From dhow culture to the diaspora: ZIFF, film, and the framing of transnational imaginaries in the western Indian Ocean

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Coastal East Africa has been dramatically re-imagined in recent years. Popular culture and mass media have played a central role in sparking new visions of how Zanzibar in particular "connects" with the wider world. For more than a decade now, both the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) and the Sauti za Busara music festival have worked to resituate Zanzibar regionally and within a wider diasporic and transnational Indian Ocean milieu. Through the staging and promotion of these annual festivals, culture has become a key tool for development, linked to tourism, media networking, and the growth of culture industries. ZIFF and Busara attempt to refigure Zanzibar with regard to space and temporality, emphasising certain visions of history and collective identity that are anything but uncontested. In practice and performance, ZIFF and Busara invoke transnational continuities across the Indian Ocean world; pan-Africanism and continental solidarities; the black diaspora; regional connections; and local cultural roots. This article focuses on the contradictions that unfold from these divergent spatial imaginaries, arguing that images of cultural connection or seamless flows mirror theoretical flaws in transnational studies more broadly.

Keywords: African film; transnationalism; festivals; development; dhow culture; Zanzibar

Introduction

Along the western edge of the Indian Ocean, borders seem up for grabs or in question in ways that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. In a formal sense, of course, the political and territorial boundaries established during the colonial period have proven strikingly durable. Outside the Horn of Africa, perhaps the most significant shift occurred just after independence, with the formation of the union of Zanzibar and Tanganyika, attributed variously to pan-Africanist ideology, Cold War manipulations, and internal political calculations, among other motives. While the physical boundaries of the nation-state system in East Africa have remained relatively stable, territorial markers are operating now in quite different ways, impacted by a concatenation of forces. These changes are simultaneously imaginative and material, as postcolonial borders have been significantly reconfigured, rendered more porous or permeable to certain circuits or flows, while continuing to serve as barriers to others.

A number of related processes are at work. First and foremost, we can readily see the ongoing impact of neoliberal policies, which have opened up Tanzania to
global capital in dramatic ways – from the rise of South Africa to the Gulf States, India, and China. Second, these new forms of investment have been accompanied by novel flows of people – not just expatriates or entrepreneurs from the Gulf or India, but also particularly along the coast the rapid growth of tourism as a primary sector of the economy, generating significant foreign investment and hard-currency earnings. While tourists may be short-term visitors in one sense, their cumulative impact is much more constant and long-lasting, restructuring national priorities, capturing resources and infrastructure, and inculcating different modes of social relations and horizons of aspiration. Third, intimately bound up with these changes are new sources and forms of “goods,” spheres of circulation, and sites of consumption, especially clustered in the urban milieu. Fourth, we must also grasp the myriad ways that established borders have been destabilised by significant innovations in media and technology – including diverse satellite broadcasts, the Web, new media channels and private stations, piracy, and the proliferation of video production based on the Nollywood model.

In Zanzibar in particular, there has been an intriguing nexus between spatial restructuring, economic change, and new deployments of culture. Numerous groups and forces have fed these processes, but the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) has certainly played an early and influential role, linking cultural exchange with development while seeking to formulate a theoretical foundation for new connections between the islands and the world beyond. ZIFF has worked over the years to resituate Zanzibar both regionally and within a wider transnational Indian Ocean milieu, branding it as the centre of “dhow countries” (nchi za jahazi), the “dhow region,” or “dhow culture,” variously theorised. The festival has spawned related efforts, such as the Dhow Countries Music Academy, while the Sauti za Busara music festival has sought to resituate the islands at the heart of the continent, moving to a pan-African beat. More recently, the Jahazi (“dhow”) Literary and Jazz Festival has taken off, and there have been calls to develop more festival events to punctuate the tourism calendar throughout the year.1

Questions of culture have been at the core of these efforts to reconfigure spatial imaginaries – not only through the assertion of a shared culture or linked cultures that join the countries of the Indian Ocean basin, but also through the enactment of annual festivals of cultural performance and expressive media that are intended to showcase or make manifest “dhow culture,” pan-African music, or the black diaspora. Through the staging and promotion of these festival events, organisers have stressed the value of culture as a tool for socioeconomic development, linked to the growth of local cultural industries, tourism, image production, networking, and other entrepreneurial engagements.2 In many ways, these festivals are steeped in the stuff of mass or popular culture, but they also draw upon broader currents and trends in academic discourse. The spatial turn in the social sciences and new theorisations of cultural borders and boundaries seem especially relevant in the case of Zanzibar. Over the last 20 years or so, scholars in the social sciences and cultural studies have increasingly emphasised forms of interconnection and exchange, focusing on transnationalism, diasporas, cosmopolitanism, and more hybrid sociocultural milieus. Much of this analytic work has focused on the supposed decline of the nation-state form geopolitically and the erosion of boundaries long taken as enduring. Above all, this discourse has been predicated on the notion of flows across space beyond the scale of the national: of culture, capital, and commodities, among other entities.
Over the years, ZIFF has highlighted strikingly similar themes of connection and continuity across the Indian Ocean basin: the festival is deeply rooted in images and ideas of inter-linkage, dialogue, communication, and exchange. In the initial years, enormous time and attention was devoted to formulating the theoretical foundations of “dhow culture” in a series of conferences and workshops (Slocum 2007; Sheriff 2004). Here, I’m less concerned with tracing the shifting grounds of the different terms deployed over time or raising questions about the conceptual coherence of “dhow countries,” “dhow culture,” or “dhow people.” These idioms, of course, have a particular history and cultural context. They are framed within certain ideological circumstances, and seek to respond to the exigencies of a wider political economy. They open up certain possibilities for responding to the forces unleashed by globalisation, yet, like transnational studies more broadly, are also marked by sharp limitations. In particular, many of the framing idioms deployed by ZIFF are predicated upon notions of convergence, unity, and holism – visions of seamless cultural connection that occlude critical issues of difference. These rhetorics of inclusion mystify the complexities involved with the festivals and fail to capture the core tensions of the present in which they are enmeshed (Bissell 2012b).

