



Spiritual Relationality in Swahili Ocean Worlds

Paula Uimonen | Professor of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University
Hussein Masimbi | PhD Student, University of Dar es Salaam

ABSTRACT This article interrogates how people in Kaole relate to the ocean spiritually. Located on the Swahili coast in Tanzania, with a long history of transoceanic connections, Kaole is a fishing community where everyday life is lived alongside and through the ocean. Drawing on exploratory fieldwork in preparation of our new research project Swahili Ocean Worlds, in this article we share some of our initial findings, which we contextualise with the help of scholarly work on the Swahili world and Islam in Africa. To broaden our scope, we also engage with some comparative material from other parts of the world. In conceptualising Swahili ocean worlds, we draw on the anthropology of water, which has ascertained the centrality of water in the making of social worlds. But to grasp the spiritual relationality of the ocean, we adopt a pluriversal approach, with an emphasis on multiple worldings in an emergent world of many worlds. Our aim is to go beyond the focus on materiality and sociality in the anthropology of water, to interrogate the spirituality of the ocean in terms of spiritual beings as well as becomings.

Keywords: Swahili, Islam, ocean, spirituality, pluriverse, worlding

Introduction: A Pluriversal Approach to Spirituality in Swahili Ocean Worlds

“It is the power of God that takes the water out and brings it in,” Hamisi explains to us, concluding “We believe the ocean is sacred”. He describes the ocean in terms of its *purity*, “nothing can make it dirty; the sea cleans itself, it takes out stuff”. This cleansing is related to the tides, which he attributes to divine power. We are talking with Hamisi near the beach in Kaole, a fishing community on the Indian Ocean coast in Tanzania. In the background we can hear the laughter of children who are splashing around in the waves. The tide is high and the sea offers a fresh respite after a warm day, before darkness sets in. At low tide, the ocean withdraws quite far from the shoreline, but at high tide it is sufficiently deep for a soak, yet not too deep for children to stand on the sandy bottom. Hamisi is very knowledgeable about the Quran and one of his jobs is to pray for people who have problems, as *mtu wa dua* (person of prayer) or *mwalimu* (teacher), which is how he refers to his profession. We sit with Hamisi outside an empty house, on an elevated concrete seating that is typical of houses on the Swahili coast. The house offers a quiet, undisturbed place for our conversation, not far from Hamisi’s home. Some chicken are pecking the ground nearby and the branches of the mango trees are drooping with fruits soon to ripen. The sun is about to set and the air is cooling down, freshened by a light ocean breeze.

With these fieldnotes, we welcome you to Kaole and Swahili ocean worlds.¹ In preparation of our new research project *Swahili Ocean Worlds*, we carried out some exploratory fieldwork in Kaole from November 2020 to March 2021, mostly interviews and some participant observation with fishers and other local residents.² In conceptualising Swahili ocean worlds, we draw on waterworlds (Hastrup and Hastrup 2015) and Indian ocean worlds (Srinivas et al. 2020), to capture how the ocean features in the making and remaking of social worlds. While there is substantial scholarship on the *Swahili world* (Wynne-Jones and LaViolette 2018), anthropologists have argued that “the relationship of Swahili people to the sea has not been theorized explicitly” (Fleisher et al. 2015: 110), thus our focus on Swahili *ocean* worlds, foregrounding the ocean as a theory machine (Helmreich 2011).

In this article we explore how people in Kaole relate to the ocean spiritually. The word *Swahili* is in itself telling of close relationality with the ocean, a word of Arab origin that means coast. Swahili culture is thus by default coastal culture, while Swahili people (*mswahili*, plural *waswahili*) means coastal people. Kaole, the small fishing community on the Swahili coast in mainland Tanzania where we have carried out our preparatory fieldwork is located in the administrative region *Pwani*, which means Coastal Region (*Mkoa wa Pwani*). All in all, we are engaging with the ocean by way of coastal people in a coastal culture in a coastal region.

Focusing on spiritual relationality in Swahili ocean worlds, we aim to move beyond the focus on materiality and sociality in the anthropology of water. As recognised in a recent review (Ballesterio 2019), anthropologists have interrogated water as a multifaceted field of relationality (Krause and Strang 2016), with an emphasis on sociality and materiality, approaching water as “part and parcel of the lived world”, thus viewing it as “social in nature” (Hastrup and Hastrup 2015: 6). In recognition of the multiple meanings of water in different cultural contexts, Strang has also brought attention to how “water serves as an image of spiritual essence, social identity, and belonging” (2012: 98). It is this *spiritual essence* we aim to probe further, including and beyond different *water beings* (Strang 2015, 2019).

While the spirituality of water is often approached as cultural belief, we draw on recent work on the pluriverse, which has invited “anthropology to reckon with the idea that much of what the discipline deemed cultural beliefs might be *not only* such” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 17, emphasis in original). While this epistemological shift reflects the proverbial tree as a spirit in the ontological turn in anthropology (Heywood 2017), we choose to lean on recent work on the *pluriverse*, to foreground worldmaking in a world of many worlds (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018; Escobar 2020; Ingold 2018; Reiter 2018). In addition to the emphasis on non-Western ontologies and epistemologies (Reiter 2018), and heterogeneous worldings (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018), we appreciate the scholarly attention to worldmaking through relational ontologies of radical interdependence and cosmovisions of sacred nature (Escobar 2020), along with elaborations on multiple ontogenesis in the worlding of our one world, the

¹ We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who offered constructive critique on an earlier version of this article. We are also very thankful to our interlocutors in Kaole who so kindly shared their knowledge with us, and we hope that this article captures some aspects of their relationships with the ocean in adequate ways. Shukrani! All interlocutors have been given fictitious names in this article, for ethical reasons.

