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978-1-107-08483-4 - International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean

Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman

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International Order in Diversity

International Relations scholars typically expect political communities to resemble one another the more they are exposed to pressures of war, economic competition and the spread of hegemonic legitimacy standards. However, historically it is heterogeneity, not homogeneity, that has most often defined international systems. Examining the Indian Ocean region – the centre of early modern globalization – Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman explain how diverse international systems can emerge and endure.

Divergent preferences for terrestrial versus maritime conquest, congruent traditions of heteronomy and shared strategies of localization were factors which enabled diverse actors including the Portuguese Estado da Índia, Dutch and English company sovereigns and mighty Asian empires to co-exist for centuries without converging on a common institutional form. Debunking the presumed relationship between interaction and homogenization, this book radically revises conventional thinking on the evolution of international systems, while deepening our understanding of a historically crucial but critically understudied world region.

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107084834

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First published 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Phillips, Andrew, 1977–
International order in diversity : war, trade and rule in the Indian Ocean / Andrew Phillips, J. C. Sharman.

pages cm. – (Cambridge studies in international relations ; 137)

ISBN 978-1-107-08483-4 (hardback)

1. Indian Ocean Region – Relations. 2. Geopolitics – Indian Ocean Region.

I. Sharman, J. C. (Jason Campbell), 1973– II. Title.

DS341.P55 2015

327.09182'4–dc23

2014044743

ISBN 978-1-107-08483-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-44682-3 Paperback

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This book reflects our shared fascination with empires, and a related longstanding interest in the role of military power in the rise of the West. From the outset we were united in our frustration at two disconnects within International Relations scholarship. The first was the still widespread tendency to banish empires to the distant, irrelevant past, and to base theories of international systems almost exclusively on the experience of today's global sovereign state monoculture. The second was the field's tacit reliance on an outdated triumphalist historiography, which both exaggerates and elongates the period of Western global military supremacy. This misreading of history mistakes the sovereign state's contemporary triumph as somehow reflecting the logical end-point of centuries of continuous interaction and competition. Our intuition was that history was far messier and more meandering, and that making sense of durably diverse international systems, where neither the sovereign state nor the West had been predominant, would provide a useful corrective.

In focusing on the Indian Ocean, we were motivated by our desire to contribute to an exciting body of scholarship that is now seeking to recast International Relations on less Eurocentric foundations. But as political scientists based in Australia (itself a product of extra-European Western hegemony) our interests have also been shaped by our country's preoccupation with the dawn of a purportedly 'Asian century'. For while Australians increasingly ponder the challenges of navigating an increasingly post-Western world, a popular historical understanding of how international relations worked in maritime Afro-Asia before Western dominance has until now remained elusive. Without this historical understanding, it remains difficult to contextualize or prepare for the transformations that are now reshaping the global order. Beyond our theoretical ambitions, then, we hope that this book will also help to expand readers' historical horizons, enabling them to more confidently engage a world where non-Western powers are reclaiming their earlier centrality.

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Anyone who writes a book incurs many debts along the way, and we are no exception. We would especially like to thank Alex Cooley, Luke Glanville, Seb Kaempf, Peter Katzenstein and Chris Reus-Smit for their thoughtful and detailed feedback on an early version of the main argument. Similarly valuable was a panel ('Globalization's Cradle: International Relations Theory and the Indian Ocean') at the 2013 International Studies Association annual conference, featuring Amitav Acharya, Charles Butcher, Ryan Griffiths, Peter Katzenstein, Manjeet Pardesi, Shogo Suzuki and Bill Thompson. We have also presented our main thesis at Griffith University, the University of Queensland and the Australian National University, and we are grateful for the feedback we received in these fora. Likewise, we also appreciated the valuable feedback we received from presentations of the argument at the 2011 International Studies Association Asia-Pacific Regional Section Inaugural Conference, the 2012 Oceanic Conference on International Studies and the Woolloongabba Writers' Collective. We are especially grateful to Janice Bially Mattern, who provided excellent suggestions for refining the argument in her capacities as chair and discussant of our ISA Asia-Pacific Regional Section panel. We would also like to thank Cathy Moloney and Ben Walter for their terrific research assistance. Sharman would like to thank his current and former colleagues at Griffith who provided comments – in particular Luke Glanville, Ian Hall, Hun Joon Kim, TongFi Kim, Andrew O'Neil, Frank Smith, Pat Weller and Wes Widmaier. Likewise, Phillips would like to thank University of Queensland colleagues who provided constructive feedback on the book's main argument, in particular Stephen Bell, Richard Devetak, Tim Dunne, Heather Rae, Chris Reus-Smit, Emily Tannock and all other participants in the St Lucy's International History Reading Group. We are very appreciative of the detailed and helpful feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers and the time and effort that this represents.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Australian Research Council grants DE130100644, DP120100937 and FT120100485, and the University of Queensland Early Career Researcher Award grant 2011002322. Lastly, Andrew Phillips would like to thank his parents for their unending support and encouragement, while J. C. Sharman would like to thank Bilyana for putting up with his frequent absences, both physical and mental.