Founding the festival: articulating a “nebulous concept”

African cities have often been defined in stark terms, depicted as spaces “under siege,” where “things fall apart,” don’t work, or simply cannot continue (Myers 2011; Fourchard 2011; Davis 2006; Enwezor et al. 2002; Kaplan 1994). They have been portrayed as sites that defy conventional expectations – undercutting normative urban theory, growing beyond bounds, and bristling with disorganised, even chaotic, energies (Robinson 2006; Malaquais 2006; Gandy 2005; van der Haak 2003). Alternatively, others point to signs of unrecognised inventiveness and creativity. Confronting the failures of state and market to provide infrastructure and opportunity, ordinary urbanites manifest the ceaseless capacity to make do, to get by, to adapt and rework, displaying astonishing resourcefulness and resilience with regard to everyday life and spatial practice (Simone 2011, 2004; de Boeck and Plissart 2004; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Barret and de La Tullaye 2007). Less often, however, have African cities been associated with innovations in technology or media or recognised as centres of formal creative activity in their own right, with vibrant arts and performance scenes that attract global audiences. Both ZIFF and Busara seek to foreground this dimension, sponsoring events and expressive performances that are socially engaged, build local and regional capacity, and place the islands on a global map of cultural production and performance.

ZIFF began as a rather ad hoc affair in 1998 and has since grown significantly in scope while spawning related (sometimes competing, sometimes allied) groups and efforts: the Dhow Countries Music Academy, Sauti za Busara, and the Jahazi Literary and Jazz Festival. Festivalisation has certainly been prominent globally in the last several decades, fuelled by an urban entertainment economy based on cultural spectacle (Bissell 2012a; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009; Stringer 2001). In recent years, new film festivals have been cropping up throughout the region, ranging from Nairobi to Kigali, Kampala, Dar es Salaam, Muscat, and Dubai. But at the moment of ZIFF’s founding, the field was relatively open and the timing rather auspicious. Within the continent itself, FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ougadougou) was already well established, but was oriented to
Francophone West Africa and a more auteurist vision of African cinema. In North Africa, Carthage had focused on Maghrebi/Middle Eastern/African film since 1966, while at the opposite end of the continent the Durban International Film Festival had started in 1979 and was coming into its own in the post-apartheid period. In shaping ZIFF, organisers in Zanzibar had several advantages: the relative paucity of Anglophone competitors; the exotic allure of the place name itself as a draw; a growing tourism industry; a relatively uncontested event-field in Eastern, Central, and southern Africa; and the inventive thematic framing of the festival itself, which situated Zanzibar at the very centre of a far-flung transnational space.

From its formative moment, ZIFF’s production of the festival was linked to an ongoing knowledge project. As the executive director noted,

"ZIFF is unique among film festivals in that it has, almost from its inception been involved in mobilizing a large body of local, regional and international knowledge, information and contacts around the “Dhow region” that hitherto has not been named as such. In setting up the ZIFF in 1998, the organizers had taken upon themselves to define what was then only a nebulous concept of “Dhow Culture.” (Owuor 2004, n.p.)

This foundational work predominated in the first five years of the festival, as conferences, exhibitions, seminars, and workshops were intertwined with programming and performances, seeking to define the “dhow culture theoretical framework” and launch a “Dhow Culture Research Programme” (Bakari 2004, 3) – goals that were in the end only partially realised.

Over the years, ZIFF’s initiatives have been consistently informed by diverse scholarly theories and debates, seeking to define dhow culture and put it on display. Many involved with the organisation early on have pointed to the first jury report in 1998 as a foundational document that laid out the basic contours of dhow culture. “This concept,” the members of the first jury argued, “is informed by the theoretical approaches of many leading scholars, including Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and Sekou Toure, who have collectively contributed to ideas of decolonization and development” (First Jury 2007, 21). While the jury highlighted these influential postcolonial theorists, the definition of dhow culture itself drew upon much older traditions in cultural theory, echoing a long history of debates in early anthropology (Stocking 1968, 1987).

Abdul Sheriff has argued that the first jury was nuanced in its conceptual approach, recognising that dhow culture was “not like any homogeneous culture normally studied by anthropologists with a well-defined boundary, language, social practices and beliefs” (2004, 60). In one sense, he is right that early formulations of dhow culture were distanced from classical anthropological notions of culture as bounded, holistic, and integrated. But by the time the first jury report was written, such conventional notions of anthropological culture no longer held sway in the discipline, being subjected to sustained critique on multiple grounds (Borofsky et al. 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Abu-Lughod 1991). Moreover, the model of dhow culture initiated in the first jury report didn’t so much overturn or resist older theories of culture as simply blur the edges. In this sense, theorising about dhow culture replayed anthropological debates from Tylor to Boas, diffusionism and beyond, discussing the Indian Ocean in terms that echoed the long development of the culture concept, invoking cultural complexes, arenas or ensembles, lifestyles, traditions, cultures, and culture itself:
ZIFF will reflect the various traditions and expressions that make up the Swahili culture of Eastern Africa and beyond. The concept [of dhow culture] being proposed here recognizes culture in the singular rather than cultures in the plural. This refers to a group of similar although distinct lifestyles. Each cultural arena consists of several distinct cultures which are confined within a given geographical territory and comprise behavior which is similar in several important aspects. We group them together and speak of culture in the singular. In this way, we can permit ourselves to speak of the Dhow Culture and to signify the numerous cultures of the Indian Ocean basin. (First Jury 2007, 21)

Here, we might suspect that the jury was seeking to have it both ways: to inscribe a cultural and geographical milieu that is both singular and plural, unified and diverse, similar yet distinct. Or perhaps the members were less concerned with analytic precision, opting to leave lines of definition more open-ended and indeterminate. And yet, the more one inquires into the outlines of “dhow culture,” the more questions seem to arise: if the diverse cultures of the Indian Ocean basin combined to constitute an overarching Dhow Culture, where exactly could we find the lines of demarcation between the constituent parts? Did it constitute a “civilization,” or was this more a question of related cultures within a unified geographical (that is, oceanic) sphere? How were the boundaries or relationships between the one and the many to be understood? Or, alternatively, where did “dhow culture” stop and “Swahili culture” start? Were these different phenomena or simply alternative names for the same “entity” – “a mother of cultures, an ensemble of cultures that are mutually intelligible, much like the dialects of a single language” (Mzee 2004, 5)?

