

Soqatra: South Arabia's Strategic Gateway and Symbolic Playground

SERGE D. ELIE¹

ABSTRACT *This article undertakes a critical retrospective of the symbolic appropriation process through which Soqatra was constituted as an imaginative geography, embodying the strategic desiderata of states as well as the ideational fantasies of men over millennia. The island's location on the threshold of continents (Africa and Arabia), and on a cardinal node on the sea-lanes linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and beyond, subjected its internal dynamics to the maelstrom of events in the larger world. Moreover, its physical isolation endowed it with an endemic biodiversity that has spurred reveries about the lost Garden of Eden, and made it a coveted haven for a mosaic of human aspirations. The article examines the strategic interests pursued, and the appropriating discourses deployed, by the European powers vying for political and economic hegemony at the different historical periods surveyed here: Antiquity, Portuguese, British, Soviet and the recent adoption of a United Nations-brokered environmental regime for Soqatra. Finally, it draws out the ramifications of this strategic entanglement and symbolic appropriation process on Soqatra's estimated 50,000 inhabitants at the present historical conjuncture.*

Introduction: In Search of the Real Soqatra

There dwells a people whose origin is still involved in myth, and of whose speech the true relations are undetermined, who, according to received records, having attained to some degree of civilization and embraced Christianity, have gone back from their advanced position to the lower state in which we now find them, and thus present to us a feature of exceptional interest in the history of mankind.²

The Soqatra archipelago is Yemen's ultimate frontier, dangling between the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula. It is an isolated speck of land that, when seen on a map, evokes the image of a doorknob to the *Bab al-Mandab*, the gateway to the Suez Canal, as it straddles the entrance of the Red Sea while simultaneously demarcating the beginning of the Indian Ocean in the Gulf of Aden. Soqatra is the largest island of an estimated 258 islands in the Arab Middle East that are dispersed throughout an area stretching from the Maghreb in the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. The archipelago's location on the threshold of two continents, and on a cardinal node on the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean,

¹ Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, UK; email: sde21@sussex.ac.uk. I wish to express my appreciation to the anonymous reviewers of *BJMES* for their useful suggestions, and to Jean Lambert for a thorough reading of the manuscript.

² 'Preface', in Bailey Balfour (ed.) *Botany of Socotra* (Edinburgh: Robert Grant & Sons, 1888), p. xviii.

meant that its internal dynamics were driven by the maelstrom of events in the larger world, and as such is derivatively constituted as a geographically and culturally hyphenated space. Moreover, its physical isolation as a landmass endowed it with an endemic biodiversity that has spurred reveries about the lost Garden of Eden and made it a coveted haven for a mosaic of human aspirations for centuries. Soqotra's strategic position in an area, which for centuries constituted the centre of international trade among the great empires of the East as well as between them and a then-backward West, has ensured its entry into the annals of ancient as well as modern history. Soqotra's entry into, and exit from, the historical archives followed an ebb and flow pattern, alternating between strategic centrality and peripherality, depending on the interests manifested by outsiders.

The sheer diversity and number of those who have had dealings on the island is most probably at the root of the uncertainty about, and thus divergent representations and interpretations of, the most basic features of the place, such as its name, origin of its inhabitants, the source of its language, nature of its economy, and its relations with the Southern Arabian mainland, among other aspects. The island's fluctuating political fortune and economic fate was linked to the succession of great powers that sought to use it as their dominion and to the values they attached to its strategic location or to the perceived commercial potential of its resources. This aspect has remained constant until today. Indeed, Soqotra's initial fame in the first millennium BC was due to its aromatic plants. The island's recent 'rediscovery' by the international community at the dawn of the twenty-first century is based on the perceived global significance of its biodiversity.

Soqotra remains a historico-cultural enigma, which has spawned a research cottage industry that has transformed the island ever since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a hypothesis-testing domain par excellence, in order to unravel its secrets, whether these had to do with its fauna and flora, or the origin of its people and their language, customs and livelihood practices, or the history still buried beneath its landscape. For the case of Soqotra presents a perplexing issue: namely, the relative absence, subsequent to a lengthy history of heterogeneous cultural and economic contacts with the rest of the world, of the benefits of such contacts given the low level of cultural and economic attainment of the population. This situation would suggest the case of a society that has experienced an evolutionary reversal: a kind of civilizational collapse, hence a relapse into a more elementary cultural state. Alternatively, it could be argued that these contacts were superficial at best, in that they did not permeate into society, thus no institutions were built to sustain any kind of internal development. More probable, perhaps, is that Soqotra was never endowed with a significant capacity to generate much of a material surplus—its legendary reputation as an aromatic cornucopia, notwithstanding—that could be transformed into capital for civilization building, or if it did have such a capacity, the surplus was siphoned-off by its political masters. As a form of compensation, however, its *exotica naturalia* seemed to have engendered a kind of ideational surplus in those who came in contact with it. In retrospect, it could be asserted that while Soqotra was spared a 'resource curse' and the economic depredation that this usually entails, it has had the mixed blessing of a 'symbolic curse', which has made the island a coveted object for symbolic encompassment.

Soqotra's encounter in the twenty-first century with an intrusive modernity through 'development' in the guise of environmental conservation and ecotourism will perhaps help to lift the veil on its enigmatic aura. Also, it might either confirm

or reject the legend concerning Soqotrans' indomitable spirit, and thus of the island as a graveyard for those outsiders who sought to rule it or develop it. The article undertakes a critical retrospective of the symbolic appropriation process through which Soqotra was constituted as an imaginative geography, embodying the strategic desiderata of nations and the ideational fantasies of men over millennia. Accordingly, it deconstructs the narrative of endemic utopia that has come to be associated with Soqotra by examining the strategic interests pursued, and the appropriating discourses deployed, by the European powers or their organizational surrogates, during five historical periods: starting with Alexander the Great's project of Hellenizing the Orient during the third century BC, then through the Portuguese mercantile exploits during the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth century, by way of the British empire building at the dawn of modernity in the eighteenth century, followed by the Soviet in the Cold War in the 1970s and finally the United Nations in the present era of development and environmental conservation. Lastly, it draws out the ramifications of this strategic entanglement and symbolic appropriation process for Soqotra's estimated 50,000 inhabitants at the present historical conjuncture. This conjuncture is marked by the central government's consolidation and modernization of the incorporation of the Soqotra Archipelago under the aegis of the Yemeni nation-state, and the deployment of an economic strategy that entails, in part, showcasing the island on the international stage as an environmentally and culturally unique sub-national entity.

History in Five Phases: Genealogy of a Process of Symbolic Appropriation

Its history has yet to be written, and must be compiled from references dispersed in a multiplicity of books and records, not so much in Arabic as in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and even Danish... It will be long before all significant allusions have been collected from chronicles, travel narratives, and the archives of European trading companies.³

As Beckingham noted above, the formidable task of shedding light on the period from fifth-century BC or earlier to the fifteenth-century AD through the collections of all 'significant allusions' that are free of 'legendary accretions' is yet to be taken up. Paradoxically, it is this very uncertainty about the 'real' Soqotra that has exercised a kind of symbolic domination over the imagination of men for more than two millennia, and has maintained its attraction until now. Indeed, Soqotra served as a vehicle for their projective fantasies: for the travelers—historians (really mythologists) in pursuit of the exotic to enrich their fantastic tales; for the merchants driven by their pecuniary imagination in search of tradable commodities; for the would-be conquerors seeking territorial expansion and possession; for the men of science (mainly naturalists doubling as ethnologists) groping for explanations as to the origin of man and the original location of the Garden of Eden; and last but not least for the men of a religious calling, imbued with a proselytizing urge, gathering converts for the kingdom beyond. All seem to have made their obligatory pilgrimage to Soqotra in search of their particular fulfillment. The renewed interest in Soqotra seeks, perhaps, to rekindle the island's power to mesmerize in the hope of appealing to the new breed of heroes of the post-modern age, namely the biodiversity conservationists and their relentless

³ C. F. Beckingham, 'Some Notes on the History of Socotra', in Robin Bidwell and Rex Smith (eds) *Arabian & Islamic Studies* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 172.

pursuit of ecological capital preservation, and the ecotourists and their search for re-enchantment through visual consumption of nature.

This process of symbolic appropriation followed, or at least resonated with, the changes in the dominant themes and perspectival prisms in the discursive registry of European powers during the different historical periods that marked the quest for oversea dominions. The mythological perspective constituted Antiquity's primary, if not sole, means of appropriating and making (non)sense of the world beyond its restricted geographical boundaries. That world was depicted through a phantasmagoric mythography—a peculiar combination of the factual with the fantastic in evoking images of places and describing peoples. The religious prism of the Middle Ages was an improvement of sorts, as it reified the animistic polytheism of the previous era into a monotheistic universe that was sharply divided into exclusive boundaries of faith, animated by a proselytizing urge. It was this faith-based cultural divide and its antagonistic spirit that constituted the optic through which the 'natives' encountered during the Age of Discovery were perceived. The scientific gaze of the modern era consecrated Europe's hubris in an exceptionalist doctrine, as it emerged from over a millennium of other-worldly miasma, that asserted the European *Homo sapiens*' primacy over nature and other peoples. A global social hierarchy, with Europe at its impregnable pinnacle, replaced the boundaries of faith. The current period, variously characterized as late or post-modern, witnessed the emergence and universalization of the secular millennial myth of progress, which incorporates elements from the above forms of knowledge. This secular cosmology was reified in the master trope of the twentieth century, namely 'development', which heralds a Eurocentric worldview, and purveys a melioristic social philosophy as well as constituting the only means of entry into modernity reserved for those societies described as 'traditional'. All these modes of discursive appropriation to be discussed below represent forms of knowledge that actively produced and reproduced spaces and places at the margins of Europe as an imaginative geography.⁴

I. Antiquity: Mythography through an Edenic Discourse

A kingdom of equality that knew nothing of private property.

This was the way Euhemerus of Messina (early fourth century BC) was reported to have described the island of *Panchaia*, which is said to refer to Soqotra, in his account of a voyage that took him through the Red Sea and to South Arabia. Thus, this paradisaical island represents one of the most ancient models of the utopian human habitat. Euhemerus was among the first to have used the Greek term *Arabia Eudaimonia* to characterize the geographical space occupied by Yemen today. This term, in its Latin form *Arabia Felix*, which meant prosperous, rich, well-endowed in natural resources, especially in aromatic plants, was to achieve indelible iconographic status with reference to South Arabia and Soqotra, and was invested with talismanic properties as well. In effect, Euhemerus seemed to have elaborated a theory on the historical interpretation of mythologies in his *Sacred History of Utopia*, which initiated a discursive tradition of paradisaical notations in which South

⁴ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Arabia and Soqatra in particular were seen as cornucopias of aromatic flora and fabulous fauna⁵, and as the location of the Garden of Eden.⁶

Indeed, the garden and the island became the two symbolic—or more aptly, totemic—forms that have proved central to the task of giving meaning as well as constituting an epistemology to the West's physical interaction with, and symbolic appropriation of, the natural world. These two totems became the pillars of an occidentalist imaginary that was used in the objectification of nature and otherness. As Richard Grove pointed out, this was part of a symbolic ecology in which the garden and the island were seen as offering 'the possibility of redemption, a realm in which Paradise might be recreated or realized on earth, thereby implying a structure for a moral world in which interactions between people and nature could be morally defined and circumscribed'.⁷ It is inadequately appreciated that this Edenic discourse, which was a complex ensemble of European, Arabic and Indian philosophical speculations, was recuperated later to serve as the progenitor of the Orientalism of the eighteenth century Romantic savants that was the discursive corollary of European colonial expansion in the East—albeit less enamored of gardens and aromatic plants and more enchanted by minerals and other commodities.⁸

The nature of the discursive practice that prevailed during this historical period was a form of incestuous borrowing and modifying of information without attribution, which constructed its object of knowledge in an allusive way. This bequeathed a puzzling intellectual legacy that has preoccupied successive generations of researchers on Soqatra, as answers to the most basic questions took on the character of solving a puzzle of a thousand fragments. Three fundamental questions about Soqatra have remained shrouded in mythical allusions, and the answers to which have guided implicitly or explicitly the research quest of men and women in many of the branches of the human and natural sciences. These three questions remain pertinent today, as the answers provided thus far have been, in Beckingham apt phrase, 'significant allusions contaminated by legendary accretions': what is the origin of the island's name, who are the original inhabitants and the source of their language and what did they do for a living? The brief account below does not attempt to solve the persisting puzzle about these three questions, but merely to highlight the ways in which some of the pieces were provisionally put together. Moreover, the concern here is not to ascertain the truth-value of the answers, as they can only be of relative plausibility, but to provide a partial inventory of what has been said.

