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Contingent Zanzibari Maps

Criss-crossing Geographies in an Anthology of Swahili Indian Ocean Poetry

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"Perhaps we could imagine space
as the simultaneity of stories so-far"

(Massey, *For Space*, 9)

"Or to put it in an archaeological way,
it is as if the details of our lives have accumulated in layers,
and now some layers
have been displaced by the friction of other events,
and bits of contingent pieces
still remain, accidentally tumbled about."

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea*

Introduction[1]

My main concern in this contribution is to show the heterogeneous imaginations of

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the Indian Ocean found in the contemporary Swahili poetry that I have worked on and translated together with a group of Zanzibari poets with the aim of producing an anthology. Our aim is to bring attention to the Swahili poetic production about the Indian Ocean. Despite the increasing scholarly attention to Indian Ocean literary studies over the last decades, Swahili poetry from this region remains significantly under-researched, overshadowed by novels in the European languages of the former colonial rulers. The anthology, by its very nature of being a collection of poems by different poets, brings together a variety of visions of the ocean, which also question some of the patterns of discussing the Indian Ocean in literary scholarship. Indian Ocean literary studies has often overlooked not only locally specific imaginaries and practices of literature but also the particularly troubled positions of contemporary Indian Ocean communities living in places at the intersections of many complex political geographical 'maps' and layers. While Indian Ocean studies has made a huge theoretical contribution in questioning fixed identities as well as the 'container-logic' of confined areas or continents by introducing a perspective of long-term historical encounters, cultural exchange, and hybridity, it has had a tendency to be "disengaged with material critical" contingencies, as Brugioni and Fendler (2021: 169) critically remark. Rather than merely celebrating cosmopolitan visions, one needs to include a perspective that sees that the Indian Ocean "is instead determined by historical and social contingencies established at the core of the colonial and cultural relations that materialize in the Indian Ocean regions and especially in the historical, political and cultural environment of the island(s), which represents a peculiar space-time unit within the Indian Ocean." (ibid.)

Critical perspectives have mostly been taken with regard to the past and in relation to the complicated memories emerging from contexts of slavery and indentured labour at the expense of the "contemporary and contemporaneous", as Srinivas, Ng'weno and Jeychandran (2020: 13) also emphasize in their edited volume, *Reimagining the Indian Ocean*. They make a case for more ethnographic studies of practices in the 'here and now': "While we are interested in the historical, we pay special attention to micro-cultural practices for imagining and simulating spaces, and the many ways pasts influence the present or are reclaimed by various actors. We recognize that there are many worlds and plural modes of belonging that constitute the diverse spaces of the Indian Ocean." (ibid.).

The "microcultural practices" I will consider in the following, are poetic

practices rooted in local understandings of poetry on Zanzibar. The poems comprising the anthology reflect and construct "plural modes of belonging" on Zanzibar. In this respect, I also take inspiration from Srinivas, Ng'weno, and Jeychandran's *Reimaging the Indian Ocean* (2020: 13) because they foreground "place, placemaking, and quotidian practices as valuable frames for the study of Indian Ocean worlds". The poems I am studying are, as I want to argue, ways of worldmaking on Zanzibar. They spell out "plural modes of belonging" and worlds of various scales. As you will see, the poems sometimes consider the ocean in relation to Zanzibar's history of transoceanic exchange and its glorious past; sometimes they make the ocean shrink to a 'pond' limited by the confines of the Tanzanian nation state, obscuring the view of a wider Indian Ocean; and sometimes, in line with both nationalist discourses of development and multinational interests, it becomes an exploitable resource.

The anthology aims to bridge the gap in scholarship by exploring Indian Ocean imaginaries within Swahili poetry, connecting these historical contexts to contemporary creative expressions. In the poems, the ocean is a dynamically constructed and increasingly contested space: the contemporary moment from which the poems emerge points at the changing political and social maps of which that the Zanzibari community has been a part. Moreover, the poems do not merely describe political moments and mirror smaller or larger worlds, but rather take an active part in shaping and imagining them, presenting different visions of world. Poems also call worlds into being.

My contribution has the following structure: To both contextualize Zanzibari poetic practice and give an idea of a changing place, I will firstly situate Zanzibar and Swahili, and its poetic practices, in the larger changing historical context of the Swahili coast and its history of poetry. Secondly, I will describe contemporary poetic practice in Zanzibar to explain how it is situated in people's lifeworlds, and to stress the cultural specificity of poetic practice. Afterwards, I will examine some poetry from the anthology by stressing the polyphony of voices and imaginations of the Indian Ocean. My main aims are to situate the poetry in the typical poetic and discursive practices, as they exist on Zanzibar, and to show how various historical strands have influenced contemporary practice.

A Historical Perspective on Zanzibar, the Dynamic Swahili Coast and its Poetic Practice

Zanzibar, referring to the two islands of Pemba and Unguja, has been interwoven with changing and overlapping geographies defined by maritime interactions. It has had various rulers, first the Portuguese (1498–1698), and then the Omani Arabs (1698–1964) alongside the British (1890–1963), who made Zanzibar a protectorate and part of their colony of Tanganyika until the latter's independence of 1961. The Zanzibari revolution of 1964, which cost the lives of many thousands and sent even more into exile, connected Zanzibar to the nation state of Tanzania. From a cosmopolitan hub, which Zanzibar stone town became in the 19th century, it became a troubled part of the socialist state.

While Zanzibar – more precisely the stone town of Unguja – became the most important trade hub only in the 19th century, Swahili port towns have a longer history: The remnants of urban settlement and coral stone architecture, like mosques, seem to have emerged around 800 and 1000 A.D. together with the Swahili language, accounting for the same "cultural complex", defined by transoceanic trade and Islam, as archaeological and linguistic research suggest (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993, Horton & Middleton 2000). They have existed all along the so-called Swahili Coast, extending roughly from Southern Somalia to Northern Mozambique, constantly forging new alliances amongst themselves, but also with the wider Indian Ocean (see also Kresse and Vierke 2022).

