

Swahili language and literature as resources for Indian Ocean studies

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Abstract

In this contribution, our common point of convergence as an anthropologist and a literary scholar is to see Swahili language, literature and other texts as interwoven with the depth, scope, and complex dynamics of human experience and social life on the East Africa coast, with its long history of Islam. This includes prominently a view as to how this relates or is integral to the larger Indian Ocean world. Swahili language and its genres have been shaped in relation to, and in context of, transregional interaction with other languages and traditions that carry influence, and significance for the coastal residents. Ideas, thoughts, arguments and verse are taken on, adapted, mediated and disseminated flexibly by Swahili speakers through language repertoires and (mostly poetic) genres in changing media. These range from oral performances and handwritten manuscripts to booklets, CD recordings, radio programs and social media platforms.

1 | INTRODUCING THE DYNAMIC HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Our common point of convergence as an anthropologist and a literary scholar is to see Swahili language, literature and other texts as interwoven with the depth, scope, and complex dynamics of human experience and social life on the East Africa coast, with its long history of Islam. This includes, a view as to how this relates or is integral to the larger Indian Ocean world.

The term Swahili already echoes oceanic orientation: it comes from the Arabic *sawahil*, meaning 'coastlands' or 'lands of the edge'. Kiswahili, an African language of the Bantu-family came into being from 800 to 1000 A.D. (Nurse & Hinnebusch, 1993), and this coincides with the first archaeological evidence of stone mosques in Swahili port towns

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(Horton & Middleton, 2000) between Southern Somalia and Northern Mozambique. Chronicles (*khabari*) of Swahili towns commonly include reference to incoming traders from Middle Eastern ports and kingdoms, Muslim Arabs and/or Shirazi, who brought their merchandise (above all cloth) and came to settle converting the ruling families to Islam, founding new local dynasties (e.g. Tolmacheva, 1993). As mutually competing city states, these stone-built port towns were distinctively characterized by their transregional connections, while residents emphasized their respective local urban identities also reflected by the about twenty dialects of Kiswahili. For centuries, the rivalries between these city states have been acted out prominently in competitions involving dance, music and poetry (Biersteker & Shariff, 1995) giving form to changing local coalitions and wars for predominance, in which neighbouring landfolk as well as foreign powers became involved as allies, including (next to the Portuguese, from the late 15th century) diverse strands of Omanis with keen economic interest. Most prominent among them was Sultan Said (1790–1856) who made Zanzibar his political base in the 1830s, gradually ruling over most of the Swahili coast. When Britain and Germany took over mainland rule from 1895, they constrained Omani rule to Zanzibar itself.

The multi-connected history of Swahili illustrates that a language does not produce a static, unified 'world'. The Swahili social sphere, which is spanning across the coast and stretches far inland, has itself been embedded in a wider and changing multi-lingual environment (Mugane, 2015; Rombi, 1989). Trade routes, created by caravans (largely concerned with acquiring slaves and ivory and bringing brass and cloth) reached far into Central Africa, and Swahili was long used as mediating lingua franca between people of different origin and unequal status. Its changing vocabulary echoes the long-term impacts and effects of a transregional history of human connectivity, also across the Indian Ocean, with the Red Sea, the Gulf, Gujarat, Kutch, the Malabar coast, and far beyond (including China in the early 15th century). Accordingly, Swahili spheres have been multilingual, embedded in overlapping, intersecting, but also parallel life-worlds of language use, including, for instance, Arabic, Gujarati, Kutchi, Mijikenda, Somali, and Luba. In this environment, Swahili was used strategically as lingua franca also by the British, German, Belgian and Portuguese colonial powers. In the post-independence era, it again acquired different roles in Tanzania (where Nyerere used it for nation-building through socialist *ujamaa* politics), Kenya (where it is a national language, next to English), Uganda (where it was largely used in markets and within the army), the Democratic Republic of Congo (where it is one of four official languages), as well as Burundi and Rwanda (where it has more recently spread due to the migration of refugees). Among Muslims, some diasporic groups over time took on Swahili as language of everyday life (notably in Tanzania), but used Urdu, Arabic, or Persian as authoritative languages for religious knowledge and formal discourse (Akhtar, 2016, on Khojas). Swahili did become a language for such discourse and debate among Shia Ithnasharis, the more numerous and influential Swahili converts including notable scholars, from the late 1980s.¹

