

# “To Cross a Surf Both Alarming and Dangerous”

An Exclusionary Knowledge of Motion in the Madras Surf Zone, 1755–1842

*Abstract:* Movement between ship and shore at the English East India Company port of Madras (modern Chennai) was mediated by local boatmen in locally designed and built masula boats from the founding of the city in 1639 through the end of the nineteenth century. Without the masulas and boatmen, Company officials had no alternative methods for landing cargo and passengers and as a result were fully dependent on the continued cooperation of the boatmen. Aware of their linchpin role in the continued operation of Madras as a trade hub, the boat people alternatively supplied and withheld their exclusive knowledge and skill in the surf zone as a means of increasing personal profit and in attempts to improve working conditions. This paper argues that the boatmen’s periodic withholding of expertise and technology allowed the community to assert group agency and limited company control over the system of ship to shore movement.

*Keywords:* Madras, English East India Company, masula boats, indigenous knowledge holders, non-circulation of knowledge, boatmen

## Introduction

The HCS *William Fairlie* arrived off the coast of Madras (modern Chennai) on 24 June 1828, carrying 300 new recruits for service in India. Typically, the very next day the troops and their baggage would have been unloaded by way of masula boat, quickly and safely deposited onshore for deployment. But 25 June 1828 was not a typical day. Early that morning, deputy head of the government-run Boat Department, Edward Gascoigne, wrote to the secretary of the Marine Department that the boat people who manned the port’s masula fleet had gone on strike and refused to

---

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-3-10>



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

Morgan Breene, University of Oxford, Brasenose College, Radcliffe Square, Oxford, OX1 4AJ, Morgan.breene@history.ox.ac.uk

report to the beach.<sup>1</sup> Their refusal to work stranded the troops offshore and threw the Marine Department into chaos: ship's boats could not cross the turbulent two-mile zone between the safe anchorage and the beach without risking destruction, and sailors or unskilled labourers could not replace the highly trained boatmen in the masulas. Police threats could not compel the boatmen to return, nor could quickly growing fines. The boatmen demanded a pay increase, and nothing else would compel them to return to the beach and retrieve the troops and cargo of the *Fairlie* from the roadstead. The *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* reported that "not a boat could be got by fair means or foul [...] all business was at a stand owing to this untoward event".<sup>2</sup> Not until the head of the Boat Department, Master Attendant William Majoribanks, personally promised what amounted to a ninety per cent raise did the boatmen finally return to work on 28 June.<sup>3</sup>

The panic garnered by the boatmen's 1828 strike while a troopship sat in the roads in desperate need of service is illustrative of the complete British dependency on native knowledge, skill, and technology for maintaining communication between ship and shore at Madras. It also demonstrates the boatmen's awareness of their role in the surf zone, and the valuable tool their expertise could be in dealing with the English East India Company (EIC). The Madras boat people closely held communal knowledge of the surf and how to cross it as a means of asserting group agency, increasing profits, and increasing wages in the face of EIC efforts to create a cheap and regulated transport system. Focused on the period between 1755 and 1842, when attempted EIC oversight of the boat system was most intense, this paper argues that exclusive community knowledge of a specific environment and technological expertise allowed the boat people to resist complete subsumption into a Company-controlled system, leading to the construction of a negotiated system for ship to shore movement.

## Colonial knowledge in South Asia

The history of knowledge and knowledge circulation in the colonial South Asian context has been widely explored, covering topics such as political and social intelligence, language, and knowledge about the natural world including botany and

---

1 Records of the Board of Control, Letter No. 210, from J. Daniel Esq. Secretary to the Marine Board, to R. Clive Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 30 June 1828, 287–8, British Library (BL) IOR/F/4/1188/30856.

2 Anonymous, Mutiny Amongst the Boatmen, in: *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, XXVII (1829), 95.

3 J. Daniel to R. Clive, 291, IOR/F/4/1188/30856.

medicine. This work also emphasises the ways in which knowledge was hybridised, co-created, and translated between European and South Asian contexts, and vice versa. Kapil Raj, for example, has argued that not only were European science and ways of thinking about the world spread through South Asia, but that, conversely, traditional knowledge had a major impact on European thinking and the development of its scientific tradition.<sup>4</sup> Raj further argues that the concept of knowledge “circulation” in particular is well suited to the South Asian context because it instils all participants with equal agency in the process of knowledge exchange.<sup>5</sup> While circulation and hybridisation frameworks require the historian to view participants on an equal footing, Johann Östling and his co-authors of the introduction to the edited volume *Circulation of Knowledge* note that there is also value in examining the reverse, or non-circulation.<sup>6</sup> Examining instances of non-circulation is a route towards uncovering participant agency in unequal power settings. Others have demonstrated that European colonial officials and explorers were not necessarily able to gain access to all knowledge systems. Christopher Bayly, for example, has argued that British intelligence gathering in Nepal and Burma in the 1810s and 1820s was actively obstructed by ruling elites, creating an “information famine” and blocking or delaying colonisation efforts.<sup>7</sup> Whether addressing circulation or non-circulation, transference or withholding, these studies all suggest that “knowledge” as the result of scholarly study or social or political elitism could be a means of assisting or resisting the developing colonial state.

