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Gulf Nakhudhas and Merchant  
Princes in the Indian Ocean World**

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## **Monsoon Travelers: Gulf Nakhudhas and Merchant-Princes in the Indian Ocean World<sup>(1)</sup>**

In 2008, during the month of Ramadan, Kuwait Television aired a new series called *Ōh Yā Māl* (literally, “Oh, Wealth/Money”). The story highlighted the adventures of Hamud, the son of a poor sailor, who joined a dhow sailing to Zanzibar in order to earn his family a meager income. While in Zanzibar, Hamud developed a close relationship with Muzza, the niece of a wealthy merchant, whose parents had been murdered by her scheming cousin, and Hamud had rescued her from him. When the time arrived for his dhow to sail back to Kuwait, Hamud was forced to stay behind because of an injury – but in doing so narrowly avoided death as his nakhudha and fellow sailors all perished in a storm. Hearing of the shipwreck, Hamud’s father, who in the many months that Hamud was away found himself deeper and deeper in debt, abandoned all hope and mortgaged his home to a merchant-moneylender.

The series explored themes that were commonplace in Kuwaiti soap operas: love, jealousy, greed, wealth and poverty. These, however, were explored in a somewhat surprising setting, the Indian Ocean. The cast of characters, which included sailors, nakhudhas (dhow captains), merchants and murderers, moved frequently between Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and East Africa and the bodies of water in between. Set against this backdrop

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(1) A version of this paper has appeared in Engseng Ho and Abdul Sheriff, eds., *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies* (New York: Hurst, 2014).



of fluid spatial mobility was a plotline that highlighted a mobility of a different, yet inextricably linked kind: socioeconomic mobility. While he was away in Zanzibar, Hamud married Muzza and began to work for her uncle, eventually amassing a considerable fortune. The story ends with Hamud's return to Kuwait as a wealthy merchant, rich and of enough consequence to buy his family out of debt and punish the avaricious moneylender.

While it may have been the most popular, *Ōh Yā Māl* was neither the first nor the last show of its kind: scores more have featured the ports of Persia, Iraq, South Arabia and India. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to name a series filmed in the region set in the past that did not in some way highlight the centrality of the sea in economic, social and political life. Even in shows that focus primarily on life in the Gulf itself, the sea is portrayed as a passageway for the legendary riches of India and East Africa – a bountiful source of wealth, when compared to the poor and barren lands of the Arabian Peninsula. And in shows like *Ōh Yā Māl*, as well as others, the sea was the site of mobility – a source of endless potential from which merchants, *nakhudhas* and mariners alike could draw to remake themselves into people of consequence.

The discussion here explores this Indian Ocean world, of which the merchants, *nakhudhas* and mariners of the Gulf were very much a part. In it, I mainly draw on material from Kuwait, from which I collected the bulk of the sources I use; I point to examples from other Gulf port cities whenever possible. In order to lay the groundwork for future

scholarship on these merchant communities, this paper will discuss three broad issues: the geographical distribution and commercial activities of Gulf merchants and nakhudhas, how they positioned themselves within broader Indian Ocean and Arabian Peninsula mercantile communities, and the opportunities for political and economic mobility that this position afforded. The argument is that their ability to tap into resources from around the Indian Ocean afforded Gulf merchants and nakhudhas unique opportunities for social, economic and political mobility at home. While the Gulf may have been a relatively barren region, those who carved out a place from which they could draw on the resources of the broader Indian Ocean and channel them back to the home ports were able to exercise considerable degrees of political and economic influence. This illustrates a much bigger point: that the world of the Indian Ocean formed a critical dimension of economic and political life in the Gulf, and that if scholars are to advance the study of Gulf history any further they cannot ignore these broader frontiers.

## **The Gulf and Indian Ocean in Scholarship**

In imagining the Gulf's past as being fundamentally maritime in nature, and in drawing the Indian Ocean into social and economic life in the region, television shows like *Ōh Yā Māl* have pre-empted scholarship on Gulf history. For despite the many ways in which the region's linkages to the Indian Ocean are reflected in different forms of popular culture – film, music, art, and literature – most scholars continue to treat it as part of the broader Arab World or

Middle East. Certainly, the desert hinterland played a critical role in Gulf economic and political life; this, however, should not preclude an exploration of the region's trans-oceanic linkages. The economies of the Gulf chiefdoms were far more influenced by market shifts in India and Aden than they were by those of places like Cairo and Damascus. The food consumed by the inhabitants of the Gulf – curries and rice – more closely resembles that of India and East Africa than it does other, more Mediterranean, Middle Eastern foods. Even the dialects spoken by the inhabitants of the area display maritime influences, heavily infused as they are with Hindi and Persian words and pronunciations. Moreover, the strength of the Gulf's ties with the sea are still celebrated to this very day through rituals such as the annual pearl dive, which commemorate the region's maritime heritage.

Unfortunately, the Gulf's ties with the Indian Ocean have not been reflected in the literature on either region. While scholars have written a great deal on the history of the Omanis and Hadhramis in the Indian Ocean, far less work has been done on the maritime histories of the rest of the Arab communities in the Gulf – from the United Arab Emirates to the port of Basra. Research on the linkages between Bahrain, Kuwait, Persia and Iraq and the broader Indian Ocean has been sporadic and uninterested

at best, with only a few minor exceptions<sup>(1)</sup>. None of these works, however, gives readers a broad overview of Gulf participation in the Indian Ocean, and none explores what the Indian Ocean meant for political, social and economic life in the region.

This regrettable state of affairs in the Western historiography of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean is all the more striking when one considers the amount of attention the Indian Ocean has received in Arabic-language works by local historians in the Gulf. Within this literature, there exist many secondary works as well as memoirs written by merchants that recall the multiplex linkages between the Gulf and the ports of Western India and, to a lesser degree, East Africa. While the overwhelming majority of these works comes from Kuwait, which had the largest number of overseas mercantile communities of the Arab Gulf states, there are also works on the history of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates that pay attention to the commercial and cultural links between the Gulf and broader Indian

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(1) See also M.N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2003; Thabit A. Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra*, SUNY Series in the Social and Economic History of the Middle East, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001; James Onley, 'Transnational Merchants in the Nineteenth Century Gulf: The Case of the Safar Family,' in Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2005, pp. 59–89. For a discussion of these linkages in the mid-twentieth century, see E.B. and C.P. Martin, *Cargoes of the East: the Ports, Trade and Culture of the Arabian Seas and Western Indian Ocean*, London: Elm Tree Books, 1978.

