From Zanzibar to the Gates of the Alhambra
Negotiating Identity…Navigating Cultural Diversities
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Introduction

Our sense of identity, of who we are and where we come from is often like a subjective personal shadow which may be taken for granted as long as one is standing under the mid-day sun! That is to say the issue of our identity rarely raises its challenging head as long as we are comfortably centred within the dynamic forces of our inner and outer worlds. Disturbances or traumatic changes in either or both of these worlds may trigger the so-called ‘identity crisis’ or plunge one’s self awareness into a deep and often confusing search of one’s place in the home and the wider

Sunset at Forodhani, Zanzibar
(Courtesy: A. Sheriff)

This paper is part of an ongoing manuscript bearing the same title.
community. In this vein, departure from ‘home’ to a life in exile or in the diaspora tends to sharpen our self awareness of our identity. It launches us, consciously or unconsciously, into a long and often tortuous journey of negotiating our sense of identity vis-à-vis the ‘other’ across countries and cultural diversities. Issues of ‘losses’ in self awareness, of being home and away, and hoping to return home may overwhelm our senses and efforts in adjusting to new environments. Many of us may feel haunted and tortured by questions about ‘home’. What is ‘home’ and whether it is sufficient to chase it materially outside us or whether we have to rediscover and rebuild it inside ourselves? Do we regard a ‘home’ as fixed in place and time or is it something we carry around with us in our hearts and minds? How and why a sense of home in exile may carry nomadic nuances and creative meanings pitched in the context of the local vis-à-vis the global? Our personal and subjective sense of being and of becoming becomes a process which frames our search of a ‘home away from home’ and perhaps a hope of arriving to a ‘home within’!

The importance of our senses of who we are cannot be underestimated because identity is the essence of humanity, the texture of social fabric and the driving force of human development for better or worse. Identity labels may be used and are often abused for all kinds of socio-political and economic reasons and excuses. Some people may seem more self aware of their identities than others. Others may be even more cognisant of or secretive about their multiple identities. The diversity in our human environment may be the source of that highly prized ‘cosmopolitanism’, at the same time it may become the basis of a great deal of political and social conflict.

So, what is this ‘concept’ called identity? Is it all ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’ or both and much more? Is it ‘originary, integral and unified’ or is it more subjective process of identification in search of self representation? More importantly, and central to the theme of this paper, what becomes of identity in the course of emigration and a life in the diaspora? How do we negotiate our identity as we navigate intercontinental and intercultural terrain?

Gates of the Alhambra
(Courtesy: F. Sheriff)
In this paper I intend to explore, firstly, the concept of identity in terms of both our inner psychological worlds and the outer socio-geographic influences. My contention is that identity is not a fixed phenomenon but an ever evolving process which is dependent on the constant interaction between our inner worlds of personal psyches and inherited collective memories, and the outer worlds of social, political and cultural encounters.

Secondly, I would like to suggest that our evolving sense of being and of becoming depends on the strength of our ‘mentalisation’ process, i.e., when our thoughts and feelings work in tandem and provide a sense of relative comfort and equilibrium in our lives. However, a permanent move away from ‘home’ may rupture this relative calm of the comfort zone whereby one’s identity is thrown centre stage for interrogation and introspection. ‘Leaving home’ may feel like being stripped of the comfort of ones knowledge of oneself within the context of all that was familiar, warm and containing, even if not all that comfortable. In a sense it is like a serious and traumatic loss – often compared to that of ‘death’. In this context, negotiating identity in exile becomes a daily task of processing the pain of that loss in search of some healing and reconciliation and, if possible, of regeneration of spirit towards a functional sense of being with oneself in the wider global community. Such an unavoidable journey is a very personal one and it may take different twists and turns. The degree of its duress may be experienced very subjectively by different individuals according to their own psychological, political and social profiles and histories vis-à-vis the influences of the ‘host’ environment they encounter and must live in. In many cases a life-long search for a ‘home’ away from home may have to contend with ultimately finding a home within oneself.

