

Kifusi: Towards an Ethnography of Rubble*

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Abstract

In this work I talk about matter. In understanding the urban and its practices, I am concerned with the power of affect and memory, and here with the agency of the matter out of which they are built. Thinking through Mohamed Ghassani's poetry, Abdul Sheriff's historical knowledge and moved by the recent collapse of the House of Wonders in the Old Town of Zanzibar, I look at matter, and particularly rubble, as an actor in material-discursive practices (Barad 2007), and not just as the terrain of action. I look at rubble not as a component of 'ruins' but as active and present contemporary matter, the analysis of which discloses complexities that are, otherwise, simplified, invisible indeed, and, when addressed, run the risk of reifying and reproducing dangerous dichotomies and categorizations (Barad 2003). Looking at rubble as presently communicative restores agency to those humans and things who are constantly and regularly silenced because considered predetermined to their relations, and thus rendered fixed and unchangeable. The article eventually suggests that an ethnography of rubble can translate the plurality of invisible urbans, in response to the need to recalibrate urban studies away from "the stories that the West tells about itself" (Roy 2019) and toward ontological and epistemological justice.

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On Christmas morning, I woke up late, very late. I had had a beautiful eve with my kids, eating, playing, and watching movies until late into the night, forgetting, at least for a moment, that this year we could not join my mum and the rest of my family in Italy. I was drinking my coffee while reading the news on my mobile. And, as I had become accustomed to doing over the last several years, I was checking my social networks to get the information I knew I would never read on mainstream media. To my astonishment, my Twitter account was exploding with posts about Zanzibar: Beit-al-Ajaib – Jumba la Maajabu, known in English as the House of Wonders, had just fallen, under the eyes – and the cameras – of the world.

Reading the posts, I could feel the sense of loss, the mourning, not only for the palace itself, but, importantly, for the cultural and historical grandeur to which it was attached, the pride of Zanzibar and Zanzibaris since its building in the 1880s. Wonders indeed were the many ‘modernities’ the third al-Busaidi sultan Seyyid Barghash brought into that House, onto Zanzibar, the city and his own reign.¹ At the time, the islands were a very wealthy nation, and Barghash, sometimes deemed frivolous, was easily attracted by beautiful objects and innovative tools. He was deeply in love with the material cultures of the world (Meier 2018), was not stingy in imagining and realizing an oeuvre which was destined to (in)scribe the history of the East African Coast through urban design. The House of Wonders was the most impressive of all his works, enacting “a vision of Zanzibar’s profound centrality in the world. Its symbolic and material fabric sits at the intersection of multiple ways of marking territory and claiming place” (Meier 2016: 138). The palace sat at this intersection not only because of its siting on the city’s waterfront, but for the many claims to space exerted by the various powers which ruled from within its walls and atop its verandas (Myers 2003, De Boeck & Baloji 2016), powers exerted on Zanzibari lives and displayed in the building’s very architecture.

I remember entering the House of Wonders in 1996 for the first and last time, before it was declared unstable and closed to the public. I remember it was chilly inside, too ample and rich to grasp all at once. The humble mtepe (sewn sailing boat) that filled the entrance hall was stunning, something which did not belong

¹ The “wonders” referred to here include electricity, the lift, the marble, the materials, imported and local, with which the palace was built. The same materials were described in British colonial reports as a jumble of styles that revealed the sultan’s lack of taste. Yet Meier is also referring to the embellishments which the Sultan Barghash had had added to every room, and especially the ceremonial room designated for welcoming his guests – ambassadors, heads of state, merchants, religious leaders, etc. (Meier 2018; Al Busaidi 2020)

to Barghash's vision, nor to the British colonial project, but rather to the individual experience of the urban as understood by professor Abdul Sheriff, who, under the presidency of Salmin Amour, had been given the responsibility of transforming the rarefied House into the Museum of Zanzibar and the Swahili Coast, accessible to all. I remember the stairs, and the lift, and the rooms with their breath-taking view, and the furniture, the oil paintings of the sultans who had reigned on the islands, and kangas on the walls. I do not remember much else, and I regret not noticing the floor, which I have since discovered was constructed of marble from Carrara, where my own life began. It is a detail I continue to ponder, my journey to Zanzibar an echo of the marble's.

