

‘Moyo wangu, nini huzundukani?’: Self and Attention in Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir’s *Al-Inkishafi**

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“*Suu ulimwengu bahari tesi* [This world is a tempestuous sea],” laments the poet Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir (1720-1820) in his poem *Al-Inkishafi*, in which he seeks a stable point in the stormy ocean of historical upheavals. *Al-Inkishafi* has been translated as “The Soul’s Awakening” (Hichens), as self-examination or revelation. Against the backdrop of a depiction of the economic decline of the Pate sultanate at the end of the seventeenth century, the poem dwells on the vanity of earthly life and worldly pleasures and questions the presence of the self in the world and whether the self can withdraw itself from the world in search of a transcendent stable point.

The poem arose in the context of an ongoing poetic discourse along the East African coast, where Sufism and religious asceticism found expression in poetry, and my paper reads it alongside other poems from this period as evidence of the constitution of introspection, interiority, and a new kind of self-consciousness. I will specifically examine the role of attention in this process. In addition to being a cognitive filter that removes confusion and error from thought and ensures the self—a relational construct arising from the interaction of reason, passions, and the world—constructs an adequate intellectual representation of the world, attention acquires ethical and pragmatic connotations in facilitating the self’s resistance to temptation as well as its focus on salvation. It is, effectively, only thanks to attention that the self is able to discriminate both cognitively and morally and, crucially, to maintain agency through exercising control over its desires and actions.

Key words Swahili poetry; Zuhdiyya; Sufi Islam; *Al-Inkishafi*; African philosophy; cogito; Descartes; Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir

1 Introduction

“*Suu ulimwengu bahari tesi* [This world is a tempestuous sea],” laments the poet Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir from Pate (1720-1820) in his poem *Al-Inkishafi*, in which he seeks a stable point in the stormy ocean of historical upheavals. Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir is also the presumable author of *Takhmis ya Lijongo*, a poem built upon the “antithetic values of gentleness and warlike fame” (Gérard 1981: 99).¹ According to Mulokozi (1999), *Al-Inkishafi* was composed around 1800; Hichens (1939) suggests 1810-1820.² As “[o]ne of the finest literary works in Swahili” (Abdulaziz 1996: 421),³ *Al-Inkishafi* has been edited several times (Stigand/Taylor 1915: 73-105; Werner 1927; Hichens 1939; Allen, R. 1946; Harries 1962; Jahadhmy 1975; Allen, J. de V. 1977;

* I first read *Al-Inkishafi* in a seminar taught by Abdilatif Abdalla, in the winter semester 1999/2000 at the University of Leipzig, Germany. The study of this poem and writing an essay in Swahili on the philosophy of *Al-Inkishafi* was my first engagement with what I later called “Afrophone philosophy.” I owe my passion for Swahili literature, and for literatures in African languages in general, to Abdilatif, who truly made me see, feel, and speak about the world in an African language. A first version of this article was presented at the workshop *Virtues of Attention: Global Philosophical Perspectives*, organized at the NYU Abu Dhabi Saadiyat Campus on December 18-19, 2017. I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation to participate in this event.

Knappert 1979; Mlamali 1980; Abdulaziz 1996; Mulokozi 1999; Dittmer 2006) and interpreted diversely as “a Swahili speculum mundi” (Stigand/Taylor 1915: title page), “The Soul’s Awakening” (Hichens 1939: title page), and “Catechism of the Soul” (Allen, J. de V. 1977: title page).⁴ Against the backdrop of a depiction of the economic decline at the end of the seventeenth century of the Pate sultanate, which had been for several centuries a flourishing cultural and commercial city-state located on the Pate Island in East Africa, the poem dwells on the vanity of earthly life and worldly pleasures and questions the presence of the self in the world and whether the self is able to withdraw itself from the world in search of a transcendent stable point.

Using the comparative method to isolate key aspects of the structure of the mind, this article reads the poem as evidence of introspection, the constitution of interiority, and a new kind of self-consciousness in its cultural context. It is here that interiority is talked about and conceptualized for the first time in the history of Swahili scholarship. I will specifically examine the role of attention in this process. In addition to being a cognitive filter that removes confusion and error from thought and ensures “the self” constructs an adequate intellectual representation of the world, attention also acquires ethical and pragmatic connotations in facilitating the self’s resistance to temptation and focus on salvation. It is, effectively, only thanks to attention that “the self” is able to discriminate both cognitively and morally and, crucially, to maintain agency through exercising control over its desires and actions. I will also examine attention’s relationship with “the self” and suggest that “the self” must be seen in *Al-Inkishafi* as a relational construct arising from the interaction of reason, passions, and the world; it is for this reason that I will sometimes use “the self” in inverted commas to indicate its unstable and relationally constituted nature.

2 Ai ulimwengu!⁵

Al-Inkishafi arose in the context of a poetic discourse along the East African coast which gave expression to Sufi religious asceticism. Abdulaziz qualifies it as “a Swahili *zuhdiyya* qasida” (1996: 421). While categorizing the poem in the genre of *qasida* may appear controversial, as *qasidas* are usually literary praises of the Prophet Muhammad and these are altogether absent from *Al-Inkishafi*,⁶ the connection of the poem to *zuhdiyya* (see Sperl’s characterization below) is pertinent. Abdulaziz elaborates:

The author speaks to his heart, *moyo*, which in Swahili culture is the seat of temptation, the abode of Satan himself. The heart is contrasted with *akili* (Arabic *‘aql*) or reason. The Arabic equivalent of the Swahili *moyo* is *nafs* of which the Qur’ān says: ‘The human soul is certainly prone to evil...’ (*Inna’l-nafsā la-ammāratun bi’l-sū’i*, 12:53). Admonition of the *nafs* occurs in many *zuhdiyya* poems as well as other religious *qasidas*. A typical example is al-Būṣīrī’s *Burda*, where warnings against the *nafs* are issued in several lines. (Abdulaziz 1996: 421)

