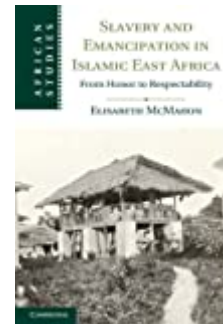


Elisabeth McMahon. *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 293 S. ISBN 978-1-107-02582-0.



Reviewed by Felicitas Becker

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E. McMahon: Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa

This detailed, absorbing and thought-provoking study is the most explicit attempt so far to address the aftermath of slavery in East Africa, a topic that has shown up in many previous studies but rarely been the main focus. Based on records from Pemba, it reinforces a point that already emerges from existing literature on the colonial social history of such places as Lamu, Mombasa and Unguja: namely, that the settlements between former owners and former slaves were always unstable, tense and shaped by very specific local conditions. In tracing out the Pemban case, McMahon greatly advances our understanding of these processes, while also opening up questions that await further investigation.

The author has to work with difficult material. Most of it consists in Anglophone records produced by missionaries and the colonial administration; two deeply interested parties in the process of emancipation. Interested, moreover, in ambivalent ways: notwithstanding their official commitment to abolition and emancipation, officials and missionaries shared Europeansâ dim views of ex-slavesâ moral and intellectual qualities. Avoiding confrontation or embarrassment was often more im-

portant to them than pursuing an anti-slavery agenda. McMahonâs work shows clearly how much individual slavesâ chances for emancipation depended on the commitment, or lack of it, of individual officials.

McMahonâs main claim is well signposted in the title of the book: after emancipation, the stark social hierarchies that divided (intrinsically honourable) slave-owners from (intrinsically dishonourable) slaves became negotiable. Over time, respectability, a social quality bestowed on an individual by their neighbours and kin, and constantly reproduced (or undermined) in social interaction, came to predominate over the older notion of aristocratic, dominating honour. This process is examined from different angles in each of the bookâs six chapters, though as most of them draw on different forms of legal dispute, the angles at times overlap.

Early court cases, reflecting slavesâ efforts to exploit the 1897 decree that only created a heavily circumscribed opportunity for emancipation, show how finely stratified the worlds of Pemban slaves were. Thus one slave woman, Mzuri Kwao, can be observed opposing her own resale at the hands of another slave woman, who was

acting for their male owner, partly on the grounds that she did not like where the proposed new owner would take her. In a situation where slaves facilitated the sale of slaves, and the sold person's acquiescence depended on the details of her new position, there is no clear dichotomy of slavery vs. freedom. Mzuri Kwao had to make her decisions amid the grey-in-grey of less than attractive options. However, another woman, whose name was not recorded, managed to prevent her own resale and obtain her freedom by persuading workers on the ship that was to take her away to report her predicament, and the ship's departure time, to the authorities. What she did next is not recorded.

The book depends very much on such glimpses of life stories to trace out the force-field in which emancipation took place. They are its most absorbing part and at the same time inevitably leave questions open. In particular, what selection biases exist in the court records that provide this material? It is hard to tell, but perhaps would merit further discussion.

At any rate, it is clear that while ex-owners lost control over their ex-slaves' labour fairly quickly, they remained influential in their lives as spouses, employers, patrons, judges or administrators, creditors and neighbours. This is very much what previous research would make you expect. But the way this unstable balance evolved here is markedly different from more urbanised and more Omani-dominated Unguja Island. McMahon shows, for instance, that unlike there, Mswahili did not become the identity of choice for an early generation of ex-slaves. Rather, they used more specific terms derived from their mainland origins or developing local affiliation. Meanwhile, the status economy that developed around clothing as a means to address up from slave origins remained comparatively modest. Though most ex-slaves remained poor, while ex-masters continued to live well beyond their reduced means, a remarkable number of ex-slaves managed to acquire small landholdings. Overall, the local Omani elite was divested of its privileges to a greater extent than in Unguja, as evident in the story of the island's greatest land- and slave-owner, who was imprisoned and exiled for the sadistic murder of two escapees.

But for an absorbing discussion of mortgage practices, McMahon treats the economic dynamics of the situation mostly in passing. Nevertheless, she conveys that the collective dependence of all Pembans on highly seasonal and labour intensive clove cultivation, creating a universal need for credit and a strong bargaining position for clove pickers, was an important levelling force. Ex-

owners could not retreat into urban life while designating their ex-slaves country bumpkins. It is a shame that agricultural labour and labour disputes are apparently largely absent from the archival record. The detailed information on moneylending and indebtedness, though, gives a vivid impression of the interdependence of Pembans' economic lives.

McMahon shows that despite the widespread use of written agreements, oral information was crucial in cases involving debt. Moreover, in defiance of official decrees on rules of evidence, personal reputation and the ability to recruit reputable witnesses remained a crucial resource in the pursuit of disputes. In other words, while respectability was less conspicuous than the elaborately-demonstrated honour of slave owners had been, it had very important effects.

The treatment of witchcraft is the part of the book that left this reader somewhat doubtful. McMahon takes the widespread practice of witchcraft (as distinct from a widespread practice of talking about witchcraft) as a given. Moreover, she accepts the existence of 'organised' witchcraft, covens that regularly practiced cannibalism. She also associates the practice of witchcraft closely with the exercise of power. Witchcraft, she argues, in a sense 'replaced' the power that slave owners lost with emancipation, while also allowing a minority of ex-slaves to 'work their way up' by becoming successful sorcerers. I wonder whether it is wise to take the sources (both oral and written) by their word to the extent the author does. Even where witch hunting and ordeals were not practiced, as in Pemba, witchcraft allegations and rumours had a life of their own, independent from the actual practice of witchcraft. Moreover, McMahon appears to subsume elements of healing and spirit possession under the heading of *uchawi* (Swahili for 'witchcraft'), which I suspect her sources would very much dispute.

There are other things to take issue with. The copy-editing could have been better, and the language is sometimes unclear. Some aspects of the story might have come out better if the book had not been structured so exclusively around different permutations of the transition from (hierarchical) honour to (more egalitarian) respectability. But all this notwithstanding, this book is carefully researched and argued, and adds considerably to our understanding of an under-researched and fascinating topic. It is to be hoped that historians of East Africa will use it to start a broader conversation on how the patterns and variations in post-emancipation settlements between owners and slaves came about.

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