

Buying Time

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# Introduction

## *Temporizing across the Indian Ocean*

HE PROMISED TO DO it in two years. In 1869, Juma bin Salim wrote a contract, in his own hand in Arabic, to deliver 10,500 pounds of ivory to Zanzibar in two years. In exchange for a substantial advance, he agreed to bring the ivory to Ladha Damji, a Hindu financier and the leading creditor on that Indian Ocean island. In authoring the contract, Juma used the most formal version of his name—Juma bin Salim bin Mbarak bin Abdullah al-Bakri—and identified his hometown, Nizwa, in distant Oman. More than a decade before, Juma had left Oman and joined the caravan trails in central Africa, where he became known as Juma Merikani. He was famous for importing *merikani*, American-made cotton sheeting, which he exchanged for elephant tusks. Juma identified Ladha with an honorific title, the Arabicized version of his name, and by his position as the agent of “our lord,” the sultan of Zanzibar. The contract spelled out the exact weight of ivory and established that Ladha would pay the taxes on it. This was convenient, since Ladha and his firm collected all the taxes for the sultan.<sup>1</sup>

While Juma’s Arabic contract was very detailed, its formality left many things—not just Juma’s colorful nickname—unwritten. It did not mention money or acknowledge that Ladha had ever lent money to Juma. Those arrangements were kept separate to avoid the Islamic prohibition on interest. The elements of the contract reveal a historical process rooted in Islamic finance and adapted to a burgeoning global commodity trade. Fulfilling the contract’s promise required the cooperation (and coercion) of people from

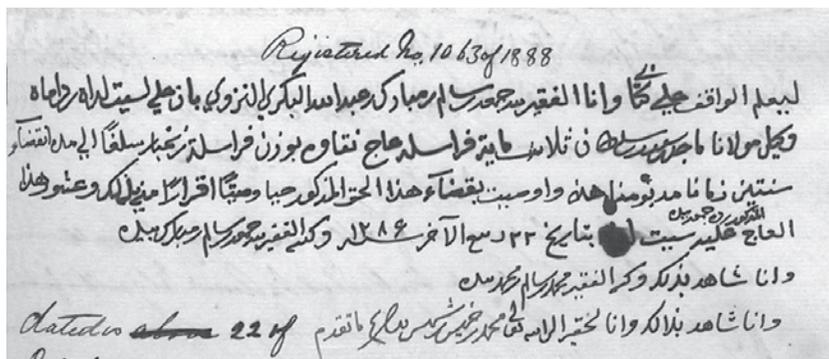
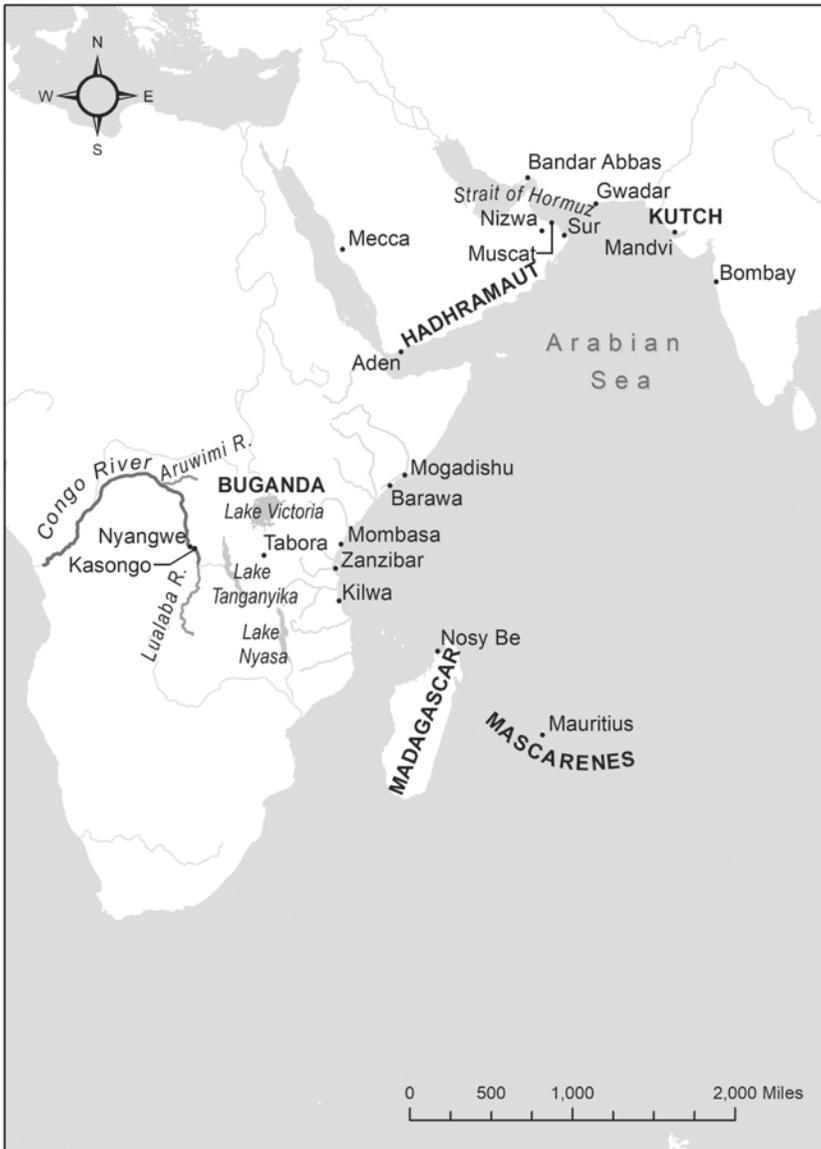


FIGURE 0.1. Juma bin Salim al-Bakri al-Nizwi's 1869 acknowledgment of ivory debt. Registered deed 1063 of 1888, AM 12/20, Zanzibar National Archives.

the Indian Ocean littoral and the residents of its interior hinterlands: Africans, Arabs, and Indians. Juma's contract also spanned a vast geography: his hometown was in the interior of eastern Arabia, and his debt would require him to travel to new ivory outposts near the Congo's tributaries. This contract for African ivory included a set of global exchanges: the capital financing his journey came from Bombay, and the cotton sheeting he exchanged for ivory came from American mills in Massachusetts. When the contract was written, the ivory was still attached to elephants in upland Africa, and at least fifty of them would need to be killed to meet the contract's terms. All this would take time, and time mediated the relationships between the people, geography, and commodities in this contract. As for the intermediaries, complex negotiations, and travel required to repay the debt to Ladha, Juma bin Salim had two years to figure it out.

