

The Ends of the Indian Ocean: Tracing Coastlines in the Tanzanian “Hinterland”

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Abstract: In recent years, several attempts to revitalize Area Studies have concentrated on oceans as the unifying force to create regions. In this respect, the Indian Ocean has become a prime example to show how economic as well as cultural flows across the sea have contributed to close connections between its shores. However, by doing so, they not only seem to create a certain, rather homogeneous, Indian Ocean space, they often also lead to a conceptual separation between “coast” and “hinterland,” similar to earlier distinctions between “African/Arab” or “East/Central Africa.” In this contribution, so-called “Arab” traders who settled along trade routes connecting the East African coast to its hinterland will serve as an empirical ground to explore and challenge these boundaries. Tracing maritime imaginaries and related materialities in the Tanzanian interior, it will reflect on the ends of the Indian Ocean and the nature of such maritime conceptualizations of space more generally. By taking the relational thinking that lies at the ground of maritimity inland, it wishes to encourage a re-conceptualization of areas that not only replaces a terrestrial spatial entity with a maritime one, but that genuinely breaks with such “container-thinking” and, instead, foregrounds the meandering, fluid character of regions and their complex and highly dynamic entanglements.

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Résumé: Au cours de ces dernières années, plusieurs tentatives de revitalisation des études régionales ont été consacrées aux océans qui sont ainsi devenus une force unificatrice pour la création de régions. À cet égard, l'océan Indien est devenu un excellent exemple pour montrer à quel point les flux économiques et culturels le traversant ont contribué à l'établissement de liens étroits entre ses côtes. Cependant, ces études ont non seulement semblé créer un espace assez homogène mais elles ont également souvent conduit à une séparation conceptuelle entre "côte" et "arrière-pays," répétant ainsi des distinctions antérieures entre "Africains/Arabes" ou "Afrique centrale/Afrique de l'Est." Dans cette contribution, les commerçants dits "arabes" établis le long des routes commerciales reliant la côte est-africaine à son arrière-pays servent de base empirique pour explorer et contester ces distinctions. En étudiant les imaginaires maritimes et leurs matérialités connexes dans l'intérieur de la Tanzanie, cet article se penche sur les extrémités de l'océan Indien et sur la nature d'une telle conceptualisation maritime de l'espace. En prenant la pensée relationnelle qui est à la base de la maritimité intérieure, il souhaite encourager une re-conceptualisation des zones qui non seulement remplacent une entité spatiale terrestre par une entité maritime, mais qui rompent véritablement aussi avec une pensée caractérisée par un cadre géographique rigide. Au lieu de cela, cet article met en évidence le caractère sinueux et fluide des régions et leurs enchevêtrements complexes et hautement dynamiques.

Introduction: Revitalizing Area Studies through Maritime Regions¹

Area Studies went through a crisis in the 1990s. The crisis was particularly virulent in the United States, but affected Area Studies in other parts of the world as well. Stimulated by the *National Defense Education Act* of 1958 and by generous funding of the Ford Foundation as well as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Area Studies had become a rather unquestioned part of the academic landscape in the United States. Until 1990 about 124 Area Studies Centers and graduate schools focusing on different world regions had been established.² However, with the end of the Cold War the political support for Area Studies decreased remarkably. Moreover, new geopolitical constellations, particularly in respect to the breaking up of the Soviet Union, raised questions about the stability and "givenness" of established world regions. The increasing role of

¹ Parts of this work have been developed within AFRASO, an interdisciplinary research project at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, Germany, generously funded by the BMBF 2013–2019. I especially wish to thank Marc Boeckler, Frank Schulze-Engler, and other members of the "theory group" for many fruitful discussions. Moreover, this research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

² Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 166.

globalization in academic discourse further fueled these critical debates, since processes of globalization seemed to oppose clear regional boundaries.³ Thus, by the mid-1990s there were strong calls for a rethinking of areas in Area Studies.⁴

As a response to this “crisis” of Area Studies, in 1996 the Ford Foundation launched a program to “revitalize” the field.⁵ During the following years, a number of projects therefore discussed the general relevance of Area Studies, and more particularly, the possibility of alternative regions, e.g. based on transregional, translocal, or maritime connections.⁶ In a project entitled *Oceans Connect*, for example, a team of scholars from universities around the United States explored the ways in which maritime

³ Arjun Appadurai, “Globalization and Area Studies: The Future of a False Opposition,” in: *The Wertheim Lecture 2000* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies [CASA], 2000); Robert H. Bates, “Area Studies and the Disciplines: A Useful Controversy?” *Political Science and Politics* 30 (1997), 166–169; Peter Hall and Sidney Tarrow, “Globalisation and Area Studies: When Is Too Broad Too Narrow?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 January 1998), B4–B5; Stanley J. Heginbotham, “Rethinking International Scholarship: The Challenge of Transition from the Cold War Era,” *Items* 48 (1994), 33–40; Sidney W. Mintz, “The Localization of Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism,” *Critique of Anthropology* 18–2 (1998), 117–133; Alexander Murphy, “Regions as Social Constructs: The Gap between Theory and Practice,” *Progress in Human Geography* 15 (1991), 22–35; Christopher Shea, “Political Scientists Clash over Value of Area Studies,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (10 January 1997); Mark Tessler, Jodi Nachtwey and Anne Banda, “Introduction: The Area Studies Controversy,” in: Mark Tessler, Jodi Nachtwey and Anne Banda (eds.), *Area Studies and Social Sciences* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), vii–xxi.

⁴ Sidney Tarrow and Kent Worcester, “European Studies after the Cold War,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (10 January 1994), B4–B5; Erik Gilbert, “Coastal East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean: Long-Distance Trade, Empire, Migration, and Regional Unity 1750–1970,” *The History Teacher* 36 (2002), 7–34. In geography, negotiations over the concept of areas and related methodological approaches as e.g. in *Landeskunde* have characterized the discipline at least since the late 1960s. See e.g.: Bertram H. Farmer, “Geography, Area Studies and the Study of Area,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 60 (1973), 1–15.

⁵ Toby A. Volkman, “Crossing Borders: The Case for Area Studies,” *Ford Foundation Report* 29–1 (1998), 28–29.

