Port Infrastructures and the Making of Historical Time in the Horn of Africa:

Narratives of Urban Modernity in Djibouti and Somaliland

Abstract

As infrastructures mushroom across Africa, this article investigates narratives accompanying infrastructural investments in East African cities, Djibouti-city (Djibouti) and Berbera (Somaliland). While cities in the Global North move towards a post-industrial future, the Horn of Africa depicts other endpoints, breaking with experiences of colonisation while hoping to diminish asymmetries in a Western-dominated global system. Inspired by models that condense idealized experiences of urban success elsewhere, Djibouti and Somaliland rework historical narratives while envisioning their future as urban nodes interlinking different places and cultures. We build on Koselleck's theory of historical time and link it to notions of elsewhere to show how different actors rework past experiences and future expectations through port modernizations. On the one hand, port operators and logistics companies use city labels and propagate developmental trajectories that assimilate East African cities to Dubai or Shekou models. On the other, political elites and city residents search in these projects for their own path, creatively combining elements of similarity and distinctiveness while developing the city's specific brand. Through qualitative interviews substantiated with secondary sources, this article shows how infrastructure becomes a driver of identity promoting spatial imaginaries, re-invigorating (shared) memories, and formulating aspirations drawing on different times and places.

Keywords: port infrastructure, Djibouti, Berbera, identity narrative, Dubai model, Shekou model.

Introduction

Many African cities experience an infrastructure boom, where maritime and land corridors are established, enlarged, and modernized to enable containerized cargo transhipment across the contintent. Infrastructure development promises to better integrate Africa into international trade networks (Gillespie & Schindler, 2022), but also became a source of geopolitical competitions involving established and rising powers seeking to expand their foothold in Africa (Blanchard, 2021; Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021; Gurjar, 2023; Larsen & Stepputat, 2019). Constituting infrastructural nodes interlinking commodity flows across land and sea, ports are at the heart of infrastructural developments and sites of extensive international investments. Currently, many ports in East Africa are made fit for containerized shipment, enlarged, and deepened to enable the anchorage of ever-growing container vessels. Ports are then integrated into intermodal transport chains, with railways, roads, and airports being built alongside logistic zones and dry ports.

Infrastructural investments in the African continent are often interpreted as a repetition of the continent's history of colonialisation reproducing colonial practices while serving the interest of global capital (Cupers & Meier, 2020; Enns & Bersaglio, 2020; Kimari & Ernstson, 2020). Scholars also examine how newly rising powers, including China, Brazil, India, and Gulf countries, forge South-South connections beyond routes established in the interest of 'the West' (Hönke et al., 2024; Noort & Colley, 2021). These infrastructural investments remain embedded in modernist notions of development while depicting an 'endpoint' promising to break with modernity's deep entanglement in colonialism. Many rising powers, therefore, draw inspiration from cities outside Europe, such as Dubai and Shekou. As examples of very late and rapid, but successful modernization (Hvid, 2009, p. 397), these cities promote an 'authoritative image' of becoming a global city (Kangas, 2017) without following the European historical trajectory of industrialisation and post-industrial transformation. Developing different trajectories, these cities are marking endpoints of their own. Infrastructures are, therefore, more than just technical objects. They are embedded in and productive of narratives, defined as spoken or written accounts that connect events into a story about the world and how people experience it (Hinchman and Hinchman 2001, xvi). Due to the centrality of movement and the peculiar ontology of infrastructure, as 'matter that enable the movement of other matter' (Larkin, 2013, p. 329), these physical installations make promises of the future (Müller-Mahn, 2020) and raise expectations (Anand et al., 2018; Harvey & Knox, 2012).

We acknowledge that infrastructure projects are foremost driven by *Realpolitik*. In our case studies, Djibouti and Somaliland's political elites were heavily motivated by exigencies of political survival while striving for the country's economic development, and, in the case of Somaliland, also international recognition. These ambitions overlap with external investors' interest in expanding their footholds in East Africa (Styan, 2016). Infrastructural projects, however, do not evolve in a quiet chamber, and we build on the emerging body of literature that engages with the ideational and affective side of infrastructures (Anand et al., 2018; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Noort, 2020), to comparatively explore the narratives accompanying port developments in Djibouti-city (Djibouti) and Berbera (Somaliland). These narratives are multiple. We show how global port operation and logistics companies actively use infrastructures to promote models of development that emulate success stories of other cities. Nevertheless, African actors, too, aspire to improve their economic and political standing in the global hierarchies of states and cities (Soulé, 2020) and build their own visions of infrastructural success, following the need to distinguish their port from those of their

competitors. The visions, therefore, tend to oscillate between emulating successful developments elsewhere and highlighting distinct histories. Meyer (2016) additionally traced the longing to an elsewhere and the desire to belong to places beyond their homeports through architecture in Swahili port cities. We show, in a similar vein, how political elites in Djibouti and Somaliland embed port investments in narratives that promise to repeat success experienced elsewhere while preserving key narrative features that states and cities tell about themselves. We also show that within the narrative tensions of emulation and distinction, ports in Djibouti and Somaliland are transformed into 'formative site[s] of state renewal' (Chalfin, 2010, p. 574). We build on Koselleck's (2004) theory of historical times but expand his twin concepts 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation' with the notion of 'elsewhere', demonstrating how people not only rely on existential spaces where experiences were made but adapt their horizons of expectations to success stories derived from other places. We interweave Koselleck's theory of historical time with approaches that highlight the role of narratives accompanying port modernisations.

While Western cities have been at the heart of the debates on infrastructure, cities in the Global South, African cities included, have brought subaltern research agendas to urban studies (Parnell & Pieterse, 2016; Roy, 2011; Simone, 2020). These studies request a departure from grand narratives and their promotion of binaries, prominently global versus local or universal versus particular. Instead, these studies investigate how global forces and universal ideas travel before they locate themselves in particular places (Cheshmehzangi 2015). We follow this quest by exploring how the ongoing logistics revolution is materialising in two African cities, focussing particularly on the narratives that accompany these transformations. Only few studies have attended to this topic (Goodfellow & Huang, 2021; Hönke & Cuesta-Fernández, 2018) and the article, therefore, enhances scholarly understanding of the effects of densified integration of African cities into international supply chains while increasing competition between them in attracting containerized cargo. It also contributes to scholarly knowledge of ideational aspects of infrastructural development, whilst presenting novel empirical accounts of Djibouti and Berbera, two understudied cities in urban research and in area studies.

