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Introduction: Thinking with the Indian Ocean

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Over the past five millennia, plants, animals, people, languages, faiths, 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. The deep historical connections, along with the circularities to which they give rise, lead us to conceptualize the Indian Ocean rim as a shared geographical space in which half of humanity resides. Yet, in comparison with the wealth of scholarship on the North Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds,[1] the study of the Indian Ocean is a relatively new field. Since the pioneering historical scholarship of K.N. Chaudhuri, Michael Pearson, Edward Alpers, and Sugata Bose put the Indian Ocean rim on the global academic map, two generations of scholars have worked assiduously to unsettle long-established modes of thought and transcend the limits imposed by contemporary national borders and traditional area studies.

Since 2014, the Indian Ocean Working Group (IOWG) at Georgetown University, Qatar has brought together academics on both campuses and worldwide to build collaborative expertise beyond the boundaries of traditional area studies. In thinking critically about the Indian Ocean, Doha offers a distinctive vantage point at the crossroads between landmasses labeled conventionally as "Asia," "Africa," the "Middle East," and indeed, Europe and the Americas.As we work with new archives, fieldsites, and interlocutors, we have endeavored to consolidate

[1] See, for instance, Bailyn, *Atlantic History*; Gillis, *Islands of the Mind*; Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*; Abulafia, *The Great Sea*.

existing knowledge as well as create new knowledge on the myriad circularities that define the past and present of the Indian Ocean.[2]

In this special section, we propose to build on the dynamic new field of Indian Ocean studies to rethink key concepts such as space and circulation (Prestholdt), gender and kinship (Kooria), and popular media and infrastructure (Mannil). We draw on fresh interdisciplinary insights from our contributors' archives and fieldwork to critically interrogate these concepts from a distinctive intellectual vantage point. Historians and anthropologists based in different parts of the globe come together in this special section to "think with the Indian Ocean." We take a concept that is in wide currency in the humanities and social sciences, and then, re-imagine it creatively in the contexts that we study. In doing so, we decenter familiar ways of seeing and knowing, and offer a new decolonial lens to make sense of the circularities and connections that constitute our world. For instance, global histories of slavery, servitude, and forced labor, as Jeremy Prestholdt argues, must take seriously not only the European presence in the early modern Indian Ocean, but the circuits of capital and commodity flows that, since the late fifteenth century, conjoin littoral societies in East Africa and South and Southeast Asia with the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds. Similarly, Mahmood Koria argues that our inherited understandings of Islamic law and reform cannot be grounded only in classical textual traditions of jurisprudence, but must reckon seriously with the matrilineal customs of Indian Ocean societies as far apart as the Comoros Islands, Kerala, and the Indonesian archipelago. Lastly, Bindu Menon Mannil shows persuasively that dhow boats used to crisscross the Arabian Sea for

[2] Oruc and Lionnet, "Indian Ocean Literary Circularities": Chandra et al, *Oceanic Circularities*.

centuries are today a kind of infrastructure whose poetics and imagery enter into Gulf Malayali popular songs and films.

Why Think With the Indian Ocean?

When KN Chaudhuri deployed a Braudelian lens to posit the existence of a unified oceanic space since the advent of Islam, similarities and differences with the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds were implicit in his magisterial historical surveys.[3] Studies of the Indian Ocean dovetailed nicely with the "new thalassology,"[4] a growing approach to rethinking global history through the water bodies that connect societies often deemed to belong to disparate regions understood conventionally as, say, "Europe," "South Asia" or the "Middle East."[5] This oceanic turn in writing history focused on old and new connections between peoples and places and the forms of socio-spatial mobility beyond the fixed, immovable nation-states that came to dominate the post-WWII era.[6] In retrospect, writing this new kind of global history may be seen arguably as a way of reflecting critically on earlier eras of globalization before our own.

