

# ‘KUISHI UGHAIBUNI’: EEMPLACED ABSENCE, THE ZANZIBAR DIASPORA POLICY, AND YOUNG MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING IN ZANZIBAR AND OMAN

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## ABSTRACT

*Ughaibu*, in Swahili, describes a state of being absent, or missing, a state of unobtainability and remoteness. Paired with the locative ‘-ni’, *ughaibuni* translates as ‘diaspora’. The concept of diaspora was recently put at the centre of a policy issued by the government of Zanzibar in 2017. In *The Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar* the ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ refers to ‘people originating from Zanzibar who are residing in foreign countries but maintain patriotism to their homeland, recognize the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution as the basis for the liberation of Zanzibar people and respect the laws and constitution of Zanzibar.’ It is considered ‘of vital importance that such people remain patriotic and demonstrate a sense of belonging, desire and commitment to support socio-economic development of Zanzibar’ (p. 8).

Drawing on conversations with young Zanzibaris who live with absence, or in diasporic situations, conducted between 2018-2019, in this article I argue that exploring specifically the movement of young people can enrich our understanding of what the ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ may be. By thinking with diaspora as ‘absence’ I take into consideration the accounts of young Zanzibaris, who negotiate absences both within Zanzibar itself and between Zanzibar and Oman, and show that their own concepts of diasporic belonging go beyond the political limitations expressed in the policy. In both cases ‘going absent’ becomes a present-making and future-building strategy that helps young Zanzibaris navigate stagnation.

## INTRODUCTION

Diaspora identifies a relational network, characteristically produced by forced dispersal and reluctant scattering. It is not just a word of movement, though purposive, urgent movement is integral to it. Under this sign, push factors are a dominant influence. They make diaspora more than a vogueish synonym for peregrination or nomadism. Life itself is at stake in the way the word suggests flight or coerced rather than freely chosen experiences of displacement.<sup>1</sup>

There has been continuous movement between Zanzibar and Oman for centuries. The historical links between the two places have been instrumental in the production and perpetuation of groups of people who live away from their shared country of origin - what one may call diaspora. However, what has remained largely underexplored is how young people within this diasporic space live with such absences, and how these absences shape their sense of identity and belonging within a contemporary Zanzibar diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Even though youth always made up a particularly active group of diasporans, for reasons such as high pressure to attain educational or economic goals during the transitional years from childhood to adulthood, a focus on them in the analysis of the movement within, from, and to Zanzibar has so far been lacking. In order to contribute to discussions on diaspora in the Western Indian Ocean, this article explores the perspectives of Zanzibari diasporic men, in the context of the recent imagination of the so-called ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ as outlined in the first ‘Zanzibar Diaspora Policy’ issued by the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar in 2017.

As Gilroy observes, diaspora can seldom be considered a displacement that was freely chosen. It is thus young people’s liminal mobile identities that result from life being at stake – in terms of the limitations to live in the present and build the futures to which they aspire in the face of the new frameworks of neoliberalism that often create financial insecurity and complicate living up to societal expectations.<sup>3</sup> As my interlocutors’ accounts show, a strategic use of absence, or going absent, simultaneously connects and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora,” *Paragraph*, 17, 3 (1994), 207

<sup>2</sup> Franziska Fay, “Rearing like the state: Belonging, child rearing, and greetings in Zanzibar,” in *Across the Waves: Strategies of belonging in Indian Ocean island societies*, eds. Iain Walker and Marie-Aude Fouéré (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Akbar Keshodkar, “Indian Ocean trade and emerging pathways of mobility in neoliberal Zanzibar,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 6, 1 (2022), 38-64.

divides places across urban and rural settings in Zanzibar, as well as those across translocal boundaries between Zanzibar and Oman. They ultimately shed light on a contemporary understanding of young Zanzibaris' contributions to and roles within the changes that shape the concept of diaspora.

Theoretically, this article thinks with the temporal category of waiting, as a phenomenon very similar to 'social being,'<sup>4</sup> and the spatial notion of absence – as can be traced in the etymology of *ughaibuni*, the Swahili term often used for diaspora. I am interested in the productive power of diaspora, or in Engseng Ho's words, in the fact that 'absence can be highly productive.'<sup>5</sup> *Ughaibuni* derives from the Arabic term *ghiyab* غياب (absence, non-attendance, unseen). *Ghaibu*, in Swahili, translates to 'out of sight'<sup>6</sup> or to 'the state of an unknown or invisible matter or a speculative thing' (*hali ya kutojulikana au kutoonekana jambo au kitu bayana*).<sup>7</sup> Paired with the Swahili prefix *u-* that marks mostly abstract and uncountable nouns as well as country names, and the locative *-ni*, *ughaibuni* then expresses a location and translates to 'countries that are located far from a person's countries' (*nchi zilizoko mbali na nchi ya mtu*)<sup>8</sup> or simply to 'abroad, overseas, foreign place.'<sup>9</sup> Living in the diaspora (*kuishi ughaibuni*) thus describes both a state of being absent, missing, or unobtainable and a place that is located in remoteness, away from home. It is the quality of absence, or non-presence – or not-being-there, or being elsewhere, whether due to moving from Zanzibar Town to the coast or north along the Indian Ocean to Oman – that turns into a defining feature of many young people's lives. *Kuishi ughaibuni* thus literally translates to the state of living in, or with, absence and to life in the place away from home, which is common to all the young men's accounts I present.

Thinking with *ughaibuni* adds nuance to the linguistic discussion of diasporic life, alongside other key terms such as *al-mahjar*, which Iain Walker points out is the word used by Hadramis to refer to their diaspora and which Mohamed Ahmed Saleh emphasises is relevant, in its Swahili rendering, for discussions of Swahili trans-migrant populations:

<sup>4</sup> Ghassan Hage, "Introduction," in *Waiting*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>6</sup> To clarify the term, the example of '*Soma kwa ~*' is added which literally translates to reading/reciting a text in its absence. See: Toleo la Kwanza, *TUKI Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza* (Dar es Salaam: Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, 2001), 87.

<sup>7</sup> Baraza la Kiswahili la Zanzibar (BAKIZA), *Kamusi la Kiswahili Fasaha* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>9</sup> Toleo la Kwanza, *TUKI*, 336.

the ‘terminology of *Wahajirina*<sup>10</sup> (migrants or exiles) formulated around the metaphor of hegira i.e., when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were forced by circumstances to migrate from Mecca to Medina.’<sup>11</sup> Walker contrasts *al-mahjar*, or *Wahajirina* – people who migrate – with *al-shatat*, the term commonly used to name diasporic practice by, for example, the Palestinian diaspora. Walker elaborates:

The etymology of *shatat* is linked to scattering and dispersal: it is an abstract noun that is concerned with a physical scattering, the process of going to different places, of no longer being together: it refers to the place of origin. *Mahjar*, on the other hand, refers to the act of migration itself, to a departure, certainly: a separation, a relinquishment, a suggestion of a lack of choice; but, crucially, it also refers (as indicated by the *ma-* prefix) to the diaspora as emplaced. *Shatat* is an abstract collection of dispersed people; *mahjar* is community emplaced in the world: it has a concrete existence there where it is.<sup>12</sup>

What becomes clear from these elaborations is that all the terms described present different conceptualisations of diaspora. While *mahjar* is understood as an emplaced community, *shatat* draws descriptive boundaries around a group of dispersed people as a non-emplaced community, and *ughaibuni* implies a geography and a state, by means of emplaced absence. The qualities of unobtainability, invisibility, and speculation of both people and place that are inherent to both *mahjar* and *shatat* puts the ideas in dialogue with each other. At the same time, and in line with Walker’s description of *al-mahjar*, and Saleh’s *Wahajirina*, *ughaibuni* implies the act of going absent, of becoming not-present and of being a part of a speculative community of absent people quite literally framed by the Swahili geographical locative construction *-ni*, which corresponds with the Arabic *ma-* prefix.

Following this, I understand the concept of diaspora, or *ughaibuni*, in the case of Swahili-speakers in Zanzibar and Oman, as located on a register between other notions of

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<sup>10</sup> If we now contrast the nouns *Uhajirina* with *Ughaibuni*, the key difference lies in the former translating more generally as the practice of migration while the latter translates into a place that is not there, or simply absence.

