

“Ports in a colonial situation: questioning the relevance of a concept. The case of the French Empire from the 16th to the 20th century”

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“The only people to dominate the sea were those who established their power alongside the Ocean,”

Manuel Sevrin de Faria, 1625¹

Ports in a colonial situation were the subject of many studies, even before the process of decolonization began. For the most part, these studies were urban monographs, often led by geographers. Very few of the studies gave an imperial explanation, instead they were anchored to a local, colonial scale. The only articles celebrating the grandeur of the Empire were economic reports, used as propaganda tools or strategic information for companies working overseas, all raising awareness of the specific place that one port or another occupied in the system that formed the empire. These articles and studies, more numerous in the 1930s when imperial self-sufficiency was considered a remedy for the global economic crisis, did not continue beyond the Second World War. The years of bloodshed that followed were hardly favourable to this type of study, except in sub-Saharan Africa, and with decolonization complete, a disinterest for colonial issues started to gain ground. The best example of this comes from the 1960s, when Fernand Braudel established Area Studies in France, originally founded in the United States in the 1930s. This field overrode and replaced the scholars of French Imperial History, contrary to Great Britain which maintained its prestigious Imperial Studies. The last to occupy the chair of French imperial history at the Sorbonne was Charles-André Julien, eminent specialist in North Africa, largely engaged, as an academic, in the decolonization process. We have witnessed a systematized, indeed, institutionalized, reinforcement of the disconnection between the motherland “here” and the colonial “elsewhere”².

In fact, studies on colonial ports experienced the full force of this compartmentalisation, which separated studies on the motherland from those on its colonies³ and broke the connections between the

¹ “Les seuls qui ont dominé la mer, ont été ceux qui ont assis leur pouvoir à côté de l’Océan” in Djanirah Couto, *Histoire de Lisbonne*, Paris-Arthème Fayard, 2000, 384 p., p. 382.

² Jean-François Klein and Marie-Albane de Suremain, “Clio et les colonies. Retour sur des historiographies en situation coloniale”, *Romantisme. Revue du dix-neuvième siècle*, n° 139, 2008-1, p. 59-80.

³ For convenience, we have grouped all the colonial structures used in the French colonial empire under the term “colonies”, which, let us recall, are essentially protectorates. This includes colonies, protectorates, concessions, factories, a condominium (the New Hebrides), catchment areas where the informal French Empire, to use the term created by Gallagher and Robinson, holds sway. See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, in *The Economic History Review*, Second series, vol. VI, n°1, 1953, pp. 1-15.

colonies themselves. As and when they specialized, academics of cultural areas spoke less and less with specialists in other areas. Worse still, over time, a narrowing appeared, an ultra-specialization embracing the creation of the countries born from independence. Therefore, the Vietnam specialists, for example, no longer spoke with the Cambodia specialists or experts on Algeria, Côte-d'Ivoire or on one part of Oceania or another. In fact, historical research lost the thread of the connections that formerly linked the empire, creating a dynamic system comprised of multiple interactions.

Nowadays, imperial history is once again the subject of historical research, revisited by the field of New Imperial History in Britain, New Colonial History in the US, and the work that began in France in the 1990s. The latter was largely inspired by the revival of the biographical genre, the Cultural turn and the Anglo-Saxon Transnational turn as well as the Italian *microstoria* which, with its use of scale, is particularly dynamic. It seeks to understand the movement of people, goods, ideas and practices (military, legal, religious, scholastic, and so on.) within an imperial system⁴, on the basis of the principle that what makes an empire is not its borders (the map is not the territory) but instead what flows through it.

In fact, the interest for these ways of making connections has re-emerged and the role of colonial ports has become central again, falling resolutely under the umbrella of the field of Global and Connected History. Formerly, the monographs on these colonial ports allowed the strength and fluidity of the imperial economy in action to be celebrated. Today, they nourish historians' reflections on the colonial period and make it possible to unearth, on an imperial scale, the idiosyncrasies of this or that hub of development or, in contrast, of places with a weak connection, or none at all, to the global market.

However, it seems that the concept of the colonial port itself has not been investigated systematically. It goes without saying that this concept refers to very varied realities. Indeed, what do the following have in common: a simple trading post for the slave trade, a *loge*, or trading station, on the coast of India for the spice trade in the early modern period and a large industrial-port complex during the time preceding decolonization? Furthermore, in certain instances, such as in Asia (for example Malacca, Canton), the Maghreb and the Middle East, the colonizer integrated into an existing port network. Yet this was not always the case. The ports of sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, for example, where coastal or fluviomaritime cities were very often *ex nihilo* creations, such as Abidjan or Noumea. The fact remains that at a time of a global or, at the very least, connected, history, when the field of New Imperial Studies shows the organic links between ports in a colonial situation and globalisation, an overview study of these themes seems necessary. Considering the colonial port as an operational concept entails highlighting the elements which distinguish it, or not, from many of the motherland ports

⁴ David Lambert and Alan Lester, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire. Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 396 p.

and those overseas which escaped colonial status, as well as from the colonial city in general, which is difficult to define or, in any case, essentialise⁵, although it may have been studied as such⁶.

This article, intended as a work in progress, aims to present certain recently explored avenues within the framework of a collective project on port themes in the French Empire from the 16th to the 20th century, in relation to colonial and imperial history. Although this article, and the larger project which is broadly outlined within it, focus on the French Empire, forays into other empires are by no means prohibited and a comparative approach is encouraged. This project brings together various historians and historians of art of the early modern and late modern periods: Emilie d'Orgeix, Pierre Guillaume and Alexandre Fernandez of the University of Bordeaux-III; Gérard Le Boëdec of the University of Lorient; David Plouviez, Virginia Chaillot and Jean-François Klein, of the University of Nantes; François-Joseph Ruggiu of the University of Paris-Sorbonne; Bruno Marnot, of the University of La Rochelle; Claire Laux of Sciences Po-Bordeaux. This project also owes much to fruitful discussions with Cécile Vidal and Alain Delissen of EHESS⁷, and to the support of Caroline Le Mao of the University of Bordeaux-III, the Roland Mousnier Centre (Paris-Sorbonne), CEMMC (University of Bordeaux) and CRHIA (University of Nantes). Lastly, a final epistemological detail: this project, on the whole, comes under the *tournant impérial* or imperial turn, currently seen in French historiography, which leads to a more systematic investigation of the national past without, from now on, overlooking overseas colonies⁸.

