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## Developing a new theoretical model for West African maritime archaeology

### Développer un nouveau modèle théorique pour l'archéologie maritime en Afrique de l'Ouest

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Maritime archaeology in West Africa, including the study of Indigenous maritime traditions, has immense potential to contribute to global discourses on histories of fishing and whaling, ports and harbours, trade and commerce, ecology and environment, identity and ethnicity, colonialism and empire, and the transatlantic slave trade, subjects common to the study of maritime archaeology across the world. This article applies Africana critical theory to the discipline of maritime archaeology, suggesting that the problems of representation and diverse storytelling in maritime archaeology can only be solved by expanding existing paradigms and developing new theories. Changing the theoretical paradigm in West African maritime archaeology also allows for a stronger dialogue with movements toward Black liberation in historical archaeology. Drawing on perspectives from (Africana) critical theory, ecophilosophy, Indigenous studies, and queer theory, this article experiments with the development of a new theoretical paradigm for the historical approach of maritime archaeology in West Africa through two case studies.

**Keywords:** maritime archaeology; West Africa; underwater archaeology; Africana critical theory; archaeological theory; nautical archaeology

L'archéologie maritime en Afrique occidentale, et notamment l'étude des traditions maritimes autochtones, présente un potentiel immense pour enrichir les débats internationaux sur l'histoire de la pêche et de la chasse à la baleine, des ports, du commerce, de l'écologie et de l'environnement, de l'identité et de l'ethnicité, du colonialisme et de l'empire, ainsi que de la traite transatlantique des esclaves ; autant de sujets communs à l'archéologie maritime dans le monde entier. Cet article applique la théorie critique de l'Africana à la discipline de l'archéologie maritime, et suggère que les problèmes de représentation et de narration diversifiée en matière d'archéologie maritime ne peuvent être résolus qu'en élargissant les paradigmes existants et en développant de nouvelles théories. Changer le paradigme théorique de l'archéologie maritime ouest-africaine permet également de renforcer le dialogue avec les mouvements de libération des Noirs en archéologie historique. S'appuyant sur les perspectives de la théorie critique (Africana), de l'écophilosophie, des études autochtones et de la théorie queer, cet article expérimente le développement d'un nouveau paradigme théorique pour l'approche historique de l'archéologie maritime en Afrique occidentale, ceci via deux études de cas.

**Mots clés:** archéologie maritime; Afrique occidentale; archéologie sous-marine; théorie critique Africana; théorie archéologique; archéologie nautique

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## Introduction

The tradition of maritime archaeology in Africa is often steeped in colonial legacies, influencing what sites are chosen to be excavated, methods that are applied, historical questions that are asked, and interpretations proposed, including in the implementation of heritage management frameworks derived from examples out of Europe and the Americas. African and Africanist archaeologists have demonstrated how Indigenous African experiences and perspectives are still little prized in the accounts of maritime archaeological research (McGhee 2005; 1997; Ray and Rich 2009; Richard 2015; Thiaw and Mack 2020), which is especially clear in the region of West Africa. Disciplinary discourse in maritime archaeology often underrepresents West Africa as a site of practice and West Africans as practitioners, especially when compared to initiatives and archaeological projects on the eastern side of the continent. Heritage practitioners have identified various levels of success at implementing heritage management strategies for underwater resources in African contexts on the eastern side of the continent, but similar discourses are only beginning to happen in West Africa (Blue and Breen 2019; Breen and Lane 2003; Henderson 2019; Lane 2012; Sharfman 2017; Silva 2020; Trakadas et al. 2019). It is also worth noting that most funded research efforts to manage the maritime heritage of Africa and Africans have traditionally originated outside the continent or within the academy, and the results of these archaeological investigations in Africa have often been removed from community contexts while the benefits of heritage preservation have not been realised in those immediate communities (Thiaw and Wait 2018; Trakadas 2012; Werz 2021). Maritime archaeology has often had less diverse representation that often contributes to African voices being ignored or silenced in practice (Grinnan, Lemke, and Haigler 2022), though this is changing through the work of organisations like Diving with a Purpose and other groups dedicated to increasing access and representation in maritime archaeological training. In addition, while academic knowledge about African maritime history is being generated by practitioners cited in this article, public and popular knowledge about African history still remains relatively limited.

The diversity of maritime archaeological sites in West Africa, which houses eleven coastal countries and major groups of islands, is only recently growing in representation in publications and scholarly focus. Maritime archaeological efforts in Africa have included efforts at (mostly) recovery and documentation of European shipwreck remains from the postcontact period, such as the excavation of the *São José* and other European shipwrecks in South Africa (NMAAHC; Werz 2021); East African excavations in Tanzania, Mozambique, Zanzibar, Madagascar, and Kenya (Breen and Lane 2003; Duarte 2012; Kirkman 1972; Lane 2012; 2018; Seetah 2018; Trakadas 2012); excavations at Elmina, Ghana and Cape Coast Castle, Ghana (Cook, Horlings, and Pietruszka 2016; Horlings et al. 2011; Horlings and Cook 2017; Pietruszka 2011); Bunce Island in Sierra Leone (Amarthey and Reid 2014; DeCorse 2013; 2015); survey and investigation in Senegal's riverine networks, and partnership with the Slave Wrecks Project in the Atlantic (NMAAHC; Thiaw and Wait 2018); and the development of the *Rising from the Depths* network in East Africa (Henderson et al. 2021). However, the identification and excavation of European shipwrecks has often been divorced from descendant and local communities, and even projects focusing on Indigenous or local maritime traditions remain dominated by Euro-American epistemologies. The two West African nations in which European shipwrecks have been excavated or surveyed at the time of writing are in Ghana and Senegal, while other sites which have been excavated or surveyed are maritime or marine in terms of resource exploitation or cultural practices, such as salt-boiling sites in Benin and Nigeria (Haour et al. 2022). In addition to the lack of archaeological scholarship on maritime West Africa, West African scholars are themselves marginalised in the process of scholarly production internationally.

