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Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1850

Pedro Machado

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Introduction

Laxmichand Motichand was enmeshed in a world on the move. As a prominent Vāṇiyā merchant from the island entrepôt of Diu located at the southern end of the Kathiawar peninsula of present-day Gujarat, he had over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century developed significant business interests in Mozambique in Southeastern Africa. Arriving as a young boy on Mozambique Island sometime in the early 1760s, Laxmichand began his commercial career as an apprentice in the family firm. He worked his way up the commercial hierarchy, learning Portuguese (a language of empire, trade and imperial administration) and likely a form of Emakhuwa (an African language utilized in commerce in northern Mozambique), as he became the firm's main partner in Mozambique by the 1780s. His standing as an “honourable” and “credit-worthy” merchant reflected both his and the firm's reputation within Mozambique and Diu that was to endure well into the nineteenth century.¹

Along with other Vāṇiyā, who from early in the eighteenth century had begun to direct their trade to Southeast Africa, Laxmichand was heavily invested in the procurement and importation of Gujarati cotton textiles. These were essential as currency in the exchange economy of Mozambique and Laxmichand arranged for large volumes to be transported across the western Indian Ocean in long-distance Gujarati sailing vessels. Textiles arrived on Mozambique Island, the coastal entrepôt where Laxmichand owned property and maintained storehouses, where they served not only as exchange media for the purchase of ivory and slaves (the two main exports from Southeast Africa in the eighteenth century) but also as high-demand products among Africans throughout Mozambique. It was African consumer tastes that drove the variety of styles and qualities of

¹ This biographical sketch of Laxmichand Motichand draws on a diffuse range of information contained in a variety of documents in the AHU, Lisbon, Portugal; the AHM, Maputo, Mozambique; and the HAG in Panjim, India. Laxmichand, like other Vāṇiyā boys brought to Mozambique in the eighteenth century, “appl[ied] themselves in learning their [Yao or Makua] idiom...” AHU, Moç., Cx 47 Doc. 39, “Registo da carta...”, n.d. [but c. 1784].

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cloth that Laxmichand had to ensure were acquired in each trading season from weavers in Gujarat so that he would find buyers in coastal and interior markets.

That he was able to acquire the appropriate textiles in India owed much to the structure of the family firm. Laxmichand corresponded regularly with firm members in Diu, who used textile brokers to communicate details of the cloths “of a new fashion” that were in demand in Mozambique. Acquired first from African agents in his service, who in turn maintained relationships with long-distance traders and merchants in the interior of Mozambique, this vital information was transmitted along multiple chains of relation that connected Laxmichand and his agents to the interiors of Africa and India.

The centrality of Gujarati cotton textiles to the commercial economy of Mozambique – indeed to all economic exchange in the territory – placed Laxmichand, with access to networks of procurement and distribution on both sides of the Indian Ocean, in an influential and significant commercial position. Cloth financed credit as a vital component undergirding long-distance trade, allowing Laxmichand to extend loans widely to merchants along the coast and interior of Mozambique. For much of the eighteenth century, these loans financed the purchase of African ivory that because of its quality and durability was highly sought by Indian consumers in Kathiawar and elsewhere in Gujarat for use as marriage bangles and a variety of other products. Laxmichand ensured that the ships that had brought cloth from India to Mozambique returned across the Indian Ocean carrying thousands of tusks to Diu, where they were redistributed to regional markets such as Bhavnagar and Surat.

Increasingly from the middle of the century, the loans that Laxmichand was able to extend to merchants also financed African slave purchases as Mozambique developed from the 1750s into an important source of servile labour for the markets of the southwestern Indian Ocean and southern Atlantic. As with ivory purchases, the purchase of slaves required Gujarati cloth, and as one of the most prominent merchants in Mozambique, Laxmichand was among the *Vāṇiyās* who effectively underwrote the expansion of slaving through their dominance of the textile trade. In being able also to make *hundis* (bills of exchange) available to merchants, Laxmichand made possible the complex multilateral payments that were required in both the slave and the ivory trades. In particular, his wealth, commercial and financial prominence enabled Laxmichand to participate more directly in the slave trade by financing the acquisition of slaving vessels at Port Louis in Mauritius, the destination of a large number of African slaves as labour for the island’s sugar plantations. This involvement entailed, further, entering into partnerships with Portuguese slavers,

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especially once the commerce in slaves began to intensify from the 1770s and 1780s.

