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Toward a Definition of the Term Zanj

Marina Tolmacheva

The word Zanj (sometimes Zanj) is a collective noun which frequently occurs in mediaeval Arabic texts with reference to Africans. Occasionally it is used as a toponym. More frequently, however, it is employed as an ethnonym; therefore Bilad al-Zanj 'the country of the Zanj' or Ard al-Zanj 'the land of the Zanj' are made available for toponymic use. The broken plural Zunaj also occurs, and apparently may refer to Zanj groups as well as Zanj persons.

This paper addresses itself to the use of the word Zanj in relation to black people of East Africa in their domicile. The Zanj slaves of the Caliphate and the so-called Zanj of the Western Sudan remain therefore outside its scope.

This approach implies a basic distinction in cognitive perspective, to be repeatedly referred to later: specifically, that in the Caliphate the word Zanj usually refers to slaves and consequently sets the people called Zanj in a separate socioeconomic category, entailing connotations of dependence and inferiority. In West Africa, too, the word denotes a category of serf population; whereas in the East African context, to the contrary, the reference is generally to free inhabitants of the area. Here they are implicitly recognised as a majority, if not the sole population group.

The earliest mention of Zanj in Africa is found in an excerpt from the astronomer al-Fazari, where Zanj is but one of many countries listed in such a manner that the reference may be dated around the 780s. That is almost exactly a century after the first alleged use of the word Zanj in an Arabic text otherwise unconcerned with Africa. After that, the first author to do more than merely mention the Zanj is al-Jahiz (d. 869). Excluded here are references to the Zanj ascribed by Arab authors to Plato, Galen or Aristotle, since they are anachronistic.

2. An earlier version was presented to the Middle East Studies Association of North America (Salt Lake City, 1979).
5. The event at which the word was reportedly used (in a poetic reference to a Zanj slave) followed the Alid massacre at Kerbela in 680 AD. See Maulana S. Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, "Zenj": its first known use in Arabic literature', Azania, II (1967), pp. 200-201. The actual record of the story, though, may date to the mid-eighth century.

106 Zanj and cannot accurately reflect the original Arabic use of the term which is not found in either Greek or Latin. Also omitted is discussion of the toponyms Azania (Periplus of the Erythrean Sea), Zingis (Ptolemy), and Zingion (Cosmas Indicopleustes), since despite the apparent phonetic and geographic parallels with Zanj, there is no evidence of direct connection between the Greek and Arabic usages.

The Zanj and the non-Zanj
To begin with, it is necessary to establish the criteria used by the Arab authors to distinguish the Zanj from the other, non-Zanj peoples. The racial classification used by the Arab writers was extremely loose. Thus, al-Jahiz lists among the 'black' peoples such African groups as Zanj, Habasha, Nubians, Zagawa and Meroe, then the Berbers, Fezzan, Copts, and even the Sind, Hind, Sin and Masin, etc. Interestingly, perhaps the Sudan of West Africa do not appear on this general list of the blacks.7

According to tradition, the Zanj were descended from Noah through Kush son of Ham. The earliest record of this genealogy belongs to al-Ya'qubi (d. 897): The children of Kush and Ham - and they are al-Habash and al-Sudan divided after crossing the Nile of Egypt. One branch went to the right, between east and west (i.e. to the south). These were al-Nuba, al-Buja, al-Habasha and al-Zanj. The other part went westwards.8

Here the difference between the black people of West Africa (Sadan) and the eastern branch (Habasha) is clearly perceived although not explained. 'Al-Habasha' is a collective name (sometimes also used as a toponym) of a large group of 'Ethiopians' which, more closely defined, included the Zanj, Beja, Nubians and Abyssinians proper.9

