Prologue

Looking out across the ocean from his palace in 1800, the Sultan of Muscat, Sultan bin Ahmed Al-Busaiʿidi, had much to be proud of. Over the course of the past few decades, he and his family members had built an expansive maritime empire around the Western Indian Ocean. His father, Ahmed bin Saʿid, had brought most of coastal Oman under his rule, having won over many of the tribes who had plunged the countryside into civil war. Ahmed bin Saʿid and his sons had also expanded Busaʿidi power regionally, working to exert some form of suzerainty over the vast littoral of the Western Indian Ocean. Having established themselves in Muscat, their sultanate gradually grew to include various town and port cities along the coast of South and Southeast Arabia; they leased the Persian port of Bandar ʿAbbas and its environs from the ruler of Persia in 1780, they established themselves as the overlords of Gwadar, on the coast of Baluchistan, a few years later, and even tried to take the pearl-producing island of Bahrain further up the Gulf. After reaching a critical mass of revenue and manpower, they then set their sights on East Africa, imposing their domination over, though never really entirely possessing, port cities and islands from Mogadishu to Cape Delgado. By the time he took power in 1792, then, Sultan bin Ahmed had inherited a far-flung empire of port cities around the Western Indian Ocean.

But the Sultan's expansion into East Africa also forced him to confront the legacies of the dynasty whose mantle his family had inherited. His sultanate gradually chipped away at the holdings of his predecessors, the Yaʿrubis, a dynasty that had led a successful offensive against the Portuguese in South Arabia and East Africa in the seventeenth century. The Yaʿrubis had expelled the Portuguese from Muscat in 1650, and over the next fifty years had managed to wrest from them a series of forts along the East African coast, all the way down to Mozambique. To administer this sprawling network of forts and port cities, they had sent out different clans to govern on their behalf: the Busaʿidis were their governors in Sohar, while other clans like the Mazruʿis were their men in Mombasa.

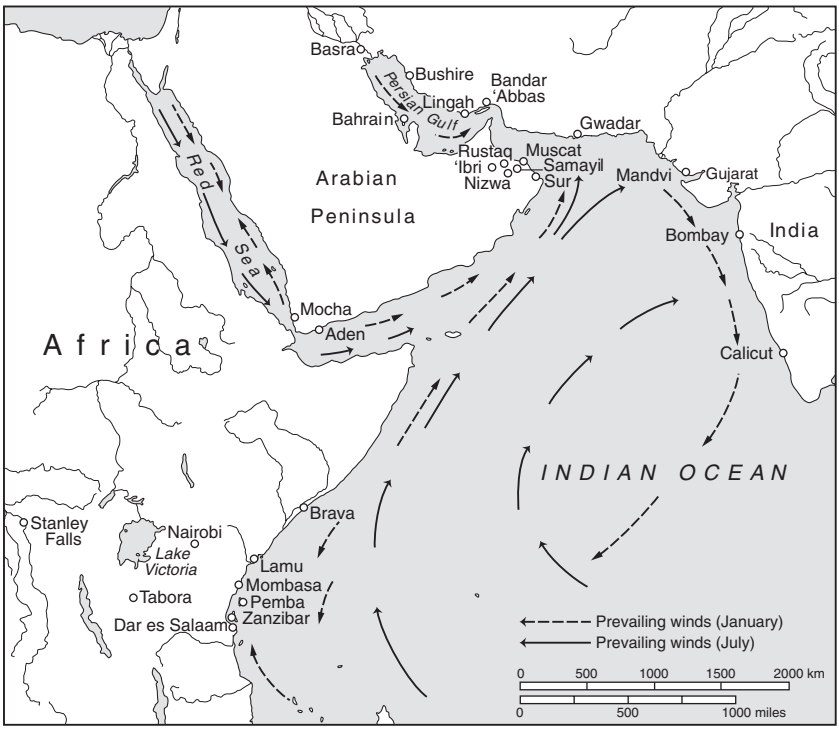

Figure 1 A map of the Western Indian Ocean

By the 1720s, rival factions within the Ya'rubi dynasty began to reveal the polity's seams; and after a protracted civil war, more challenges from within the family, and interference from Persia, the dynasty imploded.[1] Town by town and port by port, the Busa'idis picked up where their former overlords had left off.

