



Trade, Translation and Cultural Exchange across the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800: A Connected Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Trade, translation, and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean between 1500 and 1800 created a dense network of commercial, linguistic, religious, and intellectual interaction. The article looks into the ways in which goods, people, texts and knowledge were transported via maritime routes between East Africa, Arabia, South Asia, the Southeast, and the trading powers of Europe. They rely on scholarly literature, a historical archive, travelers' accounts, missionary records, commercial documents, and translated sources, and employ a qualitative historical design that is shaped by a connected-history analysis. It appears that trade was the material basis for maintaining contact, and that people who could interpret, trade, write, convert, and translate facilitated communication across linguistic and cultural lines. The multilinguality of port cities like Surat, Goa, Jeddah and others on the Indian Ocean became a site where commercial exchange refashioned social identities, religious practices, consumption and knowledge systems. European imperialism changed the existing networks by establishing monopolies, the use of the military force and administration, while regional rulers, merchants, brokers and local communities had a lot of agency. Exchange of culture thus occurred in a negotiated, adapted, resisted, and selective process, rather than in a single transmission. The article maintains that the Indian Ocean world has emerged from a process of interaction between commerce, translation and culture over time and across political and geographical boundaries.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, maritime trade, translation, cultural exchange, connected history

Introduction

During the period 1500–1800, the Indian Ocean was a great space of interaction between the people of the eastern coast of Africa, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the island societies. Besides being used for moving goods and merchandise, it was also of historic significance because of repeated encounters resulting from the presence of ships, ports, pilgrim stations, merchant settlements and diplomatic missions. The Indian Ocean was the world's third largest oceanoid area to serve as a vast physical environment for establishing trade and cultural connections between political boundaries. At the same time Portuguese, Dutch, English and French powers tried to increase their control over the sea routes and port revenues, long-established African, Arab, Persian, Indian, Malay and Chinese networks continued to function.

That wasn't the first time that people were connecting the Indian Ocean. Instead, it led to a radical restructuring of the older systems via the arming of shipping, chartered companies, imperial competition and new modes of documentary control. Alpers (2014) imagines the ocean as a historical world, dominated by mobility, and highlights the contributions of sailors, merchants, slaves, migrants, and religious travellers as all these groups made a cross-oceanic journey. These movements established relationships which can't be adequately understood from national histories. Ports and coastal communities served as zones of intersection between commercial interests and language, belief, law, diet, dress and material culture.

Trade was the main element of these encounters but it was never just business. Textiles, spices, porcelain, ivory, horses, metals, and other goods had social meaning and began to be consumed in new ways. In his interpretation of Indian Ocean relationships, Bose (2006) approaches the subject by examining the complex layers of mobility and political hypothesis that continued to bridge the oceans, even as territories expanded. This type of circulation relied on multilingual negotiation. Interpreters, brokers, scribes, missionaries, and merchants had the task of translating contracts, religious ideas, diplomatic messages, and local customs for audiences whose expectations were different in terms of language and culture.

McPherson (1993) shows that the sea brought people together, not kept them apart by distance, in long-lasting trade networks. Translation should therefore be seen as a mediation as well as a cultural adaptation. They exchanged words, beliefs, technologies and practices in their travels among societies. Pearson (2003) also emphasises that maritime history needs to consider the relationship between the sea and the land, as the inland production centres, courts, caravan routes and coastal ports were all interconnected.

The evidence of material and documentary types also outlines the amazing extent of these connections. The archives of the Dutch East India Company have survived in the records of about 25 million pages in the archives in The Hague, Jakarta, Colombo, Chennai, and Cape Town, carrying information about hundreds of Asian and African political and trading regions (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Ray (2014) also places maritime environments in the archaeological context, in the heritage, in the way the ships were navigated, and in the intercultural communication, demonstrating that the routes became meaningful as a result of the communities that used them.

It discusses the role of trade in fostering continuous contact, the intermediation of trade in commercial, diplomatic, and religious activities, and the transformation of Indian Ocean societies between 1500 and 1800 by contact and cultural exchange. It seeks to answer three questions: How did commercial networks facilitate the transmission of language and culture; Who were the intermediaries between imperial powers and between locals and foreigners in ports, routes, communities, and contact zones—merchants, interpreters, missionaries, scribes, political brokers—and how did inequality affect the exchange?

