KNOWLEDGE AND INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE IN A SWAHILI CONTEXT: 'WISDOM' AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

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In his seminal discussion of the field of African philosophy, the Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo highlighted the need for research that is situated between philosophy and anthropology, to investigate 'African discourse together with its rules of inference, in everyday life as well as in specialized circumstances' (Masolo 1994: 188). According to Masolo, the work of Mudimbe indicated a direction for this, leading away from ethnophilosophy and towards ethnography (*ibid.*: 190). Part of such a project, as Masolo suggested, was the 'situational analysis of how people use different aspects of everyday discourse' (*ibid.*: 193). In this article, I address such issues within the Swahili context of Mombasa's Old Town, and investigate aspects of the performance of knowledge and its appreciation and wisdom, as they are situated within the intellectual practice among both lay people and specific experts of knowledge in everyday life.

In pursuing this, I pick up on observations and arguments that I have developed more fully elsewhere (Kresse 2004, 2005, 2007) while also presenting a framework for an anthropology of philosophy (Kresse 2007: Chapter 1). From here, I seek to push further some general reflections on the social dimensions of knowledge, and on the ways that intellectual practice is performed and appreciated along the Kenyan Swahili coast. In the vast literature on Swahili culture, language, history and society (much of it written by African researchers and Swahili speakers), there have been few attempts to generalize about intellectual practice in everyday life, issues of 'knowledge' and its social definition and acquisition, its performance and appreciation (for a notable exception with a focus on Islamic knowledge in Zanzibar, see Purpura 1997). Some of the existent studies, however, particularly in the field of poetry and wordplay, give detailed, sensitive and illuminating accounts of these dynamics in specific social and historical contexts, and thus provide excellent starting points for attempts in such a direction (see, for example, Abdulaziz 1979; Shariff 1988 and 1991; Biersteker 1991 and 1996).[1] Here, the juncture of poetry, music

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[1] The field of knowledge and Islam has been studied increasingly, too, providing a much-improved starting point for general reflection from that side (some anthropologically oriented studies include: Parkin 1995a, 1995b; Purpura 1997, 2000; McIntosh 2004, 2009).

and popular discourse continues to play a particularly prominent role. Intriguing case studies of this have been documented for colonial Zanzibar (Fair 2001) as well as post-colonial Tanzania, in the study of *tarab* and nation building (Askew 2002), and in the analysis of Swahili rap (Stroeken 2005). Below, reference to poetry, in its classic didactic form of the *utenzi* genre, will inform this article as one of the case studies used for discussion and illustration. These case studies are drawn from my own fieldwork,[2] and their function is to provide illustration of some representative aspects rather than to cover the whole range and depth of the field of investigation. In particular, what are sometimes called 'modern' intellectual and academic debates (for instance at East African universities), and their recent influence on social discourse, are not investigated here; neither are Swahili poetry, literature and other established genres of communication.[3] Nor are the ways in which proverbs, sayings and riddles may transmit 'wisdom' and provide platforms for its social performance (also as a kind of intellectual contest).[4] Generally speaking, however, they could well be integrated into the argument made below about the importance of the social dimensions of knowledge.

To use my own linguistic and cultural background as point of departure, there is an idiomatic expression commonly used to qualify philosophers within the German-speaking world: a philosopher is, people say, *ein Spezialist für's Allgemeine.* This expression qualifies the philosopher as, literally, 'a specialist of the general', a specialist of general knowledge. What is meant is that philosophers are expected to be able to generalize, in their reflections on any specific issue, in such a way that ordinary citizens and lay people within the public sphere (or the community concerned) can benefit from what they are saying. One would expect, for instance, that philosophers would be able to summarize and comment upon, in an accessible manner, complex theories (like those of relativity, genetics, or economics), to discuss them critically with a view to their general and essential features, and

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[2] Fieldwork was conducted for over thirteen months in 1998 and 1999, mainly in Mombasa's Old Town, and during subsequent visits in 2003, 2005 and 2006. Funding from DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service), SOAS, and the University of St Andrews is gratefully acknowledged, as well as funding from the DFG (German Science Foundation) during the time of revision and final preparation of the article at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. I am especially grateful to Ustadh Ahmad Nassir and Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir for their openness toward my research interests, and their generosity and patience in answering my questions.

[3] In this sense, the limitations of this article are significant and also delimit the nature and scope of my argument. Alena Rettova, for instance, presents some engaging discussions of aspects that are not covered here, while also referring to modern Swahili literature and providing comparative cross-references to historical poems that are related to the poem I discuss below (see Rettova 2007, n.d.).

[4] The collections and commentaries on these (examples include Taylor 1891; Scheven 1986; Knappert 1986) could well be used and worked through to address recent concerns in the field of African philosophy dealing with proverbs and wisdom in Africa (see Gyekye 1987; Madu 1992; Wanjohi 1997).

their political relevance. They are seen as the experts who are able to make understood complex or specialist issues to the general public. They are also seen as socially required to do so, in so far as these issues matter for the general well-being of society, and to the extent that ordinary lay people, as members of the community, should know about them. Thus in this conception an implicit normative demand is made upon philosophers: they have the obligation to act as a bridgehead between specialized knowledge of the sciences and other fields, to report upon (and basically 'translate') issues of potential public concern, so that a general process of discussion and consideration of such issues can take place – in a manner that is informed, to the point, and focused on social relevance – within the wider field of public discourse. Of course, this demand is not explicitly made *vis-à-vis* all philosophers all the time, but in so far as this popular idiomatic expression is involved, this is a central feature and expectation.

