

# A JANUS-FACED SEA: Contrasting Perceptions and Experiences of the Mediterranean

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*ABSTRACT* This article makes a plea for more systematic attention in maritime anthropology to the under researched topic of how people perceive and relate to the sea. More specifically, it deals with different perceptions and experiences of the Mediterranean. At its core is an account told by a clandestine Moroccan immigrant about his experience of crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. The agonistic image of the sea arising from this contemporary narrative is discussed against the historical background of changing attitudes towards the sea and contrasted to the tourist image of a benevolent Mediterranean that has become so pervasive over the past fifty years.

A sailor drowned in the sea's depths.  
Unaware, his mother goes and lights  
a tall candle before the ikon of our Lady,  
praying that he'll come back quickly,  
that the weather may be good –  
her ear cocked always to the wind.  
While she prays and supplicates,  
the ikon listens, solemn, sad,  
knowing the son she waits for never will come back.  
(C.P. Cavafy, 'Prayer')

## **Introduction**

Over the past fifteen years there has been a shift in maritime anthropology from general ethnographic themes to policy-oriented topics such as over fishing, management systems, legal pluralism, coping strategies and sustainability of marine resources (van Ginkel 2003). This trend reinforces the one-sided focus in maritime studies on the instrumental aspects of the relationships people, almost exclusively fishermen, maintain with the sea. Far less attention has been paid to the perceptual and expressive features of how various categories of people relate to the sea. We may think here of subjects such as myth, symbolism and ritual. To be sure, there are early exceptions (van Hageland 1961) and several ethnographers have dealt with sealore in their studies of fishing communities. Yet, on the overall, it seems to me that much more research has been devoted to instrumental than to symbolic angles of the interactions between people and the sea.

The idea for this article, which focuses on perceptions and experiences of the Mediterranean and is mainly based on secondary sources, was triggered by interviews I held with clandestine trans-Mediterranean migrants in the 1990s. Their

dark view and experience of the sea offer a counterpoint to the romantic image of a benevolent Méditerranée -- smooth as glass, bathed in sunshine, blue, green and turquoise colours and consumed by mass tourists -- that has become dominant since the 1950s. I will discuss these contrasting images against the historical background of changing attitudes towards the sea and of the different ways Mediterranean peoples have imagined their sea.

### **The Taming of the Mediterranean**

Since ancient times the Mediterranean has inspired a broad gamut of feelings and attitudes, ranging from freedom and constraint, fear and courage to fascination and indifference, awe and contempt. The Inner Sea has been anthropomorphized, demonised, deified, exploited and co modified for different purposes. Praised and cursed in songs, poems and ritual incantations, it has been perceived as corrupting and benevolent, connecting and dividing, therapeutic and devouring, nourishing and threatening and in mixtures of these qualities. The many guises, shapes and colours of the Mediterranean are perfectly represented by Proteus, the Greek sea god who was able to change his appearance to suit the circumstances. Proteus is thus an apt metaphor for the perplexing range of images, which have been projected onto the Mediterranean.

Until the recent introduction and diffusion of the satellite view, only few specialists -- scientists, cartographers, strategists and mariners -- were able to visualize the Mediterranean Sea as one single entity. Throughout its long history the Mediterranean was largely perceived from local perspectives. In fact, the Mediterranean is not a single sea but rather a succession of small seas that are interconnected by wider and narrower straits (Braudel 1972:108). From the perspective of coast dwellers, sailors and fishermen there are numerous *local* seas and each bay and gulf is a complex micro cosmos variously linked to the wider Mediterranean (Kaddouri 2000). Until the advent of motorized navigation, shipping on the Mediterranean was predominantly cabotage, inshore navigation over short distances with relatively small cargoes. Lines of sight and sound played a vital role as means of orientation in pre-industrial Mediterranean navigation. When, for instance, a ship ran into thick fog, obliged to sail blind with no land in sight, the crew was seized by despair (Braudel 1972:105). In general, the high sea (Cicero's 'immeasurable sea') was avoided as much as possible.