Thus the Zanj are both different from al-Habasha as Abyssinians and at the same time part of al-Habasha as equivalent to the Ethiopians of the Ancients. Apparently it is in this larger sense that the collective term 'al-Habasha' is sometimes replaced by the broken plural Alfabsh, i.e. 'groups of Habasha' (see about similar usage of Zunrij above). This form appears when al-Mas'udi (d. 965) discusses both the Zanj and the Habasha in their respective groups: al-Zanj drina sa'ir al-Ah abish, 'the Zanj apart from the other kinds of Ethiopians.' The Nubians and Abyssinians are the most frequently named among the lateral relations of the Zanj, while the Beja (Buja, above) appear in this connection but rarely. Some lack of clarity is apparent with the term Barbara (Barbard) and their relation to the Zanj because of the frequent confusion between the eastern Barbara and the North African Berbers.
7. It has been suggested that Sidn first appears in Ibn Qutayba: see Arabskie
istochniki VII-X vv. po etnografii i istorii Afriki iuzhnee Sakhary (Moscow-
Leningrad, 1960), p. 380. Upon a careful consideration of the text, however, I feel
that his use of the word is very similar to that of al-Jahiz: that is, it is still simply a
plural noun and not yet an ethnonym. See Ibn Qutayba, al-Ma'ari (ed. F.
population, in my view it first occurs in al-Istakhri: see al-Masalik
al-Mamalik, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1870), pp. 4-5.
8. al-Ya'qubi, Ta'nkh, ed. M. T.Houtsma (Leiden, 1883), p. 217. Ibn Qutayba has
an earlier but less precise version (see ibid.).
9. Throughout this paper the word 'Abyssinians' is used with the sole purpose of
distinguishing in English the 'Habasha' of mediaeval Ethiopia, from whose name
Abyssinia is derived, from the much broader category
of 'Ethiopians' of the ancient authors familiar to the Arabs.
10. al-Mas'udi, Murui al-dhahab, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de
Courteille (Paris, 18611877), iii, p. 6.

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For the most part, Barbara has been accepted to denote the pre-Somali
Cushiticspeaking population of the Horn of Africa. Descriptions of the coast
customarily name Bilad al-Habasha, then - moving eastward (according to the
Ptolemaic geographic conception) - Bilad al-Barbara, then Bilad al-Zanj and
Sofala. AlMas'udi names the Barbara as a group of Zanj.1 The town of Barbara,
尽管 its seemingly obvious name, is sometimes placed in the land of al-
Habasha, sometimes in the land of Zanj. For example, Abu 'l-Fida' (14th century,
drawing on Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi) speaks of Barbara min bilhd al-Zanj.12 Yaqut
(1220s), even more confusingly, quotes 'Barbara of al-Zanj' and calls Merka 'a
city on Zanjibar belonging to the black Barbara.' He also talks about the mainland
of al-Barbar alongside the Sea of Zanj and places Mogadishu, whose population
the later authors call Barbara, in the land of Zanj.13
The Barbara may be defined from these data as a negroid population (they are
'black', in contrast to the Berbers), as neighbours to the Zanj (and to al-Habasha as
well), and also as a minor group in comparison to both. (They may be a part of the
Zanj, but the Zanj are not a part of the Barbara.) On the one hand, a perception
emerges of the land of Zanj as a major and dominant geographic concept in this
part of the African continent. On the other hand, the inconsistent, sometimes
overlapping, use of geographic and ethnic terms may be a reflection of the
migratory movements of population in this area.14
Divisions of the Zanj
In all probability, some of the confusion and inconsistencies in the above
examples may be a reflection of the weak, undeveloped or poorly defined
terminological criteria of mediaeval scholarship. Still, the picture becomes even
more complex when we turn to the internal composition of the Zanj. That they
were not regarded as a uniform race is reflected by the early use of such
expressions asjins min al-Zanj, 'genus of the Zanj' (Ibn Rusta, early tenth
century)15 or asndf al-Zanj, 'kinds of the Zanj' (Ibn al-Nadim, c. 987).16 For the first time names for different groups of Zanj occur in al-Jahiz who distinguishes two kinds: Zanzibaris (Lanjya, from Unguja) and Pembans (Qanbala, from Mkumbuu).17 Obviously, this is a geographic rather than an ethnic classification. (There is an implicit argument for cultural distinction

