

## Cosmopolitanism and Identity on The East Coast of Africa

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At a recent discussion hosted by the University of Kent,<sup>[1]</sup> Abdulrazak Gurnah touched on the issue of identity where he mentioned that, generally in East Africa, people no longer publicly acknowledge having multiple place identities. In summary, they cannot claim to belong to more than one geographical location. He gave the example of Zanzibar and Oman where one has to choose which of the two locations they identify with. In this sense, belonging to more than one place, which has been the way that the East African coast has identified itself for centuries, is perceived as disloyal. According to Gurnah, this cosmopolitan identity is almost like treason.

To understand the source of this supposed betrayal, one has to look at colonialism and the way it interrupted the cosmopolitan Swahili coast. In his writing, Gurnah grapples with this issue by showing how people in East Africa were re-ordered, maps and borders were re-drawn and new identities were forged. Similarly, the newly independent states of Kenya and Tanzania identified with continental Africa as opposed to the age-old networks from the Indian Ocean. In this new nationalistic world, it seems, there was only room for single identities. No one could publicly claim to be Indian and Zanzibari, Chinese and Zanzibari or Malawian and Zanzibari. It is generally in private that people speak of their '*asili*' (roots/ancestry) and feel free to mention Nyasa, Oman etc.

Various academics<sup>[2]</sup> have engaged with the question of Swahili identity and it is generally agreed that, it 'is both multiple and shifting'.<sup>[3]</sup> Swahili speakers do not tend to identify themselves as 'Waswahili' but use their geographical location instead; hence they would call themselves Wazanzibari, Wapemba, Wangazija etc. Abdulrazak Gurnah does this in his writing too where he refers to his Swahili characters through their place identity, for example Maimuna in *Paradise* is from Lamu and the description of Yusuf's father who moves from town to town shows that he is Mswahili, from one of the coastal towns.<sup>[4]</sup> His first wife was Arab and hence would have held multiple place identities; similarly, Yusuf's mother, the second wife, was originally from a tribe in continental East Africa and had settled on the coast, becoming part of the cosmopolitan society that had strong links with the Indian ocean.

Today, in the popular sphere, the memory of the cosmopolitanism that made life what it was at the turn of the century, is not given precedence. Cosmopolitanism here is understood to be the result of specific historical processes and historically determined interconnectedness with other areas of the Indian Ocean.<sup>[5]</sup> Hence it encompasses mobility, consumerism and diversity that has been characteristic of the Swahili coast for centuries. What is said about the Swahili people is done using large strokes, allowing varying versions of history to circulate. This is also the case for what has been done in the name of various imperial powers and the impact of their actions on the Swahili speaking people of the coast.

Gurnah reclaims this history. Through his writing we are offered an insight into the multi-layered society that was the Swahili society. In *Paradise*, he has embedded Swahili travel narratives including that of Salim bin Abakari's late nineteenth-century *Safari Yangu ya Urusi na ya Siberia* (My Journey to Russia and Siberia), *Safari yangu ya Nyasa wakati bwana Major von Wissmann alipopeleka stima katika mto wa Nyasa* (my journey to Nyasa when Major Von Wissman took the train to Lake Nyasa) and *Safari yangu ya Ulaya toka Daressalama hata Berlin* (My journey to Europe from Dar es Salaam to Berlin). Also, Selemeni bin Mwenye Chande's *Safari Yangu na Bara Afrika* (My Journey Up-Country in Africa)<sup>[6]</sup> and Hamed bin Muhammad el-Murjebi's (Tippu Tip) *Maisha ya Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi yaani Tippu Tip: kwa maneno yake mwenyewe* (Life of Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi also known as Tippu Tip: in his own words).<sup>[7]</sup>

Salim bin Abakari was born in the Comoro islands and later moved to Zanzibar. His travelogue includes a trip he took in 1896 when he travelled from Berlin to Russia and Siberia. He writes about houses in Amsterdam that were washed on the outside, his disgust at being in a sauna, his shock at Europeans who shared their sleeping space with animals and his marvel at the midnight sun in St. Petersburg. He is shocked at experiencing the very cold Russian winters and incredulous that there are villages where all the men, women and children are blind drunk. In *Paradise* this story is told by a visitor from Mombasa who mentions some of the anecdotes from these faraway places that his uncle had visited. The visitor speaks of his uncle meeting Muslims in Russia and the wonder of discovering their differences and the comfort of recognising what they had in common. These kinds of stories were the reality of life on the coast. Zanzibar for instance was a melting pot of languages, cultures and religions.

