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(Re)making the margins: Frontier assemblages and brokerage in Hambantota, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of brokerage surrounding two moments of rupture (the tsunami and the end of the war) in Hambantota, a district in southern Sri Lanka and a key site of frontier development. We contrast the two development assemblages that emerged from these moments, examining how structural transformations shape the dynamics of brokerage, and how brokers mediate the effects of these transformations. By tracing the shifting fortunes of a local government broker, we reveal the changing power dynamics within these two assemblages, whilst highlighting how moments of rupture both open and shut down brokerage spaces.

KEYWORDS
assemblage, broker, brokerage, development, frontier, Hambantota, Sri Lanka

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article examines the role of brokerage in the recent frontier history of Hambantota, a historically marginalised district in southern Sri Lanka, which in recent years has become an important site of large-scale infrastructure development. We explore the dynamics of change surrounding two moments of rupture—the 2004 tsunami and the end of the war in 2009—and the emergence of two distinct frontier assemblages that appeared in response to these two inflection points. We draw on the concept of assemblage to capture the amalgam of actors, resources flows, institutions, forces, and affects, which became entangled across space and over time at these two frontier moments. We combine analysis of brokerage with an assemblage framework to illustrate how shifting assemblages create distinct ecologies of brokerage, which can amplify or limit the agency of brokers.

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This article is concerned with frontier brokers operating in moments of transitions. Many of the characteristics of frontier regions create a demand for brokers, including the existence of hybrid institutions, fragmented sovereignty, inaccessibility, and complex social and political boundaries (Goodhand et al., 2017; Yousef et al., 2018). In common with many countries affected by conflict or experiencing periods of societal transformation and governance transition, politics in Sri Lanka has been marked by volatility and prolonged periods of 'political unsettlement' (Bell & Pospisil, 2017), which has driven abrupt shifts in the dynamics of brokerage (Goodhand et al., 2021), as well as inflating the salience of brokerage (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018).

By focusing on frontier brokers and brokerage, we aim to tell a wider, relational story about Hambantota's recent history. As explored below, Hambantota has been depicted as an historically marginal and backward place, but in recent years, it became an important site of major infrastructural development and a key 'imaginative frontier' onto which nationalist visions of modernity have been projected. As well as challenging dominant narratives about Hambantota's recent rise, framed largely in relation to ideas of modernisation or geo-political struggle (Hamilton et al., 2014; Ruwanpura et al., 2020), our assemblage approach develops a more granular understanding of the complex constellations and oscillations of power that underpin Hambantota's recent transformations and helps us to look beyond the simple binaries of centre/periphery, and war/post-war that have framed many mainstream accounts. We identify two distinct but connected assemblages that emerged following two moments of rupture—one we have called a 'crisis assemblage', which grew out of the post-tsunami response, and the other an 'infrastructural assemblage', which emerged during the post-war investment boom.

This analysis of shifting assemblages provides the backdrop for a more complex reading of the role of frontier brokers in shaping volatile post-war transitions. We trace the story of 'Ameer', a local government official, who mediates between the central government bureaucracy, politicians, local communities, and international aid agencies. By examining shifts in Ameer's brokerage role across the two assemblages, we demonstrate the complex connections between structural transformations, ecologies of brokerage, and the fortunes of individual brokers. At the same time, our study highlights some of the specific challenges facing frontier brokers who operate in contexts of political volatility.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we develop conceptual connections between frontiers, assemblages and brokerage. We then turn to our case study, providing some background on Hambantota, a historically marginal—but politically significant—frontier district in the 'deep south' of Sri Lanka, followed by the 'frontier story' told in two chapters that are defined by two moments of rupture that transformed Hambantota and its place in the world, and which have given rise to two distinct but connected frontier assemblages. Within each assemblage we focus on the dynamics of brokerage, and in particular the rise and fall of 'Ameer', a government official and broker. His experience reveals some of the power dynamics and inner workings of these two assemblages. We finish with a set of analytical reflections related to the implications of this case for the wider literatures on brokerage, development and frontier assemblages.

2 | FRONTIER ASSEMBLAGES AND BROKERAGE

2.1 | Introducing frontiers

Frontiers are commonly understood as moving zones of transition or expansion. Frontiers are relational spaces; though often portrayed as peripheral, remote or disconnected, centres and peripheries exist in a dialectical tension with, and co-produce, one another.

Frontiers can also be understood as a particular kind of ideational space, marked by specific manifestations of state power and political authority. They conjure up particular narratives, myths and imaginaries that tend to emanate from metropolitan centres, and perform ideological work for certain groups and audiences. The anxieties and fantasies of the centre tend to get projected outwards and onto the margins. Conversely, counter hegemonic

imaginaries emerge from the margins which challenge the legitimacy of metropolitan elites, the central state or top-down development.

A recurring imaginary of the margins is the frontier as a wilderness space that is untouched and open for exploitation. This trope justifies progressive development and control (Tsing, 2004). Frontiers represent the discovery or invention of new resources (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Top-down development schemes are enacted in the name of progress. And 'progress' leads to disturbance (Tsing, 2015). Frontiers are crucial spaces that hold the key to economic expansion, development and growth—they offer a window into broader processes of managing risk, facilitating accumulation and dispossession, and reconfiguring sovereignty. Many of today's frontiers can be understood as zones of 'creative destruction' and transformation.

In Sri Lanka, the concept of the frontier has largely been associated with the North and East—a region with a distinct dry zone ecology and ethnic geography (with large concentrations of Tamils and Muslims), which has remained marginalised in relation to the Sinhala heartlands of the South and West and served as the site of state-led colonisation schemes (Bastian, 2020; Klem & Kelegama, 2020; Korf, 2009). While Hambantota's demographics and positionality differ from the frontier regions of the North and East, it is a district that has been marginalised politically and economically and has served as a key 'imaginative frontier' where competing visions of development have been projected and negotiated.

2.2 | Frontier assemblages

Assemblages are compositions that bring together heterogeneous elements—namely, encounters, interactions and relational practices, involving different forces and actors. The networks within assemblages are unstable and prone to breakdown. Rather than traversing across empty space, these networks play a role in 'making space', rendering it topological. Power is decentred, provisional and relational rather than operating through clearly defined hierarchies. Assemblages are therefore not driven by a singular logic; they are always in the process of becoming, the product of encounters and entanglements between multiple actants. The concept of the assemblage is useful for understanding 'settings characterised by complex public–private arrangements, different political economies, and multiple, yet often mediated, landscapes of meaning and power' (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018, p. 805), a set of features that resonate in the recent history of Hambantota.

