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‘WHERE HAVE ALL THE SLAVES GONE?’
EMANCIPATION AND POST-EMANCIPATION IN
LAMU, KENYA¹

BY PATRICIA W. ROMERO

EMANCIPATION in Lamu took place in a many-sided political setting where Arabia, Zanzibar, Great Britain, and the broader international community were all involved. Lamu town was an ancient island port with a mainland hinterland that had become an independent city-state before the early eighteenth century. By the late 1820s, the Sultan of Oman, who also controlled Zanzibar, had established a protectorate over Lamu – at the invitation of the town elders who hoped to use Zanzibari power as a makeweight against local rivals. When, in 1840, the Sultan of Oman moved his court to Zanzibar, Lamu town was decidedly in the Oman–Zanzibar economic system, which involved it in the increasing slave trade from the interior, especially from the vicinity of Lake Malawi. Slaves came overland to the coast and then north by sea to Zanzibar, Lamu, and on to other Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf States.²

Later in the century, the European factor became important. By the 1860s, the British began to put pressure on the Sultans of Zanzibar, first to reduce the Zanzibari role in the East African slave trade, and then to abolish it altogether. By the 1880s, Germans appeared in the vicinity of Witu, a small mainland community of about 3,000 people located near the plantations owned by the wealthy Afro-Arabs of Lamu. (Relations between the Sultan of Witu and the Lamu town dwellers had been hostile even before the Germans appeared.) In 1887, the Sultan of Witu claimed the right to tax products grown on Lamu-owned land within his disputed political jurisdiction. The Germans formed the Witu Company that year.³ The following year the Sultan of Witu carried out another hostile act toward Lamu and Zanzibar by establishing a customs house to the south, at the mouth of the Belazoni canal, which was recognized territory of the Sultan. This move diverted goods from the port of Lamu to the Tana River, and cut off supplies from the interior to Lamu town. The combination of taxes and diverted goods – which lasted only two or three years – had a negative effect on Lamu’s economy. Then, too, the suppression of the slave trade, which took effect from 1873, left Lamu landowners without the labour supply necessary to continue large-scale operations on the mainland. Fewer new slaves meant more work for those already at work on the plantations.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the African Studies Association meeting in Los Angeles, October 1984. I wish to thank William Freehling, James McCann, and J. Forbes Munro for helpful comments and suggestions during revisions.

² Patricia W. Romero, ‘Lamu and the suppression of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean’, paper presented to the Colloque International sur la Traite des Noirs, Nantes, 10 July, 1985.

³ John Horace Clive, ‘A short history of Lamu’ (1933), MSS Afr. S. 1273, Rhodes House Library, Oxford.

In the meantime, Germany and Britain were still at odds over control of the northern coastal area. Germany supported Witu; Britain, through the Sultan of Zanzibar, placed agents and troops in Lamu. In 1890, an Anglo-German treaty placed both Witu and Lamu solidly in the British sphere, though Britain still acted through its protectorate over the Sultan of Zanzibar.⁴ By then, Lamu landowners on the mainland had suffered irremediable economic setbacks. Many slaves who had worked on these plantations ran off, joining the Witu army and setting a pattern for further desertion. Others deserted and set up small villages, cleared land for themselves, and farmed on their own account. Some went south to Mombasa seeking wage labour. By the date of legal emancipation – 1907 – Lamu's economy was already in decline. Slaves were fewer in number, and, according to the son of one former master, 'a family of ten could not do what five hundred slaves had done'.⁵ Although a few slaves came into the area through the illegal caravan trade, their numbers were not significant, and one District Commissioner believed that part of the decline was on account of high mortality rates among those who remained. 'The population [was] sunk in apathy... riddled with disease. Ophthalmia and elephantiasis added to invisible ills of malaria and syphilis, and worm infestation' contributed to the overall decline in the Lamu area.⁶

By 1898, Arthur Hardinge, British Consul at Zanzibar, wrote of Lamu's 'trade having of late years been diverted to Mombasa, and it is probable that its population will be stagnant, even if it should not actually decrease'.⁷ Hardinge could not have been more prophetic. The old Afro-Arab rulers of Lamu were poised on the brink of poverty – a condition which persisted almost without interruption until after World War II. But in Lamu town the story of emancipation is quite different from that of the mainland, and it is with the Lamu town slaves that this article is concerned.

EMANCIPATION

By 1907 the population of Lamu was between 5,000 and 7,000. The free population chiefly consisted of the Afro-Arab ruling class, Bohra Indians (who had been in the area for at least 150 years), Hindus and other Indian British subjects, and a few Arabs from the Hadramaut who had been arriving since the late nineteenth century. There was a smattering of other free people, including a tiny group of British officials, but the bulk of the population were slaves. (A few were already technically free because Britain had required its Indian subjects to free their slaves earlier – but most still held their slaves illegally.)⁸

⁴ Clive, 'Short history', 105. See also Marguerite Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century: Trade and Politics* (Boston, 1979).

⁵ Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy, personal interview, Lamu, 1980.

⁶ Eric Reginald St A. Davis, 'A brief history of the Lamu archipelago', MSS Afr. S. 513, Rhodes House Library.

⁷ Arthur Hardinge, F.O., Diplomatic and Consular Reports, Zanzibar and Pemba, 1898, 2x[c. 8683114] Public Record Office (PRO), London.

