

Proceedings of the 10th Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University

Slavery and the Slave Trades in the Indian Ocean and Arab Worlds: Global Connections and Disconnections

November 7-8, 2008
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Social Mobility in Indian Ocean Slavery: The Career of Sultan b Aman

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It is rare in the history of slavery in general, and in the Indian Ocean in particular, that we can go beyond the endless disputation about numbers, or imposing generalisations about origins and occupations borrowed from the better known but inappropriate Atlantic model, to look at slavery with a human face. The problem is partly a question of the paradigm adopted and the objective of the investigation, but it is also partly a problem of sources, since most of the sources are the creations of the owners, the rulers, and the imperialist powers that had a direct interest in representing their own views on the subject.

One of the rare exceptions is a large batch of manumission documents created in the Persian Gulf region by British imperial authorities during the early decades of the twentieth century. This was not the first set of manumissions in the region, for manumission was a built-in feature in Islamic law, as a result of which by the beginning of the twentieth century there was already a large class of free(d) people, who constituted nearly a third of the people of African origin, for example, and many others of Baluchi and other origins, who

had been integrated into the local social structure to varying degrees. Since such manumission was not imposed by any state authorities, but depended on Islamic exhortation on emancipation,¹ it tended to create a class of people who were freed more amicably because of the special relationship that had developed during servitude, a relationship that was transformed into a sort of dependency between former owners and former slaves. This class of manumissions are still difficult to study because of scarcity of documentation that may still come out of the Qadhi's court records and the few surviving personal papers, or from oral research.²

The other class of manumissions arose out of the British anti-slavery movement in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf region from the nineteenth century, which was part of their imperial expansion into this strategic and important commercial region. The Persian Gulf was dotted by British Residencies and Political Agents to protect British and Indian commercial interests, and manumission were imposed on the subordinated petty chiefdoms in the name of humanitarianism, but it also expanded British authority in the region. Since it was imposed by an imperial authority on reluctant local potentates and owners of slaves, it created a different class of freed people whose relations with their owners were often conflictual, and social integration of the freed into the local society may have been rendered more problematic.

Hundreds of such manumissions were effected in the 1920s and 1930s at various centres of British influence in the Persian Gulf, such as Muscat, Sharjah, Bahrain and Bushire, creating a class of freed people who were inevitably dependent on the British for protection thereafter, but as we shall see, that protection was not always dependable. The manumissions were not a general movement of abolition of slavery and emancipation, but a

¹ See A. Sheriff, 2005, 'The twilight of Slavery in the Indian Ocean', in G. Campbell, 2005,

² e.g. Fredrik Barth, 1983, *Sohar : culture and society in an Omani town*, Baltimore: John Hopkins,

piecemeal manumission of individual cases where slavery had become utterly unbearable and the slave could sustain a charge of maltreatment by the owner. In each case the British had insisted on a short biography, supplemented by additional information by the British Political Agents, which incidentally begin to give a voice to the discontented slaves. In almost all the cases, there was an average of three or so documents per slave, and the information gleaned about each case was often meagre.

The case of Sultan b Aman, an Ethiopian slave, is unusual in that it occupies nearly a hundred pages in the India Office Records now housed at the British Library.³ He may have been freed under the abolition of slavery decree in Zanzibar in 1897, but was re-enslaved when he went to the Persian Gulf. It is a case of an enterprising slave who showed his business acumen to operate a successful commercial venture at Dubai initially for his owner, but later was allowed to run it on his own account while still a slave. He was able to borrow large amounts from local financiers and maintain estimable relations with some of the local ruling authorities. However, he was still operating under the shadow of slavery despite manumission from the British, and ultimately reduced to bankruptcy and utter desperation.

1. Origin

Sultan b Aman b Abdullah was born in slavery in Zanzibar, although Sultan is a strange name to be given to a slave child. According to himself, his father belonged to Seyyid Barghash b Said, Sultan of Zanzibar (1870-88), and judging by the Muslim name of his grandfather, Sultan may have been a third generation Ethiopian slave. He says that he was ten years old when his father died in the time of Hamed b Thuwaini (1893-6),⁴ and he remained with another Sultan Humoud b Muhammad (1896-1902) for nine years until he

³ British Library: India Office Records: R/15/1/216: 'Manumission of slaves at Muscat: individual cases, 1921-1929'. All archival references are to this volume, so I give only page numbers in the following footnotes.

