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Cultural Exchange in the Indian Ocean Region

History and Patterns

The Indian Ocean region contains a variety of cultures and people varying from nomadic tribal peoples to highly technological urban communities. The vast geographic spread of the region, combined with the enormous spectrum of human activity within it, has obscured the fact that culturally and historically the lands of the Indian Ocean form a distinctive region. With the exception of August Toussaint's *History of the Indian Ocean* scholars have yet to study the region as a historical and cultural unit and have instead concentrated upon the individual peoples and cultures of the littoral.

This paper examines the various processes of cultural interchange which have taken place within the Indian Ocean region over the millennia since the beginning of human activity. Civilizations emerged at various times and places around the Indian Ocean in distinctive core areas each with its own separate origins, yet all have undergone various types of interchange with other cultures of the region. The core civilizations have retained their regional identity whilst at the same time they have enriched, and been enriched by, neighbouring cultural zones to form a larger region within which one can trace the historical perspectives of such processes.

Human activity along the shores of the Indian Ocean can be seen as operating along a curve from southern Africa to south-western Australia. Along this curve, by land and by sea, peoples have moved eastwards and westwards for at least 50,000 years leading to a constant intermingling of cultures, races, languages, religions, and trading goods.

The Indian Ocean itself has been an important avenue for this complex pattern of human activity and movement. But peoples have also moved into the littoral lands from the interiors of the bordering continents of Africa and Asia and, latterly, directly from Europe. Sometimes these folk movements have ended at specific points on the Ocean shore, but sometimes the migrating people have taken to the sea and travelled to more distant parts of the littoral or to the islands of the Ocean.

Details of the earliest human activity on the Indian Ocean region are obscure, but some general points can be made. Early centres of the evolution of homo sapiens have been located inland from the coast of East Africa and in the Indonesian archipelago. Australia was settled at least 50,000 years ago by peoples moving through islands to the north, and in succeeding millennia there were other waves of migration in the Indian Ocean region. Southeast Asia and the Malay World were populated by people moving across the mountains of southern China. Central Asia and the Arabian peninsula contributed peoples

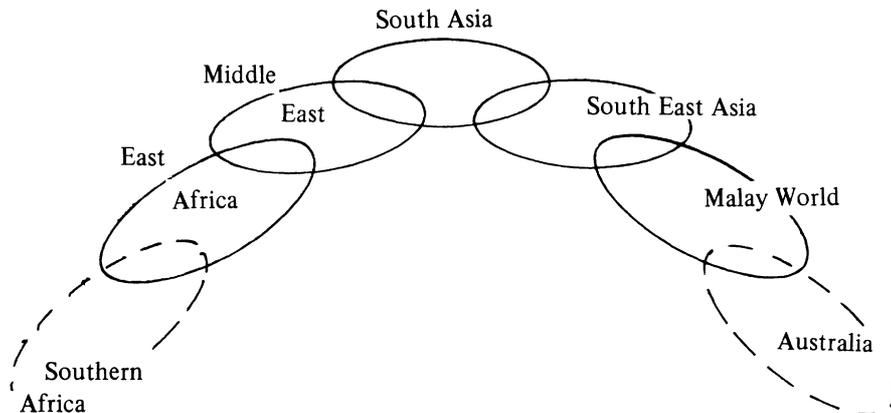
who moved into the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent to mingle with the earlier inhabitants of these regions, whilst middle and north-east Africa were reservoirs of people who settled eastern Africa from the shores of the Red Sea to the southern reaches of the continent. Much of the Indian Ocean littoral was inhabited before the arrival of these migrating peoples but our knowledge of the earliest inhabitants is limited.

Against this background of population movement, which continued over the millennia, urban civilization began relatively early along the Indian Ocean littoral compared with other regions. Mesopotamia and the Indus valley were sites of some of the world's earliest urban civilizations, and certainly the Middle East and Southeast Asia were centres of some of humanity's earliest seminal technological achievements.

