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The Sailing Scribe: Mansur al-Khariji and the Oceanic Worlds of the Gulf**

الناسخ البحار: منصور الخارجي وعوالم المحيط في الخليج

Abstract: How did Gulf *nakhodas* [dhow captains] produce the routes they traversed around the Indian Ocean? This article draws on the writings of one Kuwaiti *nakhoda*, Mansur bin Ibrahim al-Khariji (1879-1954) to explore the intellectual labour that made movement and circulation in the Gulf and Indian Ocean possible. His manuscript, which he composed after a long sailing career, includes notes on navigation, transactions, and the political geographies he crossed, together with stanzas of poetry. His notes shed light on the workings of a world in motion; of institutions and ideas that animated circulation around the Gulf and Indian Ocean. Through engagement with al-Khariji's writings, this article offers reflections on a nautical world that has been pushed to the margins of a terrestrially moored historiography.

Keywords: *Nakhodas*; Indian Ocean; Gulf; Historiography; Dhow.

الملخص: كيف أنتج نواخذة الخليج الطرق التي عبروها في المحيط الهندي؟ تستند هذه الدراسة إلى كتابات أحد نواخذة الكويت، منصور بن إبراهيم الخارجي (1879-1954)، لاستكشاف العمل الفكري الذي جعل الحركة والتداول في الخليج والمحيط الهندي مُمكنين. ويتضمن مخطوط الخارجي، الذي أنتجه بعد مسيرة بحرية طويلة، ملاحظات حول الملاحة والمعاملات والجغرافيا السياسية التي عبرها، إضافةً إلى أبيات شعرية. وتسَلط ملاحظاته الضوء على طريقة عمل عالم متحرك من المؤسسات والأفكار التي نشطت التداول في جميع أنحاء منطقة الخليج والمحيط الهندي. ومن خلال التفاعل مع كتاباته، تُقدّم الدراسة تأملات في عالم بحري دُفع إلى هوامش التاريخ الأرضي.

كلمات مفتاحية: نواخذة؛ المحيط الهندي؛ الخليج؛ منصور بن إبراهيم الخارجي؛ السفن الشراعية.

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Thinking About Movement and Mobility

By the time the *nakhoda* [dhow captain] Mansur Al-Khariji sat down and penned the colophon to his manuscript in March 1945, he had already been sailing for more than 40 years, and had spent nearly as long recording his observations and experiences. His first voyage, he wrote, was with his older brother Ali, in 1895. Seven years later, he would begin learning how to captain his own vessel. Decades after al-Khariji's death, a Kuwaiti research centre published his notebook as a navigational guide with the rather unwieldy title *al-Qawā'id wa-l-Mayl wa-l-Natīja fī 'Ilm al-Bihār* [*The Principles, Declinations, and Almanac in the Science of the Seas*], which al-Khariji himself appended to the book's inside cover page. But there was little to suggest that there was a coherent project behind the book itself: he cobbled together the different principles of navigation and data that one might find in other navigational manuals, but much of it consisted of what appeared to be notes to himself. Rather than a coherent treatise on navigation, al-Khariji's work more closely resembles a notebook in which he jotted down various principles of navigation and their accompanying maxims, but also different rules, formularies, observations, poetry, and more. The only threads that ran through the different entries in the book were al-Khariji himself, of course, and the fact that all of these were collected on his dhow as he sailed around the Western Indian Ocean.

A ship captain's notebook may seem like an unlikely starting point for reflecting on how we write history, yet from the deck of a dhow, we might read things a little differently. For *nakhodas* like al-Khariji, the world was not the static, bounded entity we see when staring at a map. Where we see landmasses separated (or connected) by bodies of water, they saw seas and oceans ringed by coasts – waterways and sea lanes that bled into one another, and an oceanic world that washed up onto the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and India. From the deck of the dhow, then, what historians understand to be the “Middle East” or “Arabia” appeared dissolved into the waters of their more immediate milieu: the Arabian Sea.¹

For al-Khariji, the Arabian Sea was far more than an abstract scholarly construct; it was the world in which he lived. From the turn of the century onward, he spent most of his time at sea, shuttling back and forth between the Gulf, South Asia, the Southern Red Sea, and East Africa. His notebook reflected this broad geography, as did his dhow. *Nakhodas* like al-Khariji recruited sailors from Yemen and saw themselves as part of a broader community of Arab mariners. Through al-Khariji, his dhow, and these mariners, we can consider the watery contours of the Arabian Peninsula, and the ways we draw lines around our subjects of inquiry. The dhow offers a compelling lens to reorient us away from the land and toward the sea – prompting us to write history such that the land is relegated to the periphery, and to weave together the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, all of which had equal claim to being the home of that vessel.