2. Methodology

This study was a qualitative historical study that was based on a connected-history approach. It explored the linkages between trade, translation and cultural interactions in the Indian Ocean, between 1500 and 1800. The sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited volumes, archival publications, travel writings, commercial correspondence, port records, missionary writings, diplomatic documents and translated texts. The materials selected were those that discussed

maritime trade, multilingualism, cultural interaction, merchant networks, port societies, religious encounters, or the circulation of knowledge during the indicated time period. Geographical scope ranged from South Asia to the Arabian peninsula, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and European maritime settlements connected to the Indian Ocean. Research prior to 1500 or post 1800 was included only if it explained the origins, continuity, or longer-term impacts of processes within the selected time frame. Items from outside the main chronological span were considered to be as background information and not as contemporary evidence for the period 1500-1800. Authorship, date, purpose, intended audience, institutional background and potential for political, commercial, religious or colonial bias were all examined for each source. The gathered documents were organized around broad themes, such as trade networks, linguistic mediation, cultural transmission, port-city interaction and imperial power. Comparative historical analysis was then employed to make comparisons, contrasts and connections between regions. Material exchange was connected to translation practices and broader cultural change through the use of thematic synthesis, and source criticism was used to interpret the different accounts that existed in the past.

3. The Indian Ocean as a Connected Historical Space

The Indian Ocean between 1500 and 1800 was a continuous historical region of ports, shipping routes, merchants, courts and religious institutions. Its unity was not brought about by political rule under one empire. It came from the frequent journeys between the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, eastern Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Bentley (1999) suggested that ocean basins are useful historical analogies because they provide insights into processes that span territorial boundaries (commercial, biological and cultural). This focus moves away from the single state and towards relations that are maintained in movement.

Arab, Persian, Gujarati, Tamil, Malay, Chinese and African traders had already had trade links by sea before Portuguese ships arrived in the late fifteenth century. European expansion changed these systems, but did not make them. Fortified ports and naval taxation were in practice in Portugal, along with traditional commercial base, and later Dutch, English, and French shipping firms vied for commodities, privileges and influence. Pearson (2011) demonstrated that the Indian Ocean and Red Sea were linked and interdependent maritime regions that were linked to inland production, pilgrimage, and exchange. Ports, therefore, relied as much on hinterland as on ships, and on courts as on hinterland. The important maritime routes, land links, and port cities mentioned in the text are depicted in Figure 1.

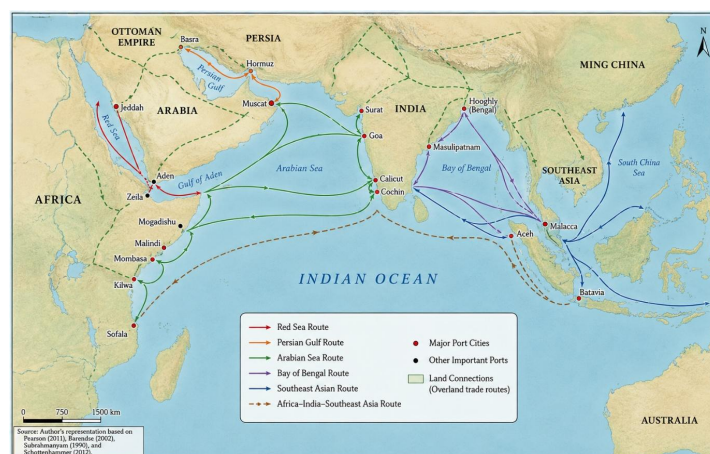


Figure 1. Major maritime routes and selected port cities across the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800

The connected approach also shows that commercial transactions involved negotiation between languages, religions and legal cultures. The thinking and institutions of the early modern world were not bounded by the scope of their national or imperial contexts, and Subrahmanyam (1997) challenged the histories limited to these national and imperial boundaries. Merchant brokers, interpreters, sailors, diplomats, and migrant communities linked with far away political centres did not erase local identities. They established a multi-layered sense of belonging that was bound up in regional attachments and in actual maritime experiences.

There was no homogeneous cosmopolitanism or powerless cosmopolitanism within this context. Bose (2009) noted that the imagination in the global world can be diverse, enabling mobile populations to be involved in the broader intellectual sphere and yet maintain their own historical identity. It was not only cultural convergence, however, as there was accommodation, rivalry, and adaptation.