The dynamic multiple connectivity of Swahili is reflected in verbalizations by its speakers, authors and thinkers, especially in particular genres and media. Genres, as historically established forms of discourse, associated with particular styles, vocabularies used, reference points and imaginaries invoked, channel the reception and production of text and discourse in social contexts (Barber, 2007). A focus on genres allows us to combine a perspective on the present and contemporary dynamics with a historical view on discursive change and circulation. On the Swahili coast, local scholars, both male and female, have creatively made use of a wide range of long-established genres (see e.g. Abdalla, 1990; Mahazi, 2018; Nabhany n.d.1; Shariff, 1988). Particularly poetry has been regarded as the most highly valued form of knowledge production and dissemination over the centuries. It constitutes a unique source telling us about social life, religious rituals, and specific historical events on the Swahili coast. While within Swahili studies, poetry is a well-established field of research, poetry traditions are under-researched with a view to the diverse kinds of transregional connections.² In Indian Ocean studies, with its focus on trade relations, Islamic canonic texts, and Arabic and Europhone texts and literatures, regional endogenous poetic genres have thus far been understudied.

2 | PRE-20TH CENTURY SOURCES: SWAHILI MANUSCRIPTS IN ARABIC SCRIPT

Although the Swahili coast has been praised for its rich manuscript culture in Arabic script (also called 'Ajami', but this term is not commonly used here), its potential as a unique source for Indian Ocean studies has not been explored in depth. In East Africa, vernacular writing in Arabic and the translation of Islamic poetry from elsewhere into Swahili are intricately linked (Knappert, 1989; Omar & Frankl, 1997; Parkar, 2019; Parkar; Vierke, 2014). Around the beginning of the 18th century an elite of scholars with roots in the Hadhramaut and versed in Arabic began to systematically translate Arabic poetry, like the *Qaṣīdat al-Hamziyya*, *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* or *Mawlid Barzanjī* into Swahili, in an effort to spread Islam (see Vierke, 2015, 2017). As evidence of early versions of bilingual manuscripts of the *Qaṣīdat al-Hamziyya* suggests (Parkar, 2021; wa Mutiso, 2005), it is from interspersed Swahili glosses and translineal translations found in margins of Arabic manuscripts, that these poets gradually began to write Swahili masterpieces like the philosophical poem *Al-Inkishafi* ("The Soul's Awakening") composed by A.A. Nassir around 1820 (Hichens, 1939).³

Besides letters of mostly official correspondence between sultans and the colonial administrations, the most important genre found in archives is poetry, and this echoes its social importance across East Africa. Many of the poems now considered classical, which constitute unique sources for exploring society, intellectual history, and precolonial imaginaries of Muslim networks, are available for research. In contrast to many undocumented collections of manuscripts in East Africa (see below), there is a large corpus of catalogued and hence comparatively easily accessible Swahili manuscripts situated in Western collections, foremost Hamburg and Berlin (584 sources) and London (450 manuscripts). However, like the ca. eighty available editions of Swahili texts (Samsom, 2014: 249, see also Biersteker & Plane, 1989), they have hardly been used for Indian Ocean research.⁴ Crucial aspects of translation and adaptation as well as circulation across the ocean and along the coast have only just begun to be explored (e.g. Vierke & Mutiu, 2021). Further inspiration could be taken from earlier comparative research on Arabic and Swahili sources. In the 1920s and 1930s, the renowned Arabist Rudi Paret in consultancy with Alice Werner, the first professor of Swahili at the School of Oriental and African Studies, explored Swahili poetry as part of comparative Islamic literature (Abel, 1938; Paret, 1926/27; Paret, 1930). Thus, drawing on Paret's comparative vision, many of the Islamic poetic manuscripts available in archives but also the existing editions of poems like the *Utendi wa Abdrahamani* (Dammann, 1940) or the *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* (Allen, 1971), could be productively re-explored to study the circulation as well as the creative rewritings, which are so indicative of local discourses in various places on Indian Ocean littorals. Considering translation as a major way of partaking in and imagining a wider "Arabic cosmopolis" (Ricci, 2011), it could also address the question how Swahili Muslims have projected themselves into Islamic narratives of the wider Indian Ocean while addressing local concerns at the same time. Apart from an analysis of the Story of Yusuf (*Utendi wa Yusuf*; Raia, 2021), recent comparative studies on *qasida* poetry in praise of the Prophet (Abdulaziz, 1996) or the *Mi'rāj*, the poetic account of the Prophet's miraculous journey through the heavens, adapted by outstanding poets (Vierke, 2019) popular in many parts of the Indian Ocean area (Bang, 2014; Ullah, 2020; Van der Meij and Nanno, 2014) have taken steps into this direction.

