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# THE GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME IV, NO. 4

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# THE GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE

Editor

Michael Huxley

The founders of THE GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE have undertaken the legal obligation to assign one half of all profits which the Magazine earns to a fund for the advancement of exploration and research, and the promotion of geographical knowledge. This fund will be administered by a Board of Trustees, whose Chairman will be the President of the Royal Geographical Society

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# Seamen of the Indian Ocean

by DENIS PALMER

*Few Europeans realize, when they speak of 'the Moslem world', that it includes within its orbit most of the native maritime peoples of the Indian Ocean, from Tanganyika to the Malay Archipelago. Hence those commercial and family connections which, as Miss Freya Stark mentioned in our December number, unite places so far distant as the Hadhramaut and Singapore. Mr Palmer not only describes how these connections came to be established, but is able from personal experience to relate and compare the characteristics of the Moslem navigators in various parts of the Indian Ocean*

FOR several thousand years now the picturesque slow-sailing dhows have been a familiar sight in the Indian Ocean. When the ancient Britons were launching their flimsy coracles, Phoenician ships of dhow design chartered by King Solomon were rounding Cape Guardafui. For centuries a large fleet of dhows from Cutch and the Persian Gulf has crossed on the wings of the north-east monsoon to trade with the peoples of the East African littoral. They bring with them Persian carpets, Arab chests, dates, spices and dried shark flesh, and, after disposing of this cargo and refitting and careening their craft, return with the south-west monsoon, mostly laden with grain.

Today this fleet, although of diminished size, still undertakes its yearly voyage across the seas. It carries almost the same cargoes; the character of its seamen remains unchanged and the design of its ships has hardly altered. What a fascinating study is this Indian Ocean with its living links with remote antiquity! And how few Europeans know anything of the history of its seafarers, or realise that by taking a trip in an Arab dhow they can obtain an insight into the lives of Eastern sailors of the age of Hiram.

The first time that I saw an Arab dhow stealing out of Mombasa harbour in the red glow of early morning, my imagination was fired. I watched her Arab and Swahili sailors dip their crudely-carven oars into the water until, passing Fort Jesus (built by the Portuguese), they felt the first ocean air-currents, and hoisted the

tattered three-cornered sail. Then, like a gigantic sea-bird, the dhow skimmed away, dipping her nose in the mirror-like sea, flinging up millions of glittering diamonds.

Since that day I have undertaken many voyages in these primitive ships and learned to appreciate the capabilities of their sturdy sailors. Before describing some of my experiences while living aboard Arab dhows and other native craft, I will first swiftly survey the varied fleets and nationalities that have made the routes across the Indian Ocean their highway.

Although the Egyptians never maintained a permanent fleet in the Red Sea, they repeatedly tried at different periods to bring themselves into contact with southern Arabia and the eastern horn of Somaliland, the countries that produced the spices they used so much and valued so highly. Seanchkara, the last king of the eleventh dynasty, commissioned Henu to fit out an expedition from Coptos to 'Punt'. A similar task was entrusted to the fleet of Queen Halkephut about 1490 B.C. The Egyptians must certainly be regarded as the earliest recorded navigators of the Indian Ocean.

India with her enormous wealth was always an irresistible magnet luring the Near Eastern races and later the Europeans to brave those then uncharted wastes. The first attempts at direct maritime communication with India from the west were undoubtedly made by the Phoenicians, whose trading ventures to the north-west Indian Ocean date back to the 2nd

millennium B.C. Even at the time when Hiram and Solomon sent to Ophir from Elath, the route to that mysterious district of gold had long been known and used.

From the reign of King David the Hebrews, in spite of the fact that they were not a maritime race, recognized the inestimable value of easy access to the Indian Ocean, and the defence of Edom, with its port of Elath in the Gulf of Akaba, was always one of the most important functions of the princes of Judah. After 730 B.C., the Hebrews can no longer be reckoned a naval power and their fleets finally disappeared altogether.

