CHAPTER FIVE
THE MAKRAN-BALUCH-AFRICAN NETWORK IN ZANZIBAR AND EAST AFRICA DURING THE XIXTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the western Indian Ocean during the XIXth Century there were not just one, but people from many regions, merchandise and slave routes. They were generally divided in two main monsoon directions: one from East Africa and the Red Sea to Arabia, to India and to South East Asia, and the other in the opposite direction; consequently, slaves were not only black Africans, but also Asians.1 African slaves were imported in great numbers annually from East Africa to Oman, travelling on Arab dhows (sanbuq). Around the first half of the XIXth Century there was an extensive commerce of slaves from Ras Assir (“The Cape of Slaves”) and Pemba, and many African people were bought with cloth and dates on Zanzibar and Pemba Islands, enslaved, and transported to the Arabian Peninsula where they were mainly engaged in fishing pearls in the Persian/Arab Gulf.2 Slaves also became lords of African “reigns”, as they were considered to be more loyal than anybody else within their clans and tribes. In this regard, OMANIS used to recruit mercenary troops also from the Baluch tribes, who developed a long-lived military tradition, representing a real element of power within Omani areas of influence in East sub-Saharan Africa.

This article examines the role played by the Makrani-Baluch tribes during the XIXth Century’s sub-Saharan East African apogee with the OMANIS, and their influence on the social, political and economic level giving special attention to slavery.

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2 From now on the Persian/Arab Gulf will be referred to as the Gulf.

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Introduction

In the Indian Ocean religious elements, such as Hinduism in India, Buddhism in the Malaysian-Indonesian Archipelago, and the spread of Islam through short as well as long-distance trade routes, strongly influenced, and in many cases, modified the concept and use of slavery. The social, political and economic functions of slaves were generally: a) domestic patriarchal, b) productive-agricultural (bonded labour directed into intensive wet crop agriculture); c) military administrative. Within the Islamic world, armies of slave-soldiers came from Central Asia, mainly Turkish peoples from the Caucasus and from the Steppes till their Islamization; while domestic slaves came chiefly from the coastal strip of East Africa.

Methodology

This article evaluates the cultural synthesis of different local realities through fieldwork and, at the same time, integrates this with the archival and bibliographical research that lies at the basis of the work itself. In this respect, the new historical perspective which tends to the relations between the coasts, islands and interior of the continents no longer a state of incommunicability, isolation and stasis but rather an intense and dynamic movement of peoples, goods and ideas—with marked effects on local societies—is also to be considered an extremely valid tool in providing a more complete and up to date interpretation of events. It is well known that studies in the history of the western Indian Ocean can no longer be considered merely as hagiographic reconstructions, but must take into consideration a number of historical political institutional aspects. These include: the presence of different ethnic, social and religious groups together with the affirmation of Arab-Omani domination between the end of the XVIIIth and start of the XIXth Century; the fundamental influence of the Indian mercantile and other Asian communities; the impact with the Swahili populations of the East African coast and the sub-Saharan areas. All of these factors must, naturally, also be considered in relation to links with Europe.