

Introduction

This volume explores the relationship between Africa and the wider Indian Ocean world (IOW) from early times to 1900 through perspectives that challenge conventional approaches to the history of the non-western world. It takes into full account, for the first time for such a macro-region and timespan, the impact of environmental and climatic forces on peoples and economies, and their role in shaping historical change, notably in the creation and development of an IOW “global economy”. It also differs from most conventional works in its emphasis on the dynamic contribution of Africans to the wider IOW economy even after Europeans entered the IOW. This introductory chapter identifies and defines the regions of Africa that formed part of the IOW, explores the major environmental factors that influenced the evolution of the IOW global economy, examines the notion and significance of human-environment interaction for Africa and the wider IOW, and summarises the main issues to be discussed in later chapters.

The discipline of history as currently taught in Western academic institutions first developed in Western Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It reflected concerns of the educated elite of the time and region, notably the rise of Western civilisation, European expansion and global dominance, the emergence of nation states, and the role in those processes of great men – chiefly monarchs, military, and political leaders. These themes reflect quintessentially Eurocentric perspectives, as do the temporal and spatial paradigms adopted – and that continue to be routinely used in historical analysis. Periodisation

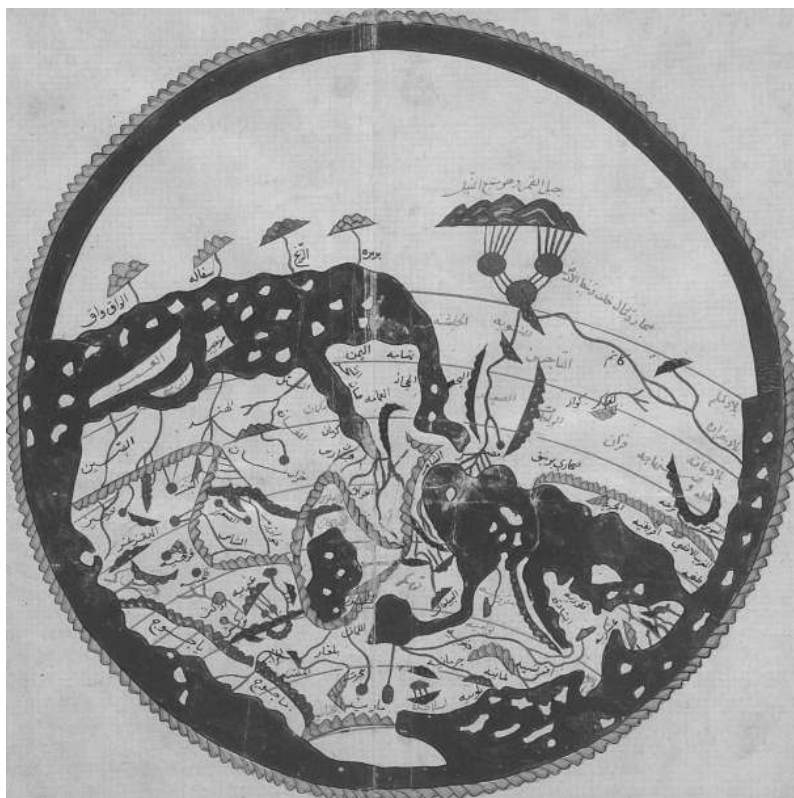


FIGURE 1.1 Al-Idrisi's World Map, 1154 (with the south at the top)

Note: No copyright – source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1154_world_map_by_Moroccan_cartographer_al-Idrisi_for_king_Roger_of_Sicily.jpg (accessed 05/12/10).

based on concepts such as the “ancient”, “medieval”, “early modern”, and “modern” eras reflects attempts to better understand the temporal evolution of European history. However, such periodisation does not necessarily accommodate the temporal shifts in the histories of the extra-European world to which it is also customarily applied. Similarly, despite the welcome rise over recent decades of more comparative and “global” studies, most histories of the non-western world rely on European spatial paradigms that focus on states, empires, and colonial regional demarcations such as the East Indies, and colonial political entities such as Kenya – the borders of which had little historical meaning prior to its creation as a British colony in 1920.

Moreover, throughout the IOW, such artificially imposed borders have remained porous, as is demonstrated by continued large clandestine cross-border flows of money, people, and commodities such as arms, drugs, and ivory.