Where to begin? The colonizer's choice of a "good" port

The colonial port is, by definition, firstly anchored to a territory, that of the colony. This idea of territory must be considered in the broadest sense, alongside the questions it brings up: is it possible to identify a morphology specific to these ports? Which geopolitical and geostrategic rationales are at the origin of their foundation and evolution? What relations do they maintain with the forelands and hinterlands of the dominated, or soon-to-be dominated, regions? Note that the concept of foreland in this article refers to the catchment area and the economic relations that a port maintains with the overseas territories with which it is connected. The foreland relies closely on the hinterland, the back-country, which very often determines both the supply and demand of port trade. We can extend this economic concept, frequently used by geographers, to the political and cultural influence that the colonial port exerts on its more or less dominated hinterland, the rest of the empire, the motherland as well as the ports of other empires.

Geographical factors play a role at various levels in the choice of the settlement site, and also the development of the port, which is subsequently in a "colonial situation", to use Georges Balandier's

⁵ Hélène Vacher (ed.), *Villes coloniales aux XIX^e-XX^e siècles : d'un sujet d'action à un objet d'histoire*, Paris, Éd°. Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005, 191 p., p. 8.

⁶ See, for example, the very good, recent overview: Odile Goerg, Xavier Huetz de Lemps, *La ville coloniale, XV^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 2012, 464 p.

⁷ We would like to express our profound thanks to these researchers for their important contribution to our work.

⁸ Jean-François Klein, "Des écuries aux escaliers d'honneur ? Réflexion sur l'historiographie des colonisations françaises", *Historiens & Géographes*, May 2013, n° 423, p. 195-206.

concept⁹. A port, colonial or otherwise, is first of all a site (with good anchorage, sheltered as in Gorée or Saigon) and a location with the possibility of spreading out into a vast back-country, in a central or strategic position. The best examples of this are the island ports, such as Hong Kong, Nosy-Bé¹⁰, Singapore¹¹ and Zanzibar. The first point of contact between Europeans and their future colony is far from always the site where they then established the colonial port. Admittedly, Cook disembarked in Botany Bay, which became Sydney, but the first French contact with New Caledonia took place in Balade harbour and it was only much later that they made the deliberate choice to found Noumea and make it the port and capital of the archipelago. This is also the case for Papeete. The first French settlements at the mouth of the Senegal River led to the creation of Saint-Louis. The establishment of Dakar came much later, related to political colonization and the need to increase port capacity for vessels of higher tonnage and a deeper draught, following the development of the gradually conquered Sudanese hinterland, of which Dakar was the principal drainage point.

Physical constraints and risks

Colonial ports, located for the most part in the intertropical zone, with the notable exception of the ports of North America, faced a number of their own specific constraints. Whether they were *ex nihilo* creations or had been grafted on to pre-existing port structures, these ports had to be able to be compatible with European sailing, which involved a number of technical issues that differed from one region to another. In the Pacific, for example, Europeans had to seek out channels through the reef, unlike Oceanians, who sailed on dugouts. Hawaiians, for instance, traditionally ran aground their dugouts on the beach of Waikiki, while the foundation of Honolulu dates back to the discovery of its channel by two Englishmen in 1792. On the African coasts of the Gulf of Guinea, the omnipresent rip current necessitated the use of specialized pilots and drove Europeans to choose the river mouths that offered more sheltered harbours. In the late modern period, from the 1880s, technological progress made it possible to circumvent these problems by constructing wharves beyond the rip current and, at the end of the colonial period, in the 1950s-1960s, by setting up vast port complexes as had been realised in East Asia and South America¹².

In the case of islands, the geographical constraints could initially play a role in islands competing for port specialization. Indeed, until 1810, when Isle de France (currently Mauritius) and Bourbon (currently Réunion) were both French, technical reasons meant that the former became a large colonial port, a way station on the route to India, whereas Bourbon played only a secondary role, that of

⁹ Georges Balandier, “La situation coloniale: approche théorique”, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. 11, 1951, pp. 44-79.

¹⁰ On Nosy Bé, we have at our disposal Samuel Sanchez’s remarkable thesis, *L’île de Nosy Be, Nord-Ouest de Madagascar, un carrefour de l’océan Indien occidental (1839-1920)*, thesis on contemporary history, typescript, ed. Faranirina Rajaonah, Université Paris-7 Denis-Diderot, 2013, 775 p.

¹¹ Richard John Lee Bryant, *The Maritime Fabric of Singapore, 1819-1914: a Historical Geography*, thesis (Ph.D.), Monash University, 1994, 397 p. See also Rodolphe de Koninck, *Singapore: an atlas of the revolution of territory*, Montpellier, GIP-Reclus, 1992, 128 p.

