


ROUNDTABLE

Escape from Zanzibar: Refugees, Documents, and the Indian Ocean Shipping Regime

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In January 1964, on the heels of its formal independence from Britain, the East African island of Zanzibar exploded in a violent uprising ousting the Al-Bu Saidi sultan—an Omani by descent—and his primarily “Arab” government. Though early reports of the revolution did not indicate targeted attacks against Arabs, it soon became clear that thousands of Arab-identified residents—settlers—were killed, mostly in rural areas.¹ Others, including some families I came to know during my years in interior Oman, described being separated from their families or being captured and taken to detention camps, where they stayed a week or two before being reunited. Some found their way to these camps in search of relatives, shelter, and food.² Decades later, the chaos and violence of that time was recounted to me with unnerving directness. Eventually, thousands of Arabs were deported or fled—to Kenya, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Muscat and Oman. Muscat, on the coast of Oman, was the seat of the other Al-Bu Saidi sultan—a cousin of the Zanzibar sultan—who had only recently taken control of “Oman proper,” the territory of the Imamate whose ruler was now in exile in Saudi Arabia having been defeated in a war with the Sultan of Muscat. In the meantime, those leaving Zanzibar required ships and documents.

As scholars of modern shipping and seafaring, such as Vaselka Huber, have noted, the flow of goods and people through the Suez Canal enabled by coal (and then oil) and the expansion of ports has often been as convulsive as it is smooth, though often greased by capital.³ As “choke-points,” ports—and the Suez Canal itself—often accelerate and decelerate connectivity, even in the best of times; that is, in times of relative peace. The opening of the Suez Canal not only enabled the expansion of steam shipping into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, it also accompanied, or helped fortify, a legal world of choke-points and check points decades in the making.⁴ With the introduction of the global passport system after World War

¹ Estimates of the number of Arabs killed have varied significantly. At the end of January 1964, British officials were estimating between 400 and 1000, but by April, they estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 Arabs had been killed. Public Records Office (PRO) DO 185/60 and FO371/178270. For the earliest reports, see DO 185/59. For an excellent account of the experiences of the Zanzibar diaspora, see Nathaniel Mathews, *Zanzibar Was a Country* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, forthcoming).

² For details from the perspective of British officials in contact with the Red Cross, see PRO DO 185/60. According to the file, there were four centers, holding 2,220 detainees. British Red Cross reports detail the four centers that were soon established in Zanzibar town and on Prison Island to which they provided care. Other centers popped up elsewhere on the island. British Red Cross (BRC) RCC/1/12/4/190.

³ Vaselka Huber, *Channeling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴ Will Hanley, “Papers for Going, Papers for Staying: Identification and Subject Formation in the Eastern Mediterranean,” in *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940*, eds. Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh, and Avner Wishnitzer (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 177–200.

I, and then the cementing of territorial boundaries with decolonization and the growth of nationalism after World War II, the processes of bordering and identification became even more exacting. The fantasy of globalization, as Laleh Khalili has argued, married—albeit with varying degrees of tenuousness—shipping and port infrastructure to nation-states and international legal structures.⁵ Here, I wish to focus on the choke-point of Zanzibar, when the contradictions of the demands of political membership and identification were laid bare in the aftermath of the 1964 revolution.

By the early 1960s, people traveling to Zanzibar from Oman had already been subject to decades of bureaucratic regulations, often limiting their expectations of unencumbered settlement on the island. The first attempts to control immigration to Zanzibar by British colonial officials were, however, *not* supported by the Colonial Office in London. Edward Clarke, the British Consul General in Zanzibar, raised the problem of immigration in 1909 and again in 1912, lamenting that Zanzibar was “the only place on the East African coast where immigration was not controlled.”⁶ It was only *after* WWI, in 1923, that Zanzibar had its first immigration decree, outlining the requirements of a passport.⁷ The demand for travel documents, however, also meant determining peoples’ political membership and subjecthood, not an easy feat given the centuries and seeming tangle of mobility, marriage, slavery, property, and political rule. British officials tasked with sorting out and defining membership had to remind each other of historical cut-off dates and the differences between protectorates and colonies.

Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, residents of Zanzibar had become more than familiar with the demands of defining identity and political belonging, even if they also often ignored documentary requirements. By the time the 1964 violence broke out, Omanis who had remained in Zanzibar through the tumultuous politics and heated rhetoric of independence and what post-colonial Zanzibar would be, had, therefore, already been subject to decades of policies and discourses of official belonging, never mind the growing, intense, and angry public debates about power and identity in popularly circulating newspapers.⁸

And yet, the tensions of territorial sovereignty maintained by legal arrangements were hardly ironed out. At the end of January 1964, with thousands of people frantic and “encouraged” to leave and 2,000 people still held in camps, British officials, the Red Cross, and the United Nations

The High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were trying to decide which “Arabs” were “Zanzibar nationals” and which were “Omani subjects.”⁹ This distinction affected not only whether the sultan of Muscat *and* Oman (as he insisted on being called since his recent defeat of the Imamate) would allow entry to those being evacuated, but also whether the UNHCR would become involved.¹⁰ In other words, not only could the UNHCR officially not help while Arabs were *in* Zanzibar (they had not yet crossed a border), but it was also unclear whether Arabs were leaving their homes and country of origin or returning to them. How, then, could they be “Omani?” Indeed, how were they “Arabs” in the first place? In addition to these questions, there eventually emerged another one: could they travel with official documents from the Imamate of Oman, a polity defeated by the sultan

⁵ Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁶ Zanzibar National Archives (ZNA) AB 26/15.

⁷ ZNA AK 9/3 and ZNA AB 26/15. Zanzibar was not alone in promulgating new immigration decrees in 1923 and 1924. The United States, for example, instituted its Immigration Act of 1924 affirming a quota system, first introduced in 1921, that cemented the passport system. See also John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁸ Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁹ PRO DO 185/60. This distinction became particularly important after the first steamer, the *Jan van Riebeeck*, arrived in Salala in February, as the sultan became frustrated with the fact that “Zanzibari subjects” were on board.

¹⁰ PRO FO 371/178270.

of Muscat (with British military support), that had established a government in exile in Dammam, Saudi Arabia?

As the humanitarian crisis escalated and the extent of the violence became clearer, the Red Cross and UNHCR procured ships and documents for those leaving. Both steam ships and dhows carried “refugees.” By mid-February, the first steam ship, the *Jan van Riebeeck*, carried 160 evacuees from Zanzibar to Southern Arabia, traveling first to Salala and then arriving in Muscat (February 22, 1964), before heading to other ports of call in the Persian Gulf.¹¹ The sultan of Zanzibar and his family, along with half of the police force and several hundred other passengers, had already escaped on the royal yacht, the *Seyyed Khalifa*, on January 12.¹²

After first accepting those on the steamer, the sultan of Muscat and Oman became wary, soon announcing that subjects of the sultan of Zanzibar (his distant cousin and rival) were not *his* subjects and thus not welcome. The shared rule with Zanzibar had ended in 1860 (with the British mediated “Canning Award”) and so he, the sultan of Muscat and Oman, would only accept those who were Omani born, those with Sultanate of Muscat passports, or those “easily identifiable.”¹³ The idea that they were “Arabs of Omani origin” did not carry much weight.

While the Red Cross and UNHCR organized the steamers, sailing ships, or dhows, also began heading for Muscat, though these had to wait until the April monsoon winds (moving from the southwest) allowed them to sail north.¹⁴ On April 2, two dhows (the *Samham* and the *Afiat al-Rahman*), with 193 and 148 passengers respectively, left Zanzibar for Muscat. Then, on April 4, the *Salam* left with 207 passengers and, on April 9, the *Fateiker* left with 201 and the *Badry* with 215.¹⁵ These ships were severely overcrowded. As the Zanzibar port officer noted, the capacity of the *Samham* and *Afiat al-Rahman* was each 50 and the *Salam* was only 35. Another nine dhows, with 1,137 passengers in total, left Zanzibar throughout the remainder of April.

