INTRODUCTION

Oceanic Circularities:

Mobile People and Connected Places in the Indian Ocean

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Over the past five millennia, plants, animals, people, languages, ideas, religions, technologies, and a vast array of raw and manufactured commodities have circulated along the watery highways connecting East Africa with the Persian Gulf, South and Southeast Asia, and China. Yet imperial and national historiographic traditions as much as the presentist bias of the dominant social sciences have, until recently, prevented scholars from exploring the multifaceted connections between distant places and peoples across the Indian Ocean rim. In comparison with scholarship on the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds, the study of Indian Ocean circularities is a relatively new field of study even as it pushes us to rethink global history.

Since 2014, the Indian Ocean Working Group (IOWG) in Georgetown University has brought together researchers on our Washington and Doha campuses and from every inhabited continent to build collaborative expertise across the boundaries of traditional area studies. Georgetown’s branch campus in Qatar has a distinctive location that puts us at the crossroads between landmasses labeled traditionally as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and indeed, Europe and North America. As we work with new archives, fieldsites, and scholarly interlocutors, we endeavor to consolidate existing knowledge as well as create new knowledge on oceanic circularities in the Indian Ocean. We showcase this new knowledge not only through books and articles, but also via a growing online multimedia portal on which images, maps, blog posts, and podcasts that trace circularities across the Indian Ocean.

 At the core of our volume is the interdisciplinary concept of “oceanic circularities,” by which we mean the flows of people, commodities, and ideas that tie together places across the Indian Ocean. These flows are not simply linear or unidirectional. They are, as we explain below, *circular* insofar as port cities and coasts have been, historically speaking, key nodes interlinked via maritime highways. As people moved to and from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Western India, they continually traversed old sea routes in new ways. Notions of ethnicity and faith as much as those of slavery and servitude have thus come to be defined (and redefined) recursively, albeit in ways that defy any naive romantic view of globalization before modernity. Yet, in deploying the concept of circularities, we seek to emphasize how they contribute to the shared, cosmopolitan nature of oceanic spaces in which overlapping conceptions of the self and others have emerged over centuries and millennia. The study of oceanic circularities, in other words, moves us beyond the traditional boundaries of area studies to show what historians and social scientists might learn from the Indian Ocean across time and space.

We draw on prior historical and anthropological work on the Indian Ocean and inter-Asian connections[[1]](#footnote-0). We also draw on a growing body of historical scholarship that deals with slavery and empire in the Indian Ocean worlds[[2]](#footnote-1). Lastly, scholars have traced imperial and anti-imperial connections across the Indian Ocean[[3]](#footnote-2). Our contribution in this volume moves beyond any particular region, but it also avoids attributing an artificial unity to the Indian Ocean in its entirety. We follow K.N. Chaudhuri’s pioneering *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge University Press, 1983) that launched the field of Indian Ocean Studies. For Chaudhuri, the western Indian Ocean stood out as a distinct transregional space in economic and cultural terms. Going beyond Chaudhuri, however, we bring the Swahili Coast in East Africa into a three-way conversation with the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf as well as the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, the oceanic space is itself better understood as an Afro-Asian ocean rather than an Indian one (as labeled by British imperial administrators).

Additionally, our core concept of “oceanic circularities” goes well beyond maritime commerce and the cosmopolitan connections forged by it. The articles in the volume tackle vexed questions of race and slavery, modern empires and their legacies, as well as religious, ethnic, and ideological networks that crisscross our area of study. It is not our contention that the Indian Ocean offers an exotic case study of cosmopolitanism and commerce prior to modern imperialism and the forms of globalization to which it has given rise. On the contrary, our volume straddles different historical eras to show how culture, power, and history are intertwined inextricably in both pre-modern and modern oceanic circularities.

Taken together, the contributions to this volume push us to consider, firstly, what makes the Indian Ocean distinctive as a connected space of exchange and mobility, and, secondly, what *oceanic circularities* might teach us about how mobile people shape places and cultures that are often taken to be static, typically terrestrial, “nations” and “civilizations.”