Some 5,000 - 6,000 years ago distinctive core areas of cultural expression had evolved on the shores of the Indian Ocean: East Africa, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent (or South Asia), Southeast Asia, the Malay World and Australia. Each of these areas formed links in the giant chain of human activity which stretched along the littoral of the Indian Ocean. At best the areas are crudely defined, but the concept is valid and provides a working model with which is possible to examine the processes of cultural evolution and interchange.

Each of the links in the chain represents a distinctive core area of civilization which, as a result of various processes of cultural interchange, is linked to a neighbouring core area of civilization. The degree of cultural interchange varied, and varies, greatly but for the greater part of history of human activity in the region the processes of such interchange have taken place along the littoral curve of the Ocean.

The nature of cultural activity in each of the core areas varied, and varies, considerably and is inextricably inter-twined with the differing topographical and economic conditions along the littoral of the Indian Ocean. The degree of "separate origins and inspiration" is no doubt open to dispute, but is admitted for the sake of argument bearing in mind the possibility of an earlier and greater degree of human and cultural intermingling than we currently have any knowledge of, (see Figure 1)



Migration and Commerce: The First Stage

From the earliest times the Indian Ocean has provided the ideal means of communication between the core areas of civilization along its shores. Maritime hazards may have been daunting, but had to be weighed against hostile terrains encountered during land migration. Many migrating peoples followed the land route but the Ocean was the route of the Austronesians, the Malays who settled in Madagascar, the Indo-Aryans and Dravidians who occupied Sri-Lanka and the Maldives, the Aborigines who occupied the Andamans, Nicobars and Australia; and later groups such as Arabs, Indians, Africans and Europeans.

The movement of peoples across the Indian Ocean, within and between core cultural areas, was one of the major agents in the earliest forms of cultural interchange. The process gained momentum with the discovery of the secrets of the Ocean (particularly the monsoon winds) and refined shipbuilding techniques, and a settled civilization developed and prompted the growth of trade within the Indian Ocean region. The process of human maritime expansion constantly intertwined with land-based migration of peoples on the littoral and both processes added to the growing complexity of the core cultures.

The movement of peoples was paralleled by the development of maritime commerce. At least 5,000 years ago Egypt was trading in the Red Sea and indirectly with East Africa, similarly the civilizations of Mesopotamia were linked commercially to southern Arabia, East Africa and possibly the Indus valley civilization. Too little is known of this early trade to accurately assess its importance as a factor in cultural interchange, but tantalising hints indicate some exchange of ideas and concrete forms of cultural expression.

Certainly maritime trade was an important feature of the earliest great empires of the Middle East, and by the first millennium B.C. Indian Ocean trade was a regular feature of the economic life of that area. At its height in the sixth century B.C. the Iranian empire, which stretched from Anatolia to the Indus valley, linked the worlds of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. It attracted traders and goods from the Indian Ocean region and, within its boundaries, there were small but significant movements of peoples away from the Mediterranean towards the Indian Ocean littoral. Perhaps the most notable of these were the transplanted Greek communities scattered along the overland route from central Iran through the mountains of Afghanistan to South Asia.

The Iranian empire facilitated cultural interchange and its civilization was a blending of eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures. The resulting culture was regionally-varied but fused a host of cultural influences, many of which were dispersed eastwards and westwards with armies, traders and migrating peoples.

Our knowledge of the movement of peoples and goods around the Indian Ocean region is more detailed from the fourth century B.C. onwards. The collapse of the Iranian empire before the armies of Alexander the Great strengthened rather than destroyed the Mediterranean -- Indian Ocean nexus. Alexander expanded Greek settlements in Afghanistan, the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley; despatched expeditions to chart the coast of the Arabian Sea; and ushered in an era of cultural interchange which was related to a rapid expansion of trade within the Indian Ocean region. Greek and Arab traders fanned out from the Red Sea and Gulf to meet traders moving westwards from the Indian sub-continent.

