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

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"Slaves of One Master:" Globalization and the African Diaspora in Arabia in the Age of Empire

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At the turn of the twentieth century, a six-year-old boy named Ismail bin Mubarak was kidnapped from his hometown of Mkokotoni in Zanzibar by a slave dealer and taken away to Arabia in a Suri dhow. The slave broker took him to a spot on the Batinah coast of northern Oman near the Sawadi Islands where he sold him to man from Hamriya (a town not far from Dubai). Five years and two owners later, Ismail found himself the slave of Salim bin Sultan of Sharjah who sent him to the pearl banks to dive each season the for the next twenty years. In March 1931, after two decades of abuse and grueling work as a pearl diver, Ismail had had enough. He stole one of his master's boats and fled with four other enslaved divers across the gulf to seek their freedom at the British naval depot at Bassidu on the northwestern tip of Qishm Island off the coast of Persia.¹

¹ Statement of Ismail bin Mubarak, Swahili, aged 40 years, recorded at the Political Agency, Bahrain (May 23, 1931). India Office Records (hereafter IOR), British Library R/15/1/209.

Nine days later Ismail and his companions were taken aboard the HMS *Hastings*, a British sloop only a few months old and on its inaugural assignment patrolling the Persian Gulf. The commanding officer received the five men aboard and telegraphed the Political Resident for instructions, noting that he had “obtained all particulars” and was “convinced case is genuine.” The brief notes preserving the testimonies of these refugees reveal a common story among a diverse group captives: A 26-year-old Zanzibari diver who as a boy had served in the German East Africa campaign was kidnapped by a dhow operator who promised to take him from Zanzibar to Mombasa but instead took him Dubai and sold him as a slave; a 20-year-old Swahili pearling crewman who was born to slave parents in Persian Mekran and sold at age ten to slave owners in Oman; and two Baluchi divers of mixed Swahili-Baluchi ancestry in their early twenties who had been kidnapped or sold to slave owners in Oman in the early 1920s.²

Ismail and his companions present something of a paradox for the contemporary historian. The conventional historiography of Indian Ocean slavery tells us that the slave trade from east Africa to Arabia should have been eliminated by the diligent work of the British Royal Navy in the second half of the nineteenth century and would have been, at the very least, cut to only ‘a trickle’ by the last decades of the century.³ The literature on Middle Eastern and Arab (or ‘Islamic’) slavery informs us that ‘Arab slavery’ should have consisted only of a ‘benign’ form of domestic slavery—non-productive labor, dominated by women, outside of the economic

² Telegram from HMS *Hastings*, Henjam Radio, to Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, No. 1501 (March 30, 1931); “Summaries of Declarations of Refugee Slaves” (April 1931); (The Political Agent noted that the men “speak Arabic and look like Negroes,” Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Agent in the Persian Gulf (May 30, 1931). IOR R/15/1/209.

³ Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 271; Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860-1970* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 63.

sector—unlike the intense slavery of the Atlantic world.⁴ Pearl diving seems both too arduous and too profitable to fit this description. In addition, economic historians tell us that the economy in Arabia and the Gulf should have been so trifling following the devastation of the nineteenth century—the region’s loss of trade after Napoleonic Wars, the ultimate collapse of the dhow trade following the rise of steam ships and the opening of the Suez canal in 1869—that few, if any, Gulf residents could have afforded to own slaves.⁵ Demand for slave labor should therefore have been low. Historiography from the Gulf has tended to further reinforce a picture of a region long impoverished before the development of oil resources under the benevolent tutelage of the region’s wise sheikhs and sultans.⁶ Everything about these men’s story seems out of place.

Ismail’s story is not an isolated case. It is one example of the stories of thousands of Africans who were kidnapped in their youth and sent to work in the Gulf. Hundreds of similar cases are preserved in the archives from British outposts in the region. The five men who boarded the HMS *Hastings* in the spring of 1931 had been sold into slavery during a period that also marked the peak of a global pearl boom – an oft-neglected period of massive pearl production and soaring consumption that spanned the half century ending in 1929. Ismail’s capture and subsequent manumission help us understand wider global economic trends that

⁴ Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989); Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989); Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Curry, 1987), 37-41; Robert G. Landen, *Oman Since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁶ Donald Hawley, *Oman and Its Renaissance* (London: Stacey International, 1977); Mohamed Al-Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story from Abu Dhabi* (London: The London Centre of Arab Studies, 2004); F. A. Clements, *Oman, the Reborn Land* (New York: Longman, 1980); Sergey Plekhanov, *A Reformer on the Throne: Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said* (London: Trident Press Ltd., 2004).

affected thousands of enslaved divers in the Gulf and around the world. His capture coincides with the peak of the global pearl boom, and his manumission coincides with the industry's collapse.

During the half century that ended in 1929, the Gulf pearl banks, which had produced on a smaller scale for regional markets for millennia, were drawn into a massive, expanding global market. Another Gulf product – dates – found global appeal around the same time. Like the pearl market, the date market experienced a boom followed by a catastrophic decline around 1929. Both industries were victims of broader global economic forces – rapid growth while demand was high and collapse when more developed regions found ways to mimic or exceed Gulf production with the benefit of industrial technology. During the boom in these industries, labor demand was in high and incentives to import labor – often slave labor – grew in tandem. With the collapse of the Gulf's date and pearl industries, the regional economy ground to a halt. The collapse was followed by a corresponding rise in abuse, flight, and manumission of enslaved workers. It is thus no coincidence that Ismail and his companions chose to flee in 1931 in the midst of the Gulf's economic crisis. This paper places the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century slave trade from east Africa to Arabia in the context of wider global economic developments. I argue that the experience of thousands of enslaved Africans in the Gulf presents a challenge to traditional interpretations of Middle Eastern slavery and the economic history of the Gulf and the Western Indian Ocean. Their experiences are should not be seen as part of an "Islamic" slave trade, but part of a slave system which – like Atlantic slavery – was structured around global economic forces.

Arabia and the East African Slave Trade

It is difficult to gauge the numeric dimensions of the east African slave trade, in part because – unlike the Atlantic trade – traders produced little documentation and most of the trade existed beyond the view of Western observers who account for our usual source for such quantitative data. Using the limited evidence available, historians have produced a wide range of approximations.⁷ Perhaps our best estimate to date comes from Paul Lovejoy, who has suggested a global figure for east African exports of enslaved Africans at 100,000 for the seventeenth century; 400,000 for the eighteenth century; and 1,618,000 for the nineteenth century, half of whom were sent overseas, and the other half of whom were retained on the east African coast.⁸ With few exceptions, historians of east Africa agree that, although the slave trade existed on a small scale for several centuries, it increased sharply in the eighteenth century and grew dramatically during the nineteenth century until it reached a peak some time around the 1870s.⁹

⁷ R. P. Baur, *Voyage dans L'Oudoe & L'Ouzigua* (Lyons, 1882), R. W. Beachey, *The African Diaspora and East Africa: An Inaugural Lecture delivered at Makerere University College (University of East Africa), Kampala, Uganda, on 31st July, 1967* (Nairobi, 1967); Richard Reusch, *History of East Africa* (New York, 1961), cited in Esmond B. Martin and T. C. I. Ryan, "A Quantitative Assessment of the Arab Slave Trade of East Africa, 1770-1896," *Kenya Historical Review* 5, no. 1 (1977), 72; Ralph A. Austen, "The Islamic Slave Trade Out of Africa (Red Sea and Indian Ocean): An Effort at Quantification," Paper presented to the Conference on Islamic Africa: Slavery and Related Institutions, Princeton University, 1977; Thomas M. Ricks, "Slaves and Slave Traders in the Persian Gulf, 18th and 19th Centuries: An Assessment," and Ralph A. Austen, "The 19th-Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census," in William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Cass, 1989); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 79-81. For an excellent discussion on the challenges of retrieving quantitative data for Indian Ocean slavery see: Edward A. Alpers, "Introduction: Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa," and "Mozambique and 'Mozambiques': Slave Trade and Diaspora on a Global Scale," in Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers and Allen Isaacman (eds.), *Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa* (Maputo, Mozambique: Filsom Entertainment, Lda., 2005), 1-12 and 39-61.

