

Ways of Being: Water Spirits in Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* (1992)

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ABSTRACT


Mia Couto is a Mozambican writer known for an aesthetics of the fantastic in his numerous works. In most of his writings, he blurs the distinctions between the human and the non-human, land and water, the natural and the supernatural. This is particularly evident in his 2006 novel *Sleepwalking Land*, set in the context of the Mozambican civil war. This paper argues that the elusive figure of the water spirit is an ideal lens by which to read *Sleepwalking Land* to capture the complexity of the horrendous civil war. Drawing on magical realism, I consider Couto's use of water-based indigenous beliefs to underscore ideas of flexibility and mobility in a land ravaged by war, while revising the myth of powerful water spirits in line with the raging civil war. The chaos of war is amplified in the novel through actions of spirits that encroach on the human world, influencing events and problematizing the laws of logic, time and space. Their intractability enables Couto to foreground ambiguity and hybridity with characters who assume different forms at different stages of the fragmented plot, mirroring the raging war.

KEYWORDS

water spirits; Mia Couto; magical realism; Mozambican civil war; *Sleepwalking Land*; indigenous beliefs; water; hydro-criticism

Introduction

The prominent Mozambican writer Mia Couto is known for blurring the distinctions between the human and the non-human, land and water, the natural and the supernatural. Several critics have attributed this fluidity and hybridity to his background and beliefs. Born in Beira, Mozambique, to immigrants, Couto found himself exposed to different cultures which shaped his life's outlook – stories of Europe his parents shared with him, and those of Africa, his land of birth. This exposure made him aware of the many ways of being and reading the world, a stance that later translated into his literary style. In one interview, he states that 'In daily life there was a borderline. But we were encouraged in our house to cross it. I played with black kids, heard their stories and spoke their languages. I was lucky' (Jaggi). He goes on to describe himself as a 'white guy and an African; the son of Europeans and Mozambicans; a scientist living in a very religious world; a writer in an oral society. These are apparently contradictory worlds that I like to unite because they're part of me' (Jaggi). The crossing of borderlines and the uniting of contradictory worldviews reflect the theme of hybridity that is pervasive

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in most of Couto's works. Couto's translator David Brookshaw argues that 'in Couto's world, identity is a fluid, never-ending narrative, prone to change ... and in his fiction, this is often under-lined by the importance of symbols of liquidity and movement, such as rivers and the ocean' (23). Furthermore, Maisha Michell notes how the ocean and water symbols in some of Couto's works act as a beacon of hope and survival for his characters.

Within the fields of the Blue Humanities and environmental studies, critics and writers have shown that immersing land-based narratives and epistemes in water offers fresh insights into texts and muddies what are usually construed as neat binaries between human/non-human, natural/supernatural, land/water, while also expanding notions of narrative time and space. Reading the Indian Ocean in the academy, Isabel Hofmeyr notes how it 'complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms' ('Indian Ocean' 722). One can then argue that the Indian Ocean offers alternative readings of the African continent. By reading the history of Africa in water, we encounter a sophisticated continent in terms of governance and trade long before the arrival of Europeans on its shores. By engaging with the depth, the surface and its materiality, the sea becomes an agentive space that allows for a resurfacing of stories, rituals, and beliefs such as those of water beings that add to the rich tapestry of African literature. As Henry Drewal argues, the many attributes and roles of these water spirits in literature are as fluid as water itself and only the frames of history and culture give them specificity. This turn, among other possibilities, calls for a re-reading of old texts in new ways, foregrounding the improbable and broadening our understanding of the universe as also populated and shaped by the other-than-human.

Through this reading, cyclic and mythical notions of time become central, and the idea of space broadens to encompass the depths of the oceans and ancestral realms. The past, present and future become intertwined. Such a reading contributes to the many ways scholars have been trying to decolonize the ocean space in literary works (Hofmeyr, 'Hydrocolonialism'). This reliance on the sea and its materiality to speak to issues of identity, culture and belonging is also captured in Niyi Afolabi's study on miscegenation and transculturalism in Lusophone writing. For Afolabi, the elusive figure of *Mamiwata* (Mother Water) 'attribute[s] a sense of constant motion, shifts, transformation, hybridization, and fluidity to identities that do not imply any particular loss of identity, but an enrichment of identities despite the struggle with elusive authenticity' (88). The elusiveness and ambiguous nature of *Mamiwata* enables writers to theorize slippery concepts such as identity and belonging especially in postcolonial contexts. Afolabi's reading of the figure of *Mamiwata* draws on Drewal's analysis, which emphasises her desirability and deadly nature: 'at once beautiful, protective, seductive, and potentially deadly, the water spirit *Mamiwata* (Mother Water) is celebrated throughout much of Africa and the African Atlantic worlds' (60). Focusing on the works of Mia Couto, José Agualusa and Germano Almeida, Afolabi argues that the fluidity of the sea and the elusiveness of *Mamiwata* captures the 'constant migration and mixing of cultures that have shaped African life for centuries, both within the continent and in the diaspora' (183). *Mamiwata* represents the notion of shifting cultures that are always in a state of formation. As a figure that is always in motion, *Mamiwata* helps us celebrate the intermingling of cultures as opposed to insisting on authenticity. In this paper, I argue that Couto's use of water

