Figure 1. A village waterscape in West Africa that I travelled to by canoe. It is the village of Ganvie, Benin which was built on Lake Nokoué for protection from enslavers. Photo by the author.

(Life) Cycles, (Ocean) Currents, and (Ancestors') Rhythms: Dawnland Maritime Histories through Indigenous and Black Voices

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What if the conventional maritime history of the Dawnland (New England) and the "founding" and development of Turtle Island (North America / the United States) had always been told through Dawnland Indigenous and African-descended voices? How would the story of the Dawnland be told? What parts of the story would be prioritized and how would the current narrative change? The upcoming Mystic Seaport Museum exhibition, *Entwined: Freedom, Sovereignty, and the Sea* represents our work with Black and Indigenous communities to do just that—tell the maritime history of the Dawnland through Indigenous and Black voices as the authoritative history. *Entwined* opens to the public April 20, 2024.

What if the accepted, "legitimate," *central* historical maritime narrative of the United States focused on the descendants of the African continent and the people of Dawnland Indigenous sovereign nations encountering one another during a cycle of disruption (dispossession and enslavement)—*after* millennia of our own maritime cultures, innovation, and development? What if the telling of Black and Indigenous American maritime histories always began *before* "America" and included *our* Indigenous and African ancestral contributions to American maritime industry and history?

Within our African and Indigenous worldviews, maritime history cannot be told without our cosmologies, spiritualities, our ancestors, cycles of time (rather than time *lines*), cycles of trauma and rebirth and acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the sea itself. These have largely been silent (or silenced) in the framing of the Americas' maritime history. Typically, when traditional scholars engage in Indigenous and Black maritime histories, they "wedge" these histories into a Western, Eurocentric worldview that invalidates Black and Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. What if these perspectives and

histories were validated even when they contradict what historians *think* they know?

I am a scholar who is the descendant of enslaved, "involuntary migrants" to the US who no doubt had deep maritime knowledge, traditions and experiences. I am also the descendant of voluntary migrants—Cape Verdean mariners who came to the Dawnland and established lives, and who themselves had to accommodate the US's framing of "race." I work with and within Dawnland Indigenous and African descendant communities to tell our Indigenous and Black maritime histories through our own voices and the voices of our ancestors to provide insight into the legacies, strength and resilience of the sovereign Indigenous nations and African-descended peoples of the Dawnland. My training as an anthropologist and archaeologist on the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Reservation, my spiritual training in Benin on the shores of West Africa (no doubt, the point of no return for many of my collateral ancestors), and my work among Rastafarians on the shores of the US Virgin Islands have given me the knowledge—both personally and professionally—that I must tell these histories in a way my ancestors would tell them, to acknowledge the perspectives of my ancestors and to honor them. As a scholar, with all I have been given, I must reclaim my place in the sea and its tributaries for myself and my ancestors.

I will share some knowledge about this maritime history that has been shared with me (knowledge that I have permission to share) from African, African American and Indigenous community members. Of course, the Indigenous stories are not mine. They are histories that have been told to me for the purpose of sharing and education. And I have been entrusted to relay these stories truthfully, respectfully, and sensitively, with humility and in friendship.

It feels odd to say as a scholar and an academic, but I don't have many answers—I'm simply learning to ask better questions. I have been taught to explore this history and ask these questions with a humble heart and the wisdom that not all of the story is meant for me to know or to tell. Nonetheless, I think asking new questions is vitally important in reframing the way we do maritime history—or even what we mean when we say "maritime history." How would *you* define "maritime history"? Would you include rivers? Marshes? Wetlands? Landscapes? The divinity and sacredness of water? Ancestral stories? The sovereignty of the ocean? If we are looking at maritime history and maritime stories through Indigenous American, African and African American lenses, we have to see all of the above as inextricable from how we define "maritime." I am relatively new to the discipline and definitely got the sense when I started that for most, *true* maritime history is about "white men on big boats"[1]…but my own history and training outside of the field have led me to approach maritime history differently.

