

Conclusion

The oral traditions of many Mijikenda communities include a story about a group of elephant hunters settling Mombasa. The basic outline goes as follows: some hunters shot an elephant and tracked it to Mombasa, which was then not settled. They followed the elephant through the forest until it collapsed and died at a cave on the northeastern part of the island. They stayed there and feasted on the elephant's meat. But in time, the hunters realized that they could not grow crops on the island. So, without any other source of food, they abandoned Mombasa and returned to the mainland. This story is usually told to accompany traditions on the settlement of the coastal region during the mythical migration from Shungwaya. In some iterations, the hunters tracked other animals such as buffalo. In others, the Mijikenda hunters are accompanied by hunter-foragers who they called the Laa. Regardless of these minor differences, in every version one thing is consistent: the roving hunters abandon the coast and make their homes along the forested ridges inland from Mombasa.¹

A Swahili manuscript on Mombasa's origins tells a similar story. In the Swahili narrative, Mombasa's original inhabitants were a mix of people, including migrants from Persia and the Hijaz who lived alongside hunter-foragers north of Mombasa Island. One day, the hunters saw an elephant and followed it until it collapsed on the island. Like the hunters in the Mijikenda story, they stayed on the island feasting on the elephant's meat. However, when finished, instead of abandoning Mombasa, they began exploring and discovered that Europeans were already living on the island. From there, the narrative explains Mombasa's partnerships with the Portuguese who had arrived as traders living at Fort Jesus. After starting as a story of elephant trackers discovering Mombasa, it quickly moves to narratives of oceanic trade and conflicts with Europeans and Omanis, finally culminating with the town's incorporation into the Busaidi Sultanate in the nineteenth century.²

I close this book by juxtaposing these two origin stories because of the vastly different ways that they orient our gaze, despite both featuring a tale of elephant trackers on Mombasa at their core. In the Swahili narrative, we're quickly swept into a rich tapestry of Indian Ocean connections featuring migrants from Persia and Mecca, and trade and conflicts with the oceanic empires of Portugal and Oman. The Mijikenda elephant hunting story does something different. Whether intentionally or not, the oral traditions explain a metaphorical turn inland *away* from Mombasa and its oceanic connections and *toward* more favorable environments immediately inland. If the Swahili narrative places Mombasa's origins within the familiar bounds of an outward-facing Indian Ocean history, the Mijikenda story invites the listener to imagine the littoral from an alternative, inland vantage point. Most importantly, it explains Mijikenda speakers' inland orientation as an intentional choice. It is easy to see connections and collaborations within the oceanic sphere as the result of choices and historical agency. This book has highlighted the ways that people might reject or participate selectively within these very same networks according to their own ambitions.

Over the previous five chapters, I have argued that Mombasa's maritime connections were contingent on its inland neighbor's particular modes of engagement with the norms and practices of the Indian Ocean. Moving away from a focus on diasporic traders and Islamic port cities, I've shown that Mombasa's global connections hinged on an array of developments in the interior. This included the circulation of medicinal ideas among inland societies, as well as material practices with textiles in forest clearings. Mombasa's global history was also shaped by Mijikenda speakers' use of rituals of honor and displays of martiality—which they articulated using an Arabic loanword—to demand tributes and articulate their autonomy from the port city. Stories about inland communities supplying trade goods like ivory and consuming imported goods like textiles make sense within conventional narratives of the Indian Ocean. But if we ask why inland agents acted as they did, then we must acknowledge that global trading patterns and politics were contingent on many things invisible from the perspective of a port: people in rural villages choosing to dress memorial posts for their ancestral spirits with strips of cloth, a healer's aspirations to obtain powerful medicines, or circulating knowledge between different social groups related to meeting places, rituals, or animal husbandry.

Inland developments loom large in Mombasa's history. Mijikenda-speaking groups acted at different moments as the town's suppliers, as its political and military allies, and as aggressors conducting raids on the island. As a result, urban merchants and elites had to regularly accommodate and appeal to their inland neighbors to obtain trade goods, provisions, and military support. Coastal urbanites and the town's foreign interlocutors often disparaged Mijikenda communities, calling them barbarians or bush folk. But they also understood that communities in the interior were critical to the port city's position as a leading commercial hub.

This book has focused on Mombasa, one node of an interconnected Indian Ocean. It is a specific case study, but I believe that it is not exceptional. People in many parts of the world and at different times in the past have participated in larger interactive spheres while also pursuing goals and interests dissonant to the dominant norms of those arenas. By reimagining what it meant to participate in the Indian Ocean world from the vantage point of Mombasa's immediate interior, I have highlighted the generative potential of developments that might seem out of harmony within a global history literature dominated by stories of cosmopolitan traders, port cities, and states and empires. People living in small, seemingly disconnected places could and did participate in global developments.³ Not as an exploited periphery, but as active agents, capable of shaping larger-scale processes, even as they pursued goals rooted in their particular social or cultural milieu.