¹² Dominique Barjot, *La grande entreprise française de travaux publics (1883-1974)*, Paris, Economica, 2012, 940 p.

supplying Isle de France. In fact, Saint-Denis, directly battered by swells, offered very poor anchorage. Whereas, on the geologically older Isle de France, Port Louis boasted the protection of a barrier reef, making it one of the best harbours in the Indian Ocean, alongside Trincomalee. During times of war, the island-cum-way station, Isle de France, was transformed into an island of corsairs, whose task was essentially to attack East India Company craft, as part of a global strategy to damage Great Britain's power. The shipowner-merchants of the Mascarene Islands had thus very quickly grasped that the economic heart of Great Britain was not the City or the colonies in the West Indies, but the trading stations on the coasts of India, which were especially strengthened when the dominion of Company Raj gradually expanded across networks of trading stations and controlled increasingly vast, inter-connected territories. Contrary to Pondicherry, protected by its seawall yet separated from its Indian hinterland, Port Louis had become an important layover port for French interests in the Indian Ocean. It then became such a strategic place that the seat of the Mascarene government was transferred there by the French ministry of the navy and colonies¹³. During the American War of Independence and then the Napoleonic wars, Isle de France became a true thorn in the foot of the British, who did all they could to conquer it as part of a global strategy (1809-1811) aimed at expanding a protective buffer zone around the Anglo-Indian colonies and keeping veritable "Maritime Highways" open: the route from the Cape to the Mozambique channel, from the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz to Bombay and, from there, from Bombay to Calcutta¹⁴. The Western Indian Ocean cordoned off, the British consolidated their presence in the China Sea, controlling the Strait of Malacca, the southern coasts of Borneo and, from there, the routes to China and Australia. A veritable thalassocracy whose interconnected ports formed a vast network on a global scale that Niall Ferguson called the anglobalisation of the world¹⁵. Indeed, Port Louis and Bourbon fell in 1810, when operations in Madagascar, Hormuz and Java were also launched. Shortly after the Congress of Vienna, the British kept Isle de France, renamed Mauritius, as opposed to Bourbon, which was returned to Louis XVIII. The rationale here was geopolitical: the volcanic island, deprived of a natural port, whose coastal capital, Saint-Denis, its harbour defenceless against the open sea, battered by large ground swells, did not present any danger to the East India Company or the Royal Navy's craft. The construction of a port then became essential for the French, on a commercial and strategic level.

¹³ Jean-François Klein, "L'ombre de Duplex plane sur la Constituante. La stratégie indienne de Louis Monneron (1790-1791)", in Prosper Ève (ed.), special edition "France-Angleterre dans l'océan Indien du XVIII^e au XXI^e siècle", *Revue Historique de l'océan Indien*, n° 8, November 2011, p. 5-18.

¹⁴ See Guillemette Crouzet's thesis, *Genèses du "Moyen-Orient". Les Britanniques dans le Golfe Arabo-Persique (c. 1800 - c.1914)*, thesis of contemporary history, typescript, ed. Éric Bussière, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014, 3 vol., 1 410 p.

¹⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world*, London, Penguin, 2003.

Furthermore, located in coastal regions or on river banks by definition, these colonial ports confronted the hardships of Mediterranean and subtropical natural environments in particular. Their development was restricted for a long time by specific medical and technical challenges, such as various illnesses, typhoons, cyclones, and so on. Colonial ports are thus often presented as the “tombs of Europeans”, where catastrophic epidemics of malaria, typhus, cholera and yellow fever prevailed, for example, in Batavia in Java, an unsanitary marshy region, and Grand-Bassam on Côte d’Ivoire on the Gulf of Guinea coast, situated on the Ébrié lagoon. In most cases, these colonial ports became the capitals of the new colonies, yet it would sometimes occur that geographical constraints or historic risks meant that the principal cities were located inland. For example, in Andean America, Guayaquil and Vera Cruz were the port facades of the capitals at altitude: Quito (2,750m) and Mexico City (2,200m). In the French Empire, Madagascar comes to mind, with its capital, Tananarive, located on the populated high plateaus of Imerina and connected, in particular, with its colonial port, Tamatave, and its secondary port, Majunga, from where General Duchesne led his invasion in 1895. All these cases do not feature *ex nihilo* constructions, instead, the conquerors ultimately integrated into the pre-existing political territorial system that predated colonial rule.

From another perspective, it is important to remember that steam-powered navigation and the innovations and technical progress of the late modern period minimised these risks to a certain extent. Above all, these developments allowed the European colonizers to at least partly liberate themselves from certain determining factors of the early modern period, such as the tyranny of the winds and tides, seasonal weather patterns (trade winds, monsoons), and, in particular, the alarming death rates that were reduced by the development of tropical medicine from the second half of the 19th century¹⁶. At the beginning of the 1840s, the British squadron charged with pursuing the Gulf of Guinea slave traders was called the Coffin Squadron due to the decimation of its crews at the hands of yellow fever. Another example, following an investigation carried out in 1871-1872, French Admiralty considered the acceptable annual death rate for the infantry troops of the navy stationed overseas to be an estimated average of nine per cent. An internal investigation estimated that after three years, the average increased to twelve per cent in the West Indies, Guyana and Réunion. Whereas, after two years in Senegal and Cochinchina, the death rate of troops exceeded twenty-seven per cent, causing the admiralty to limit colonial tours to both of these colonies to two years. It goes without saying that these rates were just as high, or even higher, within the populations of inhabitants, who did not benefit from wintering, as was imposed in the first settlements at altitude, or from gradual acclimatization organised by the admiralty in times of peace.

We must also consider certain risks specific to the natural environments in which the colonies were situated, starting with natural disasters, whether climatic or linked to the relief, in particular in volcanic regions. The best-known example is that of Saint-Pierre, the colonial port capital of Martinique until 1902, when it was destroyed suddenly by the volcanic eruption of Mount Pelée. The port was then

¹⁶ Bouda Etemad, *La possession du monde: poids et mesures de la colonisation (XVIII^e-XX^e siècles)*, Bruxelles, Éd° Complexes, 2000, 352 p.

transferred to Fort-de-France, since it was sufficiently distant from possible subsequent eruptions and possessed a good harbour. Indeed, these incidents could call into question imperial stability as a whole and define new strategies, generating the search for new, more suitable sites.