Comparisons with other maritime regions must also be used carefully. Mediterranean models can explain connections between national identity and foreign influence, but can mask the unique geography and political pluralism of Southeast Asia (Sutherland 2003). The Indian Ocean needs therefore to be studied in terms of networks. UNESCO (n.d.-a) also characterizes the Maritime Silk Roads as permeable, in which goods, languages, customs, science, religion, and art flowed in and out through contact between different cultures. These connections reveal continuity in the face of imperial rivalry: European powers are actors in a world of action who transformed it, however, by means of force, cooperation and a reliance on regional know-how. The following Figure 2 summarizes the connected historical framework employed to understand the flow of commodities, people, language and knowledge around the Indian Ocean.

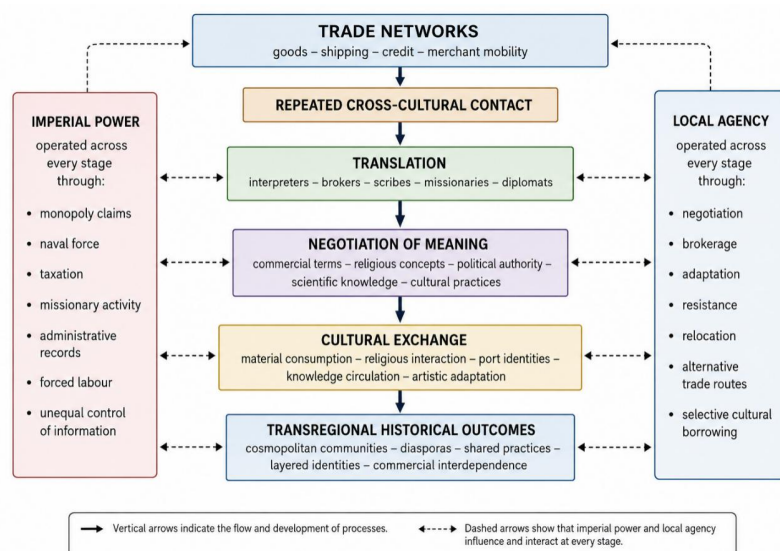


Figure 2. Connected Historical Framework of Indian Ocean Exchange

4. Trade Networks and the Movement of People and Goods

The trade of Indian Ocean region during 1500-1800 was not a unified system but rather a complex network of overlapping routes. Ports in Gujarat, Malabar, Bengal, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, eastern Africa and Southeast Asia were linked by the seasonal monsoon winds. Cotton cloth, pepper, cloves, nutmeg, rice, sugar, porcelain, ivory, horse, metals and precious stones were sold in coastal markets and inland distribution centres. Barendse (2002) demonstrated the interdependence of the commercial region of the Arabian Seas during the seventeenth century, and the lack of a clear boundary to the movement of goods, credit, information and labour.

The range of the commodities and the communities found along these routes has been confirmed by early descriptions. Barbosa (1866) noted active ports on the East African and Malabar coasts, and described trade that included gold, ivory, spices, cloth, foodstuffs, and slaves. He also claimed to have discovered that commerce relied upon local rulers, brokers, pilots, and multilingual intermediaries who knew how to navigate the waters and customs of the region.

Financial arrangements had to be developed to lower the risks involved with trade over a distance, where there was often limited information, piracy, shipwreck, and slow payment. Traders could transfer value without carrying their wealth in coin with the use of bills of exchange, merchant credit, partnerships, advances, and correspondent relationships. These have emerged from reputation, and numerous transactions, and then become more regularised in great commercial centres (Accominotti & Ugolini, 2020).

European chartered companies came into these systems and tried to bend them to their own will by giving themselves monopoly rights, building fortifications, imposing naval pressure, and contracting

control. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was established in 1602 to run affairs via 6 Dutch chambers and set up an administrative structure in Asia. Its success relied upon the availability of desired cloth and co-operation of the producer, the broker, money lender, transport and political figures in Bengal (Prakash, 1985).

Asian and diasporic merchants nevertheless retained agency. Armenian merchants linked Portuguese zones with Persian, Indian, SE Asian and Mediterranean markets by relying on family ties and scattered agents to exchange goods and commercial intelligence between imperial domains (Teles e Cunha, 2007). South Asian traders brought the cotton factories together with the markets in Africa. In particular, based on the late eighteenth century evidence, Machado (2014) showed that Indian cloth and African ivory were linked in mutually sustaining circuits, which were influenced by consumer choice, the knowledge of the merchants, and the negotiation taking place in the region.