It is important, however, to consider this first framing of the concept of dhow culture in context. The first jury, after all, was not a scholarly body bounded by rules of evidence and argument, nor were its members necessarily preoccupied with conceptual rigour and clarity. Instead, their brief was to outline the criteria motivating their aesthetic decisions with an eye toward shaping the “institutional framework of the festival” and “to imply an agreed understanding of the terms of reference for future festivals.” The long-term goal was to establish “this festival as a credible and significant international event,” laying a foundation for ZIFF’s ongoing practice (First Jury 2007, 21). The concept of dhow culture didn’t need to be theoretically elegant and exact; it just needed to be fruitful and productive over the long term. And in this sense, the jury was initially successful, for they supplied a definition that was all the more suggestive for being rather imprecise, flexible, and open to interpretation.

The symbolic weight of the dhow: from cultural vessel to contemporary values

Subsequent formulations often harkened back to the basic terms laid out in the 1998 report. The first jury had spoken of “Dhow Culture” in the singular, locating it within an entity called a “cultural arena” that was presumably quite geographically broad, embracing the entire Indian Ocean basin. Within this cultural arena, then, there were diverse cultures located within given territories, which were nonetheless mutually intelligible and could be grouped together in an ensemble or network. As Sheriff (2004, 72) summed up, dhow culture

is a cultural complex that is based not on parochial interactions within a delimited society defined by land, language, and religion, but rather on inter-societal interactions
across a vast ocean, giving birth to a cosmopolitan culture with a particular maritime ethos, as portrayed and defined by its musical and verbal aesthetics.

Embracing this logic, others made reference to a tradition of trade and travel that had produced the art and culture of the “Dhow Region,” something shared by the peoples of “the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and Indian Ocean Islands” (ZIFF 1999, 5).

The first jury had insisted that dhow culture was “owned by no one and by everyone,” drawing attention to the cultural vessel that had traversed the Indian Ocean: “The Dhow as the icon of the festival is the symbol of a long history of communication, migration and interaction which has produced a cosmopolitan culture as the manifestation of the human experience and expression of the region” (2007, 22). The dhow took on significant symbolic force, even as it was elevated into the premier icon and brand of the festival itself (in terms of design, at opening ceremonies, and with regard to the highest award, the “Golden Dhow”). Articulating the cultural weight and meaning of the dhow seemed to take discursive precedence. In a context where the Indian Ocean could be characterised as geographically dispersed, with divergent societies, religious traditions, cultures, and languages, the dhow came to be represented as a unifying vehicle – a common vessel that served to bring these many worlds into contact, knitting them together into a more seamless whole.

In a highlighted statement on “dhows and dhow culture,” the 2003 festival programme emphasised,

Throughout history [the dhow] has been the device by which the peoples of the Indian Ocean coast have traveled and met; it has been the vehicle for exchange of produce, languages, religions, attitudes, ideas and traditions. The dhow is clearly a common feature in these diverse communities and cultures but the Culture of the Dhow itself represents a multiplicity of meanings, sentiments and realities; a meeting place for collective memories. (ZIFF 2003, n.p.)

In much of the ZIFF discourse on dhow culture one could find similar points of slippage; rather than mapping cultural relations or tracing fissures or fault lines, theorists seized on the dhow as a unifying emblem – a singular icon of cultural technology and transport that came to bear a great deal of cultural freight. Dhow culture, as Sheriff outlined in an early overview (2004, 72),

is fundamentally based on the exchange not only of goods but also of peoples, creating a dense web of communications along which flowed ideas, ideologies, and aesthetic forms which have shaped the region’s collective memory and unfolded its identity. [...] In the truly free trade arena of the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese, different cultures mingled but on an entirely voluntary basis, leading to bonding rather than bondage, founded on mutual respect, understanding, tolerance and sharing, where pride in one’s culture did not imply prejudice against other cultures.

Crossing back and forth across the ocean, in innumerable quotidian journeys driven by the monsoon winds, the dhow was said to produce an overarching cultural fabric over time that was framed in particular ways: as a source of common identity, shared heritage, collective memory, or cohesive tradition (ZIFF 1999, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2008). Dhow culture was imaged in terms of fusions, complex routes, webs, migratory patterns, and networks. In bridging continents and crossing boundaries, it
anticipated modern mass media, allowing for the transmission of ideas and images across vast distances. As one festival director stated,

the modern means of mass communication is nothing new to this region. The Internet, the most important tool of the twenty-first century, is just another variation of this network that had already been in place in this region. Surfing through ideas was being practiced literally ages ago, over here. Both the festival and Zanzibar can now co-opt technological advances to achieve what the dhows did before. Today this means using modern methods to undertake new journeys along the old routes. (Barua 2005a, 3)

As this suggests, discourse about dhow culture was never simply about the historical past, but had real implications for the present. Discussions about the symbolic import of the dhow, its iconic status, readily translated into a discourse about the contemporary cultural values it invoked. “This Culture is about forming collaborations, building relationships, and enhancing networks; of peoples coming together from different parts of the world and creating a new energy” (ZIFF 2003, n.p.). Bridging space and bringing people together through cultural performance was what the festival was all about – ideals that organisers sought to put into practice. As the film scholar and festival director Imruh Bakari stated (2004, 2), “The dhow is a signifier too, of a multiplicity of meanings, sentiments and realities; a symbol of migrations and journeys of social, economic and personal significance to people from diverse spaces and places.” Out of this discourse, a quite consistent set of images emerged concerning the role that Zanzibar and the festival itself could play in the contemporary world. The festival was consistently framed as a space of encounter, a meeting ground, a point of convergence or cultural fusion, experimental, multicultural, tolerant, diverse, and dialogical.