Studies of the Indian Ocean world began in the mid-1980s with the publication of a number of path-breaking works, by K.N. Chaudhuri, Janet Abu-Lughod and others, challenging conventional Eurocentric interpretations of Asia. These scholars revealed extensive long-distance commercial networks linking the major Asian civilisations that long predated European intrusion into the region, and which remained preeminent up to the mid-eighteenth century. André Gunder Franck argued that indigenous powers continued to economically and politically dominate the region into the nineteenth century. Moreover, European predominance was, in historic terms, of short duration, being challenged again from the 1980s by the rise first of the Southeast Asian “tigers”, and subsequently by India and, above all, China. Such Asianists firmly established the Indian Ocean world alongside the Atlantic world as a founding pillar of the newly emerging discipline of global history. Their studies nevertheless have two major limitations. First, in placing Asia at the centre of their historical perspectives, they largely exclude the role of Africa and Africans. Thus Chaudhuri considered the IOW to have been created by four “Asian” civilisations: Irano-Arabic, Hindu, Indonesian, and Chinese, but excluded Africa because “indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean”.¹ Indeed, he largely buttresses the conventional Eurocentric view that the history of Africa was forged by external forces, first Muslim and subsequently European. Other Asianists have attempted to integrate Africa into their perspectives of IOW history, but for them it has remained either peripheral, or – as for Thomas Metcalf – a field of Indian economic or even imperial endeavour.²

In reaction, Africanists have over recent decades stressed early indigenous African initiatives and economic development that included

¹ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

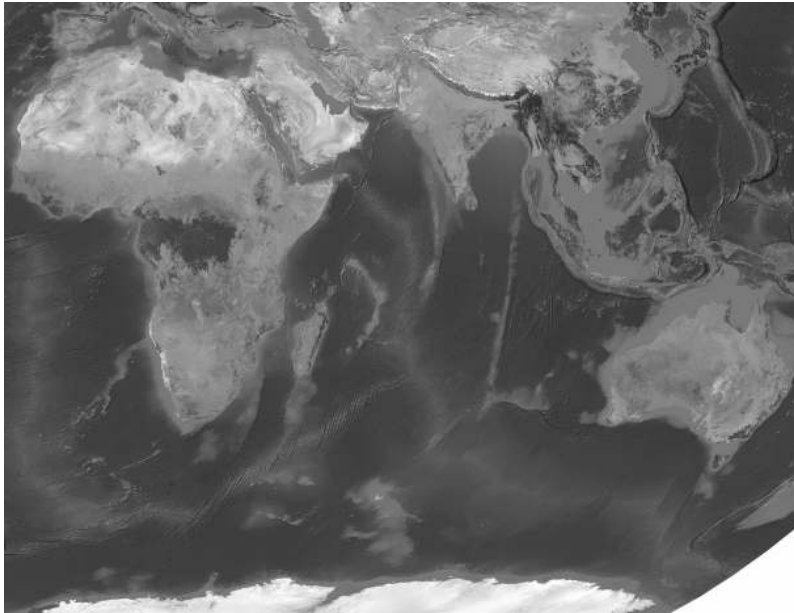
² Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections. India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

involvement in the wider IOW. However, their discussion of Africa's relations with the IOW has largely been confined to the colonially defined region of "East Africa", and has concentrated on mercantile elites and rulers, notably the Swahili. Their seminal contribution to the debate over Africa's relations with the wider IOW is in repudiating the traditional view that the Swahili were the result of Muslim immigration and influence from the Middle East, and asserting the currently dominant view that the Swahili were representatives of an authentic African civilisation which engaged fully in trans-IOW exchange (see Chapter 6).

However, while revisionist historians of both Asia and East Africa have underscored the vitality of early indigenous economic and cultural life, they have largely focussed on themes at the centre of Eurocentric historiography, notably the rise and demise of states and civilisations, and the role of male elites. Moreover, while some emphasise indigenous initiatives prior to the European "Voyages of Discovery", their major preoccupation is the post-1500 "early modern" European arrival and impact in the IOW, first of the Portuguese, and subsequently of the Dutch, English, and French. Thus one of the central Asianist debates is the timing and magnitude of the so-called "Great Divergence", when the gap between Asian and European economies widened to the point at which Europeans developed an insuperable economic and political advantage.³ In their turn, with some notable exceptions such as Thomas Vernet,⁴ Africanists have also assumed that from around 1500, European intervention ended the golden epoch of Swahili civilisation, extinguishing African entrepreneurship and involvement in the wider IOW. With the European arrival in the Indian Ocean, and their dominance of the East African littoral, the peoples of the East African interior, while sometimes undergoing considerable migration, and forging various short-lived political entities, were largely cut off from the coast and external economic and other relations. The focus of historical attention has largely been on the slave export

³ See e.g. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not. Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴ Thomas Vernet, "East African Travelers and Traders in the Indian Ocean: Swahili Ships, Swahili Mobilities ca. 1500–1800" in Michael Pearson (ed.), *Trade, Circulation, and Flow in the Indian Ocean World* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 167–202.



