

## INTRODUCTION: THE OCEAN AND THE HISTORIAN

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## INTRODUCTION: THE OCEAN AND THE HISTORIAN

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I feel singularly privileged to write the introduction for the first of two special JIOWS festschrift editions honouring Michael Pearson's contributions in the field of Indian Ocean studies. My association with Mike goes back to 1979/80 when I met him at the University of Viswabharati, where my mentor Ashin Dasgupta was working with him on an edited volume devoted to the history of India and the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> This was a time when as a young graduate student, I was being exposed to the hotly debated and discussed sub-field of maritime history. Several senior historians questioned the need to study maritime history outside the general frame of Indian economic history, by then an established field of enquiry, driven primarily by the agrarian question, poverty and the drain of wealth paradigm. I recall how, in course of my apprenticeship, I read a range of writings that looked at Asian trade and commercial exchanges that, although written largely out of European archives, dared to tell a very different story to the dominant one of European commercial and military hegemony. This was long before the heady debates of globalization, of Asia before Europe or indeed of the world system thesis that had entered the field; instead, we were chewing over the critiques of the peddler thesis put forward by Van Leur, and of the uncritical endorsement of colonial perspectives on Asian trade embodied in the writings of scholar administrator W.H. Moreland. It was here that Pearson and Dasgupta gave us the vital tools of our trade, to look beyond the official voices in the archive, to search for private adjustments and compromises that had so much more to say about the messy world of commercial and social transactions—where to look for Weberian rationality or pure economic determinism was chasing a mirage. Pearson's first publication *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth century* (1976) demonstrated this impeccably as it lucidly uncovered the web of private arrangements and compromises undertaken by the Portuguese in India, dismantled the monolith of the *Estada da India*, and exposed the largely horizontal nature of territorial expansion preferred by the Sultans and Mughals who ruled India. In one stroke, the book laid out first, a method to understand empire not as a monolithic façade but as a web of competing interests that worked often to undermine it; secondly, a thesis that foregrounded the primacy of textiles in the intra-Asian trade in the Indian Ocean that

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1. Ashin Dasgupta and M.N. Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean 1500-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

in value and volume was far more significant than the Indo-European traffic; and finally, a nuanced sociological analysis of politics and commercial society in sixteenth-century India. The details spoke for themselves, as the narrative identified the twists and turns of official Portuguese policies, of the evasion strategies adopted by local merchants to exploit the cartaz-cafila-armada system, and of the protocols and procedures adopted by the ruling Indian state to govern its subjects. In so many ways, the book anticipated later arguments that would emerge about the performative nature of sharia under Muslim rule, and of state-society relations in Mughal India. Also like Dasgupta, his senior colleague, Pearson was able to chart out the potential that private European records assumed in delineating the complex layers of the Indian Ocean trading world in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

Subsequently, Pearson developed and synthesized many of these ideas in the New Cambridge History volume *The Portuguese in India* (1987) where he reiterated the argument that the advent of the Portuguese was more significant for Europe than for India, and that their commercial impact was not only marginal but served to reinforce indigenous trading patterns and processes. The volume was emphatic in its critique of the peddler thesis, and of the luxury trade component in the trading world of the Indian Ocean world (IOW), and in its contention of limited Portuguese success in controlling the spice trade. The leaks in the Portuguese seaborne empire were hard to plug and this, combined with their dependence on indigenous IOW authorities for supplies, meant that evasion of the official Portuguese system was commonplace. On the flip side, the Portuguese indubitably brought their political agenda into the IOW and, with their better seafaring skills, their claim to sovereignty over the seas was a nuisance that affected temporary dislocation of indigenous IOW agents. It is arguable if the Portuguese escalation of violence at sea by promoting the idea of armed trading had long term consequences for subsequent coastal political formations along the IOW littoral. Pearson suggested that Portuguese influence varied widely, 'ranging from massive to miniscule, according to three criteria: time, place and category (for example, social, religious, economic, political).'<sup>2</sup> He located the micro-story of the Portuguese seaborne empire within the larger narrative of European expansion before formal colonial rule to seriously question the peddling thesis of Van Leur, to interrogate the teleological process of European hegemony wherein the Portuguese encounter represented the first phase of a process that led eventually to formal colonial rule in the late eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

I can, without hesitation, confess that these formulations, reinforced by Pearson's colleague Dasgupta, gained enormous currency and informed the work of my generation. My own research area was coastal western India, and focussed on the cities of Bombay and Surat in the second half of the eighteenth century. My concern was to track the

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2. M.N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 25.

