

The Leven House Factor in the Birth of Digo Mission and Christian Empire in East Africa

Julius Gathogo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1718-0082>

Kenyatta University, Kenya

Research Fellow, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa

jgathogom@yahoo.com

Abstract

Leven House, as it exists in the 21st century in Mombasa city of Kenya, remains one of the most historic buildings in eastern Africa. In our focus on both the birth of the Christian Empire in East Africa (that stretches from the Kenyan Coast to the Democratic Republic of Congo), and the Digo Mission that began in 1904, Leven House becomes a critical issue. As the Anglican Diocese of Mombasa commemorated 114 years of the Digo Mission (1904–2018) in December 2018, serious issues emerged regarding the birth of Protestant Christianity in the region. One of the issues is the nature of English missions during the 19th and 20th centuries in Africa, where the Christian symbol of the flag was preceded by the British flag. The second issue is the nature of Arabic civilisation on the East African coast, which went hand-in-hand with the spread of Islam. Third is the conflict among the three ruling Omani dynasties (Yorubi, Busaidi, and Mazrui) as one major factor that ironically favoured Christian missions in eastern Africa. Fourth is the role of Mazrui-Omani Arabs, a Muslim society, in midwifing Christianity in East Africa. Was Christianity in East Africa mid-wifed by Mazrui-Omani Arabs via their provision of Leven House to the British soldiers in 1824? Was the feuding of the three Arab Omani clans a blessing in disguise that aided the establishment of the British Empire and the Christian missions that went hand-in-hand? In its methodology, the article historicises the issues at hand in order to retrace the events that paved ways for the establishment of the Christian Empire and the Digo Mission in particular. In a nutshell, the problem statement is: What is the role of Leven House in the establishment of the Digo Mission in particular, and Christian Empire in general?



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Introduction

The Digo is a sub-group of the larger Minjikenda community (also called Minzikenda, meaning nine towns or cities). They live with their cousin sub-group, the Wanduruma, in Kwale County of Kenya. The entire nine sub-groups that make up the indigenous Minjikenda community of the East African coast are: the northern Minjikenda (Chonyi, Kambe, Duruma, Kauma, Ribe, Rabai, Jibana, and Giriama); and the southern Minjikenda (the Digo, who are also found in Tanzania due to their proximity to the common border). In a nutshell, the Minjikenda inhabit the East African coast of Kenya, between the Sabaki and the Uмба rivers. The area stretches from the border with Tanzania in the south to the border near Somalia in the north (Baur 1994).

In Kenya, Christians constitute about 83 per cent of the population, with Protestants at 47.7 per cent, Catholics at 23.4 per cent, and other Christians at 11.9 per cent. The Muslim population stands at 11.2 per cent, traditionalists at 1.7 per cent, others at 1.6 per cent, agnostics (neutralists) at 2.4 per cent, and unspecified religions at 0.2 per cent. However, Digoland figures are unique (Joshuah Project 2018). It is in Kwale County, Digo homeland, where in the 21st century Muslims account for 79 per cent and traditionalists 20 per cent—a phenomenon that makes an interesting case study. While Christianity has taken root in the entire region of East Africa since 1844, Digoland—where the European missionaries passed through as they moved on to the interior—remains a predominantly Muslim zone. With a total Christian population of less than two per cent, a Muslim population of 79 per cent, and 20 per cent traditionalists, the low figure of Christian missions in this area (Digoland or Digo Mission) drives us to explore the matter further. Are they a by-product of Leven House? Does the Digo Mission have any connection with Leven House; and does it have any connection with the establishment of the British Empire, which went hand-in-hand with the Christian missions in the 19th and 20th centuries?

A leading evangelist/catechist from Digoland, Stephen Gude Zani (1899–1985), recalls, in his write-up, how the Digo Mission began:

In 1904, a European missionary from the UK, by name Bans, visited Digoland. He was accompanied by three African assistants; namely Macheche Baraka from Rabai, Njuguna, and Munuhe Munene. The latter two were from Kikuyuland in central Kenya. Bans went on to construct the Pastor's house, then a makeshift house for worship and prayer [temporary church] dug a borehole for fresh water on Mwangala side, and built a teachers' house. He then brought an elderly person by name Ephraim Yamungu who took care of cattle in the nearby forest. It is from there that Bans started teaching the Digo people. He stayed in this centre for eight years. The centre was renamed Pa Mzungu or Zungu [meaning, "the Europeans' place"]. (Zani 1983, 1)

For a mission that was too close to Leven House (mission house) to “start” in 1904, it was clearly a delayed mission as her neighbouring missions had begun as early as 1875. After Rev. Bans had abandoned the Digo Mission in 1912, he claimed that his eight years’ stay (1904–1912) was “a hell of trouble.” The succeeding European and local missionaries have not yet succeeded in putting the Digo Mission on par with the neighbouring missions. Does this signify the failure of the British Empire to ensconce itself fully?