⁴ although he names him as Ali b Thuwaini.

was 19 years old, although the British Political Agent at Sharjah says he was 14 years old when he was brought to Dubai.⁵ As one of the Sultan's slaves, he may have been among the earliest to be freed when slavery was abolished in Zanzibar.

According to his own account, the 19 year-old boy negotiated with Thabit b Said b Thabit al-Jenebi from Sur to take him as a servant for Rs. 30 per month, which was extremely high for the time. However, the latter double-crossed him, and tried to sell him on the Batinah coast of Oman, where nobody offered to buy him because 'they took me to be a Somali.' It is equally possible that the 14 year old boy by another account was kidnapped by the Suri, which was a common occurrence after the prohibition of the slave trade. Eventually he was bought at Dubai by Thani b Khalaf or Khalifah with whom he remained for 16 years.⁶ Thus, by the time his story starts in Dubai in the early 1920s, he was either 30 or 35 years old.

2. Manumission

A similar confusion persists regarding his status at this time. According to the Residency Agent at Sharjah, Thani Khalaf gave him a manumission certificate in 1917 'so that he should enjoy liberty and not to be molested by his sons.' However, according to Sultan's own initial statement in 1924, he was given only a written permission to work for his living 10 months previously. He repeated in 1926 that his master did not actually manumit him but only gave him a written permit signed by the Qadhi, the Sheikh of Dubai and others, that he could carry on business on his own account. Thani b Khalaf apparently stated before the Qadhi that Sultan would be freed only on the owner's death.⁷

⁵ Statement by Sultan b Aman, 22.07.1924, p. 136. Resident Agent, Sharjah (Hereafter as RAS) to Political Resident in the Persian Gulf (hereafter PRPG) 21.9.24, p. 142.

⁶ Statement by Sultan b Aman, 22.07.1924, p. 136. See Sheriff 2005.

⁷ RAS to PRPG, 21.9.1924, p. 142. Statement by Sultan b Aman, 22.07.1924, p. 136.

This seems to be a very categorical statement that Sultan was not manumitted by his owner under the Islamic law. Nevertheless, seeing that he was good in his business, he was allowed to trade on his own account, which was apparently unusual. The British Resident Agent at Sharjah who was deeply involved in many cases of slave manumission in the Persian Gulf, expressed his suspicion in an early report on Sultan b Aman, believing that he was manumitted:

I am of opinion that if Sultan was a slave the merchants would not have dealt with him and the Sheikh of Debai would not have given him a letter of recommendation because a slave is under command and has no authority to do business and to proceed to Batinah Coast.⁸

A year later the Ruler of Dubai also wondered 'in case Sultan was a slave of his master, Thani b Khalaf, and his master manumitted him, why the Bunnia [Indian trader] Rajah gave so much money to the slave though he is neither a diver nor a "tawwash" (merchant to go in boat and buy pearls from the divers at sea)' The Resident Agent added to his suspicion: 'It is evident that the Bunnia had an arrangement with the slave for stealing pearls from him when he was in the service of his master, otherwise a slave would not be given so much money⁹, for which there was absolutely no evidence.

But Sultan was not an ordinary kind of slave. Nevertheless, Sultan, realised his precarious position. In July, 1924 he reported that three months previously when his master left for Ghamza, and since his sons were angry with him and had stopped him from working, he had escaped leaving his wife behind.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he apparently continued with his private trade. In December 1924, while he was away, one of the sons of his owner carried away his dates, and when he complained to the Sheikh of Dubai, the owner's son merely refused to return them. Moreover, the owner and his sons tried to arrest him and force him

⁸ RAS to PRPG, 21.9.1924, p. 144.

⁹ RAS to PRPG, 24.8.1925, p. 164-5.

¹⁰ Statement by Sultan b Aman, 22.07.1924, p. 136.

to continue to serve them as before, which Sultan resisted.¹¹ He therefore decided to take additional steps to secure his freedom.

He tried to apply for a Manumission Certificate from the British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf at Bushire through the Residency Agent at Sharjah. When this was delayed, (although it arrived just after he had left for the Batinah), he approached Sd Hamad b Faisal, the governor of Batinah, where he was used to trading for dates and palm materials, to obtain a letter of recommendation to the British Political Agent at Muscat to obtain a Manumission Certificate there. The governor wrote a very encouraging letter to the Residency Agent at Sharjah, which again gives an indication that Sultan was not considered a mere slave, but may also point to political rivalry between local chieftains seeking enterprising followers. He wrote:

