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Aromatic Passageways: The Interwoven History of Moluccan Cloves and Coromandel Textiles in the Early Modern Era

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Aromatic Passageways: The Interwoven History of Moluccan Cloves and Coromandel

Textiles in the Early Modern Eraⁱ

Smarika Nawani

Abstract

Among early modern Indian Ocean commercial networks, the historic trade axis between Coromandel Coast and the Moluccas islands in the archipelago region of Southeast Asia was essentially a functional contact with its fulcrum at the entrepôt of Melaka. Central to this study is the exchange of Coromandel cottons for cloves—a commodity endemic exclusively to the Moluccas until the nineteenth century. The discussion also evaluates how Garcia da Orta's 1563 treatise demystified the clove for a European audience, following its Latin translation, accelerating the imperial contest for maritime supremacy and weaving the intricate threads of early modern global history. Above all, in relation to this pelagic interconnection, related academic writings are either Coromandel-centric or focus on the archipelago—apart from the ones with a pan-Indian Ocean flavour following by Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Connected History: Essays and Arguments*. Thus, this article explores the “binary” nature of this interconnection: a network that simultaneously sustained regional socio-economic structures and laid the foundations for colonial and global history. Overall, its different layers provided a unique shape to the interconnection and distinguished it from other such economic axes apart from being marked by its ever-resilient and entangled nature.

Keywords

Connected histories, Coromandel Coast, Melaka, the Moluccas, textiles, clove, nutmeg, mace, Garcia da Orta, *misericórdias*, *Estado da Índia*

Among the enduring maritime networks spanning from Sofala to Japan, the corridor between the Coromandel Coast and archipelagic Southeast Asia stands out for its longevity and economic synergy. This relationship was anchored by the mutual necessity of textiles and spices—commodities that not only linked these geographically distinct worlds but also forged deep-rooted social and commercial ties. The criticality of this link was famously captured in 1612 by Hendrik Brouwer, the VOC Governor-General, who described the Coromandel Coast as the “left arm” of the Moluccas, noting that the spice trade would perish without Indian textiles. Ironically, Brouwer noted this despite having

pioneered a direct route in 1611 from the Cape of Good Hope to Batavia to bypass the northern Indian Ocean altogether.

Building on Brouwer's characterization of the Coromandel as the "left arm" of the Moluccas, this article investigates the enduring synergy between Indian textiles and Southeast Asian spices. It explores the "binary" nature of this interconnection: a network that simultaneously sustained regional socioeconomic structures and laid the foundations for colonial and global history. Central to this study is the exchange of Coromandel cottons for cloves—a commodity endemic exclusively to the Moluccas until the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the discussion evaluates how Garcia da Orta's 1563 treatise demystified the clove for a European audience, accelerating the imperial contest for maritime supremacy and weaving the intricate threads of early modern global history.

Above all, the study of such pelagic networks is often lost between micro-histories of single coasts and macro-histories of the entire Indian Ocean. This article addresses a critical gap by focusing specifically on the Coromandel-Southeast Asia network, a vital artery of the clove trade; it is such networks that gave the Indian Ocean a unique, lasting rhythm. It was these distinct interconnections that gave the Indian Ocean its lasting dynamic nature and vitality. As mutually dependent systems, they silently shaped the development of their respective littorals, exerting a profound influence far beyond their own geographical boundaries. In fact, if such interconnections had not existed, the essence of Indian Ocean world and its various coasts would have been less dynamic like pre-Columbian Atlantic or Arctic or Antarctic oceans. Hence, historiographically speaking, works abound either individually related to early modern Coromandel or those associated with archipelagic Southeast Asia as a whole or its certain pocketsⁱⁱ. Apart from such region-centric writings that give glimpses of maritime connections among other aspects, works with a pan-Indian Ocean flavourⁱⁱⁱ also dominate, in addition to Sanjay Subrahmanyam's innovative concept of *connected histories*^{iv}. Consequently, this article addresses the existing scholarly lacunae by focusing specifically on the Coromandel-Southeast Asian network during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and draws flavours from Subrahmanyam's framework of connected histories. It examines how this network was sustained despite shifting geopolitical climates—moving from the attempted Portuguese monopolies of the 1500s to the increasingly crowded and competitive Euro-Asian trade of the 1600s. By navigating the tension between the Eurocentric 'rhetoric of changelessness' and the historical reality of constant transformation, the sources reveal a maritime network defined by its resilience. This capacity to adapt to new geopolitical coordinates was a decisive factor in the 'making and unmaking' of various littorals and strategic transshipment hubs, most notably Melaka.

Cloves and textiles across the Bay before 1500 CE: A prelude

While reflecting on the structure of the age-old maritime link of the early modern times, one cannot forgo its pre-16th century relevance and dynamism that continued later too from ports like Nagapattinam, Masulipatam, Pulicat, Fort St. George, Malacca, Macassar, Tidore, Timor, Ambon among others—often with changed roles of diaspora. Long before the 16th century, the “left arm” of the spice trade was already firmly connected to the Coromandel Coast. This link was driven by the tireless activity of indigenous trading communities like the Chettys, the Balijas, and Marrakayars, who facilitated a symbiotic exchange: Indian textiles for Moluccan spices. In the sweltering heat of the Moluccas and across other parts of the Southeast Asian archipelago, cotton cloth was an essential commodity, as the region did not produce on its own. Market dynamics in the archipelago were largely bifurcated between Gujarati and Coromandel cotton textiles; however, in the Moluccas, the specific weaves from the Coromandel Coast were uniquely prized, cementing their role in the exchange for cloves.

Cloves among other spices and aromatics like pepper, nutmeg and mace had been in circulation not only on the Coromandel but in others parts of Indian Ocean world and associated mainlands as well as in Europe even before the 16th century. Neither cloves nor nutmeg grew in the Indian subcontinent—or anywhere else on earth—until European colonists successfully transplanted them in the late 1700s. Although pepper grew naturally across the Western Ghats in Malabar, and wild nutmeg could be found in a few spots, the clove was an entirely imported luxury. This scarcity made the clove the most highly valued spice on the Coromandel, far outstripping the worth of local pepper and wild aromatics. Far from being a mere culinary luxury or a preservative or an aromatic, the clove was an indispensable component of ancient medical systems in the subcontinent, including the Siddha tradition of the Tamil region and the Vaidyasaramu of the Andhra region. Its pharmacological significance is also well-documented in foundational treatises of the inland subcontinent such as the Dhanwantari Nighantu and the Bhaishajya Ratnavali, alongside its long-standing circulation in European markets. Furthermore, evidence of the clove trade is preserved in early Sangam literature and medieval travelogues, illustrating a deep-rooted cultural and pharmacological demand that rendered more significance to this specific maritime network.

