



Networks of Displacement: Comparative Histories of Forced Migration and Cultural Adaptation in the Indian Ocean World (16th–19th Century)

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean world has historically served as a vibrant arena for migration, commerce, and cultural interaction, yet the dynamics of forced migration within this region remain insufficiently explored. This study aims to investigate the patterns and impacts of coerced mobility between the 16th and 19th centuries, particularly under Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial regimes. Through a comparative framework, the research analyzes how displaced populations, including African slaves, Indian convicts, and war captives, navigated the complexities of transplantation, adaptation, and cultural retention across diverse maritime contexts. The findings indicate that despite systemic exploitation, displaced groups cultivated resilient cultural identities, established diasporic networks, and contributed significantly to the urban, religious, and economic transformations of key port cities such as Colombo, Batavia, and Zanzibar. Discussions underscore how forced migrants facilitated hybrid cultural practices, informal economies, and religious syncretism, challenging monolithic views of colonial domination and presenting the Indian Ocean as a space of multidirectional agency rather than passive subjugation. By framing forced migration within the larger currents of maritime and global history, this study critiques Eurocentric models of displacement and labor historiography, emphasizing the active role of marginalized groups in historical processes of globalization. It concludes that forced migration, far from being a peripheral phenomenon, was socio-economic landscapes in the Indian Ocean world. Future research is recommended to expand comparative analyses across additional colonial contexts and to integrate archaeological and linguistic evidence, offering a more holistic understanding of the enduring legacies of forced mobility in shaping modern global interconnections.



Introduction

The Indian Ocean world has long served as a dynamic zone of circulation, linking the littoral societies of East Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East through intricate webs of commerce, pilgrimage, and cultural exchange. This study contends that, beneath the celebrated narratives of mercantile cosmopolitanism and religious interconnectedness, forced migration was a structurally defining phenomenon integral to the region's development. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, European imperial expansion, spearheaded by the Portuguese Estado da Índia, the Dutch VOC, and the British Empire, reconfigured existing systems of mobility and bondage by institutionalizing coerced labor regimes across maritime Asia and the African coasts[1] [2, 3]. The circulation of enslaved Africans to South Asia, Indian convicts and indentured workers to the Mascarenes and Southeast Asian ports, and Southeast Asian captives to European settlements constituted an interconnected network of displacement and adaptation, fundamentally underpinning both colonial economies and new cultural formations[4, 5].

While the Atlantic slave trade has dominated global historiography on forced migration, recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the Indian Ocean's distinct systems of coercion, rooted in precolonial practices of servitude, Islamic legal traditions, and regional patterns of warfare and debt bondage[6, 7]. As Clare Anderson (2012) compellingly argues, the Indian Ocean world "was not merely a recipient of coerced labor from elsewhere, but a generator of its own regimes of punishment, exile, and displacement"[8]. Colonial port cities such as Zanzibar, Colombo, Batavia (Jakarta), and Port Louis emerged as hybrid urban spaces where African slaves, South Asian convicts, Arab sailors, and Southeast Asian intermediaries collectively shaped new sociocultural identities and creolized urban cultures[6, 9].

This study adopts a comparative historical and transoceanic framework to examine the patterns, experiences, and legacies of forced migration across the Indian Ocean between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing from colonial judicial records, maritime archives, missionary accounts, and oral traditions, it reconstructs how displaced populations negotiated the moral economies of bondage and exercised agency in contexts of coercion. By rejecting representations of coerced migrants as passive victims, this research foregrounds their strategic adaptation, kinship formation, and cultural resilience[3, 10]. Such approaches align with emerging historiographical movements in global microhistory and connected histories, emphasizing the mobility of subaltern actors and the interdependence of imperial and local worlds[11, 12].

Moreover, this paper situates forced migration within broader debates in postcolonial and global labor history, interrogating Eurocentric paradigms that have traditionally rendered the Indian Ocean secondary to the Atlantic[13, 14]. As Engseng Ho (2006) observes, the Indian Ocean constituted "a coherent and deeply historical arena of interaction," wherein mobility—whether voluntary, contractual, or coerced—became the engine of transregional identity-making[10]. Through the lens of displacement, this study reveals how imperial structures of control intersected with local systems of kinship, religion, and trade, producing enduring patterns of creolization, linguistic hybridity, and cultural fusion[5, 15]. This research demonstrates that forced migration in the Indian Ocean constituted a core structural mechanism of colonial rule, shaping patterns of empire-building, demographic transformation, and cultural synthesis. By integrating comparative perspectives from East Africa, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indonesian archipelago, it seeks to recover the voices, strategies, and subjectivities of displaced peoples who navigated violence with resilience. In doing so, the study advances the central argument that forced migration was not peripheral but essential to the making of the early modern and colonial Indian Ocean world,

contributing to multidimensional understandings of diaspora formation, labor mobility, and intercultural encounter.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary historical methodology. It investigates the dynamics of forced migration and cultural adaptation across the Indian Ocean world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The research integrates macro-level structural analysis of colonial systems with micro-historical reconstructions of the experiences of coerced migrants. This approach combines empirical precision with interpretive and humanistic depth.