The authors of a recent history of the Mediterranean aptly summarize the perception and experience of pre-industrial navigation: 'Mutual visibility is at the heart of the navigational conception of the Mediterranean, and is therefore also a major characteristic in which micro regions interact across the water, along the multiple lines of communication that follow those of sight. There are only relatively restricted zones where, in the clearest weather, sailors will find themselves out of sight of land. And these unintelligible 'deeps' of the sea are the areas that have held the greatest terror for the Mediterranean seafarer, from Odysseus onward' (Horden & Purcell 2000:126). Inshore sailing was not only a matter of orientation and protection against the elements and corsairs, it was also dictated by opportunities for buying, selling, reselling and exchanging goods. And there was the further necessity

of the almost daily renewal of supplies and water (Braudel 1972:107).

Given its vastness, emptiness, danger and liminality, the sea was often attributed an ambiguous, if not an altogether negative role in Mediterranean cosmologies. Until the eighteenth century, when a significant change of attitude towards the sea took place, particularly among the elites of Western Europe, it mostly inspired fear and abhorrence (Corbin 1994). For instance, several ancient moralists and philosophers saw the Mediterranean as a corrupting sea. The easy communication it made possible was felt as a threat to the integrity of the social order. However, at the same time the Inner Sea was *mare nostrum*, an integral part of the territory and identity of the ancient sea born empires (Horden & Purcell 2000). The classical perception of the sea as a metaphor of whimsicality, evil and doom was reproduced in the notion of the sea as a vessel of horrors and contrasts, which was current throughout the Christian Middle Ages (van Hageland 1961:13). To be sure, an alternative perception of the sea as a space of freedom, adventure and opportunity was never entirely lacking as is testified by the *Odyssey* and later travel writings. But on the overall, an attitude of fear and repulsion seems to have been dominant among the dwellers of the Mediterranean shores.

One recurrent motif in the imagination of the Mediterranean (and other seas as well) has been the idea that it is the home of monsters, which reflects the sea's unruly and tempestuous nature. Sea monster legends go back to ancient times. Babylonian epics tell of Labbu, a gigantic sea beast, and the inhabitants of the metropolis of Ugarit situated on the Syrian coast opposite Cyprus had to cope with Yam, a powerful spirit of the sea (Gilmore 2003:31-33). Ancient Greek mythology is replete with sea monsters ranging from the 'Monster of Troy' and one-eyed Polyphemus, the son of the sea god Poseidon, to the Tritons, half-human sea beasts, the sailor-eating Cyclops, and Scylla and Charybdis, who lived under the waves in the Strait of Messina where they dragged down sailors and their ships. Even the sober Aristotle pondered the terrible sea serpents and other marine terrors of the Mediterranean that he and his contemporaries believed responsible for most shipwrecks (*ibid.*:2). The Romans, who took over most of the Greek sea monsters, saw empirical corroboration for their legends in the huge fossils they found in the promontories around the Mediterranean.

In the Old Testament the sea is described as a plumbless and dark depth hosting the wreckage of the Flood, an empire of chaos, evil, monsters and demons among whom Leviathan, depicted in quasi-human qualities, stands out as the epitome of the sea's terror. In the eyes of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, the sea was both a source of life and a realm of death. In spite of its storms, torments and monsters, it made possible Paul's missionary travels and thus the spread of Christianity.

Some of the sea monsters of the early Christian iconography survived into modern times as ritual beasts. A well-known example is the Tarasque of southern France and Catalonia. This man-eating serpent played a major role in the Corpus Christi and Pentecost festivities. It may have originated in the early Middle Ages in the Provençal town of Tarascon. Legend has it that this sea serpent was domesticated by a holy woman, St. Martha, who arrived in the Provence by means of a fortuitous shipwreck. The Tarasque survives as a ritual monster in the Fête de la Tarasque, which is now largely a tourist attraction having lost its religious connection (Gilmore 2003:161-2).