Juma bin Salim was one of a multitude of migrants in the western Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century, and his life course represents one path among a wide range of trajectories that transformed the region. Juma bin Salim was originally from Nizwa, an ancient city in the interior of Oman, but he made his name as an ivory trader in central Africa, where he would eventually be buried in 1887. At the time of his death, he had been an active trader on Lake Tanganyika and the Congo tributaries for thirty-some years. Juma bin Salim controlled large stores of ivory, managed plantations of rice and maize, had several African wives, and was a vital source of geographic knowledge for the few Europeans who had reached the center of the continent.<sup>2</sup>

What set this world into motion? Why would date farmers and city dwellers from Arabian oases leave their homes for uncertain ventures in East Africa?



MAP 0.1. The western Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century

Part of the explanation is environmental. In the late 1830s, three decades before Juma bin Salim wrote his promissory note, an extreme drought in the interior of Oman led many residents to leave for the Arabian coast and the Indian Ocean world. But economics and politics also contributed. Around

the same time as the drought, the Omani sultan—motivated by trade and strategy—relocated his court and his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar, over two thousand miles away. The sultan’s move was just one part of a larger pattern of migration from Arabia and India to Zanzibar and the African coast in the nineteenth century. Zanzibar was where Juma bin Salim promised to deliver ivory to Ladha Damji, who had himself been born into poverty in Kutch in western India. Ladha Damji became notoriously wealthy in Zanzibar as the head of the island’s most important commercial house, as well as the sultan’s master of the customs revenue. Ladha invested heavily in slaves and ivory by lending money to caravan leaders like Juma bin Salim. His investment portfolio included loans for ivory, plantations, and houses. Juma bin Salim’s contract gave him two years to fulfill its terms. He set to work, crossing from Zanzibar to the mainland, hiring a band of porters, and organizing a caravan to travel hundreds of miles into the African interior. During his travels, Juma bin Salim acquired great stores of ivory, gave loans to European explorers, and eventually chose not to return to Zanzibar to face his creditor.

In the nineteenth century, ivory became East Africa’s most valuable export, and it complemented a rise in plantation culture on the East African coast. Ivory and plantations spurred an economic boom in Zanzibar. Ivory was the plastic of its day, used in manufacturing a wide array of items, and, like copal, cloves, and coconuts, one of many East African commodities with a growing global demand. Juma bin Salim and other caravan leaders of his era tried to meet the increasing demand for tusks by venturing deeper into the African interior to find elephants. In the 1840s, Juma’s colleagues crossed from the eastern part of the continent to the west, two generations before Europeans.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1860s when he drew up his contract with Ladha Damji, Juma bin Salim had been a caravan trader for at least a decade. His early trips revealed the amount of ivory in the eastern Congo, and by the 1860s an “ivory fever” had developed there akin to the California Gold Rush or the scramble for diamonds in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Ivory fever had consequences for peoples and politics across east and central Africa. Indeed, Juma’s 1869 contract with Ladha Damji was part of a cresting wave that thrust residents of the Indian Ocean basin into deeper and more frequent contact with peoples of Central Africa. These waves of contact created pools of Indian Ocean culture far into the interior. Juma settled in the eastern Congo, and many travelers observed “second Zanzibars” in Africa. The undertow of this movement swept away ivory and the Africans who harvested it—first to the littoral and then out to sea. An ocean away, these same tides pulled Arabs

from interior towns, while the wealth from East Africa reconfigured Arab settlements and local politics.



*Buying Time* is a history of how nineteenth-century credit and mobility knit together a vast region, extending from the deserts of Arabia to the equatorial forests of Africa's Congo watershed. Juma bin Salim and others who created this western Indian Ocean world—Africans, Arabs, and Indians—used monsoon winds and ancient trade routes to link port cities to distant hinterlands. They relied on Islamic financial instruments with deep roots in Indian Ocean exchanges to record obligations of creditors and debtors. From the 1820s onward these men and women endeavored to take advantage of the new opportunities—as traders, as patrons, and as clients—available in an increasingly globalized economy. When their initial strategies failed, or when they met resistance from entrenched hierarchies, they bought time. Time allowed them to escape drought, seek new markets, acquire ivory, reconfigure life paths, and often—but not always—pay off debts. In the half century before European colonization, Africans, Arabs, and Indians used credit and new circuits of mobility to seek out new opportunities, establish themselves as men of means in distant places, and maintain families in a rapidly changing economy. To tell this story, this book traces people's movements and the financial flows that underwrote their activities. It is a story told in previously unexplored Arabic contracts. The documents that lie at the heart of this book illustrate the startling reach of the Indian Ocean world even as they convey the individual aspirations of the people who inhabited it.

As a social history of interconnected Indian Ocean worlds, this book is foremost about people: families who left date farms in Arabia; freed slaves who bet on the ivory trade; sultans and their rivals; displaced Swahili elites; religious ideologues; mixed race Indo-Africans; dissident traders; sophisticated scribes; African porters; Arab confectioners; and an eloping Arab princess who became a German housewife and author. The members of this diverse group inhabited overlapping regions in Arabia and Africa. They also shared a set of scribal practices and used fixed formulas to carry out transactions. Their documents cut across a world now rife with national boundaries. At the same time, they created obligations between creditors and debtors. These obligations fit into broader Indian Ocean patterns of patronage and clientship, which crossed ethnic, geographic, and cultural groupings. By focusing on the strategies that individuals developed in the face of broader changes, this book examines the complex, interwoven, and mobile societies that

existed in the western Indian Ocean in the years before formal colonialism would undermine these ties.



