

## BOOK REVIEW

SENGUPTA, GUNJA and AWAM AMKPA. *Sojourners, Sultans, and Slaves. America and the Indian Ocean in the Age of Abolition and Empire*. University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 2023. xvi, 359 pp. Ill. Maps. \$49.95; £42.00. (E-book: \$49.95; £42.00.)

The historian Vincent Harlow was the first to point out the continuities between Britain's First Empire in the US and the Second Empire in South Asia, arguing that the latter did not arise accidentally after the disillusion of forfeiture of a colony. He set aside the orthodoxy of the period that the loss of America had destroyed all thought of colonial expansion, and that a "spirit of political lethargy" (in the words of HT Manning) had set in. Sir Christopher Bayly, in his magisterial *Imperial Meridian*, carried forward the argument about continuities by showing the circulation of personnel, of ideologies, and of governance across the British Empire, creating a grammar of rule across Africa and Asia. In this work, Sengupta and Amkpa bring together for the first time the conjoined histories of, and the debates around, slavery in the US and India in the nineteenth century, resisting the conventional separations of phases and geographies of empire. Moreover, the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean are brought together in their interlocking histories moving away from the lethargy that has studied the Atlantic as the space of slavery and the Indian Ocean as that of indenture. Conjoining debates, discourses, and material histories they put forward a strong case for studying the "interoceanic public domain" (p. 6), and, more dramatically, "interoceanic hemorrhages" (p. 289). This is global history at its best that resists confinement within the temporal and spatial carapace of empire at its different moments. They also engage with a multinational cast of characters ranging from American and British pro- and anti-slavery ideologues to Portuguese and Arab merchants, Gujarati financiers, African consumers, white southern mistresses, and Indian dancing girls.

Even as Britain abolished slavery, various forms of bondage and domestic arrangements of servitude were allowed to continue in India, which took the edge off the moral outrage against the continuance of slavery in America. British bankers and Lancashire industrialists continued to benefit from the cotton kingdom in the American south and this contradiction had to be addressed. A discourse of the humanity of slavery in the Orient had to be invented and the East India Company official T.H. Colebrooke became the ideologue of British Asian exceptionalism. British Indian slavery was defined under personal rather than state law, and domestic rather than agrestic slavery was seen as the paradigmatic form. Differences like the absence of a profit motive, self-sale by destitute Indians were emphasized, making slavery in India out to be a kind of poor law that provided for the destitute. Indian judicial authorities were able to maintain Britain's moral authority through legal legerdemain. This was picked up by American commentators like Thomas

Cobb in writing of global slavery as well as by the British India Society's William Adam.

Adam was to come up with an original plan for ending slavery in the American south by promoting "free grown" export staples from British India. In his comparison of British and American slavery, Adam emphasized the centrality of consent in Hindu law and the existence of manumission rituals. He saw only agrestic slavery in South India as similar to slavery in America. Thomas Bayles motivated by notions of American masculinity as against Indian passivity attempted to recruit American skill and technology from Mississippi and New Orleans hiring young overseers on the promise of farms in India and cheap labour. This plan foundered on the mediated structures of agrarian hierarchy in Bundelkhand and Gujarat, as much as the weather and work habits of the local population. The latter drew comparison with "the able-bodied American Negro" who could do the work of "half a dozen Hindoos".

Sengupta and Amkpa, in a fine chapter, discuss the contrasting maternalisms of the slave mistress in the south and the tradition of courtesans in India that worked with similar discourses of parental care and social insurance. The British saw the Indian system of courtesans adopting destitute girls as similar to the reformed poor laws back home and the Law Commission was clear in seeing slavery in this respect as "the Indian Poor Law and preventive of infanticide" (p. 128). The question of "immorality" was mitigated by the act of supposed "free will" (p. 138) exercised by young women who chose the profession of dancing girls; the profession itself coming to be seen as familial professional guilds. The rendition of courtesans within the discourse of domestic governance was paralleled in the understanding of the trafficking of children from Tanzania and Mozambique to Western India for domestic service in rich merchant and royal households. In the Indian Ocean World and practices of bondage, slavery was implicated in local structures of "kinship, patronage, and dependence". Royal families in Western Indian-owned slave markets and Africans were brought as wives and concubines to Bombay. Alongside this, there was the larger economy of Asian textiles, New World silver, African ivory and slaves, and Gujarati credit and shipping that linked Mozambique with the South Atlantic. Discourses of slavery and anti-slavery were located in the webs of Indian Ocean commerce that stretched across the continuous oceans from South America to South East Asia.

The contradictions of American and British positions on slavery were most evident in oceanic networks of trade. As the authors point out, even as New York and New Orleans were key nodes in a "slaving nexus" stretching from Ouidah and Cabinda in Africa to Havana in Cuba (p. 231), in the early nineteenth century, the Anglo-Portuguese treaty allowed for the legality of the slave trade in Mozambique and Quelimane. New England merchants were trading in Zanzibar in 1850 to the tune of \$ 1 million with baniya merchants engaging in slavery as subjects of Zanzibar rather than the British Empire. The British attempted to target the local merchant population driven more by the sentiment of curtailing American trade, through burning of their goods and manumitting slaves by deeming them subjects of British India (p. 237). The authors point out that while official US policy during and after the Civil War aligned with British abolition, "the chasm between

Washington and its citizens and consuls over slavery in the Indian Ocean” continued (p. 239). Caution, compromise, and profit as much as the intricate networks of trade and politics in the Indian Ocean created another timeline for abolition that was markedly at variance with terrestrial discourse.

This parallel maritime history is exemplified in the fascinating chapter on the life of Benjamin Wilson, Massachusetts born Yankee slaveholder and sugar baron in the Comoros. The Comoros archipelago was ideally situated as a conduit between Madagascar and Mozambique allowing commerce with Arabia, India, and Portuguese Africa. When the slave trade was prohibited by the French in 1848, Arab and Swahili traders along the African coast emancipated the slaves and indentured them for long terms to coffee and sugar plantations in French colonies and protectorates in the ocean – Mayotte, Reunion, etc. Wilson’s own plantation had both slaves and freedmen; personal bonds of friendship with the monarch allowed leeway but also drew him into local conflicts that eventually compromised his enterprise. In these far-flung outposts, the compromised rhetoric of freedom by European powers were further subverted by local rulers. As late as 1889, Sultan Abdullah postponed emancipation by requiring free people to serve their masters as hired workers for fixed terms.

This original and pioneering work that draws upon a wealth of archival work (including small town newspapers in the US) gives us a rich textured perspective on “slavery’s interoceanic boundaries” (p. 287). The histories of the Indian Ocean World and the Atlantic are brought together, and a plural history emerges that cannot be straitjacketed into triumphal terrestrial histories of emancipation. Prevarication, compromise, profit, and the intransigent independence of maritime networks open up a history of “multinational slavers and defenders of ‘servitude’ from Charleston to Calcutta, and Kutch to Zanzibar”. After this book, it is impossible for historians of the maritime to stick to their respective “oceans” necessitating an engagement with continuous oceans and their multiple miscegenated networks.

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