Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar

The roots of British domination

M. Reda Bhacker

ROUTLEDGE

Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar

This book looks at the role of Oman in the Indian Ocean prior to British domination of the region. Omani merchant communities played a crucial part in the development of commercial activity throughout the territories they held by Oman in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially between Muscat and Zanzibar, using long-established trade networks. They were also largely responsible for the integration of the commerce of the Indian Ocean into the nascent global capitalist system.

M.Reda Bhacker, himself a member of a long established Omani merchant family, looks in detail at the complex relationship between the merchant community and Oman's rulers, first the Ya'ariba and then the Albusaidis. He analyses the tribal and religious dynamics of Omani politics both in Arabia, where he looks especially at the Wahhabi/Saudi threat, and in Oman's sprawling 'empire', with particular reference to Zanzibar where Omani ruler Sa'îd b Sultân had his court from the 1830s. His aim is to consider all Oman's overseas territorities as a single entity, eschewing the conventional but misleading compartmentalisation of African and Arabian history.

Dr Bhacker finds that, despite their prestige and influence in the region, neither the merchant communities nor the Omani ruling classes were able to respond to Britain's determined onslaught. He traces the local and regional factors that allowed Britain to destroy Oman's, largely commercial, challenge to its hegemony and to emerge by the end of the nineteenth century as the commercially and politically dominant power in the region.

This book will appeal to students and scholars of history, economics and politics, especially those with interests in the economic development of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Middle Eastern, Indian and East African history, and in the growth of the British Empire.

Exeter Arabic and Islamic series
General Editor: Aziz al-Azmeh

Arabic thought and Islamic societies
Aziz al-Azmeh

The Islamic law on land tax and rent: the peasants' loss of property Rights under the Hanafite Doctrine
Baber Johansen

The Muslim conquest and settlement of North Africa and Spain
'Abdulwāhid Dhanun Tāha

Arab history and the nation-state
Youssef M.Choueiri

Allah transcendent: studies in the structure and semiotics of Islamic philosophy, theology and cosmology
Ian Richard Netton

Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar

Roots of British domination

M.Reda Bhacker

London and New York

First published 1994
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-41033-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-71857-7 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-07997-7 (Print Edition)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bhacker, M.Reda (Mohmed Reda), 1955–
Trade and empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: roots of British domination/M.Reda Bhacker.
p. cm.—(Exeter Arabic and Islamic series)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-415-07997-7
1. Oman—Commerce—History. 2. Oman—Foreign economic relations—Great Britain. 3. Great Britain—Foreign economic relations—Oman.
I. Title. II. Series.
HF3765.B43 1992
337.4105353–dc20 91–47666
CIP

Dedicated with love and gratitude to Batool A.Ali Salman and Bhacker Habib Murad, my parents, first among my teachers.

Contents

Figures, Maps and Tables

FIGURES

MAPS

TABLES

Preface

One of the main objects of this book is to examine how and why the Omani international port of Muscat, which during the eighteenth century had dominated the commercial activity of the western Indian Ocean region, reverted to a forgotten backwater by the middle of the twentieth. In doing so, two interrelated topics are considered: the role of Muscati rulers and of various mercantile communities in Oman's commercial expansion at Zanzibar during the nineteenth century; and the factors that led to the initial rise of the Albusaidis in East Africa followed by the causes of their decline as a result of the interplay of internal Omani politics and external pressures.

The extent to which British policy was responsible for turning the once powerful rulers of Oman into proxies dependent on Britain by the last decades of the nineteenth century is analysed. This is reviewed against the backdrop of internal Omani politics and regional factors, the most important of which was the Wahhabi/Saudi threat not only to Oman but to all tribal principalities of the Arabian Peninsula. The book also accounts for the fortunes of the Ya'ariba (the ruling Dynasty in Oman before the Albusaid) in Albusaidi times, a topic hitherto sorely neglected by most modern Western writers and Arab historians.

The loss of influence by Omani rulers by the end of the nineteenth century has been conventionally interpreted as coinciding with the decline of commercial activities at Muscat. This study adduces contrary evidence to show that these activities continued throughout the nineteenth century in Muscat and, initially, were crucial in providing the impetus for the phenomenal commercial expansion at Zanzibar. Even before the British-sponsored dismemberment of the 'Omani State' in 1861, it was Muscati rulers who had lost any influence that they may previously have held in the regional Indian Ocean trade. That influence had, in any event, derived from their intimate links with members of mercantile communities from India who had been long-time residents of Muscat. As Britain intervened

more and more in Omani affairs, these 'Omanis', for long active in Oman's regional commercial activities, were replaced by other traders who, although again from India, were now associated solely with British rather than Omani interests.

Historical studies on nineteenth century East Africa and Oman have tended, in their rigid compartmentalisation of reserving East Africa for Africanists and Oman for Arabists, to give a distorted picture and an often incomplete interpretation of the connections between the two. As a result of the failure to appreciate the effective integration of the two areas in a single entity, and the need to study events contemporaneously and concomitantly, the rise of Zanzibar has been attributed to the 'far-sighted policies' of the Omani ruler Sa'îd b Sultân (r. 1806–56). Moreover, the transfer of Said's court to Zanzibar in the 1830s is frequently characterised as a move from a position of strength after the Omani ruler had allegedly consolidated his power in the Gulf.