Such a fruitful dialogue between the maritime past and the present has, in the past two decades, called into question the anthropological assumptions that underlay traditional area studies in the Anglo-American academy.[7] It has led to a critical reexamination of what constitutes a "region" or "space," and how it is produced or imagined in and outside scholarly

[3] Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean*; Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe*.
[4] Vink, "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'New Thalassology'"; Horden and Purcell, "The Mediterranean and "the New Thalassology"."
[5] Green, "Rethinking the "Middle East" After the Oceanic Turn"; Low, "Introduction: The Indian Ocean and Other Middle Easts."
[6] Ho, "Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies."
[7] Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes"; Sheriff and Ho, *The Indian Ocean*.

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writing.[8] Beyond the boundaries of traditional area studies generated by modern European empires and the Cold War, where, after all, does "Asia" end and "Africa" begin? Similarly, if the Indian Ocean was once an Islamic sea, writes Edward Alpers, it became a "British lake" after c. 1850 even as older circularities and connections were transformed in the age of modern imperialism.[9] To rethink precolonial and colonial histories is, of course, to reimagine the present, too, as "Inter-Asian," "Afro-Asian" and so on. Although we rely on critical conceptions of transnationalism, translocality, and globalization today[10] to understand and accommodate multicultural diversity in North Atlantic democracies, historical scholarship on the Indian Ocean rim pushes us much farther to grapple with the legacies of and linkages between longstanding diasporic communities,[11] imperial networks,[12] anti-colonial nationalists,[13] and decolonial imaginaries.[14] To think with the Indian Ocean is, therefore, not to provincialize our received notions of space and time, but to reconsider and reinvigorate them in understanding how "regions" are made, unmade, and remade in different ways over time.

The Indian Ocean, in Levi-Strauss's terms, is "good to think with" because it pushes us to interrogate our inherited ideas of modernity and identity and, hence, to challenge hegemonic modes of thought centered in the North Atlantic world or trapped in the straitjackets of methodological nationalism.[15] Yet the counter-hegemonic nature of scholarship on Indian Ocean mobilities should not lead us to see it as an exceptional or exclusivist space. "Vernacular

[8] Duara, "Asia Redux."
[9] Alpers, "On Becoming a British Lake."
[10] Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, "Towards a Definition of Transnationalism"; Appadurai, "The Production of Locality": Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
[11] Ho, *The Graves of Tarrim*.
[12] Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*.
[13] Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*.
[14] Desai, *Commerce with the Universe*.
[15] Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea"; Burton et al, "Sea Tracks and Trails."

cosmopolitanisms"[16] and "engaged universals"[17] coexist in this fuzzily-bounded space, which is simultaneously shared, hierarchical, and fractured.[18] As KN Chaudhuri reminded us a generation ago, it is scarcely hard to believe that the "spicy" dishes that are famous across the Indian Ocean rim today could scarcely be conceived without the chili peppers that the Portuguese brought with them from South America.[19] In much the same vein, we now know, contrary to earlier Eurocentric analyses of world-systems, that the workings of modern capitalism owe a great deal to the manner in which European company-states and indigenous merchants worked in tandem in the Indian Ocean.[20] Far from being a backwater of the modern world, the Indian Ocean, whose rim is home to roughly half of humanity today, lies at the heart of contemporary global political economy. Accordingly, to think with the Indian Ocean is to question our theoretical certitudes, and ultimately, to initiate new ways of seeing our shared past and present.

The Papers

The three papers in this themed section together demonstrate the value of "thinking with the Indian Ocean." They range in time from the early modern period to the postcolonial present, in terms of scholarly location in the US, EU, and India, and across the disciplines of history, anthropology, and cultural studies. The contributors to this section draw on their varied expertise to reflect critically on how the Indian Ocean modifies or complicates concepts and theories in their respective fields. On the surface, the three papers appear to share little in

[16] Werbner, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism."
[17] Tsing, *Friction*.
[18] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal.*
[19] Chaudhuri, "The Portuguese Maritime Empire."
[20] Subramanian, "Banias and the British"; Asaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century*; Bishara, *A Sea of Debt*; Machado, *Ocean of Trade*.