Indian Ocean Circularities: A Spatio-Temporal Approach

The Indian Ocean, much like the Mediterranean basin, has been crisscrossed by people, ideas, and goods for over five millennia. Slaves and freedmen, traders and travelers, wives and concubines: all of them have moved between ports on the vast littoral that spans from the eastern seaboard of Africa to the southeastern archipelagos of Australasia. In studying the cultural flows and exchanges that accompanied mobile groups across this watery expanse, we take a distinctive approach that highlights certain key spatio-temporal features of the Indian Ocean. *Oceanic circularities* refers to the non-linear modes of mobility that resemble recursive loops in space and time. Implicit in this definition is the idea of returning home again and again, albeit in ways that render homecoming a shifting kaleidoscope of old and new sensory experiences. Yet it is not simply a to-and-fro motion between two fixed points on a map. We are dealing instead with cartographic *lignes d’erre* (“wander lines” or “errant lines”), as proposed by the French educator Fernand Deligny, in which circular mobilities criss-cross and invariably lead to novel places and experiences that rupture familiar patterns and modes of traversing oceanic space[[4]](#footnote-3).

“Circulation” has been used in the past to describe human mobilities within fixed or stable circuits and networks. In early modern South Asia, Markovits, Pouchepadass, and Subrahmanyam (2003) explore itinerant groups and forms of circulation within the Indian subcontinent. The circulation of people is, here, akin to the circulation of blood in animal bodies. We draw on this analogy insofar as “[i]n circulating, things, men, and notions often transform themselves” in “incremental” fashion (ibid. 3), but reject the mechanistic nature of mobility implied by the circulatory metaphor. As some of the contributors in this volume show, circularities break out of or disrupt fixed circuits of movement to spill over into new routes and loci. Coral architecture, for example, spread to the Swahili coast from islands much farther east in surprising ways. Similarly, the ivory trade between British East Africa and the Bombay Presidency grew out of the “Anglo-bania” collaborative nexus that bankrolled ships and wars in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea[[5]](#footnote-4). Pre-existing patterns of circulation are, in other words, superseded in critical ways by social actors in pursuit of power, prestige, or perhaps, simply serendipity. New circularities, in our terms, do not merely follow older ones even as they grow out of the latter. Often, we are dealing with triadic connections between regions we now label “Africa”, the “Middle East,” and “South Asia,” though such labels would make little sense to the people and societies whose experiences are at the heart of this volume. This is why we turn to Deligny’s *lignes d’erre* that defy formal techniques of mapping and instead privilege agency and contingency.

Circularities also build on recent scholarship in development studies on “circular

migration” but departs from it significantly. Much of this scholarship is a response to the growing realization in policy and academic circles during the 2000s that overseas remittances to families back home are a crucial component of the migration process today[[6]](#footnote-5). As with circulation, circular migration, too, connotes a fairly fixed binary of “home” and “abroad,” though movements of persons, objects, and money are assumed to transform notions of home in a dynamic manner. Development economists have also focused narrowly on remittance economies, and even the broader concept of “social remittances”[[7]](#footnote-6) suggest, somewhat patronizingly, that sociocultural flows move from more to less wealthy regions. Indian Ocean circularities have neither been driven solely or primarily by economistic factors, nor does the concept convey cultural flows modeled along the lines of biochemical osmosis. Contributors to this volume tell fascinating tales of Goans that travel along Lusophone imperial circuits via Oman to the island of Zanzibar, and of the longstanding transoceanic ties that bind Persian Gulf societies to northern and western India. Our spatio-temporal approach in this volume does not, therefore, privilege economic relations or binaries of home/abroad as we present complex portraits of mutual exchanges between overlapping cultures and regions across the Indian Ocean littoral. In this context, oceanic circularities are as much aesthetic and affect-laden as they are of people and things moving from port to port.

