

Review Article

The Indian Ocean: Historians Writing History

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I

Between the 1960s and 1990s maritime histories, that is, histories of political activities on the sea, centering on European sea borne empires in Asia, dominated academic studies on the Indian Ocean.¹ Politics, monarchs and maps, admirals and their hydrographic charts and navigational instruments were the focus. Trade and bullion flows occupied centre stage.

¹ See C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800* (New York: Knopf, 1965); C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415-1825* (New York: Knopf, 1969); Geoffrey Vaughn Scammell, *The World Encompassed: The First European Maritime Empires, c. 800-1650* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981); J. H. Parry, *The Establishment of the European Hegemony, 1415-1715: Trade and Exploration in the Age of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), J. H. Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (1966; repr., Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), J. H. Parry, *Trade and Dominion: the European Oversea Empires in the Eighteenth Century* (1971; repr., Cheshire, UK: Phoenix Press, 2001), J. H. Parry, *The Discovery of the Sea* (1974; repr., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *The Portuguese Empire, 1415-1808: A World on the Move* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), among others.

The history that materialized from these contacts was primarily a naval history of Europe; it was a palette of ‘discoveries’ in a nautical canvas concentrating on the period between 1400 and 1800, a period when Europe ‘discovered’ the world. Travel literature, diaries, official company records and correspondence featured as source. Human endeavour and human agency occupied centre stage in such a history. What emerged was an imperial naval history of contact, plunder and trade, ending in conquest and colonization.

II

The downside to this maritime approach was that no agency was ascribed to non-European shipping and mercantile activities; they were generally absent in such accounts unless addressing a battle or naval skirmish. The maritime historian Ashin Das Gupta pointed this out as early as 1967.² Remaining greatly disturbed by this absence he attempted throughout his career to correct this imbalance.³

Yet another maritime historian, K N. Chaudhuri, who started his publishing career with the history of the trade of the English East India Company,⁴ also encountered this marginalization. He subsequently moved away from company-based history to study historical interactions over this vast waterscape, taking Islam’s expansion across the Indian Ocean as example. Lastly, Chaudhuri then posited Asia before Europe, simultaneously with Abu-

² Ashin Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade: 1740-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat: c. 1700-1750* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979); Ashin Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson, *India and the Indian Ocean 1500-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³ Ashin Das Gupta, *Merchants of Maritime India, 1500-1800* (Ashgate: Variorum, 1994).

⁴ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The English East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-Stock Company, 1600-1640* (London: F. Cass, 1965); K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

Lughod's *Before European Hegemony*. Both these works criticized Wallerstein's notion of a world system emanating from Europe. Frank's last work, *ReORIENT*, suggesting that the rise of the West was a myth—being a feat that was achieved by piggy backing on Asian shoulders—drove home the point decisively.⁵

III

From the purely political to the economic was a significant shift in maritime studies. A particular sub-category within maritime history that rose was maritime economic history, dealing primarily with the story of global flows of exchange, particularly of silver. This sub-category, emphasizing flows reinforcing older connectivities, endured in historical scholarship, and now occupies a prominent place in maritime studies.

Silver had connected the world. It created the Eurasian silver century long before the First Global Age between 1400 and 1800.⁶ During the latter the role of silver became even more central. Om Prakash wrote: “an important element in the rise of this economy was the integration of the Indian Ocean into the larger framework of world trade on a scale unimaginable before. Not only were the three principal segments of the early modern world economy—the New World, Europe, and Asia—now drawn into the vortex of world trade but there emerged also an organic and interactive relationship across the three segments whereby the growth of trade in one

⁵ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); A. G. Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

⁶ Akinobu Kuroda, “The Eurasian Silver Century 1276–1359: Commensurability and Multiplicity,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 2 (July 2009): 245-69.