What if scholars changed the way we framed the accepted maritime narrative of the Dawnland and the primary narrative was one of millennia-old Dawnland maritime peoples encountering the descendants of the African continent and sharing their very similar, millennia-old maritime traditions? What if they focused on the centuries of collaboration and conflict between these maritime communities that have had to accommodate and survive through this 500-year cycle of disruption? Changing the narrative in this way wouldn't be so different from what we (as a larger society) already do—the story we tell is that the founding begins in 1620 with the arrival of the Pilgrims—even though there were already sovereign nations present on the landscape and waterscape. As often happens in colonized lands, Indigenous presence on land and waterscapes prior to 1620 is generally framed as happening before the *actual* story starts. So, the beginning of the story depends on *whose* story we're choosing to center. If we removed European "discovery" and colonization as the *cen-*

tral narrative in "American" maritime history, we can start to explore African-Indigenous encounters and connections in more meaningful ways and as a primary narrative—including themes like use of environment, different knowledges and sciences, cosmology, spirituality and maritime histories and experiences—really, a new, more holistic epistemology.

We might ask new questions about watercraft. Maritime communities in the Dawnland—for example, nations such as the Pequot, Narragansett, Nipmuc, Wampanoag and others built muhshoons/mishoons (dugout canoes). In the Dawnland and throughout sub-Saharan Africa, dugout canoes were used for fishing, maintaining community connections and for trade along the coasts and on rivers. Throughout Africa, they were also used for naval battles and long-distance travel (the river system on the continent spans from the west coast to the Sudan) and there was a distinction between those who used canoes to travel the open seas and those who navigated rivers in canoes. There are early Portuguese accounts of Senegalese fishermen who "fished up to three, four and five leagues to sea…and were expert and able swimmers and divers."[2] Some West African canoes were quite large and could carry up to 120 men, had cooking hearths, storage for sleeping mats and contained forecastles. They had the ability to carry heavy cargoes. Some were also recorded as having sails.[3] Rivers connected inland communities with coastal people, and canoes were also used to navigate up and down the coast—from the Gold Coast to Angola (Figure 1). Throughout the continent, Africans utilized riverine and coastal routes for trade and warfare from Sudan to the Atlantic.

It is intriguing to think about *how* these existing Indigenous and African skill sets were incorporated into Euro-American boat building and navigation techniques…and we do know from the history of Southern plantations and from communities like the Wampanoag that they were. We also know that enslaved Africans were often employed in boat construction all along the East Coast and throughout the Caribbean.

We can imagine Africans encountering the Indigenous peoples of the Dawnland and seeing that they often created watercraft using the same methods; that they used a similar selection process for the wood, and they constructed their watercraft in a very similar way—by burning them out. An early description of the construction of an African canoe by a European observer could very well have also been a description of the burning out of a muhshoon/mishoon:

> They are made all in one piece, from a single tree trunk…They round off the trunk at each end, then dig it out with an iron tool[4]...[they] then burn straw in the hollow, in order to prevent the sun from splitting the boat or worms from entering.[5]

> When the Trunk of the Tree is cut to the Length they design, they hollow it as much as they can with these crooked knives, and they burn it out by Degrees until it is reduced to the intended Cavity and Thickness, which they then Scrape and Plane with other small tools of their Invention, both within and without, leaving it sufficient Thickness, so as not to Split when loaded. The Bottom is made almost flat, and the sides somewhat rounded, so that it is always narrower, just at the Top, and bellies out a little lower, that it may carry more Sail. The Head and Stern are raised long, and somewhat hooked, very sharp at the End, that several men may lift them on Occasion, to lay it up ashore and turn it upside down, so that they make it as light as possible.[6]

> On sea-going canoes, the sides are propped up by wooden posts because to [*sic*] prevent the wood from expanding. Riverine and lagoon watercraft are allowed to expand.[7]

