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# Africa e Mediterraneo

C U L T U R A E S O C I E T À

## n. 87 | L'Africa si racconta. Dal griot all'influencer digitale

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*Sauti ya Kisonge: Images and Imaginaries Debated on the Cyberbaraza*

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Money Can Buy Friends: Wealth and Relationships in Senegalese TV Series

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Una società in scena: teatro e fiction televisive in Senegal dall'indipendenza a oggi



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# *Sauti ya Kisongwe*: Images and Imaginaries Debated on the *Cyberbaraza*

A blackboard in Zanzibar town, known as *Sauti ya Kisongwe* (the voice of Kisongwe), has reached a global public through the dynamics of digital media: different imaginaries are discussed concerning the alternative public of *cyberbaraza*.

by Irene Brunotti

**A**t a central intersection of Zanzibar Town stands a blackboard known as *Sauti ya Kisongwe* (the voice of Kisongwe). Its fame arises from the very strong, politically-concerned messages that are written on it on a daily basis. The site of local political practices, *Sauti ya Kisongwe* has reached a global public through the dynamics of communication shared through digital media. Drawing from Roman Loimeier's notion of *baraza* as «an important feature of the Zanzibari public sphere» (Loimeier 2005, p. 26), this study uses the unique alternative and “locally” grounded concept of *cyberbaraza* (Brunotti 2016) to look at the nature of images, and the ways they are shared on digital social networks as an area of political debate.

## Introduction

The Michenzani neighbourhood, a central urban area of Zanzibar *ng'ambo*,<sup>1</sup> from which almost every corner of Unguja island is reachable, is not only a strategic location but, more importantly, it strongly represents the embodiment of postcolonial urban policies. Located outside *Mji Mkongwe* (the old city), commonly known as Zanzibar Stone Town, it was chosen by the first independent government after the revolution<sup>2</sup> as the location for a magnificent housing project of 6,992 apartments distributed over 229 blocks (5 to 15 stories high) for approximately 30,000 residents (Myers 1994, p. 455). However, the project translated into the building of only eight Soviet-era style blocks with 1,102 apartments which are today known as “The Trains” of Michenzani. As a clear attempt at state control imposed on the domestic environment, the project failed in its major intent, while a locally derived urban area developed as a counterpoint to the dominant ideology (Myers 1995). This is revealed, for instance, by the emergence of *baraza*<sup>3</sup> and *maskani*<sup>4</sup> at the base of these imposing blocks. The residents' response to the government's urban planning was to reproduce the very central places of sociability characterizing Zanzibar society which had been completely ignored and overlooked in “The Trains” project. The buildings dominate the central Kisongwe roundabout, an

area which, in 2013, was chosen to host the memorial of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution, to become the site of the new commemorative monument, the *Mnara wa Mapinduzi* (Tower of Revolution), which was still unfinished a year after the anniversary in 2015. As impressive as the housing blocks were at the time of their building, the Tower of Revolution rises behind them to remind Zanzibar of the founding myth of the 1964 new Zanzibar nation and to unfold, once again, the authoritarian exercise of power which, far from being inserted within a local meaningful reception, is welcomed by ineluctable indifference (Fouéré 2017a).

On one side of the roundabout, *Sauti ya Kisongwe* has acquired a very interesting role, symbolizing the political practices, but also underlining the dominant political discourses permeating the local sociopolitical context.

*Sauti ya Kisongwe* is actually a blackboard positioned close to one of the most important branches of the CCM - *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (Revolutionary Party),<sup>5</sup> the ruling party in Zanzibar. Famous because of its controversial politically-themed messages written on it daily in chalk, it voices one-sided CCM political statements addressing Zanzibar's local public. While nobody knows who writes the messages on the board, *Sauti ya Kisongwe* is an important landmark, which Zanzibaris refer to as a manipulated space to foster the hegemony of the ruling party and to symbolize the impossibility for counter-discourses to be voiced or enacted.

