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

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*"No Objection to a Wandering Unsettled Life:" Bondsmen and Freedmen in the Ports and at Sea of the Indian Ocean World, c. 1500-1900*

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African freedmen make "fair sailors," wrote a British political officer in Aden to his superior in Bombay in 1872. These men hold "no objection to a wandering unsettled life."<sup>1</sup> The Briton must have witnessed many ex-slaves whose wanderings brought them to his post at Aden and then continued, carrying them to still other parts of the Indian Ocean world: especially Bombay, but also recently Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> On that island, the same characteristics that made freedmen good sailors ensured that they would reject a "life long sojourn" as agricultural workers. His opinion disappointed the British colonial governors of the Atlantic colonies of Trinidad and Guiana, who had written to Bombay in hopes that African freedmen in the Indian

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<sup>1</sup> OIOC, R/20/A/397, Slave Trade Compilation, 1872, Political Department, Aden, to Secretary to Government, Bombay, 30 May 1872.

<sup>2</sup> OIOC, R/20/397, Slave Trade Compilation, 1872, Murdock, Emigration Board, to R. H. Meade, 27 September 1871. Between 1859 and 1869, 2339 liberated enslaved Africans were sent to Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Ocean would follow the earlier wave of south Asians to the sugar and coffee fields of the two colonies.

My paper expands and revises the brief comments of the officer, as they applied to African bondsmen and freedmen in the northwestern Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> In part, the Briton was correct. Nineteenth-century African freedmen indeed often worked at sea. Moreover, both African bondsmen and freedmen had served as sailors well before the nineteenth century. By 1872, many freedmen were not technically “sailors” because they worked not with sails but rather with the engines that powered steam vessels. These freedmen led unsettled lives; but more by necessity than because they “held no objection” to wandering. Their unsettledness originated in their enslavement, which uprooted them and launched them on forced journeys away from their homelands. As bondsmen many led a mobile, if not precisely “wandering,” life in land or sea transport as porters, stevedores, harbor workers, or mariners. As freedmen, some continued to labor in port or maritime activities. And some bondsmen entered the crews of steam vessels at the very moment that they became freedmen.

Among the enslaved Africans who sought emancipation in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world were two groups of sea workers who appeared before British officers in April and September. First, two young bondsmen named Yabir and Sarur had separately hijacked small canoes to escape boats belonging to their masters. They then sought refuge on board the Royal Navy steamer the *Wild Swan* as it cruised the Red Sea. The boys each reported

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the northwestern Indian Ocean refers to the sea and its immediate hinterland from Cape Delgado in the southwest to the west coast of India in the northeast. Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands remain largely beyond the focus of my work, in spite of the post-1500 entry of those lands into the Indian Ocean world, and the impact of their historical dynamics (for Madagascar, state formation and warfare; for the Mascarenes the development of sugar plantations) on the slave trade and slavery in the northwestern Indian Ocean.

that several years ago they had fallen into slavery in the upper Nile Valley, and been forced on a journey to the Red Sea. There, they dove for mother-of-pearl from Red Sea vessels. Both Yabir and Sarur stated that the crews of the boats had hung them by their hands or feet, beat them, and starved them if they did not produce their daily quota of shells. On his head Sarur bore marks of recent wounds, which the British officers of the *Wild Swan* interpreted as the signs of beatings. The two boys not only endured physical abuse; as divers, they performed difficult and dangerous work. The British officer emancipated Yabir and Sarur, then immediately enlisted them on the *Wild Swan* as “punka boys” for the officers of the wardroom.<sup>4</sup>

Five months later, eleven enslaved Africans, including one woman, arrived in the British enclave of Aden on board a Red Sea trading boat that they admitted they had stolen from the man who owned both it and them. As had Yabir and Sarur, the ten men and boys worked as divers, although they seem also to have served as sailors.<sup>5</sup> And as had Yabir and Sarur, these fugitives reported abuse from their master, as well as the boat’s crew. The eleven also gained emancipation. Legally free, they first became charges of the state. Then, the British officials turned them over to “respectable, well-to-do natives” of Aden who would clothe and feed them in return for their services as domestics.<sup>6</sup>

Ten days after the arrival of the fugitives on the hi-jacked vessel, three men followed them to Aden. One of them, Mubruk Mubarak, introduced himself as an ex-slave, manumitted

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<sup>4</sup> OIOC, R/20/508, Slave Trade Compilation, 1878, Gardiner, Senior Lieutenant, to Captain Hunter, Aden, 21 May 1878, enclosing Stuart to Powlett, Commander of *Wild Swan* 1 May 1878.

<sup>5</sup> Their owner referred to the bondsmen as “kalassis”—a term generally applying to Indian Ocean sailors; this implies that the men and boys manned the vessel as well as diving for mother of pearl.

<sup>6</sup> OIOC, R/20/508, Loch, Political Resident, Aden, to Secretary to Government, Bombay, 21 September 1878.

by the owner of the vessel and slaves. His former owner then appointed Mubruk as captain of the vessel. As such, the freedman requested that the British turn the stolen boat over to him, so that he could return it to its rightful owner. (And the authorities eventually did, after making Mubruk return with a letter attesting that he acted as legal agent of the boat owner.) The second man in the party, not a bondsman but rather a passenger on the vessel, asserted that the silver dollars found in the boat belonged to him. As was Mubruk, the third member of party, Abd al-Khayr, identified himself as a former bondsman who had been manumitted by the boat owner. Now free, he belonged to the boat's crew. In sharp contrast to his captain Mubruk, but apparently without objection from him, the freedman Abd al-Khayr stated that he "came after the rest of the Sidis who came to Aden in . . . [the vessel] the other day as he could not remain behind without them."<sup>7</sup>

The stories about Yabir and Sarur, the eleven fugitives, Mubruk Mubarak, and Abd al-Khayr evoke intriguing questions and insights about the slave trade and slavery in the late nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world. Certainly Yabir and Sarur, and perhaps the thirteen other escaped bondsmen and freedmen, moved from freedom in their African homelands to enslavement many miles away and back to freedom in British realms—all within the space of even short lifetimes of young boys. The bonds of slavery were flexible enough to allow some enslaved Africans to cross to freedom without escaping their owners. Mubruk and Abd al-Khayr received manumission in the same land where they had been slaves. As did Mubruk, some freedmen remained loyal to their ex-owners and remained in the sites of their

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<sup>7</sup> OIOC, R/20/508, Loch, Political Resident, Aden to Secretary to Government, Bombay, 21 September 1878. Quoting from Loch's letter, my account implies that Abd al-Khayr himself spoke the word "sidi." But even a translator supplying the word attests to its use in this situation.

enslavement. But other stories belie any image of slavery as benign, and loyalty to former owners as continuing in freedom. The eleven people who had worked under the freedman Mubruk found slavery so burdensome that they fled to British Aden. Four of the eleven, as well as Yabir and Sarur, were children forced to work in the onerous and perilous job of diving for mother-of-pearl. Their stories and Sarur's scars testify to brutal treatment.

Emancipation in British realms bore ambiguities, too. Freedmen in Aden and elsewhere found themselves under other kinds of control. The eleven crew members who absconded with their owner's vessel were made to enter Arab or Indian households, working for their keep. The two freed boys, Yabir and Sarur, went directly from slavery on an Arab-owned boat to the discipline of the Royal Navy.