 Our circularities approach takes seriously, what Michael Pearson (2003) has called the “deep structures” of the Indian Ocean as a driver of human mobilities. These structures consist of the monsoon winds that change direction seasonally, oceanic currents that interact with the monsoons to produce distinctive ecological zones along the littoral, and the land barriers that restrict or prevent population flows and encourage maritime navigation. All three structural factors act together to enable as well as constrain flows and exchanges across the Indian Ocean. As climate ecologies and histories of the Indian Ocean gain prominence, we now had better appreciate that droughts in a certain region may lead to a spurt in the transoceanic slave trade to another region and military conquests in an altogether different place[[8]](#footnote-7). The triadic connections between East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian subcontinent form the geographic focus of this volume. These regions or “sub-spaces”[[9]](#footnote-8) are interlinked by the deep structures of the ocean itself. Until 1800 CE, it is fair to say that the interlinkages between disparate peoples and places also implied a kind of hidden, even mystical, unity amongst them[[10]](#footnote-9). Seemingly, incompatible cultures and ideas have come to exist cheek by jowl or in layered ethnic hierarchies over sedimented time. In this regard, we ought to remind ourselves that connectedness and shared structures are critical ingredients of Indian Ocean circularities, but they do not necessarily permit us to romanticize this transregional space as one marked by hybridity and cosmopolitanism. Ethnocracies and enslavement, lest we forget, are as much a part of Indian Ocean histories as hospitality and neighborliness.

 Our circularities approach also carries implications for the study of ethnicity and diasporas in the Indian Ocean. As people move between places along the littoral, they also become interlocking elements that bind those places to each other. To speak of “littoral societies” is, strictly speaking, somewhat misleading. As Engseng Ho has pointed out, the oft-used notion of “society,” derived from the work of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and William Robertson Smith, rests on assumptions of methodological holism that do not gel well with inter-Asian cultural dynamics[[11]](#footnote-10). Interlocking mosaic societies manage an overwhelming ethnic heterogeneity through political accommodations at the top and hierarchical relations that link groups and individuals vertically. As the interlocking parts of these intertwined societies circulate, a spectacular kaleidoscopic diversity becomes visible to outsiders even as the faith and kin networks that sustain everyday life remain relatively opaque. Contributors to this volume probe into these social networks on which oceanic circularities rest, for instance, the *hajj* pilgrims and Sufi saints and shrines that continue to inform Gulf-Africa relations and the diasporic networks through which ideas of Islamic modernism spread from Ottoman Arabia to the Dutch East Indies. Mobile networks and itinerant individuals are, in a sense, the protagonists that propel and sustain oceanic circularities. Inter-ethnic cooperation and connections coexist with overt and latent boundary markers that distinguish, say, Gujarati Bohras from their Patel counterparts or Syro-Malabar Catholics from the Orthodox Christians of Kerala. As people move, however, their sense of belonging and identity transform over time. Old places acquire new meanings, and new destinations become familiar via socio-religious networks. Cultural borrowings do not necessarily lead to creolization, but equally, the historical constitution of Gulf societies suggests that legacies of both slavery and creoleness may be at work. These are no “melting pots,” as suggested by the familiar US multicultural metaphor, but layered cakes of multi-local households and ethnicities in flux in which cosmopolitan ethics and the cold-eyed logic of hierarchy are mutually imbricated.

This is an ethnoscape rather far from the North Atlantic world, dominated as it is by nation-states, emanating out of post-Reformation Europe, that promise equal citizenship in exchange for varying degrees of homogeneity. Of course, modern imperialism, most notably the British presence in the Indian Ocean, fostered new forms of unity and fragmentation across littoral societies. Older circularities and their accompanying conceptions of identity and belonging came to inform new ones as mobile people and networks began making use of the new technologies of the steamship and telegraph to transform their sociocultural worlds. New conceptions of imperial citizenship emerged alongside communities of anti-colonial resistance[[12]](#footnote-11). Regimes of “free” indentured labor grew out of the debris of “unfree” forms of slavery and servitude in the Indian Ocean. The cultural mosaic of this vast oceanic space has been repackaged now into a postcolonial order of nation-states. Yet bloody civil wars and inter-ethnic conflict are far more common now in a world of territorial fixes. Even then, despite the ravages of European imperialism and the traumatic legacies it left behind, transoceanic circularities continue to inform the cultural sensibilities and mores of people across distant coastal communities. In the myriad worlds of the Indian Ocean, “home” is still, as some of our contributors show, understood in the plural, but it is also, ineluctably, a mix of the familiar and the strange.