The inhabitants of the coastal towns interacted with each other, exchanging goods, teaching each other Islamic knowledge and intermarrying. Yet, their relations have also been characterised by competition and rivalry. The townspeople did not identify as Swahili, but cherished strong local identities – people still identify as Mombasan, Mwamu (a person from Lamu) or Mwunguja (a person from Unguja) – reflected in the approximately twenty different Swahili dialects. For centuries, music – and particularly poetry – played a key role in acting out rivalry (Biersteker & Shariff 1995), but also in forging constantly changing alliances of various scales (sometimes including outside forces like, from the 15th century onwards, various Omani clans, and later, the colonial powers). In this context of flexible alliances, political power – the capacity to attract followers – and poetic skill – the ability to outplay one's opponent with one's own verses – have been strongly linked. For instance, some of the earliest

Swahili poetry we have has been attributed to the mystical hero Fumo Liyongo, who had to fight for the throne on Pate in what is now northern Kenya (see Miehe at al. 2003). To give another example, in the early 19th century, political rivalry between the flourishing city-states of Lamu and Pate first found its expression in poetic duels, *kujibizana*, before leading to the violent battle of Shela, in which Pate, which had overpowered the region for centuries, lost to Lamu. Under Zanzibari tutelage, the latter became a flourishing centre of Islamic scholarship, poetic production and music in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Biersteker 1996, Biersteker & Shariff 1995, Vierke 2022b).[2] Lamu's dialect, Kiamu, became synonymous with poetic language all along the coast when Swahili poetry spread to northern Mozambique in the context of growing Sufi networks. In the 19th century, Sufi intellectuals systematically trying to reach wider parts of the population composed Islamic poetry in Swahili – which played a decisive role in the adaptation of Arabic motifs, verse prosody and script, as well as in the spread of Swahili and its poetry. Before and parallel to colonial efforts, Swahili became a language associated with writing (in Arabic script), Muslim learning and poetry recitation all along the coast (Vierke and Mutiua 2021, Vierke 2022a).

In the 19th century, the centre of poetic production and scholarship gradually shifted southwards, echoing the shift of the political and economic centre: from Lamu to Zanzibar, where the Omani Said bin Sultan (1790-1856) moved his throne in the 1830s, ruling over the whole Swahili-speaking world. The keen economic interest that motivated the movement to the Western Indian Ocean meant a reorientation of the Swahili world, as Jeremy Prestholdt (2020: 30) describes, "facilitating or strengthening ties with the continental interior as well as with Europe and the Americas. […] The networks of the Indian Ocean extended west through caravan roads engineered by Yao and Nyamwezi merchants. By the late nineteenth century, substantial links between the Great Lakes and the Swahili coast saw regional commodities sold to merchants from as far away as the United States while coastal merchants settled deep in the interior." Following these caravan routes, as well as Muslim networks, the Swahili language reached as far as Mozambique, the Comoros, the West Coast

[2] The affluence of the Lamu archipelago, based on Indian Ocean trade networks, is reflected in the poetry committed to writing in the 19th century (see Vierke 2022b).

of Madagascar, and far into the hinterland of what is now Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Congo, and Burundi (Luffin 2004, Vierke and Mutiua 2021, Alpers 2007: 167ff.).[3] It turned into a language of transregional communication at the Western rim of the Indian Ocean, also absorbing influences from other Bantu languages and often in a position of power and authority over other local languages, which was further enhanced by its use as medium of written communication. As a language of transregional communication, it was used so widely that it was also adopted by the Portuguese, German and British colonial administrations for mostly pragmatic reasons (Whiteley 1969, Mutiua 2015, Bonate 2016).[4]

European colonisation changed the map of the Swahili coast again. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Italian, British, German, French, and Portuguese colonisation redefined the coast along the lines of colonial borders – between Italian Somalia, German, British, and Portuguese East Africa and the French Comoros and Madagascar. When Britain and Germany took over mainland rule from 1895, they constrained Omani rule to Zanzibar itself. In German East Africa, the demarcation of the state's territory went hand in hand with standardising Swahili, creating an official language of German East Africa. The compilation of dictionaries and grammars that missionaries had started in the mid-19th century, as well as the creation of institutions of standardisation from the 1920s onwards, played an important role towards the goal of unifying the language (see Whitely 1969, Robinson 2022).

Reflecting its importance as a centre of power, Kiunguja, the dialect of Zanzibar, was chosen as the basis for the standard language – to the pride but also dismay of the Zanzibari, who have felt increasingly disenfranchised of their language. The Swahili newspaper, the creation of a modern Swahili literature –

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[3] Swahili did not first appear on the Mozambican coast at that time. But, for many along the Mozambican coast in the 18th and particularly the 19th centuries, Swahili became a second or third language (Mutiua 2015, Vierke 2022a).

[4] Along the coast, Swahili poetry had a history of being written in Arabic script which reaches back at least to the early 18th century. From the 19th century onwards, print and colonial education increasingly made Latin script dominant and, from 1899 onwards, when Arabic script was abolished in German East Africa, mandatory (Vierke 2014).

mostly the novel but also poetry – in the new standard language, played an important role in turning Kiunguja from a dialect of the port city into a modern language of the (colonial) state, linked to a standard orthography, taught in school and via a national canon of newly promoted literature.[5]

In many ways, independence, though coming with the 'inaugural narrative' of a new beginning, breaking away from the colonial past, meant the continuation of many aspects. In Tanzania, the project of standardising Swahili and the creation of a modern literature was continued in the name of nationalism after independence. The colonial institutions, promoting research and standardising Swahili, turned into national ones: the East African Swahili Committee turned into the *Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili* (Swahili Research Institute), associated with the University of Dar es Salaam. There is not only a continuity of institutions, like schools and university bodies, associations, and publishing houses, but also in terms of people. The pioneering poets of the independence generation, like Shaaban Robert (1909–1962), Matthias Mnyampala (1917–1969) – the first chairperson of the UKUTA (*Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania*, Standardisation of Kiswahili and Poetry in Tanzania)[6], Amri Abedi (1924–1964), and even Julius Nyerere – who was also a poet and translator, a classmate of Amri Abedi and a patron of UKUTA – were all educated in colonial schools, and quickly climbed the ladder of success. Coming from the mainland, they also embodied the shift (again already part of the colonial project based on defining the state by territory) away from the coast,