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common. Yet there are latent interconnections that are worth fleshing out in this introduction. First, the objects and people that move between the eastern seaboard of Africa to the Persian Gulf and the mainland and island archipelagos of "Monsoon Asia"[21] trace many-layered circularities that tie together seemingly disparate yet interlocking littoral societies. Second, notions of trade and commerce as much as gender and kinship or media and infrastructure must be revised in the light of these Indian Ocean circularities insofar as they speak directly and critically to global intellectual histories and to the extent that they situate translocal and interregional connections within wider global circuits of ideas, social relations, and commodities. Third, the papers in this section push us to consider processes of integration as well as fragmentation generated by interconnected societies so that we do not lose sight of the hierarchies of scales and values embodied in the transoceanic encounters of Malayalis in the Gulf, matrilineal communities and the textual orthodoxies of classical Islam, and Malagasy and Comorians embedded in global economies of forced labor and slavery. Connections, in sum, may imply cosmopolitanism in terms of the meeting of strangers but they may also entail domination and subordination. Oceanic circularities compel us, therefore, to rethink our cherished ideas about the making of the modern world through decentered and decolonial lenses, albeit without a naive, celebratory sense of the Indian Ocean as somehow benign and amicable in comparison with the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds.

In "Global Currents and the Transformation of Space in Indian Ocean Africa," Jeremy Prestholdt looks at oceanic space as a mutually-constituted set of overlapping subspaces that interact and shift over time as well as facilitate the formation of "layered circularities." The

[21] Henley and Wickramasinghe, *Monsoon Asia*.

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dynamic, multi-directional nature of human interaction in the Indian Ocean basin, argues Prestholdt, lends us emic perspectives, whether African, Arab or Asian, on the myriad meanings of this oceanic space that coexist uneasily with etic views based on fixed coordinates. Prestholdt avoids attributing a unitary essence to this space à la Braudel and Chaudhuri, and delineates the making of translocal and transregional circularities that define the Indian Ocean. Both integration and fragmentation matter here as we grapple with multiple articulations of scale (global, transregional, regional, translocal, local) and multiple foci of exchange and interaction in delineating the spatial parameters of the Indian Ocean. As Prestholdt puts it, "To varying degrees, each point along the Indian Ocean's rim has been integrated with a greater diversity of regional and global networks over time." Viewing this vast oceanic expanse from the eastern seaboard of the African continent permits us to decenter the Indo-centric lenses of an earlier generation of historians of South Asia, while at the same time centering Indian Ocean Africa in global histories of slavery and capitalism.

As a global historian who views the Indian Ocean from its East African rim, Prestholdt urges us to rethink the meanings of globalization afresh. Through his exploration of a wide range of examples of slavery and forced labor, we can see how transoceanic exchanges between eastern and southern Africa, the Arabian peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent brought together disparate subspaces in the western Indian Ocean. The circulation of slaves as property, moreover, shows how the early modern Atlantic and Indian Oceans bled into each other. Regional and interregional trade received a new fillip with the arrival of the Portuguese and other European merchants to the extent that, for the first time in human history, a truly global world-system came into existence. For Prestholdt, the significance of this momentous historical conjuncture lies

above all in the ability of Africans located in the Comoros Islands, Zanzibar, Cape Town, Mozambique, Madagascar, and the Mascarenes to participate as key actors situated betwixt and between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. Beyond trade, we can recognize today how marriages between American pirates and Malagasy slaves or transactions between the Comorian Sultan and Portuguese merchants led to new forms of "world-making."[22] It is striking that, as Prestholdt points out, that the earliest known instance of written Afrikaans is in Arabic script. These historical imbrications between diverseregions within and beyond the Indian Ocean are equally visible in the everyday worlds of African commodity consumption. Since the sixteenth century, New World silver and European weaponry as much as textiles, especially those made of pure unbleached cotton, were in great demand among Indian Ocean Africans.[23] The circulation of American or *merikani* cloth and its Indian and Japanese counterparts in East Africa, in particular, reminds us to situate Indian Ocean Africa at the center of global histories today without necessarily falling back into the old tendencies of imperial historiographies centered around North Atlantic nodes and networks. Ultimately, the Indian Ocean trade in people and things push to rethinking how spaces are constituted, connected, fractured, and reconstituted over time. There is clearly much more to globalization than the incursions of Europe, historical or hyperreal, into the rest of the world.

