

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIR

RFG - 22
Segeju Tribe
I - People of the North Tanganyika Coast

c/o Barclays Bank
Arusha, Tanganyika
June 6, 1956

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When Vasco da Gama first sighted Mombasa in 1498, the East African Coast already had a long history of contact with civilization. For at least 2,000 years seafaring people from southern Arabia, Persia, and India had been visiting East Africa and establishing trading settlements. Very likely the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians, and perhaps the Chinese also, sailed to East Africa from time to time. From written documents and from archeological and ethnological evidence, the outlines of this ancient history can be dimly discerned. There is no doubt that the main incentive for trade with the Coast of what is now British East Africa was abundant supplies of ivory and slaves, though further north on the Somali Coast spices and frankincense were important commodities, while to the south along the Mozambique Coast there was gold.

These foreign invaders formed settlements at harborages along the coast, often on offshore islands. They were oriented towards the sea, but the source of their wealth--ivory and slaves--lay in the interior. To carry on the trade



Moa Beach

on which their existence depended, the colonies of Arabs, Indians, and Persians required the services of the native tribes of the Coast. Just what kind of relationship existed between the native Africans and the trading settlements in pre-Islamic times is not known, though it is possible that future archeological research may produce evidence on this question. The advent of Islam brought a new influx of Arabs who founded strong colonies and set about propagating the new faith among the Africans. The history proper of East Africa starts at that time with the appearance of written documents. The muslim Africans of the Coast adapted a number of Arab customs and abandoned some of their pagan tribal ways. They came to be called "Swahili," from an Arabic word Sahil meaning "coast." So far as I have been able to discover, there is no tribe or other distinct group of people that calls itself "Swahili." The word seems to be most commonly applied to all muslim Africans of the Coast, regardless of tribe, but sometimes it is used to distinguish the Africans living in urban centers who have lost contact with their native tribes.

Unlike some of the other peoples who early accepted Islam, notably in North Africa, the muslim Africans of the East Coast did not adopt the Arabic language. Instead, one of the Bantu languages came to be used as a lingua franca by the Africans and Arabs alike. This Swahili language contains a large proportion of Arabic loan words, which makes it a suitable vehicle for discourse on religious matters among Mohamedans. But nevertheless, as I will mention again later, the feeling prevails that prayer and liturgy should be conducted in pure Arabic, even by those who do not understand it. Language, in fact, seems to be one of the principle features which distinguish Arabs from Swahilis in East Africa. There has undoubtedly been considerable racial mixture between Arabs and Africans, but a distinction between the two groups, cultural and racial, is clearly recognized. Similarly to the case of the American Negroes, the miscegenation in East Africa operated mainly through the mating of Arab men with African women, who were taken as wives or, more often, as concubines. The children of such unions could claim the right to inherit property and position from their fathers and might be accepted as members of the Arab community. An African man rarely married an Arab woman. Consequently not much Arab blood entered the Swahili communities.

Although the political history of the East African Coast has been investigated and written in some detail, virtually no anthropological research has been done on the present-day inhabitants of the Coast. In a report to the Colonial Office on research needs in Tanganyika and Uganda, which was compiled in 1949 by Mr. W.E.H. Stanner, all but two of the twelve coastal tribes of Tanganyika were listed under the rubric "Insufficient, Negligible, or No Data Available." This was one of the reasons why I planned to make a short investigation of a coastal tribe. In addition, I hoped that such a tribe would offer some interesting contrasts with the tribes of the interior of Tanganyika which I had previously studied. On the basis of local advice, the Segeju Tribe were chosen for this investigation.

Betty and I spent six weeks in the field with the Segeju, camping at two different places on the Segeju Coast. We also made shorter visits at other Segeju villages and at some of the Digo, Zigua, and Shirazi villages between Tanga and Pangani. In Tanga I talked with Segeju who had left their villages and moved to the city. Our first camp was at Moa, a Segeju

town near the main coastal road, about 35 miles north of Tanga. There we lived in a small rest house on the shore, centrally located in the village and within thirty yards of the baraza, the mosque, the fish market, and the Indian duka. Our second camp was a thatched shelter at a beach on the shore of Boma Peninsula. It was twelve miles south of Moa, and six miles off the main road, reached by a track which was impassible after heavy rain. Boma Camp was in the vicinity of two Segeju villages; the small village of Bomandani (50 houses) was half a mile away, and the larger village of Sibutuni (about 150 houses) was two miles away.

