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African encounters with the sea: Durban and beyond

*Heather Hughes**

Introductory

In October 2013, a boat carrying refugees from the port of Misrata in Libya caught fire and sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Lampedusa is some 290km from the North African coast and as such, is a key point of arrival for migrants from Africa seeking entry into the European labour market. So risky is this crossing – vessels are often unseaworthy and overcrowded, and there is always the danger of being caught by European coastguards, imprisoned and then turned back – that those who entrust themselves to the people-smugglers have been dubbed “Kamikaze migrants”.¹ All too regularly, boats sink and people are drowned. On this occasion, around 350 people perished.² The BBC’s Rome correspondent, veteran journalist David Willey, was asked to explain the high death toll. His reply? “Africans can’t swim”.³ Immediately the twittersphere and blogosphere were alive with indignant tweets and posts. Such offence was caused that Willey appeared on a news programme the following evening to explain himself. He declared that he did not mean any harm; rather, he was reflecting on levels of poverty and the way in which many African children were deprived of facilities such as swimming pools at school. He was supported by experts working for NGOs and charities of one sort and another.⁴ While one would not wish to deny that there has been deprivation, all this served merely to entrench a certain stereotype of a poverty-stricken continent, full of humans suffering from a fundamental deficit. And as with any stereotype, a misleading picture was left behind.

This seems an appropriate entry point into a consideration of the many and varied relationships of Africans and the sea. While the focus here is on such relationships between those inhabiting the south east African coast and the Indian Ocean, the key thing about discussing the sea is that it resists confinement: its tides and currents, and the winds that blow across its surface, all contribute to its restless, continual movement. Moreover, the world’s seas and oceans flow into

* Heather Hughes is professor of Southern African Studies and the University of Lincoln, UK Her interests include biography/life writing; histories of leisure in southern Africa; and the early phases of nationalism in South Africa. This paper was originally presented as a keynote address to the Conference of the Historical Association of South Africa, Durban, 26 June 2014. The venue suggested the theme. Some references and points have been expanded, but the paper retains its original structure. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Johan Wassermann for inviting me to deliver the talk, and to several conference delegates for feedback on the result.

1. J. Carling and M. Hernandez-Carretero, “Beyond ‘Kamikaze Migrants’: Risk Taking in West African Boat Migration to Europe”, *Human Organization*, 71, 4, 2012, pp 407–416.
2. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24390368> (accessed 20 June 2014).
3. BBC Radio 4, *PM* programme, 3 October 2014.
4. See also <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/radio-4-would-have-you-believe-black-people-cant-swim>; <http://twitter.com/anthonycallan/status/385808188655681536> (accessed 20 September 2014).

each other and through history have borne people away to new settlements, carried traders out and home again and sometimes claimed those who presumed to challenge their nautical power. The seas have moved everything from beads to armies over vast distances. And along with people have spread ideas – foreign at first from some distant place, indigenised, moulded, resisted, subverted, everywhere transforming lives and livelihoods. Of course historically, people, goods and ideas have spread over land too, but at some point in these journeys, before the arrival of flight in the twentieth century, the high seas played an integral part in transporting and transferring, connecting and dividing. Three themes have been chosen in an effort to make sense of how the south-east African coast has interacted with the sea: our “place” in the Indian Ocean imaginary; gazing out to sea from landed bases; and going to sea.

Our location in the Indian Ocean world

Although history-writing remains distinctly ‘terracentric’, to borrow Rediker’s term,⁵ it does seem that in the past fifteen or so years, we have witnessed a “maritime turn”. There has been a proliferation of scholarly interest in a range of questions (themselves not necessarily new) about what the sea represents: what role has it played in shaping history? Does it have its own history, paradigmatically separate to land, or do landed social relations reproduce themselves at sea?⁶ Examples of these different approaches are Charlwood’s argument that the migrant voyage from Britain to Australia acted as a social leveller, introducing would-be settlers to the benefits of cooperation;⁷ and Joseph Conrad’s view that the ship represented the harsh relations of land-based society in microcosm, “a fragment detached from the earth”⁸ – except of course in one respect, these “fragments” were different from “the earth”, in that ships’ crews have been so overwhelmingly male in composition. In pursuit of connections along this stretch of coast and the sea, we shall follow the suggestion of one of the leading writers on the Indian Ocean world, Michael Pearson, that what is called for is an “an amphibious history which moves easily between land and sea”.⁹

Our amphibious history starts with a consideration of how this particular littoral relates to what we might call the Indian Ocean imaginary – this is the ocean, after all, that we call “ours” along this stretch of coast. One very recent work casts this as extremely peripheral, which might come as a shock to those who have, down the generations, had it impressed upon them just how strategically important these shores were to the emergence of various maritime empires. This is *The Indian Ocean in World History*, the most recent addition to the

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5. M. Rediker, see presentation at <http://vimeo.com/15686475> (accessed 20 September 2014).
 6. Among many contributions, see J. Bentley, R. Bridenthal and K. Wigen (eds), *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures and Transoceanic Exchanges* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2007); B. Klein and G. Mackenthun (eds), *Sea Changes: Historicising the Ocean* (Psychology Press, London, 2004); J. Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (Reaktion Books, London, 2011); L. Paine, *The Sea and Civilisation: A Maritime History of the World* (Atlantic Books, London, 2013); M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2003); and E. Rice (ed.) *The Sea and History* (Sutton Publishing, Stroud, 1996).
 7. D. Charlwood, *The Long Farewell: Settlers under Sail* (Allen Lane, Victoria, 1981).
 8. J. Conrad, *Nigger of the Narcissus: A Tale of the Sea*, in *The Nigger of the Narcissus, Typhoon and Other Stories* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971), p 35.
 9. M. Pearson, “The Idea of the Ocean”, in P. Gupta, I. Hofmeyr and M. Pearson (eds), *Eyes across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2010), p 8.