In fact, Said's reign, throughout its duration, was plagued with dissensions among Omani and Swahili communities in East Africa as well as among the tribes in Oman. And contrary to what has been alleged, his move to Zanzibar, far from being part of a grand design seeking to establish an Omani 'empire', was a desperate attempt to save what commercial links remained to Muscat not only in East Africa but in the Indian Ocean region as a whole. In the final analysis, the move was the inevitable consequence of the seizure by Britain during the time of his father, Sultân b Ahmad (r. 1793–1804), of considerable powers and privileges that Muscat had previously enjoyed in India. By 1840, the need to shift the focus to Zanzibar had become urgent when the gaze of both Britain and France, hungry for new conquests, fell upon those territories in Africa which the Omani ruler had hitherto perceived to be under his suzerainty.

Besides attempting to give a more complete portrayal of the Omani-African links, firstly through an historical overview, and secondly by a study of internal events and dynamics taking place coterminously in Oman and East Africa, this book also analyses the underlying reasons for the inability of Muscati rulers to resist the external British challenge and their ensuing dependency upon Britain. The way the aforementioned factors were to affect the subsequent development of Oman is shown to have derived from the economic, political and social Muscati rulers to the British, aggravated by a lack of viable Omani dislocations which emanated as much from the subordination of institutions, as from the personal ambitions of Omani tribal and religious leaders.

Apart from Arab geographers' and historians' accounts, extensive use and reinterpretation of Omani chronicles and *dîwâns* (poetical

compilations, correctly *dawâwîn*) have been made throughout the study. Contemporary narratives of travellers to Oman and East Africa have also been widely cited. The main archival sources consulted are the Zanzibar Archives in Tanzania, the India Office and Public Records Office in London and the United States Archives published in book form or on microfilm. In addition, information obtained in fieldwork by gathering oral traditions and conducting numerous interviews in East Africa, Oman and India between 1981 and 1989 has also been incorporated.

Acknowledgements

Although they cannot all be listed, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the many individuals whose advice, assistance and criticism have made this study possible. First and foremost, I wish to extend my thanks to the Government of Oman for giving me leave to pursue my studies and for funding part of my research. Without the backing of H.E. Yusuf b Alawi and H.H. Sayyid Haitham b Tariq, Minister and Undersecretary of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs respectively, this book could not have been completed. My thanks to both of them for their understanding and support.

I would like to record here the debt I owe to the late Professor Tom Johnstone who, as a teacher and personal friend, encouraged me during my last year at the London School of Oriental and African Studies in 1980 to embark upon a doctorate project. Although I started my research in 1981, by the time work obligations in Oman permitted me to return to study at Oxford, Professor Johnstone had unfortunately passed away, a great loss to all who knew him and to the field of Omani studies.

I am grateful to all my three supervisors who, at various times, guided my research at Oxford: to Dr Roger Owen, a fellow old Bryanstonian, for 'launching me on my career' at St Antony's College, and to Professor Wilfred Madelung, especially for his insights on the Shi'i and Isma'ili aspects of my work. My special thanks and appreciation go to my main supervisor, Dr John Wilkinson, for his constant encouragement, invaluable advice and guidance.

Numerous teachers, colleagues and friends have contributed their constructive criticisms and useful suggestions throughout my research. Of these I would like to make a special mention of the following: Professors Charles Beckingham, Malcolm Yapp, K.N. Chaudhuri, Jawad b Jafar al-Khaburi; Drs Calvin Allen, Christine Nicholls and Garang Mehta; and Albert Hourani, Mustafa Muhammad Said, Abdul Rahman Siddique, Eugenic Lucas, Chizuko Tominaga and my wife Bernadette

who, despite her many domestic and professional duties, found the time to undertake the enormous task of proofreading and editing.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the many librarians, archivists and officers whose institutions are mentioned in the Bibliography, for their help and assistance in locating and obtaining often obscure material. Deserving of a special mention are Rosamund Campbell, Gillian Grant and Diana Ring of St Antony's College.

Finally, for the warm hospitality and friendship extended to me during my trip to East Africa, I am grateful to Ali b Nasir al-Ma'wali; Hammadi Omar, Director of the Zanzibar Archives; Abdul Rahman Muhammad Juma of the Zanzibari Ministry of Information, Culture and Sport; and Shaykh Salih b Salim al-Hadrami of Pemba.

Conventions and abbreviations

CONVENTIONS

A standard transliteration system is used for Arabic, Omani, Swahili, Persian and Indian words (Ar., Om., Sw., Per., In., respectively) which are set in italics, but, like names, are transliterated only when they first appear in the text. The transliteration is based on the system used by the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* except for jîm and qâf which are denoted by j and q respectively. In addition, no italics have been used to show doubleletter transliterations (e.g. gh and not *gh* for Ghayn). Elongated vowels are shown by [ˆ]. Hamza is shown by [‘] and is usually not transliterated when coming at the beginning of a word. ‘Ayn is denoted by [‘] or [‘]. Ta marbuta is indicated after a long alif (e.g. salât) and sometimes, for better reading, when followed by an alif lâm (e.g. al-Qasîdat al-Qudsîya). Alif maqsûra at the end of a word is not shown (e.g. Nizwa and not Nizwâ). Spellings given reflect local usages. English spelling is used for those proper names that have a recognised standard English (thus Sohar and not Suhâr). A for Abu (father of), b for ibn (son of) and B for Bani or Banu (sons of, in a tribal sense) are used in construction with proper names. Recognised plural forms such as ‘ulama are used but more frequently plurals are indicated by the addition of s to the singular (e.g. Shaykhs and not Shuyûkh). ‘The Gulf is used for the Perso-Arabic, Arabian or Persian Gulf. ‘Sayyid’ is not used as a title before names and ‘Sultan’ describes the post-1861 rulers when the term officially came into use. Both terms are explained in the text and in the Glossary.

