

# British Agency in Muscat and its Role in Family Disputes of the Ruling Family in Oman (1798-1862)

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During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Oman was privileged by maritime domination and became a force to reckon with in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. With the expansion of the English East India Company's influence and control over the Indian subcontinent, the gulf's importance increased for the company as it was one of the most dangerous routes that led to its property in India, past Oman in particular. Oman represents the key to this route, specifically the city of Muscat and its port, which became a significant centre of British policy because of its strategic position owing to it being Oman's major commercial port. Muscat is the dock that received and shipped cargo via India, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Britain realised that Muscat would be a control centre for other rivals in the Indian Ocean, especially France. This motivated British policy to deepen its relations with Oman via agency, which seemed commercial in appearance. But in its depth, the agency was political and over time it increased its operation through making Oman's local policy. This agency created a fertile atmosphere in which to interfere in family disputes about Oman's local authority and to strengthen its roots in Oman. Therefore, the importance of the paper focuses on this point.

**Key words:** *Navy control, Roads, Strategic location, Goods, Local authority.*

## Introduction

*The Study Includes an Introduction, Three Sections, a Conclusion and References*

The first section is: The British interest in Muscat and the endeavour to found their agency. This section will clarify how Britain focused on Oman to get to Muscat because of its strategic and commercial importance, which becomes a centre for attracting European countries,

especially Britain and France. Moreover, it will show British attempts to create an agency in Muscat so as to preserve its interests and security in the region.

The second section is: The development of a British agency in Muscat. This section elucidates the development of a British agency in Muscat and how Britain was able to establish a diplomatic representation to make progress in its relations with Muscat, even though Oman refused these ties completely (Muqdam, 2008). The third section discusses the role of the British agency in the conflicts of Oman's rulers and how Britain manipulated Oman's internal policy contours to cope with its interests through interference in the internal affairs of Oman by its agent in Muscat.

### **The First Section: British Interest in Muscat and the Endeavour to Found the Agency**

During the era of Ahmed bin Saeed (Fadil, 1988) the Omani-British ties were friendly and he followed the policy of neutrality and the preservation of the country's sovereignty, particularly in relation to the British-French (Salih, 1979) competition, which was turned towards the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf (Fadel, 1979). Since Oman had a strategic location and was of commercial importance, Muscat in particular (Al-Jalali, 2010), which became an attractive centre for both Britain and France (Skeet, 2005), so each one of them worked to gain superiority in the area. Ahmed bin Saeed refused the British request to establish an agency in Muscat (Afaf, 1980). He was afraid of Britain's ambitions in Oman; Britain wanted to preserve its maritime transport lines to the Indian subcontinent by extending its influence in the Arab gulf region. Britain found Oman was the most appropriate site since it is situated on the important maritime line that reaches India (Malalla, 2012). The two parties kept communicating through trade exchange though there was no official British representative in Oman (Samir, 2000). But the English East India Company (Al-Qaisi, 1993), started interfering in Oman's internal affairs specifically during Saeed bin Ahmed's rule. Saeed bin Ahmed adopted the Indian merchant Ram Chandra Radji's proposal, who was a local agent, to move the capital of Oman from Rustaq (Hajar, 2005) to Muscat. Hamad Bin Saeed approved this proposal in 1784 (Abdulwahab, 2001) and became the actual ruler in Muscat while his father remained in Rustaq. This change separated the religious and political systems and turned Muscat into a highly influential area in political, military and economic aspects for different European powers that recognised its location's importance for its commercial aspect (Hamad, 1997).

Moreover, the English East India Company controlled many Indian ports, and the economic development of Muscat's port was mainly related to those seaports. In the same vein, Oman worked on simultaneously strengthening its commercial ties with the company, as the English East India Company was keen to activate its trade with Muscat (Hussein Ghanem, 1997). According to Samuel Manesty and Harford Jones's (Saleh, 2000) reports in 1790, Manesty clarifies that the merchants who settled in Muscat found good manner and assistance in addition

to a safe environment for their goods. He adds that the trade between Muscat and India was carried out by Arab ships with other ships from different European countries. But Al-Muscatya ships dominated the scene of internal trade in the gulf (Harvod, 1994). He elaborates that the Muscat government was one of the Arab governments that deserved attention and respect, for which reason Britain tried by all means to assign a political representative in Muscat who then brought this matter to the sultan of Muscat, Sultan Bin Ahmed (Hafiya, 1988). The envoy Mirza Mahdi Ali Khan concluded a treaty on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1798 (Sultan, 1957), with the sultan of Muscat, then the treaty was enhanced by the agreement of 1800 (Afaf, 2006). The government of India sent captain John Malcolm (J. Malcolm) on his first mission to the Persian court to stabilise British relations with Muscat and to identify the British policy objective that attempted to establish a British agency in Muscat; that attempt was refused by Sultan Bin Ahmed (Lorimer, 2012). Britain attempted to preserve its interests in the region especially when the competition and conflict with the French government intensified. After the campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte against Egypt and his attempts to expand in to the gulf area, his ambitions were the source of concern to British policy in the region (Fathia, 2000).