Ocean<sup>(1)</sup>. Few of these works, however, are ‘histories’ in the academic sense; they are often anecdotal in nature, featuring the names of local personalities and small events rather than broader overviews and dates, thus reflecting the intimate ways in which members of these communities understood their relationship to the Indian Ocean<sup>(2)</sup>.

These works are interesting in their own right as expressions of linkages between the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, but also challenge prevailing misconceptions among historians of the Gulf by making use of local sources. Local historians, however, seem to use these sources somewhat differently than Western scholars. Rather than using letters and other sources as evidence to support an argument, local historians often use them to illustrate the phenomena they describe. For example, a discussion of Kuwaiti merchant communities in Bombay might be accompanied by a letter from a Bombay-based Kuwaiti merchant to his relative or friend in Kuwait. The author, however, would not use the letter to support any of the assertions he/she makes in the section nor would he even refer to it the text itself. Rather, he/she would simply use it to illustrate that there were

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(1) For examples of this, see also Adel Muhammad al-Abdul-Mughni. *Nawakhudhat al-Ghaws wa-l-Safar fi-l-Kuwayt* [The Captains of Pearling and Travelling in Kuwait]. Kuwait: Privately published, 1999; Ahmad ‘Abdul-‘Aziz al-Muzayni, *Kuwayt wa Tarikhuha al-Bahri, aw Rihlat al-Shira* [Kuwait and its Maritime History, or The Sailing Trip], Kuwait: That es-Salasil, 1986; Rashid al-Zayyani, *al-Ghaws wa-l-Tawasha* [Pearl Diving and Trading], Bahrain: al-Ayyam Publishing; and especially Ya‘qub Y. Al-Hijji, *al-Nashatat al-Bahriyya al-Qadima fi-l-Kuwayt* [The Old Maritime Activities of Kuwait], Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait (hereafter CRSK), 2007.

(2) This is not to denigrate the many useful insights one finds in these histories. Rather, it is simply to say that these works do not fill the academic and analytical gap referred to in this discussion. There are, of course, some exceptions to this general rule; Ahmad Mustafa Abu Hakima’s *Tarikh al-Kuwayt*, translated into English as *The Modern History of Kuwait, 1750-1965*, London: Luzac & Co, 1983, esp. pp. 93-106, includes a somewhat detailed discussion of Kuwait’s trade with India and the Arabian Peninsula.

Kuwaiti merchants based in Bombay, much like one would use a picture. While this might be frustrating to those who crave interpretation of these materials, their usage points to the fact that there do exist local sources in the Gulf that one can gain access to in trying to excavate this past. Primary materials such as the dhow logbook (rozenamah) series recently published by the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait further add to the growing list of sources. These, along with private collections that members of merchant families have only recently opened to researchers, reinforce the optimism one feels in trying to search for local merchant records<sup>(1)</sup>. When combined with the wealth of cultural artifacts that illustrate Gulf-Indian Ocean linkages, such as television shows, literature and music, these constitute a veritable treasure trove of materials that promises to yield rich results.

## **Mapping Gulf Merchant Networks in the Indian Ocean, 1870-1930**

Considering the lack of scholarship on the connected histories of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, it is useful to broadly sketch out the dimensions of Gulf networks in the region and the flows of commodities within and across these networks. Although these have been mapped out in some detail in Arabic-language histories of the Gulf, no English-language scholars have ventured to explore these flows.

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(1) Prominent among these is the Bushiri archive, run by Ali Akbar Bushiri in Bahrain, which researchers both foreign and local have made use of. To it, one can add the al-Qina'i and al-'As'usi collections available at the CRSK and other private collections in the country, although access to these is limited.

This gap can be attributed to a number of reasons, chief among which is the relative paucity of readily available primary sources. As important, however, is the fact that historians have only recently begun to take an interest in the Indian Ocean as a geographical unit of analysis, stepping beyond the nation-state paradigm and into discussions of cross-communal linkages. Discussions of Indian and East African linkages with the Indian Ocean have been treated with some thoroughness; the few historians of the Gulf, however, have only very recently begun to consider its trans-regional dimensions. Scholarship on the history of the Indian Ocean suggests that the merchants of the Gulf sustained a presence in the region for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Archaeologists have surmised that members of the ancient civilization of Dilmun, in what is now Bahrain, traded frequently with port cities in South Asia and Southern Arabia, as well as with the Horn of Africa<sup>(1)</sup>. During the early medieval period merchants and soldiers from Siraf, on the Persian coast, established a commercial and military empire that stretched as far out as the East Coast of Africa<sup>(2)</sup>. The Ya‘arubi dynasty of early-modern Oman also had extensive holdings in East Africa that date at least as far back as the mid-1600s<sup>(3)</sup>.

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- (1) See also Daniel T. Potts, ed., *Dilmun: New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*, Berlin: Reimer, 1983; Geoffrey Bibbey, *Looking for Dilmun*, New York: Knopf, 1969.
  - (2) Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 151-170; Roxani Margariti, 'Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and "Pirate" States: Conflict and Competition in the Pre-modern Indian Ocean World of Trade.' *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 51, No.4 (2008) pp. 543-577.
  - (3) Ahmad Maamiry, *Oman and East Africa*, New Delhi: Lancers Publishers, 1979; Patricia Risso, *Oman and Muscat: An Early Modern History*, London: Croom Helm, 1986.

References to the involvement of 'Utub of Kuwait and Bahrain or the tribes of the Southern coasts of the Gulf in the Indian Ocean, however, only date back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This is perhaps unsurprising when considering how young the tribal confederation is: the 'Utub made their way to the shores of the Gulf during the mid-eighteenth century, and only established themselves as important maritime emirates later that century. Indeed, it was only in the 1780s that the 'Utub of Zubara (in what is today Western Qatar) and their counterparts in Kuwait were able to wrest control of Bahrain from the Persian-backed Al Madhkur, whose protector, the Persian ruler Karim Khan Zand was overthrown by the Qajars during that time. By taking over both Kuwait and Bahrain, both of which were located near the pearl banks of the Gulf and were important transit centers for goods moving into the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, the 'Utub were able to position themselves as important players in the region's commerce. This, along with the presence of Arab trading ports on the Persian littoral and the concomitant movement of Persian and Arab merchants between the two littorals, fostered the development of dynamic intra-Gulf circuits of exchange.

