

Review of *Tranquebar—Whose History? Transnational Cultural Heritage in a Former Danish Trading Colony in South India*, by Helle Jørgensen, New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2014, xi + 356pp., \$40/£42, Hardcover, ISBN 9788125053453

Neha Gupta*
Department of Geography
Memorial University of Newfoundland
*nguptag@gmail.com

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in International Journal of Heritage Studies, 2017, [http://www.tandfonline.com/
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1333522>](http://www.tandfonline.com/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1333522)

Jørgensen examines the emergence of Tranquebar as a heritage town in post-colonial India through the diverse, sometimes competing interests and claims of local residents, state-oriented institutions, scholars and policy makers, non-governmental organisations, and private entrepreneurs. Tharangambadi, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, colloquially known as Tranquebar, is a fishing community of about 23000 people on the Coromandel Coast of India. Tranquebar was one of two trading posts that the Danish East India Company established in the 1600s, and that were taken over by the Danish Crown in 1650. The British East India Company acquired Denmark's Indian territories in 1845, and they were subsequently taken over in 1857 by the British Crown when the Company was dissolved. These territories were transferred to the Indian national government in 1947, when India gained independence from the British Crown. Jørgensen investigates the use of the past, that is, the making of Tranquebar into a destination for heritage tourism based on its Danish colonial history. The study takes place in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean earthquake on December 26, 2004. This major seismic event centred in the west coast of Sumatra, resulted in a powerful tsunami that radiated from there toward each

country that shares a coastline on the Indian Ocean. The tsunami inundation in turn, caused the destruction of infrastructure, towns and villages, the displacement of coastal communities and the loss of human life. Tranquebar was severely impacted and since the tsunami, initiatives to promote economic growth in the town have intensified.

The present volume is aimed at scholars in heritage and culture studies, anthropology and closely related disciplines who have intellectual interests in the Indian context. The narrative is fundamentally descriptive and builds on recent efforts in the history and anthropology of science that shed light on the social context of field sciences (Nielsen et al., 2012). Jorgensen remarks that Tranquebar has been understood primarily from ‘Danish perspectives’ which are most often published in the Danish language (p. 9). She thus offers a rich ethnography written for English-speakers based on her engagement with Tranquebar’s residents who are largely Tamil-speaking.

Tranquebar—Whose History is an ‘ethnography of the uses of the past in the present’ (p. 8) that examines the ‘present-day uses of colonial history and its traces’ within the town itself (p. 9). While Jorgensen has the best of intentions, she falls a bit short when she overlooks relevant works on contemporary political uses of the past, including material culture, such as Kohl and Fawcett’s *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (1995), Abu El-Haj’s *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (2002), Kohl et al.’s *Selective Remembrances: Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration and Consecration of National Pasts* (2007) and Díaz-Andreu García’s *A World History of Nineteenth-century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (2007). This oversight is problematic because Jørgensen seeks to analyse heritage tourism from local, national and ‘transnational’ perspectives (p. 9) that invariably relate to knowledge, space and power.

Jørgensen forewarns that her examination does not ‘establish how the past was’ nor does it contribute to an understanding of colonial history. Rather, Jørgensen (p. 8) employs the concept of ‘townscape’ and Hirsh and Stewart’s (2005) ‘historicity’ to frame the ‘dynamic social situation’ of heritage making in Tranquebar. Under this model, the town is a material thing that is shaped ‘in interaction with the social life’ within it (p. 6). The meaning that residents of Tranquebar assign to cultural heritage and the ways that they use that heritage ‘under the constraints of social ideologies’, is of greatest interest (p. 8-9).

In *Tranquebar*, Jørgensen offers glimpses from her eight month ethnographic fieldwork that included eighty-seven interviews with town residents, tourists, guides, other researchers, members of non-governmental organizations such as the Indian National Trust of Art and Cultural Heritage, and representatives from private organizations such as the Neemrana Hotel chain, the Danish Bestseller Fund, the Danish Tranquebar Association and local religious institutions. She also interviewed individuals engaged in town planning and heritage preservation at local, state and national levels, such as from the town *panchayat* (council), the district collector, the State of Tamil Nadu departments of archaeology, and tourism, the Directorate of Town and Country Planning and the Archaeological Survey of India. The latter is the national department for archaeology and heritage management in India. Jørgensen supplements her interviews with (unpublished) reports, surveys, promotional material and popular print publications (newspaper and magazine articles) on Tranquebar (p. 13-14). The author remarks that her analysis has a ‘predominantly spatial rather than a chronological focus’ (p. 17). This approach potentially allows Jørgensen to shed light on the preservation of cultural heritage from diverse perspectives. Collecting a vast range of source material is no small undertaking and Jørgensen’s efforts are commendable. Yet the author’s synchronic view has implications on her

overall understanding of how residents and visitors, and scholars and policy makers conceive of the Indian past and how these ideas relate to heritage preservation.