Narratives of loss

The Old Town of Zanzibar, and Beit-el-Ajaib within it as one of the most emblematic structures, has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2000. Pictures and videos of its collapse went viral among global digital publics. In these spaces, Beit-al-Ajaib is remembered and recalled as a symbol of modernity, progress and civilization, the undeniable (land)mark of long past glory and the power of once flourishing reigns, the emblem of Zanzibar and Zanzibaris, indeed, an indelible witness to the passing of time and to the changing sentiments which accompanied (Tarpino 2008) and moulded it.

The event is recounted as a tragedy and a disaster, a source of grief (*msiba*) for which eulogies (*tanzia*) are delivered all over the Internet. The collapse of Beit-al-Ajaib is understood as and associated with loss, something irreparable. Zanzibaris are mourning a building as a lost loved one for whom all the living have left is *kuomba dua* (prayer). Loss, regret and anger for an accident perceived as avoidable, foreseen in 2017 already, when, according to the posts, the Sultanate of Oman funded its renovation with 5 million US dollars. And yet, the edifice was left to lose its charm and personality (*jengo [...] linaachwa likipotezwa haiba yake*).² Budget mismanagement, to put it politely, is one of the most favoured arguments, when it comes to the desperate search for answers from a government which is unlikely to take any responsibility. Abdul Sheriff (2020) says: *Akili yetu imekuwa ya kufadhiliwa tu* – our minds are stuck in an attitude of funding dependency. But there is also a counternarrative, which holds responsible the then owners for the maintenance of that House, and the whole of Old Town. This story suggests that the government neglect is intentional and strategic, committed to letting the city collapse, in order to allow its *wenyeji* (Zanzibaris themselves, citizens, locals, owners), as it conceives them, to re-build

² [@HilmiHilal88](#) (re-posted on December 25, 2020, accessed on March 01, 2021).

in their own image and to erase the distasteful history of foreign domination once and for all (Ghassani 2020). Matter seems political.

While reading and watching I am struck by a rising cacophony: while all the words describing and narrating the event offer a precise narrative of that House, of harmonious cultural fusions, Indian Ocean and world cultures,³ relations and translocalities (Declich 2018; Verne 2012; Bang 2003), global flows and consumerism (Pretholdt 2008), what I see is the kifusi, rubble. The pile of debris that stands at the very forefront of every picture and video, the building literally stripped of its haiba, its charm, its grace, partially revealing its intimate interior, interrupted, after so many years of use and abuse (Bissell 2005; Myers 2003).

I think I am angry, but not surprised; it is a sense of hopelessness. I write to my friends and family *kuwapa pole zangu* - to give them my condolences - and I receive the link to a video, an interview with the Zanzibari historian Abdul Sheriff, host, edited and published by the poet and journalist Mohammed Khelef Ghassani on his private you-tube channel, *Gumzo la Ghassani - A Chat with Ghassani*.⁴ A widely acknowledged scholar and expert on urban Zanzibar, Prof. Sheriff speaks of his shock in learning about the collapse, while he was at home, just a few streets away from Forodhani garden, where the House of Wonders had ruled, superb, until that moment. He looks sad and expresses concern about something in particular which draws my attention back to the very matter out of which *Beit-al-Ajaib* was built: not only stones, but also, for instance, cables, *maboriti*, steel, and wood works of all kinds, now constituting a portion of the rubble amassed in front of what remains of the House. Speaking of the government's apparently urgent need to clear it away, he reflects on that *kifusi* (debris, rubble) and its significance, not only for himself, but for all Zanzibaris, the histories told through the House and the ones stamped into its materiality. He feels, in this regard, that "the government wanted to do that to get rid of the shame of what has happened. But that is not a source of shame, it is an accident! (*mimi nahisi zaidi walifanya vile ili kuondosha ile aibu ya lile lililotokea. Na ile si aibu, ni ajali*)" (Sheriff 2020).

These feelings of majesty and grandeur embedded in the material of the House of Wonders transformed into shame, visible in its debris, must be understood within the socio-political and historical context of urban Zanzibar. One could

³ UNESCO 2020.

⁴ Mohammed Khelef Ghassani, born in 1977 in Zanzibar. A Swahili poet, blogger and author. Multimedia journalist working with the German International Broadcast (Deutsche Welle) based in Bonn, Germany. Studied languages at the Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages in Zanzibar (Diploma) Mass Communication in Tumaini University Dar es Salaam College (BA) and Translations and the Media from the Open University of Tanzania (MA).

make a parallel with the clearing away by police of the remnants - the everyday things - of the 2011 sit-ins in Cairo; getting rid of the kifusi “was a necessary manifestation for [sic] the state clearing out matter out of place” (Malmsröm 2018: 115). What is to be cleared out then? Shame, matter, shame-matter? Matter is political.