These networks facilitated the transportation of people as well. Languages, beliefs, technologies, habits were transferred between ports by sailors, pilgrims, artisans, interpreters, financiers, migrants, and enslaved people. Commercial routes thus facilitated intercultural contacts and commerce became part and parcel of social mobility and cultural exchanges. A summary of the main commercial circuits and their impact is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Major Indian Ocean Trade Networks, Commodities, and Cultural Effects, 1500–1800

Trade network	Principal connected regions	Major commodities	Important actors	Wider cultural effects
Western Indian Ocean network	East Africa, Gujarat, Arabia, Persian Gulf	Cotton textiles, ivory, gold, spices and food products	Gujarati merchants, African traders, Arab brokers and sailors	Circulation of clothing styles, commercial terminology, religious practices and consumption patterns
Red Sea network	Jeddah, Yemen, Egypt, western India and Southeast Asia	Textiles, spices, metals, coffee and pilgrimage supplies	Merchants, pilgrims, shipowners, interpreters and port officials	Growth of pilgrimage-based mobility, multilingual neighbourhoods and Islamic scholarly links
Arabian Seas network	Persian Gulf, Malabar, Gujarat and Arabian Peninsula	Horses, textiles, pearls, spices and precious metals	Persian, Arab and Indian merchants, financiers and pilots	Exchange of navigational knowledge, credit practices and maritime customs
Bay of Bengal network	Bengal, Coromandel, Malacca and Southeast Asia	Cotton cloth, rice, sugar, porcelain and spices	Indian, Malay, Chinese, Armenian and European merchants	Expansion of diasporic settlements, shared market practices and material exchange
European company network	Goa, Bengal, Batavia, Cape Town and European ports	Textiles, spices, porcelain, medicinal goods and metals	Portuguese officials, VOC agents, East India Company merchants and local brokers	Standardisation of records, imperial competition, translation needs and unequal commodity control
South Asia–East Africa textile–ivory circuit	Western India and eastern Africa	Indian cloth and African ivory	South Asian merchants, African suppliers, brokers and consumers	Mutual influence on consumer preference, design, status display and regional commercial identities

5. Translation and Linguistic Mediation

Indian Ocean trade was vital to sustaining Indian Ocean exchange between 1500 and 1800, as commerce, diplomacy, religion, and administration meshed speakers of Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, Gujarati, Konkani, Malayalam, Tamil, and several other regional languages. Linguistic equivalence was not necessarily crucial for communication. It depended on the use of interpreters, brokers, scribes, merchants, missionaries, and court officials whose meanings were determined by political agenda, business necessity, and cultural context. Couto (2017) demonstrated that the sixteenth-century city of Goa was highly interconnected with information networks that linked the Portuguese with rulers and trading communities throughout the Indian Ocean via messengers, interpreters, Jewish agents, and New Christian informants. These numbers did more than convey words, they conveyed intelligence, explained customs, and made decisions.

Missionary translation was part of this process. Catholic missions needed to make teachings, prayers, practices and religious terms understandable in local languages. In Indonesia, as in India, missionaries used translation as a form of persuasion and cultural accommodation: Županov, 2005, showed that missionaries in India translated concepts that were not directly translatable from Christian to Indian intellectual traditions. Goa became especially central for a number of reasons: it was the ecclesiastical, administrative and educational hub of Portuguese Asia and language mediation facilitated the governance, conversion and communication of the empire (Županov, 2010).

Vocabulary choices were not just about substituting words, but about missionary translation as well. Confession, salvation, sin and Divine authority were Christian concepts that were all packaged in ideas that had been formed in the Indian religious and philosophical context. Translators thus had to engage in a process of negotiation with local teachers, converts, scribes and language specialists. The resulting texts were the result of missionary aspirations and the linguistic situations of the communities for whom the texts were created. Translation was a place of cultural negotiation because each word selected had the capacity to change the meaning, acceptance, repudiation, or integration of a doctrine into the current systems of belief.

The translation was also essential for courtly, diplomatic meetings. The Mughals and Portuguese trading settlements engaged in embassies, petitioning, frontier conflicts, trade negotiations, and religious exchanges. These encounters were characterized by mistrust, strategic ambiguity and the agency of intermediaries who operated between the imperial systems, as shown by Flores (2015). Translation thus became a factor in the concept of authority, as the wording of a message could affect the understanding of authority such as sovereignty, obligation, or privilege.

European knowledge of Asia was also generated by translated reports, reports from merchants, missionary letters, and travel accounts. Lach and Van Kley (1993) noted the ways in which European perceptions of Asia were developed as a result of translated literature, description, maps, and observations gathered. These materials were often a blend of personal experience and second hand accounts, interpretation, and preconceived notions.

