

## AFRICA, THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD, AND THE 'EARLY MODERN': HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS AND PROBLEMS

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# AFRICA, THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD, AND THE “EARLY MODERN”: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS AND PROBLEMS\*

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## ABSTRACT

European-inspired scholarship underscores conventional academic consensus that African commercial entrepreneurship disappeared with the European voyages of discovery, and subsequent implantation of the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French commercial empires. Thus the people of eastern Africa are portrayed largely as technologically backward and isolated from the main currents of global history from about 1500 until the onset of modern European colonialism from the close of the nineteenth century. This article argues that the conventional view needs to be challenged, and that Eastern African history in the period 1500-1800 needs to be revised in the context of an Indian Ocean world economy.

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter emanates both from my long-term research into Africa’s historical relationship with the Indian Ocean world and from a workshop held at Johns Hopkins University in March 2009 entitled “Africa and the Early Modern.”<sup>1</sup> I recall vividly, while a student at the University of Birmingham, Antony Hopkins’ insistence that the fundamental division in African history that conventional historiography draws between precolonial and colonial history needed to be challenged: that such an emphasis was Eurocentric in nature; that there was possibly greater continuity than contrast between the periods immediately prior to, and following, the Scramble for Africa and imposition of colonial rule; and that a much more elemental division in African history was the nineteenth-century creation

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of a truly international economy, and its growing absorption of all regions of the African continent into that economy as the nineteenth century progressed.

In the same vein, I here argue that for that side of the African continent east of the Cape-to-Cairo axis, the conventional emphasis on the “early modern” in African historiography is fundamentally Eurocentric and needs to be challenged. While there are a number of works that stress a dynamic African involvement in trade with Asia in the pre-1500 era, the overwhelming consensus in the historiography is that African commercial entrepreneurship disappeared with the European voyages of discovery, and subsequent implantation of the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French commercial empires in the Indian Ocean and Indonesian Sea. From about 1500, the people of eastern Africa are portrayed largely as technologically backward and isolated from the main currents of global history. That historiography is chiefly a product of European-inspired scholarship, established initially during the modern colonial era, but mainly during the postcolonial era. It has thus followed Eurocentric preoccupations. Chronologically, it has reinforced the stress on the onset of modern colonialism in the period 1870–1914 as the major division in the history of eastern Africa, holding that the Scramble for Africa marked the end of African isolation and start of enforced modernization. Thematically, it has highlighted Islam as well as Portuguese and French intervention in eastern Africa in the period 1500–1870 as having had largely negative impacts manifested chiefly through the slave raiding and the slave export trade, while portraying Africans chiefly as the passive victims of extraneous, largely “Arab” and European forces.

This paper argues that such perspectives are misguided and that Eastern African history in the period 1500–1800 needs to be placed in the context of an Indian Ocean world economy.

### **THE CONCEPT OF THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD (IOW)**

The concept of the IOW is so novel that most historians, including Africanists, have either not heard of it or have little idea of its meaning. It is based on the application from the mid-1980s of Ferdinand Braudel’s concept of a Mediterranean “maritime” economy to the oceanic spaces of Asia that were governed by the monsoons — a system of regularly alternating winds and currents unique to the Indian Ocean and South and East China seas. From April to September, as the Asian landmass heats up, rising hot air produces a vacuum that sucks in the air from the ocean, creating the southwest monsoon. During the other six “winter” months of the year, the opposite reaction occurs, creating the northeast monsoon. The conventional view is that these winds enabled vessels to engage in purposeful two-way transoceanic trade that some economic historians term the “first global economy.”

Of seminal importance here are the publications of K. N. Chaudhuri, who argues that an Indian Ocean maritime economy, centred on South Asia, and linking the major

productive areas of Asia, China, India, and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq), constituted the world's first "global economy," defined as a sophisticated, durable, and interconnected system of production and long-distance trade.<sup>2</sup> Opinions differ as to the origins of the system. Authors such as Chaudhuri and André Wink argue it emerged alongside Islam from the mid-seventh century, whereas Janet Abu-Lughod, as well as George Modelski and William R. Thompson, link it to developments in Sung China from around the tenth century.<sup>3</sup> All agree, however, that it developed earlier, and remained until the mid-eighteenth century of greater importance, than the European "global economy," centred initially on the Mediterranean and subsequently on the Atlantic. Andre Gunder Frank speculated that the Indian Ocean–Asian "global" economy might have begun earlier than is currently thought, and considered that European dominance was only achieved in the nineteenth century and that it will shortly be eroded by an Asian economic renaissance.<sup>4</sup>

However, these studies suffer from two major limitations: they largely ignore human-environmental interaction beyond accommodation of a simplistic monsoon model; and despite being nominally "Asia-centric," they are infused with Eurocentric interpretative preconceptions that obscure the full historical nature of the IOW.

