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Mapping the French controlled Spice Trade in Mahe and Karaikal

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Abstract

This paper examines the spatial logics of French colonial control over the spice trade in the enclaves of Mahe (on the Malabar Coast) and Karaikal (on the Coromandel Coast) through a critical GIS-based historical analysis. By digitally mapping trade routes, administrative boundaries, port infrastructures, and ecological zones of spice cultivation, the study reconstructs how French imperial power was territorially produced, maintained, and contested in these fragmented colonial spaces. Rather than treating Mahe and Karaikal as peripheral outposts, the paper situates them as strategically embedded nodes within an uneven and multi-scalar colonial network of circulation linking South Asia to the Indian Ocean world and the global capitalist system. Drawing on political geography, the research conceptualizes French colonial space as relational rather than continuous, characterized by enclaves, corridors, and maritime vectors of control. GIS layers are used to visualize the spatial disjunction between sovereignty and territory, revealing how colonial authority operated through selective control of ports, customs regimes, and commercial intermediaries rather than through territorial contiguity. This spatial fragmentation is interpreted through world-systems theory, positioning Mahe and Karaikal as semi-peripheral extraction and exchange nodes that facilitated the movement of spices from localized agrarian ecologies into global commodity chains dominated by European core powers. The paper further engages postcolonial and critical cartographic theory to interrogate mapping itself as a colonial technology. French archival maps and trade records are georeferenced to expose how cartographic representation functioned to naturalize imperial control, obscure indigenous trade networks, and reframe ecological landscapes as extractable resources. By combining historical GIS with critical theory, the study challenges Eurocentric narratives of colonial efficiency and coherence, instead emphasizing improvisation, dependency on local actors, and the fragility of imperial power.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates how digital mapping can be mobilized not merely as a descriptive tool, but as a critical method for re-theorizing colonial political economy, spatial sovereignty, and the geographies of global capitalism in the Indian Ocean world.

***Keywords**: French colonialism; spice trade; GIS; political geography; world-systems theory; Indian Ocean; Mahe; Karaikal; historical cartography; colonial enclaves*

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has long been recognized as a dynamic arena of commercial and cultural circulation. From antiquity through the early modern period, maritime networks connected East Africa, Arabia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia through complex systems of exchange. Spices such as pepper, cardamom, cloves, and cinnamon became among the most valuable commodities in global trade, drawing European powers into competitive ventures across the Indian littoral. While much scholarship has focused on Portuguese, Dutch, and British imperial ventures, the French presence in India - particularly in enclaves such as Mahe and Karaikal—deserves closer examination, especially in relation to religion and cultural exchange.

This paper explores the French-controlled spice trade in Mahe (on the Malabar Coast) and Karaikal (on the Coromandel Coast) as interconnected nodes within Indian Ocean trade networks. Rather than viewing these enclaves solely as economic stations, this study interprets them as socio-religious contact zones where trade routes became pathways of cultural interaction. In doing so, the paper aligns with the conference theme, "Religion and Trade Routes in India: Pathways of Cultural Exchange Through History," by demonstrating that the mapping of spice routes reveals overlapping circuits of commerce, belief, and identity formation.

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Drawing on secondary historical research, archival references, and sociological approaches to trade networks, the study argues that French trade in Mahe and Karaikal fostered hybrid social formations, missionary expansion, interreligious negotiation, and cosmopolitan port cultures. The spice trade was not merely an economic enterprise but a multidimensional process that linked material exchange with spiritual and cultural transformation.

Historical Background: French Expansion in the Indian Ocean

The French East India Company (Compagnie des Indes Orientales), established in 1664 under Jean-Baptiste Colbert, aimed to rival Dutch and British dominance in Asian trade. French settlements in India eventually included Pondicherry, Chandernagore, Mahe, Karaikal, and Yanam. Among these, Mahe and Karaikal were strategically significant for their proximity to spice-producing regions and agricultural hinterlands.

Mahe, established in 1721 on the Malabar Coast, was positioned in a region historically dominated by pepper cultivation and Muslim maritime traders. Karaikal, acquired in 1739 from the Raja of Thanjavur, provided access to the fertile Kaveri delta and functioned as an important export center for rice, textiles, and spices.

French involvement in these territories was shaped by both geopolitical rivalry and economic aspiration. However, as historians of the Indian Ocean have emphasized, European powers entered pre-existing networks of Asian trade rather than creating them from scratch. Thus, French merchants depended heavily on indigenous intermediaries, religious communities, and established mercantile practices.

Mapping the Internal Spice Circuits of Mahe

Mahe's importance lay primarily in its access to the spice-producing highlands of the Western Ghats. Pepper cultivation was concentrated in upland regions controlled by local rulers and agrarian communities. French traders relied on local Hindu landlords, Muslim merchants, and Syrian Christian intermediaries to procure spices.

The inland trade routes connecting the Ghats to Mahe formed complex circuits involving:

1. Caravan routes descending through forested passes.
2. Riverine transport systems facilitate movement toward the coast.
3. Seasonal markets regulated by local rulers and temple authorities.

These routes intersected with religious institutions. Temples often served as centers of economic redistribution and credit. Muslim merchant guilds operated within mosque-centered communities that provided trust-based commercial networks. Thus, the mapping of spice routes reveals overlapping religious geographies. From a sociological perspective, these networks illustrate how economic exchange depended upon embedded social relationships. Trust, reputation, and religious affiliation structured commercial cooperation. French traders, as outsiders, had to integrate into these local systems through negotiation, alliance-building, and occasional military intervention.

