



**MONSOON
[+ other]
WATERS**

EDITED BY LINDSAY BREMNER

PREFACE

Monsoon [+ other] Waters is the second of three publications by Monsoon Assemblages, a research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 697873). It arises from a symposium held at the University of Westminster, 12-13 April 2018. It contributes to Monsoon Assemblages' agenda to foster interdisciplinary conversations between the environmental humanities (anthropology, environmental studies, political ecology, cultural geography and philosophy), the natural sciences (meteorology, climatology and climate science) and spatial design (architecture, landscape architecture, planning and urban design) and to further understandings of the impacts of changing monsoon climates and rapid urbanisation in South Asian cities and beyond.

MONSOON [+ other] WATERS

SOAKING CARTOGRAPHIES: OF WATERS, LANDSCAPES AND MATERIALITIES

Pedro Pombo is Assistant Professor (Visiting Faculty) at Goa University, India. He received his PhD in Anthropology from ISCTE- IUL, Portugal, with an ethnography on spatial belonging, local history and personal narratives in Southern Mozambique. He investigates traces of maritime circulations in the Indian Ocean engaging dialogues between cartography and archives, heritage and material culture. He also has been researching on topographies of Africa in India unveiled by textile aesthetics, stories of migration and contemporary art, inquiring about possible archaeologies of the contemporary in the Indian Ocean world.

Approaching the Coast

Departing from a series of visual experiments on the encounter of water and land in the Western coast of India - the island of Diu, Cambay Bay and Goa - this essay navigates towards the aesthetic and epistemological possibilities of water as a template for migration stories, architectural ensembles and visual and material circulations. It investigates how to unveil the traces that waters - salty oceanic water, monsoonal watery cycles - have left in landscapes, walls, objects and memories.⁰¹ Text and visual collages act as the unmooring of a broader exploration on the potentials of fringes and the unsteadiness of landscapes, material traces and heritages as fertile ways of revealing alternative histories and temporalities in the contemporary Indian Ocean world.

The Indian Ocean is a territory of intersections between people and goods, flows and obstacles, wet and dry climates. While stable cartographies are drawn upon lands, histories in the ocean (Pearson, 2003) invade hinterlands through diverse materialities and hybrid locations. The contact between water and land 'unfolds' (Bremner, 2013) in diverse coastal landscapes, from vast backwaters to rocky and deserted cliffs, as aesthetic reverberations of the possibilities of integration and dissolution of the two elements, land and sea. Cyclic tidal and water movements disrupt the presumed immobility of cartographies, cyclically adding or subtracting territories through water movement. Port towns decline after estuaries become silted and coastal regions change dramatically over time. Looking at how ecologies of the monsoon (Ansaldo, 2009) act on coastal and cultural landscapes offers a beneficial methodology. The recognition of the instability and fluctuation of coastal land and waterscapes can produce perceptions of time, porosity and movements of amplification or contraction as conceivable cartographic templates. I propose to look to some of the Indian Ocean coasts with an affective care for their details: the undrawable maps of the ocean reaching the land and the material and sensorial gradation of monsoons and currents, erosion and sedimentation, silting and evaporation. What are the epistemological consequences of interrogating the modes of ocean 'soak' (Mathur and da

Cunha, 2009), the material world that flourishes on its shores, or paying attention to chromatic settings and the transformations of landscapes over time?

In this essay I explore three locations of the western coast of India connected with maritime trade in the Indian Ocean: The Cambay Bay, the island of Diu and the coastal state of Goa. Through visual experiments made with collages of images and maps in gradations of scales and terrains,⁰² I contemplate the ocean from the perspective of hybrid coastal topographies: mangroves, muddy or shallow waters, marshlands, paddy fields, safe harbors, bays, beaches and cliffs.⁰³ It is the contact, symbiosis or divergence between water and land that explains that certain places became sites of intersection between rootedness and maritime elsewhere (Meier, 2016).