Primary data come from a variety of archival sources, preserved in Portuguese, Dutch, and British repositories. These include shipping logs, penal registers, missionary accounts, and trade correspondence. These materials are cross-referenced with local petitions, oral narratives, and ethnographic evidence from descendant communities such as the Siddis of India and the Afro-Sri Lankans. This cross-verification enables the study to reconstruct complex patterns of mobility, adaptation, and identity formation within different colonial regimes.

A comparative framework encompasses Portuguese Goa, Dutch Batavia, and British Ceylon. This provides the foundation for identifying both structural continuities and regional specificities in coerced labor systems and cultural resilience. The study places these case studies within a broader theoretical matrix. This matrix is informed by postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, maritime history, and world-systems analysis. The research employs the concept of “new thalassology,” which reimagines the Indian Ocean as a dynamic and historically contingent zone of exchange, movement, and hybridity. The study integrates oral histories and ethnographic evidence. It focuses on foodways, musical traditions, and ritual practices to capture processes of cultural syncretism and identity negotiation in Afro-Asian diaspora communities. Critical textual analysis of colonial documents is informed by ethical sensitivity toward narratives of displacement and trauma. This ensures the recovery of subaltern voices and recognition of migrant agency. Through this multi-scalar and ethically grounded approach, the research balances documentary rigor with empathetic interpretation. It aims to contribute to a more inclusive and relational understanding of Indian Ocean histories.

Literature Review

The historiography of forced migration in the Indian Ocean world has undergone substantial evolution over the past few decades, particularly as scholars have sought to decenter Eurocentric narratives and foreground the experiences of non-Western populations in mobility, labor, and cultural transformation. Scholarship now increasingly examines coerced migration, diasporic identity formation, and colonial labor regimes across the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, highlighting the oceanic space itself as a dynamic arena of historical interaction[12, 16]. Emerging frameworks, such as new thalassology and comparative oceanic histories, have challenged conventional land-centric historiographies, reframing the Indian Ocean as a site of multidirectional flows of people, goods, and ideas[4, 17].

A foundational contribution is Campbell’s (2004) edited volume, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, which examines the multiplicity of forced labor systems—including slavery, indenture, and penal transportation—across European and indigenous regimes. Campbell emphasizes the economic and political rationales of coercion, arguing that Indian Ocean slavery was structurally distinct from the Atlantic system, yet no less exploitative. Complementing this structural lens, Anderson (2012) applies a microhistorical approach in *Subaltern Lives* to explore

the experiences of convicts and slaves transported across British colonies, particularly between India, Mauritius, and the Andaman Islands. Her biographical method foregrounds agency, resistance, and adaptive strategies. These challenging narratives portray coerced migrants as passive subjects, while simultaneously highlighting the archival silences and biases described by Stoler (2002) in her notion of the “archival grain.”

In the Portuguese and Dutch imperial spheres, Allen (2010) and Alpers (2005) provide comprehensive analyses of how Afro-Asian labor populations were regulated, commodified, and mobilized by both state authorities and private merchants. These studies illuminate the intersections of coercion, economic imperatives, and social hierarchy, emphasizing that forced labor in the Indian Ocean was deeply embedded within imperial governance and commercial networks. Several scholars have focused on the cultural adaptations of coerced migrants in port cities and island settlements. Jayasuriya (2003) traces the African diaspora in South Asia, particularly Afro-Sri Lankan and Siddi communities, showing how these populations forged new identities while retaining linguistic, musical, and religious practices. Similarly, Ho (2006) examines Hadrami Arab networks across the Indian Ocean, demonstrating how genealogical, spiritual, and commercial linkages facilitated transoceanic diasporic formations. These studies highlight diasporic identity as fluid, negotiated, and hybrid, shaped through both coercion and agency. Pearson (2003) and Bose (2006) further contextualize these findings by emphasizing the Indian Ocean as a space of connectivity and exchange rather than fragmentation, and by illustrating how both voluntary and involuntary mobility shaped the region’s cultural and economic ecologies.