This is more of a challenge than it might appear at first glance. Historians and social scientists are thoroughly oriented toward land-based categories of analysis. Our training is often in fields rooted in a terrestrial schema of world geography (the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, etc.), and the bulk of our analytic tools for understanding society, economy, and politics emerged from a Westphalian vision of world order. Even subfields that focus on the maritime world – Indian Ocean history and its other oceanic siblings, not to mention the long tradition of maritime history – find it difficult to wrest themselves from the firm grip of land-based paradigms. For many scholars in these fields, envisioning a history untethered from the land remains elusive, and for many decades, historians chose to fall back on the well-worn (and perhaps tried and tested) frameworks of trade and empire. This is especially true of scholarship on the Arabian Peninsula, which, insofar as it has taken on the sea, has struggled to conceive

¹ Here, I understand the Arabian Sea to stand in for much of the Western Indian Ocean, at least in geographical terms. However, as a historiographical category, I argue here that thinking with the *Arabian Sea* might help us open up the historical container of the *Arabian Peninsula* to broader oceanic processes and currents, allowing us to resituate it in the world-historical map.

of an oceanic history that does not place most of the analytical burden on empire (usually of the European variety).²

For many historians, circulations, connections, and mobilities – crossings, more generally – offered a way out of the continental and imperial containers that constrained their thinking and writing. By narrowing their focus on individuals, objects, texts, ideas, and sometimes institutions that moved and crossed boundaries, they were able to engage in generative conversations about the limits and prospects of a new type of world history, which they alternatively called connected history, *histoire croisée*, “new” world history, or, more recently, global history. However, as analytic categories, circulation and mobility have not gained traction everywhere. Boundary-crossing has not been at the forefront of the literature on the Gulf, Red Sea, and Arabian Peninsula. Insofar as it has been acknowledged, work on these areas have treated movement as though it were incidental to their histories.³ One notable exception has been the work on the Bedouins of the region, whose movements were understood to pose a serious challenge to state structures. Beyond this, the tendency had been to underplay the movements of the region’s inhabitants, assuming their fixity in space, and (perhaps unintentionally) restrict their role in shaping the historical narratives of the region. In the Gulf and Red Sea, movement has largely been understood as an activity that foreigners engaged in – Indian merchants, colonial officials, and, more recently, migrant labourers. This has of course changed in recent years, as historians are increasingly recognizing the centrality of mobility to the histories of these regions, widening their apertures to encompass the broader arenas in which their histories unfolded.⁴

Circulation and mobility, while often conflated, are not the same thing, at least not analytically. Circulation “implies a double movement of going forth and coming back, which can be repeated indefinitely”.⁵ Whether of people or goods, this back-and-forth movement has been a regular feature of world history. Historians writing in this vein have frequently focused on the circulation of commodities within an imperial framework – that is, between metropole and colony, or between colonies under the carapace of empire.⁶ Even Fernand Braudel, for whom circulation formed one of “the pre-conditions of any form of capitalism” – so much so that “indeed at first sight one might think them to be exclusively determined by this single factor” – reserved circulation on a global scale for empires.⁷ In a global world of commodity circulation, then, empires have often formed the sinews of circulation and the epistemological

² This is a point that has been made in a few different places. See, for example: Michael Christopher Low, “The Indian Ocean and other Middle Easts,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2014), pp. 549-555; Fahad Ahmad Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2020), pp. 397-412.

³ There are clear exceptions to this. See, for example: Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Engseng Ho, “Empire Through Diasporic Eyes: The View from the Other Boat,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2004), pp. 210-246; Michael Christopher Low, *Imperial Mecca: The Ottoman Hijaz and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lindsey Stephenson, “Rerouting the Persian Gulf: The Transnationalization of Iranian Migrant Networks, c. 1900-1940,” PhD. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2018; Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁴ See, for example: Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Low, *Imperial Mecca*; Stephenson.

⁵ Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass & Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 2-3.