Cons and Eilenberg (2019) draw on the notion of 'frontier assemblages' to provide a framework for thinking about the configurations, spatial dynamics and intertwined materialities that emerge in frontier spaces. In this article, we explore two distinct but connected assemblages—a 'crisis' and an 'infrastructural' assemblage.

Crisis assemblages have material and expressive components. Disasters are generative of new 'emotional', as well as political economies, producing feelings of trauma, nostalgia and loss, alongside new hopes, solidarities and visions. For example, the Asian tsunami caused widespread devastation and loss, whilst also shifting the configurations of power and giving rise to new development visions (e.g., 'build back better'). Processes of territorialisation reflected the 'imagined futures' of the powerful rather than those of the marginalized (McGowran & Donovan, 2021). Along Sri Lanka's southern coast, post-tsunami planning and reconstruction prioritized the business interests of developers and tourism over the concerns and needs of local fishermen and communities (Hyndman, 2008).

In relation to Hambantota's second chapter (the infrastructural assemblage), we draw upon Deborah Cowen's (2014) work on 'logistics assemblages' which focuses on the how capital and commodities are moved, pushed, coerced and circulated. Spatially, logistics prompts the integration of global economic space and Cowen zooms down to the specific places and moments—in particular, ports, gateway cities and their associated infrastructure—where these flows, forces and interests become entangled. Hamilton et al. (2014) apply a similar approach in their account of Hambantota's recent history, which they examine through a focus on the flow of material resources and ideas, emphasizing the need to critically interrogate the misleading abstractions (such as the

'string of pearls' theory or the idea that Hambantota Port constitutes a 'pure economic space') that shape popular understanding of the district's transformation.

As explored below, crisis and infrastructural assemblages share common features as amalgams of heterogeneous elements, and many of the actors and institutions involved remain the same; however, these two assemblages are also quite different—in relation to the resources and actors involved, the forms of (state and non-state) regulation, the imaginaries that animate them, the forms of resistance they mobilise, and their material and spatial effects.

An exploration of the different role of brokers in these two types of frontier assemblages helps deepen our understanding of their changing dynamics, the constellations and oscillations of power, the interactions, everyday practices and encounters across different parts of the assemblage and their effects 'on the ground'.

2.3 | Frontier brokers and assemblers

There is an emergent body of work on 'frontier assemblages' (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019), but except for a collection by Koster and van Leynseele (2018), there has been limited work which brings together the fields of brokerage and assemblages or focuses on brokerage within frontier assemblages.

Brokers are 'network specialists' whose ability to straddle multiple knowledge systems and life-worlds enables them to act as gatekeepers across various social 'synapses' or 'choke points' (James, 2011; Wolf, 1956). Koster and van Leynseele (2018) study the situated practices of brokers and their role as connective agents, assemblers and translators, emphasizing that brokers have their own position and point of view, pushing back against the tendency of assemblage thinking to 'write off' human agency (Jensen, 2018). This perspective provides a jumping off point for thinking about the role of brokers within frontier assemblages and specifically their positionality, dynamics and effects.

First, the *positionality* of frontier brokers is defined by the contexts and times in which they emerge, their own personal backgrounds and their locations within frontier assemblages.

Brokers occupy points of friction within political, economic or social systems that require and create opportunities for some form of intermediation. They act as both the connective tissue and point of friction within frontier assemblages, bringing together disparate elements and performing multiple roles—alignment, coordination, representation, translation, claim making—whilst also acting as gatekeepers, filtering flows of resources, capital, ideas and affects.

Frontier brokerage brings into focus the interstitial places within assemblages—how brokers assemble heterogeneous entities. These assemblages often happen under the radar, and it is often precisely the absence of formal, legible mechanisms to manage political, legal, economic, social encounters, that generates the opening for brokerage. Brokers are involved in acts of value translation—for example, translating centrist development visions into discourses and value systems that gain local traction in the frontier.

The *dynamics* of brokerage are bound up with the ambiguity and contradictions of brokers whose role as fixers is to address problems, but never fully resolve them. Some brokers experience temporary success in this role but are unable to adapt and are marginalised, (as in the case study presented below) whilst others may graduate from being a broker to a key decision-maker at the centre of power. For some, brokerage is a long-term career, while for others it is a short-term transitional phase.

Brokers are more than simply 'intermediaries' facilitating linkages and flows; they are also 'mediators', with a degree of autonomy, agency and power, enabling them to shape, regulate, and filter flows (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Latour, 2005, p. 39; Lewis & Mosse, 2006). As Goodhand et al.'s (2017) study of political brokerage in Eastern Sri Lanka has shown, brokers are rarely high-profile figures, but they are capable of playing a key role both in enacting the central government's post-war plans, whilst negotiating their effects. Brokerage may therefore have structural effects on wider systems of state and market power. Trajectories of change in the frontier regions are

rarely gradual and linear but marked by moments of rupture or 'punctuated equilibrium'. Before turning to the dynamics of brokerage within Hambantota's shifting frontier assemblages, we will briefly outline our methodology.

3 | METHODS

This article draws primarily on research conducted between 2016 and 2019 as part of a comparative project, which explored post-war transitions in five borderland and frontier regions in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Over 250 semi-structured interviews were conducted across both countries as well as 20 life histories of 'frontier brokers' (key individuals who mediate between national and local levels and between centre and periphery), which involved extended repeat interviews. We selected a sample of frontier brokers who varied in their origins, identity, gender, brokering and professional roles. The main broker examined in this article—'Ameer'—was selected, not because he is representative of a wider group, but because his experience highlights how brokerage dynamics shift during moments of rupture. Political brokerage, which is the primary focus of this paper, is a highly masculine space. Whilst female political brokers exist, there are limited spaces for women to inhabit key brokering roles. For example, a prominent female politician from the district explained that it was hard for women to succeed in district-level politics without contravening social norms: 'Men will sit around drinking with other men in the electorate, talking with them, but we women cannot do such things'.[1]

Researching brokers generates significant ethical and methodological challenges. First, our life histories had to reconcile conflicting accounts of brokers' roles, which was overcome by carefully triangulating findings with a wide range of respondents. Second, some aspects of brokerage involved discussion of sensitive themes such as corruption, which raised security risks for informants and researchers. We mitigated these risks by anonymising informants and ensuring that the research team included researchers who were from, or had long-standing familiarity with, our research locales.