The Busa'idi Sultan was thus heir to the spoils of early modern history, of the dismantling of the Portuguese Empire in the Western Indian Ocean and the emergence of a splintered political geography in the region, carved and re-carved again through battles, migrations, and usurpations. And the sultanate bore the imprint of its history of expansion in the region: it included Arab sultans born to Indian and African mothers, Gujarati customs masters, and Baluchi, Omani, and Hadhrami soldiers manning Portuguese cannons and forts, all littered around a sprawling inter-continental geography. By establishing themselves along the coasts

[1] John Wilkinson, *The Arabs and the Scramble for Africa* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2015), 22–26.

of East Africa, South Arabia, and the Persian Gulf, the Busa'idi sultans hoped to direct regional trade through their ports and profit from the customs revenues that would follow.

But the Busa'idis hadn't done this alone. In building their trans-oceanic empire, they rode the tides alongside a range of different actors, all of whom played some role in shaping their expansion into the Western Indian Ocean. Their efforts, travels, and trajectories help us reflect on how we've mapped the Indian Ocean as a coherent space – how historians, but also historical actors, might have imagined connectivity in the region.

Arabia, Africa, and the Oceanic Turn in History

There was one moment in the history of Omani expansion into East Africa that early historians of the region all highlighted: the first face-to-face encounter between an expanding Busa'idi sultanate and the Mazru'i governor of Mombasa, a holdover from the previous Ya'rubi regime. Zanzibar's Chief Justice during the mid-twentieth century, Sir John Gray, recalled the moment in his first book, *The British in Mombasa, 1824–1826*. In Gray's telling of it, the young military commander Ahmed bin Sa'id Al-Busa'idi, arrived in Mombasa in January 1785, after a successful campaign to convince his recalcitrant uncle Saif to give Zanzibar back to Ahmed's father, who at the time was the ruler of Oman.[2] Emboldened by his success, Ahmed sailed to Mombasa and walked right into Fort Jesus; the gatekeeper who saw him and his men did nothing to stop them, as he "thought that they were trading Arabs, who had come down with the monsoon." Upon seeing Ahmed, the fort's governor "rose from his seat and showed him great respect"; when Ahmed asked him whom the fort belonged to, he replied "It is yours." Gray continues: "Then the Imam's son [Ahmed] said, 'Give me a writing to that effect.' So he gave him a document written with his own hand to the effect that he held the fort for the Imam's son." Ahmed then left the fort and sailed away to Muscat, 2,500 miles away.[3] Questioned later, he told his overlords that it was

[2] Ahmed was Sultan bin Ahmed's nephew; at the time, Sultan's brother Sa'id bin Ahmed was the ruler, though he would pass away shortly afterwards.

[3] John Gray, *The British in Mombasa, 1824–1826, Being the History of Captain Owen's Protectorate* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1957), 13; The account that Gray relies on is just one of many; important details, including names and dates, vary in other versions. See also Sa'id bin 'Ali Al-Mughairi, *Ǧuhaynat al-Akhbār fī Tārīkh Zanjibār*, 4th ed. (Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2001), 210; C.H. Stigant, *The Land of Zinj: Being an Account of British East Africa, its Ancient History and Present Inhabitants* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1913), 24; M. Gullain, *Documents Sur L'Histoire, La Geographie, et Le Commerce L'Afrique Orientale* (Paris: Arthur Bertrand, 1856), 556–558.

clear that Ahmed would have been able to take the fort by force, and so he "gave him a piece of paper so as to avoid the evil of the hour."

Gray's narrative of the encounter at Fort Jesus, which drew on a handful of local chronicles, recalled a moment that historians would now consider to be emblematic of the oceanic turn in the histories of Arabia and Africa. The narrative brimmed with the very sorts of oceanic connections that historians have begun to highlight. The narrators mention Muscat and Mombasa, Arab traders, and aspiring Arab sultans and rogue governors in East Africa, all in one breath. Moreover, Gray's suggestion that the fort's gatekeeper had assumed that the Busa'idi walking into the port was one of the "trading Arabs who had come down with the monsoon" pointed to a common vector of the oceanic turn in historical writing: the role of the monsoon winds in shaping trans-regional connections. The monsoon winds formed a critical element of the Indian Ocean world, giving trade, migration, and agriculture their seasonal rhythm. From November to January, sailors could count on winds blowing from Arabia and India towards East Africa, and from China to Southeast Asia; from April to August, the winds would blow in the opposite direction, bringing with them the rains that farmers throughout the region had gambled their livelihoods on.[4]

The monsoons also constituted an integral component of how historians have written about the Indian Ocean as a zone of interaction. K.N. Chaudhuri began his pioneering work on the history of the Indian Ocean with a meditation on how the monsoon winds shaped patterns of circulation and food production along the Indian Ocean rim. Historians after Chaudhuri followed suit: it quickly became standard practice to begin books on Indian Ocean history with an homage to the natural forces of the monsoon as the most primordial expression of trans-regional connectivity.[5] And there is little reason to discount the role of the monsoon winds in regularizing contact between Arabia, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. Indeed, the notion that the arrival of trading Arabs in Mombasa would have prompted no action by the gatekeeper suggests just how common movements between the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa were.