Finally, in order to highlight some of the issues and points raised above I propose to reflect on my own personal identity journey – something I have negotiated my way through various professions and life in different countries over the last four decades. Considering myself a ‘Mzanzibari’ has meant being held by a steadfast identity core as I have travelled and traversed the intercultural and intercontinental terrain……always negotiating my identity and being self aware in relation to feeling ‘at home’ even if not always ‘in place’.

**Reflection on Identity, Identification, Losses and Regeneration in Exile**

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are in motion, in place, in the form of all kinds of combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I would like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. (Edward Said, 1999: 295)
The concept of identity has been the subject of lively and often acrimonious debates in some areas of social sciences and has been the focus, for instance, of a searching critique in the works of Hall and du Guy (1996). The old notion of an ‘integral, originary and unified’ identity has been deconstructed and transformed into a more power-related concept (Foucault, 1970), translated in terms of subjectivity and unconscious process of formation and articulation, and through representation (Hall, 1993, 1996). This constructionist approach to identity is complex but I believe its focus on the ‘constructive’ and the ‘relational’ is useful in understanding the topic of this paper.

Identity Construction and Identification

Considering individual and collective identity a social construction, Cornell and Hartmann (1998); Hall (1996); and Connelly (1991) maintain that it is changeable, contingent and diverse. This facilitates the understanding of the process of identity construction as a dialectical search for a ‘balance’ between what is assigned in natural, human and circumstantial terms, and what is asserted in relation to identified differences such as race, class, gender and age. There is, thus, an element of agency – individual and collective – in peoples’ search for this ‘balance’. However, since this state of balance is a tenuous social goal, never fully achieved or arrived at, identity is continually formed, reformed, reproduced and often repudiated over time. Cornell and Hartmann (ibid) identify three primary and related issues in identity construction process:

Firstly, there are boundaries which may include markers such as skin colour, ancestry, cultural practices and categorical lines along sex and/or class distinctions signifying difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’. The tendency to consider these in binary and often fixed terms, i.e., black/white; man/woman; rich/poor, have a historical function as may be illustrated in terms of the institutionalisation of race as a boundary issue and all its implications in ones sense of self and the world. Thus, while these boundaries are important markers, it is boundary-fixing in terms of the psych-social and political interpretations which play a crucial role in identity construction process. We need to understand why boundary issues such as race, class, gender and age are articulated differentially and hierarchically in terms of their importance in identity construction. For instance, why has race, especially the colour of skin, as a boundary issue been so deeply ingrained in our psyche as the most profound and troubling difference in identity.

Secondly, there are social positions, both real and perceived. Since identities emerge in the midst of social relations, the construction process involves the positioning of individuals and groups in the context of those relations specifying their ‘locations’ or situations within sets of relationships and statuses. Furthermore, social positions help specify an individual’s or group’s relationship to a larger system of stratification, distribution of power, status and resources.

Thirdly, and most importantly, construction of identities involves the assertion and/or assignment of meanings to events, beliefs, views, and cultural values and so
forth. This attribution of meaning is perhaps the most crucial aspect in identity formation because in giving meaning to issues of boundaries and social positions, it establishes identity’s depth and horizontal terrain in societies and communities. At the same time, however, this very same aspect is perhaps the most difficult to explain because it is so subjectively based on the individual and collective psyche, ideological and spiritual beliefs, knowledge, history and daily experiences. It is through the assignment of meanings that the process of identity formation becomes one of identification.

Formation of identity and the process of identification do not take place in a vacuum. Indeed they are more concretely located in social arenas or sites such as politics, labour markets, housing, social institutions, culture and the day-to-day experiences. These are sites where social actors make claims over resources, define one another, jockey for position in pursuit of exercise of power. Hence, power differentials (based on race, sex, class, etc.) between and among the social agents and groups sharpen, reinforce or dilute identity boundaries attributing differential significance to the identities they define. In this process, those in the dominant positions (whites, heterosexuals, the rich) control much of what goes on in these arenas, shaping opportunities and constraints which institutionalise differences of race, gender and class, to their advantages.

