Sensing Swahili aesth-ethics with and through Mzee Farouk Topan's wor(l)dings

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In this chapter I argue that intellectual biography as a western scientific method does not allow us to sense Swahili wor(l)ds, because it assumes life (bio-) and (written) work (-graphy) to be separate, primordial entities. In this view, authors and their intellectuality exist prior to—and therefore separately from—their work, and their biographies can be written 'at a distance' by somebody else. What if bio- and -graphy were, instead, inseparable and co-constitutive of the 'becoming intellectual'? How could we then humbly attempt to sense the unfolding becoming of intellectuals with and through their work? Exploring these questions, I engage with Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan's intellectuality through the Swahili tradition of *wasifu*, which is not just a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium. Rather it encompasses a long poetic tradition in oral narrations, and, importantly, it is born across the Indian Ocean, carrying a sense of belonging that is uniquely and specifically Swahili. After introducing the concepting that co-constitutes my reflection, I will attempt to share how I was touched by, and, in reverse, could touch the words of Mzee Farouk in the ways of *wasifu*, an experience of sensing Swahili aesth-ethics that emerges through his own wor(l)dings (wordings and worldings).

Keywords: *wasifu*; aesth-ethics; Farouk Topan; wor(l)dings; touch.

1. Introduction

In engaging Swahili wor(l)dings we are engaging with onto-epistemologies that are co-constituted by emotions, orality, recitation, haptics, practices, that some western modes of wording might fail to sense. In Swahili ways of knowing and being, words are not necessarily cut apart from worlds, they do not represent worlds, rather they co-constitute them. So, in sharing my encounter with Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan, a Zanzibari playwright, anthropologist, scholar in Swahili Studies and religious studies, I need a mode of expression that allows for the relationality between his words and the worlds he helps to unfold. I need to narrate how I came to relate to these worlds through his words, how I sensed his wor(l)dings. And while it might be suitable in a different situatedness, intellectual

biography does not seem an adequate method for my project, because it lacks the sense-ability (Gandorfer 2020: 71) that I need to express how I was touched by Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings.

Instead, I chose to engage with his intellectuality through the Swahili tradition of *wasifu*, which is not just a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium, but rather encompasses a long poetic tradition in oral narrations (Topan 1997), and, importantly, is born across the *Ziwa Kuu* (Great Lake), that is the Indian Ocean (Karugia and Khamis 2018), carrying a sense of belonging that is uniquely and specifically Swahili.

I will begin by clarifying how and why biography does not help me as a method, while suggesting *wasifu* as a Swahili mode of sensing and composing, which allows the (bodily) expression and perception of Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings. That is how I introduce the enactment of my-self experiencing Mzee Farouk's intellectuality. By way of an (in)conclusion, I will point out the relevance of the bodily perception of words in sensing Swahili aesth-ethics, while engaging with Swahili onto-epistemologies.

2. On bio-graphy

This book, conceived from a workshop held in Napoli in April 2024 bringing together scholars working on and/or with Swahili intellectuals, suggests the intellectual biography as an entry point for engaging with Swahili literary epistemologies. Yet, what I witnessed during those days was a concerto of places, things, words and personae narrated in ways that intellectual biography as a method, I feel, is not always able to value.

This western scientific method assumes the predetermined existence of the separate entities of life (bio-) and (written) work (-graphy). In this view, authors and their intellectuality exist prior to—and therefore separately from—their work, and their biographies can be written 'at a distance' by somebody else. The Non-representational(ism) theorist Nigel Thrift feels suspicious towards both autobiography and biography, defining them as subject-based modes of perception that, as such, invite to fix and 'monumentalise' certain individualities, instead of promoting the possibility of an endless re-turning to them (Thrift 2007). In his study's first chapter, significantly entitled *Life, but not as we know it*, he, instead, insists on the co-constitutive nature of the world, as

> made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter, and the violent training that such encounter forces (Thrift 2007: 8).

Similarly, in relational modes of thinking emerging out of African, South American or Indigenous scholarship, like the philosophies of *Utu* and *Ubuntu*,[1] notions like *Nepantla* spaces[2] or Indigenous Place-Thought (Watts 2013), words are not discrete linguistic entities with essentialized fixed qualities, but are in fact ontologically co-constitutive becomings (Barad 2007). Therefore, there is no worded life account (biography) that exists as de-touched—unfolding without enfolding—from some-body's life and work that it claims to describe. Neither is there any account that presumes, and therefore dictates, a life trajectory in which intellectuality is born, grows old to then die. Rather the life, the works and their account are co-constitutive of an(y) intellectual becoming.

The ways I encountered Mzee Farouk's intellectuality, then, need a relational mode of engaging with them that allows to matter-forth the co-constitutive relationality of his persona and his work, without suppressing any subjectivity, any-body, my body, involved in the experience.

It is perhaps through the practice of *wasifu*, which rests in-between the oral and the written, that we can find a different way to engage with Swahili intellectuality. Certainly, it is through *wasifu* that I can try to express and narrate how my-self experienced Mzee Farouk's wor(l)ldings and invite you to be touched by it as I was touched by his wor(l)dings. A way, for me, to sense Swahili onto-epistemologies (Swahili ways of knowing and being), without reducing or erasing the aesth-ethics (in Mzee Farouk's wor(l)ding – the *uzuri*) they are imbued with.

