"Tavern of the Seas"? The Cape of Good Hope as an oceanic crossroads during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

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The Cape of Good Hope, on the tip of Southern Africa, was at the crossroads for European ships traversing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans en route to Asia and returning to Europe. Centuries before the establishment of the first formal European settlement at the Cape, Portuguese mariners were familiar with the southern African coastline as they made their way towards the East African coast and intervened in the major indigenous trading networks in the Indian Ocean and its intersection with the South China Sea. Various European merchant ships flying the flags of England, France, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands stopped at the Cape of Good Hope in fluctuating numbers from the sixteenth century to re-provision their ships with fresh water and meat bartered from the local Khoikhoi inhabitants. It was in 1652 that the Dutch East India Company, who were in the process of wresting the mantle of European ascendancy in Indian Ocean trading networks from the Portuguese, decided to occupy the Cape of Good Hope to forestall such a move by a rival European merchant company. Despite Dutch fears of invasion, sometimes well founded and other times bordering on the paranoid, the Company was able to maintain exclusive control of this oceanic crossroads for almost the next 150 years. The settlement that sprung up at the Cape, particularly the port town itself, bore the indelible imprint of the Dutch East India Company empire. It was the particular trajectories of the various networks that comprised the Company empire that determined both the character and the role of the Cape as a crossroads of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

This paper also examines the Cape metaphorically as a crossroads for scholarly debates on colonialism, empire, urban history and diaspora. It engages with the literature on the nature of port cities as oceanic entities and argues that Cape Town shared more characteristics with the colonial Atlantic port cities than with Indian ocean port polities that were later colonized by Europeans. Cape Town intersects with the emerging literature on 'oceanic worlds' by being part of both the Atlantic and Indian ocean worlds at this time, while not conforming to the major patterns of either, although it is rarely included in the academic literature on either ocean. Last but not least, the Cape of Good Hope was a crucible for multiple layers of migrations that were part of the movement of people in the Dutch East India Company empire. This paper attempts to bring the elements of these movements into focus in a single analytical framework that addresses the phenomenon of the migrations in the historical past and the growth of diasporic consciousness in the cultural present of contemporary post-apartheid South Africa.

Cape Town's Urban History:

The title of this paper describing Cape Town as the "tavern of the seas" is an ambiguous reference to the way that the urban history of the city has been written and the way it was characterized historically during the Dutch East India Company period. Charles Boxer speculated on who first gave the town the appellation of de Indische Zeeherberg (Tavern of the Indian Ocean); it was already in common usage by the eighteenth century when the Swedish surgeon-botanist Carl Peter Thunberg traveling to the Cape in 1772 described it as:

(a)n inn for travelers to and from the East Indies, who, after several months' sail may here get refreshments of all kinds, and are then about half way to the place of their destination, whether homeward or outward bound.¹

Amateur historians have often employed the term to write anecdotal and antiquarian romantic histories of Cape Town stressing the cosmopolitan character of the Cape and the raucous adventures of the sailors ashore, telling tales from a European, mostly male, perspective.²

The academic scholarship on the urban history of Cape Town has consciously chipped away at that façade, particularly in the workshops that resulted in the series Studies in the History of Cape Town which were published in six volumes between 1979 and 1988. During this period Robert Ross wrote one of the few essays situating the growth of Cape Town in a comparative colonial context within an analysis of its integration into a world capitalist markets.³ Overall, Cape Town's urban history has developed within the
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fluctuations in trading relationships of walled cities with orientation to the sea before the seventeenth century. Individual port cities waxed and waned, but the system was fairly coherent in its patterns of trade. The 'concentricity of entrepot and polity was almost a universal phenomenon in Southeast Asia'. The increased presence of European traders who forced their commercial interests by the use of political interference backed by military force accelerated the decline of specific indigenous port cities from the mid seventeenth centuries, shifting focus to those occupied, conquered or established by Europeans and their marshalling of indigenous labor. The conquest of Melaka in 1511 by the Portuguese, and subsequent conquest by the Dutch in 1641, precipitated the city's decline from the most cosmopolitan emporium in the world, but in turn stimulated the growth of alternative Southeast Asian entrepots like Aceh, Banten and the coastal sultanates of the Malay peninsula. In turn, port cities like Banten that were not conquered militarily stimulated the establishment of European-controlled rival ports designed specifically to divert already existing trade patterns and link them to direct sea routes with Europe. A case in point is the establishment in 1619 of Batavia, the Asian capital of the Dutch East India Company empire, in the vicinity of Banten on the west coast of Java is a case in point.