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[5] The journal *Kiongozi* published in German East Africa and, later under British rule, *Mambo Leo*, provided newly emerging East African audiences, educated in colonial schools, with a new experience of a variety of texts, like 'news', reports on, for instance, the railway, the warship, and other latest developments in technology, adverts for shipping companies and farmers' supplies, as well as poetry – often in praise of the Kaiser – combined with imagery, forging the notion of belonging to the wider world of the empire (Askew 2014). Translation of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, which appeared in abridged form in the Swahili newspaper *Kiongozi*, or Steere's translations of English prose tales (*Hadithi za Kiingereza*, 1867), Johnson's book-length translation of Kipling's "The Jungle Book" (*Hadithi za Maugli, mtoto aliyelelewa na mbwa mwitu,* 1929) or Gulliver's Travels (*Safari za Gulliver*, 1932) came out with the aim of supplying a Swahili audience with a Western canon.

[6] UKUTA is the state literary association of Tanzania, founded under British rule, in 1959 (see Whiteley 1969).

its transoceanic literary exchanges, and the departure into a modern era also creating a new national poetry. For instance, Mnyampala, a Mgogo, who occupied various high ranking positions as a judge – including for some time, the position of *kadhi* in Dar es Salaam – played a key role in creating a national poetry: Much promoted by Nyerere, he adapted the Gogo genre of *ngonjera*, a genre of dialogic poetry, into Swahili to propagate the ideals of *ujamaa* socialism (Roy 2013). It became (and still is) the most performed genre in schools also in Zanzibar, meant to turn school children into good citizens (*wananchi*).

Nyerere's policy did not merely create continuity but was also embedded into the new world order of the cold war coming with new dichotomies of East and West. The newly created nation states in East Africa adopted different language policies reflecting the binary world order. In socialist Tanzania, Swahili made the biggest career: Nyerere attributed to Swahili the main role in building a "self-reliant" nation (*kujitegemea*) (see Nyerere 1966). In Tanzania, language and literature – and particularly poetry – became the chief concern of the state, considered a prime vehicle to transport *ujamaa* socialism in the national language Swahili, promoting values of progress and nation-building – very much reflected as well in some of the Zanzibari poetry we worked on.

In reflecting upon the changing ecologies of literature, Alexander Beecroft (2015: 198) describes the introduction of the nation state as a fundamental disruption of previous literary spheres, whose cosmopolitan sources and references become obscured. The nation state imposes a unilineal account of national progress with a normative agenda of literature and language. Texts that cannot be assimilated into the narrative of the national literary history are marginalised (ibid.). Although Zanzibar has had a highly conflictual relation with the nation state, with which it was forced to unite after the revolution in 1964, poetry also became a school subject and a vehicle for progress and development on Zanzibar. A dichotomy emerged between poetry written and printed in schoolbooks following a national canon with an emphasis on writers from the mainland and the so-called oral 'traditional' or 'popular' poetry, mostly drawing on earlier poetic practices – as much as a dichotomy between the standard language and dialects also found in the poems discussed here.[7]

[7] The label 'traditional' literature was born at the same time as modern literature;

In a telling way, Nyerere himself even deliberately changed the meaning of the word 'Swahili': In an effort to fight against tribalism, he addressed all Tanzanians as Waswahili and delinked the language's prime association with the Swahili coast (Blommaert 1999; Madumulla, Bertoncini, and Blommaert 1999). By simply using Waswahili to emphasise the territorial definition of the nation state and its inhabitants, for a short moment in time, even diasporic Asian communities using Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Gujarati or Hindi at home – or at least in religious and formal discourse (Akhtar 2015, on Khojas) – but who had often adopted Swahili as their language of everyday life, could identify as Swahili (and Tanzanian). A national and deracialised notion of Swahili seemed possible from here. However, the Zanzibar revolution with its bloody massacres, and even more, the economic pressure on Asian communities and their increasing political exclusion, foreclosed such a future early on. In the late 1960s, scholarly debates also increasingly crystallised on dichotomies of Africanness vs. foreignness, and turned the notion of fluid identities against the Swahili coast: the recurrently evoked question "Mswahili ni nani?" ("Who is a Mswahli?") suggesting that the coast with its flexible notions of belonging and its cultural diversity makes the term Swahili open for reinterpretation (as Tanzanian), was increasingly perceived as hostile at the coast (Mazrui and Shariff 1994, Mazrui 1992).[8] Conceiving of culture and people as belonging to mutually exclusive categories of being either 'African', 'autochthonously' part of the Tanzanian nation, or 'Arab' and hence foreign, subsequently gained much prominence (Gaudioso 2022). Feeling disenfranchised of their own identity, this question raised much (persistent) resentment along the coast, adding to a general feeling of marginalisation on Zanzibar.[9] One can read the poems cherishing the

many Swahili varieties, rich poetic languages, became dialects, which were not accepted in school (see also Mazrui 1992).

[8] It goes without saying that the dichotomy of the Swahili coast with fluid notions of belonging vs. clear-cut ethnic identities in other parts of Tanzania is entirely a construction.

[9] Though far away from being egalitarian, often based on economies of exploitation, for many centuries, Swahili city states had had flexible notions of ancestry, and put more emphasis on Islam as common religion (which in fact meant a large spectrum of practices and belief) and cultural refinement, most prominently language, through which one could gain membership to the city states (cf. also Kresse 2007: 37).

cosmopolitan past (see below), particularly against the recurrent tendency to essentialise identities after independence. The effort to reclaim Zanzibari dialects against the oppressive force of the standard can be considered in a similar vein.

Thus, Zanzibar is far from a unified world, but has been interwoven with changing and intersecting social and political geographies, which Swahili and Swahili poetry have been shaped by but have also co-created. The dynamic view of geography goes together with a view on time that is not merely teleological: As I have outlined, a number of practices and notions do not simply give way to new ones, but like archaeological layers, persist or re-emerge and take new shape. As we shall see, poetry is also traversed by multiple relations and diverse political geographies.

