

Cultures of Trade:
Indian Ocean Exchanges

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Edited by

Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: OCEANIC CULTURAL STUDIES

DEVLEENA GHOSH & STEPHEN MUECKE

We are in a certain sense amphibious, not exclusively connected with the land, but with the sea as well ... the sea and the land in which we dwell furnish theatres for action, limited for limited actions and vast for grander deeds.¹

Two thousand years ago, the Greek geographer Strabo recognised that the ocean was not just an empty space but a place of social and cultural engagement. His ocean, the aptly-named Mediterranean, later came to be the subject of Fernand Braudel's famous study, which gave scholars a way to study history geographically, to see how wealth and civilisation would slowly flow according to the natural contours of sea and land. What was also radical about Braudel's approach was his break from the limited "enthusiasms" of nationalist historiography. His vision thus remains in place for us, like a beacon, as we propose, in this volume, an interdisciplinary approach to oceanic studies.

What does cultural studies have to offer the Indian Ocean? One may well ask, since not only has the Ocean itself managed very well (current environmental problems notwithstanding), without this interdisciplinary analysis, but an array of disciplinary and area-studies works in history, politics, anthropology and international relations have *already* found the Indian Ocean to be a fruitful domain. Surely this is enough? It might be, but only if the 20th century modernism in which those disciplines are cast could forge ahead, ignoring the critique that has been brought to bear by scholars of postcolonialism. Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, for instance, introducing the "Afro-Asian Century" issue of the journal *positions*, speak of how "U.S.-style cultural pluralism underestimates the significance of transethnic and transnational solidarities of African and Asian peoples".² This is something that Indian Ocean historians have always been aware of, that transnational identities established through trading relations have produced specific coastal identities for Indian Ocean peoples.

Our approach, therefore, in proposing an interdisciplinary cultural study of the Indian Ocean which leans heavily on the importance of commerce, finds its

rationale *both* via historical depth *and* via the contingencies of the present. The Indian Ocean in medieval times was dominant as a “global economy” with enabling cultural modalities (language, religion, trade practices, shared knowledge), and today it is reasserting itself, but more as a set of transnational relations *alternative to* hegemonic northern globalisation. According to Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, the editors of *Minor Transnationalism*, transnationalism is a critical “product” of globalisation.³ Unlike globalisation itself, which centralises by shunting commercial and cultural activities back through imperial (northern) centres and in the process homogenising and maintaining hegemony, the transnational designates a space of exchange, participation and transformation of people and things, without any necessary mediation by a centre. Typically facilitated by transnational border-crossings are new identities, marginal trading, NGO activities and cultural festivals. Transnational oceanic exchanges sometimes involve hybrid inventions, sometimes they are conceived of as activist in opposition to dominant global forms, and sometimes as the continuation of traditional exchanges.

The discipline of history, to take one example, begins to dissolve its contours as it is immersed in the Indian Ocean materials seen with an interdisciplinary perspective. Earlier, as histories of the sub-continent of India began to emerge from the Eurocentric paradigms of history writing, the specificities of this more “decolonising” (if not “post-colonial”) history writing found that the Nation did not quite have the borders that independence had blessed it with, at least historically speaking, for this nation was a new and controversial imposition in a very ancient land of complex layerings of sovereignties and ethnicities. Its port cities, like those of the Gujarati coast (the face of the subcontinent which is turned towards the Middle East and Africa), were in their very *being* not simply Indian. These cities, as hubs of trade, expressed economically and culturally, in very complex ways, the heterotopic relationships between peasant hinterlands, merchant ships and other lands.

If such cities are not quite Indian, then what are they? Perhaps these cities, like those of Arabic, African, Indonesian and other coasts, were, and still are, cities of the Indian Ocean. The economic strength of Hong Kong and Singapore was founded on their oceanic trade, and they continue to be maintained by it to this day. From our perspective in Australia, we see Perth more as an Indian Ocean port, just as Nigel Worden has identified Cape Town in his chapter.

Cultural histories which look back to the pre-colonial period, thus find, more than bordered communities defined by *gemeinschaft*, multi-ethnic sites shot through with moving vectors, travelling cultures. In this book, we make an attempt to re-think an “imaginative geography”, that of the space of the Indian Ocean, by articulating a form of transnational cultural analysis.

If we turn our gaze to the colonial period, we see Europe seeking economic gain through trading *relationships* more than through annexation of territories. Progress, in the European sense, depended on the judicious development of policies of appropriate government: military force, “protection”, taxation, religious conversion, even citizenship on occasions. But as much as the East was plundered for profit, the return cargo was a strangely powerful complex of cultural forces, as heady as the perfumes, as fabulous as the imagined and real treasures, as reproductive as the libidinal fantasies of the exotic. This, after much gazing and thinking and appropriating, became orientalism, the name for a European culture still trying to catch up, just as it had to catch up to the East economically, a thesis famously established by figures like K. N. Chaudhuri in *Asia before Europe* and Andre Gunder Frank in *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*.⁴

This then, is one step towards our answer of why History might benefit from the newer area of Cultural Studies. Another approach, quite different in its concerns to world history, and still a transnational manifestation of cultural studies, is Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, which deploys the category of race beyond and across that of nations, for how could slavery be understood simply as a European, or an American, or even African phenomenon? It is, quite rightly, “oceanic”. And this particular oceanic culture, on the way to becoming Black modernism, also calls out to be understood musically: Jazz, Blues, Rock, etc, which is why we are so pleased to include here Daniella Police’s chapter, as far as we know the first description of Mauritian Sega published in English, and outside of that island.

There are ways other than music in which people express their belonging and perpetuate their cultural exchanges. This “diversely human” aspect of the cultural studies approach is manifested in our colleague M. N. Pearson’s work on religious traffic in this book. Similarly Lakshmi Subramanian gives us a unique history of piracy as a product of colonial economic relations.

