

Omani Diplomacy and Maritime Trade in the Indian Ocean World, 1792-1856

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Abstract

When considering the dynamics of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean, many historians consider the British Empire the premier maritime power. Interestingly, England's greatest political and economic challenges in this resource-rich region arose not in Europe, but in Oman, a small state on the eastern fringes of the Arab world overlooking the Persian Gulf. Oman emerged as a thalassocracy during the reigns of Sultan bin Ahmad (r. 1792-1804) and Said bin Sultan (r. 1807-1856). Many scholars agree with Mohammed Reda Bhaker, who argues that England and other Western powers manipulated the Omani state to serve their economic goals, leading to its dissolution after 1856. In my research, however, I assess how the Albusaid dynasty set economic policies and engaged diplomatically with foreign and regional powers as Omani merchants engaged in trade along the coast of East Africa. I investigate the influence of Omani merchants and rulers in published primary sources like Vincenzo Maurizi's *History of Sayid Said* (1819) and Hamid ibn Ruzayq's *History of the Sayyids and Imams of Oman* (1871). These sources suggest a need to further investigate the economic liberalization by the Albusaid rulers as well as their relocation of their primary commercial center from Muscat to Zanzibar. I use treaties between Oman and other states to evaluate the purpose and effect of Omani diplomacy in the Indian Ocean world. Additionally, I use historical customs revenue data from Muscat and Zanzibar to assess the efficacy of Omani diplomacy over time. These sources allow me to assess what I consider to be Oman's under-appreciated contributions to the Indian Ocean world. In doing so, my research will contribute to conversations about the role of this regional power in the evolution of European imperialism and maritime commerce.

Keywords: Oman, Muscat, Diplomacy, Trade, Indian Ocean World, Zanzibar, Said bin Sultan, Persian Gulf, Colonialism

From the late-eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, the Omani state under the Albusaidi family created a powerful maritime empire that controlled much of the modern state of Oman, the east coast of Africa, and a number of port cities along the Persian Gulf.¹ During this time, European powers, the British and French in particular, pushed for influence in the Indian Ocean trade networks.² These encroachments drove the Omani state, first under the leadership of Sultan bin Ahmad (r. 1792-1804) and later under the leadership of his son, Said bin Sultan (r. 1806-1856), to compete with the European powers for influence in the wildly profitable world of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean. Historians have long focused on the European powers' use of Oman in their imperial machinations, but how did the Albusaidi rulers use Europe in their own bid for power in the Indian Ocean world? This research will respond to this question and, in doing so, will illuminate the ways in which Omani rulers expressed political and economic agency, used savvy diplomacy to achieve their goals, and acted independently in the face of European interests in the region.

Oman's political character during this period was defined mostly, if not entirely, by tribal affiliations. In this system, different tribes, each ruled by a tribal leader, or *tamima*, possessed areas of political and economic influence, or *diyaar*, which were to be respected by members of other tribes.³ Further, while there was a central leadership, first in the form of the Ibadhi *Imams* and then in the form of the Albusaidi *Sayyids*, they had no practical means to exercise their power independent of the tribal leaders. In this way, the rulers of the Omani state did not possess sovereignty over their territorial possessions; they possessed suzerainty which could be threatened at any time if a given tribal leader decided to rebel against them. Because of this decentralized, tribal model of governance,

the legitimacy of the Albusaidi state was almost entirely determined by its ability to create favorable economic conditions for the merchant elite.

Reorienting Diplomatic History in the Indian Ocean World

The question of the effectiveness of Omani diplomacy during this period continues to fuel debate among scholars of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Mohammed Reda Bhacker—former professor of economics and international relations at the University of Westminster—is the most pessimistic, arguing that Oman was entirely at the mercy of the British throughout this period. Further, Bhacker asserts that diplomacy itself is what doomed the Omani state, as it was far too eager to enter into fruitless relations with European powers.⁴ However, Jeremy Jones, a diplomatic historian at Oxford's Center for Islamic Studies, and Nicholas Ridout, a professor of theater at Queen Mary University, take a more optimistic view. They argue that Omani diplomacy ultimately achieved the goals of the state during the rule of Sultan bin Ahmad and Said bin Sultan because it maintained Oman's territorial integrity in the face of European incursions and internal strife.⁵ Calvin Allen, a former political historian of the Middle East at Shenandoah University, takes a view that is somewhere between Bhacker and Jones; he argues that Omani diplomacy was ineffective as far as creating a maritime empire in the Persian Gulf, however, it did provide the Omani state with leverage in dealing with both European powers and powers within the Gulf itself.⁶ Abdul Sheriff, an economic historian and professor emeritus of history at the University of Dar es Salaam, asserts that Omani diplomacy failed to create a maritime empire based in Muscat, but helped the Omani state to establish an economically prosperous empire based in Zanzibar.⁷ The

present research takes the position that the Omani state actively attempted to assert a strong economic *and* political position in the Indian Ocean world through diplomacy that maintained and, at times, expanded Oman's influence in the region.

