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The medieval Muslim geographers characterized the Indian Ocean as the Green Sea (*al-Baḥr al-Akhḍar*), a term that also means “black/dark” in Arabic, signifying both “night” and “the sea” (*al-akhḍarān*). This polysemous nomenclature is echoed in the title of Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s “polyphonic history” of the early modern Western Indian Ocean. By juxtaposing and connecting the Indian Ocean and European sources, Subrahmanyam brings to life a crucial period marked by significant political, economic, and cultural transformations. His book, *Across the Green Sea*, explores these transitions through the lens of a “connected history,” moving away from traditional comparative history approaches that often impose regionally bounded and Eurocentric frameworks.

*Across the Green Sea* is spatially organized, moving from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, along the East African coast, and back to the Arabian Sea of South Asia. The narrative begins with the Ottoman admiral Seydi ‘Ali Re’is’s shipwreck in Gujarat in 1554, which spurred the penning of the *Kitabü’l-Muhit* (Book of the Ocean). This incident underscored the indispensable role of local knowledge in navigating different seas, paralleling the book’s framework that each ocean requires its historical narratives grounded in its political economy and social history. The detailed examination of the kingdom of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf sets the stage for understanding complex interactions and strategic resistance against Portuguese colonization efforts. Subrahmanyam employs diverse sources to reconstruct a series of encounters among Indian Ocean actors and their Iberian, and later English and Dutch, counterparts.

The book is structured into four chapters, which peel back the layers of history of the Western Indian Ocean. The first chapter, “An Epoch of Transitions, 1440-1520,” introduces the geographical and historical trajectories of this oceanic arena, emphasizing the regulatory role of the
monsoon wind system in long-distance navigation and trade. Here, Subrahmanyam moves beyond geographic determinism to critique the simplistic core-periphery model of historical geography, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of power and cultural influence rather than focusing solely on economic dominance. His critique highlights the importance of various types of islands—small archipelagos (e.g., Maldives), strategically located islands (e.g., Hurmuz, Bahrain), and large islands like Madagascar—in regional trade and cultural exchanges, emphasizing Madagascar’s Austronesian and African influences.

The political landscape shaped by the Ming dynasty’s maritime expeditions under Admiral Zheng He revealed that the Ming interactions favored smaller port cities over larger polities. Active Timurid oceanic diplomacy, set against the backdrop of the Vijayanagara-Bahmani sultanate conflict and the rise of the Gujarat sultanate, showcased that the Indian Ocean was far from a *mare liberum*, free of competing political claims and economic rivalries. In this charged arena, the Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean involved violent strategies to dominate trade and establish fortified positions, which had to adapt to preexisting political structures. Despite Portuguese interventions, ports like Kannur and Hormuz persisted. The chapter concludes with the transformative Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516-17 and the rise of the Mughal and Safavid Empires, marking significant shifts in the political geometry of the Indian Ocean.

In the second chapter, “The View from the Hijaz, 1500-1550,” Subrahmanyam shifts his focus to observe the ocean from the perspective of the Hijaz, emphasizing the Red Sea’s role in commerce and Islamic pilgrimage. This approach offers a local perspective with an oceanic outlook, avoiding regional categorical frameworks. Subrahmanyam uses underutilized Arabic sources, such as *Nail al-muna* by Jarullah ibn Fahd al-Makki, which animated ongoing transregional connections between Mecca and Gujarat, critiques of Ottoman rule, and economic and social conditions. By analyzing and historically contextualizing such texts, Subrahmanyam highlights mercantile activities and significant commercial, diplomatic, and intellectual interactions, revealing the geopolitical context involving Gujarati ships and the onset of Portuguese threats. The chapter also explores the aftermath of Cambay sultan Bahadur Shah’s loss to Mughal sultan Humayun, detailing the challenges faced by Gujarati nobles and the changing political dynamics following the Ottoman conquest of the Hijaz in 1517.

The third chapter, “The Afro-Indian Axis,” portrays East Africa’s role in the trading networks of the Western Indian Ocean. Subrahmanyam emphasizes here Arabic’s cultural and linguistic influence and the utility of the “Arabic cosmopolis” concept.[1] He outlines the historical development of Islamic city-states along the Swahili coast, focusing on ports like Mozambique, Kilwa, and Mombasa. His analysis emphasizes how East African and broader Indian Ocean interactions influenced social structures, urbanism, and architectural evolution. The narrative further examines early Portuguese contacts and conflicts, highlighting evolving trade relationships and the complexities of Portuguese monopolistic policies. Subrahmanyam also sheds light on how external threats and Portuguese actions influenced the political and trade relations between the Deccan ports and northeast Africa. Notably, Ethiopian elites like Malik ’Ambar and Sidi Sa’id Sultani al-Habashi played significant roles in Gujarati and Deccani politics and state formation. The chapter concludes by sketching the political and trade relations between Muslim powers and Ethiopia, influenced by Portuguese campaigns against figures like Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim and his Ottoman allies. Through these conflicts, Subrahmanyam foregrounds the involvement of Christian and Muslim actors in creating long-lasting instability that fueled the slave trade and its expansion to mar-
kets in the Hijaz, Yemen, and as far as the Delhi sultanate.