To examine narratives and branding strategies in port infrastructural developments in Berbera and Djibouti-city, we used a multi-sited and comparative research approach where 120 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023 in Djibouti, capital city of Djibouti, and Berbera, the major port city in Somaliland. The Somaliland sample includes interviews with government officials in the capital city Hargeisa, and with residents in Toc Wajaale, a border town at the newly built transport corridor to Ethiopia. This approach allows drawing comparisons and showing connections between research sites. Most interviews were conducted by our partner organisations,[1] who used their contacts and networks to interview governmental actors at national and city level, port authorities and managers, and prominent businesspeople. They used snowball sampling to interview people engaged with ports, including shipyard workers, porters, truck drivers, businesspeople, and restaurant owners. In Djibouti, access to government officials was limited, due to the political sensitivity that

[1] Our partner organisations are the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Hargeisa in Somaliland and L'Institut de Recherche indépendant de la Corne de l'Afrique (IRICA) in Djibouti. This collaboration is part of the project 'Port Infrastructure, International Politics, and Everyday Life in the Horn of Africa', based on collaborative research between researchers and institutions in Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

surrounds the port. We relied on publicly accessible governmental statements and documents. In Somaliland, only a few documents are available, but access to governmental officials and port authorities was easier. We acknowledge the limitation of a sample gained through established networks and snowballing, as opposing voices may have been lost, and only people who work with and alongside the port, thus likely to benefit more from its modernisation, were interviewed. To control this bias, we included in both cities a smaller sample of city residents who are not directly engaged with the port.

An evolving literature links infrastructure development to both stateformation and experinces of citizenship, with infrastructural access being interpreted as central for political inclusion and national identity formation. Scholars have pointed to the discursive side of infrastructure-led development and shown how these physical artefacts become the funnels through which identities evolve (Anand et al., 2018; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Noort, 2020). Larkin (2013, p. 152) drew attention to the indivisibility of the politics and poetics of infrastructure and discussed how material objects are tightly associated to an envisioned future'. Others have explicated that infrastructures allow the roll-out of governmental power across state territories, linking citizens to a state's administrative apparatus while drafting national identities (Guldi, 2012; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Kurtiç & Nucho, 2022; Merriman & Jones, 2017).

Most of this literature, however, engages with roads, electricity grids, hydraulic networks, and sanitation (e.g, Truelove & Cornea, 2020; Akhter, 2015; Morales et al., 2014), while the examination of port infrastructures and their relation to identiy formations have not received similar attention. Our research was inspired by antrhopolotical and sociological studies on 'everyday nationalism' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) following questions of how ordinary people engage with and enact (also ignore or deflect) stories of national belonging in the contexts of their everyday lives. We, used the port developments as a lens to study such enactments of identities across a spectrum of urban dwellers, looking at both societal elites and ordinary citizens and contrasting their responses with the models and narrative promoted by international investors. We developed a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide, which had one section with questions related to belonging and identity. To avoid politicization, we did not question directly ask about interviewees 'identities', but aimed at letting the topic emerge during the discussion and in futher questions about their urban and family background, the relevance the port has for their, and what they expect from the port for their own lives. In short, we asked about what the port means to them, how their relations to the port evolved as the port modernized and changed the city and their lives.

Interviewers followed the answers of the interviewees, without sticking too close to the interview guideline. In this way, we aimed at capturing a broad range of discourses of belonging in both port cities, while be able to differentiate more, official 'narratives proposed, propagated, and discursively articulated by political elites, from the way in which ordinary citizens relate to these narratives, i.e. appropriate, subvert, evade, or transform them (Brubaker et al. 2008, 12) or even develop alternative stories. We expected differences between narratives promoted by government officials and other politico-economic elites, who are often acting as 'identity entrepreneurs' (Fauchart and Gruber 2020) and, through their access to state resources, media, and official channels, are able to promote city branding. However, we found in both cities that narratives by elites and ordingary citizens did not differ significantly, and interpret this finding as public affirmation of elite discourses and as indication that narratives and branding strategies by societal elites reverberate at societal levels. They also point to the deep entanglement of infrstructure development with similar, modern expectations of development, enhanced connectivity and future prosperity. In this respect, we were intrigued

by the similarity of narratives, the hope and positive outlook aligned to the port. This included the repetitive use of spatial and somatic metaphors in interviews, which we interpret as evidence for the development of collective imaginaries aligned with port modernisations.

We comparatively studied the development of port infrastructure in Djibouti-city and Berbera. Both cities are located along the Gulf of Aden, with international port operators copeting for access to manage and modernize their ports and wider transport and production infrastructure, including the development of free zones and dry ports. The close vicinity of Berbera and Djibouti-city, both competing for cargo en-route to Ethiopia, further rationalizes the comparison. Both ports received large-scale investments by the Emirati global port operator Dubai Port World (DP-World), but the company was ousted in Djibouti and replaced by China Merchants Port (CMP). This allowed us to compare differences in the models international investors propagate, resepectively the Dubai model promoted by the UAE and the Shekou model by China. Both models, as we discuss below, led to the re-invention of experiences in the host countries, interwoven by temporally and spatially distinct experiences along with expectations already fulfilled elsewhere.