Concerning the origin of the name of the island, clearly there cannot be a single source as the naming process was a complex mechanism that depended partly on which of the colonizing groups achieved economic, political and cultural hegemony at a particular historical moment. This led to a cyclical naming process that took the form either of corruption of the previously established name or the imposition of an entirely new name, according to the peculiar muse of the new occupants. King's philological deconstruction of the naming process as a form of symbolic

⁵ One famous example of this fabulous fauna from Soqatra is the mythical bird Phoenix, which arose from the ashes of aromatic resins. See a brief account in Herodotus, *The Histories* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 112. Its progeny in Soqatra today is called the Egyptian vulture, known as *Soido* in Soqotri, and it is a scavenger.

⁶ Maxime Rodinson, 'L'Arabie du Sud Chez les Auteurs Classiques', in Joseph Chelhod (ed.) *L'Arabie du Sud: Histoire et Civilisation*, vol. I (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 1984), p. 58.

⁷ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 13.

⁸ See discussion of Edenic discourse in Grove, *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22. For the broader history see Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

appropriation seems to provide a plausible account, as it suggests a hierarchy in terms of which appellation came first, which mirrors the succession in time of the groups that occupied the island.⁹ Accordingly, the Indian root of the name is given genealogical ascendancy. After all, Indians have been the peripatetic inter-regional traders as well as reputed predators of the seafaring vessels linking the Indian Ocean to the southern coasts of Arabia and the eastern coasts of Africa since the beginning of the second millennium BC. The original name of the island is presumed to be *Dvipa Sukhadhara*, which is Sanskrit, and when its roots are examined—*dvipa* refers to island, *sukha*, to happiness, and *adhara*, to support—they yield the meaning of ‘Island of Bliss’ or ‘Abode of the Blest’. However, in contrast to the Sanskrit derivation of the island’s name, Professor Walter Muller suggested an audacious hypothesis, namely that the radical letters *s k r d* derived from Old South Arabian script and perhaps were vocalized as *Sakarad*. According to him it is this version which constitutes the oldest source and the original form of the island’s name, and the island’s inhabitants adopted it when they migrated from the old kingdoms of South Arabia.¹⁰

In the case of the Greek name for the island, a brief historical context is necessary. When Alexander the Great (336–323 BC) initiated his project of Hellenizing the world by starting in the Orient through the conquest of Persia in 334 BC, he opened the floodgates of a mass emigration movement; where ‘thousands of Greeks swarmed out of their homeland... in hope of finding fortunes in foreign parts’.¹¹ In a story related by the Arab historian al-Masudi writing in the tenth century AD,¹² it was Aristotle, the tutor of Alexander, who appeared to have titillated Alexander’s interest in the Orient in general and in Soqotra in particular by referring to the availability and economic potentiality of aloes, which were used widely for medicinal purposes. Indeed, the island was supposed to be used as a plantation for aloes. It is reported that the Greek colonists, in their new vocation as aloes farmers, were handpicked by Aristotle and came from his native town.¹³ The veracity of these last details is opened to doubt, as it is suggested that the Greek colonization of Soqotra most probably took place later under the Ptolemies’s monarchy in Egypt in the third century BC. It is entirely plausible, indeed factual, that the Greeks did find their way to Soqotra,¹⁴ and it was perhaps in recognition of the Gods who protected them throughout their sea journey to the island that these colonists named it *Dioscuri*. The name refers to two Greco-Roman heroes, Castor and Pollux, who were worshiped by sailors as their protectors, because they had power over the winds and waves. Equally probable,

⁹ J. S. King, ‘The Aborigines of Sokotra: An Ethnological, Religious, and Philological Review’, *The Indian Antiquary* (July 1890), pp. 189–215.

¹⁰ In *Oriens Christianus* 85 (2001), pp. 139–161. I am grateful to Miranda Morris for this reference.

¹¹ William H. McNeill, *A World History*, 3rd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 151.

¹² Ahmed Ubaydli, ‘The Population of Suqutra in the early Arabic Sources’, *Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 1989, 19, p. 150.

¹³ On the basis of this story, the late Robert B. Serjeant added, without trying to promote, his own pet theory about the origin of the island’s name: ‘It is a curious coincidence that, though it is agreed that the name Socotra is derived from Sanskrit [...], the radical letters of Aristotle’s birthplace *Stagirus/Astaghara*, S T G H R, allowing for a simple metathesis and the very common interchange of the letters *gh/q* in Arabic, are the same as those of Socotra/Suqutra’. See his ‘The Coastal Population of Socotra’, in B. Doe, *Socotra: The Island of Tranquility* (London: Immel, 1992), p. 137.

¹⁴ By the sixth century AD the Greeks or their descendants were still there, according to Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek merchant later turned Christian monk in Alexandria, who recounted that, ‘I sailed along the coast of this island, but did not land upon it. I met, however, with some of its Greek speaking people who had come over to Ethiopia.’ See J. W. McCrindle, ed. *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1897), p. 119.

indeed more so, was that these colonists, as agents of their emperors' search for tribute-paying dominions, in their Hellenizing zeal corrupted the contracted version of the Indian name, *Diuskadra* and turned it into *Dioscorides* (or *Dioscorida*).¹⁵ It was under this name that Soqotra was introduced in the inaugural text of *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*¹⁶, which marked a turning point in the tide of commerce between the East and the West during the first century AD, as well as representing a departure from the prevailing mythological discourse, as it adopted a more descriptive factualism of the places visited.

In the case of the Arabic source of the island's name, it is attributed to a derivation of the term *Suqutra*, which is a contraction of *sūq al-qatra* and breaks down as follows: *sūq*, means market or emporium, and *qatra*, means drop: the market for drops. This designation seems most plausible because it is probably related to the fact that most of the natural products for which the island has been known for millennia (e.g. the resin of the Dragon's Blood tree, aloes, frankincense, etc.) were, and still are, collected through a bleeding process and emerge as drops from the trees or plants.¹⁷ However, the naming process did not end here, but changed its focus from symbolic appropriation of the island as a whole to territorial occupation of specific places within it. For example, in the sixteenth century the Portuguese attempted their own form of symbolic appropriation, in corrupting the name of the main village of Soqotra, 'Suq' (Shiq in Soqotri), as they renamed it 'Zoco'. By the nineteenth century, if not much earlier, Soqotra had a new wave of immigrants from the Gulf region. These immigrants were attracted by the island's potential for pearl diving and opportunities to broker the trade in ghee, then a major export commodity to these countries. These settlers, according to Western visitors unaware that Diodorus in the first century BC had called Hadiboh *Panara Tamara*, called their new abode Tamarida. It was hypothesized that the term was the Latinized version of the Arabic word for date, *tamr*. Nevertheless, the term aptly reflected the fact that the place resembled an enormous date plantation at that time and it seemed to have captured the imagination of these new settlers, as it was in sharp contrast to the desertic ecology they inhabited previously. Accordingly, the use of this name was restricted to the settler community, as the Bent observed during their visit in 1896: 'the present capital is called Tamarida by the Arabs and foreigners, and Hadiboh by the natives'.¹⁸ Finally, by the twentieth century the Soqotri term Hadiboh had prevailed, and appropriately so, as it referred to a protective spirit who dwelled in all the houses of the city, perhaps as a form of protection from future dispossession, symbolic or otherwise.¹⁹

Concerning the origin of Soqotra's inhabitants, again the *Periplus* was the source of the oft-quoted description of these inhabitants as follows: 'The inhabitants, few

¹⁵ See the comments and examples by J. S. King, 'The Aborigines of Sokotra', p. 189, on the propensity of the Greeks and Portuguese to corrupt Oriental words with which they came in contact.

¹⁶ As one of its many editors and translators explains, it was a guide for merchants and not seaman, thus was concerned with advancing the pecuniary interest of its intended audience. Accordingly, its 'emphasis is overwhelmingly on trading information, the products that could be bought and sold in each port' (Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 8). See Rodinson, 'L'Arabie du Sud', pp. 67–68, for a discussion of the divergent views on this text.

¹⁷ The spelling adopted in this paper is based on this version. It is not universally used, as can be seen in the use of 'Socotra' by the authors quoted here.

¹⁸ Theodore and Mabel Bent, 'The Mahri Island of Sokotra', in *Southern Arabia* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900), p. 391.

¹⁹ See Serge Elie, 'Hadiboh: From Peripheral Village to Emerging City', *Chroniques Yemenites*, 12 (2004) (available at: www.univ-aix.fr/cefaf).

in numbers, live on one side of the island, that to the north, the part facing the mainland; they are settlers, a mixture of Arabs and Indians and even some Greeks, who sailed out there to trade.²⁰ This rather cryptic reference to ‘settlers’ suggests that perhaps there were other inhabitants who were not settlers, but natives of the place. This would suggest the existence of unidentified aboriginal groups during the first century AD that dwelled in the hinterland, which the author did not visit. The scantiness of this description betrays an absence of anthropological curiosity in contrast to its expansive economic sensibility, as it compares poorly with the rich details concerning consumption items, names of ports and places with potential as export destinations; indeed, about everything that had to do with commerce.²¹ This tripartite characterization of the ethnic provenance of the island’s inhabitants surely must have been an approximate depiction of the ethnic variety present, as it was perhaps limited to the coastal inhabitants. For the central location of the island, and its use as an obligatory staging-post for traders of all seafaring nations in that part of the world, must have given rise to a promiscuous admixture of people. Nevertheless, this elusive reference in the *Periplus* was to generate much misspent ideational surplus in the reductionist enterprise aimed at assessing the anthropological formation of present-day Soqotrans, in order to determine which group could be considered the ‘core population’, which first settled on Soqatra and became aboriginal through isolation. Moreover, the reference to Greeks in the *Periplus* and elsewhere inspired the search for ‘white colonies’ or their archaeological remains that were imagined to have been established by Alexander’s colonists in Soqatra.²²

Associated with the search for the ethnic origin of Soqotrans was the need to determine the original carriers of the Soqotri language using the genealogical framework of language diffusion. Accordingly, there were attempts to establish a sequence of migratory waves to the island.²³ The result was a kind of paradigmatic tripartization of the inhabitants, in which the ethnic groups represented in the three slots identified in the *Periplus* have since varied minimally over time. The conundrum involved here is that Soqatra was, and still is, intrinsically a derivatively constituted socio-economic space, whose internal dynamics were impelled by the *événementiel* maelstrom of the larger world, and thus cannot be reduced to a hypothesis based on an orderly sequencing of population movement. Indeed, the island’s location within the path of the monsoon winds made it a seasonal destination, thus a temporary residence for most of its visitors, who correspondingly have incarnated various forms of vagrancy (e.g. occupational and spiritual) across many calendrical registers: BC, SA (South Arabian chronology²⁴), AD and AH (Islamic calendar). Accordingly, Soqatra became successively, and sometimes simultaneously, a haven for a human mosaic: migrant labourers to the incense fields from the Sabean Kingdom; aromatic plant cultivators escaping

²⁰ Casson, *The Periplus*, p. 69.

²¹ This absence is explained by the fact, as Casson observes, that ‘the raison d’être for [t]his handbook, is the trade in luxury goods for the Mediterranean world that was carried by on by the merchants of Roman Egypt’, *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² C. F. Beckingham, ‘North and North-East Africa and the Near & Middle East’, in L. E. Pennington (ed.) *The Purchas Handbook*, vol.1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1997), p. 225.

