

ANGALIYA BAHARINI, MAI YALIYOKO PWANI: THE PRESENCE  
OF THE OCEAN IN MAHMOUD AHMED ABDULKADIR'S POETRY

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The idea for this paper came to me while heading off to the university on a unexpectable hot day in Bayreuth. While longing for “my sea” and its water, my mind wandered to Mahmoud Mau’s poetry and the meaning and prominence of *bahari* for a poet born on an island like Lamu. Ustadh Mau’s poetry is an inspiring field of research, one that I have become more familiar with over the years since getting to know him in 2014, in the course of my Ph.D. research. The contents of this paper make reference to early remarks of his that I had saved in my notebook in 2014, along with other interviews that I had conducted with Ustadh in April 2016, when I presented a paper on the social commitment of Mahmoud Mau’s poetry at the African Literature Association conference in Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Ustadh Mau never tired of answering further questions that I addressed to him while preparing this contribution.<sup>2</sup>

\* When I travelled to Lamu in August 2014, I was captivated by the beauty of this port island, its language, people and scents. Elena Bertoncini knew that I travelled there, and asked me for some pictures of the island, which she had hitherto never visited. If nowadays even her Italian *wajukuu* (grandchildren) enjoy Swahili poetry, its places and its language, it is after all thanks to her: *asante sana, Mwalimu*.

<sup>1</sup> Most of the English translations presented in this paper are first drafts, courtesy of the indefatigable mind of Clarissa Vierke, in collaboration with Ustadh Mau, Jasmine Mahazi and myself, produced during the lovely time we spent with Mahmoud Mau in Bayreuth in 2015. These memories have been recorded in Mahmoud Mau’s poem *Zijara Ujerumani* (A Visit to Germany). All the material which has been generously provided to us by Mahmoud Mau is kept at the DEVA archive in Bayreuth. The idea for an anthology of Ustadh Mau poetry is a forthcoming project. In the cases wherein the translations come from other sources, it is explicitly specified in footnote.

<sup>2</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Flavia Aiello for having invited Mahmoud Mau to Naples in occasion of the first conference on Swahili literature at the University of Naples

Before looking at the *bahari* in Mahmoud Mau's poetry, I will briefly introduce his life, as some of his life's threads are intertwined with his oeuvre, and this will aid in understanding and drawing nearer to his way of life and of making poetry.

### **Ustadh Mau: Maisha**

Any study of Mahmoud Mau's poetry must take into account his hometown, Lamu, the island where he was born and raised. Like in biology and as attested by Uexküll, every organism is not only adapted to (*angepasst*) but also entirely fitted into (*eingepasst*) its environment (Cassirer 1992: 23-24), it is the same if we consider Mahmoud Mau's life. Indeed, his oeuvre is totally imbued by a *Merknetz* (receptor system) and a certain *Wirknetz* (effector system) both generated by and linked with his alma mater.

Although he worked in Tanzania for two years – from 1971 to 1973, as a shopkeeper in the Manzese area of Dar es Salaam – and despite his love of travelling, he can't imagine himself living in a better place than Lamu. The joy (*raha*) that he feels every time he returns from a journey is unexplainable (*haielezeki*) for him.<sup>3</sup> He compared it to the joy in someone's heart when they are about to see their love again: "*Ile raha ninao sikia haoelezeki na bila ya safari raha hiyo siwezi kuipata nikama ile raha anao sikiya mtu aliokuwa mbali na mpenzi wake wakati anapokuwa hurudi kwenda kukutana na mpenzi*" (Mau 2017).<sup>4</sup> He is simply proud of and grateful for the place where he lives and where his parents, Ahmed Abdulkadir Abdulatif and Barka Aboud Mbarak, raised him. While, on the one hand, it is needless to say that we have no power to decide either where we are born or who our parents are, Mahmoud Mau declares that, even if he had this power, he wouldn't have chosen another place or other parents.

"L'Orientale", and to my friend Roberto Gaudio for having joined Mahmoud Mau's voice with those of other poets from our home town.

<sup>3</sup> *Mimi sioni mahala bora kwangu mimi zaidi ya hapa amu nami napenda sana safari kwa sababu unapo fika wakati wakurudi amu basi ile raha ninao sikia haoelezeki nabila yasafari raha hiyo siwezi* (Mau 2017). "I can't imagine a better place for me than here at my home in Lamu. I love travelling very much, because when you come back to Lamu after having travelled, well, the joy which I feel, I can't explain it to you and without travelling I couldn't feel it."

<sup>4</sup> "That joy which I feel is inexplicable, and if I did not travel I could not experience this joy. It is like the joy that a person feels when he/she is far from his lover and then comes back to see his/her lover."

On Lamu and by his community, he is considered a social philanthropist: he is an imam, a teacher and chairman of the Lamu Muslim Youth, and for his contributions to national development, he has been awarded the Head of State's Commendation. He often uses his poetry to comment on pressing social and political issues: the poem *Kimwondo* (The Shooting Star, 1975), for instance, was composed at the time of the election campaigns and the selection of candidates for the parliamentary seat of Lamu East in 1975 (Amidu 1990).<sup>5</sup> He wrote the short poem *Mama Musimlaumu* (Don't Blame the Mother, 2006) to raise public awareness of an event too easily condemned by newspapers in 2006: a mother had abandoned her newborn baby in the bush, who was then found by a stray dog.

Mahmoud Mau's being "many things" (Timammy 2014: 85) befits his status as a multi-faceted poet. He indeed writes about a broad range of topics, prompted by different sources of inspiration: the books in his library, his private life, or the people of different generations whom he knows and is inspired by or asked to write about. *Wasiya wa Mabanati* (Advice to the Young Girls; 140 stanzas), a poem composed in 1974, was written at a time when customs were under threat. Poets like Ustadh Mau would plead for the respect of customs and culture. In composing his own admonitory *utendi* to young girls, Mau was inspired by the Arabic pamphlet *ya-Banati*, composed by 'alī al-Ṭaṇṭawi in 1954, which he had read earlier.<sup>6</sup> Ṭaṇṭawi's text was meant to warn young ladies not to let themselves be deceived by men in matters of love. However, the poem *Wasiya wa Mabanati* is not a general admonition to stick to one's customs, but was inspired by a specific incident: a young woman from his own island had lost her honour. Furthermore, it builds on a tradition of admonitory, didactic poetry: roughly a century before, another admonition in the form a didactic poem (*wasiya*), the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* – which later became one of the most venerated poems of Swahili classical *tendi* compositions – was composed and addressed to a young woman, the author Mwana Kupona's daughter. The poetess, who was born in Siu but spent her

<sup>5</sup> Mahmoud Mau was writing on behalf and in support of Mr. Mzamil O. Mzamil, vehemently urging people to vote for him rather than for the rich Bwana Abubakar Madhubuti (see Amidu 1990:43).

<sup>6</sup> Ṭaṇṭawi is a Syrian writer whose grandfather was Egyptian; he moved first to Syria and then to Egypt. He died in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 1999, at the age of 90. His *ya-Banati* has been published in Pakistan and translated into Urdu and Farsi.

adulthood in Lamu, her mother's hometown<sup>7</sup> (Romero 1997: 32), used the poem of Mwana Kuona (Werner & Hichens 1934; Allen 1971) to impart advice on how to behave in society, with the aim of preserving moral values, such as those the poet Mahmoud Mau recalls in *Wasiya*.

Before *Kimwondo* and *Wasiya*, the first poem that he had composed for public recitation (*mahali pa umma*) was titled *Miaka Kumi ya Uhuru* (Ten Years of Independence), written on the tenth anniversary of Kenya's independence in 1973. A man who liked the poem awarded him five shillings for his performance.<sup>8</sup> Although he recited his first poem in public and has participated in many other performances,<sup>9</sup> Mahmoud Mau himself prefers writing to reciting. However, he knows well the advantages of recorded poems, which can reach a larger audience (Mau 2016; see also Mau & Frankl 2013: 2). In fact, his compositions have been recorded and distributed all along the coast; for instance, the *Wasiya wa Mabanati*, as chanted by Said Karama, has gained popularity also in Mombasa (see Kresse 2011).<sup>10</sup> Not only Karama, but other singers have also worked to "give voice" (*kutia sauti*) to his compositions: *Ramani ya Maisha ya Ndowa* (A Map of Married Life, 2006) was sung by Fakhrouddin Muhsin; *Uzinduzi* (Awakening, 2000), by Abdurahman Mustafa, a man from the Comoro. Mau's expertise in the Kiamu language and Swahili poetry, along with his astonishing knowledge of the Arabic language, textual sources and Muslim doctrine, have made him the authority to consult, and his library a meeting point where he has supplied several scholars and researchers with information and material.