[4] Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–8.

[5] K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21–29. See also M.N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 13–26; Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 15–25; and most recently, Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 8–13.

But as the encounter also shows, other layers of historical forces reinforced the monsoon vectors of trans-oceanic history. As merchants in different port cities looked across the sea to find trading partners, others saw different opportunities. Well before the arrival of European empires in the Western Indian Ocean, regional sultanates and other potentates – the "empires of the monsoon," to borrow Richard Hall's evocative term – reached out across the ocean to realize their political ambitions. The Busa'idis and the Mazru'is are excellent examples of these impulses: both were products of the confluence of world historical forces and oceanic migrations that had given the Western Indian Ocean its distinct flavor, and both saw the ocean as an opportunity to exercise a form of local or regional suzerainty. Their meeting in Mombasa echoed a time of Indian Ocean economic and political expansion before Western colonization – a time in which local rulers vied with one another over the right to control key forts and port cities along the oceanic littoral, and access to commodities.[6]

For inhabitants of South Arabia, the coasts of East Africa constituted a key staging ground for their intertwined commercial and political aspirations.[7] Though prolonged contacts between the two regions go as far back as the tenth century, from at least the early modern period merchants and political aspirants from Southeast Arabia envisioned East Africa as a place where they could reinvent themselves as actors of consequence. Just as Hadhrami scholars established their trans-regional religious mission in India and Southeast Asia, political actors from Oman looked across the Arabian Sea, to East Africa. Ousted rulers and governors saw in the East African coast a place to assert independent political ambitions, backed by local tribes and access to the flows of commodities like gold, ivory, and slaves from the interior.[8] Those who were able to

[6] On the confluence of trade and political ambition in the Indian Ocean, see also Sebastian R. Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 5 (December 2011), 1269–1293; Roxani Margariti, "Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and "Pirate" States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 58 (2008), 543–577; Patricia Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

[7] The best overview of this long, intertwined history can be found in Wilkinson, *The Arabs and the Scramble for Africa*, 14–40.

[8] The Pate Chronicle speaks to many of these themes. In it, the Al-Nabhani dynasty, which ruled the interior of Oman, was displaced by the expanding Ya'rubi dynasty and took refuge on Pate, in what is now the northern coast of Kenya, near Lamu. They intermarried with the local ruling dynasty and, over the course of two generations, established themselves as the rulers of Pate, where they developed plantations and established a trade with India and Arabia. Stigant, *The Land of Zinj*, 30–45; Al-Mughairi, *Juhaynat Al-Akhbār*, 169–172. The chronicle also recalls how the Mazru'is, who had been sent by the Ya'rubis to expel the Portuguese, established themselves as independent potentates and

mediate between the outward flows of East African goods and the inward streams of textiles and other products from South Asia, the region's principal bazaar, established themselves as political contenders. The monsoon-structured trade system thus underpinned regional political power.[9]

The South Arabian dynasties of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognized the opportunities that lay before them. The Ya'rubi dynasty profited from a growing trade in ivory from the East African interior, but also generated revenue through maritime plunder and the imposition of protection costs on shipping in the Western Indian Ocean.[10] After the dynasty's collapse in the middle of the eighteenth century, the field was open for their former governors to either stand their ground and hold out for the possibility of establishing themselves as rulers of independent port cities, or to try to assert themselves as political suzerains over the tribes and clans that ran along the coasts of South Arabia and East Africa, profiting from the flows of commodities and people that characterized the region. The Mazru'is took the first route; the Al-Busa'idis chose the latter.

Thus, when the Busa'idis and Mazru'is met at Fort Jesus that day in 1785, at stake was not just a fort in coastal East Africa. At stake were the spoils of a regional commerce in ivory, slaves, and other commodities – a commerce that would underpin expansionist ambitions on both sides, and excite the intellectual agendas of historians centuries later. But lurking beneath this imperial expansion was another vector of oceanic history – the movements of merchants and other commercial actors.