11. Ibid., p. 2

between the two groups as well.) Moreover, since al-Jahiz speaks of the Zanj in the Caliphate as his main topic, he really means slaves imported from Zanzibar Island and Pemba. However, on another occasion he also gives the local names (or nicknames) for them: yaKibwa and yaMbwa, respectively.18 Later al-Mas'udi names three Zanj groups: al-Makr, al-Mashkar (both unidentified) and Barbard.19 After a considerable lapse of time, Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi (13th century), in reversal of all previous tradition, adds to this list Zanj al-Nfba and Zanj al-Habasha.20 In the fourteenth century al-Dinashqi repeats (distorting along the way) al-Jahiz's information about Lanjuya and Qanbalu, and includes among the Zanj al-Zigr-n, al-Zag and Lamlam.21 The first two are descendants of Qift son of Misr son of Ham and appear in other sources in connection with the West African people; the last name is of a people more
commonly called Namnam and identified with supposed cannibals of the vague interior on the one hand, and - less romantically - with the Zande of the Nile-Congo watershed on the other.22

The Zanj as barbarians

The accusation or assumption of cannibalism among the Zanj, although by no means common, appears in Arabic texts on a number of occasions. In no instance, of course, do we find an eyewitness account or any specific evidence of man-eating. While some of the existing reports undoubtedly derived from the ancient tradition, the belief in Zanj cannibalism certainly continued through Islamic times. In a famous tenth-century story from The Marvels of India a ship is driven by the storm beyond its destination to the coast of Sofala: 'When I had examined the place,' said the ship's captain, 'I realised that we had come to the land of the man-eating Zanj and that to land in this place was certain death.'23 From the story which follows it becomes clear that the local population was not Muslim. Indeed, that may have been the observation of the captain as he 'examined the place' and arrived at his sad conclusion. The question of religion appears crucial in the evaluation of a Zanj society by the outsiders.

Thus, the 'city dwellers' and the 'northern Zanj' (al-Zanj al-shimalyiin) are noted for their wisdom and the art of rhetoric, while the rest - particularly those residing in 'remote areas' - are dismissed as 'refuse of the Zanj.'24

The 'northerners', naturally, would be among the first to experience the influence of Islam (as well as to enter into commerce with Muslim lands). For the first time Islam among the Zanj is registered by al-Mas'udi:

Qanbala is a populated island inhabited by Muslims, although their language is Zanji. They took possession of the island and captured those Zanj who resided there... The owners of ships from the people of Oman cross this sea to the island of Qanbala situated in the Sea of the Zanj. In this city are Muslims interspersed with infidels.25

22. However, some Arab geographers also placed Namnam far to the west, in the area of the tropical forest.
23. English translation by Bernard Lewis: Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople (New York, 1974), ii, p. 82.
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This statement used to be taken to mean that the Muslims were not Zanj, and as proof of the claims of traditional Swahili histories about the origin of the coastal dynasties from Arab and Persian immigrants. The work of Misiugin in the 1960s and of Derek Nurse, Randall L. Pouwels and Thomas Spear in more recent years has done much to reconstruct the complex socio-historical reality behind the traditions. We should note, however, that while the coastal histories reflect the importance of Islam in the self-perception of the indigenous populations, the Arabic use of the term 'Muslim' and 'Zanj' in the context of East Africa reflects very specific attitudes of the outside Muslims. It may be appropriate to reiterate here that since we do not possess any written information on East African populations from the pre-Islamic era, all Arabic sources implicitly or explicitly project a Muslim evaluative stance. It appears that al-Mas'udi finds an incongruity in the fact that the Qanbalu Muslims speak a Zanj language. On the other hand he does seem to distinguish between local Muslims and Omani visitors (naturally, also Muslim).

