

**“BEHIND SO MANY NAMES, THE SEA”.  
MOZAMBIQUE AND THE INDIAN OCEAN**

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*This chapter proposes a discussion based on a critical intersection between Indian Ocean studies and Cultural and Literary Studies in Portuguese-speaking contexts, by addressing the Indian Ocean as a critical framework for interpreting literary and visual narratives from Mozambique. Its objective is to put forward a counterpoint between literary and visual representations and thereby address the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic and epistemological paradigm in order to (re)situate the Mozambican cultural imagination, and thus, contribute to "new disciplinary developments" (Pearson, 2011) in the field of Indian Ocean studies.*

keywords: Indian Ocean studies, African Literatures, Visual and Written narratives, Mozambique, Indian Ocean.

A historical study centred on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure.

**Fernand Braudel**

In order to provide an appropriate introduction, I would like to start my reflection by underlining at least two preliminary aspects that characterise both the state of the art regarding transnational approaches in the Portuguese-speaking world, and the relevance of Mozambique in the field of Indian Ocean studies.

Regarding the state of the art, when it comes to the application of transnational frameworks to the study of African literary and visual narratives, the concepts related to the Atlantic space are the most established and properly theorised (Gilroy, 1998; Shoat & Stam, 2012). They represent a productive alternative paradigm in addressing historical, social and cultural relationships. As far as the Portuguese-speaking world is concerned, the transnational approach favoured by theorisation, originally analysed, for instance, by leading scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001) and Miguel Vale de Almeida (2000), offers the opportunity to outline an alternative political, social and cultural history of the southern region of the Atlantic by addressing the specificity of this area as crucial to an understanding of the past and present of the region and the cultural “*branchements*” (Amselle, 2001) related to the “*postcolonial situation*” (Balandier, 2007). Slave trade history and heritage, international relations, transnational development policies, South-South cooperation and migration, race and ethnic studies, cultural and social representations are just a few of the topics that are addressed in the transnational perspective of the Global South Atlantic, establishing this very concept as one significant category of analysis in the Portuguese-speaking critical contexts, in order to (re)think relations between Portugal and its former Empire (Almeida 2000; Santos, 2001; Alencastro 2000; Bethencourt & Chaudhuri 1998-2002, among others).

At the same time, critical and theoretical production regarding the Indian Ocean in the Portuguese-speaking world is rather different, still representing a very marginal framework, even in the fields of maritime study, slave trade his-

tory and social history in general. Few works on the slave trade in the Indian Ocean have been published in Portuguese and there are very few publications in the fields of anthropology, sociology or history that actually address the relations between, for instance, Mozambique and the Indian Ocean and conceptualise the maritime space as a region or a unit of analysis (Alpers, 1975; Boxer, 1963; Campbell 2004; Capela 2002; Pereira Leite & Khouri, 2012; Perez 1998; *Oceanos* 1998-2002). Moreover, the majority of the works published until now are actually dedicated to ancient times, the period prior to European colonisation, and so far have left modern and contemporary space and time roughly untouched in different fields of research (Pearson, 2011). Especially in the field of history, research on the Indian Ocean has considered the different presences and contacts established in this space-time framework over history and addressed the different nations, areas and regions linked through the Indian Ocean "network" (Kearney, 2004; McPherson, 1993; Pearson, 2003; Vergès, 2003). Although the Indian Ocean world represents a well-established study area in a number of disciplines in so-called African studies this critical perspective still appears to be a ground-breaking approach.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in Indian Ocean studies the linguistic divide that characterises the region represents a very strong impediment to the inclusion, for instance, of Mozambique in an area where the hegemony of languages other than Portuguese, i.e. English, French and Swahili, among others, fosters a difficult attitude of a Portuguese-speaking context in the Indian Ocean region. In my opinion, on the contrary, it appears to be remarkably emblematic for a cultural and socio-political analysis of the Mozambican context, as I hope to highlight in this article.

