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Commercial Networks Connecting Southeast Asia with the Indian Ocean

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Summary

Southeast Asian history has seen remarkable levels of mobility and durable connections with the rest of the Indian Ocean. The archaeological record points to prehistoric circulations of material culture within the region. Through the power of monsoon sailing, these small-scale circuits coalesced into larger networks by the 5th century BCE. Commercial relations with Chinese, Indian, and West Asian traders brought great prosperity to a number of Southeast Asian ports, which were described as places of immense wealth. Professional shipping, facilitated by local watercraft and crews, reveals the indigenous agency behind such long-distance maritime contacts. By the second half of the first millennium CE, ships from the Indo-Malayan world could be found as far west as coastal East Africa. Arabic and Persian merchants started to play a larger role in the Indian Ocean trade by the 8th century, importing spices and aromatic tree resins from sea-oriented polities such as Srivijaya and later Majapahit. From the 15th century, many coastal settlements in Southeast Asia embraced Islam, partly motivated by commercial interests. The arrival of Portuguese, Dutch, and British ships increased the scale of Indian Ocean commerce, including in the domains of capitalist production systems, conquest, slavery, indentured labor, and eventually free trade. During the colonial period, the Indian Ocean was incorporated into a truly global economy. While cultural and intellectual links between Southeast Asia and the wider Indian Ocean have persisted in the 21st century, commercial networks have declined in importance.

Keywords: commercial networks, trade, history, Southeast Asia, Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, European expansion

Subjects: Archaeology, Indian Ocean Studies, Southeast Asia, World/Global/Transnational

Origins

The Indian Ocean is the cradle of the global economy.[1] Unlike the world's other oceans, its predictable monsoon winds have for millennia facilitated agricultural growth, economic exchange, and cultural interaction. The ocean's long-distance networks are indeed a continuation of preexisting linkages of a smaller scale. Geographically, its northern waters are split by the Indian subcontinent, with the Arabian Sea to the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east. The African landmass constitutes the western boundary of the Indian Ocean world, while the precise location of its easternmost reaches is up for debate. The ocean adjoins the Southeast Asian mainland and a number of marginal seas of the Indonesian archipelago and Australia, ultimately linking it to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The western coasts of Myanmar, the Thai-Malay Peninsula, and Sumatra are integral to the Indian Ocean monsoonal system, while the southern coasts of Java, Bali, and the Lesser Sunda Islands are less navigable and therefore less

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connected. The maritime communities of Southeast Asia have long linked Indian Ocean commerce with that of East Asia through the Straits of Malacca and with New Guinea through the spice-bearing Maluku archipelago.

Both the Southeast Asian mainland and the islands have seen remarkable mobility since their earliest human habitation. The ecological conditions of the littoral areas, river deltas, and tropical rainforests ensured sufficient protein intake for small-scale communities. Outside a number of fertile river plains, there was little impetus in many parts of the region to create centralized systems of food production. Population growth and urbanization therefore remained low in comparison with other parts of Asia. Widespread sources of nutrition included sago, different kinds of roots, aroids, bananas, game, fish, and, in the coastal zones, shellfish. While Southeast Asia is at present known for its terraced rice fields in the hill areas, its original agricultural systems centered on slash-and-burn farming, horticulture, and arboriculture. Mounting archaeobotanical evidence suggests that food crops from different parts of Southeast Asia and the wider Indian Ocean world were translocated across long distances from prehistoric times.[2] Barter contacts, including of ritual and luxury items, facilitated the maintenance of friendly relations between Southeast Asia's diverse ethnolinguistic communities. These recurrent encounters connected the region's sparsely populated highlands, fertile lowlands, and coastal and archipelagic zones. Many Southeast Asian societies developed orientations toward the sea, rivers, floods, swamps, mangrove forests, and other bodies of water.[3] Marine commodities, such as salt and dried fish, were traditionally exchanged for forest products such as beeswax, fruits, and items made of rattan or other plant fibers.

By the late second millennium BCE, bronze metallurgy entered mainland Southeast Asia through overland routes from what would eventually become southern China, although the populations involved in these transfers had more in common with each other than with the Han populations who came to inhabit this area in later centuries.[4] Through the same networks, sedentary rice cultivation was introduced southwards. As a consequence, larger settlements developed in the western parts of Southeast Asia. The eastern islands, by contrast, retained small-scale societies and commercial patterns very similar to those of Melanesia. Due chiefly to the agency of seafaring communities, these processes of technological transfer and cultural adaptation increasingly started to involve actors from beyond the region.

