

# Anthropology Book Forum

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Pirates, Insurers, Traders, Diviners: Encountering Economies of Somali Piracy

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In the context of the intensified global circulations of people, commodities, and capital, *Captured at Sea* examines striking moments of contemporary rupture that have seized the global imagination and international headlines—Somali piracy and hostage-taking along the ample channels of the Indian Ocean. The rise of Somali piracy in the waters off the Horn of Africa between 2007 and 2012 represented a peculiar form of global interruption; rather than simply the seizure of cargo, whose value is limited to the cargo itself, the hijack-and-ransom of ships and crew instead generated millions of dollars of value through ransom, demurrage, and negotiation.

Through dynamic and original ethnographic work, *Captured at Sea* traces a host of actors ensnared by moments of pirate encounter, ranging from sailors and Somali kin networks to pirate syndicates, powerful insurance corporation brokers, traders of the stimulant *khat*, shipping conglomerates, militaries and state intelligence agents, NATO warships, post-9/11 private security contractors, South Asian *dhow* crewmen, negotiators, and diviners. *Captured at Sea* deftly illuminates how this multi-billion dollar economy of value emerges through a complex global web of liability that entangles transnational insurance industries, centuries-old Indian Ocean credit and trading systems, and globalized containerized commodity flows.

As anthropology experiences renewed interest in commodity circulation and theories of value in contemporary capitalism, Dua skillfully centers piracy as an aperture to examine how parallel, overlapping, contemporaneous regimes of value are forced into contact and fleeting moments of commensuration through ransom-based piracy, however incomplete. Central to the book is the concept of protection; in addition to contextualizing the practices of Somali pirates in a long history of pastoralism along the Indian Ocean coasts, the concept of protection analytically illuminates how the varied actors understand and legitimize their actions. Furthermore, tracing logics of protection through varied domains demonstrates how “otherwise quite distinct locations with different participants, histories, demands and infrastructures become legible to one another” and “transforms the story of piracy into an alternative form of connectivity and possibility” (21).

Each chapter focuses on a distinct albeit overlapping world, beginning with how Somali mobility at sea emerges in relation to social systems on land. We quickly see that Somali piracy is less a story of desperate ragtag handfuls of men making do with state failure, as popular media and academic accounts portray, but rather one that emerges from a long history of making livelihoods along the “pastoral commons” of the Indian Ocean and its coasts (44). *Captured at Sea* situates the intersection of long Indian Ocean trade histories and moral economies of social protection in Somalia in the wake of colonial and imperial social and ecological conquest. By tracing the transformation of property regimes through the colonial and postcolonial periods, piracy is contextualized as one competing mode of value capture and redistribution by multiple forms of authority, from colonial and postcolonial states to kin-based clan and lineage claims. It is this context that strong systems of kin-based *diya* groups organize unpredictability, accountability, and redistribution in Somali social life.

A focus on Somali social systems such as *diya* demonstrates the ways in which pirate sojourns and kidnap-and-ransom strategies actually require a relatively high degree of social stability to take shape and succeed. *Diya* mediates minor incidents between people, which we see operating in one instance in the book like insurance in a car accident, while also facilitating immense systems of debt, credit, protection, and adjudication between individuals and large groups of people. Along with *diya*, the book examines the adjacent East African *khat* trade, another significant economy of obligation that both anchors mobility while also being a space of “ephemeral opportunity and equally of ruination” (84). The buzz of chewing *khat* also facilitates

emboldening socialities between men, sparking and normalizing high risk-taking endeavors like ransom and capture on the seas. Indeed, the striking image of the Somali pirate that emerges in *Captured at Sea* is the figure of an indebted man, imbricated in systems of expectation and protection even before journeying out to sea, or in the words of one interlocutor, “even before a pirate leaves land he is already in debt. The supplies, the boat, the khat they chew, it is all owned by different people. Becoming a pirate is about becoming indebted. That’s why all these young men can never stop going to sea” (80).

As the ethnographic lens moves towards the world of counter-piracy and the shining corporate domains of maritime insurance agencies in London, the book turns its critiques towards imperial modes of controlling capitalist circulation and more recent geopolitical developments in the militarized infrastructures of the global War on Terror. *Captured at Sea* strikingly highlights the historical and contemporary conjoined relationship between sovereignty and violence in staking claim to the ocean and its profits. In its most recent iteration, counter-piracy initiatives enable the partnership of global insurance corporations and state militaries to claim legitimacy in regulating oceanic space and its commercial flows. Beyond simply being the interruption of global flows, Somali pirates skillfully force encounter, inserting themselves into transnational circuits of capital and forging new kinds of connectivity and claims to profit of multi-billion dollar industries. Of potential particular interest to contemporary anthropologists of capitalism is the book’s exploration of ransom market-making that carefully parses out the process of how intermediaries transform the practice of capture into a materialized ransom payment. Strikingly, ransom-and-capture is not a strategy that necessarily guarantees profit but secures a frame through which profit may be possible by forcing encounter. In this context, insurers, negotiators, and intermediaries do not simply mediate the market for ransoms; they create the possibility of the market itself, by enabling “an encounter between worlds that are in fact mirrored and overlapping” (123). In this sense, piracy forces moments of reckoning that generates value in its ability to qualitatively shift a regime of value, opening up new political claims and vocabulary that questions the validity of existing regimes of value.

Interrogating piracy through the lens of “economies of protection” moves beyond narratives of Somali state failure or exceptionalism, instead lifting the frame to incorporate a whole array of moving components and mobile actors – South Asian crewmen, post-9/11 American mercenaries, khat traders, state and corporate actors in the global War on Terror

security apparatus, shipping conglomerates, London insurance companies. The last chapter of *Captured at Sea* considers the intimate and fraught relation between Somali pirates and the South Asian *dhow* boat crew they often hijack as intermediary vehicles for accessing larger container ships. The unexpected intimacy of forced cohabitation amongst the hijackers and hijacked on the *dhow* creates a fragile yet dense daily sociality that involves sharing food, media, living quarters, and sea-faring skills, transforming both parties involved. These interactions, fleeting yet transformative, exemplify the acute contingency of the power of Somali piracy, which at once captured the attention and profits of the contemporary world's most powerful geopolitical actors while also being extremely precariously positioned towards the bottom end of global inequality. This sense of contingency and complexity is central to each chapter of the book, which illustratively interweaves accessible and gripping ethnographic work with long duree historical threads, genealogies of juridical categories, and anthropological theory, making *Captured at Sea* an engaging and rigorous example of contemporary ethnography of law and capitalism.

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