Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism

Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s–1930s)

Amal N. Ghazal

Culture and Civilization in the Middle East

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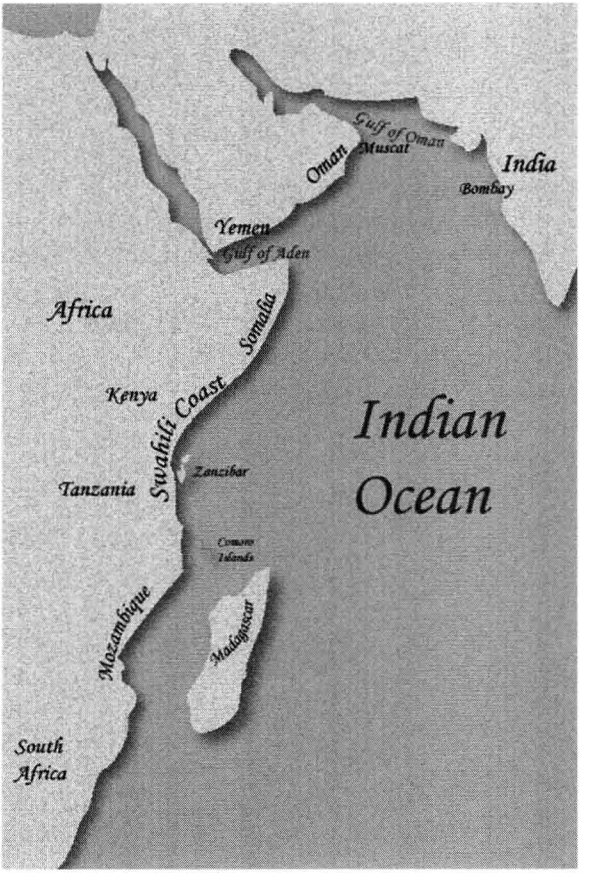

Map 1 The Swahili Coast (drawn by Louise Rolingher, reprinted with permission).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUB	American University of Beirut
HMK	Private Papers Hāshil al-Maskarī, Oman
JSHAI	Jam'iyyat al-Shaykh Abī Isḥāq Ibrahīm Atfiyyash li khidmat al-turāth, Algeria
MCH	Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Oman
TNA	The National Archives, England
ZNA	Zanzibar National Archives

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1

ARABS IN ZANZIBAR

Revisiting history

In his memoirs of a 1997 visit to Zanzibar, the Arab journalist Najīb al-Rayyis compared the island off the East African coast to Andalusia, or more accurately, compared its loss from Arab-Muslim rule to that of Muslim Spain.[1] Like its counterpart, Zanzibar came under Arab-Muslim rule, flourished, and earned a reputation as a tolerant center of economic and intellectual prosperity. Both "paradises" of Arab rule were lost violently, too. By making such a comparison, al-Rayyis pointed to a phase in the history of the island when it was under al-Būsaʿīdī rule (1832–1964) and was associated with an Arab-Islamic world far beyond its shores.

Al-Rayyis was not blind to the fact that while Andalusia was ruled by the Umayyads, Zanzibar was ruled by the descendants of the Umayyads' opponents, the Ibadis. Yet the sectarian identity of Ibadis was gradually refashioned by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements of religious nationalism and anticolonialism that erected new borders of belonging. Ibadi Omanis in Zanzibar, who constituted the ruling elite and included Sultans, merchants, traders, ʿulamaʾ, and the intelligentsia, placed their identity and that of Zanzibar within those borders.

This book is not only an attempt to trace those newly refashioned borders; it argues that segmented accounts of identity politics and nationalism do not provide a clear picture of how Muslim critics of the world order in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed their ideas. Local discourses of politics and identities were shaped by global endeavors revealed through wide networks of communications and different models of connections. It is through the study of those networks and the ways ideas and ideologies developed and spread among them that we are able to reframe our understanding of religious reform, nationalism, and anticolonialism in the Arab world. The Omani elite in Zanzibar, and the Omani intelligentsia

in particular, was situated within such networks. It constructed a multilayered Zanzibari nationalism that embodied this intersection between the local and the global, speaking simultaneously to local Zanzibari, pan-Arab, and pan-Islamic issues and developments. Thus, segmented accounts of nationalism fail to provide the wider context in which religious and nationalist discourses are nurtured and to which they are ideologically tied.