Methodologically, the present study aligns with the “new thalassology” perspective, as defined by scholars such as Vink and Wigen (2007), which reconceptualizes oceans as central rather than peripheral to historical processes[4, 17]. This approach is efficient for exploring the experiences of displaced and subaltern populations, offering a transregional lens that captures multidirectional flows of people, goods, and ideas. Likewise, contemporary critiques of Eurocentric labor histories, including Bertz, underscore the need to examine post-slavery transitions, racial hierarchies, and creolized urban cultures in port cities such as Zanzibar, Colombo, and Batavia[18].

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship is localized, focusing on individual colonies, empires, or ethnic groups, with limited attention to comparative, trans-imperial patterns of coerced migration. Additionally, hybrid cultural formations beyond resistance narratives are underexplored. The present study addresses these gaps by offering a comparative, transregional analysis of African slaves, Indian convicts, and Southeast Asian war captives across multiple colonial port cities, foregrounding their cultural agency and highlighting their roles as active participants in the urban, religious, and economic transformations of the Indian Ocean world.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the study's significant findings, drawn from a comparative analysis of coerced-migration experiences in the Indian Ocean world under Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial regimes from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The discussion focuses on four thematic axes: (1) patterns of forced migration, (2) cultural adaptation and resilience, (3) contributions to colonial urban economies, and (4) diasporic agency and identity formation.

Patterns of Forced Migration: Colonial Coercion and Maritime Connectivity

This study reveals that forced migration in the Indian Ocean world from the 16th to the 19th centuries was not sporadic or incidental but constituted a deeply embedded and deliberate strategy within the imperial economies of European colonial regimes. The Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires all relied heavily on maritime mobility to consolidate labor regimes, extract economic value, and project imperial authority. The movement of coerced labor, whether enslaved Africans, Asian indentured workers, convicts, or war captives, was facilitated by the Indian Ocean's longstanding trade routes and navigational knowledge systems, which predated European arrival but were increasingly exploited for colonial ends. The Portuguese, as the earliest European maritime power in the Indian Ocean, initiated a transoceanic slave trade that linked East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. As early as the 1520s, enslaved individuals from Mozambique and the Swahili Coast were transported to Goa and further dispersed to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malacca, and even the Moluccas[19]. These captives were often re-exported from one colonial port to another, serving in domestic, military, and religious labor. Importantly, Portuguese authorities usually justified such trade under the veneer of Christianization and the "just war" doctrine, which classified captives as legitimate spoils[6]. Moreover, Lisbon's Estado da India relied on slave labor for both commercial operations and domestic service. The 17th-century records from Goa show that African and Southeast Asian slaves constituted over 20% of the urban population, and many were assimilated into Luso-Asian households, indicating early patterns of creolization and coerced cultural fusion [16].

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) institutionalized one of the most extensive and bureaucratic systems of coerced labor in the Indian Ocean. Their operations were characterized by logistical efficiency and a commercial ethos that reduced humans to fungible commodities to meet the fluctuating demands of port cities such as Batavia (Jakarta), Colombo, and the Cape Colony. Enslaved people were drawn from a diverse catchment area that included Bengal, Sri Lanka, Java, the Coromandel Coast, and Madagascar[20]. Crucially, the VOC distinguished itself by deploying enslaved workers across imperial zones, often separating families and ethnic groups to discourage resistance. For instance, Sri Lankan captives were regularly sent to the Cape Colony to prevent uprisings on the island. At the same time, Southeast Asians were relocated to the western Indian Ocean ports to support military garrisons and Dutch households[21]. The Dutch use of slaves in urban construction, maritime dockyards, and as household workers in Batavia highlights the multifaceted roles they played beyond plantation contexts. Colonial governors often maintained inventories of "Company slaves" and "private slaves," and these registers reveal a high turnover rate and frequent mortality, evidence of the harsh conditions under which coerced laborers lived and died[4].

The British Empire, especially from the late 18th century onward, turned to forced labor in the form of penal servitude and indentured contracts as substitutes for transatlantic slavery after its formal abolition. Indian convicts, many of whom were political prisoners or debtors, were relocated to penal colonies such as the Andaman Islands, Mauritius, and even Southeast Asia[8]. These convicts were instrumental in clearing forests, building roads, and constructing colonial infrastructure. Unlike African slaves under Portuguese and Dutch rule, these laborers were regulated by a strict, legal-rational bureaucratic framework that emphasized reform, surveillance, and productivity.

In parallel, the British system of indentured labor, most notably post-1834, relied on long-term contracts to recruit impoverished Indian workers for sugar, tea, and rubber plantations across the Indian Ocean, particularly in Mauritius, Ceylon, and Natal. These migrants were bound by semi-

coercive contracts that limited their movement, underpaid their labor, and subjected them to abusive working conditions. Although legally “free,” many scholars argue that the indenture system reproduced many of the exploitative conditions of slavery[22]. Furthermore, British records from the 1850s show how colonial shipping schedules were organized to maximize the transport of convict and indentured laborers along seasonal monsoon routes, minimizing cost and maximizing labor turnover[23]. Thus, maritime logistics became a critical tool of colonial coercion and demographic engineering.

Despite differences in colonial law and administration, these systems all converged around the Indian Ocean’s capacity to facilitate the mass movement of labor under duress. The monsoon-driven rhythms of the ocean dictated migration timing, while long-established Arab, Swahili, Tamil, and Malay trading circuits were appropriated for the movement of people rather than goods. This coerced mobility was not just physical but transformative, often stripping individuals of their kinship ties, languages, and status, while simultaneously creating new nodes of community. Over time, island colonies like Mauritius, Réunion, Ceylon, and Zanzibar became archipelagos of displacement, populated by fragmented yet adaptive diasporic communities that bore the scars and legacies of imperial forced migration[6]. The structured systems of forced migration across the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires demonstrate the Indian Ocean’s centrality as a maritime zone of imperial exploitation and social transformation. By tracing the routes and modalities of coerced migration, we uncover not only the logistics of colonial domination but also the infrastructural and ideological scaffolding that sustained the movement and subjugation of human beings across continents. These patterns laid the groundwork for enduring diasporas that would, in turn, reshape the cultural, linguistic, and economic contours of Indian Ocean societies well into the modern period.

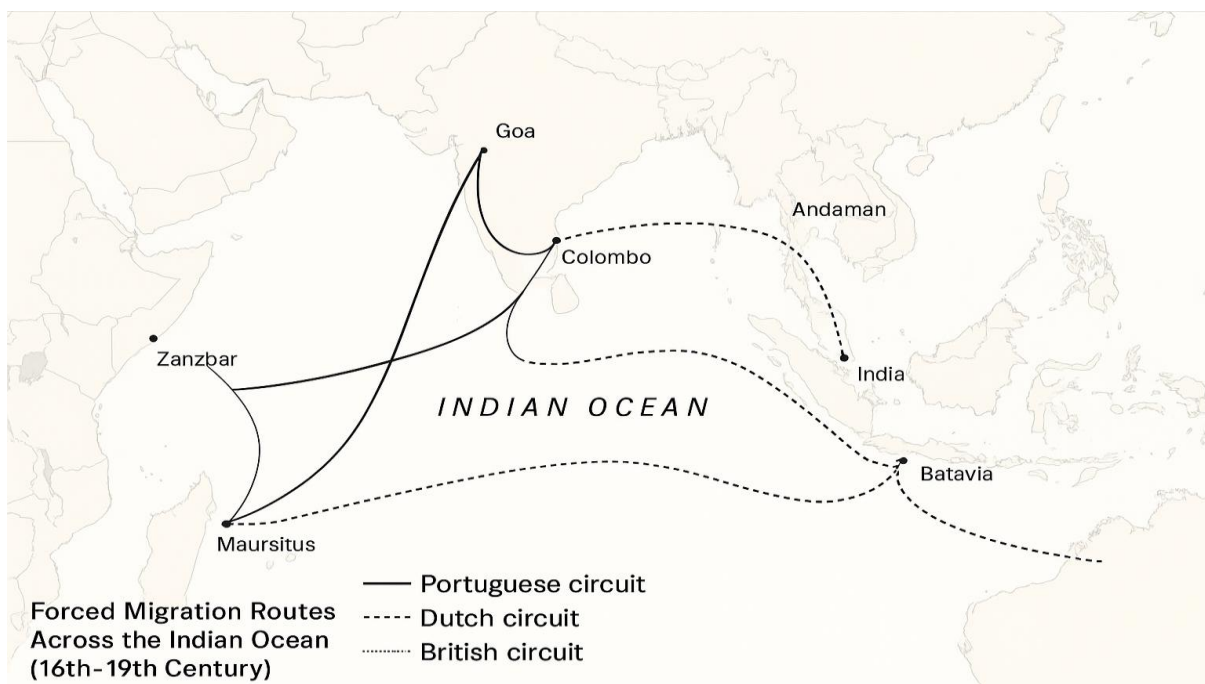


Figure 1. Trans-Imperial Forced Migration Routes Across the Indian Ocean (16th–19th Century). This map shows the major routes of forced migration prepared by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires across the Indian Ocean world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Main routes linking Mozambique, Zanzibar, Goa, Colombo, Batavia, Mauritius, and the Andaman Islands reveal how imprisoned Africans, South Asian offenders, and other forced laborers were

reallocated crossways many imperial zones. The picturing highpoints the Indian Ocean as an integrated system of forced mobility shaped by overlying colonial regimes.