The Segeju villages, some 25 to 30 in number, are strung along the coast between Tanga and the Kenya border. The population of these villages is about 8,000, but there are other Segeju living in different tribal areas south of Tanga and in Kenya. All but two or three of these villages are situated on or very near the shore, and their principle occupation is fishing. The Segeju have a lively sense of their history and are keenly aware of their tribal identity. They are not formally an endogamous group, but marriages outside the tribe seem to be uncommon. Very few people of other tribes are to be found in Segeju villages. I was especially struck by this fact after a visit to the Pangani region, where the population of some of the so-called Zigua villages was divided among three or four different tribes. In the account that follows I record some of the Segeju customs as I observed them, mainly at the villages of Moa, Bomandani, and Sibutuni. How far they are distinctively Segeju customs and how far they are common to coastal culture in general I am not able to state at this stage in my investigation.

The tribal headquarters of the Segeju is located at Moa, which is their largest village at present. It contains the native court or baraza of the tribe, and the government-appointed chief (the Jumbe Mkuu) lives there. Under the Jumbe Mkuu there are 17 headmen or Jumbes living in the more important villages. In some cases a Jumbe has two or three small hamlets under his rule. These positions are not strictly indigenous, and the officials are not accorded any special honor beyond the respect which is due to their government-sanctioned powers. The Segeju have long been under the hegemony of an outside power, whether it was the Shirazi Diwans who once ruled this part of the Coast, the Sultan of Zanzibar, the Germans, or the British. These ruling powers would no doubt deal with the Segeju through a tribal representative approved by themselves, similar in principle to the present Jumbe Mkuu. Their traditional history, though, gives no indication of a hereditary chieftainship. Until quite recently, the judicial powers which are now possessed by the Jumbe Mkuu were in the hands of men versed in the sharia or muslim law and were religious rather than political in sanction; for the Segeju have been Mohamedans for several centuries.

Moa is a thriving little town of about 300 houses which has an Indian duka, four African dukas, and four mosques; it is visited by three or four buses a day. Cloth, which is usually the chief commodity of dukas in East Africa, is not sold in the Moa shops. The people either go to Tanga (thirty-five miles away) for the clothing or buy it from itinerant Arab merchants who travel from village to village with their goods, usually by bicycle. The most important commercial institution of the village is the fish market, which is regulated by the government and has an official market clerk in charge. The people of Moa, as in other Segeju villages, consider fishing as their main occupation. I estimated that 150 men--or



Moa Main Street



Houses at Bomandani

roughly half of the able-bodied men of the village--are directly engaged in fishing, while another group is indirectly concerned in the fishing trade as boat and equipment craftsmen or through buying and selling fish. All fish that are sold must be sold at the market, where the government collects a small tax on each sale. During the season of our visit at Moa the fishing was unusually poor, according to native opinion. Fish sales at the market averaged about \$100 dollars a day for the five days that I checked. No permanent market records are kept, but the average over the year must be somewhat higher than this. The buying of fish at the market is by open bidding. Most of the fish consumed locally does not go through the government market; it goes directly to the fishermen's homes or is distributed to other villagers on the basis of barter or other personal arrangement.

The people of the Segeju fishing villages also practice agriculture, but do not, as a rule, grow enough food to last them the whole year. At Moa during our visit most of the grain bins were empty, although it would be three or four months before a new crop was harvested. In the meanwhile imported food was purchased with profits from the sale of fish. Sorghum, cassava, millet, rice, and maize are the main food crops at Moa. Coconuts are also used as domestic food, but are mainly grown as a cash crop. The rules of land tenure differ for the different kinds of fields.

Crops which are planted anew every year, such as maize and sorghum, may be planted on any piece of land not already in cultivation. The owner of the crop has no permanent rights to the land, but he is entitled to use it as long as he keeps it cleared. After three or four years the soil loses its fertility and must be left fallow for a period. If it reverts back to bush, another person may later clear it for cultivation. There seems to be plenty of uncleared bush available for cultivating these crops. Cassava is a slower growing crop, which may be left in the ground for as long as six years before the roots are dug up. In theory the rules of tenure are the same as for annual crops, but cassava fields are kept in cultivation for much longer periods. If an owner dies while a crop is in the ground, the field is inherited by his heirs. But if a field is abandoned and grows back to bush, the original owner loses his special rights and anyone can clear and cultivate it. That is, any Segeju, for foreigners are not allowed to plant crops on Segeju tribal land.



