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The intersection of tradition and economy: Exploring the sacrificial practices in Zanzibar's Blue Economy

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ABSTRACT

The blue economy is now emerging as the essential conceptual framework to know how communities living on the coasts cope with sustainability and identify issues and build marine-based livelihoods. This paper aims to discuss the intersection between tradition and economy by investigating the issues of sacrifice in the Zanzibar fishing industry. That of the research, which relies on the accounts of fishermen and field observations in addition to questionnaire (n=22) results, concludes that whereas some individuals consider ritual sacrifices to be symbolic to more ceremonial rituals required to reach prosperous catches and economic prosperity, other people perceive it to be expensive or even destructive. These practices show how the cultural rituals and belief systems inform the way resources are utilized, how they make their revenue, and the way communities are built. They also highlight the relevant concerns of the correlation between traditional worldviews and the existing policies that facilitate the development of the blue economy. By placing sacrificial activity in the larger context of the fisheries livelihoods and cultural sustainability debate, this article highlights the need to incorporate socio-cultural considerations into strategies to support inclusive and resilient blue economies particularly where local systems of belief continue to have an impact.

Keywords: blue economy; Zanzibar; traditional; fishing

1. INTRODUCTION

The blue economy is increasingly becoming the core vision for island and coastal nations as serving the frameworks which integrates sustainable development, marine livelihoods, and environmental stewardship (Gul & Khawar Ali Shah, 2021; Sumaila et al., 2019). In Zanzibar, an East African archipelago part of Tanzania, fishing not only is an economic activity but is also rooted in culture, religion, and social life (Pike et al., 2024; Stiepani et al., 2023).It functions as the backbone of the economy, providing livelihoods, employment, and food security for a significant percentage of the population (Ferrol-Schulte et al., 2014; Thyresson et al., 2013).

While substantial portion of the blue economy literature concentrates on technology innovation, marine planning, and environmental sustainability, relatively little scholarly attention has been focused on the degree to how traditional practice and belief influence fish behaviour and shape how community-level risk, uncertainty, and resource management strategy. (United Nations, 2017)

In this context, Zanzibar fishers, as in so many other coastal societies globally, fishing is a way of life more than an economic endeavour; it is a cultural practice deeply embedded in spiritual faith, social custom, and indigenous systems of knowledge. Fishers sometimes conduct sacrificial rituals (locally referred to as *kafara* or *ritwali*) ranging from simple offerings of seawater or salt to more complex rituals involving offerings of livestock or symbolic actions prior to fishing trips or to mark the onset of a new fishing season. These rituals are thought at the local level to ensure safety, good fortune, and fruitful harvests. However, these activities in coastal economy are at an intersection of traditional and economic rationality that is continuously modernizing. (Deb, 2018; Reddy, 2020)

The study examines the sacrificial practices of fishing communities in Zanzibar. Examine them as logical, culturally established risk-management techniques in context of significant and environmental uncertainty goes beyond simply putting them off as superstition. The article is addressing two related questions: (a) How do fishers in Zanzibar perceive and practice ritual sacrifices in the context of their marine livelihoods? And (b) What are the implications of these practices for culturally sensitive and inclusive blue economy development?

To respond to them, the study was employed qualitative interviews and field observation with fishermen on the coast of Zanzibar, supplemented by review of secondary literature on marine governance, belief systems, and economic anthropology. The results present contradictory scenario: with some of fishermen strongly believing sacrifice rites are very essential, while others consider and put them as expensive superstition. These differing point of views are crucial for policy creation: Ritual based elimination poses the danger of alienating the communities and weakening governance initiatives. This paper argues that, for the blue economy frameworks to be both locally legitimate and robust, they must engage with, rather than substitute for cultural knowledge

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Blue Economy: Promises, Pitfall ad Local Realities

The "blue economy" concept coined in various forms by Gunter Pauli and used commonly by international organizations—is inclusive of ocean-based economic activities that are sustainable and environmentally friendly (Md. Simul Bhuyan et al., 2020; United Nations, 2017). The Blue Economy model has been applied across the Western Indian Ocean and African continent (UNECA, 2016). The model is inclusive of sustainable, multi-sectoral development encompassing fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, and renewable energy, moving away from purely extractive uses of ocean resources.

