REVIEW ESSAY

Mobility, Migration, Credit, and Slavery in the Indian Ocean World

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Thomas F. McDow. 2018. *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean*. Athens: Ohio University Press. 378 pp.

Sandra Rowoldt Shell. 2018. *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 352 pp.

Thomas F. McDow's *Buying Time* and Sandra Rowoldt Shell's *Children of Hope* explore different types of mobility and migration in the Indian Ocean World. McDow, currently associate professor of history at the Ohio State University, begins with the story of Juma bin Salim, who signed a contract to deliver 10,500 pounds of ivory to Zanzibar to Ladha Damji, a Hindu financier and creditor. 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" (p. 2). McDow skillfully employs an underutilized source, Arabic contracts, to illuminate a bustling world of credit, trade, and mobility. Shell, currently Senior Research Associate at Cory Library, Rhodes University narrates the gut-wrenching story of children who were enslaved in Ethiopia, "taken to the coast and crammed into dhows that were to ferry them across the Red Sea to further bondage in Arabia" (p. 1), and rescued by the British navy. Shortly after their rescue, missionaries interviewed the children and recorded and preserved their stories. Sixty-four of them then went to Lovedale Institution in South Africa, a Free Church of Scotland mission. McDow and Shell, through able use of overlooked or marginalized sources, provide excellent analyses of the Indian Ocean World.

Buying Time analyzes how credit and mobility "knit together a vast region, extending from the deserts of Arabia to the equatorial forests of Africa's Congo watershed" (p. 5). McDow pays particular attention to five themes—time, debt, mobility, kinship, and environment—as he discusses the western Indian Ocean World during the long nineteenth century. He begins with a consideration of why people in nineteenth century eastern Arabia migrated to East Africa.

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Many migrants were "people of modest means from interior towns, not wealthy traders from port cities" (p. 26). McDow chides scholars for creating a false dichotomy between supposedly static interior societies and enterprising coastal people. Arabs from the interior migrated in large numbers, and for many Omani people Africa became a refuge and a source of wealth. Many migrants arrived in Zanzibar, a city in transition. The customs master, due to his access to cash and patronage networks, was the city's apex creditor. Indeed, Jairam Shivji, one customs master, was the wealthiest man in East Africa because of his position and extensive commercial network. Numerous people relied on credit, often supplied by commercial firms in India.

The presence of Omani rulers in East Africa also proved important. The Omani sultan traveled between East Africa and Arabia to "settle disputes, to protect his interests, and to ensure his rule would continue" (p. 66). McDow offers detailed analysis of how Seyyid Said bin Sultan's sons jockeyed for power before and after his death. Because of British intervention, the Oman and Zanzibar sultanates were separated. Turki bin Said eventually came to power in Oman due to "his ability to move in the gulf and the western Indian Ocean and his use of the overlapping networks of wealth, clientship, and imperial power in this broader world" (p. 84). Barghash bin Said ruled in Zanzibar. Both Turki and Barghash had been exiles who returned to claim power, but they were not the only claimants for power in the Indian Ocean World. As McDow notes, "during the second half of the nineteenth century, debt and mobility were critically important to structuring political conflict and shifting power dynamics throughout the western Indian Ocean" (p. 215). Salih bin Ali, for example, "tapped relatives to use the credit markets in Zanzibar to assist the rebellion or pay for it afterwards" (p. 243). In sum, Salih bin Ali used Zanzibar's wealth in his attempt to reform the government of Muscat. At another time, McDow observes, he might have been successful, but "even this wily, sagacious, and tough Harthi sheik could not defeat the British empire" (p. 259).

