CrossMark

'Inhabitants of the universe': global families, kinship networks, and the formation of the early modern colonial state in Asia*

David Veevers

School of History, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NX, UK
E-mail: dv54@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

New research on the early modern colonial state in Asia has emphasized the agency of actors and their networks in a process of state formation, while the rise of global history has similarly highlighted the importance of global connections in forming sites of empire. This article seeks to contribute to this growing literature. It does so by revealing that the families of English East India Company servants, following their counterparts in other European East India companies in Asia, underwent a global transition in which they established Asian-wide networks of kinship, transcending the local and regional spaces in which they had previously operated. Through their increasing ability to operate across the social, cultural, economic, and political borders of Asia, Company kinship networks facilitated the formation of a politically amorphous colonial state. Furthermore, while previous scholarship has confined colonial state formation to the later eighteenth century, this article challenges the historiography by relocating this process to the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Keywords agency, East India Company, family, networks, state formation

Introduction: 'a family enterprise'

Historians have recently shown renewed interest in the early modern colonial state in Asia before the extensive territorial acquisitions of the later eighteenth century. Philip J. Stern has challenged the long-established belief that nations monopolized processes of state-building. Rather, he argues that a range of corporations, communities, and associations could acquire and exercise their own political and constitutional authority. This sovereign power existed alongside that of the nation-state in what he describes as 'an early modern world filled with a

variety of corporate bodies politic and hyphenated, hybrid, overlapping, and composite forms of sovereignty'.[1] Stern explores the ways in which the English East India Company built a state in Asia, by upholding legal jurisdictions, raising revenue, planting colonies, waging war, and claiming territory. In contrast, Kathleen Wilson has rejected such institutional understandings of the early modern colonial state. Arguing that, as an entity, the state was a fiction, she focuses instead on the performative nature of state power and the 'practices of state-building' by colonial actors operating on the peripheries of empire, which included organizing, regulating, and reforming subject populations in the 'context of the nation-making and nation-marking that were so central to claims to sovereignty and to colonial governance alike'.[2]

Stern's focus on the numerous non-nation-state bodies capable of forming the state, and Wilson's exploration of the colonial actor's ability directly to exercise political agency beyond the 'centre', complement recent historiographical trends on the domestic European state. Indeed, these have emphasized the importance of informal agency in state formation. Eschewing traditional understandings of the state as consisting of a 'centre' with the means and willingness to project its authority, usually violently through warfare, Michael Braddick has instead emphasized the role of office-holders operating in localities.[3] Such agents created networks that embodied the state by exercising political power beyond the so-called 'centre', and were thus capable of shaping, developing, and expanding the state itself.[4] Furthermore, according to Mark Goldie, these agents were not always political or social elites. In the absence of national or official bureaucracy, away from metropolitan centres, 'large numbers of people undertook the self-management of their local communities'.[5] As Goldie points out, beyond Whitehall, which employed a mere 1,200 people in the seventeenth century, government was undertaken by 'amateur, part-time and unsalaried' community members.[6] The early modern state, therefore, was neither a central nor a top-down building process. Rather, it was formed through the assumption and exercise of state power by informal and indirect agents operating within their own networks of association, loyalty, interest, and authority.

The decentring of the state has continued to influence historiographies over the past decade. Phil Withington, for example, argues that 'State formation … involved not so much the centralization of military, fiscal, and bureaucratic power as the incorporation, and empowerment, of disparate communities'.[7] Similarly, Patrick Joyce has recently questioned

---

1   Philip J. Stern, *The company-state: corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British empire in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 3.

2   Kathleen Wilson, 'Rethinking the colonial state: family, gender, and governmentality in eighteenth-century British frontiers', *American Historical Review*, 116, 5, 2011, pp. 1295–9.

3   For the state as a monopoly over the means of violence, see Max Weber, 'Politics as a vocation', reprinted in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, Chippenham, Wiltshire: Routledge, 2009, pp. 77–128.

4   Michael J. Braddick, *State formation in early modern England c.1550–1700*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

5   Mark Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England', in Tim Harris, ed., *The politics of the excluded, c.1500–1850*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, p. 154.

6   *Ibid*.

7   Phil Withington, 'Public discourse, corporate citizenship, and state formation in early modern England', *American Historical Review*, 112, 4, 2007, p. 1036.

understandings of the state as an 'it', defined by central constitutional and administrative functions. He argues instead for an understanding of the state in relational terms, 'not as a thing … but as something like a site of passage of and between different powers', or, in other words, 'in terms of relationships' between agents or groups of agents.[8] Lauren Benton has reiterated this perception when exploring the discourses and practices of colonial sovereignty, defining it as 'a set of relationships that, through spatial and temporal prisms, may endow distant actors with greater specific powers'.[9]

Drawing from these new developments in the historiography of the state, this article views the formation of the early modern colonial state in Asia as a product of the globalization of family networks. Over the past two decades, historians have increasingly understood empire as a process of global connection.[10] As David Armitage and Michael Braddick have argued, an 'Atlantic World' was created by 'a complex of evolving connections' in that particular ocean.[11] Similarly, Alison Games has exposed a 'web' in which 'globetrotters' circulated colonial experience, knowledge, and models from one part of the world to another.[12] These connections, circuits, and webs operated as forms of long-distance networks which, it has been suggested, created the 'first global age' between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries by bringing Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia into unprecedented levels of contact. What emerged was 'an open, complex, dynamic, nonlinear system' which led, among other things, to the establishment of European colonial states.[13]

Perhaps the most important force in driving such global networks was the family.[14] Having been 'the most elemental and enduring form of a mercantile partnership' across Eurasia since the medieval period, families produced the social capital, joint resources, and loyalty that proved so fundamental in operating effectively as a global network.[15] Families were key colonial agents and their wider kinship networks functioned as important authors of the colonial state. In the early modern period, family formation provided opportunities for state formation. Indeed, what Edmund Burke termed the 'little platoon' was a prominent social, economic, and political actor in the polity.[16] As Stern has observed of early modern Britain, the state was comprised of 'an interlocking matrix of commonwealths, churches,

8   Patrick Joyce, 'What is the social in social history?', *Past & Present*, 206, 1, 2010, p. 238.

9   Lauren Benton, *A search for sovereignty: law and geography in European empires, 1400–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 292.

10   For the importance of networks in studying empire, see Natasha Glaisyer, 'Networking: trade and exchange in the eighteenth-century British empire', *Historical Journal*, 47, 2, 2004, pp. 451–76.

11   David Armitage and Michael Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic world, 1500–1800*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 5.

12   Alison Games, *The web of empire: English cosmopolitans in an age of expansion, 1560–1660*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

13   Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Networks in the first global age, 1400–1800*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, p. 6.

14   Charles H. Parker, *Global interactions in the early modern age, 1400–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 78–9.

15   *Ibid.*, p. 78. For social capital and trust in global mercantile kinship networks, see Sebouh David Aslanian, 'Social capital, "trust" and the role of networks in Julfan trade: informal and semi-formal institutions at work', *Journal of Global History*, 1, 3, 2006, pp. 383–402.

16   Edmund Burke, ed., *The works of the right honourable Edmund Burke*, London: Ballantyne, Hanson & Co., 1887, vol. 1, p. 534.

associations, communities, office-holders, agencies, and families', all of whom were capable of exercising a form of political agency that could both embody and shape 'the state'.[17] The family's effectiveness in creating global networks meant that, overseas, it operated as the most important political actor in this diverse matrix.