Between 2012 and 2014 Beit-al-Ajaib had already experienced two partial collapses, for which it was often renamed Beit-al-Aib – the palace of shame (Sheriff 2021). But kifusi, says Sheriff, does not represent shame, rather it is the result of an incident, and much more. Sheriff goes on in his talk to point out what is in there, in the kifusi, a treasure which could not have come to light anew if the House had not collapsed. He refers to huge and very old timber planks carved in religious calligraphy, painted in gold and green,⁵ which constituted a very visible part of the front side of the verandas in the first building, the one envisioned and realized by Sultan Barghash. At their arrival, after Seyyid Barghash died, the British claimed the power to decide who would become sultan, depriving Barghash’s son, Sayyid Khalid bin Barghash, of his succession rights. While he did not react immediately, when the successor chosen by the British, Sayyid Hamed bin Thuwain, passed away five years later, Sayyid Khalid bin Barghash decided to claim his status and position, physically moving into the House. He held his throne against threats until the British army reacted by bombing the House, initiating the shortest war in world, which lasted only 45 minutes, and killing between 400 and 500 people. It was 1896 when Khalid bin Barghash fled the country and the British took power over the House too, rebuilding the palace and incorporating a clock-tower into its design.

In renovating the House of Wonders, the British needed poles to support the tower. They needed wood, any wood, and so they took the very planks from the veranda which had made the building so famous. The planks, turned in such a way as to make their carvings invisible, literally disappeared from the sight of the colonialists, and, forcibly, from the memories of Zanzibaris. While anyone who dared such a thing today, Sheriff says, would be considered an aggressor against history (*mkatili wa historia*), they did it. They took that wood and since they needed it to be plain, they hid the carving. It is how we relate to matter that makes matter political, then.

⁵ The Islamic religious imagery was displayed in various ways and through various materials, a relational practice throughout the Indian Ocean world, which was not always about ethnic negotiations, rather about visual and corporeal pleasure in decoration. Imagery could communicate strong territorial claims to the city, as shown by the examples of the mosques in Mombasa and Lamu, or enact a political re-centering of the peripheries of the Ocean world, as Barghash wanted his own architectural design to do (Meier 2018).

Since that time and until the collapse of the building on Christmas in 2020, the planks had been hidden from the sight of history. Today, however, history could be recovered: this accident offers the chance to save that wood (*kuokoa zile mbaona hizi kuzirejsha sasa*) and to return it to their city.

Is it shame then that the government is trying to get rid of, once again, the memory of an uncomfortable past (Bissell/Fouéré 2018) and present? Is it yet another act of cleansing the multiple identities of Zanzibar and relegating some of them to the trash heap (Malmsröm 2018)? After all, “objects, sometimes more powerfully than faces, remind us of what was and no longer is,” they are “reservoirs of specific personal experience, filled with the hours of some person’s life. They have been touched, or worn through use. They have frayed, or been placed just so” (Cole 2015). Whatever the reason, those beams mattered to the British and, through the act of hiding them, the British architecturally embedded the sultan(ate) into the new colonial leaders(hip). Aware of that matter’s agency, they acted upon it. Matter is indeed political.

I would like to turn to this matter and the House of Wonders whose collapse it marks, and see how it provides for a more complex reading of urban Zanzibar and the identities which have been literally shaped into its architecture. While people give meaning to objects, and therefore affect the perception of a place, the objects, too, produce new concepts and significations in their places, according to the other actors involved in that relationality (Appadurai 1986). So, while the very first project of the House of Wonders was to realize a precise desire of its maker, the House is impregnated with the materials, the knowledge, the touch and the memories of its developers. And the will, the desires, the powers of all those who related to it afterwards have acted upon it, changing its significance, as much as they have been affected by its magnificence. Beit-al Ajaib’s matter has changed in form and agency, and yet it still matters.

From metaphor to matter

Before beginning the interview with professor Sheriff, Mohammed Ghassani gifts the public with a eulogy to the House of Wonders (*Ta’azia kwa Jumba la Maajabu la Zanzibar*). I want to focus on his poem, together with the final emotional exchange between the poet and Sheriff, to show how “materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole/Frost 2010: 9).