By breaking down parochial concerns and reframing them within translocal political and intellectual movements, this book widens the horizons of the historiographical debate on nationalism in the interwar Arab world by including a network of Muslim intellectuals wedded to a religious worldview. Two decades ago, in his work on the life and thought of religious nationalist Shakīb Arslān, the late William Cleveland warned against an exclusive association between nationalism and secularism, faulting historians who

> regarded secular nationalism as the doctrine which, in either its liberal or totalitarian form, would emerge as the dominant Middle Eastern ideology ... Those who had tenaciously borne, and continued to bear, the responsibility of the Islamic tradition came to be regarded by the new political elite of Arab society, as by some Western observers, as reactionary enemies of progress.[2]

Although Cleveland concluded that the writings and anticolonial activities of Arslān "reflected the longings of a large segment of educated Arab-Muslims,"[3] Arslān and the segment of activists and intellectuals he represented remain outside the general boundaries of the historiographic debate on nationalism in the Arab world. Arslān, as my work shows, was not alone in his campaign. Many more Arabs (and non-Arabs likewise) who were members of the Muslim intelligentsia championed the cause of Islam, modernist reformist Islam more particularly, as a nationalist force and an anticolonial ideology. Revisionist contributions to the field of interwar nationalism have highlighted the persistent role of religion in shaping identities and nationalist discourses but have focused more on popular movements and less on the intellectual and political elites.[4]

Zanzibari nationalism as formulated by the Omani intelligentsia not only embodies the religious discourse of nationalism, it also reveals the depth of that discourse in the Arab world. Zanzibari nationalism had Islam and Arabism as its two main pillars and was fused with a reformist tone that transcended sectarian borders

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between Ibadis and other Muslims. The Omani intelligentsia operated within a broad network of reform-minded Muslims in the Arab world to whom territorial nationalism was a viable doctrine as long as it retained a religious and pan-Arab framework, much like the Salafi version of Algerian nationalism.[5] The identity that the Omani intelligentsia constructed in the interwar period was one that had been in the making since the second half of the nineteenth century. It had its origins in the political and intellectual transformations within Islam and its reformist movements that strove for Muslim unity in the face of all-encroaching European powers. This interwar identity was shaped by Zanzibari politics and colonial policies in Zanzibar as much as it was molded by ideas and events in different corners of the Arab world. To define and trace the contours of that identity and to follow the tracks of Zanzibari nationalism, this book moves between Zanzibar, Oman, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Istanbul; between pan-Islamism, British and French colonialism, and the Imamate in Oman; between Islamic reform, the Arab *nahḍa*, and pan-Arabism.

Deparochializing disciplines and geography

To chart this interwoven history, we need first to redraw our map of disciplines and fields of study. In other words, we must "deparochialize" what are labeled as Arab and African histories before we attempt to examine the politics of identity of the Omani elite. Disciplinary boundaries have, more often than not, undermined the historians' ability to detect all the dynamics involved in the (re)constructions of identities and the development of nationalist thought within communities whose roots lie outside traditional historical and geographical localities. Thus, I draw on notions of global history, with globalization being "intended to designate a *condition* or state of consciousness rather than a set of processes – a worldview which suggests wider sets of possibilities or the potential for society to stretch itself across space."[6] This is not an endorsement of one side of the "local versus global" thesis, which, as Peter Mandaville has argued, is a dichotomy that does not "carry much analytical weight unless very precisely elaborated within specific contexts."[7] So doing, I create a translocal platform on which to examine crossregional ties and networks of belonging that cannot be captured through local lens alone.

In his study on Arabs in the British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia, Engseng Ho uses the term "parochialization" to refer to

"the imprint of colonial history, and of colonial categories which still organize its historiography."[8] This, as he observed, occurred at a number of levels, from defining a political geography that later became a "national" geography, to dividing time into specific historical periods to especially creating racial categories out of multiethnic conglomerates. This is a mirror of the historiography of al-Būsaʿīdī rule in East Africa.

The definition of Arab history itself defies any attempt to parochialize it. That history is not confined to Arab "nation-states" and is not a monopoly delineated by their past or present boundaries. Arab history is as elastic as Arab geography. Its definition is as resilient as that of the "Arab world" marked not by boundaries and frontiers but by a borderless identity, such as the one al-Rayyis located in end-of-twentieth century Zanzibar. That identity marks its limits in moving sands and seafaring waves. It builds its foundations on a common language and religion, and draws on shared memories and cherished pasts that contract and expand geography in order to accommodate history. It borrows from reality and imagination, memory and desire but continues to wrap itself in the robe of the Arabic language and the garb of Islam. It is this definition of Arab history that qualifies members of the Omani elite in Zanzibar – as speakers of Arabic, followers of Islam, and bearers of common history and beliefs with much of the Arab world – to be identified as both subjects and agents of Arab history. So far, their role has not been recognized as such and they have been cast outside the field of Arab and Middle Eastern studies.[9] The fact that the country of origin of this elite, Oman, is in itself considered peripheral – not only in terms of geography but also in terms of politics and intellectualism shaping or influencing Arab history – has further contributed to its marginality.