3. On *wasifu* as a method to sense Swahili aesth-ethics

Differently from aesthetics, "aesth-ethics takes seriously that sense-making requires attentiveness to the ongoing intra-action of modes of sensing and the being of the sensible (i.e. that which is sensible but not recognizable). Thinking, far from being restricted to human and humanist thought, (un)matters and (un)makes-sense. As such it is both an onto-epistemological and ethical concern" (Gandorfer and Ayub 2021: 2). Aesth-ethics seems to get closer to the meaning and the doing of *uzuri* as the way in which Mzee Farouk words, and therefore co-constitutes, Swahili aesthetics (Topan 2008). *Wasifu* allows me to be open to the continuous (un)mattering of "entanglements that not only shape,

[1] The Swahili *Utu* and the Southern African Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele *Ubuntu* are not just concepts (to be easily translated—as they are in various dictionaries—as 'humanity'). Rather they express relational philosophies breaking free from Western hegemonial intellectuality. For more insights, see Coy (2024), Kresse (2011), Mangena (2016), Mubaya and Mawere (2016), Mugo (2019), Tutu (1999).

[2] *Nepantla* (a Nahuatl word that can be translated into something like 'in-between space'), like *Utu* and *Ubuntu*, is not just a concept. Rather it is a wor(l)ding which Gloria E. Anzaldúa has thought with and through. It became-with her theories of the Borderlands and the Coatlicue state developed in Borderlands/La Frontera (1987). For more insights, see: Anzaldúa (2015).

but are epistemologically and ontologically constitutive of, the very processes of knowledge and meaning production" (Princeton University 2018). And, in so doing, to nurture the attentiveness to the situatedness of Swahili onto-epistemologies.

Wasifu is a Swahili mode of storying[3] that is co-constituted by and through the *Ziwa Kuu,* embodying histories, trajectories and aesth-ethics born out of and through the Indian Ocean.

Wasifu's Arabic root وَصْف (*waṣf*) carries into the Swahili word ancient Arabic poetry's wor(l)dings, in which it ex-pressed 'narrative passage,' a pause in compositions that poets and readers (or listeners) could enjoy by delving into places and times, meditations and reflections, bringing to the surface certain bodily (physical, psychological and sensorial) aspects to shake up and awaken the public's imagination. "The original Arabic *waṣf*," says Mzee Farouk, "signified 'description' or 'characteristic,' applicable to the divine (as *sifat*, usually translated as 'attributes') and the human" (Topan 1997: 300). In translating —as in carrying and bringing across— وَصْف (*waṣf*) into a Swahili wor(l)ding, it has come to co-constitute *wasifu* not just as a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium, but as encompassing a long poetic tradition in oral narrations: not a critical evaluation, but rather didactic and admiring accounts of the many entangled hows, whos, wheres and whats of these lives (Topan 1997).

In the practices of composing, praising, commenting and describing, *wasifu* is enriched (wa Thiong'o 2013) by the Swahili noun *sifa* (quality, trait, attribute, characteristic, feature, reputation, qualification) and the verb *kusifu* (to praise, commend, extol, laud), which are co-constituted by the Arabic صِفَة (*ṣifa*) and, consequently, وَصْف (*waṣf*). In its ways, then, *wasifu* rests strongly on the openness to the subjectivities involved in this relational ode, without ever erasing the networks in which all participants are in turn involved.[4] In other words, *wasifu* leaves the freedom to pull one string rather than another, without aiming at a single, fixed chronological account that would define the trajectory of a before and after, and delimit places and encounters. Rather, it opens itself up to the possibility of multiple subjectivities, of authors and *wahusika* (characters, the ones involved).

I am not sure whether what I composed can be called a *wasifu* of Mzee Farouk, but I was certainly inspired by the wor(l)d (of) *wasifu*, while thinking of a way that could ex-press my encounter with Mzee Farouk's intellectuality differently, not as something given, rather as something that has become-with him, and, here, with me, and you.

[3] For a survey on the biographical 'genres' in Swahili, see Topan (1997).

[4] On the specificities of 'being involved'—*kuhusika* and *kuhusishwa*—see the enactment.

This Swahili mode of wor(l)ding does mainly three things: It allows me and my body to stay in the picture, to express my experience thanks to, and by way of, a relationality that has been changing me. *Wasifu*, in fact, does not take away either the author's nor our presence in weaving a very situated story. It allows me to sense and make sense of the Swahili aesth-ethics of Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings and to matter-forth that we can, in fact, touch and be touched by words. It opens up to the indefiniteness and innumerability of such experience of touch, that could become-with any other body.

I now invite the ones who have remained with me until this point to read the following enactment, while imagining the possibility of actually—not metaphorically—touching and being touched by wor(l)ds.

4. Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;
it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with;
it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts,
what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties.
It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.
—Donna Haraway

The first time I met Mzee Farouk it was almost twenty years ago in Bayreuth, when, after my presentation on *Ngoma za Kizanzibari*, he came to me and said: *Pazia lingalikuwepo, nisingelijua wewe si Mswahili*. I had smiled, re–membering my body when my beloved Bi Kidude,[5] in Kariakoo Zanzibar, told me: *Umetoka katika tumbo la Mswahili*, while she was teaching me to dance *ngoma ya ndege*. A sense of belonging, in a moment of my life when my *kwetu* was in fact also in Unguja, ties attached to the Island, *vitovu* born from my body, buried in the land, a Swahili land, a Swahili world.[6]

[5] Popularly known as Bi Kidude, Fatuma binti Baraka (c. 1910-2013) was a *nyakanga* (initiation ritual instructress), an expert in natural healing practices, and a *taarab* singer. To me, one of the most fearless and powerful soul and *mwalimu* (teacher, guide) in and of life I have ever met and to whom I am infinitely grateful.

