

## **The Life of the Red Sea Dhow: a cultural history of seaborne exploration in the Islamic world**

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‘Oh, these are big ships, we call them *kotia*; no wait! It looks similar but it is a bit smaller like *pathemar*. We used to see them off our beach when we were small’, was the answer I received from my father, who spent his childhood along the Konkan coast of India, when I showed him the cover image of this book—a boat with a flying lateen sail. These mysterious boats, identical looking by their sails, but different in their build and structure, are not only difficult to identify at a glance, particularly by an ‘outsider’, but ‘one finds oneself in a labyrinth of different names for the same type or the same name for different types’ as the author asserts.

Dionisius Agius, one of the leading scholars of Islamic material culture, takes his readers on a journey to understand the complex but iconic craft of the Indian Ocean commonly known as ‘dhow’, mostly through the eyes of the old sailors who worked and lived on them. Along with their memories and their firsthand experience, the author also used 18th- and 19th-century European traveller’s and survey accounts to understand the vital role the dhow played in the maritime landscape of the Red Sea. It is this ethnographic and ethnohistorical nature of the fieldwork that is the true essence of this book, which attempts not only to understand the dhow by its holistic approach, but also aims to save by documenting some important cultural memories, the voices of the Red Sea people themselves and their priceless experienced knowledge.

The book is divided into 18 short chapters, making it truly accessible to readers, as each chapter can be read independently, but they are related to each other and are presented cogently. In chs 1 and 2 Agius brings together 11 years of fieldwork conducted along the shores of the Red Sea and presents it to the public through his vast experience both of the language and the culture. In ch.3 he provides a geographic context to the study area, summarizing physical geography, climate, biodiversity and briefly discussing the main anchorages round the Red Sea. In ch. 4 Agius provides historical context by discussing the political and economic situation during the Early-Modern period, and its influence on maritime technology and communities of the Red Sea.

From chs 5 to 9 the main focus is on the dhow as a cultural object. Chapter 5 presents a general overview of the traditional wooden craft and its survival and continuity until the present, outlining how to recognize dhows from among the different types of vessel, especially in a culture that categorizes boats by their shape and size and not by their rigging, as is the case in the west. This forms the theme of ch. 6. Apart from describing different dhow types, the author also informs us about the different regions where such seagoing vessels were built both in the past and today in the Red Sea. What it takes to build a dhow is another topic discussed in this chapter—building techniques, and the types of skills and expertise required, including how such knowledge, experience, and skilled craftsmanship is passed on from one generation to the next. Agius also explains the different approaches adopted in the Red Sea region to build dhows, such as shell-first, frame first, and a hybrid approach, with exemplary evidence, and shows how skeleton-first

techniques (primarily Mediterranean boatbuilding techniques) would have been introduced into the Red Sea.

Chapter 7 is where the author brings to our attention four extinct dhows and endeavours to reconstruct their appearance with the help of pictorial, textual, linguistic, and oral information. This chapter would logically have been easier to read immediately after ch. 1 or as part of ch. 2. Nevertheless, in this chapter the author emphasizes how complicated it is to recognize dhows from among different names for the same type or the same name for a different type. Among these extinct types, he discovers that the most discussed boat-name among interviewees was *sanbuk*. The type and subtypes of *sanbuk* are addressed in ch. 8 wherein the issue of its identity, origin, construction and hull-design are discussed, enquiring whether the term *sanbuk* is used generally to describe a specific type of craft or as a generic term for all traditional sailing vessels.

The dhow is a product of the coastal landscape in which it is built. Agius, in ch. 9, endeavours to demonstrate how a boat-name connects it historically to a particular place and serves as a marker of cultural identity for the people who build and sail it. However, the title of this chapter, ‘The Dhow Landscape: the northern and southern Red Sea’, is ambiguous, giving the false impression that there are two main distinct dhow landscapes—the southern and northern regions of the Red Sea. However, the author makes it very clear in the text that the landscape of the Red Sea includes an ‘impressive typology of dhow types’ found across the different coastal regions. Chapter 10 is devoted to shipboard organization and ch. 11 to shipboard life. In the former, the author describes the role of the sea captain, shipmates, navigators, and sailors on board dhows along with the description of their traditional working clothes. In the latter, however, the author looks at some of the social aspects of life at sea, such as communal mealtimes and entertainment during long-distance voyages.

