

perspectives grounded in cultural autonomy and African histories and practices to develop alliances, and on the similarities between his trajectory and that of another great pan-Africanist, Walter Rodney.

In an edited book of this type, with so many contributions, there are inevitably some chapters that are stronger than others, and also a degree of overlap between some entries. All the same, when taken as a whole, *Claim No Easy Victories* does a thorough job in representing Cabral's enduring importance both nationally and internationally, and in arguing for the importance of continuing to engage with the ideas and movements that he championed with such great flair and prescience. The abiding impression is that Cabral's greatest legacy is one of an enormous sense of loss. His assassination robbed both his country and the wider world of a vital figure in theorizing and challenging colonialism and its legacy. Curiously, one of the few gaps in the book is the real absence of assessments of the condition of Guinea-Bissau today, the nation that he was unable to lead once independence had been gained; had such assessments been included, the devastating nature of the loss of Cabral would have been even more apparent.

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GAURAV DESAI, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian imagination*. New York NY: Columbia University Press (hb \$50 – 978 0 231 16454 2). 2013, xiv + 291 pp.

As we head into the Asian century, the study of the Indian Ocean becomes ever more conspicuous. Whether from the perspective of area studies, oceanic or world history, the Indian Ocean arena and its deep histories of non-Western exchange are attracting increasing attention. However, the existing scholarship on the region has largely been dominated by histories of the early modern period on the one hand, and by security studies and international relations on the other. By contrast, literary and cultural study has been less prominent and has tended to be anglophone in orientation.

Gaurav Desai's prize-winning book makes a decisive intervention into the field and provides us with new genealogies of Asian cultural production in East Africa while drawing out their implications for an understanding of the Indian Ocean region more generally. Studies of Asian fiction in East Africa generally examine the recent past, examining the late colonial or early independence era. In some cases, M. G. Vassanji's novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989) provides a starting point; in Desai's text, *The Gunny Sack* appears in the final chapter. Leading up to this moment is a variegated literary history that sketches a range of genres: plays, ram-lilas, poetry recitals, radio, newspapers and literary journals in Urdu, Hindi, Swahili, Gujarati, Punjabi, Gurumukhi and English. Against this backdrop, Desai focuses on a corpus of little known autobiographies from 1905 to the early 2000s.

In tracing this literary domain, Desai stresses richness, complexity and ambiguity, complicating the 'flattened stereotype' (p. 170) of the Asian immigrant as exploitative *dukawallah* or philistine *banian*. Several of the autobiographies he discusses are by merchants and show the extraordinary diversity within this supposedly monolithic class. The book also focuses on Asian political figures

in Africa and includes a fascinating account of Sofia Mustafa, an MP under Nyerere.

At the same time, this is no apologia, and the book stresses the insularity of Asian communities in Africa and the fault lines between African and Asian groups. Desai demonstrates the often tortuous shift for Asian writers 'from being the external deliverers of a commercial modernity to learning to become equal partners in a common and shared postcolonial enterprise' (p. 170).

This commitment to complexity is signalled from the introduction, which questions Fanonesque ideas of colonialism as a matter of 'settler' and 'native', stressing instead the diverse range of actors involved. The first chapter on Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* extends this ethics of complexity. Building on an influential article that Desai published in 2004, the chapter sets out an insightful but sceptical analysis of the text, calling into question its nostalgic readings of pre-Western Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism. This reading arises from Desai's careful scrutiny of the *geniza* sources with which Ghosh worked. While showing a deep appreciation for Ghosh's craft, Desai highlights the elisions that were necessarily introduced in order to create a picture of a peaceful Indian Ocean world rent asunder by Portuguese intrusion. While sympathetic to a broader project of Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism, Desai insists on complexity and resists any flattening of the contradictions of the world, whether before European imperialism or after.

Based on ten years worth of research, the book is a treasure trove of ideas and information. The readings of texts are scrupulous and imaginative and the book excels in both distant and close reading – the former providing an enriched sense of the field as a whole, the latter illuminating particular books. There are also many small nuggets, miniature and insightful overviews of topics such as the intellectual history of Makerere, Senghor's interest in Tamil, and the depiction of Asian/Indian characters in the African novel. One especially impressive feature of the book is its engagement with Africa-based scholarship alongside metropolitan work so that one has a rich sense of the archive surrounding any particular text. Of interest for Africanists, the book is deeply rooted in East African historiographies and tracks these in careful detail. There is, for example, an astute discussion of the exchange between David Himbara and Michael Chege on Kenyan economic history, which is put into dialogue with the merchant autobiographies. The key debates of East African/Indian Ocean scholarship (ethnicity, nationhood, diaspora, empire) are approached from fresh angles.

One method for exploring these historiographies is via a series of mini-biographies, and one of the many pleasures of this book lies in its rich range of characters. Through their lives, we see how people negotiated between empires, between merchant diaspora and imperial claims, and between ocean-looking cultures and ideologies based on race and place.

Already crowned with the René Wellek Prize by the American Comparative Literature Association, this remarkable book will continue to inspire scholars for many years to come.

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