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# Chokepoints and Corridors

## Ordering maritime space in the Western Indian Ocean

Jatin Dua



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the Western Indian Ocean

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Cover image: Cargo ship transiting through the Suez Canal, December 2018 © Jatin Dua

This report is a product of the X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the FCDO's Cross- Border Conflict—Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme, funded by UKaid from the UK government. The programme carries out research work to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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## Summary

In the Horn of Africa there is a dynamic interplay between land and sea that has shaped political, economic, and social relationships. Historical and contemporary instances of piracy in the Western Indian Ocean, at different times, precipitated a securitization of this maritime space and made visible the economic and political connections that tie sea to land. These events also reveal the multiplicity of actors and locations involved in the ordering and reordering of maritime space.

The subsequent wars on piracy that have followed emphasize how securitization (and regional and transregional geopolitics) and trade do not operate in distinct spheres but rather are closely articulated. Increasingly, policy makers and scholars pay attention to the relationship between geopolitical and economic spheres, with a focus on geo-economics. This is especially the case in the context of the development of large-scale and transregional infrastructure projects, such as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Nonetheless, the lens of the territorial nation state, with its national capital focus in relation to centre–periphery dynamics, still reigns supreme, thus obscuring connections across (maritime) space and scale.

Rather than confining them to a separate analytical sphere, maritime connections should be placed at the centre of our understanding of the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. Our framework of analysis should be widened to include forms of mobility and circulation that criss-cross borders between land and sea. Doing so emphasizes the role of trade corridors and chokepoints on land and sea in facilitating and constricting mobility and possibilities of power and profit that emerge from control over these spaces for a variety of actors. The Western Indian Ocean and other maritime spaces should be viewed as a zone of connection and activity, rather than simply an empty transit space as is often the case.

This broader perspective likewise means reckoning with the multiple ways in which the sea emerges as a resource for a variety of actors, including the role of non-human actors. In the Red Sea, this opens up the possibility of highlighting the role of winds, waves, currents, offshore oil deposits and coastal upwelling in shaping political and economic life, including the ways in which climate change impacts the interrelated nexus between securitization and trade.

## Policy considerations

- Effective policy interventions require the abandonment of singular territorial units in favour of transregional ones entailing a broadening of analytical frameworks beyond state centric views. While policy makers and international actors are recognizing the importance of transregional infrastructure projects and global logistics

supply chains, the territorial limitations of a state-centric or continental geography remain central in how we understand spaces like border zones, ports, and trade routes.

- There is an important need to integrate maritime realms into policy analysis. Beyond empty spaces or zones that exist outside social processes, maritime realms are shaped by political, economic, and social forces on land and simultaneously operate independently from these landed systems. This dynamic can help produce analyses that treat maritime space in a similar way as the dynamics associated with borders and cross-border relations.
- The integration of maritime realms is also central to emphasizing multi-scalar analyses that integrate socio-political and economic analyses with environmental analyses, including emphasizing the role of climate change and the impact of human and non-human actors in shaping mobility and exchange across the Red Sea.

# 1. Introduction

In 1695, the *Ganj-i-Sawai*, one of the largest Mughal trading vessels at the time, was returning from Mecca to Surat, a major port in Western India, with around 600 Hajj pilgrims. The vessel was also transporting revenue from the sale of Indian goods at Mocha and Jeddah. Given its valuable cargo, the ship was heavily armed and escorted by another ship, the *Fateh Muhammad*. As the ships sailed from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, a group of pirate vessels led by the notorious king of pirates,<sup>1</sup> the Englishman Henry Avery, gave chase. After sacking the *Fateh Muhammad*, Avery's crew pursued the *Ganj-i-Sawai* and, following a ferocious battle, boarded and ransacked the ship. News of the hijacking, especially the attack on pilgrims returning from the Hajj, was met with anger and horror in Surat and threatened the tenuous trade relationships between the Mughal empire and the British East India Company.