Maria Theresa Dollar (MT$) a silver coin also known as the Austrian Crown, *thaler, Qirsh* or *Riyal,* was current in the Indian Ocean trading area throughout the nineteenth century. In Oman it was used, together with the Indian Rupee, as recently as the early 1970’s when it was replaced by the Omani Riyal. Its value at different times is explained in the Notes.

ABBREVIATIONS

See the Bibliography for details on Omani and Archival works.

al-Adnaniya	'Al-Sahîfat al-'Adnânîya', Ibn Ruzaiq, 1258/1842, BL Or. 6569
AHS	*African Historical Studies*
Anon. MS.	'Anonymous Titleless History of Oman', MS BL Add. 23,343
BL	British Library
BM	British Museum
BS	'Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government', at IO
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
Dissn	Dissertation
EALB	East African Literature Bureau
EAPH	East Africa Publishing House
EI2	*Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edn)
EIHC	Essex Institute Historical Collections
al-Fath	'Al-fath al-mubîn fî sîrat al-sâdat âl-bû-sa'îdiyîn', MS Cambridge Uni. Lib. Add. 2892; tr. Badger G.P., 1871
FO	Foreign Office Records at PRO
FOCP	Foreign Office Confidential Print at PRO
Foster-Factories	'The English Factories in India', 1906–27
Guillain-Documents	'Documents sur l'histoire, la geographic et le commerce de l'Afrique Orientale', Guillain C., 1856
IJAHS	*International Journal of African Historical Studies*
IJMES	*International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*
Int.	Interview with
IO	India Office, London
IOR	India Office Records, London
JAH	*Journal of African History*
JOS	*Journal of Oman Studies*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JRGS	*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*
Juhaina	'Juhainat al-akhbâr fî ta`rîkh Zanjbâr', alMughairî, 1979

Kashf	'Kashf al-Ghumma al-jâmi' li akhbâr al-`umma', attributed to its copier Sirhân al-Izkawî, BL Ms. Or. 8076.
Khabari Lamu	'Khabari Lamu', Shaykh Faraji al-Lamuy, ed. Hichens W., 1938, 'Lamu Chronicle'
Kitab al-Zunuj	'Kitâb al-Zunûj', text and Italian tr., Cerulli E., 1957
Lib.	Library
lit.	literally
al-Murjibi	'Maisha ya Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi yaani Tippu Tip…', tr. Erode H., 1907; tr. and ed. Whiteley W.H., 1959; tr. and ed. Bontinck F., 1974
MES	*Middle East Studies*
MNHC	Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, Muscat
Morice-Projet	'Projet d'un Etablissement sur la côte orientale d'Afrique', 1777, tr. Freeman-Grenville G.S.P., 1965, 'The French at Kilwa Island'
Nahda	[in the main text]=Ibadi reform or revival movement [in the Notes]='Nahdat al-a'yân bi hurrîyat 'Umân', al-Sâlimî, Muhammad
NEMA	'New England Merchants in Africa', eds Bennett N.R. and Brooks G.E., 1965
Or.	Oriental
PAM	Political Agent, Muscat
PAZ	Political Agent, Zanzibar
Pr.	Press
PRO	Public Record Office, London
PRPG	Political Resident/Residency in the Persian Gulf
al-Qahtaniya	'Al-Sahîfat al-Qahtânîya', Ibn Ruzaiq, 1269/1852, Rhodes House MS Afr. S.3.
Qisas	'Qisas wa Akhbâr jarat bi 'Umân', al-Ma'walî, BM Ms Or. 6568
al-Qudsîya	'Al-Qahîdat al-Qudsîya al-nûrânîya fî al-manâqib al-'Adnânîya', Ibn Ruzaiq, BM Ms Or. 6565, vol. 2
r.	Reigned
RC	*Revue Coloniale*
SD	'The East African Coast: Select Documents', ed. Freeman-Grenville, G.S.P., 1962a