## AFRICA IN IOW STUDIES

Africa has suffered at the hands of a still predominantly Eurocentric historiography, as well as a resurgent Asia-centric historiography. Assisted by anthropological studies that emphasize the primacy in non-European societies of social rather than economic factors, the Eurocentric historical tradition considers European culture to have made unique contributions to economic development, in particular by facilitating the early development of capitalism characterized by the emergence and primacy of individualism, private property, and the profit motive. Thus Immanuel Wallerstein argues that

the modern world-system took the form of a capitalist world-economy that

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2. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, 1997). Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor," in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D., 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996).

4. Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

had its genesis in Europe in the long sixteenth century and that involved the transformation of a particular redistributive or tributary mode of production, that of feudal Europe (Braudel's "economic Ancien Régime") into a qualitatively different social system. Since that time, the capitalist world economy has (a) geographically expanded to cover the entire globe; (b) manifested a cyclical pattern of expansion and contraction. . . ; and (c) undergone a process of secular transformation, including technological advance. . . that is still going on today.<sup>5</sup>

Wallerstein draws the distinction that while the European world economy absorbed the Americas, Asia and Africa remained on the periphery as sources of chiefly luxury commodities (e.g., silk and spices) and slaves, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Wallerstein follows H. R. Trevor-Roper in the common assumption that there existed a "vacuum in sea-borne trade" in the Indian Ocean that first Portugal and subsequently other European countries filled and competed to monopolize.<sup>7</sup> The implication is that archaic social structures obstructed modernization and commercial development in non-European societies, which blocked the emergence of a coherent and sophisticated system of long-distance maritime exchange, until such time as European forces—military, political, and commercial—imposed themselves and eradicated local barriers to modernization. Thus the caste system and tribalism centered on elders are often cited as the major impediments to social and economic modernization of India and Africa, respectively.

Over the past few decades, historians of Asia have mounted a vigorous attack on Eurocentrism. This has been particularly marked among historians of South Asia. Many, such as Chaudhuri, have placed India at the centre of the first "Asian global economy" that emerged in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, while more recently Sugata Bose and Thomas Metcalf have argued that India also lay at the core of developments in the British Empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> However, all accept the conventional Eurocentric interpretation of the role of Africa and Africans. Africa lay isolated on the margins of the Asian- and later European-centred global economies, while Africans, responding to primitive irrational rhythms, remained largely inert and passive actors. Consequently, African history comprises the impact of the outside world on Africa—something that only started to gain any momentum with colonization and the forcible

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5. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), vol.2: 7–8.

6. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 45, 329; Wallerstein, *Modern World System* vol.1: 86–90.

7. See H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Historical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 120.

8. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).



imposition by Europeans of an economic infrastructure in their African colonies. Metcalf argues that even with the coming of colonialism, it was Indians rather than Africans who took the initiative and profited from the economic and social opportunities opened up by empire in those parts of Africa in direct contact with the Indian Ocean, from Egypt and Ethiopia to Kenya and South Africa.