fortunes of local Indian merchant groups in order to test the validity of the revisionist hypothesis proposed so boldly by C.A. Bayly in his *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars North Indian Society in the age of British Expansion 1770-1870* (1983) and to try to excavate an exciting narrative from the tedious official colonial archive.<sup>4</sup> I felt handicapped by the lack of both Dasgupta's shining prose and Pearson's uncanny ability to dip under the official radar to investigate the murky private world of Indo-Portuguese commerce. Nonetheless, I laboured to read the archive to unearth a story of not just the Anglo-Bania order and its resilience to English expansion, but also of a dynamic network of competing and collaborating Indo-European commercial interests that could not be contained within narrow descriptions of colonised victimhood.<sup>5</sup> What has stayed with me is first, the messiness of social and commercial transactions that undermined empires, caste, and commercial networks, and second, the need to pay due attention to the contingent nature of change, even while acknowledging the structural transformation produced by colonial domination and subsequently by imperial enterprise. Equally influential has been the value of close examination of European archives. Both Dasgupta and Pearson demonstrated how reading Portuguese and Dutch archives might yield an incredible range of both information and interpretive possibilities that could help build a more complex even if less coherent narrative of Indian society from the mid-seventeenth century—often seen either as an age of partnership with Europeans or as contained conflict with them.<sup>6</sup>

Through the 1980s and 1990s, two broad intellectual concerns animated Pearson's writings. There was, on the one hand, the beginnings of a self-conscious engagement with the idea of a littoral region, its workings and dynamics; and on the other, a provisional framework for looking at heuristic categories and theoretical analyses. His spatial field of enquiry remained western India but he now sought to look beyond the confines of Mughal Gujarat and its Lusitanian experience to the overall functioning of the Portuguese dispensation along the littoral, and analyse littoral experiences through a new lens. Implicit in this exercise was a mode of micro-history writing and its integration into global history, something that scholars such as Francesca Trivellato now see as extremely valuable both in opening up the field of micro history, and for global history.<sup>7</sup> Thus the 1980s witnessed two important new publications by Pearson, *Coastal Western India* (1981) and *Before Colonialism: Theories on Asian European Relations 1500-1750* (1988). While *Coastal Western India* iterated the significance of largely underexplored archives, such as those in Goa, and avoided the extreme presentism that most modern historians

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4. C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars North Indian Society in an age of British expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

5. Lakshmi Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion Bombay, Surat and the West Coast* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6. See for instance the discussion in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 252.

7. Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?" *California Italian Studies*, 2, no. 1, (2011). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>.

suffer from, the second work provided at the same time a useful and strident critique of the peddler and luxury thesis that continued to cast its shadow on historical writings, and a robust engagement with Immanuel Wallerstein's World system theory. Both collections were also significant in charting out the theoretical predicament for the historian. Thus, in examining coastal society and its encounter with the Portuguese, Pearson reminded his readers that

Every historian is faced with preconceptions stemming from the basic fact that that the scholar is situated in the present but writing about the past... But the basic necessity is to see past societies, whether more or less culturally different, in their own terms, and to analyse groups and practices in terms of their functions in such societies.<sup>8</sup>

It was only then that the practices undergirding Portuguese enterprise or indeed those of pre-modern states could make sense, and help prise open loosely-used categories such as corsairing and corruption, and subject them to closer scrutiny and attention. The importance of recovering indigenous practices and reviewing them in their context formed part of Pearson's theoretical project as well. He never shied away from theory that he saw as crucial for the historian's tool kit. Nonetheless, he considered it crucial to remember that there was no singular and universal prescription of capitalism. His critique of the Wallerstinian world system analysis was its inadequate grasp of transnational frameworks, of the confusion over the luxury-necessities component of the long-distance trade in pre-modern times (especially between Europe and Asia), of the inadequate treatment of the IOW in a discussion of world systems and world economies, and of the limits of the Wallerstinian thesis as far as the IOW was concerned. Pearson's pithy observations in his brief work titled *Before Colonialism*, like so many of his contributions, has been prescient in determining and configuring debates on the 'west and the rest' thematic.<sup>9</sup>

Let us return to the idea of littoral society, both as a unit of analysis and as an important feature of maritime geography, which has the potential to throw up fresh categories for thinking and describing human experience. Very simply put, littoral society was one that had its orientation more towards the sea than towards the hinterland. This was not to suggest that littoral connections with the hinterland were not decisive. It was simply to make the point that societies along the coast had a very distinct relationship with the sea as both a physical frontier and an economic resource from which to draw. A littoral society was not a given, it was socially constructed, inhabited by typically shore people such as fisher folk and boat men. It was part of a wider group of transactions, and threw up important political and social formations as a consequence of circulation flows

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8. M.N. Pearson, *Coastal Western India Studies from the Portuguese Records* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company), 18.