Ghassani’s verses narrate a ‘multiple’ House, its significance and its substance. He addresses the House directly, admitting its age (*ulikuwa mkongwe*) not as a sign of weakness (*udhaifu*) rather of wisdom and knowledge, together with

power and strength. “Built in stone, clay and lime, with a skin of glory/majesty/grandeur (gamba la utukufu); Barghash made it strong, in purpose and integrity”.

Through the rhetorical device of personification, Ghassani is invoking the House, arousing our attention from the vital metaphor forcefully to the matter, from the symbol, the sign, the voice and the vision as well as the memory of Zanzibaris (Ulikuwa alama, ukawa sauti, na dira ya tuendako Na kumbukumbu ya tutokako), to the speaking (land)mark: “you told us:” he denounces, (that) “we were the ones who stood up, while others were sleeping. You told us:” he continues, (that) “we were a respected sovereign nation, under God’s favour. You told us:” now in the present, (that) “we are the chosen ones, and not just anybody”.⁶ Beit-el-Ajaib was the remarkable “symbol of the country of Mwana wa Mwana, the nation of Mwinyi Mkuu, the land of Mkamandume,⁷ the dynasty of al-Busaidi, and the homeland of all the Zanzibaris of yesterday, today, and tomorrow”⁸

Is the Beit -al-Ajaib now reduced to its very matter, the kifusi? Does the kifusi give the opportunity to recite a different eulogy, to make a different claim, which literally translates into the present and the future evoked by Ghassani?

I will try to answer these questions looking at Sheriff’s last intervention during the interview, and then back to Ghassani’s poem.⁹ Sheriff is asked to comment on the role and place (nafasi) of the House of Wonders in urban Zanzibar, and to consider on whom falls the responsibility for the maintenance and renovation of the Old Town (mji mkongwe) both morally and economically. Ghassani is here referring to the very strong argument, held by some Zanzibaris (wazalendo, the patriots, he says) which holds that the Old Town was established (ulianzishwa) two centuries ago, and especially under the al-Busaidi rule, a foreign rule, and therefore the buildings represent (yawakilisha) but do not speak for the wenyeji wa Zanzibar. The patriots, he says, believe it is better to let the buildings fall down and to build a new city, because it is neither their responsibility nor their obligation (wajibu) to attend to them. I think it is very interesting and revealing to look both at how the question is posed, and consequently answered.

When he addresses the House’s collapse, Ghassani speaks of its nafasi, which is

⁶ Last stanza.

⁷ The fiction writer, literary translator and sociocultural anthropologist Nathalie Arnold Koenings, who’s worked on Pemban mystical-scape for more than twenty years now, interestingly comments on this verse: “I am just so struck by how this is so powerful, dada - not at all the vision might have been animating government attitudes - this mention of Mkama Ndume is a relinking also with Pemba, an act of geographic suturing” (personal communication, August 11, 2021).

⁸ Last stanza.

⁹ Please find the entire poem in Swahili in the appendix.

not just the space where the House of Wonders once stood, but its space-time, its historical, social, and cultural role. At first listen this seems to be a question of representation – *alama, ishara, nembo* – but we know that under that representation he is thinking of the stones, the lime and the clay of which the House is built, the materiality ‘in place’, which has affected the city, with its presence, and now with its half-absence. “Watu hulizwa na miji na majengo yao kama walizwavyo na watu wao. Majengo na miji kwetu ina roho, yavuta pumzi”,¹⁰ Mohammed Ghassani writes me on WhatsApp. His words, ‘People are saddened / moved to tears by the built environment the way they are by their own people. The houses and the cities to us (at home/ in our place) have a soul, they breathe,’ strike me deeply. What do they mean? Literary studies often treat metaphors as meant to free the author from a supposedly binding concreteness and to open the senses to dreams and phantasies. Yet Mohammed is not freeing himself from the matter which moved him to write. He does not ignore it, supersede it, leave it behind, for it is that matter co-constituting his words; a material metaphor of fluidity, what Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos calls a matterphor, “one that slides between the linguistic and the material, while nodding to things that can never be fully expressed” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2021: 270). Mohammed’s matterphor - the houses and the cities to us (and at home/ in our place) have a soul, they breathe - opens to a variety of understandings, embodiments, and of intra-actions; it neither fixes its objects nor their function (Ibid.). This is the power of the matterphor, a sensed-material response-ability (Haraway 2016, Barad / Gandorfer 2021) to a word/matter. The words do not rest on describing and representing, rather they matter and they are mattering. This is precisely why I sense the breathing, I feel the sorrow, and I am angry. This is why and how the world relates to the collapse, to the eulogy, to the words and the images, to the House of Wonders itself, and to its rubble. From metaphor we slide to matter and back; the matterphor is a sliding process and practice (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2021). Matter allows us to sense and make sense of the matterphor, of the collapse, of the rubble, of Mohammed’s poem, of Sheriff’s thinking, of my writing, of your reading. Matter is not finite, it is not fixed. As Ghassani powerfully insists, in a way that should provoke rethinking, “it has a soul, it breathes”.