[6] The first time I met Mzee Farouk it was almost twenty years ago in Bayreuth, when, after my presentation on Zanzibari *ngoma*—cultural performances involving dancing, drumming and singing—he came to me and said: "If there had been a curtain, I wouldn't have known that you are not a Mswahili." I had smiled, re–membering my body when my beloved Bi Kidude, in Kariakoo Zanzibar, told me: "You are born from a Swahili womb," while she was teaching me to dance a *ngoma*

I had already met him long before though, through the words of his two famous plays that we, as students of Kiswahili, were engaging-with, thanks to our Mwalimu Bi. Elena Bertoncini Zúbková's endless passion: *Aliyeonja pepo* (Topan 1973) and *Mfalme Juha* (Topan 1971a). While I was a student in Napoli, his third play *Siri* had already been woven in Riyadh (Topan 2021), but it was still a *siri* (secret) to all of us, unpublished until 2000.

> *ZIRAILI: Habari ya toka jana?*
>
> *JUMA: Nzuri, nzuri, nzuri. Mahali pa starehe hapa.*
>
> *ZIRAILI: Ndio maana pakaitwa peponi.*
>
> *JUMA: Kila uvumbuzi upo hapa.*
>
> *ZIRAILI: Kweli. Kila aina ya uvumbuzi uliopo duniani, ukiwa wa sayansi usiwe wa sayansi, sisi tunao hapa. Hata mambo yatakayovumbuliwa baadaye duniani, hapa tunayo hivi sasa.*
>
> *JUMA: Starehe niliyoipata hapa toka jana sikuipata kamwe duniani. Wenzangu duniani yanawapita mengi. Kama wangejua yaliyopo hapa, hawangebakia huko hata mtu mmoja* (Topan 1973: 12).[7]

What a chance is given to Juma, a fisherman from Bagamoyo, who's soul is erroneously brought to heaven, a place of wonders that suddenly turns into a place of im/possible choices. A chain of thoughts and views (also *wasifu*) that are so entangled with one another to the point of not knowing what is good, and what is evil, what is left of *dini* (religion) on the earthly world. *Elimu* (education) and *siasa* (politics) do play a role, Mzee Farouk explains to us in the *dibaji* (preface), in the creation of this entanglement in which, he asks:

> *[...] ikiwa dini sasa si nyenzo pekee ya kutegemea maendeleo ya mwanadamu kijamii au kitaifa, ikiwa elimu na siasa ni nyenzo nyingine muhimu katika karne hii kwa ajili ya maendeleo; ikiwa dini iwe ikisaidia tu nyenzo mbili hizi bila ya kuweko haja ya kusomesha habari za pepo na moto;. ikiwa dini imefikia hali hii; basi dini kweli itakuwa 'dini'? Ukiyaondoa mawazo ya pepo na moto, basi kazi yake Ibilisi itakuwa nini? Atakuwa hana haja tena ya kubaki duniani. Atapatana na Mungu aende zake mbinguni?* (Topan 1973: xii)[8]

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called *ndege*. A sense of belonging, in a moment of my life when my home was in fact also in Unguja, ties attached to the Island, umbilical cords born from my body, buried in the land, a Swahili land, a Swahili world. All translations are mine.

[7] Asrael: How have you been since yesterday? - Juma: Fine, fine, fine. It's an amusing place here. - Asrael: This is why it has been called paradise. - Juma: Every invention is here. - Asrael: That's true. Every kind of invention that existed on earth, be it a scientific one or not, we have it here. Even all those which will be invented in the future on earth, here we have them now. - Juma: The joy that I have felt here since yesterday I have never felt on the earth. Many things happen to my friends on earth. If they knew what is here, they would not have stayed there, not even one of them.

[8] If religion is no longer the only means to rely on for the social or national development of the human being, if education and politics are now other important tools for development in this century; if religion is only to assist these two tools without the need to teach about heaven and hell; if religion has reached this point, then will it truly still be religion? If you remove the

The answer is to be found in *utu* (humanity), and enacted in *vitendo* (actions). Mzee Farouk does not teach us, but invites us to feel through reading (or seeing) his play.

And what an absurd plot is the one unfolding in the play *Mfalme Juha* (1971a), a story he had encountered in his Gujarati class, as a pupil in Zanzibar. At school the story was narrated to teach the kids to not desire anything excessively, but, more amused by the plot than impressed by its moral, he decided to turn the story into a humorous drama. What an absurd affair this is in which a series of characters are blamed for the murder of three brothers, who died in the rubble of the wall of a jeweller's shop they were trying to rob. The allegation brought before the king by their mother and considered with 'obvious consternation' by the king, triggers a chain of accusations that end up falling on the king himself. 'Poor King Idiot' (*Mfalme Juha*), in order to show, demonstrate and remonstrate his power, winds up commanding to be hanged, deceived by those who weave more words than he does, gullible to the point of thinking that yes, on that day, in that month of the Islamic calendar, if hanged, he would receive a place at God's side in exchange. Mzee Farouk wrote it in 1963, when he was a student in London: a fragment of his past, so present to unfold into a Swahili rhythm, himself the conductor, the pen his baton, and the notes-words tuned by leafing through the pages.

... do you hear them?

In his study of post-independence Swahili works (Topan 2006a), Mzee Farouk, in conversation with Said S. Yahya, explains to us how words are carved out of the writers' feelings such as joy, love, desire and pain, co-constituted by and through their life experiences, their historical bodies, the contexts in which works are written, and the texts themselves, in their content and form, in their aesth-ethics—*uzuri* (Topan 2008). Let me stop and walk around in Mzee Farouk's words; let me re-member how we express feelings in Swahili, that is through and with the body. *Kuona huzuni* (to feel sad), *kusikia furaha* (to feel happy), *kupanda hasira* (to feel/become angry); all these expressions carry the body and the sensorial in themselves (*kuona* 'seeing,' *kusikia* 'hearing,' *kuwa na* 'being-with,' *kupanda* 'climbing, getting on'). In sharing states of being, we also share Swahili concepting of time-place: we cannot just be, we can only be-with and become-with certain places, in an indeterminate time: *upo*?, *nipo*! 'are you here ready to engage, to function, to be here? are you ok?, are we paying attention to each other? Yes, I am, we are!,'

concepts of heaven and hell, what will be the work of the Devil? Will he no longer have a reason to remain on Earth? Will he reconcile with God and go back to heaven?

or *tupo pamoja* 'we are together, we feel for each other,' or *nipo hoi kwelikweli* 'I am really overwhelmed,' always someplace and sometime (*-po*).