What does the port open on to? The geopolitics and geostrategy of colonial ports

In a colonial context, these places had, first of all, a military function, particularly in the early modern period. With the exception of factories and simple commercial trading posts, these ports were initially forts, which allowed the colonizers to set up defensive networks on an imperial scale. This issue also arose, albeit in different terms, in the late modern period. Thus, Singapore played the role of advanced naval fortress in the China Sea as well as that of the Anglo-Indian emporium open to trade with Canton before being connected in 1841 to Hong Kong, which developed similar functions. A strategic base, where ships could load coal and do business, fusing the two driving forces of contemporary imperialism – the geopolitical prestige of the flag and the commercial activity of the trading post – into one modus operandi, nullifying, to some extent, the old dispute between the supporters of different causalist explanations for the Western expansion across the world.

The role and the place of colonial ports in the processes of colonization and controlling the territories, which differed from one empire to another, from one geographical region to another, and from one era to another, is yet to be defined. The islands, therefore, seem to be preferred places of settlement in these colonial port spaces, insularity creating the effect of a “natural fortress” and considerably simplifying the issue of security while often offering positions of control in significant regions. This was the case for Gibraltar and Penang, which controlled two strategic straits, just as Saint Helena covered the coasts of Equatorial Africa while offering a vital way station on the route to the Cape. As for Hong Kong, a small island deprived of a fresh water source, its deep port created a safe roadstead for the opium clippers of the Anglo-Indian traffickers before the outbreak of the First Opium War (1839-1841). It was an “inhospitable island”; uninhabited, it was rarely visited by Chinese fishermen who would generally use it as refuge from typhoons. Indeed, generally speaking, in the process of colonial appropriation, an island often appears easier to extract from the sovereign country on which it depends. This was the case for Macao, yielded by Beijing to the Portuguese, and Penang, sold by the sultan of Kedah. Inversely, the small artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki Bay was built by the Japanese to create an artificial lock to house the crews of the Dutch VOC and keep them away from the land of Shōgun Tokugawa. As for Singapore, yielded by the sultan of Johor-Riau to Thomas Stamford Raffles, lieutenant-governor of Penang, this decision seems to be extremely judicious and foresighted with respect to Malaysia and the Dutch Indies, then in the making, by defining an imperial no man’s land in the middle of the Strait of Malacca¹⁷.

¹⁷ Oliver Sevin, “Les métropoles d’Asie du Sud Est”, in *Les Très grandes villes dans le monde*, Paris, éditions du Temps, 2000.

Colonial ports thus seem to be one of the tools of domination. Once settled on the ground, either by force or compromising with the local rulers, contact with the local population began; a meeting in a colonial situation. Europeans, and later the Japanese and the Americans, rarely settled on a deserted site (for this reason, Hong Kong and the small island of Qeshm in the Persian Gulf are exceptions). Consequently, the colonial port city became a contact zone, to use Mary-Louise Pratt's expression¹⁸, and the place of compromise, where, perhaps more than anywhere else, the "hegemonic transaction"¹⁹ that represents colonial society took place.

The issue of the centrality of the port in the process of controlling the territory on the part of the colonizer then arises. In what way and how did the port become the bridgehead of an invasion into the hinterland, often militarily progressive and culturally diffuse? The intensity of trade with the indigenous populations and the extent of their integration into the established colonial system are good markers for the type of relationships maintained by the colonizers with those they subjugated, more or less severely, according to time and place. It is, therefore, essential to raise the issue of the place that the economy and strategy occupied not only in the hinterland, but also the foreland. Not to mention the extent to which the port developed connections with the motherland or other regional ports, whether legal or otherwise, as was the case in the Caribbean world before the abolition of exclusive trade, which was often imposed by the motherland to the detriment of the colonies.

This issue differs between cases of *ex nihilo* constructions by European colonizers and the occupation of a pre-existing port by colonizers. The latter was sometimes alongside a previous colonization, such as the case of Zanzibar, formerly an Arabic colonial port under the Sultanate of Oman where many commercial communities from the whole of the Indian Ocean basin were found²⁰. Malacca is another example: the port-capital of an interconnected commercial empire that was founded in the 15th century by a sultan who had built up his capital to fight against the dominant thalassocracy of Srivijaya (Sumatra). Portuguese since 1511, Malacca was used as a bridgehead for further expansion of the Portuguese Empire in Asia²¹. A landmark in fortified trading posts, like Elmina on the Gulf of Guinea, it became a possession of the VOC, allowing the Dutch company to block the spice trade route from French and British competition before it came under British rule in 1795 and ensured strategic control for the East India Company on the route to Canton. In all these scenarios, as in places seemingly more disconnected from the international market that Europeans imagined were bound to be poor without them, such as in Muscat or Nosy-Be, the colonizers slipped into urban and port structures and the commercial networks that predated them. While they were sometimes able to model the structures and

¹⁸ On the concept of "contact zone" see Marie-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge. 1992, 296 p.

¹⁹ "transaction hégémonique" Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand, "De quel legs colonial parle-t-on ?" in *Esprit*, 6 December 2006, pp. 134-160.

²⁰ Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir (ed.), *L'autre Zanzibar, géographie d'une contre-insularité*, Paris, Karthala, 2008, 379 p.

²¹ See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *L'Empire portugais d'Asie, 1500-1700. Une histoire économique et politique*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1999, 385 p.

networks to their needs, they could never erase the indigenous character completely, proof of the layers of a space which must be read synchronically, in an imperial context, but also, diachronically, by cultural area.

In this scenario, does the colonial port strengthen or supplant a pre-European port system? It is necessary here to emphasise the issue raised by both communication and port infrastructure, put in place by the colonizer in order to carry out these relations. Understanding the infrastructure subsequently allows us to measure to what extent the scale of connection with the wider world changed, entailed by the colonization of the site. In general, the more technologically developed the port, the more significant its outreach became. However, ports that were less technologically developed, in particular in terms of lifting equipment, also existed, such as Saigon. The coolie workforce paled in comparison to cranes, however, this did not prevent the large fluvio-maritime port at the mouth of the Mekong from being largely open to the southern China Sea and, beyond, towards the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean via Suez.