We conducted several life history and follow-up interviews with 'Ameer'. We triangulated findings from these interviews with other respondents in the district who were familiar with his work and who were involved in politics and development in Hambantota. These interlocuters were selected to provide us with perspectives from a variety of sectors and communities and included politicians, government officials, businesspeople, civil society representatives, and academics based both in Hambantota district and Colombo.

Our analysis of Hambantota's infrastructural boom draws primarily on interview data and analysis of secondary academic and policy literature, government data and news reports. Our analysis of the tsunami period drew on three sources. First, we conducted interviews with a variety of respondents about their experiences during this time. Second, we draw on the research team's long-standing experience of working and conducting research in Sri Lanka since the 1990s (Goodhand) and the 2000s (Walton). Throughout the research, we were supported by a team member who is from Hambantota district and has deep knowledge of the district's political dynamics, while Author B worked in the NGO sector in Sri Lanka during the tsunami response. Third, we draw on an extensive body of policy and academic literature examining the tsunami response in Sri Lanka, much of which has examined Hambantota specifically (Boano, 2009; Gamburd, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2014; Hollenbach, 2014; Jayasuriya et al., 2006; Korf et al., 2010; Mariyathas et al., 2016; Perera-Mubarak, 2012; Said, 2015).

4 | SRI LANKA'S POST-WAR TRANSITION AND THE RISE OF THE RAJAPAKSAS

The civil war between the Sri Lankan government and a Tamil separatist group—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—continued intermittently between 1983 and 2009. While the armed conflict with the LTTE was fought along

[1]Interview with politician, Colombo, 9 August 2016.

ethnic lines and most fighting took place in the North and East, many of those who fought in the army and lost their lives in the war came from Hambantota (Venugopal, 2018). Furthermore, this was not the only instance of widespread violent conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka. In 1971 and in the late 1980s, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a youth-based Sinhala nationalist group in the South, attempted to wrest power from the government through violent means. As discussed below, Hambantota constituted one of the JVP's heartland areas.

The story of Hambantota's rise is intertwined with the fortunes of the Rajapaksa family, who played a prominent role in Hambantota politics since independence but rose rapidly to dominate the national landscape after 2005. Mahinda Rajapaksa was Prime Minister at the time of the tsunami in 2004 and won the presidential election shortly afterwards in 2005. Rajapaksa mobilised along nationalist lines, centralised power and took a hard-line approach towards the LTTE, who were eventually defeated by government forces in 2009. After the war, there was a further concentration of power in the hands of the President and the Rajapaksa family, and levels of military spending rose steeply, with the former LTTE-held areas remaining heavily militarised (Goodhand & Walton, 2017). Large-scale infrastructure development projects drove high growth rates but generally failed to lift the living conditions of the poor, especially in the conflict-affected regions of the North and East (Sarvananthan, 2016). As power coalesced around the Rajapaksa family, there were growing concerns about corruption (Mampilly, 2011).

These issues contributed to Rajapaksa's defeat in the 2015 Presidential election. The victorious 'good governance' (*Yahapaalanaya*) coalition, however, remained divided and struggled to implement its agenda. This provided space for the Rajapaksas to regroup and establish a new political party—the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—which won successive elections culminating in a victory for Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Mahinda's brother) in the 2019 Presidential election. Another important feature of the post-war period was a growth anti-Muslim violence with major episodes in 2014, 2018 and 2019.

4.1 | Hambantota as a development frontier

Hambantota is a southern coastal district, some 200 km south of Colombo. Although one of Sri Lanka's poorest and most marginal districts, historically Hambantota was a key trading hub within the wider Indian ocean region, where salt and other spices were traded with China, Siam, and Indonesia, and transported inland (Mariyathas et al., 2016). The large Malay and Sri Lankan Muslim community in Hambantota town played a key role in this trade.

Hambantota can be understood as an 'imaginative frontier' (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019) where notions of peripherality and competing visions of the state, development and modernity have been projected and contested. Post-independence Hambantota was a site where shifting visions of development were enacted and tested, from the Norwegian-supported Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) of the 1970s and 80s, to the Chinese-funded mega-infrastructure projects in the 2010s. At the same time, its development path has been shaped by immanent processes of development (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) associated with globalisation and market expansion, as well as moments of rupture such as the war (and its ending) and the tsunami. Together these immanent and planned processes have shaped Hambatota's position as a frontier space that is simultaneously seen to be lagging behind yet ripe for investment and development (Hamilton et al., 2014).

Since colonial times, processes of development have been highly uneven, contributing to stark differences in living standards between the poorer inland regions and the wealthier coastal towns. The district's population is predominantly Sinhalese (97%), with small communities of Malay Muslims (1.4%) and Sri Lanka Muslims (1.1%) concentrated in the urban areas, particularly in Hambantota town, where 24% of the population are Muslim (GoSL, 2012).

The portrayal of Hambantota as backward and marginalised is perhaps most famously captured in Leonard Woolf's novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), based on his time serving as a colonial official in the interior of Hambantota district (1908–1911), which was later popularised by a widely known Sinhala-language film. This depicts a harsh frontier region 'continuously pressed in' by surrounding jungle. In the post-independence era, Hambantota's

status declined further as poverty rates increased, and it became known as a 'punishment posting' for government workers.[2]

In conditions of rising expectations alongside declining economic opportunities in both the rural and urban sectors, the district became a heartland of the youth-based Marxist-Leninist movement, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, lit. People's Liberation Front), which staged two armed insurgencies in 1971 and 1988, and mobilised around themes of centre-periphery inequalities, high youth unemployment, and the pernicious influence of Colombo-centred patronage politics. A refrain common with JVPers during this period '*Kolambata kiri, apata kekiri*' (milk for Colombo, *kekiri* [a type of gourd] for us) captured the perceived divide between the centre and the periphery (Hughes, 2013).

Hambantota's role as an imaginative frontier must also be understood within a wider spatial imaginary of Sinhala nationalism; an ideology that celebrated rural Sinhalese, Buddhist values, and the role of the state as a welfare provider and protector of peasant agriculture (Rampton, 2011; Venugopal, 2018). This ideology was increasingly in tension with Sri Lanka's economic trajectory since the late 1970s, when the economy was liberalised, leading to a diminished role for agriculture that intensified the 'reproduction squeeze' facing the rural peasantry.

