

knowledge as rightfully scientific in its production would go a long way toward recognizing its value and potential for bringing about positive change.

Lastly, the first two chapters in Part III could do a better job of connecting the cases (tsetse fly and locust control) with the overall theme of the book. Neither of the two adequately develop how perceived mismanagement of the landscape by Africans contributed to these problems. Rather they focus on how imperial scientists tried to develop management strategies for these plagues.

Notwithstanding these points, *African Environmental Crisis* is a strong addition to the literature on African environmental history and the history of science. Its analysis of the African environmental crisis and the flawed assumptions of imperial science is relevant not only for historians but also those involved in present-day development work. I recommend it to those interested in learning more about the promise and peril of scientific research in Africa.

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An Ocean of Debt and Possibility

Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean

By Thomas F. McDow. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. 378. \$36.95, paperback, (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2282-3); \$80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2281-6).

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In *Buying Time*, Thomas F. McDow argues that coastal merchants from Zanzibar, moving between coast and interior, created circuits of value, meaning, and knowledge that connected the central East African interior to the Indian Ocean (5). Perhaps best described as a historical panoply of nineteenth-century mercantile activity across a vast region, *Buying Time* has Braudelian ambitions of scale and scope. McDow's study reveals that the networks of East African commerce were vast and encompassed a variety of both elite and nonelite social actors. His focus on the latter is one of his book's great strengths. Another is that each chapter is capable of standing on its own as an essay. Indeed, the book loops and jumps forward through the nineteenth century, circling back to its main themes, while expanding the tableau with new examples. McDow's study joins economic processes in continental East Africa to the study of Indian Ocean credit pursued by historians like Fahad Bishara, Hollian Wint, and Johan Mathew.

Given the scope and lack of chronology, the thematic linkages between chapters can be tenuous, yet the book nevertheless hangs together beautifully around the theme of social actors from the East African coast, India, and Oman 'buying time' — accessing credit, deferring their debt, and escaping their debtors by moving into the East African interior. McDow demonstrates how, in spite of formal prohibitions on interest, coastal Muslim traders effectively used interest to push the Indian Ocean mercantile economy deep into the continent. Using transaction documents and contracts from the Zanzibari archives, McDow unearths different types of 'time sales' whereby

those in need of credit sold property to creditors ‘with the option of repaying the price within a fixed time to regain them’ (195). Vivid language helps drive home the link between credit, debt, and the exigencies of material accumulation in the interior, as when, considering a document by Juma bin Salim al-Bakri al-Nizwi, McDow writes: ‘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’ (2).

The book’s central focus is how people of low and middling status accessed credit (9). McDow observes that Arabic deeds show the changing nature of property relations on Unguja in the 1840s, as many local farmers sold land to Indian creditors. McDow’s analysis of one land sale shows the link between Indian Ocean mobility, knowledge, and social prestige. When Maqame bin Masibu sold a piece of land to Jairam Shivji, the powerful Kutchi customs master in Zanzibar, he left a deed of sale. McDow observes that Maqame’s title on this deed is ‘Serang Maqame’, indicating his expertise in oceanic navigation. McDow speculates, given the prestige of Indian Ocean navigators in Zanzibar, that Maqame’s relative prestige and alternative sources of wealth allowed him to pursue the sale of land as an economic strategy, taking advantage of its inflating value (54).

If the enclosure of the island’s most profitable land made some wealthy and impoverished others, the caravan trail itself was a social leveler due to the uncertainties involved in trade. Later in Chapter Four, McDow analyzes the relationship between two coastal residents in the interior, Mwinyi Kidogo and Said Salim. Mwinyi Kidogo was born free on the coast, son of a local authority (*diwan*). His power also emanated from his deep knowledge of the caravan trail and the networks linking it to surrounding societies. His counterpart Said Salim, a high-born Arab linked to the sultans, was nominally in authority over the whole caravan, but had little knowledge of the interior and thus had to defer to Mwinyi Kidogo (100–3). In subsequent chapters, McDow extends his analysis of social mobility through credit to access the experiences of manumitted slaves. He demonstrates the significance of manumitted slaves in the credit economies of the coast and in the interior. Coastal slaveowners used ‘insincere manumissions’ to maintain control over the labor of their slaves while transporting them to the Mascarenes. McDow shows how this was a subversion of the ideal of Muslim manumission, used to evade the Royal Navy’s antislavery patrols. Chapter Eight continues the theme, arguing that manumitted individuals exercised considerable agency as participants in the emerging mercantile economy that linked coast and interior. A manumitted individual could accrue independent social and economic capital through proximity to their former master; McDow shows how two manumitted slaves used land set aside as waqf (pious endowments) for their manumission in Zanzibar to access credit to trade on Lake Victoria.

There is much to praise about the book, but the ending leaves unanswered questions about what precisely changed about credit, kinship, and mobility under British and German colonial hegemony. The arguments of earlier chapters led this reader to expect the conclusion to discuss the changing ability of poorer East Africans to access credit and gain social mobility in the colonial period. McDow’s epilogue gives a broad summary of how European conquest and colonial sovereignty constrained Omani mobility, but he does not address a question that follows from his earlier chapters’ case studies: Did those of low and middling status find it more difficult to gain social mobility through credit after the 1890s? Did the legal and commercial instruments McDow describes simply disappear, and if so, when? Notwithstanding this critique, the book makes a significant contribution to understanding the whole of nineteenth century East Africa, not just the coast, as part of an expanding Indian Ocean trading world.