direction became critically dependent on the growth of trade in the other.”⁷

Even earlier, when Arab and Persian traders traded across the Indian Ocean from the seventh-eighth centuries, silver coins had been the trade currency of the Indian Ocean, while usage of copper cash was the norm in Southeast Asia. China, lacking adequate supplies of both, repeatedly tried to break into the Indian Ocean trade by way of its paper currency, but was not successful; silver remaining the currency of long distance Indian Ocean trade until the nineteenth century. A ‘lesser’ currency—the *kauri* shell or *cypria moneta*—bridged the gap between silver and local currencies all along the Indian Ocean littoral.⁸

IV

This essay focuses on the Indian Ocean. The very term privileges India although the boundaries of this ocean also touch the African and Australian coastlines. Scholars have to grapple with this problem of nomenclature because Africa still remains largely unrepresented in most works on the Indian Ocean.⁹

⁷ Om Prakash, “The Great Divergence: Evidence from Eighteenth Century India,” (Paper Presented at the Seventh GEHN Conference at Istanbul, 11-12 September 2005): 5-6, http://www.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/GEHN/GEHNPdf/Conf7_PRakash.pdf. Accessed March 5 2013 and quoted with permission of author by email of March 5 2013; Dennis O. Flynn and Marie A. Lee, “East Asian Trade before/after 1590s Occupation of Korea: Modeling Imports and Exports in Global Context,” *Asian Review of World Histories* 1, no. 1 (January 2013), 117-49. See too the numerous Flynn and Giraldez publications on silver flows.

⁸ James Heimann, “Small change and ballast: Cowry trade and usage as an example of Indian Ocean economic history,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (1980): 48-69.

⁹ Recent publications are rectifying this. See Philippe Beaujard, *Les mondes de l’océan Indien*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); Philippe Beaujard, “The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems Before the Sixteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 16, no. 4 (December 2005): 411-65; Anne Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860/1925* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003); Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Miller, eds., *Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, vol. 1 of *Women in Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hof-

It is by now evident that Europe neither ‘discovered’ nor ‘created’ the Indian Ocean. But how did Asians view this space? Arab mapping of the Indian Ocean, the Korean Kangnido map of 1402, Cheng He’s fifteenth century maps, Javanese sea charts and Piri Reis’ maps in the sixteenth century *Kitab I Bahriye* show a working knowledge of the Indian Ocean world, although it is not always depicted accurately.

While Asians were certainly aware of this vast world, the Asian seas were confusing to European sailors, explorers and geographers and so the *cartographic* category of the ‘Indian’ Ocean was slow to capture the European imagination. The ‘Indian Ocean’ as a historical category arrived only in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Until then, European cartographers called this whole waterscape the ‘Indian Sea’. Therefore, we see that spatial narratives and historical events did not always move in synchronization.¹¹ The geographical imagination was far more diverse and a great deal richer than the historical mind was capable of grasping.

How can we see this world? Vink suggests we see it in terms of “‘the new thalassology’ of the ‘Greater Indian Ocean’, ‘Maritime Africa and Asia’, ‘Indian Ocean Rim’ or ‘Indian Ocean Africa and Asia’ [that] should combine the concepts of the ‘Asian Seas’ (Frank Broeze), ‘a string of closely related regional systems stretching from East Asia...to East Africa’, and ‘littoral societies’ (Michael Pearson) along the Indian Ocean Basin, extending inwards into the interior with ‘porous frontiers acting as filters through which the salt of the sea is gradually replaced by the silt of the land.’”¹²

meyr and Michael N. Pearson, eds. *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Johannesburg: UNISA Press, 2010) among others.

¹⁰ Rila Mukherjee, “Oceans Connect/Fragment: A Global View of the Eastern Indian Ocean,” in *Oceans Connect: Reflections on Water Worlds Across Time and Space*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (Delhi: Primus Books, 2013), 226-29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 223-24, 234.

¹² Markus P. M. Vink, “Indian Ocean Studies and the ‘New Thalassology,’” *Journal of Global History* 2, no.1 (March 2007): 53.