This book joins a growing body of scholarly literature in oceanic history, a field pioneered by Fernand Braudel, whose 1949 history of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean “world” recognized that the sea was not a true boundary during that period. In many ways, Braudel anticipated the work of more recent scholars examining the latest wave of globalization. He noted that the civilization of the Mediterranean “spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns,” and suggests, “We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, some cultural.” Without looking at this zone of influence, it would be difficult to grasp the sea’s history.<sup>5</sup> In his formulation, the Mediterranean pulsed, creating a dynamic “world” over time. Braudel’s work became the foundation for a new scholarship of oceanic spaces, and comprehensive histories of the Indian Ocean have explicitly attempted to adopt Braudel’s model.<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of Braudel-inspired studies around the world gave rise to a “new thalassology” (the study of the sea), and the Indian Ocean has emerged as an important space in this new field.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the Indian Ocean’s much longer standing as an arena of human interaction and cross-cultural exchange, the Atlantic Ocean has attracted more scholarly attention. One result of this has been a lopsided sibling rivalry between oceanic adherents—lopsided in the sense that scholars of the Indian Ocean have been the ones to call attention to the slights of inclusion and perceived inequalities. For example, the Indian Ocean was left out of a forum on “Oceans of History” in the *American Historical Review* that focused only on the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Scholars of slavery in the Indian Ocean have been particularly diligent in trying to provincialize Atlantic plantation chattel slavery as but one of many forms of bondage and dependence.<sup>9</sup> In both oceanic worlds, however, Africa has historically been given short shrift, generally characterized by slavery and its human contributions to the slave trade. Recent scholarship by Atlantic Africanists, however, although focused on slavery generally, offer models and insights that can enrich Indian Ocean histories through biography and micro-history, paying attention to the dynamic changes in port cities, and mapping oceanic actors in broader hinterlands.<sup>10</sup> A focus on Africa’s relationship to its western ocean has profitably expanded the scope of Atlantic world studies, and in this book the Indian Ocean world is inconceivable without Africa.

The boundaries of the Indian Ocean world varied over time, and this book demonstrates how the nineteenth century was the time of their greatest extent and their greatest incorporation of Africa. Many anthropologists and social scientists have grappled with late twentieth-century (and early twenty-first-century) globalization. From their perspective, nation-states and continents break down, failing to be useful containers of human activity. Arjun Appadurai calls them “problematic heuristic devices,” and scholars have approached subjects across national boundaries that have revealed new insights about the global order.<sup>11</sup> One of these approaches replaces standard geographic considerations with “process geographies” that can shift (like Braudel’s pulsing Mediterranean) and focuses on “congeries of language, history, and material life.”<sup>12</sup> Newer historical studies of the Indian Ocean have used innovative and unconventional sources (like genealogies of diasporic communities) and have read colonial archives against the grain to find new connections between nodes.<sup>13</sup> This study attempts to do both. The Arabic transaction records in the Zanzibar Archives describe a type of process geography, a world of credit and debt. This information is embedded in Arabic contracts about assets and people, from Arabia to central Africa. Commodity chains (like those of ivory) and foodways (such as the production, consumption, and social practice around the Omani sweetmeat *halwa*) have spatial dimensions and dispersed geographies in this Indian Ocean world. By focusing on debt—both as an economic relationship and as part of a network of social relationships—this book describes human mobilities and a unified geography by pursuing connections across boundaries of race, ethnicity, status, class, and religion. This book considers time, debt, mobility, kinship, and environment to show how individuals took advantage of credit and mobility to temporize and to reshape their lives.

This book concentrates on the hinterlands of the western Indian Ocean, during the long nineteenth century. In European terms, we can define this period as spanning the French Revolution to World War I. This era encapsulates the Anglo-French rivalry in the Indian Ocean; British attempts to gain more control over India and its dependencies, both before and after 1857; and the explosion of colonization in the last decades of the century. While such global processes affected many people in this story, local events governed their lives in more profound ways. In eastern Arabia, local rulers chose either to accommodate or to challenge Wahhabi expansion, and rulers in Muscat, Oman, struggled to shore up their power in the face of challenges from their families and coreligionists. Omani sultans sought to

balance this opposition with cooperation—both commercial and political allegiances—with British officials and their Indian subjects.

On the African coast and in the interior, Zanzibar's economic boom made the island an important node. Local trade in cloth, gunpowder, ivory, and slaves reconfigured politics and practices near and far. Formal Omani rule in Zanzibar was a novelty during this period. Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi brought the East African coast under his control, moved his court to Zanzibar in the 1830s, and ruled dominions in Arabia and Africa until his death in 1856. His sons became sultans in Oman and Zanzibar, and their rivalries and their reluctant British clientship paved the way for international treaties that limited the slave trade and later ceded territory and created colonial sovereignty.

The western Indian Ocean is the stage for the action in this book, and it includes not just the cosmopolitan port cities long connected to maritime trading networks but also the distant hinterlands of Arabia and Africa. This area includes the rugged mountain-to-desert landscapes of eastern Arabia, the Indian Ocean seascape, the fertile islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, the mangrove-guarded coasts of East Africa, the central plateau of the eastern African mainland, the Rift Valley lakes, and the tributaries that pushed the Congo River to the Atlantic Ocean. Remarkably, by the end of the nineteenth century, this diverse geography had some things in common. Arabs from Oman and Swahili speakers from the coast inhabited trading outposts across the east central African plateau, built dhows on the shores of the Great Lakes, and navigated the Congo River. Africans from the interior lived on the east coast and traveled—some as slaves, others free—to coastal and interior Arabia. Human mobility connected interior regions to global trade networks, expanded the Islamic ecumene, and broadened the boundaries of the Swahiliphone world.

Throughout this period and across these spaces, this book focuses on five factors—time, debt, mobility, kinship, and environment—to elucidate the patterns and disjunctures around which people in the western Indian Ocean structured their lives.

## TIME

The notion of “buying time” is an organizing metaphor for this book. It frames both historical contingency and the many time-mediated exchanges that were vital to the region. Buying time is shorthand for a particular type of historical agency: temporizing. To temporize is to adopt a course of action to conform to circumstances; to wait for a more favorable moment; or to

negotiate to gain time.<sup>14</sup> By seeing the actions of Indian Ocean actors in this framework, we recognize the limited choices and difficult decisions they had to make, often with incomplete knowledge.<sup>15</sup> This also allows us to focus on people of middling and low status, such as impoverished migrants, freed slaves, and nonsheikhly Arabs, and recognize that even sultans and tribal leaders had to make decisions between an uncomfortable status quo and a possible threatening future. In the western Indian Ocean, slaves often had more power than an outside observer would expect, and sultans often had less. Western Indian Ocean actors used temporizing strategies to improve their circumstances, enhance their autonomy, and increase their security. The strategies for buying time provide a lens to view the actions and choices of individual actors to go along, to parley, and to see what would happen in a world of uncertain outcomes.

