

Free essay on religion and gender before the 1500s

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



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HOW DOES RELIGION AND GENDER STRUCTURE PLAY A ROLE IN SWAHILI PORTS TOWN BEFORE AND AFTER 1500's THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF WEALTH IN PEOPLE?

How does Religion and Gender Structure Play a Role in Swahili Port Towns Before and after the 1500's Through the Concept of Wealth in People?

Introduction

During the ancient period, the coast of East Africa where the Swahili cities that comprises the civilization in the region are thriving from maritime trade, which in time became the source of immense wealth for most of its people. In the acquisition of wealth among the people of Swahili, the influential contributing factors are religion and gender. The role of gender structure and religion in terms of examining the pre and post Swahili ports town under the lenses of wealth in people is the subject of this discussion. This includes comparing and contrasting the historical operation of the wealth of people by examining gender structure and religion in Swahili ports town. In addition,

the evaluation of the role of gender and religion will be based from historical perspectives in which relevant literatures were used as reference. Based on the historical evidences and analysis, it can be assumed that the primary role of religion and gender structure in the wealth of people before and after the 1500s is to establishment a society divided by social class, dominated by commercialism, and slavery.

Prior to the Portuguese conquest in the 1500s, the East African coastal independent towns in Swahili thrive in maritime trade dominated by merchants since around 100 A. D. The population of the Swahili region is composed of mixed local coastal people and foreign traders from the Arab regions. The blend of cultures and language was labeled by the Arabs as Swahili, which translates to “ people of the coast” in the native Arab language. The text from Middleton (2003) “ Swahili merchants built a pattern of long-distance exchange of many kinds of goods, both natural and manufactured, between producers and consumers of very different economies and cultures”. The passage from this Middleton’s essay describes the environment in which the people of Swahili before the Portuguese conquest in 1500s. The thriving maritime and merchants trading fuels the economic vehicle in the East African Coast. In the same sense, the cultural mix between the Arab merchants and the local coastal people has created a harmonious coexistence where cultural attributes such as religion were practiced without prejudice.

Considering that maritime trade involving mostly Arabs dominated the major economies of Swahili, the cultural integration of the merchandising activities

in the region has helped in establishing collective independent coastal city-states. The Swahili people before the 1500s was able to establish their own socio-political environment as evidently stated in Middleton's text " the towns with kings may perhaps be considered segmentary states or incipient city-states, each a polity with a clearly defined core with peripheral groups held to it by ritual ties." Based on these accounts, it becomes apparent that the Swahili people thrive in a monarchical political environment with the merchants as the most important sector that conveys influence towards the heads of the state. Considering that the merchants' exercises the most influence in the political affairs in Swahili and the majority of the merchants are Arabs, it can be assumed that religion was also an important factor that helps shape the Swahili culture.

Among the most influential religion in the world, which was also embraced by the coastal people of Swahili is Islam brought by the Arab traders and merchants to the East African Coast, " the merchants, by adroit use of gifts of luxuries to others along the coast, were able to influence or even control the local system of ranking and power". Central to immense influence of the merchants towards the local system is the imposition of Islamic beliefs, which in return also shapes the social characteristics of the Swahili people particularly when it comes to gender structure. Furthermore, the historical accounts from McMahn's text (2014) shows " Islam dominated the coastal people's lives, regardless of their social status". The Islamic belief is very particular about gender structure in respect to the laws created in reference to the teachings of the said religion. For example, the Sheria Law was drawn from the principles of Islam suggests that, " witness had to be heard without

being screened or questioned about their religion.”

It was mentioned that maritime the maritime trade industry in Swahili has placed merchants including Arabs at one of the most prominent places in the society. The growing influence of the Arabs in the East African coast led to the spread of Islam in the region, which in return also influences the social structure as a whole including gender roles. In the Islamic faith, both men and women are expected to behave according to the cultural, social, and religious codes. Although the ancient interpretation of the Islamic law suggests equal state of human dignity between male and female, the social practices shows otherwise. Even during the Swahili's existence in the East African coast, gender structure already shows similarities to today's Islamic social practices. The women do not have the same rights as compared to men when it comes to autonomy and decision-making. Such decision includes freedom to choose a partner in marriage, getting divorce, or custody of children. In such context, it is apparent that men dominate the Swahili society. It can also safe to assume that male merchants comprised of Arabs are the controlling sector in the region.

