

PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIC TRADE AND RELIGION ON THE EAST COAST OF AFRICA

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Abstract

Sabaeen (pre-Islamic Arabic) colonies were established in Ethiopia very early (at the beginning of the seventh century BC) as is proved by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language, religion and writing as well as by the oral traditions of the Lemba in Southern Africa. The Sabaeen King, Kharabit, was, 'to an indefinite extent', in possession of the eastern coast of Africa. The Sabaeans' widespread commerce brought them and their colonies into contact with both Christianity and Judaism but also with some 'pagan' Sabaeen concepts. The Falasha constitute a people who furnish us with not only a key to the evolution of the religious beliefs of a people under Sabaeen influence but also a parallel to what we believe happened elsewhere down the coast of East Africa, wherever Ethiopians of Amhara extraction or Sabaeans settled. For at least three thousand years the Indian Ocean trading networks involved people and commodities from a variety of cultures who, in the course of trade, also exchanged religious ideas and practices. Trade and religion exerted a reciprocal influence on one another.

1. Introduction

Some of the earliest mentions of the maritime undertakings and trade between the Semitic world (Tyre, Israel and Saba/Sheba) and Africa are probably to be found in the Old Testament. 1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-9, 12 refer to the 'kingdom' of Saba (Hebrew: *Sheba*; the ancient kingdom of south western Arabia

and the Horn of Africa) and narrate how the famous Queen of Sheba¹ came to visit King Solomon (approx 1000 BC²). She gave the king ‘*a hundred and twenty talents of gold*, a very great quantity of spices, precious stones; never again came such an abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon’ (1 Kings 10:1-13). Isaiah 60:6 mentions ‘... the caravan of camels... All coming from Sheba; ...they shall bring gold and frankincense’. This legend is also contained in the Ethiopian *Kebrā Nagast* (‘the Glory of the Kings’; the oldest version dates back to the 6th century AD).³ The *Kebrā Nagast* records that the head of the queen’s trading caravans was a man called Tamrin who supplied King Solomon with building materials for the Temple⁴ (*Kebrā Nagast*, #25-26, 28). It tells us of her *commercial* visit to Solomon, but also of her resultant *religious conversion* to Judaism. She decided to abandon the worship of the sun, stars, and trees and proclaimed that ‘... henceforth I shall not serve the sun but the Creator of the sun, the God of Israel’ (*Kebrā Nagast*, #25-26, 28; cf. Ullendorff 1960; 1974:110; Corinaldi 1998; Le Roux 2004).

Apparently the Sabaeans or pre-Islamic Arabians and their ‘neighbours’, the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) in Africa were rich merchants in the gold trade, since Arabia itself is deficient in gold (Bent 1969:227). Names of Sabaean kings appear in the Assyrian inscriptions of the eighth and seventh centuries BC. These record that Teima, Saba and Haipa paid Tiglath Pileser (733 BC) tribute in gold, silver and incense; similarly Sargon (715 BC), Eratosthenes (276-194 BC), Agatharchides (120 BC) and Artemidorus (100 BC) speak of the wealth and greatness of the Sabaeans (ANET 1969; Müller 1888:24). Agatharchides the Greek geographer of Knidos reports that much of their (the Sabaeans) wealth came from the trade from Africa (Bent 1969:227).

By the tenth century BC the kingdom of Saba was maintaining colonies along trade routes leading to Palestine and had been able to develop the overland

¹ Named Makeda in Ethiopian tradition and Bilqis in Islamic tradition (cf. Philby 1981:43ff; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheba>). Sheba is mentioned several times in the Bible, e.g. in the Table of Nations (Gen 10:7), listed along with Dedan, as a descendant of Noah’s son Ham (as sons of Raamah son of Cush); another Sheba is listed in the Table of Nations (Gen 10:28) as a son of Joktan, another descendant of Noah’s son Shem; in Genesis 25:3, Sheba and Dedan are listed as names of sons of Jokshan, son of Abraham; and yet another Sheba is mentioned in 2 Samuel 20:1-22 who rebelled against King David, was beheaded and his head thrown over the wall by the people in the city of Abel in order to save their lives (cf. Philby 1981:27-42).

² More recent archaeological inquiry questions, to some extent, the conventional dating of the Solomonic era.

³ In Ethiopian tradition, the last of the three Sheba’s mentioned in footnote 1 (Joktan’s son) is considered the primary ancestor of the original Semitic component in their ethnogenesis, while Sabtah and Sabtecah, sons of Cush, are considered the ancestors of the Cushitic element (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheba>).

⁴ The authenticity of this visit is given further support by the fact that it is set side by side with an account of Solomon’s relation with another local ruler, King Hiram of Tyre (1 Ki 9: 11-28), who similarly cooperated in adding worldly riches to the proverbial wisdom of Solomon.

camel trade route with the north, as the legendary visit of the Queen of Sheba shows. Sabaeen colonies were also established in Abyssinia at a very early period (at the beginning of the seventh century BC), which is demonstrated by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language and religion, as well as by the oral traditions of groups who migrated to Southern Africa (Gayre of Gayre 1972:89).

Over many centuries from the first millennium BC onwards Saba received Semitic immigrants from south-west Arabia. The result was a Semitic religion and linguistic⁵ penetration into Abyssinian culture. The Falasha-Abyssinians constitute a people who provide us with a key to the evolution of the religious beliefs of a people under Sabaeen influence as well as a parallel to what we believe happened elsewhere down the coast of East Africa wherever Ethiopians of Amhara extraction or Sabaeans settled. The *commercial* activities of the Abyssinians also exercised a major influence on the *religion* of the populations in Saba (and later Yemen) and similarly on those of the East coast of Africa.

Africa's eastern littoral has attracted traders and travellers from inland Africa and various destinations in the Persian Gulf, India, China, Indonesia and the eastern Mediterranean for at least three thousand years (cf. Horton & Middleton 2000). Over the centuries formal trading caravans bearing such valued commodities as ivory, gold, spices and slaves wended their way eastward through the African interior to the shores of the Indian Ocean. There, middlemen, such as the Swahili⁶ and the Lemba, living in urban settlements would purchase the cargo in exchange for foods acquired from seafaring traders who arrived on the coast in vessels called dhows. In this manner, Chinese ceramics, Indian textiles, Venetian and Phoenician beads, Indonesian spices, Arabian glassware, ancient mining techniques and a variety of religious and linguistic concepts spread throughout eastern, central and southern Africa as brokers created for themselves privileged positions in a lucrative international network.

