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PORTUGUESE PRESENCE AND ENDEAVOURS IN EAST AFRICA, 1498-1698

Watson A. O. Omulokoli

PART II & III

II. Political Occupation and Presence, 1498-1698

Early Picture and Background

Our knowledge of outside contact and interaction with East Africa seems to go back to the first century A.D. The first major communication from this period comes from a Greek sailor from Alexandria, Egypt.¹ He made a comprehensive survey of the seashore in the latter part of the first century. Together with the explorations, every valuable information which was gathered, was carefully recorded. Eventually, this information was compiled into a guidebook for sailors making sea voyages in this part of the Indian Ocean. It was entitled, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (meaning, the circumnavigation or sailing around in the Indian Ocean, as it was then referred to by the Greeks and Romans). This writing still survives today and is the main source of knowledge on conditions on the eastern coast of Africa in that ancient period.

Further outside contact resulted in trading expeditions aimed at the region, and as a consequence of this, multi-ethnic settlements seem to have developed at the coast of eastern Africa by the fourth century A.D. The principal source for this period is from Claudius Ptolemy, who probably lived in the second century, but whose existing information in his *Geography* seems to represent the knowledge of fourth century Greeks from Alexandria.² Among other things, we gather that the Black stock of people were beyond, to the south of the area explored then, near the Pangani and Rufiji rivers in Tanzania. Furthermore, it was indicated that the interior had snow-capped mountains and lakes out of

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which the River Nile flowed. There is then a break in information when it seems that contact with East Africa by the Greeks from Alexandria may not have continued beyond the collapse of Rome in the fifth century A.D.

Over the centuries, however, Arab and Persian traders continued to ply this region as gold and iron added to ivory as the leading commodities from there. With the flow of trading expeditions by Arabs, Arab settlements began to appear in these coastal areas. A further development came in the form of Arab domination over the local inhabitants. This was clearly evident in the seventh and eighth centuries, but the process seems to have slowed down for the next four or five centuries. It was actually in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that steady increases of Arab incursions into the territory were in evidence.³ As this took place, there were instances where Arab settlers became assimilated into the existing majority Bantu population. This Arab ascendancy and domination in the thirteenth century was the prevailing situation on the eastern coast of Africa when the Portuguese arrived there at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries.

Portuguese Entrance On the Scene

European contact with East Africa came as part of the historic voyages of exploration aimed at finding a sea route around Africa to India and the Far East.⁴ These wider explorations aside, European interest in the north-eastern part of Africa was linked to the search for the legendary powerful ruler, Prester John, and his influential Christian kingdom. Over the years, this was thought to be the same as the Christian empire in Ethiopia.⁵ It was in this connection that while the exploration of the eastern coast was going on from the south, contact was also made in the upper section from the north.

The first contact with the north-eastern coast of Africa was made by a Portuguese, sailor, Pedro de Covilha, who used the traditional route through the Red Sea. He left Portugal in 1487, and after travelling widely in the north-western section of the Indian Ocean, and therefore, coming in contact with the northern sector of the coast of eastern Africa, he finally went through Zeila and entered Ethiopia in 1494, and remained there till his death there over thirty years later.⁶ This means that in the process, he touched on the fringes of the northern coast of eastern Africa before the celebrated stopover in East Africa by Vasco da Gama in 1498 on his way to India.

In the case of East Africa proper, the first European arrival was the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama. Building on the earlier efforts of

Bartholomew Diaz, he rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, and sailed up the eastern coast of Africa. In the process, he stopped at various points on the east African coast in 1498 before crossing over to his eventual terminus, Calcutta in India, which he reached in that same year, 1498.⁷

Portuguese Efforts at Conquest and Control

When Vasco da Gama returned to Portugal from India in 1499, plans were laid out for the securing of the eastern coast of Africa as a corridor to India and the Far East. The main aim was to set up a viable settlement in India because of the commercial potential which it seemed to hold out. To ensure that it was not endangered, it was proposed that fortresses should be established in the Indian ocean along the main routes of the anticipated trade.⁸ The architect of this scheme was one, D'Albuquerque, and in the space of ten years, these plans were implemented to such an extent that by 1509, Portugal had established a foothold along the eastern coast of Africa. In about this same year, 1509, D'Albuquerque became the Portuguese viceroy of India.