This has inevitably provoked a reaction from historians of eastern Africa. However, the reaction has concentrated chiefly on the pre-1500 era, notably on the rise of the Swahili, a people that conventional Eurocentric historiography linked to the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Modern-day Africanists have emphasized rather the Swahili as an example of a vibrant African Bantu-speaking people that adapted to, and adopted, a deep-sea maritime culture.<sup>10</sup> Mark Horton dates the emergence of the Swahili civilization to ca. 750 and the foundation of Shanga, in the Lamu Archipelago off northern Kenya.<sup>11</sup> In his turn, Felix A. Chami claims an uninterrupted period of African innovation and entrepreneurship in which Bantu-speakers were not only central to what Christopher Ehret terms “an African Classical Age” in hinterland East Africa that endured over two millennia up to 400 CE, but continued their innovatory activities upon reaching the east African coast.<sup>12</sup> There, Chami argues, they adapted to a maritime lifestyle, and participated in the IOW “global” economy much earlier than is traditionally thought, thereby laying the foundations for the classical Swahili period.<sup>13</sup>

This isolates the period 1500–1820 as a peculiar era that, in the historiography on Africa and the Indian Ocean world, is marked by a rapid African retreat from the IOW, and subsequent African isolationism. In Eurocentric historiography, this process resulted from the advent of Europeans into the region, their military superiority, and their monopolization of the most valued trading commodities and maritime trade routes—a process that reduced indigenous traders to the role of peddlers. While Asia-

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9. See, e.g., Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Seyyid Said in 1856* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Kenneth Ingham, *A History of East Africa* (London: Longmans, 1963); John Sutton, *A Thousand Years of East Africa* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1990).

10. Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); James de Vere Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (London: James Currey, 1993).

11. Mark Horton, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996).

12. Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia &, 1998).

13. Felix A. Chami, “A Response to Christopher Ehret’s ‘Bantu Expansions,’” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 647–51; and *The Unity of African Ancient History: 3000 BC to AD 500* (Dar es Salaam: E&D, 2006).

centrists have successfully challenged most Eurocentric assumptions, emphasizing that until the mid-eighteenth century Europeans enjoyed at best a dominance of highly limited duration over some Asian regions and commodities, Afrocentrists have left such assumptions unchallenged. Thus in the historiography, Africans between 1500 and 1820 remained largely isolated from developments in the rest of the world, exploited by external actors—European and Muslim—whose production and export of slaves formed “Africa’s” chief contribution to the external Atlantic and IOW “global” economies. This raises the question, why is Africa an exception to the historiography of this period? Is it because the evidence is lacking to challenge Eurocentric assumptions, or because of the continued dominance of interpretative biases that have hindered the mounting of such a challenge?

## **HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The evidence suggests that interpretative biases continue to obscure the true role of Africa in the IOW in the precolonial era. Most of these biases stem from two factors: the paradigms inherent in Eurocentric historiography, on the one hand, and the poverty, malnutrition, illness, political corruption, and insecurity that plague Africa today, on the other.

### **PARADIGMS INHERENT IN EUROCENTRIC HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Eurocentric historiography has erected and maintained paradigms for viewing African history that have persisted to the present day and continue to dominate research and writing on Africa. These comprise chiefly colonial geographic, ethno-cultural, and political conventions. Traditional Eurocentric conventions divide North from sub-Saharan Africa and on ethno-cultural grounds align Muslim countries of the North, notably Egypt, with the Middle East rather than with Africa. They also split sub-Saharan Africa into regional blocks comprising West, Central, East, and Southern Africa, and subdivide those regions into countries based essentially on political entities created by colonial powers from the late-nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa.

Such divisions obscure Africa’s historical involvement in the IOW, and thus tend to reinforce rather than mitigate or challenge Eurocentric and Asia-centric conceptions of African passivity and isolation in the period 1500–1800, and of the overwhelming economic and military superiority of Europeans in the post-1800 era that resulted in the imposition of colonial rule. This paper concerns Africa’s relationship to the IOW that conventional paradigms have largely underrated. Eurocentric, Asia-centric, and Afrocentric scholars have tended to assume that the only region of Africa on which the IOW trade network had a direct bearing was East Africa—with the latter having played only a marginal role in the Indian Ocean until the arrival of European powers in the

region from 1500.<sup>14</sup>

It is here argued that conventional geographic, ethnocultural, and political Eurocentric paradigms for interpreting precolonial African history need to be exorcised and new paradigms constructed in their place for Africa's post-1500 role in the IOW to be fully appreciated. Rather, the major overland and maritime trading routes linking Africa to the rest of the IOW "global" economy, and the commodities, technology, ideas, and peoples that flowed along them should form the focus for historians. The major overland routes that connected Africa with the IOW crossed the Isthmus of Suez to link up with the trans-Asia Silk Road via Syria and Mesopotamia, and led—with a crossing by boat—to various points across the Red Sea, thus connecting all of northeast Africa from Egypt to Somalia to Arabia and the Middle East. In Africa, traders followed the Nile, the world's longest river (4,160 mi.; 6,693 km), from which trade routes, via the Sudan, connected Ethiopia and the Great Lakes region of eastern Africa with Central and West Africa. Another major conduit of trade was the Great Rift Valley (running from the Red Sea coast to the Zambesi Delta).