Various questions arise here: as in the case of the motherland ports, can a gradual separation between the city and the port be noted over a long period of time precisely because of the development of port infrastructure? Can we, therefore, observe a dichotomy between the processes of urban and economic development? And, on an urban level, does the port form an incomplete city, its spatial development limited by the waterfront? This phenomenon is much more prevalent than sites that prevented the city from expanding due to a naturally hostile hinterland (mountainous region, marshes) or resistance from the indigenous population. On the other hand, the concessions in China and the first European trading stations on the Indian coast are examples of the yielded area depending solely on the local ruler. In these cases, the settlers were unable to leave without extremely rigid state monitoring, making concessions in China veritable commercial lazarettos, encysting Westerners on the Chinese coastal borders²². A phenomenon that lasted until the treaty of Shimonoseki imposed on Beijing by Tokyo in 1895 and which opened up the entire Qing imperial territory to the appetites of the global powers.

In another problematic case, as in the regions of Andean America previously mentioned, where the most densely populated areas were not found on the hostile coasts, one of the problems that arose for the colonizer was that of connecting the ports to the dense settlement regions of a colony which sometimes experienced strong demographic and economic growth. Once again, the link with the hinterland proved vital to creating an effective outreach and a multipurpose command centre (political, economic and cultural) with a firm grip on the colonized territory. In addition, one of the essential, defining elements of these colonial ports was, of course, the status of the regions where they were

²² Robert Bickers, *Britain in China. Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900-1949*, Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press, coll° "Studies in Imperialism", 1999, 276 p. see also Jean-François Klein, *Soyeux en mer de Chine. Stratégies des réseaux lyonnais en mer de Chine (1843-1909)*, thesis of contemporary history, typescript, ed. Claude Prudhomme, Université Lyon-2, 2002, 1 200 p.

established. A colonial situation requires dominance and imbalance in favour of Europeans, and not simply trade or even influence. The case of the port of Busan, which came under Japanese rule in 1876 (forty-five per cent of the population were Japanese) while the rest of the kingdom of Joseon remained independent, although still subject to an informal Japanese influence, allows what was truly colonial to be measured. A concession that allows consular law to be enforced – extraterritoriality – and gives residents the right to own land, is proof of colonialism recognized within the framework of international law as determined by the Concert of Europe.

Colonial or imperial ports?

One of the most rewarding and interesting ways to investigate the concept of “ports in a colonial situation” is to introduce a change of scale and connect the history of colonization and colonial empires²³. Exploring scale can be done on a political level: are the ports integrated into a colonial or imperial project? As well as on an economic level, ports are defined by flows of people and goods. Clearly we should question whether or not these flows have a specifically colonial dimension. The issue of these ports’ political status and, more broadly speaking, of their relationship to the colonial empires of which they form a part, becomes particularly pertinent. Are they withdrawn into the imperial unit and their motherland? Or, on the contrary, do they maintain natural links with their neighbouring territories and, on a smaller scale, with other imperial spaces, their colonial ports and motherlands?

Ports in colonial or imperial systems

The principal difficulty, then, is that, in many cases, until the middle of the 19th century, the status of these ports was not clearly defined and could fluctuate. This is the case, for example, with the ports of the Near East and the trading posts on the coasts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This issue, of course, relates to the matter of relationships with non-colonial ports. The exclusive trade issue obviously has a central role in the definition of colonial ports. Their influence could vary widely in amplitude (including over time); some of these ports were only linked to their political motherland, others, on the contrary, acquired a trans-imperial dimension and their commercial activities became part of complex trading within the same empire, or, indeed, between several empires, such as in the example of New Orleans and Kingstown in Jamaica. The extent to which these ports integrated into empires varies on a scale from the specialized port to the emporium or hub, and includes the trading post, factory, layover (e.g. Port-Said at the Mediterranean entrance to the Suez Canal), island way station port, Gateway Port and so on.

²³ See for example, Jean-François Klein, “Du patronat colonial au patronat impérial : pour un changement de paradigme”, in J.-C. Daumas (ed.), special edition “Radioscopie du patronat français”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’Histoire*, n° 114, 2012, p. 67-82. And Pierre Singaravélou (ed.), *Les empires coloniaux, XIXème à XXème siècle*, Paris, Editions Points, 2013, 470 p.

In fact, we discover a wide variety of localised port functions, specific to each colony. In the British Empire, several multipurpose colonial ports can be found, port capitals boasting high populations and diverse economic activities. The growth of Indian ports was particularly spectacular and does not have a true equivalent in the French Empire. Calcutta had the role of capital of the Company Raj, and beyond, since the capital of the British Raj was not transferred to Delhi until 1911 and then to New Delhi in 1927. In fact, until the disappearance of the East India Company in 1857, the governor general of the EIC was based there. Calcutta, with a population of over one million in 1900, was ranked 14th in the world and required the adoption of the town planning conceived by E. P. Richards. As for Bombay, until 1850, before being a city-trading post, it was the first commercial, industrial and financial centre of India and acquired important economic administrative duties (banks, financial firms). Its 10,000 inhabitants in 1660 reached 250,000 in the middle of the 19th century. Bombay, the second city and relatively autonomous, extended its power across the whole western basin of the Indian Ocean and, in particular across the Persian Gulf, which contributed to creating the geopolitical concept of the Middle East²⁴.