St Expedite is a religious figure, European Catholic yet with strong Indian Ocean associations, being located at its centre in Reunion. Philippe Reignier’s brilliant analysis of the history and meaning of this icon of speedy exchange will cause us to reflect further on the slowness of sacred culture versus the rapidity of the movement of contemporary commodities and messages. And that brings us inevitably to satellites, and John Sinclair and Mark Harrison set the scene for global television networks in India and China which impact, or will impact, increasingly on Indian Ocean culture. These television and satellite networks speak to a number of diasporic communities and May Joseph’s chapter deals with cross-cultural exchanges in the contemporary milieu of immigrant realities and older identities, exploring the richness of cross-cultural memories transmitted through food and culinary practices and cultural productions such as

theatre and political activism. Her chapter links usefully, as memory and cultural analysis, with Akhil Gupta's analysis of globalisation, also in connection with foodstuffs and culinary practices. He reminds us that there is no such "thing" as the global and that it is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Tracing the distribution of foods is a clear illustration of early forms of global relationality.

In *ReOrient*, André Gunder Frank tells us that the West has only dominated the world economy for two hundred years. Prior to that the regional world system of the Indian Ocean (including China) was dominant. While we are not expecting this regional economy to take over again soon, it hardly needs to be repeated that China and India are on the march again, as an effect of the *new* globalisation of economies. We stress "new" because our collective study of Indian Ocean cultures wants to assert this historical depth of globalisation. What was happening in the Indian Ocean from the 10th century onwards *was* globalisation, reaching to the very limits of the known world, and eventually extending beyond it until the global was literally achieved. Histories of Zheng He have been proliferating in recent years, but we take a different approach to this legendary figure by providing, for the first time, an English translation, by Graeme Ford, of some of the legends, sections of Luo Moudeng's courtly romance. Zheng He, we might add, is a figure recently mobilised in Singapore to give substance to an Asian "alternative high culture" of "limited cosmopolitanism" as outlined by C. J. W.-L. Wee in his discussion of Kuo Pao Kun's contemporary play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*.⁵

The social and cultural production of this oceanic space would then require a narrative in which "being, consciousness and action ... [exist] not simply 'in' space but 'of' space as well".⁶ Thus the actors in this new landscape participate continuously in the cultural and social production of the space. However, this may involve, in Said's words, a spatial alterity where geographical notations, theoretical mapping and charting of territory depend on the authority of the European observer—traveller, merchant, scholar, historian or novelist.⁷ Ryan, for example, points out that the continent of Australia was "othered" in the European imperial imagination by being represented as an upside-down blank, a *tabula rasa* that could be filled by the fantasies of difference emerging from the European imaginative archive.⁸ Similarly, the modern construction of the ocean as "empty" (like a table map for war games, as opposed to a "commons" full of resources) has made it difficult to incorporate indigenous conceptions of social and cultural relations. The "human" element of our selection of texts includes, therefore, not only the extracts from the Ming Dynasty novel about Zheng He, but also an oral narrative by an iconic Kenyan performer, Mzee Mombasa, and a fictocritical narrative by one of the editors which (re)creates an Indian Ocean story from diverse materials.

One of the questions addressed obliquely yet continuously by this volume is whether the Indian Ocean region has real unity. The *longue durée* factor is important. There are long-range connections of migrant communities, trade links and religious doctrines.⁹ The rigid (national) boundaries as we know them today (and the detention of asylum seekers) did not happen until recently, so people and ideas moved freely. Institutions that grew up around the Hajj promoted an equally important flow of cultural forms, languages and ideologies across the entire region from the borders of China to the Maghreb.¹⁰ So the perception of the unity of the Indian Ocean as an enabling space is perhaps old; as old as its early naming as *al-bahr al-Hind* in old Arab navigational treatises. Further, it may be useful to consider this unity, like M. N. Pearson, as matters of monsoons, ports, ships and sailors and the widespread distribution of certain products from particular areas.¹¹ For example, from the 16th to the 18th century, the majority of inhabitants across the Indian Ocean wore Indian cottons produced in Gujarat, Coromandel and Bengal. In this context, Sugata Bose calls for the innovative imbrication of economy, politics and culture in a reconceptualizing of the Indian Ocean in the 19th and 20th century.¹²

Yet in promoting this unity, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the early modern world of the Indian Ocean was a golden age of happily engaged cultures. So though there was a thriving commodity trade in textiles that linked the South East Asian archipelago to the Middle East, there was no substantial diasporas of commercial personnel until the 19th century.¹³ In dealing with the unity and the fragmentary character of these liminal spaces, we must pay attention to the stories told, not only by those whose business took them all over the region, but also by those whose oceanic experience is local and community based, such as fisherfolk whose knowledge of the ocean may not be wide, but is certainly deep.

How do we subvert the old disciplinary boundaries as well as the Orientalist views of the Indian Ocean region? How can a cultural studies methodology enable us to both unravel internal fragmentary narratives at the same time as we, in Bose's words, render arbitrary borders permeable and then creatively trespass across them?¹⁴ Our contention in this book of essays is that the Indian Ocean is a kind of Foucauldian heterotopia, a space of diverse, fragmentary and alternate narratives which empirically resist any normalising gaze.

