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Locating the Indian Ocean: notes on the postcolonial reconstitution of space[†]

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The networks of human relation that define the Indian Ocean region have undergone significant reconfiguration in the last half-century. More precisely, the economic insularity of the region has diminished while the postcolonial nation has both restricted movement and reoriented the political imaginations of people along the rim. At the same time, the Indian Ocean has been revived as a unit of social exchange and analysis, particularly since the end of the Cold War. This article explores the meaning of Indian Ocean Africa in the context of a multipolar world by focusing on how the dictates of nations have transformed the region and how the petroleum economy as well as shifting means of social engagement have engendered new linkages. The essay argues that although the postcolonial era affected the closure of certain historical routes of connectivity, relationships structured by contemporary nations and air travel, among other things, have encouraged perceptions of regional coherence. What we might term *basin consciousness* has begun to reverse the introverted politics of the early postcolonial era and animate the Indian Ocean as an idea.

Keywords: Indian Ocean; nationalism; Cold War; post-Cold War; historical imagination

The Indian Ocean region is a matrix of historical connectivities and a valuable heuristic device. However, developments over the past half-century have affected the integrity of the Indian Ocean as a field of maritime-linked social systems. More precisely, in a postcolonial epoch marked by the container ship and air travel, the port cities that once defined the human geography of the rim lost their central roles as nodes of trans-oceanic interface. Simultaneously, postcolonial nations both restricted movement and

[†]The special thematic section that follows – including the papers by Jeremy Prestholdt, Preben Kaarsholm, Scott Reese, Jatin Dua, Stephanie Jones, and David Anderson and Jacob McKnight – has its background in two workshops that were held at Roskilde University in November 2013 and May 2014 on ‘Pirates, preachers and politics: Security, religion and networks along the African Indian Ocean coast’. The two workshops were organized jointly by the AEGIS collaborative research group on ‘Africa in the Indian Ocean’ and Roskilde University’s research priority programme on ‘The Dynamics of Globalisation, Inequality and New Processes of International Interaction’. Among the participants and discussants who contributed to these two lively and inspiring workshops were Anne K. Bang, Felicitas Becker, James R. Brennan, Francesca Declich, Isabelle Denis, Nikolas Emmanuel, Tobias Hagmann, Stig Jarle Hansen, Sarah Hillewaert, Anna Leander, Bjørn Møller, Gorm Rye Olsen, Rosa Maria Perez, Samadia Sadouni, and Kadara Swaleh.

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reoriented the sociopolitical imaginations of people along the rim. If petroleum and the nation transformed coastal societies, and the sea has receded as a primary conduit of human interface, what meaning does the Indian Ocean region have in the post-Cold War era?

Though the economic insularity of the region has diminished, since the end of the Cold War the Indian Ocean has been revived as an important unit of social exchange and analysis. Alternative connectivities have emerged, some more substantive than earlier engagements, and an array of centripetal forces have fostered a new sense of equivalence affecting both individual and collective relationships. The study of this reconstitution of the Indian Ocean rim in the context of a multipolar world offers an opportunity to both reconsider basic assumptions about the region as a field of interaction and discern continuities and discontinuities across multiple epochs. This essay offers a thumbnail sketch of the postcolonial Indian Ocean region, with emphasis on Indian Ocean Africa. Specifically, it focuses on two lacunae of Indian Ocean historiography: how nations transformed the region and how the rise of the petroleum economy engendered new modes of linkage. It concludes that although the postcolonial era has seen the closure of certain routes of connectivity, the development of new maritime and non-maritime linkages across the sea revived perceptions of regional coherency. In short, the convergences of the past half-century have reconstituted the region, both integrating and transcending it as a physical space while reanimating it as an idea.

Coherency, connectivity, closure

Before the mid-twentieth century the Indian Ocean rim exhibited a coherence sufficient to define it as a unit, a “world” in Kenneth McPherson’s terminology.¹ Research by archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, geographers, and literary critics have presented this world as a cultural continuum constituted by exchange, belief, taste, and other practices, and facilitated by maritime mobility.² As K.N. Chaudhuri explained in his masterful survey of the region, the Indian Ocean evidenced elements of cohesion in its economic exchanges, climate, movement of people, shared religion, and means of travel. Perhaps most importantly, Chaudhuri emphasized that despite social diversity, relations across the Indian Ocean basin were meaningful for those at its shores.³ Elaborating on this point, Michael Pearson has argued that port cities such as Mandvi, Muscat, and Mombasa shared more features with each other than they did with their own hinterlands. More precisely, they were nodes of, in Kai Kresse and Edward Simpson’s words, the “related but different social worlds” of the Indian Ocean basin.⁴ As Chaudhuri and others have demonstrated, at least four constants provided a superstructure for these related social worlds since the sixteenth century: significant human interaction across the sea; Islam as a centripetal force; South Asia as an economic core; and dominance of the sea by external empires.⁵

Because of the region’s historical coherence, the Indian Ocean is also a heuristic device, one that has allowed us to consider human experience beyond the boundaries of the continent and nation.⁶ As a paradigm, Indian Ocean studies highlights features of human interaction that cannot be easily grasped from continental or national perspectives. As a heuristic device, the basin is particularly apropos to the current era of globalization, one steeped in oceanic metaphors such as “flow”, “currents”, “fluidity”, and so forth.⁷ Moreover, in both scholarly and strategic thought the Indian Ocean has become an important object of reflection, particularly

since the end of the Cold War. The idea of the Indian Ocean has gained relevance beyond these spheres as well, as I will demonstrate in the final section. The ocean is an increasingly powerful field of the imagination: a discursive anchor for new relationships, a vessel for the articulation of transnational identities and community beyond the nation.⁸