Moreover, the Omani elite is a Muslim elite but most of its members belong to the Ibadi sect, to which Islamicists have devoted little attention. Ibadism has its roots in the movement of the *Khawārij* or Kharijites who resented the decision of Caliph ʿAlī to accept the arbitration proposed by his foe and rival Muʿāwiya. The Kharijites who turned against ʿAlī following the arbitration were part of a coalition that lent its support to ʿAlī in his war against Muʿāwiya. Those in the coalition who became known as the Kharijites were already critical of Caliph ʿUthmān, Muʿāwiya's cousin, and were opposed to what they believed was his nepotistic style of leadership. They believed in an egalitarian Islam that should institute a merit system based on piety and good deeds rather than tribal origins and class hierarchy.[10] Their opposition to ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya

led to their eventual persecution by both parties. The Kharijites then split into several groups, with the Ibadis refusing to resort to violence in response to persecution and denouncing the killing of fellow Muslims. Thus, Ibadism defined itself in contrast to other Kharijite groups who resorted to violence like the Azāriqa, and in contrast to Umayyad despotism. Despite popular misconceptions, the founder of Ibadism was not ʿAbd Allah ibn Ibāḍ, one of the group's most outspoken theologians, who played only a secondary role in its establishment, although he did ultimately lend his name to it. This change in nomenclature came about because of ibn Ibāḍ's public advocacy of Ibadi beliefs at a time when Ibadis were operating underground and because of his open debates with extreme Kharijites and hostile Muslims. The group's decision to adopt the name "Ibadi" resulted from the desire to be associated with an authoritative figure best known for his criticism of both extreme Kharijism and what Ibadis considered an Umayyad despotic and unjust rule.

The "quietist" stance of Ibadis did not spare the sect's members the wrath of Umayyad caliphs and their governors. Umayyad persecution eventually pushed Ibadis into open revolt after 737, when Ibadis attempted to overthrow the Umayyads and establish a just Imamate spanning from North Africa to Khurasan. They succeeded in founding a cluster of temporary Ibadi Imamates, a prominent example being the Rustamid dynasty in North Africa. The longest-lasting Ibadi Imamate was established in Oman where it endured until 1957, barring a few interruptions. With the expansion of Omani rule in East Africa in the nineteenth century, Ibadi communities flourished there and made lasting contributions to the economic, political, and intellectual life of East Africa.

The scant literature available on Ibadism is unevenly distributed between works devoted to its early history and studies of its modern one. Although Ibadi communities are found almost exclusively in the Arab world – in Oman, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya in addition to the East African coast – they are rarely featured as contributors, or even participants, in modern Arab-Islamic history.[11] While Ibadi communities in North Africa are ethnically Berber, they are still within the boundaries of what we define as the "Arab world." As Arabic-speakers, they have contributed to Arab intellectual and political heritage. The failure to acknowledge Ibadis' importance reflects their "double marginalization" because of both sectarian affiliation and to geographic location.

This chapter in the history of Zanzibar is also as much part of African history as it is of the Arab one. These two fields are

complementary and overlapping, though they are often treated as being dichotomous. While the definition of "Arab" tends to defy geography, that of an "African" is often made to manipulate geography, insulating itself within borders, rigidly marked by the demarcations of a specific color, race, tribe, religion, or language. Arabs and Islam, along the lines of that definition, do not belong within those borders and do not fit the categories of "African" races and religions. They tend to be rejected by many Africanists as part of the African heritage.

Arabs have inhabited the East African coast for centuries and have contributed to the birth and development of Swahili language, culture, and society. The arrival of al-Būsaʿīdīs in the nineteenth century was but one more chapter in the continuous interaction between Arabia and East Africa, a by-product of their deeply interwoven histories. Omani Arabs, like many Arabs who had been arriving on the coast, became an integral part of the Swahili society; they defined it as much as it defined them, they were part of it as much as it was part of them. They bridged two worlds, two geographies, and two histories.

The arrival al-Būsaʿīdīs was soon followed by that of the British whose perspective on African history and societies, one that has much shaped Western historiography of Africa, was defined by the search, creation and imagination of "indigenous" races and tribes. Geography and genealogy were the accepted parameters of an "African" identity, and Arabs hailing from another geography and with different genealogies were considered neither "indigenous" nor "African." For Western observers, the Swahili society was divided into two categories of people or "races": the Swahili and the Arab. Even the Swahili was first declared by the literature as racially impure, thus not "African." Some researchers asserted that the Swahili could possibly be "African," but it all depended on how much "Swahilism" owed to Africa rather than to Arabia or the Middle East.[12] Identifying the Swahili in terms of Africanness or Arabness has been an exhaustive exercise and a recurrent topic that has dominated the field of East African history.

