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CASAR Public lecture: Mapping the Journeys of Enslaved People from Zanzibar to the Gulf

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October 15, 2023 at 1 pm
AUC New Campus Tim Sullivan Lounge
Event Report by Maha Muehlhaeusler

Event Title: Mapping the Journeys of Enslaved People from Zanzibar to the Gulf

Summary:

Part of the CASAR October lecture series and in partnership with AUC's history department, this event featured guest scholar John Thabiti Willis, an associate professor of history at Clarendon College in Northfield Minnesota. For the last ten years Thabiti has dedicated himself to the study of African contributions to the history and heritage of pearling in the Gulf. In this event, AUC had the honor of listening to how Thabiti uses geographical information systems (GIS) to organize primary evidence gathered from manumission statements to analyze enslaved peoples journeys from Zanzibar to British political agents in Bahrain, Muscat, and Sharjah between the mid 1920s to 1940s. Thabiti walked the guest listeners through the heritage and histories of pearling in the Gulf, the map creation and archival data, and the implications of this research so far, identifying patterns in the GIS created maps. While students and faculty members enjoyed light snacks and beverages, there was also an opportunity for a question and answer.

Report:

This event was introduced by CASAR Direction Mark W. Deets with a special thanks to Yasmeen El-Ghazaly and history faculty members. Professor Deets launched the event as part of the CASAR October lecture series and in partnership with AUC's history department, this event featured guest scholar John Thabiti Willis, an associate professor of history at Clarendon College in Northfield Minnesota. For the last ten years Thabiti has dedicated himself to the study of African contributions to the history and heritage of pearling in the Gulf. In this event, AUC had the honor of listening to how Thabiti uses geographical information systems (GIS) to organize primary evidence gathered from manumission statements to analyze enslaved peoples journeys from Zanzibar to British political agents in Bahrain, Muscat, and Sharjah between the mid 1920s to 1940s. Thabiti walked the guest listeners through the heritage and histories of pearling in the Gulf, the map creation and archival data, and the implications of this research so far, identifying patterns in the GIS created maps. While students and faculty members enjoyed light snacks and beverages, there was also an opportunity for a question and answer.

In part one of his lecture Thabiti provides background to his research by exploring the heritage and histories of the pearling Gulf. He delves into how pearling was perceived as a "man vs. nature" labor, and dominated by men. Thabiti also mentions how this idea is preserved by museums in the Gulf, notably Dubai and Qatar, which he has visited for his research and for archival purposes as well. Moving forward, Thabiti suggests that the slavery manumission records tell a different story about the pearling industry, rather than focus on the "man vs. nature" aspect, they are detailed accounts of real people who endured difficult laboring conditions. Thabiti also made an effort to look at the number of manumission statements issued

by men and women, though an overwhelming majority are male, and the pearl industry is predominantly male, Thabiti expressed an interest in the gender and the greater effect on the economic scheme. Thabiti stresses the limitations of using the manumission statements as evidence, as they are translated and written down by a British imperial agent, which silences languages and voices, but does provide insights to where the slaves came from and why they are issuing a statement. Another limitation is the “inconsistent use of racial and ethnic descriptions and locations by town, region, country or state.” In an attempt to find a new lens into the pearl industry to combat such limitations, Thabiti turned to musicians, who have preserved their history of pearling in the gulf through song over generations. These real life accounts give Thabiti a groundwork for the legacy of his research, and add new dimensions to the British accounts.

In the second part of his presentation Thabiti introduces his methodology and the use of GIS in doing so. Thabiti manually read through the manumissions to find out locations of where the slaves have been, their age, what year they were declared free, and so on. Using this, he created a spreadsheet that would have detailed information on every individual that was recorded. This spreadsheet would be uploaded into the geographical information systems to create different types of maps based on what feature Thabiti is trying to capture. The GIS system that Thabiti introduces is a system “creates, manages, analyzes, and maps all types of data.” It does everything from connecting data to a map, connecting descriptive information, and providing a “foundation for mapping and analysis.” It is a software, hardware, and collaborative work of many team members that helps understand “patterns, relationships, and geographic context.” Thabiti also “maps” the limitations of using GIS, as it can be used for social transformation and understanding, but also potentially the opposite as well.

In the third part of his lecture Thabiti showed the audience the maps he has created using his data and GIS. These maps were of different types, with different aims. One was titled “The Distributive Flow from Sites of Capture to Manumission: Muscat, Sharjah, Bahrain.” This map had thick lines to represent the number of slaves who had been captured (mostly born into slavery) and brought to the Gulf. Another map was “Spider Diagram from sites of Capture to Manumission in Bahrain.” The most complex map was one with start to end points marking different “legs” of the journey from Zanzibar. By splitting up this map in two four different maps, it breaks down the journeys into different smaller segments, allowing for less inconsistency since the data itself is inconsistent with the number of places.

The implications of this research, methodology, and the use of GIS is that it created a critique of capitalism and race, helped identify who are the individuals who are more exploitable and why, add ethnographic dimensions through the consulting of musicians, and how maps can be used to make greater assumptions about the global systems in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf, Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Questions that were asked included if there is a type of written code that researchers used on this project to have computers extract the data for them. Thabiti answered that this did happen, but it contained many flaws because it is difficult for the AI to read the manuscript and record all the data needed from it, which is why it was done manually. Another question was about if there are maps that compare the journeys of women to the journeys of men, and how that might show a contract in the type of laboring locations used for different genders. Thabiti had in fact worked on this, but it was not shown in the presentation. Another question was about

how do people now remember, if they do, their own history of pearling in the Gulf. Thabiti stated that descendants actually keep track of their ancestral history, and are living in countries in the Gulf. There are studies yet to be done on the descendants of pearl laborers as well, just as Thabiti does by studying the musicians. Another question was about to what extent the British agents recorded how brutal their labor and treatment was, which Thabiti answered that of course there is a bias in and a silenced history of slaves, which is the same for the Atlantic Slave Trade.