History Compass - Indian Ocean Worlds as Method “Subaltern Lives: history, identity and memory in the Indian Ocean world”

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It is historiographically well established that the history of the Indian Ocean is a history of mobility, networks and cultural exchange. In recent years, a rich and diverse literature has emerged, and through it scholars have brought together the concerns of maritime and new imperial history to centre on what Marcus Vink has called the ‘process geographies’ of ‘porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries and borders.’¹ But how to capture and represent the history of the people who breached, bridged and leaked across these materially elusive spaces? I do not mean those travelling elites whose trace can be found in published (auto)biographies, official archives, newspapers, photographs and family papers.² I mean ordinary people – the seafarers, slaves, soldiers, migrants and labourers – who moved in an often-circular fashion around, between and across polities, nations, colonies and Empires. Their *footprints* are usually easy to see, but their *footsteps* are often extraordinarily difficult to trace. In this paper I will suggest that two ways forward for writing about subaltern mobility and history in the Indian Ocean are a transnational engagement with colonial archives of surveillance and restraint and the opening up of the discipline of ‘history’ to the possibility of ethnographic work in and on the region’s islands and littorals. By this, I am not advocating the production of new forms of oral history, but I am proposing that we take seriously contemporary understandings of imperial effects on society and social formation.

It is scarcely original to suggest that extensive mobility - the movement of people across space - underpin cultural transformation. But perhaps what has been less well recognised is that because European empires kept a close eye on people who moved from place to place, whether they were voluntary travellers or migrants, or coercively shipped and hired soldiers, slaves and labourers, ordinary people often became subject to various colonial surveillance strategies. This has left us with an exceptionally rich archive, *inter alia* of ships, port cities, barracks, prisons, and plantations. However, when empires fractured into independent countries, with decolonization in the twentieth century, newly established state archives and their documentary holdings quite naturally became the foundations for the writing of national, regional (or, if you prefer) area studies histories. But these were literally and metaphorically *paper* foundations, for paradoxically enough the rightful democratisation of archives and their geographical boundedness have worked against the use of this archive

¹ Markus P.M. Vink, ‘Indian Ocean Studies and the “new thalassology”’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), pp. 41-62; *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*, ed. H.P. Ray and E.A. Alpers, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007.

² Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2006.

and to write connected forms of imperial or colonial history, at least from the perspective of the Global South. This spatial confinement in history writing – which reflects the spatial boundaries of imperial rule itself – has been compounded by the fact that imperial archives of metropolitan cities remained largely intact during this period; some like French Aix-en-Provence even grew with the repatriation of records from newly-independent Algeria and ex-colonial *départements et territoires d'outre-mer*. Thus, even when research faces outwards, London, Paris, Lisbon and The Hague have frequently remained at the geographical core of the *production* of imperial history.

If archives of mobility are scattered across towns, cities, states and nations; they can be found in the places where people were born, lived and died; and in the locations where they journeyed and sojourned. Thus tracing their histories and lives, their experiences of empire, and their impact on imperial formations, compels us to work transnationally. In Ann Laura Stoler's words, this means that we take seriously the 'along the archival grain,'³ to bring histories of islands, littorals and empires into dialogue with the circuits and circulations of migration and labour, voluntary or otherwise. Beyond my own interest in subaltern biography (with subalternity a process rather than a fixed category of identity), in promoting the individuation of communities often collectivised in the colonial and postcolonial imagination, and in the experiential dimension of empires, such an approach has a further advantage: of opening out to view the relationship between spaces that are not obviously connected together.⁴ The potential significance of this way of seeing has been illuminated in recent scholarship in and across the British, French and Merina empires in Madagascar, Mascarene Islands, the Straits Settlements, India, the Bay of Bengal and Australia, and more specifically in the remarkable work of Kerry Ward on forced migration and the Dutch East India Company in Indonesia and the Cape.⁵

If transnational, geographically connected and/ or pan-imperial archival research offers potentially new perspectives on empires in the Indian Ocean, so too does ethnographic work. Sociologists and historians, in some cases inspired by the intellectual currents and apparent cultural hybridity of what is generally called the Black Atlantic,⁶ have been active in linking the colonial past to the postcolonial present. To take some examples from the western rim of an ocean that Michael Pearson memorably suggested that we ought to rename the Afrasian Sea, we come first to Engseng Ho's extraordinarily textured unpacking of the 'local cosmopolitanism' of Hadhrami migrants, by studying selected Yemeni grave sites and their relationship to diasporic religious and cultural

³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009).

⁴ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: biographies of colonialism in the Indian Ocean world, 1790-1920* (CUP, 2012.)