We can actually locate feelings and sensations in and outside our bodies at once. The (Swahili) body itself (*mwili*) is a "material inside enveloped by skin with 32, 33 openings. [...] With the skin and with the openings, *mwili* moves in and encounters the outside world while providing an inside in which nonmaterial life-defining forces reside and act. *Mwili* mediates between immaterial forces and the material world" (Nieber 2024: 31), and must be taken care of, by ritual washing, for example, that prevent spirits from entering providing "space for *roho*, *akili*, *nafsi* and *moyo* (English approximations: esprit, mind, self/soul, heart)[9] to be bound to each other and a bodily material substance to navigate through life's moral landscape" (Nieber 2021: para. 4).

Emotions in Swahili are not pre-determinate states of the body, but are literally co-constituted by and through the relationality of the inside and the outside of *mwili*. "That means," Lobanyi writes, "paying attention to feelings as well as ideas, and viewing feelings, not as properties of the self, but as produced through the interaction between self and world" (Lobanyi 2010: 223). Mzee Farouk, keenly aware of the uniqueness of such a *mwili*, never loses sight of the relationality between the individual, the collective and the land. Elaborating diachronically on what he sees as the paradoxical condition of the Swahili identity (*uswahili*), he underlines the many ways in which it has been used and abused under colonial and postcolonial rulers, pointing out the loss of land as a loss of status, a loss of a sense of belonging, an identity weakened because de-touched from its land, its home and its community (Topan 2006b). Lobanyi continues that we must see this interaction between self and world "not as the coming together of two separate entities, but as a process of entanglement in which boundaries do not hold. It also means taking into account not only conscious feelings, but also what is felt at the level of the body, questioning the body/mind divide" (Lobanyi 2010: 223).

It is in mattering-forth Swahili wor(l)dings that Mzee Farouk expresses the un/making of this divide between the self and the world, the body and the mind, engaging with this wounded *uswahili*, of which "the sustaining ingredients are likely to be language (Kiswahili), sentiment and memory" (Topan 2006b: 65). In so doing, he opens up to a more spacious *uswahili*, and defeats any attempt at breaking the relationality among the person *mtu*, their *utu*, and the community they co-constitute (*watu*). So, while reading 'the texts themselves,' attentive to the significations of words, verses, metaphors and

[9] In my translation: spirit, mind, life, breath of life; intelligence, intellect, ingenuity, ability, discretion; soul (of human, angel or spirit), spirit, self, a three-month-old human embryo; heart, courage, sincerity.

names, and to the reasonings that might have prompted them, as we have been trained to do, why not also surrender to their touch, and, at once, why not touch them?

As scholars in Swahili Studies, we have already been experiencing how the different styles in speaking and writing can be understood in terms of bodily processes that can affect people in their actions. We know it from the splendid researchers we engage-with, as we know also the power of silent bodies, of sealed lips, of bodies without names, of names without bodies:

> Generations of Kenyan women have used their bodies to create a new collective imagination and to nurture justice in our political community by showing nakedness, by offering bodily truths and by converting corporeality into transformative speech. As I tell you these stories now [...] in the silence, I hear the loud clatter of my fingers on the plastic computer keys. I hear the songs of my mothers and my sisters. I hear my voice. (Mwangi 2013: para. 6)

And yet, scholars trained in western modes of thought and analysis refrain from the possibility of thinking words as worlds, as inherently material-discursive; instead, we continuously cut words apart from worlds, as if words could not be blown, drunk or walked (Siragusa and Zhukova 2021; Irvine 2017; Nieber 2021: 2024; Ware III 2014).

How powerful is it that in Zanzibar *wachongaji* (carvers) can touch the words they sculp, *waweza kuyabembeleza ndiyo*—can sooth and calm them, yes–, sensing their im/perfections through their fingers, while shaping them and, in so doing, composing *wasifu* of queens and kings, of spirits of the land and of the sea, powerful enough to protect (or harm) the insides from the outsides (Krause-Alzaidi and Brunotti 2024).

... do you see them?

What would their *isimu* have told us? Not *isimu* just as linguistics, rather *isimu haswa*—an actual *isimu*—the one Mzee Farouk and his students worked with at the end of the 60s.

> When I went back to East Africa, to Dar es Salaam, in 1968 and I introduced the teaching of Swahili literature in Swahili, it was a different experience from the way I was taught at SOAS. There it was taught in English, and we discussed the translation. Here in Dar, we were discussing the literature in Swahili. We struggled with terminologies in those early days, terminologies which would be meaningful to the context. And how conceptually meaningful was it to study Swahili literature in Swahili in a new nation in 1968? Just four years after Tanzania was established? Quite a few factors made the process so obvious and desirable – one of them was the enthusiasm of the young people around the seminar table, at a time when both the country and the University were places of dynamism and hope. [...] There was a palpable sense of euphoria in Tanzania at that time (Topan, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 31).