In fact, in spite of the re-introduction of a multiparty system in 1995<sup>6</sup> that legitimized open debate between political parties, the elections have been, since then, characterized by vehement confrontations, violent riots, political exclusion and suppression (Bakari 2011). Facing it on the opposite side of the roundabout, is a branch of the main opposition party, the CUF - *Chama cha Wananchi* (Civic United Front). Both the *maskani* in Kisongwe are extremely lively social locations that have also been places where the sympathizers of one or more of the parties can meet and participate in debates on political issues, «un espace intensément disputé dans le rapport de force iconographique qui a opposé le CCM et le CUF» (Fouéré 2017b, p. 125). As Fouéré informs, during politically relevant

moments, for instance during electoral campaigns, whenever the sympathizers of CUF hang their posters up they are regularly removed by CCM sympathizers. Although flyposting in Kisongwe is officially prohibited, the removal of CUF posters by CCM supporters seems to be a daily practice all over the city (Fouéré 2017b). As a result, CUF supporters have embraced the challenge and have committed themselves to endure this illegal behaviour, «pour inscrire la contestation dans l'espace public» as a militant act (Fouéré 2017b, p. 125).

The very local experience of bill posting clearly exemplifies the atmosphere surrounding the offline political practice, but does not account for the potentially diverse models of political practices that the digital social network seems to open up. While *Sauti ya Kisongwe* loudly echoes the one-sided CCM political statements, the opposition has no board on which to reply to them and through which to transform them into political debate in search of consensus, and thus, legitimization.

On the contrary, the photos of the same blackboard statements shared on digital social networks allow for a very different participation in debates which reach a temporally and spatially wider social participating audience, and open up imaginaries that, although de-territorialized, remain very much locally grounded.

Here the discursive hegemony of the CCM is challenged by the very nature of digital publics, and among them of the *cyberbaraza*, which suggests the need for a different experience and conceptualization of political practices (and activism).

### **Cyberbaraza: an Alternative Public**

Drawn from the notion of *baraza*, as «an important feature of Zanzibari's public sphere» (Loimeier 2005, p. 26), the *cyberbaraza* is a unique alternative and locally grounded concept in order to be able to understand the phenomenon of publics on the Zanzibar islands. The *cyberbaraza* is to me one of those public forums that David J. Goldstone recognizes as marking the cyberspace which he describes as being «more like a city» (1998, p. 10), where some of the forums should be treated as public and others should not. I understand the *cyberbaraza* as neither the literal cyberspace, nor solely as Chartesian spatial notion, and not even as the whole Internet as such, but rather as a place which includes the three dimensions which characterize the architectural counterpart - organizational, spatial and temporal (Loimeier 2005) - and which are profoundly affected by, and affect, the sociability of its character.

The *cyberbaraza* is a digital public made up of practices of communication enacted on the Internet (digital social networks), and regulated, as is the case with the *baraza* in the Zanzibar Town, by unofficial but conscious membership rules, behavioural norms, attendance, commitment, participation and agency (Brunotti 2016). Here discourses characterizing Tanzanian geopolitics, and in particular Zanzibar as a micro-context, become global in their scale, allowing the people who are undocumented offline to participate in a diverse form

of political discussion. It constitutes itself as a «parallel discursive arena(s) where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs» (Fraser 1990, p. 67), expanding it and opposing the monolithic and dominant narratives characterizing the offline public sphere. Where political identities are often under threat within offline publics, the *cyberbaraza* as a public space appears to allow concerns to be voiced, suggesting a certain degree of freedom of speech.<sup>7</sup> Here subjectivities are defined through the practice of communication, that is to say communicative practices in the Swahili language, on issues of common concern, which are debated upon through

the variety of texts available in the digital media.

Participants develop discussions through which they construct a profile of themselves, freed from the offline official identification codes but still endorsed by public recognition. It is established through the «mediated activity that seeks to raise people's awareness, give a voice to

those who do not have one, offer social empowerment, allow disparate people and causes to organize themselves and form alliances, and ultimately be used as a tool for social change» (Fenton 2008, p. 63). The *cyberbaraza* emerges as a social space in a new sense, where formerly bounded, physical spaces interpenetrate and manifest through new patterns of flow and (trans)formation (Cohen 2007). An alternative space where information is produced, circulated, debated and legitimized collectively, this is where diasporic identities are called upon to have a role, materially and discursively, in the identity formation, disrupting or altering pre-existent geographies of power; it is a site of narratives of early and contemporary transnationalism and globalization too.<sup>8</sup>

As part of a digital public, the *cyberbaraza* participants create communities that are tied to a sense of belonging, enacted through personal stories and experiences, which are narrated, shared and read. These processes of storytelling are a novel space for the public to engage with traditional power centres through a different experience of political practice and participation (Nishant and Jansen 2011). Allowing organization around a person's interests or relationships, the digital social networks are mainly based on the notion and practice of sociability, rather than on content. They are frequently used for people to meet both online and offline (consider Facebook or Twitter). Yet they exhibit effective communicative features, which have also been used in critical situations to report injustice and trigger immediate responses, as well as for the opposite effect - to implement injustices and incite violence, facilitating harassment events.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to contemporary political Zanzibar, what is to be investigated is the kind of response to the dominant and hegemonic political discourses permeating the offline public as replied to, and contested, through the online public.

