

Notes on an archipelagic ethnography: Ships, seas, and islands of relation in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract: This paper explores a mobile anthropological method, or what I call an archipelagic ethnography. This archipelagic ethnography focuses on relationality to think through not only islandness and archipelagoes—land, ship, and sea—but also considers relationality as a starting point for examining connections across space. Based on over ten years of ethnographic research among dhow sailors in the Indian Ocean, I argue that navigation, social interactions, notions of patronage, and protection alongside memories and histories of mobility draw together these multiple spaces across the Indian Ocean. Moving between dhows docked in port, on islands, and at sea, I elaborate on an archipelagic ethnographic method that is a mode of thinking relationally about different kinds of spaces and places. Taking relationality as a central point in thinking through relations between ship, land, and sea, I hope to think about the notion of society in relational terms as a starting point for an anthropological method that is attuned to both difference and connection.

Keywords: anthropology, archipelagic, dhows, Indian Ocean, islands, relationality

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Introduction: Anthropologist on board?

A ship is a world unto itself, even if it is docked in port. I tried balancing myself on the narrow thirty-foot plank that led to the *Sagar Sanpatti*, a wooden sailing vessel or dhow, moored at the jetty in Mombasa's Old Port. Gingerly placing one foot in front of the other, inching forward slowly on the shuddering wooden plank, I turned around to look at Yunus, the dhow's cook, who was helping me board the vessel for the first time. "Don't look back, and definitely don't look down!" he said, the plank shifting in the wind, my *dupatta* (scarf) flying over my eyes, blinding me. I tottered, almost lost my balance, cursed the fabric, and paused. Against the cook's advice, I looked at the water rippling forty feet below. Yunus reached out to me and I quickly grabbed his hand. "I'm here, don't worry," he said, reassuringly. The captain who was watching from the deck yelled, "You know how to swim, right?" I nodded. "Good, because Yunus doesn't! If you both go down, rescue him!" The rest of the crew, an audience of ten able seamen, laughed at the absurdity of this slow-moving spectacle. *A woman boarding a dhow. That too, an Indian woman in Mombasa. A ship's cook who can't swim.* I finally reached the end of the plank and lifted myself onto the ladder, the captain reaching out a hand to help me climb on

board, for the first time. “*Asalaam aleikum*, welcome,” Yusuf, the captain, said as I clumsily landed on the deck, readjusting my *dupatta*. Behind me, Yunus confidently drew himself up on to the vessel and laughed. An everyday movement for him, was a tightrope act for me.

The dhow I had just boarded for the first time was a world whose boundaries were clearly circumscribed, one misstep carrying you from this world unto another. Yet, this seemingly enclosed world was filled with traces of another, more familiar one. The deck smelled industrial, of greasy diesel, suffused with the acrid, pungent smell of dried shark, an odor that wafted through the streets that lay beyond the port. The captain graciously led me to the cabin, instructing Yunus to make me a cup of tea—the code of hospitality not being forgotten even though I could sense Yusuf’s confusion. *Who is this woman? How did the port authorities allow her in? And what does she want from us?* I sipped on the masala chai that Yusuf offered me in a glass. It tasted just like the masala chai I had grown up drinking in Bombay. Inside the cabin lay a stack of DVDs of the latest Bollywood films. Here were traces of the familiar, in the strange. A ship, a floating space, is a world unto itself, but is always in relation with many others.

This essay is an effort to examine the relations that bind ships to islands, and to the sea. I do so by not only tracing itineraries that crisscross across these spaces, but also through relationships, forms of social interaction, and sense memory that draw islands, oceans, and ships together. Focusing on the Indian Ocean, I argue that navigation, social interactions, notions of patronage, and protection alongside memories of histories of mobility draw together these different spaces. In doing so, I elaborate on an ethnographic mode of inquiry that is not only multi-sited, but archipelagic, that is able to simultaneously hold the particularity of spaces whilst drawing them in relation to each other. This archipelagic ethnographic method is a mode of thinking relationally about different kinds of spaces and places, opening pathways for thinking about the notion of society through relational terms as a starting point for methods in the social sciences.