The traces of these voices and stories are faint but indelible in much of current work on the Indian Ocean. K. N. Chaudhuri has argued that the Indian Ocean proved the binding thread for a long-standing and well-integrated pre-capitalist civilisation. The primeval ocean is, after all, the bed of Vishnu the Preserver in Hindu creation myth. These legends also name the ocean as the repository of fabulous and dangerous things; ambrosia, healing herbs, riches and death (the divine physician, the goddess of good fortune and wealth, Lakshmi,

and the most deadly poison all emerge from the great churning of the ocean). For traders since ancient times, the bustling ports around the Indian Ocean rim were an essential space of both commercial and cultural engagement because the seasonal monsoons that moved their ships, and gave the Indian Ocean its trade rhythm, required frequent stay-overs at foreign ports. Additionally, the navigational techniques utilised by Indian Ocean scholars were informed by a conception of the sea as a highly differentiated space of discrete places. Apparently, Vasco da Gama's Arab navigator knew things that the Portuguese did not know, "such as the set of the currents, the behaviour of the wind, ... how high in the sky the pole star should be before he ran east for Calicut".¹⁵ The *Jatakamala* of Arya Sura in the first century A.D., discussing early navigational practices, describes the Bodhisattva of the Buddhist scriptures as a "perfect pilot", who knew "the course of celestial luminaries, ... observing the fishes, the colour of the water, the species of the ground birds, rocks etc. he knew how to ascertain rightly the parts of the sea".¹⁶

Thus our post-Orientalist perspective (asserting both an economic and a cultural priority for the Asia side of the Asia-Europe relationship) emphasises that non-Europeans played key roles in world economy and history. The powerful markets that were established during the last five hundred years "were not natural or inevitable, always latent and waiting to be 'opened up'; rather markets are, for better or worse, socially constructed and socially embedded".¹⁷ Northern economic hegemony, often gained through violence (examples being the Portuguese impact on Indian Ocean trade routes and the Opium Wars) is now challenged by alternative modernities and economies, which were always there, but necessarily elided for that northern hegemony to function. The importance of mercantile activity to society is something that everyone—East and West—seems to agree on. Listen for a moment to Jean Chardin, a French traveller in Asia in the 17th century, as he describes a particular "culture of commerce": a high status and secure occupation supported by most states in the Indian Ocean region:

Trading is a very honourable Profession in the East as being the best of those that have any Stability ... Another Reason why it is valu'd is, because the Noblemen profess it and the Kings also; ... [T]he Name of Merchant, is a Name much respected in the East, and is not allowed to Shop-keepers or Dealers in trifling Goods; nor to those who Trade not in foreign countries ... In the Indies the Laws are still more favourable to Traders, ... in the East Traders are Sacred Persons, who are never molested even in times of War; and are allowed a free Passage, they and their Effects, through the Middle of Armies: 'Tis on their account especially that the Roads are so safe all over Asia, and especially in Persia.¹⁸

Chardin probably somewhat exaggerated the status of the merchant but there is considerable truth in his portrayal. Another Punjabi merchant writing in the early eighteenth century agrees, saying: “Trade is many times better than nobility: nobility makes one subject while in trade one leads the life of a ruler”.¹⁹

These merchants not only carried goods to sell with them but stories to pitch their goods; this is how value was added and profit achieved. To this day we know that “cold calculations” are not at the heart of a commercial culture. Indian Ocean merchants were members of plural societies, which was both a source of stress and richness. Though many trading societies tried to protect the integrity of their original cultures by producing intricate systems to prevent their merchants from going native, the role of the merchant as cultural broker enabled engagement and plurality.²⁰ Marriage sometimes created new mixed cultures such as the *perankan* in South Java (partly Javanese and partly Hokkienese from Southern China).

This exchange of commodities takes on a tangible, corporeal sense which is imbued with the richness and texture of materiality and craft. Thus James Flecker “value-adds” by poeticising in “The Golden Journey to Samarcand”:

Have we not Indian carpets dark as wine,
Turbans and sashes, gowns and bows and veils,
And broideries of intricate design,
And printed hangings in enormous bales?

The stories of objects and the objects’ stories may tell us a great deal about the development of economic and cultural practices. We could follow the career of a commodity, such as ivory, and reflect on how its value changed from fence palisade in Africa to precious artefact elsewhere in the world. Or perhaps the story of coffee which began its recorded history in Yemen in the city of Mocha about 1400 AD but, by the end of the twentieth century, became a popular drink in the United States. It was the beverage of choice for the Sufis in Arabia and later drunk in coffeehouses, places of political intrigue, like the Cafe Foy in Paris where the assault of the Bastille was planned. In London, merchants gathered at Jonathan's and Garraway's establishments where, besides drinking coffee, they bought and sold stocks; “Lloyd's cafe became the world's largest insurance company”.²¹ Trade in commodities played a fundamental role in the origins of the Industrial Revolution since it provided European workers with the necessary foodstuffs when the peasants became industrial workers. Factory life began in the Caribbean's sugar plantations, England's cotton industry was dependent on foreign trade for its cotton supply and, after colonisation, India provided a protected market essential to British manufacturers.²²

At the other end of the ocean, medieval China imported most of its spices and tropical goods from Southeast Asia but Far Eastern demand for these and other products, for example myrrh, frankincense and ivory, also left distinct traces on the pattern of trade in the Indian Ocean. Above all, China's involvement in Asian trade led to a constant flow of coins, silks and ceramics to Africa, the Near East, and India.²³ The translation of a section of the Zheng He romance in this book highlights the cultural importance of these tributary goods in the way they not only shaped China's view of the world but also its view of itself.

Zheng He was a Muslim. Religion is a crucial part of this reflection of cultural and commercial life. Hindu merchants from India carried their religion and secular culture to Southeast Asia as did later Muslim merchants. Muslim identity is invested not only in religion but also in specific social and commercial behaviours. The Islamic legal code had an enormous impact on maritime commerce. Islam provided a viable framework for trade because it was a portable, legalistic faith, attractive to and suitable for merchants. Michael Pearson's chapter thus shows how consolidating the faith was an essential part of Arab trade in the Indian Ocean region.

