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Networks of Empire and Imperial Sovereignty

In the Cape Town spring of 1997 one of the twentieth century's greatest heroes and liberators, Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace Prize winner and the first democratically elected president of South Africa, met with one of the century's greatest tyrants and dictators, General Suharto, President of Indonesia, who came to power after a bloody coup that ushered in over three decades of authoritarian military rule. One official event in Suharto's South African visit involved the two elderly presidents trudging up a steep path of foot-worn stone steps, entourages in tow, leading to an austere white-washed and green-domed shrine where both men paid homage to a shared national hero. Today a plaque on an outside wall of the structure marks the day they stood together on that windy hill overlooking the Cape coast at the tomb of a Muslim saint known locally as Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar, who was exiled from Java by the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* – VOC) and died at the Cape of Good Hope in 1699. Through Shaykh Yusuf, Mandela and Suharto implicitly acknowledged a common colonial past in the VOC empire.[1] Shaykh Yusuf had already been claimed by Mandela to be a forefather of the liberation struggle in South Africa. Suharto had also declared Shaykh

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[1] The Dutch East India Company, *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), is correctly translated as the United East India Company. However, the common English usage is the Dutch East India Company, which is used in this book interchangeably with the "Company" and the "VOC." The United Provinces of the Netherlands is referred to as either the United Provinces or the Netherlands. Holland is used to refer specifically to the province, not the whole country. Dutch refers to the Dutch language, the people who originated in the Netherlands, and people in the VOC empire of Dutch descent (unless otherwise specified.) European is the more general term for people from Europe, of European descent, and the ascribed legal category.

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Yusuf Tajul Khalwati a National Hero of the Republic of Indonesia.[2] Although the commemoration in 1997 was staged as a public relations exercise that punctuated the more immediately pressing bilateral negotiations taking place between the two leaders and their governments, their coming together through a relatively obscure historical figure brought to the fore the complexities of historical interpretations that forge their respective national pasts.

Almost ten years later, at a lavish formal banquet in the Indonesian State Palace in Jakarta, South Africa's second president, Thabo Mbeki, addressed these same historical links in a toast to the first directly elected president of the Republic of Indonesia, Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The construction of the Istana Negara (state palace), located on Jalan Merdeka (Freedom Road), began in the last years of the VOC and was eventually taken over by the Dutch colonial state as the governor general's official residence. This symbolic bastion of the colonial past no doubt threw the burden of the present into sharp relief that evening. Like Suharto's visit to South Africa, Mbeki's visit to Indonesia marked a first in diplomatic relations between the two nations and was evidence of a political transformation that had taken place within and between both countries. On this occasion President Mbeki chose first to honor Autshumao, a Khoekhoe leader and South Africa's "earliest freedom fighter" who was taken on board an English ship from the Cape to Java in the 1630s and returned only to be later imprisoned on Robben Island by the Dutch after they invaded the Cape in 1652. Having established that indigenous African resistance to European colonialism predated Shaykh Yusuf's exile as a "freedom fighter who fought against Dutch colonialism," Mbeki stressed the role of "unsung heroines and heroes" of the past who were "transported as human cargo to the Cape to serve as slaves to the colonists" and became "builders of our new nation." He further affirmed that the local community in South Africa had built the shrine visited by Mandela and Suharto to honor "Shaykh Yusuf and others who were brought to South Africa against their will" and declared that the site was being designated a national monument.[3]

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[2] *Cape Times* and other press sources, November 21, 1997. See also *Impact International* 24(6), 1994, p. 10, for Mandela's speech regarding Shaykh Yusuf as a liberation struggle fighter. For a report of Suharto's declaration of Syekh (Shaykh) Yusuf Tajul Khalwati as a national hero see *Kompas* (Jakarta), November 10, 1995.

[3] Thabo Mbeki, "Reply by the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to the Toast Remarks by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, at the State Banquet, Istana Negara, Jakarta," April 19, 2005, http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2005/05042008451004.htm.