Known in Sanskrit, Buddhist and Jain literature, cloves were already present in the Indian subcontinent a few centuries before Common Era; reference to cloves are found in Sangam literature (c. 300 BCE to 300 CE) (Taylor Sen, Saberi and Bhattacharya, 2023, p.90). One of the main arteries through which clove was introduced in the subcontinent was the Coromandel-archipelagic Southeast Asian maritime network. The resilience of this pre-European maritime link rested on the traditional

transoceanic trading legacy of the Coromandel diaspora. Traders such as the Tamil Chettys and Marakayars (the Klings and kelings of Malay and Portuguese historical records and travelogues), and the Andhra Balijas had established deep roots in Southeast Asian markets while maintaining strong links in their subcontinental homelands. This was an interconnected world: an indirect contribution of diaspora from in and beyond the Strait like the Malays, the Chinese also sustained the circulation in pre-European times. The Coromandel diaspora carried varieties of textiles to Johore, Palembang and other centres in pre-Melaka times and on their return voyages they carried not only Moluccan spices but also Chinese porcelain, wax, lac, and copper—commodities brought to these entrepôts by the regional networks of Malay and Chinese traders.^v Such was the relevance of cloves on the Coromandel and beyond that a Kakatiya inscription in Telugu dated 13th January, 1171 CE was found in Karimnagar belonging to the reign of Rudra also mentioned laying of gardens of cloves among others at their capital, Anmakundâ (Lakshmi (trans), 2023, Vol 2, p. 80).

The Strait of Melaka has long served as a strategic hinge, connecting the cultures and commerce of the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. It was here, at the dawn of the fifteenth century, that under the aegis of the Sultanate of Melaka, an entrepôt called Melaka emerged, transforming itself from a sleepy fishing village into a world-class trading emporium, a rise documented by the contemporary Malay source, *Sĕjarah Mĕlayu* (Brown, 1952,p.21). Because of its location at the tip of mainland Southeast Asia in Malay Peninsula, Melaka became an indispensable gateway for ships journeying from the Bay of Bengal and beyond into the archipelagic world, China and Japan, and vice versa, thereby making it a transient zone as well. The network and the circulations continued in one form or the other during early modern period and later too, thus marking its resilience in *longue durée* despite physical degeneration of ports, hostile climatic conditions and changing geopolitical contexts. For four hundred years, the Coromandel–Archipelago trade relied on Melaka as its primary artery, a role it relinquished only when the rise of Singapore and Penang under British rule shifted the region's commercial gravity although it remained a backwater while still retaining its cosmopolitan character.

Crossroads at Melaka, a gateway to the East

In the context of the Coromandel-Moluccas maritime network, as well as between the said coast and the other pockets of the archipelago, the Malay Strait had always played a crucial role in the passage of ships laden with goods traversing across the macro region like in the present times. Melaka largely continued to witness varied diaspora after Portuguese *Estado da Índia* seized the entrepôt in 1511 CE, nevertheless, a relocation of earlier participants and a change in manner of conducting trade was observed with the coming into being of commercial and administrative structures like fortress,

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factories and concession systems in addition to quasi-religious ones like missionaries, bishoprics and *misericórdias*, the last one being typically embraced by European Catholic communities.

Being an important fulcrum of trade in eastern Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean as referred in different genres of European sources and earlier indigenous ones like *Sějarah Mělayu*^{vi} along with Chinese sources, its pan-Indian Ocean connections as well as its direct and indirect contacts with the wider world appealed all across centuries. It was an all-season port which was its biggest advantage over any other port of the Indian Ocean world that functioned on the basis of the monsoon winds. Thus, due to its strategic location, climatic conditions and conducive political-economic conditions, it lured diaspora making it extremely cosmopolitan and undoubtedly unique and one of the biggest entrepôt of the times. At the onset of the sixteenth century, Ludovico di Varthema noted: “*more ships arrive here than any other place in the world, and especially there come here all sorts of spices and an immense quantity of other merchandise*” (Jones, 1928, p.85). The hinterland of Melaka that was a tiny sultanate on a *bughâz*^{vii}, did not produce anything substantial, rather much of its provisions were bought in. Its richness was not only due to the location but was also based on the fact that the polities created a cohesive atmosphere as Tome Pires has greatly stressed. The various Melakan Sultans such as Muhammad Iskandar Shah, Muzaffar Shah showed keen interests maintaining kinship ties with other tiny kingdoms of Southeast Asia like Pahang, Kampar and Indragiri through matrimonial alliances, or through drums of sovereignty with Kedah^{viii} or simply trade. This made the entrepôt more prominent as pointed out by *Sějarah Mělayu* and other sources. Tomé Pires also observed^{ix} how trade for its part defined allegiance of neighbouring kings of Melaka towards the port state. Thus, Melakan polity and trading activities were synonymous to each other since its early days.^x

Melaka maintained its decisive influence in the Coromandel-archipelago network as well as with other maritime networks thanks to its well-organized port administration. A hierarchy of officers that administered this tiny Sultanate had furthered its commercial nature and created succinct conditions for thriving of varied diaspora. The shahbandars (municipal officers) who were four in number were the link between diaspora and the administration. Among the diaspora, the *kelings*, as Chetty merchants from the Coromandel were known in Malay—in early travelogues and later in 16th century Portuguese sources—were close to Melakan polity and had a shahbandar just to cater to their needs. The closeness of the said group continued during the Portuguese period as well which again emphasizes the importance of the coast-archipelago network. Thus, in pre-1511 period, Melaka maintained trading linkages with the ports of Coromandel Coast, that is, Nagapattinam, Mylapore and Pulicat primarily through the *kelings*. Merchants of other locales of coastal Indian subcontinent as well as Indian Ocean region such as Sofala, Hormuz, Gujarat, Bengal, Tenasserim,

Pegu, Sumatra, Java, Makassar, Solor, the Moluccas, and coastal China also frequented Melaka and were guided by shahbandars allocated to them.

