



Photo by Ivan Barros

MULTIPLE INDIAN OCEAN: TRANSOCEANIC AND TRANSMEDIAL IMAGINARIES

Digital Workshop – Feb 14-16th 2022

Zoom Meeting:

Meeting ID: [628 4696 2155](#) Passcode: 933292

Monday, February 14th

Alterity, Translations, Transfers in the Indian Ocean

9:45-10:00 BT
11:45-12:00 Eldoret
12:45-13:00 Mauritius
14:15-14:30 Goa

Welcome Address

I

10:00-11:45 BT
12:00-13:45 Eldoret
13:00-14:45 Mauritius
14:30-16:15 Goa

Chair:
Clarissa Vierke

[Shihan de Silva](#)

Perceptions of Alterity in the Indian Ocean

[Annachiara Raia](#)

The Ocean in your pocket: materiality, forms and worldviews within 20th century Swahili booklets

[Nikhita Obeegadoo](#)

Croaking Frogs and Struggling Youth: When Séga Engazé meets the Francophone Novel

II

14:00-15:15 BT
16:00-17:15 Eldoret
17:00-18:15 Mauritius
18:30-19:45 Goa

Chair:
Elena Brugioni

[Peter Simatei](#)

The Pulses of the Sea: Magical Realism and Oceanic Imaginaries in Khadija Abdalla Bajaberin's The House of Rust

[R. Benedito Ferrao](#)

The Art of Intercontinental Connections in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

Tuesday, February 15th

Intermedial connections in the Western Indian Ocean

I

10:00-11:45 BT
12:00-13:45 Eldoret
13:00-14:45 Mauritius
14:30-16:15 Goa

Chair:
Farouk Topan

[Andrew Eisenberg](#)

In the Event of Appropriation: Reflections on Swahili Taarab as an "Indian Ocean Music"

[Nathalie Arnold Koenings](#)

The Epic of the Useless Clove: Thinking Pemban Ties to the Land with a Poem of Catastrophe

[Duncan Tarrant](#)

Baraza Imaginaries – Some musings on Politics, Power and Politeness in Zanzibar

II

14:00-15:15 BT
16:00-17:15 Eldoret
17:00-18:15 Mauritius
18:30-19:45 Goa

Chair:
Pedro Pombo

[Clarissa Vierke](#)

"The sea", he gasped, "cannot be spoken". Reflections on Untranslatability in "The Dragonfly Sea" by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

[Zoly Rakontoniera](#)

The woman warrior image in contemporary Southwest Indian Ocean women's performance poetry

Wednesday, February 16th

Intermedial connections between the islands

I

10:00-11:15 BT
12:00-13:15 Eldoret
13:00-14:15 Mauritius
14:30-15:45 Goa

Chair:
Duncan Tarrant

[Ute Fendler](#)

"Ceux qu'on jette à la mer..." - tidalectic memories of the ocean

[Pedro Pombo](#)

Sensing Territory, History and Contemporary Art in the Mascarenes Archipelago

II

14:00-15:15 BT
16:00-17:15 Eldoret
17:00-18:15 Mauritius
18:30-19:45 Goa

Chair:
Benedito Ferrao

[Hans Ramduth](#)

Proposing alternative archives for Indianoceanic cultures

[Kumari Issur](#)

Multi-layered and Rhizomic Transoceanic Imaginaries in the Indian Ocean

15:30-15:45 BT
17:30-17:45 Eldoret
18:30-18:45 Mauritius
20.00-20:15 Goa

Concluding discussion

SHIHAN DE SILVA (KYOTO/LONDON)

Perceptions of Alterity in the Indian Ocean

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In an attempt to widen our widespread understanding of alterity and to improve its conceptual framework, we try to extend new ways of our understanding of cultural influences resulting from direct economic and cultural forces over millennia, we move away from the subjects of our enquiry – the people of the Indian Ocean themselves. The point of departure in this paper therefore is the argument put forward by Jean Houbert (2003) that the creole islands of the western Indian Ocean are a second Caribbean. Other examples confirm the heterogeneity of the Indian Ocean. Houbert takes the creole islands of the Western Indian Ocean outside the boundaries of the Indian Ocean and into another space. He undermines the idea of a culturally uniform Indian Ocean. To what extent does this notion undermine cultural heterogeneity raised by issues of race, ethnicity and difference?