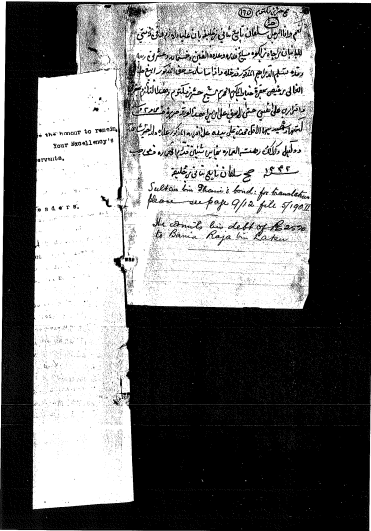
Sultan slave of Thani b Khalaf resident of Debai has come to me and has requested that he should be permitted to live in my estates and under my protection. I cannot but welcome anybody who wants to be near me and this is one of our established customs but at the same time we are compelled to make enquiries about the man and his identity and that he should reside in our estates after all doubts about him are cleared. This Sultan has informed me of these details in full and he is now coming to you to get emphasises (sic) on these, and has asked me to write you a letter of recommendation asking your assistance for him in case he will need it. I therefore request you not to neglect him and give him assistance in the matter he is about to effect.¹²

He eventually got the Manumission Certificate from Muscat, as well as another from Bushire. He wrote to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf in January 1925 that 'It makes me very happy to think that I am free', although he still signed his letter in Arabic as 'Sultan b Aman Khadim [slave or servant of] Thani b Khalifah.¹³

¹¹ Further Statement made by Sultan b Aman, n.d. [1.1926], pp. 192-5.

¹² Sayid Hamad b Faisal, Wali of Sohar to H.B. Abdul Latif, RAS, 25.8.1924, p. 149.

¹³ RAS to PRPG 14.1.1925, p. 151. Note by Khan Bahadur Abdur Razzaq, 22.2.1926, pp. 212-3. Sultan b Aman Abyssinain to PRPG, 25.1.1925, p. 152.



Sultan b Aman's deed with his signature in Arabic and his Manumission Certificate (pp. 191, 170)

3. Sultan's Business

Armed with these two certificates, Sultan may have felt more confident in carrying on with his own businesses, and stronger to resist falling under the control of his former master and his sons. According to the Resident Agent at Sharjah, his owner had previously entrusted Sultan with his business and house until 1917. 'As Sultan was known to the merchants since he was with his master and they became aware of his freedom and he knew to do business, he used to take money from the merchants on credit and to repay them.'¹⁴

His strongest niche was apparently in the date trade with the Batinah Coast where he had established good contacts with the governor of the district. For example, in September 1924 he returned to Sharjah from Batinah with 400 baskets of dates and other goods belonging to him, and opened a shop where he was selling his merchandise, including rice and presumably other provisions, and he also dealt in pearls.¹⁵ Later he shifted to Dubai where he opened a shop, and he leased a plot of land with one godown on it for five years,

¹⁴ RAS to PRPG, 21.9.1924, pp. 142-4.

¹⁵ RAS to PRPG, 25.09.1924, pp. 148-9.

and went on to expand it at his own cost by building two more godowns. His trading activities extended to Ajman. (see below)

He was apparently so successful that by 1924 he had outstanding loans from a number of Indian, Arab and Persian traders totalling more than Rs. 7,000 as follows:

Raja b Lakhu, an Indian merchant and moneylender	Rs. 2,520
Jabu b Shamu, - ditto -	Rs. 2,800
Haji Abdul Qadir Muhammad Abbas, apparently a Persian, described as a British protégé	Rs. 910
Abdullah b Saif, a bedouin	Rs. 780
Total	Rs. 7,010

At the same time he was owed by several Arabs in Dubai, as follows:

Isa b Thani, his master's son	Rs. 3,551
Abdullah b Thani b Khalifa, another son	Rs. 270
Juma b Khalifa, brother of his master	Rs. 498
Mohamad b Khalifa b Nassar [Nazar], a diver	Rs. 100
Said b Ubaid Swaidi, a diver or captain of a pearl dhow	Rs. 405
Total	Rs. 4,824 ¹⁶

Sultan's financial position was not as precarious since his debts exceeded his loans to others by only about 30%, so long as his business was running smoothly. However, the largest amount of his loans was owed by Isa b Thani, his master's son, which included pearls that Sultan had bought from Said b Zahi and Muhammad b Rashid b Jorish, but they were taken by Isa and sold at a profit of Rs.1,020. Isa had previously repaid part of his debt through a draft of Rs.800 on Muhammad b Ahmad Dalmuk, a prominent local Arab merchant at Dubai, which was honoured, but there was still an outstanding debt of Rs.3,551. Another son of the owner, Abdullah, had taken away dates and mattings from Sultan's shop during his absence for which Sultan was claiming Rs.270. The third was a debt of Rs.498 owed by Juma b Khalifa, his owner's brother. If so, the total amount owed by his

¹⁶ Summary of Sultan b Aman's case, n.d. [1. 1926], pp. 188-9. Statement of Sultan b Aman, n.d., pp. 185.

owner's family members amounted to nearly 90% of the total, which he was not in a position to demand repayment when in need, especially in view of the strained relations between them.