Religion and Gender After the 1500s

The arrival of the Portuguese colonizers has changed the socio-political and economic structure of the city-states in Swahili. Before the 16th century the Swahili merchants are the organizing party of the states' society with or without a political figurehead in place. The new order of the Swahili society was changed dramatically as stated in Middleton's text, " Commoners and slaves provided the labour; the patricians provided intellectual and religious

ability and leadership. Ranks in Swahili society included regnant kings and queens at the top; then the wangwana or patricians; then the commoners (non-patrician fishermen, farmers, and craftsmen); and at the bottom various categories of slaves." In this structure, the slaves were introduced as lowest social class, as the Portuguese colonizers have redefined its purpose in the society. Before the 1500s, even the slaves were considered for marginal rights have rights in consideration to religious association. However, the colonization of the Swahili city-states changed the form of enslavement, " the language for forms of enslavement along the Swahili coast specifically detailed the age, gender, and occupation of the enslaved." The power and wealth of the Swahili merchants after the 1500s grew further particularly in terms of monopolizing the provision of articles stipulating that stipulates ranks, luxury, and prestige. There gap between the middle and the noble class widens and among the most affected in such changes are the slaves who were labeled as no different than any other commodity, " Commodities were transformed into luxuries or prestige items: cloth into markers of status; gold into spices; slaves into soldiers, concubines, and loyal uniformed servants; ivory into Indian women's bangles and European combs, piano keys, and billiard balls. The transformations were effected by the 'secret' exchanges in merchants' houses, and the Swahili controlled and manipulated them to their own advantage." The secret exchanges mattered the most for the controlling sector of merchants in the East African Coast. When it comes to religion and gender and their role in the Swahili society, historical accounts from McMallon suggests " Oaths were a feature of everyday life for people who believed in both uchawi and Islam, which was a

sizeable portion of Pemban society irrespective of ethnicity, gender, social class.”

Gender role is specifically described in the referenced texts where enslavement means employing the Eastern African locals for specific set of skills, they live away from their masters and has freedom of movement. It goes far beyond the conjured description of slaves in the Western civilization where enslavement means working people up with like farm animals. Prior to the colonization by the Portuguese, slaves in East African coast has a choice to free them from enslavement and the rights of the freed slaves including preferred religious practices were granted. The slaves who embraced the Islam were not forced to do so or becoming like their owners, but rather uphold a strong belief in the virtue of Islamic beliefs. On the other hand, the wealthy asserts the hegemonic idealism of slavery in order to ascertain a paternalistic power over the household, the economic sector, and even in the socio-political sector. Such idealism reflects the role of gender structure in the Swahili society. It was mentioned earlier that the gender structure in the coastal region was influenced largely by Islamic faith brought by the Arab merchants before the 1500s. However, the arrival of the Western Europeans in the coastal towns of Swahili changed the perceptions about gender roles and religion.

Although the people of Swahili was able to retain their prestige and respect of the Western colonizers through the effective use of wealth, the role of religion and gender structure on the other hand was severely penetrated by the new enslavement idealism. After the 1500s, the validation of elite status became more important than acquiring estates. The display of wealth also

constituted a greater importance to the superiority of religion, “ Some were of Sharifu lineages, descendants of the Prophet, and claimed superiority of religious knowledge and morality.” Considering that the religious knowledge is a superiority at which the people of Swahili and its elites mostly rely on more prestige, it is apparent that such display of superiority also defines the con-existing gender structure that comes along with the religious virtues. It is apparent that the dominating religion in the East African coast after the 1500s is Islam, which means the gender structure shifts from equal to patriarchal.