McDow also explores how migrants connected the East African interior to the Indian Ocean. "The process of transforming upland East Africa into an Indian Ocean World was not a grand strategy implemented from Zanzibar, Muscat, Bombay, or London. It was the result of thousands of individuals trying to make the best from limited options" (p. 87). Because many scholars focus on return migration to Oman, they often overlook the migrants who set up shop in the interior and, by so doing, made continental Africa part of their larger world. Many towns in the interior were Indian Ocean outposts, and people used their mobility to replicate coastal society. Any study of migration should consider kinship, and McDow does so by focusing on Tippu Tip, a trader who had a network of kin unmatched by any contemporary. This was particularly important because "Arab kinship was central to the organizational logic of the caravan trade" (p. 128). In his discussion of a dhow sailing on Lake Victoria, McDow presents additional evidence of people replicating the coast in the interior. Songoro, the coastal trader who built the dhow, created a second Zanzibar on Lake Victoria and consequently made the interior part of the Indian Ocean World.

In his exploration of slavery and manumission before 1873, McDow analyzes a slave trader who also "freed many of his slaves, founded a mosque, and owned houses and farms to support the mosque and his freed slaves" (p. 145). A simple distinction between slave and free, McDow cautions, "is not the best way to understand a slave's position. Like free individuals,

slaves existed in hierarchies of dependency" (p. 147). Unexpectedly, given the increasingly powerful British presence, British treaties tightened restrictions on the transport and sale of slaves. The British also pressured Barghash to sign a treaty to "abolish the trade in slaves from Zanzibar, close all slave markets, protect liberated slaves, and prohibit Indians from owning slaves" (p. 165). When Barghash refused to sign, the British threatened to blockade Zanzibar. This treaty introduced new layers of bureaucracy in an attempt to close loopholes and regulate mobility in the Indian Ocean World. Nevertheless, "Africans, Arabs, and Indians found ways to forestall its effects while maintaining the fluidity that had long been a hallmark of the western Indian Ocean" (p. 168). Manumission and mobility of freed slaves, McDow asserts, "highlighted the intersection of Islamic law and imperial interest on the one hand, and the congruence of social and economic ties between former slaves and former masters on the other" (p. 188). McDow's fascinating volume, through his use of often-overlooked sources, thus skillfully illuminates a lively world of credit, trade, and mobility in which people migrated from one place to another, circulated among many different places, formed networks of credit and kinship, navigated different polities, transplanted society and culture, and waged rebellions. These flows of people, goods, and ideas marked a world in ferment that nonetheless narrowed throughout the nineteenth century due to the burgeoning presence of imperial actors such as the British.

Sandra Rowoldt Shell complements McDow's analysis of mobility and migration in the Indian Ocean World by examining a group of children enslaved in Ethiopia, who were intercepted by the British navy and eventually relocated to Lovedale Institution in South Africa. Like McDow, who drew on largely underutilized Arabic contracts, Shell also found an important body of overlooked sources, specifically the narratives missionaries recorded about the children's lives. Plenty of information about the children existed in the Cory Library and other South African libraries and archives, but it had been unexamined for decades. Shell employs quantitative methods and prosopography—"a collection of biographies that allows for the study of groups of people through systematic analysis of their collective characteristics" (p. 3)—to tell the story of the Oromo children. She correctly contends that these sources add new dimensions to the study of slavery. For example, in contrast to the emphasis of Atlantic World scholars on the Middle Passage, scholars of slavery in the Indian Ocean World need to be more attentive to the "the scarcely documented first-passage experience" (p. 9).

Shell begins by discussing the children's memories of home. She first notes that the term Oromo "is used to describe the largest Cushite-speaking people of Ethiopia" (p. 18) and argues, with considerable justification, that the children's accounts "illuminate slavery and family structure as few sources have done" (p. 29). For one, their narratives "both confirm the general consensus on the youthfulness of the slave trade in the Horn of Africa and provide the sort of specific age detail not found elsewhere" (p. 33). At least fifteen percent of the children were sold into slavery by their family or their neighbors. Critically, "the relative levels of wealth and status of the Oromo families emerge as crossing all social strata, from the humblest level of servitude to the elevated thresholds of the local royal houses" (p. 50). In other words, slaves did not just come from the ranks of the poorest and humblest, and no class or group was safe from slave raiders. Most of the children suffered violence at the moment of their capture. Their

accounts offer considerable evidence of their torturous first passage, or the route from the point of capture to the coast. Treacherous mountain routes and increasing temperature extremes made their first passage "not only complex and convoluted but also indisputably longer than earlier thought" (p. 81). The children also reported many incidences of cruelty and abuse.

