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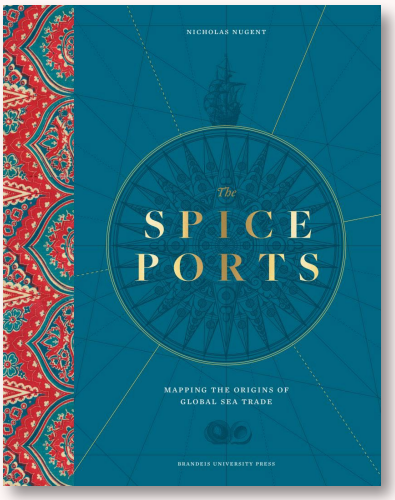

THE SPICE PORTS: MAPPING THE ORIGINS OF THE GLOBAL SEA TRADE

By Nicholas Nugent

Brandeis University Press, 2024

288 pages, approximately 184 maps and illustrations

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In the German children's book *Oh, wie schön ist Panama* [published in English as *The Trip to Panama*] (Janosch 1978), the character Little Bear finds a crate floating on a river with the word "Panama" written on the side. The smell of bananas coming from the crate convinces him that Panama is the land of his dreams, prompting him and his friend Little Tiger to attempt to travel there. They have no map, so they start off by asking everyone they meet for directions. Having traveled in a big circle, they eventually end up back at their own home, and, thinking they have finally reached the land of their dreams, they live happily ever after. The book, as well as its pseudonymous author and illustrator Janosch, is very popular in Germany, and when I tell Germans that I am from Panama, they often mention the story and ask me about bananas.

It's always strange when our discussion of a feel-good story about friendship and dreams morphs into one about the United Fruit Company, industrial-scale monoculture in Central America, worker exploitation, wetland destruction, pesticide poisoning, and genocide. Reading *The Spice Ports* feels a bit like this.

This book by British journalist Nicholas Nugent—published by Brandeis University Press in the US and the British Library in the UK—examines how the world changed through the extraction and transportation of valuable plants from the tropics to Europe. While this story has been explored before, Nugent frames it with an impressive assemblage of maps and illustrations, with nearly half coming from his own personal collection of antique maps, amassed over the decades since his first visit to Indonesia's Banda Islands in the 1970s.

It's difficult to overstate the impact of spices in world history. Why were they so sought after? *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (2008), by Yale historian Paul Freedman, tells us that the huge European "craving" for spices came from how these flavorful and aromatic plants symbolized social prestige and carried sacred overtones—coming, as they did, from faraway, mysterious lands associated with the Christian concept of Paradise, imagined as a perfumed location somewhere in the East (Freedman 2008, 97). The way in which this trade stimulated the push for colonial expansion, enabled by technological advances in cartography, shipbuilding, book-making, and navigation, came not only from the enormous profit margins—cloves, on the dock in Venice, easily fetching one hundred times their original price—but also from the obsession with bypassing Muslim intermediaries to access these luxury status symbols that promised far more than their practical culinary uses. This was the driving force behind Columbus's and da Gama's expeditions to India, one reaching the Americas and the other the actual India.

The Spice Ports tells this story in twelve self-contained chapters dealing with an assemblage of places (see map) connected to Nugent's map collection. These places were either key ports in the trade of spices to Europe and the

