

PLURILocal COMMUNITIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

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This special issue is the second of two that have emerged from a conference in Halle, Germany, in September 2019 with the theme ‘Us and them: Diasporas for others in the Indian Ocean.’¹ In the introduction to the previous issue, in which we conceptualized the Indian Ocean as a diasporic space, we concluded by observing that a ‘diaspora for others’ could be characterised as plurilocal, ‘a network of spatially dispersed and geographically overlapping communities that exhibit a dynamic cohesion that is rooted in historical configurations, spatial particularities and contemporary practices.’² Plurilocality distinguishes these diasporas from spatially dispersed groups which may be described as diasporas, but which display no real social cohesion and are simply multi-sited. Plurilocality is the infrastructure of both intra- and transnational phenomena in the contemporary world, and characterises diasporas for others, diasporas that are spatially dispersed social formations that exhibit a degree of commonality and coherence, whether cultural or social. In particular, it is through this infrastructure that transnational connections and identities in the Indian Ocean can be explored.

The idea of the plurilocal community is not new. Although he didn’t use the term itself, Roger Rouse suggested that the people with whom he worked, Mexicans moving to and fro between Mexico and the US, constituted ‘a single community spread across a

¹ See: *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4, 2 (2021), for the first collection. This conference was held at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Regional Studies (ZIRS), Martin Luther University Halle- Wittenberg. It was funded by Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and ZIRS. The organisers wish to acknowledge their generous support.

² Iain Walker and Martin Slama, “The Indian Ocean as a diasporic space: A conceptual introduction,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4, 2 (2021), 90.

variety of sites,³ a concept which others subsequently described as plurilocal.⁴ However, the most consistent early use of the term was by Ludger Pries (perhaps not coincidentally also working on Mexican migrants in the US), and although he never theorised the term in any depth, Pries proposed that ‘transnational social spaces are pluri-local frames of reference which structure everyday practices, social positions, employment trajectories and biographies, and human identities, and simultaneously exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies.’⁵ Turning this about somewhat, we can take plurilocal communities to be spatially dispersed communities that exist, if not above, then certainly in parallel with ‘the social contexts of national societies’; plurilocality provides us with a framework for the analysis of a society that is composed of geographically dispersed but socially contiguous groups. It is not concerned with the multi-sited, since ‘multi-sited’ merely reflects the spatial distribution of a group of sites, whereas ‘plurilocal’ invokes social cohesion across space.

Plurilocality also allows us to remove the ‘national’ (which really means ‘statal’), which is often of only limited relevance, not only because these communities are not always transnational – see Franziska Fay’s consideration of diasporic communities not only within what is in many respect the cultural continuum of Zanzibar-Oman but within Zanzibar itself – but also because political boundaries are not always relevant to their spatial distribution: Wilson Jacob’s analysis of Hadrami Alawi movements in the colonial era are largely pre-national.⁶ Indeed, most diasporas with any temporal depth were constituted not only before the establishment of international borders as we currently understand them, but also often before the establishment of the homeland as a state: it was not until the late twentieth century that Hadramis came from Yemen. This is not to say

³ Roger Rouse, “Mexican migration and the social space of postmodernism,” *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies*, 1, 1 (1991), 14. He called this a ‘transnational migrant circuit.’

⁴ See, for example: Angelika Bammer, “Editorial: Question of home,” *New Formations*, 17 (1992), ix; Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson, “The topic and the book,” in *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of home in a world of movement*, eds. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 7.

⁵ Ludger Pries, “The disruption of social and geographic space: Mexican-US migration and the emergence of transnational social spaces,” *International Sociology*, 16, 1 (2001), 69. Compare with: Ludger Pries, “‘Transmigranten’ als ein Typ von Arbeitswanderern in pluri-lokalen sozialen Räumen: Das Beispiel der Arbeitswanderungen zwischen Puebla/Mexiko und New York,” *Soziale Welt*, 49, 2 (1998), 135-49; Ludger Pries “Ambiguities of global and transnational collective identities,” *Global Networks*, 13, 1 (2013), *inter alia*.