Where methodology is concerned when addressing history through a space-time framework, following Fernand *Braudel* ideas, and tackling the sea as a place of historical, economic and also cultural relations (Braudel, 1985), Indian Ocean studies<sup>2</sup> provides a set of epistemologies and concepts that define the Indian Ocean as a "network of dynamic and structured relationships" (Chaundhury, 1990). They underscore the critical assumption that "Space is a more fundamental, rational and a priori dimension for social action than time-order and succession. (...) Space takes precedence in historical understanding over its complementary

<sup>1</sup> The definition of *Literature of the Indian Ocean* within the field of African literary studies represents an ongoing critical debate, especially within specific critical contexts such as the francophone one. In this regard see "Claiming the Field. Africa and the Space of Indian Ocean Literature" by Moradewun Adejunmobi in *Callaloo* 32.4 (2009) 1247-1261. Also in the so-called Portuguese-speaking African literatures, the Indian Ocean perspective it is not yet an established critical framework, especially in a comparative approach among narratives written in different languages and thus placed in distinct national contexts.

<sup>2</sup> For an essential bibliography on *Indian Ocean Studies*, see Bose 2006, Gupta, Hofmeyr & Person, 2010; Fawaz & Bayly 2002, Kearney 2004, McPherson 1993, Moorthy & Jamal, 2010, Pearson 2003, Vergès 2003.

field of chronology” (Chaundhury, 1990). In this respect, historian Sugata Bose (2006) has a specific definition for the Indian Ocean, which engages with the critical debate in the very field of the Indian Ocean as a study area, and promotes an alternative framework to define this space-time region.

The Indian Ocean is better characterized as an “interregional arena” rather than as a “system”, a term that has more rigid connotations. An interregional arena lies somewhere between the generalities of a “world system” and the specificities of particular regions. (Bose, 2006, p. 6)

According to Bose, the relationship between a regional entity and world-system that the definition of the Indian Ocean as an “arena” attempts to promote is based on the need to problematise spatial constructs that seem to project a certain *coloniality of knowledge* (Mudimbe, 1998; Quijano, 2002). However, the conceptual definition of the Indian Ocean as an “interregional arena” and, of course, its epistemological developments is far from being a consensual theoretical assumption. In this respect, the problematisation proposed by Shanty Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (2010) engages with Bose’s theory and sets forward a number of different critical perspectives and paradigms that provide a distinctive framework to situate and analyse the Indian Ocean space-time. Underlining commonality as a crucial aspect in order to deconstruct the opposition between the “local” and the “global”, according to this theorisation, the Indian Ocean needs to be addressed as an independent area, thus eliminating the risk of using a diminished critical and epistemological definition of the region.

We propose that the Indian Ocean region possesses an internal commonality which enables us to view it as an area in itself: commonalities of history, geography, merchant capital and trade, ethnicity, culture, and religion. This we contrast to Sugata Bose’s notion of an “interregional arena.” While usefully raising the possibility of viewing the Indian Ocean region as a human theatre which occupies interstices and straddles several regions, “interregionalism” runs the risk of diminishing the Indian Ocean region as a unique space, locking it into being a region between more significant regions, overshadowed by the concerns of nations with fixed borders and orchestrated histories, and continents that dominate by virtue of sheer mass. We prefer to treat the Indian Ocean region as one, among many, liminal spaces of hybrid evolution, an area whose boundaries are both moveable and porous, which brings us close to Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke’s notion of *transnational imaginative geography*. (Moorthy & Jamal, 2010, p.4)

Moreover, the critical reflection from Moorthy and Jamal (2010) is based on a specific critical framework regarding the notion of "world-system" and thus suggesting an interesting theoretical articulation in the field of African studies.

Reorienting significance and temporality features large in Andre Gunder Frank's application of world system analysis, advocating one, rather than many, world systems. This not only restores the Indian Ocean world to its place in the panoply of human history, but allows this region to be treated as a unit for analysis in a contemporary world which Frank proposes has always been international, economically integrated and globally interconnected. (Moorthy & Jamal, 2010, p.10)

Furthermore, this specific articulation underlines an important epistemological perspective regarding the "human dimension of the Indian Ocean region" (Moorthy & Jamal, 2010), and the role of the imagination for its study and theorisation.