To succeed in their plans, Albuquerque had wanted the control of three places: Socotra on the Red Sea, Ormuz on the Persian Gulf, and Malaca in the Chinese sector. Yet beyond possessing and controlling these strategic operational points, it was also necessary to keep the supply trade routes open and free from danger and interference. This is where the Portuguese conquest and occupation of eastern Africa came in. It was not an end in itself, but rather as a means of controlling the waterways in its trading circuit. When the implementation of the desired conquest was carried out between 1500 and 1509, it was with a lot of cruelty and savagery.

In a series of attacks and battles the Portuguese systematically brought the coast under their control. On his second voyage to India in 1502, Vasco da Gama took over Kilwa after defeating its ruler. Next, in 1503, another Portuguese, Ravasco overcame and took Zanzibar into Portuguese authority. These beginnings were followed by more force when in 1505, Portugal dispatched D'Almeida as the new viceroy to India. He had with him a fleet of over 20 ships to assist him in taking control of three centres on the coast of eastern Africa: Sofala, Kilwa, and Mombasa. In the ensuing attacks, Sofala, the inlet to the gold in the interior fell easily. Similarly, Kilwa, which had about 4,000 inhabitants in 1505 succumbed without much resistance. It was at Mombasa, which had a population of about 10,000 in 1505, that the Portuguese met with much resistance before gaining temporary victory. Although

vanguished at this time, trouble persisted in Mombasa for more than the next 200 years.

To the south, Mozambique was overcome and taken in 1507 and was to eventually emerge as the strategic headquarters of Portuguese authority on the eastern coast of Africa. The conclusion of the ten year period of conquests and control came in 1509 when a combined force of Egyptians, Arabs, and Persians was defeated at sea by the Portuguese, hence eliminating, for the time being maritime resistance to Portuguese expansionist schemes. In that same year, 1509, the king of Portugal attempted to consolidate the gains in the region by appointing a governor-general specifically for the entire strip of the eastern coast of Africa.

In the course of their time of occupation of this territory, the Portuguese did not have stable continuous rule over East Africa in particular. This explains why, in great measure, they did not gain much from the coastal areas of East Africa. Although they had outposts on the shores, unlike the Arabs whom they replaced, they did not venture into the interior. Lack of profit aside, they incurred such immense losses that, "it has been estimated that the overall Portuguese trading losses during her two hundred year control of the East African coast ran as high as 40 percent over revenue".⁹ Portuguese dominance over East Africa in the 200 years of their presence was tentative, weak, and short-lived.

Uneasy Foothold On the Territory

Throughout the period of Portuguese occupation, Mombasa, which was emerging as the principal town in East Africa then, did not surrender easily to Portuguese attempts at controlling it. While Mombasa was consistently hostile, Malindi and Zanzibar were well disposed towards them. In part, this was a consequence of the fact that because Malindi and Zanzibar were not on good terms with Mombasa, they often assisted Portugal in its attacks on Mombasa. This was part of the picture in a period when Portuguese occupation and presence in East Africa was constantly punctuated by active hostility between its forces and Mombasa.

The catalogue of battles included that of 1528 when Nuno da Cunha, on his way to India as viceroy, attacked Mombasa with the assistance of Malindi and Zanzibar. This time, although unwillingly, Mombasa surrendered. About 50 years later, a Turkish pirate aroused rebellion in Mombasa against the Portuguese, although he was defeated on the two occasions on which he tried

this. First, in 1586, he helped Mombasa to drive away the Portuguese temporarily. Three years later in 1589, he tried again, with the help of a Zulu group, the Wazimba.¹⁰

Although the Portuguese succeeded in putting down the rebellions of 1586 and 1589, Mombasa continued to be troublesome. In view of this, the Portuguese attacked again in 1592, damaged the town extensively, and replaced its ruler with the one in Malindi who now combined both. With Mombasa now in their hands, the Portuguese took measures aimed at making the town their capital in East Africa. As part of this scheme, in 1593, they built Fort Jesus as a garrison or fortress to look after their military interests. As has been observed, this face-saving step may have been taken when their dominance was on an irretrievable slide. Thus, "In 1593, in an effort to contain the political disaffection of the coast, the Portuguese built and garrisoned the great citadel of Fort Jesus at Mombasa, but already the north-east corner of the Indian Ocean was slipping from their grasp".¹¹

Despite these fortifications, times and fortunes were not in Portuguese favour. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, after a century in East Africa, Portugal began weakening its hold on the area. This development should, however, be viewed on the backdrop of the fact that in reality the Portuguese had no political or commercial stakes in East Africa. They were interested in it merely as a transit base for their really claims in India and the Far East. With no interest in the local people, it is no wonder that "No significant attempts were made to colonise the northern region of the coast and it has been estimated that towards the end of the sixteenth century, after a long period of peace, there were hardly fifty Portuguese living north of Cape Delgado".¹²