In the immediate aftermath of this act of piracy at sea, the Mughal governor ordered his troops to occupy East India Company establishments in Surat and nearby Suwali, incarcerate their 63 employees and stop their trade. After nearly a year of negotiations, the employees were finally released and trade re-established—once the British East India Company agreed to hire out two English ships to the Mughals as a protective convoy for the Hajj pilgrim vessels from Surat. In addition, Avery's actions led to a global hunt for pirates who were moving from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean in the late seventeenth century and eventually the entry of the British state into the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean, transforming the ocean into a large securitized British lake.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, the contemporary Red Sea seems radically different from the Age of Sail (generally dated as 1571 to 1862) and its contests between pirates and sovereigns. This is now a world of container ships, logistics and computerizations. From the 1990s onward, however, an old forgotten foe returned to world oceans from the Straits of Malacca<sup>3</sup> to Somalia. Shifting regulatory regimes, a proliferation of small weapons, the growing demand for fish and the sharp decrease of crew members on container ships

1 On the broader history of piracy in the Atlantic Ocean and the movement of European pirates between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean, see: Kevin McDonald, *Pirates, Merchants, Settlers, and Slaves. Colonial America and the Indo-Atlantic World*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015 and Robert Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

2 For authors who emphasize the centrality of the threat of piracy *inter alia* in transforming the British presence in this region, see: Patricia Risso, 'Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century', *Journal of World History* 12/2 (2001): 293–319; Philip Stern, 'British Asia and British Atlantic: Comparisons and Connections', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63/4 (2006): 693–712; and Lauren Benton, 'Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47/4 (2005): 700–724.

3 The Straits of Malacca is a narrow stretch of water (930 km long) between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. It is the primary shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and one of the most important shipping lanes in the world.

due to shifting labour regimes and mechanization made the busy shipping lanes of South East Asia, Latin America and Africa once again sites of predation, profit and plunder. As is generally the case with life at sea, these acts of predation largely remain obscured from popular view or concern. A series of spectacular hijackings off the coast of Somalia between 2007 and 2013 changed this, making visible this sea of piracy and generating an unprecedented naval, legal and policy response.



Artistic rendition of Henry Avery and capture of the Ganj-i-Sawai. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganj-i-Sawai#/media/File:Henry\\_Every.gif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganj-i-Sawai#/media/File:Henry_Every.gif)

In 2008, following the hijacking of the US-bound Saudi Arabian very large crude carrier *MV Sirius Star* approximately 725 km south-east of the Kenyan coast, the UN Security

Council adopted a series of resolutions to construct the legal edifice for the twenty-first century global war on piracy. Specifically, UN Security Council Resolution 1816, while ‘reaffirming its respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and unity of Somalia’, gives unprecedented authority to international naval vessels to pursue pirates in international waters, Somali territorial waters and even on land.<sup>4</sup> Also addressed by the resolution, counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean are organized primarily under the auspices of three naval coalitions, with more than 30 states participating in the policing of the western Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> Within a year, by 2009, an international coalition had assembled off the coast of Somalia, marking the latest chapter in the long war on piracy in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean that first began after the attack on the *Ganj-i-Sawai* in 1695. International naval vessels were back, once again involved in chasing pirates.

This analysis draws on concepts in global history, critical geography and transregional ethnography to describe the tensions and contradictions around the desire to order the Western Indian Ocean space from the macro-regional security level to the micro-level related to the unregulated movement of goods and people. Based on research on mobilities across the Western Indian Ocean, what emerges is the necessity to engage as much across as within national and even regional spaces. For example, understanding events in Puntland requires studying regional connections in the Horn of Africa but also necessitates a focus on Yemen and Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Effective policy interventions thus require the abandonment of singular territorial units in favour of transregional ones. This analysis also makes a case for taking the word ‘maritime’ in studies of maritime trade and mobility seriously. This means widening the framework of analysis to include forms of mobility and circulation that criss-cross borders between land and sea. It also means viewing the Red Sea and other maritime spaces as a zone of connection and activity, rather than simply an empty transit space as is often the case.