Ghassani addresses the Old Town as an entity which began, rather was begun and established mostly during the leadership of the Omani sultanate. The city flourishing under the al-Busaidi rule was then the material display of that foreign rule and could neither represent nor speak for all Zanzibaris, the *wenyeji*,

¹⁰ Personal communication, March 9, 2021.

the only ones who can claim the rights to their land, and their city. And in his poem Ghassani is raising further reflection: is that urban as foreign as their rulers? Can a city's beginning be traced to a precise spacetime? Who was effectively building it, dwelling in it? What were its borders, its peripheries? And most importantly, who were and are its wenyeji? Who is it that owns the city? Who has the rights to it? And who are the patriots, then, who claim their city not to be this, but rather a city-to-come (therefore washing their hands of this present city, while wanting to clear out its materiality)? And he ends his recitation with:

Naam, ni wewe uliyekuwa ishara [...]	Naam, it's you [the House] who were the symbol [...]
Ya Zanzibari watwani	Of homeland to all Zanzibaris
Ya daima na milele	Of eternity and forever
Ya jana	Of yesterday
Ya leo	Of today
Na ya Kesho	And of tomorrow

Sheriff seems discouraged. He does not address these many issues separately, rather as a whole, claiming that the very thought that the old city belongs to some foreigners, is like that of a horse with blinders on: if they are removed and he can see everything around him, he will be afraid, therefore his eyes are covered. And we do the same! (“Hiyo fikra ni kama farasi, ukimwachia anaona kwa macho anashtuka kwa hivyo anafunikwa. Na sisi tunafanya hivo hivo.”) Pointing to the cultural encounters that have been occurring for centuries, Sheriff argues strongly against any racial discrimination (ubaguzi wa rangi), seeing it as extremely dangerous and unhelpful in addressing the reality that “these people are Zanzibaris (hawa ni Wazanzibari) and this is our culture” even though it is partly the fruit of foreign domination: “You cannot say that this is not our culture! - Huwezi kusema kwamba haya sio utamaduni wetu!”, echoing Ghassani – the House is homeland to all Zanzibaris.

In taking seriously the materiality of Swahili port cities, Meier gifts us a marvellous work in which she focuses “on the active role of the material world in shaping history” (2016: 21). Going beyond architecture as mere expression of social meaning or as background for the making of history (Ibid.), she looks at buildings (architecture) and people's individual relation to them, presenting a different story about the Swahili coast's port cities. In her work she aims to show “how stone architecture once embodied the Swahili ideal of the ‘elsewhere’ and

how it came to stand for racialized difference” (Meier 2016: 27). Her ethnographic work on the Swahili port cities of Lamu, Mombasa and Zanzibar, with a focus on specific buildings, mostly mosques, but also the House of Wonders in Zanzibar, allows us into a deep understanding of how the materialities of these buildings carry hereto untold stories of these places and their people.

Inspired by her work, I read Sheriff’s words and Ghassani’s poetry as keys to enter Beit-el-Ajaib and understand its matter, its stones, lime, clay, and wood. Perhaps the converse is more accurate: I am using its matter to enter their narratives, and eventually understand how that matter helps to disclose what the notion of *wenyeji* entails.

While imbued with discourses which tend to assign certain architectures (the stone architecture, in particular) essential racial identities, a process which is in line with the state’s project of ordering, sketching and simplifying (Scott 1998), matter tells multiple stories. Whatever is the historical time, “state simplifications”, as Scott remarks, “are always far more static and schematic than the actual social phenomena they presume to typify” (1998: 46); they translate into forms of physical, architectural mapping which, as is the case in Zanzibar too, discriminate, categorize and homogenize to enhance the state’s own capacities of order and control. Bi Zainab Himid, interviewed by Bi Sauda Barwani on her life and work, as poet and teacher, speaks of the post-revolutionary Old Town: “the revolution aimed at making all people equal”,¹¹ she explained. The government enacted its project claiming ownership of plantations and stone houses, therefore evicting people from their homes, seizing their possessions, and redistributing them to Zanzibaris from all over the islands, determining the (in)habitability of their own new urban.