Successive presidents of the independent modern nations of South Africa and Indonesia continue to invoke seventeenth-century links between the two regions as a shared history of forced migration and the struggle against European colonialism that created a common heritage of community. Although these speeches serve contemporary political interests and potential alliances, they do indeed represent a reinterpretation of an historical narrative of the nation in both South Africa and Indonesia. For South Africa, nation building requires a history of inclusion in the struggle against oppression and dispossession of the majority. Indigenous resistance and forced migration are paired processes of a colonial past that are considered direct precursors to the struggle against apartheid. For Indonesia, historical links across the Indian Ocean to South Africa exist in a broader continuum of cultural expansion and migration that began in the first era of the great transoceanic voyages of the Malay seafarers, nearly a millennium before Shaykh Yusuf arrived at the Cape in 1694. Yet even within this longer trajectory of ocean crossing, the importance of a shared Islamic heritage is of much greater significance to Indonesia as the most populous Muslim nation in the world. Shaykh Yusuf was already a scholar of renown in seventeenth-century Indian Ocean Islamic networks and therein lies his significance for Indonesians.

Although Shaykh Yusuf is revered as a common national hero exiled for his beliefs and struggle against the VOC, the history of forced migration in the form of slavery, which was widespread in indigenous Southeast Asian societies as well as European colonies in the early modern period, is not emphasized as formative of the Indonesian nation. Neither South African nor Indonesian narratives of Shaykh Yusuf as a national hero highlight his having gone into exile accompanied not only by numerous members of his family and followers but also by his slaves. In South Africa this acknowledgment would dilute the force of his struggle against Dutch colonialism; in Indonesia it would not be considered relevant because debt slavery was an ancient and ubiquitous indigenous social practice only later adapted and adopted as chattel slavery by the Dutch in the evolution of their empire.

In both cases the presidents of South Africa, Mandela and Mbeki, and of Indonesia, Suharto and Yudhoyono, were well aware of their roles in creating new historical narratives that attempt to build unity among the diverse class, religious and ethnic groups of their respective nations. Colonial histories and hagiographies in both South Africa and Indonesia pronounced the Dutch East India Company period the origin of the modern nation and the bringing of European civilization to backward indigenous peoples. This narrative was reinforced in South Africa under

apartheid while simultaneously being abandoned after World War Two in independent Indonesia. Although their historical trajectories of colonialism diverged after the end of the Dutch East India Company period in the closing years of the eighteenth century, both countries have borders created as a legacy of their colonial past and have sought to maintain their territorial boundaries in the transition to independence and democracy. As modern states, South Africa and Indonesia have grappled with ethnic, religious, and regional tensions that have threatened their territorial integrity. The apartheid regime that ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994 partially implemented its white supremacist ideology of "separate development" that divided the country into racially based invented "homelands" that would eventually be granted independence and leave no black South Africans with claims to citizenship in the Republic of South Africa. The end of apartheid was accompanied by a reorganization of provincial boundaries that reintegrated the former homelands into larger regional political entities.

Indonesian nationalists under Sukarno declared independence in 1945 after the end of the Japanese occupation during World War Two. Since then, the Republic of Indonesia has met repeated challenges from within by regional religious and ethnic movements. These movements claim the right to secede from the Republic to become independent nations. The challenges have ranged from the successful independence struggle in East Timor, which was invaded and incorporated into Indonesia in 1975, to the persistent civil war waged in Aceh province. The port-polity of Aceh was formed as a Muslim sultanate on the north coast of Sumatra around 1500 and fiercely defended its autonomy from external domination. When the VOC entered the Southeast Asian arena it compared the Sultan of Aceh, Iskander Muda (1607–36), to a young Alexander the Great.[4] The modern independence struggle was brought to a halt only by the force of nature after the region was devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The official national motto of the Republic of Indonesia, "unity in diversity," has been an ideal yet to be fully realized. Under vastly different circumstances both Indonesia and South Africa have sought to implement this vision of a unified nation and continue to do so.

