

# There Is So Much More to Sea

## The Myriad Aquatic Engagements of Humankind

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My life continues to be an on-going affair with the sea. Let me count (some of) the ways.

My mother taught me and my younger brother how to swim from an early age; our summer adventures consisted of taking the bus to Marsascala Bay, Malta, almost every afternoon and spending a couple of hours of carefree swimming and diving before it was time to begrudgingly head back home. My brother Alex almost drowned, twice; I pulled him out from a vicious riptide once; the second time, he was saved by a gentleman who dove into the sea and pulled him out of the water in the nick of time.

My father was a shipyard worker all his life, having joined Malta Drydocks at age 14 as a 'yard boy'. He was a fire fighter during the Second World War, including during the German Luftwaffe's attack on

HMS *Illustrious*, a British aircraft carrier, and then in Malta's Grand Harbour for repairs in January 1941. He then moved on to become an electrical fitter and writer and continued at the Drydocks until retirement at the age of 61 in 1982. He never wanted me to visit his workplace, lest I might be tempted to join its workforce. Ironically, I was contracted by the then Malta Prime Minister to report on the workings of the self-management system at Malta Drydocks and my scathing report contributed to that system's demise in 1997.

I now live in Marsascala, a former quiet fishing village transformed into an upscale service, residential and entertainment hub in Malta's southeast. I much enjoy swimming across the bay, which I consider to be the heart of the settlement. Just a few days ago, I was

robbed of my clothes, shoes and towel while I was busy crossing the bay: I had never been robbed before in my life. I had to walk back home, somewhat distraught, barefoot and clad only in my swimming trunks.

Just a month ago, my brother and I took our mother, now 85, to what may well be her last swim, again in Marsascala Bay. She is now resident in the dementia unit of an old people's home located 10 kilometres inland from the coast. When my wife and I visited her this week, she asked whether she could exit the building and head down to the sea for a swim.

I do not intend to bore you with the nuanced snippets of my life. They are just fragments of an on-going personal story that connects with the sea in so many ways and places, twists and turns. We may be landlubbers as *Homo sapiens*, but our engagement with the sea remains an elemental force of nature and culture, especially for those of us who live alongside riverbanks and coasts or on small islands.

Aquapelago, terraqueousness, beaches as third spaces... Words try but simply fail us as we seek to fully describe the manner and extent to which water and earth, land and sea, are imbricated and intertwined in our lives. Water is life, and much more. The fluidity of water unsettles us; the immensity of oceanic expanses belittles us; the wrath of ocean storms frightens us; the richness of marine protein sustains us; the mystery of seabed resources drives our explorations; warm lapping ripples on sandy beaches nourish our tourism industries; and the rise of sea levels threatens the very existence of whole atoll states over the coming decades. Hay (2013) is right when he argues that we, as land-loving humans, are still slowly uncovering 'what the sea portends'. The sea is and remains the greatest natural

mystery of our *planet*. *Perhaps we should not speak of a Planet Earth, but a Planet Ocean.*

I join *Etnofoor* editors Markus Balkenhol and Michiel Swinkels (2015) in admitting that we remain hopelessly 'terracentric' in choosing topics and themes for research. Liquidity is a negative term, equivalent to non-committal and lack of social bonding (Bauman 2013). We describe some jurisdictions – Maldives, Seychelles, Tonga, Tuvalu – as 'small island states', while they are also 'large ocean states' following the coming into force of the United Nations Law of the Sea. Our land base translates subtly and innocuously into a land bias and, as Dolman (1988) noted, makes researchers and scholars think twice about getting our proverbial feet wet. And yet over 10 per cent of the world's population lives on islands (Baldacchino 2007) and 60 per cent of the world's population lives along or near the coast (Gillis 2012). Most of our human histories include travels over water – still the cheapest, albeit not the fastest, form of transportation – with peoples and cargo (and rats and disease and invasive species) daring crossings, chancing discoveries and making landfalls. The sea memorializes journeys, deaths and even ecological catastrophes: major sea battles involving wooden warships, such as the battles of Lepanto in 1571 and Trafalgar in 1805, destroyed huge swathes of forest and consigned them to the bottom of the sea. The middle passage transporting African slaves to the new continent was a voyage of deep and irrevocable loss and despair. The sea – that grey vault – is pre-eminent history, as Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott (1986) reminds us. Brine, blood, sperm, tears ... water is the common factor.

