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Beyond “Islamic Slavery”. The Gulf Pearl Divers Between the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries as a Case Study

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Abstract
This paper aims to establish an adequate analysis framework for the *salafiyya*, a form of debt bondage used in the early 20th-century Arabian side of the Gulf to recruit seamen for the thriving pearling industry. As it will be argued, this system is part of a broader spectrum of working conditions between slavery and free labor, whose correct analysis requires a shift from clear-cut categories and generalizations, including the “Islamic slavery” framework. Due to its nature, the *salafiyya* could be regarded as a local response to two main issues: a region-wide demand for manpower after the abolition of the slave trade and a global-wide demand for exotic products. The definition of a proper context of analysis trespasses the borders of the area studies and adopts a three-layer perspective, considering local, regional, and global factors. The focus of the intervention should be on the social, cultural, and economic specificities that influenced the development of this form of bondage, avoiding parallelisms with other forms of slavery and quasi-slavery. This perspective is also necessary in order to filter the overgeneralizations and prejudicial perspectives found in the main sources available, namely the British archival records. Finally, it allows us to highlight the complex system of dependency established by the pearling industry.

Keywords
salafiyya / pearls / Gulf / debt bondage / slavery

1 - An “Islamic” Slavery?

The academic debate on the most suitable approach for the study of slavery is still open (Miers 2003:1-16; Cameron & Lenski 2018:1-14; Pargas & Roşu 2018:1-9). So far, scholars have not agreed on a universal analysis framework. In particular, those focusing their research on non-Western societies expressed dissatisfaction with models considering the Atlantic experience as the quintessential slavery. Such perspectives have been criticized for being excessively Eurocentric, simplistic, and unable to detect the peculiarities of each place and epoch (Cameron & Lenski 2018:12-13). In particular, the studies of slavery in the *dār al-Islām* suffer from an acute tendency to generalize.

In his book *The Indian Ocean*, Michael Pearson (2003:80) blames orientalist scholars for having developed the idea of a "pure" Islam based exclusively on the Quran, the Sunna, and the Five Pillars. The result is an excessively generic narrative regarding Islam as monolithic and immutable and Muslim people as a shapeless mass thinking and acting in the same fashion throughout history. Concerning slavery, especially after 09/11 and other tragic events that struck parts of the Muslim world, a number of scholars asserted that trading and owing other human beings is a typical and perpetual feature of Islam (Hopper 2015:32-33). Instances of such a tendency can be found in the works by Bernard Freamon and Ehud Toledano. In the compelling text *Possessed by the Right* Hand, the former aims to frame slavery as an intrinsically Islamic institution, attempting to connect the different forms of bondage and dependency documented throughout history within the *dār al-Islām* with the crimes of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Daesh (Freamon 2019:3). The latter goes further by arguing that Muslim societies were unable to conceive an abolitionist discourse without an European intervention precisely because of their religion. However, Toledano seems to be quite confused about the extension of these societies, as he considers Zanzibar as part of the Ottoman Empire (Toledano 2018:366-369).

In response to this attitude, scholars such as Abdul Sheriff (2005:139; 2018:246) and Henri Médard (2013:49) reject the idea of Islam as a framework to explain forms of large-scale slavery, as well as the term "Islamic slavery" itself. In her book *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran*, 1800-1929, Behaz Mirzai criticizes Bernard Lewis and the scholars quoting him for confusing the religion and the society where such religion is practiced. Mirzai invites searching each Muslim society's political, economic, and cultural specificities before analyzing the different forms of slavery practiced within it (Mirzai 2017:21). Certain practices, while common to the entire *dār al-Islām*, evolved in peculiar ways according to some specific conditions.

Mirzai's approach is particularly suitable for the case study proposed in this paper. An analysis of the relationship between religion and slavery might be useful. Considering Islam gave the institution a legal basis, the concrete forms of bondage do not stem from religious prescriptions; rather, they result from circumstances and necessities of a political, social, and economic nature. Each of these instances requires the definition of its own spatiality and temporality. Failing to consider these peculiarities leads to the overgeneralization mentioned above.

2 - A Framework for the *Salafiyya*.

This paper focuses on the *salafiyya* system, a peculiar form of debt bondage spread between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries on the Western coast of the Gulf[1] (Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the seven shaykhdoms currently known as the United Arab Emirates) for the employment of pearl divers. In particular, it aims to define the correct framework of analysis for this phenomenon by detecting its peculiarities and rejecting the concept of "Islamic slavery".

Due to the shortage of contemporary sources in Arabic, the main sources on the *salafiyya* are the archival documents from the India Office Records from the British officials stationed in several Gulf port towns. These reports, memoranda, and letters are a fundamental resource for scholars but are also full of prejudices, generalizations, and even mistakes. For instance, British officials tended to label as African any dark-skinned individual, regardless of their actual origin (*File 5/20*:7r-9v). One possible way to filter the British point of view and avoid their errors is contextualizing these sources and the information they provided by inserting them into a wider regional and global context while considering the local specificities of the societies in question.