⁸ Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61-62, 155-158.

⁹ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987), 35-41, 223-235. Sheriff suggests a declining curve for exports in the second half of the nineteenth century. See also: Abdul Sheriff, "The Slave Trade and Its Fallout in the Persian

The reasons for the growth of the slave trade to the coast of east Africa and the nearby Indian Ocean islands in the nineteenth century have been firmly established in the region's extensive historical literature. The creation of a massive plantation complex which produced agricultural commodities (cloves, coconuts, grain, copra, oil, and sugar) for both domestic and global consumption fueled a massive increase in the demand for servile labor in the region.¹⁰ But the reasons for the rise in demand for slave labor in Arabia have remained more elusive. The murkiness persists in part because the main resource we would expect for such information – Great Britain, which made abolition of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean a centerpiece of its imperial policy and nominally controlled most of eastern Arabia – did not aggressively seek to answer the question. As Abdul Sheriff poignantly argued, British imperial agents and their early historians regarded Arabia as “a convenient bottomless pit that allegedly consumed any number of slaves that their lively imagination cared to conjure up.”¹¹ Arabs were assumed to demand slaves simply because they were averse to hard work and part of a religion and culture condoned slavery, not for any economic reason.

Gulf,” in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 106.

¹⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977); Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987); Gwyn Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750-1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa c. 1884-1914* (Oxford: James Currey/Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota/Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Thomas Vernet, “Les Cités-États Swahili de l’Archipel de Lamu, 1585-1810. Dynamiques Endogènes, Dynamiques Exogènes,” (Université Paris I, 2005); Hubert Gerbeau, “L’Océan Indien n’est pas l’Atlantique. La traite illegae à Bourbon au XIX^e siècle,” *Outre-Mers. Revue d’Histoire*, vol. 89, no. 336-337 (2002), 79-108; Rakoto Ignace (ed.), *La Route des Esclaves: Système servile et traite dans l’est malgache* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).

¹¹ Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory*, 35.

The confusion about the rise in demand for slave labor in Arabia may also be attributed to historians of “Islamic slavery,” who have insisted that slavery in the Middle East differed fundamentally from Atlantic slavery. These differences allegedly include an overwhelming preference of women over men, a preponderance of ‘elite’ slavery (soldiers, eunuchs, harems, and retainers) over manual labor, and labor limited to the non-productive sector.¹² Thus, while Western historiography largely regards slavery in the Western Hemisphere as the byproduct of European economic expansion,¹³ slavery in the Middle East is regarded as a fundamental element of Islamic civilization or Arab character. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said noted that, “Whereas it is no longer possible to write learned (or even popular) disquisitions on either ‘the Negro mind’ or ‘the Jewish personality,’ it is perfectly possible to engage in such research as ‘the Islamic mind,’ or ‘the Arab character.’”¹⁴ We see something similar in studies of “Islamic

¹² Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989); Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989); Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Bernard Lewis, “Other People’s History,” in Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998). Murray Gordon, for example, claimed that “Household slavery was an indispensable form of labor in Arab society, where the people were ill-disposed to doing menial work.” Arabs, he explained, were “too proud” to work as servants or “too independent in spirit to serve a master” (58).

¹³ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997); Barbara L. Solow (ed.), *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (New York: Cambridge University Press; Reprint edition, 1993); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, reprint edition, 1999); Howard Temperley, “Capitalism, Slavery and Ideology,” *Past and Present* 75. (May 1977), 94-118; Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Eric E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, reprint edition, 1994).

¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 262. See for example: Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York : Scribner, 1983); John Laffin, *The Arab Mind: A Need for Understanding* (London : Cassell, 1975); Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind* (New York: Longman, 1976); Rajmohan Gandhi, *Understanding the Muslim Mind* (Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 2003); Michael Youssef, *America, Oil, & the Islamic Mind: The Real Crisis Is the Gulf Between Our Ways of Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991); AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993).

slavery.” Historians tend not to label slavery in the Atlantic world as inherently “Christian” or “European.”¹⁵

In reality, there was little that was “Islamic” about the slave trade to Arabia. The rise of demand for slave labor in the Gulf had much in common to the rise in demand on the east coast of Africa. Most of the Middle East, including the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, was drawn into the expanding global economy in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Incorporation generated economic growth in some sectors and wealth in some circles, just as it increased regional dependence on global markets and subjected the Gulf to the whims of international consumer tastes, and supply and demand. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Gulf experienced a boom in date exports, fueled in part by increased demand from India and new international markets in North America and Europe. Likewise, the pearl diving industry expanded dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century, as pearl fashion experienced a revival in Europe. Pearl exports skyrocketed in the first decades of the twentieth century as pearl fashion spread beyond royal and aristocratic classes in Europe and North America. Growing demand for labor in the date-farming and pearl-diving sectors of the Gulf economy kept the trade in enslaved men and women profitable into the twentieth

¹⁵ The connections between the slave trade in the Indian Ocean with that of the Atlantic are best made in: Ralph A. Austen, “From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean: European Abolition, the African Slave Trade, and Asia Economic Structures,” in David Eltis and James Walvin (eds.), *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 117-140.

¹⁶ James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35-46; 73-87; Immanuel Wallerstein (et al), “The Incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the World Economy,” in Huri Islamoglu-Inan, *The Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 88-97; Donald Quataert, “Ottoman Manufacturing in the Nineteenth Century,” in Donald Quataert (ed.), *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1950* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 87-121; Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 180-188; José Morilla Critz, Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, “‘Horn of Plenty’: The Globalization of Mediterranean Horticulture and the Economic Development of Southern Europe, 1880-1930,” *Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 2 (June 1999): 316-352.

century and drove many traders to participate in the slave trade from parts of Africa, Baluchistan, Persia, India, and some regions of Arabia, but the greatest trade was from east Africa.