⁶ Rena Lederman, “Globalization and the Future of Culture Areas: Melanesianist Anthropology in Transition,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27 (1998), 427–449; Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, “A Maritime Response to the Crisis in Area Studies,” *Geographical Review* 89–2 (1999), 161–168; Mintz, “The Localization of Practice;” Appadurai, “Globalization and Area Studies;” Karla Slocum and Deborah A. Thomas, “Rethinking Global and Area Studies: Insights from Caribbeanist Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 105–3 (2003), 553–565.

linkages and transoceanic relations between disparate societies might generate new perspectives on the internal dynamics and identities of world areas. On the basis of this project, Lewis and Wigen formulated their “maritime response to the crisis in area studies.” Proposing alternatives to the largely unexamined western construct dominating the division of the world, they argue that “putting maritime interactions at the center of vision brings to light a set of historical regions that have largely remained invisible on the conventional map of the world.”⁷ Or, as Wick has put it: “[P]lacing the sea at the center of historical analysis allows us to question some lingering yet outdated, singularly state-centered cultural and spatial categories, extending the critique of geographical naturalism and realism to its global reach.”⁸

In this respect, to take oceans as a starting point means to suggest a different view of “areas” more generally, as constituted by interaction and connection instead of being a topographic entity held together by a surrounding boundary.⁹ But, while a focus on oceanic linkages indeed promotes a different regional thinking, generally characterized by a special emphasis on historical relations and processes of exchange, at the same time it can be observed that often new boundaries are created. In respect to the East African coast, for example, such maritime thinking not only seems to create an understanding of a certain, rather homogeneous, Indian Ocean space, but also usually leads to a conceptual separation between “coast” and “hinterland,” similar to those between “Arab/African” and “East/Central Africa.” It thus adds a new kind of divide within the continent, which is neither clearly delineated nor coinciding with established boundaries between territorial or political conceptualizations of East and Central Africa. This way, despite an increasing emphasis on connections and exchange in one direction, distinctions of and between regions appear to slip in again by the backdoor.

⁷ Lewis and Wigen, “A Maritime Response,” 161.

⁸ Alexis Wick, “History, Geography, and the Sea,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (2016), 743–766, 744.

⁹ Earlier attempts to think of regions in relational terms included the work of Ratzel on the diffusion of cultural traits across the Indian Ocean, e.g. Friedrich Ratzel, *Die afrikanischen Bögen, ihre Verbreitung und Verwandtschaften, eine anthropogeographische Studie* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1891); Friedrich Ratzel, “Geschichte, Völkerkunde und historische Perspektive,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 93 (1904), 1–46. See also: Fritz Graebner, *Methode der Ethnologie* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1911) for the way in which these relational spatial constructs were taken up by anthropologists in the so-called *Kulturkreislehre*. For a discussion on how to embed these early works into contemporary discussion about relationality, mobility and space see: Julia Verne, “The Neglected ‘Gift’ of Ratzel for/from the Indian Ocean: Thoughts on Mobilities, Materialities and Relational Spaces,” *Geographica Helvetica* 72 (2017), 85–92.

In this article, I therefore wish to take up the debate on the merits and limits of maritime regions by teasing out the ends of the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Using the scholarly debate about where to situate “the Swahili” as an empirical anchor, I will begin by revisiting the rise of Indian Ocean Studies. This will be followed by a discussion of several approaches to define the confines of the Indian Ocean, such as Pearson’s concept of littoral societies¹¹ and recent reflections about maritimity.¹² Focusing in particular, on the effects of a conceptualization of the Indian Ocean for the separation between “coast” and “hinterland,” I will finally present parts of my own fieldwork among so-called Arab traders along the Great Lakes.¹³ Tracing maritime imaginaries and material connections in the Tanzanian interior, after all, not only illustrates the fluid and meandering ends of the Indian Ocean, but will also allow for critical reflections about maritime conceptualizations of space more generally. Finally, by taking this relational thinking inland, it lays the ground for a re-conceptualization of areas that not only replaces a terrestrial spatial entity with a maritime one, but that genuinely challenges such continental “container-thinking” and the regional divisions within them.

Situating the Swahili: In-Between Ocean and Hinterland

“We who lived [at the coast] were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back.”¹⁴

The relationship between the so-called Swahili coast and its “hinterland” has for a long time been characterized by political tensions and cultural prejudices. As Middleton has pointed out, already in the early modern era, those he considered as Swahili merchants saw themselves

¹⁰ Similar discussions are taking place related to other oceanic spaces such as the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, e.g. David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in: David Armitage and Michael Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11–27.

¹¹ Michael Pearson, “Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems,” *Journal of World History* 17 (2006), 353–373.

¹² Jeffrey Fleisher, Paul Lane, Adria LaViolette, Mark Horton, Edward Pollard, Eréndira Quintana Morales, Thomas Vernet, Annalisa Christie and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, “When did the Swahili Become Maritime?,” *American Anthropologist* 117–1 (2015), 100–115.

¹³ In this empirical research context, one is confronted with different terms (Swahili, Arab, Zanzibari) being used for the same (group of) people. In this article, these terms are used as encountered in the field. Since they indicate only how people are being called or call themselves, quotation marks are used to emphasize an anti-essentialist stance.

¹⁴ Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1979), 12.

as the owners of *ustaarabu* and *utamaduni* (here probably best translated as “cultural Arabness” and “urbanity”), and used the term *ushenzi* (“barbarism,” “savageness,” or “wilderness”) to demarcate what was outside their towns.¹⁵

Even though this suggests that “the world of the Swahili”¹⁶ might not always have been conceptualized in territorial terms, but rather as a network or archipelago,¹⁷ what came to dominate was an understanding of the African interior as fundamentally different from, and essentially inferior to, the coast. In current (public) political debates such discourses about the differences between coast and “hinterland” still play an important role and usually feature prominently in accounts that point to national inequalities and the “bad” treatment of the Swahili – either from the *Mrima* coast or from the islands – by the *wabara*, the mainlanders. In respect to contemporary Kenya, Kresse has illustrated well how Swahili today feel to “have become downgraded to second class citizens; worse still, they have become ruled, and taken advantage of by the *wabara* (...) who in the historical consciousness of Mombasa’s urbanites used to be the underprivileged and less cultured outsiders, incomers, and, indeed, second-class citizens.”¹⁸

But not only in local discourses are differences between the East African coast and its hinterland being emphasized. Within Swahili scholarship the question “who are the Swahili” and where to situate them has occupied much of twentieth century academic writing.¹⁹ Similar to the

¹⁵ John Middleton, “Merchants: An Essay in Historical Ethnography,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9–3 (2003), 509–526. See also: Katrin Bromber, “Ustaarabu: A Conceptual Change in Tanganyikan Newspaper Discourse in the 1920s,” in: Roman Loimeier and Rüdiger Seesemann (eds.), *The Global Worlds of the Swahili* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2006), 67–82; Kai Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 47; Alamin M. Mazrui and Ibrahim N. Shariff, *The Swahili. Idiom and Identity of an African People* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).