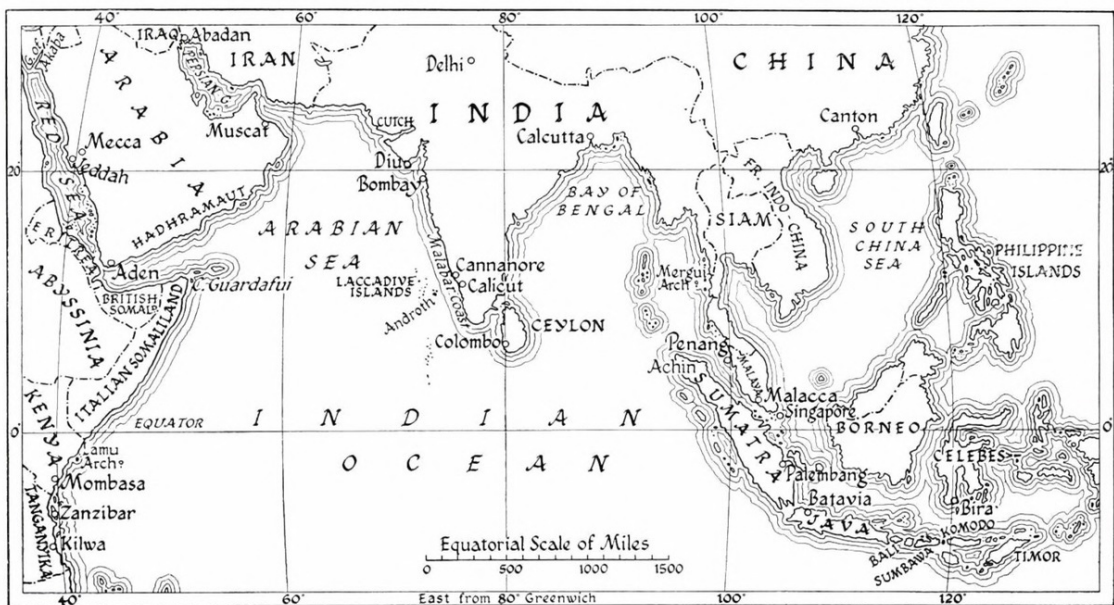
The Phoenicians, unlike the Hebrews, did not covet political greatness but only desired to be left alone to trade; they became past masters in the art of attaining their goal not by opposing the enemy but by utilizing him. They used both the Hebrews and the Egyptians to further their trading expeditions, the wide range of which—from Britain to Ceylon—testifies to the skill and boldness of their navigators.

Up to this time the trading had mainly been coastal, cargo being carried only for a limited distance by the sailors of each

region, and then picked up by someone else. No one nation had as yet organized maritime communications direct across the whole ocean.

After the conquests of Alexander, however, when India became widely known to the West, communications were carried on for over a thousand years direct between that country and Alexandria. In 30 B.C., when Egypt was proclaimed a Roman province, a further stage in the organization of commerce with India was reached. The way thither now lay open to an exceptionally enterprising power and instead of indulging in erratic expeditions the Romans began to make use of the monsoons.

The discovery of this phenomenon, the secret of which had long been closely guarded by the East, was made in about the middle of the 1st century A.D., supposedly by the Greek navigator Hippalus. This knowledge, although it made possible real voyaging across the Indian Ocean, forced those who used it to adopt a regulated system of trading. It meant that their fleets had to arrive and depart with the changing monsoons at roughly the same time each year. The Romans sent



## SEAMEN OF THE INDIAN OCEAN



*W. H. Stevens*

*Dhows 'stealing out of Mombasa harbour in the early morning'. The two on the left are of the M'tepe type (see page 241): that on the right hails from the Persian Gulf*

ships to Ceylon, Malacca and China, most likely to Canton.

After A.D. 250, Roman vessels ceased appearing in Chinese waters and the Chinese, afraid of losing their valuable trade connections with the West, started sending their own junks for longer distances. In the 4th century A.D., they were in Penang, reaching Ceylon towards the end of that century and, later, the Persian Gulf and various East African ports. Part of this trade was shared with the Chinese by the Malays. From the 4th century on, the Græco-Roman seamen were slowly ousted by races which, although long settled on the borders of the Indian Ocean, had only just learned to make use of it.