His private library, which he has created over the years, is a special place for him. It is full of books, stacked high on every shelf, in Swahili, English and

<sup>7</sup> The plaque affixed outside her house, in the Mta Muini area of Lamu, reads as follows: "Above here, in about 1880, Mwana Kuona wrote her *utendi*." Mahmoud Mau kindly provided me with a photo of the plaque, which allowed me to re-read it and to quote it here.

<sup>8</sup> *Mtu mmoja alipenda shairi hili na akanituzia shilingi tano. Alipoa bashishi shilingi tano* (my transcript of the *Encyclopédie des Littératures en Langues Africaines/ ELLAf* video at <http://ellaf.huma-num.fr/contenu/kiswahili-bila-mipaka/> minutes 12.55-13.28).

<sup>9</sup> To name but a few: the Jukwani Festival, Nairobi 2009; RISSEA, Mombasa 2014; Chuo Kikuu cha Kimataifa cha Kiislamu Africa, Sudan; Iwalewa Haus, Bayreuth, 2015; Berlin and Hamburg Universities, 2016; UNIOR, 2016; Zanzibar, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> An audio version of another popular poem, *Kiswahili*, has also been recorded by Mathieu Roy in 2005 (see Roy 2013: 45-56). In contrast to *Wasiya wa Mabanati*, this audio version has been recited by Ustadh Mau himself.

Arabic. He began to order Arabic-language books from Cairo when he was around sixteen years old. Mahmoud Mau's joy lies in his books, and this joy permeates his library: *Raha yangu iko kwenye zitabu. Ndio maana nimetenga sehemu hii [makataba] niwe yangu, mimi peke yangu na vitabu vyangu.*<sup>11</sup> Mahmoud Mau's library contains plenty of journals and books about Chinese culture as well, which has always fascinated him. Even his nickname, "Mau", comes from his support of Mao Zedong, and only later was it associated with the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (at which point, to avoid trouble with the government, he changed his nickname from "Mao" to "Mau").

Not only books, but also people have fostered his interest in and love of poetry. Mahmoud Mau's father, Ahmed Abdulkadir Abdulatif – the last born from his grandfather Abdulkadir Abdul Latif and Hadidja – known by the nickname "Gandhi" both for his intelligence and for being like the Mahatma – was a poet himself.<sup>12</sup> Mahmoud Mau still keeps a poem that his father composed especially for him, *Hapo Zamani za Jana* (Once Upon a Time). The poem features the same tone and theme of paternal advice that one finds later on in the poem that Ustadh Mau composed for his son Abud in 2000, *Haki za Watoto* (The Children's Rights), which addresses all the parents in the community.<sup>13</sup> Mahmoud Mau started reading his father's poetry when he was a young boy, and this made him start appreciating and composing poetry on his own. Another factor that

<sup>11</sup> My transcript of Ustadh Mau's interview for the *Kiswahili Bila Mipaka* corpus video, ELLAf, minutes 17.7–12. "Books are my joy. This is the reason why I have set apart this section [the library] for myself, so that I can be alone with my books."

<sup>12</sup> On his mother's side, the poetic talent can be traced back to his *nyanya*, or grandmother, who was also a poetess, although she mainly composed her poems orally without writing them down. Mahmoud Mau still remembers the poem his grandmother composed when the telephone arrived in Lamu. Mahmoud Mau's grandfather Abdul Kadir Abdul Latif originally from Poona in India, came to Lamu when his wife died and was employed by the government as an engineer. Known for being a good Hanafi Muslim and a very devoted person, Abdul Kadir Abdul Latif has been a close friend of Habib Swaleh, the "Mwenye Mkuu" of the Riyadhah Mosque and the Maulidi celebration on Lamu. Mahmoud's grandfather and later on his father, contributed a lot with the construction of the Riyadhah Mosque (see Salvadori 1996: 34-35).

<sup>13</sup> Like the *Waisya wa Mabanati*, *Haki za Watoto* was sung by Karama and is available from many shops in Lamu and Mombasa. A copy of it, provided by Mahmoud Mau during his first visit to Bayreuth, is nowadays also kept at the DEVA archive at the University of Bayreuth.

helped to train him as a poet was the madrasa that he attended for nine years, where he learned how to chant and compose *qaṣīda* to be recited at celebrations of the prophet's birthday (*maulidi*). Like many Swahili scholars, particularly before independence, Ustadh received a Muslim education – a type of instruction often frowned upon in contemporary Kenya, despite having produced so many outstanding scholars and poets along the East African coast, where, “since the coming of Islam to the East African coast the Swahili have received their formal education in the *chuo* and the madrasa” (Frankl 2012: 3) – as opposed to the “formal education” introduced by Christian missionaries in the nine-teenth century. Even before entering the madrasa at the age of seven, he had already started learning the Qur’ān by heart with his uncle’s wife, Mama Kinana. When he started his first year of madrasa, taught by Mwalimu Omar Abdallah Kirume,<sup>14</sup> the talented pupil Mahmoud Mau already knew how to read the holy book and was able to recite some suras from memory.<sup>15</sup>

It is not only his humbleness but also his immense knowledge of Muslim culture and Swahili poetry and linguistic varieties that have earned him recognition “despite the lack of formal education”, as P. J. L. Frankl (2012: 3) has pointed out. Mahmoud Mau himself neither regrets nor hides his upbringing, as is also attested in the following line from *Kilio Huliya Mwenyewe*<sup>16</sup> (Change starts at Home, 2006):

<sup>14</sup> The teachers who followed him over nine years at the madrasa are the following: Mwalimu Muhamad Sharif Said al-Beydh, Mwenye Ali Dini, Mwalimu Muhamad Ali Khatib and Ahmad Ali Khatib, Kassim Abdalla Kirume and Athan Ahmad Kirume, Ustadh Sayyid Hassan Badawy. The latter is one of the prominent religious leaders who opposed Mahmoud Mau’s choice to start preaching the Friday sermon in Kiswahili (see Timammy 2013-14: 87-88). All his teachers were followers of the Tarīqa ‘Alawīya, which had some influence on the poet’s education until he was inspired by al-Ghazālī’s doctrine, as contained in the book *Laysa min al-Islām* (It’s Not Part of Islam), which signalled a turning point in Mahmoud Mau’s education. This made his teachers consider him a Wahhabi. (Timammy 2013-14: 86).

<sup>15</sup> As reported by Timammy, under Kinana’s tutelage, Mahmoud Mau learned “the final thirtieth of the Qur’ān’ (namely *juz’ ‘Amma* in Arabic) at home” (Timammy 2013-14: 86).

<sup>16</sup> The original title is namely *Kilio Huliya Mwenyewe – na mtu mbali kalialia*. Clarissa Vierke in dialogue with Andrew Eisenberg opted for translating it as “Change starts at home” since a literally translation of it would have not rendered the intention and meaning imbued in the poem’s composition.

*Nimezawa kisiwani                      wala nde sikutoka*  
*masomo ni ya chuoni                  ndiyo niliyobahatika*  
*wala dufu siiyoni                        mbee ya wailimika*

I was born on the island, never did I leave it.

My education is that of the Qur'ānic school, that is what I am blessed with.  
I do not regard myself as worthless compared to those with a school education.

