

THE INDIAN OCEAN AS AN (UN)COMMON PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALITIES BEYOND BLUE ECONOMY POLICIES IN THE COMOROS ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Comoros as a critical site for rethinking the Indian Ocean beyond dominant blue economy narratives. Through ethnographic engagement with artisanal fishermen, it explores how everyday maritime practices, sensory knowledge, and oceanic imaginaries complicate policy-driven visions of sustainable development. While blue economy discourse frames the Indian Ocean as a frontier of sustainable growth, in the Comoros, it intersects with longer histories of marginalization, failed development schemes, illegal extraction, and uneven global market integration. Artisanal fishers occupy a paradoxical position: historically stigmatized within social hierarchies yet newly targeted by conservation and maritime development initiatives. Their experiences reveal continuities between the economization of the sea and contemporary sustainability agendas, challenging the presumed rupture between exploitative and ecological paradigms. The Comorian artisanal fishers' ways of inhabiting, perceiving, and imagining the sea offer a situated lens through which to interrogate the expanding blue economy in the Western Indian Ocean. By tracing ethnographic assemblages that emerge from everyday maritime practices, this article explores how global conservation and restoration policies intersect with local histories of marginality, ecological knowledge, and social identity. In so doing, it shows how the Comoros—positioned within a wider Indian Ocean seascape—becomes a site where oceanic futures are negotiated through both vulnerability and possibility, revealing the sea as a material, imaginative, and political space.

INTRODUCTION

*‘Il faut visualizer la mer,’*¹ says Nasser, breaking the silence to resume our conversation. We are sitting on the beach in Mitsamihuli,² on an overturned *kwassa-kwassa*,³ enjoying the last of the daylight hours. Nasser is drinking gin from a half-filled plastic bottle to wind down at the end of his day. His gaze is ever directed towards the sea. Attentive to the slightest movement and to every shimmer of light upon the water, he embodies an esoteric sensory world that revolves around perceiving and engaging with the ocean, whether one is on land or at sea. Visualizing the sea means knowing where to go the next morning, what technique to use, and, above all, what fish to catch.

Focusing on the archipelagic context of the Union of the Comoros, this article examines how Comorian artisanal fishers’ ways of inhabiting, perceiving, and imagining the sea offer a situated lens through which to interrogate the expanding blue economy in the Western Indian Ocean. By tracing ethnographic assemblages that emerge from everyday maritime practices, it explores how global conservation and valorization policies intersect with local histories of marginality, ecological knowledge, and social identity. In so doing, it shows how the Comoros—positioned within a wider Indian Ocean seascape—becomes a site in which oceanic futures are negotiated through both vulnerability and possibility, revealing the sea as a material, imaginative, and political space.

Located at the entrance to the Mozambique Channel, the Comorian archipelago is characterized by socio-cultural continuity and geopolitical fractures. The three islands that constitute the independent state of the Union of the Comoros are counterbalanced by the

¹ French: ‘You have to visualize the sea.’

² The ethnographic material presented here derives from fieldwork conducted for my PhD research between July 2022 and May 2023 in the Union of the Comoros. The broader project encompassed three areas affected by processes of marine conservation and the establishment of marine protected areas: the Mitsamiouli–Ndroude National Park (Ngazidja), the village of Itsamia (Mwali), and the area surrounding Bimbini (Ndzuani). Mayotte was not included as a field site due to its distinct legislative status as a French overseas department and the divergent trajectories of economic and urban development that have shaped different modes of engagement with the sea. This article focuses specifically on the Mitsamihuli area in northern Ngazidja, where the Mitsamihuli–Ndroude Marine Protected Area is located. Fieldwork was structured around daily participation in the maritime and onshore activities of a group of artisanal fishers (mainly men aged between 20 and 45), complemented by informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. All interlocutors were informed of the aims of the research, and ongoing dialogue was maintained to foster, as far as possible, a shared and negotiated production of knowledge. Given the qualitative nature of the ethnographic research, it is not possible to quantify precisely the number of interactions or individuals involved. During my stay in the Mitsamihuli area, I was engaged on a daily basis with approximately one hundred people—men and women—primarily connected to the fishing economy, including fishers and their families, market sellers and buyers, and institutional actors. From these regular interactions, a number of key interlocutors emerged with whom I developed ongoing conversations and, in several cases, conducted more than one recorded interview. In total, fifty interviews and recorded conversations (mostly fishermen) were carried out with prior consent. To protect participants’ privacy, all names used here are pseudonyms.

³ Fiberglass fishing boats normally between 6 and 9 meters long.

island of Mayotte, a French overseas department, effectively making the archipelago one of Europe's outermost frontiers. This geopolitical complexity affirms the archipelago, and in this case the Union of the Comoros, as a relevant perspective from which to investigate the growing attention to marine conservation in the Indian Ocean, where international development funds and projects overlap with complicated and unresolved socio-cultural issues and structural economic vulnerabilities. As such, the Mitsamihuli-Ndrude marine park area in the north of Ngazidja, created in 2019, is particularly relevant for tracking the impact of blue economy policies in the Union of the Comoros and how they are articulated. The marine park is located in a vibrant social context, where the prospects for environmental conservation and eco-tourism development clash and collide with the maritime activities of the inhabitants, particularly those who depend on fishing for their livelihood.

Fishing activities in the Comoros, and interactions with the sea more broadly, occupy a deeply ambivalent position. Although fish remains an essential source of subsistence for the population, work at sea evokes class distinctions and strongly marked forms of belonging, through which it is possible to trace the historical marginality and low social status of those engaged in these activities within Comorian society. As Iain Walker and Said Moussa note,⁴ this marginality is reflected in the spatial organization of urban areas and neighborhoods, and it recalls lineages associated with a slave-based past.⁵ Consequently, perceptions of the sea as a dangerous space inhabited by spirits reinforce this line of social demarcation.⁶ As Walker argues, the ambivalent relationship with the sea—conceived simultaneously as a site of fear and of the unknown—has structured the Comorian sense of insularity: static and liminal, yet endowed with a certain attractiveness, while at the same time reproducing the subalternity of those who venture into this hostile space.⁷

⁴ Iain Walker and Moussa Said Ahmed, "Two fisherman's songs: From Ngazidja, Comoros Islands," *Wasafiri*, 26, 2 (2011), 59-62.