Choosing to remain in Aden with “the other Sidis” who he could not leave behind, Abd al-Khayr’s words evoked how enslaved people and freedmen forged attachments. But why did Abd al-Khayr apply the term “sidis” to the escaped slaves? The word *sidi* and its variations bear a long currency and multiple meanings. In 1500 *sidis* denoted a maritime elite, descendants of slaves, who ruled the island of Janjira off the west coast of India. In 1886, a passenger on the *SS Parramatta* described the African “seedees” serving on board. By the end of the nineteenth century, a dictionary of Anglo-Indian words and phrases reported that the “proper application . . . [of seedie] in the ports and on the shipping of Western India is to negroes in general.”<sup>8</sup>

The various meanings of *sidi/seedie* provide a palimpsest that accrued new meanings and retained older ones. Delving into the layers of this palimpsest reveals something of the

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases and of Kindred Terms, second edition, (Delhi, 1968), 806.

history of enslaved Africans in the Indian Ocean world. We can see some commonalities in the experiences of African bondsmen over centuries in the Indian Ocean. But the palimpsest also traces changes in the nature of slavery, which ultimately led to the enlistment of African freedmen on Indian Ocean steam liners. Sidi and its variations always referred to African or African-descended people. It usually bore a maritime connotation. But shifts in its meanings accorded with three overlapping eras of the African slave trade and slavery in the Indian Ocean. The three eras themselves also form a palimpsest, with traces of earlier forms of slavery continuing into later times. After tracing very briefly the history of enslaved and freed sea workers in the Indian Ocean, my paper focuses on African bondsmen and freedmen during the height of the Indian Ocean slave trade in the nineteenth century. During that time, the Indian Ocean basin represented a “world in motion.”<sup>9</sup> My paper ends by exploring what difference the heritage of slavery made to freedmen, especially freedmen who worked at overland or maritime transport. How did their lives differ from the lives of other migrants, many of them engaged in maritime work and many of them immiserated?

**Part I: Seafaring African Bondsmen and Freedmen  
in the First Era of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade, before 1500 to c. 1700<sup>10</sup>  
Sidis as a Maritime Elite**

The enslaved Africans who gave rise to the sidis of Janjira were not the only bondsmen to make an ocean crossing during the earliest, and longest, era of slavery, lasting from the rise

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<sup>9</sup> The term is from Bernard Bailyn.

<sup>10</sup> Obviously, my paper pays little attention to this first “layer” of the African slave trade and slavery. I have done little primary research for this topic. Equally obviously from my endnotes, the basic source for this era remains Joseph E. Harris, The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade. Evanston:Northwestern University Press, 1971. For a study of sidi communities in India, see Edward A. Alpers and Amy Catlin-Jhairazbhoy, Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians, Trenton:Red Sea Press, 2005.

of Muslim rulers in the northwestern Indian Ocean to their demise.<sup>11</sup> Well into the seventeenth century, the slave trade moved in multiple directions and caught up many people other than Africans.<sup>12</sup> Enslaved people filled a range of social and economic roles, from unskilled labor to trusted economic positions to high political offices. And because of the importance of the ocean to the region, many enslaved people lived in maritime communities or worked on the water. Amitav Ghosh imaginatively reconstructed the life of a twelfth-century slave, from an Indian maritime community, who traveled to Arab-controlled Aden as the trade agent of his Jewish master.<sup>13</sup>

As in other parts of the Muslim world, rulers in Arabia, Persia, and India filled their armed forces with slave-soldiers. In western India many of these African men, often called *habshis* (“Abyssinians”), eventually attained positions of power and authority. Some of these powerful Africans had descended from slaves; others had been enslaved within their lifetimes.<sup>14</sup> About the time of Da Gama’s arrival, a group of such Africans ruled the island of Janjira off the west central Indian coast. They had become known as *sidis* or “lords” from the Arabic *sayyid*. These *sidis* eventually gave their name to descendants of Africans living in western India.

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<sup>11</sup> I’m using the presence of Muslim rulers as marking a span of time, not necessarily a form of “Muslim slavery.” During this span of time, many non-Muslims owned slaves who served in the range of capacities described below. See, for example, the Jewish master of an enslaved Indian trade agent, described in the paragraph.

<sup>12</sup> See below, the brief description of how the English and Dutch transported enslaved people from the east coast of India to island southeast Asia in the seventeenth century.

<sup>13</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*.

<sup>14</sup> For this era, I have found no evidence of either bondsmen or their descendants having received manumission in the rather formal, often bureaucratic manner that characterized the nineteenth century. But then, my research into the early years remains pretty minimal.

Even as Europeans carved out enclaves on the coast of India, the sidis of Janjira continued to wield power and other Africans continued to arrive as slaves in India. Perhaps the most renowned of these was Malik Ambar, an enslaved Ethiopian who became the effective ruler of the inland kingdom of Ahmadnagar from 1602 to 1626.<sup>15</sup> Malik Ambar made an alliance with the sidis of Janjira. Together, the sidis and Malik Ambar stood against the Mughal Empire.<sup>16</sup> Malik Ambar also employed sidis on his vessels. A list of ship masters who received maritime passes from the Portuguese in 1618-1622 included a number of sidis, all under the employ of the king of Ahmadnagar.<sup>17</sup> In addition Malik Seto, an Ethiopian-born seafarer, commanded a large ship that sailed between western India and Arabia in 1616; among the men under his command was a European.<sup>18</sup>

Long after the death of Malik Ambar and the decline in power of the Janjira Sidis, Africans continued to fill the entourages, armies, and maritime forces of south Asian and Arab rulers. Nonetheless, after about 1700 men so clearly identified as African bondsman or their descendants did not attain the renown or power of Malik Ambar or the Sidis of Janjira.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph E. Harris, The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade. Evanston:Northwestern University Press, 1971, pp. 91-94.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph E. Harris, The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade. Evanston:Northwestern University Press, 1971, pp. 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> M. N. Pearson, Western Coastal India, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Brouwer, 315; Das Gupta, "Indian Merchants and the Western Indian Ocean: The Early Seventeenth Century," 491. CHECK also Coolhaas, Van den Broeck in Azie, I, 81. The European was identified as a merchant, but also helped man the ship. Whether passenger or crew member, he would have been under the authority of the nakhoda.

<sup>19</sup> The absence of clearly identified Africans among the higher ranks of political, maritime, and/or military elites might simply reflect an absence in my knowledge.



**Part II: African Bondsmen and Freedmen as Seafarers  
in the Indian Ocean Slave Trade, c. 1500-1820  
Bondsmen and Sidis in the “Drifting Sea Proletariat”<sup>20</sup>**

For about the first 150 years of their presence, the Europeans who arrived in the Indian Ocean in part fit into the previous patterns of the slave trade and slavery. Early seventeenth-century ships of the English East India Company carried enslaved Hindus and Parsis, the property of Persian merchants, from India west to the Persian Gulf.<sup>21</sup> The English and Dutch also transported Indian bonds people to the east, where the Europeans needed workers and settlers for their outposts in island Southeast Asia. In the early 1620s, the Dutch took advantage of the warfare and famine in southeastern India that forced people into slavery. The Dutch Company bought perhaps more than one thousand slaves for their island enclaves. The EIC noted the forced migration with jealousy; it created a shortage hurting the Company’s own attempts to send slaves from the region to its own island outpost.<sup>22</sup>

But Europeans also brought to India and the islands of Southeast Asia bondsmen from new African homelands. Sailing past the Atlantic and southern Indian Ocean coasts of Africa, Portuguese and English ships picked up African captives. The Portuguese brought the Mozambique coast, including its captives, more tightly into the Indian Ocean world. The English sometimes attempted to transport slaves from their posts in West Africa. In the 1660s, for

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Barendse for the evocative phrase!