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To conclude, let's take a brief detour away from East Africa and delve into secondary scholarship on three widely circulated Indian Ocean products—pepper, cotton textiles, and birds of paradise feathers—and the people that initiated their entry into large-scale networks. My aim is to draw focus to the people, places, and practices contributing to the movement of each product across and between different scales, from inland villages to port cities in different parts of the Indian Ocean. Together, these examples hint at the possibility of writing histories of large-scale connections while keeping the agency and ambitions of interior regions, villages, and small-scale societies at the center of the narrative.

VILLAGE ECONOMIES AND COTTON TEXTILES

Cotton textiles are synonymous with India's connections with global trade and thus offer a useful starting point. While much of the literature on Indian cottons adopts a large-scale focus—their circulation in Europe, Africa, and other parts of Asia, and their critical role in the Industrial Revolution—textile production started within much smaller, village-based economies. In preindustrial India, cotton spinners bought raw cotton directly from growers and sold it to people in weaving villages where textile production skills had been developed and passed down over generations. Women in peasant households did most of the processing work, cleaning raw cotton and spinning it into yarn before selling it to weavers who used cotton looms to turn the yarn into cloth textiles. Next, agents with established relationships with weaving households and villages purchased the textiles for finishing. Dyes made from indigo, turmeric, safflower, and madder, along with block prints and sketching, gave the finished textiles their colorful design patterns.⁴ By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, finishing took place in specialized workshops near urban centers, which allowed merchants to cater designs to the

consumer demands of external markets.⁵ Eventually, the cotton textiles reached the ships of merchants who transported the cloth to locales across the world.

As the above sketch shows, village textile production was highly complex, implicating multiple actors and forms of expertise even within a single weaving village. Notably, those engaged in textile production did not play a direct role in trading the garments they produced.⁶ However, they did use their skills to earn social and economic benefits, something evident in “tax reductions . . . grants of agricultural lands, privileges in temple rituals, or positions in temple administration” available to weaving villages by the fourteenth century.⁷ While textile production was driven by weavers’ goals within this particular milieu, once cotton textiles were taken out of the villages, they had a wide range of use values in the different locales to which they traveled. In addition to their most common use as adornments in India, cotton was also used for recordkeeping, mapmaking, and as decorations in the interiors of homes and royal courts.⁸ In Southeast Asia, textiles—both locally produced and imported—were used for “curing diseases, death and other religious rights, the sanctification of icons, ceremonial and diplomatic exchanges, as well as the payment of services and taxes and the decoration of royal compounds.”⁹ As we’ve seen, Mijikenda speakers used textiles in initiations and various ritual contexts and as a form of tribute that undergirded their commercial and military partnerships with Mombasa.

Viewing the Indian Ocean’s history from the life of an object, we can imagine a textile passing through various hands, from a weaver’s loom to a healing ceremony in Indonesia or a forested glade in Mombasa’s interior. A dhow’s cargo hold or a port’s storehouse would have been nodes within our textile’s life cycle. But these spaces where it was touched by the hands of actors deemed sufficiently “global” were transitory. To fix our gaze solely on the maritime sphere erases other means by which people participated in and shaped transregional connections. Women processing cotton fibers in villages in India’s interior were a critical part of circulations that spanned continents, even if they never interacted with characteristic spaces like a port city. By taking a different orientation within our sources, paying attention to participation strategies that are dissonant to the practices traditionally centered in narratives of the Indian Ocean, scholars might find that the macro-region’s history can be as productively analyzed from the vantage point of a weaving village as it can from tracing the movements of diasporic merchants.

FROM THE FOREST SWIDDEN TO THE “LAND OF PEPPER”

India’s Malabar coast offers another compelling case study for thinking about smaller interior networks and Indian Ocean connections. Malabar is popularly known as the “land of pepper” due to the spice that fueled the region’s connections to global trading circuits.

Historian Sebastian Prange's book *Monsoon Islam* is the most comprehensive study of the Malabar coast—and perhaps the best study of any single Indian Ocean region—masterfully tracing the role of ports, mosques, palaces, and the sea in the formation of the commercial, religious, and political milieu of port cities in south-west India.¹⁰ Although the book spends only two sentences discussing Malabar's hinterland—the Western Ghats where pepper was procured—in a separate article, titled “Measuring by the Bushel,” Prange delves into pepper production based on the sparse available evidence. The insights of that article—while remaining more suggestive than definitive—indicate the critical role of this “hinterland” in the making of Malabar's oceanic connections.

