ZANZIBARI POETIC WORLDS

Duncan Tarrant
University of Bayreuth
E-mail: duncan.tarrant@uni-bayreuth.de

Abstract

This article draws on my PhD fieldwork, carried out in late 2019, for which I interviewed just under fifty Zanzibaris who were all involved in the production, performance, publication, and/or criticism of poetic works in Zanzibar. Poetry on the Swahili coast has been highly regarded for centuries and has formed a key part of knowledge production in Swahili society. Poetry remains ubiquitous in Zanzibar, as testified by the sheer quantity of poets who continue to produce, perform, and publish. These poets and their poetry, along with the relevant social and political institutions, play out struggles in a space that intersects all strata of society as they compete for literary capital or relevance. This article uses Pascale Casanova's idea of a literary "world" or "space" to examine how a specifically Zanzibari poetic space functions, using two examples of poetic practices within this world. In particular, the article seeks to answer the following questions: how do artists, institutions, and poetry within this world relate to one another; what rules or norms govern this space; and how and why are these being adapted or developed to suit modern concerns?

Keywords: *Swahili,* Poetry*,* World Republic of Letters*, Zanzibar, Poetic Practices*

Introduction

Poetry on the Swahili coast is a long-standing and prestigious form of both knowledge production and entertainment, as evidenced by its centuries-old manuscript culture (Knappert, 1979). Poetry is ubiquitous and unavoidable in Zanzibar. Poetic structures imbue Swahili proverbs; the popular musical genre *taarab* is essentially poetry sung with orchestral accompaniment; and poems are recited at public events and ceremonies. It would be exceptional for a wedding or a political rally to take place without some form of poetry. Poetry is taught at school from a young age; it is published in daily newspaper columns and aired daily on the radio (Askew, 2014). Writers' societies and *taarab* musical groups are plentiful, and poetry is shared on social media: e.g., in WhatsApp groups devoted to the exchange of poetry.

Improvised poetry appears in the most unexpected places. The following episode took place after one of the poets I interviewed, Ali Haji Gora, took me to see his father, Haji Gora Haji—Zanzibar's most celebrated living poet (Gora, 2019; Koenings, 2018). Ali and I returned to the centre of Stonetown in a *daladala* (small public bus). When I paid both of our fares, the *konda* (conductor) took the opportunity to make a jibe at Ali, implying that he was too poor to pay his own way. Ali responded to the jibes in verse composed on the spot—and to my surprise, the *konda* also responded in verse, and a good-natured[1] improvised poetry battle

ensued. I did not understand everything, but the following is what I did glean over the noise of traffic, the monsoon rains, and the laughter of my fellow passengers. Essentially, Ali claimed that allowing me to pay his fare was a sign of civility and politeness. It would be rude and even insulting to reject the offer of a grateful friend, especially when it was little more than a few hundred shillings (400 TZS ≈ 0.20 USD). The *konda* then implied that if it was such a small amount, then Ali should pay for me, because I was a guest in Zanzibar. Ali replied, to the pleasure of the other passengers, that I was not really a guest in Zanzibar, but effectively a native, and that he was even going to find me a Zanzibari wife among his relations. Much to my regret and that of the other passengers, the spectacle petered out after only two or three exchanges, as the *konda* could not keep pace with Ali, himself a well-practiced and respected poet following in his father's footsteps.

According to my interviewees, this type of improvisation is no longer as common as it once was, yet this encounter demonstrates that it certainly remains a living practice, and the ability to compose spontaneously is considered a sign of true intellect. In general, poets are considered to be intellectuals, and poetry garners wide public recognition; however, poets don't enjoy literary success as it is measured in the West—where the emphasis is on "reviews, sales, advance, copies, rights, royalties" (Michael, 2018). A closer investigation of the Zanzibari literary space reveals that while publishing and sales are gaining importance in Zanzibar, it is the *heshima*, "respect," or the symbolic capital that poets earn through composing that is more important.