The article proceeds as follow. First, we present the theoretical foundation of our argument and show how infrastructures stimulate narratives that rework and embed the past and future into the present and re-shape urban and national identities by embedding them in horizons of expectations inspired by an elsewhere. We also clarify our focus on narratives, promoted by both investors and political elites as they aim at (re-)branding spaces to justify port modernizations but also 'to sell' their cities to investors and cargo operatores. Second, we examine the case of Djibouti and explore how the political elites promote a narrative where this small state's *raison d'etre* is tied to the expansion of port infrastructures. We show how interviewees embraced Emirati and Chinese investors 'branding' — following the Dubai or Shekou model — but interwove them with key features of Djibouti's distinct historic narrative. Third, we examine how the modernization of Berbera port in Somaliland is used to narrate the country's peaceful transition and state-building success, differentiating the country from its neighbours. We found Somalilanders to embrace homogenising narratives of infrastructure-led development, dreaming of becoming Dubai or Singapore, and interpreting this becoming as crucial for the country's quest for international recognition. In both countries, the narratives illustrate how spaces of existential experience and expectations of future possibilities were blended with experiences made elsewhere.

Experience Made Elsewhere: Narratives and Branding of Infrastructures

Port cities in the Horn of Africa are often depicted as the main gateways to the African continent. Their strategic importance is derived from their geographic position opposite to the Middle East and along one of the globally most frequented commercial sea routes: the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean. This sea route carries over 30% of today's obal cargo (Zeljko et al., 2024).

Over the past two decades, established and ascending political powers competed over access to ports along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including the UAE, China, Russia, UK, USA, France, Turkey, and Qatar. These powers invested heavily in infrastructures, mainly ports, but also airports, roads, transport corridors, and trainlines. Such foreign investments are usually interpreted either as a repetition of colonial experiences of resource appropriation and foreign domination or as a promise to cure economic underperformance, allowing African states to catch up (Langan, 2018). We argue that while many cities in the Global North debate their

industrial endpoints moving into post-industrial futures (see SI introduction), their counterparts in the Global South discuss other endpoints, a break with experiences of colonisation linked to the hope of diminishing asymmetries in a global system dominated by the 'West'. In this way, this article speaks to the special issues' focus on endpoints: the contemporary modernisation of African port infrastructures in the context of the global logistic revolution changes the way in which urban futures are envisaged, realigning past, present and future in novel ways that align to the logistic language of connetions, networks, nodes and mobilities. However, whilst endpoints often imply a loss of certainty, as outlined in the introduction to the special issue, we found that infrastructure development are rather fostering dreams of a better future and are accompanied by optimism and the hope that the deep ontological insecurity that structure the everyday of many urban residents in the Horn of Africa, are eventually coming to an end.

Port cities go through processes of homogenisation (Vormann, 2014). Large scale infrastructural developments inevitably homogenize space, as the efficient organisation of flows requires standard forms, equalizes designs and diffuses transferable metrics and measurement (Bakonyi and Darwich 2024). The relationship between (urban) space, memory, and identity, however, remains far from clear-cut. Cities have demonstrated astonishing resilience, and rather than pointing to mere homogenization, scholars nowadays emphasize how the tension between local histories and global forces shape different forms of urbanism (Mah, 2014; McFarlane, 2018; Mocca, 2022; Murray, 2017; Philo et al., 2019). Infrastructural megaprojects inevitably affect societies as they unsettle experiences, trigger re-orientations, and lead to expectations of change (Anand et al., 2018). During such moments of existential transformation (or endpoints), political elites tend to invest in strategic narratives that embrace societal alternations while selecting and preserving some foundational identity elements that provide continuity and stability (Subotić, 2016).

Our comparative analysis of infrastructure narratives drew inspiration from Koselleck's (2004) emphasis that past and future are developed in the present. He identified experiences and expectations as 'anthropological givens' that are tightly interlinked and cannot exist without each other (Koselleck, 2004, p. 257-58). Experiences are anchored in milieus, constituting 'spaces of experience' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 258) that are brought into the present from where they open 'horizons of expectations', that is speculations of how the future might unfold. Speculations, however, are rooted in social memory and based on experiences that 'bind together fulfilled or missed promises' as they attend to the 'yet to be reached' (Pickering, 2004, p. 277). In this vein, infrastructures not only connect places but also rewrite time; they are embedded in narratives that rework past experiences (present past) in line with expectations of future changes (present future).

Building on Koselleck's notions of experience and expectation, we broaden his theorization of time and space by linking the conceptual twins to an elsewhere. We found that in their explanations of contemporary infrastructure development, interviewees are not only continuously interweaving and stitching together 'layers of time' (Koselleck, 2003) but connect them with 'layers of space' (Schulz-Forberg, 2013, pp. 41, 49). This practice becomes particularly pronounced during ruptures and in moments of (radical) change, when narratives tend to denote endpoints, depicting that infrastructures will end what was before and open horizons with previously unknown possibilities. International investors and logistics companies play a crucial role in the projection of new horizons of expectations as they propagate idealized models (or brands) of development that follow experiences of 'successful' modernization of other (port) cities and, thus, promote expectations of the future that strips these experiences from their context. The de-contextualisation, de-localization, and diffusion

of port city models are promoted by various actors in internationalized networks (Jacobs, 2006, p. 3), including experts, port and city planners, logistics companies, governments, and transnational labour forces.

The diffusion of port city models can be read as an ongoing practice of not merely 'thinking' but building 'cities through elsewhere' (Robinson, 2016). On the one hand, the assimilation of experiences and their homogenization into a model allows for the projection of future possibilities in line with (idealized) experiences from other cities. Narratives that accompany large scale port city investments attempt to flatten out diversity (Jacobs, 2006, p. 7), However, the so far dominant Western models of urban development — Paris as paradigmatic model for modernity and Los Angeles for post-modernity — have gained unexpected competition from Southern cities, as Shekou and Dubai are now serving as models for urban development in the contest of the logistic revolution.

On the other hand, infrastructure projects do not evolve in a socio-material void. People in the Horn of Africa reinterpret their past experiences in the light of these models (present past) as they speculate about possible futures (horizons of expectations) that may well differ from pathways proposed by investors. In this respect, the analysis of memory and identity gained new traction. Due to increased global competition, political elites actively engage in branding exercises, thus repackaging places and emphasizing a distinct urban or national identity to demonstrate the city's or country's attractiveness to potential investors (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020; Wang, 2013). Urban branding tends to use cultural flagship projects that can distort and re-interpret 'cultural legacies and historical narratives' (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020, p. 151). It can also provide identity narratives, drawing on schematic templates that answer questions of who people are, point to their place in the world, and structure their relationship with others. Such schemes reframe a foundational understanding for what once was (the past) and for what ought to be (the future) (Wertsch, 2000, p. 518). In the context of such branding attempts, we define narratives as those elements of stories that provide a political purpose and serve political ends (Payne, 2001), selectively mobilising schematic historical features to justify political choices of the present (Roediger and Wertsch, 2008).

