

## GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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During the past decade there has been a considerable increase in literature documenting the growth of Indian Ocean port cities. Famously described as the Brides of the Sea, port cities such as Cape Town, Karachi, Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, and Jakarta were the bridgeheads for the establishment of European dominance. They fostered greater connectivity and intercultural exchanges, and they produced distinctive urban settlement patterns, environments, and social relationships. One strand of the historiography has associated the rise of these port cities to the expansion of European mercantilism and the growth of an interconnected world-system that bound industrialised Western nations to the less-developed periphery.<sup>1</sup> Such works have traced the imprints of colonialism on urban morphology and the built environment, and they have identified specific features that distinguished them from indigenous urban formations in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> In delineating the features of these settlements, scholars have examined how they represented the projection of colonial power, liberal governance, and planning and improvement discourses, and became the staging grounds for disciplinary violence and regulation.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, another set of writings has examined how new forms of economic activity, trading

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin Jan Aart Broeze (ed.), *Brides of the Sea: Port cities of Asia from the 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1989); Kenneth McPherson, "Port cities as nodal points of change: The Indian Ocean, 1890s–1920s," in *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, eds. Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C.A. Bayly (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 75–95. Classic studies include: K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ashin Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant 1500–1800* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Dilip K. Basu, *The Rise and Growth of the Colonial Port Cities in Asia* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985); Susan J. Lewandowski, "Urban growth and municipal development in the colonial city of Madras, 1860-1900," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 34, 2 (1975), 341–60; Susan M. Neild, "Colonial urbanism: The development of Madras City in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Modern Asian Studies*, 13, 2 (1979), 217–46; Anthony King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010),

<sup>3</sup> Sandip Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity: Urban hegemonies and civic contestations in Bombay City 1900–1925* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007); Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920* (Aldershot, 2007); *Imperial designs and Indian realities: the planning of Bombay City, 1845-1875*, Oxford University Press, 1991 Swati Chattopadhyaya, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Uncanny*, London; New York, Routledge, 2005

networks, and technological transfers aided the production of global modern ports,<sup>4</sup> and another has focused on these spaces as sites of interaction between peoples of the Indian Ocean World. These writings focus on commodity flows, labour migration, familial networks of trading and credit arrangements, diasporic and religious networks, and the spread of local cosmopolitanism transcending national, imperial, and maritime borders.<sup>5</sup> All in all, these different strands demonstrate how port cities shepherded the advent of steam shipping and other transport infrastructures, became the sites for networks, institutions, and circuits of migration (forced and voluntary), through which goods, people (seafarers, merchants, slaves, servant's soldiers, and migrants), knowledge, and religious cosmologies interacted, and constituted gateways through which highly militarised forms of imperial power spread to non-western worlds. Building on these insights, this collection of articles from a Henry Luce funded intensive workshop held in New York University, Shanghai is an attempt to understand the histories of port cities as part of a larger imperial, colonial and post-colonial project to shape urban environments, social relations, labour, and racial identities.

The first article of the special feature, written by Daniel Steinbach, analyses the impact of the First World War on demographic patterns and race relations in a British East African port city. The outbreak of war between Britain and Germany transformed Mombasa into a key military hub. Together with the boom in defence-related manufacturing and production, as well as large-scale mobilisation of finance capital, labour and investment projects, the status of the port city was elevated to a prominent node within the global network of commodity and migratory flows. Conscripted labour and soldiers from the interior of the colony and across the Indian Ocean ensured that Mombasa accommodated diverse racial and ethnic populations which triggered colonial anxieties regarding the disruption of existing racial hierarchies and spatial

<sup>4</sup> Frank Broeze, Peter Reeves, and Kenneth McPherson, "Imperial ports and the modern world economy: The case of the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Transport History*, 7, 2 (1986), 1–21; Sandip Hazareesingh, "Interconnected synchronicities: The production of Bombay and Glasgow as modern global ports c.1850–1880," *Journal of Global History*, 4 (2009), 7–31.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Harper and Sunil S. Amrith, "Sites of Asian interaction: An introduction," *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, 2 (2012), 249–57; Sebastian Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and faith on the medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and globalisation in the Suez Canal region, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Janet Ewald, "Crossers of the sea: Slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914," *American Historical Review*, 105, 1 (2000), 69–91; Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and containment: The voyages of South Asian seamen, c. 1900–1960," *International Review of Social History*, 51, S14 (2006), 111–41; G. Balachandran, "Making coolies, (un)making workers: 'Globalizing' labour in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and Early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 24, 3 (2011), 266–96; Clare Anderson, *Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic diaspora, Livorno, and cross-cultural trade in the early modern period* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009) Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Merchant Networks in the Early Modern World, 1450–1800* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996).

divisions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial Mombasa was a deeply fractured society with Europeans at the top of the racial hierarchy and migrant communities (both African and Indian) at the bottom. European elites resented the expanding commercial affluence of the Indian mercantile classes and feared the possibilities of unwanted proximities developing with Africans, who often worked in low-paid and stigmatised occupations. The global ramifications of the war were visibly present in the manner it significantly altered and intensified these local, cross-cultural, and racial interactions. Mobilisation of professional Indian soldiers combined with efforts by wealthy Indian elites to galvanise resources for the war pointed to the latter's political and economic power. Furthermore, the circulation of a mobile labouring populations from the countryside to the port city also produced anxieties about mixing with the 'wrong kind of native,' which tested the colonial state's social engineering capabilities. However, while the war allowed for the circulation and upward mobility of raced subjects, it also formed the context for the imposition of severe restrictions on their political freedoms, thus containing and limiting the transgressions that accompanied the outbreak of the war. By linking the impact of the global theatres of war to wider questions of race relations in the port city, Steinbach provides a much-needed discussion on war-induced governance structures and modes of social control that the colonial government put in place to 'fix' social identities and racial hierarchies.