Indians, Arabs and Persians all started sending ships across to East Africa, but for a long while the Persians had by far the greatest proportion of this trade, and easily gained complete monopoly of the short

route across the mouth of the Persian Gulf. These three races also sent their vessels to Colombo where they received the wares brought by the Chinese junks: silk, aloes and sandalwood.

A new force was now coming into power which eventually affected every country whose shores are washed by the Indian Ocean. A few years after the death of Mohammed in A.D. 632 his flag and faith were borne to the Mediterranean and as far east as the Pacific. By contrast with the well-known historical events which marked the militant advance of Islam westwards, there is little record of its progress eastwards along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. The process seems, in the main, to have been one of peaceful infiltration: certainly Arab sailors and merchants first introduced it to Achin and Palembang in Sumatra and, much later, to Java. There is no evidence to suggest that they



Oscar Marcus

*The triangular 'lateen' sails of the Arab dhows (here seen at Jeddah) are familiar throughout the Indian Ocean*

## SEAMEN OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

founded colonies, but undoubtedly many individual Arabs from Mecca, Muscat and the Hadhramaut were very early established in the principal ports of the East Indian archipelago where they exercised considerable influence on the destinies of the natives.

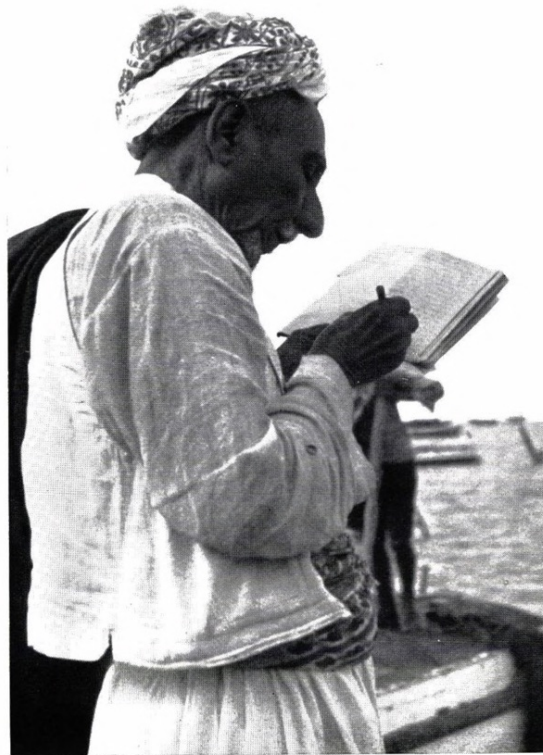
Wherever the Arabs penetrated, in fact, they converted the original inhabitants to the True Faith and effected remarkable changes in their customs, life and thought. They often intermarried with the natives, producing in time a new race. Such are the Swahilis of Zanzibar and Kenya and the Moplabs of the Malabar Coast of India. By the middle of the 8th century the Arabs had sailed round the coasts of India to Malaya, Java, Siam and China. Until nearly the end of the 15th century, they remained undisputed masters of the sea trade with the East, establishing trading centres wherever they touched.

The next great transformation was when Vasco da Gama in 1498 made his famous voyage to Calicut, which eventually gave the Portuguese practical control over the whole Indian Ocean. For more than a century they were supreme, till the year 1650, when the Dutch overcame them on sea, and on land the coastal tribes of south-eastern Arabia drove them out of Muscat. The Arabs then began to assemble a great fleet at Muscat, composed largely of square-rigged ships of European design. With these they harried the Persian shores and after an interval of twenty years sailed across the Arabian Sea and sacked the Portuguese town of Diu. By 1700 the Arabs were as free of the Indian Ocean as the Portuguese had been in 1600, and not until the 19th century, when Great Britain put a stop to the slave trade, was there any interference with the Arab seamen.