More recently, however, historians of knowledge have debated whether research should be restricted to such “high” or scholarly subjects, or whether practical or folk knowledge, encompassing topics such as artisanal, craft, agricultural, spatio-cartographical, and women’s medical knowledge, should also be included as areas of inquiry.<sup>8</sup> While Lorraine Daston suggested that further expanding the boundaries of the sub-discipline would ultimately lead it to become meaningless, Christian Joas, Fabian Krämer, and Kärin Nickelsen have argued that the inclusion of practical knowledge is what sets the field apart from the older and more exclusive history of

---

4 Kapil Raj, Thinking without the Scientific Revolution. Global Interactions and the Construction of Knowledge, in: *Journal of Early Modern History* 21 (2017), 445–458, 454.

5 Kapil Raj, Circulation and the Emergence of Modern Mapping. Great Britain and Early Colonial India, 1764–1820, in: Claude Markovits/Jacques Pouchepadass/Sanjay Subramanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation. Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950*, Delhi 2003, 228–259, 258.

6 Johan Östling/David Larsson Heidenblad/Erling Sandmo/Anna Nilsson Hammar/Kari H. Nordberg, The History of Knowledge and the Circulation of Knowledge. An Introduction, in: eid. (eds.), *Circulation of Knowledge. Explorations in the History of Knowledge*, Lund 2018, 9–33, 25.

7 Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information*, Cambridge 1997, 110; 115.

8 Martin Mulso, History of Knowledge, in: Marek Tamm/Peter Burke (eds.), *Debating New Approaches to History*, London 2018, 159–187, 160.

science.<sup>9</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram has also argued from a specifically South Asian context that the history of knowledge does not require a focus on elite scientific practices to show how knowledge was appropriated and moved in the colonial world.<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of practical or folk knowledge within the broader historiography of knowledge circulation can serve as a means of reconstituting the personal agency of lower-status actors and illuminating the importance of their expertise in shaping everyday experience. Much like scholars or political agents, skilled labourers, artisans, and women could either share or withhold their knowledge, expertise, and technology as means of asserting individual or group agency in scenarios of unequal power relations. This article argues that not only did the Madras boat people's understanding of the surf zone, navigation, and boatbuilding constitute a closed knowledge system but also that they purposefully limited access to their own community to retain a means of challenging EIC attempts to fully control the passage of goods and people between ship and shore.

### Littoral knowledge: composition and development of the boatmen's knowledge of motion

The ability to move between ship and shore is crucial for seaborne trade and the movement of people, goods, and ideas. Transit between ship and shore at Madras could only be carried out in a specific style of watercraft, a masula boat, but this meant that the experience of ship to shore movement remained largely unchanged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When a vessel arrived in the Madras anchorage, the need for boats was communicated either via signal flag or by sending a message with a catamaran man. If the weather was fair, masulas would then begin the up-to-two-mile approach from shore to the anchorage to load passengers or cargo, or if the need was for victuals or fresh water, laden with supplies. Cargo was placed into the bottom of the boat on a layer of brush and covered with canvas tarpaulins to provide some protection from spray.<sup>11</sup> Masulas would then return to shore under the direction of the boat's tindal, or cockswain, whose job was described by a travel writer as "standing on an elevated platform in the stern of

---

9 Lorraine Daston, *The History of Science and the History of Knowledge*, in: *KNOW. A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1/1 (2017), 131–154, 143; Christian Joas/Fabian Krämer/Käarin Nickelsen, *Introduction. History of Science or History of Knowledge?*, in: *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 42 (2019), 117–125, 118.

10 Sujit Sivasundaram, *Trading Knowledge. The East India Company's Elephants in India and Britain*, in: *The Historical Journal* 48/1 (2005), 27–63, 61.

11 Thomas Chase, *Regulations for the Boat Department*, in: *Madras Courier*, 31 January 1794.

the boat armed with a steering oar, watch[ing] the run of the sea, directing the men when to pull, and guiding his unwieldy craft through the tremendous surf, with wonderful skill and presence of mind<sup>12</sup>. After the boat's cargo was unloaded onto the beach, the crew would set out once again for the anchorage. In good weather a crew would complete three to five trips each day, each taking one or more hours to complete, depending on the conditions and the speed at which cargo and passengers were loaded on board.<sup>13</sup>

