Goswamy, 2016).



After cloth, beads were another item that Africans demanded in exchange for their ivory and copal. Kutchi made sure that the demand for beads was always met. They also brought to Africa, in small quantities, many other items: skullcaps, knives, razors, firecrackers, soaps, needles, scissors, looking-glasses, picture books, jumping dolls, rings, daggers, naval and cavalry sabres, cooking pots and Birmingham trinkets. Given that the underlying exchange with African sellers was through barter, mismatches in goods demanded and supplied happened all the time. The preparation of a caravan heading into the interiors has been well recorded.

Kutchi merchants relished their central and profitable role in the supply chain. Their intelligence about changing demand and supply positions was pretty good, despite the conditions of the time and place and at least by reputation, they were supposed to be the early birds in getting viral information, which they kept to themselves. Kutchi learned quickly about consumer preference in the African trade. Success in trading largely depended on the agents' abilities to read African fashion trends and relay this information to manufacturers (Goswamy,2016).

Either because of their business practices, their lower overheads or their preference for lower margins, Kutchi traders almost always offered better pricing than their European and American competitors. Key to Kutchi commercial success in Zanzibar seems to have been the fact that they got in there early. They set up the infrastructure for trading, broking and money transfers. So when the Euro-American merchants arrived, this Kutchi network was cost effective in servicing them. Kutchi followed the Omanis into the African interiors, frequently acting as financiers.

Throughout the East Africa coast, Kutchis maintained a sophisticated financial infrastructure featuring drafts, loans and mortgages. European, American and Arabs relied on this network. In addition, Arab landlords employed Kutchis as bookkeepers and financial controllers and used their business services. John Kirk calculated that Indian capital invested in Zanzibar in 1873 was not less than £1.6 million. Hence, Indian traders specially Kutchis were driving wheel of whole East African economy throughout nineteenth century or from early centuries as well.

Conclusion

The involvement of Kutch merchants in the commerce that took place throughout East Africa during the 19th century had a considerable influence on the economic environment related to the area. In order to bridge the distance among the Indian and East African markets, the Kharwa and Bhatia tribes, who are well-known for their skills in sailing, played a significant role. To a large extent, their commerce included trading expensive things like as ivory, gold,



and slaves from East Africa for textiles made of cotton, spices, and metalware from India. The construction of a network of trading ports along the coast of East Africa was rendered possible by Kutch's advantageous location's close proximity to the Arabian Sea as well as the entrepreneurial nature of its merchants. The success of Kutchi merchants was dependent on their close links with the African people that were located in their immediate vicinity. These relationships enabled them to incorporate East Africa into the global economic network. Not only did this help to the wealth of the area, but it also resulted in the development of thriving Indian villages along the coast of East Africa. Even though they are firmly ingrained in the history and economics of the area, these communities continue to play an important part in the development of the region. It may be concluded that the involvement of Kutch merchants in the commerce that took place in East Africa during the 19th century had a significant and long-lasting effect on the economic and social environment of the area. Indian populations in East Africa continue to make significant contributions to the region's culture and economy, which is evidence of their legacy.

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