Economic liberalisation compounded longstanding contradictions between nationalism, state-building and development, which were felt most acutely in frontier regions. On the one hand, the Sinhala state valorised the peasantry, delivering development projects and initiatives that supported agriculture through irrigation schemes and subsidies. Large-scale resettlement and irrigation schemes such as the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project (AMDP [1979–1995]) were couched in Sinhala nationalist tropes and sought to benefit the Sinhalese rural masses from districts like Hambantota, who were settled in the newly irrigated zones in the East. On the other hand, market liberalisation exposed rural small holders in the periphery—who in the south were a core constituency of the Sinhala state—to regional and global competition. Rebellions in the south and the northeast were brutally suppressed, fuelling resentment towards Colombo's cosmopolitan elites. While nationalism and economic liberalisation transformed the peripheries, these processes also reshaped the capital city Colombo, which became more closely associated in the public imagination with commercial and foreign interests (Nagaraj, 2016).

These developmental and security-driven impulses are closely intertwined. Development interventions in Hambantota were partly driven by concerns about youth unemployment and the need to prevent future rebellion. An Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), was initiated in 1979 by the Norwegian government, which focused on rural infrastructure, including irrigation tanks, in districts not benefitting from the AMDP.[3] Support for agricultural irrigation also formed a central plank of the development work of D.A. Rajapaksa, a leading Hambantota politician, and the father of Mahinda, Gotabaya and Chamal who became key members of a Rajapaksa family ruling dynasty in Sri Lanka after Mahinda became President in 2005.

4.2 | Brokerage and shifting assemblages in Hambantota

Against this historical backdrop, we now chart Hambantota's trajectory in two chapters, defined by two key inflection points—the tsunami of December 2004 and the ending of the civil war in May 2009—which were widely seen by people in the district as key turning points and were often referred to in the same breath as improvements in material living conditions. In doing so, we attempt to map out the emergence of two distinct but related frontier assemblages—a crisis assemblage and an infrastructure assemblage—and to examine the dynamics of brokerage within these assemblages as well as their transformatory effects on the political, economic and social landscapes.

In the first chapter, we examine the emergence of a 'crisis assemblage' in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. This was associated with the circulation of new financial flows, resources and ideas and the influx of new actors

[2]Interview with Hambantota resident, 6 July 2016.

[3]Interview with former IRDP official, Colombo, 17 September 2017.

TABLE 1 Key features of the crisis and infrastructure assemblages

Frontier imaginary	Governance and key actors	Resources/flows	Brokerage	Distributional effects
Crisis International solidarity, alleviating humanitarian needs, responding to trauma, managing risk, protecting communities, 'building back better' and entrepreneurship.	Western, international orientation, diffuse, fragmented, decentralised authority; infrastructure to service NGOs (guesthouses, hotels etc.). **Key actors**: international donors, NGOs, diaspora groups, private companies, and religious organisations, which became entangled with local civil society organisations and various branches and levels of the Sri Lankan state, including special funds and task forces (e.g., Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation [TAFREN]).	International aid, multiple streams, rapid influx –overloading local capacities; capillary action of resource flows – money, commodities, employment opportunities—mediated through local authorities at provincial, district and GS level. Some flows circumvent government authority altogether – e.g., diaspora networks, home town associations; multiple accountabilities and reporting; large scale 'wastage', duplication, corruption and loss of resources	**Positionality** Fragmented and sometimes chaotic response creates opportunities for multiple brokers involved in assembling coalitions, mediating diverse flows, translating (literally and figuratively) between international and local agendas **Dynamics** Tsunami opportunities allow some brokers with relevant skills like Ameer and Aruna to expand their networks and operations	Broad-based trickle down – linked to new resources and employment opportunities – but uneven spatial and social effects (development focused on coastal strip). Increased inequalities within Hambantota between hinterlands and key hubs. And at a national level more resources flowed faster to South than Eastern coastal areas. Tourist developments displaced or marginalised some coastal communities. NGO projects that accentuated pre-existing intra-community divisions and power imbalances.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Frontier imaginary	Governance and key actors	Resources/flows	Brokerage	Distributional effects
Infrastructure Modernisation, new alignments and connectivities, nationalist heartland and frontier, development futures.	Chinese funded, UDA-led, centralised, military-political-private sector partnerships, streamlined, hierarchical structure—though in practice multiple layers of contracting. **Key Actors:** Chinese banks (led by the state-owned China Exim Bank), Chinese and Sri Lankan state-owned enterprises such as China Merchants Port Holdings and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, Sri Lankan government ministries, international and local private management firms, consultancies and contractors Debt and governance; policing of labour. Infrastructure to service Chinese workers—bars, prostitution etc.	Top-down, regulated, large-scale and sequenced. Flows are tightly managed and funnelled.	**Positionality** Smaller number of powerful brokers with political connections like Aruna. **Dynamics** Narrowing of spaces and opportunities for frontier brokers	Dispossession linked to land reserved for construction. Imported labour. Limited trickle-down effects. Economic opportunities concentrated amongst metropolitan elites and a small group of powerful, politically connected families and brokers.

(see Table 1 for further details). This loose and volatile assemblage of institutions, people, commodities, financial flows, and ideas, performed different roles—filtering and identifying beneficiaries, transferring money and materials, translating local discourses, enrolling public support, zoning costal land for large-scale development—which in turn had diverse material and ideational effects—transforming the physical and social infrastructure, generating conflict with local coastal communities, shaping the distribution of wealth and poverty, which in turn prompted distributive conflicts and counter-discourses linked to foreign interference.

In the second chapter, we map the emergence of a post-war 'infrastructural assemblage', when Hambantota became a hub in a peacetime infrastructure boom and the site of several 'mega' infrastructure projects. These included the new Hambantota Port (phase one was completed in 2010), an international cricket stadium (completed in 2011), Sri Lanka's second international airport (2014), and the construction of new road links connecting the district to the main southern expressway. This assemblage, like the crisis assemblage, was highly internationalized, but involved very different actors, resource flows and brokering arrangements (see Table 1).

Against this wider account of post-tsunami and post-war transition we interweave the life history of a mid-level Muslim broker from Hambantota town employed as an official in the Urban Development Authority (UDA), who we call 'Ameer'.[4] In the first chapter, he rises to prominence as a trusted local official, and a loyal ally of Chamal Rajapaksa, a prominent local politician and brother of the President. In the second chapter, Ameer is buffeted by political turbulence at the national and local levels, eventually removing himself from local politics as Chamal is increasingly side-lined by the faction of President Mahinda Rakapaksa's son, Namal.