<sup>11</sup> Iain Walker, “Hadrami identities in Saudi Arabia,” in *Rebuilding Yemen: Political, economic and social challenges*, eds. N. Brehony and S. Al-Sarhan (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015), 46; Mohamed A. Saleh, “Swahili elites and the concept of long-distance nationalism within the diaspora,” in *Translocal Connections across the Indian Ocean: Swahili speaking networks on the move*, ed. Francesca Declich (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 298. See also: Ali A. Mazrui and I. N. Shariff, *The Swahili: Idiom and identity of an African People* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Walker, “Hadrami identities,” 46.

diaspora like those referred to above and therefore both as a state and a place that can be found both within and outside of Zanzibar. I think with Ho's notion of diaspora as 'the society of the absent' (2006: 19) and 'a particularistic form of sociality.'<sup>13</sup> And even though for Ho it is the others, the deceased, who are absent, and in my exploration it is young people themselves who move with and along absences, thinking Ho's suggestion that 'absence, rather than presence, everywhere shapes diasporic experience' alongside my proposition of 'speculative presence' is helpful in the process of understanding the contemporary Zanzibari diaspora through young people's eyes.<sup>14</sup> To comprehend specifically young men's experiences in the context of the 'Zanzibari Diaspora' I suggest considering their geographical self-locations as a continuum between the 'here' and the 'away,' between 'home' and 'diaspora,' that arises precisely out of the necessity to draw on the possibilities that exist for building a life in both places if need be. I explore how young men's perceived urgency for mobility, both within Zanzibar and beyond its borders, frequently results in scattering and affects how young Zanzibaris feel they belong – both to their home society and to the diasporic network that is produced in the course of their movement.

Against the backdrop of some of the diasporic history that involves Zanzibar and Oman and the current developments in this field, I explore the role of the younger generation against the backdrop of the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy.<sup>15</sup> I set out to explore a more contemporary understanding of 'Zanzibar Diaspora' that goes beyond the memories of the revolution and its consequence of diaspora-formation. In order to do this, I engage with how Zanzibari youth in both Zanzibar and Oman, some with Omani heritage and some without, negotiate multiple absences and engage with the sense of belonging or 'patriotism' that is advocated in the policy.

I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the conditions that shape young Zanzibaris' everyday realities at their places both of departure and of destination enables a more critical reading of 'diaspora' as a spatial and temporal set of practices of absence. This framing extends an inter-generational approach beyond the experiences of the generation directly affected by the 1964 revolution. Put differently, I argue that in young people's mobility strategies, we can trace the contemporary Zanzibar diaspora, and contrast it with politicised conceptualisations of it as visible in the diaspora policy.

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<sup>13</sup> Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 19; Engseng Ho, "Empire through diasporic eyes: A view from the other boat," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46, 2 (2004), 214.

<sup>14</sup> Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar* (Stone Town: Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, 2017).

With the aim of reflecting on the conditions of diaspora-membership as set out in the policy, I trace some of the localisations, and some of the ideas put forward by young people that frame their own concepts of belonging to, or distancing themselves from, the Zanzibar Diaspora. This article draws on data from semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with young people between the ages of 15 and 35 that took place in Zanzibar and Oman.<sup>16</sup>

While I spoke with both young men and women who decide to leave Zanzibar and often travel between the islands of the archipelago and Oman, for the purpose of this paper I focus specifically on the realities of the young men I encountered and explore the particular situations and issues they face. Centering a male point of view in this piece, on the one hand, reflects the greater practical ease of gathering data from male interlocutors due to their increased accessibility and outspokenness in the public sphere in both Zanzibar and Oman. On the other hand, restricting the discussion to young men's experiences allows us to foreground existing nuances across their practices on the diasporic spectrum that vary greatly and often according to aspects such as class or age. Nevertheless, these are often linked by similar structural reasons such as the corresponding social roles and expectations – including acting as family provider or acquiring a certain financial capital in order to be able to make a marriage proposal. Despite this focus on young men's mobility in the diasporic context, young Zanzibari women are similarly mobile and constituting of the Zanzibari diasporic space in Oman, even if their mobility may be confined to less public spaces – as is commonly the case with female labour migrants who tend to take up work in domestic or less regulated markets – and further constrained by socio-religious aspects.<sup>17</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND DIASPORA BETWEEN ZANZIBAR AND OMAN

Zanzibari emigration in the 1960s and 70s was inscribed within a historical pattern of Indian Ocean migrations over the *longue durée*. The people of Oman and Zanzibar have co-influenced each other's historical development for centuries. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Zanzibar – and many other parts of the East African coast – fell under the control of Saif

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<sup>16</sup> The given age bracket is the period most generally referred to as 'youth' in treaties such as the African Youth Charter. See: African Union, *African Youth Charter* (2006): [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033\\_-\\_african\\_youth\\_charter\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033_-_african_youth_charter_e.pdf) [Accessed: 25 May 2019], 3.

<sup>17</sup> Tanzanian domestic workers often travel to Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Joanna Busza, Shein Teferra, Serawit Omer, and Cathy Zimmerman, "Learning from returnee Ethiopian migrant domestic workers: A qualitative assessment to reduce the risk of human trafficking," *Globalization and Health*, 13, 71 (2017), 1-9.

bin Sultan, the Imam of Oman. In the 1840s Said bin Sultan, also known as Seyyid Said, made Zanzibar the final capital of the Omani Empire (1696-1856). This was a result of strategic interests in increased control over the Western Indian Ocean trade in enslaved people and goods, for which Zanzibar was the ideal location.

From this time onwards, many young Omanis moved to Zanzibar – at the time a centre of trade and Islamic education – in search of other opportunities to settle than were available in the Oman of the time, which bore little resemblance to the oil-based state it is today. While the Omani diaspora in Zanzibar developed alongside the Sultan's rule, the Zanzibar diaspora was largely established as a result of the events in Zanzibar in 1964, when he was overthrown in a violent revolution. Due to decades of intermarriage and cohabitation between Zanzibaris and Omanis, the lines between genuine 'ancestry' or 'origin' have become fuzzy. More so, they commonly overlap, with many younger people simultaneously identifying with a selection of categories such as Tanzanian, Zanzibari, Swahili, African, Omani, or Arab and applying those terms differently in relation to the contexts in which they move. The relationships that young Zanzibaris and Omanis maintain with kin in both places often also affect and shape their contemporary practices in terms of building a life as well as their sense of belonging and identity.

Today, the translocal relational network of Zanzibaris can no longer primarily be attributed to the revolutionary events in 1964. Particularly for young people in Zanzibar, the 'urgent movement,' that Gilroy describes as integral to diaspora formation, has become an inescapable matter of the present, as many struggle to live with the effects of neoliberalism and global capitalism that have them living under precarious circumstances.<sup>18</sup> They reveal themselves in the economic and social pressures – such as being able to find paid employment that will allow them to pay a bridewealth or to build a house. These have become central push factors that define the routes that young people follow in order to build a life. With the semi-autonomous archipelago's economic instability making financial independence a hard to attain goal for Zanzibari youth, many turn to forms of mobility, like 'going rural' – to escape the city's additional financial demands – or 'going abroad' – which in recent years has increasingly meant following personal heritage paths to Oman to attempt more promising future-making over there. Alcinda Honwana has discussed this state of African youth in the context of the concept of 'waithood', or 'waiting for adulthood' – 'a prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood' – and Adeline Masquelier has recently referred to it in the words

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<sup>18</sup> Keshodkar, "Indian Ocean trade," 38-64.

of her interlocutors in Niger, as the ‘the sitting that kills the pants’ – the absence of work opportunities and the state no longer serving as a provider of jobs literally wears out one’s pants.<sup>19</sup> It is thus the inevitable encounter with a reality defined by waithood that leaves visible traces on one’s own existence such as ripped clothes or symbolically a damaged representation of oneself.

