

## FROM SLAVES TO COOLIES: TWO DOCUMENTS FROM THE NINETEENTH- CENTURY SOMALI COAST

LIDWIEN KAPTEIJNS AND JAY SPAULDING

This essay presents two letters written to the British Resident in Aden by leaders of the Majerteen, a community of Somalis who in 1884 inhabited the Horn of Africa between Bandar Ziyāda on the Gulf of Aden and Rās al-Khayl on the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent leaders of the Majerteen in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were ʿUthmān Maḥmūd, recognized by the British as Sultan of the Majerteen, and his cousin Yūsuf ʿAlī Maḥmūd, lord of the coastal settlement of ʿAlūla. The first of the letters offered here was written by the sultan's uncle Samantar ʿUthmān, and the second by the sultan himself; they date respectively from August and October 1884.<sup>2</sup>

The year 1884, which ushered in Egypt's withdrawal from Harar and the Somali coast, was a milestone in the European Scramble for Africa. Since 1877 Britain, reluctant to see the African coast opposite Aden occupied by other European powers, had formally recognized the Khedive's authority as far south as Rās Ḥafūn, and had clung to this legalistic illusion despite an increa-

1 Bandar Ziyāda lies at 11° 15" N.Lat. x 48° 58" E.Long.; Rās al-Khayl lies at 8° N.Lat. x 49° E.Long.

2 The letters were preserved in the Aden Residency Records kept in the India Office, London (R/20/A4A/14 ff. 412, 414). Few records of any sort from the Somali coast, let alone documents written by Somalis themselves, survive from the years preceding the colonial conquest. As L.P. Walsh noted in *Under The Flag and Somali Coast Stories*, London: Andrew Melrose, 233: 'It is sad to know that when the Somali Coast Administration was handed over to the Colonial Office [in 1905] these records and those in H.B.M.'s Consulate at Aden were destroyed. There are practically no records now existing of the period from 1884 to 1892.'

singly strong French presence in Obokh and Italian intrusions from Assab to Masawwa. Egypt's decision to withdraw created a diplomatic and political vacuum; within a year the British, French and Italians each laid the foundations of their respective protectorates over the African coasts of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In 1884 the British sent vice-consuls to Zeila, Berbera and Bulhar. While the western boundary to their sphere of interest was promptly and fiercely contested by the French, for the moment the eastern limits remained out of the spotlight and undefined.<sup>3</sup> There the Majerteen maintained *de facto* independence despite German commercial and diplomatic initiatives and half-hearted attempts by the British authorities in Aden to offer them protection; they continued to fly the Turco-Egyptian flag until 1889, when their leaders signed treaties with the Italians in return for stipends of 1,800 *Thalers*.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, however, the British had undertaken to negotiate an agreement of more limited scope. This was concluded on 31 March 1879, and both letters presented here referred to it.

The coast of the Majerteen was unusually dangerous to shipping; the French traveller Georges Révoil, who visited during the period 1878-80, reported that since 1877 no less than six steamships had foundered there.<sup>5</sup> The British, after a series of *ad hoc* arrangements with the Majerteen, decided to seek to negotiate a formal Anglo-Majerteen agreement in December 1878 when the steamer *Voltigem* was wrecked in bad weather off °Alūla. That part of the coast was under the authority of Yūsuf °Alī, whom the British considered to be 'a cousin and feudatory [vassal]' of Sultan °Uthmān.<sup>6</sup> The Somali plundered the cargo of the *Voltigem* after having fought off, they claimed, no less than thirty-four pearl-fishing vessels from Sur. As Yūsuf °Alī himself told the British, 'The Somalis also plundered a number of guns and some ammunition, but I did not prevent them, there being famine in the country. I could have been able to recover

