

Toward Blue Cultural (Re)Visions in the Literature of the Northern Mozambique Channel

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ABSTRACT

The ocean has been represented as a mysterious and alien space; too fast to comprehend yet compressed in narratives, in many studies. Once a neglected area in literary studies and discourses, the ocean is now gaining a considerable attention by scholars. This article is an exploratory analysis of the cultural meanings of the oceanscape with close references to the Mozambique Channel literary productions. By locating African studies in the context of the oceanscape—itsself a site of antique multicultural negotiations—the article suggests a shift in the ocean’s ancient meanings to the early modern period meanings encapsulated in slavery and colonialism. The article examines trends and dominant images that contribute to a blue cultural understanding of these artistic works. The study seeks to illustrate that the oceanscape speaks to a catalogue of modern knowledge hubs such as postcolonialism, globalization, history and environment. By drawing on New Historicism, the article provides examples on how the Mozambique Channel oceanscape discourses shift our interpretation of this postcolonial literature by first, engaging an explication of select texts and secondly, through a (re)consideration of historical contexts of the Mozambique experience in favour of blue cultural studies. The study (re)visits how indigenous traditions, values, customs and art forms as depicted in these works (inter)penetrate other social discourses as cultural expressions.

Key words: Blue culture, Literature, Northern Mozambique Channel, New Historicism.

INTRODUCTION

The literature of Northern Mozambique Channel includes the shared historical experiences of the five countries that form the Channel: Mozambique, Tanzania, Malagasy and France (Mayotte). This region is surrounded by and borders the eastern Indian Ocean. The Channel has a long and rich history and literature dating back to centuries of slavery and colonization of Africa. The concepts related to the Atlantic space provide a critical background the in terms theory in the study of blue culture (Gilroy, 1998; Shoat & Stam, 2012). The envisioning of a blue culture aims to close a cultural fissure, which exists in the region considering the diversity each of the multicultural identities bring on board. The Indian Ocean in this cosmopolitan background represents a convergence of these cultures. Burgioni (2017) argues that provides a critical background in reading literary and visual narratives from the Mozambique Channel. Water is a conventional symbol of change and is often present at turning points in both poetic and narratives of slavery and colonialism. Apart from its conventional symbol of life, water in this context, represents healing and a fresh start. It also purifies, cleanses, and signifies a craving for a specific discovery as well as enlightenment. The ocean is particularly a sign of colossal and indefatigable strength, staking above all other known symbols of water due to its towering presence. The oceanspace and its depth represents mystery, magic and chaos of unprecedented proportions. Mckinstry (2017) recognizes the paradoxical nature of the sea as a blend of fortunes. Although the eastern African coast is associated with rich civilization occasioned by slavery and colonial activities, the literariness of the ocean as an important factor in linking the traders and the colonialists on the one hand and; the slaves and the colonized on the other, has not been versified, dramatized or narrated to reflect the people’s cultural history. Pearson (2011:78-79) views the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic and epistemological paradigm in contextualizing Mozambican cultural imagination. Poetic productions set along this coast dating as far back as the 18th century in Swahili language have major gaps with regard to the place of

blue cultural engagements during this period. This paper traces Mozambique literary culture and offers insights on a path towards blue culture.

Towards Literature from Northern Mozambique Channel

Northern Mozambique Channel is not a literary desert. Yenjela (2021) argues that Swahili epics of war with reference to Europe and the Arab world's conquest histories on the Indian Ocean were produced by among others, Mwenzo bin Athuman (*Chuo cha Tambuka*, 1728, and, *The Epic of Tabuk*) as well as by Mgeni bin Faqih (Utenzi wa Rasi'lGhuli, 1855). These epics mainly focused on translating Arabic tales for Islamic religious reasons. According to Yenjela (2021), these epics refer to eastern Africa's conquests by the Portuguese and the Omani Arabs. The epics reveal how the oppressed can, through religion, realize freedom by launching resistance uprisings that finally lead to revolutions. These early modern epics expose sparks of early resistance by coastal Africans against the more sophisticated and endowed militaristic empires of European and Arab imperialists. The poems served to spark collective war experiences of the time thereby sustaining the fighting spirit through narrativization from one generation to the next. The history of Mozambique as a postcolonial location fits within these Swahili epics due to the shared coastline and historical experience. According to Madureira (2017), modern Mozambican literature may not be traced to a distinct ideological, aesthetic or literary movement. Some literary magazines were published to serve the reading interests of the local literate community.