Part of the conceptual problem with characterizations of Southeast Asian and Asian port-polities by scholars in the late 1980s was the insistence that they were "Asian". The original collection of essays edited by Frank Broeze, *Brides of the Sea* was revised in its second incantation by dropping the feminization of urban entities but retained its Asia-centricity in the title Gateways of Asia. Although Broeze claimed that his notion of "Asia" came from Said's more expansive geographical definition of the concept in his famous book Orientalism, the inclusion of East African port cities in both books is surely a stretch of the imagination. It's interesting to note the reluctance to embrace the idea of the Indian Ocean as a category of analysis within this literature, partly because of the inclusion of port cities on the South China and East Seas. The unifying factor of urban forms in Gateways of Asia is that:

The foundations of most if not all Asian port cities ultimately rests on indigenous fishing villages. It would not be too much to see the origins of Asian sea faring in the myriad of fishing communities which, to a very large extent, still stretch along much of the littoral of the continent and its islands.

The main problem with including Cape Town as an Indian Ocean or "Asian" port city is that it grew entirely without direct contact with indigenous Indian Ocean shipping networks. Cape Town as a port was exclusively tied into European shipping patterns across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. There is no evidence that Asian, African or Arabic ships ever entered Table Bay before the nineteenth century. Nor could
indigenous hunter-gatherer or pastoral societies in the Western or Eastern Cape prior to European settlement be characterized as "fishing villages". The orientation of indigenous societies in the region was not towards the sea. Trading relations between African societies in the geographical area of modern South Africa took place through overland routes. Although these contacts were ancient, they did not rely on riverine communications and did not resemble the "upstream-downstream" hierarchical relationships between Southeast Asian communities linked to the coast.

Cape Town's primary function remained a refreshment post and hospital for ships' crews and a repair dock for European ships plying the waters to and from Asia and Europe. Their numbers fluctuated depending on factors. Firstly, the state of alliances between the Netherlands and other European states determined which ships had permission to enter Table Bay. The Company officials could deny anchorage or provisions to foreign ships, although supplying these services was profitable for the Company. Between 1700-1714 over one thousand ships anchored in Table Bay with only 64% of these belonging to the Company. While during the mid-eighteenth century numbers fluctuated, they increased precipitously in the later decades of the century. Combined with this annual fluctuation in the number of ships was the seasonal nature of shipping in general. Ships were most commonly in harbor for approximately a month during the autumn and spring, which had a massive seasonal influence on the population of the Cape in any one year. The population of the Cape was therefore tied to its role as a port city with a similar seasonal pattern to the Indian Ocean port polities dependent on monsoon winds for their main trading networks.

**Cape Town in the Atlantic World:**

An alternative perspective in examining the structure of Cape Town as a port city is to turn westwards towards the Atlantic Ocean. The concept of an "Atlantic World" is more coherent and longer lived than the emerging debates on an "Indian Ocean World". Bernard Baylin's article on 'The Idea of Atlantic History' posits that the unifying concept of an Atlantic World emerged from historians analyzing the unification of the Old and New Worlds in terms of the common development of societies based on western European Christian civilization. However, as John Thornton has powerfully argued, any consideration of the Atlantic world must have as one of its central premises the examination of the role of Africans in the making of this oceanic world.

