

Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c1750-1850

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In a review in this very forum in 2009 Clare Anderson praised a shift in Indian Ocean studies. By looking not from land to sea but from ocean to coast, scholars are better able to immerse themselves in the variegated transactions, linkages and nodal points of this peripatetic maritime world, especially in the period before the region was more greatly territorialised by European empire in the latter 19th century. But Anderson also highlighted the pressing need for more ‘rigorous incorporation of Africa’ and littoral African communities into Indian Ocean Studies (1) as part of what Markus Vink terms the latest wave of ‘new thalassology’ in Indian Ocean historiography – the need to ‘disentangle the complex strand of spatial categorizations and explore the permeable inner and outer boundaries of the Indian Ocean world(s)’. (2) Anderson’s own work, like that of Ned Alpers, Gwyn Campbell, Michael Pearson, Sugata Bose and a new generation of scholars such as Thomas McDow, has been influential in this emerging trend. (3) It is the search for a more textured picture of the multivalent economic and cultural interactions that ‘produce histories *in* rather than *of* the region’. (4) In this timely book by Pedro Machado of Indiana University, already himself an energetic new Indian Ocean thalassologist through a number of journal articles trailing this volume, we have an excellent and focused contribution that incorporates Africa and Africans, as well as better documented western Indian nodes and peoples, into this complex oceanic turn. It will surely be required reading for anyone interested in Indian Ocean and global history.

The title of the book, originating in a 2005 SOAS doctoral thesis, is rather sweeping for a work whose strength and claim to originality is its case study focus. Machado looks deliberately and industriously to the economic lives of the Vaniya merchant caste from the small coastal enclaves of Diu and Daman in (then Portuguese) western India and their relations with Mozambican customers, agents and providers in the period 1750–1850. In so doing, he attempts to explain ‘the layered and entangled histories of Africa and South Asia’ in an empirically substantiated and specific setting. Gujarati textile production and African consumption are the beating heart of the story, and so too increasingly are slaves transported from southeast Africa to India, Arabia and across the Lusophone world. This speaks to the kernel of the book: an exposition of the dynamic world of regional and global trade via a thematic narrative centered on the quotidian exchanges of South Asians and Africans. By following the routes, institutions and credit infrastructure of

astute Vaniya cloth merchants, who began to redirect their endeavours from the Red Sea to eastern Africa in the early 18th century, this book cleverly reveals entangled regional economic histories.

Gujarati textiles were voraciously consumed in Southeast Africa in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Indeed, as Machado explains, they were central to the economy of Mozambique as a form of currency, as well as desirable commodities in themselves. Crucially, he skillfully recognises Africans as drivers of this economic zone, arguing that it was African demand that impelled Vaniya family businesses to create long production chains of Gujarati weavers, creditors and African agents who transported products beyond the littoral. Machado rightly flags excessive historiographical emphasis on Africans as producers, above all a legacy of colonial experiences. By contrast, here we see that the diverse social and cultural meanings inscribed on this cloth by African *consumers* were critical to the accumulative possibilities of Vaniya merchants organising seasonal commerce and traversing Indian Ocean world(s) at large in this period.

This leads to the second major argument: that western Indian merchants were absolutely central in mediating oceanic linkages to stimulate Afro-Asian interaction and wider regional economic dynamism as slaving replaced ivory extraction as a key sector. Vaniya businessmen communicated African market knowledge (especially seasonal changes in fashion) to weaving households in Gujarat who specialised in Mozambican marketplaces. The cloth trade then financed complex credit lines which buttressed long distance trade in the 18th century, especially the reciprocal extraction of high quality ivory demanded in Kathiawar, Bhavnagar and Surat and, from the 1750s–1780s increasingly, slaves for the western Indian Ocean and southern Atlantic markets. Machado's dense analysis and attractive prose cogently proves that Vaniya merchants, despite the continued preference for ivory trade, 'virtually underwrote the expansion of slaving through their dominance of the textile trade...and made possible the complex multilateral payments that were required in both the slave and the ivory trade' (p. 3). By the late 18th century, the availability of New World silver stimulated this expansion of servility (given lower costs in the Indian Ocean and less abundant British anti-slaving patrols than in the Atlantic). Thus, by the 1820s this trade came to dominate the economy. It was the capacity of Vaniya merchants to accept these New World dollars in exchange for Gujarati cloth that enabled Atlantic slavers to operate in Mozambique and in turn financed domestic credit networks in western India. Again Machado, ever conscious of connection, mobility and production across large spaces, nicely ties together two oceanic worlds in addition to two continents.