Poetry in Place

In this part, I will briefly describe contemporary poetic practice as it is situated in people's lifeworlds. Studying Indian Ocean literature as poetic practice means to study the making of poetry as it is done, situated in a place that is also being dynamically reshaped. Paying attention to genres specific to Indian Ocean communities also means to avoid simply imposing a notion of literature mostly derived from a Western understanding. This is important, since, poetry, differently from the novel which works much more as a modern, autonomous text, intersects with lifeworlds in many ways. Poetry, as I want to emphasize here, constantly emerges *in locally specific relations* – in relation to other poetry, to genres, institutions, media, social ties, and political discourse, as well as in relation to constantly changing notions of space.

On Zanzibar, poetry is a highly venerated form of public speech and exchange: There is no single important event, the opening of a conference, of a new hospital, a wedding or the *hijra* to Mecca that is unaccompanied by the recitation of a poem. Poetry co-constitutes the event: it does not merely present it as important and public, but it has a "generative force" (Arnold 2002) that calls things into being and blesses them. You also find poetry in the newspaper; all radio stations have poetry programs; it is discussed in conversations in the streets and extends into social media, like WhatsApp and Facebook. The quick serial and dialogic function of social media gives new shape to the much older, but still much appreciated forms of dialogic poetry (*kujibizana*). Evoking earlier coastal

connections between poetry and leadership, and poetic exchanges between the Swahili city-states, but also in Nyerere's promotion of *ngonjera* grounded in his understanding of poetry as a vehicle for political exchange, poetic duels are a platform that poets use, understanding themselves as mouthpieces of their communities.

Poetry creates or sustains sociality and takes institutionalised forms, which again have their roots in various eras. The local poetry association that I have worked with, ChaKuWaza (*Chama cha kuendeleza Washairi Zanzibar*, The Association of Promoting Poets on Zanzibar), has over 230 members from of all walks of lives.[10] Most of the people who belong to the *chama* are *wananchi*, the so-called 'common people'. Mzee Dere, who recently passed away, was a police officer, writing poetry, self-publishing his poetry in six volumes. Abdallah Ali Abdallah, a B.A. student of education in his twenties, finds little jobs here and there to make ends meet and writes ocean poetry inspired by his previous experience as a fisherman. Asha Saidi Yusufu, was born in 1980, has one daughter and a grandchild, and is renowned for both composing poetry on the spot and reciting with a beautiful voice. By selling some of her poetry on CDs, she earns a little money.

The associations (plural *vyama*, singular chama) in which poets organize themselves draw on earlier social organizations of competing Swahili *ngoma* dance groups (Ranger 1975), which provided platforms for the exchange of poetry, but also gesture to the colonial and the socialist states, with their poetry associations (like the UKUTA mentioned before). *Vyama*, like the ChaKuWaZa, are tied to an agenda of promoting progress through language, but also with the idea that poetry is an institutionalised activity, with a spokesperson, a treasurer, and a secretary general – a heritage of the socialist state. Also, the link between poetry and school education – rooted in colonial times and further promoted under socialist rule but still persistent today – has played into popular practices of poetry outside of school. Though popular poetry is appreciated for its oral recitation and ad hoc reactions to topical debates, and hence not for preservation on a page, many ChaKuWaZa poets aspire to publish books that become part of

[10] This is not the only poetry association on Zanzibar and there are even more on the mainland.

the school curriculum, since it is the only way books sell. Some poets actually manage to publish their own poetry, which sometimes even makes it into school or university courses: The line between popular poetry and "highbrow" or academic poetry taught in school and written by academics is often hard to draw on Zanzibar. Sticking to conventions of rhyme and rhythm, *vina na mizani* ("rhyme and meter"), which were enhanced as a symbol of Swahili "traditional poetry" and against the "revolutionary" modernist, intellectual poems in the 1960s, the poets typically do not understand their poetry as a kind of avant-garde poetry.[11] However, it is also not simply a continuity of "Swahili tradition" (as if this was even possible, as continuity needs to be discursively created). The poets understand their poetry as modern and progressive; sometimes even using an nationalist tone, sometimes, however, also taking proudly Zanzibari perspectives in critique of the state and against the notion of marginalization previously described.

Apart from organizing poetry events and its social media presence, the *chama* creates a social web of mutual obligations, e.g. giving money for funerals, weddings, or hosting poets who come to visit, which hence also exceeds the realm of the 'literary' as an autonomous sphere. The relation between performing poetry and performing other social ties and roles is constantly negotiated. On the one hand, the poetic arena is constructed as different from 'normal life': All poets, for instance, have pen names (see Vierke 2020). The poet takes on a persona, using a veiled language which can be hard-hitting and a tone that is confident and boastful (in contrast to the common code of modesty).[12] In poetic gatherings, gender and age differences, which carry great meaning on Zanzibar, are also suspended to a certain extent: both men and women can perform together at poetry events. Although occasionally, the notion that a good Muslim woman should not go on stage recurs, almost half of the *chama* members are women, who, as our interviews show, have found ways of negotiating their roles as poets with their husbands and wider family, as well as the neighbourhood.[13] On the

[11] On the fierce debate between the so-called revolutanaries and the traditionalists, see Gaudioso 2022.

[12] Particularly in *kujibizana*, poets use a symbolical language that addresses taboo topics, like rivalry, corruption or love affairs and betrayal (Samsom 1996).

[13] I conducted narrative interviews with all the poets who contributed to the

other hand, the poetic self is also partly convertible into social life: respect – but also conflicts – can extend into other social and political realms, and the other way around. Thus, poets understand themselves largely as intervening and commenting on – but also shaping – social relations from the smaller world of the everyday to the larger arena of the nation state (see Arnold 2002, Askew 2002).