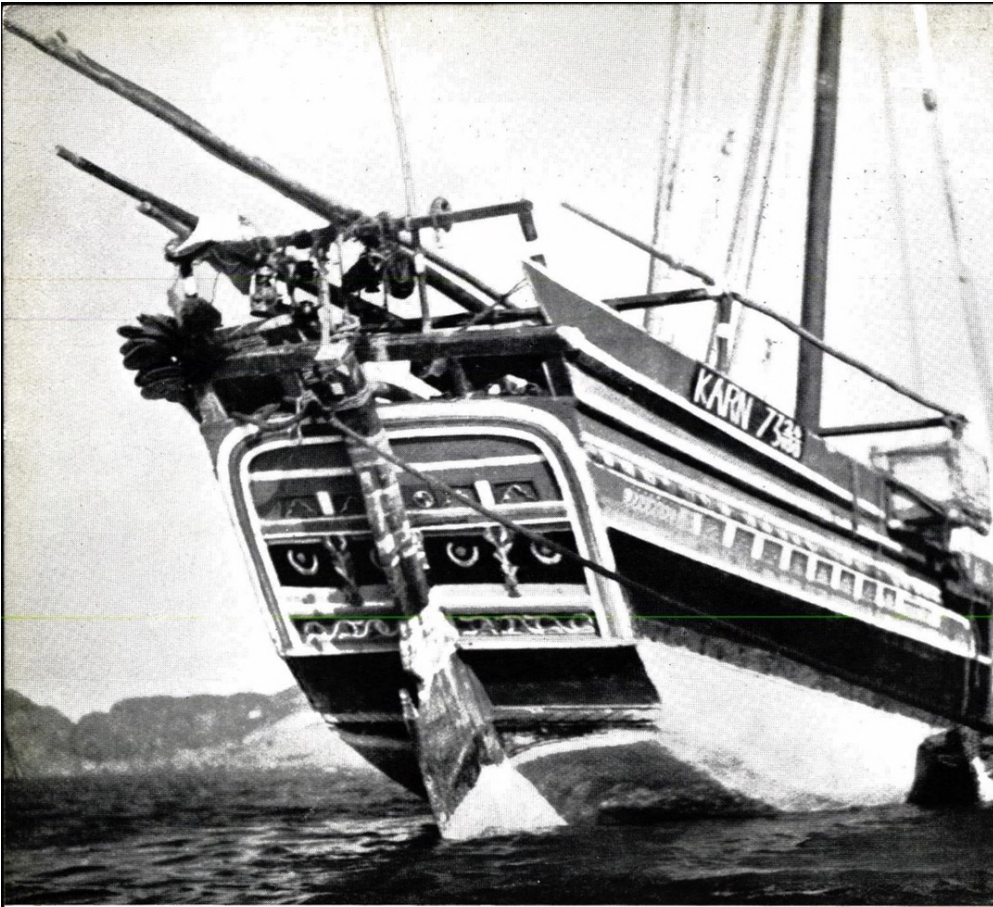
Today, when the *Pax Britannica* has long prevailed over the seas and coasts which they frequent, the Arabs peaceably carry on their trading ventures by dhow as of ancient time. All countries bordering the Indian Ocean are familiar with their lateen-

sailed craft, and the coast dwellers of these lands include a large proportion of Mohammedans. Thus the Indian Ocean is surrounded by a vast, unorganized but extremely potent Moslem culture.

Right round the Arabian peninsula from Akaba and Jeddah on the west, past Aden and Muscat to Abadan and Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf, and all down the north-west coast of India, the Arab dhows ply their busy commerce. They intrude into tiny East African ports everywhere from the Red Sea past Cape Guardafui in the north to Kilwa in southern Tanganyika. You see them in Malayan harbours and in the Dutch East Indies. Their historic trading takes them up creeks and inlets where no steam vessel



*Oscar Marcus*  
A dhow-owner of Jeddah keeps his tally: dates, carpets, dried fish, perhaps, to be exchanged for grain at Mombasa and cloves at Zanzibar