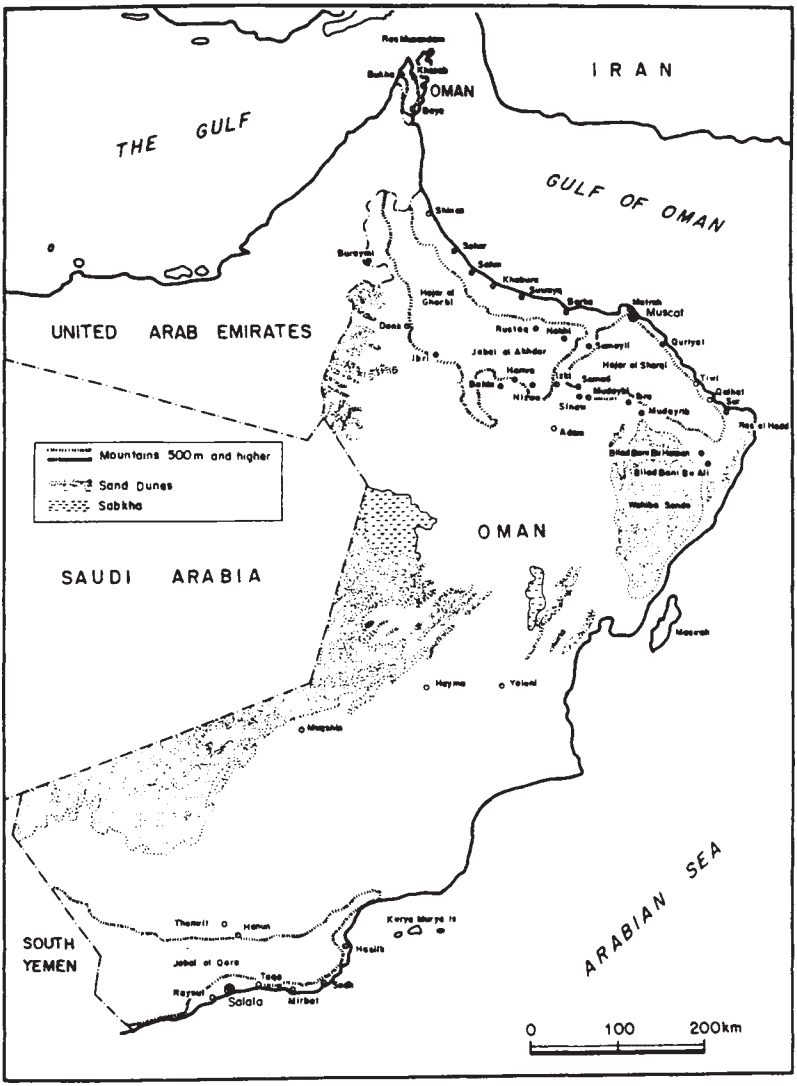
al-Shua'a	'Al-Shu'â' al-shâ`i' bi al-lam'ân fî dhikr A`immat 'Umân', Ibn Ruzaiq, Cambridge Uni. Lib. Ms
Tarikh al-Mazari'	'Ta`rîkh wilâyat al-Mazâri'a fî Ifrîqîya al-sharqîya', al-Mazrû'î, Amîn b 'Alî, n.d.
TBGS	*Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*
th.	thesis
TLSB	*Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*
TNR	*Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika) Notes and Records*
Tuhfa	'Tuhfat al-a'ayân bi sîrat ahl 'Umân', 'Abd-allâh al-Sâlimî, 1927
Uni.	University
US/Arch	US Archives (published or on microfilm)
Waqayi'	'Waqâ`i'-i manâzil-i Rûm', Abdul Qadir, Khwaja, tr. and ed. Hasan M., 1968, 'A Diary of a Journey to Constantinople'
ZA	Zanzibar Archives, Zanzibar

Table 1 The Albusaidi and other rulers of Oman and Zanzibar, 1749–1970

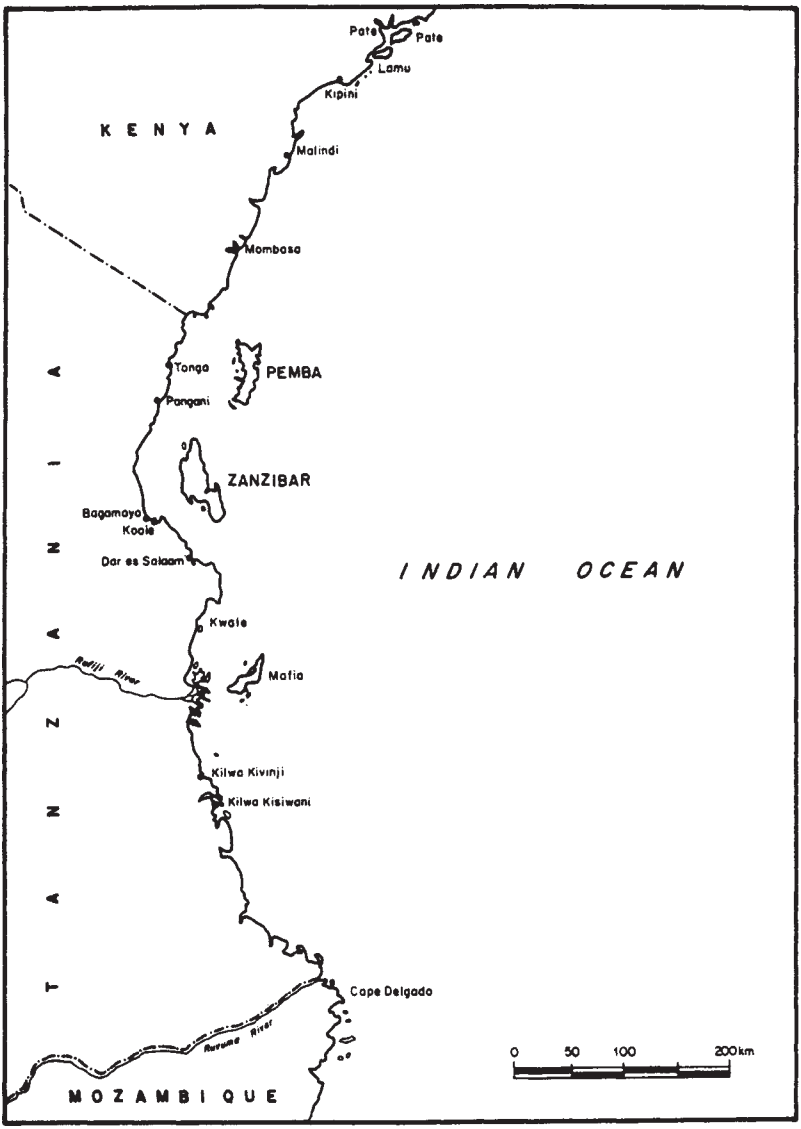
Oman		*Zanzibar*	
	Im. Aḥmad b Sa'îd		(1749–83)
	Im. Sa'îd b Aḥmad		(1783–89)
	Ḥamad b Sa'îd		(1789–92)
	Sulṭân b Aḥmad		(1792–1804)
	Badr b Sayf		(1804–6)
	Sa'îd b Sulṭân		(1806–56)
Thuwaynî b Sa'îd	(1856–66)	Mâjid b Sa'îd	(1856–70)
Sâlim b Thuwaynî	(1866–8)		
Im. 'Azzân b Qays	(1868–71)		
Turkî b Sa'îd	(1871–88)	Barghash b Sa'îd	(1870–88)
Fayṣal b Turkî	(1888–1913)	Khalîfa b Sa'îd	(March 1888–February 1890)
		'Alî b Sa'îd	(February 1890–March 1893)
		Ḥamad b Thuwaynî	(March 1893–August 1896)
		Ḥamûd b Muḥammad	(August 1896–July 1902)
		'Alî b Ḥamûd	(July 1902–December 1911)
		Khalîfa b Ḥârib	(December 1911–October 1960)
Taymûr b Fayṣal	(1913–32)		
& Im. Sâlim b Râshid al-Kharûṣî	(1913–20)		
Sa'îd b Taymûr	(1932–70)		
& Im. Muḥammad b 'Abdallâh al-Khalîlî	(1920–54)		
& Im. Ghâlib b 'Alî al-Hinâ`î	(1954–5)	'Abdallâh b Khalîfa	(October 1960–July 1963)
		Jamshîd b 'Abdallâh	(July 1963–January 1964)
Qâbûs b Sa'îd	(1970–)		