In Zanzibar, however, the implementation of this global model encounters local challenges. The small-scale and artisanal fishermen which is the central to the local economy, face several challenges such as declining fishery resources, climate-related impacts, destructive fishing, and constrained access to innovative technology and capital (Mustelin et al., 2011). Consequently, while coastal countries like Tanzania (with Zanzibar included) view Blue economy as a driver of development, employment, and climatic resilience, critics warn that it is focus on largescale, investment-demanding activities (such as commercial aquaculture and offshore energy) can marginalize

small scale fishers (Abdalla et al., 2023; Maskaeva et al., 2024; Thoya et al., 2022). There is also concern of "Green grabbing" where development or conservation agendas are seen to take priority over local access rights and customary modes of doing things (Bennett & Dearden, 2014).

In responding to these challenges, a growing body of research advocates for a "just blue economy," which acknowledges socio-cultural, equity, and governance aspects (Bennett & Dearden, 2014; One Earth, 2022). Legitimacy, involvement and cultural sensitivity together with environmental or economic success determine the effectiveness of blue economy policies in such situations (Diederichsen et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2023).

2.2. Ritual Economy and Cultural Belief in Economic Decision

The ritual economy concept introduce the focus on the practical effects that may be caused by rituals that represent symbolic business and non material values. (Kopytoff, 1986) According to several scholars, people frequently use cultural practices including rituals, divination and offerings in addition to instrumental action when faced with uncertainty. (Rudski & Edwards, 2007). This phenomenon has deep roots in the economic anthropology notably observed by Malinowski (1948) in the Trobriand Islands, when he saw that magic served as a psychological shield against uncertainty of fishing

Empirical studies in West Africa, Latin America, and South Asia reveal that market rationality can coexist with ritual action particularly in agriculture, mining, and forestry (Kanamaru, 2014; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2004). Within coastal societies, research indicates that fishermen might be spending time or money in ritual action because it is not irrationality, but as substitute strategies in addition to gear investment or social networks (Karakara et al., 2024). Despite this evidence, these cultural dimensions are rarely incorporated into mainstream blue economy debates. (Engen et al., 2021)

In East Africa, in Zanzibar where Islamic and Swahili cultures dominate, religious beliefs come in the shape of an orthodox religion-spirit cults (masheitani), and local cosmologies (Bolton Caitlyn, 2024; Thompson, 2015). Sacrificial offerings are among the many ways of praying for protection, health, or prosperity (*kafara* in Kiswahili, with Islamic roots). In fishing, the offering can vary from the harmless (praying or giving or contributing to the community) to the contentious, e.g., blaming animal and, in some instances, human offering to strong sea spirits (Da Silva et al., 2019; Niswatin et al., 2020). They are not typically in the open, thus not easily studied but worth learning about the local political economy of fishing.

In summary, the literature suggests that cultural beliefs and rituals are not marginal curiosities but rather engaged motivators of decision-making on the use of resources and legitimacy in societies. For Zanzibar, this implies that any effective blue economy policy must be able to engage with sacrificial practices, acknowledging them as part of the "economy of belief."

2.3. Literature Gap

While there is ample research on the ecological and economic aspects of Zanzibar's fisheries and some on gender roles, the specific role of ritual sacrifices in the economic life of fishers remains critically under-examined. Most blue economy policy documents are silent on this issue. This article seeks to fill this gap by empirically documenting these practices and analysing their implications for blue economy governance and livelihood resilience.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study Area and Research Design

The research was conducted in Zanzibar's coastal fishing communities located on the island of Unguja and Pemba Islands. To ensure diverse range of perspectives data was collected from several coastal villages and towns in Zanzibar including Nungwi, Bububu, Mtoni and Mbuzini. The research employed a mixed-methods study design integrating quantitative survey, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observation. Data collection took place over four months (June–September 2025) and focused on sample of 22 individuals who are working in Zanzibar's fishery industry including fishers, boat owners, and fish traders.

