Bresnahan on Campbell, 'Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to Circa 1900'

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*Africa and the Indian Ocean World* offers a sweeping two-thousand-year narrative of global interactions along the continent’s eastern littoral. This book is a part of Cambridge’s New Approaches to African History Series, which produces survey texts aimed at students. At first glance, the structure of the book gives the impression of a more generalist text focused on familiar themes within the Indian Ocean historiography such as global trade, oceanic imperialism, and slavery. However, Gwyn Campbell’s innovative use of climate data enables him to analyze these topics from a perspective centered around the region’s environmental history. This unique lens, which focuses on human-environmental interactions, makes the book a valuable resource for both Africanists and scholars of the Indian Ocean world more generally.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, with human-environmental interactions serving as the driving force within the narrative. The role of the Indian Ocean’s monsoon winds in facilitating long-distance maritime voyages is well covered in the literature. However, as Campbell argues, scholars have too often treated the monsoon as a “static” environmental force (p. 8). In the introductory chapter, Campbell provides a helpful overview of the different environmental agents that influence climate patterns in the Indian Ocean, including the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), and volcanism. Campbell outlines how these factors shape the climate at a variety of scales—from the seasonal to the centennial—to present the Indian Ocean’s climate as a dynamic and changing phenomenon.

Starting from chapter 2, the book is organized chronologically, moving from the late centuries BCE until the 1800s. The second chapter offers a brief overview of the Neolithic Revolution and its role in fostering overland and maritime exchanges prior to the emergence of large-scale Indian Ocean networks. Chapter 3 focuses on the first “upswing” in the global economy, during the era of Indian Ocean-Mediterranean trade documented in historical sources like the Periplus. The chapter offers a familiar overview of the role of different locations in Indian Ocean Africa—including Egypt, Aksum, and the Azanian metropolis of Rhapta—in contributing luxury goods and staples to emerging trade networks that connected Afro-Eurasia up until the early centuries of the first millennium.
While chapters 2 and 3 focus on the interconnectivity of the ancient world’s economy, the payoff of Campbell’s environmental approach comes into sharper focus in subsequent chapters. Most chapters of the book begin with a section on the “Human-Environmental Context” that allows readers to situate developments chronicled in historical literature alongside climate data from the same period. For example, chapter 4 links the mid-first-millennium decline of major empires along the Indian Ocean world rim to climate change, including human-induced changes stemming from deforestation during the first global upswing, and volcanism. Pulling from a wide range of sources, the chapter considers how a cooler and more arid climate may have contributed to political instability in Han China and the Roman Empire while gesturing to the potential of climate data for generating new questions on the history of Aksum and the East African coast during the same period.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the reemergence of Indian Ocean networks during the late first millennium, a development most often linked to the rapid expansion of Islam across the Indian Ocean. Without downplaying the important role of religion, Campbell details how a more benign climate during the Medieval Warm Period contributed to population growth, industrial production, and increased human mobility. In chapter 6, Campbell to look at the origins of three major societies within Indian Ocean Africa: Swahili, Malagasy, and Great Zimbabwe. By focusing on this focus on human-environmental dynamics, he places these three quite different societies within a single framework.

While some readers may be wary of this emphasis on the environment as a driving force within Indian Ocean history, Campbell avoids being overly deterministic with environmental data. In chapters 7 and 8, for instance, the book turns to the well-told story of European incursions into the Indian Ocean and considers how environmental changes may have limited European influence during the early stages of oceanic imperialism. Campbell suggests that unstable environmental conditions between the 1300s and early 1800s—during the “Little Ice Age”—would have made it more difficult for Europeans to gain access to trade goods and provisions in many parts of the Indian Ocean. However, climate change was not the only limitation, as the rise of major inland polities, such as the Mughal and the Ottoman Empires, also reconfigured the relationship between inland and maritime trading networks. Together, these political and environmental changes forced European merchants to rely heavily on local agents and networks, which, as Campbell argues, resulted in the continued vitality—and even growth—of trade and production in different parts of eastern and southern Africa.

The next three chapters address the dramatic transformations of the Indian Ocean during the industrial age, including familiar themes such as the global economy (chapter 9) and colonization (chapter 11). Chapter 10, which looks at “Indigenous Modernization,” is the most ambitious of the three. The chapter examines how governments in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Imerina (Madagascar) promoted modernization projects as a means to resist European encroachment during the 1800s. Campbell chronicles large-scale investments in schools, militaries, and transportation and communication networks across these three locations, suggesting that they resisted European influence by endeavoring to participate within the rapidly expanding capitalist world economy on their own terms. These modernization projects ultimately failed, according to Campbell, because ordinary people resisted the expanding reach of the state into their daily lives.
The final chapter looks at slavery in Indian Ocean Africa in the *longue durée*. The chapter offers a useful overview of the challenges of comparing Indian Ocean slavery to the Atlantic world; however, within the monograph as a whole, it felt tacked on and the information contained within could have easily been woven into other chapters. Since the book does not include a formal conclusion, this also struck me as a strange way to end a work so focused on human-environmental interactions.

Overall, *Africa and the Indian Ocean World* offers a well-researched synthesis of the history of Indian Ocean trading networks across two millennia. Campbell’s incorporation of environmental data is especially effective at highlighting the contingencies of commercial exchanges within the region. The mobility of people, commodities, and ideas, as Campbell shows, was influenced by a range of human and environmental forces. Furthermore, the periodization that this environmental lens provides also demonstrates how scholars may bridge conventional divides within Africanist historiography. Campbell suggests that scholars should conceptualize Indian Ocean Africa as a region inclusive of the whole of the eastern edge of the continent, from Cape Town to Cairo. While scholars seldom put places like Madagascar and Egypt within a common analytical framework, the book’s elaboration of the ways that large-scale environmental trends affected people across this larger macroregion illuminates how scholars may integrate the histories of a wider range of locales in Indian Ocean Africa. Similarly, Campbell’s forays into discussions of volcanism in China or agriculture in South Asia help to demonstrate the interconnectivity between Indian Ocean Africa and other world regions in ways that push beyond the more common focus on shared religious ideas, trade, and cosmopolitan lifeways.

As would be expected in such a sweeping work, there are a few issues. For example, Campbell suggests that settlements on the Swahili coast practiced little agriculture prior to the fourteenth century (p. 116); however, this claim is at odds with recent archaeobotanical studies that provide ample evidence of cereal cultivation on the coastal mainland and offshore islands from at least the seventh century.[1] More generally, there is surprisingly little engagement with the wealth of recent archaeological literature on biological translocations in the Indian Ocean. Since much of this work focuses on the Swahili coast and Madagascar, it would have provided an interesting complement to several parts of Campbell’s analysis.[2]

Some readers may also be dismayed by the lack of footnotes in the text. This is of course less a critique of Campbell than the conventions of publishing survey texts. Given the mountains of interdisciplinary research from which Campbell builds this narrative, however, more extensive footnoting would have been a welcome addition, especially for scholars or students wishing to consult or cite the climatological studies on which many of the book’s most significant insights are based.

Notes


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