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“Our Little Piratical Intentions” Select Narratives of British Abolition in East Africa, 1849-1873

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Abstract

This paper examines efforts of the British Royal Navy to abolish the slave trade along the East African coast in the mid-nineteenth century through the select narratives of George L. Sullivan and William Cope Devereux. The abolition campaign was weakened by numerous factors, including the Royal Navy's lack of instruction, organization and central command. I argue that these problems resulted in various acts of misconduct by British Navy men. Increasingly, compensation and "success" depended upon antagonistic relationships with slave traders, Zanzibari locals, Omani elite and other European agents.

Keywords

Zanzibar, 19th century, slavery, abolition, British imperialism

Introduction

This paper will explore the journals of two British Royal Navy crewmen involved in abolition campaigns in East Africa, with close attention to how these individuals perceived their own role(s) within wider regional/global abolition efforts. The slave markets and extensive dhow¹ trade of adults and children from the island of Zanzibar, and in the principally coastal Sultanate of Zanzibar², complicated the abolition project in the Indian Ocean world. The journey to the western Indian Ocean was very long for Royal Navy squadrons, and the terrain much less familiar, as abolitionism had not reached East Africa with the same aggression as it had in the West. Moreover, the British government did not provide detailed instructions nor establish the necessary judicial bodies for the Royal Navy based in Bombay or the Cape of Good Hope, as it had in West Africa. Thus, the transition from slave-based modes of production to other “freer” forms of labour in Indian Ocean Africa, as imagined by British Royal Navy crewmen, was ambiguous at best. As this paper will illustrate, numerous formal treaties and unofficial agreements between Indian, British and Omani governments allowed for elements of slave trading to continue well after formal emancipation in 1833.

The journals of Captain G.L. Sullivan, published in 1873, recount his time aboard three anti-slavery British cruisers from 1849 until 1869. Coupled with the personal logs of William Cope Devereux, an assistant paymaster on the H.M.S. *Gorgon* during the early 1860s, both sets of journals highlight some of the failures and successes of abolition campaigns of the British Royal Navy in East Africa. Devereux’s logs, in particular, tell of numerous instances in which British crewmen were hostile towards non-white officials and traders in the region, including the Sultan of Zanzibar himself.³ More notably, both sources reveal a disorganized and decentralized British Navy command in the western Indian Ocean. Undisciplined and demoralized by these circumstances, Royal Navy crewmen would occasionally commit acts of piracy and misconduct. In a sense, then, abolition in this context became a sort of enterprise for them in which compensation and success depended on an increasingly hostile relationship with Arab slave traders and Omani officials.

¹ A dhow is a traditional sailing vessel with a long, thin hull and lateen sails, typically used by Arab and Indian traders in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Crew size varies from approximately 12 to 30 individuals, depending on the size of the dhow.

² The Sultanate of Zanzibar ran roughly from Lamu, a coastal town in present-day Kenya, to just south of Lindi, a town on the coast of present-day Tanzania.

³ Sultan Seyyid Said ruled as the Sultan of both Oman and Zanzibar from about 1806 until his death in 1856. He relocated to Zanzibar in 1840. Said was succeeded by two of his sons upon his death: Thuwaini bin Said became the Sultan of Oman and Muscat, while Majid bin Said became the Sultan of Zanzibar. While Seyyid Said established the major treaties with British officials in the 1820s and 1840s, the Sultan of Zanzibar during the 1860s (during Devereux’s time at sea) would have been Sultan Majid bin Said, who ruled until 1873. Sullivan, on the other hand, spent over 20 years at sea, and therefore would have encountered the rule of both Sultan Seyyid Said and Sultan Majid bin Said in Zanzibar.

Methodology

The British abolition bill passed on 28 August 1833 defines a slave master as the owner of a marketable good in its title: "An act for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies; for promoting the industry of manumitted slaves; and for compensating the persons hitherto entitled to the services of such slaves."⁴ In this essay, then, I define slavery as the "status or condition of a person over whom any and all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are practiced."⁵ Indeed, Suzanne Miers rightly asserts that African slavery must be viewed apart from Western notions of "freedom" and "enslavement," and instead considered within the context of African kin groups and their social networks.⁶ In nineteenth-century Zanzibar, the slave trade principally involved the transport and sale of women and children from the mainland of East Africa to slave markets in Zanzibar, and then northwards to buyers in the Bay of Aden and the Persian Gulf. The slaves with whom Sullivan and Devereux came in contact were alienated entirely from their cultures and families, and generally mistreated by the "Arab" traders⁷ under whose transport and ownership they were released by the British.⁸

