

*The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies.* Abdul Sheriff and Engseong Ho, eds. London: Hurst & Company, 2014. ISBN-10: 1849044260

The growing field of Indian Ocean History is integral to the study of World History. This volume, with its aim of opening up debate and new avenues of research into the Indian Ocean World and its peoples, continues to enrich the historiography of World History by providing insight into how local peoples carved out trade routes, negotiated types of labor, and forged identities that created the interconnections and patterns of the Indian Ocean.

The volume begins with a valuable introduction to the Indian Ocean World by Abdul Sheriff who explains how the environment of the Indian Ocean, particularly the monsoon system, created the structure of the Indian Ocean World by defining the rhythms of the movements of its peoples and goods and facilitating their interconnections. Islam reinforced this system by providing cohesion through language, legal systems, and movements of elites, scholars, and pilgrims.

With this framework, Part One, entitled “Oceanic Movements and Connections,” examines how various forms of trade and labor were more interconnected through the Indian Ocean than via overland or state connections. All of these articles see a distinct Indian Ocean dynamic that sharply differed from European models, and that in some cases even functioned well into the twentieth century. In his essay, Ravi Palat argues that the Indian Ocean was defined by free trade and that mercantile communities moved about and settled their issues without relying upon local authorities. The state was not entirely absent, but its presence was minimal and helped to forge an interstate system that understood the maritime realm as a space of shared sovereignty. When the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean they benefitted from this system, and were often incorporated

into the local trading communities as yet another group. Palat notes that it was only much later when European power grew that the relationship between state control, local communities, and the sea was redefined.

Fahad Ahmad Bishara examines the role of Gulf Arabs in the Indian Ocean, contending that we should understand them as more a maritime rather than desert people. He points out that Gulf economies were far more influenced by Indian Ocean ports than cities such as Cairo or Damascus. As such gulf merchants and captains drew upon the capital and resources of the Indian Ocean providing them greater upward mobility at home, particularly in political and economic influence. The booming pearl and dates trade of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century created a complex network of merchants with global connections who intermarried and owned an array of properties.

In his article, Steven J. Rockel contends that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the dhow traders of the Indian Ocean and the overland porters of East Africa shared important qualities from the Indian Ocean system that created significant patterns of labor, a fact reinforced by their interactions in port cities. The rhythms of the monsoon season defined their labor, providing a time period of work and who they interacted with, as well as a similar wage system, working conditions, sense of discipline, and even idea of honor. Indeed Rockel notes how the concept of *utani*, which is an African institution centered around joking relationships that involves ritual abuse in order to form a bond, helped to facilitate social interactions and forge trust between disparate groups.

The next two essays underscore how the Atlantic World has dominated studies of World History, and contend that the Indian Ocean offers a valuable perspective that complicates our understanding of issues regarding different forms of labor. Indeed,

Gwyn Campbell persuasively argues that the Atlantic World has shaped our perceptions and even definition of slavery. Instead, he crucially points out the differences in Indian Ocean slavery: it lasted far longer than the Atlantic world, was multi-directional with no single point of origin or destination, and involved multiple peoples from across the Indian Ocean. Even the type of labor varied greatly, with field hands only one form of slave labor, and with most slaves purchased by elites for status. Significantly, Campbell argues that the sharp division between free people, defined as possessing basic rights, and slaves was not so stark in the Indian Ocean World. Whereas in the Atlantic World slaves have been defined as chattel, a person as property who could be bought and sold, in the Indian Ocean World this was a minority. Many slaves possessed basic rights. And most slaves probably entered a form of debt or sex bondage, rather than enslaved through violent means. Who was a slave, and a slave's status in society, varied a great deal from the Atlantic World.

In a similar vein to Campbell, Vijayalakshmi Teelock points out that European Atlantic perceptions of indentured servants mislead us in the Indian Ocean, which reflect a great diversity in who was an indentured servant. Indentured servitude is defined as contract labor but one that provides from criminal punishments for breach of contract. With the need to replace slave labor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of abolition, indentured servitude increased dramatically. Even so, over 60% of indentured servants remained in their host country. Teelock argues that the emergence of Indian indentured servitude was the most important labor movement in 19th century Indian Ocean world, and calls for more research into the multiplicities of this global event.

The second part of the volume, entitled “Migrations and the Formations of New Societies” shifts away from labor and trade and examines the cultures that emerged as a consequence of Indian Ocean interconnections. It pointedly asks who were these people, and argues for a global identity that avoids a monolithic point of origin, such as Arab or African, and instead focuses on a blending and evolving dynamic that reflects the complexity of Indian Ocean interactions over time. As such, the section also warns how nationalism and contemporary politics have contributed to singular identities and complicates our study of a cosmopolitan past.

Mohamed Bakari argues that Swahili culture is a distinct community on its own, multilayered with many influences in its development, and not predominantly Bantu or Arab. His call to broaden our conception of who is Swahili, and the need to be interdisciplinary in our studies, is echoed by the other chapters in the section. In her essay on Zanzibar, Paola Ivanov argues that culture on the island had been historically fluid, created by maritime and cosmopolitan influences that are evident in clothing styles, weddings, and even behavior. Her anthropological approach is supported by Iain Walker who argues that the Comorian community on Zanzibar deliberately crafted aspects of their identity in an attempt to gain privileges and status of French subjects during the late nineteenth into the twentieth centuries. In both articles it was the rise of the nation-state, with affixed national identity, that created problems for a more global identity. Finally, Wazir Jahan Karim offers a needed balance to these studies on communities in the Western Indian Ocean by examining diaspora communities in Melaka. He argues that Muslim communities created institutions for philanthropy, welfare, and trust that provided healthcare and education to the poor, prestige for elites, and a way to bind the

community together across economic divides.

In the end, the work largely succeeds. The volume does reflect a trend in Indian Ocean historiography to focus on the western Indian Ocean, neglecting a fuller incorporation of the Bay of Bengal, southeast Asia, and even maritime China. Still, the examples studied demonstrate peoples who developed rich cultures and trade practices that flourished even as Europeans rose to global power. By examining how different peoples operated as interconnected societies and cultures, not just economic units, the volume advances the study of the Indian Ocean World and helps to further strengthen the field of World History.

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