

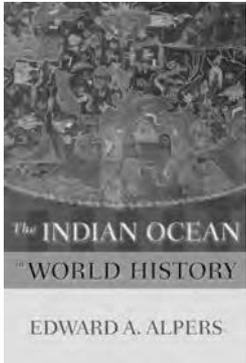
## The Indian Ocean in World History

By EDWARD A. ALPERS

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Reviewed by Caleb Clark



For some time now, a paradigm shift has been occurring in the field of world history. An emerging trend often referred to as “new world history” is helping change the landscape of traditional thinking by incorporating a global perspective rather than focusing on the West. *The Indian Ocean in World History* is part of the *New Oxford World History* series aimed at expanding the definition of what was traditionally included by taking a comprehensive look at all peoples and all aspects of society. This global approach to studying world history is refreshing

and exceedingly helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the ever-increasing globalized world we live in.

Oceans cover 71 percent of the surface of the earth, and maritime culture has long been integral in telling the story of humanity around the world. Our story is one interwoven with the sea. Yet, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 95 percent of the underwater surface of our planet is yet unexplored. Through *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Edward Alpers provides perspective on one of the great mysteries left on our planet by taking an in-depth look at the Indian Ocean and the people who have called it home.

In his first chapter, Alpers wrestles with the question of how to define a space like an ocean, which affords no set boundaries. Can you define a space by its people and the culture they exhibit, and will any single definition encompass the complexity of a region so vast as the Indian Ocean? Throughout the subsequent five chapters of the text, covering ancient civilizations up to the last century, Alpers weaves a story of hardship, economic prosperity, political dominance, and diverse culture. Four clear themes emerge that are each helpful in their own way for gaining a sense of understanding concerning the Indian Ocean: physical geography, economics, policy and governing bodies, and a shared culture connecting the region to larger historical themes.

Alpers defines the physical geography of the Indian Ocean as a place that stretches from the Cape of Good Hope, north to the Red Sea, east to the South China Sea, and finally south to Australia. Over this vast expanse, one common theme connects these distant waters: monsoons. No description of this region would be complete without an understanding of the seasonal winds that for thousands of years dictated the trade routes and agricultural processes of the region. Alpers states, “Appreciating how these winds and currents operated in the Indian Ocean is critical to understanding its history” (6). The physical geography of the region dictated the course of human events until the Industrial Revolution provided man the machinery to overpower nature with the building of the Suez Canal and steamships that would travel freely against the prevailing winds.

The second theme that emerges is an economic definition of the region. Evidence of trade on the Indian Ocean can be found as early as 5000 BCE, and it is clear to see how Alpers uses the flow of money and trade around the Indian Ocean to define the region. He details the struggle for economic dominance between the Portuguese and Ottoman Empire, and

outlines how the rise of European trading companies in the seventeenth century expanded the definition of territory to include Cape Town, South Africa, as a part of the Indian Ocean world in 1652. The rise of British industrialization in the late eighteenth century throughout the nineteenth century shifted the economic focus of the region toward colonial domination and cash crop economies. By the twentieth century, Alpers outlines four emerging themes for the region: the impact of air travel, the continued expansion of Islam, natural disasters that pose a threat to human society, and the resurgence of piracy. For each of these themes, he describes a strong connection to the commodity of oil, further establishing how economic activity can be used to define the region.

Increased economic activity was fostered by developments in government and during periods of political stability of the region. Alpers highlights the rise and fall of dynasties and governments who through their policies dictated trade and movement, and helped shape the world of the Indian Ocean. A look into piracy and how each nation dealt with those who would seek to plunder trading vessels reveals a long-standing struggle to define the term, as well as how to control the actions of piracy across the Indian Ocean. Alpers also details the lengths that Islamic Law and the changes in political philosophy of various Caliphates have shaped the policy and legal framework of trading across the region. By the nineteenth century, European politics of imperialism “imposed new territorial borders that artificially cut through historic or fluid frontier and frequently divided ethnically discrete societies” (111). Each consequent change in political policy redefined the region and gave form and structure to the lives of those who lived along the coastline of the Indian Ocean.

Alpers discusses the Indian Ocean as a “world within a world,” revealing an interconnected culture of people groups in the region whose exploits connect to and help frame larger themes of world history far beyond the borders of the Indian Ocean. Alpers describes cultural diffusion within the region as early as the late Harappan period, circa 1900–1300 BCE (25). Extensive examples of cultural diffusion are described throughout the history of the region, spanning from the spread of cholera in the 1800s to migrant people groups farming colonial plantations. Furthermore, Alpers connects excerpts from primary sources to detail the story of the African slave trade in the region. These texts span from the Absid Caliphate exporting Ethiopian slaves in the seventh century to the institutionalized slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries driven by colonial plantain economics. These accounts offer an insightful comparison to the contemporary TransAtlantic slave trade. Alpers proposes that at the end of the nineteenth century, “The Indian Ocean world was, more than ever before, both an internally connected world region and one that was globally linked to the rest of the world” (127).

*The Indian Ocean in World History* proves to be an excellent source of information, especially in the emerging trend of “new world history.” This text would serve as an excellent ancillary source for AP world history courses, IB history, or undergraduate courses focusing on the rich history of the Indian Ocean region. Alpers defines the region by accurately describing the complex interplay of culture, language, economics, and politics that often takes place in inquiries about human action. By taking a holistic approach to writing about history, the reader leaves with a rich sense of identity for the Indian Ocean and the people who have called the region home. ■

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