Yet, despite deepening involvement, Laxmichand Motichand never redirected his business interests to the slave trade. His commercial focus, and that of the family firm from its earliest days in Mozambique, remained the ivory trade. The bulk of the textiles that were carried on his vessels – or that arrived on consignment in other Vāniyā ships – were destined for the purchases of ivory tusks that came principally from the Zambesi Valley in central Mozambique by the final quarter of the century and were shipped to Mozambique Island from Quelimane. Laxmichand adapted to the changing realities of the Mozambique (and regional Southeast African) economy by investing some capital in slaving and shipping modest cargoes of slaves to India, where military and domestic markets existed for African captives. As an importer of Gujarati textiles that were utilized to purchase slaves along the coast and interior of Mozambique, though, Laxmichand benefitted financially from the expanding trade by the payments he received for cloths in New World silver dollars from visiting merchants invested in the trade. Large cargoes of silver currency were brought to the coast of Mozambique beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and increased rapidly from the final quarter of the century as the slave trade expanded to include Brazilian merchants from Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, and slavers from Montevideo in the Río de la Plata. The exchangeability of cloth for silver made the purchase of slaves possible and therefore allowed an expansion of slave trading and brought the markets of the southern Atlantic and southwestern Indian Ocean into close relation with one another in a demonstration of the trans-oceanic linkages of the eighteenth-century trade. The silver coins that Laxmichand Motichand acquired as a result of selling cloth to slavers were shipped to India where they were used in payments to Gujarati bankers and to secure credit that was an indispensable component of long-distance trade.

This story of exchange, mobility, production and consumer demand are the subject of this book. Laxmichand Motichand's career is emblematic of the depth and extent of Vāniyā merchant networks in the western Indian Ocean and of their critical role in mediating its oceanic relationships. From late in the seventeenth century, and especially from the 1720s and 1730s, Gujarati Vāniyā merchants from Diu began redirecting business investments away from the Red Sea – where they had maintained a long-standing presence – and towards Southeast Africa. This included Vāniyā from Daman, a notable shipbuilding port on the west coast of India. By the middle of the century, these merchants had established a dominant position in the commercial and financial economy of Mozambique as their investments grew in African trade. Vāniyā

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control over the procurement, shipment and distribution of Gujarati cotton cloths was key in undergirding this dominance because of their central place in African exchange as both currency and commodity. High demand for Gujarati textiles derived from the many uses to which cloths were put, and from the myriad social and cultural meanings with which they were inscribed by African consumers. Without textiles, no merchant could trade successfully in Mozambique and its far interior that today forms part of Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia.

Trade expanded markedly from the 1730s with the growth of cloth imports amid greater Vāṇiyā involvement in the economy of Mozambique. Cloth was distributed along well-organized routes by long-distance traders and African agents who operated in a commercialized environment of widespread exchange. This expansion of African trade occurred within a broader Indian Ocean context of trans-oceanic exchange in which Laxmichand Motichand and other Vāṇiyā were key participants. In particular, consumer demand in Kathiawar, Kutch and more broadly throughout Gujarat for African ivory from Mozambique propelled Vāṇiyā interest and reflected the commercial resurgence of these regional Indian economies from the mid-eighteenth century.² A process of political consolidation among the principalities of Kathiawar, which is detailed in Chapter 1, helped to foster a stable economic environment where expanding networks of commodity production (especially textiles) forged links between agrarian India and newly expanding commercial markets in the wider Indian Ocean economy. Kathiawar thus emerged in the 1750s as a commercially vibrant region.³ As a strategy for generating revenue through taxation, states supported and promoted trade. This occurred during a period of Mughal imperial decentralization when regional polities such as the Marathas consolidated their autonomy and power contra the imperial centre. The resulting political instability and insecurity that these reconfigurations caused on trade routes in Gujarat created a fluid environment in which commercial fortunes shifted from one port, city or region to another as merchants and artisans moved to less affected areas that were considered safer, such as the Kathiawar peninsula.⁴

² Throughout this book, I have used place names as they appear in the sources or that have accepted spellings in English, and have therefore not used contemporary designations – Kutch rather than Kachchh; Querimba Islands rather than Kerimba Islands, and so on.

³ David Ludden, “World Economy and Village India”, in Sugata Bose (ed.), *South Asia and World Capitalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 159–77.