The major IOW maritime routes involved, in Africa, three main sectors: the Red Sea and the northeast Somali coast; the Swahili coast, from Mogadishu to Cape Delgado (with an extension via the Comoro Islands to northern Madagascar), and the "southern" network comprising the coast of continental southern Africa between Cape Delgado and the Cape of Good Hope as well as the west and east coasts of Madagascar south of Baly Bay and Antongil Bay, respectively. All these sectors developed important trading connections with the IOW that fluctuated over time. Moreover, they were not isolated from each other. By at least the end of the last century BCE and the beginning of the first century CE, important maritime trade routes linking Egypt and Ethiopia as well as southern Arabia also extended down the east African coast at least as far as the "metropolis" of Rhapta, probably situated in the Rufiji Delta, opposite Mafia, near present-day Dar es Salaam.<sup>15</sup>

## **AFRICA: THE RECALCITRANT ECONOMIC FAILURE**

The wave of economic success stories in modern times of Japan, the Asian Tigers, China, and India have led historians of Asia to search for the roots of that success in their own histories. By contrast, the manifest failure to rise from the economic, social, and political morass in which they found themselves within a few decades of independence has resulted in historians of Africa reinforcing, rather than challenging, traditional Eurocentric

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14. See, for example, Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*, which almost completely omits Africa from its analysis of IOW economic history.

15. Carl Hughes and Ruben Post, "A GIS Approach to Finding the Metropolis of Rhapta" in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Early Exchange between Africa and the Wider Indian Ocean World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 135-155.



interpretations that stress the passivity of Africans and primacy of external forces.

Eurocentrism dominated both the Colonial school of history, which considered European intrusion into non-European societies to have been a positive force, and the Marxist (and by extension the “development of underdevelopment” thesis) and Nationalist schools, which consider the European impact to have been chiefly negative. Only the post-1945 Liberal school has consistently emphasized the dynamism of precolonial non-European economies. However, even the Liberal school largely subscribes to the conventional wisdom that modern economic history starts with developments in Europe, which subsequently rose to global economic domination, and that the decisive events in the economic development of the rest of the world were the European “discoveries” at the close of the fifteenth century and subsequent domination of the New and Indian Ocean worlds. Hence the current plight of Indian Ocean Africa is viewed by advocates of the older interpretative frameworks as being primarily the fault of Africans—laziness and pervasive corruption being integral to African culture, coupled with centuries-long exploitation by Arabs. For advocates of the Marxist and Nationalist schools, it stems rather from exploitation initially by Arabs but especially by Europeans, backed by their overwhelming military and economic superiority.

## THE SLAVE TRADE AND SLAVERY

Therein, in part, lies the intense interest among historians in slavery and the African diaspora. For the slave trade and slavery are considered the quintessential examples of external exploitation of Africans, to the benefit of the outsider and to the economic, political, and social ruin of Africa. Thus, for the “old school,” Reginald Coupland followed well-established accounts by British naval captains of their exploits in anti-slave trade squadrons in East African waters, and stressed the horrors of the Arab slave trade in East Africa and the virtues of the British in suppressing it.<sup>16</sup> More recent but similarly old-fashioned studies have pursued the same approach.<sup>17</sup> Of a different order are the works that criticized both Arabs and Europeans for their part in the east African slave trade. These have focused overwhelmingly on the “Arab” slave trade to, and slavery in,

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16. Reginald Coupland, *The Exploitation of East Africa, 1856–1890: The Slave Trade and the Scramble* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939). See also Frederick Lamport Barnard, *A Three Years Cruise in the Mozambique Channel for the Suppression of the Slave Trade* (London: R. Bentley, 1848); Philip Colomb, *Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean: A Record of Naval Experiences* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873); G. L. Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa: Narrative of Five Years' Experiences in the Suppression of the Slave Trade* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1873).