As noted by Gathogo (2013), the overall spread of the Anglican religion took place from 1844 to 1930. Sadly, this speedy growth excluded Digoland, where the Digo Mission remains numerically small in the 21st century. Ironically, the distance between Kwale County (where the Digo Mission is located) and Mombasa County, is a mere 28 kilometres. Certainly, the proximity of the Digo Mission (centre in Kwale County) to Leven House, which acted as the centre of all English activities since 1824, should have given her an advantage over other missions of eastern Africa, such as Freretown 1875, Sagalla 1883, Jilore 1890, Mbale 1900, Kaloleni 1904, among others. In the central and western regions of Kenya, there were well-established mission stations such as Kabete 1900, Weithaga 1904, Wusi 1905, Kahuhia 1906, Nairobi 1906, Maseno 1906, St Paul’s Kiruri 1906, Kisumu 1909, Kabare 1910, Kigari 1910, Mutira 1912, Butere 1912, Gathukeine 1913, Ng’iya 1921, Kacheliba 1929, and Marsabit 1930. In the rest of East African countries, namely Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the then Tanganyika (now Tanzania), more Church Missionary Societies (hereafter CMS) progressed well. Such include Baganda 1876–77, Moshi 1878, Rwanda 1916–19, and Burundi 1934. As noted earlier, the Digo Mission in the 21st century remains a struggling mission, particularly when we consider its spiritual, material, human and other resources. Why is it that the proximity to the “centre of the British Empire” in East Africa (Leven House) did not give the Digo Mission an advantage? The concern in this article is to locate the interface between the establishment of the British Empire, which went hand-in-hand with the English missions—as the cross followed the flag—and the critical role of Leven House to the Digo Mission and the rest of the Protestant missions in eastern Africa.

Leven House and the Mazrui Family

Leven House was initially built by the Mazrui dynasty/family around 1800. The Mazruis were a Muslim Omani Arab clan that reigned over some coastal areas of eastern Africa, and especially Kenya, from the 18th to the 20th centuries. As they governed Mombasa and some other coastal areas, in current Kenya’s territorial space, they were vehemently opposed to the Omani All Bu Sa’id (hereafter Busaidi) dynasty/family that ruled Zanzibar. The conflict between the two Omani clans, the Busaidi and the Mazruis, despite both professing Islamic faith, was largely due to the battle for supremacy right from their homeland. After the Portuguese—who first docked on the East African coast in 1498 with the coming of Vasco da Gama from 7 to 13 April 1498, and finally left Mombasa in 1729—the whole “coast north of

Mozambique was under the firm Islamic control of the Sultan of Oman” (Baur 1994, 224). As John Baur (1994, 224) has perceptively noted, “the enterprising Sultan Said eventually moved his residence [from Muscat] to Zanzibar in 1841, in order to have better control over the coastal trade.” Seyyid Said, at one stage, invited the French, British and even the Americans to open a consulate on the Island of Zanzibar, thereby making Zanzibar the centre of trade and politics in eastern Africa. Interestingly, the coming of the “Christian” European powers went beyond the military agenda that the Sultan had in mind; rather it also strengthened the Christianisation of the East African region, as missionaries from the various Western countries began to dock on the East African coast. With Sultan Seyyid Said uttering his famous words, “I am nothing but a merchant,” to demonstrate his trade policy, the European counterparts and their sister missions back home exploited that loophole and encouraged the Christian missionary enterprise to penetrate the predominantly Islamic and African religious zones (Baur 1994, 224).