Historians are increasingly moving beyond the socioeconomic role traditionally ascribed to colonial families to examine their political significance in the formation of European empires, especially in Asia. As Emma Rothschild has recently observed, 'empire was a family enterprise'.[18] She concludes that 'the history of families has been the history of empires', in which economic, political, and military processes intersected with the ties of family and kinship that connected members of colonial families often separated by thousands of miles.[19] Margot Finn similarly focuses on the various aspects of empire that intersected in the family, arguing that it operated 'at once [as] a place of political power, a prime site of capital accumulation, a focal point of identity formation and a key locus of emotional development and expression'.[20] For her, family formation shaped the motives and actions of the imperial agents responsible for driving the colonial state.[21]

This was particularly true for agents of the various European East India companies. As Durba Ghosh has argued of colonial officials in India, 'cohabiting with a local woman and Anglicizing mixed-race children was sometimes seen as beneficial to the nascent colonial state of the East India Company'.[22] Interracial relationships created a culture of intimacy that facilitated the establishment of colonial trade, politics, and rule in Asia. In this respect, colonial agents tended to embody 'the state builder, monied man, and family patriarch' all at once.[23] Far from being a familial dynamic exclusive to pre-capitalist societies, 'elite families and states meshed' in the early modern period, as Julia Adams has pointed out.[24] The servants of European companies operated economically and politically through their extensive family ties, monopolizing political office and controlling vast colonial interests.[25] Analysing the Dutch East India Company, Adams concludes that 'as the patriarchal family and lineal networks and ideologies were woven into the web of patrimonial power, they formed what we might call a familial state'.[26]

For the English East India Company, however, the focus on families as colonial agents capable of shaping the state has remained predominantly confined to the later eighteenth

---

17 Stern, *Company-state*, p. 9.

18 Emma Rothschild, *The inner life of empires: an eighteenth-century history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 121.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 269.

20 Margot Finn, 'Anglo-Indian lives in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33, 1, 2010, pp. 49–50.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

22 Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the family in colonial India: the making of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 249.

23 Julia Adams, *The familial state: ruling families and merchant capitalism in early modern Europe*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 29.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

century and beyond. Indeed historians of the English Company have defined Asia before this period as a space of trade and commerce.[27] Supposedly, the small number of Britons operating there were confined to merchants and officials residing in scattered and isolated factories and forts, hoping to make a quick fortune and return to their families and homes in Europe.[28] Thus, because of this impermanence, the establishment of a Company community, society, or 'world' was thought to have been impossible, in contrast to other areas of empire before the later eighteenth century such as the eastern Mediterranean, where the families of Levant Company officials formed important colonial communities.[29] This article seeks to challenge these well-established assumptions by revealing the global networks of kinship established by Britons in Asia, and their significance in exercising political agency and facilitating the condition necessary for the formation of a colonial state as early as the seventeenth century.

'Distance of time or place ought to be no obstruction': the familial world of the company servant

The significance of the company servant's familial world in Asia was emphasized by Sir Josiah Child, chairman of the court of directors, who, in outlining the benefits that the East India Company's joint-stock monopoly brought to Britain in 1681, described 'the English Nation living in any places within their Charter' in Asia as consisting of 'many hundred[s] of Families'.[30] Indeed, company servants maintained connections with family and kin in Europe and depended significantly on the considerable number who travelled with them to Asia. As well as reinforcing existing connections, however, they also established new ones by integrating cross-cultural and interracial relationships into their own families. In doing so, they built a web of connections across Asia that broadened, transcended, and quite frequently subverted the official social, commercial, and political boundaries of their respective companies.

In perceiving the English East India Company in Asia as a series of families, Child acknowledged the important role that families played in the lives of Company servants even after they departed from hearth and home in Europe and entered the far-flung oceans, continents, and archipelagos of Asia. The hereditary dynamic of Company recruitment was a significant factor in the growth of its servants' families throughout Asia. Hoping to join the Company's service or reside within its jurisdiction beyond the Cape of Good Hope necessitated the use of familial patronage.[31] The Company itself privileged new servants from the families of existing servants, considering such recruitment as the most efficient vetting process available, one that would ensure trust, loyalty, and usually experience among

---

27   Philip J. Stern, 'British Asia and British Atlantic: comparisons and connections', in 'Forum: beyond the Atlantic', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 63, 4, 2006, p. 694.

28   James Horn, 'British diaspora: emigration from Britain, 1680–1815', in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire: the eighteenth century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 29.

29   Holden Furber, *Rival empires of trade in the Orient, 1600–1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 302. For the Levant Company, see James Mather, *Pashas: traders and travellers in the Islamic world*, London: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 59, pp. 80–5.

30   Philopatris [Sir Josiah Child], *A treatise wherein is demonstrated, I. that the East-India trade is the most national of all foreign trades*, London, 1681, p. 23.

31   Finn, 'Anglo-Indian lives', p. 56; Rothschild, *Inner life*, p. 27.

new servants.[32] When the court of directors considered the application of new factors in April 1697, it accepted that of Thomas Marshall as 'his Father [is] an ancient Member of our Court'. Thomas Lovell also met success because he was the 'Son to our Recorder', as did Trevor Games, who was 'related to Sir William Langhorne', an ex-governor of Madras.[33] This hereditary preference meant that most writers, factors, and agents sent out to Asia were following or accompanying a father, uncle, cousin, or brother.[34]

Once Company servants arrived in the vastness of Asia, many factors worked together not to dislocate families but to bind them together. The servants relied on the support and resources of family and kin in Asia for everything beyond what their meagre wages allowed.[35] When Joseph and John Walsh were sent out to Asia through the patronage of their uncle, the Madras councillor John Styleman, they relied on kin for even the most basic of sustenance. Joseph, who was stationed on the west coast of Sumatra, was regularly forced to ask his aunt at Madras to send him parcels of 'things I wrote for', while one uncle supplied him with European articles such as 'the head of a cane', and another sent him European shoes.[36] Beyond the necessities of food and clothing, Company servants also required a constant supply of credit and investment from family members if they were to embark on the trading ventures that would provide them with financial success. When the supercargo Thomas Dixon lost his ship and all of his goods in a storm in the Bay of Bengal in 1718, he declared to his cousin John Scattergood that he was now 'utterly Ruined and not worth one Rupe [sic] in the world', requesting a substantial loan from him of 3,000 pagodas to recover his losses.[37] The ties of joint interest, obligation, and trust expanded through this dynamic of necessity, thickening the connections between family and kin dispersed between Europe and Asia and across Asia itself.[38]

That is not to suggest, however, that eventual financial independence, if it happened at all, loosened family ties. Rather, as siblings, sons, nephews, and cousins were sent out to Asia in the service of the East India Company, they supported their families if they met success.[39] In 1710, for example, the Collets, a City merchant family, suffered financial ruin when Joseph Collet declared bankruptcy.[40] In an attempt to retrieve the family's fortunes, he accepted an offer by the Company for the deputy-governorship of the west coast of Sumatra. On arrival in Asia in 1712, Collet depended on the financial and material support of family members, such as his brother-in-law John Bedwell, who furnished him with a regular supply of European articles

32   P. J. Marshall, *East India fortunes: the British in Bengal in the eighteenth century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 11.

33   British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (henceforth BL, APAC), India Office Records (henceforth IOR), E/3/92, court of directors to Madras, London, 16 April 1697.

34   Games, *Web of empire*, p. 9; Rothschild, *Inner life*, p. 27.

35   Santhi Hejeebu, 'Contract enforcement in the English East India Company', *Journal of Economic History*, 65, 2, 2005, p. 502.

36   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D546/1, Joseph Walsh to John Walsh, Fort Marlborough, 21 June 1718.

37   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, Thomas Dixon to John Scattergood, Bengal, 1 January 1718.

38   For the persistence of family ties in global merchant families, see Richard Grassby, *Kinship and capitalism: marriage, family, and business in the English-speaking world, 1580–1740*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 190.

39   Finn, 'Anglo-Indian lives', pp. 54–5; Rothschild, *Inner life*, p. 15–33.

40   H. H. Dodwell, *The private letter books of Joseph Collet*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1933, pp. 11–15.

including hats, leather shoes, vinegar, spectacles, silk stockings, and Virginian tobacco.[41] But within two years Collet's political and commercial success meant that he was able to provide his family and kin with substantial allowances, dowries, pensions, and lucrative employment.[42] For example, his four daughters enjoyed a considerable annual allowance of £400 each, and his mother was paid a pension of £100, which he hoped would provide 'a comfortable maintenance'.[43] Besides cash remittances, Collet provided his son John with several thousand pounds' worth of capital for his private trading ventures, and appointed his eldest brother as supercargo of one of his own ships.[44] Collet revealed the underlying motives of his presence in Asia in a letter to Governor Harrison: 'The proffits of my Government … maintain my Family', he wrote in 1714.[45] He summed up this strengthening of family connections since his arrival in Asia in a letter to a friend in the following year: 'The int'rests of Parents and Children are so closely united … and distance of times or place ought to be no Obstruction'.[46] In fact, distance proved the catalyst for binding a Company servant's familial world closer together.

