

Research Colloquium

Tuesday, 14 January 2025

2:15 pm, University of Bayreuth, Building GW I, Room S 93

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OCEANIC POETRY – POETIC OCEAN: ON THE RELATION OF SWAHILI POETRY AND THE SEA

“... there is no question that the history of the Indian Ocean world is enmeshed with its poetry in some ways propelled by it...” (Bose 2006, 5)

Bahari (Swahili, from Arabic baḥr, بحر):

1. Ocean, sea;
2. Any strong current
3. Genres of Swahili poetry
4. End rhyme in poetry

The aim of my contribution is reflect upon the relation of Swahili poetry from Zanzibar and the sea.

Is the Swahili word for ocean, bahari (see above) meant metaphorically when it refers to poetry? Or does the ocean and its environment operate not only as similes and analogy, but inform notions of poetry as well as forms, like rhythm or rhyme? And if so, how does the Indian Ocean shape its

poetry? How does poetry shape place and how is it shaped by the very ecological environment, the sensuous perception of it?

Foregrounding the ocean as a metaphor means to understand the world around us as shaped by language and its figurations: we only perceive what we have a language and imagery for. However, what will play a more prominent role in my contribution is the question how language and poetry grow out the specific environment or rather the speakers' experience of it. Thus, I suggest here to read Swahili poetry from a specific place. I reflect upon poetic practice in place and place in poetic practice and the place where poetry happens. How does place nourish its imaginaries, enlarge and condition its possibilities?

I want to focus more specifically on poetry's "material engagement with water" (Hofmeyr 2019) in connection to the specific ecological, human and inhuman dimensions of the island. For my reading, I rely on a collection of Swahili Indian Ocean poetry which I am currently coediting, but will also bring in conversations with fishermen and -women to bring in the lived realities of Indian Ocean communities. It is the specific view of local communities and local languages that has so far been strikingly absent from critical Indian Ocean discussions. Accordingly, I engage in a back and forth conversation between the poems, their forms and topics, and the very specific oceanscape, including, for instance, the monsoon shaped by kusi and kaskazi winds, currents, and near-shore fishing, diving and sailing along the shores.

If you would like to attend this presentation online, please email brady.c.blackburn@uni-bayreuth.de or Claudia.Favarato@uni-bayreuth.de to request the Zoom link.