'MONSOONS & MIGRATIONS'
A REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE

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As part of its now almost annual programme of conferences/workshops since its inception in 1998, Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) organised another conference on 'Monsoons & Migrations' from 5th to 7th July, 2005, to explore the concept of the dhow culture and what could be its unique contribution to world civilisation.

The dhow culture was fundamentally based on exchange not only of goods but also of peoples, creating a dense web of communications along which flowed ideas, ideologies, and aesthetic forms which have shaped the region's collective memory and unfolded its identity. As such it followed the logic of trade which thrives on difference, otherwise there would be nothing to exchange, and on peace, since violence and monopolies kill trade. It was cosmopolitan based on mutual respect, understanding, tolerance and sharing. Religious difference was the norm where Christians and Jews, Hindus and Muslims, Zoroastrians and Buddhists have not merely tolerated or coexisted, but flourished with mutual respect.

Differences are not the problem; they are resources for all of us everywhere. We always live with differences, in some sense even thrive on it. So, as Imruh Bakari, the former ZIFF Festival Director asked, when does difference become a problem? The Indian Ocean was by no means a paradise on earth. There were tensions and injustices in such mercantile societies, between the continental and maritime dimensions of these societies; between different classes within these societies; and there is the reality of the slave trade and slavery that have bedevilled social relations in such societies with long-term consequences. The involuntary migration of people across the ocean affected not only the biological and social configuration of the populations around the rim, but also the cultural and artistic expressions of the diasporic communities, such as the Sidis of western India and the mixed communities around the Persian Gulf.

These were some of the questions raised in our Call for Papers. As part of a film festival where a large number of people with the most varied interests, expertise and outlooks take part, the conference was intended to facilitate dialogue not only among scholars themselves, but especially between them and the artists, poets, musicians, storytellers, film and documentary makers, etc.

We were very fortunate in getting favourable responses from some of the most renowned scholars of the Indian Ocean as well as budding scholars entering the field
with bright new ideas and approaches. In all about 20 papers were submitted on the most varied approaches to the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately some of the scholars could not make it for health and family reasons. Dr. Farouk Topan, one of the initiators of a sub-theme on Zanzibar, suffered a heart attack on the very day he was supposed to travel, but we are happy to say that he is fully recovered. The most tragic was Professor Laura Fair, who had presented a very exciting paper on the Indian cinema in Zanzibar in a previous workshop. She lost her young son to malaria and other complications only a few days before the conference. We missed them both and deeply felt their loss which was also ours.

The contributions to the conference were varied and covered the ground fairly well. The conference was inaugurated with a short documentary by Beheroze Shroff (University of California, Irvine) on 'Voices of the Sidis' exploring ancestral links of the Sidis to East Africa, a very instructive introduction into the subject of the conference.

The first two sessions were devoted to migrations and its economics, and it was kicked off by Professor Gwyn Campbell (McGill University) exploring the various theories of the Malagasy migrations from Indonesia and Africa. He was followed by a discussion of the triangular migration of the Baluchi to Oman and East Africa by Beatrice Nicolini (Catholic University, Milan) and of the double migrations of the Goans by Margret Frenz (Oxford) and Ismailis by Alia Paroo (York University, Canada), from India to East Africa, and thence to the West. The session raised questions about how endemic was migration in the psyche of the people of the Indian Ocean, and the extent to which they formed diasporic communities. This was followed by a consideration of the economics of migrations. Patrick Krajewski (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin), examined the effect of the imposition of colonial rule on pre-existing Indian Ocean relationships, on the dhow traffic and the shift of population from Zanzibar to newer colonies on the mainland. Wambui Mwangi (University of Toronto) on the other hand, focused on the replacement of the old Indian Ocean currency, the Indian Rupee, by the shilling representing the new colonial relations.

The third session focussed on the slave trade in the Indian Ocean. While Professor E. A. Alpers (UCLA) expanded the definition of the 'Middle Passage' to cover the whole
process from the moment of capture to the final point of disposal, the resulting discussion elaborated on its three moments: the initial capture and transportation to the coast, the short-run transportation of slaves along the East African coast, and the long-distance slave trade across the Indian Ocean. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya, (Coordinator, TADIA) compared the migration of African slaves to Mauritius and Sri Lanka, and examined their assimilation and identity in the two different circumstances. Heloise Finch (Michigan University) pursued the case of the Mascarones, showing the slaves' attempt to manipulate differences between the two colonial powers as regards their attitude to slavery during the brief British occupation of the French island of Reunion to their own advantage. On the other hand, Lynn Smith (Humboldt State), in dealing with Sri Lanka, went beyond the slave issue to deal with an earlier conversion to Islam through Sufi networks where the 'imported' character of the immigrants, emphasising Islamic orthodoxy and Arab descent, enabled Sri Lankan Moors to maintain their monotheistic and egalitarian ideology in a polytheistic and hierarchical cultural context.