² Swahili Ocean Worlds is a multidisciplinary research project that investigates how coastal fishing communities in Tanzania relate to the ocean. It is coordinated by Paula Uimonen at Stockholm University in collaboration with Dr Mwanahija Shalli at University of Dar es Salaam. The project is funded by the Swedish Research Council, grant number 2021-03661 (funding period 2022-2024).

becoming of being (Ingold 2018). Our reason for relying on a pluriversal approach is that this body of scholarship opens up new possibilities for appraising the spiritual relationality of water.³ It offers a planetary perspective that recognises the interdependence of human, natural, and spiritual worlds, as articulated in one of Escobar's early deliberations on the pluriverse (2011: 139): "[T]he evolving pluriverse might be described as a process of planetarization articulated around a vision of the Earth as a living whole that is always emerging out of the manifold biophysical, human, and spiritual elements and relations that make it up".

This article starts with an ethnographic account of spiritual relationships with the ocean, outlining how some people in Kaole engage with the spiritual world through rituals and in daily life. In the following section, we contextualise Swahili ocean worlds in relation to the transoceanic history of the Swahili world. In the next section, we draw on scholarly work on spiritual relationships with water in other parts of the world, arguing for a scholarly shift from cosmologies to worldings. To appreciate the particularities of worldmaking in Swahili ocean worlds, we then dwell deeper into the entanglements of Swahili and Islamic worlds. In the last section, we explore spirituality in Swahili ocean worlds in terms of divine worlding in the pluriverse, before concluding with some reflections on a paradoxical contrast between the seen and the unseen, in this case notions of spiritual purity as opposed to material waste.

Sacred Tidal Waves and *Majini* in Kaole



Fig. 1.
Receding tide
in Kaole. Photo:
Hussein Masimbi.

When Hamisi told us about God's power in taking the water out and bringing it in, he elaborated on rituals related to the ocean tides. One such ritual revolves around prayers at low

³ As scholars have pointed out, the analytic use of pluriverse stems from ethnographic experiences of worldings (e.g., earth beings and animal spirits in forests), that are beyond the grasp of political ecology and other material-semiotic grammars (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 4-5). Similarly, Escobar has pointed out how "The Western realist episteme translates non-Western reals into beliefs, so that only the reality validated by science is real. We have science (and thus the true perception of the real); 'they' can only have 'beliefs' (myths, ideologies, legends, superstitions, local but never universal knowledges, and so on)" (Escobar 2020: 15). In her recent work on femininity and spirituality in Nigerian women's literature, Uimonen (2020) used scholarly work on the pluriverse to make sense of sacred water, along with African womanism, which also recognises the reality of spirituality.

tide to get rid of something and at high tide to bring something back (Figure 1). For instance, if someone wants to get rid of bad luck or bad spirits a ritual is performed as the tide is getting low, so that misfortunes are taken out of the body and spirit and sent away with the receding water. When people want to bring back something they have lost, such as a job, friends or income, losses that can be caused by envy and bad spirits, at high tide they can pray to God to bring it back. Hamisi reflected that he preferred the rituals at low tide, because the water that was going out was also cleansing, and once your spirit was cleansed it would attract the positive things you wished for. Rituals can also be carried out through immersion in the sea, pouring water and bathing a person. In these rituals, Hamisi relies on Islamic prayers and recitals (*kisomo* and *dua*) to invoke God's powers, which are connected to the tidal system.

The ocean features in rituals performed for the community as well, for cleansing and protection. On the fourth month of the Islamic calendar, a village protection/cleansing ritual is performed by the Kaole community. It is known as the *Kuzingua Mji* day for Kaole and Hamisi compared it with the *Mwaka Kogwa* festivity in Makunduchi in Unguja (Zanzibar), a Swahili New Year ceremony celebrated with elaborate rituals. In Kaole, the festive event is for all people, everybody is invited. During the ritual, they conduct a special prayer (*dua*) for the village. They pray for God to protect the village and save it from all calamities, evils (fights and conflicts) and all that will harm the place and the people. Offerings are also made to the ocean.

Hamisi recalled how in the past, the ritual was quite elaborate. They used to do it by reciting the Quran while walking around the village. Those who couldn't read the Quran walked along and made some wishes for the well-being of the village. They slaughtered a cow at the last point of the walk and prepared a soup from the whole cow. After the *dua*, three groups of children from the *madrasa* (Islamic school) walked around with baskets and pieces of wood, which were used as instruments to accompany their singing. They would knock at different houses while singing and the house owners would open and give them money or some bites, which they collected in their baskets. They spent the money they received to buy more bites, especially breads. In the end, they met at the mosque where the soup was served, bringing the bites and bread they had collected. People were not supposed to break the bones while eating the cow meat soup. Afterwards all the bones were collected and thrown into the ocean. Some people would also go to swim in the ocean to cleanse their bodies and celebrate the event. They swam at high tide and by the time the tide was getting low, they had already thrown the bones and swam. They believed everything bad/evil from their bodies and their town went away with the water. That was the purpose and the whole reason behind that ritual and its process.

Hamisi recounted how the ritual is conducted these days, in comparison to the old days. Nowadays people no longer walk around town reciting the Quran and there is no singing procession. There is rarely swimming, or it does not happen at all. Instead, they sit in one place and read or recite the Quran, slaughter a cow, and prepare a soup. They share the cow meat soup and afterwards they collect the bones and throw them into the ocean.

The bones are thrown into the ocean as an offering to the spirits in the sea, such as *jini* (plural *majini*). In earlier times, the blood from the sacrificed cow was also poured into the ocean, but nowadays the offering consists of bones only. The spirits (*majini*) can get into humans and cause them problems, such as sickness, stress, and anxiety, and sometimes the affected people cannot get better through modern medical treatments, Hamisi explains. By offering them some food, the ritual is aimed at appeasing the spirits in the sea, so they will spare humans and not cause any trouble to anyone.

During our conversations with fishers in Kaole we learn more about the spirits in the sea, especially around islands, rocks, and coral reefs. An elderly fisher, Mwalimu Rashidi explains to us that “there are many different kinds of spirits, a whole world of the unseen under the water”. Although they cannot be seen, the spirits are a powerful force that needs to be reckoned with, as they might inflict harm. He recounted the circumstances of his son’s death, many years ago:

He was swimming to get the boat to take it to the shore and bad luck happened, he didn’t have enough energy to get to where the boat was. Someone was in the boat and telling him to keep going, but he didn’t have the ability to get there, and as I told you there are many things in the sea, some can be seen, and some cannot be seen. You can ignore it, but many people have died, without being pushed or drowned. Sometimes, someone took the boat into the water and did not return. As you hear of land spirits, *jini* and devils, they are also in the water, and they cannot be seen.