While the development from material circulations to full-fledged trade is notoriously difficult to pin down, reciprocal exchange networks eventually culminated in transregional economic systems. Based on archaeological evidence, the eastern parts of Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Borneo, and the Vietnamese coastline, integrated with the South China Sea from 1500 BCE, whereas the western parts exhibit material connections with the wider Bay of Bengal from at least the 5th century BCE.[5] The eastern Indian Ocean featured an interaction zone characterized by the circulation of beads, pottery types (rouletted ware and northern black polished ware), and cultural practices such as jar burials and the erection of megaliths.[6] Several new luxury goods from overseas entered and transformed Southeast Asia's commercial networks, including porcelains and stonewares from China and textiles, ornaments, bronze bowls, and figurines from India.

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While Southeast Asia's archaeological record reveals circulations of nonperishable products, such as shells, obsidian, ceramics, North Vietnamese bronze drums, and other manufactured goods, our knowledge of the equally important foodstuffs, spices, and natural resources is chiefly informed by historical accounts and ethnographic observations dating from colonial times.[7] Nevertheless, we know that a number of staple crops were first cultivated in or around New Guinea and found their way to Eurasia in prehistoric times, revealing multidirectional voyages between the islands of Southeast Asia.[8] An extensive trade network also existed in the Maluku islands, involving sago, rice, cloth, metal, gongs, birds-of-paradise feathers, sandalwood (*Santalum album*) from the Lesser Sunda Islands, massoy bark (*Cryptocarya massoy*) from New Guinea, and slaves.[9] Two spices from this archipelago revolutionized the global economy during the first millennia CE: cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*). The economies of the islands increasingly came to depend on the Asian spice trade. Knowledge of harvesting (if not cultivation) was closely guarded by indigenous communities, who relied on food imports to feed their villages. It remains unclear when cloves and nutmeg first reached the Indian Ocean in large quantities; the earliest archaeological dates are controversial.

These intensified long-distance contacts prompted urbanization and economic prosperity, especially in the coastal areas, but also introduced new technologies, industries, ideas, religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), political structures, and practices of warfare. Such processes were intimately connected. Merchant groups, especially in classical India, were usually supported by religious networks.[10] At the same time, textiles and other luxury goods from afar often obtained magico-religious value away from their centers of production. Economic growth and the resultant need for larger workforces also increased practices of slave raiding, while armies increasingly served to enforce trade concessions and launch punitive expeditions. Southeast Asian ships and sailors were crucial to all these activities, as stands confirmed by linguistic and especially archaeological findings.[11]

Bay of Bengal

Between the 4th and 2nd century BCE, the coastal proto-state of Khao Sam Kaeo, along with a number of other archaeological sites in the Thai-Malay Peninsula, is among the first settlements in Southeast Asia to resemble those of South Asia, including in its cultural assemblages and dietary practices.[12] Unlike the better known connections between Southeast Asia and China, for which ample textual documentation is available, contacts with South Asia are chiefly evinced by archaeological data. Operating at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Southeast Asian polities supplied China's vast markets with local produce, but also with valuable commodities from the Indian subcontinent. Examples of Southeast Asian luxury goods dispatched to China included precious minerals, spices, aromatic words, tropical birds, and other forest commodities. In addition, Sumatra served as a way station for Chinese pilgrims traveling to India. These maritime voyages and economic activities across the Bay of Bengal (partly) replaced terrestrial routes, which were regularly cut off by hostile nomadic populations.

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From the 3rd century BCE, coinage spread from South Asia to the Southeast Asian mainland and eventually to some of the islands. Yet the introduction and local production of gold and silver coins never fully replaced other modes of payment, which included salt, lengths of cloth, and cowries. Some parts of Southeast Asia, such as Borneo, Laos, and eastern Indonesia, became money-using much later.[13] Localized systems of credit and pawning must have also emerged as part of intensified contacts with the wider world.[14] South Asia also connected Southeast Asia with the wider Indian Ocean. The Roman objects found from the 1st century CE in various sites in the Southeast Asian mainland were likely distributed eastwards via the Indian subcontinent. In a number of Southeast Asian settlements, including in Pagan, the river deltas of the Mekong and Chao Phraya, coastal Vietnam, Kutai, and Java, Indic influence becomes visible from the mid-first millennium CE through monumental architecture, epigraphy, and religious structures and objects. Indic notions of statecraft and religiosity are seen in temple architecture, artifacts, inscriptions, and statuary. Yet these cultural links were preceded by centuries of commercial interaction, in which South Asian traders operating across the Bay of Bengal appear to have played a pivotal role.[15] The incentives for merchants to test their luck in Southeast Asia become clear from the textual record, which portrayed the region as a "golden land" (*Suvarṇabhūmi*). This reputation, which quickly spread across Eurasia, was presumably informed by the presence of actual gold among the region's exports.

