

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/11/port.html>

## Port

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By Jatin Dua

Indian Ocean port cities are worlds of coral and glass. Consider Lamu or Zanzibar on the East African coast with their labyrinthine old towns where ornate buildings made of smooth grey coral stone stand in various states of ruin along narrow and winding lanes echoing long histories of trade and mobility. If coral indexes a distant past of commerce and cosmopolitanism, the cityscapes of Dubai and Singapore with their gleaming glass structures conjure up the “fake” futurity that Pamela Gupta notes in [her reflections on the World Islands project](#) in Dubai. In contrast to these ruins of coral or the shimmer of glass, Berbera, like other port towns that dot the Northern Somali coast, is by every measure architecturally unremarkable. Nestled between parched and jagged mountains and hazy blue of the Red Sea, this semi-bustling port city, neither features in tourist itineraries nor in the manifests of container ships and is a ramshackle collection of drab concrete buildings, shops, and warehouses. But, these worlds of ramshackle concrete, like those of coral and glass are equally defined by arrivals and departures. Saints, sovereigns, pilgrims, merchants, adventurers and pirates arrive in addition to cargo that ranges from pasta to Land Rovers. Some regulated, some clandestine these arrivals and departures give a rhythm to life along this threshold of land and sea. Sometimes, certain arrivals muddle distinctions and temporalities—objects wash ashore; tsunamis churn up rubble from the hidden depths of the sea. In these moments legal classifications and distinctions are sought and made. Flotsam and jetsam, gift and theft are not mere descriptors but projects and end results of legal and ethical arguments that emerge from within encounters and arrivals. Thinking through the “rubble” (Gordillo, 2014) on land and sea is both to make visible the sinews of connectivity that shape Berbera and other seemingly marginal littoral spaces and a meditation on worlds of toxicity and obligation created in the wake of these connections—these arrivals and departures.

In 2010, when I conducted research in Berbera, the main road leading to the port was lined with shelled-out and bullet-pocked buildings and an abandoned and rusted tank—artifacts of the civil war that began in 1980s pitting the inhabitants of Somaliland against the dictatorial regime of Siyad Barre (1969-91). Adjacent to the port, half-sunken ships were visible on the horizon, reminders of the aerial bombing campaigns that marked the twilight years of the Barre regime, when all dissent was viciously quelled.



Legacies of the Cold War, when Somalia oscillated between the Soviet Union and the United States, also lingered in the shadows of the city. The seemingly endless airport runway constructed by the Soviet Union and used by NASA as an emergency space shuttle landing site was perhaps the most visible reminder of Berbera's then-strategic importance. But there were also smaller imprints of the Cold War: health clinics, fisheries cooperatives, and schools mostly reduced to rubble due to the shelling or just neglect. One such building, a former Cuban health clinic at the edge of town, had been recently reoccupied and renamed the Somaliland Fishing Association (Somafish).

After a week of back-and-forth phone calls and text messages, Muse, the director of Somafish, agreed to meet with me right after the *asr* (afternoon) prayer. To get to his office, I had passed a graveyard of fiber fishing skiffs—the preferred vessels of local fishermen as well as the pirates who roamed farther out in the Gulf of Aden. Sitting across a desk littered with papers and a somewhat odd trinity of a Somaliland flag, shark jaw with teeth intact, and a replica of an anchor, Muse recounted his personal biography, one intertwined with these histories of geopolitics and mobility. Born in Mogadishu, Muse had moved to the Northern Somali coast in the 1970s drawn to the sea by Siyad Barre's vision of transforming the Red Sea into a sea of profit and calories for the local population. Forged through a dance of maritime currents and wind patterns, the waters off the coast of Somalia are teeming with tuna, snapper, and over coveted piscine delights. Beginning in the 1970s, the Barre regime sought with Italian and Soviet assistance to harness this bounty of the sea. By the 1980s

long-distance trawlers from as far as Japan and Norway were drawn to this coast partly fleeing the tightening embrace of maritime regulation and the aftereffects of overfishing in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. When Somaliland announced its independence in 1994, revenues from the Berbera port and fisheries were seen as crucial to securing the newly independent, though unrecognized, nation's economic sovereignty. "We established Somafish with the goal of harnessing the sea like it was in the early years of the Siyad Barre regime." But, Muse explained, this project had encountered many difficulties. "As you can see, we are not very far from Yemen and Yemeni fishermen often come to Somaliland to steal our fish. We also have Korean trawlers that are responsible for overfishing and Italian mafia ships that dump hazardous waste."