3.2. Sample and Respondent Selection

A study selected a purposive sample of 22 active small-scale marine fishers. In sampling considerations, there was geographical variation (east, west, and centre coasts), gear type variation (traps, handlines, nets), and willingness to discuss ritual practice. The sample may be small, but it is sufficient for exploratory qualitative-quantitative triangulation in this ethnographically rich field.

3.3. Data Collection

The primary data collection included: (1) Formal survey to gather demographic data, fishing tradition, willingness to make sacrifices, expense and frequency of rituals, views on perceived advantage, and willingness to try alternatives; (2) semi-structured interview: Allowed participants to share stories and explain the underling reasoning behind their rituals action; (3) through participant observation which involved accompanying fishermen on several trips and recorded when, how, and whether changes in behaviour followed rituals.

Secondary sources of data were: (1) NGO and government studies on Zanzibar blue economy and fisheries policy (e.g. TAFIRI, Ministry of Blue Economy, Zanzibar Fisheries Department); (2) Academic literature on East African coastal fisheries, ritual practice, and cultural anthropology; (3) Fish stock trend data from NOAA, FAO, and WorldFish for the Western Indian Ocean, as comparative ecological frame of reference.

A through critique of peer reviewed scholarly articles, government documents and books on blue economy, anthropology of fishing and social cultural in Zanzibar was undertaken to put most important findings into context. Generally, this makes that study well supported by available scholarly literature

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative surveys were examined utilizing univariate descriptive statistics (frequencies, cross-tabulations). Qualitative interview information was coded through thematic analysis, utilizing thematic codes of belief logic, economic trade-offs, social legitimacy, and policy receptiveness. (Galanis P, 2014; Vetter, 2017) Ethnographic field notes gave contextual depth and illustrative quotes.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive context of the topic, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all the respondents. Every care was exercised in using the term "harmful practices" in such a way as not to prejudge, and respondents were free to describe their experiences in their own words.

4. RESULTS

The study results give a complex story of the fishing communities in Zanzibar where traditional beliefs are deeply rooted and contemporary economic pressures and high level of education.

4.1. Socio-Economic Background: Education, Uncertainty and Dependence On Fishing

The profile questions of the respondent give general assumption about the participants of ritual practices. The participants were only male, an indication of the gendered dynamics of labour involved in offshore fishing, and with a mean age of approximately 30 years. Significant finding was that all respondents were at least college level educated, indicating that participation in ritual practice is no confined to the elderly or uneducated but prevalent among a literate and younger subset of people.

Fishing was the main source of livelihood for the majority, although with a wide variation of monthly earnings ranging from below Tsh. 100,000 to over Tsh. 1,000,000. This is in an environment of high concern. The most-consensual result was fishermen feeling that catches have declined during the recent years compared to the past, with the respondents often pointing at lack of fish, degradation of the environment, and unfavourable market prices as main issues.

These findings echo earlier studies across East Africa showing that fishers' livelihoods are highly vulnerable to declining catches due to climate variability, overfishing, and weak market structures.(Mphatso G.M et al., 2025; Ochiewo et al., 2020) . In Zanzibar specifically, research confirms

that rising economic pressures often intersect with cultural practices, shaping how fishing communities adapt to uncertainty (Narriman S.J & Marcus C.Ö, 2002).

4.2. The Ritual Economy: Prevalence, Typologies, and Costs

4.2.1. Prevalence and Rationale

Confirming the significance of these practices, 86.4% of respondents (19 out of 22) actively engaged in or confirmed the existence of pre-fishing rituals. The primary rationales provided were Protection of vessels and crew and to secure good luck and abundant yields. This present ritual as determined investment in both material and financial security rather than as folklore. They serve as focused risk management technique in the face of an unpredictable maritime environment and their timing occur as needed or at the beginning of each fishing season underlines this.