Amitav Ghosh sets his novels (*In an Antique Land*, *The Hungry Tide* and the first two novels in the Ibis trilogy) against the backdrop of the Indian Ocean, highlighting connections between various towns (Cairo, Madagascar, Cochin) and peoples (African, Creole, Arab, Indian, European, and Chinese), the action often taking place on boats (*Ibis*, *Mariamamma*), suggesting that people need a model of belonging beyond national frames.¹³ Kunal Basu, another contemporary novelist, has also situated *The Opium Clerk*, *The Japanese Wife* and *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* within waterscapes, which he perceives to be vehicles of both memory and desire.¹⁴

Much like Ghosh and Basu, Barendse sees the Indian Ocean as a very mobile space: "Rather than looking for 'essential elements' and *longues durées* in the Arabian seas, I propose to call it a constantly shifting and adaptive economic and social 'network.'...if one understands a 'network' as a number of nodal points standing in a few relations (social, religious, and economic) to other nodal points."¹⁵ Barendse visualizes his networks as being built on 'interlocking circuits of commerce' in the narrow seas, determining a purely internal trade within a similar interlocking complex of narrow seas. These were circuits that ignored imperial borders, and tied the region together as a common maritime border region or maritime zone.¹⁶ This network of exchanges was structured as 'a grid of maritime connections between a number of interlocking port towns.'¹⁷

¹³ Claire Chambers, "The Indian Ocean in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh," *Wasafiri* 26, no. 2 (June 2011): 87-91.

¹⁴ Water Conference, Institut de Chandernagor, December 2012. Now in press with the working title *Writing a Water History*.

¹⁵ Rene Barendse, "Trade and State in the Arabian Seas: A Survey from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

V

From the 2000s, as research on sea faring communities across the Indian Ocean progressed, there was a shift from maritime studies to a more inclusive oceanic history,¹⁸ pleading for the centrality of the sea, and not humans, in the writing of history and in which the works of Matsuda and D'Arcy are predominant.¹⁹

Hybridity, cosmopolitanism and alterity are some of the emerging themes, although these are essentially 'Mediterranean' concepts; others such as locating culture on board ship (extension of land based norms or purely maritime?),²⁰ and studying identity, violence and harmony are popular.²¹ Yet another theme in the same genre is maritime religion.²² Mazu, the Chinese maritime goddess, was worshipped in many coastal areas, not just in China but also across the eastern Indian Ocean rim. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were mobile and quite maritime from very early times and their exchanges across seas are apparent both in the persistence of beliefs and practices as well as in the artifacts that are now being excavated in Southeast Asia and China. Attention is also directed toward material culture and its practice: tales, songs and rituals, literature and music. The recently concluded Water History conference at the Institute de Chandernagor, India, focused on novel ways of studying waterscapes and building an archive on water his-

¹⁸ Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford India Paperbacks, 1993); M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹ Matt K. Matsuda, "Ocean-Based Histories - The Pacific," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 758-80; Paul D'Arcy, "Sea Worlds: Pacific and Southeast Asian History centered on the Philippines," in *Oceans Connect*, ed. Rila Mukherjee, 23-38; Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

²⁰ M. N. Pearson, "Water and History: Some Skeptical Notes," forthcoming in *Writing a Water History*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (working title).

²¹ See various studies by M.N. Pearson and Anthony Reid, to name a few.

²² Michel Mollat, *Europe and the Sea* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993); Tsu Yun Hui, "Between Heaven and the Deep Sea: The Religious Practice of Chinese Seafarers from The Eleventh to the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *East Asian History* 23 (June 2002): 69-86.

tory.²³

Consequently new archives have emerged with categories such as object biographies and shipwreck studies.²⁴ New spatial contours are visible in Indian Ocean studies; Africa, the China seas and the eastern Mediterranean world are now included under this rubric.

