

Piracy in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

Popular assumption equates piracy to plundering. It ignores the complex social, economic and political factors which influenced the activities of pirates. There are instances of Pirates working legitimately for particular states, against their rivals. In fact, state rivals were loosely described as pirates. This essay will focus on piracy in the Indian Ocean between the 12th and 19th century as this period has the maximum source material regarding piracy. Most information comes from colonial records or reports by states and kingdoms.

The perusal of the records also establishes how the act of piracy was deeply embedded in the socio-political environments of the regions and how the pirates shared a complex relationship with the state. Not only were they deeply involved in the commerce of the regions, but they also influenced it by playing a significant role in the conflicts between kingdoms as proxies which would loot and weaken rivals. In certain cases, pirates would become integral for businesses specialising in the distribution of goods which were declared to be illegal by the state, or to bypass prohibitions of the state. Instances such as these reveal how pirates were not always obstacles for trade and commerce, but would help facilitate it.

A study of piracy reveals the complex nature of trade and politics in the Indian ocean, which shaped and moulded the economies and politics of communities and kingdoms alongside the Indian Ocean.

Introduction-

An old Malay saying holds that “the first ship ever built was to catch fish, while the purpose of the second was to rob the first one of its haul.” This expression is no exaggeration as piracy does appear to be as old as sea faring. The Indian ocean has one of the most important and oldest sea based trade routes which

connected some of the oldest and richest kingdoms in history to each other. The sheer volume of goods being delivered and exchanged, along with the value of its items, made the Indian Ocean a prime target for piracy. A deeper analysis of the source material relating to piracy would reveal that it was a far more layered concept, rather than mere plundering.

Pirates can be divided into 4 categories- plunderers, smugglers, State/Non-state actors and political entities. These categories existed between the 12th and 19th century. However, states and colonial authorities attempted to label their rivals as pirates/criminals in the pejorative sense of looting ships at sea. This can be discerned from various sources.

While Chinese and Indian sources, centuries old, have mentioned the dangers of piracy, it is only with the arrival of Europeans that extensive research into piracy in the Indian Ocean began. Since they started seafaring in the Indian Ocean between the 12th and 19th century we get a confetti of sources which bring out various nuances of the very idea of piracy. The travelogues, personal accounts and documents belonging to state officials and explorers highlight the important role played by pirates in the economy and politics of the Indian Ocean. The aim of this article is to bring out the various aspects of piracy during this period.

The essay will be divided into two parts. The first part will analyse piracy in the pre-european period and the various types of piracy which existed. This part will look at how pirates were part of the economic system rather than an anti-thesis of it, by looking at how they worked within the market system. This section will highlight how states at times attempted to root out piracy and at times hired them to selectively target their enemies. Pirate also became powerful not only to challenge other kingdoms, but also attempted to establish and set up their own state like structures.

The second part of the essay will cover the European period, when the arrival of European colonists coincided with the arrival of

Caribbean pirates. The common ethnicity of both the groups resulted in colonists being made the scapegoats for acts of pirates. Even during the European period there were four categories of pirates as described above. In fact, the Caribbean pirates would infamously attempt to form their own state in Saint Mary island from where they would indiscriminately raid ships. Interestingly, attempts of European colonists to explore and gain control of the lucrative trades taking place in the Indian Ocean were met with resistance from locals in the form of piracy.

Piracy is seen as a permanent scourge on maritime commerce across the region. This was certainly how it was perceived by merchants making frequent mention of having escaped the grasp of pirates with their lives. Hopefully by the end of this essay, the readers would view the relationship between pirates and merchants as being more complex than that of a parasite with its host.

Historiography and label of pirates-

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, piracy is defined as the practice of robbing and attacking ships at sea. As stated earlier, this understanding gives us a limited outlook into the activities and impact of pirates. This essay will analyse pirates as plunderers, who raided and looted ships, smugglers, who engaged in the smuggling of illicit goods or in bypassing prohibitions of kingdoms, State actors who worked as mercenaries for States and rulers or acted against them and finally as Political entities with their own state-like structures.