⁸ Patricia Romero Curtin, 'Laboratory for the oral history of slavery: the island of Lamu on the Kenya coast', *American Historical Review*, LXXXVIII (1983), 862. See also Romero, 'Suppression'. The population for the whole Lamu district in 1910 was listed as: Europeans 21, Goans 465, Indians 472, Arabs and Swahili 15,387. Swahili may mean slaves and ex-slaves, but it could also mean Bajun, Somali, Boni, and others who dwelled

Despite the decline of their mainland plantations, most of the Afro-Arab aristocrats continued to live luxuriously in large stone houses in the town, and to keep second homes on their small agricultural plots (*shambas*) behind the town. The façade of opulence was kept up through borrowing on their houses and other property. District Commissioner Talbot-Smith reported that they ‘piled mortgage on mortgage’, some selling heirlooms and jewellery – all to Indian merchants who also carried the mortgages.⁹ Slaves kept up the townhouses; and lived and worked on the island *shambas*. Some of the wealthiest Afro-Arabs had up to forty slaves on the *shambas* and as many as ten working in their homes. In fact, a few of the aristocratic old families owned up to three island *shambas*, with as many as seventy to seventy-five slaves.¹⁰ In addition, Indians owned 200 or 300 slaves, and the Hadramis owned a few as well. Some Sharifs (descendants of the Prophet) moved into and out of Lamu, usually coming from the Comoro Islands or from towns on the northern coast of East Africa; and some of these Sharifs also owned slaves – probably not more than two or three per family. There are no accurate figures for Lamu town and the adjacent *shambas* in 1907, but the number of slaves may have been between 3,000 and 4,000 and the majority of these were owned by the Afro-Arabs.

In comparison with treatment of slaves further down the coast, and especially in Zanibar and Pemba, Lamu owners were generally humane,¹¹ although H. Greffulhe, who lived in Lamu in the 1870s, wrote that slaves he saw were badly fed, poorly clothed and overworked.¹² Living ex-slaves also recall the brutality some owners displayed toward their slaves. One remembered that at legal emancipation a few masters refused to free slaves who wanted to go, and at the first opportunity their slaves ran away. Ex-slave Salim Kheri remembered good masters and bad. An old woman ex-slave recalled treatment accorded to those who were especially slow in getting to work on the *shambas*. Overseers, she said, did not have the right to abuse slaves physically although she thought some did. (Overseers were usually slaves themselves – as was the case further down the coast.) A few masters treated their slaves like *punda* (donkeys), making them carry heavy loads on their backs.

One story handed down in the slave community may be apocryphal. According to the legend, there was a ‘magician’ who lived a long time ago (*zamani*). He advised the Afro-Arabs who ‘wanted to build houses which lasted’ to place a wall around someone who was alive and then throw sand

on the mainland and on the other islands. Lamu Political Record Book, ‘Annual Report of Lamu District 1910’, Kenya National Archives (KNA). In 1913 there were around 7,000 people in Lamu and 800 or 900 were reported as emigrating – but it is not clear if the latter figures refer to the town or the district. All of these figures are suspect because the British officials had no way of making an accurate count in the town, not to speak of the mainland.

⁹ L. Talbot-Smith, ‘Historical record of Tanaland’ (1921), 76 MSS Afr. S. 1274, Rhodes House.

¹⁰ Curtin, ‘Laboratory’, 866.

¹¹ Frederick Cooper, ‘The treatment of slaves on the Kenya Coast in the 19th century’, *Kenya Historical Review*, 11 (1973), 89–103. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977).

¹² H. Greffulhe, ‘Voyage de Lamoo à Zanzibar’, *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie et d’études Coloniales de Marseille*, 11 (1879), 215.

over him. The presence of this human sacrifice assured a sturdy dwelling and 'all would go well' for owner and family. Ex-slaves believed that some of their group had indeed been used for this purpose, but it 'was so long ago' that no one remembered this actually happening.¹³

In 1907 the Abolition of the Legal Status of Slavery Ordinance was proclaimed by the Sultan, following pressure from the British. News of legal emancipation came to Lamu at the same time as it reached the mainland, but the slavery commission which was empowered to enforce the Ordinance did not actively interfere in Lamu until 1910, when officials came to the island and insisted that all slave owners come to the seafront with their slaves. Notices were posted about the town in which slave owners were warned that they would be punished if they did not produce their slaves on the appointed day. The notices also promised fair compensation for the owners of emancipated slaves. However, Lamu owners were paid less than those down the coast or in Zanzibar and Pemba. There, compensation for an able-bodied slave was equal to the five months' wages a slave could earn his master. In Lamu compensation was equal to only three months' wages. In all, a total of Rs. 150,000 (£15,000) were paid to Lamu masters and mistresses.¹⁴

However informants agree that, while most masters collected their compensation, many actually refused to free their slaves. A few others believed the compensation so small that they refused to apply for it and simply kept their slaves anyway.¹⁵ Those slaves who were allowed to go free seem to have been the troublemakers and the aged. British reports indicate that a mere fourteen years after many slaves were legally freed they were 'getting old and incapable of work' and some were dying off between 1910 and 1924.¹⁶ According to Frederick Cooper emancipation brought rapid change further down the coast, but in Lamu there was in fact little change in relationships between master and slave. Ironically, those owners who accepted compensation and who then kept the slaves, did so with the collusion of the slaves themselves. Any slave who wished to, might have reported his master, and subjected him to a fine of Rs. 1,000 or imprisonment. Yet few, if any, brought claims against owners for continued enslavement. Concubines were excluded from the emancipation arrangements in any case. According to the Ordinance of Emancipation, 'concubines shall not be deemed to be slaves... and nothing in this ordinance shall alter the law relating to... the rights and duties of concubines'; but, if a concubine was mistreated and brought charges against her master, she was free and no compensation would be paid for her.¹⁷

¹³ Lamu ex-slave women, interviews October–November, 1983. Because of rigid purdah in Lamu, I am not at liberty to mention the names of my female informants.

¹⁴ A. A. Skanda to Sharif Saleh Hasan, taped interview, Lamu, March 1982, copy in possession of author. Tanaland Provincial Commissioner's Report, 1912–13, KNA. We do not know the numbers of slaves 'freed' through compensation so it is not possible to give a per slave figure. We do know that in 1910 one ex-slave claimed Rs. 8 (less than 20 shillings) against an owner for value of a nose ring. Another ex-slave claimed Shs 25/20 for work time – but we do not know the amount of work on which this figure was based. Cooper found that compensation for slaves in the Malindi–Mombasa area was Rs. 64 per slave. See Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya 1890–1925* (New Haven, 1980), 73.