Shell argues, quite correctly, that scholars need to be more careful in their discussions of first passages and middle passages. Atlantic World historians, unsurprisingly, place considerable emphasis on the Middle Passage, but, in the Indian Ocean World, the middle passage was not necessarily as important. Case in point, once the children completed the first passage and arrived at the coast, slave traders loaded them into dhows in order to transport them to the Arabian Peninsula. The British intercepted these dhows in 1888 and 1889, and, consequently, "the middle-passage experiences of the Oromo slaves aboard the dhows lasted only a few hours" (p. 97). Even after their rescue, the ordeal of the first passage continued to scar the children, much in the same way the Middle Passage did to slaves in the Atlantic World. After liberating the children, British authorities placed them with Free Church of Scotland missionaries who decided the best home for them would be Lovedale Institution in South Africa. Their arrival at Lovedale "signaled a rare, unexpected link between South Africa and Ethiopia during the nineteenth century" (p. 130). In contrast to other scholars, who usually paint a critical picture of the missionaries, Shell offers a more a more balanced portrayal of life at Lovedale, including some examples of the lack of discrimination on the basis of skin color.

In *Buying Time*, McDow discussed many different types of migrants—some who traveled from Arabia to Africa and stayed, whereas others returned to their homes or continued to circulate throughout the Indian Ocean World. The Oromo, who "left Lovedale as literate adults, free to determine their own futures" (p. 157) faced similar choices about whether they wanted to return to their homelands, stay in South Africa, or move elsewhere. Attitudes about repatriation proved mixed. While a number of students repatriated, the Lovedale authorities "voiced misgivings about the wisdom of their repatriation, whether solo or in a group" (p. 164). Some of the Oromo stayed in South Africa, perhaps due to the fact that "the Oromo have long held a reputation for easy assimilation into other ethnicities and cultures, so settling in South Africa may not have been too much of a challenge. Nonetheless, assimilation would probably have been easier for the five who married South African spouses than for the three who married fellow Oromo" (p. 182). Shell contends that the Oromo made their mark in South Africa. They arrived as children, but, during their time at Lovedale, "redefined themselves as free, fully-fledged, self-determining adults" (p. 183). Indeed, "their triumph was their survival, coupled with their literacy, courage, initiative, and leadership in negotiating their return home" (p. 183). Shell also included five appendices: a lengthy discussion of the data, transcriptions of the Oromo narratives and maps showing their routes to the coast, a gazetteer of place names, an essay by one of the Oromo children written at Lovedale, and the repatriation questionnaire from 1903. Shell's excellent volume takes a long-overlooked set of sources—the narratives of children who were enslaved in Ethiopia, taken to the coast, loaded into dhows, intercepted by the British, and relocated to South Africa, where they redefined themselves as adults—and presents a compelling and fascinating story about slavery in the Indian Ocean World.

These two superb books speak to each other in many ways, some of which are outlined in this review, and also raise other ideas to consider. For one, both demonstrate what skillful scholars can do with overlooked or marginalized sources like Islamic financial documents (McDow) and the narratives of enslaved children (Shell). Both volumes critique the tendency to pay more attention to the Atlantic World and neglect the Indian Ocean World. As McDow notes, "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" (p. 6). Both authors explore continuities in patterns of unfree labor in both worlds as well as highlighting important differences. Shell, for example, constantly reminds readers that the first passage was far more traumatic for the Oromo children than their nearly nonexistent middle passage. Finally, the British played a very different role in each volume. British intervention initially compromised Barghash and Turki's rebellions and, once the two men gained power, the British were fickle allies at best. On the other hand, the Oromo children benefitted from British assistance based, in part, on long-standing nineteenth century British antislavery sentiment. These two depictions of the British highlight how various imperial powers squabbled with each other in the Indian Ocean World. In sum, *Buying Time* and *Children of Hope* succeed in enriching our understanding of slavery, credit, migration, and mobility in the Indian Ocean World and will be welcomed by anyone interested in these subjects.