The list also shows he was making advances, probably of provisions, to pearl divers or captains of pearl dhows, such as Said b Abeid Swedi who owed Rs.405 on account of advances to be refunded after the diving season. In a *Majlis* (meeting at the Ruler's court), Said had agreed to pay Rs.250 and gave an order Muhammad b Ahmed b Dalmuk, but the latter refused to honour it. Muhammad b Khalifa b Nazar was probably another diver who owed Rs.100 on account of advances. Pearl diving debts, however, were notorious in that the divers were rarely able to repay their debts on time and often had to be carried forward to the next diving season.¹⁷ Sultan was therefore not able to call for repayment when he was in greatest need.

4. Calamity and Bankruptcy

With his financial position so precariously balanced, a disaster struck Sultan in the middle of 1924. He had sent some of the borrowed money to Batinah to purchase date sticks, firewood, oil, leather, etc. The goods were shipped in a dhow which sank in the Ajman creek. According to Sultan, the *nakhuda* (captain) sold what was salvaged from the sea and took the money to Batinah. On hearing this, Sultan took a letter of recommendation from Sh. Said b Maktum, Ruler of Dubai, to the governor of Batinah to assist him in recovering his property.¹⁸ However, contrary to the practice around the western Indian Ocean for a shipwreck, which were fair game for the local people to plunder it at will¹⁹, according to Sh. Humaid b Abd al Aziz, Ruler of Ajman, he summoned Ahmad b Abd al

¹⁷ See Sheriff, *Dhow Culture*, Ch. 4.ii – The Pearl Industry, forthcoming.

¹⁸ RAS to PRPG 21.9.1924, pp. 142-4.

¹⁹ See Sheriff, *Dhow Culture*, Ch.1.iv – Piracy, forthcoming.

Rahman and Khasif b Ali, who were apparently divers who had got hold of the goods while diving. They admitted that they had sold the salvaged cargo, including 12 bundles of leather for Rs.200, ropes and palm tree trunks for Rs.14, and wood for Rs.100, totalling Rs. 314. The Sheikh added a curious statement that Sultan 'has a share in the wood', suggesting perhaps that the rest could be claimed by others. The account ends with the statement that a total of Rs.190 were due to Sultan and had been paid in full, in smaller amounts at different times personally or through a servant of the Ruler of Dubai. The balance of Rs.124 was apparently shared by the others, presumably including the divers.²⁰

Unfortunately, the two reports do not give an indication of the total loss that Sultan had suffered from that disaster, except that he recovered only about 65% of what was actually salvaged. But it seems that the calamity brought down the business house of Sultan. He wrote in 1926 that 'Two years ago I suffered great losses in the trade. I was leading business at Debai and therefore contracted heavy debts say for Rs.11,000.'²¹ The Residency Agent at Sharjah instituted inquiries in Sultans' possessions so that he may pay off his debts, but found that he had none in Dubai. He therefore convened a meeting of Iranian, Arab and Indian merchants, in the presence of an Iranian and an Indian creditor, Haji Abdul Qadir Muhammad Abbas and Raja b Lakhu, as well as Sultan the debtor. They came to the conclusion that Sultan was bankrupt and had no money to pay the debts due by him. They therefore declared him a bankrupt with immediate effect, and added: 'Whoever desires to do business with Sultan anew in order to obtain something of his debt he is at liberty to do so.'²² Sultan later protested that the meeting was forcibly convened against his will, and it

²⁰ Sh Humaid b Abdul Aziz, Chief of Ajman to Abdur Rahman b Muhamad Khalu, 22.6.1924, p. 209.

²¹ Statement of Sultan b Aman of Dubai, 21.1.1926, p. 184.

