

# THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD: Africa in the First Global Economy

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**Gwyn Campbell**<sup>1</sup>  
McGill University

## Abstract

This paper outlines the debate surrounding the emergence of the first ‘global’ economy and discusses the role within it of Africa. First, it outlines the case for arguing that the Indian Ocean World (IOW) rather than Europe should be considered the arena in which the first global economy developed. It subsequently examines the historical role of Africa within the IOW with particular emphasis on Africa’s contribution to the IOW global economy and the possible repercussions such an analysis has for the historiography of Africa and the wider IOW.

## Introduction

Eurocentrism has until recently dominated the discipline of history. Placing Europe at the centre of economic and political development, Eurocentrists hold that Europe developed a unique culture that facilitated the emergence of individualism, private property and the profit motive, three keys to economic modernisation. By contrast non-European societies remained dominated by archaic social structures, such as caste, and by religious ideologies, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, that hindered the emergence of individual entrepreneurship and private property. While complex state structures based on agriculturally productive systems developed in certain regions, such as China, India and Mesopotamia, any surplus produced was removed by the political and religious elites who used it to sustain their habits of conspicuous consumption rather than to invest in economically productive activities. The trading sector in such societies remained small and was dominated by religious values. Asian societies were thus deemed archaic and backward. Only from the late eighteenth century, when European powers intervened, undermined political and religious

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<sup>1</sup> Gwyn Campbell is Professor in Indian Ocean World History at McGill University in Montreal. His most recent book is *Women and Slavery* with Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller.

authorities, and opened them up to the progressive twin forces of liberalism and capitalism, did non-Western societies start to modernise.

In this viewpoint, Europe lay at the heart of modern economic development which may be divided into three major phases: the rise of a global economy initiated by the European ‘Voyages of Discovery’ from the late fifteenth century; the development of an international economy in the nineteenth century; and the new globalisation of the twentieth century dominated by the United States.

From the 1980s, Eurocentrism has been challenged by an Asiatic School led by scholars such as K.N. Chaudhuri, Anthony Read, Janet Abu-Lughod, André Wink, George Modelski and William R. Thompson.<sup>2</sup> They and others argue that while Asian societies were socially and culturally different from European societies, Eurocentrists are incorrect to consider that Asian social structures, religious ideologies and political institutions posed insuperable barriers to economic development. Indeed, Asia, rather than Europe, was at the centre of the first global economy which developed well before Europe emerged from the Middle Ages: Abu-Lughod, and Modelski and Thompson working on backward projections of economic long cycles, date it to developments in Sung China in the tenth century; Chaudhuri considers it coincided with the rise of Islam from the seventh century, while Gunder Frank argues audaciously that it developed in the early first millennium C.E. or possibly earlier.<sup>3</sup>

For Asiatic historians, the first global economy was focused on the three great productive and consumer regions of China, India and Babylonia, extending into the less significant Mediterranean basin and the overland and maritime trade structures that

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<sup>2</sup> K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985); *idem*, *Asia Before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); André Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* 2 vols (Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996 and 1997); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers. The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996), esp. pp.142-5, 156; Frank, Andre Gunder, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Berkeley University Press, 1998); see also P.J.Cain & A.G. Hopkins, ‘Gentlemanly capitalism and British Expansion overseas, I: the old colonial system 1688-1850’ *South African Journal of Economic History* 7, 1 (1992), pp.150-81.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Lughod considers that a nascent global economy existed by the second century C.E.. However, she argues that its core was not Asian economies but the Roman Empire, and that it failed to survive the collapse of the latter in the third century - Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, ‘The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor’ in Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic & European Expansion. The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 80.

linked them. Of particular importance was the application of Braudelian concepts of a sea-based economy to the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, across which sail and exchange was rendered easier than across the Pacific and Atlantic because of their unique, northern hemisphere monsoon system of winds and currents. Blowing from the southwest from roughly May to September, and from the northeast from October to March, and supplemented by a perennial two-way system of equatorial winds and by predominantly southeasterly southern hemisphere trade winds, these gave merchants indigenous to the region a potential for regular trans-oceanic sail and commerce unparalleled in other oceans. This led to the early establishment of an IOW-wide trading network (from China to Southeast Asia to India to the Persian Gulf/ Red Sea and Mediterranean),<sup>4</sup> with major entrepôts at strategic transshipment/ provisioning/ repair locations (notably at the mouths of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, South India, the Malay Peninsula) and backed by sophisticated mercantile finance. This entire network formed an IOW global economy.

