



Mauritius

An Ocean of Connectivity

Ships were long the fastest means of transportation, capable of carrying people and goods in large quantities. As a result, the seas became a medium through which a variety of nations made contact and carried out trade. To this day, ports serve as hubs and cultural melting pots. Taking the Indian Ocean as their example, **Burkhard Schnepel** and his team at the **Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology** are studying how diverse networks developed across the waters.



Strait of Malacca

George Town (Penang)

TEXT **TINA HEIDBORN**

The Indian Ocean covers around 70 million square kilometers – approximately 15 percent of the Earth’s surface – providing a link, at its southern limits, between the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and Perth on Australia’s west coast all the way northward to Karachi, Pakistan and Kolkata, India. In between, the world’s third-largest ocean is dotted with islands and archipelagos. It’s not exactly a small area that Burkhard Schnepel chose to study. He is Professor of Social Anthropology at Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg and a fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, where he heads the “Connectivity in Motion: Port Cities of the Indian Ocean” working group.

Burkhard Schnepel’s primary interest in the Indian Ocean is what the water has made possible: “People have been travelling around this area for more than 3,000 years,” he explains. “It’s not just vast, it also has a long history.” For the social anthropologist and his project team, the Indian Ocean is a contact zone.

Thanks to the regular monsoon winds – blowing from the southwest in summer and from the northeast in winter – the Indian Ocean was relatively navigable during the age of sailing. Both historically and ethnologically, it can be regarded as a medium for contact and trade since ancient times, a “maritime silk road.” When Europeans arrived in increasing numbers from the 16th century onward, these opportunities for trade were a major factor: an ocean full of routes between Africa and Asia. Burkhard Schnepel has already done work on both continents. He wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford on the Shilluk people of South Sudan before turning his attention to field work and projects in eastern India. Now his focus has broadened to “Indian Ocean studies.” The ocean provides a framework, but to study the movements across it, researchers need to concentrate on individual points of departure and arrival and grasp the details: small islands and ports are a focal point of the project.

Burkhard Schnepel himself is dealing with an island that in the West is



Burkhard Schnepel (far right) is studying the island of Mauritius as a hub where knowledge derived from various cultures has been amassed, for instance about the effects of herbs (left). Immigrants have created their own traditions, such as the Sega style of music and dance (right). Today, Ebène Cybercity, south of the capital Port Louis, is an interface for high-speed optical fiber cables (right center).

regarded primarily as a vacation destination: Mauritius. To carry out field work and archival research, he has for years been making regular visits to the island nation, or more accurately to the main island of Mauritius and its capital and port city, Port Louis. Of decisive significance for him is its role as an important hub.

But what makes an island a hub? One key factor is the location: Mauritius was originally an uninhabited island, but one that was of great use to seafarers in the empty vastness of the Indian Ocean, on the route between East Africa in the west and India in the east. While the island is said to have been marked on the charts used by Arab sailors as far back as the 10th century, the first Europeans to “discover” Mauritius were the Portuguese in the early 16th century. Here they could take fresh food on board and refill their water casks, allow the crew a little relaxation, and repair and refit their ships.

It wasn't until 130 years later that the Dutch established the first colonies. Approximately one hundred years later, the island was settled by the French, and later still, in 1810, it was conquered by the British. As time went on, Mauritius gained in importance as a trading

center: it was a way station for textiles and spices from India and ceramics from China, but also for slaves from Africa, of importance to the East India Companies of the European colonial powers. But the ships carried more than people and goods across the Indian Ocean. “They also brought ideas, languages, cultural and religious influences, and certain beliefs and expectations,” says Burkhard Schnepel.

SUGAR CANE WAS ONCE SMUGGLED ONTO THE ISLAND

And that's another reason why Mauritius developed into a hub: over the past nearly 300 years, people from a wide variety of cultures have come to the island, creating an unusually varied pattern in a closely confined area. Social anthropologists and politicians alike refer to this as “unity in diversity.” To this day, a variety of religions and cultures exist more or less independently side by side. Languages and dialects from northern and southern India and China can be heard on the island along with – for official occasions – French and English, but the main language Mauritians use to communicate with one another is Morisyen, a unique Cre-

ole language that developed on the basis of French and other tongues that come together here. The multilingual character of the island remains one of its locational advantages.

Burkhard Schnepel believes that hubs are also distinguished by a high level of energy; they change the things that pass through their hands, transform them and add value. Schnepel mentions both historical and current examples: by the end of the 1960s, the island's main export was sugar. Yet, originally, there was no sugar cane on Mauritius – it was smuggled onto the island from southern Asia. This was the only reason why Mauritius was able to start exporting sugar. What is more, the varieties with the highest yield were cultivated here, and were thus transformed before leaving the island again. Since it was granted independence in March 1968, the island has undergone an impressive economic transition. The traditional view that Mauritian society is defined by the centuries-old system of sugar cane plantations is not one that is shared by the social anthropologist from Halle. “Mauritius has come to regard itself as a hub and markets itself as such. Not just in maritime sectors, but progressively also in other areas too,” he adds.