While the exact month and year of the construction of Leven House are not clear from the available materials, it is easy to estimate by addressing three critical factors. First, it was one of the most spacious, magnificent, and “modern” houses by 1822, which the Mazruis used to entice their British military allies as they fought off the Sultan of Zanzibar who sought to take over their territories. This means it was not a very old house by the time the Mazruis gave it out to the British operatives in 1824. Second, the Mazruis were the real threat to the Sultan of Zanzibar, who wanted to enforce total control of the East African region. Hence the reason why he sought to wrestle down all the coastal areas that were opposed to him. At one time, the Mazruis allied with the Portuguese and attacked Stone Town (also called Mji Mkongwe—the oldest part of Zanzibar, Tanzania) which was then occupied by their rival Omani Muslim clan. It was out of these bitter Omani clan rivalries that Leven House was first handed over to the British in 1824 by their original owners, the Mazruis, as they sought further military support. Third, the house was renamed Leven after a British military ship. It went on to host the Western missionaries, explorers and colonial administrators who docked on the East African coast from 1824 onwards. It became a critical house in the dream of extending British hegemony and Empire in eastern Africa. Clearly, the house has huge implications for the Digo Mission and the quest for establishing a Christian Empire in eastern Africa. Certainly, the house is critical for the entire eastern African Christianity as we know it today, as the initial scheming and reshaping of Christianity in eastern Africa have been conducted at Leven House since 1844.

The East Coast of Africa in the First Century

As we mull over the Digo Mission and the intrigues behind its establishment, it is important to concede that there were trading activities in Digoland and the surrounding areas of the East African coast before the coming of Islam in the 7th century. As early as the first century AD/CE, there were myriads of activities in the East African region that hosted the Digo Mission. In particular, the three original inhabitant groups of the

Old Town, Mombasa, where Leven House is situated—the Wakilindini, Wachangamwe who later moved to the present day Changamwe District, and Watanga who still live in Kuze within the Old Town (Kilindini)—began to interact with people from outside their territorial space many years ago. At one stage, in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, Wakilindini, Wachangamwe and Watanga (together with Kingozi, also the Swahili) had to request help from the Mazrui Omani Arabs for support to overcome the Portuguese (Said, interview 3:10:18). Oblivious of the fact that the Mazrui dynasty would later “colonise” them, the inhabitants thus invited the Mazruis.

In reading the book, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, published in the first century CE/AD, we learn that the East African coast, stretching as far as present-day Tanzania, had well-established Indian Ocean trade links. In other words, it had good connections with the rest of the world. The diverse traders used to come in ships which were blown across the Indian Ocean by the yearly monsoon winds. These traders with East Africa came from Arabia, India, Persia and even China. They brought beads, pottery, cloth, metalware and wine (Jack 1972).

With the birth of Mohammed, the Prophet, in Arabia, and the eventual birth of Islam in the 6th century, nearly all Arabians accepted the faith and theology that he propounded. After Mohammed’s death, the subsequent succession battles in Arabia led to a split (Jack 1972). The Muslims split to follow separate leaders; as some left Arabia and came to live in the land of Zenj (black people). Digoland on the East African coast is one of the places where they have settled since the 7th century. Other Arab settlements that emerged in post-Mohammed Arabia include: Malaya which later united with North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore in 1963 to become Malaysia—even though Singapore was expelled from the federation in 1965; India, and China (Jack 1972). These countries are critical in understanding the Digo Mission and the politics behind Leven House, as they all traded with Africa, a phenomenon that went hand-in-hand with the spread of Islam.

When Vasco da Gama and his sailors docked on the East African coast in 1498, while being accompanied by both traders and Catholic Christians, he found people who were well rooted in both traditional African religion and Islam. They were not willing to change their religio-social positions. To show the deep penetration of Islam among the people on the East African coast, Barbosa, a Portuguese missionary of the 15th century, wrote: “... we found Moors [the Portuguese name for Muslims], some fair and some black ... finely clad in many rich garments of gold and silk and cotton ... we saw fair houses of stone and mortar with many windows after our fashion very well arranged in streets” (Barbosa quoted in Jack 1972, 23). Unlike the Arabs who would enter a bit of the interior by sending trading caravans, the Portuguese lost the heart of the East African coast by 1729 due to their failure to do likewise; and further due to their perennial conflicts and clashes with Muslims, among other factors. Hence, their Catholic Christian faith did not stamp its mark among the Digo or with any other coastal community of East Africa. As the Portuguese control declined, Mombasa, in particular,

took advantage and rebelled in 1631—a rebellion that was led by Sultan Yussuf. In this unprecedented bloody confrontation, all the Portuguese soldiers in Fort Jesus, which they had built in 1593, were massacred.

