Muslim Africa Before Colonisation

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[I'LL POST A SEPARATE POSTING ON HOW WEALTHY AFRICA WAS PRIOR TO EUROPEAN COLONISATION and how it was not a third world continent prior to the 1500s]

as promised:

(by the way - it is important to know this because many educated muslims feel that we need to imitate the western capitalistic system (especially as communism has failed spectacularly) - i just want to show that africa was one example where a just, fair and prosperous economic system operated without muslims resorting to european-style slavery, colonisation, brutality, genocide, interest / riba, etc).

North Africa - what was it like before Slavery and Colonisation

Arab Muslims first arrived in Africa in 641/2 AD, when they displaced the tyrannical rule of the Byzantium Empire in Egypt and north Africa. Under Islamic rule, Egypt was regarded as major source of wealth for Muslims as they replaced the competitive taxation of Greeks and Romans with a fairer tax system. With the emergence of new and stable systems of Islamic law and order in the Near East and North Africa, the arteries of economic growth regained their health.

In the Mediterranean, as in all the seas surrounding Arabia, trade recovered and was steadily enlarged. Responding to their new opportunities, as well as to the challenge of their new unity and faith in themselves, Muslim merchants pushed their ships and enterprise far across the seas. They established themselves little trading settlements along the coasts of India, Ceylon, Malaya, down the eastern coast of Africa, and in the ports of southern China. They multiplied the old Phoenician links between southern Spain, soon to be the seat of material prosperity and soaring intellectual achievements under a succession of Muslim dynasties. They re-opened large channels of inter-continental communications. Old markets were expanded and new ones founded, helping to shape the course of political change. Large regions of Africa benefited particularly from this recovery and expansion, creating long-enduring networks of commerce, that penetrated far into the continent [24].

West Africa - what was it like before Slavery and Colonisation

In West Africa, salt and food dominated trade in the Sahara desert (sahr means desert in Arabic [23]). The trade also included gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, tortoise shells and furs from sub-Sahara. When the Arabs arrived in Africa, trade increased because of the camel. Camels were crucial because they were able to travel up to 100 km or more a day, that is twice the distance of pack-oxen or horses. Camels could also withstand both daytime heat and night-time cold. Berbers engaged in long-distance trade. Arab traders bought west African gold from Ancient Ghana - the land of Gold and financed Berber caravans. In this way Islam spread very quickly and transactions became easier. The expansion of Muslim trans-desert trade after about 750 AD provided a new and major spur to West African state-formation and urbanism.

By 1067 the Andulasian chronicler al-Bakri, writing in the then brilliant Andulasian city of Cordoba in southern Spain, but drawing on firsthand information from trans-Saharan travellers and traders, described Ghana as a large and powerful state. Writing at the court of the Norman king Roger II of Sicily, al-Idrisi described how the rulers of Ghana would often feed thousands at a time, spreading banquets more lavish than any man had ever seen before.

However, it was Mali in West Africa that was brought to attention of Muslim world by the ruler of Mali, Mansa Musa (d.1337), brother of Abu Bukhari (famous for sending thousands of trading ships to the Americas in the 1300s), with his famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324-5, arriving in Cairo with a huge caravan that included 100 camel-loads of gold. Musa showed his generosity by giving away quantities of gold in Egypt, depressing Egypt's currency. This created the European

mythology of West Africa as a place of immeasurable wealth where even slaves wore gold [7]. Completing the Catalan World Atlas of Africa in 1375, the Majorcan cartographer Cresques (Jew ?) showed the king of Mali seated on a throne, holding an orb (huge gold nugget [7]) and sceptre, in the centre of West Africa while the traders of all North Africa march sturdily towards his markets. West African gold became a staple export to Europe with at least two-thirds of the world's supply of gold coming from West Africa. Monarchs as far away as England struck their coins in the precious metal of West Africa [Pg. 76-77, 24].

Mansa Musa encouraged the development of learning and expansion of Islam. In the early years of his reign, Musa sent Sudanese scholars to the Moroccan university of Fes. By the end of his reign, Sudanese scholars were setting up their own centres of learning and Quranic learning, particularly in Timbuktu, later to become an important centre for Muslim traders and scholars, Sudanese as well as Berber.