The pre-oil Arab side of the Gulf struggled to find its own place in historiography. From a strictly geographical point of view it is part of the Arabian Peninsula, yet, it usually had a marginal role in the events and developments of the wider Arabic-speaking *dār al-Islām*. It could be said that the historical studies focusing on the Gulf are confined inside a sort of «academic ghetto» (Bishara 2014:93). Nevertheless, this area had a fundamental role within the context of the Indian Ocean: indeed, it had more contacts and exchanges with other ports along the oceanic shores than, for example, with Cairo or Damascus (Bishara 2014:71). Due to the harsh environment, for the dwellers of the Arabian coast maritime trade was the main mean to acquire those goods they could not find locally. Therefore, the area was integrated into a network of long-distance trade connecting people and societies along the shores of the Indian Ocean.

These contacts, continuities, and commonalities among the societies of this oceanic basin are the cornerstone of the Indian Ocean studies, launched by Kirti Chaudhuri – who applied the theories of Fernand Braudel to the context of the Indian Ocean (Chaudhuri 1985) – and later developed by other scholars. This perspective is widely adopted for research on slavery and has important implications that might be crucial for a correct analysis of the *salafiyya*. It indeed encouraged scholars to abandon the dichotomy of slave-freeman in favor of a *continuum* between these two poles by focusing on the different forms of bonded relations practiced throughout the area, and to consider them as both a local specificity and an element of commonality while taking into account the regional and global factors that might have qualitatively and quantitatively influenced the practice of slavery in a specific area. Moreover, such a perspective is par-

[1] Rather than choosing between the labels "Persian" and "Arabian", the author followed the example of Michael Pearson (2003:14) and opted for a simpler and more neutral "Gulf".

ticularly adequate for underlying the flexibility and changeability of the institution of slavery itself. Therefore, it appears to be the most suitable for the present analysis.

2.1 - A Spectrum of Bonded Relations

One element of commonality in the Indian Ocean world was the existence of several forms of bonded labor. These working conditions did not fit into the clear-cut categories of "slavery" and "freedom"; instead, they formed a spectrum, influenced by political, economic, and social factors, between these two poles (Campbell & Stanziani 2013; Hopper 2015). Such a continuum is fundamental for a more complex understanding of power relations: not only is an excessively narrow definition of slavery incorrect and incomplete, but it is also harmful especially in a contemporary context, as it might minimize or even ignore forms of bonded labor and dependency that, in practice, reproduce dynamics quite similar to a master-slave relation.

The laborers involved in the *salafiyya* were theoretically free men, as in Gulf societies incurring a debt did not mean acquiring the status of a slave. Nevertheless, this particular bond subordinated the personal freedom of the debtor to the will of the creditor, who generally was also the employer. These laborers generally entered these relations by personal choice. People all around the Indian Ocean shores, including pearl divers, used to bind themselves to richer individuals as a safeguard strategy. The current concept of personal freedom as a value is a product of the Enlightenment epoch; before the contemporary era, these Asian and African workers valued more being granted an income, protection, food, and accommodation for themselves and their families rather than an intangible freedom (Campbell 2014:141).

2.2 - The Gulf Pearling Industry: Between Global, Regional, and Local

The *salafiyya* is a geographically and chronologically defined form of debt bondage. Still, its rise, development, and decline were entangled with a series of developments on a global scale and with their repercussions on the area of the Western Indian Ocean. In order to correctly understand and contextualize this practice, it is necessary to simultaneously work on three levels: local, regional, and global. A strictly area-focused perspective is insufficient; it is essential to adopt a regional perspective and analyze those global influences impacting the Western Indian Ocean in a time of crucial changes as the span between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. This approach allows the insertion of the Gulf and its peculiarities into a wider regional context and takes into account those connections that influenced and changed the political, economic, and social life of the Gulf itself.

Long-distance commerce has been a constant feature of the Indian Ocean since the discovery of the monsoonal system (Pearson 2003:50-1). Nonetheless, during the 19th century, the rise of global capitalism and the development of an international economy, along with swifter and cheaper means of transportation, altered the pre-existing trading circuits, widening them on a global scale. This series of progress coincided with the rise of Great Britain as an imperial power, especially from the second half of the 19th century, when the oceanic rim was mostly colonized or under British political influence. Due to the new balance of power, the area became an exporter of rough materials and luxury products to Europe and North America. The interregional commerce of precious goods was nothing new. However, from the 19th century, the Western demand rose thanks to the *nouveaux riches* middle class, who displayed their wealth and social respectability through the exotic and expensive products they could finally afford (Chaudhuri 1985; Pearson 2003; Hopper 2015).

