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British Empires: Imagining Indias
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Takeway 1

Janet Abu-Lughod, in “Before European Hegemony,” writes about the state of trade prior to European presence in the Indian Ocean system. Abu-Lughod divides the region into three primary circuits. The westernmost circuit is inhabited mostly by Muslim traders and spans from Arabian ports and interior capitals like Baghdad to Calicut. The middle circuit is mostly influenced by Hindu culture, but there are other connections as well. The middle circuit covered the Malabar Coast, the entirety of the Bay of Bengal, and even went as far east as Java. The third circuit had the strongest Chinese influence, with many states in the area being part of China’s tributary system. Despite very different primary influences within each circuit, cultural influences spread freely between circuits through ports and trade, and did not stay confined within one circuit.

Abu-Lughod asserts that the primary divider of these zones is not political or regional power, but weather systems that create these divides. Abu-Lughod also stresses the importance of maritime weather guides in creating travel itineraries for merchants moving between the three circuits. Ibn Majid’s writing is used as an example of what a monsoon guide may look like. However, the author notes that the guide does not include travel to China anymore, because Chinese seaports closed and were isolated from international trade.

David Ludden writes about mapping in relation to Asia and how mapping can gloss over disorderly spaces within our society (1058). Many people view the world through mapping, and when a space is conveyed only through a neat, orderly border, it can conceal migratory changes, cultural shifts, or even rebellious factions. Ludden notes that territorial authorities bury mobility inside territorial order. This burying of mobility can omit people and mobility from previous historical context and instead tie them to the new borders created by territorial authorities.

Unfamiliar terms:

- Emporia
 - Place of trade or a market. In this context, a port emporia would be a market connected to a port
- Beachhead
 - Foothold
 - Often used in a military sense
- Hinterlands
 - a region lying inland from a coast or remote from urban areas

- Straight of Malacca
 - Between the Malay Peninsula to the northeast and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the southwest
 - Connects the Andaman Sea to the South China Sea
- Disparate
 - Markedly different in quality or character
- Anachronism
 - An error in chronology

Citations:

Abu-Lughod, Janet L. “Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350.”

Ludden, David. “Presidential Address: Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1057–78. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3591759>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2026.