Such research on poetry can also be productively extended to the present: Many of the classic poems have remained popular, circulating on cassettes, CDs, the internet or in booklet form in East Africa, but also among the Swahili diasporas in the Gulf and Western countries.⁵ Also the *utenzi* (or *utendi*), the genre of most Islamic narrative poems, did not fall out of use, but became a template to narrate more recent struggles, like colonial raids (Bromber, 2003; El-Buhry, 1961; Miehe et al., 2002; Saavedra Casco, 2007), World War II (Robert, 1967), or, in socialist Tanzania, heroic victories over exploitation (Roy, 2014). *Utenzi*'s function as a didactic genre has persisted throughout colonial and postcolonial history: poets explored it to enlighten and remind their peers about fundamental human qualities (e.g. Nassir, 1979; Kresse, 2007: chapter 5).

However, Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script are increasingly endangered and disappearing, as the most recent and extensive survey of both private and institutional collections conducted by Ridder Samsom and Ahmed Parkar along the coast showed (Samsom, 2014). For the biggest Swahili manuscript archive in East Africa, the East Africana Section at the Library of the University of Dar es Salaam, the catalogue compiled by J.W.T. Allen together with Sir

Mbarak Hinawy (1896–1959), Liwali of the Coast of Kenya, who contributed many of his own manuscripts, lists 814 Swahili and 250 Arabic manuscripts as well as 325 sound recordings (Allen, 1970; Lodhi, 2011). Samsom found that “around 90% of the original Swahili manuscripts including the microfilms which have been made and the audio tapes have disappeared” (Samsom, 2014: 254).⁶ Swahili manuscripts found in private households have rarely been catalogued and are disappearing, as families are not aware of the importance of the manuscripts or do not know how to preserve them (Roper, 1993: 153–162). Samsom and Parkar spent months tracing Swahili manuscripts dispersed over several households and institutions, like, for instance, the collection of the Zanzibari Sheikh Burhan B. Muhammad Mkelle (1884–1949), including bilingual Arabic-Swahili manuscripts by Sheikh Abd al-'Aziz b. Abdu'l-Ghany Al-Amawy (1838–1896), which are not a unique source of processes of reception and translation of Arabic texts at the coast.⁷

Furthermore, to give another example, the collection by Ahmad Sheikh Nabhany (1927–2017) from Lamu could provide important insights, as he was one of the most important cultural brokers with regard to Swahili literature and language in the 20th century: he contributed to numerous editions of Swahili manuscripts, assisted J.W.T. Allen and Ernst Dammann cataloguing Swahili manuscripts (Dammann, 1993), but also composed his own poetry in a unique effort to preserve and disseminate local knowledge on, for instance, shipbuilding (Miehe and Schadeberg, 1979), but also to educate with regard to a variety of social and religious themes (Nabhany, 1976; Nabhany, 1985b; see Kresse, 2007: chapter 4; Geider, 1992).⁸ His collection, which was handed over to the *Research Institute of Swahili Studies in East Africa* (RISSEA) in Mombasa, contained many of his own poems as well as those of his grandmother, Amina Abubakr, copies of now lost manuscripts compiled by his teacher Faraj Bwana Mkuu, but also several manuscripts by the outstanding poet and musician Muhamadi Kijuma (1888–1945), including the unedited “Book of Travelling” (*kitabu cha safari*) which could be a unique source for Indian ocean seafaring (Miehe & Vierke, 2010). There have been, of course, a number of comparable scholars of this kind, and so Nabhany here also stands as an illustrative sample of this group.