myths in *Sleepwalking Land* points to the intricacies of life during and after the Mozambican civil war. The war unsettled the sense of permanence and fixed structures on land, a disruption perhaps best captured in the fluidity and elusiveness of water spirits, as this paper will show. I argue that Couto draws on the attributes of water and water spirits to afford the characters a sense of mobility denied by the war. Couto additionally revises some traits associated with water spirits, such as power, to capture the gruesome reality of a war-torn Mozambique.

In *Sleepwalking Land*, water and the spirits collapse the boundaries between the physical and spiritual as the reader is sometimes asked to engage with both worlds at the same time. We encounter a world where the lines between the tangible and the spiritual realms blur as the reader's attention glides from what is familiar to the mysterious aquatic world. For Couto, it is important to recognize the presence of other worlds even if we do not understand them. In my reading of the text, I draw on some insights from magical realism. I am aware of the elusive nature of this term, whose definition changes with different locations and cultures. Scholars like Fayeza Aljohani maintain that the mark of magical realism is that it does not explain the magical elements found in it but persuades the reader to accept these events as natural. In his words, 'the story proceeds with a logical precision as if nothing extraordinary took place' (74). As a mode of narrative mediation, magical realism has been associated with the work of several writers from Africa including Ben Okri, Zakes Mda, Bessie Head, K. Sello Duiker and Amos Tutuola to make sense of the puzzles of changing socio-political norms. In some instances, magical realism works to reconceptualize notions of belonging and identity, challenge knowledge hierarchies and speak to the anxieties of the postcolonial world. I adopt Brenda Cooper's formulation of magical realism as a concept that emerges in unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, scientific and magical perspectives co-exist. She goes on to state that magical realism 'thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in post-colonial societies, and where there is syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created' (15). Drawing on this reading allows us to be alive to the alternatives that Couto is gesturing to by giving us characters who can access different realms as and when needed. The devastating effects of the civil war necessitated new ways of being that countered being trapped in the 'sleepwalking land' that Mozambique had become.

When *Sleepwalking Land* was first published in Portuguese in 1992, it generated a lot of commentary from readers interested in postcolonial studies, translation studies, ecocriticism, war narratives, magical realism and gender studies amongst others. Critics such as Sean Rogers have noted the text's ambivalent narration of the Mozambican civil war. Indeed, Couto blurs the line between the victim and the perpetrator in the novel. Some critics praised the novel for seamlessly bringing in different realms and destabilizing the lines between the physical and the spiritual. Bill Ashcroft observes that the layering of multiple worlds in Couto's works is more than just magical realism but can also speak to the diversity of the nation of Mozambique. It is important to Couto that people embrace the many ways of being in the world rather than insisting on a single identity. In *Sleepwalking Land*, he foregrounds ambiguity and hybridity with characters who assume different forms at different stages of the fragmented plot. Hofmeyr contends that Couto offers a slithery continuum, creating worlds that deny absolutes but allow for a

continuous invention of self (Hofmeyr, 'Seeing the Familiar: Notes on Mia Couto', 388). Elsewhere, Mitchell proposes that through the use of the aqueous divine in the novel, Couto gives a voice to those who often go unheard in chaotic situations such as the Mozambican civil war, including women and children. While Mitchell reads for this aqueous divinity in the female characters, I extend my reading to some of the male characters in the novel, noting their alignment to water and water spirits.