Travel writing further transformed cultural difference into readable narratives for distant audiences. Ethnographic travel accounts were organized by comparison, classification and selective description, as described by Rubiés (2005). Translation in such texts never was neutral. It helped to mold the image of customs, beliefs, and political institutions. In sum, linguistic mediation, across the Indian Ocean, generated trust and access and it also generated distortion and unequal control of meaning. Table 2 shows the contexts, actors and consequences of translation.

Table 2. Forms and Functions of Translation in Indian Ocean Exchange, 1500–1800

Context of translation	Main intermediaries	Materials or messages translated	Primary function	Possible historical consequence
Maritime commerce	Merchants, brokers, port interpreters and pilots	Prices, contracts, commodity descriptions and shipping	Supported negotiation and reduced commercial	Built trust but allowed brokers to influence information

		instructions	uncertainty	
Diplomacy	Court interpreters, envoys, scribes and political agents	Petitions, treaties, privileges and diplomatic correspondence	Communicated authority and negotiated political obligations	Produced ambiguity over sovereignty, tribute and legal status
Missionary activity	Missionaries, converts, local teachers and language specialists	Prayers, doctrines, confessional texts and religious vocabulary	Made Christian teaching intelligible in local languages	Encouraged adaptation, resistance and contested meanings
Imperial administration	Clerks, translators, informants and officials	Tax records, legal documents, intelligence and official orders	Supported governance and documentary control	Strengthened imperial surveillance and unequal access to knowledge
Travel writing	Travellers, informants, editors and translators	Descriptions of customs, religions, political institutions and landscapes	Presented Asian and African societies to distant readers	Created selective or distorted representations
Scientific exchange	Physicians, scholars, artisans and botanical informants	Medical knowledge, plant names, navigational ideas and classifications	Enabled the circulation and reconstruction of knowledge	Produced shared knowledge while obscuring local contributions

6. Cultural Exchange and Knowledge Circulation

Exchange of culture across the Indian Ocean took place via the flow of objects, persons, the exchange of practices and knowledge between 1500 and 1800. Spices, textiles, porcelain, metals and ivory were not the only imports on commercial routes. It was also their job to pass on medical cures, navigation skills, religious beliefs, artistic motifs, food habits, architectural forms, and systems of classification. These elements were seldom adopted without modification. Communities chose, adapted and modified unfamiliar practices to suit local needs, social structures and conventions.

Commercial expansion was directly involved in the creation of scientific and medical knowledge. Merchants, physicians, sailors, collectors, company officials collected data on plants, drugs, diseases, climates and new environments. Cook (2007) illustrated how commercial activity in the Dutch Republic stimulated empirical research, as knowledge of commodities or medicinal substances had an economic value. Botanical specimens and medical reports obtained through Asian networks came into the European collections and were sometimes interpreted with the help of knowledge provided by local healers, cultivators, Asian brokers, and translators.

Earlier material evidence helps establish the historical foundations of the networks that remained active during the period examined here. The beads brought back from Africa, ceramics, and other manufactured items found at African sites show that there was a continued exchange of materials between South Asia and eastern Africa in the late first millennium. This evidence predates 1500 but it shows that early modern exchange was not just a consequence of the expansion of Europeans. These objects were socially re-interpreted as they entered local systems of status, consumption and display, rather than passively received, indicating that they were imported rather than just received (Hawkes & Wynne-Jones, 2015).

Selective borrowing and resistance was also triggered by religious encounters. The Jesuit missionaries had a number of Christian books and paintings and theological arguments to offer to Emperor Jahangir at the Mughal court. The emperor interacted with the religious and artistic cultures of Europe but did not embrace the expectations of the missionaries; some elements of these cultures were incorporated

into Mughal court culture but in a way that maintained his imperial authority and political identity as an Islamic king (Lefèvre, 2012). These encounters illustrate that cultural exchange did not involve conversion or total assimilation.

Cooperation and exchange between people belonging to different intellectual traditions was the medium for knowledge to be distributed. Raj (2007) maintained that scientific knowledge was not transferred directly from Europe to Asia, but was produced, negotiated, and moved. Knowledge was translated and transacted between cartographers, astronomers, doctors, and natural historians, transforming the disciplines they practiced.