¹⁵ Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy, interview.

¹⁶ Tanaland Provisional Commissioner's Report, LMU/O, 1924, KNA. See also Curtin, 'Laboratory', 859.

¹⁷ F.O. 84/5289, PRO.

Concubines who produced children for their masters were elevated to equal status with legal wives, and their children shared equally in inheritance. This Ordinance therefore protected childbearing woman better than emancipation itself would have done. Despite the mistreatment clause, if any concubines were treated badly, none came forward to charge her master. It seems clear that the public 'emancipation' on Lamu's seafront was mere theatre for the British Commissioners who, having fulfilled their assignment to 'emancipate' the slaves in Lamu, then disappeared. In 1919, and in complete ignorance of events in Lamu, the British issued a decree which stated that slavery no longer existed in East Africa.

The small number of missionaries in Lamu seem not to have interacted with the aristocracy any more than did the British civil servants who lived in the town – usually on the waterfront and away from the intertwining stone houses occupied by the Afro-Arabs (and their slaves). The missionaries educated some young children (whose we do not know) and held services in the slave village, which was concentrated at the southern (Langoni) end of Lamu.¹⁸ However, contrary to the position in Mombasa, where 'near rioting' was reported because missionaries took in ex-slaves, they seem to have secured no following among that group in Lamu and were virtually ignored by the Afro-Arabs and other slave-holders.¹⁹ Consequently the missionaries seem to have been as poorly informed as resident officials about the continuity of master–slave relationships on Lamu island.

What British officialdom did notice, and what it continually reported from 1910 through to the 1930s, was the fact that the 'former' slave owners would not and did not work. The following excerpts – with variations – from District Commissioner Reports cropped up year after year: 'Ex-owners will not work.' Or, the 'rising generation of Arabs in Lamu, having lost their slaves, seem averse to work, some inclined to drift through life in an aimless manner, although fond of comfort, and little luxuries they would appear to prefer being without than to having to attain them by work. They may be seen walking about town in the most spotless clothing and yet seem indifferent to the insanitary and filthy conditions of their dwellings'.²⁰

These remarks are telling. The Afro-Arabs did not work, nor did they need to, while they still had numbers of slaves working for them. No one questioned *how* the Afro-Arab men came to have spotless garments. And it was not in the owners interest to send their slaves into the streets or engage them in house repairs where questions might have been raised. But the District Commissioners were accurate in their assessment of lack of income among this group. As the economy prospered further down the coast, Lamu's economic decline turned into stagnation.²¹ Where further down the coast a wage labour system had been introduced, and public works initiated first by the Imperial British East African Company, and later by the British government, there was little of either in Lamu. One British District Commissioner commented that although Afro-Arabs (and others) were

¹⁸ PC Report, 1912–13 KNA.

¹⁹ T. Ainsworth Dickens, 'History of Lamu', (1923) KNA.

²⁰ DC/LMU/1/5/KNA; Lamu Political Record Book III, DC Report 1910, KNA.

²¹ Ahmed Ikha Salim, 'The impact of colonialism upon Muslim life in Kenya', *Muslim Minority Affairs*, 1 (1979), 60–66. A. I. Salim, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast* (Nairobi, 1973), 110–11.

forced to pay hut and poll taxes, only a small amount of the money collected was put back into the local economy in the way of jobs.²²

As compensation money ran out and everything that could be mortgaged was, the Afro-Arab families began their own form of emancipation. One old woman from the upper-class remembered that when she was a child – in the early 1920s – numbers of slaves were freed by her family and went to the mainland where they joined squatters and attempted to cultivate crops. Those who were friendly with their former owners sent them grains and fruits. Others, she recalled, consumed what they needed and used the surplus to buy other goods, and sometimes ex-slaves even shared the latter with their former owners. However, these ex-slaves soon abandoned their plots because, she thought, they were attacked by Boni and Somali raiders. Reports of bands of wandering *shifita* (raiders) came from many informants and *shifita* seem to have been a major barrier to later attempts to reopen the mainland farms. Brush and trees grew up where once lush fields and coconut plantations had been so productive. And the large herds of cattle, once so profitable for the landowning families, were reduced to an occasional cow – which was also subject to theft from roaming bandits.²³

Not all former slaves on the mainland were friendly, however, and some raids on the newcomers may be attributed to them rather than nomads in the hinterland. An ex-slave woman in her eighties in 1983 talked about the mainland she remembered. Her father had run away from a *shamba* before legal emancipation. He ended up near Mkunumbe and started his own small *shamba*. It was there that he arranged her marriage with another runaway ex-slave. When the marriage failed, her father was annoyed and refused to take her back home. She joined a group she described as ‘poor and abandoned’ and walked across the Lamu mainland to the bay. En route, she recalled passing scores of *watoro* (ex-slave) hamlets, and she recalled her group’s fear of these people. She said they raided and looted as a means of keeping alive.²⁴

Salim Kheri, an ex-slave said to be nearly one hundred in 1981, remembered freed Lamu slaves on the mainland. He talked about travellers’ fears of danger in the area, and especially robbery. Ex-slaves like himself were afraid to roam around: ‘You went to Siu and the tide was out and people were sleeping there until the tide returned. They would rob... You walked through the growing bush on the mainland, and someone would come and take everything you had – even your clothes at times.’ Although an upper-class informant remembered that, contrary to British reports, some men of her class went to the mainland with their slaves after legal emancipation, they too were afraid. Fear of being robbed or injured rather than fear of work may have contributed to keeping masters on the island. As one aristocratic informant said, upper-class men were more vulnerable on the mainland than the ex-slaves.²⁵

²² Dickens, ‘History’. Cooper noted that ex-slaves down the coast deserted mainland plantations for the lure of the city and wage labour (*Slaves and Squatters*, 179–80).