Identity and the Politics of Difference

From a constructionist perspective, and my own subjective inclination, identity may be defined in very simple terms, as ‘people’s source of meaning and experience’ (Castells, 1997) which may be understood as neither settled, singular nor unified across time. Rather identities are multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicisation, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation (Hall, 1996). For many people such a non-essentialist dynamic view of identity may prove problematic because it does not lend itself easily or conveniently to those seeking to ‘fix’ identity to its ‘origin’. The question ‘where do you come from?’ to many of us in the diaspora is all too familiar even if it is not always welcome! This tendency to invoke the ‘origin’ of identities in a historical past may be considered an easy short cut to fix people as if they are outside their ongoing experiences of politicised environment through which new identity associations are being forged. Hall (1996:4) responds to such a tendency by suggesting that ‘identities are about questions of using the resources of history, languages and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we come from” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves... not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our routes’.

The general tendency to ‘fix’ differences of race, class, religion, gender and age may be better understood in the context of the politics of identities. Hall (1993) and Gilroy (1994:4) suggest that ‘precisely because identities are constructed within, not
outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion than they are the sign of identical, naturally constituted unity...'. Thus, ‘contrary to the form in which they are regularly invoked, and because they are constructed through, not outside, difference, identities function as points of identification and attachments only because of their capacity to exclude, leave, out or render outside, abjected’ (Hall, 1996).

Identity and the Paradox of Difference

It is important to note that the constitutive role of difference in identity making has a double edge. It is both relational and paradoxical. It is often taken for granted that an identity is ‘established’ in relation to a series of differences which have become socially organised. These differences are essential to the very being of identity for without them an identity would have no existence in its distinctness! What is perhaps ignored or avoided (because it may be disturbing) is the recognition that the relationship to the ‘other’ is not only indispensable but it harbours tendencies to ‘congeal identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things’ (Connelly, 1991). In other words, identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty. Identity making may therefore be considered ‘trapped’ in the complex and paradoxical relationship with the ‘other’. While it depends on its ability to define, and therefore exclude those who are ‘different’, it is vulnerable to the potential resistance or subversion of the very definitions applied to them. Identity, as a process, stands in a complex political and paradoxical relation to the differences it seeks to fix!

In locating our understanding of identity construction within the context of relations of power (Castells, 1997), we may begin to explore why and how certain identity differentials are considered more acute and difficult than others. Also, why has there been a preoccupation with the issue of race (especially by the colour of skin) more than any other cultural differences. Focusing on the relational, dynamic and contradictory character of power, Castells identifies three forms of identity building. In simplified forms, these are:

1. ‘legitimising identity’ – introduced and jealously guarded by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination vis-à-vis social actors (e.g. nationalist/obedience to law and order);
2. ‘resistance identity’- generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination (e.g. Blacks, disabled, radicals); and,
3. ‘project identity’ when social actors engage in political issues and activities through which they try to redefine their position in society, and, by so doing, seek to transform the overall social and political structures (e.g., feminists, fundamentalists, gays and greens!).
In distinguishing the above forms of identity formation, it must be emphasised that they are non-exclusive and dynamic. Thus identities may start in the form of resistance may induce projects, and may, along the course of history, become dominant and therefore legitimising to rationalise their domination. More importantly, there are the benefits of each identity for the people who ‘belong’. For those excluded, power may be sought through resistance and sometimes through the building of defensive identity to exclude the ‘excluders’ by reversing value judgement while reinforcing the boundaries (e.g. fundamentalists, black pride, etc.).