Ameer performs a variety of roles. In the first chapter, he connects or 'assembles' a jumbled set of actors who hurriedly came together in the aftermath of the tsunami, mediating and directing the flow of resources and materials. As well as facilitating material flows, figures like Ameer were needed to accommodate and translate (both figuratively and literally) the diverse goals and agendas of international, national and local players, and to help choreograph an often chaotic response. During this period, he carved out a position as a local fixer, supporting Chamal Rajapaksa's development agenda. But in the second chapter, his politically constrained and ephemeral role as a fixer becomes apparent. His experience sheds light on the shifting dynamics of brokerage associated with these two frontier assemblages. A focus on Ameer's changing circumstances and the wider dynamics of brokerage reveals both the power and precarity of frontier brokers during moments of transformation and rupture.

Ameer's brokerage is shaped by his identity as a Muslim. Although Muslims constitute around 10% of the total population of Sri Lanka and only 2.5% of Hambantota district, they are a more prominent and long-standing minority in Hambantota town where they make up around 25% of the total population. Ameer's identity as a Muslim government official enabled him to maintain close ties with the Muslim community, whilst insulating him from the vicissitudes of caste-based Hambantota politics. This also helped him develop the trust of more powerful Sinhalese politicians and officials. As explored below, however, his position as a Muslim also limited his room for manoeuvre and made him vulnerable in the context of rising post-war anti-Muslim sentiment.

5 | CHAPTER 1: TSUNAMI AND THE 'CRISIS ASSEMBLAGE'

The December 2004 tsunami crashed into the lives of the people of Hambantota with a devastating impact. One resident of Hambantota town, whose house was destroyed by the tsunami, remembers the aftermath; 'We could not recognize Hambantota. It was chaotic … The injured were lying around in various places … and there was mud and dead bodies all over the place'.[5]

Over 30,000 people were killed across Sri Lanka, more than half a million displaced, and over 1000 km of coast-line were destroyed (Boano, 2009). In Hambantota, 4500 deaths were reported, the second highest in the country.

[4]The UDA was brought under direct control of the Defence Minister in 2010 and therefore took on a more politically prominent role in the second chapter of this story.

[5]Interview with resident of Hambantota town, 20 August 2016.

The rapid arrival of resources, actors and ideas became known as a 'second tsunami' or 'golden wave' (Gamburd, 2013). This galvanized a chaotically constructed 'crisis' assemblage of NGOs, local businesses, local political players, and community leaders who quickly adjusted to and exploited the opportunities that came with this new influx (Perera-Mubarak, 2012).

An estimated $1.1 billion flowed into Sri Lanka during this period, funding the construction of temporary and permanent housing, schools, the reconstruction of infrastructure, and replacing fishing boats (Jayasuriya & McCawley, 2010). Money and materials flowed into Hambantota, as did a small army of NGO workers, volunteers, military and government officials, in addition to masons, carpenters and labourers, gravitating towards the new opportunities created by post-tsunami reconstruction. The response in the southern districts was significantly faster and more comprehensive than in the conflict-affected North and East (Jayasuriya et al., 2006).

While the response in Hambantota was relatively quick, there was a lack of consultation with communities, which resulted in the wasteful and uneven distribution of resources, including the construction of poor-quality housing. The hurried and ad hoc nature of the response created demand for brokers who could fill information gaps and overcome language barriers, while generating opportunities for officials, politicians and community leaders to misappropriate resources (Korf et al., 2010; Perera-Mubarak, 2012).

The government imposed a 'buffer zone', preventing the rebuilding of homes within 100 m of the sea. The official reasoning was to protect against future disasters, but the policy also built on familiar conceptions of Hambantota as a development frontier ripe for exploitation and served the wider economic agenda of the government and large corporations by creating space for new high-end tourism resorts (Mariyathas et al., 2016). Across the Hambantota coastline, fisher communities and other poorer residents living in the buffer zone were displaced and dispossessed, and new tourist resorts were constructed.

Despite the devastating consequences for poorer coastal residents—which were heavily gendered[6]—and the highly unequal distribution of resources, there was a general sense that the infusion of money and resources cumulatively had a positive impact on the district (De Mel, 2007; Perera-Mubarak, 2013; Ruwanpura, 2008). As one resident commented: 'it was a blessing in disguise. It changed the entire landscape here. For years, nothing happened here … But the tsunami brought everything from water lines, to roads, to housing schemes. There were lots of run-down areas where the poor lived. All of them got houses'.[7] In contrast to the mega-infrastructure projects discussed in the second chapter, the crisis assemblage was relatively broad-based, diffuse and decentred involving many players and low barriers to entry (see Table 1). The benefits of these engagements spread widely, reaching a range of enterprising individuals and local businesses along the southern coast. Small shops in towns along the coast boomed, tour operators and hotel owners scaled-up their operations and local land brokers benefitted from an upsurge in demand for coastal land from foreigners and Sri Lankan entrepreneurs (Gamburd, 2013). The international donor discourse melded together ideas of entrepreneurship with touristic visions of an exotic, yet regulated frontier paradise, which the buffer zone policy and the displacement of poor coastal communities seemed to facilitate (Said, 2015, p. 57).

Although benefits spread widely, impacts were highly uneven. Development occurred along the narrow coastal belt, intensifying the relative marginalisation of inland regions. The tsunami response was also blighted by corruption; a media investigation found that millions of rupees of tsunami funding were siphoned off by Mahinda Rajapaksa (then Prime Minister) into a private account (Gamburd, 2013; Perera-Mubarak, 2012).

For many interviewees, the speed and scale of the response in Hambantota stemmed from its status as the home of the then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, a view shared by Ameer who saw this as a 'period of opportunity', when the district had 'direct access' to the central government via Rajapaksa. International dignitaries flocked to Hambantota: as one interviewee commented 'even Kofi Annan came here. We were on BBC'.[8] The

[6]Women were disproportionately affected by the tsunami; more women died than men, they were subject to sexual and gender-based violence in the camps, they were under-represented in decision making processes relating to reconstruction, and their employment and livelihoods needs were prioritized less than men's (De Mel, 2007; Perera-Mubarak, 2013; Ruwanpura, 2008).

[7]Interview with Hambantota resident, 1 September 2016.

[8]Interview with Hambantota resident, 20 July 2016.

