ART. X.—The Language of Somáli-land. By Robert
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In the Eastern corner of North Africa is a country very little explored, the extreme Eastern Headland of which is called Cape Guardafui, known to the ancients as Aromáta Promontorium. The Region has a frontage to the Red Sea, and to the Indian Ocean, and its geographical position is in its favour. There is no Protestant Missionary Station within its boundaries: there is no portion of the Scriptures translated into the Language of the people.

The Rev. Frère Evangeliste de Larajasse, a Missionary of the Church of Rome, who had been since 1892 in that country, called upon me during the Summer, and offered for my acceptance two volumes, which represented the result of his labours:


(2) Somáli-English, and English-Somáli, Dictionary.

Both were published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co., London, and their appearance was most creditable. I have presented them to the Society’s Library.

I had a long and interesting conversation with the compiler. It appears, that he had a colleague, also a Missionary of the Church of Rome, who shared his labours, the Venerable Frère Cyprien de Sampoint.

As the author was returning to his station, I offered to pay him, on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society, a certain sum of money, if he would translate the Gospel of Mark, and send it to me; and he agreed to do so. It is right to record, that the learned world is indebted to Lord Delamere for the publication of these costly works, which
was far beyond the resources of the humble Missionary of the Church of Rome.

It is true, that Colonel Hunter some years ago published a Grammar and Vocabulary of this Language, and the German Scholar Schleicher also laboured in the same direction, but their opportunities were slight compared to those of the present author. There are undoubtedly Dialects of this great Vernacular, and we shall know about them in future years. The standard of pronunciation of words, and the words themselves, are adopted from the marketplace of Bérbers, the chief place of business in Somáli-land, and visited by individual members of all the tribes; but experience teaches, that those, who stay at home, are the best representatives of the Dialects spoken in each sub-Region.

The Roman Alphabet has been wisely adopted, but that does not dispose of the problem, as there are many varieties of the Roman Alphabet; notably, the French mode of transliterating certain letters differs greatly from the English. It will be interesting to compare the mode of rendering the same or similar sounds adopted by those, who have dealt with the three Dialects of the neighbouring Galla Language, and the company of great Scholars, who have placed the Coast-Language of East Equatorial Africa on a sound and scientific base. I allude to the Swahili.

The Manual of Sentences attached to the Grammar is specially valuable: they have been compiled on a system adopted from an English-Hindustani Manual of Conversation: of course, as to the success in the idiomatic rendering, no opinion can be given. Arabic may have been used in times past, and may still be used, for purposes of correspondence, just as Persian was used fifty years ago in British India, but the Author has wisely kept clear of the Arabic Written Character, though the use of some Arabic loan-words is a necessity.

I now quote a portion of a learned Review of this Grammar and Dictionary, which appeared in the London Times a few weeks ago:
The origin of the Language, like the origin of the race, is wrapped in mystery. There are those, who consider the Somáli to be of North African Berber origin, and point to the name of Bérbera as an indication of this. It would appear, however, more natural that the name of Bérbera, if indeed it is derived from any settlement of strangers, is more likely to be due to an occupation from Berber in the North-Eastern Sudán. Perhaps the old theory of Sir R. Burton is the most correct one: that they are of Negro-Hamitic descent, and ‘nothing but a slice of the great Galla nation Islamised and Semiticised by repeated immigrations from Arabia.’ Such a theory is in the main in harmony with the Somáli traditions of their Arabian descent, and geographical and historical conditions do not conflict with it; moreover, the physical type of the people agrees with it. The origin of the Galla is another question altogether. Whether they are part of the same race, which pushed into South Africa from the North and are now represented by the Káfir, or whether they are a half-caste Abyssinian race, need not here be discussed.

Somál, or Somáli, is a name, that has only been in use to describe the dominant race in the Horn of Africa since the beginning of this century. Sir R. Burton (1856) says that the Somáli call their country Bar-al-Ajam. The old maps name the country Asha and Hawiya. The derivation of the word Somáli has puzzled people. Major Abud, whose authority must carry great weight, leans to that, which has been suggested by the Language itself. He says: ‘The Somáli are a hospitable race, and, as milk is their staple food-supply, the first word a stranger would hear in visiting their kraals would be So-mal, i.e., go and bring milk. I have heard it suggested that the word for milk, liss, may account for the termination of the word lis in Somalis.’ As a matter of fact, So-liss is not used in a command to go and bring milk or to go and milk a camel for a visitor, but only in ordinary conversation, and So-mal is the usual
"command in bidding anyone to go and bring milk for the
"refreshment of a stranger. In any case, there is nothing
"indicative of the origin of their Language or race in the
"name Somáli or Somál. Sir R. Burton has a note on
"the name Somál, where he alludes to a traveller who
"asserted that Somáli was derived from the Abyssinian
"Soumahe (heathen)."