Networks and Trade in World History

When the Kutchi merchant Sewji Topan Thakkur first arrived in Muscat from Gujarat in the 1780s, he could not have possibly imagined the world of trade and politics that he was about to step into. At the time, Muscat was only just beginning to come into being as a commercial entrepôt of serious consequence. The port city had benefited from a number of political transformations taking place in the Persian Gulf, and

even sought to extend their rule into Lamu. Stigant, *The Land of Zinj*, 55–73; Wilkinson, *The Arabs and the Scramble for Africa*, 31–32; Al-Mughairi, *Ǧuhaynat Al-Akhbār*, 207–210.

[9] M.N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 36–62.

[10] Wilkinson, *The Arabs and the Scramble for Africa*, 24; Thabit Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 60; R.B. Serjeant, *Customary and Shariah Law in Arabian Society* (Hampshire: Varorium, 1991), 80–83.

its long-standing links with East Africa and India ensured that its bazaars were well stocked with the sorts of wares that inhabitants of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula desired. Muscat had not yet become the regional commercial and political capital that it was going to be over the next seventy years or so, but it was on its way there; Sewji had arrived at the right time.

Kutchis like Sewji Topan constituted only one of what was a dizzying variety of merchant communities in the Indian Ocean: Arab, Persian, Armenian, Swahili, Gujarati, Chettiar, Chinese, Bugis, and more, all of whom engaged in a rich commerce with one another and with merchants from around the world. Their movements and activities undergirded the sultanates, empires, and petty chiefdoms that dotted the Indian Ocean rim. Mercantile activity formed the resource bases of these Indian Ocean polities: rulers derived revenues directly from commerce, established quarters for foreign merchants so as to attract trade, and spent money on patrols to protect merchant shipping. At other times, they profited from raiding merchant ships, flexing their military muscle along key trading routes, and using the proceeds to establish themselves as political contenders.[11]

The expanding Sultanate of Muscat and Zanzibar was no exception to this trend, housing (and profiting from the presence of) merchants from South Arabia, the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and India. Of these traders, Indian merchants – Kutchis like Sewji Topan, but also others – have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, in part because of the visibility of their activities to imperial officials around the region, but largely because of their centrality to commerce.[12] They formed a core constituency in economic and political life in the Omani empire and the Indian

[11] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Of Imarat and Tijarat: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1995), 750–780.

[12] Works devoted almost entirely to Indian merchants include: Uma Das Gupta (ed.) *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500–1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Scott Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550–1900* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002); Calvin Allen, "Sayyids, Shets and Sultans: Politics and Trade in Muscat Under the Al Bu Said, 1785–1914" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1978); Pedro Machado, *Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa, and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Chhaya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea: Kachchhi Traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800–1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011); Charles Schaefer, "'Selling at a Wash:' Competition and the Indian Merchant Community in Aden Crown Colony," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1999), 16–23; Ghulam Ahmed Nadri,

Ocean more broadly: they channeled commodities and credit around the region, but also bankrolled aspiring Sultans and petty rulers, financing their battles and providing them with the means to coopt potential rivals.[13]

Sewji Topan fit the mold well. Shortly after arriving in Muscat, he became a banker to Sultan bin Ahmed, the ruler of Muscat, financing many of his campaigns in East Africa.[14] To compensate Sewji for his financial support, the Sultan awarded him and his family the right to farm customs, first in Muscat and then in Zanzibar and East Africa – a right that Sewji's family held onto for more than sixty years. Moreover, Sewji's mercantile firm linked together resources and markets in South Arabia, East Africa, and India, channeling goods and credit around the Western Indian Ocean. The movement of commodities he and others stimulated constituted the life-blood of the Omani sultan's empire: it generated revenues, attracted merchants and settlers, and formed the basic outlines of commercial and imperial expansion.

To historians searching for a non-imperial lens through which they could write about the history of the Indian Ocean, merchants like Sewji Topan seemed to offer a clear possibility. Merchant communities cut across geographical boundaries, intersected with empires and other polities, and bridged regions that would otherwise have little to do with one another. For historians, Sewji Topan and others like him stood at the center of a historiography that first explored these worlds through the prism of cross-cultural trade and later developed into sophisticated accounts of trust and reputation within trade networks.[15] Here, the agents of history were the traders themselves: their quests for profit, their dogged efforts at

Eighteenth-Century Gujarat: The Dynamics of Its Political Economy (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Noor Mohammed Al-Qasimi, *Al-Wujūd Al-Hindī fī Al-Khalīj Al-'Arabī, 1820–1947 [The Indian Presence in the Gulf, 1820–1947]* (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: Government Printers, 1996).

