

INTRODUCTION

Iain Walker
Manuel João Ramos
Preben Kaarsholm

The Indian Ocean, with its extensive trade and circulation networks, has been characterized as a major inter-regional arena within broader studies of processes of globalisation. These maritime networks are some of the oldest in the world, and through the centuries persistent and resilient forms of transnational and transcultural communication have developed in the regions touched by it, linking the Horn of Africa, the African Indian Ocean islands and Eastern and Southern Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and even meaningful parts of Southeast and Eastern Asia. It is also a particularly sensitive area in security terms, presently harbouring major naval and aerial surveillance capabilities of both intra- and extra-regional military and economic powers.

The western Indian Ocean has thus been both a fluid space of intense exchanges between various local communities and a much-coveted setting for successive projects of hegemonic appropriations of human and material resources. The substantial flow of goods and people across it has, from time immemorial, attracted predatory and clandestine activities, which are today the pretext for member countries of NATO to maintain an impressive security presence and for emerging powers such as India and China to display their military and naval capacities.

A comprehensive understanding of the conditions and implications of this multiple presence requires a multidisciplinary effort that has to take into account the underlying, and generally silent, reality of the existence of family-based networks (African, Arab, Indian, Armenian, Iranian and South-east Asian) which, assuming an ancient heritage, have ensured the continuity of flows between the different countries connected by the Western Indian Ocean by resiliently adapting themselves to ever-changing balances of power, to the impositions of external agents, and to the bargaining strategies of local and regional predators.

The present volume sets forth to analyse illustrative aspects of the deep-rooted immersion of the populations of the eastern coasts of Africa in the vast network of commercial, cultural and religious interactions that extend to the Middle-East and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the long-time involvement of various exogenous military, administrative and economic powers (Ottoman, Omani, Portuguese, Dutch, British, French and, more recently, European-Americans).

On the side-lines of an inward-looking vision of Africa shared by most African Union member countries, which have only recently begun to develop a fledgling security policy and a strategy of development of the African coastline, various agents from East African countries have sought to manage and develop existing networks in a transnational logic supported by historical ties that come from the

old triangular trade facilitated by the monsoon regime, linking these coastal regions to the Arabian Peninsula and South-east Asia.

As the overall process of globalization of human affairs assumes local and regional dimensions, rather than excluding them, it realigns and remodels them. It co-occurs and co-relates with various other competing forces seeking to reclaim and reactivate areas of social activity and identity, in the broadest sense. Against such a complex contemporary background, an important challenge for students and researchers of regional studies is not only to incorporate a understanding of the input of globalizing trends in the reshaping of major regional contexts but specifically to question their very limits and boundaries. This tendency is illustrated by a growing and deepening interest in interregional borders and border-crossings, and in acknowledging their importance in the very fact of the (re)formation and (re)invention of regional areas.

In the particular case of the long-established African regional studies area, this has implied interrogating the validity of distinguishing sub-Saharan (former “black”) Africa from the Maghreb, traditionally subsumed within Southwest Asian (“Near” or “Middle Eastern”) studies; revising the role of the Mediterranean both as frontier and bridge with Europe; refocusing on Africa’s Atlantic ties to the Americas; and of course recognising the Indian Ocean as a major pathway for Eastern Africa. It was in this spirit that in 2012 AEGIS – the African-Europe Group of Interdisciplinary Studies network – established the Collaborative Research Group (CRG) on Africa in the Indian Ocean, whose aim is to “promote and facilitate discussion, exchange of information, and collaboration between scholars in Europe, Africa and Asia” studying this topic from different disciplinary perspectives. This CRG exists to exchange information on research projects, events and activities, to enhance the visibility of the connection between Africa and the Indian Ocean world within the general African studies landscape, with the final goal of developing new knowledge on African ties to the Indian Ocean, and to debate theoretical and methodological insights across disciplinary and area or regional studies boundaries.

The African in the Indian Ocean CRG has organised international conferences and conference panels and facilitated the organisation of workshops, post-graduate summer schools and researcher training courses. The present volume is the product of one of the main activities of this CRG: organizing AEGIS international thematic conferences on African in the Indian Ocean. The second such conference took place in Lisbon, at ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, on April 10th April 2015, convened by the Centre of International Studies, and organized by

Iain Walker (Max Plank Institute), Manuel João Ramos (CEI-IUL), and Preben Kaarsholm (Roskilde University).

