FILM REVIEW ESSAY

POETRY AND FISH ON THE EAST AFRICAN COASTLINE

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Jeroen van Velzen, director. *Wavumba: Those Who Smell of Fish*. 2012. 80 minutes. Kiswahili, English. Kenya, Holland. No price reported. Available at www.bigstar.tv/movie/wavumba-2012 or www.digitaliafilmlibrary.com/vilm/177/wavumba.

Ron Mulvihill, director. *Poetry in Motion: 100 Years of Zanzibar's Nadi Ikhwan Safaa*. 2012. 70 minutes. Kiswahili. Tanzania, U.S. Buda Musique. No price reported.

East Africa, and in particular Tanzania, is—cinematically speaking—a conundrum. On the one hand, historically, it is surely one of the most photographed and filmed regions in Africa. Its savannahs and wildlife, its thorn trees silhouetted against sunsets, still inform many people's view of what constitutes that elusive entity, "Africa." Hollywood films, from the 1935 *Sanders of the River* (set in Nigeria, but with savannah sequences that could only be East African), to *Out of Africa* (1985), with its heroic lion hunters and noble natives, to *A Ghost in the Darkness* (1996), with its man-eaters and hapless railway builders, have for long perpetuated those familiar stereotypes for a Western audience. On the other hand, examples of cinematic self-representation by local filmmakers of the kind we are accustomed to from the West and, latterly, South Africa are few and far between. Of the three countries that traditionally make up East Africa—Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania—only Kenya can be said to have anything approaching a film industry, though the impact of Nollywood has led to a boom in popular digital dramas in Kiswahili in Tanzania, known as Bongo cinema, and digitally shot action movies in Uganda's so-called Walkaliwood. Recent Kenyan feature films like Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half-life* (2013) and Nick Reding's *Ni Sisi* ("It's Us," 2013), though they have won awards at the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) and enthusiastic local audiences, have no external distribution and remain unknown in the West. Similarly, very little

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documented information on Tanzanian films or cinema is available, and references to Tanzania in any of the various book-length studies on African cinema that have emerged in the last two decades are rare. Kenneth Harrow's description of the documentary *These Hands* (1992) by the Tanzanian filmmaker Flora M'mbugu-Schelling as "one of the most wonderful of testimonial recordings of the African woman" is one of these rare references (1999:236–37).

Which brings us to ZIFF, for the last eighteen years East Africa's most prominent film platform. The savannah-and-wildlife romance is fundamentally challenged by ZIFF's subtitle, "Festival of the Dhow Countries," referring to a geographical reach defined as the Indian Ocean basin and consisting of (eastern) Africa, Arab countries such as Oman and the UAE, Iran, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Indian Ocean islands such as Madagascar and the Seychelles. This immediately signifies a different "Africa" from that of the tropes familiarized by Western colonialism and representation, one that faces not across the Atlantic, but eastward. Kiswahili, the lingua franca of Tanzania, a splicing of Arabic and Bantu with admixtures of Hindi, Portuguese, and English, is known or spoken in many of these places, and it is primarily to this Swahili community that ZIFF addresses itself. The very word "Swahili" is derived from the Arabic for "littoral" to designate the creolized people of the coast.

In the light of this very specific history and identity, the two films reviewed here are remarkable, partly for their focus on the unique stories and complex cultural practices of the East African coastline. Both are documentaries, though one, *Wavumba*, combines personal memoir with a lyrical mythic register, and the other, *Poetry in Motion*, is a detailed archival and historiographic account of an orchestra devoted to the Zanzibari musical form taarab which, at its centenary, was one of the oldest orchestras in the world. For *Wavumba*'s director, Jeroen van Velzen, a young Dutchman who spent his early years on the Kenyan coast, making the film was a quest to recover the childhood experiences that helped him survive the English boarding school to which his parents sent him at the age of eleven. Through his memories he is able to enter and inhabit an alternative world—magical, mythic, and full of drama—to which he had full access as a young boy. The opening sequence—with a close-up shot of a shaman and storyteller recalling an encounter with a fish that became a spirit and attacked him—transports us directly into that world. As we are told by van Velzen in voice-over, the Wavumba of the title (meaning "those who smell of fish") are fishermen who originated in Zanzibar and moved from there to the smaller islands of Pemba and Wasini off the Kenyan coast, "the place where spirits live." He recalls as a child accompanying one such migrant, an old fisherman named Kitete, on fishing trips out to sea: "When I was little, my special hero was Kitete. He had special powers and knew all the secrets of the sea. With a single sip of seawater he would talk to the fish. Bare-handed, he would catch sharks bigger than his boat. He belonged to the tribe of the Wavumba. . . . In my most exciting memories of Kitete, I'm at sea with that old fisherman."

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Accompanied by his partner, Sara Kee, the filmmaker returns to Wasini in search of Kitete and his marvelous stories of the world beneath the waves. Though he admitted to worrying that nothing would be as he remembered it (personal interview, Tribeca Film Festival, New York, 2012), the return visit provided him with the perfect subject for the film: Massud, another old fisherman, known as "the Commander," whom van Velzen follows as he once followed Kitete.

The storytelling mode adopted by the director involves multiple voice-overs: his own narration, evoking his recaptured childish wonder; the words of a male shaman; the tales of an elderly female storyteller who stands, perhaps, for the housekeeper of van Velzen's childhood; and the voices and stories of Massud and his younger assistant, Juma. The strangeness of the world described by the voices is enhanced by the musicality of the Kiswahili language in which the stories are told, which itself is a repository of spirit-belief and magical lore. Though van Velzen narrates in English, he is the intermediary and witness to this world, which he transmutes into images using his own kind of magic. As he told me, though Juma and Massud and the others became accustomed to the camera in two and half months of production, they had never seen film or television and therefore had no concept of acting or changing their behavior for the camera. This pays off in the film's astonishing intimacy, the spontaneity of the dialogue, the feeling that nothing was staged. One of the stories told by the old woman is of the grumpy fisherman who quarreled with everyone: "They thought he was rough, uncivilized, and anti-social. . . . Whatever his helpmate did, the fisherman got cross with him." As she speaks, the film cuts back and forth between her face and the boat, where Massud constantly berates the hapless Juma, sweating as he works: "Stop grumbling and nattering. . . . You're the rower and I'm the captain. . . . Don't rest Juma, keep on pulling. . . . What language do I have to explain it in?" As van Velzen put it in the 2012 interview, "the story about the grumpy old fisherman is realized in Massud," even as he tells a different story, of his heroic battle with giant sharks, alone at sea. Massud, he said, is the perfect character for the film because of "the way he makes a fairy tale out of his life." The humor and irony of the old man's boasts of his former prowess in the face of his present incapacity are one of the pleasures of the film.

Another strength of the film is the sheer beauty of the cinematography, matching the voice-over's description of "two worlds, that of the people and that of the spirits. They are mirror images of each other. . . . Sometimes the sea is so calm that you can see the other world in the water." On the screen are upside-down reflections of figures and trees in still rock pools inhabited by ferns and coral, the world above mingling with the world below. Later we see Massud and Juma searching for bait in those same rock pools, delving into holes in the coral to extract an octopus, or wading in the mangrove forest, or, in a fantastical sequence toward the end, hunting for sea snakes at night by the light of a flaming torch. The human story, of the old man's quest to catch one last giant shark, and Juma's grudging tolerance shading

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into disaffection, is counterpoised by the magical story in which these two are simultaneously part of a spirit world where they play roles larger than themselves. The cinematography also portrays the filmmaker's personal quest to recapture the past: "I saw in the glitter of the water the creatures of the sea that had died—sea horses, jellyfish, and dolphins. I saw them playing and dancing in the waves. They lived in between the two worlds of people and spirits. . . . I let myself be carried away by Massud's belief. . . ." He and Massud both have to come to terms with the loss of their vision of the magical past where anything was possible: "Now I still see sparks glittering on the waves but nothing else." Massud has to give up on capturing his shark and returns to shore, and Juma looks for a different kind of work, but the magic is there in the film notwithstanding. Watching it, we participate in the ritual conducted by the shaman to call the spirits; we believe in that other world.

In *Live from Dar es Salaam: Popular Music and Tanzania's Music Economy* (Indiana University Press, 2011) the cultural anthropologist Alex Perullo writes about the ways in which music in Tanzania reflects the evolution of Tanzanian society in the face of increased insecurity, urban competitiveness and consumerism, and the breakdown of earlier forms of family and community. Ultimately, he argues, creative practices are an expression of desire and a way of cheating death. The film under review here, *Poetry in Motion: 100 Years of Zanzibar's Nadi Ikhwan Safaa*, sets out to memorialize the centenary of a musical institution, but it also bears witness to this dynamic process of social change. Nadi Ikhwan Safaa, or "The True Brotherhood Club," one of the oldest institutions in Zanzibar, is more than simply a taarab orchestra. It is a social club, a meeting point of cultures (the name comes from Iraq, the music originated in Egypt, its musicians move between Zanzibar and Oman and Dubai)), and a site of social experiment, where in spite of Islamic separatism women mix with men and perform in public to mixed audiences. Eschewing voice-over, the film is structured so as to lead us through a succession of themes: celebration of longevity and tradition, changing relationships among the generations, the role of women, the opposition to taarab in some sections of a conservative island society, the resultant backbiting and gossip-mongering, the pride of the musicians in their playing and singing, and their freedom from any notion of Western cultural dependency. The film, therefore, not only offers unique insights into the local cultural context, but becomes, ultimately, the occasion for a personal accounting by its participants—for introspection, retrospection, and statements of personal commitment.

It is clear the film was long in production—from the club's one hundredth anniversary in 2005 to its release in 2012. One of the slight frustrations I found as a viewer was the lack of explanation of this gap, though the fact that the production team was widely dispersed, to Europe and the U.S., may explain it. The decision not to use voice-over, though understandable aesthetically, leaves gaps in the viewer's understanding and necessitates a

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long (90-second) sequence of opening titles explaining Zanzibar and taarab. This explanation, however, leaves out what I consider to be some key elements. Though the titles tell of "the flow of trade from Africa, Arabia and India," they are silent on one aspect of this trade on which Zanzibar built its wealth. Like the Black Atlantic, the Indian Ocean has its history of slave ownership and trade in which Zanzibar was a central node, receiving captives from the interior, offering them for sale in its notorious slave market, and shipping them onward to many of the destinations of the Indian Ocean basin. This is completely ignored in the historical overview, as is the fact that Stone Town, Zanzibar's capital, was the seat of the Sultan of Oman from 1870 to 1888, a particularly relevant detail since taarab began as court entertainment imported from Egypt by the Sultan. We are told that after the revolution of 1964 all musical clubs had to carry the name of their locality (hence "Malindi"), but nothing is made of the fact that taarab, originally an Arab music, has been embraced by all, whether of Arab or African ancestry. Of course, the film does not set out to tell the whole history of taarab, but of a particular club and orchestra; indeed the producer, Kelly Askew, has engaged with this history in an earlier film and a book on Swahili music (Askew 2001). However, the film provides such rich content that the lack of context is worrying. In the absence of any reference to slavery, for example, what are we to make of the undated archival photographs showing slaves displaying ivory tusks? Not everyone knows the history, and the inclusion of images without mediation empties them of signification.