Generally speaking, each territory developed an economy specialized in a few typologies of products to export. The Gulf shaykhdoms focused on date cultivation and, even more importantly, on pearl fishing. In Arabia, this last activity was thousands of years old. The earliest jewels with pearls date back to the 6th millennium B.C.E. and the earliest proofs of their trade can be set around the 4th millennium B.C.E. (Carter 2018:240). According to a 1906 esteem, off the Western Gulf coast existed 243 pearl banks, 184 of which located between Ras Tannura and Dubai (*File 34/3*:12r-18r). The export of pearls was a fundamental feature of the oceanic long-distance commerce: in exchange for these gems, the dwellers of the Arabian shore received all those goods they could not produce locally, including rice, timber, sugar, and spices from India; arms, tobacco, grain, and fruits from Persia; and coffee from Yemen. Pearls were confined to an elite market until the second half of the 19th century when they became a status symbol for the European and North American middle classes, who imitated the aristocracy by buying fancy clothes and accessories. Simultaneously, with the complicity of imperialism and orientalism in fine arts, Western consumers became fond of the far and mysterious "Orient". They thus demanded products capable of recalling such a place (Hopper 2015:98), further promoting the demand for Gulf pearls.

Along with the demand, prices rose, and so did profits: pearls became the main source of wealth for the Gulf shaykhdoms (Lorimer 1915:2220). The global expansion of the pearl markets was so crucial that already in 1863, the Qatari *šayḫ* Muhammad bin Thani could state: «We are all, from the highest to the lowest, slaves of one master, (the) Pearl» (Hopper 2013:104; Hopper 2015:88; Fromherz 2018:16).

2.3 - The Abolition of Slavery and Some Alternative Strategies

The cultivation, production, collection, and craft of the goods demanded by the Western world required a considerable amount of manpower (possibly cheap). Early on, local producers and merchants overcame this problem by increasing the purchasing of slaves, especially young men from Eastern Africa. Human trafficking had been part of the oceanic trade for centuries, and Arabia, especially the Omani Batinah coast, had been one of its main hubs. Nevertheless, until the 19th century, slaves did not participate in the pearling industry significantly; their presence on the banks grew and became relevant during the pearl boom (Hopper 2018:313-316).

However, this new demand for slaves overlapped with the abolitionist campaign Great Britain decided to launch on a global level. The reasons for such an effort are still a matter of debate. Some authors prefer to highlight the humanitarian concern stemming from the horrors of the Atlantic trade. At the same time, Eric Williams and other scholars after him stressed the changes triggered by Industrial Revolution and capitalism on the labor market: a worker who could use their wage to buy goods was more convenient than a slave to be fed and clothed (Campbell 2005:14-15). Furthermore, abolitionism was a weapon against the rival nations still accepting slavery, especially France, and a tool to justify the imperialist expansion (Hopper 2015:147) and the subjugation of non-European people. Finally, the military and technological advantage made the British believe they were morally and culturally superior, so they entitled themselves to "civilizing" the others, even by coercion (Pearson 2003:191-192). This attitude is easily detectable in some documents where the Gulf pearl divers, the protagonists of this article, are described as «some thousands of ruffians and semi-savages from a dozen different countries without, for the most part, any families present to restrain them» (*File 35/3*:9r).

The firepower was nonetheless insufficient to gain and maintain control. The British were usually forced to cooperate with local rulers and avoid losing their favor. The Arab shaykhdoms considered in this paper (Kuwait, Bahrein, Qatar, and the seven members of the present-day United Arab Emirates) were not colonies; despite this, starting from 1820, a series of treaties put them under the protection (and thumb) of Great Britain, which aimed at securing peace and stability along the routes to India. The British government in Bombay gained the prerogative to manage the relationship with other polities on behalf of these shaykhdoms and to create on their territories a network of diplomatic offices; however, the British still had to negotiate with local rulers when internal affairs were concerned. Consequentially, when a certain form of slavery or quasi-slavery was particularly remunerative, or if excessive pressure for its removal should jeopardize relations with the local rulers, causing political instability, the abolitionist effort was set aside.

The British were nevertheless able to use their political influence and military superiority to close the fundamental slave trade from Zanzibar in 1873, forcing merchants and producers to find new sources of cheap manpower. The human traffickers of the Gulf managed to maintain a small but steady flow of new slaves from Africa, Persian Baluchistan, and Arabia itself. However, the main strategy adopted by pearl merchants to secure an adequate number of workers was the improvement and large-scale application of the *salafiyya*. This system was not an innovation of the late 19th century, as the presence of indebted pearl divers was already recorded by Ibn Battuta (2018:307).

However, the scarcity of sources prevented scholars from detecting its actual beginning. Nevertheless, the late 19th-century pearling boom combined with the reduced availability of freshly imported slaves triggered an evolution of this practice (Bishara 2021:517), which became more elaborate, hierarchical, systematically applied, and harsher for the people involved.

3 - The *Salafiyya* System: Debts and Quasi-Slavery

The *salafiyya* was applied in all the shaykhdoms of the Arab coast of the Gulf (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the Trucial States, namely Abu Dhabi, ʿAjmān, Dubai, Raʾs al-Khayma, Sharja, and Umm al-Qaywayn). Aside from some minor differences concerning the rights and obligations of workers, the principles ruling this system were shared throughout the area. Thus, debt bondage in the Gulf pearling industry can be analyzed as a unitary phenomenon.