It is important to note that these roles of pirate were not neatly separated. Pirates did not

always confine themselves to one role. However, for the purposes of the essay, it would be more practical and concise to look at pirate activities through each particular role.

The problem with studying the activities of pirates is that they rarely left historical sources of their own. Historians have had to rely on secondary sources for the study of pirates, such as the journals of traders, merchants and travellers. The administration of states would record the activities of pirates as well. But one of the most invaluable sources of pirate history is undoubtedly the records of European powers. In the case of the Indian Ocean, the East India Company (EIC) were the first writers to express an interest in studying the activities of pirates in the Indian Ocean.¹

The records of Colonial powers such as the EIC must be critically examined due to their inherent bias when it comes to labelling entities or individuals as pirates. The biases expose themselves as soon as we ask "Who is a pirate?" For the layman, a pirate is a person who attacks and plunders ships at sea. This understanding of piracy can encapsulate almost every major seafaring power, from European nations to the navy of kingdoms and even merchant communities.

In 1944, the Oxford English dictionary gave the definition of piracy as: Robbery and depredation on the sea or navigable rivers or by descent from the sea upon the coast, by

¹ Patricia Risso, *Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 295

persons not holding a commission from a civilised state."

This definition clearly reflects the internal bias of Europeans when it came to branding communities or peoples as 'pirates'. Especially since colonials viewed most kingdoms and societies in the East as 'uncivilised'.

This leads to the phenomenon of countries and kingdoms labelling their rivals 'pirates.' For instance, the Portuguese would label anyone who flouted their system of trade control as 'pirates', such as the Mapillah traders of Malabar.² They would try to avoid the Portuguese system and continue trading in spices such as pepper as they had done for centuries. In contrast, we find the tendency of Europeans to use the term 'privateers' instead of 'pirates' for individuals engaging in plunder, giving it an air of legitimacy. In many cases, Europeans who were granted licences for trading were allowed to attack ships which were carrying the flag of an enemy state. Very few Europeans were placed in the category of 'pirates.'

Pirates in the Pre-European era-

Pirates are often viewed as being the antithesis of trade and law and order. They can be viewed as macroparasites who leech off traders in return for nothing. However, their activities were either dependent or part of the economic and political factors of the Indian Ocean.

Plunderers needed to have access to markets in order to sell the goods they captured from ships. These stolen goods were sold below

² Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, (Routledge, 2003), 139

market price and were therefore highly sought after. To add insult to injury, in some cases these goods were sold back to the traders from whom it was stolen from.³

For plunderers, each successful act of piracy gave them more resources to spend on upgrading their ship, but it may not be enough. Piracy is an expensive venture and this matter of expenses related to piracy, created another level of dependence on the economy and political entities. Ships were among the most expensive and complex machinery to exist which required time, skills, resources and money to construct. Piracy was therefore a costly business which required investors.⁴ It can be assumed that the need for investment and the support of entrepreneurs which was required to finance expeditions of piracy made pirates obligated to serve them or act in a manner advantageous to them. These could include only robbing ships owing allegiance to a particular association or state, setting aside a part of the loot as tribute for their investors and acting and guarding the ships of their investors. Plunderers in such cases turn into non-state actors.

In India an elaborate system of financing developed which involved land-based investors providing the necessary capital to hire ships and crews. 17th Century European visitors to South India observed how local

pirates were financed by wealthy and powerful lords to build and equip their ships.⁵

Sponsorships from rulers was another means of funding piracy. This is where the political aspect of piracy begins to take shape. Pirates would become State actors to be used by rulers to weaken and gain more wealth out of their rivals as well as harm their trade. It would also allow rulers to have 'plausible deniability'. In one case, Japan's Tokugawa government in the 16th sponsored Chinese maritime entrepreneurs, who were regarded as pirates by the Qing state. The notion of pirates being private rather than political actors is quite inaccurate. Cheng I Sao would famously negotiate a deal with the Cantonese government for a complete pardon for all her crimes as a pirate and retire to a peaceful life. In Japan, armed bands of smugglers would collaborate with Japanese pirates who would sell protection passes in exchange for a toll. They would even provide naval assistance to the local Japanese lord or 'daimyo' who served as vassals of the Shogun.⁶ Thus, pirates working for the Tokugawa government would achieve greater legitimacy when they acquired land and became members of the Samurai warrior class.