Casting a philosophical thinker as a 'specialist of the general' is a useful initial characterization for my discussion here, emphasizing that philosophy is concerned with general questions about the world and specific phenomena in it, questions which are socially acknowledged to be relevant, generally, and potentially to all. I take it for granted that reflecting upon what it means to be human, to be good, or to know, is a socially embedded activity that may be performed in many different kinds of societies all around the world. In my research, I have looked at people who may fit this category of such a socially acknowledged 'specialist of the general' within a particular Swahili context, the Old Town of Mombasa. Here, I will discuss general conceptions and internal sub-differentiations of such knowledge specialists or experts, and discuss how the philosophical thinkers that I was interested in relate to or can be situated in them.

On the basis of fieldwork and literature research, I sketch out the features and abilities that generally qualify people as such experts of knowledge, as 'specialists of the general' locally. Here, 'the general' stands for issues and questions concerning everyone who is part of the same social context, as member of the community (or simply as a human being). Being concerned with the portrayal of philosophical discourse, the knowledge experts I was interested in were those reflecting upon issues of general interest and fundamental intellectual orientation, and relating these reflections clearly and eloquently to their peers. Issues and questions treated could be seen as being 'of necessary interest to everyone' – to use an expression by which Kant conceptualized philosophy as 'worldly' activity that seeks to address such issues and questions (*Philosophie im Weltbegriff*), placing 'wisdom' at the heart of philosophy. By negotiating these and formulating approaches and answers to them, Kant says, individual thinkers produce 'doctrines of wisdom' which can be used as guidelines for orientation in life (Kant 1974: 28). For this, they may be acknowledged and recognized as 'wise' within their social environment, by people who may then confer praise and status upon them.

In the following, I will take off from these initial characterizations linking philosophy to wisdom, and present brief ethnographic cases from the Swahili context, illustrating intellectual activity within social practice, and some ways in which some individuals (qualified through their special reflexive and discursive abilities) are acknowledged and endorsed as wise, as teachers of society – *walimu wa jamii* – an expression I came across quite often. I will also look briefly at the criteria involved for social appreciation. In this, I expand on reflections on 'wisdom' in the Swahili context, developed while re-thinking the material of my fieldwork. On the basis of these cases, I will introduce and discuss further some aspects of what it means to be an intellectual in the Swahili context, by involving issues of 'expertise', 'skill' (or skilled performance), and 'knowledge' as points for analysis. A brief sketch of Swahili terms for 'knowledge' should be given, before turning to the accounts of genres and intellectual practice in social life.

WISDOM AND INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In the Swahili language, the terms *hekima* (wisdom, knowledge, judgement) and *busara* (good sense, wisdom, sagacity) are the two words most explicitly denoting 'wisdom'. They are often used in a joint idiomatic phrase, *hekima na busara*, to endorse or commend the wisdom or good common sense of someone's action. This expression may be used for such praise (as in *fulani ameonyehsa hekima na busara yake alipofanya hivi na hivi* – someone has shown his wisdom by doing such-and-such), but also in communal invocations when seeking the right decision on an important matter (for instance, *Mungu atupe hekima na busara kuamua vizuri* – may God give us the wisdom to make the right decision). There are numerous words for different kinds of knowledge in Swahili, often originating in Arabic loanwords, and it constitutes a separate task in its own right (which cannot be undertaken here) to sketch out the interrelationships of semantic fields of 'knowledge' in the Swahili context. *Ujuzi* (knowledge, wisdom, experience), *maarifa* (knowledge, information, intelligence) and *elimu* (education, knowledge, learning) are three more of the most commonly used terms, within a multiplicity of words for 'knowledge'.

To add more social dimensions to the way that knowledge as intellectual (and morally relevant) ability is usually qualified and appreciated in the Swahili context, age has to be mentioned as a category. It is generally older people who, through their longer life experience, are associated with wisdom. This is also reflected in the use of the term *wazee* (elders, old people), where the connotations of being honourable, respectable, and knowledgeable are inherently part of the meaning itself. Furthermore, *mzee* (singular of *wazee*) can also be used as an honorific term for someone who is not an elder or old in terms of age. For this person, *mzee* may be used as a kind of

title, marking an achievement or a certain status (such as intellectual or political leadership), and inherently ascribing or invoking wisdom as a characteristic quality of that person. In this way, we may find presidents, mayors and educational or religious leaders being addressed as *mzee* by people who are older than them – it is a discursive marker to acknowledge their achievements, or a level of superiority and power of the addressee (in the latter case, of course, it has little to do with wisdom; see also McIntosh in this volume on related issues in the Mijikenda context).

