

Empire Building in the Indian Ocean: A History of Competition and Violence

During the Early Modern Period of Indian Ocean history, the rise, fall, and conflict between empires greatly influenced the trade and relations within the region. Throughout this time of empire building, violence dominated as the Portuguese, Ottomans, Dutch, and British fought for control of trade in the Indian Ocean.

Many external powers sought to expand their influence in the Indian Ocean. Portugal was one of the first to break into this part of the world. They held two primary objectives: first, finding Christians and spreading Christianity and second, establishing economic dominance by controlling trade. The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama was among the first to establish a significant presence in the Indian Ocean. At first, he attempted to establish amicable relations with local authority figures; however, after many cultural missteps in conjunction with his racial prejudice, Gama began to employ violence as a means to spread Christianity and control trade. In his book *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Edward Alpers describes the Portuguese as taking a more "bellicose approach" in their attempt to take control of maritime trade in the region (Alpers 71). When confronted with opposition, the Portuguese resorted to violence, creating animosity with other local and external powers seeking influence over the Indian Ocean World. A series of military battles ensued between the Portuguese and the Ottomans for most of the 16th century. During these battles, the Ottomans "saw themselves as delivering the Islamic Sea from the infidel Franks" (Alpers 74). In contrast to the Portuguese, who looked to spread Christianity, the Ottomans were the power that supported Islam and its continued dominance in the region. On the religious front, the Ottomans were more successful than the Portuguese as Christianity did not become a popular religion within the Indian Ocean World beyond Portuguese Goa (Alpers 80). Regarding the influence over trade, both Portugal and the Ottoman Empire pursued control of the

major ports in the region. However, it was the strategy of the Ottomans to conquer key choke points to control entry to and departure from the Indian Ocean (Alpers 74). The Portuguese were more technologically advanced, and their ships proved superior to those of the Ottomans. For this reason, the Portuguese were able to dominate in open-sea battles, and the Ottomans were forced to be more strategic.

Evidence that the Indian Ocean World was plagued with violence can be found in the collection of maps by the Portuguese historian António Bacarro. These maps depict various Portuguese settlements, most surrounded by walls and armed with cannons. Estampa XVI, which depicts the town of Da Maõ, is an excellent example as it depicts two Portuguese settlements surrounded by tall man-made walls with towers and cannons facing the local settlements (Bocarro, Estampa XVI). The presence of walls implied that the settlements faced some threat significant enough to dedicate the time and resources to their construction. Other primary sources from this time—such as the poem "al-Sofaliya" by the poet Ibn Majid and a letter from Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to King Sebastião— suggest that the Portuguese created an environment defined by violence that made the construction of walls imperative for the survival of the settlements (Alpers, 74&77). As previously mentioned, the Portuguese violence soured relations with other foreign empires, such as the Ottomans. Creating such enemies would be another reason these settlements would be so heavily fortified.

In addition to violence, economic competition was another important factor influencing the Indian Ocean World during the Early Modern Period. Generally speaking, there were two perspectives on trade in the Indian Ocean. The first perspective is *mare clausum*, advocating for a closed system of trade. This perspective was supported by the Portuguese, who wished to oversee the regulation and control of all trade within a closed India Ocean system. To establish

a *mare clausum*, the Portuguese imposed port taxes and required licenses issued by the Crown called *cartazes* for non-Portuguese merchants (Alpers 79).

The second perspective is *mare liberum*, advocating for free, open trade. Supporters of this perspective were the Dutch and the British. Unlike the Portuguese, who traded under the Crown, the Dutch and British operated primarily as private merchants or chartered companies. The chartered companies most notable of mention are the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the British East Indian Company (EIC). A Dutch polymath, Hugo Grotius defended the *mare liberum* perspective to the Portuguese using religious and popular literature references to build his case. As Portugal was a Catholic country, the biblical references would have been particularly persuasive for the readers of Grotius' argument. Grotius argues that God has made nature to supply everyone with "the necessities of life" and that free trade is needed to ensure all individuals obtain their necessities if they are not native to their homeland (Grotius, 7). He concludes by stating, "The Portuguese, even if they had been sovereigns in those parts to which the Dutch make voyages, would nevertheless be doing them an injury if they should forbid them access to those places and from trading there" (Grotius 10). In the end, the Dutch's *mare libereum* became the general view on trade in the Indian Ocean despite Portuguese efforts.

The presence of slavery in the Indian Ocean was another example of violence and how it defined the region during this time. Although they advocated for an open system of trade in the Indian Ocean, the Dutch sought to monopolize the spice and coffee trades. The Dutch succeeded in Sri Lanka with cinnamon production and in the Maluku Islands—also known as the "Spice Islands"—with clove, nutmeg, and mace production. However, to achieve this success, the VOC and other chartered companies began establishing plantations built on slave and indentured labor. According to Alpers, the Dutch were the first to employ slave labor for agricultural purposes and

continued to capture and trade slaves long after the practice was made illegal (Alpers 83). In addition to the Dutch, various natives to the Indian Ocean entered and found great wealth within the slave trade. Likely the most notable slave trader was a man named Tippu Tip from Zanzibar. In the book *The Life of Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi, Known as Tippu Tip, in His Own Words*, Tippu Tip describes the harsh conditions his men suffered and the violence he ensued when he was disobeyed. Very little in his description indicates any remorse or humanity as he almost sounds proud of the dominance and fear that he commands. He states, "They call me Kingugwa— the leopard, because the leopard attacks indiscriminately, here and there" (W.H. Whiteley 53).

In the 1800s, when the British became a more significant player in the Indian Ocean World, slavery was abolished and replaced by indentured servitude. Various treaties were signed between England, Portugal, and local powers that outlawed slavery and strengthened international trade relationships. Whereas the Transatlantic Slave Trade was abolished in 1807, slavery continued legally in the Indian Ocean for a few more decades. The Moresby Treaty signed in 1822, and the Hamerton Treaty, signed in 1845, are two examples of efforts to abolish slavery in this region. However, countries such as the Netherlands were against such treaties, considering their empire found success through the institution of slavery. This difference in options led Britain to take up a more influential role as the enforcer of the anti-slavery treaties. This shift in power is another example of the conflict and competition that existed in the Indian Ocean World during this time of empire-building. Although this period of great British power was after the Early Modern Period, it is still important to note how slavery led to disagreements and shifts in power among the influential players in the Indian Ocean World.

Throughout the Early Modern Period, the control and influence over the Indian Ocean and its trade were desired by many external powers and led to a period of empire-building. This time was defined by competition and violence, primarily between the Portuguese, Ottomans, Dutch, and British, who were all searching for influence and economic success within the region. During this time, empires rose, fell, and fought hard to maintain all the land and power they had conquered through any means necessary. The competition between these countries and local Indian Ocean powers led to extreme violence. Additionally, the highly violent and later illegal slave trade allowed for the development of the plantation industry within the Indian Ocean World. As production and trade continued to grow, the importance of the Indian Ocean as an economic region also grew, allowing the region to play a more significant role on the world stage. Overall, the conflicts and events during this Early Modern Period shaped the region's future during the long 19th century and beyond.