Although the sultan eventually accepted those on board these ships in the winter and spring of 1964, he had become adamant about limiting entry by the summer.¹⁶ In turn, the private shipping companies contracted by the Red Cross and UNHCR also became more reluctant to carry passengers who could not be guaranteed to disembark.¹⁷ After much back and forth and multiple cancelled and revised plans, it was agreed that passengers on the remaining ships without Sultanate documents would be asked their tribal details, to which shaykh in Muscat and Oman they were “connected,” in which part of the country they wished to live,

¹¹ The ship, named after a seventeenth-century Dutch navigator and founding commander of Dutch fortifications at the Cape of Good Hope, had been plowing the Indian Ocean when it was recruited for the task. The Dutch government, however, was unaware that the ship was carrying these “refugees.” UNHCR Evacuation of Manga Arabs from Zanzibar. 11/1-15/112 (vol. 1).

¹² PRO DO 185/59.

¹³ PRO FO 371/178270. Interestingly, the original cable from the British consul general in Muscat reporting on the sultan’s position, noted that the time after which those of Omani origin became Zanzibari was when Zanzibar became a British protectorate, which would be 1890 and not 1860. Accordingly, the date on a subsequent memo summarizing the cable has the original date as 1890, crossed out to 1860. BRC RCC/1/12/4/190

¹⁴ The “Winter monsoon” of October to March blows from the northeast toward the southwest, bringing ships from Arabia to East Africa.

¹⁵ PRO FO371/178270.

¹⁶ One memo from the UNHCR suggested that it was, in fact, the British Foreign Office that had advised the Omani Sultan to screen—and limit—those leaving. UNHCR Evacuation of Manga Arabs out from Zanzibar. 11/1-15/112 (vol. 1).

¹⁷ Indeed, by the summer of 1964, it appeared that while the first wave of about 3,500 had departed for Muscat, Salala, and other ports, there were many others (at first, it seemed to be about 1,200 or 1,300, but then maybe 1,900 or 2,113), half of whom were children and many from Pemba, waiting to leave. The Red Cross and UNHCR tried to secure other ships, including the *SS Santhia*, a ship of the British India Steam Navigation Company and from the Pan-Islamic Steamship Company. UNHCR Evacuation of Manga Arabs out from Zanzibar. 11/1- 15/112 (vol. 1).

and the name of the family they wished to contact upon arrival.¹⁸ In other words, while the Red Cross and UNHCR projected a generic “Arab of Omani origin” and had to maneuver financial compensation to the shipping companies and exit approval from Zanzibar, what mattered in Oman (in addition to the costs), or at least to the sultan of Muscat and Oman, were kin networks and local social structures of responsibility.

At the same time, many of the deportees or refugees who were considered “Arabs” in Zanzibar, but who could not or did not wish to enter Muscat, did not appear to feel much affinity for other countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The Red Cross and UNHCR shifted from ethnicity as “language and culture” to “ethnic origins.” Indeed, Felix Schnyder of the Red Cross, writing to the UN Secretary General about the plight of the remaining “Arabs” in Zanzibar, noted,

It is the view of the Red Cross that the remaining Arabs in Zanzibar must be resettled elsewhere. These people left Oman and Muscat some generations ago and very few of them possess passports or other tangible links with this country; many do not even speak Arabic today although they are ethnically of Arab origins.¹⁹

Schnyder did not explain what constituted “ethnic origins,” but it was enough to suggest that the refugees/deportees should be resettled in an Arab country. Whereas hypodescent rules in the United States would have categorized and racialized these “Arabs” as “African,” in the context of East Africa, they were still “Arab,” no matter what language they spoke or who their mothers or grandmothers may have been.