While the prominence of Arab Gulf communities such as the 'Utub, the Qawasim of Sharjah and Ra's al-Khayma, and the Bani Yas of Abu Dhabi in the Gulf coastal trade is well-established, their reach into the Indian Ocean is much less clear. Historians of the Gulf generally seem to agree that the rulers of Muscat limited 'Utubi involvement in Indian Ocean commerce. The Omani military presence in the Straits of Hormuz and insistence that Indian Ocean-bound



vessels pay a toll or purchase goods from Muscat created an effective barrier to entry for Gulf traders hoping to establish themselves in India and South Arabia<sup>(1)</sup>. However, it seems that this did not completely paralyze Gulf merchants of Kuwait and Bahrain, a number of whom were able to settle in the port of Surat<sup>(2)</sup>. Those who did not participate in the India trade effectively handled commerce within the Gulf itself, transporting goods from Muscat or Bandar Abbas to the smaller Gulf ports.

Most local sources date the entry of these Gulf mercantile communities into the Indian Ocean trade system to the mid-nineteenth century, an assertion that is at least partly supported by extant primary sources, most of which date back to the 1890s. While a number of merchants from the area must have settled in Indian Ocean ports much earlier, we are lacking enough evidence to discuss these in any detail here. Moreover, there is ample reason to treat the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries separately, as the two centuries witnessed enormous transformations to economic life in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Arabic-language sources suggest that the development of the deep-sea boom during the nineteenth century allowed Gulf mariners to reach the distant ports of India and East Africa – that the maritime technology that preceded it simply

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(1) Abu Hakima, *Modern History*, p. 93.

(2) See Ya'qub Yusuf al-Ibrahim, *Min al-Shira' ila al-Bukhar* [From Sail to Steam], Kuwait: al-Rubay'an Publishing, 2003, pp. 83-84. Al-Ibrahim identifies three waves of Gulf merchant settlement in India: the first waves settled in Surat during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the second in Bombay at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the third wave in Karachi, Calicut and Goa prior to the Second World War.

did not allow for sustained contact<sup>(1)</sup>. While the reasoning is compelling, one must also be able to attribute the shift to broader structural changes that were taking place within the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Perhaps the most important among these was the division of the Sultanates of Muscat and Zanzibar following the death of Sultan Sa'id b. Sultan in 1856, which effectively weakened Muscat's position as the guardian of the Straits of Hormuz. Coupled with the effective removal of the Qasimi – a maritime community alternatively described as traders, toll collectors, and pirates – and the establishment of a strong British presence in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean might have facilitated the entry of Gulf merchants into this trading system. One could plausibly argue that the series of British-sponsored maritime truces between 1820 and 1853 might have created an environment within which Gulf ships could move between their home ports and those of Western India, South Arabia and East Africa<sup>(2)</sup>.

Another, equally important dimension to this expansion could lie in economic developments – specifically, the pearl and date booms of the mid-to-late 19th century. In the Persian Gulf, the sizeable expansions of the market for dates and pearls depended on the advent of these infrastructural changes. One historian outlines how the markets for dates expanded in important ways during the 1880s, reaching

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(1) al-Hijji, *Al-Nashatat*, pp. 18-19; this theory also has widespread currency amongst other local historians, who often cite each other's work. See also al-Ibrahim, *Min al-Shira'*, pp. 40-41; Abu Hakima, *Modern History*, pp. 93, 96-7.

(2) On the Qasimis, see also J.B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi, *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*, London: Croom Helm, 1986; and Charles Davies, *The Blood Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797-1820*, Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997.

consumers in Europe and America. The Gulf began to export dates in much greater quantities following the establishment of markets abroad – markets whose supply depended largely on the sinews forged by the recent advent of steamships and the telegraph in the region<sup>(1)</sup>. Between 1899 and 1906, the earliest years for which there are published figures, Muscat's date exports nearly doubled, from over £52,000 to £92,500, peaking at over £103,000 in 1902-3. Bahrain's comparatively small exports also grew exponentially, from over £10,500 in 1899-1900 to almost £26,000 six years later<sup>(2)</sup>.

As the date trade with the United States began to solidify, new markets for Gulf pearls also developed and the value of pearl exports skyrocketed. These changes owed a great deal to a boom in the demand for pearls in Europe and North America during the late-nineteenth century. The boom prompted vigorous entry by European pearl merchants into the industry – either indirectly via Bombay, an established market for pearls and home to a large number of Gulf pearl merchants, or directly through Bahrain, considered the largest market for pearls in the Gulf. External demand for pearls had existed since at least the 16th century; although it waned following the mid-17th century upheavals in Europe, it persisted 'in muted form' until it was revived in the mid-nineteenth century by European royalty and aristocrats. This demand was only bolstered by the post-Industrial

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(1) Matthew S. Hopper, 'The African Presence in Arabia: Slavery, the World Economy, and the African Diaspora in Eastern Arabia, 1840-1940.' Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006, pp. 112-114.

(2) J. G. Lorimer, 'Date Production and the Date Trade in the Persian Gulf Region,' in *The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Slough, UK: Archive Editions, 1905/1987, Vol. 1 (Historical) Part II (Appendices) p. 2307.

Revolution emergence of the European and American nouveau riche – commercial magnates, agricultural landowners, and professionals – who ‘joined the ranks of high society and eventually overtook it in dictating fashion trends in both Europe and North America.’<sup>(1)</sup>

The boom in the market for pearls and the appearance of European competitors to the Indian market had a predictable effect on the price that Gulf pearls commanded. One 1877 observer noted that the price of pearls was said to have doubled since the middle of the century<sup>(2)</sup>. During the decade between the early 1890s and early 1900s, for which we have solid figures, the total value of pearls exported from the Gulf tripled from almost £500,000 in 1893-4 to nearly £1.5 million in 1903-4. This growth was particularly remarkable in Bahrain, where the value of pearl exports rose by nearly 600 percent between 1873 and 1906<sup>(3)</sup>. Together with the rising prices that dates commanded, the pearl bonanza of the second half of the nineteenth century would have provided Gulf mercantile communities with enough added income to fuel commercial expansion into the Indian Ocean<sup>(4)</sup>.

By the early twentieth century, as the boom reached its zenith, the merchants and mariners of the Gulf had established sizeable communities in a number of Western

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(1) Hopper, “The African Presence in Arabia,” pp. 180-82.

(2) E.L. Dorand, ‘Notes on the Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf,’ The Persian Gulf Administration Report, 1877-1878, p. 39.

(3) J. G. Lorimer, ‘The Pearl and Mother of Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf,’ *Gazetter*, Vol. 1 (Historical) Part 2 (Appendices) pp. 2252-3. It is not clear whether these increases hold when adjusted for the quantity of pearls being exported. That said, even a rise in the number of exported pearls would indicate a boom in production.

(4) For figures on the rise in date and pearl export values during the nineteenth century, see J. G. Lorimer, *The Gazetteer*, Vol. 5, pp. 2252-2255, 2307.