The masula boatmen were able to monopolise ship to shore transit because nearshore conditions at Madras were notably poor and difficult to predict from a European perspective. The city was built on the Coromandel Coast, a flat, north-west-southeast oriented coastal plain mere metres above sea level, which only rises to meet the Eastern Ghats 80 kilometres inland.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the coastline is straight and devoid of natural features like inlets or rocky outcroppings that could protect shipping from daily on- and offshore winds and storms. Combined with the persistent wind patterns, the coastline is hammered by a triple bar of surf, which approaches the coast at varying angles throughout the year, sometimes in opposition to the wind. Wave heights average between one and a half and three metres, depending on the time of year, but during storms greatly exceed these averages.<sup>15</sup> Not only are the waves large, but they also break well offshore; an 1866 piloting guide noted that while on calm days waves begin breaking 300 feet (91 metres) from shore, during gales they can break up to 1,000 feet (305 metres) from shore.<sup>16</sup> The Coromandel Coast is exposed to a Northeast (NE) monsoon from late October through December and a Southwest (SW) monsoon from June to August, during which periods the region experiences stormy weather, high surf, strong winds, and changing currents.<sup>17</sup>

The boat people's knowledge system was comprised of environmental, technological, and navigational knowledge about the Madras littoral and how to move through it. The boatmen who worked in the port belonged to a small hereditary

---

12 Walter Campbell, *My Indian Journal*, Edinburgh 1864, 40.

13 Anonymous, *The Madras Almanac and Compendium of Intelligence for 1840*, Madras 1840, 406–408.

14 BM Faruque/GG Vaz/GP Mohapatra, Chapter 16. *The Continental Shelf of Eastern India*, in: FL Chiochi/AR Chivas (eds.), *Continental Shelves of the World: Their Evolution During the Last Glacio-Eustatic Cycle*, London 2014, 221–229, 223.

15 JS Mani, *A Numerical Study on Coastal Defence at Chennai and Related Management Strategies*, in: *Natural Hazards* 31 (2004), 523–536, 525; 531.

16 Alexander Findlay, *A Directory for the Navigation of the Indian Ocean. With Descriptions of Its Coasts, Islands, Etc., from the Cape of Good Hope to the Strait of Sunda and Western Australia*, London 1866, 854.

17 RPD Walsh/R Glaser/S Militzer, *The Climate of Madras during the Eighteenth Century*, in: *International Journal of Climatology* 19 (1999), 1025–1047, 1025f.

community that predated the British occupation of the site, having subsisted as fisherpeople for centuries.<sup>18</sup> The boat community was predominantly Catholic, converted by the Portuguese at the nearby site of San Thome in the sixteenth century, and had a hierarchical but flexible internal social structure. Regular boatmen, tindals, head boatmen, maistries, boat builders, and boat owners lived together first at Chepauk, to the south of Fort St George, and then, after 1800, at Royapooram, to the north of the Fort.<sup>19</sup> Historic communal experience was the basis for the boat people's understanding of the littoral space, weather, boat building, and navigational practices. Training started from an early age; sons began working in their fathers' boats as bailers, before advancing into positions as rowers, and, for the most skilled, to that of tindal, or boat captain. The position of tindal required a great deal of experience, skill, and environmental knowledge, as they were required to read wind and wave conditions to direct their crews safely through the surf. Working in the boats demanded an "embodied knowledge" that was the result of an intimate understanding of environment and technology brought together; the particular strength that came from plunging a long-handled, small-bladed oar into the sea from a high angle repeatedly combined with the particular ability to read hourly wind as well as wave and seasonal storm patterns.<sup>20</sup> Training and lifelong exposure to littoral conditions combined to establish and maintain the boat people's unique role in ship-to-shore transport.

The exclusivity of the boatmen's skill and experience is evident in government concerns over what might happen if they felt their position threatened. For example, a proposed breakwater was rejected in 1828 partly over concerns about how the boat people would react; a reviewer speculated that if the project angered the highly trained boatmen and led them to disperse, then failed, it would be difficult to recall enough men to operate the port and result in "the greatest imaginable inconvenience".<sup>21</sup> As late as 1869, Madras officials lamented the fact that the boatmen had recently become "disinclined [...] to bring their sons up in their own trade"; and that

---

18 For a discussion of the boat community and the boat people's relationship with the Company in the seventeenth century see Jangkhomang Guite, *From Fishermen to Boatmen. The Mucquas of Madras, 1650–1750*, in: Yogesh Sharma (ed.), *Coastal histories. Society and Ecology in Pre-Modern India*, Delhi 2006, 181–207.

19 Henry David Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras. 1640–1800*, vol. 3, London 1913, 517.

20 For a discussion of "embodied knowledge" as long-term practice and environmental expertise see Kunbing Xiao, *The Taste of Tea. Material, Embodied Knowledge and Environmental History in Northern Fujian, China*, in: *Journal of Material Culture* 22 (2017), 3–18, 5; John Edye, *Description of the various classes of vessels constructed and employed by the natives of the coasts of Coromandel, Malabar, and the Island of Ceylon. For their coasting navigation*, in: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1/1 (1834), 8.