The Red Sea is generally perceived as dangerous to navigate. In ch. 12 Agius argues that all seas are dangerous, and that with the right vessel, the right configuration of sail and the right skills, knowledge, experience, and determination any sea could be navigated. This is an influential chapter that confronts previous thinking about the Red Sea. The author not only presents the dangers faced by sailors on the Red Sea, such as storms, coral reefs, piracy, human error and overlaid cargo, but also explains how local sailors overcame such dangers and navigated the so-called dangerous sea with their experience, skills, and knowledge without any chart or navigational instrument. The author provides real-time examples gleaned from travellers’ accounts and sailors themselves, claiming that ‘the number of voyages far outweighs the number of shipwrecks’.

What types of sails were/are used, how they were made, what raw material was used and how different sail types performed in different wind conditions, is the focus of ch. 13. It also includes descriptive accounts of sailing techniques, routes, prevailing wind-patterns, and their use by local navigators. This chapter would have been more robust if backed up by new scientific data on regional winds, but otherwise the topic is well addressed. Nevertheless, in this chapter, it is interesting to note how local sailors maintain their navigational knowledge and skills. The author asserts he witnessed that his subjects were unaware of any navigational theory credited to the 15th-century author Ahmad Ibn Majid. Local sailors, the author says, mainly relied on ‘the traditional method of memorizing nautical poems containing information about winds and currents, sailing

distances and landmarks, and that members of the older generation are still able to recite some of the verse'. The author's effort to record some of these poems in detail is very much appreciated.

The highlights of ch. 14 include the significant role dhows played in transporting goods from different regions of the Red Sea and the horn of Africa, the capacity of dhows, and commodities traded and exported. Some sections in this chapter are repeated from the previous chapter on land-routes and wind-patterns. Chapter 15 focuses on fishing and shell collecting, pearl-diving activities, and fishing seasons, and ch. 16 on slave-trafficking, arms-dealing and slave-routes. This chapter is interesting, tackling a controversial topic—slavery—and how slavery in the Red Sea region differs significantly from that which transported millions of Africans to America. Agius also discusses stories related to smuggling and introduces to the readers the dhow-type that was used for such purposes, called *zaruk*, which 'were so fast sailed in any wind that the English frigates and brigs could seldom catch them'.

Chapter 17 presents exemplary evidence about local sailors' belief in evil spirits and what they did to appease such spirits by telling stories heard from the sailors themselves, and explains the intimate relationships of the people of the Red Sea with the natural environment, the spirit world and the supernatural. The concluding chapter summarizes how cultural identities of different coastal communities of the Red Sea have been integrated in the past through the concept of 'open sea' and by speaking a 'maritime Arabic *lingua franca*'. Furthermore, Agius discusses how maritime identity of the past continues to survive today through such things as festivals, old and modern buildings (some of which include re used boat-timbers), place-names such as *Bir as-Sawa'I* ('well of the dhow'), paintings found on public buildings and restaurants, and monuments erected on roundabout and roadsides. He highlights the fact that without any proper mechanism of transmission, the maritime past is fast disappearing in front of the local communities of the Red Sea. We should be grateful to the author for managing to salvage some priceless memories by documenting the voices of the Red Sea people.

In summary, the strength of this book is its holistic approach and the wealth of invaluable information gathered by interviewing 166 people of various groups and ages. For the first time the dhow which was previously mainly seen as a techno-functional and economic entity, is considered within a much wider cultural context. By combining a variety of sources along with several seasons of ethnographic fieldwork, the author has made it clear that the dhow has played a unique and a significant role enabling people to inhabit the coastline and navigate the Red Sea spreading ideas, language, ritual, and oral traditions. It would have been nice to see supplementary transcripts of interviews included in the book, to have helped future researchers. Nonetheless, the descriptive account of those old sailors who spent their life on trading dhows, the glossary describing local maritime terminologies, appendices with the list of people interviewed, and bibliography makes this book an archive and a significant source for students, researchers, and all those interested in the maritime cultures of the Red Sea and beyond.

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