To highlight this relationality, in what follows, I share notes from long-term fieldwork that moves from the site of the dhow, or the ship, to different spaces across the Indian Ocean. While many of these sites are islands—*islands of navigation, islands of danger, islands of protection, islands as ports of call*—what draws them together is not simply their “*islandness*” but their relation to each other, to dhows, and to the Indian Ocean itself. This relationality is brought into being not only through material connections—of trade or people—but also of memory and histories of mobility across these spaces, an archipelagic ethnographic method being central to viewing these relationalities across ships, sea, and land.

Ship, land, and sea in island studies

Departing from older tropes of viewing the island as static, isolated, and insular, island studies scholars have looked to the island through the lens of relationality and “*thinking with the archipelago*” (Baldacchino, 2006; Braithwaite, 1999; DeLoughrey, 2007; Gilssant, 1997; Grydehøj et al., 2020; Pugh, 2013; Stratford, 2003; Stratford et al., 2011). Much of this work has been concerned with seeking out the form that this relationality might take—the assemblages, networks, mobilities, and worlds that islands are embedded in (Clark & Tsai, 2009; Hau’ofa, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). This connectivity and relationality does not “*flatten*” or take away from the uniqueness or islanded-ness of a space, but in fact accentuates the specific formation of each of these islands as places (Hay, 2006).

One obvious vector of connection across island spaces is the sea. Island relationality has therefore been situated in the water, as well as through the vessels that move across it (Blum, 2013; Bremner, 2016; Pugh, 2016, 2018). Rather than viewing the seascape as the backdrop against which vessels move, and islands are situated, scholars have centered how the sea is a socially constructed space that shapes island relationality (Pugh, 2018; Steinberg, 2001; Steinberg & Peters, 2015), the concept of “aquapelago” resituating even environmental processes at the center of this relationality (Hayward, 2012). Relationality has emerged as a key concept by which ships, seas, and islands have been thought through. Nevertheless, as Jonathan Pugh (2016) has convincingly argued, although relationality has often been used as a heuristic device, oceans, ships, and islands, have most often been studied in isolation from one another. Bringing together literatures of island studies, ships, and the oceanic turn in the social sciences, he argues that “islands, oceans and ships should not always be reductively conceptualized in isolation, because they are often inextricably interwoven into complex, multifaceted and shifting arrays of relations and assemblages” (Pugh, 2016, p. 1041). In doing so, he turns our attention to Barbados’ Landship, a performance and welfare institution that gestures to the relationality of island, ship, and sea through a dance choreographed to invoke not only the sea, but also past mobilities through ships—whether the voyages of slave ships, the British Navy, or steam ships. For Pugh, the Landship as an institution acts as a metaphor for the relationality between island, sea, and ship, where neither one of these elements disappears into the other, but they each retain their particularity even as they come together.

Pugh’s analysis of the Landship provides one avenue for exploring the relations that bind ship, island, and sea; it is a relationality that is performed, that imagines the sea and the ship on land, invoking a Barbadian past in the present. While these relationalities between land, ship, and sea are useful to think with, Pugh’s 2016 study is located on one island, on one performance. Building upon Pugh, how might anthropologists and other social scientists adopt an approach that is able to apprehend this relationality across multiple islands, vessels, and seascapes? What kind of methods can be employed to examine relationality across the sea, between islands, and the vessels that move between them?

Building upon concepts like “thinking with the archipelago” (Pugh, 2016), anthropologists Nimführ and Otto (2020) suggest that island relationality be thought through the concept “islandscape.” The term itself was coined by Broodbank (2000, p. 21), who defined *islandscape* as an approach that situates an island in its connections to other islands, mainlands, and the sea, highlighting its multidimensionality and “human imprint.” Nimführ and Otto (2020) employ “islandscape” to redefine binaries such as isolation/relation and global/local, combining -scape and assemblage thinking in island studies. They argue that employing this term allows them to develop a “differentiating and differentiated view on island dynamics” (Nimführ & Otto, 2020, p. 4) where researchers must show when and how the island is made significant in their empirical data, thereby moving beyond the problems of islandism and relationality.

Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Pugh (2016) and Nimführ and Otto (2020), I am interested in exploring an anthropological method, or what I call an *archipelagic ethnography*, that can perhaps harness relationality to think through not only islandness and archipelagoes – land, ship, and sea—but also consider relationality as a starting point for examining connections across space. I do this by considering relationality between ship, seas, and islands in the Indian Ocean, a region with a long history of mobility across a vast space.

Dhows and Indian Ocean ports of call

The Indian Ocean and the vessels that ply across its waters provide a rich context through which to consider ship, sea, and land relationality. Dhows, or wooden sailing vessels, have facilitated movement across the Indian Ocean since people first went to sea in the region. These vessels harnessed the monsoon winds to traverse the ocean, transporting goods, people, and ideas across the Indian Ocean, making it what some scholars have called the “cradle of globalization” (Cassanelli et al, 2002). Yet, the term ‘dhow’ is somewhat of a misnomer. It was originally used in the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa to refer to a particular type of lateen-rigged sailing vessel. But in the 19th century, the British came to call all sailing vessels “dhows”. Despite efforts to categorize them based on size, building material and type of sail, for the British, a country craft or dhow was ultimately one that was manned by “natives” or indigenous sailors from across the Indian Ocean. Historians such as Johan Mathew (2016, p. 21) have suggested that, in many ways, a dhow defies definition and falls in the category of “you know it when you see it.” In post-colonial India, dhows that no longer rely on the sail are called ‘mechanized sailing vessels,’ but the terms ‘country craft’ or ‘dhow’ are still used in the English media to describe these indigenous, hybrid form of ships.

Today, mechanized dhows (or, as they are known in Kachchhi, *vahans*) from Kachchh, a region in western India, continue to traverse the old Indian Ocean routes today. They go where container ships cannot go, transporting foodstuffs, diesel, charcoal, dried fish, livestock, and even cars across Indian Ocean ports. Functioning as an economy of arbitrage (Dua, 2016, 2019), dhows quickly adapt to market trends and shifting government policies. They have especially found a niche in servicing minor ports in times of conflict, mostly recently the minor ports of Yemen and Somalia in times of war and political instability. These *vahans* are primarily run by sailors from two towns on the Gulf of Kachchh in the state of Gujarat in India—Jam Salaya, near Jamnagar, and Mota Salaya in Mandvi. These dhow crews are typically Muslims—of either the Bhadals or Wagher castes, with some Hindu Kharvas, seafaring being an important part of caste identity for these endogamous groups.

This essay, then, is based on over ten years of archival and ethnographic work amongst Kachchhi sailors and dhow owners as they moved across the Indian Ocean. Much of the research took place onboard dhows docked in ports in India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kenya, but also in the homes of sailors in Mandvi and Jam Salaya, as well as through communications received from sailors whilst at sea. This ethnographic research took place not in just one of these sites over a long-period of time, but required a multi-sited ethnographic approach that extended over ten years. This long-term relationship forged between myself, the anthropologist, and sailors and their families made some of the relationalities between ship, sea, and land become visible. In the next section, I examine my own relationship to my interlocutors or collaborators to argue that this form of social interaction was crucial to the archipelagic ethnographic method I sketch out in the rest of the essay.

An anthropologist at sea: On an archipelagic anthropology

When I first began this ethnographic research on board the *Sagar Sanpati* as it was docked in Mombasa’s port in 2011, my presence on board was seen with suspicion. “Are you a spy? Are you working for the CID?” Yusuf would ask me. Other crew members would whisper to

each other in Kachchhi, assuming that I couldn't hear or understand, "Look at her! Is she a spy? She doesn't even look like one! She can barely lift herself onto deck!" I often heard concerns like, "Who is funding her? Where does she get money from? She has an Indian passport but says she's a student in America?"

Yet, in a strange way, the fact that I am an Indian woman allowed me entry into this world in a way that I imagine would be difficult for men. Despite the comments about my body, my fitness, and suspicions about my intentions, being a young-ish woman, identifiable as an upper-class woman from Mumbai, a city that seafarers knew well, forced the sailors to act in codes that were familiar to them even in strange circumstances. As a young Indian woman, alone in Mombasa, the older, devout captain, Yusuf, believed it was his responsibility as a patriarch to ensure my safety and well-being. He would often tell me, "You live away from home, just like us, for over nine months of the year and you go back only for a few months every year. Your life isn't much different from ours!"