A number of such parenetic poems emphasizing contempt for this world were translated or newly composed around the same time as *Al-Inkishafi*, i.e., in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century; some late examples were composed in the early twentieth century (Vierke 2016).⁷ These include the ancient *Qala Shair al-Muhadhar*, “The Shairi of Muhadhar,” an old poem in the long meter of 14 syllables per line attributed to a poet called Muhadhar or Mudhaffa; three versions of *Ayuba al-Magbururi*, an anonymous lament of 27 stanzas and its two expansions by Bwana Yasini and by Kaim bin Ahmad aka Bwana Ngasho (see Hichens 1939, Appendix D); *Tabaraka* by Mwenye Mansab (ed. Dammann 1960); *Ya Dura Mandhuma*, “Strung Pearls,” by Sayyid Umar bin Amin, the chief kadhi in Siyu on Pate (ed. Werner 1929, Dammann 1940: 328-34; Harries 1953 and 1962: 118-27); *Wajiwaji* (ed. Harries 1950, Dammann 1939); Muhammad Kijumwa’s *AIU* (ed.

Dammann 1980); but also the ancient *Ayi Wangi Wangi* (ed. Knappert 1969); the *utenzi* about Job, *Utendi wa Ayubu* (ed. Allen 1971, Werner 1921-23, cf. Gérard 1976, Parker 1979 regarding its dating); or the translation of *The Burda* by al-Būṣīrī (*Kasida ya Burudai*) (ed. Knappert 1971).⁸ These homiletic verses request that the listener turn away from the world and focus on the *ahera* (the afterworld); they warn against the punishment of Hell and perdition on Judgement Day:

The *zuhdiyya* preaches renunciation of transient, sensual pleasures so that man's soul may remain pure and he may be rewarded with eternal bliss in the hereafter. In order to make man realise that the other world is his true destination, the *zuhdiyya* admonishes him by reminding him of the inevitability of death.... The world (*al-dunyā*) is full of deceit (*ghurūr*) to which man falls victim because of his ignorance (*jahl*). As a result, he goes astray (*dall*), is subject to greed (*hirs*) for wealth and stature, and so humiliates himself (*adballa*) by committing acts of evil (*sharr*). He acquires wealth through the misery of the poor and spends his time in laughter and amusement (*marah*, *ghibṭa*). On the Day of Reckoning he will be cast into hell-fire . . . The one, however, who is not deceived by the temptations of this world, who is satisfied with little (*qunū*), and does not strive to acquire more because he knows that God provides him with all he needs (*riḡq*), is in possession of knowledge (*ilm*) which will guide him (*huda*) to the only righteous life a man can lead: a life of piety in the fear of God (*taqwā*), spent in doing good works (*khayr*). He will triumph in the end (*ḡawṣ*), and leave the "house of impermanence" (*dār al-ḡawāl*) for the "abode of eternity" (*dār al-qarār*). Between the two extremes, between *qunū* and *hirs*, *jahl* and *ilm*, *khayr* and *sharr*, *taqwā* and *marah*, lies the soul of man. An easy prey to sinful passions (*hawā*), it is not strong enough to abandon the world and wavers between sensuous temptation and fear of damnation. Incessantly it must be admonished (*wa'ṣ*) and reminded of death (*tadhkīr*). Sudden eruptions of disaster, sudden painful bereavements, cemetery descriptions, burial scenes, remembrances of the countless numbers who have perished without trace, all go to confront the soul with its inevitable end. (Sperl 1989: 72)⁹

I have quoted this passage at length, because it perfectly captures the spirit of *Al-Inkishafi*. Sperl goes on to point out intertextual links between the Islamic *zuhdiyya* and Christian, Biblical, pre-Biblical, and ancient Babylonian literary works (Sperl 1989: 72) and concludes that "the *zuhdiyyāt* are an Islamic version of a certain kind of wisdom (*hikma*) literature" (Sperl 1989: 72).

The influence of Sufi Islam on Swahili poetry, however, is not limited to religious poetry. Wamitila, among others, argues that it extends to most of Swahili poetry composed in the nineteenth century, generally considered the "classical tradition" of Swahili poetry—a period when poetic forms were already stabilized and the composition of poetry reached a peak in terms of both technical perfection and intellectual quality:

Most of ... poetic texts encode Sufi philosophy in varying ways.... the adherence to Sufi philosophy parallels Kiswahili mystic verse with Hausa. A careful scrutiny of the imagery employed in the bulk of Kiswahili poetry of classical tradition shows a lot of appropriation of Sufi symbolism and philosophy like the swearing by the chin and the pervasive image of a bird flying away seen, for example, in *Al-Inkishafi*. (Wamitila 2001: 21)¹⁰

Next to religious poetry, similar rejections and devaluations of "the world" are found also in secular poems of the *mashairi* type. The renowned Mombasan poet, Muyaka bin Hajji al-Ghassaniy (c. 1776-1840), compares the world to "a dry tree":

Dunia mti mkavu, kiumbe siulemele,
 Ukaufanyia nguvu kuudhabiti kwa ndole;
 Mtiwe ni mtakavu, mara ulikwangushile.
 Usione kwenda mbele, kurudi nyuma si kazi.

*The world is like a dry brittle tree; do not lean on it, you mortal creature.
 Nor should you hold on to it tightly with too firm a grip.
 It is made of rotten wood, and will soon drop you to the ground:
 Do not be too tempted by present good fortune, misfortune may come any time.*

*(Lit. You may be finding yourselves moving forward now, but going back is a most easy thing to happen.)
 (Abdulaziz 1996: 63, translation Abdulaziz's)¹¹*

In another poem, he laments: *Ai, ulimwengu jifa*, “Oh, the world is a big chasm” (Abdulaziz 1996: 94 and 137).¹² He warns: *Ulimwengu siungie*, “Don’t throw yourself into the world” (Abdulaziz 1996: 258), and he also suggests the world is overwhelming for humans to deal with: *Ulimwengu ni mkuu*, “The world is too large” (Abdulaziz 1996: 258).