MAP 1.1 The Indian Ocean World

Note: Crop of Earth Map in Robinson Projection, by xingmin07 / Getty Images.

trade which, it is argued, was driven by external demand and agents and, in combination with European colonial exploitation, laid the basis for the economic underdevelopment of Africa.⁵

Indian Ocean World and Indian Ocean Africa

In a volume exploring the historical relationship between Africa and the wider IOW, it is necessary to explain the terms Indian Ocean world (IOW) and Indian Ocean Africa (IOA) that are employed throughout.

Indian Ocean World

This volume is not a history of Africa and the Indian Ocean. It is a history of Africa's historical relationship with the IOW. The IOW here

⁵ See e.g. Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (London: James Currey, 1987), 56–76.

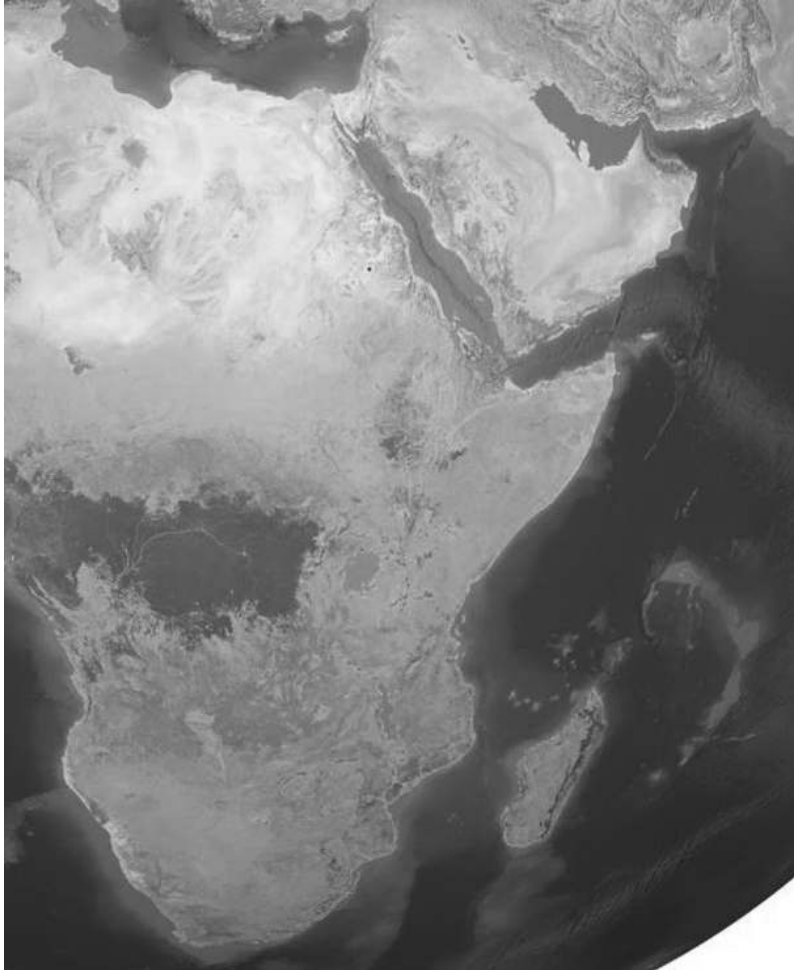
has two geographical components: maritime and terrestrial. It includes the oceans (Indian Ocean, Indonesian, and China Seas) affected by the monsoon winds and currents (see section on human-environment interaction below), as well as their maritime offshoots such as, in the western IOW, the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, and the southern hemisphere maritime spaces dominated by trade winds that fed into the monsoon system to its north. It also includes the islands in those seas, as it does the continental littorals and hinterlands to which the IOW oceanic zones were significantly connected through trade, migration, and the interchange of ideas and technology. Thus, the IOW also comprises a wide terrestrial belt that runs from the deep interior of Africa through the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to East Asia.

Indian Ocean Africa

Of central concern in this volume is Africa. In African historical studies, spatial paradigms have largely derived from colonial divisions whereby sub-Saharan Africa was divided geographically into West, Central, East, and southern regions, and linguistically into Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone zones; or focus on histories of modern-day states. Such essentially political divisions significantly underestimate communalities of environment, and forces of human-environment interaction that played a vital role in shaping historical developments over the *longue durée*.

