



CULTURES OF TRADE
INDIAN OCEAN EXCHANGES

EDITED BY

DEVLEENA GHOSH
STEPHEN MUECKE

The revival of interest in the Indian Ocean is taking it into the interdisciplinary direction of Cultural Studies. Today, this new scholarship is faced with two major challenges.

Firstly, the re-emergence of the economic strength of East and South Asia means new cultural and commercial developments, and secondly there is the challenge to map Indian Ocean cultural identities in the complex of cultural exchanges between global and local.

The pre-colonial Indian Ocean hosted the first global economy and today that history is repeated in the new markets that have developed in the new post-colonial and globalised era—from spices to television.

In narrating the cultures of exchange in the Indian Ocean, the contributors to this volume show how culture adds value to commodities and how cultures of trade created the complex of religions, ethnicities and ways of living in and by the sea that is the Indian Ocean today.

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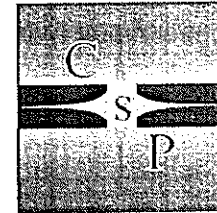


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CHAPTER ONE

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 Expedit 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-colonial 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 more (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 Hecker "value-adds" by poeticising in "The Golden Journey to Samarqand":

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 post 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 process of the Industrial Revolution since it provided European workers with the necessary foodstuffs when the peasants became industrial workers. Factory life 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