Notes: Im.=Imam; all rulers are Albusaidis except where indicated

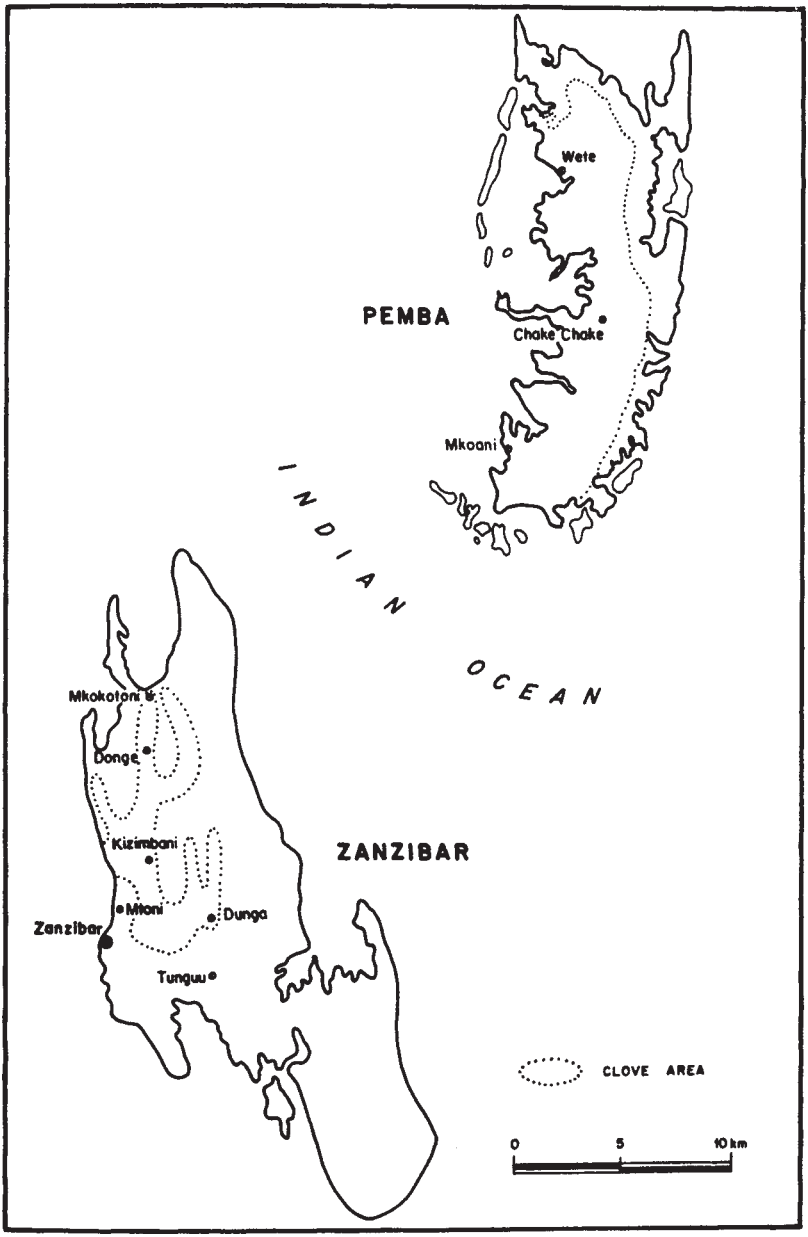
Sources: Anon. Ms, 165–71; Kashf, 155; Juhaina, 136–8 and 260–480; IOR/P/381/33, Seton to Bombay, 9 July 1802; IOR/ 15/6/437–540 and IOR/ 15/1/719/3–6 and IOR/ 15/1/720–1 for Administration Reports, 1873–1947; ZA/*Zanzibar Gazette* and British Colonial Reports; ZA/AA1–5 series; Bathurst R.D., 1967, 323–5; Beckingham C.F., 1941, 257–60