Examining the port cities of the Atlantic Ocean shifts an emphasis away from the purely commercial and political role of the Indian Ocean port cities towards complementary functions of administration and defense. Stressing these multiple elements of the Atlantic port city, and their origins in European colonialism, bears direct comparison with the main functions of Cape Town as a port city. Atlantic port cities were similarly not tied into pre-existing indigenous shipping and long distance trading routes. European colonial shipping provided the impetus for trans-Atlantic shipping and retained a monopoly on the ownership of oceanic transportation. It was European ships harboring in colonial Atlantic port cities that transported goods and people from the interiors of the lands bordering the ocean. The trade in people as commodities to the port cities of the colonial Americas and Caribbean during the trans-Atlantic slave trade also bears comparison with Cape Town. The Cape colony relied on the transportation of slaves from around the Indian Ocean to provide the basis of its colonial workforce. While indigenous Khoikhoi were variously incorporated into the rural labor force, the port city itself at the Cape was almost exclusively dependent on slave labor.

**Cape Town as a cross-oceanic port city:**

Historians of the Indian Ocean have already acknowledged that the multiplicity of long term and complex networks of association across and around the ocean make it difficult to define a unified concept of the region. Perhaps one alternative is to borrow the national motto of modern Indonesia "unity in diversity". Eric Tagliocozzo has made the latest attempt at a long term overview of common experiences in the transformation of the Indian Ocean in terms of large-scale economic and social processes. He employs Michael Pearson's concept of "littoral societies" as communities extending from the coast that are influenced by their relationship with the port, an influence that weakens with geographic distance. This concept of a littoral society has the advantage of integrating the harbor town with its hinterland, in a similar way to earlier analyses of Southeast Asian indigenous port polities. Tagliocozzo identifies three major 'littoral regions' on the boundaries of the Indian Ocean: the eastern littoral including Southeast Asia; the northern littoral incorporating South Asia; and the western littoral of East Africa. This conceptualization has the advantage of incorporating East Africa within an analytical category of the Indian Ocean schema and takes into account the major dynamics of indigenous trading networks rather than cross-oceanic patterns.

But one of the problems with examining port cities or littoral societies is that it downplays the importance of shipping as the process of voyaging rather than in terms of transportation of commodities or people from point-A to point-B. Cape Town was a site within a shipping network that accommodated large numbers of people either on a permanent basis or seasonally transient one. When one considers this major feature of Cape Town as an oceanic crossroads rather than concentrating on the urban history of its fixed...
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Atlantic ocean to bring slaves to the Cape.

Two ships, one from Dahomey in West Africa the another from Angola in south-west Africa, traversed the Atlantic ocean to bring slaves to the Cape. The vast majority of slaves came from the various Indian Ocean networks of slave trades. The Company utilized these indigenous networks and overlaid their own slave
trajectories of other European nationalities in the Company

Cape Town emerged within the Company period as a littoral society fundamentally engaged with the intersections of multiple imperial networks of trade, information and migration across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The Dutch imperial networks are of primary importance because the Company, by virtue of its territorial possession of the Cape and its harbors, was able to control access to these shipping networks as they intersected with the city. David Hancock's characterization of Atlantic world has direct resonance for the Cape.

[To] accentuate inter-imperial behaviour over intra-imperial behaviour would be to miscast reality. One really needs to present both. In its identification of a community more-or-less oceanic, the Atlantic history perspective, if it is to be anything more than boiled-over imperial history, must accentuate cross-boundary exchanges. At the same time, it extends our understanding of how real people constructed their commercial, social and cultural lives out of plural demands and influences, especially how marginal members of society wove together threads from local and international sources to create syncretically new social phenomena and cultural forms.26

Instead of examining the process of movement itself, Cape Town can be examined as a node in these networks of movement across the Atlantic and Indian oceans that bring into focus both rulers and ruled as engaged in different forms of migration. This perspective contrasts with that of Ross and Telkamp who claimed that 'cities were superfluous to the purposes of colonists' from the point of view of the colonists, the cities were necessary evils, as they were parasites on the rural producers, competing with the colonists in the process of surplus extraction.27 One cannot separate production from consumption in the case of Cape Town as a "tavern of the seas".

**Sojourns, Sentences, Migrations and Diasporas at the Cape:**

This paper argues that there are two oceanic networks interacting in the peopling of the Cape during the Dutch East India Company period. Of course, this process took place within the context of the peopling of southern Africa over millennia. The colonial myth of large parts of southern Africa as having been "empty land" has long been debunked and it could never be sustained in the western Cape where indigenous occupation of the land was ancient and inscribed in the landscape. From the time the Company set up shop at the Cape, a small number of Khoikhoi joined the settlement and subsequently there was a small indigenous population in the town.