This approach preserves a sense of historical contingency that has often been overlooked in teleological approaches to the history of East Africa and Oman. Some Marxian and world-systems analyses have tended to treat economic processes, class formation, and European colonialism as foregone conclusions. Likewise, racial and ethnic categories that hardened in the violent politics of Zanzibar in the 1950s and 1960s have tended to cloud fluid identities from the previous century.<sup>16</sup> The combination of these sets of arguments that map class and race ends up ignoring poor and low-status Arabs, outcast Indians, and African elite traders. If, as Isabel Hofmeyr has suggested, the Indian Ocean has become “the subaltern sea,” we need to employ a temporal approach that leaves room for agency and contingency as a wide range of actors created the interlinked Indian Ocean world.<sup>17</sup>

But what was “time” in the context of the western Indian Ocean? Jürgen Osterhammel reminds us that there were a multitude of methods for reckoning time in the nineteenth century, and prior to the nineteenth century time was far from “universal.”<sup>18</sup> Then, in 1884, the same year that the Congress of Berlin met to divide up Africa, the Prime Meridian Conference met in Washington, DC, to divide the world into time zones and to create a universal day that began at midnight.<sup>19</sup> This movement was tied to technological innovations like railways, telegraphs, and steamships, which required something more than nonstandardized local times.<sup>20</sup> Excellent recent histories of the movement to adopt a universal time narrate their stories beginning in the 1870s and emphasize the way various actors contested the imposition of new time schemes.<sup>21</sup> The long history of movement and exchange in the Indian Ocean, however, had created many overlapping units for rendering time before the late nineteenth century. The monsoonal calendar governed ocean travel for millennia, and it created the seasonal rainfall

patterns that dictated growing seasons. In the African mainland, dry season trading ventures set the stage for long-distance trade. The date harvesting cycle shaped the patterns of life in eastern Arabia, which stands outside the monsoon rainfall system. Consequently, the need for irrigation and shared water resources led to systems for measuring time with stars and to elaborate units of time—the smallest was one-sixteenth of a second—to measure the water flow in irrigation canals.<sup>22</sup>

In East Africa, the time of day was measured in hours from the sunrise, so that noon was “*saa sita* (six hours).” Islamic time had a lunar calendar that included months for fasting and pilgrimage, but the start of these months was locally determined by moon sightings. Likewise, the Islamic calendar did not synchronize with other natural, seasonal calendars, so for instance, Ramadan could occur during Oman’s date harvest one year, slip back through the “agricultural” year, and not coincide with the date harvest again for thirty-three years.

While nineteenth-century technologies helped define parameters of time and space, multiple time scales persisted in the western Indian Ocean. Jeremy Prestholdt has shown that, when the sultan of Zanzibar installed a clock tower in the 1880s, he “domesticated” the clock by setting it to Swahili time, the local standard, in which one o’clock is the first hour after sunrise. Thus he “did not Europeanize time in Zanzibar; rather he adapted the European timepiece to Zanzibari perceptions of time.”<sup>23</sup> Erik Gilbert has further demonstrated that dhow travel on monsoon winds was prominent until late in the twentieth century. The flexible logic of dhow sailing—as opposed to the rigid schedule of steamships—allowed dhows to compete on favorable terms with freighters for coastal cargoes.<sup>24</sup> Given the ways that those in the western Indian Ocean incorporated or challenged “universal” or “bureaucratic” time, what does it mean to say that people in the western Indian Ocean and its hinterlands bought time?

In Oman, people bought time when they needed to buy water. The country’s interior needed elaborate irrigation schemes to make agriculture possible. The water was distributed by shares. Yet, while some people owned permanent shares, others bought shares in regular auctions. They were not, however, buying certain volumes of water. They were buying units of time, during which the water would flow into their channels.<sup>25</sup>

The Arabic contracts that people like Juma bin Salim used to acknowledge debt explicitly involved time. One subset of these documents suggests that individuals were literally buying time. Although Juma bin Salim did not put up collateral for his 1869 ivory deal, many others received credit by pledging houses or land, with an agreement to redeem them after a fixed period by

paying in ivory. Others took part in *bay' al-khiyār* (optional, reversible sales) that gave the creditor rights to rent or usufruct for a fixed period of time, after which the original owner could withdraw the original sale. When clerks in Zanzibar copied these deeds—sometimes decades later—for the British consul, they often called the deeds “time sales.”

The Arabic documents also demonstrate the imposition of bureaucratic time, which was out of sync with time in the Islamic legal system. The deeds followed Islamic formularies, and the scribes recorded dates in the Arabic calendar. Time for redeemable sales was also measured in Arabic years. Yet the Islamic dates were much less important to the clerks who recorded them for British consular courts. Clerks duly noted, stamped, and indexed the documents by the date they were registered. Sometimes these documents were registered decades after the transactions took place. Juma bin Salim’s 1869 promissory note was registered at the consular court in 1888. This suggests that Juma bin Salim never satisfied this debt despite his promise to return in two years. Operating in and among these overlapping and unstable boundaries of time in the nineteenth century, the concept of “buying time” reflects the literal sense of some transactions, and it also metaphorically explains agency and historical contingency.

This book focuses on debt and mobility as temporizing strategies. Omani Arabs from nonsheikhly lines went overseas when they could no longer



FIGURE 0.2. Juma Merikani’s house in the Congo. From Verney Lovett Cameron, *Across Africa* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877).

access irrigation water. Freed slaves sold property to join the caravan trade, and during their journeys they maneuvered among categories and statuses. Arabs, Africans, and other Indian Ocean actors who took to the caravan trails founded and populated settlements in mainland East Africa. Their opportunistic traveling took them to places where they could find personal autonomy and could attract clients of their own, while the distance from the coast loosened their ties to creditors. In Oman, tribal leaders played cat-and-mouse games with the sultan and his allies—parleying at times and attacking at others. These opportunities to strike, however, were organized through a financial interface—namely credit from Zanzibar—that shaped political tensions with the sultan. These temporizing strategies across the long axis of the western Indian Ocean demonstrate how the constrained agency of multiple actors worked to maintain an interconnected region.