### **The Second Section: The Development of British agency in Muscat**

Archibald Bogle was first selected as a British political resident in Muscat (Wahab, 1985). Bugel succeeded in winning Sultan bin Ahmed's trust and later took the post of British political agent in Muscat (Muhammad, 2001), making him the first official British political agent in Muscat, and he assumed his post on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1800 (Ismail, 2001). Bugel was able to change Sultan bin Ahmed's policy towards the French, and in turn Sultan bin Ahmed's ties with the British became close (Jamal, 2006). He remained in office until his death in late 1801, caused by his declining health due to the Muscat climate (Maqdam, 2002). This shows that Britain was able to establish its diplomatic representation and make progress in their relations with Muscat, even though it was completely rejected by Oman.

In 1801, David Seton was assigned as a successor to Bugle. He left for Bombay from Muscat because of his health in the second half of 1802, and stayed there for one year before returning to Muscat in June 1803. The Bombay government summoned him when it learned that France had sent an envoy to Muscat, to build a French station there. Seton, on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1803, convinced Sultan bin Ahmed not to receive the French envoy or and to allow them to build a French station in Muscat. He departed for Bombay in October 1803 to recover from his sickness. Though he was ill, he continued contacting the Bombay government to be briefed on Oman news. The Bombay government summoned him in early February, 1805 to show his stand regarding Sultan bin Ahmed's murder. He introduced his report to the Bombay ruler, which confirmed that Al Qawasem murdered Sultan bin Ahmed and that Sheikh Qeshm had taken over Sultan bin Ahmed's ships and occupied Bandar Abbas (formerly Jimbaran). He asked the Bombay government to back the Muscat government to attack Al Qawasem and to



send military support. Consequently, he was ordered to directly return to Muscat to resume his office.

After the death of Sultan bin Ahmed, who left his two sons Salim and Saeed, the internal situation of Oman deteriorated. The guardian of the two sons Salim and Saeed was Mohammed Bin Nasir Al-Jabry. A dispute rose among their uncles about their rights, especially Qais Bin Ahmed bin Saeed. Meanwhile, Saeed and Salim trusted their cousin Badr Bin Saif Bin Ahmed, who had allied with Wahhabist to defeat Qais (Al-Jabri, 2005). But the disturbances and internal problems erupted between Badr Bin Saif Bin Ahmed and Qais, who was supported by Omani tribes. Therefore, the sorted to ask for help from the British government through Seton, who showed no interest in the Oman situation because the Bombay government's instructions were to realise and maintain its interests in Muscat. The relations between the British East India Company and the Imam of Muscat did not oblige the company to assist Sultan bin Ahmed's successors, in this case his sons. The obligations of the two treaties of 1798 and 1800 justify Britain's intervention in Muscat to maintain its interests based on justice or non-involvement in fighting with Muscat. But Britain soon relinquished its standpoint because of its fear that Wahhabis would take control of Oman and threaten the British interests in the region. Since Badr Bin Saif depended on Britain's participation to defeat Wahhabis, concomitantly Britain supported Badr to preserve its own position in the region. Qais appealed to British support and attempted to show that Badr, Salim and Saeed were cooperating with the French, their strongest competitor, and were refused by the British policy.

Saeed bin Sultan took office in Oman, where the situation was unstable. Saeed's first mission was to control internal affairs and solve their inherent problems. At that time, he needed popular support to stabilise the internal situation, in a time that witnessed a heating competition between the French and the British to control the country (Ismail, 1990). In spite of the tumult, Saeed bin Sultan was able to assume power officially in 1806, but the government of India did not recognise him officially until 1807 because it was afraid of involvement in defending Muscat, or in its problems related to Muscat's ties with France, the Wahhabis and Qawasim (Saeed, 1979).