Clear signs of a new type of cultural interchange began to emerge. At the Mediterranean end of the empire goods from the Indian Ocean region -- silk, cotton textiles, rare timbers, ivory, exotic spices and slaves -- were in great demand. In the more esoteric realms at least one major Greek school of philosophy, the Sceptic school of Pyrrho, bore signs of Jain and Buddhist teachings. At the

other end of Alexander's empire, on the borders of the Indian sub-continent, Greek ideas and culture merged with the pre-existing cultures of the region. A host of petty Greek states made a disproportionate contribution to the evolution of early Buddhist art, Buddhist philosophy and Indian concepts of statecraft.

By the beginning of the Christian era the western Indian Ocean was interlocked with the Mediterranean in a profitable commercial system. Greek, Roman, Indian, Arab and Iranian merchants traded directly between East Africa and the Indian sub-continent via the Middle East. Such trade led to the first Arab and Iranian settlements on the coast of East Africa, and also to the establishment of Arab, Iranian and Roman coastal trading centres on the Indian sub-continent.

The upsurge in demand from the Mediterranean and China for the goods of the Indian Ocean region not only introduced Mediterranean merchants to the region and expanded the boundaries of Arab and Iranian activity, but prompted the spread of maritime trade elsewhere in the region. Indian trading groups began to reach eastwards across the Bay of Bengal to trade with Southeast Asia and the Malay World, and stimulated in turn maritime commerce against the peoples of these regions who also came into contact with the expanding commercial network of China. Such trade was a major factor in the blending of Indian cultures with the cultures of the Malay World and Southeast Asia.

Migration and Commerce: The Second Stage

By the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the last centuries of the Roman Empire, the patterns of cultural interchange were set. The core areas of civilizations were clearly delineated each with its own distinct, if still evolving character. Yet each also linked with its neighbouring cultural zone on the curve of the Indian Ocean littoral. Obviously the intensity and degree of the contact between the zones varied. There is no evidence of contact between East Africa and Australia, with only marginal trading contact between parts of the Malay World and northern Australia, yet there is much evidence of contact between East Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent. Equally impressive evidence links the Indian sub-continent, like some gigantic lynch-pin, with Southeast Asia and the Malay World which in turn were linked into the Chinese-dominated world of the north-west Pacific.

Historical events beyond the Indian Ocean, such as the collapse of the western Roman empire and periodic dynastic upheavals in imperial China greatly affected the ebb and flow of maritime commerce and cultural interchange within the Indian Ocean region. But the basic patterns remained, only the emphasis and direction shifted. The collapse of the western Roman empire in the fifth century A.D. combined with the Christianity's sweep across the Mediterranean to weaken the demand for goods from the Indian Ocean in much of Europe. This in turn led to a decline in the contacts between the Middle East and East Africa dictated by a fall in consumer demand for goods from East Africa, and for several centuries there are gaps in our knowledge of the history of the East African littoral.

On the other hand the Middle East still supplied Byzantium and Iran with goods from the Indian Ocean region and Arab and Iranian traders increased their activity in the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka. This commercial interest in turn re-inforced the activity of Indian merchants in Southeast Asia and the Malay World as middlemen for Arab and Iranian merchants. But by this stage

there was increasing internal demand within the Indian Ocean region for the products of various areas along the littoral. Merchants involved in the maritime trade of the region were not simply agents for Europe or China but were equally involved in the passage of goods between the various internal markets of the Indian Ocean littoral.

This spread of Middle Eastern and Indian mercantile activity eastwards had far-reaching repercussions. It confirmed the role of pre-Islamic Arab and Iranian merchants as the major participants in the maritime trade of the western Indian Ocean, and encouraged their settlement in coastal areas of the Indian sub-continent such as Gujarat, Kerala and Tamil Nadu as well as on the coast of Sri Lanka. Similarly merchants from Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Orissa and Bengal penetrated in greater numbers into Southeast Asia and the Malay World, carrying with them their varied cultural legacy and the two great religions of the Indian sub-continent, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Archaeological evidence from the fifth century A.D. indicates the concrete nature of the cultural interchange which was taking place between South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Malay World. Urban sites and ports in Southeast Asia and on the Kra isthmus show clear evidence of South Asian cultural influence, and in succeeding centuries civilizations scattered across the Malay World and Southeast Asia evolved which reflected the cultural and religious legacy of South Asia.