So yeah, he swam to get the boat, but he lost energy before reaching it and drowned. He drowned at a spot that for many years is known to have *majini*, *wadudu*, and for that reason, we were told we would not find his body on that first day, maybe in two days. We found his body on the next day, it was brought to the shore by the water. Therefore, there are some hidden/unseen creatures in the ocean.

Similarly, the younger fisher Hamidu reflected on the existence of invisible creatures in the sea and how they are sometimes perceived to be the source of misfortunes during fishing:

The creatures [spirits] are there but cannot be seen or rarely seen, naturally they are there on both land and in the ocean. They have their habitats, in the ocean and on land but that is deep knowledge. If you want to know more about it, you have to go deeper on that environment...

He went on describing how they go to work and come back from fishing, but sometimes they have challenges and accidents may occur, which people may interpret in such a way that the incidents are related to those mythical spirits; the *majini* could be the reason. He explained that to understand this you need “special and deep knowledge of another environment”, what is known as *Mazingira ya Kiswahili* (Swahili spiritual environment). He insisted that they have developed a faith beyond that fear, as they go on fishing, while acknowledging the existence of the unseen world: “You just develop faith; you go and come back but in your conscious and subconscious mind you know the spirits are there. You cannot see them, you cannot”. While viewing death in terms of destiny, Hamidu reflected that when someone dies people will make up their own stories, sometimes they associate it with *chunusi*, the spirit that lives in the ocean and sometimes kills or takes people. We asked how they protect themselves against *chunusi*? He laughed and said, “there is no way you can protect yourself against that spirit, you can’t even see it”.

He recounted how people would do some rituals or pray for their own protection, safety, good luck, and success, according to their faith. In his case, most of the time when he leaves the house, his main prayer is asking for a good day of work and a safe return: “*Mungu nisaidie katika kazi yangu, niende salama nirudi salama*” (God help me with my work, may I go safely and return safely). Sometimes he also performs a *Shahada*, the Muslim declaration of faith and the first pillar in Islam: “*Ash-hadu an la ilaha ill Allah, wa ash-hadu ana Muhammad ar-rasullallah*” (There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his rightful messenger). It is believed that if you manage to say this before your death, chances are you will go to heaven.

Apart from individual prayers and rituals, God is also invoked for collective protection, the Captain of a fishing boat explains to us. Between fishing periods (*bamvua*), fishing boats

and equipment are repaired. When the boat has been serviced, they often do a *dua*, invoking God to protect and bless them in their work, to have all the best of luck at work. The *dua* is usually organised by the owner and the captain, who make the necessary arrangements before the new fishing period starts. When we asked if they always do prayers before the fishing period, the Captain responded: “Yes, but sometimes we don’t, we believe we had a *dua* at a certain time or previous *bamvua* so we believe God is still with us”. A *dua* can also be performed at other times, when they sense things are not going well.

These excerpts from our fieldnotes offer glimpses into Swahili spiritual worlds, from God’s power in directing the tidal waves, to invisible spirits in the ocean. The extent to which people engage with these spiritual forces vary, yet their presence is taken for granted. Far from being remnants of traditional belief systems or orally transmitted myths, spirits coexist with humans in everyday life. And as much as collective ritual practices have changed over time, they still remain in different forms, while individual spiritual practices vary, as they presumably always have. In this coastal community, where artisanal fishing continues to be one of the main sources of livelihood, spiritual relationships with the ocean are integral to everyday life.

The Transoceanic History of Swahili Ocean Worlds

The historical formation of Swahili ocean worlds exemplifies the centrality of the ocean in the making of social worlds. In the context of Swahili society, the ocean is evidently “a generative and agentive *co-constituent* of meanings and relationships” (Krause and Strang 2016: 633, emphasis in original) since the very existence of what is denoted as the Swahili world hinges on the Indian Ocean. In their introduction to *The Swahili World*, the most comprehensive account of Swahili civilisation to date, the editors acknowledge the problem of representing “the diversity of the Swahili world”, concluding that their volume aims to give a sense of “the many worlds that might have been called Swahili over the last two millennia” (Wynne-Jones and LaViolette 2018: 11). This recognition of a Swahili world of many worlds speaks to a pluriverse of heterogeneous worldings and heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 4). Even as an analytic concept, the Swahili world captures worldmaking in the plural, signifying how any world is made up of many worlds. When foregrounding the ocean, we can appreciate the complexity of these worlds even further and the entangled relations of their making.

The spatiotemporal relationality of Swahili ocean worlds is quite remarkable, reflecting a long history of transcultural connections and relationships across the Indian Ocean. Scholars have described this history in terms of Swahili cosmopolitanism in the Indian Ocean world system (LaViolette 2008), anchoring Swahili culture in oceanic linkages that have created a seascape described as an interconnected, transcultural ocean (Sheriff and Ho 2014). This scholarly work exemplifies what Helmreich refers to as “*oceanization*, a reorientation toward the seas as a translocally connecting substance” (2011: 137, emphasis in original). Although translocality has been a dominant feature in Swahili studies (e.g., Declich 2018), translocal relationships have not always entailed cosmopolitan engagements with cultural others. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Zanzibar and Kilwa were centres in slave trade, with Swahili and Arab merchants selling slaves brought from the inland to different places on the East African coast, southern Arabia and beyond (Prestholdt 2018: 524).⁴

⁴ Slave trade in Kilwa was also directed at other parts of the world, as merchants responded to demand from plantations on the French islands of Mauritius and Reunion, as well as demand from Madagascar, Gujarat, the Western Cape and Brazil (Prestholdt 2018: 524).