The use of spiritual and ritual practices as an adaptive mechanism that supplement formal fishing knowledge has also been recorded by anthropological studies conducted in Tanzania and Mozambique, especially kin situation of risk and uncertainty. (Bonhomme, 2007; Walley, 2010)

4.2.2. Range of Practices and Related Expenses

The survey and narrative found a wide variety of rituals, they may be divided into the following categories: (1) *Propitious Sacrifices:* The most often mentioned material sacrifice includes animal or blood sacrifice, which is performed in order to make happy or favourably impress spiritual forces; (2) *Syncretic Religious Prayers:* Some of the respondent mentioned religious prayers, most of which were Islamic in nature and included elements of devotion and orthodoxy. *"Before we go, we throw a small amount of salt in the sea and pray so that the sea spirits accompany us."* As an elderly fisherman summarized; (3) *Social and Communal Rituals:* Practices like giving presents to the community served as means of both requesting favour from God and strengthening social ties within community; (4) *The severe and dark secret:* one respondent said *"to offer a human sacrifice.....that is when the income is fulfilled"* to describe the most extreme action, so this is evidence from survey and testimonies that pointed as more severe practices.

The financial cost of this "economy of rituals" is very high for single occasion, survey participant estimated the expenses range from Tsh. 50,000 to more than Tsh 2,000,000. this is a big financial burden for lots of people. A young, religious fisherman emphasized the trade-off between cos t and gain, saying, *"Im not convinced much, but some suggest we pay for sacrifice…. My profit margin may drop by 5-10% as a result, I would rather invest that in better equipment."*

Walley's (2004) ethnographic research revealed similar results, that show rituals investment frequently took resources way that could otherwise been spent on gear or household needs.

4.3. Social Dynamics: Secrecy, Cohesion, and Harm

4.3.1. Various Viewpoints and Increasing Skepticism

Majority of participants strongly believed the effectiveness of these rituals, with some confirming that they boost revenues and catches. However, there is also evident scepticism and ethical criticism in the findings. several respondents criticized the practices outright as "backward beliefs," stating that *"Modern science and technology should replace them."* This internal disparity points to a community that is going through a change in culture.

This, like other coastal fisheries in Africa, suggests a cultural clash between the traditional belief and the current rationalities. (Bonhomme, 2007)

4.3.2. Secrecy and Social Cohesion

These practice remains secret and many respondents talked about community awareness as a secret or known only by the few. These practices are different in terms of social acceptability; some cultures allow these activities, and some do not. However, rituals are also a social bond. Even non-believers often submit to them, as one fisherman remarked: "For me i *don't really care...I let other people pray or pour water, if they believe it will help it doesn't stop me" This* highlights its function in preserving cultural identity and community harmony

4.3.3. The Negative Effects: Risk and Harm.

The critical insight was the understanding of negative effects of rites. When some questioned about the rites if they are causing any negative effects, more than a half of all respondents answered yes. Respondents also talked about risky threats besides the financial cost; one of them said: *"A fisherman can go in the water and never come out again,…he already disappeared"* other one also said by express his worry of stepping beyond the boundaries of moral: "*Some practices go too far, people whisper about hurting animals or worse, for me I'm not going to do that....* "The narratives bring a picture of a world where the quest to achieve financial stability can be extremely costly in human terms.

These risks correlate with the data at local level indicating that ritualistic fishing may be source of human insecurity and social cohesion (Bene, 2003)

4.4. Policy Void and Conflict with Blue Economy Models

Another significant observation is the large absence of institutional government. Every respondent said that these behaviours are not specifically regulated by any legislation. The ritual economy may operate in an uncontrolled environment due to the absence of a legal framework, that open chances for abuse and damage.