'second tsunami' opened up a new space in Hambantota for brokerage within the field of aid delivery and reconstruction; a new class of brokers emerged who were able to forge connections, jump scales (from the local to the international) and mediate the flow of resources, ideas and information (Perera-Mubarak, 2012). For example, the post-tsunami influx of NGOs spawned several gender-focused programmes, and an increased demand for female intermediaries. 'Sryani' was one such broker, hired by Oxfam GB to respond to the social and economic concerns of women affected by the tsunami. She, and others trained during this period, continued to act as brokers after the withdrawal of INGOs, in a range of fields including micro-enterprise, legal rights and community development.[9]

Ameer, as a leading figure in the UDA in Hambantota, was a key player in the post-tsunami reconstruction and development processes. Born to a middle-class Muslim family in Hambantota town, he was known as a 'doer' and someone who looked after his community. As we talked overlooking the old fishing harbour, he described how he had narrowly escaped with his life after the second tsunami wave swept him inland by hanging on to a king coconut (*thambili*) tree. 'These are my tsunami marks', he said, pointing to large scars on the back of his hands. He was one of the first to arrive at Hambantota hospital, witnessing scores of dead bodies.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, Ameer worked closely with Chamal Rajapaksa, the President's brother, then Deputy Minister, and in 2005 played a central role in tsunami reconstruction. Ameer was a junior official in the UDA, but his relatively strong command of English, his dynamic and open-minded character, and his local knowledge and planning expertise, made him a 'go to' individual for international donors and NGO representatives, and cemented his place as an important intermediary between communities and their representatives, the UDA, assorted national and local level officials, and (I)NGO representatives. Ameer and other brokers who could speak English played a role in reconciling the diverse and sometimes clashing visions of aid and development that came together in the tsunami response; 'foreign concepts swept ashore with the tsunami, but local cultural logic buffered their arrival' (Gamburd, 2013, p. 198). Using such translation skills, Ameer expanded his networks and his ambitions rose accordingly.

At times he was forced to make decisions 'against what people wanted'.[10] One tense episode ensued when Ameer had to demarcate the buffer zone around Hambantota town (initially a 200 m zone, later reduced to 100 m), which dispossessed many families of land they had owned for generations. Ameer recounts: 'They [the crowd of residents] were ready for me with *polu* [Sinhala: wooden sticks] to beat me and the presence of the Police and Navy did nothing to stop them'.

He requested greater police protection, forming 'a 50-metre buffer in each direction of me! This is the only way I will be able to do my job'. He worked in the face of insults and heartfelt protests from residents, many of them Muslims, or people known to him since childhood ('You're one of us. Why are you doing it?'). Nevertheless, this episode boosted his career and his superiors were impressed by the way he conducted this sensitive work.

Throughout, Ameer demonstrated strong loyalty to Chamal Rajapaksa, who he admired for his strategic thinking and being a champion of the district ('he has a plan for Hambantota'). He began cultivating this link by delivering on small tasks handed down to him by Chamal in the early 2000s. This relationship deepened over time, to the extent that Ameer became known as 'Chamal's man'. He demonstrated his loyalty at the time of Hambantota market's relocation; one stallholder who was dissatisfied the decision, appealed to another local MP and then Deputy Minister, but Ameer stood firm in the face of pressure from the Minister.

The tsunami response, therefore, saw the sudden and poorly coordinated arrival of a 'crisis assemblage' of resources and ideas, seeping in capillary-like fashion into the varied communities and webs of social relations along the coastal belt. This decentred and diffuse assemblage generated a particular ecology of brokerage, which enabled a multiplicity of relatively small-scale fixers like Ameer to emerge and occupy key synapses that connected different scales, spaces, institutions and forces.

[9]Interview with 'Sryani', 16 August 2016.
[10]Interview with 'Ameer', 18 January 2018.

As explored in the next chapter, the infrastructure assemblage that emerged at war's end involved different sets of actors, resources flows and power relations, and this fundamentally shifted the dynamics of frontier brokerage in Hambantota—which was to have a major impact on Ameer's career as a broker.

6 | CHAPTER 2: NAVIGATING POST-WAR MEGA DEVELOPMENT—THE ‘INFRASTRUCTURAL ASSEMBLAGE’

The Rajapaksa government's post-war strategy prioritised economic development over demands for political reforms, accountability and transitional justice (Fonseka, 2017; Goodhand & Walton, 2017). Rajapaksa's second Presidential election manifesto in 2010 drew a sharp line between the ‘negative’ focus of the war years (focused on the elimination of terrorism) and the ‘positive’ agenda of the post-war period (focused on economic development). Post-war development became a point of convergence for global, national and local agendas, including the growing reach of Chinese capital into the Indian ocean region, a nationalist programme to develop and secure the peripheral regions, and a strategy for consolidating the power and legacy of the Rajapaksa dynasty.

The discursive dimensions of this new assemblage—rooted in progress, modernity and a prosperous future—contrasted sharply with imaginative dimensions of the crisis assemblage connected to solidarity and recovery. This development strategy, with its heavy focus on infrastructure, marked a shift in Sri Lanka's external relations, drawing on closer ties to regional donors, especially China, and minimizing reliance on western governments.[11] It also privileged economic growth, and effectively put on hold western-friendly market reforms that had been the hallmark of the previous UNP-led coalition (2001–2004). This strategy, which projected the rhetoric of anti-neoliberalism, alongside a focus on mass nationalist policies (Venugopal, 2018, p. 201) was partially successful, but masked deeper contradictions and tensions that were exposed in 2015 with Mahinda Rajapaksa's defeat in presidential elections.

Rajapaksa's post-war development agenda involved two spatial moves. First, it relied heavily on inflows of Chinese capital and evoked the imagery of the Silk Road, which challenged the western orientation of past development strategies and supported the revival of long-held aspirations to follow the development path of city states such as Singapore and Dubai.