Further, Asiacentrists counter the Eurocentric view that, whatever existed previously, the entry of European royal and chartered companies into the IOW from the close of the fifteenth century resulted in a near monopoly for Europeans of the staple luxuries of long-distance maritime trade (notably spices) and major maritime trade routes and, in consequence, the relegation of indigenous (including Muslim) maritime merchants to the role of coastal peddlers. Asiacentrists argue rather that indigenous commercial structures largely survived, or quickly recovered from, initial European aggression, and that Europeans lacked the resources to impose durable monopolies of all key maritime trade routes<sup>5</sup> and valuable commodities: in the much vaunted case of Dutch control over spices, it took years, was costly to impose and was partial in effect.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, 'The World System in the Thirteenth Century pp. 78-9.

<sup>5</sup> For Indian merchants, see e.g. K.S. Mathew, 'Trade and Commerce in Sixteenth Century Goa' in Teotonio R. de Souza (ed.), *Goa Through the Ages. Vol.II. An Economic History* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1990), 141; Om Prakash, 'The Indian Maritime Merchant, 1500-1800', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47. 3 (2004), 453-5.

<sup>6</sup> Heather Sutherland, 'Believing is Seeing: Perspectives on Political Power and Economic Activity in the Malay World 1700-1940', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26. 1 (1995), 137; Om Prakash, 'Restrictive Trading Regimes: VOC and the Asian Spice Trade in the Seventeenth Century' in *idem*, *Precious Metals and Commerce. The Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean Trade* (Aldershot, Hamps & Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1994), 109-10, 121, 147, 188 fn.2, 189 fn.6; Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 138, 148.

Moreover, Asian disdain for European products obliged European companies to both continue importing into the IOW precious metals to pay for Asian goods in demand in Europe and, in an attempt to stem that flow, to enter intra-regional trade (country trade) in order to seek IOW commodities with which to pay for desired Asian commodities.<sup>7</sup> However, successful participation in intra-regional trade required the acquisition of local expertise (e.g. translators, commercial agents, local pilots) and the construction of alliances with regional political authorities to protect their activities, agents, trading posts and warehouses, in which Europeans were often minor partners.<sup>8</sup>

Most Asiatic historians contend that European dominance came late. Thus Chaudhuri considers that Europeans gained the upper hand only in the eighteenth century, although Ashin Das Gupta stresses that European influence varied considerably according to time and place<sup>9</sup> and Om Prakash argues that private (as opposed to state) Indian maritime merchant activity increased during this period.<sup>10</sup> In his turn, Frank asserts that European dominance was not achieved until the nineteenth century. Moreover, that dominance is currently under challenge from Asian countries, notably China, which has traditionally regarded all Westerners as ‘barbarians’.

### **Africa in Eurocentric and Asiatic Histories**

Eurocentric histories consider that, unlike Europe and the ancient civilisations of Asia, Africa was part of the uncivilised world (alongside e.g. highland Asia and outer-island Indonesia). It was characterised by a failure to develop sophisticated agricultural technology and hence generate large regular harvest surpluses, demographic expansion

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<sup>7</sup> Om Prakash, ‘The Dutch East India Company in the Trade of the Indian Ocean’ in *idem*, *Precious Metals and Commerce. The Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean Trade* (Aldershot, Hamps & Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1994), 186-92.

<sup>8</sup> C.R. Boxer, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion, 1415-1825: A Succinct Survey* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1968), 37-9; Om Prakash, ‘Asian Trade and European Impact: A Study of the Trade from Bengal, 1630-1720’ in *idem*, *Precious Metals and Commerce. The Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean Trade* (Aldershot, Hamps & Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1994), 63, n.25; Om Prakash, ‘The Indian Maritime Merchant, 1500-1800’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47. 3 (2004), 437; M.N. Pearson, ‘Brokers in Western Indian Port Cities. Their Role in Servicing Foreign Merchants’, *Modern Asian Studies* 22. 3 (1988), 455-72; Michael Pearson, *The Indian* pp. 131, 133-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ashin Das Gupta, ‘Indian Merchants and the Western Indian Ocean: The Early Seventeenth Century’, *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 3 (1985), 485.

