

Out of the Depths: A Report on Indian Oceanscapes and Its Heritages

By Dr Dominique Santos (Anthropology Department & Rhodes Africa Studies Centre)

This is an example of an exciting pilot research project that was recently funded at the ACC level in Makhanda. We report it to show a forthcoming huge project that we will be launching. Here, Dr. Dominique Santos, the principal investigator shares her initial incites.

Storm surges in 2024 along South Africa's Eastern Cape Indian Ocean coastline have revealed long hidden remnants of shipwrecks from the era of Portuguese trade expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries. A large fragment, found by staff of the East London Museum at Chintsa near the port city of East London and still undergoing testing and verification, is believed to be from the Nossa Senhora da Atalaia, wrecked in 1647. An ongoing collaboration between the East London Museum, Rhodes University's Anthropology Department and African Studies Centre and local cosmology experts of the Eastern Cape, is engaging with the process of interpreting the fragments from multiple perspectives. In doing so, we consider how the increasing frequency of storm surges, climate change, the retrieval of stories of marginal crew, enslaved people and indigenous communities concealed within shipwreck survivor narratives, and interpretation through an endogenous cosmological lens, might offer new forms of public interpretation and presentation of maritime heritage, and transformative insights into the making of South African and World society.

In the Eastern Cape, the East London Museum holds the primary collection of shipwreck artefacts retrieved from the Indian Ocean Coastline, displayed in the Maritime Gallery. The Rhodes Anthropology Department, in collaboration with the Rhodes African Studies Centre, has been working with the East London Museum to consider how our research on shipwreck narratives might impact interpretation and presentation practices in the Maritime and Anthropology Galleries. Following fieldwork at shipwreck sites, the Museum, and the discovery of new shipwreck fragments following storm surges, a workshop was convened for knowledge exchange to take place between stakeholders. This workshop brought the shipwreck fragments revealed by the storm surges into conversation with existing collections in the Maritime Gallery and a range of ontological perspectives on how to interpret and present them. This polyvocal approach to researching maritime history and contemporary coastal environments and society engages traditional archaeological practices, environmental science, archival research, narrative analysis through a restorative history and environmental justice lens.

We explored the collaborative potential across knowledge systems to interpret and present recent shipwreck heritage finds through exhibition, ritual, installation, performance and public events. Foregrounding the entanglements between marginal crew, enslaved people and indigenous communities in the early modern era, exemplified in the instability and opportunities of the Portuguese slave shipwreck and its aftermath, we considered how

shipwrecks offer a lens into alternative understandings of the making of world society and the complex global trajectories of people, ideas, spirits, trade objects and natural resources which converge on the Southern Indian Ocean coastal area. An engagement with explanatory models offered by local cosmologies, including divination, to engage the material remains of shipwrecks, historical records associated with them, and the land and water where they occurred, painted vivid and engaging stories that offer new perspectives on Southern African communities of the early modern era, Portuguese trade expansion and entanglements across the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds in the making of contemporary world society and climate crisis. The workshop identified potential exhibitions, publications and performances which can bring to life the entangled stories and alliances between diverse peoples of the world existing on the margins of master narratives about the emergence of global society. We are excited to see this project move into the production phase of bringing these stories **Out of the Depths**.



Image 1: Workshop Participants at Anthropology Gallery, East London Museum



Image 2: Workshop participants at Maritime Gallery, East London Museum



Image 3 & Image 4: Shipwreck Fragments revealed by storm surges at Chintsa



Image 5 & 6: Traditional healers and endogenous cosmology experts conduct community ritual acknowledgement of Ocean's spiritual force, and welcome of shipwreck fragments, and the stories they hold, at Chintsa.