Our author adopts the idea, that the Somáli race comes
from India; other writers base their arguments on the
similarity of architectural fragments to temples in the
Dekkan, and to the use of certain Indian words, which
really does not prove much: but our author, in a letter
to me, as well as in conversation, lays stress on the existence
of some Portuguese book, in which the story is told of the
emigration from India to the Horn of Africa. As the
name of the book, and the name of the author, were
unknown, I suggested, that he should go to the British
Museum Library and search the Catalogues; he did so,
but failed to come on any clue. His theory is, that the
expedition took place in the eleventh century of our era,
but up to this time there is no shadow of proof. For fear
of not having stated his theory fully, I subjoin an extract
in the French original from one of his communications.
His two excellent Philological works will enable Dravidian
Scholars to give a distinct opinion, whether there exists the
alleged linguistic affinity.

The Somáli are Mahometan in Religion, and the amount
of the population, which is in a very low state of culture,
has never been ascertained.

It is not actually included in any Protectorate, or Sphere
of Influence; possibly the Italians may have had a dream
about annexation, but they have been roused from that
dream. The Abyssinians may in past centuries have deemed
it to be their hunting-ground. The coast is occupied by
English and French settlements, who would have some-
thing to say, if Germany or Russia were to attempt to
annex it.
Extract from Notes on the Somáli-land, prepared by the Rev. Frère Evangeliste de Larajasse, at my request, and with a view to publication in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society:

"De l'étude de la langue Somáli, en ne considérant que le seul point de vue philologique, il nous apparaît que ce langage n'a aucune parenté avec celui des peuples environnants.

Le génie de la langue Somáli n'a rien, qui ressemble au génie de la langue Arabe. Le Somáli a fait de très larges emprunts à la langue Arabe, mais en prenant les mots Arabes, il les a arrangés à sa façon, et suivant le génie de sa langue. Donc, malgré leur généalogies, transmises par la tradition généalogies, qui les font tous remonter à un ancêtre Arabe, il me semble impossible d'admettre uniquement cette descendance Arabe; une telle descendance aurait certainement laissé sa trace dans la langue parlée. Je suis porté à croire, que le Musulman, qui a conquis le pays vers la fin du 13e siècle, a détruit, ou emporté, tous les anciens monuments de la première occupation, à fin de mieux fixer ce peuple conquis dans la croyance à l'Islamisme. Cette politique, suivie dans toutes les conquêtes faites par les Musulmans, a dû être la même sur la terre Somáli. Pourtant, si le conquérant a pu imposer sa religion, il n'a pas eu la puissance de changer de langage du peuple conquis.

Le Somáli, et l'Abyssin, n'ont aucune ressemblance; il existe bien quelques mots empruntés à cette dernière langue, mais ce serait totalement insuffisants pour attribuer une origine Abyssine au peuple Somáli. Il y a plus d'affinité entre le Somáli et le Galla; quelques centaines de mots paraissent dériver d'une racine Galla; néanmoins, le génie des deux langues reste si différent, qu'il est bien difficile d'attribuer une descendance Galla au peuple Somáli.

Je ne connais pas le Swahili, mais à en juger par les différents extraits que j'ai pu lire, je ne vois rien, qui ressemble au langage Somáli.
"J'en suis par conséquence arrivé à conclure qu'il faudrait aller chercher l'origine de ce peuple étrange jusque dans les Indes, non point sur la côte de Malabar, mais de l'autre côté des Indes sur le versant des montagnes, qui séparent la côte de Coromandel de la partie des Indes faisant face à l'Océan Indien.

Le langage des peuples Indiens qui parlent le Concanim, ou le Tamil ou Tamul, semble avoir quelque affinité avec la langue Somáli. Les mœurs des peuples nomades, qui habitent les montagnes du Dekkan, sont les mœurs du peuple Somáli; et le langage Somáli a de si grandes affinités avec le Tamil, qu'un Madrassien après quelques semaines est capable de comprendre un Somáli. Si on pouvait trouver l'historien portugais, qui parle de la conquête des côtes Africaines au 11e siècle, on aurait la solution de ce problème, qui jusqu'à cette heure est resté un mystère pour tous les Savants."