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Buying Time takes the reader on an intriguing journey across the western Indian Ocean during the nineteenth century. It traces individuals, ranging from slaves to sovereigns, and their social, political, and economic networks as they move across time and space in pursuit of new opportunities. As McDow skillfully disentangles intricate and strategic alliances based on kinship and trust, we learn how they were shaped in response to economic and political changes in the period under study, when informal colonialism ushered in formal European colonization. The work contributes to the burgeoning field of Indian Ocean Studies as well as to new approaches to African History by bringing to life the characters that inhabited this vast space and their social and physical environments.

McDow uses stories to shed light on the experiences of a wide range of actors in this world marked by opportunities and increasing constraints. The stories that unfold are beautifully told and the poetic voices of the actors McDow has uncovered resonate in his own language. Making the work not only accessible but also enjoyable to read was clearly a main goal of the author, who is particularly successful in helping readers imagine the complex worlds of the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean by offering vivid and detailed descriptions of the physical environment and everyday life. At times, though, details not directly relevant to a main point can become a bit overwhelming and distract readers from following the gist of an already complex and multilayered story.

As the title of the book suggests, time is a central analytical category. McDow’s contribution lies in showing how „time mediated the relationships between the people, geography, and commodities“ (p. 2). The main source that allows him to illustrate this are business deeds available from the 1840s. Throughout the book, McDow demonstrates how buying time was a main strategy for individuals to negotiate their lives. In Oman buying time equaled buying water; both in Oman and Zanzibar buying time gave access to credit. Debt, „as an economic relationship and as part of a network of social relationships“ (p. 7), was tied into the concept of time and underpinned financial and geographical mobility. Kinship, which together with time, debt, and mobility constitutes the fourth category of analysis, was crucial in facilitating debt and mobility, which, at times, it also impeded. Movements of people further occurred in response to the environment, such as periodic drought in Oman. The environment as the fifth factor is the backdrop against which strategies of mobility and debt played out.

In excavating the layers of people’s interactions across this vast and highly mobile space, McDow draws on a new body of primary sources, Arabic business deeds from the Zanzibar National Archives. Although not explicitly mentioned in the introduction, the author consulted archival records in East Africa, India, and Europe, and also conducted extensive fieldwork in Oman. A potential shortcoming is the author’s reticence in discussing his sources in more detail and locating his narrative within the existing body of scholarship. While the author’s strategy to sideline historiography enhances readability, it can also leave the reader pondering his contribution to the literature. Readers are unlikely to question McDow’s deep knowledge of the region and its vast historiography yet would benefit from knowing more consistently how Buying Time fits into the historiographical picture.

Chapter 1 takes off in the Omani interior in the 1840s. It explains how environmental factors in form of drought and floods in later periods triggered the movement of Omanis to East Africa. It introduces the geography and geographic mobility as a temporizing strategy.

Many of the stories that McDow pieces together in the following chapters involve the who-is-who of the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean. Chapter 2 looks into credit networks under Omani Busaidi rule and Zanzibar’s customs master as their „vi-
tal node” (p. 46). The networks were undergirded by Islamic law and essential to their workings were specific transactions, like conditional sale, which enabled the seller to purchase back property at the price sold within a certain period of time. Most importantly, business transactions linked parties from various religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter 3 illustrates that mobile governance was pivotal to Busaidi statecraft. The chapter opens with the arrival of Sultan Said’s corpse in Zanzibar. He passed away in 1856 on one of his many trips between Oman and Zanzibar. Weak state structure further accounted for the sultan’s strategy to have rivals accompany him on travels and offer them payments.

Chapter 4 takes on the myth of return and "coastal chauvinism” (p. 87) of historians of the Swahili coast. By privileging the coast, McDow argues, historians have created the misleading understanding that those who migrated into the interior wanted to return to the coast. He offers compelling evidence how the migrants reshaped social categories and identities in the interior.

Kinship networks crucially configured the adventures of the illustrious trader known as Tippu Tip. Chapter 5 uses kinship as analytical category and attends to gender, followed by discussions of former slaves’ mobility (Chapter 6) and how bureaucratization under first informal then formal colonialism restricted their movements after 1873 (Chapter 7). Fluid social categories and high mobility contrasted with legal categories and territorial units embraced by British imperial agents, who sought to end slave trafficking. By 1873 Zanzibar’s sultan „had run out of time“ (p. 165) and signed the antislavery treaty. Chapters 6 and 7 also offer interesting arguments about insincere manumission during abolition.

Chapter 8 takes us back to the East African interior and the ventures of a former slave. This example shows not only the social and economic ties between the interior and the Arabian and East African coastlines, but also increasing competition and levels of violence due to the presence of European imperial agents.

In Chapter 9 we return to Oman where the protagonist, a paramount chief, repeatedly challenges the sultan in Muscat. He threatens Oman’s political authority by mobilizing social and economic networks spanning the western Indian Ocean.

The Epilogue traces the arc of mobility across the twentieth into the twenty-first century. Through anecdotal evidence McDow illustrates how the fortunes of Zanzibar and Oman became reversed in the twentieth century, with the Zanzibar revolution of 1964 and pogroms against Arabs and Indians on the one hand, and Oman’s oil boom and twentieth-century modernization on the other. In many ways, Buying Time shows the antecedents of migration patterns that are better explored for the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

McDow has provided a compelling and beautifully crafted account of the people who moved across the nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean and of the factors that both enabled and constrained their mobility. He has captured the cadence of their lives and revealed to what extent time and financial transactions shaped their agency across the ocean, as abolitionists and imperialists competed with and against them.