

The cultural conquest of the Indian Ocean and its landmarks

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The Indian Ocean contains within its rim the greatest diversity of race, religion and living language in today's world, as well as the half of current global civilizations according to Huntington's division of civilisation. The countries that fringe its shorelines together wield considerable strategic weight in the global economy and this influence is expected to assume leading status in the 21st century.

Geographically, the Indian Ocean divides the continents of Africa and Asia as far as Australasia, and although the account of a 3rd century merchant (*A tour of the Eritrean Sea*), describes the Indian Ocean as an African Sea, we understand that even at that time it was believed to be an internal body of water, albeit one that linked the coasts of

Oman, Yemen and the Red Sea with the east coast of Africa. As such it was an African/Asian Sea. A more detailed geographical knowledge of the Indian Ocean was established in the 8th century as awareness grew of the extent of its reach, bounding in parallel the Silk Road, or long-distance overland trade route from Far Eastern Asia (Turkistan and China) to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. It was originally thought that the Silk Road served for the transporting of merchandise across countries that did not benefit from sea or coastline, or from long navigable rivers. Now, however, we know that this land route was used for the carriage of soft commodities, while the sea and ocean routes were reserved for the shipment of hard commodities or substantial quantities of goods and raw materials. If it is the case that the Silk Road spread beyond local and domestic traffic boundaries from ancient times, as a consequence of peaceful accord and the amicable conduct of goods-trading activity, the Indian Ocean effectively broke through local and internal (conceptual) boundaries from the 9th century, when Muslims succeeded in navigating their merchant fleets between Basra, Sohar and Seraf in the Arabian Gulf to the coasts of India and the China Sea via the Strait of Malacca.

The ocean continued to instill fear because of its ferocious storms and cyclones, as recounted in the stories of Sinbad, in Aja'ib Al-Hind (*The wonders of India*), and the voyage of Sulaiman the Merchant. As the shipbuilding industry advanced and knowledge of the ocean's islands expanded, these could be sought out for refuge or as a tem-

porary anchorage where merchants could engage in the exchange of goods until the storms passed or the trade winds returned. Or they could await the arrival of Indian and Chinese merchant ships to the islands for an exchange of contact and goods. From the 10th century onwards, the ocean was a medium of peace, commerce and internal exchange for small merchant vessels plying the ports on both sides, as well as large merchant ships making the long crossing between Oman, Basra, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Sea and the ports of India and China. In this way, the Indian Ocean had come to encompass, geographically, a vast continuum that depended on three principal advances: firstly, expansion in the knowledge of marine weather, of cyclones and astronomy; secondly, progressive innovations in the shipbuilding industry; and thirdly the success of Muslims in prevailing over communities and countries throughout the ocean and over its eastern, western and southern shores.

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History

The Arabic historian Ibn Habib (d. 859) accounts in his work *Kitab al-Muhabbar* that Chinese and Indian ships reach Arabia, and the ships using Diba port in the northern Oman as their main port. He added that the Julandanis kings of Oman who were monarchy in the 4th century took taxes from these ships. Certainly, if we take this account into consideration, then it shows the exchanging of trade between Arabia and Southeastern Asia and the Far East in the pre-Islamic period. From the 8th century onwards, the

ports of Sohar, Basra, Seraf and Aden were known as the “Indian” ports. The Indian epithet was not an indicator that some Indian state had attained control over these regions, but rather reflected the presence of large colonies of sailors from Indian territories and because of the quantities of Indian merchandise available there. History also tells us that maritime trade conducted by Muslims remained in private hands, continuing to attract the investment of leading merchants and encountering no state intervention beyond the collection of taxes and tolls in major ports. Again, it was not the state that ensured the protection of sea commerce and the merchants who conducted it, but rather the presence of Muslim communities after the 8th century on the African and Asian shores of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent lands, including much of the territory along the Silk Road. And so, historically, trade remained private and merchant fleets also remained in private hands: civilian fleets maintained and overseen by the traders themselves. As such, it was the traders who funded and invested in the development of the shipbuilding industry and in the advancement of marine knowledge, both in terms of technical innovation and the exploration of ocean waters and islands. Because capital is risk-averse, as we know, it followed that merchants, as concerned as they were about protection on the high seas, were just as keen to maintain dominance over the ports through the services of local authorities who held sway by controlling communication and coordination, and through a “generation” of supportive authorities, so to speak.

