

Imagining the Indian Ocean World

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Alan Villiers writes, “It was the first week in December when we sailed from Aden, and the northeast monsoon was blowing very quietly.”¹ Villiers was setting forth on his voyage aboard the boom “Triumph of Righteousness” in 1938, headed towards the East African coast and eventually around the coast of Arabia. Villiers, who was a seasoned sailor, lamented:

It seemed to me, having looked far and wide over twenty years of a seafaring life, that as pure sailing craft carrying on their unspoiled ways, only the Arab remained. Only the Arab remained making his voyages as he always had, in a wind-

¹ Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), p. 26.

driven vessel sailing without the benefit of engines. Only the Arab still sailed his wind ships over the free sea, keeping steadfastly to the quieter ways of a kinder past.²

The same thrill of discovery is expressed by Amitav Ghosh in *In An Antique Land*, nearly everyone's favorite modern Indian Ocean chronicle, when he exclaims: "Seen from the sea, on a clear day, Mangalore can take a newcomer's breath away." Yet Ghosh also remarks that if you are looking for this past, "today almost no trace of its medieval incarnation remains. . . . The imagination baulks at the thought that the Bandar once drew merchants and mariners from distant corners of the world."³ This morning I wish to direct my introductory remarks to this element of imagination that it takes to conjure up the Indian Ocean world.

We know that traders exchanged goods and sailors manned the boats that carried those goods along the coasts of the northwest Indian Ocean from at least about 2000 BCE, long before the rise of Islam and the kind of seafaring that Villiers regrets the passing of. As Shereen Ratnagar has demonstrated, traders from the Harappa Civilization transported goods by

² Ibid., p. 4.

³ Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New York: Vintage Departures, 1994), pp. 241-243.

coasting vessels to the Red Sea and eventually to Egypt;⁴ similarly, Himanshu Ray reminds us in her paper for this conference that South Asian maritime traders were active in the last centuries of the first millennium BCE and into the current era. Also, the Indonesian settlement of Madagascar bears witness to the reality that the entire circumference of the Indian Ocean littoral was probably being traversed as early as the first centuries of the first millennium CE.⁵ By this time, of course, we have the *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* as our guide to the trade of the Indian Ocean, which although it is a particularly prosaic document reveals to the reader the commercial wonders to be had beyond the waters and shores of the Red Sea, branching out both to the coast of Africa and to the Indian sub-continent.⁶ What I wish to suggest, however, is that to come to grips with the world of the Indian Ocean takes more than a mere recounting of the ships sailed, the goods traded, the ideas exchanged and transformed, and the historical links created by these transactions. What it takes is imagination.

Here, it seems to me, is where Ghosh's *tour-de-force* takes on special meaning for scholars of the region by spanning geography, time, and disciplines. His refusal to be bound by "the myth of continents," to use the

⁴ Shereen F. Ratnagar, *Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappa Civilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁵ For a useful short summary of the state of knowledge on Indonesian migration and settlement of Madagascar, see Mervyn Brown, *A History of Madagascar* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000). Pp. 10-15.

⁶ See Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

phrase coined by Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, is also significant for the study of the Indian Ocean world.⁷ But Ghosh was certainly not the first writer to address the Indian Ocean imaginatively, to seek to conjure up its wonders for his audience. Marco Polo, for example, claims for himself and his companions that “I assure you that they sailed over the Indian Ocean fully eighteen months before reaching their destination. And they observed many remarkable things, which will be described in this book.”⁸ But it was not Polo’s intention to provide his readers with a way to grasp the Indian Ocean world as a whole organism any more than did his famous Muslim counterpart, the intrepid fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta. What Ibn Battuta’s peripatetic *Travels* does reveal is a largely Islamic world that was outward looking, interconnected, and multiethnic. It was a world that for Ibn Battuta focused on the major port cities of the Indian Ocean littoral, entrepôts like Aden, Mogadishu, Kilwa, Zafar, Hormuz, Calicut, and Samudra.⁹

⁷ Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See, in particular, their comments at p. 199: “The Indian Ocean, the Baltic of the Hanseatic league, the much-traveled Mediterranean Sea, and more recently the Pacific Ocean have all facilitated the creation of complex webs of capital and commodity exchange. Only a sea-centered perspective is capable of revealing these economic regions, which carve up conventional land-centered blocks in unexpected ways.”

⁸ Ronald Latham (trans. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 43.