The Solidification of Omani Power: Sultan bin Said's Rule (1792-1804)

By the time Sultan bin Ahmad rose to power in 1792, Oman had experienced a significant expansion in its economic power in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. According to a 1790 report from British merchant-diplomats Samuel Manesty and Hartford Jones, fifty percent of the trade going from India and the Persian Gulf into Arabia passed through Muscat, creating immense profits for the city.⁸ Moreover, Ibn Ruzayq notes that, prior to his conquest of Muscat in 1792, Sultan bin Ahmad sent letters to the merchant families of Muscat indicating that their property and people would not be harmed in the ensuing battle.⁹ This gesture is an early indicator of Sultan's general attitude towards commerce: it took precedence over everything.

Throughout the 1790s, Sultan bin Ahmad oversaw the continued expansion of Oman's economic and political power through diplomacy and military conquest. For example, in 1794 Sultan acquired control over the port city of Bandar Abbas through negotiations with the Shah of Persia.¹⁰ As a result of these negotiations, Sultan was required to pay an annual rent of \$15,000 Maria Theresa thalers (MT\$) to the Persian ruler. Maria Theresa thaler was a silver bullion currency and served as the dominant mean of exchange in the Indian Ocean world throughout this period. Based on data from 1802, this amounted to about 11 percent of state revenues, which totaled MT\$130,000; however, the profits gained from his control

over the port were more than enough to justify these payments. For instance, in 1804, the Albusaidi family collected MT\$180,000 in customs revenue from Muscat alone.¹¹ Additionally, he encouraged commerce in Muscat further by lowering import duties to 2.5% for Muslims and 5% for non-Muslims. This religious tolerance was key for the development of Muscat as a commercial center, as it forged deep relationships between domestic traders and merchants from India, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and other locales.

Aside from customs, the Muscati economy exported several valuable products. Vincenzo Maurizi, an Italian doctor who lived in Oman and became a commander of the Omani Navy, described some facets of the Muscati economy in his 1819 *History of Seyyid Said, Sultan of Muscat*. He wrote that "saltpeter [sic] is procured in considerable quantities... the pearl oyster gives employment to many... [and] the common fishery to a still larger number".¹² Saltpeter and pearls, then, were a key export to European merchants, who used the former for the production of gunpowder and the latter for the production of luxury jewelry, musical instruments, and other products. The other major export of Muscat was dates, as the subtropical climate allowed for extensive date palm cultivation.¹³ Moreover, the economy of Oman was based almost entirely on trade, and, as such, the Albusaidi-led state had to enact policies that would encourage both domestic and international commerce.

During this period, the British East India Company expanded its control over the western coast of India, and by 1801, it had control over the entirety of the Malabar Coast. This expansion came at the expense of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, who died in the 1799 Battle of Seringapatam against the British, further

solidifying British control over southwest India.¹⁴ This was an alarming development for the Omanis, as the Kingdom of Mysore had been one of their primary trading partners in India since the mid-eighteenth century. Moreover, the destruction of the Kingdom of Mysore was a warning for the ruling Albusaidi family against any attempts at military action against the British. To eschew this possibility, the Albusaidis sought to forge alliances with the British to secure their position in the Indian Ocean trade routes while capitalizing on the British-controlled Indian trade networks.

Like the British, the French sought to expand their influence in the Indian Ocean. During the reign of Sultan bin Ahmad, the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars shook the very foundations of power in Europe. Additionally, France's 1798 invasion of Egypt and further expansionist tendencies greatly inflamed tensions with the British, whose holdings throughout India came under threat by Napoleon and the revolutionary regime. Interestingly, Napoleon wrote a letter to Sultan in 1798 in which he asked his Omani counterpart to ally himself militarily with the French in order to combat the British in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ This letter never reached Sultan, as the British intercepted it before it arrived. However, its significance regarding Omani relations with European powers cannot be overstated. Upon seeing this letter, British East India Company officials knew that they had to do something to combat French encroachments in the Indian Ocean, so they reached out to Sultan bin Ahmad.

Thus, the first major treaty of the period was formed; the 1798 Anglo-Omani Treaty.¹⁶ Considering the British expansion over Western India, Sultan bin Ahmad thought that diplomatic and commercial ties with the British would cement his position in the Indian Ocean, granting him the ability to expand trade and political control in the area.

The 1798 treaty comprises seven articles, all of which point to a political, military, and economic relationship between Oman and the British to the exclusion of the French. For example, articles two and three established that the enemies of the British shall be considered the enemies of the Omanis—and vice versa—and that Oman would not allow any states at war with the British to set up factories in the domains of the Omani Empire, which, at this point, meant the French. Likewise, article five dictated that French trading vessels should not be allowed to enter the port of Muscat while British ships are there and if hostilities arose between French and British ships while in any Omani port, the Omanis were obligated to help the British. Thus, the treaty was almost entirely centered around limiting the French-Omani ties and promoting the British-Omani relationship.¹⁷

In exchange for these demands, Sultan bin Ahmad gained a few significant advantages. In particular, the British exempted Omani ships from pilotage charges in British India, permitted the Omanis to bring “1000 maunds of salt per year to Calcutta” for trade, and provided free resupplies of food and water for one of Sultan's ships in Bombay and two in Bengal per year.¹⁸ By acquiring such advantages, especially the exemption from pilotage charges, Sultan bin Ahmad dramatically improved the position of Omani merchants in India, creating conditions in which trade could flourish. And while it did limit the potential for Omani-French relations, it did not extinguish them outright. Sultan bin Ahmad refused to allow the British to build a factory in Muscat—likely to regulate British commercial influence in the country—and continued to trade with the French in East Africa.¹⁹ In the aftermath of this treaty, the Albusaidi leaders of Oman secured a political and economic alliance with the British, maintained trade with the French, continued

to expand their revenue through fees and pilotage charges, and nourished the merchant class by bolstering trade in British India.