⁵ See: Valérie Lilette, "Conservation et patrimonialisation de la tortue marine dans le Sud-Ouest de l'océan Indien" (Unpublished PhD diss., La Réunion, 2007); Sophie Blanchy, "L'esclavage à Ngazidja, Comores. Approche ethnohistorique," in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, eds. Henri Médard, Marie-Laure Derat, Thomas Vernet, and Marie-Pierre Ballarin (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 329-60; Ibourui Ali Tabibou, "L'esclavage aux Comores, cas des descendants des esclaves makua," *Revue historique de l'océan Indien*, 16 (2019), 393-403.

⁶ Michael Lambek, *Human Spirits: A cultural account of trance in Mayotte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁷ Iain Walker, "The Comoros: Strategies of islandness in the Indian Ocean," in *African Islands: Leading edges of empire and globalization*, eds. Toyin Falola, R. Joseph Parrott, and Danielle Porter Sanchez (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019), 371-2.

Notwithstanding these representations, maritime activities generate a cross-cutting involvement in the Comorian domestic economy,⁸ encompassing those who physically engage in fishing, activities of buying and selling, and the socio-political implications linked to processes of coastal protection and conservation. Despite the rejection of a fully recognized maritime culture,⁹ the ocean remains a constant presence, marked by the diversity of practices associated with it. This is evident, for example, in women's participation in shore-based fishing techniques, particularly during low tide, which renders fishing an activity not exclusively practiced by men.¹⁰

However, the dangers of offshore fishing—upon which the imagery of the 'great fisherman' and related social stereotypes are built—point to fishing modes and techniques that are predominantly male.¹¹ It is these latter practices that are examined in this article to underscore how everyday interactions with the ocean are continuously rearticulated by the actors involved, and how they result not only from a local ecological relationship, but also from complex global processes of socio-economic valorization of the oceanic context.

Although small-scale offshore fishing remains unprofessionalized, it compensates for the lack of alternative employment and permanent jobs for a large portion of the male population. It is therefore an occasional activity for many, mainly those who do not own equipment and join a fishing crew on a flexible basis, and a permanent activity for some. The latter are often the owners of boats and equipment who invest in the activity for financial gain, which is nevertheless unpredictable due to precarious instrumentation and the intrinsic unpredictability of fishing. In a context of widespread precariousness and economic uncertainty, fishing is both an unknown quantity and an opportunity for that

⁸ Sophie Blanchy, *Maisons des femmes, cités des hommes: filiation, âge et pouvoir à Ngazidja, Comores* (Nanterre » Société d'ethnologie, 2010).

⁹ See: Matteo Aria, "Come sembra lontano il mare dalla spiaggia. Analisi di alcuni aspetti della cultura del mare in area Nzema," *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 42 (2000), 129-50.

¹⁰ Melissa Hauzer, Philip Dearden, and Grant Murray, "The fisherwomen of Ngazidja Island, Comoros: Fisheries livelihoods, impacts, and implications for management," *Fisheries Research*, 140 (2013), 28-35.

¹¹ For more on the 'great fisherman,' see: Trambwe Mbaye, Damir Ben Ali, and Masséande Chami-Allaoui, *Poèmes, pensées et fragments* (Moroni, Comoros: Centre national de documentation et de recherche scientifique, 1990).

large section of the population, of which my interlocutors are a part, who live without a job or a fixed income.¹²

The act of visualizing the sea is both material and symbolic and evokes Nasser's close relationship with the marine world. On one hand, it is an expression of maritime savoir-faire, of a perceptual sensitivity to the surrounding environment that sees beyond and below the surface. It is an act of cartography, which relies on senses that have been refined during a lifelong ecological relationship with the sea. At the same time, it is also an expression of the symbolic act of imagining the opportunities opened up by the sea. Scrutiny of this simultaneously perceptual and imaginative process enables us to discern the contemporary changes that have redefined ways of thinking about the sea, starting with the actors who inhabit it. The social, economic, and ethical changes that shape oceanic policies are inscribed on bodies and affect the way the sea is perceived. They are integrated into (and they reassemble) preexisting rhythmic and ecological relationships.

Within the myriad of assemblages that emerge from the Comorian context in the era of the blue economy, it is important to contextualize all that is at stake in attempting to reconcile the contemporary drive for maritime development and conservation. This applies especially within examining situated ways to exploit, seek refuge in the interstices of – or rethink and negotiate – an alternative maritime identity: An identity that can draw on multiple levels of imaginative, economic, and political opportunity surrounding the blue economy and the competing expectations of the Western Indian Ocean and the African worlds. Thus, I first retrace some of the crucial junctures in the construction of the dominant blue economy discourses in the Indian Ocean, before coming back to the stories and challenges of the Comoros. From ethnographic vignettes and the voices of different maritime actors, I draw out the struggles of everyday resistance at sea and new local ecological interpretations of the ocean within the global ebb and flow of the blue economy in the Indian ocean. The everyday implications, opportunities, and obstacles that

¹² The socioeconomic status of fishermen is a consequence of family belonging and economic means. In a hierarchical society such as the Comorian one, differences in status continue to be reproduced in terms of opportunities and access to stable jobs, political or institutional positions. The still significant role of a cultural institution linked to the great Comorian wedding, such as the *āda*, especially on the island of Ngazidja. Iain Walker testifies to the continuity between economic resources and social status: Iain Walker, *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A history of the Comoros* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). The artisanal fishermen with whom I conducted my research are relegated to the lower layers of Comorian society due to their family background and the lack economic opportunities – therefore their inability to organize the 'Great Marriage.' However, it should be emphasized that, despite the tendency to aspire to economic success and a consequent social ascent through 'Great Marriage,' those who can actually enjoy a wealthy economic status are a very small segment of the Comorian population.

follow the new forms of maritime ecological intervention point to the broader impact of the blue economy framework, raising the question of how to conceptualize the materiality of the sea and expectations for the ocean's future.