The Fieldwork

As with any network to which one is an outsider, I quickly learned the importance of cultivating a pool of contacts through which one is vouched for and trusted. My legitimacy as a researcher depended on those who were well connected and well positioned, the *waheshimiwa* or "respected": those who, as Bourdieu and Casanova put it, have great capital in the Zanzibari literary marketplace. This process of legitimising and assigning symbolic power is described in Bourdieu's theory of the marketplace of cultural goods under the term "consecration," whereby "established players have the necessary material and political resources to enforce norms and standards for evaluating cultural productions that conform to their specific interests" (Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014).

The first crucial connection was the retired journalist-turned-*taarab* musician Miriam Hamdani, the chairwoman of the Zanzibari National Arts & Music Council (Swahili: Baraza ya Sanaa la Zanzibar, or BASAZA). Without her backing (and with it, the backing of the arts council), I would not have been able to obtain a research permit, organise interviews, or make arrangements for a visit to Pemba, Zanzibar's other main island.

The second contact was introduced to me by my doctoral supervisor: Bi. Sikudhani Jalala (pen name: Nitendeje), a well-established poet from the mainland who had already accompanied my supervisor as they met and spoke with several poets in Zanzibar earlier that year. Bi. Jalala's knowledge of poetry as well as her pre-existing (literary) contacts allowed her to step

into this world easily, not to mention add legitimacy to my position as a researcher despite being an outsider to the Zanzibaris.

Without these two contacts, I believe my fieldwork would have been much less fruitful. This is evidenced by the fact that whenever I tried to organise interviews on my own, my efforts failed.

As to the interviews themselves, I conducted recorded interviews with forty-eight different people. My interviews were conducted primarily in Swahili and lasted between forty minutes and an hour. The majority of my interviews were one-on-one, but in some cases, I interviewed two or three people in one sitting, while in others I was assisted by Bi Jalala or Hamad Ali Kombo (pen name: Dr. Mshiko), the chairman of a Zanzibari poets' society (JUWACHIZA). The interviews would usually start with biographical questions, which led to discussions of their early involvement in literature or performance (or both) and the practicalities of their work. Wherever applicable, I collected examples of their work; for example, the first poem they ever wrote, their most recent work, or their personal favourites. If time allowed, we moved on to theoretical questions about the purpose and value of poetry/song; the meaning and origins of Zanzibari culture, especially against the backdrop of Swahili culture and language; and questions of cultural adaptation, purity, and preservation.

The interviewees came from all walks of life, from fruit sellers to government officials, teachers to fishermen, and as such had widely varying levels of education, as well as differing motives for composing poetry. All were practising Muslims, with all but one being born into Muslim families.[2] Of the forty-eight interviewees, only ten were women, of which only one had not completed or begun at least an undergraduate degree. Among the men, however, fewer than half had completed some form of tertiary education. This disparity in education might be explained by how women, despite their varying social position in Zanzibari history (Fair, 2001), are still placed under great pressure to marry and have children, and are thus often afforded fewer opportunities for further education and/or public performance than their male counterparts. Young and unmarried women who, for fear of damaging their *heshima*, cannot openly write about taboo topics may have their work attributed to male artists. The hidden world of female artists is further compounded by husbands who do not want their wives in the public eye, and it is not uncommon to hear of female artists who, at the behest of their husbands, no longer perform.[3] It may be that there are other female poets, both with and without a formal education, whom a male researcher would never be able to meet.

Before the main body of analysis, the following section will briefly explore Pascale Casanova's theory of the "world literary space," which will serve as a framework for understanding how and why poetry is valued on Zanzibar, as well as how different actors compete for cultural significance. Furthermore, understanding this can provide insight into the how and why of recent developments within this Zanzibari literary space.