A common methodological problem in understanding the dispersal of material culture is the issue of cultural asymmetry. While the manufactured items and cultural influences from the Indian subcontinent show up ubiquitously in the archaeological record, the impact of Southeast Asian agents is considerably less visible.[16] Whereas South Asian commodities included beads, ceramics, glassware, metal objects (bronze bowls, golden coins, silver ingots, etc.), and other finished products, Southeast Asia's chief exports consisted of raw metals (gold and tin) and innumerable perishable products. In addition to spices from Maluku and sandalwood from Timor, the forests of Sumatra, Borneo, and the Southeast Asian mainland were renowned for their aromatic tree products, including camphor (*Dryobalanops* spp.), agarwood (*Aquilaria* spp.), sappanwood (*Caesalpinia sappan*), lakawood (*Dalbergia parviflora*), and benzoin (*Styrax* spp.). Other luxury exports, including to China, were the feathers of parrots, kingfishers, and birds-of-paradise. The textual record furthermore informs us that the Bay of Bengal featured a lucrative trade, in multiple directions, of black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), gemstones, bezoar stones, hornbill beaks, rhinoceros horns, ivory, elephants, horses, and Indian textiles. The latter included coarse cloths as well as items of dress, which were often manufactured according to local preferences.[17] Marine resources, such as pearls, turtle shells, cowries, dried fish, salt, and corals, were likewise traded across the Indian Ocean.

In the western parts of Southeast Asia, contacts with wealthy foreign merchants, frequently from South Asia, played an important role in processes of state formation.[18] This created a situation of codependence rather than dominance. Some inscriptions of the Indo-Malayan world mention the local word *puhawang* "shipmaster" and the Prakrit loanword *baṇyāga* "merchant" in one breath. Yet Southeast Asian traders did not leave behind similar textual footprints as their Chinese, Arab, and Tamil colleagues operating within the same networks.[19] Their agency transpires from the growing body of shipwreck data, which demonstrates the importance of traditional Southeast

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Asian or hybrid vessels.[20] From the 9th century, the epigraphic record of Java depicts a vibrant economic landscape featuring inter-island trade, coastal-hinterland exchange, local markets, communities of foreign merchants, and sporadic attempts to control prices at ports.[21] Premodern texts furthermore contain information on taxation, rights, and duties. These early instances of law-making no doubt protected the resident foreign merchant communities, while also preventing them from becoming more powerful than the local elites. It is not known whether traders from Southeast Asia resided communally in any of the ports of the Indian Ocean, as they did in Guangzhou by the late 11th century, but Malay rulers oversaw the construction of a monastery in Nalanda and a temple in Nagapattinam around the turn of the 11th century.[22]

A number of patterns emerged across the "Indianized" parts of Southeast Asia. Hierarchical upstream-downstream linkages developed along all major rivers. These multicentered clusters often aligned with a larger polity. Srivijaya, operating from the 7th to the 13th century, became the most famous example of a trade-dependent federation. Situated along the Musi River in Sumatra, it is often described as a maritime state (thalassocracy). Its economy depended on reciprocal contacts with forest communities and coastal peoples.[23] Perhaps largely for this reason, it never aspired to be a centralized, bureaucratic empire. On the mainland, Khmer and Mon rulers benefited from the economic opportunities of trade, yet remained predominantly agrarian-based. They invested heavily in religious display, military expansion, and diplomatic contacts. At times, their agricultural systems were financed by Buddhist temple networks stretching across the Bay of Bengal, as in 11th- to 14th-century Pagan.[24] In regions with insufficient agrarian resources and limited access to global trade, such as Borneo, coastal centers attracted and at times enlisted marauders or pirates.[25] Across Southeast Asia, urbanization accelerated economic development and facilitated the formation of social classes specialized in commerce, various crafts, and manual labor. The establishment of larger settlements also relied in part on the slave trade, which, however, appears to have been a less massive enterprise in premodern times than it became under European imperialism.[26] Naval raids and other forms of armed conflict were not absent in the Bay of Bengal, yet nothing suggests they took place on a similar scale as, for example, in Mediterranean history.

Arabian Sea

Indian Ocean commerce historically consisted of multiple interaction zones and economic circuits. The Arabian Sea had long facilitated trade between diverse ethnoreligious communities. Bordered east by the Indian subcontinent, it was not in direct contact with the Bay of Bengal until the age of steam navigation, even though Persian and Arab merchants regularly traveled between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and China from the 8th century.[27] The material distinctness of the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea transpires from their different ship-building traditions.[28] People and products invariably traversed the Indian Ocean via India or Sri Lanka, depending on the vagaries of the monsoon. As a result of their geographic centrality, South Asian merchants enjoyed the strategic advantage of having access to commercial activities in both parts of the ocean. Coconut fiber (coir), teak (*Tectona grandis*) and other tropical tree products, which Arabic shipwrights have long incorporated in their watercraft,