One of the most influential contributions in the new century was the concept of similar littoral societies dotting shorelines across the Indian Ocean by Pearson. Quoting Steinberg's notion of two seas: the coastal zone, susceptible to regulation by state-controlled actors and the deep sea, Pearson writes: "Are there then two Indian Oceans, one pelagic, the other littoral or benthic? Or are there more? Does the ocean include other places: port cities; islands; the hinterlands and/or the forelands of port cities? And if so how far inland must we go before the ocean influence ends? What about estuaries?"²⁵

Pearson pointed to the malign effect of the American Area Studies programme by remarking that "Surat and Mombasa have more in common with each other than they do with inland cities such as Nairobi or Ahmadabad. Yet this is not yet widely accepted. In a complaint against the dead hand of area studies and its effects on academic work, Erik Gilbert recently pointed out that one can

²³ December 19-22, 2012 at Kolkata and Chandernagore. See *Times of India*, December 21, 2012, "World Experts in City to Chart History of Waves"; *Times of India*, July 14, 2013, "Researchers Chart Bengal's River History: Archive on Anvil"; Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Writing a Water-Based History* (Delhi: Primus Books) (forthcoming).

²⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/exploreraltflash/>; Kenneth R. Hall, "Indonesia's Evolving International Relationships In The Ninth To Early Eleventh Centuries: Evidence From Contemporary Shipwrecks And Epigraphy," *Indonesia* 90 (October 2010): 1-31; Michael Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation of the 10th Century: Intan Shipwreck* (Archaeopress, 2002); Michael Flecker, "Miscellaneous Artefacts: Identifications and Implications," 658-705, http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/documents/belitung/The%20Belitung%20Wreck/22_flecker_misc_kat_656to705.pdf. Accessed March 6, 2013. Other than the Belitung and Intan wrecks, see reports on the Cirebon wreck.

²⁵ Michael N. Pearson, "History of the Indian Ocean: A Review Essay," *Wasafiri* 26, no. 2 (June 2011): 78-99, 82.

get a grant to compare Zanzibar and Gambia, but not to compare Zanzibar and Aden or Calicut.”²⁶ In another publication he noted that “In the United States after the Second World War, Eurocentrism was rectified to an extent by the funding of Area Studies programmes...While this had the commendable advantage of turning more attention to the non-European world (and even this terminology is objectionable, for it makes ‘Europe’ the default category), it still imposed straitjackets on what could be studied. One could compare two areas within Africa, but not two related areas if one was in Africa and one in India. Casablanca and Zanzibar were considered to be capable of being compared, but not Mombasa and Cochin.”²⁷

Littorals connect and the littoral is consequently a mutable and porous place, marked by the circulation of various objects (for trade, for diplomacy, as religious relics, as gifts of power etc.), beliefs, peoples and languages (Arabic, Portuguese, Malay, Chinese).

VI

In the new millennium there has been a further shift; this time from oceanic history to a more specific water-based history, which interrogates archives on sea and oceanscapes and also takes into account the impact of rivers, tanks and lakes on human history. This vision also has the advantage of enabling us to study constituent waterscapes of oceans; in the Indian Ocean the Red and Arabian Seas, the Bay of Bengal, the Java, Sulu, Timor and Flores seas, for example.

Emergent themes are ecology and environmental history, climate history, coastal history and maritime/salvage archaeology. The emphasis is on a maritime cultural landscape. Boundaries,

²⁶ Michael N. Pearson, “Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems,” *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (December 2006): 353-373, 354.

²⁷ Pearson, “History of the Indian Ocean,” 79.

connections and connectivities remain important and historical cartography plays an important role. Social networks visible in ports among traders (commodities, financial flows, trust) and the role of the state (law, justice) are studied.²⁸

But water history is not just about waters. Upstream/downstream connectivities are emphasized, as are overland routes that are seen as part of an oceanic world and whereby far-flung, landlocked regions form part of a maritime cultural landscape as well.²⁹

VII

This essay presents the history of the Indian Ocean world as world history. However, for many scholars the dividing line between a de-centered regional history and world history remains vague, many regional histories appearing as world histories. This is something we need to be aware of, as also the question of time when writing a world history.

Anne Bang pointed out the pitfalls of inserting local histories into a world history paradigm when she wrote that:

²⁸ Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund, eds., *Emporia, Commodities and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c. 1400-1750* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991); Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Vanguards of Globalization: Port-Cities from the Classical to the Modern* (forthcoming, Primus Books, 2013), Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Networks in the First Global Age 1400-1800* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011); Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, *A questao da pimenta em Meados do Seculo XVI: Um Debate Politico do Governo de D. Joao de Castro* (Lisboa: CEPCEP, 1998).