Premodern pepper cultivation unfolded across several spheres: among small-holding farmers who intermixed pepper in garden plots with bananas and coconuts, on larger monocultural plantations controlled by wealthy landowners, and in upland swiddens where forest dwellers cultivated spices and collected forest goods that ultimately reached coastal markets.¹¹ Malayali traders brokered exchanges between port cities and these different nodes of inland production. Spices did not move directly from the interior to the port but were instead, according to Prange, “assembled at trading locations further inland along roads, rivers or backwaters and only later transported to those markets.” He concludes that this “intermediary sphere was sustained by the physical and social barriers that separated the land and society of Malabar's interior from the centres of international demand on its coast.”¹² There's no doubt that Malabar's rise to a major region of the Indian Ocean was intimately connected to the development of shared religious, commercial, and political practices among Muslim merchants in coastal ports. But it also hinged on inland networks that had few direct interactions with the worlds of port cities connected by the Indian Ocean monsoon.

The people that first developed knowledge of pepper cultivation remain obscured from the Indian Ocean's history, despite pepper's centrality to Malabar's connections to this global macro-region. Pepper first grew as a wild, gathered product. Communities living in the forested Western Ghats were experts at “locating, gathering, drying, processing, and transporting” pepper to other parts of South Asia.¹³ By the early centuries CE, some began cultivating pepper intentionally, incorporating it into their swidden plots along with plants like ginger and cardamom. These spices circulated alongside other forest products, including aromatic woods and resins that were similarly valued far beyond the forested Ghats.¹⁴ Anthropologist Kathleen Morrison argues that early European visitors to South Asia misrecognized pepper and other forest products as “wild” commodities, erasing the people and knowledge behind their production and circulation in the process.¹⁵ Historians have continued along this path, devoting little attention to the circulation of forest products between the uplands and coastal markets prior to their inauguration as “global” trade goods once they reach the port. The

labors, knowledge, and aspirations of people living in the interior pepper-producing regions remain obscure to global histories as a result.

TO SOUTHEAST ASIA: FOREST PRODUCTS AND BIRD FEATHERS

There's perhaps no region where forest producers and products played a larger role in global maritime networks than Southeast Asia. For centuries, forest products like sandalwood oils, camphor, beeswax, and resins fueled Southeast Asia's connections to larger exchange networks.¹⁶ Sandalwood oil, for instance, was used in India and China for artisanal purposes and as a medicinal aromatic. Much of the sandalwood reaching these places originated in Timor and then circulated through global transshipment hubs, first in the Srivijaya empire and later at port cities like Melaka. Like the resins, gums, and oils mentioned above, sandalwood was a product of the forests rather than of the sea. From one perspective, sandalwood and other forest products appear as little more than commodities on a list of trade goods, moving from a distant "periphery" to core trading cities. Once the forest goods enter the shipping holds of ocean-bound merchants, their story transforms from local to global. Yet forest products reached port cities through the actions of many other individuals, including forest experts who possessed the specialized knowledge necessary to identify and assemble the forest's bounties, and various agents who moved goods through complex local exchange networks. In most cases, these people had social ideas and community organization strategies quite different from those centered in studies of oceanic trade.¹⁷

Birds of paradise feathers, which originated in eastern Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, provide another rich illustration of the diverse social ideas and skills undergirding transregional trade. The birds' colorful plumage was valued widely in Indian Ocean ports, in Himalayan kingdoms, and in parts of medieval Europe. These circulations began not with merchants in transshipment hubs, but with skilled Papuan hunters. Hunting birds of paradise was no ad hoc matter. It took place annually when the birds visited the same forest clearings to mate. Knowledge of the preferred clearings and timing of mating rituals was passed down between generations of hunters who staked claims at specific mating trees. Hunters positioned themselves in the trees, waiting until the mating ritual commenced and then shot the birds using blunt arrows. After killing as many birds as possible, they had to prep them immediately on the spot so their skins dried with the colorful plumage intact. They did not develop these immense skills simply because birds of paradise feathers were export goods. Papuans themselves understood the feathers to have protective qualities. Warriors wore the birds' colorful plumage as head-dresses when going into battle, and people also adorned themselves with feathers for wedding ceremonies and fertility rituals. As historian Leonard Andaya has

argued, birds of paradise feathers were not raw economic goods. Instead, the story of this globally circulating good must be understood within local Papuan contexts.¹⁸ As was the case elsewhere, larger processes of global trade and cultural interactions grew out of the cultural ideas and skills of people largely invisible within much of the literature on transregional oceanic connections.