Furthermore, this paper is geographically limited to Sultan Seyyid Said's territory. Buying and owning slaves for domestic work on Zanzibar's plantations became commonplace in the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Abdul Sheriff, Zanzibar traditionally acted as the commercial intermediary between mainland Africa, from which the majority of black slaves were taken, and both Western and Middle Eastern countries.⁹ However, a transformation occurred during the nineteenth century wherein Arab slave traders "began to divert slaves to the clove plantations of Zanzibar, and later to the grain plantations on the East African coast."¹⁰ The market thus changed from one that exported slaves to one that relied upon an internal slave mode of production. Some authors contend that this transition occurred due to the global suppression of the slave trade, and others argue that a depression in the

⁴ Parliamentary Papers, (492) An act for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies; for promoting the industry of manumitted slaves; and for compensating the persons hitherto entitled to the services of such slaves, 5 July 1833, vol. IV.183.

⁵ Quoted in Léonie Archer, ed., *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour* (London: Routledge, 1988), 21-22.

⁶ Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).

⁷ The term "Arab" is used very generally by Sullivan, Devereux and their contemporaries. It comprised local, Indian and Omani slave runners active in this region.

⁸ Few scholars have examined in detail what became of slaves who were rescued or taken from slaving dhows by the British Royal Navy. The terms "released" and "freed" are therefore used loosely throughout this paper. Both Devereux and Sullivan mention the fate of slaves only briefly, and both also wonder openly at the fate of the slaves they deposit at Zanzibar and Bombay.

⁹ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (Oxford: James Currey, 1987), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

trade of marketable products like cloves and ivory caused the Sultan of Zanzibar to look for profit elsewhere.¹¹

Historical Context

Both the 1822 Moresby Treaty and 1845 Hamerton Treaty were key in complicating the sea-based abolition project in East Africa, as Sheriff, and both Sullivan and Devereux's narratives attest. Both treaties allowed domestic slave trafficking to continue for the Sultan's uses, such as the plantation labour described above. The Moresby Treaty of 1822 was the first formal treaty signed between British officials and the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, Seyyid Said, who relocated to Zanzibar in 1840.¹² This treaty put into effect a "Moresby line" along which British ships were given the right to patrol.¹³ The line began at Cape Delgado near the border of Mozambique, and continued upwards hundreds of miles to the Indian port, Diu.¹⁴ The Moresby Treaty gave the Sultan "complete sovereignty and authority over the waters of the eastern shores of Africa."¹⁵ The body of the treaty also contained several stipulations aimed at directly supporting British abolition efforts. The document stated the following:

all external traffic in slaves (viz. the foreign slave-trade to Christian as opposed to Moslem countries) should cease; that all vessels carrying the Sultan's flag found or convicted of being engaged in the traffic to other places than his dominions should be considered pirates and treated as such; that residence be offered to British consuls and agents at certain strategic places where, with the Sultan's assistance, British subjects engaged in the trade might be apprehended; and finally ... that any vessel on the Sultan's flag found trading in slaves [beyond the Moresby line] ... should be liable to seizure by any British cruiser or officer of customs.¹⁶

The Moresby Treaty also contained several ambiguities related to the punishment and conviction of slave traders, and the fate of "freed" slaves, as Sullivan's journals demonstrate. These ambiguities added to the confusion felt on the ground - and at sea - by British patrols. With the Moresby Treaty in effect, British agents were entitled to seize any vessel carrying slaves bound

¹¹ Gerald Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean: A Study of Maritime Enterprise, 1810-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

¹² However, Zanzibar had been largely under Omani rule since the eighteenth century.

¹³ See Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (Oxford: James Currey, 1987), 36 for a map of the Moresby and Hamerton Lines.

¹⁴ Beatrice Nicolini, *Makran, Oman and Zanzibar: Three-Terminal Cultural Corridor in the Western Indian Ocean, 1799-1856*, translated by Penelope-Jane Watson (Boston: Brill, 2004), 134.

¹⁵ Nicolini, *Makran, Oman and Zanzibar*, 134.

