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Reading the Cultural Politics of Transnational Anti-Colonialism in Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai*

The Indian Ocean World has garnered attention in the past few decades for its long *durée* trade networks, cultural exchanges and religious economies which mark this space as a complex world – system, phenomenologically diverse, layered arena of sovereignty; which the European explorers enter comparatively late by the sixteenth century (Michael Pearson; Phillipe Beaujard). However, by the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the political and economic structures of the pre – existing Indian Ocean World were heavily influenced by the colonial powers which had managed to get a foothold across the littoral spaces, especially the British colonial control over the East African and Western Indian shoreline (Sugata Bose). This development from 1880s to mid twentieth century was significant, as it marked the highpoint of not only colonial hegemony, but also the simmering anti – colonial discourse across the Indian Ocean British colonies, hinting towards the potential of a transnational anti – colonial imaginary in the first few decades of the long twentieth century.

In literary works emerging from the context of an Asian African heritage which often draw from longer oceanic histories of Asian presence on the Indian ocean littoral, especially in East Africa, it is impossible to overlook the ideological contradictions which shape the public sphere inhabited by Africans, Asians and colonial masters. Sultan Somjee's ethnographic novel *Bead Bai* (2012) emerging from his inquiries into the material culture of the Asian African community could be read as an literary – cultural text engaging with the historical context of this oceanic, transnational anti – colonial imagination. The novel frames stories within stories, of a young girl born in the syncretic Satpanth Ismaili Khoja community, but connected because of her midnight moment of birth, with the revolutionary African female leader Mary Muthoni, who in the 1920s led the rebellion against the oppressive kipande system after Harry Thuku's arrest, the not so non – violent 'Gandhi of East Africa'. Through this literary text, Somjee has captured the multilayered interracial political and cultural alliances between the Asian diaspora in East Africa, and the Kenyans, when both the colonial subjects became increasingly disillusioned with the exploitative imperialist policies. In my paper, I would read the cultural politics within the public arena as sketched within the novel from the lens of the larger politics of the Empire across the Indian Ocean World, and the echoes it carried for the development of an anti – colonial imagination in the Kenyan context specifically. Were these echoes one – way (from India to East Africa), or can comparative structures of anti – colonial sentiments be traced in these two constituencies of the Empire? The novel presents a nuanced picture of the Asian diaspora which has merged its beliefs and epistemological structures with their African context, thus creating a nuanced and politically charged public sphere in the first few decades of twentieth century, which will be the subject under study in this paper.