East Asian maritime networks formed another major channel of exchange. The South China Sea was linked to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean by Chinese ports, which exchanged ceramics, technologies, business methods, and religious ideas until around 1800 (Schottenhammer, 2012). UNESCO's Silk Roads Programme, which has studied these land and sea routes over the past 31 years, has highlighted that trade facilitated communication of languages, skills, beliefs, sciences and art forms (UNESCO, n.d.-c). Cultural circulation, then, could be seen as a process of appropriation, adaptation, and resistance, resulting in the development of shared practices that do not completely refute regional differences.

7. Port Cities as Sites of Cultural Encounter

The visible focal points of Indian Ocean commerce from 1500 to 1800 were port cities. They were surrounded by traders, shipmen, pilgrims, merchants, craftsmen, and translators from far and near, whereas political centers along the interior were more insular. They were not generally culturally homogeneous. The commercial areas, the warehouses, the religious centers, the markets, and the residential neighborhoods gathered communities whose languages were different and whose legal and religious beliefs were different. Broeze (1989) argued that Asian port cities grew on the basis of their ability to link up maritime routes and economies. They were thus influenced socially by both mobile commercial groups and the local authorities.

This relationship is clearly demonstrated in Surat. It was an important trading port for the Mughals in the seventeenth century, connected to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, eastern Africa and the South East Asian region. It was a trading place for Indian merchants, Armenians, Arabs, Persians and European company agents. The problems during the first half of the eighteenth century were not the only ones that caused its decline; the reasons were political instability, changing maritime routes, competition from Bombay and the weakening of institutional protection for merchants (Das Gupta, 1994). Surat exemplifies the need for trust, credit, security, and access to regional production centres for the port's success.

The urban organisation of Goa was different due to the impact of Portuguese political and ecclesiastical power. The city became a hub for the imperial government, religious institutions, administrative functions, and missionary activities. However, Portuguese rule was reliant on Indian merchants, local labour, interpreters and regional supply networks, meaning that it was not entirely feasible to differentiate between colonial and indigenous society (Pearson, 1987).

There were also networks that sustained port communities beyond state empires. Goods and information flowed across political borders through family businesses, religious networks, caste connections and merchant networks. These Afarabaian, Indian, and Southeast Asian community networks had connected ports, and created social identities that were locally grounded, and oceanically connected (Ray & Alpers, 2007).

In southern India the ports kept on expanding and getting reorganised. Some ports grew and others shrank between 1500 and 1650, due to shifts in political patronage, in the production of textiles, in the demand for shipping overseas, and in competition from other European ports. These changes were part of a broad restructuring of the trade of southern India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Subrahmanyam, 1990).

Southeast Asian ports also were an integral component of this urban network. Malacca and then Batavia linked the routes between the South China Sea and trade routes towards India, Arabia and eastern Africa. Their markets attracted Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab, Armenian and European inhabitants, and political powers depended on the mediators, interpreters and merchants for the

regulation of commerce. These ports demonstrate that the Indian Ocean urbanism was not limited to western and central India Ocean but also reached maritime Southeast Asia.

Jeddah offers another model of port-based cultural interaction. It's a significant port in the seventh century, as specified by UNESCO, and a seaport for pilgrims going to Mecca. It was very prosperous and drew traders from Arabia, the Maghreb, India, and Southeast Asia, and its coral architecture brought in crafts and ideas that were spread along Indian Ocean trading routes (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2014). Ports were then transformed into commercial mobility becoming an intercultural process in the multicultural neighbourhoods, diasporic communities, common practices and long-lasting cultural exchanges. The following comparison of selected ports, the political context, commercial position and mobile communities, illustrates how these different aspects influenced the nature of urban interaction (Table 3)

Table 3. Comparative Characteristics of Selected Indian Ocean Port Cities, 1500–1800

Port city	Political setting	Main commercial connections	Cultural and linguistic features	Historical significance
Surat	Mughal imperial port	Persian Gulf, Red Sea, East Africa and Southeast Asia	Indian, Armenian, Arab, Persian and European merchant communities	Major centre of commerce, credit, pilgrimage traffic and multilingual brokerage
Goa	Portuguese imperial and ecclesiastical centre	Western India, East Africa, Arabia and Europe	Portuguese, Konkani and other Indian-language interaction; missionaries and interpreters	Connected imperial administration, Catholic missions, maritime trade and cultural translation
Malacca	Malay and later Portuguese and Dutch-controlled port	South China Sea, Bay of Bengal and wider Indian Ocean	Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab and European communities	Strategic meeting point between East Asian and Indian Ocean commercial systems
Batavia	Dutch East India Company administrative centre	Southeast Asia, China, India, Cape Town and Europe	Malay, Chinese, European, Indian and Armenian populations	Centre of company control, documentation, forced labour and regional redistribution
Jeddah	Ottoman-associated Red Sea port and gateway to Mecca	Arabia, India, Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Mediterranean	Arab, Indian, Southeast Asian and North African merchants and pilgrims	Joined pilgrimage, commerce, Islamic learning and cosmopolitan urban culture
Sofala	East African port affected by Portuguese intervention	African interior, Swahili Coast, Arabia and India	African, Muslim, Portuguese and regional merchant interaction	Demonstrated the limits of European control over older gold and maritime networks