OCEANIC EXPECTATIONS: THE BLUE ECONOMY PARADIGM

Since the 2010s, the term 'blue economy,' closely linked to the 'green economy,' has become increasingly widespread. It refers to the potential of the oceans for future sustainable development. In particular, the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, marked a decisive moment in the affirmation of the concept in global politics and discourse.¹³ The strength and pervasiveness of the paradigm lies in the broad and generalizing tendency to view the oceans as sustainable resources for global economic wealth, combining exploitation with environmental protection. A wide spectrum of political and economic actors with different purposes converges within the paradigm. These include policies for the extraction and exploitation of marine resources, policies for the governance and management of maritime spaces, conservationist approaches, projects for the implementation of maritime and port infrastructure, and policies for the development of sustainable fishing. It is precisely this fluidity of intent and purpose that makes the blue economy an ambiguous and contested paradigm, through which forms of exploitation and appropriation of resources and social and ecological fragility are reproduced.¹⁴ At the same time, the emergence of the blue economy has turned the global spotlight onto coastal and island contexts, emphasizing their pivotal role in global economic change.

Turning to the Indian Ocean, the economic potential of maritime environments is increasingly becoming a driving force in the economic and political prospects of its coastal and island contexts.¹⁵ Therefore, the framework of the blue economy offers a new perspective on the economic dynamics that have emerged across the Indian Ocean in recent decades, reinforcing cartographic and economic tensions and connections between

¹³ Jennifer J. Silver, Noella J. Gray, Lisa M. Campbell, Luke W. Fairbanks, and Rebecca L. Gruby, "Blue economy and competing discourses in international oceans governance," *The Journal of Environment & Development*, 24, 2 (2015), 135-60; Alex Midlen, "What is the blue economy? A spatialised governmentality perspective," *Maritime Studies*, 20, 4 (2021), 423-48.

¹⁴ Gordon M. Winder and Richard Le Heron, "Assembling a blue economy moment? Geographic engagement with globalizing biological-economic relations in multi-use marine environments," *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 7, 1 (2017), 3-26; Mads Barbesgaard, "Blue growth: Savior or ocean grabbing?," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45, 1 (2018), 130-49.

¹⁵ Timothy Doyle, "Indian Ocean and seascapes: Blue economy and communities or race to the bottom of the sea?," in *Indian Ocean futures: Communities, sustainability and security*, eds. Thor Kerr and John Stephens (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), xiii.

distant shores. On the African continent, as argued by John Child and Christina Hicks, the echo of the blue economy and associated opportunities reverberates far beyond coastal settings, altering the balance of power among states as a function of their access to the ocean. The new focus on the sea in general and on the Indian Ocean specifically as a key resource for the future of the planet is disruptive to previous continental hegemonies,¹⁶ affording a stronger role to both coastal and remote island states. The oceanic potential unleashed by the grammars of the blue turn have allowed marginal actors to transform the imagery of isolation and exile traditionally associated with islands into contemporary economic opportunities based on sustainable development and eco-tourism.¹⁷ Now, these institutional actors find themselves as key drivers in the transition towards futuristic oceanic economies, reconstructing their oceanic identity and political legitimacy by spearheading new geopolitical equilibria across the Indian Ocean and its islands.

The conceptualization of the ocean as a privileged place for conservation and sustainable economic development, as propagated by the blue economy narrative, increasingly takes on the guise of a political resource for renegotiating the role of Indian Ocean states within global geopolitical processes. As Timothy Doyle has pointed out, the rise of the blue economy ‘as a powerful and contested concept’ strengthens the strategic position of the Indian Ocean,¹⁸ distancing it from its image as the Ocean of the South and projecting a new image for it as the Ocean of the Future. The sustainable use of the Indian Ocean and its resources underpins the economic importance of the sea in this historically connected oceanic region, attracting the attention of major institutions, which are well positioned geographically to exploit the political and economic potential of this turn to the sea. Indeed, the ambiguous and vague heterogeneities inherent in the concept of the blue economy fit with the predominance of a capitalist economy and a development-oriented

¹⁶ This oceanic orientation is by its nature opposed to attempts originating on land to uniformize it, and thus includes a political dimension, hence scholarly proposals of an anti-continental geography that seeks to relativize the territorial essence of many hegemonic discourses and to complicate binary logics. See: Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Michael Naylor Pearson (eds.), *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010); Isabel Hofmeyr “The complicating sea: The Indian Ocean as method,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32, 3 (2012), 584-90; Rosabelle Boswell, “Ocean and human health in the blue era, Indian Ocean and African perspectives,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 6, 2 (2022), 208-26. Vivian Y. Choi, following Hofmeyr, argues that in a time of global crisis and a ‘not-yet’ incapable of offering specific solutions (with reference to climate challenges), the concrete potential offered by the Indian Ocean as a method should be given serious consideration: not only in terms of conducting further study of this geographical region, but most especially on the ocean itself. The oceans, she reasons, are not only key to defining geographical limits, human interaction, migration, and territorialism, but also bear immense potential to further the production of knowledge and perspectives of inquiry. See: Raffaele Maddaluno, “Il mare come metodo? Suggestioni dall’Oceano Indiano,” *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo*, 24, 2 (2022).

¹⁷ John R. Child and Christina C. Hicks, “Securing the blue: Political ecology of the blue economy in Africa,” *Journal of Political Ecology*, 26, 1 (2019), 327.

¹⁸ Timothy Doyle, “Blue economy and the Indian Ocean rim,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 14, 1 (2018), 1.

imaginary: they undergird the African myth of blue growth by ‘capturing and reducing oceanic diversity into an economic object of potential through the simple and colorful epithet: “blue”.’¹⁹

Entangled within the global oceanic market, the narratives of the blue economy threaten to reproduce marginalization at a range of levels. As the ambition to overturn continental hegemonies develops,²⁰ a restrictive vision of oceanic dynamics also emerges. Homologizing narratives of sustainable development from the sea colonize imaginaries and expectations of an oceanic future. Conceiving this sea as one ocean implies flattening the socio-economic and political asymmetries and heterogeneities at the core of its cosmopolitan essence.²¹ As Doyle has remarked, ““oneness” is admirable, but only if it does not prioritize one set of narratives and, in its stead, is firmly based on an increased understanding, appreciation and celebration of shared but differentiated identities.’²² Therefore, re-imagining the Ocean towards sustainable development implies reducing the generative potential of thinking about the materiality of the sea for discourses of development and sustainability, while reinforcing a homogenizing conceptualization of the ocean that relies on the dogmas of oceanic capitalism.