Every time I came on board, he persuaded me to eat lunch. Spicy fish curries, rice and lentils, cold mangoes and a bottle of cola. Food on board was a taste of home. "Yunus cooks better than my wife!" Abdul, the foreman, or *serang*, would tell me. Patriarchy and a form of identification of being Indian, and hence foreigners in Kenya, allowed for a different kind of relationality between anthropologist and interlocutor, between woman and sailor. Yusuf took on the role of an older brother, a protector of a woman who he identified with as being equally mobile, although from a different class.

However, with time, this relationship changed. When I first began this research, years ago, Yusuf was the gatekeeper, treating me as a young girl in need of fatherly protection. Over the course of ten years, as I moved from being a student to a professor in an academic institution in the US, Yusuf began to see me as a patron. It then became my responsibility to take care of Yusuf and his family, just as he did for me while I was a student. This care included gift-giving, assisting him with the marriage of his daughters, and helping his son find a job in Dubai. I was able to successfully, if unknowingly, fulfill my role as patron in some moments, and failed in others. Both failure, and success in this role were seen as part of a long relationship. This relationship of patronage and protection, between anthropologist and sailor, each of whom took on the role of patron and client in different moments, became foundational in this multi-sited, archipelagic ethnography, this patronage relationship extending not only over time, but also space.

Multi-sited ethnography and an archipelagic method

Ethnography, the defining method for anthropology, has long grappled with the problems of spatiality. Traditionally, anthropologists studied one field site (classically, the village) over a long period of time (months, or years), this site being understood to be the locus for a plethora of social relations that could then be examined and compared with elsewhere. The boundedness of the site implied assumptions about both space and society. A field site was taken to be as given, defined by perhaps even the boundaries of governments who defined and labelled a place as such. Furthermore, it implied that societies were contained within these units, whether it be a village, town, city, or nation. Multi-sited ethnography however, sought to break with these conventions.

As George E. Marcus (1995) has argued, multi-sited ethnography focuses on social relations that cannot be contained within a single site. Rather, this method follows connections and relationships across space, such that ethnographers themselves move across sites, either physically or conceptually. Since Marcus (1995), multi-sited ethnography has become rather popular, even becoming a “buzzword” in anthropology, and is now commonplace, deployed to study the mobility of people and things. Yet, the concept has also been criticized. For example, Hage (2005) has argued that, in the case of migration, “multi-sitedness” is less useful than conceptualizing a single, geographically discontinuous site, the concept implying a misguided holism. Others have argued that multi-sitedness has led anthropologists to spread themselves thin over multiple places, with ethnographies no longer having the depth of thick description as was once possible with longer term field work in one site.

Despite these critiques, the concept of multi-sitedness has led anthropologists to think in more nuanced ways about space, place, scale, and mobility in the fields in which they operate (see Soja, 1989). It is now implicit that space is socially produced (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991), and that it is a product of interrelations and interactions, space constantly made and re-made through these relations (Massey, 2005). These insights have made multi-sitedness a cornerstone of anthropology’s methodological approaches to understanding interactions on different spatial scales. It has complicated existing binaries between local and global, universal and particular; especially in the face of globalization, whereby social formations are formed and morph in “global assemblages” (Ong & Collier, 2005). Other anthropologists have been able to use a multi-sited method, especially between land, ship, and sea to consider the making of space and regionalism.

In a recent ethnography of region formation in the Mediterranean, anthropologist Naor Ben-Yehoyada (2017, p. 4) argues that historical processes and social interactions produce regions such as the Mediterranean, where transnational spaces are “everchanging constellations which form and dissipate through the interaction between cross-boundary practices and official region-making projects.” Based on an analysis of social interactions on land and onboard a fishing vessel as it voyages through the Mediterranean, Ben-Yehoyada (2017) shows us how space, and a region, can be approached as constellations that are formed into being, and disintegrated, in different historical moments. What becomes visible in his ethnography is that region—and, by extension, space—are not simply geographically determined, but produced through social interactions—both past and present—a scaling up and down in analysis allowing one to avoid assumed conflicts between the local and global. In his analysis, these interactions bring to the fore the formation of a region in certain historical moments.