17. Peter Collister, *The Sulivans and the Slave Trade* (London: Rex Collings, 1980); Raymond C. Howell, *The Royal Navy and the Slave Trade* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Deryck Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1998).

the Zanzibar plantations and to the Persian Gulf, and on the slave trade to, and slavery in, European enclaves in the IOW, notably the Mascarenes and the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>18</sup>

However, the most startling development of late is the burgeoning interest in slave diaspora studies in the IOW. This was largely generated, and is maintained, by American scholars, although IOW scholars, notably from India, have also rushed into the field.<sup>19</sup>

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18. On East Africa and the Persian Gulf, see Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, and Ivory in Zanzibar* (London: James Currey, 1987); Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); and Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: James Currey, 1995). On the Mascarenes see J-M. Filliot, *La traite des esclaves vers les Mascareignes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1974); Moses D. E. Nwulia, *The History of Slavery in Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1810–1875* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981); U. Bissoondoyal, ed., *Slavery in South West Indian Ocean* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1989); Anthony J. Barker, *Slavery and Antislavery in Mauritius, 1810–33* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1996); Vijaya Teelock, *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998); Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). On the Cape see Robert Carl-Heinz Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); John Edwin Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003); Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and *The Chains That Bind Us: A History of Slavery at the Cape* (Kenwyn, UK: Juta, 1996).

19. Joseph E. Harris, *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971); Graham W. Irwin, *Africans Abroad: A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean during the Age of Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Omar Khalidi, “African Diaspora in India: The Case of the Habashis of the Dakan,” *Islamic Culture* 53, nos. 1–2 (1989): 85–107; R. R. S. Chauhan, *Africans in India: From Slavery to Royalty* (New Delhi: Asian Publication Services, 1995); Runoko Rashidi and Ivan Van Sertima, eds., *African Presence in Early Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1995); Shanti Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan: From Medieval to Modern Times* (London: Sangam Books, 1996); Edward A. Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions for Research,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 17, no. 2 (1997): 62–81; Ochieng Omondi, *The Siddis of India* (Nairobi: Asian African Heritage Trust, 2000); Ronald Segal, *Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); Behnaz Mirzai, “African Presence in Iran: Identity and Its Reconstruction in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 89, nos. 336–37 (2002): 229–46; Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003); Amy Catlin and Edward A. Alpers, eds., *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians* (Rainbow Publishers, 2003); Kiran Kamal Prasad, ed., *TADIA—The African Diaspora in Asia: Explorations on a Less Known Fact* (Bangalore: Jana Jagrati Prakashana, 2008); Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Jean-Pierre Angenot, eds., *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge University

Although precious few of these studies attempt to offer a sturdy definition of what they mean by “diaspora,” they are uniformly informed by American approaches to African Diaspora studies, relentlessly pursuing themes such as rebellion, diasporic consciousness, longing for the “homeland,” and the significance of linguistic and cultural attributes from the homeland.<sup>20</sup>

What is missing from these, as from most major modern studies of slavery and the slave trade in Africa, is the IOW dimension;<sup>21</sup> however, most works with such a dimension rely on Asian-African comparisons rather than conceiving of the whole within the paradigm of an IOW “global” economy.<sup>22</sup> Research in the African diaspora in the IOW is expanding at a considerable rate—a response to academic market forces—but tends to reinforce, rather than challenge, the very paradigms, constructed by Western scholars, that continue to obscure the true nature of African history. In the process, moreover, scholars of the African diaspora discourage the research and freshness of mind required to overturn this trend.

#### AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE IOW “GLOBAL” ECONOMY RECONSIDERED

I would suggest that the answer to the question “What is the future of early modern African history in the current intellectual environment?” is “more of the same.” A core of key paradigms inherent in Eurocentric history, and adopted uncritically by Asia-centric and Afrocentric historians, need to be seriously questioned, if not overturned altogether, before African history will truly emerge from the shadows.<sup>23</sup> There are six major interpretative models that need to be seriously questioned.

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Press, 2009). Black Diaspora studies is so popular, it has even led to the launching of a specific journal—*African Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Africa in a Global World* (published by Brill).