²² Signed by Isa b Abdullah Sumaiah; Haji Ahmad Khuri; Dhamanmal Isardas; Jaffer Ali Hayderabadi; Kalluh Bunnia. RAS to PRPG, 14.12.1925; Translation of *Process Verbal* & the merchants' decision, 12.12.1925, pp. 173-4.

declared him bankrupt and defamed his reputation.²³ However, he repeatedly acknowledged his debts and expressed willingness to repay gradually in instalments as much as he could afford to pay.²⁴

One issue that was to bedevil Sultan's case was the claim by the Indian merchant Raja b Lakhu that Sultan had mortgaged a house with him as a surety for his loan, and demanded it to be handed over. However, the Ruler of Dubai stated that the house did not belong to Sultan but to one of his subjects, and that Sultan had merely rented it for a year, and his brother Sh. Hashar b Maktum denied that there was any reference to the mortgage when he sealed the original bond. Sultan said that when he contracted a bond with the Indian, there was no mention of the house in the original document, but that the Indian had insisted to mortgage something with him.²⁵ An undated minute by the Secretary of the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, but dating to January 1926, noted that 'When on his last tour, the Political Resident was shown this document on which Raja b Lakhoo's claim is based and it was found that the mortgaging of property has been inserted in the document six days after the document was originally drawn up by Sultan admitting his debt to Raja b Lakhoo, and the mention of the mortgage was in quite different handwriting.'²⁶

Sultan himself provided a more complete explanation, but apparently only in January 1926 that, gives a good demonstration of Sultan's business acumen, but also provides information about the material circumstances that was relevant for consideration by the Committee of Merchants convened by the Resident Agent. He stated that the alleged mortgage

²³ Sultan b Aman to Political Resident & Consulate-General (hereafter PRCG) 28.12.1926, p. 210.

²⁴ RAS's certificate, 23.9.1924; RAS to PRPG, 25.09.1924, p. 148-9.

²⁵ RAS to PRPG 24.8.1925, pp. 164-5. Tr of *Process Verbal* & the merchants' decision, 12.12.1925.

²⁶ Minute by Secretary, n.d. p. 183.

was not a house. It consisted first of a plot of land with one godown in it. Sultan rented same for Rs.190 a year for a period of 5 years. He has built two godowns in the land which have cost him Rs.598/4/- Deducting one year's rent... there remains Rs.375/4/- As the owner owed Sultan this sum and the Bania arranged with Sultan to let the property on an annual rent of Rs.600 to another trader while Sultan could pay Rashid [the owner] Rs.190/- a year for the remaining period of 4 years Sultan has therefore mortgaged the property with the Bania. Sultan says the above balance of Rs.375/4/- has been paid to him when his account were lately looked into at Debai, and it, in turn, been paid to Raja b Laku.²⁷

While this may not legally absolve Sultan of the charge of fraud, it does suggest full knowledge of the exact proprietorship of the plot and collusion by the Indian moneylender in the fraud from which he recovered part of his loan. Sultan may not have presented this information to the committee of merchants that determined his bankruptcy, and they ruled that it was 'a fraud by Sultan for which he deserves punishment' to prevent him doing similar thing in the future, without stating what that punishment should be, but a charge that was going to stick on Sultan alone, and not the Indian trader who had colluded in it.²⁸

While the committee of merchants came down so heavily on Sultan, they do not seem to have inquired into another matter which should have been considered as part of his assets and therefore relevant to the bankruptcy, nor did Sultan himself present evidence on his counter claims against Arabs in Dubai, which amounted to Rs.4,800. A very large part of the claim was against the sons of his former owner, as mentioned above. Sultan stated in January 1926 that he had 'complained to the Residency Agent at Sharjah, who wrote three letters to the Sheikh for recovery of my claims' and in another undated statement by Sultan, he said that 'the Resident Agent had the knowledge of the claims against the above, had referred them to the Sheikh of Debai, who had called the creditors and they agreed to pay me a part of my debts but had later on refused to pay anything to me.' He added that 'Isa b

²⁷ Further Statement made by Sultan b Aman to explain his case n.d. [1.1926], pp. 192-5.

²⁸ RAS to PRPG 14.12.1925, Tr of *Process Verbal* & the merchants' decision 12.12.1925, p. 173.