The so-called Swahili coast was dotted about with villages, small in size, starting in the North with Mogadishu (which is now the capital of Somalia) and ranging south to Sofala (in modern Mozambique). Each village was supplied with fruit and vegetables from the cultivated areas within and without the village boundaries (http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1624_story_of_africa/page77.shtml).

For at least three thousand years the Indian Ocean trading networks involved people and commodities from a variety of cultures who, in the course of trade, also exchanged religious ideas and practices.

⁵ Linguistic evidence points to a close historical relationship between the two sides of the Red Sea, as South Semitic languages are found only in two places: southern Arabia (modern Yemen and Oman), and the Horn of Africa (modern Eritrea and Ethiopia; cf. Korotayev 1995; 1996).

⁶ Similarities of words and peculiarities of grammar and constructions have been noted in the Sumerian and Swahili languages (Stigand 1913:116 and Ingrams 1931:44, in Duffey 2004:3).

The reconstruction of the prehistory or religious background of any tribe in Africa (or elsewhere) is no easy task and this is very much the case with the people on the East coast of Africa.⁷ The earliest available accounts which in one way or another refer to tribes or groups in Africa stem from maritime undertakings of different groups all over the world, mainly the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Arabs (Sabaeans) and the Portuguese (Le Roux 2003:31).

This article investigates the possible Semitic connections with the east coast of Africa from available sources and specifically tries to indicate the interaction between the pre-Islamic Arabians (Sabaeans) and the Abyssinians and the influence their commercial activities brought to bear on the religion and language of each other and on other groups on the south-eastern coast of Africa. A possible link between the Falasha-Abyssinians and the Lemba will be scrutinised. Apparently, religion and trade were inseparable and have reciprocally influenced one another (cf. Le Roux 2003:31, 32). Due to limited sources, both written and archaeological, I have been obliged to rely heavily on oral traditions and to attempt to construct plausible theories around the little information available.⁸

2. Maritime Undertakings between the Semitic World and East Africa

2.1 *The Tyrian-Hebrew expeditions*

From the earliest times the Phoenicians⁹ (or Tyrians) traded with the land of Ophir (1 Ki 10:11-15; in some sources known as Afurr¹⁰) and Punt and subsequently beyond both to the south and to the east (see map, Le Roux 2003). Because of the

⁷ The task is even more difficult if we accept that 'unnatural' boundaries, drawn around human groupings, were most probably the invention of seventeenth and eighteenth century European colonialists, missionaries, travellers and others in southern Africa (and elsewhere; Chidester 1996:240; 1992). We therefore have to search in earlier records (other than the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) for references to human groupings other than those invented by comparativists.

⁸ This is not an in depth study of the religion of the Ethiopians or the Lemba, but is rather intended to indicate some traces of, mainly, the pre-Islamic Judaised Arabs on the East coast of Africa which bear witness to some of the maritime activities that took place between the pre-Islamic Sabaeans/Arabs and this part of Africa.

⁹ One Phoenician voyage is believed to have circumnavigated Africa from West to East in about 600 BC (Herodotus, *History* iv, 42, 43; cf. Le Roux 2003:32; 2008). The role played by the Phoenicians has been interpreted diversely, and the historical value of the biblical accounts has been evaluated differently (cf. Lipiński 2004:191-194). It is well known that King Solomon drew rich merchandise from an alliance which he had formed with Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Ki 10:11-15; Gn 10: 29). It took Solomon's fleet three years to return and bring various kinds of items that would be the combined products of the coast of East Africa and of Southern India.

¹⁰ Note the similarities with the name Africa. 'In the dryer country near the Zambezi Rift Valley on his journey towards the beautiful Nyanga Mountains, Dr. Carl Peters (like the earlier Portuguese explorers), came upon the Fura or Afurra Mountain (renamed Mt. Darwin by the English colonists of Rhodesia.) He encountered many variations of the word "Furra" (Arabic "Furr" or "Afurr"). The root is obvious – the biblical word Ophir (Private communication, Ian Kluckow 2007; Cf. Colvin, D 1909). Ilias (2008) refers to 'Judaising groups' on the west coast of India, exhibiting African features.

monsoon winds and the distance, it was nevertheless, impossible to voyage to and from Ophir (assuming it was in India) without making a principal landfall at Ethiopia (the Horn of Africa) or further southwards at Sofala. The latter is a specific town on the coast in modern day Mozambique, but it is also the name of the area between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers (Le Roux 2003; an area very rich in gold).¹¹

Many earlier sources ‘tentatively’ link Ophir and Sofala as the port whence Hiram of Tyre brought gold for Solomon’s temple (Summers 1963:18). Kitchen argues that if Ophir¹² was situated in Sofala on the east coast of Africa, it could have been ‘an 11th-10th century BC successor to Punt and ‘Amau,¹³ and therefore a source of gold for possible Tyrian-Hebrew (and other) expeditions’ (Kitchen 1997:144). Usually Pwanit or Punt is identified with the north coast of modern Somalia (Mogadishu), but the Egyptians (who made use of the Phoenician seafarers, as early as 2400 BC) report that they obtained antimony, incense and wood in Pwanit or Punt (Casson 1989:11n2; Lacroix 1998) which was not produced in the Horn of Africa but in Sofala (modern Mozambique).¹⁴

The most famous expedition yielding the most extensive evidence is the naval expedition sent to Punt in the ninth year of Queen Hatshepsut’s reign (1473 – 1458 BC) commanded by a Nubian, named Nehsi. It is vividly recorded on the walls of her celebrated mortuary temple at Deir-el-Bahri, near Thebes. The inscription records that the Puntites were astonished that it was possible that strangers could reach such a distant and unknown country, which suggests that the journey was much further to the south than normally expected. The inscription also refers to the ‘myrrh-terraces’ which could be the extensive Nyanga terrace complex of eastern Zimbabwe (Duffey 2004:5), in the district of Sofala, but scholars have not arrived at a satisfactory answer yet.