<sup>21</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 3, 1624-1629. Oxford:Clarendon, 1909. p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 2, 1622-1623. Oxford:Clarendon, 1908, pp. xxxviii (cites Methwold, Purchas His Pilgrimage, ed. 1626, Relations of the Kingdome of Golchonda, p. 993), 105, 122, 127, 133, 141-142, 147.

example, EIC ships calling on the coast of West Africa were charged with picking up slaves.<sup>23</sup>

But for the EIC, Madagascar was an earlier and more important source of enslaved Africans. By the eighteenth century, it appears the enslaved Africans from Madagascar formed the majority of African bonds people in English enclaves.

Making their forced journeys on European vessels, this new wave of bonds people found themselves working in a range of capacities. Reminiscent of their roles for Muslim owners, Africans belonging to Portuguese masters often served in households and armed entourages. African bonds people collected by the EIC joined captives from a variety of homelands in the settlements of island Southeast Asia. In the 1660s, the Company hoped to settle slaves on its intended settlement on the island of Pulo Run as well as Bantam in Sumatra.<sup>24</sup> Roughly a century later, the EIC put enslaved Africans to work on Sumatran pepper plantations.<sup>25</sup>

As they had for Muslim rulers, some bondsmen worked as soldiers or sailors. Enslaved Africans served the Portuguese in the infantry and auxiliary troops in Goa, Ceylon, and Macao.<sup>26</sup> The EIC likewise recruited captive Africans as soldiers. The Court of Directors in London held high hopes for such troops, having been informed by 1740 that Madagascar slaves were “expert

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<sup>23</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 11, 1661-1664. Oxford:Clarendon, 1923, pp. 43, 51, 157. It is interesting to note that one of the ships ordered to collect slaves on the African coast failed to do so because the “blacks were unwilling” and the captain claimed that he “had noe order to force them.” Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>24</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 11, 1661-1664. Oxford:Clarendon, 1923, pp. 43, 51, 157. It is interesting to note that one of the ships ordered to collect slaves on the African coast failed to do so because the “blacks were unwilling” and the captain claimed that he “had noe order to force them.” Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert J. Young, “Slaves, Coolies and Bondsmen: A Study of Assisted Migration in Response to Emerging English Shipping Networks in the Indian Ocean, 1685-1765,” in Friedland, ed., Maritime Aspects of Migration; Government of India, District and Provincial Gazetteers, Bombay. Vol. 26, Town and Island, pp. 263-265.

<sup>26</sup> Pinto, 28, citing Boxer, PSE, 301-302 & Pescatello, 35; Pinto, 50, citing Scammell in Correia-Afonso, Indo Portuguese History, 171; Barendse, 92.

in the use of small arms” and should be employed in the Bombay garrison.<sup>27</sup> In 1752, the Court of Directors in London hoped that their agents in Bombay would enlist as soldiers two hundred enslaved men and “well grown” boys from Madagascar who, the Court thought, the “Moors” particularly feared.<sup>28</sup> In 1780, when Company territory on the west coast of Sumatra possessed more slaves than it needed, the Court in London directed its employers there to send surplus *coffrees* (the English version of the Portuguese *kaffir*, itself derived from the Arabic word of unbeliever or non-Muslim) to Bombay where they would work in either the military—or the marine.<sup>29</sup> But on land or at sea no African bondsman reached a position of command or outranked a European as had Malik Seto.

Following their practice as they had established it in the Mediterranean, from their early years in the Indian Ocean the Portuguese and English were as likely to enslave any non-Christian enemy as they were to enslave Africans. And as they had in the Mediterranean, they put the motley crew of captives into work on ships. Bondsmen worked alongside other men of color. A Portuguese frigate, for example, carried 63 crew; of these, 40 were listed as "moorish [i.e., Muslim] lascars;" ten as men of mixed race, and seven as slaves.<sup>30</sup> In 1621, the English captured “Arabians and Portingall blackes” (the latter perhaps Africans, Afro-Portuguese, Indo-Portuguese, or Indo-Catholic) from a Portuguese ship, then apparently put them to work on EIC

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<sup>27</sup> OIOC, General Correspondence, E/3/108, Court to President and Council of Bombay, 28 March, 1740.

<sup>28</sup> Government of India, District and Provincial Gazetteers, Bombay. Vol. 26, Town and Island, 259.

<sup>29</sup> Government of India, District and Provincial Gazetteers, Bombay. Vol. 26, Town and Island, 267.

<sup>30</sup> Barendse, 314.

vessels.<sup>31</sup> The following year, the EIC put a group of “very stout and servisable” slaves on vessels defending its outposts, as well as those of its temporary Dutch allies, in the islands.<sup>32</sup> There, too, captured men from Deccan and the Malabar Coast served as sailors until the arrival of adequate numbers of lascars.<sup>33</sup>

Escaped and manumitted African bondsman joined the motley, “drifting sea proletariat” in the ports of India and elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> In 1638, some of the “great consort” of Africans and others who clustered around English enclave of Masulipatam enlisted on the crews of Danish vessels.<sup>35</sup> Portuguese “renegades,” including Africans, lived in the southern Arabian port of Muscat: the capital of the Omani maritime trade network until the Omani elite established themselves in the off-shore African island of Zanzibar.<sup>36</sup>

During the centuries when the English and other Europeans in the Indian Ocean trafficked in African slaves, the referents for the term “sidi” and its variants expanded. It applied to communities of African descent in northwestern India; imported African bondsmen married with the “Sudhees’ (negroes)” of the region.<sup>37</sup> African bondsmen of the ruler of

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<sup>31</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 1, 1618-1621. Oxford:Clarendon, 1906, pp. 284, 313.

<sup>32</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 2, 1622-1623, pp. 165, 223. For the so-called “Defence Fleet,” see pp. xxxv-xxxvi.

<sup>33</sup> William Foster, ed., The English Factories in India, vol. 5, 1634-1636. Oxford:Clarendon, 1911, pp. 111-112. For sending other captives from India and the Maldives to Bantam, see EFI, vol. 7, 1642-1645. Oxford:Clarendon, 1913, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> “Drifting sea proletariat” comes from Barendse.

<sup>35</sup> Foster, EFI, vol. 6, 71-72.

<sup>36</sup> Barendse, 311-12.

<sup>37</sup> HCPP, 1837-38 (697) . . . Burnes to Secretary to Government, 29 December 1835; OED online, “seedie,” citing J. Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, 1813, vol. III, p. 167.

Cambay were called “by way of courtesy . . . seddees, or Master.” Whether descended from the centuries-old African presence in India or newly arrived, sidis from northwestern India crewed country ships. The wife of a British Naval officer voyaging from Bombay to Ceylon on one such ship wrote “the best lascars [i.e., sailors] are Siddees, a tribe of Mahometans, inhabitants of Gogo in Guzerat.”<sup>38</sup>

Some sidis sailed to England when the India-England trade opened to Indian-built, country ships in 1795. On a selection of sampled voyages of EIC-hired country ships arriving in London, mariners with names denoting African origins--notably those prefaced by forms of “sidi/seedie”-- served on twenty-two of the thirty-one voyages.<sup>39</sup> (Seafarers with such names only rarely enlisted on ships built and based in England, and chartered by the EIC.) In 1813, the same year that African slaves in Cambay were called “seddees,” an Indian seafarer who had arrived in London on a country ship identified “seedies” as African sailors from Madagascar.<sup>40</sup>

But in spite of their prominence as sailors, African or African-descended seafarers did not command ships as had sidis before the eighteenth century. Rather, they formed the rank and file of crew members.

**Part III. African Bondsmen and Freedmen**  
**During the Height of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade, c. 1820-1880**  
**Seedies as an Industrial “Drifting Sea Proletariat”**

Abd al-Khayr, Mubruk, Jabir, Sarur, and the other African freedpeople whose stories introduced Part II had fallen into captivity during the third and most recent historical layer of

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<sup>38</sup> Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*, 85, cited in Bulley, 4.