By then we were already deep into a discussion of the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean region. Behnaz Mirzaei (York University, Canada) examined the practice of African spirit possessions in Iran, such as zoro, and the incorporation of Islamic elements which provided ideological avenues through which people who were ethnically different were provided with a cultural identity and were socially accepted by the host society. This was followed by a discussion by Professor Abdul Sheriff (Zanzibar Museums) of slavery in the Persian Gulf. While the pre-existing Islamic system of manumission had created a large class of freed Africans even before the European-inspired emancipations, shortage of labour during the Depression had led to a new wave of kidnappings and enslavement of not only people from the East African coast but also freed Africans in Arabia, Baluchi and other Muslim communities, thus cutting across both racial and religious lines. The session was concluded by Helen Basu (Free University, Berlin) who, through a critical examination of a Sidi travelogue, raised the question whether these involuntary migrants formed a diaspora, or whether they testify to the regional diversity of a historically constituted Indian Ocean culture brought about by maritime movements.

A considerable part of the last day of the conference was devoted to Zanzibar as a case study. Jonathon Classman (Northwestern University) delved into the intellectual history of racism in Zanzibar, showing how ethnic differences became a racial problem when the 'other' was stereotyped and dehumanised in a clash of nationalisms, civilisational and racial, during the 'period of politics' preceding the Revolution of 1964. Georg Deutsch (Oxford) followed with a discussion on the interconnection between memory and property, pointing out that memory always follows along social fault lines, between the old inhabitants of the Stone Town, the post-Revolution poor immigrants from the rural areas of Zanzibar, and the current migrants from the mainland in the wake of the tourist boom. Taking a different and innovative path, Louise Rolinger (University of Alberta) explored the cosmopolitan character of Zanzibar by looking at the 'eating identities' in this 'fluid culture' in which African, Arab and Indian cultural practices come together. In a similar vein Prita Meier (Harvard) looked at Zanzibar's architecture in the nineteenth century, challenging the compartmentalisation of architecture as 'African,'
'Swahili,' Arab,' European,' Indian', etc. She argued that it was a complex synthesis of local sign systems and use of space, and Asian and western architecture and technological innovations.

The conference concluded with a session on the Dhow Culture and the African cinema. Rachael Anyango Diang'a (Kenyatta University), a budding young scholar from Kenya, took her cue from Ali Mazrui's 'triple heritage' in a critical review of two films from Tanzania and Kenya, but she concludes that these forces were tearing apart the Dhow citizen's identity, but there may be a question whether the two heroines were typical dhow citizens in the first place. The session was concluded by David Slocum who placed the discussion within the critical debate around the issue of cultural diversity, referring to the FESPACO 2005 call for the development of cultural policies that 'give priority to dialogue, the sharing of responsibilities and resources, a respect for difference and permanent quest for tolerance.'

The conference was very exciting in terms of the range of subjects covered and their different approaches and perspectives. However, despite its success, there is a need to consider how it could be made more representative of the citizens of the Dhow Countries as well as of the global village. Future conferences should make a greater effort to entice scholars and artists from around the rim of the Indian Ocean to give them a greater taste and feel of the Dhow Culture on which ZIFF is focussed.

The participants may not have emerged from the conference with conclusions about the Dhow Culture, migration, the slave trade, the diaspora, and their representation in the cinema, but hopefully they left with significant questions buzzing in their heads. One of the primary objectives of the conference was to facilitate dialogue between academics and artists. The introductory documentary by Beheroz Shroff provided at least one model that could be emulated, and it is hoped that the discussion at the conference will inspire artists and academics to carry on the dialogue in their respective media.

Unfortunately the journal, with the time and financial constraints, cannot carry even half the papers presented at the conference, and it was extremely difficult to select a sample that would convey the flavour of the conference and the major themes covered. However, we are convinced that the remaining papers will find expression in other journals to carry on the debate in other forums.

We also include specimens of some of the other activities of the Film Festival, for ZIFF is much more than the conference, and includes Children's, Women's and Village Panoramas, and other workshops. We can only make a modest beginning with them in this issue, and it is hoped that future issues will provide a more comprehensive coverage of this festival of culture in all its variety.

The theme for next year's festival will be Sails of Time, and there has been some discussion about convening a get-together of all the different types of sailing vessels of the Indian Ocean during the ZIFF in 2006. We invite you to peruse the call for papers for that conference on the back-page of this journal, and to join us next year.

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