In motion: currents of theory
One can readily see why these images and idioms were deeply meaningful to the disparate intellectuals, artists, and activists involved in the cultural work associated with ZIFF. Indeed, much of the discourse on dhow culture echoed wider developments in cultural theory, focusing on issues of migration and mobility. In a world where people, images, and objects were insistently on the move and no longer seeming moored in place, fixed or bounded approaches to culture no longer seemed viable. In a global landscape characterised by “transnational connections” (Hannerz 1996), many scholars argued for greater analytic attention to groups in motion – traders and migrants, refugees, transnational elites, development experts, those who inhabit the cultural borderlands or spaces in-between (Clifford 1997; Marcus 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). New geographies of interaction came more sharply into focus, as with the Central Asian steppes, the Afro-Atlantic world, or the rise of Indian Ocean studies. These transnational zones also were linked to alternative modes of identity and cultural belonging, from diaspora (Carter 2010; Clifford 1994) to flexible citizenship (Ong 1999), creolisation, cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2006; Breckenridge et al. 2002), and hybridity. Alternatively, others turned to commodity circuits or flows of media, arguing that the world had become intensively interactive in unexpected ways, erasing older cultural borders and boundaries (Larkin 2008; Mazzarella 2003; Stoller 2002; Steiner 1994). Following on Appadurai’s work (1996, 2000), scholars began to emphasise the importance of cultural
flows across space, tracing new interconnected mediascapes, ideoscapes, or technoscapes.

ZIFF and allied groups were very much informed by these wider currents even as they sought to respond to them. Most of the key players involved had grown up in transnational contexts, travelled widely, and were no strangers to complex subject positions and cultural hybridity. With the seventh festival and the launch of the ZIFF journal in 2004, for instance, Imruh Bakari announced the intention “to bring a new body of knowledge into focus which engages with a wide spectrum of issues across diverse subject areas including: cultural diversity, globalization, culture and development, media discourse, identity and migration, representation, Indian Ocean Slave Trade and Indian Ocean-Atlantic ocean connections” (2004, 3). Many of these issues have informed the programming and workshops of the festival, and the concern with addressing topical issues and theoretical questions has remained. So too has the emphasis on building bridges, fostering dialogue, and promoting transnational exchange. As a more recent festival CEO, Martin Mhando (2008, 5), has phrased it,

*ZIFF welcomes collaborative activities that have the potential to result in sustained cooperation, complementarily, and to contribute on a long-term basis to the development of cooperation between African and other cultures. [...] Collaborative projects must have the potential to generate other future initiatives which aim to promote the transnational mobility of people working in the cultural sector, to encourage the transnational mobility of artistic and cultural products and to further dialogue between cultures.*

While those involved with ZIFF were responding to the changing contexts inscribed by postcolonial theory, other historical events and shifts in political economy exercised even greater influence. First, of course, was the widely perceived need to critique the terms of neoliberal globalisation, represented by the hegemony of the so-called Washington consensus. An early conference in 2000 contrasted the communality and collectivity of dhow culture with globalisation, which was described as a “barbarian concept” that rested on the imposition of dominant values, devoid of respect for other cultures (Sheriff 2004, 63). In the Indian Ocean, one festival director declared, Portuguese colonialism initiated an ominous era of global interaction:

*The seas and oceans, too cumbersome for anyone to claim their own, retain their status as spaces of freedom. [...] A vast communal space had evolved centuries before the formation of our own era’s global organisations. It was the advent of the square rigged masts, from without the Indian Ocean region, which then challenged this predominant concord. (Barua 2006, 5)*

Dhow culture prior to the European presence was often described as diverse, tolerant, open, and sharing – an era of truly free trade that stood in marked contrast to the inequalities and rigid impositions of the present (Sheriff 2010).

Second, globalisation “sees mono-culture as the only way of existence,” writes Fatma Alloo (2007, 17), and the festival, grounded in local and regional values, was intended to counteract this hegemony. By presenting this cultural legacy as a shared heritage and common resource, ZIFF could envision its mission as bringing diverse people together, united by cultural performance, to articulate alternative forms of development based more on cooperation and interconnection. Nor should
we overlook the fact that these all-embracing terms of reference held great value for Western donors and foundations interested in underwriting African culture and indigenous media. They also had resonance for the booming tourism industry, bolstering efforts to market and promote the islands as a unique cultural attraction.

Third, ZIFF was also clearly responding to developments in the wake of the US embassy bombings of 1998 and the events following 9/11. In opposition to the “war on terror,” religious fundamentalism, and proponents of an inevitable “clash between civilizations” (Huntington 1993) setting Muslim versus non-Muslim, visions of dhow culture invoked an alternative history and set of cultural possibilities: an Islamic world where trade, tolerance for difference, and cultural engagement were the rule, rather than violence and terror. One of the early dhow conferences, funded by the Prince Claus Foundation, highlighted the question of coexistence, “Living Together: Who Matters, What Matters.” The festival, then, was framed around reflecting the historical legacy of the region, while putting it on display in practice through performance: unity through diversity, cultural dialogue, mutual tolerance, and reciprocal exchange.

Last, there was another set of more specifically local factors that reinforced these discursive terms. From the Omani colonial period on, coastal exceptionalism had interacted with Arabocentric discourses of *ustaarabu* and *uungwana* to equate civility with Arab identity, marking those of African descent as savages or slaves, outsiders or others (Glassman 2011). In the run-up to independence in 1963, this chauvinism came up against explicit racial nationalism, as an African nationalist party, the ASP, fought with an Arab-identified coalition, the ZNP/ZPPP. Increasingly, political, economic, and social differences were seen in essentialised racial terms, as divisions between “African” and “Arab” infused everyday social life. Contested elections were punctuated with spasms of violence, culminating in the pogrom of June 1961 and the waves of violence following the revolution of 1964. While the revolution claimed to overcome colonial racial categories, in many ways it simply served to reinforce the terms, while rewriting the polarities of cultural value assigned to “African” or “Arab.”