⁶ See, for example: Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015); Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century World and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Erika Rapaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 587. As a feature of economic life, circulation dominated the second (and perhaps even the third) of Braudel’s trilogy on capitalism in world history: the technologies, institutions, and infrastructures of circulation in Europe take up virtually all of *The Wheels of Commerce*, whereas Braudel’s third volume, *The Perspective of the World*, was effectively an economic history of imperial expansion in the early-modern period.

foundations of “the global”. The circulation of people, too, has overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, been understood as an inter-imperial phenomenon.⁸

And yet not all meaningful circuits of movement were global, nor were they imperial. Across the Indian Ocean world, goods, people, ideas, and other artifacts of history circulated (in dhows, caravans, and other vessels) between small states, littoral communities, and other social groups and political entrepreneurs that lived on the peripheries of, or in spaces in between, empires. The circulation of goods mattered a great deal to the polities they traversed, opening up avenues of connection to distant marketplaces and sustaining communities that could not provide everything they needed for themselves. Circulation constituted the lifeblood of these societies, and as historians have long recognized, those who facilitated it – who organized it, and who could channel resources toward it – could position themselves advantageously within the social and political community. Within these groups, circulation was woven into the fabric of the polities, societies, and economies of the region, and involved more than just the goods themselves.

Among the emirates and sheikhdoms of the Gulf and Red Sea, circulation was no less a “total social fact”, completely blurring the boundaries between the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Sea. The wealth and income they relied on were spread out across the Indian Ocean littoral: the government budget in Muscat depended on remittances and wealth in Zanzibar; the physical and financial capital of economic actors in Kuwait circulated between Southern Iraq, Persia, India, and East Africa much more than they did inland; and the merchant classes of Aden relied heavily on a broad infrastructure of law, industry, and government that linked them directly to Bombay.⁹ The circulation of people, goods, and other “things” on board dhows loosens our grip on historical processes, shifting our view from “the sedentary prince” to “the life of the wanderer”.¹⁰ It destabilizes our sense of place, challenging our terrestrially-grounded notions of state, law, economy, and even society, forcing us to grapple instead with how those categories might operate when spread over broad distances. Contending with, tapping into, and otherwise managing the movement of goods, people, and wealth around the Indian Ocean was thus central, rather than incidental, to the processes that constituted state, society, and economy in the region.

To write an Indian Ocean history of places like the Arabian Peninsula means more than merely acknowledging their connections overseas; it requires weaving those connections (and the circulations that animate them) into the social, political, and economic fabric of the region. Without eschewing trade and empire (for how can we?), I suggest that al-Khariji’s notebook provokes us to think less imperially and more oceanically. Rather than taking stable, grounded categories as our point of departure, it invites us to think about the sinews of circulation and connection across the Indian Ocean – about the movement itself, the ideas, and infrastructures that make that movement possible. Reading al-Khariji’s notebook in this way is not as radical an imaginative departure as it might initially appear: the thrust of the notebook involves the routes that he constructed and traversed, and the circulation of goods, people, and capital that he engaged in. By thinking alongside al-Khariji, we can liberate these circulations and connections as routes from the confines of the Arabian Peninsula that the Red Sea and Gulf have become limited to and instead open them up to the broader horizons of the Arabian Sea. Rather than limiting “Arabia” to the peninsula and its terrestrial neighbours, we might take the notebook as an opportunity to disaggregate it and spread it out over a much broader maritime geography. Al-Khariji, like other *nakhodas*, was actively

⁸ See, for example: Ogborn; Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Empires between Islam and Christianity, 1500-1800* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

⁹ M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1995); Tania Bhattacharyya, “Ocean Bombay: Space, Itinerancy and Community in an Imperial Port City, 1839-1937,” PhD. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2019; Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, 1745-1900* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997); Yacoub Y. Al-Hijji, *Kuwait and the Sea: A Brief Economic and Social History* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2010).

¹⁰ Markovits, Pouchepadass & Subrahmanyam (eds.), p. 2.

tracing out the connected worlds that dhows moved through, and the routes and circuits of capital and law that animated them. His notebook, therefore, is as much of an invitation to think more capaciously about Arabia's oceanic history, as it is a practical guide for navigating the seascape and maritime economy.

Environment and Epistemology

It might come as no surprise that the bulk of al-Khariji's notebook deals with the nuts and bolts of navigation on board a dhow; that was his livelihood, after all. Although some of this involves instructions for sailing into and out of specific ports and along particular coasts (a topic I discuss in greater detail below), most of it delves into the abstract principles that facilitated wayfinding by the *nakhoda*. These include principles for determining latitude through solar measurements, and a series of mathematical principles for deriving longitude from a combination of solar declination and latitude – highly technical discussions that would not normally be of interest to anyone but the most committed of historians of the navigational sciences.

Al-Khariji's notes on wayfinding immediately challenge the historian to consider how individuals along the Arabian coasts harnessed their natural environment to forge routes across the water. For the Indian Ocean historian, this is in many ways an old story. The pioneering works of Indian Ocean history all began with an explication of the monsoon winds and the patterned movement around the water that they helped shape. The monsoon winds are, in many ways, the *sine qua non* of circulation in the Indian Ocean world: it constitutes the essence of how historians have understood movement and connection in the region, and what lends the region its coherence. In many ways, it is what makes the region "oceanic" but also what makes it distinctly "Indian". For those working on trade and empire in the region, the environment has thus long been part of the story of the Indian Ocean world – so much so that the monsoons have become an abused metaphor for virtually every remotely oceanic phenomenon there can be.