This work contributes to anthropological studies that reassess key assumptions in both the social sciences and social theory. Anthropologists since Eric Wolf (2010) have shown that multi-sitedness, following people, networks, commodities (Mintz, 1986), tracing routes rather than roots (Clifford, 1997), allows one to develop an understanding that a society is not contained within one spatial unit. Indeed, as Engseng Ho (2017) has argued, the idea of society in Western social theory is based on this boundedness, an internalist view where society has been theorized for a state, and vice versa. Ho (2017) suggests that new conceptual tools need to be developed to understand mobile societies, the context of transregional Asia providing an apt field to think through mobility. He argues that a mobile method can provide a pathway out of the internalist maze of classic social theory (Ho, 2017).

In many ways, island studies scholarship has grappled with similar questions around space and sociality. How can an island be understood as a particular place, that is both isolated and particular, but yet always in relation to other islands, mainland, ships, and the sea? Relationality is a key optic through which island studies have understood islandness. In the literature, an “archipelagic thinking” (Pugh, 2013) that is attuned to relationality and particularity is especially persuasive, and offers anthropologists a methodology through which to think through space, and the fields in which they operate.

I call a multi-sited ethnography – one that is wet with the sea but still attuned to dynamics on land – an “archipelagic ethnography” as it borrows from the field of island studies not only a sense of relationality between different sites, but also views space as being formed not just through geography but through the social interactions between multiple sites, the field site being created through these interactions. Thinking with the archipelago, a relational thinking is perhaps useful for anthropologists in approaching mobile societies. In tracing relationality, archipelagic thinking provides an apt ground for imagining multi-sitedness where relationality is centered, where the place is not lost in the relational scale but, in fact, made through relations with other spaces and places. This relationality is formed not only through networks of trade, or the movement of people, but also through social interactions, traces of past movements, and mnemonic traces (Joseph, 2007). It is through these relationalities that one can hold island, ship, and sea together, alongside a view of a mobile society formed through these relationalities.

Fieldnotes of an archipelagic ethnography: Ship, sea, and island relationality, reconsidered

A ship provides a unique vantage through which to consider relationality and space. A ship is, after all, a heterotopia in its truest form. As Foucault (1984, p. 6) has famously argued, a heterotopia “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” These heterotopias are also linked to ‘heterochronies’, where time either accumulates, or then is only experienced in its most fleeting ways. As Foucault (1984, p. 9) states, a:

boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea, and that from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures.

A ship, as a heterotopia, is thus a unique kind of place: it is at once, isolated, and closed in, whilst being in relation with the sea, and the ports it might dock at. An island is much like a ship—it has been viewed as both isolated yet in constant connection with other sites, often linked to these sites by boats, the sea swirling and spilling on to both the deck of ships and the shores of islands. Viewing the boat as a heterotopia allows one to think of relationality—of ship, sea, and island through a different lens—where the uniqueness of each of these spaces is, in fact, accentuated by their relationality, even defined by it. In what follows, I center the ship: a heterotopia that is always in relation with multiple sites and imaginaries.

A dhow at sea: A world unto itself

A dhow, as a vector of mobility, a connector between sites, and as heterotopia, is a world into itself. For sailors laboring on board, the dhow is a place of work. “We get tired of seeing the same faces every day. We work on different parts of the vessel, at different times of the day. We meet only at meal times. But even then, what is there to say?” Ali, a young *sukhani* (ship’s steerer) said to me as I asked about life on board a dhow during a voyage. The vessel had docked in port in Sharjah, UAE, only a day ago, coming from Salalah in Oman. I had rushed to meet them in port as I knew Ali from his hometown, Salaya, in India. The voyage was fresh on his mind. It had been largely uneventful—no storms, no disasters at sea. It was a voyage that reminded him of the most mundane aspects of his life at sea. For him, a day at sea was spliced into four six-hour shifts. Two six-hour shifts of work, six hours of sleep, and two other six-hour shift of work again. The work shifts included breaks for meals, and short interruptions to prepare and chew tobacco and betel nut. “It’s so tedious. Who wants to be around this man all the time?!” Ali pointed at another *sukhani* and they both laughed, a kinship born out of living and working closely together for months on end; this sort of camaraderie, and even honesty, only being permissible for those at the same rank.

Life on board a dhow, like any other ship, is defined by a strict hierarchy (see also Simpson, 2007). At the top of the ladder is the *nakhwa*, or captain, who is responsible for managing the crew, cargo, finances, and communication. Second-in-command is *maalim*, or navigator, and then the *rasoiya bhandari*, or cook. He is followed by the ship’s engineer who maintains the diesel engine; then the *serang*, or foreman; the *sukhani* (or the one who steers the vessel’s wheel); oilman; and helpers such as the *gherporiya*, or watchman. There is usually also a young unpaid apprentice, or *petoriya*, onboard who does all the odd jobs. These crew members (apart from the captain) are collectively known as the *khalaasi*, or laborers.

For these *khalaasi*, life on board is structured around work. On his shifts, Ali would sit by himself in the navigation room, on top of a tall wooden stool, made more comfortable with a pillow. For six hours, he would look out the cabin, steering the wheel, the captain (the *nakhwa*) instructing him every now and then, reminding him to stay on course. Otherwise, Ali would stare at the sea in front of him, listening to music as he navigated, until his shift was over, or they arrived in port. There was also a constant need to charge and recharge phones, frequent calls keeping them connected to loved ones at home. Whilst on a voyage, the dhow was a world enclosed upon itself, isolated, but always in relation with other worlds—its routes were carefully charted to carry cargoes that were in demand in distant markets, its movement predicated on these relations to places that lay beyond the horizon. The dhow is thus always in relation with other sites, but is also a unique object, and world, in and of itself.

Islands and navigation

For a dhow sailor, an island is not only a destination but is also a marker in navigation, a way station, or even a respite from a horizon where the sea never ends. Islands dot the Indian Ocean where dhow ply. En route to Yemen and East Africa, islands become ports of call, but also mark space at sea. Over the ten years that I have known Yusuf, his communications to me have been filled with references to islands – islands where neither of us have been present. His voice-notes to me over WhatsApp would use islands to mark his position: “We left Dubai

port a day ago, and are now passing by Masira island. After we reach Khuriya Muriya islands, I will lose cellular network, but it's not far from Salalah where I will have network again." Islands like Masira, and archipelagoes like Khuriya Muriya, marked the seascape and became points of reference even for vessels moving along coastlines of the mainland.

Still other islands marked a change in tack. En route to Bossasso in Somalia, from Dubai, Yusuf would tell me, "the voyage up to Khuriya Muriya is usually uneventful—we sail near the mainland. But from Khuriya Muriya to Socotra, we are in the open sea. It is difficult until we pass Socotra, and are then close to the mainland again."

The island of Socotra has long been a way station for Indian sailors—there are rock carvings in Brahmi script on the island, indicating that sailors from India passed through the island over 2,000 years ago. The island is also believed by some Hindus to be home to *Sakotari Mata*, the goddess of Socotra who is believed to protect sailors passing the island. Even today, some sailors pay tribute to this goddess by offering her a miniature dhow when passing the island, praying for safe passage on their trips to the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa. Although Socotra was not the destination for these sailors, its presence was of continual importance, their relationship to the island enabling mobility.

Today, these narratives of a Socotran past resurface in the present. Not only is a successful voyage past Socotra a source of relief for sailors, but Socotra itself has become a destination. With increasing conflict in Yemen, dhows have now found a new niche market transporting used cars and other goods to the country's minor ports, including those on the mainland such as Shihr and Nistoon, but also Socotra itself. This "island of heritage" (Peutz, 2018) has become a source for limestone used in constructing "heritage" buildings in Dubai and other parts of the UAE. These construction projects repurpose an Indian Ocean past—often Disney World versions of shining port cities flanked by the desert—a tourist attraction, replete with coral and limestone buildings, souks, and restaurants, evoking old Indian Ocean connections, even as these are forged anew in the present.

While these old connections are largely visible, there are some island relationalities that are much more difficult to trace. For dhow sailors, islands have also been nodes for smuggling goods, some of these islands less visible to an untrained eye. Sand banks, or '*zinyka*' as they are called in Kiswahili, especially off the coast of East Africa have historically been used to transport contraband. Abdul, a sailor from Lamu, Kenya, would tell me:

In the 1970s, sand banks were used to transport contraband—ivory, rhino horns and other goods being transported surreptitiously. Small dhows would bring them to the sand bank in the middle of the night, larger vessels picking them up in low tide.

