

Slavery and the Slave Trades in the Indian Ocean and Arab Worlds: Global Connections and Disconnections

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Servitude and the Changing Face of Demand for Labour in the Indian Ocean World, c. 1800-1900

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Abstract

Conventionally the history of servitude in the Indian Ocean world (IOW) has been largely limited to that of the east African slave trade and the African diaspora. However, any analysis of forms of servitude and the labour market needs to be framed within the wider economy. For the IOW, issues of servitude and labour relations need to be framed within the context of the IOW global economy that had emerged by at least the tenth century CE, linking the entire region from China to Africa. This system involved forms of servitude and human trafficking in which Black Africans probably formed a minority of victims. The IOW global economy remained vital during the nineteenth-century when the growth of a truly international economy created an unprecedented commercial boom in the IOW. This boom established a large and growing demand for menial labour that was difficult to meet for two main reasons: comparatively low and uneven demographic growth, and the tying up of the potential workforce in largely indigenous systems of bonded labour. Abolitionist pressure in the IOW was muted as the focus of abolitionists was on the Atlantic slave system, and European officials in the IOW were reluctant to attack a ubiquitous system that most regional elites held dear. They therefore perpetuated some traditional systems of bondage, and introduced new ones.