By the time ZIFF was getting off the ground, everyday discourses about race and identity were exacerbated by sharp (and ongoing) tensions in Zanzibar over the union accord and relations with the mainland – which were often cast in terms of stark divisions between Arab and African, coast and mainland, Muslim and Christian, opposition and ruling party. Moreover, the opening of multiparty politics had produced intensely divisive elections in 1995, 2000, and 2005, marked by conflict, widespread intimidation, outright violence, and persistent allegations of fraud. Hence, many of the framing idioms fostered by ZIFF intellectuals emphasised notions of shared legacies, traditions, or heritage – consensual visions of cultural interaction and exchange that seemed at odds with politics and everyday life in the streets. Within this political culture, giving voice to divisions was often seen as a potential incitement to conflict – one step along a road that could lead inexorably to dissolution and disharmony, undermining the concord supposedly necessary to secure national development. More recently, these tensions have only increased, as separatist sympathies have strengthened and burst into the open in urban Zanzibar, linked publically to civic debate and demonstrations led most prominently by an Islamic revivalist group, Jumuiya ya Uamsho na Mihadhara ya Kiislam (Association for the Awakening and Propagation of Islam, or simply “Awakening”). Public review of the Tanzanian constitution has coincided with rising popular demands for
the restoration of sovereignty in the islands (Fouéré 2012). Crude state attempts to repress public demonstrations against the union have sparked conflict, with pitched street battles in the city, fusillades of tear gas, fire-bombings of churches and bars, and so-called “riots” in late May and mid-July 2012.5

At sea: disjunctures and gaps in transnational flow

Given these intersecting forces and factors, we can readily grasp why these particular terms of reference began to predominate at a certain moment in time in ZIFF discourse and practice. While opening up certain possibilities, they also foreclose or exclude others, and it is important to ask what has been overlooked within the dominant framing of the festival. The sorts of questions I have in mind here are precisely those that are being posed more broadly about transnational studies. Invoking cultural flows or continuities across the Indian Ocean doesn’t help us conceptualise the nature of those connections – or account for potential divergences or disjunctures. In a related transnational and oceanic context, Paul Gilroy has raised the trope of “the ship” as a potent signifier of the transnational crossings that constituted the black Atlantic. It was no accident, he writes, that key Afro-Atlantic figures started out as “sailors, moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” (1993, 12). But ships, like dhows, come in different sizes and sorts. As Shalini Puri acutely observes (2004, 25), it does not serve us well to conflate very different vessels and forms of passage:

“Gilroy’s suggestive metaphor of the ship as a site of transnational identities needs to be elaborated further so that we can distinguish between the cultural hybridities and border crossings represented by, say, slave-ships, U.S. warships, luxury cruise ships, and Haitian rafts. Only a failure to consider such issues can explain why border-crossing is so often cast as intrinsically subversive”.

In her work on deportations from the US to Somalia, Nathalie Peutz makes a related point. Under globalisation, the experience of a borderless world might indeed be open to some, while barriers are raised even higher for others, excluding or enclosing them in novel domains. This is especially true of those subject to removal, rendition, or regimes of deportation, as with the forcibly repatriated Somalis she interviewed who were convicted of minor crimes in the US and sent back to a stateless “homeland” that few recognised or remembered. Peutz observes (2006, 218):

After a decade of intensive anthropological scrutiny of transnationalism and globalization, the premillennial enthusiasm for transcendent flows, organizations, and beings has waned as anthropologists are called upon to confront the tenacity of the state (even a “failed” one) and the inevitable logic of its exclusionary practices, especially in an era of global terror. [...] Previously, in an attempt to determine what was new about globalization at the turn of this century, anthropologists were constructing labels to explain what were deemed emergent modes of (transnational) personhood and often privilege: “flexible citizenship,” “cultural citizens,” “discrepant cosmopolitans,” and “creolized cultures.” This literature’s main shortcoming, however, was that the hackneyed concept of the “transnational” never gained the explanatory power it needed to determine who was or was not a transnational subject or “agent” [...] and what exactly such disparate groups – refugees, transmigrants, expatriates, investors, aliens, hybrids,
travelers, nomads, and anthropologists – might have in common (a transnational subjectivity?).

As this reminds us, during the era of globalisation, the sovereignty of the nation-state was recalibrated in complex ways, not simply replaced (Ferguson 2006; Mbembe 2001). While capital and information may have flowed seamlessly across borders in some parts of the world, this freedom of movement was never extended to labour, migrants, refugees, or the poor. We should not allow invocations of the Indian Ocean as a unified zone of cultural exchange to distract us from the fact that the entire basin remains marked by politically distinct and territorially bounded states – most of which still maintain a more or less elaborate bureaucratic apparatus to hinder or restrict flow: border posts, port authorities, police, immigration, customs, security, and all the rest. During the tenth anniversary ZIFF conference, “Celebrating Memories and Visual Cultures,” Rustom Bharucha sounded a cautionary note about some of the images being associated with dhow culture. When seas get packaged in certain ways and associated with notions of openness, tolerance, and diversity, he asked, what kind of romanticism is involved here? We should beware, he argued, of leaping from the embodied material of everyday life to the iconic – jumping, that is, from the hard, gritty, and often wretched lives of sailors or fishermen to the tourist romanticism of “Dhow Culture” at the level of the iconic. Dealing in such idealised or exotic images remains a real risk for any festival dependent upon an “appealing” locale, mass tourism, external donors, and commercial sponsors – in a global economy driven by consumption, branding, and spectacle, identity and culture are readily recuperated and commodified: “Ethnicity, Inc.,” as the Comaroffs nicely phrase it (2009).