In his *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, Oman and Central Arabia, John Gordon Lorimer (1915:2227) divides the workers involved in this activity into two categories – operatives and financers. The former group included all the men actively participating in the fishing expeditions, in other words, the members of the crews and their captains (*nawāẖiḏa*, singular *nāẖuḏa*). Instead, the financers were the merchants with capital to invest in fishing, providing the operatives with the resources for working. The structure of the *salafiyya* was designed to create a bond of dependency between the two groups, which did not differ much from a slave-master relation. As illustrated by a 1930 British report:

> The diving community consists in 3 categories: the shore merchants who do the big buying and selling and who either finance the boats, the nakhudas[2] or boat captains, and the large inarticulate mass of divers, illiterate arabs who were previously cheated and oppressed by their employers, or rather their owners, the boat captains (*File 8/3*:49r).

3.1 - The Crew and the Fishing Activities

The *salafiyya* system was based on the seasonal nature of the pearling industry and the persistence of the traditional fishing techniques, which maintained this activity labor-intense and granted a job for most of the male population of the Gulf (*File 8/3*:54r). During autumn and winter the Gulf waters were too cold for divers to work efficiently, and the risk of storms and other hostile weather conditions was higher. Consequential-

[2] Quotations from sources maintain the original spelling.

ly, pearling started in spring and ended at the close of summer (Ross 1878:34; Lorimer 1915:2228). The activities were held on ships which remained off the coast for the entire fishing season, except for swift calls on a port for resupplying water and burying the deceased.

The crew members were thus forced to remain away from land for several months, and the working day lasted from dawn to dusk, with an hour break. The divers, called *ġawwāṣūn* (singular, *ġawwāṣ*), descended on the seabed with a weight tied around their ankle, wearing only a loincloth, a pincer for closing the nostrils, and leather fingertips. Each one of them worked in pairs with a puller, or *sayb* (plural *siyūb*), who had the task of helping immersion and resurfacing. Once collected as many oysters as possible inside a basket, the *ġawāṣ* signaled to his *saīb* that he wanted to return on board by pulling a second rope tied around his waist. After a few minutes break, he descended again. The introduction of the double rope system and the *ġawwāṣ-sayb* pair cannot be dated with precision, but already in the 14th century, Ibn Battuta (2018:306-307) observed it.

Mariners were forced to work in extremely harsh conditions. In order to minimize the expenses, the food quality was poor, and ships were unhealthy and overcrowded places, reeking of the smell of oysters and dead bodies. As a result, the *ġawwāṣūn* risked chronic health problems, including permanent damage to the eyes, skin, respiratory system, and eardrums. In addition, dangerous animals, such as jellyfishes and rays, inhabited the Gulf waters. Only at the beginning of the 20th century some *ġawwāṣūn* started wearing a full cotton suit to partially protect themselves from stings and bites.

Safety risks and the high mortality did not discourage the mariners, who voluntarily chose to enter a *salafiyya* bond to secure the means of survival granted by the flourishing pearling industry. The demand for manpower also attracted foreign workers. Therefore, on a pearling ship, it was possible to find, along with local port towns, Arabs and African or Baluchi slaves, Omanis, Yemenis, free Afrodescendents, Persians and nomads from the surrounding areas (Lorimer 1915:2228). Even freed slaves often decided to remain on the Arab coast to work in pearling (*File 5/168 IV*:467r).

Although these free men spontaneously decided to move to one of the Gulf port towns and enroll in a pearling crew, their living conditions were quite similar to those of their enslaved co-workers. As in other forms of bonded labor, the *salafiyya* made the borders between slavery and free work fuzzy and difficult to define.

3.2 - The Key Concepts: *Salaf, Barwa, Ḫarǧiyya e Tisqām*

In order to provide their crews with equipment and supplies and allow them to support their families during the long months at sea, at the beginning of the season, the *nawāḫiḏa* granted a loan called *salaf* ("advance", after which the entire system was named), in cash or goods with monetary value (usually bags of rice, dates, and tobacco) to each non-enslaved worker. This anticipation was the starting debt of the mariner. The captain and the sailor scaled their agreement by recordingit on a special piece of paper called *barwa* (plural, *barwāt*) (Bishara 2021:515), and the latter had to spend the fishing season with his creditor. The debt account was updated with every new loan: the *salaf* was followed by the *ẖarǧiyya* (*File 10/6*:4r), provided in the middle of the season.

The starting debt, consisting of the sum of *salaf*, *ẖarǧiyya*, and other eventual smaller advances, was supposed to be repaid at the end of the pearling expedition with the seasonal earnings. However, the wage, called *ẖatm* (*File 5/201*:11r), was not fixed: it depended on the gains from the selling of the pearls, valued according to a combination of factors such as weight, dimension, and color. After deducting the expedition's expenses and having paid the ship's owner (most of the boats were leased), the *nāẖuḏa* split the profit into shares to be distributed among all the mariners, according to their role. *Ġawwāṣūn* received three shares each, *siyūb* two shares, and the rest of the crew one (*File 10/6*:2r). The captain reserved for himself the same amount accruing to a *ġawwāṣ*. As the advances, the *ẖatm* could have been in cash or goods to be resold to gain money.

