

# Preface

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## Indian Ocean Cargoes

*Thinking Transoceanic Connections through Things*

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TO SOME, the Indian Ocean is just an area on a map encompassing the world's third largest ocean, the islands within it, and the adjacent coastal states. For others, however, it is a prime example of a region that is held together not by physical proximity but by relations and a sense of togetherness that has emerged out of the mobility of people, ideas, and things. Transoceanic exchange has woven together the different ends of the Indian Ocean, leading to what Chaudhuri called "a basic underlying structure, the ground floor of material life."<sup>1</sup> In effect, scholars have long appreciated that trade and commerce are central to understanding the connectivity that underpins the complex human experience in the Indian Ocean world.<sup>2</sup> However, studies of this mercantile and commercial activity have tended to pay rather little attention directly to the cargoes that were transported across the Indian Ocean and the role these cargoes played in connecting the disparate parts of this vast oceanic world.<sup>3</sup>

This volume seeks to fill this lacuna by focusing on the ways in which the cargoes themselves have informed and continue to shape processes

of exchange across the Indian Ocean. More specifically, by paying attention to the materiality of cargoes in motion across both space and time from a multidisciplinary perspective, this volume seeks to enrich our understanding of the ways in which the particular nature of things (e.g., their size, composition, (in)visibility, perishability, or their being alive) has influenced and challenged common modes of transport across the Indian Ocean and the nature and dynamics of the connections that have developed between the disparate parts of the Indian Ocean world.

Responding to Haidy Geismar's call to examine "the interpretive and analytic purchase of thinking through things,"<sup>4</sup> this volume engages with two major theoretical and methodological approaches to material objects, which are outlined and discussed in a thematic and methodological introduction by Burkhard Schnepel. The first of these reflects Arjun Appadurai's<sup>5</sup> attention to the "the social life of things" and his attendant call for us to see commodities as more than just inanimate, mute things. The second of these approaches, which draws on so-called *Actor Network Theory* and the *new materialism*, emphasizes the co-constitution of the material and immaterial dimensions, as well as the vitality of matter.

The influence of Appadurai's edited volume has far transcended the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology as it has become a seminal contribution to material culture studies. *New materialism* can be considered a genuinely interdisciplinary endeavor, as many of its core contributions were written by scholars focusing in particular on the relation between scientific approaches and disciplines.<sup>6</sup> In this vein, this volume also builds on an interdisciplinary engagement with cargoes in motion, which aims to bring together thorough historical and even linguistic analysis with deep ethnographic insights from both anthropology and cultural geography. The field of Indian Ocean Studies as it has developed in recent decades seems to have formed different disciplinary clusters, with those involving historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, religious scientists, and literary scholars being the most pronounced. They have shaped different and fairly separate streams of work, which we build on with the aim to stimulate future discussions and more interdisciplinary work on the Indian Ocean world. This may also revitalize area studies more generally, as it further encourages the link between regional expertise and conceptual as well as methodological reflections.

Offering empirically grounded contributions to the debates that revolve around these two interdisciplinary approaches, the chapters in

this book go beyond classic examinations of material exchange, which usually focus on either economic aspects or social ties. By foregrounding the materially demanding dimensions of transoceanic mobility and looking at how different cargoes are formed and made, adapted, appropriated, put to use, and transformed in the course of their journeys, it becomes possible to improve understanding of the ways in which the Indian Ocean world's "mental" and material frameworks are closely intertwined.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, this volume does not restrict itself to engaging with commodities alone, as it also looks at noncommercial items, such as gifts and personal belongings, as well as objects like invasive species that arrived unintentionally in different parts of the Indian Ocean world on board ships.

