

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Portrait of Sayyid Majid bin Saïd al-Busaidi, first Sultan of Zanzibar

Signed (illegibly) and dated 1864

Watercolour on paper

20 cm high, 14.5 cm wide

Stock no.: A6080

A watercolour of Majid bin Saïd al-Busaidi of Zanzibar (b. 1834, r. 1856–1870), the first independent Sultan of Zanzibar. He comes from the House of Al Busaid, the current ruling family of Oman. His father, Sayyid Saïd bin Sultan, had ruled the Omani Empire, including the Sultanate of Zanzibar. On his death in 1840 the Empire was divided into an African section, ruled over by Majid bin Saïd and an Asian section, ruled by Thuwaini bin Saïd.¹

Majid bin Saïd is seated on an elaborately-carved wooden throne chair, probably a Bombay Presidency blackwood chair.² The floral carpet and background of a vase of flowers and marble columns are likely the interior of the Beit el Sahel, the palace of the Sultans until its destruction in 1896.

His clothes represent a hybrid of Omani and Zanzibari fashions. His overcoat or bisht and open-toed sandals are typical of Omani dress, as is his long under-robe or *dishdasha*, which is white to signify his official role. The distinctive blue turban-like headdress is a *massar*. Though it was adopted in Oman in the 20th century, it originated in the East African Swahili coast. The most striking detail is the saif sword which the Sultan holds in his lap. It has a curved blade in a leather-covered wooden scabbard with gold

mounts. It bears a distinctive feature of Omani swords, namely the row of gold stitching down the seam of the leather on the scabbard.

The watercolour is dated lower left to 1864, towards the end of Sultan Majid's reign. It is unclear whether it was painted from life. An engraving published in John Hanning Speke's 1863 *Journal of the discovery of the source of the Nile* has a very similar composition.³ The illustration's caption states that the engraving was based on a photograph by Colonel Robert Lambert Playfair [[possibly this one](#)]. A [second engraving](#), by Émile Bayard, was published in the French translation of Speke's account.⁴ It is therefore possible that the artist of this watercolour painted from the same photograph by Colonel Playfair.

Colonel Playfair was stationed as a diplomat in Aden, Algiers, Tunisia, and Zanzibar. He was particularly interested in ending the slave trade in Zanzibar, where he reported that "it is evident that our operations...have had no appreciable effect in stopping the slave trade".⁵ He seemed to have acted as Speke's fixer in Zanzibar during his Nile expedition between 1856 and 1859.

[1] Rhodes, Daniel, Colin Breen and Wes Forsythe. 'Zanzibar: A Nineteenth-Century Landscape of the Omani Elite', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2015), pp 3–24;

[2] See, for example, a chair in the Museum of Design Excellence, Mumbai: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/regional-bombay-blackwood-chair-unknown/EAF_HS7kAO7GJA?hl=en

[3] Speke, J. H. *Journal of the discovery of the source of the Nile*. Edinburgh/ London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1863, p. 10.

[4] Édouard Charton (ed.) *Le Tour du monde : nouveau journal des voyages*, vol. 9, Paris: Hachette, 1864, p. 278.

[5] Précis of correspondence relating to Zanzibar affairs from 1856 to 1872. Prepared by Captain P D Henderson, attached to the Foreign Department, p. 90, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/18/B150A, in Qatar Digital Library, retrieved online via https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023935572.0x000063 on 15.10.2025.