Less than twenty years after Musa's death the globe-trotting Berber, Ibn Battuta still restlessly wandering after nearly thirty years of eager observation up and down the Muslim world visited Mali. He wrote: `the Negroes possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people...There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence'. From E.W.Bovill, `The Golden Trade of the Moors'.

Timbuktu, the capital of Mali reached the height of its wealth and fame in the 16th century. Writing for an Italian audience early in the sixteenth century, Leo Africanus described Timbuktu, as a city of learning and letters where the king, besides disposing of an army of three thousand cavalry and `countless infantry', supported from his treasury `many magistrates, learned doctors and men of religion. `Here in Timbuktu', he noted, `there is a big market for manuscript books from the Berber countries, and more profit is made from the sale of books than from any other merchandise' [Pg. 73, 24]. The reputation of their schools of theology and law spread far into Muslim Asia. This central age of Mali was afterwards remembered as a golden age of prosperity and peace [Pg. 76-77, 24]. By the late Dark Ages, with western Europe in crisis, the Black interior kingdoms of the western and central Sudan flourished. A number of African kings, among them Mansa Musa and Sonni Ali, enjoyed renown throughout Islam and Christendom for their wealth, brilliance and the artistic achievements of their subjects. Their capitals were large walled cities with many mosques and at least two, Timbuktu and Jenne, had universities that attracted scholars and poets from far and wide. Their power derived from a mixture of military force and diplomatic alliances with local leaders; their judges dispensed justice; their bureaucracies administered taxation and controlled trade, the life-blood of these states [pg. 134, 17].

Portugal hoped by gaining direct access to the gold producing regions of West Africa, would provide it with a major source of national wealth. Once access to west Africa had been achieved, the wealth could finance further exploration round the southern tip of Africa and so towards India. Ultimately, by reaching India via a southern route, the Portuguese would bypass the Muslim-controlled trading routes of western Asia. On the orders of the Vatican, the Portuguese sailed along the coast of West Africa seizing a number of ports along the coast. The early Portuguese were not traders or private adventurers, but admirals with a royal commission to conquer territory and promote the spread of Christianity. [Pg. 404, 25]. The Portuguese who sailed with Da Gama were men of the Catholic renaissance and their successors were under the influence of the

Counter-Reformation. Culture and religion for them were inextricably mixed and it was impossible to say where Catholic stopped and Renaissance Portuguese began [15].

Portuguese sailing ships first reached the west African coast in 1470s. They built a fort there called Elmina (the mine) to protect their trading post from rival European shipping. By the treaty of Alcacovas, Spain had recognised Portugal's rights to explore the African coast, and the Pope

granted indulgences to those who sailed to take part in the building of the La Mina. It's full name, Sao Jorge Da Mina, St George of the Mine, embodies the religious and commercial nature of 15th century Europeans [12].

In 1497, Vasco Da Gama set sail from Lisbon in Portugal. Unlike previous Portuguese expeditions, Da Gama continued sailing further down the West coast of Africa and round the southern tip of Africa, north along the East African coast. With the help of an Arab pilot borrowed from Malindi in modern Kenya, Da Gama entered the Indian Ocean [pg.81 24].

Basically the Portuguese hoped that by entering the Indian Ocean from the south they could bypass the Muslims who dominated north Africa and the eastern Mediterranean world of western Asia. The Portuguese wanted to seize from Muslim control the fabulously wealthy trade in spices, perfumes, silks and other luxuries of India and China, carry them to western Europe in ships and sell them at a considerable profit. Afterall the Portuguese were also aware that Egyptian merchants grew rich on the trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean where the Egyptians minted their own gold coins and the Fatimid dinar became a basic unit of international currency in the Swahili cities of the east African coast.

Eleven months after setting sail, Da Gama arrived at the Indian city of Calicut on 20th May, 1498. From the first, Da Gama encountered hostility from the `Moors', Arabs and Africans, but he seemed to have found favour with the zamorin or Hindu raja of Malabar [25]. Da Gama told the first Indians he met on the Malabar coast that he had come to seek `Christians and spices'. The Christians he had in mind were a legendary people to be rescued from Muslim encirclement and who would help him in his Crusade. They were probably the subjects of the mysterious Prester John and were in reality the Abyssinians whom Da Gama never met. The Christians they did find were the `Syrians' of Travancore, probably resident since 4 AD and unknown to Europe.