An Outline of the Volume

The volume consists of sixteen papers, divided into five sections. These sections cohere around our core concept of “oceanic circularities” and situate it within recent scholarship on commercial and cultural exchanges and mobilities in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans as well as the Mediterranean Sea. They highlight everyday lived practices of race, ethnicity, and faith that took shape betwixt and between Africa, Arabia, and India as people and goods circulated through ports and their hinterlands. Our focus on the shared, interconnected space of the Indian Ocean leads us to consider both convergences and divergences in how disparate regions and peoples came to see themselves and others over time. Without romanticizing cosmopolitan connections, the introduction to the volume lays out why the Indian Ocean merits scholarly attention and what it offers to scholars interested in slavery, capitalism, imperialism, migration, diasporas, and intercultural understanding.

1. Slavery, Empire and Race

This section probes into a distinct set of circularities in the western Indian Ocean. Teelock and Sheriff show that the history of slavery in this part of the Indian Ocean goes back to the seventh century CE, when East African (*zanj*) slaves were brought from the Swahili coast to the Arabian Peninsula as a lucrative business that persisted well into the nineteenth century[[13]](#footnote-12). These circularities came under attack when the British claimed Mauritius in 1810 and, by the Moresby Treaty of 1822, a ban was imposed on the slave trade from Zanzibar to points south. Missionaries, explorers, administrators, and subsequently, historians of the region redeployed Atlantic models of slavery and abolition to describe patterns and processes in the western Indian Ocean. Yet, as slew of scholars have now ably demonstrated via official archives of sale and manumission and ethnohistories, significant differences exist between the Indian Ocean and its transatlantic counterpart[[14]](#footnote-13). Gwyn Campbell writes:

Views of plantation slavery in the Americas have largely formed the context for research into slavery in the 'non-European' world. Attention focused first on western Africa, source of the bulk of the 10 million to 12 million slaves shipped to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Subsequently it expanded to include other African slave sources, African slave exports to the Middle East and European islands in the Indian Ocean, and intra-African slave trades and systems of slavery.[[15]](#footnote-14)

Campbell goes on to elaborate on the nuances and intricacies of slavery in the IO to set it apart from that of the Atlantic. In particular, racial differences did not primarily drive the slave trade. Alpers has, much like Campbell, argued that slavery in the western Indian Ocean claimed a particular “Islamic” form whereby domestic slaves and masters remained locked in patronage ties even after their manumission. At the same time, Alpers also shows that many plantation slaves (*shamba*) ran away from their masters, a flight that the very topography of the Islands eased, and patronage ties did not develop as a result[[16]](#footnote-15). These similarities and differences are instructive when comparing slavery as an institution in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.

In his contribution to this volume, Edward A. Alpers attempts to recover the voices of East African captives “liberated” by British naval vessels during their passage from Omani Zanzibar across the Mozambique Channel to the Comoros Islands and Madagascar. Although such trafficking of human beings had been barred by the Anglo-Omani treaty of 1873, the maritime transportation of enslaved Africans to both Zanzibar and Pemba, and across the Mozambique Channel to the Comoros and Madagascar where labor continued to be in demand, persisted. Based on published and archival testimonies by both Britons and Africans involved in this traffic, he delves into the experiences of those captive Africans who were “liberated” by British naval vessels that intercepted *dhows* en route to these African islands during the first decade of the illegal maritime slave trade. The voices of these “liberated” Africans provide us with an invaluable set of perspectives on the experience of enslavement and maritime passage in late nineteenth-century East Africa and, thereby, contribute to our appreciation of oceanic circularities in the modern Indian Ocean world.