¹⁶ Graham, *Great Britain in the Indian Ocean*, 199.

for “Christian countries” including France, Portugal and America. The exportation of slaves from Zanzibar by other European nations and Western countries was also banned.¹⁷ Nonetheless, an illegal human smuggling trade developed under European flags and, as Gerald Graham argues, “it was up to the British to stop it.”¹⁸ “[Seyyid Said] had performed his share of the bargain” in signing the Moresby Treaty, and later the Hamerton treaty, signed on 2 October 1845.¹⁹ This second treaty narrowed the Moresby Line, thus restricting even further the Sultan’s capacity to legally import slaves for domestic uses, such as plantation labour in Zanzibar. The Hamerton Treaty prohibited, “under severe penalties, the export of slaves from [the Sultan’s] African territories and the importation of the same from any part of Africa in his possessions in Asia.”²⁰ However, there remained numerous disagreements between Indian, Omani and British authorities regarding who was meant to prosecute captured slave traders, and what was to become of “rescued” or “freed” slaves. Devereux’s account makes little mention of where slaves lived and worked following their removal from slave dhows, apart from a brief mention that “after boarding the dhows, we generally put their crew on the nearest land, and take the slaves to the Seychelles, where they are taken care of.”²¹ Little scholarship exists documenting the lives of freed slaves in this region, and Sheriff argues that this aspect of the abolition project was systematically underplayed and omitted in written records “by many who had a very intimate knowledge of the situation,” including British officials.²² This paper, then, will also account for the likelihood that certain activities and pieces of information were omitted from Sullivan and Devereux’s material. For example, Sullivan’s logs do not mention the piracy and looting that reportedly occurred among British officers patrolling suspected slave ships, despite Devereux’s extensive recollections on the subject.

Similarly, Erik Gilbert has traced the effects of the Royal Navy’s anti-slave trade campaign on dhow commerce in East African waters, presenting a fairly negative view of the Royal Navy. Gilbert argues that crewmen often acted illegally with regards to the Arab traders whose boats were often searched and condemned for either holding slaves or for possessing items or products that enabled the transport of slaves. Vessels captured by the Royal Navy were given a bounty of £5 10s per ton, though if “a captured vessel was so unseaworthy as to present a threat to the safety of the prize crew, it could be destroyed at sea and adjudicated later.”²³ Gilbert argues that little formality seemed to exist

¹⁷ Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, 200.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁹ However, the Hamerton Treaty did not go into effect until 1847.

²⁰ Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, 214-215.

²¹ William Cope Devereux, *A Cruise in the “Gorgon,” or, Eighteen Months on the H.M.S. “Gorgon”, Engaged in the Suppression of the Slave Trade on the East Coast of Africa* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1869), 72.

²² Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, 230.

²³ Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860-1970* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 61.

for Royal Navy patrols when capturing slaving dhows. Dhows were often destroyed on the spot so that British crews would not be required to leave their cruising grounds to bring them to Zanzibar or Bombay, and risk fighting monsoon winds.²⁴ Not only were financial incentives available to British Navy crews who managed to capture ships, but “[British patrols] were also in a position to profit from misrepresenting legitimate trading vessels as slavers.”²⁵

In contrast with the West African slave trade, the Royal Navy on the Swahili coast did not encounter large slave ships intended to transport hundreds of bodies across the “middle passage.” Slave dhows frequently held between one and six individuals “whose status the officer in charge and his translator could not account for.”²⁶ Moreover, dhow owners involved in the slave trade kept their vessels close to shore in order to elude British patrols. When slave traders were “surprised by a naval vessel, it was a simple matter to run the dhow on the beach and chase the slaves ashore.”²⁷ Additionally, British Royal Navy crews engaged in acts of piracy, taking money and/or possessions from ships and crews, regardless of whether the dhow in question was found to be transporting slaves. There were not enough British Navy ships to chase the numerous dhows engaged in the slave trade, and there lacked judicial commissions and overseers to ensure that captured and destroyed dhows deserved this treatment.

The Narratives of G.L. Sullivan and William Cope Devereux

The journals of G.L. Sullivan and William Cope Devereux were published in the late 1860s and early 1870s due to a growing public interest in abolitionism and Royal Navy pursuits. Devereux’s account is candid and in many ways more explicit than the personal journals of Sullivan, whose writings offer a very structured and broad overview of the Royal Navy’s activities. Though Sullivan’s journals include several retrospective addendums outlining ways that events could have been handled differently, chasing slave dhows along the East African coast remained a problematic activity for British officials. These journals also reveal the Royal Navy’s lack of resources in the region. It is unclear whether the Crown was ever truly aware of how the slave trade functioned in this region, or the conflicts of interest that arose between British officials and local government.

William Cope Devereux joined the H.M.S. *Gorgon* in April 1859 as a clerk. The ship sailed to North American and West Indian stations throughout 1859 and returned to England in the fall of 1860. This is the period in which Devereux’s record begins. On 14 September 1859, Devereux was promoted to the position of Assistant Paymaster, and the *Gorgon* departed England for the Cape of Good Hope on 7 November 1860. The H.M.S. *Gorgon* arrived at a

²⁴ Ibid, 61.

