



Space, Time and Scale: When Geohistory Reveals a Territorial Heritage Based on Water

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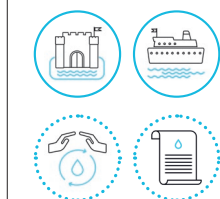
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The Mozambique Channel separates the island of Madagascar from Mozambique on the African continent, creating a total of 6200 km of coastline. Yet, in inscriptions of national heritage, water is not a focus of discussion nor is it considered. This lack of attention to water-related heritage is surprising given that the cities and heritage sites along the Mozambique Channel emerged from a maritime trade network that existed until the nineteenth century and formed the foundation for the evolution of the two countries. A water-based approach to heritage can help address contemporary challenges involved in the regional expression of heritage as well as the building of a national identity. Focusing on territorial dynamics, this article helps to rethink the role of heritage in creating a water-aware approach to heritage along the Mozambique Channel. It uses a multiscalar and spatio-temporal methodology called geohistory to analyze the development of the two coasts, their development over time and the resulting questions for heritage.

Keywords: geohistory, urban network, maritime territory, geographical partitioning, Mozambique Channel



KEY THEMES



< Fig. 1 Dhow, a traditional means of transportation between regions in Vilanculos, Mozambique (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2023).

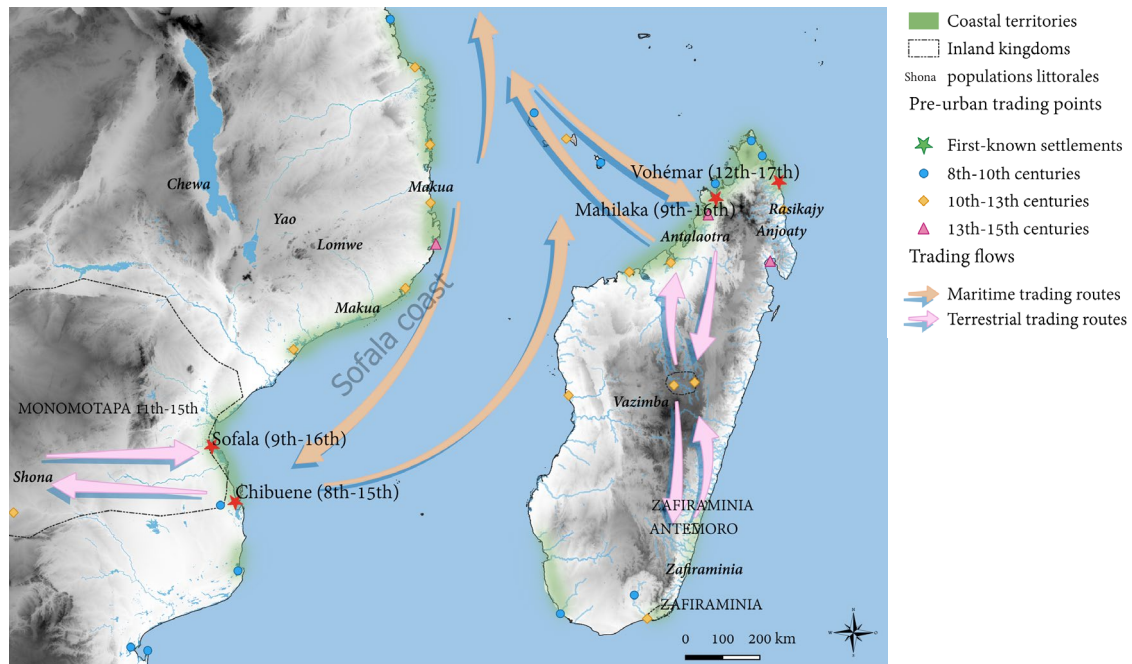
Introduction

The Mozambique Channel is a segment of the Indian Ocean that lies between the countries of Mozambique and Madagascar. For centuries, it has served as a vital route for transportation and trade, facilitating the movement of goods and people. Trading along the channel's coasts gave rise to a network of settlements and cities. Despite the presence of numerous historical and heritage sites along this coastline, there is currently no comprehensive national policy for the recognition and preservation of this coastal heritage.