¹⁶ John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Elaine Stratford, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko and Andrew Harwood, “Envisioning the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 6 (2011), 113–130.

¹⁸ Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa*, 76.

¹⁹ Mazrui and Shariff, *The Swahili*; Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear, *The Swahili. Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society 800–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili. The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

development in Area Studies, in this debate as well, a significant change can be noticed in respect to the spatial references at stake. While, originally, we find a clear urge to situate the Swahili in either Africa or Arabia/Asia,²⁰ thus reflecting the common regional divisions, in recent years a shift to the Indian Ocean as the major regional framework can be observed.

Such spatial references become especially relevant in terms of the “quest for ‘origins’” prevalent in much of Swahili Studies over the last century.²¹ As Horton and Middleton have noted, “historiography and archaeology, as well as more general writing, have [long] assumed, on remarkably little evidence other than wishful thinking, that the Swahili have formed a creole society whose civilization has been implanted on the African coastline by invaders from Asia, mostly from Arabia.”²² Colonial era archaeologists in particular were convinced that the ruins they studied along the coast must have been of Arab origin, since they did not expect Africans to build stone towns.²³ This perspective was followed by an equally politically motivated revisionist stance, culminating in a so-called Swahili nationalism in the post-independence period. In line with a general “preoccup[ation] with ‘discovering African initiative’ in African history,”²⁴ the idea then was to emphasize an African origin of the Swahili.²⁵

Today, it seems to be generally agreed that external elements from Asia and Arabia did play a crucial role already in the formation of Swahili culture during the first millennium, although the exact impact of these diverse influences, as well as their differences across time and space, still remains a subject of debate. But while the direction of the “outward” orientation, the intensity of interactions with the interior on the one hand, and relations to

²⁰ See e.g.: Arthur C. Madan, *English-Swahili and Swahili-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903); Edward Steere, *A Handbook of the Swahili Language as Spoken at Zanzibar* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1908); Chauncy H. Stigand, *The Land of Zinj: Being an Account of British East Africa, its Ancient History and Present Inhabitants* (London: Constable, 1913), 130.

²¹ Mazrui and Shariff, *The Swahili*, 17.

²² Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili*, 2.

²³ Gilbert, “Coastal East Africa,” 9. See also: James S. Kirkman, *The Arab City of Gedi: Excavations at the Great Mosque, Architecture and Finds* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); Justus Strandes, *The Portuguese Period in East Africa* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1961).

²⁴ Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean. Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (London: Hurst, 2010), 24.

²⁵ James de Vere Allen, “A Proposal for Indian Ocean Studies,” *Mawazo* 2–1 (1969), 23–32; Felix A. Chami, “A Review of Swahili Archaeology,” *African Archaeological Review* 15–3 (1998), 199–218; Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*; Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili*.

places across the Indian Ocean on the other, still form major themes within Swahili studies, archaeology, and East African history,²⁶ the discussions no longer seem to be trapped in an Arab-African dichotomy.

As Gilbert concludes for the period between 1750–1960, “the coast is best seen from the sea rather than viewed from the land.”²⁷ More generally, he argues that this period in particular highlights the inadequacy of the conventional area studies approach to study the Swahili, since “one can better understand the history of the coast by dropping the traditional Africa/Arabia and Africa/Asia dichotomies and instead view the coast and islands of the Western Indian Ocean as a region.”²⁸

Such calls to situate the Swahili not in either Africa or Arabia/Asia but within an Indian Ocean region have been voiced frequently among Swahili scholars within the last two decades. First was probably the historical geographer Kirk who, at the first major conference of African history in 1962, argued that research on landward traditions should be supplemented by “investigations into the cultural patterns of sea regions embracing the oceanic faces of the continent.”²⁹ He was convinced that “many of the keys to the cultural history and character of the eastern face of Africa must be sought not in Africa itself but in the changing patterns of the Indian Ocean region.”³⁰ A couple of years later, in 1969, de Vere Allen, in a paper presented at Makerere University College in Kampala, sketched out a proposal for Indian Ocean Studies suggesting that a focus on the Indian Ocean as an area of study was needed, “not only because the region deserves to be studied in its own right but also because such research would unquestionably throw a useful light on major problems facing those already studying in areas bordering on it.”³¹ In his view, it was only through gaining a more thorough knowledge of the links and connections across the Indian Ocean that scholars would be better equipped to get to grips with their material

²⁶ Erik Gilbert, *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar, 1860–1970* (Oxford: James Curry, 2005); Adria LaViolette, “Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600–1500,” *Archaeologies* 4 (2008), 24–49; Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures*; Ceri Shipton, Richard Helm, Nicole Boivin, Alison Crowther and Dorian Fuller, “Intersection, Networks and the Genesis of Social Complexity on the Nyali Coast of East Africa,” *African Archaeological Review* 30 (2013), 427–453; Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).

²⁷ Gilbert, “Coastal East Africa,” 29.

²⁸ Gilbert, “Coastal East Africa,” 8.

²⁹ William Kirk, “The N.E. Monsoon and Some Aspects of African History,” *Journal of African History* 3–2 (1962), 263–267, 263.

³⁰ Kirk, “The N.E. Monsoon,” 263.

³¹ De Vere Allen, “A Proposal.”

and immaterial effects and, thus, to question or confirm the social, cultural and economic unity of the Indian Ocean as well as its boundaries.