This broader perspective likewise means reckoning with the multiple ways in which the sea emerges as a resource for a variety of actors. In addition, this allows for engaging with the materiality of the Red Sea. A robust scholarship on oceanic spaces seeks to emphasize the materiality of oceanic spaces. By this, such scholars mean understanding oceans and seas as ‘three-dimensional, fluid and liquid, [and] also undulating surfaces; how does the texture, the currents and the substance of the water impact contemporary social and cultural uses of that space?’<sup>6</sup>

4 United Nations, Security Council, ‘Resolution 1816’, 2 June 2008, S/RES/1816(2008), 1.

5 For discussion of counter-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia, see: Zoltán Glück, ‘Piracy and the Production of Security Space’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33/4 (2015): 642–659 and Douglas Guilfoyle, ‘Piracy off Somalia: UN Security Council Resolution 1816 and IMO regional counter-piracy efforts’, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 57/3 (2008): 690–699.

6 Quoted in Philip E Steinberg, ‘Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions’, *Atlantic Studies* 10/2 (2013): 156–169, 164.

In the Red Sea, this opens up the possibility of highlighting the role of winds, waves, currents, offshore oil deposits and coastal upwelling<sup>7</sup> in shaping political and economic life, including the ways in which climate change impacts the interrelated nexus between securitization and trade.

<sup>7</sup> Upwelling is an oceanographic phenomenon involving the wind-driven motion of dense, cooler and usually nutrient-rich water from deep water towards the ocean surface, replacing the warmer, typically nutrient-depleted surface water.

## 2. Beyond the border

Throughout the Horn of Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, people, goods and ideas move across borders with relative ease. This creates dynamic *entrepôt* economies in borderlands and spaces of social and political opportunity. Borders and borderlands provide a set of ‘affordances’<sup>8</sup> for a range of actors—from customs officers, army officials and market sellers to smugglers, bandits and revolutionaries—who transform borders and borderlands into different types of resources. As is highlighted in one exploration of borders and borderlands in the Horn of Africa, these resources can be divided into four main categories: ‘economic resources, political resources, identity resources, and status and rights resources’.<sup>9</sup>

Mobility across borders is also central to navigating environmental volatility—processes that are likely to become even more acute with the impact of climate change. While emphasizing the dynamic state of borderlands in the Horn of Africa, it is important to note that the permeability of borders in the region, namely the ease with which certain groups are able to move back and forth across state borders does not correspond to ‘inconsequentiality’.<sup>10</sup> Borders and borderlands have to be understood in relational modes across various scales: On the one hand, permeable local borders often need to contend with rigidity at inter-state levels; on the other, sometimes ‘permeability is tolerated at the state level, whereas a local population might prefer a more rigid form of border’.<sup>11</sup> This focus on ‘understanding how people adapt to state borders and make use of them’ has been analytically useful in understanding the dynamics of mobility and marginality in the Horn of Africa.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, there remains a ‘fundamental mismatch between the nation state framework through which bilateral and multilateral actors see the world, and the networked lives of often vulnerable populations in the region’.<sup>13</sup> In research on ‘everyday transnationalism’ in the Ethiopia–South Sudan borderland, one observer highlights the importance of borderlands simultaneously as accelerators of mobility, hubs for goods,

8 Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1998, 17. Affordances refers to the qualities or properties of an object or space that define its possible uses or make clear how it can or should be used. For Barth, and scholarship on borders that has been influenced by his anthropological analysis, borders are not simply political constructs and lines that demarcate national boundaries but spaces of opportunity.

9 Dereje Feyissa and Markus V Hoehne, eds., *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, Woodbridge: James Curry, 2010, 11.