⁹ See H.A.R. Gibb (trans. and ed.), *Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354* (London: Darf Publishers, 1983 [1929]); also Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

Both Polo and Ibn Battuta were outsiders to the Indian Ocean world. More than a century after Ibn Battuta, the learned Omani navigator, Ahmad ibn Majid, wrote his monumental treatise on Arab navigation in the Indian Ocean. Ibn Majid's *Fawā'id* is the most comprehensive treatment of the Indian Ocean in the pre-modern era, but like the *Periplus*, it is a practical manual rather than a work of imagination. Nevertheless, Ibn Majid was also a poet, and he regularly intersperses his technical advice with verses that provide us with some idea of what it meant to embark on these waters in the late fifteenth century. He writes, "When the author has finished expounding all the more important properties of the lunar mansions, rhumbs, routes, *bāshīs*, stars and their seasons . . . he should begin to explain the signs for landfalls (*ishārāt*) and the management and the organization of the ship and its crew, for although this is not in itself scientific it is characterized by this science." Ibn Majid then concludes several paragraphs of such advice with the following verses:

If I remain with those who follow not in my steps

It is more bitter than the dangers of a stormy

sea.

Give me a ship and I will take it through danger,

For this is better than having friends who can be insincere.

At times I will accompany it through difficulties,
At others I will divert myself with society and late nights.
If there is no escape from society or from traveling
Or riding [the ship] then we have surely reached our final
end.
This [ship] is a wonder of God, my mount, my escort.
In travel 'tis the house of God itself.¹⁰

In his paper for this conference, Benjamin Zimmer introduces us to another Indian Ocean resident, the anonymous early sixteenth-century author of the Sundanese text, *Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian*, who describes an Indian Ocean world that is defined by the different “ways of speaking” around its shores. Zimmer suggests that for this writer, the four most “distant realms” among the fifty-five mentioned in the text -- China, southern India, Persia, and Egypt – can be seen to represent the “four corners” of the Indian Ocean world. Yet, for this learned individual, the Indian Ocean did not include eastern Africa, including even the Indonesian outlier of Madagascar.

A final pre-modern outsider who attempts to capture this elusive Indian Ocean region for his readers is Camões, the famous poet of the Portuguese seaborne empire in the East. Camões spent seventeen years in

¹⁰ G.R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean Before the Coming of the Portuguese* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd. For the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971), pp. 192, 195.

Goa, Macau, and Mozambique before returning home in 1570 to publish *The Lusíads* two years later. His Indian Ocean world was still significantly Muslim, but it was now marked by bitter conflict between the Portuguese empire and local Muslim potentates that was part military, part commercial, and part religious. As Landeg White explains, by relating the known geography of sixteenth century coastal Mozambique to that perceived by the ancient Greeks, “Camões is making an ideological point: that these sea routes and city states, currently in the possession of Islam and about to become a battleground, were ‘colonized’ by the European imagination long before the ‘Moors’ got there.”¹¹ Thus, referring to the King of Portugal in the introductory verses to Canto One, Camões proclaims:

Let the world tremble as it senses
All you are about to accomplish,
Africa’s land and Oriental seas
The promised theatre of your victories.¹²

Camões is not sympathetic to the peoples whom the Portuguese encountered in the Indian Ocean, but he does nicely catch the initial curiosity of the Portuguese themselves that was provoked by their intrusion into this unfamiliar world. Vasco da Gama’s fleet reached Mozambique Island in

¹¹ Landeg White (trans. And ed.), *Luis Vaz de Camões – The Lusíads* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xviii. The reference is to Canto One, Stanza 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6, Canto One, Stanza 15.

January 1498. Although he initially did not intend to put in there, he changed his mind because, so Camões tells us,

On the instant from the island nearest
The main there came in close company
Several small feluccas skimming
The wide bay under their broad sails.
Our people were overjoyed and could only
Stare in excitement at this wonder.

— ‘Who are these people?’ they kept exclaiming,
‘What customs? What beliefs? Who is their king?’¹³

Camões concludes this episode with lines that evoke the verses of Ibn Majid and again emphasize the enormity of attempting to gain imaginative control of this vast oceanic world.

On the sea, such storms and perils
That death, many times, seemed imminent;
On the land, such battle and intrigue
Such dire, inevitable hardships!
Where may frail humanity shelter

¹³ Ibid., p. 12, Canto One, Stanza 45. As is well known, the discovery that the people they had found were Muslims set Gama off on one of his notorious fits of poor judgment and a clash eventually ensued. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Briefly, in some secure port,
Where the bright heavens cease to vent their rage
On such insects on so small a stage?¹⁴

Whether they were insiders or outsiders, each of these early writers struggled with the challenge of conveying the vastness and complexity of the Indian Ocean world. This was inevitable, considering the many different societies that were a part of the region's history. More significantly, each cannot escape the ties that bind him to the place from which he viewed the Indian Ocean world. This same dilemma holds just as true for each of us in this room.