Early written "literary" texts, in Portuguese, authored by Mozambicans appeared in the *Almanach de Lembranças* (Lisboa, 1993). This was a periodical, which published literary works sent from every part of the Portuguese empire. One important feature of this periodical was entertainment as well as incorporation of women in its production.

But of special exception to these publications was the periodical *Brado Africano* (1918-1974) in which a first generation of postcolonial creative writers published their works. The founders of this periodical were two pairs of brothers José and Joao Albasini, Estacio Dias and Karel Pott, who arguably claim the credit for the literary talents that glowed in the 1950s Mozambique. Poetry and the short story were the most popular and pronounced literary works of that time but opportunities to publish were rare. Attempts at literary activities also were censored with literature regarded as a form of cultural warfare. In view of this Mondlane (1969) posits that the number of literary enthusiasts that could access poetry was inconsequential but he recognizes the writers of this period for making a significant step towards a national consciousness in the colony. The first major literary boost, however, came from Samora Machel, the leader of Frelimo political party that led Mozambique to independence. Samora saw literature's potential in mobilizing people and went ahead to disseminate creative works he thought supported his political course. The quality of these works, however, never rose beyond biased political agenda. A particular mention of these publications churned out by Frelimo was an anthology of poetry called *Poesia de Combate* (Fighting Poverty, 1979). According to Bertelsen (2018) Mozambique's post-colonial experience required concerted efforts to reframe its nation's past, present and future.

Due to their focus on international cultural attraction, neighboring South Africa became influences to Mozambican intellectuals who were keen on looking for wider horizons away from the Portuguese censorship at home. Lisboa (2006) argues that because of this, writers such as Noemia de Sousa and Jose Craveirinha came to know about the struggle of the American black people and Pan-African ideals through English publications in South Africa. These two writers have been hailed for their focus and quality of Mozambique's postcolonial literature. Other writers of this first generation of writers include Rui Knopfli, and Rui Nogar. The later works by Luis Bernardo Honwana, particularly, his anthology of short stories *Nos Matamos o Cao Tinioso* (We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories, 1964) has received wide critical attention. The first generation of Mozambican writers were evaluated against their commitment to their nationalist moment as well as their commitment to their political destiny.

The second generation of Mozambican postcolonial literary writers appears to have shifted focus from the national struggle to contemporary issues in their present postcolonial locations as well as a (re)visioning of their country's historical events from the point of view of the colonized thereby deconstructing Eurocentric

narratives of hegemony. Stennett (2023) describes this Mozambique post-colonial literature as the types that identifies continuities and ruptures. In this group are writers such as Mia Couto and Paulina Chiziane among others. But the 1950s of resistance to the colonial situation remains a turning point in this literature with many writers reflecting on colonial episodes of the time as well as references to the cultures of the time. Some of these writers negotiate issues of self-assertion of the culture of their people as well as denouncing historical imperialism and violence meted out on them by colonialists.

Critics Maria Fernanda Afonso and Hilary Owen, argue that the amalgamation of current Mozambican literature is shaping into an identifiable configuration of “first hand record” of historical events (*testimonio*).

Writing against the background of Zanzibar in neighbouring Tanzania, Gurnah’s fiction depicts a complex web of social codes, emotions, and stories that characterize subjectivity in an extremely unstable and multicultural social reality. His novels, *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Desertion* (2005) repeatedly thematise cultural confusion, migration, fluid states and estranged subjects. Falk (2007) posits that Gurnah’s writing about history and diaspora suggests that various forms of entanglements ironically provide the solution from anxiety and alienation to a more viable states of being.

Gurnah’s fiction is painstakingly multicultural. His novels show stories of (dis)location and dispossession of his characters from Zanzibar to England, or from the East African coastal area into the interior of the continent. These stories of dislocation constitute a major demographic migration instigated not just by the British imperialism, but they also belong to a complex past that precedes the incursion of Western powers. The Arab rulers and Indian traders patronized the East African coast before the Portuguese, British and Germans. This history of cultural encounters which Gurnah writes about suggests the social instability and complex identities. Gurnah’s narratives suggest that estrangement could be a result of an extremely volatile society, the result of a complex convergence of competing codes and expectations that define social reality (Falk (2007)). The recreation of this resourceful social and cultural historical patterning suggests an alternative to African cultural nationalism as well as to eurocentric methods that exclusively read African cultural expressions as reactions to European imperialism.