In those days, the *isimu* was de-touched or, better, bravely untouched by the constraints in which Western linguistics obliged it to be. It could, and was holding on to its core—sign as presence, message, name(ing)—while exploring itself a potential 'science' (*taaluma*) in unpacking the meanings and the doings of words. It was an *isimu* capable to sense authors as becoming-with their texts, words as becoming-with their crafters; *isimu* as movement of words in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, utterances in verses, verses in *tenzi,*[10] a work of weaving, *kufumba na kufumbua* (dis/closing, un/hiding, un/making a riddle), an ode to the very physical sensation (think of *kufumba macho* 'closing the eyes,' and also *kufumbua siri* 'revealing a secret') that the 'text itself' is built-with and builds in its aesth-ethics. That is what Mzee Farouk and his students were so deeply caring for, in the efforts to allow us to sense the Swahili wor(l)dings:

> There is no shortcut to theory. That is why I find it totally unhelpful to have so-called 'literary dictionaries' in Swahili, or dictionaries of literary terms, which simply translate terminologies, or should I say try to do that, from English into Swahili. As if every facet given in the 'translated' dictionary is present in current discourse. *Sasa, je, nadharia itokane na jamii au itokee nje? [...] "Hakuna ubaguzi. [watu, wasomi] Wa ndani na wa nje washirikiane kutumia mbinu za elimu kujenga nadharia. Lakini iwe nadharia inayoeleweka 'ndani' pia, si 'nje' tu. Yaani, inayoeleweka kwa kimazingira ya fasihi au ya lugha 'ndani', si iliyopachikwa kutoka 'nje' kama katika mfano huo wa kamusi la msamiati wa fasihi* (Topan, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 35).[11]

... and this is where his mastery,

his artistry is also clearly revealed

So, what would the *isimu* of Mzee Farouk and his students have told us? Perhaps such an *isimu* would have told us about *uzuri* (being good, beautiful wholesome), that is, Mzee Farouk reminds us, "integral and basic to the concept of *utu*, humanity or humanness, among the Swahili" (Topan 2008: 89), whose perception of self and the environment—that is of an Islamic worldview too—"finds expression in the tenet 'there is no God but God,' whose oneness then permeates the world. [And] just as there is only one God, so there is only one reality and, further, [...] no separation within that singular reality between what is termed 'spiritual' and 'secular' in Western discourse of aesthetics" (Topan 2008: 89). And,

[10] A Swahili poetic tradition on which you can read extensively in Vierke (2011).

[11] So, then, should theory come from within societies or from outside? People/scholars from within societies and from outside should cooperate in using scholarly strategies in the process of concepting. But it should be a concepting directed to the 'inside' as well, not only to the 'outside'. That means a concepting that is understandable in the literary or language context 'inside', and not a concepting that is just copied and pasted from the 'outside,' like in the case of literary dictionaries.

quoting Mbiti, that "no line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical" (Mbiti 1969: 5 in: Topan 2008: 90). Let me add here that neither is a line drawn between the wordly and the physical, between the word and the world.

... do you feel them?

Perhaps such an *isimu* makes apparent that Mzee Farouk treats words no differently from how he treats objects. It is the playwright and the anthropologist introducing us to the *uzuri* of *usinga* (flywhisk) and *chetezo* (incense burner), and with them, to their material-discursive relevance in mattering-forth *uswahili*: "objects serve as nodes through which cultural meanings are acknowledged and transmitted; collectively the way and the manner of the objects' usage help to define a people's identity and self-perception" (Topan 2008: 95).

... mtu ni utu, utu ni vitendo, ubinadamu ni vitendo,
our beloved poet Mzee Haji Gora Haji has taught us[12]

Quoting Kassam and Megerssa, Mzee Farouk continues: "the objects become extension of the self and contributes to the construction or destruction of identity. They project the person, the person's status and authority in society and situate the individual in social time and space" (Topan 2008: 95). And I remember the historian Rudolf Ware speaking of the practices of Quranic learning in Senegambia, of the embodiment of the knowledge, of the corporeal absorption of Qur'an's verses (see also Nieber 2021, 2024), diluted and drunk by pupils after the madrasa. In so doing, he says, they respond to how the Prophet was not merely the receptacle and repository of the revelation, rather to how "God's Word had filled his inner being to the point that he physically embodied the Word. [...] He was the Qur'an walking on the earth" (Ware III 2014: 13).

[12] ... a person is *utu*, *utu* is agency, humanity is agency: Haji Gora Haji, Zanzibari poet of Tumbatu, whom I met during my Ph.D. research in 2002, gifting me, from then on, so much knowledge and a vision of life that is wider than the *Ziwa Kuu*.

... what an uzuri *the one which lets us stretch our bodies,*
our limbs to touch the soul, and the spirit, and to sense written or uttered words,
which can ultimately walk, and be walked:
uzuri wa utu, mtu ni utu, mtu ni watu, uzuri ndiyo watu[13]

More objects help our bodies to touch words, and entangle also sacred wor(l)dings: rose water is said to be sprinkled and burned in the *chetezo* during, for example, *maulidi* (ceremonies marking the birth of the Prophet). An assemblage, says Mzee Farouk, that "consists of a receptacle for the incense and a bottle-sprinkler for rose-water" (Topan 2008: 93), and extends to the participants to the anniversary, the recitations, the gesturing bodies, the drums, the rhythms, the scents, the atmosphere and the *qasida*: a material-discursive assemblage, not (de)finite, rather becoming-with and co-constituting all these entities through their relationality, giving them meaning, and, vice-versa, being made meaningful (Haraway 2016; Barad 2007). While focusing on the *chetezo* and the rose-water used in the ceremonies of *maulidi*, we are gifted by Mzee Farouk amazing instances of Swahili aesth-ethics (*uzuri wa Kiswahili*): the rose-water, a liquid matter which infuses calm, used to clean bodies and souls, its smokes affecting the senses and the limbs in order to reach a soul-body (*nafsi* with/in *mwili*), a state that is transcending-yet-becoming-with matter. "[...] accepting rose-water in one's hand or handkerchief and daubing a little on one's face or forehead, gives one sense of humility and of participating in an act of cleansing 'dirt', both external and internal" (Topan 2008: 94). Rose-water mattering purity, life and energy, the condition for bodies and souls to strive towards the paradise, together with the invocations, which might be prayers or supplications, co-constitute such a possibility of purity. There is no inside cut apart from outside of one's body, there is no word (invocations) cut apart from the world (rose-water), there is no meaning cut apart from sensing.