THE SWAHILI *BARAZA*

In everyday life along the Swahili coast, there is one particularly prominent setting in which intellectual practice can be observed, as social performance of knowledge and discursive capacity – albeit only among men, in a gendered space. This is the evening *baraza* of men of a neighbourhood – their meeting point (literally, '*baraza*' refers to the stone benches integrated in walls) in front of the houses on the street, an informal social institution that provides space for reflection, discursive focus and attention, and intellectual exchange in familiar surroundings and a leisurely atmosphere. After evening prayers, regular groups of neighbours and friends will assemble at their *baraza* to exchange the day's news, comment on recent events, and generally to socialize and enjoy each other's company. These groups are small, consisting of three to eight persons or so. They are characterized by familiarity, and, along with gossip, joking, and the exchange of news, serious discussions may emerge or be taken up again at any stage of the evening's conversation. Such discussions may cover any topic, with politics or proper Islamic conduct perhaps the most common ones for any *baraza*, no matter what age group. People use and display their abilities of reasoning and rhetoric, of thinking and speaking, making the *baraza* a setting in which we can observe how 'wisdom' is displayed, performed and appreciated in the Swahili context.[5]

In *baraza* communication the art of speaking, the level of knowledge, experience and education, and the habitus in which people shape and present themselves as knowledgeable and reasonable, together shape a kind of wisdom performance. The collective wisdom performance of a *baraza* – if we can call it that – consists of the specific complementary ways in which individuals act, speak and argue.

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[5] There are several published (for example, Peake 1989; Loimeier 2007) and unpublished (for example, in Beckerleg 1990, and, in various versions, by Jan-Georg Deutsch, on a street-corner in Zanzibar Town; see also Deutsch 2002) accounts of *baraza* settings in the Swahili context. Also, it should be noted that colonial and post-colonial administrations have used the term to refer to political gatherings, rallies, and meeting points generally (reflected, for example, in Haugerud 1997). I have written about the *baraza* as a social institution relevant for the cultivation of intellectual practice more extensively elsewhere (Kresse 2005); here, I am interested in providing a sketch and some further illustrations, observations and comments relevant to a discussion of 'wisdom'.

A *baraza* typically consists of neighbours and friends who are very familiar with each other but may have different characters, educational and ethnic backgrounds, and possibly vary in social status. We can commonly identify an internal order which participants follow to fill out complementary roles. To illustrate this, we have to be aware that the factors that matter in *baraza* discussions are quite differently personified in each participant. For instance, a *sharifu* (a descendant of Prophet Muhammad)[6] will normally have a high social status and be treated with corresponding respect, but in his *baraza*, this may not matter as much as elsewhere in social interaction. What matters more is the actual input that people make during discussions, the impact they have (in the mid- and long term) on the thinking of the others. In this sense, a *sharifu*, like anyone else, may have to prove himself as knowledgeable and thoughtful, as an entertaining or otherwise admirable speaker. In each case he will have to have a significant impact on knowledge-based or insight-seeking discussions, in order to attain a highly respected position in the *baraza*. Speaking of complementary roles, for *baraza* discussions to make knowledge-related and wisdom-oriented progress, we can anticipate the need for a balanced combination of different types of thinkers and speakers – critical listeners and sceptics, questioners and educated readers (in religious, scientific and worldly affairs), enthusiastic commentators and citizens well-informed on politics and world news. From my experience during fieldwork, members of neighbourhood *baraza*s typically do fill such roles and thus contribute in distinct ways.

What about wisdom as linked to individual members of a *baraza*? Let me approach this by considering the perspective of those who appreciate and admire others as wise. Based on a significant amount of shared time spent with each other, their judgement is based on experience. They have observed how someone approaches and discusses tricky issues, and have been able to correlate the comments, statements and predictions made on such issues by this person to the way that these issues then developed further. In a way, then, they have been constantly scrutinizing the validity and success of the evaluations of their *baraza* peers. Some aspects and ways of behaviour and discursive performance that are particularly appreciated and associated with wisdom are the following: independent thinking, the ability to speak well and convincingly, and being well-informed on worldly and religious matters. More to the point, as for the concrete synthesis being shaped in each respective event of reflective inquiry, making convincing arguments from unconventional and unexpected angles or positions is particularly appreciated, even (or perhaps specifically) when this runs against established modes of thinking. Often, this is done by or linked to a sensitive and appropriate use of humour that assists in bringing home such a point or argument.

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[6] Here one should be aware that actual descent cannot always be verified. What matters socially is that there are local families who are recognized as such descendants.

A SWAHILI ISLAMIC SCHOLAR AND HIS LECTURES

As described in more detail elsewhere (Kresse 2004; 2007: Chapter 6),
I attended the daily Ramadhan lectures of an Islamic scholar in
Mombasa, Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir – a local intellectual who had also
held positions as teacher, politician and publisher, and turned to
Shi'ism in the 1980s. Making people think, I concluded when reflecting
upon his lectures, is what these were all about, and, as I explain below,
I feel he should be identified as a 'wise' person according to some
of the criteria just mentioned. Furthermore, the discursive situation
of his lectures shared some significant features with the *baraza*, as
far as the appreciation and transmission of knowledge is concerned.
The lectures were given in a small hall which had been built in a
simple neighbourhood of Mombasa, through the initiative of local
youths. The purpose was to provide an educational support centre for
children of the neighbourhood, assisting them with their homework and
other school-related tasks during the afternoon. The project had also
been started partly in response to the fact that local drug users had
begun frequenting the openly accessible plot (where the hall was to be
built), to hang out and pass the day. In their stead, the initiators of
this project were determined that more useful and beneficial activities
should occupy this spot. The educational initiative had invited the
Sheikh to deliver his Ramadhan lectures in their hall, when they heard
that the imam of a local mosque had retracted his offer to him to give
his lectures there.[7] Sheikh Abdilahi had accepted, and a mixed audience
of different ages, and ethnic and educational backgrounds, and Islamic
affiliation (Shia and Sunni), attended, with numbers varying between
thirty and seventy listeners, all of whom were male.