In Zanzibari society, waiting, especially with young people, can be considered as ‘present systematically.’<sup>20</sup> Following Hage, I propose that young Zanzibaris’ waiting can be understood not as a phenomenon in its own right but rather as a lens through which to view and understand the construction of the sociocultural process of diaspora-making. Waiting, he writes, ‘emphasises a dimension of life where the problematic of our agency is foregrounded,’ and it is this constrained or conflictive practice of young people’s agency in the face of turning to absence as a strategy that I focus on.<sup>21</sup>

Finding ways to overcome the impossibility of socially becoming an ‘adult’ is a unifying experience the young Zanzibaris who spoke to me in both Zanzibar and Oman share. Whether they try to make a living at home or abroad, all situations are riven by unpredictability and thus make the need to move between places, or to ‘return’ home, a constant possible necessity to balance uncertainty. They frequently explain the practices they turn to as ‘building a life’ (*kujenga maisha*) in order to become ‘self-reliant/independent’ (*kujitegemea*). How young people are thus ‘living translocality’<sup>22</sup> shows how *kujenga maisha* and *kujitegemea* happens across local and national boundaries. As young people wait for their futures to begin, absence has become a demand of the present they must negotiate.

These efforts to become self-sufficient and to build a life are often coupled with an explicit demand for more just political and socio-economic relations. However, the inability to have them fulfilled increasingly results in involuntary migration. In my research with children and young people in Zanzibar (since 2012) and in Oman (since 2018), I have frequently witnessed such involuntary or reluctant movement – young people setting off on their journey elsewhere as they grow older and negotiate their positions on the spectrum of future-projections. Movement and mobility across existing,

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<sup>19</sup> Alcinda Honwana, “Youth, waithood, and protest movements in Africa,” *Lugard Lecture 2013* (International African Institute, 2013), 1; Adeline Masquelier, *Fada. Boredom and belonging in Niger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Hage, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Julia Verne, *Living Translocality. Space, culture and economy in contemporary Swahili Trade* (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012).



occasionally transnational, networks of connections have become a necessity and the ‘elsewhere’ one chooses takes various shapes and depends on where ‘building a life’ works best and appears most promising. As kinship ties between Zanzibar and Oman remain strong today and affect how young people move between and make use of these worlds, young people’s mobility directly shapes what becomes the contemporary Zanzibar diaspora.

## THE ZANZIBAR DIASPORA (POLICY)

The question of Zanzibaris who live in the diaspora (*kuishi ughaibuni*, lit. ‘to live in absence’) recently gained attention when the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar issued ‘The Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar’ in 2017.<sup>23</sup> The policy, launched by the Minister of State Issa Haji Ussi, primarily aims to increase financial and professional (re)investments in Zanzibar by Zanzibaris living abroad.<sup>24</sup> The vision statement of the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar sets out the Zanzibari government’s objective ‘to have a Diaspora community that is patriotic and ready to contribute towards the Socio-Economic Development of Zanzibar,’<sup>25</sup> and the policy’s mission aims ‘to identify, engage and involve the Zanzibar Diaspora into a unified group.’<sup>26</sup>

The Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar’s first chapter opens with the acknowledgement that ‘Zanzibar is an Island State within the Indian Ocean in Eastern Africa of which its inhabitants originate from all corners of the world.’<sup>27</sup> In a positive tone it proceeds to consider that it is ‘natural for Island people to migrate’ with ‘travelling and migration becoming part of their culture.’<sup>28</sup> According to the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar, ‘there is no official or reliable statistics showing the number of Zanzibaris or Tanzanians living outside their home country in terms of number, domicile, age, qualifications, education

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<sup>23</sup> The separate Swahili version of the document is called *Sera ya Diaspora ya Zanzibar*. In May 2020 a related law entitled ‘Diaspora Affairs Act 2020’ was passed. It emphasises applicability ‘on the matters concerned to all registered and non-registered Diaspora and for the matters related to Zanzibar’ which includes, for example matters of recognition of status and privileges, as well as not allowing diaspora members to participate in political issues such as the right to join political parties, vote or be elected.

<sup>24</sup> Issa Yussuf, “Zanzibar launches first diaspora policy,” *Daily News* (13 May 2018):

<https://www.dailynews.co.tz/news/zanzibar-launches-first-diaspora-policy.aspx> [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022].

<sup>25</sup> *Dira ya Sera: Kuwa na jamii ya Wanadiaspora wenye uzalendo na moyo wa kuchangia na kukuza maendeleo ya kiuchumi na kijamii ya Zanzibar* (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora ya Zanzibar* (Zanzibar: SMZ, 2017), 10).

<sup>26</sup> *Dhamira ya Sera: Kuwatambua, kuwaunganisha na kuwashirikisha Wanadiaspora wa Zanzibar katika umoja wao ili waweze kuchangia ipasavyo katika maendeleo ya Zanzibar* (Ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Kama ilivyo desturi kwa watu wa visiwa, suala la kusafiri na kuhama ni utamaduni wao* (Ibid., 9).

and levels of income.’<sup>29</sup> For Britain, for example, the exact number of Swahili-speaking people ‘is unknown since several have adopted many and varying nationalities, largely for political reasons.’<sup>30</sup> Other sources have referred to census reports that count ‘32,630 individuals of Tanzanian descent living in the UK with similar numbers in Canada and Scandinavia.’<sup>31</sup>

The Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar’s second chapter offers a definition of ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ as including ‘people originating from Zanzibar who are residing in foreign countries.’<sup>32</sup> The dissonance between the expressions to live ‘in foreign countries’ and ‘to live outside the country’ [*nje ya nchi*] leaves room for interpretation. It remains unclear whether mainland Tanzania would count as a foreign country or as connected to Zanzibar – as the archipelago’s status within the Union grants it only partial autonomy. A press release by the State House Zanzibar/Office of the Press Secretary from 9 August 2014 explains that the Zanzibar diaspora includes individuals living in the UK, Canada, the US, Denmark, Sweden, Oman, UAE, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland.<sup>33</sup> This, particularly with its mention of Oman and exclusion of mainland Tanzania, contributes to a notion of diaspora that includes those individuals who left after the revolution.

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<sup>29</sup> *Hakuna takwimu halisi wala taarifa sahihi ama za Wazanzania au Wazanzibari wanaoishi nje ya nchi kama Diaspora kwa misingi ya idadi, sehemu walipo, umri, taaluma, mafunzo, kipato na uzoefu wao wa kitaaluma* (Ibid., 1; Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 5).

<sup>30</sup> Ida Hadjivayanis, “Integration and identity of Swahili speakers in Britain: Case studies of Zanzibari women,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 9, 2 (2015), 232. The policy’s affirmative and movement-legitimising opening stance towards migration as an ordinary and likely practice of island populations in particular is followed by an ambiguity between the English and the Swahili version of the policy. While the English version states that ‘a considerable number of Zanzibar people have migrated to various parts of mainland Tanzania and to other foreign countries’ – with ‘other’ here suggesting specifically that mainland Tanzania itself is a foreign country, the Swahili version reads that ‘*kuna idadi kubwa ya Wazanzibari wanaoishi nje ya Tanzania* (Diaspora)’ (Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 1; Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 1). This literally translates to the opposite of what is stated in the English sentence: Namely, that there is a large number of Zanzibaris who live outside of Tanzania. The policy thus begins with two different definitions of what and where the ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ actually is – one that locates it also within mainland Tanzania and other foreign countries, and another definition that considers it to lie fully outside of Tanzania. The discrepancy may relate to the respective audiences that are targeted with the different language versions of the policy – one for ‘foreign’ or non-Swahili speaking consumption implicitly emphasizing the autonomy of Zanzibar, and a local version that aligns with the official narrative of Zanzibar as a part of the Union of mainland Tanganyika and Zanzibar that is present-day Tanzania.