This situation deserves to be reviewed to the extent that Africa constitutes a first-rate laboratory in which it is possible to analyse historical events from both an Indigenous and universal

perspective. West Africa is at the heart of diasporic research on hybrid identity constructions and reconstructions, thus offering a wide range of theoretical approaches to the human and social sciences. Most maritime archaeology in Africa has occurred in East, North, and South Africa with a wider neglect of the littoral West African region from Senegal to Bioko and, moreover, with a predominant focus on European ships. There is a greater need for archaeological investigation in coastal West Africa, and there is a need for creative public interpretation of these stories as well as meaningful, longstanding connection to descendant communities. Maritime archaeology in West Africa, including the study of Indigenous maritime traditions, has immense potential to contribute to global discourses on histories of fishing and whaling, ports and harbours, trade and commerce, ecology and environment, identity and ethnicity, colonialism and empire, and the transatlantic slave trade, subjects common to the study of maritime archaeology across the world. This article argues for two theoretical transformations in maritime archaeology. First, a combined approach utilising a new practice of maritime archaeology with deep roots in Africana critical theory could offer engaged research and theories that lead to praxis and partnership that improve the lives of people of African descent (Chawane 2016; Gordon 2008; Mazama 2001). Second, changing the theoretical paradigm in West African maritime archaeology also allows for a stronger dialogue with movements toward Black liberation in historical archaeology.

Historical archaeology, in which maritime archaeology most often falls, has traditionally been defined in terms of the post-expansionist interactions of Europe and the rest of the world (Deetz 1996; Gijanto and Horlings 2012; González-Ruibal 2015; Hume 1978; Orser 2016; Ponsnansky and Decorse 1986; South 1977a; 1977b). This definition is slowly changing with new concepts of multitemporality and multiscale processes (Orser 2024; Theou and Hamilakis 2013); of studies placing historical archaeology in critical contexts (Franklin et al. 2020; Silliman 2020); and in the discussion of Black pasts and changing epistemologies in African American archaeologies (Agbe-Davies 2014; 2002; Battle-Baptiste 2013; Hartemann 2022). In the face of global anti-Blackness, such work pragmatically seeks liberation through historical-social transformation. Africana philosophers have conceptualised this liberation and responsibility as community-oriented obligations that extend throughout time and space (Gordon 2008, 107; Kelbessa 2018; Okpoko 2022). Such liberation and responsibility to community comes from the application of Africana critical theory to archaeology. Africana critical theory is an intersectional framework that critiques global white supremacy and oppression and seeks liberation for African and African-descended people. Application of Africana critical theory allows us to reimagine Eurocentric maritime or historical archaeological theories in co-creation with communities who are direct stewards of West African maritime heritages.

This article suggests that the problem of representation and diverse storytelling in maritime archaeology can only be solved by moving away from existing paradigms and developing new theories and applications of external theories, such as Africana critical theory. Drawing on disparate methods, this article proposes a new way of looking at African maritime archaeology by applying an Africana critical theory framework to maritime archaeology in West Africa. We first discuss the applications of various maritime archaeological theories and paradigms through a definition of maritimity, which often exists within a framework of coloniality. Next, we investigate how the often-Eurocentric epistemology of positivism is found in maritime archaeology and how Africana critical theory can address this within our archaeological practice. We offer guiding principles for maritime archaeological research in West Africa, especially the development of a theoretical framework specific to the region. This framework is based in lessons and analysis of the Rising from the Depths network in East Africa and from the Slave Wrecks Project's partnership with the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noir in Senegal, West Africa. West African maritime archaeology theory is a new paradigmatic suggestion for historical, archaeological, and field-based research into West African nautical, underwater, and maritime archaeology.

### Defining maritimity

Maritime archaeology is still a growing field, especially in West Africa. It is commonly defined as ‘the archaeological study of humans and their interactions with the sea [which] can include sites that are not underwater but that are related to maritime activities such as lighthouses, port constructions or shore-based whaling stations’ (McGhee 2005). Since humans are ‘cultural amphibians,’ the human past can be understood in terms of interactions in maritime spaces (Ford, Halligan, and Catsambis 2020, 7), whether through consumption of marine life, trade and transport via water, or basic reliance on water for survival.