Sheikh Abdilahi's lectures were special in comparison to others,
not only because of his particular gift for public speaking (unhurried,
thoughtful, original and clear), which kept younger and older listeners
equally attentive, but also because he used particularly memorable
phrases, humorous idioms and vivid illustrations while developing his
overall arguments. He also combined his commentaries on the Qur'an
(*tafsir*), which constituted the lectures on weekdays, with reflections
on the current social and political situation in Kenya, particularly as it
affected coastal Muslims (in fact, he had been an influential politician
in his youth, representing regional interests and arguing to the British
colonial government for the independence of the Coastal Strip from
Kenya; cf. Salim 1970). So these lectures were not just historical or
doctrinal exercises. His weekend lectures engaged even more explicitly
with the audience, as he discussed topics that had been requested
by members of the audience beforehand. These topics included
discussions of the recent local controversies about the beginning and
end of Ramadhan, the potential effects a new constitution would have

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[7] This retraction was due to the fact that a local Sunni reformist group, who opposed Sheikh
Abdilahi for his previous shift to Shi'ism, had pressurized the imam to withdraw his offer
(personal communication; see also Nassir 2005: vii).

on Kenyan Muslims, and the agenda of US politics in the Middle East (with a particular view to Saddam Hussein). At the end of each of these lectures, ample time was provided for further questions and discussion. With these features, his lectures provided a rare example of a local Islamic scholar engaging openly in discussion and debate, in mutual exchange, and thus at least in principle on an equal level with his audience. This intention was also exemplified in his way of speaking, as he included himself and his audience in the same 'narrative we', together facing problems and reflecting upon them. This was in contrast to the more common ways of lecturing by Islamic scholars that I encountered otherwise, where the audience was usually addressed from a position of superiority, in an ideological and combative language presenting dogmas that should be followed. Sheikh Abdilahi's lectures, in contrast, were about the questioning of dogmas, and the questioning of oneself, making the listeners think about themselves, not only as Muslims but also as moral agents.

This process of seemingly open-ended engagement with questions that were of concern and importance to all present was what made listening to Sheikh Abdilahi's lectures such a special experience for all involved. This was confirmed to me in informal discussions with a variety of regular attenders – but also by people who said they (as opponents of Shi'ism) did not attend because they knew of the 'danger' and the 'temptation' that his rhetorical skills posed to all his listeners. One feature of Sheikh Abdilahi's rhetoric was to encourage listeners to start a process of self-questioning by reflecting upon social issues from 'their' perspective, with reference to common sentiments and understandings generally shared by 'us' coastal Muslims. This marked the lectures as a discursive space of common reflection, and in turn supported the acknowledgement of the Sheikh as someone who could provide meaningful insight into issues that mattered for all in the Muslim community. And as the process of questioning oneself opens up the possibility of self-transformation, both of these aspects are related to the appreciation and transmission of 'wisdom', as described above. Comments on Sheikh Abdilahi and his lectures by members of the audience support this impression. Various people of different ages, status, and educational background expressed to me that they were most impressed by the Sheikh as an independent thinker who was not repeating the common rhetorical appeals so frequently used in Islamic speeches, but rather engaging with issues that mattered to everyone, in ways – and through words – that were also accessible to everyone.

Some of these features are shared with the *baraza*, as far as the discursive setting *vis-à-vis* an understanding of 'wisdom' is concerned. In both cases, there is a learning (or thinking) process set in motion for those who are seeking knowledge and advice. They are sitting in, listening in, at discursive events which are concerned with shaping clearer perspectives of orientation in the world, learning through presence and observation. They observe how elders and intellectual superiors are dealing with social concerns, how they argue, how they phrase their advice, and how they present themselves in terms of overall

behaviour. They may copy and try to emulate those features which they find most convincing – manners of speaking and reflecting about things, as well as ways of behaving appropriately in such contexts (potentially making an impression on others). This, then, is part of performing a general task set by Islam for all Muslims: that of becoming a better person, of increasing one's moral status; of following the role model of Prophet Muhammad (and other prophets). An admirable example of good and decent behaviour is copied and internalized, so as to make oneself a better person, and in terms of the application of one's knowledge to the particular setting in which one is situated, more wise.

A SWAHILI POET AND HIS POEM

My second example is drawn from the *utenzi* genre of Swahili poetry, and concerns its relevance for documenting or transmitting wisdom and knowledge in general. Both in written form and as oral performance, poetry has been an intrinsic element of Swahili culture and social life for many centuries, and various poetic genres have been prominently used for different social occasions. Common elements with related Bantu languages and cultures are traceable – at least in terms of this poetry's prominent place in public social performance on festive occasions, and its didactic and mnemonic function in terms of preserving a popular consciousness of norms, values and events[8] – as well as strong influences from Arabic traditions. There is also a significant and ongoing tradition of Islamic poetry in Swahili (see also Knappert 1971; Shariff 1991). Swahili poetry is richly documented and researched, and even though poetic composition is nowadays no longer part and parcel of common education,[9] the ability to compose poetry according to the classic rules of composition is still highly admired, if barely rewarded. Notably, poems composed for specific festive occasions (such as weddings, religious holidays or political rallies) are still recited in public; they are usually requested from qualified poets for the event. Historically, didactic poetry has been an important genre of social and moral education. One famous example of this is the *Utenzi wa Mwanakupona*, a nineteenth-century poem in which a patrician mother reminds her daughter of all aspects of proper conduct towards her future husband (see Allen 1971; Biersteker 1991). Other prominent cases illustrating forceful wit and wordplay combined with education are the poems of Muyaka, from nineteenth-century Mombasa (Abdulaziz 1979), and more recently Shabaan Robert's poems, written in late colonial Tanganyika.