To speak of a "human ocean" then, is not merely to speak adjectivally, or metaphorically, but to harness human cultural practice to the element which has made it possible. Moreover, to think the oceanic human is also to affirm "the rearrangement of desires" within the ethico-political sphere of the humanities. (Moorthy & Jamal, 2010, p.14)

To sum up, the critical debate in Indian Ocean studies offers a number of diversified theoretical discussions and epistemologies that appear to be particularly relevant in the field of African literary, visual and cultural studies, putting forward an original and alternative outlook to read and place African literary and artistic narratives in a transnational and transdisciplinary framework. It is in these theoretical and critical articulations that contemporary African literary and visual narratives offer the opportunity to tackle the Indian Ocean as a "transnational imaginative geography" (Ghosh & Muecke, 2007), suggesting "alternative epistemological experiences" (García Canclini, 2012), to (re)define the grammar of human knowledge and experience.

Within this theoretical discussion, Mozambican cultural imaginary, social and political features can be addressed, tackling the relation between the land — Mozambique — and the sea — the Indian Ocean — as a paradigmatic link in order to (re)situate and understand the contemporary cultural and social transformations of this country whose relevance is increasing in transnational relations in the Western Indian Ocean arena. However, in order to situate the relationship between Mozambique and the Indian Ocean, I need to set up a specific space-

time framework, by moving back in time to the age of the Portuguese imperial expansion in Africa, and by heading north in space, to arrive at a paradigmatic place such as the Island of Mozambique, *Ilha de Moçambique*.

## **Ilha de Moçambique and the Indian Ocean, a metonymy of the literary nation**

Situated in the northern part of the country and linked to the mainland by a narrow bridge, the Island of Mozambique is an exceptionally symbolic and paradigmatic place both for the “great narrative” of the Portuguese discoveries — *descobrimentos* — and for the colonial and post-colonial eras. From a historical point of view, the Island of Mozambique is the place where Vasco da Gama, one of the key figures of the Portuguese imperial narrative, arrived with his fleet in 1498, and where the poet Luís Vaz de Camões stopped on his way back to Portugal from India. One important aspect is the political definition of the Island of Mozambique in the Portuguese Empire. The island was in fact the African outpost of the Indian State, and thus the administrative headquarters of the Portuguese establishment in East Africa. In 1753, the Portuguese Crown established the Island of Mozambique as the capital of the province of Mozambique. In 1898, the capital was then moved south, to the city of Lourenço Marques, now called Maputo.

From a cultural perspective and thus from the point of view of the national imagination, the Island of Mozambique often stands as a synecdoche for the nation — the part for the whole — or, as the historian Alexandre Lobato pointed out, “a living symbol” (1989), signifying and projecting a peculiar imaginary particularly with regard to the variety of subjects, histories and cultures that populate the Mozambican cultural universe. It is the “astonishing Indian Ocean” in particular — *o espantoso Índico* — as Lobato stated (1989), that shapes the distinctive historical, social and cultural features of this “fragment of the nation” (Chatterjee, 1993) and establishes the Island of Mozambique as a fundamental starting point in approaching, defining and problematising the relationship between the Mozambican national cultural imagination and identity and its maritime component.

Observing Mozambican poetry during both colonial times and after independence, the Island of Mozambique represents a paradigmatic place or, as Jessica Falconi pointed out, “the metonymy of the nation” (2008). From here it raised an alternative and disruptive identitarian discourse which pointed to a potential *alternative utopia* (Chaves, 2002; Falconi, 2008) of what has been defined as

the literary *Mozambicaness* — *moçambicanidade* — whose limits go far beyond the telluric space and where the Indian Ocean represents a crucial standing point in order to re-think and re-define the cultural discourse on the Mozambican narratives of the nation. In her reflection on three key figures of Mozambican poetry Rui Knopfly, Luís Carlos Patraquim and Eduardo White, concerning Ilha de Moçambique, Rita Chaves states:

As metonymy of a larger history, each with its own geographical, historical, political and cultural reality that Mozambique is setting, the Island will be represented as an incomplete mosaic, in which the pieces were lost and/or were improperly placed. The design, therefore, proves to be confusing and the exercise of the word is a means to revolve the ground and extract meaning from now deposited fragments before each gaze. (...) the attachment to the space should not be confused with the idealization and what stands out are the signs of a relationship which, being one of love, does not pacify spirits nor hides frustrations. (...) the island is organized as a metaphor for an identity in disquiet, a process that mixes refusal and persecution, far from finding in the field of subjectivity the serenity that monsoons offered to the difficult art of navigation. (Chaves, 2002)<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, the dimension of “disquiet, refusal and persecution” (Chaves, 2002) is particularly relevant when reflecting on cultural and identitarian discourses that are related to an idea of a homogeneous and hegemonic nationhood, inscribing in the national paradigm a differential and counter-hegemonic feature, which seems to be crucial in rethinking the national construct in its cultural articulation. In this respect, the Indian Ocean as an “inter-regional arena”, according to Sugata Bose (2006), becomes a particularly useful concept for highlighting the fragmentary and confrontational dimension that constitutes a crucial feature of this symbolic, political and cultural maritime space-time. Furthermore, the Island of Mozambique becomes a physical and conceptual place to (re)think cultural discourses and narratives placed in the Mozambican space, before and after independence, pointing to a number of representations, ambiguities and contradictions and thus underlining a symbolic, cultural and political ambivalence that becomes emblematic in questioning the present and the past, not only from

<sup>3</sup> Original quote: “Como metonímia de uma história maior, a de cada um com essa realidade geográfica, histórica, política e cultural que Moçambique vai configurando, a Ilha será representada como um mosaico incompleto, no qual as peças se perderam e/ou foram inadequadamente colocadas. O desenho, portanto, revela-se confuso e o exercício da palavra é um meio de revolver o terreno e extrair o significado dos fragmentos ora depositados diante de cada olhar. (...) o apego ao espaço não se confunde com a idealização e o que salta são os sinais de uma relação que, sendo de amor, não pacifica espíritos e não esconde frustrações. (...) a ilha organiza-se como a metáfora de uma identidade em desassossego, num processo que mistura recusa e perseguição, muito distante de encontrar no terreno da subjetividade a serenidade que as monções ofereciam à difícil arte de navegar”. (Chaves, 2002)



a national perspective but also from a regional and transnational standpoint. In other words, as Jessica Falconi points out:

On the one hand, the Island as “brothel of history” (Soupa & Saúte 1992, p.53), hellish place of slavery, and submission to the different dominations that passed by; on the other hand, in the antipodes, the image of an exemplary place of peaceful coexistence between peoples and cultures, emblematic of that “world that the Portuguese created” theorized by Gilberto Freyre (...) Such representations make of the Island’s memory a problematic heritage, determining the controversial role that this place still takes in the Mozambican national imagination (Chaves, 2002) nowadays. Therefore, it is with these images of the island that the poetic of representations either get in an open rupture, or in processes of negotiation. (Falconi, 2013, p. 80)<sup>4</sup>

The Island of Mozambique becomes the geographical, poetic, political and visual place from which to examine the relationship between the land — Mozambique — and the sea — the Indian ocean — underlying the epistemological potential of these *fragments of the nation* in order to establish the importance of the maritime space in Mozambican contemporary cultural discourses and representations.

## “Transnational Imaginative Geographies”: Mozambican visual and written narrative of the Indian Ocean

As noted by Francisco Noa, the Indian Ocean is emerging loudly among the new voices of Mozambican poetry. Following the path of the previous, acclaimed generation of Mozambican poets,<sup>5</sup> such as Virgílio de Lemos, Rui Knopfly and Luís Carlos Patraquim, among others, the new generation is claiming the Ocean as a “source and motivation” (Noa, 2012) in order to propose an “unconventional” and “dispersive” identitarian and cultural discourse defined by a number of specific themes such as, for instance, “the sea and travel” (Noa, 2012).