Map 1 The modern Sultanate of Oman



Map 2 The modern East African coast



Map 3 Zanzibar and Pemba

Introduction

Maritime trade, Imamate Government and tribalism are three of the most pervasive themes in the history of Oman. Whilst the outlines of the Omani tribal structure, like those of long-distance commerce, antedate the advent of Islam, the final form of tribalism has been strongly influenced by the political dimensions of the Imamate Government following the rise of Islam. Thus, of the three above-cited themes, maritime trade has been the most persistent and resilient and has had a more lasting impact than the other two as a unifying economic and cultural force for the people of Oman.

Recent archaeological evidence puts back the origins of the impact of maritime trade on Oman to as early as the sixth millenium BC when parts of Oman are thought to have established commercial exchange links with the coastal inhabitants of the area known by the Greeks as the Erythraean Sea.[1] This area included the borderlands of the Arabian Sea and its two extensions of the Red Sea and the Gulf which penetrate the Afro-Asian land mass. During the Islamic era, the effect of maritime trade was such that the Ibadi religious-cum-tribal structure which gave rise to the Imamate Government could not have implanted its roots in Oman had it not, in its initial phases, received financial support from Oman's mercantile communities.

Being by nature a long-distance phenomenon, maritime trade bridges geographical and cultural boundaries and criss-crosses established commercial networks and political frontiers. In this phenomenon, Omani ports, forming part of the Indian Ocean region, have played a fluctuating commercial and political role on a local, regional or global scale depending on Oman's own political condition and its interaction with internal and external influences.

Although the Indian Ocean region has always been characterised as having culturally distinct entities—Perso-Arabic/Islamic Near and Middle Eastern, Hindu and Muslim Indian, and Chinese—underlying

this there has also always been an inherent impression that the Indian Ocean has an independent and coherent force giving it a distinct sense of identity and sphere of influence. Parallels to the Braudelian conception of the Mediterranean Sea here are only too obvious.[2] From a 'longue durée' Braudelian perspective, before the introduction of mechanised maritime transport in the Indian Ocean in the late nineteenth century, this sense of identity was further reinforced by climatic conditions, most notable among which was the influence of a single global variable, the wind system known as *mawsims* (monsoons). The sailing pattern and consequently the trading seasons of the region were fixed with fine precision to coincide with the prevailing winds which could be gauged with remarkable accuracy by contemporary sailors and navigators.

It is as part of this Indian Ocean regional system that Omani commerce, having undergone a considerable development at Muscat, branched out during the second half of the eighteenth century to reap its share from the East African trade expansion which from that time was converging on to Zanzibar. That this East African commerce was to reach its zenith in the late 1870s and early 1880s was not solely due to the 'far-sighted' policies of Zanzibari merchants or Muscati rulers.[3] Nor was it a consequence of an active or deliberate 'African policy' pursued by Oman's mercantile or political leaders.[4] It was the result of a complex concatenation of geographical conditions, historical developments, religious considerations and economic factors. Among these, as the substance of this study will show, the economic and political situation of Oman combined with the increasing involvement of West European nations and the United States of America in the affairs of the Indian Ocean were to play a major part.

The legacy to which the Albusaidi rulers of the nineteenth century acceded can be traced back to the foundation of the Portuguese seaborne empire in the Indian Ocean in the early sixteenth century. One of the most important elements introduced by the Portuguese was their practice of conducting trade by warfare while controlling maritime commercial routes through the use of force. Among the ports involved in the Indian Ocean trade at that time, only Muscat, which by the end of the sixteenth century had become a prosperous commercial town,[5] together with a number of ports in Imperial China, had sufficient resources to construct defences in order to withstand Portuguese assaults.[6] With the rise of the Ya'ariba Dynasty in Oman and the expulsion of the Portuguese from Muscat by Sultân b Sayf al-Ya'rubî on 23 January 1650,[7] Oman was to enter a period of more than a century of maritime expansion, at the expense of the Portuguese, in India as well as in East Africa. In the same

way as the Portuguese were driven out of Muscat with the collaboration of Banyan merchants resident at that port, so it was the continuation of similar cooperation between Muscat's rulers and merchants hailing from India that was responsible for the nineteenth century commercial development of both Muscat and Zanzibar.

In the pre-nineteenth century commercial field, as the monopoly over the protective costs of the Portuguese perfected 'peddling' trade, to use Steensgaard's terminology, was being supplemented by the newly introduced structure of the 'company' trade by the European East India Companies,[8] the Ya'ariba rulers of Oman, in the political sphere, were receiving positive assistance from Omani and Indian residents of East Africa in their joint struggle against the Portuguese.[9] Following the undermining of Portuguese influence, the eighteenth century Albusaidis (correctly *`Âlbûsa'îdîyûn* or collectively *al-`Âlbûsa'îd*) continued the practice adopted by the Ya'ariba of using both systems of trade. During the nineteenth century it was the English East India Company that took it upon itself, as it did in many other aspects affecting Omani commerce, to force Omani merchants to abandon the protective costs system by describing it as 'piracy'.

