The abolition of the slave trade in the waters of the western Indian Ocean produced an interesting body of evidence by officers of the British anti-slave trade patrol in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Their published accounts combine tales of adventures on the high seas and in the major ports of the region, detailed observations and information on the slave trade, and abolitionist rhetoric. They also include a disparate collection of personal testimonies by so-called “liberated” slaves that give modern readers some insight into what it meant to be enslaved and to enter the “dhow phase” of their movement from the interior of eastern Africa to their overseas destinations. A complementary body of evidence was written by “liberated” slaves who were entrusted by the British anti-slavers to Christian missionaries based in the western Indian Ocean. Taken together, these documents provide some insight into the conditions aboard dhows engaged in the slave trade during the last half of the nineteenth century. It is this story that is the focus of my paper.

Before we consider this evidence it is important to appreciate that the sea voyage from Africa across the Indian Ocean was only one leg of the traumatic journey that forcibly removed free Africans from their homes in Africa to their ultimate destinations. Indeed, I believe that we err in restricting our analyses of the middle passage only to
oceanic passages, assuming that enslaved Africans embarked from the African coast as though they were leaving their native country, when in fact their passage from freedom into slavery actually began with the moment in which they were swept up by the economic forces that drove the slave trade deep into the African interior. Thus, I argue that the middle passage began at the moment of separation from an individual’s home environment, even if that individual was already enslaved in Africa, and did not end until she or he reached a final destination. In the case of eastern Africa, this traumatic transition involved several stages: movement from the interior to the coast (which itself could be a short or quite long journey), the seaborne passage from the coast to Zanzibar, the Comoro Islands or Madagascar as a final destination, and the longer oceanic transportation from Zanzibar to the ports of southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

Much of the slave trade carried out in dhows, irrespective of distance, involved small numbers of enslaved Africans, who were frequently indistinguishable from domestic slaves belonging to the owner or captain, or from enslaved members of the crew. Accordingly, recounts Captain Philip Colomb, “Except that they are more crowded, I have not perceived that the condition of the slave in transit across the Arabian Sea is very different from that of his master.”

Other evidence, however, contradicts this observation. For example, on 1 November 1867 H.M.S. Daphne apprehended a dhow with 156 slaves on board: 48 men, 53 women, and 55 children. The effects of being transported in a small space were vividly apparent to Captain George Lydiard Sullivan:
The deplorable condition of some of these poor wretches, crammed into a small dhow, surpasses all description; on the bottom of the dhow was a pile of stones as ballast, and on these stones, without even a mat, were twenty-three women huddled together – one or two with infants in their arms – these women were literally doubled up, there being no room to sit erect; on a bamboo deck, about three feet above the keel, were forty-eight men, crowded together in the same way, and on another deck above this were fifty-three children. Some of the slaves were in the last stages of starvation and dysentery.²

According to a report published earlier that year by a member of the British anti-slave trade patrol, “The second day after leaving Zanzibar we took a dhow with 150 slaves, almost all children, or boys under 14; and as they had only started they were in good health, all but a few who are significantly called the lanterns by the sailors, because, I suppose, you can almost see through them.”³ An account published in the Times of India in October 1872 reported the capture of a slave dhow near Ras al-Had at the southeastern tip of the Arabian peninsula in the following terms:

The number of slaves it was impossible at the time to estimate. So crowded on deck, and in the hold below was the dhow, that it seemed, but for the aspect of misery, a very nest of ants. The hold, from which an intolerable stench proceeded, was several inches deep in the foulest bilge-water and refuse. Down below, there were numbers of children and
wretched beings in the most loathsome stages of small-pox and scrofula of every description. A more disgusting and degrading spectacle of humanity could hardly be seen, whilst the foulness of the dhow, was such that the sailors could hardly endure it. When the slaves were transferred to the ‘Vulture,’ the poor wretched creatures were so dreadfully emaciated and weak, that many had to be carried on board, and lifted for every movement. How it was that so many had survived such hardships was a source of wonder to all that belonged to the ‘Vulture.’