## DEBT

Notions of time are inextricably linked to the concepts of debt and indebtedness, a second core concept of this book. The anthropologist David Graeber has called debt “just an exchange that has not been brought to completion,” and it follows that what remains in that equation is time. And, as Graeber notes, the time between contracting a debt and repaying is when “just about everything interesting happens.”<sup>26</sup> As Juma bin Salim’s two-year promise makes clear, debt was an essential part of acquiring ivory, and thus it was a vital link in a commodity chain that stretched from East African forests to Victorian parlors.<sup>27</sup> In this way, ivory was similar to other natural products from the Indian Ocean world—cloves, copal, pearls, and dates—that the growth of global capitalism helped deliver to distant centers.<sup>28</sup> The procurement and delivery of these goods around the Indian Ocean depended largely on Indian merchants, like Ladha Damji, who served as key creditors and intermediaries within commodity chains. It was credit and debt from these lenders that drove the commercial expansion of the Indian Ocean world in the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Assuming debt and accessing credit allowed people to take advantage of new opportunities in the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century, and they did so through contracts rooted in Islamic law. Juma bin Salim’s promissory note acknowledging his ivory debt to Ladha Damji represented one of many types of *waraqqa* (literally paper) that were flexible instruments used to extend credit and confirm debts. Although non-Muslims like Ladha Damji used these documents widely, the writings followed well-known Islamic formulas so that they would be legitimate in the eyes of *qadis* (jurists). Thus,

one of the goals of such contracts was to avoid the appearance of usury (*ribā*) because charging interest would invalidate the legality of the contract. Does this mean that merchants and moneylenders did not charge interest in the Indian Ocean?

While European observers in the nineteenth century claimed that merchants charged exorbitant interest rates—up to 100 percent—this was not true. The nature of the transactions, however, and the surviving documents make it difficult to determine the actual rates with precision. Certainly European traders paid interest at a rate that was eventually standardized to 9 percent in the 1860s.<sup>30</sup> When financiers like Ladha Damji lent money to Muslims like Juma bin Salim, however, the interest was obscured through two separate transactions, both of which were legal. To begin, the financier advanced a certain value of trade goods—*merikani* cloth, trade beads, and other goods. In a separate transaction, like the one Juma bin Salim completed, the debtor acknowledged that he would deliver a certain value of goods at a future date. The “interest” was thus the discount between the value of goods advanced and the value of the payment promised. In the late 1850s Burton noted that secured loans included interest of 15 to 20 percent, and Livingstone reported in the 1870s that the rates were between 20 and 25 percent.<sup>31</sup> Stanley, also writing in the 1870s, claimed that the effective interest was between 50 and 70 percent.<sup>32</sup> The initial agreement may have been negotiated orally, and only the second contract was written down. In these cases, the “interest” was charged initially on the transaction so there was no compounding over time, and the debt could be ongoing.

Another common way to avoid the sin of interest was through a set of incomplete sales that created debt. These included optional sales (*bayʿ al-khiyār*) in which the seller could undo the sale by returning the sale price, and sales with pledged property (*rahnān maqbuḍ*). In both cases, the creditor would retain the right to the property sold, such as a house or a farm, and would profit from the rent on the house or the produce of the farm. One common version of this arrangement included the debtor renting his own house back from the creditor. In this case, the sale of the house from A to B would be written in one contract, and a separate contract would be issued for B to rent the house from A at a fixed rate each month. In this case, the “interest” was the rent and could, in theory, continue indefinitely. These optional sales, *bayʿ khiyār*, became a way for many different actors with even a small amount of property to leverage themselves into positions to participate in and profit from the lucrative trade booms of the Indian Ocean world.

In all of these cases, indebtedness created a set of obligations that mirrored patron-client relationships elsewhere in the Islamic world. In the western

Indian Ocean, as on the caravan trails of the Sahara, commercial dealings did not depend entirely on faith or ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> The portfolios of merchants represented the diversity of peoples present in port cities. In Zanzibar, debtors included Arabs of many social strata, Hindu and Muslim Indians, indigenous Zanzibaris, Swahili, mainland Africans, and enslaved people. In this sense, debts created overlapping networks of obligation that implicated both sultans and slaves. The sultans in Oman and Zanzibar were, after all, chronically in debt to their customs masters. Within these networks of patronage and obligation, creditors cultivated clients to build their own reputations and firms while clients and debtors sought to balance powerful patrons with their own autonomy.<sup>34</sup>

When the autonomy of clients as debtors threatened to undercut the loan, Indian Ocean creditors did not rely solely on reputation mechanisms.<sup>35</sup> One reason Hindu creditors like Ladha Damji followed Islamic contractual prescriptions was so that they could appeal to jurists (*qadis*) to help enforce their claims. *Qadis* themselves sometime turned to the local rulers for enforcement. Punishments included fines, confiscations, and imprisonment.<sup>36</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, British consular courts in Indian Ocean port cities came to assume an outsized role in settling disputes that involved Indian merchants, which eventually reshaped commercial law and practice in the Indian Ocean by the early twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> These enforcement mechanisms, however, depended on the debtors being close at hand. Debtors could escape enforcement in a region marked by mobility.

#### MOBILITY

Time, debt, and mobility expanded the boundaries of the Indian Ocean world in the nineteenth century, and mobility features as the third major theme of this book. The Indian Ocean was a world in motion from earliest times because monsoon winds made long-distance travel possible. Jewish merchants in old Cairo traded and settled in western India in the eleventh century, Ibn Batuta sailed the breadth of the ocean in the fourteenth century, and Vasco da Gama found mariners on the East African coast who could guide him to western India at the end of the fifteenth. From the Hadhramaut in southern Arabia, generations of sayids traveled and settled as teachers, scholars, and advisors at court in distant Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>38</sup> From Malacca to Kilwa, cosmopolitan port cities have long been a hallmark of the region.