Afonso de Albuquerque's conquest of Melaka in 1511 while furthering Portuguese aspirations in the archipelagic world of Southeast Asia, also brought the Coromandel into light due to the importance of the latter's textiles in the archipelago. The *kelings* at Melaka, in fact, had smoothed the Portuguese access in the region; in this regard, Nina Chatu's role is well known. Around the same time, Tomé Pires' sumptuous note reflects on the potentiality of the region: "*The Malay merchants say that God made Timor for sandalwood and Banda for mace and Maluku for cloves, and that thus merchandise is not known anywhere in the world except in these place*" (Cortêsão, 1944, p.204). Albuquerque and his successors also understood the potential of the region like Pires though nutmeg and cloves from Moluccas and pepper from Sumatra had also enthused them.

The Portuguese conquest of Melaka was also an evident geopolitical rupture and had led to some pulling-down and re-routing of trade. Nevertheless, they largely super-imposed their military and administrative structures over a thriving age-old network in the region by building fortress or settling in important niches and further using *carrieras* and concession systems to control trade for their gain; at the same time, the Portuguese also controlled ports like Solor and its commerce indirectly. Thus, to the east of Cape Comorin, the *Estado da Índia* built its first fortress at Melaka labelling it as a formal settlement^{xi} as 16th century records and 17th century official treatise, *Livro das plantas de tôdas as fortalezas, cidades e povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental* of António Bocarro and Pedro Barreto Resendé have attested (de Bragança Pereira, A.B., Tomo IV, Vol II, Part I, 1940). In this fortress, along with the Captain, the Bishop and other administrative officers, two other institutions, that is, *Senado da Camara* (town council) and the *Santa Casa da Misericórdia* provided base for the new Portuguese settlement. Generally, to the east of Cape Comorin, the Portuguese enterprise had followed what was postulated by Luis Fillipe F.R. Thomaz as the 'Guinea model intervals distant at placed were factories and frequent less became fortresses wherein^{xii}' while trade was seasonal in nature. This was a different approach to maintain presence when compared to the western Indian Ocean, where there existed a string of fortresses and factories that were the site of power and commercial activities.

To expand their reach and integrate into Southeast Asian networks, the Portuguese established the *Carreira* system (navigational lines) of navigational routes after gaining the trust of regional rulers in the *lands below the winds*. By posting clerks and trade factors throughout the *Mar do Sul*^{xiii}, that is, Sumatra, Java, the Moluccas, and all the other islands of the archipelagic Southeast Asia, they decentralized commerce and eliminated the need for local traders/inhabitants to transit to Melaka,

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effectively seizing control of the region's commercial “arteries”. While official presence was marked by fortresses in Ternate and Timor, informal settlements or “soft” presence in sites like Makassar further extended Portuguese influence over the spice trade including cloves and nutmeg during the 16th century, leading to an astute blend of different presences.

Beyond the Southeast Asian archipelago, the Coromandel Coast represented a crucial segment of the Portuguese oceanic network. After seeing the diversity of Coromandel fabrics in Melaka and beyond, almost thirty varieties in number, the Portuguese moved to engage with the coast directly. The merchants from the coast like the Chettys (kelings/klings), Balijas and Marrakayars from southern Coromandel still dominated this trade besides rice and other commodities. A letter from Gaspar da India to the King of Portugal dated 16th November 1506 suggests that the initial arrival of the Portuguese on the Coromandel was an accidental one and was marked by conflict with Marrakayar traders in the vicinity of Nagapattinam, probably, Nagore (Subrahmanyam, 1990 (b), p.98). Nevertheless, the Portuguese eventually integrated into the commercial landscape of Coromandel in the following decades.

The contemporary chronicler, João de Barros^{xiv} mentions in his *Decadas da Ásia*, that the Portuguese reached Mylapore (São Thomé) under the guidance of an Armenian called Khwaja Sikander around 1518. They had been drawn to the place by the legend of St. Thomas and also the high profits of the textile trade. While the religious allure of Mylapore—rechristened São Thomé as the purported burial site of St. Thomas—provided a spiritual anchor to the fleeting Portuguese population, the true catalyst for their presence was the lucrative textile-for-spice trade. Despite the Coromandel Coast's treacherous winds, cyclones, and poor harbours, it became a magnet for material wealth. Because the *Estado* initially viewed the region as peripheral, it evolved into a haven for Portuguese fugitives, soldiers, and lower nobility fleeing the strictures of Goa or Melaka. These “renegades” established unofficial but prosperous lives in settlements like Pulicat and Nagapattinam, seeking fortune through independent trade or, in more extreme cases, piracy through the 16th century; they were the ones who provided services and acted as aides, especially to the English, later on.

Unlike Melaka, which was a direct extension of the *Estado da Índia*'s control, the Coromandel niches were largely populated by renegades. However, a second distinct group existed: the *casados*. These were Portuguese men married to local women who remained under the *Estado's* legal jurisdiction and received patronage from Goa. The *casados* served a multifaceted role, providing military defense for fortifications while engaging in private commerce across the Coromandel-Southeast Asian circuit beside other network routes. By operating in both the