Throughout the African continent, canoe-builders are considered almost religious leaders.[8] Africans, early African-descended peoples in the Dawnland and Indigenous people in the Dawnland had the same personal and spiritual connection with their watercraft and conceived of the universe in similar, holistic ways. How did this contribute to free and enslaved Africans' choices and desires to live in and marry into Indigenous communities? Was Indigenous spirituality and maritime perspective a means of maintaining their *Africanness* and their existing worldview? These were two maritime cultures that existed before "America," and both were dealing with dispossession and enslavement at the hands of Europeans and later Euro-Americans. Conceiving of connections like these can help us rethink the many ways "free and enslaved Africans found respect, spirituality and safety in Native communities"[9] and maintained their existing maritime traditions.

As mentioned, Black and Indigenous relationships with the sea and its tributaries predate "America." There were knowledges of water, waterways, waterscapes and water divinities. On each side of the Atlantic, both Africans and Indigenous North Americans depended on deep knowledge of the sea and tributaries as fluctuating, cyclical ecozones, and they relied upon the sea and travel by water for sustenance, trade, and maintaining community and kinship. In many Dawnland creation narratives, people's origins are in the marshes and the ocean is a divine and sovereign entity in and of itself.

In thinking about these maritime connections between sub-Saharan Africa and the Dawnland, it is also important to point out similarity with regard to worldview and feelings about the water that would have been a major point of connection between the two geographic locations (the African continent and the Dawnland)—and it is intriguing to think of how this may have played a role in BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) identities, participation, experiences and perspectives when large numbers of Black and Indigenous men engaged in whaling and maritime trade.

Maritime scholars have not traditionally asked questions about the impact of traditional African-descended and Indigenous worldviews and how they informed maritime experiences for men of color. For example, among communities in Indigenous Nations of the Northeast, the (under) water world represented both spiritual power, history, and liminal status (being betwixt and between). Wampum, which comes from the quahog shell, has a special significance, in part, because of these associations. I came across beliefs about the sacredness of the ocean and the underwater world in a cemetery analysis I did many years ago as an archaeologist looking at who was buried with *what* in a mid-18th-century New England Indigenous burial ground. This was a cemetery that had to be removed and reburied/repatriated/rematriated because it was discovered on someone's private property, and the work was done under the supervision of the tribe whose ancestors were in the cemetery. Upon analysis of the belongings interred in graves, it was clear that only a certain age group was buried with wampum. It was an age group that could be considered "liminal" with one foot grounded in this world and one in the spirit world. No one else in the cemetery was buried with wampum.

I highlight these meanings and uses of wampum as an aside, so that we can start to think about what non-Indigenous scholars and institutions (such as museums) must include in considering Indigenous maritime histories and narratives. These beliefs are also evident in stories of Maushop, the benevolent giant who creates waterscapes and landscapes and nourishes people with the bounty of the sea. There are many other Indigenous maritime histories that have been reduced to "myths" and have been invalidated by scholars and non-Indigenous people. These Indige-

Figure 2. An African figurine representing Mami Wata, from the collection of Kevin Dawson. Photograph by Matteo Dawson

Figure 3. Cowrie shell transported from West Africa by an enslaved individual, discovered beneath an attic floorboard in Newport, Rhode Island. The shell was part of a bundle presumably created for prayer and to accompany its creator home when they crossed the waters. Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society

nous stories are present, valid, relevant and contain a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge—a holistic perspective that includes science, history, creation and the other disciplines that scholars tend to treat as distinct and separate. This knowledge has always sustained and continues to sustain the people of the Dawnland through the present. If this holistic and spiritual lens is how Indigenous people of the Dawnland conceive of materials from the water, envision the sea, and define water in general, it is an important component of telling a holistic maritime narrative if non-Indigenous scholars wish to do a new maritime history that is truly told through Indigenous voices.