At a more critical level, the festival’s relationship to local, national, regional, and global spheres remains underdetermined, to say the least. Different emphases and spheres continue to co-exist within ZIFF programmes, and the relations between them remain unclear. The fluidity or imprecision of organising categories has permitted many programmes and themes to come into focus, flourish for a time, and then fade, depending on the interests of different directors, submissions, board concerns, and outside organisations or donors. At specific moments, this has led to a profusion of goals that do not readily cohere or co-exist. “The strategic objective,” Bakari wrote (2004, 3–4), “is to utilize diverse cultural resources to support creative national socio-development growth; harnessing dhow cultures as sources to stimulate regional economic empowerment and information product creation; to document, showcase, celebrate and distribute expressions of dhow culture and African socio-cultural processes.” When referring to the regional economy, did this mean East Africa or instead the “dhow countries”? And by “national” growth, did this refer to Tanzania? Or was it more narrowly focused on Zanzibar? Within the context of the festival, was it truly possible to stimulate national social development, support regional economic growth, and showcase pan-African culture all at once?

The lack of consistent clarity about objectives and orientations carries over to broader questions of the festival’s larger role and purpose. In 2011, a representative from the opposition party opened a debate on a social media site asking whether Busara and ZIFF serve to promote Zanzibari culture or foreign culture. Opinions were necessarily varied and diverse. A good number claimed that these festivals were ruining local culture, or promoting outside cultures at the expense of Zanzibar. Others said the events attracted mostly external performers and audiences. While
few seemed to actually know what Busara or ZIFF’s stated objectives were, there was a palpable strain of cultural nationalism running through much of the commentary, motivated by the implicit assumption that cultural events in Zanzibar should focus on specifically Zanzibari or Swahili cultural forms and promote them to the world beyond. For example, as the public official summed up the discussion about the music festival (in a debate that developed in the comments responding to a statement he posted on Facebook, on February 10, 2011),

Busara is a Kiswahili word and any festival bearing this name is required to promote the culture of an Mswahili (a person from the coast of East Africa) first. I haven’t been to a festival of any other East African country or even in northern or southern Africa that promotes or nurtures Zanzibar’s culture, so why are Zanzibari festivals so cheap all the time and used to promote neighboring countries and their cultures, all on the backs of Zanzibar?

Few of the goals enunciated by Busara or ZIFF – promoting cosmopolitan cultural exchanges; creating networks of artists and other cultural producers; fostering the visibility of local, national, and regional arts; bolstering African music or cinema; turning Zanzibar into a centre of pan-African creativity; promoting tourism and heightening the global profile of Zanzibar – were embraced, endorsed, or even mentioned by the many discussants. What this clearly suggests is that behind or beneath the discourse of an interconnected dhow culture or region, significant disjunctures and gaps of interpretation remain.

Pan-African dialogues: locating a language in which to speak

This issue of divided audiences and divergent genres is perhaps best crystallised in the problem of language itself. What, after all, is the language that the festival should speak, and to whom should it be addressed? For a cultural event premised on questions of voice, indigenous perspectives, and representation, ZIFF has fostered remarkably little sustained reflection concerning the relationship between language and culture. If the purpose of the festival has often been framed around notions of bringing people together, building bridges, and fostering cultural interconnection or exchange across space, how can these goals be achieved when different publics simply cannot understand what is on the screen or speak to one another? Again, images of inclusion – and the insistent symbolic use of the dhow as a unifying vehicle of culture – have served to mask and preclude consideration of the more complex cultural realities surrounding the festival.

At the early conference on “Cross Currents of Culture,” Abdulhamid Mzee offered a linguistic turn on dhow culture, describing it as a “‘Mother of Cultures,’ an ensemble of cultures that are mutually intelligible, much like the dialects of a single language” (2004, 5). Extending this kinship idiom, he then explained that different dialects of Kiswahili (Kiamu, Kiunguja, Kingazija) were like “daughter languages”; they may sound different, but they are united by membership within the same family. Later on, he took note of the existence of different languages in the Indian Ocean, but argued that four of the major tongues shared a quarter of their vocabulary, emphasising the commonalities between them. But historical connections and common vocabulary do not necessarily translate into commensurability, let alone intelligibility. Others within ZIFF have largely echoed these assumptions about the ease of communication, as if they were operating in a cultural sphere
without linguistic differences. “Swahili language and culture,” asserted Jakub Barua (2005b, 106), “so much at the root of Zanzibar’s historically intrinsic cosmopolitan outlook, where the inclusiveness of other influences has never been perceived as a hampering force but rather a challenge inspiring creative adaptations, lend themselves as pliable means of connecting together a vast geographical space.” Perhaps so, but that vast space is hardly connected by a uniform language, speaking in a unified voice.

At the same conference addressed by Mzee, the Zanzibari journalist Ally Saleh raised pointed questions about the linguistic frames promoted by the festival. Decrying the alleged hegemony of Hollywood and the dominance of American English in popular culture, he argued (2004, 4–5) that ZIFF had not done enough to foreground Kiswahili:

So far Swahili as a language does not feature very prominently as a priority in the ZIFF programs. [...] Because of this the Swahili as a language has been staying in the fringes of the Festivals and not in the center stage. [...] Swahili language has been relegated to such a low position that speeches in closing and opening are written in English and translated into Kiswahili. There is no policy as to the number of Swahili film entries, sub titling [sic] of the films, the quota of Swahili film entry. The focus on this has been poor or to say the worst blurred.

In some sense, Saleh was anticipating the cultural nationalist objections quoted earlier about ZIFF and Busara not being dedicated to the promotion of specifically Zanzibari cultural forms and artists. Certainly both organisations see themselves as showcasing local, national, and regional performers before wider audiences, while simultaneously working to build local capacities in film and music production. These efforts, however, have been mixed at best, and the task is rather more complicated than it might ostensibly seem. Film production in the African context was often national in scope in the early decades of African cinema, mostly controlled by postcolonial state bureaucracies. Funding was invariably insufficient (and in the Francophone sphere, generally neocolonial), and the national sphere rarely provided a sufficiently deep market to support production on a wide scale or to allow the industry to become self-sustaining over the long term.