The plot of the novel revolves around an old man named Tuahir, and a young boy, Muidinga, who both escape from a refugee camp and travel to the open sea in search of an exit route from their war-torn land. As the two travellers trek through the barren land, they come across the burnt-out wreck of a bus with charred corpses inside, symbolizing the imploding nation and the unknown victims of the civil war. While the story of Tuahir and Muidinga represents the major plot of the novel, there is also the subplot of Kindzu – a dead man. We get to know Kindzu through a series of entries in his notebooks, found by Tuahir and Muidinga in a bag next to the burnt *machimbombo* (bus). Through the notebooks we learn of Kindzu's childhood and how he leaves his home in search of the *naparama*¹ he believed would help him salvage the dignity and humanity stolen by the war. The non-linear narrative alternates between the present struggle of the two travellers and the past experiences of Kindzu. The discontinuous narratives complement each other as temporalities are blurred and the boundaries between land and water, the spiritual and the physical overlap, creating a cyclic narrative. In this way, the text does away with the idea of linear narrative time and engages instead with what has been termed ancestral time, where the past and the present flow into each other. The perception of space also expands as the plot moves between different realms, the natural and the supernatural, while foregrounding questions of belonging and identity under the chaos of a civil war. Between their journeys, the three travellers meet other characters who have their own stories to tell about the horrors of the Mozambican civil war. Stylistically too, the reliance on water in *Sleepwalking Land* brings the complex and dramatic dimensions of chaos to the surface, thereby articulating the unspeakable strife of living through war.

The Mozambican civil war² broke out two years after the country attained its independence from Portugal. Mozambique attained its independence under the leadership of Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) in 1975. Two years later, in 1977, the nation descended into a gruesome civil war that ended in 1992. The war was between the Marxist FRELIMO and the anti-communist Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) parties, with the latter rejecting the socialist policies proposed by FRELIMO. Because of their ideological differences and the support of their different allies (FRELIMO had the support of the Soviet Union, while RENAMO relied mostly on the United States of America and apartheid South Africa), the parties found themselves at great loggerheads, with no clear way forward. The resultant war was deeply detrimental as millions lost their homes and about a million lost their lives. Some Mozambicans found themselves in refugee camps within the country, while others found refuge in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe. Mozambique was soon shut off from the world as the fighting intensified and humanitarian aid could not reach those in need. Describing the civil war, Kindzu states that it 'is a snake that bites us with our own teeth. Its poison flowed through all the rivers of our soul. We no longer ventured outside during the day, and at night we no longer dreamed' (*Sleepwalking Land* 9).

Using the metaphor of the poisonous snake, Couto captures the deleterious impact of war on communities and individuals, while underscoring the blurred lines between victim and perpetrator, as Rogers notes. That people could not venture outside of their homes during the day nor dream at night resonates with the title of the novel, which suggests a state of hopelessness and powerlessness. We read that, for the two travellers, 'their destination is the other side of nowhere, their arrival a non-departure, awaiting what lies ahead' (*Sleepwalking Land* 1).

These desperate circumstances are further crystalized in Couto's description of the barren landscape in the first chapter of the novel entitled 'The Dead Road'. This title suggests some form of futile finality: dead roads lead nowhere, hence the inertia and entrapment of the war. For

the landscape had blended sadness the likes of which had never been seen before, in colours that clung to the inside of the mouth. They were dirty colours, so dirty that they had lost all their freshness, no longer daring to rise into the blue of the wing. Here the sky had become unimaginable. And creatures had got used to the ground, in resigned apprenticeship of death. (*Sleepwalking Land* 1)

The lack of colour, staleness and the presence of dirt in this landscape mirror the dead country that the two travellers are trying to navigate. The colours that clung to the inside of the mouth symbolize the indescribable suffering that is troubling the landscape and its inhabitants. Even the sky had become unimaginable, signalling a broken hydrological cycle that is illustrative of a fragmented social sphere. In such a space of intense suffering and turmoil, waiting for death becomes the norm. Kindzu captures this suffering candidly: 'we were poorer than we had ever been. Juney's knees were popping out of his legs, and even breathing tired him. We could no longer tend our crops' (*Sleepwalking Land* 9). However, in the midst of this wretchedness Couto gives us characters who seem motivated to fight. Instead of sitting 'in resigned apprenticeship of death,' we witness some of the characters move to different littoral spaces such as the beach, the ocean, the river and the swamp. By enabling his characters to engage with both the aqueous and the spiritual worlds, Couto gives them a chance to navigate the civil war, a task not without difficulties. Water spirits play a pivotal role in Couto's framing of these characters' responses to the civil war's upheavals.

In this paper, I refer to these spirits as water spirits because of their affiliation with water. While I refer to these beings as water spirits, they are also known as water gods or deities in some communities. For some cultures in Southern Africa, there is a recognition that the ocean is a repository of different cultural beliefs, such as those embodied by water spirits *Nzuzu* and *Njonji*, which populate the sea and other various bodies of water in Mozambique. Although domiciled in water, 'these divinities occupy and move between the subterranean, the terrestrial and celestial worlds, uniting these worlds in a vital cosmic flow of life' (Bernard, "'Living Water'" 147). In some cases, these creatures with supernatural powers are thought to be mermaids but to the Lenge people in Chopi, Mozambique, the *Nzunzu* is associated with a snake that also trains traditional healers known as *sangomas* (Bernard, 'Messages'). As in other parts of Southern Africa, the *Nzuzu* is envisioned as an elusive supernatural creature that can exert its power on humans and the environment. Owing to its link to shadowy wealth and power, it is both feared and desired (Niehaus; Wood). Water spirits are known to be ambivalent