For example, there is a predisposition in the literature -- revealed in the overwhelming majority of papers for this conference -- towards the western Indian Ocean. Michael Pearson, who is in the process of completing a new history of the Indian Ocean, has specifically decried an African bias to Indian Ocean studies, but his concern could be turned on its head to include the relative lack of interest shown by scholars of insular Southeast Asia in connecting their particular region to the larger Indian Ocean world.

When we turn to modern attempts to address the Indian Ocean globally, we encounter several different approaches. Four decades ago,

¹⁴ White, *The Lusíads*, p. 24, Canto One, Stanza 106.

Auguste Toussaint, archivist and historian of Mauritius, asked rhetorically: “By what gateway shall we enter the Indian Ocean? What is the most favourable approach for considering it as a whole? . . . What is the best place from which to feel the ocean’s life?” Not surprisingly (for a patriotic Mauritian), Toussaint argues for the centrality of the small island groups in the center of the Indian Ocean -- the Chagos, the Seychelles, and the Mascarenes.¹⁵ To be sure, Toussaint’s history is not narrowly insular, but it suffers from seeking to locate one place from which best to view the entire region. A decade after Toussaint, James de Vere Allen suggested a different kind of organizing principle,

what might be envisaged as three layers of unity, although of course not all three layers are to be found in all districts. First, there is racial unity of a sort provided by Malay and other migrations; secondly, cultural unity radiating out from the Indian subcontinent; and thirdly, the religious unity provided by Islam, which of all religions has probably been the most successful in subduing,

¹⁵ Auguste Toussaint, *History of the Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966; 1st French ed., 1961), pp. 3-5, quoted at p. 3. For a stimulating echo to Toussaint’s focus on the islands of the Indian Ocean, see Jean-Louis Guébourg, *Petites îles et archipels de l’océan Indien* (Paris: Karthala, 1999).

though not necessarily eliminating, political, racial,
and cultural differences among its adherents.

Allen noted, in addition, that his three layers “were regularly refreshed and reinforced, at least until very recently, by a constant intercourse between most of the lands concerned,” while acknowledging, as does Ned Bertz in his paper for this conference, the inhibiting influence of “the growth of national, regional, and continental sentiment and the corresponding increase of bureaucratic and other obstructions”¹⁶ Still, Allen’s schema is only briefly sketched out and omits as much as it includes.

The past two decades witnessed several important efforts to establish the parameters of the Indian Ocean world by very different historians. The best known of these is Kirti Chaudhuri’s major study of the economic history of the region from the rise of Islam to 1750. Chaudhuri’s contribution, while it is important, is self-limiting in its scope with respect to its periodization, theme, and geographical scope (e.g. he never really takes Africa seriously).¹⁷ At about the same time, Kenneth McPherson proposed a model of overlapping cultural zones for understanding cultural exchange in

¹⁶ James de Vere Allen, “A proposal for Indian Ocean studies,” in *Historical relations across the Indian Ocean*, The General History of Africa, Studies and Documents 3 (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), p. 140.

¹⁷ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

the Indian Ocean region.¹⁸ When he published his general history of the region in 1993, he subsumed this model in the concept of an Indian Ocean “world,” proposing “a regional identity” that was constructed upon “the relationship between maritime trade and processes of cultural diffusion and interaction” to form “an interlocked human world joined by the common highway of the Ocean.”¹⁹ McPherson is emphatic in not advocating for a “unitary ‘cultural area’,” but recognizes that within the range of cultural practices that were connected by maritime trade, there existed “*certain* cultural commonalities which set them apart from the peoples of contiguous ‘worlds’ such as the Mediterranean and East Asia.”²⁰ His interpretation, it seems to me, is still valuable and worth considering in any discussion of the Indian Ocean world. A third scholar to enter the fray in the 1980s was Michael Pearson, who proposed that we approach the history of the region by looking at what he terms “littoral society.”²¹ More recently, in a stimulating paper on Muslim travelers in the Indian Ocean world, Pearson has questioned “the whole matter of the unity of ‘the Indian Ocean world.’” He notes that most residents of the bordering societies identify politically

¹⁸ Kenneth McPherson, “Cultural Exchange in the Indian Ocean Region,” *Westerly*, 29, 4 (1984), pp. 5-16, and “Processes of Cultural Interaction in the Indian Ocean: An Historical Perspective,” *The Great Circle*, 6, 2 (1984), pp. 78-92.