Houbert, Jean (2003). Creolisation and Decolonisation in the Changing Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. In: *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*. Eds: Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst. New Jersey: Africa World Press.

ANDREW EISENBERG (NEW YORK/ABU DHABI)

In the Event of Appropriation: Reflections on Swahili Taarab as an “Indian Ocean Music”

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Since the turn of the twenty-first century, certain forms of Swahili *taarab* from Zanzibar and Mombasa have been heritagized, such that they are now consistently presented to local and international audiences as artifacts of a Swahili cultural past. An essential component of this heritagization process has been the promulgation of a particular narrative of *taarab* as an “Indian Ocean music.” This narrative emphasizes long-term processes of transculturation. To quote from the promotional materials of one Zanzibari *taarab* group, it casts *taarab* as “the result of hundreds of years of exchange...across the Indian Ocean” (Jahazi Media n.d.). Meanwhile, the conscious appropriation of foreign musical styles and songs, which was a centerpiece of Mombasan *taarab* during the twentieth century, is left out of the narrative entirely. In this presentation, I ask what lies behind the absenting of appropriation from the narrative of Swahili *taarab* as an Indian Ocean music, and what might be gained by instead placing appropriation at the *center* of an understanding of Swahili *taarab*’s relationship to the Indian Ocean world. I suggest that the reason practices of transoceanic appropriation in Mombasan *taarab* defy heritagization is the same reason that they are deserving of special attention in discussions of Swahili culture and identity: their *eventness* (understood in Bakhtin’s sense of irreducible dialogism and “unfinalizability”). Attending to the eventness of transoceanic appropriation in Mombasan *taarab*, I argue, reveals translocality in Swahili music, and Swahili culture in general, as a contingent and creative process of self-making.

UTE FENDLER (BAYREUTH)

“Ceux qu’on jette à la mer...” - tidalectic memories of the ocean

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Taking the title of one of Mauritian writer Carl de Souza’s novels “Ceux qu’on jette à la mer” (‘those who are thrown into the sea’) as a starting point, this essay will discuss verbal and visual snapshots that highlight moments of collective memories that are sometimes repressed, hidden, drowned but making their back into the endeavors undertaken by artists to respond to the re-emerging calls of ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch) by re-constructing memory. This essay will set up a polyphonic network of fragments that respond to each other and thus allow creating a larger oceanic memory of – forced – migration. Paintings and photography by Nirveda Alleck and Krishna Luchoomun (2017-2021) enter the tidalectic memories together with verbal sequences written by Carl de Souza, *Ceux qu’on jette à la mer* (2001), by David Jaomanoro, *Pirogue sur le vide* (2006), and by Nathasha Appanah, *Les rochers de poudre d’or* (2003) and *Tropique de la violence* (2016).

R. BENEDITO FERRAO (WILLIAMSBURG)

The Art of Intercontinental Connections in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* brings into focus the strategic utility of Mary Pereira/Braganza's native land in the colonization of South Asia. Pereira evokes the history of Goa as one of the longest held European colonies (1510-1961) in what was to become modern-day India. In adopting the Braganza moniker, the character harks back to the 1662 marriage of Catherine of Braganza to Charles II. Through the alliance, England received the port city of Bombay from the Portuguese. My presentation will examine how Rushdie's novel uses the history of seaports and women icons to underscore the postcolonial location of Luso-Asian characters in post-British India. However, rather than solely rely on the transcolonial history of Portuguese and British liaisons in the Indian Ocean, my paper will look to art history as the methodology from which to "read" Rushdie's characters. To this end, I will use the works of the Flemish painter Jacob Huysmans, Czech-born Wenceslaus Hollar, both of the seventeenth century, as well as the Goan modernist Angelo da Fonseca, to place *Midnight's Children* in the larger context of global events that include European metropolises and the African continent.