Being a poet and an imam at the same time are not roles that contradict each other. In a roundtable on Islamic intellectual traditions and institutions of learning in Africa held in Bayreuth in March 2016, Mahmoud Mau recalled what the Qur'ān clearly recites in the sura of the poets, *āya* 226, in which quality poetry is praised whereas bad poetry is rejected.<sup>17</sup>

His role as a preacher, delivering the Friday sermon at the Pwani Mosque, and as a teacher in the Bandani Mosque permeates his poetic voice and his repertoire of themes, which are strongly infused with a guiding and admonishing tone. For him, all these roles share the common mission and challenge of working together for the benefit of the community<sup>18</sup> (*umma*) (Mau 2017). This principle echoes Shaaban Robert's concept of *wajibu wa mwandishi au mshairi* (the duty of the writer/poet). The point of being a poet, according to Mahmoud Mau, is to chronicle the events, both happy and sad (like the tragedy embodied in *Wasiya wa Mabanati*), that bind the community that he is part of: *Na mshairi sawa na msanii mgine anaathirika na mazingira ya jamii yake analiwa wakati anapoona jamii haina raha na anacheka na kufurahi wakati anapo shuhudiya raha na furaha ya jamii yake kilio au kiteko chake kinaonekana katika kazi zake za sanaa* (Mau 2017).<sup>19</sup>

Composing a sermon (*hutuba*) implies several levels of commitment for Mahmoud Mau. Although sermons may deal with different themes de-pending

<sup>17</sup> The prophet Muhammad AS, along with Hassan bin Thabit, Kaab bin Malik and Abdulahi bin Rawaha, are the poets whom he mentioned in his talk, providing examples of poetic practices as far back as the Islamic age. The Qur'ānic *āya* he refers to is the following: "Save those that believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God oft, and remember themselves after being wronged; and those who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they will be overturned" (Sura 26:226; Arberry's translation 1986:381).

<sup>18</sup> *Mwalimu na khatib na mshairi wote hawa wanashirikiyana katika kutumikiya.*

<sup>19</sup> "And a poet is like any other artist who is affected by the context of his community. He cries when he finds his society unhappy, and laughs when he pays witness to joy and happiness in his society. His cry and laughter are evident in his artworks."

on the specific event the community is facing – be it Ramadan or political elections – in every case, a *hutuba* has to supply testimony (*ushahidi*) from the holy Qur’ān or from the hadith. On some occasions, as Mahmoud Mau has told me in an interview, imams also pick relevant quotations from proverbs and poetry that could be of guidance in their sermons.

On the other hand, he considers it his special duty as a teacher to address the youth. The teacher’s role in this sense is to take care of children and prepare them to become adults<sup>20</sup> (Mau 2017). Finally, being a writer entails the formidable mission of guiding (*kuwalekeza*) and advising (*kuwashauri*) people on how to go about their lives (*jinsi yakwenda maishani*) (Mau 2017).

Ever since he started composing poetry, he has typically written most of his poems in Arabic script, which to him is the natural form in which to commit his words to paper, but which makes him rather exceptional in contemporary Lamu.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he is unique in the sense that he started to deliver the Friday sermon in Swahili, which was a very controversial choice at that time; ultimately, however, the community approved of it, and nowadays almost all the imams deliver their Friday sermons in Swahili (see also Mau & Frankl 2013: 2 ; Timammy 2014: 87-88).

Ustadh Mau also writes short poems, *mashari mafupi*, for the people who regularly knock at his library door, asking for poems to celebrate a graduation or wedding or somebody’s pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>22</sup> Mahmoud acknowledges that the community needs people who can transfer the message (*ujumbe*) that is in one’s heart or mind into a better form (*kwa ndiya nzuri zaidi*), namely poetry: *jamii huwa inawahitaji watu hawa kwasababu wanawasaidiya katika kuwasilisha ujumbe wao kwa ndiya nzuri Zaidi* (Mau 2017).<sup>23</sup> When he writes on commission, he commits himself to the person whose behalf he is talking, and to their situation or context; he writes through the lens of the other person: *nawakati mgine anatunga kwa niyaba ya mtu au watu wangine na katika hali hii ya pili inambidi mshairi ajiweke*

<sup>20</sup> *Ni kuunda watoto na kuwatayarisha kwa maisha ya ukubwani.*

<sup>21</sup> For an example of his writing in Arabic script, see the poem titled *Kiswahili* in Mau & Frankl (2013: 1-18), in which a list of all his composition in *tendi* and *mashairi* forms is also provided.

<sup>22</sup> As attested by his daughter Azra, Ustadh Mau doesn’t even charge for these short poems.

<sup>23</sup> “The community needs this kind of people so that they may help them to transfer their message in a nice form.”



*katika mazingira ya ule mtu ambao anatunga kwa niyaba yake* (Mau 2017).<sup>24</sup>

Besides writing poems on demand, based on inspiring books or chronicling events in the community, Ustadh Mau regularly writes about his own feelings (*hisia*) and the experiences which have come to mark his life. In this respect, the poet says on his own behalf: *mshairi anatunga kwa ajili yakuelezea hisia ambazo ni zake yeye mwenyewe kwa mambo ambayo yamemtokeya yeye binafsi* (Mau 2017).<sup>25</sup>

### ***Bahari*: A multi-layered figuration and experience**

Reality is not a unique and homogenous thing; it is immensely diversified ,  
having as many different schemes and patterns as there are different organisms.

Every organism is so to speak a monadic being.

It has a world of its own because it has an experience of its own.

(Cassirer 1992: 23)

The variety of Ustadh Mau’s compositions – imbued with moral values and sermonic tones, and mixed with personal notes in *mashairi* and *utenzi* form – is an inspiring and very complex area of investigation. In this paper, I will refer specifically to the presence and cultural notions of the *bahari* in Ustadh Mau’s life, thoughts and poetry. How do cultural concepts shape experience, and how does experience shape cultural concepts? The ocean’s presence in a port city like Lamu is woven into moral discourses on social responsibility in Ustadh Mau’s poetry, as I wish to show in the poem *Bandari ina Mawimbi* (The Port has Waves); on the other hand, it is also a presence that pervades and influences the poet’s private sphere and personal feelings , as in the poem *Hafi asiye timiwa* (No One Dies Before Their Time is Up, 1998), and his personal observations. Besides these two topics, an investigation into *bahari* in terms of poetic meter and rules of prosody, from Mahmoud Mau’s perspective, will also be necessary; hence, the wordplay in this paper’s title.

I will look at the *bahari* in Mahmoud Mau’s poetry as an aesthetic idea, as advanced in Blamberger (2013). In fact, the figure of the *bahari* contains

<sup>24</sup> “On other occasions, he composes on behalf of somebody else or other people; and in that case, the poet has to make an effort to put himself into that man’s context on whose behalf he composes.”

<sup>25</sup> “The poet composes to explain his own feelings about his personal experiences.”

an ambiguity that can be understood in different ways. On this matter, it is worth quoting Blamberger, who describes Thomas Mann's attempt to show "that interplay of figural constancy and discursive variation" with the metaphor of black piano keys amid enharmonic change (*enharmonische Verwechslung*):

A single black key on a piano can at the same time be "F sharp" or "G flat"; the note can be reinterpreted, be assigned to a different tonal context and a different function, thus allowing a change of key (*Tonalwechsel*). (Blamberger 2013: 10-11)

In Mahmoud Mau's compositions, *bahari* is subject to this change of keys. However, as opposed to the concept of death in Mann, it does not contain that "figural constancy" either, since the *word* itself already embodies two unrelated meanings: rhyme/meter and sea/ocean. As first, I wish to look at the approach to and use of *bahari* (prosody) in Mahmoud Mau's compositions in the following paragraph; I will then narrow the focus to the use of *bahari* as a metaphor in some of his poems, which will reveal the different contexts and patterns of its occurrence. As in the *al-Inkishafi* by Sayyid Abdalla bin Nasir, in which the ruined city becomes a metaphor for talking about experiences and is thus reused (much like in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which reuses the metaphor of Joachim Ziemssen's skeleton) (see Vierke 2016), to what extent does Mahmoud Mau use the sea as a metaphor, a device for talking about experiences? Its water and its port and the feelings generated from them are components the poet exploits to add texture to his compositions. Thus, *bahari*, as a point of departure, will first be analysed for its ability to determine the "musical key" of a poem via prosody; then it will be investigated as a cultural figuration: *bahari* as the port, Mahmoud Mau's own community, and *bahari* as a very personal experience permeated by his own feelings: the metaphor of the universe and the fine line between the experiences of life and death.

What will emerge from a comparison of *bahari* in the poet's personal memories (see paragraph "*Bahari inanikumbusha*") and *bahari* as the figuration of the Lamuan community which is plugging like a *jahazi* (dhow) or in troubles because of *mawimbi* (see paragraph "*Bahari in the port-city*"), is a striking tension between Ustadh Mau's plurality of experiences and the metaphor of the ocean.