Indian ports, including Karachi, Bombay, Goa and Calicut, with some venturing farther into the interior and taking up residence in such trading centers as Hyderabad and Poona<sup>(1)</sup>. Western India quickly became a cornerstone of the Indian Ocean world of Gulf merchants, providing them with access to foodstuffs such as rice, sugar, tea and spices as well as textiles, building materials such as Indian teak and other types of timber, which were vital to the burgeoning dhow-building industry in the Gulf. To the ports of Western India, Gulf mariners would bring dates from Basra, which were consumed in great quantities around the Indian Ocean, and pearls extracted from the banks between Bahrain and Kuwait.

Of all the economic activities Gulf merchants were involved in, the pearl trade was the most lucrative, employing most of the adult males in the Gulf during the summers and generating considerable income for the merchants involved in it. Many pearl merchants settled in Bombay, which developed a reputation as the biggest market for pearls in the region. This trade, however, only lasted until the early 1930s when the onset of the worldwide economic depression effectively diminished demand for the luxury good. Adding to this was the introduction into world markets of Japanese cultured pearls, which were far cheaper than their natural counterparts and virtually indistinguishable from them in

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(1) The al-'As'usi collection at the CRSK contains letters from Kuwaiti merchants based in these different areas and the al-Qina'i collection contains price lists from Kuwaiti shops in these towns. This was further confirmed by Faysal al-'Isa, the first Kuwaiti consul in India, during an interview in the summer of 2008.

appearance<sup>(1)</sup>. Both of these external developments sent the pearling industry into decline, wiping out a number of Gulf pearl merchants.

Not all India-based Gulf merchants, however, were exclusively involved in pearling. Many traded in pearls as well as in general goods, running import/export businesses out of offices in Western India in conjunction with family members in the Gulf. Merchants sent goods from India to their home ports in the Gulf, from which they would re-export to the smaller ports of the Gulf or, more importantly, into the interior of the Arabian peninsula, where they were consumed by nomadic and settled communities alike. In return for goods brought from India, Gulf-based merchants would receive other foodstuffs from the smaller Gulf ports and goods like ghee (clarified butter), handicrafts and dry brush (used as firewood) from the interior<sup>(2)</sup>. This import/export/re-export business proved to be a lifeline for the Gulf during the depression of the 1930s and the collapse of the pearling industry and, as will be discussed later, was crucial to the preservation of the merchants' influence in the political sphere<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition to pearls, the Gulf merchants of India imported dates from the plantations of the Shatt al-‘Arab

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(1) See also al-Hijji, *Al-Nashatat*, pp. 90-92; al-Zayyani, *op. cit.* pp. 75-79; Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, New York: Longman, 1982/1996, pp. 180-181.

(2) al-Hijji *Al-Nashatat*, pp. 295-310; the al-Qina‘i collection also contains correspondence regarding these matters between ‘Abdullah b. ‘Abdul-Ilah al-Qina‘i and his trading partners in Zubair. Moreover, a large number of the court cases in the IOR involve claims between port-based merchants and their interior-based counterparts.

(3) See also Jill Crystal, ‘Coalitions in Oil Monarchies: Kuwait and Qatar,’ *Comparative Politics*, 21/4 (July 1989), pp. 427-43.

waterway just south of Basra, and from al-Hasa<sup>(1)</sup>. These came in scores of different varieties and sub-varieties, each of which enjoyed a preferred market. Of all Shatt dates, the al-Sayir was the least expensive and most abundant, and was the most preferred variety in the markets of Aden. In the markets of India, the Zahdi variety – which consumers in the Gulf rarely bought – sold the greatest amount, although far more so in Bombay than in Karachi<sup>(2)</sup>. Europe-bound steamers, however, mostly carried the Halawi and Fardh variety, which developed a reputation for its superior taste and sweetness. These dates were an important part of the diets of the Western Indian Ocean, making their way into a number of local foods and desserts and establishing themselves early on as regular accompaniments to meals and coffee in such areas as Yemen, the Levant, North Africa and Turkey. That said, however, dates were not always consumed as food, but were sometimes processed; in India and as far away as Marseilles, France, they were often used in the making of alcoholic beverages.

While Western India was home to the vast majority of the Gulf merchants of the Indian Ocean, there were a number of Gulf merchants who operated out of South Arabia – namely from the principal ports of Muscat, Aden and Mukalla. These merchants were also involved in the import/export business, trading primarily with their Gulf-based counterparts, but rarely with the India-based Gulf

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(1) While many Gulf merchants owned date gardens in Basra or al-Hasa, not all of them did; those who did not purchased the dates from gardens owned by merchants from Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. See also Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, 1750-1900*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1997, pp. 63-72; Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks and Murder*.

(2) al-Hijji, *Al-Nashatat*, pp. 168-175

merchants. This, one can presume, was because of the nature of the goods they traded in. South Arabia-based Gulf merchants imported dates from the Shatt Al-‘Arab, which were in high demand, and mostly exported coffee and tin containers of fish oil, which mariners used to protect their dhows’ hulls from the relentless rays of the sun<sup>(1)</sup>. These goods were important for mariners in the Gulf, but were far less useful to the Gulf merchants of India. Another reason for the weak trade links between India- and South Arabia-based Gulf merchants might have been the heavy presence of Indian banians in Muscat, Aden and the ports in between, which would have precluded Gulf merchants from any significant trade with India<sup>(2)</sup>. Although Indians had also migrated to ports in the Gulf, their presence there was not nearly as pervasive as it was in South Arabia; save Oman, Indians activities in the Gulf were limited to Bahrain, the Trucial States and, to a lesser extent, the Persian port of Bandar Abbas<sup>(3)</sup>.

As well as being a place of business for the Gulf merchants, Aden was also a transit point for Gulf dhows en route to East Africa. Dhows making short stops at Aden would deliver the last of their dates, and the crews would use the freightage they received to purchase cargoes of salt, which they would then sell in the various ports of East Africa (including Mogadishu, Lamu and Mombasa) before finally

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(1) Ibid. pp. 147-150.

(2) For more on this, see also Rajat Kanta Ray, ‘Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: the Rise of the Bazaar, 1800-1914,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1995) pp. 449-554; Charles Schaefer, ‘Selling at a Wash: Competition and the Indian Merchant Community in Aden Crown Colony,’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 19 No. 2 (1999) pp. 16-23.

(3) Precise figures can be found in J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, Vols. 5 and 6.



reaching their final destination, Zanzibar<sup>(1)</sup>. It is important to note here that India-bound dhows very rarely went to East Africa, opting instead to making two voyages between India and the Gulf for freightage. Zanzibar-bound dhows, however, only made one voyage per season, and crews on those dhows had to invest their money in a trade of their own in order to make profits substantial enough to justify the nine-month ordeal. Only a handful of dhows made the India-East Africa voyage, often sailing from Mangalore in Western India and delivering cargoes of tiles to Mombasa, where they were highly sought after<sup>(2)</sup>.