⁴ Ghulam A. Nadri, “Exploring the Gulf of Kachh: Regional Economy and Trade in the Eighteenth Century”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 51 (2008), 462; Lakshmi Subramanian, “The Political Economy of Textiles in Western India:

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Although largely unexamined, Kathiawar's commercial vibrancy from the second half of the eighteenth century was bound up with the growth of trans-oceanic African trade which was driven both by high ivory consumption throughout the Kathiawar peninsula and by high Gujarati textile consumption in Mozambique. These intersecting consuming passions for the goods of Africa and India thus brought ivory hunters, African long-distance traders and agents into close relation with Gujarati weavers, cloth brokers and bankers. Though separated by thousands of miles of ocean, the choices and decisions made by these protagonists influenced one another and created an inter-regional oceanic embrace made possible by Vāniyā merchants who played a key integrative role for these economies of the western Indian Ocean.⁵

In emphasizing the importance of consumer demand in structuring relations across the ocean, *Ocean of Trade* urges a rethinking more broadly of the place of local markets in sustaining production between the economies of the ocean. Much scholarship has focused on the development of European demand and tastes for Asian goods and “luxuries” in the eighteenth century as central to the emergence of new social and cultural practices that informed changing ideas of fashion, dress, adornment and identification.⁶ This scholarship has also recognized that the consuming habits of Europeans were an important element in the development of the global economy from the eighteenth century as rising demand for goods from South Asia, China and elsewhere stimulated commerce across different regions of the world.⁷

By contrast, far less attention has been given to the role of consumer demand as an economic, social and cultural activity among those assumed

Weavers, Merchants and the Transition to a Colonial Economy”, in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (eds.), *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500–1850* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 253–80. That the Kathiawar peninsula experienced increased trade and was commercially vibrant when other areas of western India were adversely affected by the political realignments of the eighteenth century suggests that, rather than view India as possessing a single integrated economy, it might be more useful analytically to regard the subcontinent as possessing multiple “economies”. See David Washbrook, “India in the Early Modern World Economy: Modes of Production, Reproduction and Exchange”, *Journal of Global History*, 2, 1 (2007), 87.

⁵ I draw here on an insight from Sven Beckert, “Reconstructing the Empire of Cotton: A Global Story”, in Manisha Sinha and Penny Von Eschen (eds.), *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race and Power in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 164–90.

⁶ Useful summaries and overviews of this scholarship can be found in assorted essays in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ See, for example, John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1994); Maxine Berg, “In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century”, *Past and Present*, 182, 1 (2004), 85–113; *eadem*, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

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to be marginal actors in trade and exchange and in affecting larger economies of commerce and production. Indeed, the focus of much scholarship on the material worlds of Africa and South Asia has continued to follow a “production-dominated Marxian view”, in which questions related to patterns and processes of consumer demand and consumption have been almost entirely overlooked.⁸ This is explained, in the case of South Asia, by, among other factors, the concerns of nationalist historians with the impact of colonial rule and deep-seated Marxist traditions of scholarship that favoured production as a framework.⁹ The influence of Subaltern Studies more recently has been limited to studying “subaltern” groups and their political role in Indian history. For Africa, an exaggerated focus on Africans as producers, whether as slave labourers or from the later nineteenth century as members of an industrial proletariat, has overlooked their role as consumers whose tastes and preferences had repercussions beyond the continent.¹⁰ Assumptions about the limitations that colonial rule and rural poverty placed on the consuming behaviours of Africans further explain this omission.

Taking consumer demand as a vantage point makes possible an appreciation of the influence of consumer tastes on commercial activity across the Indian Ocean. African demand in Mozambique sustained large-scale textile production among weavers in Gujarat who, as they developed specialized knowledge about patterns and styles that were desired by African consumers, became reliant on these African markets for their livelihoods over the course of the eighteenth century.¹¹ In turn, high levels

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in *idem*, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13.

⁹ Douglas E. Haynes and Abigail McGowan, “Introduction”, in Haynes, McGowan, Tirthankar Roy and Haruka Yanagisawa (eds.), *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–25. The introduction to this pioneering volume offers further discussion of the reasons why South Asian historical scholarship has often overlooked consumption as an analytical lens in the study of the past.

¹⁰ There have been recent indications that this is beginning to change: Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption & Cleanliness in Zimbabwe* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996); Jeremy Prestholdt, “On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism”, *American Historical Review*, 109, 3 (2004), 755–81; *idem*, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Dmitri van den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007); Pedro Machado, “Awash in a Sea of Cloth: Gujarat, Africa and the Western Indian Ocean”, in Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi (eds.), *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 161–80.