Portuguese Defeat and Withdrawal

There were a series of setbacks and stages through which the Portuguese presence and occupation of East Africa came to an end. While these were taking place in East Africa, on the home front in Europe drastic changes which had jolted Portuguese power and influence had already been effected. At the heart of these changes was the fact that when the Portuguese royal lineage ran out without an heir, Philip II, King of Spain, inherited the Portuguese crown in 1580 as the next one in line.¹³ Armed with his own set of priorities in Spain, Philip was not in a position to salvage Portuguese projects. Portugal remained in this state of royal subservience until 1640.¹⁴

In the theatre of operations on the eastern coast of Africa, the beginning of the end set in in 1622 when Persians drove the Portuguese out of Ormuz, and therefore, from the northern sector of its possessions and corridor in the Indian Ocean. On the heels of this set-back, the Portuguese were faced with a serious rebellion in 1630-1631 in Mombasa. The leader was the Portuguese-installed ruler, Yusuf bin Hassan, who had been taken to Goa for upbringing and education by the Roman Catholics as a young man. Now he reverted to Islam and led this rebellion against his masters, the Portuguese. Although the Portuguese eventually crushed the rebellion and regained power over Mombasa, the foundations of their authority there had been severely shaken.

In the next series of systematic defeats, the principal protagonists were the Omani rulers of Muscat. Beginning at home, the Imam of Oman drove the Portuguese out of their stronghold in Muscat, in 1650, in the same way in which they had been driven out of Ormuz earlier. In 1652, the Imam of Oman went on and drove the Portuguese out of Malindi, further reducing their territorial claims in East Africa.¹⁵ In the case of Mombasa, which was the last major Portuguese stronghold, the initial assault was made by the Imam of Oman, Sultan bin Seif. It was however, his son, Imam Seif bin Sultan, who waged the final attack in which Mombasa was taken in 1698 with the capture of Fort Jesus from the Portuguese. This defeat, together with the driving out of the Portuguese out of their remaining East African possessions is taken to mark the end of their “rule in East Africa north of Mozambique”.¹⁶ Although the Portuguese tried to regain control and make comebacks as in the case of the efforts in Mombasa in 1727-1729,¹⁷ for all practical purposes, Portuguese presence and occupation had come to an end at the close of the seventeenth century. It is for this reason that it is safe to say that Portuguese ascendancy and domination in East Africa lasted about two hundred years, 1498-1698.

END NOTES

¹ Robert W. July, A History of the African People, (New York. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 76 [Other sources talk of “Hippalus, a Roman sailor who sailed down the Red Sea in A.D. 45 and discovered the regularity of the monsoon winds”. Zoe Marsh and G.W. Kingsnorth, An Introduction to the History of East Africa. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1961), 9].

² Roland Oliver, and J.D. Fage, A Short History of Africa. (Baltimore, Maryland. Penguin Books, 1962), 96.

³ Oliver and Fage, 97-99.

⁴ C.P. Groves, The Planting of Christianity in Africa. 4 vols. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 1:119. In the scientific rationale for exploration, “the discovery of a route to India by sea was a master ambition”.

⁵ Roland Oliver, ed., The Cambridge History of Africa. Vol. 3 From c. 1050 to c. 1600. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1977), 179-181. [See also Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions. (Middlesex, England. Penguin Books, 1964), 140].

⁶ Oliver, ed., Cambridge History, 80.

⁷ Groves I., 125. Before sighting the shores of India on 17th May, 1498, Vasco da Gama had stopped at Mozambique, Mombasa, and Malindi en route.

⁸ Marsh and Kingsnorth, 12

⁹ July, 85

¹⁰ July, 85 [see also Oliver, ed., Cambridge History, 229, with indications that in addition to Mombasa, there was revolt in other towns].

¹¹ Oliver and Fage, 101 [see, Oliver, ed., Cambridge History, 230].

¹² Oliver, ed., Cambridge History, 227.

¹³ Marsh and Kingsnorth, 16 [See, H.H. Johnston, The Opening Up of Africa. (London. Williams and Norgate, n.d.), 173].

¹⁴ July, 85.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Marsh and Kingsnorth, 17

¹⁷ David Barrett, et al eds., Kenya Churches Handbook: The Development of Kenyan Christianity, 1498-1973. (Kisumu, Kenya. Evangel Press, 1973), 21.