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almost certainly reached their shores from southern India rather than Southeast Asia. Unambiguous evidence for the presence of Indonesian spices is absent in Mediterranean antiquity. However, from the 1st century CE onwards, some spices originating from Southeast Asia have been tentatively identified in the textual record.[29]

From the 9th century, Middle Eastern geographers steadily gained more accurate information about Southeast Asian products and peoples, whom they appear to have sporadically encountered as far west as coastal East Africa.[30] In addition to a series of cultural introductions from Indonesia to the Swahili coast and beyond, Southeast Asian activity in the Arabian Sea led to the westward distribution of important plant species such as Asiatic rice (*Oryza sativa*), bananas, greater yam (*Dioscorea alata*), taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), as well as a number of domestic and wild animals.[31] Recent archaeological findings also point to the Southeast Asian manufacture of specific glass beads and ceramic types excavated in coastal East Africa.[32] Meanwhile, the presence of enslaved Africans in Java can be traced to the 9th century on the basis of textual evidence.[33] It is also evident that the island of Madagascar was settled from at least the 8th century CE by people of partly Indonesian genetic, cultural, and linguistic affiliations.[34] It is not entirely clear what spurred these navigations across the Indian Ocean, nor which sailing routes were taken. Originally, the island may have been settled via coastal East Africa, rather than directly from Indonesia, by an already mixed population. There is also some cultural and linguistic evidence for Indonesian presence on the Maldives, but it is difficult to judge whether this archipelago served as a stopover for East Africa.[35] None of the ancient westward voyages have been described in any Indonesian text preserved to us, leaving archive-based historians ill-equipped to study them.

Middle Eastern merchants, known from antiquity for their sophisticated glassware, also traded with Southeast Asia. While Muslims from West Asia had already settled as far east as Guangzhou by the 8th century CE, the period between the 10th and 13th century occasioned favorable circumstances for them to also establish themselves in the eastern parts of the Indian Ocean. This relatively warm period increased agriculture, population growth, state-building, and overseas trade.[36] Persian loanwords such as *saudāgar* "merchant," *shāhbandar* "harbor master," and *nākhudā* "captain" spread across the ports of the Middle East, East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia.[37] Although Islamization took place rather slowly and incompletely in the ports of Southeast Asia, the "lands below the wind" eventually became home to a cosmopolitan Muslim oikumene known as the Jāwī. By the 14th and 15th centuries, most Indian Ocean trade was carried on by Muslims, although the economic interests of these diverse communities were not always aligned. By no means did Muslim hegemony eliminate the ethnoreligious diversity of Indian Ocean commerce, which also featured Middle Eastern Jews, Armenian Christians, Syrian Christians from Malabar, Hindus from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast, Chinese, and many others.

Arab, Persian, and South Asian Muslims had become familiar trading partners of Srivijaya and other coastal polities. Their activities apparently did not lead to large-scale conversion to Islam. Only in Campa do we find evidence of Islamization by the 10th century. The infamous Chola raids of the 1020s, conducted by southern India's most powerful dynasty in an attempt to gain more

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direct access to the lucrative South China Sea trade, affected Southeast Asia's commercial landscapes in more dramatic ways. These naval expeditions dealt a devastating blow to the supremacy of Srivijaya, whose position as a regional nexus of trade soon shifted to Kediri in Java and Kota Cina in northern Sumatra. The latter settlement maintained close commercial connections to southern India, Sri Lanka, and China between the 11th and 14th centuries CE.[38] The Thai-Malay Peninsula, too, experienced an economic boom around this time.[39] In the 1160s, another raid was mounted against Lower Burma by Parākramabāhu I of Sri Lanka, also due to economic rivalry, although friendly relations between Theravada Buddhist polities across the Bay of Bengal prevailed elsewhere. In the 13th century, Pagan, Siam, Campa, and Java suffered from Mongol invasions under Kublai Khan.[40] While the Yuan dynasty failed to gain a permanent foothold in the area, these attacks disrupted commercial life, allowing West Asian, Indian, and Chinese sailors to significantly increase their share in Southeast Asia's trade and shipping for some time.