Unfortunately, local circumstances slowed this boom from the end of the 1790s onwards. In particular, the emergence of the Wahhabi movement, which originated in central Arabia, constituted an enormous threat to the political and commercial stability of Oman. From 1799 onwards, the Wahhabis engaged in frequent raids on Omani trade caravans and cities, continuously disrupting the flow of goods in and out of Muscat.²⁰ Aside from the Wahhabis, the Qasimis in Ra's al-Khaima, who had allied themselves with the Wahhabis, continuously threatened Omani commerce during the reigns of both Sultan bin Ahmad and his successor, Said bin Sultan. Given their proximity to Muscat and other Omani cities, the Qasimis posed a serious threat to the Omani state. They had been a nuisance to the Omanis for centuries, often engaging in raids on Omani ships, destroying Omani trade caravans, and invading Omani cities.²¹

Sultan bin Ahmad made sustained efforts to fend off the joint Wahhabi-Qasimi threat. In 1804, after a series of military failures against the Qasimis and Wahhabis, he reached out to the Ottoman sultan, Selim III, who agreed to provide military aid to the Omanis to combat the Wahhabis.²² Unfortunately, when he arrived in Basra to meet the Ottoman forces, he found them unprepared and unwilling to travel to Eastern Arabia. Disappointed, he left Basra to return to Oman. However, on his voyage back, Qasimis attacked Sultan's ship, killing the Albusaidi leader.²³ It is fair to say that Sultan bin Ahmad's tenure as *Seyyid* marked an apogee of Omani power in the Indian Ocean world. His diplomatic maneuvering, particularly with the British, set a precedent

for the future rulers of Oman. Moreover, the 1798 treaty that he signed with the British laid the foundations for the British-Omani relationships, one that would go on to define Oman's regional position in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Beyond this, Sultan set the bar high for his son, Said bin Sultan, and the latter's initial inability to fill the proverbial shoes of his father caused numerous problems throughout the early nineteenth century.

Internal Strife and External Ambivalence: Said bin Sultan's Early Rule (r. 1806-1832)

The death of Sultan bin Ahmad sent Oman into a state of disarray. As noted by Ibn Ruzayq (b. 1783), a contemporary Omani historian, the whole town of Muscat was "convulsed with sadness" and, throughout Oman, the "sorrow became universal."²⁴ Sultan bin Ahmad's shadow loomed large, especially given his success in expanding Oman's commercial standing. After a complex succession crisis lasting several years, his son, Said bin Sultan, took control of the Omani state in 1806.²⁵ Throughout Said bin Sultan's fifty-year rule, he continued his father's mission to expand Oman's commercial and political position in the Indian Ocean world. When Said bin Sultan took power, his primary goals were to expel the Wahhabis, save the faltering Omani economy, and maintain positive relations with the British to bolster his position in the Indian Ocean. All three of these goals ultimately showcase the importance of trade for the structural integrity of the Omani state and Said bin Sultan's subsequent actions reflected this dire concern for financial stability.

Legitimacy crises marred Said bin Sultan's early years in power. Due to the economic strain imposed upon Muscati merchants by the Wahhabis and Qasimis,

some questioned Said's ability to stabilize the country and bring back the prosperity that his father had created. Said was only sixteen years old when he assumed power, a fact that further diminished his legitimacy in the eyes of his critics. Additionally, the British refused to recognize Said as the rightful ruler of Muscat for over a year.²⁶ Therefore, both internal and external pressures weighed heavily on Said throughout his early reign. The pressures led Said to put efforts into combating the joint Wahhabi-Qasimi threat militarily and creating new opportunities for increasing state revenues diplomatically.

In 1807, Said bin Sultan signed the first official French-Omani Treaty, which created a "perpetual and inviolable peace" between France and Oman.²⁷ While the treaty was never formally ratified in Paris, French and Omani merchants operating in the Indian Ocean treated its terms as binding, resulting in greater economic ties between the two countries. Given that the French controlled Mauritius (called Ile de France at the time), Said bin Sultan saw this treaty as an opportunity to expand the trade of spices, especially cloves, in East Africa. This treaty, however, served as a wake-up call to the British who had abandoned the Omanis during this period. While it is impossible to prove that Said agreed to the treaty solely because of the British, it is fair to speculate that he aimed to demonstrate that he was fully capable of creating alliances with their enemies despite their refusal to recognize his leadership in Muscat. Consequently, the British officially recognized Said bin Sultan in 1809 and re-dispatched David Seton, who had been recalled from Muscat in 1804, as British envoy in Muscat.²⁸