20. Gwyn Campbell, “The African-Asian Diaspora: Myth or Reality?” *African and Asian Studies* 5, nos. 3–4 (2006): 305–24.

21. See, e.g., Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

22. James L. Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Martin A. Klein, ed., *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). A salutary exception is Clarence-Smith, who, however, concentrates on an analysis of the Indian Ocean slave trade within the context of the burgeoning international economy of the nineteenth century rather than within the pre-1800 global economy—William G. Clarence-Smith, ed., *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1989).

23. See, e.g., Gwyn Campbell, “The Indian Ocean World: Africa in the First Global Economy,” in *Cultural Currents of the Indian Ocean*, special issue of *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 3, no. 2 (2008): 32–44—<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/TfC/article/viewArticle/920>; and “Islam in Indian Ocean Africa Prior to the Scramble: A New Historical Paradigm,” in Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, eds., *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007), 1–50.

## 1. THE EARLY MODERN

Economic historians have long pointed to the making of the international economy in the nineteenth century rather than the imposition of colonial rule in the period 1870–1914 as the critical temporal division in modern African history.<sup>24</sup> The maintenance in the historiography of the early modern era as a primary chronological division in African history reinforces Eurocentric biases. It reflects the Eurocentric viewpoint that 1500 marked a major turning point in the history of the world, an era of “European discoveries” that led to European military, economic, and political domination in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean worlds. However, the evidence for this occurring in the IOW is being increasingly challenged by Asia-centrists. While the Europeans might have scored some initial military victories, this in no way ensured their dominance in the region. Moreover, apart from a toehold at the Cape and later on the Mascarenes, the European presence in Indian Ocean Africa was negligible until the eighteenth century when its spread was mainly restricted again to the Cape and the Mascarenes. Elsewhere, attempts by Europeans to gain any foothold in Indian Ocean Africa were thwarted by a combination of malaria, which generally decimated European settlements, and hostility from locals. As Antony Hopkins pointed out for West Africa, not until the 1880s did Europeans acquire the means—in the form of quinine, steamboats, and improved weaponry—needed to penetrate and permanently inhabit tropical Africa and militarily defeat its indigenous peoples.

## 2. STATES, EMPIRES, AND MODERNIZATION

A second pervasive bias in the historiography is the fixation on states and empires. This stems in large part from the Eurocentric emphasis on the birth and development of the “nation-state,” of a unified “national” culture and sentiment (patriotism), and thus with territorial and linguistic-cultural frontiers. The Colonial school of historians focused on similar themes, as have postcolonial historians. Hence, much of the supposedly postcolonial radical historiography has reinforced the search for the rise of Asian and African “nation-states” while Asia-centric and Afrocentric historians of the pre-1500 era have concentrated on hierarchical political entities and empires—thus, in Indian Ocean Africa, the Afrocentric fixation with Great Zimbabwe and the Swahili commercial empire. Moreover, the theme of the decline of indigenous states and empires—slow in Asia, meteoric in Africa, is the gist of the “early modern” period. However, if, as Afrocentric historians have recently demonstrated in force, the pre-1500 era was characterized by significant African economic initiative, it is preposterous to assume that a few boatloads

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24. Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, and Ivory*; Gwyn Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



of Europeans, most of whom once in the tropics rapidly succumbed to disease, could have stifled that initiative overnight.

### 3. CENTRALIZED POLITICAL ENTITIES AND MODERNIZATION

An ancillary and largely unchallenged perception is that state formation and economic modernization are closely correlated—economic development, as a rule, being most advanced in centralized hierarchical states and least advanced in decentralized stateless societies. For the IOW, this approach has resulted in the assumption that China, India, and the Middle East constituted the “core” IOW economies, and regions such as Africa and the Indonesian islands (besides Sumatra and Java) were of marginal economic significance. However, as some studies demonstrate, there is no necessary correlation between centralized states and economic development. In fact, decentralized polities often displayed vibrant economic activity, as in parts of Indonesia and Africa.<sup>25</sup>

### 4. TERRITORIAL AND MARITIME FRONTIERS

Almost all histories of Africa follow colonial conventions in dividing Africa into territorial divisions: of northern versus sub-Saharan; and within the latter—western versus eastern and southern; and within those distinctions, divisions into countries (Kenya, Tanzania, and so forth) all with fixed terrestrial and maritime frontiers. The same approach analyzes the IOW in terms of territorially defined countries and such regional zones as the Far East, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. These serve to imprison history within conventional frameworks of nation-states or “territorial” area studies. They do little justice to the complex transfrontier, trans-IOW—including Indian Ocean Africa—exchange of commodities, monies, technologies, ideas, and people that characterized the precolonial era and that—some might argue—continued into the colonial era.