In other institutional collections in East Africa, Swahili manuscripts are typically only a few among many Arabic manuscripts: there is, for example, only one Swahili manuscript of rare dance poetry written by Muhamadi Kijuma, in the Zanzibar National Archives (Samsom, 2014: 256). Out of the 106 Arabic manuscripts of the Riyadhha Mosque in Lamu digitized as part of a project of the endangered archive programme run by Anne Bang, there are 3 manuscripts in which Swahili appears next to Arabic.⁹ Certainly more Swahili lines could be found in collections of predominantly Arabic manuscripts. These would promise insights on the hitherto under-researched topic of historical processes of translation (of foremost religious concepts and ideas) in the predominantly oral context of learning, where Swahili played an essential role in commenting and making sense of Arabic texts – also reflected in the many Swahili glosses typically found in Arabic manuscripts.

Also the variability of manuscript versions across the Swahili-speaking area, and, in particular, the relation to neighbouring related African languages, like Ngazija on the Comoros, or Koti or Makhwa in Mozambique, are only beginning to be explored (Vierke & Mutiua, 2021, see also; Samsom and Vierke, 2021). Particularly in the 19th century and early 20th century and with the spread of Sufi movements, Swahili became established as a language of written letter communication, as far as the Congo (Luffin, 2004, 2007) and Somalia (Vianello et al., 2018) as well as northern Mozambique, where it turned into a language of Islamic learning (Bonate, 2010, 2016) and written poetry composition (Vierke & Mutiua, 2021). Particularly, Swahili letters in Portuguese archives could prove an incomparable source for Indian Ocean studies. The ca. 600 Swahili letters in Arabic script from mostly the 19th century kept at the Historical Archive in Maputo, exchanged between local rulers and the Portuguese colonial government (Mutiua, 2014) could be read in relation to the hitherto hardly documented circa seventy Swahili letters, part of the *Livro das Monções* and kept in the Goan archive, which are currently considered the oldest existing Swahili manuscripts dating back to the early 18th century (Boxer, 1957; Lynn, 2005; Omar & Frankl, 1994). Reading the letters in context could open up a unique long-term historical perspective on the dynamic negotiations of the Portuguese pan-oceanic colonial administration and Swahili-writing African elites.

3 | TWENTIETH CENTURY: NETWORKS OF INDIVIDUAL THINKERS, VERNACULAR TEXTS AND LOCAL PRINT CULTURE

With the beginning of the 20th century, our picture of the field of Swahili scholars and authors, and their embeddedness in religious educational networks becomes more nuanced, as there is a wider range of sources on this available, both in Arabic (see works by Anne Bang, Scott Reese, Amal Ghazal, and others) and in Swahili.

Here, the internal account of East African Sunni (Shafii) sheikhs, written in Swahili by Sheikh Abdalla Saleh Farsy from Zanzibar (1912-82) in 1970 when based in Mombasa, has provided rich insights into relevant teacher-student relationships and transregional networks of scholars from the late 19th century onward, particularly the Alawiyya. Locally published in Mombasa (Farsy, 1972; English translation; Pouwels, 1989). This has been a rich resource for scholarship, providing many concrete references for studies of coastal society and the contested dynamics of Islamic reform (e.g. Bang, 2003, 2014; Kresse, 2007, 2018; Pouwels, 1981, 1987). Farsy's account conveys, from an internal perspective of the Shafii connections, the sense of coastal East Africa, and especially Zanzibar in the early 20th century, as a truly important regional centre of Islamic scholarship. This is illustrated by scholars based there, like Sayyid Ahmed bin Sumeit from the Comoros (1861-1925) and Sheikh Abdalla Bakathir from Lamu (1860-1925) who both spent many years studying with leading scholars in places like Mecca, Cairo, Istanbul, and Tarim (Hadramaut) and remained well-connected after their return to East Africa. Farsy's account also provides us with historical episodes that represent crucial aspects of connectivity and historical consciousness at the time – for instance, when recounting how Sheikh Abdalla Bakathir went on a conflict resolution trip to Cape Town upon request from Mecca; and how Sheikh Ali bin Abdalla bin Nafi Mazrui (1825-1894), who had left Ibadhism and become a Shafii missionary in the late 19th century, proclaimed a prophetic curse to the Sultan Bargash when being incarcerated for his missionary activities.

