

The Art of Hubbing: The Role of Small Islands in Indian Ocean Connectivity

Halle, 15–17 October 2015

The conference “The Art of Hubbing: The Role of Small Islands in Indian Ocean Connectivity” was held at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany from 15 – 17 October 2015. It is already the second conference on the Indian Ocean World organised by Burkhard Schnepel and his Max Planck Fellow Group “Connectivity in Motion: Port Cities of the Indian Ocean”. The conference focused on small islands and their heuristic potential in the anthropology and historiography of the Indian Ocean. It organised in an international interdisciplinary framework bringing together scholars from African, South Asian, South East Asian and East Asian Studies as well as anthropology, history, political science and sociology. This broad mix of regional and disciplinary expertise stimulated vibrant discussions among the participants who all shared an interest in Island and/or Indian Ocean Studies.

The conference commenced with a thematic introduction by the organiser Burkhard Schnepel. The core idea which the conference sought to address was that small islands have been, are and continue to be “hubs”, i.e. contact and exchange zones, negotiation spaces and socio-cultural laboratories, crucial in Indian Ocean connectivity. Schnepel argued that “hubbing” may be seen as a process of strategic accumulation and concentration of connections. He elaborated on this theme by emphasising three vital issues around which the event revolved: First, the exploration of the various ways in which islands, insularity and islandness matter in establishing, maintaining and interrupting maritime and terrestrial connections in the Indian Ocean World. Second, the empirical investigation of particular island sites and how they emerge and sustain and/or collapse and vanish as nodal points (in various respects) in Indian Ocean networks in the course of history. And third, the study of small islands as confluences of geography, history, society and imaginaries, which enables us to investigate broader issues, such as diasporic living, creolisation, post-/colonialism, socio-cultural exchanges of various sorts and globalisation.

Picking up on the core theme of insularity, smallness and “hubbing”, André Gingrich (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna) argued in his keynote address “Smallness and Insular Hubs: Some Working Hypotheses from Historical Anthropology” for a notion of relative smallness by distinguishing three types: first, a “binary” sort of island smallness that rests on the relation to a large mainland neighbour; second, a “buffer” position between larger

landmasses in which small islands might be situated, and third, a “cluster” variant that lumps together small islands in close proximity. Drawing on historic examples, he made the point that each type of relative smallness makes specific hub functions more or less likely.

All 14 presentations that followed in the subsequent two days discussed issues of insularity, “hubbing” and connectivity by examining cases covering almost the entire Indian Ocean rim over a period of nearly two millennia. To be able to synthesise the contributions most comprehensively I will divide them in two groups: on the one hand, those presentations that focus on island hubs to explore the workings of connectivity, and on the other, those papers that centre on connectivity to investigate to roles of islands.

The first kind of presentation includes Keebet von Benda-Beckmann’s (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) “Ambon – A Spicy Hub”. In her paper she investigated how the colonial struggle between Portuguese, Dutch and Indonesian (and other) powers for control of the spice trade, in particular cloves and nutmeg, has shaped contemporary society in the harbour city of Ambon. Von Benda-Beckmann then related the long history of connections with Europe, the Arab world and South Asia to contemporary tensions, eventually arguing that despite Ambon’s long multi-cultural legacy segregation along religious lines now appears to be more rigorous than ever before.

Jürgen G. Nagel (Fernuniversität Hagen) also presented a case study from the Indonesian-Malayan region and also focused on the interplay of religious and economic facets. His paper “Commodities and Creeds: Changing Connectivity of Makassar (South Sulawesi), 16th to 20th Century” investigates the fluctuation of connections of a port city in a long-term perspective. Besides problematising and filling some gaps in Makassar historiography the main contribution of Nagel’s paper was to show how the port city’s commercial hub function intersected with its religious hub function. He concluded that Makassar’s long history reflects well the various expansions and contractions of religious, political and commercial connections to closer and more distant localities and thereby offers insights into the mechanics of “hubbing”.

In his paper “Port Louis (Mauritius) and the Making of a ‘Hub-Society’” Burkhard Schnepel (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) argued that from the time it was first inhabited in the 17th century the island of Mauritius has always functioned as a hub. He maps out how Mauritians have over the last few hundred years strategically positioned themselves at junctions of trans-regional networks. Schnepel argues that Mauritians have perfected the “art of hubbing” to that extend that the island is now not merely a maritime hub for commodity trading (like sugar, seafood or petrol products), but is also a hub for knowledge and information flows as well as

financial transactions. Probably the biggest merit of Schnepel's anthropological discussion was to demonstrate a society's agency and creativity in establishing itself as a hub at multiple levels.

Historian Tansen Sen (City University of New York) took a different approach, investigating not an inside, but a particular outside view on the island of Ceylon. In his contribution "Small? Big? Island? The Perceptions of Sri Lanka in Chinese Sources" Sen presents his findings on how Chinese travellers portrayed the island between the 5th and 15th centuries. Sen's historiography revealed that from the 5th century onwards the Chinese had established quite sophisticated geographical depictions of the island and were well aware of Sri Lanka's commercial hub function. Many sources from Chinese merchants, diplomats, scribes and monks also mention Sri Lanka as an important centre of Buddhism, which is further evidence that historical contemporaries appear to have given prominence to commercial and religious aspects in depicting a distant land.