The Coming of European Christian Missionaries

Both the introductory part and the section on the East African coast in the first century have helped us to understand the situation before the arrival of the 19th and 20th-century European missionaries. As we mull over the challenges, we can easily understand the Arab-Islam connection, and also the role of traders to East Africa who came from Arabia, India, Persia and even China. They all had a bearing on what became a mission in the East African coast and the Digo Mission. Indeed, as the 21-year old Lieutenant Reitz disembarked from Owen Ship, HMS Leven, with a small contingent of British soldiers to plant the British flag in Mombasa in 1824, it became evident how the cross followed the British flag. As a result of the hoisting of the British flag at Leven House in Mombasa Island, the first English protectorate was declared in East Africa. It is from there that the 19th and 20th-century missions followed suit and eventually sought to establish their mission. These events point to the intrigues that saw the early attempts at establishing a Christian Empire in eastern Africa, a phenomenon where the cross of Christ followed the British flag. As we shall see, the British conquests were a huge blessing to the missionary enterprises in the region. After Captain Owen had established himself at Leven House, all British operatives in the region took it as their centre of operations, irrespective of their diverse interests. This section has also prepared us to explore more to understand the three ruling dynasties in Oman (Mazrui, Busaidi, and Yorubi) and to comprehend their implications for the Digo Mission.

Mazrui, Busaidi and Yorubi Dynasties and Leven House

Following the defeat of the Portuguese in 1729, the Imam of Oman declared his sovereignty over the coastal areas. He eventually sent his governors to govern on his behalf in all of the coastal towns. In other words, the Islamisation of the East African coast, including Digoland, was complete by 1729. Although the ruling Yorubi dynasty in Muscat, Oman, was overthrown in 1741 and replaced by the Busaidi dynasty/family, Mohammed bin Uthman al-Mazrui—who belonged to the Mazrui dynasty/family—remained the ruler of Mombasa. Uthman al-Mazrui had been appointed by Sultan Saif ibn of the Yorubi dynasty before he was killed in 1741. As the new ruling Busaidi dynasty took control of both Oman and the East African coast, Mohammed ibn Uthman Mazrui refused to accept the leadership of the Busaidi dynasty (and especially Ahmed ibn Said as his superior), a phenomenon that marked a protracted war, from 1741 to 1837, between the Mazrui dynasty and the Busaidi dynasty.

As Sultan Said bin Sultan al-Said of both Muscat and Zanzibar began his attacks against Fort Jesus in 1822 against Mohammed bin Uthman al-Mazrui of Mombasa, with intent to remove the Mazrui dynasty from Mombasa, they sought a military alliance with the

British. Certainly, the Mazrui dynasty was held under suspicion by the Sultan of Zanzibar due to their Anglo-Omani alliances. As the anti-slave trade crusaders, the British agreed to join forces with the Mazrui dynasty in Mombasa in its war against the invading Sultan of Zanzibar. The ripple effect was that the Mazruis in 1824 offered the most modest house, in the standards of the day, as a base for all their activities. The house was renamed Leven House after a British naval survey ship that was commanded by Captain William Owen. The ship was called Her Majesty Service, Leven or HMS Leven.

Henceforth, Leven House, a two-storey-building, became a “British House”—where all manner of activities that promoted the British Empire in all dimensions of life were conducted later. The house later served other roles such as the centre of administration for the British protectorate, centre for explorers coming to East Africa, such as John Speke (1827–1864), Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), Joseph Thompson (1858–1895), and so forth. It was home to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) medicine practice, briefly served as a school on the island to teach boys of Hindu and Swahili origin how to write and speak English (Otieno 2012), and more importantly, it is the house that accommodated the church missionary society pioneers in eastern Africa. Examples are Ludwig Krapf (1810–1881), Johannes Rebmann (1820–1876) and other English missionaries who came afterwards. It was the operating base that was critical to the Digo Mission of 1904, as it had by then become the “trusted” base of the 19th and early 20th European missionaries. It was the house where Krapf’s wife Rossina and daughter died in 1844 (Otieno 2012). In 1888, Sir Frederick John Jackson (1860–1929) stayed in Leven House on his way to Uganda. The Digo Mission cannot be fully understood outside the hospitable comfort of this house, even though Kisauni, Freretown was being prepared from 1875 onwards as an alternative missionary centre. Considering that the Digo Mission is an offshoot of Krapf’s pioneering role, Leven House remains the major centre where the entire mission in East Africa was mooted.