Thani, the son of my master interfered in the case telling me that I should give him my Manumission Certificate and serve him; he would then allow that my claim be paid to me. I reported the case to the Resident Agent who advised me to withdraw the case.²⁹

Thereafter Sultan repeatedly appealed to the Residency Agent at Sharjah for the recovery of his moneys, but the latter advised him not to speak of his claims lest Isa b Thani forges some new debts against him. In February 1926, the Secretary to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf suggested that 'We may send Sultan to Debai with letters to the Sheikh of Debai requesting him to form a Committee of Merchants with the Qazi of Debai (whom Sultan considers a very (sic) and impartial man) to investigate his claims and to recover the sums for payment to his creditors after leaving a little money for himself to continue his trade',³⁰ but no action seems to have been taken. By May the Secretary was recommending that 'Sultan's claims against his master's son had better be dropped as they will either perjure themselves that Sultan owes them money or else they will pass witnesses to that effect and Sultan will not succeed to prove his case against them.' The Resident Agent at Sharjah warned Sultan that if he wanted to remain in Dubai, he should keep quiet about his claims against Isa b Thani and Juma b Khalifah.³¹

While Sultan's claims were swept under the carpet for the sake amity with the local ruler and former owner of Sultan, and the Resident Agent at Sharjah reported in November 1928 that 'When the Arabs and Ahwazis [Iranian] merchants came to know the insolvency of the slave Sultan b Aman, they let him go.',³² except for one of the Indian moneylenders. Like the proverbial Shylock, Raj b Lukhoo did not drop his claim to his pound flesh, although the other Indian moneylender, Jabu b. Shamu, who owed an even bigger amount, seems to

²⁹ Statement of Sultan b Aman of Dubai, 21.1.1926, Statement of Sultan b Aman, n.d. pp. 184-5.

³⁰ Memo by Secretary 28.2.1926, pp. 198-9.

³¹ Summary of Sultan b Aman's case, n.d. [1. 1926] pp. 192-5. Minute by K.B.(?) 3.5.1926, p. 220.

³² RAS to PRPG, 28.11.1928, pp. 230-1.

have accepted the judgement of the Committee of Merchants. Although Raja was present at the meeting of the committee which had declared Sultan bankrupt, over the next few years he repeatedly petitioned the British authorities either personally or through his lawyer Kalumal & Co. in Karachi for the recovery of his loan. In 1926 his lawyer tried to goad the British authorities into action even against the Ruler of Dubai by suggesting that since the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf had ruled that the Ruler's brother had countersigned the *Tamsak* (bond), the Ruler was equally liable to honour the mortgage, although it has been shown that the reference to the mortgage was added later. He provocatively added that 'It seems that Your Excellency's decision is not final and binding but is sought to be reviewed or opened up again and left to the Majlis'.³³ In October 1928, Maghanmal Lakhmidas Rajani, apparently a descendant of Raja b Lukhoo, again claimed the repayment of his Rs.2,500 loan and the surrender of the mortgaged property. But the British refused to be provoked, and had finally ruled in 1926 that 'The decree of the Merchants' Committee declaring Sultan bankrupt cannot be altered now.'³⁴

5. The End of the business career of Sultan b Aman

In desperation to get the sympathy and support of the British to his cause, since he had been doubly manumitted by the British, and against his former owner and the Resident Agent at Sharjah, in January 1926 Sultan alleged that in 1911 he was instrumental in exposing arms smuggling by his former owner. He alleged that at that time a steam launch was inspecting vessels entering or leaving Dubai for smuggled arms. Though he was a slave of Thani b Khalifah, he was giving regular information to the 'negro' interpreter about rifles which were in his owner's house. Sir Percy Cox, the British officer in charge, had ordered that the rifles should be surrendered to the Resident Agent, but Sultan alleged that the

³³ Kalumal & Co. to HBM Consul & Pol Agt, Bushire, Karachi 8.1.1926, pp. 179-80.

³⁴ Maghanmal Lakhmidas Rajani to PRPG, 21.10.1928, p. 221. Min. by KB, 3.5.1926, p. 220.

Resident Agent was not assisting in getting the rifles but was cooperating with Thani b Khalifah in shifting the rifles to another place. Later a British warship arrived and fighting ensued in which the Arabs were subdued. He said that his master's son Isa was fined Rs.4,000 which he took from Sultan but refunded only Rs.1,000. He also alleged that Sir Percy Cox had asked the Resident Agent to summon Sultan before him in order to grant him a present, but the Resident Agent had replied that he had died. As a result of this he was in a lot trouble. He was imprisoned and banished from the Oman coast to the interior and then to Iran for a long time. The Secretary to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf noted the claim and suggested an investigation, but in this case also the British did not wish to be pushed into another major investigation, and they dropped the case.³⁵