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[4] Successive Dutch colonial regimes attempted to subdue Aceh. This was finally achieved by brutal military occupation by 1910 – only three decades before the Dutch colonial state would itself collapse instantly under invasion from the Japanese. Although Aceh was also a center for Indonesian nationalism, there remained powerful forces in the region who demanded autonomy if not outright independence from the Republic. Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and Other Histories of Sumatra*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005, pp. 5–20.

It is therefore not so surprising that Shaykh Yusuf, a seventeenth-century exile who embodied the principles of cross-cultural and inter-regional community building through his role as a religious leader in the early colonial periods of both Indonesia and South Africa, has come to the forefront as an important historical figure in contemporary nation-building narratives. Less explicitly acknowledged within this emerging narrative is a shared past through the Dutch East India Company as an imperial entity that claimed sovereignty over parts of the Indonesian archipelago and the Cape of Good Hope for nearly two hundred years before its demise at the end of the eighteenth century. During this period, the Dutch East India Company created networks across the Indian Ocean that brought partial territorial and legal sovereignties into a single imperial web. As an empire, the Company did not seek primarily to become a colonizer, and its territorial ambitions differed substantially among the various sites where it operated.

This book seeks to explain what constituted the Dutch East India Company as an empire by examining the networks through which its sovereignty was exercised. It focuses particularly on the networks of free and forced migration to begin to explain how the Company developed and coalesced as a system or web of networks. From this perspective, Shaykh Yusuf emerges as a person engaged in these networks against his will, first as a political prisoner and later as an exile of the Company. The network of imperial power included the categorization of people as slaves, convicts and political prisoners. These legal categories of bondage intersected with, but were not constituted by, the network of forced migration comprised of the slave trade, penal transportation and political exile. Despite having been banished to multiple and far-flung Company controlled sites, Shaykh Yusuf managed to circumvent VOC efforts to neutralize his influence. As a scholar, teacher, and political leader of renown in Islamic networks of worship, writing and pilgrimage across the Indian Ocean, Shaykh Yusuf's capture and exile by the Company in Batavia, then Colombo (Ceylon) and finally the Cape, enhanced rather than diminished his reputation. As a result he was able to extend the reach of autonomous Islamic networks to the southern tip of Africa.

By concentrating on the circuit of forced migration connecting the Cape and Batavia, the Company's imperial headquarters on the island of Java, one can begin to envisage how other circuits of forced migration operated and, over time, coalesced into a network that constituted an important dimension of VOC sovereignty. Shaykh Yusuf's story is just one of many examples of how the VOC network of forced migration intersected in dynamic relation with indigenous Indian Ocean cultural and religious

networks to produce unexpected consequences for the Company. Attend-
ing to the dynamic interaction of VOC, European and indigenous net-
works in the Indian Ocean therefore enables one to consider Shaykh
Yusuf and other captives in their contemporary context in an early mod-
ern world and highlight their capacity for agency and influence. In this
world, the Dutch East India Company was but one of the European mer-
chant companies interjecting itself into a regional grid of ancient and
vibrant cultural, religious, and trading networks that had long eluded
domination by any one merchant enterprise, polity or empire.

Defining Imperial Networks

This book argues that the Dutch East India Company empire manifested
itself through cultural, legal, administrative, transportation, territorial,
military and exchange networks that amalgamated spatially and over
time into an imperial web whose sovereignty was effectively created
and maintained but always partial and contingent. It advances the view
that early modern empires were comprised of the material manifesta-
tions of lands and peoples conquered, and that these durable networks,
with regional circuits and sub-circuits, and territorially and institutionally
based nodes of regulatory power, operated not only on land and sea but
discursively as well. It further advances the view that these components
of imperial sovereignty were constituted through negotiations between
the Company's governing body in the metropole and the people who
managed its forts, factories, settlements, and colonies established in its
charter domain. VOC imperial sovereignty also developed in dynamic
response to challenges waged by individuals and other sovereign entities
operating within the same geographic grid, mainly in the Indian Ocean,
but extending to the South China Sea as well. By closely examining one
imperial network, forced migration, *Networks of Empire* seeks to explain
how the Dutch East India Company constituted its entire empire through
the creation and management of these multiple and intersecting fields of
partial sovereignty. It follows the Company's subjects of bondage across
multiple continents and examines their lives with respect to the dynamic
evolution of imperial sovereignty in the Indian Ocean region during the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