Although the above constructionist views of identity may not directly elucidate the manner in which identity differences are graded and ordered, the gravity of the psycho-social impact of each difference or marker must be related to the dynamics of history and cultural embeddedness. For instance, the overriding concern with race (especially colour of skin) in our identity awareness may be understood in terms of the ‘naturalised and inferiorised’ role of ‘blackness’ in the depths of the legitimising and dominant identity formation of its opposite ‘whiteness’. In Fanonian terms, white identity secures its humanity only at the price of the dehumanisation of blacks. Although specific forms of racialised identities are historically contingent, the politics of racialised differences and all their emotional baggage of guilt, shame and anger, remain deeply sedimented in our collective unconscious and influence our daily experiences.

**Identity and the Journey into Exile**

Our evolving sense of being and of becoming depends on our early experiences gathered in the containing and caring environment of ‘home’. Our senses of who we are and where we are going may be aided or abetted by the crucial influences of families, friends, familiar and favourite places, even favourite foods and events. The quality of our inner worlds depends on the relative functionality of the caring environment we grow up in. A sense of security, of familiarity, of being cared for in an emotionally nurturing environment – preferably unconditionally – form the bedrock of our sense of identity. These experiences, however, may be very diverse and varied depending on the generational transfers of ways of being and of becoming. Thus, some of us may feel ‘lucky’ to have been attached to particular family, communal and national backgrounds and geographic locations. Many others, however, may have to cope with difficult and different and often dysfunctional circumstances. A sense of pride, shame, and anger often accompany our self awareness in relation to those immediately around us and beyond. More importantly, an evolving sense of identity may be experienced in very subjective ways so that even the same family/caring environment may produce diverse individual senses of personal identity experiences.

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71 This is a complex psychoanalytic concept developed by Fonagy (1997) and associates. Using attachment theory in psychoanalysis, mentalisation process is described as ‘a reflective function of the psyche’. In simple terms it refers to the mental function necessary for depicting feelings and thoughts which guide action (or non-action) in daily experiences.
The depth and strength of who we are and where we might be going is crucially dependent on what has been psychoanalytically defined as ‘mentalisation’ process. This reflective function of the psyche provides the critical backbone to the functioning of our thoughts and feelings and their translations into action/behaviour in our daily lives. Sanity, madness or even simple neurotic behaviour is manifested through the quality of the mentalisation process. As long as this process functions relatively adequately, it provides a sense of ease and comfort in the daily psychological environment of the individual. The idea of being in one’s ‘comfort zone’ is often invoked to suggest one’s sense of inner calm, equilibrium and psychological harmony with oneself and in relation to the outer world. However, any serious disturbance or disruption in the form of any kind of severe trauma may rupture this mentalisation process and shatter this inner sense of equilibrium.

In psychological terms, traumatic events, such as forced emigration, may overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life through instigation of fear, helplessness, anger, insecurity and loss of control. In severe cases, these may produce an altered state of consciousness called ‘dissociation’ (Janet, cited in Herman, 1992). In simple terms this may be explained as a defensive disruption of the mental function necessary for depicting feelings and thoughts. According to Fonagy (1997) dissociation as a rupture in the mentalisation process is the deactivation of the reflective function of the psyche as a strategy against pain and fear which may be unbearable. In less serious and more widely experienced cases, effects of traumatic events such as emigration may be interpreted in terms of feelings of losses of both the material and the intangible.

A permanent departure from ‘home’ to a life in exile, especially if such a move is involuntary or forced, is considered one such traumatic experience. In fact, psychological effects of a permanent move away from home have been compared to those of losses equated with death! Although emigration may not physically terminate one’s life (though occasionally it does), it may throw one’s sense of being into deep turmoil. Migration is indeed constituted of a deep sense of ‘loss’ in all matters of familiarity and security of home, families, friends, memories, familiar places, and even favourite foods and events. It may have primary effect not only on the psychological structure of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community. It may challenge the person’s fundamental assumptions about safety of the world, the positive value of the self and the community, and the meaningful order of the social and political environment. However, while loss of home and all that is familiar may feel like ‘death’, there may be the lingering hope of return (real or imagined) and the very acute need to hold on to such hope often very defensively and through nostalgia.

