

# BOOK REVIEW

**Thomas F. McDow.** *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. xiv + 364 pp. Maps. Photographs. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2281-6.

Thomas McDow's engagingly-written book follows the ebbs and flows of migrants from across the western Indian Ocean. As such, it offers historians who specialize in particular regions of this thalassology a gateway to other places they may be less familiar with. Indeed, McDow's book—reminiscent of the organization of Stephen Rockel's book on Nyamwezi porters—is structured as a journey of sorts, led by the stories of multiple actors. It begins in the arid interior of Oman, where drought forced many inhabitants to migrate to Zanzibar, the lynchpin of western Indian Ocean commerce, where credit might be located to start anew. McDow follows various actors—better known historical characters such as Tippu Tip and the Sultans of Zanzibar, but equally fascinating lesser-known people such as Mwinyi Kadogo, Thani bin Amir al-Harhi, and Songoro—into the central African interior to the heart of the ivory trade, where new fortunes might be won. The book ends where it began in Oman, but following the story of one who returned to use his wealth acquired abroad to effect political change in his homeland.

Establishing the Omani interior, Zanzibar, and the East African hinterland as the central settings of his book, McDow explores the motivations behind why people moved to and from these places during the nineteenth century. In doing so, McDow eschews predominant narratives which focus on the Swahili littoral, or which give the Omani Busaidi dynasty too much credit for motivating opportunists from around their empire to seek their fortunes in East Africa. Instead, McDow looks at environmental factors such as droughts, floods, and hurricanes which pushed peoples from long-established residences to search for ways to escape financial ruin. Even members of the Busaidi royal family were not exempt from environmental and political forces which forced them to flee Zanzibar and Muscat. He also questions the “myth of return” which posits that most people returned home from East Africa after making their fortunes; while some ultimately did, many did not, in order to avoid facing creditors whom they could not repay.

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*Buying Time* examines a hitherto overlooked trove of primary documents located in the Zanzibar National Archive, consisting of hundreds of loan contracts and business deeds written in Arabic. McDow reveals, through careful interpretation, how the actors who move throughout his book acquired credit and took on debt as a means to “buy time” to navigate disasters caused by environmental and political factors, and to move themselves to new frontiers of opportunity. They took advantage of old kinship bonds and new marriages to facilitate their success or at least mitigate their failure. In this way, *Buying Time* compliments other recently published monographs by Matthew S. Hopper and Fahad Ahmad Bishara that move beyond trade networks to new frameworks, such as slavery and Islamic legal systems, to examine other forces which connected the region.

I applaud McDow’s emphasis on how Arabs and Indians could, and did, localize in their adopted homes along the Swahili coast and especially in the African interior. Identities, he argues, were fluid, and peoples adapted to their local circumstances accordingly. His chapter on the family of Tippu Tip and their process of intermarrying among various African communities—not just for economic opportunity, but also for companionship and support—illustrates crucial, but overlooked, moments in a history of mobility in which people laid down roots for extended periods of time, roots that were necessary to succeed. McDow is also careful to note that while people moved to new frontiers to start over, they often carried their class prejudices with them over hundreds, even thousands of miles. Redefining one’s self was never a simple process, albeit one that was often mitigated by time.

McDow also examines the mobility and “temporizing strategies” of lower-class men and male slaves. Women are not given the same level of attention, but he acknowledges their movements across the same regions, as well as their roles in cementing interpersonal bonds. While it remains challenging to find women’s voices among the extant source materials for the book’s time period, addressing questions of gender nonetheless would have been instructive. The epilogue might have featured a contemporary woman’s story of time, debt, and mobility to counter the paucity of archival sources.

I enjoyed this book. *Buying Time* delivers fascinating stories of mobility, survival, and transformation informed by business deeds, travelogues, slave emancipation documents, diaries, and correspondences from four different continents. McDow weaves these microhistories against a backdrop of rich contextualization to open a new perspective on an increasingly familiar western Indian Ocean thalassology.

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**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Elkiss, Terry H. 1973. "Kilwa Kisiwani: The Rise of an East African City-State." *African Studies Review* 16 (1): 119–30. doi:10.2307/523737.
- Pawlowicz, Matthew C. 2015. "Competition and Ceramics on the East African Coast: Long-Term Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century History at the Swahili Port Town of Mikindani, Tanzania." *History in Africa* 42: 335–55. doi:10.1017/hia.2015.11.
- Spear, Thomas. 2000. "Swahili History and Society to 1900: A Classified Bibliography." *History in Africa* 27: 339–73. doi:10.2307/3172120.