In the final chapter, “The View from Surat,” Subrahmanyam provides readers with a textured exploration of Surat’s history. This significant port city is examined through the lens of cosmopolitanism, emphasizing cultural exchanges, tolerance, and the diverse communities that have shaped it. Subrahmanyam illustrates the city’s vibrant trade networks, multicultural population, and the complex mercantile environment by drawing on accounts of European visitors, such as John Ovington and François le Gouz de la Boullaye. By comparing Surat with other ports and analyzing diverse historical sources, the chapter demonstrates Surat’s cosmopolitan nature and impact on intercultural understanding and global connectivity. However, the chapter complicates and probes the concept of “cosmopolitanism” away from Eurocentric historical genealogies. Oceanic cosmopolitanism flourished in Surat and was recognized even in Europe by the late eighteenth century despite its decline.

In his conclusion, Subrahmanyam intertwines Persian chronicles, Portuguese records, and Balochi epic ballads to reconstruct the history of Mughal Sind and Balochistan. The result of Subrahmanyam’s approach is a multivocal representation of Portuguese activities, trade dynamics, and the resistance of local populations, such as the tragedy of the Baloch chief Mir Hammal Jihand and his confrontation with the Portuguese at sea. By unraveling these polyphonic sources, the book offers a panoramic view of the influences that shaped the Indian Ocean world. Subrahmanyam’s invitation to embrace “polyphonic histories” encapsulates the objective of this book. It sets the stage for constructing interconnected historiographies and multidimensional processes that capture the myriad voices of the Green Sea’s history: “The history that emerges is inevitably not merely connected but polyphonic, perhaps at times even discordant. But there is no proper history, whether of an ocean or a continent, where all the voices from the past will sing for us either in unison or in harmony” (p. 215).

In 1990, Sinnappah Arasaratnam reflected on the historiography of the early modern Indian Ocean world and found that it had come a long way “from a view of the ocean as primarily the playground of European naval and commercial powers with indigenous actors providing minor roles for the lead up to the period of empire in the nineteenth century.”[2] Over the last three decades, Indian Ocean historiography has made leaps that have produced textured studies of commerce, empire, religion, literary communities, material culture, and diplomacy, among many other domains in which local agency and source materials counterbalance the Eurocentricism of the earlier studies.[3] Recent histories of the medieval and early modern Western Indian Ocean, such as studies by Elizabeth Lambourn, Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, Mahmood Kooria, Sebastian R. Prange, Jorge Flores, James White, and Christopher D. Bahl, integrate South Asia and the Middle East, pushing the boundaries of area studies.[4] Subrahmanyam’s *Across the Green Sea* is a welcome contribution to this burgeoning scholarship, where ports and regions like Surat and the Hijaz act as cosmopolitan global magnets of trade, knowledge production, and diplomacy. Yet East Africa, as Gwyn Campbell argues, remains on the margins of medieval and early modern oceanic histories.[5] In this regard, Subrahmanyam’s focus on the roles of East and Northeast Africa as central nodes in the historical processes that shaped the Indian Ocean world is a much-needed intervention given the longue durée multidirectional exchanges that intensified in the early modern period.

Subrahmanyam’s critical approach to traditional comparative history reminds us of the valuable methodological insights and rewards of writing connected and polyphonic oceanic histories. His use of diverse genres, sources, and voices from
multilingual historiographies allows for a polyphonic and multifaceted history of the Western Indian Ocean. The book's structure and the depth of analysis in each chapter highlight the frictions of transregional interactions, political dynamics, and cultural exchanges, rendering it an invaluable resource for scholars and researchers. Overall, *Across the Green Sea* enriches the narratives of the Western Indian Ocean's history, advocating for an approach that transcends area studies and traditional imperial histories. It is an essential read for anyone interested in the historiography of Afro-Asian connections, interactions between terrestrial and maritime powers, Indian Ocean source materials and their European counterparts, oceanic history, and the complexities of early modern global interactions.

Notes


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