The ocean has historically been a highway for large scale and long term flows of communities, commodities, and ideas, in which millions of people willingly or unwillingly traveled, traded, coerced, and commodified. Africa’s major collaborators have been the Asian communities before and after the European and American colonial/imperial endeavours. Both Asia and Africa, the two major continents sharing the ocean’s shores, have historically plotted their socio-political, economic, and religious trajectories under the direct influence of the ocean. This review essay is mainly concerned with the two major continents sharing the ocean’s imperial endeavours. Both Asia and Africa, after the European and American colonial/commodified. Africa’s major collaborators or unwillingly travelled, traded, coerced, and produced a significant amount of academic interactions between Asia and Africa, inside and outside the region. The major conferences organised by the University of Goethe in Kuala Lumpur (2010), Cape Town (2015) and Frankfurt (2016) and by the International Institute for Asian Studies in Accra (2015) and Dar es Salaam (2018) are worth noting in this regard. The latter’s first conference with participants from 40 countries in 55 panels resulted in the formation of a consortium called the Association for Asian Studies in Africa, headquartered in Accra, and has identified and energised “Africa-Asia” as a new field of study. Relatedly, there have been remarkable academic initiatives by Chinese, American, Indian, South African, Malaysian, Singaporean, and European institutions, not to mention the international diplomatic conventions for South–South collaborations between postcolonial Asian and African countries, starting with the Asia–Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955 and stretching to its 60th anniversary conference re-hosted by Indonesia in 2015. All these efforts have produced a significant amount of academic projects to record, analyse, and advance the nuances of these linkages, yet the Iron’s share is focused on the interests of China in Africa, mainly emphasising political and economic negotiations and investments, but also social, cultural and demographic implications. Given the recent ‘reappearance’ of China after almost 600 years, this sudden boom in literature and discourse has created an imbalanced academic orientation towards the deep genealogies of transcontinental exchanges and encounters between the two regions. The Indian Ocean often appears only marginally as a memory space of the historical past to be invoked when the situation demands it.

Notwithstanding, the wider Africa–Africa discourse, several edited volumes, and conference proceedings, have recognised the role of the ocean in the transcontinental interactions. Two book series, for example, (published by Ohio University Press, edited by Richard B. Allen, by Palgrave, edited by Gwyn Campbell) have published volumes with an emphasis on African interactions with Asia through this littoral. Within this field, one booming zone of study is slavery in the Indian Ocean. The subfield explores nuances of other-wise unrecognised forced relocations of Africans and Asians, from within different Asian-African regions to such faraway places as Australia. Some other common themes, such as piracy, have also found significant scholarly attention, particularly after the increase of Somali piracy in and around the 2010s. Several other individual researches have explored the African involvement in the oceanic mobilities through intellectual, religious, and legal networks. The works on Islamic legal and political encounters in the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries have presented fascinating African cases in the wake of European colonial expansions. And, of course, the histories of European and Arab colonialisms in East and South African terrains through enslavements, forced migrations, genocides, armaments, organised plunders, along with negligible tints of infrastructural developments, have been subjects of serious studies through the frameworks of the oceanic scope.

The three books under review slightly move away from these trends in present historiography, yet they are informed by and have emerged from the wider currents in the African and Asian connections and conflicts because of the European colonial expansions. Omar H. Ali follows the life of Malik Ambar, an iconic figure in the transoceanic and transcontinental mobility of the 17th and 17th centuries, who dramatically went from being a teenage slave to a statesman and kingmaker; Antoinette Burton focuses on gradations of race, gender and politics in the literature produced on the Africa–India entanglements in the 20th century; and Tor Sellström foregrounds the African islands in the Indian Ocean as products and producers of the maritime sociocultural geography. These works together represent three major aspects of East and South Africa’s predicaments with the maritime world: that of slavery, armed forced migrations, the depictions of Africans as an inferior racial category within the Indian (Ocean) literary contexts, and the islands as marginalised terrains in geopolitical concerns of mainland countries, be they in Africa or elsewhere.

Phenomenal life of an African slave

Omar Ali’s study tells of the ways in which Africans were forced to leave their homelands as slaves and travel thousands of miles. Malik Ambar was such a slave, yet a figure who resisted the Mughal expansion into the Deccan through his diplomatic skills and military tactics (begari-girl). For several decades in the late 16th and early 17th century Ambar was the sole barrier for the Mughals to the Deccan. Born into and raised by an Oromo prince in the Ethiopian tribes, enslaved and exchanged in the slave markets of Africa and the Middle East before ending up in South Asia, Ambar travelled a long way in his life, similar to many other thousands of Africans before and after him. In India, Malik Ambar was first sold in the Sultanate of Ahmadnagar to the chief minister Mirzâ Dâlah âka Chengiz Khan, who himself was once a Habshi slave and had risen to his position in the royal court. Under his tutelage, he learnt “the ways of the court and state operations” (p.112). Following the assassination of his master in a royal plot, Ambar travelled between different kingdoms in the Deccan region working for several commanders and rulers. Over the course of time, he “increased his following across the western Deccan” by inheriting the army of his former commanders and harassing Mughal forces and capturing their supply convoys. Utilising this manpower, military and diplomatic skills, and marriage alliances, he rose to prime minister of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate where he controlled the enthronement and dethronement of sultans, built up marvellous cities and forts, and excelled in administration of law and order. In between all the ups and downs of his life, Ali argues that Ambar depended on the life principle of namak halal or “true to the salt” – a concept and tradition of being loyal to the master—in his services to the Nizam Shah rulers, no matter who sat on the throne. However, although true that he was loyal to the sultanate during several hardships, he also poisoned a ruler to death when things did not go as he had planned; or more precisely, when the then Persian queen called his daughter “a mere slave girl”, “concubine” and a “kaffir” (p.65). Ambar poisoned both the queen and the king and replaced him with a five-year-old boy as the new sultan. Ambar served his interests more than that of the master(s) and the throne. Ambar’s story has attracted the attention of several scholars in the last century, but also “oceanises” the story through comparative and connected histories. He provides a vivid comparative description of Ethiopia, Iraq and India as backdrops for Ambar’s trials. Ambar’s later life has been well recorded, but the author accommodates a “discursive strategy” of contextualisation and imagination to fill the gaps in his early life for which “documentary evidence is sparse” (p.135). Through this mechanism of interpretative connected historical reading, we get a detailed image of the lives and oceanic journeys of not just Ambar, but of also several other African slaves from East and Central African regions.
Africa enjoyed or strived for during the colonial tellings, in which Africa, Africans, and their (and biases) of the connections and their practices, Burton elaborates on the politics in which those are narrated, negotiated, of the Africa-Asia interactions and the ways in which those are narrated and positioned as racial category vis-à-vis the ‘black’. Those of the Afro-Asian (unequal) collaborations often asserted itself as an in-between or better of the Indian soils and minds. Despite the events and moments of human tragedies (p.306).

The islands under discussion are Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion, Mauritius, Seychelles, Mayotte, and Chagos. In the Indian Ocean, the flow of slaves between the continents was reversed; the movement of slaves, labourers, pirates, and traders shaped their recent past, the large scale migration and movement of people and ideas, such as that of the Austronesians, Bantu, Arab, Swahili, and others, who were involved in the very nature of each island’s historical and contemporary situations. The interactions between the Asian and African communities along with the European colonialism provide irrefutable spectacles of transoceanic interactions which created hybrid, multi-racial/ethnic communities. Some of the islands had been drastically transformed through Westernisation; even the remote island countries such as the Comoros or other later-populated islands such as Reunion and Mauritius, the same way Indian impact on the lives of some of its inhabitants.