⁶ Compare with: Neville Chittick, “East Africa and the Orient: Ports and trade before the arrival of the Portuguese,” in *Historical Relations Across the Indian Ocean. Historical relations across the Indian Ocean: Report and papers of the meeting of experts organized by UNESCO at Port Louis, Mauritius, From 15 to 19 July 1974* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 13-22. It also avoids the methodological (and semantic) nationalism criticised by, particularly, Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer: Nina Glick Schiller, “Beyond methodological ethnicity: Local and transnational pathways of immigrant incorporation,” *Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations*, 2/08 (2008); Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation–state building, migration and the social sciences,” *Global Networks*, 2, 4 (2002), 301-34.

that contemporary political formations and the state apparatus are not relevant – clearly they are – but they are not always determining, particularly where diasporas are concerned.

While the contributors to this special issue discuss diasporas of different temporal depths, the temporal dynamics that shape these communities play an equally salient role in determining their plurilocal characteristics. This is particularly so in the cases analysed by Khesodkar, Fay, and Venkatachalam, which unfold under contemporary conditions of globalisation. This ‘world of high-speed modernity,’ as Thomas Hylland Eriksen has called it,⁷ is fuelled by phenomena of acceleration that Indian Ocean diasporas can take advantage of, or that can leave them struggling against the risk of being left behind.⁸ Under such circumstances, only being able to participate to a lesser extent (or not at all) in the speedy movement of people and goods can put immense pressure on communities that are constituted through their plurilocality. Taking an active part in transnational trade today means having to adhere to the temporalities in which items are expected to move from one place to another. Similarly, being able to cross national borders and to travel or migrate when movement is said to bring progress in one’s life or in the life of one’s community implies that one is part of contemporary global spatio-temporal accelerations. However, as Keshodkar’s and Fay’s contributions attest, nothing is more bitter than having to stay put, ‘stuck’ in one place, when the world is, or appears to be, moving ever faster, and when mobility promises the resolution of one’s problems (which may of course reveal themselves to be false promises). And this, we contend, applies even more to societies that have a tradition of movement and migration to a plurality of localities in the Indian Ocean and beyond, such as the diasporas discussed in this special issue.

The articles in this collection offer a range of very different perspectives on diaspora. From Jacob’s diaspora within a diaspora (a nested diaspora?), to Akbar Keshodkar’s double diaspora, Fay’s internal diaspora, and Meera Venkatachalam’s converging diaspora, the exploration of a variety of types of plurilocal societies exposes the fluidity of spatially dispersed social groups and the different modalities of how diasporas are constituted, including particular temporalities. Fay and Keshodkar are both concerned with Zanzibari diasporic practice, and while Fay’s focus is on the (or ‘a’) new Zanzibari diaspora and Keshodkar’s is on other diasporas already present, and present for

⁷ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Overheating: The world since 1991,” *History and Anthropology*, 27, 5 (2016), 469.

⁸ Note that the research on which the articles of this special issue are based was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic somewhat decelerated global flows.

some time, in Zanzibar, the underpinning problematic is fundamentally economic. Both authors reveal the contradictions inherent in the pursuit of economic success by those confronted with social expectations of ‘correct’ behaviour, but also the hope that ideally leads to economic success, and the temporal condition of waithood that, for many, characterises the path to that success. For both, but particularly for Keshodkar’s Zanzibaris of South Asian origin, mercantile activity is socially esteemed, and is necessarily based on diasporic connections and personal mobility. The networks, both transnational and plurilocal, that underpin their mercantile activities have been constituted over time and through an interweaving of kin links, marriage strategies, and business relationships: self-reproducing, they are difficult to enter (and often equally difficult to break out of). Those without the requisite connections find themselves trapped by the familiar paradox of being unable to establish the necessary relationships for lack of those very relationships. Entry may be open to those who have achieved mercantile success, but this remains, for many, something that they hope for, and wait for, both of which are key analytical concepts in Keshodkar’s study. Since economic success invariably depends on connections beyond Zanzibar, both waiting and hope as central temporal predicaments characterise the projects of those without the diasporic connections.

