
Edward A. Alpers’ collected volume serves two purposes. First, it examines the significance of the Indian Ocean for eastern Africa. Second, it acts as a survey of the historian’s four decade career. While the material presented here is all previously published, its compilation into a single collection serves both of these purposes well. Alpers discussion of history is one grounded in place, literally and figuratively. Much like a geographic study, Alpers is consistently concerned with the uniqueness and contexts of the places about which he writes. More figuratively, his attempts to place East African history in a larger Indian Ocean history serve to reveal important patterns of influence that have shaped this region.

The volume is split into three sections, defined by geographic extent, each consisting of three chapters. The first of these sections focuses on the western Indian Ocean. This is the broadest geographic scale Alpers covers; this serves the book’s opening well as these chapters contextualize the larger region for the more specific writings to come. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on early trade networks in the region. Chapter 1 discusses the role(s) of Hindu merchants from the Gujarat region in the ivory trade. This discussion crosses three centuries beginning with sixteenth century, covering a period of competition and conflict between and across Portuguese and Arab trade routes. This is the widest timescale Alpers writes of, his focus becoming increasingly more narrow through the later chapters. Chapter 2 reproduces one of the least read items in the volume--a conference paper discussing trade in foodstuffs across the western Indian Ocean. This topic is notable, as Alpers himself points out it has been underdeveloped and often neglected in historical literature on the region. Chapter 3 takes a different approach, presenting the islands of the region as a focus and arguing they should be the driving point of study, opposed to the more common focus on continental locations in the region.

In contrast with Chapter 3, the second section acquiesces to larger scholarly emphases and focuses specifically on coastal East Africa. Despite this contradiction, the section segues well from the previous one, leading readers through a discussion of what is broadly conceived of as the Swahili coast. Chapter 4 examines and positions Muqdisho in a nexus of Busaidi Zanzibar, commercial networks (again with a focus on trade), and a broad urban tradition of the region. This nexus, Alpers argues, presents a city in contrast with the traditional nomadic Somali experience. The following chapter dovetails from this discussion by examining the indigenous textile industry in the city, serving to indirectly illustrate and support the more sweeping ideas of the previous chapter. Finally, Chapter 6 switches focus and discusses a women’s spirit possession cult from the mid-nineteenth century. The takeaway of this chapter is the importance of cultural networks that interlink regions and serve to advance and evolve cultural traditions. While itself a worthwhile discussion, this chapters placement is the one notable question mark in the book, as it is such a radical departure from this section’s other two topics.

The third and final part of the book focuses on the Mozambique Channel. These chapters are the most complex, examining this channel as a zone of activity involving intricate networks of politics, religion, commerce, and family. Much like the subject matter of Chapter 2, this topic is somewhat understudied and Alpers accordingly underscores its importance here. Chapter 7 returns once again to trade networks, examining the Indian Ocean slave trade through the example of Malagasy raids of coastal eastern Africa. Chapter 8 focuses solely on the islands.
exploring the relationship between Mozambique and the Comoros. Finally, Chapter 9 closes the book by testing the concept of littoral society in the Mozambique Channel context.

Volumes of this nature are important. A survey of Alpers’ career would be worthwhile from any scholar, but Alpers own selection and compilation of the work he thought to be most noteworthy, compiled using a framework of his own design, serves to give readers the most complete look at this overview of his work. Individual reader’s utility of this volume will vary based on their previous experience with Alpers’ scholarship. However, when considering the importance of his topics and the longevity and evolution of his thinking evident in these pages, even Alpers’ closest colleagues will likely find value here.

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In Governing the Empire: Provincial Administration in the Almohad Caliphate (1224-1269) Pascal Buresi and Hicham El Allaoui embark on the ambitious task of presenting a detailed account of the administrative strategies and shifts of the Almohad Caliphate. While less frequently addressed by scholars than the Abbasids or Umayyads, the Almohad Caliphate was the ruling dynasty of Morocco and Al-Andalus for over a century (1121-1269). As such, the work of Buresi and El Allaoui represents an important discussion of a significant dynasty which has been hitherto under analyzed. Despite their brilliance in articulating the administrative structures and strategies of the Almohads, they fall short in terms of situating this group within the broader history of the Caliphate.

The major purpose of this work is to provide insight into the internal workings of the Almohad administration. Issues such as how and why individual appointments were decided, decisions to centralize power or rely on local governance, and techniques used to establish the political and religious legitimacy of the Caliphate (and Caliph himself) are at the forefront of this analysis. In this regard, the author’s succeed in brilliant fashion. Their ability to gather enough administrative documents to address all of these issues in detail over a period of forty-five years is nothing short of impressive. Simply put, the reader walks away from this text with a strong understanding of how and why Almohad administrative practice evolved over time.

Another strength of the book is the authors’ detailed explanation of their translation of primary Arabic documents. To be sure, the attention paid to the nuances of translating twelfth and thirteenth century documents could be perceived as tedious by those who have no knowledge of the language. However, for scholars and students who understand the frequency with which the translation of Arabic documents is either explained poorly, or not at all, the in-depth discussion offered in this work is a breath of fresh air. This through explanation (not to mention that quality of the translation itself) allows the language and context of the original documents to be preserved to the maximum extent possible.

Despite their success in analyzing the internal dynamics of the Almohad Caliphate, the authors largely ignore the broader institution history and context of the Caliphate. While the main purpose of the book was an administrative analysis of the Almohads, their structures and