The book makes a number of innovative claims that speak to a range of historiographical niches. There is a convincing argument that the celebrated commercial vibrancy of Kathiawar, home to these Vaniya merchants, was largely dependent on Gujarati textile consumption in Mozambique. Equally, the commercial and distributive potential of southeast Africa was driven by an 'inter-regional oceanic embrace', founded on South Asian trust and reputational networks, concepts long at the centre of diasporic entrepreneurial historical analysis (e.g. as discussed pp. 44–59). That is not to say that Empire is absent from the story, indeed it is well integrated into the multi-layered narrative. From the late 18th century, Portuguese officials expressed interest in promoting commerce in their separately administered Indian and African territories, which led to a liberalisation of trade. Vaniya merchants were able to take advantage of this regime through their 'selective engagement' with the Portuguese state (p. 9), notwithstanding waves of regulative restriction by those anxious that Indian merchants undermined Portuguese patrimonial ambitions. It was, however, increasingly, if grudgingly, admitted that the Portuguese presence in Mozambique, Diu and Daman was 'informed by the stark reality of their [Vaniya] vital contribution – both in terms of their role in facilitating commerce and their financial contributions through customs payments to state income' (p. 270). Vaniya merchants played the imperial game with dexterity, exploiting their protection as imperial subjects alongside customary *mahajan* (guild network) institutions. These two arenas of imperial subjecthood and diasporic belonging acted as 'complimentary mechanisms' to entrench commercial advantage yet more deeply in western India and southeast Africa.

As Machado makes clear, this 'raise[s] questions about the role of indigenous capital in sustaining and undergirding imperial edifices in South Asia, Africa and elsewhere' (pp. 270–1). It was a situation also preoccupying late 19th-century and early 20th-century merchant-adventurers in East Africa. Like Vaniya

traders before them, hugely successful Lohana and Ismaili businessmen like Nanji Kalidas Mehta, Manubhai Madhvani and Allidina Visram adroitly utilised their position as Indian imperial citizens to protect property interests and representative rights in early colonial Uganda and Kenya. Yet, at the same time, they articulated Indo-centric and diasporic notions of their role as agents in the vanguard of modernity, active throughout the territory long before any colonial official asserted any such progressive claim.⁽⁵⁾ Machado's work thus provides fodder to those interested in interrogating the periodisation of the Indian Ocean as European empires opened up a plethora of trading opportunities to Gujarati and Sindhi trading communities who soon outcompeted Vaniya monopolists. This vitality of South Asian commerce and the 'vast array of its waterways' thoroughly debunks 'an enduring teleology of the triumph of empire ... as signaling a break with the past ... in which South Asian merchant networks were displaced and made subservient to the demands of colonial masters.' Imperial consolidation was not the transformative moment; rather, it partially conditioned certain changes in the forms of an older 'bazaar nexus' (pp. 272–3).

This is a tight and disciplined book that sensibly does not extend its tentacles into this better trodden historical terrain, rather it presents a rich and highly detailed portrait of earlier regional connectivity. Those interested in the mechanics of 18th-century shipping and transportation will find much of revisionist and empirical appeal in chapter two. This argues that Vaniya access to larger, long-distance vessels and skilled navigators to service the mammoth Mozambican trade dictated comparative advantage over Arab, Swahili, private European and African merchants. As important to this advantage was the ability to gather intelligence on changing African taste and transmit such knowledge to specialist Gujarati weaving centres like Jambusar, to which Machado transports the reader (pp. 142-149) in a fine example of his fluid style. The sheer weight of trade by these Hindu communities in southeast Africa in the 18th century thus negates older conceptions of the Indian Ocean as primarily an 'Islamic lake', a view emerging more from the mid 19th-century resurgence of Muscat and Zanzibar as powerful maritime entrepôts (p. 71).

Yet this is a book that should animate not only those sailing the currents of effervescent Indian Ocean historiography, but also global historians more generally. With a light-touch, but an incisive comparative historiographical bedding, Machado draws others in. Stellar work by scholars such as Maxine Berg or Giorgio Riello has shown how the tastes of 18th-century Europeans and their consumption of Asian luxury commodities were central to the formation of new socio-cultural practices and the development of the global economy at large.⁽⁶⁾ This book convincingly shows how seemingly more marginal or subaltern economic actors (especially Africans) also significantly conditioned the larger frames of commerce if one can get at their histories. More than merely placing such interactions on a larger canvas, Machado's central thesis is that such 'inter-regional circuits of production, commercialization, exchange and consumer demand' shaped the 'contours and parameters' of the global economy (p. 14). His integrated Mozambican, Gujarati, regional and inter-oceanic scales of analysis provide an exemplary call to arms for an economic history produced in a region and then used to test the largest scale historical arena. This engagement with debates about grand global connection is a telling reason why a large audience should imbibe the thesis and think about how to incorporate such zones into their globalisms.