²³ See Antoine Lonnet, ‘The Soqotri Language: Past, Present and Future’, in Henri Dumont (ed.) *Soqatra* (New York: UN Publications, 1998), pp. 297–308.

²⁴ See discussion of chronological framework for ancient South Arabia in K. A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, part I (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994).

the fallout of the wars among the ancient kingdoms of the South Arabian mainland; Greek economic settlers escaping poverty in their homeland and later converting themselves into monastic Christian missionaries; Indian pirates raiding the ships traversing the Indian Ocean; Nestorian and Jacobite Christians from the Arabian Peninsula on proselytizing missions; Abyssinian Christians fleeing from the overthrow of their empire in South Arabia by the Persians in the sixth century AD; Islamic proselytizers from the Ibadi sect of Oman in the eighth century AD; East African indentured labourers and slaves; Omani sailors from the port of Sohar; nomadic pastoralists displaced by the internecine conflicts between the bellicose Sultanates of Hadramawt; itinerant peddlers of assorted goods from Europe and elsewhere; seasonal pearl divers from the Gulf turned permanent residents; Somali fishermen and stevedores; conquering Mahri tribes who finally installed the Bin Afrir dynastic Sultanate late in the fifteenth century that lasted until 1967; and so on.²⁵ This kaleidoscope of human contact and its corollary cultural mosaic constituted the interstitial space that spawned the diversity of the human phenotypes in Soqatra today, and which undermines the legitimacy of any genealogical reductionism.

What was the initial occupation of the islanders? When Diodorus of Sicily, writing in the first century BC, stated that Soqatra kept the entire world provided with myrrh and laudanum, among other aromatic plants, he was asserting a fact and not uttering a legend or, at least, not entirely. For Soqatra's aloe (*Aloe perryi*) 'was from very early times an important article of commerce, and was produced almost entirely on Socotra'.²⁶ By the first century AD the *Periplus* does not mention aromatics, but tortoiseshell as the chief export product that was exchanged with Arab and Indian traders for grain, rice, cotton cloth and female slaves. Nevertheless, the intriguing statement that 'At the present time the Kings have leased out the island, and it is under guard' would suggest that aromatic plants were being cultivated in large quantities in a plantation-like production system using slave labour.²⁷ This would be in keeping with the production system used on the mainland, which the *Periplus* describes as follows: 'The frankincense is handled by royal slaves and convicts. For the districts are terribly unhealthy, harmful to those sailing by and absolutely fatal to those working there—who, moreover, die off easily because of lack of nourishment'.²⁸ The image that emerges of Soqatra during the first centuries of the first millennium AD is that of an island prey to the economic competition between the Sabeian and Hadrami kingdoms in their quest for control over tradeable resources that were crucial to their political survival. Soqatra was a dependency of the Hadrami kingdom, whose sovereign leased the island, most probably to Arabs,²⁹ perhaps as part of a commercial arrangement that would guarantee a steady flow of revenues while being protected militarily from competing powers. The island, although very

²⁵ The information contained in this paragraph is a collage from all of the sources cited in this paper, in addition to Walter Dostal, 'Mahra and Arabs in South Arabia: A Study of Inter-Ethnic Relations', in *Arabian Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Ghul* (Jordan: Yarmouk University Symposium, 1984), pp. 27–36.

²⁶ W. H. Schoff, *Peryplus of the Erythrean Sea* (New York: Longmans, 1912), p. 129.

²⁷ Casson, op. cit., p. 69. Description of Soqatra (Dioscorides) is contained in paragraphs 30 and 31 of the *Periplus* (pp. 68–69).

²⁸ Casson, *Ibid.*, p. 67. One need not accept Casson's (*Ibid.*, p. 166) suggestion that this statement may be mere propaganda being repeated by the author of the *Periplus* that was put out by Arab traders to discourage competition.

²⁹ The suggestion that Roman traders from Egypt might have leased the island is rejected by Casson, *Ibid.*, p. 169.

large, was barren and damp, and had ‘no farms products, neither vines nor grain’. There were reptiles, among them huge lizards that ‘people eat their flesh and melt down the fat to use in place of oil’. This would suggest, assuming that these reptiles did exist, that the inhabitants were dependent on food imports to complement their diet, and it was this dependency that provided the incentive to participate in the local plantation economy for aloes and other aromatic plants. In addition to its local production, the island’s central location made it, if not an important incense production zone in its own right, at least a nodal platform for the transshipment of incense and other commodities. As one commentator explains: ‘The shores of the Arabian Gulf produced an ever-rising value of frankincense and myrrh; while the cloths and precious stones, the timbers and spices—particularly cinnamon—brought from India largely by Indian vessels, were redistributed at Soqotra or Guardafui [Somalia], and carried to the Nile and the Mediterranean.’³⁰

Archaeological research conducted in the twentieth century was to provide circumstantial evidence that: ‘The inhabitants of Socotra were farmers, working in conditions similar to a co-operative farm, whose produce was monopolized by the Hadrami Kingdom [seventh century BC to third century AD] on behalf of the temple dedicated to a moon deity, for trading purposes on the mainland.’ Seasonal migrant workers from Mahra in Hadramawt and the Qara mountains of the Dhufar region in Oman tended the trees and collected the resin. They migrated to Soqotra when the incense trade was flourishing between South Arabia and the Mediterranean.³¹ By the fourth century AD, demand for frankincense began to dwindle and the incense trade in South Arabia was in ruins by the sixth century AD. While some have argued that the demise of the south Arabian incense trade was due to increasing Greek and Roman mercantile competition,³² the main factor was when Christianity replaced paganism as the official religion of the Greco-Roman empire in the fourth century AD. This led to the discontinuation of the pagan rites that made use of aromatic resins. The officialization of Christianity gave rise to an early manifestation of Christian fundamentalism. Bands of monastic vigilantes rampaged through the streets of Alexandria and elsewhere, systematically destroying the pagan temples where such rites were practised.³³ In Soqotra this led to a demise of the plantation economy and its replacement with small-scale, individually owned aromatic plant gardens as a supplemental economic activity. The islanders who did not join the exodus of migrant workers had to rely on their own resources as fishermen, herders and date farmers, and some of the inhabitants retreated to the hills and mountains and gave rise to the troglodytic bedouins of Soqotra.³⁴

Finally, Soqotra seems to have always harboured foreigners—even if temporarily—as it remained a tributary of regional powers and was used as a garrison encampment, religious safe haven and trade outpost by occupiers from Abyssinia in sixth century, from Oman in the ninth century, if not earlier, and

³⁰ Schoff, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³¹ Brian Doe, *Socotra: Island of Tranquility* (London: Immel, 1992). See further discussion of archaeological research in section III below.

³² See George Hourani, ‘Did Roman Commercial Competition Ruin South Arabia?’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 11:4 (1952), pp. 291–295.

³³ For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150 – 750* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 96–112.

³⁴ By the 1970s a significant proportion of the population was still dwelling in caves.

again later from Mahra in the South Arabian mainland; not to mention the multitude of merchants who came to barter their goods for local ones. By the thirteenth century, when Marco Polo visited the island, or was at least told about it, Soqotra was an emporium with a colony of foreign merchants as brokers of trading activities, and incense was no longer the prized commodity. As he noted: 'There is a great deal of trade there, for many ships come from all quarters with goods to sell the natives. [...] They have a great deal of ambergris; and plenty of cotton stuffs and other merchandise; especially great quantities of salt fish of a large and excellent kind.'³⁵ Moreover, Soqotra had become an obligatory stopover for 'all the vessels bound for Aden touch this island'. More importantly, for future European occupiers of the island, was the fact that 'the people are all baptized Christians; and they have an Archbishop [...] that] is subject to the great Archbishop who lives at Baudas [Baghdad].' Soqotra's appeal to the Portuguese was based on the island's use as a regional trade mart and transshipment platform, and the potential alliance that could be formed with the inhabitants given their religious affiliation in their quest to control the Indian Ocean trade.

II. Portuguese Proselytizing Reconquest: Incorporation into a Global Mercantilism

In mediaeval Europe Socotra was probably more famous, even if not better known, than it is now. It was famous for several things, for its aloes, its dragon's blood, its ambergris, the proficiency of its inhabitants in witchcraft, and, perhaps above all, for the fact that they were Christians.³⁶

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, under the reign of King Manuel (1496–1521), Portugal was an emergent power; having established a beachhead across the Atlantic it was eager to pursue its expansionary adventure eastward. As the East had become the source of the most coveted commodities in Europe, namely spices (i.e. pepper, ginger, nutmeg, etc.). In effect, pepper, 'the substance of the Indies', replaced frankincense and the other aromatic plants constituting the 'gold of the East'. Indeed, pepper came to serve as money in parts of Europe, attaining a value equal to gold, and was used in the payment of taxes.³⁷ It was in this context that Soqotra made its return in the annals of the history of the 'Age of Discovery'. This was occasioned by the Portuguese attempt at establishing an organized network of maritime ports of call as military strongholds and trading-posts along the Southern Arabian and South-East Asian shores in order to increase their participation in, and if possible achieve hegemony over, the Indian Ocean trade. Given Soqotra's strategic location, it was coveted as a potential base from which to disrupt the trading activities of enemy vessels and thus control the lucrative trade in an area central to international commerce. It is worth noting that the imperial ideology of the day was steeped in proselytizing fervour and still imbued with a crusading spirit; hence Muslims were regarded as 'hereditary foes'. Indeed, one commentator explains what was at stake thus: 'Granted that the principal

³⁵ Henry Yule (trans.) *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, vol. II (London: John Murray, 1875). All the quotes are taken from chapter 32, 'The Island of Socotra', pp. 398–403.

³⁶ Beckingham, 'Some Notes', p. 172.

³⁷ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 236.

object of the Portuguese ambitions was the capture of economic supremacy and even the monopoly of the eastern trade, there was always an underlying emotional consciousness of a holy war.³⁸

The importance attached to the occupation of Soqotra is only partly explained by its strategic location. The more important factor perhaps was the assumption that Soqotrans, being 'Christians', would be natural allies, and the island would provide a safe base, in an otherwise hostile environment, from which Portuguese ships could attempt 'to close the Gulf of Aden to Muslim Commerce'.³⁹ Accordingly, Soqotra was assigned a pivotal part in a larger scheme that went beyond the mere re-conquest of Iberia from the Muslims by the Portuguese to encompass the destruction of the underpinnings of Muslim power, namely the Arabs' control of the Indian Ocean trade. As Serjeant⁴⁰ explains, 'Portuguese penetration into the Indian Ocean was no chance venture, but the result of long preparation and carefully matured plans.' Indeed, two such plans were concocted in the early fourteenth century: The first was by a certain Marino Sanuto, who proposed the establishment of an alliance with Nubia and the maintenance of a fleet to conquer all the islands in, and the coastal zone of, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Guillaume Adam, who was a French Dominican priest sent by Pope John III to Soqotra, where he stayed for nine months between 1313 and 1314, proposed another plan.⁴¹ It called for the building of four galleys to be used for blocking the Red Sea from Soqotra.⁴²

The order to occupy Soqotra was given by King Manuel himself, upon being informed that the Soqotrans were 'Christians who had lived there since the time of Saint Thomas'.⁴³ The expeditionary force that left Portugal in April 1506 was made up of 14 naval vessels and well over a 1,000 men, and was led by Chief Captain Tristao Da Cunha with Afonso De Albuquerque second in command. The latter was to be the leader of Soqotra's occupation. The expedition had the following mission: (i) to consolidate the Portuguese hold on southern India in order 'to prevent the Moors . . . from again becoming lords of the coast of Malabar'; (ii) to control the entrepot towns along the entire length of the South Arabian coast and the adjoining sea lanes from the entrance of the Red Sea to the Strait of Hormuz as well as the eastern seaboard of the African continent, from Mozambique to Somalia. Albuquerque was made responsible for patrolling the South Arabian coast, and was charged with occupying all of the major ports in that region. He was

³⁸ Robert B. Serjeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 2.