21 Extract Fort St George Consultations, No 340. Letter from T Daniel, Esq. Secretary, to the Marine Board to David Hill, Chief Secretary to Government, 23 October 1828, 16, BL IOR/F/4/1332/52612.

they were a “limited and peculiar class of skilled labourers” who could not easily be replaced. Mere strength, they noted elsewhere, could “always be had on easier terms than strength and skill combined”.<sup>22</sup>

The strength and skill of individual boatmen was further combined with a distinct and environmentally well-suited style of boat. The boats used at Madras, known to European residents as masulas, were specifically designed to handle the multidirectional forces of the surf zone. Specialty watercraft were imperative; unlike in better protected ports, European-style ship’s boats could not be used to land cargo or passengers. Inflexible European boats, built rigidly on a structure of internal frames, fell apart in the Madras surf. In a masula, on the other hand, planks of the hull were sewn together with coconut coir to create a box-like, double-ended flat bottomed-boat without nails or internal structure.<sup>23</sup> Sewing the planking of the boats together, rather than nailing planks to an internal frame, made masulas bend and flex in the waves. Also unlike European-style ships boats, which typically had rounded hulls culminating on the point of a keel, masulas were keel-less. This meant that if a masula was slammed into the sand by a wave in the process of landing, the force of the impact was distributed throughout the boat, rather than concentrated on a single point. The sewn construction also made masulas easy to repair, and therefore cheap to maintain; when the stitching inevitably loosened or a plank broke, a masula could be disassembled, dried, and re sewn more cheaply than building an entirely new boat.<sup>24</sup> Masulas were propelled by a crew of eight to ten rowers sitting double-banked on crossbars attached to the boat’s gunwale using very long oars with small, palm-shaped blades. They were built and repaired by builders who were members of the boat people’s community; furthermore, the boatyard was located within the boat people’s settlement of Royapooram, which helped the boat people to maintain spatial control over the construction process.

Equipped with a knowledge of the surf and weather based on personal and communal experience and a style of watercraft well-suited to repeatedly passing back and forth through the surf, the boat people mediated the space between ships in the roads and the shore from the foundation of Madras in 1639 through the last quar-

---

22 Madras Presidency, Annual Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency. During the Year 1868–69, Madras 1869, 89; Public Works Department, Papers Connected with the Construction of the Madras Harbour, Calcutta 1885, 14.

23 Eric Kentley, Some Aspects of the Masula Surf Boat, in: Sean McGrail/Eric Kentley (eds.), *Sewn Plank Boats. Archaeological and Ethnographic Papers Based on Those Presented to a Conference at Greenwich in November 1984*, London 1984, 303–317; JF McKennie, *Masulah Boats at Madras*, in: *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle for 1838*, Cambridge 2013, 836f.

24 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from John Thomson, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable George Lord Macartney, 25 May 1783, 742, BL IOR/P/240/56.

ter of the nineteenth century. The sustained reliance on a masula transport system impacted the boat people's relationship with the EIC, providing them with opportunities for asserting personal and group agency and complicating the Company's ability to create a cheap and efficient transport system.

## Non-circulation in the Madras littoral

Aware of the Madras government's complete dependence on their skilled labour and distinctive boat technology, native boat owners and boatmen used their exclusive knowledge of the littoral to exert agency in the surf zone and increase profit and wages in the face of attempts to regularise communication and shorten port call times. The ninety years between 1755 and 1842 is the period in which attempts to manage and control the boat people were most intense. The internal correspondence of the Madras provincial government, as well as reports and correspondence sent between Madras and the London-based Court of Directors and Board of Control, are rich sources for reconstructing the attempted administration of the passage between ship and shore, and the ways in which the EIC struggled to exert meaningful or lasting control. These documents contain specific discussions of the "Boat Department", which was established in 1762 and was tasked with overseeing the process of hiring and paying for passenger and cargo transport until 1842.<sup>25</sup> The Boat Department was headed by a European "Master Attendant" and an ever-growing staff of European and Indian assistants, clerks, and *peons* to monitor the behaviour of the boat people on the beach and during transport.<sup>26</sup> The documents preserved in the India Office Records at the British Library concerning the Boat Department include revisions to regulations for the operation of the masula fleet, discussion of theft-prevention measures, responses to complaints from merchants and naval officers about the system of loading and lading cargo, the impact of conflict on the supply of boats and men, and lengthy summaries of misconduct perpetrated by both the boat people and officials in the Boat Department. These reports also occasionally contain more direct evidence of the boat people's interaction with the EIC, such as translations of complaints of ill treatment, petitions for improved working conditions, requests for funding to rebuild damaged boats, and in the case of one Head Boatman active from the 1750s to the early 1780s, Pregawsham

---

25 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from George Baker to the Honourable George Pigot, Esq., President and Governor in Council of Fort St George, 15 August 1762, 445, BL IOR/P/240/20; Records of the Board of Control, Extract Marine Letter from Fort St George, 22 October 1842, 5–6, BL IOR/F/4/2001/89156.