Cultural Adaptation and Resilience: Religion, Language, and Social Practice

Despite the violence and trauma embedded in the experience of forced migration, displaced communities across the Indian Ocean world demonstrated remarkable cultural resilience. Rather than passive victims of imperial coercion, Africans, Indians, Malays, and other subjugated peoples engaged in dynamic strategies of adaptation, preservation, and creative reinvention. This section examines how religion, language, and social practices were transformed under conditions of displacement and domination, revealing the agency of subaltern actors in shaping diasporic cultural landscapes and sustaining moral and social worlds in the aftermath of exile[24-26].

Religious Syncretism and Ritual Innovation

Religion often served as both a refuge of continuity and a medium of innovation for coerced migrants. African-descended communities in South Asia, particularly the Afro-Sri Lankan Kaffirs—descendants of African slaves brought by the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—preserved ancestral spirit worship and communal dance traditions such as *Kaffrinha*, while integrating aspects of Catholicism and Buddhism into their spiritual life[27, 28]. These syncretic rituals exemplify the process of what Hannerz (1992) calls “creolization as cultural creativity,” representing survival through transformation rather than assimilation.

Similarly, Indian convicts and indentured laborers transported to Mauritius, Natal, and the Andaman Islands reconstituted religious practices under material and social constraints. Hindu migrants simplified rituals and reinterpreted caste boundaries that were impossible to maintain in the plantation world[8, 22]. The creation of roadside shrines, local festivals, and plantation temples became centers of moral order and community cohesion, fulfilling Durkheim’s insight that ritual sustains social solidarity under stress. Among Muslim convicts, Islamic practices often blended with Hindu devotional forms, generating hybrid religious expressions[2]. These transformations illustrate that diasporic religiosity in the Indian Ocean world was simultaneously a strategy of survival, an act of identity reconstruction, and a form of spiritual innovation[10, 16].

Language, Creolization, and the Politics of Communication

The linguistic dimension of cultural adaptation is particularly notable in colonial port cities, where polyglot environments fostered creolization—the development of mixed or simplified languages that enabled communication across ethnic and linguistic divides[29]. Languages such as Sri Lankan Portuguese Creole, Batavian Malay, and Mauritian Bhojpuri emerged in plantation towns and garrison colonies, reflecting both colonial hegemony and subaltern negotiation.

In Sri Lanka, Portuguese Creole served as a lingua franca among Afro-descendants, Indo-Portuguese Christians, and lower-caste Sinhalese, persisting long after the end of colonial rule[30]. This linguistic hybridity encoded histories of contact, subjugation, and adaptation, becoming, as Pratt (1992) terms it, a “contact zone” language—a space where unequal power relations generated creative negotiation and new identities. In Batavia (modern Jakarta), Batavian Malay functioned as a colonial pidgin linking Dutch, Javanese, Indian, and enslaved African speakers[31]. These linguistic practices became repositories of collective memory, storytelling, and emotional resilience, preserving fragments of lost homelands while articulating new social solidarities in the colonial world[32, 33].

Social Practice, Kinship, and the Remaking of Community

Forced migrants reassembled social norms and invented new kinship structures that transcended traditional caste, ethnic, and regional boundaries. For instance, Indian indentured laborers in Mauritius and Fiji reconstructed fictive kinship by adopting non-biological "brothers" and "sisters" as social anchors in unfamiliar settings. They also instituted communal arbitration mechanisms, such as *panchayats*, to resolve disputes and maintain order in the absence of formal legal recourse[22]. The formation of informal panchayats (village councils) enabled migrants to resolve disputes and uphold communal justice outside colonial legal frameworks, reflecting moral self-governance within systems of domination.

In penal colonies like the Andamans, convicts forged multi-religious alliances, often sharing food and participating in each other's rituals. This was partly pragmatic but also reflected a deeper moral economy of solidarity in the face of systemic violence[8]. Women played a crucial role in these adaptations by preserving oral traditions, cooking practices, and childbirth rituals that stitched together fragmented social worlds. Moreover, burial customs and death rituals were often reimaged to accommodate the ecological and logistical constraints of exile. In Ceylon and Mauritius, both Hindu and Muslim migrants adapted funeral rites using available resources, integrating local flora and modifying purity rules[23]. These adaptations indicate that exile did not erase ritual significance but reoriented it in relation to new material and social realities.