Issues in the Language of Mozambique Literature

Reite (2020) argues that Mozambique presents one of the most complex linguistic possibilities in the Lusophone Africa. Mozambique’s main languages are Portuguese, Shona, Nyanga, Yao and Ronga-Tsonga-Tswa group. Literary scholars from Mozambique have used these languages to preserve “territorialisation” cultural agenda which locates Mozambique’s literary creativity and criticism within its own African borders drawing on realities of the times for self-assertive purposes. Mozambique literature is written in Portuguese, the colonial languages, as well as a host of other local languages such as Ronga. Bertelsen (2018) argues that by defending territorialisation, Mozambique’s literature subverts the hegemonic multicultural and deconstructive approaches that blow over literature from other parts of the world. In literary persuasions, “territorialisation” signified the production of fresh, modern, postcolonial literature with roots in the realities of a specific location complete with its social critique, the representation of lived social lives including a reflection on its history, politics and cultural practices. Noticeably, it is during this phase of “territorialisation” awareness that Mozambique broke its ties with the colonizer’s aesthetic patterns, rejecting romantic and modernist literary influences of the 20th century. Thus, an effort at (re)constructing Mozambique’s “territorialisation” with focus on the maritime in postcolonial literary trends is what would reframe local literature and open it up to the global world.

Mondlane (1975) observes that the challenge of which language is best suited for this transformative mission beckons. In which language will Mozambique churn out its literary works without compromising the principles of territorialisation? Should the writers use the colonizers’ language or should they use their rich local languages? Or should they choose the appropriation of the colonizer’s Portuguese language, marking the text with the local alternative to the former usage of the empire’s norm? In situations where local languages are threatened with extinct, there is need to encourage writing in any language a writer feels they can express themselves appropriately. But in the case of Mozambique where literary works written in Portuguese as well as those written in local languages are hardly accessible to the rest of Africa which is mainly Anglophone and

Francophone, this is the time to call for establishment of Literature and Translation departments in local universities to globalize this literature. Ana Maria Mao-de-Ferro Martinho argues that writing in Portuguese Mozambique is preferred to writing in local languages as the latter are less appealing due to neglect by policy makers. Martinho thinks the current preference of Portuguese as the official language has not been envisioned to cushion the multicultural universe that Mozambique is or that does it reflect different cultural memories, diverse ethnic formations as well as regional linguistic features.

Yet there are critics who have suggested the africanisation of Portuguese with African languages as a more acceptable approach to create this literature. However, instead of “Africanising” Portuguese, by drawing from the region’s oral literature traditions as a source of inspiration, some critics think that the current generation of writers who think cosmopolitan have subverted the ideals of “territorialisation” in favour of Lusophone and Anglophone literary global appeals, (Bertelsen, 2018).

In what concerns poetry there are two factors to take into account. Within the frame of colonialism, and the cultural warfare that began around the 1950s, the choice for poetry served strategic necessity: it eluded censorship more easily. But there is another (far more important) reason to be found among local literary heritages. One of the languages of Mozambique, Swahili, is the product of the second wave of literacy in Africa which came with the spreading of Islam to the oriental coast of Africa, brought by Arab emigrants, many centuries ago. Though Swahili is not Arab it evolved under its influence. The way oral cultures negotiated the arrival of literacy is important to understand the preference for some literary forms instead of others. Swahili literature is predominantly made of narrative poetry about the life of the prophet Muhammad and his fight against Christians. Klobucka (2019) argues that secularisation in the 19th century, expanded the themes of these poems to include the struggles between sultans and the governors of neighbouring cities, or the resistance of local peoples to European presence. This bit of history suggests that poetry has a long tradition in the oriental coast of Africa, equally promoted by songs of praise, one of the main genres in regional oral literatures, Klobucka (2019).

All this information allows me to suggest that the novel is indeed a foreign form to the literary tradition of the oriental coast of Africa, just as it happened with the appropriation of the novel in Indian literature, through the influences of modernism and the English education system.

