(civilizing) mission, through such spiritual practices as Kumina, Dianne Stewart’s innovative contribution, for example, illustrates how practitioners curated their self-governing abilities amidst the exclusionary politics of colonial governance. Defining themselves as Kumina nation (italicized here and in Stewart’s work to differentiate nation as “an Africana category for designating shared social, political, and cultural identity and allegiance,” from nation as “geopolitical state formations” (p. 603), devotees engaged in nation-building practices that included “holding native judiciary courts, hosting coronation pageants, and assuming royal titles” (p. 611).

Wrestling with questions of imperial power and colonial subjectivities, cultural formation, history writing, and intersecting underpinnings of race, colour, class, and gender, *Victorian Jamaica* is a must-read for anyone interested in the complex negotiations over freedom, citizenship, economic agency, and cultural production in the period that followed the legal abolition of slavery in Jamaica.

Sasha Turner

*Quinnipiac University*

---


In a somewhat pioneering work, Fahad Ahmad Bishara analyzes the legal underpinnings of commerce in the western Indian Ocean, most notably in western India, Oman, Zanzibar, and mainland East Africa between 1780 and 1950. He adds to a growing body of work on this region and time period that traverses political boundaries across the Arabian Sea. Bishara’s contribution is a legal perspective. In many ways, *A Sea of Debt* is the history of khiyār sales and waraqas. Khiyār sales were transactions in which people pawned their property in exchange for credit and were the preferred method of credit/debt exchange across the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, waraqas were the “papers” on which khiyār sales were recorded (p. 19). Surviving waraqas that are now held in the Zanzibar National Archives form the bulk of the primary material for the book. Bishara analyses the waraqas alongside Omani-Islamic and British legal texts. Through these documents, he sheds light on the rise and fall of a commercial culture that transcended much of the western Indian Ocean.

*A Sea of Debt* is organized chronologically. It begins with the expansion of western Indian and Omani commerce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Specifically, it examines these regions’ growing connections with “Zanzibar,” a region that included the archipelago of the same name and the African mainland opposite it (p. 33). In the background is the growing European, especially British, presence. Indeed, it is as the British enter the historical narrative more prominently from Chapter 4 onwards that Bishara’s analysis comes into its
own. In this and subsequent chapters, Bishara analyzes the encounters between Omani and British legal systems, and the contradictions, limitations, and eventual European impositions therein. He cites specific legal cases to display how British courts were “informal” in c. 1870-1890 (p. 138); how the British presided over a range of legal systems in the early colonial period (pp. 166-167); and then how colonial law became standardized through the publication of the Zanzibar Law Reports in 1919 (pp. 169-173). Meanwhile, the influence of Omanis, Indians, and specific conditions in Zanzibar are considered throughout. What emerges is a transregional re-imagining of colonial-era encounters between Europe and the western Indian Ocean.

A Sea of Debt, however, has one major shortfall: for a book that spends most of its time exploring encounters in Africa, Africans receive alarmingly little attention. Bishara does not account for the roles of, for example, African free-waged porters, state-builders, or traders who affected trans-regional networks in a multitude of ways on the African mainland. Indeed, Africans only receive due consideration in discussions about slavery. On the one hand, Bishara’s analysis of slavery builds on some recent trends in Indian Ocean historiography that emphasize the variety of the bonded experience. Particularly noteworthy are the ways in which slaves negotiated personhood and manumission with a view to acquiring credit (pp. 75-78). However, the place of this analysis in the book gives the false impression that Africans only contributed to the western Indian Ocean’s history as subjects in systems of bondage that were imposed from outside. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it perpetuates a widely criticized view that Africans were marginal to the history of the western Indian Ocean; and secondly, it taps into older, discredited perspectives that associated the history of Africa only with the history of slavery.

The absence of Africans in most of the book is particularly galling because some of the primary sources that Bishara refers to imply significant African influence. For example, in attempting to codify colonial law in the early Zanzibar Protectorate, a British judge declared the need to incorporate common law, Zanzibar decrees based on Indian Codes and Acts, Islamic law, and “the multiplicity of customs prevailing among the various communities of Zanzibar” (p. 172). Although almost certainly of African origin, who comprised these “various communities” and their specific influence on colonial law is not explored. Additionally, Bishara notes the effects of widespread property foreclosures in Zanzibar and Pemba in the 1920s and 1930s. The primary table indicates that foreclosures were more numerous amongst the “Swahili” (who were of African origin), but the discussion focuses almost entirely on Omanis and on “financial collapse” in Muscat. Bishara states that the “Swahili” contributed to the issue of foreclosures in Zanzibar and Pemba and that foreclosures there were “more complicated” than in Oman, but what these complications were and how they affected the history of the broader region is left to the reader’s imagination (pp. 222-224).

The result of Africans’ omission from the book is that the history that Bishara describes occasionally lacks proper contextualization. For example, Bishara claims that “by the middle of the nineteenth century, Indian capital had
reconfigured the geography of the interior of East Africa” (p. 39). This claim does not consider African demand for specific goods or African capacity to accommodate, manipulate, or resist those who brought them. Also, no light is shed on the ways Swahili and other African epistemologies affected Omani legal thinking, which would have been especially relevant in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, British influence is seen to have contributed to a social and political order dating from the 1820s and 1830s (p. 218). Additionally, significant attention is given to the construction of the Uganda railway, while the equally ambitious Central Railway in German East Africa is ignored (pp. 150-160). This privileges the British colonial sphere when both Indian and Omani traders with historical roots in the deeper past were intimately connected with the German-built railway as well. Thus, the importance of Omanis, Indians, and British in the history of the western Indian Ocean is often overstated, while the roles of Africans and to a lesser degree Germans are obscured.

Despite these drawbacks, Bishara’s book remains an important contribution. The use of sources in Arabic script is novel for most historians who concern themselves with East Africa, notwithstanding Thomas McDow’s *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (2018). Clearly, Africanists looking toward the Indian Ocean should devote more attention to these kinds of sources in the future. Additionally, the legal perspective adds a new way of thinking about the trans-regional history of the western Indian Ocean, the writing and teaching of which are still in their formative stages. Finally, the writing style is fluent, engaging, and clear throughout, meaning that the book is accessible to both students and more seasoned scholars alike. It may eventually be considered a seminal textbook on some of the trans-regional connections around the western Indian Ocean, especially as the discipline of Indian Ocean history grows and is increasingly disseminated to undergraduates.

Philip Gooding

*Indian Ocean World Centre, McGill University*


Sous le titre à allure de manifeste se présente un recueil collectif issu de séminaires et ateliers doctoraux organisés par Christophe Duhamelle et Falk Bretschneider à Paris et Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger à Münster, avec la coopération de Matthias Schnetter (Mayence) et de Guillaume Garner (Lyon). Les auteurs n’ont évidemment pas la prétention de soumettre au public une première histoire sociale de l’Allemagne des XVIe-XVIIIe siècles. Bien au contraire, comme le soulignent les éditeurs dans leur introduction puis Matthias Schnetter dans sa contribution historiographique, il n’est pas de sujet plus renouvelé depuis une trentaine