10 Feyissa and Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands*, 12.

11 Feyissa and Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands*, 12.

12 Feyissa and Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands*, 13.

13 Freddie Carver, ‘Rethinking Aid in Borderland Spaces: The case of Akobo’, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2020, 4.

money and people, and as sites of political influence for local actors.<sup>14</sup> The inability of international donors to understand these complex forms of mobility in borderland regions, coupled with a state centric model of framing aid and intervention, is a missed opportunity. It also runs the risk of doing more harm than good. As the Ethiopia–South Sudan borderland highlights, these consequences range from ‘empowering local power brokers at the cost of ordinary citizens, inciting conflict among different groups or cutting off key livelihood strategies central to resilience and survival’.<sup>15</sup>



Containers being unloaded at the Port of Jeddah in the Red Sea, December 2018. Photo by Jatin Dua

An emphasis on everyday transnationalism makes visible regional and transregional mobilities and discloses an important challenge for understanding the efficacy of humanitarian and security intervention. While the reality of everyday transnationalism makes visible networks and connectivity that overlap across borders and continents, security and humanitarian frameworks continue to necessitate an engagement via state-based structures. Expanding our purview of geographical forms to include regional and transregional configurations can help better capture dynamics of mobility on land and sea and their consequences for shaping livelihoods and communities.

<sup>14</sup> Carver, ‘Rethinking Aid’, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Carver, ‘Rethinking Aid’, 16.

### 3. Chokepoints and corridors

Connectivity is forged through specific pathways of mobility. These zones of flow, including roads, railway lines, port projects and special economic zones, constitute corridors and link regions across borders, including national borders, regional borders and the borders of land and sea. Historically, the Horn of Africa has been criss-crossed with numerous trade corridors that connected hinterlands to port cities and through those port cities to wider worlds of trade and circulation. The nineteenth century colonial scramble for the Horn of Africa was also reliant on corridors for exerting political and economic domination. A series of land-based projects of roads and railways, along with ports and steamship lines on the coast, helped make possible the extraction of raw materials for expanding industries in Europe. These projects, such as the *Chemin de Fer Djibouto-Éthiopien* (C.D.E, Franco-Ethiopian Railways), built between 1894 and 1917 to connect the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, with the port city of Djibouti, linked hinterlands with newly emerging colonial ports, creating corridors of colonial presence.



Ship leaving Dubai port, December 2018. Photo by Jatin Dua

Recent global shifts in modes of capitalist production and distribution over the past half century, including practices such as offshoring and outsourcing,<sup>16</sup> have reinvigorated the importance of corridors due to the rise of logistics. As one group of observers note, ‘Business logistics was born as a science of systems, entailing the integrated coordination of myriad functions with the objective of maximizing profits across the supply chain as a whole.’<sup>17</sup> In contrast to national development frameworks prominent in the mid-twentieth century, which emphasized national markets and economies, logistics emphasizes flow and mobility of power and profits through corridors.

On the African continent, logistics has emerged as a benchmark for measuring the ‘proximity gap’<sup>18</sup> of the continent to world markets. For numerous observers and international donors, development and economic growth can be usefully understood through the efficiency and efficacy of logistical connectivity. This has resulted, *inter alia*, in logistics and infrastructure being a key site for investment and intervention by a variety of international actors, including China.<sup>19</sup> A new scramble for the Horn of Africa has led to the rehabilitation of existing corridors of trade and mobility, as well as the construction of new corridors. Corridors, such as the Berbera corridor connecting landlocked Ethiopia to the port of Berbera in Somaliland, are important spaces for mobility, providing a logistical fix for capital extraction. Crucially, they are also ‘conduits of force [that] ... organize economies, politics and social life around particular directional priorities’.<sup>20</sup>

One study of the Berbera corridor emphasizes how a focus on the corridor per se can deepen understanding of both the projects and politics of circulation:

‘Projects of circulation’ refer to efforts by identifiable social and political actors who are anticipating positive outcomes of their attempts to make certain commodities, people, capital or information circulate. ‘Politics of circulation’ refer to the dynamic processes of negotiation, manoeuvres, resistance, arm-twisting

<sup>16</sup> Offshoring refers to the practice of relocating a business or department to a foreign country to take advantage of lower taxes or costs. Outsourcing refers to the practice of obtaining goods or services by contract from an outside supplier.

<sup>17</sup> Charmaine Chua et al., ‘Introduction: Turbulent Circulation: Building a Critical Engagement with Logistics’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36/4 (2018): 617–629, 618.