Indian Ocean Studies on the Rise

Even though de Vere Allen was able to present his proposal again five years later, in 1974, when being invited to a meeting of experts organized by the UNESCO in Mauritius to discuss the historical relations between East Africa, Madagascar, and (South-East) Asia, it would – most probably due to its rather peripheral publication³² – still take about ten more years until the Indian Ocean became more widely considered as a relevant unit of analysis. In 1979, Chaunu, for example, could still argue that the Indian Ocean was “scarcely more than an extension of the eastern Mediterranean;” an ocean which was not forming a unity in the way the Mediterranean did, and thus had no importance in itself.³³ This position finally appeared to change, not least due to the influence of Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean. After its publication in English (1972),³⁴ *La Méditerranéenne* inspired others to adopt the model to larger seas.³⁵ In his *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* Chaudhuri openly acknowledges his debt to Braudel. A few years later, in a seminal article on the concept, he explicitly raises the question about the nature of the Indian Ocean: “Does the history of the civilizations around and beyond the [Indian] ocean exhibit any intrinsic and perceptible unity, expressed in terms of space, time, or structures, which allows us to construct a Braudelian framework?”³⁶ Focusing on economic relations and political histories, Chaudhuri himself comes to the conclusion that, even though the Indian Ocean might not have a “common destiny,” it has “a basic underlying structure, the ground floor of material life,” so that for certain kinds of analysis the Indian Ocean should indeed be understood as a single unit of space, while it must be broken up for others.

³² James de Vere Allen, “A Proposal for Indian Ocean Studies,” in: *UNESCO, Historical Relations across the Indian Ocean* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 137–151.

³³ Pierre Chaunu, *European Expansion in the Later Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co, 1979), 218.

³⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Harper Collins, 1972).

³⁵ Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003); Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures*.

³⁶ Kirti N. Chaudhuri, “The Unity and Disunity of Indian Ocean History from the Rise of Islam to 1750: The Outline of a Theory and Historical Discourse,” *Journal of World History* 4 (1993), 1–21, 1.

Inspired by Chaudhuri's work, an increasing number of historians began to systematically explore the Indian Ocean as an historical area of interaction and exchange, transcending not only Europeanist ideologies, but also works on Africa, the Middle East, and South (East) Asia which dealt with these regions as more or less separate geographical units.³⁷ The majority of this work, however, concentrated on its "European" period, e.g. on the political and economic dimensions of imperialism, while interconnections and processes of exchange in which Europeans were not the central actors were widely neglected. In Michael Pearson's words, "the Indian Ocean was brought into history when some external force came to it."³⁸ This changed only recently, as can be seen for example in Ho's work on Hadhrami mobility,³⁹ Aslanian's study of the social lives of Armenian merchants,⁴⁰ or Margariti's book on life in the medieval port of Aden.⁴¹

Moreover, it was only during the last decade that the Indian Ocean has also become of interest beyond the disciplinary concerns of history. In line with the revitalization of area studies, mentioned above, and a growing interest in maritime regions – not least due to Paul Gilroy's work – anthropologists as well as scholars from cultural studies and literature have engaged in studying the Indian Ocean. What many of these works share is a new "bottom-up" approach to understanding the Indian Ocean by focusing on those living at, with, and from it; on their "cosmopolitan" entanglements, mobile cultures, or on the various ways in which they experience and memorize the Indian Ocean and its multicultural composition.⁴²

Meanwhile, we have a great number of works that discuss the general usefulness as well as the particularities of the Indian Ocean from a variety

³⁷ Nile Green, "Maritime Worlds and Global History: Comparing the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean through Barcelona and Bombay," *History Compass* 11–6 (2013), 513–523; Nile Green, "Rethinking the Middle East after the Oceanic Turn," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34 (2014), 556–564.

³⁸ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 3

³⁹ Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). See also: Anne Bang, *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean, c. 1880–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁴⁰ Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Roxani Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁴² Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke, *Cultures of Trade: Indian Ocean Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2007); Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, *Struggling with History. Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyer and Michael Pearson (eds.), *Eyes across the Water, Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010); Julia Verne, *Living Translocality: Space, Culture and Economy in Contemporary Swahili Trade* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012).

of disciplinary angles. In respect to the Swahili context, there seems to be an agreement that the Indian Ocean offers a way to study the Swahili in their own right, not at the periphery of either Africa, Arabia or Asia, but at the center of the Indian Ocean world.⁴³ However, while the majority of work so far has focused on the inclusive nature of the Indian Ocean, reflecting actual relations instead of “artificial” colonial boundaries, the bordering effects of the Indian Ocean, its exclusions and ends have largely been neglected.⁴⁴ In how far, for example, is the focus on the Indian Ocean as a maritime region more than a shift in vocabulary? Or is it simply replacing the African/Arab dichotomy with a land/sea binary?

In what follows I will therefore turn to some of the attempts to define the boundaries of the Indian Ocean in order to point out the ways in which they affect the conceptual separation between coast and interior, with particular attention to the Swahili context, and their entanglements with conceptualizations of East and Central Africa.

Where, or Rather, How to Draw the Boundaries?

A definition of the Indian Ocean as a study-area is no easier than a definition of say, South-East Asia in the same context, probably even more difficult.⁴⁵

In his proposal for the study of the Indian Ocean de Vere Allen is well aware of the difficulties in defining the object of enquiry. “For the moment,” he suggests to:

envisage it as including the following: the coastlands of all East Africa from the Limpopo to Djibouti or even Suez (“coast-lands” stretching far inland in some places such as the hinterland of Sofala and the Tana River); the Arabian Peninsula and most of modern Iraq and Iran; the southern part of Pakistan and the Gujarati-speaking areas around Bombay; at least the southern part of the Indian subcontinent, including Calcutta; the Kra Peninsula and the whole of the Malay Peninsula, including the east coast, which does not touch the Indian Ocean, (...); and most of the Indonesian Archipelago, including Borneo and at least the southern, Muslim districts of the Philippines but excluding Papua New Guinea. For some purposes the west and north-west coast of Australia might be

⁴³ Horton and Middleton, *The Swahili*, 3.

⁴⁴ For a recent attempt to conceptualize the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic space and explore its implications for understanding the Swahili coast, see: Julia Verne and Markus Verne, “The Indian Ocean as an Aesthetic Space,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37–2 (2017), 314–320.