In Kaole, this transoceanic history is materially visible in some tomb ruins in town and the archaeological site Kaole Ruins, which attracts visitors from near and far. The Kaole Ruins features a thirteenth century mosque, one of the oldest in mainland Tanzania, and a fifteenth century mosque, along with graves from the same period, archaeological remnants of trade and interaction with the Arab world (Pollard 2018). The museum also holds pieces of Chinese pottery, material proof of early relationships with distant civilisations.

In Kaole, the ocean has also been an important source of livelihood, before and alongside transoceanic connections. Kaole has been described as one of the “late first- and early second-millennium ports” on the Swahili coast, and archaeological evidence of fishing activities indicate the “longevity of techniques that persist to the present day”, including the use of wooden fish-trap baskets, which are still used by fishers in Kaole (Pollard 2018: 37). Kaole has also been identified as one of the first proto-Swahili settlements in the second half of the first millennium, and it has been suggested that these proto-Swahili communities were drawn to the coast by its maritime resources (Horton and Chami 2018: 141).

The transoceanic history of the Swahili world is manifest in the Swahili spirit world. Giles has discussed how “Swahili spirit cosmology mirrors the cosmopolitan nature of Swahili society”, with its long history of translocal linkages as well as cultural and religious influences (Giles 2018: 190). She notes that the spirit world can be categorised into Muslim (*kiislamu*) and pagan (*kafiri*) as well as coastal (*pwani*) and upcountry (*bara*), which in turn have various sub-categories. There are also spirits from other cultures and societies, such as Arab, Somali, and Abyssinian spirits, as well as more generalised categories like Congolese and European spirits, and the spirits themselves are seen as “translocal beings that freely travel between locations” (Giles 2018: 191). This translocality is also evident in various rituals, as shown in Giles’ detailed comparison of spirit possession beliefs and practices in Pemba, Comoro Islands and Madagascar.

The *jini* (plural *majini*) is a good example of the translocal composition and mobility of Swahili spirits. The word is derived from the Arabic *jinn*, spiritual beings dating back to pre-Islamic Arabian cosmology that have been incorporated into Islam. In Swahili spirit cosmology, *majini* are classified as *pwani* (coastal) spirits, “since they have come over the sea from the Middle East and North Africa”, and they tend to require Islamic ceremonies (Giles 2018: 192). In mainland Tanzania, *majini* are associated with coastal communities, but over the last few decades *majini* have spread inland, which has been attributed to the “growing presence of Islamic healers” (Lindhardt 2019: 87). In Iringa, Lindhardt notes that Pentecostals/charismatics consider *majini* to be fallen angels, and in recognition of their existence and power they now see “*majini* as their primary adversaries in spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness” (2019: 90). By contrast, Tanzanian Muslims have a more nuanced understanding of *majini*; they are spirits created by God and they are not essentially good or bad, but they influence the human world in various ways, and they also establish relationships with human beings. As the elderly fisherman we spoke with in Kaole reflected on the *majini*, spirits that “cannot be seen”:

There are good and bad ones [*majini*]. Some might be sent to harm and there can be another spirit taking care, protecting you and your life, if someone intends to hurt you, they protect. There are situations when *jini* can be sent directly, for example go to Hussein [he uses Masimbi as an example], and this protector does not want you harmed and a fight may occur, you see, and possibly your time is not yet [meaning: your death].

There are spirits for protecting you all the time and some that are enemies, kept by some individuals, and can be used to harm. When they miss a human and there are animals, like cows and goats, they will suck their blood and kill them. They are kept like domestic animals, cows or goats. *Majini* are like humans, that is why God said, “I have created humans and *jini* to worship me” [cited from the Quran]. *Majini* are *viumbe* (creatures) like humans, and among them there are good and bad ones.

In Kaole it is generally believed that there are more *majini* in the sea, along with other invisible beings, but these ocean creatures can also appear on land, even in human form, and they can also be manmade. As Larsen (2014) has discussed, *majini* are both material and immaterial, visible and invisible, since these unseen spirits can inhabit human bodies and thereby become material as well as visible. She prefers to discuss this in terms of embodiment rather than spirit possession, to emphasise that “Spirits and humans are regarded as different beings”, even though they may sometimes “share a body in the human world” (Larsen 2014: 9). Even when they share a body, the spirit/s and the human retain their separate identities, while maintaining a relationship that can last for years and even be passed on to succeeding generations.

Swahili ocean worlds demand a historically attuned appraisal of spiritual relationality. In these ocean worlds that have been formed over more than a millennium of transoceanic connectivity, we cannot ignore the many layers of history that coalesce in contemporary life, from seafaring and slave trade to cultural exchange. In places like Kaole, fishing periods (*bamvua*) are determined by environmental conditions and calculated according to the Islamic calendar, using fishing techniques that have been shaped by centuries of making a living from the ocean. Nor can we turn a blind eye to the many spirits that fishers have to take into consideration when entering the ocean, while placing their trust and hope in the divine intervention of the Creator of life itself. Surely we are dealing with something far greater than just a body of saltwater?

Water Cosmologies and Multiple Worldings

Spirituality in Swahili ocean worlds can be compared with spiritual relationships with water, especially seawater, in other parts of the world. Strang has shown that water beings, such as sacred serpent beings, have appeared in different cultural contexts throughout human history (Strang 2015). A great variety of water deities and water spirits are found in Africa, for instance the water goddess often known as Mammy Water or Mami Wata, who is also worshipped among African diaspora in Latin America (Drewal 2008; Jell-Bahlsen 2008; Uimonen 2020). A detailed historical overview of spirit worlds in maritime communities in Southeast Asia documents how waters in the region have been inhabited by a vast range of water spirits and deities, oftentimes gendered (Watson Andaya 2016), and how different world religions have been incorporated into local water cosmologies over time (Watson Andaya 2017). In this region, which scholars have called a world of water (Boomgard 2007), we also find elaborate indigenous sea cosmologies, for instance among island societies in Maluku Tenggara (Pannell 2007), while the pre-Islamic Ocean Goddess in Java, Ratu Kidul (also known as Nyai Roro Kidul) continues to exert her influence, even through social media (Strassler 2014). In Australia, McNiven (2003) has documented the deep spiritual connections to the sea among Saltwater Peoples (coastal Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders), underwritten by a Dreaming cosmology.