We see that establishing a relationship with another State or ruler, can give pirates the opportunity to turn more legitimate and gain a

³ Patricia Risso, *Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 295

⁴ N. Steensgaard, "The Indian Ocean Network and the Emerging World Economy, ca. 1500–1700," in *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics*, S. Chandra (New Delhi: Sage, 1987), 149.

⁵ François Pyrard, *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval aux Indes orientales (1601–1611)*, 2 vols. (Paris: Chandeigne, 1998), 412.

⁶ Xing Hang, "The Shogun's Chinese Partners: The Alliance between Tokugawa Japan and the Zheng Family in Seventeenth-Century Maritime East Asia," (*Journal of Asian Studies* 75.1 2016), 111–136.

level of immunity from the law. Becoming a State actor is quite advantageous in this regard. However, it does mean that they must avoid attacking ships belonging to their benefactors and only target ships of rival states or targets specified by the State.

States too would benefit from such alliances or deals with pirates. Pirates as State actors were used as a means to gain more loot and resources. Marco Polo recounts how the ruler of Thana in the Konkan Coast, colluded with pirates as long as they provided the king with horses plundered from ships.⁷ Rulers in the Malacca Straits would attach themselves to the sea people of their region who lived solely on trading and plunder.⁸ In such cases of State actors, pirates become part and parcel and perhaps even essential towards the effective functioning of kingdoms who are in need of more resources. Pirates were rarely an independent force. They were more often than not, an arm of local potentates who themselves began as pirates or embraced maritime raiding as a means to expand their domains. As seen in the case of the Tokugawa government allowing pirates to become part of the Samurai class, pirates would easily turn into an extension of a State's navy. This would make piracy systemic feature of the Indian Ocean world rather than a hurdle which was meant to be overcome.

⁷ Ranabir Chakravarti, "Horse Trade and Piracy at Tana (Thana, Maharashtra, India): Gleanings from Marco Polo" (Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient) 34

⁸ R. J. Antony, *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Traders in the Greater China Seas*, (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 19

For smugglers, merchants could become a source of investment during times of prohibition. It was not uncommon in the Indian Ocean for rulers and states to impose bans or restrictions on trade. These prohibitive measures would be taken for a variety of reasons ranging from isolating or boycotting goods from rival states, preventing the import of illicit goods or to simply gain more profit. For instance, The Ming dynasty in China imposed the *haijin* sea ban in order to reduce the influence of Japanese pirates. This ban was brought into effect to counter and diminish the presence of Japanese pirates as well as to reduce the possibility of foreign nations colluding with the subjects of the Ming emperor to dethrone him.⁹ This coupled with the intensifying war in Japan between regional lords made normal trade and travel much more difficult.

Trade bans and restrictions would obviously disrupt the lucrative trade practices of merchants. Smugglers proved to be valuable entities who would allow traders to bypass restrictions. As a result, merchants themselves would dabble in piracy either out of desperation or out of greed for greater profits. The policies of the state which attempted to further control trade only encouraged smuggling operations. Here piracy was not seen as the antithesis to trade, but rather an opportunity to earn a greater profit by bypassing what they felt were unjust or strict laws. For instance, merchants had to resort to piracy when China imposed a ban on overseas trade and travel.

⁹ Von Glahn, Richard, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700*, (University of California Press, 1996), 90

When the state extended their influence to gain greater control over trade and port cities, merchants resisted by turning to the practice of piracy to preserve their profits. They protected contraband and ensured that trade was carried out without any hindrance. Thus, piracy became a means of resisting authority and a sign of rebellion amongst the masses. As one Ming official who was charged with fighting piracy in Chinese waters observed: "Pirates and merchants are the same people. When trade is open, the pirates become merchants; but when trade is illegal, merchants become pirates. To start by prohibiting merchants is to end by struggling to contain pirates."¹⁰ The Ming officials comment perfectly summarises the paradoxical problem of prohibitions leading to even more disorder.

