

Of Mollusks and Men: Diving for Pearls in the Indian Ocean 1850–1925

Tamara Fernando

Historians of the Indian Ocean have long argued that common networks of law, religion, culture, and credit are stretched across watery spaces, knitting disparate places together. And yet, in almost all these accounts, the sea itself remains timeless and absent of non-human life. For the most part, the Indian Ocean is described as a space for culture—not science. Moreover, there is no environmental history of the Indian Ocean to date, even though these movements of empires and their respective scientific-bureaucratic apparatuses shaped the seas just as they did human cultures. The larger goal of my research is to fill this gap. My work specifically aims at using the scientific archive to re-theorize the relationship of the ocean’s material and animate substrates with its human dramas, moving beyond anthropocentric visions of the past.

Pearls—the gleaming, rounded, naturally-occurring luxury gemstones that are derived from the ocean—are conspicuous objects. The sparkle of these commodities masked other elements of their extraction and production. This book recovers the transformations in the ocean’s submarine environments from which billions of oysters were lifted to meet the demand for pearls, as well as the work of thousands of men and boys who labored diving up to 30 meters underwater to find these mollusks. My present research project turns to the history of natural pearling to demonstrate how science, law, and the state, aimed to make the ocean’s shallow continental shelf, or foreshore, where pearl oysters lived, legible at the turn of the twentieth century. This project of “seeing like the sea,” however, was incomplete. Exploring this partial domestication of an oceanic environment gives us new ways to think about capitalism, labor, and resource extraction in the age of the Anthropocene.

My book manuscript, “Of Mollusks and Men: Pearling Labour and Environments in the Indian Ocean 1800–1925,” which I am writing as a Landhaus Fellow, is the first comparative and connected history of pearling in the northern Indian Ocean, including the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Mannar, and Southern Burma. It engages with well-established fields of labor and commerce, putting them into conversation with additional archives usually consigned to the history of science or environment, including studies on oyster reefs, preserved marine specimens, Tamil mathematical manuscripts, undersea maps, as well as photographs of *dhow*s [sailcraft] and fishery camps. By connecting the history of pearling with the history of science, I bring new actors, such as local pearl divers, to the foreground in terms of rendering the ocean’s material visible. Taking the history of the life sciences out to sea through the nascent and emerging disciplines of marine biology and oceanography requires reading across multiple kinds of sources and national boundaries. In turn, this offers exciting possibilities for writing about history across the Global South.

More specifically, my writing maintains that understanding labor, science, and law during the high imperial moment requires a transregional view. The manuscript is based on archival research across the Middle East and South Asia including in the Yangon National Archives, the Tamil Nadu State Archives, Maharashtra State Archives, Sri Lanka National Archives (Colombo and Kandy), Sharjah Maritime Museum, Qatar National Museum, Qatar National Library, Al Bushiri Archive, Abu Dhabi, and UK archives. I also rely on oral histories in Moken, Arabic, and Tamil to access life histories for non-textual communities. Rather than seeing the integration of the non-human into historical narratives as maligning maritime labor history, I view it as bringing us closer to the lifeworlds of those who worked underwater.