²⁵ Ibid., 62.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 63.

cruising ground off the coast of Mozambique on 23 June 1861 and patrolled the Swahili coast, visiting Zanzibar many times before September of the same year.²⁸ Devereux's journals were published by an unnamed editor in London in 1869, under the title *A Cruise on the "Gorgon,": or, Eighteen months on the H.M.S. "Gorgon", engaged in the suppression of the slave trade on the east coast of Africa*. This text was published four years before the Parliamentary Select Committee Report on the Slave Trade (East Coast Africa) was published in 1871,²⁹ to which these journals later contributed evidence.³⁰

Captain G.L. Sullivan's *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters on the eastern coast of Africa – Narrative of the suppression of the slave trade* was published in London in 1873. In May 1849, Sullivan joined the H.M.S. *Castor*, which sailed until February 1851 along the East African coast from the Cape of Good Hope, to Madagascar and Zanzibar. In May 1866 and June 1869, Sullivan also captained the H.M.S. *Pantaloön* and H.M.S. *Daphne*, respectively. His time at sea as a member of the Royal Navy's anti-slavery squadron brought him in contact with slave traders, slaves, Indian and Omani authorities, and other British crews with the same purpose: to suppress the trade and transport of slaves along the East African coast. The region that gave Sullivan the most cause for concern during his twenty years at sea was that of Zanzibar and its coastal waters, particularly the area governed by Sultan Seyyid Said and his son. These narratives indicate that knowledge of the features unique to slavery in this region - and the resources appropriate to quell it - were generally lacking among British Royal Navy crews.

Internal Shortcomings of Royal Navy Fleets

During Sullivan's first tour on the H.M.S. *Castor* in 1849-50, he noted that "we boarded several dhows on this coast, and it may be asked, If the slave-trade is so extensive, why [no slaves] were captured?"³¹ On the same date, Sullivan remarked upon the lack of information he and his crew had been given for properly suppressing the slave trade. His crewmen did not have "any instructions or documents relating especially to the East Coast trade, or the experience of any officers who had been engaged in that service previously."³² The Royal Navy based on Africa's west coast were given detailed instructions related to their duties, and guidelines outlining how to capture a slaving vessel

²⁸ This span of time comprises the first ten chapters of Devereux's published journals.

²⁹ Parliamentary Papers, (420) Report from the Select Committee on Slave Trade (East Coast Africa); together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index, 4 August 1871, vol. XII.1.

³⁰ This is notable, as it suggests that these journals were perhaps published first and foremost for public interest and not solely for political reasons (as evidence in a parliamentary report).

³¹ Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, 54.

³² *Ibid.*

and what to do with its occupants.³³ The Crown also supplied the Royal Navy operating in the Atlantic Ocean with information about specific treaties Britain had signed with other nations in West Africa and Europe, so that captains were aware of possible limitations, as well as their own rights. In contrast, the Royal Navy based out of Bombay and the Cape of Good Hope was given little reference material. Sullivan expressed confusion at the dissimilarities between what his crew was witnessing in the Indian Ocean, and what the “official instructions” lead them to expect:

We expected to find “fittings,” “tanks,” planks, shackles, rice, if not fettered negroe double up in them, according to the experiences gained by some of those who had seen the captures of American and European vessels or which we had learnt to look for from the wording of the official instructions on this subject.³⁴

Sullivan also commented that “[he and his crew] knew so little of this trade, and had no conception of it being carried on in that way.”³⁵ Though Devereux does not directly express the same frustrations, he was at sea within the same time frame as Sullivan, and there is little doubt that these Royal Navy crews in the western Indian Ocean shared the same knowledge base.

Furthermore, slave traders in this region regularly employed specific tactics to outrun and elude British cruisers. In the 1850s, slave traders began to use smaller ships, which were more difficult to spot. They would also travel at night and close to the coastline, despite the fact that evading the British for too long (days and even weeks) was very risky, due to hunger and sickness aboard ill-equipped dhows.³⁶ Slaving dhows would frequently run ashore at the sight of a British cruiser, and the dhow’s captain and crew would try to persuade enslaved men, women and children to jump overboard and flee when they reached land. Sullivan recounted multiple instances when his crew tried to reach the shore before slaves were able to run off. Able-bodied slaves would frequently carry injured peers inland and out of sight to evade British officials.³⁷ Sullivan expressed further frustration at the fact that many slaves would often drown or become injured in these scenarios. In one case, Sullivan and his crew, onboard the H.M.S. *Daphne*, conducted oral interviews with a group of slaves recently freed from a dhow, which he later recorded in his journals:

the dhow was crammed with slaves, but that on seeing the ship the Arabs said, pointing to the smoke from [the *Daphne*’s] funnel,

³³ For instance, in July 1844, the British Parliament issued a 500-page document titled “Instructions for the Guidance of her Majesty’s Naval Officers in the Suppression of the Slave Trade.” Parliamentary Papers, (577), July 1844. vol. L.1.