Creating an Anthology of Indian Ocean poetry

Poetry echoes – but also co-constitutes – the changing geopolitical geography. When I first arrived on Zanzibar in the context of the project "Multiple artworks – Multiple Indian Ocean" in 2019 after many years of absence, I found that poetry was considered with the everyday, the small social dramas; its imagination was Zanzibar or the nation state, but the Indian Ocean was strikingly absent. Much of the precolonial poetry that I had worked on takes the audience to the Arabian peninsula in Islamic epics, or depicts the rich interior of Swahili mansions, decorated with porcelain, bronze trays, and textiles, which evoke transoceanic trade connections (see Vierke 2022b). In contrast, in contemporary Zanzibari poetry, Indian Ocean links are largely absent; national discourses of progress dominate, echoing changing socio-political geographies. This has nothing to do with people's experiences, life stories, and genealogies: almost all the poets had an intimate link with the sea, they had grown up next to the sea, some had even been fishermen going out on boats to fish, most (both men and women) had fished close to the shore, harpooned octopuses, or combed the beach, collecting seashells and crabs for food. Some of them could trace their genealogies across the ocean, and many had complicated links with the mainland.

In 2022, we tried a kind of experiment: We called on Swahili poets to compose poetry about the Indian Ocean. Together with Shani Khalfan and Ali Mwalimu Rashid (both part of the State University of Zanzibar), I invited ChaKuWaZa poets to come and present their poetry in a one-day poetry meeting. Inviting poets to compose and recite poetry concerning a certain topic is not

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anthology with the aim of understanding more about their poetic practice. Bi Jalala Sikudhani, a poet from Dar es Salaam, accompanied me to all the interviews and also asked questions.

unusual: the state and NGOs regularly organize poetry competitions or awareness days, like, for instance, the day of the protection of the sea turtle, where poems have the role to argue for the topic's importance, making mostly a moral appeal the audience (see also Vierke 2020). Poets receive a little money for commissioned work (composing poetry also contributes to households) – and we followed that logic. In the end, thirty poets, including six from the neighbouring island Pemba, answered the call and came.[14] Most of the poets were accompanied by a reciter to give voice to the poems they composed.

In 2023, we started translating the poetry as a team: Shani Khalfan, Ali Mwalimu Rashid, Wanimo (chairman of the ChaKuWaZa), Bi Jalala (poet from Dar es Salaam), Madame Mai (secretary of the ChaKuWaZa) and I sat together to translate the almost sixty poems, preparing an anthology. Its aim is to foreground underexplored poetic voices and offer new insights into the cultural and historical entanglements of the Indian Ocean region. Working on it has been a communal activity: we went through each verse together relying on each other's expertise, often discussing meanings and connotations. We also went to the harbour, the fish market and the beach to talk to fishermen and fishmongers to get a better understanding of fish, boats, and fishing, but also to get more explanations of words. Our translations into English are still a work in progress. For the moment, they convey the sense, but do not mirror the poems' strict prosody.

The anthology, as I will show in the following section, brings together a variety of voices with diverse imaginations of the Indian Ocean.[15] Diversity is a particular strength of anthologies, as Weishin Gui (2022) also argued. He made a compelling case for shifting the focus from single-author novels to literary anthologies of the Indian Ocean. In his case, he referred to the anthologies of Perth's Centre for Stories: "Ways of Being Here" and "Wave after Wave" (Wood 2019).[16] As he argues, those collections of multiple narratives by multiple

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[14] Hence, the selection of poets came mostly naturally: We invited the poets who had composed poetry in response to the call that the ChaKuWaZa poets received.

[15] The anthology is not the first one of Zanzibari poetry. See, for instance, Chama cha Waandishi wa Vitabu Kanda ya Zanzibar 2007.

[16] https://centreforstories.com/product/wave-after-wave/ Founded in 2015, the center in Perth seeks to promote diversity in Australia, by inviting both oral and

authors offer more diverse forms of reading, which echo the fluidity of the ocean. Read from "cover to cover", it offers a "circulatory and fluid" form of "generic wateriness" (Dimock 2007). Hence, the anthology as such, with its different narratives, offers a dynamic and polyphonic construction in its own right, which in its fluid nature, not following a telos or plot, resembles the back and forth of waves. In a similar way, in his anthology of Pacific poetry, the indigenous Pacific islander, poet, and editor of poetry, Craig Santos Perez, describes how it is the anthology that, in its multitude of voices, opens up a new terrain of "the region's multi-faceted history and aesthetic practices" (Santos Perez 2020). Craig Santos Perez (2020, 245) advocates for "reading anthologically" as "a literary navigation" through a range of sources and "multi-voiced perspectives".

I want to take up the notion of "relational wayfinding" for the Swahili poems to underline the flexible imaginaries of Zanzibar and the ocean. I do not seek to read the poems comparatively in the sense of assessing them merely in terms of difference or identity. Rather in parallel to the local understanding of *kujibizana*, in which poems are produced in response to other poems, gradually changing the direction, I want to look at how the poems overlap in certain topics and styles but also branch out differently. As you will see, some notions recur in different formulations, creating links across poems, speaking back to each other, while some reformulate, reaccentuate or refute other views, or ignore them. Thus, there is not one imagination of the Indian Ocean in the poems, nor do they exhaust the topic; they rather open a field. The reading of the poems is inspired by the conversations I have had with the poets, their comments, and the discussions in our translation group.

written storytelling, particularly by individuals with an Indian Ocean background. "Wave after Wave" is an anthology of stories written by workshop participants from Mauritius to Malaysia.

The Zanzibari poets on the Indian Ocean poetry day on 21st September 2022 (photo: M. Ramadhani)

Looking back, Looking forward: Poetic Constructions of the Indian Ocean

The poems offer a prism or a kaleidoscopic view on the Indian Ocean, construct different worlds, sometimes re-evoking the past, sometimes hoping for a better future. A number of the ocean poems narrate a history of broad transoceanic mercantile exchange, re-evoking Zanzibar's golden age as a hub that flourished under Omani rule (1698-1964). In Ali Mwalimu Rashid's poem, *Pepo Njema Mansuni* ("The Good/Benevolent Monsoon Winds"), he creates a link between the ocean's nature – what the historian Michael Pearson (2003: 13-26) calls "the deep structure" of the Indian Ocean – and its history of cultural exchange: In his poem, the monsoon wind system of the *kusi* and the *kaskazi*, which change directions each season, also change the direction of the ships. Zanzibari culture is a product of the ocean's nature, as the poem suggests. Furthermore, in his poem, which contains many constructions and words from the Pemban dialect, the language situates the poem proudly on the island of Pemba. It is a subtle way of speaking out against the longer history of Pemba being sidelined in the context of the nation and even in Zanzibar (Arnold 2002).