The cartographic gestures of surveying and mapping can be applied to the intertidal surfaces, opaque waters of mangroves and cyclic interventions of the monsoon on coastal regions. The three locations I examine are all constituted by degrees of dissolution of the soil into the sea and vice versa. Cambay Bay is known for its dampened coast and changing shores, sensed through its flat horizons and widespread estuaries. These enabled the establishment of port towns, but also the silting of riverbeds. The island of Diu can be understood as diverse grades of solidity: from the rocks where the fort stands to the cyclically flooded salt pans that almost connect the island with the mainland. The area of the island contracts and expands depending on whether we integrate or exclude these volatile tidal areas in conceptualising or mapping it. In Goa, the landscape is crucial for the construction of spatial and social realities, with white churches and temples built to be visible across extensive

paddy fields or marking fertile lands and water sources amid forested hills. The Catholic conversion embraced a much older form of spatially grounding deities to the landscape.

Following the intimate connection between space and society, looking at imprecise places that are both part of oceanic routes and firm land cartographies, takes us to the fringes of social structures and narratives that became silenced in archives and historical accounts.⁰⁴ Landscape, if conceived as an archive, inspires us to search for 'muddy' documents, to pay attention to the 'tidal' aspects of historic events and to the 'silting' of statistics or political intentions over time. Landscape and archive, both often overlooked in hybrid regions, questions notions of centers and peripheries, of land and island-ness (Gupta, 2010) and reveals entanglements between a plurality of localized phenomena and cosmopolitan elsewhere (Lionnet, 2011).

Cambay: The Bay and the Ports

Cambay Bay has been a region of historically important port towns in the Indian Ocean world for centuries. It became one of the centres of maritime trade in Western India from the end of the first millennia and has witnessed the establishment of an extraordinary diversity of communities from all continents. The Bay is punctuated on the west by the old ports of Bhavnagar and Ghogha, on the north by Cambay, and on the east by Surat and Bharuch.

We can read the region as a sequence of transitory estuaries where rivers flow wide during the monsoon and opaque seawaters modify the coastline in diffuse gradations of soaked soils. Time is a layer that maps

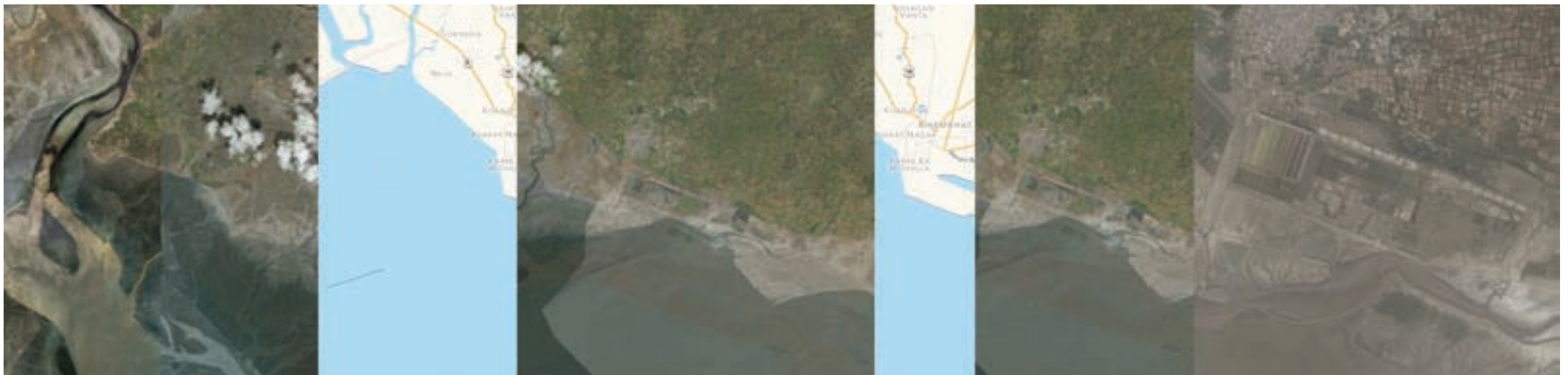


Fig.01 Cambay Bay. This image reads from the larger estuarial waters, on the left, to the contemporary distance between the ocean and Cambay's urban centre, on the right. Pedro Pombo, 2018. Data: Google, Airbus, DigitalGlobe.