With enough successful ventures, pirates or people who engaged in piracy from time to time, could pool their resources to acquire better ships and equipment. Eventually, at times organisations emerged which coordinated activities, making acts of piracy more effective. Pirates often became powerful enough to enter into alliances or be recognized by the state. In other cases, they became powerful enough to challenge other states.

Pirates were especially numerous and powerful in South East Asia, often numbering in the thousands, the power of pirate leagues would even surpass that of navies. The pirates would govern themselves with their own rules, strike their own alliances with both local and foreign powers and maintain complex ties with land

based communities, financiers and officialdoms.

The exploits of Cheng I Sao, the most powerful female pirate in history, is an infamous instance of pirates forming a conglomeration capable of threatening other states, active in the 18th century. Initially a Cantonese prostitute, Cheng I Sao would delve into piracy after marrying the pirate leader Cheng I, who would later die in battle. Cheng I Sao would become the leader of a powerful confederation of pirates and establish the 'Chang Pao's Law' which would turn the relations between pirates into a more formal power structure. She would control the financial operations of her confederation and regularise protection rackets.¹¹

This confederation of pirates would reign havoc in the South China seas with complete impunity. The Chinese government was forced into a more diplomatic approach when they offered the pirates amnesty. An offer quickly taken up by Cheng I Sao with added benefits, such as being allowed to keep the proceeds of their exploits.

While Cheng I Sao's confederation cannot be considered a 'State'. The manner in which it was maintained and regulated is one of the most successful instances of pirates forming their own state-like structures. They certainly seemed to have achieved some semblance of recognition as the Chinese government themselves approached them for negotiations as equals. It also reveals how pirates could become truly independent by pooling their resources to finance their own activities. This method would stand in contrast to financial

¹⁰ D. D. Ho, "Sealords Live in Vain: Fujian and the Making of a Maritime Frontier in Seventeenth Century China" (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2011), 76.

¹¹ C.R. Pennell, *Bandits at Sea: a Pirates Reader*, (New York University Press, 2001), 259

dependence from outsiders which came with its own set of obligations.

One such pirate state was the Island of Kish located off the Southern coast of Iran. According to the accounts of the Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju, the commander or *Amirs* of this kingdom were among the most ambitious pirates of the Indian Ocean who preyed on rich merchant vessels.¹² In one particularly bold move, the *Amirs* of Kish demanded that the city of Aden, located in modern day Yemen, hand over a chunk of its city as a form of protection money. When the city refused the demands, Kish sent a fleet of 15 ships with the intent to raid merchant vessels of the port. However, their plan failed when a convoy of ships belonging to the powerful trader by the name of Abû'l Qâsim Râmish managed to fend off the attacks.

We see a similar level of power, influence and respect among pirates in the Indian coastlines. However, confederation of pirates in India were not as massive or formidable as those in SouthEast Asia, as we saw in the case of Cheng I Sao. In South India, piracy was hereditary and organised around politics of caste and on communal lines. This perhaps prevented pirates from forming larger alliances that extended beyond their respective communities.

One account of a confederate of pirates is given by an Arab navigator by the name of Ibn Majid warns travellers about the *al-Kabkuri* who reside between Koshi (Cochin) and Kulam. "They are a people ruled by their own rulers and number about a 1000 people. They operate

out of the backwaters of Kerala with small canoes."¹³

For many, piracy was a means of survival for those who were not properly integrated into society. For them, piracy was their last resort. Thus, locations such as the Kwangtung province in the South China sea which attracted delinquents would become hubs for pirates.¹⁴ Piracy presents an opportunity for smaller communities to be involved in a wider commercial world and make their mark on it.

European Era-

The arrival of the Europeans in the 15th century in the Indian Ocean greatly impacted the trade and economy of the Indian Ocean. The attempts of European colonists to control the commerce of the Indian Ocean would challenge the established norms and practices laid out by indigenous communities. It especially threatened the proactive role of traders and merchants in managing control over the Indian Ocean.