The Dutch East India Company instituted various networks of migration that intersected at the Cape. Almost from the beginning of the Dutch residence at the Cape, strands of these networks were brought together. At first, European settlement was both semi-permanent and seasonal. The Company outpost was not at first considered a permanent fixture, it took decades for the definitive decision to establish sovereignty over the land. Therefore, the first European migration to the Cape was part of the sojourn patterns of the Company that scattered its personnel administrators, soldiers and artisans around its various settlements on a temporary basis. European Company personnel crossed the Atlantic Ocean and were assigned to particular settlements around the Indian Ocean, but could apply for transfer from one to another post. This pattern could be characterized as a trading diaspora, but in the sense that Philip Curtin has used the term, I think it needs modification to be more accurately described as an 'imperial diaspora'.28 It was not until a commitment to permanent settlement of the Cape was made in the 1670s that one can claim a stable European migration took place. Around the same time, the first voluntary migration of civilians took place, with the Company offering refuge to several hundred French Huguenots who allowed to settle and were given land at the Cape to farm.29 These early voluntary migrations slightly shifted the gender ratio of European residents at the Cape from an overwhelmingly male population. Nevertheless, European residence at the Cape continued in patterns of small-scale migrations from Europe combined with the decision of small numbers of Company personnel to settle permanently at the Cape alongside much larger patterns of temporary residence or seasonal sojourning. The "Dutch" nature of the Company has long been disputed. Various historians have traced the trajectories of other European nationalities in the Company and at the Cape. For example, Linder's detailed register of the Swiss at the Cape is one of the works that has historians to tease out the regional variations in European migrations to the Cape of Good Hope.29 Not all European migrations, whether temporary or permanent, were voluntarily made. The Cape doubled as a penal colony for the Dutch East India's Indian Ocean empire. Unlike most other early modern European colonies, the Cape did not receive convicts direct from Europe across the Atlantic Ocean. Europeans were transported as convicts to the Cape throughout the Company period but came only from the Company's Indian Ocean empire.30

Almost from the outset, the port city at the Cape was also a slave colony and was therefore engaged in patterns of permanent forced migration. The Cape was not in general part of the Atlantic slave trade. Only two ships, one from Dahomey in West Africa the another from Angola in south-west Africa, traversed the Atlantic ocean to bring slaves to the Cape. The vast majority of slaves came from the various Indian Ocean networks of slave trades. The Company utilized these indigenous networks and overlaid their own slave...
The ethnic origins and identities of these slaves from the eastern Indian Ocean were complex and it is difficult to ascertain where many of them were born despite slave naming practices that indicated supposed place of origin. Although one can confidently identify a forced Malagasy diaspora to the Cape, in general one cannot do the same for, say, a Bugis diaspora. Robin Cohen’s characterization of a ‘victim diaspora’ would, interestingly enough, include the Huguenots alongside the slaves that arrived at the Cape. It’s not clear how one would categorize penal transportation within notions of a diaspora because, at least for Europeans, those who survived their sentences did not remain permanently at the Cape. This is not necessarily the case for Asians who were forcibly migrated as criminals and political prisoners. James Armstrong has traced the transportation to the Cape of Chinese men, overwhelmingly residents of Batavia who were convicted of crimes or exiled as illegal residents. In a sense, one could extend notions of the Chinese trading diaspora to a trans-Indian Ocean dimension that includes the Cape. One element of Indian Ocean diasporas and migrations that has not previously been considered is that the transportation of Muslim slaves and prisoners links the Cape to hajj pilgrimages to Mecca and the societies bordering the Red Sea. Some of the most prominent exiles sent to the Cape from the Indies were Muslim scholars who were part of the Indian Ocean Islamic networks and who therefore linked the Cape to this wider realm. The transmission of Islam came directly through these slaves and political prisoners who formed the basis of the Muslim community at the Cape.

**Cape Town as a Diasporic Site:**

One of the disadvantages of teasing out the networks of migration to the Cape across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans is the tendency to treat the strands of migration as separate phenomenon. It goes without saying that the colonial society at the Cape, despite the Company’s racial categorization of the population of its settlements, was forged through the intertwining of these people from different parts of the world as well as those who were there in the first place.