³⁹ Beckingham, 'Some Notes', p. 173.

⁴⁰ Serjeant, *The Portuguese*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Jaqueline Pirenne, *A la Découverte de L'Arabie* (Paris: Le Livre Contemporain, 1958), p.19.

⁴² Afonso Albuquerque, Soqotra's Portuguese conqueror, seemed to have entertained some grandiose plans of his own. One of his many hagiographers, Diogo Machado, explains them as follows: 'There were two actions suggested by the magnanimity of his heart which he was determined to perform. One was to divert the channel of the Nile to the Red Sea, thereby to render the lands of the Grand Turk sterile; the other to carry away from Mecca the bones of the abominable Mafoma [Prophet Muhammed], that, these being reduced publicly to ashes, the votaries of so foul a sect might be confounded.' Walter De Gray Birch (trans.) *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalbuquerque*, vol. I (London: Hakluyt Society, 1875), p. xli.

⁴³ Saint Thomas is the apostle who is reported to have converted the Soqotrans while on his way to India around 50 AD. The discussion that follows relies on Birch, *The Commentaries*, vol. I. The book is a four-volume chronicle of the Captain's voyages and exploits on behalf of the expansion of Portuguese rule in the Indian Ocean, and published in two editions, 1576 and 1774. It was written by Braz Dalbuquerque, Afonso's son, based on the latter's letters, 'collected from the actual originals written . . . in the midst of his adventures to the King D. Manuel', p. li.

to remain there for three years, prior to assuming the post of Governor of India;⁴⁴ and (iii) to occupy Soqotra and build a fortress, and a troop contingent left 'for the protection of the Christians'. Also, the island was to be secured as a winter harbour for the Portuguese ships in the Indian Ocean and to serve as a platform from which to interdict Red Sea traffic. The commanders of the above mission were instructed by the King 'to make stern war against and destroy all the kings and lords who [were] unwilling to be friends and tributaries'.⁴⁵ This usually resulted in a scorched-earth policy in non-Christian lands. However, Soqotra was to be spared such a fate. Almost a year after it had left Portugal the Portuguese fleet arrived in the bay of the village of Zoco (Suq) on the northern shore of the island. The fleet duly acknowledged Soqotra's special status: 'with flags flying from all the ships in holiday trim, they saluted the place with artillery, as it was inhabited by Christians'.⁴⁶

Contrary to expectation, it was soon observed that there was already a fort built with 'Moors' soldiers occupying it. This seems to have caused major consternation as it contradicted the King's information, which was usually accorded a certain infallibility and treated with great deference. Following a meeting of all the captains of the ships, a two-man delegation was sent ashore to offer an ultimatum to the fort commander to 'quit the fortress, and safe-conduct [w]ould be given to him and all his people to go to their own land'. That is, to return to Mahra, in the south east of mainland Yemen. Upon the refusal of the offer of mass emigration, the Portuguese resolved to wage a war of liberation against these Moors holding Christians in subjection. The battle lasted half a day, during which the Mahris put up a valiant resistance and Albuquerque almost lost his life. The fort was finally over-run, and most of the Mahris Killed.⁴⁷ This conquest was followed by an intriguing display of colonial magnanimity based on religious solidarity, due perhaps to a situation of mistaken identity, and which might have saved Soqotrans from ethnocide. The account seems evocative of an imaginative reconstruction of events and is recounted in a language of contrived theatricality: a verbal declaration was made to the 'Christian' population of Zoco⁴⁸ in which the noble intent of the King of Portugal was made known to them, namely 'to make a fortress for their safety, and that a captain and soldiers might be stationed there to defend them from the Fartaquins⁴⁹ and ships of the Moors'. In response, 'they came and cast themselves at his feet [of Captain da Cunha], giving him many thanks for the favour he had done them in liberating them from the thralldom of the Fartaquins, who so tormented them that, not content with being lords over all their possessions, they had even taken away their wives and children to make Moors of them'. Predictably, this unrestrained expression of gratitude was followed by a fervent request in which 'they begged he would deign to protect and defend them from such a bad set as these Moors were'. Captain da Cunha reciprocated with a request of his own: 'Since they were Christians, he begged they would kindly received the doctrine of Christ,

⁴⁴ During his tour of duty in the region, he was to effectuate many visits to Soqotra and her sister island Abd Al Kuri.

⁴⁵ Birch, *The Commentaries*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Birch, *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ The description of the battle is spread over eight pages of *The Commentaries* (pp. 45–52).

⁴⁸ It is not made clear how the Christians were differentiated from the non-Christians.

⁴⁹ So-called because they are presumed to come from Ras Fartak, a promontory, situated in Mahra.

and learn the ceremonies of our church, which they had already *long ago forgotten*.⁵⁰ The task of assisting them in reclaiming their Christian faith was given to Father Antonio, member of the expeditionary force, who preached and baptized them.⁵¹ Subsequently, the fort was rebuilt and named St Miguel, and the mosque converted into a church that was named Our Lady of Victory. Da Cunha left for India and Albuquerque was put in charge of laying the foundation of a colonial administration in Soqotra. He ‘began to turn his attention to the affairs of the land, and divided the palm-groves, which the Moors had there, among the native Christians, and those which belonged to the mosque he now gave to the churches’.

This Solomon-like redistribution of property as a means of redressing a wrong was perceived as a form of arbitrary dispossession of one group of locals in favour of another that was more willing to collaborate with the occupation. The resentment generated by this decision was to undermine collaboration, as the troops left behind in the fort after Albuquerque’s departure for the Strait of Hormuz,⁵² had to resort to eating palm rind and the occasional goat they manage to steal, as the natives seemed to have deserted the village of Zoco and failed to fulfil their promise to provision the troops. Upon Albuquerque’s return eight months later he embarked on a murderous rampage and imposed a punitive ransom⁵³ that could not have improved relations. The Soqotrans’ passive resistance, coupled with an inclement weather and a chronic insufficiency of supplies, gradually undermined the will of the Portuguese to pursue their ill-fated search for communion with fellow Christians. The Portuguese withdrawal from Soqotra in 1511 was not voluntary, due to the chronic non-cooperation of Soqotrans, as we are led to believe by the Portuguese historian Castanheda’s explanation: ‘The people of the country were generally more friendly to the Moors than to us and often revolted when the Moors made war.’ According to the Yemeni chronicler Shanbal, they were forced out following a battle led by the two sons of the Mahri fort commander slain at the time of the invasion.⁵⁴ The Portuguese failure in Soqotra led to their targeting Aden as an alternative base. Albuquerque launched an attack on Aden in 1513. One chronicler of the event, with a ken for hagiography,⁵⁵ describes it as follows: ‘He failed to reduce Aden, but he put such fear into the Sultan of Egypt, who had never seen a hostile fleet in his waters, that

⁵⁰ Birch, *The Commentaries*, p. 54, emphasis added. This phrase betrays the fact that what the Portuguese were looking at was a form of religious syncretism that had only an imagined resemblance with Christianity. More interesting is that the account seems to confirm that Soqotra had remained a multifaith community that was a tributary of Mahra, and was politically managed by a pact between the Muslims as political masters and non-Muslims as protected minorities. The presence of the fort and the troops were to enforce the payment of the *Jizya*, and to protect against invaders, and not to prevent visitors such as Christian missionaries. This arrangement seemed a continuation of the *sulh* (agreement) initiated in the eighth century AD, when Soqotra was colonized by Oman under the first Ibadī Imam Julanda ibn Mas’ud (751 AD). For an interesting discussion of this political arrangement, see J. C. Wilkinson, ‘Oman and East Africa: New Light on Early Kilwan History from the Omani Sources’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14:2 (1981), pp. 272–305 (especially pp. 275–281).

⁵¹ Birch, *op.cit.*, pp. 53–54.

⁵² Albuquerque acknowledged the crucial contribution made by a Mahri pilot: ‘this Moor was a great pilot for that coast, and gave him a chart of all those parts of the Kingdom of Ormuz’. Birch, *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵³ A yearly payment of ‘six hundred head of sheep, and twenty cows, and forty bags of dates’, *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁴ Serjeant, *The Portuguese*, p. 46.

⁵⁵ This was a widely shared propensity, and very much in evidence in Albuquerque’s English translator, for whom he was the ‘Caesar of Portugal . . . whose deeds of martial valour, whose intrepid spirit, whose kingly aptitude for supreme power . . . [and] his especial genius for widely spread conquest’ commended him to his readers (*Ibid.*, pp. ii, xviii, xxi).

the latter remained henceforth on the defensive. Albuquerque called it “the greatest blow in the house of Mohammed for a century”.⁵⁶ However, Portuguese ships continued to call for water and shelter, although more haphazardly, and Christian missionaries continued to visit the island, unimpeded by the Muslims guarding the island. A Carmelite priest, Padre Vincenzo, who visited the island in the seventeenth century observed: ‘The people still retained a perfect jumble of rites and ceremonies, sacrificing to the moon, circumcising, and abominating wine and pork. They had churches called *moquame* [...] and] the priests were called *odambo*.’⁵⁷

With missionary zeal the Portuguese episode heralded the entrance of Europe in that part of the world, which entailed the incorporation of countries and continents into a globalizing trading system that shifted permanently the balance of power from the Orient to the Occident. Soqatra was among the first places in the East to experience a foretaste of this emergent system. In spite of the Portuguese brief historical interlude it is presumed to have bequeathed a cultural legacy to the island, which seems to have constituted an intellectual frame of reference for subsequent Western visitors and researchers. In effect, it has rekindled the dying embers of the Greek heritage through the infusion of Portuguese blood and culture, thus perennating the search for traces of European ethnicity and civilization. In sum, the Portuguese are credited with having had a transformative impact on the island⁵⁸ which had the following effects: (a) the landscape is said to be filled with remnants of their presence in the form of forts and churches in addition to Greek temples—these remnants were to occasion the archaeological missions of the early twentieth century. (b) The Soqotri language was thought to owe many aspects of its peculiarity to Portuguese influences. To this fiction was added speculations about Greek origin of the language.⁵⁹ This has led, through a complex web of associations, to a persistent belief among Yemenis, about the Soqotri language being a foreign import, and among an increasing number of religiously minded Soqotrans it is seen as a remnant of Soqatra’s pre-Islamic (*jahiliya*) period. (c) Inhabitants of certain parts of the island (e.g. the Shilhal tribe in Momi in the East) are thought to be descendants of the Portuguese. This allusion continues to be reiterated by the islanders as a mark of distinction. It also spawned the search for ethnic origins of the inhabitants as every visitor to the island, with unflinching consistency, was to proffer his/her own typology. This typologizing imperative amounted to a racial stratification and classification scheme based on physical features and skin pigmentation, and was reified into a kind of biological foundationalism by a team of Russian researchers in the 1980s. (d) Finally, the encounter with the Portuguese is claimed to have initiated the Soqotrans’ ‘first contact with modern ideas’.⁶⁰

This last assertion is, of course, a hyperbolic one, given the brutal disposition of the Portuguese and the provincial, otherworldly ideological justification of their imperial enterprise. This makes sense only in the context of a persistent and competitive claim making the symbolic primacy of one cultural-religious heritage

⁵⁶ E. Prestage, *The Portuguese Pioneers* (London: A&C Black, 1933), p. 298.

⁵⁷ Yule, *Marco Polo*, p. 402. Subsequent travelers were to encounter only the artifactual remains, but not living practitioners, of this religion.

⁵⁸ See Balfour’s (1888, op. cit., p. xxv) speculative appreciation of the Portuguese legacy on Soqatra.

⁵⁹ Bent, ‘The Mahri Island of Sokotra’, pp. 343–398.

⁶⁰ Bent, *Ibid.*, p. 380, and Georg Schweinfurth, ‘Recollections of a Voyage to Socotra. 1881’, in Doreen and Leila Ingrams (eds) *Records of Yemen*, vol. 4 (London: Archives Edition, 1993), pp. 187–204.

over another. In fact, Soqotrans would have to wait another century to come into contact with modern ideas, and only superficially so, when the British deployed the rhetoric of science and the use of new transport technology, and of large-scale organization as the basis of their colonial empire.