An analysis of the area's geographical partitioning and evolution reveals how water, once a central element of society, became a neglected space. Water-based practices have played a significant role in shaping the coastal territory on both sides of the Mozambique Channel, resulting in a shared expression of evolving regional territoriality with the channel at its core. This article identifies three spatio-temporal phases

in the logic of territorial evolution in this region. At the regional scale, there has been a strong consolidation of local identities that are specific to this coastal territoriality. The expression of these identities has been affected by colonization as well as the sense of belonging associated with them. As a result, the coasts have evolved in distinct ways, maintaining a certain distance from the new national scale and safeguarding their original coastal characteristics. In recent times, national interests have increasingly sought to incorporate these coastal territories in their territorial dynamics. However, despite this growing attention, they struggle to be acknowledged and legitimized as an important part of the national heritage.

Geohistory can illuminate the territorial and societal dynamics of the region. This methodology allows for the examination of specific territorial dynamics over time, using temporality, space and scale as analytical tools (Jacob-Rousseau 2009). Using this method, I identify three dis-



^ Fig. 2 The emergence of a coastal territory starting in the eighteenth century (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2024).

tinct time periods and show how the territories on both sides of the channel were part of larger trends beyond the present-day national scale.

In this article, I ask how Mozambique and Madagascar have handled their shared channel heritage throughout these three phases, leading to their marginalization in the present day. Using a multiscalar approach, I explore the role of water as a source of connection and division on both sides of the channel over a period of eight centuries. I also highlight contemporary elements that reaffirm the importance of geohistorical analysis in understanding a regional identity focused on water and its role in cross-channel heritage discussions.

Water as the Center of a Territory: Maritime Routes and Port Cities Networks

In the Mozambique Channel, regional organization originated from a maritime trade system as early as the fifth century (Beaujard 2009). Maritime routes served as the foundation for the growth of a complex network of coastal settlements. Within a hierarchical network, each trading outlet played a specific role depending on the natural resources of various inland areas and on its connection to various ports in the Indian Ocean. By examining these coastal networks we can grasp the regional articulation of the territory as both water and land. Indeed, the coastline permitted the emergence of a specific territory that was not subject to any political domination.

In the tenth century, the coastline became connected to inland kingdoms (Sinclair 1982) but the coastal settlements acted independently with regard to trade. As a result, coastal cities emerged and declined throughout the centuries, depending on the intensity of maritime trade

routes. During the golden age of the Great Zimbabwe Empire (from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries), important trading points emerged on the coast of Mozambique, such as Chibuenne and Sofala. However, as the empire started to decline, other routes took over, leaving the former cities in despair. In Madagascar, the first settlements were located along the northern coast, first in Vohémar and later in Mahilaka. These cities played a key role in shaping the channel's coastal dynamics (fig. 2).

Taking islands and archipelagos in the southeastern Indian Ocean region as an example, Ottino (1974) argues that the emergence of a coastal territory is strengthened by the development of "coastal fringe cultures." This also applies to the Mozambique Channel. In fact, the coast served as a focal point for many different populations. As a result, organized communities emerged, creating specialized roles in trade activities (Ottino 1974; Beaujard 2009) that connected both sides of the channel as early as the ninth century (Sinclair 1982). These included the Antalaotra people, known as the "People from the Sea" in the Malagasy language, who lived on the northwest coast of Madagascar, as well as the Rasikajy and the Anjoaty people. These coastal populations were the result of mixed cultures that shared cultural and religious characteristics. Furthermore, this led to a similar spatial organization in which water served as the connector, as socio-spatial dynamics relied on maritime routes. The slightest change in regional geopolitics had enormous consequences for regional socio-spatial dynamics.

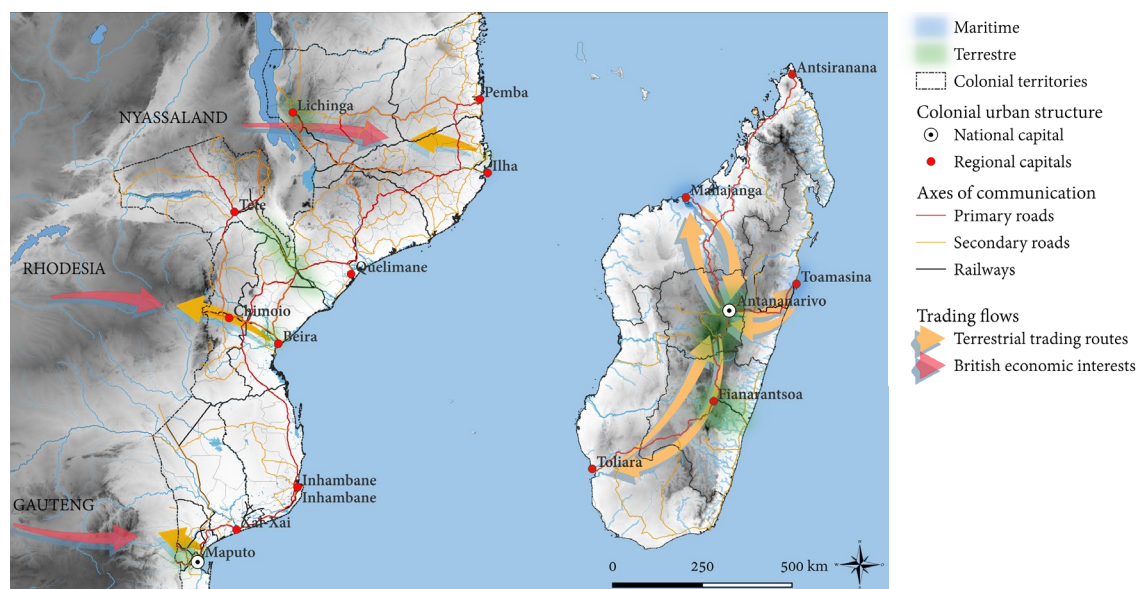
Water as a Border: Changing Territorial Partitioning and Colonialism