Carved Doorway of Moa House

Rice is planted in swampy places and ponds in the valleys. Rice fields are looked on as permanent possessions, but there are very few of them in the Moa and Boma areas. Further north, at Vanga and along the Uмба River, there are extensive rice valleys, mostly belonging to old Arab and Shirazi families, who rent them out on a share-crop basis for a rental of one quarter of the crop. Rice cultivation is done by

women and cassava by men, while the work on other food crops is divided between men and women.

The ownership, sale, and inheritance of coconut trees are subject to complicated rules, which result in the greatest number of lawsuits brought before the native court. Almost every Segeju owns a few coconut trees, but the largest proportion are owned by nonresident Indians. African holdings tend to become fragmented through following Islamic laws of inheritance, by which a man's property is divided among the different members of his family. As a measure for checking this fragmentation, there is law that a person can not sell coconut trees to an outsider until he has first given his brothers and neighbors a chance to buy them. This law does not work out very well in practice and results in numerous quarrels and lawsuits. The present law states that Africans can sell trees to other Africans or to Arabs (who have ancient rights in the region) but not to Europeans or Indians. Arabs, however, are allowed to sell coconut trees to Indians, and through this means the Indians are acquiring ownership of most of the coconut trees in the Segeju area. Coconuts are of less importance in the Segeju economy than in the case of some of the tribes living further back from the coast.

Another industry, in this case exclusively in the hands of women, which brings a certain amount of money into the Segeju villages is the weaving of coloured mats. The leaves used for weaving these mats, from a wild palm shrub, are imported from Kenya. They also grow locally, but are of poorer quality and only used for making baskets and utility ware. The leaves are dyed in three or four colors and then woven with a variety of designs into long strips from one to two inches wide. The strips are then bound together into large rectangular mats for household use or into small, oval prayer-mats for use in the mosque. Although these mats are commonly called "Moa mats," they are made in other Segeju villages as well. They are sold to other African tribes and also to Asians and Europeans.

The Segeju live in the rectangular, thatched houses which are seen all along the coast. The walls are built of mud applied to a frame of poles and sticks. Coral stone is mixed with the mud wherever it is available (for instance at Moa) to make more durable walls. The universal thatching material is makuti, made from the fronds of coconut trees. It provides a rainproof roof which last six or seven years before wearing out. Most of the houses have hinged doors of boards. The doors in some of the older Moa houses are carved in intricate designs--a simplified version of the ornate carved doors which can be seen in Arab houses. The more prosperous and progressive Segeju are beginning to put cement floors in their houses.

Segeju villages are laid out in a gridiron pattern of straight streets lined with houses. The mosque occupies a prominent central place in every village. In the smaller villages the mosque is built like the houses, only larger. Moa and some of the bigger villages have more impressive mosques having concrete floors and thick walls which are plastered and whitewashed. Many of the mosques have roofs of corrugated iron instead of thatch. The Moa mosque has a flat roof in the Arab style made of cement laid over horizontal beams and rafters. Villages like Moa which are situated on protected bays are built right on the shore. But where the shore fronts on the open sea, as on the Boma Peninsula, the villages are built a short distance back from

the shore so as to avoid the excessive ocean wind at certain seasons.

Fresh water is a serious problem at all the coastal villages. The water from the village wells is used for bathing and to a small extent for cooking, but it is too brackish for drinking and can not be used for washing clothes with soap. The nearest fresh water wells are from three to five miles in from the coast. Water must be carried to the villages from there.