Aside from the French threat, the British drew closer to Muscat in 1809 because of the growing Qasimi nuisance to British trade. From 1797 onward, Qasimis raided British ships in the Persian Gulf and off the Gujarati Coast. Particularly after the

death of Sultan bin Ahmad, who had largely quelled the Qasimis during his reign, Qasimi piracy grew immensely, leading the British to engage in military action against them. In this way, British and Omani interests aligned, resulting in a joint Omani-British invasion of Ra's al-Khaima in April of 1809.²⁹ Unfortunately for Said, this invasion did not subdue the Qasimis, in part due to British hesitance to commit to a full-scale invasion. To add insult to injury, the British engaged in secret diplomacy with the Wahhabis in 1810, promising to not interfere in the internal affairs of the Arabian Peninsula in exchange for safe passage for British ships.³⁰ This news left Said feeling betrayed. When he wrote to the British in 1810 asking for more help with fighting the Wahhabis, they advised that he agrees to all Wahhabi demands. Later, when he contacted the French for support, they told him that he should accede to the Wahhabi terms for peace and convert to Wahhabism.³¹ Thus, it seemed that the 1798 British-Omani Treaty and the 1807 French-Omani Treaty meant nothing, as neither of the European signatories was willing to help Said in his time of need. Since the Napoleonic Wars were in full swing, Oman ranked low on both the British and French lists of priorities. The lack of action on the part of his European counterparts alarmed Said, leaving him completely alone to maintain his power.

Despondent, Said turned to Persia for military assistance. At this point, according to British sources, Said bin Sultan only controlled the coastal regions of Oman, with the northern and interior regions under the control of the Wahhabis.³² Consequently, in 1810, Said sent his brother, Salim, to Shiraz to request soldiers for a campaign into Ra's al-Khaima. Said knew that the Persians, too, were frustrated with the Qasimis, as they engaged in frequent raids on Persian pearling ships in the Gulf. Thus, he hoped that the Persians would be willing to support him in suppressing them.³³ Additionally, the

Wahhabi attacks on Shi'ite holy sites, such as Karbala, further incensed the Persians, who were mostly Shia, to help the Omanis. Thus, the Persians sent a force of about fifteen hundred men, including six pieces of artillery, to Oman.³⁴ Unfortunately for Said bin Sultan, this expedition did not result in any gains. The Qasimi-Wahhabi armies wiped out the joint forces and maintained control over their territories. In the aftermath, the Persian leadership made peace with the Wahhabis, a move that further isolated Oman.³⁵ This marked the lowest point of Said bin Sultan's rule.

This situation, however, did not last long, as internal and external factors began to turn in his favor in 1811. First, the Egyptians under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Pasha began their military campaign in 1811 against the Wahhabis, which forced the latter to move their forces away from Oman and to central Arabia.³⁶ Additionally, from 1811 to 1813, tribes in northern Oman revolted in masses due to frustrations with the increasing tributes that the Wahhabis demanded of them.³⁷ As a result, the al-Khalifa family agreed to pay an annual tribute and recognize the suzerainty of the Albusaidis over Bahrain. Steadily, Said gained his footing, retaking territories that had been taken by the Qasimis in northern Oman while establishing an increasingly advantageous position for the Omani Empire in the Persian Gulf. In spite of his earlier struggles, Said bin Sultan was able to regain some level of control over his territory on his own account.

While the Omani state began to recover during this period, the previous decade of political instability, tribal warfare, and economic interruption resulted in a sharp decrease in state revenues. In 1804, state revenues from customs collected in Muscat amounted to MT\$180,000; in contrast, in 1816, the state collected only MT\$95,000.³⁸

In spite of this massive loss in state revenues, Muscat remained a hugely important port city through which large numbers of products passed. In 1830, J.S. Buckingham, an English journalist who traveled to Muscat in 1816, described Muscat trade in detail, noting that Muscati merchant ships

are employed in voyages to Bengal, from which they bring muslins and piece-goods; to the Eastern Islands, for drugs and spices; to the coast of Malabar, for ship-timber, rice, and pepper; to Bombay, for European articles, principally the coarser metals, lead, iron, and tin... and lastly, to the Mauritius, for coffee and cotton in small quantities, returning by way of Zanzibar [sic] on the African coast... in which is collected gold dust, ostrich feathers, tamarinds, elephants' teeth, and slaves.³⁹

From this and other accounts, it is evident that Muscati commerce was both highly diverse and robust, with Omani merchants maintaining high levels of trade even through times of crisis.

By 1818, the Egyptian expedition against the Wahhabis in central Arabia neutralized the Wahhabi threat, at least for some time. Their Qasimi allies in Ra's al-Khaima, however, had not yet been subdued and continued to pose a threat to Muscati commerce. Said bin Sultan once again appealed to the British for help against the Qasimis.⁴⁰ Allen notes that, at this time, the British had grown increasingly tired of what they deemed as piracy in the Persian Gulf, and sought to end it through military means.⁴¹ Once again, British and Omani interests

aligned. Thus, in 1819, a joint British-Omani force invaded Ra's al-Khaimah and subdued the Qasimis, resulting in the General Treaty of 1820. While the British did not include Oman as a signatory of the General Treaty, it had an incalculable impact on the future of the state.

In short, the General Treaty ended what the British considered piracy in the Persian Gulf. The treaty, which was signed on January 20th, 1820, contained eleven articles, all of which effectively codified British oversight of the commerce and politics of the Persian Gulf, giving them immense sway in the region. The General Treaty forbade piracy, acts of aggression between tribes that did not include an official declaration of war, and the transport of slaves on any vessel belonging to signatory tribes. Additionally, the signatory tribes were forced to fly a red and white flag on their ships to indicate that they were British allies.⁴² In exchange, the treaty entailed that all Arab ships that bore the red and white flag would have access to all British ports.