In terms of technique, Paulina Chiziane has had the merit of being the first woman to write a novel in Mozambique, and what is more, a polemically feminist first novel. In an interview with Patrick Chabal, Paulina Chiziane says that she considers her *début* novel, *Balada de Amor ao Vento*, still immature in terms of writing technique and style, but she goes on to add that she would not have changed what she “had to say”:

Moreover, the controversial status of Swahili populations in the modern states of East Africa, and more generally the issue of African involvement in the slave trade, remain sensitive issues, which have probably inhibited research on this matter. Finally yet importantly, until recently the slave trade in the Muslim world was rarely investigated and often underestimated. This study reconsiders the slave trade and slavery on the East African coast before the second half of the eighteenth century, mostly through Portuguese sources. It focuses on the region from Cape Delgado in the south to the Lamu archipelago in the north, because this area is the heart of cultural debates about Swahili civilization. Sugata (2006) argues that this does not mean that Swahili communities inhabiting other parts of the coast, in particular the Mozambique area or the Comoros, were not concerned with the slave trade. Between the early sixteenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century the Swahili were widely involved in slave trading networks. Most captives came from northwestern Madagascar and were destined to fill demands for servile labor in Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and the Swahili city states, and from the late seventeenth century, the Omani. This study primarily examines the nature of the slave trade organized by Swahili traders, especially its scale, its role in the development of prosperous new trading networks of some coastal city-states. In addition, it will shed more light on the movements of some Swahili and Hadrami groups on the East African coast. Conclusions arising from these investigations largely question the earlier assumptions about and estimations of the East African coast slave trade. So far historical sources are too few to estimate the scale of the Swahili coast slave trade before the sixteenth century

Towards the Blue Culture

There is a dearth of cultural meanings of the maritime world in early modern Mozambique Channel literature yet the ocean played a major role in connecting the channel to the outside world thereby creating a multicultural practice on the channel. Campbell & Gwyn (2004) posit that placing Mozambique Channel's literary culture in the context of the massive Indian Ocean, bound expansion of African culture that began in the 15th century with slavery. The Indian Ocean's ancient meanings shifted in the early modern period as geographic experience, imperialist expansionism and knowledge increased. Some recent exploits in maritime studies, sometimes referred to as 'new thalassology' according to Horden & Purcell (2006), may extricate these trends from the now-traditional New Historicist and Indian Ocean studies and propose how these approaches can contribute to a 'blue cultural studies' with references to the Mozambique Channel. By resorting to a (re)vision of cultural knowledge of the Indian Ocean, the new maritime literature and humanities speak to chains of modern discourses which include post-colonialism, globalization, environmental studies and technology among other discourses. Noa (2012) argues these maritime discourses are meant to give fresh impetus to our interpretations of early modern Mozambique Channel literature. These discourses start by examining canonical Swahili poems produced during the Portuguese and Oman Arabs conquest of the eastern Africa coast—and second through (re)visioning a historical context of slavery and colonialism.

The 21st century is bringing humanities scholarship back to the "thalossos" or to the sea as the Greeks would call it. This fresh interest in the oceans informs interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges and initiatives such as environment care, a (re)visioning of the ecological sciences, government policy as well as international legislation and practices. It is possible for this type of literature to emerge out of the thriving and dominant history of the eastern Africa coast beginning with Swahili civilization. This history (re)visioned in terms of economic and imperial history as well as historical geography will go a long way in giving creative artists the requisite material for (re)writing. These dialogues seek out the maritime in order to re-examine acceptable conversational models. A new approach at the sea, instead of the land which has predominantly been the setting of most of literary production from the region, contests conventional practices of thought. This new maritime viewpoint does not regard the ocean simply as a mass of water to be crossed, but as thematic issues in themselves. (Re)visioning the ocean as complete unto itself can (re)ignite new analytical frames for scholars of early modern African literature, including a fresh sense of ecological interactions and a diverse way of interrogating multicultural networks in the early modern global world. This creative and analytical trend is not a new path. A reviewing of Milton's poem 'Lycidas' (1638) with a maritime lens, revises our appreciation of the early modern poetics of nature in the English literature. Another example is a re-reading of Bermuda shipwreck booklets as arguably captured in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1623) with straight emphasis on the sea and maritime geography showcases novel perspectives on the colonial mission and its cultural consequences.

Historian John Hattendorf has shown that the 'boundless deep' defined a fresh global actuality for early modern culture, (Hattendorf, 2003). The oceans have signified resistance to control from the time Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* challenged the Portuguese domination of the East Indies trade. The 'freedom of the seas' was always challenged, and John Seldon's counterblast *Mare Clausum* emphatically demanded for lawful regulation of maritime routes and resources. Oceanic liberty wrought in the early modern period as a fascinating cultural fantasy, in which the incessant change and uncertainty of the sea disputed human existence on land. This sense of the ocean's contest to landed order has antique origins. Plato in the *Laws* reveals the setting of a new city eleven miles inland: "...eleven miles is hardly enough. For the sea, although an agreeable, is a dangerous companion, and a highway of strange morals and manners as well as of commerce," (Ali & Majeed, 2015, p.52). It is Plato's reference to "strange morals and manners" and the mention of "commerce" that continues to draw scholars to the maritime.