Yet, emphasis on regional coherence is not without drawbacks. The language of “flows” often conceals the ways in which the ocean and the states along its rim have been significant barriers to mobility. Terrestrial states, as William Bissell reminded us, have restricted economic interaction and cultural currents. Thus, rather than flows alone, it is the shifting apertures, closures, and frictions that define the contours of the Indian Ocean.⁹ Like other geographical coordinates, the Indian Ocean as a unit of analysis also forces an interpretive sieve: in order to assess specific networks of relation we neglect important linkages beyond them.¹⁰ The economies and cultures of the Indian Ocean rim have affected and been affected by an ever-increasing breadth of societies. The interpenetration of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins provides the deepest historical example.¹¹ From the early sixteenth century the societies and economies of the Indian Ocean rim likewise became linked to an emerging Atlantic economy. European and American trade with the Indian Ocean basin not only created significant wealth for merchants and investors, but it also engendered relationships of trans-regional interdependence.¹² For instance, the slave trade in West and Central Africa depended on European access to South Asian cloth. Thus, American plantations, European trading firms, Indian weavers, and African consumers integrated American, European, and West African economies with that of the western Indian Ocean.¹³ The reconstitution of the Indian Ocean as a “British lake” only deepened the interdependence of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean basins.¹⁴

Marcus Vink has suggested that the boundaries of the Indian Ocean have been far more indistinct than contiguous landed territory – and they have been in constant flux.¹⁵ For instance, European empires established settler societies that evidenced the interlacing of Atlantic and Indian Ocean sociocultural forms. Creole islands constituted by Africans, Malagasy, South Asians, Europeans, and others, but modeled on the Caribbean plantation complex, dotted the southwestern Indian Ocean region.¹⁶ The most striking example of the blurred boundaries between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean basins is South Africa’s Western Cape region. From the mid-seventeenth century Cape society evidenced various creole forms. Enslaved Malagasy, South Asians, eastern Africans, and Javanese labored in European-style vineyards owned by Dutch settlers.¹⁷ Dutch took on words from Malay, Indo-Portuguese, and multiple eastern African and Khoisan languages, which contributed to a new language: Afrikaans. Rather than a dividing line between oceanic spaces, the Cape embodied the two basins’ interface.¹⁸

Colonialism facilitated new forms of integration in the Indian Ocean region, but, as we will see in the next section, it also enforced closures and reconfigured the economies of the wider basin. The end of empire had equally dramatic effects on the societies of the region. As independence movements and nations emerged from European colonies, people along the Indian Ocean rim were forced to reimagine spatial relationships within new parameters of citizenship. Just as important, diplomacy did not follow patterns of historical connectivity. Postcolonial states built alliances linked to imagined communities grounded in race or shared colonial experiences, including Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, and the Non-Aligned

Movement.¹⁹ This sociopolitical and economic reorientation has produced a quandary for Indian Ocean historiography. Historians of the region have been hesitant to conceptualize the structural shifts of the past several decades within a regional *longue durée*. This, at least in part, is a consequence of the fact that if political imagination and trade are privileged as indicators of coherency, the end of empire represents a significant *zeitbruch*.²⁰

The end of colonial rule was not the only means by which spatial relationships were restructured in the second half of the twentieth century. Much as regional political realignments represent a break in time, the history of maritime travel reveals other significant transitions. Indeed, a consideration of transoceanic mobility offers yet another mode of conceptualizing historical change. If social linkages define the Indian Ocean rim, and we conceptualize historical epochs by means of human mobility, we can sketch two overlapping eras across the broad arch of Indian Ocean history: a long epoch of the sail followed by a comparatively short era of fossil fuels.²¹ The sail and fossil fuels have differently shaped human interaction and the movement of commodities. The sail first constituted the Indian Ocean as a zone of social interface. It facilitated regional economies, botanical exchanges, and cross-cultural influences. From the sixteenth century, European naval technology made possible the first trans-Indian Ocean empire as well as the greater integration of the Indian Ocean rim with other world regions.

At the dawn of the second epoch, which began in earnest in the latter nineteenth century, coal revolutionized mobility. Steamships loosed the societies of the Indian Ocean rim from the rhythms of the monsoons. Since steamship service integrated distant reaches such as Natal into older networks, coal effectively expanded the Indian Ocean region. Just as important, railways stretched far inland, linking port cities with small communities and burgeoning cities across the interior. As James L. Gelvin and Nile Green argue, steam (along with print) facilitated new social imaginaries validated by a range of new social practices.²² Petroleum extended the effects of coal. By the 1950s oil had begun to unmoor Indian Ocean societies from the ocean itself. Petroleum reoriented the regional economy, containerization refashioned vessels, and air travel collapsed space more dramatically than had earlier forms of transit, facilitating more direct and immediate human relations across the region. The ease and rapidity of mobility in the age of air travel integrated the far reaches of the ocean basin even while it more firmly linked these societies with the wider world. Finally, the global demand for oil positioned the Persian Gulf as an economic nucleus of energy, finance, and consumer culture, thus reorienting migration and engendering links with the world's most powerful nations.²³

To illuminate the shifting relationships among societies along the Indian Ocean rim, this essay explores both shifting political imaginations and changing modes of connectivity over the past several decades. First, it considers the effects of colonial and postcolonial political structures on regional coherency. Then, it addresses the repercussions of the petroleum revolution for societies along the rim. It concludes by suggesting that since the end of the Cold War the confluence of these sociopolitical forces has not led to the disintegration of the region either as a concept or field of relation. Rather, inter-state relations, trade, air travel, and nostalgia for a maritime world have led to a resurgence of basin consciousness at the level of the state, social group, and individual.