Emilio Ocampo Eibenschutz shows how slave markets in Muscat and Zanzibar became key sites of colonial knowledge production in the latter half of the nineteenth century through the production of official documents and first-hand testimonies. These archival sources contributed directly to abolitionist discourses and memorials that reimagined Britain as a slave-less empire of free trade in the Indian Ocean. This reimagined legacy is important in the context of modern-day Zanzibar, where British colonial sources are used in the memorialization of the slave trade. Reading records of the Western Indian Ocean slave trade, including first-hand accounts of slave markets, he probes into these sites of memory-making as they unfolded in British abolitionist rhetoric. He also examines parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, and illustrations to situate slave markets as spaces of rhetorical relevance for imperial geopolitical interests. By 1873, these discourses led to the prohibition of slave markets as well as to the transformation of the site of Zanzibar’s last slave market into an Anglican cathedral. The site still stands today, not only as a house of worship, but also as a memorial and exhibition of the East African slave trade that relies on British sources.

Taken together, the two papers in this section offer a unique set of insights into the oceanic circularities through which we might understand the entanglements and legacies of race, empire, and slavery that bind together the Arabian Peninsula with East Africa.

2. Maritime Islam

This section probes into the oceanic circularities generated by Islam as faith and identity. It works with but also rethinks the idea of the pre-modern Indian Ocean, especially its western part, as an “Islamic lake” until British encroachments in the nineteenth century. The papers in this section show that, not only did faith networks persist into the colonial and postcolonial eras, ideas of reform and revival are central to the remaking of littoral societies in the past two centuries. In the case of Gulf-Africa relations, for example, Islamic networks and allegiances also shape contemporary foreign policy or geopolitical ties, particularly in the old Omani imperial world carved out within the British Indian Ocean. These networks and allegiances, much like those sketched out by Nile Green in *Bombay Islam* or by Eric Tagliacozzo and M. Christopher Low in their books on *hajj* in the age of steamship empires, are best understood in comparative perspective[[17]](#footnote-16). As a recent book by Mirjam Lücking on religious and labor mobilities between Indonesians and the Arab world tells us, the socio-religious worlds of the Indian Ocean even today are shaped by its myriad pasts[[18]](#footnote-17).

Anne Katrine Bang examines hajj pilgrimages undertaken by two East African Muslim scholars in the new steamships introduced by British imperial overlords. Being one of the fundamentals of Islamic observance, while also becoming more readily accessible through the incorporation of East Africa into global steam shipping, *ḥajj* travel increased in the period 1850-1950. However, it is striking that descriptions of the *ḥajj* itself take up only limited space in the travel accounts (*riḥlāt*) produced by East Africans in the period. Rather, these authors describe at length their encounters with famous shaykhs and visits to graves and mosques, while also quoting at length poetry and *dhikr* recited on the occasion. Bang argues that travelers tended to emphasize esoteric authority in the form of encounters with *shaykhs* dead and alive over normative rituals such as the *ḥajj*. She also investigates the journey itself, following the lead of researchers who have pointed out the ways in which networks shifted as modes of transport changed from dhow traffic to steamships to the airplane. Modern transport, she shows, sped up the actual travel, yet scholarly and family networks remained central to forming itineraries. Lastly, Bang tracks the substantial funding and organizational efforts that went into the *ḥajj*. Even if the *ḥajj* itself was allocated a few words in the writings of famous scholars, the *ḥajj* remained essential to East African Muslim identity via the forging of esoteric religious networks between Arabia and East Africa.

Ahmad Ibrahim Abushouk studies the life and work of a Sudanese scholar, Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad al-Surkitti (1876–1943), whose fourteen years in Mecca and Medina prefigured his role as a leading Islamic reformer in early twentieth-century Indonesia. His chapter traces the early life and career of al-Surkitti in Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and critically assesses his contribution to the *islah* and *tajdid* movements in the Malay-Indonesian world. al-Surkitti’s intellectual and religio-political discord and conflict with the Alawi traditionalists is contextualized in relation to Hadrami identity and discourse between “orthodox Islam” propagated by Surkitti and his followers and “popular Islam” that gave the Alawi *sayyids* special recognition in their home society in Hadramaut and diaspora in Indonesia. These conflicts push us to revise our inherited notions of orthodoxy and reform in the Indian Ocean world.