<sup>10</sup> Om Prakash, ‘The Indian Maritime Merchant, 1500-1800’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47. 3 (2004), 455-6.

and urban growth. In consequence, few centralised states emerged in Africa and power lay rather in decentralised tribes and groups of elders governing largely subsistence societies that generated little long-distance trade. Foreign trade was limited to a few luxury items, notably ivory and slaves, which were demand dominated: Europeans on the west coast and predominantly Arabs on the east coast financed and shipped African slave exports to the Americas and Muslim IOW respectively. However, foreigners did not penetrate the interior of the *Dark Continent* where traditional African society lay mired in historical inertia, economically, politically and socially stagnant.

Asiacentrists concur with this view. They consider that Africans were largely passive victims of external (Arab and European) forces and that their economic contribution to the global economy was limited largely to the provision of unskilled servile labour to the chief centres of production in the IOW.<sup>11</sup> The economic backwardness of Africa stemmed largely from the primitive nature of African belief systems and institutions that were intrinsically inimical to modernization. Chaudhuri even attributes this to a specifically ‘African’ mode of development:

The exclusion of East Africa from our civilisational identities needs a special word of explanation. In spite of its close connection with the Islamic world, the indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> Asiacentrists thus either omit most of Africa from their discussion of the rise of a global economy or relegate it to a minor role on its periphery.

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<sup>11</sup> Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, ‘The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor’ in Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic & European Expansion. The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 78-9; K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, CUP, 1985), 40-1.

<sup>12</sup> *Asia Before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

This situation changed only during the nineteenth century when Europe cemented its global predominance and Africa became a battleground for the suppression of the slave trade and for European imperial rivalry. It was then that the history of Africa truly commenced as European skills and investment started for the first time to modernise African economies and political structures.

### **The Afrocentric Response**

The formation of an Afrocentric School in response to Eurocentrism was relatively slow but inevitable. Forged by elements from both the Nationalist Schools of African history and Afro-Americanism, Afrocentrists have argued that Africans were responsible for major economic and political developments on the African continent that have traditionally been ascribed to external forces and that Africans in some cases impacted on external events.

Afrocentrists have to date concentrated on the period before 1500. Within that period, they have first pointed to the dramatic findings of DNA analysis and archeological research that indicate an origin for *Homo sapiens* in East Africa (Ethiopia) around 160,000 years ago. Significant migrations out of Africa from c.40 000 B.P. led to the human settlement of first Asia, and only subsequently of Europe.<sup>13</sup>

They also point to an African rather than Middle Eastern genesis for the Egyptian civilization on the grounds that some of the early pharaohs were Negroid and that the Coptic language of Ancient Egypt was African. Africans not only contributed to the building of the Pharaonic state in Ancient Egypt but, by extension, of Ancient Greece.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Africans underwent a number of major technological innovations of their own making. This included a Neolithic pastoral revolution characterised by the domestication of cattle and crops, major independent centres being Ethiopia and West

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Robert Sanders, '160,000-year-old fossilized skulls uncovered in Ethiopia are oldest anatomically modern humans' *UC Berkeley News* (11 June 2003) – <http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/06/11>

<sup>14</sup> See Theodore Celenko (ed.), *Egypt in Africa*, (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1996); Ali B. Ali-Dinar (ed.), 'African Origins of Science & Math [Sadiki]. The African Origins of Science and Mathematics; A New Paradigm for Scientific Thinking; an Annotated Bibliography' University of Pennsylvania – African Studies Center - [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Bibliography/African\\_Origins\\_Math.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Bibliography/African_Origins_Math.html) (15/09/06).

Africa. It also included the independent invention of iron-making by Bantu speakers in central East Africa and its revolutionary application to agriculture.<sup>15</sup> Again, Afrocentrists argue for an African rather than Arab or Persian genesis for the Swahili civilisations on linguistic and technological grounds; Kiswahili is structurally a Bantu language, and much of the material basis for the Swahili civilization, including ship-building and oceanic voyaging, can be traced to African, specifically Bantu-speaking, roots.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the details of the African contribution to the global economy are rarely elaborated upon beyond the diffusion of African rice to the new World and African millets to Asia.<sup>17</sup> Rather, Afrocentrists have concentrated on demonstrating how Africans succeeded in fulfilling European-defined criteria of civilised societies, such as the creation of cities, kingdoms, states and sedentary agricultural systems. Hence the emphasis on, for example, Aksum, Ethiopia, Great Zimbabwe and the Swahili port-state complex.