<sup>39</sup> OIOC sample, voyages from Asia.

<sup>40</sup> Old Bailey Online, t18130915-64.

African slavery in the Indian Ocean. A new meaning of *sidi* or *seedie*, as it more commonly appeared, developed during this era between 1820 and 1880 when the African slave trade in the Indian Ocean peaked. We know two things for certain about this third era of the Indian Ocean slave trade. First, we know that we cannot quantify the Indian Ocean slave trade as precisely as historians have quantified the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>41</sup> Second, the African slave trade and exploitation of slaves burgeoned when the Indian Ocean world became more integrated into global commercial and political networks.<sup>42</sup> More enslaved Africans than ever before made Indian Ocean journeys in years when steam vessels began to ply the waters and Britons, ideologically committed to abolition, consolidated their hegemony—if not their formal rule—in the region.

The political and commercial networks of the nineteenth-century northwestern Indian Ocean demanded both more workers and mobile workers, who could move from job to job and sometimes from place to place. The expansion of commerce, growth of cities, and rise of the British imperial and regional states resulted in a greater demand than ever before for all kinds of services and labor. Increased shipping, whether powered by sail or steam, needed more crew members; shipbuilders; dock workers. In ports, bustling waterfronts, expanding populations, and busy merchant households needed artisans; trading agents; porters;

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<sup>41</sup> Gwyn Campbell wrote that “it is currently impossible to estimate with any precision the number of slaves traded in the IOW,” although his best estimate is that in the nineteenth century 1.5 million enslaved Africans might have crossed the ocean. Gwyn Campbell, “Introduction: Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean World”, in Campbell, ed., *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, London:Frank Cass, 2004, ix and Gwyn Campbell “Introduction: Abolition and Its Aftermath in the Indian Ocean World,” in *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, London:Routledge, 2005, 5. Other estimates of nineteenth-century slave exports range from 800,000 (Austin) to 2,400,000 (Manning).

<sup>42</sup> Campbell notes the increase in commerce and rise of the slave trade in his “Introduction”, *Abolition and Its Aftermath*, 2-5.

messengers; domestic servants; water carriers; construction workers; cleaners of streets and other public facilities. Military expeditions deployed not only soldiers, but also a myriad of other workers to supply services and supplies as well as often build an infrastructure.

Whether ruled by regional elites or Britons, port cities burgeoned. A few years before 1839, when the British took over the sleepy port and made it into a major coaling station, only about 1,300 people lived in Aden. By 1856, the city counted 21,000 inhabitants.<sup>43</sup> The center of the Omani commercial empire, Zanzibar's population might have grown from 12,000 in 1835 to around 25,000 permanent inhabitants in 1857.<sup>44</sup> The cities of the Hijaz—Mecca, Medina, and the port of Jidda—likewise perhaps doubled their combined population from 75,000 in the first half of the nineteenth century to 150,000 by 1900.<sup>45</sup>

The population figures conceal both the seasonal and sporadic increases in population. In addition, to its permanent population Zanzibar received a “large floating” influx of an additional 15,000 to 20,000 people during the trading season.<sup>46</sup> The pilgrimage season brought the Muslim faithful to the Hijaz. The annual influxes of pilgrims appear particularly high in the 1870s, when many pilgrims from the east arrived on steam vessels. In that decade, an average of perhaps 143,400 pilgrims—more than the total population of the three cities—arrived

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<sup>43</sup> R. J. Gavin, Aden Under British Rule, 1839-1967 (London, 1975), 4.

<sup>44</sup> ?? Burton, Zanzibar: City, Island and Coast, 2 vols., London:Tinsley Bros., 1857, reprinted, 1967, I:81.

<sup>45</sup> William Ochsenwald, Religion, Society and the State in Arabia: The Hijaz under Ottoman Control, 1840-1908, Columbus:Ohio State University Press, 1984, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Richard F. Burton, Zanzibar: City, Island and Coast, 2 vols., London:Tinsley Bros., 1857, reprinted, 1967, I:81.

annually. In both 1870 and 1876/77, 200,000 pilgrims were estimated to have visited the Hijaz, a number apparently exceeded only in the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

Demands for workers in these and other cities fluctuated in regular and irregular cycles. When vessels carrying goods and passengers arrived with the busy trade or pilgrimage seasons, local entrepreneurs faced serious labor bottlenecks. But during the slack season, the need for labor suddenly declined. Imperial ventures and steamships added sudden bursts of activities to the seasonal cycles. A military expedition or the arrival of a steamship summoned the efforts of many workers, whose services were no longer needed when the army retreated or the vessel embarked. Straining the labor capacity of Aden, the Abyssinian Expedition of 1867 created an even stronger surge of activity in the African Red Sea port of Massawa which the British imperial forces used as their base for their invasion of the interior. Termed an “engineer’s war,” the venture brought not only huge numbers of troops but also workers and material to the port as the British began to build a railway, market, and other buildings, as well as a road into the interior.<sup>48</sup> The activity largely ceased when the expedition withdrew.

On a regional level, rather than from the perspective of any single port or ship, sudden labor demands arose in one place only to decline and then re-appear in another place. Sites demanding workers, for example, would be ports and sailing ships during the annual trading season; Aden in the 1840s, during the first rush to build a port and municipal infrastructure,

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<sup>47</sup> Ochsenwald

<sup>46</sup> Thomas E. Marston, Britain's Imperial Role in the Red Sea Area, 1800-1878, (Hamden, Connecticut:Shoe String Press, 1961), 341, 346, 353-354; Ghada Talhami, Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, (Washington:American University Press, 1979), 85-86; D. A. Farnie, East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History, 1854-1956, (Oxford:Clarendon, 1969), 78; AMAE, cccdj, vol. 2, Du Breuil to MAE, March 1, 1868. SOME OF THESE REFER TO ADEN; CHECK.



then after 1869 when larger numbers of steamships arrived via the Suez Canal; Zanzibar in the 1830s and 1840s, when landowners expanded their clove cultivations, and again with a building boom in the 1880s; Massawa and Suakin during British expeditions in 1867 and 1884; the Hijaz during the 1870s, when more pilgrims than ever arrived. Each of these “hot spots” absorbed laborers for a span of time; but once the demand for labor declined, either seasonally or sporadically, the workers needed to move to other tasks--or other places.

In Arabia and Africa, migrant workers filled the demands for labor. In British Aden, men from India, Yemen, Somalia, and the Swahili coast built and maintained Aden. Newly enslaved Africans provided such labor in Zanzibar, Jidda, Mecca, and other cities under the rule of Muslim elites. Bonds people thus represented one group of migrant workers: the most coerced of all, except perhaps the Indian convict labor with which the British briefly had experimented in Aden.

Enslaved Africans performed the labor that produced export commodities, sustained commerce, and supported the populations of growing cities. In Zanzibar, where exports increased five-fold after the 1820s,<sup>49</sup> bonds people not only cultivated cloves but constructed buildings and did much of the “work in connection with the mercantile houses,” including cleaning and preparing goods for export.<sup>50</sup> Enslaved men also carried those goods to

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<sup>47</sup> Sheriff, Slaves, Spices, and Ivory, 87-10; Cooper, Plantation Slavery, 144, 187, 232; Jonathon Glassman, Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888 (Portsmouth, N.H., 1995), 61-62, 70, 74-75, 87, 94, 110.