The relationship of Islam with the sea is even more problematic. This is not only reflected in religious texts, travel accounts and proverbs but also in the rather limited development of a maritime culture on the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores (de Planhol 2002, Driessen 2002a). And, although the sea is represented in the Quran as a neutral creation to be used for the benefit of the believers, a statement attributed to the Prophet Muhammad has it that 'sea is hell and Satan the ruler of the waves'. The following Arabic proverbs likewise illustrate the negative attitude towards the sea: 'Nothing good ever came out of the sea', 'The sea takes half the world and seeks the rest', 'The sea is a traitor: he who enters it is lost, he who escapes it is reborn', and 'Have nothing to do with the sea, even if there is grass growing on its back' (Driessen 2002a:14). I was unable to find proverbs in which the sea is depicted in more positive terms.

None of the peoples that sailed the Mediterranean under the banner of Islam had a long tradition of seafaring, although there have always been pockets of seamen and corsairs scattered along the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores. The *Ibuqquyen* of the Central Rif in northern Morocco, a stretch of coast with numerous creeks between Cape Quilates on the east side of the Alhucemas bay and Cap Tres Forcas, are a case in point. For centuries, these Berber tribesmen used their skills as fishermen and caboteurs in occasional acts of smuggling and piracy. For instance, during the 1890s their raids on passing Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese steamers became notorious (Artbauer 1911, Hart 1979:355-56).

It is true that the study of Ottoman sea power has been a victim of the persistent prejudice that the history of the Ottomans on the water is mainly one of inferior seamanship buttressed by government-supported brigandage (King 2004:127). But this does not alter the striking facts that a considerable part of the Turkish maritime vocabulary is derived from Italian and Greek; that the maritime expertise of Venetians and Greeks was crucial in the development of the Ottoman fleet; that by the fifteenth century Christian ships had achieved virtual hegemony over most Mediterranean routes; and that the ranks of Barbary corsairs were periodically filled by renegades from the Christian Mediterranean. From the Muslim point of view seamen constituted an unreliable and infamous lot. In sum, there are numerous indications of the incompatibility of sea life with Islam and this goes a long way to explain why Muslims missed the boat at the time of maritime expansion towards the New World.

In the travel accounts of Moroccan diplomats between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries the sea is mainly associated with threat, danger, death and hell (Kadouri 2000:20-24). However, in the popular Islam of the Moroccan Rifians we get a glimpse of another face of the Mediterranean, i.e. the sea as a sacred space personified by the sultan Muhammad I-Bahr, Muhammad of the Sea (in a sense cognate to the Catholic notion of the Virgin Mary as *Stella Maris*), who hosts forty saints. In yet another popular image the sea is perceived as praying night and day, the waves being its prayers. The role of the sea in the rituals of coastal towns and villages around the Mediterranean, which are mainly geared to the imploration of a safe passage, deserves further comparative research (Driessen 2002a:16-18).

There are several factors, which may account for the gradual advance of a predominantly aesthetic, recreational and romantic perception of the Inner Sea. The introduction of larger and faster ships, ship engines and sophisticated navi-

gation techniques greatly reduced the vastness of the sea and the danger of shipping. Progress in naval technology, oceanography, and weather forecasting led to an increase in empirical knowledge and control of the sea and to a gradual shift away from a preponderance of religious beliefs and practices in the interaction between people and the sea. The spread of the idyllic view of a benevolent sea at the expense of the perception of the sea as threatening and repulsive were conditional upon such developments.