Even as the dynamics of production and distribution have shifted, these problems have lingered. Without generous (and recurring) subsidies from abroad, Zanzibar is too small a market to sustain a local film industry (and until the rise of popular melodrama as a staple of local video production, this goal also eluded Tanzania as a whole). To support cultural production then, ZIFF and Busara inevitably have to cast a wider net, drawing on work (and cultural productions) from the Swahili coast, from East Africa as a region, the continent as a whole, or the dhow countries. And at the same time, they have to be global in scope, attracting attention in Europe, North America, and the Indian Ocean, gaining donor support and building networks with allied organisations in Africa and the diaspora, and attracting spectators, artists, and critics from all over. Balancing these diverse objectives and audiences has proved to be a daunting task. If they go too local, the festivals will narrow their scope and limit both their audience and support, withering away over time. But if they broaden their scope too wide, they lay themselves open to charges of selling out to foreigners, promoting outside cultures at the expense of Zanzibar, and risk losing local support and engagement.
“After 13 years ZIFF remains a forum for dialogue between the Dhow countries and cultures, between North and South and between home and the diaspora,” the ZIFF board wrote to mark the 2010 festival (ZIFF 2010, 6), emphasising, “ZIFF is a hub for exchange and dialogue.” But if so, this dialogue is often conducted in different languages, with miscommunication or lack of comprehension the result. Many films from Africa or the Indian Ocean world are subtitled in English, but for non-speakers of the language as well as for many for whom English is a secondary or tertiary language, this is hardly a unifying or satisfactory solution. And even the languages used during festival events can provoke disputes. Presenters often switch back and forth between English and Kiswahili, trying to address as large a segment of the audience as possible, but these messages can often fall between the cracks. In response to those who argue that Kiswahili needs a more prominent role, the language (and films in Kiswahili) has figured more prominently of late. But the establishment of a “Swahili day” in 2010 could also have a ghettoising or stigmatising effect, marking Kiswahili film (or Bongo video) as a niche category well outside the main currents of African and world cinema.

Other tensions are also involved. While many in ZIFF emphasise the importance of featuring local, indigenous, and alternative voices, some others in attendance view the priority given to Kiswahili as either too much (detracting from the festival’s global aspirations) or not enough. At the opening night of the twelfth festival in 2009, for example, the festival’s CEO, Martin Mhando, began speaking in Kiswahili before switching to English, proudly announcing to his Kiswahili-speaking audience, “this is the place to proclaim and reclaim our language.” To my mind, it was a salutary gesture, speaking first to the audience that should have pride of place at the festival – Zanzibaris, Tanzanians, and East Africans. But inclusive gestures to the local or indigenous can also work to exclude, and I was somewhat surprised to subsequently hear that some in the audience objected to this opening statement. A couple of days later, the electricity went out during a night screening, stopping the film and plunging the fort into darkness. As technicians worked to fire up the generators and resume the showing, I fell into conversation with a North American tour operator working out of Kenya who had been organising “festival tours” for Westerners to come to Zanzibar expressly for the film festival. During the ensuing conversation, when I asked how he thought the festival was going, he launched into complaints about the use of Kiswahili during opening night:

I didn’t agree with him [Mhando] speaking in Swahili on opening night. I told him that – I thought it was bogus. If a large part of your audience can’t understand, then what does that say? I told Mhando it showed a lack of cultural confidence. If you want to have an international film festival, then you have to speak in ways that are compatible with international standards. You have to work on a par with Tokyo, Toronto, New York, Redford’s Sundance – and that doesn’t mean speaking in a language that more than half the audience doesn’t understand.

This discourse is fuelled precisely by assumptions about the cultural hegemony of English that at least some Zanzibaris and members of ZIFF seek to contest – the idea that English is a global language “compatible with international standards” in ways that Kiswahili (which the tour operator did not speak) is not. Whether this is true or not depends on which “global” perspective or international framework one adopts as the standard. More crucially, in a multilingual
and cosmopolitan urban context like Zanzibar, no matter which language one chooses – Kiswahili, English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Italian, or French, among others – at least some members of the public are inevitably going to be left out of the conversation.

In at least their public statements and presentations, however, ZIFF proponents seem to make little allowance for these divergences or divisions, opening the stage for ironic disjunctions. For example, in 2010, the festival featured the African premiere of Owen ‘Alik Shahadah’s *Motherland* (2009), which ultimately won the best documentary award. The film was a rousing evocation of pan-Africanist sensibilities, revisiting the philosophies of the early independence moment with the conviction of the newly converted. The documentary has an impressive scope and range, drawing on diverse figures from the diaspora, particularly Afro-centric intellectuals, and leaders such as Meles Zenawi and Jacob Zuma on the continent itself, attempting to build an epic case for the necessity of pan-African unity. Ultimately, however, the film failed to assess why the pan-Africanism of Nyerere or Nkrumah was never realised in an earlier generation, nor did it supply any real political or economic analysis of how it might be achieved in practical terms today. And the response to the screening itself hinted at some of the enduring challenges involved.

The director was present for the screening, and came up on stage after the film to field questions from the audience. Shahadah said he was delighted to be back in Zanzibar, noting that he had first been there in 2000. In fact, that visit was his first experience of Africa, and he was prompted to come to the continent by a desire to reflect on the ancestors and slavery, resulting in his first film, *500 Years Later*. As Shahadah was speaking, a young man in dreads and Rastafarian clothing came up on stage, standing well off to the side. He performed some acrobatic flips, and it wasn’t quite clear if he was part of the show or an interloper stealing the stage – the spotlight moved back and forth between the director and the acrobat, uncertain where to shine. Finally, the youth indicated that he definitely wanted to speak, and was handed the microphone to pose a question for the director. Beginning in rapid Kiswahili, he lavishly praised the film as an excellent work that demanded to be seen as widely as possible, but then asked why it was not presented in Kiswahili itself. Most spectators at ZIFF, he emphasised, cannot speak English and hence could not understand the movie – a significant drawback for a documentary seeking to make the case for pan-African unity, and a potent illustration of some of the practical challenges involved in unifying the continent. In reply, Shahadah stated that they had wanted to do Kiswahili subtitles for the ZIFF premiere but simply ran out of time; in the rush to finish the film for the festival they simply hadn’t been able to undertake the work of translation.