Agreeing with anthropologists of media on the reflective

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**The *cyberbaraza* is a digital public made up by of practices of communication enacted on the Internet (digital social networks), and regulated, as is the case with the *baraza* in the Zanzibar town, by unofficial but conscious membership rules, behavioural norms, attendance, commitment, participation and agency.**

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role of media, therefore considering media texts as integral to broader social and cultural discourses,<sup>10</sup> the paper reveals how political thought and Swahili Zanzibari knowledge are conveyed and circulated in the *cyberbaraza*. Relying on the cyber-ethnography (Gajjala and Altman 2006), the study looks at the different alternative ways of shaping the ability of the actors involved to produce, discuss and deliberate on political issues. It envisions how the communicative practices evolving on the *cyberbaraza* can contribute to the debate on their implications, if any, for the practice of politics. Therefore, it critically examines the *cyberbaraza* as constituting a counterpublic (Fraser 1990), within the multiplicity of the existing public spheres.

### *Sauti ya Kisonge Goes Online*

Looking at the times preceding and following the election re-run on March 20th, 2016,<sup>11</sup> the debates arising on the *cyberbaraza* reveal a relevant alteration of the nature of political practice and participation as compared to the offline context. While the political statements written and publicly displayed on *Sauti ya Kisonge* in Michenzani are realized in a fixed location and bounded by a monopoly over their content, the images shared within the digital public - the *cyberbaraza* - define a wider social commentary. Unfettered by their fixedness, they are displayed on a variety of social media platforms which open up diverse imaginaries and foster political debates that are intrinsically different. In fact, besides the involvement of Zanzibaris in the diaspora, the *cyberbaraza* as a public is not limited by time constraints and welcomes a kind of participation that is based on common concerns, ethics and civic responsibility. Compared to the Stone Town *baraza*, which can be seen as «gendered spaces» (Loimeier 2008, p. 152), the *cyberbaraza* is constituted through the negotiation and re-negotiation of social identities, therefore overcoming any restrictive dichotomous definition. Whether or not members construct their own profile indicating a specific gender through which to be identified or not, this does not affect their participation, or their membership, as long as the implied behavioural ethics are respected.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2016 a post on *Jamiiforum*,<sup>12</sup> a very popular user-generated content site widely used by Swahili-speaking communities, reads: «I do not even comment...»,<sup>13</sup> the caption to a group of photos of *Sauti ya Kisonge* stating (in order of appearance): «go to fill your own districts, you migrate in such a horrible way, you're taking even the chickens with you. Revolution forever», «go back home, you who do not agree, let us lovers of peace and development free», «the boil of oil has been already popped up. Your fake company should go on digging water wells», «Woe are they! Pemba should be peaceful but in Unguja we are tired of turmoil: the 2015 reconciliation should end to have peace in Unguja. Revolution forever!», «Zanzibar is the second city in Tanzania to be invaded by so many people. So, do you actually know where are you standing? You are 530 every Km<sup>2</sup>!».<sup>14</sup>

The pictures, appearing all at once in the post, do not inform us of the details of the statements written on the blackboard (date, occasion); they address a variety of very relevant political issues debated upon by the two parties within the wider political context of the Union of Tanzania (1964). The state-