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.  
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,  
the shore yellow: all lovely,  
all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this  
(I actually did see it for a minute when I first stopped)  
and not my usual day-dreams here too,  
my memories, those sensual images.  
(C.P. Cavafy, 'Morning sea')

### **The Sea of Tourists and Migrants**

Each year between June and September approximately 110 million tourists spend their holiday along the Mediterranean shores, making up one third of the global tourist flow. In the light of this massive arrival of foreign, and more recently domestic tourists, the Inner Sea has taken on an entirely new meaning as an economic, social and cultural resource. Mass tourism, attracted by the widely diffused image of a calm, blue and salutary sea as an icon of the good life and *dolce far niente*, has transformed and homogenized formerly diverse coastal landscapes with regard to buildings, economic and leisure activities, manners, and the perception and organization of time. It has also drastically affected centre-periphery relationships, the fragile coastal environment, and the quality of life in most Mediterranean countries (Löfgren 1999).

The massive counter-movement of trans-Mediterranean migrants from the early 1960s onwards points to a dividing sea, a deepening political, economic and ideological watershed between the countries of the European Union and those of the southern, eastern and north-eastern shores. Over the past ten years the clandestine, mostly nocturnal, crossing of the Mediterranean has become a dangerous passage into Europe for an increasing number of migrants from Africa and Asia. These 'new immigrants' are often confronted with the dark face of the sea. Their experience of a threatening, repulsive, unpredictable and devouring sea is similar to that of earlier generations of sailors, travellers, fishermen and coast dwellers. It is the complete opposite of the beneficent sea of the tourists, which is a sea domesticated for pleasure.

This Janus-faced Mediterranean is particularly evident when seen from the beaches of Tarifa, the southernmost town of Europe at a distance of only thirteen kilometres from Africa. In the daytime the beaches are crowded by a motley international flock of windsurfers and sunbathers, local joggers and strollers with their

dogs. At night they are the scene of clandestine migrants wading ashore in search of a better life. During the day, tourists are ferried from Tarifa to Tangier for a day-trip, while at night African migrants make their risky passage in small, overcrowded fishing sloops in the opposite direction.

Spanish border officials estimate that between 1995 and 1999 more than 3,000 people drowned crossing the sea frontier between Morocco and Spain (Driessen 1998:103; 2002b:29).

Local authorities of beach towns such as Tarifa do their utmost to keep the contrasting worlds of tourists and clandestine migrants apart. Sometimes the nocturnal and daylight activities meet. This is dramatically shown by a series of powerful pictures taken some years ago by a Spanish photographer on one of the beaches of the Costa de la Luz. They show the body of a black man washed ashore. At a small distance sits a young tourist couple relaxing under a sunshade. Policemen spread out the meagre possessions of the drowned migrant: a Bob Marley compact disk, some family snapshots, a picture of the Pope, a comb and hair brush, a few banknotes and a rollable tape line. In the final picture we see the young couple playing badminton while the corpse is carried away in a coffin. This fleeting small tableau tells a penetrating story. The reality it captures has become an almost daily routine along several of the beaches of Europe's South where migrants are landing.

Let me now quote at length from an oral account of a Moroccan man who almost lost his life during his sea passage to Europe. During the interview he lived and worked on a farm in the southeast of Spain as part of a team of clandestine labourers who are relatives and proceed from the same village in the interior of Morocco. His story is derived from the recent documentary film *Quand les hommes pleurent* (When men cry) by the Belgian-Moroccan filmmaker Yasmine Kassari. I have chosen it because it relates in minute detail the experience of crossing the Mediterranean at night in a sloop and evokes an experience of the sea that stands in stark contrast to the touristic image of and involvement with the Méditerranée. The migrant's narrative develops as follows:

'I decided to make the crossing in a small boat and went to Tetuan [in northern Morocco] where I spent forty-two days in a hotel. We made an arrangement with a smuggler. During the passage he was drunk. We almost capsized and had to return. The sea was too turbulent. We spent another twenty days in Tetuan ... . When the sea became calm again, another man was chosen to ferry us across. We departed on a Friday midnight. We passed Ceuta [a Spanish enclave in Morocco] and the Straits of Gibraltar. We hoped to land in Spain at four a.m., before the morning fog. When we were crossing the Straits, the motor failed. The fog thickened and we could not see anything. By the time the motor was fixed, the smuggler had completely lost his way because the Moroccan lighthouse that was his point of orientation could not be seen anymore. Because of the peaspout fog we could not see either coast. We were lost. Twenty-three men were packed in a small boat. We could not move. The boat was long and narrow [probably between four and six metres long and two metres wide, the usual measures of a *patera*, a sloop]. You just could not move. At about 5 p.m. a small ship passed by. The crew saw us yet they sailed on.