Having the merchants at the controlling position, their houses are referred to as the business house or companies where the male members of the family were being allocated with specific responsibilities according to ability. The women in the family act as the linking factors between the elite families through marriage. The choice of husbands and bride in a marriage are being arranged either to keep the wealth within the family circle or also to acquire business acumen. On the other hand, the non-patrician members of the society that are not part of merchants sector can be transformed as a patrilineal descent if they have shown productive acumens or acquired property such as coconut palms or clove trees. The first daughter’s marriage in the family is considered of high importance because it is usually being arranged in a monogamous manner in which the daughter is being married to her male cousin, and the marriage cannot be subject to divorce. The idealism of status and wealth in the family defines the gender structure in which the constitution of marriages depends largely on wealth. In addition,

the separation of responsibilities was also gender specific where the women serves as the ticket in establishing lineage with other wealthy families.

The Role of Gender and Religion in People's Wealth

Religion and gender roles have constituted a new social structure that relies on wealth. Several centuries of complex historical interactions with immigrants and foreign merchants that settled on the coasts from Arab to Portuguese colonizers. In some parts of the Western regions, religion and the political sectors establish their influence in terms of creating a direction towards social order. In the case of the Swahili people in the East African coast; wealth inequality has grown way beyond a reasonable proportion. One potential factor that contributes largely towards the increasing gap between the wealthy and the slaves in Swahili is the high influence of merchant's relation to the state. Moreover, the family-level wealth gap and the participation of religious practices in the imposition of social values led to formation of a gender structure that prevailed in the coastal regions of Swahili.

The way religion played a roles in Swahili ports town is that religion have provided the backbone for the new gender structure and social class. First, religion laid the foundations of Swahili's society. In this sense, the merchants flocked the coastal lands for trading and establishment of a maritime industry dominated by foreign merchants that are mostly Arabs and other nationalities from the Middle East. The effect of merchant domination in the Swahili coastal towns is establishment of a political structure composed of figures heads and monarchs. The constant flock of Arab traders in the town

made heads of Swahili city states to rely on the economy created by the merchants for import and export taxes. Merchants also played the role in policy decision-making, which allowed more merchants to settle in the coastal towns. The increase in constant Arab trades with Swahili has resulted to the spread of Islamic faith in the East African coasts. It was mentioned that Islam constitutes civic laws governing the role of each gender in the Islamic society, “ by the eighth century CE, the local people were acting as middlemen between the African interior and Arabia, were accepting Islam, and may be recognized as 'Swahili', a people of various origins.”

Before the 1500s, the people of Swahili demonstrate a very typical gender structure and roles where the men are the hunters and fishermen. On the other hand, the women were the gatherers and farmers. Such roles were not typical of an Islamic faith because the religion is very specific about the role of men and women in the society. In the Islamic society, women are bound to their husband to their husband and the socio-political participation is very limited. The Swahili people's customs have changed from being farmers, fishermen, and gatherers into slaves and peasants that rely largely on Arab and Patrician merchants. The gender roles have shifted from women taking part in the role as gatherers and farmers, but the domination of minority of merchants referred to as waungwana have isolated the women into slaves particularly after the Portuguese colonization after the 1500s. Religion and gender class also defined the people's wealth and social structure. For one, the wealthy merchants have created lineages to keep the wealth within the family circle. However, the definition of women roles even in the wealthy class is specific to marriages and creating links to other wealthy families,

while men remained the important sector that kept the maritime trade economy in Swahili strong. Religion on the other hand has been the foundation of a society driven by wealth, divided social and gender class.

Conclusion

Based on the historical evidences and analysis, it can be assumed that the primary role of religion and gender structure in the wealth of people before and after the 1500s is to establishment a society divided by social class, dominated by commercialism, and slavery. The coastal city-states in Swahili have embraced the Islamic faith, which in return laid the foundation for a patriarchal society dominated by merchants, the male gender, and wealth.

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