

The View from the Edge: The Indian Ocean's Middle East**NILE GREEN**Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, Calif.; e-mail: green@history.ucla.edudoi:[10.1017/S0020743816000866](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816000866)

I first encountered the Indian Ocean on the shores of Makran. I thought I was at land's end, Asia's edge. The ocean hadn't entered my thoughts except as *non plus ultra*, an ending void. The map said Baluchistan, and I had come to find the Baluch. But I soon found Africans and Zikris, palm-frond huts and Omani passports, old soldiers (or mercenaries) from an overseas foreign legion and smugglers of whiskey, opium, and pharmaceuticals. Now China has built a port there; then, less than twenty years ago, they were still making dhows, subtle smuggling ships. Yet it was far from romantic. It was a rough and hard place where traders and fishers eked a marginal existence from the watery edge of a dust-powder desert. Karachi was thirty-six hours by bus then truck. But Pakistan was an abstract and suspect idea; locals talked more of Muscat. A year or two later, in the Tihama of Yemen, I watched as boatloads of Africans (refugees? job hunters? all men at any rate) ran ashore through the surf. My Arab colleagues, all from the highlands, said they arrived every day, and spoke ill of them. A while after that, in Muscat, I listened with curiosity to Arabic laced with Urdu (or was it Hindi, or Gujarati? They were just nouns, *Wanderwörter*: terms that travel). In Iran, it was different sounds of the ocean I heard when urban friends gave me tapes of *bandarī*, the music of the ports.

Throughout that time I had no concept of an "Indian Ocean world." The course books and set texts I read about the Middle East had no place for the people I had met, the things I had seen, or the sounds I had heard. Later I understood that those books had been written from above and afar: from the capital city, from the state archive, from the ethnic majority, from the domiciled, from the borders and languages of the nation, from those who were said to belong. All those perspectives matter. But so does the view from the edge that reveals a Middle East (if such it is) that lies far from Istanbul and Cairo. Elsewhere I have argued for deconstructing the conceptual geography (indeed, the entire concept) of the "Middle East" in favor of a processual geography of three arenas—Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, Inner Asian—that better capture the plurality and difference of the region's (no, the regions') past.¹ Here, I will shift back from the conceptual to the concrete, building on the Indian Ocean as I first encountered it by way of a focus on its overlooked empirical connections with the Middle East.

It is a general if not universal rule that historians follow sources and that sources follow states. Political power marshals the centralization of resources. Those resources and the people who control them attract myriad providers of services. Many of these providers—bureaucrats, priests, praise singers—count literacy among their marketable skills. As a result, through the quiet pull of patronage and the silent gravity of the state, political centers become textually dense. We in turn are drawn to these centers, and often with good reason: the concentration of power is always worth explaining. But political power is not the only force at work in shaping geographies of concentrated activity: there is also of course economic (more specifically mercantile) power. In the Middle

East especially, political power has rarely been sited at coastal hubs of merchant activity, leaving such sites far from the focus of Middle East studies. In our field of inquiry, Baghdad overshadows Basra; Shiraz overshadows Siraf; Sanaa overshadows Mukalla; Riyadh overshadows Jeddah; Cairo overshadows Qusayr and the canal.

Yet a shift from political centers to commercial hubs has radical potential. It calls us from the Levantine Middle East that has always dominated our field to Arabia, the Red Sea, the Gulf. It leads us to liminal spaces away from the standardizing pressures of political power and cultural hegemony to maritime frontiers that are porous and creole. Such a shift settles our gaze before and beyond the age of nationalism to see the motley populations of ports and coasts who have been all but written out of history, even when they have been crucial to state formation.² There are the Italians of Suez, the Indians of Jeddah, the Africans of Bushire, the Americans of Abadan, the Iranians of Bahrain, the Baluch of Muscat. What does being Arab, or Iranian, or Indian, or even Muslim, mean in those mottled spaces?³ And how in turn do those categories look from other sites amid the old circuits of the ocean, where many Indians and Africans also lay claim to be Persians and Arabs? What does it mean to be a *sayyid* in an ocean of slaves? And if so sanctified a category as *sayyid*-ness is called into question, what does this suggest about categories of more recent coinage?