Prior to this, piracy was an accepted means of competition among the tribes of the Persian Gulf. While it threatened Muscati commerce, anxieties surrounding Qasimi attacks on Omani merchant vessels drove merchants to pay the Albusaidis for naval protection, providing a stable source of revenue for the state.⁴³ Thus, the General Treaty effectively undermined Said bin Sultan's political position in the Persian Gulf, reduced state revenues, and destroyed his ambitions to retake Ra's al-Khaimah.⁴⁴

Another factor in the 1820s contributed to the waning of Omani power in the Persian Gulf: the Moresby Treaty of 1822. The Moresby Treaty limited Muscati commerce by banning the sale of slaves to "Christians of all nations".⁴⁵ Part of Britain's anti-slavery crusade, the treaty affected the entirety of the Omani Empire, including its East African holdings where slavery

constituted a far bigger piece of the economy. The question again becomes: why would Said bin Sultan agree to a treaty that appeared to go against his interests, both in the case of the General Treaty and the Moresby Treaty? The answer lies partially in Said's interests in maintaining good relations with the British. Said received explicit British recognition of his control over the waters surrounding East Africa, granting him British protection and an implicit guarantee that the British would not interfere with Omani trade there, so long as Omanis were not caught selling slaves to Christians. Furthermore, Said bin Sultan effectively used diplomacy with the British to strengthen his position in East Africa, which, as we will see, resulted in a huge expansion in state revenues.

A New Beginning: Said bin Sultan's Transition to Zanzibar

Most scholars agree that Said bin Sultan's gradually diminishing position in the Persian Gulf throughout his early reign caused him to look toward East Africa as a new site for economic and political growth. Said realized that he had little potential to create a strong commercial presence in the Persian Gulf due to the growing British presence, particularly following the General Treaty of 1820, which functionally established the British as the only possible power broker for conflict within the Persian Gulf.⁴⁶ Additionally, Said saw the immense economic potential of Zanzibar and East Africa in general. There was already a sizable Omani presence in East Africa due to long-standing migrations of Arab settlers into the region for commercial, agricultural, and religious reasons.⁴⁷ Moreover, the growing demand for ivory, cloves, and slaves indicated to Said that East Africa was a viable alternative for commercial expansion.

Prior to moving his court, Said had to secure his position in East Africa, which had been challenged by other Omani tribes living

in the region. In particular, the Mazaria (sing. Mazrui)—a tribe of Omani origin that had settled in East Africa during the Yarubid dynasty in the seventeenth century—constituted a threat to Albusaidi’s control over East Africa. The Mazaria had political control over a great deal of East Africa in the early nineteenth century, including the lucrative port city of Mombasa, the island of Pemba, and the Lamu archipelago.⁴⁸ When Said bin Sultan ascended to power in 1806, the Mazaria refused to recognize his leadership and stopped paying annual tribute to Muscat. Later, in 1814, the Mazaria severed all ties with the Albusaidis in Muscat. Given his precarious situation in the Gulf, Said was unable to do anything to combat the Mazaria, allowing them to cement their position in Mombasa.

By the 1820s, Said was in a better position to reclaim East Africa. Beginning in late 1823, he embarked on an expedition to retake Mombasa and subdue the Mazaria once and for all.⁴⁹ In February of 1824, Said discovered that British naval forces under the command of William Owen fought to protect the Mazaria against the Albusaidi invasion. Owen then declared Mombasa a British protectorate, which the Mazaria welcomed with open arms. Stunned, Said appealed to the British in India, writing a letter in which he condemned Owen’s “threatening and unbecoming language”, asserted that the “people of Bombossa [sic] are dependents of Oman”, and asked that the British “be good enough to make [an] answer to him”.⁵⁰ Again, Said bin Sultan dealt diplomatically with the British, even when members of their military engaged in active conflict with the Omani forces. Eventually, in 1827, Owen left Mombasa after the Bombay government came to the resolution that Mombasa should not become a British protectorate.⁵¹ Moreover, this incident demonstrates that,

although Said was willing to concede control over the Persian Gulf to the British with little complaint, he was not willing to allow them to interfere in his East African holdings.

In January of 1828, Said bin Sultan occupied Mombasa and brought it under his control once more.⁵² Further, He maintained diplomatic relations with the British throughout the Owen incident, indicating that his desire for diplomacy with Western powers outweighed his frustrations with Britain’s apparent ambivalent attitude towards him. From this position, Said decided to move his court from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1832, marking a significant shift in the trajectory of the Omani state.⁵³ Writing to his agent in Bombay in 1833, Said explained that “[m]y revenues in Muscat are very small and my expenses very great... all the chief men have died out of Oman and only the low and mean remain, and I am ashamed to live next to such despicable people.”⁵⁴ However, as Bhacker notes, Said’s justification was not sufficient to fully address why he moved his court to Zanzibar.