<sup>50</sup> Christie, Cholera Epidemics, 312, 330; Burton, Zanzibar, vol. 1, 80; for a description of groups of women “garbling” or cleaning copra, see Ropes.

warehouses and ships; by 1878 bondsmen men comprised most of the porters in Zanzibar.<sup>51</sup> African captives also served as porters, joining the caravans that linked Zanzibar and other ports with the interior.<sup>52</sup> In Mecca, the growing numbers of pilgrims produced something of a building boom as entrepreneurs added to their homes or constructed new dwellings for renting during the pilgrimage season. Newly arrived bondsmen did the heaviest work of quarrying, mixing cement, and construction.<sup>53</sup>

Enslaved African men worked on the water. Some of them dove for pearls and mother-of-pearl, whose export value had increased because of the expanded demand for consumer goods in European markets. (The growth of European appetite for another luxury good—ivory—had stimulated slave raiding and trading in the Indian Ocean hinterland.) Others served as sailors. In 1838, 150 sailors, most of them "African negroes," manned a large ocean-going Omani ship.<sup>54</sup> About twenty-five years later, in 1873, enslaved African seafarers often formed entire crews of Omani vessels along the coast of India.<sup>55</sup> Evidence suggests that the proportion of enslaved Africans who manned Red Sea vessels increased in the course of the nineteenth

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<sup>51</sup> Burton, Zanzibar, vol. 1, 80, 466-467; Norman Bennett, "William H. Hathorne: Merchant and Consul in Zanzibar," Essex Institute Historical Collections, 99(1963), 127. Christie, Cholera Epidemics, 312, 330. See also Ropes.

<sup>50</sup> Sheriff, Slaves, Spices, and Ivory, 87-109; Cooper, Plantation Slavery, 144, 187, 232; Jonathon Glassman, Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888 (Portsmouth, N.H., 1995), 61-62, 70, 74-75, 87, 94, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Hurgronje, Mekka, 11-12.

<sup>54</sup> J. R. Wellsted, Travels in Arabia, 2 vols., (London, 1838), 1:28. It remains unclear, however, whether these African sailors were bondsmen or freedmen.

<sup>55</sup> OIOC, India Office Records, L/P&S/9/22, Ross to Bartle Frere, 11 January 1873, enclosed in Ross to Duke of Argyll, 25 January 1873.

century until they formed the majority of crew members.<sup>56</sup> Other slaves and freedmen worked on industrial transport. The men who loaded coal and cargo onto steamships anchored off Zanzibar were probably slaves whose owners had hired them out.<sup>57</sup> The approximately five-fold increase in steamships visiting Jidda after 1869—from thirty-eight in 1864 to 205 in 1875—created new labor demands, often filled by slaves.<sup>58</sup> Lightering vessels crewed by bondsmen carried cargo, ballast, and passengers to steam vessels in the Jidda harbor until the early twentieth century.<sup>59</sup>

In the “straw towns” of Indian Ocean ports, bondsmen and freedmen mingled with other workers. By the 1830s in the Hadhrami port of Makulla, the section of the town that housed sailors and other trade workers consisted of almost 5,000 people: African slaves and freedmen, Somalis, and Arabs.<sup>60</sup> The mingling of slave and free made it difficult to distinguish slaves from poor free people in Zanzibar.<sup>61</sup> In 1843, a visitor lumped together “sailors, slaves,

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<sup>56</sup> Shortly after 1810, crews of small Red Sea vessels calling at Jidda included African slaves among crews who were Somali, Hadhrami, and Yemeni seafarers. By about mid-century the majority of crews of Egyptian ships were reported to be slaves. And by the 1880s, slaves constituted the majority of all Red Sea crews. Burckhardt, *Travels*, 23; Charles Xavier Rochet d'Hericourt, *Second Voyage sur les Deux Rives de la Mer Rouge, dans le pays des Adels, et le royaume de Choa*, (Paris, 1846), 19. Check date of voyage; FO 84/1849, Jago to Secretary of State for the Foreign Office, July 9, 1887.

<sup>57</sup> Burton, *Zanzibar*, vol. 1, 467; Christie, *Cholera Epidemics*, 330, 408.

<sup>58</sup> For numbers of steamships visiting Jidda in the last half of the nineteenth century, see William Ochsenwald, "The Commercial History of the Hijaz Vilayet, 1840-1908," in R. B. Serjeant and R. L. Bidwell, eds., *Arabian Studies VI*, London:Scorpion, 1982, 70-72.

<sup>59</sup> For an example of bondsmen serving on a lighter, see National Records Office, Kew, Foreign Office [FO] 84/1482, Deposition of Murjan, 11 Dec. 1876 enclosed in Wylde to Derby, February 11, 1877; On the continuing use of bondsmen in the harbor, see Jan Schmidt, *Through the Legation Window, 1876-1926: Four Essays on Dutch, Dutch-Indian and Ottoman History*. Istanbul:Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1992, 71.

17. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, II:428.

<sup>61</sup>. Sheriff, 149, citing Menon, 43.

and others" as a "class" whose members were frequently imprisoned in Zanzibar's fort.<sup>62</sup> Slave coolies and the "lower classes of the citizens" mingled in both wedding ceremonies and mock battles that threatened the civil peace.<sup>63</sup> In the early 1850s, the poor in the Omani city Masqat included "negroes," at least some of them certainly slaves and many of whom made a living as "coolies" in the port.<sup>64</sup>

The value of slaves, and the tenacity of slavery, derived not so much because slaves filled one particular role but because they filled so many, and could be moved from one role to another. The mobility and flexibility of slave labor made it compatible with the nineteenth-century commercial economy characterized by cyclical or irregular demands for labor. Slave labor was labor in the bank for an owner who could quickly call on it when s/he needed it for almost any purpose. When the owner did not need the labor of bonds people s/he loosened the ties that bound, allowing slaves more autonomy—and the responsibility for maintaining themselves. For their part, enslaved people sometimes exercised autonomy without seeking legal freedom; for them, ties to their owner represented potential support and patronage.<sup>65</sup>

Conversely, ties between owners and their bonds people remained even after manumission. Considered an act of charity, manumission created an obligation; a freed person stood in debt to his or her former owner. An Arabic proverb stated "he who frees a slave

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<sup>62</sup>. Browne, Etchings, 371.

<sup>63</sup> CHECK fn—same as above.

<sup>64</sup>. Osgood, Joseph. Notes of Travel or Recollections of Majunga, Zanzibar, Muscat, Aden, Mocha, and Other Eastern Ports. Salem:George Creamer, 1854, 92, 93.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, the life story of Rashid remained legally enslaved although he exercised considerable mobility. Margery Perham, ed., Ten Africans, 2nd. edition, Evanston:Northwestern University Press, 99.

fetters a hand."<sup>66</sup> The ex-master thus retained his former slave as a follower and client. In Mecca the enslaved men from the upper Nile valley who first worked in the heavy labor of construction, then moved into the businesses or households of their owners, often received manumission. Their ex-owners became their patrons, helping them establish households of their own.<sup>67</sup> For their part, some freed people saw their best chance in life in remaining with their ex-owners. Assigned a position of responsibility, and probably profit, as the commander of a vessel, Mubruk exemplifies a freedman who chose to continue working for his former owner.

Some enslaved Africans, particularly young men, took advantage of their physical mobility and mingling with other workers to escape their owners. In Jidda, for example, an enslaved African hired out to work in the city found out from "the other coolies" that the British consul would intervene on his behalf for manumission. Moving about the city on his work, Suedo went to the consulate and indeed obtain manumission.<sup>68</sup> Jabir, Sarur, and the eleven other seafaring slaves whose stories began this paper used their maritime mobility to flee bondage.

Royal Navy vessels on anti-slave trade patrols also confiscated and emancipated enslaved Africans. The fleet assigned to enforcing anti-slave trade regulations intercepted the

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<sup>66</sup>. R. Brunschvig, "Abd," in Encyclopedia of Islam, new edition, (Leiden and London, 1960), 26; Reuben Levy, The Social Structure of Islam, (Cambridge, 1971), 80-81; Daniel Pipes, "Mawlas: Freed Slaves and Converts in Early Islam," in Willis, ed., Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa, 199-227; William John Sersen, "Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Slaves in Arabic Proverbs: A Preliminary View," in Willis, ed., Slaves and Slavery, 97.