The volume's unique engagement with animal cargoes reflects both the conceptual interest in understanding things as animate and vital, as outlined above, and the increasing attention being paid to human-animal entanglements, which can currently be observed in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>8</sup> As animals demand specific care on board ships if they are to reach their destinations alive, they provide powerful examples illustrating the ways in which cargoes in motion are closely intertwined with other things and actors, thus conveying a vivid image of the multiple efforts that go into creating and sustaining transoceanic connectivities. Tracing the origins, processes of formation and improvisation, and emerging trajectories of diverse "things-in-motion"<sup>9</sup> allows unique insights into the diverse meanings of these objects over time and space.<sup>10</sup>

In the first section, the contributions place a specific emphasis on the efforts that go into *the making of cargoes*. While Pedro Machado points out the decisive role of maritime governance structures and labor markets in turning pearls into the "brilliant cargoes" that linked the Bay of Bengal and parts of South India to Southeast Asia and the South China Sea, Kunbing Xiao examines the material efforts made to turn Bohea, a Chinese tea originating in the Wuyi Mountains, into a commercial product of historical significance, preferred by the British from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Shifts in significance and the resulting (im)mobilities are also highlighted by Steven Serels, who analyzes how salt from the southern Red Sea region was turned from a simple form of ballast into the largest export product by volume through an elaborate political and technological infrastructure that proved robust enough to withstand changing tastes and political dynamics until it was ultimately

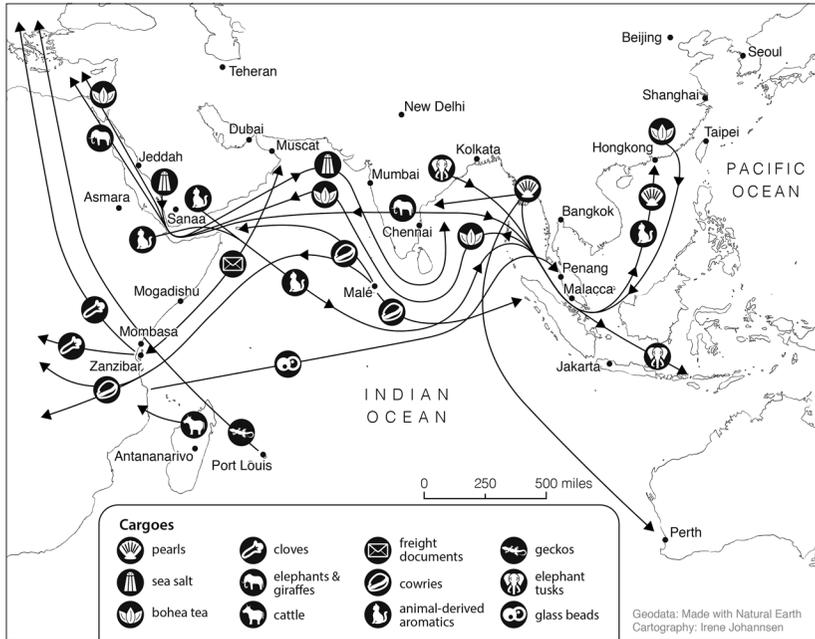
dismantled through war in the early twenty-first century. Linking historical narratives with contemporary market dynamics is also crucial with regard to the Indian Ocean spice trade. Here, Rupert Neuhöfer and Hannah Pilgrim illustrate how current practices of biocertification are (re)defining the material capacities of cloves in Zanzibar in a tense context of local economic development, cultural preservation, global competition, and changing consumer trends in Europe. Together, by following these different cargoes over time, as well as along their routes, these four chapters reveal continuities and ruptures with regard not only to the popularity of these objects, but also to the Indian Ocean and its spatial extensions.