T. Hickinbotham

W. H. Stevens

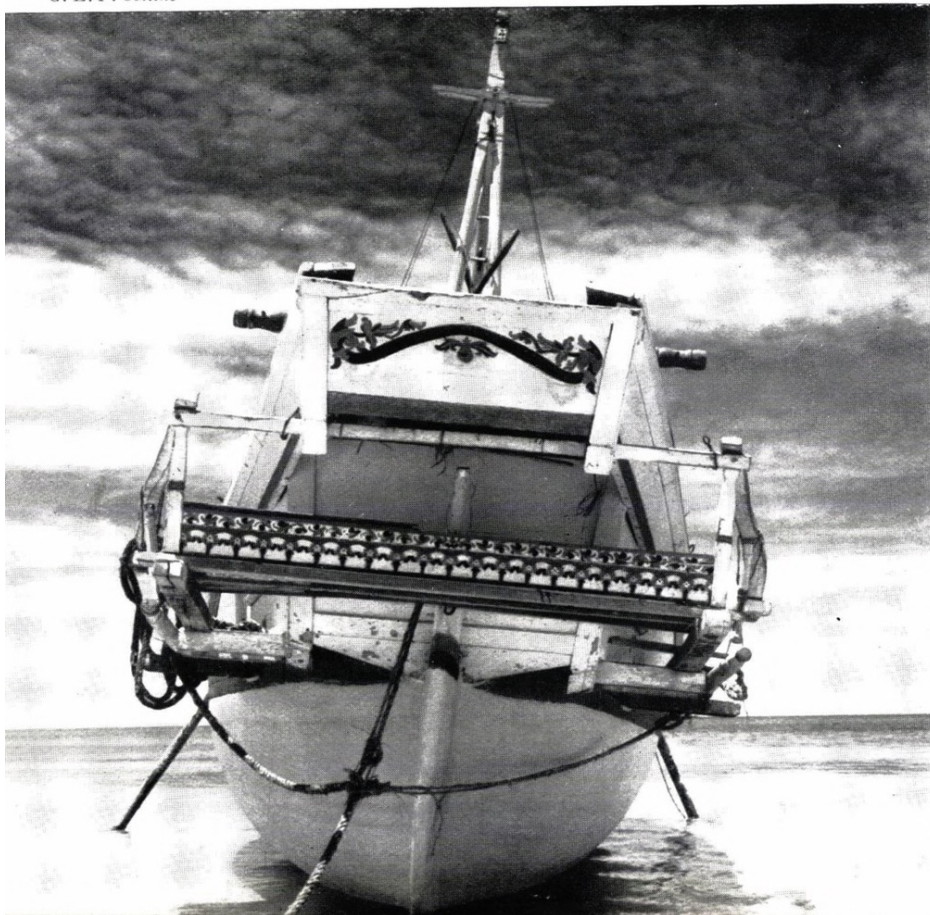
*The true Arab sea-going dhow is a fast, able ship, of as much as 200 or even 300 tons' burden. Though there are local differences of detail, these vessels vary little as a class: great beam and a decorated poop are among their chief external characteristics. (Above) A dhow built at Makalla in the Hadhramaut; (right) another from the Persian Gulf, at Mombasa, with stern windows reminiscent of a long-vanished European style*





G. E. P. Collins

P. J. van Baarda



*The corresponding vessels of the Malay archipelago go by the generic name of prahus. A deep-sea merchantman in Old Batavia harbour (above) carries on her starboard bow a modern iron anchor, and on her port bow an old wooden grapnel. At Bira in Celebes may be seen (left) a design partly copied from Portuguese ships 400 years ago. Note the steering gallery: the two rudders are lashed to heavy beams on each quarter*



Denis Palmer

*On a dhow bound for Lamu. The sailors of the East African coast are mainly Swahili, of mixed Arab and African descent*

can go, or would consider it worth while to go, ferreting what cargo they can. A rough estimate of the quantity of cargo still being carried by dhow can be obtained from the fact that on an average the ports of Kenya alone record over 7000 dhow entrances and departures per annum.

My first voyage was from Mombasa to the Lamu Archipelago, one hundred and thirty miles farther north. Abdul Salim, an Arab wood-seller, kindly introduced me to a dhow captain, a typical dark-bearded Arab seaman with courteous manners and a remarkable knowledge of the sea inherited from generations of sailor ancestors. His dhow, the *Faza*, owned by an Indian, was typical of hundreds of other coasting craft. The single mast was raked sternwards to facilitate going about when the long slender lateen sail has to be lowered

and passed round it, again to be hoisted as the vessel turns off on the new tack.

The freeboard was so low that I feared the slightest sea would swamp us, but to counteract this defect woven coir matting about eighteen inches high was fixed right round the sides from stem to stern. This coir bulwark is never put up till after the loading is finished, and although it prevents spray from continually soaking cargo and crew, is not of much value in really dirty weather.