Families were not only strengthened by their engagement with Asia but also changed and reconfigured in fundamental ways through what can be termed a process of 'familial globalization'. Because substantial numbers of British mercantile families were dissenters and foreign immigrants, they were never entirely culturally homogenous, although in Asia they represented a racially cohesive community.[47] In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the families of Company servants became even less homogenous 'Company families', sites of interracial and multicultural contact and exchange. Such a process enabled Company servants to straddle various ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic, and political worlds. The Powney family represents the typical composite, polyglot, and changing make-up of Company families during this period. Stationed at Madras, the seven sons and five daughters of the supercargo John Powney and his wife, Mary, created a vast kinship group which established connections that crossed the boundaries of cultural and national affiliation, marrying an assortment of the settlement's most influential British and non-British residents and their daughters, including a governor, a mayor, numerous councillors, and the port's most affluent merchants. For instance, Rebecca Powney married the Portuguese registrar of the Mayor's Court, Noah Casamaijor, while Thomas Powney was married to Catherine de la Matrie, daughter of Antony Coyle De Barnaval, a Franco-Irish supercargo of Company ships trading between India and Manila.[48]

41   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/1, Joseph Collet to John Bedwell, Cape of Good Hope, 12 February 1712.

42   For this dynamic in the Johnstone family, see Rothschild, *Inner life*, p. 51.

43   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/3, Joseph Collet to Mary Collet, Fort Marlborough 8 September 1716; BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Mary Collet, Fort Marlborough, 10 October 1715.

44   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/1, Joseph Collet to Edward Harrison, York Fort, 15 June 1714; BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/3, Joseph Collet to Ann Bedwell, Fort St George, 13 July 1717.

45   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Edward Harrison, York Fort, 2 June 1714.

46   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Lady Wills, Fort Marlborough, 1 April 1715.

47   Grassby, *Kinship*. For the number of dissenting merchants, see table 6.5, p. 258; for the number of merchants born outside Britain, see table 7.1, p. 272.

48   For the Powney and Barnaval families, see Henry Davison Love, *Vestiges of old Madras, 1640–1800, traced from the East India Company's records preserved at Fort St. George and the India Office, and from other sources*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 314–18.

While Company families and their kinship groups blurred the lines of nationality, culture, and religion, they also incorporated significant multiracial elements as well. Indeed, the product of both legitimate and illegitimate unions between Company servants and Asian women produced a substantial number of Eurasian marriages and offspring.[49] In this respect, servants of the English East India Company sought to mimic the successful practices of global family formation achieved by the servants of other European companies operating in Asia, such as the Portuguese Estado da India (State of the Indies) or the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (United East Indies Company, VOC).[50] Although marriage between VOC officials and Christian Javanese women at Batavia was officially acknowledged, the VOC sought to regulate such unions in order to limit the number of subsequent Eurasian families. Unofficially, however, 'the overwhelming majority' of families living there were of this nature, even those of senior VOC officials.[51] As early as the mid seventeenth century such practices had led to the formation of a 'Mestizo society', transforming Batavia into the centre of Dutch power in Asia.[52]

Similarly, few of the English East India Company's elite families discussed in this article were purely European.[53] On the west coast of Sumatra, sexual, commercial, and political opportunities led to the incorporation of Eurasian members into Company families.[54] Company servants frequently sought to integrate Malay wives and children into their lives and to promote them as legitimate family members. In 1714, Joseph Collet arranged the courtship of his main trading partner and second-in-command on the west coast, the chief of Bantal, Henry White, with his daughter Elizabeth.[55] Collet facilitated their courtship at the same time that he cared for White's Malay daughter at Bencoolen while her father was away at Bantal, a settlement known for its unhealthy climate and lethal diseases.[56] The deputy-governor's need to bind his trading partner and successor to him through marriage necessitated the acceptance and integration of Malays into such an elite Company family.

But such Malays could also be elite as well. Collet discovered this himself shortly after he arrived at Bencoolen, when no less than three Malay rajas sent him their wives or daughters as gifts 'to attend me'.[57] Similar interracial family formations had certainly driven the substantial growth of the Portuguese Estado da India.[58] In Sumatra, Portuguese

---

49   Parker, *Global interactions*, pp. 78–9.

50   Dennis B. McGilvray, 'Dutch burghers and Portuguese mechanics: Eurasian ethnicity in Sri Lanka', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24, 2, 1982, p. 237.

51   Jean Gelman Taylor, *The social world of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in colonial Indonesia*, 2nd edn, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009, p. 19.

52   *Ibid.*, p. 15.

53   Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the family*, p. 46.

54   For example, see Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, 'Interracial marriages and the overseas family: the case of the Topas of Timor', in Geoff Wade and Li Tana, eds., *Anthony Reid and the study of the Southeast Asian past*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2012, pp. 221–40. For a later period, see also E. Ulrich Kratz, 'Like a fish grasping for water: the letters of a temporary spouse from Bengkulu', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 34, 100, 2006, pp. 247–80.

55   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Elizabeth Collet, York Fort, 5 May 1714.

56   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Henry White, York Fort, 13 March 1714.

57   BL, APAC, MSS Eur D1153/2, Joseph Collet to Samuel Collet, York Fort, 23 August 1714.

58   C. R. Boxer, *Race relations in the Portuguese colonial empire, 1415–1825*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, pp. 57–85.

officials married Asian women in the hopes of forging alliances with political elites, while in south India they did so to break into local trade networks.[59] Their success in integrating with Asian cultures since the sixteenth century prompted the servants of other European companies to consider the Portuguese of mixed descent there as *Topasses*, an Asian people whose Portuguese language was the *lingua franca* of Asia's coastal regions.[60] While East India Company families never attained anything like the Portuguese degree of interracial reconfiguration, they nonetheless created a web of connections not only between Europe and Asia, but more importantly across Asia itself as Company families spread out to new regions of trade, settlement, and opportunity by the end of the seventeenth century.

'Within the compass of our own family': kinship, exchange, and the expansion of networks in early modern Asia

At the turn of the eighteenth century, individual Company families became increasingly interconnected into Asian-wide networks of social, cultural, and economic exchange. Built upon the ties of blood and marriage, these family networks were comprised of kin members stationed throughout Asia's various ports and cities and along its maritime highways who were required to 'cooperate with natural flows of energy and natural resistance' which defined the vastness of Asia.[61] Company families maintained their networks by exchanging goods, capital, information, and even people between various nodes and centres. The expansiveness of these networks challenges the traditionally localized treatment of the Company in Asia, in which its various regions are considered as separate, with divergent political trajectories shaped by the Asian states in whose jurisdictions they were established. This was noted by the eminent historian P. J. Marshall, who argued that the Company's 'early empire was built on Indian foundations, which varied greatly'.[62] But in spreading right across Asia, kinship networks created an increasingly interconnected colonial space there, allowing Company servants to operate not only within local regional frameworks but in an Asia-wide or even a global one.

Such a colonial space was not created on a *tabula rasa*, however. When Europeans began to arrive in Asia from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, they encountered an ancient system of highly complex social, cultural, commercial, and political networks established by

---

59   Barbara Watson Andaya, *To live as brothers: southeast Sumatra in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1993, p. 50; Francisco Bethencourt, 'Political configurations and local powers', in Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto, eds., *Portuguese oceanic expansion, 1400–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 214.

60   Leonard Y. Andaya, 'The "informal Portuguese empire" and the Topasses in the Solor archipelago and Timor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 141, 3, 2010, pp. 391–420.

61   Richard Drayton, 'Maritime networks and the making of knowledge', in David Cannadine, ed., *Empire, the sea and global history: Britain's maritime world, c.1763–c.1840*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 73.

62   P. J. Marshall, *The making and unmaking of empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750–1783*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 229.