But al-Khariji's writings remind us that the natural environment was not simply a backdrop, shaping human behaviour yet never shaped by it. Actors around the Indian Ocean world actively intervened in their environment as they made their way across the ocean. They actively thought about the wind but also the stars, the sun, and the water itself, and devised ways to recombine those elements into epistemological frameworks that allowed them to determine where they were and where they might be going. The act of movement thus involved a high degree of interaction (and indeed, entanglement) with the natural environment. It required *nakhodas* and other wayfinders to take the natural world and abstract from it, so as to facilitate the circulations from which they drew their livelihoods.

Al-Khariji was hardly alone in this endeavor. *Nakhodas* from around the Gulf produced similar texts – manuals aimed at guiding their peers through the maritime environment of the Indian Ocean, virtually all of which were even more structured and intentional than al-Khariji's. Among those, perhaps none was as prolific or revered as the *nakhoda* Isa al-Qitami. Born in 1870, he was a renowned Kuwaiti captain and navigator. Historians and other *nakhodas* alike refer to him as "*al-rubbān al-awwal*" [the first pilot]. By the early 1920s, al-Qitami had authored three texts, the first and most popular being the *Dalīl al-Muḥtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* [*The Perplexed's Guide to the Science of the Seas*], a nautical manual that combined the principles of navigation with practical directions for sailing around the coasts of the western Indian Ocean, which he first published in 1916. Shortly after writing the *Dalīl*, he published *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ* [*The Summary Specific to the Traveler, the Merchant, and the Diver*], a shorter manual aimed at guiding *nakhodas* around the coasts and pearl banks of the Persian Gulf. In 1924, he also published *al-Khāliṣ min Kull 'Ayb fī Waḍ' al-Jayb* [*The Blemish-*

Free in the Situation of the Pocket], a manual to assist in the standardization of the weight and value of pearls, facilitating their movement from one marketplace to another.¹¹

While al-Qitami's texts give a good sense of the diverse texts *nakhodas* produced on how to recombine the elements of the natural world to facilitate the movement of people and goods, he was not the only one. There were many others like him, though few were quite as active. In 1933, his contemporaries, the Kuwaiti *nakhodas* Mohammed bin Asfour and Hussain bin Abdulrahman al-Asousi, published *al-Natīja al-Kuwaytiyya*, an almanac that mixes navigational principles with mathematical tables for determining date and time. Further, as late as 1956, the Syrian *nakhoda* Nasser al-Khaduri penned the manual *Ma'dan al-Asrār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* [*The Mine of Secrets in the Science of the Seas*] as a corrective to al-Qitami's manual.¹² Read together, we might see these texts as part of a trans-oceanic maritime print culture, a world of books that travelled back and forth across the ocean, prompting a circulation of ideas and skills that were at least as important as the trade in goods. The circulation of these texts on the decks of dhows – their movement from the hands of one *nakhoda* to another – contributed to the spread of particular forms of navigational practice around the Arab maritime communities of the Indian Ocean, as mobile captains and mariners moved from one port city to another. These writings thus formed the vectors through which navigational knowledge and practice was disseminated through the Indian Ocean world. They formed a crucial part of the history of oceanic circulation that drew the Arabian Peninsula into its sea.

Texts like these imagined a broad audience of Arab mariners, none more self-consciously than al-Qitami, whose *Dalīl* addressed “our Arab seafaring brothers” (*ikhwānunā al-‘arab ahl al-sufun*). To meet their expectations, he wrote in a nautical colloquial that, according to the *Dalīl*'s editor, was to appeal to mariners, for “among those who work on sailing voyages, some are illiterate and cannot read and write, and they will not benefit from it unless it was written in the common dialect”.¹³ In his *Mukhtaṣar*, al-Qitami makes this clearer: he explains that although grammarians (*ahl al-naḥw*) might find fault in the language he uses in the text, “it will suffice to communicate the book, because all of them [i.e. practitioners] will have come upon this language in their comings and goings”.¹⁴ Al-Qitami thus stretched the contours of Arabic writing – and with it, the Arab world – into the circulating dhows and mariners that made up his “Arab seafaring brothers”. His writing suggests the possibility of a broader society of Arabs at sea who had their own lexicons, signs, and histories.