So we hope that these examples, and the chapters to follow, will convince you that cultural studies can be "imported" into the Indian Ocean, or better, recreated *sur place*. We have taken this step with an awareness of the tendency among economists and popular media to abstract markets from human motive and agency. In other words, "the objects of economics are made up by ignoring or forgetting their cultural or social constitution" as Paul du Gaye and Michael Pryke argue in their book *Cultural Economy*.²⁴ Doing a "cultural economy", they suggest, is a much more performative activity, it *negotiates* an object of study rather than taking that (economic) object as objectively given. In our approach we seek to go even further, to the ways in which texts literally attribute values to commodities. The traditional disciplines of economics, politics and history are inadequate by themselves to illuminate human stories.²⁵ For instance, the neoclassical and Marxist "labour theory of value" doesn't apply well to forests but Partha Das Gupta's notion of "natural capital" enables us to marry the real lives of peasants and workers with the real "value" of the environment in which they live. Our "Natural Logics" chapter thus uses his ideas to explore how current notions of economic development conflict with ecological stability. There are now many more signatories to the contract licensing us to "exploit", not only these ideas, but also the ocean: the various forms that *nature* takes to aid or impede *human* agents, the *objects* that seem to have a "life of their own" and certainly a market value, the *gods* to whom we might appeal when all seems lost, and finally the *concepts* organising our worlds, as we have explored them here and in the chapters to follow.

SECTION ONE

THE OCEAN THEN

CHAPTER TWO

CONSOLIDATING THE FAITH: MUSLIM TRAVELLERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

MICHAEL PEARSON

Here are two Indian Ocean Muslim lives. ‘Abd al-Ra’uf of Singkel was born in North Sumatra around 1615, and in about 1640 moved to the Hijaz (western Arabia, the area where Mecca and Medina, the Holy Cities, are located) and Yemen to study. In Medina his main teacher was the Kurdish-born Ibrahim al-Kurani. He spent a total of nineteen years in Mecca, and gained very considerable prestige. In particular, he taught hundreds, even thousands, of Indonesians there, and initiated many of them into the *sufi* (devotional) Order of which he was a distinguished member, the Shattariyya. He returned to Sumatra, to Aceh, in 1661 and was a revered teacher there for nearly thirty years. He kept in touch with Ibrahim in Medina, and taught what he had learnt from him to the many Indonesian, especially Javanese, pilgrims who stopped for a time in Aceh on the way to the Red Sea.¹

Our second life is that of Sayyid Ahmad bin Sumeyt. His career provides an excellent case study of an Islamic leader in east Africa. His father, Abubakr, was a Hadhrami (southern Arabian) *sharif* (a distinguished Muslim), born in Shiban, who was a trader and scholar and was made *qadi* (Islamic judge) of Zanzibar in the time of Sultan Majid (1856-70). His son, Ahmad, grew up to be a trader and scholar too. He interrupted his trading to study religion in Grand Comoro under the supervision of his father, who had retired there, and another scholar. Then Ahmad studied in Zanzibar under an Iraqi scholar, and was made *qadi* in the 1880s. Even so he visited the Hadhramaut three times later to study some more under famous scholars and get their *ijaza*, that is a certification, licence or permit. While away between 1883 and 1886 he spent time in Istanbul

and studied with Sayyid Fadhi Basha bin Alwi bin Sahi, a famous Hadhrami scholar, and through his influence received an Ottoman Order from Sultan Abdul Hamid. In 1887 he studied in Al-Azhar, and Mecca, and in 1888 returned to Zanzibar. From then until his death in 1925 he was a very famous scholar and teacher. Students came from all over the coast. Indeed he had an international reputation, for he was asked by the *mufti* (judicial leader) of Mecca himself to settle a quarrel between two Zanzibari *ulama* (religious scholars). Even prestigious scholars in Egypt sometimes sought his opinion, such was his reputation.²

What do these lives tell us about connections around the Indian Ocean? For millenia the area has been the site of many different clashes and contacts of various cultures, though it could be that modern communications, in other words globalisation, have begun to impose one hegemonic “culture” all over the region. A recent survey of Internet usage in the Gulf region found that 42% of users had bought books from Amazon.com, and 38% watched CNN news, while only 8% followed the locally-based the Gulf News.³ Be this as it may, in earlier times we can find a similar process, which over a long period achieved remarkable success. I am referring to the spread of Islam around the littoral of the ocean, and especially to continuing efforts to ensure that normative Islam transcended local variations. Over many centuries Muslim authorities from the heartland, like our two case studies above, have travelled widely, and set up networks designed to spread and reinforce the true faith. This is not so much a matter of converting people, but of “improving” their religious practice. More precisely, they aim to achieve substitutive, not additive, change. Rather than allowing the addition of some elements of Islamic practice to a base of earlier indigenous belief, they aim to eliminate earlier belief entirely, and substitute their version of normative Islam. The relative success of these travellers has created a strong element of unity all around the shores of the ocean.

The easy bit about conversions is the first bit.⁴ For Muslims, the recitation of the *shahada*, the declaration of faith (“There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God”), is something to be going on with. The trick was to keep converts in the faith, insist that they learn more of it, and observe its major precepts: pray five times a day, fast during the month of Ramadan, give money to charity, and endeavour to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, at least once in a lifetime. Conversion is thus to be seen as a continuing process, even extending over several generations.

Two sub themes are evident in all that follows: first, the central role, the prestige, in Islamic terms the *baraka*, of people from the Muslim heartland, essentially the Arab world, or those who shared in this prestige at one remove, that is people from other areas who had studied in the heartland. Second, there

is a very close nexus between trade and religion in all this. Scholars traded, merchants were also exemplars of Islam. *Cacizes* (a general term used by the Portuguese for any Muslim teacher or authority)⁵ often were associated with particular groups or lineages of merchants, and accompanied them on their travels.