Even though the Sultan of Zanzibar had managed to wrestle Leven House from the Mazrui dynasty in 1837, before the arrival of the pioneer CMS missionary, Johannes Ludwig Krapf (1810–1881), the Mazrui family still retains the credit for their construction of the house and for the initial handover to the British soldiers. As Judith Aldrick (2013, 43) has noted:

Originally owned by the Mazrui, the rebellious Arab governing family of Mombasa, the [Leven] house is first mentioned when it was offered to Lieutenant Emery, 31st August 1824, when he came ashore to take over from Lt Reitz who had died in May of that year. The house was offered because Reitz’s old house was in the possession of Midshipman Phillips who, along with Reitz, formed part of the small band of British junior naval officers that Captain Owen left in charge of Mombasa during the brief British Protectorate of 1824–26. The house was named, at a later date, after Captain Owen’s ship, H.M.S. Leven.

Aldrick (2013) avers that Captain Owen, in 1824, readily accepted the invitation by the Mazrui family, and officially surveyed work along the coast. He also allowed himself to be persuaded by the Mazrui family to hoist the British flag over Fort Jesus. While the Mazruis desperately wanted the British to come in as a bulwark against imminent attacks from the Busaidi dynasty, Captain Owen, on the other hand, wanted a strategic operation base from where he could stamp out slave trade and eventually create a space for the 3Cs that Dr David Livingstone had envisaged. That is Christianity, Western Civilisation, and Western Commerce. In such a symbiotic relationship, both the British and the Mazruis needed each other for mutual enrichment.

Hoyle (2000) clarifies that the site where Leven House is situated today is associated with the short-lived unofficial British occupation of the city of Mombasa (1824–1826). It is sometimes referred to as “Owen’s Protectorate” that was first established in 1824 after the Mazrui sought British support against Busaidi-Omani Arabs (Al Mazrui 1995). Hoyle (2000, 18–19) agrees with Aldrick (2013) when he summarises it thus:

Following a visit in February 1824 by Captain William F. W. Owen in HMS Leven, Lieutenant J. J. Reitz was left in charge of the British base but shortly died and was replaced as governor by Lieutenant J. B. Emery within the same year. Emery’s diary, held among Admiralty papers in the Public Record Office, London, is a key source on which Sir John Gray based his later account of the British in Mombasa, 1924–26. Correspondence between Emery and the geographer W. D. Cooley is preserved in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society in London; and Emery contributed a short note on Mombasa to the Journal of the RGS. Sir Frederick Jackson (Governor of Uganda, 1911–18) claimed to have seen a ghost at Leven House, and a useful note on the house is appended to his account of this experience by H. B. Thomas. The Church Missionary Society records in London contain details of the renovation of the house in the 1870s.

Regarding the British traders and explorers before the Digo Mission and the East African mission in general, their reports were critical as they aroused the missionary appetites. This mainly came after Leven House and the harbour around it was given good coverage in the British press. In particular, Captain Owen, in his *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar, performed in H. M Ships Leven and Barracouta*, described Mombasa harbour as the best in the world. He said:

Perhaps there is not a more perfect harbor in the world than Mombasa. It possesses good riding ground at the entrance, sheltered by an extensive reef on either side; an anchorage, which, from its vicinity to the coast, constantly enjoys the sea-breeze; and a steep rocky shore, in many places rendering wharfs unnecessary, and in others forming a shelving sandy strand, where vessels can be hauled up and careened, favoured by a tide rising twelve or fourteen feet.” (Owen 1833, 412)

Importance of Leven House

While Leven House had a huge implication for the Digo Mission of 1904, which, like all the other missions in eastern Africa were first housed in Leven house, Lieutenant Emery's well-kept diary helps us to retrace its critical role further. In his diary entry of 1 September 1824, Emery describes the house as one that had seven rooms "and is situated near the water at the upper end of the town, not far from the Customs House, with rather a partial view of the sea, but a commanding view of the harbor" (Emery quoted in Aldrick 2013, 43). In demonstrating his religio-cultural dissatisfaction with Islam religion, Lt Emery felt that the Mazrui Sheikhs had no clear understanding of the "superior" British etiquettes. Having scared off the Busaidi attackers, Lt Emery feared that the Mazruis were no longer keen to honour their joint memorandums of understanding; hence, mistrust began to set in. With a strategic house, however, the British now looked forward to a moment when they could strike from all fronts and stamp in their religio-cultural civilisation in the East African region. To this end, Christian missions were seen as part of promoting the British civilisation and Empire.