We tried to follow but the ship disappeared out of sight again and again because of the waves. On top of a wave we could see that the ship had turned around. Then it disappeared again. A helicopter was following the ship. Suddenly it turned to our sloop but it flew over. We signalled to the helicopter but it vanished. We were desperately longing to get out of the sea but the helicopter never came back. Everybody fell asleep except me. The wind blew small waves against the sloop. I saw fish jumping out of the water. I don't know whether it was fish. At midnight something big came out of the sea. I didn't know what it was. It was very big. It whistled and splashed into the water. The sloop watered and I got soaking wet. I was confounded. Then I saw girls sitting on the water. One was sitting in front of me, the other sideways, looking at me. I thought I went crazy. Girls sitting on the water! Impossible. [Question by the filmmaker: "Were they sitting close to you?"] No, at a distance. I had gone mad. They had golden hair. Their hair spread out over the sea. I cannot recall more. I touched the water and said to myself: "Me at high sea and the girls sitting on the water? No!" Then the day broke and again we were sailing the empty expanse of water. We were completely lost and the fuel was almost finished. We wanted to get out of the sea if only to a desert island. The feeling in our feet had gone. We were benumbed up to the hips. A man from Tawriat [a town in the central Rif], a Kader, no Ramdan. I met him in Tetuan. He cried: "Oh, Children, my children. I did not die among my children and my body will not be returned." He wept. The sight of the sea was just too much for him. He was sitting on his heels. His eye sockets turned green as grass, real green. His mouth hung open, filthy, covered with flies. He was smelling bad. Then we saw a ship pass. We moved in front trying to ram it because then at least they had to rescue those of us who could swim. We could hear the sound of its engine coming closer. Two sailors saw us and gave us a sign to stop. It was a Turkish freighter. They called Barcelona to ask what to do. Barcelona replied: "Leave them behind, or do whatever you like but don't bring them here. We do not want to have anything to do with Moroccans." The sailors started to quarrel among themselves and the men in my boat began to cry. Then the Turks said: "We have found you in the name of Allah. Whatever they will tell us, we will rescue you or we will go down together. You are now with us and we will see that no harm comes to you"

I heard similar, albeit much less detailed stories, about the clandestine passage across the Mediterranean when talking to 'new immigrants', I met at several locations in Southern Spain during brief periods of fieldwork in the 1990s. Several of my interlocutors had experienced horrific moments on the open sea and almost all had been frightened to death when the smugglers forced them to get out of the sloop into the sea just short of the sometimes rocky coast. Some of them told me that they had seen companions being swallowed up by the sea because they could not swim. All were completely exhausted and dumb by the time they reached the dunes. One look at the faces of the 'wetbacks' or 'boatpeople' in the photographic reports by Salgado (2000) and Van Denderen (2003) is enough to sense the mixture of exhaustion, horror, fear,

and numbness. These immigrants have been witness to an archetypal dangerous Mediterranean, a sea that the average tourist will never experience in his or her life. The sudden mists, treacherous currents and winds pose the greatest danger during the nocturnal crossing from Morocco to Spain. Moreover, the fishing sloops used in the people smuggling business are only apt for inshore sailing and overcrowded. It is no exception that they make water during the passage. And if the engine fails, the boat runs the risk of drifting into the Atlantic Ocean.