Dominant developments in late capitalism and postmodern culture apparently eclipsed the maritime world in the African culture during the second half of the 20th century. The fictional scholar Foulke (1997) describes the 'missing context' of the maritime in late 20th-century Anglophone culture as a 'historical...linguistic...and experiential' crack in our collective comprehension. The archetypal reader today may not understand the specialized information, language, and lived experience of the sea that were once common in the eastern Africa coastal culture. The perception of the sea is today restricted to recreation such as sun-bathing on

beaches and swimming. This has made the sea less present to early 21st-century African readers than it did to Africans who experienced slavery and colonialism. The modern world has shed off part of its cultural history by subverting the sea from a vision of disorder into a play park. Due to implosion of aviation industry, automation of ports, containerization of goods and the passion for exploration to outer space by modern science and technology, the centrality of the maritime world in the African cultural imagination has been undermined.

Despite the foregoing dwindling importance of the ocean, it is particularly gaining attention in 21st-century academic treatises and concerns. The scholarly reimbursements of the sea for many fields revolves around its unfamiliarity, and on the astonishment of unfamiliarity that comes from shaking one's mental setting into a new structure. Historians explain the appeal of maritime scholarship through its reconfiguration of materials across and beyond national and linguistic borders. The oceans also connect the physical sciences with historical and cultural studies, as efforts to 'historicize the oceans' have the potential to bring together historians, ecologists, scientists with special interests in marine life and environment as well as policy makers and activists. Wigen (2006) argues that 'Maritime scholarship seems to have burst its bounds.' She range of areas that make reference to the sea. These include but not limited to the histories of science, slavery and colonialism (717). She also enlists several 'common properties of ocean-oriented histories', with shared interest in oceans as modern and imperialist constructs with culturally unique perceptions of the sea as 'fractured and fragmented' as well as 'intrinsically unstable.' There is need to revision the Indian ocean as a space with capacity to connect at a multicultural global as well as regional level (719–21).

The Indian ocean literary production has so far slugged behind other fields in the Indian ocean studies with literary scholars remaining behind in announcing a 'maritime paradigm' that focuses on 'Indian Ocean maritime literature' as a subgenre. Yet, fresh theorizations of the maritime in literary discourses are emerging, often making explicit references on recent historiography. Studies such as Margaret Cohen's survey of the 19th-century global maritime novel, Joseph Roach's research of 'circum-Atlantic performances' and Ian Baucom's spectacular works on the Atlantic have rejuvenated ideas of maritime English literature.

Mentz (2009) argues that the phrase 'new thalassology' was weaved by the historians Nicholas Horden and Peregrine Purcell to aggressively revision Mediterranean history for a new generation. The product of these efforts encapsulated in *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), informs, extends and replies Fernand Braudel's work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1972). Horden and Purcell's work revisits Plato's already-cited fear of the maritime with encouraging conversations about the place of the Mediterranean in ancient and modern history. These works show that blue cultural studies are possible in the Indian ocean context. Accordingly, there is need to engage and critique dominant New Historicist scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt Richard, Helgerson and Mary Fuller with focus on 'microecologies' and local deviations in ocean trade can fill the fissure to between the specialist interests of the ecology scholars and modern traditional postcolonial concerns in the study of Africa. Indian ocean contemporary literary scholars can shift narratives of New Historicist and Indian ocean history toward a revision of cultural meanings of the Indian ocean itself with connectivity as a fundamental thematic feature in the new maritime culture. A transoceanic, not necessarily trans Indian perspective, can revise this notion to reimagine the cultural break of both slavery and colonialism.

CONCLUSION

Mozambique Channel literature and by extension, Indian Ocean maritime literature needs to emerge out of, and in critical conversation with, the Indian Ocean history which already has a life of its own. Indian Ocean humanities need to articulate a critique of the Indian ocean model of scholarship with specific references to the Mozambique Channel as an area with gaps. Literary scholarship can influence conversations on the Indian Ocean world by emphasizing on the enduring role of Swahili poetic forms and fluid spaces available for this revision. A revisit of the African culture in which the 'Indian Ocean should shift from the margins to the center of academic discourses can meaningfully transform the conservative land-based literatures and national histories.

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