Some of what follows will be based on Portuguese records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These records, despite their very obvious bias and hostility, are still useful, for the Portuguese were themselves trying to convert people, and thus they studied closely the activities of their Muslim rivals. The Portuguese noted the characteristic mixture of trade and knowledge so common among Muslim travellers in the Indian Ocean. They considered these people, not the locals, to be the real threat to their trade, their control, and their missionary efforts. A letter to the Portuguese king from Mozambique in 1508 claimed that

these others who do the damage are merchants and foreigners, one from Hurmuz, another from Aden, others from other parts and they are men of knowledge who have traded all their lives and these are the ones who should be expelled.⁶

We have many examples of censorious visitors complaining about the quality of the Islam that they found as they travelled around the ocean. Indeed, many of these comments came from European observers, and presumably are designed to cheer up the Christian missionaries: “These Muslims aren’t doing very well at all”. In Siam when *cacizes* spoke the locals stood listening with their mouths open and fanning with their hands, saying that the air of the words, that enters via the mouth, sanctifies in their hearts. This is not obviously part of orthodox Islamic practice. The famous Francis Xavier claimed that the new converts to Islam in Amboina really knew nothing of their religion. An account from the 1570s in Amboina noted how local converts to Islam retained their reverence for spirits and the tombs of pre-Islamic saints. A Spanish missionary described a practice which has very little to do with great tradition Islam but which shows the survival of earlier folk practice:

In Funerals, the Moors of Macassar usually have four Boys very well clad at the four corners of the Bier, which is very large. Every one of them carries a Fan and fans the dead Body which goes in the middle, which is to cool the Soul, because of the great heat it endures in the other world. This I myself have seen.⁷

Muslim observers commented on exactly the same perceived laxity, though obviously, unlike European observers, they saw this as detrimental. A Turkish visitor to Gujarat in 1546 commented sourly of the local Muslims that “at the

time of prayer they simply play music; most of them are infidels".⁸ In 1542 in Malindi Xavier met his alter ego, a chief "caciz", who complained that the local Muslims were extremely slack in their observance. Once there had been sixteen mosques in the town, but now there was only three, and even these were poorly patronised.⁹ The famous Muslim navigator Ibn Majid wrote of Malay Muslims that

They are evil people who follow no rules; the unbeliever marries the Muslim, and the Muslim the infidel woman . . . they publicly drink wine, and they do not pray before setting out on a voyage.¹⁰

While a modern secular observer would probably take a relativist stance ("If they say they're Muslims then they are") such tolerance was and is anathema to these guardians of Islam.

How to rectify this? One central mechanism was to encourage people to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*. I have discussed this matter in detail elsewhere.¹¹ In the early modern period, some 15,000 from India undertook this pious obligation each year, out of a total of up to 200,000, while today, although numbers are limited by the Saudi authorities, at least two million participate each year. The results are dramatic. Believers who undertake the central rituals of the *hajj* are strongly impressed with the power and majesty of the Faith. Over the five central days in Mecca, Muslims of all ethnicities, ages, genders, and social status act as one.

More important for our purposes, *hajjis* go back home, whether it be to Java, Kerala, Sydney, Mombasa or Abu Dhabi, and act as cynosures of the faith. "Here is how they do it in Mecca", "This is what they told me in Mecca". This authority was magnified if the returnee had spent time studying in Mecca before and after undertaking the rituals of the *hajj*. There are many examples of returning *hajjis* leading vigorous rectification campaigns once they got back home. Maulana Muhammad Tahir, a Gujarati Bohra, spent some time in Mecca in the sixteenth century, "and after his return, imbued with purist zeal, undertook the reform of his fellow Bohras", engaging in a vigorous rectification campaign.¹² A particular *sufi*, Shah Sibghat Allah, was a member of the mildly unorthodox Shattari order. He was born in Broach and had his training, and his *pir*, in Ahmadabad. Late in the sixteenth century he did a *hajj*, which, as usual, seems to have caused him to change his opinions, for subsequently he led a puritanical and reformist campaign in Bijapur.¹³ Two later examples of Indian scholars going to Mecca to study and do the *hajj*, and then returning to lead reformist campaigns at home, are the very well known reformers Shah Waliullah in the eighteenth century, and Saiyid Ahmad of Rae-Bareilly in the nineteenth.

The famous fourteenth century traveller Ibn Battuta gives us a good impression of the cosmopolitan nature of Islam around the Indian Ocean, with authorities from the heartland clearly valued wherever they went. He came from Morocco, the far northwest of *dar ul-Islam*. Because of his scholarship, and the fact that he had spent time in the Holy Cities, he had considerable prestige. In 1331 he was in Mogadishu, was very well treated, and lodged with the *qadi*, who had originated in Egypt, and who took him to the sultan. Here also he was treated with respect. He was given robes, including a tunic of Egyptian linen, a furred mantle of Jerusalem stuff, and an Egyptian turban. In Mogadishu were many jurists and sharifs, people who had done a hajj, and *sheikhs* (honoured Muslims). Ibn Battuta said little about Mombasa, but in Kilwa, then at its height of power and riches, he found the sultan to be very generous, and noted especially the large number of sharifs from Iraq and the Hijaz and other countries who had flocked in to benefit from his pious patronage. Indeed, this sultan had once absented himself for two years to go on hajj.

Once he got to Malabar (today Kerala) Ibn Battuta found a similarly diverse lot of Muslims in positions of secular and religious authority. At one place the *qadi* and preacher was a man from Oman. The *amir* (leader) of the merchants in Calicut was from Bahrain. On one of the junks that he travelled on the factor was from Syria, while in Quilon the chief Muslim merchant was from Iraq, and the *qadi* from Qazwin.¹⁴

Portuguese records of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can tell us much about the way these Muslim authorities spread their word, for they often had the effrontery to travel on Portuguese ships. In 1556 a long letter noted

There was another thing here in which God Our Lord is much disserved, and I consider this to be one of the worst things imaginable; it was, that in our own Portuguese ships Muslims, *cacizes* in the sect of Muhammad, embark, and, under the pretext of being merchants, and that they are carrying goods, they stay in gentile [Hindu or Buddhist] areas and successfully engage in conversions.