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that al-Khariji's notes include an explicit reference to the writings of the 15th century Arab navigator Ahmad Ibn Majid, a looming figure in Indian Ocean history and the author of the navigational treatise *Kitāb al-Fawā'id*, considered today a pillar of the Arab nautical canon. In a section titled “The Sayings of Ibn Majid, the Sheikh of the Science of the Seas”, he quotes the navigator's admonitions to *nakhodas* to keep watch at night and to take responsibility for the ship more generally, but also his advice on when to take solar bearings.¹⁵ More than 400 years stood between the two navigators, and yet Ibn Majid remained, both for al-Khariji and for many other *nakhodas* who found in the famous navigator's treatise echoes of issues they continued to confront. The appearance of the legendary navigator illustrates how, on the deck of the dhow, the epistemologies of the past poured into those of the present, tying the Arab seafarers of earlier centuries into the circulations of the *nakhodas* of the 20th century Arabian Sea.

¹¹ Isa al-Qitami, *al-Khālīṣ min Kull 'Ayb fī Waq' al-Jayb* (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2007); Isa al-Qitami, *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait: Kuwait Printer, 1924); Isa al-Qitami, *Dalīl al-Muhtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, 3rd ed. (Kuwait: Government Printer, 1963).

¹² Nasser bin Ali al-Khaduri, *Ma'dan al-Asrār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, 2nd ed., Hassan Saleh Shihab (ed.) (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2015).

¹³ al-Qitami, *Dalīl al-Muhtār fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār*, p. 13.

¹⁴ al-Qitami, *al-Mukhtaṣar al-Khāṣ lil-Musāfir wa-l-Tājir wa-l-Ghawwāṣ*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Mansur al-Khariji, *al-Qawā'id wa-l-Mayl wa-l-Natīja fī 'Ilm al-Biḥār* (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2007), p. 105. Throughout this article, I will be making reference to the printed version of al-Khariji's manuscript so that interested readers can refer back to it.

Infrastructures of Circulation

Of course, not all al-Khariji's notes were on the principles of navigation. Littered throughout the manuscript, and in no particular order, were principles of a very different sort: legal and financial. Much like his discussion of the principles of navigation, these were also intimately tied to the act of circulation. Law and finance formed the infrastructure of circulation in the Indian Ocean, animating the act of crossing and forging pathways through the regional commercial arena. Like matters of navigation, these fell directly within the scope of the *nakhoda's* work. It was his responsibility to ensure that the books were in order, that sailors were paid, and that the business of the voyage was on a sound footing. It is thus wholly sensible that al-Khariji would place discussions of money and law alongside wind, water, sun, and stars.

It is roughly a quarter of the way into his notebook that al-Khariji enters into his brief digression into the principles of profit-sharing on a dhow voyage, taking for his example a sailing season that he identifies as occurring in 1941 (although his discussion seems largely hypothetical). Over the course of four manuscript pages, he walks his reader through the intricate mathematics involved in determining the number of shares on that voyage and their division between the shipowner and the crew – and within each, he outlines the sub-divisions of shares for the *nakhoda*, his mates, and ordinary sailors, and in a number of different scenarios.¹⁶ His instructions would have been immediately legible to *nakhodas* in both the Gulf and Red Sea, where the basic principles underlying the profit-sharing regime on board dhows were the same.¹⁷

Although al-Khariji supplied only the principles for the division of profits at the end of a sailing season, his schema rested on a more expansive financial system that intertwined the littoral economies of the Arabian Peninsula with that of the Western Indian Ocean more broadly. Profit-sharing regimes like these gave teeth to the circulation of capital around the Arabian Sea and its transformation from one form to another as the dhow and its mariners travelled around the ocean's littoral. Arrangements like this were necessary given the variety of goods that dhows moved from one season to another. Dhows from Basra would have to make their way to markets around the Western Indian Ocean, where profits would be plunged into sacks of rice, flour, and other dry goods, scores of timber and mangrove poles, which would then be sold in different markets, with proceeds going to different combinations of merchants, *nakhodas*, mariners, and shipowners, all of whom had accrued varying amounts of debt along the way. The date circuit thus forged the pathways through which other goods and forms of capital could travel, both in space and through account ledgers. The profit-sharing system, based as it was in the net proceeds of the entire season rather than individual rights to single transactions, was supple enough to bear it all.