The poet Ali bin Athmani from Pate, known as Ali Koti (1820-1895), explains that the world is deceptive, because it turns around: *Dunia imezunguka . . . Walo yuu huporomoka, wala [sic] tini benda yuu*, “The world has turned . . . Those who are up are thrown down, those who are down rise” (Harries 1964: 58, my translation; the word *wala* is read as *walo* by Harries when he translates it into modern Swahili as *walio*—an obvious reading given the figure of parallelism here).¹³

Even contemporary poets subscribe to this ethos. Ahmad Nassir (1936-2019) points out the deceptive, unreliable nature of the world: *Dunia kama kinyonga, leo hivi kesho vile*, “The world is like a chameleon, today this way and tomorrow that” (Nassir 1966: 62-3, transl. Lyndon Harries).¹⁴ The world is not only deceptive, but also inferior: *Dunia kitu dhaiju*, “The world is a weak thing” (Nassir 1966: 72-3, transl. Lyndon Harries) and it has many evils: *Ulimwengu baa zake ni nyingi zakueleya*, “The evils of the world are many and you know them” (Nassir 1966: 66-7, transl. Lyndon Harries). Therefore, Nassir advises: *tabadhari na dunia*, “beware of the world” (Nassir 1966: 66-7, transl. Lyndon Harries). Contextualizing the changing nature of the world in Tanzanian post-independence politics, Mathias Mnyampala inserts an enigmatic poem called “Ulimwengu una nguo?” in his collection of otherwise quite straightforward propaganda of socialism in dialogic verse (Mnyampala 1970; see also Rettová 2016).¹⁵ The poem refers to the changes of the world as changing “clothes”: the fearsome darkness of the night opposed to the clarity of daylight.

This poetic imagery has been taken up by Swahili novelists, who quote or paraphrase such statements about the world in the titles of their novels. Said Ahmed Mohamed’s *Dunia Mti Mkavu* (The world is a dry tree, 1980), set during the 1948 dock strike in Zanzibar, uses the verse from Muyaka to express despair over the situation of the Zanzibari poor. Hammie Rajab’s *Dunia Hadaa* (The world is deceptive, 1982) deals with marital infidelity, as does the novel of the same name by Catherine N. M. Kisovi (2007); here the deception of the world is embodied in “people” who mistreat those who trust the “world.” Euphrase Kezilahabi’s *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (The world is an arena of chaos, 1975) uses the figure of the deceptive world to critique Tanzanian socialism: its manifesto, the Arusha Declaration, brought about an abrupt change of rules by which the game of life was played in Tanzania, the casualties of this upheaval being honest and hard-working citizens.¹⁶

3 *Dunia* (“The World”), *Ahera* (“The Beyond, The Afterworld”), *na Moyo* (“Heart”): A Close Reading of *Al-Inkishafi*

The homilies concentrate on *ahera* while *mashairi* and the novels concentrate on *dunia*—but both with a negative attitude to the latter: all three genres devalue the world and advise the human being to abstain from investing him/herself in it. Yet, neither of these groups of texts concentrates on the interface between *dunia* and *ahera*: on the subject of experience and agency, the self, connected to the world through *moyo* (“heart”), *roho* (“soul”), or *nafsi* (“self, soul”), although only the first two are used in *Al-Inkishafi*, and *roho* only once (see below, see also endnote 23). It is in this feature that *Al-Inkishafi* distinguishes itself. While *Al-Inkishafi* devalues the world as the other parenetic poems do, it also goes into unprecedented detail in its portrayal of the inner sphere and its interactions with “the world.” In the poet’s dialogue with his *moyo*, the poem constructs the landscapes of the soul. It is in this era, in this genre—and, we can say, in this poem—that interiority and subjectivity are constituted and conceptualized in Swahili culture, with profound implications on all subsequent attempts at theorizing the inner sphere.

Through a careful reading of the poem, I would like to show that it is attention that is key to the *moyo*’s capacity to resist the world’s temptation and to not stray from the virtuous path, and is thus instrumental to salvation. Attention becomes the proverbial Archimedes’ point that can “move the world” and is indeed constitutive of selfhood. This “self” is a much less stable point than Descartes’s *cogito*, precisely because attention is a relational faculty: it is what ties the capricious and desire-ridden *moyo* to its wakefulness and cognitive discrimination and what establishes its agency.

But I first need to show how the inner sphere is constructed in the poem. I will employ a comparative method to do this. Several philosophers in different regions of the world were addressing questions about reason, emotions, and the self in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Zera Yacob (1599–1692) in Ethiopia, Ioannes Amos Comenius (1592–1670) in Bohemia, and René Descartes (1596–1650) in France. A relative late-comer to this discourse, *Al-Inkishafi* articulates these same concerns and offers itself to a number of interesting comparative readings. Considerable comparative research is already in existence (cf. Kiros 1998, who compares Zera Yacob and Descartes, while Patočka 1997–2003 presents extensive comparisons of the work of Comenius with Descartes and other European philosophers).¹⁷ My comparative work strives to insert African thinkers and texts, such as *Al-Inkishafi*, into these comparisons.¹⁸ Some of the comparisons address the thematic or conceptual similarities between the thinkers, where interesting parallels can also be drawn with Hindu and Buddhist intellectual traditions, but some also interrogate historical relationships and influences, as for instance the impact of the common cultural stock that both Christianity and Islam draw on as well as the histories of translation and appropriation between European and Middle Eastern philosophies (cf. Götz 2003).¹⁹

In this article, I will use René Descartes’s (1596–1650) *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641) as a lead to tease out the elements of the constitution of interiority in *Al-Inkishafi*. The French philosopher, in his despair at the unreliable senses, launched his project of universal doubt to arrive at the previously uncharted territory of the *cogito*. Through this, he became the most prominent philosopher of the European Enlightenment and the celebrated predecessor of phenomenology. It is for these qualities that Descartes’s work is used in this comparison: his reasoning has provided, as it were, reference points for philosophers interrogating the nature of the human mind and of subjective experience. Whether their own analyses concur with or depart from Descartes, these reference points constitute recognizable milestones in their reasoning. A reading of Sayyid Abdallah’s poem with these reference points in view facilitates a departure from the existing readings of the poem as either an expression of *zuhdiyya* or a testimony of disruptive historical change (Vierke 2016), and motivates an interrogation of this text as an exploration of the human mind.