The following section comparatively examines the narratives and branding strategies that international investors and political elites promote in Djibouti and Somaliland in the context of ongoing infrastructural investments and port modernisation.

Djibouti: Searching for Distinctiveness in Models from Elsewhere

Djibouti's strategic importance lies in its geographic position at the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a geophysical narrowing between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and a choke point for ships travelling between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Since decolonization, this 'desolate' piece of land, which attempted to escape its colonial dependence on France, evolved into the main gateway to Ethiopia (Styan, 2016). The authoritarian regime of Ismael Omar Guelleh, in office since 1999, had ambitions to rescue Djibouti from its developmental quagmire. The regime relied on the country's maritime infrastructure adjacent to vital global waterways and tied its political survival to ongoing transformations of Djibouti city into a logistical hub and an entry to African markets (interview D10 and D11).

Several factors contributed to Djibouti's rising ambition but fragile success. Since the Ethiopia-Eritrea war from 1998-2000, Djibouti-port holds the logistical monopoly for trade with Ethiopia, an economic powerhouse in the region. Djibouti's unique position, identified as an 'unusual resource curse' (Brass, 2008), additionally turned this small state into a centre of

geopolitical competition over military bases in the context of the Global War on Terror (Le Gouriellec, 2020). Djibouti city hosts several overseas military bases, including those of France, the United States, and China (Cabestan, 2020a). Guelleh's grand plans for Djibouti was taken forward by a confident of the president, Abdulrahman Boreh, a businessman who used his close relations with Emirati business circles to broker a contract with DP-World to modernize Djibouti's port system.[2] In the early 2000s, under Guelleh and Boreh's guises, Djibouti secured investments from DP-World and other Emirati funds to build the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT), designed to expand a maritime-based logistic network across the country, including Djibouti Dry Port, Horizon Oil Terminal, and Djibouti Free Zone (Barton, 2023, pp. 89–98). Beyond DCT, three further Red Sea harbours, Tadjourah, Goubet, and Damerjog, were designed to facilitate the turn-over and processing of special products, such as minerals, petroleum products, livestock, and raw materials for industrial production (NDP 2020-24, p. 26-27).

These mega-infrastructural projects, facilitated through personal ties of a few key individuals, were accompanied by narratives of belonging promoted by the political elite. The development projects aligned the interests of external investors with those in Djibouti's presidential networks, and thus with individuals with political power and resource allocation capacity (Styan, 2016). The port was made a cultural flagship project and was used to brand the country as 'a strategic meeting point' since ancient times, able to provide interlinkages between different cultures and worlds. Located at the 'crossroad of the world', the city's strength is identified in its ability to adapt to a 'continuously changing world', connecting East and West Africa, Asia, and Europe (Port de Djibouti, 2015a, 2015b). As the country was transforming into 'a commercial and logistical hub of Africa', Djibouti was branded to become 'the Singapore of Africa' as expressed by Djibouti's then foreign affairs minister (Miguil 2017) or 'the lighthouse of the Red Sea', as President Guelleh highlighted in the National Development Plan (NDP, 2020) repeating an earlier statement during discussions of Djibouti's vision 2035, when the outcome note of the Worldbank (2014, p. 8) stated that Djibouti, in order to enhance its competitiveness, should position itself 'as the East African "lighthouse" for African and international companies'.

The Guelleh regime drew up new horizons of expectations that couched the port modernizations into a collective strive for development by turning from Djibouti from a mere land for military bases into a land of opportunities by opening its doors for external investment ventures. He used the language of logistics, emphasizing interlinkages, mobilities, connectivies and exchange, to attract international investors, first the Emirati giant DP-World and then China's largest port operator and logistics company CMG, through the group's port and logistics arm, China Merchants Port (CMP). Djibouti's recourse to external funders first from the UAE then China reflects pragmatism and alignment of interests. According to Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Djibouti's foreign affairs minister, 'it was quite natural that we raise our partnership with China. Neither Europe nor America were ready to build the infrastructure we needed. We are projecting our country into the future and looking after the well-being of our people' (cited in Bearak, 2019). Engaging with these models of development, we show in the remainder of this section how the regime in Djibouti narrated expectations by combining the

[2] Guelleh and Boreh subsequently fell out, often known as the 'Boreh affair', which initiated a protracted court case in London (Barton, 2021).

success of these models with a distinctiveness that reinforces Djibouti's unique role as logistics nation, being a 'natural connector' between different worlds and cultures.

Dubai of the Horn

Between 2002 and 2017, the Emirati-based global port operator and logistics giant, DP-World, made large-scale investments in Djibouti's port and city infrastructure, and in 2006, they agreed a 30-year concession to develop the Doraleh port and build a free zone. DP-World promoted its own brand, when it promised to transform Djibouti into the 'Dubai of the Horn' or the 'New Dubai' (AFP News Agency, 2015). Accordingly, Djibouti was to follow its own 'flagship model' of Jebel Ali port and free zone in Dubai, which provided a blueprint for infrastructure-led port development. DP-World designed a port that resembles Jebel Ali, built shopping malls that emulate those in Dubai, and engaged in a narrative imagining Djibouti as the 'protectorate of Dubai' (Barton, 2023, p. 99). For DP-World, Djibouti has become one among other ports acquired over five continents (DP-World, 2023a) and integrated in 'a global strategic network of port facilities' (Nicolson, 2006). Following DP-World investments in Djibouti, Emirati businessmen invested in real estate and tourism. In 2006, Dubai's Nakheel corporation (a DP-World subsidiary) inaugurated the first 5-star hotel and resort, the Kempinski Djibouti Palace Hotel, costing $400 millions to provide luxury accommodation for traders, investors, businesspeople, and tourists. Plans also included waterfront properties, tourist resorts, and shopping malls (Husain, 2006) — emulating the Dubai model.