from them (the Somalis) all that they plundered, but they were in a starving condition.' 'It is our custom,' he added, 'when any vessel is wrecked on our coast, we take for ourselves all that the vessel contains and do not wait for an answer from Aden. I have sold the shipwreck...' Having little choice but to put a good face to the situation, the British Resident concluded: 'The action taken by the Alulah Chief is that of an uncivilized ruler, and cannot be gauged [*sic*] by any civilized law, and hence any parallel in justice cannot be drawn. Superior force alone can be admitted as constituting right, and such reply to the Chief would be a simple solution of the difficulty, but I do not consider it politic, viewing the liability of future disasters on the Mijjerteyn Coast, to meet the present claim in this spirit.'<sup>8</sup> In the event, the Resident undertook to seek more satisfactory arrangements through negotiation, and he soon found the Majerteen leaders to be amenable to suasion.

The new pact concluded in the wake of the *Voltigem* disaster stipulated that the Majerteen would offer protection to wrecked ships and prevent them from being plundered; they would assist those on board to proceed to Aden; they would notify the British authorities at Aden immediately, and if so desired would help them to erect a beacon or lighthouse on the coast. In return, the Majerteen leaders would receive a yearly stipend of 360 *Thalers* and such salvage as they would be entitled to under British law as determined by the British Resident at Aden.<sup>9</sup> In light of the civil war between °Uthmān Maḥmūd and Yūsuf °Alī which erupted sporadically from late 1877 well into 1884, when Yūsuf °Alī decided to emigrate south to Hobyo (Obbia), it is noteworthy that both were listed as signatories to the treaty—°Uthmān Maḥmūd as 'Sultan of the Mijjerteyn tribe,' but Yūsuf °Alī merely as one of the seven approving elders mentioned by name. It would seem that the issue of shipwrecks, notably those of the *Mei-Kong* in 1877 and the *Voltigem* in 1878, was a major source of contention between the two leaders if not actually the cause of the break between them. Not only did Yūsuf °Alī claim theoretical authority

3 I.M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, London: Longman, 1980, 40-56; India Office L/PS/18, B17.

4 India Office R/20/A/4554, R/20/A/1171; Lewis, *Modern History*, 51.

5 Georges Révoil, *Voyages au Cap des Aromates (Afrique Orientale)*, Paris: E. Dentu, 1880, 174.

6 India Office L/PS/18, B3.

7 India Office R/20/A 512 (14.2.79).

8 *Ibid.* (Francis Loch, Resident, 31.2.79).

9 India Office L/PS/18, B3.



over wrecks off his part of the coast, it was the arms and ammunition his followers plundered from the *Voltigern* that enabled him to challenge °Uthmān Maḥmūd militarily.<sup>10</sup> That all was not well even at the signing of the treaty is evident from a British report of the formalities, which were conducted at °Uthmān Maḥmūd's headquarters of Marāya; Major George Goodfellow, it was said, had 'failed to settle certain internal feuds between the Mijjerteyn Chiefs.'<sup>11</sup> As is evident from the letters presented here, the Majerteen leaders set great store by the treaty. Perhaps they felt they had been recognized and 'protected' without giving up their autonomy; when the British did offer the Majerteen a protectorate, in February 1886 under very different circumstances, the Somali leaders replied that one treaty with the British was enough.<sup>12</sup>

In the two letters presented here both the sultan's uncle (August 1884) and then the sultan himself (October 1884) explicitly invoked the stipulations of the 1879 agreement. They asked the British authorities in Aden to return certain subjects (with their boat) who had been picked up on the open sea by a steamer bound for Aden. The British Resident immediately investigated the matter and discovered that the *Bokhara* of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company had indeed picked up nine men from an open boat in bad weather. The boat was abandoned and the men taken to Flint Island, where they underwent the customary quarantine procedures. They were slaves, and specifically Swahili slaves or 'Seedee' according to contemporary parlance, who had escaped from the Majerteen coastal settlement of Handa because of ill-treatment by their masters.<sup>13</sup> Since Sultan °Uthmān referred to the men as 'soldiers,' they may have served as bodyguards to the Majerteen lords. Révoil, during his years on the Majerteen coast (1878-1880), had attested to the hard circumstances of the 'Swahili' slaves there; he reported that they were considered 'more lowly than dogs.'<sup>14</sup> The French traveller, who may not have