Karaikal and the Coromandel Maritime Network

Karaikal functioned differently from Mahe due to its location on the Coromandel Coast. While not a major spice-producing zone itself, Karaikal connected inland agrarian production with maritime export systems. It linked Tamil agricultural villages to French shipping routes extending toward Pondicherry, Île de France (Mauritius), Réunion, and Europe.

The Coromandel Coast was historically integrated into Southeast Asian and Bay of Bengal trade circuits. Muslim merchants, Tamil Chettiar financiers, and Hindu temple networks played key roles in structuring commerce. French merchants relied on these established actors to maintain supply chains.

The mapping of Karaikal's trade networks reveals multidirectional flows:

- Inland to coastal export.
- Coastal to intercolonial French territories.
- Inter-Asian trade linking India to Southeast Asia.

These routes facilitated not only commodity movement but also migration of artisans, catechists, sailors, and laborers. Thus, Karaikal

became a node of both economic and cultural circulation.

Maritime Routes and French Cartography

French maritime operations required systematic mapping of coastlines, ports, and navigational hazards. Cartography became an instrument of both economic strategy and imperial control. However, French maps frequently incorporated indigenous geographic knowledge, including Tamil and Malayalam place names.

This blending of European and local knowledge systems reflects a form of epistemic exchange. Cartographic production was not purely a colonial imposition, but a collaborative process shaped by pilots, translators, and local informants.

The maritime routes from Mahe and Karaikal connected:

- Pondicherry as the administrative capital.
- The Mascarene Islands as logistical hubs.
- French Atlantic ports as final destinations.

Ships carried spices, textiles, rice, and sometimes enslaved laborers. Onboard life included Catholic rituals, while ports hosted religious ceremonies marking safe voyages. Maritime religiosity thus accompanied commercial expansion.

Catholic Missions and Religious Transformation

The French presence in Mahe and Karaikal was closely tied to Catholic missionary activity. Missionaries established churches, schools, and seminaries that served both European settlers and local converts. Conversion efforts often targeted marginalized communities, including lower-caste groups seeking social mobility.

Mission stations functioned as social institutions offering education, mediation, and material support. They also introduced new ritual forms, architectural styles, and devotional practices. Over time, Catholicism in these regions incorporated local elements - music, language, and festival customs - resulting in hybrid religious expressions.

At the same time, missionaries depended on trade networks for mobility and protection. Commercial ships transported clergy; merchants provided patronage; and colonial administrators offered security. Thus, trade routes enabled missionary expansion, and religious institutions supported commercial stability.

Indigenous Religious Networks and Commercial Ethics

Hindu and Muslim communities remained central to the spice trade. Temple-centered economies structured landholding and redistribution in both Malabar and Tamil regions. Merchant guilds frequently operated under religious patronage, reinforcing ethical codes rooted in dharma or Islamic jurisprudence.

Muslim traders, especially Mappilas on the Malabar Coast, had longstanding connections to Arab and Persian maritime networks. French traders entered these established circuits rather than displacing them entirely.

Religion provided moral frameworks for trade:

- Oaths sworn in temples or mosques reinforced contracts.
- Charitable donations linked commercial success to religious merit.
- Festival calendars structured seasonal trade cycles.

Thus, mapping trade routes also maps moral and spiritual geographies.

Cultural Hybridization in Port Cities

Mahe and Karaikal developed cosmopolitan characteristics typical of Indian Ocean port cities. Diverse populations coexisted, including Europeans, Tamil and Malayalam-speaking Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and mixed-heritage communities.

Cultural hybridization manifested in:

- Architecture blending European and South Indian styles.
- Linguistic exchange producing French loanwords in local languages.
- Shared culinary practices shaped by spice circulation.
- Intermarriage between Europeans and local women.

Such developments illustrate what Hannerz (1996) describes as cosmopolitanism—cultural openness emerging in trans local contact zones.

Social Stratification and Power

While cultural exchange occurred, colonial trade also produced hierarchies. French administrators maintained legal distinctions between Europeans

and indigenous populations. Economic benefits were unevenly distributed. Yet, indigenous elites - merchant financiers, temple authorities, and intermediaries—retained significant influence. French power depended on negotiation rather than absolute dominance, particularly in smaller enclaves like Mahe and Karaikal. The spice trade thus generated both collaboration and contestation. Religious identities sometimes intersected with political resistance, particularly during periods of Anglo-French rivalry.

Trade, Religion, and Identity Formation

The intersection of trade routes and religious exchange contributed to evolving identities. Catholic converts formed distinct Tamil and Malayalam Christian communities with localized traditions. Muslim traders reinforced transoceanic Islamic affiliations. Hindu merchant groups strengthened caste-based commercial identities. These developments reflect the dynamic interplay between globalization and localization. Trade routes facilitated mobility and exchange, yet local identities remained resilient and adaptive.

Conclusion

Mapping the French-controlled spice trade in Mahe and Karaikal reveals that trade routes were far more than channels of commodity circulation. They were socio-religious corridors linking inland producers, coastal ports, maritime networks, and transoceanic destinations. Through these pathways, spices traveled alongside missionaries, merchants, sailors, rituals, and ideas.

The French enclaves functioned as embedded nodes within larger Indian Ocean systems. Economic exchange intersected with religious expansion, cultural hybridization, and identity formation. By examining both internal spice circuits and maritime routes, this study demonstrates that commerce and religion were mutually constitutive forces in shaping early modern South India.

In alignment with the conference theme, this case study underscores that trade routes in India have historically served as pathways of cultural exchange, where economic ambition and spiritual life converged to produce enduring transformations.

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