To this day Pwanit (or Punt) is the Swahili word indicating ‘seaside’ and the chances are that the similar word may have existed 2,600 years ago. Similarly the word Sofala is derived from the Hebrew word (or Arab word) Shephelah, meaning ‘Coastal Plain’ (Bent 1969).

¹¹ Great Zimbabwe lies almost due west of the settlement of the coastal town of Sofala.

¹² Despite much research and speculation the real location of Ophir remains a mystery (Le Roux 2008:9). The discussion of the various possibilities falls outside the parameters of this investigation.

¹³ Duffey (2004:2) argues that the ancient traders who knew how to reach the riches of Southern Africa tried to keep the whereabouts a secret, and they often used the same names for quite different places; for example, both Africa and Indonesia were referred to as the ‘Land of the Waqwāk’ and the word ‘Meluhla’ was used for both the East Coast and the Indus Valley.

¹⁴ Wooden logs (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*; or African blackwood) were found on the Ulu Burun (1400 BC; shipwreck) which grows as far south as Mozambique. This is the same wood used for furniture in Tutankhamun’s tomb and most probably that mentioned in the Punt inscriptions (cf. Bass 1987, in Duffey 2004:5).

2.2 The Sabaeans' or pre-Islamic Arabians' (Yemenites') trade and expansion

The pre-Islamic Arabians (Sabaeans/Yemenites) were one of the great Semitic maritime powers of ancient times, who must have been involved in any settlement and exploitation of the coast of East Africa (Gayre of Gayre 1965:212; McCrindle 1973:10). The Sabaean Kingdom¹⁵ was widely referred to as Saba (meaning 'man' or 'trader' in Arabic). The chief city of the Sabaeans, the present-day Mar'ib, probably flourished as did no other city of ancient Arabia, since it was a focal point of caravan routes between seaports of the Mediterranean and the frankincense-growing¹⁶ region of the Hadramaut¹⁷ (cf. Holditch 1902, in Gayre of Gayre 1972:89). They prospered in the frankincense, myrrh, and spice trade until the Romans began to open the sea routes through the Red Sea (McCrindle 1973:11). People were also imported: an inscription of the third century BC, in the temple of Athtar at Qarnaw, mentions Gaza twenty-eight times and lists detail of naturalization requirements for foreign women from Phoenicia and Egypt but also from Arab descent¹⁸ (Mackintosh-Smith 2007:39).

Several navigational factors of outstanding importance were involved in the foundation of the settlements by Arabs and others on the coast of East Africa (Le Roux 2008). The Arab ships, even at the beginning of the Christian era, used lateen sails. With this rig they could sail much closer into the wind than was possible in any other early craft. The Arab dhow was not only the most efficient but also the fastest vessel of its time (Van Dijk 2006).¹⁹ The Sabaeans were

¹⁵ The better watered, higher areas of southwest Arabia supported three early kingdoms: The Minaean, which existed approx. 1200 to 650 BC, was centred in the interior of what is now Yemen, but probably embraced most of southern Arabia; the Sabaean (Saba) kingdom, founded about 930 BC and which lasted until about 115 BC, probably supplanted the Minaean kingdom which occupied substantially the same territory (and the Hadramaut). The Himyarites followed the Sabaeans as the leaders in southern Arabia in about 115 BC to about AD525.

¹⁶ 'At a very early date, the South Arabian states had become aware of the demand for aromatic gums, as the Pharaonic Egyptians were considerable burners of incense and substantial consumers of another Arabian product, myrrh, used medicinally and in the mummification process' (Mackintosh-Smith 2007:39). Incense-burners from this period, remarkably similar in form to Arabian examples, are found over the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean. Other commodities were also traded, but the South Arabians managed to keep their sources a secret in order to retain their monopoly on the carriage of such goods. The Romans alone spent 85 tons of coined silver a year on incense, while myrrh was vastly more expensive and the spices and other luxury goods which passed in transit through South Arabia fetched similarly high prices (Mackintosh-Smith 2007:37-38). The gum of *Boswellia sacra* was consumed.

¹⁷ There was a large dam nearby which provided water for irrigation (cf. Holditch 1902, in Gayre of Gayre 1972:89). The great dam of Mar'ib possibly dates from 1700 BC – its construction is attributed to the father of Himyar the founder of the Himyaritic Dynasty.

¹⁸ The God of the Old Testament used the prospect of transportation to the Sabaeans as a threat to his people (Mackintosh-Smith 2007:39).

¹⁹ Similar kinds of dhows are still found in different harbours on the east coast of Africa.

therefore much better equipped for long distance ocean travel than were most of their rivals.

Of further prime importance (as mentioned above) was the monsoon wind and system of currents off the east coast of Africa. With the aid of the north-east monsoon, the Sabaeans could, without difficulty, sail down the east coast of Africa to near the borders of modern-day Mozambique or even a little further south (Gayre of Gayre 1972; Casson 1989:11, 12, 283-291). After three months they could use the south-east trade winds to return northwards to the equator where the south-west monsoon would take them across the Indian Ocean to India²⁰ and Ceylon (Gayre of Gayre 1965:225). From there they could turn towards the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea with the north-east monsoon because they were able to sail sufficiently close to the wind. Sofala was remote from Arabia, but it lay on one possible route to the East (Duffey 2004:2; Le Roux 2008:9). Duffey (2004:2) argues that the 'world has always thought that India was the source of the raw materials which actually came from Africa'. He is convinced that India has always been the entrepôt through which products from Africa, the Mediterranean world and the Far East exchanged hands.

The Sabaeans (and the Himyarites) were probably the first Arabs to settle permanently on the east coast of Africa. The ruins of Arab warehouses along the shore of Mozambique are more than 1000 years old and the remains are said to have been destroyed in a punitive raid by Vasco da Gama (St Aubin de Teran 2007).