These civilizations may have developed as a result of Indian colonisation and conquest. But it seems more likely that social, political and economic change in the areas coincided with an upsurge in international trade which lead to a selective adoption of South Asian cultures. The interchange and degree of adoption varied, and was most intense in those areas linked into the major maritime trading routes. The important cultures did not replace the pre-existing cultures, but rather blended with them to form distinctive localised cultures which combined South Asian and indigenous forms.

Paralleling this process of cultural interaction there was further cultural interchange caused by continuing folk movements into the lands of the Indian Ocean littoral.

As mentioned previously our knowledge of these earliest movements remains sketchy. Nevertheless, we can plot the major movements of the Indo-Aryan peoples into Iran and the South Asia, of the Semetic peoples through the Middle East out of Arabia, and of the Hamitic and Bantu peoples in East Africa. Of later arrivals such as the Greeks, Bactrians, Kushans, Huns, Mongols, Mons, Burmans, Thai and Khmer the picture we have is more detailed. The movement of many of these people spanned centuries, representing a filtration of peoples rather than invasion.

There remain, however, folk movements about which we know very little. The timing and route of the Malay settlement of Madagascar is still subject to dispute, and presumably took place several hundred years either side of the beginning of the Christian era. Similar problems exist concerning folk movements in East Africa, particularly in its southernmost regions, and to an extent in Australia. What, too, were the origins of the Dravidian peoples of southern India who occupied the Indian sub-continent before the coming of the Indo-Aryans?

By the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. several discernable processes of cultural interchange were in operation in the Indian Ocean region. The oldest and most persistent related to population movement, the others related to political and commercial developments: all three intermingled to enrich and diversify the core cultures of the lands bordering the Ocean.

The Rise of Islam

The emergence of Islam in the seventh century A.D., as a major world religion and syncretic culture, was to have a profound effect on many of the Indian Ocean cultures. The establishment of a great Islamic empire which stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indus valley gave impetus to an intellectual and commercial renaissance which was to have repercussions from the North Sea to the Pacific.

In the centuries following the establishment of the Islamic empire centred upon Mecca and Baghdad, Arab and Iranian merchants and generals of the empire carried Islam by land and sea to many parts of the Indian Ocean littoral. The core Islamic civilization which emerged had varied origins. The Hellenized lands of Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia and the ancient culture of Iran combined with the more austere culture of Arabia to form a new dynamic cultural system which was rapidly exported eastwards and westwards to mingle with more ancient non-Islamic cultures.

Muslim generals swept through Afghanistan to begin the centuries-long conquest of the Indian sub-continent. Between the eighth and thirteenth centuries Muslims became masters of northern India from the Khyber Pass to the Bay of Bengal, before turning their attention southwards. Elsewhere Islam spread along the maritime trade routes and established itself in the pre-Islamic Arab and Iranian trading settlements along the coast of East Africa, the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka.

Arab and Iranian trading settlements on the coast of East Africa evolved, after centuries of obscurity, into wealthy Afro-Asian Muslim city-states on the export of gold, timber, ivory and slaves. Islamic culture merged with that of the indigenous peoples to form the Swahili culture and language of much of the East African coast. In southern India, on the Malabar coast and the ports of Tamil Nadu, colonies of Muslims were in evidence by the eighth century A.D. based on the centuries-old activity of Arab and Iranian traders in the highly profitable trade of textiles, timber, gemstones, horses and spices. A similar evolution occurred in the ports of Sri Lanka, whilst in the Laccadive and Maldivian islands Islam replaced Buddhism.

Commerce and conquest facilitated the diffusion of Islam in the Indian Ocean region. But the impetus given to maritime trade by the establishment of the Islamic empire had a ripple-effect. The upsurge in commercial activity in the western Indian Ocean encouraged non-Islamic mercantile groups in India and Sri Lanka to more intense activity. From South Asia Hindu and Buddhist merchants continued to press eastwards to Southeast Asia, the Malay World and China, and reinforced the impact of South Asian cultures upon local cultures.

