Introduction

In 1862, on a beach in what is today northeastern Somalia, a British colonial official told a Somali sultan that he faced a choice. It was a choice between personally beheading eight of his own subjects, or accepting the bombardment of his coastline by an armada of British gunboats looming in the distance offshore. Nine one-hundred-foot-long, fume-spewing steel-hulled frigates underlined the starkness of the decision confronting the Sultan. These ships were relatively new to the seas globally, and were a novel and menacing sight on this stretch of the Somali coast, which was more used to seeing elegantly-rigged wooden dhow. The combined cannons of the British and Indian Navies pointed threateningly towards the shoreline. In this particular coastal location, the Sultan and his people had witnessed the spectacle of cannon-fire only once before. On that occasion, the fire from three ships had destroyed a medium-sized town, resulting in numerous deaths. The Sultan attempted to reason with the British official, but he refused to listen. In the end, one after another, the Sultan beheaded eight of his own subjects before swearing allegiance to the British flag on the quarterdeck of one of the warships anchored off his coast.

The colonial history of the southern Red Sea region – contemporary Puntland, Djibouti and Yemen – is strewn with the bodies of victims of maritime violence. The whole culture of international relations in the region was transformed by colonial conquest. A permissive and cooperative system of diplomacy gave way to a violent and competitive regime. Incidents of maritime conflict proliferated. Focusing on three case studies from across the southern Red Sea region – Majerteen in northeast Africa, the Zaraniq coast in the Tihamat Yemen or Yemen coast, and the French enclave in the Gulf of Tadjoura (see Map I.1) – we see the unfurling of colonial chaos in the southern Red Sea. The late nineteenth century saw a steep rise in imperial competition, geopolitical jockeying and the proliferation of rival factions vying for recognition in the emerging colonial
regime of sovereignty, scrambling for colonial military patronage to support their quasi-military insurgencies along the coast. By the mid-twentieth century, a historic network of coastal royals and a long-standing mode of diplomacy had given way to a tense, transactional style of international relations and lawmaking. Diplomacy was diminished in favour of colonial chaos.

Colonial officials normally described the protagonists of maritime violence as pirates, as self-serving criminals. This study takes a more expansive and historical look at peoples labelled as pirates by the international community. In three acts, focusing on three sets of characters from three corners of the southern Red Sea during the colonial era, we see that maritime violence served strategic ends.
By launching attacks against shipwrecked European steamers, taking hostages, negotiating salvage, seizing European-flagged ships on the sea, and trading arms and other colonially banned goods, upstarts and rulers from around the southern Red Sea littoral negotiated their inclusion into colonial treaty agreements. These agreements ultimately formed the basis of the modern map of regional and national power along the coast of northeast Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula. Incidents of maritime violence and treaty making offer a porthole onto the culture of international law creation in the colonial period.

By making violence an entry-point to international relations, European colonialism created a zero-sum system we would today recognise as competitive geopolitics. Contemporary violence along the foreshores and reef-strewn coastline of the southern Red Sea originated in the colonial era, between about 1830 and the mid-twentieth century. During this time, European empires transformed the coastline into a crucible of international conflict. While we commonly think of the impact of colonial rule on the international sphere in terms of swashbuckling commonplaces such as ‘divide and rule’ and ‘gunboat diplomacy’, the true effect of colonial violence was profound. Europeans ran amok, transforming the very rules that governed the international system – and which purported to bring peace where there was conflict, and order where there was upheaval – into a violent competition for survival. Disputes over shipwrecks, treaties and maritime jurisdiction during the imperial period eroded customary forms of diplomacy, peaceful alliances between regional states and stable coastal monarchies.

Unravelling

Europeans did not introduce violence to a peaceful precolonial idyll. An extensive literature emphasises the cosmopolitan harmoniousness of the pre-colonial Indian Ocean, however this literature is now considered somewhat romantic.¹ There is in fact a long history of naval

conflict, even imperial subjugation, by indigenous empires in the northwestern Indian Ocean which long predates the arrival of nineteenth-century European colonists. Empires, port states, coastal kingdoms and island fiefdoms had long competed for control of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which lie at the centre of East–West trade. When a world trade system first emerged with its centre in the Middle East five millennia before the present (BCE), the Red Sea became a site of commercial energy, the subject of political contestation and control. The Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians and Sabaeans all sought to some degree to control the Red Sea trade routes – notably by monopolising regional timber production and shipbuilding. The discovery of the monsoon wind patterns in about 300 BC – allowing for yearly sea-bound commercial voyages between Asia, Africa and Europe – increased traffic through and political interest in the Red Sea as a maritime thoroughfare. The Fatimids, Mamluks, Rasulids, Ayyubids, and Ottomans all continued the tradition of shipbuilding and of using navies to protect merchant shipping in the Red Sea in the Middle Ages. At the same time, a number of smaller regional ports such as Aden, Adulis, Dahlak, which straddled the Red Sea’s chokepoints, challenged the dominance of larger empires by building flotillas of smaller ships and using harassing tactics to overpower fairly large imperial navies in their quest to control shipping in the region, sometimes for many decades at a stretch.


Notwithstanding these tensions, there was an entrenched culture of diplomacy in the region. Commercial continuities and standards of behaviour in the international realm smoothed changes of political order in the region in the precolonial era. Conquest looked more like absorption than subjugation. The tenor of geopolitics was tolerant and permissive, rather than competitive and retaliatory. Maritime commerce carried on in a cooperative rather than a competitive fashion. Several ethno-cultural networks facilitated the movement of goods; at the same time, a culture of gift-giving and diplomacy between regional kingdoms, which treated one another as equals, oiled the wheels of commerce between different parts of the northwestern Indian Ocean. Complementary commercial and diplomatic networks criss-crossed the northwestern Indian Ocean (see Map I.2). These regional networks bridged the far corners of the northwestern Indian Ocean, facilitating the exchange of goods from across the East, including coffee, incense, Chinese pottery and silk for staples such as rice and timber, as well as currencies in the form of cowrie shells and...
later silver in Maria Theresa dollars. To borrow the anthropologist Alexander Lesser’s analogy, precolonial international society was not a billiard table – a mass of collisions between discrete actors – but rather inextricably interconnected ‘aggregates [interwoven] near and far, in web-like, netlike connections’. Such networks were essentially cooperative, based on gift giving and reciprocity rather than on power and force.