According to the Periplus, as early as the seventh century BC the south-west Arabians (Sabaeans) began to expand to nearby Africa (Periplus [of the Erythraean Sea], first century AD; in Landstrom 1964:52; cf. Fage 1978:55; Davidson 1992). In part they went as *traders*, seeking supplies of incense, spices and ivory, but they soon discovered better conditions for agriculture in Eritrea and Ethiopia²¹ than those at home. From there they needed to penetrate even further into Africa to exploit trade routes for commodities such as ivory, gold and gum. In the ancient world myrrh was more precious than gold. The southern African variety of the myrrh tree, called *Commiphora Africana*, which is known for its sweet smelling gum and resin, is mainly found in Zimbabwe, northern Namibia, northern Botswana and the northern Limpopo province (in South Africa; Palgrave 1995:357-358' in Duffey 2004:5). According to Duffey (2004:6; cf. Le Roux 2008) it is undoubtedly the exact region in which ancient mining²² in sub-Saharan

²⁰ It is impossible to visit any town in north Mozambique without noticing the presence of Indian merchants. Although the overall power of the Indian settlers was later usurped by the more warlike Arabs, the Indian legacy remains to this day (St Aubin de Teran 2007: 73).

²¹ Behind the arid western coastland of the Red Sea.

²² One name that was cogent in the Arab (and Abyssinian) world was Suleiman – bin – Daoud (Solomon, the son of David); therefore, when the Arabs and part-Arab traders saw deserted buildings and mine workings in the heart of Africa, they could naturally ascribe these apparently ancient places to their folklore hero Solomon (Summers 1963: 8, footnote 1).

Africa took place and where the vast Nyanga terrace network is situated. This movement into south-eastern Africa included not only Sabaeans, but also Arabian Jewish elements (Fage 1978:55).

The Periplus furthermore records that the Sabaean King Kharabit, in AD 35, was ‘... to an indefinite extent’ in possession of the eastern coast of Africa (Bent 1969:229),²³ where his people exchanged spears, axes, knives and glassware for ivory and tortoiseshell (*Geographi, graeci minors, Périple de la Mer Erythrée*, in Bruder 2008:121). The whole coast was governed by Karibā-II (Charibael), a Sabaean king whose capital was at Zafor (probably Sofala)²⁴ and who ruled between 40 and 70 AD (Gayre of Gayre 1965:222,223). The name of the Kariba Dam in modern day Zimbabwe is paralleled by that of the latter Sabaean king, or of a Priest King, of Saba, Kariba-ili-Water (Gayre of Gayre 1972:68; cf. Hommel 1897:322). This confirms a very early pre-Islamic-Arabic influence in East Africa.

3. Religious Turmoil in the Sabaean Kingdom

3.1 Hebrew influence in Saba

Judaism²⁵ was introduced very early into the Sabaean ‘kingdom’. According to the folklore of Yemenite (Sabaean) Jews, their ancient forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen, ‘... exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple’. No historical record of such a settlement has been found thus far, but their presence is attested during the centuries immediately preceding Islam by Muslim and Christian sources, as well as by local inscriptions written in the Himyarite language (Gotein 1969:226, 227). Inscriptions dedicated by some of Dhū Nuwas’ (died AD 525) noblemen prove that the All-merciful (Rahmān - the Talmudic name for God) was worshipped in shrines originally sacred to local gods (Gotein 1972:227).²⁶

In the pre-Islamic period, *Judaism* was indeed widely practised in the area (Yemen) while there were Jews in the Hadramaut even after the rise of Islam (632 AD; Beeston (1952:16-22)).²⁷ Arabic sources indicate that those Jewish groups in

²³ A Greek inscription, from Axum in Abyssinia, further confirms this statement (Bent 1969:229). Gayre of Gayre (1965:222,223) similarly refers to the ports at the coast of East Africa which were in the hands of Arabs (who were subject to Mocha in Yemen) and which were actually part of Saba or Sheba.

²⁴ The Portuguese named ‘Sofala’, Sofara (Zophara).

²⁵ Although Judaism and Jewishness are not equal denominators, in the context of ‘Judaising groups’ these concepts are now sometimes used interchangeably (Parfitt 1997:2; Le Roux 2004:5). This immediately provokes the question as to how ‘Judaism’ should be defined. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:2) contends that ‘... there is, of course, no stable object called Judaism...’ Commonly Judaism refers to both a religious as well as an ethnic community who reflect a particular way of life, and who practise a unique set of beliefs and values (Ellison 1988:631).

²⁶ These sources also bear witness that the Jews in Yemen were in close contact with their co-religionists in Palestine and that they proselytised vigorously in their adopted country (Goitein 1969:226).

²⁷ Torrey (1933:131-133) accepts the likelihood of an Israelite presence in southern Arabia dating from Solomonic times. The Jewish community in Yemen, who were repatriated to the newly founded state of

Yemen had the Ark of the Covenant in their possession and used it against their enemies on the Peninsula (in Parfitt 2008:113, 114, 210 – 213; cf. le Roux 2009).

Putting aside the earlier Hebrew influences in Saba, in our era the Sabaeans' widespread commerce brought them into contact with both *Christianity and Judaism*. Both religions were established and to a considerable degree supplanted the existing religious beliefs, which were based mainly on *astrology and occultism* (Gayre of Gayre 1972:227).

The Sabaean kingdom endured a series of vicissitudes including a Jewish dynasty and conquest by Ethiopia in the sixth century AD which must have sent many more Arabs overseas to the African colonies and outposts.

3.2 *Judaism and Christianity in Saba*

At the end of the third century (about 270 AD) the Axumites (the Ethiopians of Axum) invaded the Himyarites in Yemen, South Arabia (Dart 1955:21). The Himyarites became independent a century later (375 AD) and soon afterwards adopted the *Jewish faith*.

The last Himyarite ('Homeric') king, Dhú Nuwás who became converted to Judaism, weakened both Christianity and Judaism and opened the way for the conversion of the Arabian peoples to Islam (Gayre of Gayre 1972:89). He became a devoted Jew whose zeal *alienated Christian merchants*. According to Hendrickx, he was notorious for his persecution and massacre of the Christians in his country, which by 399 AD had already led to the termination of his reign and the invasion by Abyssinians²⁸ on behalf of their Christian brothers (1991:181; Gayre of Gayre 1972:94). Gayre of Gayre explains that many Sabaeans were *converted to Christianity* under Constantius II by the Indian Theophilus, but another account credits this event to the reign of Anastasius (491-518 AD; 1972:89; cf. Muller 1888:739). It was a Byzantine fleet that transported the Ethiopian army across the Red Sea (Shahîd 1979:25).