The "World Literary Space"

In Pascale Casanova's article *Literature as World*, the idea of a "world literary space" is explored: a tool "to be tested by concrete research" (Casanova, 2005). Her hypothesis is intended to help critics "move beyond [the] division between internal and external criticism" (Casanova, 2005):

> Let us say that a mediating space exists between literature and the world: a parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature. Here, struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms. Working from this hypothesis, while trying to envisage all its theoretical and practical consequences, should permit us to set out on a course of criticism that would be both internal and external; in other words, **a criticism that could give a unified account of, say, the evolution of poetic forms, or the aesthetics of the novel, and their connection to the political, economic and social world.** (Casanova, 2005, pp. 71-72; emphasis mine)

Her hypothesis is nothing if not ambitious, hoping to provide "an account of the logic and history of literature" (Casanova, 2005) which, according to Casanova, is not "world literature" itself—that is, a body of literature expanded to a world scale, whose documentation and, indeed, existence remains problematic, but **a *space:* a set of interconnected positions, which must be thought and described in relational terms. At stake are not the modalities of analysing literature on a world scale, but the conceptual means for thinking literature *as* a world.** (Casanova, 2005; emphasis mine)

This attempt to describe a literary space relationally, not separating close reading from contextual analysis, is very interesting in the case of Zanzibar. As demonstrated earlier, there exists a network of writers and institutions who belong to a specifically Zanzibari literary world. In this space, which Casanova describes as "the bourse of literary values" (2004, p. 12), writers exchange their works according to a common set of rules in order to gain "literary capital" or "the power and authority granted to a writer by virtue of the belief that he has earned his 'name'" (Casanova, 2004, p. 17). Zanzibari society has accepted poetry as a highly valuable literary form that can be used effectively to negotiate social hierarchies and further agendas. The plethora of poets within this world use the established norms of poetic form and composition as the framework or medium in which to conduct "struggles of all sorts" (Casanova, 2005, pp. 71–72). These exchanges take place in varying consecrating forums, where audiences, peers, critics, and institutions all play a role in deciding which poets and poems, and thus ideas, are of value or not.

It would be remiss to ignore criticism of Casanova as Eurocentric with regard to her idea of a "Greenwich Meridian Line of Literature" (Casanova, 2004), which claims that the world literary space centres around French literary ideals, and more specifically the city of Paris. Casanova appears to ignore the original development of this French literary primacy:

> It is through the philological knowledge revolution—the "discovery" of the classical languages of the East, the invention of the linguistic family tree whose basic form is

> still with us today, the translation and absorption into the Western languages of more and more works from Persian, Arabic, and the Indian languages, among others—that non-Western textual traditions made their first entry as literature, sacred and secular, into the international literary space that had emerged in early modern times in Europe as a structure of rivalries between the emerging vernacular traditions, transforming the scope and structure of that space forever. (Sahota, 2007)

Furthermore, literary success can also be defined without Paris as a reference point:

> The implication of Casanova's account is that the definition of success for a writer, from whatever part of the world, is acceptance by the Western literary establishment, when clearly there are forms of international success that do not involve the imprimatur of Paris (i.e., literary texts with wide distribution in non-Western languages that, for whatever reason, do not translate well or conform to the norms of Europe). (Mulrooney, 2005)

I hope that this article will offer a way to use Casanova's theory in a way that begins to recognise that literature as a "world" does not have to be conceived as a series of reference points predicated on one main Western centre, but rather, that it is useful as a framework for understanding and mapping out other literary worlds that Casanova may have overlooked or ignored and, as such, perhaps do not function in exactly the same way.

The argument for a specifically Zanzibari literary world takes into consideration both the Swahili oral poetic tradition, which predates Paris's literary ascendency—a phenomenon that Casanova, in her *World Republic of Letters*, traces to the sixteenth century, at which time the Swahili poetic manuscript tradition already existed. Furthermore, many of the poetic genres in use today are the same as those used centuries ago, with little change in their metrical rules, though some are adapted to suit modern needs. As such, it is possible to retain Casanova's framework while dropping the West as the relative centre of this literary world.

What Does *Good* Poetry Do?