Houses (t)he(y) [the new tenants] cannot live in but many stone houses were occupied by people anyhow [ovyo ovyo] and even the House of Wonders was occupied by people brought in from the Ng’ambo¹² area. [...] They do not know how to use these things. If a man is very poor and given this house to live in, what will he do? Can he live in it? He cannot. So, all these buildings started to collapse. All the houses that were

¹¹ Bi Zainab Himid, in: Barwani/Gerhardt 2012: 171 (translation from Swahili by the authors, my additions in square brackets).

¹² The Old Town and its ‘other side’ were divided by a creek until the beginning of the 20th century. While colonial and postcolonial narratives mainly (re)present Zanzibar city as unambiguously divided, architecturally and socially, Bissell contends that Zanzibar urban planning has always been rather chaotic and not structured as imagined (Bissell 2011). See also: Folkers and Perzyna 2019, Myers 1995a, 1995b; Sheriff 1995.

confiscated are beginning to crumble.¹³

This narration, recorded in 2012, describes the degradation of the Old Town: “the old city, the space of the former elite, was not demolished but simply allowed to languish as a relic of an outmoded social form” (Bissell 2005: 218). But it is also a clear example of how categories of belonging are reproduced through and projected onto a place’s architecture, and its matter. The coral stone has been used to effectively create borders within the city (*watu ovyovyoy* – just anyone – have been brought from the other side of the city), and between people, to categorize them and circumscribe their rights to the city, their *uwenyeji*. *Watu ovyovyoy* – just anyone – are not to inhabit the Old Town. In this excerpt the relationship between people and matter is striking. Here the narrator speaks of her own understanding of what is happening to the stone houses in relation to their dwellers, and the socio-political context of that historical time. We perceive her tone of disappointment, as if the dwellers are to be held accountable for their assumed lack of knowledge, since the stone demands a precise concept of habitation based on *uzoefu* (experience, training, knowledge), and ascribes habitability to specific people’s role in that socio-spatial context, not just anyone from the ‘otherside’ (*watu ovyoy ovyoy wameletwa kutoka Ng’ambo*).¹⁴ We learn, indeed, from Meier how the stone masonry was a specialized technology, an art which required initiation into, in the same way blacksmiths and herbalists are, implying the power to “control supernatural forces and to manipulate the natural world” (2016: 40). Its maintenance, thus, requires *uzoefu* and *uwezo* (here, financial power) exactly because it does not consist in ‘simple’ renovation and cannot be implemented by everyone, as Zainab points out too. Yet *uwezo* has no fixed measurement, as Sheriff tells us in the aforementioned interview, and still requires the individual will of the householder to take care of his/her abode. “We have to take care of it ourselves,” Sheriff insists, claiming a collective Zanzibari commitment.

Thus far, as we have seen, the definition of accountability can be associated with that of belonging, which is, as we might have understood at this point, a complex notion directly tied to the built environment. As a matter of fact, in post-revolutionary Zanzibar in the 1980s, when the degradation of Old Town made apparent the economic inability of both the state and the stone houses’ tenants to take care of its maintenance, the government began to search for a different (?) narrative to be granted donors’ support and investment. The Old Town had to become a collective cultural property to be protected. The name that had marked

¹³ Bi Zainab Himid, in: Barwani/Gerhardt 2012: 171.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the distinctiveness of the colonial ‘proper’ and elitist space, Stone Town, attached to a very loud rebranding and transformation of Old Town into the “famous historic city” (Bissell 2005: 220) on which the government counted to rebuild the islands’ economy:

Reified distinctions between tradition and modernity made it all too easy to overlook the fact that the “historic city” of Zanzibar was itself the product of the thoroughly modern forces of merchant capitalism and colonialism that had once sparked urban transformation, just as tourist redevelopment was doing now. As Stone Town was being transformed from a lived space to a phantasmic one. (Bissell 2005: 228).

The new Old Town made of its matter its title, Stone Town, created the colonial dual city anew (Bissell 2007), and re-invented its other side, Ng’ambo, as the counter-city, the ‘native’ city, which, as Sheriff reminds us (2021), was rendered invisible (Calvino 1972, De Boeck/Plissart 2004). From then on, Stone Town has boldly appeared in narratives of ‘harmonious encounter’ and ‘Indian Ocean flavours’, with the precise aim of creating the touristic destination which would rebuild Zanzibaris’ lives and fulfilling the international criteria by which a site can be designated a protected World heritage site.