The chapters in this book are a selection of reviewed and revised contributions to that Conference. Edited books are conceived to carry forth the ideas and discussions that have their starting point in academic conferences, offering a set of arguments based on illustration. The theme of the conference is presented here both from different disciplinary perspectives (social and political history, anthropology, political science and cultural studies) and regarding different contextual case studies (Horn region, North-eastern and South-eastern coastal regions) and their connections to the Arabian Peninsula and Western India. Although the contributions are heterogeneous, chosen to depict the rich variety of the theme, a number of common threads may be distinguished. The first is the notion that, as central as Africa's Eastern coastal areas have been in the history of the region's relationship with the Indian Ocean trading networks, the involvement of the neighbouring hinterland is not to be taken as a mere complementary footnote to it but rather as an integral element in diachronic and synchronic analytical efforts to understand both processes and situations. Another relevant aspect that some of the chapters draw attention to is the varied nature of the encroachments dealing with the Western presence and impact in the region since the 16th century, urging for a more sustained look at factors such as adaptation, conflation and appropriation. A third thread worth noting is the implicit recognition in most chapters that disciplinary constraints and contextual boundaries are worth transcending given the overlapping characteristics of the topic.

The chapters are presented chronologically, from the 16th century to the present day, and are contextually paired (Eastern Africa and Madagascar, the Horn, and South Africa). The first chapter, by Ana Roque, addresses the local and regional impact of the establishment of Portuguese settlers in Sofala (Mozambique) in the 16th century, the specificities of their interaction with the local communities, the importance of the "non-official" strategies they adopted in order to be accepted by the chieftaincies, the impact of their integration in the local and regional networks and how their attitude framed new geographies of power in an area marked by political, economic, social, cultural and religious dichotomies. Her analysis of the Sofala region during the 16th century highlights its role in the African-Indian Ocean trading networks and how the economic and political integration of the Portuguese settlers occurred beyond the limits of the official control of the Portuguese crown.

Rafael Thiebaut's chapter draws on Dutch East India Company (VOC) sources to analyse the importance of linguistic and cultural brokering skills of European

and Malagasy intermediaries between the Dutch and the Sakalava in the slave trade of western Madagascar during the 18th century. The chapter traces the shifts in attitudes towards these brokers as their roles were formalised and came to be occupied by a single individual, often for many years. These brokers were often high-status individuals who exercised a degree of independence from the slave sellers, and particularly the king, to maintain the trust of the Dutch, often walking a fine between the two parties. Unlike their West African counterparts, these brokers neither traded slaves themselves, nor received a commission on sales, but were rewarded for their services with gifts rather than a commission. They were, particularly in later years, individuals who had spent sufficient time in Europe to become quite familiar with European practice, and some also would have been of mixed European and Malagasy parentage: they were cultural brokers as much as financial ones.

In her chapter, Elena Brugioni addresses the rhetoric *topos* of the Indian Ocean as a critical framework to read literary and visual narratives originating in modern Mozambican novelists and poets. Her stance is that of the need to critically intersect between two research contexts: the Indian Ocean regional studies and the more topical Portuguese-speaking cultural and literary studies. By offering to create a counterpoint between literary and visual representations, and thereby addressing the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic and epistemological paradigm, Brugioni (re)situates the Mozambican cultural imaginary within the field of Indian Ocean studies.

African-Arab connections comes under scrutiny in Manuel João Ramos's chapter on the female migratory flows from the Horn of Africa and the particular kind of relationship that they entail. As happens with their Asian counterparts, girls and women temporarily migrating from the Horn work mainly as housemaids in affluent Arab countries, where they tend to be denied free and fair labour rights, under a harsh interpretation of the *kafala*, or sponsorship system, prevalent in the Gulf. Ramos details the system in place, and the culture that supports it, whereby the lack of state institutional protection subjects maids to a reality of everyday "structural violence" and employers end up bearing an unwonted responsibility. Although the high psychological, social and economic costs of this migration are well documented, two less known facts are here given consideration: that of the female workers' agency and resilience in the face of the hardships encountered, and that of the ways this situation is understood and managed from the employers' perspective.