### 5. ISLAM, THE IOW, AND AFRICA

Similar paradigms distinguish between Muslim North Africa, which is conventionally classified as “Arab” and part of the Middle East, and “Black Africa.” However, such an approach obscures the historic dynamism of Islam, the expansion of which created a wide Muslim zone running from the western Mediterranean to Indonesia, and in Indian Ocean Africa penetrated as far south as the Cape. Conventional treatment of Islam also views

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25. For Indian Ocean Africa, see, e.g., Campbell, *Economic History of Imperial Madagascar*, and for Indonesia see James Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768–1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2007).



it embodied in religious, political, and legal institutions. It rarely speaks to its economic significance—which, however, lies at the heart of the IOW “global” economy, and Africa’s role in that economy.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. SLAVERY STUDIES

As noted, of equal importance is the need to challenge for the IOW the current models used to research slavery and the obsessive search for the slave diaspora. Cast within the dominant Atlantic paradigm, it is an understandable passion—simple, literally “black and white,” with any deviations from the rule (notably in Latin America) being embraced as a means of consolidating the rule. Nevertheless, the current paradigms are unhelpful in the IOW context, where even the definition of “slave” and “slavery” are highly contested outside the minority of European enclaves (e.g., the Cape, Mascarenes, Goa, Batavia) upon which Western scholarship on the slave export trade and slavery in the IOW has overwhelmingly concentrated.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, conventional models of “Islamic slavery,” by tying slavery to a religious ideology and to religious institutions, obscure rather than illuminate the nature of the slave trade and slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and the IOW.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would argue from the perspective of Africa’s relationship to the IOW global economy that the paradigms currently governing research serve to obscure rather than clarify African history. The true dimension of African history within the IOW context will remain occluded unless a major challenge is mounted to the dominant Western-driven perspectives governing historical chronology, the significance of states, the equation of hierarchical polities with economic modernization and of decentralized polities with economic backwardness, the territorial divisions implicit in regional and country analyses, narrow definitions of Islamic influences, and “Atlantic” models of slavery and the slave diaspora.

Central to this is the concept of the Indian Ocean world (IOW)—which is here taken to comprise all regions directly involved in the long-distance maritime trade network of the “first global economy,” an economy that was regulated by the monsoon system of the Indian Ocean and the China and Indonesian seas. The IOW economy thus comprises the entire area from the Cape to Cairo to Calcutta to Canton. The main maritime trade

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26. Gwyn Campbell, “Islam in Indian Ocean Africa Prior to the Scramble. A New Historical Paradigm” in Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007), 1-50.

27. Gwyn Campbell, “Slave Trades and the Indian Ocean World,” in John C. Hawley, ed., *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 17–51.

network complemented the older overland trans-Asian Silk Road. In the western IOW, both converged on two main trading hubs: the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

The IOW “global” economy had a significant impact on all parts of Africa washed by the Indian Ocean or its Red Sea extension (South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, the Mascarene, Comoros, and Seychelles islands, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt), as well as on landlocked regions in the interior including Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ethiopia, which possessed important trade outlets to those waters. This embraced a vast eastern portion of the African continent covering most of the area, from the Cape to Cairo, which is here termed Indian Ocean Africa.

This new geographic structure permits a reappraisal of the role of Africa in the IOW, and of Islam in Indian Ocean Africa, that breaks the association of both in traditional histories with the African slave export trade. A new historical paradigm emerges in which important links become apparent, not only between Indian Ocean Africa regions, but also between them and the IOW. These connections ensured important exchanges of capital, people, commodities, technology, and ideas, albeit ones that fluctuated over time, and demonstrate that Indian Ocean Africa played an integral part in the creation and development of “first global economy” from early times to at least the end of the nineteenth century.