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Empires of Technology and Knowledge

The Indian Ocean Basin has long been home to traditional ancient empires such as Maurya Empire, Persian Empire and Aksumite Empire. However, with the advent of new technology such as improved sailing and gunpowder, new empires with distant homelands, mostly in Europe, arrived in the historical oceanic region. The social fabric of the Indian Ocean was already well-established before the advent of early European imperialism, however. The first Western Empires in the region permanently reshaped the interactive and communicative nature of the Indian Ocean. In essence, it enabled the already existing cultures of the vast shores to make contact and interact with each other by newly introduced means. Already in the Medieval period, Indian Ocean peoples were characterized by a well-established identity and culture; many also had ripened cultural connections. The first Europeans, such as the Portuguese and then the Dutch, came across a well-defined cultural substrate for each local ethnic group they encountered.

European empires in the early modern period effectively modernized the medieval reality of the Indian Ocean. Contact had already been made in the Middle Ages between Mediterranean and Western cultures and Indian Ocean cultures. Berber explorer Ibn Battuta has travelled in and

around the Indian subcontinent as well as other localities around the Ocean. The recounts of his voyages provide a detailed Mediterranean perspective on existing social dynamics in the Medieval Indian Ocean, “the majority of its inhabitants are foreign merchants, who are always building there fine mansions and magnificent mosques” (Battuta 215) highlighting pre established contact between the Islamic world and the Indian Ocean. These exchanges consisted in culture, trade goods, ideas and knowledge. Therefore, following excursions by Middle Easterners like Battuta, initially Portuguese colonialists in the 16th century were met by local inhabitants who knew well about Western Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean. This first European empire attempted to establish a personal dominion over the entire Ocean; not necessarily by conquering most of its shores, but by introducing a naval captaincy which dictated transoceanic travel. However, this ambitious objective was scarcely reached.

The Portuguese ended up doing what had already been done for centuries in the region. Those looking to expand the emerging empire set out for the Indian Subcontinent, East Africa and East Indies based on information gathered by prolific Portuguese explorers Vasco Da Gama and Magellan. When the first European colonialists arrived to establish trading posts along the shores of the Indian Ocean, they were obstructed by already present cultural, commercial and religious networks. These initial contacts, pioneered back in the Middle Ages, later evolved into normative practices which expanded influence beyond the Indian Ocean Basin by the start of the Early Modern Period. In the Middle Ages, the Indian Ocean was regionally very interconnected but the arriving European empires in the subsequent centuries expanded that into globalism through their doctrine of imperialism. The Dutch Empire aimed to enhance this trading demeanor that the Portuguese already possessed by being more open to travel and contact with locals.

The Dutch were more eager to engage in commerce with new natives they encountered in recently explored or eventually claimed lands. Most Dutch imperial possessions originated and emerged in the 17th century from lands administered by the Dutch East India Company. They fundamentally believed in the human nature of being able to interact and exchange reciprocal benefits. As a matter of fact, a Dutch colonial representative of the time named Hugo Grotius upheld this value of freedom of travel by comparing it to ancient Mediterranean maritime customs documented by Ancient Greek and Roman writers such as Diodorus Siculus, Vergil and Pliny. He argued that navigation and trade was part of human nature “Those therefore who deny this law, destroy this most praiseworthy bond of human fellowship, remove the opportunities for doing mutual service, in a word do violence to Nature herself.” (Grotius 8) condemning anybody who opposed this fundamentally perceived law of freedom of travel and exchange. Colonialists from the Netherlands were mostly mercantile rather than militaristic given they opened up new seaborne trade routes across the Indian Ocean and forged new connections among its diverse inhabitants, some even many thousand miles apart on opposite coasts. Overall, the Dutch colonialists exhibited desirable novelties in trade activities, communication and sailing technology.

Such an expansive agglomeration of diverse external cultures and practices in the Indian Ocean brought about incompatibility with some religious teachings. Islamic ideology, first introduced in the Middle Ages, had ascribed a particular divine element intrinsic to many ethnic identities of the Indian basin by Early Modern times. Since this was in the same period as the emergence of the first Western European Christian empires in the region, a common conflict of ideologies also emerged.

Newly introduced ideas and technology evolved into this often unfriendly existence. However, fear of deprivation of religious rights and cultural identity was not always from a mirroring reality such as Christianity because more often than not any conflictual introduction contrasted already engrained values such as strict regulations opposing mass oceanic travel and exploration, warfare in a trade-rich environment, assimilation of people that had been used to interacting with others different from them. A precise testament to this would be oppressed people who had long been introduced to Islam concerned about expanding terrestrial empires like the Ottomans despite Turks being Sunni Muslim: these are the origins of division and opposing interpretation in a single religion. A Muslim written letter of the time illustrates “to permit lust and rape, the massacre of the most virtuous and respectable men, the destruction of pulpits and temples, the profanation of tombs, the ill-treatment of the ulama, the doctors and emirs descended from the Prophet, the repudiation of the Quran” (Selim 61) referring to the ominous advance of the Ottoman Empire into the region and what will come of the next Muslims on the Turkish journey of massacre based on previous conquests. It is historically plausible to have a more powerful faction with conflicting ideologies interrupt the deeply incubated values, customs and beliefs of various Indian Ocean populations, this not being only limited to the Ottomans. The complex modern disposition of the Ocean was a prime baseplate for more technologically advanced and dynamic empires like the British and French.

The British East India Company drastically overturned and revived the transoceanic economy and authoritative structure. The British Company possessed many more resources than its Dutch counterpart and in turn exploited fragile local regions along the basin by imposing its interests on various natives forcefully. A widely influential aspect still frequently seen today would be the denotation of dollar for currency “The ‘dollars’ in this English translation are Maria

Theresa thalers, an Austrian coin that was accepted as currency in East Africa.” (Jacobs 52) although Austrian in origin it became very popular thanks to its adoption in a British colony. Furthermore, the British East India Company implemented new foreign policies and restrictions on production and commerce: it introduced new economic incentives. The Company also made use of a fighting force in order to be so influential and spread its authority effectively. The British Crown later acquired the Company’s holdings and found itself faced with subjects already deeply nestled in Western authority. That is to say, the colonial structure was present well before full on imperial administration with its core in the Indian Subcontinent. However, the British also successfully colonized peripherally in an attempt to geographically envelop the oceanic basin with the objective of dominating maritime trade and travel. Lastly, more advanced warships empowered the British Royal Navy to easily spread their entire ideology.

It is evident that the Indian Ocean basin was enticing to both traditional contiguous terrestrial empires and modern Western colonial empires. The richness in resources, terrain, culture and diversity of the general region was a justified and sensical motive to attempt to establish a presence. Medieval explorers from the Mediterranean and Europe already witnessed the vast array of customs, traditions and above all opportunities in the Indian Ocean. This knowledge permitted later European nation states to colonize and establish dominions despite the vast distance and the lack of shortcuts such as the Suez Canal. Nevertheless, advancements in military, travel and communication technology enabled Early Modern Europeans to materialize their colonial ambitions despite the logistical ineptitude. The Indian Ocean, even over the last centuries, always continued to evolve and morph into the enormous cultural and ideological mix that it still is today thanks to innovations often brought by non-natives over time.