### **Bahari, a prosodic change of key**

The twofold meaning embodied in the technical term *bahari* in Swahili classical literature is well-known: *Kwanza, hurejelea kile kina cha mwisho katika utenzi na ambacho hakibadiliki katika utenzi au utendi mzima. Maana ya pili ni kumbo la tungo za kishairi ambalo huweza kuwa na sifa na vitanzu mbalimbali* (Wamitila 2003: 27). Indeed, as concerns the *kina* (rhyme, pl. *vina*) of the *utendi*, the term *bahari* (from the Arabic *baḥr*, بحر), literally “ocean, sea” in Swahili), denotes the monosyllabic end rhyme, which is also known as *kina cha utendi* (rhyme of the *utendi*) or *kina cha kikomo* (end rhyme). In a broad sense, the term *bahari* also refers to categories of poetry, genre as is clear from the following passage: *Sheikh Nabahany na Bibi Zaynab Mahmoud Fadhil wamenifunza juu ya bahari kumi na tatu*<sup>26</sup> [...] *Hakuna anayejua kwa hakika, ni bahari namna ngapi waliotumia Waswahili; zaidi ya bahari za aina tatu maarufu ziiitwazo: wimbo au nyimbo, shairi, utenzi au utendi* (Shariff 1988: 44-45).<sup>27</sup>

In this broad sense, *bahari* echoes the meaning of the Arabic *baḥr* (meter, pl. *buhūr*), a term that was first used in the science of metrics and rhyme. In his *Poem about metres (Fī buḥūr al-ṣi‘r)*, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī says of the “meter/sea”, “Every *baḥr* has a shore” (Capezio 2013: 22). This imagery of sea and shore also applies to the *ubeti* structure: as every sea has its shore, every *ubeti* has a monosyllabic *bahari*, which flows throughout the poem. Indeed, in the *utendi* meter, while the end rhyme of the first three *vipande* changes from one stanza to the next (*aaa-*, *bbb-*, *ccc-* ...), the end rhyme of the last hemistich recurs throughout the whole poem (*-x*, *-x*, *-x* ...).

Knowing the norms of composing poetry, for Mahmoud Mau, is like knowing the grammatical norms of one’s own language. However, his approach to poetry has developed in a very spontaneous way, and transcends any established schools of poetic practice. When Mahmoud Mau composed his first poem, *Wasiya wa Mabanati*, in 1974, he didn’t know anything about

<sup>26</sup> Here the following thirteen meters elicited by Shariff (1988: 45): 1. *Wimbo*, 2. *Shairi*, 3. *Zivindo*, 4. *Utenzi au Utendi*, 5. *Utumbuizo*, 6. *Hamziya*, 7. *Dura Manhduma/Inkishafi*, 8. *Ukawafi*, 9. *Wajiwaji*, 10. *Tiyani Fatiha*, 11. *Wawe*, 12. *Kimai*, 13. *Sama, Mahadhi au Sauti*.

<sup>27</sup> “Sheikh Nabahany and Bibi Zaynab Mahmoud Fadhil have taught me upon thirteen meters [...] there is no one who knows with certain how many types of meters the Swahili do use; three of the most renowned meters are: *nyimbo, shairi, utenzi au utendi*.”

the so-called *sheria za kutunga mashairi* (rules for composing poems; see Abedi 1954). In fact, the poem, meant to be a moral admonishment to Muslim youth, is known as an *utendi*, praised for its “enduring relevance” across time and place (Kresse 2011); however, it was not composed in the *utendi* form, but in the *Dura Mandhuma* genre<sup>28</sup> based on four bi-colons (*mishororo*) and of six syllables (*mizani*) per each verse (*kipande*).<sup>29</sup> The first line of the poem reads as follows:

*Sikiza mwanangu nikupe waswiya*  
*Mimi ulimwengu ninauweleya*

<sup>28</sup> For the description of this genre I am basically referring to the definition and explanation provided in Shariff who groups *Dura Manduma* and *Inkishafi* together and defines them as it follows: *bahari ya sita ya utungo hujulikana kwa majina mawili, yaani Dura Manduma au Inkishafi. Kwa upande mmoja, majina haya ni ya bahari yenyewe ya utungo wa aina hiyo, na kwa upande mwingine majina haya ni ya tungo maalum zilizotungwa zamani kwa bahari hiyo. Bahari hii ina beti za mishororo mine yeneye mizani sita kwa tano na vina vyake viko mwisho wa mishororo mitatu ya kila ubeti, kwa hivyo mizani ya sita ni kiwango tu* (Shariff 1988:54-55); “The sixth genre of composition is known under two names, that is *Dura Manduma* or *Inkishafi*. On one hand, these names refer to the genre itself of this kind of compositions. On the other hand, these are the names of famous compositions which have been composed in this genre/meter.”

<sup>29</sup> The term *kipande* (line) has a different meaning compared to the term *mstari*. In the general acknowledged manuscript form of all the Swahili *tendi*, the stanza is a unit that occupies one manuscript line, namely *mstari* and is written from right to left. Thus, each *kipande* is placed one after the other in a single line (*mstari*), and some scribes used to place a small, upside-down heart filled in with either black ink or a different colour to mark the caesura (*kituo*). Just as the caesura is optionally denoted, often an *ubeiti* corresponds to a single manuscript line. This one-line pattern characterises most *utendi* compositions in Arabic script. Accordingly, the *utendi* has also been described as a one-line verse that is 32 syllables long (Shariff 1988: 58). The one-line stanza arrangement in the manuscript and the visual division of the page into four equal columns is made possible by the writing of the Arabic consonant system, as only the consonants are written and the vowels most often appear only as diacritical signs above or below each consonant (*ibidem*). This accounts for a uniform length of eight consonantal characters for each *kipande*. When Roman script was introduced for writing Swahili poetry (see Krapf 1882, Frankl & Omar 1997 and Gerhard 2005), verses started to be written one on top of the other (as a quatrain), since the script, which includes both consonants and vowels, contained too many characters to fit each stanza into one line (Shariff 1988:58). The four-line layout led in turn to the misleading perception of the *ubeiti* as a quatrain based on four equal lines, although it actually consists of two bicolons (*mishororo*), as Shariff (1988: 51) and Vierke (2011: 48-50) have shown.

*Mingi nyaka wangu katika duniya*  
*Nawe haya yangu hela zingaitya*

Listen, my child to the advice I shall give you;  
 I understand the ways of the world.  
 I have spent many years on this earth;  
 and what I tell you now, you should bear it in mind.<sup>30</sup>

As evident from this first stanza, the *ubeiti* falls into eight verses (*vipande*, sg. *kipande*). Each *kipande* is made up of six syllables (*mizani*). Furthermore, the *ubeiti* falls into two parts (*mishororo*) made up of four verses (*vipande*) each, which consist of twenty-four syllables (*mizani*).<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, the poem *Bandari ina Mawimbi* (The Port Has Waves; 18 stanzas) is listed as one of Mahmoud Mau's shorter compositions in *mashairi* form (Frankl & Mau 2010: 16). Still, despite its brevity, the meter does not adhere to the *shairi* prosody but to the *utendi* prosodic pattern of eight syllables per verse, amounting to 32 syllables per stanza, as the first stanza shows: *Bismillahi awwali, kwa ina lake Jalali/ Twaanda yetu kauli, ya karibu kuwambiya* (In the name of God, first, in the name of the Almighty, we start our speech by welcoming you). Beyond the prosodic pattern, the very tone

<sup>30</sup> Kresse & Mahazi's translation (2011).

