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The Mandala, Agency and Norms in Indonesia-India Global Affairs

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The notion of the *Mandala* can be traced back to a Tamil inscription that describes a settlement and commercial system of a South Indian communal compound before the Chola's raid in 1025 CE. The records note a commercial system in Lobu Tua of Southern Aceh dated in 1088 CE (McKinnon 1994). Mercantile exchanges between the two regions continued despite political turbulence resulting from domestic or global affairs. Many scholars believe that the Mandala of the Indian Ocean was the most substantial factor that engineered this international relationship. Mandala is a Sanskrit word that means a circle of space and time that connect through a circulation of being, according to Bose (2006). Through the shared Muslim cultures across the Indian Ocean (Pradines and Topan, 2023), The Mandala's international norms ruled not only the entanglement on networks, ports, commodities, and agencies that characterized the systemic order of sovereignty, rivalry, and alliances with the great powers but also the fluid political ecosystem of the Ocean. It guided mobility, interactions, and a sense of belonging to the native-becoming South Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Jews, and Europeans.

Fernand Braudel highlighted a similar notion of *mandala* in French as revealed in his book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (1972). He coined the "long duree" concept to explain spatial and temporal connections threaded in the cycle of economic and political circulatory processes that shaped inter-civilizational pluralism and inclusivity. Complimentary to Braudel's, Acharya's reflection (2019) on the origin of the global economy and international politics showcases the cycle of circulation pattern between various empires. It contributed to a "civilizational state" where "embedded norms and cultures engineered pluralism and unipolarity" that formed the global order across the Indian Ocean. Such multiplexity had to owe to the 'open' character of the surrounding sovereignties, as Manjeed S Pardesi (2022) concluded. He showed that the 'open' character contributed to shaping a 'de-centered hegemony' of the centric world order system, referring to the case of 15th century Malacca's international politics with the global powers.

South Indian merchants emerged in the cycle mercantile network from Coromandel ports such as Portonovo, Nagore, Kayalpattinam, Nagapattinam, Kailakkaral, Chennai, and Pulicat to areas such as Aceh, Malacca, Kedah, Perak, Penang, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka before rerouting back from the Coromandel Ports (Nordin, 2005). These merchants were vital players who possessed knowledge of the economic and political oceanic flow across the ports and networks. They were known not only to be capable of managing agencies and maintaining commodities through long-distance voyages – they were also polyglots, learned men, and wealthy merchants who allowed their involvement in the un-hierarchical governmental political structure and controlled the ports and networks in almost autonomous leadership, as revealed through the interactions of the South Indians such as the Nainar, Chuliah, Lappai, Marikan, Kelings, etc. They occupied numerous positions, from primary port minister (*Shahbandar*), Ship Captain (*Nakhoda*), local rajah, to the economic and political adviser of the Sultan (Nordin, 2005).

Aside from increasing appointments as *shahbandar*, advising the Sultans and local rajahs, and handling their trade affairs, South Indian merchants were also trusted to be skillful as lobbyists, expanding their tasks as diplomats, interpreters, letter drafters, and bearers. They could act in this capacity, at least from the multicentric sovereign perspective, where an autonomous ruler shaped the alliance.

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An event occurred in c. 1767–8 concerning ships believed to be carrying numerous cargoes belonging to British merchant companies Gowan Harrop and Baillie, beside the Acehese Sultan's commercial goods. A conflict emerged with supercargo owners, and the case was referred for arbitration to the court of Pondicherry in India, a French colony. To solve the dispute, the Sultan delegated Abu Bakar Lebby (Bayly, 1989) to seek consultation with Nawab Wolan Jir of the Carnatic, or Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah (1717–1795), who was influential enough to “calm the air” with the French authorities (Lee, 2006).

Abu Bakar Lebby was chosen because of the language skills and political knowledge of the Aceh-Carnatic and Coromandel-French spheres. In the Sultan's and Lebby's geopolitical understanding, the Nawab was the patron of the wealthiest Marikan mercantile network with prolonged commercial relations in Aceh-Indonesia, Malaysia, and Strait Settlement. The Nawab employed the Marakkayarese to supply and man his ships in Porto Novo, which he used to bear charity and pilgrims to Mecca and Medina. Other figures worth mentioning are Shahbandar and Sultan's advisers, Muhammad Kasim and Poh Salleh, who are recorded in Thomas Forrest's account in 1772. Other two merchants, Sahib Nadar Alam and Panton Abdullah, were entrusted with governing two villages in northern Sumatra by Sultan Jauhar al Alam Syah (1786-1823). The Sultan's Nakhodas were Meera Labbai, Muhammad Musa, Mohammad Sultan, and Kasim. Lubbai Muhammad and Gullah Meidin are names of scribes and drafters of a treaty between Aceh and the great powers such as France and the US (Reid, 2008).

Obert Voll (1994) argued that historically, Islam is a world system that can engineer order within the complexity of social and political hierarchy. It regulated an open character of power behavior that encompassed its “inter-civilizational political entities,” leading its sovereignty to establish an “imperial unification.” This is because he found that “no single cultural, economic, or imperial system was hegemonic,” which provides a hypothesis on peace and the universal value of the oceanic interaction between Indonesia and South Indians of the *Ma'bar* and the Coromandel ports.

This argument supports the idea that Islamic culture was the norm that helped establish the oceanic maritime world order. The norms witnessed the inferior presence of a hierarchic international system established based on the supremacy of skin color and religious exclusivity, as revealed in the international affairs between South Indians and Acehese-Indonesians in the 18th century, especially with the evidence of non-Muslim enclaves and diverse political occupants. For instance, a particular Hindu's Purvan traded with Aceh by partnering with British Merchants; Nathaniel Sabat, an Orthodox Catholic from Syria, was an interpreter and adviser to the Sultan. Non-Muslim British and French merchants acting as advisers were not unusual too (Lee, 2006). All these Europeans found their way to the Indonesian Islands by escaping colonial India. Numerous periods show the presence of non-Muslim enclaves, such as the Chinese, Indians, and Europeans in Aceh and Java, that were given legitimacy for a self-determined order. In the case of South Indian Hindus, there was the Chettys enclave in Malacca, Pasai, and Sulawesi (Subrahmanian, 1995).

The Indian Ocean Mandala, multi-skill agencies, and norms were critical factors in the longevity of international engagement between Indonesia and South Indians. The Indian Ocean connected maritime sovereignties and agencies predominantly attached to Islamic entities. The shared cultures and identities shaped the international norms, devoid of the race-religion-oriented international system.

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