<sup>67</sup>. Hurgronje, Mekka, 11-13.

<sup>68</sup> FO 84, story of Suedo.

largest numbers of slaves in the late 1860s. From 1867 through 1869, 2,645 bonds people received emancipation from naval officers: an average of over 800 slaves annually.<sup>69</sup> By the year ending on 28 May 1878, 438 slaves had received their freedom while in transit on the ocean; a year later, the number had fallen to sixty.<sup>70</sup>

Being taken on board a British vessel on anti-slave trade patrol launched newly freed people on yet another involuntary journey that scattered them throughout the western Indian Ocean. From 1859 through 1861, 1,607 slaves taken on board British vessels were sent to Mauritius and the Seychelles; just over seven hundred joined them in those destinations by 1870. Freed people also disembarked from RN vessels in Bombay and its vicinity, as well as Aden. As early as 1847, enslaved African children confiscated by a British steamer arrived in Bombay.<sup>71</sup> Later British anti-slave trade ships received instructions to send freed slaves to various institutions in western India.<sup>72</sup> Some newly freed people spent a short time in Aden, only to resume their voyage for Bombay. In the space of a only few weeks in the late 1860s, at the height of the anti-slave trade patrols, perhaps just under one thousand newly freed bonds

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<sup>69</sup>. IOR R/20/A/397, Slave Trade Compilation, 1872, Murdock, Emigration Board, to Herbert, 19 October 1871.

<sup>70</sup>. IOR R/20/A/598, Slave Trade Compilation, Slave Trade Annual Report by Commander in Chief, Naval Forces, East Indies Station.

<sup>71</sup>. H. Gundert, Biography of the Reverend Charles Isenberg (London:Church Missionary Society, 1885), 54. This is possibly the same event noted in IO R/20/A/118, Southey(?) to A. C. Lewis, March 1, 1848.

<sup>72</sup>. IOR R/20/A/118, Haines to Malet, December 15, 1847; R/20/142, Anderson to Coghlan, June 26, 1856; R/20?a/180. Coghlan to Anderson, March 24, 1858, Anderson to Coghlan, April 24, 1858, Coghlan to Crawford, July 9, 1858, Coghlan to Masters of "Success," July 9, 1858, Crawford to Coghlan, August 9, 1858; R/20/A/215, Playfair to Kemp, June 12, 1860; R/20/A/279, Secret Compilation, 1865. Gonne, Secretary to Government, Bombay, to Political Resident, Aden, 15 June 1865; Fred Morton, Children of Ham: Freed Slaves and Fugitive Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873-1907 (Boulder:Westview, ), pp. 52-58; For an overview of the missions, with special attention to the CMS mission at Sharanpur (called Nasik, see Harris, Africans in Asia, 72, 74-76.

people arrived in Aden. There, they were put on an island in the harbor called "Slave Island," which one contemporary observer called a "prison," to await transport to Bombay.<sup>73</sup>

As they had in slavery, many freedmen the northwestern Indian Ocean worked in ports and at sea. The mission schools inland from Bombay taught young freedmen crafts useful for manning and maintaining ships: not only sailing but also carpentry and other skills.<sup>74</sup> By 1864, more than half of the two thousand Africans in reported in Bombay earned their living as sailors or in related maritime work.<sup>75</sup> Freedmen also served the new industrial transport in its most onerous job: working with coal to fuel steam vessels. In the 1840s, steam liners calling at Aden employed coalers who came from the Swahili coast near Zanzibar. In order to keep these liners on schedule, the coalers ""never cease, night or day, until they have finished their task, and the fatigue is so great, that it was calculated that one man died for every 100 ton of coals."<sup>76</sup> A few years later, a government official noted that escaped slaves, as well as sons of free men and slave women, worked with Yemenis from mountain villages at loading coal onto steamships.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>. In the space of a few weeks in the late 1860s, perhaps as many as 967 freed slaves arrived in Aden. There, they were put on an island in the harbor called "Slave Island," which one contemporary observer called a "prison," to await transport to Bombay. Colomb, Slave-Catching, 101, 260-261. CHECK

<sup>74</sup> Colomb, Slave-Catching, 101, 261; H. Gundert, Biography of the Reverend Charles Isenberg (London, 1885), 54, 71-73; IO, ARR, R/20/A/118, Southey to A. C. Lewis, March 1, 1848; IO, R/20/A/118, Haines to Malet, December 15, 1847; R/20/142, Anderson to Coghlan, June 26, 1856; R/20/A/180. Coghlan to Anderson, March 24, 1858, Anderson to Coghlan, April 24, 1858, Coghlan to Crawford, July 9, 1858, Coghlan to Masters of Success" July 9, 1858, Crawford to Coghlan, August 9, 1858; R/20/A/215, Playfair to Kemp, June 12, 1860; Fred Morton, Children of Ham: Freed Slaves and Fugitive Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873-1907 (Boulder, 1990), 52-58.

<sup>75</sup> Harris, Africans in Asia, 72.

<sup>76</sup>. Griffith, A Journey across the Desert vol. 1, 19, 21.

<sup>77</sup>. OIOC, R/20/A/58, Haines to Malet, September 9, 1846; Playfair, History of Arabia Felix, 15.

African freedmen in ports and on ships became known as seedies by the British. In 1857, a member of the Aden administration reported that the port's population and workforce consisted mainly of Arabs, "Seedees, Somalees" and others.<sup>78</sup> Together with other workers, many seedies in Aden lived in the "straw town"—or, perhaps more appropriately, "mat town," after their housing material—of the Maala quarter in Aden.<sup>79</sup>

Seedies were the nineteenth-century, industrial version of the "drifting sea proletariat." They performed the heaviest work in all of the ports of the northwestern Indian Ocean. Seedies labored as stevedores in Karachi and Bombay, ports frequented by steam vessels.<sup>80</sup> In Bombay, seedies served steam vessels belonging to the East India Company. Presumably because they were accustomed to working with coal, in about 1850 the Eastern Archipelago Company recruited thirty or forty seedies, along with their wives, and sent them to Labuan in Borneo where the Company hoped to mine coal for steam vessels. Although they formed a minority of workers in Labuan, they performed the vital work of actually removing the coal. Their British employers reported more satisfaction with the performance of seedies than with either other Indian migrants or local Malays. Unlike the Malays, they did not disappear from the worksites when family obligations called them; perhaps because their immediate families had accompanied them and, as uprooted captives, they did not possess extensive kin ties in

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<sup>78</sup> OIOC, R/20/A/155, Anderson to Coghlan, July 27, 1857.

<sup>79</sup> Hunter, Account of the British Settlement of Aden, 36.

<sup>80</sup> BT, 1896.



Borneo or India. For their part, the serang of the seedies reported that his men preferred the Labuan coal works over labor in steam vessels.<sup>81</sup>

The Royal Navy gave an official ring to the seafaring connotations of “seedie.” The Navy had long recruited seafarers from the west coast of Africa, especially the colony of freed slaves at Sierra Leone, who became known as Krumen.<sup>82</sup> Some of the Sierra Leonians served on RN vessels belonging to the East India Station. In 1870, the officers of the East India station received orders to replace the Sierra Leonians with "seedies" in Zanzibar. “Seedie” then became an official rating in the Royal Navy.<sup>83</sup> East African seedies served as supernumeraries: that is, extra crew hired beyond the normal complement. They performed a range of tasks. The youngest among them worked at service jobs, which sometimes took them below deck. One freedman, trained as a boy at an Indian mission school, worked under an engineer aboard a RN vessel, eventually returning to Bombay via Aden.<sup>84</sup> Other seedies worked directly with the stokehold crew.<sup>85</sup>

Yabir and Sarur were not the only young bondsmen who moved directly from slavery to service as seedies in the Royal Navy. Other boys who had been emancipated entered the

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<sup>81</sup> HCPP, 1852(357), James Motley, “Report on the Coal of Labuan,” 24 May 1849; O’Riley, “Report on the Coal Mines, enclosed in O’Riley to Shaw, 25 November 1851; O’Riley, “Diary of Occurrences at Labuan,” enclosed in O’Riley to Shaw, 25 November 1851.