By the nineteenth century, the Imerina kingdom's expansion and subsequent colonial conquests

introduced the concept of national territories. As a result, an urban network developed with a focus on the new political center (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1988). On the East African coast, the territorial vision underwent a drastic change when Portugal and France created new land-based colonial territories, dividing Mozambique and Madagascar into two distinct territories. Each territory had its own capital, serving as a new political center. This change had a significant impact on the role of the urban network within the emerging society. Coastal cities now served the newly formed national territories, which turned their attention toward the capital. Maritime routes were replaced by new terrestrial routes, leading to a reduction in trade contacts between the coasts and the eventual closure of the Mozambique Channel.

Each country developed its own terrestrial focus leading to the independent evolution of coastal territories. In Mozambique, the national communication network was organized along two axes: a north-south axis that replaced the former maritime cabotage system along the coast,

and a second axis crossing from west to east to connect the English inland territories with a harbor (Fair 1989). As Mozambique served as a territorial outlet for the nearby English colonies, three main port cities emerged: the newly named national capital Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) serving the Gauteng region, Beira for Rhodesia and Nacala for Nyasaland. The establishment of these cities disrupted the former regional organization and relegated the historical port cities to a secondary level of importance. In Madagascar, the former coastal organization remained largely unchanged. The three former coastal cities on the west coast – Antsiranana, Mahajanga and Toliara – were designated provincial capitals. The communication network was designed to converge toward the capital Antananarivo, located in the territory’s central highlands. However, the secondary network connecting the provincial capitals did not seem necessary to the colonial administration (fig. 3), allowing communities – like the Vezo and the Sakalava – to continue their traditional activities that were closely tied to water.



^ Fig. 3 The coast as colonial outlets (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2024).

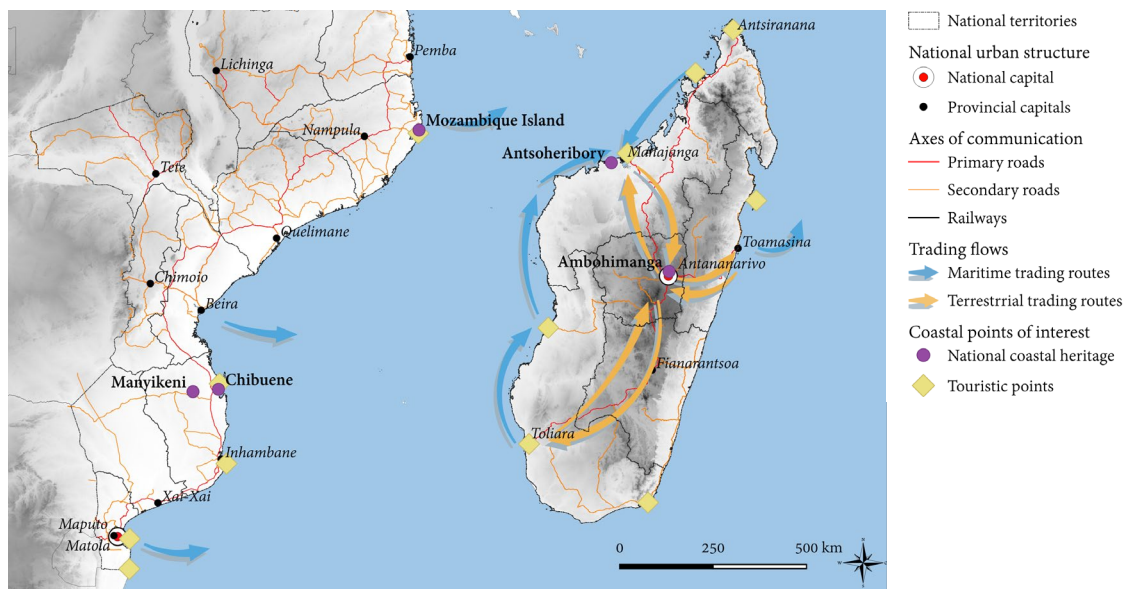
The new national capitals always kept their distance from the coastal settlements, sometimes forging a national vision in opposition to the latter in pursuit of political goals (which included maintaining their dominance). The territorial conquest was reinforced during colonization with the gap between inland and coastal communities growing deeper and stronger. In Mozambique, even though the coast was still an area of economic interest, the new cities were created ex nihilo, ignoring the importance of regional trade in the past. The coastal territories never disappeared completely during this geographical partitioning but continued to exist in a marginalized way, shadowed by national hegemony (fig. 1). Later, independence brought new possibilities for the coastal territories to claim their legitimacy.