Keshodkar’s diasporas are pre-revolutionary, constituted over decades, if not centuries of Indian Ocean trading activities, and are truly plurilocal, extending through a range of sites that are, sometimes exclusively, sometimes simultaneously, both homeland and hostland. Zanzibaris of South Asian origin, generally Muslim, have migrated either onward (to North America, Europe, Southeast Asia) or ‘back’ to South Asia, constituting a global diaspora that almost seems rhizomatic. Suppressed in Zanzibar during the revolutionary period, these diasporic networks remained active and resilient precisely by virtue of their plurilocality, and are now seized upon – renewed, reconstituted – in a post-revolutionary world: repeatedly dispersed, with no (or multiple) homelands, they exemplify a diaspora for others. Franziska Fay’s post-revolutionary diaspora, in contrast, is a Zanzibari diaspora, and is in the process both of constituting itself and of being recognised by government strategy. In her article, Fay explores the effects of the Zanzibari government’s recent attempts to view the country’s diasporic history positively, both by acknowledging that parts of its population have diasporic backgrounds, old and new, and by encouraging those presently in diaspora elsewhere to contribute to the archipelago’s socio-economic development. Fay contrasts the rhetoric of this new policy, which, while ostensibly different, nevertheless remains rooted in the nationalist discourses that became prevalent after the 1964 revolution, with the contemporary experiences of Zanzibaris of

Omani descent. The hardships faced by these young Zanzibaris in a difficult economic climate, coupled with frequent discrimination against them as (following the same revolutionary discourses) they are identified as ‘Arabs,’ prompts many to consider migration to Oman; but if the option is frequently discussed, it cannot always be realised. However, those who manage to move to Oman are often confronted with similar problems: economic hardship and the complex problems of identity (as ‘Africans’), leading to a condition – in both places – that Fay analyses as ‘waithood’: a prolonged youth as their economic situation does not allow them to reach adulthood in a culturally acceptable way, namely by marrying, and establishing and supporting one’s own family. As Fay shows, their diasporic belonging is conditioned by increasingly limited economic opportunities and options of mobility, as well as by discriminatory state policies and exclusionary nationalist ideologies. Being forced to accept their absence in a desired place to be, young Zanzibari-Omanis today are confronted with a diasporic condition that does not give them much room to live the diasporic life that previous generations enjoyed. Nevertheless, diasporic desires for mobility, including social mobility, still play an important part in their lives, as the plurilocal connections that today are often constitutive of a diaspora for others remain alive despite physical immobility, at least for the time being.⁹ Fay’s young Zanzibari men, living through a period of ‘waithood,’ find that their lives are precarious; mobility is essential but often beyond reach, which makes it difficult for them to constitute diasporic selves in the temporal and spatial terms that have shaped previous generations.

Like Keshodkar’s South Asians, the high status *sada* Hadramis of the Indian Ocean maintain, through endogamous marriage preferences, a community that is geographically dispersed but socially coherent. In his article on the Alawis, and on the specific trajectories of one family, Wilson Jacob shows us how a diasporic people threaded their way through an Indian Ocean in which sovereignty and borders were reshaping their movements as they moved. Expelled from their home (if not their homeland) in a pre-national era by a private trading company, the family of Said Sahl spent their lives negotiating the new political formations that saw diasporas fractured and reshaped in a constant struggle as old, plurilocal social formations were perturbed by colonies and empires, nations and states, and as a world order was reconstituted, disempowering the new subalterns.

⁹ Many of the Zanzibaris who constitute the diaspora, particularly in Oman, are already part of an Omani diaspora, raising intriguing questions about diasporic boundaries in cases where further movement draws erstwhile diasporans back to a now foreign homeland.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, rather than fading away, diaspora was ‘reconceived as a space of autonomous action’ (Jacob, this issue, p. 70), confronting, perhaps unsuccessfully, the changing terms of sovereignty in the Indian Ocean. Eventually, as Jacob demonstrates, while the category of diaspora remains resilient, the context required a deconstruction of the Alawi diaspora as a political construct and its reconstruction as a more docile formation, within which Said Sahl positioned himself as apolitical: no longer a threat to the colonial project. Ultimately, he failed, remaining tainted by association with the historical Alawi sub-diaspora.