New Oxford World History series, by Edward Alpers, an important historian of eastern African and the Indian Ocean.¹⁰

Alpers begins with the observation that throughout the age of sail, from antiquity to the mid-nineteenth century, trade across the Indian Ocean was dependent on the monsoons: from November to January each year, prevailing winds blow down from the Arab peninsula and western India towards the eastern African coast, and surface currents accelerate the movement of sailing vessels in a north to south direction. Then from April through to August, the pattern is reversed, when strong winds push north, again accompanied by currents that facilitate the movement of ships. (Because the monsoons also bring rains, landed peasants have equally relied on these seasonal patterns.)

However, the effects of the monsoon reached only as far as the northern Mozambique channel, where sailors would have encountered countervailing wind patterns that disrupted their ability to ply trade further south if they wanted to complete a round trip in a year. Thus with the emergence of what Alpers calls the “Islamic Sea” in the second millennium, the Arabian Gulf became the fulcrum of trading relationships in the western Indian Ocean. South eastern Africa was rather beyond their reach, with the main African trading centres being further north at ports like Sofala, Kilwa, Zanzibar and Mogadishu, in the Swahili world. (Huffman reminds us that Swahili itself means “coastal dweller”;¹¹ moreover, along the eastern coast of Africa until the nineteenth century, there were no mosques more than two kilometres inland.¹²)

From the sixteenth century, a new force burst on the scene: seaborne trade backed up by state-sponsored violence, in the form of the Portuguese, and later the English and Dutch. What these European sailors also achieved was linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, although Alpers is largely silent on what this meant for the southern coast of Africa, except to note that “this decision by the Dutch [to establish a station and colony at Cape Town in 1652] marked the real integration of South Africa into the Indian Ocean world”.¹³ This is not followed through, except in observations such as that from the mid-nineteenth century, when the “Islamic Sea” gave way to the “British Lake”, and sail to steam, coastal entrepôts like Durban (along with Aden, Karachi, and Fremantle) became the smaller jewels at the ends of a “necklace of critical ports” located in India, strategically bolstering British imperial power in the region.¹⁴ The opening of Suez in 1869 seemed merely to reinforce this sense of being on the outer edge of somewhere else, someone else’s history.¹⁵

The age of steam accelerated the large-scale movement of labour from one continent to another in the Indian Ocean region. Of course there had been such movements for centuries before, both across other oceans – hence what has

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10. E. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014). See also his *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Markus Wiener, Princeton: NJ, 2009).
 11. T. Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa* (UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2007), p 75.
 12. Mack, *The Sea*, p 60.
 13. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean*, p 81.
 14. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean*, p 112.
 15. Because of fees and congestion, much shipping continued to sail around southern Africa: J. Hyslop, “Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine, c.1880–1945”, *Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 44, 1, 2009, p 62.

come to be called, after Gilroy's seminal work, the Black Atlantic¹⁶ – and in the Indian Ocean region. In the latter, trade in slaves had accompanied seafaring from the earliest times; it was the Dutch who expanded this trade to supply the labour needs of their colonial agriculture. Alpers discusses various examples of labour transportation in the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century, and in this connection notes the importation of Indian indentured workers to Mauritius, Ceylon, Burma and Natal. But the social and cultural implications of such labour movements, or for that matter of the earlier phases of slavery across the Indian Ocean to the Cape, are not part of his discussion.

Other settlers who arrived in Natal of course came from the direction of the Atlantic Ocean, which is possibly why they are not part of his discussion either. Yet if we are attempting an appreciation of *relationships* between land and sea – south eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean – their presence must surely be part of the story: how else to explain (as just one example) the rumours spreading through Zululand during World War I that the Germans would come from the sea and release Africans from settler tyranny?¹⁷ The very smallness of settler numbers, relative to the indigenous population, was a critical factor in shaping the geopolitics of colonial Natal and Zululand. A further (and related) critical issue that Alpers does not raise is that the age of steam also meant that it became possible to deploy the British army relatively quickly in defence of its interests throughout the Indian Ocean world. Among the earliest reinforcements rushed to bolster imperial forces in October 1899 were soldiers stationed in India; Durban became a critical “gateway” for moving tens of thousands of troops, as well as supplies, to the front throughout the South African War. Conversely, Boer prisoners of war often spent long periods in prison ships anchored off Durban before being despatched to camps in India, Sri Lanka, St Helena or the Caribbean.¹⁸

There is another literature on the Indian Ocean world that gives it rather different dimensions, culturally and politically speaking, whose watchwords include cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, creolisation and alternative modernities.¹⁹ Although there is substantial overlap with the broad outlines of Alpers's Indian Ocean history, this postcolonial literature is more concerned with subjectivities, cultural linkages, and how modernities were constructed by those whose very humanity was denied by the rulers of empires and the waves. Baderoon, for example, has this to say about what she terms slave modernity:

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16. P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, Princeton, 1993).
 17. A. Grundlingh, “Black Men in a White Man's War: The Impact of the First World War on South African Blacks”, Unpublished paper presented to the African Studies Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, August 1982, p 14.
 18. J. Wassermann and B. Kearney (eds), *A Warrior's Gateway: Durban and the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2002); J. Wassermann, “A Tale of Two Port Cities: The Relationship between Durban and New Orleans during the Anglo-Boer War”, *Historia*, 49, 1, 2004, pp 27–47; P. Datta, “The Interlocking Worlds of the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa/India”, *South African Historical Journal*, 57, 1, 2007, pp 35–59.
 19. Key texts include Gupta, Hofmeyr and Pearson (eds) *Eyes across the Water*; J. Hawley (ed.), *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2008); I. Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge: Mass. and London, 2013); Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*; J. Soske, “‘Wash Me Black Again’: African Nationalism, the Indian Diaspora and KwaZulu-Natal, 1944–1960”, PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2009; L. Bremner, “Folded Ocean: The Spatial Transformation of the Indian Ocean World”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 10, 1, 2014, pp 18–45; and the special issue (“Tracks and Trails: Indian Ocean Worlds as Method”) of *History Compass*, 7, 11, 2013.

The modernity of Islam at the Cape is evident in the form of the religion, which shows the influence of both the Sufist origins of Muslim slaves from around the Indian Ocean and the impact of slavery and conversion. Islam at the Cape has taken a notably tolerant form in relation to women's roles, it may be argued, in response to the enforced prostitution and sexual slavery to which enslaved women were subjected.²⁰

The south-eastern African coast has entered this literature very largely through the activities and influence of Mahatma Gandhi in Durban and Phoenix, although this is not in any way to underplay the significance of the Indian settlers, free and unfree, who were the cause of his being here in the first place.²¹ Nevertheless, Gandhi is emblematic of so many of its key themes: cosmopolitanism in his borrowing and exchange of ideas, and use of language; rootedness and re-rootedness in his insistence on the right to a sense of belonging of diasporic communities; utopianism in his vision of a social order based on justice and tolerance; and defiance of authority in his elaboration of an alternative political practice.²² The point, for our purposes, is that from this new and exciting perspective, our coast is far more closely connected into an Indian Ocean world – at least for the more recent periods of its very long history – than in the interpretation offered by Alpers. At the very least, then, we can observe that the precise nature of our membership of this world is the subject of ongoing debates, not least because they involve attempts to shift the *site* of these debates in a global-southerly direction.²³

In concluding these brief observations, it may be noted that there is still much to learn. For example, very little work has been undertaken (from an “amphibious” perspective) on the role that this region's peoples played in two world wars, or of the impact that such wars have had on its politics, culture and social life. Whether one examines world war in the context of struggles for political and economic dominance, or for the ways in which ordinary people connected with and apprehended each other (large-scale maritime troop movements, or spreading nationalist ideas, for example²⁴) there is much more to be added to our understanding of how an Indian Ocean imaginary has been constructed in more recent times.

Gazing out to sea: life on the littoral

Archaeological evidence suggests that those living along the littoral of what is now KwaZulu-Natal had long foraged in the coastal dunes for herbs, and had hunted game here, but were essentially cattle-keepers who looked to the land for their

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20. G. Baderoon, “The African Oceans: Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture”, *Research in African Literatures*, 40, 4, 2009, p 92.
 21. There is a wide literature on Indian South Africans, noted below.
 22. See most notably Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press* and M. Frost, “In Search of Cosmopolitan Discourse: A Historical Journey across the Indian Ocean from Singapore to South Africa”, in Gupta, Hofmeyr and Pearson (eds) *Eyes across the Water*, especially pp 80–89.
 23. For an interesting review of such trends, see M. Jayawardene, “Of Bastards, Creoles and Incommensurable Reminders in the Transnation: Postcolonial Studies and South African Literature”, *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, 1, 1, 2013, pp 190–207.
 24. As just one example, Desai and Vahed point to the still largely invisible role that Indian South Africans played as stretcher-bearers in East Africa during World War I. see A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indenture: A South African Story, 1860–1914* (Madiba Publishers, Durban, 2007), p 15.

needs.²⁵ There were important exceptions. Survivors of the wreck of the *Sao Bento* (1554) who were trekking north to reach Delagoa Bay encountered survivors of an earlier wreck, *Sao Joao*, living among people in Durban Bay who fished. In fact these visitors called the Bay area “Pescaria”²⁶ and a century later, others also reported seeing fish traps in the bay.²⁷ Yet until one got beyond Lake St Lucia, there was no more evidence of fishing. This was most likely to do with the nature of the coastline, the extremely rough surf and the lack of protected inlets, rather than (or as much as) fish taboos, which Isichei claims were widespread along this coastline, as well as in the interior.²⁸

What, if anything, do we know of indigenous people’s attitudes to the sea in earlier centuries? There is very little evidence but what fragments we have are intriguing. We are told that from the seventeenth century, Africans believed that white people lived under the ocean;²⁹ this became a “symbolic template” for interpreting military incursions and land dispossessions.³⁰ In the first half of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Bleek reported a Zulu creation myth reworked in terms of a similar opposition between the people of the land and the people of the sea:

In the beginning, uNkulunkulu created human beings, male and female, but also black and white. While black human beings were created to be naked, carry spears and live on the land, white human beings were created to wear clothing, carry guns and live in the sea.³¹