The development of the container terminal under DP-World put the first stone in transforming the city while fostering an urban national identity transcending ethnic divides that marked political life since independence (Imbert-Vier, 2013). Instead, it depicts this small state as a 'crossroad' (Styan, 2016). Djibouti's political elites embraced these models, building their expectations on experiences of success elsewhere. As Slim Feriani, CEO of the Djibouti Sovereign Wealth Fund highlights: 'Singapore was a very poor swampy island in the 1970s, but today it is a global economic power, capitalizing on its port activities, financial services and tourism sector'. For him Djibouti can achieve a similar success: '[Djibouti] has no oil or gas, but it does have a strategic location, at the entrance to the Red Sea, at the crossroads of the major maritime routes linking Africa, Asia and Europe, where around 15% of the world's maritime traffic moves, which has enabled it to establish itself over the last twenty years as a global port hub' (both cited in Du Couëdic, 2024). The port development was accompanied by official narratives that branded Djibouti as a unique financial and maritime hub in the Horn of Africa. Connectivity became a key notion in the country's strategic development plan (NDP, 2020), blending ongoing infrastructure modernization with Djibouti's historic identity as a 'nation carrefour', a nation that facilitates multiple interconnectivities. Ahmed Saleh Farah, the vice-president of the international chamber of commerce and industry, attests how this identity narrative has been forged since independence: 'Djibouti is a place geographically privileged, located on the maritime trade connecting East, West, North, and South, one continent and another, races, cultures, countries, systems, and ports of the whole world. We find in Djiboutian society a unique culture that is different from the world [..] enriched by encounters' (cited in Laudouze, 1982, p. 105).

As port concessions are granted in a personalized and authoritarian fashion, involving the president and a closed-knit elite, the regime branded Djibouti with a specific identity to justify its decisions (interview D8, D9). These concessions signalled some changes in Djibouti's postcolonial dependency on Western powers, be it with respect to aid or investments. The cooperation with rising powers expanded the playing field and provided the political regime in

Djibouti with some level of bargaining power using sovereignty as a resource while protecting it. It remains to be seen whether the new investments can become an endpoint for Djibouti or lead into a vicious circle of new dependencies.

DP-World promoted Djibouti's emulation to the Dubai model, but the political elites provided a different meaning of Djibouti's unique position and its quest for modernization. These narratives revolved around actively propagating Djibouti's identity as a 'crossroad', emphasizing its historical and contemporary role in facilitating connection. Official narratives stressed the country's role as 'natural connector', long pre-dating the arrival of DP-World. Drawing on this unique spatial identity, a government official explained that it was Djibouti that gave Dubai its 'global outlook' (interview D1), as the company's first international investment abroad. Djiboutian officials re-narrated historical experiences adapting them to their future expectations: 'Since the pharaohs, we are relays. Since the departure to Indochina, we are a relay' (interview D5), thus 'it is in Djibouti's DNA to become a gateway' (interview D26). Some interviewees used Djibouti's geographic position to highlight a natural path, emphasizing 'that God has located us in this small place' (interview D5), branding the evolution of the city and country as 'the gift of the port' (interview D6), and the port as the 'lung of Djibouti' (interview D7). As an interviewee summarized, 'Djibouti lives in and from the port' (interview D7).

The modernization of the port and aligned infrastructures was not without contention. President Guelleh realized that the 2006 concession agreement had sold Djibouti's sovereignty too short. By 2012, the regime's position toward DP-World shifted with a desire to rewrite history of infrastructural development. In 2018, the disagreement with DP-World culminated in the nationalization of DP-World's assets in the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT) and its transfer to a newly established public company, 'Société de Gestion du Terminal de Doraleh (SGTD)' (Barton, 2023). Djibouti's justification highlighted the sovereignty issue and raised concerns that DP-World held a minority of the shares but took a managerial role, and the 30-year concession was simply too long. Guelleh took Djibouti's argument to several international courts, which declared the agreement with DP-World as legally binding (Oxford Analytica, 2018).

Djibouti promoted a narrative that DP-World underexploited DCT's capacity to protect its business in Jebel Ali. Djibouti's leadership felt constrained due to the exclusivity clause prohibiting development of other maritime infrastructure in Djibouti without DP-World consent (interview D1, D17). This view was matched in many interviews with citizens and port workers. A port worker mentioned: 'Djibouti can be big, but DP-World wanted us to stay small' (interview D1). These infrastructural developments awakened Djibouti's expectations, as another port worker highlighted, 'today we can defend our interests. Sometimes, small countries like Djibouti, have to say "yes" because our GDP does not allow investments. But why do we have to be capped when the only limit we can reach is the sky' (interview D17). While the agreement with DP-World provided a horizon of expectation for development and prosperity, based on the successful model of Jebel Ali, Djibouti's regime mobilized the society behind feelings of belonging to a nation, instilling patriotism around Djibouti's distinctiveness.

Djibouti: Transitioning to a Logistics Nation with China's Support?

After Djibouti's fallout with DP-World in 2018, the country further embraced its partnership with China, which provides another one-size-fit-all model based on the Shekou model, one of the early Chinese free zones and urban industrial parks developed by the state-owned China

Merchant Group (CMG), through its subsidiary CMP (Bagwandeen, 2021; Wan et al., 2020). In 2020, CMP reached an agreement with Djibouti to invest US$ 3 billion in the expansion of the port of Djibouti. These investments promise to transform Djibouti from a transit point to Ethiopia's trade into a regionally leading hub for trade, business, and logistics. CMP replicates the 'Port-Park-City' model that transformed Shekou from a small town into a metropolis of over 13 million people. The model entails the integration of the port, free zones, industrial parks, commercial buildings, highways, power plants, and residential areas (Cabestan 2020b).

