

International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies

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An International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies was held in Perth from 15-22 August 1979. The Indian Ocean area as defined for this purpose included all island and littoral nations of the region comprised by the East African coastline, the Red Sea, Arabian peninsula, Persian Gulf, South and Southeast Asia and Australia. The theme was "The Indian Ocean in Focus" and the conference was divided into seven specialist sections. These were (1) Environment and Resources; (2) Trade and Development; (3) The History of Commercial Exchange and Maritime Transport; (4) International Politics; (5) Cultural Exchanges and Influences; (6) Archives and Resources for Study; and (7) Comparative Education.

A general call for the submission of papers was issued early in the year and individual people were also approached. A good number of papers was received and these were published and circulated before the conference. Plenary and section meetings were held daily. The format of each section session was envisaged as being a brief resumé by the authors of papers who were present, followed by general discussion of the topic. This was more or less successful depending on numbers present, personalities, etc. Sessions were held in both French and English and summary translations were given as discussions proceeded. Simultaneous translations were provided for the plenary sessions.

Section 6 had mustered an impressive complement of archivists, librarians and users of historical source materials. Session topics included source materials in Indian Ocean Island countries, in Asian countries, in Africa, in Europe, in Australia and archaeological and oral, linguistic and literary sources. Brief mention only may be made of some of the papers but full sets are available for purchase from the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Western Australia.

The first Section VI session was concerned with archival and other sources for Indian Ocean study in Indian Ocean island countries. The speakers were Monsieur M. Chabin of the Departmental Archives of La Réunion, Andrew Forbes who is currently working on Maldivian artefacts at the British Museum and Madame Ly-Tio-Fane, from Mauritius, whose field is sources for the study of natural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Monsieur J. C. Roda of the University Library of La Réunion spoke about documentation in the créole islands.

The following session was on archaeological sources and a paper by Jeremy Green on shipwrecks in the Indian Ocean was discussed. A later paper by Dr Gunter Schilder on early mapping of the Australian continent gave further insight on Dutch maritime history and sea routes to the Indies, some of which produced unexpected visits to Australian shores.

Papers on source materials in Asian countries were given by Miss Dhan Keswani of the University of Ghana (previously of the Indian Archives in New Delhi), Miss Mona Lohanda of the National Archives of Indonesia, Dr. Mahapatra of the University of Calcutta and Mr. Wimalaratne of the National Archives of Sri Lanka. Source materials in India and Indonesia were covered and also the study of monastic landlordism in Sri Lanka.

A session on oral, linguistic and literary sources included a brief insight into the work being carried out by Professor and Madame Domenichini on tradition in Malagasy and research into the theme of the sea in literature and "mentalité" in a specific area in Indonesia by Professor Denys Lombard.

African source materials were discussed by Mrs. Mariam Ali of the Government Archives of Tanzania, Dr. Kagombe of the Archives of the Government of Kenya, Professor Muller from the University of South Africa and Professor Mutibwa from the University of Nairobi. Papers on European sources were given by Dr. Richard Bingle of the India Office in London, Madame Denis-Combet of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, Dr. Om Prakash of the University of Delhi, whose subject was Dutch sources, and Dr. R. K. Renford of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London who considered missionary records.

It was interesting to see the complementary role of European and local records and to get some idea of what records had been removed to Europe by the colonial powers. It was pointed out that in many cases the policy and administrative records were to be found in Europe while the case files and grass-roots material were still in the Indian Ocean countries and that a great deal of information could be obtained from both sources.

The removal of records from the point of origin was a touchy matter and time and again the French Foreign Office records, which are held at Aix-en-Provence, were quoted for the richness of source materials held there. However, discussions were amicable and rewarding. A point made

concerning the Maldivé Islands was certainly a plus for colonialism when it was said that there is little if any relevant documentation relating to these islands as they had never been colonised.

The last session was concerned with Indian Ocean source materials in Australia and included papers from the National Library, the Australian Archives, the Battye Library and the Australian National University. Two useful bibliographies had been compiled for the occasion, one by the National Library and the other by the Australian Archives.

The opportunity which the Conference gave for an exchange of ideas and contact with archivists, librarians and users of source materials of the Indian Ocean area was agreed by the participants to have been a most worthwhile experience and a recommendation went forward from the Conference to UNESCO that further such meetings should be held.