<sup>31</sup> Roberta Piazza, “With and without Zanzibar: Liminal diaspora voices and the memory of the revolution,” *Narrative Inquiry*, 29, 1 (2018), 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Wanadiaspora wa Zanzibar ni Watu wenye asili ya Zanzibar wanaoishi nje ya nchi* (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

<sup>33</sup> “Dk Shein: Serikali inathamini mafanikio yaliyopatikana kutoka kwa Wazanzibari wanaoishi ncho za nje,” (9 Sep. 2014): [http://www.zanzinews.com/2014/08/dk-shein-serikali-inathamini-mafanikio.html?fbclid=IwAR1MHO1jJVgibGhiX3TZ5g8cRYWw0VR-P21-gjQ1G\\_dbTMIPyKuqakYwPsU#more](http://www.zanzinews.com/2014/08/dk-shein-serikali-inathamini-mafanikio.html?fbclid=IwAR1MHO1jJVgibGhiX3TZ5g8cRYWw0VR-P21-gjQ1G_dbTMIPyKuqakYwPsU#more) [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022].

After the definition, the policy's second chapter continues with a specification of the characteristics that qualify a Zanzibari diasporan. These include to 'maintain patriotism to their homeland, recognize the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution as the basis for the liberation of Zanzibar people and respect the laws and constitution of Zanzibar.'<sup>34</sup> 'That such people remain patriotic and demonstrate a sense of belonging [not included in the Swahili version],<sup>35</sup> desire and commitment to support socio-economic development of Zanzibar' is considered to be of vital importance.<sup>36</sup> In sum the 'main identification criteria of Zanzibar Diaspora'<sup>37</sup> include: 'a) Zanzibar origin; b) Patriotism; c) Recognition and respect of the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution; and d) Adherence to the Constitution and legal frameworks.'<sup>38</sup> These clearly outlined conditions for belonging raise questions about who this document is aimed at, how people are defined as being a part of the Zanzibar Diaspora, and, more importantly, how they view themselves in relation to the qualities set out as necessary for membership. Ultimately the question that remains is whether it is possible to speak of such a thing as a 'unified group' of Zanzibari diasporans?

### *One policy – multiple diasporas?*

As a political tool, the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy paints a picture of a supposed 'Zanzibar Diaspora' as a coherent and homogenous group, that can be addressed and engaged as a collaborating body of people, without mention of different diasporic identities and motifs for previous, and potentially forced, migration. Zanzibar is presented as a socially cohesive homeland, which, of course, can easily be contested, and presents a stark simplification of reality. The approach that is used in the diaspora policy to define diasporic belonging thus seems to be intended rather as a tool of absence that speaks to a confirming but not to a critical audience.

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<sup>34</sup> Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 8. (...) wana uzalendo, wanatambua Mapinduzi Matukufu yam waka 1964 kwamba yameleta ukombozi wa Watu wa Zanzibar na wanaheshimu Katiba na Sheria za nchi yao (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

<sup>35</sup> 'Patriotism' is further explained as 'having passionate love to Zanzibar' (Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 8). *Upendo wa nchi* (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

<sup>36</sup> Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 8. Ni muhimu kwamba, watu hao wawe na hisia za kizalendo, ham una ari ya kushiriki katika kuimarisha maendeleo ya Zanzibar (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

<sup>37</sup> Vigezo vikuu vya kumuwezesha mtu mwenye asili ya Zanzibar kutambulika kuwa Diaspora (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

<sup>38</sup> Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *The Diaspora Policy*, 8. a) Asili ya Zanzibar; b) Uzalendo wa nchi; c) Kutambua na Kuheshimu Mapinduzi Matukufu ya Zanzibar yam waka 1964; na d) Uti wa Katiba na Sheria za nchi (Serikali ya Mapinduzi ya Zanzibar, *Sera ya Diaspora*, 9).

A more nuanced definition of a Zanzibar diaspora can be found on the website of ‘Zandias – Zanzibar Diaspora Scandinavia,’ which states ‘it is political – those who left Zanzibar because their lives were in danger; academic – those who left for further education, and economic – those who left for financial reasons.’<sup>39</sup> This resonates with Hadjivayanis’ observation that in Britain, most Swahili mother-tongue speakers are usually either economic or political migrants. As common factors of the Swahili-speaking diaspora in Britain, she identifies language (Kiswahili), culture (Uswahili), origin (Uswahilini), and religion (Islam).<sup>40</sup> Here, particularly the qualifier of origin resonates with the framework set out in the policy.

The part of the Zanzibar diaspora ‘who left Zanzibar because their lives were in danger’<sup>41</sup> was largely a result of the violent revolution of 1964 ‘when Zanzibar’s indigenous African population revolted against Omani rule’ and ‘between 5000 and 15,000 Arabs were killed.’<sup>42</sup> In the course of the revolution ‘the Omani Arabs were summoned by the newly independent state to “go back home”, because of their supposed foreignness.’<sup>43</sup> After this initial phase of urgent movement, the year of 1970 presumably marked the beginning of a second round of increased migration and growth of the existing Zanzibar diaspora in Oman, following Sultan Qaboos’ accession to power and his invitation to ‘East African Arabs’ to return to Oman.<sup>44</sup> This invitation started a movement when ‘a critical mass of more educated Zanzibari-Omanis - who would become the technocratic backbone of the country - opted to leave their initial places of refuge to heed what is now widely referred to within Oman as ‘the call’ [the Sultan’s invitation to the diaspora] to reside in Oman as citizens and contribute to national development.’<sup>45</sup> ‘Around 10,000 Omani from Zanzibar are thought to have moved back to Oman by 1975’ and were granted immediate citizenship ‘without any consideration of the time their family had spent abroad.’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Zandias: Zanzibar Diaspora Scandinavia: <http://www.zandias.org/> [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022]

<sup>40</sup> Hadjivayanis, “Integration and identity,” 232.

<sup>41</sup> Zandias: Zanzibar Diaspora Scandinavia.

<sup>42</sup> Nafla Kharusi, “The ethnic label Zinjibari: Politics and language choice implications among Swahili speakers in Oman,” *Ethnicities*, 12, 3 (2012), 338.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Valeri, “Nation-building and communities in Oman since 1970: The Swahili-speaking Omani in search of identity,” *African Affairs*, 106 (2007), 485.

<sup>44</sup> Dawn Chatty, “Women working in Oman: Individual choice and cultural constraints,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32 (2000), 241-54. Within days of taking power, Qaboos announced that the ‘[t]ime will shortly come for Omanis living abroad to be called to the service of their homeland.’ Cited in: Sarah Phillips and Jennifer Hunt, “‘Without Sultan Qaboos, we would be Yemen’: The renaissance narrative and the political settlement in Oman,” *Journal of International Development*, 29 (2017), 653.

<sup>45</sup> Phillips and Hunt, “‘Without Sultan Qaboos,’” 650.

<sup>46</sup> Valeri, “Nation-building and communities,” 485.

To some extent, Sultan Qaboos' call resembles the most recent call of the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar to its own diaspora as put forward in the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar; in particular, the aim that the diasporic community should return to contribute towards national socio-economic development is a clear parallel. It remains unclear who is addressed with this invitation in the policy. Zanzibaris living abroad represent a wide range of different groups. While in response to Sultan Qaboos' call the majority of those who were said to have 'returned' had fled the recent violence in Zanzibar, the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy's address leaves it open as to who will follow its call and whether this too includes Zanzibari-Omanis who once sought refuge in Oman. Ultimately, many people who were considered to 'return' to Oman did in fact not return but had often never previously entered the country. However, the politicization of the notion of 'return' here allowed them to profit from being offered citizenship in response to heritage claims that would allow for an imaginary 'return' to a fictitious homeland.

Today, certainly not all of these East African-born Omanis and their descendants would self-identify as part of a 'Zanzibar diaspora,' and some indeed want no association with it. Even though generalising ascriptions like 'Zanjibari' certainly exist in Oman, and despite their broader way of addressing not just people from Zanzibar but from East Africa in general, they also suggest an attempt to group all Omanis with Swahili heritage together. Eventually they ignore the internal cleavages that exist within this category. As Valeri emphasizes, Swahili-speaking Omani have indeed 'progressively developed a new collective identity, which has its *raison d'être* within the framework of the modern Omani State'<sup>47</sup> and is strongly built on 'their shared vernacular language – Swahili.'<sup>48</sup> Further, Al Harthy, for example, reports in the context of his research on Afro-Omani Music, that 'those I saw as Omanis of African descent in Sur resisted any application of the term Swahili as a signifier of their identity. It is erroneous, therefore, to consider this "diasporic" term as applying to the whole spectrum of Omanis who have connections with the East Coast of and central Africa, regardless of the nature and intensity of these connections.'<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, others do not exclusively identify as Arab, and pass this desire on to the next generation. As part of a discussion about a book launch on the Zanzibar & Oman Facebook group, a commentator with an Omani tribal name and introducing himself as

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 479.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 481.