The notion that the "Swahili" is not pure "African" on account of the different color, language, and intermixing with Arabs still persists today, as is evident in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s comments on the Swahilis in his controversial documentary *Wonders of the African World*. Gates' statement: "It has taken my people fifty years to move from being Negro to being black, to being Afro-American. How long is it going to take the Swahili to become African?" implied that one could not be both, Arab and African, but has to be either.

While not every Africanist shares this view,[13] Gates' views are still shared by many Africanists. It is for this reason that "Arab" North Africa and often the Sahara, are often carved out of "African" history with the assumption that they represent, and therefore belong to, another category of history.[14] Several communities in Africa, born out of conjuncture of histories, remain marginalized within the field of African history. This has been the case with the Omani ruling elite in Zanzibar. Defined as non-African, Omanis have been treated as an anomaly. From that perspective, they have become the "colonial" and the "outsider." They belong to the category of the "invaders" of Africa.[15] Many of the studies on post-1964 Zanzibar were written, again, for the purpose of asserting that anomaly in African history and to showcase the events of 1963 and 1964 as an "African" revolution aimed against "colonial" Arabs.

This study rejects this binary view and situates Omani rule within a paradigm that unifies the usually disjointed "Arab" and "African." Doing so allows us to best capture the dynamics of the identity articulated by Omanis in Zanzibar. For them, Zanzibar belonged to an Arab-Islamic world that stretched into Africa.

Contextualizing 'Arab' identity

The Omani elite in Zanzibar shaped its identity within the parameters of that Arab-Muslim world. Identities have many components and are elastic, malleable, situational, and multilayered. Those components can be constructed and reconstructed and range from occupation to gender, from class to language, from age to religion. This complexity and elasticity of identity, however, does not negate its significance. After all, identities do exist as points of collective social definitions and political reference. As Yasir Suleiman indicates:

> Being so wide-ranging in scope, it is not surprising that the concept of identity defies precise description. This fact should not however deter us from delving into those questions of collective affiliation which constitute the scope of identity, not least because of the persistence of this notion as an operative factor in all aspects of human life.[16]

Some factors, such as religion, language, and communal history, have a more permanent and stronger impact on identity than others and I take these specific factors as anchors of the Omani elite's identity. The prominence of each element may vary from time

to time or from person to person, but taken together they constitute the essentiality of collective identities. They form the "inner" and "spiritual" domain, to use Chatterjee's words. Those elements or parameters of identity were deliberately chosen by the Omani elite and woven in a conscious manner. This process allowed the elite to articulate that identity at a time when the British were enforcing their own definition of "identity" in Zanzibar, and at a time when the Omani elite needed to self-identify *vis-à-vis* their "other," their colonial masters.

The British were very keen on, if not obsessed with, creating biological categories of identities to classify the heterogeneous Zanzibari population. Omanis identified themselves as "Arabs" and were identified by the British as such, but the British definition of an "Arab" was one with which few Arabs would agree. An "Arab," as F. B. Pearce indicated, is "the true Arab of unmixed descent,"[17] while "the Zanzibar negro," he added, "whose great-great-grandmother may have had some connection with an Arab harem, cannot fairly be classed at the present day as an Arab, as the term is understood in Zanzibar."[18] This definition of the term "Arab" was surely one that was understood by the British alone and not by the Swahili society with its Arab and non-Arab members. On the one hand, "so dense have been the many forms of Arab/African intermingling over a great many cultures that there was no analogous line of demarcation between the Arab, the Arabized, and the non-Arab as there had been and continued to be between the European and the non-European."[19] On the other hand, it was not race but language and culture that marked the difference between an "Arab" and a "non-Arab." Long before al-Būsaʿīdīs established their rule on the East African coast, "an ideal of cultural Arabness had already emerged in the mind of the Swahili."[20] This trend to "Arabize" through linguistic and cultural assimilation intensified under al-Būsaʿīdī rule and "Arabness" remained "a mark of status" many desired to achieve.

"Arabness" in British eyes, in addition to being associated with "race," was a class identity. An "Arab" was a land owner, "a perfect gentleman," and a dweller "in a massive, many storied-mansion."[21] He was "par excellence a landed proprietor, and usually has his money in clove and coconut plantations."[22] Arabs of Hadrami or Comorian origins who did not fit in those categories were looked upon as inferior to Omanis. Thus, the British distinguished not only between an "Arab" and a "negro," to use Pearce's word, but also between Omanis and other Arabic-speaking communities.

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