Arabic sources continue to mention pagan beliefs on the coast well into the fifteenth century, but it is clear that progress of Islam in the area was noticeable to visitors from the Middle East. Instead of the 'kings' mentioned in several texts of the tenth century, 'sheikhs' and 'sultans' appear in the sources of the thirteenth century and later. Mogadishu is first mentioned by Yaqut as a Muslim town early in the thirteenth century, to be described by Ibn Sa'id only a few decades later as a 'glorious city of Islam.' 26 Shortly after Yaqut, Ibn al-Mujawir records sectarian movements in Kilwa, and a century later Ibn Battuta calls the people of Kilwa ahl al-jihd.27

It seems that the texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries especially well register the significant changes which had occurred in the content of the word Zanj as a result of the Islamisation of the coast. Initially the word clearly meant those blacks whose home was East Africa and whose religion was non-Islamic and pagan. As Islam spread, the meaning of the term expanded to include those blacks whose home was still East Africa but who became brethren in faith with the Arabs. Hence the expression kuffdr al-Zanaj (the Zanj unbelievers) was used by Ibn Battuta for reference to those against whom jihad was waged at Kilwa. Furthermore, to describe the area where raiding by the Sultan of Kilwa took place, Ibn Battuta uses the expression ard al-Zunfij: literally 'land of Zanjes' or even 'land of (diverse) groups of Zanj'. Unlike the more customary terms ard al-Zanj and Bildal-Zanj(see above), this expression is not a toponym. In my view, the use of the phrase ard al-Zunfij in this account has two implications. One is that a spatial juxtaposition existed between Kilwa and the Zanj: obviously, the raids were conducted on the mainland while Kilwa itself was located on an adjacent islet. Therefore ard al-Zuniiij may carry the connotation of 'the Zanj mainland.' The second implication, unavoidable if less obvious, is that of a cultural (religious) juxtaposition: the victims of the raids were Zunfij, while the inhabitants of Kilwa, implicitly, were not Zuniiij by virtue of their being Muslim. Thus, to a Muslim outsider, those East Africans who became Muslim somewhat lost, at least in part, the less desirable aspect of 'Zanjiness' or 'Zanjhood.'
That the Muslim Zanj became regarded as 'not quite Zanj' while at the same time remaining 'of the Zanj' and that being a non-Islamized Zanj somehow suggested inferiority, may be illustrated even more clearly by the curious terminology introduced in the fourteenth century by al-Dimashqi. This author is explicit that Kilwa belongs to the Muslim Zanj: li-Zanj al-muslimlin.28 To this group are intentionally juxtaposed, on religious grounds, the Zanj living further south. These latter are called Zanj al-Zanj, namely the 'true' or 'hardcore' Zanj, with the entailing accusatory sense of stubborn persistence in barbarism. In this light it is inviting to take a fresh look at the capacity for cultural discrimination revealed in what seemed on the surface to be a purely ethnic term. Reference was made above to the unusual composite ethnonyms occurring in Ibn Sa'id, such as the Zanj al-Nuiba and the Zanj al-Habasha. Superficially, these may be understood to apply to some groups of mixed origins whom the author found difficult to classify, or else to the settlers of some border areas between the major regions. It seems, however, that these names may not be true ethnonyms but more likely denote cultural or, more narrowly, religious distinctions. It is difficult to be more specific since, unfortunately, no other sources contain these terms. Nevertheless, one might conjecture that both the terms refer to pagan entities; that in both instances the part 'Zanj' carries a negative connotation with an implied comparison to the 'mainstream' groups; and that its use is reflective of a growing awareness among the Arab geographers of the cultural diversity of inner Africa. Thus, to be more specific, I suggest that the term Zanj al-Nfiba refers to non-Christianized and non-Islamized Nuba, and the term Zanj al-Habasha to the non-Islamized and non-Christianized entity within the Habasha, while the part Zanj is employed here with its 'original' religious, rather than ethnic or racial implication.

The pejorative aspect of the term apparently became even more pronounced in time. It has even been suggested recently that the search for the origin of the word may be best abandoned since it is 'unreasonable to seek a precise meaning for a term of abuse.'29 But as the above analysis shows, the implication of inferiority was not always present, nor was it particularly strong in the African context, especially at the earlier stages. It is true that, in Persian at least, zangi could mean 'fool' or 'simpleton,'30 but in such cases the original reference to Africans became extremely hazy. Also, aside from the accustomed feeling of superiority on the part of Islamic writers, the weight of pejorative themes probably drew from a society where the name Zanj was constantly related to a socially inferior (slave) population. Thus its Middle Eastern usage may have developed nuances alien to the original content of the word.