Maritimity (French: *maritimité*) was first defined by Françoise Péron and Jean Rieucan in 1996. It is an idea that networks and societies of the sea become unique to populations living and working in these environments. Knowledge and techniques generated in these contexts permit people to insert themselves in the sea, exploit it, and play in it (Barron 2021; Ilves 2003; Laubé 2021; Peron and Rieucan 1996). Maritimity is an ephemeral epistemology and way of being that places cultural value on the water, a precarious resource (Laubé 2021; Tuddenham 2010). But maritimity is hard for archaeologists to define precisely because it is internalised and it is fluid and moving. It is amphibious (Pauwelussen 2017, 2). In the context of East Africa, explorations of the idea of ‘maritimity’ led to a realisation that the application of this concept could be fundamentally rooted in racial colonial paradigms (Kusimba and Walz 2018). This dovetails with what was argued above, namely that the denial of a maritime cultural heritage to Indigenous African populations is an essentially racialized colonial act. The idea of maritimity, once realised in a culture, is often seen as fixed; societies either have maritimity, or they do not (such as in studies of Swahili maritimity by Fleisher et al. 2015). But a group which lives by the sea is not maritime just because of the environment in which they live, nor because of the economic, subsistence, or cultural activities in which they partake. Rather, maritimity (in this view) is seen as acquired over time; a cultural value and persistence of ideas, including economic, subsistence, and cultural activities, which differs from those in the inland and separates coastal people from inland people. A ‘maritime worldview’ is difficult to see in the archaeological record alone (Fleisher et al. 2015). And, as Kusimba and Walz (2018) note, ‘there does not exist any historical example in which a vibrant, urbanized coastal zone is effectively sealed from social, political, and economic interaction with inland peoples. In fact, it is probably impossible for urban [coastal] areas to develop without substantial interaction with adjoining hinterland areas’ (431).

By focusing on European maritime archaeology in Africa often at the expense of Indigenous African maritime cultural heritage, scholars tacitly devalue – or even deny the existence of – an Indigenous maritimity worth studying. This trend in Euro-American thought was noted by Adas (2014) in his study of the ideologies of western dominance. Adas (2014) argues that it was only by denigrating the achievements of non-European peoples – including Africans – that ideologies of western technological dominance could be established. Scholars today may no longer actively hold views that dismiss African technological – or maritime technological – achievements, but by ignoring these achievements scholars tacitly contribute to the furtherance of ideologies of European technological superiority. By turning our gaze to Indigenous maritime cultures in Africa, we are better able to realise the empowerment of African activity advocated by philosophers of Africana studies.

Since the formalisation of maritime archaeology as a discipline around the 1960s, few theories have been more influential than Westerdahl’s (1992) concept of a maritime cultural landscape (MCL), further theorised in Ford and Crisman’s (2018) study of Lake Ontario and translated to many maritime and underwater archaeological projects, extending the original definition. The working definition of an MCL included the combination of terrestrial and underwater archaeology

to study people's cultural interactions with each other and with the environment, on the coast, in any landed space related to the water transport, and at sea itself through a combination of approaches based in cognitive landscapes theories (Westerdahl 1992). Such a perspective views nature and society as conjoined, influencing the way people see and use their environment. A maritime cultural landscape approach seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship on landed sites and that of nautical and underwater sites (Ford and Crisman 2018) and between the coast and hinterland, as suggested by Kusimba and Walz (2018). It posits that people create and interpret their landscapes and worlds through cultural values, specifically in a maritime setting, while also suggesting that people who are born, raised, and continue to inhabit maritime spaces have a unique perspective on their landscapes – or waterscapes – that is distinctly aqueous (Amarthey and Reid 2014; Flatman 2003; Ford and Crisman 2018; Westerdahl 1992).

Waterscapes are defined as a liminal landscape that combines society and nature, drawing on work in architecture, heritage, anthropology, and political ecology (Appadurai 1990; Gagné and Rasmussen 2016; Karpouzoglou and Vij 2017). Waterscapes, like landscapes, are fleeting, dynamic, and transgressive; but due to the nature of water, this constant change is heightened by the natural and social flow of water. Dawson (2018) uses the idea of a waterscape to describe how African swimmers, divers, and sailors interacted with their environments in West Africa prior to and during European colonisation. Because water is fluid and complex, human interactions about and on water are similarly complicated. A waterscapes perspective also views nature and society as parts of a whole.

More recently, archaeologists working in the Mediterranean have begun discussing the utility of viewing the sea as a hyperobject: an object (or thing) so large and all-encompassing that it transcends space–time boundaries (examples include global warming, or the sea). Hyperobjects are nonlocal, so they transcend local climates and contexts. They are also formed by relationships with multiple other objects, and so are not a discrete 'thing' themselves (such as global warming, which is produced by emissions, sun, ozone, fossil fuels, cars, and other objects, but does not exist on its own apart from these) (Campbell 2020; Morton 2013). While this theoretical intervention has yet to catch on in the more mundane practice of maritime archaeology as it is currently expressed, it presents more utility when faced with maritime archaeology outside the western epistemological framework. If we view the sea as this hyperobject, and humans as just one of many creatures inhabiting the space, we may understand cosmologies and ontologies outside the 'Judeo-Christian philosophy which defines water as chaotic, uncontrollable and fundamentally negative, a barrier more than a bridge' (Flatman 2003).

Archaeologists have used such concepts, rooted in definitions of maritimity and cognitive landscapes, to investigate questions of the past in maritime West Africa. West Africans have placed high value on the watery landscapes and land-bounded waterscapes as evidenced by their use of canoes, river systems, and maritime trade routes throughout history (Dawson 2018; Smith 1970). These environmental conditions have shaped human cultures in West Africa and continued to inhabit the cognitive landscapes of littoral, lacustrine, and riverine communities in West Africa to the present day. The few studies of West African shipwreck sites (albeit, of European ships) referenced here have relied on expansive maritime cultural landscape theories as their primary theoretical disposition (Gueye 2023a; 2023b; Horlings 2011; Pietruszka 2011; Tuddenham 2010; Westerdahl 1992). In West Africa, most of this work has taken place regarding the historical period after 1400 – guided by traditional definitions of historical archaeology as expressed in the introduction to this article, with the exception perhaps of the precontact Dufuna canoe find in Nigeria (Adewumi 2014). Silences in the historical archive of this period are often made louder by the presence of material culture and serious archaeological study, which is precisely where the practice of maritime archaeology contributes to this dialogue with its 'potential for the writing of humanistic, self-critical social archaeologies' (Ransley 2005, 9).