Close links between Oman and communities originating in Oman, which had a long history of settlement on the East African coast, can be traced back centuries before the advent of the sixteenth century to at least as far as the first century AD.[10] But it is important to bear in mind, in the context of an organisational backdrop of Omani society, that these communities, once settled in East Africa, continued to function within the familiar Omani tribal structure safeguarding their administrative and judicial independence. As in Oman, these communal or tribal groupings settled their own disputes and had a consensus that the *tamîma* or leader of each tribe or group should be their representative and spokesman before the ruler of the time whether he happened to be an Imam or a Sultan.

Such an essentially Omani tribal system was organised on the basis of regions of influence (*dâr;* pl. *diyâr*) for each tribe or group whose territorial limits were recognised and respected by all others. In such a system, the notion of a central government was non-existent. Thus, throughout Oman's history, one encounters ethnic-cum-religious groups within the Omani population, such as the Baluchi mercenaries, the Makrani Zadgalis, the Lawatiya, Banyan, Khoja and 'Ajam (Persian) merchants, the imported slaves, or more recently the Dhofaris, the Jibbalis and the Zanzibaris, originating from communities which did not belong to the so-called 'core' tribes. But like these tribes, each community had its own recognised quarters and administered its own affairs on quasi-tribal lines. Although these communities are now more intermingled,

they continue to the present day to safeguard jealously their distinct identities. On the other hand, some of their members, having been subjected to massive acculturation processes such as uniform school curricula or political trends such as Arabism, have recently joined the older established tribes in their search to give a more 'Arabised' camouflage to their existence in the historically cosmopolitan world of Oman. However, even among those who have chosen to adhere to their former loyalties, some have been obliged to describe themselves in a tribal fashion, thus giving rise to *nisbas* (clan or locality affiliative name; correctly *`ansâb*) like al-Bulushî or al-Lawâtâ.

By functioning on the principle of *'asabîya* (tribal or group cohesion), each tribe or group could theoretically change its allegiance as it best suited its interests at a particular point in time. During the periods of Ibadi Imamate governments, the Imam derived his authority as leader ideologically from the constitutional powers of the *sharî'a* (Islamic Law) while in practice he relied for his financial and physical support on his tribal and communal followers. Such a system of government perpetuated the tribal system of organisation in which the Imam assumed the role of a *tamima* and was thus no more than a 'primus inter pares'.[11] In the more recent era of the Sultanates, though the position of the rulers lacked a *sharia*-based complexion, the Sultans were nevertheless, like the Imams, totally dependent internally on their tribal and communal following. However, whether under Imamate or Sultanate rule, mercantile communities, including non-Muslim ones, lived and conducted their commercial activities in Oman's international ports, based successively at Sohar, Qalhat and Muscat, throughout the Islamic period. Even during Imamate times, the *mushrikûn* (polytheists) among these communities, such as the Hindu Banyans, were tolerated at these international ports where reciprocal taxation arrangements applied to them under *`amân* (protection) agreements in the same way as they theoretically affected Omanis living abroad.[12]

It will be quickly deduced from the preceding account that, at least from the early Islamic times, Oman has never been a monolithic Arab tribal entity. If the core of Omani 'nationality', as some writers would argue, has been the Ibadi-cum-tribal identity of the *dâkhilîya* (interior),[13] then the peripheral plural society on the Omani coast involved in maritime trade cannot be regarded as less 'Omani'. Throughout Oman's history, the coast and the interior have always been interdependent for their very survival. Indeed, as far as tribalism is concerned, the tribal system, as Khazanov has shown, can never be regarded as a pre-state formation but a final form having no potential by itself for further development.[14] For the Omani 'national' system, maritime trade, at times accompanied by

foreign conquest, has been an integral part without which Oman as a 'state' could never have existed.

From a demographic angle, only about 55 per cent of Oman's population is said to be Ibadi.[15] Therefore, nearly half the number of Oman's people adhere to religions or other Islamic groups that are allegedly not part of the strict *dakhiliya* definition of Omani 'nationality'. This religious or cultural plurality of Omani society has hitherto not received the attention it deserves primarily because Omani history has been written from a *dakhiliya* point of view using predominantly Ibadi works. Written sources for a coastal perspective of Omani history are unfortunately non-existent. But there is a considerable amount of evidence, albeit fragmentary, for at least the commercial aspects of the coast in travellers' narratives which, when added to a careful sifting of oral traditions, give us a reasonable picture of Oman's ethnic-cum-religious communities that make up the coastal component of Oman's population. As far as oral traditions are concerned, as Spear has pointed out, 'no serious history can ignore local peoples' own perceptions of their past'[16] nor indeed the 'national state' to which they feel they belong.