⁴⁵ De Vere Allen, “A Proposal,” in: *Historical Relations*, 138.

included. And of course Madagascar and the other islands and archipelagos in the ocean would be central, with the conceivable exception of Sri Lanka.⁴⁶

While a more detailed explanation of this definition follows, it already becomes clear in this part, that setting the boundaries of the Indian Ocean is not simply a matter of drawing a line in a certain distance to its shoreline. In some places “coast-lands’ stretching far inland” are included, while in other places even the immediate coast is excluded; some islands are considered central, others are left out. For de Vere Allen, the decisive aspect is what he discusses as “three *layers of unity*,” that have contributed to what he tentatively calls an “Indian Ocean culture” or “civilization,” even though they might not all be present in all places along the ocean. “First, there is a racial unity of a sort provided by Malay and other migrations [such as the Shirazi]; secondly, cultural unity radiating out from the Indian subcontinent; and thirdly, the religious unity provided by Islam.”⁴⁷

Whereas this clearly shows a special emphasis on racial criteria, Pearson, in his contribution to the Routledge Series on “Seas in History,” focuses more generally on people living along the Indian Ocean shore and the role of the sea in their lives. When trying to get to grips with the history of an ocean, Pearson calls “to look from the sea to the land, most obviously to the coast”⁴⁸ and identify people whose social life is to a significant extent tied to the ocean, while usually combining a mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences. Arguing that a location on the shore is able to transcend differing influences from the inland, he proclaims the existence of *littoral societies*, meaning that “we can go around the shores of an ocean (...) and identify societies that have more in common with other littoral societies thousands of kilometers away on some of their shore of the ocean than they do with their immediate hinterland.”⁴⁹ In this respect, he considers material as well as immaterial aspects such as food, building structures, ship styles, overlapping vocabulary (a corpus of “travelling Arabic words” especially in Malay and Swahili languages), “folk religion” and rituals linked to the sea, as well as a certain cosmopolitanism particularly connected to ports as meeting places. For him, Surat and Mombasa serve as one example to illustrate this point. Although one can surely argue that indeed these two cities have more in common with each other than with the inland cities Nairobi and Ahmadabad, this example raises a crucial question: “How far inland must we go before we can say that the ocean no longer has any influence?”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ De Vere Allen, “A Proposal,” in: *Historical Relations*, 138.

⁴⁷ De Vere Allen, “A Proposal,” in: *Historical Relations*, 140 (italics added).

⁴⁸ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 5.

⁴⁹ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 38; see also: Pearson, “Littoral Society,” 353.

⁵⁰ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 27.

or as Chaudhuri put it eighteen years earlier: “How far the Indian Ocean made its influence felt in the vast sweep of land in the north and the south west, in the direction of Asia and Africa, is a fascinating question.”⁵¹ It was a question, however, to which Chaudhuri himself, according to Pearson, offered little answer.⁵² Pearson himself refers to Braudel who suggested “to compare it [the Mediterranean] to an electric or magnetic field, or more simply to a radiant centre whose light grows less as one moves away from it, without one’s being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade.”⁵³ Arguing that the extent of the hinterland that can be included into an Indian Ocean space varies depending on the question or problem being posed,⁵⁴ he contends that location cannot be the only signifier; “one can live with the sounds of surf in one’s ear and not be maritime.”⁵⁵

It is this aspect of *maritimity* that has been at the center of discussions in recent archaeological attempts to grasp the relevance of the Indian Ocean in the Swahili context. In an article entitled “When did the Swahili become maritime?”,⁵⁶ the authors question the assumption that the Swahili of the East African coast were a maritime society from their beginnings, following calls “for a more critical problematisation of what it means to call the Swahili a ‘maritime’ society.” As they claim, “it is surely more than just living by the sea, using boats, and eating fish.”⁵⁷ Referring to D’Arcy,⁵⁸ they point out that maritime societies are instead characterized by the fact that the sea not only plays a fundamental role in communication and economy but also in social organization and ideology. According to Hoogervorst,⁵⁹ in maritime societies the sea plays a crucial role for their sense of cultural identity and autonomy, acting as “storehouses of cultural identity.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, here as well, the problem remains “how to define the specifically maritime in relation to what is specifically land-oriented or, if you like, terrestrial. This is not at all self-evident.”⁶¹

As this brief, and therefore necessarily reduced, presentation of three different approaches – de Vere Allen’s “layers of unity,” Pearson’s

⁵¹ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization*, 160.

⁵² Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 27.

⁵³ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 170; Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 28.

⁵⁴ Pearson, “Littoral Society,” 354.

⁵⁵ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 44.

⁵⁶ Fleisher *et al.*, “When did the Swahili Become Maritime,” 1–16.

⁵⁷ Fleisher *et al.*, “When did the Swahili Become Maritime,” 4.

⁵⁸ Paul D’Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

⁵⁹ Tom G. Hoogervorst, “Ethnicity and Aquatic Lifestyles: Exploring Southeast Asia’s Past and Present Seascapes,” *Water History* 4–3 (2012), 245–265, 248.

⁶⁰ Edvard Hviding, *Guardians of Marovo Lagoon: Practice, Place and Politics in Maritime Melanesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), 233.

⁶¹ David Tuddenham, “Maritime Cultural Landscapes: Maritimity and Quasi Objects,” *Journal of Maritime Archaeology* 5 (2010), 5–16, 6.

“littoral societies,” and the idea of “maritimity” as currently advanced by archaeologists – to discuss the usefulness and limits of thinking of the Indian Ocean as a distinct maritime region exemplifies, at least in these examples, the Indian Ocean is not constructed as a clearly bounded topographical space, as it has been the case in conventional area studies. While a closer investigation of the rethinking of space involved in the “maritimization” of areas is beyond the scope of this article, what I want to stress here is the potential effects of such attempts to define the limits of the Indian Ocean on the separation between “coast” and “hinterland” or between what is being considered as East and Central Africa.