9. M.N. Pearson, *Before Colonialism Theories on Asian European Relations, 1500-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 21.

and movements. These formations signalled processes of hybridization, permeability and mobility that gave coastal society a very distinct profile. Pearson suggested that scholars have remained attached for too long to land based frameworks, especially in relation to property, occupation, law and sovereignty—and it was only with the foregrounding of the littoral as a space that lay in between, that we could engage with ideas such as permeability, mobility, and hybridity, to better understand an array of social experiences. His 2006 essay ‘Littoral Society: The Concept and Problems’, demonstrated how the mixture of terrestrial and maritime influences made littoral society a very useful paradigm for understanding maritime history, for it was on the littoral that land based power literally met its limits, while it was precisely here that the waves crashed, making it a very unique location. The space threw up and supported a variety of social groups who lived off the sea, leaving their families, especially women, to manage the household. The littoral communities participated in flexible religious beliefs and partook of shared linguistic practices that gave them certain cosmopolitan elements not easy to explain from a terrestrial perspective. This was partly because of the permeability that littoral social structures enjoyed, nourished, and manifested in mixed religious and language practices, and in certain forms of mobility and movement that access to certain kinds of sailing and navigational knowledge ensured.

A few observations to elaborate the idea of permeability, connections, and connectivity may not be out of place here, for these figured prominently in the later writings on the IOW that Pearson undertook. Drawing his cue especially from the *Corrupting Sea*,<sup>10</sup> Pearson wrote of the need to look at connections between micro-regions in the IOW, of the permeability that distinguished littoral regimes in the ocean and enabled a closer appreciation of the ideas, beliefs and practices that gave the ocean its unity. ‘The history of the ocean’ as he put it, ‘is not just a history of trade and war ships’, there were material and mental structures to be understood and these could be addressed only if one was prepared to look at connections as an explanatory device to get at those features that gave the ocean its unity. The IOW commanded a unity that was constituted by physical features like the monsoons, by long standing connections and trading linkages made possible by the ocean that functioned as the highway. While the sea and its traffic made possible connections and movements, the permeable nature of littoral societies absorbed these movements in a variety of ways, and produced hybrid societies and analogous micro-regimes. Littoral societies had thus more in common with other littoral societies than they did with their inland neighbours, and provided for the maritime historian useful spatial units of analysis.

Pearson’s analysis has been of immense value in studying a set of littoral-based micro-practices such as smuggling, clandestine trade and piracy, as well as the rapid absorption of Islamic practices, trading procedures, and conventions including legal

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10. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (London: Blackwell, 2000).

practices in the IOW. My own work on piracy in India's western littoral in the latter decades of the eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth century, preferred to focus on littoral enclaves with their immediate and larger political and moral economies, wherein, coastal groups negotiated complex relations with local bosses, temples and shrines, and small grey markets in order to eke out their livelihoods and articulate a very distinct form of raiding and even political expression.<sup>11</sup> Regimes of predation and piracy in India's littoral were complex phenomena embedded in structures of authority, and were part of nested rights that had a more complex prehistory. If one were to detach the local realities from our understanding of predation and piracy, then we would face the peril of uncritically endorsing the archival representation of the Europeans for whom Indian activity and defiance of the European pass was illicit and piratical. In fact, the growing consensus in the field of IOW piracy studies is that the rhetoric of piracy was deployed to mark off licit and illicit activity as the Europeans chose to define them, and that the articulation and deployment of maritime violence by littoral societies was embedded in a complex milieu of social and economic transactions. Concurrent definitions of piracy are necessary to grapple with the phenomenon of littoral and maritime violence, and its role, even if by default, in the construction of state power.

It also appears important here to review the experiences of littoral society in relation to law. Given that the space was removed from established structures of political and juridical authority, it is tempting to look more closely at what law looked like for the littoral, and for the peoples traversing the seas. For Pearson, whose concerns were grounded in his understanding of the Portuguese interventions, the question of *mare closum* and the ramifications of the caratz-cafila-armada system was foremost. His work identified the gaps in the legal-military system and stressed how its efficacy was compromised, enabling local groups to carry on with business as usual. His focus was not on customary legal practices among merchants and seafarers in the littoral; he acknowledged the ubiquity of Islam as a shared set of beliefs for littoral peoples, and instead preferred to look at the Hajj and its social interactions over a *longue durée* in the IOW. In the process of examining the pre-modern history of the Hajj, his treatment of social life was used to interrogate a number of assumptions that have tended to align commerce with religion in the early modern period of the IOW. His work, *Pious Passengers: The Hajj in Earlier Times* (1994) thus questioned the tendency to over-stress the links between commerce and religion. That Muslim traders accommodated poorer pilgrims in their ships who may have engaged in trifling levels of trade was a fact, but this did not account for any substantial commerce. In any case, Mocha and Jedda were the principal epicentres of trade, not Mecca. We could quibble over these details and indeed there is the occasional voice of disaffection by poor pilgrims in a city like Surat in the eighteenth century, when they were forced to work with new trade restrictions and regulations imposed by the English East India Company over