8. Power, Empire, and Unequal Exchange

Political power began to influence Indian Ocean trade from 1500 to 1800, connecting commerce with military force, taxation, territorial claims, and religious involvement. European powers did not venture into an unorganised maritime space. They found that African and Asian rulers, merchants, port authorities and commercial communities were still essential to their cooperation. For the Portuguese, the use of fortified settlements, naval patrols, cartaz passes, customs demands, and alliances to secure strategic routes were all necessary elements of its expansion. Indeed, Disney (2009) has demonstrated

that the Portuguese overseas empire was still geographically dispersed and thus the imperial authorities had to resort to both coercion and negotiation, relying on local intermediaries.

The restoration of Portuguese independence in 1640 added to the strain of an empire already under pressure from the Dutch, local opposition and limited money. The House of Braganza tried to balance Portuguese Asia by reorganizing administration, holding a stronghold on selected bases and keeping commercial alliances until about 1640-83 (Ames, 2000). These measures exposed the unequal nature of imperial control authority was strongest around fortified ports, and weaker in the rest of the network that provided labour, food, credit, and commodities.

Along the western coast of Africa, Portuguese expansion became part of the trade of ideas and politics and religion. Royal agents, missionaries, merchants and military officers became involved in exchanges of gold, ivory, slaves, textiles and other commodities. There is documentary evidence of negotiation of terms, restricting access, redirecting trade and pursuing regional agendas through the Portuguese (Newitt, 2010). In Sofala, the Portuguese came to seek access to the gold trade but the African and Muslim commercial networks in place were not so easily replaced. The Portuguese colonists were able to become part of local networks that could have been outside the direct control of the Crown (Newitt, 2017).

There was no lack of local agency in an unequal power. Port rulers, brokers, pilots, merchants, and interpreters had an impact on taxation, supply, diplomacy, and markets on the Swahili Coast and in western India. Pearson (1998) regarded Europeans as intruders, whose influence was dependent on their ability to penetrate older systems of exchange on coastlines. When monopolistic policies posed a threat to the interests of local actors, they could cooperate, protest, relocate or trade on alternative channels.

The Dutch East India Company eventually created a more highly institutionalized business empire. The company is recorded by UNESCO to have been active from 1602 up to 1795, and about 25 million pages of the company's documents are still preserved in Jakarta, Colombo, Chennai, Cape Town and The Hague (UNESCO, n.d.-b). These records document the control of commerce, warfare, diplomacy, forced labor, enslavement and commodity control over hundreds of African and Asian political and trading regions. Imperial exchange was thus not a one-way street, but rather one that relied on local knowledge, translation, production, labour, and negotiated authority.

9. Discussion

All the evidence reviewed in the above sections has demonstrated that the three processes of trade, translation, and cultural exchange were not three distinct events but rather three distinct aspects of a historical continuum. People, objects, texts, beliefs and technical knowledge circulate across the Indian Ocean via commercial routes. The intelligibility of these movements was achieved through translation, and cultural exchange developed through multiple negotiations, adaptations, and selections from different cultures. The Indian Ocean, then, is to be seen as an ocean of relations, maintained by merchants, sailors, pilgrims, scholars, interpreters, missionaries, rulers and migrant communities between 1500 and 1800. Figure 3 shows the relationship between the main analytical themes of this article.