As any *nakhoda* would have known, though, even the most minute arrangements for profit-sharing were only as good as the regimes of law that they were anchored in. Financial regimes around the world rest on different forms of legal security, and the dhow economies of the Western Indian Ocean were no different. Virtually every one of the ties that bound *nakhodas*, mariners, ship-owners, and merchants together was articulated as a legal obligation – in a written legal and financial instrument that the dhow generated in its wake. Al-Khariji understood this well and knew the importance of getting the form of the instrument right. Among his notes were formulas for various legal instruments, including acknowledgments of debt, safe-conduct passes, and legal requests for death certificates from different authorities.¹⁸ Together, legal forms like these constituted artifacts of a legal infrastructure that underpinned the oceanic circulations that *nakhodas* engaged in. They helped infuse certainty and regularity in a highly uncertain enterprise

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 59-63.

¹⁷ On profit-sharing on dhows, see also: Dionisius Agius, *The Life of the Red Sea Dhow: A Cultural History of Seaborne Exploration in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 175-192; Al-Hijji, pp. 78-92; Alan Villiers, "Some Aspects of the Arab Dhow Trade," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1948), pp. 399-416.

¹⁸ al-Khariji, pp. 128-129, 146-150.

and coordinated expectations and action between far-flung actors. If the coastal economies of the Arabian Peninsula were connected to those of the western Indian Ocean littoral, legal instruments like this formed the sinews of those connections.¹⁹

Read this way, al-Khariji's notes on law and finance suggest yet another route away from the land-locked epistemologies that had long constrained thinking on the Gulf and the Red Sea. These were once institutions and practices that we understood as being mostly local in nature – the sort that actors developed to give shape to the maritime economies of the Arab coasts, and not much more. However, once we open up their vistas to include South Asia and East Africa, we can begin to see how they formed an infrastructure that facilitates the circulation of goods, people, and capital around the western Indian Ocean more broadly. Through the different pieces of paper they mobilized, *nakhodas* like al-Khariji forged the contours of a maritime commercial arena, weaving the economies of coastal Arabia more deeply into those of India and the East African coast. For the inhabitants of the world of dhows, law was not the terrestrial phenomenon we have long understood. Rather, law as a historical phenomenon was thoroughly submerged in salty water, soaking through the pieces of paper that *nakhodas*, mariners, and even pirates wielded as they crossed the waters of the Arabian Sea.²⁰

At the same time, these circulating forms must be read as expressions of a much deeper Islamic legal epistemology, one that bound the history of the Arabian Peninsula to legal communities around the Indian Ocean world. They drew on a long history of Islamic jurisprudence and writings on obligations – or, more accurately, they excerpted, paraphrased, and otherwise borrowed from them in order to forge the legal contours of their own world-economies. As they circulated around the ocean's shores, these legal discourses, anchored in texts and embodied in legal scholars traveling on dhows, formed a counter-narrative to that of imperial law. And as they took shape in different paper obligations, they rendered that counter-narrative portable.

Imperial Entanglements

Of course, imperial politics were never too far from the minds of *nakhodas* like al-Khariji. If their writings point to a narrative of connection, circulation, and history beyond empire, they could never escape it entirely. As frequent visitors to the port cities of South Asia and East Africa at the height of imperial expansion in the Indian Ocean, they were keenly aware of how empires attempted to impose themselves onto the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula and across the high seas. For the mobile mariners of the 20th century Indian Ocean, the British Empire was the most dominant imperial presence, but was certainly not the only one – and, more than that, only the latest in a long chain of empires.

Al-Khariji had a keen eye for how the empire had remade the world around the dhow. At a few points in his manuscript, he made note of different political events that he had witnessed or heard about. The first such note appears roughly halfway through the notebook, sandwiched between a template for a debt obligation and a note on how to convert between different units of weight measurement. In it, he writes that on 17 Dhu Al-Hijja 1332 AH – that is, 6 November 1914 – he was loading dates in the town of al-Qasba, on the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway in southern Iraq, when “the English entered al-Faw”, the town at the mouth of the Shatt, where the Ottoman customs house stood. “On the second day”, he continued, “their ships entered into the creek, and a fierce battle took place, lasting an hour and a half”. He followed

¹⁹ See also: Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Thomas F. McDow, *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018).