²³ Upper-class woman, interview, November 1983. Clive, ‘History’.

²⁴ Ex-slave woman, interview, November 1983. This woman thought she was born about 1900, and said she had been set free by the British when she was a child and before she joined her runaway father in Mkunumbe.

²⁵ Salim Kheri, interview, February 1981; Abdulla A. Skanda, interview, 1980. Salim (*Swahili-Speaking Peoples*, 51) noted that banditry was a cause of considerable concern after emancipation.

AFTER LEGAL EMANCIPATION

Ex-slaves from Lamu island who were either freed by their masters or who fled after emancipation had few alternatives. The old and infirm were pensioned off and settled mostly in Langoni, or in shacks along the seafront. Most able-bodied men who wanted to, and who were no longer necessary to their owners, left. Salim Kheri remembered some Lamu ex-slave sailors who jumped ship, preferring to live and work on the docks of Zanzibar or Arabia, where they formed a small Swahili-speaking community.²⁶ Opportunities to leave by ship in the years immediately after emancipation were very good indeed. Despite the decline in Afro-Arab wealth, Indians and the British civil servants still imported goods. Lamu exported mainland products (ivory and hides), ambergris, mostly from the Bajun islands, and dried fish, mangrove poles, coconuts and other products. Dhows called at the port in large numbers between 1911 and 1916 equalling or at times surpassing those which called at the growing port in Mombasa. (Steamships came to Mombasa, only dhows called at Lamu.)²⁷

Table 1. *Dhows calling at Lamu and Mombasa, 1911-16*

	Lamu	Mombasa
1911-12	1,038	989
1912-13	936	959
1913-14	1,107	627
1914-15	1,038	1,008
1915-16	1,125	1,247

The numbers of sailors listed as leaving Lamu island unfortunately include the entire district, and they do not include stowaways, or men who bribed their way on board. We have no accurate measurement of how many men actually left by dhow during those years. For instance, in 1914, the Provincial Commissioner of Tanaland Province (which came to include Lamu district) listed 302 seamen employed on dhows as the wage of Rs. 12 per month – without rations. By 1916, 776 paid employees received the same wage. Some of these were ex-slaves.²⁸

In 1921 the Provincial Report for Seyidie (which then included Lamu) indicated that, in the absence of employment opportunities, there was a

²⁶ Salim Kheri, interview.

²⁷ P. A. Memon and Esmond B. Martin, 'The Kenya coast: an anomaly in the development of an ideal type colonial spatial system', *Kenya Historical Review*, IV (1976), 204. The population figures supplied by these authors do not match those of the District Commissioner for this period. C. S. Nicholls (*The Swahili Coast*, (London, 1971), Appendix) reported that as the slave trade drew to a close, the Lamu economy turned to profits from hides. These hides, however, came from the mainland before slaves stopped production; and later from Somalis who sold them to Indian middlemen. No profits accrued to the Afro-Arabs from items brought in from elsewhere and then sold to Indian and later Hadrami traders.

²⁸ Tanaland Provincial Commissioner's Report, 1916-1917, KNA. T. Ainsworth Dickens also reported in 1923 that most dhows were owned by Lamu Indians and most sailors were ex-slaves who were almost constantly in debt to the Indians, thus a kind of debt peonage developed which replaced slavery, and may have placed them in a more precarious economic condition than they had known earlier (Dickens, 'History').

widespread emigration from Lamu. 'The result is loss of over 1,000 population... Practically every person capable of earning a reasonable wage elsewhere has migrated, excepting sailors and a limited number of herdsmen and agriculturalists' (some of whom were still slaves).²⁹ Informants from both the ex-slave community and the upper-class remembered migrations of each group to Zanzibar and Mombasa. Zanzibar enjoyed the reputation as the centre of Swahili life in those years. By 1923 some 4,334 mainlanders were recorded as entering the island – almost certainly this number included ex-slaves from Lamu. Many of these came as contract workers on the clove plantations, and others arrived to take menial jobs, staying on as squatters.³⁰

Some Lamu ex-slaves went as far south as Tanga, where they found employment with the Germans. Many went to Malindi and Mombasa, although informants believed that the majority of those who went to Malindi were either ex-slaves from the mainland or free but poor people from Shela, a small village on the tip of Lamu island. (Cooper found a section outside Malindi called '*Washela*').³¹ In Mombasa, some Lamu ex-slaves rose to become customs checkers counting cargo on dhows at the Old Town port. Others started and ended their Mombasa lives as porters. Even today descendants of Lamu ex-slaves work on the Old Town pier as day workers – carrying heavy loads on their backs and earning very little – as did their fathers and grandfathers before them.³² Some porters, however, saved their money and, helped by their wives' small savings, bought houses and were considered prosperous by slaves still in Lamu. Others were thrifty enough to open small stores (*dukas*) in the Old Town. A few went into construction work, and other Lamu ex-slaves got work on the docks unloading freighters at Kilindini Harbour (the new port). Here they worked side by side with descendants of the old Lamu aristocracy.³³

Before economic decline and before legal emancipation, Lamu was noted for the fine quality of workmanship of its slave artisans. Slaves mastered the art of goldsmithing, creating bangles, necklaces made of crescents and roses, as well as brooches, chains and other forms of decoration.³⁴ They were also silversmiths, making beautiful carved sword handles and carving ivory for Omani-style dagger handles. In addition to practising metal crafts, slaves had long enjoyed a reputation as high-quality wood carvers. Carved doors and furniture from Lamu – especially Portuguese-style chairs with inlays of ivory – were renowned along the coast. By 1910, however, the market for onately carved chairs and fine filigreed jewellery had already begun to decline and only a few slave-craftsmen were active. Informants of both classes said that most carving was done in their owners' homes, and we can assume that much of the profit went to owners. At emancipation, the remaining carvers

²⁹ Seyidie Province Commissioner's Report, 9/6/1921 KNA.