Sand banks that recede and come into view with changing tides—here now, and then gone—forged an itinerary for smugglers at sea, their fortunes changing with their ability to navigate islands and sand banks. For these sailors and smugglers, the island was also always a place where danger was imminent.

Islands of danger, islands of protection

On May 23, 2018, Cyclone Mekunu, the most intense tropical cyclone to ever hit the Arabian Peninsula, devastated the island of Socotra. Although the cyclone was being monitored closely

by meteorologists and dhow sailors, its effects were deathly, and unpredictable. In Socotra, the cyclone sank 120 fishing boats, and over five *vahans* from the Gulf of Kachchh, with twenty-four sailors reported missing. For other dhow sailors at sea, the devastation caused by Cyclone Mekunu made them turn to Sufi saints for protection and comfort. Many of these saints are now buried on islands, their shrines becoming important pilgrimage sites for sailors.

Take, for example, the tomb of the Sufi saint Haji Kirmani on Beyt Dwarka (literally: the Island of Dwarka) in the Gulf of Kachchh in western India. About a two-hour drive and hour boat ride from the coastal town of Salaya, where many dhow sailors call home, the shrine of Haji Kirmani is an important site of pilgrimage dhow sailors. Thoughts of this shrine, located on the sea front of the island, move with sailors as they travel across the Indian Ocean. Many sailors who voyage across the Indian Ocean carry with them a piece of green cloth made from the sheet that covers the saint's tomb. This cloth is then fastened on to the dhow, believed to mark Haji Kirmani's protection from the dangers of the sea.

Haji Kirmani is said to be a Muslim cleric from Kirman in Iran who travelled to India (on a dhow) to spread the word of God. He has also become an anti-colonial hero, legend having it that the Portuguese and the British attempted to destroy the shrine with cannons. But their cannons fell into the shrine, and did not burst into flames, the shrine standing even today, cannons strewn around its ground as evidence of this wonder. This miracle performed by Haji Kirmani is just one example of his power—for sailors stuck on islands like Socotra, especially in turbulent weather, this saint who is buried on an island close to home is said to come to the aid of sailors in distress, his green flag protecting them from danger at sea. For example, Rashid, a dhow sailor whose vessel was anchored off the coast of Socotra during Cyclone Mekunu, returned home to Salaya and promptly went on pilgrimage to Haji Kirmani's shrine, to thank him for keeping him safe at sea, and for ensuring his safe return home. This island, then, became a locus for protection for Rashid, Socotra being linked to Beyt Dwarka even if only in a moment of peril at sea. Dhows connect not only these sacred sites but also island cities, the past haunting the present.

An island port-of-call: Mombasa

The city of Mombasa is an island tucked into coastal Kenya. The Old Port, the dhow dock, lies on the eastern tip of the island, its residents ever preoccupied with the world on the horizon, yet often unconscious of their islandness. After all, they are connected to the mainland with a bridge on the northeast toward the suburb of Nyali, to the northwest by the Makupa causeway, and to the south by the Likoni ferry. But the center of the city is on the island, the buzz of traffic only abating at the shorelines, citizens crowding at the promenade along Mama Ngina Drive for a breath of salty ocean air, even as 13th century mosques of city-states past lay silently buried below them. There are traces of elsewhere everywhere in this island city.

Yet, the city is an island unto itself. The distinctive round minarets of mosques that mark the island's unique architecture are at home with humble *makuti* (thatched) roofs and ornately carved wooden doors, balconies, and art deco building reminiscent of India's western coast, Zanzibar, and Oman (Meier, 2016). After all, many of the city's inhabitants came from elsewhere, either from the Indian Ocean or the interior of Africa. Mijikenda, Digo, Omani, Yemeni, Baluchi, Swahili, Bajuni, Somali, Barawan, Bhadala, Ismaili, Ithnashari, Khoja, Patel, Lohana, Punjabi: they are all Mombasan, often defining themselves against more recent