<sup>18</sup> Wim Naude, ‘Geography, transport and Africa’s proximity gap’, *Journal of Transport Geography* 17/1 (2009): 1–9, 1.

<sup>19</sup> On the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, for example, see: Yiping Huang, ‘Understanding China’s Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment’, *China Economic Review* 40 (2016): 314–321 and Colin Flint and Cuiping Zhu, ‘The Geopolitics of Connectivity, Cooperation, and Hegemonic Competition: The Belt and Road Initiative’, *Geoforum* 99 (2019): 95–101. These authors also discuss the implications of this initiative for geo-economics and geopolitics.

<sup>20</sup> Léonie Newhouse and Simone Abdulmalik, ‘An introduction. Inhabiting the corridor: Surging resource economies and urban life in East Africa’, in *The Corridor: How the East African Corridor Spanning the Indian Ocean from Somalia to South Africa is Being Radically Re-Shaped*, eds. Tau Tavengwa and Léonie Newhouse, Göttingen/Capetown: The Max Plank Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in association with *Cityscapes Magazine*, summer 2017, 4. Accessed 15 December 2020, [https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item\\_2486952\\_1/component/file\\_2486951/content](https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item_2486952_1/component/file_2486951/content).

and power differentials that are set in motion with the articulation of one or more projects of circulation.<sup>21</sup>

Corridors thus highlight the role of formal and informal economies, and formal and informal political actors within the same frame, thereby fully integrating the commercial and the political in understanding contestations over sovereignty and authority beyond the nation state framework.

Corridors emphasize transnational forms of mobility, the porousness of borders, and the intertwined nature of politics and economy. Similar to the corridor, another geographic frame that has been equally central in shaping political and economic life in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea littoral is the chokepoint. The term ‘chokepoint’ generally refers to a point of constriction or blockage within a system, network, or process. It is used across a variety of domains, including shipping, logistics, engineering, security, military operations and organizing labour.

The most obvious chokepoints are geographical sites associated with narrow passages. As zones of ‘operative paradox’,<sup>22</sup> chokepoints are pivotal spaces for understanding how questions of polity and economy play out in wider domains. From locations such as quarantine facilities and ports to areas of geographic constriction, such as the Bab-el-Mandeb (the straits between the coasts of Yemen and Djibouti–Eritrea) and mountain passes, chokepoints become staging grounds for a number of agendas. Chokepoints can be controlled and worked to a variety of ends so as to siphon off value, challenge the status quo or subvert the logics of globalization. What emerges in and around a chokepoint are high-stakes interplays and tensions between circulation and regulation, local and remote forces, and human and non-human actors,<sup>23</sup> often with unexpected and far-ranging effects. For example, the emergence of the Bosaso port in Puntland as a major port of call in the region is tied to its ability to funnel forms of mobility to the port—specifically livestock—through the quarantine facility, which was established during the Somali Civil War. The rise (and fall) of ports such as Bosaso can be seen in this context as a part of a dynamic process of chokepoint making and unmaking.<sup>24</sup>

Corridors and chokepoints illustrate projects and politics of circulation. They highlight both the centrality of borders and borderlands (as both porous and fixed) and the dynamic interplay of local and transregional forces, human and non-human actors, and finally, movements across the border of land and sea. Importantly, these concepts

<sup>21</sup> Finn Stepputat and Tobias Hagmann, ‘Politics of Circulation: The Makings of the Berbera Corridor in Somali East Africa’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37/5 (2019): 794–813, 796.

<sup>22</sup> Ashley Carse et al., ‘Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the Constricted Contemporary’, *Ethnos* 32/1 (2020): 1–11, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Non-human actors are defined as objects, artifacts or structures that interact in a network with people (human actors) by constraining, permitting, facilitating, promoting or responding to human actors. It is a key term in actor network theory.