However, colonization could, on the contrary, lead to high port specialization and geopolitical influence and here we find an aspect of the hegemonic transaction previously mentioned. This was the case, for example, for New Orleans and Lome for American cotton, and the Niger Bend, Dakar (Senegal) and Grand-Popo (Dahomey) for oilseeds (groundnut and palm kernel oil²⁵; Haiphong or Port Wallut for Tonkin coal; the Burmese rice dispatched from Yangon, in accordance with imperial demand, to Calcutta, Singapore and Hong Kong; Brisbane for merino wool, and so on. As we progress through the late modern period, through the decades that preceded decolonization, we increasingly come across ports that had the role of dispatching only one resource, with the specialization of the boats themselves, and we see coal wharves, methane tankers, and oil tankers developing. Other ports, such as Hong Kong and Algiers were hubs and fully fulfilled their purpose of storage and redistribution centres on various scales. Additionally, we find that the majority of these ports, excluding the hubs, are characterized by fundamental inequalities and imbalances. The capital ports, where goods flowed, were exchanged and redistributed, logically offered much more balanced traffic. Hong Kong was the third ranking port, in terms of financial value and tonnage, in the British Empire. One of the principal elements of differentiation was due, therefore, to the nature of the empires to which these ports belonged, with significant differences between the ports of global and more restricted empires. It is clear that the ports of the Italian Cyrenaica could not compete with the Cape or Batavia.

Specific port flows

²⁴ Cf. thesis Guillemette Crouzet, *op. cit.*

²⁵ On this subject, see the work of Xavier Daumalin, *Marseille et l'Ouest africain. L'outre-mer des industriels (1841-1956)*, Marseille, CCIMP, coll° "Histoire du commerce et de l'industrie de Marseille", 1992, 475 p. and the work of Yves Péhaut on the Bordeaux company Maurel & Prom.

Furthermore, it is necessary to investigate the flows of goods, capital and workforce specific to the colonial situation, which gave these ports their colonial identity. In the early modern period and, in fact, until the 1840s, these flows, dominated by sailing ships, were subject to seasonal risks, in particular wind patterns. Therefore, in all cases, flows cannot be reduced to binary exchanges between motherland and colony. South-South trade was set up, such as the Indian trade in India or triangular trade²⁶ in the early modern period. These flows intensified in the late modern period, in particular concerning the coolie trade, with certain colonial ports, such as Singapore, becoming global hubs. The ports were indeed the necessary crossing points for migratory movements, as well as a number of individual displacements caused by colonization. There was also an environmental dimension to these ports, through which certain foreign plants were disseminated. In this area, ports also carried out the role of way station and crossroads in a process of globalisation²⁷. Colonial ports, like their motherland counterparts, organized and catalysed flows but, in certain cases, could also hinder them, in particular due to infrastructure that was either too specialized or insufficient.

In all cases, the port was, by definition, a place of loading and discharging. Therefore, the colonizer had to consider connecting with the rest of the region, colony or empire by other means of transport: river navigation, roads and tracks, railways and aerodromes, at the end of the late modern period. It is essential to note that, in many instances, the port was established as the head of the rail network, as was the case with routes such as Abidjan to the Upper Volta (Abidjan-Ouagadougou later reached Niamey, in Niger). The same applies to the Dakar-Koulikoro line. However, connections were not only on land, short sea shipping often played an important role in regional redistribution, such as in Papeete, where redistribution was carried out by galleys or small steamships, guaranteeing short sea traffic from island to island.

Lastly, consider the issue of the colonial port as a space of accumulation and valorisation of capital. The role of credit institutions, the scale of the network of bank branches from motherland banks, local banks, banks from other parts of the empire or other countries and/or colonial empires, is a good indicator of the place a specific colony and its related port occupied in terms of economic influence. The most obvious example is that of the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited, founded in 1864 by Scottish family, the Keswicks, close relations of Jardine, Matheson & Co that spread throughout the empire, and by the group which revolved around Thomas Sutherland, one of the figureheads of the P&O²⁸. On a smaller scale, the *Banque de l'Indo-Chine*, bank of issue of the Indochinese piastre, was the fruit of a consortium of the principal motherland commercial banks that spread beyond Indo-China,

²⁶ On this matter, the expression “triangular trade” is overused and does not sufficiently take into account of the importance of the Indian Ocean in trade (muslin traded in the Gulf of Guinea, Asian gold versus European money and the cowry of the Maldives). In fact, the slave trade and the results of its product, sugar, and the Atlantic world are connected to their Eastern cousin, who, we believe, has been underestimated for too long.

²⁷ Brunot Marnot, *La mondialisation au XIX^e siècle (1850-1914)*, Paris, A. Colin, collection U, 2012, 288 p.

²⁸ Frank H. H. King, *The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 701 p.

reaching Noumea, Papeete, Réunion and Ponduchery²⁹ and, like the *Comptoir d'Escompte* of Paris, was an imperial bank, by means of its colonial branches. Many social actors revolved around these financial establishments and can be a way of tracing the formal and informal networks that held the empire together.

The colonial port, essential wheel of trans-colonialism

One of the specifically colonial aspects of the ports is that they contributed to giving empires an internal coherence. Trans-colonial knowledge and practices originated from and were directed towards the ports of the colonies. Trade networks and circuits were therefore set up that could escape the motherland and that contributed to giving shape to the concept of an empire by the movement of soldiers, engineers, architects, and workers, who participated in the creation of technical and doctrinal bodies of knowledge as well as construction methods from one colonial port to another³⁰. The colonial ports, as economic, social and cultural interfaces, thus seem to have been characterized by the flows of goods and people that were tapped by the ports themselves. However, they were also characterized by their own sociology resulting from these flows, as well as by the imagery and representations related to it, which sometimes hardly reflected the material aspects they produced.

Can we speak of specific colonial port civilisations and colonial ports as matrices of colonial societies?

At this point, the idiosyncrasies of the composition, structures and sociabilities of colonial ports must be considered in comparison to those of colonial cities in general and, more widely, of the frontier cities. These ports emerged as the cradle of colonial civilization, but at the same time they developed specific forms of sociability and even specific cultures.