Mahmood Kooria's paper, "When Men Get No Share: Matrilineal Muslims and Their Laws of Succession," sheds new light on our received ideas of *gender* and *kinship* from the perspective of maritime Muslims in the Indian Ocean from Minangkabau in Indonesia to the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of peninsular India and along the Swahili coast. Against British

[22] Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*.
[23] Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*.

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colonial and Quranic expectations of patriarchy, patrilineality, and patrilocality, the Muslims of Malabar or their counterparts in the Malay and Sulu archipelagos follow a matriarchal, matrilineal, and matrilocal system of kinship, marriage, and inheritance. This distinctive approach to kinship has, historically speaking, favored local women, who controlled land and the homestead as immovable property. At the same time, this kinship system also worked to the advantage of itinerant men, who visited the Malabar coast as traders, missionaries or sea adventurers. Raised in their maternal homes according to matrilineal norms, the offspring of these unions were simultaneously local Muslims and Arab descendants. Similar to the creative rethinking of space and circulation by Prestholdt, Kooria shows how the sociocultural logics of kinship among maritime Muslims reimagine Islamic law and jurisprudence on marriage and inheritance. Over the past two centuries, however, internal and external pressures generated by Islamic reform movements and colonial regimes threaten to rend asunder centuries-old systems of matrilineality. For maritime Muslims, therefore, matrilineal systems of kinship are a precarious adaptation to the mobile worlds of the Indian Ocean that stand in stark contrast to hegemonic anthropological models of male-dominated kinship since the onset of colonialism.

Kooria's paper compels us to rethink the nature of social relations and property, and by implication, the interplay between customary (*adat*) and textual traditions (*shariat*) of Islam in the Indian Ocean. As in Prestholdt's paper, here, too, we uncover latent interconnections between the "religious economies"[24] of disparate littoral and island societies. Space and circulation are deeply implicated in the constitution of customary laws of inheritance alongside the widespread adoption of Sunni-Sufi traditions and the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence. After all, matrilineal

[24] Green, *Terrains of Exchange*.

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Muslims, as Kooria calls them, are the products of transoceanic relations,[25] which are gendered and, in the eyes of Islamic reformers and their *fatwas* in Monsoon Asia, un-Islamic. By reading these *fatwas* against the grain, that is, seeking to infer from them the arguments made in favor of matriliny by female jurists, and by juxtaposing these insights with those from ethnographic fieldwork, Kooria shows us the vitality of living traditions of property ownership and transfer among matrilineal Muslims across the Indian Ocean. In some legal arguments against an understanding of Islamic law that privileges an Arab-centric, patrilineal tradition, matrilineal Muslims regard customs (*adat*) as the basis of *shariat*, thereby denying any simple binary opposition between the two. Indeed, the legal scholars interviewed by Kooria insist that matrilineal inheritance does not in any way violate Quaranic injunctions because *shariah* seeks to ensure the preservation and reproduction of kinship relations over generations. To compel women to live without the security of their inherited property would, according to this line of reasoning, disrupt everyday social relations as well as intergenerational dynamics within a close-knit Muslim community. As is the case of trade and commerce, the religious economies of Islamic custom and law in matrilineal societies across the Indian Ocean reveal how spaces produced by interregional circulation are constituted and connected yet fractured discursively over time. Islamic law is clearly not reducible to textual traditions developed in the Arabian peninsula and embraced by colonial and postcolonial reformers in Asia and Africa.

The final paper in this section deals with transoceanic worlds of both economic and religious exchange, but focuses on *dhow* boats as well as film and media as two forms of infrastructure that circulate between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the Malabar

[25] Prange, *Monsoon Islam*.

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coast in southwest India. In her article "Amphibious Media Histories: Dhow in Indian Ocean Film and Media," Bindu Menon Mannil urges us to consider the poetics and aesthetics of infrastructure, whether the *dhows* themselves used to smuggle commodities from the Persian Gulf to the western coast of India or the audio and video cassettes through which oral and cinematic narratives of migration in Malayalam circulate across the Arabian Sea. The distinction between what is legal and what is licit is significant here. In the latter third of the twentieth century, Indians, especially Malayalis, traveled for work in the Gulf states, and on their return journeys, they faced a rigid system of national taxes and duties on commodities ranging from gold to electronics. Evading capture and confiscation by Indian authorities, a distinctive form of commodity circulation emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as entire families turned willy nilly into contraband smugglers. The politics and poetics of infrastructure,[26] as revealed in these transoceanic circuits of commodity exchange, allow Mannil to turn the spotlight on the "hydropoetics" of *dhows* and cassettes as both material and aesthetic objects in motion. As in Prestholdt's paper, we find here resonances of "global currents" of interregional circulation and consumption, and as in Kooria's contribution, we may discern the salience of everyday lived experience over abstract notions of law and state authority that guide social relations involving people and things. Ultimately, for Mannil, the hydropoetics of new media infrastructures hold the key to a deeper understanding of media modernities, which are, in Ravi Sundaram's terms, "pirate modernities"[27] in contemporary South Asia and the rest of the Global South.

Media objects are special kinds of infrastructure, whether in printed form as Isabel Hofmeyr has analyzed recently[28] or in audiovisual form as Samhita Sunya shows in her recent

[26] Larkins, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure."
[27] Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*
[28] Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press*.

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book.[29] They are things, but not merely things. The embodied aesthetics of experience are tied closely to the materiality of media goods. *Dhows*, viewed as media infrastructure, are not merely conduits of contraband commodities across the watery highways of the Arabian Sea. *Dhows* are, in fact, at the heart of the cinematic portrayal of migration in Malayalam cinema insofar as they generate pleasure and excitement among viewers even as they torment them with images of young men leabing behind the comforts of kin and home to find work in inhospitable terrain across the sea. The media goods that are transported by *dhows* as well as those that depict *dhows*, for instance, audio and video cassettes and their accompanying recorders and players bind together the Gulf and India in a curious way. These goods mediate, in Mannil's words, an ambivalent modernity in which the aesthetics and erotics of desire intersect with those of longing and loss. As film studios and video and DVD libraries have emerged in Dubai as much as Kerala, the films themselves have come to reflect patterns of interregional mobility and circulation across the Indian Ocean. The lines dividing the real and the reel are blurry: everyday life itself is so densely mediatized that its texts and scripts saturate the social imaginaries of mobile people and interconnected places. The "amphibious histories" of such media infrastructures render the sea as an actor in its own right that connects as well as fragments families and societies. The instantaneous movement of soundwaves and moving images across transoceanic spaces has only recently become commonplace in a digital age. But amphibious media histories of the Indian Ocean remind us that the making and unmaking of interlocked littoral societies are mediated as much through things and affect as through the bodies of people on the move.

[29] Sunya, *Sirens of Modernity*.

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To think with the Indian Ocean is, in this sense, an invitation to interrogate and revise received ideas and theories of media as much as kinship and space from a distinctly decolonial and decentered perspective. Ours is far from the last word on the subject. We hope that others will be inspired by the papers in this section to recenter global histories of ideas, capital, and cultures vis-a-vis the interregional circularities that define the extent and limits of the Indian Ocean.

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