<sup>24</sup> Jatin Dua, Abdideeq Warsame and Ahmed Shire, ‘Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden: Changing dynamics of a land–sea network’, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2020, 22.

are productive for understanding the ordering of maritime space. Instead of a zone of lawlessness or merely an extension of land-based authority, the ordering of maritime space in the Western Indian Ocean reveals the dynamics of formality and informality, and the constant movement between land and sea. Similar to borders and borderlands, this ordering of maritime space also has to be understood in relational modes across various scales—rigidity and permeability at state (land), inter-state and maritime levels.

## 4. The sea is not a barrier

Political, economic and social life in the Somali peninsula of the Horn of Africa is often understood through pastoral idioms and their emphasis on genealogy and segmentary lineage systems. These idioms are seen as being in tension with more territorial and statist visions of political and social organization, a tension at the heart of numerous border wars and political conflict in the region. In the case of Somalia, the couplet ‘*u dhashay—ku dhashay*’ (born to a family and clan; born in a place and region) captures this clash between lineage and territoriality, as one observer highlights: Genealogy and territoriality are interlinked as part of a shifting repertoire of political claim-making, both historically and specifically in the aftermath of the Somali civil war.<sup>25</sup> This has important consequences for how projects of intervention and state building are envisioned in the region.

The flexible claims of lineage and territory in landed (territorially bound) political organization in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa also extend into the maritime realm, specifically the Western Indian Ocean. Genealogical connections across oceanic space have been central in creating a series of coastal sultanates throughout coastal Horn of Africa. These were cosmopolitan spaces, where ‘people and culture mix[ed]; a perfect *lieu de métissage*, a locus of intermixing par excellence’.<sup>26</sup> Contact with coastal communities helped transform hinterland economies from a single mode based on pastoralism to one in which pastoralism went hand in hand with long distance trade. An important by-product of this connection between port cities and pastoralism was the spread of Islam into the hinterlands that drew the ‘Somali peninsula into sustained contact and a measure of interdependence and conflict with the Abyssinian hinterland and with the Oromo lands in the southwest’.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to transforming the economic base of the region and possibilities for political alliance and conflict on land, maritime connections also have been key in shaping a sense of self and community. Consider the question of genealogy.<sup>28</sup> In their oral traditions, the Darood—one of the largest Somali clan families—trace their ancestors back to Abdirahman bin Isma’il al-Jabarti. According to oral retellings and the *manaaqib* (collection of glorious deeds) of Sheikh Ahmad bin Hussen bin Mahammad, entitled *Manaaqib*

<sup>25</sup> Cedric Barnes, ‘U dhashay—Ku dhashay: Genealogical and Territorial Discourse in Somali History’, *Social Identities* 12/4 (2006): 487–498, 487.

<sup>26</sup> Johnathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009, 18

<sup>27</sup> Lee V Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600–1900*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, 9.

<sup>28</sup> These accounts are summarized from Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, ‘Arabic Sources on Somalia’, *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 141–172 and I M Lewis, ‘Historical Aspects of Genealogies in Northern Somali Social Structure’, *The Journal of African History* 3/1 (1962): 35–48.

*as-Sheikh Ismaa'il bin Ibraahiim al-Jabarti*, the sheik fled his homeland in modern-day Yemen following a familial argument. During the tenth or eleventh century, he is believed to have then settled in northern Somalia, just across the Red Sea. He subsequently married Dobira, the daughter of Dagale (Dikalla), the Dir clan chief, which is said to have given rise to the Darood clan family. Similarly, the Isaaq, the dominant clan in present-day Somaliland, trace their lineage back to Sheikh Ishaq ibn Ahmad al-'Alawi, a Banu Hashim who came to Somalia at around the same time. These genealogies, threaded into everyday life through *abdirso* (recounting of ancestors), are also expansive histories of oceanic mobility. They provided, and continue to provide, pathways of mobility across the Western Indian Ocean.

These are not simply historical backdrops or contexts but crucially shape contemporary dynamics in the region. A shift from a static state centric understanding of borders and borderlands to one that focuses on corridors and chokepoints highlights, *inter alia*, the continued role played by ports and the scramble over port and hinterland connections in regional economies and politics. Contemporary contests over port making and unmaking in the region, from Djibouti to Kismayo, connect formal and informal economies, pastoralism and other trades. These also become locales where political futures are imagined and contested.

