

**The Denial of African History and the Blindness of Colonial Writers
on Arab and African Moslem Sources: an Appraisal from East
African Sources**

*Arap ve Afrika İslam Kaynaklarında Sömürgeci Yazarların Körlüğü ve Afrika
Tarihinin İnkârı: Doğu Afrika Kaynaklarına Göre Bir Değerlendirme*

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Öz

Bu çalıřma sömürge dönemi öncesi batı Afrikadaki yazma geleneğini ve sömürgeci yazarların bu gelenek çerçevesinde ortaya konmuş kaynaklara karşı tutumlarını tasvir eder. Romalı ziyaretçilerin kıyı halklarını dokumanlařtırdıkları klasik dönemden beri Doęu Afrika yazmalarda yer almaya bařladı. Arapların bölgeyi ticaret ve macera amacıyla ziyatretlere bařlamasından sonra klasik hegemonyanın sonu gelmeye bařladı. Doęu Afrika kıyı halkları ve Arap iliřkileri Swahili medeniyeti altında edebi okuryazarlıęa geliřti. Swahili medeniyeti altında yazma geleneği kıyı bölgelerinde Arap ve Afrikalı Müslüman yazarlar tarafından bařlatıldı, sonrasında iç kısımlardaki müslümanlar tarafından benimsendi. 19. yüzyıldan itibaren Avrupalılar Doęu Afrika hakkında yazmaya ilgi duydular. Bu ilgi 20. yüzyılda sömürge döneminde devam etti ve sömürgeci tarih yazarlıęı olarak tanındı. Sömürgeci tarih yazıcılıęı tarihi çalıřmalar için geçmişin önemini varlıęını inkâr etti. Kıyı ve iç kesimlerdeki Müslüman yazarların üretmiş oldukları metinlerin yorumlanmasında, çeliřkili bir biçimde, bu yazarlardan bazıları Afrikalı Müslümanlarla ortak çalıřtılar. Bu yazının sonuç tespitlerinde Doęu Afrikada İřlamın nasıl Swahilileřtirildięi anlatılır. Böylece, Afrikalı Müslüman yazma geleneęi yabancılar yerine Afrikalıları onaylar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tarih, Klasik Kaynaklar, Arap Kaynakları, Afrika İřlam Kaynakları, Sömürgeci Yazma sanatı, Doęu Afrika.

**The Denial of African History and the Blindness of Colonial Writers
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Abstract

This study describes traditions of writing in East Africa early to colonialism and the attitude of colonial writers toward sources produced from these early traditions. East Africa started to appear in writings from the classical era when Roman visitors Documented the people of the coast of the region. The demise of classical hegemony was followed by an epoch when Arabs visited the region for trade and adventurous motives. The Arabs and east African coast people relations culminated into writing literacy shrouded under Swahili civilization. The tradition of writing under Swahili civilization started by Arabs and African Muslim writers around the coast then adopted by interior Muslims in later years. From 19th CE, Europeans started to have interest in writing about East Africa. This interest continued to the colonial era in 20th CE and became famously known as colonial historiography. Colonial historiography denied the existence of the past significant for historical studies. Paradoxically, some of

these writers worked in collaboration with African Muslim in interpreting manuscripts produced by Muslim writers along the coast and interior. The conclusive remarks on this study tell about how Islam was swahilized in East Africa. Thus, African Muslim writing tradition subscribes to Africans rather than foreign.

Keywords: History, Classical sources, Arab sources, African Muslim sources, Colonial art of writing, East Africa.

Introduction

This article deals with the view of colonial writers on the absence of African history and the position of Arab and African Muslim sources in refuting such conception has five sections. The first section introduces the western conservative stand on African history. Under this section, ideas of modernism and their impact in explaining the development of non-European communities have been surveyed. The second section discusses the historicity of writing tradition in east Africa before the onset of Islam in the region. In this section, the classical world contributions in writing of such continent part are presented. The third section offers insights into Islamic literacy and the tradition of writing in east Africa. This part proceeds by identifying the epochs of writing from Arab to African Muslim writers and ends by informing about the entrance of European writers (Missionaries and travelers) to colonial historiography. The fourth section discusses the attitude of colonial historical writers towards Arab and African Muslim sources in East Africa. While the last section offers conclusive remarks on the discussion

1. Western Colonial Stand on African History

The era of Modernism is remarkable for bringing tremendous adjustments in the development of historical writings. One of the great developments was the professionalization of history as an official discipline (Ochwada, 1993; Ziegler, 2003). The fact that writing was part of European life traditions made it possible the preservation of communities' past experiences and therefore it was easy to fetch plenty of information on their past lives (Ogot, 1968; Ochwada, 1993). This offered the ground for making documents the principal sources in any historian's attempt to research and write an account of the past (Adeoti, 2014). Regarding the agreement on using documents as major sources in historical writings, it was challenging to apply to periphery communities, which were not considered in professionalization.