Although based on different criteria, such as race, practices and imaginations, they all start out by trying to identify significant commonalities among the people along the different shores of the Indian Ocean. In a second step, the maritime characteristics identified are usually related to, or rather distinguished from the “hinterlands.” Whereas the conception of the Indian Ocean and the search for unifying elements are generally closely tied to histories of economic exchange and migration, aspects of mobility hardly feature in discussions about the boundaries – and connections – between the coast and the interior. Here, an image of rather stable units of littoral and hinterland societies seems to dominate the debate, when trying to evaluate the extent to which “coastal” characteristics have influenced “hinterland” culture. In opposition to such accounts that appear to fall back into conventional notions of areas as clearly confined spaces, I now want to foreground the connections and flows of people, objects and imaginaries *across* “coast” and “hinterland” and, by doing so, to exemplify a more fluid understanding of the Indian Ocean that may even travel further inland. It was not only sailors and the passengers on sailing ships that were “carriers of ideas, cultures and technologies that, along with cargoes of goods from various parts of the region, bound its peoples into a unique Indian Ocean world.”⁶² The same holds true for merchants and others who travelled far inland – or from further inland to the coast for that matter. Through mobility along the caravan routes, they were creating and connecting places in similar ways. Still today, people carry their orientation towards the Indian Ocean far into the interior. To illustrate this, I will present some of my own empirical material that evolved in several periods of ethnographic fieldwork between 2007 and 2014 in which I was focusing on cultural dimensions of contemporary trade in and through Zanzibar.⁶³ The question here is not so much where the Indian Ocean ends, but who carries the ocean with them, how coastal ties are expressed, and where and how the Indian Ocean relates to other regional conceptualizations by

⁶² Kenneth McPherson, “Indian Ocean,” in: John Zumerchik and Steven L. Danver (eds.), *Seas and Waterways of the World: An Encyclopedia of History, Uses and Issues*, volume 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 151–159, 152.

⁶³ Verne, *Living Translocality*.

other – or perhaps even the same – people. This will finally take us back to a more critical reflection on the nature of maritime spaces more generally.

Taking the Ocean Inland: Mzee Mohamed and his Family in Sumbawanga

During my research on translocal mobilities involved in contemporary trade in and through Zanzibar, I have spent considerable time with trading families of Omani descent in Tabora, Sumbawanga, and Mpanda. While some of them were born in Oman, others on Zanzibar or Pemba, and again others in one of the historical trading posts in the Tanzanian hinterland, they all feel a connection to the Indian Ocean and try their best to intensify it. Thus, they offer an empirical insight into how a maritime orientation is actively moved and negotiated beyond the coast. By taking one family as an example I wish to bring to the fore some of the ways in which their links to the coast are actively emphasized, and, thus not only accentuate that the boundary between “coast” and “hinterland” is porous but also stress the specific relational character of maritime spaces.

The family I want to concentrate on lives in Sumbawanga, a town situated in Ufipa, a plateau between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Rukwa, in the far west of Tanzania. Sumbawanga is the capital of the Rukwa region, with an estimated population of about 200,000 inhabitants based on the 2012 census. It is the host of the transport department for the region as well as several other smaller government agencies. More importantly, Sumbawanga serves as the major center for commerce in the area, with the market – crucial for the food supply of the whole region – being situated right in the city center. As there is hardly any industry in town, the economy is mainly based on agriculture and small businesses. Nevertheless, whereas originally the city was mainly inhabited by Wafipa, over the last years, also people from further away, such as, for example, Wasukuma, have moved there. However, with most of the Wafipa being peasants, and the Wasukuma especially investing in restaurants and bars, it is the “Arabs,” as they are locally called and usually also call themselves, who own most of the shops in town.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, so-called “Arab” traders or traders from the coast have been active in the Ufipa region on the route from Katanga to the coast along the southern end of Lake Tanganyika. Wanyamwezi caravans already passed through Ufipa around 1820, perhaps even earlier.⁶⁴ When, in the mid-twentieth century, traders from the coast increasingly suffered from the competition with South-Asian traders on the main commercial axes, Sumbawanga was one of the secondary places

⁶⁴ Roy Willis, *A State in the Making: Myth, History and Social Transformation in Precolonial Ufipa* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press 1981), 82.

appearing to offer good business opportunities.⁶⁵ Overall, Sumbawanga therefore has developed a small but stable “Arab” community ever since, and, as the place is continuously growing and promises a relatively lively business, it remains attractive to traders from the coast.

Mzee Mohamed, so he and his family tell me,⁶⁶ is considered to be the first Arab who settled in Sumbawanga. Although born in Kigoma, he was raised in Oman and then came back to Tanzania in the 1940s looking for business opportunities. In the early 1950s he came to Sumbawanga by first taking the boat from Kigoma and then walking from Kasanga, a fishing village at the south shore of Lake Tanganyika. When he arrived in town, apart from the market there was not much more than some shanties and huts, and most of the building activities were only about to start. He built his ample house, with space for shops in the front part, close to the market. Apart from opening a shop, he also started a transport business with several trucks and jeeps running between Sumbawanga and the surrounding villages. At that time, Mzee Mohamed spent most of his time sitting in front of his house, supervising the shop as well as the transport arrangements. With more and more “Arabs” coming to live in Sumbawanga, all regularly passing by to greet him and exchange some news, the space in front of his house soon developed into a lively meeting place. To make these visits even more comfortable, he decided to open the first *mkahawa* in town. According to him, this coffee house was what considerably strengthened the Arab community and made him famous. Today, not much seems to be left of this lively, future-oriented atmosphere that he evokes in his narratives. The *mkahawa* is mostly closed, and many of his old companions have left the town, most of them to the Arabian Peninsula. Those still around regularly meet on the *baraza*, tell each other stories about the past and their family histories, and jointly imagine the Indian Ocean.

This performance of what is considered to be an Arab lifestyle, these shared stories and memories form an important way of maintaining and strengthening the imaginative links to the coast and the ocean. Together with a business ethos, these stories and memories are also passed on to the younger generation. Mzee Mohamed’s sons, who have meanwhile taken over his business, regularly join the older men in the old *mkahawa*.

⁶⁵ John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 141.