The interesting thing about this is that the first strangers from the sea that many coastal communities would have encountered would have been survivors of shipwrecks; moreover, a great many of the ships that ran onto rocks off this treacherous coast from the mid-1500s were making their way back from points in the east, fully laden with slaves. So it was not just white people in odd costumes who emerged from the sea; clearly the distinction between land-people and sea-people was very specific, then. Though not pertaining to our immediate stretch of coast, it was deeply gratifying to discover that south of the Mthamvuna River, where the *Sao Bento* was wrecked, survivors noted that the local people “were fearless swimmers”.³²

Along the KwaZulu-Natal coast, people from the sea do seem to have been treated as if they possessed magical qualities. For example, just north of the Umgeni River, shipwreck survivors encountered people who “offered them ears of millet to lay on those parts of their bodies where they suffered pain, hoping to be cured by those means”.³³ There is of course a far more recent instance of the sea

25. G. Whitelaw, “Iron Age Fishing Tales”, *Southern African Humanities*, 21, 2009, pp 195–212.
 26. G. Vernon, *Even the Cows were Amazed: Shipwreck Survivors in South-East Africa, 1552–1782* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2013), p 41.
 27. Vernon, *Even the Cows were Amazed*, p 115.
 28. E. Isichei, *A History of African Societies to 1870* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), p 146.
 29. W. MacGaffey, cited in D. Chidester, “Colonialism”, in W. Braun and R. McCutcheon (eds), *A Guide to the Study of Religion* (Continuum, London, 2000), p 426.
 30. Chidester, “Colonialism”, p 426.
 31. W. Bleek, cited in Chidester, “Colonialism”, p 426.
 32. Vernon, *Even the Cows were Amazed*, p 101.
 33. Vernon, *Even the Cows were Amazed*, pp 159–60.

being associated with cleansing: its role in purification rites in the independent churches, such as the AmaNazaretha.³⁴

Apart from this last-mentioned instance, all these references are to a time before industrial/commercial expansion had transformed Durban from an open roadstead served by lighters to a port with dockside facilities for all sizes of ship. In common with other port cities, its spatial layout and social relations, not to mention its politics, were shaped by maritime trade. Moreover, in the harshly racialised labour market, in which the local authorities made every effort to prevent African urbanisation, workers were almost exclusively African men until after World War I. Togat, or daily-paid, workers dominated the docks; most were Zulu-speakers but in times of labour shortage, such as in the aftermath of the South African War, stevedoring companies recruited workers elsewhere in the Indian Ocean world, such as Egypt, Zanzibar and Inhambane.³⁵ The dockworkers called themselves *izinyati*, buffaloes, strong men: physically strong to handle the job, mentally strong to cope with the appalling conditions in the barracks where they were required to live:

there are narrow, dark, winding stairs that lead to the room occupying the floor above, and the air is foul ... The "comfort" and "rest" to be got from sleeping on a wooden board in a room where a harsh light burns throughout the night must be experienced to be believed.³⁶

One can understand workers' struggles to secure a foothold in town on their own terms, in early shanty towns such as Eastern Vlei, Berea Townlands and Bamboo Square.³⁷ Their removal – usually on health grounds – was an essential element in employers' determination to exert control over work discipline and labour costs, which in this port city took the particular form known as the Durban System. On the one hand the local state decreed that workers should be housed in highly controlled single-sex barracks, while it simultaneously secured a monopoly on the brewing and sale of beer, profits of which funded the administration of Africans in town.³⁸ Dock workers were in the forefront of resistance to the Durban System; they also happened to be the only group of workers in Durban to produce their own leadership, rather than depending on a school-educated stratum that had not risen through the ranks. Their most remarkable leader was Zulu Phungula, who was involved in a number of strikes in the 1940s for higher pay, until banished to his home town of Ixopo.³⁹

Just as Bamboo Square, hidden among the dunes at the Point, was continually under threat of removal before finally being demolished in 1903, so have shanty towns existed tenuously yet continuously in Durban's urban history since the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁰ They are testimony to ordinary people's

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34. G. Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Brill, Leiden, 1992), p 161.
 35. D. Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dock Workers of Durban", PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1979, pp 86–88.
 36. Cited in Hemson, "Class Consciousness", p 324.
 37. B. Kearney, "Bamboo Square: A Documentary Narrative of the 'Indian and Native Cantonment' at the Point, 1873 to 1903", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 20, 1, 2002, pp 29–64.
 38. P. La Hausse, "The Struggle for the City: Alcohol, the *Ematsheni* and Popular Culture in Durban, 1902 to 1936", in P. Maylam and I. Edwards (eds), *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996), pp 33–66.
 39. Hemson, "Class Consciousness", chapter 5.
 40. P. Maylam, "The 'Black Belt': African Squatters in Durban 1935–1950", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 17, 3, 1983, pp 413–428.

stubborn determination to shape a sort of enclave modernity, in defiance of every aspect of the official narrative about them: the need for sanitation, orderly behaviour, racial purity and obedience to industrial norms. While admittedly itself an example of official anxiety, this description of Bamboo Square in 1880 conveys something of its “alternative cosmopolitanism”:

They are composed of some of nearly every uncivilized race in the world – about 15 prostitutes of all colours. Cunning Chinamen. Drunken Portuguese Kafirs. Thieving and Grog-selling Coolies. Card-sharping Malays. The remainder (about 460) are hard-working fishermen, labourers, boatmen, and togt Kafirs ...⁴¹

In Bamboo Square we are firmly on the edge of the ocean. As Trotter has recently reminded us, prostitution is in the lifeblood of sea ports worldwide (though not exclusively of ports, of course).⁴² Then there were the fishermen, based not only in Bamboo Square but at other points around Durban Bay. In the main, they were ex-indentured workers who turned to profitable use the skills they had brought with them from India and who all but monopolised the supply of fish to Durban and Pietermaritzburg markets. A rowing boat was used to set the net from the shore, which was then hauled in by hand; in the early twentieth century, there were some 40 fishing boats operating in this way in the bay; by the 1990s, this had dwindled to two.⁴³ In Bamboo Square, there were exuberant celebrations following successful expeditions: “on such occasions [it] was a lively place, with dancing, singing and lots of beer”.⁴⁴

Durban was also a base for the commercial harvesting of the sea in a very different form. From 1908 to the mid-1970s, this was a whaling port. For the first two decades, whale carcasses were offloaded at a quay located on the south side of the harbour entrance, and transported by rail to the whaling stations on the ocean side of the bluff.⁴⁵ Laurens van der Post’s memoir of a hunting expedition in the seas not far off Durban (in which he became the youthful “Eyes” of the captain, on the lookout for sperm whales⁴⁶) belongs to this early phase. From the 1930s, vicissitudes in the industry and the decline of coastal whale stocks led to the growth of pelagic whaling – ships fitted out with processing plants, which could hunt deep into the Antarctic. The most experienced crew tended to be Norwegian but others “were hired in Durban for the season and consisted of all sorts, ranging from tramps to doctors and students, all attracted by the high rates of pay”.⁴⁷ After World War II, both coastal and pelagic whaling were brought within the regulatory regime not only of the International Whaling Commission but of more stringent conditions on the part of the South African government. Such limitations, together with the continuing depletion of stocks, meant that by the 1970s whaling from Durban was no longer a profitable industry; the oil crisis of 1973 finally terminated operations.⁴⁸

41. Kearney, “Bamboo Square”, p 41.

42. H. Trotter, “Soliciting Sailors: The Temporal Dynamics of Dockside Prostitution in Cape Town and Durban”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 3, 2009, pp 699–713.

43. L. Beckley and S. Fennessy, “The Beach Seine-fishery off Durban, KwaZulu-Natal”, *South African Journal of Zoology*, 31, 4, 1996, p 186; Kearney, “Bamboo Square”, p 34.

44. Kearney, “Bamboo Square”, p 38.

45. C. de Jong, “A History of Whaling from Durban”, in B. Guest and J. Sellers (eds) *Receded Tides of Empire: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Natal and Zululand since 1910* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1994), pp 112–135.

46. L. van der Post, *The Hunter and the Whale* (Penguin, London, 1970).

47. “A Blacksmith Remembers his Whaling Days” at <http://www.fad.co.za/Resources/whaling/tribe.htm> (accessed 30 September, 2014).

48. de Jong, “A History of Whaling”, p 126.

It is notable that before World War I, Durban's connection with the sea was almost wholly conducted through various activities associated with shipping and fishing. A 1903 official guide to Natal underlines this point: while there is some mention of leisure activities associated with the sea, it is the harbour that takes centre stage.⁴⁹ An imagined passenger is invited through its entrance to marvel at the engineering feats of the dredging of the channel and the construction of pier, breakwater, lighthouse and signal station, before disembarkation at the Public Wharf:

What noisy, animated scenes the principal wharves present! – jangling of chains, barrows rumbling over the quay, sirens hooting, locomotives screaming as they push or pull their long-bodied wagons into position, the grinding of winches, the ho-hoying of sailors, and natives chanting some monotonous refrain ...⁵⁰

Durban had developed a beach culture of sorts on Bay Beach inside the harbour from the 1850s.⁵¹ Across marshy ground and dune forests to the east of the town was Back Beach, facing onto the Indian Ocean. Until the early twentieth century, it was considered to be a deeply unattractive, waste area, as its contemporaneous name suggests. This began to change after the South African War, when the city council embarked on a massive investment in infrastructure: Back Beach changed its name to the more appealing Ocean Beach, tramlines were extended for day-trippers and a Marine Parade was laid out to facilitate access. By 1910, the beachfront was already showing signs of the "exotic eclecticism" that was so much a feature of British seaside architecture at the time.⁵² The spectacular centrepiece was a large safety bathing enclosure supporting a circular pier, constructed out into the sea. Soon, upcountry visitors were arriving by train for their annual holidays: 15 000 tourists enjoyed the new seaside experience in 1908, despite the twenty-seven-hour journey from Johannesburg.⁵³ From about 1910, a trip to Ocean Beach was an obligatory shore excursion for visitors arriving by cruise liner. And in 1915, marketing the city to both domestic and foreign visitors began in earnest.

Seasides are often represented as liminal spaces, suspended between propriety and abandonment. If so, there is an underside to liminality, a constant reminder of servility and oppression to those denied access to such spaces. For whites, acts of leisure were an important mark of refinement, helping to reinforce a distinction between them and the African and Indian subaltern majority. Moreover, where Africans and Indians impinged on this space, they were expected to be at work: supervising children, patrolling boardwalks, pulling rickshas, carrying luggage, waiting on hotel patrons. No other presence was permitted in the pleasure zones. Sometimes even black people at work proved an inconvenience. When Indian fishermen tried to launch boats from the bathing enclosure and to fish

49. C. Harrison (comp. and ed.), *Natal: An Illustrated Official Railway Guide and Handbook of General Information* (London, Payne Jennings, 1903).