We also know, historically, that again and again crises broke out between Omani and Buyidis traders from Persia, which in one case ignited a rebellion led by Rashid bin Hafis, or again between the Makarama traders and the new Mamluk authorities following the occupation of Aden in Yemen. These latter were looking to monopolise trade in certain commodities or to raise unreasonably exorbitant excise duties and tolls on goods. It is a fact that the private and peaceful nature of trade in the Islamic era was not confined to the Indian Ocean but also included the Mediterranean Sea. The situation in the Mediterranean differed from that of the Indian Ocean, for in the latter Muslims were importers and exporters, while in the Mediterranean they were exporters only, with the merchants of Italian cities being importers. The Italian city merchants, who also received delivery of Indian goods from the ports of the Levant and Egypt, had no communication with Islamic authorities beyond the payment of taxes and tolls. All other matters were dealt with on their behalf by Muslim traders, including issues related to security and disputes, which were conducted by proxy all the way to arbitration.

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The Italians subsequently established agencies and neighbourhoods in coastal cities for the storage of merchandise following purchase and prior to shipment. In this way they increased their interaction with Muslim authorities, without the consequences ever leading to war, because Muslim trade syndicates remained dominant and because the concept of war fleets or warships was not yet known or familiar. Exceptions were certain port-based security ves-

sels, some of which Muslims and Europeans occasionally leased on a temporary basis during certain seasons and in certain ports, especially during times of political upheaval and periods when security was threatened, such as when incidents of piracy were prevalent in the northern Indian Ocean and along the coast of Oman. It was times such as these that forced Imam Ghassan bin Abdullah to establish a naval garrison to deal with piracy. Similar such times were recorded during the Crusades and some periods of political unrest in the port cities of the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Arabian Sea. Even when Islamic shores on the eastern extremities of the Indian Ocean were visited in the 15th century by the Chinese war fleet under Admiral Cheng Ho, this was with the knowledge of the authorities and the fleet was loaded down with merchandise and gifts. No tension of a military nature occurred in association with the visit and we do not know, even today, what the real objective of this visit was because it was not repeated. Nevertheless, we do know that historically the concept of war never tarnished the Indian Ocean or the maritime trade it facilitated until after the arrival of the Portuguese in the early years of the 16th century. After the successful rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, fleets of Portuguese warships appeared, escorting Portuguese, Spanish and Italian merchant vessels, and proceeded to confiscate non-European trading vessels. They went further, constructing coastal way stations protected by naval garrisons, even in ports south and east of the Arabian Peninsula and on the sea route to the Strait of Malacca and India.

Strategy represents a third landmark. From the 8th century, the Indian Ocean, like the Mediterranean Sea and surrounding local seas, became a zone of strategic importance for the Islamic world. However, there were differences between the two maritime zones, as well as between the Mediterranean and the ocean. In the ocean, Muslim dominance rested on the emergence of Islamic urban communities in coastal areas and ports, or the prevalence of peaceful or allied communities throughout the region, and this lasted up to the 16th century. In the Mediterranean, on the other hand, Muslims found they were obliged to avail themselves of military fleets to ward off hostile attacks from Western Europe on the eastern and southern Mediterranean coasts. There the islands were either in a constant state of rebellion or in the atoning mode, even after the capture of Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) by the Muslims. It is known that Muslims continued to collaborate with Italian merchants in order to protect seagoing commerce from hostilities, but the Italians could not remain neutral during the Crusades and subsequently throughout the European-Ottoman standoff. They leased their vessels for the transport of soldiers from Western Europe or volunteered warship carriers in the hope of earning trade concessions in the wake of victory by the invaders.

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So the Europeans, from the days of Byzantine control up to the 7th century and the Crusades, then beyond to the Ottoman era, never permitted Muslims to establish dominance in the Mediterranean. Neither did the code of peace and collaboration ever come to prevail in the Mediterranean Sea itself,

or in its connected waterways or ports, if we exclude the Italian merchants who persevered in their efforts to maintain a climate of cooperation and peace with the southern Mediterranean up to the beginning of the 18th century.