Port Cities and Island Colonies as Cultural Laboratories

The evidence from African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian diasporas underscores the role of colonial port cities and islands as sites of cultural experimentation and hybridization. Historians such as Sugata Bose argue that these locations functioned as "laboratories of cultural fusion," where coercion and creativity coexisted[12]. The enforced proximity of diverse groups—convicts, slaves, settlers, soldiers, and merchants—created conditions for syncretism, acculturation, and the emergence of new forms of belonging.

Such plural environments produced vernacular architecture that blended Islamic, European, and local designs; mixed religious festivals such as Colombo's Perahera and Batavia's Cap Go Meh; and multilingual musical forms like Kaffrinha and Baila, which wove African rhythms into South Asian melodies[27, 34]. Though colonial authorities often condemned these as moral disorder, they embodied what Clifford (1997) calls "diasporic cosmopolitanism from below." Cultural adaptation among coerced migrants across the Indian Ocean thus represented not merely endurance but creative rearticulation of identities, practices, and solidarities. Through syncretic religion, creole languages, and reconstructed kinship, displaced peoples transformed colonial spaces of suffering into arenas of cultural reinvention. Their legacies challenge linear narratives of loss and instead affirm the fluid, negotiated, and contested nature of cultural production under empire[12, 24, 25].

Contributions to Colonial Urban Economies: Labor and Informal Networks

Coerced migrants were not merely passive subjects of imperial exploitation but the hidden architects of colonial cities. The economic transformation of Indian Ocean ports such as Colombo, Batavia, Zanzibar, Goa, and Mauritius was deeply dependent on the labor, knowledge, and adaptive strategies of enslaved, indentured, and penal populations. This section examines their contributions across two interconnected spheres—formal imperial infrastructure and informal urban economies—revealing how forced migrants not only undergirded but also subtly reshaped colonial urban systems, challenging dominant historiographies that cast them solely as victims or tools of empire[2, 8, 26].

Imperial Infrastructure and Maritime Logistics

The expansion of European colonial urbanism in the Indian Ocean was materially realized through coerced and unfree labor systems. Enslaved Africans in Portuguese Goa and Ceylon, South Asian convicts in British-controlled Mauritius and the Andamans, and Javanese slaves under Dutch rule in Batavia were mobilized to construct the physical backbone of empire—fortifications, warehouses, canals, arsenals, docks, and roads—without which the maritime circuits of colonial trade could not function[2, 8, 20].

In Colombo, enslaved Africans and South Asian laborers cleared forested marshland, laid gridded streets, and erected monumental Dutch fortifications that still define the city's spatial core[35]. In Batavia (modern Jakarta), the Dutch East India Company (VOC) deployed enslaved Javanese, Balinese, Malabari, and Bengali laborers to construct canals and administrative quarters modeled after Dutch urban designs but adapted to tropical hydrology[31, 36]. These workers' embodied knowledge of local materials, monsoon rhythms, and soil conditions was indispensable—transforming colonial blueprints into viable urban ecologies[12, 16].

Similarly, in Zanzibar, under Omani and later British influence, enslaved Africans built port facilities, aqueducts, and clove-processing plants that anchored the city's rise as a nineteenth-century entrepôt[7]. These infrastructural achievements, while foundational to the empire, were silenced in colonial archives, which celebrated European planners but erased the subaltern hands that materialized their visions.

Informal Economies and Everyday Urban Life

Beyond formal labor regimes, coerced migrants also played critical roles in informal and subterranean economies that sustained daily urban life. Many enslaved and freed individuals engaged in petty trade, street vending, food preparation, domestic service, and artisanal crafts—occupations which, while marginal in the eyes of the colonial state, were vital to urban sustainability and cultural vitality[2, 8].

In Batavia, enslaved women ran market stalls selling rice, fish, and textiles, and often acted as intermediaries between VOC officials and local populations, particularly in household provisioning[37]. In Colombo, African-descended communities engaged in coir rope making, drumming, and animal husbandry, while indentured laborers in Mauritius cultivated kitchen gardens and participated in clandestine markets within plantation compounds[23].

These activities constituted what James Scott (1985) terms the “infra-politics of the everyday”—practices of quiet resistance and self-reliance beneath overt domination. Informal markets and neighborhood associations became spaces of microeconomic autonomy, where enslaved and freed persons could accumulate modest capital, sustain kinship networks, and reconstitute community life. Women played particularly vital roles as traders, healers, and food producers, shaping what Cooper and Stoler (1997) describe as the “intimate economies” of empire.

Transition and Subaltern Mobility

Despite structural constraints, some coerced populations achieved limited economic mobility through adaptive strategies and embeddedness in informal networks. In Sri Lanka, African freed persons and their descendants became dockworkers, fishermen, and boatmen, leveraging maritime skills acquired under servitude to participate in the colonial economy[27]. In Zanzibar, Indian freed convicts and laborers became small-scale moneylenders and craftsmen, gradually integrating into local guilds, mosques, and communal associations[7].