In Africa, colonial historians did early attempts to document communities' history. For these writers, it was a difficult task to come across sources telling about the African past since the tradition of writing did not exist in many of the communities (Oliver, 1968;

Kimambo, 1969). Many of the sources they encountered explained about European adventures and discoveries in Africa, which sounded like writers' own biographies (Juma, 2004). The question of scarce documents describing African communities' past life experiences led to a general conclusion on the Absence of history (Juma, 1996b). Among the famously quoted statements that will serve as entrance doors justifying the referred conclusions was that of Hugh Trevor who when addressing to his undergraduate students about the question of teaching African history he asserted that:

“... nowadays undergraduate demand that they should be taught African history. Perhaps in the future, there will be some history to teach. But at present, there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not deny that men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists, but history, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too. It is not a mere phantasmagoria of changing shapes and costumes, of battles and conquests, dynasties and usurpations, social forms, and disintegration (Ogot, 1968, 1-2).”

George Hegel who in his lectures on philosophies of history when philosophizing about African people and their history in the continent he described that:

“In his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, (he) has not yet succeeded in making a distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his self. Thus man in Africa has not progressed beyond his immediate existence (Hegel, 1975,177).”

These few instances among many highlight the understanding not only of European historians of the time but of all the people under European modernism. Reports are written by travelers, Missionaries, and traders concerning Africa were standing stones to cement the view of unhistoric, and dark Africa, until 15th century European penetration in the continent. From this background, it was enough to consider Africa as a continent that its population did not possess any significant past for historical studies (Neugebauer, 1991).

These views however faced an attack from Africanists and later African historians in the period before and post-independence in Africa (Juma, 2004). These new writers strived to prove the presence of African history. Reports produced by Archaeologists, Anthropologists and Historical linguists together with the use of oral traditions were important tools in offering evidence on the evolution of African societies (Ochwada, 1993). The ultimate argumentation in post-independent Africa is acceptance of the presence of the African past before the commencement of European activities in Africa (Juma, 1987). This gives

a juncture for this article to look back in time and question the relevance of the philosophy posed by western writers on drawing facts from documents for historical writings and the grounds for colonial writers ignoring early sources in east Africa particularly in the coastal areas of east Africa.

2. The Historicity of Writings in East Africa Before Islamic Literacy

The doors for writing about East African people opened for the first time by the Roman classical writers. During the classical era, people were eager to know what was going on around and outside the Mediterranean world. Many writers started to roam around the world seeking for news to write and tell the Mediterranean people about the existence and lives of other communities (Allen, 1949; Juma, 1996). The fact that the ocean was the only means connecting East Africa with the outside world made it possible for the visit of classical people who came for trade and adventures ambitions (Kimambo, 1969).

The famous known classical sources that contain information about East Africa were the guidebook of Indian Ocean sailors, which is argued by many researchers to be written in Alexandria Egypt while its author is still anonymous to us. Another source written in the time equally to Periplus is Ptolemy's geography (Horton, 1984). This source contains Geographical information about east Africa. It is a source that has mentioned the location of Rhapta which was the great commercial city that flourished along the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa (Alpers, 1969). These two sources 'all written between 1st 4th CE' are currently considered the masterpiece documents containing the earliest information about east Africa however few. Despite being grounding sources, these sources have some limitations in telling the African past.

One of the weaknesses we can point out from these sources is their sole focus on the coastal societies. Writers' scope over East Africa was bounded along with the coastal societies and nothing is explained about the interior communities (Juma, 2004). The coast, which had long-term trade relations with Mediterranean traders, was the place that East Africa started and end. In this sense, one could argue that the reason for the interior of East Africa did not appear in these sources was that there was no regular contact between the people of the coast and interior societies (Kimambo, 1969). On the other hand, the blindness of these classical sources about the interior has been attributed to the fact that much of the information came across the writers were drawn from the stories narrated by sailors and traders who landed on the East African coast and interacted for while before going back to their homes (Alpers, 1969). Around 5th - 6th centuries the power of the Mediterranean roman empire declined and this marked the end of the continuous visit of Roman citizens in East Africa (Juma, 2004). This event marked the rise of Islamic civilization, which had an impact on writing about East Africa.