In any literary space, as outlined above, a set of rules or norms are accepted by the different players as they vie for recognition and literary capital. In Zanzibar, the poetic space is no exception to this, and there is a consensus over what makes a poem "good" or "bad"; it is this consensus of opinion that governs the consecration process. When I asked poets and critics the question *shairi zuri liwe linafanya nini?* — "what should a good poem do?"—the intention was to discover what poets had at the forefront of their mind while composing: namely, the ideals by which poetry is measured. By examining these ideals, the logic underpinning the functioning of this poetic space is revealed. Interestingly, I almost always received some variation of the following two statements as the first two answers from my interviewees:

a) *mashairi lazima yaburudishe*, "poetry should be relaxing/entertaining," and

b) *mashaira lazima yawe na ujumbe*, "poetry should have a message."

It is interesting that the interviewees recited these answers in almost the same tone as if stating "two plus two equals four" or "Nairobi is the capital of Kenya." Perhaps this is due to the Zanzibari school syllabus, where students are taught poetry and composition from a young age and there is a specific, correct answer that one must give in order to obtain a good mark. It may also be linked to the formulation of my questions. Either way, these two statements form the foundation of any judgment of poetry in the Zanzibari poetic space. Poems that are to be consecrated as good, and thus earn literary capital and *heshima* for their composers, should be both entertaining and meaningful. As Casanova says, the value of literary capital "rests on judgments and reputations" and depends on "people's opinions" (Casanova, 2004, p. 16).

This is all well and good in theory, but what are the factors that people use to judge whether a poem is enjoyable or meaningful? As to the former, poetry is intended to be recited or sung;[4] as such, it should conform to the correct metrical and rhythmic structures required by the *sauti* (voice/tune) in which it will be recited. Poems can also keep the attention of the listener through the use of stylistic devices and content such as vivid imagery, intrigue, or humour.

As to the latter quality, the poets also used the verb *kuelemisha* "to educate," which suggests that a poem with a message gives its intended audience something memorable to take away. In other words, a good poem presents "critical, challenging and original thoughts" (Kresse, 2007, p. 71). This message or memorable takeaway is what makes a poem meaningful to its audience. While the "best" poetry is seen as speaking to everyone, it can be used in vastly contradictory ways. Take, for example, the *taarab* songs played during Zanzibari elections, which have either been used to promote peace and prevent postelection violence (interview with Mariam Hamdani) or, "rather than preventing violent discord, [have] often necessarily accompanied and contributed to it" (Arnold, 2002, p. 142). This does not mean, at least in the logic of the Zanzibari poetic space, that there is not also "good" poetry that has only been read by a certain few, e.g., poetry intended solely for a lover or a close friend.

In any case, the principles of having a message and being entertaining are intertwined, and as such, it is often the case that content and stylistic devices are used to increase both aspects of a poem, as in the case of humour or the use of riddles, which are both engaging and entertaining.

With the logic of the Zanzibari literary space in mind, the following sections will use examples, drawn from my fieldwork, of two different practices or forms of poetry—namely, *kujibizana* and two examples of the *utenzi* genre in performance—to explore in greater detail how literary capital is formed, adapted, and used toward differing ends both by individual and institutional agents.

Kujibizana* or *Malumbano

The exchange of improvised verse between Ali Haji Gora and the *konda*, as recounted in the introduction, is a form of the poetic practice known as *kujibizana* or *malumbano* (verbal duelling/poetic dialogue). Almost all of my interviewees said that they had taken part in some

form of *kujibizana*, which as a verb literally means "to cause to answer one another." In its most archetypal form, *kujibizana* is the exchange of poems on a specific topic between two poets, which Biersteker calls "composing in dialogues" (Biersteker, 1996), because poets continue the rhyming pattern set forth in the previous poem, resulting in a series of individual poems that can be seen to form a greater "whole."

The topics of these poems can range from the deeply philosophical or highly political to friendly banter, intended only in jest, as seen above. For example, the book *Mashairi ya Vita vya Kuduhu* (Biersteker, 1995) examines the poetry exchanged by enemy poets before and after the early nineteenth-century battle of Kuduhu. This poetry helped build identity and unity in the city-states involved (Lamu and Mombasa), and was intended to boost each side's morale while demoralising the enemy.