On boarding the *Faza* I noticed that it had been heavily overladen and remembered that this was one of the reasons why Europeans are not keen on sending goods by dhow. For it is a common occurrence for portions of their cargo to be washed overboard. Sacks of rice and bales of matting were piled haphazardly one upon the

other; sacks of grain, mangrove poles, cotton piece-goods and dried fish were all carelessly mixed together. There was no accommodation for the crew or passengers and we had to scoop for ourselves a nest among the cargo.

After a few hours at sea I realised that the stories I had heard of dhow discomforts were not exaggerated. Anyone who can withstand their sickening smells and treacherous gait is a true sailor. The equatorial sun blazed down upon us and there was no shelter from it. The sea gleamed like polished metal and pained my eyes. Flying-fish spun across our bows to disappear once more in their element.

About midday the Arab sailors had their first meal. A large bowl of rice prepared by a Swahili cook was placed in their midst and they squatted round eagerly to clutch out the usual large handfuls. But before they started eating, one of their number came across and asked me to join them. I accepted, for these seamen possess simple natures and nothing upsets them more than when a proffered kindness is refused. On all my trips by dhow I do not remember one instance when their Mohammedan crews have started a meal without first offering their food to me. Mohammed himself said that his followers should always share their dates and rice with strangers and eat together out of a communal bowl for good fellowship.

After the rice was finished a large mug of coffee was passed round from mouth to mouth, and again I had the honour of being the first to partake. After doing so I was careful to hand the mug to the next Arab with my right hand, for as the left hand is always used by these people for certain ablutions they are scrupulously careful to offer food and gifts with their right.

Hours later, when eerie shadows enveloped the *Faza* like a soft grey mantle and when the lateen sail was flapping disconsolately in the night breeze, the captain

produced a soiled copy of the Koran and started to chant the chapters in a loud monotonous voice. Favourite verses he repeated over and over again, the crew and the Swahili passengers making a subdued chorus. This went on for over an hour. Then, before composing himself for a few hours' sleep, the captain offered up a short prayer asking for fine weather and good winds.

All through the night the helmsman sang steadily in the sing-song Arab fashion, his voice sometimes becoming lost in the wind, at other times rising to a dismal wail. The purpose of this continual sound was to scare away the evil demons that haunt the ocean during the dark hours.

For two days and nights we cruised along the Kenya coast, bound for mysterious Lamu Island, which as well as possessing some Persian ruins is famous for the great beauty of its women. When the wind dropped, the crew set up a curious kind of shrill whistling to attract it to them. This method of luring a breeze is a very ancient one and, as they continue doing it off and on until the wind rises, always succeeds.

As we drew close to Lamu the crew seemed to go mad. Drums were got out and loudly beaten, long poles were pounded on the deck, and others banged on empty tins with sticks. Arab seamen nearly always make this tremendous din when entering a new port, in order to attract attention. They are amazingly vain in a childish way and dislike dropping anchor in a harbour unless watched by a crowd from shore. In this case, the sailors were particularly keen to attract notice, as they were desirous of warning the Lamu girls of their arrival.

At Lamu I made my first acquaintance with a type of dhow called the *M'tepe*, and in one of them I sailed up a winding creek to view some of the Persian ruins. The *M'tepes*, which are largely built at Lamu, have their side-planking sewn to the skeleton vessel's frame by hand. They are quite seaworthy, but tend to ship water. Their design is exceedingly old and has not



*Denis Palmer*

*Another variant of the dhow is the odom, plying between the Laccadive Islands and the Malabar coast of India, where the descendants of Arab traders and Hindus are known as Moplahs*



*Denis Palmer*

*Of fine physique, the Moplah sailors are famed for their Moslem piety*



*The perfectly curved little bay of Androth, chief island of the Laccadives. In the background can be seen the sheds in which the odoms are stored when not in use*

*Denis Palmer*



*Sliding an odom onto palm-wood runners, ready for hauling up the beach*

*Denis Palmer*

changed at all. In A.D. 60 a Greek sailor, while visiting Zanzibar, wrote in his log-book: 'In this place are sewn boats.' They came from Lamu. It was then, and is today, one of the chief dhow-building centres on the East African coast.