commonly do not represent, but for this Bay it has been an essential element of its geography, since the silting of the navigational channels resulted in the port towns becoming further away from the seafront (Chaudhuri, 1985). Being frequently located at the junction of estuaries and the ocean, port towns suffered the influence of both hinterland and maritime climatic systems. On the monsoonal Indian Ocean this meant that port towns became material traces of the interweaving of salty and sweet water, ocean and river, coast and hinterland or sky and soil. The ocean made possible long distance travel while rivers and backwaters took the sea far inland and brought the hinterland to the coast.

(Fig. 01) suggests the impossibility of representing in simplified maps the muddy extensions that result from low and high tidal movements and the gradual occupation of land that surfaced from the constant silting of Cambay's waterfront. As the coast receded, new agricultural fields occupied the lowlands. (Fig. 02) experiments with differences of visualisation and representation of unclear landscapes, where soil not solid enough to be considered land and water not deep enough to be considered ocean. Bhavnagar and Surat, historical harbour cities on opposite margins of Cambay Bay are surrounded by a landscape of lowlands and muddy terrains. The silting of the old coastline of Bhavnagar, to the north and east of Cambay is now being used for saltpans (in the first two images on the left), while the flood plains of the Tapi River and its estuary, southwest of Surat, slowly move the city far inland (on the right). In both cases it is clear that we can't rely on linear maps to understand the incertitudes of landscapes that vary with tidal and monsoon processes. When we look close enough we can understand how urban spaces of the Bay of Cambay were shaped in relation to now absent waterfronts. The water receded but the historical urban grids remind of a past that has not completely vanished. Urban cores and heritage built because of the ocean became the remains of a maritime past that still informs the present.

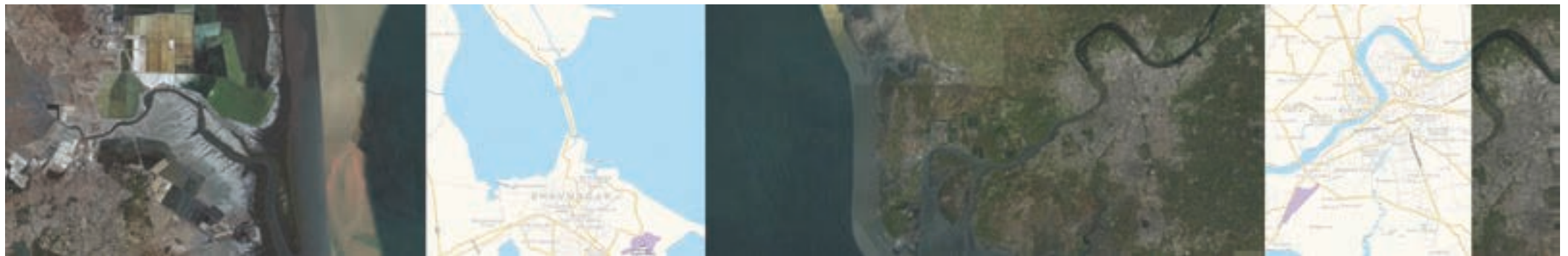


Fig.02 Bhavnagar and Surat, historical harbour cities on opposite margins of Cambay Bay, became surrounded by a landscape of lowlands and muddy terrains. Pedro Pombo, 2018. Data: Google, DigitalGlobe, Terrametrics, Landsat/Copernicus.