official realm of Melaka and the informal settlements of the coast, they acted as a vital, albeit indirect, link between the “incognito” Portuguese world and the central government of Portuguese Indian Ocean settlements in Goa. Moreover, the *casados* also inhabited Melaka, the official realm of the *Estado*. Thus, in terms of settlement pattern and nomenclature, the Coromandel settlements had diverse Portuguese and mixed population and above all, presented a dichotomy in comparison to mainstream niches of *Estado da Índia* like Melaka and those of western Indian Ocean. Like any other Portuguese settlement including those under the direct control of *Estado*, a church for the abiders existed in these settlements. Besides, *Santa Casa de Misericórdia* (*misericórdia*, hereafter), a charitable fraternity had come into being at São Thomé and Nagapattinam to take care of the needs of the sick and the poor which also indirectly assisted the *Estado* to guide and rein in the varied and non-law abiding population of the coast. Within the dynamic and complex environment of the Coromandel Coast, the Portuguese Crown formalised an annual trading voyage by the late 1520s. This led to a strategic redesign of the *carreira*; the original Melaka-Pulicat-Melaka route was expanded into a more comprehensive Goa-Pulicat-Melaka-Goa circuit which shows how the route and the coast were being reined in. The one between Melaka and Pegu now included Pulicat and was redesigned as Goa-Pulicat-Pegu-Goa route. By making Goa the terminal point for these routes, the *Estado* further demonstrated growing administrative confidence and a desire to better regulate the region. Consequently, Pulicat emerged as a powerful, unofficial ‘empire within an empire’ (Subrahmanyam, 1990 (a),p102). While São Thomé held spiritual and informal significance, Pulicat’s superior harbour made it the commercial hub for the textile trade.^{xv} In contrast, Nagapattinam, situated in the Kaveri delta, remained a secondary port during this era. Known primarily for its rice trade and ‘*the route to very large countries,*’ (Jones, 1928, p72) as Varthema stated, it was dominated by a mix of Indo-Portuguese and Muslim merchants. Though a Portuguese settlement existed there from the 1520s, Nagapattinam became the coast's leading port only after Pulicat’s eventual decline later in the century.

In the mid-16th century, Portuguese officials responded to fluctuating prices on the Coromandel *carreira* by implementing two major strategic shifts: The first was to withdraw shipping activities from such *carreiras* and the second was to monopolize the Coromandel-Melaka network to create obstacles for the parallel Asian shipping. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam notes, this culminated in the 1570s in the concession system—a system in which, individuals who had rendered services to the Portuguese Crown, were granted the concession or right by the King of Portugal to conduct a voyage between two points of the Indian Ocean. The concession voyage

was also granted in lieu of a salary payment or to enable a *fidalgo* to arrange a marriage of his daughter. Hence, such grants replaced the old Crown shipping *carreiras* with a new system of concessions. For the first time that established a system of monopoly over commercial routes of the Bay of Bengal by the Portuguese. Such a shift has been posited by Luis Fillipe Thomaz as a ‘second wind.’^{xvi}

Under the concession system, official regulations prohibited direct trade between Nagapattinam and Melaka to protect the exclusive rights of the São Thomé–Melaka concessionaires. However, as Subrahmanyam notes, these monopolies were largely theoretical and seldom enforced (Subrahmanyam, 1990(b), p.191). The Italian traveller Cesare Federici, visiting in 1570, observed two “great ships”—presumably concession vessels—departing São Thomé annually for Melaka and Pegu (Hakluyt, Vol. 3, 1926, pp 229-231, 251-5). As the century progressed, the commercial geography of the coast shifted; Pulicat’s influence waned so significantly that Jan Huygen van Linschoten omitted it from his 1580’s list of major ports. By the early 17th century, Pulicat had been surpassed by the emerging hubs of Nagapattinam and Masulipatnam, eventually falling to Dutch offensive operations.

From colloquy to competition: Garcia da Orta’s impact on Early Modern clove knowledge and trade

Parallel to such aforementioned existing networks, the Portuguese presence was transformative. Beyond being the first Europeans to establish a framework of colonies, forts, outposts and factories in the sixteenth century, they also provided a critical scientific and intellectual foundation through Garcia da Orta’s *Colóquios dos simples e drogas he cousas medicinais da India compostos pello Doutor Garcia da Orta* (Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India). This treatise became the primary European reference for understanding spice-producing flora—detailing their habitats, cultivation, and medicinal applications—while indirectly illuminating the intricate maritime circuits that sustained the trade networks.

Beyond the physical infrastructure of Portuguese settlements and trade monopolies, the sixteenth-century botanical treatise of Garcia da Orta provided an intellectual echo that resonated across Europe. While spices had circulated long before the Portuguese bypassed the Cape of Good Hope, the translation of Orta’s work into multiple European languages, the first one being in Latin, ignited a renewed European fervour to explore the East. A doctor by profession besides being involved in the trading world, da Orta’s^{xvii} seminal treatise, *Colóquios*^{xviii} was published from Goa in 1563 CE. The text did more than catalogue botanical and pharmacological properties. In addition to the diverse

descriptions of plants that included botanical and pharmacological properties, the text astutely accumulated vast information and deciphered indigenous as well as European understanding of the same. His detailed accounts of Southeast Asian flora reflect a sophisticated grasp of regional ecology and local practices, while simultaneously mapping the commercial interests and territorial reach of the Portuguese *Estado* and its diaspora.

As previously noted, spices were the primary drivers of the commercial link between the Coromandel and Southeast Asia—commodities that resonated across the Indo-Pacific and Atlantic markets alike. Within this context, Orta’s *Colóquios*^{xix} provides a window into more minute and interesting insights about cloves and clove trade. While the aroma of the evergreen clove—a spice endemic only to the Moluccas—had reached Europe in antiquity, Orta’s narrative adds a layer of imperial propaganda to its history. Writing amidst the Portuguese-Spanish skirmishes for control of the ‘Spice Islands’, Orta boastfully legitimises the *Estado’s* presence at Ternate^{xx}:

“The king of one of the islands, called Ternate, when it was proposed to him that he should help the Spaniards, said that the clove was given by God to the Portuguese, because each clove contains the five quinas of the Kings of Portugal.”

This anecdote functions as more than a simple eulogy; it serves as a powerful rhetorical tool legitimizing the Portuguese *Estado’s* formal presence in the region.

The *Colóquios* also offers an intimate look at the sensory life of the Portuguese settlers. Orta records how the aromatic properties of the clove were harnessed in everyday life, particularly by Portuguese women, illustrating a deep cultural adaptation to the local environment of the Moluccas. The Portuguese women in the archipelago used cloves in various ways—especially distilled water using green cloves which according to Orta was *very fragrant and a good cordial* and that they wanted to introduce the same in Portugal. The historical depth of the clove’s aromatic appeal is further evidenced by Thomas Zumbroich, who notes its mention in early Sanskrit sources. In these texts, the spice transcends its culinary role, appearing as a key ingredient in both oral hygiene and the sophisticated world of erotic perfumery (Zumbroich, 2012, pp.37–97). Furthermore, Orta’s reflections on the medicinal properties of cloves extend beyond the Moluccas, highlighting how the spice was integrated into diverse healing practices across the broader Indian Ocean world. His work meticulously documents the adaptation of the clove as a pharmacological agent, transcending its regional origins to become a staple in trans-oceanic medicine:

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Many Indian physicians make a sudorific with cloves, nutmeg, mace, long pepper, and they say it draws out the Castilian itch. I have also seen Portuguese physicians use it, but I do not think it is a good medicine. Some people apply pounded cloves to the head, and say that they find it good for headaches
(Markham, 1913, p. 219).