Although it is true that Great Britain engaged in a spirited campaign against the east African slave trade in the Indian Ocean, the operation was short-lived and largely ineffective. The celebrated antislavery crusade was fraught with problems and produced, at best, an ambiguous freedom for the Africans who were captured on the high seas and “liberated” at various ports around the Western Indian Ocean. For most of its history, the Royal Navy’s anti-slave trade campaign was conducted by patrols which were sparse, ill-equipped, and inefficient. Strategies for suppressing the slave trade in the Atlantic Ocean largely failed in the Indian Ocean, where the conditions differed greatly. When the campaign belatedly adopted more effective strategies in the 1870s, the problem of what to do with African captives became acute and never found satisfactory resolution. The resulting system led to the tragic deaths of a large portion of those who were “liberated,” and those who survived were placed in conditions ironically similar to those who were enslaved. The Western Indian Ocean slave trade persisted in a modified form into the twentieth century despite the Royal Navy’s efforts and died out only much later and for reasons largely unconnected to British patrols.¹⁷ The lives of those Africans who were captured in the Indian Ocean as a result of British patrols in many ways mirrored the lives of those who were enslaved. In matters of health, livelihood, family, and general treatment, “liberated” Africans experienced conditions similar to, and often more oppressive

¹⁷ Matthew S. Hopper, “The African Presence in Arabia: Slavery, the World Economy, and the African Diaspora in Eastern Arabia, 1840-1940,” Ph.D. dissertation (UCLA, 2006), 32-100; “The Nineteenth-Century Slave Trade from East Africa to Arabia Reconsidered,” paper presented to *50th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association*, New York, NY (October 18, 2007).

than, conditions experienced by Africans who had been enslaved in the same regions and period.¹⁸ For a large number of the Africans who were caught up in the vicious conditions of slavery in the Western Indian Ocean, their experiences were dictated economics – specifically, the rise of Gulf’s two key industries: dates and pearls.

The Date Industry

Dates were the first Gulf commodity to be drawn into expanding global markets in a serious way in the nineteenth century. The Gulf, like the rest of the Middle East and much of the rest of the world, increasingly shifted to agricultural production aimed at export in exchange for cash in the nineteenth century. Arabian dates may not present the most obvious example of the wider cash crop trend, as most of the produce was consumed locally or exported to India as opposed to Europe, but the dense date gardens scattered between Muscat and Basra, were part of the same process affecting silk and tobacco in Anatolia, grain in Iraq, olives in Tunisia, oranges in Palestine, and cotton in Egypt and Sudan.¹⁹

In the Gulf, as in many parts of the Middle East, the expanding global economy absorbed and augmented a trade that already existed on a regional level. In the largest date producing areas of the Gulf—Basra, Al-Hasa (the east coast of today’s Saudi Arabia), and

¹⁸ This point is developed in detail in: Matthew S. Hopper, “Ambiguous Freedom: Paradoxes of Liberation and Antislavery in the Western Indian Ocean,” paper presented to *Liberated Africans as Human Legacy of Abolition: An International Workshop to Mark the Bicentennial of British and American Abolitions of the Slave Trade*, University of California, Berkeley (May 1, 2008).

¹⁹ Roger Owen, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820-1914: A Study in Trade and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) and *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993); Charles Issawi, “Middle East Economic Development, 1815-1914: the General and the Specific,” in Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury & Mary C. Wilson (eds.), *The Modern Middle East* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993); Victoria Bernal, “Cotton and Colonial Order in Sudan: A Social History, with Emphasis on the Gezira Scheme,” in Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts (eds.), *Cotton, Colonialism, and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 96-118.

Oman—date exports provided the basis for extensive regional trade and allowed for the importation of such staples as rice from India. In the eighteenth century, tons of locally produced dates from the Ottoman *sanjaq* of Basra, a sub-division of the Baghdad *vilayet*, were annually exported each September by ships from Muscat which brought home coffee from Yemen and other goods in exchange. Basra dates found their largest outlet in India, which annually exported an estimated 30 *lakhs*' of rupees (one *lakh* = 100,000) worth of cotton piece-goods, rice, indigo, sugar and metals to Basra in exchange.²⁰

By one estimate there were some ninety million date palms growing around the world at the start of the twentieth century. More than half of these trees were grown in the countries touching the Arabian Gulf, with an estimated thirty million grown in Iraq alone. Oman's share of the world's date palms was relatively small, estimated around four million trees, with most of these palms grown on the Batinah Coast.²¹ Yet it was Oman which contributed the most to the development of global markets for dates in the nineteenth century, essentially creating the lucrative American date market. American ships carrying cotton cloth from Massachusetts mills visited Zanzibar annually beginning in the first years of the nineteenth century, and within a few decades came to dominate international trade to that island.²²

Following the seasonal monsoon winds of the Western Indian Oceans, American ships made a

²⁰ J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 36-37. For a regional perspective see: Edward Alpers, "The Western Indian Ocean as a Regional Food Network in the Nineteenth Century," ICIOS. II: International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies, Perth, Western Australia, *Proceedings Section A: Resources, Environment and Economic Development*, (December 5-12, 1984).

²¹ Paul Popenoe, "The Distribution of the Date Palm," *The Geographical Review* 16, no. 1 (1926), 117-121.

²² Erik Gilbert, *Dhows & the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860-1970* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 33-36; Norman Robert Bennett, *New England Merchants in Africa: A History Through Documents, 1802 to 1865* (Boston, MA: Boston University Press, 1965); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987); Jeremy Prestholdt, "On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism," *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004).

habit of visiting Muscat to exchange cotton cloth, piece goods, and specie for local produce, particularly dates, which served the dual purpose of providing ballast and items of trade.²³ Oman was home to particularly hardy varieties of dates, which could survive lengthy sea voyages, and which ripened earlier than most dates on account of Oman's southern latitude and intense summer heat. Dates of the *fardh* variety would ripen in August, which would allow American ships enough time to load dates at Muscat, trade at Zanzibar, catch the monsoon winds and make the hundred-day journey home in time for the winter holidays. As American ships conventionally returned from voyages to the Indian Ocean in the autumn, the arrival of Arabian dates in New York before Thanksgiving became an American tradition.²⁴ C. P. Rigby lamented to Captain W. M. Coghlan in 1860 that American merchants were "acquiring a monopoly of the carrying trade of coffee and grains from Aden, of dates, hides, etc. from Muscat, and of wool and hides from Mekran."²⁵ By 1871, the pressed *fardh* dates preferred by Americans merchants were selling at \$30 a bag, and 15,000 bags were being exported annually.²⁶

Although the *fardh* variety was not highly regarded in Arabia, Americans loved the sweet, sticky variety, and grocers stocked and sold millions of pounds of the fruit annually as a holiday confection. Grocers would use an ice pick to chisel off portions of blocks of sticky dates and sell them by the pound. The first American export company in Muscat, W. J. Towell

²³ Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 109-13, 136-37.

²⁴ Calvin Allen, "Sayyids, Shets and Sultāns: Politics and Trade in Masqat Under the Al Bū Sa'īd, 1785-1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1978), 140-156.

²⁵ C. P. Rigby to W.M. Coghlan (October 15, 1860), ZNA AA 3/19. C. P. Rigby to Anderson (June 1, 1860), ZNA AA 3/19.

²⁶ *Administration Report of the Political Agency Muscat for the year 1871-72*, IOR R/15/6/5.

Company, was established in 1866 specifically for shipping Omani *fardh* dates.²⁷ With the arrival of steam ships in the mid-nineteenth century, and the opening of the Suez canal in 1869, the voyage from the Gulf to New York was cut to sixty days, and merchants began to add varieties of dates from Basra to their annual imports of *fardh* dates from Muscat. By 1885 Americans imported more than 10 million pounds of dates annually, valued at \$382,267.²⁸ A British observer in Oman noted that it was “from the labors of the date cultivator that the country derives most of such wealth as it has.”²⁹

American date imports grew from an average of 10 to 20 million pounds annually between 1893 and 1903 to an average of 20 to 30 million pounds between 1903 and 1913. Date imports soared from 32 million pounds in 1920 to 53 million pounds in 1922, and peaked at nearly 79 million pounds in 1925.³⁰ Basra date exports roughly doubled with the opening of the Suez Canal, jumping from £67,000 in 1868 to £126,000 in 1869.³¹ Although Omani dates had whetted America’s appetite for dates, its appetite was increasingly satisfied by Iraqi produce. By 1911, *fardh* dates accounted for only 3.9 million pounds out of the 29.5 million pounds (or roughly 13%) of dates imported to the United States.³² By 1929, 83% of the dates imported into the United States came from Iraq.³³

²⁷ Calvin H. Allen, “Sayyids, Shets and Sultans: Politics and Trade in Musqat Under the Al Bu Sa’id, 1785-1914” (Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Washington, 1978), 140-153.

