

Book Review

Thomas F. McDow. *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. xii+364, paperback ISBN: 9780821422823

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The study of the connection of East African coast, the Middle East and India through the Indian Ocean has been attracting great interests from scholars for centuries. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* writings in the 1st century A.D documented the connection so did Ibn Batuta and Portuguese voyage writings in the 14th, and 15th to 17th centuries respectively. Thomas McDow's book, *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (henceforth *Buying Time*), fits in this Indian Ocean scholarship.

Buying Time is a social history book on the 19th century interconnection through the Indian Ocean of the Western Indian Ocean World -Arabia, Zanzibar, East Africa coast and Central Africa (Congo). The author argues that the people of the region used mobility, debt, credit, time, kinship and environment to temporalize their lives.⁴¹⁴ Temporalization simply means strategies that individuals used to cope with the challenges of their lives. Individuals who are the centre of the work include immigrants from Oman to Zanzibar, East African coast and Congo, freed slaves who traded in ivory, sultans, Swahili elites, traders, Indians, Indo-Africans, African porters, Arab confectioners (*halwa* makers), and Arab princesses. The individuals in question needed time, which in this book has many meanings including the period a debtor was given in a given contract to repay his or her debt, the period Omani Arabs bought during share auctioning to use water for irrigation from owners of irrigation channels-*afraj*, the period that elapsed when contracts were signed in Zanzibar in the 1840s, 1860s and 1870s and when they were registered by the British in the 1880s, and the appropriate period adopted by politicians to negotiate, ally, or rebel against a given leader.⁴¹⁵ The pre-

⁴¹⁴ Thomas F. McDow. *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), pp. 8-9.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.215.

colonial 19th century, which is the period of focus of the book, was marked by the British imperial hegemony in Zanzibar, India, and the Middle East (Oman), and the intensification of the caravan trade that was connected to the global economy with Zanzibar as its node.

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter one titled “Drought and New Mobilities in the Omani interior” is set in the first decade of the nineteenth century and focuses on social, political and environmental forces at work for migration to Zanzibar of Arabs from Omani interior and its coast. The forces in question include droughts, floods and Sultan Said’s decision to move his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in the 1830s to establish a commercial empire. The second chapter “Customs Master and Customs of Credit in Zanzibar” deals with business contracts entered into among sellers, buyers, debtors and Indian creditors. The documents, which are the central plank of the book, do not only show economic transactions but also social relations of debtors such as their social statuses, places of their birth, clans and or their tribal names. Chapter three, which is entitled “Sultans at Sea” details movements of Said bin Sultan al-Busaid between his two dominions of Zanzibar and Oman and political rivalries and intrigues arising from heirship to the throne in both Muscat and Zanzibar after his death in 1856. His death led to a civil war which led to the separation of the two dominions in 1861 and the formation of an *Ibadi* Imamate (1868-1871) in Oman. In Zanzibar rivalries to the throne pitted Said’s sons Majid bin Said al-Busaid (r.1856-70) against Barghash bin Said al- Busaid. Following the defeat of Barghash, a great number of his Arab supports migrated to the interior of modern-day Tanzania mainland. Chapter four, “Halwa and Identity in the Western Indian Ocean World” deals with mobility and changes in identity, belongings and kinship in the region among Arabs, Swahili and the Nyamwezi porters while chapter five “Tippu Tip’s Kin from Oman to Eastern Congo focuses on networks of kinship of a renown and successful trader, Hemed bin Muhammed al-Murjeb (famously known as Tippu Tip). Rather than seeing him as a self-made man, his kin who stretched from Oman to Congo helped him to his success. Chapter six “ Freed Slaves: Manumission and Mobility before