  The traditional historiography of empire has been dominated by the
temporal and spatial oppositional binaries of "rise and fall," "expansion
and decline," and, more recently, "center and periphery" and "metropole
and colony." Most of these analyses privilege the imperial center, or

metropole, as the driving force of the rise or expansion of empire. Accordingly, histories written from this perspective focus primarily on power as it flows from an imperial core to a colonial periphery at the level of the management and governance of its trading colonies and, conversely, on the products of extraction and trade as they flow back from the settled colony to the imperial center.[5]

The postcolonial critiques of the 1980s, however, reset the analysis to focus on the colonies and to thereby view colonized subjects as active participants in the colonial project. This reversal left the center-periphery model intact as it created new subjects of analysis that included the construction of identities of difference through a colonial discourse of race, class and gender. In discarding a single privileged vision of empire emanating from the European center, these scholars demonstrated that both metropole and colony were formed through their mutual encounters.[6]

In its second stage, the "new imperial history" of the 1990s sought ways to conceptualize empire as a more dynamic configuration of metropole and colony that could be studied from within a single analytical framework. Fred Cooper and Ann Stoler in particular proposed abandoning the binary formulation of metropole and colony and working instead towards a conceptualization of the temporal and modular elements of imperial sovereignty without losing sight of the articulation of local and global patterns of social transformation.[7] Their critiques of the presuppositions of colonial historiography have left historians with a daunting analytical challenge for the reconceptualization of the complexities of empire.

The concept of a network has proven useful in applying these insights to explain the multiple dimensions, partialities and instabilities of empires

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[5] Edward Gibbon's *The History of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* published between 1776 and 1789 inspired the title variation of "Rise and Fall," both of which have been used by subsequent generations of historians. For a recent example of center and peripheries see Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Polities of the British Empire and the United States, 1607–1788*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

[6] See for example collected editions including Nicholas Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992; Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997; Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire, a Reader: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

[7] Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in Cooper and Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire*, p. 4.

that cannot be adequately defined with reference either to their metropolitan "centers" or their colonial "peripheries." Alan Lester has been most successful to date in employing this concept through what he terms 'geographies of connection' in his analysis of Britain and South Africa in the context of the global reach of the British empire. He argues that "colonial and metropolitan sites were connected most obviously through material flows of capital, commodities and labour. . . . By the late eighteenth century, British material culture was already located within intensively developed circuits connecting Western Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. . . . The nodal points holding this expanded imperial web and its extra-imperial trading partners together were ports and the means of transmission between them, ships . . . However, colonial and metropolitan sites were articulated discursively as well as materially and through the same kinds of network infrastructure that serviced global commerce."[8] Lester's reconceptualization of an empire through its networks recognizes the multiplicity of imperial connections as it paradoxically narrows the analytical lens to create a more fully realized view of a particular dimension of the constantly changing and unstable imperial web.[9] Examining the constitution of empire through its networks has led to further studies that refocus attention from the European metropole to imperial centers in African, Asian and South American colonies. Thomas Metcalf portrays India as "a nodal point from which peoples, ideas, goods, and institutions – everything that enables empire to exist – radiated outward."[10] India, in other words, had its own peripheries in the Indian Ocean.

These studies of imperial networks have imposed specific constraints to achieve narrative coherence for this dynamic, multilayered and complex topic. Metcalf limits chronological periodization to examine multiple networks across the broad spatial range of the Indian Ocean, or the "British Lake" as this oceanic region became known in English during the nineteenth century.[11] Lester focuses on "geographies of connection" between two regions of empire, the British metropole based in London and its South African colony, to analyze the contingent material and discursive networks of empire.[12] The metaphor of network successfully transcends the meta-geographies that Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen argue have

[8] Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 6.