[13] See also M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1994),12–14, 68–75, 117–128; John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 63–66; Goswami, *The Call of the Sea*, 79–238.

[14] Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, 72–74.

[15] On trade networks and trust in world history, see also Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–2. Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: the Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011). Machado, *Ocean of Trade*, 44–59; Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*; Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

overcoming obstacles on land and at sea to carve a niche for themselves, and their ability to navigate a world of regional politics, at times circumventing authorities and at other times drawing them into their agendas. In a sense, they brought back economic history of the Braudelian variety – histories in which state institutions developed to meet the imperatives of material life and capitalism, not the other way around.[16]

As revealing as they have been, discussions of networks and trust have been perhaps too narrowly focused. With only some exceptions, most studies of networks in economic history have told us little about how members of these networks interacted with actors outside the trust circle. The emphasis on trust within the network has also tended to obscure as much as they have revealed. As astute as these new Indian Ocean economic histories have been in their analysis of the internal legal dynamics of merchant networks, they have generally ignored the pivotal question of how these internal dynamics intersected with an external institutional world – courts, tribunals, and the state. By emphasizing merchants' proclivity for self-regulation, even in a formal institutional setting, these authors often paint a narrow picture of self-contained mercantile communities in a static institutional world, and risk flattening complex institutional experiences to highlight an internal equilibrium. After all, the world of Indian Ocean trade was not simply one of trust; it was one of law.

Law and Political Economy in the Indian Ocean

In the Indian Ocean, law was both everywhere and nowhere. It was hardly ever visible, but it left its mark on every actor, artifact, and action. It was present in that meeting between the Mazru'is and Busa'idis in Mombasa, where a deed infused with legal meaning exchanged hands between the parties. It was there throughout Sewji Topan's career and the journeys of thousands of others who crossed the Indian Ocean in search of profit, advancement, or a new life. It was there in the court of the Sultan and of his governors, in Muscat and in Zanzibar, where displays of power and authority intertwined with notions of justice in a public theater. And it was there whenever actors transacted with one another, whether they explicitly invoked it or implicitly understood it.

Law was a central part of how this Indian Ocean world took its shape. As a technology – a means of coordinating action – law furnished the institutions and instruments necessary to organize commerce and settlement between Oman, India, and East Africa, and to facilitate access to

[16] Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, Vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

the capital necessary to fuel economic activity. As a discourse, jurisprudence furnished the intellectual underpinnings of this world, providing a philosophy to the nature and shape of the commercial obligations that ran through it, and the institutions that governed it. And as modality of rule – a medium for the expression of multiple and overlapping sovereignties – law was essential to the process by which a range of actors negotiated, established, and contested jurisdiction over communities and commerce.

Perhaps nobody could appreciate this more than the Omani jurist Nasser bin Abi Nabhan, born in 1778, just as the Busa'idi sultanate was beginning its expansion. An accomplished jurist in his own right, Nasser eventually accompanied the Sultan from Muscat to Zanzibar, where he penned a range of different tracts on theology, medicine, astronomy, and jurisprudence. He spent the rest of his life moving between South Arabia and East Africa on the decks of dhows, writing on law and religion and contemplating the changing economic and political world that he was born into. Nasser died in Zanzibar in 1847, but not before a number of other jurists and *qāḍis* joined him there, moving to East Africa from Oman and Hadhramaut.[17] As part of a trans-regional community of legal scholars, the jurist would have immediately understood how fundamentally constitutive law was to the world around him.

Nasser also belonged to a distinguished lineage of scholars, and formed part of a regional revival in theology and jurisprudence – a juridical *nahḍa* that had started in the late eighteenth century, just as the Busa'idni political project was beginning to take hold in East Africa. The *nahḍa's* fountainhead was Nasser's father, Ja'id bin Khamis Al-Kharusi, known to all of his peers and later jurists as "Abi Nabhan." Abi Nabhan was considered to be the greatest legal mind of his generation, but was also sympathetic to the demands of commerce; he is credited, among other things, with having disposed of the argument against coffee consumption in Oman.[18] Along with other contemporaries, Abi Nabhan spearheaded the renaissance in Ibadhi legal thought.

But though Abi Nabhan was largely responsible for the emergence of a renaissance in legal thinking, he was hardly the first jurist that wrote in service of a broader political and commercial transformation. Around

[17] Amal N. Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s–1930s)* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 21; Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition*, 231, 355 n. 7. Anne Bang's *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1920* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) highlights the movement of jurists and *qāḍis* from southern Yemen to East Africa.

[18] Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*, 204.