<sup>82</sup> SOURCE ON KRUMEN. BROOKES?

<sup>83</sup> Arthur Davey, "Tindals, Seedies and Kroomen," Simon's Town Historical Society Bulletin, 17:4(July, 1993), 157, 158.

<sup>84</sup> H. B. Thomas, "The Death of Dr. Livingstone: Carus Farrar's Narrative," The Uganda Journal, 14:2(1950), 116, 120.

<sup>85</sup> ADM 117/1014?, Ledger for HMS *Vulture*, Quarter 1 April-30 June, 1873, for seedie permanent supernumeraries serving as stokers.

British Indian Navy as cabin boys.<sup>86</sup> In 1865 two young enslaved boys running away from their owner, a boat master, arrived by canoe on an island off Aden. The chief officer at the island ordered them to report to the police office. But before doing so, they enlisted on board the HMS *Victoria*.<sup>87</sup> In 1875 at Zanzibar, the Captain of the HMS *Daphne* encountered a young man who had been recently freed by an anti-slavery patrol, then deposited at Zanzibar. The Captain enlisted him on his vessel as a seedie, noting—probably with some justification—that the freedman would likely be re-enslaved if simply left in Zanzibar.<sup>88</sup>

Seedies also worked in the stokehold of steam liners belonging to the Peninsular and Oriental [P&O] and British India [BI] companies. The pattern appeared early. In March 1858, a traveler reported that the entire crew of the P&O liner *Pottinger*, except English quartermasters, consisted of Indian lascars, while the firemen and stokers were African “Seedy coolies.”<sup>89</sup> In a sample of seventy-three voyages made by P & O liners between 1874 and 1889, seedies appeared in every stokehold crew. They constituted slightly over half—1,432—of the 2,753 firemen and coal trimmers. Within that group, African freedmen served disproportionately in the ranks of the most poorly paid workers: coal trimmers, among whom seedies constituted 86.5%. They filled only about a quarter of positions as firemen.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Check for ref—may be in earlier long fn. re: African children in mission schools.

<sup>87</sup> OIOC, ARR, R/20/A/279, M/Nockler[CHECK] to Political Resident, 5 August 1865.

<sup>88</sup> Foreign Office Confidential 2624, July 27, 1875, Cumming to Secretary of the Admiralty, May 19, 1875, and Inclosure 4, Captain Sullivan to Cumming, May 4, 1875 reprinted in A. P. Hurdett, ed., Persian Gulf and Red Sea Naval Reports, 1820-1960, Vol. 4, 1875-1881, 47, 56.

<sup>89</sup> F. R. Kendall, cited in Padfield, Beneath the House Flag, 35-36.

<sup>90</sup> Memorial University, St. John’s, NFLD, Maritime History Archive, Crew Lists and Agreement. The evidence cited here is very preliminary, illustrating a general trend rather than supporting an extrapolation.

Because they worked at the most dangerous jobs, seedies suffered higher mortality rates on the P & O liners than other seafarers. A sample of nautical reports of P & O vessels from 1862 through 1901 lists 148 coal trimmers as having died, compared to fifty-seven firemen.<sup>91</sup> The difference in mortality rates between firemen and stokers is even more disproportionate than those numbers indicated, because vessels typically carried more firemen than trimmers. Terse as they are, the occasional brief descriptions of these deaths offer a litany of the various dangers of the stokehold work: burns, explosions, falls, collapsing heaps of coal, respiratory illness. Sometimes the combination of those dangers proved fatal. Already suffering from chronic bronchitis, Khamis Mubarak picked up a hot cinder and burned his hand; he went into shock and died.<sup>92</sup>

African freedmen became coal trimmers and firemen because the forced journeys of enslavement, and some of the less overtly coerced journeys of emancipation, took them there. The relationship between freedmen and British authorities, on one hand, and British authorities and steam liner enterprise helped channel them to stokeholds. If they had been emancipated by Britons or lived in British-ruled territory, freed people found themselves under imperial tutelage: perhaps even under the command of British officers in vessels of the Royal Navy. And empire and maritime enterprise reinforced each other.<sup>93</sup> British entrepreneurs and

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<sup>91</sup> NMM, Peninsular and Oriental Nautical Reports [PONR], 40/10-40/27, January, 1862-September 1901.

<sup>92</sup> NMM, PONR, 40/23, October, 1890-March, 1893, *Gwalior*; NMM, Peninsular and Oriental Nautical Reports [PONR], 40/22, July 1888- September, 1890, *Venetia*; NMM, PONR, 40/22, July 1888-September, 1890, *Parramatta*; 40/27, April, 1899-September, 1901, *Egypt* and *Assaye*; NMM, PONR, 40/23, October, 1890-March, 1893, *Kaisar-i-Hind*; MUMHA, Crew Agreement and List for *Kaisar-i-Hind*, for voyage 5 May-23 September, 1891; NMM, PONR, 40/22, July 1888-September, 1890, *Parramatta*; 40/27, April, 1899-September, 1901, *Egypt* and *Assaye*.

<sup>93</sup> The title of J. Forbes Munro's book, Maritime Enterprise and Empire, expresses this well.

officials, acting on abolitionist ideology and sometimes joined by missionaries, moved freedmen along the paths leading to labor that sustained empire, including industrial maritime labor.

Closely tied to the interests of the BI and serving as British consul in Zanzibar, John Kirk actively directed freedmen to various kinds of work beyond Zanzibar.<sup>94</sup>

The activities of the firm of Smith Mackenzie & Company, in particular, brought freedmen into the network of shipping interests and imperial endeavors. The firm began operations in Zanzibar in 1875.<sup>95</sup> It acted as an agent for other steamship companies, especially the BI, as well as for the Imperial British East Africa Company; organized caravans into the interior; and supplied coal for steamers of the British and German navies.<sup>96</sup> These projects all required collecting workers. While Smith Mackenzie & Co. recruited workers for government endeavors, the government also turned freed people over to the firm. Smith Mackenzie & Co. arranged for the conveyance of slaves which Royal Navy vessels had confiscated at sea.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps the firm directed some of these freedmen to coaling operations in port, or to the stokeholds of steam vessels. The BI and P & O also transported members of the British military, including the seedies who had enlisted in the Royal Navy. In 1877, for example, six seedies who had manned the HMS *Philomel* on its Aden to Suez run made voyage back to Aden on the P & O liner, *Peshawur*.<sup>98</sup> Below them, in the stokeholds of the *Peshawur*, the labor of other freedmen

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<sup>94</sup> Andrew Porter, Victorian Shipping, Business, and Imperial Policy, 121; Munro, MEE, 183-184. For example, Kirk arranged to send freed slaves as laborers to South Africa and a labor recruiter from the Cape was present in Zanzibar. Porter, Victorian Shipping, 34, 83, citing CO 48/484/4735.

<sup>95</sup> Munro, Maritime Enterprise, 184, 186.

<sup>96</sup> Jones, Two Centuries of Overseas Trading, 128.

<sup>97</sup> Jones, "The Role of the Shipping Agent in Migration," 339.