The experience recounted above provides us with a clue of how people in the past may have lived the Mediterranean passage whether as merchants, sailors, soldiers, galley slaves or as diplomats, missionaries and explorers. Of course, these people usually did not travel in the kind of sloops the clandestine migrants are doomed to. Nonetheless they also had to face the unpredictable forces of the sea and weather as well as the ordeal of seasickness and (the threat of) lack of food and water. The mirage experienced by the Moroccan migrant, caused by lack of sleep, by hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear of the overwhelming mass of water, may thus be indicative of how the Mediterranean has been experienced throughout much of its history: as threatening, repulsive, capricious, mysterious and devouring. The parallel between the man's visions and the ancient images of monsters and sirens is striking indeed. The Jewish-Spanish Ladino saying *dame el mazál e ecame a la mar* (wish me good luck and throw me into the sea) and the ritual acts performed before embarking on a sea passage, can be better understood when we take into account this migrant's story.

The notion of *la mer dévoreuse* (the devouring sea) is also current among the Moroccan relatives and friends whom the 'new' migrants leave behind and who sometimes never learn of the fate of their beloved ones. This is a powerful theme in some recent short stories and novels by Moroccan writers (Kabbal 1999-2000; Binebine 1999). And it is evoked in a stanza from a recent song called 'Clandestinos' by Manu Chao: *Pa'una ciudad del norte, yo me fui a trabajar; mi vida la dejé entre Ceuta y Gibraltar* (To a city of the north, I went to work; I left my life between Ceuta and Gibraltar). This conception of a sea that takes human lives, both in a literal and metaphoric sense, is of course a far cry from the idyllic, salutary Mediterranean of the tourists.

This sharp opposition between a romantic and agonistic view of the Mediterranean as represented by the experiences of tourists and migrants can be put into wider perspective by taking into account testimonies of men who depend on the sea for making a living. Talking with professional seamen it struck me that they rarely praised the beauty of the sea but rather that of ports and their hinterlands. Asked to tell about the most difficult moments in his career, a retired captain of a container ship related the following incident:

'What marks me for the rest of my life happened in September 1994 when navigating the Strait of Gibraltar in thick fog. I suddenly detected a *patera* about to capsiz and twenty people desperately clinging to the sloop. In spite of the fog, the strong current and the fact that the ship was heavily loaded, I managed to turn it towards the drowning people trying to rescue them by throwing lifebuoys, life jackets and nets to them. The ship approached them very closely and the drowning men struggled to reach it, but most of

them could not swim. We managed to get two boys out of the water but the other eighteen drowned in front of my eyes. Even after almost ten years, this image of young men swallowed up by the sea still haunts me.'

This informant also recollected various occasions when he had to seek refuge in ports because of unexpected storms. And although he spoke with satisfaction about his thirty-five years on the seas, he was not at all inclined to glamorise sea life nor to identify himself with the romantic image of the sea.

## Conclusion

The different ways people relate to the sea involve not only exploitations, such as fishing and transport, but also perceptions, such as sayings, symbols and rituals. Although instrumental and expressive features are intimately related, in this article my emphasis has been on the symbolic dimension, which has received far less attention in maritime studies than the instrumental one.

Since the emergence of mass tourism the smooth and calm Mediterranean under a clear blue sky has come to overshadow older images of the sea as represented in the experiences of illegal migrants who cross the sea at night in small boats. The idealized view of the Mediterranean is an image constructed from a cruise ship, beach and bathing perspective during the daytime and the spring and summer seasons. This is a Mediterranean marketed as a source of life, relaxation and regeneration. And although the benevolent Mediterranean has never been entirely absent from the imagination and experience of earlier generations who faced the sea, a more agonistic disposition, in which the sea is perceived as a realm of unpredictable forces, danger and death, has been dominant throughout much of Mediterranean history. Given the scale and impact of the tourist industry, the dark side of the Mediterranean has recently become submerged as part of a deepening divide between its northern and southern shores.

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