In the Indian Ocean, control exerted by states and kingdoms varied from region to region. For instance, in India rulers avoided deliberating or interfering in events which took place at sea, leaving it to merchant communities. A Gujarati ruler's statement encapsulates this when he stated that "Wars at sea are merchants affairs and of no concern to

¹² Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, (Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1992), 257–8

¹³ G. R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean Before the Coming of the Portuguese*, (Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971), 202

¹⁴ C.R. Pennell, *Bandits at Sea: a Pirates Reader*, (New York University Press, 2001), 257

the prestige of kings.”¹⁵ Simultaneously, rulers in China were more bureaucratic with little regard for trade by sea.¹⁶ Hence, we see periods of bans and restrictions to control trade. But, such prohibitions did not extend beyond the territory of each kingdom or ruler. The Europeans attempted to exert control over trade in the Indian Ocean on a scale previously not seen. They sought to exert their control in complete disregard of the sovereignty of kingdoms and in opposition to their established practices. Furthermore, it was the brutal methods of subjugation employed by Europeans which made them distinct from other conquerors of the region.

J. G. Lorimer and C. R. Low are two of the first writers to become interested in piracy. An explanation given by both of them for the rise of piracy in the 16th century is the brutality of the Portuguese.¹⁷ It was their excesses which led to many locals resorting to criminal activities. The Mapillah traders of Malabar notably continued trading in pepper and other products in direct violation of the directives of the Portuguese. In such cases piracy became a means of survival for traders who wished to continue trade practices they had performed for generations. European intervention in the internal politics of local states began to legitimise piracy as a means to push back

against transgressions of colonial powers. We can deduce another reason for the rise in accounts of piracy by looking at the European understanding of what constituted piracy. As far ahead as 1944, the Oxford English dictionary gave the definition of piracy as: Robbery and depredation on the sea or navigable rivers or by descent from the sea upon the coast, by persons not holding a commission from a civilised state.”

Afonso de Albuquerque, the terrible, the chief strategic mastermind behind the Portuguese expansion into Asia wrote to the King of Portugal in 1510 after the sacking of the Indian city of Goa. “I haven’t left a single grave stone or Islamic structure standing,” he boldly claimed. In another letter to the king, he wrote: “I tell you, sire, the one thing that’s most essential in India: if you want to be loved and feared here, you must take full revenge.” In another instance, Pedro Alvares Cabral was dispatched with a large fleet to the Indian Ocean. When the fleet stopped at Calicut in southern India on the Malabar coast in 1500, fighting ensued that killed over fifty Portuguese. In response, Cabral seized ten Arab merchant ships anchored at the port and killed over 600 of their crews.¹⁸

This understanding of piracy among the Europeans explains the rise of piracy and the accounts of Europeans of the Indian Ocean being infested with pirates. The term ‘civilised’ is quite subjective and this compounded by the Europeans belief in their superiority meant that almost every ship or association that engaged

¹⁵ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, (Harvard University Press, 2006), 44-45

¹⁶ R. J. Antony, *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Traders in the Greater China Seas*, (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 16-17.

¹⁷ Patricia Risso, *Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 295

¹⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, *How Portugal Forged an Empire in Asia*, *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2019. [URL](#)

in activities against their interests, regardless of whether they were officially aligned to a State could be branded a 'pirate'. We see this happening in the case of the Mapillah traders who were branded as pirates by the Portuguese. Thus, we see Europeans labelling a much larger number of people as pirates.

The above section of the essay explained how pirates were not always viewed as a scourge. Piracy was looked down upon, but not outright rejected. It was a viable source of income for people with no other recourse and a mercenary force for investors and rulers against their rivals. Sultan Husain of Singapore once said, what the Europeans called piracy "brings no disgrace" to a Malay ruler.¹⁹ This specific wording reveals how the Europeans understanding of piracy erred rulers in the Indian Ocean who for centuries had been relying on plunder to weaken rivals and gain more resources.

There was added confusion and even disdain from those indigenous to the Indian Ocean as Europeans and European colonists themselves engaged in plundering of rival ships. European States would licence private shipowners to raid the shipping of those considered enemies during times of war, which they deemed legitimate privateering.²⁰ The difference between pirates and privateers was not clear for the people of Asia. This confusion was

¹⁹ R. J. Antony, *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Traders in the Greater China Seas*, (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 19.