beings who either bless or smite depending on the circumstances. Those favoured by the spirits are showered with different gifts such as wealth and healing powers. On the other hand, some are believed to have met their death through drowning because of the water spirits. This duality can also be read in their physical forms, which sometimes draw on two different species; for example, the mermaid figure, which is half human, half fish. These supernatural beings are also known to be elusive and slippery like the water element, their abode. These attributes make them powerful in the sense that they cannot be pinned down, hence their ambiguity. In human form, they usually manifest as beautiful women who are able to command the attention of those who encounter them. When disrespected, or when their followers fail in their offerings, water spirits are known to leave, moving on to their next watery home.

Bacchilega and Brown remind us that tales of 'mermaids and other water spirits raise issues of gender, voice, and sexuality, as well as knowledge, ecology, and spirituality especially but not only in indigenous contexts' (12). Although there is a body of literature on African water spirits in the arts, much of this scholarship has focused on the West African *Mamiwata* (Stipriaan; Drewal; Carwile; Stokes; Peterson). Sabine Jell-Bahlsen notes the presence of the goddess of Oguta Lake in Flora Nwapa's novels. She argues that 'what she stands for, and what she means especially to women is a prominent theme in all of Nwapa's work' (31). The ability of the different water spirits to assist women with different ailments and their desires is also evident in some of Couto's writings, where the female characters seem to garner strength and a sense of belonging in water, as I demonstrate below. The South African author Mohale Mashigo does the same in her short story 'Manoka,' where the female characters are provided with an alternate home in the ocean. At some point in their lives, these women find their way back into the ocean, assuming different forms to access this realm. One can argue that aligning these female characters to water and water spirits is an attempt at empowering women. Drewal makes a similar observation, seeing *Mamiwata* as a free spirit outside patriarchal social norms (2008). While they can be compassionate, we do encounter some texts in which the figure of the water spirit is at odds with humans. In the short story 'Protista' by Dambudzo Marechera, the *Njuzu* figure is portrayed as a blood-sucking monster in line with its colonial setting. Similarly, the Angolan author Pepetela resorts to the myth of *Kianda* to give a voice to the thousands of people who felt neglected by the government in postcolonial Angola in *The Return of the Water Spirit* (1995). The elusive struggle for solutions persists in war-torn Angola, mirroring the elusive struggle to pin down *Kianda*, the water spirit in the text. The slipperiness of *Kianda* speaks to the challenges of reclaiming an authentic Angolan identity. The above instances show the different ways the figure of the water spirit has been employed in literary texts.

By focusing on the spirits, my reading of Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* foregrounds the improbable, broadening our understanding of the universe as populated and shaped by the other-than-human. I argue that Couto models his characters upon water spirits, giving them a degree of flexibility that enables them to navigate the treacherous spaces they find themselves in as a result of the civil war. While the figure of the elusive and ambiguous water spirit allows us to traverse the barriers between human and non-human, it also highlights the chaotic nature of war. Bill Ashcroft explains that '[in] such a context of loss and turbulence, the question of who belongs to the nation and even

what it means to be alive at all becomes urgent' (108). While Ashcroft reads this blurring of boundaries in Couto's works through the mulatto figure, I suggest the same through the figure of the water spirit, a hybrid creature that is at home on both land and water.

In *Sleepwalking Land*, I read the characters Kindzu, Farida and Nhamataca as connected to water and water spirits to account for their dogged optimism under horrendous circumstances. These characters are elusive, as they assume different forms at different stages of the novel. For Kindzu, this connection with water is established when he begins his travels by sea in search of traditional warriors, the *naparamas*. Kindzu's adventures foreground his shape-shifting abilities, which align him to water spirits. As for Farida, we meet her self-isolated in the middle of the ocean, waiting to be rescued by the owners of the stranded vessel. The ocean for her is safer than the imploding land; and it is from the ocean that she is able to command Kindzu to do her will. As she awaits the owners of the ship, Farida takes on many forms that align her to water. For Nhamataca, whose name means the maker of rivers, salvation had laid in constructing a river that was going to unite people. Retelling his story, Nhamataca claims to be a product of a human and a water spirit.