As arrival in Muscat and Oman became increasingly difficult, “Arabs” from Zanzibar began to be relocated to other Gulf polities. One contingent traveled to Dubai, as Noora Lori recently noted.²⁰ There, they quickly organized a Zanzibar Association and sent notes of complaint and frustration in impeccable English about their conditions to OXFAM. They noted, “almost all of us cannot speak Arabic ... [our] very background has made it difficult for several of us to get really settled, integrate in this society and feel at home. Some of us would prefer to settle in English-speaking countries where we would feel more at home.”²¹ What they meant by their “very background” is unclear, though one can imagine that their sense of being elite and educated did not mesh with their imagination of Dubaians, “Bedouins.” In other words, Arabia was not home.

Others, those not officially settled by the UNHCR and Red Cross or who could not acquire passports from Muscat, managed to acquire documents from the Imamate government in exile, the government from interior Oman defeated by the sultan. In UNHCR files pertaining to “Zanzibari refugees” in Saudi Arabia dating to 1969, we learn that the Saudi government had accepted Imamate “Omani” passports issued by the government in exile in Jeddah, but not those issued by the government in exile in Cairo. The office of the Imam also met arriving dhows at port and handed them new passports on the spot. By 1969, although Lebanon

¹⁸ By August 1964, the UNHCR, recognizing that the remaining Arabs in Zanzibar were *not* technically refugees, determined that the high commissioner would act as an “intermediary of good will” for humanitarian reasons and endeavor with good prospects to raise the cost of transport through voluntary agencies and interested governments. UNHCR Evacuation of Manga Arabs out from Zanzibar. 11/1-15/112 (vol. 1). See also, BRC RCC/1/12/4/190 for accounts of negotiations. By May 1965, the Muscat government insisted on the end of the emergency period and would no longer accept emergency documentation issued in Zanzibar and cleared in Muscat.

¹⁹ UNHCR Evacuation of Manga Arabs out from Zanzibar. 11/1-15/112 (vol. 1).

²⁰ Noora Lori, *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Noora Lori and Yoana Kuzmova, “Who Counts as ‘People of the Gulf’? Disputes over the Arab Status of Zanzabaris in the UAE,” POMEPS (Project on Middle East Political Science, 2021), <https://pomeps.org/who-counts-as-people-of-the-gulf-disputes-over-the-arab-status-of-zanzabaris-in-the-uae>.

²¹ The petitioners also stated that “50% of refugees [were] fit for nursing homes” and that, as cultivators and shopkeepers in Zanzibar, they could not pursue work in Dubai. Similarly, the petitioners complained, hundreds of their children needed schooling and the standards in Dubai were not nearly as rigorous as those in Zanzibar. Those with secondary education wanted to attend university; PRO FO 371/179781.

was also recognizing these passports, the Saudi government declared that it no longer would; subsequently, many Zanzibaris in Saudi Arabia holding these Imamate “Omani” passports began to leave for Dubai, even though the document was also not recognized there.²² Saudi authorities demanded proof that individuals were *born* in the Gulf.²³

The world of mobility and ships transformed in many ways by the opening of the Suez Canal and demanded an international legal regime that not only demarcated jurisdiction and contracts for shipping goods, but also aimed to identify people as they moved across and through borders. This exercise was never straightforward, as a multiplicity of identification and travel documentation circulated, and, as became evident in Zanzibar too, hinged on tensions between identification by blood—genealogy and presumed geographical origins (*jus sanguinis*)—or membership by place of birth or residence (*jus soli*). For those of Omani and Arab “origins,” belonging was even more complicated. Those with Zanzibar passports, reflecting their long-term residence in Zanzibar, could be refused entry to their supposed “country of origin.” Those without passports who could not prove their origins could also be refused entry. Those who could not obtain Zanzibar or Muscat passports but could obtain an Imamate passport could board a ship, but could not disembark in Muscat or Oman. And, those in any of these circumstances might be relocated to a place that was supposedly “ethnically” familiar and like “home,” “Arabia,” but where they felt no affinity.

²² A cable from Athens to the UNHCR in September 1967 mentions four destitute “Zanzibaris” with Imamate passports. UNHCR Refugees from Zanzibar—General (1967-1971). 11/2/10-100.GEN.ZAN[a].

²³ UNHCR Refugees from Zanzibar in Saudi Arabia. 11/1-1/0/SAU/ZAN.