ments refer at different levels to the huge migration that has been taking place since the 1960s from the rural and urban areas of Pemba Island to Zanzibar Town in Unguja. While portraying the socioeconomic challenges that the population in Pemba has been facing since the revolution, due to an imbalanced redistribution of resources which is often re-inserted into identity politics, the post also reveals the disappointment felt by CCM supporters concerning the contemporary social context. In a time of economic crisis, which has been worsened by neoliberal policies enacted since the 1980s, CCM sympathizers strongly disagree with the status quo: where CUF supporters claim and demonstrate for more equality, with reference to the whole archipelago and not only to Unguja island, CCM supporters see their own context as unjustly threatened. They define themselves as supporters of peace and development, and recall the revolutionary motto *Mapinduzi daima!* (Revolution forever) to remind others of the modernist dream of the then new nation. Yet, the new nation they are referring to is the one emerging from the Union of the islands with Tanganyika, a Union that Zanzibaris have always been concerned with, especially referring to issues of sovereignty, the structure of the Union, legal participation and significant agency of the islands in Union matters, the distribution of resources, and policy implementation. In this context, racial rhetoric has never been excluded from the everyday life of ordinary people, rather it has been constantly invented anew: in «(...) post-revolutionary Zanzibar, racial categories were reimagined in the course of conversations about how to realize the modernist dream of building a nation-state» (Glassmann 2011, p. 287). Among the clear geopolitical entities created, the CUF (political identity) was made equal to “Pembanness” (identities constructed around the island of Pemba) in claiming sovereignty and more independence from the mainland. While during the 2015 election campaign a stronger overall “Zanzibar identity” was permeating the digital narratives (Brunotti 2018), the new political scenario invites old patterns of identification to dominate the offline debates and within the *cyberbaraza*: Pembans should go home, the reconciliation should be broken, Unguja’s problems are all caused by their presence. Suddenly the Zanzibar identity, previously recalled to claim a better redistribution of Tanzanian resources between the mainland and the archipelago, is downplayed to underline the futility of the CUF’s claims of rights to the ownership of natural resources (namely oil) and to invite them to leave the situation as it is.

Yet, while in Kisonge, in the local context of CCM *maskani* (and maybe also CUF), the statements would have provoked what could be called a “monotone” discussion on the matter, without any possible visual reply, members of the *cyberbaraza* offer lively comment and debate around them, constituting themselves, in this way, as counter public. The pictures posted on *Jamiiforum* trigger a debate on models of political practice in Zanzibar (but not exclusively) as one comment suggests: «I agree with Donald Trump’s opinion on Africans».<sup>15</sup> The comment refers to the rumors that US president Donald Trump had defined Africans as «lazy and prone to crime».<sup>16</sup> Here the post, regardless of the truthfulness of the rumours, brings the debate onto a more international level, while showing the individual interests of the *cyberbaraza*’s member is very much



locally located. Followed by another comment reading, «these CCM supporters in Unguja hate Pembans. Don't they know that Shein<sup>17</sup> himself is just a Pemban?»,<sup>18</sup> it delves into the politics of identities of the islands, bringing it once more back into the open. Notwithstanding the day when the statement was actually written on the blackboard in Kisonge, we discover the same picture had briefly been discussed in October 2015 under the subpage *Burudani - Habari-Picha* (Entertainment, News-Photos) on *Mzalendo.net*, the webpage of the newspaper *Mzalendo*. Here the perspective is turned upside down and the commenter makes fun of it: «So do actually Kisonge people know that if Pembans leave Unguja they will die of starvation? What about the police or Dr. Shein, do they know that? »<sup>19</sup> On the digital social networks members are reacting to the exclusive racial category to which CUF supporters are reduced. With a direct reference to *Sauti ya Kisonge*, on *Zanzibar Daima* (Zanzibar forever),<sup>20</sup> under the session *Uchambu-*

*zi* (Analysis), it reads: «CCM has its famous blackboard called “Sauti ya Kisonge” outside its branch in Michenzani, Zanzibar. Recently, racist statements addressing Arabs and people with mixed blood and, obviously, Pembans, have been written on it continuously. People coming from Pemba Island have become the great blood sacrifice of every harsh racist attack by the hands of the CCM. Luckily, there are people who recorded this propaganda of hatred. I have never heard any official statement that blames this behaviour on the CCM. (...) Fortunately, there are people who see this behaviour and do not agree with it, but they do not dare to speak aloud, for fear of being intimidated by the attacks of this main and old party».<sup>21</sup> Addressing the racist statements that had appeared on some boards carried by CCM supporters during a demonstration on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2016,<sup>22</sup> the author openly mentions *Sauti ya Kisonge*, and fearlessly accuses the CCM's heads of indifference towards the issue. Her article goes on to compare Zan-



Above: Michenzani. Courtesy of Rose Marie Beck.