As noted above, great value is placed on the ability to respond and to debate one's point spontaneously, effectively "winning" the argument, as Ali did in the *daladala*; however, the vast majority of *kujibizana* exchanges occur in the form of written poems, sent out for publication in newspapers or aired on the radio. At some point, one (or more) of the parties can no longer add to the exchange, and the ideas of the other party (or parties) win out. This conclusion is much more obvious in the case of improvised verse, where the poets have only a very short acceptable time in which to respond. In the case of newspaper or radio poetry, however, the time is extended, and the poets have days or weeks to compose their replies, meaning it is not immediately obvious who has "won." Furthermore, these forums give significant consecrating power to the newspaper editor and the radio manager, who have the ultimate say in whether a poem is worth airing.

Whatever the context, *kujibizana* usually takes place in a forum that has an audience, and not as private correspondence. These audiences, whether they consist of critics, decision-makers in the media, or random members of the public, serve as the consecrating force that decides which poet's ideas are better. It is not at all uncommon for individual poets or poetry societies to gossip about and discuss these exchanges, even to the point of choosing sides. These para-discussions can influence the duelling poets because they unavoidably become aware of who is saying what – after all, this network is highly connected, and the opinions of others determine one's *heshima*.

One poet who has adapted the *kujibizana* practice to his benefit is Kassim Yussuf Mohd, better known as Ziro Kasarobo.[5] Ziro epitomizes the poet of improvised *kujibizana*; he no longer writes down any of his verses. He explained that in the mid-'90s, he had intended to publish a collection of some hundred poems, but unfortunately the manuscript was lost.[6] Ziro found the experience so painful that he vowed never again to put his poetry to the page, choosing instead only to perform on the spot and to enjoy the aesthetic moment.

When I first met Ziro, I was surprised to meet a tall, athletic man, sporting a faded green army beret, camouflage trousers, and a tattered Tanzanian football jersey. This was not what I was expecting when the manager of Redio Adhana first told me about a master of *malumbano* and had him compose for me over the phone. He didn't disappoint; he greeted me, welcomed me to Zanzibar, and then offered to meet. Despite his scruffy appearance, he is well known and respected, as demonstrated by the opportunities that being the embodiment of oral *kujibizana* has afforded him.

The Pemban-born ex-policeman earns his daily bread (though apparently not much more) through his talents as a poet. Despite having no formal musical or literary education, Ziro performs at political events for Tanzania's ruling party, the Chama cha Mapinduzi (Revolutionary Party). He is also a part of the Afya Theater Troupe, which, under the guidance of the Ministry of Health, performs across the country to educate audiences on health concerns like HIV/AIDS and malaria.

On top of this, Ziro has four radio shows a week with two different radio stations: the popular culture station, Chuchu FM (90.9 FM), and the Islamic station, Redio Adhana (104.9 FM). Each show lasts about an hour and consists of listeners phoning in and requesting poems on a certain topic, about which Ziro then improvises and recites live on air.[7] This format falls somewhere between Ali's impromptu *malumbano* in the public bus and the battles that take place over days or weeks as poets send their work to radio stations, in which the poetry is pre-recorded before being aired. This can be seen as a new form of *kujibizana*:

> New genres take shape as writers/composers of texts convoke new audiences (or old audiences in new ways) and, at the same time, the people out there bring new expectations to bear on texts, responding in new ways. (Barber, 2007, p. 138)

In this format, although Ziro is responding to a specific caller who initiates the exchange, he addresses the broadcasting radio station's listenership "simultaneously" (Barber, 2007, p. 139). In this sense, the spontaneous orality of improvised *malumbano* is preserved and the audience grows substantially; however, there are no longer two equal parties "composing in dialogues" (Biersteker, 1996)—only Ziro, who has earned his position on these shows thanks to his talent being recognised. Verse and performance are not simply a way for Ziro to entertain and inform his audiences; these shows also elevate him further and bolster his *heshima* within the literary world, which even serves him as "an alternative to financial capital" (Baumann, 2001).