### **The colonial paradigm in maritime archaeology**

As defined by Africana studies scholars, the colonial paradigm views Africa and Africans reductively through the lens of racial imperialism. Within the colonial paradigm in Africa, Black people have historically been the subordinated group, and epistemicide has been the normative standard. The colonial paradigm is rooted in theories of Blackness and Africanness as inferior or culturally deficient. Black Africans have been viewed in a contradictory fashion, as on the one hand unable to navigate and sail, and on the other, as ‘an amphibious race’ (Dawson 2018, 16) as if their abilities to sail and their maritime cultures were biologically ingrained rather than the result of skill and tradition. When ideas of ‘innate inferiority’ fail, the ‘cultural deficit’ paradigm has been used to argue that African people suffer from deficiencies or disparities because of a lack of culture (Adas 2014; McDougal 2017, 37). According to this paradigm in maritime archaeology, for example: West African vessels are titled boats or canoes, not ships (McGhee 2005); use of sails on indigenous boat types has been attributed to importation from the Portuguese or Islamic sailors, rather than as an African invention (Smith 1970, 519); and in the Americas, enslaved Africans were thought to be incapable of building dugout canoes unless they were taught by Native Americans (Dawson 2018; Smith 1970). These perspectives find place in broader paradigms dismissing African technological and cultural achievements in general (Adas 2014). In addition, the focus on European shipwrecks to the exclusion of Indigenous seafaring shows how the colonial story and the postcontact period is seen as more worthy of study or perhaps seen as easier to study and analyze within the discipline. This is seemingly related to the colonial overtones of nautical archaeology, specifically, and the insistence on resurrecting a glorious past of seafaring (McGhee 1997; Rich 2021). The history of Africa is still treated as supplementary or special compared to ‘other history,’ with Africans acted upon or simply reacting to external stimuli rather than being considered agents. The colonial paradigm can be seen across African maritime archaeology, especially in who is doing the work in-continent, who is funded, and who publishes. Most publications include a majority Euro-American scholars or scholars educated in those regions as authors; many excavations are directed and/or funded by Europeans and Americans. While West African practitioners have called for increased support for archaeology from institutions like the African Union (Abubakar 2008), this has not yet been realised. That is not at all to say that European and American scholars should not research the continent or European engagement with Africa at all; but this practice must be critical and reflexive to decolonise the products and processes of our research. A pan-African and Afrocentric approach necessitates partnership between scholars from the global north and the continent wherein African archaeologists trained in African universities lead the way, serving as equal partners in the research process.

Africana Critical Theory presents an antidote to the colonial paradigm. It suggests that domination, imperialism, and discrimination ought to be uprooted (Bassey 2007; Fanon 1961). This theory draws on revolutionary questioning of prominent systems of domination: racism, sexism, and imperialism. Africana theory was developed as ‘theory critical of domination and discrimination in classical and contemporary, continental and diasporan, African life worlds and lived experiences’ and therefore ‘inextricably linked to progressive political practice(s) that highlights and accents Africana radicals’ and revolutionaries’ answers to the key questions ... that have historically and continue currently to shape and mould our modern/postmodern and/or neo-colonial/postcolonial world’ (Rabaka 2006). But critical theory must also move beyond criticism and development of explanations for phenomena; Africana critical theory takes a destabilising view of hegemonic power while also practically developing and testing new ways to live in the world (Spillers 2020). Application of Africana critical theory is Afrocentric in that it centres African and African-descended people

and relies on three basic claims: Black experiences deserve study, African and Africana peoples' historical experiences are common human experiences, and African and African-descended people have had distinct experiences under the racial capitalist modern world (Kershaw 1992; Leroy and Jenkins 2021). Africana Critical Theory also provides alternatives and new ways to understand the world and create transformative change by promoting activist politics that identify needed changes, create new strategies, and emphasise agency in transforming society (Bassey 2007; Lemos 2023; McDougal 2017, 62; Rabaka 2010; 2006; 2002). Africana critical theory presents an alternative to the dehumanisation of Africana people. In disciplines like maritime archaeology that have traditionally been hegemonic in their Eurocentric focus, antiracist, decolonial theory and praxis will help eradicate oppression and remove whiteness and Eurocentric standards as unquestioned universals and as yardsticks against which other epistemologies are measured – but this will take reshaping our epistemologies or ways of knowing.

### **Co-creation: reframing epistemologies**

Colonisation has 'universalized western paradigms' and reframed epistemologies in such a way that Africans are forced to learn European and American ways of knowing but are not seen as contributing value in return (Talabi 2023, 331). The resulting epistemicide is evident in maritime archaeology, where little scholarship addresses the Indigenous African past apart from European contact (Patin et al. 2021), and the evidence for Indigenous African seafaring is frequently ignored in comparison to other foci of study (Smith 1970). Africana critical theory allows us the opportunity to reimagine Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies and reject or reshape them in a new image.