10 Révoil, *Voyages*, 8, 175; India Office R/20/A 512.

11 India Office L/PS/18, B3.

12 India Office R/20/A/1171 (11.2.1886).

13 India Office R/20/A4A/14, ff. 403-19.

14 Georges Révoil, *Voyage au Pays Çomalis: Dix Mois à la Côte Orientale de l'Afrique: La Vallée du Darrar et le Cap Guardafui*, Paris: Challamel, 1888, 110-15.

been able to distinguish between mercenary and slave soldiers, believed that slaves, who were bought from Arab dhows sailing from Zanzibar, were not very numerous and constituted a luxury that few Somalis could afford.<sup>15</sup>

Although the authorities in Aden had the justified fear that their settlement might become a refuge for slaves from all over Arabia and East Africa, and despite the fact that in practice their policies toward runaway slaves was far from consistent, in this instance they decided to free the men.<sup>16</sup> The nine runaways were dismissed from Flint Island and given coolie passes, '(as they were today without means of subsistence), + have already obtained work.'<sup>17</sup> On 13 November 1884 the Resident wrote Sultan °Uthmān a firm reply: 'Be it known to you, o friend, that we have not got the sumbook [boat], and as the men referred to were slaves, they have been released. Hoping that you are in the enjoyment of excellent health...'<sup>18</sup>

The slaves from Handa thus received their freedom. The records do not report on these slaves' future as coolies, the free wage laborers who coaled the big steamers that put in at Aden. Yet it is worth noting that British administrators sometimes concluded that 'slaves may be good slaves but they make poor labourers, as they have to do labourers' work without the amenities in life to which a slave is accustomed.'<sup>19</sup> Some slaves considered coolie labor to be beneath their status; one is told, for example, of the 'Two slaves[who] demanded to be employed as Askaris [police-men or soldiers] and refused to work at Lalljee's saltworks as coolies.'<sup>20</sup> Yet given the steady stream of slaves who took refuge in Aden, the belief that 'town air makes free' appears to have been stronger than fear of physical hardships and crass exploitation.

15 *Ibid.*, 115. Révoil himself purchased the freedom of one male slave for 80 *Thalers*; the man was being punished for refusing to obey an order from his elderly and crippled master.

16 For an extended discussion see the present authors' forthcoming *Counsels of Despair: Voices of the Lower Orders of Colonial Aden*.

17 India Office R/20/A4A/14, ff. 403-404 (L.P. Walsh, July 1884).

18 India Office R/20/A4A/14, f. 419.

19 India Office R/20/A/1561 (28.8.37).

20 *Ibid.*



## Text I

قدوة الامرا<sup>21</sup> الكرام ونخبة النجباء الفخام سعادت كينج  
 صاحب المفخم اديم محروسا / وبعد المعروض على اعتابكم  
 الكريمه والمرفوع على عواطفكم / الرحيمه نعلمك من خصوص  
 ان بيننا شروط على نحننا<sup>22</sup> ان / وجدنا احد من رعيتكم  
 نحفضهم<sup>23</sup> ولم نشعر الا وبعض / من رعيتنا كانوا في الساعيه  
 ماشين ومركب من المراكب / جزع وراهم واخذهم في المركب فلت  
 الساعيه الذي<sup>24</sup> / كانوا فيها والان ندعي عليكم مرادنا  
 بالعسكر والساعيه / يكون حضورهم بين ايدينا على موجب  
 الشروط ونحننا<sup>25</sup> / عازمين السفر مع صالح عمر ومرادنا  
 وترخصنا نطلع معه / والجواب مطلوب سريعا هذا والسلام X  
 صحيح / سمتر عثمان / سنه ١٨٨٤ / ١٠ الأقسط