We also find spiritual practices related to the ocean in different parts of the world. For

instance, among Aboriginal people in Australia, we find various rituals related to the tides, including ritual arrangements of bones, demonstrating an intimate spiritual relationship with the sea, which is animated by spiritual forces, reflecting cosmologies of human coexistence with invisible spiritual worlds (McNiven 2003). In many societies, bathing in the ocean is ritually purifying (Watson Andaya 2016: 241), and in Bali, the beach has become a place of ritual cleansing and the sea a source of powerful holy water (Watson Andaya 2017: 361). In Java, offerings to Ratu Kidul are made in various forms, including dedicated rooms in beach hotels, and while some Islamic scholars denounce such practices, others endorse them (Strassler 2014).

More directly comparable with our study, the ethnography of Mandar people in the Makassar Strait in Sulawesi, Indonesia, shows interesting similarities between Muslim fishing communities in different parts of the world (Zerner 2003: 62-73). For many Mandar fishers, Allah has the ultimate power over the fate of men as well as the currents of the marine realm, and the sea is inhabited by various spirits, including shape shifting spirits of reefs and shallow waters. Similar to fishers in Kaole, Mandar fishers manage these spiritual relationships in various ways, including recitations of the Quran, prayers, and offerings as well as respectful behaviour.

Research has thus shown how different communities engage with the ocean spiritually. Whether treated as indigenous sea cosmologies (Pannell 2007), cosmologies of the maritime world (Watson Andaya 2016; 2017), spiritscapes of seascapes (McNiven 2003), or a seascape of spirits (Zerner 2003), we find both commonalities and differences in spiritual engagements with the ocean in different parts of the world, along with changes over time. This cultural diversity could be approached in terms of spiritual beliefs and practices, embedded in local cosmologies or ontologies that ascertain a close relationship between humans and the natural environment.

But what happens if we direct our attention from cosmologies and ontologies to worldings and ontogenies? Ingold has encouraged anthropologists to shift their focus from multiple ontologies to multiple ontogenies, to explore the very generation of being in a world of becoming, a *one world* of ever-emergent difference, where every being is constituted through the generative processes of life itself (Ingold 2018: 167). By comparison, Escobar (2020) has emphasised relational ontologies and cosmovisions of interdependence as viable alternatives to a hegemonic *one-world world* (OWW), thus challenging the dualist ontology of Western modernity. Far from being irreconcilable, both Ingold's philosophising on ontogenesis in one world and Escobar's ontological politics against a Western one-world can be productively applied to Swahili ocean worlds, which are non-western, non-secular, exceedingly relational and unpredictably emergent.

Swahili Worldmaking and Islamic Modernity

When interrogating spiritual relationality in Swahili ocean worlds, we are reminded that "seawater is both good to think with and here to live with, in multifarious actuality" (Helmreich 2011: 138). To appreciate this multifarious actuality, we can pay closer attention to alternatives to modernist/scientist appraisals of the ocean as a marine environment, let alone marine resource, seeing that water cannot be "reduced to H₂O" and that even the "substance" that is water "varies with culture and epoch" (Illich 1985: 4-5). As noted above, anthropologists have done excellent work in this regard, interrogating the multiple meanings of water, in different places and at different times in human history (e.g., Strang 2012; 2015). Now that the ocean is receiving more attention in the environmental crisis that our planet is facing, Strang has noted a "refocusing on the spiritual meanings of water" (2019:

11). She argues that human dominion over nature and the objectification of nature can be related to the historical movement from nature religions to monotheistic beliefs, which can be contrasted with “place-based indigenous communities” for whom “waterscapes are often both sentient and sacred” (Strang 2019: 9). Similarly, in his search for biocentric alternatives to modern anthropocentric models of life, Escobar (2020) foregrounds territorial and communal cosmovisions of sacred nature that are found among indigenous peoples. While we appreciate this scholarly attention to spiritual engagements with nature, we would like to extend the scholarly gaze beyond indigenous cultures, so called nature religions, and pre-modern societies. Through Swahili ocean worlds, we can appreciate the spiritual relationality of the ocean in contemporary civilisations, thus pushing past dichotomies of modern-traditional societies, or monotheistic-nature religions.

Since we focus on relational worldmaking in contemporary Muslim fishing communities, our epistemic framework needs to encompass Islamic modernity in Africa. More precisely, we need to consider what scholars describe as African Islam, or even East African Islam, underlining that “*de facto* Islam is both *one* and *many*” (Evers Rosander 1997: 2, emphasis in original). By exploring Islamic modernity in the making of Swahili ocean worlds, we hope to show that we need not only look into “nonmodern collectives” to find communities where “persons exist in relation to their ancestors, their kin, their communities, the natural world”, and where “the sacred and the everyday are lived experiences” (Escobar 2020: 16). Such characteristics are also found in contemporary Swahili communities, which by no means are nonmodern. Quite the contrary, on the Swahili coast like in many other parts of Africa, Islam has often been associated with modernisation, alongside Western forms of modernity, demonstrating that “Modernity does not necessarily mean Westernization or secularization” (Evers Rosander 1997: 10).

With its long history of transoceanic connections, the Swahili world is intricately interconnected with the Islamic world. On the Swahili coast, Islam dates back to the eighth century, through early connections with Muslim societies in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea (Bang 2018). In the early modern period, Swahili societies had close relations with Oman and the Ottoman Empire, and the Sultanate of Oman ruled over Zanzibar from 1698. While European colonial rule, starting with Portugal and followed by Germany and Great Britain, had a profound impact on the Swahili world, it was predated by a much longer history of exchange with the Muslim world. Moreover, concurrent with European colonialism, there was a Swahili cultural renaissance, which drew on religious and cultural influences from the southern Arabian region (Prestholdt 2018). After independence from colonial rule, Islam was propagated as a third way in many parts of Africa, offering a complete way of life and an alternative to Western capitalism as well as Eastern communism (Hunwick 1997: 33). With accelerated globalisation, connections between Muslim communities in Africa and other parts of the Muslim world, especially the Middle East, have intensified further, while Islam has evolved in many different forms throughout the continent. More recently, with the global ‘war on terror’, the Swahili coast with its predominantly Muslim communities has been turned into “one of the main battlegrounds against supra-state Islamism” (Meier 2018: 639).