³⁴ Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

'white man is lighting a fire to cook nigger with,' and by this they persuaded the poor creatures to risk jumping in the water when they grounded.³⁸

Sullivan reiterated that these scenarios were commonplace: a dhow would crash ashore, thereby injuring the slaves onboard, and threatening the safety of British cruisers as they sailed into the shallow waters. British patrols needed efficient methods and more ships so that dhow captures would not continually involve the death or injury of slaves and British crewmen.

Devereux's journals also highlight many of the practical problems and strategic short-comings that the British Royal Navy faced. On 5 July 1861, Devereux described the H.M.S. *Gorgon's* pursuit of a suspected slave-holding vessel. Upon inspection, the ship was found to be holding cargoes of rice, coffee and other merchandise, though Devereux stated "I feel convinced that the main hatchway has been used for other purposes than the right."³⁹ However, without evidence – in the form of either slaves, or the chains and shackles used to restrain slaves - British captains were not permitted to detain vessels within or outside of the Moresby or Hamerton Lines. Of the encounter, Devereux stated that "all our hands have been expectantly watching our approach, and we feel sorry to dispel that semi-smile flitting over their countenances; but their curiosity will have it, therefore the words "No prize!" are uttered, and everyone looks disappointed."⁴⁰ Without evidence of slave transport, the *Gorgon's* captain was, in this instance, forced to allow the dhow to continue on its way.

Devereux also made frequent and detailed comments regarding the methods that dhow captains employed to escape British ships. He stated that northern Arab dhows "are the acknowledged pirates of the coast, and when chased they throw their slaves overboard;" but, when the slaves "exceed the value of the dhow, they either make a bold run for it, or else land them."⁴¹ In September 1861, Devereux remarked on the poor treatment of slaves by Arab owners and recounted a circumstance in which "a dhow had slaves on board, and hearing that a cruiser's boats were on her track, the Arabs commenced a whole-sale butchery of the slaves, cutting their throats and tossing them in the sea." He then stated that the Royal Navy only arrived in time to save fifty or sixty slaves, with "at least twenty or thirty having been despatched."⁴² The Royal Navy's methods for obstructing the slave trade could not always prevent the deaths of slaves, and this further complicated the effectiveness of the abolition project in this region.

Another common problem that the Royal Navy faced was that of translation. As Sullivan noted, British crews often did not have a capable

³⁸ Ibid., 163.

³⁹ Devereux, *A Cruise in the Gorgon*, 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 71.

⁴² Ibid., 111.

translator to speak with the captains of suspected slave-holding vessels, nor any British officers able to read the Omani-issued licenses required for the “legal” transportation of slaves. It was well known that slave traders would try to disguise their slave passengers as wives, family members or other crewmen. Identifying whether the passengers on a vessel were slaves, and whether they were “legal” or “domestic” slaves according to the authority of the Sultan, became an impossible task without proper translation. In one entry, Sullivan commented that

we, having no interpreter, were unable to put such questions, and how many vessels escaped us in consequence it is impossible to say; but we boarded on this part of the coast sometimes two or three dhows in a day, and, recollecting how full many of them were of Arabs and negroes, I feel convinced from subsequent experience that hundreds of slaves must have so run the gauntlet and passed us.⁴³

Dhows engaged in the legal trade of products such as ivory, hides, rice or corn were also known to illegally “smuggl[e] a few slaves on board, or as many as they can stow conveniently with the least possible risk, but which have no licence or authority for conveying them even in Zanzibar territory.”⁴⁴ As Sullivan stated, “I do not believe that the extent of the coast trade was then fully known, and we had seldom more than three cruisers off the East Coast, which extended nearly to the Equator.”⁴⁵