These *cacizes* were so keen that they came from all over the Muslim world. On one occasion, a particularly flagrant one, in the very ship in which a Jesuit father was travelling, a Muslim boarded in Baticala, near Goa, along with his entourage. He claimed to be a relation of Muhammad, in other words a *sayyid* or sharif, and thus was greatly respected by all Muslims. He travelled to Borneo, where there were already some of his fellows, and they had enormous success in their conversion efforts, so much so that a local king paid obeisance to this sheikh three times a day. When the ship ran into bad weather, alms for the (Christian) saints were solicited to avoid shipwreck, and to avoid detection this Muslim was one of the first to contribute.

To add to our initial account of the career of ‘Abd al-Ra’uf of Singkel, here are a few smaller examples of the activities of these travelling teachers in southeast Asia. The ruler of Melaka was converted by a *caciz* from “Arabia”, while maritime Sumatra had missionaries from Persia, Arabia, Gujarat and Bengal. Francis Xavier claimed that Amboina was subjected to the attentions of three *cacizes* who came from Mecca, adding, in a mistake often found in the records, that this was where Muhammad’s body was to be found. Fernão Mendes Pinto found Turkish and Arab missionaries working in Siam in the 1550s. A detailed account of 1556 found all over southeast Asia *cacizes* from Mecca, Cairo, Constantinople and other very remote places spreading and consolidating their faith. Late in the decade, Solor was being worked on by “three or four *cacizes*, two from Calicut and three from Bengal [*sic*]”. A detailed account from the same decade talks of missionaries from Mecca and Aceh and Malaya working in Tidore, while the editor of this collection notes that many Turks came to Borneo, Sumatra and Ternate after D. João of Austria won the battle of Lepanto, in 1571.¹⁵

Turning now to India, we find similar examples to show how international Islamic learning was, with much of it however focused on Mecca. The great master of *hadith* in Delhi in the early seventeenth century was Abdulhaqq Dihlawi, who died in 1642. He had studied in Mecca for some years, and his teacher there was Abdulwahhab Burhanpuri, who in turn was a disciple of one of the great Indian immigrants to Mecca, namely Ali al-Muttaqi (or Shaikh Ali Muttaqi) of Burhanpur, who got to Mecca in 1534 and died there in 1568.¹⁶ Thus Dihlawi brought back to India, at second hand, the ideas of an Indian authority.

Stephen Dale’s exemplary work on the Mapillas of Malabar provides further detail. He notes that in this area, today called Kerala, Islam is of the Shafi’i *madhhab* (school of law), as compared with the Hanafi school of the Turkic-Persian rulers of the great inland empires. Scholars came to Kerala from Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Baghdad. From Kerala Islam flowed on, to Southeast Asia, especially to the north Sumatran state of Aceh in the sixteenth century, and even to the Philippines. Indeed, in their wars against the Portuguese in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the Acehnese were helped by Muslims from southern Arabia, and by Mapillas from Kerala. Further to demonstrate wide ties, some military support was supplied by the Ottoman Turks, whose sultan the Acehnese recognised as khalif (successor to the prophet).¹⁷

Apart from the account of the career of Sayyid Ahmad bin Sumeyt which we provided at the beginning of this essay, we have other good information relating to the Swahili coast.¹⁸ Pouwels notes that Islam spread in the area from the eleventh century, but up to the seventeenth century at least it was in adapted and

internalised forms and remained fundamentally local in outlook. From this time there was more stress on orthodoxy as a result of the influence of saintly families from southern Arabia and the Red Sea, who brought with them access to written sources. These exemplars at first settled in the Lamu region, but then, after translating written sources into Swahili, they moved south to Kilwa and the Comoro islands. A further orthodox push came in the nineteenth century during the period of Zanzibari dominance.¹⁹

Many of these authorities came from the Hadhramaut area of southern Arabia. People from this area have dispersed far and wide as mercenaries, merchants, religious authorities and humble labourers in Java, Hyderabad, the Persian Gulf, and all of east Africa. Hadhramis have led important reform movements in various parts of Indonesia. They retain ties with their homes, send their children back there for education, send money back home, and usually retire there.²⁰

A.I. Salim provides a useful general statement to set the scene for the role of Hadhramis in East Africa in the nineteenth century. He notes

cultural traffic linked South Arabia to the Banadir, to the coast southwards to Mozambique and to the offshore islands: the Lamu archipelago, Zanzibar, Pemba, Mafia and the Comoro Islands. Hadhrami towns like Inat and Tarim, Mecca and Medina, sometimes Cairo, and occasionally Istanbul helped to mould the scholastic minds of the East African Muslim scholars. Students from the East African towns travelled to the Hijaz, Hadhramaut, and sometimes Egypt to study under renowned scholars. The acquisition of an Idjaza (certificate) from one of these scholars established its recipient as a teacher in a mosque or in his own home of the Arabic language, Kuranic exegesis, hadith, Sharia etc. From this educational system there developed a strong body of ulama from among whom the Busaidi rulers appointed their Kadis.²¹

A young Norwegian scholar, Anne K. Bang, recently provided a useful three-way analysis of connections between the Hadhramaut and East Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. First are networks devoted to family and kinship matters, and these are stratified, with sayyids at the top, and then sheikhs, and so on. These networks maintained ties with their homeland, a purer place even if less profitable. And these networks cover the whole Indian Ocean. Members go back to the Hadhramaut to study, and travel widely to visit kin. Second are networks for trade and shipping, for many scholars were also merchants, as we have noted several times already. Finally, these networks went beyond the confines of the Indian Ocean to the wider Muslim world. For example, the reform ideas of Muhammad Abduh in late nineteenth century Egypt were influential on the coast, as also were pan Islam ideas from Istanbul at the same time.²²