⁵ 'Special Issue: The Indian Ocean', *Journal of Social History*, 45, 2 (2011); Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992.

formations.⁷ Next is François Vergès' *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, a study of slavery and its aftermath in the French Mascarene colony, and now *département d'outre-mer*, Réunion. 'The past weighs on the present, solidified in denial and disavowal,' she writes. 'It hides a secret. What is repressed ...? Slavery.' In a powerful epilogue she urges us 'to take the island as a starting point and *from this point* to look at the diversity of the elements that contributed to make [the Réunionnais].'⁸ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully have proposed the concept of Coolitude as a politically engaged identity for the descendants of migrant Indians from the sugar colony of Mauritius, to complement that of Negritude for people in the Caribbean who trace their enslaved origins to Africa.⁹

These important studies read and frame the postcolonial present through the authors' successful meshing together of archives and a sensibility to the historical constitution of societies and cultures. How could this kind of methodological synthesis be taken further in the Indian Ocean context, and in a way that does not lose sight of my desire to 'people' its history? I would like to propose a destabilising (though not entire de-centring) of official archives as the only starting point for writing history, and to suggest historians' engagement with the alternative knowledges and cultural practices of families and communities. Genealogical research is booming, and the authors of online community blogs and forums express acute historical awareness (if also partial framings and misconceptions) about many issues and concerns. Of course neither phenomenon – family history and community association – is entirely new, but Internet search engines have taken them into every historians' study. I have both contacted and been contacted by genealogists, and from them I have learned that family papers and passed-down stories can illuminate histories of peoples' lives that are not available to us in state archives: the whiff of scandal, the shame of secrets, the 'passings' effected despite – or perhaps because of – colonial distinctions of race and class.¹⁰

Inspired by this work, I have taken a more systematic and explicitly ethnographic approach to my current research on the British Indian penal colony in the Andaman Islands, Bay of Bengal (1858-1945).¹¹ Over the past two years, accompanying years of work in archives in mainland India, Britain, North America and the Islands' capital Port Blair, I have interviewed and corresponded with the descendants of South Asian convicts and other involuntary migrant settlers, as well as descendants of the British and Anglo-Indian colonial

⁷ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006 (quote p. 163).

⁸ Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: colonial family romance and métissage* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999), 15, 248-9 (my emphasis.)

⁹ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an anthology of the Indian labour diaspora* (London, Anthem, 2002).

¹⁰ Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, introduction and ch. 5. See also Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories*. (Esp. Renee Sentilles' essay.)

¹¹ 'Integrated Histories of the Andamans' (2009-13) is an international collaboration with Madhumita Mazumdar and Visvajit Pandya, funded by the ESRC (award no. RES-000-22-3484).

establishment. I have asked them about their understanding of the islands' history, of their political affiliations, and their sense of community and place. In this work, I have reflected on feminist ideas about ontology and epistemology, and the effects of my presence and projections on my research and writing: notably as a white, British woman working on the violence and coercion of a penal colony so recent that elderly folk in the Andamans remember seeing convicts at work shortly before the Second World War. Although I have always tried to remain respectful *to* the individual subjects of my research in archives (as well as to their *subjectivity*), this ethnographic work and its coincidental development with the burgeoning of online genealogy has rendered me ever more mindful that at the tap of a button on a keyboard, or the click of a mouse, when I give names and voices to the individuals I have been researching, and when my papers and publications appear online, I am potentially always establishing a direct line to their descendants. In this, there is a need to think carefully about the ethics of our research engagement, both within and beyond the academy.

This brings me to my final point: memory. I mentioned above Vergès' important work on the repression of the history of enslavement in the context of Réunion; and the disavowal of its importance in the making of the island's society and culture. But memory works in other ways too. As Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, silences enter 'history' not just in the making of sources and archives, but in the making of narratives.¹² And these narratives are not just born of historians, and our decisions to research and to write particular kinds of history, whether explicitly theoretical or not. They are also produced in the public domain: through the celebration and memorialisation of the sacrifices of those Indian indentured labourers who crossed the black waters (*kala pani*) to the Mascarenes and Caribbean; of 'pioneer' colonial settlers on Australia's Indian Ocean rim; and, to return to the Andamans once again, in the projection of the history of the penal colony as a history of anti-colonial, nationalist struggle, freedom fighting and ultimately martyrdom. 'Jai Hind!' the tour guides say after a choreographed two-minute silence at the islands' gallows. Is there anything specifically *Indian Ocean* about these makings of history, identity and memory, and these broader methodological reflections? Perhaps that is a question with which historians of other post-colonies and spaces can engage.

¹² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 26.