Positivist epistemologies suggest that the researcher should distance their emotions and experiences as far as possible from the research object; scientific objectivity is prized, and it is affirmed that the researcher is able to be objective when these barriers are removed. Such epistemologies are key to the processual approach to archaeology and to archaeological approaches that lean more heavily on scientific methods such as maritime archaeology (Kershaw 1992, 8; McDougal 2017). While these approaches have usefulness, they are by no means neutral postures. As Mignolo (2009) suggests: 'the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science.' This succinct definition of the positivist epistemology shows how such approaches tend to reinforce established practice, perpetuating the status quo and privileging certain perspectives as the norm; we see this in maritime archaeology's focus on European shipwrecks and neutral posture towards European and American colonial projects. Critical approaches tend to lead to new innovations and ideas (Kershaw 1992, 16). Black feminist critical theories can bring additional and more expansive insight by emphasising lived experiences, dialogue, and subject-subject relationships instead of subject-object relationships; knowledge therefore becomes collaborative and co-creative rather than hegemonic (Battle-Baptiste 2013; Flewellen et al. 2021; Franklin 2001; Lee and Scott 2019; McClaurin 2001). Theorist Patricia Hill Collins argued that this kind of knowing is likely to lead to transformative change and justice because it demands moral accountability (Collins 2006).

Positivist approaches to the archaeology of ship construction, use of boats, and maritime livelihoods like fishing tend to be the most dominant in maritime archaeology today, though this is slowly changing. In West Africa, this has been applied to shipwreck archaeology. The effects of the positivist paradigm in maritime archaeology can be seen in the publications on ships and shipwrecks that emerge from archaeological study; an overwhelming number of publications on ship construction and technology neglect West African perspectives and emphasise evolutionary paradigms. For example, at the time of writing, the *International Journal of Nautical*

Archaeology (IJNA), which overwhelmingly focuses on shipwrecks and ship construction, had just 435 search results in the journal for articles referencing Africa not related to South Africa. When this was narrowed to only include those with the word ‘Africa’ in the title, the search included 11 results. When this was adjusted to include only results with the keyword ‘Africa’ in the abstracts, there were 19 results. Seemingly only two results (Cook, Horlings, and Pietruszka 2016; Insoll 1993) focused on nautical technology in West Africa. Similarly, in 2012 the Journal of Maritime Archaeology (JMA) ran a special issue on maritime archaeology in Africa, with only one paper in the issue dedicated to research in West Africa (Horlings 2012). These works were pioneering in the field, but there is still much work to be done in sharing the important maritime archaeology of West Africa.

Other work does broadly refer to Africa, acknowledging past erasures of this history and emphasising heritage management and capacity building, viewing African maritime cultural heritage as at-risk or as placed at-risk by a variety of processes and attitudes towards heritage (Henderson et al. 2021; Mahumane 2020). The designation of West African maritime heritage as ‘at-risk’ most often leads to preservation projects directed by members of the international heritage preservation community and working within established convention. But for those Indigenous people for whom heritage sites or memories are meant to pass away in their life cycle, the western epistemology of protection and preservation does not always work (Wright, Hylton, and Watson 2024).

The idea that humans thrive in community with each other and with nature’s cycles enlightens our view on what maritime archaeologists have termed maritime cultural landscapes and allows us to create more profound ways of understanding maritimity. People who are intimately connected to the maritime sphere, both in fresh and salt bodies of water, develop cosmological, ontological, and epistemological relationships with water and with these environments. In a world of constant mobility, people could choose to live elsewhere, to migrate to the hinterlands, but they chose to live by the sea and die by the sea. The relationship between land and sea and between shore and hinterland is not often divorced but is dialectical for many groups across the world, as maritime cultural landscapes theories proposed (Flatman 2003; Ford and Crisman 2018). Major theories in maritime archaeology and landscape theory do not, on their own, fully explain the contours and nuances of the nature of the human, social, and cultural relationship to, with, on, under, and in water, especially in a West African context. Western epistemologies emphasise spatial divisions between land, sea, and shore, but to many groups the land, sea, shore, the object, and the human are inextricably bound up in one another. Space, place, environment, and people are not separate entities. We are all connected. This connection, called *ubuntu* in certain Bantu languages (meaning *I am because we are*), is a major tenet of some recent innovations in Indigenous West African environmental philosophy (Kelbessa 2018; Murove 2004; Okpoko 2022; Webster 2022). Eco-bio-communitarianism posits that environment, nature, and humanity are interconnected inextricably, made from the same stuff; ontologically, human and environment are the same (Ufearoh and Onebunne 2020). Other western theories of the human relationship to environments privilege the individual human over the community or the interconnected relationship between individuals, communities, and the environment, with negligible impact on environmental issues (Chemhuru 2019).

The Eurocentric, post-industrial concept of nature and humanity’s domination over nature has contributed to catastrophic climate change and environmental degradation that disproportionately affect West African communities (Dunne 2022; Kelbessa 2018; Mafaranga 2020; Mersha 2020; Okpoko 2022; Ridgway and Hoegh-Guldberg 2016). The African-based philosophy of eco-bio-communitarianism rejects the historically-Eurocentric idea that the earth is an exploitable resource by viewing humans ‘as within nature, not as subjects detached from it’ (Kelbessa

2018, 316). This environmental ethic suggests a return to traditional African values that promote ‘a more cosmically humble, cautious, respectful, and peaceful relationship with nature’ (McDougal 2017, 70). Humans, nature, the environment, and the cosmos are interdependent, not independent of one another (Okpoko 2022). This perspective could be an antidote to the catastrophic climate change and ocean rise that threaten coastal communities and heritage across West Africa. Overfishing and colonial fisheries practices threaten traditional lifeways and livelihoods (Lewis and Olson 2010). Underwater cultural heritage is threatened by oil and petroleum development, ocean rise, sediment change, oceanic chemistry, pollution, and human action (IPCC 2022; Jarvis 2023; Mafaranga 2020; Trakadas et al. 2019). All of these are directly tied to maritime archaeology and investigation of coastal sites. They are also tied to environmental justice and the lack of concern for disparities in environmental effects on traditionally colonised communities.