Asian merchants, their families, and their wider kinship groups.[63] This was particularly true of the Indian Ocean, in which extensive networks of trade and exchange had formed a deeply integrated regional society and economy over many thousands of years.[64] In regions such as the Bay of Bengal, networks connected centres of production, ports of distribution, and markets and merchants, creating webs of interregional communication, migration, and exchange.[65] Asian merchants formed themselves into 'endogamous guilds' that represented 'a cluster of families related by ties of marriage and kinship': what Tirthankar Roy has conceptualized as the 'collective'.[66] As they spread out across Asia, vast networks were sustained by these 'collectives' of families and their interests.[67]

The practice of newly arriving European companies was to be no different. If they hoped to participate in Asian commerce, they had to model their own networks of trade, movement, and exchange on the regional networks they encountered. Initially they often delegated responsibility for managing their business and affairs there to elite Asian kinship networks.[68] By the later seventeenth century, however, Europeans were developing their own extensive kinship networks to both compete with and eventually dominate those of their Asian and European rivals.[69] This was certainly true of the Dutch VOC, which consisted of multiple material and discursive networks that 'exist[ed] simultaneously as paths of circulation for people, goods and information'.[70] Indeed, according to Kerry Ward, the Dutch empire in Asia was 'comprised of an intersecting set of networks' of both a temporal and a spatial nature.[71] The pattern of networks within both the VOC and its European rivals was shaped by 'nodal regulatory points' consisting of ships, settlements, and, more crucially, individuals or groups of individuals.[72] For instance, with a monopoly over the export of

---

63   The classic account of the 'Indian Ocean World' is, of course, K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. For the developments in this historiography, see Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Gita Dharampal-Frick, and Jos Gommans, 'Spatial and temporal continuities of merchant networks in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (1500–2000)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, 2/3, 2007, pp. 91–105.

64   Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 51. See also Eivind Heldaas Seland, 'Networks and social cohesion in ancient Indian Ocean trade: geography, ethnicity, religion', *Journal of Global History*, 8, 3, 2013, pp. 373–90.

65   Kenneth R. Hall, 'Ports-of-trade, maritime diasporas, and networks of trade and cultural integration in the Bay of Bengal region of the Indian Ocean: *c.* 1300–1500', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53, 1/2, 2010, pp. 109–45.

66   Tirthankar Roy, *Company of kinsmen: enterprise and community in South Asian history, 1700–1900*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 89.

67   For example, see Prista Ratanapruck, 'Kinship and religious practices as institutionalization of trade networks: Manangi trade communities in South and Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, 2/3, 2007, pp. 325–46.

68   Ghulam A. Nadri, 'The maritime merchants of Surat: a long-term perspective', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, 2/3, 2007, pp. 235–58; Bhavani Raman, 'The familial world of the Company's *kacceri* in early colonial Madras', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 9, 2, 2008.

69   Barry Crosbie, *Irish imperial networks: migration, social communication and exchange in nineteenth-century India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 37.

70   *Ibid.*, p. 10.

71   Kerry Ward, *Networks of empire: forced migration in the Dutch East India Company*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 9.

72   *Ibid.*

Persian silk, Armenian families spread out from New Julfa in the seventeenth century to establish lucrative kinship networks between the disparate nodes of their global communities, stretching from Venice to Madras. According to Sebouh David Aslanian, the early modern Armenian diaspora was sustained 'through the circulation of men, capital, information, priests, and women' between the many family firms that operated as nodes in a vast circuit of networks.[73] The Asia-wide expansion of English East India Company families followed a pattern similar to those of Dutch or Armenian families: the establishment of networks of exchange, circulation, and movement that criss-crossed Asia and connected scattered kin members and their nodes.

The reconstruction of the Scattergood kinship network reveals the process through which this was achieved. John Scattergood, a free merchant stationed at the English East India Company's settlement of Madras on India's Coromandel Coast at the beginning of the eighteenth century, belonged to an extensive kinship network that had established itself across Asia, stretching from Bombay to Canton. He was born in 1681 to a small family with few horizons and interests beyond the insignificant settlement of Balasore on the Bay of Bengal where his father, Robert Scattergood, was third of council in the Company's service.[74] But when his father died shortly after John's birth, his mother married Robert Trenchfield, the brother of another Balasore councillor. The Trenchfields were a large family with members and interests spread throughout the Bay of Bengal. His mother's new marriage gave John two half-sisters and two half-brothers, and the family relocated to Madras so that Robert Trenchfield could more effectively coordinate his family's trading concerns.[75] By the time that John Scattergood joined the Company's service in 1698, his family had expanded to include numerous kin from both the Scattergood and Trenchfield families, including several aunts and uncles and at least a dozen cousins, all of whom played a role in John's day-to-day life or possessed active connections to the family at Madras. These kin had established themselves in most of Asia's main ports and along its maritime highways by the time of John's death in 1723.

The exchange and circulation of goods, capital, information, and people across and around John Scattergood's kinship network cemented connections within the network, maintained relationships between members, and bound together the various nodes from which members operated. His receipt of a letter at Madras in 1715 from his brother Elihu Trenchfield at Calcutta, discussing the arrival in Asia of their younger brother Jack Trenchfield, is typical of the dynamic of Company kinship networks in Asia. 'When my brother Jack arrived, he delivered me six hundred Madrass rupees on Account of your Daughter Carolina,' wrote Elihu, 'which according to your desire have interested in my private Adventure this Voyage.'[76] Jack Trenchfield had arrived from Europe to trade in partnership with his brothers, bringing capital from family in Lincoln to invest in their Asian commercial enterprises. As a free merchant operating between places as geographically

73   Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: the global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, p. 211.

74   Records of Fort St George, *Diary and consultation books 1672–1756*, Madras: Madras Records Office, 1910–43 (henceforth RFSG *Consultations*), vol. 8, p. 48, 28 July 1679.

75   RFSG *Consultations*, 31 May 1698, vol. 27, p. 61.

76   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/1, Elihu Trenchfield to John Scattergood, Calcutta, 13 December 1715,

diverse as Persia and China, Elihu offered family members opportunities for employment and financial gain, while they, moving between Europe and Asia, and, more importantly, around Asia itself, provided both a source of family capital to invest in his voyages and a connection to other nodes of their kinship network. In the same letter, Elihu, occupied in Bengal, pleaded with his brother John at Madras to acquaint him with 'all news, foreign and Domestic, especially in the last of Our own family', and to send him 'all the News Papers and pamphlets you think worth my reading'.[77] Company kinship networks were indispensable to commercial, political, and social transactions in Asia through their ability to acquire and circulate information, communication, and knowledge 'within the Compass of our own family', as Arabella Scattergood's brother-in-law declared in 1703, to members operating in the disparate regions of Asia.[78]

The movement of kin between the various nodes, centres, and spaces in which the network operated in Asia strengthened the trust, bond, and interests connecting participant families. The commercial relationship between John Scattergood and his cousin Bernard Wyche was an important link in the trade carried on by their wider kinship network at that time. As chief of Surat, Wyche employed his younger brother George and his cousin John Scattergood as supercargoes on the ships trading from Surat to the port of Amity in China, a lucrative and privileged appointment.[79] Wyche was also instrumental in protecting John Scattergood's interests further down the coast in Malabar, where he engaged in joint ventures with their cousin Charles Burniston. The importance of the Wyche connection within the kinship network was considerable and John Scattergood was aware of the need to reinforce and strengthen the link on a continuous basis. One way in which this was achieved was by extending hospitality to Bernard Wyche's family. For example, in 1714 John and Arabella Scattergood invited the Wyche children to stay with them at Madras, extending the invitation to the family of William Phipps as well, John Scattergood's cousin and a member of Wyche's council at Surat.[80] Other relationships were also strengthened in this way, and periodically members from Bombay and Surat went to stay with the Scattergoods at Madras, including Carolina, the daughter of Charles Burniston, deputy-governor of Bombay, and John, the son of William Aislabie, governor of Bombay. Such circulation of family members consolidated the connections that maintained kinship networks across the diverse regions of Asia.

Constant expansion of kinship networks was necessary to ensure their ability to provide continuous opportunities and greater cohesion for their members. After all, networks were never a finalized group, but were always undergoing re-formation.[81] Factors such as the dismissal or death of important members worked to reduce their effectiveness.[82]

---

77 *Ibid.*

78 BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/1, Alexander Forbes to Francis Forbes, London, 11 March 1703. For this dynamic in the Johnstone kinship network, see Rothschild, *Inner life*, p. 55.

79 See Hosea Ballou Morse, 'The supercargo in the China trade about the year 1700', *English Historical Review*, 36, 142, 1921, pp. 199–209.