In the evolution of South African society, the Dutch colonial period has been seen by South Africans both within distinct migrations of Europeans and as the mixing of people living at the Cape who formed the basis of those communities who were later classified as “white” and “coloured” under apartheid. I would argue that the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa has brought renewed interest among South Africans in their search for cultural origins and that this process contributes to the theorization of what “diaspora” means in a colonial context.

The strands of cross-oceanic migrations that I have outlined above can be more accurately described in combination as migrations and sojourns rather than diasporas. A crucial part of theorizing “diaspora” is that a diaspora includes the continued claim of a specific homeland by those living elsewhere. What has emerged in South Africa is about the last decade is the development of diasporic consciousness among individuals and communities, particularly at the Cape. Coloured communities at the Cape have begun to embrace their slave origins and in some instances search for specific sites from which their forebears originated. There has been a renewed interest in claiming “Malay” ethnic heritage in the Cape which projects a notion of a “Malay diaspora” backwards into the past, particularly (but not exclusively) among Cape Town Muslims. Travel agents in Cape Town do quite a brisk trade in “homeland tours” to Southeast Asia where South Africans visit Malaysia and Indonesia to explore what they believe is, and embrace, as their own cultural heritage. Individuals have traced their family genealogies to specific islands in the Indonesian archipelago and sought their “roots” in these communities. Others have embraced India as the site of their diasporic past, although not in religious terms. Interestingly, Madagascar isn’t a significant site in this evolution of diasporas in the Cape despite its significance for the origins of slaves.

I think this process in South Africa mirrors patterns of the proliferation of people claiming to be part of “diasporas” in the era of globalization. While some academics have claimed that this is a process that indicates the weakening of loyalties to and identifications with the nation-state due to processes of globalization, in South Africa it is precisely the opposite. Renewed interest in “ethnic origins” conceptualized through notions of diaspora are part of the claiming of what being part of the “new South Africa” is all about. Disengaged from apartheid and racial discrimination, claims of ethnicity in South Africa have no legal basis in people’s relation to the state and therefore can be embraced historically as part of the cultural history of the country. This is most clearly visible in the Cape where the majority of communities and individuals claiming origins in slavery and forced migration live, where the representation of these diasporas also form part of the marketing of the Cape in local and international tourism. The revitalization of Cape Town’s history as the
"tavern of the seas" has shifted meaning from a Eurocentric cliché towards an acknowledgement of the Cape as a place where people who traversed the Atlantic and Indian Oceans met at this oceanic crossroads.

Notes

9 Reid, Expansion and Crisis. p. 85.
11 J. Kathirithamby-Wells, 'Introduction' p. 2.
15 By no means all European ships stopped at the Cape of Good Hope. As Boucher points out 'Cadiz, the Brazilian coast and the islands of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans sheltered many ships; St Helena in particular was used by British East IndiamenPortugal, with an anchorage at Mozambique made little use of Dutch facilities in Southern Africa'. M. Boucher, 'The Cape and foreign shipping, 1714-1723', South African Historical Journal, 6, November 1974, pp. 5-6.
21 Indigenous Africans, Americans and Caribbean islanders obviously engaged in extensive riverine and localized sea travel and commerce, but they did not navigate trans-oceanic voyages.
The oceans had long been subject to the freedom-of-the-seas doctrine - a principle put forth in the seventeenth century essentially limiting national rights and jurisdiction over the oceans to a narrow belt of sea surrounding a nation's coastline. The remainder of the seas was proclaimed to be free to all and belonging to none. The hope was for a more stable order, promoting greater use and better management of ocean resources and generating harmony and goodwill among States that would no longer have to eye each other suspiciously over conflicting claims. Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. The retail of alcohol was so central to the economy and society of the Cape of Good Hope during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it earned the nickname "tavern of two oceans." Serving as it did as a pivot between two oceans; the existence of a colonial society at the Cape of Good Hope made possible the development of a globalised, unified oceanic world by the nineteenth century. Bookmark. by Gerald Groenewald.