The idea of Africa's pre-colonial history remains complicated. Post-independent African historiography sought to disrupt the colonial school, by demonstrating the existence of states, democracy and organized markets in pre-colonial Africa, 1 thereby challenging depictions of pre-colonial Africa as the insulated and peculiar scene of human stagnation and societal mayhem. As Basil Davidson noted, the writing between people of Africa, though long gone from reasonable discourse, retain a kind of underground existence.

For historians, the unit of inquiry -- with regard to both time and space -- is a recurring theoretical dilemma. In the wake of traditional thinking on Africa, its history has routinely suffered from the publication of works that attempt to 'do history' of the entire continent and are consequently at once ambitious in scope and theoretically weak. Often left out of these accounts are histories that challenge the legitimacy of African isolationist position. Also, the literature that is emerging about the history of East Africa's role on the Indian Ocean rim show lively, diverse commercial and cultural exchanges for centuries. For that reason, it invalidates the idea of Africa as a place unto itself and thus renders history inspired by such thinking untenable.

In this respect, Abdul Sherrif's Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean is a welcome addition to African historical literature. In this important work, the author explores the expansive network of Indian Ocean trade and cultural interface and its impact on East African societies (as well as the zone stretching to the Indian coast). Abdul Sherrif, who is director of the Centre for the Study of the Indian Ocean, Research Institute, takes a long overdue approach to the history of the littoral region of Indian Ocean as a 'zone of consumption', much in the vein of K.N. Chaudhuri, who in turn was inspired by Fernand Braudel and his pioneering study, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (1973). Sherrif connects the Indian Ocean littoral to the Mediterranean, arguing that the Indian Ocean 'zone of consumption' created an environment that led to inter-regional social interactions among disparate peoples, giving rise to a cosmopolitan society (p. 17).

The work is divided into four parts. The first deals with 'Regional partners', from other scholars and quoting heavily his writing with different perspectives and even identities. The second part, which gives a detailed look at navigation and the dhow itself, the principal means of communication and commerce in the region. Third, Abdul Sherrif gives details of 'Dialogue across the ocean', where he offers a brief account of what he finds to be the three dominant eras of interaction in the history of the Indian Ocean: the murky and sporadic days of the early Indian Ocean trade, leading what Sherfiff describes as the 'superimposition of Roman trade' (p. 140), the emergence of Sassanid empire and finally the 'era of Sinbad' where Sherrif describes the Indian Ocean as an open sea, where no one culture was dominant (p. 171).

In the final section, he tackles the role of slavery and Islam in shaping the dhow cultures.

The result is a broad understanding of the forces that drew the east coast of Africa (and all the way to the Indian sub-continent) into this trade network for over two millennia, and an appreciation of how Islam shaped that enduring relationship.

The Indian Ocean littoral was shaped, not only by geography but also by climate. The two-monsoon system, though reliable, resulted in a sort of gridlock that required seafarers to spend months at their port of destination before setting sail to their port of origin. It is in this interval period between the monsoon seasons that the culture of the Indian Ocean truly begin to mix, transcending narrow commercial interaction. For sailors, to partake in trade in this monsoon system means having multiple homes, families and even identities.

Although the concept of dhow cultures smacks of geographical determinism (much of the first portion of the book details the physical features of the different regions), Abdul Sherrif makes a clear argument that it took Islam to animate the disparate peoples of the zone to coalesce into a cohesive whole.

This account shines in its treatment of the dhows themselves. Abdul Sherrif sees the dhows as the governing metaphor of the Indian Ocean. Not only was the boat 'the premier vehicle for the process of economic exchange and cultural interaction' (p. 79), but it also reflected the inter-connectedness of the region. The term 'dhow' describes the many boats of the Indian Ocean that, through various iterations, have been at the core of maritime trade. The dhow itself changed to meet the economic and technological conditions. The actual make-up of the dhow was an amalgam of different materials and technologies found in the littoral, and in some cases, even further inland. Shipbuilding thrived all over the region. Thus, in one dhow, one could find a boat built in the Arafat Peninsula, out of African teak, with iron nails from India and employing Islamic navigational technology.

In an attempt to distill the important historical features of the Indian Ocean region, Abdul Sherrif's writing emphasizes the complexity of linkages and interactions in the littoral. He substantiates his work with historical accounts (such as the ancient Periplus of the Erythraean Sea) and picks moments in history and migratory trends that shaped the variety of dhow cultures. For example, he delves into the murky history of Madagascar, which he positions as unique and yet emblematic of the Afro-Asian connections of the dhow cultures. He also describes the different periods such as the Iranian interlude and the dominant role of Islam in the region.