The people who were enslaved and brought from the African continent to the Dawnland were sometimes coastal and often riverine maritime peoples. On both sides of the Atlantic, there were fishing communities and boat-building traditions. There were also surfing traditions on both coasts of the African continent. Fishing trips would often end in canoe surfing races. It amazed European observers that no one ever drowned[10]—because most Europeans could not swim, let alone surf. There were also deep-water diving traditions and other highly skilled maritime practices that were transported to the Americas along with the bodies of the enslaved, such as shark hunting[11] and other skills detailed in studies such as Kevin Dawson's *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (2018).

Both Africans and Indigenous North Americans conceptualized (and *conceptualize*) waterscapes as seamless intersections of land and water that create social, cultural, and spiritual understandings. Water is the source of human life and a life-force that sustains us, physically and spiritually. We know that these beliefs were transported from West, Central and Southern Africa when we hear Southern Black American folklore about "Simbi [also spelled Cymbee] spirits." Simbi:

> are water spirits that hail from western and central Africa. They live in unusual rocks, gullies, streams, springs, waterfalls, sinkholes, and pools, which areas they effectively "adopt" as territorial guardians. The Simbi are said to be able to influence the fertility and well-being of people living in their territory. At the same time, they can and will cause trouble if they are not treated with respect.[12]

Ras Michael Brown argues that these spirits allowed Africans who were strangers to the area and lacked ties with named ancestors to still have access to the agents of otherworldly powers and to feel attached to the land where they lived. These spirits were on the land and waterscapes "regardless of what inhabitants already occupied those lands and waters and what these indigenes called the spirits found there."[13] In the Dawnland, this may have again created a context within which, "free and enslaved Africans found respect, spirituality and safety in Native communities"[14] through similar spiritual connections to land- and waterscapes.

Similar to Dawnland Indigenous knowledge about (under)water worlds and the spiritual significance of bodies of water, throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa and most notably the Kongo regions, the world under the waters is the land of the dead/spirits/ancestors. Stories of Mami Wata, the "mermaid" (the Mother of the fishes, the Mother of us all) encapsulate an African knowledge of the sea as divine, *feminine* space (Figure 2). The Mende describe death as "crossing the waters" and we see this sentiment repeated through the present day in the story of Ibo Landing, in which enslaved individuals walked off the slave ship in chains, turned around and walked into the water. Historians have interpreted Ibo Landing as a "mass suicide" but African descendants describe it as "flying home" or "crossing the waters." And finally, although most enslaved African descendants in the

Dawnland were instructed in Christianity, there is evidence from Newport, Rhode Island and Deerfield, Massachusetts that the enslaved maintained their African spiritualities and practices (though hidden) with regard to water by gathering and maintaining *nkisi* bundles[15] that contained shells, broken glass, nails, bones and other materials so that they would have these bundles to bring back home with them when they crossed the waters (Figure 3).

With regard to "conversion" to Christianity, it is important to consider how Africans and Indigenous peoples of the Dawnland were able to thread enforced concepts of Christianity into existing worldviews and maintain their spirituality (for the purposes of this conversation, specifically regarding beliefs about water). Maintaining African spirituality and community are not as apparent in New England as they are in the Southern United States or in the Caribbean (in practices like Vodoun or Santería), but we have rarely asked these questions beyond simply looking for "Africanisms" or "retentions." For example, scholars and people of African descent who are far removed from African systems of meaning (because of time and disruption) can ask about meaning systems for enslaved Africans in the Dawnland when they were introduced to the Virgin Mary (the name Mary, which also literally means "the sea" and is whom seafarers pray to for safety at sea). Was Mary a common-sense representation of Mami Wata for African descendants in the Dawnland?