### Developing theory from practice: case studies

In practice, the West African Maritime Archaeology theory that is proposed here relies on African Critical Theory and posits that systems of domination within maritime archaeology must be questioned and uprooted, including the nature of western academia, access to scholarship, and education in archaeology. The presuppositions upon which the proposed West African maritime archaeology theory is built are derived from practice-driven research in two case studies, discussed below. While imperfect examples, these cases illustrate progressive changes in the field that can be used as a springboard for more egalitarian and reparative frameworks down the line. It is only by moving from theory to practice that we can realise an Afrocentric maritime archaeology.

#### *Case 1: Rising from the Depths Network*

The Rising from the Depths network is an effort funded by the United Kingdom in collaboration with East African institutions. It aims to build research networks of people involved in maritime archaeological research, build capacity for management of maritime cultural heritage resources, and create maritime cultural heritage programmes in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar that are directed by principal investigators from those nations (*Rising from the Depths* 2024). The network aims to ‘stimulate ethical, inclusive and sustainable economic growth’ through maritime cultural heritage in East Africa, thereby ‘build[ing] social cohesion and reduc[ing] poverty in individual states’ and increasing ‘the value and impact of overseas aid in the maritime sector’ (*Rising from the Depths* 2024). The network is mostly geared towards funding such projects through collaborative, multi-lateral partnerships with UK institutions, NGOs, national museums and institutions, and East African universities (Henderson et al. 2021). Many principal investigators within the network’s funded projects are affiliated with these organisations, and others are also members of the communities in which they work. Though based firmly in East Africa, the Rising from the Depths network illustrates one of the main problems and solutions of maritime archaeology in West Africa: funding. With the funds of the RFtD network and the unique format by which funds are dispersed (Blue and Breen 2019; Henderson et al. 2021; *Rising from the Depths* 2024), there is further opportunity for community partnership and growth of maritime archaeology programmes within the region of East Africa that hosts the network.

In West Africa, however, there is a less established base of research and there is not a centralised networking body to provide such a mechanism, yet. Then there is the added dimension of breaking out of European and American epistemological frameworks which are often reinforced and even required by funding bodies that prize positivist studies of maritime culture. There is

also the question of our paradigm; do we, as researchers, still exist within a colonial paradigm by viewing communities as deficient, defenseless, vulnerable, at-risk, or lacking? Or, alternatively, do we work within a framework of government funding that continues to uphold these ideas? Can we subvert such a system through the development of new theoretical frameworks while redistributing these funds to community projects that privilege local interests and West African leadership? This is the situation we find ourselves in, and so the question under consideration for our present moment (especially when education and funding for maritime archaeology mostly originates in the global north) is not the utter rejection of Eurocentric thinking frameworks altogether (such as the utter rejection of the study of European shipwrecks), but to understand that European epistemologies are insufficient and the questions developed by these frameworks are lacking. It is therefore a question of exploring how this heritage, which is now the heritage of all, and which concerns us all, can be rethought for and by Africans. It is the act of flipping a Eurocentric paradigm on its head to question how West African communities might directly benefit from subversive decolonisation of an academic and financial system that was designed to exclude and ‘other.’

### ***Case 2: Partnership of the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noir (IFAN) and the Slave Wrecks Project (SWP)***

As stated, maritime archaeology research about cultural interactions and Atlantic commerce and colonialism occupies a place of increased importance in West Africa (Gueye 2023a; 2023b; Horlings 2011; Pietruszka 2011). Faced by this state of being, Senegal and the team of the Slave Wrecks Project (SWP) have begun explorations into survey, identification, and documentation of sites relative to the trade in Black enslaved people. The SWP is an international network of researchers and institutions administered by George Washington University and supported by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, which uses maritime archaeology and historical research in a distinct historical approach to the transatlantic slave trade. The goal is to bring a detailed examination of the links between maritime archaeology and the theories of postcolonialism, thus affiliating the studies of historical processes and how these shape our perceptions of modernity. The SWP and the work conducted by the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noir (IFAN) in Senegal contribute to the aims of maritime archaeology by clearly critiquing the social phenomena surrounding the analysis of the archaeological record – such as the marginalisation or exclusion of archaeologists from the continent within maritime archaeological research. Archaeologists from the IFAN direct the SWP in Senegal and have gone on to receive doctoral and master’s degrees from both Senegalese and French institutions because of the project.

The research project the SWP is conducting aims to compensate for the marginalisation of Africa in archaeological studies of Atlantic maritime archeology and in anthropological and historical accounts of cultural and commercial interactions during the long historical trajectory of the Atlantic. By developing such a project, the idea is to correct gaps and open avenues of dialogue between African historical maritime archeology and a wider audience on how past environments are created and how these have shaped our modernity. The SWP thus explores the different trajectories, practices, and models developed by Senegambians during the historical period, especially in the face of emerging capitalism. It is not just limited to the study of European slave ships. This work seeks to spark broader dialogues and research by working within staunchly interdisciplinary frameworks and exploring diverse data sources. Such an approach is based on material culture and relies on the materialities expressed in other media, both in the past and in the present.