Right: "Even if we all die, we won't let the nation go! Revolution forever".  
<https://www.facebook.com/znzdaima>  
 (posted on 23rd January 2016, 01:54 pm; accessed on 7th January 2018).

zibar to Rwanda at the time of the genocide: the author asks herself what exactly the difference is between the two countries if the Zanzibar police authorizes the CCM to continue publishing and advertising racist statements and inciting violence and segregation on their boards. Addressing Muslims, Pembans, Arabs and people of mixed ethnic origins as circumscribed and fixed identities, she argues that the CCM is actually losing sight of what Zanzibar is, and, ultimately, of what many of the CCM supporters are too.<sup>23</sup>

A very short comment follows the article: «Thanks for your contribution to humanity and rights».<sup>24</sup> The concept of humanity is used here to refer to the Swahili saying *utu ni vitendo* (*utu* is action), meaning a humanity based on human beings' agency, on the very capability and possibility to (re)act, (ex)change, (trans)form any condition and situation that, consequently, are never perceived as permanent or motionless. «*Utu* consists of acting well, in having mercy towards your fellow human beings, and being kind, and so on, that's *utu*» (Haji 2017).<sup>25</sup> Therefore this notion, at different levels, refers both to a general moral goodness, trustworthiness, and to the good actions through which it becomes explicit. *Utu* rests on *imani* (faith, belief, religious belief) and implies a moral behavior that prescribes the treatment of others in a just way and not to take advantage of them. It implies respect and good deeds, and can never be bad (Kresse 2007). In other words, here the *cyberbaraza* member is relocating the article's argument calling for the unique Swahili social imaginary of *utu* to address and embrace a wider acknowledging public. By social imaginary I mean here, «the creation of significations and the creation of images and figures that support these significations» (Castoriadis 1987), that are «widely and commonly shared» (Taylor 2002). They are embedded in the habits of a population or carried in implicit understanding that underlie and make common practices possible. (Göle 2002) In this way the *cyberbaraza* constitutes itself as a public, being a space of debate that is fundamentally locally grounded, overcoming the impossibility of constituting an effective offline (counter)public sphere. *Cyberbaraza's* members do not remain in silence, but rather they (re)act in search of legitimization, openly replying to offline incitements: «The blackboard of Kisonge is strategically supported and given strength as a kind



## Sauti ya Kisongwe: immagini e immaginari dibattuti nel cyberbaraza

**N**ella città di Zanzibar c'è una lavagna conosciuta come *Sauti ya Kisongwe*, nota per il forte messaggio politico che trasmette: essa dà voce alle affermazioni del partito di governo CCM, anche se nessuno sa chi sia l'autore dei messaggi. L'opposizione non ha lavagne o altri spazi su cui replicare, eppure le immagini della stessa lavagna, condivise sui *social media*, permettono la partecipazione a vari dibattiti a un pubblico più ampio, in termini di tempo e spazio. Partendo dal concetto di *baraza* (lett. una lunga panchina o gradone di pietra o cemento costruito a ridosso dei muri esterni delle case), spazio concreto di condivisione e importante aspetto della sfera pubblica di Zanzibar, l'articolo esplora quello di *cyberbaraza*: inteso non (o non esclusivamente) come cyberspazio, o come nozione spaziale in senso cartesiano, né semplicemente come Internet.

Il *cyberbaraza* è lo stesso pubblico digitale che, pur attingendo alle pratiche di comunicazione proprie della *web*, è regolato, come il *baraza* a Zanzibar, da norme - non ufficiali ma consapevoli - di comportamento, impegno e partecipazione. Un'arena parallela, dove membri di gruppi sociali subordinati creano e fanno circolare un contro-discorso portatore di un certo grado di libertà di espressione, dando vita a comunità che sono legate da un profondo senso di appartenenza. Uno spazio alternativo in cui l'informazione è prodotta, circola, viene dibattuta e legittimata.

L'egemonia, anche comunicativa, del partito dominante è in questo modo sfidata grazie alle possibilità dello spazio pubblico digitale, e da quello del *cyberbaraza*: attraverso le dinamiche della comunicazione tramite *media online*, *Sauti ya Kisongwe* raggiunge un pubblico globale.