This study of the relationship between Africa and the wider IOW over the *longue durée* aims to focus less on conventional historical spatial divisions than on those regions of Africa with major commercial outlets to the Indian Ocean and its Red Sea tributary. In this context, areas of Africa located east of a line running approximately from the Cape to Cairo are considered to comprise a distinct region, here termed Indian Ocean Africa (IOA), that formed a significant and intrinsic part of the IOW. These include the territories of present-day Egypt and South Africa, and extend eastwards to Madagascar and neighbouring island groups. Such a spatial configuration runs counter to conventional academic approaches that often exclude Egypt and the western Indian Ocean islands of Madagascar, the Comoros, Mascarenes, and Seychelles, from African Studies.

The IOA coastline runs some 18,800 km, between about 30°N and 35°S, and includes Red Sea shores of present-day Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia, the Indian Ocean littorals of



MAP 1.2 Indian Ocean Africa

Note: Crop of high resolution 3D render of Planet Earth, by janrysavv / Getty Images.

Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and South Africa, and those of the western Indian Ocean islands.

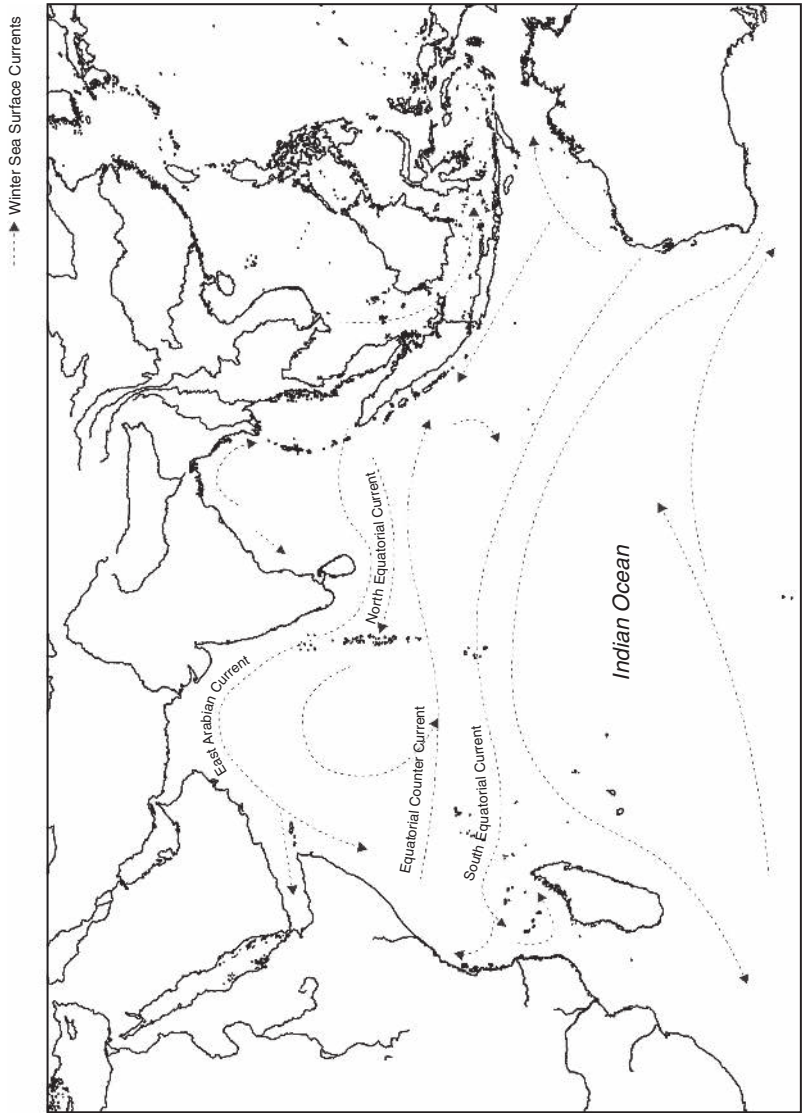
In general, the IOA coastline is characterised by a narrow coastal plain, arid in the north, but subject to increasing rainfall below about 2°S, mid-way along the modern-day Swahili coast. In Madagascar, the littoral is humid in the north and east, and arid in the south and southwest.