The division of the earnings in parts to be redistributed according to the role on the ship does not appear to be a traditional paying method, as sources from the Abbasid era mention a fixed wage (Carter 2012:42): this practice was nonetheless entirely replaced by the end of the 19th century by the shares system, which was convenient for the employers/creditors as it strengthened the debt bondage. Indeed, the *ẖatm* was never sufficient for the total repayment of the debt cumulated during the pearling season, which was consequentially postponed to the following year. This meant that the mariners were forced to continue working for their *nāẖuḏa*. Furthermore, during the cold season, these seamen could not work; some of them managed to find another job, but the vast majority depended on a third loan provided during winter, *tisqām* (*File 10/6*:4r). Therefore, surviving the winter meant accumulating a bigger debt. At the beginning of the new pearling season, the mariners returned to their *nāẖuḏa*/creditor, who granted them another *salaf*; in this way, the bargain was again struck, and the circle of debt restarted.

3.2.1 - A Glimpse to a *Nāẖuḏa* Register

As mentioned above, the main sources concerning the *salafiyya* come from the British archives. An English copy created for the Political Agency in Bahrain allows the partial analysis of the ledger book of the *nāẖuḏa* Tahar Muhammad (*File 8/3*:4r-36r) and to observe how the seasonal wage was infinitely lower than the sum owed by the mariners to their captains. For instance, at the beginning of winter 1921, the debt of the recently enrolled *ġawāş* Hussain bin Mubarak was equal to 265,8 Rupees (Rs). After two pearling seasons and the consequential series of advancements, the amount of such debt rose to 569,8 Rs, while the sum of the wages was merely 73 Rs (*File 8/3*:24r).

The same source reveals further details on the employees of the *nāḫuḏa* Tahar Muhammad. In particular, the advances had no fixed amount, rather, they were different for each crew member. For instance, in 1922, the already mentioned Hussain bin Mubarak received a 55 Rs *tisqām* and a 110 Rs *salaf* (the latter loan was usually higher than the former). During the same year, the amount granted to his colleagues fluctuated from the 22 Rs *tisqām* for the *sayb* Mabrook bin Khamis (*File 8/3*:7r) to the 230 Rs salaf for the *ġawwāṣ* Hassam Keram (*File 8/3*:36r). The skill of each worker might have influenced these sharp differences; probably, *nawāḫiḏa* provided their best *ġawwāṣūn* with bigger advances as an incentive (Bishara 2012:88).

Another interesting detail from the logbook of Tahar Muhammad concerns the *ḫatm*. The totality of the available sources, from coeval documents to scholarly analysis, agrees on the fact that each mariner received the same share according to his role within the crew. Considering again the year 1922, the majority of the *ġawwāṣūn* working for Tahar Muhammad gained 72 Rs, while the *siyūb* were given 46 Rs. However, Hussain bin Muhammad, operating as a *ġawwāṣ*, received the share of a *sayb*, while another diver named Muhammad bin Abdullah had an exceptionally high *ḫatm* equal to 102 Rs (*File 8/3*:28r). The source from which these data had been extracted lacks further information about these discrepancies; nonetheless, it is possible to hypothesize that such unbalanced payments were the result of rewards or punishments from the captain to a given mariner.

3.3 - Implications for the Indebted Sailors

Documents such as the logbook of Tahar Muhammad prove that the system of advancements and obligations at the base of the *salafiyya* was designed to coerce sailors to return to the pearl banks year after year through the bond of a debt that could hardly be repaid in a lifetime. Generally speaking, unless an indebted man tried to escape, the *nawāḫiḏa* did not attempt to take the owed sums forcibly. Instead, they exercised their rights as creditors by imposing harsh working conditions and controlling the movements and activities of their debtors. Captains could, indeed, forbid their crew to sail to other locations (such as Ceylon, Soqotra, or the Red Sea) during the winter in order to participate in other pearling expeditions (Lorimer 1915:2229; *File 5/20*:11v). This ban imposed a remarkable limit on the chances to have an additional income during the off-season, actually forcing the sailors to become dependent on the *tisqām*.

The permanence of the debt implied that the sailors could not leave their *nāḫuḏa* at will. On the other hand, the latter had the prerogative of selling his employees like slaves to other colleagues upon paying the pending debt. The “buying” captain simply had to provide the sum noted on the *barwa* of the chosen worker. The payment could be arranged in two different ways: entirely during the “purchase” or in installments, reserving a quarter of the upcoming *ḫatm* for this purpose. Once the transaction was concluded, the “sold” mariner received a new *barwa* attesting to the passage of the credit and claims attached to it from one *nāḫuḏa* to the other: if the sum required for his “purchasing” was provided in one unique payment, he received a *barwat faṣl*, while if the debt was settled in installments, the document was named *barwat rubāʿ*. It attested that the “selling” captain had renounced the rights on the person of the sailor and his working abilities while maintaining the right to receive the owed sum (*File 14/7 (XVIII) and (XX)*: 26r). Only those mariners who managed to settle their debt completely could receive the *barwa ḫāliyya* as a proof of the exemption from obligations towards any *nāḫuḏa* (*File No. E/7 V.O.*:33r-34r).