The clove, as documented by Orta, serves as a powerful metaphor for the breadth of the Portuguese empire. By the late 1500s, the *Estado* had moved beyond mere territorial outposts to create an eco-pharmacological imagery of empire—one that synthesized the vast profits of the spice trade with a sophisticated, firsthand understanding of the natural world. The many translations of Orta’s work in different European languages not only sighted importance of this botanical treatise in Europe but also communicated echoes of Portuguese entangled actuality and their spirited scientific temperament in understanding cloves, its botany and the clove-producing regions of the Moluccas besides flora of other diverse landscapes of the Indian Ocean world. In fact, the treatise became a base for later European writings on botany, pharmacology, medicine and even for development of medicinal and botanical gardens like the ones at Kew and Leiden, besides diffusing indigenous botanical and pharmacological knowledge of Indian Ocean world in Europe which latently encouraged ecological imperialism later. It was the translation of the text in Latin that had led to the dispersion of botanical knowledge about spices like cloves in Europe that also included the one about the landscape in which it grew.

The threads of this dissemination are evident, for example, in the Dutch understanding of the Moluccas and related English writings from the 17th and 18th centuries. In the first half of the 17th century, the archipelago was embroiled in a fierce contest for spice dominance, particularly cloves, between the Portuguese and the Dutch. Simultaneously, a fierce competition also existed for the same between the Dutch and the English that was to continue further into the 18th century. Similar was the case on the Coromandel too.

A contested network: The Coromandel–Archipelago link in the age of Companies

The “aromatic laurels” of Portuguese success in the 1500s eventually became a roadmap for their rivals. Information trickling back to Europe inspired the formation of joint-stock companies in England and Holland followed later by Denmark and France, prompting a new wave of maritime ventures into the Indian Ocean world. As the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (the United Dutch East India Company or VOC, hereafter) and English East India Company penetrated the Indian Ocean, Portuguese settlements fell into a state of “existential crisis”^{xxi} in the first half of the 17th century. As Portuguese and other European primary sources suggest, this decline was fuelled not only by institutional failure but also by a moral decay among the *casados*, who frequently turned

to privateering or defecting to rival powers. In the Coromandel-Southeast Asian trade corridor, as in other maritime networks, Portuguese settlers—specifically the *casados*—had also resorted to privateering and frequently transferred their allegiances to rival European powers. Between 1600 and the 1660s, the Dutch aggressively seized Portuguese trading posts through constant warfare and sieges, fundamentally altering regional trade. After all, in the early decades, Brouwer had also already recognized the indispensable commercial link between the Coromandel Coast and insular Southeast Asia amidst the contest for clove-producing regions among others.

The VOC's 1619 establishment of Batavia provided a strategic base near Southeast Asian spice hubs. The Dutch outmanoeuvred the Portuguese by taking rapid, local decisions from their capital in Batavia. In contrast, the Portuguese *Estado* was hampered by its reliance on Lisbon, where communication cycles dictated by monsoon winds could exceed a year, that is, the Viceroy in Goa had to wait for the monsoons just to send a letter to Lisbon, often waiting for over a year for a reply. Recognizing that this lag was costing the Portuguese settlements in the Indian Ocean, in the face of Dutch sieges and blockades of Portuguese navigational routes and settlements including Melaka, the Portuguese King issued a directive on 16th January 1607 granting the Viceroy the power to make immediate decisions based on “*tempo por mostrando*”(the need of the moment), thereby initiating a degree of decentralization (de Bulhão Pato, Tomo I, 1880, p.90). Further, the Viceroy could take an opinion of those who had better information on the matter. This basically implied formation of a public opinion—surely by the high clergy, the members of the high echelons of the administration and the more affluent members of the trading community.

Even with the reforms outlined in the King's previous correspondence of 1607, the Portuguese continued to struggle with the complexities of managing and defending their Indian Ocean commercial networks through the 1610s. A royal letter from 1620 reveals the King's annoyance regarding the ignominious behaviour of the *Estado's* soldiers, which he identified as the primary cause of both territorial losses and increased operational expenses. Criticizing the soldiers in Portuguese settlements as living a *vidacara e dissipada* (expensive and immoral life), the King pointed out at their extravagant style of living—clothes and high-rent accommodations in the heart of the towns amounting to a rent of 20 or 25 xerafins that actually had always been occupied by administrators of the *Estado* and the affluent traders. By going far beyond necessary limits, the soldiers, according to Lisbon, were not behaving in accordance with the prevalent military conditions of the time and were not maintaining their service demeanour that also included abidance to rigorous military discipline established by the state; they had deprived the *casados* of their accommodation—and widows too, who had now no place to live. The letter

from the King further indicated that all such resources had been accumulated by the soldiers through vice and corrupt means. Further, the soldiers were so engrossed in their *modo de vidalarga* that they did not pay attention to the use/practice of arms as in the previous times, leading to losses of *Estado* due to their inability to perform in the war/s. Such ‘*scandalising way of living*’ of the soldiers had to be checked by the council of the Viceroy with the help of Archbishop of Goa. The said authorities were directed to take measures to induce the soldiers to correct themselves. Further, the King also entrusted the Viceroy to inform him about the ways of life apart from duties abided and executed by the captains and nobles serving in different Portuguese settlements.

The above mentioned irregularities as mentioned in the King of Portugal’s letter along with other similar correspondences besides records of VOC and English East India Company point towards the internal problems in the structure of *Estado da Índia*. This has been termed as ‘*decadência*’ in documents. Besides, Goan authorities along with other administrators in different niches like Melaka had realized the changing situation in the early seventeenth century due to the VOC’s increasing presence. Correspondences related to the requirement of guards and soldiers on permanent basis to protect fortresses like Melaka and others besides checking corrupt practices and mutiny of soldiers were emphasised in these documents. Following the Dutch attacks, the documents highlighted the lack of funds for maintaining the defence of the *Estado*’s possessions. Consequently, the practice of transferring resources that had been allocated to the *misericórdias* by Lisbon began in such territories.

