

1.1. Introduction - Beatrice Nicolini

An *ecotone* is a transitional area between two or more distinct ecological communities, like for example the zone between field and forest, mountain and ocean, or between sea and land. The two ecosystems may be separated by a sharp boundary line or may merge gradually. An *ecotone* may also indicate a place where two communities meet, at times creolizing or germinating into a new community. We will be borrowing this term traditionally used in environmental studies and geography, and apply it to postcolonial studies in disciplines such as history, the social and political sciences, ethnic studies, etc. Consequently, *Ecotones* seek to continue exploring the complex chemistry of creolizing worlds, the contact zones between cultures in contexts such as migration, diaspora, refugee movements and other postcolonial displacements and environmental evacuations, among other major historical events. The ecotones, as points of contact or points of friction, between the Indian Ocean and the African continent, will provide the main frame of approach.

Within this wider framework, the historical, political and institutional elements of this collection of studies are focused on the end of the borders inside the dynamic interfaces between the sea and the land, with equal attention being given to the sea, the foreshore, and the terrestrial coastal fringe. Adopting a maritime as well as a coastal landscape perspective, this collection of open research essays seeks to address questions of continuity, change and identity over centuries. More specifically, current and future studies will aim to reconstruct the nature, pattern, and intensity of resource use at different periods in the past; the environmental contexts, impacts and sustainability of these different strategies of resource use; the nature and form of the port towns, and the natural and cultural landscape in which they were situated; the mechanisms and technologies of trade and maritime activity; and the nature of settlement activities outside of the towns. There is further scope, also, for developing some of the ideas of historians concerning the manner in which interaction between land and sea has fashioned the histories of many societies and civilizations, and on the significance of trans-oceanic links between these maritime societies. Similar ecologies around the Indian Ocean, and the monsoon system that dominates the whole region, have developed into a great deal of similarities in the social and cultural fields, giving rise to intercultural connected land and maritime societies.

The Swahili civilization, for example, arose at the confluence between the continental world of East Africa and the maritime worlds of the Indian Ocean, which is visible in every aspect of their culture. Similar tendencies characterise the Hadhrami coast of Arabia and the Malabar coast of India, and even beyond in the Indonesian archipelago. They were part of a global unity that long preceded the capitalist unification of the world from the sixteenth century, and the more recent process of globalisation.

Within this boundless framework, we decided to trace our studies, not with object of 'containing' either the regions, either the issues, but opening to a series of research questions.

Within an interlinked cluster like the Indian Ocean, are we so sure on the early globalisation in this vast area? Moreover, are we so sure about a series of 'enthusiastic' and lyrical descriptions of a sea-life full of different people, ideas, goods, religions, exchanging and living together in a sort of 'peaceful' liquid world before the Europeans? The sea voyages were much more wider than we suppose: the ports of Western India were connected with the Arabian Peninsula and with the Horn of Africa, and beyond. During the period which saw the rise of Europe in the Indian Ocean, probably a 'revolution' occurred from which new protagonists emerged along the Asian, Arabian and African coasts. Against these backdrops, the gradual emergence of new Arab dynasties - and Empires - resulted from the polarization which followed the struggle against the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean. This gave rise to a gradual and discontinuous process of unification among the Arab groups, traditionally divided and in conflict with each other, which came to the fore in the progressive affirmation of what we could define as the power of the Omani Arabs. Here, coastal cities made rich by trade, date growing and pearl fishing, dominated by autocratic sovereigns whose wealth also provided for great military power, confronted the interior, the

hinterland of mountains and great deserts where power was decidedly uncertain, and where groups preserved a virtually absolute independence and perpetuated what we may call a 'guerrilla' state. Two clearly distinct political realities were destined to co-exist: the complex, multi-ethnic mercantile societies of the coasts, and the tribal, pastoral societies of the hinterlands where, from time to time, the formers succeeded in prevailing and imposing their laws.

In the ports of this maritime corridor, small 'city-states' prospered, their gaze directed mainly seawards, while larger 'reigns' turned towards the interior and the north. The city-states jealously preserved their independence and attempts to make inroads on their commercial predominance often ended in failure for their enemies. The Arab potentates of the coasts thus created flourishing markets between the ports of South-Western Asia and the Arabian, Western Indian and East African coasts. These studies will open the discussion on people from South Central Asia and their role in the Persian Gulf region and beyond during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The major motivations to South Central Asian movements were originated from environmental issues as well as from socio-economic conditions in their land. These conditions implied numerous consequences such as the expansion of lawless habits throughout their region, enslaving by external powerful groups, and the progressive creation of new roles in the Persian/Arab Gulf region such as the military one. Very little has been published about these so-called "diasporas communities". For a long time available literature, not so generous on this particular topic, did portray the Asians as a monolithic group of people who migrated in search of a better life. Nevertheless, we would like to try to re-read the role of this Asian community and especially their migrations throughout the wider Persian/Arab Gulf region. Within this framework, the realities of terrain, climate and maritime connections and interconnections played a crucial influence on the construction of the Asian identity throughout contemporary history. This collection of studies have been presented to the Sesamo Conference: Beyond the Arab Uprisings: rediscovering the MENA Region, January 2015, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy. The Editor wishes to express her personal esteem and gratitude to Prof. Matteo Legrenzi, President of Sesamo (Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies), who did organize such a stimulating Conference. Consequently, all contributors are discussing open issues and wish to developing an occasion to further enrich their single challenges. Moreover, the presence of new young scholars is here a significant proof of the great vitality of Italian studies on the Horn of Africa, on transnational issues, on migrant societies, on geopolitics and institutional topics that deserve to be recognized and much better supported. The aim is here to focusing on more than one littoral and more than one region, with the object of analyzing different perspectives both chronologically and methodologically. It should be noted at the outset that ethnocentric views—especially Eurocentric ones—have informed numerous studies for a long time, and sometimes still do. In this regard, most of western oriented strategic studies and analysis on the role of South Central Asian region and of their people throughout history did focus on external menaces, interests and priorities. Therefore, the gradual creation of an 'empty space power' in this area often lead to wrong focuses on the processes of dominance; at the same time, numerous contemporary local and regional interpretations were too blinded by resentment, sorrow and injustice to offer lucid analysis. International, as well as regional policies that did ignore consistently both of these perspectives were, and probably will, destined to fail. Therefore we believe that an inward looking to the region and to the, true, identity of Asian and African groups and tribes, essentially a cultural identity regardless of political boundaries, could ease new, and more empathic approaches to the study of their roles throughout the broader Indian Ocean region. The following essays are "crossing" from north to south an imaginary journey from the lands of South Central Asia to the shores in front of the Persian/Arab Gulf, than "sailing" thank to the monsoon winds to the Horn of Africa, and crossing the complex piracy issue to reach the Nile. It's a "journey" that could be read through the opposite direction, methodologically reaching more than one region and more than one topic, while all of them are deeply interdisciplinary. The cover is the picture of a Pakistani soldier inside a mountain gorge, he is not visible as his eyes are looking

towards the end of the borders.¹

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¹ https://zainabkhawaja.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/the-balochistan-series-part-2-1950-onwards-one-unit-scheme-ayub-khan-etc/balochistan-pakistan-army-military-operation/?hc_location=ufi.