²⁹ K. R. Hall, "Unification of the Upstream and Downstream in Southeast Asia's First Islamic Polity: The Changing Sense of Community in the Fifteenth-Century Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai Court Chronicle," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44, no. 2 (2001): 198-229; Bin Yang, "Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective," *Journal of World History* 15, no. 3 (September 2004): 281-322; Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen, eds., *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010); Rila Mukherjee, "Introduction," in *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal before Colonialism*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 1-260; Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647-68.

...in the past two decades, the field of Indian Ocean studies has manifested a specific discourse which goes beyond the local and focuses instead on inter-civilizational encounters and the ensuing cultural change. Words like ‘hybrid’, ‘polyphonic’, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘pluralist’, ‘multi-cultural’ can be found in most academic works on Indian Ocean culture and history and reflect the emphasis on *movement* and *exchange* as starting points. Authors of full-scale Indian Ocean histories have tended to focus on migration resulting from the regularity of the monsoon, emphasizing trade, religious linkages or family networks spanning the ocean....What these studies have in common is the concept of *translocality*, both as an overarching research perspective and as reference to empirical realities. However, what these studies also have in common is the problematic (and to varying degrees resolved) relationship between local narratives and the wider, global history into which they inevitably play. In localities, perceptions of the present world—and the past world—are created and re-created. In these localities are also produced what historians call ‘sources’—be they written, material or transmitted in the form of narratives. The relationship between the source, the locality and the other locations it directly or indirectly refers to, is one that the historian of the Indian Ocean (or of the localities of the Indian Ocean) will need to ponder.³⁰

Is the ocean a theater for world history, or merely a stage for a regional history? With what tools—archival and conceptual—can the historian or archaeologist navigate this vast space? The recent Manguin, Mani and Wade ed. volume re-examines the links between South and Southeast Asia in terms of cross-cultural exchange and localization.³¹ Yet another way forward would be a particular spatial focus through a study of social networks: such as at a

³⁰ Anne K. Bang, “Reflections on the History of the Indian Ocean: the Sources and their Relation to Local Practices and Global Connectivities,” *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4, no. 2, (November 2009): 1-3, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>. Accessed August 11, 2010: 1-3.

³¹ Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade, eds., *Early Interactions Between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore: ISEAS; India: Manohar, 2011).

specific port. See for example Sidebotham's *Berenike*, or the forthcoming *Vanguards*.³²

Regional histories can and do go a long way toward opening up waterscapes, see for example the tribute-volume to one of the foremost historians of Southeast Asia, Anthony Reid. Reid sought to position Indonesia, not just in the Melaka Straits but also in discrete waterscapes across the eastern, and sometimes also the western, Indian Ocean. Focusing on Southeast Asia's place in the world, this volume covers Southeast Asian interactions over the *longue duree* and contains essays by celebrated Southeast Asianists such as Victor B. Lieberman, Wang Gungwu, the late Denys Lombard, James Warren, Ishii Yoneo, Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya.³³ Just as large parts of Southeast Asia are truly pelagic and part of the larger history of the region, its interactions over time and space also make it a part of world history. Paradoxically, and at the same time, regional histories of Indian Ocean lands have undergone a structural shift away from space, thereby privileging place or location.

VIII

In conclusion, Indian Ocean studies have seen shifts in emphasis from the purely political to the economic, from the centrality of the human to the leading role played by the geographical category of the sea, from the marginality of water-based archives to the essentiality of the same, from local history to world history and from world history to place-based histories once again. The way forward is promising and as more and more studies emerge, either of the

³² Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*. California World History Library, 18 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011); Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Vanguards of Globalization: Port-Cities from the Classical to the Modern* (forthcoming, Primus Books, 2013).

³³ Geoff Wade and Li Tana, eds., *Anthony Reid and the Study of the Southeast Asian Past* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

whole ocean or a constituent part of the same, we can look forward to an exciting crop of new discoveries, theories, and speculations. Imagination, after all, is the stuff of history.