³⁰ Lamu women; Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy; Abdulla Skanda, interviews; Anthony Clayton, 'The general strike in Zanzibar, 1948' *J. Afr. Hist.* xvii (1976), 418.

³¹ Upper-class Lamu women now living in Mombasa, interviews, 1983. 'Harriet' interviews, 1982, 1983, see 'Harriet Alger: life history of an ex-slave', in Patricia W. Romero (ed.), *Life Histories of African Women* (Ashfield Press, forthcoming). Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 83.

³² Sherif Abdulla Hussein, interviews, Mombasa, 1980; Abdulla bin Abdulla, interview, Mombasa, 1983.

³³ Azziz bin Mohamed, interview, Mombasa, 1983; ex-slave women; Abdulla Skanda.

³⁴ Talbot-Smith, 'History'.

gradually moved to Mombasa where they worked for Indian merchants. A few started their own carving shops, but seem not to have been able to compete with the Indians. In Lamu, Indians moved in to fill the void in gold and silver jewellery. Lamu women believed that their prices were inflated; besides, few had the means to purchase gold jewellery after compensation ran out.

One old ex-slave woman remembered that some of her male relatives became office boys for the British in Mombasa. Others went to work as houseboys for the increasing numbers of settlers. But here they had to compete with ex-slaves from Malindi and the Mombasa hinterland. Cooper found that in Mombasa as many as sixty per cent of the houseboys, policemen, and porters were ex-slaves³⁵ – and most of these came from close by. But in Mombasa it was possible for ex-slaves to rise in the hierarchy in ways it was not in Lamu. One Lamu ex-slave, Fadhil Kuchi, worked, saved, acquired property, and eventually became headman of the Old Town. In that position he held authority over former members of the Lamu aristocracy who had also moved there.³⁶

Although the sample is small because few ex-slaves remain to tell their stories, and most descendants of ex-slaves refuse to admit their heritage, it appears that of the small number who moved to Malindi, most cut their Lamu ties. One informant said she had relatives who went to Malindi and who worked on *shambas* for wages, but she lost touch with them, and they had never come back to Lamu. Several ex-slaves and descendants of slaves from Lamu who were interviewed in Mombasa talked about making at least one return trip a year – usually during the Maulidi (a celebration honouring the Prophet's birth). Whether the ex-slaves worked as coconut tappers outside Mombasa, or were employed and living in the Old Town, they all came together for Lamu weddings and other celebratory events. And, whereas stratification remained rigid in Lamu, class lines had little meaning in Mombasa. Ex-slave and freeborn celebrated together – although everyone knew where they rested in the hierarchy back home. A major difference between ex-slaves from the larger mainland plantations up and down the coast, and those from Lamu, was the latter's common bond to the small island town where they all consider themselves to have roots.³⁷

Lamu ex-slave women found it harder to migrate than men. One Kadi forbade women to leave without their husbands. He feared that single women would become prostitutes in Mombasa. Any woman who desired to leave Lamu by dhow was required to give her name to a local official. The Kadi checked the list and if he found unmarried women on it, he removed their names. A few women enlisted the help of men travelling to Mombasa (or elsewhere), pretending they were married to them. Others walked. They set out by *jahazi* (small boats) to the mainland, and in groups of two or three. Hiding as best they could from the bandits, they trekked the 250-odd miles

³⁵ Cooper, *Slaves and Squatters*, 180.

³⁶ Sharif Abdulla Hussein, interviews. Ex-slave Lamu women, 1983.

³⁷ 'Harriet', interview, 1983; Mohamed Abdulla, interview, Mombasa, 1983. Personal observation near Mombasa where an ex-slave continually referred to the man who took me to her home as 'master'. For crumbling social stratification in Mombasa see Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975* (New Haven, 1979).

through bush, past cattle herders, and through alien territory until after many days they reached Mombasa.³⁸

When they got to the Old Town they found relatives or friends with whom they could stay; and they usually supported themselves by making *kofia* (small Muslim caps for men), or by baking bread which they sold to local merchants. As to prostitution, ex-slave and upper-class informants uniformly rejected the suggestion that women from Lamu town engaged in the profession. They all agreed that there were prostitutes in Mombasa from Lamu district, but these women, they said, came from Shela or from the Bejun islands nearby. Today in Lamu one or two woman who beg for alms on the streets are sometimes labelled as ex-slaves who turned to prostitution, but most Amu – ex-slave and freeborn – claim these woman are not originally from Lamu.³⁹

One unmarried young ex-slave woman, forbidden travel to Mombasa, went to Sharif Ideroos, son of a local saint (in the Sufi tradition), and asked his help. He prescribed a change in climate to ‘improve’ her health. Taking her ‘prescription’ she went to the Kadi, received his permission to emigrate, and remained in Mombasa for twenty-one years before returning to Lamu.⁴⁰ The trip by dhow was difficult for women. They were all packed into a small section in the bow of the dhow – where they were supposed to stay covered and modest. If upper-class women were also travelling (with their husbands), these woman had access to places nearest the curtain separating them from the men and were closest to the limited air which circulated on deck. Women were not allowed to leave their quarters for matters of hygiene or in the event of illness – although some ex-slave women remembered that they broke the rules once they were at sea.⁴¹

Although many ex-slave women settled in Mombasa and never returned permanently to Lamu, others stayed a few years and then came back. Relatives left behind might resent their former status, but those who returned preferred social stratification in Lamu to hardships they met down the coast. Several ex-slave informants realigned themselves with their former owners on their return; some even working for them. A few ex-slaves came back because of property they owned in Lamu. One very aged woman came back to find other relatives had taken over the house which her slave mother had given her. While she chatted with members of her former owners’ family, those who had stayed on lurked in the background – waiting to see if any gifts

³⁸ Lamu ex-slave women, interviews, 1983.