Courtney Freer proceeds in a similar vein to show how the unique form of Ibadi Islam practiced in Oman is best understood as a transnational community in the Indian Ocean with the former Omani imperial capital of Zanzibar as a key site of religious diffusion. When it comes to the study of Ibadi religious traditions, there tends to be an Oman-centric bias, which Freer seeks to redress. In addition to assessing the extent of religious connections interlocking these specific littoral societies and de-centering the study of Ibadism, she also makes a contribution to current scholarship on Oman by examining the degree to which geopolitical changes in Oman’s foreign policy relationship with East Africa in general have been influenced by religious heritage above and beyond matters of security or trade. For Freer, the aim is to assess how cultural, and particularly religious, capital matters when it comes to connections between the Gulf and Africa via Indian Ocean circularities.

3. Cultural Production and Social Imaginaries

This section takes us on a voyage to the cultural productions and social imaginaries brought to life by oceanic circularities. From coral stone as a littoral building technology to creole confections made from milk curds, the papers in this section delve into the material and aesthetic histories of the Indian Ocean. Taken together, they shed new light on our understandings of mobility and enslavement in littoral regions, opening up hitherto unexplored lines of inquiry into the formation and spread of coral architectures and creole confections across the ocean.

Stéphane Pradines’ paper traces the use of fresh porite coral as construction material in the Indian Ocean since late antiquity. Drawing on two decades of archaeological research, Pradines focuses on the Maldives and Sri Lanka as little-known centers of coral stone architecture which spread via Abbasid mariners and Indo-Islamic trade as far as the Swahili Coast in the west and the Indonesian archipelago in the east. From pre-Islamic Buddhist shrines to vast compounds of cemeteries and mosques in later Muslim settlements, Pradines’ excavation findings show us how porite coral stone remained an ubiquitous building technology that circulated for millennia in Indian Ocean trading networks. Through this distinctive marine product and the architectural styles and material cultures to which it gave rise, we can appreciate the tangible nature of oceanic circularities across littoral worlds.

Ananya Jahana Kabir and Esha Sil juxtapose disparate cultural texts creatively to show how *sandesh* and *rosogolla*, two well-known Bengali sweets made out of milk curds (*chhana*) are, in fact, creole confections produced in the crucible of trade and commerce in the Portuguese Indian Ocean. Creolization in Bengal emerges in their paper as a complex, multifaceted process through which local actors in the mofussil encountered and engaged with circulating tastes and aesthetics that bound them to far-away lands across the Indian Ocean. Taste, they also argue, is curiously intertwined with sonic sensibilities as they have been memorialized over time in Bengali nursery rhymes and popular songs. Only by grappling with the sensorium of Indian Ocean circularities can we make better sense of how interconnected littoral societies have imagined their relationship to the ocean.

4. Afro-Asian Connections

This section delves into the triadic commercial and political exchanges between the Asian, Arabian, and African landmasses. These exchanges figured prominently in wide ranging archeological, linguistic, and commercial interdependencies throughout history since the invention of the dhow. Chhaya Goswami presents a close study of the Kachchhi merchant networks and commercial exchanges that lay at the heart of the ivory trade in nineteenth-century Zanzibar. She details how ivory tusks sourced from eastern and central Africa were processed in manufacturing units in western India before it circulated in the form of piano keys, ornaments, chess pieces and other items of luxury consumption across Indian Ocean worlds and as far as New England. The sociocultural prestige attached to ivory came to be tied inextricably to the Afro-Asian connections that sustained oft-overlooked circuits of commodity capitalism.

Despite calls for transcending Eurocentrism, historians have portrayed the modern Indian Ocean as a space for the ultimate concourse of British hegemony. This is, as Nicholas Roberts shows, rooted in the idea that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Indian Ocean had become a “British lake.” Roberts challenges this idea by drawing upon sources scattered across a dozen archives in multiple languages to investigate the international relations of capitalism in Zanzibar under Saʿid bin Sultan. Rather than being a time and space in which the British planted roots for their domination, he argues that Omani power remained dominant until after Saʿid’s death in 1856. By weaving together the relationships between Saʿid, the American Consul, and the British Consul in Zanzibar, Roberts shows how the British were aware of their own relative weakness throughout Saʿid’s domains, constantly frustrated by Saʿid’s independence and by American commercial superiority. While the Americans might have bested the Brits over time, the commercial power brokers in this time were Omani and Indian entrepreneurs, who set up a thriving system of what economists today call financial intermediation. Omani merchants preferred to work with American traders because of a shared entrepreneurial spirit of enterprise. By unpacking Omani commercial superiority in the Age of Saʿid bin Sultan, Roberts demonstrates why scholars ought to look as much to Afro-Asian connections in places like Muscat and Zanzibar as much as Atlantic connections in England and New England to understand the history of our present-day global economy.