In September 1875, J. F. Elton, H.M. Consul at Mozambique, who was an ardent enforcer of the recently concluded anti-slave trade treaty with the Sultan of Zanzibar, joined H.M.S. *Thetis* to suppress the slave trade from this notorious slaving region. During their patrol they captured a slave dhow with 250 slaves and 53 crew. According to the account of Captain Ward of the *Thetis*,

The slaves were stowed on two decks, squatting side by side in such a position as neither to allow of their standing up nor lying down, nor of moving for the purpose of obeying the calls of nature; indeed, the stench in the hold showed plainly that these poor creatures were compelled to squat in their own excrement. They had been only three days from their last port, and, therefore might be expected to be in exceptionally good condition. Some of them were, however, much emaciated, and fifty-three of them were suffering from a most virulent and loathsome description of
itch, which gave us some trouble from the necessity which it entailed of isolating them as much as possible. . . . from the wretched state of the dhow’s ‘tween decks,’ which appeared to me to be a pest-house, in which no human being could live for many hours, I can only conjecture that the majority of her cargo would have perished before reaching any port in Madagascar had we not fallen in with her, as her passage, judging from the winds we experienced, would have lasted some five or six days longer.⁵

Two decades later, in April 1893 a British naval lieutenant gave the following detailed account of what transpired upon boarding an Arab dhow flying French colors.

Whilst examining the papers, one of my boats crew lifted the hatch and at once a number of children (17) made a rush on deck, they having been stowed under close hatches amongst the wood cargo; as passengers going of their own free will would certainly not be stowed away in such a manner, and as the passenger list, where ages were mentioned, showed ages from 16 to 40, and these were all children, I considered myself justified in ordering the captain of the dhow to lower his sail, and in instituting a further search, in the forepart of the dhow we found five more stowed in crevices of the wood cargo, and finding the cabin under the poop locked I
demanded the key, which after some demur was produced; on entering we found two women and five boys in total darkness, and with no ventilation, the stern and the side windows having sheets of tin nailed over them, and matting again over that; we sent them on deck, and a light being struck, I saw again a small trap hatch in the deck which I at once ordered to be opened; as the hatch was lifted a most piteous cry came from the utter darkness below, and twenty little arms were stretched up to us out of this horrible hole; we lifted one or two at a time, five or six women, and upwards of forty children; the heat and stench were something fearful, the place being without vestige of ventilation, swarming with rats, cockroaches, and other vermin, and a close hatch over it. When the children were freed they cried most piteously for water, which was at once given them; they then asked eagerly for food, and I saw one of them devouring orange peel. 

This vivid account bears witness to the persistence of an illegal dhow slave trade with its attendant abuses into the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Although these overtly abolitionist memoirs must always be read with the audience of the contemporary British public in mind, it should be evident that the overwhelming burden of evidence demonstrates that conditions for enslaved Africans on slave dhows in the western Indian Ocean were generally atrocious.
Let us now turn to the individual voices of liberated Africans to get a better sense of how the victims of the slave trade themselves experienced this other middle passage. Even these accounts, of course, were recorded in the same abolitionist context as those of the British, but they bring an authenticity to the story that cannot be denied.

Elton recorded several depositions at Durban from freed slaves who had been caught up in the Mozambique Channel slave trade from ports in Mozambique to the Comoro Islands and northwest Madagascar. From a group who came from the area near Mozambique Island, Elton learned: “We were ten days on board before we were captured. . . . They were Arabs who collected us. We were packed closely in tiers one above the other. Those of us who died, died of starvation; they gave us hardly any food and but little water.”

The fear of being literally devoured by the slave trade appears in several of these personal histories, including that of a ten-year old Yao girl named Swema, who after a long, harrowing overland journey finally reached the coast at Kilwa in 1865. After resting and recuperating for several days, she was loaded aboard a slaving dhow bound for Zanzibar.

The slaves who found themselves in the same group began to tremble all over and to cry out in a strange manner. ‘Oh! They said, we are lost. We are going to Zanzibar where there are white men who eat the Blacks.’

Although I was generally indifferent to everything that happened around me, I did not long remain in this state in the dhow, where my
suffering redoubled. We were so closely packed that not only could I not turn, but not even breathe. The heat and thirst became insufferable, and a great seasickness made my suffering even worse.

At night a strong cold wind chilled us and covered us at every moment with sea foam that was raised up by the violence of the wind. The next day each one of us received a little drinking water and a piece of dry manioc root. Thus it was that we passed six long and still more painful long days and nights. Hunger, thirst, seasickness, the sudden transition from great heat to insupportable cold, the impossibility of laying down one’s head for a moment because of lack of space, finally all these sufferings combined to make me regret for the first time our painful voyage across the desert.  