Kindzu: The Waterman

From an early age, Kindzu is drawn to both water and land. In the context of the civil war, this might be Couto's way of showing us that neither space could offer the solace so desperately desired by the characters. As tensions rise and his closest friend is attacked, Kindzu decides to abandon his village and consults a medicine man about his plans of leaving. He is advised to 'go by sea, [to] travel along the farthest lip of land, where water causes thirst, and the sand leaves no footprints' (*Sleepwalking Land* 24). He is told that the sea will cover his tracks and cure him as it has no ruler. The romanticized idea of the ocean is however offset by the recognition of the ironic nature of sea water, which cannot quench thirst. Kindzu is also told to 'take care ... because only the sea lives upon the sea' (26). As welcoming as it seems, the sea spews out its foes. Read this way, Kindzu is being advised to be one with the sea if he is going to survive; not to fight but to embrace the tides, just like the trees from which he derives his name. Indeed, his name, which is the 'same name given to the skinny little palms that bend and sway along the beach' (7), seems to portend his encounters with the sea. Kindzu reflects: 'water had always made me feel at ease, and next to it, I was like a cricket among grass' (38). The solace derived from water stems from his precarious existence on land, which is characterized by lack. Even when his father dies, he turns to the ocean for consolation: 'I would spend the day wandering here and there, my feet caressing the waves that caressed the beach' (15). As a child and adult, Kindzu is drawn to both land and water like water spirits who can access both realms depending on their form. As the land keeps rejecting him, through the loss of family and friends, the sea beckons with the promise of escape. From the moment he leaves the village, his dreams are tied to the sea and his quest to find the *naparamas* and re-unite with Farida, who had stolen his heart.

Kindzu's journey in search of the *naparamas* is non-linear and thus disturbs our ideas of time and space. The past and the present are intertwined, while the line between the land and the ocean becomes blurred. As he journeys towards the unknown, Kindzu's dead

father keeps appearing, confronting him about his choice of action. In other instances, he believes that his young brother Juney, who disappeared after turning into a chicken, is trying to make contact with him. As he journeys into the future, he must make peace with the past. To this end, Kindzu's story becomes circular. Once on his journey, Kindzu remembers to 'travel next to the shore, where the waters tumble forward in white foam' (*Sleepwalking Land* 35). The shore, a marginal place, already places him on a shifting boundary between the land and the sea, enhancing his ambiguous nature and amplifying his fragile existence in a war-torn nation. Being close to the shore facilitates prompt access to land to rest his boat from the waves but also to the sea for possible escape. This appears to be a strategic narrative device that Couto deploys to portray the uncertainty caused by the Mozambican civil war and the coping mechanisms that people had to devise.

New forms of being emerge as survival becomes exceedingly difficult. Kindzu's metamorphosis begins at sea: 'a web of overlapping skin grew between my fingers. In the water I felt I had scales instead of skin' (*Sleepwalking Land* 36). He remembers the medicine man telling him 'in the sea, you will become the sea' (36). As he is changing, everything around him begins to transform as well. Some fragments of sails from his ship become fish as his oars become trees. Through this transformation, Kindzu adopts a form that helps him navigate the perilous sea. Douglas Mulliken makes the point that Kindzu's isolation on water 'means that he is gradually giving in to the ocean's power and becoming a marine animal instead of one designed for the land' (120). But before his transformation begins, he must assume a hybrid form that allows him to lose the *chissila* curse that is cast over him. This starts with a ritual to ensure that he will not leave any tracks as he journeys. To that end, he plants feathers in all the holes created by the oars in the sea. He plucks the feathers from the carcass of a bird he receives from the medicine man. From each feather, a gull is born and as it takes to its wings, the holes disappear and erase any traces of him. By flying away, the sea gulls seem to be transposing him into the atmosphere to protect him, changing his form into shapeless and colourless vapor. The gulls flying away extend the enabling narrative frame, from water to atmospheric particulate.

Later in the narrative, Kindzu finds himself in Matimati, so named because of its proximity to the sea. The narrator describes how the 'town lay in the water's embrace; it looked as if it had been there since before the arrival of the sea' (*Sleepwalking Land* 51). It is this town and its people that change the course of Kindzu's life. The locals fled from the interior and are now gathered and stranded by the beach. Here again we witness the centripetal force of water as it promises solace away from the hostilities of land. The villagers spend their time summoning the ancestors (believed to be in water) to provide for them. This is one example of an animist belief system that Couto draws on; the idea that death does not mean the end but a continuation of life in another form, in this instance as an ancestor that is meant to provide for, and watch over, the living. Sometimes help comes in the form of food and commodities recovered from sinking or sunken ships. Kindzu is however not welcome in this village and is advised to leave. The town administrators are always on the lookout for strangers to blame for all the town's misfortunes. He returns to the sea where he meets Farida, the daughter of the sky who sends him back inland to look for his son.