The Sabaeans' last Jewish king was killed in 525 AD and an *Abyssinian (Christian Ethiopian)* governor was appointed there (Dart 1955:21; cf. Hendrickx 1984:69-74, in Hendrickx 1991). Ethiopia remained Byzantium's ally²⁹ in the Afro-Arabian regions and also in the Red Sea.

The flourishing Christian elements in Yemen disappeared under *Islamic rule*, but *Judaism stood firm* throughout the history of that country and greatly influenced Sabaean colonies in East Africa (Goitein 1969:227).

In turn, the *Judaised Arabs* were persecuted by the Christians so that after several conquests and resultant pressure to migrate, they left for the Himyarite

Israel in 1948, formed a large section of Yemen's artisans, gold and silversmiths and weavers (Beeston 1952:16-22).

²⁸ The Christian Ethiopian ruler of Axum, Caleb, reigned from 493-535 AD.

²⁹ Hendrickx is convinced that the Axumite-Byzantine alliance dated from somewhere between 527 and 535 AD, i.e. during the reign of Emperor Justinian.

colonies in East Africa and Mashonaland (present-day Zimbabwe),³⁰ in ships, of which their merchants boasted plenty (Hendrickx 1984:69-74, in Hendrickx 1991). Hendrickx (1991:181; cf. Papadopoulus 1966:27-28; Sellassie 1972:128-135, Hendrickx 1984:69-74, in Hendrickx 1991 and Letsios 1988:248 sq) surmises that there is not enough evidence for the alleged flight of the 'Jewish' Yemenites to East Africa, and states that the question of Himyarite colonisation is still controversial. But in general most scholars could concur with this theory. It is clear, though, that the groups who left for Africa were *not Muslim* (cf. Gayre of Gayre 1972: 90-94; Hendrickx 1984:69-74, in Hendrickx 1991) and this concurs with Lemba tradition in Southern Africa (Le Roux 1999:34). The east coast of Africa has offered itself perpetually, and has served repeatedly, as an escape route for dissident or conquered Arabians or other Near Eastern communities (Dart 1955:21).

In Yemen, an oral tradition supports the belief that a group of Jews left Yemen centuries ago (the exact period is not certain) for Africa, and did not return (Parfitt 1995:5). This again constitutes a tradition of the Lemba in Southern Africa

Most probably the Sabaeen traders could have been the pioneers of *Judaised and Christianised Arab influence* as far south as Mozambique, before the arrival of later Islamic Arabs (Le Roux 1999:35). Therefore, it could have been possible for a group such as the Yemenite Jews (most probably the ancestors of the Lemba) to become involved in this way in Africa and eventually establish themselves here. This possibility is attested in the many place names, provinces, rivers and other names in ancient and modern southeast African countries (see below).

We may expect that from the time that the *Semites* (Judaised or Christianised Arabs) first made commercial contact with the coast of East Africa, both cultural mixing and genetic miscegenation could have taken place with the native populations, as the Lemba tradition holds (Le Roux 1999:35). However, important is the fact that it seems clear that the influences of religions such as Judaism and Christianity transmitted through maritime activities were operative in Africa, long before that of Islam. The groups who left for Africa were *not Muslim* (cf Gayre of Gayre 1972: 90-94; Hendrickx 1984:69-74, in Hendrickx 1991).³¹

³⁰ Some scholars suggest that the Sabaeans were an integral element of the development of the Zimbabwean civilisation (Cf. Mullan 1969:135). This subject, however, falls outside the framework of this investigation.

³¹ 'By 326 AD the Persians had driven the Arabs from the Persian Gulf and when they had also driven the Abyssinians from Yemen (579 AD), they were in control of both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea routes of maritime traffic between Asia and Africa on the one side and the Mediterranean area and Europe on the other side' (Dart 1955:21). Fifty years later the Ethiopian Christian government was overthrown by the Persian king Chosroes II (579 AD) so that the proselytism by Islam of the Yemen (Saba) was made possible (Gayre of Gayre 1972:94).

4. Religious Pluralism on the East Coast of Africa

4.1 *The Horn of Africa (Falasha-Abyssinia)*

One of the major landfalls on the voyage to and from Ophir (presuming it was in India³²) was at the Horn of Africa (as stated above). The influence of trade on the religious emergence of Abyssinia was immense, as were similarly the role and influence of the Abyssinians along the East coast of Africa.

The Falasha-Abyssinians, like the former ruling Amhara and its monarchy, claim to be derived from King Solomon³³ and the Queen of Sheba (Saba) through a hypothetical son named Menelek (*Kebrā Nagast*).

... [i]n the course of time, elements of this culture [Hebrew] had been absorbed by the Sabaeans, so that the invading Semitic Amhara brought into Ethiopia some elements of religion which they share in common with the Falashas which are of primitive Hebrew derivation, as well as other elements from pagan [sic] Arabian sources. When the Amhara became Christian, both these cultural traditions were absorbed into Coptic Christianity. Furthermore, when the Sabaeans turned from Christianity and adopted Judaism the probability is that it was a primitive and debased form of that religion analogous to what now survives among the Falashas... rather than the more sophisticated religion associated with the Hebrews at the end of the pre-Christian Dispensation or with Jewry since (my insertion; Gayre of Gayre 1972:96).

Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) *became Christian* in the fourth century³⁴ (Dart 1955:22). This was based on an existing structure of *Arabian-Semitic cultural* elements, in which some degree of *Judaism* was involved. It is significant that even today Ethiopian Christianity retains many Jewish rites and customs, such as the keeping of an Ark of the Covenant in each church, and the practice of circumcision (Gayre of Gayre 1972:94). Ullendorff (1960:110,111; cf. Foran 1957:72) states that the ‘cult’ of the Falashas³⁵ specifically is a mixture of Judaism, paganism, and some Christian elements. He is convinced that ‘... like their Christian fellow Ethiopians, the Falashas are stubborn adherents to

The Persian power did not last long in Yemen and within fifty years the local governor submitted to the newly-arisen prophet ‘Mahomet’ and turned Muslim (628 AD; Dart 1955:21). The brothers Suleiman and Said migrated from Oman in 683 AD to establish the first Arabian settlements of the Islamic era along the East Coast (Dart 1955:21). This was a period of religious turmoil in the Near East.