Upon reaching Zanzibar, nakhudhas and their crews invested their money in the one good that they could buy in bulk – a good for which Gulf merchants allowed them an exclusive market: mangrove poles. Sailing down to the Rufiji Delta, the mariners would purchase hundreds of mangrove poles, which they would then sell in the main ports of the Gulf, where they were used as roofing/ceiling material because of their strength and durability<sup>(3)</sup>. Of course, not everyone was able to purchase Rufiji poles, which were known to be the best variety; dhow crews that were late to arrive in Zanzibar or that did not have enough money to purchase Rufiji poles had to settle for the Lamu variety, which was less sought after because of the number

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- (1) This leg of a dhow's Indian Ocean voyages was described in great detail by Alan Villiers, who spent several months in the 1930s on board a Kuwaiti dhow sailing from Aden to Zanzibar, and from there back to the Gulf. See Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940.
  - (2) These routes are made clear in a number of dhow logbooks published by the CRSK between 1996 and 2010.
  - (3) Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860-1970*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004, p. 115; Philip Curtin, 'African Enterprise in the Mangrove Trade: The Case of Lamu,' *African Economic History*, No. 10 (1981), pp. 23-33.

of knots in each pole, but they still found buyers among the poorer inhabitants of the Gulf. Boat owners, nakhudhas and their crews divided the profits from the mangrove trade in agreed-upon proportions according to a rather complex system of division, to be discussed in greater detail later. For now, it is important to note that unlike the pearl trade, the mangrove trade was generally the exclusive province of the dhow crews. The only money merchants collected from the mangrove profits were for the debts that the nakhudhas might have owed them.

## **Credit, Trade and Authority between the Gulf and Indian Ocean**

In forwarding goods between the different ports, Gulf merchants developed complex and lasting relationships with merchants, agents and brokers throughout the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. By integrating themselves within these communities and tapping into their networks both in the Gulf and abroad, Gulf merchants carved for themselves strategic positions, both within the Indian Ocean trade system and at home. In Bombay, for example, such Kuwaiti families as the al-‘Isa (of the al-Qina‘i clan) and al-Shaya‘, among others, developed close contacts within the Indian merchant community over there; this is also true for the al-Sager family in Calicut, and the Karachi-based al-Marzuqs<sup>(1)</sup>. Those from Bahrain, such as the al-Zayyanis, Zaynals and others were also long-time residents

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(1) Interview with Faysal al-‘Isa, summer 2008. Also, these families feature prominently in correspondences held at the CRSK.

of Bombay. James Onley's recent work on the Safars and Sharifs points to the fact that Bahraini merchant families have had branches that resided in the major ports of the Indian Ocean for a number of generations<sup>(1)</sup>.

Although full-fledged partnerships, with all of the legal and commercial implications they entailed, were not uncommon between the merchants of the Gulf and those of the interior Arabian Peninsula or other Gulf ports, there is very little to indicate that such partnerships developed between Indian Ocean-based Gulf merchants and their Indian or East African counterparts. More common were repeated, but isolated, transactions between the Gulf merchants and the various merchants of the Indian Ocean ports. These did not develop out of spatial proximity alone, but were the result of years upon years of transacting and commercial contracting. This is in part illustrated by the close ties between the mangrove brokers of East Africa and Kuwaiti nakhudhas – it will be remembered that there were no Kuwaiti merchants residing in East African ports – who were not residents of these ports, but seasonal traders<sup>(2)</sup>. It was largely by revisiting the same ports every year and doing business through the same brokers that the nakhudhas of the Gulf were able to develop the ties necessary to ensure smooth transactions and access to credit and housing<sup>(3)</sup>. That the brokers were Hadrami Arabs resident in East Africa

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(1) Onley, 'Transnational Merchants,' pp. 66-71.

(2) Ya'qub Al-Hijji, *Mubahhirun Ma'a al-Riyah: Rihlat al-Sawahil*, [Sailing with the Winds: The Journey to the Swahili Coast], documentary film, CRSK, 2006.

(3) In Zanzibar, Kuwaiti nakhudhas most often transacted with the broker Abdullah Harun Ba Harun, and in Mombasa they often did business with Muhammad bin Abdullah Al-Shatiri, both of whom developed very close relationships with and often stayed with them during their visits to the region.

suggests that linguistic and cultural commonalities between them and Gulf nakhudhas may have facilitated this process.

The scant evidence on relations between Indian Ocean-based Gulf merchants and the members of other mercantile communities whom they lived amongst seems to suggest that they made use of a variety of strategies in developing ties. Perhaps the most obvious strategy was the very fact of taking up residence; in establishing a permanent presence, a Gulf merchant placed both his professional reputation and his property at stake in transacting with members of his host society. For merchants on the move, as so many were in the Western Indian Ocean during the latter half of the nineteenth century, property ownership hardly ever had only local implications. A merchant conducting business between the Persian Gulf, India and East Africa was likely to own property in each. Hajji Mirza Mohammed ‘Ali Safar, a Persian merchant who conducted business around the Persian Gulf and Western Indian Ocean at the outset of the nineteenth century, illustrates this well. By the time Safar passed away in 1845, he owned substantial properties in Bushire, Basra, Hilla, Bahrain, Muscat, Bombay and Mocha – a large and far-flung estate that he left to his sons, who continued to conduct business in the family’s name. For other Gulf merchants, this strategy was further buttressed by marriage; those who married into their host communities were able to forge close relationships that were simultaneously social and economic. In doing so, they carved for themselves a strategic commercial position that

they were then able to pass on to their children<sup>(1)</sup>.

Merchants like Safar did not invest in different properties around the Indian Ocean out of simple ostentation. They did it because the exigencies of commercial life in the region required it, for the merchant who owned property in a foreign port was more likely to access credit there. Relative to the other sub-regions of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf was a capital- and commodity-poor part of the Indian Ocean that produced little. Access to credit was thus vital to the merchants of the Gulf – perhaps ever more so than would be the case anywhere else. The production and distribution of the few goods that the Gulf did export – pearls, dates and dhows – relied heavily on credit; captains, divers, planters, and shipbuilders all had to be advanced money for their services. While some wealthy merchants could have generated their capital locally – though even they would have invariably enjoyed connections to mercantile communities in other Indian Ocean ports – the vast majority of merchants and other economic agents in the Gulf region had to depend on creditors, be they Arab, Persian or Indian, to finance their activities.