Second, in contrast to his 2005 manifesto, the 2010 agenda explicitly prioritised the regions, giving a pre-eminent role to Hambantota district. The construction of a new port and airport were symbolically important and signalled a power shift away from the colonial capital, Colombo (Hamilton et al., 2014). During the post-war period, business elites and politicians in the South talked of the emergence of ‘Hambantota 7’, an upstart competitor to the elite ‘Colombo 7’ neighbourhood. The rise of Hambantota and the attachment of the Rajapaksa name to the new infrastructure[12] can be read as an attempt to challenge the traditional Colombo-centric political dynasties of the Bandaranaikes and the Senanayakes. But post-war development efforts in both the north east and the south were not entirely a moment of rupture—they were continuous with longstanding governmental concerns about curbing rebellious impulses in the periphery through compensatory development programmes. The post-war securitization of development efforts was also visible in institutional changes within the Sri Lankan government, as the UDA came under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence in 2010, as part of Mahinda Rajapaksa's ‘economic war’ to ‘rebuild the nation’ after the LTTE conflict.

Post-war Hambantota therefore became an important frontier space where longstanding development visions were recast and renegotiated, taking on a wider geopolitical significance (Hamilton et al., 2014), in the context of debates about China's alleged ‘debt trap’ diplomacy (see for example, Abi-Habib, 2018) as well as claims that Chinese investment in Hambantota port was driven by security interests (Khurana, 2008).[13] Controversy

[11]Attempts to ‘develop the south’ are not new and in 1995 when Chandrika Kumaratunga became President she created the Southern Development Authority.

[12]The port, airport and cricket stadium were all named after Mahinda Rajapaksa.

[13]The debt trap narrative in Hambantota has been widely critiqued (see Moramudali, 2019).

surrounding China's involvement in Hambantota intensified after Rajapaksa's defeat in 2015, after which the new coalition government renegotiated the terms of the lease on the port project. This decision led to protests in Hambantota, ostensibly on the grounds that selling a greater share to Chinese companies constituted a threat to Sri Lankan sovereignty but were in fact largely motivated by the loss of jobs to young loyalists of Namal Rajapaksa (Bastians, 2016).

Infrastructure development proceeded with remarkable speed in Hambantota district after the war. The first phase of the port was completed in 2010, the international cricket stadium in 2011, and the new airport and connecting highway in 2014. Echoing the experience of tsunami housing schemes, these mega infrastructure projects were heavily underutilised and labelled 'white elephants', whilst residents were again critical of the lack of community consultation and the limited benefits for them. As Ameer noted 'Hambantota has the resources but not social justice: the community does not know the way this town is developing – they are in the dark, so the situation is easily manipulated by politicians'.[14]

The inflow of resources into Hambantota that accompanied the infrastructural assemblage was of a far greater magnitude than the flows associated with the 'crisis assemblage' that followed the tsunami. Although it is difficult to accurately measure inflows, rough calculations for Chinese funds for Hambantota projects after 2008 amount to at least $1.5 billion. This is considerably more than most estimates for *national* inflows following to the tsunami ($1.1 billion), of which an estimated $55 million was allocated to Hambantota.[15]

Despite the massive scale of these infrastructural programmes, the trickle-down benefits were more limited. Most of the large infrastructure projects used some Chinese labour, especially in managerial positions. Benefits to local businesses tended to be reserved largely for those with connections to Chinese company officials via politicians or their brokers. Some fishermen reported that the arrival of Chinese workers had pushed up the price of certain kinds of fish, and some small businesses such as beer sellers reported a rise in business due to the large projects.[16] But generally, business owners, particularly those based in Hambantota town, were critical, arguing that mega infrastructure had undermined their economic position, by circumventing the town centre and destroying the sense of place (Mariyathas et al., 2016). The new harbour and highway cut off Hambantota town from passing trade on the Colombo-Kataragama road, dealing a major blow to local businesses who used to sell locally-produced items such as buffalo curd. There were vast disparities between grandiose plans and local realities: 'There is a massive convention centre on one side of the highway and some structures that look like shacks on the other. The convention centre stands alone in the jungle with cows grazing opposite to it'. (Mariyathas et al., 2016, p. 66). When the two authors visited Hambantata's airport, the cavernous buildings were eerily quiet, with just one flight coming in that day from Dubai. Similarly, the four-lane highway on our journey back to Colombo was almost traffic free. Infrastructure on this scale may enable connections and flows at the international and national scales, but almost entirely bypasses 'the local'.

In this new context, Ameer was buffeted by shifting political coalitions and divisions within the Rajapaksa family. Chamal's election as an MP in 2010 at first cemented his position as a gatekeeper who had a say in major investments and development programmes. Chamal encouraged Ameer to move into politics by standing in the local government elections in 2011 as part of Rajapaksa's UPFA coalition. After being elected as a member of the Urban Council, Ameer worked diligently on various proposals to develop Hambantota town.

However, Chamal's position within Hambantota district was increasingly challenged by his nephew, the eldest son of the President, Namal Rajapaksa, who became an MP in 2010. One of Namal's supporters was elected Mayor of Hambantota and Ameer found that his proposals were rejected. As political rivalry between Namal and Chamal

[14]Interview with Ameer, Hambantota, May 2017.

[15]The estimated $1.5 billion includes published costs of phases 1 and 2 of the port project, the airport, the cricket stadium, and the Southern expressway extension. Based on an assessment of tsunami reconstruction-related needs, and assuming relatively even distribution of resources, one can estimate that the total flows into Hambantota are unlikely to have exceeded 5% of the national total—i.e., $55 million. Even accounting for a greater inflow into Hambantota based on political favouritism, inflows during the later period are clearly of a different magnitude.

[16]Interview with Ameer, Hambantota, 1 May 2017; Business representative, 11 August 2016.

intensified, Ameer's connections with Chamal became a liability. On several occasions Namal rejected Ameer's name as a potential collaborator saying 'he's Chamal's man', hinting that his involvement might lead to sabotage. In frustration, Ameer jumped over to the leading opposition party, the UNP, in 2014 but subsequently withdrew from politics altogether. He felt increasingly exposed, particularly in a context of growing anti-Muslim sentiments which intensified after the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019. No longer a significant broker, he assumed a more back-stage role, focusing on small community-focused projects.

Ameer's experience is not atypical; the post-war infrastructure assemblage involved a new class of brokers allied to Mahinda and Namal Rajapaksa and lower-level players like Ameer were pushed aside. Initially he used his ties with Chamal to occupy a key position within the development landscape but he was undermined by Namal's rise to power. The infrastructure assemblage was more structured and hierarchical than the crisis assemblage. The centralisation of power and narrowing of resource channels meant that opportunities for those who acted as go-betweens diminished, and the barriers to entry increased. Flows of resources—following a pipeline or funnel action, rather than a diffuse capillary flow—were more tightly concentrated around leading politicians, key brokers and their close allies and consequently the spaces for mid-level brokers to shape development processes diminished.