80 BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/1, John Scattergood to Bernard Wyche, Madras, June 1714.

81 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Drayton, 'Maritime networks', p. 79.

82 For the many conflicts and difficulties within kinship networks, see David Hancock, 'The trouble with networks: managing the Scots' early-modern Madeira trade', *Business History Review*, 79, 3, 2005, pp. 467–91.

The Scattergood network was no exception, as family members sought to expand it by integrating new members through marriage. One such successful prospect was Edward Fenwick, a supercargo of Company ships whom Scattergood described in 1713 as 'my old friend'.[83] Scattergood had used Fenwick to deliver gifts and goods to family and kin in Lincoln.[84] During these visits, Fenwick stayed with the Trenchfields and wrote to John in 1716 of 'enjoying the Company and Conversation of the best Mother and Sisters that ever Man had'.[85] Fenwick began a courtship with John's eldest sister, Elizabeth Trenchfield, which was encouraged by her brothers.[86] Owing to Fenwick's position as supercargo of the *Marlborough* on the lucrative trading routes to China, Elihu regarded him as a figure 'that I should sooner choose to be allied to'. Jack similarly agreed to 'the Match' and signalled his approval by appointing Fenwick as his attorney, trusting him with the management of his financial affairs in Asia.[87] Such encouragement ensured that Fenwick and Elizabeth were married in 1717 when he returned from Asia.[88] From then on, John Scattergood addressed him as 'Dear Brother Fenwick', appointed him as his attorney, and declared that 'the tyes of old Friendship as well as that of a relation' would strengthen the bond between them.[89]

Such expansion meant that John Scattergood's kinship network was the largest of its kind in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. At its height, the network operated right across Asia and organized the Company's largest private commercial transactions. For example, in 1714 John conducted a voyage to China as supercargo of the *Amity*. He coordinated investment from all of the network's nodes in Asia and, of the 179,800 rupees eventually subscribed to the voyage, 40% of the investment came from members of the network, with John and his cousins William Aislabie and Bernard Wyche committing the largest sums.[90] These families – the Scattergoods at Madras, the Aislabies at Bombay, and the Wyches at Surat – were the most prominent nodes within the network, with governors and chiefs who commanded extensive political power and patronage networks at their respective settlements, which they used to further the fortunes and interests of their kin.[91]

A host of less distinguished families within the network operated alongside them, their members counting a number of deputy-governors, councillors, and factors. There were the Burnistons and Forbes at Bombay, the Phipps at Surat, the Fleetwoods at Madras, and the

---

83   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/1, John Scattergood to Elihu Trenchfield, Madras, 13 November 1713.

84   For the importance of gift-giving among kin in Asia, see Margot Finn, 'Colonial gifts: family politics and the exchange of goods in British India, *c*.1780–1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 1, 2006, pp. 203–31.

85   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, Edward Fenwick to John Scattergood, Fort St George, 10 October 1716.

86   *Ibid*.

87   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, Jack Trenchfield to John Scattergood, Tellicherry, 5 December 1717.

88   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, Elizabeth Fenwick to John Scattergood, London, 10 January 1719.

89   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, John Scattergood to Elizabeth Fenwick, Canton, November 1719; Elizabeth Fenwick to John Scattergood, London, 16 December 1719; John Scattergood to George Lewis, Fort St George, 25 May 1719.

90   BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, 'Shareholders in ship Amity, 1714'; see also Soren Mentz, *The English gentleman merchant at work: Madras and the City of London 1660–1740*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005, table 5.10, p. 206.

91   For information on each family, see Sir Richard Carnac Temple, ed., *The Scattergoods and the East India Company: being a selection from the private letters and business correspondence of John Scattergood, East India merchant, 1681–1723*, Bombay: British India Press, 1935, p. 33.

Dixons in Bengal.[92] The Trenchfields and Pains, meanwhile, existed in the oceanic spaces in between, acting as captains and supercargoes. They travelled along Asia's maritime routes which served to connect the various families together and to link them to other parts of Asia. Jack and Elihu Trenchfield and their cousin Thomas Pain, for example, made regular trading voyages to places such as Tellicherry on the Malabar Coast, Mocha in the Persian Gulf, and Canton in China.[93] Regardless of their collective size or individual distinction, these families formed a network of mutually beneficial exchange and shared interest, maintained by the strengthening of familial ties and the expansion of their member base across Asia by the second decade of the eighteenth century.

The expanding kinship networks of the English Company weakened, shaped, and reconfigured those of other groups. For example, by the first half of the eighteenth century, the networks of Armenian families in the Indian Ocean became 'severely hampered by the imperializing network of the European East India Companies and especially that of the English East India Company'.[94] This was also the case with Sephardic kinship networks, which had monopolized the trade in Indian diamonds since the mid seventeenth century.[95] The Sephardim had traditionally operated through the Estado da India, carrying coral and diamonds on Portuguese ships and using Goa as their main centre of export.[96] But the gradual dominance of English Company kinship networks in the diamond trade from the 1680s onwards necessitated the resettlement of Sephardic families from Goa to Madras, where the trade's infrastructure and logistics were eventually based.[97]

A third example is the integrated trading system that had existed for centuries across the Bay of Bengal, based upon intense commercial and cultural exchange between the markets of the Bay through the activities of, predominantly, Muslim traders.[98] Company kinship networks reshaped trade and society there in a number of fundamental ways. For instance, previously non-existent colonial ports such as Madras rose to dominance, eclipsing traditional Asian ports such as Masulipatnam further to the north, causing a shift in the physical geography of important trade routes.[99] Certain staple trading commodities gained new value and distinction in new markets, such as the importance of pepper re-exports from Madras and Sumatra's value as a new market for textiles.[100] The trade of Company kinship

---

92 See *ibid*.

93 BL, APAC, MSS Eur C387/2, Jack Trenchfield to John Scattergood, Tellicherry, 5 December 1717.

94 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, p. 213.

95 Gedalia Yogev, *Diamonds and coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and eighteenth-century trade*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978, p. 103.

96 Francesca Trivellato, *The familiarity of strangers: the Sephardic diaspora, Livorno, and cross-cultural trade in the early modern period*, London: Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 232–43.

97 For the dominance of English Company merchants in Indian diamonds, see Mentz, *English gentleman merchant*, pp. 110–25.

98 Om Prakash, 'The Indian maritime merchant, 1500–1800', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 47, 3, 2004, p. 449.

99 The decline of Masulipatnam corresponds roughly to the rise of Company kinship networks at Madras in the later seventeenth century. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'A note on Narsapur Peta: a "syncretic" shipbuilding centre in south India, 1570–1700', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 31, 3, 1988, p. 308.

100 For example, see BL, APAC, MSS Eur D546/1, Joseph Walsh to John Walsh, Fort Marlborough, 16 December 1717.

networks grew at the expense of Asian traders, and the *dhow*, which had ploughed the Bay for centuries was forced to share and, in many cases, contest with larger and heavier European shipping.[101] Eventually, 'pre-existing interregional networks were utilized, molded, reordered, and rendered subservient' to European interests.[102] Such developments were driven by Company kinship networks, which refashioned the Bay of Bengal into a profitable colonial trading region. This process of commercial integration shared similar dynamics with the pattern of colonial expansion elsewhere, such as in the Atlantic, where networks of 'associates' created an Atlantic community that facilitated British commercial, political, and territorial expansion there in the eighteenth century.[103]

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Company servants and their families had formed something akin to a diaspora, being forced to ingratiate themselves into local indigenous networks in order to accommodate their weakness relative to host societies.[104] But the 'familial globalization' of Company families and their expansion across Asia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries enabled Company servants to re-orientate themselves away from regional frameworks, much earlier than traditionally thought. With their ability to cross private, public, spatial, and temporal boundaries, Company kinship networks gradually formed a site of empire in early modern Asia, one which consisted 'not so much [of] bounded entities, but rather specific juxtapositions of multiple trajectories'.[105]

'Not a subordinate but a coordinate power': private networks, political agency, and the formation of the colonial state

As East India Company kinship networks spread and thickened across Asia, they laid the foundation for a colonial polity. Indeed, as both Philip Stern and Kathleen Wilson have recently revealed, the colonial state was a much earlier manifestation in Asia than has traditionally been thought.[106] Company kinship networks were important drivers of the state-formation process, creating new sources of constitutional authority, acquiring greater political power, and binding together jurisdictions, agents, and sovereign spaces. As in the domestic British state, metropolitan centres and colonial institutions possessed only a very weak – and often imagined and rhetorical – hold over actors, agents, and groups operating in Asia across maritime expanses, up vast riverine regions, at subordinate settlements, and beyond

---

101 This was also the case in the western Indian Ocean in this period. See Om Prakash, 'English private trade in the western Indian ocean, 1720–1740', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, 2/3, 2007, p. 227.