While increased revenues certainly played a role, there is more to the story. A combination of increased safety and the ever-growing plantation economy of Zanzibar made it an attractive choice. Zanzibar is an island, so it is naturally protected from land invasions, making it safer than Muscat. Given the Wahhabi incursions into Oman that defined Said’s early rule, it makes sense that he sought a political capital from which he could not be invaded by land. Additionally, during the 1820s, especially after the Moresby Treaty, Zanzibar’s economy had begun transitioning from one based on the exchange of slaves to one based on the labor of slaves. That is, Zanzibar transformed into a plantation economy, cultivating cloves and sugar cane, both of which were more lucrative crops than the

dates of Muscat. In an 1828 letter to his agent in Bombay, Said wrote, “In consequence of the abolition of the slave trade the collections of Zanzibar have been diminished; it has therefore been deemed necessary to make plantations... in the islands”.⁵⁵

By pivoting away from the slave trade, Said guaranteed that his empire would not be a direct target of British aggression, which had, at that point, eliminated most independent polities on the Indian subcontinent. We can see, then, that Said bin Sultan’s decision to move his court to Zanzibar in 1832 was not based on financial factors alone. While increased revenues undoubtedly played a role, the strategic, relatively safe location of Zanzibar appealed to Said, who had faced tremendous difficulties with land-based invasions in his early reign. Additionally, the growing plantation economy of Zanzibar presented Said with an economic opportunity in the face of the anti-slavery legislation pushed by the British.

Plantation Prosperity: Said’s Rule in Zanzibar (1832–1856)

Once established in Zanzibar, Said worked with local merchants and landowners to encourage the growth of the Zanzibari and, more generally, East African economy. As Jones and Ridout point out, the period following Said’s move to Zanzibar constituted a “new era of Omani diplomacy” defined by a more profit-driven outlook on the part of the Omanis.⁵⁶ Part of this stems from the integration of the greater Indian Ocean economy into the budding global capitalist economy, which allowed Omani merchants to engage in trade with the so-called Western world in new ways. Moreover, the plantation-style economy of Zanzibar enabled Said and his merchant elite to base their economic choices around the export of goods, especially cloves, ivory, and sugarcane. Although Muscat did export some

goods, most notably dates, the basis of its economy was commerce, with Omani merchants bringing in products from abroad and selling them to other merchants or local consumers. Likewise, Zanzibar was an entrepot for goods across the Indian Ocean; however, its exports set it apart from Muscat and served as a vehicle for the development of mercantile capitalism in the Omani Empire.

With this new mindset, Said bin Sultan sought to forge new or revitalize old commercial relationships with Western powers, whose influence in the Indian Ocean continued to grow. Establishing commercial relationships with the West would provide Omani merchants with fresh locales to export their goods while also equipping Said with political alliances that would help him bolster his position in the region. By the 1830s, the British had largely abandoned their relationship with the Omanis.⁵⁷ Part of this stemmed from the fact that Britain no longer had a geostrategic imperative to maintain Oman as an ally. That is, British East India Company diplomats had initially been interested in Oman because of the threat posed by Napoleonic France to British India. Once they defeated Napoleon, there was no longer a strong desire to keep Oman on their side. Another reason for this waning relationship was the Mombasa incident of 1824 when Captain Owen fought against Said’s forces to defend Mombasa and declare it a British protectorate. Said had to look beyond the British to find new trading partners to encourage commerce in his domains.

It is important to remember that Said’s legitimacy was largely determined by his ability to create favorable economic conditions for his merchant elite, whose approval was essential for his power. To do this, Said forged a relationship with one of Britain’s main rivals: the United States. Oman’s relationship with the United States is

fascinating and worthy of reevaluation on many levels. I argue that this relationship constitutes the most potent evidence of Oman's agency during this period, illustrating the desire of the Omani state to compete with European powers in the Indian Ocean. The defining document in the Omani-American relationship was the 1833 commercial treaty between the two countries, which, above all else, established a positive relationship based on mutually beneficial trade.

Before going into the details of the treaty, it is important to establish why the Americans were interested in a treaty with the Omanis. After all, this was only the second time that the United States signed a treaty with an Arab country. The main commercial attraction for the Americans was ivory. Owing to the growth of the middle classes in both Europe and the United States and new technologies that facilitated the easy processing of ivory throughout the early-eighteenth century, demand for ivory products skyrocketed while their prices fell. These products included combs, piano keys, and billiard balls, all of which are indicative of their middle-class market.⁵⁸ Moreover, because of Omani merchants' control over trade routes stretching into east-central Africa, ivory was an abundant product.

In addition to identifying the American desires behind the signing of such a treaty, it is necessary to address the Omani motivations. I attest that there were two major factors that played into Oman's desire for such a treaty: first, Oman sought to send a message to the British, who had been miserly in their willingness to negotiate with Said bin Sultan's government and, second, Said wanted access to American military technology to solidify his rule over East Africa. In creating a deal with the Americans, Said sought to show the British that the

Omani state was capable of acting independently in order to strengthen its interests in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, due to resistance from tribal groups within East Africa, such as the Mazaria, Said bin Sultan sought to strengthen his military power in the case of war breaking out. Thus, this treaty is a clear example of agency from the Omani state, showing us that Said bin Sultan actively sought to strengthen his political and economic power in the region through diplomacy.

The 1833 treaty between the United States and Oman consisted of nine articles, each seeking to establish a mutually beneficial commercial relationship between the two countries, and the most important articles to consider are Article Two, Three, and Eight. Article Two established a relationship of almost complete free trade between the two states. Paradoxically, the most important aspect of Article Two for Oman was that it guaranteed that the United States could not sell "powder, bullets, [or] muskets" to any of Said bin Sultan's subjects; rather, all military technology brought to Omani territories had to be sold to Said himself.⁵⁹ This clause effectively created a monopoly on military power for the Albusaidi government, reinforcing the idea that Said sought to utilize American military technology to strengthen and expand his influence in East Africa.