Sea, empire, nation

Empires, and the nations that emerged from them, reconstituted political space. The landed state has long been an arbiter of economic exchanges, human mobility, and political possibility. Relations within the Indian Ocean region have perhaps always been contingent on the complicated politics of coastal polities.²⁴ Yet, colonial rule created new barriers to regional mobility. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, empires enforced closures in service of internal security interests and as part of a global regime of migration control. At the same time, “imperial globalization” created new possibilities for movement.²⁵ The modern era saw a marked increase in the movement of people within the Indian Ocean region. But these migrations, unlike many earlier patterns of movement, were to a great degree choreographed by imperial policy-makers.²⁶ In short, empire redrew the geography of the Indian Ocean, encouraging connections sometimes related to precolonial channels of connectivity but often oriented by new dictates.²⁷

Empire became such an important collective experience for people throughout the region that anti-imperial agitation was one of the earliest global political movements. Overlapping and competing universalisms shaped the imaginations of people along the Indian Ocean rim long before the modern colonial project, but in the first two decades of the twentieth century a variety of cosmopolitan discourses emerged.²⁸ As Mark Ravinder Frost has shown, before 1920 multiple strains of thought coalesced as anti-imperial movements that ranged from Pan-Islamism to supranationalism.²⁹ For several decades universalist anti-colonial agitation and territorial nationalism ran along converging tracks. In the most extreme case, outlined by Faisal Devji, the cross-fertilization of anti-imperialisms shaped an Indian deterritorialization of Islam that embraced elements of nationalism but abandoned conventional definitions of the sovereign state in favor of a global Muslim political community.³⁰ In a more general sense, Islamic reformism (*nahda*) and Arab nationalism offered solidarity and expansive intellectual networks.³¹ As James R. Brennan and Isabel Hofmeyr have shown, the notion of a Greater India, or a transoceanic South Asian political community, gained popularity among diasporic Indians in the first half of the century. Moreover, as Sana Aiyar’s work demonstrated, for many diasporic Indian political thinkers the division between “homeland” and “hostland” was remarkably imprecise.³² Socialism and Communism also inspired notions of community that captivated people along the ocean’s rim. Some nationalists even saw the national and international as converging projects: national liberation was the first step to building a larger socialist political community.³³

By the early 1950s the possibilities of transcolonial community narrowed significantly as macrospatial relations were again reconceptualized. The system of nations that emerged from the era of decolonization represented a shift in the geographical and conceptual divisions of humanity. Colonial boundaries remained, but permutations of nationalist thinking and definitions of citizenship were increasingly narrow.³⁴ Even ideologies that seemed to open channels of solidarity, such as socialism and Pan-Arabism, came to be structured by introverted nationalisms. Across the Indian Ocean region, the postwar era was marked by the dominance of territorial nationalisms. As a result, trans-regional engagements, both economic and diplomatic, were rarely predicated on the notion of the Indian Ocean as a coherent socioeconomic space. Instead, multilateral engagements such as the 1955 Bandung meeting and the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference were grounded in a common experience

of colonialism and a valorization of the nation – shared experiences of colonialism, not shared histories.³⁵ Moreover, the end of empire created new frictions and disjunctions, from the partition of India to the Zanzibar Revolution.

Those groups that boasted transoceanic genealogies and networks but were embedded in local social relations (*local cosmopolitans* in Engseong Ho's terminology) faced an uncertain status in new nations.³⁶ This was in part a result of the privileges enjoyed during the colonial era. Regimes of social classification varied across colonial environments, but the distinction between *native* and *nonnative* was a fundamental, if imprecise, colonial administrative convention that favored the latter.³⁷ The privileges that nonnatives accrued often appeared to ally them with the departing colonial governments. This did not augur well for local cosmopolitans. Since anti-colonial rhetoric emphasized the reclamation of indigenous rights, nationalist politics frequently linked race and ethnicity to continental geography. Additionally, in many of the colonies that rimmed the Indian Ocean, nationalist political thinkers envisaged introverted states that emphasized a continental orientation. For example, in eastern Africa many local cosmopolitans considered nonnative – South Asian, Arab, and even Swahili (who were classified as native but popularly perceived as nonnative) – found themselves in a political quandary, which encouraged claims of autochthony and nativist authenticity.³⁸ Christopher J. Lee has suggested that such compounding quandaries of social identity and nationality evidenced *tensions of postcoloniality*, or conditions and conflicts situated between the inheritance of colonialism and possible futures.³⁹

The effects of decolonization on local cosmopolitans were uneven. People of Hadrami descent offer a case in point. In Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, where Arabs were classified as “Foreign Orientals,” many Hadramis joined nationalist movements and found important positions in nascent states. In contrast, postcolonial India deported Hyderabadis of Hadrami descent alongside other Arabs in 1948.⁴⁰ In the early 1960s Kenya, coastal African nationalists vilified Hadramis. In the context of a fractured coastal separatist movement led in part by Arabs, many nationalist opponents of secession threatened to claim Arab property at independence.⁴¹ In Zanzibar, various strains of nativist territorial nationalism similarly derogated Arabs, both Omani-Zanzibar and Hadrami.⁴² The 1964 revolution ultimately forced many Hadramis into exile.

Post-revolution Zanzibar offers an example of not only how many postcolonial nations viewed local cosmopolitans but also how states turned away from historical oceanic linkages. Less than four months after the revolution, Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) nationalists formed a union with Zanzibar's continental neighbor, Tanganyika. In a highly symbolic gesture, ASP leaders banned all sailing vessels from entering Zanzibar that had visited an Arab port in the previous 12 months. The new Zanzibari political elite curtailed the island's historic maritime orientation, championed an explicitly African identity, and later appealed to East Germany, the Soviet Union, and China in an effort to build alternative political and economic networks.⁴³ Beyond Zanzibar, the projection of American, Soviet, and Chinese power into the Indian Ocean region created possibilities for connectivity beyond the region. It also engendered closures and exacerbated regional frictions.⁴⁴ Civil wars in Yemen, Mozambique, and elsewhere occasioned the indirect involvement of the Soviet Union, China, and the USA. Decolonization and the postcolonial nation thus reconfigured real and imagined transoceanic space in important ways.⁴⁵

While mobility between some points within the Indian Ocean decreased in the postcolonial era, migration to or from previously unlikely destinations surged in the

era of petroleum. East Africa, once an important destination for Arab migrants, was no longer a significant destination for southern Arabians. At the same time, Indian Ocean Africa's coastal cities have drawn millions of migrants from across the African continent.⁴⁶ South Asian migrants have been drawn to a handful of southern Arabian states as well as to many other nations around the world (see below). These patterns of migration illuminate one of the most crucial developments of the postcolonial era: each point along the Indian Ocean's rim has been increasingly integrated with a greater diversity of domestic, regional, and global relations.⁴⁷ Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city and once the most powerful city-state on the Swahili coast, offers an instructive case study.