Chhaya Goswami presents a close study of the Kachchhi merchant networks based in western India and their commercial exchanges with British East Africa that lay at the heart of the ivory trade in nineteenth-century Indian Ocean trade and commerce. Kachchhi capital and credit played vital and varied roles in these exchanges from the interior of east and central Africa to the ivory-ware industries of Ivoryton and Connecticut in New England on the one hand, and manufacturing pockets of Kachchh, Rajputana, and the Bombay Presidency on the other. Merchant organizations, interpersonal ties between trading partners, both within regions and across the Ocean, the means of exchange, and the social and cultural values given to goods and commodities transcended space, class, and culture. Tracing the panoptic circularities of ivory, capital and artistry, Goswami lays out the structure, investments, circulation, marketing, retailing, and the consumption patterns associated with East African ivory in the 19th century. The multiple and changing social and cultural values attached to the use of ivory shaped these trends and, in a sense, created a globalised market economy. The sociocultural prestige attached to ivory came to be tied inextricably, as Goswami shows, to the Afro-Asian connections that sustained oft-overlooked circuits of commodity capitalism.

Pamila Gupta explores another instance of Indian Ocean circularities in the age of modern imperialism in her paper on the Goan minority in Zanzibar and the eastern seaboard of Africa. This little-known community sat at its frayed seams of Omani Sultans (1698-1964) and British Protectorate status (1890-1963), particularly after the majority left during the Afro-Shirazi revolution of 1964. Earlier, Goans moved within circuits of Portuguese and British imperial imperium, taking advantage of creative and commercial opportunities overseas. Through the medium of photography, Goans became indispensable chroniclers of elite and everyday life over the past century. Gupta recuperates their history, and time and placeness, through the practice of photography. Capital Art Studio on the island of Zanzibar offers a peek into what photographic images produced by oceanic circularities can tell us about forgotten Afro-Asian connections. Ranchhod Oza, the proprietor of CAS, was visually attuned to their work of adornment as Stone Town’s bakers, tailors, and photographers during the 1950s. His photographs show the relational qualities of these Goan professions in this cosmopolitan Indian Ocean port. At the end of her paper, Gupta turns to two contemporary Goan photographers John da Silva and Robin Batista to show how their acts of Afro-Asian portraiture suggest the potential of tailoring “photographs as history”

Gary Thomas Burgess takes us in an altogether different direction to trace Afro-Asian connections via an examination of socialist ideas and regimes across the Indian Ocean during the Global Cold War. As many as ten regimes across the oceanic littoral were socialist, inspired by events in Russia, China, and Cuba and eager to domesticate ideas on the move into vernacular public spheres in ways not dissimilar to circulating commodities and faiths in earlier centuries. The Soviet Union, China, East Germany and even Cuba were sometimes willing benefactors, sending aid, experts, and advisors. The appeal of socialism, however, was not merely a function of such patronage. Nor can it be summed up in a few words such as “justice” and “equity.” In the Indian Ocean, the language of socialism enabled the pursuit of a series of state initiatives that persons of varied backgrounds supported for their own unique and diverse reasons. Through an extended case study of Ali Sultan Issa, who led the brief revolutionary government of Zanzibar before its merger into modern-day Tanzania, Burgess helps us understand the appeal of socialist ideas for cosmopolitan elites in such societies and asks whether the Indian Ocean at this time might be understood as a socialist sea. At the end of his chapter, Burgess asks tantalizingly whether there was something unique about the Indian Ocean that made socialism particularly attractive, and if it constituted an integrated network of socialist linkages, encounters, and exchanges. Socialism was, after all, not a commodity like cloves that could be carried in a ship’s cargo to far-away lands. Even if its cosmopolitan character can at least be partially attributed to a long history of transoceanic flows of peoples and commodities, which gave rise to a cultural habit of appropriating and translating ideas and beliefs from afar, Burgess helps us grasp why it is possible to conceive of the Indian Ocean as a socialist sea.

