

# H-Net Reviews

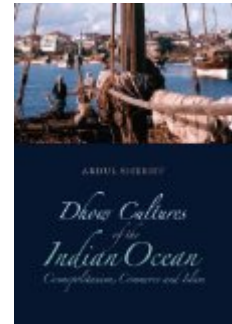
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abdul Sheriff. *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Illustrations, maps. xv + 351 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70139-6.

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## Trade, Society, and the Indian Ocean

Abdul Sheriff's new publication provides, in a clear and concise manner, a historical overview of the ecosystems of the Indian Ocean featuring three vast littoral regions. These three geographic areas include the East African Swahili coast; the arid landscapes from the Horn of Africa to the Indus Valley; and finally, the region encompassing the west coast of India. The author clearly explains how the dynamics of monsoons had an impact on the climate and therefore shaped the economic resources (flora, fauna, minerals, and atomic elements) that created unique baskets of trade goods, which, in turn, promoted trade and cultural exchange among the three regions. Based on such concepts as the "*longue durée*" and the socioeconomic, and therefore cultural, change of Indian Ocean societies introduced by K. N. Chaudhuri (1985), Sheriff focuses on the commonalities of these regions from the rise of mercantile capitalism through the emergence of its industrial successor.

Most perceptively the author traces the development of interregional trade based on fleets of ocean-going ships referred to as dhows. The construction of these remarkable vessels relied on trade goods and materials, such as wood, rope, sails, and metal, which came from all three regions. Sheriff reasons that the ships, crews, trade goods, broker houses, and mercantile manufacturing systems in concert generated an extensive group of trading and commercial societies with common interests and similar cultures. His descriptions of shipbuilding and life on board and at the ports, where a diverse mix of peo-

ples ate, traded, married, played, and worshipped, reveals the forces that shaped this part of the world as we know it today. Specifically, the exchange of slaves, ivory, spices, mangrove wood, dates, metal weapons, textiles, pearls, red coral, Arabian stallions, cowrie shells, fish, and grains unique to these regions promoted similar lifeways and ideologies. The brokers in this peaceful exchange, as Sheriff refers to it, included Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. Among the many fascinating narratives describing the goods and services of the trade, the reader learns, for example, that ivory from Africa was shipped to India where it was made into body ornaments for Hindu brides. And later, that ivory was shipped from India to Great Britain and the United States where it was made into pool balls and piano keys for the rising middle class, all within the framework of industrial capitalism and the rise of leisure time.

To further clarify and reinforce his views, the author has selected superb and instructive illustrations, featuring photographs of ships and crews, architecture, and markets. In addition, many maps are included, tracing trade wind patterns, low and high pressure zones, and the trade routes that tied the three regions together. This book constitutes a fine introduction to the subject, unlike the author's previous publication, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (1987), which is very detailed with rich and at times overwhelming data. *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean* is an important read for a diverse group of scholars in the fields of economics, maritime history, re-

ligion, politics, and cultural studies. For general readers, it reveals how ancient global trade affected societies long before the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution, and it begins to clarify current events associated with political and economic unrest in the Muslim societies of the region.

A few concerns should be flagged, however. Sheriff introduces the European trade component and, though the facts are aligned with some historical data, his conclusion that pre-European trade and economy was nonviolent seems exaggerated in the face of the documentation that that trade was at gunpoint from the Portuguese forward. Developing from this perspective is the author's argument that slavery in the Islamic, pre-European era was gentler. Although Sheriff draws this conclusion based on Islamic law, primary sources demonstrate that slavery was indeed harsh and inhumane in both Islamic and Christian-based eras. One could argue this using spe-

cific cases, perhaps, but not with sweeping generalities, as does the author. In addition, Sheriff states at the outset that along with the East African Swahili coast, the stretch of land from the Horn of Africa to the Indus Valley, and the west coast of India, the area from the east coast of India to China would receive due consideration. However, this interesting region is simply glossed over.

A highlight of this volume is the collection of excellent primary sources cited, including the observations and thoughts of Arabic, black African, European, Indian, Jewish, and Muslim travelers, traders, and artisans. Thus the book not only offers a well-written history of this region, but also puts at the disposal of the reader references that allow for more in-depth study of particular aspects of the trade and its history. I highly recommend *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean*, especially as it applies to global instability today, no doubt in part shaped by the experience of the Indian Ocean.

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