³² Flavius Arianus, Greek Governor of Cappadocia states that Ophir was not in India.

³³ We know that this son of David maintained trading posts in the Red Sea in connection with his overseas trade and it seems not unreasonable to assume that these so-called Jews of Ethiopia derive their cultural descent from Hebrew trading peoples in or about the region of Saba at the time of King Solomon, and Hiram King of Tyre (1 Ki 9:26-28; cf. Le Roux 2004).

³⁴ It had been introduced by three Tyrian Phoenicians: one of them, Frumentius, was consecrated Bishop of the Ethiopian Church in Axum (326 AD) by Athanasius of Alexandria (Dart 1955:22).

³⁵ The heroic age (1270-1632) marked the ‘beginning of the Falasha (Beta Israel) as an identifiable named group, formed in response to the impact of a revived Christian state and proselytizing church’ (Qurin 1992:40).

formalised Hebraic-Jewish beliefs, practices, and customs, which were transplanted from South Arabia into the Horn of Africa.’

If it were derived from Sabaeen sources it would be a debased Judaism and based largely on the Mosaic Law and little else, with, as among the Falasha to this day, other gods quite apart from the one God of Hebrew religion. According to Foran (1957:73) the influence of the *Semitic traders* on the religion of the people of East Africa has survived among them in a crude form: a genuine belief in the existence of an All-Wise God. He is of the opinion that almost every condition of the African’s life compels them to cling tenaciously to that belief (cf. Isichei 2004).

Quirin (1992:18) states that there is ‘persuasive evidence that the Hebraic-Judaic’ elements in Ethiopian Christianity must have been due to a pre-Christian Jewish presence in ‘Aksum’. Getatchew Haile concurs that the *Hebraic-Jewish elements* were part of the indigenous ‘Aksumite’ culture adopted into Ethiopian Christianity (1988:246). This interpretation does not explain whether such ‘indigenous’ Jewish influence came from South Arabian traders or through Egypt. But it is in accord with the local tradition that Ethiopia was Jewish before it was Christian, a tradition embodied in the fundamental but controversial legend of Solomon and Sheba as written in the *Kebrā Nagast* (‘Glory of the Kings’; cf. Levine 1973:12; Crummey 1975:266-278).

The religion of the Abyssinians not only contains *Cushitic elements*, which were animistic combined with the veneration of the serpent, but also ‘pagan’ *Sabaeen concepts* which were based upon Athtar (Ashtar or Ishtar, Venus), Almaqah (Sin, the moon-god) and Dhat Himyam (Shams, the sun-goddess; Gayre of Gayre 1972:96). It is clear that wherever the Sabaeans settled, even when they were Judaised or Christianised, some elements of these ‘pagan’ or traditional religions of Arabia would always be in evidence in some way or another (Gayre of Gayre 1972:97).

The overland route to the south along the Nile obviously attracted the interest of Abyssinians/Ethiopians in the merchandise from Sofala and other gold-rich countries in the South (Gayre of Gayre 1972; Anderson 1887).

In 943 AD Masudi (the Arab geographer) reports that ‘Sofala [in present-day Zimbabwe and Mozambique], from which much gold was brought ..., was inhabited by a tribe of Abyssinians who had emigrated there recently, and whose king, called Waklimi, had his capital there’ (my insertion; Kenyon, in Caton-Thompson 1931:264; Huffman 1972). Summers (1963:100) is of the opinion that the ‘Abyssinians’ were probably some group ‘differing from the existing inhabitants’. It has been suggested by Blake-Thompson (in Summers 1963:90) that they were Shona-speaking groups belonging to the great Shawa clan (cf. Shabwah in ancient Yemen) whose traditions ascribe to them an origin some distance away in the Horn of Africa. Summers adds that a number of the place

names in Zimbabwe³⁶ connected with these people use a variant of the clan name as their root – Mashaba, Shabani, Sabi and so on (meaning trade or trader).

Four hundred years earlier, in 547 AD, Cosmas, a Christian monk and an Alexandrian merchant traveller,³⁷ states that the Abyssinian king of Axum was active in the trade for gold and regularly sent naval expeditions to Sasos. He explains that Zingium ‘... lies beyond the country where the incense grows, which is called Barbaria’. Menell (1902:81-84) points out that ‘... [b]eyond Barbaria there stretches an ocean, which has the name of Zingion, bordering on the same sea is the land called Sasos which possesses abundant gold mines’ (in Gaye of Gayre 1965:223). He adds that it took six months to go and return, describes how these trading Abyssinian people bartered oxen, salt and iron for gold and explains how ‘the winter of those regions coincides with the summer amongst us.’³⁸ Dart is convinced that Sasos refers to ‘Rhodesia’ (the former Zimbabwe; 1959:14).

The coastline of Sofala (Sufālah)³⁹ was known as the land of Zing (meaning ‘heathen’ or ‘Gentile’). Ancient geographers such as Masudi (Theal 1964:200; Von Sicard 1952:175) speak of the aborigines of Central Africa as being the zindji, Zang or Zenj. The words Senzi or Zindji (Vhazhenzhi) have been preserved by the Lemba/Basena of Southern Africa for more than 1000 years with the same connotation of disdain (Stayt 1931:236).⁴⁰

Dart (1955:20) argues that ... there is correspondence too great for sheer coincidence between the historical datings arrived at independently by isotopes, by beads, and by these two ancient Christian and Moslem documentary records – of Abyssinian gold-getting from the territory in Africa beyond the Bantu and south of the equator called Sasos in the sixth century, and of the Abyssinian settlement in Sofala amongst the local Bush-Hottentot people in the tenth century – respectively.