Throughout the volume, Jørgensen conceptualizes cultural heritage in Tranquebar as though it were timeless and static. For example, Tranquebar itself is described as a remote and ‘sleepy’ town that has been on the decline since the end of Danish occupation in 1845 (p. 54-55). She cites three sources to support this claim, two of which (Pedersen 1987; H. M. Hansen, 2005) are by Danish scholars and the third is an unpublished report prepared in 1993 by Archigroup (p. 54). Jørgensen, quoting Pedersen suggests that “empty lots” in the town are “clear expressions of the isolation and economic downturn of Tranquebar...this almost two centuries old decline” (p. 54, quote in original). Jørgensen (p. 305) rightly remarks that this view of stagnation is central in particular post-tsunami efforts to promote heritage tourism in Tranquebar and by extension, to ‘develop’ the town itself. Yet she misses the opportunity to critically analyse how and why this view came to be, and how these methods are used by social groups to justify their social, political and economic objectives. It would have been helpful to know for instance, who or what Archigroup is, who sponsored its report and the local conditions in Tranquebar when the report was prepared.

Elsewhere, Jørgensen has remarked that in 1986, rail service to the town was discontinued (p. 69-70). The reader would benefit from knowing that the East Coast Road (p. 71), which currently serves as an artery for transport from, and linkages with nearby towns, opened in 1998. This information can shed light on how such changes impacted the town, and in turn, the knowledge and perceptions of those who prepare tourism reports. Greater attention and careful examination of knowledge claims by an authority at specific moments can offer insights into the intersection of power and space. Moreover, the essentialist view of an isolated and

stagnant town is not supported by interviews with local residents as Jørgensen notes (p. 130-131). Rather, residents remark how their town has *changed*, including its ‘basic infrastructural conditions’, (p. 68) and emphasize the town’s potential for growth and prosperity when investments are made. This is reflected in Jørgensen’s interviews with M. Sultan, a resident historian, who clearly wanted to ‘beautify’ the town for tourists (p. 72). A common theme in these narratives is comparison between Tranquebar and places that are nearby, such as Porayar, Karaikal and Pondicherry (p. 261-262) and others further away such as Singapore (p. 72-73), reflecting far greater awareness amongst Tranquebar’s residents of social and political conditions than the view of isolation and stagnation suggests.

Tranquebar is organised into an introductory chapter, followed by three chapters that are conceptually related to the theme of remoteness, ‘development’, and the making of heritage and history. The concluding chapter attempts to answer the question of ‘whose history’ (p. 303). Jørgensen draws upon the concept of ‘transnational’ relations in heritage making, alluding to complexities in the narrative of ‘anti-conquest’ and ‘perfect friendship’ between Denmark and Independent India (p. 279-280). In this context, she hints at the influence of Danish development aid that India received between 1963 and 2005 (p. 280). Here, Jørgensen could have applied the same lens to the interests of the Danish Tranquebar Association in preserving the Danish character of Tranquebar, or the interests of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in promoting a specific period of Indian history (i.e. Thanjavur Nayaks) through its programme of heritage preservation (p. 278-279). In the same vein, why does the national department for archaeology protect just the Land Gate and do these efforts better engage with the town’s fishing population?

Jørgensen successfully draws together several sources of information, however, the volume would benefit from deeper analysis of the wide range of perspectives on preservation of heritage. A more explicit spatial approach to these perspectives can assist the reader in elucidating who wants to preserve what, and where, which in turn can give insights into particular actors that are able to influence people and situations at specific moments. Nonetheless, Jørgensen offers a compelling narrative on the complexities of heritage preservation in the 21st century and a window into Tranquebar, a former Danish trading post and the life of its residents in post-colonial India.

References:

Abu El-Haj, N. 2002. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Díaz-Andreu García, M. 2007. *A world history of nineteenth-century archaeology: nationalism, colonialism, and the past*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kohl, P. L. and C. Fawcett (eds.). 1995. *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kohl, P. L., M. Kozelsky, N. Ben-Yehuda (eds.). 2007. *Selective Remembrances: archaeology in the construction, commemoration and consecration of national pasts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nielsen, K. H., M. Harbsmeier and C. J. Ries (eds.). 2012. *Scientists and Scholars in the Field: studies in the History of Fieldwork and Expeditions*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Dr Neha Gupta, S.S.H.R.C. Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada