Studying Africa in the Context of the Broader Indian Ocean World

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Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam

by Abdul Sherrif,
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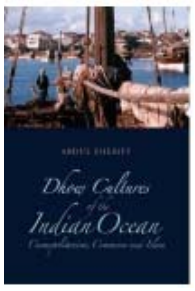
The idea of Africa's pre-colonial history remains complicated. Post-independence African historiography sought to disrupt the colonial school, by demonstrating the existence of states, democracy and organized markets in pre-colonial Africa,[1] thereby challenging depictions of pre-colonial Africa as the insulated and peculiar scene of human stagnation and societal mayhem. As Basil Davidson noted, old ideas about 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 traditional historical understandings of Africa's role in the world, as being either isolated or the scene of exploitation or wealth extraction. For instance, there is substantial body of literature as well as oral accounts that challenges 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 Zanzibar Indian Ocean Research Institute, takes a *long durée* 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 Fernando Braudel and his pioneering work on the history of the Mediterranean. He argues that the Indian Ocean 'zone of consumption' created an environment that led to intimate 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', where Abdul Sherrif explains the three principal regions of the Indian Ocean world, the Swahili Coast, the Arabian Peninsula and the Western Indian Seaboard. He follows that up with an indepth 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 into what Sherrif 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 cultures of the Indian Ocean truly begin to mix, transcending narrow commercial interaction. For sailors, to partake in trade in this monsoon system often meant 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 dhow itself. Abdul Sherrif sees the dhow 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 Arabian Peninsula, out of African teak, with iron nails from India and employing Iranian 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-Asiatic 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 communities 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 diaspora communities (which were comprised largely of male seafarers) that had strong connections to their homeland, yet were very much ethnically mixed with their host cultures. In Gujarat during the 16th century, many Hadhrami worked as mercenaries; elsewhere, they comprised a powerful merchant class. Many children of the Hadhrami, a great number of whom were of mixed ancestry, experienced discrimination at the hands of their full-blooded Arab families. In short sections like these, the author handles the storytelling with aplomb, interspersing his writing with different perspectives from other scholars and quoting heavily from historical records.

Throughout these vignettes, the role of Islam as a unifying force is a fairly consistent theme. In the section entitled 'A Muslim Lake,' the author discusses the specific ways in which Islam spread, the distinctive features of the religion and the attendant culture that allowed it to flourish. It was a force for unification, helping to smooth out cultural differences among the people of the littoral. The author makes a convincing case that Islamically inflected maritime trade was indeed a unifying force, concluding: 'The common belief system provided an identity and organisational framework to regulate transactions between people over very long distances who shared certain norms of behaviour and business practices'(p. 257).

The flexible religious and legal framework grounded in the Qur'an and *hadiths* allowed Islam to be re-negotiated in places like the Indian and African coasts. The author describes the nature of itinerant scholars and Sufi networks in the region, which, in his words, filled the 'inner void in the spiritual cravings of the heart' of many would be Muslims (p. 244).

Even if Mecca and the Arab culture are central to Islam, the depiction of the 'Islamic Lake' leaves readers with an understanding of the region that relegates the different ways in which Islam was practiced outside the Arabian Peninsula to a peripheral position. By focusing on the Sufi orders and their presence in the region, Sherrif overlooks the mainstream iterations of Islam that existed elsewhere.

Therein lies a problem. Although briefly touched on, it is important to emphasize that there existed Islamic centers of learning that would likely reject the Sufi label and whose leaders did not conform to the label of 'itinerant scholars'. The author missed here an opportunity to highlight the ways different communities were involved in knowledge production and theology within the framework of Sunni Islam. There were examples that demonstrate that religious writing and centers of knowledge production existed in other parts of the Indian Ocean world, and in some cases, such centers became hubs of Islamic knowledge in the region.[2] For example, the Lamu archipelago on the Swahili coast has long been a center for Islamic medicine, attracting students and practitioners from across the Muslim world. Studying in Lamu meant learning under specific pedagogies that created genealogical links that conferred prestige and authority[3]. Zeroing in on one of these theological and scholarly communities and its historical significance would have been useful to show how Islamic thought flourished in the Indian Ocean world in a manner consistent with the flow of the rest of the book. Alas, it is a missed opportunity that could have served readers well.