<sup>49</sup> Majid Al-Harthy, "African identities, Afro-Omani music, and the official constructions of a musical past," *The World of Music*, 1, 2 (2012), 109.

one of the page's administrators, inquires whether there will be a book launch in Oman too. He explains his request with there being 'a large Zanzibari Diaspora group in Oman and also many Swahili speakers'<sup>50</sup>. His comment suggests that he does not conflate Zanzibari diasporans and Swahili-speakers, but views them as separate, probably coexisting groups in which Zanzibari diasporans may today well only be Arabic-speakers, and Swahili-speakers may also be from other places than Zanzibar and identify different sets of national belonging, or speak Swahili without any Swahili-heritage at all.

For the use of the generic term 'Swahili' in Muscat, Al-Harthy encountered its application 'in reference to a group of people, whether it is self-descriptive (used by Omanis to refer to themselves as waSwahili or, more precisely, waZanzibari) or externally imposed (used by those who do not think of themselves as waSwahili or waZanzibari, but refer to a specific group of other people as Swahliya, the Omani term for waSwahili).'<sup>51</sup> A part of this is the flexible ethnic label 'Zinjibari,' which, Nafla Kharusi explains, 'is used in Oman to refer to individuals of Arab descent with historical connections to East Africa.'<sup>52</sup> Depending on user, context and situation, it may 'function as a mark of solidarity and a source of cultural and ethnic pride, as an exclusionary label employed to challenge or even reject an individual's Arab identity and also as either a slur or a mark of prestige.'<sup>53</sup>

These insights bring some nuance to the different effects that descriptive terminologies of belonging may have in the context of different diasporic settings, such as Hadjivayanis' less contested use of the term Swahili to describe the members of the Zanzibar diaspora in Britain.<sup>54</sup> The Zanzibar diaspora, in Oman at least, constitutes a more multi-layered and fluid group of people than envisioned in the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar and represents an example in which a variety of identity categories, such as 'Omani', 'Arab', 'Zanzibari' and 'Swahili', coexist.

Against such a dynamic interpretation of the diaspora, I now turn to those young Zanzibaris who shared their perspectives with me in both Zanzibar and Oman. The fluidity and constant change that defines the Zanzibar diaspora becomes particularly visible in their experiences and associations with it.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=954349901270098&set=p.954349901270098&type=1&theater> [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022].

<sup>51</sup> Al-Harthy, "African identities," 109.

<sup>52</sup> Kharusi, "The ethnic label," 335.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Hadjivayanis, "Integration and identity," 231-46.

## ZANZIBARI YOUTH IN DIASPORA – MATUNDA YA MAPINDUZI?

In March 2019, while I was conducting exploratory fieldwork on youth, education and identity making in Zanzibar and Oman, I posted a call for potential research participants on the Facebook group ‘Zanzibar & Oman.’<sup>55</sup> I specified I was interested in speaking to ‘Zanzibari-Omani youth between 15-35 years of age’ to learn about their ‘contemporary educational choices’ and how these ‘contribute to their identity formation.’ Amongst various responses and messages that reached me, a comment from one woman, who, as stated on her Facebook profile, lives in London but attended a secondary school in Zanzibar Town, was particularly interesting:

Good ideas, except when it comes to the relationship between Zanzibar and Oman, the age-group between 15 to 35 is a generation that is not very aware of that history because they are the fruits of the “Revolution”, you [will] understand me, mind you, it’s not all of them but some of them will know the truth. Good luck.<sup>56</sup>

Even though my post did not touch on history but focused instead on education and identity formation, her response immediately set the focus on the socio-political and historical connections between Zanzibar and Oman and their intertwinedness with the events of the revolution of 1964. Keeping in mind that one of the government’s criteria for diaspora membership is the ‘recognition and respect for the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution,’ this account suggests a more complex relationship to this event. Additionally, the commentator’s reference to the young people I was looking to speak to as the ‘fruits of the Revolution,’ who make up a generation with only partial awareness for the so-called ‘truth’ – as in their own government’s public processing of the archipelago’s history – emphasises the heavy weight of the revolution on a self-defined sense of belonging that diverges from exclusive ‘recognition and respect.’

The particular version of history she seems to have in mind and frames as ‘true’ needs to be considered in relation to the official version of the history propagated by the governments of Tanzania and Zanzibar. On the official website of the government of Tanzania, for example, Zanzibar Revolution Day is explained to be ‘celebrated every 12<sup>th</sup>

<sup>55</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/groups/zanizbar/search/?query=franziska&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/zanizbar/search/?query=franziska&epa=SEARCH_BOX)

<sup>56</sup> *Mawazo mazuri ila, ikija kwa uhusiano wa Zanzibar na Omani umri wa miaka 15 hadi 35 ni kizazi kisichotambua sana hiyo history’s kwani ni matunda ya “Mapinduzi” utanifahamu mind you si wote baadhi watakuwa wanaujuwa ukweli. Good luck.*

of January to commemorate the day people of Zanzibar overthrew Sultanate administration.’<sup>57</sup>

In July 1963 the Sultanate government held parliamentary elections which resulted in the Arab minority retaining power to an extent of making Zanzibar an overseas territory of Oman despite winning 54% of the votes. That incident provoked the African majority. To solve the problem, the Afro Shirazi Party (ASP) allied with Umma Party to join force. On 12<sup>th</sup> January 1964 the ASP, led by John Okello mobilized around 600 revolutionaries to Zanzibar town and overthrew the Sultanate government.<sup>58</sup>

Another explanation on the website on the ‘50 years of Zanzibar Revolution 2014’ details that ‘The President of the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar Dr. Ali Mohamed Shein used the occasion in his speech to remind the people of the importance of the Revolution as well as maintaining peace and stability as a major item in developing Zanzibar.’<sup>59</sup> The depiction of the Zanzibar Revolution as ‘problem solving’ and an ‘African’ reclamation of the illegitimate ‘Arab’ hold on power is supported by emphasizing the supposed qualities and effects of the revolution as ‘important’ and as a peace- and stability-maintaining pillar for the development of Zanzibar. All of these aspects are reflected in the exclusive formulation for diaspora membership as included in the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar. Even though, as William Cunningham Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouéré show, ‘the exact history of the revolution and its meaning have been sharply contested’ and how the revolution is remembered and reconstructed is still ‘a source of continuing cultural struggle,’ the Diaspora Policy seems to serve as one specific tool for remembering historical events in one particular way only.<sup>60</sup>

Whether the woman on Facebook considers not all Zanzibari young people to be aware of the ‘truth’ because she considers them as too young to know, or too politicized to know differently, remains unclear. Either way it shows that identities and belonging are

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<sup>57</sup> United Republic of Tanzania, “Zanzibar Revolution Day”: <https://www.tanzania.go.tz/home/pages/236> [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022].

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> United Republic of Tanzania, “50 Years of Zanzibar: Revolution 2014”: <https://www.tanzania.go.tz/home/pages/1926> [Accessed: 11 Mar. 2022].

<sup>60</sup> William Cunningham Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouéré, “Memory, media and *mapinduzi*: Alternative voices and visions of revolution, fifty years later,” in *Social Memory, Silenced Voices, and Political Struggle. Remembering the revolution in Zanzibar*, eds. William Cunningham Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouéré (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2018), 4. The Zanzibari government has never since publicly addressed the legacy of the revolution and essentialized categories of race or religion continue to structure associated narratives (Ibid., 5).



still closely tied to the events of the revolution in 1964, about which the different generations have different knowledge and which continue to have various effects on the lives of young people in Zanzibar according to their ethnic background. This leaves me to ask what else, other than a historical positioning and transmission of the memories of this event, influences young people's decisions to seek a life in or outside of Zanzibar. I understand generation as 'social generation' – a period shaped by the same set of experiences during formative years of youth and to be located in the socio-political context.<sup>61</sup> This accords with what the age group I spoke to considered as a set of similar experiences by which they are shaped, and that affects their movement across the Indian Ocean region and beyond in various ways.