Sufis, members of devotional Orders within Islam, have often played a crucial role. One example, again from East Africa, is the Qadiri brotherhood, followers of Abdul Qadir Gilani. The legends of the founder have been translated into Swahili as well as Malay and Javanese. During the colonial period the Qadiri network reached from Mecca and southern Arabia along the Somali coast past Brava, Kisimau and Lamu to Mombasa, and then via Voi, Nairobi and Kampala into the Belgian Congo. Other lines went to German East Africa, others west through the Sudan to Nigeria and Mali. Their teachings spread from the Hadhramaut ports to Indonesia. Not surprisingly then, some textbooks found in the Belgian Congo were identical to those in use in Indonesia. This was a very rich and important network.²³

Such activities continued into the nineteenth century and even today. Colonial rule involved speedier communications, and the widespread dissemination of ideas via the printing press. Knappert notes that textbooks for prayer sessions printed in Egypt, Bombay, Singapore and Penang have been found in Jakarta, Mombasa and Dar es Salaam. Texts for Shafi'i law were published in Swahili, Malay, Javanese and Amharic.²⁴ Similarly in South Africa, where the community was closely tied in to the wider Muslim world, scholars from the Comoro Islands visited and taught. In 1903 Muslims in the Transvaal got guidance on three particular matters from Muhammad Abduh, the grand mufti of Egypt, and today South African Muslims have one of the highest rates of hajj outside of the Middle East.²⁵

These connections continue to today, most obviously via the greatly expanded hajj, but in other ways also, ways very similar to those we have noted for the past. As just one example, the Swahili Muslim population in Kenya has been strongly influenced in recent decades by the push towards normative Islam, sponsored especially by contact with and people from Saudi Arabia. Some young Kenyan Muslim leaders have trained at the University of Medina. The hijab is increasingly seen in Kenyan schools. Similar trends have been noted in Tanzania and Uganda. In Uganda the largest missionary movement in the world, the Jama'at Tabligh, is very active and influential. Originating in the Indian subcontinent, it is highly significant that its focus is on the existing Muslim community. As with many other revivalist movements today, it wants the Qur'an and *shariah* to be the only guides to conduct, and the basis of all legislation.²⁶ Similar trends are obvious all over south and southeast Asia. One visible sign is the many mosques and *madrasas* (religious schools) funded by money from oil-rich Arab states.

Yet the process whereby orthodox, normative Islam triumphs is far from complete: to revert to earlier terminology, these authorities have not yet completely eradicated additive change and achieved substitutive change. In

Mayotte, a surviving French possession in the Comoro Islands, everyone is Muslim to be sure, but many also are spirit mediums. To avoid what seems to be inevitable conflict between the two, when people are setting off to go to a spirit ceremony they take off their amulets which contain Quranic passages.²⁷ This sort of flexibility, a cohabitation of normative Islam with older informal beliefs, will be hard to eliminate completely by even the most vigorous rectifier from the Hijaz.

All this material raises one final general point, namely the whole matter of the unity of “the Indian Ocean”. Is the area too vast and diverse for the term to have any heuristic value? About one third of the world’s population are conventionally included in the rubric “the Indian Ocean world”. Certainly today most people living in one of the 37 states which border the ocean identify in political terms with their own country, not with some nebulous notion of Indian Ocean commonality. Yet I would argue that the work of these far flung Muslim scholars and saints has produced a strong element of religious, social and cultural *communitas* shared by all Muslims around the littoral of the ocean. This is most evident when they gather at the time of the hajj in Mecca. Modern communications have acted powerfully to foster this journey, and more generally to make the orthodox message much more pervasive all around the shores of the ocean.

CHAPTER THREE

OF PIRATES AND POTENTATES: MARITIME JURISDICTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PIRACY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

Introduction

The maritime profile of European enterprise in Asia in the pre-colonial period stands in marked contrast to the terrestrial dimensions of state building in south Asia. Barring a few instances of spectacular energy, as in the case of Chola power in peninsular India in the tenth century, the Indian state, both Hindu and Islamic, in the medieval and early modern period staked its legitimacy and sovereignty on control of land and its produce. Supported by a landed aristocracy and a corps of military officers whose loyalty was ensured and expressed in terms of territorial assignments, the state remained by and large indifferent to the notion of maritime sovereignty and jurisdiction. The seas constituted for them an uneasy and restless realm that did not invite subjugation. John Fryer, who visited the East Indies in the latter decades of the seventeenth century, observed in his inimitable style,

and if the King's fleet Aurangzeb (the last of the Great Mughals) be but ordinary, considering so great a monarch and these advantages, it is because he minds it not, he contenting himself in the enjoyment of the continent and styles the Christians, the lions of the sea saying that God has allotted that unstable element for their rule.¹

Admittedly by the time of Alamgir's rule, a series of European trading groups had staked their claims to the sovereignty of the Indian Ocean and had instituted a variety of patrolling and policing arrangements. There was no ambiguity in the proffered claims, particularly with the Portuguese articulating

an ideological position to validate and rationalise their claims. The Sultans of Gujarat, predecessors of the Mughals and among the first, along with the sovereigns of Malabar, to deal with the European intruder in the Indian Ocean, were benign in their understanding of maritime power, an attitude that was best exemplified in Bahadur Shah's statement, "Wars at sea are merchant's affairs and of no concern to the prestige of kings".² The notion of power and status was inextricably tied to control of territory and land. It was the mounted cavalryman who commanded the imagination of the chronicler and who provided assurance to the sovereign in governing and expanding his realm. The entire military and social ethic remained bound with land in a fundamental way and it was only natural that the seas or its treasures should enjoy a decidedly subordinate priority in the political agenda or, indeed, in the creative imaging of their immediate social reality. Under the circumstances, the merchant and the seafarer remained oblivious to the notion of maritime power and armed trading, for the seas they plied constituted a free zone. Freedom of navigation did not admittedly imply complete security of person and property; the Asian merchant had to and did cope with the problems of piracy and violence. Piracy was an old and time-honored occupation and was not a concomitant of European intrusion into the Indian Ocean. However, the nature of European enterprise with its particular inflections of sovereignty and jurisdiction did result in a new connotation of piracy. It is with the construction of piracy as a category of subversive Asian activity, that this paper is concerned. Why and how did the Europeans define the Indian pirate? To what extent was the definition validated by the actual operations of Asian seafaring groups within and outside the confines of the new European dispensation that was articulated from about the sixteenth century? How did the "pirates" themselves perceive the European entrant and the new system of maritime controls that he embodied? Was the representation of the dreaded *Harmad*, a recurring motif in local Bengali ballads and oral tradition, a reflection of the larger social transformation in the world of the Indian Ocean—who was the pirate and the interloper of maritime Asia in the pre-colonial period? These are some of the issues that the paper proposes to investigate.