The *misericórdias* along with Camara (town council) have been referred by C. R. Boxer as twin pillars of the Portuguese overseas society. These institutions afforded a continuity that the transient governors, bishops and magistrates could not offer. Their members were drawn from identical or comparable social strata, and they formed to some extent colonial elites (Boxer, 1963, p 273). Among the two, *misericórdias* were charitable institutions^{xxii} that had come into being in 1498 in Portugal. As Portugal moved overseas, so did the institution. Thus, this institution was also evolving along with Portuguese expansion, branches spreading throughout Asia and Africa across formal and informal settlements. The Goa branch was established shortly after the conquest of Albuquerque and it was based on the same principle as the one in Lisbon. Of the various *misericórdias*, the one at Macao assumed great importance though there existed one in Melaka and some on the Coromandel coast too. The funds that supported *misericórdias* were entirely derived from private charity and from legacies left by the departed souls. As part of its duties, a minimum percentage of ill-gotten gains was returned to the poor and the needy from (whom) perhaps it had been squeezed in the first place.

In the context of Dutch blockades of 17th century that choked the Coromandel-archipelagic Southeast Asian trade routes and respective areas of production of cloves and textiles, Portuguese documents reveal borrowing of funds from different *misericórdias* of the Indian Ocean specially for protecting and strengthening Melaka—indicating *Estado*'s desperate reliance on them. In the first decade of the seventeenth century itself, a letter of Bishop of Cochin of 25th December, 1606 CE reflects the same. The Bishop wrote that the larger “poverty”, that is, lack of financial resources, that existed in the *Estado* had compelled him to sell the silver vessels of the Church of *Casa da Misericórdia* in order to raise money in the city of Cochin so as to purchase two *naus* to be sent to Melaka for help. He further ensured that the loan would be repaid. Similarly, a loan from the *misericórdias* of Goa was taken to help Melaka (de Bulhão Pato, Tomo III, 1880, p.252). Loans taken from the *misericórdias* of Hormuz were also sent to Melaka. These instances clearly point towards a systemic financial failure within *Estado da Índia* and also dire efforts made to save Melaka from the persistent VOC blockades. Also, the borrowings from the *misericórdias* grew with most unfavourable situations that the *Estado* faced. These ad hoc financial arrangements from *misericórdias* make one wonder whether the *Estado* was so scarce of resources that it could not defend Melaka with its own appropriations or, did such borrowings take place due to problems in *fazenda* indicating depletion of resources; or simply, was it the Portuguese inability to counter immediate threats posed by the Dutch due to delayed mode of communication between Goa and Lisbon or even between Goa and Melaka. Batavia, the centre of VOC activities in the region as well as the Dutch capital, was strategically located. Its close proximity to Melaka and other group of islands like the Moluccas and the Sunda Strait allowed the VOC to intercept and blockade Portuguese presence both on land and sea. This threatened and blockaded Portuguese access to vital resources.

Despite many such ad hoc measures that were undertaken to protect Melaka and other regions during the 17th century, Melaka finally succumbed to Dutch attacks in 1641CE although by the 1620s, clove producing Moluccas had already witnessed Dutch consolidation with the final monopoly coming into being in 1663 due to a series of phased diplomatic and military actions including the famous “Amboyana Massacre” of 1623. The years between 1641 and 1680 CE represent the height of the Dutch maritime influence in the Asian waters. The Dutch influence in the Coromandel-archipelago-Southeast Asia linkage had become dominant by 1662 CE. Most of the important niches had been conquered by them. On the Coromandel, Nagapattinam and Tuticorin were seized by the VOC in 1658 CE leading finally to the conquest of the Coast with the capture of São Thomé in 1674 although the niche had been lost to the Sultanate of Golconda in 1662 with Dutch

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assistance followed by a French interlude between 1672 to 1674. The aroma of some of these spice-producing islands and textile niches had enthralled the Dutch interest from the very days of their expansionist zeal in the Indian Ocean that finally led to their complete monopolization of the Coast-Archipelagic network by the seventh decade of the 17th century.

However, the lucrative “aroma” of the network in consideration did not wither away despite of many odds. The taking over of Melaka by the VOC again led to some disruption of trade and with the capture of most of the Coromandel ports by the Dutch by the 1660s, the network remained in their hands. Nonetheless, British Madras (Fort St. George) was also on its rise to the south of Pulicat and conducted trade in the same coast-archipelago network but between Madras (also Masulipatam) and Bencoolen. The Portuguese (including *casados* and their descendants) not only were into private trading from Fort St. George (Madras) to up to the archipelago and beyond but also provided human resources in the ever-expanding town.

The English were involved in textile-spice trade from Madras but the scary incident of 1623 CE at Amboyna in the insular region, popularly called Amboyna Incident or Amboyna ‘Massacre’ was one of the defining ones as far as their relationship with the Dutch was concerned. The beheading of ten English merchants and Japanese mercenaries on 9th March 1623 by VOC at Amboyna, in an attempt to control the spice producing island, altered relations between the Dutch and the English and had repercussions on clove plantation and trade from the region as well. Although the English could not be in control of the region till about the end of the 18th century, when they ousted the Dutch from the Moluccas and Banda islands around 1795 CE controlling the islands briefly, their tryst with cloves or clove plants had already existed. Smuggling of clove plants in 1686 CE and transplanting them in Madras although was a failure, it portrayed the Company’s desire for spices like cloves while being enthusiastically involved in Coromandel textile trade. The latent influence of Garcia da Orta’s text that swirled other Europeans in the Coromandel-archipelago Southeast Asia network from 17th century onwards in an attempt to create hegemony in addition to growing botanical knowledge and transplanting experiments during the 18th and 19th centuries, gave fuel to the rhetoric of political as well as botanical imperialism. Thus, the age-old Coromandel-Southeast Asia passageway saw various participants at different times but the network always thrived and remained connected through textiles and spices (cloves) despite diverse political and economic settings which after all, had come into existence significantly because of the concerned commodities.