Thereafter, the end of Sultan's business career came to a pathetic end. In January 1926 he stated that he was not permitted by the Ruler of Dubai to go to Bushire, presumably to reduce British interference in the matter, but he was allowed to go to Qatar but was blown to Bahrain. There he informed the Political Agent that he had been starving for three days, and begged for the cost of a shirt 'as I have no money myself to buy one.' Since he had no money for a passage to Bushire, he was forced to mortgage his bedding, including his valuable account book which contained all the evidence of his claims against the Dubai Arabs, for Rs.8 with Haji Ali b Haji Hussein, a shopkeeper.³⁶ In March he wrote to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, apparently in English for the first time in a bad handwriting, although the signature is not legible. He mentioned that he had left Dubai leaving his wife behind, but there is no mention of any children. He said he had been in Bushire for three and a half months and had written three letters to his family in Dubai but

³⁵ Sultan b Aman to HBM Consul Gen, 26.1.1926, Memo by Secretary, 28.2.1926, pp. 198-9, 215.

³⁶ Further Statement made by Sultan b Aman to explain his case n.d. [1.1926], pp. 192-5. Sultan b Aman to HBM Consul Gen, Bushire, 26.1.1926, p. 215.

had not received any reply from them. He was perplexed and worried about any injury that may be done to them by the Arabs and the Residency Agent. He said his family have 'no money for their expenses and as you know I am poor...', and begged for some money to remit to them, since he could not return to Dubai without British protection.³⁷

When he was completely down, his enemies in Dubai, including the Residency Agent at Sharjah and the Ruler of Dubai, decided to strike the final blow, perhaps partly in response to his accusations against them in the alleged arms case. The tone had changed since February when Khan Bahadur Abdur Razzaq, apparently the new Political Agent at Sharjah after the death of his predecessor, was asked to review the whole case. He wrote that he had inquired into Sultan's case and had concluded that 'his statements... are all unfounded. ... All the actions of the slave are fraud.' He considered Sultan's admission that he had not been emancipated by his master as a lie; his approach to the governor of Batinah as improper; he said Sultan thought that by the support of the manumission certificates 'he would be able to swallow the dues of the people.' 'Among his contradictory actions is his mortgaging other people's building with the Bunnia'; and Sultan's failure to advance his claims against the Dubai Arabs was considered another 'great fraud.'³⁸

Finally, the Resident Agent and the Ruler of Dubai decided to throw the book at Sultan on the issue of the mortgage. The Committee of Merchants had indeed said in December 1925 that Sultan deserved punishment for the fraud regarding the mortgage of the house that did not belong to him, but did not suggest what sort of punishment. In January, 1926, the Resident Agent was asked to find out what punishment Sultan was liable to so that it should be meted out on him by the Sheikh of Dubai. This provided a perfect opportunity for them, and the collusion between the two is very evident. The Resident

³⁷ Sultan b Aman to Political Agent, Bushire, 19.3.1926, p. 216.

³⁸ Note by Khan Bahadur Abdur Razzaq, 22.2.1926, pp. 212-3.

Agent reported in April that he 'consulted His Excellency Sheikh Said b Maktum in regard to the punishment of Sultan for his cheating Raja and other Bunnias in obtaining from them money... He says ... that Sultan decidedly cheated the Bunnia and that he agrees to a punishment ...if the Hon Political Resident would agree Sultan should be imprisoned until the next diving season and then he may be sent to do diving and whatever he would get by God's grace shall be divided proportionately between Raja & others. I take liberty to state that the Sheikh's opinion in this case is good and Raja shall gradually get his dues from Sultan.'³⁹

This was evidently to be the ultimate humiliation of Sultan. However, the British did not have a stomach for any revengeful action against a slave they had manumitted, and wanted to reach a closure quickly on a question that had dragged on for so many years. In May, therefore, the Secretary of the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf had a talk with the Resident Agent at Sharjah, and came to their final conclusion, that:

1. The decree of the Merchants' Committee declaring Sultan bankrupt cannot be altered now.
 2. Sultan's claims against his master's son had better be dropped as they will either perjure themselves that Sultan owes them money or else they will pass witnesses to that effect and Sultan will not succeed to prove his case against them
 3. That he should be allowed to go to Debai and work for his livelihood in the service of Muhammad b Ahmad Dalmuk.
 4. Sultan has agreed to all the above and requests that he may be permitted to go to Debai and beseeches that he may be granted a passage by the "Netravati"
- The above seems to bring an end to this case and appears to be somewhat favourable to Sultan also.⁴⁰

However, matters did not end there. Four years later, Sultan was still in Bushire and writing to the Political Resident and Consul-General in the Persian Gulf, asking him to help him go to Dubai to bring his family to Bahrain, and asking for British protection and a letter

³⁹ RAS to PRCG, 6.4.1926, p. 219.