III. British Research Station: Integration into an International Environmentalism Discourse

The commercial and utilitarian purposes of European expansion produced a situation in which the tropical environment was increasingly utilized as the symbolic location for the idealized landscapes and aspirations of the western imagination.⁶¹

The initial British encounter with Soqotra was a rather haphazard one when it took place in the seventeenth century, following Queen Elizabeth's grant of a monopoly to the East India Company to trade beyond Africa. This allowed the Company to venture into the Indian Ocean in search of new markets, nearly 100 years after the Portuguese made their initial incursion in the area. In April 1608, when the first British East India Company ship reached Soqotra, it was to be a brief stopover in order to merely inquire from its inhabitants about how to reach Aden, the preferred destination. According to Geddes, the British did not know how to reach Aden. However, as of that date Soqotra 'was to become to the English merchants . . . a standard port of call for the purchase of the island's chief export, the Soqotra aloes, and a supplier of meat and fruit en route to the ports of the Red Sea and the western coast of India'.⁶² Sir Thomas Roe,⁶³ who visited the island in August 1615, recommended that it not be used as a port of call for the following reason: 'At Socotra the victuals is both carrion and dear as in England, the water far to fetch and dangerous, so that every fleet had lost some men in rolling it down a stream full of deep holes.'⁶⁴ His advice seems not to have been heeded, partly because of the availability of aloes, which was being bartered for foreign goods. At the time of Roe's visit the Sultan had 'all the year's aloes ready, and in great quantities'. By the early 1800s the British sought to establish a more permanent presence on the island, motivated by the economic prerequisites of the changing nature of international commerce, characterized by the transition from a mercantilist to a colonialist mode of economic exploitation and an imperial mode of political domination. This period represented a continuing evolution in the global trading system initiated by the Portuguese and of its consolidation into a

⁶¹ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, p. 3.

⁶² Charles L. Geddes, 'An Account of Socotra in the early 17th Century', *University of Colorado Studies in History*, 3 (1964) p. 70. An interesting incident occurred there, which seemed to have led the British to establish a trading post in 1618 in Mokha on the Red Sea coast of Yemen, in order to participate in the coffee trade. Aboard the ship there was a merchant named William Finch, who remained on Soqotra for over three months, prior to continuing to India. According to Geddes, (*Ibid.*, p. 72). 'His description is not only the earliest made by an Englishman but is also the most complete for the entire century.' In his journal Finch described the peculiar coffee drinking habit of Soqotrans. It was 'the first mention of it [coffee] in the records of the East India Company'. The British East India Company appears to have discovered the existence of coffee through the 'ethological' account of Soqotrans drinking the brew.

⁶³ He was the first Royal ambassador selected by King James at the request of the East India Company to negotiate a trade agreement with the Great Mughal of India in an attempt to break the monopoly of the Portuguese.

⁶⁴ William Foster, (ed.), *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-19* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 24.

global regime of production based on modern technology of transport (i.e. the use of steam navigation and the corresponding need for coaling depots) to conquer the distances separating the far-flung outposts of empire, and the expanded use of state-sponsored trading companies to exploit more effectively economies of scale. The role of Soqatra in this context is explained by Captain Haines: 'A direct communication by steam being the anxious object of the Supreme Government of India, it was considered probable that Sokotrah might answer as a depot. I was, consequently, sent on a mission to Kishin to obtain the island by purchase.'⁶⁵ The Sultan of Mahra rebuffed his offer of 10,000 German crowns in 1834. However, as one official report explained, 'the Government of India, anticipating no difficulties in the matter, sent a mixed detachment of European and Native troops to take possession'. The troops remained until November 1835. British interest flagged for a while until other European powers began to show interest in Soqatra. The catalyst was the Italian government's expression of interest to acquire the island in 1871. This occasioned a flurry of correspondence between Calcutta, Bombay and Aden that culminated into an urgent telegram in 1876 instructing to 'lose no time in concluding negotiations about Socotra'. Having lowered their ambition from purchase to lease, the British found a more accommodating Sultan who signed a protection treaty in 1876 for a yearly subsidy of 360 dollars and a lump sum payment of 3,000 dollars.⁶⁶ The island's status was upgraded when Mahra was incorporated in 1886 as the first member of what was to become the East of Aden Protectorate. The exertion of imperial might, however, did not lead to a commensurate economic reward.

The British encounter with Soqatra did not result in what was the norm elsewhere, namely the imposition of the colonialist mode of economic exploitation. Instead, it had a more benign outcome: it made the island safe for scientific research. This was not by design, but by default. As Theodore and Mabel Bent,⁶⁷ following their hypothesis-testing trek around the island in 1896 in search of traces of the Himyaritic civilization, were to observe later: 'It is undoubtedly a providential thing for the Soqotran that his island is harbourless, that his mountains are not auriferous, and that the modern world is not so keen about Dragon's Blood, [. . .] frankincense and myrrh, as the ancients were.' Indeed, the purpose of the first inland scientific expedition by the British in 1834 was to determine whether there was a harbour and how auriferous was the island's soil. It was only after the failure of the search for coal, and of the island's unsuitability as a coaling depot, that Soqatra was relegated as a potential laboratory for the scientific investigation of the man–nature dialectic in the nineteenth century, and for which it maintained the curiosity of many throughout the twentieth century and beyond. The search for resources was confided to James Wellsted, a Lieutenant in the Indian Army employed by the East India Company to conduct a survey of Soqatra. His mission to Soqatra, as dictated by his superior at the Company, was contained in the terms of reference, which read as follows:

It being the wish of the Government to obtain all possible information regarding this island not only as to its correct geographical position and harbours but its government,

⁶⁵ Stafford B. Haines, 'Memoir of the South and East Coasts of Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 15 (1845) p. 107. Kishin was the main village of Mahra, which had jurisdiction over Soqatra.

⁶⁶ For all the correspondences regarding this incident see Doreen and Leila Ingrams (eds) *Records of Yemen*, vol. 4 (London: Archives Edition, 1993), pp. 160–185.

⁶⁷ Bent, 'The Mahri Island', p. 394.

population, produce, fertility and quality of its soil as well as the religion, customs, manners, power and wealth of its inhabitants you are hereby directed for the purpose of more correctly ascertaining the latter to travel... Any information you may be able to collect either in geography, botany, zoology, indeed any science that may assist us in a thorough knowledge of the island and its productions will be of utmost service.⁶⁸

Clearly, Wellsted's mission literally was to lift the veil of myths that have shrouded Soqotra and to pierce through its mysteries with the empirical gaze of science. Mindful of his scientific responsibility to discredit the kind of discursive mixture of projective fantasy and empirically superficial observations that was concocted by travelers from Antiquity up to his time, he observed, 'Notwithstanding these several visits our accounts of the inhabitants, and of the appearance and produce of the island, have been always hitherto vague and contradictory.'⁶⁹

The publication of the account of his mission to Soqotra constituted a kind of inaugural research agenda-setting document. His account ranged over a number of topics with an economy of detail sufficient to arouse the diverse scientific interests of his countrymen and of others in Europe. All the scientific missions that succeeded Wellsted's have made obligatory reference to his account, and most have sought to retrace his path in order to confirm or reject his findings as well as to expand upon them. The reception of the report as the referential framework for subsequent scientific endeavours in Soqotra cannot be attributed solely to the novelty of the information, and thus the revelatory value, of the report but to the auspicious convergence of events, as captured in the epigraph above, which enabled the emergence of an intellectual sensibility *vis-à-vis* the environment. It was a kind of conjunctural *gestalt*, a type of intellectual ecology, which encompassed the following dimensions: an economic pragmatism characterized by a prescient realization that the globe's biological resources were the commodities of the future; a scientific idealism based on the deployment of scientific means to recuperate knowledge of the historical past or to uncover nature's hidden knowledge for the sake of advancing civilization; a political liberalism inspired by an acute awareness of European-caused degradation of the tropical environment, and couched in a new environmentalism as an oppositional discourse to colonial rule; and an intellectual romanticism driven by the desire to preserve environmentally and culturally pristine abodes in a quickly disappearing pre-capitalist present in the face of the advancing colonial juggernaut. This intellectual predisposition resonated with the Edenic discourse of Antiquity, and it found in Soqotra an accommodating context in which to engage in the pursuit of a multiplicity of scientific interests. In effect, Wellsted's terms of reference seemed to be a product of that conjunctural *gestalt* and its contents have maintained their pertinence, as they seemed to have guided, almost teleologically, all the research missions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In that context, the particular emphasis on botanical research as part of the scientific expeditions to Soqotra during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not a mere coincidence. During that period, botanical surveys were the most prevalent form of research both in terms of frequency and numbers of botanists involved. Indeed, the 48-day expedition by Dr Isaac Bailey Balfour of

⁶⁸ S. B. Haines, J. R. Wellsted and C. Cruttenden, 'Surveys of the Island of Socotra—1834–35', in D. and L. Ingrams (eds) *Records of Yemen*, vol. 1 (London: Archives Edition, 1993), pp. 617–704.

⁶⁹ James R. Wellsted, 'Memoir on the Island of Socotra', *Journal of Royal Geographic Society*, 5, (1835) p. 132.

Glasgow University⁷⁰ which was sponsored by, among others, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, seems to have catalogued over three-quarters of the plant species on the island. The sponsorship was not motivated entirely by purely academic interest. Indeed, according to Brockway, from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries, British botanical gardens were organized into a network dedicated to a form of 'botanical imperialism'. In that system the botanical garden, as an institution of scientific research, was the handmaiden of the colonial economy of empire based on a worldwide network of plantations. Its role, through its corps of scientists, was the collection and cataloguing of plant species from around the world and their development into improved species, which were transferred subsequently to colonial plantations for their commercial exploitation.⁷¹ In fact, Carl von Linnæus (1707–1788), the Swedish naturalist known as the father of botany, exemplified the economic pragmatism that informed scientific pursuits at an even earlier period, as he personified the Enlightenment natural philosopher and the Cameralist government adviser, for whom botany was a syncretic new science encompassing an epistemology and a technology. For botany was to provide the foundation of an import substitution strategy as part of Sweden's national economic policy. Floral transplants from the tropics were to be adapted to the Nordic climate through a gradual process of acclimatization. If successful, this would render Sweden self-reliant in key agricultural produce and obviate the need to pursue military conquest of tropical tributaries to procure them.⁷² Earlier in his career, a director of the Dutch East India Company recruited him to oversee his botanical collection and garden.⁷³ This represented the 'first alliance between naturalists attempting to incorporate organisms in global classificatory schemes and the progenitors of enterprises which were becoming increasingly global in their commercial outlook'.⁷⁴ This global outlook was an imperative of the global production system, which spawned a collective interest in the search for an appropriate framework for the systematic classification of all the world's fauna and flora. This was facilitated, if not generated, by the involvement of the East India Companies (English, Dutch and French).⁷⁵ The end result was the ultimate transformation of natural history from an intellectual activity pursued by enthusiastic amateurs into a scientific undertaking global in scope, carried out by trained professionals employed by state institutions and trading companies. For both the State and trading companies, 'the

⁷⁰ There is a remarkable similarity in terms of professional interest and provenance between Dr I. B. Balfour (1853–1922) to his precursor, if not relative, Dr Edward Green Balfour (1813–84), who was a leading advocate of a radical environmentalism in India. This similarity confirms the portrait of the early environmentalists from the United Kingdom painted by Grove (*Green Imperialism*, p. 11) as follows: They were 'Scottish scientists employed by the East India Company... mainly medical surgeons trained in the rigorous French-derived Enlightenment traditions of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen universities. They were especially receptive to a mode of thinking which related the multiple factors of deforestation, water supply, famine, climate and disease in a clear and connected fashion.' Incidentally, I. B. Balfour botanical expedition to Soqatra led to a dissertation on the phanerogamic vegetation of the island for the MD degree in 1883.