<sup>31</sup> For the description of the *utendi* stanza, I am adopting the technical definitions as provided by Shariff (1988) and Vierke (2010: 25): "The stanzas are the biggest independent, prosodically and graphologically separate units of the *utendi*. A stanza consists of four lines (*vipande*, sg. *kipande* "piece") of eight syllables each. The four lines are divided into two pairs (hemistichs) or bi-colons (*mshororo*, pl. *mishororo*), so that an *ubeiti* consists of two *mishororo* (which in turn consist of two *vipande* each)." As concerns the *utendi* bi-partite structure falling into two *mishororo* it is worth citing what Vierke and other scholars before her have extensively commented upon: "The *utendi* stanza can be considered as displaying a form of progressive bipartition: two rhythmic groups account for a line, two lines for a *mshororo* and two *mishororo* for the stanza, *ubeiti*. [...] For Hinawy, for instance, who considers the *utendi ubeiti* to consist of two long-lines, the division into four *vipande* which are marked by rhyme is not the decisive criterion that could turn the *utendi* in a quatrain strophic form - which he eventually calls a "pseudo-quatrain" or "false quatrain" (Hichens 1962/63: 110, 111). He rather considers the *utendi* as being derived from the long-line (long-measure) of Persian-Arabian origin: 'It is, plainly, none other than the old long-measure strophe graced by three vituo or internal rimes and one true kina or verse-end rime. It is, thus, not a true quatrain, but a single-line verse, riming with its adjacent verses and carrying three subsidiary or internal rimes of its own' (Hichens 1962/63: 120)" (Vierke 2010:48).

of this opening stanza encourages us to read it as a typical *utendi*, which typically sets the atmosphere with praises in the name of God in the first stanza. The *utendi* style of his short compositions, as he himself defines them (*mashairi mafupi*), has been also highlighted in the political verses of *Kimwondo* (Shooting Star), which are in fact *shairi* verses “in the utenzi vein” (Amidu 1996: 56).

Mahmoud Mau’s numerous roles in everyday life are also reflected in his compositions, in which he does not stick to the conventions of a specific meter or prosodic pattern. He rather lets the first line of his composition define which “*bahari – key*” the poem will bear: *mshairi mara nyingi hachegui bahari gani anataka kutunga. Anatunga na ubaiti wa kwanda ndio unamuongoza kufuwata bahari* (Mau 2017).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the poem dictates its own rules: the first stanza (*ubaiti wa kwanza*) is conceived of as the leading stanza, which dictates the meter and guides the poet’s hand. Mahmoud is referring to the natural act of composing poetry, which goes beyond any norms: the poet starts composing naturally, without any premeditated decisions. The meter does not even strictly shape the composition: *Kwetu sisi utungo waweza kuitwa utendi hata kama haukufuwata ile bahari maarufu ya utendi [...] Bahari ya utendi kawaida ni mrefu lakini mara nyingine washairi hutumiya bahari ya utendi kwa kuandika tungo fupi* (Mau 2016).<sup>33</sup> According to Mahmoud Mau’s perspective, the *utendi* genre is easier than the *shairi*, which makes it even more apt for compositions, and this is the reason why he himself recommends this genre to students of poetry (Mau 2017).<sup>34</sup>

### ***Bahari as personal experience: Bahari inanikumbusha ...***

*Bahari kwangu mimi mbali nakuwa naipenda kwa ajili ya mazowezi, lakini piya bahari inanipa utulivu wamoyo namapumziko yaroho baharini nahisi raha ambayo haielezeki labda nikwa sababu kuwemo baharini inaikumbusha nafsi yangu wakati ule nilipokuwa tumboni*

<sup>32</sup> “Very often the poet does not choose the meter in which he wants to compose. He composes and the first stanza is the one suggesting him a meter to follow.”

<sup>33</sup> “For us a composition can be called *utendi* even if it does not follow the well-known *utendi* meter [...] The *utendi* genre is usually long but very often poets use the *utendi* genre to write short compositions.”

<sup>34</sup> *Bahari hii ya utendi nyepesi kutungiya kwa hivo mara nyingi mimi huwambiya wanafundi wa ushairi waizoweshe kwa kutumiya bahari hini.*

*kwa mama nilipokuwa nikiogeleya katika maji yalionizunguka hali ambayo akili haikumbuki wakati huo lakini bila shaka roho namoyo unakumbuka hiyo hali labda ndiyo sababu yakuhisi utulivu ninapo kuwa baharini. (Mau 2017)*

In this first section, I will consider the relationship between Ustadh Mau and the sea, where he enjoys swimming and above all feels at home, but where he has also risked his life. As I wish to show in the following, Mahmoud Mau's feelings towards the sea exhibit an affinity and closeness that can be traced back to a) his memories of being a fetus in his mother's womb (the sphere labeled *Tumbo la Mama* in the diagram below); b) his reflection on God's power over this world (the sphere *Uwezo wa Mungu na mipango yake* below); c) his reflection on human beings and their lives, which find parallels in the way the sea's water "behaves" (the sphere *Mwana Adamu na mabadiliko ya maisha yake* below); and finally d) his memories of times spent together with his friends in the very early hours of the morning (the sphere *Urafiki na kushirikiana* below).

In an attempt to define how and why he feels at ease in the water in which he swims, Mahmoud Mau digs into the depth of his feelings and finds an explanation for something that can hardly be explained rationally. Beyond the merely aspect of swimming and training, the sea bestows his heart with tranquility, serenity and calmness, and allows his soul to rest (*utulivu wa moyo na mapumziko ya roho*). The joy that he feels in the water brings him back to a state that the mind cannot remember, but that lingers on in the heart and soul: the time when he was in his mother's womb (*nilipokuwa tumboni kwa mama*) and when he was surrounded by water (*maji yalionizunguka*). The sea, for Mahmoud, is the same water in which he floated before being born. *Bahari* and the mother's womb share the same universe, whose secret hides in the water that flows through us.

Beyond Mahmoud Mau's private feelings, the *bahari* also flows into a parallel dimension – namely that of God, since it is a symbol of God's power and his plans, which are never subverted, *jongo*:<sup>35</sup> *Bahari kadhalika ina nikumbusha uwezo wamungu na mipango yake isiyo kuwa na jongo [...]*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Jongo* ni kama *kombo* (pl. *makombo*): "kombo hauko sawa sawa." Mtu anweza kusema "mti huu una jongo" (this tree has a crookedness) (Mau 2017). Among other expressions, *hapana kombo* means *hapana shaka* "there is no dispute"; *asiye kombo na tua* "he who is without crookedness nor blame", is one of the pretended quality of Muhammad (Krapf 2012 [1882]:168).

<sup>36</sup> "The ocean reminds me also of God's power and His plans which are without crookedness."

God's power can be seen in his firm plans (*mpango madhubuti*), which control the ocean as well as the regular high and ebb tides of the water, which become more evident on Lamu in some seasons (*maji ya bahari yanajaa kwa siku maalumu na yanafuma kwa siku maalumi*). Tides are very important in delineating time in Lamu. Thus the imagery evoked in this scene, particularly the ever-moving water (known as *maji makimbizi* "flowing water" as opposed to *maziwa* "stagnant water") does not come from its meaning alone, but is totally rooted in Mahmoud Mau's culture. As depicted in Prins's volume, "Tidal waters, always in flux and reflux, not only surround the islands, but are an integral part of the Lamu world" (Prins 1965: 62).<sup>37</sup>

God's power, as reflected in the natural flux and reflux and the systematicity of the ocean's water, reminds Ustadh Mau of a famous verse that still is anchored in his memory: *Angaliya baharini, mai yaliyoko pwani/Hutoka wapi mwendani, nakisa yakarejea* (Look at the ocean, the water which shores the coast. It goes out in its flow and then comes back; my translation). This verse, which likely originates from a qasida learnt by heart at the madrasa, invites one to look at the ocean's water and how smoothly it falls upon the coast, changes direction and then comes back again.

In the changing of the ocean's states, Mahmoud Mau sees the same progression that happens to every human being. He invites us to reflect on how the serenity and cruelty of the ocean are like the calmness and turmoil within our own lives. In fact, the ocean can be glad or get angry just like humans do: *Na mabadiliko yake ina nikumbusha mwana Adamu na maisha yake/ Furaha na hasira shuwari na dharuba za bahari ni sawa na utulivu na misukosuko katika maisha yetu sisi wanaadamu bahari inafurahi na piya inakasirika* (Mau 2017).<sup>38</sup> The *bahari*, described by the common adjective *shwari*, is compared to the abstract concept of *utulivu* for human beings, just as the ocean's *dharuba* parallels the people's *misukosuko* (vicissitudes; turmoils).