Since 2012, CMP built Doraleh Multipurpose Port (DMP) and Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ). CMP designed a real estate complex on the site of Djibouti's old port to serve as 'integrated development platform' featuring a hotel, marina, business centre, and shopping mall. Like DP-World, China promoted a model flattening out historical and cultural differences in East Africa. In December 2022, we conducted a visit to the Red Sea Exhibition Centre (RSEC), which was inaugurated in June 2022 to show how the Shekou model is applied in Djibouti. The RSEC launched the vision for a 'New Djibouti', with imageries — illustrated in maps, graphs, photos, and short films — displayed to promote the transition from a rural, nomadic past to an urban future, envisioning a hub sitting at the crossroads between different worlds (Chiré et al., 2023). The visit to the RSEC concludes with the slogan: 'New Djibouti, prosperous future'.

Based on our observations, it is evident that the RSEC is a story of what a city decides to remember or abandon. While DP-World initiated Djibouti's infrastructure development for over a decade, the exhibition strategically ignored DP-World's crucial role. Instead, it promotes the story of a 'New Djibouti', emerging from CMP investments transforming Djibouti into a 'new Shekou'. The official narratives promoted by Djiboutian political elites maintain distinctiveness and difference, emphasizing an independent Djibouti that can devise its own vision for the future aligned with its aspirations and history, where China is only one among many international investors.

Berbera: A Port City with Dreams of Modernity

The port of Berbera is located on the southern shores of the Gulf of Aden. Smaller ports along the Somali side of the Gulf served for centuries as a main trading hub for the export of livestock from pastoralist networks that criss-cross the Horn of Africa. One of these ports in Berbera was developed first by Egypt (1870-84) and then Britain, which remade the port to direct livestock supplies to its colonial outpost in Aden (Yemen), a central station for maritime trade with India (Lewis, 1988, p. 40). Although the postcolonial Somali state concentrated its modernisation efforts on the southern part of the country, both Cold War superpowers invested heavily in the civil and military development of Berbera's port, the Soviet Union in the 1960s and the USA in the 1980s, attesting to Somalia's shifting Cold War alliances (Interview SL 66; SL 67; Matthies, 1990).

Berbera port remained a central hub for the export of livestock, which provided a large part of Somalia's revenues. With the rise of political tensions in the 1980s, the port's activities steadily declined and it eventually stopped operating at the start of the civil war in 1988. Following the collapse of Somalia's state apparatus, Somaliland declared its independence in May 1991 and embarked on a parallel process of peace and state building. Berbera port was reopened, but international trade continued to be affected by elite competition, clan-based tensions, violence, and rampant banditry.

Port-building as State-building

Today, the port in Berbera serves as an authoritative symbol of a sovereign Somaliland. The story of the port is intertwined with Somaliland's official narrative of successful peace and state-building. In these narratives, Berbera is described as a city that hosted the first series of peace conferences, which established the path for state independence after 1991. These stories usually ignore how Berbera port became the object of power struggles and violent confrontations between the newly established central government and local clans in early 1992 (Balthasar, 2013). The port conflict nearly dragged Somaliland into another civil war, until the then government managed to put the port under its control (Bradbury, 2008, p. 117). Most interviewees across Somaliland acknowledged the central role of the port for financing the state, accounting for two-thirds of Somaliland's revenues (Somaliland Ministry of Finance Development, 2020, p. 5). Customs and port fees enabled the building of a new state apparatus, including security and administrative infrastructures. Interviewees, therefore unsurprisingly, referred to the port as Somaliland's 'most important financial infrastructure' (interview SL4) and its 'only true resource' (interview SL9). Others used somatic metaphors that depicted the port as the 'main artery' (interview SL12), 'beating heart' (interview SL5), and 'heart' of the state (interview SL7, SL12).

According to an interviewee involved in negotiations with international port operators, officials from the UAE and Somaliland held informal negotiations about port modernisations for several years, but formal negotiations started in 2016 (interview SL68; SL69). The UAE then got its 'final push' (interview SL69), when Djibouti unilaterally ended the cooperation with DP-World. In 2017, Somaliland signed a 30-year concession agreement with DP-World to manage, expand, and modernize the port. The details of the deal were surrounded by secrecy. In a county that gains its legitimacy from balancing clan interests and cooperating with powerful business tycoons, the government's neglect of clan-based power arrangements in Berbera and the lack of consultation with local power holders (Musa & Horst, 2019) attest to the centralisation of governmental power in Hargeisa and to an increasingly authoritarian ruling style. This process alignes with experiences of other countries where big infrastructure development initiated processes of 'upscaling'. The outward focus of networked integration, the required negotiations with international investors, and the necessary planning skills for big-scale infrastructure disadvantaged local elites and empowered central state actors (Kanai &Schindler, 2019, p. 309-12).

Many Somalilanders were initially sceptical about the port deal. When stories about the business deal first started to circulate, they were dominated by suspicion that government officials were selling Somaliland's 'greatest economic asset' (Balthasar, 2013, p. 220) to a foreign country. These fears were not unfounded, as DP-World holds with over 50% a majority of the port's shares, Ethiopia was supposed to take 19% and the Somaliland government remained with 31% of the shares. In 2022, after Ethiopia did not take up its agreed 19% shares, the governmental finance institution British International Investment (before called CDC) partnered with DP-World (Irwin-Hunt, 2022) and brought in new investments (SL2). In 2018, Ethiopia's new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, promoted Somalia's unity and did, therefore, not stick to the initial port agreement with Somaliland (interview SL71). Most interviewees in Somaliland, however, remained optimistic, emphasizing that landlocked Ethiopia requires access to the sea, and will try to limit its dependence on Djibouti. Their optimism was confirmed in January 2024, when the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and President of Somaliland announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), where Ethiopia was to receive a strip of land on Somaliland's Red Sea coast for naval and commercial maritime use

and access to Berbera port in exchange for recognition of Somaliland as sovereign county. The MoU sparked diplomatic outrage (Bakonyi, 2024). Although, as of September 2024, no material steps towards the realization of the MOU were undertaken, tensions across the region remain high, and regional alliances have started to shift.