⁷¹ Lucile H. Brockway, 'Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens', *American Ethnologist*, 6:3 (1979), pp. 449–465.

⁷² For an interesting account of this aspect of Linnæus's life, see Lisbet Koerner, 'Linnæus' Floral Transplants', *Representations*, 47 (1994), pp. 144–169.

⁷³ It was an opportunity for which Linnæus was extremely grateful and seems to have contributed to his scientific *épanouissement*, and thus to the furthering of botany as a science. See the exuberant acknowledgement by Linnæus in Grove, *Green Imperialism*, p. 312, n. 8.

⁷⁴ Grove, *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁷⁵ For the case of the French, see Michael Osborne, *Nature, the Exotic, and the Science of French Colonialism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994).

collection of globally derived material on a systematic basis had a strategic and commercial attraction'.⁷⁶

In the case of Soqotra, botanical research was a pre-commercial form of bio-prospecting and was pursued as part of a benevolent crypto-colonial discourse because, in contrast to other places, the synergy generated by this particular instance of the fusion of science and commerce did not lead to any financial reward, but did accumulate a substantial body of natural science information.⁷⁷ Pecuniary concerns aside, the intellectual predisposition discussed above generated interest in other domains animated, however, by an unrestrained romance with the pristine: the eccentric antiquarian travellers engaged in the exploration of the interior landscape for the vestiges of the past. The dedicated naturalists—ethnologists embarked upon their scientific expeditions to survey the fauna and flora as well as the inhabitants' customs, and the Orientalist—philologists sought to decipher the list of 236 words Wellsted had collected of a hitherto unknown language, namely Soqotri.⁷⁸ It was the first time that Soqotri, part of a group of six languages known as the Modern South Arabian Languages, was brought to the attention of modern Orientalists. This discovery led to the *Sudarabische Expedition*, a multidisciplinary mission by members of the Imperial Academy of Sciences of Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century. It resulted in a number of seminal publications, including the *Mahri–Soqotri Lexique* by Muller in 1905 and later the Soqotri dictionary by Leslau in 1938.⁷⁹ Worthy of note is the obsession with the discovery of a past European presence. Indeed, the latter became persistent 'romantic daydreams among the more fanciful antiquaries' of the nineteenth century, and of the professional archaeologists in the twentieth century, as they searched for 'the survival of vestigial Christianity among its people' and the remains of its physical evidence on Soqotra's landscape, in the form of churches, in addition to Greek temples. This is best exemplified in the following sentimental confession by Lord Rennell: 'One subject near to my heart is that of trying to ascertain whether or not there are traces of either Greek or Roman settlement and occupation.'⁸⁰ In fact, one of the main goals of archaeological research was to confirm or reject the civilizational collapse that is assumed to have taken place in Soqotra, given its elementary state of cultural development which was, and still is, in stark contrast with what the accounts from Antiquity, and since, have led researchers to believe.

This goal was the guiding thread of the most extensive, although not the first or the last, archaeological excavation. Brian Doe,⁸¹ a British archaeologist, carried it out in

⁷⁶ Grove, *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁷⁷ See Michael D. Gwynne, *Soqotra: A Bibliography* (Edinburgh: Royal Botanical Garden, 1999).

⁷⁸ Wellsted seems to have been partly guilty of intellectual opportunism. It turns out that he did not collect the list of words for which he has earned the eternal gratitude of the Orientalist—philologists. Lieutenant Haines, Wellsted's superior officer during the Soqotra mission, peeved by the inadequate acknowledgement of his status and of his presumed crucial contribution, was to remark later: 'He published my vocabulary and meteorological register, and stated other matters so as to make it appear that he was the principal throughout. [...] He was much indebted for information never acknowledged.' See Haines, *op. cit.* (1845), p. 110.

⁷⁹ For a brief account of this mission by some of its members, and an historical overview and portrait of the participants, see D. Muller, O. Simony and F. Kossmat, 'The Austrian Expedition to South Arabia and Sokotra', *Geographical Journal*, 13:1 (1899) 638–640; and E. Macro, 'The Austrian Imperial Academy's Expedition to South Arabia 1897–99', *Arabian Studies*, I (1993) pp. 54–82.

⁸⁰ King, 'The Aborigines of Sokotra'. Lord Rennell was chairing the meeting during which Douglas Botting presented a paper on his 1956 Oxford University expedition to Soqotra. See Douglas Botting, 'The Oxford University Expedition', *Geographical Journal*, 12:4 (1958), p. 209. And P. L. Shinnie, 'Socotra', *Antiquity*, 34 (1960), pp. 100–110.

⁸¹ Brian Doe, *Socotra: Island of Tranquility* (London: Immel, 1992).

1967. The remains of a church were found, but he was unable to confirm the presence of Greeks on the island as no meaningful artefacts dating earlier than the fifteenth century AD were found.⁸² More importantly, Doe sought to characterize the mode of production that underpinned the social formation that prevailed during the first millennium AD. His extensive archaeological research revealed the past existence of miles of walls, indicating that large, individual enclosures were set up as production units for frankincense groves, as well as for aloes and dragon blood trees, thus suggesting the presence in the past of organized and extensive agricultural production on Soqatra. As he conjectured: 'The foundations of the ancient farms and their boulder lined fields, sometimes vast irregularly shaped tracts of land, remain as a testimony of the period when Socotra was an important producer of luxuries desired by traders for the wealthy countries of those ancient times.'⁸³

Paradoxically, it was the scientists of the colonial era who conferred upon Soqatra a redeeming purpose—i.e. as a scientific research station—while colonial economic interest found a commercially non-viable outpost.⁸⁴ Their collective intellectual labour has come to constitute a Soqatra archive made up of travel accounts, scientific research monographs, historical testimonies, archeological surveys and ethnological profiles. Also, the encompassment of Soqatra within the emergent and universalizing environmentalism that galvanized the interest in the fauna and flora of the tropics was (i) to partly redeem it from being an entirely neglected colonial ward and (ii) to make environmental conservation the primary justification as well as objective for the renewed interest in the island in the twenty-first century. In that context environmentalism was to serve as a precautionary discourse against indiscriminate development.

IV. Soviet Ethnographic Appropriation: The Adaptation of 'Ethnos' Theory

Socotra . . . may after all be the missing intermediate link in the race–genetic 'west–east' gradient for which anthropologists search in order to fill the gap between the African Negroids and the Australo-Veddo Melanesian types in the equatorial race area.⁸⁵

⁸² All archaeological excavations have failed to uncover evidence of Greek settlements. The one exception being a team of Russian archaeologists, which conducted excavations in the 1980s, and found shards of pottery in the settlement of Hajriya in the suburb of Hadiboh that 'were probably made in the Mediterranean region in the early centuries of this millennium.' Vitaly Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993), p. 120. For an overview of archaeological research in Soqatra see Lloyd Weeks, Miranda Morris, Bernadette McCall and Khalil Al-Zubairy, 'A Recent Archaeological Survey on Soqotra', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 13 (2002), pp. 95–125.

⁸³ Doe, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ England's colonial interest in the island seemed to have been merely for its use as a flagpole; except during the Second World War when it served as a base for anti-submarine patrols. Aden became England's prized possession and served as a coaling depot. On various occasions Soqatra came up as a 'satellite Jewish settlement' if Palestine could not absorb the Jews, and the idea of separating the island from Aden's jurisdiction in order to maintain it as a British dependency after South Yemen's independence; both ideas were momentarily entertained but abandoned. In effect, Soqatra was a colony with an absentee colonial master. The British presence—prior to, and since, the period of 1939–1945 when a garrison of allied soldiers was maintained—was through its resident officers in Aden, who visited the island irregularly as escort of scientific missions and to formulate experimental development project proposals (e.g. agriculture and fisheries) that were never implemented. (D. and L. Ingrams, *Records of Yemen*, vol. 9 contain a series of government correspondences dating from 1943 on the subject of Soqatra as a Jewish settlement and reports on development projects on pp. 737–782); *ibid.*, vol. 15, pp. 740–761.

⁸⁵ Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, p. 67.

Soqatra also had a central role in the era of the Cold War. When the British were forced to concede independence to South Yemen in 1967, within three years the country had assumed a new name, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) as well as a new ideology, Marxism, and thus became the first and only Marxist state in the Arab world. Strong economic and military ties were established with the Soviet Union and the countries of the Socialist bloc. This transformed South Yemen into a theatre in the Cold War and heightened tension in the region due to the sensitive trade routes—especially for oil—of the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. In 1977, when the Soviet Union was forced to vacate the port of Berbera in Somalia due to a policy reversal by the Somali government, there was a frantic search for an alternative base in the area. The PDRY ceded Soqatra to the Soviet Union in 1979 and the island was converted into a military base. The impression was given that undetectable underground facilities were established and that the island was bristling with sophisticated weaponry. All ships were prohibited from venturing near the island, and it was inaccessible to most outsiders without prior governmental authorization. The island most certainly must have been placed under the gaze of spy satellites, and its awkward half-moon shape displayed prominently in the Pentagon and Kremlin's war rooms with a pin on it, while its fate was pondered over by geopolitical domino strategists. All this, however, turned out to be cunning Cold War theatrics, as there was no major military investment made to change Soqatra's landscape, and the Soviets succeeded in conveying a contrary impression only through cosmetic camouflage;⁸⁶ or, perhaps, the other protagonist knew all along that it was a bluff, but its political interest was served by acting as if a threat existed in the region.

More to the point, however, is that in spite of the *cordon sanitaire* established around Soqatra, the 'Soviet–Yemeni Complex Mission' made up of a Yemeni–Soviet team of researchers was allowed to undertake several research expeditions to the island during the period of 1983–1988.⁸⁷ The leader was Vitaly Naumkin, a Russian anthropologist–Orientalist, at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. These research excursions to Soqatra resulted in the publication of three monographs,⁸⁸ including the only ethnographic monograph on the Soqotrans available in any language, *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra*, which was published in 1988 and translated into English in 1993. In essence, the book offers an encounter with Soviet ethnography, as it reveals the latter's disciplinary idiosyncrasies in terms of its particular conceptual repertoire, theoretical framework and methodological approach. However problematic its contents, it enables the reader to gain a glimpse of how the world can be construed differently, and more importantly to understand the Soviet's textualization of Soqatra's reality. It is only through reference to the background to such textualization to be presented below that sense can be made of some of the emphases and analytical foci in Naumkin's ethnography of Soqatra. Indeed, it was its absence that led one reviewer to remark: 'What is consistently missing is explanatory

⁸⁶ J.-L. Guebourg, *Socotra: Une Ile Hors du Temps* (Bordeaux: Cret, 1998).

⁸⁷ For the broader context of the Soviet research activities in Yemen see A. Knysh, 'The Soviet–Yemeni Mission in South Arabia: Nine Years of Fruitful Research', *Yemen Update*, 33 (1993), pp. 12–14; and P. A. Gryaznevich, 'History of Hadramawt Studies in Russia', in M. N. Souvorov and M. A. Rodionov (eds) *Cultural Anthropology of Southern Arabia: Hadramawt Revisited* (St Petersburg: Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, 1999), pp. 6–19.