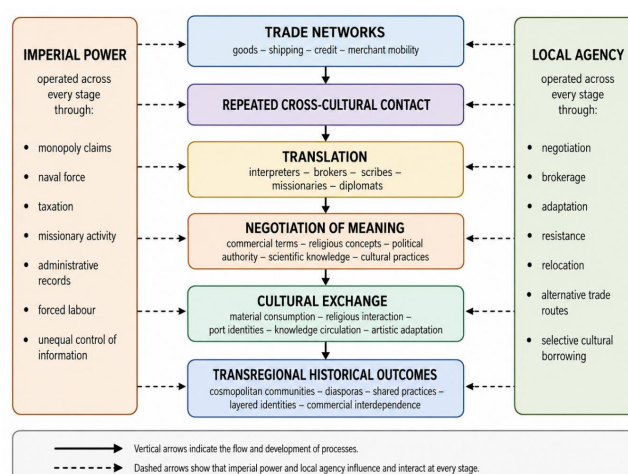


Figure 3. Relationship among Trade, Translation, Cultural Exchange, and Imperial Power

Local identity did not vanish in the face of mobility. It frequently resulted in multiple types of affiliation, linking families and communities to multiple areas. Ho (2006) showed how family ties connected communities together across Arabia, South Asia and Southeast Asia by movement, religious leadership, marriage, and memory. Such networks make interpretation difficult and complicated when the migration is interpreted as a complete severing of ties with the homeland. In contrast, oceanic mobility fostered enduring social worlds, where ancestry, trade, and religious learning strengthened transregional bond.

Trade goods also had significance beyond their trade uses. For instance, Indian textiles went to Africa, Middle East, Southeast Asia and Europe, and these textiles were chosen for their colour, design, texture, status and local custom. The transit of textiles linked producers, dyers, brokers, sailors, merchants and consumers in far-flung societies. Machado et al. (2018) demonstrated that textiles could form part of cultural practices and identity, highlighting the role of the object as an active participant in the processes of cultural interaction, rather than a passive carrier.

Religious and business networks often conjoined. Law, devotion, architecture and literature were transferred between coastal settlements by Muslim merchants, scholars, sailors and pilgrims. In the East Africa dhow-based maritime culture was seen as cosmopolitanism, based on commerce and Islam, by Sheriff (2010). But this cosmopolitanism did not eliminate inequality or conflict, it established common conventions for communication and cooperation between culturally different communities.

The Indian Ocean historiography also has taken on models that were created primarily from Atlantic history. Hofmeyr (2007) proposed expanding the transnational approach to encompass the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean in a way that did not diminish one to the other. This comparison highlights the issue of slavery, migration, print, religion, and cultural memory and serves as a way to keep the unique Indian Ocean monsoon ecology, port systems and multilingual culture alive.

Several gaps nevertheless remain. Much of the information that is preserved focuses on the words of European companies, missionaries, state agents, while women, enslaved, ordinary sailors, artisans, and informal interpreters are not as often heard. Attention has also been focused on the major ports and at the same time, the smaller coastal settlements and inland-maritime connections need to be looked at. Sivasundaram (2010) emphasised that the histories of science around the world need to focus on the production of science as it was circulated, mediated and encountered locally. Future research should thus take in combination commercial records and material objects, vernacular texts, oral traditions, maps, religious manuscripts and archaeological records. This research would help to build knowledge about the role of power in shaping the exchange and would seek to restore the agency of communities whose knowledge enabled the connections of the Indian Ocean.

10. Conclusion

The Indian Ocean was a lively space in which trade, languages, religions, and material items constantly overlapped from 1500 to 1800. Besides goods, textiles, spices, metals, ceramics, people, and information were transported via trade routes throughout Africa, Arabia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and across Europe; but the importance of these trade routes was not limited to commerce. Ports became multilingual spaces of negotiation and adaptation as merchants, sailors, interpreters, missionaries, pilgrims, rulers, and migrant communities transformed these sites. Translation facilitated trade contracts, diplomatic exchanges, religious transmission, and the dissemination of knowledge, and cultural spread had an impact upon foodways, artistic expression, medicine, architecture, and social identity. European expansion disrupted the pre-existing networks; established new ones, through monopolies, strengthened settlements, the use of force, and administrative control; but did not make local merchants, brokers, rulers, and communities powerless. They resisted and co-operated with the imperial powers and were mobile enough to not allow them to have full control over regional exchange. Such a connected historical perspective shows that the Indian Ocean world was created through the movement of people, the differences of contact, and the selective borrowing of culture. The evidence also reveals that local identities did not become redundant as a result of global interaction but existed instead alongside other identities, such as those associated with port, faith, family, occupation, and maritime route. These connections are important because they help us

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understand how early modern oceanic networks influenced the persistence of cultural diversity and commercial interdependence as well as the exchange of knowledge between regions.

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