Political Systems in South Asia

A brief survey of the regional political systems and their workings in pre-Mughal India and thereafter, in the specific context of the European encounter, is a convenient starting point. This enables us to identify the complexities and nuances of the ruling elite's attitude towards maritime trade, politics and sovereignty. A combination of tangible considerations with normative preferences engendered a set of attitudes towards matters maritime. The

economy of maritime trade for the most part did not assume significance as an area of taxation or investment—revenues from customs did not constitute a major proportion of the state's income. The lifeline of most Indian State units remained agrarian revenue, which meant that territorial control was the single most compelling drive in their political agenda. This was true even of Gujarat, the premier maritime region of the subcontinent, where political authority in the fifteenth century was exercised by the regional sultanate.³ The two most enterprising of the rulers, Mahmud Begada (1450-1511) and Bahadur Shah (1528-37), busied themselves with what M.N.Pearson calls “horizontal expansion and consolidation of territorial power”, co-opting important local functionaries and landed elite groups in the process. The coast and the littoral was integrated into the larger political and administrative set up and controlled by nobles who combined public office with investments in seaborne trade and lived up to the van Leurian image of merchant prince and patrician. The potentialities of commercial income were not lost on this specialised group of merchant princes but were not compelling enough to articulate a comprehensive program of maritime sovereignty and jurisdiction. This came into sharp focus when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean and put forward their grandiloquent claims to maritime hegemony.

The drama of Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean, the focus of their commercial commitments and the organisation of their naval empire adhered to an inner logic of maritime prerogatives that clearly envisaged the seas as a zone of exclusive control. Determined to control and monopolise the carrying trade in spice in the Indian Ocean, which they claimed to be their exclusive zone of operations, the Portuguese used a combination of injudicious diplomacy and brute force to coerce merchants and sovereigns into submission.⁴ In effect this meant that merchants were no longer free to transport their goods in the Indian Ocean and rulers no longer free to exercise exclusive claims to commercial revenue. A series of carefully planned attacks on indigenous shipping in the open seas was intended to intimidate local merchants while the deployment of naval power directed from a series of carefully chosen forts and strongholds was intended to both tax Asian trade and to negotiate with the local rulers from a vantage position of strength. For the Portuguese there was never any doubt about the sacrality of their exclusive claims to the seas, a prerogative that their official chronicler, Joao De Barros, set out in clear and lucid terms. For the Indian rulers, on the other hand, including the sovereigns in the Malabar coast where commerce figured as a major concern of the state, the seas simply did not figure as a space for articulating political control and sovereignty. It was only in the aftermath of the Portuguese claims and contestation, that local rulers developed a language of maritime politics and sought to duplicate the language and idiom of rights over the high seas and littoral.

The confidence of the Portuguese in setting out their claims derived largely from the initial success of their naval forays but more fundamentally from a differently constituted cognitive framework of authority and sovereignty. For Joao de Barros, the official chronicler of the Portuguese, the question related to Roman law, which was convenient to invoke as a symbol to validate the newly formed claims to domination. His formulations emphasised that the seas were, by common law, open to all, but this applied only in Europe to Christians who were governed essentially by the principles of Roman jurisprudence. Hindus and Muslims, by contrast were outside the purview of Roman law as indeed they were outside the laws of Jesus Christ. Further, Hindus and Muslims had no claim to right of passage in Asian waters, because before the arrival of the Portuguese, no one had claimed the sea as hereditary or conquered property. There being no preceding title, there was no present or future right of passage.⁵ Herein lay the essence of the Portuguese position. They were guided by considerations of Christian law and as pioneers in the charting of the Indian Ocean, they exercised the moral right to claim right of passage and control. Their stakes were easy to establish in view of the absence of prior Indian claims on that great and unsteady realm, an omission that implicitly gave over to the Portuguese, rights over the newly charted maritime space. From here, it logically followed that any defiance of Portuguese claims was illegal, clandestine and unlawful activity. Any or all such offenders of the new law became interlopers and pirates and piracy became synonymous with a refusal to acquiesce in the official Portuguese system of controls articulated through the triadic grid of the *Cartaz Cafilla* and *Armada*. The *cartaz*, or trading permit issued under the discretion of the Portuguese official, symbolised the superior right of the Portuguese to determine and direct commercial transitions, while the *Cafilla* and the *Armada* was expected to not merely enforce the *cartaz* but to display the putative aspect of Portuguese naval strength.⁶

The effects were demonstrable. The state and its subjects preferred to work within the new maritime dispensation and exhibited no qualms in accepting Portuguese permits to transact their business across the seas. This act of acquiescence not merely suggested an indifference to the material potentialities of maritime power but also of its significance as an attribute of sovereignty. Even for the coastal governors with investments in trade, the issue never assumed larger dimensions and failed to trigger a major change in attitudes. The sultans of Gujarat did, on a couple of occasions, react and respond to the challenge offered by the Portuguese. The challenge essentially involved a violation of the principles of free navigation and trade in the Indian Ocean, an encroachment on custom revenues of port towns like Diu and Surat and the building of forts and fortifications that barely concealed intent of aggression. These factors, as far as the Sultans were concerned, were irritants but not