The influence of Islamic modernity in the making of Swahili ocean worlds is eminent in the arts, not least literature and poetry. It was through the spread of Islamic scholarly material, which included poetry, that literacy developed on the Swahili coast, especially from the nineteenth century, when eastern African Islam became increasingly “bookish” (Bang 2018: 560). This textual orientation was often related to literacy in Arabic, but from the

1890s, Swahili scholars also started publishing their own books, journals, and newspapers, increasingly in Swahili. Even so, it is important to recognise this cultural connectivity in terms of “multi-directional flow” (Bang 2018: 564), which becomes clear when Swahili literature is appreciated as world literature (Helgesson 2020; Uimonen 2018). The Swahili renaissance was a period of “remarkable cultural productivity” and the “apex of classical Swahili poetry”, characterised by increasing Arabisation of Swahili language and culture, since Arabness was equated with civilisation (Prestholdt 2018: 523). But as much as early Swahili poetry derived from an “Islamic-Arabic cultural commons,” these “Arabic narratives” were “Africanized” at the same time as Swahili communities became “culturally Arabized” (Helgesson 2020: 100). In contemporary world literature studies, Swahili literature is seen as an illuminating example of “Indian Ocean literature”, which insists on “different universalisms”, while inviting “a more pluricultural reading of the Indian Ocean through deep time” (Helgesson 2020: 93).⁵ This multi-directional orientation is also evident in contemporary forms of digitally mediated performance poetry, which mix poetry, music, and theatre in creatively entangled ways (Uimonen 2018).

The influence of Islam is also evident in education, with Islamic schools (*madrassa*) playing an important role in learning and social formation. While primary education is compulsory in the state’s educational system, in Swahili communities the *madrassa* is considered equally if not more important. Among Muslims in Kaole, few people undertake education beyond primary school, but everyone attends *madrassa*. The elderly fisher Mwalimu Rashidi, who is in his late sixties, did not even study past fourth grade in primary school, instead he pursued Islamic education. He learned the Quran well and became a teacher (*mwalimu*) at Kaole Madrasa. He recollected that “in those days, elders were in favour of religious (Islam/ Quran) education. It was taken more seriously than secular education”. He retired from teaching some years ago, but still guides and helps the Madrasa as advisor, elder and former teacher. The Captain, who is in his early forties, completed primary education in Kaole in 1994. He did not continue with further education, but he continued with *madrassa*, to the point of being able to read the Quran quite well. He is no longer a fulltime member of the school, but he still engages with it: “I can always join them as a former student and support the Madrasa on different occasions, especially preparing for ceremonies and performing”.

While recognising the multi-layered entanglements of Islam, in everyday life as well as arts, our study goes beyond religion as a system of belief, thus our focus on spirituality. When discussing religion in African culture, scholars have underlined that religion is a belief and an attitude, reflecting an “ontological ultimacy” on non-human powers and agencies (Oladipo 2005: 357).⁶ Scholars have also highlighted African difference in the Islamic world, for example the presence of departed ancestors in human life worlds, a

⁵ Helgesson discusses the novel *Paradise* (1994) by Abdulrazak Gurnah, emphasising the need to take a “deep-time view of Swahili literature evolving within a non-Western literary ecology” into account (2020: 100). Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021 by the Swedish Academy. He was described as a postcolonial writer from Africa, a Tanzanian novelist born on Zanzibar and based in the UK. Through Abdulrazak Gurnah, there will undoubtedly be more interest in Indian ocean literature worldwide.

⁶ In his discussion of religion in African culture, Oladipo refers to Bolaji Idowu’s earlier definition of the structure of African traditional religion, which consists of: belief in God, divinities, spirits, and ancestors as well as the practice of magic and medicine (2005: 356). Oladipo challenges the categorisation of some of these characteristics as religion, which is indicative of the epistemic difficulties involved when discussing religion in African contexts. This is another reason why we focus on spirituality rather than religion.

“pervasive ontology” of African peoples, irrespective of religious affiliation (Diagne 2005: 378). Indeed, Islam in Africa has always entailed intricate cultural syntheses, resulting in a diversity of African Muslim cultures, which in turn are entangled with pre-Islamic African cultural elements as well as Euro-American ones (Hunwick 1997). In the Swahili world, while most coastal dwellers have been practicing Muslims since the eleventh century, “Other indigenous spiritual practices continued alongside and interwoven with Islam, as we see up to the present” (Wynne-Jones and LaViolette 2018: 9).

This multi-layered complexity is evident in Swahili ocean worlds, which bring together a variety of spiritual relationships. Swahili ocean worlds remind us that as much as Islam is a monotheistic religion, with universal claims and aspirations for global unity, the world of Islam is plural and porous. In Muslim fishing communities like Kaole, Islamic prayers can be combined with offerings of bones to appease the many spirits in the ocean. By enlisting the power of God in controlling the tidal waves, people can also get rid of bad luck or bring back something that was lost due to envy. The point here is not to distinguish what is modern or traditional, Islamic or indigenous, since it does not really matter in everyday life. Similar to Muslim fishing communities in Indonesia, these spiritual engagements are more akin to the “changing configurations of a kaleidoscope in motion”, full of crossovers and overlaps (Zerner 2003: 62).

Divine Worlding in the Pluriverse

The coexistence of humans and spirits is a central feature in Swahili ocean worlds. As you may recall, the young fisher Hamidu referred to *Mazingira ya Kiswahili* when he reflected on how people sometimes interpret challenges and accidents as incidents caused by *majini*. The literal translation of *Mazingira ya Kiswahili* is Swahili environment. While the term is used to denote a spiritual environment, it is intrinsic to the physical environment. In other words, in Swahili ocean worlds, the natural environment is both physical/material and spiritual/immaterial.