Such transitions show that coerced migrants were not stuck in dependency but displayed flexible agency within the empire's boundaries. Using linguistic skills, relational resources, and geographic familiarity, they created fragile niches that blurred the lines between slavery, servitude, and freedom[2, 8]. These microhistories align with Clare Anderson's claim that "penal and indentured laborers were not only exploited bodies but also intelligent actors who learned the rhythms and vulnerabilities of the colonial economy"[8].

Rethinking Colonial Urbanism from Below

The economic and infrastructural contributions of coerced migrants call for a fundamental rethinking of colonial urbanism in the Indian Ocean world. Cities like Colombo, Batavia, and Zanzibar were not just imperial impositions of European spatial order, but complex assemblages of subaltern labor, indigenous knowledge, and cross-cultural adaptation[12, 38].

By highlighting the subaltern economies that supported colonial cities, this study adds to a growing body of history that examines empire from below—showing how coercion and creativity coexisted in urban life[26, 28]. The lasting physical and economic landscapes of these cities carry the invisible marks of those who built, cleaned, traded, and kept them going—men and women whose efforts, though often pushed aside in archives, are still woven into the urban fabric of the Indian Ocean world.

Diasporic Agency and Transnational Identity Formation

Perhaps the most important yet overlooked result of coerced migration in the Indian Ocean world was the rise of diasporic agency and flexible transnational identities among displaced groups. Unlike traditional stories that see enslaved or indentured people as voiceless and permanently separated from their homelands, these groups actively shaped their identities and created networks of support that crossed imperial, ethnic, and religious lines. Through inventive adaptation, they integrated themselves into the social, legal, and spiritual aspects of their host societies, turning the Indian Ocean into a space of cosmopolitan connection.

Kinship, Spiritual Resilience, and the Formation of Afro-Asian Communities

One of the most compelling findings is the development of Afro-Asian communities, forged through shared experiences of dislocation, marginalization, and adaptation. Despite being uprooted from vastly different geographies—West Africa, Mozambique, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, the Malay Archipelago—coerced migrants developed horizontal solidarities through kinship ties, shared labor experiences, and communal rituals[28].

In Sri Lanka and western India, African-descended populations like the Kaffirs maintained distinct yet adaptable identities, often through conversion to Catholicism, Islam, or Buddhism, as well as through musical and performative traditions such as Baila and Kaffrinha[27]. These expressive forms served not only as memories but also as acts of identity affirmation in societies structured by racial hierarchy and exclusion. Spiritual institutions became vital infrastructures for maintaining these identities. Mosques, Catholic churches, Sufi shrines, and burial societies acted as centers of moral authority, ritual continuity, and social organization. In port cities like Zanzibar, Goa, and Colombo, multi-ethnic congregations formed around such sacred spaces, creating overlapping communities of belonging that were neither entirely indigenous nor thoroughly colonial[12, 16].

Legal Navigation and Everyday Autonomy in Colonial Cities

Despite living under regimes of legal ambiguity, racial discrimination, and surveillance, coerced migrants developed sophisticated strategies to assert personhood, negotiate identity, and claim

rights. Clare Anderson (2012) notes that penal laborers in the British Empire often sought out loopholes in imperial legal systems—registering marriages, acquiring property, and challenging their classifications as “non-free”[8].

In many cases, former slaves or convicts transitioned into roles as domestic workers, traders, artisans, or religious leaders, gaining not only material wealth but also symbolic capital within their communities. In Mauritius and the Andaman Islands, indentured and freed South Asians organized mutual aid societies, subscribed to religious publications, and established community councils that helped sustain social cohesion and advocate for group interests[23]. Furthermore, some migrants manipulated colonial hierarchies by aligning themselves with imperial projects—such as serving in colonial militias, police, or lower administrative roles—thus navigating dual loyalties to gain strategic advantage and relative autonomy[8].

Creole Households and Cultural Fusion

The Creole household emerged as a key site of identity transformation. Beyond biological hybridity, these households embodied new cultural values, gender negotiations, and modes of domestic organization. In Batavia, Dutch settlers frequently formed unions with Javanese or Balinese women, giving rise to *mestizo* families that combined European domestic practices with Southeast Asian aesthetics[31]. Similarly, in coastal India and Ceylon, African men and local women established kinship alliances that defied both caste and racial hierarchies[18].