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[8] Here, I am particularly thinking of the Southern African praise poems (see, for example, Vail and White 1991).

[9] As several elders told me, during the time of their upbringing children learned the composition of poetry from their parents and/or grandparents as part of their domestic educational process.

The transmission of moral knowledge through poetry does not *per se* entail 'wisdom' of the poet: reiterating existing descriptions of social values does not characterize someone as 'wise'. So, if, in the Swahili context, poetry as a didactic educational means has to do with the perpetuation of moral knowledge in society, where does a link between poetry and wisdom come in? We have to look at the composition of a poem, the creative act of the individual poet. It would be in and through the formulation of insights that are relevant for a wide variety of members that wisdom comes into play. This can be in the sense that a piece of common social knowledge is phrased in such an extraordinarily beautiful and memorable way that this now becomes a common expression; or, a new and relevant insight shines out of the creative and innovative use of language within a poem.

My example here is a long epic poem of the *utenzi* genre, written in the 1960s by Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo – the brother of Sheikh Abdilahi, treated above – then still only in his twenties (Nassir 1979).[10] His poem *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* ('*Utenzi* about the saying "a human being is humanity"') consists of a long explanation of *utu*, the Swahili concept for humanity, both in a general sense and also for moral goodness itself. The poem provides over four hundred stanzas of illustrations, exemplifications and reflections (an expansive but not uncommon length for a didactic sermon in this genre). It draws on common social knowledge in the form of proverbs, as shown in the title, and presents the poet's specific interpretation of them, contributing to a general account of *utu*. Internal sub-aspects of *utu* are treated and illustrated in interrelating parts. They concern the codes of good moral behaviour in true friendship, the marital relationship, intergenerational relationships, and social relationships in general. Here as well, proverbs are used as starting points for reflection and commentary. Furthermore, *utu* as a central moral concept is explored through its relationship to relevant subsidiary ones, like *upendano* (mutual love) and *usawa* (social equality). The result is a universalist account of moral goodness, framed and formulated from a Swahili perspective, but notably from that of a specific critical individual, the poet Ahmad Nassir, and thus *not* representing any communal 'Swahili wisdom'[11] as such. Interestingly, the particular position he put forward here contrasts with other understandings of *utu* I heard expressed by other Old Town residents, assuming that true moral goodness could only be achieved by Muslims, or by members of the Swahili community. In this way, his poem goes beyond locally or ethnically confined conceptions of morality while using local colour for its general portrayal.

Generally speaking, this poem can be qualified as part of local wisdom literature in two ways. Conventionally, it could be argued that the poet is engaged in a commentary and interpretation of Swahili

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[10] I have treated this in much more detail elsewhere (Kresse 2007: Chapter 5).

[11] Expressions such as this one sometimes reflect collectivizing assumptions that have often wrongly been made about and applied to African societies. On this see, for instance, Hountondji's critique of 'ethnophilosophy' (Hountondji 1996).

folk wisdom reflected in commonly known proverbs and sayings. But I believe it is more useful to appreciate as wisdom the specific way in which Ahmad Nassir here goes beyond commonly held beliefs about values and morality; thereby, he has generated new insights, and thus provides us with a wider perspective on *utu* than was previously available. This is accessible to all potential addressees, the members of the Swahili-speaking community. Within their circle, the interpretation of *utu* that Ahmad Nassir presents in his poem may be characterized as 'of necessary interest to everyone': it is of concern for all of them, providing orientation on how to behave as a good human being. Kant's phrase 'of necessary interest to everyone' (Kant 1930: 701)[12] links us back to a 'doctrine of wisdom' that according to Kant characterizes a 'worldly conception' of philosophy (the *Weltbegriff*) which is open and accessible to all. I believe that this is applicable to the poem *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*: being accessible to all members of a discursive community, the text has generated an expanded horizon of what *utu* means, and how and why it needs to be adhered to.

There are further links to general reflections raised above, in that readers or listeners[13] are made to re-think the familiar (a common feature of philosophical thinking). In reading or listening to the poem, they are urged to compare the explanations and characterizations here with their own understanding of *utu*. For them, as for the poet, their conceptions are linked to proverbs as resources of social knowledge which usually remain implicit and unreflected. But confronted with the poem, the audience is pushed to make their own understandings explicit and reassess them with a view to the interpretation presented to them here. In a similar way to the dynamics in Sheikh Abdilahi's Ramadhan lectures reviewed above, the poet Ahmed Nassir here *makes people think*, makes them question some of the values and standards and self-conceptions that they would normally take for granted in their everyday life.[14] *Vis-à-vis* a particular (if long and complex) explanation of moral goodness, they are challenged to confirm or modify their own personal vision or interpretation. And, as described above, this may lead them to more fundamental reflection about themselves – that is, to instances in which intellectual self-transformation could be set in motion.