Specific terminologies:

Non-English words and phrases with their meanings that were in use during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries in Malay and Portuguese primary sources—the same have been used in the article.

Decadência: A term used in 17th century archival Portuguese documents that indicates decline in the system

Casados: Portuguese men married to local women

Carrieras: Navigational lines

Fidalgo: a nobleman

klings/ kelings: A term used for Tamil Chetty merchants in 15th century Malay source *Sějarah Mělayu*, and subsequently used so in Portuguese archival sources and contemporary travel accounts.

Modo de vida larga: An early 17th-century Portuguese phrase found in archival documents, that translates to “enjoying life”

Shahbandar: Municipal officer as known in 16th century Melaka

Senado da Camara: Town council

Santa Casa da Misericórdia: A quasi-religious institution of Portuguese Empire engaged with charitable works

Tempo por mostrando: A Portuguese expression found in archival documents of early 17th century which means the need of the moment

Vida cara e dissipada: An early 17th century Portuguese phrase found in archival documents of the period meaning expensive and immoral life

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ This paper is a revised version of the talk delivered at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, PMML, Teen Murti House, New Delhi on 30 May, 2024.

ⁱⁱ The early works around Coromandel are centred on the region's political history. Rao Bahadur and C.S. Srinivaschari's *A History of Gingee and its Rulers* (1943) is one such work. Thereafter, the politico-economic themes acquired focus. Reflection on the economic aspect of the coast in view of the European trade was first studied by Tapan Raychaudhuri in his *Jan Company in Coromandel, 1605-1690* (1962). Sinnappah Arasaratnam's three decades of writings on various themes related to the European companies and indigenous polity, society and economy culminated in his most distinguished work published in 1986- *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740*. The writings of Sanjay Subrahmanyam related to south India followed in 1990's. His two books, *The Political Economy of Commerce* and *Improvising Empire* are comprehensive accounts that deal with the intra and inter trade structure, the centres of trade and trading groups besides the role played by the indigenous polities and European trading groups in the sixteenth century and the changes which took place in the mid-seventeenth century. S. Jeyaseela's *The Coromandel Coast and its Hinterland* (1997) is an interesting study of the sixteenth century Coromandel in which epigraphic sources along with the main body of Portuguese sources have been effectively used. In the case of Southeast Asia, van Leur's *Indonesia Trade and Society* (1934) was written with an indigenous perspective. The dismissive comments of van Leur on Portuguese trade formed part of Meilink Roelofs's critique (1962). Two years after the publication of Meilink Roelofs's work, Luis Filipe FR Thomaz's thesis, *Os Portugueses em Malacca* threw a valuable light on various aspects of Portuguese expansion in Malacca and the region beyond. Besides, many of his articles subsequently on different aspects of Portuguese activities in Asia gathered attention. Anthony Reid's work *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* (1993, 1998) spread over in two volumes not only brings into focus the European element but also envisages the milieu that dominated the land below the winds.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pertaining to maritime and commercial history in a pan-Asian context are works of C.R. Boxer, K.N. Chaudhuri, Ashin Dasgupta, Sanjay Subrahmanyam along with the edited ones of Francisco Bethencourt, Diogo Ramada Curto, K.N. Chaudhuri and Rila Mukherjee that have thematic bearing on the area and period of study. Writings of Amitav Ghosh and Sunil Amrith can also be read in this light.

^{iv} Besides writing with pan-Indian Ocean perspective and with writings related to coastal peninsular India and the world around the Bay of Bengal and beyond, Subrahmanyam has developed interesting concept of connected histories. His two related works are as follows: *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, OUP, 2004; *Connected History: Essays and Arguments*, Verso, 2022

^v For further references, see Sen, Tansen, 'The formation of Chinese maritime networks to Southern Asia, 1200-1450', *JESHO*, 2006: pp.421-453.

^{vi} *Sĕjarah Mĕlayu* or popularly called Malay Annals is an early modern Malay text composed sometime prior to 1536 CE that underwent changes in 1612 CE on the orders of Sultan Abdullah Maayah Shah, the Sultan of Johor. Literally meaning 'the genealogy', the annals primarily trace the descent of the Malay rulers of the bygone era and allude to the greatness of Malay Sultanate that had been established at Melaka on the Malay straits in 1414 CE. Besides an evocative political description, of not only Melaka but other related regions like Palembang, Pasiretc, it presents political dynamics and commercial networks before the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511 CE and thereafter.

^{vii} *Bughâz* means a strait in Arabic.

^{viii} In *Sĕjarah Mĕlayu*, it is referred how the Raja of Kedah went to Melaka to pay homage and requested for the Drum of Sovereignty and granted the same.

^{ix} Pires noted that "...the said kings came to be in Melaka,...for all the things and lands and districts were nothing in comparison with Melaka..." Cortesão, Armando (ed.), Vol II, 1944, p.251.

^x Andaya, Barbara Watson in Tarling, N.(ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. I, CUP,1992, pp. 202; such poly-centred polities have been perceived as 'kingdom' by Barbara Watson Andaya, who understood it to be a "coalescence of localized power centers, ideally bound together not by force but through complex interweaving of links engendered by blood connections and obligations." Besides, there was also a concept of tributary states prevalent much before the establishment of the Melakan Sultanate. Assuming such titles whose meaning was grand like- *Raja Qudaw* which meant King of the horses; *Raja Baya* alias *Sam Agy Jaya Baya* which meant Great Lord of nations; *Sam Agy Jaya Taton* meaning Lord of all; *Batara Tamarill* which stood for Pure king; *Batara Tomarill* meaning king of the lands and lords of the islands; *Sam Agi Palimbaão* meaning Lord of all for- explicitly connotes the attitude of the polity in the Malay world. Freek Colombijn, in a case study of Sumatra, has explained the nature of states in Southeast Asia in terms of volatility which he terms as chequered polities. According to him, the states were volatile in the sense that the size of the individual states changed frequently. There were cases the ruler moved his state capital under forced circumstances. The death of a ruler sometimes was caused by a dynastic struggle, which was so common in Melaka of the fifteenth century. In some

cases, a local subordinate head either ignored or took over the central state power. So, in short, the states underwent through frequent cycles of rise and decline; moreover people were key to success for them rather than land.