102 Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: the Indian Ocean in the age of global empires*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 14.

103 David Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

104 Games, *Web of empire*, p. 198. For an English diaspora in Asia, see Mentz, *English gentleman merchant*, esp. pp. 41–8 and 215–59.

105 Alan Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British empire', *History Compass*, 4, 1, 2006, p. 135.

106 Stern, *Company-state*; Wilson, 'Rethinking'.

formal colonial boundaries and jurisdictions.[107] In this respect, according to Michael Braddick, the state was 'not something "central", but rather something that is extensive'.[108] This was certainly true of the Dutch VOC, whose development was not conditioned by a centre 'radiating outward' but rather through 'the extension of various networks, circuits, and nodes'.[109] Significantly, although the 'Heren XVII' (Seventeen Gentlemen) based in the United Provinces were theoretically the governing body of the VOC, it was 'elite family networks' operating across Asia 'which actually created regional circuits of authority within the empire'.[110]

In a similar dynamic, the English Company's metropolitan authorities at East India House in London could only marginally project their authority over and shape the actions of Company servants and their family networks operating in Asia.[111] Bengal's failure to despatch any letters, accounts, or correspondence home in 1680, which the latter claimed 'hath been a greate damage to us', was symptomatic of East India House's inherent inability to determine affairs in Asia.[112] The directors were clear why their servants had neglected to execute their public duties: 'Certainly you could never have been guilty of such great an omission', they wrote in indignation the following year, 'but that you were overburthened with ye Load of private trade.'[113] Realizing that they could do little to alter this, East India House was reduced to pleading with their servants that 'if you have [private] commissions or businesse … dispatch ye Companys businesse first'.[114] By 1681, metropolitan control over Bengal had been all but relinquished. 'Affairs in those factories', East India House lamented to Madras, '[are] intolerably bad … wee cannot bear with them any Longer.'[115] Not that the directors believed Madras to be any better, describing their servants and settlements there as 'totally corrupt & depraved'.[116] But it was not only private trade which servants pursued in opposition to the intentions of the Company's metropolitan authorities.[117] They also frequently sought to implement their own political designs and interests above those of their masters in Europe.[118] This was revealed by a frustrated Sir Josiah Child at the end of the seventeenth century, when he charged Company servants with 'perverting or misconstruing,

---

107 For example, see Benton, *Search for sovereignty*, pp. 40–103.

108 Braddick, *State formation*, p. 14.

109 Ward, *Networks of empire*, p. 55.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

111 See David Veevers, '"The company as their lords and the deputy as a great rajah": imperial expansion and the English East India Company on the west coast of Sumatra, 1685–1730', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, 5, 2013, pp. 687–709.

112 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/89, court of committees to Hugli, London, 5 January 1681.

113 *Ibid.*

114 *Ibid.*

115 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/89, court of committees to Madras, London, 15 March 1681.

116 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/90, court of committees to Madras, London, 20 September 1682.

117 The literature on European private trade in Asia is extensive. For the classic account, see Holden Furber, *John company at work: a study of European expansion in India in the late eighteenth century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951. For Bengal, see Marshall, *East India fortunes*; for Madras, see Mentz, *English gentleman merchant*; for Bombay, see Pamela Nightingale, *Trade and empire in western India, 1784–1806*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

118 For the pursuit of 'private interest' in India, see Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for empire: English private trade in India, 1659–1760*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1980.

procrastinating or neglecting our plain and direct orders to you, as if you were not a subordinate but a coordinate power with us'.[119]

In Asia, Company kinship networks were indeed a coordinating power and not subject to effective regulation or control by East India House. Through the absence of central authority, these networks emerged as an unofficial but crucial political group, acting as the authors of the colonial state.[120] As Phil Withington has suggested for corporate elites in early modern Britain, Company servants and their networks politically 'empowered' themselves and in the process decentred metropolitan models of state-building.[121] The mercenary, opportunistic, and often incoherent nature of the political agency exercised by family networks in Asia represented a process of gradual 'state-formation' and not of systematic 'state-building', one that manipulated, curtailed, or outright rejected metropolitan designs and policies. This was certainly the case for the acquisition of new sources of constitutional authority in Asia. The Company had always been a 'body politic' in its own right, as declared in its original charter in 1600.[122] But following new charters granted throughout the seventeenth century, including those acquired from Oliver Cromwell in 1657, Charles II in 1661, and James II in 1686, it enjoyed an ever greater degree of independence from the British state and ever greater state-building powers of its own, including the right to raise taxes, mint coins, administer justice, wage war, claim territory, and enjoy the sovereignty of its possessions.[123] Stern has argued that the Company acquired these rights because it considered itself as a body politic much like the nation-state, and its charters had indeed provided it with the means to 'forme us into the condition of a sovereigne State in India'.[124]

However, chartered forms of corporate sovereignty were not so much the tools of metropolitan state-builders as they were the by-product of Company kinship networks determining the Company's political framework within Asia in support of their own interests. For instance, the charter issued by James II in 1686, which granted the Company the right to wage war and claim territory, merely confirmed powers and rights already exercised and acquired by servants and their kinship networks in Asia, initially against the wishes of the Company's metropolitan authorities in London. Thus, in 1680 East India House declared itself 'averse to all kinds of war in India', stressing the 'very great imprudence' to be met with in fighting 'those great and mighty princes which might seem to obstruct our trade and ruins us'.[125]

---

119 Originally cited in K. N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 77. See also Julia Adams, 'Principals and agents, colonialists and company men: the decay of colonial control in the Dutch East Indies', *American Sociological Review*, 61, 1, 1996, p. 20.

120 For the importance of officeholders in displacing central sources of authority, see Daniel Lee, '"Office is a thing borrowed": Jean Bodin on offices and seigneurial government', *Political Theory*, 41, 3, 2013, pp. 409–40.

121 Phil Withington, *The politics of commonwealth: citizens and freemen in early modern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

122 BL, APAC, IOR/A/1/2, 'Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth, to the governor and company of merchants of London, trading into the East-Indies', 31 December 1600.

123 See Stern, *Company-state*, especially pp. 19–99.

124 Cited in *ibid*., p. 83.

125 Cited in John Keay, *The honourable company: a history of the English East India Company*, London: HarperCollins, 1993, p. 177.

But the private interests of its servants and their networks in Bengal – interests of a pecuniary, social, and political nature – brought them into armed conflict with the Mughal governor of Hugli from 1682, followed by the nawab of Bengal himself two years later – not to mention elsewhere in Asia, such as the west coast of Sumatra from 1685 onwards.[126] Servants such as Job Charnock, who led an expedition against the nawab of Bengal, advised Sir Josiah Child that 'peace is best made with the Sword in hand, ffor a Mogull's perfidiousness is too Subtill for any other pollicy'.[127] The king himself revealed the fact that the charter was acquired as a consequence of the policies and actions of servants in Asia, when he wrote in 1686 that he had granted the Company increased powers to wage war because he was 'given to understand that many of the Native princes and Gov[e]r[nor]s of India … have of late … endammaged and abused their Chiefs and ffactors'.[128] Thus new sources of constitutional authority, such as the right to wage war, were already assumed *de facto* by servants in Asia, reducing the acquisition of a royal charter to little more than a process of metropolitan rubber-stamping.

The Charnock kinship network's role in the formation of the colonial state, particularly in Bengal, was representative not just of how family networks exercised political agency but also of what their motives were for transforming the political environment around them. Job Charnock and his wife, a Rajputi noblewoman whom he renamed 'Maria', had four children, all of whom married into the political establishment in Bengal.[129] Their expansive, interracial kinship network established considerable social, commercial, and political interests right across the Mughal province. Between 1684 and 1726 the network produced five governors alone, and at least a dozen councillors.[130] Their virtual monopoly over Bengal's political establishment allowed the network to shape the Company's political framework there in pursuit of their own interests.