26 Baker to Pigot, 453, IOR/P/240/20.



Tomiapah, extensive suggestions for the better management of the fleet and suppression of theft.<sup>27</sup>

The creation of the Boat Department was an attempt on the part of the Madras government to bring some semblance of order and regularity to the process of hiring boats for loading and lading cargo. The goal was to standardise the relationship between the EIC and boat owners and boatmen, but the regulations meant to govern this relationship were frequently revised in a way that makes it difficult to fully reconstruct how EIC officials and boat people interacted on a daily basis. Most simply, the Boat Department contracted with native boat owners for the use of their masulas, rather than the government owning its own fleet. The boat owners were then responsible for hiring and maintaining crews, yet for most of the period from 1762 to 1842, boatmen were paid directly through a Boat Pay Office, staffed by the Boat Department, where all requests for boat hire were processed. This meant that crew pay was standardised across the fleet, despite the EIC not directly employing any owners or boatmen. Not until the 1830s did the government experiment with direct employment of individual boatmen, before eliminating the boat pay system and adopting a competition-based system in 1842.<sup>28</sup>

This system of contract and indirect employment is part of the reason why the boat people, and boat owners in particular, were able to leverage their position in the surf zone. Specific EIC officials made it clear they recognised that the continuation of trade and transport through Madras was precariously and completely reliant on the boat people's continued cooperation. For example, Vincentio Corbett and Hugh Boyd, joint Master Attendants during the 1780s, observed to the Madras Board of Trade that working in the boats was "a laborious and dangerous employment and requires both time to acquire sufficient skill and habitual courage to exercise it"<sup>29</sup>

---

27 Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of Pregawsham Tomiapah, one of the Chief of the Boatmen Cast to the Worshipful John Maxwell Stone Esq., Sea Customer, read 6 December 1776, 751–755, BL IOR/P/240/42; Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of the divers for anchors at Madras to the Honourable Thomas Rumbold Esq, President and Governor in Council, read 29 May 1779, 151–153, IOR/P/240/48; Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of all the owners, & Coolies of the Masoolah Boats, boatmen inclusive, read 12 August 1780, 677–681, IOR/P/240/51; Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of the head Maistries of the Sea Beach, read 3 December 1782, 1322–1325, IOR/P/240/55; Records of the Board of Control, Humble Petition of the Owners and Crews of the Masula Boats, to Ernst William Fallofield Esq., President and Member of the Board of Trade, 1795, IOR/F/2/626; Extract Fort St George Consultations, Humble Petition of the undersigned (102) Tindalls and boats crew to EJ Gascoigne Esq., Acting Master Attendant, 14 March 1827, 90–92, IOR/F/4/1188/30855.

28 Records of the Board of Control, Letter No. 933, from Robert Clerk Esq, Secretary to Government, to the Marine Board, 11 November 1828, 333–337, BL IOR/F/4/1188/30856.

29 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from Vincentio Corbett and Hugh Boyd, Master Attendants, to the Right Honourable Lord Macartney, President in Council, 20 December 1784, 1359, BL IOR/P/240/59.

In 1796, in response to the news that deputy Master Attendant William Abbott had been taking a share of the boatmen's earnings as a personal emolument, the Court of Directors in London scolded the Madras Board of Trade for overlooking this irregularity, writing that "the more secure this necessary and useful description of Men are in regard to their own Earnings, and the better they are paid, the more secure the port of Madras will be in having a preference to other Ports in their Esteem".<sup>30</sup> Master Attendant Christopher Biden noted in 1840 "the natural difficulties opposed to the employment of any other class of Boats or Boatmen" in forwarding ideas to the Madras Marine Board for monitoring the boatmen on the beach and in the roads.<sup>31</sup> But local government officials were not the only ones cognizant of the crucial role played by the boat people. Evidence of owners suppressing the number of working boats, mass absences, complaints and petitions, sustained concern over the prevalence of theft, and strikes amongst the boat people suggest that they were also aware of their linchpin role in the continued operation of the port. Both the boat owners, made up of wealthier members of the boat community, and the boatmen who worked in the masulas, leveraged their exclusive knowledge and skill in the surf zone to increase personal profit and attempt to improve working conditions.

