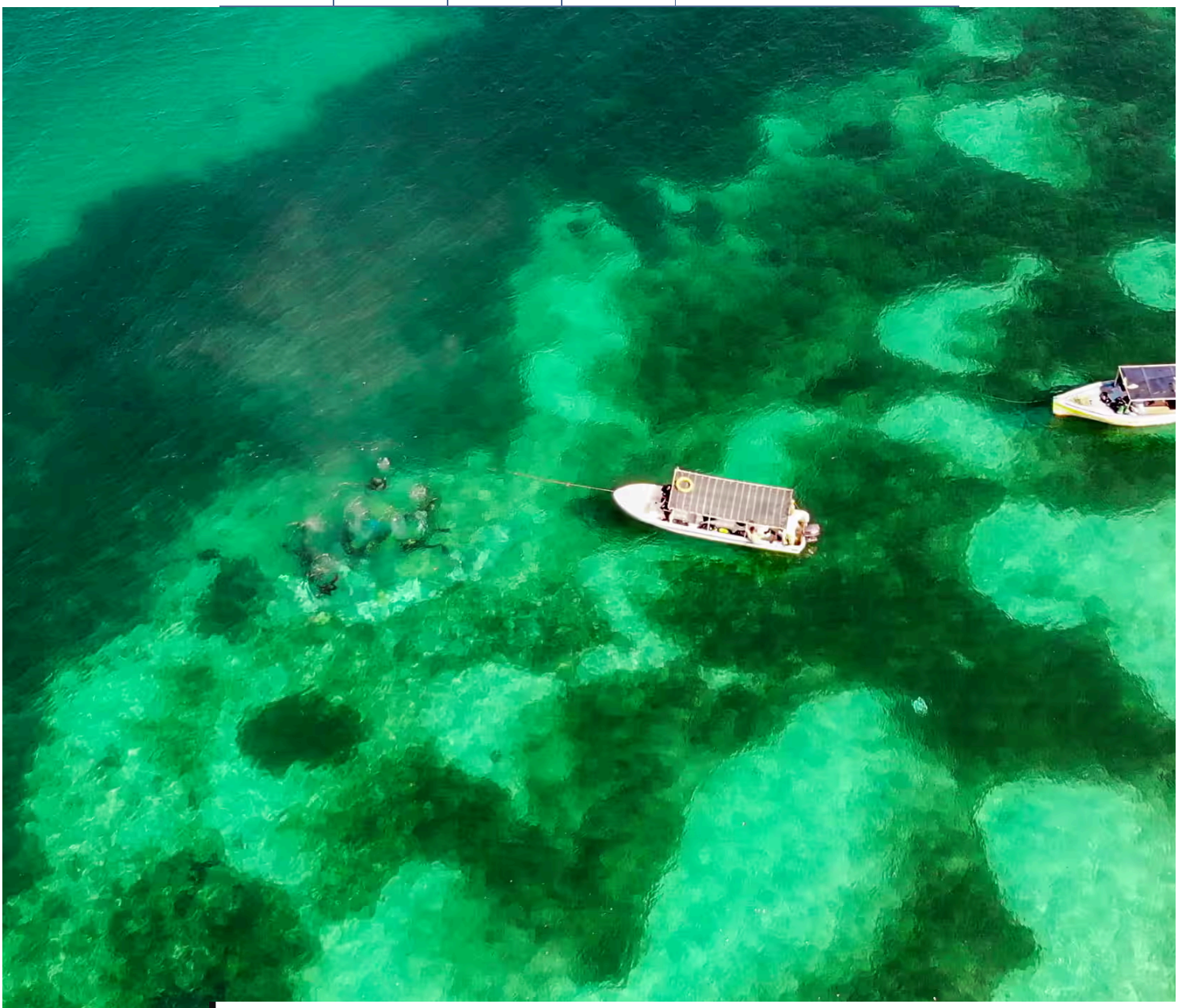
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# ‘People did not go quietly’: divers explore wreck of 18th-century slave ship where mutiny took place