Water as Heritage: Reconnecting the Dots of a Common Water-Based Territory of the Past

Postcolonial independence reinforced the inclination toward a national vision. Since the geo-

graphical centers were located in the national capitals, national unity mainly emerged through those centers, which empowered the countries' territorial structures. However, once the two countries disconnected from the former colonial powers, this situation offered better national visibility to the local scale. In fact, empowering regional urban centers became a priority on the national agenda. Given the predominant coastline in both Madagascar and Mozambique, coastal cities were ideal candidates.

Consequently, coastal communities have appeared more prominently on the national stage. For example, the maritime cabotage system is a preferred alternative to the national roads, the conditions of which are worsening every year. In addition, tourism is attracting more people to the coast, highlighting the region's distinctive historical and cultural aspects. Tourism perhaps is the strongest factor of this coastal highlight. It allows reconnection with the history of the coast itself, bringing regional trade history, which is unique to coastal areas, from the past into the spotlight. The shared territorial



^ Fig. 4 The coastal area as a predominant point of interest (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2024).

foundation is reemerging in the expression of the various coastal heritages (fig. 4).

However, coastal heritage struggles to be accepted as national heritage. Recently, progress has been made by the central governments and communities to highlight regional heritage. To name a few examples, in 1991 the Island of Mozambique became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the only national historical site to be listed. The former trade route linking the Great Zimbabwe to the Mozambican coast was highlighted recently by the restoration and development of two archaeological sites in Chibuene and Manyikeni. In Madagascar, the islet of Antsoheribory, a former capital of the Antalaotra merchants, is being listed by the Malagasy government in its inventory of the national heritage. Although only a few places have achieved this kind of rec-

ognition, they offer important examples of how it is possible to reconnect the national scale to its regional past, with water as a shared inheritance.

Conclusion

Reshaping territories inevitably transforms the approach of their features. In the Mozambique Channel, water heritage is one of these features, since water provided a foundation for the territory's original construction. Geohistory highlights this common territorial foundation that continues to exist and on which a variety of water heritages have evolved. The region has shifted from water-based territories to land-based territories without totally erasing the former connection with water. In fact, local communi-



^ Fig. 5 The Garden of Memory, remembering the slave trade routes in the Indian Ocean, Island of Mozambique (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2023).

ties shifted their ways of expressing their heritage. With a common contemporary process of seeking the former regional territorial heritage and reasserting their own local heritage, the latter is then still forged on the past water-based territory. Designating the Island of Mozambique as a UNESCO World Heritage Site not only highlights the island's historical past as part of national history but also reconnects its regional past within the southwest Indian Ocean (fig. 5). Not lost but only hidden, a shared water-based territory evolved and became fragmented, but reemerged in a way that allowed local heritage to be expressed.

Policy Recommendations

- National heritage should include every part of the national territory as a legitimate part of its heritage. Although it might not be obvious from a contemporary perspective, so-called territorial opposition may have common roots.

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Lauriane Verhoog is a PhD candidate in cultural geography at the University of La Réunion with a research focus on the evolution of urban identities on the coasts of the Mozambique Channel. With deep fieldwork at the center of her research, she is investigating common regional aspects of the coastal cities, with a focus on Mahajanga in Madagascar and Inhambane in Mozambique.

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