In the Indian sub-continent two major processes of cultural exchange were taking place. In the north Islamic influences were absorbed into the Indian cultural spectrum, whilst in Southern India and Sri Lanka Hindu and Buddhist cultural systems were, through the medium of trade, constantly impinging upon the cultures of Southeast Asia and the Malay World. There was, however, a qualitative difference in the two processes. To an extent the spread of Islam in northern India was a result of conquest; there was considerable intermingling between aspects of Islamic and Hindu culture but generally the two developed along parallel lines defined by religious affiliation. Islamic culture in India developed forms which marked it as different from Islamic culture elsewhere, but at the same time it remained a different cultural system from that of the Hindus of India.

The process of Hindu and Buddhist cultural diffusion out of southern India and Sri Lanka was markedly different. It began with the spread of Buddhism

from India to Sri Lanka several centuries B.C. and was compounded by the dispersion eastwards of Buddhism and Hinduism from both areas in later centuries. The agents of this cultural dispersion were not soldiers or colonists but merchants and priests. Unlike Islam in the Indian sub-continent Buddhism and Hinduism became integral parts of the cultural life of all the inhabitants of these regions and were absorbed into the mainstream of indigenous cultures. Both Buddhism and Hinduism were transformed by the adopting peoples and integrated to form regional cultures reminiscent of, but not the same as, the cultures of South Asia. In fairness it should be noted that the spread of Islam in the Indian sub-continent was not always the result of conquest nor did it always lead to the development of two distinct and parallel cultures. Elite Muslim groups in northern India practised a distinctly Indian Muslim culture but amongst the Muslim masses in the north and the isolated Muslim communities in the south the dividing line between popular Muslim and Hindu culture was often vague and ill-defined: only in the mosque and the temple was the division clear.

In the western Indian Ocean maritime and land based states rose in East Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent based on the interchange of Islamic culture with non-Islamic cultures. In the eastern Indian Ocean states developed in Southeast Asia and the Malay World based on the blending of South Asian cultures with indigenous cultures. This should not, however, indicate a simple bifurcation of cultures in the Indian Ocean region based on Islamic and Hindu-Buddhist values. The core regional civilizations absorbed and adapted aspects of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism according to local requirements and the nature of pre-existing cultures. Thus the extent of cultural interchange varied enormously. Islamic influence was dominant throughout the Middle East but remained largely a coastal and ocean-oriented culture in East Africa, whilst it co-existed with Hindu culture in the Indian sub-continent. In the Malay World and Southeast Asia Hinduism, Buddhism, and Animism fused to an extent that it is difficult to separate them in the area of popular culture.

In the four or five centuries after its establishment in Arabia Islam had had a tremendous impact upon many cultural zones in the Indian Ocean region. But the processes involved in its expansion prompted cultural interchange between non-Islamic cultures; most notably in the eastern Indian Ocean but also in the African interior where the pull of Indian Ocean trade was a factor in continuing cultural evolution not related in form to the culture of Islam.

Islam was not confined to the lands of the western Indian Ocean and, within a few centuries of its existence, Arab trading settlements were noted as far afield as Sumatra and southern China. But unlike Arab and Muslim settlements in the western Indian Ocean they were exotic outposts and the exception rather than the rule.

Islam in the Eastern Indian Ocean

By the fourteenth century A.D. there is clear evidence that Islamic influences were beginning to make a significant impact on the Malay World. The period was marked by an increase in the volume and value of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean via the Middle East. Muslim traders out of East Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent were the major beneficiaries of this growth in international trade and increasingly they came to dominate the major sea-routes eastwards from India to the Malay World whose spices were in great demand in India, the Middle East and Europe.

The increasing Muslim share of the trade of the eastern Indian Ocean was due to several factors not all related to a rise in consumer demand. Within the Indian sub-continent Muslim power was rapidly increasing particularly in areas which produced India's greatest export item: cotton cloth. The whole of northern and much of central India was under Muslim rule. In the southern reaches of the peninsula the great medieval Hindu trading kingdoms had stagnated; Hindu traders had turned much of their expertise away from foreign trade and were replaced by local and foreign Muslim groups. In Sri Lanka central authority had collapsed and the island was divided into rival polities with the conduct of foreign trade in the hands of Muslim merchants.