Dart (1955:22) stresses that the ... fact that the Axumite kingdom flourished in Abyssinia from the first to the seventh century, corroborates the inference that Abyssinian influence was the dominant foreign influence from the Red Sea to Rhodesia [modern-day Zimbabwe] between the third and seventh centuries⁴¹ (my insertion).

³⁶ Local tradition holds that Great Zimbabwe was originally a place where religious rites were conducted, rites connected with the ‘cult of Mwari, a local monotheistic religion associated with high places, with wind and with oracles in caves. In many ways it has Semitic connections’ (Summers 1963:100). It may be that, hidden in Arab writings there is something about Great Zimbabwe, for there is no doubt that these mighty travellers had trade contacts with the ‘ruins’, but so far nothing has come to light.

³⁷ In *Topographia Christiana*.

³⁸ This explains the spread of Abyssinian cattle to the south of Africa.

³⁹ Arab chroniclers sometimes fail to differentiate clearly the meaning of Sofala, ‘shoals and dangerous ground’ (Burke 1962:98) from the sense of the part of Sofala, i.e. the settlement as the Portuguese found it in 1498.

⁴⁰ This again confirms a very early pre-Islamic-Arabic influence in East Africa.

⁴¹ Fleets regularly sailed to and from India. Ships called at Mogadishu (Serapion) and Ras Hafun (Opone) in Somalia, at Luma on the Kenyan coast, at the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, and at a port called

Abyssinians probably settled in force in Sofala when the Sassanian Persians drove the Abyssinians out of Yemen towards the end of the sixth century and occupied the coast as far south as Zanzibar.

He is further persuaded (1955:22) that ‘if the subsequent course of Red Sea history is a true guide such events had occurred even earlier because the era was one of great religious turmoil in the Near East.’

At a very early stage, continuing influences between the Semitic world and that of the south-eastern parts of Africa clearly had a reciprocal impact on each other (Gayre of Gayre 1972; Anderson 1887).

4.2 Sofala (Basena/Balemba)

As mentioned above Sofala was one of the major landfalls on the journey to and from Ophir (if it was in India). The source of gold was Sofala, but the market for the gold was India. According to Duffey (2004:8) India was an importer of gold and not the exporter; the implication is that these passages needed to include a gold-rich country such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Sofala). Over thousands of years, ships arrived for their crews to find fresh water, to repair and renew their masts, and to trade timbers, spices, herbal remedies, ivory and the seemingly endless supply of black gold: slaves. For ships sailing up from the Horn of Africa, docking at Sofala and Ilha de Mozambique were a must. Within Mozambican territorial waters lie numerous ancient sunken ships.⁴²

Apparently, the Lemba people (the so-called Black Jews of Southern Africa), of Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa today, are to a certain extent the equivalent, in that setting, of the Falasha of Ethiopia. They live in small groups among the Venda in the Limpopo Province (SA), among the Sotho/Pedi in Sekhukhuneland (SA), among the Karanga of Belingwe district (Zimbabwe), in the Sabi valley and Sofala district in Mozambique and elsewhere. They are known by a variety of names such as Lemba, Remba, Mwenye, Basena and so forth, but all these discrete groups hold to common ideas which separate them from the people with whom they live.

Rhapta on the Rufiji or the Pangani River near Dar es Salaam in Tanganyika (Gayre of Gayre 1965:222). Duffey (Private communication, 2009) is convinced that Rhapta is Quilimane (on the coast of Mozambique).

⁴² From the Sofala and Ilha de Mosambique area, records refer to 90 000 slaves in one year, 58 000 in another, waning to 27 000 as the slave trade died elsewhere (St Aubin de Teran 2007: 245). Wherever there have been slave markets there must have been the descendants of Arab and local native Africans alike who whipped the ‘black gold’ across the land and onto the ships. What many descendants of slaves in the Diaspora find unthinkable is the part some black Africans played in the sale of their brothers and sisters (St Aubin de Teran 2007:247).

Among the Lemba or Basena, the tradition is to be found (in various forms) that they came by boat to Africa as traders from a place called Sena⁴³ on the other side of the Phusela (Wangemann 1868:437). They were in search of gold and after each trading expedition they went back to their country by sea, but they could not remember the name of their country. They were masters of iron and copper-smelting and also masters of timber-work, because they needed to build their own ships for their maritime undertakings (Le Roux 2003).

At different places in Africa they erected trading depots and left some of their people behind to take charge.⁴⁴ Then something bad happened in their country of origin – a war broke out and they, the *šavi*⁴⁵ (Mushavi, traders), could not return (Le Roux 2003:39, 40). Because they did not bring their wives along, they now were obliged to take wives from the Rozwi, Karanga, Zezuru and Govera tribes (Le Roux 2003:39, 40).

The Lemba tradition is furthermore perpetuated by traditions relating to how they built the city of Sena (II) in Africa on the Zambezi, which has also been located by many scholars (Le Roux 2003:40). Sena I to the north, where they rebuilt their place of origin for the first time, has not been located yet.

The Lemba were most probably the middlemen between the Arabs and the locals, in the area between the Zambezi- and the Sabi Rivers known (until the present) as the Sofala district. Huge Arab and other trading boats came into the interior with the Zambezi up to the harbour of the modern-day Tete (the remains of an ancient harbour are still visible). Peters (1902:393) reports the discovery of an ancient Egyptian Ushabté⁴⁶ figurine in the vicinity of Tete (at 17°S. lat. and 32°E long). Many scholars refer to the Lemba's highly developed technical skills as regards finding and reworking gold and other metals. Archaeological remains of possible Semitic inscriptions on the walls of an ancient Lemba site (Machemma; cf. De Vaal 1943), remains of ancient mining, smelting and other activities all over the Soutpansberg district in the northern parts of Southern Africa reflect their various skills. My investigation shows that they were most probably the traders who reworked and sold the gold at Mapungubwe (on the Limpopo) to Arab and other merchants⁴⁷ from all over the world (cf. Mathivha 1992). When due allowance is made for group pride, their claim is one which

⁴³ Ancient ruins of a city called Sena (and Sayunl meaning Zion in Judeo-Arabic) were found by Parfitt 'on the other side of wadi-Masilah, in the eastern Hadramawt' (1997). 'P' and 'M' are often interchangeable in African languages.