Such issues push us towards a paradigm shift from autochthonous and discrete culture areas to interactive and mutually constitutive ones. Economics has long laid the foundation for such “world history” approaches, whether in terms of the movement of trade goods, the need for bullion and currency, or the reliance on migrant people. Often, the impact and evidence of such interconnections is hidden at the level of discourse and found only at the level of material culture. Many examples are found in the archaeology of Gulf and Red Sea ports or in the traditional architecture of Jeddah and Basra.⁴ Foodways form another route into the quotidian impact of such exchanges, of which the oceanic samosa (*sambūsa*, *samsa*, *samūsa*) and tamarind (*tamar al-hind*, “Indian date”) are just two obvious examples.

A paradigm shift also impacts our understanding of higher categories. Religion is a case in point, as seen with recent work on the early Islamic contact with Axum.⁵ Then there is the question of the African impact on Islam more generally, which calls into question the *Heilsgeschichte* model of the diffusion of Islam from the inland town to the coast and beyond, from Mecca and Baghdad to the world. Instead, the view from the edge shows the spread of other Islams, of the possession-based Islams of the *zar*, *bori*, and *gnawa*, as they moved out of Africa to Arabia and the Maghrib, or the *ahl-i havā* (people of the winds) of coastal southern Iran.⁶ And in terms of literate religion, the view from the edge helps us rethink the role of African ‘ulama’ in the Middle Eastern life of the mind. We might point here to the circuits of East African scholars or Zanzibar’s role in the revival of Ibadi theology in Oman and Libya.⁷ This picture of importing Islam from across the sea reverses the standard model of Africa as the passive recipient of Middle Eastern civilization. Given the number of Africans, both free and bonded, who were sent to and sometimes circulated through the Middle East, this “out of Africa” model has implications outside the sphere of religion.

The same arguments can be made with regard to India, whose role throughout history was rarely as the passive importer of Islam from the west. India was also a religious exporter, whether by way of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi order from the Mughal Empire

or the sundry religious firms of industrial Bombay.⁸ The life histories of Hindi/Indian ‘ulama’ provide additional means of tracing the oceanic input into Middle Eastern intellectual nodes (rather than “centers”). The same is true of Jawi/Southeast Asian ‘ulama’.⁹ Many such itinerant careers lie forgotten in Arabic biographical dictionaries and Persian literary anthologies. Looking beyond Islam, the Indian Ocean circuits of Baghdadian Jews, Syriac Christians, and Yazdi Zoroastrians are also underexplored, as is the presence of Hindu, and later Sikh, diasporas in Arabia and Iran. Questions of gender are also important. Migrant wives, women slaves, and the fewer female pilgrims force us to ask whether the ocean was primarily a domain of male movement and the opportunities such mobility laid open. The gradations between free and forced movement are especially significant here.

This brings us to the importance of focusing not only on the dominant and the oppressed, not only on “national” and “minority” groups, but also on the forgotten: those who do not (seem to) belong at all: the Africans of Mecca, the Hindus of Shiraz, the Hui of Cairo.¹⁰ Like all transregional ventures, such projects will need languages that are not part of the area studies model of Middle East studies, whether Malay or Mandarin, Swahili or Sindhi. New combinations of languages will be essential, not so much the old “Arabic plus Persian” recipe as new blends of local and inter-regional, Middle Eastern and oceanic. Hajj narratives form one obvious and abundant source.¹¹ But other sets of accounts (both alphabetical and mathematical) by merchants, pilgrims, and passengers will need to be traced, not least through research in provincial and family collections more than familiar state archives.¹² Among the richest seams will be languages that appear “out of place,” whether Judeo-Arabic in India or Urdu in Arabia.

Finally, we will need to rethink our basic geographical concepts, to undermine their hard geological rhetoric and build new models from the rubble. For even in a physical sense, geographies evolve and elude fixity. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 rapidly transformed the material and human geography of its associated ports.¹³ Whether in Port Said or Aden, this created a pull to the coast that saw internal and external migrants settle in new cosmopolitan environments. The challenges of those oceanic environments fostered new cultural forms and political formations, whether football or the Muslim Brotherhood that was founded in Ismailia. Muslim passengers and pilgrims in the age of steam commented frequently on the strangeness of finding so many different people residing in ports that seemed no longer part of the *dār al-islām*. The cognitive dissonance of such displacement and misplacement fueled new ideas, identities, and ideologies, not only nationalisms but transregional spatial concepts, such as the now commonplace “Islamic world” (*al-‘ālam al-islāmī, jahān-i Islām*).¹⁴

What this all suggests is that the Middle East was a place of passage as much as residence, an idea as much as an entity. The evidence of the ocean has the potential to make us rethink many of the basic assumptions of Middle East studies. Shifting our inland standpoint of centers and states, such is the view from the edge.