²⁰ R. J. Antony, *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Traders in the Greater China Seas*, (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 19.

made all the more worse when they observed the relationship between colonists and Atlantic pirates.

The period of 1716 and 1726 saw the rise in the activities of Anglo-American pirates, who would come to occupy a grand position in the long history of piracy in the ocean. The number of Anglo-American pirates, also known as Atlantic Pirates, numbered in the thousands. Their exploits were extraordinary and their plunderings were exceptional in both volume and value.²¹ Some of the most infamous Anglo-American pirates include Henry Teach (Blackbeard), Henry Every, William Kidd and Bartholomew Roberts among many others. These pirates were active in the Caribbean, United Kingdom, North America, West Africa and were now extending their influence into the Indian Ocean.

Pirates from the Caribbean and Atlantic entered the Indian Ocean in search of riches and more secure places of refuge. By setting up their base at Madagascar they began indiscriminately raiding ships in the Indian Ocean region.²² Saint Marie's island would become an infamous hideout for pirates of the likes of William Kidd and Henry Every. Each successful act of piracy and plunder made Saint Mary's island notorious and a subject of many plays, songs and stories.

The relationship between colonial powers and Atlantic pirates was not always hostile. Atlantic

²¹ Marcus Rediker, *Under the Banner of King Death: Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726*. (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1981), 203

²² J. L. Anderson, *Piracy and World history*, (University of Hawaii press, 1995), 192-193

pirates were often hired by European states or even given immunity as long as they pillaged and plundered the ships of rival countries. In the 17th century, pirates could find sponsorships in various English ports, where they could sell their plunder, encourage investors, recruit crews and purchase supplies. There were several pirates working from Saint Mary's island who hailed from Europe or worked for Colonial companies. The East India Company was known for purchasing pirate plunder.²³

The relations between pirates and European companies began to sour when the rulers in the Indian Ocean held the Colonial companies responsible for the actions of Atlantic pirates. The Mughal reaction to the exploits of Henry Every is one example of this.

Henry Every would gain great fame and fortune for his plunder of Indian treasure ships, the *Fateh Mohammed* and *Gang-i-Sawai* (Gunsway). The plunder of these two ships which would later return to the port in Surat, did not bode well for the East India Company. The EIC was attempting to establish itself within India, when rumours quickly spread of the killing of pilgrims at the hands of the merciless pirates. Surat's governor had to rally the troops to protect EIC officials from being killed by angry mobs. When news of the plunder of Gunsway reached the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb he denounced the English as criminals and sent his army to attack the English and seize company property.

²³ Jan Rogozinski, *Honor Among Thieves: Captain Kidd, Henry Every and the Pirate Democracy in the Indian Ocean*, (Stockpole Books, 2000), 89

Owing to the common ethnicity of Atlantic pirates and officials of European companies, Indians came to view the Europeans as pirates within Indian society as described in Bengali Ballards and Malayali chronicles. These setbacks were great losses for Colonial powers especially the East India Company who were losing out on the lucrative trading activity in the Indian Ocean.

This led them to push the British government towards taking action against piracy. This would lead to the formulation of "the Act for Preventing Frauds, and Regulating Abuses in the Plantation Trade" which differentiated licit and illicit maritime activities more clearly in 1696.²⁴ This would allow for a systemic imperial framework which would become even more profitable than illicit trade. With the imperial framework in place, colonies gained direct access to slaves from West African Markets. This was a far more profitable and safer endeavour in terms of legality to pursue. Due to this, Atlantic pirates found themselves increasingly ostracised from colonial ports.

In 1807, King George III signed into law the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. This meant that the environment of trade was poised for another radical shift.

The anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 was meant to regulate trade in the Indian Ocean and demarcate proper boundaries between the British and the Dutch. It included a clause committing both nations to suppress acts of piracy and wipe out slave trade in the Indian Ocean region. For the colonists, this treaty could be used to serve another purpose.