... do you touch them?

Mzee Farouk himself has always engaged with the material-discursivity of words and objects in a deeply caring way, attentive to their *uzuri* and committed in the writing of their *isimu*. I am thinking of his work on the spirit-possessions in Mombasa and how he describes this experience to his friend Mzee Rajabu, mattering-forth, in fact, a relationality between humans and non-humans that is co-

[13] The aesth-ethics of *utu*, any human is *utu*, any human is people, aesth-ethics is people.

constituted through the body: when a *mganga anakunywa na kunywa, halewi; si mtu anayekunywa ni pepo*[14] (Topan 2021), or when the spirits speak while "having taken their seat in human bodies" (Topan 1971b: 243).

... do you hear them?

Yet *uzuri*, as *utu ni mtu*, is also radically individual, never the same. If we engage with it affectively, as intensity of *uswahili*, as essence, says Mzee Farouk, we accept it as unique in our different encounters with it:

> *Navyofikiria mimi, [uswahili] ni kama ni continuum, na hii continuum inakuwa na ile* intensity, [...] *ila ukiendelea ile inapungua, lakini haipungui kwa kupungua* essence, *ile* essence *inakuwa ipo lakini inakuwa* complemented by something else. [...] the core is there, the essence is there, *lakini ile* essence, intensity *yake*, degree *yake* is complemented by the culture [...] around [...] (Topan in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 15).

And I reply, in conversation with him, "I am thinking also about *makala yako*, From Coastal to Global: the Erosion of the Swahili 'paradox' (Topan 2006b): *humo uliandika kuhusu* sentiments, memory and Kiswahili. That could become Viswahili—sentiments and memory—and sentiment and memory are very crucial, they are of *mtu binafsi*, and this is also where the multiplicity comes in."[16] And I continue: "In Italian to say core, we say *cuore,* which translates the heart as well; so, we know that the heart is an organ which is porous and entangled matter, right? So, also *kwa Kiswahili*, instead of using *kiini* to say core, we could use *moyo*..." (Brunotti, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 44).

"Beautiful analogy!" Mzee Farouk replays, "Yes, *moyo*, and of course its emotions" (Topan, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 38). "Yes," I conclude, "and it relates to the personal, the individual experience, the life experience that one brings in as a person, as a scholar, as an individual, and with-in a collectivity, a umma" (Brunotti, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 38).

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[14] When a "healer drinks and drinks and drinks, s/he does not get drunk: it is not the person who's drinking, it's the spirit."

[15] In my view, [*uswahili*] is like a continuum, and this continuum is in fact that intensity, [...] but the more you go on, the more it diminishes, but it is not the essence falling short, that essence is always there, but it is complemented by something else. [...] the core is there, the essence is there, but that essence, its intensity, its degree is complemented by the culture [...] around [...].

[16] I am thinking also about your article, From Coastal to Global: the Erosion of the Swahili "Paradox" (2006): there you wrote about sentiments, memory and Kiswahili. That could become *Viswahili* (Swahili language in plural, something like Swahilis), sentiments and memory, and sentiment and memory are very crucial, they are of a person, an individual, and this is also where the multiplicity comes in.

... do you feel them?

And again, because *mtu ni utu* and *mtu ni watu, umma* takes an important space in Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings, a care that he expresses in his writings, them being *michezo ya kuigiza* (plays), *hadithi* (stories, tales) or *kazi za kitaaluma* (scholarly works). The author a different person from the narrator, Mzee Farouk specifies, yet invested of the "tripartite role of historian, as a narrator, and as a craftsman" (Topan 2001: 118). Mzee Farouk the teacher, the scholar, the devout Muslim, the playwright, the translator, the anthropologist, the philosopher, the friend and companion, how many roles conversing through his tireless practice of wor(l)ding Swahili: such a profound knowledge and simultaneously a honest openness to what and who co-constitutes him as part of the *umma*. And to his *umma*, *Ibilisi* (the Devil) eventually confesses:

> *Mapenzi. Hiyo ndiyo sababu. Mungu ananipenda. Ndiyo sababu ya kumwumba Adamu. Na Hawa. Na dunia hii. Ndiyo sababu ya kunipa dunia hii niimiliki. Ndiyo sababu ya kunipa wafuasi wangu. Nami kila nikiwapotosha yeye anazidi kuwaongoza. Kama baba anavyomdekeza mwanaye. (Anasita.) Sasa nimefahamu. Sasa nimeelewa. Dunia hii ni jengo la kuendeleza ayatakayo. Hivi viumbe ni watoto bandia. Hawana uwezo wowote. Kule yupo Mungu, huku nipo mimi. Na sote sisi ni kitu kimoja, kwa sababu tunapendana. Ndipo aliponiumba mimi mwanzo kabla ya kitu chochote. Nami ndiye nitakayebakia mwisho baada ya kila kiumbe kufariki dunia. Hapo nitarudi kwake mbinguni, ambapo pia ni pangu* (Topan 1973: 23).[17]

... do you hear them?

Mzee Farouk, like the Swahili poets he writes of and speak to, a crafter of the best values of the community, through personal and individual experiences: feelings in words, words in bodies, words as bodies. I will never forget his interpretation of *Ngoma na Vailini*, a poem composed and performed by Ebrahim Hussein[18] in Dar es Salaam in 1968. I still see his gestures, his body swinging, *vuta n'kuvute* (push and pull), and hear his voice, feel through his shimmering eyes the admiration and the *heshima* (respect) he has for his student, friend, colleague—love through suffering, joy through sorrow.