On the whole, the Swahili writings and publications by Sheikh Abdalla Saleh Farsy represent perhaps the largest reservoir of published Swahili Islamic writings. Farsy, who, after moving from post-revolutionary Zanzibar to Mombasa in Kenya around 1967, acquired the reputation of becoming a more and more staunch reformist, engaged in campaigns against unacceptable practices of religious innovation (*bidaa*) that he saw linked to Sufi practices performed by the Alawiyya. Together with his peer, Sheikh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui from Mombasa (1912-82), who was a similarly avid writer, and the editor of the quarterly Islamic newspaper *Sauti ya Haki*, 1972-1982 (see Babu, 2019; Kresse, 2003, 2018: ch. 5), they followed the program of their teacher and mentor, Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui (1891-1947), who was himself a student of the two globally recognized sheikhs, A. bin Sumeit and A. Bakathir (mentioned above). Sheikh al-Amin was regarded as the one who woke up his Muslim peers and criticized needless spending, wasteful consumption, and (what he regarded as) aberration from the right pathway of Islam. Stimulated by the examples of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, as a regular reader of *al-Manaar* and other modernist publications,¹⁰ he adopted their role-model to the East African scenario in terms of themes selected and language used: Mazrui began publishing a double-paged Swahili leaflet, called *Sahifa* ("Page"), in 1930, and then, replacing it, a bi-lingual Swahili-Arabic pamphlet called *al-Islah* (Reform), from 1932 till 1934. Many more Swahili texts followed, including translations of selections of the Qur'an and the hadith.¹¹

He became a role model for his students. As representative and influential samples of educational Islamic writings that address the larger Muslim Swahili-speaking public (including many potential converts), we list some of their publications, like A.S. Farsy's translation of the Qur'an funded by the UK based Islamic Foundation (Farsy, 1969), in the bibliography. Covering issues of basic concern to ordinary Muslims, on how to pray or fast correctly, giving accounts of the life of the Prophet and the four khalifas, providing summaries of relevant Islamic history, rules of conduct, regulations of marriage and divorce, relevant hadith etc., their writings were decidedly composed to provide 'guidance' (*uwongozi*) on a scope of relevant religious and social matters¹². Their booklets have been available in bookshops, stalls and markets across East Africa for many decades. They constituted the most accessible and the most popular regionally written resource of (reform-oriented) Islamic education and provided model-types for language

use and themes covered in public Islamic discourse until the 1980s, when publications (often in translation) funded through Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere became influential.

Students of theirs (and students of their students), like for example Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir (a former politician, who was a Sunni reformist before becoming a leading Shia figure), Ustadh Harith Swaleh (who resisted the powerful Alawiyya *masharifu*, and whose students became some of the leading Salafi scholars of the next generation), Ahmad Msallam (one of Ustadh Harith's students, and a long-term translator for the Saudi Embassy) and Saidi Musa (a student of Farsy based in Tanzania) were prominent writers of this sort, while going their own pathways (e.g. Nassir, 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 2003a, 2003b; see Kresse, 2004, 2007, 2008: Ch. 6; Swaleh, 1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2004; see Msallam, 1976, 2009; Musa, 1986; Swaleh, 2012). Thematically, their writings – and later ones following their example – can be explored comparatively for Indian Ocean Studies with a view to Islamic education and internal debates among Muslims (of different orientation); to the relation of the Muslim communities to colonial institutions, Christian missionary activities, and later the postcolonial state; or to comparative comments made in the field of social and cultural achievements, looking at South Asia, Europe, or Arab countries in relation to pressures and hardships experienced in East Africa (e.g. Mazrui, 2017; Mazrui Alamin, 2017).

Similarly to the previously mentioned precarity of Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script, one also has to assume the existence of many more Swahili manuscripts than we could possibly know of, largely based (or already destroyed) in family archives. We know of a number of sizable personal libraries of local intellectuals (sheikhs, historians, teachers, healers, and poets), who passed away over the last decade whose collections have not been stored safely, or even catalogued.¹³ But not only the written sources are unreplaceable – just as much (or perhaps even more so) the multi-layered dimensions of oral archives, concerning knowledge, performance, and compositions (also those that were not passed on in writing) are disappearing more and more with every demise of a senior local intellectual – female as much as male. Particularly women have played an important role as custodians, copyists and performers of textual traditions, and as composers (e.g. Biersteker, 1996; Raia, 2020a). One of the true classics of Swahili poetry, the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* (Allen, 1971), was composed by a female author, Mwana Kupona (d. ca. 1860) who was publicly acknowledged in the title (for a feminist reading, see Biersteker, 1991).