The so-called 'fruits of the Revolution' – young Zanzibari and Zanzibari-Omanis that cultivate ties to both ends of the connection – constitute the links between the two places through their movements between them. They often do this along the routes their ancestors established while similarly following their aspirations to build a better life, or a self-reliant existence. Exploring the places that young people, and in this article young men specifically, create and inhabit by means of translocality – the constitution of social spaces by movement – opens the perspective onto different scales of entanglement and goes beyond national and normative borders that often inadequately represent the far-reaching networks that youth draw on. Acknowledging the historical links that extend from Zanzibar to Oman and connect people and ideas still opens up a perspective on youth in diaspora that is not constrained by the diasporic definitions of their elders.

Migration as some form of future-making, turned out to be a part of the lives of all the young men I spoke to. While some of them attempted 'making do' at home by removing themselves from the strenuous contexts of urban life, others opted for opportunities that arose for them overseas. In all their accounts, it turned out to be their place-making practices, their making use of absence and its incorporation in their daily life as a response to their experiences of waiting, that seemed to shape most strongly the Zanzibar diaspora through the eyes of their generation. As 'places have different meanings for different people,'<sup>62</sup> multiple rather than single identities operate as processes instead of being static, and have neither clear inside nor clear outside borders,<sup>63</sup> it is hardly possible to speak of any essentialised notions of place. As Doreen Massey put it, they

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<sup>61</sup> Karl Mannheim, "The problem of generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Kecskemeti (London: Routledge, 1952 [1928])

<sup>62</sup> Iain Walker, "Place and space on Ngazidja and among Comorians in Zanzibar," *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers*, 172 (2016), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places. Urbanism, architecture, identity, power* (London: Routledge, 2010).

embody ‘the chaos of simultaneity and multiplicity’ with great ‘intimations of mobility and agility.’<sup>64</sup> Therefore, how young men navigate places like ‘home’ and ‘in diaspora,’ how they navigate their lives in sometimes precarious, sometimes more well-off situations, appears as a helpful lens to look through in the attempt to theorise young diasporas across transnational spaces and relations. Focusing particularly on the practices of the generation considered as ‘*matunda ya mapinduzi*,’ enables a perspective on what the ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ entails for a different generation who occasionally turn to a diasporic life to overcome stagnations that may be framed as waitthood. That this young generation can only draw on the memory narratives of the revolution that were passed on to them further affects where they position themselves on a contemporary spectrum of Zanzibari national as well as diasporic identity and belonging.

## YOUNG MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF WAITING AND ABSENCE

If the ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ is located in an elsewhere between mainland Tanzania, Oman, and a variety of other places, I first wanted to understand why young men may *not* choose to go to one of these places in order [to] *kujenga maisha* (to build a life), but how they achieve *kujitegemea* (self-reliance/independence) by staying in Zanzibar, and how this, nevertheless, still increasingly involves dealing with periods of waiting and bridging them by going absent in a number of ways.

### *On Waiting and Absence in Zanzibar*

‘I have left the city and moved to the coast about 6 months ago,’ Rahim, 29, who has lived in Zanzibar Town all his life, tells me when we happen to run into each other in a village on the East Coast of the main island. Over the course of the past years, he managed to open his own small tourist company and afford a car to take his clients on tours. When I ask why he left town, he explains:

It’s just getting too hard to live there. Other young guys from the mainland are coming over and take away our jobs with the tourists. They are pushing us out of town. The other thing is that many of my friends are now selling heroin or cocaine (*wanauza unga*) because those are the only jobs available. But I want nothing to do with that. So I decided to go to a different place

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<sup>64</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (London: Polity Press, 1994), 1.

(*sehemu nyingine*) that would be far away from those things. (...) I have a girlfriend in Scandinavia at the moment and I hope she will help me to go there too. I have just applied for the visa. I want to work there for a few years but then I will come back. I really need to be here to take care of my siblings. At the moment it's me who pays their school fees.

Rahim's account points out the harsher sides of the urban life he has been living, despite the work he has been able to sustain. Facing increasing competition in the labour market and rejecting the pressures to make easy money by selling drugs has pushed him to search for a space that is free from all that, away from the city. Considering leaving Zanzibar, at least as a temporary option, underlines how it is not only material, but also moral goals, of, for example, being able to support your own family, that may become more achievable in the long run if one decides to leave.

'*Angalia maisha yangu*' – look at my life – Idris, who is turning 30 this year and who moved to the same coast shortly after Rahim, tells me proudly when I visit him in his new tourist office on a Zanzibar East Coast beach. He shows me his official tourism license, which allowed him to open the office, and which he hopes will enable him to establish himself further in the tourism industry.

In town I could have never come this far, the rent would have been too expensive. So now, I will live here. I don't want to go abroad anymore, it's too late to leave (*nishachelewa kuondoka*). If I leave now, then I will come back one day and I will have nothing. If I were twenty, this would be different. But me, now, I will stay here, at home (*nabaki home*). I need to build myself [a life] here (*nijijenge hapa*) and buy a plot to start building a house for later.

Resonating with Rahim's experience, Idris also points to the lesser cost of living away from the city, and even more strongly than him, considers leaving the archipelago altogether not even an option anymore. Staying put, to him, appears as the only possible way to provide for himself in the long run. Seeing this opportunity to 'build himself,' as he says, by opting for a rural existence, suggests a sense of agency that is more easily located away from the constraints of the city and may in fact be blocked there.

Unlike Rahim and Idris, for other young men I spoke to, imagining a life in the diaspora away from Zanzibar was a central hope that remained amongst their frustrations

of not being able to build the life they aspired to in town. Daudi, who grew up and lives at home with his parents in Kisiwandui, just across from Darajani, is 28 and of partial Hadrami ancestry.

I've lived on the coast and worked for some of the hotels, but they paid me almost nothing. It's not enough. I had to come back to live at home. You know, two of my brothers are in Europe and managed to get in as refugees (*wamejifanya refugee*). I want to do the same. I have already tried it once, but they stopped me at a border and found that my papers weren't real. They sent me back. There is nothing to do for us here and my family doesn't have any connections that could help me find a job. I still sell my art occasionally, but I can't build my life (*kujenga maisha*) like that.

For Daudi leaving appears to be the only remaining option that he considers may potentially improve his feeling of being stuck. His attempt at moving out of town, like Rahim and Idris, confronted him with the harsh reality of the minimal pay that untrained young men have to deal with, and suggests how the idea of life in the 'diaspora' turns into a final untapped opportunity for life-making.

In all three accounts, going absent becomes an important tool to try to overcome limiting boundaries that interfere with the young men's desires to become self-reliant. Idris and Rahim leave the city for the coast to realize their plans, which the reality of urban life in Zanzibar Town would allow them, and consider leaving Zanzibar for life in the diaspora, if at all, only a temporary option. Daudi, on the other hand, turns to an 'elsewhere' that is located along the lines of mobility some of his family members have created, and which he envisions holding more possibilities than he was able to identify in Zanzibar.

It is evident that Zanzibari youth who turn to some form of absence at 'home' have to cope with a multitude of interconnected difficulties, including limited opportunities for employment, increasing rents in town, below-minimum wages, family responsibilities, nepotism, and high labour competition in the tourism sector. All of these are push factors that make them move, or want to move, whether it be within Zanzibar and from an urban to a rural setting, or away from the archipelago to join life in the diaspora in Oman. The young Zanzibaris I spoke to in Zanzibar and Oman all faced similar situations.

### *On Waiting and Absence in Oman*

Aziz, who is 33, is one of the people who responded to my post on the Facebook group. He suggests meeting close to where he lives in the central Shangani area of Stone Town. His family are Zanzibaris of Omani descent who used to own some of the most prestigious buildings in this part of town.