The old Chinese junks used to call at this island and one can presume that the hardy junk seamen made themselves thoroughly at home, because many of the Lamu-ites have high cheek-bones and slanting almond eyes. The keenness of Lamu boys for kite-flying may also be traceable to

them. Pieces of Chinese pottery are often dug up on the beach.

I eventually returned to Mombasa in a larger craft which was heavily laden with copra. When we had been waiting at Lamu for several days for a favourable wind to allow us to tack down the narrow creek, the day that it chose to veer round in the right direction happened to be a Friday. The captain and the whole crew refused to sail, for Friday is the Moham-medan day of rest and rarely does a dhow put to sea on that day.



Denis Palmer

*In the Mergui Archipelago are found the Selungs or sea-gypsies, expert fishermen, who live almost permanently afloat. Here they have built themselves an encampment on stilts over the water*

## SEAMEN OF THE INDIAN OCEAN



*Denis Palmer*

*A fleet of fishing-canoes among the Mergui islands, off the coast of Lower Burma. The local fishermen sell pearls and edible birds' nests to the Chinese junks that visit the islands*

The most interesting dhows seen in Mombasa are those of the fleet that every year comes from Cutch and the Persian Gulf with the north-east monsoon. These ocean-goers possess exquisitely carved, highly built-up poops and most of them are two-masters. Some of them reach nearly three hundred tons, while the smallest of the coasting dhows are only about twenty tons.

Somewhat similar in general appearance to the vessels from the Persian Gulf are the fleet of dhows known as *odoms* which ply between the Laccadive Islands and the Malabar Coast of India. They are usually painted black and white, and have fantastic designs wrought on their castle-like sterns. Their crews are Moplabs, a people of mixed Hindu and Arab descent, and are fine physical specimens. The Moplabs of the Laccadive Islands are known all over the East for their great piety and know-

ledge of the Koran, and their wise men lecture as far away as Singapore.

When I met Pazyagam Thangal Koya, captain-owner of a large *odom* in Calicut, and arranged that he should take me to Androth, chief island of the Laccadives, I was not surprised when he first demanded forty-five rupees. By then I knew the temperament of these Eastern seamen. In nearly every case they ask for a large sum of money for the passage and then when the voyage is completed refuse to accept a penny. You have only to treat them with sympathy and understanding and they become your firm friend. I always felt absolutely safe when trusting to their beneficence.

When I boarded Thangal Koya's *odom* I was told that we first had to sail fifty miles north to Cannanore, as he desired to recite a special prayer in the big mosque

there. There was no cargo to pick up at this port, but both he and his Moplah sailors were anxious to pray in the mosque! The coral Laccadives are such low-lying specks, their highest land-point being less than ten feet above sea-level, that the crews of the *odoms* have a quaint custom to ensure that the islands are not passed by mistake. On nearing their vicinity, about every fifteen minutes a different sailor climbs the tapering mast and scans the seas for sign of land; and the first man who sights the island shores is given a present by everyone aboard.

In most places the dhows when not in use are left anchored in the harbour or up some sheltered creek, but in the Laccadives, where there is not much protection from storms, they are hauled from the lagoon and kept in large thatched sheds.

On the eastern side of the Indian Ocean

the seamen tend to use a lighter type of craft, the *prahu*, which more often has rectangular sails than three-cornered, as on the western side. In such a boat I sailed amongst the labyrinths of the Mergui Archipelago looking for Selungs, or sea-gypsies, those curious people who live almost permanently afloat, rarely staying ashore for more than a day or two at a time. Chinese junks are sometimes seen in these islands, either pearling or searching for the birds' nests from which the Chinese make their favourite soup.

Another craft used in the Malay Archipelago is a small outrigger *prahu*, which floats so low in the water that in the distance it has the appearance of a log raft. In one of these I sailed from Benoa in Bali to the tiny neighbouring islet of Poela Serangan. The Balinese sailors also whistled when the wind failed.



G. E. P. Collins

*Sailors' sons at Bira in Celebes with their model prahus, some carrying triangular 'lateen' sails, others square-rigged like the Portuguese caravels from which a local design derives*



*Bira prahus in full sail*

*G. E. P. Collins*