Concerning the origin of the name

The etymology of the word Zanj has been a recurring topic for discussion among Africanists and Orientalists. Theories which have been advanced to date may be
grouped as Persian, Arab and African. The first has been the dominant, developed in great detail by Gabriel Ferrand early in this century. However, the Persian etymology cannot be accurately perceived from the Persian texts, since the earliest source in which Zang appears in an African context is considerably later than the


Tolmacheva first Arabic text. Suggested etymology varies from 'dark, black' to 'East African Negro' to 'Ethiopian.'

The Arab theories offer derivation from 'ajam to zanjal to Barr al-Khaza'in. The last two cannot be seriously considered to produce an ethnonym; the first continues in use alongside Zanj, usually for the Persians, but sometimes also for other non-Semitic neighbours - among them, interestingly, the tribes of the African coast of the Red Sea.

If the word Zanj came from the Persian language, it was hardly perceived as such by the Arabs, who added to it the definite article, patterned the plurals, and on the whole did not treat it as if it had other than ethnographic application. Moreover, it clearly did not mean simply 'blacks,' and was thus unlike the Arabic 'Sudan.'

Neither did the word carry the meaning of black colour in reference to other than people: all the sources describing the appearance of the Zanj include among their chief characteristics the black (or dark, designated by other words) colour of their skin. Were this connotation inherent in the word, such usage would have made it redundant.

As usual, there is an exception. This is the use of the name in adjectival form of a mineral described by al-Biruni: 'The best variety of hematite is zanj extremely black (al-mutanht 'l-sawdd) .... The hematite mine is on Mount al-Muqattam and in the vicinity, in the land of Egypt. If this is really so, then the reference to the Zanj is due only to the colour....' Still, the reasoning of al-Biruni seems to imply not the meaning of the root z.n.j. as much as the secondary derivation based on Zanj skin colour. He appears to expect that an object called zanj would come from some country other than Egypt - I would argue, from Zanj - and faced with such contradictory information, he chooses, somewhat reluctantly, the second-best explanation. That al-Biruni does not easily deduce blackness from the word Zanj is probably due to his awareness that the usual colour of hematite is reddish-brown. In rare instances, though, hematite occurs in black crystals, and this should be the high-grade variety listed in the Mineralogy.

Such adjectival use of Zanj derivatives is by no means common; the word preserves an extremely narrow lexical scope and never enters everyday Arabic vocabulary, which seems to give it a foreign aura. Thus, while the Zanj may be
described by the Arabic s.w.d. (black-skinned), the root z.n.j. is never used to describe the Sildn. Another instance of semantic support for this view occurs in al-Istakhri's expression 'white Zanj'.3 (There is never a mention of the 'white Sudan!')

If now we examine the African theories of the origin of the name Zanj, we find that they often fail to take into account its obvious significance as an ethnic term: for instance the suggested derivation from zang, a bell carried by a magician (imported from Africa for entertainment).37 Several suggested etymologies 'are based on African ethnic and cultural terms, such as Zimba, waShenzi, Hadya.

32. 1. udad al-'alam (982-3), ed. V. Barthold (Leningrad, 1930), ff. 2b, 3a, 4a, 13a, 39a. 33. A detailed review, with complete references, is found in my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation 'East Africa in mediaeval Arabic accounts: an ethno-geographic study' (Leningrad, 1970), ch. 1.

34. Two most detailed descriptions are found in al-Mas'udi and Zakariya' al-Qazwini. See Ernst Dammann, Beiträge aus arabischen Quellen zur Kenntnis des negerischen Afrika (Bordersholm, 1929), p. 10; and Zakariya al-Qazwini, X.thr al-bilid, ed. F. Wiistenfeld (Göttingen, 1884), p. 14.


While it may be that the African route of investigation is the most promising, it is very precarious and does not take us far. A casual perusal of ethnic and social vocabularies of eastern Africa provides other superficially attractive phonetic parallels - Dinka, called Gierghe by the Sudanese Arabs; Sagalo of the Rahanwen Somali; Shangalla, the negroid 'serfs' of western Ethiopia. In the vocabulary of the Masai tungani means 'man.' The earliest example may be the deneg dwarf brought to Ancient Egypt from the south. Several (like waShenzi) seem to carry derogatory overtones.