The nineteenth century, however, introduced new forms of mobility and new circuits of movement that disrupted people at every rank in Indian Ocean societies, from sultans to slaves. The introduction of steamships and opening of the Suez Canal increased the speed and routes of sea travel in the Indian Ocean, but older forms of transport persisted and allowed poorer people to cover great distances. Juma bin Salim was born in the Omani interior and died on the banks of the Congo River. Although it is difficult to reconstruct his early movements with precision, travel from Nizwa to Muscat required a hundred-mile trek walking or on camelback, sailing more than 2,500 nautical miles from Muscat to Zanzibar, and, once he reached the African continent, another eight-hundred-mile trek on foot to his settlement in the Congo. For his part, Ladha Damji had been born impoverished in Kutch on the west coast of India before making his way to Zanzibar and clawing his way to the top of the region's financial elite. One Omani sultan moved his capital to Zanzibar, and his heirs went as far as Bombay and London as exiles and supplicants, biding their time in pursuit of succeeding him. The slave trade forced Africans from the interior to the Indian Ocean islands, Arabia, India, and even the Americas, and indenture transported Indians to the Mascarene islands and southern Africa. In turn, many freed slaves managed their own mobility, and their skillful manipulations of debt and time made them part of a larger group of Indian Ocean actors who populated the East African interior.

Juma bin Salim was part of a much larger movement that made upland East Africa a far shore of the Indian Ocean. Classic histories of the Indian Ocean have marginalized Africa in the early modern period, but it is impossible to overlook the movement of people into and out of Africa in the nineteenth century. The pursuit of ivory and slaves attracted traders from Arabia and the coast most prominently, but Comorians, Baluchis, and even Khojas traveled and lived in the new commercial centers that sprang up in this period on the eastern African plateau, near the Great Lakes, and on the Congo River.

The mobility of Indian Ocean actors in the African interior has had profound long-term consequences across the region, yet scholars have given inadequate attention to this process. While debt enabled their mobility to far-flung destinations, they did not always return to repay their creditors. Scholars have frequently fallen prey to a kind of coastal chauvinism that privileges the coast in the Indian Ocean world. Accounts frequently assume that all those who traveled to the interior did so to enrich themselves and return to their own distant homes or at least the shores of the Indian Ocean. These circumstances were true for a small subset of successful migrants, and

it is clear that others repatriated wealth or invested in their home areas. But these cases overshadow the degree to which Indian Ocean actors were able to establish themselves in the trading depots of East Africa or in small settlements along the caravan routes and achieve a degree of wealth and autonomy that would not have been possible at home. By building local allegiances and marrying African women, Indian Ocean men became heads of polygynous households with many clients and agricultural holdings. Some enjoyed privileged access to trade, and many of those of lower status in Indian Ocean hierarchies—recently freed slaves, nonsheikhly Arabs, former Baluchi mercenaries—found greater degrees of freedom. While they might move beyond the reach of their creditors, they remained part of an expanding Indian Ocean milieu, and some status distinctions—like the Arab disdain of nontribal *bayāsirah*—traveled too. Nineteenth-century mobility and the commodity-focused credit that underwrote it brought Indians, Arabs, and Africans to new places on the Indian Ocean rim and its hinterland in much greater numbers than at any point in history. Assessing this mobility helps us balance both individual agency and the results of unintended consequences. If Juma bin Salim intended, at some point, to leave his plantations and trading hub and return with his dependents and his store of ivory to Zanzibar, settle his debts, and perhaps even go back to Oman, he died before he could do so. He ran out of time.

#### KINSHIP

Kinship was a vital factor in the organization of trade and mobility in the Indian Ocean. Likewise, trade and mobility led to the reconfiguration of family and broadened the purview of kin. Genealogy was a key strategy of self-representation in documents and, as a result of exogamous marriages, descent also became a discourse of belonging for Indian Ocean actors. Across the Indian Ocean, scholars have documented the family trees of rulers, descendants of the Prophet, and Sufi scholars, but new sources make it possible to reconstruct kin networks and clan memberships for other Indian Ocean actors.<sup>39</sup>

Although little evidence exists for us to see Juma bin Salim amid his own kin networks, he proudly listed three generations of paternal ancestors in a promissory note, and he established a household in the Congo with a Ugandan wife who helped oversee his ivory stores. Even from this limited information we can see how kinship functioned on two levels. The first level was an official genealogical one—the patrilineal line and clan—that created differences between people and ordered and legitimated a social order.<sup>40</sup> On

the second level, the idiom of kinship described connections to other people, and these connections or relationships could be used in certain circumstances. For Juma bin Salim, this was his African wife, and for others in East Africa these included maternal uncles and uterine brothers. Indeed, in the Indian Ocean world, the calculus of kinship was important. Said bin Salim al-Lamki was born on the Swahili coast to an Omani Arab father and a Malagasy mother. Said bin Salim served as the *wali* (governor) of Saadani on the Swahili coast before the sultan appointed him in 1857 to lead Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke on their expedition in search of the Nile. Burton was scaldingly dismissive of Said bin Salim al-Lamki's obsession with kinship, complaining of Said's "ignorance and apathy concerning all things but A. bin B., and B. bin C., who married his son D. to the daughter of E."<sup>41</sup> But Said's focus makes clear that genealogy, kinship, and marriage were vital. Birth and genealogy were tools that mobile Indian Ocean actors could use to establish new statuses and roles by calling on new categories of kin.<sup>42</sup>

Familial networks served as an infrastructure linking to production and reproduction in the western Indian Ocean. In her work on Indian networks between western India and East Africa, Hollian Wint challenges narrow conceptions of trading diasporas and static views of kinship to show the centrality of families and households. They were "neither peripheral to trading networks nor unchanging units within them, rather, they were at the core of trans-local connections and transformations."<sup>43</sup> These transformations are clear when we see kinship as socially constructed and use it as a way to analyze social inequalities through gender, power, and difference. Within Arab families in East Africa, for example, family structures changed with mobility and new marriages, and in some cases these resulted in pronounced inequalities among kin.

