

Campbell, Gwyn: *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to Circa 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019. ISBN: 9780521810357; 316 S.

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Interdisciplinary research on the Indian Ocean is a rapidly expanding branch of global studies, which has opened up new opportunities for collaboration, publication and academic institution building. Historian Gwyn Campbell is the Director of the Indian Ocean World Centre at McGill University and has been a pioneer of this with an extensive record of publications that have helped to define the field.

Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to Circa 1900 is a recent example, published in the Cambridge University Press series „New Approaches to African History“, which aims to „introduce students to current findings and new ideas in African history“ and to provide textbooks for „modules in general courses on African history and world history“.

The book is a laudably ambitious enterprise with four major objectives. One is to introduce a new mode of global historical understanding, which focuses on human interaction with climate and environment as an alternative to „conventional“ views that have prioritised political, military, and commercial events, and have had a „Eurocentric“ bias. A second objective is to give an account of this understanding from „early times“, i.e. from the last Great Ice Age 11.700 years ago to „the present day“. Within this long view, the book points to three „ups“ of prosperity from 300 BCE to 300 CE, from 800 to 1200, and from the mid-19th century to now, and three „downs“ of decline from 300 to 800 and from 1250 to 1830. Thirdly, Gwyn Campbell presents this history with a focus on „Indian Ocean Africa“, arguing that „conventional“ accounts have underestimated the importance of Africa for „Indian Ocean World“ historical dynamics. Finally, the volume sets out to do this with three broad historical case study emphases on Egypt, Ethiopia and Madagascar/Southern

Africa.

As the book’s focus is on „human-environment-interaction, more than great men, state formation, or imperial expansion“, economic history has pride of place. The geographical scope of the book is not national, but rather the broader entities of the „Indian Ocean World“ and „Indian Ocean Africa“, which it sees as meaningfully coherent arenas in the development of a „modern international economy“ (p. 20–21).

Highlights in the book’s narrative are early African contributions to the emergence of an Indian Ocean World „global economy“ such as the Swahili and Great Zimbabwe civilisations and „the human settlement of Madagascar“, which is accounted for with reference to sources of genetic and archaeological analysis. To replace the emphasis in „conventional“ history writing on „European imperial expansion and colonial conquest, and the East African slave trade“, Gwyn Campbell highlights the reaction in Indian Ocean Africa to Western economic and political forces, and discusses examples of „indigenous reactions to such forces“. This includes failed attempts at alternative or „indigenous“ modernisation in Egypt and Madagascar, as well as the alternative imperialism of a non-modernising Ethiopia, which nonetheless withstood colonisation. Further highlights are the impact of Islam – and of Sufi networks in particular – on the Indian Ocean World global economy and a reassessment of the origins and structure of the slave trade in Indian Ocean Africa, which removes it from paradigms of understanding taken from the Atlantic trade.

This is all great and good, and Gwyn Campbell’s book shows convincingly how promising in terms of new insights is the human-environment interaction approach, into which he also includes the causes and effects of climate change and the massive repeated historical impact of diseases and pandemics, which makes highly topical reading.

Maybe it is a bit of paradox that so much innovation and overturning of conventional views should be contained in a textbook for undergraduates? One consequence of this is that the book is quite sparing in references, and that its bibliography is highly selective.

This is understandable as a full bibliography and comprehensive referencing for the range of issues addressed would have been massive and difficult to contain within the number of pages available. On the other hand, the limited referencing means that the positions of „conventional“ representation, against which the book polemicises, are not precisely indicated in terms of authorship, which would otherwise have helped to set out Campbell’s position and contribution more clearly. When the book does polemicise explicitly – as in the excellent final chapter on „Africa and Slavery in the Indian Ocean World“, where recent writings by Patrick Manning, Jane Hooper and Thomas Vernet are criticised – the taking issue is perhaps of a more sophisticated nature than a student readership deserves.

The book provides lots of occasion for discussion, which will be great for using it with students. One issue is its view of periodisation and of the different dynamics of development within different periods. In Campbell’s view, in accordance with his human-environment interaction approach, even „early times“ were global, and climate change in „early times“ may also have been to some extent humanly induced (p. 83). But is there not a difference of impact between what this meant at the time of the Neolithic Revolution 4.000 years ago and today? Is there not also a fundamental difference between the way in which economic connections in the Indian Ocean World 1.000 years ago can be said to have been „global“, and the „unprecedented speed and scale“ that from the late 19th century came to characterise „truly international“ and „modernised economies“ (p. 199, 231)? Reflexions on modernisation theory and stages of globalisation would have been welcome here.

On a similar note, the book’s comparative account of the nineteenth century history of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Madagascar is brilliant, original and enlightening. But if these three cases are to serve as examples of „indigenous modernisation“ and to challenge the Eurocentrism of conventionalism, it is striking how all three of them were failures, though in interestingly different ways. This does not seem to uphold a theoretical position of „alternative modernities“, but rather to provide instances

of the ruthless universalism of capitalist globalisation.

Finally, while Gwyn Campbell’s book gives a wonderful account of the significance of Islam and Sufi brotherhoods in Indian Ocean Africa and thus of the importance of religion in the context of human-environment interaction, it could perhaps have said more about the relative weight of the different types of drivers at play within the interaction. What kind of models could be set up to show the ways in which during different historical periods a context of human-environment interaction made possible different configurations of politics and culture in the Indian Ocean World and in Indian Ocean Africa?

Maybe this is something Gwyn Campbell could take up in a future volume within what promises to become a thriving branch of Indian Ocean studies and of global history more generally. In his book *Against the Grain. A Deep History of the Earliest States*¹, James Scott describes how control of manpower and populations in the context of early agriculture and irrigation in Mesopotamia and Egypt structured relations between civilised and barbarians, and led to forms of state that were at once authoritarian and fragile. Inspiration from James Scott might lead Gwyn Campbell and us all to think again about environmental state forms and the fluctuating relationships between barbarians and their rulers in the Indian Ocean World in both past, present, and future.

HistLit 2020-2-127 / Preben Kaarsholm über Campbell, Gwyn: *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to Circa 1900*. Cambridge 2019, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.06.2020.

¹James Scott, *Against the Grain. A Deep History of the Earliest States*, New Haven 2017.