One question that arises from all these articles concerns the constitution and definition of the diaspora itself. If Keshodkar’s Zanzibaris of South Asian origin seem to form a relatively coherent group, as much through their social and cultural practices as through their economic ones, Fay’s subjects seem to blur the boundaries between Omani and Zanzibari, while Jacob’s nested diasporas raises the question of diasporas within diasporas: these latter two both raise questions about the relationships within diasporas, between diasporic sub-groupings.¹⁰ Meera Venkatachalam’s article moves to the other end of the spectrum, looking at a diversity of peoples that seem to come to constitute a single diaspora despite their diversity – constituted perhaps by a process of transculturation,¹¹ a dialectic between diasporic origins and diasporic constitutions. From a Nigerian diaspora to an African diaspora, once Indians are recruited to the church, the diaspora might perhaps be more accurately characterised as a religious diaspora, some of whose members have not moved. Movement is not of course integral to the maintenance of a diaspora, since many diasporans do not, and have never moved. At this point the question arises of whether the engagement of diaspora as an analytical concept depends upon the character of the diaspora under consideration. Again, in a sense, an internal diaspora: what sort of diaspora is this? People who move socially rather than geographically: an intriguing possibility. But attempts to draw together the various Africans in India (‘temporally layered’ communities ‘forced to identify under the corporate banner of “Africanness”’ [Venkatachalam, this issue, p. 98]) into an African diaspora failed as diasporic identity coalesced instead around the church, suggesting that the concept of an African diaspora has little purchase outside the Atlantic world, where it is constituted politically rather than culturally. The presence of Indians within this community perturbs a coherent analysis of the diaspora in which a ‘corporate African identity’ is based on the ‘creation of a Christian

¹⁰ Compare with: Federica Guccini and Mingyuan Zhang, “‘Being Chinese’ in Mauritius and Madagascar: Comparing Chinese diasporic communities in the western Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4, 2 (2021), 91-117.

¹¹ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and sugar* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1947).

African subjectivity, where race and “blackness” play a central role’ (ibid., 111). But adding Indians produces a rather hybrid diaspora that, drawing on their religious identity, perhaps promises a converging diaspora.¹²

The articles assembled in this special issue present intriguing cases that add to our understanding of the Indian Ocean as a diasporic space, pointing at the plurality of diasporic phenomena in this region, with a special emphasis on diasporas understood as plurilocal communities that are embedded in particular histories and are faced with different temporalities. They invite the reader to explore the Indian Ocean world through the eyes of diasporic selves and provide ample food for thought to approach the concept of diaspora from new, perhaps unexpected angles, as we have briefly tried to outline in the preceding paragraphs. Although this issue is the second and last of two *JIEWS* special issues on diasporas in the Indian Ocean world, we consider this intellectual project as intrinsically unfinished. By conceptualizing the Indian Ocean as a diasporic space, as a realm where plurilocal communities can be (re)discovered, we intend to encourage further research on Indian Ocean diasporas in the present and in the past; we expect that this will remain a rich field of scholarly enquiry. The Indian Ocean is not only a space of remarkable diasporas of former times providing ample opportunities for historical investigations, but also a dynamic region of today’s world where one can observe plurilocal communities in the making. In other words, the temporal depths, cultural varieties, multiplicity of connections and power asymmetries that characterize(d) the Indian Ocean world deserve to be studied through diasporic perspectives.

¹² Compare with: Robin Cohen, “Creolization and diaspora: The cultural politics of divergence and some convergence,” in *Opportunity Structures in Diaspora Relations: Comparisons in contemporary multilevel politics of diaspora and transnational identity*, ed. Gloria Toticagüena (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2007), 85-112.