50. Harrison, *Natal: An Illustrated Official Railway Guide*, p 6.

51. This and the following paragraphs on the history of leisure on Durban's beaches are based on H. Hughes, "Struggling for a Day in the Sun: The Emergence of a Beach Culture among African People in Durban", in T. Cusack (ed.) *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012), pp 141–157.

52. J. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000), p 128.

53. B. Maharaj, V. Pillay and R. Sucheran, "Durban: A Subtropical Coastal Paradise? Tourism Dynamics in a Post-apartheid City", *Etudes caribeennes*, 9/10, 2008, p 3; I. Morrison, *Durban: A Pictorial History* (Struik, Cape Town, 1987), p 62.

from the pier at night, they were hurriedly ejected. There was one form of work found virtually nowhere else: that of the tourist ricksha. As both spectacle and iconic image, this had become inextricably associated with Durban's premier status as a white playground.⁵⁴ This is another version of eclectic exoticism, with its references to a rural homestead economy – the hunt, intricate Zulu beadwork and regimental/militaristic feathers and skins – constructed in an assemblage that would have been unthinkable outside the urban leisure milieu of Durban.

Africans developed their own distinctive leisure patterns. From the ranks of the middle class a beach culture began developing from the 1920s – people who wanted to swim! Yet they faced the problem of a lack of facilities. For its part, the town council was keen to channel leisure time into acceptable forms of activity and in 1929 set aside a stretch of beach from Vetch's Pier to the harbour wall. The timing was not coincidental: it was the year of strikes and boycotts and the authorities were keen to use recreational activities as a strategy for diffusing dissent – the beach was clearly one element. Despite the fact that there were no amenities (tearooms, paddling pools, shelters and so on) this beach was extremely popular in summer. It was a rather dangerous stretch of the bay, however, with currents tending to drag swimmers towards the rocky breakwater. And there were no lifesaving facilities, which was a major grievance. There was a long and contorted wrangle with the city council over the provision of lifesavers; white lifesavers bitterly resisted the idea of African competition and it was several years before an African squad was trained – and then could only operate under the supervision of a white lifesaver. Beach segregation continued to intensify: by the 1960s, the African beach had been moved to the northern end of the so-called Golden Mile, beyond the Indian and coloured beaches, each rigidly demarcated by prominent signage. Whereas beaches were carefree places for whites, they became sites of struggle for black people, until they were all finally desegregated in 1989.⁵⁵

Going to sea, arriving by sea

We now need to turn to another perspective on our “amphibious history”: how the sea was experienced by those who sailed on it. There are many varieties of being at sea: as seafarers and as passengers, which in turn covers a very broad spectrum, from voluntary putting to sea for pleasure to enforced shipment as unfree labour. Let us begin with seafaring. Here it is necessary to refer to Hyslop's imaginative account of Zulu seafarers, based largely on the narratives of two of James Stuart's informants, Fulunge Mpofu and George Magodini.⁵⁶ Both went to sea in the early twentieth century. Mpofu boarded ship in 1916, in the middle of World War I; he told Stuart that it was attacked by Germans off West Africa and the crew all clambered into life boats, drifted for some time, were rescued and taken ashore at Freetown, then joined a convoy bound for London. He took work on a ship plying the route between Boulogne and England, deserted, was arrested, rejoined the ship, witnessed much maritime warfare and destruction, then sailed on yet another vessel for New Zealand and Australia. His ship was

54. R. Posel, “*Amashishi*: The Ricksha-pullers of Durban”, in Maylam and Edwards (eds) *The People's City*, pp 202–221.

55. See J. Dixon and K. Durrheim, “Displacing Place-identity: A Discursive Approach to Locating Self and Other”, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 2000, pp 27–44.

56. J. Hyslop, “Zulu Seafarers in the Steamship Era: The Voyage Narratives of Fulunge Mpofu and George Magodini, 1916–1924”, Paper available at https://www.academia.edu/432521/Zulu_Seafarers_in_the_Steamship_Era (accessed 1 December, 2013).

taken captive by the Germans, who later surrendered to an allied warship and the crew were put off at Montevideo. He returned to London and was looking for a way to get back to South Africa when Stuart interviewed him; he had been at sea for eight years, during that time, in common with other seafarers “committed neither to ship nor harbour, sea nor land, port nor hinterland, town nor village, urban nor rural, industry nor agriculture”.⁵⁷ Magodini went east to Bombay, but the ship suffered a damaged mast and he had to return in another, before setting off for New York, Liverpool and Cardiff. He may have travelled several other routes as well, before ending up in London, like Mpofu trying to get home to Natal.