During the course of the 14th century, three competing Southeast Asian polities experienced unprecedented economic growth: Majapahit, Melaka, and Ayutthaya. Majapahit in particular profited from the global boost in spices, largely caused by a sustained increase in demand from Europe. It also dominated the trade in valuable Timorese sandalwood, which had long attracted Chinese attention. At the height of its power, the influence sphere of this Javanese thalassocracy stretched from the Philippines in the north to New Guinea in the east. Its rulers never aspired to control the Straits of Malacca, which connected much of the region's commerce to global markets. Majapahit's privileged access to spices from Maluku eventually led to its downfall, when the newly established sultanates of northern Java gained control over the sea trade between the late 15th and early 16th century.[41] Numerous other ports in the Indo-Malayan world embraced Islam around this time, partly to create favorable conditions for Muslim merchants from the western parts of the Indian Ocean.[42] The Melaka Sultanate eventually emerged victorious in this new balance of power, while southern Sulawesi and the competing sultanates of Ternate and Tidore experienced economic growth in eastern Indonesia. Besides Islamization, the spice trade also sparked the emergence of an indigenous class of merchants, known in Malay as *orang kaya* "rich people," which participated in international trade and at times challenged the authority of Southeast Asia's traditional elites.[43] Their commercial activities regularly expanded westwards. Early European visitors described Southeast Asian *jong*s, large trading vessels, as far as the western Indian Ocean, although these maritime activities soon dwindled.[44]

European Expansion

As recent interlopers in the trade systems connecting Southeast Asia with the Indian Ocean, the first Europeans encountered large Asian ships and cosmopolitan trade hubs, such as Melaka and Ayutthaya, with self-governed neighborhoods ("camps") for foreign merchant communities. Indian textiles constituted the backbone of commerce, as had been the case in earlier times. In Java, for example, Indian and Indo-Persian cloths, fabrics, and textiles show up as early as the 8th century and have continued to be imported ever since.[45] Opium, which predominantly traveled eastwards, was another profitable commodity. Black pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and other

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spices constituted the most lucrative sources of profit, albeit less so on the Southeast Asian mainland. Although Portuguese traders, and in their wake the Dutch and the English, had clear ambitions to dominate the spice trade, establish fortified coastal factories across the Indian Ocean, and resort to violent means to protect their economic interests, their sovereign power and capacity for innovation was rather limited at first. The competing India Companies initially functioned as "trading-post empires" before developing into "company-states."[46] While European attempts to enforce trade monopolies had some historical precedents in the region, for example in 14th-century Java and 15th-century Ayutthaya, their claims of exclusive sovereignty were novel to the ocean's sociopolitical setting.

Buttressed by a powerful merchant class, increased militarization, and the plunder of the Americas, Europeans amplified the scale, volume, and intensity of trade and heralded a number of socioeconomic changes in the region. While the Indian Ocean had long been interconnected, European expansion brought new coasts into its orbit, including the Western Cape, the Mascarene Islands, the Seychelles, and eventually Australia. The Spanish and Portuguese access to Latin America revolutionized the global economy, resulting in the influx of silver, tobacco, and other commodity chains into the economies of Eurasia.[47] This new historical period saw the imposition of capitalism as the dominant production system of states (rather than just ports).[48] The European impact was also felt in the domain of slavery, which had existed throughout the Indian Ocean but assumed unprecedented proportions and long-distance dynamics.[49] Other forms of violence increased too. Portuguese fleets regularly attacked Asian ships and issued an infamous system of safe conducts (*cartazes*) to "protect" merchants not at war with the Estado da Índia.[50] States across the Indian Ocean saw themselves compelled to embrace the forces of the market and the ventures of private traders. These circumstances equipped Dutch and English joint-stock companies with clear advantages. They were competitive, profit-driven, and well-positioned to accumulate financial funds, mobilize armed ships, and exercise blunt-force diplomacy, while their ambitions to make a cultural impact were limited.[51] This convergence of mercantilism and militarism led to numerous acts of brutality, such as the invasion, with genocidal consequences, of the spice-producing Banda Islands by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch maritime ascendancy also greatly diminished Indian commerce in Southeast Asia, while Chinese merchants persevered, especially in the spice trade. European dominance furthermore contributed to the decline of Southeast Asia's indigenous industries, mercantile states, and commercial classes.[52]

Yet indigenous commerce proved remarkably resilient. In southern Sulawesi, maritime activities found new niches and routes, as far east as northern Australia. Shipping industries also experienced a period of growth.[53] Some regions reoriented their export toward China, with its never-ending demand for bird's nests, sea cucumbers, seaweed, and other marine products.[54] A number of states, such as Ayutthaya, Pegu, Sulu, and Aceh, managed to remain prosperous despite European attempts to control the trade networks that sustained them. The Sultanate of Aceh maintained amicable relations with the Ottoman Empire before the 17th century and again during the 19th century. Persian merchants remained another force to reckon with. Other regions, such as Bali, Buton, and the Bengal-Arakan borderland, tied their economies to the interregional slave trade. Eventually, however, the indigenous mercantile classes were decimated, opening the door to persistent myths of Southeast Asian indolence and laziness.[55]

