

This book deserves to be essential reading for rock art scholars. It will serve particularly well as a guide for those interested in exploring the connections that can be legitimately made between ethnography and rock art. While methodologically important, Africanist archaeologists might be disappointed that less than fifteen percent of the book covers the African continent. It is no doubt due to financial constraints that the images have been reproduced in black and white, which is a pity, especially for a book on rock art.

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## EARLY INDIAN TRADERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Crossing Space and Time in the Indian Ocean: Early Indian Traders in Natal – A Biographical Study.*

By Goolam Vahed and Surendra Bhana.

Pretoria: Unisa Press (Indian Ocean Series), 2015. Pp. xi + 275. \$29,00, paperback. (ISBN 978-1-86888-779-8).

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**Key Words:** Indian Ocean, Southern Africa, trade, transnational.

*Crossing Space and Time in the Indian Ocean* is the result of collaboration between two of the most prolific scholars of Indian South African history, Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed. Published in the Indian Ocean Series by the South African Unisa Press, the book brings a new, more Oceanic perspective to the field. The book positions Indian South African biographies in a context of networks that connect India and other African countries, most importantly Mozambique and Mauritius. The historical analysis in the book is based partly on new projects of transnational research and fieldwork initiated by Vahed in Gujarat, India, and Port Louis, Mauritius, which have generated fresh insights on Indian immigration, diaspora politics, and citizenship formation in South Africa.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One includes two chapters of an academic nature — ‘Wider connections: traders in the Indian Ocean corridor’ and ‘Early Indian traders in Natal: 1870s and beyond’ — which give a brief analytical introduction and a historical overview. The more voluminous Part Two is directed at a more general readership with an interest in family histories. This section consists of short biographies of Indian traders in South Africa (and more specifically Natal) who developed different kinds of ties and relations of belonging around the Western Indian Ocean. The biographical section draws heavily upon a fascinating 1935 Pietermaritzburg publication by Dhane Bramdaw called *The South African Indian WHO’S WHO and Commercial Directory 1936–37*.<sup>8</sup>

In many respects, the hybrid format of the volume works well. It offers a lively combination of analytically informed context and personal detail. But there are also drawbacks to this approach, including a certain lack of precision in the dates and references provided —

<sup>8</sup> This document is retrievable online at <http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/handle/10973/19051> (accessed on 4 August 2018).

for example, the first Protector of Indian Immigrants in Natal was appointed in 1872, not 1874, the year of publication of the first *WHO'S WHO* is 1935, not 1936 (31, 270). At the same time, some of the biographical entries are tiresomely repetitive, listing the names of the nine or so children of a particular person, detailing intricate family relations, or explaining how sons, cousins, or brothers carried on the business activities of particular manufacturers or wholesale and retail merchants. Nonetheless, the biographical information gives flashes of insight into mobile life histories that include Africa and India, East and Southern Africa, and various linguistic worlds. These portraits illustrate, for example, the origins of the importation of Indian films into South Africa, and the role of Indian South Africans in supporting South Africa's movie and cinema industry. The entries also illuminate the durable relations that linked Indian business families with India, as well as the unfolding of business and investment careers across African colonial boundaries, and the integration of family networks that stretch between South Africa, Mozambique, and Mauritius. Most importantly, the biographical entries make it clear that many successful Indian traders in South Africa started out as indentured labourers — their indenture contract numbers can be found listed alongside their names.

Part One expands on the importance of these details, and undermines conventional understandings of the Indian community in South Africa that characterize it as dualistically divided between, on the one hand, descendants of indentured labourers originating primarily in Bihar and Tamil Nadu and, on the other hand, 'passenger Indians' — that is, Gujarati middle-class merchant families who followed the indentured labourers to do business with them, and built their firms and fortunes on this basis. Vahed and Bhana argue instead that a substantial number of successful (and also unsuccessful) Indian businesses took off from small-scale enterprises that grew from market gardening, sugar farming, hawking, and petty trading. Many of these initiatives — which were often situated in the countryside and sold goods to Africans — were established and run by 'time-expired' indentured labourers. Vahed and Bhana use the East African term *dukawallah* to designate this type of modest and locally embedded Indian trading practice, a term that they consider perfectly adequate also for the South African context. Most importantly, the authors show that a significant proportion of what became successful Indian South African capitalist enterprises had indenture and working-class rather than Gujarati and 'passenger Indian' origins (42–44).

Another important point made in the book is that Indian traders were not only seen by European settlers as competitors and 'usurpers' of business — claims that helped animate, for example, the anti-Indian campaigns of the 1890s — but that they were also often appreciated as business partners. Thus, white farmers in Natal willingly benefited from interest-free Islamic credit, and many of them, along with black African clients, came to depend upon the supplies and provisions offered by *dukawallahs* around Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and the Natal countryside.

With *Crossing Space and Time in the Indian Ocean*, Vahed and Bhana therefore present a more nuanced interpretation of the ways in which Indian traders became South African, as well as of the ways in which they mutually interacted, understood themselves, and developed and managed transnational and trans-oceanic networks. They illuminate the business success that could be achieved by former indentured labourers, and their political aspirations to transform themselves from slave-like subjects into citizens. The book thereby lays

the groundwork for future historical research that can investigate the competition that emerged among different networks of Indian business in South Africa, as well as the linkages that grew with East African and Gulf societies further to the north along the Indian Ocean coast.

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## REFLECTIONS ON SOL PLAATJE

*Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa: Past and Present.*

Edited by Janet Remington, Brian Willan, and Bhekizizwe Peterson.

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**Key Words:** South Africa, colonial, intellectual, political.

'Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth' (ix, xvi). Thus begins Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's book-length jeremiad against the Natives' Land Act, a law that greatly restricted the ability of rural black South Africans to buy and sell land, and that compelled most of them either to crowd onto small 'native reserves' or to work on white-owned farms. Published in 1916 in London, Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* was written primarily for British readers in an effort to generate sympathy for the plight of blacks in the British dominion of South Africa and to pressure the South African government to reduce the severity of the law. However, appearing in the midst of the First World War and overwhelmed by European domination in South Africa, *Native Life* had limited impact on white public opinion and failed to stem the tide of growing discrimination against blacks in South Africa.

In commemoration of *Native Life's* centenary, a group of scholars based mostly in South Africa has produced a collection of essays with the intention 'to explore the book in its original context and to consider its contemporary significance' (xvi). Emulating *Native Life's* eclectic mix of genres, the anthology includes not only scholarly essays from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, but also several poems, photographs, a short story, and other supplementary materials. The book's examination of Plaatje's *Native Life* can be described as addressing four general themes: its production, format, and style; the social context in which it was written; its significance within the history of South Africa; and its relevance for South Africans today.

As described by Plaatje biographer Brian Willan in the first chapter, Sol Plaatje wrote *Native Life* while visiting Britain with a delegation of the South African Native National Congress (the African National Congress after 1925). As Willan relates, Plaatje employed a variety of strategies to persuade his British audience and secure the support needed to publish the book. In Chapter Two, the literary scholar Bhekizizwe Peterson examines more closely the style of *Native Life* and Plaatje's use of various tropes, idioms, and