Ian Walker (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) presented a paper, entitled "Zanzibar. A Hub in Comorian Diasporic Networks in the Western Indian Ocean", in which he explored relationships among individual Comorians across multiple localities spread along the African coast. His analysis focused on a prominent Comorian who resided in Zanzibar in the early 20th century. By means of loan and debt records Walker traced a network of relationships that enabled him to demonstrate how Zanzibar's cosmopolitan centrality helped maintain ties within the scattered Comorian diaspora.

Zanzibar is also the location of Kjersti Larsen's (University of Oslo) paper, called "Multifaceted Identities, Multiple Dwellings: Connectivity and Flexible Household-configurations in Zanzibar Town". Larsen's rich ethnography of Zanzibari households highlighted the complex intertwining of regional mobility, social organisation and identity politics. She argued that ideological and structural flexibility inherent in multi-ethnic and multi-religious households in Zanzibar Town equips residents for manoeuvring in different social and cultural spaces. This, she continued, not only enables easier integration of religious and identity plurality, but also forms a facilitating precondition for spatial mobility and hence connectivity.

With "Bali and Indian-Indonesian Connectivity: Why a Small Island Has Mattered" Martin Ramstedt (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) presented a paper in which he investigated the politics of imaginaries of "Bali" in 20th century Indonesia. Assumptions, projections and romanticisations of "Bali" as an enclave of ancient Indian roots, he argued, serve Indian Hindu intellectuals and Javanese nationalists alike to glorify Indonesia's Indian past and to counter present day Islamisation tendencies. Ramstedt empha-

sised that the strategic appropriation of historic Indo-Indonesian connectivity forms an integral part of 20th century cultural politics that constructs Bali as a significant other within Indonesia.

Ajay Gandhi (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen) presented a comparison of two Indian Ocean port cities in his paper “Specks that Speak Loudly: The View from Mumbai and Ilha de Moçambique”. His comparison of the two places teased out varying degrees of integration with state and imperial authority and explored their entrepôt functions for religious, linguistic, but also criminal circulations.

Vijaya Teelock’s (University of Mauritius) paper “The Emergence of ‘Local Cosmopolitans’: Migration and Settlement in Early 18th up to Mid-19th Century Port Louis” was a detailed historiographic analysis of urban stratification. By tracing the evolvment and decline of spatial distributions of particular segments of Mauritian society Teelock showed how the city of Port Louis emerged as the social, cultural and political hub not only for Mauritius itself, but also for its neighbouring islands.

Steffen F. Johannessen (Norwegian Business School, Oslo) showed how the notion of the “hub” can usefully be applied to analyse connectivity in the Chagos Archipelago. In his paper “From Coconut Trade to ‘War on Terror’: Connectivity and Disconnections in the Indian Ocean” Johannessen demonstrated how the control over access to the islands has dramatically shaped recent Indian Ocean history. The installation of a UK-US airbase in 1973 transformed the archipelago into a military hub through which military personnel, terrorist suspects, explosives and many kinds of fatal equipment circulate between the Middle East, other Indian Ocean localities, and the United States of America.

Johannessen’s paper is an exemplar for all the above papers that focused on how connectivity features in island hubs. The following set of presentations centre on how island hubs feature in connectivity – so they rather explore the properties of the connections than the qualities of the knots.

Beatrice Nicolini (Catholic University of Milan) discussed a journey of the first Omani ship to visit America in her paper “Global Indian Ocean Ports: Sailing from Arabia, to Zanzibar, and to New York”. This mid-19th century expedition presented the first ever mission of an African or Arabian state to the United States of America. She argued that the mercantile motivation of the journey was closely linked to political aims, because agreements on economic exchange were the main driving force for the travellers.

Edward A. Alpers (University of California, Los Angeles) in his contribution “Islands Connect: People, Things and Ideas among the Small Islands of the Western Indian Ocean” investigated the various linkages between islands along the coast of East Africa. For his analysis he favoured

the notion of the rhizome over that of the network to emphasise the lively, multidirectional and transregional aspects of connections among these places. He argued that the rhizome metaphor provides another way to think about what the conference addressed as “hubs”.

In “Displaced Passengers: States, Movements and Disappearances in the Indian Ocean” Godfrey Baldacchino (University of Malta) explored two cases of relocation within the Indian Ocean to scrutinise how this pressures states and attracts tourists. Baldacchino presented the cases of the evicted islanders of Chagos and the vanished Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 to argue that various modi of mobility and immobility should be included in the study of Indian Ocean connectivity.

Gwyn Campbell (McGill University, Montreal) investigated Kilwa as an intermediary between Africa and the Indian Ocean World from its beginnings to the 19th century in his paper “Kilwa Island and the Western Indian Ocean World”. He emphasised the importance of considering Indian Ocean connectivity beyond the fringes of the geographical margins of its waters. It follows from this that an exploration of connections in the Indian World must acknowledge maritime as well as terrestrial movements.

Overall, the papers picked up and contributed to the conference theme either by centring on a particular island hub or by highlighting connections. The interdisciplinary mix of conference participants provided an interesting setting for enriching discussions and helped to promote the macro-region of the Indian Ocean World as a trans-regional multidisciplinary research arena. The conference illustrates that Indian Ocean Studies offer interesting heuristics not only to challenge, but also to transcend common regional and conceptual departmentalisations in academia.

Boris Wille