For the most part, mariners were not aware of the actual amount of their debts: being illiterate, they could not understand the logbooks kept by the captain. The latter could easily manipulate the accounts, for instance, he could inflate the price of the goods provided as an advance or add supplementary expenses to the expedition costs in order to reduce the wages of the entire crew (*File 8/3*:1dr).

There were several cases of *nawāḫiḏa* not providing wages at the end of the pearling seasons, forcing the sailors to survive exclusively on the loans and consequentially increasing the pending debt, further strengthening the bond linking the mariner to the captain. In such circumstances, by the authority conceded by the treaties with the local rulers, the British Political Agencies could provide a *barwa ḫāliyya* to the worker capable of proving the lack of any payment. By way of example, the following is the case of six sailors working for the *nāḫuḏa* Hamad bin Butti from Abu Dhabi: in April 1929, these men, three slaves and three freemen in a *salafiyya* bond, aged between eighteen and forty-five, arrived at the Political Agency of Musqat and demanded a manumission certificate to the British officials. The group was quite heterogeneous and could be regarded as a sample of the typical pearling crew. The three slaves came respectively from Eastern Africa, Oman, and the city of Medina (although they all might have been Afro-descendents), while their indebted colleagues were from Persia, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi itself. The last three men declared they voluntarily enrolled into the ship of Hamad bin Butti. Still, their status as free individuals did not safeguard them: not only had the *nāḫuḏa* never paid them, but the supplies he provided were always inadequate, and mariners were physically abused. Considering these conditions, the six runaways, despite their different statuses, demanded a *barwa ḫāliyya* in order to be able to lawfully leave Hamad bin Butti and start a new life with a more honest nāḫuda (*File 5/190 III*:34r-53r).

Under certain circumstances, the British could intercede to reduce the amount of the pending debt. For instance, in 1923, a Baluchi man begged the Political Agent in Musqat to liberate his brother Musa: the latter was a free man working in Dubai, and his debt amounted to 900 Rs. As Musa had been serving his captain for thirty years, the British authority declared that his debt should be reduced to 500 Rs, to be paid in kind or cash (*File 5/190 II*:47r).

Should an indebted worker die before he could repay the captain, the burden of returning the owed sum passed to his heirs, who had to compensate the creditor in cash and goods or by replacing the late man on the ship. Kuwait was the only shaykhdom where the coerced compensation for the debt was forbidden (*File 5/201*:18v).

4 - The Hierarchical Pyramid of the *Salafiyya*

The person of the *nāḫuḏa* was not mentioned in the sources predating the late 19th century; however, his role as the intermediary between the operative and the financers of the seasonal expeditions, meaning the pearl merchants, became relevant during the pearling boom and the rise of the *salafiyya* system. This position gave the captains greater authority and control over their crews, but the system of advances from a financer bonded *nawāḫiḏa* to merchants, with severe consequences on their freedom.

Precisely like the pearl diver, very few *nawāḫiḏa* were *ḫāliyyin* or free from debts (Ross 1878:31; Lorimer 1915:2233) and wealthy enough to buy a ship and finance the pearling expeditions themselves. Most of the captains did not have the means to manage the fishing activities independently and consequentially had to rely on the capital of pearl merchants. The financer provided the *nāḫuḏa* with three annual loans, in cash or good with monetary value, corresponding to the advances given to the mariners: the *salaf* before the beginning of the expedition, the *ḫarğiyya* in the middle of the fishing season and the *tisqām* two months after the return to the port. With these anticipations, the captain bought equipment and supplies, provided his crew with the due loans, and paid the taxes imposed by the local *šuyūḫ*.

Merchants could choose between two financing methods, each one entitling them to certain prerogatives. In the former system, called «*ʿamil*» (*File 10/6*:5r; Ross 1878), the lent sum was not charged with interests, but the *nāḫuḏa* had to sell the pearls he found to his creditor for a price corresponding to 80% of their actual market value (Ross 1878:30). Only if the merchant/financer discarded some pearls from the batch or seller and buyer could not agree on the price, the captain was allowed to deal with another trader. This financing method predated the pearling boom: already in 1818, the British captain Robert Taylor noted that pearl divers were obligated to sell the pearls to their creditors with a 10% discount (Taylor 1856:40). A rudimentary «*ʿamil*» was attested in the mid-17th century in the Bahraini village of al-Qadam, where the Shia imam and pearl merchant Muhammad bin Suleyman al-Maqabi (d. 1674) granted loans to the divers, who in return sold all the pearls to him (Carter 2012:103); this was still a local solution, far from the more sophisticated, widespread, and hierarchized *salafiyya* system.

In the second financing method, called «*madyan*» (File 10/6:5r; Ross 1878), a 20% interest rate was added to the three loans (*File 10/6*:5r; Bishara 2021:525); therefore, the *nāḫuḏa* could sell the pearls to whomever he preferred, and his creditor had no priority. However, some British sources suggest that also the captains financed through the «*madyan*» system were coerced to bring their goods to the merchant/financer before he was allowed to deal with other traders (*File 10/6*:3r).