Indeed, once a dhow left the limits of the Sultanate with the intention of continuing onwards to the Persian Gulf, British cruisers were able to stop slave traders from transporting dozens of adult and child slaves. The problem, yet again, was that few formal instructions indicated what Royal Navy patrols were meant to do with the slaves they released. Sullivan described how the H.M.S. *Daphne*, from 1868 to 1869, freed a total of 322 slaves, all of whom were found in deplorable conditions within captured dhows.⁴⁶ The *Daphne* subsequently transported these individuals to Zanzibar or Aden, and Sullivan confirmed that 16 of this number died of disease before reaching their destination. Once British officials deposited slaves at Zanzibar or Aden, Sullivan suspected that the slaves experienced further mistreatment and little in the way of accommodation or employment after their delivery to Omani or Indian authorities. Apart from a brief mention of former slaves living happily in the Seychelles,⁴⁷ Sullivan had little information about where former slaves lived or worked. He also gave an example of slaves returned to Aden, only to be sold back into the slave trade by Indian officials.⁴⁸ What’s more, the dhows

⁴³ Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

and slave traders who were detained by the Royal Navy were rarely punished in an adequate fashion by the Sultan, according to both Sullivan and Devereux, nor were the vessels always condemned. These were no doubt demoralizing circumstances for British patrols, which also served to expose some of the Royal Navy's internal shortcomings.

External Hindrances to Britain's Abolition Project

Treaties signed between the British Crown and the Sultan of Oman also hindered the abolition project, particularly in Zanzibar. In his journals, Sullivan outlines the Sultanate, which stretched from Kelwa (200 miles south of Zanzibar) to Lamu (230 miles north of Zanzibar).⁴⁹ Within this zone, the slave trade was considered a legal trade until 1845 when the Hamerton Treaty came into effect, and the Sultanate was restricted even further. A clause in the Moresby Treaty "nominally limit[ed] the number of slaves to be carried to that required by the Sultan for agricultural purposes, [though] he alone [was] the judge of such requirements."⁵⁰ As Sheriff highlights, date and clove production on the island of Zanzibar proliferated during this period, and a slave mode of production slowly replaced the traffic in slaves to the Persian Gulf, Europe and America. Interestingly, neither Sullivan nor Devereux comment on this shift. Sullivan does, however, describe how slave traders simply needed to apply for a license to transport slaves, which was quickly granted by the Sultan. Any dhow captain "possessing such license [was] exempt from detention and capture on the part of [British] cruisers."⁵¹ Even if the number of slaves on board a dhow exceeded the number permitted by the license, it was still required by British crewman to obtain "special permission" by the Sultan to capture the dhow. This cumbersome permission system required extensive travel on the part of Royal Navy ships, and perhaps dissuaded British captains from acting "legally" when faced with licensed traders.

Sullivan's narrative also mentions that Indian authorities in Bombay occasionally undermined the Royal Navy's authority. For example, Sullivan recounted a letter sent by the Secretary of the Government of Bombay to the Political Resident of Zanzibar, written on 13 April 1869. A formal complaint was included, describing how a British cruiser had detained a ship carrying legal, domestic slaves.⁵² In this context, domestic slaves, such as one's servants or boat crewmen, were entitled to be transported on dhows. However, Sullivan expressed frustration with the fact that *identifying* a domestic slave was often a difficult task. He contended that "acknowledging a 'legal slave-trade' and 'domestic slavery' acted as an impassable barrier against the abolition of this iniquitous trade."⁵³ Moreover, the Sultan rarely punished accused slave traders. An evident disconnect existed between what British Royal Navy crews

⁴⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

⁵² Ibid., 259.

⁵³ Ibid., 2.

were experiencing and the expectations of British-Indian officials regarding treaties in place with the Omani-Zanzibari local government.

The journal entries of Sullivan and Devereux also demonstrate a sense of frustration with the ongoing slave trade under other European flags, like those of France and Portugal. Sullivan dedicated an entire chapter of his published journals to outlining “Portuguese Possessions,” in which he highlighted the Mozambique coast.⁵⁴ While travelling in Mozambique, from 13 to 17 July 1861, Devereux remarked that the Portuguese governor “appears to have the utmost hatred of slavery and the slave trade; but I believe, like all other Portuguese Governors, however well intended, he is sure to be overcome finally by the great temptations the inhuman traffic offers.”⁵⁵ While the author’s personal prejudices must be accounted for here, Devereux made several comments about the Portuguese being involved in illegal slave trading. During the same visit to Mozambique, he stated that “the unprincipled Portuguese prefer this fast way of making fortunes, to the slower method of legal trade.”⁵⁶ Sullivan made similar remarks about Portugal’s on-going participation in the slave trade, with frequent reference to the “half-caste Portuguese, a species of human nature that goes far to confirm the truth of the Darwinian theory.”⁵⁷ As well, Devereux asserted that all slaveholding European nations “have agents along the coast, who engaged for a certain number of slaves to be procured on a given spot at a certain time by Arab procurers.”⁵⁸ Both men demonstrated knowledge of a persistent slave trade driven by other imperial nations in the same region patrolled by British cruisers.