The author excels in vividly describing historical vignettes that articulate his ideas about how the transcendent nature of the Indian Ocean interacted. When appropriate, he uses extensive specific examples. In this way, he is able to show the main elements of his thesis. One of the most compelling examples of this type of writing lies in his description of the Hadhrami emigration from their insecure abode in modern day Yemen throughout the Indian Ocean basin. While assimilating into their new homelands, they formed examples of this sort of writing lies in his description of the Hadhrami emigration from their insecure abode in modern day Yemen throughout the Indian Ocean basin. While assimilating into their new homelands, they formed...
and offering paths towards freedom. Sherrif spends an appropriate amount of space on the slave trade within the context of *sharia* and the *umma* but does not delve deeper into how that led to the cosmopolitanism that he describes, especially institutionally.

An even stronger criticism can be made of his use of the term ‘cosmopolitan’. The term should not be deployed without clarification. Without a clear definition from the outset, the work falters. The author paints a picture of the Indian Ocean littoral as being marked by a maritime ethos that allowed for considerable trade and interaction. He forcefully argues that people of the littoral were bound together by the Indian Ocean and became a cohesive whole comprised of diverse communities. These societies were culturally shaped by the other societies of the littoral, through the expansion of Islam and the evolving maritime languages. Ostensibly, he unhinges the term cosmopolitanism from its philosophical roots, which has been expounded upon recently by scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah. Instead, he deploys it to describe how people of the region were open to other cultures and, as a result, formed societies (and families) that were both multi-ethnic and multicultural. Cosmopolitanism is used to denote the inclusive nature of the Indian Ocean world.

However, the author’s portrayal of the dhows cultures is replete with examples where the term ‘cosmopolitan’ would be a less than accurate adjective, and that portion of his thesis fades to the background. There are simply long and extensive non-commercial interactions in the littoral. Indeed, these distinctions (in addition to genealogy and race) have been restrictive in one way or another and continue to shape life in the region.

Take the example of the Swahili coast societies. The author writes:

Despite all the ethnic, social and cultural differences that are apparent in a maritime society such as the Swahili, they make sense only in their combination rather than in their disaggregation. Such societies located at the confluence between the continental and maritime environments are necessarily complex and cosmopolitan (pp. 279-80).

He then brings into the discourse the work of David Parkin, who notes that members of the Mijikenda, a supra-national grouping of nine largely Muslim tribes on the coast, who, although they acknowledge their non-Muslim Bantu ancestry, desire to be acculturated ‘as Swahili Muslims’.

In a cosmopolitan society, why would members of one group in society want to be identified as another? Asking this and other questions may illuminate the ways that the cosmopolitan thesis is deficient. And in doing so, one finds that this portrayal does not accurately tell the whole story. The reasoning behind this is rooted in local history. Traditionally, under the Sultanate, only Swahilis, Indians and Arabs were allowed to own land, while the Mijikenda were barred from doing so. Subsequent land reforms also privileged those who could prove land ownership. The desire to be Swahilis is structured around the fact that being commercial and entrepreneurial is inextricably mapped onto the identity of being Swahili, while the desire to be local/traditional is attributed to remaining Mijikenda.

The recent work by Janet McIntosh explains how the Girama (a tribe of the Mijikenda) resent the Swahili who have claims to ‘wealthy and sacred Arab lands and [...] the pan-national sites of global Muslims community’. And indeed, this resentment has endured. At times *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean* feels handicapped by its scope and the author’s organizational approach. While the work is enriched by a great collection of maps, diagrams and photographs, its temporal scope however leaves the reader with some questions. Periodization is a concern that the author attempts to address, but in the face of the over-riding geographical consideration girding the project, readers may find themselves searching for temporal footing. The reader would thus have been served well by a thoughtful chronology or timeline as an appendix.

Still, with *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean*, Abdul Sherrif has put together a sweeping volume that is topical, immensely readable and well documented, with a trope of valuable primary sources. He has given us a modern, serious and coherent account that should penetrate the syllabi of African history courses.

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**Notes**

2. Historian Edward Alpers writes about the network of Islamic thought in the Mozambique channel region in his article: ‘A Complex Relationship: Mozambique and the Comoro Islands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,’ *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 161 (2001), pp. 73-95.
4. His recent work 2006, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* New York: W.W. Norton & Co. is one of the more recent and widely acclaimed works on the ethical demands of cosmopolitanism.
6. And due to the structure of the book, with short chapters on many different histories across the region, this discussion (and other particulars) does seem muted.
7. McIntosh, p. 37.
8. McIntosh, 2009, makes a compelling argument as to how current relations between Girama and Swahilis are fraught with tension. She argues that the Girama view themselves in a subordinate position to the Swahili, economically as well as vis-à-vis the state.