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11. Lakshmi Subramanian, *The Sovereign and the Pirate Ordering Maritime Subjects in India's Western Littoral* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the freight trade that would appear to have included small trading pilgrims as well as more substantial traders.

The most impressive synthesis of Pearson's ideas was contained in his most recent major work, *The Indian Ocean*.<sup>12</sup> It therefore warrants a close appreciation, and will help us situate some of the major ideas and formulations that the essays in this volume address. The work is remarkable on many counts, not least because it embodies the evolution of Pearson as an Indian Ocean studies scholar, his engagement with the intellectual challenges that came his way—especially in relation to interventions from literary theorists and cultural studies scholars—and to the more recent and influential environmental imperative, in understanding social interactions in and constituting the macro-region of the IOW.<sup>13</sup> The book is not simply a clever and abstract anthology of ideas oft-rehearsed and rehashed. Here is a book that bears all the tell-tale signs of the author's engagement with the shifts in the historiography of the IOW over more than six decades. It takes its cue as much from older classics as from new ones: from Braudel's major study of the Mediterranean that historians by and large have continued to use as the principal model for the writing of India's maritime history, from Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *Corrupting Sea*, to the inter-disciplinary perspectives of cultural studies and environmental history in reconfiguring IOW Studies. Reiterating how a nationalist frame was inherently inadequate for studying the macro-region of the IOW, he uses literary representations to think of the ocean as an imaginary, in addition to a socially constructed space produced by complex historical interactions. His introduction offers one of the most significant rationales for understanding the IOW on its terms, responding to older critiques that reduced its history to that of European domination; and highlighting vividly a circuit of connections that made up that world. His example of the slave ship *The Diligent*, that left the port of Vannes to buy slaves in West Africa with 7000 lbs of cowry shells and yards of Indian cloth, evokes the materiality of dense connections of commodities and human interactions, even as it is juxtaposed to the travels of the southern Bluefin tuna fish that travelled across the ocean following its breeding impulses. The most impressive aspect of the book is the way the physicality of the ocean comes back to us, replete with smells of salt and seaweed, holding out the exciting possibilities of undertaking an alternative kind of maritime humanities.<sup>14</sup> The introduction is especially valuable in flagging those issues that have remained at the heart of any IOW studies project, and that have continued to find new resonance with the work of several other scholars. We are treated to a variety of definitional strategies, an important exercise given the reservations scholars have had about exaggerating South Asia's centrality and discounting the importance of Africa in

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12. M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003).

13. Devleena Ghosh and Steven Muecke (eds.), *Cultures of Trade Indian Ocean Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

14. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, see introduction.

the making of the IOW. The factors of topography, of geography and climate, and the interrelationship between the monsoon and movement in the age of sail, of Islam and its accommodation in and by littoral societies, of politics and empires, and finally of boats and boatbuilding, are covered with unusual detail and narrative density.

A number of these themes have featured in subsequent IOW scholarship and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Pearson's contribution stands out as a crucial reference point for our deliberations. The scholarship on the IOW has gained immense momentum: Enseng Ho, Sunil Amrith, Fahad Bishara, Johan Mathew, and Yasser Arafat, among younger scholars, have explored the issues of Islam, law, illegality and mobility with remarkable analytical rigour that has enriched the field of IOW studies.<sup>15</sup> As I look back on the last four decades, I appreciate the depth of research that has accumulated, that has drawn from a generation to whom Pearson belonged, has added incrementally to the scholarship of a macro-region apparently unmanageable within any one archival frame, and yielded valuable insights into empires, networks, mobile subjectivities, and economic practice. That IOW studies as a sub-field has come of age is clear for everyone to see, notwithstanding omissions of the Indian Ocean in the *Seas of History* volume that Marcus Vink had occasion to reflect on. The essays that form part of this volume speak to many of the concerns and themes that Pearson helped signpost, and in the case of two even offers additional reflections on his work.