In the early twentieth century, a new deep water port at Kilindini made Mombasa East Africa's primary gateway. It also dramatically changed the demographics of the city. Laborers from across Kenya and Tanzania traveled to the port. Economic migrants from southern Arabia and South Asia also came to Mombasa in search of opportunity, but by 1969 up-country Kenyans, who had represented only a minority of Mombasa's population in the early twentieth century, made up 76% of urban residents.⁴⁸ Since employers favored up-country laborers, many coastal people, including Mijikenda, Swahili, and Arab, found themselves alienated from the new economy. In the postcolonial era, these groups suffered from a range of discriminatory practices and, in part as a result of internal divisions, mustered no concerted political voice.⁴⁹ Faced with few opportunities at home, many coastal Kenyans quit Mombasa for Nairobi as well as more distant destinations such as Dubai, Riyadh, and London. By the mid-1990s, most Swahili and Arab families I came to know during fieldwork in Mombasa received remittances from relatives abroad.

Simultaneously, Islam and the Swahili language, both of which only made significant inroads in the colonial era, continued to gain purchase beyond the coast in the postcolonial era.⁵⁰ For instance, Maasai conversions to Islam grabbed national headlines in 2000 when several Maasai Muslim leaders embarked on a twenty-two day walk to Mombasa as a means of raising funds for an Islamic center.⁵¹ In the case of the Swahili language, the colonial administration encouraged its use and it was recognized as an official language of Kenya after independence. Now, most Kenyans speak the language of the coast, albeit with embellishments from English, Kikuyu, and other languages.⁵² Moreover, as young Mombasans have migrated to Nairobi in search of employment, Kenya's landlocked capital has been increasingly infused with cultural elements of the coast region. Over the past several decades the social landscape of Mombasa has shifted, while young Mombasans have been pulled inward toward Nairobi, outward across the Indian Ocean as well as to the centers of the global economy.

In the age of air travel diasporas have remained important. Postcolonial states both control and encourage migration, and expatriates send home valuable remittances. In Somalia, conflict and the absence of a state has forced a remarkable global dispersion. The post-1991 Somali diaspora – representing roughly 14% of Somalia's population – offers an important window on the relationship of dislocation to shifting demographics within the Indian Ocean region. When war broke out in Somalia many elites fled to former colonial metropolises, the Gulf States, and Yemen. However, the majority of Somali refugees crossed into Kenya. Over the following decades, Somalis also pioneered entirely new channels of migration, traveling to South Africa and braving the treacherous waters of both the Gulf of Aden and the Mediterranean.⁵³ At the same time, the weakening of al Shabaab in the wake of the 2011

Kenyan invasion encouraged a return of many Somalis, particularly from Kenya and the UAE, to Mogadishu and other cities. These lateral movements as well as Somali investment abroad suggest that the transborder and transoceanic links that Somalis have developed within the Indian Ocean basin will remain important in the foreseeable future.⁵⁴

The dire circumstances of war in Somalia also led to strengthened social and economic links within the well-worn routes of the Indian Ocean. Barawans (Bravanese) of Hadrami descent fled to Yemen at the outbreak of the war, reluctantly retracing the routes of their ancestors.⁵⁵ Many other ethnic Barawans escaped to Mombasa in the early 1990s. Barawans have traded along the Kenyan coast for centuries and many had settled in Kenya before the war. Thus, when the Somali Civil War began, many Barawans had close ties – even familial links – with Swahili and Arab Kenyans. This relationship would intensify. Unlike most other Somalis, Barawans settled permanently in the Swahili quarters of Mombasa. After more than two decades in Mombasa, the Barawan community has become difficult to discern. When the war in Somalia ends and Barawans return to Somalia, the ties with Mombasa will likely remain strong. The traumas of war have therefore expanded historical connections within the Indian Ocean region even as Somali refugees transcend them. In the post-Cold War era, conflict and statelessness has forced a new geography of closure as well as connectivity.

Ocean, oil, air

Trade is yet conducted by sea. People and ideas still cross the ocean. But few people travel by sea. Just as coal unmoored the Indian Ocean from the monsoon regime, petroleum engendered new forms of time-space compression, radically altering how people along the rim interact.

Of course, the sail neither disappeared rapidly nor completely. East Africa offers a prime example of its persistence. After the First World War, colonial policies sought to limit the use of medium-sized sailing vessels, as they proved more difficult to regulate than steamships. Nevertheless, the sail remained a cheap and reliable means of moving goods, particularly over relatively short distances. As Erik Gilbert has demonstrated, the sail even experienced periods of resurgence in the twentieth century.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, steamers and their need of deep water berths altered the landscapes of port cities.⁵⁷ For example, in Mombasa the deep water berths at Kilindini, which became operational in 1926, almost entirely displaced the old port at the heart of the city. By the 1970s, the demands of ever-larger ships, including container ships, necessitated the expansion of Kilindini's port facilities once again.⁵⁸ Only in the 1990s was trade at Mombasa's old port reinvigorated, largely as the result of commercial links with Mogadishu. Irregular direct trade orchestrated by Somalis in Kenya became a key means of delivering basic consumer goods to Somalia's capital.