[9] Ibid., p. 13.

[10] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007, p. 1.

[11] Ibid., p. 9.   [12] Lester, *Imperial Networks*.

shaped modern perceptions of the world into continents, nation-states and binary global divisions of East and West.[13] Using the framework of "imperial careering" as form of biography that takes us more deeply into the operation of empire, Lambert and Lester have brought together a variety of narratives about individual colonial professionals who in many cases were highly mobile within their respective imperial networks.[14] Of course, while biographical writing allows for an exploration of the nuances of individual lives, it is an analytical form that is by definition temporally constrained by the span of a lifetime. Studying empire through biography therefore limits a consideration of the evolution of imperial sovereignty over an extended period of time.

Networks of Empire expands upon these prior insights by alternating between spatial and temporal levels of analysis to present a history of the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) empire from its inception in 1602 to its disintegration in 1799 across the entirety of its geographical domain of the Indian Ocean region. It does so without losing sight of the lives of individuals who were constrained by, also helped determine the limits of, imperial sovereignty. To render its movement from the imperial to the individual level of analysis more intelligible, *Networks of Empire* further develops the analytical framework of the imperial network.

In this book, an empire is comprised of an intersecting set of networks that, when considered as a whole, constitute a sovereign totality or imperial web that can be studied in both its temporal and its spatial manifestations. The Dutch East India Company was created as a merchant company through its charter granted by the States-General of the United Provinces in 1602 and disbanded through bankruptcy in 1799 when its remaining networks were taken over by the emergent Dutch state. The Company's empire evolved through the assumption and expression of sovereignty granted by the partial rights of independent governance in its charter domain east of the Cape of Good Hope and through the Straits of Magellan. The States-General awarded the Company exclusive rights in this geographical grid to create and impose laws, establish forts, factories and settlements, exercise monopolies of trade, sign treaties and wage

[13] Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageographies*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997.
[14] David Lambert and Alan Lester, "Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects," in David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 21–24.

conflicts with foreign nations, and inflict capital punishment on individuals under its jurisdiction. These sovereign rights were limited because ultimate power resided in the United Provinces of the Netherlands to the extent that the repercussions of wars in Europe were also played out in the Company's charter domain. This was particularly relevant in the wars against the Iberian states and in the series of Anglo-Dutch wars that provided a legal basis for VOC conquest of European nodes and networks in the Indian Ocean grid.

Conceptualizing empire as the totality of networks within a chartered domain allows for a macroexamination of shifting patterns of connection, dissolution, and reconnection within and among domains of imperial activity and, when historical sources provide, for a microexamination of the lived lives of people who populate the imperial field of action. This approach differs from J. R. and William H. McNeill's characterization of world history as "the human web." Because they are dealing with the whole of human history, the McNeills envisage a process of ever-increasing density of webs as sets of connections linking people in patterns of cooperation and competition that characterize human progress. They use the now familiar metaphor of the world-wide web to define successive historical contexts leading up to our contemporary globalized cosmopolitan present.[15] At a "bird's-eye view" this image of human history is compelling. However, defining imperial formations requires a closer examination of the way in which networks are created, strengthened, broken, reconnected, and sometimes dismantled entirely. Moreover, the interchangeability of networks and nodes within an imperial web, as described in this book, does not necessarily imply increasing density over time.

As conceived within this study, an empire consists of multiple material networks including those of bureaucracy, correspondence, trade, transportation, and migration, as well as discursive networks of law, administration, information, diplomacy, and culture. These independent yet intersecting networks exist simultaneously as paths of circulation for people, goods, and information and in a more condensed capacity as nodal regulatory points most often located in regional centers where power and authority generally tended to originate. These nodes not only include ships, factories, forts, settlements, urban centers, colonies and their frontier zones, but also certain charismatic individuals like Shaykh Yusuf. The VOC settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, for example, was

[15] J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003.