³⁹ Ali Abdalla Jahadhmy, interview, Mombasa, 1980 and Lamu, 1981. Sharif Abdulla lived in Pate when he was a youngster and seems to have had continued relations with some Bajun in Mombasa. He and Jahadhmy both stated that the ‘Lamu’ prostitutes were from the Bajun islands. ‘Harriet’, 1983. However, Lamu is a port town and male prostitution was always considered a problem when foreign dhows came into port. It seems very likely that there were some poor women who saw this form of activity as a way to make money and engaged in it. Today, transsexual men take outsiders to female prostitutes in Langoni – although the Lamu people claim these women are Bajun. For prostitutes in the Bajun islands see Janet Bujra, ‘Production, property, prostitution: Sexual politics in Atu’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, xvii (1975), 13–39. See also Strobel, *Mombasa Women*.

⁴⁰ Ex-slave woman, interview, 1983. Cooper, however, found an informant who said she had boarded a government boat and had gone alone to Mombasa (*Slaves and Squatters*, 179–80).

⁴¹ ‘Harriet’, interviews; ex-slave women.

came her way which they could snatch as soon as she was alone and unprotected.⁴²

When these women returned to Lamu, they carried on the same economic activities that had supported them in Mombasa. Most sewed caps, made mat bags, or baked and sold bread. In Lamu, however, they were sometimes competing with poor members of the old families. Some of these women prospered enough to buy small mud and wattle houses on the outskirts of town. One worked as a midwife and traditional healer, eventually acquiring a house in Langoni and two small *shambas*. With the help of two of her several husbands she cultivated the *shambas*, raised her children and is now responsible for several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Whereas upper-class women were subordinate to their fathers, husbands, and brothers, ex-slave women were not. In Lamu, there is often a chain of women – mothers, daughters, and their children – all claiming support from one among them who might have a bit of land or small income.⁴³

Some men returned to Lamu. One old ex-slave remembered men going to Arabia and even as far as south as Dar es Salaam, and later returning to settle in Langoni. These men (some of whom are still living today) separated themselves from their former masters and had nothing to do with them. When masters died, ex-slave men (and a few women) started a new life – concentrating on their own limited kin and frequently expressing hostility toward the upper-class. Those who had the opportunity to make money and enjoy a better lifestyle were especially hostile. One woman who was freed at the death of her master in the mid-1950s, became a cook and later a house servant for a European who owned a Lamu house. She and her mother were both hostile to surviving former owners, and they never admitted their status to outsiders.⁴⁴

Upper-class men recalled difficulties with some ex-slave men in Lamu. A few 'went behind the backs of the Arabs and reported unkind or untrue things' to the District Commissioner in order to be vindictive.⁴⁵ These incidents seem to have been few in number and do not appear in official reports. If ex-slaves reported that some Afro-Arabs were still holding slaves, as would seem likely, British officials either did not investigate, or refused to believe them.

Former masters, too, had their hostilities toward the ex-slaves who stayed on. Some found them wanting in religious beliefs – religious instruction of a sort having been provided by owners. Ex-slaves did not 'belong' because they failed to accept the teachings of Islam and continued with pagan practises, one old man recalled. He said that after the slaves he knew were freed they walked up to upper-class men and were insulting; at times threatening. Ex-slave men who thought they were being written about or

⁴² This woman was one of my informants. She was quite ill, very frail, and at the mercy of her 'unwanted guests' in her home.

⁴³ 'Harriet'. See Megan Vaughan, 'Which family: problems in the reconstruction of the history of the family as an economic and cultural unit', *J. Afr. Hist.* xxiv (1983), 275–283.

⁴⁴ This woman worked for Neville Chittick, in whose house I lived while carrying out research for this project (November, 1983). Daily I brought her up to date on my findings in the ex-slave community, yet she never mentioned her former status to me – even after her former owners came to call.

⁴⁵ Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy. Mohamed Jahadhmy, interview, 1983.

talked about would beat up those they believed to be informers. Class lines in Lamu were tightly drawn. Afro-Arab men at times taunted former slaves, reminding them of their former status – making fun of them as ‘freedmen’. They joked at the way former slaves took new names. Often slaves did not know who their fathers were; more often, they were referred to by names of former owners. (Example: Ali, owned by Ahmed, became Ali *mtumwa* (slave of) Ahmed.) Often, slaves were given days of the week as names – Jumaa (Friday) being common. In freedom slaves had various ways of choosing their new names, including sometimes taking the name of their occupation: i.e. Ali Fundi, meaning a man with a skill such as carpentry.

Religion was an important factor in tying slaves to masters. Most slaves learned parts of the Koran by rote, and were taught enough Muslim law to know that only masters had the right to free them. When the British had attempted emancipation in Lamu, they succeeded in freeing those who wanted to be free, or those whose owners were glad to part with them. Those who stayed on seemed also to be those who accepted the teachings of the Koran and the Sharia.⁴⁶ Furthermore, house slaves who grew up in their owners’ homes felt stronger ties than those who lived on the *shambas*.

Although their status was inferior to their masters and mistresses, there was a unity with these families which could not be breached by outside authorities. Some have suggested that a group of Lamu Sharifs tried to bring about class revolution between ex-slaves and their former masters through manipulation of the Creation myth.⁴⁷ One Sharif in particular, Habib Saleh, the saintly father of Ideroo, is credited with attempting to level society by educating ex-slaves and giving them the gift of piety (in this case interchangeable with equality). Lamu informants – ex-slave and freeborn – disagree with this view of Habib Saleh. Old people who remember the venerated Sharif stress his gifts with Arabic medicines and his scholarship in the Koran. His sons and their sons *did* intermarry with ex-slaves, and some *have* used their considerable influence with this group for purposes which would not generally be regarded as redemptive.⁴⁸ In Lamu the Koran was used to support the theory of class consciousness, not to do away with it.