By the fourteenth century there was a political and maritime commercial vacuum in southern India. The political vacuum was partially filled by the last great Hindu empire, Vijayanagar, which was able to resist Muslim pressure from the north until the late sixteenth century, but the commercial vacuum permitted Muslims to take a greater share in the westward and eastwards trade of southern India and Sri Lanka.

Muslim merchants -- from the Middle East and South Asia -- sailed eastwards in increasing numbers and Muslim settlements began to grow in Sumatra and Java. Initially such settlements were exotic bodies attached by commercial interest to the great maritime trading empires of the Malay World, but by the fifteenth century they were beginning to take on a distinct identity of their own and developed into independent states. Sometimes these states were led by Arab or Indian Muslim expatriates, but more often they were ruled by indigenous converts to Islam such as in Malacca where the Hindu-Buddhist Malay dynasty converted to Islam in the fifteenth century.

Islam was rapidly undergoing a change of role in the Malay World. For many centuries it remained the religion of a few foreign traders in the Malay World, but by the fourteenth century the number of these traders was increasing. At the same time the increasing importance of ports in the Malay economy appears to have contributed to change in the balance of power in the area. The old Hindu-Buddhist cultural and political system of the region was unable to respond to new economic pressures. For many Malay traders Islam was an alternative to an old belief system unable to cope with changing economic and power relationships. But the adoption of the new religion was accomplished within the framework of the old cultural system and, while temples and gods may have been abandoned for mosques and Allah, much of the old combination of Animist, Hindu and Buddhist cultures was integrated into the newly evolving Islamic culture of the Malay World.

The spread of Islam throughout the Malay World was uneven and piecemeal. It was not a process involving external aggression but was facilitated by a combination of economic and social changes. Islam flowed along the trade routes of the region, hopscotching from one major area of maritime trade and economic activity to another, leaving isolated and diminishing enclaves of the old cultures in remote corners of the region. All of this underlines the nexus between trade and the spread of Islam, but the exceptions to this rule prove that one must approach such an explanation with caution.

In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia Muslim traders were increasingly important throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, yet their impact upon cultures of these areas was minimal. At the risk of oversimplification it can be argued that the indigenous peoples of these areas had no need of Islam. It offered no economic advantages to them as it did to the commercially-orientated Malay states. The cultures of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia were predominantly based on agriculture and only marginally dependent upon maritime trade. Despite political misfortunes Buddhism flourished in Sri Lanka, whilst in

Southeast Asia the Thais and Burmese established dynamic states. In comparison the states of the Malay World were in a process of political and religious disintegration and hence they were more receptive to the influence of foreign traders.

Qualifications must always be made about the impact of Islam upon East Africa. The external observer is influenced by the presence of a string of wealthy Muslim city-states along the coast and their distinctive Afro-Islamic culture. In reality these states represented little more than a veneer of Islamic culture along the coast. Barely a few kilometres inland the Islamic Swahili culture vanished to be replaced by the variegated cultures of the Bantu peoples; only to the north of the Horn of Africa did Islam penetrate inland to any marked degree. Southwards, too, the impact of Islam was limited, fading down the Mozambique coast and with minimal impact on the Afro-Malay pastoral and agricultural peoples of Madagascar.

Europe and the Indian Ocean

Mediterranean Europe had long been in contact with the Indian Ocean region. Classical Egypt, Greece, Rome and later Byzantium, then Medieval and Renaissance Europe had maintained links with the Indian Ocean. At times these were direct, but more often indirect via the trading peoples of the Middle East. By the fifteenth century direct contacts between Europe and the Indian Ocean were non-existent. Through the barrier of Muslim lands separating the two regions goods, myths and rumours of fabulous wealth entered Europe and eventually tempted European rulers and merchants to find their own direct route to the fabled land of Prester John, Cathay and the Indies.