Berbera residents initially criticized the transfer of power from Berbera to Somaliland's capital Hargeisa and experienced the management by DP-World as a detachment of the port from the city (Stepputat et al., 2023, p. 90). However, the public mood shifted, at least in the Western part of Somaliland where infrastructure development and political power are concentrated. DP-World's speedy modernisation of the port opened-up new horizons of expectations, including the international recognition of Somaliland, which was in January 2024 again refuelled by the MoU with Ethiopia. One governmental officer in Hargeisa explained, that the port enhances 'political visibility in the eyes of the world'. To get political recognition, 'we need powerful countries who have an interest in the region' (SL71). Interviewees also pointed to increased international attention (SL10, SL18) that Somaliland received due to the successful port development and were convinced that the agreement with DP-World will lead to further investment opportunities (SL6, SL15).

The agreement was interpreted as proof of the de-facto sovereignty of Somaliland and a further milestone for the country's path towards recognition. DP-World investments were classified as the largest that Somaliland has ever received (interview SL7), and Somaliland was identified as the first 'unrecognized country in the world [that] has ever received such a crucial and long-term investment' by another country (interview SL3). According to interviewee SL2, investments show 'the world that Somaliland is stable, peaceful, can be invested in and is worth recognition'. Somaliland's stability and high level of security was regularly evoked in official statements about the port, not only to differentiate the country from its southern neighbour Somalia, but also from the wider region. When Somaliland's President Muse Bihi Abdi was asked about the future of the port, he emphasized: 'We offer security and safety. No one can work with you if they are not safe,' referring to the overall volatile security situation in the Horn (Abdi, 2020).

Port Infrastructure as Symbols of the Rise of Logistic Urbanism

The fast progress of DP-World in remodelling and expanding Berbera port and free zone, and the visibility of modern cranes together with the speedy expansion of the road network between the port city Berbera, the capital Hargeisa, and Toc-Wajaale, a border town to Ethiopia, have contributed to shifting the public mood. Photos with modern cranes lined up at Berbera's shores and piled up containers with huge ships docking at the port circulate on social media with statements expressing nationalist sentiments. 'Upon entering the city, the container cranes of the port are visible. In the past, the port never had such equipment' a Berbera city official summarized the success of the collaboration (interview SL1). He continued that 'anyone who travels on the new Berbera corridor realizes that Somaliland of yesterday no longer exists and that what we have now is a new Somaliland' (interview SL1). Like King's (1996, p. 91) analysis of the 'symbolic functions of architectural giantism' with high rise buildings representing urban forms of modernity, port architecture and logistic technologies — modern cranes, containers ships, and containers provide new symbols of 'political and cultural power' and 'economic virility' (King, 1996, p. 100) in a logistic age. In this respect the logistics revolution provides a crucial endpoint, giving rise to new forms of urbanism that residents in Berbera as well as Somaliland's political elites in Hargeisa envision as Somaliland's future.

The country is already depicted as a 'logistics nation' (interview SL7), providing services and delivering consumer goods to its landlocked neighbours and further towards Central Africa.

These visions also highlight the fungible quality and substitutability of places in global logistic networks leading to the intensification of inter-city competition for cargo (Danyluk, 2019). It is not too surprising that Somaliland's political elites, like their competitors in Djibouti, evoke notions of connectivity, describing Berbera as a gateway to Africa. In an interview with AfricaNews, Somaliland's President Muse Bihi Abdi (2019) stated: 'Berbera is important to Somaliland, to the Horn of Africa and to most of the Central African countries. It is a gateway that connects many African countries to the world. To the east, all the way to Asia, the sub-continent of India all the way to China. On the other side through the Suez Canal, it connects many African countries to the Middle East, to Europe and all the way to North America' (AfricaNews, 2019). In other interviews, the President brands Somaliland as a 'trading bridge to the Horn of Africa' with a port that functions as commercial hub and can become 'the biggest and best facility in East Africa' (Abdi, 2020). Such imaginaries highlighting connectivity and movement which reveal a departure from the 'old' modern dream of industrialisation, which is already replaced by the expectation of providing logistical support and services to others.

The port's high-end technology and the newly paved and expanded road that leads to the port gates stand in stark contrast with Berbera city's crumbling infrastructures and buildings, with inner-city roads not repaired for decades while many residential houses are in poor condition. Therefore, interviewees in Berbera referred to first experiences of economic change; the port employs people, provides them with stable income, and bears, with the further expansion of infrastructure, the promise of creating new jobs and business opportunities for Somalilanders. The trend towards urban growth and the enourmous spike in land prices in Berbera were interpreted as signs of the overall increased value of the city and Somaliland more generally, and of the hope that infrastructure development will bring prosperity, notwithstanding that most urban dwellers barely had access to quality housing or basic infrastructures, such as piped water or electricity.

Emulating Models while Emphasizing Similarity

Interviewees referred to Somaliland's past experiences, but in contrast to Djibouti hardly emphasised distinctiveness. At times, they tapped into a kind of collective nostalgia and talked about reviving the old port of Berbera, pointing to its past importance. One interviewee reminded that Berbera was the port where Richard Burton (2011) [1894] entered Africa, literally putting down his first footsteps in East Africa (interview SL71). Emphasizing the port's historical importance and the city's strategic location, others referred to the long history of maritime trade and emphasized Somaliland's cultural and economic closeness with the Arab world (interview SL68, SL69, SL71). Internationally circulating models of port city development shape future expectations as the port city Berbera envisioned to become like Singapore (interview SL5, SL7), or Dubai (interview SL4, SL40), or more specifically the 'Dubai of Africa' (interview SL40) among the 'biggest and busiest port in the region' (interview SL15). Somaliland's outlier position as unrecognized polity and its difficulties of operating in a world composed of sovereign states seem to make it more susceptible to tales of assimilation and homogenisation. These tales carry a promise of normalcy expected to stimulate investments and ease international trade. Interviewees, therefore, described their country as 'open', 'welcoming to foreigners', and 'full of untapped opportunities' (interview SL15).