Hyslop argues that seafarers like Mpofu and Magodini demonstrated an openness to cultural modernity and a transnational disposition, by learning about navigation, responding with keen awareness to the cities they visited, bridging divides between traditional and modern, picking up particular attitudes to other seafarers and ducking and weaving to survive in foreign places. Through them he identifies a Zulu maritime world, representing yet another alternative modernity, of which one can find evidence until the onset of containerisation in the 1950s when the maritime labour market was restructured beyond recognition. Zulu crew seem regularly to have plied the route between Durban and Australian ports, for example.⁵⁸

On rare occasions, Durban has been drawn into international seafarers’ disputes in such a way as to exacerbate local social and political tensions. It was the first South African port to be affected by the 1925 British merchant marine strike over pay cuts, when the crew of three ships in harbour refused to sail; sailors were soon put on trial for refusing to obey orders. The strike action rapidly spread elsewhere, so that “there was only restricted sea traffic between South African ports, or between the country and the outside world, for forty-seven days”⁵⁹ – all very damaging for agricultural exports. The strike divided the South African Labour Party (then a member of the Pact government) over whether to support the strike or not. Further, despite the government’s view that the strike was wholly undesirable, it was nevertheless implacably opposed to the rumoured arrival of several hundred “lascars”⁶⁰ from India to break the strike in South African ports, as was the Natal Indian Congress, fearing that they would spark widespread anti-Indian protests.⁶¹

Travelling abroad before World War II, whatever the purpose, meant boarding one of the sailing vessels or steamships plying routes across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The most significant arrivals were long-term settlers. Those from Britain whose whiteness enabled them to become dominant in the colonial

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57. G. Balanchandran, “South Asian Seafarers and their Worlds, c. 1870–1930s”, Paper available from http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/history_cooperative/www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/balanchandran.html (accessed 6 June, 2014).
 58. “Zulus don’t Mind our Cold Weather”, *The Age* (Melbourne), 4 July, 1952.
 59. B. Hiron, “The Homeboat Strike of 1925: British Seamen and South African Community Reactions”, in *Collected Seminar Papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies* (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 1988), p 53.
 60. According to Hyslop, “Technically a lascar was specifically a seaman from India. But the inevitable mixture of sailors of varying nationalities in all ports meant that it was often used to describe all Asian and East African seamen.” See Hyslop, “Steamship Empire”, p 54.
 61. “Lascars not to Land: Are Prohibited Immigrants”, *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, Australia), 3 September, 1925. See also Hiron, “The Homeboat Strike”.

order have been much written about (though generally not recently);⁶² the journey was arduous enough to be one-way in virtually all instances. Another much smaller group who deserve a mention were Africans from the Caribbean. Cobley notes that although the largest number settled at the Cape, such communities were to be found in every port from Walvis Bay to Durban, despite strict immigration regulations, often finding work at the docks.⁶³ Sea ports are particularly porous places the world over.

Though their numbers were also comparatively small, those who ventured across the sea from the 1880s to better themselves were enormously influential for having done so: people like John Nembula, John and Nokutela Dube and Qandeyana Cele. One or two left records of how difficult it had been for them to imagine that anyone who disappeared over the edge of the horizon would ever be able to get back; conquering such fears was part of the journey towards progress and modernity.⁶⁴ Herbert Dhlomo and a colleague were offered places to study in America in the 1920s; it is highly likely that the reason they failed to take them up was that they were too afraid of the sea to make the journey.⁶⁵ All of them may have grown up in communities where a well-founded fear of the Indian Ocean had been inculcated from an early age. In addition, as Alain Corbin notes, those schooled in devoutly Christian traditions would have been exposed to terrifying biblical representations of the sea:

Genesis imposed the vision of the “great abyss”; a place of unfathomable mysteries, an uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and unimaginable over which the Spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation. This quivering expanse, which symbolised, and actually was, the unknowable, was frightful in itself. There is no sea in the Garden of Eden. There is no place within the enclosed landscape of Paradise for the watery horizon whose surface extends as far as the eye can see. To attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege, like an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable nature of God.⁶⁶

Apart from arrivals and departures there have been passengers in transit; these have varied greatly from troops en route to theatres of war (sometimes almost unwittingly showing up the stresses and strains of a port trying to cope with war conditions, as in the 1942 “mutiny” of a shipload of British army and air force personnel on their way to Singapore⁶⁷) to those on pleasure cruises. This is a phenomenon that most historians view as too frivolous to mention. Though dwarfed by operations in the Caribbean and Mediterranean and now frequently referred to as an “emerging market”,⁶⁸ cruising up the eastern African coast has been possible since at least the 1930s, with Lourenco Marques/Maputo, Mozambique Island, Mombasa, Mauritius and Zanzibar popular points for shore

62. See for example R. Gordon, *Dear Louisa: History of a Pioneer Family in Natal, 1850–1888* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1970); and A. Hattersley, *The Natal Settlers 1849–1851* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1949).

63. A. Cobley, “‘Far from home’: The Origins and Significance of the Afro-Caribbean Community in South Africa to 1930”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 2, 1992, pp 349–70.

64. H. Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2011), p 83.

65. T. Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985), p 62.

66. A. Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994), pp 1–2.

67. G. Rubin, *Durban 1942: A British Troopship Revolt* (The Hambledon Press, London, 1992).

68. R. Dowling, “The Future of the Cruise Industry”, in R. Dowling (ed.) *Cruise Ship Tourism* (CABI, Wallingford, 2006), p 426.

visits. The impact on communities in these places over such a long time has barely begun to be understood.

