

Who Needs China when You have Dubai? Linking Trans-national Social and Economic Networks between the Arabian Gulf and Zanzibar

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The history of societies along western Indian Ocean have been shaped primarily by trade between the Arabian Gulf and the East African coast. Despite the recent development of Guangzhou, China, as a new center for wholesale goods, which has to some extent disrupted these networks between Arabia and Zanzibar, many merchants and traders from throughout East Africa as well as all other parts of Africa continue to travel to Dubai to maintain old and forge new economic and social links with their counterparts there. This paper, based on ethnographic research on social networks between Zanzibar and Dubai, examines the premise on which merchants from Zanzibar continue to come to Dubai instead of following other African traders to Guangzhou and the implications of this business decision on the development of social and economic benefits not only in Dubai, but more importantly, back in Zanzibar. The paper argues that the degree of familiarity with social and economic cultural patterns in Dubai, which have influenced both regions over centuries through their interaction with each other, allows Dubai to maintain the interests of these African traders, and at the same time enables these African traders to enhance their social and economic standing back in Zanzibar. Economic development in Zanzibar over the last 25 years, following the collapse of the socialist era, has been shaped much by the expansion of these networks between Zanzibar and Dubai. The economic networks that have developed from these years of engagement between the two regions also prove instrumental for traders to circumvent national and international trading laws and other systems of governance, in the pursuit of their interests. Furthermore, for many of these African traders, Dubai, as a place full of glitz, where one can engage in kinds of social activities often inaccessible back in Africa and also in China, offers an unique opportunity to mix business with pleasure, and in the process, renew the transnational relationships vital to the development of businesses in Africa. It is the pursuit of these interests, business and otherwise, and the maintenance of social relationships between traders from the two regions that has now forced Chinese traders from Guangzhou to set up wholesale markets in Dubai, where African traders can now acquire their goods without having to travel to China.