I offer these brief considerations—of bird feathers, sandalwood, pepper, and textiles—as entry points for rethinking histories of connections that spanned world regions. As an example of these histories, let's consider Zhao Rukua's thirteenth-century commercial guide *Zhu Fan Zhi*, which is rife with references to goods that originate in smaller-scale communities living inland from the sea. The goods reported to circulate through the Chinese port city of Quanzhou included East African elephant ivory, Indian spices and textiles, various woods and resins, and avian products, like kingfisher feathers.¹⁹ Descriptions of the origin points of these goods are brief and sometimes incomplete—as we saw with the details on elephant hunting discussed in chapter 3. But in other cases, Zhao was keenly aware of the interior locales from which some goods originated. To cite a few examples, according to *Zhu Fan Zhi*, pepper grew “in the uncultivated wilds, and the villages” of India's interior, where people organized their harvests and processing around monsoonal rains. Camphor originated in the “depths of hills and remotest valleys” of Borneo. There, according to Zhao, large groups traveled into forests to cut bark from trees. They then burned the bark down to a condensed substance that they sealed in jars for trade as an aromatic medicine. Similarly, kingfisher feathers reached Chinese ports after skilled hunters living around lakes and ponds in the interiors of southern Thailand and the Malay Peninsula employed decoys to lure and trap the birds.²⁰

Thirteenth-century Quanzhou epitomizes the massive scales of premodern oceanic trade. The port city's success was tied to its robust commercial infrastructure and established diasporic communities of Muslim merchants from southern Arabia, Persia, and Central Asia.²¹ Products originating from the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, the South China Sea, and overland Silk Road routes flowed through the city's commercial offices. If we accept that goods moving between far-flung ports played a key role in forging Quanzhou's transregional connections, then we might also consider how people living in the places where these goods originated participated in these connections. As the examples above show, people living in inland regions and small-scale villages were not simply suppliers of trade goods. They were active agents in making these connections, even as their specific strategies for doing so diverged from the dominant norms of large-scale networks under study.

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Sources have always been a major limiting factor to centering the above narratives of the Indian Ocean or other global macro-regions. With few exceptions,

urban centers, states, and individuals integrated into transregional mercantile networks have better written documentation—and frequently also better archaeological visibility—than smaller-scale or rural communities. These problems are only amplified as we move further back in time. As I’ve argued, however, the very same social, political, and commercial features that make communities like Mijikenda hard to study were in fact critical to their active role and influence within expansive global arenas like the Indian Ocean. In other words, the challenges of incorporating smaller-scale communities into global histories might also offer us an opportunity to ask new questions about such communities’ participation and influence in larger-scale processes. In doing so, scholars of the premodern world can add important insights to existing “turns” in Indian Ocean and global history that have thus far been dominated by modern historians.

Recent scholarship on the Indian Ocean, for instance, has begun to break apart earlier notions of a unified and connected ocean by studying sources written in its numerous languages. Departing from the European source base that dominated earlier studies, recent work brings documentary records in the many African, Middle Eastern, and Asian languages spoken across the Indian Ocean to the fore, illuminating a heterogeneity masked by earlier focus on the unity of littoral societies.²² Like scholars working in the Indian Ocean’s numerous vernaculars, historians of precolonial Africa have a long-standing interest in language. However, reconstructed word histories, rather than written texts, constitute the vernacular source base for studying Africa’s distant pasts. Historical linguistics methods are well established among scholars of Africa, and it is possible to imagine their utilization in studies of other Indian Ocean regions as well. With such approaches and methods in hand, scholars may find entirely novel ways to narrate the macro-region’s history from the vantage of people and places thus far rendered peripheral—or simply unknowable—in studies written from the purview of urban ports.

By asking what it means to participate in the Indian Ocean, this book reveals how peoples’ selective engagements—and disengagements—with global networks and processes could help constitute larger connections. Transregional mobilities and global flows represent key themes of global histories, including the subfield of Indian Ocean studies. Yet recently, some scholars have questioned whether this focus on connectivity comes at the neglect of histories of contestation, exclusion, and rupture that were also part of global processes. Attention to the limits of larger interactive spheres, these scholars argue, will draw attention to varied responses, contingencies, and local attachments so crucial to understanding the global past.²³ As I have shown throughout this book, selective engagements with the dominant global norms could also offer people a critical means for participating in—and shaping—worlds beyond their locale. In the Indian Ocean, mobile commodities, diasporic merchants, and port cities all played a central role in creating enduring transregional interactions. But large-scale connections also hinged on an array

of less obviously “global” ideas and practices that circulated in the very places where the reach of oceanic actors—and their cultural norms, religious ideas, and technologies—seems to end. Hunters mastering the behaviors of bird species to procure feathers, forest dwellers experimenting with pepper cultivation in their swiddens, and indeed, people learning a new word—and its associated idea—as they moved between villages in a port’s interior were all participating, in one way or another, in the making of expansive worlds.