⁸⁸ The other two texts were: *Where the Phoenix Rose from Ashes* (1977), and a collaborative work with V. Y. Porkhomovski, *Essays in the Ethnolinguistics of Socotra* (1981).

context', and to assert that the inclusion of topics such as archaeology, to be 'of doubtful relevance in an ethnography'.⁸⁹ Another reviewer, upon encountering the passage quoted in the above epigraph, seems to have experienced a kind of epistemic revulsion, as he exclaims that it 'illustrates only that the Soviets are still mired in 19th century racial thinking. It is slightly unnerving that such outmoded ideas, devoid of genetic reality, should be published in 1993'.⁹⁰

This epistemic clash is perhaps partly explained by Gellner's statement: 'The most important difference [...] between a Soviet and Western ethnographer] is in the fact that the Soviet ethnographer is not separated, either in his ideas or his subject-matter, from the archaeologist or the historian... and is primarily interested in the history of mankind and the evolution of human society.'⁹¹ In addition to this diachronic orientation, there is a divergence in the object of study. For example, while American anthropology was compiling the Human Relations Area Files based upon a division of the world into culture areas, Soviet ethnography was putting together its world atlases of ethnic groups. 'Culture' was the defining concept of Western anthropology, while 'ethnos' was the key concept of Soviet ethnography.⁹² Perhaps this focus on ethnos can be understood as the former Soviet Union's own attempt to address the problems associated with managing its internal 'Others', as it was one of the most complex multinational states in the world. Let me define ethnos as I reconstitute the discussion of the term by Bromley and Kozlov⁹³ and proceed to identify some of its constitutive elements as a discursive practice, and then link both to a discussion of how they relate to the representation of Soqotrans in Naumkin's ethnography. Ethnos is more than simply ethnicity; it refers to a biosocial community defined by having the following characteristics: (i) common origin in terms of a genetic pool; (ii) occupies a remote territory or a geographically delimited space; (iii) exhibits actual economic interaction or is united by relations of production; (iv) practices endogamy, which is a defining element in an ethnos as it acts as stabilizer and 'genetic barrier' and thus enables the development of traits specific to a given community; and (v) all the above are articulated around culture and everyday life. Finally, the key concept in this analytical scheme is that of 'ethnogenesis', which is concerned with the origin of ethnic groups, and their formative processes as well as their temporal and spatial distribution. From this perspective, the evolution or transformation of an ethnos is historically and ecologically linked to a process of adaptation to the particular conditions of a landscape. Methodologically, the constitution of an ethnos is studied through the deployment of a 'practical ethnography' which emphasizes material culture and investigates the historical impact of migration and diffusion in the shaping of that culture. The site of intervention of this type of ethnographic practice is conceived as constituting an 'ethnogeography', which is the spatial-physical environment where culture is

⁸⁹ Shelag Weir, 'Island of the Phoenix: book Review', *British-Yemeni Society Newsletter* (1994).

⁹⁰ Daniel Varisco, 'Socotra Comes to Light', *Yemen Update*, 34 (1994), pp. 40-41.

⁹¹ Ernest Gellner, *State and Society in Soviet Thought* (London: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 2-3.

⁹² Teodor Shanin, 'Ethnicity in the Soviet Union: Analytical Perceptions and Political Strategies', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31:3 (1989), p. 409.

⁹³ Julian Bromley and Viktor Kozlov, 'The Theory of Ethnos and Ethnic Processes in Soviet Social Sciences', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31:3 (1989), pp. 425-438. This article seems to be the refined restatement of the authors' first discussion of the subject in the 1970s. See Tamara Dragadze, 'The Place of 'Ethnos' in Soviet Anthropology', in E. Gellner (ed.) *Soviet and Western Ethnography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 161-170.

produced as the historical result of the interaction between geographical, anthropological and economic factors.

This conceptual repertoire has informed the discursive practice of Soviet ethnographers, as they appropriated the realities of the places they encountered as they followed the trail of the adventures of the left imperialism of the Soviet state, just as did their fellow anthropologists in the West in following the colonial conquests of their respective states. Soqotra was one of those encounters and it offered grist to the mill of Soviet ethnography as it resonated with the characteristics of an ethnos: a place that was subjected to varied migratory movements, and thus susceptible to diffusionary processes; a landscape characterized by different agro-ecological zones that gave rise to different livelihood systems and thus a certain level of social differentiation between the bedouins of the mountains, the people of the plains and those of the coastal zones; leading to the constitution of separate ethnospheres. Accordingly, in Naumkin's ethnography, the physical features of the landscape are described as a by-product of geological processes that have shaped the ecological milieu to which populations had to adapt through the development of particular systems of livelihood. Second, a historical overview of Soqotra is provided in order, first, to understand the migratory patterns of the settlers on the island in terms of their origins and to envision the kind of 'racial crossing' to which it has given rise. The result of this 'racial crossing' is analysed through a morphology of Soqotra's population, which involved the use of the discredited method of nineteenth-century physical anthropology, namely the measurement of body parts, underpinned by racist evolutionary assumption in the analytical framework. This was the way in which the concept of 'ethnogenesis' was operationalized in Soqotra. This led to a division of the island's population into a three-tiered ethnosphere, with each tier constituting a particular ecological niche, namely the mountain areas, the high plateaux and the coastal zones. Each zone was seen as a breeding ground for the emergence of a distinct racial phenotype and cultural ontology.

Beyond these unconventional aspects, the ethnography did address more traditional ones, such as kinship and material culture. In the case of kinship, an exhaustive list of the Soqotri terminology of the bedouin's kinship system is provided, perhaps for the first time. Whether this terminology would be of assistance in understanding the structuring of the network of informal institutions that constitute the web of security underpinning the economy of subsistence pastoralism remains to be ascertained. Concerning the material culture of Soqotrans, the author goes through a systematic description of craft production, food processing, clothing style, settlement and housing patterns, etc. with photographs or drawings as illustration. What is striking about these descriptions is that they are merely an elaboration upon what Wellsted summarized, and other visitors have observed since, about the material aspects of the everyday life of the Soqotrans over 150 years ago. Perhaps this fact alone would justify the focus on ethnos. Finally, there is an account of the archaeological excavations undertaken by Naumkin and his team that sought to ascertain the provenance and cultural level of previous settlers and, perhaps more importantly, to challenge existing arguments about the social organization, the nature and scale of the productive activities on the island. Indeed, the intent was to specifically contest Doe's thesis about an economy dominated by large but privately held cooperative farms supplemented by seasonal workers whose produce was obligatorily sold to something resembling a central agricultural purchasing board owned by the Hadrami Kingdom. In contrast, it was

argued that the cultivation of incense-bearing trees was always a supplemental activity to the traditional pastoralism of the island's inhabitants. Indeed, it is claimed that from the seventh century BC to the first century AD, 'the island had a cohesive original culture with a powerful autochthonous base. This applies equally both to the material and the spiritual domains, and this is confirmed by the continuity and longevity of Soqatra's two basic economic-cultural types: the herders and the fishermen.⁹⁴ The rather unsatisfactory evidence provided in support of this argument was that the burials and their contents found in Soqatra resembled those in Hadramawt, and that they preceded both the Christian and Islamic periods.

These assertions privileged the diffusionist thesis, as they insisted on the primacy of mainland influence over Soqatra through migratory contact. Naumkin's assertion about the primacy of pastoralism over agriculture is partly an extension to Soqatra of the prevailing consensus regarding pastoralism as the most archaic and widespread type of economic activity in the Arabian Peninsula, if not in the Middle East as a whole. Perhaps the more determining factor in the insistence on the primacy of pastoralism as the defining livelihood activity of Soqotrans from the very beginning of their presence on the island has to do with the Russian cathexis with the nomad. This specifically Russian sensibility, as Gellner argued, has induced a predisposition among Russian ethnographers to seek the nomadic-pastoralist origins of institutions.⁹⁵ However, the sharing of a sensibility among Soviet ethnographers does not mean a monolithic application of ethnos theory. To understand the Soviet ethnographic appropriation of Soqatra it might be useful to refer to Gellner's rather caricatural, yet apt, typology of Soviet ethnographers into (a) the 'ethnosists' who stress the study of ethnicity in the contemporary world; (b) the 'primitivists' who focus on pre-state societies in search of archaic survivals; and (c) the 'ideologists' who collect ethnographic details to fill the gaps in a grand global story of human evolution.⁹⁶ Naumkin and his team represent a combination of the primitivist and ideologist, which explains the preoccupation with the archaic and the evolutionist fixation of the ethnography.⁹⁷

However, the text was not devoid of contemporary concerns, as it included a brief discussion of anthropogenic changes induced by the state incorporation process initiated by the Socialist government in the 1970s:

The new and constantly changing general conditions of life on the island are having a major impact on the lives of the herders. Their partial entry into the orbit of money-commodity relations, the slow but nonetheless ongoing process of class differentiation, the increasing pressure of population growth on the natural environment, the emergence of modern means of production, and a rise in the cultural level of the herders, all combine to undermine and destroy the existing system of relations.⁹⁸

The concern was with the sustainability of the Soqotrans' commitment to a pastoral mode of production in the face of inducements to alternative means of livelihood that change inevitably brings in its wake. The challenge to the new purveyors of 'development' that were to follow was to stabilize the increasingly

⁹⁴ Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, pp. 363–364.

⁹⁵ See E. Gellner, 'The Nomadism Debate', in *op. cit.* (1988), p. 92.

⁹⁶ Gellner, 'Modern Ethnicity', in *op. cit.* (1988), p. 121.

⁹⁷ Naumkin has since recanted the approach adopted in his ethnography. See Serge Elie, 'Vitaly Naumkin: Portrait of Soqatra's First Ethnographer', *Yemen Times*, 13:622 (2003), p. 5.

⁹⁸ Naumkin, *op. cit.* (1993), p. 364.

tenuous commitment to such a mode of livelihood, while gradually introducing sustainable economic alternatives without undermining the prevailing norms of cultural reproduction and generating a movement toward deterritorialization of pastoralists through induced migration, sedentarization and other adverse cultural and ecological outcomes.

V. UN Experiment: Rehabilitation through an Eco/Ethno-Development Regime

It is axiomatic that development superimposed upon the underlying principle that the environment is sacrosanct will be limited in nature and space... Is this realization acceptable to Soqotrans...?⁹⁹

Soqotra's rediscovery at the dawn of the twenty-first century, or more aptly its rehabilitation to something approximating its former symbolic status, is being justified on the basis of the richness of its biodiversity. In the current conjuncture it is being presented as a potential biodiversity preserve, a unique research station for biodiversity studies as well as an international destination for ecotourism. The island is being widely described, rather hyperbolically, as the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean. To consecrate the ecological mystique of the island, the Government of Yemen ratified in 1996 the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and later that same year declared the Soqotra Archipelago a special natural area in urgent need of protection. This was later followed by the UNESCO's selection of Soqotra as one of the biosphere reserve sites of global significance. Two major documents were formulated to guide the rehabilitation of the island: the Biodiversity Zoning Plan¹⁰⁰ and the Socotra Archipelago Master Plan (SAMP).¹⁰¹ The implementation of these two plans constitutes a kind of experiment that will determine the fate of the archipelago during the current millennium. Such a fate will require addressing the dilemma captured in the above quote from the Master Plan through an optimum harmonization of the conservation requirements of a place with a unique biodiversity of global significance, with the needs of a human population characterized by excessive material deprivation.

Soqotra has become the symbolic embodiment for the idealized objectives and priorities of an environmental planning process that is guided by an 'ecocratic' (i.e. environment-dominated) imaginary, as well as driven by an experimentalist ethos. This is most evident in the Zoning Plan, as it heralds a form of environmental planning as a radical process of discursive appropriation of the given natural conditions of Soqotra. As such the Plan represents—at least potentially—the symbolic dispossession of the Soqotrans' local commons and their reconfiguration and reinscription into a social construct that is being offered back to them as a new understanding of their island as well as their new identity as the international community's appointed stewards of the environment and to which they must adjust. Accordingly, it entails the deployment of an environmental policy that

⁹⁹ Commission of the European Communities, *Socotra Archipelago Master Plan* (Sana'a: MoPD, May 2000).

¹⁰⁰ Formulated as part of a project funded by a 1997 grant from the Global Environment Facility.

¹⁰¹ Yemen's Environmental Protection Council and the Ministry of Planning and Development commissioned the Plan, which was financed by the European Union, and prepared in May 2000 by a British environmental consultancy firm WS Atkins International at the cost of one million dollars.

proposes to reconfigure Soqotra's landscape into delimited natural biotic areas or anthropological reserves as experimental enclosures. This will necessitate the cultivation of an ecological consciousness on the part of Soqotrans. This cultivation process might entail the resocialization of the population's interaction with the environment in the form a disciplinary regulation of the Soqotrans' use of their environmental resources.