Sayyid Abdallah's procedure in *Al-Inkishafi* is strikingly similar to Descartes's reasoning in some aspects, yet dramatically different in others. My comparative reading will help elucidate the constitution of the inner sphere in the poem and the role of attention as both a cognitive filter to stay on the alert and ward off incorrect knowledge, as it functions in Descartes, and the facilitator of agency of the human being in the world, enabling the human being to resist the snares of the world's pleasures and be capable of action and move along on the path towards salvation and afterlife.

For both Descartes and Sayyid Abdallah, it is the experience of historical change and of impermanence of the outside world that prompts them to search for stability in oneself and in one's capacity for transcendence. In this process a "self" is constructed in opposition to the "world." For Descartes, the "self" is identified with *res cogitans*, "res cogitans, id est, mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio" ("a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason" AT VII: 27, CSM II: 18).²⁰ For Sayyid Abdallah, the poet embodies the voice of reason (*akili*; this word does not appear in *Al-Inkishafi* but is part of the vocabulary of Swahili Sufi Islam, cf. Abdulaziz's quotation above), while his interlocutor is addressed as *moyo* ("heart") or *robo* ("soul"). *Moyo* is the source of energy, the foundation of human agency; it is also an instance swayed by passions. Yet, it has a measure of control and can be advised to resist its inclinations by *akili*. The "self," then, is a relational construct established by the interaction of *akili* and *moyo*. As for Descartes, for Sayyid Abdallah the body is not part of the self. It is not even considered separately—it simply follows the self's commands.

Both thinkers start from the *realization of false beliefs*. Descartes introduces his first meditation: "Animadverti jam ante aliquot annos quàm multa, ineunte aetate, falsa pro veris admiserim, et quàm dubia sint quaecunque istis postea superextruxi..." ("Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them..." AT VII: 17, CSM II: 12). Sayyid Abdallah affirms that "the world has deceitful ways":

Moyo wangu, nini huzundukani!

Likughurielo, hela, ni n'ni?
Hunelezi nami kalibaini,
liwapo na sura nisikataye?

Moyo wangu nini huitabiri!
Twambe u mwelevu wa kukhitari
Huyui dunia ina ghururi?
Ndia za tatasi huzandamaye?
(st. 11-12)²¹

*My heart, why do you not wake up?
What is it that deceives you?
Tell me so that I can also understand it
Is it so compelling that I also cannot refuse it?*²²

*My heart, why can you not look ahead?
You are intelligent enough to discriminate
Do you not know that the world has deceitful ways?
How can you then follow its entangled paths?*

For Sayyid Abdallah, this deceit is Satan's work:

. . . penda kuuonya na moyo wangu
 Utetwe ni hawa ya ulimwengu
 Hila za Rajimi ziughuriye
 (st. 10)

*Let me now admonish my heart
 Caught by the world's lusts
 Deceived by Satan's intrigues*

In falling for the world's temptations, *moyo* becomes like Satan:

Ewe, moyo, enda sijida yake.
 Helal! Tafadhali unabihike,
 Shetani Rajimi asikuteke,
 kesho kakuona kuwa kamaye.
 (st. 30)

*My heart, prostrate yourself before Him,
 Be mindful,
 Do not let Satan capture you,
 Do not become like him.*

The supernatural is integral also to Descartes's argument in the form of the hypothesis of "genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summe potentem & callidum" ("some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning" AT VII: 22, CSM II: 15). The thinker swears that: "putabo coelum, aërem, terram, colores, figuras, sonos, cunctaque externa nihil aliud esse quàm ludificationes somniorum, quibus insidias credulitati meae tetendit" ("I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he had devised to ensnare my judgement" AT VII: 22, CSM II: 15).

Descartes declares the senses as unreliable: "Nempe quidquid hactenus ut maxime verum admisi, vel a sensibus, vel per sensus accepi; hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiae est nunquam illis plane confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt" ("Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once" AT VII: 18, CSM II: 12). To help himself detach his judgement from his sensual experience, he introduces the hypothesis that he is dreaming: "Age ergo somniemus, nec particularia ista vera sint, nos oculos aperire, caput movere, manus extendere, nec forte etiam nos habere tales manus, nec tale totum corpus" ("Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars—that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands—are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all" AT VII: 19, CSM II: 13). Similarly, Sayyid Abdallah deplors the illusory nature of the world (st. 13-17); it is likened to a mirage, and control over it is illusory (st. 21-25). Governed by impermanence, it is like a "lantern in the wind":

Nisikia sana nikwambiapo,
 Roho, enga taa katika pepo,
 Haiziwiliki izimikapo,
 saa moja hwona izimishiye!
 (st. 28)

*Listen carefully when I talk to you,
Soul, observe a lantern in the wind,²³
Inevitably it is extinguished,
In one moment you see it has been put out!*

Moreover, the world is full of evil and suffering:

Khasaisi zote na makatayo,
shida na shakawa likupeteyo,
Ni dunia sii uipendayo,
yenye dhuli nyingi na makataye.
(st. 18)