The author also makes a rather abrupt transition from slave-holding societies to cosmopolitan ones. An understanding of the mechanisms that created the broad transition from one to the other would have been vital to understanding how the modern day littoral Indian Ocean region has come to be. In his discussion of slavery, the author locates Islam as a mediating, and often mitigating, force in slavery, placing limits on the slave-owner relationship

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.[4] 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 dhow 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 stretches where cosmopolitanism, ostensibly an important facet of his argument, is not readily apparent. Instead, the author balances an account of the commercial history of Indian Ocean trade (which is largely transactional) while documenting the ways that ethnicity and religion have shaped other 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?[5] 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.[6] 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 Swahili 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 Giriama (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'.[7] And indeed, this resentment has endured.[8]

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 trove of valuable primary sources. He has given us a modern, serious and coherent account that should penetrate the syllabi of African history courses.

Notes

1. Tesema Ta'a, 2010, *Issues in the Historiography of Africa,* Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, p. 20.
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.
3. Abdul Hamid el Zein, 1974, *The sacred meadows: A structural analysis of religious symbolism in an East African town,* Evanston: Northwestern University. Press. This book has a good discussion of how genealogies connecting individuals to the bloodline of the Prophet Mohammed
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.
5. Janet McIntosh, 2009, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast*, Durham: Duke University Press.
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 Giriama and Swahilis are fraught with tension. She argues that the Giriama view themselves in a subordinate position to the Swahili, economically as well as vis-à-vis the state.

The Mobile City of Accra
Urban Families, Housing and Residential Practices

Accra, capitale en mouvement
Familles citadines, logement et pratiques résidentielles

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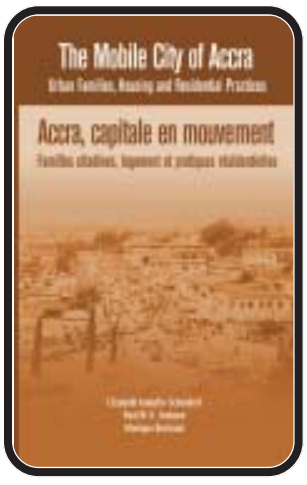

This book is a product of collaborative research between the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD, France), the University of Ghana, Legon and CODESRIA. It examines various economic, social and environmental challenges of urbanization that critically affect the capital of Ghana, which has experienced high demographic growth and territorial expansion. This work analyses the Greater Accra city dwellers' residential practices, and focuses on two main factors influencing land and rental markets. On the one hand, it interrogates the constraints and dynamics of urban families, their needs and gender characteristics in terms of accommodation. On the other hand, it explores the opportunities and interests in investment on the part of land owners and real estate developers. At these two levels of describing the social and spatial discriminations, the book attempts to explain the difficult choices that this fragmented city faces. It emphasizes the role of mobility in structuring the metropolitan area, and the negative impact of lack of mobility which results in some households and communities suffering more than others. The book throws light on diagnostics and prospects in the matter of urban planning.

Cet ouvrage est le fruit d'une collaboration scientifique entre l'Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD, France), l'Université de Ghana, Legon et CODESRIA. Il examine les différents défis économiques, sociaux et environnementaux de l'urbanisation qui affectent de manière sensible la capitale du Ghana qui connaît une forte expansion démographique et territoriale. Ce travail analyse les pratiques résidentielles des habitants du Grand Accra en se concentrant sur deux déterminations : les contraintes et la dynamique de la demande de terrains à bâtir et des besoins en logements locatifs du point de vue des familles citadines et des relations de genre qui les marquent, d'une part ; celles de l'offre du point de vue des propriétaires fonciers, des investisseurs immobiliers et des bailleurs, d'autre part. A ces deux niveaux de discriminations urbaines, sociales et spatiales, l'ouvrage tente d'éclairer les manques en matière d'aménagement urbain et les choix des politiques. L'étude met ainsi en lumière le rôle de la mobilité dans la structuration de l'espace métropolitain et le déficit de mobilité dont certains ménages et communautés pâtissent plus que d'autres dans les caractéristiques d'une ville fragmentées. Ce livre fait un diagnostique et donne des perspectives futures sur la question de l'aménagement urbain.

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