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During the late-18th and especially the 19th century, the economies of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean underwent further transformations. Britain, then the world's most industrialized imperial power, took the lead. British control over a growing number of major trading ports, such as Calcutta (1757), Penang (1786), Singapore (1819), and Hong Kong (1842), paved the way for a relatively stable transition to free trade. This was accelerated by the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867, and the introduction of steam navigation, minimizing the dependence on the monsoon.[56] Yet steam-powered vessels did not immediately replace sail navigation. In fact, sail-shipping companies owned by Straits Chinese and Hadhramis experienced substantial growth. For several mobile communities, and for the Hadhramis in particular, trade and shipping across the Indian Ocean often coincided with scholarly networks and political activities.[57] European colonialism also brought new opportunities for other "Asian entrepreneurial minorities," such as Parsis and Nattukottai Chettiar, whose cosmopolitan outlook, commercial prowess, and strategic collaborations with imperial powers made them crucial protagonists of economic development.[58]

From the 1840s, the British, Dutch, and Spanish colonial authorities implemented more liberal economic policies and, hence, a friendlier climate for capital investment. As had been the case globally, slavery was gradually replaced by indentured labor.[59] In places like Java and the northern Philippines, the ensuing dependence on the global market created structures of labor exploitation that persist in the 21st century.[60] The proliferation of mines and plantations with cash crops (tea, cane sugar, tobacco, coffee, and rubber) around this period largely relied on Chinese and later Indian low-wage laborers, who were moved in large numbers to Burma, British Malaya, and Sumatra. In the British colonies and in French Indochina, Indian migrants also worked as private financiers and civil servants.[61] From the 1880s, the South Indian Chettiar community introduced new credit systems that changed the local economies of these localities in significant ways. In some parts of Southeast Asia, such as Java, the late 19th century witnessed the emergence of new indigenous industries and companies, which advertised their ware and services in newspapers.[62] At the same time, thousands of contract laborers from this island were transported to the Dutch colony of Suriname and the French colony of New Caledonia.[63]

The Long 20th Century

By the 20th century, many of the commercial networks linking Southeast Asia with the Indian Ocean were losing their importance, although migration from South to Southeast Asia continued and in fact increased. To some extent, the regions remained economically integrated, yet these connections had become more global in nature. Some parts of Southeast Asia underwent major transformations on account of the world's demand for oil and rubber. Traditional export products, such as tin and timber, also entered global markets. Economic links between Southeast Asia and Australia strengthened during the early 20th century, although connections already existed in the preceding centuries.[64] Increased options for mobility and travel to Europe, the Middle East, and other colonies accelerated another crucial phenomenon in early 20th-century history: the rise of pan-Asian anticolonial movements and the associated push to boycott the products of imperialist powers.

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In postcolonial times, Southeast Asia's economies drifted further away from those of the wider Indian Ocean, although various new collaborations emerged in the geopolitical realm. The Bengal Famine of 1943 had demonstrated in gruesome detail the risks of reliance on imported rice from overseas. As a result of socialism and the nation-state, the Cold War period led to new economic configurations, characterized by self-sufficiency and limited migration.[65] In most of the Indian Ocean world, the concept of "illegal immigration" only emerged during the second half of the 20th century. While some coastal cities in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Jakarta, remained important regional trade entrepots, they primarily functioned as nodes in the global shipping networks that developed by this time, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and from East Asia to the Americas. Meanwhile, Indian Ocean ports such as Calcutta and Bombay gradually diminished in importance along with the decline of Britain as a global superpower. Modern trade routes outgrew traditional maritime networks and coexisted with roads and airlines. Some phenomena shaping the region's past, such as maritime predation, contract labor, and informal money-transfer networks (*hundi*), display a level of historical continuity, but even here the actual agents, communities, routes, and operations have undergone significant changes.

Southeast Asia and its connections to the Indian Ocean continue to hold geopolitical importance. The region has become a buffer for competing economic, political, and military forces in the Indian Ocean, including China, India, and the United States. China's economy significantly benefits from access to the Straits of Malacca and the ability to move goods between Yunnan and the Bay of Bengal. The so-called String of Pearls policy has increased China's control over a number of strategically located Indian Ocean ports, including Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittwe (Myanmar), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), and Sihanoukville (Cambodia).[66] Meanwhile, India's Look East policy, followed in 2014 by its Act East policy, serves to strengthen economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asia and counter the influence of China in the region. Economic cooperation between India and the ASEAN countries goes back to the mid-1970s.[67] With the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in 2010, it has grown significantly, even though India and Southeast Asia are by no means indispensable trading partners.[68] The ASEAN policies of China and India are frequently accompanied by semi-accurate claims of historical continuity. Economic, strategic, and intellectual connections between Southeast Asia and various parts of Africa are relatively free from such historiographic tropes.