Some brokers were able to make the 'jump' between the two assemblages, as exemplified in the career of 'Aruna'. From humble beginnings he started a small construction company in the early 2000s, which struggled initially. Aruna got his first break in the tsunami's aftermath by working on small-scale reconstruction projects. From here, he expanded his operation by working closely with a local politician, delivering projects both in Sri Lanka and overseas. After 2008, he used his experience and connections to rise further and his company became one of the four main local contractors working on mega-projects such as the Southern Expressway, the Hambantota port and airport. Aruna began to work as an election-campaign financier and investment manager, managing state funds and Chinese funds appropriated by the local politician and his circle, which were deposited in off-shore bank accounts. Aruna's experience illustrates the sedimented character of the two assemblages: the second infrastructural assemblage built on linkages and relations established before and during the tsunami response.

Although the infrastructural assemblage involved a smaller circle of actors, resources and ideas centred around the Rajapaksa family, Ameer's experience also highlights some of the fragilities of this assemblage. First, while the Rajapaksas appeared all powerful in 2015, their project suffered a major set-back when Mahinda lost the presidential election to Maithripala Sirisena later that year. This defeat was linked to growing frustrations relating to corruption and a perceived abuse of power from the majority community in the South and in Hambantota especially, many of whom felt they were failing to reap the benefits of the mega projects. Although the Rajapaksas have won successive electoral victories since, undercurrents of opposition remained: manifest, for example, in widespread protests by farmers in Hambantota district in 2021.

The rapid advancement of the mega projects superficially implied a singularity of purpose and ruthless efficiency, but in practice, these development plans remained highly contested and implementation had an ad hoc quality, with decisions sometimes being made on the whim of politicians and their advisers (Mariyathas et al., 2016).

7 | CONCLUSIONS: FRONTIER ASSEMBLAGES AND THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF BROKERAGE

Returning to Woolf's 'The Village in the Jungle', his novel, in some respects, reproduces the stereotype of the frontier as a violent, uncivilized and far-flung place where life is hard and unforgiving, and shaped by external, arbitrary and extractive forces. The idea that Hambantota is an underdeveloped, disconnected frontier has frequently been recycled in popular and governmental narratives, to justify successive development visions projected and imposed by outsiders. And yet Woolf's book and his understanding of the frontier were more complex and subversive than this narrative implies. His book was ahead of its time, in telling the story of the frontier from the perspective of rural frontier dwellers rather than the colonial rulers or urban elites. And rather than seeing the jungles

of Hambantota as disconnected or pristine, Woolf represents the frontier as a zone that was deeply shaped by colonial rule and inseparable from the violent extractive processes that served the interests of imperial centres. And this positioning, as a frontier zone in which marginality is actively created by more powerful players in metropolitan centres, is perhaps, a point of continuity between our two assemblages, though they exhibit very different characteristics.

We have similarly attempted in this article to draw upon a relational understanding of the margins, building upon frontier perspectives, in order to better understand Hambantota's recent frontier history. The notion of a frontier assemblage provides a framework for tracing the points of connection and friction between different spaces, scales, actors, forces and imaginaries. In doing so, it collapses simplistic binaries—between centre and periphery, state and society, war and post war, public and private.

The recent history of Hambantota district reinforces the fluidity and dynamism of frontier assemblages—frontiers are always in-the-making, as laboratories of change and experimentation. Anxieties, aspirations and contradictions at the centre get displaced or projected onto the margins, including concerns about national integrity and security, nostalgia and myths about preserving the past, or utopian visions about creating a hyper-modern, Singapore-like future. At the same time, the frontiers are not simply the passive receptors of policies and imaginaries emanating from the centre; frontier narratives about the centre have animated different forms of resistance or alternatively they have generated forms of mimicry or incorporation of the centre by the periphery ('Hambantota 7', the 'Rajapaksa dynasty'). Hambantota has therefore become a particularly salient frontier or a 'central periphery' in the post-war period.

The crisis and infrastructure assemblages sketched in this article are emblematic of the deep entanglements between Hambantota and global and national circuits of capital, commodities, people and ideas. The extroversion of this frontier space has a long history, that was intensified by post-1977 liberalisation and then reinforced by the tsunami and the post-war infrastructural boom. Flows of finance, commodities, people, ideas and affects are channelled along pathways and corridors and filtered and mediated through brokers. The more open and unruly tsunami response emerged organically as a diffuse assemblage involving a capillary action of small-scale flows. The post-war infrastructure assemblage was more centralised with resources being funnelled along more tightly controlled networks or corridors.

Though these frontier assemblages assumed different characteristics, there remained strong continuities, not least in terms of the constellations of political players in Colombo and Hambantota. Both assemblages were fluid and shifting, subject to oscillating pressures including centripetal and centrifugal forces emerging from the centre and periphery respectively. Both frontier assemblages generated a demand for brokerage—which as noted is a highly masculine space—however, the background, roles and practices of brokers changed radically in the post-war period.

These differences were captured and distilled in the example of Ameer, whose experiences convey 'the fundamental uncertainty about the positionality of the broker' (Jensen, 2018, p. 889). Brokers 'shimmer into and out of focus' (Jensen, 2018) because they occupy liminal spaces that are constantly changing, which means that successful brokers need to have chameleon-like qualities, to reinvent themselves. The act of 'assembling' involves managing and keeping in tension competing pressures and demands—in Ameer's case this meant reconciling top-down administrative plans, political pressures from Colombo, bottom-up demands from local elites and communities, as well as reconciling his own visions of development, his personal career and family interests and his identity as a member of the minority Muslim community.

Ameer's experiences shine a light on the changing positionality and dynamics of brokerage across two different frontier moments. The tsunami spawned a new class of local brokers in Hambantota and Ameer, with his technical and linguistic skills and political connections became a key player within the crisis assemblage. The infrastructural assemblage, at war's end, marked a shift in political coalitions, resource flows, and a radical narrowing of the spaces and opportunities for frontier brokers. It was a more vertically integrated frontier assemblage, which involved a smaller number of powerful brokers, and Ameer got pushed out of the game—even though some brokers, like Aruna, were able to make the transition.

In focusing on the lives of brokers within frontier assemblages we have attempted to tell a relational story, which connects the lives of those on the margins with wider events and processes emanating from centres of power. Through these encounters and entanglements, 'centres' and 'margins' transform one another in combined and uneven processes of development.

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