⁶⁶ The empirical insights presented here were gained in a first visit to Sumbawanga in 2006 and subsequent exchange with members of the families mentioned who have lived in or visited Sumbawanga until today. Participant observation in a classical anthropological sense has been combined with narrative interviews and virtual methods, for a more detailed introduction to the methodologies, see: Verne, *Living Translocality*, 33–70, Julia Verne [then Julia Pfaff], “Finding One’s Way through Places – A Contemporary Trade Journey of Young Zanzibari Traders,” in: Hans Peter Hahn and Georg Klute (eds.), *Cultures of Migration – African Perspectives* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2007), 61–88.

His wife, when gathering in the courtyard, tells her sixteen grandchildren about her childhood in Pemba and how, after the wedding, she had to take the train to Kigoma and then a boat to Kasanga, from where she was picked up and taken to what seemed to her as “the end of the world.”

Marriage is another way of emphasizing ones association with the coast and the ocean. All of Mzee Mohamed’s sons have married women from Pemba. Most of these women need some time to adjust to life in the “hinterland,” since, in Zanzibar, they were used to the common prejudices about “bara” (the mainland). While, particularly in Zanzibar Town, most women put considerable effort into looking “Arab,” represented by the style of one’s *buibui* (long black female overcoat worn by Muslim women) and the particular way of arranging the headscarf, generally imitating the latest styles from Dubai and Oman, in Sumbawanga, most Arab women wear long dresses or long skirts with a blouse and a scarf loosely thrown above their heads. In Zanzibar and Pemba this would usually only be practiced in the villages. Due to lighter skin color, different looks and speaking Kiswahili or even Arabic as their vernacular, the women can already easily be distinguished from the majority of Sumbawanga’s population and are usually immediately identified as “Arabs.” Hence, all the women I met stated that they hardly wear a *buibui*, apart from attending special occasions or, maybe, when visiting people they do not know well. However, they all want to make sure to have at least one fashionable *buibui* in their wardrobe to be well prepared for a journey to Zanzibar or Pemba.

For the women in particular, regular visits to the coast, or at least frequently receiving guests from the coast, is crucial for them in order to fill their supplies of “Arab” items. Thus, the collaboration between traders who have settled in one of the halting places along the old trade routes and those who continue to move back and forth between coast and interior is still vital for Mzee Mohamed and his family, as much as it was around two hundred years ago.⁶⁷ Then and now, Arabs in the hinterland generally stay in constant touch with their relatives at the coast who provide them with supplies of necessary items of Arab culture.⁶⁸

Two relatives of Mzee Mohamed travelled with me from Zanzibar to Sumbawanga. As soon as these two young men had made their decision to go on a trade journey through the Tanzanian interior, their sisters rushed to produce some frankincense (*udi*) that should be taken as a major trade good.

⁶⁷ M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar* (London: Routledge, 1992), 140.

⁶⁸ François Renault, *Tippo Tip – un potentat arabe en Afrique central au XIXe siècle* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1987), 12–14; Iris Hahner-Herzog, *Tippu Tip und der Elfenbeinhandel in Ost- und Zentralafrika im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Tuduv-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), 13; Christine S. Nicholls, *The Swahili Coast – Politics, Diplomacy and Trade on the East African Littoral 1798–1856* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 74–100.

While this self-made *udi* can surely not compare with the high quality products imported especially from Oman, it is not only a welcome opportunity for the women to earn some money. Moreover, *udi* as well as body fat made of it are essential items for most Arab women to live and perform their cultural practices. By using *udi* and expressing and displaying this taste, they indicate to others a great deal about their socio-cultural position and their identity. Especially for those relatives in the “hinterland,” who have never actually lived at the coast, let alone been to the Arabian Peninsula, these commodities play an important role in forming their coastal imaginations. In this respect, the traders also made sure to take at least a few *buibui*, a variety of materials for dresses, *madira* (casual cotton women’s dresses popular in Zanzibar as on the Arabian Peninsula), as well as shiny hair bands and clips. These are all items that are more difficult to obtain away from the coast, but that serve as crucial expressions of cultural belonging. Finally, they also carry some culinary specialties to their relatives inland, a selection of spices, octopus, dried anchovies (*dagaa*) and a box of *nazi* (coconuts), so that the dishes cooked in the “hinterland” still get the proper coastal taste. Thus, apart from imaginative relations and social ties, it is particularly the material relations to the coast that contribute to a strong sense of belonging to the Indian Ocean.

The life of the family of Mzee Mohamed thus clearly shows how a considerable amount of cultural aspects and traits associated with the Indian Ocean reaches far into the “hinterland” – through imaginative, social and material connections. Yet, even though Arabs living in the Tanzanian “hinterland” clearly make an effort to maintain these Indian Ocean connections, they do not withdraw from their local surrounding in any radical way. Arab women may adapt their dresses and the families’ trading businesses, for instance, form a major part of local logistics and are tied in with the provision and the market access of the surrounding villages. Therefore, even though discourses of separating coast and interior persist – especially in accordance with longstanding prejudices – this separation is continuously negotiated and overcome in both directions, allowing us an idea of how maritimality can be lived and experienced elsewhere. Here, maritimality is not necessarily related and reduced to a physical presence by the sea, but understood as a particular, relational conceptualization of space, an outward orientation characterized by exchange and translocal connections.

Conclusion: Thinking in Lines, from the Indian Ocean to East and Central Africa in Relational Terms

In fact, a certain fuzziness is in order; rather than to try to lay down rigid borders where land takes over and the sea disappears, we should accept, and even celebrate, complexity and heterogeneity.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 28.

With regard to the attempts to “revitalize” Area Studies through conceptualizations of maritime regions, Bentley has argued that “it would be pointless to do away with the myth of continents, civilizations, areas, and national states only to replace them with an equally misleading myth of sea and ocean basins.”⁷⁰ In a similar vein, Wick has emphasized that “the moral of maritime history should therefore be to resist the geohistoricist instinct of replacing one objective space for another – because there is nothing less political or ideological in the notion of ‘the sea’ than there is in the notion of ‘the nation-state.’”⁷¹ Consequently, a prime driver of maritime history should be to reconsider how space is conceptualized. This way, maritimism should rather be understood as “a category of understanding,”⁷² not something reduced to empirical qualities.”