Diu: of stone and salt

After traveling south and crossing the bridge from the peninsula of Ghogla we reach the small but famous island of Diu, which lies almost at the southern tip of the Saurashtra peninsula in today's Gujarat. Today a part of the Union Territory of Diu and Daman, its relevance in the maritime trade justified its conquest by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, becoming one of the strongholds of Portuguese empire in the subcontinent until its economic relevance steeply declined at the end of the nineteenth century. Once inhabited by a thriving ensemble of many different trading communities, the island still incorporates traces of its cosmopolitan past in the architecture, commercial establishments and life stories that recall the intense connections it made with the East African coast. The landscape of the region contrasts with southern India's green coastal belt, as it lies at the eastern end of the dryer coastal landscape that marks the Indian Ocean shores from South Asia to the East African Swahili coast. In fact, the sensorial aspects of the seascape and its shores locate Diu at the Western inflexion of the Bay of Cambay while also directing us towards the Western regions of the Indian Ocean.

The island of Diu is a small but productive example of the need to rethink the parameters that sustain our understanding of particular territories. Partially filled with saltpans and mangroves, the northern area of the island is a volatile mass of land and brackish waters, depending on the tide and the alternating of dry and wet monsoon seasons. (Fig. 03) reflects on the territory of the island. The left image is a Google earth image of the island. On the right image a blue traced area covers the lowlands that are cyclically flooded and reclaimed, shrinking or expanding the island. This marking of non-solid, non-firm territory gives visibility to a zone that is dismissed as a reason for Diu having been a central port city for centuries. The wetlands provided a shallow sea bottom slowly deepening to the east of the Ghogla peninsula, to the northeast of the



Fig.03 The lowlands of Diu island: on the right, blue lines mark the difference of territory if we count the lowlands as

part of the map. Pedro Pombo, 2018. Data: Google, DigitalGlobe, Terrametrics.

island (visible on the top of both images), providing good conditions of safe harbouring for long distance vessels.

The old Diu town is defined by an architecture of geometric forms, elaborated stone balconies and carved wooden doors, an aesthetic language that is rooted in this place but equally echoes, and is echoed by, the Swahili architecture on the Western shores of the ocean.⁰⁵

If architecture is deeply connected with the environment, how to rethink art history and aesthetics taking into account the landscapes that informed modes of living and creating? One possible way can be sensing the chromatic peculiarities of a place. If the binary of land and water, and their encounter, can be multiplied in shades and gradients of material states from the liquid sea water to the muddy man-grove soil or to the crisp salt crystals from the saltpans, unconventional maps can include chroma-tographies to register how built environments enter in conversation with the natural context through textures and colours.

(Fig.04) is a travelogue from land to sea through chromatic shades and materialities of blue. Blue dim-light home spaces, cobalt and turquoise tones on columns and stucco decorations, the intense blue of old doors and their carved frames, small and big surfaces, bluish ice to conserve the catch of the day in the fishing village of Vanakbara on the West end of the island, fishing boats, sky and the ocean. Cartographies drawn with colour instead of lines, as a possibility of representing Diu island in a way that reflects its qualities and its history.

part of the map. Pedro Pombo, 2018. Data: Google, DigitalGlobe, Terrametrics.

Goa: submerged ports and estuaries

Landing in Goa during the monsoon is an unforgettable experience. Suddenly the heavy clouds open space for a clear view of the mirroring waters flooding the lowlands and paddy fields that define the coastal landscape of the region. The water spreads in curvilinear paths from the hinterland to the ocean; the expansive Mandovi and Zuari rivers are anchored by promontories as entrances to long and wide estuaries, the salty seawater mixing with the cool river currents. While Old Goa (at the Mandovi river bank) signals the place when deep sea and land congregated for centuries, Mormugão port (at the Zuari river mouth) corresponds to the contemporary age, with its infrastructures for large-scale container shipping. While these two centres of oceanic activity remain visible, the eleventh century port of Kopakapattana, also called Govapuri, the ancient Kadamba dynasty's capital that was later conquered by the Vijayanagara empire and the Bijapur sultanate, have slowly disappeared, submerged by the Zuari estuary and mangroves. Remains of the harbour waterfront are still visible during low tide, as if the riverine water has found a poetic mode of evading the permanent erasure of what it submerged long ago.