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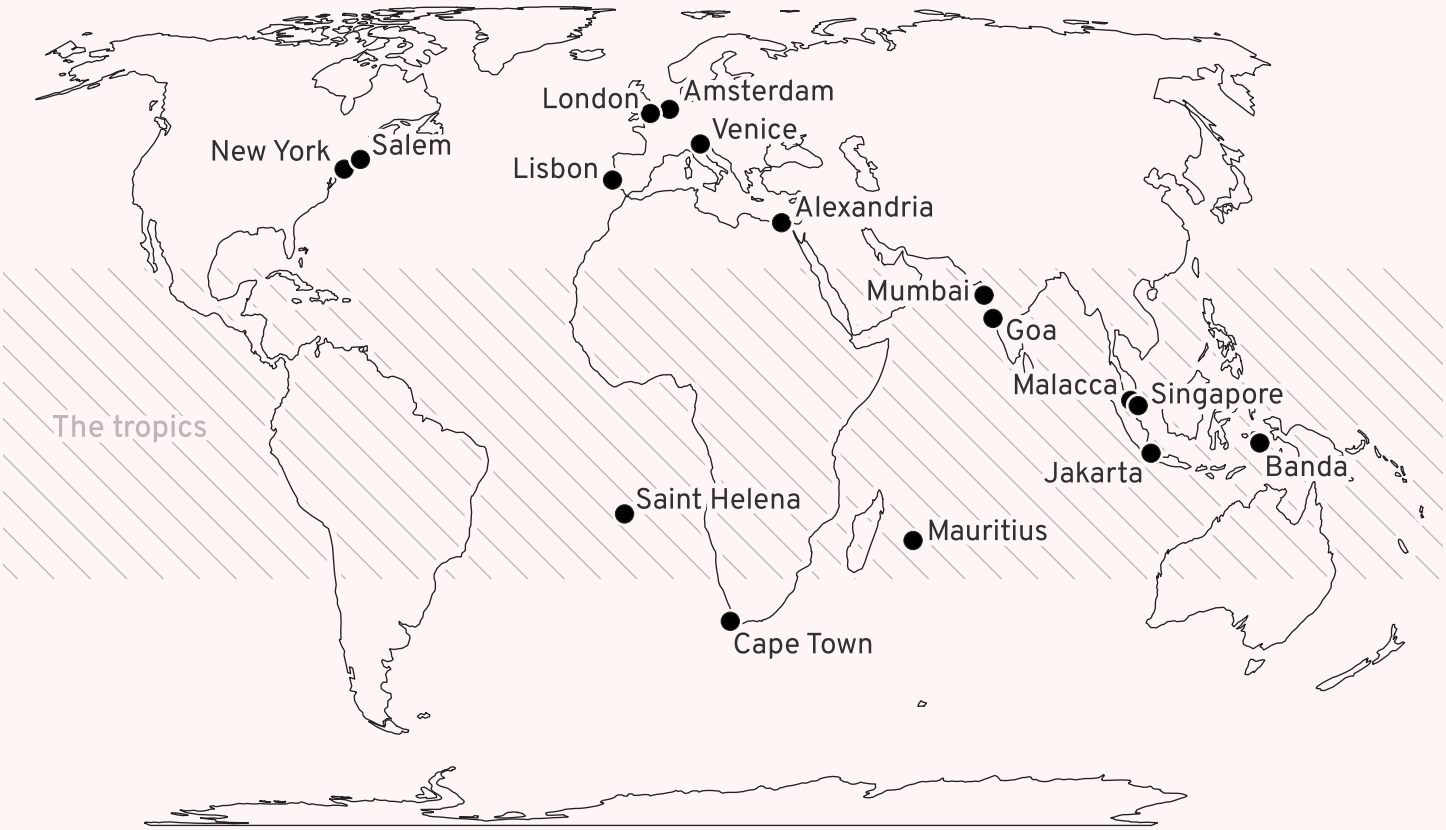
Places in *The Spice Ports*



US, or sites where spices grew and were extracted. The second chapter, for example, is devoted to Alexandria, the main port where Arab traders, with established commercial routes to the east, met those from Venice, who had a special papal exception to the rule against trading with the Islamic world. Towards the end of the book Nugent goes to the Americas, with a chapter on Manhattan, a place that was indirectly connected to spices when the Dutch traded control of that island to the English in exchange for the small (and, arguably, at the time more valuable) island of Run in the Banda archipelago.

The book is large and beautiful, and handsomely demonstrates the breadth of Western colonial mapmaking in the service of extraction, all the while providing a good reference to today's cartographers looking for color combinations, symbology, and inspiration from design details.