Swahili ocean worlds bring forth important aspects of worlding, capturing a world in continuous movement, made up relations that flow alongside. In his efforts to reconcile the universal and the particular in the ongoing formation of our world, Ingold uses correspondence to denote their affiliation, underlining that “parts are not components that are added to one another but movements that carry on *alongside* one another”, which means that “the relations that make up the whole are not *between* but *along*” (Ingold 2018: 160, emphasis in original). He also proposes a more processual approach to diversity, to “think of difference in terms of *differentiation* rather than *diversity*” (Ingold 2018: 161, emphasis in original). This is a critical distinction, since it captures the way in which parts are related to the whole, as something that emerges from within “the plane of immanence that is life itself”, according to the “principle of interstitial differentiation” (Ingold 2018: 166). While Ingold thinks through worlding in the pluriverse by way of animism and naturalism as contrasting ontological regimes, using the relation between the soul and soul-life among the Inuit in the High Arctic as his ethnographic grounding, his philosophising can also be applied to Swahili ocean worlds.

When foregrounding the ocean, the principle of interstitial differentiation can be applied to the making of Swahili ocean worlds, which emerge from one ocean, within one Earth. While we may categorise it into different oceans, such as the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean, there is only one ocean. This means that what we refer to as different oceans, are in fact interconnected oceans, emerging from within one ocean that is in continuous

movement, thus exemplifying the principle of interstitial differentiation in a continually emerging world. Since our one world, as in Escobar's Earth as a living whole, is continuously made up of various biophysical, human, and spiritual elements and relations, the ocean in Swahili ocean worlds is in turn part of a greater whole, a world where both nature and human life is subject to divine power and agency. Here the immanence of life itself is not a question of the divine being outside the material world, but the ontological ultimacy of God being essential to the very existence of life on Earth.

In Swahili ocean worlds, the world is created by God, a non-human, sacred force of life that directs the tidal currents ('nature'), as well as human destiny ('humans') in an environment that is both material and immaterial ('spirits'). In these worlds that both encompass and transcend human life-worlds, humans correspond with spirits, living alongside and emerging from within a world of divine creation. Human relationships with spirits cut across time and space, ranging from ancestors to *majini*. In everyday life, people live their lives in submission to God, knowing that come what may, their destiny is in the hands of the Creator of life. *Inshallah* (God willing).

Concluding Reflections on the Unseen in Swahili Ocean Worlds

In this article we have explored spiritual relationality in Swahili ocean worlds, focusing on the unseen in the ocean. We have discussed how the ocean in Swahili ocean worlds is both visible and invisible, material and immaterial, natural and spiritual. The movements of the ocean are directed by God, while the ocean itself is inhabited by visible as well as invisible creatures, like *majini*. To contextualise Swahili ocean worlds, we have elaborated on the historical formation of the Swahili world and its intricate entanglements with the world of Islam. When theorising spiritual relationality, we have interrogated Swahili ocean worlds through the prism of worlding in the pluriverse, to capture not only spiritual beings, but also spiritual becomings.

We would like to conclude with a rather paradoxical contrast between the seen and unseen, to bring forth the epistemic value of thinking through the spirituality of the ocean, thus venturing beyond its materiality and sociality. Let us start with Ingold's recent reflection on an art exhibition by the artist Carol Bove, visualising what the sea discards on the shore: "Over countless centuries, the ocean has swallowed up things of human manufacture and – after varying lengths of time – spat them up again" (Ingold 2021: 55-56).

"The ocean cleans itself with the power of God and it can make itself dirty", Hamisi explained to us, when describing God's power in directing the tidal waves. He reflected that the ocean has a system of bringing garbage to the shore and sometimes taking it away. "That is why sometimes the water looks so clean and attracts you to go swim and sometimes you look at it and see lots of garbage and seaweed". Hamisi acknowledged that they see that power and believe that by using the ocean their wishes will go right, for instance through the rituals he elaborated on. When we asked the Captain why some people use the sea for *dua* and healing, he responded:

It is because, looking at it from that perspective, the ocean is clean, it does not have dirt. The ocean cleans itself naturally. If there is anything in there, at some point it is taken out, there is a season when all the garbage is sent out. Even if someone dies there, he/she will not remain there, he/she will be taken out and left on shore, because the sea is a clean place. Someone

might have some misfortunes and his/her body needs cleansing. These people may get into the ocean and cleanse themselves, but the ocean will not keep their dirt, it will cleanse them but their dirt will be sent out of the ocean. It does not keep any dirt, even the unseen. Whatever you see floating there will get out somewhere on shore. What remains there is what belongs there naturally.

Our interviews with Hamisi and Captain took place during *kaskazi*, a period of north-easterly monsoon winds, when the beach was filled with garbage, brought to the shore by tidal waves (Figure 2). The contrast between spiritual purity and material debris was astonishing. But for people in Kaole, the garbage was a seasonal occurrence in the divine movement of the world, and within some months, the ocean had cleaned the beach (Figure 3).



Fig. 2. Beach full of garbage during kaskazi in November 2020. Photo: Paula Uimonen