From the 1960s, the Indian Ocean became both a primary medium for the transport of oil and a primary source for this critical fuel of the global economy.⁵⁹ The windfall of oil wealth lifted southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf from marginality, and in the process the Gulf has reoriented the Indian Ocean region. In recent decades the region has seen patterns of migration that are both novel and recall earlier inter-Indian Ocean migrations. More precisely, the greatest number of migrants have been South Asian. In 2001 the Indian migrant populations in southern Arabia and the Gulf – the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait – dwarfed other

migrant communities. They also outnumbered concentrations of Indian expatriates in other parts of the world. There are now roughly three and a half million South Asian “guest workers” in the Gulf. More than 80% of the people living in the UAE and Qatar are expatriates – that number is 68% in Kuwait – and the vast majority hail from within the Indian Ocean region. Likewise, almost 70% of Dubai’s population is South Asian, half of whom are Indian.⁶⁰ While essential to Gulf economies, these migrant laborers are increasingly important to the Indian national economy since they remit about 4\$US billion per year.

A cursory notice of the changing route maps of South Asian airlines attests to migration patterns and contemporary India’s economic relationship with the Gulf. In 1960, Air India did not operate a regular flight to the Gulf. Its closest destinations were Aden, Cairo, and Beirut. Forty-five years later, Air India no longer serviced Aden, Cairo, Beirut or anywhere else in the Middle East beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Nearly one third of all Air India flights were to Gulf States.⁶¹ The air route maps tell another story as well: that of circulation. Unlike historical patterns of economic migration, “guest workers” cannot settle in the Gulf. They are short-term laborers, destined to return home when their contracts expire. Thus, rather than a trade diaspora in formation, the movement of South Asians to the Gulf represents a people in perpetual motion. This circulation binds India to the Gulf in profound ways, but it is different than the regional diasporas of earlier epochs.⁶²

Air travel has repeated historical itineraries and fostered new connectivities. It has also had a dramatic leveling effect on space. As air travel became more common, travelers could transcend land and sea with ease, in some instances reaffirming historical links. For instance, in the 1990s Oman and Zanzibar were for the first time in decades directly connected by a Muscat-Zanzibar flight operated by Gulf Air. Yet, in the era of the transoceanic flight, travel became less a process than a transitory event. The “airborne world” created far more immediate links between locales, while it erased the connectivities created by the circuitous routes of sailing vessels and steamships.⁶³ Perhaps most important, air travel contributed to a diversification of itineraries for people along the ocean’s shore. In the era of air travel, a journey from Aden to landlocked Moscow was now no more time consuming than was travel to Moroni.

Air travel has more firmly integrated the distant reaches of the Indian Ocean rim and linked the societies along the rim with the wider world. No city better encapsulates this fact than Dubai. Since the 1990s Dubai has become the financial nucleus of the Indian Ocean region, a magnet for business, labor, and consumers as well as a crucial air transport hub.⁶⁴ Much like nineteenth century Bombay, Dubai’s position as a transit point and commercial emporium has boosted its cultural influence.⁶⁵ Because of Dubai’s relatively lax entrance regulations and the fact that air routes through it are often cheaper than direct Europe-Africa, Africa-Asia, or East Asia-Europe travel, people from many parts of the world visit the city and indulge in its consumer delights. Yet, Dubai’s emergence as a hyper-consumerist metropolis has arguably had its most profound cultural effect along the Indian Ocean rim. For instance, over the past two decades Gulf women’s fashions have gained unprecedented and surprisingly uniform popularity from Cape Town to Mombasa and Penang. In a matter of weeks, popular women’s fashions in Dubai now reach the ends of the Muslim Indian Ocean region.

Forms of road travel made possible by petroleum have been almost as significant as air travel for the cultures of the Indian Ocean rim. For example, along the East African

coast motor vehicles have supplanted virtually all other means of transport where travel by road is feasible. By the end of the 1980s, travel by sea between Kenya's coastal cities of Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu – or to Tanga and Dar es Salaam in neighboring Tanzania – was unusual, despite the fact that journeys by road were long, uncomfortable, and often dangerous. In East Africa, travel by sea only thrived where other means were available, such as between islands and across the Kenya-Somalia border. The maritime culture that A.H.J. Prins described in his classic study of Lamu at mid-century therefore only persisted in the guise of small *jahazi* that ply short haul routes or provide day trips to tourists.⁶⁶

While air and road travel have superseded oceanic sojourns, the Indian Ocean has maintained one critical role: the conveyance of commodities. Almost 90% of goods are shipped by sea, and the routes of the northern Indian Ocean are the most important corridors in the world. At present, nearly half of the world's container traffic traverses the Straits of Malacca, while about 20% of global trade passes through the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁷ As I suggested above, since the 1960s oil has consisted of an important percentage of this cargo. By the 1970s, for example, oil already accounted for 60% of all maritime cargo, and by 2011 roughly 70% of the world's oil supply traversed the Indian Ocean.⁶⁸ Therefore, the most important economic use of the Indian Ocean in recent decades has been as a medium for transporting oil.

Because of the global economy's dependence on oil, the Indian Ocean region has become geostrategically critical to nations within and beyond it. Not surprisingly, according to a recently leaked communique, US policy-makers view the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Arabian Sea as vital to American security.⁶⁹ Since at least the 1970s, American foreign policy has prioritized the protection of western Indian Ocean sea lanes. Since so many variables can affect the extraction and conveyance of oil – factors ranging from terrestrial politics to piracy at geographical choke-points – American foreign policy-makers have come to see the Indian Ocean region as a very fractured whole. This perception is shared by many other states, including India, a nation poised to once again define the region.⁷⁰

In recent decades, Indian foreign policy has shifted away from both a Nehruan liberationist agenda and a narrow concern with internal affairs. It has come to embrace a maritime Grand Strategy that seeks to make India a significant regional and sea power.⁷¹ India's economy is now dependent on foreign oil, and this has facilitated a new set of relationships with other states in the region, particularly in the past two decades. In addition to dependence on oil from the Gulf, India purchases significant quantities of coal from South Africa, Indonesia, Australia, and Mozambique.⁷² India also depends on liquefied natural gas from Qatar, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The fact that India relies on Indian Ocean sea lanes for these resources has given rise to a series of bilateral agreements with governments across the region.⁷³ In its evolving "neo-Curzonian" policy, India envisions a more complete integration of the economies of South Asia and the wider oceanic basin through its use of "soft" power. But India also intends to show that it can defend its interests by kinetic power, if necessary. In sum, Indian policy-makers are reimagining the region as "India's Ocean," a unitary vision of the basin that aspires to situate India as its dominant economic and political player.⁷⁴

