

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



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.

Reviewed by Anirudh Deshpande

Published on H-Asia (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

The place of the Indian Ocean in world history is unique because it has been a crossroads for three continents of the Old World and the region of Polynesia and Australia beyond the fluid maritime frontiers of Asia. The Indian Ocean world was “discovered” and made cosmopolitan by the African and Asian societies inhabiting its rim centuries before the Portuguese caravels entered the Arabian Sea only to be guided to the Malabar coast by Arab pilots. The book under review provides a refreshed perspective on the total history of the Indian Ocean region in the current context characterized by the rise of China and India as the new powers set once again to influence this maritime palimpsest. I dare say Fernand Braudel would have relished this tightly written narrative.

In the preface, the series’ editors, Bonnie G. Smith and Anand Yang, inform us that the New Oxford World History series “offers readers an informed, lively, and up-to-date history of the world and its people that represents a significant change from the ‘old’ world history,” which, it may correctly be presumed was history without people and their ideas. Further, the preface espouses the cause of dialectical history by asserting “that there is much to be gained by considering both the separate and interrelated stories of different societies and cultures” (p. ix). These historical stories, we are informed, present “local histories in a global context” and contain “an overview of world events seen through the eyes of ordinary people” (p. x). So far the preface is fine. These well-intentioned prefatory assertions are based on the shaky assumption that interest in world history is growing in the time of globalization. I wish to point out that interest in foreign

lands, cuisine, lifestyle, and culture conveyed by the omnipresent media these days is not the same thing as interest in world history, for often globalization promotes bourgeois tourism at the expense of meaningful national or local histories. The real workers who make globalization happen, and can be seen in large numbers in the book under review, are usually made invisible by the media narratives of globalization.

In contrast to the superficial world history that crams the brain of the so-called postmodern media addict, Edward A. Alpers has written an astonishing volume that distills knowledge accumulated about the Indian Ocean over centuries in about 146 pages rich in information and analysis. Scholars of the Indian Ocean know that Alpers is no stranger to their subject of choice. His vast professional experience, love of the subject, erudition, powers of analyzing large amounts of data and presenting them in succinct generalizations, and ability to transcend time and space within which most history is conceived are demonstrated in this delightful book. This slim volume deserves a substantial review compared with numerous fat ones, which, though they come with undeserving blurbs, might be dispatched in a sentence or two.

As an Indian historian who has traveled a little in Egypt, Arabia, the Gulf, and Southeast Asia, I found only one noteworthy blemish in the book. In chapter 2, which deals with the Indian Ocean in the ancient world and the Hellenic influence on the Arabian Sea region, Alpers states that Chandragupta Maurya established the Gupta Empire and Emperor Ashoka ruled for sixty years (p. 30). In fact, Chandragupta established the Mauryan Empire

and his grandson Ashoka ruled for thirty-seven years (269-232 BCE).

The book comprises six thematic chapters followed by a chronology, which all Indian Ocean scholars will find useful. There are also sections on further reading and websites consulted by the author and recommended to the readers. The acknowledgments and index come at the end. The whole text is peppered with maps, reproductions of paintings, and photographs; without references to visual evidence no history in general is complete. The visual evidence illustrating various facets of the Indian Ocean history has been selected by the author with great dexterity. This stringing together of visual evidence can, with a little effort, be perceived as a parallel narrative of knowledge and discourse that have characterized the human history of the Indian Ocean since the times of classical antiquity.