III. Christian Attempts and Efforts, 1498-1698

Introduction and Overview

In their maritime operations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese set out to accomplish many goals.¹ Of these, four were particularly crucial to their efforts. First, there was the desire to contribute to scientific

knowledge by unearthing fresh geographical information. Secondly, they aimed at carrying out trade and conducting commercial ventures in the new territories that came under their control. In the third instance, they set out to exercise political dominance by bringing into subjection the peoples of the new regions that they identified. Fourthly, they aimed at providing spiritual guidance by spreading the Christian faith to the people of the various areas that they came across.

In the application and success of the objectives in East Africa, the Portuguese generally fared badly. On the geographical front, they were successful with regard to identifying the key areas along the coast. In the area of trade and commerce, their performance in East Africa was abysmal. This was largely because of their neglect of the area, in preference for India and the Far East, but also partly because of their lack of success on the political level. Indeed, on the political plane, the Portuguese struggled endlessly for survival throughout their two hundred year period of occupation and presence in East Africa. By the time that they were finally driven out, they could not look back and point to a period and places where they had firm and unassailable strongholds in the region.² In the area of Christian activity, the fortunes here were adversely affected by the severe setbacks in the political arena. This resulted from the fact that in their operations the Christian efforts were inextricably linked with the Portuguese political and administrative machinery.³

Scattered Attempts

On his way to India in 1498, Vasco da Gama received a friendly welcome at Malindi. Before he left, he erected a pillar as was customary, as a sign of the amicable relationship between the town and the Portuguese establishment.⁴ On his second visit to India in 1502, he drove his earlier initiatives to the logical conclusion when he helped the Portuguese to conquer and capture several towns along the coast. The next major event came when Francisco d'Almeida made sweeping conquests of the eastern coast of Africa in 1505 on his way to India as well. Although it is alleged that he left two priests behind, it was with the understanding that they were to serve as chaplains to the Portuguese soldiers and community rather than to work among the local population.⁵

Among the places that Almeida had effectively put under Portuguese control was Kilwa. Not long after, in 1506, there were reports from there of about 40 people who wanted to become Christians. Although advice was given that their admission to the Christian faith should not be rushed, the resident Portuguese captain, helped the group to get baptised, and in the process of

ignoring this caution, he aroused Muslim anger. All the same, Christian efforts at Kilwa were stalled when the Portuguese moved from there in 1513 and relocated to the more prosperous town of Sofala to the South.

Here and there instances of chance contacts and occurrences were reported, but more often than not the outcome did not amount to much. Such was the case with the visit to Malindi of the renowned Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier. Although he stopped at Malindi for a short time in 1542 on his way to India as an envoy of the King of Portugal, there was no demonstration of missionary interest in East Africa on his part.⁶ In an isolated case John Dos Santos, a Dominican friar stationed on the Isles of Kerimba baptised a nephew of the ruler of Zanzibar in 1591. This incident annoyed the ruler so much that to avert further crisis, the young man was sent to Mozambique and from there he was transferred to India and was not heard of again. All the while Dominican and Augustinian monks seemed to have activities at Faza, Pate, Zanzibar, and Mombasa, but in each case, the results were either meagre, or shortlived.⁷

Focus On Mombasa

It is ironic that, Mombasa, where the Portuguese had the most persistent political problems, is also the place from which any meaningful records of Christian activity issued. In the period of most intense efforts, it was here that the nearest thing to sustained missionary activity took place, and the architect who spearheaded it was the Portuguese viceroy of Goa. Apart from Mombasa, he is reported to have had interest in Lamu, where he sent three priests, and in Zanzibar, where he sent one priest.⁸ In the case of Mombasa, all this took place in that period of relative calm and tranquility following Portuguese military victories after the political disturbances of the 1580's.

In the 1580's, the Portuguese had to contend with and counter fierce rebellion against their authority in and around Mombasa. In 1592, they seemed to have achieved some decisive victory, and so they proceeded with the process of re-establishing some semblance of stable authority there. As part of this development, in 1593 they commenced the construction of a military garrison, Fort Jesus, and completed it in 1595. It was then, with Mombasa seemingly under control, that they stepped up Christian activities there, with the peak being noted in the fruitful years of 1597-1599.

There were a number of developments which stood out as noteworthy in Mombasa in this period. First, one of the key things which the viceroy of Goa did was to build a monastery for Augustinian monks. Next, a House of Mercy, to help in the care of widows, orphans, the sick, and disabled was constructed.