The importance of Indian Ocean sea lanes to India, the USA, China, and other nations was made plain by responses to piracy. When small bands of ransomers based along the northern Somali coast began to threaten the sea lanes of the

Arabian Sea, the world responded in unprecedented ways. Piracy, of course, is not new to the Indian Ocean. The Straits of Malacca and Hormuz have historically been attractive haunts for sea raiders. The phenomenon of piracy in Somali waters, however, was uncommon prior to 2004.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, by 2008 the threat of piracy in the Arabian Sea created a crisis bordering on moral panic, which centered on the relationship of coastal populations to global trade and the sea.

Somali piracy was the result of a number of interrelated circumstances on land and at sea. Since the early 1990s, internal strife in Somalia has created unprecedented unemployment while the lack of a viable central government opened Somalia's extensive coastline to illegal dumping and trawling. In the early years of the war many young people turned to fishing since it was one of the few remaining ways to earn a living. However, with no state to regulate foreign fishing vessels, trawlers from Japan, Taiwan, Russia, South Korea, and other countries decimated fish stocks. This left a significant portion of the male population in many coastal towns destitute. In response, local fishermen began to attack illegal trawlers and, in some instances, detain their crews. When foreign fishing companies began to pay for the release of ships held in Somalia, a lucrative enterprise was born that would soon bear little relation to anti-trawling efforts.⁷⁶ Given that about 21,000 vessels pass through the Gulf of Aden every year, piracy offered an economic opportunity like none other in Somalia. Organized outfits began working out of several coastal towns, northeastern Puntland in particular. Some even morphed into international criminal syndicates that linked armed coteries to investors in Somalia and financiers in Dubai, Nairobi, and London. By 2008 Somali pirates and their financiers had made the ocean into a sphere of interaction closely watched around the world.⁷⁷

The threat that pirates posed to shipping drew a martial response of greater proportions than either the UN Operations in Somalia (early 1990s) or the African Union Mission in Somalia (2008–present). Perhaps never before had so many global powers faced a common enemy and acted in relative concert. Anti-piracy efforts included warships from every major navy in the world. Notable in this respect was the Combined Task Force 150 – constituted in 2001 to monitor the Horn of Africa region in service of the War on Terrorism – under American control, boasting vessels from 25 nations. The European Union naval coalition, dubbed Operation Atalanta, similarly included representatives from 27 nations. NATO's counter-piracy task force in Somali waters, Operation Ocean Shield, even extended the battle to land after gaining permission from Somalia's government to conduct terrestrial operations against pirates. Important regional powers, including Iran and India, engaged pirates as well. Indeed, for many countries interested in exerting greater influence in the region, the problem of piracy encouraged a global projection of national military power.⁷⁸ Piracy therefore offered a space for common action as a result of common interest in Indian Ocean sea lanes.

Piracy in the Arabian Sea seemed to validate a widely held belief, at least in the West, that the Indian Ocean basin is a region in crisis. For several years before and after 11 September 2001, US policy-makers pathologized the western Indian Ocean region as a hotbed of jihadism. Al Qaeda operatives in Kenya and Pakistan, affiliates in Yemen and Somalia, and attacks in Khobar and Mumbai seemed to confirm fears of rising regional terrorism. The American military was particularly concerned about the use of sea lanes by jihadists. In the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan, many policy-makers believed that jihadists escaping southwest Asia would attempt to travel

by sea to the Horn of Africa. In 2002 the US military created a regional force to address this projected movement. Stationed in Djibouti, the American contingent was dubbed the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa. The migration of jihadis across the Arabian Sea proved meager, but concerns about terrorism in eastern Africa remained, particularly with the rise of Somalia's al Shabaab. The group's ability to launch attacks in neighboring nations, including the 2013 assault on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, forays into coastal Kenya in 2014, and the 2015 student massacre in Garissa, deepened US security concerns. In addition to maintaining a significant naval presence in Somali waters, the US military has conducted numerous operations against al Shabaab in southern Somalia. Such actions have included covert ground operations as well as drone strikes, one of which killed the planner of the Westgate Mall attack.⁷⁹

In future, piracy and jihadism may be only minor geostrategic concerns. Many analysts now believe that in addition to the critical importance of the Indian Ocean region as a source and means of transporting oil, the projection of Indian power, the influence of China and its "String of Pearls" strategy of naval stations, and possible frictions between India and China are reconfiguring the region's geopolitical chessboard.⁸⁰ According to journalist Robert Kaplan, competition among old and emerging powers, alongside the crises of terrorism and piracy, have positioned the Indian Ocean at "center stage for the challenges of the twenty-first century."⁸¹ While Kaplan and others paint a compelling picture, increasing interdependence within the region seems more likely than conflict. India has sought alliances across the region, which may increase competition with China. But given India's dependence on foreign resources, at present it has few incentives for a confrontation that might limit access. China's rhetoric of a "harmonious ocean" may indeed be a platitude, but since China's designs on the region are more economic than hegemonic it would gain little from provoking India. Moreover, China and India are important trade partners. Both nations are investing in naval power, yet both also see their interests as best served through policies of soft power, not war.⁸²

The view of the region as an integrated whole is not limited to the most powerful nations. In the context of global liberalization, smaller states have also envisioned new forms of regional cooperation. As I suggested above, in the decades after independence the new nations of the Indian Ocean rim developed allegiances that hinged on corporate experiences of colonialism and a mutual respect for national sovereignty. Economic and other transnational organizations were usually continental in orientation (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a notable exception). After the end of the Cold War this changed. In 1997 Mauritius, South Africa, Singapore, Kenya, Oman, India, and Australia created the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), which hoped to stimulate investment and trade across the Indian Ocean basin. Soon, other important states, including Madagascar and Tanzania, joined the association. Though the initial impetus for the IOR-ARC came from Australia's "Look West" economic strategy, the association was founded both as a means for less advanced economies to stimulate economic growth and more developed economies to benefit from regional markets. Most importantly, its orientation is explicitly oceanic: only "sovereign states of the Indian Ocean" can be members. The IOR-ARC therefore evidenced a strong interest in building transoceanic regional ties.⁸³ In the mid-1990s, states across the Indian Ocean rim embraced a common set of interests within a shared geographical frame.