The importance of Leven House is seen clearly when we consider the fact that, after the end of the first British protectorate (1824–26) in 1837, Sultan Seyyid Said of Oman appropriated Leven House as one of the spoils of his victory over the Mazruis. Being one of the very few houses in Mombasa and the entire East African region to be fitted out in Western style, the pioneer of the Anglican missions, the Rev. Dr Ludwig Krapf, was initially given the use of the upper storey—a room where his wife and infant daughter died (Aldrick 2013). Krapf's colleague, Rev. Johannes Rebman, joined him in 1846 at Leven House after which they moved to the mainland to propagate the Christian message to the mainland peoples. In all this period, Leven House remained the missionary base for East Africa, a platform where they would operate from as they unleashed their ecclesiastical missiles, and would retreat there from time to time.

The importance of Leven House to the Digo Mission and the East African mission, in general, is further seen in the fact that it was not just the primary "mission centre" but also the centre for British explorers of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century. The 19th-century British explorers also included: Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), Frederick Russell Burnham (an American, 1861–1947), John Hanning Speke (1827–1864), James Augustus Grant (1827–1892), Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904), and Joseph Thompson (1858–1895), among others. In particular, Richard Burton was hosted at Leven House in 1857. In 1874, Rev. William Salter Price (1825–1911), who called it "the Mission House," was hosted there (Aldrick 2013, 44). Rev. Price did some repairs before moving to the mainland in his bid to help in establishing Freretown. On his way to Masailand, explorer Joseph Thompson stayed at Leven House with Rev. William. E. Taylor (1821–1902) in 1883. Further, Frederick George Jackson (1860–1938) stayed in this house while on his way to Uganda in 1888. With all these recollections, it is clear that the "Mission House," as Rev. William Salter Price (1825–1911) called it, housed all the East African missions, the Digo Mission of 1904

inclusive. It was not possible to be a “genuine” missionary in eastern Africa without the Leven House link.

Additionally, it is imprudent to ignore the Mazrui dynasty/family in the midwifing of Christianity as presently constituted in the entire East African region. For despite being a Muslim community, their initial offering of the house (which was renamed Leven House) to Lt Emery in 1824 turned out to be an unconscious invitation of the 19th and 20th missionaries in eastern Africa, to which the Digo Mission is a part. By providing a seven-roomed house that stretches to the ocean at the upper end of Mombasa City, which provided a partial view of the sea with a commanding view of the harbour, as Sir John Grey conceded, the Mazruis’ action was a major turning point in the history of exploration, governance and Christian missions in eastern Africa, including the Digo Mission of 1904. For, like the proverbial elephant that sought to have its trunk in the poor man’s hut when it was raining, the British trio (missionaries, colonialists, and explorers) were simply looking for a little opportunity to exploit in their bid to advance their diverse interests. Without Leven House, there was no clear entrance for the Digo Mission or the larger mission of eastern Africa. Even though the Mazruis were not conscious of the huge implications in their offering of the house, they thus mid-wifed the Protestant missions of the 19th and 20th centuries, and eventually aided the British “Christian” Empire. Hence their role cannot be gainsaid. As we focus on the Digo Mission of 1904, in the last 114 years (1904–2018), Leven House remains our starting point.

Another critical importance of Leven House for the Digo Mission is the fact that there is strong evidence that it hosted Rev. Canon Harry Kerr Binns (1852–1935) when he first visited the East African coast in 1878 and 1879. If it hosted Rev. William E. Taylor in 1883, why not Rev. Binns as well? Some reports say that he had come to the East African coast as early as 1876; while other sources say that as he teamed with other CMS missionaries to build other missionary centres in Rabai and Kisauni-Freretown, he was operating from Leven House. In turn, Rev. Binns was critical in the progression of the Digo Mission as he first visited the site in the last half of the 19th century. Later, as CMS secretary in eastern Africa and the area Archdeacon from 1899 to 1922, he provided resources that sought to launch the Digo Mission. As Rev. Binns set up a centre in Digoland in 1904, the funding agency was CMS under Rev. Binns.