References to nostalgia or nostalgic memories abound in all kinds of literature related to exile. We take the term for granted because feelings of nostalgia may seem

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71 This term was coined by Fred Davis, a Swiss sociologist in late 17th century, from the Greek word nostos, a return home, and algos, a painful condition. It refers to psychological and often pathological conditions and symptoms related to ‘homesickness’, despondency, melancholia, bouts of weeping, anorexia and even attempts at suicide.
as natural as motor reflexes. It may be hard to find anyone who does not feel some nostalgia about childhood memories. It is important to note, however, that the coining of the term and its extensive use in Anglophonic literature (not to mention that many cultures have no such concept at all) point to two distinct categories of meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the emotions invoked by an attempt to establish one’s innocence, or ‘victimhood’ through tender recollections of an earlier phase of life (listening to old familiar music, retelling old jokes and tales). On the other hand, and as illustrated extensively in colonial literature, the notion of nostalgia assumes the cultural and historical specificity. In many cases, this term assumes an ‘imperialist’ connotation. According to Rosaldo (1989), it is associated with a longing for the very form of life, traditions and cultures which colonial agents may have intentionally altered or destroyed.

The role of nostalgia in the process of healing from the pain of exile tends to combine and often uncritically coalesce these two sets of meanings. It may enhance and even romanticise aspects of one’s memories of innocent yearnings to capture people’s imagination, but it may also conceal complicity with or manipulate unpleasant truths of violence and domination due to experiences of all kinds of cultural differences.

Healing, Recovery and Regeneration of Spirit

Moving away from home is bound to be shrouded in feelings of loss whether acknowledged or otherwise. A sense of alienation, isolation, grief and degrees of pain may accompany a desire to ‘move on’, or to stay put at the first stop destination. In psychological terms, losses (like that of a home) which cannot be recovered, have to be grieved and healed sufficiently to enable a return to some kind of functional equilibrium of the psyche. Depending on the reasons for the departure and the individual subjective experience of exile, it might be useful to consider the healing process according to some of the stages as identified by Kubler-Ross (1969) following the trauma of loss of life.

According to Kubler-Ross, coping and healing from the prospects of death may be considered within the dynamics of five interconnected stages related to the psychological symptoms invoked by the situation. First, there is denial, isolation and disconnection. Phrases like ‘No, not me, it cannot be true’ may recur in the mind of the dying. A sense of disbelief that such a potential loss is about to strike someone’s fate may have to be psychologically warded off in order to maintain any semblance of sanity. This is a necessary defensive buffer following unexpected shocking news or an event such as the news of terminal illness or unplanned emigration to allow the patient/emigrant to collect herself and, with time, mobilise other, less radical defences. Denial, however, can often be a temporary measure which may be replaced

73 This is Dr E Kubler-Ross’ seminal analytic work based on acknowledging the feelings of fear, anger and isolation of the terminally ill patients and their needs to discuss them with their families, doctors and cares. My reference to this work is based on my view that the ‘loss of home’ (though not quite as definite as death though more complex) may produce similar symptoms and require attention to the identified stages in the healing process.
by partial acceptance.

Second, when the first stage of denial in the coping mechanism cannot be
maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy and resentment. In the context of emigration, questions like, ‘Why was it me/us who had to move? What wrong did I/we do to deserve such a punishment of a life in exile?’ may haunt the psyche. In contrast to the stage of denial, this stage of anger may be very difficult to cope with both in terms of the person’s daily life and its effects on the community around her. This is because when emotions of trauma are raw, anger may be displaced in all directions, at all kinds of people and projected onto the environment at times almost at random. The processing of anger, resentment and envy tends to ensnare those who are loved and hated in a way that provokes issues of guilt and sadness in others! Without professional help, this stage may remain unresolved and become destructive for a long time. On the other hand it may spur the sufferer into radical creativity – engagement in political, social or artistic activities in search of some healing.