Reimagining the Indian Ocean

The IOR-ARC and the geostrategic concerns of the USA, India, and China offer key examples of what Kären Wigen aptly referred to as “basin thinking”, or the perception of the rim as an integrated whole.⁸⁴ Basin thinking was a common feature of European imperial policy-making in the Indian Ocean region. Portugal and Britain, for example, saw the region as a broad field of interaction, which both sought to dominate. In the Cold War era American policy-makers embraced this conceptualization of oceanic space, as did many academics.⁸⁵ This lens contrasted with the perspectives of many nations around the Indian Ocean rim, which, as I suggested above, eschewed basin thinking after independence.⁸⁶ Yet, since the end of the Cold War the perception of Indian Ocean rim as a space of meaningful connection has reemerged in significant ways – and not only through the prism of national policy or academic research.

One of the most fascinating developments of the past two decades is the reimagination of historical relationships across the rim by social groups and individuals within the region. As Erik Gilbert demonstrated through his analysis of nostalgic evocations of the dhow, emic perceptions of an Indian Ocean region have surged in recent decades. These both conform and contrast with state initiatives.⁸⁷ The mounting interest in linkages among rim societies by people both within and beyond the region highlights a general frame of perception that we might call *basin consciousness*.⁸⁸ Conventional forms of policy-oriented basin thinking and popular perceptions of regional coherency can be distinct, but their mutual influence in the post-Cold War era suggests, following Gilbert, a conceptual frame that often blurs distinctions between etic and emic concepts of the Indian Ocean. Contemporary basin consciousness, a diffuse mode of thought that reflects historical connectivities and the legacies of basin thinking but also informs other imaginations of linkage, is shaping transoceanic relations on multiple scales.

In South Africa, basin consciousness has gained relevance within the post-apartheid heritage economy of the Cape. For instance, many Cape Coloured people feel a strong sentimental connection to Southeast Asia. This is the product of a complicated past and contemporary interpretation. In the era of Dutch rule, about a quarter of slaves delivered to the Cape were taken from Southeast Asia, primarily from the Indonesian archipelago. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ethnic terms such as Javanese, Bugis, and Timorese were applied to slaves at the Cape. At times, the more general term Malay was used as well. In the era of British rule, South African links to Southeast Asia were minimal. However, in the twentieth century the word Malay gained new gravity as the Apartheid government, and many Coloured people, marshaled the term “Cape Malay” to reference Muslim identity and extra-African ancestry.⁸⁹ “Malay” therefore became a prestige claim. It was a marker of distinction within a system of racial stratification rather than a means of establishing linkages with independent Southeast Asian nations. Indeed, when the Prime Minister of Malaysia appealed to Cape Malays in 1961 to “return” to Malaysia and cast aside the bonds of Apartheid, his call was largely ignored.⁹⁰ However, with the end of Apartheid a surge in heritage interest fueled a desire on the part of many Cape Coloured Muslims to explore historic links with Southeast Asia. Genealogical research, tours of Southeast Asia, and the marketing of Cape Town’s creole past to tourists deepened this sentimental connection. Since 1994 Malaysian institutions, including the Malaysian government, have sponsored conferences to concretize links between Cape Malays and Malaysia. An Indian Ocean community is thus

being forged from the historical legacies of slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination.⁹¹

A more unexpected reimagination of oceanic space has emerged in the context of Chinese-Kenyan relations. Over the past decade, the memory of Zheng He's fifteenth century sojourns across the Indian Ocean region has gained new life in the context of Chinese investment in Kenya. As elsewhere in Africa, Chinese interests in Kenya have grown significantly since the end of the 1990s, partially as a result of oil prospects at the coast and a planned pipeline from South Sudan to the Lamu Archipelago. The budding China-Kenya relationship took on a cultural dimension in 2005 when oral traditions from Shanga, a small island town in the Lamu Archipelago, traveled beyond the island. Local histories claim that certain families are descended from shipwrecked sailors of Zheng He's fabled fleet. Chinese geneticists investigated the claim and, through DNA samples taken from Shangan families, discovered that six Shangans were of distant Chinese ancestry. The Shangans soon became known as the "Lamu Chinese." With fanfare, the Chinese government invited a "Lamu Chinese" young woman, Mwamaka Sharifu Lali, to Nanjing to attend celebrations of the six hundredth anniversary of the Zheng He voyages.⁹²

The positive attention given to the "Lamu Chinese" encouraged Peking University to mount a joint project with the National Museums of Kenya in an effort to discover more about China's historical relationship with Kenya. The archaeologists excavated a site near Mamburi on Kenya's northern coast, which they determined was the location of the medieval Malindi visited by Zheng He. They discovered many Chinese materials, which is not unusual in coastal Kenya, but some of the finds may be linked to the Zheng He visit. Thus, the implications of the finds could prove quite different from other Chinese materials unearthed along East Africa's shores. As the lead Kenyan archaeologist suggested, such historical evidence of Chinese-Kenyan linkage could "give politicians a reason to say: 'Let's look East' because we've been looking that way throughout the ages."⁹³ Kenya's leaders are indeed looking east, and they will likely continue to do so. In 2013 China approved a \$US 5 billion development loan to Kenya and won the tender to build the first berths at Lamu Port. Soon thereafter China pledged to fund the upgrade and expansion of Kenya's rail system, an infrastructure project that would dwarf any undertaken since independence.⁹⁴