Corridors and chokepoints are useful in explaining dynamics at sea as well. For example, from 2008 onwards, attention on maritime piracy has been instrumental in establishing both a transregional security architecture and an attempt to order maritime circulation. This security architecture has brought in a range of actors: It entails naval patrols, drone and other aerial surveillance technologies, and increasingly, private maritime security companies that provide armed escort for ships transiting through the region. Securing corridors at sea, and protecting key chokepoints for shipping in the region, has important consequences for political alliances and power dynamics on land; for example, with the establishment of naval bases in places such as Djibouti; increased funding for developing regional coastguards in Somalia; and accelerating regional geopolitical contests, such as the conflict between Qatar and United Arab Emirates. Piracy thus makes visible the connections between events at sea and land-based economies and political currents. The transition from contests over fish licenses to the capture of cargo ships in the making of Somali piracy is as much a story about competing regional and sub-national systems of jurisdiction and authority, and local and transnational business elites, as it is one about capture at sea.

The contest between pirate vessels, cargo ships and navy vessels plays a key role in ordering maritime space in the Red Sea. At the same time, the sea is full of other boats. Fishing skiffs, *dhow*s,<sup>29</sup> smuggling boats and other crafts criss-cross the Red Sea. Their quotidian forms of maritime crossings have their own logics and ways of mapping and ordering the sea. Maritime spaces such as the Indian Ocean are not barriers to mobility

29 *Dhow* is the generic name of a number of traditional sailing vessels with one or more masts.

but zones of connection.<sup>30</sup> Somali traders travel across the Red Sea to locales in the Arabian Gulf that are familiar due to centuries of interaction. These movements are facilitated as much by genealogies and kinship connections as they are by visas and passports. Similarly, Yemeni refugees fleeing the war in Yemen arrive in ports of Somalia not simply as strangers. Rather, they are incorporated through kinship into cities across the Somali peninsula, where new restaurants and businesses are springing up built on partnerships between Somalis and Yemenis.<sup>31</sup> These forms of mobility are often invisible from the vantage point of policy and security interventions, yet play an important role in developing transnational economies and networks of resilience that help navigate war, famine and insecurity. They are also crucial in creating senses of belonging and place-making that are formed in dynamic ways that move beyond the binaries of nation states, continental divides or divisions between land and sea.



Navigation map onboard Cargo ship noting the Gulf of Aden High Risk Area, December 2018. Photo by Jatin Dua

Focusing on the dynamic interaction between the formal and informal ordering of maritime space also makes visible the Western Indian Ocean as a space of interaction. From the extraction of offshore gas to fisheries to a locale outside state borders where the

<sup>30</sup> Nisar Majid and Khalif Abdurahman, 'Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somalia and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Dua, Warsame and Shire, 'Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden', 20.

trans-shipment of oil and other licit and illicit substances can occur, the sea is a stage for multiple kinds of actors. These maritime interactions often have reverberations on land. They are also essential to forging transnational economies and networks of mobility. For example, at the beginning of the Saudi-led blockade of Yemen, a boom in oil trans-shipments at sea allowed traders on both sides of the Red Sea to circumnavigate restrictions. Profits from this war economy were quickly folded into and re-invested in a variety of other import and exports.<sup>32</sup>