It remains for me to reflect on and introduce some of the essays that make up the volume. I begin with Ned Alpers whose essay is a useful addition to our understanding of Pearson's work. For Alpers, too, littoral society remains the most robust conceptual contribution that Pearson made. Alpers attempts a useful genealogy of littoral scholarship, anchoring it within the Perth collective in Australia where Peter Reeves, Frank Broeze, Kenneth McPherson and Peter Reeves fostered imaginative work that preferred to stress the spatial aspect of the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup> Their work, according to Alpers, corresponded to what is now identified as geographies of knowing. The search for a spatial understanding of the Indian Ocean, for useful spatial units, informed Pearson's experimentation with the littoral, with his pursuit of what one may call 'watereality', of a story that concerned the surface of the sea and its shores, of what Jennifer Gaynor calls 'offing'.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly for a historian, the littoral is easier to capture and its porousness becomes a means to adopt a truly amphibian approach. Alper's essay develops these ideas and is especially useful in reviewing the ways in which the idea of the littoral was deployed by Pearson to

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15. Enseng Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46, no. 2, (2004), 210-246; Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013); Fahad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic life in the Western Indian Ocean 1780-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (California: University of California Press, 2016).

16. Peter Reeves, Frank Broeze & Kenneth McPherson, "The Maritime Peoples of the Indian Ocean Region Since 1800", *The Mariner's Mirror*, 74, no. 3 (2013), 241-254.

17. Jennifer Gaynor, *Intertidal History in Island Southeast Asia: Submerged Genealogy and the Legacy of Coastal Capture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

communicate with proponents of the world-systems analysis.

Pamila Gupta's essay adopts a different approach to Pearson's work. It identifies key words that made up his tool-kit and also her own writings as an anthropologist looking at faith practices in the Portuguese colony of Goa. The key words that are significant for Gupta are not spatial categories such as the littoral, but embrace a panoply of social transactions generally referred to as corruption and crowding. Explaining how these were drawn from the actuality of Portuguese experience within the Estado, Gupta relates them to her own work where material corruption was a useful counterpoint to the phenomenon of the incorrupt mortal remains of Francis Xavier.

Rila Mukherjee's essay takes up some of Pearson's ideas and draws attention to the useful distinction that needs to be made between territoriality and territorialisation. It takes up an unpublished essay by Pearson to flesh out the concept of territoriality in an oceanic space in a creative way to imagine how he would have explored this himself. The essay is also important in signposting several landmark writings on law, space and territoriality.

The remaining essays take up more specific themes close to Pearson's heart. Suzuki's essay, for instance, is a fitting acknowledgement to the life-long labour of Pearson in rethinking Africa's location within the Indian Ocean trading world, in looking closely at the agency of littoral societies. The essay looks specifically at Swahili experiences, makes innovative use of travel geographies, and examines how Islam, maritime culture and orientation of the Swahili coast played itself out. The essay also contrasts how the experience of Islam was quite different depending on the vantage point of the littoral or of the hinterland. As Suzuki observes, while Islam in Swahili port towns was characterized as being "open" towards the ocean, intended to attract overseas Muslim merchants, it worked in the opposite direction with the interior. In other words, while Islam created a shared character between inhabitants of Swahili port towns and Muslim merchants, the locals in Swahili port towns seemed to resist sharing this character with peoples in the interior.'

The essay by Soren Mentz takes up the well-known theme of European private trade and sub-imperialism in the eighteenth century. Thanks to Peter Marshall and Holden Furber, we do know how dense networks of private trade interests impacted English political expansion. What is interesting about Mentz's contribution is a focused perspective on an individual trader, William Morrison, whose writings he uses to provide more details on the trading world of the period and on the messy operations of the English Company, the policies of which were dictated almost entirely by financial considerations. Locating Morrison's commercial reverses in the context of the fall of Madras to the French in 1746, Mentz refers to the twists and turns in the relations between the Company and the merchants, how the Company's need for finances upset and undermined existing arrangements and made way for new ones embodied in the formation of Agency houses in the latter decades of the eighteenth century.

The present volume is one in a two-volume series of essays, *Festschrift II* to appear

in late 2018, in honour of Michael Pearson's contributions to the field of IOW studies. This particular volume is intended largely to review and revisit the central ideas that made up Pearson's understanding of the field and how these have been deployed time and again in specific studies of the Indian Ocean world. The idea was to think with the categories that grew organically out of Pearson's meticulous archival research, and how these categories have yielded insights for later work both at a conceptual and empirical level. The individual essays are also important in indexing some of Pearson's recurrent concerns, and I do believe that they serve in redressing biases that have plagued IOW studies and in providing instances of innovative reading of European language materials.