²⁰ Fahad Ahmad Bishara, “‘No Country but the Ocean’: Reading International Law from the Deck of an Indian Ocean Dhow, c. 1900,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2018), pp. 338-366; Lauren Benton, “Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2005), pp. 700-724.

it with a different note – this one from February 1936, where on the island of Zanzibar “there was a battle between the English Christians and the Arabs of Oman” which left several people dead or injured on both sides, along with other onlookers. The cause, he wrote, “was the coconut copra” – the dried flesh of the coconut fruit, which formed one of the island’s exports.²¹

The two notes, separated in both time and space, highlight different moments in the history of British imperialism in the Western Indian Ocean. The first was a clear reference to the beginnings of the Mesopotamia campaign of WWI, which ultimately led to the establishment of a British mandate in Iraq during the 1920s. The second was a much lesser-known event: a riot that took place in the Zanzibar countryside over rising British regulations on the sale of copra – a matter that would hardly make it into the annals of the history of Zanzibar itself, let alone the world. Taken together, the two events plot out different moments in the history of Arab encounters with empire in the 20th century: the first with imperial battleships, and the second with imperial regulations. Read alongside a third note, the picture emerges more clearly. In a later inscription, al-Khariji very briefly mentions that in 1343 AH (1924/5) Reza Shah, the Pahlavi ruler of Iran, took over the town of Mohammerah (a major port of call for dhows visiting the Shatt al-‘Arab) “and what remained of the possessions of the ruler Sheikh Khaz‘al, the son of Shaikh Jaber”, the town’s chief.²²

The note on Reza Shah, unrelated to the history of encounter with Europeans, casts a different light on al-Khariji’s observations as a whole. Read differently, al-Khariji was drawing attention to the ways in which the political shape of the Arab world of the Indian Ocean was slowly being transformed. His notes alluded to a littoral geography that had largely been under the control of Arabs – the agricultural villages and hamlets along the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway, the sheikhdom of Mohammerah (which comprised both Arabs and Persians, but was known to many as ‘Arabistan), and the Arab-headed Sultanate of Zanzibar – that over the 20th century had increasingly fallen under the control of more distant rulers. There were others like them, too, around the Arabian Peninsula – most prominently Aden and the neighboring island of Perim, which during the 19th and early-20th centuries fell under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bombay Presidency.²³

This political transformation makes itself visible in al-Khariji’s drawings, roughly a dozen of which are scattered around his notebook. All were of different coastlines and port cityscapes around the Gulf, Red Sea, South Asia, and East Africa. None of this was unusual: landmarks like mountains or other unique geological features helped orient them as they made their way along the coasts of the Western Indian Ocean, and navigational guides often included at least rough drawings of them. Many of al-Khariji’s drawings were like those of his peers. They included hillsides, rough drawings of coastlines, and features like trees and ships. In some of his drawings, there was little (if any) direct imperial presence: he highlighted mosques, temples, lighthouses, and other distinct features, but nothing with any strong imperial connotations.

In other drawings, though, the imperial presence is highly visible. His drawing of Mangalore, for example, features a large Union Jack right at its centre; another drawing of Perim Island includes two smaller British flags, while a drawing of the port city of Merca in Somalia includes one Italian tricolor. Had he included drawings of Obock or Djibouti, they would doubtless include French flags as well. Beyond these obvious signs were more subtle indicators: signs of industrial activity along the waterfront, or systems of lighthouses and buoys for regulating movement across particular creeks and headlands, for example.²⁴ As the dhows moved around the Western Indian Ocean, then, they had to navigate the markings of political authority that

²¹ al-Khariji, pp. 145-146.

²² Ibid., p. 148.

²³ See also: Scott Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839-1937* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); R. J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule, 1839-1967* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1975).

²⁴ al-Khariji, pp. 167-181.

different imperial projects left along the coast. Empire was thus part of the Arab *nakhodas* seascape. It etched itself onto the coastlines that captains like al-Khariji saw as they looked out from the decks of their dhows and onto the port cityscapes and approached them from their bow. Empires did not just map themselves onto old geographies; they created new ones, and with them new pathways of circulation.

From those port cities, empires attempted to project themselves beyond the coast and onto the high seas. By the mid-1860s, the British had established Vice-Admiralty Courts in Bombay, Aden, and Zanzibar, routing a regular convoy of naval ships around the Western Indian Ocean in attempts to intercept dhows suspected of involvement in the slave trade.²⁵ If al-Khariji included templates for safe-conduct passes, it was in part because of the frequent encounters between dhows like his and naval vessels. In 1868, *nakhodas* were already producing passes like these in an effort to maneuver around the British surveillance regime. Al-Khariji would have known, too, that there were other papers he could obtain that would produce different results. Alongside the British, after all, were the French and the Italians, all of whom were furnishing their own safe-conduct passes from ports they controlled. The Arabian Sea, thus, teemed with different political authorities, all of whom intervened in the geographies of circulation and tried to determine the terms on which it could happen – to delineate the “right” forms of circulation from the “wrong” ones.²⁶ The savvy *nakhoda* had to know how to navigate across more than one imperial horizon at a time.