L'articolo rivela come il pensiero politico e le conoscenze swahili di Zanzibar siano convogliate e circolino in maniera alternativa nel *cyberbaraza*. La varietà di *social media* apre diversi immaginari e sviluppa dibattiti differenti, accomunati però da una partecipazione basata sulla responsabilità etica e civile. Uno spazio informato per il dibattito politico, dunque, capace di dare voce anche al malcontento che non ha spazio all'interno delle pratiche politiche *offline*.

of political department of the ruling party that has been assigned the function of spreading racist, ethnic and segregationist opinions and philosophy. The aim is just one: to make sure that Zanzibar remains chained to those filthy politics that are outdated, that were ruled by ethnic, racist, tyrannical and servile emotions in order to preserve the benefits of the rulers and their families».<sup>26</sup>

Navigating the variety of social media platforms, *Sauti ya Kisongwe* resonates in a very different way, and triggers more intense and participated debates which at one point found their home on Facebook. The photo in the paper that reads «Even if we all die, we won't let the nation go! Revolution forever»,<sup>27</sup> is used on different social media platforms, being a very direct and strong statement revealing indisputable evidence, at least from the point of view of the ruling party. This evidence would remain indisputable if the blackboard could not be decontextualized and entextualized (Barber 2005)<sup>28</sup> on the social media. The blackboard is, indeed, just as performative offline as it is online, but the entextualization of debates on the *cyberbaraza* opens up a public space to engage in political discourses that formulate oppositional interpretations. Published on Mohamed Ghassani's Facebook page by a member of this *cyberbaraza*, the picture is inserted in a lengthy debate surrounding the election rerun and the possible boycott by CUF sympathizers. The debate starts discussing the role of Jecha Salim Jecha, Zanzibar Electoral Commission's Chairman, as representative of the CCM's freewill and power as compared to CUF political weakness. Some members highlight the futility of elections that in any case would never reflect a democratic decision. Others, on the contrary, dare to announce the photo as a clear sign that Zanzibar needs respect (*heshima*) and that paying respect translates into exercising the right to vote. However, it ends: «We must go back to the ring very quickly. Otherwise it is like reassuring the world that the CCM was right. Let's go to vote happy and faithful in the victory - even one thousand times».<sup>29</sup> «Better to die respected instead of living a shameful life»,<sup>30</sup> states another post. But in response to the evidence of the CCM's victory and, most importantly, to oppose the shocking election result annulment of 20<sup>th</sup> October 2015 most of the members agree that rerunning the election would be a sign of immaturity by the CUF, while now the party needs to claim its right with all its efforts. «If the CUF agrees with the election rerun the truth is that I will know that the leaders are there just for their own bellies' benefit, because the CCM knows that if elections are free and democratic they cannot win. But they wanted elections rerun because they have already planned each and every trick to sabotage them. There is no need to get back to the polling stations, let the gods of the world to do whatever they want».<sup>31</sup> Here is where the caption with the photo comes in, accompanied by an absolute refusal to go to vote again. The debate continues for days. Eventually CUF supporters boycotted the new elections, manifesting their support and commitment to their own political convictions through the communicative practices enacted as *cyberbaraza* goes, yet mirroring them in offline political practice. Therefore, the social media not only acted as a facilitating tool in organizing offline political actions, but also,

in Latour's words (2007), as a mediator, often silent, which modifies the relationship among other agents, developing a different form of mediation which can transform, translate, distort or modify meanings or elements. The *cyberbaraza* clearly constitutes a «space that ultimately becomes the training ground for action and reaction» (Castellas 2009, p. 301), a counterpublic that not only debates but also deliberates on an issue of common concern, eventually affecting the offline political context.

The CCM won the elections on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, led by Dr. Ali Mohamed Shein, who was elected president again winning 91.4% of the votes cast.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion

By exploring online Swahili discussions around the photos of *Sauti ya Kisongwe*, a landmark in Zanzibar Town embedded into the sociopolitical context of the island, the text considers the pictures and the debates surrounding them as anthropological texts (Barber 2005), giving attention to the contents of the debates, the language, but also their dynamics. In doing so, it suggests it is possible to view online discussions as a public, through the analytical and unifying concept of *cyberbaraza*. The study has revealed some interesting aspects concerning the alternative ways political thought and Swahili Zanzibari knowledge are conveyed and circulated online, disclosing the different models of political practices that are enacted by the *cyberbaraza*, focusing on the images of *Sauti ya Kisongwe*. The study reveals how *cyberbaraza* constitutes an informed forum for political debate, giving voice also to the discontent of counter publics that have no voice within offline political practices.