When European traders arrived in the region in the sixteenth century, they insinuated themselves into pre-existing Hadhrami, Levantine, Venetian, Persian, South Asian, Armenian, Omani and Swahili commercial networks; or they nested their commercial interests under the wing of a regional state such as the Mughals and Gujaratis, trading as protected minorities and as leaseholders on the sufferance of larger, more powerful regional powers. Yet the nineteenth century marked an important turning point in the history of the southern Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and their littorals. Diplomacy unravelled in favour of a system of maritime space sharing that was highly competitive, even adversarial. An environment in which trans-regional commercial and diplomatic dealings could be win-win, in which one person’s power and fortune might strengthen another’s, was replaced by a zero-sum logic. From the late nineteenth century onwards, one ruler’s gain was another’s loss – and the militarily, technologically and commercially powerful reaped the benefits while the weak were subordinated and marginalised.

The great commercial transformation driving this shift was the advent of the British East India Company (EIC). The EIC emerged from a series of internal crises and South Asian battles in the late eighteenth century as a new, imperial power; the EIC became financially secure, technologically proficient and militarily confident enough to force its way into new markets, and to seek to dominate those markets in which it was already involved. The EIC replaced the old

---


Unravelling

South Asian empires, such as the Mughals and Marathas, with an array of local rulers and loyalist upstarts who used their association with the British to enhance their influence. What emerged was an uneasy symbiosis between the East India Company and the surviving regional powers. However, to describe the relationship between the colonial powers, regional rulers and merchants in the southern Red Sea in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an ‘uneasy coexistence’ is an understatement.

Europeans spent much of the nineteenth century disaggregating the cooperative and diplomatic bonds that knit the region together. Whereas the glue of international relations in the region had previously been exchange, gift giving, treaty making and mutual recognition, maritime powers increasingly turned to force, one-upmanship and violence to assert themselves in the international realm during the colonial period. Shipwreck and salvage, attacks against seaborne shipping, hostage-taking, slave trading and other trades to which the use of force was integral, all emerged as fundamental ingredients of the maritime political economy. The political scientists Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz argue that in the postcolonial period, African elites created and sold protection for disorder, violence and unrest to strengthen their authority in the domestic realm.


9 Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).
In this study, I argue that disorder-making as political strategy originated – or was at the very least prefigured – in the colonial era. By instigating acts of aggression along the coast and at sea, actual and aspiring rulers inflated their political stock, positioning themselves as indispensable colonial proxies and military clients for foreign powers.

The creation of a new international order in the region was not, therefore, a top-down imposition on the region; on the contrary, it emerged in the course of maritime conflicts between the colonial newcomers and coastal actors. Rather than approach international relations from the vantage point of the Colonial Ministries of European capitals – or from the deck of a European steamship – I approach conflict and violence from the level of the shoreline, from the point of view of the coastal rulers, militias and mercenaries who tried their luck in the international system. Each chapter follows the career of a different protagonist of maritime violence. Each used violence to compel – or attempt to compel – the colonial powers to share power in the region, to nest their claims to sovereignty under the wing of the imperialists. Positioning ourselves on the Red Sea’s shoreline, each chapter reveals another facet of the unfolding colonial chaos and maritime violence in the region. Starting with a review of indigenous, precolonial cultures of diplomacy, the story moves through the disruption of this system during incidents of shipwreck, salvage and treaty making in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. We then see the unraveling of cooperative approaches to international relations when an assortment of hitherto marginal social groups, including private individuals, upstart chiefs, traders and military commanders, became embroiled in the work of international politics.

Told from the perspective of littoral populations, their stories are discoverable in the colonial archives. Thus in one sense, this is an imperial study, employing an archival methodology and backlit by the kinds of grand geopolitical upheavals, new technologies and epochal events, like the advent of colonialism in Africa, favoured by imperial historians. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which imbued the region with a strategic and world economic significance that it retains to this day, cuts the time frame of this study in two. After the 1870s, what was once a six-month journey under sail via the Cape route, or an arduous sea and land journey via Egypt, was transformed by 1900 into a routine two-week steamship passage via the Red Sea.
and Gulf of Aden. The Red Sea shipping route to the East cut the journey between Europe and Asia by as much as a third (see Map I.3). As a result of the opening of the canal, the entire Red Sea region

Map I.3 The Cape versus the Red Sea shipping routes between India and Europe
(© 2021 Nicholas W. Stephenson Smith. All rights reserved)

became crowded with rival imperial superpowers competing to advance their interests along the strategic route to the East with the advent of steam and large-scale commodity trading between Europe and Afro-Asia: Italy in Eritrea and northeastern Somalia, France in the Gulf of Tadjoura, Britain in Aden and Somaliland and the Ottoman Empire in the Tihamat ’Asir (see Map I.4). As we will see, even this steep rise in the region’s importance as a trade route and the arrival of European empires jostling for influence does not capture the complexity of the geopolitical situation in the late nineteenth century. Added to these territorial players were several other meddling powers, notably Germany.

Yet while the surface of this study is colonial conquest, the real concern here is the new currents of international politics, law and diplomacy swirling beneath the large-scale political and technological