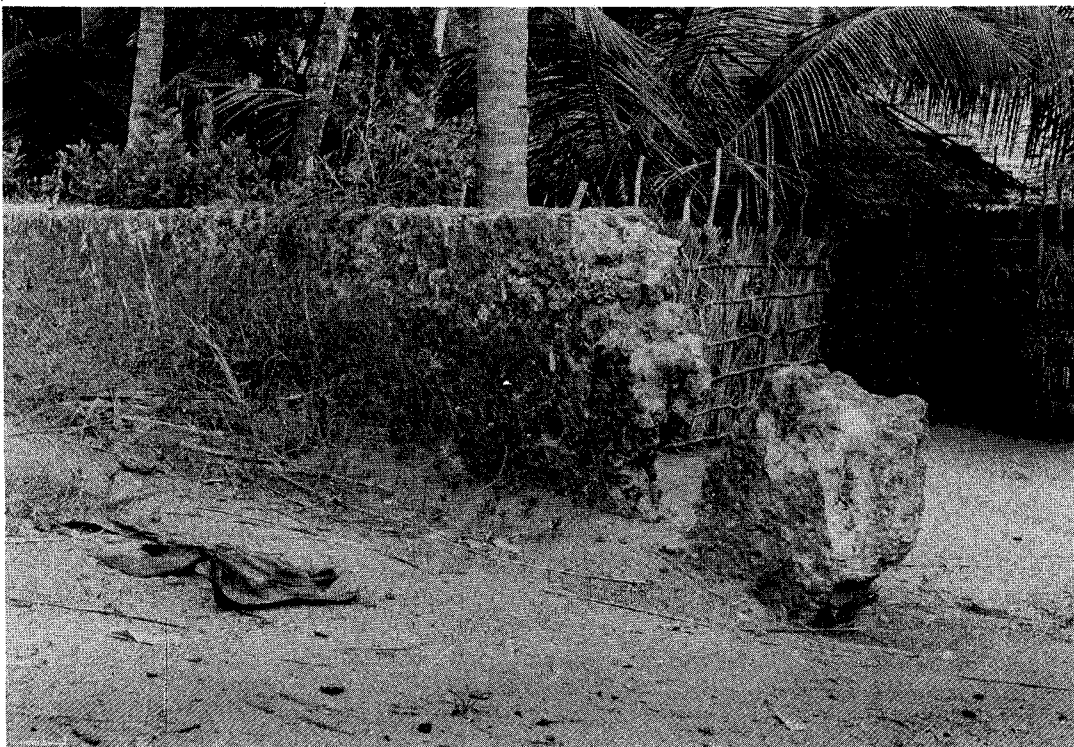
The Segeju are divided into clans, which at one time were no doubt important features of their social organization. This is no longer true, and at present the clans seem to have no functions; some of the young people are not sure which clan they belong to. Two of the clans, called Makamadhi and Boma, apparently increased greatly in size and strength at the expense of the others, and contended between themselves for political and military supremacy of the tribe. This is suggested by the traditional history, but it is too fragmentary to be of much help in reconstructing the earlier system of social organization. The tribe seems to have been divided into two moieties at one time, which were called Mlamu and Tumbulu. Whether this division was based on alternate generations or some other principle was not clear from the information that I received. Each of the villages were formerly divided into two halves, and at Moa this division is still recognized, though it has no social significance at present. The old Segeju social system might still be reconstructed by a student who had time for more intensive investigation.

A custom which has probably resulted in great changes in the social organization is the preference for marriage between cousins. The elders state that cousin marriages were forbidden when the Segeju were still pagans, and that the custom was taken over as an Islamic institution from the Arabs and Shirazi by whom they were converted. Well over half of all Segeju first marriages are now between cousins. Any cousin except a mother's sister's child can be married. This custom produces communities in which everyone is related to everyone else, often in several different ways. One's uncle or aunt, for example, is often also his father- or mother-in-law. Many people can trace back to a single great grandparent through both their mother and their father. The smaller Segeju villages, such as Bomandani, are really large extended families with no outsiders at all residing permanently in the villages. Even at the more cosmopolitan town of Moa, very few people are unable to trace a relationship between themselves, at least by marriage. From the limited data which I had time to obtain, it seems likely that the Segeju have changed their social system in the last two centuries or so from a segmented system based on patrilineal clans to a reticulate system in which descent and relationships are traced through both male and female lines.