KUMARI ISSUR (MAURITIUS)

Multi-layered and Rhizomic Transoceanic Imaginaries in the Indian Ocean

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This paper aims to address some of the phenomenological implications of Indian Ocean identities, constructed as they are, in terms of an ocean, leading to a certain fluidity – in varying degrees of consciousness –, and aims at resonating with such multiplicity and Oceanic fluidity in the widest, most inclusive sense. I will in particular debate on the (re)naming process and the expectations they schedule. I will bring under scrutiny the very name of the ocean as well as an alternative name for Mauritius (Marich). I will also explore the reshaping of the Mauritian landscape through the multiple layering of the cultural and religious imaginary of Grand Bassin/Pari Talao/Ganga Talao location as well as the transoceanic rhizomic relationship of this lake with Madagascar and India. Most of these cultural relationalities have undergone change over time and have in turn shaped and been shaped by political affiliations which by and by raise fundamental ontological questions. How far for example is Mauritius a 'Little India' or a Creole island?

To reflect on these issues, I will mostly draw on Mauritian legends/tales and visual art as well as on Bollywood films.

NATHALIE ARNOLD KOENINGS (AMHERST/BAYREUTH)

The Epic of the Useless Clove: Thinking Pemban Ties to the Land with a Poem of Catastrophe

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In rural Pemba, in 1961, religious scholar and plantain-farmer Shekhe Khamis Nassor al-Nabhany composed the epic poem *Utenzi wa Karafuu Mbovu*, a detailed account of that year's catastrophic clove harvest: People from all walks of life lost 'everything' as unexpected rains destroyed what was to have been a spectacularly profitable harvest. Presenting a poetic litany of personal losses experienced in specific locations across the island, and cataloguing individual responses to despair, the poem proposes a vision of Pemban society as characterised at once by: thickly felt, powerfully 'local' relations; farmers' constant vulnerability to the vagaries of weather; and a crucial dependence on the clove tree, that oceanic and botanical agent which, originating in Indonesia and introduced in Zanzibar for large-scale planting in the early 1800s, transformed land-use and the purposes of slavery, and would long form the heart of the islands' post-abolition economy.

Still widely known and recited in northern Pemba in the 1990s, and shared at that time in handwritten form, this poem has since 2010 sporadically circulated on global Pemban social media. Those who share it celebrate *Karafuu Mbovu* as an example both of poetic artistry and of powerful local history-telling. It is spoken of as a 'Pemban' poem that, through a form considered classical and traditional across the Western Indian Ocean, offers particularly 'Pemban' stories. Exploring the vision of Pemba that materializes in this important poem, this paper highlights the ways that certain narratives of Pemba, while manifestly emerging in and from an 'Indian Ocean' context, can actively insist on, re/create and privilege a clear sense of the deeply rooted 'local.'

NIKHITA OBEEGADOO (CAMBRIDGE, MA)

**Croaking Frogs and Struggling Youth: When Séga Engazé
meets the Francophone Novel**

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In a December 2021 debate organized by the Mauritius Global Diaspora, Mauritian author Ananda Devi underlines the importance of *séga engazé* to the confrontation of societal ills. Such a reflection has long been part of her work: Carefully interwoven into the literary fabric of Ananda Devi's novel, *Ève de ses décombres* (2006), are references to the popular *séga engazé* "Krapo Kriyé" [Frogs Cry Out] (1981) by the musical group *Grup Latanier*. As the novel follows the violent lives of four destitute youth in the suburbs of the nation's capital, it draws on the popular *séga* song that denounces societal ills such as capitalistic exploitation and domestic violence. While this intertextuality has not yet been addressed by scholars, I propose an in-depth exploration of the question it raises: How does the *séga* offer an alternative understanding of the novel's themes of poverty and marginalization? How does it help us (or not) address the always latent, and yet forever unnamed, dimension of race? And how does it interact with intertextual references, such as the verses of French poet Arthur Rimbaud? Moving beyond detailed literary analysis in the form of "close-reading" and "close-listening," my investigation ends by gazing toward future con- and disjunctions of the two art forms. If Mauritian literature in both French (Ananda Devi, Nathacha Appanah, Shenaz Patel) and English (Kama La Mackerel, Vinod Busjeet) is under the influence of increasing attention and demands from a global audience, can the same be said of Mauritian *séga*?