¹⁹ McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and The Sea* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 2-3, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²¹ Michael Pearson, “Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast,” *The Great Circle*, 7, 1 (1985), pp. 1-8.

more with their countries than “with some nebulous notion of Indian Ocean commonality.” But he also argues for the existence of “a strong element of religious, social and cultural *communitas* shared by all Muslims around the littoral of the ocean.”²² It will be interesting to see if he incorporates this model into his forthcoming history of the Indian Ocean. Finally, there is Patricia Risso’s short, stimulating analysis of Muslim commerce and culture in the region, in which she successfully navigates between the challenges of “subspeciality boundaries, the huge expanses of time and space, and linguistic challenges” to connect “the intersection of Islamic and Indian Ocean histories.”²³ Valuable though it is, like Chaudhuri, Risso’s perspective is selective, despite its great range.

So where does this leave us? The underlying theoretical premises of this conference were inspired by the works of Arjun Appadurai and James Clifford, rather than by the concepts of civilizations and cultural areas that sustain the works of the historians I have just cited. In particular, I find attractive Appadurai’s concept of “-scapes” (and its infinite variations), with its emphasis on “the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes” and his assertion that

²² Pearson, “Consolidating the Faith: Muslim Travellers in the Indian Ocean World,” *UTS Quarterly: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, 6, 2 (2000), pp. 6-13, quoted at p. 12.

²³ Patricia Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 1.

these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes²⁴

When he applies this notion to what he calls “ethnoscapes,” by which he means “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live,” with its emphasis on “human motion,” we are even closer to home, despite the fact that he is not thinking only, or even specifically, of the Indian Ocean world. Finally, Appadurai’s extension of this concept of landscapes to construct what he calls “*imagined worlds*, that is, multiple

²⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 33.

worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe,” has clear implications for the task at hand.²⁵

In my own work on the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean I have been greatly influenced by Clifford’s thinking, and when I look to the wider arena of the Indian Ocean, I find his work on traveling cultures--imbued “with this assumption of movement”--to be equally suggestive. Indeed, Clifford brings me directly back to Ghosh, whose work he takes as his exemplar in the prologue to his collection of essays entitled *Routes*. He writes, “The general topic, if it can be called one, is vast: a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis.”²⁶

The papers for this conference provide countless examples of the significance of traveling, dislocation, hybridity, and shifting perspectives about which Appadurai and Clifford write. There are many more, of course, but let me add one modern example, the story of Mzee Mombasa, a well known musician and actor who performed for many years on both radio and television in Kenya. Born in 1922, as a young man Mzee Mombasa shipped

²⁵ Appadurai reiterates this theme of “action, interaction, and motion” in his critique of area studies and suggests the notion of “process geographies” to avoid accepting an ahistorical and static view of global regions. See Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture*, 12/1 (2000), pp. 6-8.

²⁶ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), quoted at p. 2. See Edward A. Alpers, “The African diaspora in the Indian Ocean: a comparative perspective,” forthcoming in Richard Pankhurst and Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya (eds.), *African Diaspora in Asia* (Trenton: Africa World Press), pp. 19-51.

out to India, where he spent six months exchanging musical ideas and learning about Indian culture. “We met a lot of good people in India, we had quite a few parties, mixing with the Indian women, and the Indian men, just socializing.” He subsequently traveled in different merchant ships to South Africa, Somalia, the Comoros, and back to India, before returning to a similarly mobile life in East Africa. He recalls that “in all the places I visited we were treated very nicely because we were visitors and treated as guests.” When he was in port, he seems to have spent much of his time partying, and eventually turned to music more seriously for his livelihood, especially performing Indian music. At one point he returned to India to record a play that he tells us “was a mix of Swahili and Indian.” Eventually, Mzee Mombasa settled down in Kenya, where he played *oud* in several different bands, including an Indian group in which he was the only African, before joining the VOK in 1974 as part of their drama section. “So that’s my little bit of history,” he concludes, “I’m not sure if it is any good or not!”²⁷ In fact, it is good.

What I am suggesting here is that in imagining the Indian Ocean world we need to factor in movement across time and space of people, things, and ideas. At the same time, we also need to acknowledge the

²⁷ “Mzee Mombasa’s Story,” *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, 6, 2 (2000), pp. 181-185. Mzee Mombasa was interviewed with the assistance of a translator by Stephen Muecke in Mombasa on 9 October 2000.

continuing significance of the *longue durée* in the Indian Ocean region, those historical culture areas that occupy the attention of most historians. If we can manage to weave these very different perspectives together successfully, we might just be able to imagine an Indian Ocean World that makes sense historically and contemporaneously to both scholars and general public, whether they are inhabitants of the region or outsiders, like me.