



UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI  
**L'ORIENTALE**



International Conference

**FROM COAST TO COAST:  
FOLKLORE AND THE CULTURAL LIVES OF THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN**

“L’Orientale” University of Naples, Italy – 20-21 November 2025

This international conference brings together scholars to explore the dynamic and entangled cultural histories of the Western Indian Ocean through the lens of folklore. Focusing on the region stretching from the Persian Gulf and Eastern Africa to the Middle East and western South Asia, the conference seeks to interrogate how folkloric expressions (textual, oral, performative, musical, and material) mediate processes of cultural encounter, transformation, and negotiation across maritime worlds.

The Western Indian Ocean has long functioned as a fluid zone of contact, shaped by transoceanic mobilities, diasporic formations, and transcultural exchanges. Drawing on transdisciplinary approaches from literature, anthropology, history, material culture and performance studies, this conference positions folklore not as a relic of the past, but as a living archive through which communities narrate, reimagine, and contest their place within broader political, ecological, and historical contexts.

The conference will serve as a platform to map the diverse “folk epistemologies” that emerge from archipelagic entanglements and oceanic crossings, and to rethink folklore as a critical site for articulating alternative histories and epistemic resistance. We particularly welcome comparative and cross-regional studies that situate local practices within broader transoceanic frameworks. We also encourage contributions that adopt long-term historical perspectives, spanning precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, in order to trace continuities and transformations in maritime folklore and cultural expression over time.

Alongside specific case studies focusing on oral narratives, ritual performances, songs, tales, poems, and material culture, this conference offers a space to explore how identities in motion produce creative forms of expression and agency. Such expressions are often deeply political, challenging monolithic identity narratives and offering alternative imaginaries to hegemonic global discourses.

We invite paper proposals that engage with one or more of the following interconnected themes, which will structure the conference’s sessions:

*1 Folklore as Archive: Performance, Resistance, and Maritime Networks*

This theme invites reflections on how folklore serves as a living archive of narratives throughout the Western Indian Ocean. Through the processes of orality and performance, repertoires of stories and traditional lore are continuously reshaped, thereby preserving the heritage of itinerant traditions among displaced social groups and resist changed socio-cultural contexts. It also focuses on the

ways in which songs, rituals, and oral narratives bear the traces of enslaved pasts, forced migration, and collective resistance. Through these cultural forms, communities have narrated alternative genealogies, reimagined freedom, and preserved memories of displacement and endurance. Folklore here is not only expressive but political as it is mobilised to articulate experiences of oppression, survival, and fugitive belonging across archipelagic and coastal zones.

Suggested topics include:

- Performance, orality and transitions of repertoires and traditions
- Traces of enslaved pasts in folk songs and ritual practices
- Oral genealogies and ancestral memory in post-slavery coastal communities
- Subaltern uses of folklore to contest colonial histories

## *2 Seafaring Knowledge and Narratives of the Sea*

This theme invites an exploration of how languages and literary forms circulate across the ocean, constructing maritime worlds and imaginaries. From literary expressions and poetic texts to travelogues and nautical almanacks, this section encourages dialogue between linguistics, literary studies, and cultural history, focusing on how the sea is not only navigated but also narrated, named, and imagined.

Suggested topics include:

- Nautical lexicons and creolised vocabularies
- Maritime metaphors and symbolism in oral and written texts
- Travel writing across the Western Indian Ocean
- Literary artefacts of maritime devotion

## *3 Material Cultures and Maritime Worlds*

This theme explores the tangible dimensions of folklore across the maritime worlds of the Western Indian Ocean. It foregrounds the social lives of objects that circulate through oceanic routes and coastal communities. How material culture mediates relationships between humans and the sea, between past and present, and between land and water. How do objects encode and transmit local epistemologies? How are they adapted, reimagined, or ritualised in everyday life?

Suggested topics include:

- Navigational instruments and seafaring objects
- Ritual and protective artefacts
- Maritime material culture in museum collections

This conference aims to establish a transdisciplinary network for scholars working on the folklore of the Western Indian Ocean. It will also lay the foundation for joint research initiatives exploring the cultural lives and historical continuities across maritime spaces marked by movement, entanglement, and material transformation.

Those who wish to participate in this conference should submit an abstract of no more than 300 words to [annalisa.bocchetti@unior.it](mailto:annalisa.bocchetti@unior.it) by 30 August 2025. Abstracts should clearly outline the topic,

methodology, and relevance to the conference themes. All proposals will be reviewed by the scientific committee, and applicants will be notified of the outcome by 15 September 2025. Individual paper presentations will be 20 minutes long, followed by 10 minutes for questions.

Convenors:

Sabir Badal Khan, UNIOR

Annalisa Bocchetti, UNIOR

Scientific Committee:

Annalisa Bocchetti, UNIOR

Stefania Cavaliere, UNIOR

Daniela De Simone, Ghent University

Sabir Badal Khan, UNIOR