For example, conservationism, which has dominated recent turns towards blue growth, opens new economic prospects that are anchored in a reconceptualization of the ocean, yet build on earlier attempts to economize maritime space. The conservationist perspective, which is put forth by professionalized voices for sustainable development, obscures its own inherent economic dimension, marginalizing and condemning as immoral, the very attitudes, discourses, and practices from which one must begin to understand the genesis of the blue turn now encroaching upon the Indian Ocean.²³ Indeed, literature that is critical of the blue economy dwells on its continuity with a neoliberal approach that focuses on blue growth, as well as on its ultimate proposal of an oceanic

¹⁹ Child and Hicks, “Securing the blue,” 324.

²⁰ The rise to prominence of the Seychelles as a state that has been pioneering blue economy policies in the Southwest Indian Ocean appears to reflect a successful reversal of maritime power relations, whereby small, previously marginal, island states have appropriated a key role for themselves within the global political agenda.

²¹ For more in-depth background on the concept of cosmopolitanism in the Indian Ocean world, see for example: Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Abdul Sheriff and Engseng Ho (eds.) *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic connections and the creation of new societies* (London: Hurst, 2014); Walker, *Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea*.

²² Doyle, “Indian Ocean and Seascapes,” xiii.

²³ Boswell, “Ocean and human health.”

narrative that is ‘linear and inevitable, arising from a flattened sense of time and space.’²⁴ The result is an anti-political process²⁵ that precludes thinking about the constitutive heterogeneity of intimate and ecological relationships with the Indian Ocean. As a consequence, it also limits consideration of alternative forms of governance that could respond to demands and temporalities that are different from dominant models.

Although it is crucial to acknowledge this subjugation to the neo-liberal system, which risks turning the ocean into the last frontier in capitalist expansion under the banner of ecologism, at the same time, the oceanic encounters both vectors and overturns these same power relations. As Christopher Bear has observed, the materiality of the sea prompts an assemblage-based thinking, whereby human and non-human elements act from the sea, determining the potential agency of the maritime milieu and the space of intervention of the blue economy: ‘Rather than the economy being “embedded in ecological conditions,” [...] the dynamism of aquatic assemblages [implies that] “the economic” is inseparable from (rather than embedded in) “the ecological”.’²⁶ The sense of displacement that is experienced on encountering the materiality of the ocean helps to resist the totalizing spaces of the global economy.²⁷ Within this ontological and perceptual state of disorientation, uncontrolled maritime movement immerses us in oceanic assemblages of different ‘spheres of the seas,’²⁸ where neocolonial discourses overlap with the ambitions of oceanic capitalism, and ecological perspectives and ontological turns collide with the expectations and interiorizations of the ocean’s potential for a range of subjectivities and social actors. Navigating athwart²⁹ the unruly waters of the Indian Ocean dismantles uniformizing and one-dimensional approaches, and above all allows us to re-discuss and re-think the multiple declinations of the materiality of the sea. This

²⁴ Child and Hicks, “Securing the blue,” 330. For a critical approach to the blue economy, see also: Mads Barbesgaard, “Blue growth: Savior or ocean grabbing,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45, 1 (2018), 130-49; Irmak Ertör and Maria Hadjimichael, “Blue degrowth and the politics of the sea: Rethinking the blue economy,” *Sustainability Science*, 15 (2020), 1-10; Edyta Roszko, “Commentary: Enclosing blue commons, generating blue growth? Comment on Fiona McCormack’s “Precarity, indigeneity and the market in Māori fisheries” in Forum: Precarity, Indigeneity and the Market in Maori Fisheries,” *Public Anthropology*, 2 (2020), 112-26.

²⁵ Child and Hicks, “Securing the blue;” Barbesgaard, “Blue growth;” James Ferguson, “The anti-politics machine,” in *The Anthropology of the State: A reader*, eds. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 270-86.

²⁶ Christopher Bear, “Assembling ocean life: More-than-human entanglements in the blue economy,” *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 7, 1 (2017), 28.

²⁷ Philippe Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, “Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and space*, 33, 2 (2015), 247-64; Elisabeth Deloughrey, “Submarine futures of the Anthropocene,” *Comparative Literature*, 69, 1 (2017), 32-44; Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media. Thinking through seawater* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

²⁸ Doyle, “Indian Ocean and seascapes,” xiii.

²⁹ Stefan Helmreich, “Nature/culture/seawater,” *American Anthropology*, 113, 1(2011), 132-44.

orientation encourages us to rethink the ocean's materialities, recalling the perspective of a "wet ontology,"³⁰ which emphasizes fluidity, interconnection, and change. It also invites us to imagine the Ocean as something "good to think with," where knowledge and uses of the sea are shaped by expectations and confidence in an oceanic future.

The ocean, overflowing with material and utopian potential, resists attempts to be subjected to continental logics and propels us into an analysis of the micro-levels that develop between encounters and clashes on a heterogeneous seascape, where oceanic routes and junctures are produced via hybridization, mutual contamination, and conflict. Uniformizing and hegemonic patterns imposed from above are resisted from the troubled waters, whether they propagate from the continent or the sea itself. The Comoros offers an opportunity to approach the intertwining imaginaries and expectations that animate the social actors inhabiting a complicating sea that branches out into the Indian Ocean. The swell of these changes only tangentially affects the Union of the Comoros, yet it is sufficient to reshape internal expectations regarding potential economic opportunities at political and institutional levels, and beyond. The discourse on the blue economy takes form through interventions aimed at developing maritime economies and protecting marine ecosystems. These processes involve socially marginalized actors such as artisanal fishermen, who—often despite themselves—are directly drawn into the projects implemented, and they consequently become vectors of the imaginaries of progress that these interventions promote. As the following ethnographic descriptions seek to highlight, these imaginative impulses are not confined to recent blue growth initiatives. Rather, they emerge from a longer history of economic attention to the ocean and are continuous with political and identity-based movements aimed at defining an Indian Ocean identity.

The labour choices and livelihood strategies of Comorian artisanal fishermen, and the expectations associated with them, have historically been—and continue to be—influenced by the processes of economization of the Indian Ocean,³¹ which, through intricate and often contradictory trajectories, have led to contemporary perspectives on sustainable development. Attending to these subaltern lives makes it possible to observe how the economic drifts of an Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism seep into, bear upon, and ultimately materialize in lived experiences through the ecological manner to perceive and incorporate the ocean.³²

³⁰ Steinberg and Peters, "Wet ontologies, fluid spaces."

³¹ Kristin Asdal and Tone Huse, *Nature-Made Economy: Cod, capital, and the great economization of the ocean* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023).

³² Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of colonialism in the Indian Ocean world, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

GLOBAL DISCOURSES: DOMINANT NARRATIVES

The rise of the blue economy paradigm offers a key interpretation, one that situates us at the crossroads of Indo-oceanic interests and influences that flourish in an ultra-marginal context, such as the Comoros islands. The archipelago – in tension with the calls of Continental Africa, the island settings of the Indian Ocean, and the European borders of Mayotte – can play a strategic role in unveiling the ambiguities and contradictions that drive blue growth processes. The demanding nature of ocean work and consequently the imaginative expectations brought to life by the material struggle with the sea, situate local communities within a process of global economic transformation. This is a process in which asymmetries of scale, from the sea, dismantle dominant discourses. Indeed, the structural misalignment between the various political settings that have been invaded by the universalizing flows of the blue economy is reflected in the resistances, vulnerabilities, and expectations of Comorian people who engage with the sea daily.

The Comoro archipelago has historically been crossed by indistinct flows, successive but in opposition to one another, which have colonized the imaginaries and expectations of communities in close contact with the oceanic *milieu*. Local actors' relationship with the coast and perceptions of the ocean complexify the emergence of, and changes in, economic interests in the sea, and how this ties in with or contradicts recent ambitions for a sustainable blue growth paradigm. Examining the blue economy in Comoros demands consideration of broader socio-economic and political factors from a transversal and multi-scale perspective. First, it implies focusing on the cosmopolitan and global economic dynamics that, in recent decades, have impacted on Comorians' perceptions of their relationship with the ocean. Thanks to these dynamics, the environment and the marine ecosystem have become a strategic tool for renegotiating the role of Comoros as a nation (an archipelagic nation state) within the Indian Ocean region, and for improving its traditionally ultra-marginal status.

At a second level, the paradigm of blue growth also penetrates local interconnected but opposing spheres: the political and institutional discourses pursued by governmental and environmental actors clashes with the aspirations and expectations of individuals attempting to redefine their material conditions of existence. These tensions also reveal the contradictions between conservationist targets for the ocean and expectations of sea-based economic development. The ocean is a site of imaginative possibilities laden with

political meanings and existential aspirations,³³ in which global processes and local tactics are inextricably intertwined.

Ahmed, director of a World Bank-funded project for developing inter-island maritime connectivity, has a clear idea of what the blue economy is, and at what stage of the journey Comoros currently finds itself:

We are far from being a maritime state; we continue to be a littoral state. We fail to exploit the oceanic potential to develop the country; we continue to make a situated use of resources through non-sustainable fishing. A blue economy policy implies expanding maritime facilities, enlarging ports, exploiting the underwater potential that is rich in mineral resources, and going back to sustainable fishing, as in the old days, by pirogue, and not by predatory techniques that are destructive and do not allow us to evolve from a littoral economy into a maritime economy.

Deploying developmentalist language shaped by the dominant blue economy narratives, he simplifies the complex dynamics that surround the exploitation of marine and coastal resources. Furthermore, he fuels the social marginalization of subjects and practices defined as destructive and immoral, all too hastily glossing over the complex historical factors that impact on local relations with the ocean.

With a view to connecting these local-scale issues and global trajectories, I would like to return now to the ethnographic vignette from the beginning of the paper and its illustration of contemporary relations with the ocean, the outcome of economic transformation and exploitation across the connected Western Indian Ocean world. The opening '*il faut visualiser la mer*' conveys an imaginative dimension of projection and expectation surrounding a sea to be exploited, overlaying an embedded ecological relationship informed by the historical depredation of the Comorian sea – now to be conserved – as a function of global flows and the marginality of the archipelago. The seascape extending before our eyes at the end of the day demands constant mindfulness. It is a shared presence and the source of a flow of perceptions that extends beyond the act of going to sea and in which visual contact features prominently. The sea with its rhythms and timeframes shapes the everyday lives of Mitsamihuli fishermen, affecting both their

³³ Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

working existence and their imagination/expectations surrounding – and relations with – external worlds.

The materiality of the sea becomes a diffuse multi-sensory process that permeates the daily life of the fishing group and the community at large. This incessant attentiveness goes beyond the time spent at sea and is essential for planning – day by day – the most suitable techniques and fishing nets to be used and the catch zones to target. The sea pervades both the working and social existences of the fishermen.

While the blue economy focus on the ocean environment fosters the dissemination of hegemonic narratives, a glance at local dynamics suggests that we should not disregard the voices emerging from the oceans' margins but rather amplify them as key to reconstructing the historical trajectory of Indian Ocean economic cosmologies and the political factors behind the contemporary return to the sea.

LOCAL EXPECTATIONS

Every morning, Nasser's fishing group gathers on the beach. As they wait for the tide to recede to the optimum level for putting to sea, they discuss fishing and monitor the surface of the waters, the movements, and any glints of light that hint at the presence of fish. On one of these mornings, Ali Mana, the group's guide, has his back turned to the sea and listens absent-mindedly as he intently hand-weaves a new 70 mm nylon fishing net. 'We call it *shuma* (iron, wire) because it is so hard, and we use it to catch the big parrotfish – in a while it will be the season to go and look for them,' a member of the group tells me. It takes six to eight months to make such a net by hand, a daily effort that demands *savoir faire*. These are the material aspects from the sea that dictate the timing of everyday life, in which knowledge and manual dexterity are key to fulfilling the economic expectations tied to fishing. Against the background of the group's chatter, Ali Mana works to the rhythmic beating of the waves against the shoreline. This rhythm marks the encounter between land and sea, and it changes imperceptibly as the minutes pass and as the tide recedes. From a soft, gentle movement, as the tide ebbs, the rhythm becomes more syncopated and intermittent. Without so much as a glance at the shoreline, at just the ideal moment for going to sea, when the tide has gone out but not yet so far as to make it difficult to exit the reef, Ali Mana stops working on the net, gets up and – without a word – goes to change, followed by the rest of the group. The group's perception of the sea transcends the more usual predominance of vision, broadening into a 'maritimity' that pervades the senses, from manual prowess to the auditory perception of movements and the almost

imperceptible changes. However, the materiality of the sea also encompasses its deployment in discourses and the part it plays in expectations, whereby the islander's intimate and ecological relationship with the marine environment is further shaped in part by a process of assembly with economic expectations associated with changes in the global market. Tapping into this network of assemblages brings to light the situated local dimension of a maritime ecology that emerges from experiences at sea. The incorporation of developmentalist grammars resurfaces in the expectations of local actors. The imaginaries and perceptions of subjects who engage daily with sea reveal historical maritime attempts to economically exploit the Indian Ocean. Even more powerfully, they draw our attention to the contradictions implicit in policies associated with the blue turn. As recalled by Mustafa, a disheartened fisherman from Ndzuani, living and working in Mitsamihuli:

In the 1980s we were told that the future was the sea, that the country would develop thanks to the richness we have in our oceans. The fishing school was set up in Ndzuani and the *japawa*³⁴ came. They made us believe that fishing could be an opportunity. But within a few years everything fell apart, and you can see the *japawa* abandoned on the beaches. It's politics, we thought. We improvised as much as we could while waiting for the right moment. The sea is there and in it our treasures, and it is with this spirit that I began to devote myself to tuna fishing more and more assiduously, hoping to one day own my own equipment and my own boat. With the vessels we have it is a risky business, you can easily find yourself stranded on a six-metre *kwassa-kwassa* on the open sea and that could be the end of it, and what is meant to be our heritage is being plundered by the big fishing boats that fish in our waters, often illegally. When I am at sea, I often come across the endless nets of these large fishing boats, often from the European Union: they are the ones who make money in our waters. They say they are helping us but in reality they sell us our own fish, while we can at best steal a few tuna from their nets when we come across them abandoned on the high seas. During the Sambi period,³⁵ agreements were signed with Qatar, they sent us safer patrol boats

³⁴ Fiberglass fishing boats with inboard engines and greater storage space supplied with Japanese cooperation since the second half of the 1980s and the opening of the fishing school in Mirontsi on the island of Ndzuani. These vessels offered faster and safer navigation. See: Robin E. Stobbs and Michael N. Bruton, "The fishery of the Comoros, with comments on its possible impact on coelacanth survival," *Environmental Biology of Fishes*, 32, 1 (1991), 341-59.

³⁵ The period of Sayyid Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi's presidency in Comoros, 2006-11.

and it seemed to be the right way to go. The project started with us local fishermen, we were the ones who fished and then shared the catch. We made direct earnings. But the agreements with Qatar fell apart before the project got off the ground. The patrol boats are abandoned, unusable, and without engines; it's demoralizing. I no longer want to go out to sea. After all these years, I still have to share the catch with the boat owner. If I catch three tunas, two are for him. It is cheaper to stay at home. Now they are telling us not to fish with nets near the reef because we will ruin the corals and prevent the fish from flourishing, when we know what it means to fish offshore with a 15cc outboard motor.

The words of Mustafa might be seen as an indirect reply to Ahmed's accusations against a category that supposedly does not understand the route to development. They also stand as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic ethos of the blue economy that permeates institutional life, even in marginal states like Comoros. Mustafa's voice further offers a glimpse into the structural weaknesses of a labour market built on the utopia of economic development from the sea. The fragments of unrealizable expectations that he narrates evoke the same imaginaries of success that featured in Nasser's account. Like Nasser, he mentions the illegal practices that hide behind the calls of the global maritime market. In a flashback that returns us to the twilight scene on the beach, Nasser's stories echo once again:

Thanks to fishing, I got to travel and make money, using all techniques. We used to fish a lot with dynamite, but it is too risky. The most profitable time, however, was when I worked for an Egyptian who had an aquarium business in Dubai. The work was hard because the fish had to be caught alive, but it was really good money. Now there are no more opportunities like that, but I'm gearing up my boat and I already have two nets ready. It's not the earnings it used to be, but in a month's time, I'll be able to do good business without depending on anyone else. I can't stay away from the sea. These days in the evening I have to dive into the water and swim a bit, so I don't lose the habit of being at sea.

Nasser is not solely a fisherman, yet by his own admission he lives off the sea and cannot stay away from it. His many-faceted maritime inclination gives him access to an

interconnected world of interwoven and shifting global routes by virtue of his in-depth familiarity and close-knit, ecological relationship with the sea. This is a relationship that includes both the practical and the symbolic, spanning situated local dynamics and global flows. It is a relationship with the ocean and the marine ecosystem that itself simultaneously bears different meanings, from economic exploitation to an intimate identity-based association, via the impulse to imagine distant but interconnected shores that radiates from the sea around the archipelago.

Provocatively, Nasser's illegal/immoral fishing activities are an expression of the blue economy approach. The Indian Ocean has historically been an arena for maritime connections and material exploitation of waters. Processes of technological acceleration and the global market demand for the export of fish, and not only as a foodstuff, suggest that designing a blue economy must inescapably take account of an economic dimensions pathways that predate the concept of the blue economy as an ecological breakthrough. Ambitions for economic development and for the extraction of wealth from the oceans have transformed the community's relationship with the sea, establishing new requirements driven by the global market, between legality and predation. The immorality of reckless fishing is based on global expectations of enrichment from the sea, which has escalated into illegal practices. Nasser's criticizable and predatory attitude is the culmination of a more generalized pattern of economic exploitation, which has now been condemned from a blue economy perspective as destructive and short-sighted. In reality, however, it is the darker side of the same coin, despite the current emphasis on sustainable development from the sea. The reference to the use of dynamite is the apotheosis and the extreme outcome of a longer and constant process of commodification of fishing activities in the Comoros. Traditional fishing by pirogue and with hook and line, or the use of wide-mesh nets handmade from organic materials (cotton lines), has undergone a slow transformation with the introduction of fine-mesh nylon nets and, as mentioned, with the introduction during the 1980s of motorized boats, such as the *japawa*.³⁶ The availability of new technologies and the push to imagine the ocean as a source of profit have helped shape and transform customary fishing techniques. Spearfishing while free-diving, using nylon nets of varying thickness and tools such as spearguns, is particularly widespread in the Mitsamihuli area, replacing pirogue fishing, especially among those seeking income beyond daily subsistence. The interweaving of global influences and material needs

³⁶ Stobb and Bruton, "The fishery of the Comoros;" Ibrahim Mohamed Tohir, "Census of the artisanal fishing fleet in Union of the Comoros" (2011): <https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/documents/proceedings/2011/wptt/IOTC-2011-WPTT13-13.pdf> [Accessed: 25 Mar. 2026].

continuously shapes the practices and techniques that characterize artisanal fishing in the Comoros, making it impossible to fix its coordinates once and for all. The short-sightedness of this continuous adaptation—by which the conservationist turn is very often affected—mystifies the influence of historical processes that affect concrete choices, which are made visible through the rejection and acts of resistance by the social actors directly involved.³⁷

The fishermen's resistance to giving up their current fishing techniques and to unconditionally embracing the new ecological narratives reflects their marginalization and unfulfilled economic expectations. From thinking of themselves as key players in a sea-based economic development program, they find themselves as the rejects within an ecological shift and the scapegoat for its failures.

