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I am interested in the early anthropogenic shaping of environments hitherto seen as natural. In the
past this has focused on anthropogenic forests, and currently on anthropogenic soils. Yet this
interests extends to discerning anthropogenic transformations in ‘natural’ corals formations (as
there are indigenous techniques for transplanting treasured coral). Among issues of interest in the
Indian ocean context (e.g. Madagascar) might be the transport and introduction of leaches –
bothersome bloodsuckers which profoundly shapes people’s relationship with forests - and of
termites. To my knowledge no work has been done on the history of this dimension of nature. Were
there to be a ‘human history’ to such species that are arguably ecosystem engineers, it has the
potential to profoundly reshape our understanding of the ‘anthropocene’.
A second interest concerns early American voyages (sealers, whalers and traders) whose influence in
the Indian ocean (c.1780 onwards) seems to be rather untold. Firstly, their ships logs offer climatic
and economic information that is perhaps of wider interest to corroborate others. Secondly, their
involvement not only with the slave but also the dried/salt meat trade (with connections to Eastern
Africa, Madagascar) seems rather under appreciated/researched. For example, at least in the 1830s
dried cattle from Madagascar was feeding not only the slaves of Mauritius and Reunion, but also of
the eastern seabord of the US, as well as the US merchant navy and the French navy. US meat
traders were prospecting other dried meat sources (Namibia). What was the influence of this trade
on the Madagascan cattle economy and environment?