#### ENVIRONMENT

Itinerant people in the western Indian Ocean reacted to environmental challenges and reshaped local ecologies.<sup>44</sup> This book prioritizes environmental histories alongside human histories, heeding anthropologist Anna Tsing's call to take seriously nonhuman actors, disturbance-based ecologies, and their shared roles in histories of capitalism.<sup>45</sup> The Indian Ocean monsoon system has structured mobility around the ocean; likewise, periodic droughts outside the ocean's intertropical convergence zone created difficulties for date farmers in Arabia's marginal lands. Arabs left Arabia in greater numbers in times of drought. When cyclones and floods came—wiping out palm groves and settlements—Omanis also took to the sea. Repatriated monies

from migrants helped finance new irrigation channels and expand Arab settlements into marginal lands, but the threat of silting water channels and drought made for precarious livelihoods. The plentiful rain in coastal East Africa must have been a welcome relief to Arabian migrants. In Zanzibar, clove mania led to the confiscating and repurposing of farmland in the 1830s. A disastrous hurricane in 1872 destroyed substantial portions of the clove crop and undermined the sultan's independence. On the mainland, people pursuing the lucrative ivory trade changed elephant ecologies: herd populations, habitats, and dispersal. In 1875, Livingstone's biographer suggested that 44,000 elephants a year were killed to supply England with ivory.<sup>46</sup> While not all of these elephants were from East Africa, the demand for cheaper tusks created a moving East African ivory frontier, which encouraged hunters to travel deeper into the continent. Some Indian Ocean migrants and their dependents settled alongside Africans in the interior, and some carved out their own small communities. They planted the trees and field crops they wanted to feed themselves. They spread rice cultivation into the central African lake regions and the Congo River's tributaries. People living in western Tanzania still associate mango trees with early Arab settlers.

THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN, NEW SOURCES,  
AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

*Buying Time* uses a unique set of sources to complement and build on histories of East Africa and Arabia. By connecting the regions of the western Indian Ocean, this book argues for a more synthetic view of the processes that set people and goods in motion in the nineteenth century. An oceanic perspective has always helped explain the history of East Africa, but an oceanic turn in the approach to history—what some have called a “new thalassology”—in the first decade of the twenty-first century has made it easier to assess connections between distant regions through the sea.<sup>47</sup> The earliest twentieth-century histories of East Africa posited that the Indian Ocean was a source of “invaders” who “exploited” the region.<sup>48</sup> Important classic works noted the role of Indian Ocean trade networks for coastal entrepôts linked to trade and production in the African interior.<sup>49</sup> Some scholarship specified the role of “Arabs” (loosely defined) from the Indian Ocean as oppositional to Europeans in Africa, missing the opportunity to describe both groups as part of a broader regional historical trajectory.<sup>50</sup> Close study of coastal societies revealed waves of immigration from both the sea and the

interior that shaped political discourse and rebellion on the eve of European colonization, and Africans from the interior shaped forms of labor on long-distance trade to and from the coast.<sup>51</sup> While many of the historical actors had ties to distant shores, and these regional histories acknowledge the role of the ocean as a source of trade goods or migrants, they do not cross it.

A willingness to cross the sea and engage the Indian Ocean as an organizing framework also deepens our understanding of the history of Arabia. The initial histories of Oman deemphasized oceanic connections, while more recent work on the nineteenth century has focused on the Muscat-Zanzibar nexus in terms of trade and British imperial politics.<sup>52</sup> The historian Nile Green disaggregated “the Middle East” into three arenas, one of which is the Indian Ocean. (The others are the Mediterranean Sea and Inner Asia.) A benefit of this formulation, he argues, is “bringing Africa into view as a crucial component in the development of Middle Eastern societies.”<sup>53</sup> Certainly recent excellent work on Africans in Arabia shows the merit of this approach.<sup>54</sup> *Buying Time* works from both the Arabian and African shores of the western Indian Ocean to show how the movement of people between them was a crucial component of the development of both regions in the nineteenth century. Within histories of the Indian Ocean in the imperial age, India, as a subimperial power, and Indians moving within “greater India” have been prominent.<sup>55</sup> Hadrami Arabs have received the most attention as an Arabian diaspora.<sup>56</sup> While these groups certainly figure into our story, the focus of this work will be primarily on the broad social array of Omani Arabs and Africans in western Indian Ocean networks that stretched into continental hinterlands.



While this new thalassology adds an oceanic perspective, new sources make it easier to trace the movements of people across this broad, complicated region. These new sources include thousands of Arabic business contracts—sales, mortgages, and promissory notes—that have been sitting—uncatalogued and untranslated—in the Zanzibar archives for over 130 years.<sup>57</sup> These documents record the activities of Africans, Arabs, and Indians within social and financial networks—networks that included the caravan stations of East Africa and the oasis villages of interior Arabia. The unique information in this archive reveals new and important details about the Indian Ocean’s past. First, these documents show complex variations on the financial transactions that underwrote ivory trading and mortgaged property—in Arabia, on the eastern coast of Africa, and in the African interior. Second, they list names, genealogies, statuses, and clan names of a wide variety of people—Africans,

Indians, and Arabs; men and women; free and slave—who bought, sold, and mortgaged property in the nineteenth century. These genealogies illustrate the vast diversity of actors involved in these transactions. Third, the documents were created outside colonial and European influence and adhere to long-standing Islamic legal forms, but they also exhibit local inflections. Each deed provides a snapshot of an interconnected world before European colonialism.

The challenge of these documents has been to provide sufficient context to bring them to life. On the one hand, these transaction records have provided nuanced backstories for known individuals like Juma bin Salim. Starting from an interesting deed, on the other hand, I have been fortunate to fill in details of overlooked actors in Indian Ocean history by turning to nineteenth-century colonial archives, travelers' accounts, missionary journals, Swahili biographies, and Omani scholars. I also gathered family histories by following the routes that the deeds set into motion: up and down the Swahili coast, across the old caravan route to Lake Tanganyika, and to the capital and interior towns of Oman. These sources and methods cannot account, however, for more informal credit networks or arrangements that were never registered. Indeed, the source base is slanted toward those who relied on Indian creditors. During the 1860s and 1870s changes to consular courts and to the definition of who was a British subject meant that Hindu and Muslim Indian businesspeople brought their documents to be registered at the consulate. Fortunately, some of these were decades old so that it becomes possible to reconstruct a range of social worlds from the 1840s and, occasionally, earlier. The breadth of the archive makes clear that throughout the nineteenth century a wide variety of people engaged in these transactions. These exciting new sources provide a way to understand the uses of credit and debt, to see previously overlooked groups, and to map individuals into Indian Ocean circuits.