At another level, recognizing that the sea is neither an empty space nor a mere barrier to mobility also brings attention to the materiality of the Red Sea. Scholarship on oceanic spaces emphasizes the social and material ways in which the maritime realm is constituted and used by a variety of actors. These material dimensions include winds, currents and upwelling. For millennia, travel in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean was constrained and shaped by annual monsoon winds. While contemporary ships and other technologies may have rendered the sea more manageable, transforming monsoonal navigation into a year-round affair, shifting wind patterns and currents, and the impacts of climate change, greatly influence how communities on both sides of the Gulf navigate this space, with consequences that extend deep into the hinterlands of the Horn of Africa. In the Western Indian Ocean, climate change is causing a rise in sea surface temperature, enhancing evaporation, intensifying northerly and north-westerly winds and precipitation over the northern and central watersheds, and possibly causing shifts in monsoonal fronts and modifying precipitation patterns over the southern watersheds. In addition to long-term effects for agricultural and pastoral communities—and therefore also on the chokepoints and corridors of transregional trade and mobility—shifting wind patterns impact trade and circulation in more everyday ways, including wind gusts shutting down ports because the cranes are unable to operate in wind speeds of more than 40 knots. This is one mundane way in which a primordial actor, namely the wind system, can confound the seamless logics of circulation. The multi-scalar ways in which monsoon winds, rising sea temperatures and changing precipitation patterns impact political and economic life in the region is yet another reason for understanding political and economic life beyond the lens of the nation state.

32 Dua, Warsame and Shire, 'Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden', 17-19.

## 5. Conclusion and policy considerations

Engaging with the word ‘maritime’ in maritime mobilities has important consequences for understanding mobility and commerce, and its relationship to landed forms of authority in the Horn of Africa. As the historical and contemporary examples of piracy in the Red Sea reveal, events at sea have reverberations on land and vice versa. Policy makers have often restricted their understanding of political processes to territorial units, specifically state-centric models. An emphasis on maritime mobilities builds on nascent interests in the study of transregional formations such as trade corridors and chokepoints and reveals how mobility is structured and constrained beyond the divide of continents, and the boundaries of land and sea. This has the potential for making visible everyday forms of interaction and economy that sustain communities and livelihoods on both sides of the Red Sea.

As the global economy is increasingly structured through complex logistics and supply chains, and geopolitics contests regularly focus on competition over ports and sea lanes, maritime mobilities highlight the enduring centrality of the ocean in shaping political, economic and social possibilities even in locations that are often considered marginal to the global economy. Indeed, a focus on maritime mobilities in the Horn of Africa is a corrective to visions of marginality and territorial visions of order and disorder, emphasizing instead connection and interdependence.

Finally, a focus on maritime mobilities and the chokepoint and corridors through which mobility is facilitated is also a call to recognize the Western Indian Ocean, and indeed other maritime space, as not merely a barrier or empty space of transit but as a dynamic and ever-shifting stage for a variety of sojourners as they navigate shifting political, economic and environmental currents.

### Policy considerations

Effective policy interventions require the abandonment of singular territorial units in favour of transregional ones entailing a broadening of analytical frameworks beyond state centric views. While policy makers and international actors are recognizing the importance of transregional infrastructure projects and global logistics supply chains, the territorial limitations of a state-centric or continental geography remain central in how we understand spaces like border zones, ports, and trade routes.

There is also an important need to integrate maritime realms into policy analysis. Beyond empty spaces or zones that exist outside social processes, maritime realms are shaped by political, economic, and social forces on land and simultaneously operate independently from these landed systems. This dynamic can help produce analyses that

treat maritime space in a similar way as the dynamics associated with borders and cross-border relations.

The integration of maritime realms is also central to emphasizing multi-scalar analyses that integrate socio-political and economic analyses with environmental analyses, including emphasizing the role of climate change and the impact of human and non-human actors in shaping mobility and exchange across the Western Indian Ocean.

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In the Horn of Africa there is a dynamic interplay between land and sea that has shaped political, economic, and social relationships. Historical and contemporary instances of piracy in the Western Indian Ocean, at different times, precipitated a securitization of this maritime space and made visible the economic and political connections that tie sea to land. These events also reveal the many locations and actors involved in the ordering and reordering of maritime space.

This new report from the X-Border Local Research Network examines the 'chokepoints and corridors' of the Western Indian Ocean, particularly their influence on landed authority in the Horn of Africa. It argues that maritime spaces— zones of connection and activity (commercial and cultural)—should be placed at the centre of our understanding of the region, rather than seen simply as empty areas relevant only for transit.