<sup>37</sup> As attested in Prins, the ebbing of the tide "is perceived as a downward movement when on an open beach like Malindi" while "its horizontal movement is more stressed in Lamu and elsewhere in the islands where the mass of the water has to seek a way out to see again at every ebbing tide". Thus, while on Lamu it is heard *maji yafuma* or *mai kufuma* for "the tide ebbs", in Malindi and Mombasa the most recurrent form is *maji yapwa* or *maji kupwa*, "the water falls" (see Prins 1965 62-63).

<sup>38</sup> "And its changes remind me of the son of Adam and his life: The joy and anger, the calmness and turmoils of the ocean are like the quietness and vicissitudes in our life of human beings. The ocean rejoices and becomes angry."



Similarly, though in a more personal sphere, *bahari* is a motif that links him to friendship. What links the *bahari*, the poet's friends and himself is precisely the moments after swimming when, at the seashore (*ufuwoni mwa bahari*), they eat fish or meat with bread and weigh themselves on the last Sunday of every month: *Kadhalika kwenda baharini kwangu kunanipa fursa ya kukutana na marafiki na kujumuika nao pamoja [...] wakati tukila asubuhi baada yaguoga kila jumapili ya mwisio ya mwezi tunapima uzito natunakula samaki namkate au nyama namkate* (Mau 2017).<sup>39</sup>

This sense of serenity and completion, which makes the poet Mahmoud Mau feel blessed and grateful, finds its complete opposite in *Hafi Asiye Timiwa* (No One Dies Before Their Time Is Up, 1998; 14 stanzas). This poem rather evokes a tragedy which the poet had to face in 1998, when the roads were still flooded because of the El Niño storms of 1997 – to the extent that the buses couldn't cross the bridge over the Tana River, which had turned into a huge current (leaving its river bed). The passengers had to get off the bus and use small canoes to cross the water. Mahmoud Mau was on his way to Mombasa to visit his daughter Nadya, who attended a boarding school in Mombasa. The young man who saved his life is called Ali, a Mbajuni. At the time, he was in his twenties. The incident that occurred to him on that day left him with a strong conviction, found in the form of a refrain at the end of every stanza (*Hafi asiye timiwa ... Hafi asiye timiwa... Hafi asiye timiwa*), and finally emphasized in the last stanza with a sort of axiom: *Nna na faida moya, ambayo nimeipata: Mauti kuyakimbiya, si dawa hukufuata. Hafi asiye timiwa*.<sup>40</sup> The poem recounts an incident which almost ended in tragedy. From the very first stanzas the reader is thrust into the scenario; the poet describes how six people were put into a canoe (stanza 2, *Mwaoni twalingiya, kwa idadi watu sita*, "We got into a canoe; we were six in number"), along with the image of them looking at the captain (*nahuza*), who was untying the rope (*kamba*) as the canoe set off, following the current (*na mai kikafuata*). From these first stanzas on, the poem depicts a risky setting that only gets

<sup>39</sup> "Similarly, for me, going to the sea gives me the opportunity to meet friends and to stay together with them [...] when we eat in the morning after swimming. Every last Sunday of the month we weigh ourselves and we eat fish with bread or meat with bread."

<sup>40</sup> "And there is one lesson that I learned from it: running away from death is not a solution; it still follows you. No one dies before their time is up."

worse and worse stanza after stanza. The particular image evoked in these lines is the one of the poet struggling in the water, moments of surfacing alternating with the sensation of sinking again. The struggles he mentions in stanza 8 (*kwa kuwana nakuteta*) were specifically caused by his carrying a heavy load (*mzigo nimebingita*) on his shoulder: *Jibaba lakilo miya, maungoni meikita / Kwa dhati meniemeya, mabegani menambata / Kesa kuisaidiya, kutaka kumkukuta./ Hafi asiye timiwa*, “I was carrying a colossus of one hundred kilos on my back. He weighed heavily on me, leeching on my shoulders. I tried everything to get rid of him. No one dies before their time is up” (stz. 5). He first had to let go of the bag that he was trying to hold, because it became too heavy, which he viewed as a first sign of being unable to manage the situation: *Kauona kupoteya, kashindwa kuufuwata*, “I watched it sinking, unable to follow it.” The force of a man pushing him underwater, along with a strong current, prevented him from breathing, and brought him to the point where he thought he would die: *Shahada kaipijiya, na tamaa muhukata. Hafi asiye timiwa*, “I pronounced the last creed, and was about to give up” (stz. 7). Despite the water being portrayed as “swirling forcefully” (*mai kasi husokota*, stz.13), he was given another chance by God, which allowed him to come to the surface and shout for help. Far from that feeling of being safely at peace, surrounded by water like in his mother’s womb, in just a few seconds Mahmoud, pushed under water, feared and saw death. While trapped underwater, he unconsciously (he describes himself as without breath, after all) thought about his entire life and its end drawing near: *Mwenyewe kashuhudiya ulimwengu hunipita*, “I could see myself how the world left me behind” (stz. 10).

### ***Bahari*, the port-city as a social experience**

As a result of inter-port competitions and new postcolonial patterns of political and urban development, once-flourishing port cities like Lamu, Mombasa and waterfront renewals taken place in Cape Town and Dar es Salam have all been, to a greater or lesser extent, part of a process of sustainability in postcolonial Kenya and Tanzania (Hoyle 1983, 2001: 298).

As Hoyle insinuates with the phrase “once-flourishing”, along with Mombasa, Malindi and Kismayu, Lamu was one of the main ports of the East African coast (Salvadori 1996: 15):

Lamu was a well-established trade center years ago. The English and French Mission Societies which wanted to force Christianity on the people of Lamu used to buy a lot from Lamu. At present they only buy foodstuffs, the rest of their necessities being imported from Europe, and this has affected the trade in Lamu. When the Portuguese ruled the town, they built a very strong fort at great expense. You can see this fort even today in its ruined state, a reminder of the Portuguese rule. This is one of the several forts built by the Portuguese along the coast to fight their enemies.

Salvadori (*ibidem*), offers a portrayal of Lamu's harbour dating back to 1904; later, in the 1920s and '30s, there was also an abundance of "jahazis and mtepes, joined by the occasional dhow in the harbour;<sup>41</sup> all the administrators considered Lamu 'the most attractive coast station', although the district commissioner's house had 'no electricity or piped water [and] a multitude of bats" (Romero 1997: 202-203).

This "well-established trade center" (Salvadori 1996: 15) and "most attractive coast station" (Romero 1997: 202-203) are not exactly the loci portrayed in Mahmoud Mau's compositions such as *Jahazi* and *Bandari ina Mawimbi*. In the first poem I am going to present Mahmoud Mau uses the maritime lamuan symbol of the *jahazi* (dhow) to talk about the state of the economy of his own island which had declined. He particularly intends to portray a situation of economic stasis: *Nalikusudiya hali ya uchumi wa Lamu ulikuwa uchumi umeharibika sana*.<sup>42</sup> His inspiration came from a proverb on *tanga liembete na mongoti* (Sail attached to the mast) that he overheard in the street, uttered by a seller of *mishikaki*. The proverb is meant to describe a safe moment (*shwari*) when the *jahazi* doesn't move (*haitembei*) and the sail (*t'anga*) is attached to the mast of a sailing vessel, *mlingoti* (Kiamu, *mongoti*), since there is no wind. Ustadh reuses it to depict a moment when there is no economic hustle and bustle (*harakati za biashara*). Hearing it by chance, he had the idea to write

<sup>41</sup> As pointed out by Romero, "The *mtepe* came from the Bajun islands carrying both *mangati*, the better quality and heavier mangrove poles, and *boriti*" (1997: 202). However, this Bajuni origin was already attested in the pretious *utendi* penned down By Sheikh Nabhany *Sambo ya Kiwandeo: Mitepe mufahamuni / ikiiundwa T'ikuuni / wakounda ni Bajuni /waweze kusafiriya*; "The *mtepe*, you must know, was built in Pate by the Bajun folk to enable them to travel (stz. 5)" (see Mische & Schadeberg 1979: 8-9).