Caught up in this unstoppable machine, history was re-written once again onto a city, whose character was meant to be represented by that very stone, the pride of centuries of rulers.

Kifusi, the rubble

Even though the Old Town has never been a homogenous agglomerate of coral stone houses only, this is how it has been constructed, not only with the invention of the single-matter polis, but also the association of that matter with specific political, economic and racial identities. This is what the patriots refer to, when they claim to want to build their own new city; this is also the imagery from which nostalgia draws to criticize the present (Bissell 2005). And yet, its materiality does not end with the stone, and if given serious attention, speaks to a plurality which grants a space to each and every voice, without necessarily creating binaries or categories. Matter is political, indeed.

Beit-al-Ajaib’s rubble hides beams. Precious and valuable to Sheriff, they are both architectural and sentimental, revealing an intimate and religious side to the House and its historicity. That rubble carries along also the traces of the mansion of Mwana Mwema Fatuma, queen of Shirazi Hadimu ancestry, “whose descendants are considered by many the legitimate rulers of Zanzibar” (Meier 2016: 19). In spite the efforts of sultan Barghash to hide the “political indigenous

value” of these “now-invisible ruins”, the rubble brings their minuscule particles, maybe even just cells, into new light, revealing a royal memory for the most long forgotten. Matter has a soul, it breathes.

Rubble breathes and unveils centuries of representation, agency, intention and articulation, in and of itself as matter. Each person, entity, then relates to it in a different, personal and yet meaningful way. It materially speaks of the plurality of the identities and agencies which form the Zanzibari polity, *wenyeji wa Zanzibar*. This pile of rubble is present in Zanzibar, it is from and of Zanzibar. Its very presence inscribes that sociohistorical plurality into the present, acknowledging the city’s cosmopolitanism without its dense local identity being dissolved.

Rubble, unlike governments and people who have deployed partial, identity-based narratives to establish claims to the city, does not exclusively see the sultan, the porter, the Arab or the Indian, the fisherman or the seafarer. Rubble sees them all, in its ‘ongoing historicity’ (Barad 2003: 821), yet, without judgment, without becoming stuck in discursive practice, it participates in the process of materialization (Ibid). That rubble, that matter is relevant; it is so relevant that the government is compelled to remove it. It defies categories, and the resultant jumbling uncategorization is to be prevented because it is not easily controlled, and, by definition, produces disorder. The government requires cleansing, to restore order and with it the purity of a single-identity. Because hybridity always stands against purity, I do not aim at acknowledging the “hybrid identity” of the Zanzibaris, rather I want to speak Zanzibar’s multiplicity, its heterogeneity, out loud. Turning to the rubble, turning to matter, allows heterogeneity, multiplicity and complexity to exist. In other words, taking matter as an actor in material discursive practices which co-produce meaning, and not just the terrain of action, enables us to disclose dynamics and complexities which are, otherwise, simplified, obscured or nullified, while reifying and reproducing dangerous dichotomies and categorizations (Barad 2003). In this way, matter restores agency to those, humans and things, who are constantly and regularly silenced because considered predetermined to their relationalities, and thus rendered fixed and unchangeable. Matter restores *uwenyeji* to all Zanzibaris, and the House is ultimately homeland to them all.

Conclusive remarks - towards an ethnography of rubble

I want to reflect on rubble further. Rubble is, in our case study, the result of an accident, but rubble can also be produced intentionally, whether openly or covertly. I am thinking here not only of the kinds of statements I heard and read from Zanzibaris related to the House of Wonders and the whole of Old Town

which reveal intense feelings of abandonment and lack of commitment: “the House had already fallen down years ago (...), it had just to collapse” (Ghassani 2020). I am also pointing to the various projects of urban planning and re-planning which entail the literal reduction of houses, shops, and neighbourhoods into rubble.



“On our way home” – July, 22 2016. Photos: Yann Labry and Jakob Zeyer.