²⁴ David Wilson, *Suppressing Piracy in the Early 18th Century*, (Boydell Press, 2021), 50

Following the definition of piracy according to Europeans, any maritime conflict not authorised by European states could be regarded as piracy and suppressed. Thus, this treaty served to legitimise the colonists' attempts to challenge and defeat local potentates.

The treaty led to an increase in acts of piracy, due to which slavery in the region would not be eliminated. Various maritime peoples and states had been stoutly resisting the monopolistic trading practices of the European powers during the eighteenth century. The Sulu sultanate was the most successful in fending off European powers and maintaining their own trading patterns. For the Europeans, the Sulu Sultanate was the quintessence of "an Islamic world whose activities centered about piracy and slavery."

In another instance, the Angrian power established by Kanhoji Angria after being granted the command of Suvarnadurg fortress on the Konkan coast in 1688 was notorious for its strict system. Under this system all merchants were required to carry permits called *dastak* by Angria. Any ship that failed to produce this permit would be stopped and their goods and crews would be seized. This strict system did not exclude ships from other parts of the country, which were often seized for not carrying a permit. When the East India Company sought to ensure the protection of all ships carrying British passes, the Angria rejected their offer on the grounds that they were at war with the Mughals and so could not allow Mughal ships to pass. From here

relations between Angria and the EIC deteriorated.²⁵

Piracy remained a serious threat to the dominance of European countries in the region. The pirates led seasonal attacks on European and Chinese shipping by sending fleets of 'prahus' or traditional Indonesian boats, to outmanoeuvre the slower sailing merchant vessels of the Chinese and Europeans. Pirates were often an arm of local potentates, as Europeans challenged and encroached upon the dominance of these local potentates, the frequency of pirate attacks increased.

Conclusion-

We can gather from the information we have that pirates evolved over a period of time from economic actors to important political players that shaped politics in the Indian Ocean.

Before the 16th century, the pirates in the Indian Ocean oscillated between merchants and fisherfolk in one season and pirates in the other. Here piracy was an optional opportunity for greater profits and while it was certainly an epidemic, trade in the Indian Ocean continued. Piracy began as an endeavour by independent groups and with each successful venture, they gain access to better ships and equipment. With time and coordination an organisation can develop, turning piracy into a business itself funded by people on land.

By the 16th, a noticeable change occurred in the activities of piracy. By now piracy has become successful enough to develop into businesses large enough to not only enter into alliances

²⁵ David Wilson, *Suppressing Piracy in the Early 18th Century*, (Boydell Press, 2021), 268

with large states, but also attempt to form state structures of their own, leading to a larger number of incidences of piracy on a greater scale. The arrival of the Europeans worsened the matter as factions such as the Portuguese attempted to gain control of trade in the Indian Ocean region. This period also sees states such as the Ming Empire attempting to gain greater control over oceanic trade. These new developments encouraged acts of piracy to pushback against state control and as a sign of rebellion. Thus, piracy becomes far more politically ingrained than before.

The dichotomy between pirates and traders was not always apparent as the roles could easily reverse. Piracy much like other economic activities in the Indian Ocean, was seasonal and heavily dependent on the monsoon winds. So a person could be a farmer or merchant for one season and a pirate in the other. In many scenarios, piracy was seen as a necessary act and sometimes even encouraged. When rulers overstepped their boundaries and extended greater control over trade through taxes or banning of certain goods, piracy turned into an act of resistance against the state and many times against other foreign entities as occurred in the 19th century when European ships were raided by Indonesian pirates.

To conclude, pirates, traders and the state existed side-by-side and changed their allegiances depending on the times. Pirates in one respect acted as economic indicators as piracy would always increase alongside economic expansion. On the other hand, an increase in piracy is also a sign of economic dissatisfaction, a clear result of despotic control by the state over trade. From the 16th century, with the arrival of Europeans, more domineering states and other pirates from the

West, piracy in the Indian Ocean became more aggressive and politically charged.

Piracy in the Indian Ocean can only be understood if the preconceived notion of the act being committed by 'outlaws' who work against or act as barriers to the economic practices established by merchants and the functioning of the state is not used as the general rule and the idea of pirates being politically neutral elements as in the West is not appropriated in the Indian Ocean.

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