²⁸ Oscar Willoughby Riggs, “The Fruit-Ships at New York,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* XXI, no. 5 (May 1886), 599.

²⁹ Bertram Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931), 142.

³⁰ *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1894-1935.

³¹ Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy*, 182.

³² Paul Popenoe, *Date Growing in the Old World and the New*, 233; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1912 (Washington, DC: G.P.O., 1913).

³³ United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1930 (Washington, DC: G.P.O., 1930), 958.

With the advent of faster steam ships and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, later ripening varieties of Basra, marketed as “golden dates,” had come to dominate the American market.³⁴ Beginning in 1899, shipping companies competed in an annual “date race” from Basra to New York in order to land the first shipment of “golden dates” for the holiday season. Once dates were harvested and packed in Basra, competing ships—usually German and British steamers—were quickly loaded and sent the 9,981 miles to New York, stopping over in Muscat to pick up a selection of *fardh* dates. Readers could follow the progress of the ships through wire reports in local papers, and the arrival of the first ship was heralded with some fanfare. The winner of the race received recognition, a monetary prize and a bonus for the importing company, as the first shipments of dates sold at higher prices than subsequent shipments. In 1912, the winning ship earned \$120,000 for the consignees of the dates.³⁵ The bonus by the 1930s averaged about \$1.75 per ton.³⁶

The dramatic growth of the date industry in the Gulf sharply influenced labor demands. The primary area of nineteenth-century date expansion in Oman, Batinah – the 150-mile stretch of coast on the Gulf of Oman north of Muscat beginning around Seeb and continuing north of Sohar – became home to one of the largest populations enslaved Africans. As the densest area of vegetation in eastern Arabia, Batinah had a bigger population and more agricultural production than any other part of the Arabian Gulf in the nineteenth century. But Batinah differed from the other date-producing areas in the region in that it required intense human effort to irrigate the palms. Most date production in Oman uses the *falaj* system of

³⁴ David G. Fairchild, “Persian Gulf Dates and their Introduction into America,” *USDA Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin No. 54* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1903), 24.

³⁵ “Turkistan Wins Date Race” *New York Times* (Nov. 10, 1912), 6.

³⁶ “Nostalgic Note” *Time* (Dec. 8, 1941).

irrigation: human-constructed, cement, gravity-flow channels conveying water from natural springs in the Hajar Mountains in the Oman Ophiolite.³⁷ Although it has some of the richest soil in Oman, Batinah receives no consistent flow of water from the inland mountains and relies entirely on ground water for irrigation through the use of wells.³⁸ Batinah farmers employed the *zijrah (zaygra)*, the elevated well system used throughout the Arabian Peninsula and in Mesopotamia, consisting of a massive wooden framework, usually constructed of palm trunks, and a crossbar holding a rotating pulley wheel called a *manjūr*, connected by rope to a bull (or in rare cases a mule) to lift water from 20 feet below the surface using leather bags which poured into cement-(*sarūj*)-coated holding tanks which further drained into irrigation channels, *aflāj*, to water several acres of date palms. The labor-intensive process used a male laborer, a *bidār*, to work in shifts around the clock in order to water approximately every 100 trees. The work of irrigation frequently fell on the shoulders of enslaved Africans.

An American date expert visiting Batinah in 1927 estimated that there must have been at least 15,000 wells of this kind operating in Batinah alone.³⁹ Bertram Thomas, who worked as *Wazīr* (Minister) of Finance under Sultan Taimur bin Faisal in Oman between 1925 and 1930 and had the opportunity to visit Batinah on a number of occasions, estimated that there were

³⁷ J. C. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia: A Study of the Aflaj of Oman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 28-32, 36-47.

³⁸ Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement*, 47-51; Charles C. Graf, "The Batinah Hydrologic Area," in Sultanate of Oman, Public Authority for Water Resources, *The Hydrology of the Sultanate of Oman: A Preliminary Assessment*, PAWR 83-1 (Muscat, Sultanate of Oman: Public Authority for Water Resources, 1983), 28-43; Robert Dale, "The Water Resources of Oman" (Report for TetraTech International, c. 1980), James H. Critchfield Papers, private collection, Williamsburg, VA.

³⁹ "Report of Mr. Dawson, American Manager of the Iraq Date Company Following a Visit to the Batina in 1927," IOR R/15/1/460. For an excellent discussion of social and cultural aspects of the *zijrah (zaygra)* and *manjur* in Oman see Mandana E. Limbert, "The Senses of Water in an Omani Town," *Social Text* 68, vol. 19, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 35-55.

“tens of thousands of oxen daily” working these water wheels in 1929.⁴⁰ “The cacophony from many wells operating at one time is really not unmusical,” he wrote. “The effect is that of a weird assortment of stringed instruments, the cellos seeming always to delight in drowning the violas and fiddles, and the ensemble is a sort of tuning up of an orchestra.” Thomas added, ‘Oil the wretched thing,’ says a European impatient of its creaking and whining, but the owner has another view, for every well has a different note and he, from the far end of his garden, may thus know whether all goes well with his own.”⁴¹ V.H.W. Dowson, of the Agricultural Directorate of Mesopotamia, part of the British mandate government in Iraq, echoed Thomas: “Throughout the Batinah, is heard the plaintive shrieking of the pullies. To a suggestion that the axils might be oiled, the reply comes that the noisy wheel was better, *Ahzain*.”⁴² Bertram Thomas added that runaway slaves were often punished with long hours in chains working in irrigation: “The metallic chink of ankle-chains, heard, perhaps, from the bull-pit of a well within the date grove, is an indication of some such ill-fated escapade.”⁴³

In addition to irrigation, Batinah date plantations required constant maintenance. The trees have to be pollinated by hand, offshoots (suckers) have to be removed, dead branches cut off, extra date bunches removed, stocks kept clean, and—when the fruit is ripe—there is the enormous task of harvesting. In addition, in the shade of the date palms, farmers grew lucerne and other animal feed in addition to vegetables for domestic consumption. Large parties of

⁴⁰ “The word of Sultan Sa’id bin Taimur, Sultan of Muscat and Oman, about the history of the financial position of the Sultanate in the past and the hopes for the future, after the export of oil, January 1968,” reprinted in Whitehead Consulting Group, *Sultanate of Oman Economic Survey, 1972* (Harold Whitehead & Partners, Ltd., 1972), Appendix II.

⁴¹ Bertram Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* (1931), 125-126; 142.

⁴² “Report of Mr. Dawson, American Manager of the Iraq Date Company Following a Visit to the Batina in 1927,” IOR R/15/1/460.