The second article explores processes that contributed to the racialization of port labour in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Singapore. Laura Yan traces the lineages of Singapore's transformation into a multi-ethnic and racially segregated society to recruitment practices that were used to mobilize steam-ship labour servicing the needs of imperial trade. She argues that the segmentation of Singapore's society into three races, namely, Chinese, Malay, and Indian, was due to a unique experiment of social engineering of port city labour carried out by the labour contractors of the Singapore Harbour Board and by British colonial officials. The Singapore Harbour Board was primarily operated by three major labour contractors: the Tanjong Pagar Labour Company, the Cantonese Labour Syndicate, and the Indian Labour Company. Each of them recruited distinct ethnic groups for various tasks: the Chinese for skilled work and the Hokkiens and Indians for unskilled occupations, such as porters, longshoremen, or dock workers. Such recruitment strategies helped to create and solidify ideas and typologies about skilled Cantonese artisans and mechanics, as opposed to unskilled Indian workers. This, in turn, also shaped colonial ideas on racialised and ethnicised capacities of work. Historians have hitherto attributed the figure of the labour contractor

and the segmentation of the labour market either to the needs of capital or to the needs of labour for sustaining familiar social relationships within an alien work environment. In contrast to such narratives, which focus on the divisive nature of these recruitment practices, Yan's paper highlights the role of these ethnic labour divisions in enabling port workers to unionize against an increasingly hostile port administration in Singapore after the Second World War. Besides tracing the origins of these labour recruitment institutions to the colonial era, her article also foregrounds the enduring influence of these ties in informing post-colonial nation building efforts to craft an authoritarian national civic identity predicated on the historical exclusion of most unskilled overseas migrants.

While the first two articles located the port city within an expanding nexus of military and capitalist transformations and demonstrated the increasing cultural, racial, and ethnic differentiation of labour, the next two examine the impact of infrastructural expansion and port building on the environment and on urban social space. Hasan Karrar establishes linkages between the long drawn hydrological engineering of the Indus Delta – beginning with colonial-era canal construction at the end of the nineteenth century and followed by barrage and dam construction in postcolonial Pakistan – and present-day neoliberal technocratic visions of building a future port city in Zulfikarabad. By bringing the past, present, and future within a single analytical prism, Karrar demonstrates how the promises of greater connectivity, market governance, and circulation of transnational capital envisioned by the neoliberal state has been built on the back of a series of hydrological projects which have physically transformed and dried the deltaic landscape. Besides ecological transformations, the article also refers to the decline of traditional commercial networks, the shrinkage of the Indus Delta ports' seaward networks, and the advent of industrial fishing, all of which significantly diminished employment opportunities for small-scale artisanal fishers. It then goes on to examine local communities' contestations of state and neoliberal visions of realising the modernist dreams of greater connectivity, economic growth, and prosperity through port building and infrastructure expansion.

The final article, written by Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, documents the effects of the colonial construction of a canal on extant space and the matrix of social relations of power within the port city of Calcutta. In the early years of colonial rule, Major Tolly, an English East India Company (EIC) servant, proposed to undertake the arduous task of opening a navigable route connecting Calcutta with the eastern districts of the province for better trade and communication facilities. However, the construction of the canal was

enmeshed in contestations involving Company officials and the regional power holders over land ownership and the rights to levy and collect taxes. By systematically unpacking various stages of canal building, the article employs the prism of infrastructure to complicate questions of sovereignty and authority during a crucial moment of transition, when power shifted from the Nawab of Bengal to the EIC. While most existing histories point to territorial expansion, governance structures, and ideologies to examine the EIC as both a trading company and state, this article uses the canal project to unpack some of the early conflicts regarding the formal legal status of the Company, the extent of its jurisdiction over people and places in the port city, and the challenges mounted by zamindars and landholders to the Company's authority over the canal. These negotiations around land ownership and taxation not only reveal the fractured nature of colonial sovereignty, but also how these contestations shaped the outcomes of colonial infrastructural projects.

Taken together, all four articles focus on the encounters between the forces of capital and colonialism with older social relations, ethnic and racial identities, labour, and political power. Their analyses of port cities complicate existing narratives which have characterised them as colonial spatial constructs superimposed on an inert pre-colonial space. Furthermore, by thinking about migration, technologies of rule, infrastructural growth, and questions of political sovereignty, these articles question the singular focus on processes of globalisation, technology transfer, and commodity flows, and instead underscore the deep contestations, interactions, and socio-cultural, ecological, and politico-economic dynamics that accompanied the transformations of these Indian Ocean port towns into urban spaces.