The government of India declared Oman a neutral country in the British-French conflict (Salih, 2008) and it reopened Representation House in 1808 after its closure in 1804 in the wake of Oman's turmoil after the death of Sultan bin Ahmed (Madiha, 2000). There was a formal recognition of Saeed bin Sultan's authority, and the commercial and military ties were amicable throughout his period in power (John, 1993). The Muscat Agency, since its establishment in 1810 and for thirty years, continued without a representative due to Muscat's difficult climate, which affected the lives of Europeans. The British government considered that the British resident would be in Bushehr to look after the mutual interests of the governments of India and Oman. This cooperation continued until 1840, when they sensed the danger of the turning

Egyptian tide on the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab gulf. The government of India decided to open the political agency in Muscat to deepen its ties with Oman, where its interests were managed by its delegate in Bushaher after the death of the British agent David Seton, and assigned Captain Atkins Hamerton as a political agent in Muscat in 1840. He left Oman when the danger of the Egyptian forces that moved from Zanzibar to Oman in 1843 was over. Saeed bin Sultan took Zanzibar as his permanent residence and which became an important part of his kingdom. Also, the good climate and his duties required him to be close to the Sultan, and the administration of British interests was left in the hands of the Indians and other assorted nationals. Muscat was run by a national agent during the period from 1843-1860, who dealt with the government of Bombay and the resident in Bushaher. Thus, Britain did not send its agent to Muscat until 1861.

### **The Third Section: The Role of the British Agency in Oman Rulers' Disputes** ***The Role of the Agent in the Family Conflict after Saeed Bin Sultan's Death***

Britain assigned its agent in Muscat in 1859, by when Muscat had had no British agency since 1843. The agent would have several tasks: combat the slave trade since Muscat was the key centre of that trade and the traffickers were known, discuss slavery affairs, the city's development of services, and maintain the dominance of the British leverage in Muscat that extended to inside Oman. The British gathered information about the geographical nature and historical situation of these areas and investigated borders, setting up statistics for the areas, concerning British trade in the region, and protecting its commercial interests and subjects. The British agent had to know the British information about Muscat, he needed to be flexible, respectful and able to demonstrate the amicable relations between Britain and the sultan. Britain made it clear to the political agent that Muscat was his primary focus. The purpose of these instructions was to make the Sultan of Oman aware of the functions of the political agent. Britain endeavoured to increase disputes and weaken the Omani Empire, specifically after the death of Saeed Bin Sultan in 1856. Britain exerted great efforts to divide the empire into two, that is, separate Arabic and African authorities. The sultan's son Thwaini took and assumed the office in Muscat, and Majid Zanzibar and Torkey became the ruler of Sohar (Sanna Muhammad Abdul-Jabbar).

Thwaini conflicted with his brother over the African authority, and asked his brother to unite the two Asian and African parts into one Omani state under his rule. He attributed this demand to the need to counter British domination, as it had started to gain advantage from the situation to intervene and control the region. Thwaini communicated with his brother Majid, who agreed to pay \$40,000 annually; Thwaini considered the payment of that amount was the dependency of Zanzibar to him. But Majid paid the amount for one year only, and this widened the gap between the two brothers. As a reaction to this development, Thwaini prepared a campaign in 1858 to take over Zanzibar, which opposed British policy. The government of India ordered



the British Resident in the Gulf, Captain Felix Jones, to hinder Thwaini's campaign, who returned to Muscat and accepted Lord Canning's arbitration in 1861. India's general ruler judged to separate Muscat from Zanzibar. According to this arbitration, Thwaini became the ruler of Muscat and Majid the ruler of Zanzibar. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, Britain and France issued a statement of Muscat's and Zanzibar's independence and conceded respect for their sovereignty. The decision was in line with the aims of the British policy to ensure its interests in the region (Muhammad, 1861).

Through Britain's intervention in this family dispute over the rule of Said Bin Sultan's property, Britain was able to fulfil its aims, which was to destroy the Omani Empire and oversee the collapse of its economy, which was dependent on the African section.

### ***The Agent's Role in the Conflict Between Thwaini and His Brother Torky bin Saeed***

Britain gained advantage from the conflict between Thwaini and the governor of Sohar, Torki, to sustain the political agent role and mediate to solve the dispute. To achieve the mission, First Lieutenant William Pengelly, who served in the royal Indian navy was assigned as an agent to Muscat in 1861. He knew that Thwaini Bin Saeed was about to wage a military campaign against his brother Torki, the governor of Sohar. Pengelly attempted to convince Thwaini to settle the issue peacefully and to convince his brother to give up rule of Sohar. He showed that the crisis would lead to civil war and at the same time the government of India would be concerned if chaos erupted in Thwaini's region. But Thwaini explained that he had failed to subjugate his brother and had had to use force. Hence, Pengelly asked the British subjects to prepare themselves to leave Sohar in case of war.