1. Ya Enzi ya enzi zile, karne kadha za nyuma
Kuna pepo zitokele, barahi hindi zevuma
Zikavuma zikendele, mbele na kurudi nyuma
Baharini zinogile, pirika zikaegama
Pepo njema Mansuni, pepo zekuwa na mengi

In the time of those eras, several centuries ago
Winds emerged, and blew on the Indian Ocean
They changed directions, blowing forwards and backwards
They were useful ocean winds, sustaining people's trade
The good winds of the Monsoon, the winds that carried so many things

In the following stanza number ten, the poem narrates Zanzibar's history as one of cultural hybridity. As the poem suggests, similar to the trade network born out of the natural ecology of the Indian Ocean, cultural entanglement grows out of intermarriage.

10. Kuja pia kurudile, ukawa mtindo jama
Wageni walifanyile, wengine hawakuhama
Makazi wakawekele, kwenye mwambao mzima
Damu zichanganikile, tamaduni kufungama
Pepo njema mansuuni, pepo zilileta mengi

Coming and returning became their style
That's how the foreigners did it, some didn't move again
They settled all along the coast
Their blood became mixed, cultures became entangled
The good Monsoon wind, the wind that carried so many things

Fatma Rashid presents a similar perspective in her poem *Hii Ni Asili Yetu* ("This Is Our Origin"). In her poem, sailing ships (*mashua*) brought the foreigners who "started a life with the natives of the mainland" (*Wakaanzisha*

maisha, na wenyeji bara kule). Moreover, the poem creates a link between the language, Swahili, and the cultural hybridity described: It is "a new language" (*lugha mpya*), Swahili, a Bantu language, which the cultural entanglement gave birth to "so that Arabic came to an end" (*Kiarabu kimekwisha*). It is the Bantu element that also made it acceptable in many different coastal contexts (probably she also refers to the African interior), as stanza seven suggests. Swahili, "the blessing", is an oceanic language, as the poem emphasizes, that emerged from the Indian Ocean.

7. Lugha mpya wakazusha, sifaze huku na kule
Kiarabu kimekwisha, Kibantu kimo tele
Hapo pakasawazishwa, lugha imemili vale
Unoziona neema, bahari ituletele

They created a new language which has been praised everywhere
The Arabic language came to an end, the Bantu part (of Swahili) is huge
That's how the language became balanced and acceptable
The blessings that you see – the ocean has brought them to us

While Fatma Rashid's poem proudly emphasizes the power of adaptation to the African context and integration of influences, it is another poem by Ali Mwalimu Rashid, titled *Ni Machungu na Matamu* ("It Is Bitter and Sweet") which seems to question the quasi natural harmony among Zanzibar, the African continent, and the Indian Ocean trade connections. He refers to the slave market on the Zanzibari island of Unguja, situated in Mkunazini.

11. Kituo kili Unguja, paitwa Mkunazini
Pale waliuzwa waja, wakatiwa mnadani
Ikawa hiki kiroja, kusafirishwa kwa pwani
Ni machungu na matamu, bahari yetu ya hindi

The centre was in Unguja, it is called Mkunazini
There the slaves were sold, they were auctioned
And transported (like goods) along the coast – what an absurdity!

There are bitter and sweet stories of our Indian ocean

The third line refers to the inhuman "absurdity" of auctioning and transporting human beings as if they were goods.[17] A number of poems present variations of the topic of Zanzibar's "great history" of transoceanic exchange, as the last recurring verse in Maimuna Hashim's poem with the title *Kubwa yake Histori* ("Its History is Great") shows.

Wageni kwa utitiri, jahazi kusafiria
Kwa njia za manuwari, wakitokea Asia
Wakafika Zenjibari, Lamu, Kilwa, Pate pia
Kubwa yake historia, Bahari hii ya Hindi.

There was a flow of visitors travelling by dhow
By ships coming from Asia
They arrived on Zenjibari, Lamu, Kilwa, Pate as well
Great is the history of the ocean that surrounds us.

History and the ocean are interconnected in her poem. It situates the ancient "Zenjibari" – next to the famous city-states of Lamu, Kilwa, and Pate – evoking the Swahili coast as a historical network of port towns as described before. The poetry resembles Gurnah's writings of alternative maps of connections beyond the colonial and later the national state (Samuelson 2013): Here Zanzibar is narrated as part of a wider world of Asian-African links, but also against the national or colonial narrative of the territory-bound state associated with essentialist notions of autochthony and identity. While the bloody revolution of 1964 is not mentioned in any of the poems – as much as it is silenced in many other discourses – the poems discussed here can be read to come with a critical gesture of evoking the complicated transoceanic links and flexible affinities against the rigid forms of boundary-drawing by the state. Furthermore, this also

[17] In commenting on the line of his poem, Ali Mwalmu Rashid adds in a conversation: Mja kumwuza mja, hii ni ajabu gani *A human being to sell a fellow human being, what kind of an oddity is that?*

includes a reclaiming – in both message and form – of the Swahili language (and its dialects) as an oceanic language, and not as the lifeless, standard national language.

In quite a number of poems, however, the Indian Ocean past does not matter. While "long durée patterns of interface often inform historical memory and nostalgia, they have also been discarded in reimaginings of the region" (Prestholdt 2020, 25). In Maryam Juma Haji's poem, *Bahari Yetu ya Hindi* ("Our Indian Ocean"), the transoceanic past is irrelevant. Stanza three starts with "Here in our Tanzania" – a controversial position on Zanzibar, where often a particularly Zanzibari identity is highlighted against the nation state. The "here in our Tanzania" is both a temporal and spatial construction, as much as the transoceanic history constructed in the poems discussed before is. In her poem, the ocean is a "national ocean" (*bahari ya taifa*). The 'we' suggests a unity of all Tanzanians. Echoing other leitmotifs of the independent nation state, the ocean is an ocean to be used (see verse three below). It is an ocean of the future (not the past), a huge chance for progress, echoing the myth of modernity as a fast road to the nation's development and the understanding of the poet as the first role-model citizen and the mouthpiece of the state grounded in Nyerere's times. It is after independence, as the poem reminds us, that the ocean became a national resource for growth. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 35) argues, universals, such as development, progress or nation-state does not just "describe the world; it offers visions of the world." As we can see in the poem, it is a world that differs from the transoceanic world envisioned in other poems.