Aware of this threat of disappearing sources, a number of Swahili intellectuals – and sometimes their children, relatives, or students (including Westerners) – have themselves produced and often self-published booklets containing their compositions, or their collected compositions of other authors, in prose or poetry – like those by Nabhany, covered above. Among these, we can count, for instance, histories of the Swahili and their culture and language (Nabhany, 2011, Nabhany, 2012, n.d.; El-Maawy, 2009, 2013); biographical portrayals of scholars and/or poets and texts, sometimes also in English (Tamim, 2006, 2013; Al-Maawy, n.d., Mnyampala, 2011; Bakari, 2018; Babu, 2019; Chiraghdin & Nabhany, 1987; Chiraghdin, 2018; Haji, 2019). Hereby, different kinds of Indian Ocean trajectories may emerge through family histories, accounts of individual travels, or networking activities. Also, reprints and translations of historical books that are out of print are being produced, to keep access to such historical living texts alive (e.g. Kresse, 2017; Yusuf, 2020). Furthermore, there are volumes on poets who have not published their work in written form or conventional channels (e.g. Abdalla, 2011; Abdulkadir et al., forthcoming; Haji, 2019).

4 | TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: ON ADAPTATIONS ACROSS MEDIA AND NEGLECTED ORAL SOURCES

What is intriguing and at the same time challenging to follow are varieties as well as continuities of practice with regard to the many ways in which texts (and their genres) continue to be performed, and engaged with as part of multi-leveled interactions of vivid social life.

While research in Indian Ocean Studies has been most interested in written sources, oral performances (often interacting with literacy) have been a preferred means of expression and interaction on the Swahili coast for centuries. In the Indian Ocean region, slaves took Swahili riddles, tales and lines of songs and dances to Madagascar

(Gueunier, 1980, 1983), Mauritius (Bavoux, 1993) and Gujarat (Mapana, 2021), they were often the only but strong (and largely under-researched) makers of African identities -- differently from the Atlantic context, where school education formed vanguard writers of Black identity (see Alpers, 2000). Also the manuscripts in Arabic script did not merely target a reading audience. Apart from the 'grand' Islamic poetry written for recitation, this aspect is even more prominent in a number of understudied Swahili manuscripts of lyrical poetry, attributed to powerful master poets, like for instance, to the mystical hero Fumo Liyongo (Miehe et al., 2004), the shrewd political leader Zahidi Mngumi (Biersteker & Shariff, 1995) or Muyaka bin Haji, the court poet of the Mazrui in Mombasa (Abdulaziz, 1979). Committed to manuscripts in the 19th and early 20th century, these poems, which currently the Zahidi Mngumi working group headed by Clarissa Vierke is translating, have a much longer history and were part of dance performances to play out political rivalries. Even the booklets, which were increasingly printed in Bombay, Calcutta, Cairo but gradually also East Africa from the 1930s onwards (Raia, 2020b), did not only create new reading publics but also relied to a large extent on communal reading, interpretation and discussion. The interface between literacy and orality, so characteristic of many Indian Ocean literary cultures, deserves particular attention in future research.

In the 20th century, the radio and recording technology ideally added to the local concern for the spoken or sung word. Recordings have been produced locally in simple studios which have been present since at least the 1940s. Since the 1990s, texts have been transmitted in an increasing amount of formats, like cassettes and videos, and from the 2000s usually as CD, DVD, and mp3 collections, which one can buy in local shops, like Al-Hussein Handicraft in Lamu, or Mbwana in Old Town Mombasa or Adam Traders in Mombasa's Biashara Street (see Raia, 2020a). The forms of recorded speech in Swahili that are commonly sold, circulated, and exchanged among peer groups, include religious sermons and lectures, public political speeches (often by sheikhs), recitations of poems (esp. *tenzi*); and diverse forms of music, particularly varieties of *taarab*. With a view to religious music, whose various Indian Ocean trajectories and Swahili adaptations could be further explored, recordings of *maulidi* and *samai* performances would dominate, and one could get a good impression on the local diversity of *maulidi* texts and performances (al-Habshy, al-Barzanji, *ya Kiswahili* or *rama*). For *samai* (vocal and flute Sufi music), a range of popular Arabic recordings and those by East African madrassas (e.g. by Sayyid Hussein Badawy (d. 2021)), a grand-son of Habib Saleh and former leader of the Riyadhha Mosque in Lamu) would be available. The recorded religious sermons and lectures by a diverse scope of current (and past) popular speakers, sheikhs from Zanzibar, Mombasa, mainland Tanzania, upcountry Kenya, or Lamu, are wide-ranging offering normative advice on all kinds of aspects of daily life (proper behaviour, dress code, manner of speaking, inter-generational and spousal relations etc.). We have found some historical recordings (e.g. religious sermons by Sheikh Abdalla S. Farsy, or political speeches by Jomo Kenyatta or Oginga Odinga) to be available as well. While such shops are not locally understood as regular archives, they do in fact fulfil a similar dynamic function of a 'living archive' among the coastal Swahili-speaking multilingual Muslim community (of multiethnic background), which is internally diverse in terms of religious orientation; this might be worthwhile to think and explore further.