## Translation I

[To] the paragon of noble commanders, the cream of distinguished aristocrats, the honorable and eminent Mr. King, may he always be protected.<sup>26</sup> Thereafter: [This is] what we obediently submit to your honor and present to your kind attention. We inform you

21 Reading *al-umarāʾ* for *al-amr*.

22 Spelled as shown.

23 Spelled as shown.

24 Spelled as shown.

25 Spelled as shown.

26 Conjectural reading.

with regard to the fact that there exist between us stipulations that we, if we find any of your subjects, should protect them. It happened that some of our subjects were traveling by boat when a ship became concerned [as it came up] behind them and took them aboard. The boat they were in got away. Now we call on you, for we want the soldiers and the boat to be handed over to us in accordance with the stipulations [of the treaty]. We intend to travel with Ṣāliḥ ʿUmar, and we want you to give us permission to set out with him. A speedy reply is requested. This, and farewell. Samantar ʿUthmān. X [His mark is] valid. 15 August in the year 1884.

## Text II

من سلطان عثمان بن محمود الحمد لله وحده / الى قدوة  
 الامراء محبنا وصديقنا والى عدن برصاحب مرادنا احد الامرين  
 / الاول ابلاغ منا والثاني طار مننا عسكر<sup>27</sup> وشلوا<sup>28</sup> صنبوق  
 مرادنا انك ترسل لنا / العسكر<sup>29</sup> وصنبوق<sup>30</sup> الحيث نحمل  
 اصحابكم ومن شان سمتر عثمان اشكى منكم / ولكن المخابر  
 عند الاتفاق ووصل كتابك الذي خلعت عند يوسف وعرفنا ما  
 فيه / وواصل اليك من طرفنا محمد موسى واحمد سمتر عثمان  
 ومحمود شرمাকে وعمر اسماعيل / وموسى علي وبله علي  
 ومحمود شروع وجامع عبدي وعلي محمد وفاتح محمد /

27 Spelled as shown.

28 Spelled as shown.

29 Spelled as shown.

30 Spelled as shown.

ومحمد جامع ويوسف فاتح وشره محمد وديره محمد هذا  
 المذكورين واصلين / اليكم اطلقوا العسكر<sup>31</sup> وصنبوق<sup>32</sup> الحيث  
 بيننا العهود والمواثيق وتجهد لهم في / كل حال / والسلام  
 ويسلم عليكم قاضي الحاج ادريس محمود التاريخ يوم الجمعة /  
 ١١ في شهر المحرم / سنه ١٣٠٢

### Translation II

From Sultan °Uthmān b. Maḥmūd. Praise be to God alone. To the paragon of commanders, our beloved and our friend, the governor of Aden, kind sir. What we want is two things: First, to be in communication with you. Second, soldiers of ours disappeared taking a *ṣanbūq*. What we want is that you send the soldiers and [the] *ṣanbūq* to us, in as much as we protect your friends. As for Samatar °Uthmān, he has complained about you, but (we think that) negotiations will bring agreement. Your letter that you left with Yūsuf has arrived, and we have understood its contents. Coming to you from us are: Muḥammad Mūsā, Aḥmad Samatar °Uthmān, Muḥammad Sharmāke, °Umar Ismā'īl, Mūsā °Alī, Balla °Alī, Maḥmūd Shirwa°, Jāma° °Abdī, °Alī Muḥammad, Fātiḥ Muḥammad, Muḥammad Jāma°, Yūsuf Fātiḥ, Shirre Muḥammad and Dīriyya Muḥammad. These the aforementioned are coming to you. Release the soldiers and [the] *ṣanbūq* (to them), for between us are pacts and agreements. Do your best for them in every way. Farewell. The *qāḍī al-ḥājj* Idrīs Maḥmūd greets you. The date is Friday the 11th of the month of Muḥarram in the year 1302 [31 October 1884].

31 Spelled as shown.

32 Spelled as shown.