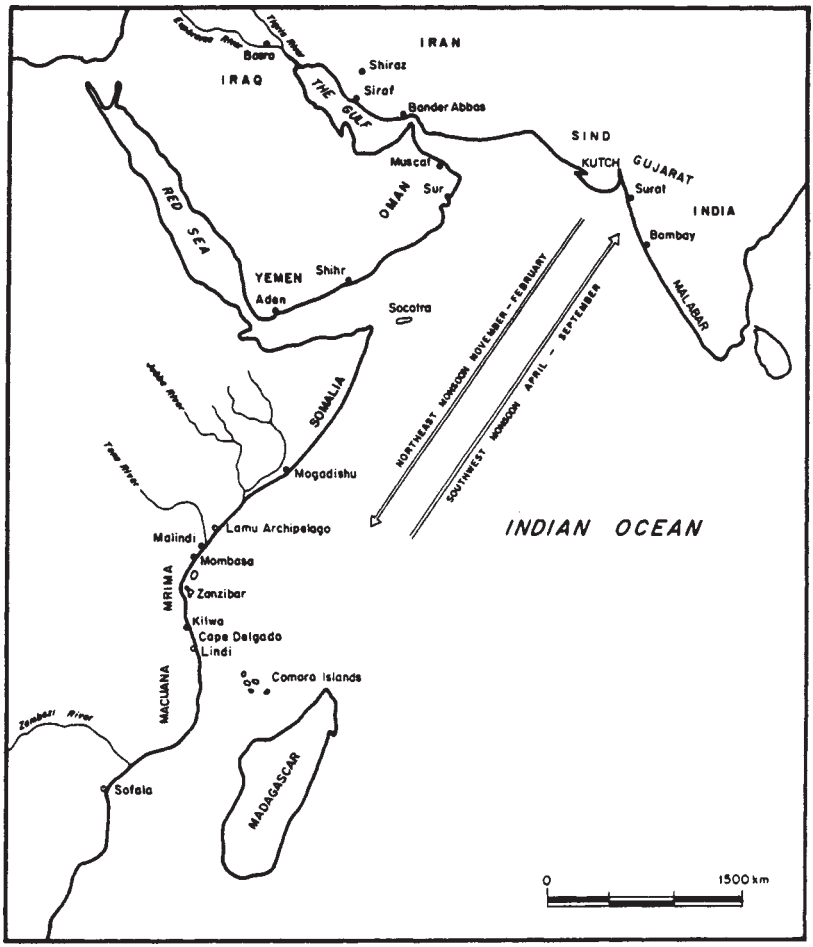
Notwithstanding the exaggerated emphasis by historians placed upon the Arab tribal aspect of Oman's culture, the few anthropological studies so far carried out in Oman have come up, not surprisingly, with the conclusion that 'Oman is an internally varied and highly complex culture area…[where] cultural pluralism is today very marked…[and where] cultural traditions persist [not] because of ignorance of alternatives [but] because people believe in them and obtain satisfaction from them'.[17] This insight from a non-historical discipline into contemporary Omani society has application nonetheless in an historical perspective.

As the central theme of this study will make clear, it was this age-old plurality in Oman's coastal culture engendering a tolerant attitude among the various communities of the cosmopolitan Omani society, whether in Arabia, India or Africa, that was behind the nineteenth century commercial expansion of Oman. It will be shown that it was the relationship of Muscati rulers with certain prominent Banyan and other Indian merchants resident at Muscat and regarded as 'Omani', which was primarily responsible for the phenomenal rise in commercial activity at both Muscat and Zanzibar. Indeed, if we invoke the core and periphery theory describing Oman's 'national' identity, then the nineteenth century development at Muscat followed by the move to Zanzibar was no less than a revolution in that the so-called traditional

core was pushed back to the peripheral boundary of the newly established centres.

As Omani commerce developed it received a boost at the beginning of the nineteenth century paradoxically from the suppression of the European slave trade. The surplus slave labour and Oman's own tribal and communal workers were both exploited for agricultural and commercial purposes such as the cultivation of cloves in East Africa and dates in Oman, the gathering of highly sought-after commodities such as ivory, pearls and cowries or the production of textiles. With the rise in demand for Omani-produced commodities and a corresponding decline in the cost of manufactured goods imported through Omani ports, the dynamics of a profitable development of commercial or commercially oriented manufactured products and agricultural activities were set in motion in Omani-controlled territories in Arabia as well as in Africa. The result was a multiplication of the existing trade routes and the introduction of new ones. As the Omani economy as a whole was progressively absorbed into the world economy, the frontiers of Zanzibari-controlled trade extended to regions as far apart as present-day Somalia to the north, Zaire to the west and Cape Delgado to the south while local African and Swahili leaders recognised Albusaidi suzerainty in parts of Kenya, mainland Tanzania, Uganda and even in certain areas of the Comoro Islands.

Nonetheless, once Oman had entered into treaty relations with Western powers, such as the United States of America, which were regarded by Britain as rivals, and once Oman's commercial development came to be perceived as a threat to the British position in the Indian Ocean, British authorities naturally responded unequivocally. The methods Britain used to curb the Omani challenge were based partly on the intensification of the British antislavery crusade coupled with the manipulation by British officials of the 'Indian' associates of Muscat's rulers. But these external reasons influencing the eventual subordination of Oman were bolstered to a considerable extent by domestic and regional factors which rendered Omani leaders incapable of resisting what was effectively a British threat to their own sovereignty and independence. Prominent among these more localised factors were the Wahhabi/Saudi incursions in Oman; the internal opposition to Albusaidi rule; the quarrels among the Albusaidis themselves; the lack of transformation in Oman's own institutions in order to meet the new challenges; and the personal ambitions of certain Omani political and religious leaders.



Map 4 The western Indian Ocean