

Thinking Oceanically: Ilha de Moçambique/Island of Mozambique

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This special issue hosts a comparative conversation between Ilha de Moçambique and its surrounding oceans and coastlines, convening a globally-oriented set of questions around a rich engagement with the local, as well as between material culture and new materialisms, maritime archaeology and poetry. Most significantly, it takes the idea of ‘East Africa’ underwater. Through shipwrecks, shells and sounds, it explores the possibility of incorporating the submarine world as a part of the East African cultural domain.

Ilha de Moçambique is characterised by a rich submarine heritage, surrounded by submerged shipwrecks that speak to lesser-known histories of East African and Southern Hemispheric slavery, connections between east African hinterlands and Indian Ocean trade networks, and unique submarine ecologies. How do we understand this place differently in relation to new ways of thinking oceanically across the South, as well as global critical ocean studies? How does thinking in and with Ilha speak to other oceans and their islands? How can we submerge our thinking about trade routes, slavery, heritage, literature, music and history?

The inaugural issue of *EALCS* set out the mandate of the journal which is to enable a mobile and multidimensional matrix of the East African region in cultural terms. As the editors explained, rather than a geographical and political fact of the “cartographer’s vision”, the region should be conceived as “a multiplicity of cultural facts, actors and artefacts” which invite “creative, artistic and cultural journeys through the region” (Odhiambo and Siundu 2014, 4). This special issue deepens this mandate by journeying beneath the waterline as well as by stretching the reach of “East Africa” to Ilha de Mozambique, and further to the east coast of South Africa including Natal, East London and the Cape.

The papers take up these themes by following natural and cultural submarine heritage along the East African coastline. In the introductory essay, “A Marine Archaeologist reads Mia Couto,” Anézia Asse discusses Mia Couto's novel *O Outro Pé da Sereia* (“The Mermaid's Other Leg”) which features Ilha de Moçambique—the site of her maritime archaeological research. The story focuses on a statue of Mary, saved from falling into the Indian Ocean by Nimi Nsindi an enslaved man from Angola. As he does so, Nimi perceives a mermaid, an African goddess of the sea, imprisoned in the statue, and breaks off one of its legs to set the mermaid free, thereby making the statue itself mermaid-like. Both the novel and maritime archaeology concern themselves with the history of objects, but produce different meanings about those objects. Unlike marine archaeology which looks outward from the ship, this story

looks inward to the life and struggles *on* the ship. By creating narratives involving both colonizer and colonized, Couto suggests the changing and creolized meanings of marine artefacts.

Providing a maritime archaeological overview of the area, Diogo Oliviera describes the *longue durée* of the Island of Mozambique, in its relationship to its East African hinterland as well as the wider Indian Ocean world. He describes the specific shifts which marked a “reorientation of society towards the sea” in this southern part of the Swahili region, employing the case study of a dig on the neighboring peninsula of Cabaceira Pequena. There, coral stone—a material formed under the sea—can be found alongside ceramics from both China and the interior, linking land-, trans- and sub-oceanic networks on the incipient and southerly Swahili coast.

Shifting from coral to cowrie shell, Justine Wintje’s article pursues an object biography of shells from sixteenth century Portuguese shipwrecks that have found their way into a museum collection in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These materials, both originating and resurfacing from the ocean, constitute the kinds of “small things” that can connect interspecies and cross-oceanic histories. Cowries had privileged status as a currency in the slave trade out of West Africa, and their “life itineraries”—from aquacultured creatures in the Maldives, to the Bight of Benin, to a cannon on the East African seafloor, and finally to a museum display—allow us to traverse “above-water and underwater spaces”, human and natural histories.

Addressing a different kind of layered cultural heritage, Rufus Maculve explores the contemporary sound signatures of the Island, exploring how these are produced by historical oceanic mobilities. Focusing on a performance tradition, the Maulide Nakira associated with the Rifa’iyya Sufi Order, Maculve investigates the genre as produced by Muslim movement across the monsoon region. Using the method of the sound walk, he also sketches the changing soundscapes of the islands with its omnipresent oceanic rhythms, buzzing motorbikes, black crows and muezzins calling.

Charne Lavery puts a slave shipwreck and a collection of poetry into conversation. The ship, the *São José Paquete d’Africa* was carrying enslaved people from Mozambique Island to Brazil when it sank off the coast of Cape Town. The poetry collection, Yvette Christiansë’s *Imprendehora* likewise memorialises the ‘long middle passage’ — between east Africa and South America, focusing on slave and indenture narratives on St Helena. As Lavery indicates, “the doubly submerged experience of southern hemispheric slavery — both literally under the sea, and historically overlooked in favour of northern narratives — the Slave Wrecks Project and Christiansë’s poetry acknowledge the ‘vast silence’ in the historical record and attempt to go ‘beyond the archive’, using the techniques of maritime archaeology and immersive imaginative reconstruction respectively.” Drawing the two together, “places the literary and the archaeological in conversation, via the submarine.”

Staging an analogous conversation between poetry and history, and opening up again onto a wider oceanic canvas, Phindezwa Mnyaka’s paper is an experimental history of a ship’s journey, in the form of a poem and narrative that tells the “ship story” of the *Lady Kennaway*. The colonial ship’s itineraries connect widely across the imperial Indian Ocean, including bringing Irish women to the port of East London to bolster the bloody war efforts in what is now the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Via the object biography of a “nondescript ship in the

sea that is modern history”, Mnyaka reflects on the fragility and risks of written history, itself a “crumpled paper boat”.

Following these various objects, artefact and narratives across and beneath the surface of the sea, the papers together trace a “journey into the past as well as the future, literally and literarily” (Odhiambo and Siundu 2014, 1). In so doing, each poses a question about the nature of history writing, museum collecting, memorialization and fictionalization, as well as about the methodological potential of crossing the boundaries between land, air, and sea.

References

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