While the maps themselves are beautiful artifacts worthy of study, they cannot be separated from the violent colonial project they served. Nugent acknowledges this, referring to the violence that enabled the European spice trade, with mentions of the slave trade and the "dark side" of this history. But, in the end, his narrative comes from the perspective of the explorers: the conquerors and larger-than-life characters who are presented as driving the march of history. It avoids posing challenging questions, or problematizing in any serious way Western historical frameworks.

It is thus the decidedly colonial bias of this book which is its main shortcoming. By relying almost exclusively on documents and maps from Europe and the US—as well as Western fiction—as references, the rest of us get no say in the telling of these events. In the chapter about Manhattan the so-called "purchase" of the island from the Lenape people, for example, gets taken at face value, with minimal critical examination.

Most tellingly, the near-extermination of the Banda Islands population in 1621, a key event in the history of the spice trade, receives only passing mention. The resistance of the Bandanese people to Dutch colonialism, as well as their reluctance to grant the Netherlanders a monopoly in the trade of nutmeg, resulted in their mass murder by Jan Pieterszoon Coen—the "Butcher of Banda"—at

the orders of the Dutch East India Company. Only about 1,000 of the original 15,000 inhabitants of Banda survived—some enslaved in Jakarta, a few more fleeing to nearby islands. The Dutch replaced them with other enslaved peoples to establish nutmeg plantations that enriched the Netherlands. The unfolding of these events is described in detail and masterfully put in full historic perspective by Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg's Curse*: *Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), a much-recommended source for those looking for a more complex look.

The memories of the colonized, usually absent from historical documents and charts—and barely mentioned in *The Spice Ports*—challenge old mainstream narratives and are fundamental to understanding ongoing forms of oppression and power. To this day, descendants of the victims of Banda remember the event very clearly. They still gather in a seafront ceremony to commemorate the massacre, holding bamboo branches symbolizing the poles where the heads of the islands' elders were displayed by the Dutch before the massacre. Memory is also passed along in the form of a dance, the *cakalele*, which survived cultural repression by the Dutch and keeps alive the story of their culture.

The Banda Journal, a multimedia project by Indonesian journalists Muhammad Fadli and Fatris MF, captures some of these memories through photography, film, and text. It focuses on Bandanese communities both in the archipelago and on Kai Besar, where some survivors fled and whose descendants still speak the language. These communities, located on Indonesia's so-called outer islands, face internal colonialism from the Indonesian state, something the Sumatran authors are aware of, and reflect upon. Rather than attempting a comprehensive history, this decolonial project remains intentionally local. The organizers, according to Fadli, deliberately chose to hold its first exhibition in Banda "as a way of showing respect" (Nathaniel and Rahad 2021, 8:53).

As Swedish author Sven Lindqvist notes in his preface to "*Exterminate all the brutes*" (1996), "European world expansion, accompanied as it was by a shameless defense of extermination, created habits of thought and political precedents that made way for new outrages" (Lindqvist 1996, x). The Dutch, although hardly the first to do it, showed Europeans that genocide was not only a possibility, but an effective way of doing business and politics as well. These outrages and their "shameless defense" (Lindqvist 1996, x) continue to this day. The dehumanizing and pragmatic language about the need to depopulate Banda that Ghosh (2021) recounts from the Dutch chronicles shows chilling similarities to the words heard from the perpetrators of the Gazan genocide.

A few centuries after the peak of the spice trade, Little Bear imagined a place which "smells of bananas all over" (Janosch 1978, 14), and decided to seek that perfumed paradise by following the European tradition and launching an expedition with the aim of settling in Panama. Nugent, like Janosch, tells a good story, but one whose point of view sounds very different from our side. At a time when advocacy for the recolonization of the Global South has become mainstream (see **the remarks** by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026), stories of Western ingenuity and fearless explorers, in which the voices of the colonized are silenced, have become very dangerous.

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