Boat owners were accused of purposefully suppressing the size of the fleet to maximise their own earnings. Boat Department officials complained on several occasions that boat owners were failing to keep their boats in a satisfactory state of repair, thereby reducing the overall size of the fleet and increasing their profit. Master Attendant Alexander Cuthbert refuted a petition by boat owners accusing him of poor management in 1782 by arguing that the owners were purposefully suppressing the number of boats available "because the greater the scarcity the larger the presents made to them for a few additional trips which I have been informed [...] they take from the poor labourers on the boats, and appropriate to themselves".<sup>32</sup> Cuthbert's successor, John Thomson, complained to the Board of Trade that due to the owners' "great neglect" the size of the fleet was dwindling fast, and he had no means of coercing them into making repairs.<sup>33</sup> The owners were also accused of sending some of their boats and crews to fish without warning instead of servicing the port, as well as using small unlicensed "fishing" masulas to monopolise the unloading

---

30 Extract of Court Public Letter to Fort St George, 3 February 1796, BL IOR/F/4/2/626.

31 Extract Fort St George Marine Consultation, Letter from Christopher Biden, Master Attendant, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Fort St George, 19 September 1842, 18, BL IOR/F/4/2001/89156.

32 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from Alexander Cuthbert, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable Lord Macartney, President and Governor in Council, 3 December 1782, 1333, BL IOR/P/240/55.

33 Madras Consultation Book, Letter from John Thomson, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable George Lord Macartney, 25 May 1783, 736, BL IOR/P/240/56.

of native grain ships that could anchor closer to shore. Beginning at least as early as 1762, owners were required to licence masulas used by the port to make it easier for Boat Department officials to keep track of the number of available boats and reduce smuggling. By neglecting to licence some of their boats, owners took away pure profit without paying the government's cut. Because boat hire was paid by the trip, and smaller "fishing" masulas could carry less cargo, extra trips in unlicensed boats meant even more profit for the owners.<sup>34</sup> These tactics impacted the number of boats available, slowing down the movement of goods and increasing the profits of the boat owners to the detriment of the boatmen and the Madras government.

Boat owners and boatmen used the threat of absence to voice their displeasure with government attempts to alter the administration of the surf zone, poor treatment, and low pay. Ravi Ahuja has argued that collective withdrawal as a means of enforcing concrete demands was an old technique of insubordination in South India, and it was used repeatedly by the boat owners and boatmen of Madras in the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup> For example, boat owners and boatmen left Madras in 1755 after Governor-General George Pigot forcibly bought out the fleet from the native owners. The owners refused to return with the boatmen until their boats were restored to them; Pigot, who had had all the boats of the fleet repaired and rebuilt in the expectation of a government-run establishment, was forced to return the newly repaired boats to their original owners, unable to recruit or retain a labour force trained in the surf without the cooperation of the native owners.<sup>36</sup>

When the Madras Board of Trade eliminated a *batta* payment introduced during the Second Anglo-Mysore War in 1784, one third of the boatmen left Madras to express their displeasure with the measure.<sup>37</sup> The boat owners, suddenly unable to man more than 80 boats, petitioned the Board of Trade for support retrieving the boatmen, who they argued owed them further service in exchange for advances paid earlier in the war. The Master Attendants at the time, Vincentio Corbett and Hugh Boyd, supported the boat owners' request for retrieving the boatmen. Corbett and

---

34 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from John Thomson, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable George Lord Macartney, 25 May 1783, 739f., BL IOR/P/240/56; Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from George Baker to the Honourable George Pigot, Esq., President and Governor in Council of Fort St George, 15 August 1762, 449, IOR/P/240/20; Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from John Maxwell Stone and Francis Jourdan to the Honourable Mesr Wynch, Esq. President and Governor in Council, 11 March 1775, 340, IOR/P/240/39.

35 Ravi Ahuja, Labour Unsettled. Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region, 1750–1800, in: The Indian Economic and Social History Review 35/4 (1998), 381–404, 385.

36 Fort St George Consultation Book, 'To Building and Repairing Masula Boats' 19 July 1756, 346–347; Letter from Robert Clive, Robert Orme, and John Smith to the Honourable George Pigot, President in Council, 5 September 1756, 497f., BL IOR/P/240/14.

37 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from John Thomson, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable Lord Macartney, President in Council, 27 June 1784, 764, BL IOR/P/240/59.

Boyd argued that the boatmen were essential to the continued operation of the port, noting that “only those who are trained and educated in [the boats] can be depended upon as really useful or serviceable”.<sup>38</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, the boatmen had shifted from removal to strikes to voice their displeasure with the administration of the Boat Department. The entire fleet struck in both 1827 and 1828 in protest of their low wages. The Secretary of the Marine Board wrote hurriedly to the Government in Council on the morning of 14 March 1827 that “at a muster of the Masulah [sic] Boats this morning, the whole of the crews refused to work and have since absconded from the beach altogether [...] it appears that their only grievance is the insufficiency of their hire”.<sup>39</sup> On 15 March, the Marine Board met with ten of the tindals (boat captains) leading the strike, and discerned that “their only motive for refusing to work, was to obtain an increase of hire”.<sup>40</sup> The Marine Board agreed to put their petition before the government, on the stipulation that the boatmen return to work the next day. Master Attendant Edward Gascoigne was ordered to further investigate the claims of insufficient pay, but he found that the boatmen’s earnings had risen in the previous ten years and reported no need to fulfil their demands.<sup>41</sup>

This rebuttal did not stop the boatmen from striking again in June 1828 on the arrival of the HCS *Fairlie*, which the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* attributed to “the very low wages they receive for their arduous employment”.<sup>42</sup> The Secretary of the Marine Board provided more detail to the Government in Council later in July, explaining that the boatmen only returned to the beach after Master Attendant William Majoribanks agreed to pay their demanded wage increase out of his own pocket. The Marine Board ultimately rescinded Majoribanks’ agreed-upon pay raise, but the strike did prompt the Board to investigate the boat people’s earning potential. They found that a decrease in the number of ships arriving at the port had led to a decrease in the number of trips assigned each day to each boat, from an esti-

---

38 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from Vincentio Corbett and Hugh Boyd, Master Attendants, to the Right Honourable Lord Macartney, President in Council, 20 December 1784, 1359, BL IOR/P/240/59.

39 Extract Fort St George Public Consultations, No. 115, Letter from J Daniel Esq., Secretary to the Marine Board, to D. Hill Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 14 March 1827, 81f., BL IOR/F/4/1188/30855.

40 Extract Fort St George Public Consultations, No. 116, Letter from J. Daniel Esq., Secretary to the Marine Board, to D. Hill, Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 16 March 1827, 94f., BL IOR/F/4/1188/30855.

41 Extract Fort St George Consultations, Remarks of the Marine Board dated 13 September 1827, signed Jas Taylor, J Guatkin, and EJ Gascoigne, Marine Board Office, 18 September 1827, 179, BL IOR/F/4/1188/30855.

42 Anonymous, Mutiny Amongst the Boatmen, in: *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, XXVII (1829), 95.

mated four trips per average day to three. As a result, the Board decided to supplement the boatmen's earnings by giving over the government portion of the boat hire, instead of raising the duties on shipping. The event also spurred the Boat Department to start requisitioning masulas from owners who failed to follow the regulations and take their crews into the department as salaried employees as an attempt to eliminate the perceived need for strikes – the only crew that had not struck was the one crew of a passenger, or accommodation, masula already on the government's payroll.<sup>43</sup>

Besides the deliberate withholding of available boats, mass removal, and strikes, the constant theft of merchandise and personal belongings during transport may also have been a means by which the boatmen asserted agency in the surf zone. Official correspondence occasionally suggests that European officers in the Boat Department believed the boatmen viewed theft as a way to supplement their low incomes, and responded both in the 1760s and the 1820s by raising the wages of the boatmen explicitly to deter theft.<sup>44</sup> However, despite EIC officials' preoccupation with theft, specific examples are rare in contemporary newspapers. This is perhaps because most theft was for subsistence purposes; stolen foodstuffs, quickly consumed, may not have warranted public attention, and instead represented small losses that were either recovered or reimbursed quickly. Specific examples of theft in EIC documents and newspapers are usually of personal items, luxury Company goods, or alcohol, even though native grain merchants complained repeatedly about the theft of their cargoes during transportation.<sup>45</sup> In 1782, Master Attendant Thomson went so far as to instruct a newly arrived captain of a grain ship to save himself the trouble of dealing with thefts and simply give the boatmen rice: "all of a sudden those boats could make four trips a day, notwithstanding the blowing weather at the time and strong currents and in the rice season when every man can steal his cloth of rice at each trip they will then work as fast as ever".<sup>46</sup> Subsistence theft further demonstrates the boatmen's ability to exploit their position as skilled knowledge holders in the surf zone;

---

43 Records of the Board of Control, Letter No. 210, from J. Daniel Esq., Secretary to the Marine Board, to R. Clive Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 30 June 1828, 291, BL IOR/F/4/1188/30856.

44 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from the Court of Directors, read 12 April 1766, 156, BL IOR/P/240/24. Records of the Board of Control, Letter No. 210, from J. Daniel Esq., Secretary to the Marine Board, to R. Clive Esq., Chief Secretary to Government, 30 June 1828, 259, BL IOR/F/4/1188/30856.

45 Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of the Grain Merchants of the Northward Ports to the Right Honourable Lord Macartney, President and Governor in Council, 11 November 1782, 1249–1251, BL IOR/P/240/55; Fort St George Consultation Book, Humble Petition of the Northward Grain Merchants in general to the Right Honourable George Lord Macartney, President and Governor in Council, read 17 April 1784, 472–476, IOR/P/240/58.

46 Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from John Thomson, Master Attendant, to the Right Honourable George Lord Macartney, 25 May 1783, 741, BL IOR/P/240/56.

when unsatisfied with their pay, boatmen could take advantage of the unsupervised passage between ship and shore to increase their earnings.

While theft was punishable by flogging on the beach, many incidents went unpunished, which may have encouraged continued thievery. After the EIC fleet departed in December 1796, for example, a large amount of cargo from the Indianman *Wycombe* was found in the huts of the boatmen. Concerned that an investigation would cause the boatmen to flee the settlement when a second fleet of EIC ships was expected, the Board of Trade decided against pursuing the theft until after the second fleet had departed again. When the investigation was finally conducted, so many boatmen were found to be complicit that it was impractical to punish them all, and only several of the most culpable were flogged on the beach.<sup>47</sup> Despite repeated efforts to deter theft, the Madras government had no effective means of supervising boatmen while in the boats. This left cargoes vulnerable and reinforced the control boatmen felt during the traversal of the surf zone. With no viable alternative to the masulas, the Company and free merchants at Madras had to tolerate some level of loss if they wanted to continue trading in and out of the port. Regular theft, alongside group absences and strikes, and the purposeful manipulation of boat availability, all demonstrate an active and selective withholding of expertise by the boat people in attempts to better their current circumstances.

## Conclusion

The boat owners and boatmen of Madras maintained an exclusive knowledge of movement between ship and shore for a sustained 250-year period. Government dependence gave boat owners and boatmen an opportunity to leverage their expertise and technology to achieve higher profits and wages, and protest Boat Department officials and policies they disliked. The inability of local officials to design and construct any viable alternative boat, breakwater, pier, or harbour until the late nineteenth century created a scenario of British dependence that led local boatmen to assert personal and group agency within the particular environmental setting of the surf zone, despite intrinsically unbalanced colonial power relations.

Stephanie Gänger wrote that “‘Circulation’ conveys a peculiar vision of how Chinese pottery, heroic images, or ‘Manilamen’ supposedly moved: easily, unhindered and smoothly, in a manner that is directed, forward, and aligned, like fluid in ves-

---

<sup>47</sup> Fort St George Consultation Book, Letter from E.W. Fallofield, C.B. Dent, and R. Darvall to the Right Honourable Lord Hobart, President and Governor in Council, 12 December 1796, 4234f., BL IOR/P/241/68.

sels”, and argued that “our attention” has been taken away from the functional side of knowledge circulation.<sup>48</sup> The Madras masula fleet and boatmen demonstrate the importance of considering the logistical side of the movement of people, goods, and ideas. The interaction between the boatmen and the East India Company illustrates the historical reality that the movement between empire and metropolis was not “fluid”, but precariously balanced on the coordination, cooperation, and skill of many different knowledgeable groups. The knowledge held by the boatmen was of movement but remained closely held within a singular littoral community. This was in fact one of the perennial frustrations of the Madras government, even beyond the study period; an 1868 report on the port noted:

“The very skill of the boatmen is one of the difficulties of the port, for their numbers being limited, they are able to set regulations at defiance [...] well knowing that the course which would elsewhere be followed of importing additional men from other localities would be inoperative at Madras [...] it does not follow that because there is a greater demand than supply of Masulah boatmen [...] that outsiders will qualify for it.”<sup>49</sup>

The exclusivity of the boat people’s knowledge in the surf had consequences; the technical and environmental context of Madras had a direct impact on the city’s performance as an international trade hub. While Madras remained the seat of the British government in southeastern India, it fell behind other major centres of export like Bombay and Calcutta, in part because of the low volumes of cargo that could move through masulas per day. By the nineteenth century, when Bombay and Calcutta were continuing to grow in global importance, Madras’ international trade had shrunk precipitously. In the late 1830s, international shipping tonnage between Bombay and Britain was twice that of Madras, while Calcutta was servicing nearly five times the volume.<sup>50</sup> By the 1860s, Madras was still servicing less than half the international shipping as compared to Calcutta or Bombay. The low volume of trade processed through Madras in the nineteenth century was directly attributed to the boat system by members of the government and the general public; an 1860s report on declining international trade, for instance, found the prime culprit to be the price, danger, and inconvenience of the masula fleet, noting that

---

48 Stefanie Gänger, *Circulation. Reflections on Circularity, Entity, and Liquidity in the Language of Global History*, in: *Journal of Global History* 12 (2017), 303–318, 311.

49 George Macgeorge, *Ways and Works in India. Being an Account of the Public Works in that Country from the Earliest Times up to the Present Day*, London 1894, 514.

50 Office of the East-India and China Association, *Trade with India*, in: *The Asiatic Register and Monthly Register* XXVII (1838), 68f.

“owing to the communication between shipping and the shore being for the most part by Masulah boats, only carrying one and a half tons at a time, the delay in loading and unloading is so great as to deter many ships [...] from coming to the port at all”.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, the pier and harbour construction efforts that made the masula fleet redundant around the turn of the twentieth century were directly attributed by contemporary European observers to the boat people’s exclusive approach to the surf zone.<sup>52</sup>

---

51 Macgeorge, *Ways and Works in India*, 1894, 515.

52 A.T. Mackenzie, *Official Papers Concerning the Construction of the Madras Harbour*, Madras 1902, 66.