The stereotyped clash between "the African" and "the Arab" also comes under analysis in Aleksis Ylönen's chapter on the entangled history of North-South

relations in the Sudan. He explains how, for centuries, the greater Horn of Africa has been exposed to influences from across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean more generally. Over time, this continued exposure has shaped the contemporary societies and states in the sub-region. The case of contemporary Sudan illustrates how the extension of Islam and the elite-led emphasis on Arab identity has led to a non-Arab society embracing Arab and Muslim culture, subsequently translated into the formation of a nationalist governing elite supporting a vision of national Sudanese identity based upon the rhetoric pillars of an appropriated Arab culture and an interpretation of Sunni Islam, this despite the heterogeneity of its cultures and peoples. Following decolonization, the Northern political elite's nation- and state-building project sought to homogenize the country through forced linguistic, cultural and religious assimilation, leading to varying degrees of direct confrontation with the Southern peoples. Ylönen considers the root causes of the armed conflict in Southern Sudan (part of the Sudanese state until 2011), identifying local perceptions and interpretations of the legacy of slavery and of forced cultural assimilation imposed through a state project of extending Islam and Arab culture, but also stressing that religion must not be dismissed as a central factor for the rebellion. He also observes that the overall situation during the wars was complex and changing, and that cynical interpretations of the legacy of slavery and religion were often used to justify armed opposition against the "Arab north". The chapter correlates these interpretations with the Orientalist image of Sudan and the aspirations of Southern Sudan's self-determination, independence, and drift towards an East African socio-cultural and Western Indian Ocean economic space.

The construction of such an economic space has long implied military and naval control. In his chapter on India's maritime strategic and security interests, Denis Venter deals with the recent expansion of India's naval capabilities and maritime security throughout the region, particularly through what he defines as highly asymmetrical developing relationships with small states (Mauritius, Seychelles and Oman) at, or near, the key points of entry into the Western Indian Ocean. Some of these states have traditionally seen India as a rather benign security provider with the capacity to act effectively as a security guarantor (the case with Mauritius and the Maldives). But the recent needs of further strengthening India's strategic posture in coastal Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula, matched with African littoral states' hopes to become regional power centres, sets the stage for a stronger role of Indian naval forces to assist in maintaining maritime order and addressing security challenges, in a delicate multilateral effort with South Africa, Australia and the US. The chapter argues that an important challenge for

New Delhi is to maintain public perceptions of India as a benign and non-hegemonic power in the Indian Ocean region just as it moves towards achieving great power status.

The book concludes with a chapter by Megna Singh on the symbolic paradox of “suspended mobility” within the maritime world, by drawing on the case of the arrested supply ship WBI Trinity at the port of Cape Town, in South Africa, as she travelled from Nigeria to Dubai, and the effect this has had on the lives of the men caught in the ensuing judicial process (the foreclosing of the mortgaged vessel). The case serves as an apt illustration of the overlapping complexities of maritime law as it intertwines with the economy and movement of international labour. By addressing the dialectical tropes of suspension, stillness and waiting affecting peoples’ lives, Singh reminds how they may help put in broader perspective the hyper-valorisation of the construction of flows of trade that dominate today’s global cultural discourses.

The contributions to this volume are a representative selection of case studies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that highlight the interconnectivity of the Indian Ocean region, from the first European entry into the ocean through to contemporary geopolitical strategies, and demonstrate quite effectively that Africa and the Indian Ocean constitute a political, economic and cultural unit whose constituent parts cannot be dissociated from one another.

This is certainly not a comprehensive and final book on the intertwining relationship between African participation in the regional trading and cultural networks of the Indian Ocean and the hegemonic presence of world powers in the area. Its purpose is rather to contribute, with a few meaningful exemplary case-studies, to assert the need for further and more inclusive investigation. It touches upon questions that have been independently addressed by different regional and inter-regional research networks (African studies, Gulf studies, Indian Ocean studies, Southwest Asian studies, etc.). The role of the Indian Ocean in global security, the increasing involvement of India and China in the economies of contemporary African states and the cultural links that bind eastern Africa to the Indian Ocean littoral are both intricate and temporally deep. The editors of this book hope that it may serve as a useful tool to bridge the different social sciences and regional studies areas, and create a clearer awareness of the deep-rooted, and evolving, ties between Africa and the Indian Ocean.