Without access to credit from the mercantile communities in which they were embedded, it is difficult to see how Gulf merchants could have participated in Indian Ocean commerce at all. Indeed, a principal dimension of

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(1) Rasha Al-Duwaisan, 'An Oral History: The Kuwaiti Community in India in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s', Unpublished M.A. thesis, Harvard University, 2008. That marriage was a common commercial strategy is further highlighted by the experience of Omanis in East Africa, many of whom married into local communities and provided their children with strategic kinship ties on which they could draw in their commercial endeavors. On this, see Thomas McDow, 'Arabs and Africans: Kinship and Commerce from Oman to the East African Interior, c. 1820-1900', Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2008, pp. 77-135.

the import/export business in which most Gulf merchants participated was the simultaneous extension and retention of credit. Gulf merchants based in India, for example, received goods on credit from the Indian merchant community in which they were embedded. These goods were then sold on credit to their Gulf-based counterparts, who then sold them in local Gulf ports or to the Arabian Peninsular merchants they transacted with, either for cash or on credit. The goods the Gulf merchants sent back to their Indian counterparts were also financed by the credit they received. The pearling industry, for example, was heavily dependent on credit, with nakhudhas receiving credit from local merchants and parceling it out amongst their mariners. The pearls they brought back were credited to their ongoing accounts with their merchant-financiers, who then sent the pearls back to their India-based financiers. The latter credited the value of the pearls to their account, and the cycle then repeated.

As members of a cosmopolitan commercial society who were able to direct the flow of resources and credit from far-flung regions to their home ports, the Indian Ocean merchants and nakhudhas of the Gulf were not of little consequence. Those who were able to carve a place for themselves in this vast trade system enjoyed privileged positions of influence over both the ruling and working classes. Moreover, they enjoyed a wide resource base from which they could draw in effecting economic, social and political mobility in their home ports. In short, Gulf participants in Indian Ocean commerce were able to shape the contours of politics and commercial society in the region in meaningful ways.

As key suppliers of goods and credit to the thousands of maritime laborers in the region – the pearling industry, it will be remembered, was heavily dependent on advances of cash and goods – Gulf merchants were able to sustain influential positions as patrons of large groups of potentially troublesome clients. Both directly and through their Gulf-based partners, through whom they channeled goods, merchants who commanded such capital and human resources were able to mount serious challenges to the authority of the comparatively weak rulers of the region. Examples abound in Gulf history of merchants who found themselves in conflict with their rulers and, exercising their sway over the population, took their capital, goods, and hundreds of their dependents to a neighboring town or emirate<sup>(1)</sup>. Faced with the prospect of economic ruin, the rulers had little choice but to beg the merchants to return to their home ports, invariably under more favorable circumstances. One often-cited example is the exodus of three influential merchants, Ibrahim al-Mudhaf, Hilal al-Mutayri and Shamlan bin ‘Ali al-Sayf, who, in protest against Kuwaiti ruler Shaykh Mubarak al-Sabah’s conscription of pearl divers into an army to fight his battles with the al-Muntafiq tribe of south Basra, packed their belongings and left for Bahrain and al-Hasa. It was only after weeks of pleading on the part of Mubarak and his family, as well as strict assurances that conscription would no longer be

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(1) See also Peter Lienhardt, ‘The Authority of Shaykhs in the Gulf: An Essay in Nineteenth-century History,’ *Arabian Studies*, Vol. 2 (1975) p. 64; James Onley and Sulayman Khalaf, ‘Shaikhly Authority in the Pre-Oil Gulf: An Historical-Anthropological Study,’ *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 2006) pp. 197-198.

mandatory, that the merchants agreed to return<sup>(1)</sup>.

These fallouts, and the ensuing negotiations, were not always peaceful. Pearling, it must be kept in mind, was for a long time a very turbulent activity characterized by a great deal of violence. The summer pearl dives were often marred by armed clashes between different tribes or polities. Indeed, so closely intertwined were pearling and war that the British made a habit of sending a gunboat to patrol the Gulf pearl fisheries every season. For the merchants who financed the dive, their indebted mariners and slaves were a small army which they could mobilize against rulers or rivals if necessary. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this is the attempted coup by Yusuf al-Ibrahim, a Kuwaiti merchant whose family's commercial activities spanned the ports of Bombay, Bahrain and Basra, and who had established a residence in Dawra, a small harbor near the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway, just south of ‘Abadan, and had earned the sobriquet ‘Shaykh al-Dawra’. Al-Ibrahim enjoyed close links to the al-Sabah rulers of Kuwait, and had married his sisters to the two co-rulers, Jarrah and Muhammad. When in 1896 the two brothers were murdered by their younger sibling Mubarak, al-Ibrahim gathered together his legions of divers and mariners and, from his base in Dawra, launched an attack on Mubarak. The attack ultimately failed, but its demonstration of al-Ibrahim's potential as a challenger to the throne was clear to the Kuwaiti ruler, who then attempted to smoothen relations

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(1) See also al-Shamlan, *op. cit.* pp. 67-84; ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Rashid, *Tarikh al-Kuwayt [The History of Kuwait]* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Kuwait: Al-Qirtas Publishing 1999, pp. 286-292.



with his rival<sup>(1)</sup>.

Al-Ibrahim's endeavors were by no means unique. The pages of the history of the Gulf are replete with accounts of disaffected merchants who were able to marshal together resources from their commercial activities and channel them towards the establishment of proto-states from which they attempted to dislodge their erstwhile rulers. The al-Mazrui of Mombasa, who were both merchants and large landowners, appealed to the British directly to establish an independent protectorate in which the Sultan of Muscat and Zanzibar would have no authority<sup>(2)</sup>. In other cases, such as the case of Rahma bin Jabir al-Jalahima, who launched campaigns against the al-Khalifa rulers of Bahrain from his bases in Khawr Hasan and Dammam, they mobilized their slaves and other dependents and resorted to outright banditry<sup>(3)</sup>.

A merchant's political influence was not restricted to his ability to mobilize his dependents and allies against Gulf rulers. At other junctures – namely economic slumps – merchants drew their influence from their numerous assets spread all over the Indian Ocean. By relying on their diverse investments, they were able to establish secure

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(1) Perhaps the best discussion of this episode in Kuwaiti history can be found in Frederick Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 92-112; another more contemporary description is in al-Rashid, *op. cit.* pp 244-255. The al-Qina'i collection at CRSK includes hundreds of letters between Kuwaiti merchant Abdullah bin Abdul-Ilah, the al-Ibrahim's agent in Kuwait, and his principals in Dawra and Zubayr, and describe these proceedings in some detail.