***Tenzi* in Performance**

The long history of the *utenzi* (pl. *tenzi*) explains its very prestigious place in the Zanzibari poetic world. The oldest *utenzi* manuscripts date from the early eighteenth century, forming part of a long-standing oral and written tradition that likely stretches back even further (Miehe, 1990, p. 202). The form is often used for authoritative works on a given topic: e.g., *Al-Inkishafi*, a nineteenth-century religious-philosophical treatise on the fleeting nature of life and pleasure; the *Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona*, a dying mother's instructions to her daughter on

navigating nineteenth-century Lamu society; and the *Utenzi wa Vita vya Maji Maji*, an epic retelling of the Maji Maji uprising.

The *tenzi* examined in this article, however, are slightly different from those named above; firstly, they are much shorter (38 and 60 stanzas, respectively), and secondly, they are intrinsically tied to the events at which they were performed. The first was written on commission for a wedding; the second, for the opening ceremony of a new government ministry.

The first *utenzi* was written by Mwanakombo, a female teacher at the Haile Selassie Secondary School, one of the most well-known schools in the centre of Stonetown. The *mghairi* who performed at the wedding, Aisha, is also a member of staff at the same school. Before looking at the first stanzas, it should be noted that weddings are big and open affairs in Zanzibar; it is not difficult to receive an invitation to one of the different stages. Weddings are famed for their vibrant colours, loud music, dancing, and lots of good food. At the same time, the celebrations are split along gender lines, and this poem was performed at the party where the women were celebrating the married couple, and would have been accompanied by music. This space, then, is both open and closed: there would have been very few men, but at the same time, there may have been guests who did not know the bride personally.

Utenzi wa Harusi ya Najib na Salumu (The Utenzi of Najib and Salumu's Wedding)

13.	*Hongera mzaa chema*	Congratulations, creator of a good thing
	Huna budi kusimama	Now you must stand
	Sogea Mama Fatuma	Come forward, Mama Fatuma,
	Mwana kumshangiria	and rejoice for your child
16.	*Mama mdogo Mayasa*	Oh, maternal aunt Mayasa,
	Nawe zamu yako sasa	now's your turn
	Hii ni yako fursa	This is your chance
	Mwana kumshangiria	to rejoice for the bride

Poet: Mwanakombo Translation: Duncan Tarrant & Clarissa Vierke *Mghairi*: Aisha

After the customary opening stanzas, which invoke God's name and ask for His blessings, greet the audience, and extol the benefits of weddings in the Islamic faith, comes the main block of the poem. The poem's main body (stanzas 12 to 33) is devoted to addressing specific guests at the wedding by name and encouraging them to come forward to congratulate the couple. This "honour roll" gives guests the spotlight for a brief moment, and an opportunity for *kutunza*, the act of giving gifts to someone who has successfully accomplished something. Kelly Askew describes this phenomenon amid the similar setting of a *taarab* performance:

[women] make their way from the audience to the stage with a stylized, elegant dance [which] enables them to show off skill in dancing or perhaps a new dress. People perform the act of tipping with varying degrees of flourish. (Askew, 2002, p. 139)

Returning to the context of the Zanzibari poetic world, the entertainment and meaning of the poem are found in this roll call of names. The chance to take the spotlight is not only a chance to enjoy and celebrate; it is also a sign of *heshima*, an act of consecration and the playing out of family and societal politics, or as Askew puts it, "an enlightening example of the imbrication of power" (Askew, 2002, p. 127). As such, the commissioned poet must have a clear understanding of which of the many family members are important enough to earn a mention. To forget someone important or mention one before another has ramifications, and it is also possible to insult or mock someone, perhaps an ousted suitor, through insinuations, for example, that they should not be jealous (stanza 11).