⁴⁴ They did, however, keep themselves separate from the native peoples because they felt themselves to be superior.

⁴⁵ This word (*šavi*/Mushavi) is still used to refer to a Lemba man, meaning 'trader', and a Lemba man is still presently called 'ishe', which means 'man' in Hebrew (Le Roux 2003:40.)

⁴⁶ The statuette dates from the period of Tutmosis III (1479-1425 BC). In the 1930s two similar Ushabté figurines were found at Schuinsdrift near Mapungubwe (Duffey 2004:6).

⁴⁷ Glass beads of ancient Egyptian, Phoenician and Arabic origin have been discovered at Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe and related sites in southern Africa (Saitowitz 1996).

deserves attention on the grounds of technical skills (Summers 1963:75). According to tradition their ancestors were involved in the building of Great Zimbabwe (Thovakhale).

Not only the religious concepts, but also the languages of the peoples on the south eastern coast were profoundly affected by the pre-Islamic Judaised Arabs (Sabaeans). Southern African (more specifically modern-day Mozambican) place-names such as Sena, Gaza, Sofala, Sayuna (which means Zion in Judeo-Arabic), the River Sabi (*šavi*, trader) and provinces such as R. de Sabia and 'Bayxos dos Judia' north-west of Cape de Correntes on ancient maps are foreign to indigenous tongues but were common to the Hebrew language of Palestine and the Sabaean language of South Arabia. The Sabaean word *saba* or 'Shava' means 'to trade' while *sabe* denotes 'man' in Arabic and Hebrew (Maingard 1929, in Dart 1955:27). Currently the Lemba men still greet each other with the expression 'Mushavi' (which means 'trader') (Le Roux 2003:40).

Since few Mozambicans live beyond their forties, due to various illnesses, I have discovered that there is little chance of finding anyone in the Sofala district who really knows the stories of their ancestors. Matters are not written down here; they are remembered and handed on from generation to generation. As society changes, this generational chain is disintegrating. There is a saying: 'When an old man dies (in Africa), a library is burnt down' (St Aubin de Teran 2007:64, 65).

Although various religions have exerted an influence on their viewpoints and in spite of the fact that most Lemba belong to some Christian denomination the social and religious practices and viewpoints⁴⁸ of the Lemba resemble a syncretising, pluralistic pre-Talmudic Judaism⁴⁹ embedded in African traditional religion (Le Roux 2003; cf. Thomas et al 2000).

5. Conclusion

Maritime activities of the pre-Islamic Judaised Arabs⁵⁰ and the Abyssinians left an indelible mark upon the face of East Africa. In a great diversity of ways religion and trade were two-way: money, ideas, goods and gods travelled to South Arabia but also to the East African coast.

⁴⁸ I have investigated the historical and existential relationship of Lemba 'Judaism' with 'authentic' Judaism (Le Roux 2003). There are many important questions to be asked, but these will not be addressed here.

⁴⁹ For example, the method associated with male circumcision is limited in scope and is possibly similar to the mode of circumcision practised in biblical times before the introduction of more extensive circumcision during the Talmudic period. The same is true of the way they celebrate the New Moon (cf. Le Roux 2003).

⁵⁰ The Semitic 'pagan' Sabaean traders were in the habit of settling overseas and became in due course absorbed into the native populations; it is thought that later immigrant Sabaeans brought with them a Judaic version of their 'paganism' [traditional religion], which has survived until the present time in the Falashas (and probably to a lesser degree in Ethiopian Christian thought and practice; Gayre of Gayre 1972:96) and in the Lemba manners and customs.

Frobenius (in Erythräa;⁵¹ Summers 1963:67) produces a remarkable picture of African culture. He considers that a large area of Africa had received so much cultural stimulus that a large area of the African continent had become imbued with foreign ideas which radically changed the character of the native culture.

The Arab colonization of the eastern coast of Africa, which started thousands of years ago, has left deep marks. Trade in ivory, spices, gold and slaves were their main objectives. The ethnographical evidence derived from an intensive study of the Falasha-Abyssinians in the Horn of Africa and the Lemba people in southern Africa provides phenomena which clearly indicate that the Sabaeans must have been one of the main elements which left their imprint on the language and religion of these people (Le Roux 2003). Similarly the Falasha-Abyssinian influence in East Africa, as far south as Zimbabwe and Mozambique, cannot be denied. If the Lemba stemmed from pre-Islamic Judaized Arab groups or from a Falasha-Abyssinian origin, this explains their affinity towards 'Jewishness'.

In other words, a resonance with specifically, the pre-Islamic Judaized Arabian (Sabaean) influence can be found in the Falasha-Abyssinians and in the Lemba in Southern Africa. The consensus of opinion among all researchers who have studied these peoples seriously has been that there are Semitic elements in their ancestry.⁵²

Hence, 'Africa's great ethnic and cultural diversity is combined with an equally complex religious scene' (Bruder 2008:7). The 'Jewish' religious identities of both the Falasha and the Lemba were shaped by their exposure to African traditional religions, Christianity, Islam and ancient Sabaean religious concepts. It is by nature virtually impossible for a religion to develop or function independently of, or isolated from, other religious convictions and customs. The phenomenon of cross-fertilisation of religious thought and custom is very real and not to be scoffed at.

In East Africa, the fluidity and flexibility of ethnic categories over the centuries are well established, albeit sometimes forgotten or ignored. They demonstrate that neither ethnicity, nor caste and class were unchanging, static verities but rather have themselves been products of that history. More fundamentally, a group may be seen to construct its own identity, although always working within diverse and changing contexts and constraints (cf. Anderson 1983; Ranger 1993: 247-262).

⁵¹ He termed this composite culture 'Erythraean', devising this term from the Greek word for the Indian Ocean.

⁵² Connaway (1976) discerns three different schools of thought concerning the specific nature of the Semitic culture involved in the origin of the Lemba: (i) a pre-Islamic -Judaic-Arabic origin, (ii) an Islamic-Arabic origin and (iii) a Falasha-Abyssinian origin. The religious practices and traditions constitute the focus of this paper.

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