Somali Migration to Aden from the 19th to the 21st Centuries

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ABSTRACT

The links between the Somali Coast and Yemen are old, particularly the trade in goods, and the slave trade. The importance of trade between the Somalis and Aden under the British began because camel caravans were plundered from the hinterland to Aden and because of the annual fair at Berbera on the Somali coast. The result was a substantial Somali community building up in Aden. A Somali Autobiography is remarkable for its insight into the life of a Somali immigrant and gives a unique point of view of the lives of Somalis in Aden. Many reports, however, were written by British officials. Trade does still exist today, but much more significant is the arrival of Somali refugees landing on Yemen’s coasts. Many of these refugees contribute to the menial workforce in Yemen but the Yemen Government has a huge task in processing them through the “immigration system”.

Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to describe the Somali migration to Aden and to consider its effects. The period in question falls into several chronological phases: firstly, the commercial migration in the course of trade especially to provide the garrison after the British occupation of Aden in 1839; secondly, the migration in search of employment in Aden and on ships sailing to and from that port; and thirdly, the migration in escaping from the breakdown of the Somali state and the subsequent eruption of civil war in the latter part of the 20th Century.

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first part of the paper is based on travel literature and archival sources. The second part uses oral histories including an autobiography of a Somali — a rare historical document — and interviews with Somalis and Yemenis in Aden.

The Somali connection with the Yemeni port of Aden, is old, and owed much to trade, including the slave trade. Somalia is situated in the Horn of Africa. The British signed the first treaty with a Somali tribe in 1827. Further treaties, the main purpose of which was to provide facilities on the Somali coast for the East India Company’s ships, were concluded with the Sultan of Tajura and the Governor of Zeila in 1840. Aden, situated on the south-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula, was long regarded as the ‘Eye of the Yemen’, the organ through which the outside world was seen and through which foreign contacts were made.

When the British seized control of Aden in 1839, from the Abdali Sultan of Lahej, their policy of encouraging trade with the Aden hinterland resulted in increasing the prosperity of Arab farmers, which in turn, fuelled Arab rebellion against the British occupation. Camel caravans laden with goods from the Aden hinterland and beyond came to the port under heavy guard for fear of being plundered. Roads to Aden remained closed for a time, but pressure on Aden was removed by the change in the monsoon, which opened trade with Mukalla and Shihr on the Hadhramaut coast. This coincided with the beginning of the important annual fair at Berbera on the Somali coast.

**Aden and Berbera**

Aden’s population in the 1840s was exceedingly mixed, and shifting, because of the port’s nature as a coaling station and garrison town. Somalis at that time constituted a large and growing fraction of the population. A few Somalis had regular employment at Aden, but many others came during the off-season at Berbera. The Somali population was then constantly changing, and nearly half left when the annual fair at Berbera began.

In 1848, Lieutenant Cruttenden of the Indian Navy, who spent much of his time dealing with Somali affairs, described Berbera’s bustling commerce:

> The place from April to the early part of October was utterly deserted, not even a fisherman being found there, but no sooner did the season change than the inland tribes commenced moving down toward the coast and preparing huts for their expected visitors. Small crafts from the ports of Yemen anxious to have the opportunity of purchasing before the vessels from the Gulf could arrive, hastened across, followed about a fortnight later by their larger brethren from Muscat, Soor and Ras al Khyma and the