When the Portuguese appeared in the Indian Ocean in the last decade of the fifteenth century they thought it was a Muslim lake. Muslim craft dominated the seaports and ports from Sofala on the Mozambique coast to the fabled spice islands of Ternate and Tidore in the eastern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. Wherever they went the Portuguese met Islam in a variety of guises: Swahili, Arabic, Iranian, Indian, Malay, merchants, peddlers, princes, sailors, craftsmen and peasants.

In the attempt to achieve maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean the Portuguese disrupted the old patterns of cultural interchange. By reducing the role of the Muslim traders they eliminated some of the major agents of cultural diffusion. But the Portuguese attempt to monopolise oceanic trade failed; Muslim traders retreated but many survived and on the littoral the Portuguese had only a limited control. Their empire evolved around control of major ports such as Sofala and Mombasa in East Africa, Hormuz and Muscat in the Middle East, Diu and Goa in India, Colombo and Jaffna in Sri Lanka, and Malacca in the Malay World.

Whilst the Portuguese limited maritime trade as a means of cultural interchange their weakness on land prevented them from inhibiting cultural interchange along the littoral. Only in East Africa, where many Muslim enclaves were dependent upon maritime links with the Middle East for cultural sustenance, did the Portuguese grossly alter the processes of cultural evolution - but even here the disruption was uneven and far from total.

In the Malay World Islam continued to spread for the simple reason that the Portuguese were physically incapable of enforcing their monopoly. They soon found that in many places (and not only in the Malay World) they desperately needed Muslim collaboration to trade profitably and successfully. At the same time in the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent mighty Islamic empires were established which paralleled and checkmated the rise of Portuguese

power. None of these empires were sufficiently strong at sea to destroy the Portuguese but on the land the Ottomans, the Saffavids in Iran and the Moghuls in India were more than a match for any European interloper.

These new empires ushered in new eras of cultural interchange and produced vital composite cultures. The Ottomans were the Turkish heirs to the medieval Arab Caliphate. The Saffavids confirmed the distinctive glories of Iranian civilization based on a mixture of pre-Islamic, Arabic, Mongol and Turkish influences. In India the Moghuls, from Central Asia, ushered in a magnificent intermingling of Iranian and Indian cultures.

Elsewhere in the Indian Ocean cultural dynamism was far from dead. In Sri Lanka adversity prompted the flowering of Kandyan Buddhist culture, and in Southeast Asia the Thais and Burmese merged a variety of cultural and ethnic groups into distinct nation states. In the Malay World strong states in the Indonesian archipelago evolved flourishing cultures: palimpsests of Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Animist traditions.

Whatever the failure of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean they nevertheless began a new process of cultural exchange. They added elements of their own culture and religion to the areas they impinged upon, but this was not their greatest legacy. Their greatest legacy was that they joined Europe and the Indian Ocean region in a new economic nexus which, in time, led to more far-reaching processes of cultural interchange.

By discovering a route to the Indian Ocean via the Cape of Good Hope the Portuguese outflanked the Muslim East and pioneered the way for other European merchants and adventurers. The Middle East was eliminated as the great exchange centre between Europe and the Indian Ocean region. For the first time the peoples of the region were placed in direct and continuous contact with European civilization.

The extent and depth of cultural exchange and interaction between Europe and the Indian Ocean region varied enormously. The Portuguese left a marked legacy only in Sri Lanka, Goa and parts of the Malay World, elsewhere they disrupted the old processes of cultural exchange. The old core areas of civilization remained largely intact, but some traditional linkages between core areas were destroyed and others were weakened.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European power and control mounted in the Indian Ocean. Commercial interest prompted territorial acquisition, as did the extension into the region of European power rivalry and conflict. Control of the littoral lands began to pass to Europeans as the indigenous empires began to decline, and European settlers slowly filtered into the region. The Portuguese left a remnant of European settlement in Sri Lanka, India, the Malay World and along the Mozambique coast. The Dutch and then the French, who followed their European rivals into the Indian Ocean in the late seventeenth century, increased the pace of European settlement: the Dutch in Southern Africa, Sri Lanka and the Indonesian archipelago, the French in islands such as Mauritius, La Reunion and the Seychelles. French and Dutch merchants and planters began to develop creole cultures of the indigenous peoples who formed the basis of these first major European colonial societies in the Indian Ocean region.