**Black archaeologists join team investigating off the coast of Mozambique as part of global project to identify and tell stories of wrecked ships involved in transatlantic slave trade**

By Carlos Mureithi in Ilha de Mozambique. Photographs by Yuri Sanada

The dive team set out to document the wreck, thought to be the 18th-century French slave ship L'Aurore. All photographs by Yuri Sanada/Aventuras Produções

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About this content

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Celso Simbine walks briskly along the narrow streets of Stone Town in Ilha de Mozambique off the country's north coast, a diving tank on his shoulder and a bag of scuba equipment on his back. Twelve years ago Simbine couldn't swim, despite growing up in a port city. Today, the 32-year-old is joining colleagues on a nearby beach to embark on a diving expedition in the Indian Ocean. They include a fellow Mozambican, a Senegalese and a Brazilian - all young, black maritime archaeologists who are part of an international team exploring what they believe to be the wreck of an 18th-century slave ship.

The team has gathered in Mozambique for two weeks of exploratory dives and classroom sessions coordinated by the Slave Wrecks Project (SWP), a programme dedicated to searching for slave ship wrecks globally and to training Africans and people of African descent in underwater archaeology in a drive to equip communities with the knowledge and resources to identify, preserve and tell the stories of the wrecks in their waters.



Celso Simbine prepares for the dive in Stone Town, Ilha de Mozambique

"A lot of African history was written in a very Eurocentric spirit," says Simbine, a lecturer at Eduardo Mondlane University in the capital Maputo and a doctoral student in maritime archaeology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. "We are looking to rewrite African history using underwater archaeology."

Setting off in three motor boats from a beach near the Fort of São Sebastião, a 16th-century fortification used by the Portuguese to trade and detain enslaved people, the team speeds past small fishing vessels to the site of the wreck.

The goal of today's dive is to document sections of the ship, identify which part of the vessel they are working on and gather information on its construction and the shipwrecking process.

SWP started searching for L'Aurore in 2015 when an archival researcher, Richard Allen, located a document in Mauritius that provided an account of the shipwreck by its captain and brought it to SWP's attention. SWP identified the current site in 2022.

According to the captain's account of the shipwreck, the French vessel left present-day Mauritius for Mozambique in November 1789 to pick up enslaved people en route to its final destination, the French Caribbean.

*"We are looking to rewrite African history using*

In January 1790, as enslaved people were boarding the ship in the harbour of Ilha de Mozambique, the 356 already on board attempted to mutiny, during which four of them drowned.