The contributions in the second section of this volume focus on *cargoes on board*, which have generally been somewhat neglected because they were not the prime objects of economic exchange. These chapters highlight the relevance of diplomatic cargoes, letters and legal documents, currencies, and food provisions as important facilitators of trade. However, not all things on board travel equally smoothly;<sup>11</sup> therefore, this section highlights the ways in which the objects' particular materialities may have enhanced or challenged mobility across the Indian Ocean. Focusing on live animals transported as gifts as part of diplomatic overtures, often combined with the aim of establishing or expanding trading relations, Tansen Sen examines the *longue durée* phenomenon of animal diplomacy by foregrounding the affordances of large animals, such as giraffes and elephants, on maritime routes. Edward Alpers also concentrates on the challenges of living cargoes by exploring the maritime transportation of cattle across the Mozambique Channel to provision Mozambique Island and the European shipping plying the East African coast. On the other hand, the chapters by Fahad Bishara and Eva-Maria Knoll turn attention to less active and rather inconspicuous cargoes that have often been overlooked in accounts of trading. While Bishara analyzes the crucial role of trading documents and letters carried on dhows in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Knoll sheds light on the handling of twelve thousand cowries, the saltwater-resistant and almost unbreakable shells that served as both ballast and currency.

Finally, the chapters in the third section exemplify how a focus on particular objects also allows *cargoes in use* to be contextualized within prevailing cultural practices to better understand their utilities, meanings, and symbolism from within the frame of reference of those who interact

with them. This entails developing an understanding of the mobility of cargoes in the sense of their adaptability and the different ways in which they come to be appropriated and even “nostrified,” thus changing the nature of the object itself.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on scientific samples of geckos collected on the Mascarene Islands and shipped to German laboratories, Lisa Jenny Krieg examines the ways in which organic tissue is transformed into information about the evolutionary history of these small animals, which is considered crucial in filling in the gaps in the geological histories of these islands. Hanne Schönig portrays the trade in, and use of, an animal-derived aromatic, the secretions of the civet cat, emphasizing the impact of an apparently minor cargo on cultural transfer in the Indian Ocean world. The chapters by Mareike Pampus and Karl-Heinz Kohl also illustrate the process whereby transoceanic commodities may become an intrinsic part of local material culture. Investigating the local demand for, and domestic use of, glass beads and beadwork in Penang, Pampus shows how an item of cargo can be transformed into a key material for an emergent local heritage while remaining highly interwoven with external, transoceanic influences. Similarly, by following the passage of elephant tusks as bridewealth within a closed system of asymmetric alliance in East Indonesian Lamaholot culture, Kohl points to the material and immaterial afterlives of a gift of transoceanic origin. Overall, the contributions to this section emphasize how, in and through such different and highly symbolic material objects, a variety of complex connectivities is being forged at different scales.

It is certainly not the aim of this volume to produce a complete overview of all the things that are transported across the Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, by covering a large array of different cargoes, we are able to examine the implications of their various affordances and show how these have shaped Indian Ocean connectivities in particular ways. First, offering insights into cargoes that have so far hardly received any scholarly attention, and in line with Lambourn’s engagement with “Abraham’s luggage,”<sup>13</sup> we wish to provide “a new place to think about dwellings and identities made in, and negotiated through, movement.”<sup>14</sup> Second, by placing the cargoes and their materiality center stage, we aim to direct attention to their specific properties and characteristics regarding, for example, their transportability, storage requirements, and preservability, as well as their dispensability and (un)controllability, and how these impact the journeys they take. Finally, we wish to demonstrate both the



Map 00.1. Cargoes in motion across the Indian Ocean. Geodata: Made with Natural Earth; Cartography: Irene Johannsen.

mobility and mutability of cargoes. By following them over time and space and identifying their translations in meaning, value, and materiality, we show how they often mean very different things to different people at different times in different places.