This may actually be welcomed by the audience, and lead to an appreciation of the author as wise. Apart from this moment of intellectual challenge as a criterion for wisdom, there was also the view that he managed to provide a 'true' and 'complete' account of *utu*.

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[12] This quote is from Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (B868, footnote), in a section related to the point about the worldly conception of philosophy referred to above.

[13] An oral tradition of *utenzi* poetry is kept alive – and is partly flourishing, as a commercial regional market of recorded cassettes of *tenzi* recitations underlines. Indeed, the *Utenzi wa mtu ni utu* has also been recorded and continues to be available at certain shops along the coast.

[14] Interestingly, the opposite observation has also been made: that due to its beauty, Swahili poetry distracted people from concentrating on the subject matter and thus hindered them from thinking. This is noted by Roland Allen in his introduction to the *Inkishafi* (Allen 1946). I am grateful to Alena Rettova for pointing this out.

Either in being able to pinpoint and put in words exactly what *utu* was all about (as people implicitly claimed they had always known it to be), or in opening up a new, wider and richer perspective on it, the poet would be recognized as thoughtful and accomplished. Making them able to see more clearly what had not been visible to them before, either buried within assumptions or just generally out of sight, is a poet's achievement that is explicitly appreciated by many in the Swahili context. In this region, throughout history poets have been seen as teachers of society, a view that implicitly ascribes the capacity of wisdom to them. It can be said that poet teachers are more readily acknowledged as 'wise' by their Swahili peers, the more 'complete', 'true' and 'clear' their poetic accounts or moral and didactic messages are perceived to be. Ahmad Nassir's *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* did well on all these counts. Comments on the poem that I could gather particularly appreciated the 'completeness' of aspects covered, next to the fact that they thought a true picture was being drawn in clear and enjoyable language. But most admired was the fact that the author of such a profound and all-encompassing poem had only been in his twenties when composing the poem. This also proved that even if old age and much life experience was usually deemed to be associated with, or even seen as a condition of, wisdom, this was not necessarily so. The poetic composition itself could make evident that relevant and helpful insight into human life had been generated – wisdom.

Evident in the above paragraph, however, is a considerable tension between the two dominant aspects reported for the appreciation of the poet as wise, namely the intellectual challenge of making people think, on the one hand, and the reference to truth and completeness of attributes of *utu* listed on the other. This may reflect an inherent ambiguity about what really counts as wisdom in the Swahili context: between the non-conformity and originality of individual thinkers going beyond previously established borders of knowledge, on the one hand, and the adherence and (complete) reproduction of an existent body of knowledge, in this case about *utu*, on the other. Both standards of judgement seem to exist side by side with each other, but are not completely reconcilable overall.

SOCIALITY, MORALITY AND ISLAM

I have discussed the cases of two thinkers who were socially acknowledged and praised for their wisdom, for the way that they passed on their knowledge and made it 'work' within a common social discursive space between author (speaker, composer) and recipients. Both illustrate that independence in one's thinking is one important element for being perceived as wise. In both cases, the non-conformity of their discourses,[15] linked to the questioning, reassessment and

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[15] It is important, however, that this 'non-conformity' never went outside the boundaries of a common framework of understanding the world (perceiving it and reflecting upon it), but remained within established genres and settings of presentation.

qualification of commonly assumed truths, was seen as an aspect that made their reflections remarkable and original to their Swahili peers – offering wider, further avenues of perceiving the world, and oneself within it. However, such independence does not imply being cut off from local traditions. On the contrary, it is embedded in them, makes use of them, and consciously positions itself toward them. In both cases, the chosen medium for reflection – and, if you like, 'transmitting wisdom' – was an established means of intellectual communication within the East African coastal society: Islamic lectures in the first case, and poetry in the second.

We have also seen – perhaps more clearly than anything else – that the social embeddedness of such individual thinkers within the discursive dynamics of society is crucial for the identification of their thoughts as 'wise', and for the possibility of their having an impact on others around them. For Sheikh Abdilahi's lectures, an immediate link to the audience assisted in this, as he could be directly observed and experienced by everyone present. He was also careful to address social issues that his audience wanted to hear about, issues about which they were seeking a clearer picture and more precise intellectual orientation. By doing so he picked up on discussions that were currently on people's minds, taking care that his reflections took on the thoughts and concerns of his listeners. Thus the discursive situation in the lecture hall resembled that of the common *baraza* in several respects, with a particularly knowledgeable person as a senior member of a group reflecting in interaction with his listeners on current events and concerns, and how best to deal with them. In a different way, the discursive context of Ahmad Nassir's poem on humanity also resembles the *baraza*: the poet addresses his audience as his peers, and is himself a member of the group. He too seeks to clarify and provide orientation on common matters of moral judgement that are encountered by everyone in the social community. In doing this, he draws from previous pronouncements on these issues that have shaped the thinking of members of society, namely proverbs. Thus in all three cases, the discourses of knowledge, the questioning of social knowledge, and the reconstitution of perspectives for knowledge in the future, as fields, efforts and projects that individual intellectuals are engaged in, are inextricably linked to common social discourses of knowledge and the channels and forms of discursive interaction that the Swahili context provides.