The foundational assumption of this experiment with Soqotra, as envisioned in both Plans and that announces the basis of this eco/ethno-development regime, is captured in the following statement: 'Since the archipelago's high environmental quality has developed and is maintained by traditional practices, then it is only logical that these should continue with few or no amendments imposed on them.'¹⁰² This epitomizes the view of culture (i.e. traditional livelihood practices) as regulator of environmental stability and biodiversity conservation. It is a view in which nature dwellers or those who practice subsistence livelihoods are seen as naturalists deploying convivial tools and engaging nature with a benign congeniality. This eco/ethno-development regime entails a process of enhancing, stabilizing and valorizing existing livelihood practices as they articulate with conservation activities. It is a locally led process that is not supposed to require extensive external input, and instead to rely primarily on existing infrastructural and currently available human productive capacities that could be enhanced gradually. It is a minimalist modernization approach. The aim is to conserve and protect the culture and the indigenous knowledge of Soqotrans from modern development pressures for economic growth. Ideally, it is a development process that is strictly based on the reproductive capacity of the island's natural ecosystem as well as the adaptive/absorption capacity of the local cultural context. This would entail, on one hand, the ecological rationalization of capital (i.e. the subsumption of all capital inputs to the existing level of the ecosystem's productivity) and, on the other hand, the regulated introduction of the paraphernalia of modernity, in order to ensure their culturally appropriate integration.

The formulation of both Plans through a participatory process entailed the deployment of a series of transposition and projection of assumptions, ideas and desires on the part of the parties involved; all undoubtedly well-intentioned, but which could potentially generate an emerging clash of environmental imaginaries. This would involve, on one hand, the conservation desiderata of the Plans' designers (e.g. converting the landscape into a recreational space and an object of spectacle) which, on the other hand, might be incongruous with the Soqotrans' priorities and sensibilities; the latter induced by their livelihood practices as well as their conception of a preferred future. Admittedly, the future may not yet be a consideration, preoccupied as Soqotrans are with the exigencies of eking out a meagre existence in the present. The clash might come by way of the Soqotrans' potential resistance to modifications in their environmental valuation scheme and its corresponding practices that are required by the new environmental and development regime proposed in the two Plans. The future of Soqotra's rehabilitation hangs on the denouement of the interaction between the divergent rationalities contained in the environmental imaginaries of these two sets of participants in this socio-ecological experiment.

¹⁰² Commission of the European Communities, *SAMP*, p. 6–5.

It is an experiment that seemed to be inspired by a combination of the aesthetic discourse of Antiquity with its quixotic quest for the lost Eden, and the nascent environmentalism of the British period. This is accompanied by a 'let's save them from modernity' syndrome, which has had the unintended consequence of reifying conservation and development into two mutually exclusive alternatives. What is observed in the field is the intriguing sight of Soqotrans being inducted into what must appear to them as an imported environmental mystagogy, while their basic needs are relegated to a second order priority.

Prospective Summation: Is a Soqotran Phase Next?

Soqotra's circumstances and history seems to set the problem of its development in a proper perspective, both as regards the tempo and the amount to be applied.¹⁰³

This incursion into history of a sort—i.e. the genealogy of the strategic entanglement and symbolic appropriation of a place—was to provide a broader historical background to the change process being initiated by the 're-discoverers' of the Soqotra archipelago, and motivated partly by the need to locate my impending ethnographic intervention on the island in a diachronic framework.¹⁰⁴ In so doing, however, my purpose was not to engage in a *post-facto* pillory of certain forms of discursive practice, as if I were merely engaged in a kind of reflexive activism driven by a revisionist impulse. More importantly, it was to draw out the ramifications of this process of symbolic appropriation at the current historical conjuncture.

What are these ramifications? In the case of Antiquity, the utopian–aesthetic discourse and its totemization of the garden and the island seemed to have crystallized into a perennial norm, namely, the perception of Soqotra as an exotic abode forever frozen in a pristine state of pre-social abundance, and to be kept that way. The Portuguese interlude, in addition to the consequences already noted earlier, established the basis for the later emergence of an acute consciousness among Soqotrans about intercultural relations being informed primarily by religion, characterized by a mildly obsessive scrutiny of their interlocutors' religious identity, perhaps as a sign of weariness about the latter's intention.¹⁰⁵ The British, in the process of deploying science as a means to the economic valorization

¹⁰³ W. H. Ingrams, 'Socotra: The Isle of the Blest', *Port of Aden Annual* (1955–56), pp. 61–64.

¹⁰⁴ See Serge Elie, *The Waning of a Pastoralist Community: An Ethnographic Exploration of Soqotra as a Transitional Social Formation*, D.Phil. dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 2006.

¹⁰⁵ This attitude is not peculiar to Soqotra, as it is found in any society where identity is defined on religious ground. However, in Soqotra it is relatively recent and has a local dimension, as it is linked partly to the mutated understanding of an historical incident that took place around the ninth century AD, which involved a civil strife between Christians and Muslims. This occasioned a poetic epistle written by a certain Zahra Soqotriya, calling upon the Sultan of Oman to come to the rescue of Muslims, in a graphic description of the barbarity of the Christians, especially toward the women. This seems to be the first act of writing—or more aptly, discursive insurrection—attributed to a Soqotran, and as such it is the source of pride among Soqotrans. However, as this poem became part of popular 'historiology'—that peculiar combination of orality and literacy, resulting into a synthesis of fact and fiction—the incident was believed to have taken place during the time of the Portuguese, and through a process of osmosis (as literacy remains a problem) has permeated the culture and shaped collective memory. See brief accounts and some background information in R. Serjeant, 'The Coastal', pp. 136–140, and J. C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 332, 344. Ahmed Said Al-Imbali, a Soqotran, has published a commentary on the poem in Arabic, which was partly responsible for making Soqotrans aware of it.

of natural resources, contributed by default in making Soqatra safe for scientific research, which led in turn to the constitution of a scientific archive for Soqatra. However, this archive seems to have benefited primarily the career objectives of its compilers, and not the living conditions of Soqotrans.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, it seems that it has remained in the exclusive proprietary domain of universities or state institutions in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The Soviet period contributed to shifting the focus from the natural to the socio-cultural dimensions of Soqatra. However, their problematic interpretative scheme transformed Soqotrans into living fossils of a teleological evolutionary process. And finally, the United Nations, as already noted, is pursuing unwittingly a strategy of indigenized modernity. This entails the practice of a form of cultural conservation dictated by environmental priorities that merely allows for a creeping gradualism in the pace of change, and which is tantamount to the management of social immobilism.

The defining characteristic of all these attempts at symbolic appropriation is that of a power-based monologue about nature and otherness in Soqatra rather than, and in passive avoidance of, a dialogue with its inhabitants. Granted that such a dialogue could not have been possible in some instances, it was never intended in the first place, precluded by the hegemonic reflex of the Eurocentric perspective that has underpinned these endeavours. Moreover, their practitioners have acted as purveyors of an invasive transcultural subjectivity that has sought, unwittingly to be sure, to transform Soqotrans into live specimens in a museum display about the idyllic bucolic existence on a remote island that persists in the third millennium. The cumulative effect has been the gradual fossilization of a virtual utopianism, as if its advocates were prey to nostalgic yearnings, and thus driven by an irrepressible impulse to idealize, better, exoticize, the island's environmental conditions and ecological status. One evidence of this is the inexorable consistency with which Edenic clichés (e.g. abode of the blest, island of tranquility, island of the Phoenix, etc.) have adorned the titles and informed the contents of books, visual materials, videos and films, newspapers and journal articles, as well as UN reports on Soqatra for the past decade. This effluvium of encomia *vis-à-vis* Soqatra's environmental endowment seemed to be part of the aesthetic (re)production of the island—i.e. its perceptual readjustment and domain sacralization—as an inducement to ecotourists. This is motivated partly by the dilemma-inducing search for a viable economic strategy for the island that would rescue it from its relative cultural insularity, economic isolation and until now its very superficial engagement with notions of development. However, the environmental imaginary of the eco-developers is too much at odds with that of the local population, and thus too socially precarious to provide the basis of a sustainable economic strategy.

In addition to the ramifications of these externally driven initiatives, there is the equally determining symbolic appropriation process that has an intranational dimension. Today, Soqatra is currently engaged in a state incorporation process, previously delayed by the two states division of Yemen. The unified Yemeni state is now engaged in the formalization of Soqatra's status as a sub-national entity, which

¹⁰⁶ One glaring evidence of this is the total absence of a discernable impact on reversing the languishing state of the local vernacular, in spite of the labour of a number of linguists working on the Soqotri language. Beyond the scores of publications of strictly academic value, in the narrowest sense of the term, there have been a few desultory warnings about the language's imminent extinction, but devoid of any concrete policy proposal to prevent that from happening. See A. Lonet, 'The Soqotri Language: Past, Present and Future', in H. Dumont (ed.) *Soqatra* (New York: UN Publications, 1998), pp. 297–308; and M.-C. Simeone-Senelle, 'Une Richesse Méconnue et Menacée: La Langue Soqotri', *Chroniques Yemenites*, 9 (2001).

entails communal accommodation to national political priorities. These include, almost obligatorily, the adherence to the foundational pillars of state formation in the Middle East: *al-umma al-arabiyya* (the secular idea of the pan-Arab nation) and *al-umma al-islamiyya* (the Islamic concept of a universal religious community). The danger here is that it might lead to a kind of expedient politico-cultural amalgamation, which does not acknowledge the island's ethnic diversity (e.g. the presence of a sizable African-descent community, the *muwalladin*) as well as the islanders' linguistic heritage. This oversight could complicate the achievement of an organic process in Soqotra's political and cultural integration into the national community. Soqotrans have developed a palpable sensitivity about their origins. This is based partly on the perceived 'contradiction' between the prevailing view that they are of Arab origins and yet their mother tongue is Soqotri. Arabic is a relatively recent import for the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants. This unresolved dilemma has given rise to an ambivalence regarding what should constitute the legitimate cultural property of Soqotrans as they claim their citizenship rights in the Yemeni national political community, and affirm their identity as Muslims. This situation has made it imperative that consideration be given to the formal recognition of the cultural specificities of the Soqotrans within the framework of a national cultural policy. In its absence, Soqotrans will transit from a culturally autonomous community to being marginal members of a dominant culture with all sorts of dysfunctional ramifications.

Finally, in Soqotra today, *Arabia Eudaimonia* has long ago given way to *Arabia Infelix*, as far as the livelihoods of Soqotrans are concerned. Nature's rhythm has been thrown out of kilter, it seems. Seasons come and go without bringing the expected rains, resulting in a chronic depression in the ecosystem's productivity in terms of the environmental resources needed by the Soqotrans—water and verdant grazing grounds. Soqotrans have interpreted this situation to be the end of *Baraka* (God's blessing). While this has not threatened the designated recreational space and the objects of spectacle reserved for the ecotourists, it has undermined the viability of the Soqotrans' traditional livelihood activity, i.e. pastoralism. Indeed, pastoralism is being transformed from an economic livelihood with monetary exchange value into a tradition-maintaining activity with mere social exchange value, as the relative importance of animal herds decreases as a source of pastoralist income while increasing as a source of expenditure, as the herds have to be fed from purchased cereals.

If Soqotra's rehabilitation experiment is to succeed, and a vibrant multicultural community preserved, the following will have to take place: the incommensurability between the eco-optimism of those whose experience of the Soqotra landscape is merely virtual, and the Soqotrans' eco-pessimism born of lived experience will have to be bridged. This would entail breaking with the intrinsic hegemony of imported ideas, and the corollary tendency of leap-frogging realities on the ground in pursuit of a virtual future. This is to be complemented by the adoption of an environmental realism rooted in the livelihood-induced environmental sensibilities of Soqotrans and that concurs with their economic priorities. While the success of a *projet de société* conceived on such grounds may not be guaranteed, it would at least ensure communal solidarity in its implementation, as well as provide a propitious context in which to test the lofty rhetoric of good intentions of today's eco-developers, and the declared commitment to democratic principles by the national political leadership.

Copyright of *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.