[17] Love. This is the reason. God loves me. This is why he created Adam. And Eve. And this world. This is why he gave me this world to reign. This is why he gave me my followers. And me, every time I mislead them, he guides them more and more. Like a father who spoils his child. (he hesitates) Now I understand. Now I know. This world is a creation where to keep on what he wants. These creatures are dolls. They don't have any free will. There is God, here is me. And we together are one thing, because we love each other. This is why he created me before everything else. And I am the one who will remain at the end, after all the creatures will have died on earth. At that moment I will go back to him, to paradise, that is also my place.

[18] A former student of Mzee Farouk, Ebrahim Hussein has since become one of the most famous Swahili playwrights and poets.

… do you see them?

If words are worlds, words weave worlds. Mzee Farouk, in his *Approach to the teaching of Swahili literature* (Topan 1968), a study which makes reference to the first class of Swahili literature held in Swahili at the University of Dar es Salaam, and that also translated into a first collection of essays written by his students with him, and edited by him, entitled *Uchambuzi wa maandishi ya Kiswahili* (Topan 1971c; 1977), clearly expresses their commitment to *uzuri* in the project of *kuchambua* (peeling back and looking for the core, the heart of something) Swahili literary works in Swahili, thereby creating wor(l)ds which "are likely to break away from their originals both in the superficial as well as in the deeper meaning, and probably affecting the underlying basis of the concept itself" (Topan 1968: 163). In these essays, I've learned how *isimu* cannot be constrained into linguistics, but rather ex-presses the heart of Swahili wor(l)dings. And through the attentiveness to this *isimu,* the *wahusika* encountered in the literary texts they are analysing are treated, spoken to and re-worlded: experts in wording, caring for the written like the sculptors care for the carved Swahili words in Swahili worlds—Swahili worlded words, Swahili wor(l)dings.

Their analyses do not distinguish between Siti Binti Saad, *mhusika* (singular of *wahusika*) of *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad*, and Karama, *mhusika* of the novel *Kusadikika* (both works by Shaaban Robert). In both cases, and all along the essays in the collection, *wahusika* emerge for what they are: *wale wanaojihusisha, wale wanaohusishwa, na kuhusika* (the ones who involve themselves, the ones who are made to involve themselves, and the ones who are involved), the narrator's essence being co-constituted by the very relationalities above mentioned, in the very moments of writing and reading.

… to learn about a mhusika*, I must learn to sense their* sifa*, touch their words,*
the ones they speak, the ones that make them

> *Maskini Sirafili. Badala ya kufufua watu sasa afufua paka. Paka nyau! (…) Sijui wangapi kati yenu mtakapokufa mtarudishwa tena duniani? Baada ya kutia mguu peponi, mtarudi vipi? Wewe, bwana, utarudishwa kwa umbo la jimbi; wewe bibi, kuku; yule bwana pale, punda; yule, mbwa; bibi yule, tausi — watakuhurumia! Bibi yule mwingine, njiwa. Bwana yule anayesinzia, samaki pono. Atalala kutwa kucha!* (Topan 1973: 22).[19]

[19] Poor you, Israfel. Instead of resurrecting humans now he resurrects cats. Cats miaow! […] I don't know how many of you once you die will be brought back to earth? After moving a step into paradise, how will you come back? You, sir, you will be brought back in the form of rooster, and you, Madame, a chicken; and you sir, there, a donkey; and you, a dog; and that

... do you touch them?

A human entangles-with a human entangles-with a word entangles-with a *siri* (secret), taking innumerable turns, weaving and being woven in an embroidery so complex that the touch cannot follow the weave. Might this be the reason why scholars have not engaged with *Siri* (Topan 2000) the way they did with the first two plays? *Siri kwa uhakika imekuwa kama ni siri kweli, kwa sababu hakijulikani sana* [...].[20] Mzee Farouk smiles while telling his friend Mzee Ahmed:

> *Niliiandika nilipokuwa Riyadh. Lilinijia wazo hili, la kuwa wapo wanadamu ambao wanatumia siri ya watu ili kujiendeleza wenyewe. Kwa hivo unakuta na watu wasiojali au wasiowajali watu wengine ili wao wenyewe wawe wanapanda ngazi, na wakipanda ngazi wanawaponda wale wengine, na njia moja kuwaponda wengine ni kutumia siri zao. Ya kuwekwa mtu anajua siri ya mtu mwengine, badala ya, kama tunavofundishwa na uislamu wetu, kuweka sitara, maana siri za mtu tumwachie mwenyewe, badala yake tunazichukua zile siri na tunazitumia kwa kuwaponda na kuwavunja ili sisi tuendelee* (Topan 2021).[21]

A different shape compared to the previous plays, Mzee Farouk confesses, the shape of a *shairi* (poem), a moral philosophy, in Mzee Ahmed's words: "*Labda ndiyo maana hakijulikani, kwa sababu ni siri* (Maybe this is the reason for it not been famous, because it's a secret!)" (Topan 2021).

> *mimi sina siri... Ati hana siri! [...] Kweli haya?... Kweli!* (Topan 2000: 77, 70).[22]

No beginnings no ends, just strings pulled and knitted into *huzuni, upumbavu au ujinga* (sadness, stupidity or foolishness), and the pain of regret: "*majuto yenye pazia, pazia lifunikalo, giza la akili na nyoyo*—regret with a curtain, a curtain that covers, a darkness of minds and hearts" (Topan 2000: 75-76).