Thus, the Slave Wrecks Academy was established in 2022 with the mission of researching slave ships, voyage by voyage, and by examining the sites, histories, and heritages that are linked to it. The Slave Wrecks Academy is an initiative of the Slave Wrecks Project (SWP) which aims to form true

professionals in maritime archaeology, but especially caters to Africans and members of the African diaspora to develop this research, documentation, and heritage preservation of the Middle Passage and transatlantic slave trade. As the mission statement of the SWP-A states:

to humanize the history of the global slave trade increases all people's capacity to understand a trade that shaped the world in which we live. By recovering the experiences and highlighting the humanity of those who were enslaved aboard the ships that plied the most horrific and extensive trade in people in world history, SWP seeks to bring the immensity of that history to a human scale, voyage by voyage. (NMAAHC)

Such work demonstrates the interest of considering maritime archeology holistically, guided by more particular methodologies and theories like the one proposed. Thus, the Slave Wrecks Academy addresses the contribution that African archeology makes to analyses of Atlantic cultural environments through historical representations, maritime archaeological remains and discourse, and theoretical conceptions about the Atlantic arising from documentation of distinctly African culture, history, and knowledge production. Maritime archeology in Senegal shows that African cultural histories constitute rich and varied repertoires of clues about the Atlantic and the experiences of Atlantic communities therein.

The SWP is one global contribution. To date, the SWP addresses mostly European ships, albeit those engaged in the transatlantic slave trade, which is a worthy venture. In training a new generation of practitioners the SWP aims to autonomize local communities and their contributions to the research for a better use of endogenous knowledge and African experiences in the research. It also establishes durable collaborations with local communities to promote diversity in the domains of history, archaeology, and anthropology, with an emphasis on the lasting legacies of these historical phenomena. Over time, these efforts will create interpretive frameworks that sustain dialogues on the complexity and sustainability of this history. Members of the SWP and SWP-A have begun community and graduate research in maritime archaeological projects related not just to European slave ships, but to Indigenous African maritime tradition and precontact archaeology further inland, extending the Atlantic Ocean inland and discussing the Indigenous contributions of West Africans outside of Euro-American epistemologies. The SWP has created transnational and transatlantic Black networks of researchers, artists, heritage practitioners, divers, museum curators, and community members all engaged in the same goal of elevating Black and African experiences within the historical archaeological record, specifically in the maritime domain. Those affiliated with the SWP or SWP-A have participated in networks that broaden conversations in maritime archaeology and historical archaeology such as the Society of Black Archaeologists (*SBA*). These networks of individuals, bolstered by community and connection, are changing paradigms in the disciplines of maritime and historical archaeology, demonstrating how community care is one antidote to dispossession and erasure (d'Alpoim Guedes, Gonzalez, and Rivera-Collazo 2021).

### **Developing a new model: West African maritime archaeology theory**

As the case studies demonstrate, African studies methodologies can be implemented in maritime archaeology to translate theoretical concepts into concrete actions and praxis that benefits the lives and legacies of people of African descent across the world. Archaeology is a political action and our archaeological 'praxis becomes emancipatory when it advances the interests of the marginalised and the oppressed against the interests of the dominant' (MacGuire 2008, 3). Using Macguire's concept of archaeology as political action, in contrast with historical legacies of Eurocentric archaeology, an Afrocentric West African maritime archaeology theory will be

concerned with centering the lived experiences, agency, and worldviews of African people. It will also acknowledge how intersecting identities and oppression shaped the lived experiences of African people in maritime spaces. Due to its anchoring in the Africa-centered heritage of the Atlantic ocean, maritime archeology conducted in West Africa is indelibly linked to questions of theory, epistemology and methodology. In fact, West Africa's past is linked to structures, histories and ideas rooted in European thought. As such, the concept of a provincial and provocative Europe as suggested by Chakrabarty (2000) has long guided research on Africa. Chakrabarty's suggestion is that the historical study of modernity is built on myths of Europe as central to the shifting concept of modernity; his study demonstrates that Europe was neither central nor all-powerful in determining what was or was not modern. To correct the ambiguities and assumptions relating to theories of modernity, novel theoretical interventions must be developed that are distinct from all other (colonial) analytical approaches aimed at concealing (whether implicitly or explicitly) the particularities of African cultures and experiences. Treatments of West African maritime archaeology must therefore move beyond characterisations of the continent as a contiguous whole and toward acknowledgement of the diversities of cultures and experiences within Africa.

This paper is one offering toward that end; we emphasise the particular nature of West African maritime archaeology and the West African past within its milieu and reject the assumption that models built for North Africa, East Africa, and South Africa will be sufficient just because these countries share a land mass (though they may apply for other reasons). Thus, this paper has sought to derive some major principles from case studies to create a new theoretical model, which is described below, that can be applied directly to concrete practice on the ground in West African maritime archaeology. Rather than simply apply existing theories to maritime archaeology, a new theory that accounts for discipline-specific needs, fieldwork and practice, and archaeological ethics is suggested with specific application for the growth of maritime archaeology in the 11 countries of West Africa. These major applications are informed by African critical theory, as well as by existing research across the continent, especially in West Africa.