Zanzibar is home, and Oman is home (*Zanzibar kwetu na Oman kwetu*), it's all our heritage (*kote ni asili*) and you can't put one above the other. I call myself mZanzibari but I really want an Omani passport, so it's easier for me to work there. Here in Zanzibar I can't find work. (...) You know, nowadays, all the youth know the truth, but the government is not speaking it. There is no education in Zanzibar today because all the educated people left for Oman. Now the education is there. All the good (*neema*) of Zanzibar moved there (*imehamia kule*). Discrimination (*ubaguzi*) is real here. The party members always ask you for your tribe (*kabila*). That's why I would never vote. They will ask you where you live and then that's it.

Aziz places himself directly between a Zanzibari and an Omani identity. For practical reasons he hopes to receive Omani citizenship, as his chances for employment are similarly low to those of the young men introduced in the previous section. Additionally, his account qualifies his dissatisfaction within another marker – discrimination. This feeling of marginalization in Zanzibar and related limited possibilities for finding employment leaves him hoping for an Omani passport to work abroad. Like the woman on Facebook, he points to the ‘truth,’ that according to him the youth today know, and suggests a silencing of certain parts of Zanzibari history that remains. This echoes the ‘passport problems,’ the fear of ‘getting stuck,’ and the strategic citizenship negotiations experienced by Hadrami offspring born of foreign mothers – those people referred to as *muwalladin* that Engseung Ho describes in *The Graves of Tarim*.<sup>65</sup> As with Omani passports, Yemeni passports had been relatively easy to acquire, as long as one could prove genealogical descent from a Yemeni émigré: applicants did not need to have been

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<sup>65</sup> Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 68. See also: Martin Slama, “‘Coming down to the shop’: Trajectories of Hadhrami women into Indonesian public realms,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 13, 4 (2012), 313-33; Iain Walker, “Hadramis, Shimalis and Muwalladin: Negotiating cosmopolitan identities between the Swahili coast and southern Yemen,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2, 1 (2008), 44-59.

born in the country themselves.<sup>66</sup> This resonates with my interlocutors' aspirations and with the fact, that Zanzibaris who can prove their Omani ancestry still remain entitled to Omani passports and citizenship.<sup>67</sup>

Aziz's perspective is partially echoed by Abdullah (30), whom I met in a coffee shop in Zanzibar. Abdullah was born in 1988 with his parents' heritage being divided between Oman and Kenya. In Muscat his family lived in neighbourhoods well-known for their high percentage of Zanzibar-Omani inhabitants.

In Oman I worked for a security company for three years. That didn't pay well but much better than anything here. But now it is getting harder to get work in Oman too, because of their nationalization policy that says they have to employ Omanis first. They say not enough Omani youth are getting jobs. So now I move between here and Oman. Half of my family live there, so every other month I go and stay for some time. (...) Here in Zanzibar I have no work and nothing to do. I speak three languages and have experience working in hotels and in a garage, but the pay they offer here is too little, so I rather not work. I also couldn't get a good job like with the police or in government. Why? Because of my Arab face (*sura yangu ya kiarabu*). There is discrimination (*ubaguzi*) here. Some years ago during elections, they beat me up in the street and said to me 'We don't want your colour (*rangi yako*) here'.

Unlike in Aziz's account, Abdullah's experience of discrimination is not only tied to his life in Zanzibar but indeed extends to Oman too. Facing situations of marginalization and discrimination in both settings, he turns to a liminal approach to moving between both places to best deal with the uncertainties that exist in each one. The tension that is still present in Zanzibari society today, and that extends beyond its geographical borders, becomes apparent in this account. The forms of othering that foreground apparent ethnic belonging and link identity to skin-colour – such as the assumption that lighter skin aligns with a higher degree of Arabness – suggest that the attribution of alterity does not only

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<sup>66</sup> Iain Walker, "Citizenship and belonging amongst the Hadramis of Kenya," in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni politics, identity and migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 169-71.

<sup>67</sup> Omar Shariff, "Zanzibar: A slice of Oman in East Africa," *Gulf News*, (26 Dec. 2018):

<https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/oman/zanzibar-a-slice-of-oman-in-east-africa-1.60457795> [Accessed: 23 June 2021].

take place in one direction, for example, from dark-skinned Zanzibaris to those with a lighter complexion, but indeed also takes place in the process of self-identification.

As for Aziz, for whom both Zanzibar and Oman are ‘home,’ so for Abdullah there is also no privileging of one place over the other but only a negotiation of the conditions tied to certain places by engaging with both.<sup>68</sup> I then asked Abdullah directly about the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy and its conditions of belonging:

To agree with the ‘official history’ is seldom for people who live outside the country (*nje ya nchi*). Our grandparents taught us differently. Some people even want nothing to do with Zanzibar. Many of the people who moved Oman forward (*wameiendesha*) were Zanzibaris. And Oman still needs Zanzibaris like their siblings/brothers (*ndugu*), but because of their hate (*chuki*), Zanzibari don’t need Omanis anymore. Personally, I consider myself a Tanzanian (*mTanzania*). There is no such thing as a Zanzibari (*mZanzibari*), because Zanzibar is not recognized (*haitambulikani*) as a country of its own.

Like Aziz’s claim, that today all youth ‘know the truth’ in regard to the governmental silences that surround the historic event of the so-called Zanzibar Revolution, Abdullah outspokenly disagrees with the demanded loyalty and agreement with the official history of the revolution as put forward by the Tanzanian government, and as depicted in the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy, that is expected of Zanzibari diasporans. He thus does not only engage and identify with both Zanzibari and Omani constructions of identity, but also distances himself from both, by choosing a third notion of belonging as being Tanzanian.

In Muscat’s majority Swahili-speaking suburb of Maabelah, I meet Mohammed, Abdallah’s cousin, outside a shisha bar he suggested. His experience adds to Abdallah’s narrative and reaches far beyond Zanzibar in our conversation. He was born in Zanzibar in 1987. His Omani grandparents had moved to the archipelago when, as he says, ‘it was booming,’ and then later returned to Oman. Mohammed has been in Oman since 2016, and before that spent two years working in China.

The only ‘job’ I was ever offered in Zanzibar was to take cocaine to China for 30.000 USD. I said no, but I know other people who do it. The problem

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<sup>68</sup> See also: Walker, ‘Hadramis, Shimalis and Muwalladin,’ 44-59.

is they don't think of their future (*maisha ya baadae*), they only think of today. In Zanzibar you can't get a real job without connections. Here in Oman I've worked in centrifuging in the desert, cleaning oil for Petroleum Development Oman, but because of the Omanization policy I was laid off 2 months ago. I had to delay my wedding because at the moment I can't pay for the bride wealth. So now we Zanzibaris are starting to struggle here too – and many I know now work unofficially as street stall vendors. I really don't understand why the president of Tanzania doesn't ask Oman to create jobs for Zanzibaris.

From Aziz's point of view, nationality as well as race plays a role in the navigation of which elsewhere a young person may choose. His frustration with the Zanzibari labour market resembles what Rahim describes in the earlier account – exclusive job opportunities in the flourishing trade of drugs – and links to Daudi's critique of nepotism as the only chance for 'real' employment. Young Zanzibaris' experiences of building a life between Zanzibar and Oman are defined by an in-between-ness that unravels that navigation of life and opportunities in both Zanzibar and Oman as a means of getting by when opportunities for long-term security are few.