Moreover, in sharp contrast to members of the Asiatic School, Afrocentrists have yet to challenge the conventional Eurocentric view of African history from the time of the European 'Voyages of Discovery'. Rather, they have accepted Eurocentric 'area study' definitions of African regions that mark North Africa apart from sub-Saharan Africa, that within Sub-Saharan Africa distinguish between West, Central, East and Southern Africa, and that accept historical studies based on 'countries' as defined largely by colonial political frontiers.

They also accept the conventional view that Africa and Africans were dominated economically by outsiders. Africa's significance to the global economy was marginal, its chief role being as a supplier of slaves to the New World and of raw materials, tropical exotica and slaves to the key productive centres of the IOW. Of particular importance is the Afrocentric acceptance of the conventional view that the Africans

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<sup>15</sup> See notably Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age. Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville & Oxford: University Press of Virginia & James Currey, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the recent writings of Felix Chami, including 'Roman Beads from the Rufiji Delta, Tanzania: First Incontrovertible Archaeological Link with the *Periplus*', *Current Anthropology* 40.2 (1999), 237-41.

<sup>17</sup> See Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Josep A. Gari, 'Review of the African millet diversity' - <<http://www.icuc-iwmi.org/files/News/millet.pdf>> (15/09/06).

played a passive role in this exchange. Instead they emphasise the dominance of Asian (notably Arab) and especially of European trade networks, merchants, finance and ships. For instance, Ali Mazrui's periodisation of east African coastal history is, consecutively, the Afro-Oriental phase up to 1500, the Afro-Occidental phase from 1500 and the current Afro-global phase.<sup>18</sup>

Thus to date, even John Middleton's characterization of the Swahili – an 'African Mercantile Civilization' – as having been 'subordinate' to Arabs and Europeans stands unchallenged.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Afrocentrists seek to underline this external dominance and African passivity as the basis for the proto-underdevelopment of the continent, a process confirmed by colonialism and maintained by the post-colonial world order.

### **Africa in the pre-1900 Global Economy Revisited**

It is clear that 'centric' schools of historical thought have failed to do anywhere near justice to African history and to the role of Africa in the IOW global economy. It is here argued that, in order to begin to rectify this injustice, some of the conventional precepts used by historians for the research, writing and teaching of African history need to be discarded and others brought to bear.

#### *Africa and Africans*

It is first argued that there is a need to reject the traditional definitions of Africa and Africans. First, with regard to Africa, the conventional divisions between regions north and south of the Sahara, between continental and island Africa, as well as colonial political frontiers should be in large measure dismissed. This permits inter-regional linkages to be more fully recognised and extrapolated, notably in the exchange of peoples, ideas, technology and commodities. On a more meaningful level, it permits the elaboration of such linkages between African regions and the IOW, with a focus upon 'interchange' and the role in it of Africans.

<sup>18</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, 'Africa and Islamic Civilization: The East African Experience', keynote address, International Symposium on 'Islamic Civilization in Eastern Africa', Kampala, Uganda, 15-17 December 2003 - <<http://www.swahilionline.com/features/articles/islam/alimazrui1.htm>> (15/09/06).

<sup>19</sup> John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili. An Africa Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1002).



Thus, for Africa's relations through time with the wider IOW, it is here argued that a Braudelian framework be adopted whereby the concept of 'Indian Ocean Africa' (IOA) replace conventional geographical and political divisions. IOA refers to all regions of Africa with direct or strong indirect economic links to the IOW. In most cases, this implies linkages to the Indian Ocean or its Red Sea extension. IOA thus refers to all African regions littoral to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, from Egypt to South Africa and those, such as central southern Africa and East Central Africa, from present-day Botswana and Zimbabwe to Uganda, that have historically important trade links to littoral IOA regions. However, IOA is not a fixed geographical unit in the sense that the degree of inter-connection with the IOW fluctuates over time and according to region; at times it might involve only limited littoral regions, at others it extended to West Africa.