Drawn as they are from diverse, and mostly recent, languages and peoples, these examples offer a confusingly rich and somewhat irrelevant array of choices. Nevertheless, it seems significant that, in a semantic parallel to them, the Arabic Zanj as well as the Persian Zang are ethnonyms and collective nouns.38 This suggests an early and consistent societal connotation to the term (as well as a nominal function).

It has never been satisfactorily explained why the Persian Zang is thought to have preceded the Arabic use of the word, nor why its geographic scope was focused on Ethiopia. A likely explanation may lie in the involvement of late Sassanid Persia in the Red Sea area and in the slave markets of Eritrea. It should be noted that, on the evidence of tenth-century and later sources, the Persians, as did the Arabs, clearly distinguished between 'Abyssinians' proper and the other Africans. If ancient Persians applied the name Zang to north-eastern Africa and if (again, as did the Arabs) they mainly meant the coast, then Zang might refer to slaves
exported from Ethiopia., (Compare al-Jahiz's classification of the Zanj based on the area of exportation.) In this manner, a self-appellation or a name given by the neighbours and attached initially to a small group of people exported from or living near the Red Sea could became a generic term for the non-Abyssinian population of Eastern Africa.

This still does not resolve the spatial discrepancy between the Eritrean coast for the Persian Zang and the East African coast for the Arabic Zanj. I would like to suggest that the history of the term Zanj, and the growth of its geographic and racial scope, may be more closely connected with the history of commercial ties between Africa, Arabia and the Persian Gulf than with political-military expansions, whether of Rome, Persia or the Islamic caliphate. Continually under certain constraints of navigation and temporarily focused under the Sassanids on the Red Sea area, these ties were eventually restored to include the East African coast. In this process the word formerly used to describe negroid slaves exported from north-east Africa may have developed a new connotation for peoples of the coast well past Cape Guardafui.

It is evidently in this new, special geographic, meaning that the word entered the vocabulary of Arab geographers: for whenever Zanj habitat is under discussion, the emphasis in the Arabic sources is certainly placed on the oceanic coast of East Africa, and not on the Red Sea or the Horn. It seems of equally great significance that all the Zanj words preserved by Arabic writers show Bantu origin.39

38. This follows from the use of Zangistin ana Zangiyan for toponyms (the earliest examples: Hudfidal-'Alam for the former and a Persian version of al-Istakhri for the latter); from the ethnonym are derived the singular form Zant rwith its own plural Zangiyan.
39. For detailed discussion see G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, 'Mediaeval evidences for Swahili', Swahili, 29/1, (1959); M. Tolmacheva, 'The Zanj language', Kiswahili, 45/1 (1975).

Certainly, one is tempted to speculate about the chronology of this phenomenon. It is probably a futile exercise to attempt to establish exactly when the name Zanj first became attached to Bantu-speakers: the post-Islamic origin of our sources makes the Bantu identification chronologically consistent. If, however, we assume a continuity between the Arabic Zanj and the Greek Azania, the linguistic aspect becomes less definite. One must further admit that such a continuity, while attractively bridging the points in coastal history from the first-second to the eighth-ninth centuries AD, might eliminate any excuse for the wanderings of the Persian Zang. Some needed answers may be provided by investigating the chronology of respective usage of Zang and Zanj in non-geographical sources. It may be hoped that analysis of early poetry may throw light on the obscure ways of terminological transformation as a result of which the word Zanj received a new life in the Arabic language as an ethnonym of varied, multi-level content. Its meaning changed, grew and expanded constantly as the contacts of the Arab world with eastern Africa developed a previously unknown diversity and complexity. From an ethnic/racial designation it went on to acquire religious,
cultural and linguistic nuances none of which may have been part of its original meaning.
Marina Tolmacheva is currently Assistant Professor of History at Seattle University. She received her undergraduate training with the Oriental Faculty of the Leningrad State University and completed her graduate work at the USSR Academy of Sciences Institute of Ethnography (Leningrad). Her research has been centred on Arabic sources on Africa and on peripheral Islamic cultures.

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