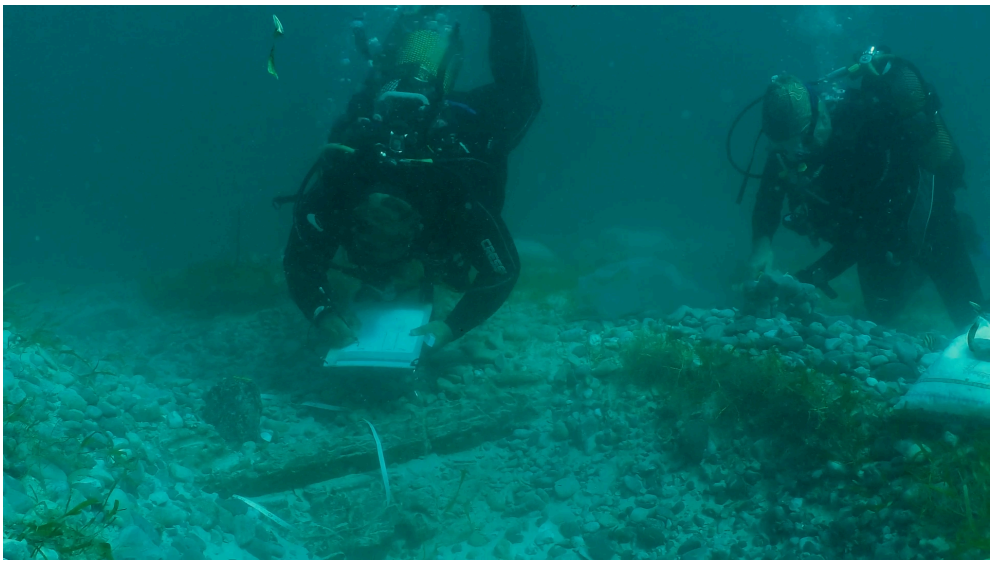
*underwater archaeology*
Celso Simbine

Because of the insurrection, the crew locked the enslaved men below deck. Women and children were kept in the main cabin. A month later, when the ship was ready to leave, a storm hit. The crew refused to open the lower deck until the vessel was sinking. When they finally opened the hatch, it was too late: 331 people died.

“It is murder,” says Steve Lubkemann, an American maritime archaeologist and co-founder of SWP. “There’s no other way to put it.”

“It’s a part of the slave trade that is often forgotten,” he adds. “People did not go quietly.”

Simbine says: “L‘Aurore is a symbol of resistance and revolt of black people refusing to be taken out of their land.”



Video footage shows members of the team documenting the wreck, thought to be the 18th-century French slave ship L’Aurore

As well as being an important symbol of resistance, L’Aurore is archaeologically significant because it is so well preserved. “It may be the best 18th-century slave ship example,” says Marc-André Bernier, a Canadian underwater archaeologist and the developer of SWP’s training programme, adding that the research will help archaeologists understand the structure of other slave ships and their living conditions.

The shipwreck has not been formally confirmed as L’Aurore, but evidence pointing to its likely identity includes the fact that the ship lies in the area described in the captain’s account; that its structure shows that it was constructed using a French technique; and that ballast found in the wreck was from Mauritius, the last port of call for L’Aurore before Mozambique.

SWP was launched in 2008 by four partners (the George Washington University, Iziko Museums of South Africa, the US National Park Service Submerged Resources Center and the South African Heritage Resources Agency) to draw attention to the study of slave shipwrecks and strengthen skills and capacity for research in maritime archaeology. It was joined by the

Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and by Diving With a Purpose in 2013.



The wreck is particularly well preserved and could reveal important insights into the structure of slave ships and the living conditions onboard





One of the team takes measurements at the site, where exposed beams from the ship can be seen (right)

In 2015, the project identified the São José Paquete Africa, a Portuguese slave ship that was wrecked near the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa in 1794. It was the first recorded wreck discovered of a ship that sank in transit with enslaved humans.

More than 1,000 slave ships involved in the transatlantic slave trade, during which more than 12 million Africans were enslaved, sank around the world, according to archival records. But fewer than a dozen have been located and documented as archaeological sites.

Part of the reason is the lack of economic value in the ships, which means people are not incentivised to find the vessels, says Kamau Sadiki, a board member and lead instructor at Diving With a Purpose.



Training with Kamau Sadiki (right), lead instructor at Diving With a Purpose

"There wasn't a lot of gold on these ships," he says. "But from a cultural, historical perspective, it's absolutely critical [to find them]. Because the period of transatlantic African enslavement is probably the most profound historical activity in the world."

Another reason is underrepresentation of people of African ancestry in maritime archaeology, says Jay Haigler, founding board member and lead instructor at DWP.

"Maritime archaeologists are the first people at the scene - and it's a crime scene," he says. "Will 99% of the field actually start to explore any parts of an ongoing activity that doesn't shine the best light on humanity?"



Mozambican maritime archaeologist Cezar Mahumane says: 'We now have the ability to tell the story from our side'

Cézar Mahumane, a Mozambican maritime archaeologist who, like Simbine, started training with SWP in 2013 after learning to swim, and now heads the Centre for Archaeology Research and Resources of the Island of Mozambique (Cairim), says that by uncovering hidden narratives of their people and countries, trainees learn to challenge some of what's been written in history.

"We now have the ability to tell the story from our side," he says. "I feel very proud to be part of this trend and I look forward to training people in this field and sharing the knowledge that I have."

SWP is working to develop similar centres in Senegal and Brazil where SWP's partners have identified other slave wrecks. In December 2023, divers located the lost wreck of the Camargo, a ship that archaeologists believe was deliberately burned and sunk by the only American slave trader to have been executed for trafficking enslaved Africans.