So far, my analysis has highlighted how Kindzu shapeshifts on his journey to find the *napamaras* and how the different forms that he adopts enable him to access both the sea

and the land. Not one of these different forms is privileged over the other; they co-exist. It is this shape-shifting that lends Kindzu an alignment with water spirits because they are also known for their shape-shifting abilities. His relationship with Farida confirms this dynamic.

Farida: The Daughter of the Sky

Like Kindzu, who assumes different forms as he journeys, Farida's form changes multiple times as the plot progresses. O'Brien Wicker reminds us that water spirits are the most adaptable, flexible and innovative of all African divinities (qtd in Mitchell 2017). When we first encounter Farida, she is just 'a noise from a thousand depths' (*Sleepwalking Land* 58). At this stage, she is invisible but perceptible to the ear. This noise is soon replaced by a dancing apparition: 'on the deck ... dancing, leaping around, skipping. Its chain was limp, as if its substance were no more than the flesh of a fish. It swayed to the rhythm of unseen drums' (58). One can speculate that through this dance and the accompanying music, Farida is tapping into the spiritual realm. Thereafter, she transforms into a beautiful woman who dazzles Kindzu with 'her wet clothes painted against her skin' (58). He confesses that 'the beauty of that woman robbed me of all words' (ibid). This brings to mind Yvonne Vera's heroine Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* (1998) whom I read as a water spirit as well. Vera likens Phephelaphi to a water goddess, and her beauty is said to have robbed Fumbatha (her suitor) of words.³ Kindzu is equally mesmerized and cannot refuse Farida's demands. She seems to control Kindzu's destiny from then. It is as if he is under Farida's spell, following her every order, including an ill-fated search for her long-lost son that eventually gets him killed. As stated earlier, water spirits are beautiful, powerful beings who can easily sway people to do their bidding. Kindzu is clearly taken with Farida.

My reading of Farida as a water spirit is problematized, however, by the fact that her domain is a shipwreck. In this way, Couto reimagines the myth of water spirits in line with the raging civil war. Traditionally, water spirits assist mortals but, in this instance, the water spirit is waiting to be saved. Couto's woman-spirit is marooned in an abandoned ship at sea, suggesting that escape does not come easy for Couto's characters. Farida sets her sights on faraway lands after the horror of being raped in her childhood by her foster father, and the traumatic loss of her son. She severs all links with the land and confines herself in a grounded ship hoping that she will one day be rescued by the owners of the vessel. While Kindzu felt he had to keep moving to find the *naparamas* (for him, joining this group of warriors was his way of helping end the war in his country), for Farida waiting alone in an abandoned ship is the solution, away from the chaos of the land.

While the ship appears to be a safe shelter for Farida, it remains a contained and controlled vessel. This realization problematizes her association with water spirits who prefer the freedom of open and living waters. According to Penelope Bernard, the notion of living waters refers to undammed free flowing waters ('Messages'). Farida might be safe on the ship that is far from the flames of war, but being wrecked, it still offers little hope for an escape. She seems just as stuck as those on land. In contrast with the active waters of the sea – the abode of free water spirits – the ship limits Farida's movements and powers.

Despite this containment, Farida has certain powers akin to water spirits. She confesses to Kindzu: 'I had already seen you from that other side, but your contours were aqueous, your face was morning mist. It was I who brought you here, it was I who summoned you ... I knew you were coming. I was waiting for you' (*Sleepwalking Land* 83). The way she describes Kindzu in aqueous terms feeds into my earlier reading of him as associated with water. From these descriptions, we sense that their connection transcends the physical realm. The medicine man Kindzu consulted before embarking on his journey also hints at this connection between the two when he tells Kindzu 'You're going to meet someone who will invite you to live upon the sea' (26).

Besides her amphibian inclinations, I argue that Farida incorporates the four elements – fire, water, air and earth – just like her mother, who 'rose among vapours, emerging from the depths of a hole and carrying in her hands a pot like the ones used for burying infants. Her fingers were roots, which later turned into snakes made of fire' (*Sleepwalking Land* 71). The description of the mother's dream extends the reading of Couto's characters as intricate beings who unite the forces of nature, highlighting the animist belief that all nature is related. Again, as in Kindzu's transformation, we see the meeting of multiple species within a single body.

Later in the narrative, tired of waiting for news about Kindzu and her son, Farida declares:

She would go and light the lamps, repair the darkness. Its light would guide ships in, and they would carry her away from there ... he saw her reach the little island and enter the lighthouse. She was in there for a while, then came out only to return inside carrying some oil drums. Suddenly the tower was shaken by a huge explosion. Flames like greedy tongues licked the building. The whole island was ablaze. (*Sleepwalking Land* 207)

One can read her death as self-willed just like Phephelaphi's in *Butterfly Burning*.⁴ While her death speaks to the despair of the characters during this unstable time, it does not point to the end but the continuation of life in a different form, as suggested by phrases like 'repair darkness' and the light that 'would guide ships in.' One can read Farida as the sacrifice that was needed to restore the imploding nation.

