Omani Diplomacy and Maritime Trade in the Indian Ocean World, 1792-1856
Ian Smith – Purdue University – History

Research Question
To what extent did Omani diplomacy create favorable economic and political conditions for the Omani Empire?

Background
From the late 18th century, the Omani state began to expand its political and economic power in the Indian Ocean world. Omani merchants sought to deepen their commercial activities in the region, building alliances with other states and establishing favorable trade conditions to cement their economic position. Furthermore, the Omani state, ruled by the Al Bu Said family, turned to diplomacy as a means of creating favorable economic conditions for its merchants with the ultimate goal of strengthening their political fortunes.

Methods
This research uses treaties, trade deals, and correspondence between Omani and foreign officials as key primary sources for understanding the diplomatic behaviors of the Omani state. Then, figures related to economic growth and development will be evaluated alongside the treaties to determine how effective they were in creating favorable economic conditions. Additionally, voyages and records of British and Italian merchants will be used to further understand the general economic conditions in Muscat and Zanzibar throughout this period.

Case Study
In 1815, Edmund Roberts, an American merchant, approached Sayyid Sa'id bin Sultan (r. 1807–1856) to request lower export duties for ivory. Sultan agreed to this on the condition that the US government signed a treaty of friendship and navigation with Oman. The resulting treaty was mutually beneficial economically and gave the Omani state more leverage in dealing with other Western powers.

Conclusions
In general, the diplomatic activities of the Omani Empire resulted in more favorable economic conditions for its merchants and, by extension, more favorable political conditions for the Omani state. However, these favorable conditions unraveled upon the death of Sa'id bin Sultan in 1856 due to treaties made with the British. Furthermore, diplomacy effectively strengthened Oman’s economic and political position in the Indian Ocean world in the short run, but failed in the long run.

Key Sources

smit3475@purdue.edu