Fig. 3. Beach cleaned by the ocean in August 2021. Photo: Paula Uimonen

References

- Ballesterio, A. 2019. The Anthropology of Water. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48: 405-21.
- Bang, A. 2018. Islam in the Swahili World. Connected Authorities. In *The Swahili World* (eds) S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette. London and New York: Routledge.
- Blaser, M. and M. de la Cadena. 2018. Pluriverse: Proposal for a World of Many Worlds. In *A World of Many Worlds* (eds) M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser. Durham, NC, London: Duke University Press.
- Boomgaard, P. (ed). 2007. *A World of Water: Rain, Rivers and Seas in Southeast Asian Histories*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Declich, F. (ed.) 2018. *Translocal Connections across the Indian Ocean. Swahili Speaking Networks on the Move*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Diagne, S. B. 2005. Islam in Africa: Examining the Notion of an African Identity within the Islamic World. In *A Companion to African Philosophy* (ed) K. Wiredu. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Drewal, H. J. (ed). 2008. *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Escobar, A. 2011. Sustainability: Design for the Pluriverse. *Development* 54(2): 137–140.
- Escobar, A. 2020. *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. London: Duke University Press.
- Evers Rosander, E. 1997. Introduction: The Islamization of “Tradition” and “Modernity”. In *African Islam and Islam in Africa. Encounters Between Sufis and Islamists* (eds) D. Westerlund and E. Evers Rosander, 1-27. London: Hurst & Company.
- Fleisher, J., P. Lane, A. LaViolette, M. Horton, E. Pollard, E. Quintana Morales, T. Vernet, A. Christie and S. Wynne-Jones. 2015. When Did the Swahili Become Maritime? *American Anthropologist* 117(1): 100-115.
- Giles, L. 2018. Translocal Interconnections within the Swahili Spiritual World: The Role of

- Pemba and the Comoro Islands/Madagascar. In *Translocal Connections Across the Indian Ocean. Swahili Speaking Networks on the Move* (ed.) F. Declich. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Hastrup, K. and F. Hastrup. (eds) 2015. *Waterworlds: Anthropology in Fluid Environments*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.
- Helgesson, S. 2020. Geographies. Reading the Oceans. In *Literature and the World* (eds) S. Helgesson and M. Rosendahl Thomsen. London and New York: Routledge.
- Helmreich, S. 2011. Nature/Culture/Seawater. *American Anthropologist* 113(1): 132-144.
- Heywood, P. 2017. Ontological turn, the. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ontological-turn>
- Horton, M. and F. Chami. 2018. Swahili Origins. In *The Swahili World* (eds) S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hunwick, J. 1997. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Wider World of Islam: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. In *African Islam and Islam in Africa. Encounters Between Sufis and Islamists* (eds) D. Westerlund and E. Evers Rosander. London: Hurst & Company.
- Illich, I. 1985. *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness. Reflections on the Historicity of Stuff*. Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.
- Ingold, T. 2018. One World Anthropology. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8(1/2): 158-171.
- Ingold, T. 2021. *Correspondences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jell-Bahlsen, S. 2008. *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology. Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Krause, F. and V. Strang. 2016. Thinking Relationships through Water. *Society & Natural Resources* 29(6): 633-638.
- Larsen, K. 2014. Bodily Selves: Identity and Shared Realities among Humans and Spirits in Zanzibar. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44(1): 5-27.
- LaViolette, A. 2008. Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600–1500. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 4(1): 24-49.
- Lindhardt, M. 2019. Pentecostalism, Witchcraft, and Islamic Spiritologies in Central Tanzania. *Journal of African Religions* 7(1): 84-93.
- McNiven, I.J. 2003. Saltwater People: Spiritscapes, Maritime Rituals and the Archaeology of Australian Indigenous Seascapes. *World Archaeology* 35(3): 329-349.
- Meier, P. 2018. The Swahili House: A Historical Ethnography of Modernity. In *The Swahili World* (eds) S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette. London and New York: Routledge.
- Oladipo, O. 2005. Religion in African Culture: Some Conceptual Issues. In *A Companion to African Philosophy* (ed.) K. Wiredu. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Pannell, S. 2007. Of Gods and Monsters. Indigenous Sea Cosmologies, Promiscuous Geographies and the Depths of Local Sovereignty. In *A World of Water: Rain, Rivers and Seas in Southeast Asian Histories* (ed.) P. Boomgaard. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Pollard, E. 2018. Resources of the Ocean Fringe and the Archaeology of the Medieval Swahili. In *The Swahili World* (eds) S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette. London and New York: Routledge.
- Prestholdt, J. 2018. Navigating the Early Modern World. Swahili Politics and the Continental Oceanic Interface. In *The Swahili World* (eds) S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette. London and New York: Routledge.
- Reiter, B. (ed.). 2018. *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Sheriff, A. and E. Ho. 2014. *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Srinivas, S., B. Ng'weno and N. Jeychandran. 2020. *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Strang, V. 2012. Diverting Water: Cultural Plurality and Public Water Features in an Urban Environment. In *Water, Cultural Diversity, and Global Environmental Change. Emerging Trends, Sustainable Futures?* (eds) B. Johnston, L. Hiwasaki, I. Klaver, A. Ramos-Castillo, V. Strang, Springer and UNESCO.

- Strang, V. 2015. Reflecting Nature. Water Beings in History and Imagination. In *Waterworlds: Anthropology in Fluid Environments* (eds) K. Hastrup and F. Hastrup. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.
- Strang, V. 2019. Water. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.
<https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/water>
- Strassler, K. 2014. Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere: Photographic Appearances of a Spirit Queen. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56(1): 98-130.
- Uimonen, P. 2018. Zuhura the African Lioness. Performance Poetry, Digital Media and the Transnational Tangle in World Literature. In *World Literatures. Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange* (eds) S. Helgesson, A. Mörté Alling, Y. Lindqvist and H. Wulff. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.
<https://www.stockholmuniversitypress.se/site/chapters/e/10.16993/bat.l/>
- Uimonen, P. 2020. *Invoking Flora Nwapa. Nigerian Women Writers, Femininity and Spirituality in World Literature*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.
<https://www.stockholmuniversitypress.se/site/books/m/10.16993/bbe/>
- Watson Andaya, B. 2016. Rivers, Oceans, and Spirits: Water Cosmologies, Gender, and Religious Change in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia* 4(2): 239–263.
- Watson Andaya, B. 2017. Seas, Oceans and Cosmologies in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48(3): 349–371.
- Wynne-Jones, S and A. LaViolette (eds). 2018. *The Swahili World*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Zerner, C. 2003. Sounding the Makassar Strait: The Poetics and Politics of an Indonesian Marine Environment. In *Culture and the Question of Rights. Forests, Coasts, and Seas in Southeast Asia* (ed.) C. Zerner. Durham and London: Duke University Press.