Finally, there were those arriving and departing as most unwilling passengers, in the sense that they were not entirely free agents. As far as this particular stretch of coast is concerned, the most significant arrival was indentured workers from India, whose history in Natal has, like that of white settlers, been very extensively studied.⁶⁹ Then there were slaves. They have been mentioned already as survivors of shipwrecks, many of whom, it seems, settled in coastal communities and were absorbed into them. But there is more. In the 1980s, it may be remembered that a fierce debate was sparked by Julian Cobbing, who argued that the *mfecane* signified a sort of misplaced blame: far from the rise of the Zulu state causing havoc across the interior, it was the pincer movement of white settlers moving up from the west and slaving activity in the Delagoa Bay region that were responsible for widespread displacement in the interior.⁷⁰ Historians were generally sceptical of Cobbing's argument because of a lack of hard evidence in terms of the timing of these upheavals. There is research now in progress at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, which is unearthing evidence that may prove to be significant for this debate, and which implicates this coast more closely than many would have thought possible. As the curator explains, "We have documented a slave ship, the *Mercury*, from 1720, that among its cargo were 74 'boys and girls' from Natal harbor, and many others from Madagascar. Its destination was Rappahannock ..."⁷¹

Rappahannock was part of the estate of Robert Carter Junior, one of the leading grandees in Virginia Colony; he was known as "King" Carter. On his death in 1732, he "had title to a third of a million acres and owned more than seven hundred enslaved Africans and African Americans".⁷² It would seem, therefore, that slaves were transported from these shores to the southern colonies of the Union. This nugget must surely begin to change the way we think of the relationship between Natal and a slave trade stretching across not one but two oceans. It may even be that Oprah Winfrey's "baffling"⁷³ claim (made in 2005) that she had Zulu ancestry, may not be so far-fetched after all.

Conclusion

Geographically, Durban may be at the extremity of the "folded ocean".⁷⁴ But from virtually every other perspective, a cursory review of the evidence presented here suggests that this city and its coast have long been closely connected into an

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69. Among many titles, one may cite S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migrants in South Africa* (University of the Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg, 1990); Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indenture*; U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Canefields to Freedom: A Chronicle of South African Indian Life* (Kwela Books, Cape Town, 2000); Y. Meer et. al., *Documents of Indentured Labour, Natal 1851–1917* (Institute of Black Research, Durban, 1980).
 70. J. Cobbing, "The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo", *Journal of African History*, 29, 1988, pp 487–519.
 71. Personal communication, R. Woodward to H. Hughes, 1 December 2013.
 72. R. Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004), p 8.
 73. "Oprah's Baffling Claim of Zulu Blood", *The Telegraph*, 14 June 2005, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/1492039/Oprahs-baffling-claim-of-Zulu-blood.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).
 74. Bremner, "Folded Ocean", p 3.

Indian Ocean World. It may well be that the continuing emphasis on antiquity – in works such as Alpers's that we started with – has been responsible for writing our coast out of this relationship. On a similar point but in more reflective vein, Bose has recently noted that worlds such as that of the Indian Ocean “have been so far mostly theorised, described and analysed only for the premodern and early modern periods”.⁷⁵ Yet there is another dimension to this: if we ask more probing questions about our region's role in the broad span of (amphibious) history in the Indian Ocean world, we will doubtless find some good answers. After all, this is a world in many different ways still under construction, inviting us to secure our place within it.

Abstract

This article presents an overview of the relationship between what is now the KwaZulu-Natal coast and the Indian Ocean, from the perspective of what has been called an “amphibious” history of land-sea relationships. It discusses two broad approaches to the study of the Indian Ocean, one concerned more with politics, economy and technology, and another that focuses more on subjectivities and cultural exchange, to show how south-eastern Africa's place in the Indian Ocean imaginary varies according to which of these perspectives is adopted. It then examines the historical evidence concerning the relationship to the ocean of those who have lived and worked along this coast, focusing largely on the port of Durban. Finally it examines the linkages between the littoral and those who have gone to sea, whether as seafarers or different kinds of passengers. The conclusion is that there is still much to be uncovered about this stretch of coast in the Indian Ocean, if we ask the appropriate sorts of questions.

Keywords: Indian Ocean world; Durban harbour; Durban seaside; settlement of Natal; slavery.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bied 'n oorsig aan van die verhouding tussen dit wat tans die kus van KwaZulu-Natal uitmaak en die Indiese Oseaan. Dit geskied vanuit die perspektief van wat as 'n “amfibiese” geskiedenis van land-en-seeverhouding bekend staan. Twee benaderings tot die studie van die Indiese Oseaan word gevolg – een meer gefokus op die politiek, ekonomie en tegnologie, en die ander op subjektiwiteit en kulturele uitruiling – om aan te toon hoe die posisie van suid-oos Afrika in die Indiese Oseaan verbeelding varieer na aanleiding van die perspektief wat aangelê word. Daarna eksamineer die artikel die historiese bewyse rakende die verhouding tot die oseaan van dié wat langs die kus gewoon en gewerk het. Die fokus is grootliks op die hawe van Durban. Ten slotte word die verwantskappe tussen die land en dié wat die see in is, of hul seevaarders of passasiers was, ondersoek. Die gevolgtrekking is dat daar nog baie oor is om ontdek te word van hierdie deel van die kuslyn van die Indiese Oseaan, mits ons die regte vrae stel.

Slutelwoorde: Indiese oseaan; Durbanse Hawe; Durbanse strand; vestiging van Natal; slawerny.

75. S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Princeton, Harvard University Press, 2009), p 6.