British officials rarely mentioned class conflict. In 1923 T. Ainsworth Dickens gave an overstated but nevertheless sympathetic interpretation of

⁴⁶ Curtin, ‘Laboratory’, 880. Thomas Wilson to author, February 1982. See also Philip A. Igbafe, ‘Slavery and emancipation in Benin 1897–1945’, *J. Afr. Hist.* xvi (1975), 422. Igbafe found a similar situation in Benin. So, too, did M. G. Smith among the Hausa in northern Nigeria (‘Slavery and emancipation in two societies’, *Social and Economic Studies*, 3 (1975), 239–90). Raymond T. Smith (‘Race and class in the post-emancipation Caribbean’, in Robert Ross (ed.) *Racism and Colonialism*, (Leiden, 1982), 116) drew on el Zein, who incorrectly stated that the upper-class ‘considered it a waste of time to try and give them [slaves] anything but the rudiments of Islam since they were the accursed descendants of Ham’. See Abdul Hamid M. el Zein, *The Sacred Meadows: A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town*, (Evanston, 1974); and my criticisms, ‘The sacred meadows: a case study of “Historyland” vs “Anthropologyland”’ *History in Africa*. ix (1982), 337–46. Jan Knappert believed that Africans were easier to convert to Islam than to Christianity: ‘One could accept... the worship of an old man, but to worship a baby was quite silly...’ (‘Conversion in Swahili literature’, in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York, 1979), 180).

⁴⁷ el Zein, *Sacred Meadows*, 198–218; Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, 239.

⁴⁸ Sheikh Ahmed Jahadhmy; Lamu women; Ali Abdalla el Mawyi, interviews, Lamu, 1983. Sharif Abdulla Hussein, and Ali Ahmed Jahadhmy, Mombasa.

what he regarded as the effects of legal emancipation in Lamu. It was 'Generous but misapplied legislation in suddenly divorcing masters and retainers, [which] produced a landed class with a small amount of capital instead of labour and with no education to qualify the former to obtain the latter... their very freedom was the undoing of the ex-slave, for as landless and fatherless, they lacked initiative and dreading the responsibilities of life they took fright and died while their children drifted' into town.⁴⁹ Emancipation created an 'idle class of young' Afro-Arabs or contributed to the break up of families because some had to 'leave and seek work elsewhere' was the way another official viewed conditions in Lamu three years later.⁵⁰ As the years passed and the economy failed to improve, owners were forced to free their slaves in ever-increasing numbers. Many retreated to Langoni, where they crowded in with other 'free' relatives. They were all poor. Their houses were (and are) barely furnished. Some recalled sleeping on mats on dirt floors. All living ex-slaves recalled the hard times and many spoke repeatedly of lack of food in those years.⁵¹ They remembered that there was no work in those years. Many who remained gradually drifted back to their owners for meagre wages from day work – mostly enough to buy food. There was little money in circulation, unlike further down the coast, and most labour was performed in exchange for food.

Shamba work was seasonal. Coconuts, for instance, were picked four times a year. The ex-slaves planted and harvested whatever grain and fruits they could grow on the *shambas* behind town. But in their anxiety to produce income for themselves and their owners they began overtapping the coconut trees. Overtapping eventually weakened the trees and many died as a result. In the interim, however, ex-slaves siphoned the juice from the trees, boiled it, and made a non-intoxicating beverage which they either sold or took to their masters in town. What their masters apparently did not notice is that many ex-slaves kept a portion of the juice for themselves, which they boiled and fermented – making liquor which they drank or sold illegally. District Commissioner reports in Lamu and further down the coast indicate that drunkenness increased significantly after emancipation.⁵²

Before emancipation slaves working *shambas* used to grow *bhang* (marijuana), which they smoked when their masters were not around. After their masters freed them, they openly grew *bhang* and sold it – sometimes with approval from landowners. Some shipped their produce to Mombasa by dhow, and waited for the proceeds when the ship returned.⁵³

For those who sought freedom, or were freed on account of hardships, material conditions worsened; but in 1928–29 the District Commissioner reported that while the aristocracy was ruined 'the masses of people have personal freedom and a possibility of self-determination not available under the *old Arab system*'.⁵⁴ Self-determination and personal freedom are relative terms. Most ex-slave informants pointed out that they were both kinless and landless. Those who stayed on as slaves in their owners' households and on

⁴⁹ PC/Coast/1/1/165, KNA. See also Cooper, *Slaves and Squatters*.

⁵⁰ DC/LMU/1/5, KNA.

⁵¹ 'Harriet'; Salim Kheri. Moses D. E. Ndwulia wrote that freed slaves on Pemba Island often chose to stay on too (*Britain and Slavery in East Africa* (Washington, 1974), 192). Population figures for Lamu in 1927 were 5,259 Africans and 2,062 Arabs (PC/Coast/1/1/238, KNA). Most of the Africans were slaves or ex-slaves.

⁵² DC/LMU/1/5, KNA. ⁵³ 'Harriet'; interview. ⁵⁴ DC/LMU/1/8, KNA.

their *shambas* were better off than those who were set free (with the exception of those pensioned off earlier by the British). Many pretended that they were freedmen, but carried out all of their functions in their owners' homes, working wherever they could find employment and turning the proceeds over to their owners.⁵⁵ Loss of slaves also meant loss of social prestige for the Afro-Arabs and, for that reason too, every effort was made to keep on as many as possible.