⁴³ Bertram Thomas, *Alarms and Excursions* (1931), 238.

workers were required to boil the *Maseybili* and *Khameyzi* varieties, common in Batinah, in large copper cauldrons and dry them in the sun turning them frequently prior to shipping these popular varieties to India.⁴⁴ Dates also have to be packed or pressed and conveyed overland or by sea to ports of export. Palm frond bags had to be woven to hold the dates, and once the dates were ready to export, they had to be loaded onto boats, conveyed to their destination and unloaded. Much of this work was performed by enslaved Africans.

With the extra labor required for date production, it was no surprise to British officials in Oman that Batinah was the primary destination of slaves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and home to the largest population of Africans and their descendents.⁴⁵ In 1885 S. B. Miles noted that, in contrast to the interior behind Sur, where demand for slaves was limited, in Batinah slaves were “in high request,” and consequently most slaves were eventually landed there.⁴⁶ The HMS *Philomel* captured a dhow with 154 slaves (128 male and 20 female), mostly Wazaramo, in the Gulf of Oman en route to Al Khadra (near Suwaiq) on the Batinah Coast, the largest importing center for enslaved Africans.⁴⁷ In 1930, the British Consul at Muscat remarked that “apart from the Batinah Coast, the method of irrigation does not demand slave labour.”⁴⁸ Batinah continued to be described by Western observers as the center of the slave trade as late as 1930.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Administration Report of the Political Agency, Muscat, for the year 1876-77, 79-82*, CDR ND1/H.

⁴⁵ Secretary to Government of Bombay to Political Resident, Persian Gulf (Oct. 31, 1889), IOR R/15/1/200; “few [slaves] seem to be sent inland to the Sharkeyyeh and Jaalan, as owing to the system of irrigation in those parts, there is not the same demand for labor on the date plantations as there is in the Batinah, where the date trees have to be watered from wells,” Maj. Saddler, “Report on visit to Sur” [April 1895, no. 5-11] quoted in J.A. Saldanha, *Précis of Maskat Affairs, 1892-1905*. Part I. p. 53. IOR, L/PS/20/C245.

⁴⁶ S. B. Miles to E. C. Ross (Dec. 7, 1885), IOR L/PS/20/C246.

⁴⁷ S. B. Miles to E. C. Ross (Oct. 31, 1884), IOR L/PS/20/C246.

⁴⁸ Political Agent, Muscat, to Political Resident, Persian Gulf (Jan. 21, 1930), IOR R/15/1/230.

⁴⁹ PRPG to Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, New Delhi (Mar. 18, 1930), IOR R/15/1/230.

From the second half of the nineteenth century until the early 1920s, Batinah absorbed the vast majority of enslaved Africans sent to eastern Arabia.⁵⁰ Because of its high demand for agricultural labor, Batinah effectively became a “seasoning” ground for newly imported slaves. Historians of Atlantic slavery have examined the process of socialization or “seasoning” which often followed the enslavement of new captives. The newly enslaved had to learn the language of the masters, be made to accept their new positions, and submit to the will of the masters in order to be valuable as a slave.⁵¹ For the enslaved from East Africa in Arabia, this symbolic transformation very often took place in Batinah. The testimonies of enslaved Africans who received manumission certificates at British consulates and agencies in the Gulf between 1907 and 1940 almost universally describe a period of at least three years in Batinah prior to being sold to final destinations elsewhere in the Gulf. For young African boys, who made up a considerable percentage of those imported in the late nineteenth century, the time passed between arrival in Batinah and eventual sale was often equal to the time required to mature to the age of a beginning pearl diver (early teens). Ismail and his companions aboard the HMS *Hastings* had experienced at least a few years in Batinah before being sent for pearl diving.

The Pearl Industry

Like its dates, the Gulf’s pearl industry was incorporated into the growing global economy in the late nineteenth century. Arabia was only of many regions that experienced a boom in export production of pearls between in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and

⁵⁰ G. P. Murphy, P.A. Muscat, to PRPG (n.d., No. 69 of 1929), IOR R/15/1/225.

⁵¹ Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (London: Athlone, 1991); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 114-115.

the first quarter of the twentieth, but it was the world's largest pearl producing region. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Gulf produced more pearls than all other regions combined. The rapid growth of the Gulf's pearl production accompanied the global boom in consumption of gems and precious stones beginning in the 1870s and the rise of a class of consumers who were able and willing to pay for gems and interested in incorporating them into their attire. Particularly in Europe and North America, diamonds, pearls and other precious stones entered mainstream high fashion in the final decades of the nineteenth century and accompanied the rise of the modern fashion industry. The pearl industry expanded in tandem with the diamond industry, but pearls came to surpass diamonds as the gem of choice for fashionable women.⁵² As global demand for pearls increased in the late nineteenth century, prices rose and production expanded from Venezuela and Mexico to Australia, Ceylon, and the Philippines. In the Gulf, the value of pearl exports rose steadily throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1873 and 1906, the value of pearl exports from Bahrain increased more than 800 percent. The rise in production attracted additional labor, and made the importation of slave labor, originally from East Africa and later from Baluchistan and Persian Mekran, profitable.

In the late nineteenth century, slave traders increasingly targeted young boys in East Africa for work in the pearl industry. By the 1870s, the ratio of male to female slaves among captured slave dhows on the Arabian coast reversed previous trends, shifting overwhelmingly in favor of young males. In 1872 the HMS *Vulture* captured a large slave dhow off the coast of Ras Al-Hadd at the entrance to the Gulf of Oman. The dhow was carrying 169 slaves from

⁵² Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 80; Rosenthal, *The Pearl Hunter*, 66.

Pemba to Sur and Batinah. Of the slaves found aboard, 124 were males and 45 were females. The majority were children.⁵³ The HMS *Philomel* captured a 63-ton dhow near Ras al-Hadd on October 13, 1884, which was found to have 128 male and 26 female slaves aboard (77 men, 14 women, 51 boys, and 12 girls). The dhow was bound for Batinah from Dar es Salaam, having collected the slaves by canoe between Ras Ndege and Kunduchi.⁵⁴ In November 1885 the HMS *Osprey* captured a 42-ton dhow around Ras Madraka in Oman bound from Ngao in East Africa to Sur with 49 male and 24 female slaves (8 men, 12 women, 41 boys, and 12 girls).⁵⁵ In fact, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to find evidence of any dhow captured off the Arab coast which was carrying more female slaves from East Africa than male slaves.

Except for its massive scale, the annual diving season in the nineteenth century looked much like it had in previous centuries. Each diving boat consisted of an all-male crew, including one *nākhuda* (captain, plural *nawākhida*), and an equal number of *ghawāwīs* (divers, singular *ghawwās*) and *siyūb* (haulers, singular *saīb*), in addition to an assortment of *radhafa* (assistants or extra hands, singular *radhīf*) and *awlād* (boys or apprentices, sing.: *walīd*).⁵⁶ The captain's responsibilities included gathering the crew and paying them off at the end of each season, selecting the pearl banks to be fished, renting the boat if he did not own it, preparing the necessary provisions for the boat, maintaining order aboard, and selling the pearls for the best price possible at the end of the season. Diving began each morning and continued until sunset

⁵³ Senior Naval Officer in Persian Gulf (and Commander HMS *Vulture*) to Rear Admiral Arthur Cumming, Commander in Chief, East Indies (Sept. 10, 1872), PRO ADM 1/6230; Lt. C. M. Gilbert Cooper, "Capture of a Slave Dhow: Or the Vulture and Its Prey," (n.d.), Lt. C. M. Gilbert-Cooper Papers, NMM BGY/G/5.