*All evil and your grief,
Trouble and pain that befall you,
That is this world that you love,
That has so much oppression and calamity.*

Descartes reduces the external world to *res extensa*: “*extensum quid, flexibile, mutabile*” (“*something extended, flexible, and changeable*” AT VII: 31, CSM II: 20), which can only be known through the mind: “*ipsamet corpora, non proprie a sensibus, vel ab imaginandi facultate, sed a solo intellectu percipi, nec ex eo percipi quòd tangerentur aut viderentur, sed tantum ex eo quod intelligantur*” (“*even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone . . . this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood*” AT VII: 34, CSM II: 22). Realizing the world’s deception, impermanence, and evil, Sayyid Abdallah sweepingly devalues the world: it is entirely worthless, likened to a “rotten carrion”:

Dunia ni jifa siikaribu.
Haipendi mtu ila kilabu.
I hali gani ewe, labibu,
kuwania na mbwa hutukizwaye?
(st. 19)

*The world is a rotten carrion,
No person only a dog wants it,
How could you, wise as you are,
Fight for it with a detestable dog?*

Desiring and being swayed by the world’s whims is a “folly” which, eventually, compromises eternal life:

**Zituko zingapi hutanabahi,
ukanabihika hukunabihi,
Utaata lini ya usafihi?
Nambia ukomo niusikiye.**

Hiki, ewe moyo, kievu changu,
hukengeukii nusuha yangu.
Huza akherayo kwa ulimwengu,
ya kuliwa bangu ukhitariye.

(st. 26-27)

*So many signs, yet you are not mindful
You were warned, yet you did not take the warning,
When will you stop this folly,
Tell me where the end of it is?*

*By my beard, listen my heart,
You do not heed my counsel,
How could you sell your eternal life for the world,
Allowing yourself to be deceived?*

The world offers no stable point. It is impossible to reach stability through the world:

Suu ulimwengu uutakao,
emale ni lipi upendeyao?
Hauna dawamu hudumu nao,
umilikishwapo wautendaye?
(st. 31)

*This world that you so desire,
What good does it have that you so love?
It does not last, nor will you.
What would you do if you were given power over it?*

The impossibility of stability within the world is accentuated with examples of rulers and their riches (in st. 32-43); no matter how powerful and rich these people were, they still were destroyed through death (st. 44-54). Finally, also the poet's—the "self's"—ancestors and immediate family, evoked in stanzas 56-64, were consumed by death:

Sasa, moyo, pako tauza nawe,
Nelezato sana, nami nelewe,
Wawapi wazazi wakuzaawe?
Nambia walipo, kawamkiye.
(st. 56)

*Now, my heart, I will ask you,
Explain it well to me so that I also know,
Where are the ancestors that gave birth to you?
Tell me where they are so that I can greet them.*

Similarly to these people, the "self" has no "stable point to hold on to":

Moyo, ya kwambia ya watu sao,
kalamu ya Mungu iwapeteo,
Nawe, wa yakini, kuwa kamao,
au una yako uyashishiye?
(st. 64)

My heart, look at those people,

*God's pen sealed their fates,
You too will succumb,
Or do you have a stable point to hold on to?*

Like Sayyid Abdallah, Descartes fails to find a stable point in the world. However, for him the stable point is found in the terrain of interiority, in the *cogito*: “Nihil nisi punctum petebat Archimedes, quod esset firmum & immobile, ut integram terram loco dimoveret; magna quoque speranda sunt, si vel minimum quid invenero quod certum sit & inconcussum” (“*Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable*” AT VII: 24, CSM II: 16). This stable point is resistant to all assaults from the side of the malicious demon or from the unreliable senses: “[deceptor summe potens] nunquam tamen efficiet, ut nihil sim quamdiu me aliquid esse cogitabo. Adeo ut, omnibus satis superque pensitatis, denique statuendum sit hoc pronuntiatum, Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum” (“*[a deceiver of supreme power] will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind*” AT VII: 25, CSM II: 17). And Descartes concludes: “Sed quid igitur sum? Res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, & sentiens” (“*But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions*” AT VII: 28, CSM II: 19). Self is identified with the thinking activity, which to Descartes is seated in the mind. Descartes identifies the “thing that thinks” with “mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio” (“*a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason*” AT VII: 27, CSM II: 18). The “thinking thing,” *res cogitans*, is transcendent to this world; it is another “substance” altogether from the substance of the world, *res extensa*, and thus also totally unrelated to the body. Likewise, Sayyid Abdallah finds stability through transcendence, but it is the transcendence of the Beyond, accessed on Judgment Day (st. 66-77). This stable point is expressed here through the word *baki*, which in Swahili means “right, justice” or “righteousness,” but in Islamic discourse more specifically “truth” or “God.” It is religion that is the only stable and reliable support of human worldly existence:

Moyo, taadabu, sipeketeke,
ata ya jauri, **haki ushike**.
Wendo wachokoka nawe wokoke,
Moto wa Jahimu usikutwaye.
(st. 65)

*My heart, behave yourself, abandon your pride,
Hold on to the truth,
So that you may also be saved,
And escape hell fire.*

Descartes, too, eventually takes recourse to God as the ultimate source of stability and truth. The idea of perfection in *cogito* cannot originate in the imperfect human being and is evidence of the existence of its origin. Having established God's existence through this ontological argument, Descartes explains that God is perfect, and since non-existence and evil are imperfection, therefore God exists and is benevolent. A benevolent God would not deceive, and thus God is the ultimate warrant of truthful knowledge.

