

## Book Reviews

*Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean.* By Thomas F. McDow. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. 364, xiii. \$80.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

Thomas McDow's *Buying Time* is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature that links the interconnected histories of East Africa and Arabia across the western Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century. The book makes use of new sources to tell an important trans-regional story from fresh angles. It also strikes a strong balance of advancing compelling arguments while remaining accessible to a wide readership.

McDow uses Arabic business contracts (sales, mortgages, and promissory notes) from the Zanzibar National Archives to illuminate the interconnected lives of Arabs, Indians, and Africans in a period of rapid change that simultaneously produced fabulous wealth and crushing poverty. *Buying Time* demonstrates that both push and pull factors were at work driving mobility across the western Indian Ocean and that access to credit allowed people to take advantage of new opportunities in the nineteenth century.

*Buying Time* follows themes of time, debt, mobility, kinship, and environment in the Western Indian Ocean. It is set primarily in East Africa and Oman and follows the lives of both political elites, such as the Busaidi ruling family, and common folk, such as Juma bin Salim Al-Bakri, a humble merchant from Oman who made his fortune in the eastern Congo as an ivory trader. Juma's story exemplifies McDow's arguments. He left Oman partly for environmental reasons. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, a severe drought struck Oman in the 1840s and motivated a generation of Omanis to seek new opportunities in East Africa.

However, as Chapter 2 illustrates, these opportunities hinged on access to credit, much of it from Indian creditors, and a sophisticated system of Islamic financial transactions, which produced a paper trail that allows McDow to follow the lives of both borrowers and creditors. An acknowledgement of debt (*iqrār*) could permit a debtor to borrow cash against fixed assets—even if hundreds of miles away—for fixed periods of time. These transactions, enforced through Islamic courts, gave owners of property the ability to raise the funding necessary to seek their fortunes in the East African interior.

But mobility also hinged on political factors. As Chapter 3 shows, the ruling Busaidi family from Oman maintained a precarious hold on both Muscat and Zanzibar with rival forces threatening from both inside and outside the family. McDow argues convincingly that mobility was a temporizing strategy for royals as well. Their mobility "allowed them to buy time when faced with a reconfiguration of power in the Indian Ocean" (p. 62). Such mobility transformed the lives of migrants like Thani bin Amir al-Harhi, a humble *halwa* confectioner from Oman who became one of the wealthiest traders in Kazeh, an ivory depot in the East African interior. Chapter 4 explores the lives of Omani migrants who made new homes in East Africa and shows that their communities were far from monolithic. Status mattered, and marginalized *bayāsirah* (sing. *baysari*) folk—possibly including Thani bin Amir—could find that marginalization followed them abroad.

Among the many strengths of this book is that McDow has crafted the individual chapters to build upon one another but also stand alone as readings that could be assigned to undergraduate and graduate courses in the history of East Africa or the Indian Ocean. Chapters on Tippu Tip (Chapter 5) and the dhow that plied the waters of Lake Victoria (Chapter 8) would be particularly appropriate readings for classes. Chapters 6 and 7 address subjects related to slavery, including the mobility of freed slaves and the ironies of British antislavery in the Indian Ocean, which produced a “documentary regime ... that both facilitated and controlled the movement of Africans across the Indian Ocean” (p. 170) as slaveholders developed a form of “insincere manumission” to relocate slaves overseas.

McDow’s skill as a master storyteller is on full display in Chapter 9, which recounts the gripping story of the imamate rebellion in Oman in the 1870s and 1880s and traces the East African connections to the imamate and its financing. The author’s writing is engaging and effective throughout the book, but the crescendo is in the finale: the last chapters tie the book’s main themes together and circle back to connect the opening stories to twentieth-century events including the SAS bombing raids in Oman in 1959 and the Zanzibar Revolution of 1964.

*Buying Time* is deeply researched and impressive in scope. It highlights the importance of multi-site research—McDow conducted extensive archival research on three continents and makes particularly strong use of sources from Zanzibar, India, and the United Kingdom. The book is clearly written and compelling. It is suitable to be assigned in whole or in part to undergraduate and graduate courses on the history of the Indian Ocean and East Africa and should be in the library of every scholar of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean.

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***Water Brings No Harm: Management, Knowledge and the Struggle for the Waters of Kilimanjaro.* By Matthew V. Bender.**

Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. Pp. xv, 336; 18 figures, 3 tables, 7 maps. \$80.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper.

This is a history of water on Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro since its initial settlement by farming communities 500 years ago. Matthew Bender carries the story forward through the periods of German and British colonialism, discusses water policy in socialist and neo-liberal Tanzania, and concludes by considering recent debate over Kilimanjaro’s shrinking glaciers. His accounts of techniques of water management and changes in understandings of water are illustrated with abundant, well-chosen detail. Particularly interesting is his treatment of *mifongo*, the irrigation canals first constructed perhaps 400 years ago and by the 1920s numbering about 1,000. Some of these canals could extend for several kilometers and some remain in use. Bender describes not only their construction and