⁴⁰ Minute by K.B. 3.5.1926, p. 220.

to the Resident Agent for his protection. He added: 'You are aware that a woman has heavy rights on the husband. Every year I am sending expenses for my wife. Now I have received news from her that she is anxious to see me. But I am unable to go. The Qadhi informs me to divorce her. I do not wish this.'⁴¹ In a minute, the Secretary of the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf said that 'Sultan might get into trouble if he visits Debai: his creditors may also grumble that he is now able to work and pay up his debts but that the Residency helps him in getting his family away from Debai. He should therefore appoint an agent to do this for him. The Resident Agent at Sharjah may be asked to help Sultan's agent.' Another minute expressed the exasperation of the British officials when he said that 'This Abyssinian slave was manumitted in 1924 and ever since we have been settling his affairs' and wanted the case to be closed once and for all.⁴²

6. Conclusion

The career of Sultan b Aman was certainly unique among the 500 or so slave manumission cases that were recorded in the Persian Gulf in the 1920s, but it must be remembered that administrations typically spend a lot of time solving problems while successful cases may pass unrecorded. In the case of manumissions by the British, all the cases were problems arising from the breakdown of amicable relations between slave owners and slaves, forcing the latter to resort to intervention by the imperial power, instead of working within the Islamic system of manumission and resorting to local authorities when there was a hitch. So there may have been many other cases of enterprising slaves with business acumen who had made it in the world under slavery or after non-conflictual manumission under Islamic law that have remained unrecorded.

⁴¹ Sultan b Aman to PRCG, 13.12.1929, p. 235.

⁴² Minute of 22.12.1929, p. 240.

Nevertheless, the short career of Sultan was remarkable. Within seven years from the time he was given a written permission to operate his business on his own account in 1917 while still a slave and 1924 when things fell apart with the shipwreck in Ajman, Sultan had established a successful business against all odds, that showed enterprise and promise, importing dates and sugar from the Batinah coast, and trading as far as Ajman. He was making advances to pearl divers and dhow captains, and even trading in pearls. He must have been able to prove his worth for the tight-fisted Indian, Arab and Iranian merchants and moneylenders to lend him large amounts. In the problematic case of the alleged mortgaging of a house, he showed that he could take a little-developed property with one godown for which he was paying a rent of Rs.190 per annum for five years, and develop it by building two additional godowns that could yield a rent of Rs.600 that helped him reduce his debts. He was also able to prove his worth to the local political authorities for him to have the ear of the Rulers of Dubai and Ajman and the governor of the Batinah coast willing to write letters of recommendations for him, but also the British authorities in the Persian Gulf to grant him double manumission certificates.

The case, however, also exposes the broad penumbra between slavery and freedom in the Persian Gulf that seems to have befuddled even the British Resident Agent at Sharjah and the Ruler of Dubai. How could a slave operate a business on his own account since 1917 when he was still a slave without a manumission certificate from his master? But equally, how could the former owner and his sons continue to exercise their dominance over him, with the connivance of the local ruler and the local British representatives, even after he had been granted Manumission Certificates by the powerful British imperial authorities. The latter failed to protect him against his local enemies and shied away from demanding

repayment for his counter claims against them with the same vigour as they had earlier sought his bankruptcy and infamy.

This is the shadow under which the freed slaves seem to have operated in the twilight zone between slavery and freedom in those early years in the Persian Gulf, and perhaps still do. Throughout the hundred pages of the correspondence, Sultan continued to be described, indeed even to sign own name, as *khadim* (slave) or at best *tabei* (dependent) of Thani b Khalifa, even after his double manumissions by the British, as if the British themselves did not believe in their manumission.⁴³ These circumstances destroyed not only the business career of Sultan b Aman and reduced him to mortgaging even his bedding and account book, but also destroyed his family, for he was separated from his wife for many years. We do not know if he did make a comeback – if he did make a successful comeback, he would not have entered into the British administration of problem cases. We may never know.

⁴³ RAS to PRPG 21.9.1924, pp. 138; all the acknowledgments of debts by Sultan on p. 142; Sultan b Aman to PRPG, 25.1.1925, p. 152. Sultan's bond, 1342, p. 170; Kalumal & Co. to British Political Agent, Bushire, 24.8.1925 & 8.1.1926, pp. 158, 179.