Through Farida and her numerous shapes, Couto explores the complexities of post-colonial Mozambique. Just like Kindzu who was always on the move in search for the *napar-amas*, Farida's story also refuses linearity as it embraces different and sometimes contradicting forms to capture the challenges of trying to survive a war. The stories within stories that we find in both Kindzu and Farida's narratives hint at Couto's narrative strategy, which allows him to explore the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding the Mozambican civil war.

Nhamataca: The Maker of Rivers

Nhamataca's name means, roughly, 'he who makes rivers.' He is Tuahir's old friend from colonial times. We are introduced to him as he constructs a river single-handedly. Patrick Chabal opines that Couto's works present a 'range of characters that are often not just strange, different, but also behave in a highly unusual fashion.' He goes on to state that 'the hallmark of Couto's writing then, is the ability to present these characters, as though what they were doing, what was happening to them, was in every respect logical' (109). Chabal reads this

technique as a way of challenging and interrogating our expectations and assumptions as readers. In Couto's narratives, the world is not as clear cut. As one reads, the lines between the rational and the irrational slowly blur and mesh. The different levels of reality seem to coexist and these tensions, rather than divide, serve to enrich the reader's experience by making us aware of the many ways of being in the world. Change is the only constant in this world, hence everything should be questioned and not taken for granted especially in this context of a civil war that has rendered the country unstable. This comes through in Couto's representation of Nhamataca, who at face value seems unstable, but his actions show how desperate and dire the situation was for ordinary Mozambicans. His determination as he digs day after day does not hint at the absurdity of the pursuit but rather points at persistent hope. He is convinced that his project will come to fruition. Here, Couto juxtaposes the plausible and the implausible to blur the line between the real and the unreal, and the logical and illogical in line with a disorienting war.

As Nhamataca's subplot unravels, he calls himself the son of the waters. One can trace his link with water to his mother who seems to have a connection with water spirits. She first appears to her husband (Nhamataca's father) as an apparition before she becomes a melodious voice just like Farida. She then assumes the form of a woman when she shows herself to Nhamataca's father. Their initial interaction evokes the many stories of sailors seduced by sirens with beautiful voices. Nhamataca's father braves the waves to meet this being with a melodious voice who resides on the other side of the river. His raft is no match, however, for the turbulent waves of the river as it begins to sink. It is at this moment that Nhamataca's mother reveals herself to him. She is described as 'the owner of stunning beauty' (*Sleepwalking Land* 88). In this instance, we can see how Nhamataca's mother possesses a beauty that is usually associated with water spirits. The two consummate their love and produce Nhamataca, 'born on a boat ... the son of the waters' (88). Being born of a man and a spirit, Nhamataca can be read as an in-between, in line with water spirits who occupy both worlds.

The way Nhamataca's mother and father meet is reminiscent of Couto's short story, 'The Waters of Time' (from his 1994 collection *Rain and Other Stories*), where the protagonist and his grandfather make numerous trips up the river towards the lake. What I find relevant to my argument from this story are the mysterious apparitions that only the grandfather can see. These apparitions manifest at times as white or red cloths blowing in the wind. The grandfather later intimates that these are the invisible spirits he wishes to familiarize his grandson with before his (the grandfather's) demise. Couto frequently revisits the theme of inspirited waters in his oeuvre. To him, the waters are home to different spirits like the *namwetxo moha* 'that emerged at night, made only of halves: one eye, one leg, one arm' (*Sleepwalking Land* 240). The protagonist's mother also 'feared the threats that lurked there' (ibid). This fear of the deep unknown evokes the many stories of water beings that are associated with water bodies in different parts of Africa. The representation of these water spirits in the stories depends, as stated earlier, on the context and authorial intention.

When Nhamataca is introduced to the reader, he is making a river serve as a protective frontier against the war. While everyone else around him seems to be lost, either sleepwalking or waiting for death at refugee camps, Nhamataca single-handedly constructs a river. This venture isolates him from his family and friends who begin to question his sanity. Nhamataca however believes that his river

would never grow stormy or angry, and it would never let itself sink into the ground. Its waters would serve as a protective frontier against the war. Any man or boat carrying arms would go straight to the bottom without return. Death would be confined to the other side. The river would clean the soil, healing its wounds. (*Sleepwalking Land* 86)

The river would 'quench many a thirst, embellish fish and land alike' (*Sleepwalking Land* 86). The foregoing magnifies the dryness of the land, both literally and metaphorically. The only solution for this dry country of unfulfilled dreams is his river (to be named Mother Water), which is tied to all life-giving forces rather than the death-dealing forces of the land. While in some instances water is associated with the feminine because it is one element that is considered unpredictable and treacherous, Nhamataca subverts this association by conceiving his river as 'a gentle, slow-moving creature' (86). The hope that he places on this river is shown when he starts by digging the floor of his own house: 'On and on he went, meandering between valleys and hills, his hands shedding and renewing countless times their bloody, calloused skin' (86), undeterred by the loss of family and friends.