3. Hapa kwetu Tanzania, ni bahari ya taifa
Tulishajitangazia, tulipopata wadhifa
Ndio mana twatumia, muda tunaoutaka
Bahari ya hindi kwani, nani asiyeijua?

Here in our Tanzania, it is the national ocean
We have already announced it, when we got the power/gained independence
That's why we use it, whenever we want
The Indian Ocean, who does not know it?

Stanza six promotes fish as a marketable commodity and the ocean as the engine of the economy.

6. Yafaa tuitambue, faida yake jamani
Samaki tukawavuwe, tuwapeleke sokoni
Uchumi wetu ukuwe, Tanzania nchini
Bahari ya hindi kwani, nani asiyeijua?

We should recognize it, and its benefits, my people
Let us go fishing and let's take the fish to the market
Our economy should grow in our country Tanzania
The Indian Ocean, who does not know it?

The stanza echoes the recently pronounced interest of the national and Zanzibari government in the ocean as part of a bigger policy, called *uchumi wa bluu* (the blue economy). It has been emphasised in presidential speeches, but has also found its way into slogans on school walls (see below) as well as poetry, like the poem *Tanzania Zanzibar* (sic!) by Issa Ali Issa. In stanzas five and six, the poet re-enacts the presidential speech, focusing on the point where Zanzibar's president Hussein Mwinyi addresses the people, introducing the *uchumi wa bluu*.

5. Huseni Rais wetu, naye hindi kaiona
Buluu uchumi wetu, ni fursa kubwa sana
Ametaka wake watu, tuchangamke kwa kina
Tanzania Zanzibar, bahari yetu neema

Hussein is our President, and he saw the Indian Ocean:
"Our Blue Economy, is a great opportunity."
He has demanded from his people: "Let us be really motivated.
Tanzania Zanzibar, our ocean is a blessing."

6. Bahari ni kila kitu, baba Raisi kanena
Ni raslimali yetu, vyema tufaidi sana
Tupige juhudi zetu, mema bahari kuvuna

Tanzania Zanzibar, bahari yetu neema

“The ocean is everything”, Father President said,
“It is our resource, we better benefit from it
Let's make an effort to harvest the good things from the ocean.
Tanzania Zanzibar, our ocean is a blessing.”

Mural outside of a Secondary School on Zanzibar. It reads, “Keep Marine Environment Out of Debris to Sustain the Blue Economy.” (Photo: C. Vierke, 2022).

The *uchumi wa bluu* is the national policy translating the larger agenda of the blue economy fostered by the UN and the world bank into local discourse. It refers to the "sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem", since the "the economic contribution of the ocean to humankind has been significantly undervalued."[18] In 2020, just after my first arrival in the context of the project, Zanzibar established its "Ministry of the Blue Economy and Fishery" (*wizara ya uchumi wa buluu na uvuvi*)[19], with the proclaimed main goals of increasing the productivity in fishing and moving away from artisanal "small scale fishing" (*uvuvi mdogo*) in "shallow water" (*maji kina kidogo*) using "traditional ways" (*njia za asili*) of fishing.[20] Fishermen can now get loans for fiberglass boats, engines, and fishing gear. In reality, as our conversation with fishermen and fishmongers at the fish market on Zanzibar showed, paying back the loans or renting boats, engines, nylon nets, as well as paying for diesel and the ice for the cooling boxes, is hardly affordable for them, even if they team up. Most of them refer to the pandemic as a point when things started to become extremely difficult, because prices went up. Fish have become scarce. While we were translating the poetry, we could hardly find fish in the small local restaurant called 'Home Base' that we went to every day. Overfishing and growing demand from the tourist hotels are important reasons. Fishermen have to go far to fish, which means that they have to invest in more and different equipment, which they can hardly afford. Meanwhile, they say that big fish trawlers from foreign countries fishing in the area, like Korea, take most of the fish.

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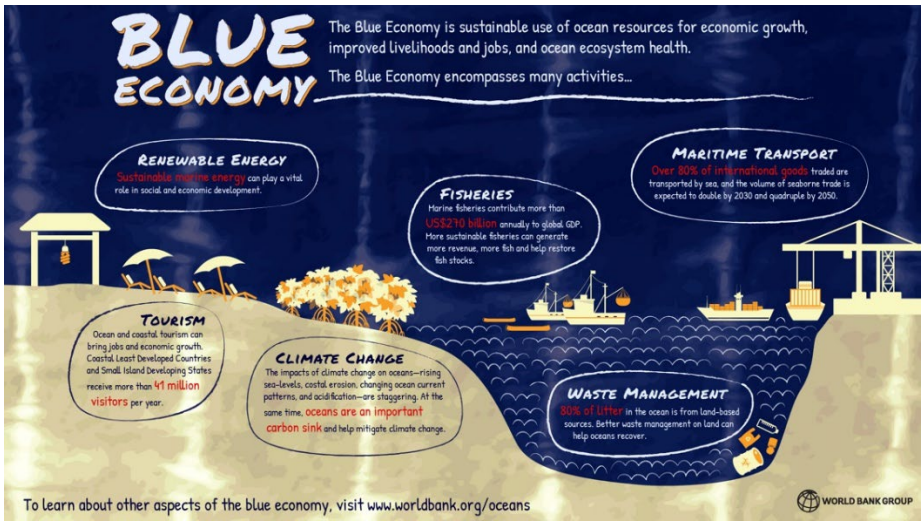
[18] Quoted from pp. 4 and 5 of the world bank's brochure https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/cee24b6c-2e2f-5579-b1a4-457011419425/content