(...) The trajectory of the Mozambican poetry, from the origins to the present day, not even necessarily setting it as a dominant theme, but with a weight and unquestionable value, reveals that the sea, specifically the Indian Ocean, is not and has

<sup>4</sup> Original quote: “Por um lado, a Ilha como “lupanar da história” (Soupa & Saúte, 1992: 53), sítio infernal de escravatura, e de submissão às diferentes dominações que por ali passaram; por outro lado, nas antípodas, a imagem de um lugar exemplar de convivência pacífica entre povos e culturas, emblemático daquele “mundo que o português criou” teorizado por Gilberto Freyre (...) Tais representações fazem da memória da Ilha uma herança problemática, determinando o papel controverso que este lugar ocupa no imaginário nacional moçambicano (Chaves, 2002) ainda na contemporaneidade. É, pois, com estas imagens da Ilha, que as representações poéticas entram ora em aberta ruptura, ora em processos de negociação”. (Falconi, 2013, p. 80)

<sup>5</sup> In this respect see: Francisco Noa (2012; 2014), Rita Chaves (2002), Fátima Mendonça (2011), Ana Mafalda Leite (2003), Carmen Tindó Secco (2006), Maria-Benedita Basto (2006), Jessica Falconi (2008; 2013)

never been, an empty space, but a place of deep, endless and consequential commitments and dynamics of human, social, cultural, political and economic nature. But above all, a place where the poetic imagination not only recreates dimensions hitherto unsuspected, but also manifests itself as a powerful exercise of aesthetic freedom, assertion of subjectivity and historical consciousness. In the mirrored relationship established between the sea and the actual writing what outweighs it are the worlds that one and the other can provide. Moreover, of how to transition from one to the other in a relentless demonstration of how both the writing and the Indian Ocean are platforms of transgression, evasion, denial of territorial or other limits and also of a restoration and reinvention of existence and destinations, either private or collective. (Noa, 2012, p. 14; my translation)<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, the work of contemporary Mozambican poets such as Adelino Timóteo, Eduardo White, Guita Júnior, Sangare Okapi and Júlio Carrilho<sup>7</sup> represents a very significant literary *corpus* that provides an original, alternative view of the question of national identity and embraces the Indian Ocean, its meanings and agency, as one of the stronger motivations in contemporary artistic and cultural discourses. As far as the contemporary Mozambican novel is concerned, it is the work of Mía Couto, and particularly João Paulo Borges Coelho, that takes a very peculiar approach to the Indian Ocean space-time, through an original literary project that uses the maritime perspective as an operational standpoint to re-present Mozambican specificity. It is interesting to consider, for example, the literary work of Borges Coelho in this light (Can, 2013; Chaves, 2008). His writing paints an original picture of the relationship between space and time, thus redefining the so-called national cultural context through an emblematic repositioning of facts and subjects in a transnational space and time framework.<sup>8</sup> It is in its engagement with a complex relationship between time and space that the literary work of Borges Coelho points to a contextual dimension that blurs the boundaries of the nation, putting forward relationships and dynamics that must be observed

<sup>6</sup> Original quote: "(...) a trajetória da poesia moçambicana, desde às origens até aos nossos dias, mesmo não se colocando necessariamente como uma temática dominante, mas com um peso e valor inquestionável, revelamos que o mar, mais concretamente o Oceano Índico, não é, nem nunca foi, um espaço vazio, mas um lugar de profundos, intermináveis e consequentes compromissos e dinâmicas de natureza humana, social, cultural, política e económica. Mas sobretudo um lugar onde a imaginação poética não apenas recria dimensões até aí insuspeitas, como também se manifesta como um poderoso exercício de liberdade estética, de afirmação da subjectividade e de consciência histórica. Na relação de espelho que se estabelece entre o mar e a própria escrita o que sobrepõe são os mundos que tanto um como outro nos podem propiciar. Mais, de como se transita de um para outro, numa incessante demonstração de como tanto a escrita como o Oceano Índico são plataformas de transgressão, de evasão, de negação de limites territoriais ou outros e, também, de reconstituição e de reinvenção da existência e dos destinos sejam eles privados ou colectivos." (Noa, 2012, p. 14)

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the contemporary Mozambican poetry see Noa 2014.