4 Moyo wangu, nini huzundukani! Self and attention

Introspective religious poetry contributed to the conceptualization, or indeed, constitution of the interior sphere, of consciousness, and of the subjective mind in Swahili culture. Attention is instrumental in this process. In *Al-Inkishafi*, “attention” is expressed through words like *kuzundukana* (st. 10)—“be awake from sleep” (Hichens 1939: 181)—and *kunabibi* (or in the stative form, *kutanababi*) (st. 26)—“be mindful, take heed, take warning” (Hichens 1939: 171). The poet reproaches his heart: *Moyo wangu, nini huzundukani?* (st. 11) (“My heart, why do you not wake up?”). And again: *Zituko zingapi hutababi, / ukanabihika hukunabibi* (st. 26) (“So many signs, yet you are not mindful / You were warned, yet you did not take the warning”). Another word, although not one used in *Al-Inkishafi*, is *kutabadhari* (“take care, be on the alert, beware”) (cf. Nassir’s poem above: *tabadhari na dunia*, “beware of the world”).

The heart is, again and again, admonished to “be on the alert” (*kunabihika*):

Moyo, huyatasa kunabihika,
zituko zingapo huyaidhika?
Hata masakizi ya kupulika,
naona kwa haya yafuatiye.
(st. 55)

*Heart, you are still not mindful
Although the signs are clear, you still have not followed the advice?
You do have ears to listen,
To what I have to say next.*

The word *kuzundukana*, or in contemporary Swahili, *kuzinduka(na)*, has a number of cognates and synonyms in Swahili which bear the meaning of spiritual, but also political, awakening. In his philosophical poem, *Utenzi wa mtu ni utu*, Ahmad Nassir includes a section called “Zinduka” (“Wake up”)²⁴ which, with clear intertextual references to *Al-Inkishafi*, through powerful imagery exposes the impermanence and degradation of all beauty in this world; on account of this, it advises its readers to follow religion. The political meaning was especially prominent in the era of *ujamaa*, Tanzanian socialism. *Ujamaa* was characterized as *zinduko* (Lesso 1972) and *mwamko* (Honero, Sengo, and Ngole 1980) (both mean “awakening, waking up”), and political poetry was seen as *uzindushi* (“that which wakes you up”). The new era *ulivazindua* (“woke up”) even hitherto inactive persons (Mulokozi 1977: 2).²⁵ The concept also has moral and philosophical overtones and is strongly reminiscent of Kant’s “awakening from dogmatic slumber,” or even of “enlightenment”—not in the sense of gaining extra-rational inspiration and insight but in the sense of becoming fully aware, of waking up to reality. Also in the neighbouring Kenya, Abdilatif Abdalla wrote an emphatic poem with the title “Zindukani” (“Wake up (pl.)”), where he presents to his fellow citizens—in particular the coastal Swahili Muslims in Kenya—a very harsh and incisive call to action:

Muzowele kubwagaza, na kungoja majaliwa
Viungo mumviviza, hamutaki jisumbuwa
Hamuna munaloweza, mwataka ya kufanyiwa
Daima tutapwelewa, jamani amshanani
(Abdalla 1973: 69)²⁶

*You are used to idleness and waiting for blessings
 You stunt your limbs, you could not be bothered
 There is nothing you can do, you want things to be done for you
 We will always be stranded, my friends, wake up*
 (My translation)

Nyaigotti-Chacha summarizes the poem: “Kama daktari aliyepima damu, anawazindua kwa kuwafahamisha kuwa ugonjwa wao ni uzembe” (1992: 82, “Like a doctor upon examination, he wakes them up by letting them know that their illness is laziness,” my translation).²⁷

Attention—*kunabihika*—separates *mojo* from its passions and desires; it makes it self-reflexive and operates its agency—its ability to control itself in resisting the world’s temptations. Attention in fact constitutes “the self,” or what could be called a “self” (it is not isolated and conceptualized in the poem itself). Self-control and self-consciousness are triggered by attending to the presence of the world’s temptations and to the perception of their impermanence and deceptiveness. “The self” is then the intersection of *mojo*’s spontaneous, unreflected existence and energy, which establishes its capacity for agency, and reason (*akili*), which is represented through the poet’s persona: the advisor and voice of reason. The self is thus an unsubstantive, relational instance operating the inner sphere: the intermediary between passions, reason, and the world as the source of temptation.

5 Conclusion

With over twenty missing stanzas (cf. Hichens 1939; Abdulaziz 1996), *Al-Inkishafi* is an unfinished poem, which iconically expresses its focus on fragmentation, incompleteness, loss, and degradation. The irreversible change, the fall of the Pate sultanate, was an experience of impermanence which led to the construction of the sphere of interiority as a source of stability, grounded on religion. The self withdraws, abstains from desire and from action in the world, and instead relates to *baki*—justice, righteousness, truth, transcendence. In withdrawal, human agency is realized, perhaps paradoxically, through *passivity in the world*. Since religion is seen as constitutive of humanity in the traditional Swahili cultural philosophy of *utu* (Rettová 2007),²⁸ the world is perceived as an obstacle to piety and, consequently, to the achievement of such normative humanity, located outside of the world, in the Beyond, which the human being can achieve through salvation.

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¹ Albert S. Gérard, *African Language Literatures. An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981).

² M. M. Mulokozi, *Tenzi tatu za kale (Fumo Lijongo, Al-Inkishafi, Mwanakupona)* (Dar es Salaam: TUKI, 1999); William Hichens, *Al-Inkishafi: The Soul’s Awakening* (London: Sheldon Press, 1939).