PEDRO POMBO (GOA/LISBON)

Sensing Territory, History and Contemporary Art in the Mascarenes Archipelago

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This presentation discusses an ongoing research on the modes contemporary artists think, sense and imagine the historical layers that profoundly changed the natural and cultural landscapes of the Mascarene islands. The archipelago's actual political geography, with Reunion island being a French Overseas Department and the Republic of Mauritius fighting over two disputed territories with former colonial rulers: United Kingdom (the Chagos archipelago) and France (the island of Tromelin), reflects the complexities of the colonial histories of the region and their contemporary afterlives.

In profound relation with the transoceanic networks of the plantation systems of the 18th and 19th centuries, and their natural and human exploitation, these islands have become spaces of recognised creole cultures, where socio-ecologies of today embody the imprints of the slave trade and indentured labour of the past and the profound transformation of the endemic landscapes into sites of production.

Today's cultural life of Reunion island and Mauritius reflects the nature of these particular histories and their simultaneous connections with much larger geographies across continents and oceans.

Discussing an ongoing exploration of local art practices engaging with the history of the slave trade and contract labour, territory and landscape and contemporary ecological damage, this presentation inquires the ways that local artists and cultural actors are exploring diverse mediums to critically think the past and imagine possible futures.

ANNACHIARA RAI (LEIDEN)

The Ocean in your pocket: materiality, forms and worldviews within 20th century Swahili booklets

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In East Africa from the 1930s onwards, Islamic pocket literature encroached on the local Swahili Muslim oral culture and its longstanding manuscript tradition in Arabic script. At the same time, it found a niche amid the several incoming European Christian-produced materials. This hitherto overlooked, yet remarkable alternative archive of devotional and didactic booklets in Swahili verse, designed and printed in Roman typescript on cheap paper from India, became very popular on the western coast of the Indian Ocean and made new notions of Islamic knowledge accessible beyond an Arabic-speaking elite. These pocket-size forms of print Islam were very much the product of transcontinental connections between Swahili authors and Indian booksellers who belonged to an Islamic *cosmopolis* concerned with embracing new ways of knowing about Islam and being Muslim in the global world. Drawing on current preliminary archival and ethnographic research, this presentation will address the complex and tacit relation between the portability of each physical booklet and the worldview that it contains; How do language, material and poetic forms interrelate in these devotional and didactic booklets composed between 1930 and 2000 in East Africa and in so doing which alternative people's lifeworlds were they forging?

ZOLY RAKONTONIERA (ANTANARIVO)

The woman warrior image in contemporary Southwest Indian Ocean women's performance poetry

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Even though significant endeavor has been made towards the emergence of a strong Southwest Indian Ocean identity; it has not yet borne much fruit particularly in the fields of arts or literature. The category of Indianoceanian arts, literature or cinema has never quite achieved the kind of prominence enjoyed by those of other regions such as the Caribbean for example. Women's arts in particular have not attracted much attention. By the mid-nineteenth century, a distinct male literary and artistic tradition was already well established in the region while women were struggling to achieve visibility. Through a comparative analysis of performance poetry by women from Madagascar, Mauritius and Comoros, this paper aims at drawing a link between those islands in order to identify their common artistic contours. Based on the theories of emergence, irradiation and flexibility (Brunel 1992), an analysis of the woman warrior image in its different incarnations in a selection of Southwestern Indian Ocean performance poetry by women will be undertaken. The contemporary figure of the woman warrior enables us to shed light on the several forms of struggles women in the Southwest Indian Ocean have to face: violence and injustice inherent to patriarchy exacerbated by economic and social breakdown. In spite of their specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, the works of performance poets from Madagascar, Mauritius and Comoros also intersect on the representation of the ways in which contemporary women warriors fight to bring changes.

HANS RAMDUTH (MAURITIUS)

Proposing alternative archives for Indianoceanic cultures

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In my earlier work, I looked at the inter-relationship between global visual culture and the Mauritian imaginary (Ramduth 2015). Events such as the 2004 tsunami and Amitav Ghosh's (2016) reading of it, especially in relation to the differences between modern architecture and older, traditional forms undergirded by ancestral knowledge, and the increasing evidence that we are, as a global modern civilization, driving straight into a wall, have led me to reconsider my archives.