Children of such unions developed creole identities, often multilingual—fluent in Portuguese Creole, Sinhala, Tamil, or Malay—and practicing blended religious rituals. Over generations, these communities became cultural intermediaries, facilitating trade, translation, and maritime communication between empires. As Stefan Halikowski Smith (2011) emphasizes, “these were not marginal groups but central actors in the making of a new Indian Ocean world—one in which identity was fluid, negotiated, and deeply entangled with imperial contradictions” (pp. 134–136).

Embedding Diaspora in the Indian Ocean Genealogy

The cumulative result of these processes was the emergence of diasporic subjectivities that were rooted in shared memory, flexible affiliation, and pragmatic adaptation. While imperial authorities attempted to fix identities through racial, religious, and legal boundaries, coerced migrants consistently subverted these classifications, forming translocal affiliations and forging cross-cultural genealogies. Rather than viewing these communities as “lost” or “residual,” they should be recognized as foundational contributors to the social and cultural fabric of modern Indian Ocean societies. Their practices—ranging from language and cuisine to ritual and music—left indelible imprints on cities such as Colombo, Mombasa, and Port Louis. Through everyday acts of resilience and creativity, coerced migrants redefined the moral and cultural geography of empire, demonstrating that diaspora in the Indian Ocean was not merely a condition of loss but a dynamic site of cultural reinvention and global interconnection.

Conclusion

This study examined the complex experiences of coerced migration across the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, focusing on Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial regimes. Through an integrated analysis of forced labor, cultural adaptation, economic participation, and identity formation, it reveals the deep connection between imperial coercion and diasporic creativity in shaping the region's early modern and modern histories. The first significant contribution of this study is reframing coerced migration as a systemic and structural feature of the Indian Ocean world, deeply rooted in the maritime economies and geopolitical ambitions of

European empires. Rather than being incidental or peripheral, these movements were essential to the development of colonial port cities, plantation systems, and penal colonies that supported the global flow of labor and capital. Second, the research emphasizes the resilience and cultural agency of coerced migrants. Far from passive victims, displaced individuals and communities used creative strategies to keep alive their languages, religions, and social traditions while adapting to radically new environments. The emergence of creole languages, hybrid religious practices, and diverse ritual spaces shows that diaspora was not just a consequence of displacement but also an active process of cultural reinvention. Third, the study portrays coerced migrants as economic agents who significantly shaped colonial urban economies. Their contributions went beyond formal infrastructure and plantation labor to include informal trade, artisanal work, and maritime activities—actions that sustained the empire's daily operations. By highlighting the economic and social agency of coerced laborers, the study challenges traditional histories that often overlook their roles in imperial development. Finally, the research shows that diasporic agency thrived even within structures of domination. Migrants built kinship networks, sought legal recognition, and created intercultural households that crossed imposed boundaries of race, caste, and faith. These practices helped develop transnational identities and creolized communities, which became lasting features of the diverse Indian Ocean world.

Theoretical and historiographical contributions include several ways of advancing global and Indian Ocean history. This study centers on mobility, coercion, and creolization in understanding modern identity formation, expanding frameworks suggested by scholars such as Clare Anderson, Sugata Bose, and Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya. Using a comparative, multi-empire approach, it sheds light on the interconnected yet distinct structures of labor, culture, and governance that link the Portuguese, Dutch, and British worlds. It also addresses ongoing debates in postcolonial and diaspora studies, challenging Eurocentric and state-centered narratives that marginalize subaltern voices. It highlights how coerced migration led not only to suffering but also to subaltern cosmopolitanisms—forms of moral, cultural, and political negotiation that redefined belonging across imperial borders. In doing so, it bridges global history with social and cultural history, emphasizing the Indian Ocean as both an economic system and a human geography of encounter. The story of coerced migration in the Indian Ocean is not just a history of dispossession but also one of resilience, adaptation, and creative change. Descendants of enslaved Africans, indentured Indians, and creolized Afro-Asian communities continue to influence the cultural, linguistic, and demographic landscapes of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. Their histories remind us that cultural survival is an ongoing act of negotiation and renewal. Future research could further investigate gendered and generational aspects of coerced migration, especially the roles of women and children in maintaining community life and preserving cultural memory. Ethnographic and archaeological methods may also reveal the intangible heritage of these diasporas—expressed through music, food, rituals, and oral histories. Additionally, comparative studies linking the Indian Ocean with the Atlantic and Pacific regions could deepen our understanding of global forced migration as a shared but regionally unique human experience. In conclusion, this study affirms that the Indian Ocean was not only a site of imperial exploitation but also a space of transcultural exchange and human resilience. Amid the tension between coercion and creativity, new identities, solidarities, and worldviews emerged—legacies that continue to shape the diverse and interconnected societies of today's Indian Ocean world.

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