Article Three established that American merchants engaging in trade within the Omani Empire would not be subject to any fees aside from a five-percent import duty. This is significant because the standard import duty was seven-and-a-half percent, creating a lucrative advantage for American merchants in the markets of Zanzibar and Muscat.⁶⁰ Finally, Article Eight established that Omani merchants would receive the same benefits while trading in the United

States that American merchants receive in the Omani Empire. This was extremely significant for the economic standing of the Omani state. More than stimulating trade between American and Omani merchants in East Africa and the Gulf, it permitted Omani merchants to create strong ties in the Atlantic world, opening vast new markets. Moreover, the opportunities given to Omani traders from this treaty granted them immense agency. In establishing deeper trade networks throughout the Atlantic world, Omani merchants could shape global commerce in new ways, especially given the rising commercial presence of the United States.⁶¹

This treaty proved especially relevant when, in 1840, Said bin Sultan sent his ship, *Al Sultanah*, to New York City for a combined commercial and diplomatic mission, marking the first time that an Arab vessel would land in the United States.⁶² The crew of *Al Sultanah* stayed in New York for nearly three months, participated in a number of social events, and bought American products to bring back to Oman. These products included “125 bales of gray sheeting... 24 bolts of scarlet cloth... 13 cases of red, white, and blue beads... 300 muskets... 300 twenty-five-pound bags of gunpowder... and a quantity of china plates”.⁶³ In total, the Omanis spent over MT\$11,000 in New York City. The most interesting purchase of the Omanis was the muskets, which reinforce the idea that Said desired a commercial relationship with the United States in order to gain access to American arms to secure his position against troublesome tribes in East Africa. Conversely, they brought a large number of goods to the United States, including “1,300 bags of dates, 21 bales of Persian wool carpets, and 100 bales of Mokha coffee” from Muscat and “108 prime ivory tusks, 81 cases of gum copal... 135 bags of cloves, and 1,000 dry, salted hides” from Zanzibar.⁶⁴ All of these items were fairly typical exports from

the Omani Empire; however, the fact that Omani merchants brought these items to the United States directly, rather than selling them to merchant middle-men first, indicates that they were exercising a great deal of agency as a result of the 1833 treaty.

While it is hard to quantify the benefits that the Omani state gained from this treaty, we can look to the customs revenue from Zanzibar and Muscat from 1833 onwards. The data from Zanzibar is more relevant to this treaty, however, as American merchants mostly engaged in business there. In 1834, the year after the treaty was signed, the Albusaidi rulers collected roughly MT\$150,000 in revenues from Zanzibar; in 1856, the final year of Said bin Sultan’s reign, they collected MT\$220,000 in customs revenues.⁶⁵ Of course, this increase cannot be attributed to the Omani-American treaty alone. However, it is fair to say that the treaty, which brought increased traffic from the US to Zanzibar, contributed to this rise in revenue. Thus, the 1833 treaty is undoubtedly one of the most influential and important pieces of Omani diplomacy from this period.

Moreover, this treaty seriously concerned the British, who, upon learning of its existence, had to reconsider Oman. Once they received the information from their agent in the Persian Gulf, the government of the East India Company sent Captain Henry Hart to talk with Said bin Sultan about the Omani-American treaty. Some members of the East India Company government speculated that the 1833 treaty violated previous treaties entered into by Oman, such as the 1798 Anglo-Omani Treaty; however, senior British East India Company officials dismissed these suspicions, as they had no actual basis in the contents of the treaty.⁶⁶ Likewise, some British East India Company officials were upset that Said did not properly inform them of the American treaty.

In response to these concerns, Said bin Sultan wrote a letter to the Governor-

General at Bombay in April of 1834 where he explained his position in a diplomatic yet passive-aggressive manner. He wrote, “We feel quite assured that your Lordship will never entertain the slightest suspicion of us but it not becomes imperative on us to inform you of everything, whether of the most important or most trifling import even if it should give your Lordship unnecessary trouble, in order that all suspicion be removed from the breast of such an old friend”.⁶⁷ This quote suggests that Said was frustrated with the British, who had been virtually absent from Said’s affairs since the 1820s. Furthermore, Said’s emboldened attitude following the 1833 Omani-American treaty demonstrates that his diplomatic maneuverings were effective in strengthening his position in the Indian Ocean world.

The result of Britain’s revitalized interest in Omani affairs is the 1839 Treaty of Commerce between Oman and Britain. In essence, the treaty reaffirmed many tenets of the 1798 treaty while providing further specificity regarding the nature of the relationship between the two parties. For example, Articles One through Three reaffirmed the rights of Omanis and British subjects to enter and trade freely within the territories of the other and provided the two states with the right to assign consuls to reside in the territories of the other.⁶⁸ On the financial side, Article Nine reaffirmed that “[n]o duty exceeding five percent shall be levied... on any goods.”⁶⁹ Thus, it confirmed the reduction of the seven-and-a-half percent default duty rate for Muscat and Zanzibar. Finally, Article Fifteen “renew[ed] and confirm[ed] the engagements entered into by His Highness with Great Britain on the tenth of September 1822 for the entire suppression of the slave trade between his dominions and all Christian nations.”⁷⁰ From this, we can see

that the British were still avid in their goal of suppressing slavery in the Indian Ocean. Essentially, the 1839 British-Omani treaty was a copy of the 1833 American-Omani treaty with the addition of anti-slavery clauses. Finally, Said got what he wanted: a new commercial treaty with the British. All it took was a treaty with the fledgling United States to motivate the British to consider Said an important ally once more.