As a bottom line, direct social interaction or sociality may be emphasized as a necessary framework condition for the appreciation of knowledge, and of wisdom (and philosophy) in a more emphatic sense (see also Collins 1998: Chapter 1). If no shared moral or practical concern was addressed in intellectual discourse, there would be no way that discourse, or its contributors, could be qualified as 'wise'. Anyone described as *mwenye hekima* (a wise person, literally 'an owner of wisdom') by their peers in the Swahili context, or attributed with *hekima* or *busara* (wisdom), will have been shown to be part of a common social discursive sphere, and have given meaningful input

to it. Thus according to my ethnographic investigations, language (the mastery of words, rhetoric) and sociality (being part of a group) are core components of wisdom. This should not rule out the sphere of non-verbal knowledge and its performance (on that I can say very little). In fact, there seems to be a double-sidedness of performance-oriented knowledge, between verbal and non-verbal paradigms of knowledge and practice. In the performance of healing, for instance, I once observed the use of a phrase that seems to reflect this: when being introduced to a new patient, the senior healer asked his junior assistant '*Anataka dawa au maneno*?' (Does she want medicine or words?). Both are, it seems, complementary viable ways or strategies of healing, and are qualified as such in this phrase. If we look at an overview of knowledge realms or relevant sub-fields of knowledge in the Swahili context, we can see that qualifications of language (verbal/non-verbal) and performance (performative/non-performative) provide two crucial axes by which we can rethink knowledge and the characteristics of its various sub-fields overall. We can already see that these axes are cutting across each other, as the performance of verbal (and discursive) skills featured crucially in the examples above.

In conclusion, I will discuss further the interrelationship between some of these realms of knowledge, and conceptual takes on their overall qualification, drawing from internal qualifications and categories. This will be done in relation to the characterization of intellectuals or knowledge specialists.

Realms or areas of knowledge, or expertise, that are generally acclaimed as important and established in the Swahili context are: historical knowledge, religious knowledge, medical knowledge (healing), artisanship (wood carving, for example), and, as we have seen, verbal knowledge (by which I here mean knowledge related to the use of language). The latter is probably the most significant and overarching area of knowledge and intellectual activity, and it can be subdivided into at least the following fields: vocabulary, rhetoric, wordplay (ambiguity, for example), and the developed genres of poetry (*tungo*), for example song (*wimbo*), riddles (*mafumbo*) and sayings (*misemo*). Indeed, poets especially were described to me as 'teachers of society' (though this characterization was also applied to Islamic scholars). In terms of relevant skilled performances linked to verbal knowledge, ways of speaking, lecturing, reciting or singing are crucial here, and these are in various ways important for success and recognition as poet, teacher, Islamic scholar and healer.

Intellectual practice, as we have seen, is performed in a variety of everyday situations and processes. Healing, composing poetry, formulating speeches or lectures, and participating in discussions with friends and neighbours (as at the *baraza*), are common and socially established activities within which intellectual practice is performed. From what we have seen above, expertise is associated with intellectual independence, with creativity, and with originality of thought, as well as with the completeness of reproduction of existing knowledge (as in the case of poetry). Acknowledged thinkers are creators and originators

of ideas that are seen as valuable by their peers. The skills by which these ideas are disseminated are discursive (and thus socially rooted and trained) skills, linked to historically developed communicative genres already embedded in society.

I should raise a final point about the social – and moral – relevance of knowledge, engrained in the Muslim character of society. A basic Islamic directive combining the two, knowledge and morality, is often implicitly referred to, or explicitly pointed out, by ordinary people commenting on everyday life, just as it is by intellectuals in poetry or educational literature and speeches. It is encapsulated in the formula that Muslims should inform each other (pass their knowledge on to others) and remind each other (about what is right and wrong), *kujulishana na kukumbushana* in Kiswahili (to make each other know and to make each other remember). Thus we have here an arising sense of social responsibility linked to knowledge, and this can be spelled out in a double sense: first, knowledge is seen as a source of moral improvement and is thus socially valuable (that is, to be passed on), which leads to an implicit obligation of acquiring knowledge, to spread it for wider social benefit; second, there is a clear social obligation to show concern for one's fellow human beings, to be ready to provide reminders, if needed, as to how they should behave. Here, individuals work on the basis of their own knowledge, and the more they know and the better they understand, the better influence they can have upon others, and the higher their own moral status will be. On the basis of all this, we can speak of a particular kind of 'knowledge economy' at work in the Swahili context, in which heuristic, moral and religious motivations and obligations interact and enforce each other, shaping a wider framework that underpins social action (see also Kresse 2009).

Put more simply, there is an explicit social obligation to attain knowledge about how to live well (as a good Muslim, as a good human being), and more basically, what (forbidden things) to avoid, and how. On the basis of the latter, individuals can help their peers avoid committing sins – and they have the responsibility to do so. On the basis of the former, they can seek to perfect themselves as human beings. This refers back to a basic moral obligation of 'commanding good and forbidding wrong' for all Muslims more generally (see Cook 2000).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps we could say that the social dimensions of knowledge in the Swahili context – and probably in many Muslim societies (and possibly many others) – encompass two significant levels: a discursive one and a moral one. The first refers to the general level of sociality, which surrounds and shapes specific forms of knowledge, and nurtures the transmission of knowledge (using and reconfirming established forms and genres for communication). The second refers to a religiously framed idea of social responsibility: to seek knowledge about good

(and evil), to do good and help to do good, and to avoid sinning and prevent others from committing sin. The first is of *descriptive* character, referring to an 'is status' of how knowledge is socially embedded; the second is of *prescriptive* character, involving a normative 'ought status' about the use of knowledge in relation to action. This second one applies to all social actors as agents; they all have the responsibility to follow up on their knowledge in their deeds. Emphatically, of course, this is true for socially acknowledged knowledgeable people: the local intellectuals, particularly Islamic scholars, but also experts in other socially relevant fields.