(2) John Gray, *The British in Mombasa, 1824-1826: Being a History of Captain Owen's Protectorate*, London: MacMillan, 1957.

(3) On the Al-Harthi see McDow, *op. cit.* pp 9-20; for a description of the proceedings of Rahma bin Jabir, see also Lorimer, *op. cit.* Vol. 2 pp. 840-855; Jon Mandaville, 'Rahmah of the Gulf,' *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 26 No. 3 (May/June 1975) pp. 12-13.

bases for themselves during periods of economic downturn and, if necessary, use these bases to mount political challenges. One of the most illustrative examples of this is the successful political action by Kuwaiti merchants against the al-Sabah during the 1930s when the pearling industry had all but collapsed. Kuwaiti merchants were still able to maintain their economic posture through investments in land in Basra, India, South Arabia and elsewhere. Indeed, for many Gulf merchants, the profits from the pearl trade were only partly re-invested in outfitting pearling dhows. Many merchants preferred to invest pearl proceeds in other assets – namely date gardens and real estate – which they could then liquidate or mortgage for credit if necessary<sup>(1)</sup>.

Merchants who did this were able to make an effective transition into the long-distance trading sector through previous investments, and were thus able to survive the storm of the 1930s. One of the more famous figures among these merchants was Hilal al-Mutayri, who invested his pearling income in real estate in both Bahrain and Bombay as well as date plantations in Basra, effectively securing an income for both himself and his sons for a number of

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(1) That land was a main area of mercantile investment in the Indian Ocean has not yet been explored in any detail. However, there do exist thousands of registered and unregistered mortgage and sales deeds in various archives, private and public, around the Indian Ocean, all of which attest to the centrality of land in commercial culture. Caches of such deeds exist in the Ratansi Purshottam Library, Muttrah, Oman; the Bushiri Archive, Bahrain; the AM series in the Zanzibar National Archives, and in the India Office Records, files R/15/2/1908 and R/15/2/2017-2022, now at the British Library.

decades<sup>(1)</sup>. Political scientist Jill Crystal has argued that it was this solid economic base during a period of depression that helped Kuwaiti merchants preserve their political influence when that of other mercantile communities in the Gulf had waned, and allowed them to launch a successful campaign for the establishment of a legislative council<sup>(2)</sup>. Other, comparable examples are seen in the biographies of almost all of the major merchant families of the Gulf, many of whom were able to maintain their influence despite political or economic shifts because of the land they owned both in their home ports and abroad<sup>(3)</sup>.

The ability to use Indian Ocean resources to carve positions of authority at home was not an exclusive reserve of Gulf merchants, whom scholars generally recognize as important political actors. Nakhudhas, too, were able to draw on their Indian Ocean connections to carve strategic positions for themselves as both economic and political actors. Indeed, this mobility was integrated into the partnership and profit-sharing structures on which the

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- (1) While many of the al-Mutayri properties in Basra are no longer in their possession, the family still owns the Bombay and Bahrain properties, which are managed by Kuwaiti merchants resident in those places. Interview with Faysal al-'Isa (Summer, 2008). It should be mentioned here, however, that not all of these properties were bought as investments; many Gulf pearl merchants acquired them as mortgages against loans given out by them after their debtors failed to repay their debts during the economic depression of the 1930s. Thus, there were close to 5,000 debt-related cases filed in the Bahrain courts during the 1930s and 1940s, all of which are available at the British Library. While not all of these involve mortgaged properties, a significant proportion of them do. See also IOR/R/15/3/2540 - IOR/R/15/3/4997, IOR/R/15/3/1 - IOR/R/15/3/2539 and IOR/R/15/3/8938 - IOR/R/15/3/11586; Penelope Tuson, *The Records of the British Residency and Agencies in the Persian Gulf*, London: India Office Records, 1979.
- (2) See Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, esp. pp. 36-61.
- (3) See also Michael Fields, *The Merchants: The Big Business Families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States*, Woodstock, NY: John Murray, 1984; J.R.L. Carter, *Merchant Families of Saudi Arabia*, London: Scorpion Communications and Publishing, 1984, and *Merchant Families of Kuwait*, London: Scorpion Communications and Publishing, 1984.

dhaw trade between the Gulf and Indian Ocean rested. In addition to the share of freightage that they might receive, nakhudhas were allotted specified shares of the profits from the sale of mangrove poles – a trade, as we noted earlier, that was the exclusive province of the dhow crews. As with freightage, the mangrove proceeds were divided into shares, and while the proportions varied across time and from port to port, as a general rule the net profits of the voyage were divided in two: one half for the dhow's owner, and one half for the crew. The crew's half was then further divided into a number of shares, which varied according to the size of the crew. Each crew member would receive the monetary equivalent of one to three shares, depending on his rank<sup>(1)</sup>.

In the above scheme, a nakhudha was given ample incentive to put together enough capital to purchase a dhow, for as both nakhudha and dhow-owner, he would stand to keep well over half of the proceeds from freightage and mangrove sales. Upon crossing the threshold into the category of dhow-owning nakhudhas, and in view of the not-inconsiderable profits he would almost certainly reap, a nakhudha could transition into the more exclusive merchant-financier class with relative ease, and would be able to bankroll his own trading voyages. Throughout this process of mobility, and even as a merchant-financier, the nakhudha drew on his established list of contacts with dhow agents in the various ports of the Indian Ocean,

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(1) See also al-Hijji, *op. cit.* pp. 127-136, 150-158. This system is also described by the famous nakhudha Isa al-Qatami's son in his appendix to his father's sailing manual, and by Alan Villiers, based on his observations during his travels. See Isa al-Qatami, *Dalil al-Muhtar fi 'Ilm al-Bihar* [Guide for the Perplexed in the Science of the Seas], Kuwait: State of Kuwait Publishing, 1964, p. 225; and Alan Villiers, 'Some Aspects of the Arab Dhow Trade', *Middle East Journal*, Vol 2 (1948) pp. 399-416.

through whom he developed the network infrastructure to support his new business ventures<sup>(1)</sup>. As with the merchants, nakhudhas could then bequeath their contacts and capital to their heirs<sup>(2)</sup>.