Regardless of the financing method, in return for the pearls he sold, the *nāḫuḏa* was paid in cash or, more commonly, in goods with monetary value to be redistributed among the crewmembers.

The bond between the merchant and the *nāḫuḏa* he financed mirrored the relationship between the captain and his crew in several ways. At the close of the 19th century, a British report described their link in the following terms:

> [the *nāḫuda* who borrows money, provisions and ship from merchants] is emphatically no longer free as he falls into the hands of the [financer]. Once in that gentleman's books it is not easy to make hauls large enough to get out of them again, or do more than gain a bare subsistence (Ross 1878:31).

As explained above, mariners settled their debts (or at least attempted to) by using their *ḫatm*, and so did the *nāḫuḏa*, who had to give back the sum he borrowed drawing on his seasonal earnings. Whether it was not possible, the indebted captain could demand to have the debt split in instalments or postpone the payment and therefore demand a further loan (to his creditor himself or a third person) in order to continue his activities (*File 5/201*:15v-16r). The triple seasonal fund to be repaid through a singular annual wage had the same impacts on *nawāḫiḏa* and mariners: just like their crews, who could not leave before they settled their debts, captains were forced to deal with the same merchant until the entire amount they owed him was repaid. As their mariners, *nawāḫiḏa* could be "sold" to another merchant willing to pay their pending debt. Insolvent captains could also be dismissed at will and forced to sell their properties and sailors to creditors (*File 10/6*:6r).

4.1 - The *Salafiyya* as a Circuit

The *salafiyya* can be imagined as a hierarchical three-tier system based on debt bondage. At its apex stood the merchants, who had the capital and resources to finance the annual expeditions for the fishing of pearls, which they bought and resold with a remarkable profit. Although they had no operative role on the pearling banks, the funds granted to the crews and the consequential bonds allowed them to occupy the highest position of the *salafiyya* and even have a political influence. Indeed, the wealth generated both directly and indirectly by the flourishing pearling industry granted most of the coastal male population an occupation and was the very base of local economy.

After the merchants came the *nawāḫiḏa*: they received loans from the formers and were responsible for leading the pearling expeditions. As they were entitled to the funds and had to keep the precious pearls found during the season, captains had to maintain a good reputation as reliable individuals capable of correctly managing the sums they borrowed. However, such a position did not exempt nawāḫiḏa from bonds and constrictions: their work, earnings, and freedom itself were influenced by the obligations towards the merchants, from whom they needed to constantly receive new advancements to practice their profession.

A portion of the loan granted to the captains was used to create debt bondage with the free members of their crews, creating a third and last tier to the *salafiyya* hierarchy. In contrast to their enslaved co-workers, these men were theoretically free individuals enrolled on the pearling ships for a non-fixed wage, which was supposed to repay the debts owed to the captain. However, the very nature of the *salafiyya* prevented mariners from receiving a pay sufficiently high to respect this obligation. Along with other locations around the Indian Ocean shore, the economy of the Gulf port towns between the late 19th and early 20th centuries was hyper-specialized in the collection of a few kinds of goods. Therefore, finding another job besides pearl fishing was particularly difficult. Men were basically forced to accept the three annual loans in order to survive, creating a bond that coerced them to return year after year to the pearl banks, and endure the harsh conditions of a dangerous and underpaid job. The dependence on the loans from the captains allowed the latter to control the lives of their crews, sparking a relationship very close to slavery.

Each of the three hierarchy groups needed the other two tiers of the system. During the period in question, the *salafiyya* and the whole Gulf pearling industry can be regarded as a circuit. Merchants used their capitals to provide loans to *nawāḫiḏa*, who used these funds to enroll the crews collecting the pearls to be sold to the financers. The latter introduced the pearls into the international markets and reserved part of the huge profits to fund a new pearling season.

Briefly, this system was more than a form of quasi-slavery. It represented the entanglement of dependencies bounding different strata of a society based on a one-commodity economy, as perfectly summarized by the quote by *šayḫ* Muhammad bin Thani mentioned above.

5 - The Dawn of the Oil Era

The *salafiyya* started declining once the global conditions that previously sparked the pearl boom waned, proving how this phenomenon was entangled with specific circumstances. Starting from the 1920s, the same Western buyers who just a few decades earlier caused the need for more manpower with their demand for exotic luxury goods lost a significant percentage of their purchasing power due to the swift succession of World War One, the Great Depression, and World War Two. As a result, consumers in Europe and North America renounced the expensive natural Gulf pearls in favor of the cultivated gems from Japan, which were less precious but cheaper and, therefore, more accessible (Hopper 2015:192). Additionally, fashion and tastes changed. New goods, such as cars, replaced lavish jewels as status symbols and marks of wealth and social respectability (Belgrave 1937:50).

The sum of these factors caused a contraction of markets. Unable to sell a sufficient amount of pearls, the Gulf merchants no longer had the financial means to grant *nawāḫiḏa* with adequate funds (*File 35/3*:15r). Despite this, captains and mariners were forced to remain bound to their respective creditors, struggling to survive with meagre loans.