"You can't just train people. You have to help them build an institution," says Lubkemann.

In Mozambique, the team, which includes community stewards who assist archaeologists, dives in the morning to map, excavate and photograph L'Aurore, carefully fanning the sand away to reveal the structure below. Over the two week period, the excavations reveal that the wreck settled on its side and that there are portions of one side of the ship intact. In the afternoon, they attend classes in project management, dive safety and principles of

artefact recovery. Mentors include Brazilian Gilson Rambelli, the head of an expedition for the search of the Camargo close to Rio de Janeiro, and South Africans Jaco Boshoff, the principal investigator of the São José Paquete Africa, and Jonathan Sharfman, who also researched the ship.



The Fort of São Sebastião was used by the Portuguese to trade and detain enslaved people

The archaeologists have discovered ceramics, lead shot and a barrel top in the wreck of L'Aurore but their current objective is to understand the structure of the vessel. And while they may eventually remove select artefacts, there are no plans to raise the ship.

"You don't need to raise the ship to tell the story," says Lubkemann, giving the example of the São José Paquete Africa, from which a number of artefacts are on display at the Smithsonian in Washington DC.

Another reason not to interfere with the site, he says, is that people lost their lives there. "Even if the bodies are not there, it is a site of tragedy. And you treat it with respect," he says.

Mozambique was a significant part of the global slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hundreds of thousands of Mozambicans were sold as slaves in the South Atlantic trade, in the Arab trade in the Indian Ocean and in the French trade to Indian Ocean islands.

The country is a former colony of Portugal, one of the earliest and biggest participants in the global slave trade.



Samira Jamú teaches other residents about their island's underwater cultural heritage

Former slave-trading powers have largely failed to confront their past. But earlier this year Portuguese president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said the country needed to "pay the costs" for crimes committed during the transatlantic slave trade. In 2022, Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, formally apologised for his country's role in the slave trade.

In a makeshift classroom at a guest house in Stone Town, where most of the team are staying, Mahumane is painstakingly mapping a section of the wreck based on notes and measurements that he took underwater.

"From a historical point of view, we might be looking at one of the greatest testimonies of crimes against humanity, which was the slave trade," he says.

"Every time you're down there and you touch the structure, this plays with your feelings and the meaning that the structure might have. It goes beyond looking at scientific aspects and sometimes it really touches our spirituality."

The search for L'Aurore and the discovery of the presumed site has gone largely unnoticed by the wider community of Ilha de Mozambique. Residents know that there are shipwrecks related to the slave trade off the island, but they don't know much more than that, says Samira Jamú, 23, who lives on the island. She adds that she started learning more about the slave shipwrecks when she became a community monitor with the SWP in 2018 to teach children and other residents about underwater cultural heritage and the marine environment.



The crew hold a pre-dive ritual before entering the water. Each will take a symbolic cowry shell to the wreck site

"We are in the process of learning it. We are in the process of knowing ourselves. We are in the process of owning our history," she says.

One morning before a dive, about half a dozen people from the SWP team stand in a circle on the beach. Sadiki hands each person a cowry shell, which used to be exchanged for enslaved people, and asks them to take the shells to the wreck. It is a ritual he has performed during explorations of the São José Paquete Africa in South Africa and the Clotilda, the last known ship to have taken enslaved people to the US.

"We are here again in these sacred waters to remember, to reclaim but more importantly to resist," Sadiki says.

"We want you to remember as you do this work that our ancestors resisted. They resisted inhumanity against them. But more importantly, they struggled to reclaim and retain their humanity."

Then the men walk to their waiting boats and head to the site for another morning of exploration.



'Sacred waters': heading into the Indian Ocean for another day uncovering the past

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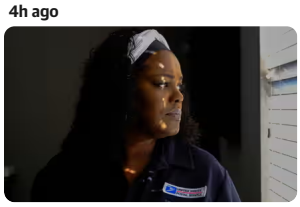
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