When these came under threat in the 1680s, following increasing fiscal and commercial demands placed upon intermediary and marginal groups in Bengal by the Mughal empire, the Charnock network sought to create a political environment that would better protect and further their interests.[131] As Company servants resisted central Mughal demands, local Mughal authorities harassed their wider networks. Charnock's confrontational attitude in particular led to his character being attacked and his goods being seized. Eventually he was himself blockaded within the Company's factory at Casimbazar, while his son-in-law Charles Eyre was imprisoned

---

126 C. R. Wilson, *The early annals of the English in Bengal, being the Bengal public consultations for the first half of the eighteenth century*, London: Thacker & Co., 1895, vol. 1, p. 80. For Sumatra, see Veevers, 'The company', pp. 687–709.

127 William Hedges, *The diary of William Hedges during his agency in Bengal*, ed. Henry Yule, London, 1887–89 (henceforth WH, *Diary*), vol. 2, p. 64, Job Charnock to Sir Josiah Child, Little Tanna, 10 February 1687.

128 BL, APAC, IOR/A/1/40, 'His present majestyes charter', 12 April 1686.

129 Ghosh, *Sex and the family*, pp. 246–7. For the principle members of this network in the early eighteenth century, see the will of Jonathan White in 1704, in Wilson, *Early annals*, vol. 1, pp. 350–2.

130 For an account of the careers of members of the Charnock network, see Wilson, *Early annals*, vol. 1, pp. 307–86.

131 For these demands, see Records of Fort St George, *Letters to Fort St. George, 1681–1765*, Madras: Madras Government, 1916–46 (henceforth *LTFSG*), vol. 8, pp. 35–6, Hugli to Madras, Hugli, 15 December 1684. For the pressure applied to marginal groups, see Om Prakash, 'Trade and politics in eighteenth-century Bengal', in Seema Alavi, ed., *The eighteenth century in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 140–1.

at Dacca.[132] In response, Charnock sought to implement what he termed his 'grand designe'. This policy involved a show of force against the local Mughal political order with the intent of negotiating additional political rights for the Company in the form of sovereign rule over territory of its own in Bengal, much like it enjoyed at Bombay and Madras, and from where the extensive interests of private kinship networks could be more effectively facilitated.[133]

The Charnock network succeeded in doing just that at the turn of the eighteenth century, transforming the Company's Bengal establishment from a string of factories dependent upon the local Mughal political order to an autonomous colonial stronghold with enlarged commercial and political rights. Succeeding as agent for Bengal in 1686, Charnock launched a campaign against the nawab, sacking the Mughal port of Balasore and defeating a small Mughal army on the island of Hijili in the following year.[134] Despite the opposition of the court of directors at East India House, who declared that they 'do rationally conclude against the opinion of our Agent',[135] Charnock opened up negotiations for the acquisition of a cluster of villages on the banks of the Hugli, which he hoped would form the sovereign stronghold from which Company networks could operate independently of the Mughal political order.[136] Appointing his son-in-law Eyre as the new chief of Dacca, he charged him with leading the negotiations.[137] At the nawab's court, Eyre zealously furthered his father-in-law's interests, requesting an imperial grant for sovereign possession of the villages.[138]

When Eyre succeeded his father-in-law as agent of Bengal in 1694, the kinship network continued to pursue the family's 'grand designe'. They began by building an ostentatious family mausoleum in the centre of the protean settlement as a sign of the network's central role in the expansion of the Company's power in Bengal.[139] As agent, with a number of kin promoted to his council, Eyre then established a source of state revenue by taxing the settlement's small Asian population, 'as is Consistant with our own Methods and Rules of Government', he informed the directors, 'and this is the only means wee can think of till wee can procure a Grant for our firm Settlement'.[140] When East India House followed this up by ordering Eyre to establish new law courts as well, he refused, informing them that additional state institutions beyond a revenue office would be useless without the acquisition of a grant for the occupation of the settlement.[141]

---

132 *LTFSG*, vol. 9, p. 39, Hugli to Madras, Hugli, 5 January 1685; WH, *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 52, Casimbazar, 30 November 1682.

133 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/90, court of directors to Hugli, London, 12 August 1685.

134 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/91, court of directors to Bengal, London, 12 December 1687.

135 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/91, court of directors to Bengal, London, 27 August 1688.

136 Keay, *Honourable company*, pp. 166–7.

137 Wilson, *Early annals*, vol. 1, p. 117.

138 Cited in WH, *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 107.

139 Robert Travers, 'Death and the nabob: imperialism and commemoration in eighteenth-century India', *Past & Present*, 196, 1, 2007, p. 90.

140 *Ibid.*

141 John Bruce, *Annals of the honorable East-India company, from their establishment by the charter of Queen Elizabeth, 1600, to the union of the London and English East-India companies, 1707–8*, London: Black, Parry and Kingsbury, 1810, vol. 3, p. 144; C. R. Wilson, *Old Fort William in Bengal: a selection of official documents dealing with its history*, London: John Murray, 1906 (henceforth Wilson, *OFW*), vol. 1, p. 14, Bengal to court of directors, Calcutta, 14 December 1694.

Beyond securing immediate independence from the Mughal authorities, there was little room for conscious state-building in the designs of the Charnock network.

Although both Madras and East India House had opposed the occupation of the villages on the Hugli, by 1695 the court of directors were forced to concede that, as their servants 'are in a great measure already settled' there, they had no choice but to designate it as the official seat of the Bengal establishment.[142] Shortly after, Eyre succeeded in acquiring the long-awaited imperial grant, which transferred sovereignty over Sudanati and the surrounding villages of Govindpur and Kalikata to the Company – a settlement servants quickly referred to as Calcutta.[143] Authorities at Madras and London criticized the family's obsession with acquiring sovereignty over the territory, describing it as 'a doubtfull foundation'.[144] But in 1699 East India House admitted that as their servants were 'now possessed of a strong ffortification and a large tract of land [it] hath inclined us to declare Bengall a Presidency, and we have constituted our Agent (Sir Chas. Eyre) to be our President there and Governor of our ffort, etc., which we call ffort William'.[145] While the 'grand designe' ultimately laid the foundation of the colonial state in Bengal, more important to the kinship networks operating there was their success in making Calcutta 'strong enough to Secure Your estates and Servants', and thus to protect and facilitate their private interests.[146]

The activities of the Pitt kinship network reveals the extent to which political agency was exercised in the pursuit of familial interests, and thus how colonial state formation was a private, inconsistent, and often incoherent process. In protecting and expanding their own interests, kinship networks could facilitate the formation of the state, or they could mitigate or even resist its emergence altogether, depending on which particular political landscape served their network best. For the Charnocks, colonial state formation provided protection from Mughal pressures, but the interests of the Pitts were best served outside formal colonial frameworks. When, in the later seventeenth century, the Company's monopoly over the Asian trade came under increasing legal and constitutional attack in Britain, interlopers such as Thomas Pitt flooded into Asia, and conducted trade there in defiance of the Company's monopoly, threatening to undermine its political legitimacy.[147]

As interlopers became increasingly established in the Bay of Bengal, East India House attempted to consolidate its political integrity by excluding them from the region.[148] In 1682, it despatched one of its own directors, William Hedges, to oversee the operation and to re-exert metropolitan control over Bengal.[149] East India House recognized from the beginning that the kinship networks of Company servants played a pivotal role in the interlopers' success in the region, allowing them to sink deep roots into Bengal in a relatively

142 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/92, court of directors to Bengal, London, 6 March 1695.

143 Wilson, *Early annals*, vol. 1, p. 37, Calcutta, 14 April 1698.

144 Wilson, *OFW*, vol. 1, p. 8, Madras to court of directors, Fort St George, 25 May 1691.

145 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/93, court of directors to Bengal, London, 20 December 1699.

146 Wilson, *OFW*, vol. 1, p. 49, Bengal to court of directors, Calcutta, 8 January 1702.

147 Stern, *Company-state*, pp. 45–6, 65–6, 144–5.

148 See Henry Horwitz, 'The East India trade, the politicians, and the constitution: 1689–1702', *Journal of British Studies*, 17, 2, 1978, pp. 1–18.