3. Islamic Literacy and the Traditions of Writing in East Africa

Until 9th century, people from the Arabian world already set their feet into the coastal areas of East Africa (Juma, 1996a). Literature has argued that the main motive for their arrival was trading with the coastal people, which on the other side was connected to the propagation of Islam and adventurous drives (Bang, 2000; Aidarus, 2014). Areas such as Kanbalu, Kilwa, Sofala, Mombasa, Tangana, Malindi, Lamu, Pate, and Zanzibar were recipients of these visitors (Ismail, 1968). The fact that writing was part of living traditions among Arabians, the coming of people from the Muslim world had an impact on documenting the people of East Africa. Under this era, the course of writing had two junctures, the former dominated by Arab Muslim writers while the second stage was under the hands of African coastal Muslim writers (Abdulaziz, 1979; Khamis, 1983).

The era dominated by Arab Muslim writers in East Africa can be dated from 9th century to 12th century. This period falls under the era of *Darul al Islam* (land under Muslim rule) in the periodization of Islamic history (Munjee, 2001). Many writers were Arab visitors who did not come for trade but adventurous purposes as they knew of the presence of Muslim settlements in east Africa. During this era, writings were dominated by Arabic scripts, which were not written for East African people to read since were illiterate (Juma, 2004). Among the known writers of the time include Al Masud who in 10th century visited Kanbalu and reported about the lives of the Pemba people that they were Muslims and spoke Zandj tongue; Al Yaqut who in his *Geographical dictionary* reported about East Africa and Al Idris The visit of people from Arabia together with the propagation of Islam to natives around the coast led to the emergence of African Muslims furnished with Islamic literacy (Mdoshi, 1971; Juma, 2004).

The rise of African Muslim writers was an important mark in the development of writing traditions in East Africa. When African Muslims took positions in writing, Arab writers were on the age of losing their shine in documenting east Africa (Raia, 2018; Said, 2020). However, it has to be known that the replacement of Arab writers by African writers was a process as they co-existed before the African Muslims' total control. This period took its course into two phases, the first phase dates from around 12th to 17th centuries and is much occupied by the coastal African Muslims. While the second phase dates from the 18th century to the beginning of the colonial era in East Africa and includes both coastal Muslims and the Muslims of the interior part of East Africa.

African coastal Muslims took their Stand with the famous known writing of chronicles (Tarikh) and poetry traditions (Ismail, 1968). It has to be clear that the tradition of writing used the early Swahili language, which was the cultural identity of the coastal people of East Africa by the time (Arens, 1975). Therefore, these writing more represented coastal people's lives than Arabic identities. Among the prominent known chronicle, the documents include Kilwa chronicle,

Pate chronicle, Lamu chronicle, Tumbatu chronicle, and Pemba chronicle (Lodhi, 1994). The writing of Tarikh went together with Documentation of Poetry. The art of composing poems became the prominent tradition of the elite class of the time around the coastal settlements. Theutendiwa Fumo Lyongo, Utendiwa Yusuph, and Utendiwa Mwanakuponaare some of the classical compositions evidencing the Swahili poetry traditions and literacy around the coast of East Africa (Raia, 2018). In 17th century trading activities, by Arab and African Muslims expanded from the coast to interior East Africa.

The expansion of trade from the coast opened the doors for literacy to the interior communities (Khamis, 1983). It is beyond the shadow of a doubt that trading activities were under the hands of African and Arab Muslims who brought literacy to the interior (Mazrui, 1978). Areas of Usambara, Kilimanjaro, Tabora, and Ujiji received literacy under this age and people such as Rajab Kirama and KimweriZanyumbai and Muhamed el Murjeb, Muhammad bin Abubakar Kijuma of Lamu, Sheikh Abdallah Mambassy and Sikujua bin Abdallah were among the literate and the eminent writers of the time (Raia, 2018). People wrote letters, Memos, and even life history documents, and the Shambalae even court writers for recording rulers' activities into co-existence such that of Shambaa (Said, 2020). In the course of this epoch, there was the co existence of writing traditions around both the coast and interior, which in the second half of 19th century co-survived with European travelers and missionaries' writings that in the colonial period became dominant.