Gurnah's use of the journey motif in *Paradise* is a recognition of these Swahili narratives. He goes further by including the character of Tippu Tip, the ivory and slave trader known for his association with Stanley, in his portrayal of Uncle Aziz. During the journeys into the interior of Africa from the coast, the reader comes face to face with a cosmopolitan milieu where the Swahili language, Islam as practiced in East Africa and a world view that is Swahili interlink to show non-westerners as the main actors in the region. There are strong connections with the African hinterland, the Arab world, Somalia, India and all sorts of places. Traders such as the conniving uncle Aziz take out huge loans so as to trade, characters such as Kalasinga bring world views that could collide with the Swahili one, but do not do so because all these perspectives have circulated along the Indian Ocean for centuries and become part of the multi layered life that make up the encounters that made Swahili identity what it was.

During the discussion at the University of Kent,<sup>[8]</sup> Gurnah spoke of starting to write *Paradise* in 1984. The first paragraph that he wrote was the junction that became its end – where the recruiters were in the town and the main character, Yusuf, chose to join them. Gurnah's aim was to write about the war. Instead, he wrote about a pre-colonial society at the brink of colonialism. It is in *Afterlives* that Gurnah picks up where he had meant to start and delves into the defeat of German Imperialism, British colonisation and Independence. He focuses on the people, exploring how they came together and built the lives that they chose to live.

Gurnah has been pre-occupied with war, colonialism and its history in East Africa. He speaks of growing up with war stories. People always told stories of how Germans were like in East Africa. They were stern, ferocious, merciless and did not hesitate to spill blood. People called the German colonial administration, *Udongo Mwekundu*, red soil, because of the blood that soiled the land during the time they controlled German East Africa.

What Gurnah writes is grounded in truth. At a personal level, he mentions that he has a family member who joined the German carrier corps as a conscript and another who volunteered to join the British Kings African Rifles. And from the public domain we know of stories such as that of Rechenberg, the German governor who was maliciously accused of maintaining a sexual relationship with his male servant in Dar es Salaam<sup>[9]</sup> and Bayume Mohamed Husen who was born in Dar es Salaam, joined the Schutztruppe together with his father, supported the German neo-colonialist movement and was later killed for being a Black man who had affairs with white women.<sup>[10]</sup> In *AfterLives* these characters are Hamza's commanding officer who taught him German and Ilyas who joined the German Schutztruppe respectively.

In an interview with Claire Chambers,<sup>[11]</sup> Gurnah points out that, colonialism did not face a huge war from the people because the society was fragmented. There were resistances such as the Maji Maji which used Swahili for communication between the tribes, although it was splintered, as was the Bushiri resistance which took place before Maji Maji. The society that Gurnah presents is made up of various ethnicities speaking a multitude of languages and holding various beliefs. 'They were constantly engaged in negotiating ways of being together, and I believe that this was a tolerant, even an enviable society, rather than having one dominant group dictating what goes.'<sup>[12]</sup>

This cosmopolitan world was fertile ground for translation which manages to highlight the power dynamics between the different cultures and communities that is presented. In *Paradise*, translation is central to understanding the colonial and religious perspectives of other cultures. Translators are needed during the journey into the interior, translators are needed to understand the German administrators making inroads into the country and translation is needed at the very personal level where Zulekha, Uncle Aziz's wife was seducing Yusuf.

In conclusion, I would point out that Abdulrazak Gurnah's win has reiterated and brought to the fore the issue of identity, especially the East African coastal identity which has historically never been fixed. Identity has changed through encounters, changing environment and of course, migration. There is an overall feeling that, through this win, the cosmopolitan way of life that has been part and parcel of the coast of East Africa has been given a new lease of life.

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[1] University of Kent, After the Nobel Prize for Literature: Abdulrazak Gurnah, YouTube, (Accessed 25 February 2022). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=tN7IfgNle0g&feature=youtu.be>

[2] See A. Mazrui and I. Shariff (1994), P. Caplan and F. Topan. (2004)

[3] Pat Caplan, 'But the coast, of course, is quite different': Academic and Local Ideas about the East African Littoral, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:2, 2007, 305-320. 10.1080/17531050701452663

[4] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1994), 13-14

[5] Kai Kresse in Francesca Declich, *Translocal Connections Across the Indian Ocean: Swahili Speaking Networks on the Move* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 7

[6] Carl Velten, *Safari za Wasuaheli* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901)

[7] Tipp Tip, *Maisha ya Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi : yaani Tippu Tip, kwa maneno yake mwenyewe*, translated by W. H. Whitely, (Nairobi : East African Literature Bureau, 1966)

[8] University of Kent, After the Nobel Prize for Literature : Abdulrazak Gurnah, YouTube (Accessed 28 February 2022). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=tN7IfgNle0g&feature=youtu.be>

[9] Schmidt, Heike, "Colonial Intimacy: The Rechenberg Scandal and Homosexuality in German East Africa." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 25–59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30114368>.

[10] Marianne, Bechhaus-Gerst. Mahjub (Bayume Mohamed) bin Adam Mohamed (Husen). <https://www.stolpersteine-berlin.de/en/biografie/263> (accessed 28/2/2022)

[11] Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 127

[12] *ibid*

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