Modern Blue Economy principles are fundamentally at tension with this governance gap. Regarding government efforts, respondents had different feelings. One person remarked : *"The government says no to certain fishing nets. But if spirits require a certain approach, people will just do it secretly anyway."* This shows the fundamental ontological gap. Whereas Zanzibar's Blue Economy Strategy (Ministry of Blue Economy and Fisheries, 2022) emphasizes marine territorial development and technology advancement, but it completely ignores any systematic interaction with the cultural beliefs that have a direct impact on fisher behaviour. Therefore, if effective policies are perceived as ignoring the spiritual reality of the communities they are meant to serve, they are likely to be ineffective or create criticism. A hopefully finding was that, fisherman was receptive to other options, suggesting that *"If officials understand our beliefs, then training and microcredit can take the place of sacrifices..."*

Without addressing how belief systems influence fishermen's behaviour, such strategies risk limited effectiveness. According to scholars, ignoring the cultural traditional and spiritual beliefs undermine the fisheries governance in Africa (Cinner et al., 2012).

5. DISCUSSION

The results show that, sacrifice practices contribute important part of Zanzibar's blue economy, despite of being frequently ignored. These techniques are not outdated customs; rather, they are proactive, strategic approaches used by fishermen in a contemporary market-driven fishing sector. This discussion places these results in the larger body of scholarly work to analyse the fundamental reasoning, contradictions and significant implication of policy toward "ritual economy."

5.1. Using Rituals as Risk Management in an Uncertain Economy

A significant economic and environmental uncertainty is created by the frequent reports of reducing catches. Sacrificial rituals *(kafara)* arise as complementing, rational risk-management techniques rather than as irrational superstition in such a context where livelihoods depend on an unpredictable sea environment. (Cinner et al., 2012). This supports Malinowski (1948) theory that, magic and ritual flourish where technology and empirical knowledge reach their limits. For Zanzibari fishers, investing in sacrificial practices substantial (*kafara)* represents a rational effort to establish a symbolic control over forces that exceed their direct command (Deb, 2018; Kumiko, 2023) .This aligns with ritual economy theory, where symbolic action coexists with instrumental strategies like gear investment and navigational knowledge (McAnany & Wells, 2008; Sabloff, 2008) . These rituals primarily address non-quantifiable risks sudden storms, navigational dangers, or simply "bad luck"—that scientific models and modern equipment cannot fully mitigate (Moore & Burgess, 2011).

5.2. "The Ritual Economy": Cost and Consequences

The substantial financial expenditures on rituals also imply an underlying "ritual economy" parallel to the mainstream fishery business in Zanzibar. The money spent on *kafara* often thousands to millions of shillings represent capital taken away from potential investment in more productive gear, boat repair, or savings. This creates a central paradox: traditions that are designed to bring economic prosperity may also interfere with growth of wealth that is essential to continued growth, which is the primary goal of effective blue economic policy. (Liang et al., 2022)

Moreover, the facts show that there is an ideological and generational divide between fishing communities. Since there are fishermen strongly believe in these traditional but some, especially youth are sceptical and are more inclined towards using technological methods to fish. Gell (1992) and Ingold (2000) indicate that this generational change implies the transition to more secular and technocratic conceptions of marine livelihood (Peterson & Stead, 2011; Segi, 2014). It is also critical to note that fishing communities are not homogeneous and require different policy responses. (Mesquita & Isaac-Nahum, 2015)

The most worrying are detrimental deliverables. Severe dangers and drastic measures, as reported, have proven that this economy is not in its right state, and the search of security may very well pose a threat to the very existence that this economy is supposed to protect. (Kuruppu et al., 2025). This negative factor highlights the urgency with which sensitive external help is needed.

