A report on Livingstone's last years would be incomplete without a description of certain *dramatis personae* who played an unexpected role in his life, namely the ‘Arabs’. In around 100 CE it was reported that Arabs had arrived on the East African coast and it is likely that they had already traded there for some time, particularly in ivory and slaves. It is certain that they had colonies there in the tenth century. Settling on islands along the coast and on the mainland was followed by political influence with the native rulers, aided by marriage with African women. Their children were the first Swahili, and since they and their descendants married Arabs, or Africans, or other Swahili, one can regard the Swahili as a ‘mixture of mixtures’. Men from old families took Arab women as their first wives; concubines were often Swahili or African. What Livingstone called ‘real Arabs’ were Swahili of lighter colour; he used complexion as the basis for a series of distinctions and moral judgements: the ‘black Suaheli’ were unreliable ‘Nigger-Moslems’, just as the ‘half-caste coast Arabs’ from the smaller trading posts on the East African coast. They were all Muslim, both the ‘white’ and the ‘black’ Arabs, and the Swahili. A good understanding between the Swahili traders and the African chiefs was essential: they gave—at a price—permission to take (mainly) ‘criminals’ and ‘captives’ away. Later the traders and their henchmen captured arbitrary villagers. During these actions deaths occurred, but seeing that the object was to collect living slaves, the number

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1 *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea.* The ships of the Arabs used the northeast monsoon and the southward equatorial streams (November to February) for the voyage to the Ruvuma mouth; the return voyage was possible due to the reversal of wind and current direction (April to September) (Coupland [1938], 17).

2 This was still so in Livingstone’s time: it is reported in LMT (508) that Said ben (ibn) Habib wanted to marry the twelve-year-old daughter of Sebetwane (which DL prevented); Hamees Wodim Tagh married the daughter of Nsama (LJJI, 232).

3 Coupland (1938), 11; Swahili, or coast people, 25–26.

4 Roberts (1967a), 251; in contrast to this, DL’s ‘black Arabs’ were, according to Christie (1876, 333) ‘islamized negroes’. I shall speak of ‘Arabs’ just as DL did (in future without inverted commas), but they remain Swahili.
was less than Livingstone calculated.\(^5\) A potentially soothing thought is that slaves were granted friendly treatment in the Koran.\(^6\)

Thus transport and trade in ivory and slaves had long been the most important activity of the Arabs: ivory went mainly to India, the slaves were exported to Egypt, the Arab countries, the Mediterranean and finally also to the many harbours round the Indian Ocean, and further on, as far as China, for plantations, households, armies and harems.\(^7\) The number of slaves traded was fairly limited: the present low concentration of Africans in the former market places for slave trading indicates this as the visibility of the fifty to seventy million Afro-American descendants of slaves, contrasts starkly with the virtual absence of comparable people of African descent in Asia.\(^8\)

With the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, the Arab influence on the East African coast diminished as their trade was disrupted. It is remarkable how ‘relentlessly aggressive and exclusive’ the Portuguese were to the Arabs. The splendid cities on the East African coast, often built of coral, were never to regain their glory.\(^9\) When the Portuguese were eclipsed by other Europeans, Arab trading recovered only to some extent. Where this did happen, it was due to the rise of Oman, a sultanate in southeast Arabia. The Omani restored the Arab administration of the trade cities north of the River Ruvuma. Due to their strategic position in the Arabian world and the Indian Ocean during the Napoleonic Wars, the Busaidi family who had dominated since 1741, were able to secure the position of Oman as overlord in the East African coastal region.

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\(^5\) Coupland (1938), 186. Neither transport nor treatment were anything like the ‘horrors’ of the Atlantic (Christian) slave trade. Life for the slaves transported by the Arabs only became unbearable when the British navy freed them and they (as ‘freemen’) had to work on the Seychelles and Comoros: overwork and epidemics (Beachey [1974], 99–105; Devereux [1869], 412). Henchmen (called ruga ruga, mostly Nyamwezi warriors): precolonial labour migration.

\(^6\) LLJI, 7; Wright and Lary (1971), 550; DLR, 242: ‘[The Africans] regarded [the Arab] system as…an extension of their own domestic slavery which was sanctioned by tribal custom’; Hartwig (1978), 37n27: ‘I use “servile person” in preference to “slave” because of cultural connotations attached to the word slave. Servitude in most African societies was markedly different from chattel slavery. When a person was destined for the international slave market, then the word slave is used; the person is then a commodity’.

\(^7\) For China, see Snow (1988, 16–19). For India and China, see Harris (1971). Until in 1874, when Tippu Tib ‘formed a state’, there was no question of land annexation by the Arabs for anything but trading posts, even when the caravans penetrated ever deeper into the continent (Vansina [1966], 238; Wright and Lary [1971], 550).

\(^8\) Considering the duration of the Arab export of slaves, two thousand years, and the limited remains of it, then Coupland’s term ‘prodigious’ (1938, 34) is unlikely. For traces which do exist, see Harris (1971).

\(^9\) Sheriff (1987), 15. For the rise and fall of the Busaidi dynasty, see likewise (1987).