Consequently, the entire Western coast of the Gulf entered a severe economic crisis. Cases of death from starvation were recorded in Kuwait in 1931 and in Dubai at the beginning of the 1940s. The widespread poverty caused some people to sell their relatives. For instance, in 1936, the British Agency in Musqat recorded the case of a *ġawwāṣ*, who pawned his son (*File 5/190 V*:54r-110v), while Robert Carter (2012:270) mentions the story of some Qatari siblings sold by their uncle, a *nāḫuḏa* who had no other means to repay his debt. Selling into slavery or mortgaging kins (generally wives and children) was a survival strategy widely practiced throughout the Indian Ocean area, especially during economic crises or periods of extreme poverty. However, among the Muslims of the Western Gulf, such a practice was normally considered inconceivable, as religiously forbidden. The very fact that many people resorted to it confirms the severity of the crisis stemming from the collapse of the pearl trade. Furthermore, it confirms how, upon extreme necessity, people violated religious prescriptions, remarking once more how Islamic precepts did not always regulate slavery in the Muslim world. Instead, it was influenced by the social, economic and political conditions in a given place at a given time.

Local rulers and British officials attempted to support the impoverished population through charity or by reforming the *salafiyya*. However, the Gulf dodged the catastrophe thanks to the discovery and exploitation of a "new" globally demanded resource that was about to reshape the local societies completely: oil.

After the first discovery of oil in Iran in 1908, the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company invested in further research on the Arab shore of the Gulf after having won concessions from the local rulers. The newly built refineries and other industrial facilities required unskilled labor. This need for manpower saved the indebted sailors: a job in the oil industry was definitely more appealing than pearl fishing, as it did not require spending months away from home and granted a fixed wage every month through the year (*Coll 30/8*:25r). Through the mediation of both local and British authorities, sailors were allowed by their creditors to work for oil companies and repay their pending debt with a specific amount drawn from their salary corresponding to 5 Rs (Bishara 2012:461; Bishara *et. al.* 2016:206).

With the gradual repayment of the owed sums and the end of all the obligations binding mariners to captains and the latter to merchants, the phenomenon of the *salafiyya* expired. As a result, the Gulf pearl fisheries were slowly abandoned. Those countries that depended on this industry until a few decades before shifted from a mercantilist economy to a rentier state system.

6 - Conclusions

This paper suggests using a nuanced, context-focused and non-generalizing perspective in the analysis of slavery and quasi-slavery. Although the Quran and Sunna have precise prescriptions concerning slavery, the *salafiyya* cannot be considered an Islamic institution. The causes of its development, rise, and fall are to be found in the conjunction of local, regional, and global factors, not in a supposedly intrinsic feature of Muslims nor, to quote a British source from the early 20th century, in the «improvident and extravagant nature of the Arab» (*File 8/3*:50r). Analyzing this practice and the pearling industry might help enriching the historiography of the Gulf itself, as the pre-oil era of this area is often neglected.

The *salafiyya*, placeable into a continuum between slavery and free work, can be understood as the local response to two global developments, namely the surge of the demand for exotic products from the rising Western middle class and the British campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Rough versions of this system already existed, but starting from the second half of the 19th century, the reduction of the number of slaves legally buyable and the need for more cheap manpower for the fishing of pearls induced merchants to apply the debt bondage in a more systematic way. Once the circumstances that triggered the rise of the *salafiyya* started fading, the entire system collapsed, and the pearling industry was replaced by the oil industry, whose effects are beyond the object of this paper. Furthermore, the stress on the local, regional, and global circumstances proves the temporal and spatial peculiarities of this institution and hence the weakness of its links with the present-day *kafāla*, suggested by authors such as Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf (2016:166). Indeed, although the sponsorship contracts system shares some similarities with the *salafiyya*, its dynamics stem from a completely different social, economic, and political context. While the *salafiyya* was a bargain based on debts specifically designed for a peculiar industry, the *kafāla* is adopted for all working sectors, from domestic labors to health care services, and is linked to the migration policies of contemporary nation-states. Indeed, the precariousness of the foreign laborers stems from their position as non-citizens in need of money. A further difference concerns the debts contracted by the workers: the migrant workers signing a *kafāla* contract do not fall into debt because of continuous advancements, but rather because they had to pay back their recruitment costs to the hiring companies. Therefore, the *kafāla* resembles more a contemporary evolution of the indentured labor contracts, which were widely adopted by colonial powers in the Indian Ocean after the abolition of slavery, than a continuation of the Gulf *salafiyya.*

In conclusion, the definition of the proper context is the key to correctly understanding the phenomenon in question. Once the framework of analysis is established, it should be possible to apply it to other forms of slavery and bondage or further expand the research by including some pending and unresolved issues. In the 20th-century Gulf slavery debate, the influence of the Saudi expansion in the Peninsula starting from 1902 had barely been taken into account. The series of violent conquest might have caused a migration of laborers from turmoiled areas to the more peaceful British-guarded coasts, and most importantly, the Saudis themselves could have had a role in the selling and buying bonded people to and from the Gulf port town.

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