**Coda**

Rather than undercut ZIFF or impugn its aims, this article seeks to highlight the complexities involved in the conduct of the festival and its invocation of dhow culture. These complications, moreover, are rarely captured in the cultural discourse surrounding ZIFF, which, like transnational studies more broadly, has largely focused on undifferentiated flows across space while devoting little attention to enduring differences, disjunctions, and divisions. More than anything else, what this research highlights is the value of long-term immersion in the far-flung dynamics...
and dimensions of cultural festivals as they unfold in practice over time – demonstrating thereby the critical importance of grounded ethnographic approaches to media and cultural performance. With regard to the film festival itself, what actually ends up getting shown on screen is perhaps the least interesting dimension of ZIFF. In the best sense, the ethnographic analysis of media takes us beyond just message or text, foregrounding the circulation of media forms across an uneven and differentiated sociocultural field.

ZIFF itself has multiple (and not necessarily coherent) aspects: it is simultaneously an NGO with links to donors, embassies, and state bureaucracies; a forum for cultural debates and artistic interactivity; an economic tool; a nexus and a network; and a series of ritual and performative enactments, among other dimensions. Analysing this complexity in practice helps us to more fully grasp the cultural dynamics of cities and the kind of creative and mobile linkages they foster in a sprawling transnational milieu that cuts across continental Africa, the diaspora, and the Indian Ocean world. In this sense the festival provides a fascinating institutional locus for the making and remaking of complex circuits of cultural traffic. Like Zanzibar city itself, the contours of ZIFF, its role and impact, are mobile and multiple, open (like all cultural domains) to clashes, conflicts, and contestation. Thinking seriously about these lines of demarcation and difference – the fractures and fissures involved in staging cultural production across a far-flung geographic scale, involving divergent local, national, regional, and global forces – is absolutely crucial to providing a richer understanding of the kind of work that ZIFF seeks to carry out, as well as the role it plays within a wider global economy of cultural spectacle.

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Notes

1. While these different festivals were inspired by similar forces and share many common features with regard to the political economy of mass tourism, media, and the use of culture as an asset for development, there are also very important distinctions between them. A full comparative analysis of ZIFF and Busara as NGOs/events, however, lies mostly outside the scope of this article. Hence, much of the discussion here focuses on ZIFF for a number of key reasons: it is the first and longest-running festival, spurring or inspiring other groups to create their own events; second, ZIFF was linked quite closely in its early years with the intellectual project of theorising its relationship to wider social, spatial, and political worlds; and third, ZIFF elaborated visions of transnational connection that later groups subsequently either drew upon or deployed to new ends.
2. Much of this essay is based on extended ethnographic fieldwork in urban Zanzibar, focusing on local/national/regional/global intersections in the case of ZIFF and Sauti za Busara. I conducted participant observation at the festivals in 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2012, in addition to completing more than a year of continuous fieldwork, interviews, and textual research in Zanzibar from June 2010 to August 2011. Research is ongoing in the methodological interest of following the festivals (which are, after all, time delimited events) over the longer term, allowing broader patterns and themes to clearly emerge – rather than restricting the analysis to a single festival cycle or two.

3. In the 2007 published version of the text cited here, there are several crucial typographical errors (“reject” instead of “reflect” and “the concept being proposed here recognizes cultures in the singular,” which defies logic). So while I have included the citation, I have based the quoted material on the original manuscript version of the First Jury report, a copy of which is in my possession. The version offered here also accords with other accounts (e.g. Sheriff 2004) and the memories of some of the participants.

4. Some of these values were anti-capitalist, in keeping with Julius Nyerere’s ujamaa legacy (and framed in opposition to the neoliberal policies that dominated the post-socialist phase of Tanzania’s recent history), while others reflected pan-Africanist ideals of liberation (hence the invocation of “decolonization and development”) or were grounded in visions of solidarity across the global South.

5. These events have a longer and broader context that I can only touch on here. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, there were sporadic attacks on sites associated either with outsiders or with practices coded as immoral or illicit: local bars, alcohol stores, or shops and sites linked to mainlanders or tourists (linked with allegations of prostitution, youth corruption, and drug use). Interpreting these incidents is never straightforward, as I discuss elsewhere (see Bissell 2012b). Yet state officials are quick to represent them as simple acts of lawlessness or mayhem, calling for the perpetrators to be quickly charged and punished. In this way, protest and unrest are branded as antisocial and illegal – accompanied by solemn vows to re-establish the rule of law, restore civic calm, and protect Tanzania’s image as politically peaceful and stable without which, the tourism and investment economy upon which both elites and the state depend would quickly collapse. For some of the reporting on recent unrest, see “Rioters Torch Churches in Zanzibar,” *Daily News*, May 28, 2012 (http://dailynews.co.tz/index.php/local-news/5610-rioters-torch-churches-in-z-bar); “Zanzibar Chaos Unacceptable, Intolerable, Says Kikwete,” *The Citizen*, June 3, 2012 (http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/sunday-citizen/40-sunday-citizen-news/22863-zbar-chaos-unacceptable-intolerable-says-kikwete.html); “How Union, Isles Govts Were Caught Napping,” *The Citizen*, June 3, 2012 (http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/sunday-citizen/40-sunday-citizen-news/22865-how-union-isles-govts-were-caught-napping.html); and “FFU Crack Down on Demonstrators as Divers Fail to Locate Sunken Ferry,” *The Guardian*, July 21, 2012, pp. 1–2 (http://www.ippmedia.com/).


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