In the next decades, contacts between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean are likely to retain their relevance in the domain of shared ecological risks, refugee crises, security issues, as well as in cultural, academic, and medical institutions. While life in many parts of Southeast Asia has become less maritime during the 20th century, the seas that have long forged connections with the wider world are destined to play more prominent roles in the future. Plans to cut a sea-level canal through the Kra Isthmus in Thailand might connect the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in ways that side-line the harbors of Singapore and Port Klang (Malaysia). Yet despite the continued importance of maritime connections across the Bay of Bengal, the same coastal communities that historically pioneered and thrived on sea trade have faced severe marginalization in the 20th and early 21st century.

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Discussion of the Literature

The first scholars to examine the commercial networks between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean operated under the aegis of colonialism. This affected their work in several ways. Colonial historiography was primarily informed by philology and art history. As such, it displayed a conspicuous focus on religions, dynastic rulers, and politics, leaving the domains of economic activities and everyday life largely unexplored. The result was a preoccupation with outside influences, which were viewed as a requirement for progress. Colonial wisdom had it that Southeast Asia owed its civilization to Indian interference and benefaction. This notion, which was eagerly adopted by a number of Bengali and Tamil scholars to advance their own “Greater India” paradigms, continues to resonate in contemporary thinking.[69] Nevertheless, many of the publications written during this period remain extremely useful for the study of Southeast Asia’s antiquity. George Coedès’ monumental *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* can be seen as the pinnacle of this academic tradition.[70] In addition, already in the 1930s, a small number of scholars underlined local agency as a driving force behind the trade networks across the Bay of Bengal. Chief among them was Jacob Cornelis van Leur, whose posthumously translated dissertation received great international acclaim in the 1950s.[71]

In postcolonial times, externalist paradigms made way for autonomist traditions in Southeast Asian historiography, shifting the focus to localization and indigenous initiative. Local chiefs, it was increasingly believed, had invited Brahmins from India to imbue their rule with divinely sanctioned authority, while merchants supplied their court with a cosmopolitan cachet. Wolters’s *Early Indonesian Commerce* is seen by many as a highlight of this new era of scholarship.[72] Such attempts to restore Southeast Asian agency were substantiated by new archaeological methods, which provided insights into the region’s pre-Indianized cultures and economic histories not available through written texts and artifacts. At the same time, this inward focus, streamlined by the fixities of Area Studies departments, detached Southeast Asian historiography from that of the wider Indian Ocean. Sunil Amrith’s *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* has been instrumental in redressing this situation for colonial times, whereas Philippe Beaujard’s three-volume *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean* is an outstanding account of the ocean’s interconnected past from antiquity.[73]

The position of Southeast Asian communities in global commerce remains a source for academic debate. Southeast Asianists have regularly called attention to neglected sources from the region to balance the overreliance on Chinese, Arabic, and European texts.[74] Meanwhile, historians of the Indian Ocean have turned the focus away from nation-states and terrestrial occupation, underlining instead the importance of port cities, commercial networks, and maritime influences on land-based economies.[75] Beyond its role as a new home for mercantile communities from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia does not always receive the attention in Indian Ocean studies it arguably deserves. It is often mentioned in one breath with East Africa, another region suffering from persistent tropes of peripherality. This juxtaposition is not entirely without merit. Southeast Asia and East Africa share their tropical climate, coastal-hinterland linkages, maritime culture, Islamization with the preservation of matrilinear traditions, and

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vibrant lingua francas (Swahili and Malay). In terms of commercial history, however, Southeast Asia's unique geographical position and ancient contacts with China gave rise to distinct trajectories from the pastoralist economies of East Africa.

One of the most influential contributions to Southeast Asia's role in world history is Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, which he envisioned took place between 1450 and 1680. This period of increased commercial activity in the Middle East and China brought new prosperity to Southeast Asia's port cities. The focus of this scholarly intervention was on the spice-dependent coastal states of the Indo-Malayan region rather than the lowland rice-based economies of mainland Southeast Asia. After a long period of sociopolitical stability, as the theory has it, the region's economic growth eventually declined.[76] Other scholars have pointed out that Southeast Asia's integration into global trading systems started earlier, in the 10th century, and was driven by developments in southern China.[77] This earlier trade boom likewise led to the emergence of new ports, industries, religions, social practices, political elites, mercantile organizations, and modes of consumption. Victor Lieberman, in his two-volume *Strange Parallels*, draws attention to additional shared developments across large parts of Eurasia. He proposes a profound rethinking of Southeast Asian history that integrates the region internally as well as with the rest of the world, paying particular attention to the impact of climate change.[78]