⁵⁴ Commander HMS *Philomel* to Commander in Chief, East Indies (Oct. 15, 1884), PRO ADM 1/6714.

⁵⁵ Herbert W. Dowding, Commander HMS *Osprey*, to Rear Admiral Frederick W. Richards, Commander in Chief, East Indies (Sept. 19, 1885), PRO ADM 1/6758.

⁵⁶ J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia, Vol. I Historical, Part 2* (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1915), 2227.

with only an hour break in the afternoon. Each diver wore only a loin cloth and was equipped with only a pair of horn pincers—a clip similar in shape to a clothespin, made of bone, shell or horn that was worn on the nose to prevent water from entering, leather fingertips, and a knife. The pearling enterprise depended in large part on the relationship between the diver and puller, who worked together in pairs. Divers descended to the sea floor with the aid of a heavy stone weight, of which several sizes were kept onboard. The stone weight was attached to a rope and fitted with a loop to the diver's foot. With the aid of the hauler, the diver would slip his foot into the loop, inhale, and descend rapidly to the sea floor.⁵⁷

Typical dives would take a diver to depths of between 50 and 80 feet and would last between one and two minutes. When a diver reached the sea floor he kept his foot in the weight's loop, reached and maneuvered himself as best he could to collect as many oysters as possible—rarely more than a few from each dive—using the knife to pry the shells from the rocky surface below. For as long as he could hold his breath, the diver put oysters he collected into a net basket tied to his waist with a second rope, which extended up to the boat and was closely monitored by the careful hands of the hauler above him. Before ascending, the diver released the weight, which the hauler pulled back onto the ship, and signaled to the hauler he was ready to resurface by tugging the second rope fastened around his waist. The hauler pulled the diver back to the surface as quickly as possible before his air expired. Divers would rest for only a few minutes before repeating the process.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Allan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad: An Account of Sailing with the Arabs in their Dhows in the Red Sea, around the Coasts of Arabia, and to Zanzibar and Tanganyika: Pearling in the Persian Gulf: and the Life of the Shipmasters, the Mariners and Merchants of Kuwait* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 393-96.

⁵⁸ E.L. Durand, *Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muscat Political Agent for the year 1877-78*, 32. PRO FO 78/5108; J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Vol. I. (1907), and Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

Diving crews heaped the oyster shells into a pile in the center of the boat and made no attempt to determine which divers collected which oysters. The shells were allowed to sit through the heat of the day and then overnight. Each morning the crews would sit around the pile of shells and, under the supervision of the *nākhudha*, pry open the oysters and search the smelly flesh inside for pearls. Only a small minority of oysters contained any type of pearl (one in five by one estimate), and most of those found were of the smallest variety, but as members of the crew found pearls, they passed them to the *nākhudha*, who placed them in a cloth bag for safe keeping until the catch could be sold. The process continued in this way for 130 days until the end of the season.⁵⁹

As was the case in the date industry, free men and slaves worked side by side in the pearl industry. While free divers kept the proceeds from each pearl season, enslaved divers surrendered all of their earnings to their masters. But not even free divers were completely free in the Gulf diving industry. Pearling captains and wealthy merchant boat owners controlled free divers via a credit system designed to ensure their loyal service year after year. Diving crews were consistently lent amounts in excess of their earnings in order to keep them indebted. In addition, they were paid in rice and other staples from a sort of “company store” which maximized the merchant’s profits. Since debts were recorded in debt diaries which illiterate could not read, captains and boat owners found ample opportunity for abuse and exploitation. As early as 1863 Sheikh Muhammad bin Thānī of Bida’ (Doha) in Qatar remarked to William Palgrave, “We are all from the highest to the lowest slaves of one master, Pearl,”

⁵⁹ Belgrave, *Personal Column*, 43;

lamenting both the indebtedness of the Gulf's divers and the growing dependence of elites on the whims of global markets.⁶⁰

Enslaved Africans and free men of African ancestry accounted for a large number of those engaged in pearl diving in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a fact which is shown in sources ranging from Western travel accounts, early twentieth century photographs, British residency records, and early twentieth-century manumission records. Captain E.L. Durand filing a report in 1878 noted that while most haulers in the Gulf were bedouin or Persians, the divers were generally "sedees" and sometimes "sedee domestic slaves."⁶¹ J. G. Lorimer, in his comprehensive gazetteer of the Gulf in 1907, stated that the divers were "mostly poor Arabs and free Negroes or Negro slaves; but Persians and Baluchis are also to be found among them, and in recent years, owing to the large profits made by divers, many respectable Arabs have joined their ranks."⁶² Paul W. Harrison, who spent twelve years in the Gulf with the American Mission in the early twentieth century, recalled in 1924 that many divers on the Trucial Coast were slaves, but "they do not number over one-half the divers." "Most of these slaves are Negroes from Africa," he explained. "A few are Baluchees from the Makran coast between India and Persia."⁶³ Charles Belgrave, who spent the better part of three decades in Bahrain and the Gulf beginning in 1925, recalled that while most divers

⁶⁰ William Gifford Palgrave, *Personal Journey of A Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia, 1862-63* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1883), 387.

⁶¹ E.L. Durand, *Administration Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muscat Political Agent for the year 1877-78*, 32, PRO FO 78/5108. The term *sidi* (also rendered variously as "seedee" and "seedie" was a term originating in northern India to describe people of African descent, many of whom were employed in maritime trade. In the wider Indian Ocean context, British officials applied the term to descendents of East Africans, enslaved and free, outside of East Africa. See: Janet J. Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (Feb. 2000), 83.

⁶² J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Vol. I. (1907), 2228.

⁶³ Paul W. Harrison, *The Arab at Home* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1924), 88.

abstained from eating much during the dive season and were relatively gaunt, “the pullers were stalwart specimens; many of them were negroes with tremendous chest and arm development.”⁶⁴ In 1929 the Senior Naval Officer in the Gulf estimated that there were 20,000 slave divers (roughly a quarter of the total) diving in the Gulf in each season.⁶⁵ Bertram Thomas, in his report on slavery in Batinah in 1929, reported that a significant number of the divers who migrated north each season from Oman were enslaved. He estimated that a fifth of the “army” of thousands divers that Batinah sent to the diving banks each year were enslaved.⁶⁶

Enslaved Africans in the Gulf

The growth in the Gulf’s pearl and date industries created a demand for the labor of enslaved Africans, and the growth of the African population in the region was noted by numerous contemporary observers. As early as 1876, the resident government surgeon in Muscat estimated that a quarter of Muscat and Mutrah’s 40,000 residents were “Negroes” and half of the remaining population was of “mixed race” consisting of “different degrees of admixture between the Arab and the Negro, and the Arab and the Abyssinian.”⁶⁷ In 1905, J. G. Lorimer estimated that Africans accounted for 11% of Kuwait’s population, 22% of Qatar’s population, 11% of Bahrain’s population, 28% of the Trucial Coast’s population, and 25% of Muscat and Mutrah’s population. By his estimates, Africans made up roughly 17% of the total

⁶⁴ Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, 44.

⁶⁵ Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf Division, HMS *Triad*, to Commander in Chief, East Indies Station (Sept. 12, 1929), No. 27G/56/1, IOR L/PS/12/4091.

⁶⁶ “Notes on the Slave Trade by Wazir Thomas, August 1929,” P. 7418/29, IOR L/PS/12/4091.