During his first mission survey of the East African coast, Rev. Binns, visited Godoni near Marere of Kwale County and Jilore. In turn, Jilore is a settlement in Kenya’s Kilifi County; and was once a settlement that thrived in the 1800s with traders in grain and locksmiths. It developed into a Christian mission centre in 1881. Upon the arrival of an English missionary, D.A.L. Hooper, it became a fully pledged centre for the Christian missions in the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. In the present day Malamba sub-location of Kwale County (Digoland), Rev. Canon Binns, in his first visit in 1878 and 1879 was able to experience cool weather, partly due to the nearby Godoni forest, and he planned to come again. Sadly, for him, the area had

already been strongly dominated by Islam and African religions, as the trading Arabs had also introduced their Arabic civilisation in the course of trade. This, he later did in 1904 and on several other occasions, especially during the great famine of 1899 that mainly hit the coastal region. To this end, the UK newspaper, *The Times*, of 2 October 1899, reported on starvation in Africa thus, "... the Rev. H.K. Binns having fed from 500 to 1000 people constantly during the last 12 months in East Africa protectorate" (Binns 2018).

As the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society and the Archdeacon of the vast area, from 1889 to 1922, Rev. Canon Binns had a critical role in the Digo Mission, despite its being "too difficult one" as strong Islam and African religious presence complicated it (Zani 1983). As he visited various spots in the East African coast, and Digoland in particular, Rev. Binns operated from Leven House, though he later shifted to Freretown, Kisauni, when he finally settled as a full-time church minister. Leven House, therefore, remains a critical house as we focus on the Digo Mission.

Prior to Rev. Canon Binns, William Salter, the pioneer CMS Freretown missionary, and his wife lived for some time in Leven House in 1875. They renovated it in 1875. In a letter to the CMS in 1878, Salter wrote:

It is now a tolerably commodious house, tends certainly to architectural beauty, yet presenting almost a grand appearance in contrast with the squalid Suaheli habitations by which it is surrounded. It occupies a commanding site, and a stranger entering the beautiful harbor has no difficulty in singling it out, as an unmistakable sign that some civilising Englishman has stolen a march on him. The headquarters of the Mission are now at Freretown, on the mainland, a mile and a half from Mombasa, but the old house must on no account be given up. (Smith and Ofundi 2016, 16)

In other words, despite the decision to move the mission centre from Leven House to Kisauni, Freretown (outside Mombasa Island) by the time Kenya became a British protectorate in 1895, there were still pockets of CMS clergy who remained there. An illustration will suffice: When the HBM Consul to Mombasa, Captain Gissing, was occupying Leven House from 1887 onwards, he was still accompanied by some missionaries who also lived in the same house. Among them was Rev. W. E. Taylor who was one of the Freretown missionaries, "and a collector of African proverbs" (Smith and Ofundi 2016, 16). In other words, Leven House was the first place where the incoming European missionaries stayed before they moved elsewhere. And even after moving to Freretown and Rabai where "the Rev. Canon Harry Kerr Binns ... had luxurious homes" (Smith and Ofundi 2016, 69), they were still beholden to Leven House, the "missionary house."

Furthermore, as the premier hosting house, no mission work in East Africa can be able to isolate itself from Leven House. To this date, Leven House remains the key memorable and visible linking centre for the East African missions (refer to Rabai

mission, Kisauni mission, Mutira mission, Kabete mission, Weithaga mission, Maseno mission, Marsabit mission, Baganda mission, Arusha mission, Busoga mission and Mumias mission, among others). With Leven House, all missions in East Africa stood up or fell down completely. The interesting bit in understanding the role of Leven House is in its multi-tasking perspective. In other words, it hosted the English missions, anti-slave trade crusaders, Anglican missions, Methodist missions, and government functionaries during the British protectorate, explorers who had no religious or Christian agenda, and became a school at one stage. It is currently a Swahili restaurant despite being superintended presently by the Kenya Historical Association (KHA). By 2018, KHA had offices on the second floor.