It is quite apt to open the *Etnofoor* issue on the sea with a reference to a sliver of that massive human

migration that has swept across Europe in recent months. While the (mainly land-based) migrations of hundreds of thousands of immigrants, Syrians in particular, have gripped governments and media attention, other thousands have braved a Mediterranean crossing, hoping to land within the European Union and claim asylum. Here some small but strategically placed islands, such as Lampedusa, Malta, Lesvos and Fuerteventura loom as destinations of expectant landfall, but also as theatres of human tragedy and loss of life: the images of a limp three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who drowned (with his mother and a brother) after trying to get to Canada, are haunting. Heidrun Friese (2015) walks us through a veritable thalassographical compendium, redolent with histories, hopes, fears and ordeals. Land and sea have always been complicit on the small Italian island of Lampedusa and its folk, yet the 21<sup>st</sup> century has ushered in a new twist to a millenary relationship that is fraught with tension, diplomacy, international relations and also, lest we forget, rich seams of humanitarianism.

The sea giveth; the sea taketh away. The ebb and flow, life and death, coming and going, fate and fortune associated with the marine also manifests itself in the potential for tragedy to become opportunity, thereby adding a different team of dialectical flows: exclusion and inclusion. The ‘Boxing Day’ tsunami of 26 December 2004 wrought havoc in the Indian Ocean. Many islands witnessed the full force of the ocean, with hundreds of thousands of fatalities. Once the waters receded, the international community responded with considerable generosity in cash and in kind, dubbed ‘the second tsunami’. Arvid van Dam (2015) critically reviews how post-tsunami Sri Lanka capitalized on the

golden wave of largesse, exposing the inherently unequal, ‘negotiated and political character’ of the recovery. Constructions enabling ‘sun, sea and sand’ tourism are allowed within a coastal buffer zone, while residential units for fishers are not. But there is no simplistic cleavage between these two sectors: the planning of recovery in the name of securitisation and its intended effects has encouraged a blurring of lines, a strategic ‘bottom up’ unfolding of agency in the face of ‘top down’ land use planning.

The iconic value of mangroves as protectors of coastal communities from tsunami-like disasters has become legendary post the 2004 Indian Ocean event. Mangroves now feature increasingly around the world as important components to coastal bio-systemic natural reserves, often including ‘custodian’ communities entrusted with their stewardship. The mangroves return the compliment by serving as loci for metabolic exchange between different life forms: they protect ‘creatures of the mud’ and filter impurities from the water, encouraging the development of marine health and biodiversity from which such coastal communities obtain sustenance. In her contribution, Luciana Lang (2015) reports on her ethnographic fieldwork in a fishing community not far from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One quickly realizes that a scientific and rational assessment of the pivotal role of the mangrove is simply deficient: the permeability and adaptability of its bio-system – features that the mangrove shares with the sea – and which permits a symbiotic relationship with the polluting, untreated sewage of 100,000 people, is also a manifestation of Exu, the Lord of Magic. By transcending the mundane and reductionist tendencies of science, it is the metaphysical that best explains and

locks the mangrove into a complex bio-political economy, reminiscent of the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock 2000). The mangrove is worth saving, because it is a lifesaver.