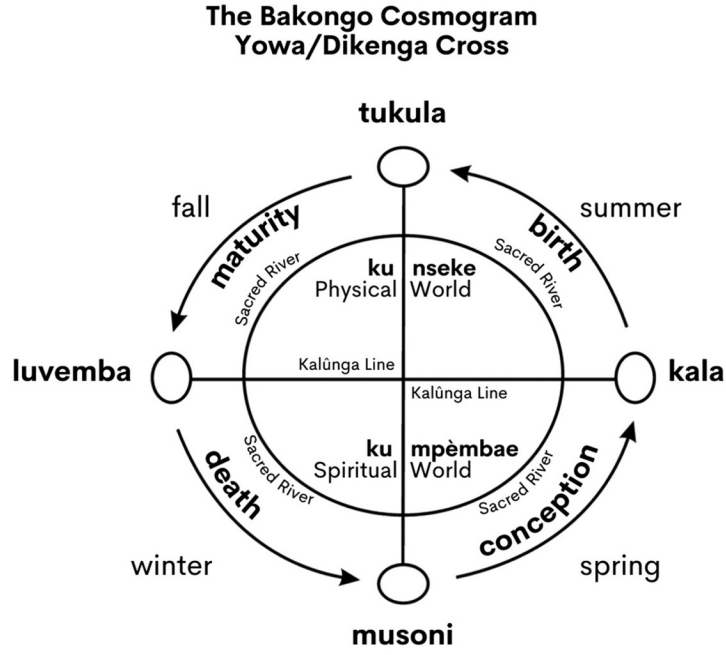

Figure 4. The Bakongo Cosmogram. Image by MiddleAfrica, CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kongo_Cosmogram_01.png

This representation of or exchange of imagery of Mary for Mami Wata is *very* visible in contemporary spiritual practice throughout the Caribbean and South America, where African belief and practice were kept out of sight through the use of Christian iconography like Mary to maintain spiritual and cultural practice.[16]

The Bakongo Cosmogram (a symbol of the interpretation of the universe in many traditional African religions) is a circle (representing eternal cycles of life, death and rebirth) surrounding a cross (Figure 4). The horizontal line on the cross is the *kalunga,* the watery threshold between the world of the "living" and the world of the ancestors and spirits. Would enslaved African-descended peoples in the Dawnland have seen and acknowledged the Christian cross and the story of resurrection in their own cosmogram and the (under)water world? Through hermeneutics and questioning how cultural and religious iconography would have been given meaning by enslaved peoples accommodating new, imposed worldviews, we all might come to understand how African-descended maritime peoples of the Dawnland sustained (and are currently *reclaiming*) their relationship to the seas.

For enslaved Africans *then* and both Indigenous and African-descended people now, the sea is fraught. There's a duality—the same sea that was benevolent and sustained kin and community for millennia became the means by which people were enslaved, and lost communities and ancestral ties to the land; it was also the means by which colonizers came and brought disease and dispossession. And then that sea became one of the few avenues by which Black and Indigenous men could make a living and sustain their families, communities, and tribal nations.

There are many Indigenous, African, and African-descended individuals whose stories represent the complexities and contradictions of race and racism after the disruptions of colonialism and within our traditionally told maritime heritage. We can see these contradictions in individual Indigenous and Black narratives of maritime life. For example, many men of color made their fortunes at sea. And, while the sea and river networks were the paths of enslavement, numbers of enslaved men and women alike also *escaped* their enslavement by sea—a much safer path to freedom than the terrestrial Underground Railroad.[17]

Again, utilizing hermeneutics, or the meanings people assign to things, we can explore whether this escape by water was seen by some through the lens of the spiritual power of water and the power of the ancestors beneath. And if we think about men like Venture Smith and Paul Cuffe, who made their fortunes at sea and in maritime-related trades, even though they lived steeped in racism and inequality and had to look at the enslavement of men and women who looked just like them. How did their African identities and knowledges shape and define Smith's and Cuffe's relationship with the water? Venture Smith was enslaved and taken from West Africa at the age of eight. By that time, he would have been well versed in the power of ancestors and the power of the sea. Paul Cuffe's father was West African and his mother was Wampanoag. He undoubtedly grew up learning about the power of the sea, the power of ancestors and the sea as a sovereign entity. There are also numerous stories of Black women who maintained households and communities in port towns and stories of Indigenous women like Hannah Miller, a Pequot woman who acted as community leaders while the majority of men in their communities were out to sea.