4. Colonial Historical Writers 'Attitude Towards African Arabic Sources

From the late first half to the whole route of the second half of 19th century, East Africa started to receive waves of European Travelers and missionaries who had an impact on the images of the news of western art of writing in the continent part (Bang, 2000). African image portrayed into travelers and missionaries' writings were spring boards that determined the position of colonial historiography on African image. It is proper to put clear that, these writers were filled with the views regarding Europe as the center of all human developments' over ages and the most advanced than the rest of the globe (Ochwada, 1993). When addressing a similar issue in the comparable context Gimode argued that:

"... stereotypes had been developed in Western historiography about African history and culture, which gave the false impression of the continent to the masses in Europe before the actual occupation. It has been observed that: The deformed image of the continent and her people is particularly shrouded in myths, which have been created about this continent. They are rooted in the politicization of interpretation of social phenomena following the emergence of racism as an overriding influence on scholarship. It also came to justify the Western imperialist agenda and to characterize the relationship

between the Western world and the rest of the world (Gimode, 1993, 32).

The prior established myths of diffusion over all aspects of development initiations in East Africa and the need to justify racist views over the colonized subjects made it necessary for Colonial writers to have a deformed stand over the existed documents (Hrbek,1988). Therefore, such conceptions had their foothold into all affairs of colonial art of writing. It is unbelievable to find statements that deny the existence of local initiations and development in a situation that literacy was therebefore and even during the colonial period and scatters of sources were produced by local literate people. Speaking with the same tone in a similar context Abdulrahman Juma argued that:

“Local chronicles of the East African coast have documented oral traditions. These reflect elite attempts to make sense of the past and relate to event... The famous narrative among the accounts of early Muslim migrations from the expanding empires in the Middle East is perhaps the story of the Muslim Caliph Abdul Malik Marwan of Syria, who is said to have dispatched religious emissaries to propagate Islam and establish towns on the east African coast during the 8th century AD... The *Kilwa Chronicle* provides an account of princes from the City of Shiraz in Persia (c. late 10th century) who under the patronage of Hassan bin Ali, landed at different places on the Swahili coast to establish towns such as Manda, Shanga, Kilwa, and others located on the islands of Zanzibar and Comoros, as given in the *Chronicle of Pate* (Juma, 2004, 17).”

Before the inception of colonialism, literacy was high among the coastal people who used to preserve some important information in writings. Among the known preserved evidence were the Collection of 150 manuscripts preserved in Riyadhha mosque in Kenya which covers information from the early 19th century to the 1930s. One of the manuscripts in the collection includes *Sharh tarbiyyat al-atfal* (Instruction for children) written by Muhyial-Din al Qahtan who was one of the renowned scholars in East Africa. These manuscripts offer insights into the coverage of Islamic education in East Africa (Raia, 2018). The fact local people were literate has been well indicated by Westerlund who asserted that:

“After defeating the coastal Muslims, the Germans turned to them as allies in the new administration. Their prestige remained high and even increased under German rule. The Germans adopted Swahili as the Language of administration and built up a system of state education through the medium of this language. The state schools were established mainly in the coastal area (Westerlund, 1980, 42).”

In the light of what has been presented by Westerlund, it is colorful seen that Muslims were already literate at the onset of German rule (see also Njozi, 2010). The decision to establish schools along the coast is due to the reason that, they were the areas where Swahili was

well mastered. It is also important to remember that, Swahili was the language used in writing communication by the coastal people who were mostly Muslims (Lodhi,1994). However, the important question to ask is why Germans decided to use Tanganyika Muslims in their administrations and not acknowledge the existence of their writing culture and use documents produced by them (Muslims) to construct the history of local people? Paradoxically decided to embrace the erratic views of unchanging and absence of preserved past about the region in colonial historiography. Probably, this justifies the poor background that westerners had with Islam and their civilizations, which I think is proper now to make a thorough look into it.

The relations between Islam and westerners starts when western Christendom was in Dark Age and the Muslim world became the powerful civilization that expanded to dominate some parts of Europe (Ziegler, 2003). The rise of Islam in the Middle East and its later expansion into other parts of Europe mostly the southern part of the continent was by the time unstoppable since there was not any strong organization to stop its onset (Munjee, 2001). It is beyond the shadow of a doubt that Christianity was by then a crucial identity in western Christendom societies. Therefore, the advent of Islam eroded the image of the continent as it was considered a part of the development of Islamic civilization. It is in the same ground Pope Urban the second organized and declared the war of Crusades in 1096 CE. The purpose among others being to revive Christianity identity and revenge Islam, which had disturbed the culture of western Christendom (Munjee, 2001). It is the ramifications of this purpose that serves as a road map to justify my argument on this point.