Both the French and the Dutch were responsible for a new maritime migration of indigenous peoples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Mirroring the activities of the Arab slavers the French provided their islands in the Indian Ocean with a slave labour force drawn mostly from Africa. The Dutch were not so directly involved in the African slave trade but transported troublesome Malays and Malay artisans and their soldiers to their colonies in Sri Lanka and Capetown. Under the French, too, the process of Indian settlement began on the

islands of Mauritius and La Reunion. Whatever their origins or conditions, slave or freeman, these immigrants carried their cultures with them to lay the basis for several flourishing creole cultures.

During the nineteenth century Britain emerged as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean region, and acquired a huge territorial empire.

The nineteenth century was also a century of a different type of folk movement in the Indian Ocean region. As European colonies developed various types of labour intensive economies there was a chronic shortage of labour in some areas. Emerging plantation and mining economies in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies led to massive Indian and Chinese settlement. Plantation economies in the Natal and the French and British islands of the Ocean led to a large migration of Indian labour to these areas. In East Africa, the Middle East and Sri Lanka other types of economic activity prompted by European colonialism attracted yet more settlers from the Indian sub-continent.

These expatriate communities in some instances remained exotic in their new homes, but some, such as the Chinese in Singapore and the Indians in Mauritius, came to form the dominant cultural group. But whatever their degree of integration with their new homes their links with their old homes invariably weakened and, as with the European settlers, they have had to adapt their cultural heritage to suit local conditions.

The old core civilizations were not destroyed by European intrusion, but all had different experiences as a result of this confrontation. The creation of a multiplicity of colonial states with boundaries often at odds with ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries fragmented the old core areas ostensibly discounting their basic cultural unity. Also the wave of European settlement into specific areas of the Indian Ocean region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created new zones predominantly European in cultural orientation which were minimally integrated with any of the indigenous cultures of the region.

Because European settlement, particularly in southern Africa and Western Australia, is such a recent, and to an extent traumatic event, it is viewed as an exotic and disruptive occurrence. Yet placed in a larger historical perspective European settlement has its precedents in a long series of folk movements into the Indian Ocean region stretching back thousands of years. Many of these earlier folk movements disrupted pre-existing societies, but all were eventually to contribute to the spectrum of cultures in the region.

Admittedly, modern communications and world politics have reinforced and maintained the cultural linkages of the European settlers with their original cultures. But migration and the unique demands of strange climates, different topographies and new economic activities have changed the imported European cultures. European settlers have had to adapt their heritage to local conditions, and this process has led to the creation of new cultural areas in the Indian Ocean region.

In southern Africa and Australia the indigenous cultures were discounted by the early European settlers and frequently savagely disrupted. But in recent years there has been a revival of indigenous cultures in areas of European settlement which, if it has not led to cultural integration, has led to the development of parallel cultural systems and a questioning amongst European settler groups of their own cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The great core cultures of the Indian Ocean region -- which emerged in six distinct areas millennia ago -- still form the basis of cultural differentiation and

exchange in the region. They are still the core areas of a range of societies which despite their variety exhibit common cultural features which differentiate them from contiguous groups. Over the past millennia there has been a continuing process of cultural interchange between the core areas so that there are similar threads running through the many cultures of the Indian Ocean region. Nevertheless each core area has moulded imported ideas, forms and peoples to its own needs, reinforcing its distinctive regional identity and the cultural variety and vitality of the Indian Ocean region.

The process of cultural exchange and fusion continues. The experience of European colonialism and the legacy of national states based on European-imposed political divisions has curtailed some cultural diffusion. But modern communications and the multiplication of media facilities, combined with the political and economic exigencies of the Indian Ocean region, have encouraged new patterns of cultural exchange based on the old core areas and the cultures of the European inhabitants of the region.