149 WH, *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 30, William Hedges to Balasore, Balasore road, 18 July 1682.

short time through intermarriage and social integration. Thus, Hedges was ordered to 'Seise and send home any English that you shall but suspect may aide the Interloper', especially those Company servants who 'intermarry with any women' from interloper families who accompanied their male kin in their illegal endeavours.[150] To achieve this, he was granted wide powers to 'dismiss forthwith such persons so marry'd from our Service and send them home with their [interloper] Wifes'.[151] At the heart of Hedges' attempt to re-establish metropolitan control over Bengal, therefore, was the need to sever the networks of kinship established between Company servants and interlopers.

These, however, were extensive. By the 1680s, many kinship networks in the Bay of Bengal contained a sizeable number of interlopers. Even Hedges' own deputy, John Beard, kept 'a familiar private correspondence with disaffected persons and Interlopers', including his interloping brother-in-law, James Lowdon, with whom he carried on a considerable amount of private trade.[152] As Hedges himself was shortly forced to confess to his masters in London in 1683, they could 'never be well served till … their Agent turne out those that … keepe Company and Feast dayly with ye Interlopers, as ye most precise of us doe here frequently'.[153]

The expansive Pitt kinship network was similarly comprised of a number of prominent interlopers who worked in close collaboration with senior Company servants. The interloper Thomas Pitt had established himself in the Mughal port of Balasore in the 1670s, where he had 'hired a great house' and kept a private guard of Indian soldiers.[154] Through his marriage to Jane Innes, Pitt became part of an elite network which included two of the most powerful Company servants in Bengal, his wife's uncle, Matthias Vincent, chief of Hugli, and his own cousin, Richard Edwards, chief of Balasore.[155] The network established interests right across Asia, the most profitable of which was in exporting Bengali horses to Persia, but they also included cultivating cross-cultural relationships with Europeans and Asians alike; maintaining religiously tolerant households, including the promotion of Catholic worship, against Company regulations; and finally forming interracial families.[156]

East India House was well aware of the Pitt kinship network's prominence in Bengal, as well as its role in facilitating and protecting other interloper families. Hedges had arrived with a company of soldiers to free Bengal physically from the family's grip, and to dismantle the network in the process. The directors instructed Hedges that 'In the first place wee do require you with all possible speed' to imprison Matthias Vincent so that he might 'answer to the severall breaches of trust and other notorious abuses committed by him'.[157] In a further letter, they anxiously urged Madras to assist Hedges with the simultaneous arrest of Pitt, as he was 'Mr Vincent's cousin'.[158] They emphasized that this infamous interloper was to be

---

150 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/89, court of committees to Madras, London, 27 October 1682.

151 *Ibid*.

152 *Ibid*.

153 *Ibid*.

154 *Ibid*., vol. 1, p. 31, Balasore road, 19 July 1682.

155 See *ibid*., vol. 3, p. 163.

156 See C. N. Dalton, *The life of Thomas Pitt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915, pp. 21–2.

157 Cited in *ibid*., pp. 27–8.

158 Cited in *ibid*., p. 30.

caught and returned to Europe, 'whatever the cost'.[159] The kinship network reacted by contesting Hedges' authority as agent, and thereby resisting East India House's attempt to regain control of the political landscape in Bengal. When Hedges arrived at Hugli, Vincent, forewarned of his impending arrest, withdrew upriver to the Dutch settlement of Chinsurah and levied a force of Portuguese and Rajputi soldiers, rendering himself impervious to arrest.[160] He was soon joined by Pitt, who arrived with three ships and landed at Hugli 'in great state', according to Hedges, 'with 4 or 5 files of soldiers in red coats, well armed, and great attendance of Native Soldiers and Trumpeters'.[161] Pitt then joined Vincent at Chinsurah, where, protected by their Dutch friends, they built their own warehouse, enticed Bengal's most prominent merchants away from Hugli and set up their own trade to Europe. When Hedges attempted to seize the members of the network based at Chinsurah, their influence with the Mughal governor thwarted the attack and Hedges was himself driven off by a Mughal counter-attack.[162]

For the Company, the result of this conflict was disastrous. After trade was embargoed at Hugli, Hedges was forced to submit to the Mughal governor's authority and agreed to pay punitive customs on the Company's goods there.[163] His fate is illustrative of the considerable political agency that Company kinship networks could exercise in the pursuit of their own interests, a process which destabilized and severely curtailed any attempts at metropolitan state-building. Indeed, when he continued to attack the familial connections between interlopers and servants, the agent eventually alienated the entire political establishment of Bengal, who, as a result, allied with the Pitt kinship network to force Hedges out of the region. By 1684 he was reduced to seeking refuge in the very Dutch settlement to which the Pitt network had previously withdrawn, before eventually fleeing Bengal on an interloping vessel headed for Persia.[164] As he departed, Hedges described those kinship networks that he had failed to contain as 'that wicked confederacy', and thanked God for having 'been pleased to give me Deliverance' from them.[165]

In retrospect, there was little that Hedges could have done to undermine or displace, let alone institutionalize, the kinship networks which shaped – for better or worse – the political landscape in Bengal. They transcended the public and private, connecting Company servants with interlopers and operating beyond the Company's own jurisdictions to cross into the factories of other European companies and especially into the local Mughal order. To have neutralized their political agency would have been radically to deconstruct and rebuild the nature of the Company's presence altogether, a process beyond the limited and mitigated authority of East India House in Asia. In fact, the Pitt kinship network had so successfully stifled any attempt at state-building that the Bengal agency was abolished in 1684 and the factories there were once again made subordinate to Madras, leaving Company servants,

---

159 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 29.

160 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 35.

161 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 36.

162 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

163 WH, *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 172, Hugli, 23 December 1684.

164 Dalton, *Thomas Pitt*, p. 46.

165 WH, *Diary*, vol. 1, pp. 176–7, Balasore, 10 January 1685.

their kinship networks, and their interloping members with the freedom to pursue interests across a number of cultural borders, legal jurisdictions, and political orders.[166]

Conclusion: 'inhabitants of the universe'

When Edmund Burke declared his admiration for society's 'little platoons' in the later eighteenth century, he was lamenting the decline of the smaller groups of political authority which had comprised the state for much of the early modern period, but which were then being displaced by a centralizing army of 'sophisters, economists, and calculators'.[167] Burke was invoking a heritage of political thought which stretched back to the seventeenth-century French political philosopher Jean Bodin, who argued that the exercise of state power and the conduct of governance could take an infinite range of forms, beyond the conventional narrative of monarchs and nation-states.[168] This article has revealed the process by which families of European East India Company servants formed one such political group. From the later seventeenth century onwards, Company families built wide kinship networks throughout Asia. These in turn provided members with an increasingly global framework in which to operate, creating a social and commercial colonial space in Asia by the beginning of the eighteenth century that was also increasingly hegemonic.

In 1681, Sir Josiah Child claimed that sailors and other such maritime agents were 'Inhabitants of the Universe', owing to the global reach and spread of their activities.[169] It was a title that the chairman of the court of directors could also have applied to those families whose networks spread out between Europe and Asia, and across Asia itself, acquiring political power, waging war, and founding colonial strongholds. In the absence of effective metropolitan authority and regulation, Company kinship networks were free to exercise agency and determine the political landscape around them in pursuit of their private interests. Their efforts in doing so laid the foundation of a colonial polity in Asia that would, in the case of the English East India Company, emerge as the hegemonic imperial power over the following centuries. But in the period preceding this, the formation of early modern colonial states was a gradual and multi-centric process, not one of systematic or organized metropolitan state-building.

David Veevers is currently completing his PhD thesis on the early modern colonial state in the School of History at the University of Kent. He has previously published on the English East India Company and British imperialism in Asia.

---

166 BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/90, court of committees to Madras, London, 21 December 1683.

167 Burke, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 240. See also Julie Murray, 'Company rules: Burke, Hastings, and the specter of the modern liberal state', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41, 1, 2007, p. 58.

168 Lee, 'Office', p. 410.

169 Philopatris, *Treatise*, p. 26.