In addition, places of worship were provided, including a chapel in Fort Jesus, and an Augustinian Church in the town for worship by the general public. Through these activities, Augustinian monks reported that in 1599, their work had registered about 600 converts. Among these, was the exiled ruler of Pemba who was named Philip at his baptism. From then on, there were reports of even larger figures of conversions each year, often hitting the one thousand mark.⁹

In the duration in which all this was going on, the ruler of Mombasa was the same one who was in charge of Malindi, but who had been assigned to Mombasa in the 1590's when the Portuguese took control there following the brief disquiet of the 1580's. In 1614, however, quarrels sprang up between the Portuguese and the imported rulers from Malindi. Eventually, this resulted in the murder, under suspicious circumstances, of the ruler, Hassan bin Ahmed. In what turned out ultimately to be a cosmetic patch-work, the Portuguese took the ruler's seven year-old son, Yusuf bin Hassan, to Goa for education under the Augustinians, while his uncle served as regent ruler, awaiting Yusuf's turn on maturing. While in Goa, he was ostensibly converted to the Christian faith, and named Dom Jeronimo Chingulia at his baptism.¹⁰

He went on and married a Portuguese noblewoman and returned to East Africa in 1626 as the ruler of Mombasa and Malindi, among other places. From the beginning, there was friction between him and his Portuguese overlords. In addition to these disagreements he seemed to have two other problems. First, it was alleged that in his treatment of the subjects under him, he was tyrannical and despotic. Secondly, there were reports that he was given to a life of duplicity and double standards in that while he behaved as a Christian publicly, he was following Muslim ways secretly in private. When matters came to a head in 1631, he rebelled, attacked the Portuguese, and caused much havoc before fleeing to Arabia.¹¹ From this disastrous event, Portuguese control in East Africa, and any efforts at Christian activity that were connected with it were on a steady decline until complete extinction came at the end of the seventeenth century.¹² As Barrett has summed it up, the existing Christian efforts and the related "organized missionary work in Mombasa had thus collapsed long before the arrival of the first Protestants".¹³

Conclusion

When new Christian efforts were embarked upon towards the middle of the 19th century, there was no evidence or trace of Christian presence from these earlier attempts. This state of collapse and the resultant vacuum was the prevailing situation when Johann Ludwig Krapf arrived in East Africa in 1844.

It is with this in view that it has been categorically and accurately stated that Christianity, as it exists in East Africa today was introduced there by Krapf and his German missionary colleagues, Johann Rebmann and James Erhardt. This trio of Lutherans working under the auspices of the Anglican body, the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) proved to be the pioneers who introduced Christianity in East Africa.¹⁴

END NOTES

¹C.P.Groves, The Planting of Christianity in Africa, Vol. I to 1840. (London. Lutherworth Press, 1964 Reprint) [First Published in 1948], 119.

²Robert W. July, A History of the African People.(New York. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 84-85.

³Roland Oliver, ed., The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 3, from c. 1050 to c. 1600. (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1977), 231.

⁴Lamin Sanneh, West African Christianity: The Regions Impact. (London. C. Hurst and Co., 1983), 21. As part of the enterprise of exploration crosses were planted to signify Portuguese priority in areas contacted.

⁵Zablon Nthamburi, ed., From Mission to Church: A Handbook of Christianity in East Africa. (Nairobi. Uzima Press, 1991), 2

⁶Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions. (Middlesex, England. Penguin Books, 1964), 148.

⁷Carl-Erik Sahlberg, From Krapf to Rugambwa: A Church History of Tanzania. (Nairobi. Evangel Press, 1986), 12.

⁸John Baur, The Catholic Church in Kenya: A Centenary History. (Nairobi. St. Paul Publications - Africa, 1990),16.

⁹Nthamburi, ed., From Mission to Church, 4.

¹⁰Baur, The Catholic Church in Kenya, 17.

¹¹Zoe Marsh and G.W. Kingsworth, An Introduction to the History of East Africa. (Cambridge. Cambridge Press, 1961), 16-17.

¹²Lukas Malishi, A History of the Catholic Church in Tanzania. (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Episcopal Conference, 1990), 11. [See Barrett, David. et al. eds., Kenya Churches Handbook. (Kisumu, Kenya. Evangel Publishing House, 1973), 29. This was an unsuccessful attempt which disappeared with the end of Portuguese occupation and presence in 1698].

¹³David Barrett, et.al.eds., Kenya Churches Handbook, 30.

¹⁴Watson Omulokoli, "The Introduction and Beginnings of Christianity in East Africa", *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 2 (2003): 29-33.

CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR *AJET*

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