5.3. Ontological Clashes and Policy Legitimacy

The excessive level of secrecy of these acts and the lack of any official regulation serve to outline a major contradiction between worldviews. The blue economy model introduced by the state is predominantly founded on scientific, secular ontology and seeks to control nature by means of stock measurements, ocean reserves, and quotas. (Bennett & Dearden, 2014). Meanwhile, on the other side, there are lots of fishermen whose ontology perceives the sea as spiritual space, in which forces exist and must be approached with respect. (Da Silva et al., 2019)

There is policy blind spot created by this ontological gap. When the blue economy policies bypass and dismiss local beliefs as superstitious, they may lead to legitimacy crisis that may drive rituals deeper underground and lead to community opposition. (Bennett & Dearden, 2014). The results of some respondents indicated that, the government should implement strict legislation and educate the public the evils of *kafara* that community members themselves should feel that state has a role to play in mitigating the worst attributes of these practices, a pathway through which interactions can take place.

5.4. Principles for Culturally Sensitive Blue Economy Governance

This study brings important policy lesson. Instead of trying to eradicate and disregard it, blue economy must have a culture that is sensitive and incorporate safe and sustainable practices. This can be achieved through: (1) *Participatory Dialogue:* Provide the platform for the fishermen to give out their opinions. Moreover, policymakers should be able to distinguish between the dangerous and the harmless cultural expression; (2) *Hybrid Incentives and Education:* Minimize the perceived need to engage in hazardous practice through a combination of support mechanisms, like insurance, equipment subsidies with education of sustainable methods of fishing other than the hazardous practice; (3) *Differentiated and Adaptive Approaches:* Recognize the ideological and generational diversity of community. The policies should provide diverse options, including planning activities with cultural ambassadors or individually with younger and more technologically proficient fishermen; (4) *Improved Legal Structures:* Though it is difficult to legislate against beliefs, there should be a legal system that accommodates illegal activity as in violence or fraud committed in the intersect of rituals as well as safeguarding the society.

By considering knowledge about this ritual economy, policymakers can develop more authentic, inclusive and useful policies that would build a blue economy that is not only sustainable and productive but also socially and culturally meaningful.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrated that to achieve to successful blue economy in Zanzibar it involves addressing its rich cultural foundations. The study establishes that ritual practices of sacrificial offerings (kafara) are not just superstitions but bundled in the socio-economic mainstream development of the fishing society. They are a rational, culture-based risk management system, which is used by fishers to adapt to deep uncertainties of their profession turbulent markets and increase stocks of fish and protect from natural threats of the sea.

The policy implication is clear: blue economy policies that focuses on only technology and biophysical solutions without paying attention to these cultural realities is bound to achieve limited success or even failure. To make the blue economy of Zanzibar progress towards prosperous, sustainable and equitable development, a multi-faceted strategy is necessary. This study therefore recommends the following combination: (1) Implement Culturally informed Governance: Policymakers should initiate inclusive dialogues with the community elders, religious leaders, and fishers' cooperatives to build a trust and co-design management plans that respect cultural heritage while advancing sustainability goals; (2) Strengthen Livelihood resilience and Awareness: The solution is to treat the economic vulnerability. It can be achieved by providing better access to credit, providing incentives to adopt new risk management instruments like insurance, securing fair prices in the market and promoting livelihood diversification. Parallel awareness campaign can discuss the risks of some of these rituals but point out the positive aspects of sustainable fishery technology and practices that in fact reduce uncertainty; (3) Enforce protective legal frameworks: While beliefs cannot be legislated away, criminal conduct must be always unequivocally addressed. Existing laws regarding fraud, extortion, and violence must be robustly enforced, even when committed under the guise of ritual and must be coupled with strengthened access to justice and social support for victims

Conclusively, the Journey toward the successful blue economy in Zanzibar, it involves more than just navigating the Indian Ocean's physical currents; it also necessary to effective negotiate the strong intangible currents of tradition, culture and religion. In order to ensure that prosperity at sea translates into safety and well-being on land, stakeholders may begin to establish policies that are not only successful but also equitable and inclusive by realizing this complex interaction and implementing an economic and sensible approach.

Ethical approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent statement

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

Not applicable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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