- 3 M. H. Abdulaziz, "The Influence of the Qasida on the Development of Swahili Rhymed and Metred Verse," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa. Volume One: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, ed. Stefan Sperl, and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 411–28.
- 4 C. H. Stigand, *A Grammar of Dialectic Changes in the Kiswahili Language. With an introduction and a recension and a poetical translation of the poem, Inkishafi, a Swahili speculum mundi by W.E. Taylor* (Cambridge: University Press, 1915); Alice Werner, "Some Missing Stanzas from the Northern Version of the Inkishafi Poem," *Zeitschrift für Eingeborenen-Sprachen* 17 (1927): 291–4; Hichens (1939); Roland Allen, "Inkishafi—a translation from Swahili," *African Studies* 5/4 (1946): 243–9; ed. Lyndon Harries, *Swahili Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); ed. Ali A. Jahadhmy, *Kusanyiko la Mashairi. Anthology of Swahili Poetry* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975); James de Vere Allen, *Al-Inkishafi: Catechism of a Soul. Composer: Sayyid Abdalla bin Ali Nasir. With a Translation and Notes by James de Vere Allen* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1977); Jan Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse. A Literary History and Anthology* (London & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1979, Reprint London: Darf, 1988); Muhamadi wa Mlamali, *Ikisiri ya Inkishafi. Composer Sayyid Abdalla A. Nasiri* (Nairobi: Longman, 1980); ed. and transl. M. H. Abdulaziz, *Al-Inkishafi*. In *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa. Volume Two: Eulogy's Bounty, Meaning's Abundance. An Anthology*, ed. Stefan Sperl, and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 338–57; Mulokozi (1999); Clarissa Dittmer, "Inkishafi kwa mara nyingine: erste Schritte zu einer neuen Textedition," in *Zwischen Bantu und Burkina. Festschrift für Gudrun Miebe zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Kerstin Winkelmann and Dymitr Ibriszimow (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2006), 23–44.
- 5 "Ah, the world!" The word "ai" carries connotations of exasperation, and "ai ulimwengu!" is an exclamation often used in Swahili literary works, especially poems, to deplore the human situation in the world.
- 6 It is true that the term *qasida* has in many Islamic cultures become an umbrella concept for various types of religious poetry, as Sperl and Shackle's two-volume work well attests. See ed. Stefan Sperl, and Christopher Shackle, *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa. Volume One: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings, Volume Two: Eulogy's Bounty, Meaning's Abundance. An Anthology* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). In particular, the Swahili *qasida* has recently acquired multiple and varied functions: see Aisha Schmitt, "Beyond Praising the Prophet: Making New Meanings in Zanzibari Qasida," Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, SOAS (University of London, 2012).
- 7 Clarissa Vierke, "From Across the Ocean: Considering Travelling Literary Figurations as Part of Swahili Intellectual History," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2016): 225–40.
- 8 Hichens (1939); Ernst Dammann, "Die paränetische Suaheli-Dichtung Tabaraka," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 7, no. 3 (1960): 411–32; Alice Werner, "An Alphabetical Acrostic in a Northern Dialect of Swahili," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 5 (1929): 561–9. doi: 10.1017/S0041977X0008472X; Ernst Dammann, *Dichtungen in der Lamu-Mundart des Suaheli: Gesammelt, herausgegeben und übersetzt von Ernst Dammann* (Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter, 1940), 328–34; Lyndon Harries, "Strung Pearls. A Poem from the Swahili-Arabic Text," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 (1953): 146–56. doi: 10.1017/S0041977X00087310; Harries (1962: 118–27); Lyndon Harries, "A Poem from Siu from the Swahili-Arabic Text," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13, no. 3 (1950): 759–70; Ernst Dammann, "Eine Suaheli-Dichtung mit alphabetischer Akrostichis," *Mitteilungen der Auslandsbochschule an der Universität Berlin (III)* 42, no. 3 (1939): 158–69; Ernst Dammann, "Eine paränetische Akrostichis im Suaheli des Scheichs Muhammad bin Abubekr bin Omar Kidjumwa Masihii," *Afrika und Übersee* 63 (1980): 131–45; Jan Knappert, "The Discovery of a Lost Swahili Manuscript from the Eighteenth Century," *African Language Studies* 10 (1969): 1–30; J. W. T. Allen, *Tendi. Six Examples of a Swahili Classical Verse Form. With Translation and Notes* (London: Heinemann & New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 370–427; Alice Werner, "Utendi wa Ayubu," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 2/1, 2/2, 2/3 (1921–23): 85–115, 297–320, 347–416; Albert S. Gérard, "Structure and Value in Three Swahili Epics," *Research in African Literatures* 7, vol. 1 (1976): 7–22; C. A. Parker, "On the Dating of Utendi

wa Ayubu,” *Research in African Literatures* 1, vol. 3 (1979): 380-2; Jan Knappert, *Swahili Islamic Poetry* (Leiden: Heinemann, 1971).

These poems were composed in several genres, including the very common *utenzi* or *utendi* (pl. *tenzi/tendi*), a long narrative poem composed of 32-syllable stanzas divided into four rhyming lines. Many of the religious *qasida* are composed in *ukawafi*, a form with 15 syllables per line and two to five lines per stanza. A form used more rarely in religious poetry is *shairi* (pl. *mashairi*); *mashairi* are usually shorter poems, often secular, sometimes with didactic or philosophical contents, and their stanzas have four 16-syllable lines divided into rhyming couplets.