These stories and the material remainders that litter the landscape, bodies, and biographies of those who inhabit the Northern Somali coast point to the *worldedness* of Berbera—a kind of rubble cosmopolitanism that exists alongside the aesthetics of coral and glass in the Indian Ocean littoral. Forged through histories of encounter, this rubble cosmopolitanism beckons to worlds beyond Berbera and the Somali coast and the ways in which objects that wash ashore, often unexpectedly, are domesticated and contested. [As Charne Lavery shows](#) the distant regions of the world's oceans and their dark, cold depths create a vision of oceanic space as limitless and allow for possibilities of disposal whose effects are 'delayed and distant, exhibiting not only the effects of latency but also drift.' For Lavery when objects surface from these depths, they highlight simultaneously the ideology of oceanic space as empty and its limits. But, surfacing is also sometimes about profit and at other times peril. Surfacing is about making visible entanglements and obligations, including toxic obligations.

In the early nineteenth century, about a week after leaving the relatively calm seas of Aden or Berbera a ship would find itself at the promontory of Cape Guardafui where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean. From May to November, when strong currents and gusty winds blow from the south, ships would often get caught in a whirlpool that developed northeast of Ras Haafun. An unfortunate ship caught in this whirlpool would find itself thrown westward to the rocky coast between Haafun and 'Alula. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the coast around Ras Haafun and the Majeerteen inhabitants of the area had developed into a shipwreck coast. These ships were seen as "gifts from the ocean" and the wreckage that washed ashore created shipwreck villages where inhabitants waited for ships to come onshore. Of course the British and later the Italians did not often see these as gifts. Drawing on the law of shipwrecks that distinguished between flotsam (floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo still considered property of the ship owner) and jetsam (willfully jettisoned wreckage with no property claim), the British insisted that all that appeared

on the Majeerteen coast was flotsam under the legal protection of the British. This was not gift exchange, but theft and as protectors of free trade, the British blockaded this coast until the Majeerteen gave up their claims on these “gifts.”

Sometimes, gifts are not only contested, they are poisonous. In 2005, the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami washed ashore wreckage at these former shipwreck villages from as far as coastal Sri Lanka, including mysterious containers. Rumors of toxic waste dumping had circulated in this region for many years, but were seldom investigated. Unlike shipwrecks, the containers that washed ashore at these villages were a different kind of waste. Soon stories of mysterious sicknesses and toxic exposure emerged. In 2007, a UN commission on the Indian Ocean tsunami confirmed exposure to radioactive substances in some of those villages in Northern Somalia. In recent years there has been a demonstrated increase in cancer and birth defects in Northern Somalia. Yet, on questions of culpability the report has little to say. In the case of 19<sup>th</sup> century shipwrecks, coastal populations through a vocabulary of gift and bounty sought to disassociate histories of ownership. These histories and claims to property were reinstated when the British insisted that wrecks were flotsam, and not jetsam. They were in other words not gifts. In the case of containers, it was precisely the reverse. Coastal villagers insisted that these objects were not jettisoned artifacts, but a specific kind of gift, a curse from owners who could be identified and thus this gift of toxic waste could be returned. A language of jetsam and wreck in the UN report erased these counter-claims. However undesirable, the report suggested, toxic containers were merely a gift of the tsunami.



Image source: Somaliland Nation News

Toxic containers still dot the Somali coast, though shipwreck villages have faded into obscurity. These villages briefly boomed when stories of pirates captured the global imagination. During fieldwork in one such village, I asked a group of men about the history of shipwrecks and toxic containers:

We used to sit patiently hoping and praying to get a gift from the sea. Our ancestors found shipwrecks, but the Europeans ended that when they came. Then came containers, but no one took them away. I think the pirates maybe have an answer. Today you cannot just wait for a gift from the sea; you might get poison. You have to be like these men [pirates], you have to go out to sea and bring the gift of the sea home.

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## References

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