Also radio stations on the coast, like the Islamic stations, Radio Rahma, Radio Salaam, Sauti ya Pwani, Radio Maarifa, Radio Nur Tanga, or Radio Tanzania Zanzibar, constitute a kind of alternative archive. They store, share and, on a daily basis, make active and creative use of audio-recordings of speeches and lectures by popular sheikhs and other speakers (and of songs by popular musicians and singers). Programs dedicated to religious and social reflection would play (and often replay) recordings of lectures or Koranic *tafsir*. Other programs are dedicated to the discussion of challenges in everyday life (e.g. Kresse, 2018: Ch. 5; also Kresse, 2007: chapter 6 and 7), to topics of concern among women (e.g. Alidou, 2013), or to guide people through religious seasons and festivals, like Ramadhan, Muharram, *haj*, and *maulidi*, thereby employing a mixture of discursive genres (speeches, lectures, commentaries and live interviews) and musical ones.

Nowadays, locals of all age groups would also be actively receiving and passing on new and old recordings (often in shorter edited clips) through tiktok and their whatsapp and facebook networks, and other social media. Social media show dynamics similar to the ones described above, of (self)presentations of groups, networks, and their individual representatives -- often linked to Islamic organizations with a denominational affiliation, sometimes as part of an international network (e.g. Ahlul-bayt; WAMY; Islamic Foundation), but perhaps more strongly emphasizing

local identities with increasing technological self-sufficiency and knowhow. The variety of websites, media groups, and their resources (speeches, lectures, pamphlets, in Swahili – and also in Arabic, or Somali, Urdu, English – and translations of relevant texts into Swahili) is immensely rich and merits much further study on, for instance, media adaptations, identity construction or historical legacies than has hitherto been conducted (see e.g. Arenberg, 2016, 2020; Brunotti, 2019) – also taking inspirations from studies elsewhere in the Muslim world (e.g. Eisenlohr, 2018; Hirschkind, 2006).

If what has just been said is true for the religious field of oral discourse, for forms of popular Swahili music this applies too, possibly even more so. Such resources are similarly rich, diverse and dynamic, on the internet and social media – and less and less so in live events (not least due to the recent corona crisis, but clearly dwindling even before). *Taarab*, a generic category of music comprising a wide variety of historical and current popular music (with lyrics often taken from poetry) has been inspired by a range of different influences from across the Indian Ocean, and continues to re-form and re-shape itself following local, but also translocal trends and fashions (Eisenberg, 2017; Khamis, 2001; Kiel, 2012): from historical forms developed in 19th century courtly Zanzibar during Omani rule (Fair, 2001); to more socially grounded forms of Hadrami or Indian *taarab*, cultivated by sailors and ordinary people (Eisenberg, 2009); to songs of nation-building, or individual love songs and social contestations (Askew, 2002); to more provocative music incorporating influences from other genres of popular music, like *bongo fleva*, using less and less musicians and instruments in an increasingly technologically shaped soundscape (Aiello, 2004; Khamis, 2002; Kolbusa, 2007; Topp Fargion, 2000). For historical *taarab*, not only CD recordings, but also the Dhow Countries Music Academy on Zanzibar, offering both teaching and regular concerts which reenact 'classical *taarab*'; and also Andrew Eisenberg's Collection of East African Commercial Sound Recordings at NYU Abu Dhabi, holding digital versions of early records from the beginning of the 20th century, need to be mentioned as huge reservoirs of sound worlds and songs. They are available for further studies on the coastal community with its diverse social history and its fragile present as well as its translocal connections, continuing previous excellent research.