In consulting these voices from the sea, we interface with the complexity of oceanic encounters, where the relational and intimate dimension of experiencing the salt waters of the Indian Ocean opens new sentiences dictated by an ongoing, two-way exchange with global movements, practices, and discourses. We are thus faced with an assemblage of sensibilities, where awareness of existing economic processes triggers transformations in ecological perceptions of the sea. Within this relationship, the sea conveys a rhythm, including an economic rhythm, that is set by the transformations and ambitions of the global market. From the sea, a historical memory is reinforced: one that is not overshadowed by the new conservationist currents, but emerges from the embedded imaginaries that guide the expectations of those who inhabit the sea. This 'more than ecological relationship' with the sea is linked with global processes, reflects the complexity of the dynamics at work, and unveils mutilated narratives. From the sea, it is possible to react to contemporary processes of marginalization, whereby ecological consciousness is twinned with historical economic processes and woven into the framework of the blue economy, thus determining a new perception of the sea. The traces of these shifts in perception and expectations continue to feature in local representations of the sea and fishing, as is seen in the stories of Nasser and Mustafa. They are key to a

³⁷ In this regard, it is important to note that sustainable fisheries development programs themselves come up against not only refusal but also the negotiating capacity and the ability of Comorian fishers to impose their own customary practices. Within the Mitsamihuli–Ndrude National Park, interventions under the SWIOFish 1 project aimed at banning the use of nets were implemented differently in the two adjacent villages of Hatsindzi and Ndrude. In the former, where fishing is carried out mainly by trolling from motorized boats, a prohibition on the use of nets was imposed (nets that were already not in use). By contrast, in the Ndrude area, where free-diving fishing groups using nets are present, the same measure banned the use of nets but introduced closure areas established in consultation with the local community (Raffaele Maddaluno, "Relazionalità in movimento. Lavoro in mare, rivendicazioni ecologiche, ambizioni economiche nei margini dell'oceano Indiano (Comore)" (Unpublished PhD diss., Sapienza Università di Roma, 2025).

fuller understanding of the historical dynamics and processes that have led to the current preeminence of blue economy policies, wherein the drive for sustainable blue development clashes with the long wake of the myth of growth and economic exploitation, an aspect that cannot be overlooked if we wish to understand the dynamics unfolding around the actors and communities that live on the sea and are directly or indirectly caught up in blue economy policies.

‘GLOCAL’ IMPLICATIONS

Within this patchwork of encounters, the world of David, a fisherman from Hantsindzi, exemplifies the ability to move amongst competing narratives, while blurring contradictions and tactically meshing with the blue economy to reposition oneself within the local-global (glocal) arena.

David is the treasurer of the Chimoni fishermen’s association, which was founded in 2020 as part of local involvement in the SWIOfish programme,³⁸ a four-year intervention aimed at banning trawling practices and setting up a cold store for processing and storing fresh fish. His level of commitment to the project is immediately evident from the large banner from the opening ceremony that he has hung in the hall of his home, illustrating how a hegemonic narrative about the ecological management of the coast can also colonize private spaces. This visual impact is further confirmed by David’s discourse: ‘The people in charge of SWIOfish did some inspections and interviews and then came back with the project. It was at their request that the association was set up, in order to have the numbers to be able to initiate the construction of the cold store and to ensure that trawling had been stopped.’ David, seeing an opportunity in this ecological interest in the sea and the village, jumped into the deal with the idea of enhancing his position through his professional role and knowledge as a fisherman.

This points to the fluidity of the intervention by revealing the tactical capabilities of those involved, but also the structural hurdles that stand in the way of operationalizing the mindset underpinning blue economy interventions: ‘Actually, with the association not much has changed compared to before: even if it wasn’t formal, we always got together to discuss things, to make decisions as a group of fishermen. Now, there are more defined and stable roles.’ As treasurer, he sees himself at the center of a project that is already beginning to display cracks:

³⁸ This acronym stands for the Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth Project, a regional program funded by the World Bank with the goal of improving the management of fisheries at the community level.

We are now in the fourth year, and we find ourselves without funds. It all fell apart once the cold store had been built. There are no funds to get it up and running, to cope with the cost of electricity and the frequent interruptions in supply. We just risk storing the fish for it to go rotten. In our village, we traditionally fish mainly by fishing line and we don't use trawls, so it was not an effort to ban them. The conditions for doing so were already there and we accepted that.

With the failure to meet the goals that had been announced, the initial unquestioning acceptance of impositions and methods faded away, rebalancing the encounter on an already favourable seascape and clearing the way to strategically welcome a potential opportunity to gain and carve out an even more important space (as well as legitimacy) within community dynamics. This brings us back to the reformulation of ecological relations with the sea and the rediscovery of a memory and awareness of the spheres of interaction and the issues at stake in the Indian Ocean, where economy, global market, and ecological *savoir faire* blend to reshape external intervention, which takes on the contours of an opportunity for income and reputation. This clearly emerges from a particular episode that David recounted:

Some time ago, Chinese traders came to the village to buy sea cucumbers to sell on at the Dar es Salam market. It was a profitable business conducted directly with the fishermen of Ndrude and Hantsindzi. After the first exchanges, things began to change. While it was good income for the village, the sea began to suffer. Sea cucumbers are regulators, water cleaners; they serve to maintain a balance that benefits the fish and the entire ecosystem. When there began to be a lack of sea cucumbers, there was a shortage of fish due to increased water pollution, an equilibrium that also had an economic value was disrupted. And so later, without any external pressure, because the marine reserve had not yet been established, the next time a request came, it was the fishing community that banned the sale of sea cucumbers.