[19] http://www.blueeconomysmz.go.tz/biasharanamiundombinu.html

[20] Quotes taken from the ministry's website: http://www.blueeconomysmz.go.tz/sektayauvuvi.html



Poster of the World Bank listing the "activities" of the Blue Economy, taken from www.worldbank.org/oceans

The discourse on the ocean as a resource that needs to be exploited, occurring in official policy documents, finding its way into education and everyday discourses seems to be a good example of what Hofmeyr (2019) critically calls the "hydrocapitalism" of the Indian Ocean. It is the neoliberal scramble for the oceans, which has found its way into a number of poems with a hope for a future in affluence against the increasing poverty. While some poems adopt a critical lens, warning of the destruction of the environment, for many, the government's promise to bring a better life through exploitation of the ocean is a real hope. Furthermore, as outlined before, many poets do understand themselves as mouthpieces of economic and political agendas of the state. They understand their role as promoting government policies with the hope of profiting from it either directly – by being paid for writing more poetry – or indirectly – by an improvement of the economy. It is an understanding of a poet's role deeply rooted in Tanzanian history, as I explained before, which does not easily fit the often romanticist notions of Indian Ocean literary studies.

Also, mass tourism, an integral part of the World Bank and Zanzibar's policy of the *uchumi wa bluu*, features in many poems as an economic pillar. The

tourism industry has created its own new celebratory version of the Indian Ocean, which has often been sidelined by anthropological or literary Indian Ocean studies. With a romanticist view, academics have tended to read Indian Ocean contexts and texts for transoceanic and cosmopolitan pasts or critical interventions, but seldom with regard to the marketization of a cosmopolitan past, increasingly targeting global consumers. After the end of socialism and amid Tanzania's growing liberalization since the 1990s, cosmopolitanism has been exploited by the tourism sector and supported by the neoliberal state, often leaving local Zanzibari communities with a feeling of dispossession (see Bissell 2012). Indian Ocean dhow cultures also became a brand of Zanzibari festivals and new NGOs linked to a globally entangled and growing creative sector funded by a variety of national and global organizations. The *Sauti za Busara* festival, for instance, the biggest annual music and film festival on Zanzibar, has the aim of "celebrating cultural pluralism" and "promoting Zanzibar globally as a leading destination for cultural tourism" (https://busaramusic.org/about-busara/). The cosmopolitanism of Indian Ocean cultures has also turned into a cultural commodity (see Bissell 2012).

It is tourism and container ships, as the poem "I Have Seen Many Things" (*Mengi Nimeyaona*) by Haji Makame Haji from Pemba also seems to suggest, that have become the new version of transoceanic exchange in the 21st century. The big container ships in the first stanza, and the cruise ships in the second, have taken the place of the ancient dhows. Haji Makame Haji's poem with an emphasis on container ships not only hints at the omnipresence of passing container ships, and containers on the island of Zanzibar and at the harbour, but also echoes the fact that "one-third of the world's bulk cargo, 50% of the world's container traffic (…) pass through Indian Ocean sea lanes" (Singh 2020, 231, quoted from Ghosh 2021, 113). The tales of the ocean's wonders, found in Arabic seafarer tales of sea monsters and miracles, Swahili poetry like *Utenzi wa Masahibu* (Allen 1970) or the Sindbad tales that Samuelson traces in Gurnah's narratives (Samuelson 2013) have found a new form. The lyrical I observes the 'new wonders' and laconically, probably ironically, finds: "I have seen many things on the calm ocean." Rather than understanding the present as a rupture from the past, the poem suggests a continuity or a variation of earlier forms of

transoceanic exchange.

Meli zilobeba mbao, zimenipita pembeni
Makontena mengi ndio, kwa juu yamesheheni
Mabaharia ni mwao, wafanya kazi melini
Ni mengi nimeyaona, kwenye bahari murua

Ships carrying timber, they have passed by my side
Many, indeed many containers are filled on top of the ship,
This is the sailors' habitat, they work on ships
I have seen many things on the calm ocean

Hakuta zenye vioo, watalii wamo ndani
Wengine wa juu hao, wamwirika darubini
Lengo la safari yao, waja kwetu visiwani
Ni mengi nimeyaona, kwenye bahari murua

I have found ships with glass windows, tourists are inside
Some on the deck observe with binoculars
This is the aim of their journey, why they come to our islands
I have seen many things on the calm ocean

Thus, rather than explaining away the national or the local or that which does not fit a sense of wider belonging and the typically evoked melancholy and nostalgia for the past – a mainstay in Indian Ocean literary analysis – the poems composed at and from a specific place in the Indian Ocean urge us to describe diverse imaginaries intersected by changing political geographies. The poems perforated by – but also constructing – political discourse offer conflicting visions of space as well as time. They demand that we take a more materialist perspective in the controversial present, which mirrors Ute Fendler Elena Brugioni's (2021) warning against an uncritical Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism. As I have shown, there is Swahili poetry that cherishes exploitation and a materialist view of the ocean and hence questions our scholarly discussions which tend to, firstly, ignore the present and its multitude of voices in Indian

Ocean places, and, secondly, if turning to verbal art from the region at all, often sticks to a romanticist notion of indigenous knowledge untouched by "hydrocapitalism".

Conclusion

Zanzibar is constantly under construction, and so is its relationship with the Indian Ocean. In addition, as space is "the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality" or a "coexisting heterogeneity", as Doreen Massey (2005, 9) put it, variegate imaginaries of the Indian Ocean also coexist. Hence, there are intersecting imagined maps, as well as overlapping historical layers of connections, which I also sought to outline in the historical overview. Historical practices and ideas do not merely come to an end but often persist, like archaeological layers, which can re-emerge. Time and space are not linear or well confined. The poetry includes moments of forgetting, questioning or rediscovering long-distance Indian Ocean connections, as much as highlighting national cartographies, which overwrite previous maps. Reading anthologically, as I tried to do here, suggests foregrounding the various layers and different imaginations of place and their changing boundaries. The poems, as I tried to show, suggest a complex and contradictory view of the present, redefining the past but also holding visions of the future that include national and transnational discourses of economic exploitation.

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