Converging economic and geopolitical interests, leavened with a sense of nostalgia for the historic Indian Ocean system, have heightened basin consciousness. Exhibitions and celebrations commemorating the voyages of Zheng He – including the Chinese-sponsored International Academic Forum in Memory of Zheng He's Expedition – offer vivid examples of a broad interest in China's historical links to societies across the region. While some may conclude that this is simply a manifestation of China's "middle kingdom complex", the import of such strategies seems equally external. In short, these are ways in which China has sought to reimagine its relationship with other regions and nations. Such basin thinking is explicitly geopolitical. Similar exhibitions in the Gulf have highlighted the long term connections between southern Arabia and China. In Oman, official emphasis on the country's maritime history has also shaped an Omani national identity that, as Erik Gilbert demonstrated, emphasizes Oman's historical place in the Indian Ocean region.⁹⁵

Basin consciousness has gained ground in Zanzibar as well. Given the island's potential for tourism and the necessity of economic diversification in the 1990s, Zanzibar's creole past became a strategic marketing tool. In the mid-1990s the government that once viewed local cosmopolitans with suspicion began to promote Zanzibar's

cosmopolitan past. Zanzibar's Festival of the Dhow Countries, now the most celebrated annual cultural event in East Africa, is the culmination of Zanzibar's emergent identity, one that references and reimagines a maritime past. In reviving dhow imagery as the crystallization of a historical Indian Ocean world, Zanzibaris have developed a basin consciousness that accords with currents of thought in China, Oman, the UAE, and Kenya.⁹⁶

These examples, as well as that of fiction writing, academic research, and the arts further evidence a resurgent basin consciousness. Basin consciousness has myriad underwriting forces, but one common denominator is the collective desire to revisit an interconnected past that resonates with the concerns of our time. In this way, it is a crucial dimension of the contemporary search for *equivalence*, what Kai Kresse and Edward Simpson defined as ways of "seeing the familiar in the strange, or the same in the other."⁹⁷ While contemporary forms of equivalence echo earlier examples, the patterns of linkage and cooperation that have emerged of late, from the IOR-ARC to Chinese investment in Kenya, represent departures from the more immediate past. It is in part because of these new engagements that people within and beyond region are reinventing the Indian Ocean as an idea.

Conclusions

What does the Indian Ocean mean in the era of the postcolonial nation and a global petroleum economy? The networks of human relation that define the Indian Ocean region have undergone significant reconfiguration over the past sixty years. The Indian Ocean basin has long affected and been affected by wider trans-regional relationships, and this process of extraversion accelerated in the twentieth century. While colonialism reoriented regional economies toward metropolises, the rise of the oil economy and the discovery of nearly half of the world's recoverable reserves in the Persian Gulf ensured the centrality of the Indian Ocean region to the global economy. The region has, in this sense, expanded. The stretching of the Indian Ocean beyond its former boundaries has not, however, resulted in the obliteration of regional integrity. Rather than precipitating the decline of the Indian Ocean system, the forces of the postcolonial world reconstituted the region. People still interact across oceanic space, even if the sea is no longer a primary medium for human interaction. Islam is yet a powerful centripetal force in the digital era. South Asia remains an economic fulcrum of the region, one poised to become an important player in the emerging multipolar world. And the sea is still dominated by external powers, notably the USA and China.

At the same time, post-Cold War era basin consciousness, at the level of the state, social group, and individual, is reversing the introverted politics of the early postcolonial era. National sovereignty and the interests of states remain paramount, but policy-makers as well as ordinary citizens have become more invested in transnational relationships. As a result, the historical geography of human connectivity is writing itself back into the story of the Indian Ocean, albeit often through the vehicle of the nation. The surging interest in equivalence is part of a general desire for transnational communion, but there is more to it than that. The renaissance of basin consciousness highlights historical memories and shared tastes cemented over generations, centripetal social forces that span oceanic time and space. While these centripetal forces are not as powerful as they once were, Dubai has become the trendsetter in Muslim women's fashions along the Indian Ocean rim. Given their faith and sense of

connection to Arabia, young Zanzibaris are more likely to learn Arabic than relevant regional lingua francas such as French or Portuguese. Singapore continues to draw South Asian migrants, in part because of official policies, in part because it remains central to the imagination and aspirations of Tamils, in particular. Religion, language, and genealogy have left profound stamps on Indian Ocean rim societies, and these both re-member and reinforce historical relationships. In the era of the Internet, patterns of connectivity and perception formed over the *longue durée* yet shape human desires, interests, and actions.

Because historical routes of oceanic connectivity are the bedrock upon which contemporary cognitive maps of the Indian Ocean region are layered, it is tempting to see basin consciousness as residual, a remnant of a time when the ocean was a medium of human interface. To the contrary, that history has gained new relevance and meaning for Indian Ocean rim societies. States, social groups, and individuals have reinvigorated historical geographies for the purposes of new economic relationships, contemporary political calculus, and changing communal identities. During particular conjunctures, such as the late colonial era and the years following the end of the Cold War, people along the rim have imagined the Indian Ocean region as both an alternative social identity and vital political lever. But they have done so differently, for different reasons, and with varied consequences.

The Indian Ocean port city is practically a memory, yet the cosmopolitan ideal that it evokes is increasingly relevant to our world. Despite the disjunctures of the post-colonial era, the imagination of the Indian Ocean as a distinct region has become more, not less important. The nation and oil, like previous stimuli, produced closures, connectivities, and frictions as well as new ways of conceptualizing global connectivity. We should write these processes of historical reconfiguration in concert since together they reveal the Indian Ocean's shifting centripetal forces anchored not simply in economy and genealogy but also in historical memory and perceptions of affinity.

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