migrants from Somalia, India, and Tanzania, and from “upcountry”, or the mainland. But the island city continues to be shaped by distant shores, most young men and women looking to work in Gulf states. New mobilities are layered upon previous movements, the city a palimpsest of relationalities. Some of these past movements invoke the long history of the dhow trade in the Indian Ocean, being used to forge new mobile routes and returns. For example, at the Indian High Commission in Mombasa, I once overheard a Gujarati man say, “My grandfather came here from India on a dhow, you know!” He was invoking this past movement as he applied for a visa to travel to India, expressing his annoyance at this bureaucratic hurdle to the uninterested consular official. For him, the dhow and past movements legitimized his presence in Kenya, but also his desire to go to India.

The dhows of today carry no passengers. But, like other ships, they continue to leave their traces across the island city. Tourists wrinkle their noses at the smell in Kibokoni, the neighborhood that flanks the Old Port. A warehouse that stores carcasses of dried shark, cargoes brought in on dhows, is the epicenter for this olfactory disdain. The dealers of this odorous dried fish are the only shipping agents in town for all dhows that arrive in port. Their ancestors, too, arrived here by dhow from Yemen, over hundred years ago. The cargoes they deal in move through the dhow, into port, city, and elsewhere. The wholesale fish market at the city center, Mwembe Tayari, reeks of this fish, auctioned off here, and then sold even in the Kenyan highlands.

Yusuf, the captain of the *Sagar Sanpati*, had loaded many such cargoes of dried fish, carrying the carcasses from Mogadishu and Kismayu in Somalia to Mombasa. Although he was a key actor in this network, Yusuf himself often felt oddly isolated, his life spent onboard a dhow: “In Mogadishu and Kismayu, we don’t even leave the vessel even if in port, it’s not safe,” Yusuf would tell me, referring to the ongoing conflict in Somalia since the central government’s collapse in 1991. “In Mogadishu, usually we can hear the fighting even in port. But on days that are quiet, all is desolate. We can’t even hear birds chirping.” The dhow was a world unto itself, even in port. Although Mombasa was a port in which sailors could freely move in and out, the captain, Yusuf, rarely left the vessel except to visit family members or to go to the mosque to pray on Fridays. The younger crew members would often go for walks along Mama Ngina Drive, visit local tea stalls and paan shops, or then sneak off to local bars. Yet, their wandering in town was limited by the depths of their pockets, and they would spend most of their time on the vessel, the dhow becoming their home even whilst at sea (Mahajan, 2018).

The dhow, a ship, was much like the city of Mombasa, an island. Both are at once unique, distinctive, and often isolated, insular spaces, but yet, they are also defined by relationality, situated in an “islandscape” where connections of diaspora, histories of mobility, supply chains of commodities dried fish, and the vagaries of demand and supply pulled these distinct spaces into relation with one another, the past connectivities wrought by this islandscape, ever haunting the present.

Conclusion

The seemingly unrelated fieldnotes above, gathered over ten years, suggest that islands, ships, and seas are in constant relation. This relationality is not only a material connection, forged through trade networks and the itineraries of sailors voyaging by dhow. Drawing from Glissant (1997), this relationality is also imaginative, where past histories of mobility flash into

the present, where old connections are forged anew. Some of these connections are mnemonic traces of an Indian Ocean past (Joseph, 2007), while others come into being through the routes that dhows take in the present. After all, “relation is movement” (Glissant, 1997, p. 171).

Given that relation is also “open totality” (Glissant, 1997, p. 171), social interactions across multiple sites call into question given understandings of space. A multi-sited, archipelagic ethnography, fraught with complex relationships between anthropologists and collaborators as both, patrons, and clients in different moments allow these relationalities to be apprehended. An emphasis on the heterotopic space of the dhow enables one to imagine how the ship, land, and sea are in constant relation. An archipelagic ethnography can thus provide a pathway to thinking about both the particularity of a place and its relation to multiple other spaces. Moreover, anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern (2020) have pushed us to think through how conceptualizations of relation and relationality assume discreteness. However, an archipelagic ethnography that holds seemingly discrete spaces such as land, ship, and sea together, might perhaps provide a method for reimagining space and society in more mobile, and fluid, terms.

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