Aaron Jaffer ‘Mad Dogs, Englishmen and Lascars: Animals and Indian Ocean Seafaring’

‘Lascars’ were sailors from the Indian Ocean who served aboard European vessels. This elastic term covered a wide range of Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Sikh men hired by captains at many different ports from Aden to Singapore. As Britain expanded across the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its merchant ships employed tens of thousands of lascars for both long-distance voyages to Europe and intra-Asian trade. Scholarship on lascars has flourished in recent years yet many of their beliefs, customs and shipboard routines remain unknown. Issues surrounding animals are one aspect of their seafaring lives that feature prominently in diaries, logbooks, official correspondence, newspaper reports and other surviving European documents. Common causes of friction included the presence of certain animals aboard ship, the use of animal products for medical purposes and which meats lascars would or wouldn’t eat. This paper will use these episodes to explore both confrontation and accommodation between European seafaring traditions and those of the Indian Ocean.

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