Within a patchwork of opportunities, resources, and needs that came from the sea, protecting ecological equilibrium prevailed over the opportunity for short-term profit, showing how embedded experience at sea leads to an ecological ethics that drives

scientific learning. The ecological relationship with the sea rejects predefined configurations. It is determined by economic factors, of course, but it is above all guided by experience and *savoir faire*, built by the intimate and working encounter with the sea, as well as with actors and institutional bodies. Global economic or ecological rationality must be juxtaposed with intimate interaction with the maritime environment in its multiform and esoteric expressions. This dynamic unfolds along the trajectories of subjectivities, institutions, and non-human actors. It overflows from rational profit logics, whether economic or conservationist, and yet immerses us in the movement and generative disorder of oceanic encounters.

REIMAGINING THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD FROM THE URGENT ECOLOGICAL NEED TO PROTECT THE OCEAN

The Indian Ocean serves as a framework of investigation, ethnographic, historical, scientific, *and* as something with a lively and energetic materiality of its own that erupts, shapes, intervenes in the lives of communities, nations and scientific bodies.³⁹

As we have seen, ambitions for sustainable development from the sea are always closely bound to a system of knowledge that is intimately interconnected with a specific context and its related socio-cultural phenomena. The power of an all-encompassing language evoking sustainable development collides with the local knowledge and long-term historical processes produced at the margins of hegemonic narratives of an oceanic future. The voices and stories of Comorian people inhabiting the sea unveil a broader seascape of economic, social, and historical import; one that is crucial to rethinking individual and collective ecological relationships with the ocean as a system of assemblages. Interactions with these smaller seascapes unveil a body of knowledge with the power to counteract the anti-political pressures of discourses on the blue economy, as well as essential counter-narratives from the sea with which to resist the reproduction of land-based power relations.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to contemplate and rethink the status quo, to formulate alternatives and new opportunities for transformation, and in so doing

³⁹ Vivian Y. Choi, "Exploring the unknown: Indian ocean materiality as a method," in *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, eds. Smiriti Srinivas, Bettina Ng'weno, and Neelima Jeychandran (New York: Routledge, 2020), 237. Emphasis in the original.

to perturb and reshape imaginaries of the marine/maritime dimension with its agentic indeterminacy, dynamism, and fluidity. Totalizing utopian narratives of the great oceanic dream collapse amidst Comorians' disappointed imaginaries and frustrated expectations and situated ways of experiencing the sea.⁴⁰ The ability to avoid drowning in the wreckage of these failing hopes is the basis for re-thinking an oceanic future – beyond the dominant narrative of the neo-liberal market – for the local community and its spheres of interaction with the ocean, a community whose intimate and ecological experience of the sea reflects the long history of oceanic encounters in the Indian Ocean.

In conclusion, it is crucial that we take up Isabel Hofmeyr's proposal to view the Indian Ocean – 'a complicating sea' – as a method.⁴¹ This implies, once again, valuing the connective power of the sea. It demands seeking out a hybridization and cosmopolitanism that feeds off the grammar of the monsoons and the patterns of weathering that permeate the imaginaries of coastal communities. It means shaping a maritime identity that is fluid and unpredictable and stands in opposition to the cultural and structural borders and frontiers of post-colonial nation-states and hegemonic environmental narratives. Constructing a methodological approach based on the materiality of the Indian Ocean is underpinned by a concept of the sea as a generative force.⁴² Such a framework of analysis facilitates the construction of a 'from the sea' perspective for reimagining Indian Ocean encounters and leverages an anti-continental approach to draw out Africa's maritime dimension from the marginal archipelagic context of Comoros.

Ultimately, the field of environmental intervention provides an arena in which to reclaim the maritime capacity to shape and corrupt dominant practices and discourses imposed from above. This in turn will make it possible to experience and understand the real political potential inherent in the blue economy movement as an expression of maritime materiality.

The dynamics discussed here depict a material dimension of the sea that takes shape from the multiple spheres of interaction in oceanic worlds. The materiality of the Comorian island setting goes beyond the different and disorienting volumetric and spatial conditions of the sea,⁴³ also encompassing a labouring world that experiences the ocean through everyday practices and discourses, which are further informed by global discourses, aimed at meeting immediate needs. Consequently, even imaginaries fed by

⁴⁰ Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*.

⁴¹ Isabel Hofmeyr, "The complicating sea."

⁴² Choi, "Exploring the unknown."

⁴³ Steinberg and Peters, "Wet ontologies, fluid spaces."

perceptions and discourses of the sea should be understood as an expression of maritime materiality. Oceanic encounters encompass the experiences and expectations of local actors and their ecological relationship with the Indian Ocean. They express mutual influencing and friction between global currents and situated intimate and communal experiences. As such, they may be understood as a crossroads where global discourses and local praxes meet, where ecological and interspecific relations with the ocean overlap with expectations and ambitions driven by imaginaries coming from afar, and traditional skills and maritime working worlds based on deep knowledge of seas and coastlines merge with scientific expertise and ambitions. Such a scenario of perpetual rearrangements and assemblages, amidst the waters of the Indian Ocean, characterizes the peculiar materiality of the sea that flows from Comorian shores. This dynamic indeterminacy is the essence of maritime materialities that are constantly being redefined, and into which we must dive if we are to grasp its nuances and reflect on its peculiarities, and above all if we are to repolitizise the Indian Ocean as a place that is dense with global encounters, clashes, and high-stake dynamics.

To recall the opening expression, the act of visualizing the sea thus evokes an ecological dimension and a sensoriality imbued with expectations for the future shaped by historical processes and broader political-economic flows. The material lives of these actors constitute an active and mutable testimony to processes unfolding on a transoceanic scale, revealing the concrete repercussions of development perspectives and of the expectations invested in an oceanic future. An expression of a double level of marginality—both the geopolitical marginality of the Comorian island state within the networks of the Indian Ocean and that associated with their social status—artisanal fishers in the Comoros reveal the local repercussions of global historical processes and stand as traces of the contradictions inherent in a longer process of the economization of the Indian Ocean. Through acts of resistance, everyday practices, failures, ambitions, occupational choices, and ‘illegal’ practices, it is possible to trace a continuity between the emphasis on a model of development unconditionally dependent on the sea and contemporary conservationist turns. This is a contest that continues to be played out on the backs of subaltern subjectivities, which, through constant adaptive, creative, and resistant pressures, bring to light—even in the current rush toward sustainability—the entanglements, tensions, and ambiguities of relationality within a connected transoceanic world. At local and peripheral levels, it materialises through unedited and provocative ways of embodying the ecological relationship with the ocean.