The poem is also used by the poet and the *mghairi,* when, at the end of the poem, they take the opportunity to advertise themselves:

38.	*Mimi nilowasili*	I who came
	Mambo nikayoonea	and sang these words,
	Jina langu ni Aisha	my name is Aisha
	Kwa walo wasonijua	for those who don't know me
39.	*Mtunzi wetu BI mwana*	And the composer, Mwanakombo,
	Nyote awapenda sana	whom you all love so,
	Kihitaji kwa mapana	if you need us for whatever,
	Haile (haiba) tumepokea	we can be found at Haile (Selasse School).

In short, the poem plays out the social competition between the wedding guests, consecrating (or deconsecrating) them and increasing their *heshima*, but it is also useful for the poets, increasing their standing and possibility of future employment.

The second poem was written and performed by Fatma Hamad Rajab, the outgoing woman who is the director of the main office of the Zanzibari Ministry of Youth, Culture, Art, and Sports in Pemba. When I interviewed her, she was also working toward completing a PhD in literature alongside her other duties. She performed the poem during her ministry's official opening celebration in 2019.

Utenzi wa Tamasha la Utamaduni (Utenzi for the Celebration of Culture)

14.	*Mgeni wetu muhimu*	Our important guest,
	Tupelekee Salamu	let all give him our greetings
	Raisi wetu adhimu	Our dearest president,
	Twaomba kumfikia	let's pray they reach him
15.	*Kwa uamuziwe bora*	For the good decision
	Wakuanzisha wizara	to create this ministry,
	Jambo hili la busara	a thing of wisdom
	Alilokutufanyia	that he has done for us
16.	*Pongezi ziso mithili*	Congratulations like no other
	Kuamua jambo hili	for making this decision
	Baba Sheni metujali	*Baba Shein*, you have honoured us
	Wizara kutuundiya	by establishing this ministry
17.	*Vijana utamaduni*	Youth and culture
	Kwa hili hukutukhini	you didn't deny us, [nor]
	Sanaa zilo hewani	heavenly art
	Na michezo namba moya	and the very best sport

Poem: Fatma Hamad Rajab Translation: Duncan Tarrant

As with the wedding poem, this poem also includes a section in which important guests are honoured. The stanzas above are dedicated to the Zanzibari president, Ali Mohamed Shein—here given the honorific title *Baba*, "Father"—whom the poet praises for the decision to create the ministry, thus reinforcing her position within the new ministry as well as his own authority.

There is more to be found here than praise poetry reinforcing hierarchies; there is also a wider political purpose, namely, Zanzibari nation-building. Politics in Zanzibar has a complicated history, especially with regard to political autonomy in relation to mainland Tanzania and within the divided and antagonistic political arena of the Zanzibari islands themselves (Arnold, 2002). The Zanzibari Revolutionary Government (ZRG) takes its name from the violent revolution of 1964, when ethnic African Zanzibaris deposed the Zanzibari Arab ruling class put into power by the British after independence, attained the year before. Along with the wealthy Zanzibari Indian merchant class, they were lucky if they lost only power, land, and property (Petterson, 2002, p. 94). All of this resulted in the ZRG's desire to define Zanzibari identity and fortify their efforts to bring about their vision of unity.

Throughout the rest of the poem, Hamad constructs a specific idea of Zanzibari culture, which has been handed down since *enzi za asiliya*, "the original times." She reinforces Zanzibari ideals with references to important poets and writers, both living and dead, as well as culturally significant works. On more than one occasion, she motivates her listeners to stay true to Zanzibari customs:

27.	*Utamaduni ni mali* *Ilo bora kwelikweli* *Kwa hivyo tusikubali* *Kuwacha ukapoteya*	Culture is wealth of the best kind! So let us never allow our culture to be lost!
28.	*Utamaduni azizi* *Nawaomba tuuenzi* *Tuyatumie mavazi* *Ya enzi za asiliya*	Our dear culture, I ask you that we esteem it Let us wear the clothing handed down through the ages
29.	*Tuyavae ya nyumbani* *Tuyawache ya kigeni* *Mume kuvaa herini* *Siyo jambo la muruwa*	Let's wear our own styles and reject foreign influences A man wearing earrings— this is not respectable

This reinforcement of Zanzibari cultural ideals allows the poet, and thus the ZRG, to claim the heritage of Swahili literature and culture, a heritage that perhaps does not belong wholly to them, considering the pre-revolutionary history of Zanzibar under Omani rule as a cultural and economic centre (Pearson, 2010).