<sup>42</sup> "I intended [to depict] the state of the economy in Lamu which had spoiled a lot."

the following poem, which is presented in its completeness and translated into English<sup>43</sup> for the first time here:

<p><i>Liembete na mongoti<sup>44</sup>, tanga kwa lingi shauri Hautukuti ukuti, imetuwama bahari Hata mai<sup>45</sup> hayavuti, tutapatae bandari?</i></p>	<p>Attached to the mast are the sail due to intense calm Not even a twig is moving, the sea is too settled even the waters are not pulling, how will we reach the harbour?</p>
<p><i>Ngurudi<sup>46</sup> imeshopoka, mai ng'amani<sup>47</sup> hujiri Haitaki kuzibika, na hata kwa misumari Kuyafia<sup>48</sup> tumechoka, mikono hutuhairi<sup>49</sup></i></p>	<p>The stopper is out, and water is pouring in the bilge It doesn't want to get plugged, not even using nails We are tired to wash out, hands hurt us.</p>
<p><i>Tumekosa taratibu, hatuna tena shauri Na bandari si karibu, hakupiti manuware Zimetutanda dharubu, metuzunguka khatari</i></p>	<p>We have lost our way, we don't have any plans And the harbour is not even nearby, and no vessel is passing by Difficultly has engulfed us and danger surrounds us.</p>
<p><i>Hatuisi la kutenda, tumeshindwa kufikiri Kiza kingi kimetanda, kote kimepija dori Ni heri mwamba kupanda, kama hunu utiriri</i></p>	<p>We don't know what to do, we have run out of ideas, There is total darkness completely engulfing us It is better to hit a coral reef than this nuisance.</p>
<p><i>Hatuna ila Manani, wa kumuomba Jabari Atwegeshe nasi pwani, yapokuwa kwa kihori Tuokowe Rahamani, waja wako tusitiri</i></p>	<p>We don't have except God to pray the Almighty May He take us near the shore, even if through a canoe Save us Most Merciful, protect us, your servants.</p>
<p><i>Suwali si la jahazi, hili katika shairi Litambuweni wayuzi, mafundi mulo hodari Wa mtoni wende mbizi, muzizamiayo duri<sup>50</sup></i></p>	<p>The theme in the poem is not the dhow, Let the discerning talented artists understand, Let the deep-sea divers dive in pursuit of pearls.</p>

<sup>43</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Azra, Ustadh Mau's *kipande cha ini* (Mahmoud Mau's daughter or lit. "piece of his liver"), for having gone thoughtfully to the translation of the poem and contributed to improve its English rendering.

<sup>44</sup> Swahili standard *mlingoti: mti mrefu unaosimamishwa katika chombo ili kuweza kuzuwiliya t'anga ambalo limefungwa katika foromani* (Nabhany 2012: 35–37).

<sup>45</sup> Swahili standard *maji*.

<sup>46</sup> *T'undu maalumu ambazo hutolewa kusudi ikiwa jahazi yatakiwa kutiwa maji ili ishirabu kuna na vipande vyake vya kuziba baada ya kumwagwa maji* (ibidem).

<sup>47</sup> *Mahala nyuma ya jahazi au tezi ambapo maji yanoyoiya hushukiya hapo, ikiwa ya mengi kwa omo au kwa tezi, waswahili wasema "mwenda tezi na omo marejewa ni n'gamani"* (ibidem).

<sup>48</sup> *Kuyachota (maji) na kumwaga nje* (Mau 2017).

<sup>49</sup> *-uma* (ibidem).

The poem depicts from the early stanzas the *mahabariya* and all of them far from the harbour floating on a too settled sea. Their being lost in troubles and dangers (*dharabu* and *khatari*) is already figured out and predicted by the state of the *jahazi* itself without a stopper (*ngurudi*) and with water pouring in the blige (*ngamani*) and the sailors tired of using their hands and nails to let the stopper be plugged and to wash the vessel out (*-fua maji*). A miserable state of total defeat is portrayed in stanza four, wherein the feeling of being powerless and thoughtless permeates the stanza. At the end of the poem, the road to salvation is attested in God's power which may guide and anchor all of them back and close to the shore.

Within another composition, *Bandari ina Mawimbi*, it is the figuration of the port, not anymore the *jahazi*, which is adapted and used to talk about other political issues concerning Lamu.

Between the poem's lines, composed almost eight years ago, Mahmoud Mau – in 18 *utendi* stanzas – addresses important questions that specifically concern the *Waamu* (the Lamu people). The composition was recited (*Twaanda yetu kauli, ya karibu kuwambiya*) on the occasion of a congress (*muhadhara*) organised by the governor of Lamu to present the new port construction project to the island's citizens.<sup>51</sup> Before writing about the project's risks, already implied in the word *mawimbi* (waves), Mahmoud Mau first composed a poem in 2009 under the simple title *Bandari* in order to explain to his people – in poetic form – the plans to build a new deep-sea port:

*Mimi nalitunga mashari mawili; moja anwani yake ni bandari na  
baadae nikatunga Bandari ina Mawimbi. Lile la bandari*

<sup>50</sup> Lulu (Mau 2017).

<sup>51</sup> It is worth quoting Hoyle at length regarding the political and economical features (or lack of such features) of Lamu's port: "The special qualities of this predominantly Muslim port-city, and its inherent attraction to visitors, lie in this relative remoteness and in the fact that the town still lives and prospers, albeit modestly, as a small-scale regional centre of trade, transport and socio-political activity. Unlike other once-prosperous port-cities of the archipelago, Lamu did not irreversibly decline as traditionally dispersed port activity became increasingly concentrated; unlike Zanzibar, it did not become the principal 19th-century East African emporium of maritime transport and trade; and, unlike Mombasa, it was not selected by European colonial administrators as a modern deep-water port and railway terminal." "The Kenya Government, through the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) initiated the Lamu Conservation Project in 1975 [...] in 1988 waterfront were paved"; (Hoyle 2001: 298–99). Here the project Mahmoud is talking about dates back after 2000, when debates concerning the port started again.

*nilikusudiya kuwaeleza watu kuhusu huo mradi, la pili  
nilikusudiya hatari ambazo zitaweza kutokeya nakuharibu maadili  
mema yetu na mila na desturi kwa sababu ya wageni watakao  
kuja Lamu kwa ajili ya nafsi za kazi zitakazotokeya. (Mau 2017)*

From the very first stanzas of *Bandari ina Mawimbi*, he invites the audience to pay attention to his talk in order to find a way out (stz. 4, *Tupulike kwa makini, tuyatiye akilini / Na kisa twangaliyeni, ipi ya kwandama ndiya*, “Let us listen carefully and reflect upon it, so that finally we can decide which way to go”).<sup>52</sup> In this composition, not least because of the context in which it was composed, the port is not portrayed as the strong and stable entity that makes his people feel at home; it is rather – as the title suggests – a bringer of waves (*mawimbi*), which are used as a metaphor for immense and endless (*hayakomi*) pitfalls and bad consequences, and are liable to generate a violent tsunami: *Bandari ina sunami, mawimbiye hayakomi / chochote hakisimami, kwa kifuwa kuziwiya*, “The port causes a tsunami, bringing endless waves. Nothing can resist them, no matter how hard one tries” (stz.7); *Sunami hiyo ni kali, itazowa ma’adili Nisharuti yambo hili, akilini kulitiya*, “The tsunami is so strong, it will wash away our moral standards. It is important for us to consider this.” The tsunami, popularly considered the water’s earthquake, is depicted as so harsh that is able to wash away (the verb used is *-zoa*) their moral beliefs (*ma’adili*). The image that emerges from the two above-quoted stanzas reveals a dichotomy between *mila zao* (their customs) and the port, which was planned to be built on the mainland opposite the island. Thus, this new port was a threat since it belonged neither culturally nor geographically to the Lamuans, the people of the island.