In this respect, it has been a central concern of this contribution to illustrate how the conception of the Indian Ocean as a useful unit of study generally also entails a rethinking of space more generally, thus distinguishing itself clearly from the conventional separation of the world into different world regions or areas. The turn towards maritime regions is clearly more than a shift in vocabulary. Hence, instead of relying on set boundaries of continents, regions or nations, conceptions of maritime space demand a careful consideration and the pursuit of a multitude of relations when trying to define their ends.

Nevertheless, whenever we try to establish relational understandings of space such as the Indian Ocean, we implicitly invoke conventional topographic conceptions of those spaces, which are thereby re-established.⁷³ Only by calling a space “Indian Ocean,” a reference to the Indian Ocean as known to us on the map is inevitable. The same happens when they themselves, people of Sumbawanga or we as researchers, call the family of Mzee Mohamed “Arab.” However, as a cultural, economic, political or historical space, the Indian Ocean obviously cannot be reduced to the ocean itself, and it cannot end where the ocean ends. Instead, this space is supposed to be made of manifold connections, travelling ideas and processes of exchange. Thus, when it comes to defining the limits of this Indian Ocean space, aspects of social, cultural, or historical proximity or distance do not necessarily correspond to physical proximity. Distance in relational spaces is not calculated in metric terms but, as Mol and Law put it, has to do with “the network elements and the way they hang together.

⁷⁰ Jerry Bentley, “Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis,” *The Geographical Review* 89 (1999), 215–224, 218.

⁷¹ Wick, “History, Geography, and the Sea,” 745.

⁷² Tuddenham, “Maritime Cultural Landscapes.”

⁷³ Antje Schlotmann, “Closed Spaces: Can’t Live With Them, Can’t Live Without Them,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008), 823–841.

Places with a similar set of elements and similar relations between them are close to one another and those with different elements of relations are far apart.”⁷⁴ In respect to the Indian Ocean this means that even though Bombay and Mombasa, Jakarta and Antananarivo, Zanzibar and Muscat are far away from each other in a physical sense, because of their shared history, cultural exchange or ongoing trading relations, they can be considered to be enmeshed into a relational space, characterized by similarities, shared traits, and common imaginations, or as Ingold vividly illustrates, as a “field not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines, not a network but a *meshwork*.”⁷⁵

As Yeung, one of the economic geographers who brought the idea of relational spaces to the fore, has stated, “thinking about relationality necessitates an analytical movement away from abstract phenomena to examine the interconnections between discrete phenomena and to transcend their dichotomization.”⁷⁶ With regard to conceptualizations of the Indian Ocean this seems particularly relevant in terms of avoiding a clear dichotomization between a maritime “coast” and terrestrial “hinterland.” As the ethnographic insights into the lives of Arab traders in Sumbawanga illustrated, “coastal” practices and imaginaries have long travelled and still continue to travel far inland. They clearly show, how an “Indian Ocean view” on Sumbawanga’s social, cultural, and economic aspects both widens and complicates, and thus, generally enhances our understanding of its local history.

Already in Thomson’s description of Ujiji in 1881 the town appears “not unlike a coast village on the Mlima.”⁷⁷ And, while it might not be surprising to find the Indian Ocean among Arab or Swahili families in Sumbawanga and Ujiji, there are other examples that show that “coastal” imaginaries are not necessarily tied to the mobilities of people from the coast. As Ranger pointed out: “We are told in Yao tradition of how Makanjila’s people built dhows (on lake Malawi) copied from those of the Arabs; also they planted coconuts with the object of make the lake shore resemble the coast.”⁷⁸ Yao chief Mataka I Nyambi even built a village at

⁷⁴ Annemarie Mol and John Law, “Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology,” *Social Studies of Science* 24 (1994), 641–671, 649.

⁷⁵ Tim Ingold, “Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought,” *Ethnos* 71 (2006), 9–20, 13.

⁷⁶ Henry Wai-chung Yeung, “Rethinking Relational Economic Geography,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005), 37–51, 44.

⁷⁷ Joseph Thomson, *To the Central African Lakes II* (Boston: Boustead, Ridley and Co, 1881), 88.

⁷⁸ Y.B. Abdallah, *The Yaos* (Zomba, 1919), 43–44, cited by Terence O. Ranger, “The Movement of Ideas, 1850–1939,” in: Isaria N. Kimambo and A. Temu (eds.), *A History of Tanzania* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 161–188, 165.

Mloi where he planted mangoes from the coast. When they flourished he was delighted and, according to Abdallah, the chief said: “Ah, now I have changed Yao so that it resembles the coast, and the sweet fruits of the coast now will I eat in my own home.”⁷⁹

Rather than taking these images as a basis for moving the boundaries of the Indian Ocean and simply extending its ends to include places further inland, these glimpses into material and imaginative connections across common regional divides may serve as telling examples for the relational character of space. After all, relational spaces are characterized by continuous changes of position that depend on the contents and power of the points and relations involved, leading to an ever-changing and fluid form holding together as well as being held together by a multiplicity and complexity of lines. As a meshwork of multiply interwoven lines, relational spaces have “no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth.”⁸⁰ Therefore, although the Indian Ocean will always remain physically grounded, as a relational space its extensions – through material, social and imaginative connections – remain negotiable. In this vein, maritime regions distinctively differ from those conventionally applied to continental contexts, which have for a long time dominated area studies. With their ends being oceanic, meandering, fluid and, thus, always in movement, they appear to be highly instructive for a rethinking of continental spaces and their common subdivisions. Thus, when we struggle with the boundaries between “East” and “Central” Africa, the crucial task is not to take the Indian Ocean inland by including more and more terrestrial space – and, by doing so, turning it into a conventional topographic entity – but to take with us, mobilize and translate the idea of the Indian Ocean and the particular understanding of maritime regions as relational to better get to grips with and challenge common notions of continental areas and the regional divisions within them.

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⁷⁹ Y.B. Abdallah, *The Yaos* (Zomba, 1919), 28, cited by Edward A. Alpers, “Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: The Matrilineal Peoples of the Southern Interior,” in: Terence O. Ranger and Isaria N. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 172–201, 182.

⁸⁰ Nigel Thrift, “Actor-Network-Theory,” in: Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston, Geraldine Pratt, Michael Watts and Sarah Whatmore (eds.), *Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 716.

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