⁶⁷ A.S.G. Jayakar, “Medical Topography of Muscat,” *Administrative Report of the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Muscat Political Agency for the Year 1876-77*, CDR ND 1/H.

population of coastal eastern Arabia under British protection between Hormuz and Kuwait. (By contrast, African Americans made up 10-12% of the U.S. population according to the censuses of 1900 and 1910).⁶⁸

By 1919, British officials estimated a further growth in the Gulf's African population with most of this rise on the island of Bahrain, where the increase in African population was close to 130%, mirroring the general trend in the island's population growth, a more than doubling. The greatest concentrations of Africans were in the densely populated island of Muharraq, the heart of the pearling industry. In Muharraq alone, there was estimated to be a fixed African population of 2,500 (13%) of the total population. Bahrain's commercial and political capital, Manama, was home to another 2,000 Africans, roughly 8% of the city's inhabitants. Qatar's African population increased by about 8%, and British reports noted that most of the men of African ancestry there were involved in the pearling industry with most Africans concentrated in the coastal towns of Bida' (Doha) and Al-Warkah.⁶⁹ British authorities attributed much of the growth of the African presence on the coast between 1905 and 1919 to new imports from east Africa, kidnapping of men and women of African ancestry in the Hijaz and Yemen, and later, the numerous kidnappings associated with the Ikhwān and the Saudi wars of expansion from Najd. They also noted that, with growing sources of wealth on the coast from the pearl industry, slave

⁶⁸ J. G. Lorimer, *Gazeteer of the Persian Gulf* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1915). Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990," *U.S. Census Bureau Population Division Working Paper Series No. 56* (Sept. 2002). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html> (accessed Oct. 8, 2008).

⁶⁹ *A Handbook of Arabia, Vol. I, General, Compiled by the Geographical Section of the Naval Intelligence Division, Naval Staff, Admiralty* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1919), 286-296.

owners in the interior found it increasingly profitable to send their agricultural and domestic slaves to the coast to dive for pearls.⁷⁰

The Collapse of the Date Industry

The Gulf's two leading industries collapsed in tandem around 1929, both victims of competition from more developed countries which used industrial technology to mimic and exceed the Gulf's production. The Gulf's key market in North America dwindled as soon as the United States developed a date industry of its own in California largely as a result of direct state intervention through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1890 the USDA imported 68 young palms, mostly seedlings, and distributed them among experimental stations in Yuma, Arizona, Las Cruces, New Mexico, and four stations in California. In 1902, a USDA plant explorer brought offshoots of varieties from Iraq, Baluchistan, and Muscat, and another explorer obtained further selections from Algeria and Tunisia in 1905.⁷¹

In 1902, David Fairchild, an agricultural explorer for the USDA Bureau of Plant Industry, visited the Gulf in order to acquire the best offshoots possible for propagation in California. He visited Muscat in February 1902 aboard a steamer full of Shiah pilgrims who were on their way to Karbala. In Muscat he arranged for the American consul to secure offshoots of *fardh* dates from the Semail Valley and send them to Bombay, where Fairchild would pick them up and ship

⁷⁰ "Slave Trade in the Persian Gulf," (1928), 135-136, PRO CAB/16/94.

⁷¹ Roy Nixon, "First Dates Imported 78 Year Ago," in Ole Nordland (ed.), *Coachella Valley's Golden Years: The Early History of the Coachella Valley County Water District and Stories About the Discovery and Development of this Section of the Colorado Desert* (Coachella, CA: Coachella Valley County Water District, 1968), 50-51; Thomas H. Kearney, *Date Varieties and Date Culture in Tunis*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin No. 92 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1906).

them to California.⁷² He then visited Bahrain, where he arranged to have some offshoots of the *khalasa* date from Hufūf in Hasa (now in Saudi Arabia) sent to Bombay as well. At Basra, he collected samples of several date palms including the popular *halawi* variety. He subsequently steamed up the Tigris to Baghdad, collecting samples of dates from the largest date growers around Baghdad. On the way back to Bombay, he acquired samples from Baluchistan, then packed the offshoots he acquired in mud-filled burlap sacks, boxed them, and transported them on a nine-week voyage to Washington. More than three decades later, Fairchild was pleased to report that several of the varieties he brought from the Gulf were being grown in the Coachella Valley in California around Mecca.⁷³

After extensive study, the USDA determined that the best soil and climate for date production in the United States was in the Salton Basin in California. Accordingly, in 1904 the administration, in cooperation with the University of California, opened an experimental date farm near Mecca. The following year, water from the Colorado River, which was being diverted to the Imperial Valley for irrigation, broke through its canal system and produced a rush of water into the Salton Basin, which would flow for two years and form the Salton Sea, now a permanent feature of the California landscape. The accidental flooding created the perfect environment for growing date palms.⁷⁴ When Paul Popenoe of Altadena, who had a stake in a farm at Thermal in the Coachella Valley, visited the Gulf in December 1912 to purchase offshoots of the most desirable varieties of dates from the region, California gained another 9,000 young palm trees. The American consul at Muscat met Popenoe on his arrival with a

⁷² David G. Fairchild, "Persian Gulf Dates and Their Introduction into America," *U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin* 54 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1903).

⁷³ David G. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 226-44.

⁷⁴ Nixon, "First Dates," 50-51.

dozen camels from the Sultan along with a complete caravan prepared for travel including a contingent of the Sultan's bodyguard. Brett and Popenoe traveled 125 miles inland to the Semail Valley, the home of the *fardh* date. Popenoe described the *fardh* growers as "the cleverest Arab cultivators" he had seen. He found that they followed some of the same practices with regard to the propagation of offshoots that American scientists had devised after extensive experimentation. He also found that the Omani growers were highly advanced in their knowledge of fertilization of bearing palms, adding "a donkey load per tree of well-rotted manure and straw twice a year"—far more often than producers elsewhere and in line with the recommendations of American scientists. Popenoe secured 100 offshoots of the *khalāsa* variety from Omani date growers, and subsequently arranged to get 400 more offshoots of the tree from Hasa through an American missionary at Bahrain.⁷⁵

When the trees procured from the Gulf along with several varieties from North Africa reached maturity a decade later, California began to replace the Gulf as America's source of dates. An Australian visitor in 1914 calculated that 200,000 palms had been planted in the Coachella Valley in California.⁷⁶ With an additional injection of cash from the Gillette Company in the 1920s and a flurry of speculation among Southern California land owners, the California date industry took off. For the Gulf, the development of California's date industry meant the collapse of the region's largest export market. The decline in date exports to the United States after 1925 can be attributed in part to the development of domestic production in California of varieties formerly imported from the Gulf, *khadrāwī* and *halāwī* varieties in particular, in

⁷⁵ Paul Popenoe, *Date Growing in the Old World and the New* (Altadena, CA: West India Gardens, 1913), xiv, 64, 92, 256.