- 9 Stefan Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry. A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts (3rd century AH/9th - 5th century AH/11th century AD)* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 10 Kyallo W. Wamitila, *Archetypal Criticism of Kiswahili Poetry. With Special Reference to Fumo Liyongo*. (Bayreuth: Eckhart Breiting, Universität Bayreuth, 2001).
- 11 M. H. Abdulaziz, *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979).
- 12 As Abdulaziz points out in footnote 96, *jifa* has two meanings and Muyaka is playing with this ambiguity here: on the one hand, it can mean *ufa mkubwa*, “chasm,” on the other hand, it is a loan word from Arabic, meaning “carion, rotting body.” The latter is an exceedingly common figure in Swahili poetry: the world is compared to a rotten corpse, as in stanza 19 in *Al-Inkishafi: dunia ni jifa*, “the world is a rotten carion.” The master of polysemy, Muyaka, adds an additional tension to this figure through reading *jifa* as the augmentative of *ufa* (“crack”).
- 13 Lyndon Harries, “Dunia imezunguka. Mashairi ya Sh. Ali Koti. Yamehaririwa na Lyndon Harries,” *Swahili* 34, vol. 2 (1964): 56-9.
- 14 Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, *Poems from Kenya. Gnostic Verses in Swahili by Ahmad Nassir bin Juma Bhalo*, ed. and transl. Lyndon Harries (Madison, Milwaukee, & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).
- 15 Mathias E. Mnyampala, *Ngonjera za UKUTA. Kitabu cha kwanza* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1970); Alena Rettová, “A Solitary War? Genre, Community and Philosophy in Swahili Culture,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (special issue on African philosophy, ed. Alena Rettová) 28, vol. 2 (2016): 209-24.
- 16 Said Ahmed Mohamed, *Dunia Mti Mkavu* (Nairobi: Longman Kenya, 1980); Hammie Rajab, *Dunia Hadaa* (Dar es Salaam: Busara Publications, 1982); Catherine N. M. Kisovi, *Dunia Hadaa* (Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2007); Euphrase Kezilahabi, *Dunia Uwanja wa Fuyo* (Vide~Muwa Publishers, 2007 [1975]).
- 17 Teodoros Kiros, “The Meditations of Zara Yaqub. Paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy” (Boston, Massachusetts, 10-15 August 1998 <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriKiro.htm>); Jan Patočka, *Komeniologické studie I-III* (Praha: Oikoymenh, 1997-2003). Another scholar working extensively on Zera Yacob is Claude Sumner; because of the nature of the script used to write Ge’ez, Zera Yacob’s name has multiple transcriptions.
- 18 Rettová (forthcoming) interprets the work of Comenius and *Al-Inkishafi* as “two examples of epistemologies situated outside the central narrative of Western philosophy, both departing from a ‘modern’ experience of rupture and destabilization of received values and opinions” and sees these as seeds of independent epistemological traditions respectively in East Africa and in Central Europe: “The potential of epistemological resistance to the deplored Eurocentrism of worldwide scholarship and to the hegemony of Western Europe and North America in knowledge production becomes explicit in later ramifications of such local discursive traditions.” See Alena Rettová, “Introduction,” in *Recentring Knowledge: Exploring the Epistemological Implications of Alternative Developments towards Modernity in Eastern and Central Africa and in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited volume (provisional title, forthcoming).

- 19 Ignacio L. Götz, “The Quest for Certainty: al-Ghazâlî and Descartes,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28, no. 3 (2003): 1-22.
- 20 All quotations from Descartes are from *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam & P. Tannery (Paris: 1897–1910 and 1964–1978; Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1996). I use the abbreviation [AT] for this edition; references are to volume and page number. The abbreviation [CSM] refers to the standard translation of Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, v. I, II, transl. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, & D. Murdoch, and v. III, transl. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, & A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1985, 1991). References are to volume and page number.
- 21 *Al-Inkishafi* is cited and the stanzas are counted following Hichens’s edition (1939). Emphasis in bold type is mine.
- 22 For the purpose of a philosophical analysis, I have considered it necessary to use my own, literal translation. I have, however, consulted the existing translations of the poem, in particular the very accurate one by Abdulaziz (1996) and the ones by Roland Allen (1946) and by James de Vere Allen (1977). Hichens (1939) uses a rhymed translation in verse, which sometimes obscures the meaning. I have further consulted the explanations of difficult words included in Mulokozi’s edition (1999). I have also been instructed about the meanings of some words by Abdilatif Abdalla both during his teaching at the University of Leipzig (winter semester 1999/2000) and during multiple discussions afterwards.
- 23 This is how all the existing translations understand this place. It is a legitimate reading as the poem was written down in Arabic script (as all old Swahili poetry was), and Arabic script poses several obstacles to a successful transcription: firstly, it has no grapheme ⟨e⟩, so ⟨i⟩ was used to render the phonemes /e/ as well as /i/; secondly, word boundaries are usually not indicated; and thirdly, commas are not used. Additionally, the Swahili poetic register consists of numerous archaisms and has a licence to mix Swahili dialects. Transcription and translation of old Swahili poetry therefore remain partly guesswork, despite the editor’s proficiency. This means that this line could also be read *roho i nga taa katika pepo*, “the soul is like a lantern in the wind.” This reading would offer itself also because this stanza 28 is in a sequence of stanzas that introduce death as a principle of the world’s impermanence. This alternative reading could effectuate an interesting twist in the philosophical understanding the soul’s transcendent nature with respect to the world, its immortality or the question of its salvation. It could also lead to a terminological distinction in *Al-Inkishafi* between *mojo* “heart” as the poet’s interlocutor, the seat of agency, and *roho* “soul” as the principle animating the body. On this reading, “soul” would remain bound to the mortal body and its worldly existence while “heart” would come close to what could be termed the “subject” or the agency constituting the “self.” I thank Abdilatif Abdalla for confirming this reading of the line to me and for allowing me to consult several expressions in the translation with him.
- 24 Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*, ed. Mohamed Kamal Khan (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979).
- 25 Zuberi Hamadi Lesso, *Utenzi wa Zinduko la Ujamaa* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1972); L. N. Honero, T. Y. Sengo, and S. Y. Ngole, *Matunda ya Azimio. Mashairi ya Mwamko wa Siasa* (Dar es Salaam: TUKI, 1980); M. M. Mulokozi, “Ushairi na Ukasuku,” *Kiswahili* 47, vol. 2 (1977): 1-18.
- 26 Abdilatif Abdalla, *Sauti ya Dhiki* (Nairobi, Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 27 Chacha Nyaigotti-Chacha, *Sauti ya utetezi. Ushairi wa Abdilatif Abdalla* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1993).
- 28 Alena Rettová, “*Lidství ni Utu? Ubinadamu baina ya Tamaduni*,” *Swahili Forum* 14 (2007): 89-134. <https://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A11684/zip/>