The pictures above exemplify, and dramatically simplify, the context in many ways. We are on the road which extends from Zanzibar town to the East of Unguja island. We are in Ng’ambo, between Mwanakwerekwe and Fuoni. This is one of the most important thoroughfares across the entire island, therefore it is also very busy. Yet it could be any urban context in Tanzania. In the first picture a building, probably a house, or a store under construction, is standing on the road, and red arrows and other markings are painted on the wall facing the road. Rubble on the ground. In the second and third picture we see what these markings are meant to enact within the project of widening the road, for the purpose of development, as it is called. A slice has been cut, the rest of the house remains standing. The pictures do not share with us, the public, any of the

hundreds of trees, shops and houses, labelled as abusive by the government, which have been torn down. This was 'our way home', since I, and two of my students working on a project with me, lived in a neighbourhood which borders that road, in Melinne. I have experienced the material ramifications of this project on my family members and their bodies: the dust, the noises, the coughing, the itching eyes, the disruption of the usual housework, and the bitterness.

I think that it is relevant to see this rubble, to observe it, to listen to what it has to say, to its sound and smell, to understand its thinking: "the city forms a web which travels through us and as us but which also takes in many other kinds of entities as it edges forward" (Amin/Thrift 2016: 59). And I feel there is a need for an ethnography, which is interested in all those entities, one which reveals other layers of urban complexity, an ethnography of rubble: only then will the spatial illegalization, that is to say the legal mechanism through which planners produce illegality, become apparent (Roy 2019). These genealogies of matter could reveal and display the lines of possession and dispossession that make certain urbans invisible. And perhaps they could help to understand why Fuoni's rubble, the whole of Ng'ambo's rubble, would not be talked about; why this rubble would not go viral on the internet, even as it materially and affectively impacts the daily lives of the majority of Zanzibaris.

I am also intrigued by the possible relationship among ruins and rubble and the process of transformation which happens to matter as it moves from one 'state' to another. When does rubble become ruin? When does it bear shame, or become trash? Does matter always matter? Or is there a further categorization within the politics of matter, which is assigned depending on its (political) nature? And is all matter political, or is matter made political? Relics, ruins, rubble transform within the context of human and non-human practices. Ruins acquire a complete and autonomous form, Simmel suggests in his essay (1911). But when ruins degrade into rubble, then, without ethnographic attention that can restore its communicative power, its significance is lost. And yet, what we have seen speaks quite differently about rubble. Is it, perhaps, that the intra-connections (Barad 2003) disclose the nature of the metamorphosis, granting each entity within that assemblage a precise and ever-changing role? New meanings in new places or spaces? Matter matters.

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Appendix

Wa Daima: Ta'azia Kwa Jumba La Maajabu La Zanzibar,
Mohammed Khelef Ghassani, December 27, 2020

Kweli ulikuwa mkongwe, lakini kwetu mkongwe huwa si dhaifu
Bali ishara ya hikima, busara, pamoja na nguvu
Wewe ulijengewa mawe na udongo na chokaa, lakini kwa gambo la utukufu
Barghashi alikusimamisha imara, uwe dhamira na insafu
Mbele ya Bahari ya Hindi, jua la tropiki likakubariki

Ulishuhudia miongo ikipita na kuondoka
Pa Mchoo ikaja Vuli, pa Kaskazi yakaja Masika
Sekunde zikawa dakika
Saa zikawa siku na miezi ikawa miaka
Shahidi wa wajao kwa madau na washukao mabedeli
Hata mizinga ya Muingereza, kukumaliza hukukubali

Ulishuhudia waingia kwa vishindo, kwa kyedi na bezo zao, na wingi wa dharau
Na wajao kwa adabu, hishima watukuzao, na hisani wasozisahau
Bendera zikapepea, za awamu kwa awamu, nyengine zikazeeka mapau
Milingoti ikawekwa, na mengine ikaanguka
Wewe upo makini, umesimama!

Ulikuwapo ukatupa hadhi, na daima tukataka uwepo
Japo ukongwe ni maradhi, wewe ushujaa ulikuwa ndio wako

Hata wa mbali walikuona, na kulitambua tambo lako
Ulikuwa alama, ukawa sauti, na dira ya tuendako
Na kumbukumbu ya tutokako

Ulituambia: Sisi tulikuwa tulioinuka, wengine walipolala
Ulituambia: Tulikuwa na hishima na mamlaka, na upendeleo wa Mola
Ulituambia: Sisi ni wateule, sisi si watu holelaholela
Naam, ni wewe uliyekuwa ishara
Ya nchi ya Mwana wa Mwana
Ya taifa la Mwinyi Mkuu
Ya dola la Mkamandume
Ya ukoo wa Busaidi
Ya Zanzibari watwani
Ya daima na milele
Ya jana
Ya leo
Na ya kesho