The third stage includes a sense of bargaining whereby the fear and sadness of real or pending loss may be briefly protected by a belief that one can enter into some kind of an agreement with nature and/or one’s inner world which may postpone the inevitable realisation of the facts. Such a stage may be marked by immigrants’ (and those who are terminally ill) involvement in religion and spiritual matters. Promises of hard work, good behaviour and deadlines for a return home are common features of this stage. Bargaining is essentially an attempt to postpone; it has to include a prize (e.g. of a return home in the near or distant and often imagined future) for good behaviour, and often sets a self-imposed deadline. Needless to say, this stage may quickly prove fragile against the hard day-to-day realities of every day life in exile and the immigrant (patient) may begin to experience a deep sense of loss.

Thus, the fourth stage is marked by depression. The numbness induced by denial, the anger and rage, and the courage or stoicism produced by the efforts at bargaining may be eventually replaced with a sense of great loss, the ultimate realisation of the reality of the situation. The sense of loss at this stage may feel very real and often feared that it may become permanent. A person may be overwhelmed by feelings of tiredness, listlessness, sleepiness and debilitating loss of interest in life and the world around. Alleviation of such depression, if severe, may take time and require professional psychotherapeutic help. In less serious cases, the migrant may gradually try to understand the causes of the depression and attempt to alleviate some of the unrealistic symptoms through verbal interactions and often active interventions.

Given sufficient time and a containing and supportive environment, the above stages of experiencing of loss can be vented and meaningfully expressed. It could then be said that adequate mourning of the loss has taken place, that the person has reached the stage of acceptance of his or her permanent loss of home and the fate of a life in exile. This, however, should not be taken as a happy or totally reconciled stage. Arrival at this stage is almost always relative. It is neither guaranteed nor universal. It may be unconsciously hindered or even sabotaged as the various aspects of the earlier stages may reappear. The sabotaging influences of the sadness of
departure, in collusion with the fear of not returning has, for instance, been poignantly illustrated in Said’s (1999) candid memoir. He states, when I travel I always take too much with me, and that even a trip downtown requires the packing of a briefcase stocked with items disproportionately larger in size and number than the actual period of the trip. Analyzing this, I concluded that I had a secret but ineradicable fear of not returning. What I’ve since discovered is that despite this fear I fabricate occasions for departure, thus giving rise to the fear voluntarily. (Said, 1999:217).

Often earlier feelings of envy and resentment interfere with this reconciliation stage in the healing process as Said (ibid:218) continues –

I also experience moodiness of travel…along with envy for those who stay behind, whom I see on my return, whose faces unshadowed by dislocation, happily with their families there for all to see. Something about the invisibility of the departed, his being missing and perhaps being missed…makes you feel the need to leave again because of some prior but self-created logic, and a sense of rapture. In all cases, though, the great fear is that departure is the state of being abandoned, even though it is you who leave.

Confronted by a deep sense of loss through enforced migration, most will go through the above stages of healing. They would individually negotiate these stages through various defence or coping mechanisms according to their own personality strengths in relation to the environment they encounter. These stages of negotiations will last for different periods of time and will replace each other or exist at times side by side. The one thing that usually persists through all these stages is hope. No matter what we call it, those trying to negotiate a life in exile maintain some degree of it and are nourished by it especially in difficult times. Where there is hope there is a way becomes more than an ordinary expression. It becomes a necessity and an asset in the process of healing and regeneration of one’s spirits in exile.

To recap the above theoretical points, I have tried, firstly, to suggest that our sense of our identity is an integral part of our psyche and that emigration both accentuates and challenges our self-awareness of our being and of becoming. My personal take on the concept of identity is that it is neither fixed nor unified. Rather, it is constructed within the discourses of difference and relations of power, and seeks a sense of becoming rather than just being. Secondly, and in view of the fact that exile significantly influences this process of identity formation, I have briefly discussed the inevitable sense of loss of home and the need to heal, recover and perhaps regenerate one’s spirit for a life in exile. Departure from home may become the beginning of a long and difficult and unavoidable journey in search of identity and that illusive thing called ‘home’. This journey is very personal and subjective. Its experiences vary widely according to an individual’s psychological, socio-political and cultural profile and history vis-à-vis the influences of the ‘host’ environment he or she encounters and lives in. Finally, in order to illustrate some of the issues raised above, I would like to briefly reflect on my own personal identity journey in which I have negotiated my
sense of becoming through various professional and life experiences in different countries over the last four decades.