Chapter 1 is about imagining the Indian Ocean, chapter 2 looks at the Indian Ocean in the ancient world, chapter 3 tells us how the Indian Ocean became an Islamic sea during the medieval period, chapter 4 focuses on transformations in and challenges to the Indian Ocean in the early modern period, and chapter 5 is a well-crafted discourse on the nineteenth century during which a great amount of change in the Indian Ocean world was compressed in a century dominated by Western colonialism. It was a century in which “Great Britain’s colonial enterprise in the Indian Ocean had wrought a whole range of serious consequences that affected millions of inhabitants of the entire region” (p. 126). Among these consequences were the widespread and long-term migrations of the Hadrami people whose history is well known to the historians of the Indian Ocean diaspora. This history continued uninterrupted during the colonial period. Much work has also been done on the Indian indentured laborers and the continuous movement of the ubiquitous *lascars* who manned the sailing and steam ships; all this finds mention in the volume. And, of course, Alpers points to the thousands of deaths due to the spread of fatal diseases like cholera. The last chapter is focused on the twentieth century and brings the modern social and cultural story of the Indian Ocean region up to the events with which most readers will be familiar. This it does by milking the rich diasporic history of the Indian Ocean, which has generated variegated sites of public and personal memories indispensable to the modern social historian. The dialectic of continuity and change expressed in the documented and remembered experiences of men and women—the central problematic of all history, memory, and historiography—informs this book from the be-

ginning to the end. Finally, the book ends by reminding us that the Indian Ocean, despite the long-term stability of its geographical location, “is today more than ever a major world crossroads” (p. 146).

There are two aspects of this book worth noting and that make it exemplary of the historians’ craft fashioned since the ancient times. The first is an imagination of the Indian Ocean, at whose center lies India, brought to the reader through the prose and poetry of ancient, medieval and modern voyagers, historians, and even ship pilots like Ibn Majid. This imagination produces a blend of the romantic and real—a hallmark of human memory in general. The history of ideas and goods, the author convinces readers, happens in one history that can be grasped only by following the dialectical method. The evocative description of the sailing ship as “an essentially male floating society” which facilitated an exchange of goods and ideas comes from this imagination (p. 11). Throughout the book, Alpers displays an awareness of “the enormity of attempting to gain both physical and imaginative control of this vast oceanic world” (p. 4). Alpers proves it to us that before we write the history of any subject we must know how our predecessors have imagined it with respect to time and space. The following words echo his own struggle with a subject in which he finds himself implicated: “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 significant, each cannot escape the ties that bind him to the place from which he viewed the India Ocean world” (p. 5).

The second aspect comprises the centrality of exchange, of goods and ideas together, which has created a unique hybrid cosmopolitan Indian Ocean world, which can be perceived in the evolution of the Indian Ocean societies and their technologies. From shipbuilding technology and its products like the *dhow*, *prahus*, and *junks* to the trade in and migration of grains, fruits, vegetables, exotic animals, and cattle, almost everything is underlined by modes of coastal and oceanic exchange promoted since ancient times by the intrepid inhabitants of the Indian Ocean region. The book is a description of these people and simultaneously an ode to them because their memories are built into the popular interdisciplinary nature of the author’s narrative. However, this does not mean that the dangers posed to the trade of the Indian Ocean region are overlooked by Alpers. All is not hunky dory. The historical and geographi-

cal threat posed to traders, pilgrims, and travelers, like piracy and the vagaries of nature, described in detail in the author's sources and personal experience have found their way into the text. The Red Sea and Malacca were, and continue to be, notorious maritime sites of piracy. The volume also underscores an important point that goes against understanding the Indian Ocean world from a Eurocentric "Orientalist" perspective despite the rise of European colonialism in the nineteenth century having followed the political decline of Islam.

The history of the Indian Ocean world has been

marked by several continuities and changes since time immemorial, but since the days when the water bodies of this geographical area first entered a narrativized human imagination, numerous local traditions, of which the communities living on the Indian Ocean rim are the custodians, have displayed a remarkable resilience documented in this easy-to-read jargon-free volume. This distillation of historical knowledge of the Indian Ocean world is most welcome in our academic "corporate" world where both teachers and students are not left with enough leisure to read large volumes.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Anirudh Deshpande. Review of Alpers, Edward A., *The Indian Ocean in World History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43277>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.