We should all continue to explore the nature of the sea and waterways as a double-edged sword for Indigenous and Black peoples after colonial disruption—on the one hand, representing creation, divinity, ancestors, power, strength and agency, freedom and integration…and on the other hand a place of enslavement, trauma and death. Very appropriately, according to *both* Dawnland Indig-

enous and African wisdom, this framing is fitting—as water and the ocean itself are places of birth, death, and rebirth.

Maritime social histories can make a *strong* argument that the complex narratives of the modern world *are* rooted in maritime histories—but we cannot begin the telling of these histories at the point of colonial enterprise. We cannot begin to understand our world and our humanity (let alone the development of the modern world system) without understanding how waterways have shaped human interactions and human relationships from time immemorial. And non-BIPOC scholars cannot continue to force global maritime narratives into a Western frame. Doing so is a disservice to individuals and communities whose maritime histories we tell and is a greater disservice to the discipline.

As a "conclusion" and an aside, it is worth noting that when I asked a colleague, Bridget Hall, to review a draft of this article for flow and grammatical errors, etc., she responded that my use of "our" and "we" was very confusing. It wasn't entirely clear to her when I meant "our" and "we" speaking as a person of African descent and embedded in African spirituality, and when I meant "our" and "we" speaking as a scholar of this maritime history. I hope that the issue has been clarified for the reader. But ultimately, the confusion is in part because I am not always clear on when I am acting as one or the other. I sometimes do not know when I *should* act as one or the other. Or perhaps the significance of this article is in pointing out the larger problem—that there *is* a distinction between one and the other.

Endnotes

1 At the end of the 2022 Frank C. Munson Institute of American Maritime History, one of the fellows stated to me that this was the first time they, as a maritime scholar, had thought about maritime history "beyond white men on big boats."

2 Robert Smith, "The Canoe in West African History," *The Journal of African History* 11, no. 4 (1970): 516.

3 Ibid., 518; Lynn B. Harris, "From African Canoe to Plantation Crew: Tracing Maritime Memory and Legacy," *Coriolis* 4, no. 2 (2013): 35-52

4 In the Dawnland it would have been stone.

5 Kwamina B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 297.

6 Thomas Astley, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels: Consisting of the Most Esteemed Relations Which Have Been Hitherto Published in Any Language, Comprehending Everything Remarkable in Its Kind in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America*, vol. 3 (London: Printed for T. Astley, 1745), 650.

7 Smith, "The Canoe," 520.

8 Harris, "From African Canoe," 43; Kevin Dawson, "Liquid Motion: Reimaging Maritime History through an African Lens," in this issue, 16–37.

9 Jonathan James Perry, Aquinnah Wampanoag, personal communication, January 6, 2022.

10 Harris, "From African Canoe," 38.

11 John Lawson, *A New Voyage to South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 140.

12 Natalie Adams, "The 'Cymbee' Water Spirits of St. John's Berkeley," *African Diaspora Archaeology Network Newsletter*, June 2007, 10.

13 Ras Michael Brown, *African Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Low Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91.

14 Jonathan James Perry, Aquinnah Wampanoag, personal communication, January 6, 2022.

15 One bundle was discovered under an attic floorboard of a colonial home in Newport, Rhode Island. And there is a description of Jinny Cole, a woman enslaved by Deerfield's Minister, Jonathan Ashley, collecting and maintaining items for a bundle and then passing the tradition down to her own son.

16 See Alison Glassie, "Our Lady of the Workboats: Solidarity and Spirituality on the Bay of All Saints," in this issue, 42–59.

17 See, for example, Timothy D. Walker, ed., *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).