Swema’s story is echoed two decades later in a collection of thirteen life histories written by British liberated child captives who were settled on Zanzibar at the UMCA mission school at Kiungani. Several of these include stories of alleged cannibalism that struck fear in the hearts of the captured children, but all reveal the trauma of being separated from their families and homes. The account of a Bemba boy (from modern northeastern Zambia) is especially effective in writing about both the conditions of his confinement on board the dhow that was carrying him to Pemba and, after three or four days, its capture.
It was a very large number of people who went on board, with goats, and fowls, and a large stock of food. But the Arabs were very cruel during the voyage, and because we were in a dhow we were told that the Europeans were bad people, but we thought, ‘Never mind, they can’t be worse than you. You torment us for nothing.’ . . . when it was four o’clock in the morning we heard a cannon-shot over the sail, and the Arabs cried ‘Oh! ah! the English!’ When the English boarded the dhow, everyone said, ‘I am a slave, sir.’ For when we were caught by the English we were glad. But when I thought about my home, I cried.  

Another testimony from Kiungani comes from a boy whose home was in Bunyoro, in the far west of modern Uganda. After an overland journey of over 1,000 miles that saw him passed from one owner to another, he eventually ended his passage at Tanga.

That very night we embarked in a dhow with five Arabs . . . and sailed. The first day we had bananas to eat, the second day unripe mangoes, and the third day the same as the second, both the third and the fourth. Those three days there was rain with bursts of sunshine on the sea, but water to drink there was not a drop. On the fourth of these days the sea was very rough, but we went on till four o’clock, and then we came near Pemba.
While the Arabs decided whether or not to head into the custom-house, their dhow was found by H.M.S. London, which seized the dhow and released the captives to the British Consulate at Zanzibar.

According to Anglican priest Petro Kilekwa, a Bisa, he was marched from his home in central Africa until he arrived at Mikindani, to the south of Kilwa. He was soon marched three days north along the coast and soon embarked for Muscat.

On the third evening we saw a big dhow and that same night we went on board and all the slaves were placed on the lower deck. We traveled all night and in the morning we found that we were in the midst of the sea and out of sight of land. We went on thus for many days over the sea. At first we had food twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. The men had two platefuls and the women two and for our relish we very often had fish, for our masters the Arabs caught a large number of fish with hooks and line. But because the journey was so long the food began to run short and so we were hungry, and also water was short and they began to mix it with salt water.

After missing port at Muscat they were intercepted by the British navy, so we were told, ‘Europeans are coming! They have sighted us. Their boat is a long way off. They do not want us Arabs, certainly not! But they are after you slaves and they will eat you and they will grind your bones and
make sweetmeats of them. Europeans are much whiter than we Arabs are – hide yourselves.¹²

When their dhow was captured, these fears surfaced again; as Kilekwa writes, “when we saw the face of the European we were terrified. We were quite certain that Europeans eat people but the European said to the black man: ‘Tell them not to be afraid but let them rejoice,’ and the European began to smile and to laugh. And the sailor and the black man told the other Europeans who were on the boat, ‘There are slaves here, ever so many of them.’¹³ Kilekwa’s narrative thus bears out many of the details of both British and African accounts of the Indian Ocean dhow slave trade. In addition, the fear of being eaten that Kilekwa reiterates can be seen to stand more generally as a powerful trope for the way in which the slave trade consumed the people of eastern Africa in the nineteenth century.

When we look back over the history of the dhow traffic and the slave trade in eastern Africa, we can see that whether the voyage was limited to the short run from Kilwa or Bagamoyo to Zanzibar, the longer run across the Mozambique Channel from Angoche or other coastal rulers who lay outside effective Portuguese overrule, or the longest dhow run from Zanzibar to south Arabia and the Gulf, conditions for enslaved Africans were always trying and often execrable. Yet distinctions in time and place were probably meaningful, as well, with the longer voyages to the far northern ports, especially after abolition of the slave trade in 1873 arguably the most severe. Similarly, conditions of transportation during the shorter, small scale traffic from the continent to the African islands were also probably more stressful after abolition. The accounts I have
summarized in this short paper leave no doubt that this was a sordid episode in the long history of the dhow trade in the western Indian Ocean, but it is one that merits our attention for what it can reveal about the ability of human beings to endure and survive the trials and tribulations of an enterprise as nefarious as the slave trade.

2 Ibid., p. 168.
7 Ibid., p. 116.
9 A.C. Madan (trs. and ed.), Kiungani; or, Story and History from Central Africa. Written by Boys in the Schools of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (London: George Bell and Sons, 1887).
10 Ibid., p. 35.
11 Ibid., p. 112.
13 Ibid.