Demographics of ports in a colonial situation: hybridization and interbreeding

A place of loading and discharging, the port is where everything in the colony disembarks and from where it all sets out again: goods, people and cultures. The port city is thus also the ultimate place of hybridization, interbreeding and transculturation. Transculturation, a process that was generally imposed on the colonized by the colonizers but, also, vice versa, from the colonized to the colonizers, who, although fewer, were sociologically superior to those they dominated. The history of this phenomenon also makes it possible to revisit the issue of women in colonial societies, who were always over-masculinised³¹. In fact, whether in settlement colonies or those for financial exploitation, the matter of the place of women – colonizers or colonized – is always extremely pertinent. We can already

²⁹ See map p. 54 Jean-François Klein, Pierre Singaravélou and Marie-Albane de Suremain, *Atlas des empires coloniaux, XIX^e-XX^e siècles*, Paris, Autrement, 2012, 98 p.

³⁰ On the issue of the weakening of imperial monopolies and competition see James R. Fichter, *So Great a Proffit, How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2010, 400 p.

³¹ See Pascale Barthélémy, Luc Capdevila and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (ed.), “Femmes, genres et colonisations”, special edition of the journal, *Clio* [Online], 33 | 2011, available online from 01 May 2013, accessed on 03 July 2014. URL: <http://clio.revues.org/9994>

propose, with a whole range of qualifications, that the role of women was slightly different in the ports than in other parts of the colonial world. This was the result of the doubly unbalanced gender ratio: on the one hand, due to the traditional male overstaffing of the ports (sailors, merchants, explorers and so on), and, on the other hand, because of the presence of largely male populations of migrants in transit (volunteers, slaves, coolies, colonizers). All of which led to situations that were sometimes more fraught in the ports than in the rest of the colonial world. While issues such as prostitution in the port environment were stressed by all observers, such matters have rarely been the subject of specific studies.

In the same vein, the issue of work in ports in a colonial situation must be explored. As porters and dockers can be found in all ports in the world, researchers must consider the idiosyncrasies generated by the colonial situation. Indeed, particular racially segregated sections of the population were reserved for often perilous port activities, such as the kru stevedores, who, on wharves, loaded and unloaded cargo liners anchored in the rough waters of the Gulf of Guinea as best they could. Certain “peoples of the sea” in precolonial societies reinvented themselves through port work, such as the Bugis in Indonesia or certain Malayan groups of the West Indies.

Material sociabilities and cultures in ports in a colonial situation

The phenomena of segregation, encounters and colonial compromises specifically declined in ports, even though ethnic segregation by district, characteristic of colonial cities, is apparent in the existence of the European district, the indigenous district/s, and the district/s of non-European migrants. Recent work has brought to light various details that, on the one hand, demonstrate how porous the “color line” is, and, on the other, show that spatial division of culturally different groups was a common feature in precolonial ports, in particular from the Mediterranean to the China Sea. The best examples of this are the Egyptian ports and their funduq, as well as Malacca, where, from the 15th century, various peoples mixed, including Malayan, Persian, Arab, Jewish, Chinese, Indian and so on. Be that as it may, the specific colonial dimension (or lack thereof) is yet to be explored. The urban structure specific to these situations creates and reinforces certain ambiguities: places of contact and trade, of diversity and segregation. Ports such as Noumea in New Caledonia or Suva in Fiji seem to be multiethnic and multicultural cities, when considering the markets for example, while simultaneously displaying a highly segregated urban space. A sense of community often developed in these markets, which is rarely found on the sea fronts seized by colonizers. The unsettled nature of these port societies, as much on the part of the colonized as the colonizers and workers in transit, raises the issue of the permanence of these sociabilities, as well as that of beliefs and religious practices in ports, where many forms of belief often mixed, each generating its own codes and sociocultural behaviours.

In addition, the matter of social control in port populations, which were, by definition, on the move more so than in other colonial cities, sometimes, but not always, refers to particular methods, such as instating port police forces. The port was also the place where information of any kind would collect and where the colonial power was often based, the bridgehead of power that gradually expanded outwards,

into the seas, and stayed connected to the whole imperial system with sailing boats and then telegrams. In the same vein, we come across the issue of medical facilities in such places, simultaneously affected by particular climatic conditions and the presence of floating populations. The famous lazarettos of certain colonial ports demonstrate how the colonial port could be, for both the colonized population and the colonizers, the place where the most brutal forms of death originated³². A lock between there and here, between land and sea, the port was also a lock between life and the beyond. It was, therefore, a question of bringing over a metropolitan port model, with the goal of limiting the risk of disease spreading in Europe from colonized regions.

Ports in the imagination

The port is where, in novels and accounts of expeditions, the Western hero and the colonial world first come into contact. Yet, even though Marcel Roncayolo paved the way in the 1990s³³, and despite being commonplace in exotic imagery, in particular in colonial literature, representations of ports in a colonial situation are rarely the subject of specific studies. The theme of exoticism is generally at the heart of the colonizers' representations of the colonized world. However, the colonial port often seems to be a less exotic intermediate zone. Clearly, it was the buffer zone between the motherland and the colonized country. It is important to note that, as emphasised by Henri Copin in relation to colonial literature in general³⁴, ports appear to be hazy crossroads. There, clichés and stereotypes of the "exoticized" other and the spirit of adventure³⁵ mixed with the first analyses and recognition of the indigenous culture and with the first reflections on the effects of different civilisations meeting. These reflections were encouraged by the intermingling and hybridization that occurred in ports more than anywhere else.

The richness of the representations of colonial ports varies largely according to geographical region and the importance of the port, its years of service as well as, quite simply, whether the present populations were amicable or tensions arose. For example, until decolonization, the colonial ports of South East Asia were a space of high investment and frequent encounters between the imaginations of the Europeans and the inhabitants bordering the China Sea³⁶. These representations also vary largely according to the time period. Regarding the colonizers, many historians and colonial literature experts, such as Copin, emphasise how the awareness of the colonial relationship changes and broadens as the

³² See Claire Laux, "Mourir en ville : colonisation, épidémies et pratiques mortuaires en Océanie", in Bernard Andrieu, Gilles Boëtsch (ed.), *Corps du monde*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013, pp. 168-171 and "La mort et la ville en Océanie" in *La Mort et la Ville*, ed. Philippe Chassaing, *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*, volume 114, December 2007, n° 4, p.15-27. See also Michelle Marimoutou, *Engagisme et contrôle sanitaire. Les lazarets de quarantaine dans les îles du sud-ouest de l'océan Indien aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, thesis of contemporary history, ed. Jacques Weber, Université de Nantes, ongoing (2014).