¹¹ Scholarship on the Indian textile trade has almost entirely overlooked African markets in the Indian Ocean, focusing instead on Middle East or European markets, or on the

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of demand in Kathiawar and Gujarat for Mozambique ivory influenced hunting patterns and trade routes in the African interior and coast. The local consumption of Africans and Indians was thus important to the development of inter-regional commercial activity.¹² *Ocean of Trade* contributes to an emerging appreciation that historically “under-considered populations” exerted leverage in shaping material relationships in fundamental ways.¹³

An overarching argument of this book is that Vāṇiyā merchants, with access to credit, shipping and maritime labour, were critical in mediating these linkages across regimes of consumption and production, and were therefore responsible for driving cross-oceanic exchange that stimulated the development of regional economies.¹⁴ In operating at the interstices of producing and consuming markets in Africa and India, perhaps most crucially, Vāṇiyās were able to satisfy demand for ivory and cloth because their information of markets on both sides of the ocean was kept current and transmitted regularly across its waters. Merchants communicated market knowledge about the particular types of textiles that were in demand in any one season to brokers who, in turn, passed this information on to head weavers and ultimately weaving households producing cloth expressly for the Mozambique markets. This knowledge was particularly valuable because of seasonal changes in tastes among African consumers – a particular pattern and style of textile that was in demand in one season would no longer find buyers a few seasons later as preferences changed for new cloths.

Equally crucial for Vāṇiyā merchants, knowledge about ivory markets was gathered regularly and utilized to determine where supplies from Mozambique would be sent after their arrival in Diu or Daman. Although demand for ivory was widespread in the Kathiawar peninsula and more broadly in Gujarat, consumer markets shifted and could become concentrated in particular areas. Knowing where these were located was therefore invaluable in selling the many thousands of ivory tusks that arrived each year in increasing number from Mozambique from the 1740s and 1750s.

intra-Asian trade of European companies. A good discussion of this literature can be found in Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹² My thinking here has been influenced by Haynes and McGowan, “Introduction”, 8–9.

¹³ Prestholdt, “Global Repercussions”.

¹⁴ A similar argument, based around commodity chains, has been recently advanced for Latin America in Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal and Zephyr Frank (eds.), *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

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Vāṇiyā shipment of commodities and their commercial activity occurred across local and oceanic contexts. As noted earlier, Diu and Daman merchants were intertwined with the exchange dynamics of the Kathiawar peninsula and had been active in the ports of the southern Arabian peninsula and Red Sea for centuries. Their redirection of trade and financial resources to Southeastern Africa in the eighteenth century, the focus of this book, represented a continuation of their engagement with the economies of the Indian Ocean.

They operated also, however, within a particular European imperial context: Diu and Daman, and Mozambique, were part of the *Estado da Índia*, the imperial edifice that comprised Portuguese territories east of the Cape. Portuguese African and Indian possessions were administratively separated in the 1750s but their commercial and trading relationships were not adversely affected because their economies continued to be closely connected across the western Indian Ocean.¹⁵ Moreover, in the second half of the eighteenth century, metropolitan interest in reviving the trade of Portugal's territories in the "East" resulted in state reforms that opened trade to private traders and merchants. This liberalization of commerce, together with Portuguese neutrality in the European wars of the period, revitalized trade in the imperial economies, a revival that in the western Indian Ocean was facilitated by the commercial and financial involvement of Vāṇiyā merchants.

Vāṇiyā merchants in Kathiawar and other groups such as Saraswat Brahmins of Goa were often dominant in the commercial and financial spheres of the *Estado da Índia*, in many cases underwriting state and private trade throughout the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese attempted on numerous occasions to displace Gujarati merchants from their positions of prominence in oceanic trade after they assumed imperial control of the important entrepôt of Diu in the sixteenth century because they were seen as draining the empire's economic patrimony.¹⁶ Although these attempts included disrupting trading routes in displays of aggression during the early years of the Portuguese presence in India, Portuguese officials were unable ultimately to undermine the significance of Gujarati merchant capital to commerce in the Indian Ocean. Merchants from Diu and elsewhere in Kathiawar pursued commercial opportunities in

¹⁵ Such lateral imperial connections, unmediated by a metropolitan centre, were important also during the British Raj period, for which, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁶ This formulation is from Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation Upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

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the Persian Gulf and at Red Sea ports, and maintained links with Surat during its heyday in the seventeenth century as one of the western Indian Ocean's major ports. In the eighteenth century, as this book will show, some Gujarati merchant networks deepened their regional involvement in Mozambique as the result of developments – notably the commercial efflorescence of Kathiawar – that were not determined by the Portuguese state or private European interests.