"Well, my friend, think about it, for this is the secret of secrets—*Haya, mwandani, yafikiri, kwani haya ndio siri ya siri!* " (Topan 2000: 79).

Madame, a peacock—they will blame you! And that other Madame, a pigeon. That sir dozing, a pono fish. He will sleep all night and all day long!

[20] Indeed, *Siri* has become like a secret, because it is not widely known [...].

[21] *Siri* has become really a secret, because it is not so famous [...] I wrote it when I was in Riyadh. I was thinking about those human beings who use people's secrets to their own interests. So, you can meet people who do not care about other people or who do not care about them climbing towards their own success, and one way they do so is to crash the others by using their secrets. In knowing the secret of somebody else, instead of concealing it, leaving it with its owner, the way we are taught by our Islam, we take it and use it to crash and break this person.

[22] "I have no secret" ... "Sure, he has no secret!" [...] "For real?" ... "Yes, for real!"

...pazia

... curtain

5. Afterword: on touching and being touched by wor(l)ds

> [...] ʿĀʾisha, wife of the Prophet and one of the early Muslim community's most important intellectuals, was asked to describe the character of her deceased husband to a man who had not known Muḥammad in life. No stranger to the arts of rhetoric, she answered the man's question with a question: "Have you recited the Qurʾan?" The man affirmed that he had. "Then you know his character," she replied; "his character was the Qurʾan." [...] "He was the Qurʾan walking on the earth."
>
> —Rudolf T. Ware III

> The English word 'language' is derived from Latin lingua, 'tongue': a metonymic relation between language and the tongue that is almost universal. Imagine tongue as intermediary between lived experiences, feelings, gestures, and sensibility; as a space of alchemy that gives meaning a sound. The tongue itself is a tangible zone of contact.
>
> —Yvonne A. Owuor

There is a unique relevance to the act of surrendering to the sensorial, not only because, as you might have felt, the Swahili onto-epistemology of *mwili*, and the practices related to it are materially shifting into the literal, allowing our bodies to sense words. But there is also a particularity in the sense of touch.

Touch does not stand as a metonymic way to sense the feelings produced by listening to or reading words. In Swahili onto-epistemologies a recited word enters the body through the ears—or a written word enters it through the eyes—touches the interior of the body, while the body is touched by the word, literally, in the same way the Qur'an verses, written in saffron, are drunk and flow through the mouth to touch the inside of the body. This inner touch is not a metaphor for 'how moving a word can be:' Swahili onto-epistemologies allow for the words to touch and be touched by bodies. To see words, to hear words is in fact to feel them, to be touched by them and, reversely, to touch them. The kind of knowledge that is co-constituted in a touch-being-touched relationality, then, "does not come from standing at a distance and representing the world but rather from a direct material engagement with the world" (Barad 2007: 49). It's a very situated knowledge that refrains from universalisms, while caring for the individualities that can, or choose, to be curious and brave enough to engage with the world through the body. Touch can be banal yet deadly, humble and pretentious at once, immanent yet transcendental, in its presence and its absence. Touch is reversible and potentially reciprocal—for instance, deafblind wor(l)dings are co-constituted through touch (Edwards 2024)— questioning once again the existence of subject/object, production/reception of knowledge. It has nothing to do with

belief, understanding or graspability; it simply rests on a way to engage with words that refuses to cut them apart from the worlds. It also presumes a choice that has its risks, since touch can be overwhelming, unwanted, consciously pushed away:

> Yearnings for touch, for being in touch, are also at the heart of caring involvement. But there is no point in idealizing the possibilities. [...] And if touch deprivation is a serious issue, overwhelming is the word that comes to my mind when enhancement of experience is put at the forefront. Permanent intouchness? With what? Like care, touch is not a harmless affection. Touch receptors, located all over our bodies, are also pain receptors; they register what happens through our surface and send signals of pain and pleasure (de La Bellacasa 2017: 107).

I have not willingly chosen to be touched by Mzee Farouk's words, I have not consciously engaged with Swahili aesth-ethics through my senses. But, while reflecting on the ways I have experienced them, I could not find any different way to share that with you if not through an enactment that, inspired by wasifu traditions, tries to matter-forth Mzee Farouk's intellectuality, stirring your curiosity towards the possibilities opened by Swahili onto-epistemologies of sensing Swahili aesth-ethics through your bodies. Mzee Farouk *anajali na anajaliwa*—cares about and is blessed and cared for—sharing his wor(l)dings with us, and we, in turn, *tunajaliwa na kusikia, kuona, yaani kuhisi maneno yake*—are blessed and cared about in hearing, seeing, that is: feeling his words.

Mzee Farouk the intellectual *anazaliwa upya kila tunapohusiana na maneno yake*—comes-into-be newly, whether he knows or not, every time we relate to his words. *Kwa wasifu wa nje ... kwa wasifu wa ndani* (Topan 1971c; 1977), Mzee Farouk's students have written while introducing wahusika in their essays—an external view... an internal view—a Swahili worldview which unfolds *uzuri wa maneno unaochongwa nayo*—the aesth-ethics of the words by which it is carved—that is to be touched. In the impossibility of tracing and sharing meanings from afar, I chose to open up to the potentialities of being touched by words—and worlds—in the ways of *wasifu*, which seems to me a more ethical way to engage with Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings (and Swahili wor(l)dings at large) without disrupting the relationality through and in which they, and I, and him are co-constituted. My hope is that the aesthetics I enacted in this piece can become aesth-ethics with and through your reading and touching of it. In other words: I hope to have provided a possibility to perceive and sense Mzee Farouk ethically (aesth-ethics)—a possibility to stay with him as an always becoming entanglement and, thereby, to take up our responsibility of mattering him and his wor(l)dings forth so they can co-constitute different and more just worlds.

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