Reflections on my Identity Journey across different countries and cultures.

Narrating what may seem like a life-story is daunting and may be considered presumptuous! However, years of training and hard work as a social scientist and a psychotherapist in exile, gives me the confidence that self narrative is, in some ways, not only appropriate but also useful in reflecting on one’s personal psychological journey. There are three principles which guide my following brief narrative:

First, my views on identity are constructionist and they are affiliated to Hall’s (1996) reference to identities being about questions of using resources of history, languages and culture in the process of becoming rather than being (emphasis mine). I would also add that the resources include our inner senses of curiosities, our talents and psychological make-up and emotional inheritance.

Secondly, my reflections on the emotional turmoil underlining my search of a ‘home’ finds deep resonance in Said’s (1999) own expressions of the paradoxes of such a search.

Thirdly, at an intellectual and emotional level, negotiating identity across cultural diversities may function best along certain chosen paths using specific sources of cultural artefacts and aspects– often unconsciously selected. In my own case, some of my experiences have been flowing along the lines of my interests in the languages, culinary and island/maritime aspects of cultures and ambience.
From Kiponda to Bahia de Malaga

Having been born and brought up (in a large extended family) in Zanzibar, I have spent the last four decades negotiating my sense of becoming in a life in exile. I have negotiated my way through various professions and a life in different countries and cultures. Considering myself a ‘Mzanzibari’ has meant being held by a steadfast identity core (multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, with all the positive and the paradoxical) as I have travelled and traversed intercultural and intercontinental terrain in search of a ‘home’. My journey has been marked by nomadic nuances and creative attachments, sometimes provisional, to matters for intellectual and cultural pursuits. These pursuits have guided my frequent travels (including regular trips to Zanzibar) as I have tried to understand where I have been going and what I have been becoming, always learning and hungry for more.

Having been ‘blessed’ with a good early education, albeit totally colonial (an ‘unstealable resource’ as my father used to say!)-often achieved through some struggle within the then prevailing Islamic cultural restrictions on women in the family-I moved on to higher education. This was in the fields of Geography (BA) Urban Planning (MSc.) Development Studies (PhD) -with a focus on housing, women and children, and, for the last ten years, to an additional qualification in Intercultural Psychotherapy (MSc, UKCP). I may not need to point out that the choices of these disciplinary fields-tinged with nomadic professionalism – partly reflect my unconscious search of a ‘home’ and what to make of a life in exile. All these fields and their application in the academia have taught me a great deal. More particularly, they have sharpened my awareness about the politics of knowledge and its crucial role in world development affairs. They have enhanced my efforts at decolonising my thoughts and imagination. However, it is the discipline of psychotherapy that has finally come to the rescue in my desire to come to terms with my roving identity and peace with my semi-nomadic professional and socio-cultural life.

Pursuit of the above educational and professional journeys have taken me through countries like India, Pakistan, England (where I have been based), Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the USA. Each journey, though often nomadic, has left its mark and taught me lessons of survival and of understanding the complexities of being in exile and of attempting to come to terms with a sense of belonging.

This section is part of an ongoing book project bearing the title of this paper.
Kuwait, Dubai, the Netherlands and, more recently to Spain (where I am partly based). Dotted in between these journeys I even tried to ‘return home’ to work and live as I was unconsciously trying to process both my hope of returning and fear of not managing to do. Overall, working and living in these countries have sharpened my interest in languages and culinary aspects of the host communities. In this, I have always been inclined to lean more favourably and comfortably towards things which smack of cultural familiarity. For instance, trying to learn Urdu, Arabic and, more recently, Farsi and Spanish, may be seen as associated with my deeply embedded desire to claim my linguistic and cultural home in Kiswahili\(^{75}\) and its Arabic roots. Learning and adapting to these languages may, therefore, signify the routes I have adopted in my identity journey. They have certainly been giving me a very welcome accessibility to more learning and cultural insights into the politics of languages in cultures.