From the 1990s, advances in archaeology, especially maritime archaeology, have further substantiated the role of Southeast Asian communities in wider Indian Ocean networks. Despite the prohibitive expenses of underwater archaeology, the available data on cargoes and boat remains is mounting. From the 2000s, connected histories across the Bay of Bengal received sustained scholarly attention in Singapore and India.[79] Although this was hardly the first time that academics based in Asia wrote about the continent's shared past, it is certainly one of the most inclusive and interdisciplinary episodes so far. Such a diversification of perspectives has the potential to destabilize persistent colonially rooted assumptions. As a result, tropes of diffusionism increasingly make way for circulations, "Indianization" has given way to the "Bay of Bengal interaction sphere," and the conventional "age of the sail" has acquired two important historical precedents from the viewpoint of Southeast Asia.[80] Such innovative approaches to the economic and cultural history of the Indian Ocean world are likely to yield exciting new insights in the future.

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Primary Sources

Most primary sources on the commercial networks of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean were written by travelers, geographers, and other external observers. They were often tasked to familiarize the region to the elites back home. Inscriptions in Cham, Javanese, Mon, Khmer, Burmese, Thai, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian languages, conversely, tend to be terracentric, focusing on religion, taxation, and the division of labor. Some insights into life at ports can be glanced from classical Malay texts, in particular the legal treatises (*undang-undang*) of the early modern period. Tamil inscriptions, issued between the 9th to the 13th century CE by South Indian merchant guilds, reveal the presence of resident trade communities in Thailand, Sumatra, Burma, and southern China. These documents contain snippets of information on the activities of specific agents involved in the broader constellation of maritime trade across the Bay of Bengal.[81]

Chinese records provide several additional insights. They contain, from the 3rd century CE onwards, information on tributary gifts and emissaries from different Southeast Asian polities.[82] The 7th-century Buddhist pilgrim Yijing described Sumatra, Kedah, and other places he visited on route to India. Later, Chinese geographers provided important treatises on commerce and culture in Southeast Asia and the wider Indian Ocean. Of particular interest are the 13th-century *Records of Foreign People* (諸蕃志) by the Song dynasty bureaucrat Zhao Rugua, which describes various ports and trade items known to Chinese sailors. The late 13th-century *Customs of Cambodia* (真臘風土記) by the diplomat Zhou Daguan is one of the most important sources on everyday life in Cambodia. Other key descriptions of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean include the *Veritable Records of the Ming* (明實錄) and the *Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (瀛涯勝覽). The latter was written in the early 15th century by Ma Huan, who accompanied the Ming admiral Zheng He on several of his exploratory voyages to the Indian Ocean.

Records from the western part of the Indian Ocean provide a more spotty picture. The famous 1st-century CE *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and Ptolemy's mid-2nd century *Geographia* are remarkably obscure about the Bay of Bengal, suggesting that the authors relied on secondhand information. From the mid-9th century CE, Middle Eastern geographers arrived at more accurate accounts of Southeast Asia.[83] Particularly insightful descriptions were written by the 9th-century Baghdadi geographer al-Masʿūdī and his Persian colleague Ibn Khordadbeh, followed by the 10th-century Persian sailor Buzurg Ibn Shahriyar. Several later writers hailed from North Africa, including the 12th-century Berber scholar Al-Idrīsī, the 13th-century Andalusi geographer Ibn Saʿīd, and 14th-century Berber explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. The famous Geniza documents contain no letters sent from Southeast Asia, yet feature two 13th-century death notices of Jewish merchants working in, respectively, the Thai-Malay Peninsula and Sumatra.[84]

Among the first Europeans to mention commercial activities in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Indian Ocean were Marco Polo (13th century), Odoric of Pordenone (14th century), and Niccolò de' Conti (15th century). Portuguese authors added copious additional firsthand accounts. The famous *Suma Oriental*, written in the 1510s by the voyager Tomé Pires, provides intricate details on the geography, trade items, and port dynamics he observed in Malacca, Java, and other parts of Southeast Asia. From this period onwards, innumerable Portuguese, Dutch, English, and other European accounts were written, providing detailed information on trade, shipping, and the power hierarchies and contracts in place. Needless to say, these sources largely reflect the specific interests and experiences of their authors. Thus far, they have not proven particularly helpful in determining whether the period between 1600 and 1800 saw economic growth, stagnation, or decline.[85]

Many primary sources in Asian languages have been studied and published in late colonial times as part of the orientalist endeavor to document the histories of the areas under European control. Others were edited and translated more recently, whereas a good number of Chinese primary sources remain inaccessible to scholars lacking proficiency in that language. The European and Asian archives of the three India Companies are essential to study the

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commercial networks between Southeast Asia and the rest of the Indian Ocean in the early modern period. Much remains to be done in terms of reading these and other colonial archives against the grain. In addition, experts on local-language sources across the Bay of Bengal are not always aware of each other's work.

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