The book's rich detail compels in this regard, for instance in the aggregated data of ship voyages to Mozambique by Vaniya merchants (pp. 188–190 and 227) or slave imports into Diu, Daman and Goa (pp. 250–1). The volume is consistently underpinned by copious archival endeavor in Panjim, Mumbai, Maputo, Lisbon and London, a wealth of published primary records in Portuguese and English, and a deep trawl through the pertinent secondary literature. Moreover, and very usefully, the work flags a number of unpublished dissertations where much of the fine-grained, case study analysis resides. One wonders what resources – travelogues, financial records, etc. – might exist in, say, Gujarat or the Indian union territory of Daman and Diu. One might logically ask more generally how South Asian language sources, such as they remain, would fit with the thesis presented. No doubt there is a distinct dearth of such material, but a more explicit methodological reflection on the empirical boons, but also limitations, inherent in this study would have helped orientate the reader in where to go next, as well as celebrating how far this book takes us. Could such sources offer up more detail about how the imaginative worlds of these mobile mediators impacted material lives, as is probed in the work of Nile Green or Engseng Ho?⁽⁷⁾ For example, how did faith affect

the trust mechanisms and reputational networks on which Vaniya entrepreneurial success relied? This is likely an impossible task with the source material at hand and not meant as a criticism of this book given its remit and superb contribution. The work is strong in its institutional and economic analysis, and contains choice nuggets of colourful biographical extracts from the archives (e.g. pp. 49–51). It could, however, also serve as a new launch pad for integrated socio-cultural and economic histories of inter-regional trading and mobility.

The narrative ends with Vaniya displacement in the mid 19th century as Oman's al-Busaidi dynasty expanded control in the western Indian Ocean. By the 1840s Kathiawari Vaniya merchants were being squeezed in eastern Africa by Kutchi Bhatiya competitors who enjoyed state patronage from Muscat and soon Zanzibar, the relocated capital of the imperial sultanate from 1840. A wider range of Shia Muslim and Hindu trading groups would exploit such new commercial opportunities as another form of imperial expansionism – that of the British – enveloped the region in the late 19th century. Our understanding of this later period of Afro-Indian oceanic connection has been re-invigorated in recent years by a range of new interventions, varied in their conceptual, methodological and temporal focus. The frontier-building of the imperial Indian Ocean sphere, racial divisiveness of colonial economy, universalistic transnational public cultures, and of course the cross-racial solidarities (and tensions) of anti-colonial nationalism have received much attention, especially through studies of print culture and urban history and, more recently, through literary analysis.⁽⁸⁾ Less well covered has been Machado's period, a time before new Indian Ocean empires altered forms of peripatetic possibility and scales of record keeping. He fills a major gap in the extant literature. But this is also a book about the way of doing large-scale history. Pedro Machado wants to do 'global history from a regional perspective' (p. 13). He is successful in elegantly relating particularist criss-crossing worlds of South Asian entrepreneurialism, African consumption and the varied cargos of the western Indian Ocean. Like all the best scholarly works, it will provoke and satisfy as we interrogate the global turn and its new thalassological avatars.

Notes

1. Dr Clare Anderson, 'Review of *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*' (review no. 738) <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/738>> [2] [accessed 24 July 2015].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Markus Vink, 'Indian Ocean Studies and the "new thalassology"', *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), 41–62.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge, 2012); Edward Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Gwyn Campbell *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London, 2004). For the late 19th and early 20th century S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), is also provoking debate amongst those disentangling Indian Ocean worlds.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Dr Clare Anderson, review of *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*, (review no. 738).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See for example the memoirs Nanji Kalidas Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed: an Autobiography* (Mumbai, 1966); Manubhai Madhvani, *Tide of Fortune: a Family Tale* (Gurgaon, 2009) and M. G. Visram, *Allidina Visram: the Trailblazer* (self-published, 1990).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For example, Maxine Berg, 'In pursuit of luxury: global history and British consumer goods in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, 182, 1 (2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Nile Green, 'Africa in Indian ink: Urdu articulations of Indian settlement in East Africa', *Journal of African History*, 53, 2 (2012); Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA, 2006).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. James Brennan, *Taifa: Making nation and Race in Tanzania* (Athens, OH, 2012); Gaurav Desai, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India and the Afrasian imagination* (New York, NY, 2013) and the copious Indian Ocean/South African work of Isabel Hofmeyr stand out as particularly innovative

recent interventions; while Sana Aiyer, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), which puts meat on the bones of an agenda set by Sugata Bose in *A Hundred Horizons* (2009), deserves much merit. [Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment.

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