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ternational capitalist world, especially with those of Dutch and British establishments, culminating in the foundation of the Dutch and British East India Companies. In every case, the state was either a partner or a patron, and wielded strategic control in the expansion of the European presence throughout the world.

Trade, culture and civilisation

While it is true that power is not completely absent in the act of exchange, it is not the dominant element of trade and it did not become so before the eras of colonialism and imperialism, both spearheaded, as we know, by Europeans. Nor was this a feature of the Indian Ocean alone; rather it was repeated in every part of the world. Even the famous Arabic historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1382), when he wrote of power in the context of trade, did not perceive it as an act of war but rather of artfulness, a matter of intellectual skill where the merchant's superior hand in the exchange relied for its success on his knowledge of the merchandise and the marketplace. The culture of exchange in the Indian Ocean preserved a special character, which continued to prevail there even after the emergence of Portuguese, Dutch, French and British competition. It was a culture established in the Indian Ocean region by Omanis and other traders and seamen of the southern Arabian Peninsula. Islam itself rode the cresting wave of sea commerce, and Muslim communities made inroads into the furthest reaches of India and China from trading outposts and way stations. Thus the major civilised inhabited and cultural areas were in Arabia, in particular un-

til the beginning of the 20th century: in fact, along the coast of the Indian Ocean between the Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandib straits and beyond this coast, where two thirds of the Arabian population lived.

In this sense, that is to say, in particular with the establishment of a culture of exchange in the Indian Ocean, we may speak of a cultural imprint that prevailed in the territories influential among Muslim communities who inhabit the ports or coastal areas of Asia and Africa that overlook the Indian Ocean. From this was derived, in the 20th century, the culture of a capitalist market, replaced today by the networking culture of globalism. There were no Islamic military incursions into any of the territories bordering the Ocean. No Muslim armies arrived to impose religious dogma or political control in any territory between the Arabian Sea and India and China. Instead, many small colonies spread along the shores of the ocean later developed into communities that were ethnically and religiously pure. There is no doubt that this was not solely due to the features of commercial exchange, interlocked as it was with the spread of Islam, but also to the character of the inhabitants of these areas in Africa and Asia, similar to that of Muslim traders who visited them. The difference between the communities and colonies established by Muslim traders in coastal Africa lies in their origin as small, rural, fishing and barter communities, while Asian urban areas were relatively large.

Meanwhile, traditional culture and the ancient pagan rites that predated Islam persisted alongside the new reli-

gion, albeit more so in Asia than in Africa. This, too, was a time when Sufism, and forms of Islam similar to Sufism, spread among Muslim communities and colonies of the Indian Ocean, where Hindus and Buddhists also coexisted. Sufism is tolerant of intermingling, of diversity (and the diversity of interpretation), of the philosophy of pluralism and manifestation. It is content to take the broader view and to steer clear of the militant fundamentalism that came to define Islam in some of the inland territories of Africa. This question did not go unnoticed by the leaders of the Non-Aligned and African-Asian movements of the 1950s, who saw this open mix as an aspirational model, morally and spiritually, for the convergence of major cultural traditions of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in the world of today. It was a model pioneered in the Middle Ages, when the Indian Ocean was an arena of exchange, peace and coexistence. The contemporary world has seen Australia add its Christian and Europe-oriented vision to the Indian-Ocean culture, turning the region into the largest pool of human convergence and culture on earth. The eminent Algerian thinker Malik bin Nabi gave voice to his thoughts on this unity in diversity, as did the late prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. Things are greatly changed today, with capitalism struggling and globalisation more or less shelved, but also because a major power has grown along the ocean seaboard, and because Asian religions, as well as Islam, are alive and clear and thriving. And so we watch with interest as the Indian Ocean becomes, once again, a significant arena for exchange and trade in the world to-

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day, with the principal commodity of exchange being the tradeoff between its diverse cultural *milieux*, as well as the expansion of a simple human vision of the 3rd century Sea of Eritrea into the global ocean of peace and cultural exchange that is the Indian Ocean today.