⁷⁶ W. M. Carne, "Notes on Date Culture in America with Some Consideration of its Possibilities in New South Wales," *Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales* (Sept. 2, 1914), 805.

addition to North African varieties which, when produced locally at lower costs, proved more popular than Gulf dates, and to the growing production of manufactured treats in the United States, which by the mid-twentieth century had substituted for natural sweets. The collapse of the American market for Gulf dates roughly coincided with the collapse of the global market for Gulf pearls. The result, as will be described in subsequent chapters, was a sharp fall in trade revenues and the impoverishment of the entire region.⁷⁷

The Collapse of the Pearl Industry

As quickly as the California date destroyed the Gulf date industry, the Japanese cultured pearl destroyed the Gulf pearl industry. In 1894, a Japanese noodle-shop owner named Kokichi Mikimoto perfected the ancient Chinese practice of producing cultured pearls by inserting a spherical piece of mother-of-pearl into oyster shells and inducing the oyster to produce a pearl. Mikimoto leased a small island named Tatoku and began producing cultured pearls from oysters grown in cages. He received a ten-year patent on the process in 1896, and set a goal of producing one million pearls by 1902. His first crop of 4,200 semi-round pearls was harvested in 1900 by a group of exclusively female employees, and he set out to market his new product to the world. Mikimoto proved to be a master of publicity. He invited Emperor Meiji's popular cousin, Prince Komatsu to visit his pearl-growing operation in 1900, and when the prince was selected by the emperor to represent the Japanese royal family at the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902, he presented some of Mikimoto's pearls to the royal family, generating headlines in London and Paris. By 1905 he had one million oysters planted in his pearl beds,

⁷⁷ See Matthew S. Hopper, "The African Presence in Arabia" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2006), ch. 4.

but four-fifths of them were destroyed by red tide. Among the saved oysters was an experimental basket in which the first perfectly round cultured pearls were produced, a method which he patented in 1908. His perfect cultured pearls began to enter the global pearl market between 1908 and 1911 when his representative, Rikiya Kobayashi, began marketing the cultured pearls abroad. Mikimoto soon opened a store at London and appointed agents at Paris and New York.⁷⁸

By 1913, Mikimoto had perfected the cultured pearl to the point that it could not be distinguished from natural pearls, and he offered his product at a quarter of the market price. Applying the latest in assembly line techniques, he constantly increased production. He was known to say: "I want to live long enough to see the day when we have so many pearls we can sell necklaces for two dollars to every woman who can afford one and give them away free to every woman who can't."⁷⁹ By the end of the First World War, cultured pearls made inexpensive pearl necklaces available to working class women in Western countries. Pearl consumption rose, but demand for more expensive natural pearls declined. The decline devastated the Gulf in addition to European dealers in natural ("oriental") pearls. The value of pearl production declined steadily from 1919 to 1929, then, with the onset of the Global depression in 1929, the pearl industry collapsed. After 1929, revenues from pearl exports were reduced to levels below even mid nineteenth-century levels, and they never recovered.

Aftermath

⁷⁸ Robert Eunson, *The Pearl King: The Story of the Fabulous Mikimoto* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1965).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the pearl market and in response to pressures from Parliament and the League of Nations,⁸⁰ the British Persian Gulf Administration instituted a series of labor reforms in the pearl industry in the early 1930s. including: the institution of personal account books for each diver in which the diver had to approve of each deduction, a diving court at which divers could take complaints against their *Nukhdas*, orders that at least one diver was to be present at the time of the sale of pearls, prohibition of a *Nukhda* pressing a man's debts onto his sons after his death, the institution of a fixed minimum wage required to be paid to each diver and crewmember, and the creation of permission slips, called *barwahs*, permitting divers to pass freely from one diving center to another without being forced to dive for a *nukhuda* to whom the diver had no legitimate debts. These certificates were particularly helpful to newly manumitted African slaves who were often susceptible to re-enslavement or conditions of virtual slavery after manumission.⁸¹

Although well-intentioned, reforms were unpopular on many levels. The *nukhudas* rejected the reforms as being too pro-diver, and protested to the Administration requesting a return to the old system. The merchants and financiers resented the inconvenience caused by the reforms and their loss of already reduced profits. The divers seem to have initially appreciated the efforts on their behalf, but when, in 1932, an increase in wages could not be guaranteed on account of a worsening pearl market, the island broke out in a riot in Muharraq, which was only quelled by the deployment of armed British troops from India and some local guards. Several people were killed and many others injured. During the disturbances, the

⁸⁰ India Office to Political Resident, Persian Gulf (Oct. 28, 1935), PRO FO 371/18918.

⁸¹ This topic is addressed in more detail in Matthew S. Hopper, "Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939," *Itinerario* 30, no. 3 (2006), 76-94.

Shaikh's brother was humiliated when a passing boatful of angry pearl divers conferred on him the greatest possible insult—they picked up their loincloths and exposed themselves to him in defiance.⁸²

The mass production of cultured pearls in Japan had destroyed the pearl industry of the Gulf. In Bahrain, the annual revenue from pearl exports in 1906 was over 12 million rupees, and the industry employed over 17,000 men and 900 boats. By 1931, pearl revenue was down below 2 million rupees with roughly the same number of men employed and 500 boats. By 1936, however, pearl revenue was down below 700,000 rupees with 9,800 men from the island employed in the industry and 364 boats. Pearl captains and merchants who had formerly benefited from the labor of slave divers now found them burdens. Slaves were turned out in large numbers in areas hardest hit like Bahrain. In 1936, the British Political Agent at Bahrain reported the following story.

An unusual attitude to slavery came to my notice not long ago. An old man in Hidd was talking to the Agency Medical Officer and mentioned that he was a slave. The Medical Officer said that this was quite impossible, so the old man went off and brought – his manumission certificate! The Medical Officer said that this document did not show that he was a slave at all, but on the country that he had been freed by the order of the Government whereupon the old man flew into a towering rage – “You lie! I know that it really says that I am the slave of so and so and it is proof that he must feed me – and no one shall cast doubt upon it!”⁸³

Conclusion

There was little that was “Islamic” about the “Islamic slave trade” from east Africa to Arabia and the Gulf in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Instead, the slave

⁸² Political Agent to Political Resident, Persian Gulf (May 30, 1932), IOR R/15/2/848 [and PRO FO371/16838]. This incident is mentioned in a different context in Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 90-92.

⁸³ Political Agent Bahrain to Political Resident, Persian Gulf (Jan. 16, 1936), IOR, R/15/1/226.

trade was driven – just as it had been in the Atlantic – by global economic forces. As demand for the Gulf’s commodities rose, so did demand for the labor to produce these products. Western countries increased their demand for the commodities produced by slave labor in the Gulf at the very moment they increased their pressure on the region to end the slave trade and slavery. The lives of enslaved divers like Ismail and his companions aboard the HMS *Hastings* help us understand the influence of global economic pressures on the lives of the Africans who were caught up in the vicious process of enslavement in the Western Indian Ocean. For Ismail and the thousands of Africans like him who were kidnapped to provide labor for the industries that boomed with the growth of global markets in the late nineteenth century, globalization was not just an impersonal force, but a lived experience. When the date and pearl industries collapsed because stronger economies could out-produce the Gulf, men like Ismail and his companions, experienced both sides of globalization. When Sheikh Muhammad called the residents of the Gulf “slaves of one master” in 1863, he could never have envisioned the rapid growth and sudden collapse that globalization would bring a few decades later, but his words aptly describe the stranglehold that global markets would come to hold on the Gulf and much of the world. For enslaved Africans like Ismail, the conditions were particularly dire. Having been enslaved to produce products which had lost their demand, they were turned out to fend for themselves. Until the exploitation of oil later in the twentieth century, the Gulf’s enslaved and free populations lived together through a era of extreme poverty, and it is perhaps this common experience – and not religion, race, or culture – that best explains the differences between the legacy of Gulf and Atlantic slavery for today.