The transcendental spirituality of the mangrove (and the ocean) contrasts with the material manifestation of religion in the most unlikely of places – including at the bottom of the sea. In his contribution, Jojada Verrips (2015) takes us on a scuba-diving tour of statues of gods, saints, angels and other religious ‘artefacts’, most having been deliberately located in the wet and deep. The journey alerts us of this synergy between aquatic and sacral, the ocean being a kind of ‘mythical fantasy space’ that lends itself to such a monumentalisation, while also having served, but no longer, as a stubborn frontier-scape exempt from the practice of tourism. Adventure tourism now includes dives to sunken or scuttled ships and aircraft, and some of such graveyards of metal and humanity have been turned into veritable shrines. Can we recall the excitement associated with the location of the wreck of the Titanic? Some have been, or are on track to be, successfully branded as UNESCO World Heritage sites and thus likely to attract more tourist attention.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, these statues are now home to molluscs and visited and gazed upon by many divers, believers and non-believers alike.

We stick to the theme of religion when reviewing ritual events associated with fishers, namely practices that intend to safeguard the safety and livelihood of their practitioners. Maarten Bavinck (2015) offers us written and visual ‘notes’ compiled during an all-night festival in honour of Gangai Amman, the Hindu sea-goddess, underway in the southeast Indian coastal village of Nambuthalai. Here we have more evidence of

how the sea (at least in Hindu cosmology) is much more than a biological eco-systemic churn, but an integral component of a larger world where the natural is imbricated in the supernatural, and in which one’s relationship with deities affects one’s prospects in life.

This review is so far missing the two final contributions to the thematic section of this collection, deploying two quite contrasting sets of oceanic creatures to explore complex human-nature socio-economic relationships. In the first, penned by Frank Muttenter (2015), the coral reefs of south-west Madagascar become the platforms for the enactment of skill and knowledge in fishing and foraging, at times sedentary and at times mobile, particularly for pricey sea cucumber. We have here the practising of a proper marine lifestyle that is the cultivation of moral virtue and establishes who is a consummate Vezo fisher. Fishing gear, houses and living rooms become the material manifestations of a fisher’s success, caught in a cycle of extraction and consumption.

Meanwhile, in the second, we are faced with the love affair with the whale: from dreaded and vicious Moby Dick-like sea monster or objectified container of oil, meat and blubber, this cetacean seems to have been transformed of late into the Keiko of Free Willy (the 1993 movie): humankind’s ‘surrogate kin’, super-creature and sentient cousin. This turn may best explain why a particular beached humpback whale near the island of Texel gripped the Dutch media and public for a week in December 2012. Rob van Ginkel (2015) reconstructs what happened, how people responded to the fate of the marine mammal, and reacted to each other’s views and opinions by deploying a broad modern social media scan. What unfolded is described as

'tragicomic'. The mammal got stuck on a sandbank, a liminal space between land and water shifting with currents and the ups and downs of the North Sea tides. It was also a creature that was deemed to be 'out of place' and while death is normal in nature, the topography of the event cried out loud for solution and action. The photogenic whale attracted not just interest but massive concern over its condition; many wanted it saved and many interpreted its secreting eye as compassionate tears. The whale was given a name (Johanna) and assigned a 'humane' solution to its (or should we say her?) plight: sedation and euthanasia, but not before some interpreted this act as 'murder'. Faction accused faction of bumbling, incompetence, interference, posturing and sham expertise. Even with the mammal lifeless, there were plans to organize a silent march for the dead cetacean. In this case, the author applies a tongue-in-cheek approach to poke fun at the extreme lengths people were prepared to go in order to 'do something' to, and for, the whale.

These 140 pages of *Etnofoor* provide a rich portfolio of insights into the aquatic trials of humankind. Whether to deal cogently with fishing, foraging, religion, migration, tourism, environmental stewardship, or just as a medium in which to gaze at dying creatures or sacred statutes, the sea offers that tantalizing mirror to humanity's many foibles as it seeks to better understand itself. Here is the quintessential heterotopia from and about which we have so much yet to learn. The human-sea affair is and remains a work in progress.

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## Notes

- 1 UNESCO (2015). Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1339> (accessed on 5 November, 2015)

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