



EAST AFRICA III. BALUCHI AND PARSI COMMUNITIE

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Members of the Baluchi and Parsi communities, both of which have had historical links with Persia, began settling in East Africa in the 19th century. A small group of the Baluchis first went to Zanzibar around 1837 as bodyguards of the Arab sultan of the Būsaʿīdī dynasty. They spoke a variant of Persian, and, unlike the majority of the other Sunni Muslims (who were Shafiʿite), they followed the Hanafite school of Islamic law (Salvadori, p. 138). They became traders over the years (Gregory, p. 33), and intermarried extensively with Arabs and Swahilis with the result that some of the youths today speak Swahili as their mother-tongue.

On the other hand, the Parsis (q.v.), who had originally emigrated from Persia to India after the Islamic conquest in the 7th century, in order to preserve their Zoroastrian faith, vigorously retained their identity as Zoroastrians. In time, the Parsis became “Indianized” in language and culture, adopting Gujarati as the language of communication and prayers. However, cardinal features of Zoroastrian identity were retained: the consecration of the sacred fire from Persia, the establishment of burial places (“the towers of silence”), and the creation of the *anjoman*, the community. These features were recreated in Zanzibar (and later elsewhere in East Africa), where, beginning in about 1845, the Parsis settled.



In East Africa, as elsewhere in their diaspora, the Parsis have distinguished themselves as a dynamic community which places a high premium on education. Although a community of relatively small numbers, their contribution has been significant, particularly as traders—the firm of Cowasjee Dinshaw was one of the pioneer firms in Zanzibar—and as members of the professions (lawyers, doctors, account-ants, etc.). Today, however, the Parsis are faced with an issue that is far-reaching in its implications for the continuity of their identity: whether a child born of a non-Zoroastrian parent should be accepted as a Zoroastrian Parsi. It is a modern challenge which they did not have to face in East Africa in the 19th century.

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