The IOA interior comprises the hinterlands of the above regions, including present-day South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, and Lesotho, and parts of Botswana, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – in all covering an area of some 9.5 million km². In northern IOA, the coastal plain gives way to vast sterile deserts in the Horn of Africa, Sudan, and Egypt where only the Nile, the world's longest river (6,695 km), offers the possibility of cultivation. In Ethiopia, eastern Madagascar, and South Africa, the coastal fringe is backed by highlands. In East Africa, south of 2°S and in western Madagascar, the coastal plain is wider, rising in the interior to high plateaus. The plateau in Madagascar rises to from 1,300 to 1,700 metres above sea level and runs on a north-south axis almost the entire 1,592 km length of island. The plateau in the continental interior of IOA is generally between 1,000 and 1,500 metres above sea level, but in places is punctuated by mountains that rise much higher. This highland mass, which stretches from Ethiopia to South Africa, is dissected by the Rift Valley, a geological fault line almost 10,000 km in length, that runs from Lebanon down the 2,000 km-long Red Sea and on via the Great Lakes to the Mozambique Channel.

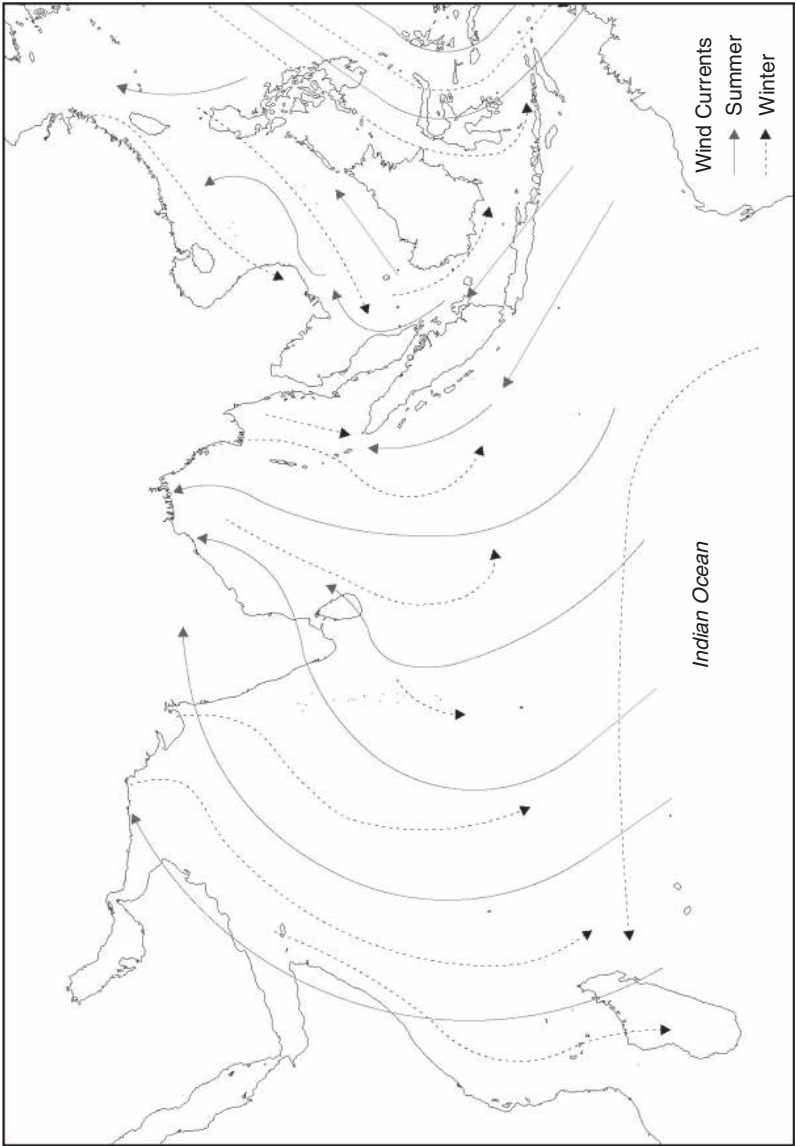
Human-Environment Interaction

Of central importance to this volume is the concept of human-environment interaction, signifying the complex interaction of human and environmental forces in which human activity occurred. In the period under review, human destruction of forests, burning of wood and coal, smelting of ores, and raising of cattle has, in certain periods, significantly affected the environment, while natural factors have also greatly affected human activity.

Most historians of the IOW underestimate the impact of environmental forces beyond a largely static notion of the monsoon system that facilitated trans-oceanic sail in the northern sphere of the Indian Ocean and in the South China Sea. A range of other, often associated, environmental factors also had significant impact on IOW history, including the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), volcanism, and cyclones. As these phenomena play such an important role in the IOW, they require a brief explanation.



MAP 1.3 Indian Ocean Surface Currents
Note: Produced by Carl Hughes, IOWC.



MAP 1.4 Indian Ocean World: Monsoon-driven Currents
Note: Produced by Carl Hughes, IOWC.