A social hierarchy also existed within the ex-slave (and slave) community. By associating themselves with their owners, slaves absorbed some of what they regarded as upper-class status and they carried these feelings of superiority with them to the growing community in Lamoni. Relations between those who were hostile to their former owners, and those who supported them were at times strained and even violent. But favourable attitudes toward masters and mistresses remain even today among some old ex-slaves – especially the women. These women often call on their former mistresses, carrying gossip and news of the outside world just as they did when they were formally enslaved. At ceremonies, particularly weddings, ex-slave women demand the right to act out roles that were theirs when they were an integral part of the household.⁵⁶

John Clive was one of the better informed District Commissioners posted in Lamu. But by 1934 he noted that there were only fourteen slaves 'at the slave village' in Lamu town; and 'no more are to be admitted as all kinds of others are anxious to be ex-slaves for the purpose of obtaining housing and food.'⁵⁷ It is quite possible that the others to whom he referred were indeed ex-slaves. Twenty-four years after legal emancipation it would have been difficult for recently freed men and women to prove their claim; and former owners would not have been helpful since it meant exposing their relatives and other members of their class who still owned slaves both in their homes and on their *shambas*.

In 1939, another British official mentioned a 'small camp' of ex-slaves who 'receive 8s per month. Ex-slaves get two issues of clothing per year; shirts and shorts for men; *lesos* [large pieces of cloth] for women.' At that time the *Liwali* (governor) was paid 500s per month, with both housing and staff provided in addition.⁵⁸ Ex-slave informants remember that at this time they

⁵⁵ District Commissioner Reports, 1927, 1928, 1929, LMU1/6/7/8 KNA. See Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, 1981), introduction, 63–64, where he discusses dependency of slaves on their masters. See also Allen R. Reyers, 'Class, ethnicity and slavery: the origins of the Moroccan Abid', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, x (1977), 436. This practice of acting out their roles as slaves differed considerably with Cooper's findings in Pemba and on the East African mainland further south (see *Slaves and Squatters, passim*).

⁵⁶ Patricia Romero Curtin, 'Lamu weddings as an example of social and economic change', *Cahier d'études africaines*, xxiv (1984), 131–155. See also Harold D. Woodman, 'Sequel to slavery: the new history views of the postbellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, xliii (1977), 523–554. Woodman found that southerners had no significant stake in the institution of slavery, but they did want to preserve the social order. This was true of Lamu aristocracy and some of their slaves as well. See Igbafe for attitudes in Benin ('Emancipation', 424).

⁵⁷ Handing Over Report, 1934, KTI 2./1, KNA.

⁵⁸ Cornell to Leslie, KT 1.2 KNA. Wages and price data are not widely available for Lamu. Some comparisons can be made, however. In 1927 the British government paid the Kadi's clerk Shs 65 per month and added a Shs 10 per month housing allowance

were making *kofia* and selling them for 50 cents per cap. Others remember weaving mats and selling them for one shilling – if they could find a market for the finished product. A hard working ex-slave (or slave) could equal or surpass those who received government pensions, but they had to buy their own clothes and supply their own housing. Many of these ex-slaves were also supporting former owners and their families on their small outside income; and, in addition, most were working on the *shambas* or in the townhouses. Had it not been for the slaves and ex-slaves who covertly worked for and contributed to their owners' households, many of the Afro-Arab families would have been in even more precarious financial condition. It was slave labour which provided the income for masters and mistresses to keep them enslaved. One family told of generations of slaves who had been born, married, and died while serving their grandfathers, fathers, and themselves – all right under the noses of the British civil servants. The last slaves of this particular family were freed in 1958 – and those still living enjoy close relations with the family.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

The Afro-Arabs were dependent on their slaves for profits and luxuries during slavery. This dependency continued after legal emancipation with slaves working in concert with owners to preserve the system which best benefited them all in a period of economic decline, which was followed by economic stagnation. Although some slaves left and did not return, others chose to stay on and either worked for their masters in a kind of debt peonage; or they supported their owners by the fruits of their own labour. Owners and slaves chose Muslim law over secular law – and hence few in either group recognized the Ordinance of Emancipation issued in 1907. None of the strident political activities of Africans elsewhere in Kenya affected Lamu. There were no settlers to contend with and the few British officials either ignored the fact that slavery continued to exist; or were unaware of it. Change was marked by increasing emigration to more and better jobs – mostly in Mombasa. A dwindling number of old retainers stayed with masters' families who remained in Lamu. By independence in 1963–4 only a handful of slaves continued in bondage – and all of these by personal choice.

SUMMARY

The legal emancipation of slaves in Zanzibar and on the Swahili coast of Kenya was enacted in 1907, but the measure was not enforced on Lamu Island until 1910. The slave-owners of Lamu were already in dire straits from the decline of their plantations on the mainland and from the changes accompanying colonial rule

sometime that year. The Liwali's clerk earned Shs 40 per month; and tax collectors were paid Shs 100 per month (Coast Provincial Report, 20/151–22/177, Pt S, KNA). Bride price for ex-slaves in the 1930s was approximately Shs 100 with skilled wages for those employed by the British at Shs 2/50 per day (but not guaranteed work every day). A pair of poor quality sandals cost Shs 2/50. By these rough measurements, ex-slaves living on pensions were not well off – but their income was regular. See Curtin, 'Lamu weddings'.

⁵⁹ 'Harriet'; personal observations, Lamu, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983. Mohamed Abdulla, interview, Mombasa, November 1983.

which, by contrast with Mombasa, left Lamu Island as an economic backwater. They were little inclined to co-operate with the provisions of the legislation and were actively abetted in this by some of their slaves. Emancipation was therefore a more protracted process than in those parts of the coast where alternative opportunities had opened up for ex-slaves and for landowners. Those who were gradually liberated either emigrated elsewhere or entered into new forms of dependent relationships with the Afro-Arab aristocracy. Meanwhile, slavery lingered on under the noses of British officials.