The conflict among the Omani-Muslim-Arabs certainly led the Mazruis to unilaterally surrender Leven House to Captain Owen and his British team. As noted earlier, this decision had profound effects, which includes having an anti-slave trade base, British protectorate base and more importantly a mission centre that came to serve eastern Africa well. This drives us to ask: Was Christianity in the 19th and 20th century Africa unconsciously mid-wifed by Mazrui Muslims who did not foresee the huge implications in hosting the British in their own magnificent house? Were the Mazrui-Muslim-Arabs the only group that midwifed Christianity in eastern Africa? Even though Leven House was a major breakthrough as it first hosted the British seafarers and/or soldiers in 1824, Sultan Said Sayyid of Zanzibar later in 1845 cooperated and gave the necessary support to the CMS missionaries. In particular, he also gave Krapf permission to occupy Leven House in 1844. In his book, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours during an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa*, Krapf says:

I remained in Zanzibar from the 7th of January to the beginning of March 1844, hearing, seeing, and learning much. On Sundays, I preached to the English and American residents ... At the period named I resolved to leave my dear wife at Zanzibar, and to proceed to the island of Lamu, and thence to penetrate among the Gallas and found a missionary station. I took with me a letter of recommendation from Sultan Said-Said addressed to the governors of the coast, and couched in the following terms: "This comes from Said-Said Sultan: greeting all our subjects, friends, and governors. This letter is written on behalf of Dr Krapf, the German, a good man who wants to convert the world to God. Behave well to him, and be everywhere serviceable to him." (Krapf quoted in Smith and Ofundi 2016, 22)

The Sultan's friendly attitude toward European missionaries, and the British in particular, is largely informed by what he saw previously. That is, the thin line between the explorers, missionaries, and seafarers. To this end, Harris observes:

By 1845, the Sultan realized that British sea power could have decisive effects on the establishment and maintenance of his power and influence over parts of Arabia and East Africa and could be particularly useful against challenges from the French, whose commercial activities in the Indian Ocean were increasing. Thus, in spite of the

tremendous source of revenue he derived from the slave trade, the Sultan acquiesced to British pressure to curtail the export of slaves from his African possessions. (Harris quoted in Smith and Ofundi 2016, 21)

In both the Sultan Said Sayyid of Busaidi family and the Mazrui family cases (Oman families/clans) thus, the Omani-Muslim-Arabs were not able to resist the penetration of the English people in their territories. In the latter case, the fear of French activities made Sultan Said Sayyid of Zanzibar to retain the status quo with regard to Leven House and the Christian missionary enterprise of the 19th and 20th centuries. Sadly, as the Anglican Church marked 150 years of Christianity in Kenya, 1844 to 1994, Leven House was not put on the agenda of historical sites and buildings where plaques were made in commemoration and subsequently unveiled by the then head of the Anglican Communion, Dr George Carey. Further, as Smith and Ofundi (2016, 22) have noted: “Leven House, if not the first Christian outpost then [it is] certainly the first Christian missionary foothold in East Africa, [and] is a landmark which has been mostly forgotten by the church today.” For the Digo Mission and the rest of East Africa, it has huge implications.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Leven House was a critical centre for the 19th and 20th Protestant missions in eastern Africa that cannot be overlooked when seeking to reconstruct our memories on the Digo Mission, or any East African mission for that matter. It went on to survey the East African coast since the first century AD/CE, a development that shows that East Africa was from time immemorial connected with the rest of the world, and especially in terms of trade. As Islam emerged in the 6th and 7th centuries, the Digo, like many others on the East African coast, were largely converted to the Islamic faith. As the local indigenous people, especially Wakilindini, Wachangamwe, Watanga, and Wangozi, among others, sought to expel the Portuguese from the 15th to 17th century; they invited the Mazrui Omani Arabs to help them carry out the exercise. And after the capture of Fort Jesus from the Portuguese in 1698, the Mazruis trooped to the Old Town, Mombasa, and became the new rulers, especially after the Imam of Oman of the erstwhile ruling Yorubi dynasty sent Nasir bin Abdallah Mazrui as his representative (*Liwali*) in Mombasa. As the Mazruis wrestled with Sultan Said bin Sultan al-Said of Zanzibar, from the Busaidi Oman dynasty, the Mazruis invited the British for military support; a move that saw them hand over Leven House. In turn, the article has demonstrated that Leven House became the de-facto centre of all the Protestant missions of the 19th and 20th centuries. It also became the centre of the British “Christian” Empire in East Africa. Despite the Digo Mission proving difficult due to the heavy Islam and African religious presence, Leven House remains the major centre from where the “Digo project” was operated. Even after Rabai and Freretown stations had developed houses for their missions, and as the house changed hands from time to time, its symbolism as “mission centre” in eastern Africa remains

the critical factor in all the successful and abortive attempts to establish the elusive Digo Mission.

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