In 1841, revenues from Zanzibar were MT\$150,000.⁷¹ This may seem strange, especially because revenues in 1827 were MT\$220,000; however, it seems that 1827 was an outlier year in terms of profit. In 1825, for example, Said collected MT\$120,000, and throughout the 1830s, he collected MT\$150,000 per year. Thus, the 1841 revenues reflect some level of continuity with the past. Despite this, trade in Zanzibar boomed during this period, partially due to the new 1833 and 1839 treaties with the Americans and British, respectively. The French, who had been underprivileged in their relations with the Omanis, wanted to take advantage of this lucrative situation. Part of this stemmed from Said’s proximity to the British, whose rivalry with the French made Said somewhat wary of engaging with them in a serious way. However, he finally signed a commercial treaty with the French in 1844, well after he had guaranteed his position *vis-a-vis* the Americans and the British.

In many ways, the 1844 Franco-Omani Treaty of Amity and Commerce mirrored the 1833 American and 1839 British treaties; however, it contained more articles than both previous treaties. Ultimately, however, the 1844 treaty put France on the same level as Britain and the United States in terms of privileges, rights, and fee rates, enabling the expansion of trade in Zanzibar and closer relations between the French and Omanis. In this way, Said used diplomacy to

create positive trade relations with even the most bitter of enemies. The fact that Said secured nearly identical treaties with three of the most powerful countries on the planet serves as a testament to his will and his ability to utilize diplomacy in a proactive way.⁷²

By 1847, three years after the signing of the French treaty, revenues from Zanzibar reached MT\$175,000, marking an MT\$25,000 increase from 1842.⁷³ From this, we can see that the volume of commerce entering Zanzibar grew during this period, suggesting that Said's diplomatic maneuvering had worked. The fact that Said revitalized British interest in Muscat by entering the 1833 American treaty, secured a subsequent treaty with the British, then entered into another treaty with the French shows that he used diplomacy in an effective way to both stimulate the domestic economy and open new trading opportunities for Omani merchants.

The final years of Said bin Sultan's rule were marked by the economic growth of Zanzibar and domestic struggles. Tribal revolts in both the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa conflicts with Persia, and the internecine struggle among his sons all weighed on Said during this time. The tribal revolts were nothing new to Said, but their continuation throughout the 1850s had to have loomed large on him. The conflict with Persia concerned Bandar Abbas, the port city in southern Iran that Said had controlled his entire reign. In 1856, his previous lease on the city expired and the Persians demanded a much higher rent from Said in exchange for Bandar Abbas than had been previously agreed to. Upon hearing this, Said petitioned the British, whom he believed would help him in negotiating with the Persians.⁷⁴ The British, however, did not help him. For Said, this was a betrayal of the relationship that he had labored to create throughout his reign, leaving him extremely frustrated with the British at the end of his life. In the end, Said's

rent for Bandar Abbas increased from MT\$13,800 to MT\$37,500 or seventeen percent of the revenues from Zanzibar in 1856. Additionally, the Persians obligated him to cede the islands of Qishm and Hormuz to them.⁷⁵

Conclusion: Savvy Diplomacy or Capitulation?

The question of the effectiveness of Said's diplomacy remains. Based on the contents of the present research, it is clear that Said was able to create new commercial opportunities for Omani merchants, increase his revenues through the promotion of trade, and maintain his territorial integrity through diplomacy with Western powers. By the time of his death in 1856, the Omani state collected MT\$220,000 in revenues from Zanzibar and MT\$80,000 from Muscat.⁷⁶ For reference, in 1804, two years before his rise to power, the Omani state collected MT\$180,000 from Muscat and MT\$40,000 from Zanzibar. Using state revenues as a rough gauge for the state of commerce, we can see that Said's diplomacy certainly increased the volume of trade passing through Zanzibar. This net gain in revenues demonstrates that Said was able to create positive commercial conditions for Omani merchants in Zanzibar despite the internal and external pressures exerted on him. It is also clear from this difference in revenues that, by the time of Said's death, Zanzibar had become the premier city of the Omani empire. I assert that the 1833 American Treaty, the 1839 British Treaty, and the 1844 French Treaty are significant causes of this increase. Of course, the plantation economy of Zanzibar helped economic growth, but these treaties increased the volume of trade passing through Zanzibar to a great extent.

It is also clear that Said used diplomacy in a savvy way. While it is difficult to say with certainty, thus introducing an opportunity for further

research, I posit that his choice to enter into the 1833 treaty with the Americans was a means to both create positive diplomatic relations with the Americans in lieu of the British *and* remind the British that he meant business. By entering into such a treaty, Said exercised his independence and agency to a degree heretofore unseen. Consequently, it led to the signing of the 1839 treaty with the British, a document that Said had been trying to sign with the British since the 1810s. Finally, after securing his treaty with the British, he moved to the French, who were eager to get involved in the lucrative Zanzibar market. Thus, I argue that the Omani state under Said bin Sultan actively attempted to assert a strong economic and political position in the Indian Ocean world through diplomacy that maintained and, at times, expanded Oman's influence in the region.

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