Similarly, conventional views of who constitutes an 'African' need to be seriously reviewed. By definition 'centrists' highlight differences between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' but in their eagerness to demonstrate the vitality of African agents, Afrocentrists sometimes encourage ahistorical concepts of ethnic, linguistic and cultural purity that distinguish 'Africans' from others. For instance, Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse exclude languages such as Malagasy and Afrikaans that are exclusive to Africa but were introduced 'over the past two millennia or so', although they include the 'Afro Asiatic' languages of northern Africa and Kiswahili which emerged sometime in the first millennium C.E.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, groups of immigrant origin, such as Afrikaners and the Malagasy, have conventionally been considered 'foreigners' and not 'Africans'. Whereas the historical role of Afrikaners has of necessity been discussed because of their contact with 'African' groups, that of the Malagasy has been conventionally excluded from African studies.

It is here proposed that a much more holistic definition of 'African' be adopted and that 'Africans' should be taken to comprise all peoples irrespective of ethnic, linguistic, or religious origin who, for more than two generations, inhabited parts of the African

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<sup>20</sup> Bernd Heine & Derek Nurse, *African Languages. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

continent and its islands. This would include not only the Swahili, but also Egyptians, Afrikaners and Malagasy.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the traditional equation of slave and African needs to be reassessed. American scholarship that currently sets the trend for historical research still accepts the conventional image of the 'African' abroad in the pre-colonial era uniquely as a slave, despite recently challenges to this view.<sup>22</sup> This historical prism constructed largely around an American-driven academic obsession with slavery and its aftermath needs to be polished and put away in order to free the way for researchers to begin to identify and elaborate the role of all Africans in the IOW whatever their skin colour, language or religion.

It is also critical to dispense with rigid distinctions between a self-contained 'interior' and an ocean-based 'littoral'. Of central importance here is the recognition of two major interrelated economic systems, one terrestrial and the other maritime (*landscape* and *seascape*) and of the connections between them.<sup>23</sup> This is of particular importance to the history of IOA and the IOW because of the conventional view that only in the nineteenth century were links forged between the two. This can be brought out through focussing on the African role in the interaction between the two, as well as in the intermediate zone - notably in the IOW entrepôts which tended to develop in it.

Finally, the Eurocentric time periods imposed on Africa, which divides African and IOW history into the era before and after 1500 and subsequently between colonial and pre-colonial eras, have to be re-examined. These are quintessentially Eurocentric concepts that reflect Eurocentric obsessions (the "Age of European Discovery" and "the Scramble for Africa"). This European focus has obscured important continuities in IOW

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<sup>21</sup> Challenges to the conventional view that has excluded Madagascar from African studies include Raymond K. Kent, *Early Kingdoms of Madagascar 1500-1700* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970) and Gwyn Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750-1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Gwyn Campbell, 'Slavery and the Trans-Indian Ocean World Slave Trade: A Historical Outline in Edward Alpers & Himanshu Ray (eds.), *Narratives of the Sea: Encompassing the Indian Ocean World* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum/ OUP, 2006), 273-91; Gwyn Campbell, 'Le Commerce d'esclaves et la question d'une diaspora dans le Monde de l'Océan Indienne' in Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya & Jean-Pierre Angenot (eds.), *Anneaux de la Mémoire* (2006).

<sup>23</sup> Jan-Georg Deutsch & Brigitte Reinwald (eds), *Space on the Move. Transformations of the Indian Ocean Seascape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2002); Ashin Das Gupta, 'Indian Merchants and the Western Indian Ocean: The Early Seventeenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 3 (1985), 482.

economic history that emerge through concentrating on fluctuations in indigenous IOW structures and patterns of trade, on IOW actors and on intra-IOW commodity exchanges.

## Conclusion

This paper outlines the conventional Eurocentric view of trade and economic development in the Asian and African regions (here called the Indian Ocean World), and the Asiatic and Afrocentric reactions to it. It argues that it is essential to break free of the 'centrist' paradigms and, embracing the Braudelian perspective, view Africa's relationship with the IOW in a more holistic sense. This calls for a clear definition of the use here of Africa and the IOW. Only then can the real nature of Africa's relationship through time with the Indian Ocean World begin to emerge in any meaningful or comprehensive way.

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