Contesting Territorial Waters: Kotte and Jaffna in the 14ᵗʰ-16ᵗʰ Centuries

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Introduction

We are familiar today with the seemingly oxymoronic concept of "territorial waters", and the idea that certain areas of the oceans belong to certain landed states. Today these are laid out neatly marked on maps, and enforced by navies across the world, but are hardly ever visible to travellers on the sea. Such invisible boundaries also existed in the past; although we tend to understand pre-modern polities as extending only up to the coast as depicted on maps. The pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka is usually periodised and mapped according to the various kingdoms that existed at different points of time. In the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the kingdoms of Raigama/ Kotte and Jaffna can be seen as being the main polities on the island. Both Kotte and Jaffna extended their spheres of power beyond the territorial into the maritime. These kingdoms enforced their claims over the maritime in much the same way as they did over land; that is, through taxation, war, and alliances. This abstract sets out the ways the states of Kotte and Jaffna used these three methods over the sea, "marking water" (Tai, 2007) as belonging to the state just as the land did.

Taxation is one of the simplest ways of expressing sovereignty. In the 14ᵗʰ century, the southwest of the island was administrated by the Alakeshwara family, who were viceroys of the Gampola kings and arguably held the actual reins of government in the region. Their capital shifted from Raigama to Kotte towards the end of the century, and in the meantime, they used the regional "right of the port" customary tax to establish their sovereignty over the ports. This right was contested by the Arya Chakravarti kings of Jaffna, who launched a series of wars and enforced their own claims over the maritime space. Tax also provides us with a perspective from which to look at the foundations of the Kotte Kingdom in the mid-late 14ᵗʰ century.

Inextricably linked to taxation, war (or the threat of war) forms another way of expressing sovereignty. Maintaining borders with physical force is common, and in the modern world we are used to seeing this at sea, from the fishing conflicts with India to refugee-coast guard encounters in Europe. In the period at hand too we can

understand maritime violence and conflict as part of the apparatus used to demarcate control and power. During the 14th century, the Arya Chakravarti kings were known regionally as "sultans powerful on the sea", and were able to involve themselves in regional politics as a result. In Colombo too in the mid-14th century we hear of a ruler using mercenaries to enforce his sovereignty over the port and sea. In the early 15th century, Ming Admiral Zheng He included certain parts of the island in his voyages, intervening in domestic affairs and fighting battles as part of the Yong Le emperor's policies for the region. Through these encounters, war and skirmishes allowed different actors to establish themselves as rulers of the sea.

When fighting wars, it is useful and sometimes imperative to have allies. Because they show us states not at war with each other, alliances provide a useful way to understand sovereignty. Allies were allowed to use the claimed maritime space whereas opponents were not. The best illustration of these alliances takes us into the sixteenth century, with the arrival of the Portuguese and their Calicut enemies, the Kunjali Marakkars. The politics and alliances of the broader South Indian region played out again in the waters of Kotte and Jaffna, leading to the contestation of these waters until the collapse of the coastal kingdoms.

Literature Review

While older scholars sometimes viewed the Indian Ocean as an apolitical space, much like today's conception of international waters, newer works have challenged this (Prange, 2013). Understanding the premodern Indian Ocean as apolitical obscures its people's political agency and overemphasizes European interventions from the 16th century onwards. Pearson (2015) suggests that the interconnectedness of the oceans also defy attempts to label one area "Indian" or other, instead merely providing us with one of several ways to view and understand the region as a whole (see also Antony, 2010).

Many scholars have written about the concept of sovereignty over the maritime space; notably Tai (2007) in her analysis of portolan maps and piracy in premodern Europe. Shapinsky (2010) provides a study of how emergent Japanese polities used taxation to claim sovereignty over spaces. Prange (2013) discusses how rulers in the south of India used the customary "right of the port" to tax shipping and stake claims, a finding also notable in Chakravarti (1991), Menon (1999) and Reid (2010).

Margariti (2008) shows how emergent polities in the Middle East which used naval power to enforce their claims were illegitimised as pirates by other, more established kingdoms. Furthermore, Margariti is important to this study because of her proposal

of viewing emergent polities as "land-and-sea realms", that is, spheres of political power extending across and beyond shores. This research also depends on Tambiah's (1976) conception of the galactic polity to understand the bounds of the kingdoms.

Several scholars have worked to conceptualize this marking of the sea; however, there is a gap when it comes to Sri Lanka of this period. This research builds on my own undergraduate research on maritime violence in the 14th century, as well as scholarship of the region and rereads existing work to understand the politics of kingdoms beyond the edge of the land.

Methodology

Rather than trying to be a definitive historical study, this research hopes to shift perspective from the land to the sea, blurring the shoreline and reading existing scholarship through a new lens. It seeks to conceptualize the waters of the Kotte and Jaffna Kingdoms during a period that covers both kingdoms' peaks and declines.

As such, this study mainly draws on existing secondary sources, read between the lines to understand the land-and-sea realms. It further uses primary sources in the forms of translations of travellers' accounts, a few inscriptions, and contemporary literary sources in order to support the existing scholarship. Using these sources, I hope to expand the conception of the two states and their borders beyond the village boundaries to the sea.

Conclusion

From this research, it becomes apparent that ending historical inquiry where the Indian Ocean meets the shore limits our understanding of the politics of any period of time. In particular, the 14th-16th centuries, as a period of major political shifts, demands that focus be moved extra-terrestrially. Thinking as an island, it is hard to break away fully from conventions of referring to Sri Lanka as a single unit; however, I have tried to reframe Kotte and Jaffna as located on the island but not as two parts of an inevitable whole.

This study has implications for the present in that it pushes for a better understanding of land-and-sea realms, which demonstrate how the modern world is demarcated and divided up. Borders at sea are highly contested and contentious; and infringements (or perceived infringements) of these borders and the sovereignty they represent can be understood in many ways. Furthermore, in shifting away from the land and towards the sea, I have tried to bring in an understanding of the physical space of Sri Lanka that moves away from the bounds of the island while still being firmly oriented towards its broader area.

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