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## REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

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**Martha Chaiklin / Philip Gooding / Gwyn Campbell (eds.): *Animal Trade Histories in the Indian Ocean World*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 324 pp.**

Reviewed by  
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Despite the “animal turn” of the last decades, book-length historical studies on animals and animal products in the Indian Ocean world (IOW) are still rare. This is all the more surprising since economic history has been at the heart of the very concept of the IOW.[1] Commonly defined as “a macro-region that stretches from southern and eastern Africa, through the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia and Australasia” that was affected by “the Indian Ocean monsoon system of winds, currents and rains” (p. 2), the IOW is often considered by its proponents to have been “home to the first ‘global’ economy” as a result of intensifying long-distance exchanges of commodities, ideas, and people between the tenth and nineteenth centuries.[2] However, historians have focused much more on commodities that were traded between the IOW and “the West”, such as

spices, tea, or precious metals than on animals, which were mainly (though not exclusively) traded within the IOW.

Building on a conference at the Indian Ocean World Centre (directed by coeditor Gwyn Campbell) at McGill University in 2014, *Animal Trade Histories in the Indian Ocean World* sets out to recognize the importance of animals and animal commodities in economic and cultural life throughout the IOW. Bringing together contributions from both junior and senior scholars in the field, the edited volume paints a fascinating tableau of the trade with and the use of a wide range of animals and animal products within the IOW between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among other things, we learn about pearl and chank fishing in Southern India and Sri Lanka under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the British East India Company (EIC), the importance of horses for state power in the Southern Red Sea Region, the economic uses of and cultural taboos regarding donkeys throughout the IOW, the seventeenth-century export of deerskins from Ayutthaya and Taiwan to Japan, or changing patterns of local ivory consumption in East Africa. While the numbers of animals, commodities, places, and groups of (human) agents are impressive, the volume is nevertheless quite coherent, as the chapters speak to each other in several ways.

At least three common threads can be identified. First, most contributions focus on how the production, shipping, and use of animals and animal products was partly transformed under the impact of increasing European involvement in the IOW trade since the sixteenth century. Accordingly, many chapters deal with European trading companies such as the VOC and the EIC (Winters, Ostroff, Vadlamudi, Sprey/Hall) or the nineteenth-century European and American trading companies in Madagascar (Campbell). Yet, going against Eurocentric tendencies, authors consistently highlight how European influence and power were constrained by local political decision-makers and traders, such as Tamil Muslim merchants in Southern India (Vadlamudi), or by diasporic trading groups from other parts of the IOW, such as Chinese and Japanese traders in the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya (Sprey/Hall), Indian middlemen in Madagascar (Campbell), and “Arab” Omani and Rima communities in East Africa (Gooding).

Second, many contributions convincingly address the shifting utilitarian and symbolic uses of animals or animal commodities. Serels, for instance, shows how horses in the Southern Red Sea Region were long used to project military and political power until better rifles in the twentieth century caused the demise of the cavalry and turned horses mainly into a mere status symbol. Chaiklin, for her part, argues that peacock feathers, once a luxury product for elite (military) use, became widely available in Japan from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The new economic uses that emerged (such as fans) even turned this exotic commodity into a symbol of Japanese culture viewed from abroad. As Gooding shows, the shift

from mass to luxury commodity also occurred in the other sense: due to rising global demand for ivory in the late nineteenth century, its formerly ubiquitous use in East Africa was increasingly restricted to elite groups. Various chapters (such as those by Winters and Chaiklin) also draw out how both living (exotic) animals and their commodities were often used as diplomatic gifts by royal houses and trading companies.

Third, in line with the strong environmental history stance of newer IOW studies,<sup>[3]</sup> many contributions show how ecological conditions and variations underwrote the “production” of and trade with animals and animal commodities. While pearl oysters and chanks only thrived in certain IOW waters, horses, donkeys, and cattle were bred more easily in particular climates and disease environments and subsequently moved “from surplus to deficit zones” (Clarence-Smith, p. 148). Others emphasize the ecological destruction wrought by increasing trade, such as the near extinction of deer in Taiwan through overhunting (Sprey/Hall), the extinction of “indigenous” birds on Mauritius through deforestation, the introduction of “exogenous” animals (Winters), or the constant fears of pearl oyster overfishing (Ostroff).

The major strength of the book hence resides in how, through a range of detailed case studies with a remarkable geographical and interspecies scope, it manages to intertwine economic, political, cultural, and environmental history. The book demonstrates not only how animals and animal commodities were crucial in all these realms in the IOW but also how they can serve as a lens to observe broader historical structures and processes.

However, the editors and authors could have pushed the analytical takeaway of the volume even further. First, by concentrating almost exclusively on intra-IOW trade until the nineteenth century, the volume makes a strong and valuable argument for the economic and cultural resilience of local producers, traders, and consumers in the face of European intrusion during the heyday of the IOW. Yet, it is a pity that, although a few chapters (rather briefly) touch upon ulterior developments, the editors do not more systematically test this revisionist argument for the long twentieth century. To what extent did territorialized (European, Japanese, or American) colonialism in the twentieth century reshape the contours of animal trades, merchant communities, and commodity uses in the region? Second, Chaiklin and Gooding in the volume's introduction open up an interesting debate about the (non-)applicability of the Capitalocene to the IOW.[4] While they base their rejection on the continuous agency and resilience of IOW actors and networks (against "Western" capitalists), this argument is not taken up by the contributions and also seems to stand in contradiction to the extinction narratives in some of the chapters (mentioned above), which all seem to go back to "Western" capitalist action. Finally, the contributors could have engaged with global commodity history

more broadly to tease out the implications of their mainly intra-IOW stories for analytical concepts such as "global commodity chains" and "commodity frontiers".[5]

These remarks, which are mainly demands for further analysis, should not ignore the major strengths of the volume. *Animal Trade Histories in the Indian Ocean World* not only greatly enhances our knowledge of the trade with and use of animals and animal commodities, but also highlights, by using this prism, the interconnectivity, shifting agency, and resilience of polities and trading communities across the IOW in an era of increasing European influence.

#### Notes

- 1 See, for instance, K. N. Chaudhuri: *Asia before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge 1990; M. Pearson (ed.), *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, Houndmills 2015.
- 2 See the mission statement of the Indian Ocean World Centre at McGill University: <<https://indianoceanworldcentre.com/welcome/our-mission/>> (last accessed 23 May 2022).
- 3 See, for instance, G. Campbell, *Africa and the Indian Ocean World from Early Times to circa 1900*, Cambridge 2019.
- 4 See also J. W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland 2016.
- 5 G. Gereffi/M. Korzeniewicz (eds.), *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, Westport 1994; S. Beckert/U. Bosma/M. Schneider/E. Vanhaute, *Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside. A Research Agenda*, in: *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021) 3, pp. 435–450.