Textile processing has since also become an important factor in the island's economic life: fabrics are imported from India and Bangladesh. It helps that two-thirds of Mauritians are of Indian origin. It also helps that the government has quite specifically created excellent conditions for the processing itself – an export trade zone that enjoys an extremely favorable tax status. The money to develop the textile factories comes predominantly from wealthy sugar barons, themselves French or of French origin – Franco-Mauritians make up around two percent of the population. There have also been investments from outside the island – once again across the sea. In the 1970s, many Hong Kong Chinese were seeking a safe haven for their money outside of the Crown colony that was facing integration into China in 1997. In Mauritius they were helped by the traditional links with Sino-Mauritians – inhabitants with Chinese roots who make up roughly three percent of the population. As a result, American and European manufacturers found excellent conditions here on the island, as well as the necessary expertise to have textiles fabricated here to a high standard. Imported materials

are now turned into luxury garments bearing prominent international brands – made exclusively for export to the West. The indigenous workers, in any case, are unable to afford the textiles and accessories they produce and finish. Often they are Indo-Mauritian and Creole women, the descendants of African slaves drawn from the poorest social strata.

Mauritius plays to its traditional strengths – excellent interconnections and communications stretching in many different directions – even in the rapidly changing age of digitization. “Back in 2000, the place where the new Ebène Cybercity now stands was still a sugar cane plantation,” Schnepel recalls. Today, some of the very fastest fiber optic cables lead to this small island in the Indian Ocean. The international communication technology segment has created around 12,000 jobs in the past few years, while developing the island's profile as an international financial services hub has added around 15,000 jobs since the early 1990s. It is primarily Indians who use the island's important banking sector for their transactions and their business with Africa. But for European and American firms, too, the island is

a good starting point for business in both principal directions across the ocean. “Sure there have been some shortcomings, but since its independence, Mauritius has been a democracy with a free press and political checks and balances,” Burkhard Schnepel explains. Mauritius has thus maintained its position as a stop-over anchorage and transshipment port for global business into the 21st century, and not only by sea.

PORT CITIES ARE THE PRODUCT OF NETWORKING

Head 5,500 kilometers northeast from Mauritius toward Southeast Asia and you are still sailing on the same vast ocean, but now in a different region in which, since fall 2014, Mareike Pampus has been engrossed. She is working on her doctorate under Burkhard Schnepel's guidance as part of the “Connectivity in Motion” research project. But is it actually possible to treat the vast area of the Indian Ocean as one unit and study it as such?

“Of course one might ask whether it wouldn't make more sense to consider the individual maritime regions separately, given the large number of dif-



ferent languages, cultures and states found around the Indian Ocean," social anthropologist Burkhard Schnepel concedes. There are even scientists who, for this very reason, advise against speaking of the Indian Ocean as a single entity. However, if the links and interconnections are considered, if one's research interest lies in the sea as a man-made contact zone, then one needs to take a view from sea to land. From the ocean to the different coastal and cultural areas where one might come ashore. As part of his research in this "maritime" dimension, Schnepel is also interested in acquiring a new perspective on the adjacent lands.

FIVE NUTMEGS WERE WORTH A WHOLE HOUSE

Mareike Pampus has found her personal niche: her work focuses on the port city of George Town on the island of Penang, now part of the state of Malaysia. "Port cities are important in our project because they often originated through networking and interchange," she says. "What is new about our research is that we view them less as a starting point for connectivity – which they are – than as the result of networking."

The British regarded the Indian Ocean as *mare liberum*, a free sea, which offers access to all and should specifically not be subdivided into the demarcated ownership of the bordering states. In order to position themselves firmly in the competitive economic environment engendered by this openness, they secured some strategically important trading centers in the eastern Indian Ocean. In the late 18th century, for instance, the British East India Company in the person of merchant and seafarer Francis Light settled at the northeastern tip of the island of Penang. He named the place George Town, though at first it was less a town than a free port with an adjoining settlement, its function being to participate in the extremely lucrative trade in spices. "Five nutmegs would buy a house in London in those days," says Mareike Pampus.

The island of Penang lies at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca, then as now one of the world's most heavily traveled waterways. In ancient times, this was the maritime route between China, India and the west-Asian world. The first Europeans to arrive here in the 16th century were the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, French

and British, all seeking to enter into this well-developed web of connectivity and extend the routes for the transport and distribution of Southeast and East Asia's costly produce further westward. To the already existing network they added their own new points of contact – such as George Town.

Others followed: "The pattern set by George Town can be traced as far as Singapore and even to the coast of Australia," says doctoral student Mareike Pampus. A few decades later, at the start of the 19th century, and around 600 kilometers from George Town, another employee of the British East India Company established an important port city: Singapore. Its founder, Thomas Stamford Raffles, had previously been Governor General of George Town. History draws a similar line from George Town to Australia, where William Light, son of George Town's founder Francis Light, who had spent the first six years of his life in George Town, went on to found another Indian Ocean port named Adelaide. "This shows," says Mareike Pampus, "how the concept of a city can cross the sea."