Another venue of my ongoing identity and home searching journey has been the exploration and adoption of culinary cultures of the ‘host’ communities I have so far encountered. It is often suggested that exiles often use food to ‘entice’ folk they join across the seas in an effort to ‘integrate’. Thus, I am very satisfied with my regular Sunday breakfast with mandazis, mbazi and vitumbuas, (Zanzibari/Swahili). I am equally comfortable and happy with puris and chapattis (Zanzibari/Indian), za’atars and sphihas (Arabic Middle Eastern), bread and muhammara (Turkish/Anatolian) and, pan con aceite (Spanish toasted bread with olive oil). Similarly, and in line with my attachment to rice dishes, I find myself enjoying the nostalgic white pilau lunch (Swahili/Zanzibari) on Sundays as much as mujjadra (Syrian/Lebanese), shireen polo (Iranian) and paella (Spanish). More specifically, I seem to have grown to like the variety and have developed the ability to carefully mix and match these in my own wider culinary repertoire which I find both nourishing and nurturing.

The subtitle of this section reflects my very special attachment to island cultures and proximity to the sea. It therefore is not surprising that my identity journey so far has taken me from Forodhani to Bahia de Malaga (Bay of Malaga) in Andalusia\(^{76}\). Such a ‘crescent’-shaped route has not all been accidental. Rather it has been a reflection of the route of my ongoing search of a ‘home’ near a warm sea surrounded by warm humanity. This phase has been imbued with a mixture of pleasurable as well as painful experiences, often tinged with nostalgia and the paradoxes of a yearning to belong. Finding resonance in Said’s words,

\[^{75}\text{In my childhood, the use of Kiswahili language was forbidden to me both at school due to the English colonial reasons and at home because of the family’s multi-ethnic differences being considered as better and superior! My quiet emotional attachment to Kiswahili appears to underlie my desire to militate against such negative and unjust cultural practices which hinder intercultural depth and wealth.}\]

\[^{76}\text{Bahia de Malaga}\]

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To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterises my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years (1999:217).

In many other ways, however, this phase has perhaps enabled me to construct a ‘home’ inside myself and helped me remain comfortably functional in often challenging and sometimes hostile socio-political and cultural environments, especially in North Western Europe. Politically, living in the Anglo-American axis of political barbarism and state terrorism has not been easy especially with the current phase of rampant Islamophobia. Nonetheless, the creative nomadic nuances in my internal ‘home’ seem to enable me to remain politically involved without the yearning to belong, integrated or to be ‘rooted’.

In conclusion, my identity journey in exile, from Zanzibar to the Gates of the Alhambra, can be most appropriately wrapped up, once again, in Said’s (1999:295) poignant words. He refers to his experiences of himself as ‘a cluster of flowing currents’, always in motion, in time, in place even if in contradiction at times, and calls it….

A form of freedom, I would like to think, even if I am far from being convinced that it is. That scepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.

With some modification I would add that I can almost always be ‘at home’ wherever I am and prefer to be so even if I am considered out of place!

References:
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The choice of Malaga is, for me, clearly associated with the city’s location on the Mediterranean but also because its historic proximity to the splendid old Moorish cities of Granada (the site of the Alhambra), Cordoba and its Mezquita or the Mosque, and, Seville where the Palace of Alcazar is. Also on a clear day, one can see the North African coast of Morocco—a bonus!
Sailing boat
(From ‘Below the Wind’)

Houses on Stilts
(From ‘Below the Wind’)

Man on boat - Sea Gypsy
(From ‘Below the Wind’)

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