³³ Marcel Roncayolo, *L'imaginaire de Marseille. Port, ville, pôle*, Marseille, CCIMP, coll°. "Histoire du commerce et de l'industrie de Marseille", tome V, 1990; 368 p.

³⁴ Henri Copin, *L'Indochine dans la littérature française, exotisme et altérité*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1996, 319 p; and, by the same author, *L'Indochine des romans*, Pondichéry, Kailash, 2000, 165 p.

³⁵ On the spirit of adventure, see the work of Sylvain Venayre, *La gloire de l'aventure. Genèse d'une mystique moderne. 1850-1940*, Aubier, collection "Historique", 2002, 349 p.

³⁶ Denys Lombard (ed.), *Rêver l'Asie*, Paris, ed. de l'EHESS, 1993.

late modern period progresses. The colonizers, the colonized, and the travellers, were increasingly able to comprehend each other's point of view. At the same time, a marginal group of colonial representations distanced themselves from the official colonial discourse, with the port often the focal point of criticism, as can be seen in the work of Albert Londres, such as in his vitriolic *Terre d'ébène* [Land of ebony]. As time progressed, the representation of the colonial port as a boundary between civilization and supposed barbarity increasingly diminished, the latter, incidentally, having been reduced by various means. The colonial port was, in fact, sometimes represented as a bridgehead of European civilization, the place from which it spread. At times, however, it was presented as an island of civilization, a "fortress", in the middle of the "savages". Similarly, regarding missionaries, for example, two contradictory representations can be found³⁷.

But the issue of representations clearly does not only concern external considerations of colonial ports, it is also closely linked to urban and port lives in a colonial situation. It is not only a question of images, but also sensibilities and sensations. Surprisingly, for the majority of authors who consider these matters, the port stays in the background when analysing urban life³⁸.

Colonial marks on the port landscape

The urban landscapes developed by Europeans in colonial ports demonstrate how they rebuilt a society overseas. How many American cities does this relate to, such as Newport and New Orleans, for example?. In the late modern period, with the end of exclusive trade, how many also developed regional autonomy in relation to the motherland? These ports thus obtained a number of their own purpose-built boats, which, through their significance and spatial location, include these ports in the colonial situation. In the same vein, the division of port cities into districts tells us how the various ethnic and social groups found their place and expressed themselves in these urban landscapes, recording a colonial port culture in buildings and cadastral division. This does not only concern the concept of town planning as the reproduction (or lack thereof) of motherland cities and as a way of managing of racial issues; interbreeding and hybridization also became part of the architecture and urban landscapes through

³⁷ See Claude Prudhomme, *Missions et colonisation, XVI^e – XX^e siècles*, Paris, Cerf, 2004, 172 p.

³⁸ The work of Daniel Nathivel, among others, looks into the links between "sensitive" citizenry (*citadinité* "sensible") and the port environment in a colonial situation. He is interested in, for example, what we might call "imagination of horizons", that is, the way in which the flows linked to the port can particularly influence urban temporality. In *Politiques d'équipements et services urbains dans les villes du Sud*, edited by Chantal Chanson-Jabeur, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Odile Goerg (l'Harmattan, Paris, 2004)³⁸, 12 out of 15 contributions concern colonial ports but the issue of life is not explicitly approached: we only implicitly grasp it and there is no systematic study on how the rationale of construction led to ports "forgetting" the majority of their inhabitants (the vast majority of the colonized but also, often some of the colonizers) to the benefit of the only minority really connected to the port and imperial economic realities, which is a quasi-constant of economic research on the territories of colonisation. See Hubert Bonin, Catherine Hodeir and Jean-François Klein (eds.), *L'Esprit économique impérial. Réseaux et groupes de pressions du patronat colonial français, 1830-1970*, Paris, SFHOM, 2008, 654 p.

negotiation, imitation and compromise³⁹. The specificities in this regard are numerous, with a subtle difference to consider between the ports created *ex nihilo* by the Europeans, Japanese and Americans and the precolonial ports taken and transformed by the colonizers. For example, the ports of North Africa, such as Algiers and Bône, predated the colonial conquest. However, they see their economic purpose and urban landscapes just like the representations linked to, modelled and transformed by the conquest, which began in the ports with, in particular, objectives of military control of the city and port infrastructure⁴⁰.

To (not) conclude

As we stated at the beginning, this article is, resolutely, a work in progress. Therefore, we cannot provide any conclusion to this five-year-long research project, which is currently at the half-way point. However, by asking these initial questions, we have tried to show in what way the colonial port is heuristic. We have also sought to open avenues of study that we consider stimulating and that, we hope, will inspire historians working on other imperial spaces to undertake comparative research.

³⁹ Emphasised by, for example, Caroline Herbelin in her thesis: Caroline Herbelin, *Architecture et urbanisme en situation coloniale : le cas du Vietnam*, doctoral thesis in history of art, ed. Flora Blanchon, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2010, 540 p.

⁴⁰ On the case of Algiers, see Jean-Jacques Jordi and Jean-Louis Planche (ed.), *Alger 1860-1939 : le modèle ambigu du triomphe colonial*, Paris, Autrement, 1999, p. 231: “les Français peinent à prendre ce port labyrinthe, les soldats ont grand mal à se repérer dans les dédales des petites rues aussi les premiers aménagements du paysage urbain ont avant tout une fonction militaire, il s’agit de sécuriser la ville” [the French struggle to take the labyrinth of a port, the soldiers have significant difficulties in getting their bearings in the maze of little streets, also, the first adjustments to the urban landscape have, above all, a military function]