Moreover, the language that Devereux and Sullivan employed in their descriptions of the slave trade and the physical environment in Zanzibar was extremely racialized and negative, and conveyed deep-seated hostility toward Arab and Swahili slave traders. While Sullivan’s narrative includes a few broad descriptions of the mistreatment of slaves, including a brief mention of the slave markets in Yemen, Devereux’s writings are much more explicit. In mid-July 1861, the *Gorgon* hired an interpreter and “general spy on the slave coast.”⁵⁹ Devereux wrote that he was not pleased with the interpreter his captain had selected, as “these half-breed Arabs are generally roguish; a species of low cunning outcasts ... and would do anything for a few dollars, even to selling their own parents, if they only knew them.”⁶⁰ He also declared that he “found the Arabs ignorant, cowardly, and false; their only thoughts

⁵⁴ Ibid., 219-255.

⁵⁵ Devereux, *A Cruise on the Gorgon*, 64.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁷ Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, 47.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁹ Devereux, *A Cruise on the Gorgon*, 63. The *Gorgon*’s crew would have certainly needed a native translator to aid in the capturing of dhows, not only for linguistic purposes, but to also gather information regarding the whereabouts of illegal slave dhows.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

being their black concubines, stomachs, slaves and dollars.”⁶¹ This language certainly demonstrates high levels of aggression towards the group that British Royal Navy men interacted with the most: slave traders legally and illegally operating in the region.

The journals also cite a situation in which one of the *Gorgon*'s lieutenants, Frederick Harvey, and some crewmen were lost in a small paddleboat in pursuit of a dhow. Harvey recounted to Devereux the violence that occurred when a group of Arab sailors came across the lost men and threatened them with arms. This story gives the reader a sense of the inherent hostility that Royal Navy men bred with traders in the suppression of the slave trade. This hostility was coupled with outright frustration at the sight of slave markets in Zanzibar, to which the crew of the *Gorgon*, in particular, was frequently exposed. The *Gorgon* was stationed at Zanzibar in September 1861, and Devereux described how vast improvements to the island's sanitary arrangements had been made since the crew's last visit, with “a better supply of water, the removal of offensive matter, and dead bodies of slaves.”⁶² Devereux also estimated that the island contained 250,000 people, comprised of “Arabs, natives, and their slaves; and besides, Arabs from Oman and Hadramat [who were] a piratical set of wretches.”⁶³

Of particular interest here are the descriptions of the slave markets at Zanzibar. Elaborate accounts of the terrible conditions that slaves were forced to endure are provided in both narratives. Upon entering a small square beyond the Sultan's palace, Sullivan described the following sight:

The first thing that meets the eye is a number of slaves arranged in a semicircle, with their faces towards us [...] Most of them are standing up, but some are sitting on the ground; some of them, in fact, utterly incapable of standing upon their feet, miserable emaciated skeletons, on whom disease, and perhaps starvation, has placed its fatal mark.⁶⁴

Similarly, Devereux offered information about female slaves being treated like cattle, as they were prodded, poked, and bound by chains. Devereux also described how “nearly all [of the slaves] are half asleep, their poor old heads dropping from sheer fatigue, and their poor persecuted bodies as dry as a chip.”⁶⁵ As the *Gorgon*'s crew walked through the market, they observed three slaves, one female and two male, near-death and chained to the ground alongside hyenas. Devereux concluded in his report that they were “not sorry to get away from this cursed slave mart, where our patience has been sorely tried daily. Every morning many dhows, almost filled to sinking

⁶¹ Ibid., 98.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁴ Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters*, 252.

⁶⁵ Devereux, *A Cruise on the Gorgon*, 104.

with slaves, cross our bows – licensed slavers beyond our control.”⁶⁶ The rampant mistreatment of slaves and the continuation of slavery by other European nations were widely acknowledged, and contributed to an overall negative and frustrated approach to the abolition project.

The Interaction of British Officials with Slave Traders

The final section of this essay will examine the extent to which hostilities with the Zanzibari, Swahili and Arab populations led to acts of misconduct and piracy by members of the British Royal Navy. Sullivan and Devereux’s narratives diverge sharply on this issue, as Sullivan’s writings are mostly devoid of any reference to piratical or illegal practices by British officials. As such, this section will predominantly draw from Devereux’s journals.