(Fig.05) is a visual essay of the sensorial features of this encounter between water and soil in the Goan landscape. The porous and chromatic levels of the landscape are visible in satellite imagery of one of the northern effluents of the Zuari estuary. These are combined with



Fig.04 The color blue is the line tracing a chromatic map of Diu town and its oceanic landscape. Pedro Pombo, 2018.

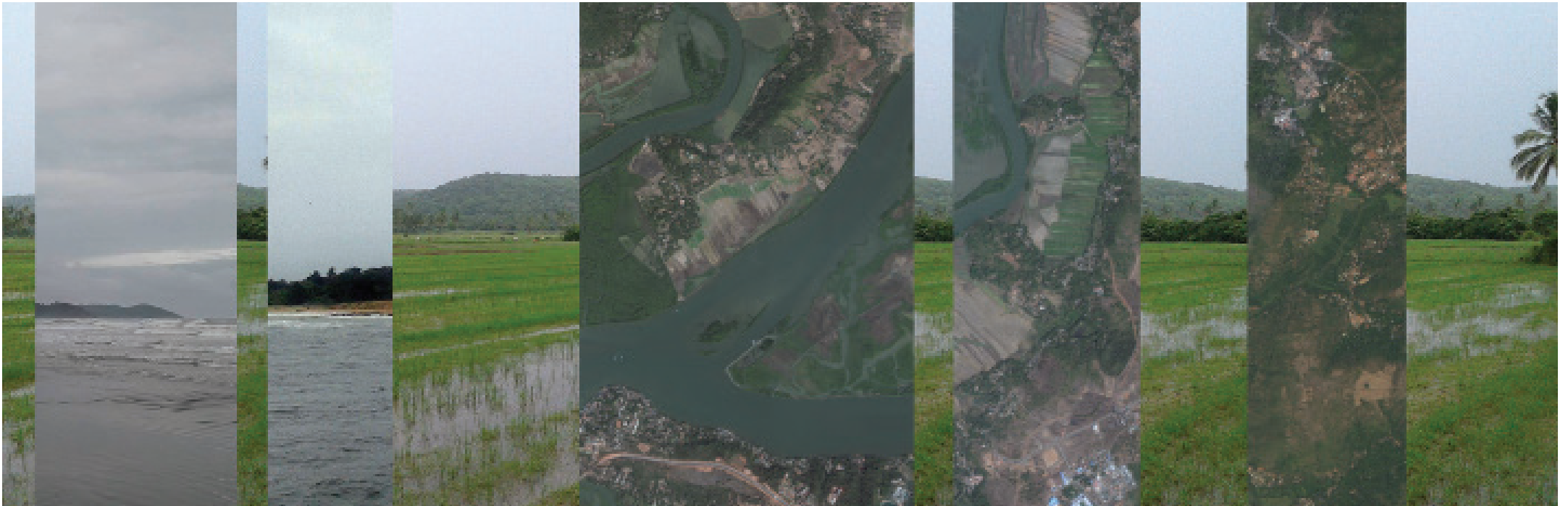


Fig.05 Grading of water embracing land in the Goan coastal landscape. Pedro Pombo, 2018.
Data: Google, DigitalGlobe, Terrametrics.

photographs of the mouth of the Chapora river and rice fields in Siolim village, North Goa. Solid rock, shallow river water, cultivated paddy fields ⁰⁶ and wild mangroves provide the layers through shades of green, blue and brown, mixing with the heavy greys of the monsoon sky. This collage intends to reflect the monsoon. Water invades every space and surface in all possible states: humid air and pouring rain and flash floods, mangrove muds or intrepid waves that consume the beaches. This is Goa during monsoon, and this is the context that peasants and fishers, sailors, traders or monarchs, administrators or missionaries, had to adapt to. Cities and ports were built taking into account the landscapes and waterscapes that opened paths beyond the Western Ghats and across the ocean; villages occupied riverbanks and reclaimed land for cultivation; temples and churches were erected using the landscape as a spatial template, inserting viewsapes in their own sacred spaces.