^{xi} As Malyn Newitt explains: “Each of the fortified port-towns of the *Estado da Índia* became the focus for a settlement of Portuguese. The population in these settlements was made up primarily of the soldiers and sailors who manned the fleets, the officials who administered the Crown’s trade monopolies and the clerics who served the church”. (Newitt, Malyn, *Emigration and the Sea: An Alternative History of Portugal and the Portuguese*, Hurst & Company, London, 2015, p.81).

Any such Estado’s important fortress such as Melaka comprised of replication of an administrative organization of the Viceroy’s court at Goa in smaller and simpler form. In each *fortaleza*, there was a military force that was headed by a captain besides a *Camara Municipal*.

^{xii} Cited in Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *The Political Economy of Commerce 1500-1650*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.92.

According to the ‘Guinea model’, firstly, the fortresses became less frequent and the factories were also placed at distant intervals. Secondly, the dominant type of trade was a seasonal one along the coasts. This is noticeable even when the Portuguese enterprise was at the highest; type of trade was not only prevalent on the Coromandel Coast but also in Southeast Asia.

^{xiii} The Portuguese called the Eastern Archipelago and the Pacific generally by the name *Mar do Sul*. Also in the East India Company’s records, down to the early part of last century, those regions are always termed as “the South Sea”.

^{xiv} Barros gave detailed description of the venture, which is translated by the author:

The first news that the Portuguese had about this place where was buried, St. Thomas is dated of 1517 and is due to Diogo Fernandes and Bastiao Fernandes who in the company of their Portuguese were returning from Melaka in the company of an Armenian, Khwaja Sikander, who was accompanied by other Armenians. The said Armenians had already been in the city of Pulicat on the coast of Coromandel belonging to the Kingdom of Vijaynagar in the extreme of Cape Comorin on his way to Bengal and had knowledge of the place where according to the tradition the Saint was buried. Arriving at the port of Pulicat at a moment in which weather conditions did not allow him to proceed in his voyage, he landed; having this Armenian told ours [i.e. the Portuguese] if they were wishing to accompany him to the place where the body of St. Thomas was buried according to the tradition. If they were wishing to go there, what the Portuguese accepted with great pleasure.”

^{xv} Many of the contemporary writers point that the coast had bad harbours. About São Thomé or Mylapur, Cesare Federici also noted it. The authors do not miss Pulicat too, which had a relatively good harbour. The famous Pulicat lake in which the ships anchored is mentioned by Streynsham Master in 1679. (Master, Streynsham, *Diaries of*, Vol.II, .01911, p.131) as “a great lake of salt water, which communicates with the sea at Pulicat” by which a great deal of trade was carried out.

^{xvi} Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *Improvising Empire-Portuguese trade and settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700*, OUP, Delhi, 1990, p.35.

According to Thomaz, in *Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century Indonesia*, it is demonstrably false to treat Portuguese official policy with respect to their participation in Asian trade uniformly during the sixteenth century. He, rather shows that there were significant differences between policies followed in the course of century and that, randomly, these changes evolved in a particular direction. The concession system was the consequence result of these changes. The reasons behind the changes also appear to have arisen due to the Counter-Reformation, the attention diverted to Atlantic trade and Brazil and the successive financial crisis of the *Estado da Índia*.

^{xvii} Orta was also a trader. While in the service of the Viceroy at Goa, he had also established a porto-botanical garden.

^{xviii} Modern historical writings on *Colóquios* written in Portuguese and English languages have variously reflected on the treatise. Many noted scholars of environment history like Richard Grove have identified the role of Orta’s *Colóquios* as the guiding light of later European works and pointed it as an *exercise in early ethno-botany* (Grove, Richard, ‘Indigenous Knowledge and the Significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch Constructions of Tropical Nature’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Feb., 1996, Vol. 30, No.1, CUP, p.133). As noted by Palmira Fontes da Costa in her edited book, *Medicine, Trade and Empire: Garcia de Orta’s Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India (1563) in Context*, Routledge, New York, 2016), Orta’s *Colóquios* was the first printed work to epitomise the interconnections between medicine, trade and Portuguese Empire.

^{xix} The contemporary of Orta, the great Lusitanian poet, Luis Vaz de Camões who wrote *Os Lusíadas* wrote a sonnet in honour of Garcia de Orta whose general translation is as follows: “The lore which Achilles once valued I studied with thee, you opened my eyes to its charm. In your garden of herbs each flower, each tree, were seen in your time by your friend. The fruits of that garden collected from far, were unknown to the learned of old. See how, in thine age thy wisdom and care brought many new simples to light. Unknown to the ancients, but revealed to our sage are the plants in thy garden of herbs. You have opened to su (sic) an inspiring page. To thy neighbours like magic it seems. Taught of yore by

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the muses of Ganges and Ind, full of learning, as of years, in all that is known of the true healing art, old Chiron must bow before thee." (Markham, 1913, p.xi). As evident, the sonnet gracefully acknowledged the eminence of Orta's work in 16th century itself.

^{xx} An alliance between Spain and Portugal. It settled disputes about the ownership of lands discovered by Columbus and others. Pope Alexander VI had (1493) approved a line of demarcation stretching between the poles 100 leagues (about 500 km) west of the Cape Verde islands. All to the west was Spanish, to the east Portuguese – an award disregarded by other nations. Portuguese dissatisfaction led to a meeting at Tordesillas in north-west Spain where it was agreed to move the papal line to 370 leagues (about 1850 km) west of Cape Verde. The pope sanctioned this in 1506. It was modified by the Treaty of Zaragossa (1529), which gave the Moluccas (Spice Islands) to the Portuguese.

^{xxi} For more details, see, Nawani, Smarika, *Entangled Spaces: Some Aspects of Portuguese Presence in Coromandel-Archipelago Southeast Asia Complex*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2017, pp 151-159.

^{xxii} *Misericórdias* performed 14 duties. They were defined as being seven spiritual and seven corporal works. The spiritual ones were: giving good advice; teaching the ignorant; consoling the sorrowful; punishing evildoers; pardoning injuries received; suffering our neighbour's shortcomings; praying to God for the living and the dead. The corporal works consisted of: giving food to the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; clothing the naked; visiting the sick and the prisoners; giving shelter to the weary; ransoming captives; burying the dead.

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