While the port was expected to boost the economy, the stanza rather predicts a disaster that will ruin the people’s moral values. The only way to avoid this disaster is to be prepared, to know one’s own culture and to strive to preserve what belongs to oneself. The risk hinted at in the poem

<sup>52</sup> Waves are definitely a recurrent motif which is also portrayed peculiarly in Sheikh Haji Gora’ composition titled *Bahari Usichungue* (Don’t Delve into the Sea/ Recondite Sea), as this stanza illustrates: *Bahari ina mawimbi Milele hayaondoki / Kadhalika na vitimbi / Vilo havidhihiriki. Kama si rangi na vumbi / Ingekuwa hakwendeki*, “The sea contains waves Ceaseless waves. Other mysteries and riddles Not evident to untrained eyes Were it not for the colour and dust You would not leave” (translation of Abubakr Zein Abubakr, Dr. Mshai Mwangola; see Owuor 2014: 113-114).

is that others might profit from the port, which is located in their immediate vicinity: *Sharuti tuwe imara, kuunda twabiya bora. Tuimarishe fikira, za kutuonesha ndiya*, “We must be firm, and work on our conduct. We should strengthen the thoughts that guide us along the right path” (stz. 9); *Tuipindeni mapema, kwa masomo kuyasoma. Tukitaka wetu umma, nao funguni kungiya*, “We should make an effort very early, by studying the relevant disciplines, if we want our community to get its share” (stz. 10); *Au tutamiza mate, na chochote tusipate. Watavuna tangu tete, kwa yuu wamezokuya*, “Otherwise, we will continue longing for it, without getting anything, while others will already profit from the first harvest” (stz. 11).

In these lines, Ustadh Mau is exhorting his people to keep “a critical attitude towards human life” at every moment by contemplating and scrutinizing human existence (Cassirer 1992:6): is this not the reason why Mahmoud pays the attention to those critical acts of *kumarisha fikira* and of *kusoma masomo*? Reinforcing their own thoughts and learn relevant disciplines are the keys to acting and reacting properly in one’s own home and for the good of their port-city. He wishes for every single *mwamu* to be “that creature constantly in search for himself” and “responsible/a moral subject” (ibidem).

The admonition and recommendations come in stanza fifteen: *Tukisaliya na pwaji, na kwingi kuipa miji na hayazoleki maji, fahamu tukiya mwaya*, “If we stay idle, ill-talking and boasting, remember, once spilled out, water cannot be gathered up again.” Here the imagery of spilling water (*kuipa miji*) is used to symbolise wasting time, which, once wasted, cannot be returned. Mahmoud Mau exhorts his listeners not to let major events occur and keep passive towards them, without exercising the power to control, react to them or plan them. His belief in moral activism lies in the wise assumption that things evolve and change, and it is people’s duty (*wajibu*) to observe and be part of the change they wish to see occur. Knowledge of many disciplines, as he hints at in the lines above (*masomo kuyasoma*), is seen as the key to being active in protecting one’s own land.

The multiple facets of the port city that Mahmoud Mau sketches out in *Bandari* are similarly present in *Kilio Huliya Mwenye* (Change Begins at Home), composed on the occasion of the conference on popular culture organized by Andrew Eisenberg and Ann Biersteker in Mombasa in 2016. Here, the natural flow of the water is used as a metaphor for life, which

flows and invites you to keep in tune with time: *Yanayotoka tezini na omo kutiririka / Yadirikeni ngamani si kwa hiyari kumbuka / Ni hukumu ya kanuni / Ya mambo kubadilika*, “[The water that] comes from the stern and that which flows from the bow, both reach the sinkhole; Remember there is no other option. This is an inert principle: things change.”

The image of a cruel tsunami, able to wash away everything, or that of water flowing from the stern to the bow before arriving at a sinkhole and changing its aspect – both spell out the essence of life, which is unpredictable and challenging, like a tsunami, and a constantly ongoing process (*divenire, becoming*). Mahmoud Mau hints at and reminds his listeners of this universal principle (*hukumu ya kanuni*). The water that he is highlighting in his lines both belongs at and comes from home: both the pronoun *mwenye* and the noun *bandari*, which are reiterated in the poems, are linked with and rooted to the island of Lamu.

The presence of his own hometown and his first-person involvement with it is emphasized by his frequent usage of the first person plural form *tu-*, by which the poet Mahmoud Mau includes himself: *Tupulike kwa makini*, “Let us listen carefully and reflect upon it” (stz. 4); *Sharuti tuiyandaye, tangu sasa tuangaliye Tusinene niye mbona yamekuwa haya*, “We must be prepared; from now on we should have a plan, lest we wonder, Why did it turn out this way?” (stz. 6); *Au tutamiza mate na chochote tusipate*, “Otherwise, we will continue longing for it, without getting anything” (stz. 11); *Na tuwe wakakamavu, tukitaka kula mbivu Tukibaki na uzivu, patupu taambuliya*, “Let us be steadfast, so that we may eat ripe fruits.<sup>53</sup> If we remain lazy, we will have nothing to bite” (stz. 12).

Nevertheless, there are lines in which he directly addresses to his audience by means of “you” (*u-*), which is not unusual in contemporary Swahili poetry. Ahmed Nassir, also known by his pen name Ustadh Bhalo, directly addresses the audience in different parts of his poem *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* (Nassir 1979) to achieve – in Kresse’s words – an “increased emotional identification” (Kresse 2007:159). In one of the last stanzas before the poem’s conclusion, Ustadh Mau shifts from the recurrent first person plural *tu-* to the second person singular *u-* (or its negative *hu-*) with a particular admonitory tone, typically found in Mahmoud’s sermons and echoing his role as a teacher.

<sup>53</sup> Allusion to the proverb *Mvumilivu hula mbivu* (A patient person eats ripe fruits).



*Ni kinyang'anyiro hiki, kiwa ziwawa hutaki  
Ng'o! Kitu hushiki, wendo watanang'anyiya*

This is a competition: “first catch, first win”. If you do not like the jostling, you will never get it, but your opponents will fight for it (stz. 14).

While such political and economic issues as the building of a port reinforce how the local lifestyle is under threat, and alarming signs seem to point to doom and decay, other spheres, such as married life, are portrayed as safe shores. In his long poems composed in the *utenzi* form, enumerating the virtues of married life for husband and wife respectively (*Ramani ya Maisha ya Ndowa / kwa mume na kwa mwanamke*, “The map of married life / for the man and for the woman”), marriage is depicted in one of the first stanzas as a floating buoy that will never let you drown if you hold onto it. Still, the word *boya*, the verb *kuzama* (to drown) and the causative of *kuvua* (to save, to rescue), along with the omnipresent *bahari*, convey a maritime imagery. In this composition, the port, *bandari*, represents stability, home and peace; it is portrayed as a safe destination for anchoring (*bandari tasikiliya*): *Boya hili la maisha, kattu halitozamisha / Ashikao tamvusha, bandari tasikiliya*, “This lifebuoy doesn’t sink at all; it will rescue the one who holds onto it, so that s/he reaches the port” (stz. 9; my translation).

## Conclusion

What I find striking about Mahmoud Mau’s life as a poet and his manner of composing poetry is the seriousness and multi-layeredness of his thoughts and compositions. His commitment to everyday social life is mirrored in his poems, in which he constantly feels the urge to talk to his people. If, on the one hand, his poems, be they in *utendi* or *mashairi* verse, have famously been born of specific circumstances, the content of their messages is more universal, since they can always be read as current and useful reminders. The “nice form” of poetry that he refers to is meant to touch the reader’s heart and to make him or her ponder its message.<sup>54</sup> The phrase *kilio hulia mwenye* (the cry/change starts at home) can easily be used as a motto, which is useful to re-

<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the reason why he claims to favor hip hop music, as well as with its goal of conveying a message: *umuhimu ni ujumbe* (see ELLAf).

read and remind one another. In fact, in his compositions, Mahmoud Mau's voice does not hold back from uttering the truth to his people. He rather dares to reproach them, push them and rouse them to action. In this sense, his being a teacher, preacher and poet are intertwined in one unique voice.

In the selected poems featured in this paper, I have attempted to show how much the ocean matters to the poet and how it figures in different ways in his poetry. His community is portrayed as surrounded by its ocean and its port, which are both motifs of home, but on the other hand also pose a threat (to the community). In Mahmoud Mau's poems, *bandari* plays a role in the political and economic landscape of the island and means "home", which every citizen should care of, but also its opposite, a deep-water port. To that end, *bahari* evokes both sweet old memories of safety in his mother's, as well as the panic he felt in the actual water, where he risked drowning.

Still, his lines contain a sense of wisdom about the inevitable flow of life. Everyone will always find his or her own path, high tides and low, as well as tsunamis and lifebuoys. Ustadh reveals himself as a believer in change and development, which for him is an ambivalent but inert principle that nobody can prevent: life changes like the tides.

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