This kind of social responsibility, and the link between knowledge and action, has already featured above, in Ahmad Nassir's poem about *utu* (goodness, humanity). I would like to conclude with the suggestion that even though the point just made has been sketched out for a particular Muslim context and with reference to the explicit relevance of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad 1986) with moral significance, it could perhaps also be made similarly (and more generally) for other societies, within and beyond the bounds of the Muslim world. Many societies in Africa, particularly among the Bantu-language speaking groups, share historically developed overlaps and commonalities with the Swahili context when it comes to conceptions of goodness, personhood and humanity. This can be seen, for instance, in discussions of *ubuntu* and related concepts in Southern Africa, and of conceptions of 'personhood' in Africa.

Within the field of African philosophy, the general conception that there was, and should be, a social obligation to put knowledge to good use was once pushed for by the Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka in his 'sage philosophy' project, under the term 'sagacity' (Oruka 1990–1). While pointing at the fact that this normative use of knowledge was a socially established and individually performed feature of many African communities (a claim that his fieldwork-based research substantiated particularly for his own, the Luo context), he also insisted that this should be cultivated further, in everyday life. But also, academic philosophy in particular had the task to make (or keep) the knowledge on which it drew socially accessible and applicable, so that it could become (or stay) meaningful to all. Here, we are reminded again of the philosopher as *Spezialist für's Allgemeine*, as mentioned above. 'Philosophy should be made sagacious', said Oruka (Kresse and Oruka 1997), and academic philosophy should be careful to retain its social relevance.[16] If the general character of the link between knowledge and practice is somewhat similar despite the fact that we are now talking far beyond the realm of Muslims and Bantu-speaking African peoples initially discussed with reference to the Swahili coast, this could be the topic of further comparative reflections.

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[16] It was in this sense that he himself engaged, as philosopher, in issues of human rights and foreign aid, making the case for what he called 'an ethical minimum' on a global scale (Oruka 1997).

For now, I close with the observation that we have found our way back to the general consideration of wisdom. Apart from everything else, perhaps it is a good way of qualifying wisdom through reference to the link between knowledge and practice. Perhaps wisdom, in the Swahili context and beyond, is to have the ability or good sense to put knowledge into action.

What does this mean, finally, in terms of 'expertise' for the field of social interaction in the Swahili context? Wisdom, as qualified here, seems to be always the outcome of a socially relevant performance of knowledge by specific individuals within a known group of people able (and somewhat required) to assess, evaluate and appreciate it. It may be seen as the expertise of keeping alive an interactive process of producing, interrogating, understanding and applying socially relevant knowledge within a community. The criteria and qualifications of that expertise, then, evolve (or rather, have evolved) from within the historical dimensions of these processes, whereby past discourses and their praise and appreciation of thinkers and speakers leave a kind of benchmark, a normative standard which then is used to qualify future performances of individuals within these communication processes. Thus, from a perspective based on experiences and observations from the Swahili coast, we may say that wisdom is the expertise of nurturing knowledge, and attending to it, for the benefit of social practice.

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates 'wisdom' from an ethnographic perspective that pays attention to the ways in which knowledge is performed, appreciated, negotiated and questioned in everyday life in Mombasa, on the Swahili coast. It discusses the *baraza* setting (daily meeting points for male social peers) as a venue

for intellectual practice and the appreciation of wisdom. Basic features of communicative interaction identified there can also be found to be in play when looking at case studies of individuals and their performances. The article looks at how two genres (didactic *tenzi* poetry and Ramadhan lectures) are used by Swahili intellectuals who are regarded as exceptional in their field. Verbal, performative and social skills are found to be crucial aspects of wisdom, which also has to do with being able to engage with common social concerns in a manner that leads to further insight and intellectual orientation for others. In this sense, social responsibilities and moral obligations in the use of knowledge play an important role. Overall, the article seeks to contribute to a general discussion of wisdom, based on insights gained on the East African coast.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la « sagesse » d'un point de vue ethnographique qui tient compte des façons de pratiquer, d'apprécier, de négocier et de contester le savoir au quotidien à Mombasa, sur la côte swahilie. Il traite du *baraza* (cadre de rencontre quotidienne d'hommes appartenant au même groupe social) en tant que lieu de pratique intellectuelle et d'appréciation de la sagesse. Les caractéristiques élémentaires d'interaction communicative identifiées sont celles que l'on peut aussi retrouver dans les études de cas de personnes et de leurs actes. L'article s'intéresse à la manière dont des intellectuels swahilis considérés comme exceptionnels dans leur discipline utilisent deux genres : la poésie didactique (*tenzi*) et les discours du ramadan. Les aptitudes verbales, performatives et sociales se révèlent être des aspects essentiels de la sagesse, qui est également liée à la capacité à s'engager dans des préoccupations sociales courantes d'une manière qui conduit à offrir des éclairages et une orientation intellectuelle à autrui. Dans ce sens, les responsabilités sociales et les obligations morales de l'usage de la sagesse jouent un rôle important. D'une manière générale, l'article cherche à contribuer au large débat sur la sagesse, en se servant d'observations recueillies sur la côte orientale africaine.