Da Gama returned home with a message from the Hindu raja saying :'Vasco Da Gama, a nobleman of your household, has visited my kingdom and has given me great pleasure. In my kingdom there is an abundance of cinnamon, cloves, ginger, pepper, and precious stones. What I seek from thy (your) country is gold, silver, coral and scarlet'.

A second expedition, consisting of thirteen ships and twelve hundred soldiers, under the command of Cabral, was despatched in 1500. The sum of his instructions was to begin with preaching, and, if that failed, to proceed to the sharp determination of the sword. On reaching Calicat (after being blown to the coast of Brazil first !), Cabral established factories in face of active hostility from the natives. In 1502 the king of Portugal obtained from Pope Alexander VI (an intensely fat and ugly man who flaunted his mistress and had three illegitimate children; one of his daughters had two husbands whilst still in her teens), a bull constituting him `lord of navigation, conquest, and trade of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India'. In that year Vasco Da Gama sailed again to the East, with a fleet numbering twenty vessels [Pg. 404, 25]. Thus began the Crusade, Christianisation, conquest, and `commerce' of East Africa and India.

East Africa - what was it like before Slavery and Colonisation

Islam had given a sense of unity, at least against their non-muslim rivals if seldom among themselves, to all those Muslim trading interests and enterprises which had spread along the coastal countries of the Indian ocean. Many of these countries meanwhile began to flourish in a new way, forming among themselves a wide community of commerce and production. At the same time, the Arab sailors whose exploits were vividly embodied in `The Thousand and One Nights', Sinbad, etc took their new faith far down the East African coast trading with Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. They converted some of the coastal people, or at any rate some of the coastal rulers. They established themselves in settlements that were wealthier, stronger, more ambitious than before, intermarrying with local women as predecessors had done. Islamic in their faith, strongly conscious

of their membership in the Muslim world, the peoples of these ports and city states were nonetheless African, being of various origins in the north and mainly Swahili in the centre and south. They drew these ports and settlements into the community of the Indian ocean trade, and thereby laid the foundations of an Islamic civilisation. By the tenth century there were markets of importance as far south as Mozambique, building their wealth and power on trade with ivory and gold producers of the interior [7].

They traded with all the peripheral countries of the Indian ocean, exporting metals, ivory, tortoiseshell, a few slaves, and buying cottons and luxury goods from as far afield as China. The discovery of 240 Chinese coins in east Africa ranging from the T'ang emperors (618-906) to much later times of the Sung period (960-1279) reveal the existence of this trade. In addition pottery and porcelain has been discovered on east African shores, indicating imports from China and Iranian Gulf States. Mosques and pillar tombs are decorated with such porcelain too [24].

Metalwork was widespread with smelted iron of East Africa acquiring international reputation in India. Collecting reports of Africa in 12th century, al-Idrisi was informed that the best steel came from India, but that India had its best iron form south-east Africa. This East African iron, he wrote, was supplied to all the lands of India ...[and] at a good price [because it is] most superior in quality and most malleable [pg. 72, 24].

Many Swahili cities on the east coast of Africa, such as Kilwa, Mogadishu, Mafia, Mombassa and Zanzibar had grown rich from trading with both India and China. By the 13th century, Kilwa and Zanzibar and probably Mogadishu on the Somali coast, had acquired mints of their own, their kings struck copper coins in fair quantity, usefully inscribing their names. Archaeologists working in the locality of Zanzibar recovered a horde of some three thousand silver coins of local minting.

These finds indicate that the burgeoning economy of the East African seaboard moved into a local coin-minting stage soon after 1050. Long after he had travelled through east African Kilwa in 1331, the Moroccan scholar Ibn Batuta could still remember it as `one of the most beautiful and best constructed towns in the world, and he had by that time, had seen the cities of India, China and his own Moorish countries. Ibn Batuta was not exaggerating the comparative comfort of the fourteenth century Kilwa. [pg.72-73, 24].

wassalam

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