Most interviews demonstrated enthusiasm and hope for a better future. They were eager to show that Somaliland was becoming different, not with respect to its investors or their models of urban development, but with respect to Somaliland's own past. Dubai's rapid urban transformation was considered a confirmation of Somaliland's potential for economic and political success. Ordinary Somalilanders align experiences from Dubai with their future possibilities, expecting that things in Somaliland will fall in the same place as they did in the Emirati city. Interviewees referred to the emulation of the Dubai model, even in smaller cities, such as the border town Toc-Wajaale, which, as a university lecturer explained, might soon look like Dubai, where people from all over the world will come to do business (interview SL38). Future visions for Somaliland matched the expectations formulated by both the Somaliland president and DP-World: 'DP-World's vision for Berbera is to develop it into a trade hub, taking advantage of its strategic location along one of the busiest sea routes in the world and access to the vast hinterland in the region, including Ethiopia' (DP-World, 2023b).

Conclusion

Port modernizations in the Horn of Africa triggered a broad range of narratives. International investors attempt to modernize ports and port cities following models of success, as Shekou in China and Dubai in the UAE. Port cities go through processes of homogenization, with infrastructures promoting standardized means of circulation, shortening circulation times, and diminishing frictions between movement on land and sea. These development models, based on provision of services and facilitation of movements, stand in contrast with the Global North model of development rather based on industrialisation followed by post-industrial transformation (see SI introduction). In their endeavour to containerize transport across the Horn of Africa, international companies promote models of port city development that emulate experiences from elsewhere. Attending to infrastructures as drivers of meaning making and identity formation, we demonstrated that the narrative agency of actors in Djibouti and Somaliland, who reworked historical narratives of port cities, highlight distinctive historical experiences of both port cities in facilitating connectivity across continents, while aspireing to create their own stories of past and future that aligns with the needs of the logistics revolutions. Narratives of progress are blended with elements of distinctiveness, as actors selectively revitalize past experiences while aligning them with expectations of a future that follows experiences made elsewhere.

Koselleck (2004; also Pickering, 2004) outlined that modernity's continuous transformations lead to dissonance between experiences and expectations to an extent that past experiences can no longer provide the ground for envisioning the future. Contrary to this, we demonstrated that actors in Djibouti and Somaliland envision their future by rooting it in experiences made elsewhere. This re-rooting opens up horizons of expectations that are no longer directly linked to the places in which they are inserted. Our conclusion alignes to findings of others, who showed that capitalism works through the de-localization and re-location of experience, diluting cultural differences until it becomes difficult to identify the particular social dynamics of one place without reference to an 'elsewhere' (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, p. 1162). Meanwhile, increased competition requires countries to develop narratives of difference.

After independence, Djibouti, a small country formed by imperial rivalry, mobilised a national narrative that aimed at moving from a ethnically divided to an inclusive national identity. Djibouti received massive investments and was confronted with models imported from aspiring global powers, most recently the UAE and China. Embracing narratives aligned to the investors' promoted models of urban developments, Djiboutians nonetheless highlight the

port's unique history and distinctiveness. Somaliland, in contrast, emphasizes its peaceful transition and security, but seemed to embrace homogenising elements of infrastructure-led developments, which are considered vital for Somaliland's quest for international recognition. In both cases, contradictory stories are blended into narratives of identity as they construct notions of belonging that align with port city projects but also aim at attracting cargo and investors, as ports and cities in the Horn of Africa enter increased competition with each other.

In both cities, the infrastructural development is a source of hope, imbricated in aspirations for development, modernity, and prosperity. This stitching of distant 'spaces of experiences' with 'horizons of expectations' defy simplified understandings that interpret infrastructure development as either new forms of colonization or colonial emancipation through South-South cooperation. The stories rather point to the travelling of ideas across time and space. Our findings, therefore, attest to layered rather than linear (modern) or circular (pre-modern) times and to overlapping spaces. African cities are adapting to the endless expansions and accelerated transitions that capitalism imposes, while trying to uphold distinctiveness and writing their own histories.

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Appendix

List of quoted interviews

To preserve anonymity, we provide neither names of interviewees nor exact dates of interviews.

Interview Code	Description of interviewee	Location	Date
SL1	Official, Central Bank of Somaliland	Hargeisa	May 2022
SL2	Official, Ministry of Public Works	Hargeisa	May 2022
SL3	Official, TradeMark East Africa	Hargeisa	June 2022
SL4	Official, Berbera Local Council	Hargeisa	June 2022
SL5	Official, Somaliland Freight & Forwarding Association	Hargeisa	June 2022
SL6	Official, Berbera Corridor Coordination Office	Hargeisa	July 2022
SL7	Official, Somaliland Special Economic Zones Authority	Hargeisa	August 2022
SL9	Businessman	Berbera	August 2022
SL10	Official, DPW Berbera	Berbera	August 2022
SL12	Official, Berbera Customs	Berbera	August 2022
SL15	Official, Planning of the Roads Development Authority	Hargeisa	January 2023
SL18	Official, DP-World Berbera	Hargeisa	April 2023
SL38	University Lecturer	Gabiley	March 2023
SL40	Official, Ministry of Trade and Tourism	Hargeisa	March 2023
SL66	Official, Berbera Port Authority	Berbera	May 2022
SL67	Employee, Cultural Centre	Hargeisa	May 2022
SL68	Official, Berbera Special Economic Zone	Berbera	May 2022
SL69	Official, Free Zone Authorities in Somaliland	Hargeisa	May 2022

SL70	Lawyer involved in the agreement between Somaliland and DP World	Hargeisa	May 2022
SL71	Official, Ministry of National Planning	Hargeisa	May 2022
SL72	Employee, Berbera Port Authority	Berbera	May 2022
D1	Port Employee	Djibouti	November 2022
D5	Parliamentarian in the opposition	Djibouti	April 2022
D6	Parliamentarian in the dominant party	Djibouti	April 2022
D7	Parliamentarian in the dominant party	Djibouti	April 2022
D10	Civil Servant	Djibouti	December 2022
D11	Civil Servant	Djibouti	December 2022
D17	Civil Servant	Djibouti	May 2022
D26	Journalist	Djibouti	May 2022