Mnemonic coastlines

Coastal landscapes soak different kinds of water: the monsoon, rivers and the ocean. While referring to the Swahili coast, Prita Meier (2017: 355) affirms that 'monsoons, long-distance commerce, and even faraway places are not just symbolic imaginaries but very much the physical matter of life.' I would like to transfer this idea to the locations discussed here. This physical matter is simultaneously the landscape, the materialities that coastal port-cities have produced and the monsoon waters that cyclically affect them.

In keeping with Isabel Hofmeyr's (2012) proposal of looking at the ocean as a method, I would like to look at the effects of monsoon on coastal places as mnemonic archives where history sediments in structures and things that are literally immersed or revealed by the natural elements. The monsoon has the power of washing away a-historic rhetorics, ideologies and projects. The cycle of time is not a repetition but a repository of subtle (and sometimes violent) layers of change that will slowly and persistently transform the coastline and its occupation. Silting and other monsoonal consequences did not only affect historical port cities but keep on affecting contemporary port structures that need concrete wave breakers or systematic dredging. There is a constant need of readjustment to variation and sedimentation, and the effects of the monsoon on coastal aquifers and soils become witnesses to history, which can be unveiled in novel archaeological approaches centred around these soaked and nonlinear landscapes.

The monsoon therefore is history, archive and witness and can be approached as a component of culture, memory and aesthetic sensibilities. It shapes architecture in steeped tiled roofs and verandas; it is embraced in cultural landscapes; it enables circulation, and thus can be understood as a spatial template and inspiring artistic expressions and

sensorial relations with the environment (Gupta, 2012). Monsoon rains moisten the outside air and home spaces, books kept in bookshelves gently accommodate the extreme humidity in curving pages, while furniture and textiles unhurriedly gain a particular scent of mould. Outer walls flourish with vivid green moss and in drier regions, as in the Cambay Bay and at Diu, the monsoon rains transform the brownish landscape into an array of green tones while wet terraces cool the houses and creeks become short-lived lagoons. Monsoon is air, water and smell, is texture, sound and colour, movement and immobility. And it is all this in an affective manner, stimulating to almost an extreme the inner qualities of the places it touches.

The visual essays presented here aim precisely at reflecting on the potential of the monsoon and its relations with the edges of the ocean to build inquiries that dilute dichotomies between sea and land, water and soil. We are left with what is not explicitly traceable and demarcated, in order to redraw potential visual responses and map out what can't be expressed and represented through precise lines and measured geographic references.

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NOTES

- 01 The notion of 'traces' as mnemonic materialities has been lately pervading my research interests, and was at the centre of exploratory research on the island of Diu focusing the presence of scattered material and intangible memories of its connections with Mozambique and the Indian Ocean world. See Pombo (2018).
- 02 The visual essays presented in this text appear as visual interrogations, and were traced during a recent period of focused bibliographical research on art from the African and Asian continents that inquires migrations, the (post)colonial contemporariness and the Indian Ocean. The impactful languages of artistic practices have a growing influence on my own research path and on re-activating my background on art history into dialogues with anthropology and history.
- 03 Another very seductive and poetic maritime element that is absence of this area of the Indian Ocean is the coral reef. Making the transition between deep sea and land, coral is part of the imaginaries of the South Seas and the Caribbean and has served as a metaphor for circulation of indentured laborers and processes of creolisation (Torabully, 1999). In fact, the coral and the hybrid spaces of the atolls figure in other inspiring reflections on the peculiarities, and possibilities, of insular locations (Hau'ofa, 1994; Gupta, 2010).
- 04 Alpers mentions that 'one needs also to consider the lands that surround the ocean' in order to understand the idea of an India Ocean world (Alpers, 2014: 10). His insight deeply resonates Pearson's concept of 'littoral societies' (Pearson 1985).
- 05 Zanzibar's Stone Town is known for the Gujarati carved wooden doors that became part of a Swahili

architectural language.
06 In Goa, these cultivated lowlands, reclaimed land from rivers and estuaries by complex systems of dams and canals are known as *khazans*.

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CHARTING THE INVISIBLE: WATER, MEMORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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