The spirit planted into westerners' hearts by the Crusades sown Much even into later ages of Modern civilization in Europe. This has been well clarified in a few sentences by Hrbek who asserted that:

“If an extraterrestrial visitor had looked at the Old World at the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era and had then revisited it after five centuries - by 1100 - he might well have concluded that the World was on the way to becoming Muslim... In the meantime, Islam had ceased to be an exclusively Arab religion; the new faith showed the capacity to win over and assimilate ethnic elements of most diverse origins, fusing them into a single culture and religious community (Hrbek, 1988, 1).”

The fact Muslims disturbed European cultures and identities made westerners think of revenging Islam wherever they meet in the world. As John, Illife has unveiled that, the second and probably the third march of Christianity carried a revenge idea on the Muslim world (Ilife, 1979; Omulokoli, 2003). Portuguese arrival in east Africa is explained parallel with the frictions and conflicts against Muslims around the coast of Kenya, Tanganyika, and Northern Mozambique. Portuguese realized that to establish their control in east Africa they had first to obliterate the hegemony of Muslims and thus a protracted quarrel existed between

them (Ilife, 2007). Consequently, the Portuguese could not acknowledge the writing achievements initiated long the coast by their rival Muslims first because it would mean nothing on their revenge motive to erode Islamic identity in the region also it would destroy the concept of European patronage on African development.

Similarly, during the colonial era, the German and British colonial historical writers did not confess to the existence of Arab and Swahili Muslim writings before their advent in the continental part. In 19th century, Europeans became aware of the existence of Swahili manuscripts along with east Africa. German and British scholars being frontline in studying the manuscripts, worked in collaboration with Muslim scholars who helped them in collecting and interpreting the content of the manuscript. Scholars such as Ernst Dunmann, Willim Hichenn, and Carl Meinhoffor example each in his own time collaborated with Muhammad bin Abubakar Kijuma of Lamu to copy and compose Swahili poems and these manuscripts were known into European academic cycle (Aidarus, 2014; Raia, 2018). Surprisingly, colonial historical writers did not admit to using these sources in reconstructing the picture of east African people's past lives regardless of the situation that the discipline has already agreed to draw facts from documents of the past. Let us draw a simple conclusion from this controversy that, this was perhaps because most of the colonial writers such as Missionaries and colonial administrators were pseudo-historians. On the other face, these writers intended to suppress Islamic identity and maintain the superior view of western patronage on the civilization over east Africa.

Conclusions

In investigating the remark contained into colonial art of history writing on the absence of literacy and any signs that imply the existence of the past in pre-colonial East Africa, this study has refuted such contention by assessing the Swahili and Arab Muslim sources concerning the past of such continent part. It has been observed that there were various epochs of writing about East African people. The first was done by the Classical writers followed by the Arab writers and succeeded by African Muslim writers before the dominance of colonial art of writing.

The claim on the absence of the past worth being investigated by historians is mantled under the views of wanting to consider and maintain the view of the western world as the spring of all human achievements in the world. This study has however added to our understanding of the evidence that deconstructs such views by referring to east African traditions of writing which indicates that the past of such continent part is not as recent as it has been thought by westerners.

One of the significant issues interrogated in this paper is that of the crossroad of the relations between European scholars and African Muslim elites in east Africa from around 19th century. Concerning such relations, this paper pointed out that westerners were aware of the

existence of writing traditions in east Africa to the extent of collaborating with them in interpreting the manuscripts written in the early Swahili language. Consequently, their colonial historiography did not divulge on the literacy achievements in that continent part.

When approaching the east African past, some recent pieces of literature still hesitate to identify Muslim and African Arabic sources as African heritage connected to the efforts of the indigenous people. Kaniki forexample claims that:

“Islam imposes on a people its own value system and general outlook towards life. Thus, the penetration of Islam into society is generally speaking equivalent to cultural conquest (Kaniki, 1980, 87).”

Possibly, this claim and others similar to this (see for example Ogot, 1993) are because we fail to understand what had been the relations between Islamic literacy and the East African culture. In most cases, people argue that it was Arabs and Islam who brought east Africa into the light of development, which is incorrect. As Lodhi (1994, 88) has argued that in east Africa, slam and its Arab immigrants were Africanized and swahilized and therefore Islam became not the Arabic practice but of indigenous which subscribed to Swahili civilization which later in 18th century began to spread into interior parts of East Africa. On the base of this argument, the Arab and African Muslim sources are the Swahili heritage and meant nothing on cultural conquest by Arabs as it may be thought.

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