Even without having made the transition into the merchant-financier class, a nakhudha, as a dhow-owner or simply a nakhudha ja'di – a captain who did not own his own dhow – was always in a position to exercise varying degrees of political power. Irrespective of where he stood in the hierarchy of economic actors, the nakhudha held a position of quasi-sovereignty as the master of the vessel and the undisputed commander of the crew. As one Kuwaiti historian observes: 'on the deck of the ship, he [the nakhudha] is the leader and the one responsible for it, its cargo and its sailors, and if you needed him as an imam he would lead all of the sailors in prayer... and he is also the judge who arbitrates in disputes between the sailors and the lawyer who defends the rights of his sailors when they encounter trouble in ports abroad.'<sup>(3)</sup> Just as important was the nakhudha's position as the most immediate holder of the purse-strings; although the money to outfit a dhow for a voyage often came from a merchant-financier whom he had to repay, the nakhudha decided the advances that his

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(1) This theme runs throughout al-Hijji's 600-page compendium of nakhudha biographies; see Ya'qub al-Hijji, *Nawakhudhat al-Safar al-Shira'i fi-l Kuwayt* [The Sailing Captains of Kuwait], Kuwait: CRSK, 2005.

(2) Perhaps the best example of this is the al-'Othman family, led by the nakhudha Abdul-Wahhab Al-Othman, who as a nakhudha developed a network of business contacts which he and his children continued to make use of well after he established himself as a merchant-financier. See Abdul-Mohsen Al-Khorafi 'A'ilat al-'Uthman [The al-'Uthman Family], Kuwait: Privately published, 2003, and Al-Nakhudha 'Abdul-Wahhab 'Abdul-'Aziz Al-'Uthman: Riyadat 'A'ila wa Tamayyuz Insan [Captain Abdul-Wahhab Abdul Aziz al-Uthman: Educating a Family, and What Makes a Human Being Distinctive], Kuwait: Privately published, 2003.

(3) Abdul-Mughni, *Nawākhudha*, p. 166.

mariners were to receive at the beginning of the journey and was the chief decision-maker in the crew's mangrove-trading ventures. And while the crews of trading dhows were not in a state of perpetual debt like they were on pearling dhows, they were sufficiently reliant on advances and gifts from the nakhudha to be called his dependents.

This economic and quasi-political sway that the nakhudha had over his mariners was not only on board the ship; it was an influence that could just as easily be exercised on land if necessary. Nakhudhas had the opportunity to showcase this influence in Bahrain in the early 1930s, in their vocal opposition to recent British attempts to reform the pearling industry and cap the advances they could give their divers. For three pearling seasons in a row, nakhudhas incited hundreds of their divers to riot and demand that restrictions on advances be lifted for both their own sake and that of the divers – a demand that the Bahraini rulers and their British advisors reluctantly accepted<sup>(1)</sup>. That the nakhudhas exercised power over a mobile force only rendered them more dangerous, allowing them to flex their muscles wherever it best suited them. There are enough accounts of disputes between port authorities and dhow crews from the Gulf in different parts of the Indian Ocean to sustain the idea that nakhudhas were able to prod their mariners into action whenever necessary<sup>(2)</sup>.

Despite the many differences between a merchant and

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(1) See Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960, pp. 49-51; Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 160-163

(2) See also Zanzibar National Archives, AK 8/13 'Seasonal Dhow Visits from Arabia', AK 4/35 'Dhow File', and AK 4/31 'Dhow Season, 1947-8'; Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar*, pp. 131-150.

nakhudha in terms of wealth and status, the above examples illustrate that they both shared one thing in common: they both drew on the Indian Ocean as a source of economic mobility, and used their privileged positions within the Gulf-Indian Ocean trade systems to reinvent themselves as political actors. By strategically positioning themselves between their own networks and those of the Indian, East African or other merchants, the Indian Ocean-based merchants of the Gulf were able to bridge the gaps that would have otherwise made cross-communal transacting too difficult to realize. The implications of their privileged intermediary positions between their home ports and the Indian Ocean were not limited to economic life. Indeed, Gulf merchants and nakhudhas used their positions to carve out for themselves strategic roles as political and social actors in the Gulf. In doing so, they actively participated in reshaping material culture and political life in their home ports, inextricably fusing the dynamics of both to the rhythms of a broader Indian Ocean commercial system.

These trans-oceanic mercantile linkages continued to shape Gulf societies, well after the emergence of oil as a key export of that region. A number of Gulf merchant families even stayed in India and South Arabia well past the introduction of oil into their countries' economies, and continued to supply their home markets with commodities from their host ports just as they did for scores of years. The majority of the Indian Ocean merchants of the Gulf, however, recognized that there were growing business opportunities at home – the most popular among which was the establishment of local agencies for the growing number

of Western companies looking to do business in the fast-developing states of the Gulf. Access to these opportunities was a natural by-product of the political influence these merchants had developed over generations; the rulers channeled commercial contracts towards merchants as a way of ensuring political stability in a period of rapid change. This economic transformation, it should be noted, did not sever the ties between the Gulf and Indian Ocean, but converted them into channels through which Gulf merchants could recruit foreign laborers and personnel to manage their growing businesses.

## **Conclusion**

The historiography of the Gulf has experienced something of a second wind over the past decade. Inspired by trends in different fields and influenced by new methodologies, historians of the region have begun to ask new questions of old materials, and have discovered entirely new archives to work with. However, despite these promising developments, and save for a handful of works, most historians of the Gulf continue to work within a resolutely local framework. For most of them, the narrative of the Gulf's past either belongs to a broader Arab/Middle Eastern history or is considered an historical anomaly – hence the need for an annual 'Gulf Studies' conference, workshops, and the like. The result has been largely harmful to the historiography of the region: despite new materials and approaches, the sub-field of Gulf history – and Gulf studies more broadly – remains an academic ghetto.



The discussion here aimed to highlight a new and potentially more fruitful arena with which historians of the Gulf could engage: the Indian Ocean. To this end, I have suggested one potential way in which scholars can begin to rethink the history of the Gulf within the framework of that of the Indian Ocean. Rather than taking the more conventional route of looking for influential Gulf actors in India or East Africa (an approach that has served historians of Hadramawt and Oman well but is potentially less useful to people working on Kuwait or Bahrain), I have attempted to turn the lens inward – to look for how actors who moved between the Gulf and Indian Ocean arenas reshaped the contours of political, economic and social life in the Gulf itself. By converting their access to credit into a basis for authority, merchants and ship captains in the Gulf were able to remake themselves into political actors of some consequence. Trade and politics in the broader Indian Ocean, then, emerge as important backstage dimensions of economic and political life in the Gulf.

If the argument seems basic, it is because I only mean to scratch the surface of a potentially enormous project – to point simply to what promises expanding the geographical horizons of the Gulf might yield. If historians of the Gulf can begin to picture broader frontiers of the region's history that lie in Bombay, Aden and Zanzibar, then they can begin to open the gates to entirely new literatures, debates and archives. By imagining the world of Gulf actors as including India, South Arabia and East Africa, historians can begin to ask new questions surrounding the trans-regional dimensions of economic, social and political communities in the Gulf itself.