Overall, by treating cargoes as providing empirical access to Indian Ocean connectivity, the contributions assembled here draw attention to how not only humans but also material objects on the move play decisive roles in the creation of transoceanic connections, thus bringing to the fore the “binding quality” of nonhuman flows.<sup>15</sup> First, by complementing existing scholarship focusing on human mobility, such as merchants, religious scholars, slaves, and indentured laborers, this volume “dehumanizes” the Indian Ocean by foregrounding the nonhuman. In addition, however, by emphasizing the variety of relationships and entanglements between cargoes and people, it ultimately “rehumanizes” the Indian Ocean by highlighting actors who have so far been rather neglected by scholarship, such as those who help make and prepare particular cargoes, those who care for the safety of live cargoes, and those who, in using

cargoes, turn them into indispensable items for local customs and identities. Their skills in handling particular materialities have played and continue to play a decisive role in shaping the fluid extensions of the Indian Ocean as a maritime region. Accordingly, we are convinced that thinking through the materiality and connectivity of cargoes in motion opens up a new window for acquiring a better understanding of the dynamic and vital nature of the Indian Ocean as a relational space.

## NOTES

1. Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, “The Unity and Disunity of Indian Ocean History from the Rise of Islam to 1750: The Outline of a Theory and Historical Discourse,” *Journal of World History* 4 (1993): 1. Chaudhuri refers directly to Braudel’s approach to the Mediterranean, discussing its transferability to the Indian Ocean.

2. See, for example, Sebouh D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar* (London: Routledge, 1992); Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Erik Gilbert, “Coastal East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean: Long-Distance Trade, Empire, Migration, and Regional Unity 1750–1970,” *The History Teacher* 36, no. 1 (November 2002): 7–34; Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke, *Cultures of Trade: Indian Ocean Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2007); Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Lakshmi Subramanian, eds., *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Uma Das Gupta, compiler, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500–1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Abdul Sheriff and Engsing Ho, eds., *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation*

of *New Societies* (London: Hurst, 2014); Krish Seetah, ed., *Connecting Continents: Archaeology and History in the Indian Ocean World* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018); Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers, *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

3. For a pair of recent exceptions, see Pedro Machado, Sarah Fee, and Gwyn Campbell, eds., *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures and the Material Worlds of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Pedro Machado, Steve Mullins, and Joseph Christensen, eds., *Pearls, People, and Power: Pearling and Indian Ocean Worlds* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).

4. Haidy Geismar, “‘Material Culture Studies’ and Other Ways to Theorize Objects: A Primer to a Regional Debate,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 1 (2011): 210–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041751000068X>.

5. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

6. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tim Ingold, “Materials against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203807002127>.

7. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003).

8. See e.g., Kristin Asdal, Tone Druglitrø, and Steve Hinchliffe, *Humans, Animals and Biopolitics: The More-than-Human Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Pru Hobson-West, “Beasts and Boundaries: An Introduction to Animals in Sociology, Science and Society,” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3, no. 1 (April 2007): 23–41; Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

9. Claire Dwyer and Peter Jackson, “Commodifying Difference: Selling EASTern Fashion,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21 (2003): 270.

10. Martha Chaiklin, Philip Gooding, and Gwyn Campbell, eds., *Animal Trade Histories in the Indian Ocean World* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Ian Cook, “From ‘follow the thing: papaya’ to followthethings.com,” *Journal of Consumer Ethics* 1, no.1 (2017): 22–29; Philipp Schorch, Martin Saxer, and Marlen Elders, *Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond* (London: UCL Press, 2020); Sophie Woodward, *Material Methods: Researching and Thinking with Things* (London: Sage, 2020).

11. John Law, *Organizing Modernity: Social Order and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 102; Yrjö Engeström and Frank Blackler, “On the Life of the Object,” *Organization* 12, no. 3 (2005): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508405051268>.

12. T. Benfouhal, “Ces objets qui viennent d’ailleurs,” in *Voyager d’un point de vue nomade*, ed. H. Claudot-Hawad (Paris: Editions Paris-Méditerranée, 2002): 113–35.

13. Elizabeth A. Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

14. *Ibid.*, 11.

15. Tim Bunnell, “Post-maritime Transnationalization: Malay Seafarers in Liverpool,” *Global Networks* 7, no. 4 (2007): 412–29; Julia Verne, *Living Translocality: Space, Culture and Economy in Contemporary Swahili Trade* (Stuttgart, Ger.: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012).