The tight relationship between poetry and power in Zanzibar is shown as the combined political and literary capital of the government and poet intersecting the act of nation-building. By having recitals of *tenzi* at their political events, the ZRG has repurposed an already respected and authoritative form to entertain the audience members present and enforce their message of cultural unity.

These intentions can be seen in the powers of this new Ministry of Youth, Arts, Culture, and Sports. It presides over the government's cultural institutions, including the Zanzibari Council of Arts, Film, and *Censorship* (emphasis mine), and requires that artists of all kinds register in their books. Hamad claims that this brought them under one roof and provided them with government support, but it could also be seen as an attempt to monopolise control over Zanzibari cultural ideals. When artists are forced to register, they are made to conform to the nation's ideals, lest they be defunded and denied access to government-approved public forums, thus losing opportunities to have their ideas heard and approved by the Zanzibari public.

Conclusion

Poetry continues to thrive in Zanzibar, where it enjoys a place of high cultural importance. In the poetic space, different forums and audiences assign *heshima* to poets and their works through their judgment of these works. The poetic logic of this space states that poetry should be entertaining and meaningful in order to be effective. The two practices show how poets earn literary capital, or *heshima*, by playing by the rules of the Zanzibari poetic space.

In the case of the *kujibizana* practice, the importance of spontaneity and quick thinking is highlighted in the examples of Ali and the *konda* and Ziro Kasarobo's radio shows. These examples show how the audience, whether comprised of strangers on a bus, fellow poets, or a wider public, also has a key role in the assignment of literary capital. Furthermore, Ziro Kasarobo's success with radio shows and his position in the government-funded theatre troupe

demonstrate that the *heshima* earned through composing can be used to further one's own social position.

The two *tenzi* show us how the poetic intersects with political and social power. In the wedding *utenzi*, the poetic and the social intertwine in establishing the social relationships in the room by intentionally including (and omitting) guests, honouring them by placing the spotlight on them. Something similar happens in the *Utenzi wa Tamasha la Utamaduni*, which praises and reinforces the authority of the political players present. Here, however, the *utenzi* also serves the ZRG's agenda of nation-building by constructing, praising, and encouraging adherence to their ideal of traditional Zanzibari culture. In both poems, the poets themselves benefit by promoting and ingratiating themselves with their audience, but also, in the second example, by reinforcing their own position of power and authority.

Endnotes

[1] Ali later informed me that they have known each other since they were young and are good friends.

[2] Rukia Morris is a singer in the Zanzibari National Taarab Orchestra. Her German father brought her up as a Christian, but she later converted to Islam, before she married.

[3] There is much more to be investigated regarding gender, poetry, and music in Zanzibar. I do not intend to attempt an in-depth discussion here—primarily, because I am ill-equipped to do so, but also because there is already ongoing research on female *taarab* musicians, such as the Tausi Taarab group, founded by Mariam Hamdani.

[4] The verb *kughairi*, "to recite," describes something different from the verbs kuimba "to sing" and kusoma kwa sauti "to read aloud." Whenever an *mghairi*, "reciter," recites poems, they use one of many *sauti* ("voice/tune") that rely on the meter of the poem—specifically the syllable count and rhyme—being correct. For the completely uninitiated, *kughairi* sounds not dissimilar to the *adhan* (the Islamic call to prayer).

[5] When asked about his pen name, he remained silent, declining to give an explanation, and merely smiled.

[6] Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar story. I have heard many accounts of people losing their work in different ways, and I will write more about this at a later date. However, the systematic nature of people losing their written work also reinforces the idea of poetry as something primarily oral.

[7] The premise of these shows is fascinating; unfortunately, I was not able to see him in action.

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