Rather than remain focussed on the impact of European culture, a comparatively late arrival in the Indian Ocean a little more than 600 years ago, what if much older archives such as the San of Southern Africa, the Indigenous people of Australia, the *Adivasis* of India and *Andamanese* islanders, were instead taken as point of departure for a discussion of contemporary culture and aesthetics? These are excluded for various reasons – perceived as static, of purely anthropological or historical interest, disconnected from our current narratives and concerns.

Populations - and with them, their imaginaries - have continuously and fluidly moved around, and the more recent waves of settlement are less than half a millennia old on the Mascarenhas islands. What are the chances of a sustainable culture on these islands if the model of culture is predominantly based on a model of exacerbated and relentless consumerism? This proposed topic looks at some artists and writers, mainly of the Indian ocean, and attempts to relate these to a sense of Braudelian '*longue durée*' in the field of art and aesthetics by bridging the above-mentioned 'older' cultures, with the more recent ones, with the backdrop of an impending climate crisis.

PETER SIMATEI (ELDORET)

**The Pulses of the Sea: Magical Realism and Oceanic Imaginaries
in Khadija Abdalla Bajaberin's *The House of Rust***

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This paper focuses on Khadija Abdalla Bajaberin's deployment of magical realism, fantasy and fabulation to imagine oceanic realities that foreground the sea as a dynamic interspecies world that is both perilous and fantastic. Reading this novel as part of the ocean literature, this paper analyzes how the appeal, the power and the ferocity of the sea is built into a dense magnitude of rhythm that gives the novel a poetic structure.

DUNCAN TARRANT (BAYREUTH)

Baraza Imaginaries – Some musings on Politics, Power and Politeness in Zanzibar

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The Swahili word baraza has multiple interconnected meanings which centre around a general idea of a “public or semi-public” (Loimeier, 2007) meeting space. The term, depending on context can refer in a literal sense of the stone benches or verandas where men meet to sit, socialise and drink coffee, to the more abstract idea of a “social institution” that the members of these spaces form, or political institutions such as the Zanzibari Arts Council (Baraza la Sanaa) and the Zanzibari Parliament (Baraza la Zanzibar).

In my presentation, I would like to share some of my experiences and observations from my fieldwork in Zanzibar, where “baraza are so omnipresent that it is hard to imagine the island without them” (ibid.) and what the baraza’s multiple and transsocietal meanings can reveal to us about the nature of Zanzibari society.

Loimeier, R. (2007). Sit local, think global: The Baraza in Zanzibar. *Journal for Islamic Studies*. 27. 10.4314/jis.v27i1.39929.

CLARISSA VIERKE (BAYREUTH)

“The sea”, he gasped, “cannot be spoken”. Reflections on Untranslatability in “The Dragonfly Sea” by Yvonne A. Owuor
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The “The Dragonfly Sea” by the Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor uses what Hofmeyr has called “the Indian Ocean as a method” to move away from the West as constant historical and geographical point of reference. The novel rewrites ancient and recent relations between East Africa and China (also Turkey) and puts an emphasis on far-reaching transoceanic connections, which are never stable. Rather than land, it is the shape-shifting, unsettling sea, larger than human life, its waves, surfs, currents, its scents, but also its pirates and container ships, which takes poetic center-stage in the novel.

I start by exploring the ocean as a potent, productively opaque metaphor which defies stable representations, but underlines an affective (embodied) and aesthetic relation to place and belonging. As I argue, with reference to Glissant, it safeguards relations from assimilation into predefined and coercive discourses and also foregrounds a multitude of possible ways of knowing. Accordingly, the novel suggests a similar approach to language: A multitude of language and cultural repertoires figure – often untranslated and unexplained: Swahili proverbs, verses from taarab songs and children’s rhymes, Arabic, Islamic formulas and calligraphy and Chinese pictograms disrupt the English narrative and challenge the reader. The novel foregrounds each language’s *Eigensinn*, but even more so, the irreducible sensuous body of every language. With Emily Apter’s notion of ‘untranslatability’, I argue that ‘untranslation’ is a powerful act and meta-comment in the “Dragonfly Sea”, which makes an effort not to ‘tame’ languages, treating them as easily substitutable. Which productive moments of astonishment, discomfort, but also understanding (and lack of understanding) arise in those parts, where we (and the novel’s characters) hear, see and are made to “taste”, as the novel says, other languages and repertoires, like oral literature, gesturing towards alternative archives?