

Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World

Review Number:

738

Publish date:

Tuesday, 31 March, 2009

Author:

Himanshu Prabha Ray

Edward Alpers

ISBN:

9780195677058

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£19.99

Pages:

320pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Clare Anderson

Cross Currents and Community Networks is an important contribution to a growing literature on the Indian Ocean world. Edited by historians Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward A. Alpers, it brings together leading figures to discuss the cultural landscape of the Indian Ocean world and the communities that crossed it. It takes a particular and ultimately rewarding approach, arguing that this unique maritime world cannot be defined simply by geography or environment, but rather through the complex relationship and interaction of both with maritime communities. Most especially, and following the pioneering work of Michael Pearson and Kenneth McPherson among others, it urges that we shift our gaze: not to look outward from land to sea, but from ocean to coast. It takes a two-fold approach in this endeavour. The first half of the book focuses on maritime communities and littoral societies, and the second examines commercial transactions and currency systems. The scope of both sections is refreshingly broad, with respect to geography, community, and time. The first (communities and societies) incorporates overviews by Pearson and McPherson, followed by studies of colonial India (Ray), Paravas (pearl fishers) in South India/ Ceylon and Portuguese Jesuits (Mahesh Gopalan), Aceh in Indonesia (Anthony Reid), the Mozambique Channel (Alpers), Cape Town (Nigel Worden), and Oman and Zanzibar (Erik Gilbert). The overarching theme of this first set of chapters is, as McPherson suggests, the idea of maritime communities as 'nodal points where different cultures came into contact and were filters through which these cultures permeated into hinterlands ... meeting points for a range of peoples, cultures, and ideas' (p. 39). The second half of the book (commerce and currency) examines monetary exchange (Najaf Haider), the circulation of the rupee (an especially richly illustrated piece by Shailendra Bhandare), non-metallic currencies (Sanjay Garg), merchant risk-sharing (Lakshmi

Subramanian), and slavery and the slave trade (Gwyn Campbell).

I would like to focus this review on one of the challenges posed by the volume: the desire for a more rigorous incorporation of Africa in Indian Ocean studies. Indeed, previously Pearson has gone as far as suggesting that a more correct name for the Indian Ocean is the 'Afrasian Sea'. As editors Ray and Alpers point out in their introduction, there are two large gaps in this respect. First, despite evidence of Indian trade with Zanzibar, Mozambique, and Madagascar, Africa has been largely neglected in writings on the Indian Ocean. Second, despite what we know of African seafaring and Indian Ocean slavery, there has relatively little work on island or littoral African communities. I would like to focus on those chapters of *Cross Currents* – by Alpers himself, Nigel Worden, and Gwyn Campbell – that take up these concerns.

Alpers examines both sets of issues in his discussion of the Mozambique Channel. He argues that by the 18th century there was a complex, multilingual littoral society stretching along the southern east African coast to the Comoro Islands and across to western Madagascar. These communities included the descendants of early migrants from Indonesia, Islamicised coastal Africans, Portuguese and Indian merchants, and Mozambican slaves, 'not to mention Dutch, English, American, and French traders who resided in their midst from time to time' (p. 136). One fascinating detail to emerge from Alpers' discussion is that descendants of enslaved Africans in western Madagascar call their homeland over the channel in Mozambique *mrima* or *morima*: the coast (p. 132). Alpers also draws attention to the importance of the slave trade in the Mozambique Channel. According to his analysis, the exchange of livestock and agricultural produce for slaves, underwritten by Indian and European trade goods and capital, created 'bonds of interdependency that were not only economic, but also social and religious' (p. 134).

Nigel Worden's contention that, despite its more traditional positioning within the Atlantic world, Cape Town ought to be studied as part of the Indian Ocean world is similarly compelling. He highlights recent histories of the port during the 18th century – constructed through the innovative use of probate inventories and criminal records, materiality, speech, and archaeology - to show how significant its Asian connections were. Europeans, Indians (Hindu and Muslim), Javanese, and Chinese in Dutch East India Company (VOC) service all passed through the port. Cape Town was also home to large numbers of slaves – initially from South and Southeast Asia and later on from Southeast Africa – who far outnumbered free men and women during the 1700s. The Dutch also used the Cape as a penal colony for *bandieten* and other exiles from the VOC settlement in Batavia, creating what Kerry Ward has referred to recently as *Networks of Empire*.⁽¹⁾

Finally, in his discussion of slavery and the slave trade in the Indian Ocean Gwyn Campbell seeks to incorporate Africa into what he terms Asia-centric readings of the first 'global' economy 'associated with the rise and development of Islam and of the maritime power of Sung China' (p. 287). Moreover, he argues persuasively for an approach to slavery and the slave trade that does not hinge on the plantation-based Atlantic model. In the Indian Ocean, as Campbell shows, slavery was not primarily associated with such work. To be sure, there were plantations on the spice islands of Pemba and Zanzibar and on the sugar islands of Réunion and Mauritius. However, in the Indian Ocean women and children were far more commonly traded than in the Atlantic, enslavement was far less violent (according to Campbell perhaps the majority entered slavery through debt), and employment patterns for slaves were far broader. Significantly, whilst slavery was the dominant form of servile labour in the Atlantic, it was part of 'multiple and overlapping structures and statuses' (p. 291) in the Indian Ocean, including debt bondage and forced labour.

Turning our attention to Africa as well as to South Asia does not simply suggest the possibilities of transforming the Indian Ocean into the 'Afrasian' Ocean (or of an Indian Ocean world that for Campbell stretches 'from the Cape to Cairo to Calcutta to Canton and beyond' (p. 287)). Neither should it become a straightforward exercise in solidifying colonial difference between two separate maritime worlds: Atlantic and Indian Ocean. A more rigorous incorporation of Africa into the Indian Ocean is also enormously significant in drawing our attention to the possibilities of what Sanjay Subrahmanyam has termed 'connected histories'.⁽²⁾ Of further relevance in this respect is Peter Marshall's recent intervention arguing for Britain's loss of a North American Empire and gain of an Indian one as part of the same process. Readers might be interested in a new AHRC-funded Atlantic/ Indian Ocean network incorporating scholars from the UK and

North America that seeks to interrogate the maritime dimension of such connectivity.[\(3\)](#)

Cross Currents will be of interest to historians working on trade, movement, and mobility across the Indian Ocean, and on Indian Ocean islands and littoral zones. The volume reads very well alongside emergent research that has in many ways either anticipated or drawn on it.[\(4\)](#) In an important recent review, Markus Vink argued for a “new thalassology” (from the Greek *thalassa*, or sea). He called for ‘process geographies’ of the Indian Ocean that historicize and localize ‘porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries and borders.’ He suggested that future research might fruitfully focus on the movement of individuals, communities, and cultural practices, in order to produce histories *in* rather than *of* the region.[\(5\)](#) *Cross Currents* certainly answers that challenge.

Notes

1. Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Connected histories: notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), 735–62.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *British Asia and the British Atlantic, 1500–1820* <[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, 2006); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Pier Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2009); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, 2007); Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, CT, 2005); Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Markus P. M. Vink, ‘Indian ocean studies and the “new thalassology”’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), 41–62.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/738>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3715>