1873” looks into manumission and mobility of freed slaves in the Western Indian Ocean World up to the 1850s while chapter seven “Acts for Consuls and Consular Acts: Documents, Manumission, and Ocean Travels after 1973” deals, in the context of the British establishment of a consul in Zanzibar, with manumission of slaves from 1873, documentation of British subjects namely Indians alongside registration of their business contracts, land deeds, adjudication of cases by the consuls and documentation of all travellers going to Oman and India. Chapter eight “A Dhow on Lake Victoria” focuses on a carrier of Sunguro Talib, a successful freed slave caravan route trader in the 1860s and 1870s who previously obtained credits based on mortgages on land and other properties bequeathed to him by his masters in Zanzibar. He became the first person to build a dhow on Lake Victoria. He later on became embroiled in credit and control of the Indian Ocean trade disputes with a chief of Ukerewe who eventually killed him in 1877. Chapter Nine, “Everything is Pledged to Its Time: Salih bin Ali, Debt and Rebellion in the Omani Interior,” examines the rebellion of 1870 in the interior of Oman which was linked with money from Zanzibar. Salih bin al- Harthi (1834-1896), in alliance with tribal leaders of the interior, militarily challenged the authority of the Sultanate of Oman in the 1870s. His rebellion depended on money he obtained through credits from his properties and kin networks in Zanzibar. Lastly, an epilogue of the book explores the migration of Arabs from Zanzibar back to Omani following the 1964 revolution and the role of the migrated Arabs in building their homeland of Oman.

The strengths of this work lie in the fact that it links the study of the Indian Ocean with the hinterland of Oman, Tanzania, and Congo during the 19th century.⁴¹⁶ This link is a sharp departure from many Indian Ocean studies that mainly focus on oceanic islands and the coast. Related to this, the book adds a neglected Indian Ocean study to other burgeoning oceanic studies namely Atlantic, Mediterranean and Pacific. Another strength of the book is that it demonstrates that globalisation in the Western Indian Ocean World was writ large in the 19th century in sharp contrast to many anthropological

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

and social science scholars who see globalisation of the region as the 20th and 21st centuries phenomenon. Mostly important, methodologically, the book taps into news documents namely contracts which are deposited at the Zanzibar National Archives. The author has aptly used the hitherto neglected documents to reconstruct not only the economic but also social relations of actors in the Western Indian Ocean World. The contract of 1869, for example, shows that Juma bin Salim (better known as Juma Merikani), who settled in Eastern Congo and became a big maize and rice plantations owner and a successfully caravan trader in American cotton sheet, hence the name Merikani, migrated to Zanzibar from Nizwar in Oman, listed his genealogy as Juma bin Salim bin Mbarak bin Abdullah al- Bakri, received credits from a famous Indian financier Ladha Damji before venturing into the caravan trade which took him up to the Congo, and he promised to repay the debt worth 10,500 pounds of ivory in two years' time to his creditor in Zanzibar but never returned to pay the debt.⁴¹⁷

Despite its strengths, the work, in my views, has two shortcomings. Firstly, it is a narrative of actors whose histories have been written. Indeed, one of the book's main source comes from registered contracts deposited at the Zanzibar National Archives. This source cannot account, as the author aptly notes, for "more informal credit networks or arrangements that were never registered. Indeed, the source base is slanted toward those who relied on Indian creditors."⁴¹⁸ Thus, other forms of credits from informal sources and actors whose histories have not been written are not captured. The author, in my view, would have redressed this weakness by tapping into oral history in the form of oral traditions. Surprisingly, the book entirely misses this source, although it is rich in missionary, autobiographical, explorer's and secondary works. Secondly, the southern and northern caravan routes found in modern day Tanzania mainland which were also central to the commercial nexus of the region has not been given attention they deserve. Instead, the work has given much attention to the central caravan route-Tabora, Ujiji, Lake Victoria zone and eastern Congo, One wonders, for example, who were the actors in

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.20.

the southern route and whether there was the emergence of “outposts of Indian Ocean World”⁴¹⁹ in the southern routes’ towns such as Lindi or in areas around Lake Nyasa or the Lake Nyansa-Tanganyika corridor akin to such worlds which had Zanzibar, Swahili and Arabian cultures in Tabora, Ujiji, and Eastern Congo.

To conclude, this book brings historical agency into the Western Indian Ocean and it is a wonderful book that will be of relevance and use to students, researchers and scholars of Indian Ocean studies in academic institutions and the general public at large.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.270.