<sup>8</sup> I am referring, for example, to the two collections of short stories *Índicos Índicios I – Setentrião* (2005) and *Índicos Índicios II – Meridiano* (2005) or to the novel *O Olho de Hertzog* (2010). In both cases, the spatial dimension occurs as a narrative paradigm, highlighting a number of emblematic transnational relations.

through a critical perspective that goes beyond a national geopolitical context.<sup>9</sup> In other words, from a cultural and literary point of view, as Isabel Hofmeyr puts it:

We need to think of the Indian Ocean as the site par excellence of ‘alternative modernities’; those formations of modernity that have taken shape in an archive of deep and layered existing social and intellectual traditions. (...) Understanding political discourse and action, then, becomes a task of understanding a complex layered pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial archive in which versions of modernity are negotiated in an ever-shifting set of idioms around ‘tradition’. (Hofmeyr, 2007, p.13)

An artistic counterpoint to these literary voices can be found in the work of the contemporary Mozambican artist Pekiwa — Nelson Augusto Carlos Ferreira (1977) — whose sculpture seems to portray a very peculiar claim to the sea, recovering, for instance, old *remains* from the Island of Mozambique and reshaping them in a way that immediately brings to mind the theme and imagery of travel. Working with emblematic and highly symbolic “traces” from The Island of Mozambique — doors, windows, pieces of wood — in his sculpture entitled *Barco Mensageiro*, the artist gave new life to these abandoned “remains” with a history, as António Cabrita states (2010, p. 196), making them new, without silencing their past, integrity and materiality.

Picture 1. *Pekiwa in Abélard, Luís (Org.) (2010). Com As Maões. 24 Artistas Moçambicanos.*



Lisboa: Babel, pp. 199.

<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Borges Coelho’s literary work seems to contribute to a reconfiguration of the so-called national context. For a critical reading of the literary work of this author, see: Chaves 2008 and Can 2011.

Furthermore, the work of Pekiwa poses a critical and conceptual question about an artistic practice where remains and ruins play a central role, pointing to a set of theoretical constellations of undoubted interest in a conceptual reflection on what could be defined as the aesthetics of the Indian Ocean (Brugioni, 2015).

On the other hand, striving to establish different comparisons and counterpoints among different narratives, it is important to underline that the Indian Ocean represents a visual element of critical and emblematic importance in modern and contemporary Mozambican photography.<sup>10</sup> Within a broad, diverse universe — and in the impossibility of making a more detailed analysis in this article — an emblematic example can be found in the photographic work of Mauro Pinto *Portos de Convergência* (2003) — *Ports of Convergence* — in which the relationship between the land and the sea is built from the point of view of its *materiality and humanity* throughout a visual construction in which the monumentality of the port is a counterpoint to the corporality of the man who inhabits this space.

Figure 2. **Mauro Pinto**, *Portos de Convergência* (2003; Copyright Maro Pinto).



*I would like to thank the author who kindly authorised the reproduction of his picture in this text.*

In conclusion, the dialogues that can be found addressing the Indian Ocean — and *Ilha de Moçambique* — as a theme, motivation and, thus, a new and *alternative cultural utopia* (Chaves, 2002; Falconi, 2008) in the Mozambican cultural and social context could be much more than these and the aim of my research is, in fact, to keep looking for these “silent” ties and counterpoints, inside and outside the limits

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, the analysis of the representation of the Indian Ocean in Mozambican contemporary documental photography will offer a number of insights for a reflection regarding a Visual Aesthetics of the Indian Ocean.

of the Mozambican nation, searching for old and new imaginations that could possibly “emerge” from the sea, and thus remembering, as Borges Coelho states in his book of short stories titled *Índicos Índicios* that: “Behind so many names, so many intersections, and so much diversity, it is always the same, *the sea*”. (Borges Coelho, 2005, p.10; my translation). From a theoretical point of view, as Isabel Hofmeyr points out, “At every turn the Indian Ocean complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms” (2010). Therefore, the Indian Ocean and its “ability to complicate received paradigms and academic traditions” (Hofmeyr et al, 2011) offers a critical situated (re)vision of the theoretical paradigms through which Mozambican cultural representations are read and analysed, re-orienting the meaning and the agency of visual and written narratives rooted in the *transnational imaginative geography* of the Indian Ocean world.

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