<sup>98</sup> OIOC, R/20/A/482, George West to Political Resident, Aden, 5 July 1877.

on Asiatic Articles fueled the liner's passage. It would be a short move for these and other seedies, discharged from the Royal Navy with experience of work on steamers, to join "the other sidis" in the stokeholds of liners.

The men who ran the BI, notably William MacKinnon, maintained even closer ties to imperial officials than did the representatives of the P & O. Why, then, didn't seedies serve as trimmers or firemen on the BI liners voyaging between India and the United Kingdom? One answer suggests the limits on the mobility of freedmen within the Indian Ocean. The BI enlisted its England-bound crew in Calcutta, in eastern India; in contrast, the P & O used Bombay as its Indian terminus. The African freedmen so apparent in the ports of the western Indian Ocean probably did not pass Cape Comorin to arrive on the east coast of India. They may have belonged to a "drifting sea proletariat," but they "drifted" only with particular currents.

The currents of recruitment for steam liners shifted beginning in the 1890s. Until then, Indian deck crew—known as lascars—most frequently came from the coastal communities of eastern and western India that had long supplied seafarers for British vessels. But by the end of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of Indian mariners arrived at Bombay from the distant interior to the northwest. These men, too, began to work in the stokeholds replacing the seedies. The change coincided with a shift in steam vessel technology. Oil rather than coal began to fuel engines. And as coal disappeared, so did the seedies.

What difference, finally, did the heritage of slavery make to freedmen? How did the lives of freedmen differ from the lives of other migrant workers? Two more stories illuminate this question. Captured and carried away from his homeland between Lake Malawi and Lake

Nyasa in the early 1870s, the boy Kibuli arrived in Zanzibar. There, the sister of the Sultan bought him; an enslaved husband and wife took him into their household in a slave settlement; and he received the new name of Rashid. The young bondsman worked at a variety of activities: most notably, caravan work. In spite of his journeys far from Zanzibar, Rashid continued to recognize the Sultan's sister as his owner; he turned part of his wages over to her. He received manumission only by upon her death, when her will freed him. Rashid then spent the rest of his life serving in various capacities—soldier, forest warden—for the Omani, German, and English governments. Although he made an abortive attempt at running a small shop, Rashid never attempted to farm. He continued his journeys, but only within the circuits mapped out by the large scale organizations of conquest regimes. But these circuits could never take him back to his birthplace. His village had been destroyed, and its people killed or dispersed.<sup>99</sup>

A Somali boy, Ibrahim, stands at the center of the second story. Born around 1900, Ibrahim soon lost his parents to warfare and dislocation. As a child and youth, Ibrahim made even more journeys than did the young Rashid. He first begged passage on a boat belonging to a kinsman and sailed to Aden. He moved among the city of Aden, its immediate hinterland, and Somalia. An impoverished street boy in Aden, Ibrahim survived largely by theft, begging, and diving for coins tossed by passengers and crew from the vessels in Aden's harbor. Departed periodically back to Somalia, he continued to call on kin ties to gain passage to Aden and other Arabian ports. In the Persian Gulf, Ibrahim turned exclusively to life as a seaman. He first

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<sup>99</sup> Rashid bin Hassani. "The Story of Rashid bin Hassani of the Bisa Tribe, Northern Rhodesia," recorded by W. F. Baldock, in *Ten Africans*, ed., Margery Perham. London: Faber & Faber, 1963.

worked on local ships with other Somali crewman. When an Arab shipmaster tried to snare them into debt and enslavement, the Somali crew of another vessel heard of their plight; they got their captain to intercede on behalf of the Somali debtors. Ibrahim eventually found work on European vessels that took him to France, England, India, Argentina, and the United States. Attracted by high wages in Norfolk, Virginia, Ibrahim temporarily deserted his vessel; repelled by segregation on public transport, he returned to sea. During one of his sojourns in the busy tramp steamer port of Cardiff, Ibrahim met a Belgian scholar; travelled with him to the Cotswold's; and narrated his life story.<sup>100</sup>

Both Rashid and Ibrahim survived because of their intelligence, resilient personalities, physical hardiness, and luck. But the circumstances that impelled them on their first journeys put them on different life courses. The violence of captivity destroyed Rashid's village and took him far away from his homeland. As difficult as were his circumstances, Ibrahim made periodic returns to Somalia. He frequently called on ties of kinship; in Aden and the Persian Gulf, he lodged himself within a community of people who identified themselves as Somali and probably themselves made journeys back to their homeland. The resilience of the Somali network, especially its continued ties to Somalia, gave Ibrahim a degree of independence and autonomy that Rashid did not exercise.

Even more than Rashid, seedies in Aden faced special difficulties in forming a community and finding work. The enclave lacked a productive hinterland that could support an agricultural community; moreover, the British tried to manage tightly the city and port. More than any other migrant group in Aden, the seedies were less able to evade attempts of the

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<sup>100</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* (Rome) 32:1977.

administration to control them. Their role as harbor workers was undermined by government policy. In 1882 Aden's authorities built the new town of Shaykh Uthman, five miles from waterfront, hoping to remove "vagrants" and temporary structures from the harbor and military installations. Workers living in Shaykh Uthman could not respond quickly when the call for labor went out in the harbor. Not surprisingly, people tried to leave the new settlement and filter back into harbor neighborhoods. Many were successful; but not seedies. In 1908, the self-proclaimed "strong seedies and hardworking men" of Shaykh Uthman complained that men from the Yemeni highlands had gained preferential treatment in hiring for steamships. Protesting, they called on their status as "humble British subjects" contrasted with the "foreigners" from the highlands outside the colony. Ironically, the temporary nature of Yemeni and Somali migration to Aden enabled them to live in ephemeral housing near the harbor and escape the authorities. Because the seedies called no place but Aden home, they were particularly vulnerable to restrictions leveled by the government.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusions

Uncovering the palimpsests of meaning in the term *sidi/seedie* traces the continuities and changes in African enslavement in the Indian Ocean through time. African bondsmen and freedmen served prominently as seafarers from at least 1500 until about 1900. But over the course of four centuries, the range of capacities in which they worked narrowed and lowered. Bondsmen and freedmen labored, as did men of other origins, at the bottom ranks of seafaring

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<sup>101</sup>. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule*, 189-190; Lawless, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside*, 21-23, "The Role of Seamen's Agents in the Migration for Employment of Arab Seafarers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Immigrants and Minorities*, 13 (1994): 34-58 and "Recruitment and Regulation," 74-102, especially p. 87.



during all times. But in the sixteenth century, the maritime expertise of some Africans gave them control over an island and its fleet. Africans commanded war and commercial vessels, some belonging to the African ruler of an inland kingdom, in the seventeenth century. But men identified as Africans or of African descent gradually receded from the higher ranks of maritime life. By the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, “sidi” sailors won the admiration of Europeans, even as some of them suffered alongside mariners of other origins in the extremely unhealthy and harsh conditions of Indian-built vessels voyaging to England. With the simultaneous rise of industrial transport and growth of the slave trade from Africa, a new wave of freedmen entered the most dangerous, difficult jobs of the industrial maritime proletariat: men working with coal, in port or below deck on steam liners.

Examining African bondsmen and freedmen in ports and at sea also juxtaposes them with the many other migrant workers and mariners in the northwestern Indian Ocean world. These juxtapositions allow for a consideration of the nature of enslavement and the ambiguities of freedom in a supposedly modernizing world.

Finally the journeys of seafaring bondsmen and freedmen, as well as those of other mariners, helped create a northwestern Indian Ocean world. Tracing those journeys thus reveals not only how the slave trade, slavery, and freedom worked in the Indian Ocean, but also how the Indian Ocean world worked as a system.