Although the film is structured around Nadi Ikhwan Safaa's one hundredth anniversary concert held at the Bwawani Hotel, ironically, it lacks a full sense of the power and glory of a taarab orchestra at a major public performance. This may have been an artistic choice on the part of the editors, however, since the emphasis on close-ups of individuals, starting with the narrative in the rehearsal room and then staying mostly onstage, offers us intimacy rather than spectacle. This is not to say that we are not treated to marvelous renditions of songs, some archival, some from the 2005 concert, and there is plenty of space to enjoy the music's combination of the stately and joyful, plangent and melodic, recitative and rhythmical, as well as its circling refrains and counterpoised male and female voices. We are also able to appreciate the talent and skill, demonstrated in close-up, of individual musicians who play throughout the film on oud, qanun, violin, and a range of other instruments. The great strength of the film is the time it gives to individuals speaking about their relationship to the orchestra and what it means, and the way this is dramatized by scenes in the interior of their homes as well as onstage and in other settings. The homes and styles of Juma Saidi Hamadi, an orchestra musician, and Ali Abdalla Buaisha, a songwriter, musician, and composer, represent a particularly striking contrast. We meet Juma clad only in a waist wrapper in his simple mud-block house in Kianga, a fishing village, from where he commutes to town to work in construction. Juma's wife, Ubwa, is seen frying mandazi (a local form of doughnut) on a charcoal stove, as she tells of her husband's love affair with

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music and how he composes songs for her. By contrast, Buaisha, clad in snowy robes and cap, is seated in an opulent living room before a low table bearing graceful pots of coffee and surrounded by fellow musicians. This speaks eloquently of the way taarab makes space for the crossing of class lines in a stratified society.

What all the interviewees have in common is the joy, pride, and humor with which they speak of the orchestra and their role in it. In one beautifully calibrated sequence, ostensibly about the politics of gender and women's membership in the club, the film cuts between the singer Mohammed Ahmed as he is sitting in a group with Buaisha and others, and Nihifadhi Abdalla, the first woman to be admitted, who is standing alone on a roof terrace. They each contribute to the story of how, when they first sang together in public, Mohammed's fiancée broke off the engagement and the two singers subsequently married. As a married woman, Nihifadhi was unable to continue singing in public, but they later divorced and she resumed her musical career. As Nihifadhi breaks off from the story to sing verses from the duet, her green outer veil revealing glimpses of a gown and jewelry, we see her transformation from lively interviewee to sensuous performer and gain an inkling of how jealousy might have reared its head.

As the film makes clear, there are negative aspects to the way the club—as well as the music—has developed. Many people still express religious objections to women performing in public, and others maintain that the music has been commercialized. According to Abdulaziz Yusuf of the musical group Spice Modern Taarab, much taarab music has lost its poetic subtlety: "When you sit and listen to taarab the meaning should require thought. You need to digest it and figure it out. It shouldn't be obvious for all to understand." However, the consensus is that the club is still valued by its members. Jawad Ibrahim Ahmed, who returned from Oman to perform at the centenary concert, declares, "I will return home with a happy heart. My heart has been opened. I have reached my goal." The singer Rukia Ramadan testifies that for her the club has become a family: "I can't leave the club because I grew up there. I was raised there by Mohammed Ilyas and Idi Farhan. . . . For me that's my home."

The film was made by three foreigners with a long-term attachment to Tanzania. The director, Ron Mulvihill, has a history of involvement in Tanzanian cinema going back to the early stage of national film-making in the 1970s. His company, Gris Gris Films, produced the feature *Maangamizi: The Ancient One* (2001), which he co-directed with the ZIFF director, Martin Mhando, and which was Tanzania's official selection at the 74th Academy Awards in the U.S. Mulvihill also wrote and directed the film *Arusi Ya Mariamu/Mariamu's Wedding* (1984), described as "the first Tanzanian-American co-production"; it won "Best Short Film" at the 1985 FESPACO. Thecla Mjatta, the Tanzanian actress who appears in both films, is listed as part of the production crew of *Poetry in Motion*. The producers, Kelly Askew and Werner Graebner, are cultural scholars and practitioners who have

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worked on the Swahili coast since the 1980s.[1] All three perform multiple roles as part of the film crew and evidently share the musicians' personal and collective passion for an enduring tradition.

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Note

1. Kelly Askew is a professor of anthropology and director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Michigan. See Askew (2002). Her film *Chairman and the Lions*, about the contemporary pressures on Masai culture, won the Special Jury Award at ZIFF 2013. Werner Graebner is a research fellow at the University of Bayreuth. See Graebner (1992). He compiled the audio CD *Rough Guide to Music in Kenya* (World Music Network, 2004) and is also the curator and producer of the Zanzibara series of music CDs on the Buda label.

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