Each of these Afro-Asian connections, whether commercial, aesthetic or ideological, permits a deeper appreciation of the neglected role of oceanic circularities in the making of societies, economies, and worldviews across the Indian Ocean rim and beyond.

5. The Indian Subcontinent and the Persian Gulf

This section takes a deep dive into the circularities between the Persian Gulf and India from the Bronze Age to today. It focuses specifically on the formation of diasporic societies along the Gulf-India corridor. Tracing the histories of diasporic formation in the region before and since the discovery of oil, the two papers in this section display the long-standing linkages of itinerant communities with older and newer homes across the Indian Ocean. They lead us to consider how modernity in the Gulf-India context may be understood as the layering of newer ways of doing things over older ones.

M. Reza Pirbhai uncovers surprising, latent connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf since ancient times. He draws on recent archaeological discoveries in the Gulf region to show how we might look beyond traditional area studies lenses of “South Asia” and “the Middle East” to posit an interconnected world of “Indo-Arabia.” Doing so allows us to see how, as early as the Bronze Age, Indian Ocean circularities bound people and places together between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, regions typically considered separate in the modern world. Conceptually, Pirbhai probes into the limits of land-based area studies paradigms vis-a-vis recent tendencies in oceanic studies and world systems theory. By recovering lost histories of an interconnected Indo-Arabia, he suggests, we can appreciate the historical depth of Indian Ocean circularities as far back as five millennia ago.

Irene Promodh studies a more recent diasporic group, namely, Gulf-based Malayalis from Kerala in southwestern India. Their patterns of mobility and the role they play in the hydrocarbon-rich economies of the Persian Gulf are altogether different from older South Asian diasporas such as the Baluchis. What is striking is how diasporic circularities today, powered by inexpensive and convenient air travel, remakes the Gulf as an urban extension of their homes in rural Kerala. Promodh shows us how a new FM radio channel forges sonic connections between two homes across an ocean and fosters a deep sense of community among the Malayalis that circulate between them. At the same time, their radio listening practices in the Gulf reveal the complex, uneasy relations that Malayalis forge with their radios as well as with those who co-inhabit and manage their workplaces. By looking at the vernacular media practices of Malayalis in intensely multi-ethnic spaces overseas, we can better understand how diasporic circularities produce new forms of ethno-racial conflict between migrants and patrons, and between native and non-native speakers.

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2. John C. Hawley (ed.), *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008) tackles military slavery in a wider assessment of historical interactions between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. On a broader scale, the essays in Robert Harms, Bernard Freemon, and David Blight (eds,), *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2013) examine practices of slavery, servitude, and indenture in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean under the unity of British imperium. Historical monographs such as Abdul Sheriff’s magisterial *Slaves, Spices, and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (Ohio University Press, 1987) and, more recently, Thomas McDow’s *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Ohio University Press, 2018) have zoomed in on particular places and networks in the Swahili Coast and the Persian Gulf in which human beings became unfree persons and commodities even as their counterparts in the Atlantic world fought for emancipation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (University of California Press, 2008); and Gaurav Desai, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. For a helpful instance of how Deligny’s concept of “errant lines” can be deployed to make sense of the everyday life of a slave rechristened “Gabriel” in the sixteenth-century Lusophone Indian Ocean, see Ananya Chakravarti, “Mapping ‘Gabriel’: Space, Identity and Slavery in the Late Sixteenth-Century Indian Ocean,” *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019): 5-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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8. See, for example, Thomas McDow, *Buying Time: Debt and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean* (Cleveland: University of Ohio Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Bose (2006, 12) identifies three primary “layers of unity” across the Indian Ocean littoral: racial, cultural, and religious. While this unity may be overstated at the level of everyday lived realities, it is nonetheless useful to think with. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Engseng Ho, “Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 907-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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