But the history of the Arabian Sea is not just one that pits plucky Arab mariners against the forces of the European empire. As tidy as it might be to schematically separate the two from one another, the evidence immediately suggests a history of deeper entanglement. Read from the dhow, the horizons of the *nakhodas* and of the British officials they encountered were closely bound up in one another. Al-Khariji and his fellow Arab *nakhodas* frequently drew on British nautical technologies – admiralty maps, nautical almanacs, and the like – as they plotted their routes around the Western Indian Ocean. His own notebook attests to as much. Al-Khariji included a discussion of how *nakhodas* converted dates from the Nawruz calendar (which they routinely used to track the passage of time) to the “Frankish” (i.e. Gregorian) calendar on which the almanacs he relied upon were based.²⁷

European officials, too, exerted enormous efforts to draw on the nautical expertise of dhow captains. The story of the Indian Ocean navigator who helped Vasco da Gama cross the Arabian Sea (erroneously thought to be Ahmad Ibn Majid) is by now well-known. Less familiar are the publications that European officials produced on Arab navigational techniques, and the degree to which they drew on *nakhodas*’ knowledge to produce texts like the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden* and the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*. Imperial practices of knowing and mapping thus rested on a body of locals and wanderers – of natives whose expansive movements and networks fed imperial officials with the information they needed to make sense of the Indian Ocean world.²⁸

Thus, even as the circulations that Arab *nakhodas* thought about and engaged in forged routes that take historians beyond the imperial connections that they have so thoroughly relied upon in writing oceanic history, they were invariably bound up in them. However they might have been classified, the circuits of people, goods, texts, and ideas that dhows traced out between the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and

²⁵ Philip Howard Colomb, *Slave-Catching in the Indian Ocean: A Record of Naval Experiences* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873); George L. Sullivan, *Dhow-Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa: Narrative of Five Years’ Experience in the Suppression of the Slave Trade*, 2nd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1873).

²⁶ Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

²⁷ al-Khariji, pp. 67-68.

²⁸ Nelida Fuccaro, “Knowledge at the Service of Empire: The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia,” in: Inga Brandell, Marie Carlson & Öner A. Çetrez (eds.), *Borders and the Changing Boundaries of Knowledge*, vol. 22 (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Transactions, 2015), pp. 17-34; Alexis Wick, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), p. 144; James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

East Africa, all pulsed through imperial arteries. Meanwhile, the pathways of imperial expansion mapped themselves onto the movements of dhows and the circulations they animated. As dhows and British ships made their way around the Indian Ocean, then, their epistemological horizons were more deeply entangled in one another than either would have been ready to acknowledge.

Conclusion: Unmooring Arabian History

There are many reasons why historians might have passed over al-Khariji's notebook and the broader constellation of texts and practices that generated it. Read from the perspective of land, few of these texts make much sense. They either come across as excessively technical or esoteric, and in all cases seem peripheral to the individuals, institutions, and processes that Middle East historians have been interested in. Even historians of the Gulf and Red Sea have only noted them in passing, as they appear at first blush to offer very little insight into the histories of those areas as well. However, this is a matter of perspective more than content.

Read from the sea – from the deck of the dhow – instead of the land, these writings open up a window into a whole world of material circulation and the intellectual histories that animated it. Circulation, these texts make clear, was not just about goods or people, but about the full range of social, political, and cultural behaviours entangled in the movement of goods, people, and capital around a far-flung arena. As a historical phenomenon, it offers historians a lens through which to see how areas were intertwined with one another, and how different realms of life could play out over broad distances. Texts like al-Khariji's – and more importantly, the ideas found in their pages – formed the sinews of circulation and helped forge historical pathways.

For the historian of the Arabian Peninsula, the move to the Arabian Sea, then, is much more than a shift to a maritime perspective. Thinking, reading, and writing oceanically allows us to move beyond national and terrestrial paradigms for writing “Middle Eastern” history, and to think about the connections, circulations, and entanglements that make up oceanic Arabia. The Indian Ocean opens up a new frontier for writing histories of the Arabian Peninsula in a broader arena, situating Arab communities in the Indian Ocean within a broader world of ethnic groups, practices, and currents of thought. Seen this way, Indian Ocean history is not orthogonal to Middle Eastern history, nor is it an alternative to it; the Indian Ocean is woven into the fabric of the Arabian Peninsula itself.

The promise of oceanic history has long been evident, but the project that motivates its writing is not over yet. A pressing need remains to ground our narratives of movement across the Arabian Sea in the actions and discourses of non-Europeans, and to write histories in which the principal actors are not empires (even as they spend much of their time thinking through and alongside empires). And this is precisely where the dhow – as a historical actor, as a metaphor for a particular kind of history, and as an epistemology grounded in a set of notes – might help us sail.

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