NOTES

¹Nile Green, “Re-Thinking the ‘Middle East’ after the Oceanic Turn,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34 (2014): 556–64.

²Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut: Reforming the Homeland* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

³Roy Bar Sadeh, “‘Transnationalizing Arabness’: The Interface between *al-Manar*’s Milieu and Indian Intellectuals, 1898–1935” (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2015).

⁴Jean Aubin, “La ruine de Siraf et les routes du Golfe Persique aux XIe et XIIe siècles,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 2 (1959): 295–301; Colin Breen, Wes Forsythe, Laurence Smith, and Michael Mallinson, “Excavations at the Medieval Red Sea Port of Suakin, Sudan,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 46 (2011): 205–20; Sultan Mahmud Khan, *Jeddah Old Houses: A Study of Vernacular Architecture of the Old City of Jeddah*, ed. Ronald Goodfellow (Jeddah: S. M. Khan, 1981).

⁵Glen W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God’s Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); I. M. Lewis, Ahmed Al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz, eds., *Women’s Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Ghulam Husayn Sa’idi, *Ahl-i Hava* (Tehran: Chapkhana-yi Danishgah, 1345/1966). On the parallel African religious input into India, see Helene Basu, *Habshi-Sklaven, Sidi-Fakire: Muslimische Heiligenverehrung im westlichen Indien* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995).

⁷Abdallah Salih Farsy, *The Shafi’i ‘Ulama of East Africa, c. 1830–1970: A Hagiographic Account*, trans. and ed. Randall L. Pouwels (Madison, Wis.: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989); Amal N. Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, 1880s–1930s* (London: Routledge, 2010); Ghazal, “Transcending Area Studies: Piecing Together the Cross-Regional Networks of Ibadī Islam,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34 (2014): 582–89; B. G. Martin, “Notes on Some Members of the Learned Classes of Zanzibar and East Africa in the Nineteenth Century,” *African Historical Studies* 4 (1971): 525–45; Jeremy Prestholdt, “From Zanzibar to Beirut: Sayyida Salme bint Said and the Tensions of Cosmopolitanism,” in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print, 1850–1930*, ed. James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2014).

⁸Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman Lands in the Early 19th Century,” *Die Welt des Islams* 22, 1–4 (1982): 1–36; Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Albert Hourani, “Shaikh Khalid and the Naqshbandi Order,” in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, ed. S. M. Stem, A. Hourani, and V. Brown (London: Luzac, 1972).

⁹Michael F. Laffan, “An Indonesian community in Cairo: Continuity and Change in a Cosmopolitan Islamic Milieu,” *Indonesia* 77 (2004): 1–26; Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009).

¹⁰Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, “Taking ‘Abduh to China: Chinese–Egyptian Intellectual Contact in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Global Muslims*, 249–68; J. S. Birks, “The Mecca Pilgrimage by West African Pastoral Nomads,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 15 (1977): 47–58; Baz LeCocq, “The Hajj from West Africa from a Global Historical Perspective (19th and 20th Centuries),” *African Diaspora* 5 (2012): 187–214.

¹¹Nile Green, “The Hajj as Its Own Undoing: Infrastructure and Integration on the Muslim Journey to Mecca,” *Past & Present* 226 (2015): 193–226; Mikiya Koyagi, “The Hajj by Japanese Muslims in the Interwar Period: Japan’s Pan-Asianism and Economic Interests in the Islamic World,” *Journal of World History* 24 (2013): 849–76; Alexandre Papas, Thomas Welsford, and Thierry Zarcone, eds., *Central Asian Pilgrims: Hajj Routes and Pious Visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2012); Eric Tagliacozzo, ed., *Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Islam, Movement, and the Longue Durée* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹²Roxani E. Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Anne Regourd, “Trade on the Red Sea during the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods: The Quseir Paper Manuscript Collection 1999–2003, First Data,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 34 (2004): 277–92.

¹³Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Studies of earlier ports are no less important. See, for example, A. C. S. Peacock, “Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire,” *Northeast African Studies* 12 (2012): 29–50.

¹⁴Nile Green, “Spacetime and the Muslim Journey West: Industrial Communications in the Making of the ‘Muslim World,’” *American Historical Review* 118 (2013): 401–29; Arang Keshavarzian and Waleed Hazbun, eds., “Transnational Connections in the Middle East: Political Economy, Security and Geopolitical Imaginaries,” special issue, *Geopolitics* 15, 2 (2010).