## **DIASPORA AS (YOUNG PEOPLE'S) ABSENCE AND WAITING**

For the young Zanzibaris I spoke to, regardless of whether they negotiated waiting through absence 'at home' in Zanzibar or in Oman, it is specifically the economic strategies they develop across translocal family lines that enable them to occupy a particular position on the diaspora spectrum. For 'the way we are, and the way places are, is a product of our interrelations with everywhere else,'<sup>69</sup> it becomes visible that by paying attention to how translocality is lived – for example by following kinship ties to Oman, if those exist – a contemporary constitution of 'diaspora' becomes visible. While the contemporary Zanzibari diaspora between Zanzibar and Oman is co-defined by younger people who can draw on Omani heritage and associated kinship connections, young Zanzibaris at home without a similar repertoire move accordingly to similar push factors that allow for a broadened understanding of diaspora – and specifically in regard to young men – as (forms of making) absence. Living in diaspora, temporarily or permanently, ultimately becomes

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<sup>69</sup> Doreen Massey, *Interview on London* (Jan. 2013): <https://youtu.be/zhHeelvwEN0> [Accessed 20 June 2021].



a tool for overcoming an increasing unattainability of the ‘traditional markers of adulthood,’<sup>70</sup> such as financial independence, renting a house, or getting married due to economic uncertainty, social pressures and political marginalization – a fluid and non-static idea of diaspora emerges that rather resembles a state of speculative presence, or a feeling, than a location or a place.

Paying attention to young Zanzibaris’ constructions of diaspora may help us to understand ‘local subjectivities and the heritages which they may prioritise.’<sup>71</sup> Young Zanzibaris’ experiences and ideas that constitute their own concepts of belonging suggest a concept of Zanzibari youth identities in diaspora that is defined by young men’s challenges of making do at ‘home.’ Unlike the conditions for belonging as set out in the Diaspora Policy of Zanzibar, these understandings are more inclusive of historical contestations and notions of identity that are tied to dissent. Thus, understanding the conditions that shape young Zanzibaris’ everyday realities at their places both of departure and of destination allows for a more nuanced understanding of ‘diaspora’ as a spatial and temporal set of practices that goes beyond the generation directly affected by the revolution and in the Indian Ocean region more broadly. Put differently, in young people’s mobility strategies we can trace the shifting nature and the productive potential of the so-called Zanzibar Diaspora.

The young people I spoke to all face a seemingly hard-to-escape situation of waiting. They all address this reality, mediate it, by going absent. Much as Indian Ocean trade offers some Zanzibaris an avenue to overcome economic stagnation,<sup>72</sup> absence, too, becomes a strategic tool to change the temporality of waiting. Whether they decided to leave Zanzibar Town, or the island altogether, this is revealed to be secondary to the fact that they feel they cannot *just* wait. What it means to be a young member of the so-called ‘Zanzibar Diaspora’ at first does not appear to be much different to simply being a young person in Zanzibar at home. The collapsing of space in the context of a contemporary understanding of diaspora through feeling excluded, or going absent at ‘home’ as well as ‘away’ reflects the processual character of ‘diaspora’ as a concept that is constantly in the making. Time, unlike space, and with it the notion of ‘waiting’ (and related ideas of ‘running out of time’, ‘not having enough time’), gain a particular place in this framework for diaspora that becomes more of a temporal phenomenon located within the movement towards a supposed ‘future.’ Challenges that youth in Zanzibar face at home do not

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<sup>70</sup> Honwana, “Youth, waithood, and protest.”

<sup>71</sup> Rosabelle Boswell, *Re-presenting Heritage in Zanzibar and Madagascar* (Ethiopia: OSSREA, 2011), 25.

<sup>72</sup> Keshodkar, ‘Indian Ocean trade,’ 38-64.

dissolve when they opt to go abroad, and the push factors that condition young men's mobility are similar to the reasons that make young men move between urban and rural areas, and also those who go beyond national borders. Going abroad, or back and forth, thus becomes a strategy to overcome limiting boundaries of present-making and future-building. Reluctant scattering and forced dispersal thus becomes a defining feature for all.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued for the need to pay attention to the productivity of the characteristics of waiting and absence for a more nuanced understanding of diaspora, and specifically in the context of understanding the contemporary 'Zanzibar diaspora' through its young diasporans' mobility strategies. I have explored how young men's experiences of living with states of diaspora come to mean dealing with waithood through strategic absences. Understandings of diaspora as forms of absence became visible in their future-oriented mobility practices and ultimately enable a focus on the non-static and processual character of diasporic realities. Centering the productivity of absence as a qualifier for diasporic practice further allows us to understand the nuances that may define specifically second and third generation diasporic communities, such as those of 'young' Zanzibaris, in relation to characteristics such as racialisation and discrimination in regard to different constructions of heritage and belonging.

I have proposed to think with *ughaibuni* – diaspora – as both a state of being absent, missing, or unobtainable, as well as a remote place, away from home as a defining feature of many young people's lives. Unlike *mahjar* (an emplaced community), and *shatat* (a non-emplaced community), *ughaibuni* describes a state and a geography by means of emplaced-absence. While *mahjar* and *shatat* speak of and to the moving subjects – the people that migrate and scatter (*wahajirina*), *ughaibuni* speaks of the realm of absence within which this movement takes place and that constitutes it.

I explored some meanings of *ughaibuni* for the contemporary context of Zanzibar by sketching out some of the conditioning factors that matter for an attempt to approach youth identity and belonging in the Zanzibar diaspora against the backdrop of the conditions of belonging as set out in the Zanzibari government's Diaspora Policy of 2017. I discussed the multiplicity of the Zanzibar diaspora that is necessary to consider in regard to conceptualisations of 'Swahili,' 'Zanzibari,' 'African' and 'Arab,' and young men's own conceptualisations of and practices related to the concept. The historical roots of current identity formations proved to be defining for how young people turn to

constructions of identity. My interlocutors' accounts unravelled a heterogeneous idea of belonging to both Zanzibar and Oman that are utilised differently depending on the means of mobility and intended aims to be achieved. They have shown how across the Zanzibar diaspora identity needs to be understood not in monolithic terms but recognised as multilayered and syncretic.<sup>73</sup> Contemporary discriminations, that co-condition chances on the Zanzibari job market, are rooted herein. The identities of the young Zanzibaris who (want to) migrate – internally and externally – have shown to be relevant to the extent that they mirror the present-day reality for young people in regard to their ethnic background. The discrimination, the racism, the passport problems, and so on, that they face are all inextricably linked to their heritage but the commonalities between local and transnational movements, such as waiting and not-being-there, bind them together.

I proposed to approach and understand young people's roles and identity in the Zanzibar diaspora by looking closely at how they negotiate their own belonging through their mobility choices and practices. I have suggested that understanding how young men between the ages of 15 and 35 actively contribute to shaping and imagining the Zanzibar diaspora allows us to better understand what 'diaspora' may mean for young people in and outside of Zanzibar. Particularly my interlocutors' liminal understanding of belonging and identity as young Zanzibaris has made clear how several categories of belonging overlap. This has demonstrated that the idea of diaspora is a complex process within which individual subjectivities are fluid and in constant relation to different contexts. It has shown itself to be a process of productively making and unmaking absences away from Zanzibar Town, a process of continuous aspiration and a condition of speculation, suspension and liminality throughout. The 'absence' that is central to this understanding of diaspora I put forward, is not only a spatial but also a temporal one. What has shown throughout the young men's accounts is that the Zanzibar Revolution continues to be the turning-point in time that redefined many Zanzibaris' sense of belonging. Therefore, young people in Zanzibar are not only increasingly absent spatially, but also deal with an absence of identity – at least in its entirety – in a temporal sense dating back to a certain historical event. Finally, the limited relevance the young men who spoke to me attach to the categories of belonging as set out in the Zanzibar Diaspora Policy, and their own

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<sup>73</sup> Abdul Sheriff, "Globalisation with a difference: An overview," in *The Indian Ocean. Oceanic connections and the creation of new societies*, eds. Abdul Sheriff and Engseng Ho (London: Hurst & Co., 2014), 6; Kjersti Larsen, "Multifaceted identities, multiple dwellings: Connectivity and flexible household configurations in Zanzibar Town," in *Connectivity in Motion: Island hubs in the Indian Ocean World*, eds. Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers (Cham, CH Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 181-208.

broader sense of identity and ‘Zanzibariness’ suggests a more nuanced and heterogeneous reality of the Zanzibar Diaspora than the policy captures.

Ultimately the shared sense of searching ways to overcome periods of waiting through strategic absences leads me to conclude with an understanding of diaspora as both a state and a place of absence that finds expression in the notion of *ughaibuni* – an equally temporal practice and geographical location that may apply to young people both within and beyond Zanzibar.