



Edward A. Alpers. *The Indian Ocean in World History*. New Oxford World History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 172 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-533787-7; \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516593-7.

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The Indian Ocean as a Historical Region

The Indian Ocean in World History by Edward Alpers is a concise overview of and introduction to the flourishing field of Indian Ocean history. The book has been published in the New Oxford World History series that aims to escape a Eurocentric world history and to analyze the past through the eyes of ordinary people across the world. Alpers thus takes the Indian Ocean very much on its own terms across centuries, without underestimating the people who lived in the littoral regions since the prehistoric times, or overemphasizing the roles of the Europeans who more recently dominated it. One major strategy Alpers employs in this regard is to pick up interesting events, individuals, narratives, and travel accounts of Asians, Africans, and Europeans who crossed or lived by the maritime highway. He includes the voices of ordinary coast dwellers, sailors, traders, travelers, shipbuilders, and craftspeople, which we hear through snippets and quotes like a Tamil love poem from South India, maritime folk tales from Mombasa in the Swahili coast, et cetera. Through such exemplary cases, Alpers recounts the ocean's long history of roughly seven thousand years.

The first chapter discusses how the Indian Ocean developed as a historical region. It engages with geological time and the impacts of the discovery of monsoon on taming the gigantic ocean through various navigational techniques, ships, and boats (mainly dhows in the western side of the ocean, and perahus, jong, and junks in the eastern side), and cartography. He writes: "both reality

and the idea of the Indian Ocean have changed over time" (p. 6), a statement that is very crucial to understanding the history of the Indian Ocean.

In the second chapter, Alpers deals with ancient navigation and maritime exchanges across the littoral from around the sixth millennium BCE to the mid-sixth century CE. Accommodating evidence from recent and old archaeological excavations and literary texts, Alpers articulates how the region functioned as a highway for short- and long-distance exchanges between several ancient communities and civilizations of Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the mid-sixth century, "the Indian Ocean trade experienced a precipitous decline" (p. 39), probably following the global epidemic of bubonic plague.

A century later, however, Islamic communities revived the maritime trade, which is the discussion of the third chapter. From East Africa to East Asia, Muslim traders navigated the Indian Ocean, negotiating and integrating with the local polities, societies, and cultures. Islam became a dominant faith around the western Indian Ocean by the fourteenth century, but "its proselytizing success was both slower and less complete in South and Southeast Asia" (p. 56). Through the increased involvement of Muslim traders and entrepreneurs, the Indian Ocean became an "Islamic Sea," Alpers writes. But he does not tell us what made the ocean "Islamic" in contrast to "a British lake" (mind you, not "Christian" lake or sea) in the later periods. He mentions that "Islamic law

provided a legal framework for the business of trade” (p. 47), but, again, he does not explain how, when, where or to what extent Islamic law influenced the Indian Ocean world of circulations.

In the following chapter, Alpers discusses how the Portuguese and the Ottomans competed to dominate the Indian Ocean trade in the early modern centuries, roughly between 1500 and 1800 CE. Against the Portuguese who “had introduced a novel form of state violence to seaborne trade” (p. 80), the Ottomans conceded their “imperial ambitions of liberating Islamic Indian Ocean lands from the Christian infidels and against their Mughal Muslim rivals” (p. 78). Even then, the Portuguese maritime power did not run unquestioned for long, as the Dutch and the English appeared in Indian Ocean waters. The English in particular would support the Armenians, who would build their own New Julfan network across the littoral, along with the Chinese and Gujarati Hindu, Jain, and Muslim mercantile communities.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to “the long nineteenth century,” with two prime discussions on the British attempts to curb slavery and piracy. In the last chapter, the discussion centers on five developments in the last century: air travel, the expansion of Islam and changes within the faith, natural disasters and environmental changes, the resurgence of piracy, and the Indian Ocean’s renewed geopolitical significance. At the end of the book, Alpers provides a short chronology, a list of further readings, and a webliography related to the Indian Ocean history.

It is striking that in the penultimate chapter, nowhere does he discuss the basic British motivation of colonialism, despite spending pages to discuss British virtue in fighting piracy with selfless motivation “to secure the maritime peace,” as he quotes Lord Curzon at one place (p. 105). He makes fleeting references to colonialism and says that it had some deep impacts on indigenous people. But he does not discuss colonial ventures across the Indian Ocean, which became a hotbed of violent colonial explorations, whereas his discussion on piracy is too detailed. After all, colonialism, piracy, and slavery are too overlapping and interrelated areas—as a historian of South Asia puts it, “the colonial subjugation is just a milder and a gentler form of slavery; the difference is only in degree and not in kind.”[1] Alpers’s neglect of colonialism can be remedied if we replace the term piracy with colonialism in his discussion, as for example in this sentence: “It seems likely that the origins and the legacy

of the maritime violence that marked Betsimisaraka [read European] history in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries owed much to the tradition of piracy [read colonialism] that was established by their interloping ancestors, for whom this way of life provided a means of accumulating wealth to which they would not otherwise have had access” (p. 111). He talks in detail about the English crusades against slavery and highlights indentured labor as “the experience was generally better” and “it improved as the system developed” (p. 117).

The book stands out for its lateness in comparison with existing general histories of the Indian Ocean world, particularly Michael Pearson’s *The Indian Ocean* (2003), Kenneth McPherson’s *The Indian Ocean: A History of the People and the Sea* (1993), and Milo Kearney’s *The Indian Ocean in World History* (2004). With respect to the latter, despite sharing the same title, the book under review does not refer to it anywhere. Structurally, too, the book follows the outlines of Pearson and Kearney, building a chronology by dedicating chapters to the Islamic sea, the early modern period, British dominance in the nineteenth century, and postcolonial contemporary histories. It is unfortunate that Alpers does not present the ocean’s history in a novel way, with new arguments and structure. A few details in the maps are incorrect and misleading.[2] Notwithstanding these lacunas in the structure and overall content, the book incorporates many recent studies in the field, especially the works of Steven Sidebotham on Berenike, Roxani Margariti on Aden, Sebouh Aslanian on Armenians, Giancarlo Casale on the Ottomans, and Kerry Ward on Dutch-Indonesia-South Africa imperial connections.[3] All these naturally make the book an up-to-date volume in the field compared to the earlier works, which all came out more than a decade ago.

Besides the freshness, the book also brings an African side of the story to the forefront, which is otherwise mentioned only in passing in the general Indian Ocean histories. Alpers’s own work on the East African trade in slavery and ivory thus gives a different dimension to the book. Precision is another added advantage over the existing studies, again save Kearney, as Alpers tells all the story of seven thousand years in less than 150 pages. The book is for general public and classroom use. A scholarly reader might crave more detail and references, which are hardly noted except in the case of direct quotes.

Notes

[1]. J. B. P. More, *Origin and Early History of the Muslims of Keralam, 700-1600 AD* (Calicut: Other Books,

2011), 154.

[2]. For example, “Cranagore” (correct spelling: Cranganore) positioned far from Muziris (in the map on pp. 20-21) and Kuwait shown as part of Iran (in the map on pp. 131-132).

[3] Steven Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Spice Route* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean*

Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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