While the extent of Indian commercial and financial dominance of the Portuguese imperial economy has been recognized to a certain extent, this scholarship has tended either to focus on the imperial capital of Goa (the centre on coastal western India of state and private Portuguese investment and trade) or has provided only brief, narrowly focused or generalized accounts of the involvement of South Asian capital in the maritime trade of Portuguese India.¹⁷ There has been thus no detailed and systematic study of particular South Asian merchant networks who, while operating under the umbrella of the Portuguese imperial state and contributing to its fiscal income, were attached to broader Indian Ocean commercial currents. Vāṇiyā merchants in Diu and Daman ran their business concerns and pursued commercial and financial agendas that were not circumscribed by Portuguese state or private pressures as they weighed up and seized opportunities in the ocean's maritime sphere.

This is not to argue, however, that Gujarati merchants marginalized or were entirely indifferent towards the Portuguese state. Rather, they maintained a relationship of selective engagement with state offices and institutions that was made possible by their powerful economic position. Vāṇiyā merchants took advantage of the perquisites of imperial subjecthood when it appeared advantageous to do so but negotiated their relationship with Portuguese authorities in India and Mozambique from a position of considerable commercial and financial strength. The income of the imperial state in Diu and Daman was largely dependent on the

¹⁷ See, for example, Michael Pearson, "Goa-based seaborne trade, 17th–18th centuries", in Teotonio de Souza (ed.), *Goa Through the Ages: An Economic History* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 146–75; *idem*, "Markets and Merchant Communities in the Indian Ocean: Locating the Portuguese", in Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto (eds.), *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88–108; Celsa Pinto, *Trade and Finance in Portuguese India: A Study of the Portuguese Country Trade, 1770–1840* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994); Rudy Bauss, "Indian and Chinese Control of the Portuguese Eastern Empire (1770–1850)", *Purabhilekh-Puratatva*, 10, 1 (1992), 1–19; Luis Frederico Dias Antunes, "A Actividade da Companhia de Comércio dos Banianes de Diu em Moçambique (1686–1777)", MA thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1992; *idem*, "The Trade Activities of the Banyans in Mozambique: Private Indian Dynamics in the Panel of the Portuguese State Economy (1686–1777)", in K. S. Mathew (ed.), *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 301–31.

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revenue generated by Vāṇiyā commerce, giving merchants considerable leverage in defining the terms of their relations with the Portuguese. As one well-informed Portuguese observer of the structure and nature of commercial relations noted about the Vāṇiyā role in sustaining commercial activity in Mozambique in the 1770s, “without these men, nothing can exist”.¹⁸

As imperial subjects, Vāṇiyās had access to state protection and legal institutions such as the Office of the Judge where merchants could bring disputes for adjudication and present cases against errant officials. They did not abandon or forego recourse to customary practice as represented by the *mahajan* (guild-like organization) to settle differences among members of the merchant community – both of these are discussed in Chapter 1. In effect, a dual system of enforcing commercial, social and legal obligations operated in Diu and Daman, and whether merchants appealed to one or the other depended on perceived benefits. The *mahajan* and imperial courts operated as complementary mechanisms to regulate merchant and related commercial behaviour. This complementarity reflected, further, the adaptive capacity of Vāṇiyā merchants to certain aspects of the Portuguese imperial presence in the Indian Ocean. It suggests also that, instead of being dictated by an abstracted notion of imperial “policy” emanating from Goa or the metropole, the logics governing interaction between Vāṇiyās and the imperial state were often determined by local pressures and concerns.

This often resulted in little agreement between Portuguese imperial officials and between them and private metropolitan interests, which further allowed Gujarati merchants to exploit commercial opportunities in the western Indian Ocean. While local officials in Diu, for example, appreciated that the financial contribution of Vāṇiyās to the income of the treasury was critical for its solvency and therefore sought to foster a commercial and financial environment that was attractive to these merchants, high-ranking administrators in Mozambique and metropolitan merchants, wedded to the notion (no matter how unrealistic) that trade between the territories of the *Estado da Índia* should be the preserve of Portuguese merchants, were hostile and resentful of the prominent place occupied by Vāṇiyās in the imperial economy. Such tensions and paradoxes were not uncommon for South Asian and other merchant networks in the Indian Ocean because – though imperialists may have

¹⁸ “Copia de Huma Informação dada pelo General Balthazar M.^{EL} Per.^A do Lago”, in Jeronimo Jose Nogueira de Andrade, “Descrição Do Estado em que ficavão os Negócios do Anno de 1789. . .”, *Arquivo das Colonias*, I (1917), 230. Its author, Balthazar Manoel Pereira do Lago, was Governor-General of Mozambique between 1765 and 1779.