Foremost, Devereux’s positive assessment of the Royal Navy’s work in abolishing the slave trade sometimes contradicts the sense of futility he also frequently expressed in his writing. Devereux opened his journal on 23 June 1861 by stating that

we are not to be over particular in the reading of antiquated slave treaties, but are to pass with the mythical coach-and-four through their many wide provisos. Nor are we tied down to certain parts of the station, but have the whole Mozambique to carry out our little piratical intentions, and do the John Bull to our heart’s content at the expense of “Jack Arab.”⁶⁷

Following the *Gorgon’s* September 1861 visit to Zanzibar, Devereux complained that British cruisers were being searched before being granted entry to the island. The Sultan of Zanzibar accused Royal Navy men of “plundering his subjects, taking from one some thousands of French dollars and from others various other valuables.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Devereux admitted that British crewmen were often in possession of “spoils” which they took from Arab and Swahili traders while searching vessels along the coast. He also hinted that “having undergone all the dangers and vicissitudes of boat-work, [the British crewman] thinks he should be allowed to keep all loots, whether money or jewelry, collected during the cruise – honestly or dishonestly.”⁶⁹ His writings warn, however, that “this irregular manner of looting is very disgraceful, and, unchecked, will lead to some dire results.”⁷⁰ Devereux also suggested that British seamen would sometimes assault or mistreat female slaves held on slave dhows:

Leaving his officer and a few conscientious men to clew up the capture, he sneaks below, breaks open doors and boxes,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

pounces upon money and jewelry, and to gain which he often perpetrates deeds that the man-vulture on the deadly field of battle would be ashamed of. The sex to whom he is naturally so gallant, is not only disrespected, but roughly handled.⁷¹

It remains unclear why Devereux's journals divulged this information about misconduct, while other primary materials have glossed over or ignored the described practices. Perhaps, since Devereux was simply an assistant paymaster and not a figure of authority, he felt more at ease recounting events truthfully, whereas those who left records from positions of authority chose not to reveal any facts detrimental to their character, or to the character of their ship's crew. Hostility and piracy in this context were bred, certainly, from the abolition project's lack of both organization and British naval resources in this region.

Based on the reports of Devereux, then, one may assume that the *Gorgon's* overall involvement in quelling the slave trade was minor. Devereux presents few, if any, instances when the crew was able to easily capture a slave dhow and safely rescue the slaves aboard without facing numerous, and often dangerous obstacles. Contrary to what one may expect given the portrait of never-ending hardship at sea that Devereux painted, his journals also include a section in praise of the Royal Navy's abolition project. Devereux asserted that the prices for slaves in Zanzibar had gone down significantly in the years since abolition squadrons took to the coast.⁷² As well, he proclaimed that "the very nests of slavery have been entirely blockaded by our boats, no end of dhows taken, and a right wholesome fear established."⁷³ While Devereux admitted that a decrease in slave-trafficking was only attainable with "great and unnecessary risk" on the part of British cruisers, he concluded that "it is a great pleasure to think that philanthropic old John Bull may yet proudly talk of the many millions of money, energy, and perseverance, he has expended in this truly Christian under-taking."⁷⁴ The "humanitarian" language here is striking when placed alongside the evident hostility and delinquency that also proliferated under the British flag in the name of abolition. Thus, Devereux's journals offer insight into the dual nature of abolitionism along the mid-nineteenth-century East African coastline: a project that combined humanitarian intentions with a form of banditry, in which compensation was not fairly doled out by a higher command, but dependent instead upon increasingly hostile relationships with Arab traders and local officials in Zanzibar.

Conclusion

The suppression of the slave trade by the British Royal Navy in this region was obstructed by the misinformation and lack of guidance given to Royal Navy

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷² This is true chiefly from the mid-1840s onwards.

⁷³ Devereux, *A Cruise on the Gorgon*, 114.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

crewmen. Existing treaties between British and Omani government from the 1840s onwards also acted as obstacles to the successful eradication of the slave trade. A lack of central command resulted in misconduct among Royal Navy officers, and a growing sense that abolition was a project in which success depended upon antagonistic relationships with slave traders, locals, Omani officials and other European agents. The Royal Navy crewmen discussed in this paper knew little about the state of slavery in East Africa prior to the 1870s. Inefficient methods for catching slave dhows and a lack of adequate manpower and material resources hindered the project greatly. Lacking discipline, morale and proper direction, Royal Navy crews destroyed dhows unjustifiably, allowed many slave traders to go unpunished, and caused enslaved adults and children to often re-enter bondage after being “freed” by British captains. These activities sit in sharp contrast with the, perhaps, better organized abolition project in the Atlantic Ocean; further comparisons between both worlds remain a critical next-step in British Empire historiography.

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