Of course the British weren't alone: besides the colonial rulers, it was predominantly the Chinese who settled in

George Town on the Malaysian island of Penang is a melting pot of religions: Situated within a few hundred meters of one another on a road called the “Street of Harmony” are a mosque, a Hindu temple and a Christian church (left, from left). In addition, a statue of Guanyin, the goddess of mercy revered by Taoists and Buddhists, is also occasionally erected to collect donations (right).



George Town; to this day, some 80 percent of the city’s inhabitants are of Chinese origin. Most of them, however, did not come directly from China. They had previously lived in the nearby trading center of Malacca, or in Indonesia, much like the Indian incomers. Like so many other places of contact in the Indian Ocean, George Town, too, is a diverse mix of languages, cultures and religions. Here, too, we find unity in diversity, preserved to this day in the language and in specific terminology. For example, among the inhabitants of George Town are the “Jawi Per-a-nakan” whose forefathers were a mix of southern Indians and Malays. The name includes the word for “child” (anak). A pattern of marriage that can be traced over centuries may be described ethnologically as one of local women bearing children by husbands who arrive as traders from foreign regions.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST

The “Baba-Nyonya,” commonly described in English as “Straits Chinese,” are a special case in George Town. This particular group dates back to the restructuring of the British colonial ad-

ministration, when, in 1826, the British amalgamated their three colonial possessions along the Straits of Malacca – George Town, Malacca and Singapore – to form the Straits Settlements. Chinese who were born in these Straits Settlements and identified strongly with this origin often received a British education and were taught British social standards. As such, they were predestined as traders to cooperate particularly successfully with the English merchants of the East India Company. “Even if their appearance was Chinese, they were highly westernized in character,” Mareike Pampus continues. The Baba-Nyonya remain to this day a separate group within the population of George Town, with their own cultural identity and Creole language.

Who am I? Who were my forefathers, where did they come from and how did they get here? How do I see myself and my cultural imprint? It is these and similar questions that Mareike Pampus seeks to answer on her research visits to George Town, where she is now staying for a second six-month term. She attempts to enter into discussion with the local inhabitants, conducts long interviews,

sometimes several times with the same individuals. It is less a matter of questioning than of allowing them to tell their individual stories. Her goal is to acquire a more accurate view of this very specific situation, of the inhabitants of a port city in the Indian Ocean with their cultural and historic heritage.

There has been a considerable boost in acknowledgment of the manifold roots and cross-cutting connections across the Indian Ocean in recent years. George Town and Malacca were both included in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list in 2008 as bearing outstanding witness to the trade and cultural interconnections that have developed over more than 500 years along the Straits and across the wider Indian Ocean. As grounds for its decision, UNESCO cited the varied influences deriving from Asia and Europe that have contributed to a unique multicultural heritage in these cities. Guide books to George Town describe Buddhist temples side by side with Hindu shrines, churches and mosques.

On a research visit to Mauritius in the spring, Burkhard Schnepel focused on the island’s typical style of music



For her doctorate, Mareike Pampus (large photo, left) is conducting interviews with inhabitants of varying origins in George Town, Malaysia, in order to study their cultural imprint. One important group is the "Baba-Nyonya," descendants of Chinese immigrants who preserve their own traditions (small photo).

and dance: the Sega. Tour operators are fond of advertising it as an illustration of the cheerful approach to life on Mauritius. It was originally brought to the island by African slaves who labored in the sugar cane plantations in the 18th century. Once sung and danced in secret by mainly Creole Mauritians, today all of the islanders – including Franco-, Sino- and Indo-Mauritians – collectively identify with it. More than twenty different forms have developed and are the subject of Burkhard Schnepel's social anthropological studies: both modern and traditional variants that are even taught at school, amalgams such as Seggae (part Sega, part reggae), but also the so-called Sega tipik or Sega typique. This more traditional Sega



was recently declared by UNESCO to be part of the intangible World Cultural Heritage – a tradition that has resulted from the interchange and coexistence between peoples coming to Mauritius from different parts of the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Even though the world's third-largest ocean lies primarily in the southern hemisphere, far removed from Germany, Burkhard Schnepel has the impression that awareness of this region is growing here, too. German politicians, at least, are showing an increasing interest. "For Germany and

for Europe, it is high time to take a closer look at the Indian Ocean region," said German Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at a conference he organized in Berlin in June 2015. The theme of the conference was "The Indian Ocean – A Maritime Region on the Rise." In other words, it's a good time for social anthropologist Burkhard Schnepel and his team at the Max Planck Institute in Halle to take a closer look at this rising region and firmly anchor their Indian Ocean studies research field in the German science landscape. ◀

TO THE POINT

- If one considers the Indian Ocean as a unit, it is possible to identify hubs: places that serve as nodes connecting the ocean's different littoral states and their cultures.
- The defining features of a hub are its location – such as at the intersection of important shipping routes – a wide variety of languages and cultures, and the fact that goods are transformed and value added prior to onward shipment.
- Among the examples studied by the scientists in Halle are the island of Mauritius and the Malaysian port city of George Town.

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