This book is organized around nine chapters. It begins in Arabia, examining the conditions in Oman during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 argues that a novel combination of environmental, social, and political factors influenced Arab immigration to East Africa. Drought and political disturbances that aligned with periods of intense migration demonstrate that emigrants from the interior of Oman left their villages as a temporizing strategy. These migrants dealt with challenges such as drought, water courses running dry, and palm groves dying, with the seemingly temporary solution of transoceanic migration. This movement was made easier by the Omani sultan's relocation to East Africa in the 1830s. Omani Arab rule in Zanzibar helped formalize a commercial culture, and chapter 2 analyzes

the Arabic business documents that comprise the heart of this book by looking at the 1840s. These documents record agreements between buyers and sellers, creditors and debtors, and each one reflects the enmeshed social and economic relations in the port city of Zanzibar, even as they implicate a broader Indian Ocean seascape.

The third chapter details the enmeshed politics of Zanzibar and Muscat, especially during the rule of Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi (r. 1804–56) and the period after his death. His heirs' intrigues and rivalries led to civil war in 1859, a division of dominion in 1861, and a revival of the Ibadi Imamate in Muscat in 1868–71. The political and economic relationships between these two capitals remained influential for the rest of the century. Chapter 3 focuses on the Omani rulers' mobility around the western Indian Ocean and on their exertion of authority through property seizures in Zanzibar and Oman. The 1859 rebellion led to more Arab settlement in the East African interior during the burgeoning ivory trade.

Chapter 4 examines the movements of people. Mobility shifted notions of identity as Indian Ocean peoples established themselves in the East African interior. The nineteenth century marked the delinking of ethnonyms from specific geographies: Arabs were not just in Arabia; Swahili people left the coast; and Nyamwezi and other interior people took to the sea. This movement produced new configurations of people and geographies, which had implications for identity, kinship, and belonging for Arabs and Africans. Chapter 5 focuses on the kinship networks of the most famous trader of this period, Hamed bin Muhammad al-Murjebi, better known as Tippu Tip. Reading his autobiography through the lens of kinship reveals that, rather than being a self-made man, Tippu Tip benefited from elaborate webs of kinship, stretching from Oman to the eastern Congo. His trade organization—like many during this period—relied on siblings, and his marriage into an elite Omani family provided him with property in Zanzibar and Oman. Kinship emerges as a vital way to understand business and family networks.

While both the slave trade and slavery itself have been associated with this period of African history, freed slaves have often been overlooked. Chapter 6 first examines manumission and the mobility of freed slaves in the western Indian Ocean up to the 1850s. Islamic manumission was an important social practice long before European colonization disrupted slavery in East Africa. The chapter then addresses the moral economy of manumission and insincere manumission after the 1850s to meet the demand for labor in the Indian Ocean islands. Chapter 7 looks at the period following the 1873 anti-slavery treaty to examine Indian Ocean mobility amid the rise of a British documentary regime. New consular courts, a redefinition of British Indian

subjecthood, and naval antislavery enforcement all contributed to a focus on new kinds of writing and a return to insincere manumission. By this time, however, African slaves and former slaves were tightly connected to Arab and Indian households, and when households left Africa for Arabia or India they revealed a racial gradient of mobility. By examining the lives of freed slaves—including their economic activity, their relationships with their former masters, and the routes they traveled—the broader history of the western Indian Ocean comes more sharply into focus.

Each of the final two chapters focuses on an individual who represents a microcosm of the Indian Ocean world: a freed slave and an Omani tribal leader. They both built lives and transformed environments far from the sea, but they depended on Indian Ocean credit, mobility, and kinship to advance their own agendas when the deck was stacked against them.

The eighth chapter focuses on the extraordinary career of the man who built the first dhow on Lake Victoria. He was a freed slave who entered the ivory business on the mainland with his partner, another freed slave. They became entangled with Zanzibari creditors and the complex local politics of their African patron. The freed slave and ivory trader created tight kin networks with his patron on the island of Ukerewe in Lake Victoria, and he built “a second Zanzibar” on the lake’s shore. This trading post attracted missionary attention in the 1870s, and it created a collision among the local ruler, the missionaries, and the ivory dealer, which led to many deaths. It sent reverberations across the lake and down the caravan trails to Zanzibar. At the center of the dispute were attempts at the manipulation of credit, misunderstood documents, and a contest in the interior over Indian Ocean trade.

During this period in Arabia, the political history of interior Oman proved to be intricately tied to Indian Ocean networks, specifically credit markets in Zanzibar. Chapter 9 traces the history of Salih bin Ali al-Harthi (1834–1896), a major religiopolitical leader in the Omani interior, to show how his challenges to the Omani sultans were connected to Zanzibar. The second half of the century also saw ongoing migration (and circulation) from Arabia to East Africa, despite the political division of the territories in 1861. Salih bin Ali was preceded in death by his former ally Barghash, the sultan of Zanzibar (r. 1870–88), and by his *bête noir* Turki, the sultan of Muscat (r. 1871–88). The death of these two sultans marked a turning point in the western Indian Ocean: European hegemony resulted in the partition of East Africa and an unofficial protectorate in Oman. An epilogue connects these nineteenth-century events to the present, including twentieth-century Omani migration; the violent revolution in Zanzibar in 1964, which killed and expelled thousands of Arabs; the 1970 palace coup in Oman, which

paved the way for East African Arabs to “return” to the homeland of the predecessors; and the place of these so-called Zanzibaris in modern Oman.



When Juma bin Salim wrote his two-year ivory contract with Ladha Damji in Zanzibar in 1869, he identified himself by genealogy and origin. He included his tribal name, al-Bakri, and appended a signifier of his place of origin, Nizwa, one of the most important cities in the eastern Arabian interior. The circumstances in Oman and Nizwa that thrust Juma bin Salim out into the Indian Ocean, into debt, and into the heart of Africa begin our story.