A dozen or so of the Segeju villages are surrounded by heavy walls of coral stone, with loopholes and embrasures. According to their own traditions, these were built about a century ago as protection against the Masai, who had then reached the coast and were raiding the villages for cattle. Most of these walls are still standing. The Moa wall enclosed about two thirds of the area of the present town. Part of it was demolished to allow room for expansion. In addition to Masai raids, there is a tradition of considerable internecine warfare among the Segeju during the last century. Slavery had become an entrenched institution, and as the supply of slaves decreased with Arab needs, the Segeju raided the neighboring Digo Tribe, holding the war prisoners in slavery. Those were dangerous times, in which villages had to



Outrigger Canoes at Moa



"Masai Wall" Surrounding Moa

be fortified against enemies, either with stone walls or wooden stockades. An exception to this rule seems to have been the group of villages on Boma Peninsula, which were never fortified. They were separated from the mainland by trackless bush and mangrove swamp, and communicated with the outside world by sea. Thus they were invulnerable against Masai attacks. These villages, though they can now be reached by road in the dry season, still retain their atmosphere of isolation and use the sea more than land for travelling.

The Segeju have long been converted to the Mohamedan faith. According to their traditional history, they were converted when they first arrived on the coast some 300 years ago. Later, during a period of political disturbance, they reverted to paganism, but in recent times they have again come to think of themselves as orthodox Mohamedans. The chief Mohamedan prelate for this part of Tanganyika is Sheikh Ali Mohamed of Tanga. A few leading Segeju teachers, holding the rank of sheikh or imamu, have studied under Sheikh Ali. These men in turn teach the ordinary village walimu or teachers, who then pass on their learning to the Segeju children. Through these channels of communication, the Segeju are integrated with the Islamic world. I shall tell more about their religious beliefs and practices in a later report. In general there is a small core of men who make a sincere effort to be orthodox in word and deed. The popular religion is more lax and tinged with paganism. One Islamic injunction which is strictly observed by the Segeju is the prohibition against taking alcohol.

The historical traditions of the Segeju were collected over a period of years by Mr. E.C. Baker, who published his findings in a recent article.¹ In addition to questioning a number of elders, some of whom are no longer living, he relied for his information largely on two old historical documents in Swahili, which I have not been able to consult. The first part of this history is pure legend which tells of their origin in Arabia. In the sixteenth century the Segeju were definitely located on the Kenya Coast, somewhere between Mombasa and Malindi. This fact is confirmed by references to the tribe in Portuguese record of that time. In the middle of the sixteenth century a marauding band of Africans known as Wazimba (probably an offshoot of the Nguni peoples of South Africa) marched north from the Zambezi, plundering and pillaging up the East African Coast, and threatened the town of Mombasa, which was then under Portuguese rule. According to Portuguese accounts, the Wazimba were defeated and dispersed in a battle fought in 1580, in which the Portuguese forces were allied with an army of 3,000, Segeju warriors.²

The Segeju left the coast and migrated inland to a place called Daiso, probably in the region of the present Voi. From there a band of Segeju travelled south to the Tanganyika border, and crossed the Uмба River.

¹"History of the Wasegeju," Tanganyika Notes & Records, No.27 (1949)

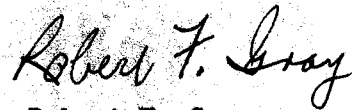
²Sir John Gray, "Portuguese Records Relating to the Wasegeju," Tanganyika Notes & Records, No. 29 (1950)

One party settled in the foothills of the Usambara Mountains at a place called Bwiti. Another group of armed Segeju men marched along the coast, defeating and evicting the Digo and Bondei people who were living there. These men took Digo wives and settled along the coast in the present Segeju tribal area.

These traditions are supported by linguistic evidence. The coastal Segeju speak a dialect of Digo as their household language and have completely lost their Segeju language, though Swahili is the polite language of the Tribe and largely used by adults. Children learn their first language in the home from their mothers, which in this case were originally Digo women. I also spent a few days visiting the Segeju community at Bwiti, who occupy three small villages and total about 600 people. The Bwiti Segeju claim relationship with the coastal Segeju, have some of the same clan names, and frequently intermarry with them. Their home language, however, is completely different. It is quite distinct from the Digo language and also from the language of the neighboring Sambaa Tribe. Very likely, as the Bwiti people claim, it derives from the original Segeju language.

Before ending this report, I shall just mention an organization of Segeju living in Tanga which is called the Segeju Union. Starting as a social and mutual aid association, this organization has recently been growing in strength, acquiring membership in the coastal villages, and taking an interest in political developments. At present it is not affiliated with the nationalistic Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) but might possibly become associated with it in the future.

Sincerely,



Robert F. Gray

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