If one reads this digging as symbolizing the summoning of the spirits, the betrayal of the river highlights Couto's refusal to privilege either the physical or the metaphysical space as safer or more productive. Even when rainwater brings it to life, the river is ferocious and threatens its creator. This river has different meanings attached to it. For Nhamataca, it will heal the wounds from the war. On the other hand, for Muidinga and Tuahir, the pursuit presents an opportunity to control their destiny: 'instead of waiting on the road, we make our way' (*Sleepwalking Land* 88). However, the project does not yield the desired results. When the river fills up with water, Nhamataca's celebration is cut short as the ferocious stream swallows him. Tuahir and Muidinga witness this tragedy. The narrator relates that the 'memory of what happened will be recollected with tears The old man and the boy try to grab the digger's body, but the current, along with its malevolent eddies, grows angrily and chaotically' (89). The turbulent eddies evoke the malevolent water spirits who strike and kill, sometimes unprovoked. On a metaphorical level, this river might symbolize the unforeseen thorns of independence in Mozambique.

To emphasize the catastrophe, the rain that swallows Nhamataca suddenly stops at noon. The landscape goes back to the way it was: 'at noon, the rain stops. The sun is right overhead, and so vengeful that in an instant it sucks up the excess water from the savannah. The earth imbibes the flood, squeezing the smallest puddle dry. As the scene changes so unbelievably, the drought once again prevails' (*Sleepwalking Land* 89). Muidinga and Tuahir go back to wandering aimlessly as their dream of escape vanishes with Nhamataca's river: 'now, however, the two seem to be wandering directionless. Hunger begins to demand satisfaction. Day after day, they advance in circles, spiralling on their feet' (90).

Conclusion

Like most of his stories, Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* maintains an ambiguous tone. In this world, there are no neat binaries between life and death, the natural and supernatural, land and water. Even though the land continues to be treacherous and the river that is supposed to nourish life heralds death, the indistinct tone of the novel opens a different reading of the events of the novel. What Couto requires of his readers is that they allow for a re-reading of the world where boundaries are challenged. It is not

enough to read the world as ordered by binaries, as these follow unequal power relations that allow for epistemic violence where other worldviews are discarded and disavowed. While the ambiguous and elusive figure of the water spirit allows us to traverse the barriers between human and non-human, this is more pronounced in anarchic circumstances such as the Mozambican civil war, where the line between life and death was blurred. Consistent with water spirits on which the characters are modelled, their deaths do not signal the expiration of life, but a continuation of life albeit in a different form, as afforded by some Southern African cosmologies. Couto's use of water myths underscores how myths are re-imagined and re-written depending on the motive of the author. For Couto, the intention is to depict the ambiguity and complexity of life during a civil war and to show how ordinary people try and make sense of it by drawing on their lived experiences and beliefs. War makes a mockery of permanence and fixed structures. The fluidity and elusiveness of water spirits best dramatizes the senselessness of both life and death in a civil war. One can then argue that through his narrative strategies that draw on the mythical, Couto is challenging his readers to expand their worldviews, and to take into account other ways of being as valid.

Notes

1. The *naparamas* were a group of warriors formed mainly in response to the atrocities being committed by RENAMO. These warriors mostly operated in the rural areas and mostly attacked guerrilla style. Initially they shunned the use of guns, in favour of traditional weapons such as spears in their warfare. They also believed in the use of traditional medicines to protect themselves against bullets.
2. For more on the Mozambican civil war, see Vines (1991), Newitt (2002) and Rogers (2011).
3. In Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, the heroine Phephelaphi emerges from the river in a manner of spirits and, as the plot unfolds, her rebellious character further links her to water spirits. Her beauty and movements are all likened to water and Fumbatha, her suitor, sees her as his gift from Umguza River. For a detailed discussion of Phephelaphi as a water spirit, see Joseph (2022).
4. Water spirits tend to move, to vanish from a society that has disrespected or disregarded them or their abodes. In *Butterfly Burning*, I read Phephelaphi's self-immolation as an escape from Fumbatha's and society's expectations which needed her to act in a particular way. Read as a water spirit, just like Farida, her death is not the end but a beginning of a new life in a different form. For more on this, see Joseph (2022).

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