The underlying principles of West African Maritime Archaeology theory include:

1. The maritime experiences of West African and African descended people are worth studying on their own terms as unique experiences based on environmental and cultural diversities. As Hartemann (2022) suggests, 'Archaeology practitioners must be reminded that there are already valid, legitimate stories being told about different times, people, their things and their places' beyond the narratives that archaeologists develop using predominantly Eurocentric epistemologies and methods.
2. West African maritime archaeology praxis requires stakeholder and descendant community involvement, or it replicates colonialism. Projects in maritime archaeology in West Africa must be led and developed representatively by West African archaeologists, including students, not only or primarily by Euro-American institutions or universities; it should involve collaboration and equal partnership (not simply partnership in name). Some examples of how this collaboration could play out include digital or web-based access to archaeological sites; Creative-Commons licensing of interviews or articles; open-access publishing (which requires funding equities); co-authorship with community members; primary and secondary education outreach; community archaeology and excavation; underwater archaeology and dive training, capacity building, and sharing of gear and infrastructural necessities (e.g. wetsuits, air tanks, air compressors); development of scholarships and fellowships for university students and exchange students.

3. Economic and environmental justice, among other forms of justice, should be a focus of our institutional structures. Our work should not neglect to mention the disproportionate climate impacts of sea level rise, storm surges and extreme weather, coastal erosion, and other issues that affect West Africa at higher rates than other regions and hold those nations in the global north accountable for their climate impacts.
4. Traditional maritime archaeological theories such as maritime cultural landscapes and more nautical-specific theories that privilege European shipbuilding cannot be applied in exactly the same way in West Africa because they have been developed for European and Euro-American colonial contexts and do not account for West African peoples' cultures, histories, or environments. New theories to explain the Atlantic African past must be developed by scholars on the continent. Furthermore, West African maritime archaeology must deal with more than just ships, vessels, or boats (and these technological distinctions, which have often been racialized, must be further criticised). It must account for the roles of water in people's daily lives, including through swimming, surfing, drinking, bathing, rituals, and other non-nautical outpourings.
5. West African maritime archaeology cannot be divorced from *either* terrestrial or underwater archaeology, respectively. Nor can it be separated from the Atlantic or from (in the historical period) the transatlantic slave trade and the extraction of people and resources from Africa under racial capitalist colonialism. The connection between West Africa and the Atlantic World, the historical legacies of the slave trade and colonisation, and the place of West Africa in globalisation during the early modern era cannot be neglected within West African maritime archaeology.
6. West African maritime archaeology must challenge the nature of systemic inequalities in academia, access to scholarship, and education in archaeology. Euro-American scholars and institutions need to make a concerted effort to cite, publish, and invite West African archaeologists and historians, who have been doing the same for them since the moment of the professionalisation of archaeology. Euro-American institutions and academics should not engage in hegemonic discourse that harms or others African scholars (see d'Alpoim Guedes, Gonzalez, and Rivera-Collazo 2021; Hartemann 2022). This will require a shift in mindset from the traditional academic epistemology of 'taking knowledge' without care and increasing publishing metrics and capital to a more communitarian, justice-centered practice including repatriation of African artifacts and redistribution of academic funding from hegemonic institutions to African communities. Thus, this theory calls for systemic restructuring and dismantling of oppressive capitalist hierarchies that privilege whiteness, maleness, wealth, and privilege within maritime archaeology.

Such a West African Maritime Archaeology theory seeks to bridge the gap between traditional maritime archaeologists and their dominant theories, most often rooted in positivist epistemologies, and African and African-descended people across the globe, thus placing maritime archaeology in a larger discourse of decolonisation and providing pragmatic solutions for changes in our theories. The proposed West African Maritime Archaeology theory avoids the traditional dichotomy between terrestrial and underwater archaeology, relying on existing concepts of maritimity to dialogue about connection, change, and cultural production and reproduction across liminal waterscapes and aqueous spaces. It also transcends the focus on boats, ships, and shipwrecks to investigating intangible aspects of heritage, and the roles of marginalised or subaltern communities in the maritime sphere. Finally, West African maritime archaeology theory extends discussions of maritimity beyond a 'process of becoming maritime,' arguing that maritimity – while cultural and cognitive in many instances – can exist in multilayered,

multitemporal, and esoteric ways that do not necessitate hallmarks of ‘global oceanic trade’ espoused by scholars from the global north in their studies of subaltern coastal communities.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse various prior theories in maritime archaeology and Africana Studies as a means of creating a new lens through which to view West African maritime archaeology. By analysing various philosophical and theoretical trends as well as two case studies that rely on theories from both archaeology and Africana critical theory, common ground and innovation can be combined. Maritime archaeology has a long way to go in terms of fully embracing public collaboration, especially in African contexts where Eurocentric academic systems have perpetuated neocolonial ideals. The resulting West African Maritime Archaeology theory holds potential for practical application in West African archaeology by seeking to uproot colonial paradigms in archaeological practice, placing control of archaeological narratives in the hands of the community. In West Africa, where maritime archaeology has traditionally been unrepresented in academic and public research, there is room to innovate and create new methodologies and practices. There is an opportunity to engage in this new practice with a grounded, intersectional, Afrocentric, anticolonial, and compassionate approach, rather than replicate the archaeologies of our Eurocentric archaeological forebearers. West African Maritime Archaeology theory proposes a small contribution to this growing field, a contribution that will surely change, grow, or be disregarded with time. Indeed, part of the authors’ approach to decoloniality must involve a call to action to other scholars to deconstruct this very theory as needed in service to a greater goal. As Chikwenye Ogunyemi, the Nigerian feminist writer, said in a 1997 discussion, ‘I think most theories cannot explain everything. A theory will definitely leave something out, and so whoever comes after will have to develop an idea that will take into consideration that which has been left out’ (Arndt 2000).

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