Pengelly attempted to mediate between Thwaini and his brother Torki to solve their conflict by meeting in the Al-Seeb region. Torki Bin Saeed conditioned that Pengelly should guarantee his safety on his return to Sohar, and Pengelly guaranteed and promised to be responsible for Torki's safety. Torki arrived in Al-Seeb accompanied by thirty of his followers, but he shortly sent a letter to Pengelly apologising that he was unable to meet him because he was sick. He did not dismount from his ship to meet Pengelly, and decided to return to Sohar. Pengelly declared that he would withdraw from the mediation. Pengelly considered Torki Bin Saeed a subject of Thwaini Bin Saeed and that he was no longer under British protection. Thwaini Bin Saeed's men were able to apprehend his brother's ship and jail him. In the midst of this development, Sohar was in turmoil and Thwaini dispatched a naval campaign accompanied by a land force to occupy the town. Pengelly knew all the details of the attack; he sent a letter to the soldiers and the people of Sohar asking them in the name of the British government to avoid violence and announce obedience and loyalty for Thwaini Bin Saeed. Meanwhile, he proposed that Thwaini should allot \$400- \$500 per month to his brother.

Pengelly arrived in the Baraka region on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1861, waiting for Thwaini return from Sohar. He met him on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July to congratulate him for his deliberate operations in Sohar. Then he headed to Sohar on August 4<sup>th</sup> to meet Salim's advisors, assigned by his father, who were a governor of Sohar accompanied by four advisors known for their wisdom and experience. Also, he ordered the investigation of claims of Torki's debts (\$2706) to British subjects, one Jewish and four Indians. Torki admitted that debt and it was paid to him. The picture of Pengelly's role to increase the family's conflicts to serve his own interests and ensure the security of the region, betraying Torki even though he had promised to guarantee Torki's safety, is quite clear.

Pengelly's behaviour, which allowed Thwaini to arrest and jail his brother, was not accepted by British policy. It was a violation of the trust and values that Britain had granted to Arab tribes and in future, that trust would be black on white. Also, it was regarded as an interference in Oman's internal affairs, so Britain sent a letter of reproach to Pengelly. He was told to tell Thwaini that any abuse of British friendship may lead to withdrawal of the British agency from Muscat.

The government of India ordered Commander Cruttenden to head to Muscat to manage the British Agency temporarily, in lieu of Pengelly, who preserved his maritime Cruttenden. He was also assigned to explain to Thwaini the British government's views concerning the British agent Pengelly and persuaded him to free Torki.

When Cruttenden arrived Muscat in late December 1861, Pengelly was impeached. Cruttenden informed Thwaini of the government of India's instructions relating to Torki's jailing. Cruttenden assumed the British agency temporarily while waiting for Malcolm Green, who arrived on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1862 carrying a letter to Thwaini from the Bombay governor. Cruttenden convened on February 17<sup>th</sup> 1862 with Salim Bin Thwaini and his minister Al-haj Ahmed, and handed him Bombay governor that was related to his position as British agent in Muscat, then he addressed the attendees:

"I have been ordered by the British government to inform your Highness that it did not agree to the way in which your brother Torki was detained. Because Mr. Torki came to meet you in Seeb after he had guaranteed his personal safety from the British delegate at your court from the first moment. So, the government will never ever tolerate to associate its name with such an infringement of pledge. I am sure that you will immediately release Torki with your Highness confirmation to allot a suitable aid to support him in the future".

Based on this speech, and after negotiation, Torki was released on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1862, who then expressed his regret at his behaviour and pledged to support his brother Thwaini in the future. These arrangements were in line with Cartenden's instructions (Saeed bin Ali Al-

Mughairi). On 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1862, Pengelly was expelled from his position as an agent in Muscat due to conduct. In this way, Britain decided the type of the political system of the internal rule of Oman. Meanwhile, the government of India made changes in its administrative system that reflected the increase of British intervention in Oman's internal and external policy.

## Conclusion

Muscat represented an attractive destination for European competition because of its strategic location, which made Britain direct its attention towards Oman to found an agency. The researcher consequently concludes:

1. It is clear that the policy of agencies in the seventeenth century was dominated by commercial natures that focused on their commercial interests. The area of concentration was the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British policy changed to achieve its goals as the agency turned from a commercial nature to a colonial and political nature. This type of agency played its role in the western coast of the Arabian gulf, Muscat in particular.
2. The British government realised the importance of Muscat's strategic location as it was Oman's first commercial outlet. Britain considered Muscat as a control centre of its competitors in the Indian ocean, especially France. Moreover, Muscat linked Britain and its colonies with the British crown.
3. Britain employed several possible means to strengthen its influence in the Arab gulf in general and Muscat in particular, by interfering in family conflicts or combatting the slave trade that was not serving its commercial interests.
4. The British government contributed to the fragmenting of Omani unity when the agency succeeded in interfering in the internal affairs of Oman and controlled the disputes among its rulers. These disputes were crystallised by dividing Oman into two divisions, one Asian and one African, and turned the ruling brothers into enemies.
5. The European competition between Britain and France was due to the existence of the position of the British agent in Muscat which was to increase its role in Muscat and to prevent any French presence in the region, and guarantee Britain's colonial aims and interests in the region without any competitor.



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