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we hope to have shown how the dynamic interlacing strands of oral and written discourse have been embedded within a wider scenario of historically established – and contested – social practices (including religious and artistic performances) in continuous vivid exchange throughout the centuries. For Swahili language and its genres, this has long been happening in relation to, and in context of, transregional interaction with other languages and traditions that carry influence, and significance for the coastal residents. Ideas, thoughts, arguments and verse are taken on, adapted, mediated and disseminated flexibly by Swahili speakers through language repertoires and (mostly poetic) genres in changing media. These range from oral performances and handwritten manuscripts to booklets, CD recordings, radio programs and social media platforms. This marks them as inhabitants of a wider world, which has especially been defined by Indian Ocean connections, which await to be further explored through the many published and unpublished resources we have hinted at.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See below, the example of Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir. These debates followed established forms and media among Swahili Sunni Muslims (e.g. Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui and followers; see below).

- 2 We leave out from our contribution the huge corpus of postcolonial Swahili novels and plays, which, especially in post-colonial Tanzania, played an important role in imagining the nation, while also keeping historical consciousness including transoceanic connections alive. For a good overview, see Bertoncini et al., 2009.
- 3 The earliest dictionaries by Johann Ludwig Krapf (1882) and Sacleux Charles (1939) are also valuable resources to think through transoceanic connections.
- 4 For good (German) descriptions of all Swahili manuscripts preserved in Germany see Dammann, 1993. The digital catalogue of the SOAS provides often excellent descriptions of texts and refers to available texts and editions: <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/swahili>. See Miehe, 2010 for a list of all editions of the grand Islamic poems.
- 5 The recent project Mprint@East-Africa run by Anne Bang explores the transition from manuscript to print in the 19th and 20th century (see <https://www.uib.no/en/ahkr/143764/mprinteastafrika>). A different set of early print sources were Swahilophone newspapers of the colonial era, like *Kiongozi*, published first in colonial German East Africa for maximum influence upon African readers (see e.g. Bromber, 2006, 2009; Askew, 2014).
- 6 The University of Dar es Salaam has worked on digitizing them. Furthermore, the microfilms of the manuscripts in Dar es Salaam which the School of Oriental and African Studies (London) also has copies of, were digitized by the University of Hamburg in 2013 (Samsom, 2014).
- 7 The other two manuscript collections, which Ridder Samsom describes, are the one by Mr. Zuheri al-Buhriy (see also Samsom, 2015), including a remarkable Swahili tafsir by the renowned scholar and Swahili poet Sheikh Ali Hemed, and the collection by Sheikh Ahmad Badawy M. al-Husseiny and Bi-Tuma Shee, containing a Swahili annotated Arabic version of the Hamziya.
- 8 Some of Nabhany's poems have been published locally (Nabhany, 1985a, Nabhany), like his dictionary of semantic fields (Nabhany, 2012), his account of Swahili social history (Nabhany, 2011) or via audio-recordings, others remain in manuscript form, like for example his introduction to Swahili genres and prosody (Nabhany n.d. 1) or have been self-published (Nabhany n.d.2, Nabhany).
- 9 See the digital database of the project "The manuscripts of the Riyadh Mosque of Lamu, Kenya (EAP466)" hosted by the British library: <https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP466>.
- 10 Information by Mwalimu Saggaf, in conversations with Kai Kresse between 1998 and 2012.
- 11 See Mazrui, al-Amin n.d.; 1933; 1939; 1950; 1980, 1981; a collection of writings from the *Sahifa* papers was published by him in 1944 as *Uwongozi* (Mazrui, 1955, 2017).
- 12 A fortunate exception is the library of the living imam and poet, Ustadh Mahmoud Mau from Lamu, which is going to be digitized as part of a project run by Annachiara Raia supported by the Modern Endangered Archives Program at the UCLA Library.
- 13 Farsy, 1999a, 1999b; Mazrui, 1958; Mazrui, 1962; Mazrui, 1964; Mazrui, 1965; Mazrui, 1970; Mazrui, 1971; Mazrui, 1972-1982.

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