Their deliberation might be brought to bear on pragmatic and meaningful political action, as the boycott of the election rerun showed. *Sauti ya Kisongwe*, decontextualized and entextualized on social media becomes an object of common political concern that can be expressed in a way that is uniquely proper to the *cyberbaraza* as a digital public. It is within the *cyberbaraza* that new and diverse imaginaries are opened and made accessible to a wider public through the communicative practices of their goers. While in the offline context, *Sauti ya Kisongwe's* statements cannot be argued or opposed by any counter public, the visual and social performative power of the blackboard in Michenzani is transformed by the *cyberbaraza* and enacted as a counter discourse to the hegemonic political narratives of the CCM.

### NOTES

1 - Lit. the other side, it consists of a vast area of Zanzibar Town that has been known throughout history as the area where the "others" live, other than the powerful elite living in Stone Town, marking the unique identity politics characterizing the history of the islands.

2 - After gaining full self-government as an independent country (Zanzibar Act of the United Kingdom) in 1963, Zanzibar experienced a violent revolution (1964) that resulted in the establishment of a one-party state led by Abedi Amani Karume (1964-1972) and a Revolutionary Government. The new government installed a regime of terror, intimidation and violence under the guise of equality, justice and freedom.

3 - Stone seat or bench table, outside the house or in the hall, it is «a place of public audience or reception, a veranda, a stone seat in the entrance

hall, a bench against the wall outside a house or a raised platform with stone seats and sometimes roofed over in front of the house, for receiving visitors, holding an audience, transacting business, for gossiping, where men gather on a fairly regular basis, usually between *magharibi* and *isha* prayers. It is a male place of socialization par excellence in contrast to *ua*, the courtyard, where female members of the society get together (*uani*) for their talks and their domestic activities» (Swartz and Saleh in Loimeier 2008, p. 144).

4 - Lit. dwelling place. Also a small branch of a political party.

5 - Founded in 1977 by the fusion of AFS - Afro Shirazi Party and TANU - Tanganyika African National Union. For further insights into the history of Zanzibar's political parties, see Glassman 2011 and Shivji 2008.

6 - The first three had taken place between 1961 and 1963.

7 - I acknowledge the existence of regimes which have complete monopoly over the Internet. With reference to Africa, one clear example is Ethiopia's government that is at the forefront of reinventing and localizing Internet technologies and capabilities aimed at monitoring Internet content. Nevertheless, we want to address the potential of digital social networks in making and/or widening freedom of speech in many African countries (Eko 2010). Techniques like mirror websites, e-mail message attachments, re-mailing from generic servers around the world can render governments' control ineffective. Social media has made it possible because of its immediacy (Eko 2015, p. 263).

8 - Arnold 2002, Bryceson 2008, Caplan and Topan 2004, Fair 2001, Larsen 1998, 2009, Mazrui and Shariff 1994, Topan 2006.

9 - For further insights into the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya and the role of digital social networks see, amongst others, Mudhai 2014, Zucekman 2009, Ogola 2011, Bowman 2013.

10 - Askew and Wilk 2002; Dickey 1997, pp. 413-427; Willems 2012, pp. 11-26.

11 - From October 2010 to October 2015 a power-sharing agreement was included in the constitution of Zanzibar allowing for a political reconciliation that significantly changed the sociopolitical context whereby features of identity have always played a decisive role in social and political participation. In the context of the general elections held in Tanzania in October 2015, the Zanzibar Electoral Commission annulled the government's election, despite fierce criticism from the opposition. The political impasse that followed ended on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, when new elections were held. The CCM won the elections, signaling the end of the 2015 reconciliation (*maridhiano*).

12 - Initiated in 2006, *JamiiForums - where we dare to talk openly* - offers information and debate on a variety of topics, such as politics, entertainment, business and economy, language, education, and law, but also communication, love, friendship and jokes. It is linked to Facebook, Twitter and an email service. It provides freedom of communication and expression, specifically pointing to individual contribution to the public discussion and its worthiness («Tunatoa uhuru wa kuongea. kama mada inakukuna au kukugusa kwa kiwango ambacho unaona lazima utoe majibu jisajili na kutoa ufafanuzi yakinifu» - «we deliver freedom of speech, if the topic irritates you or touches you to the extent that you think you have to answer, register yourself and give your empirical analysis» (*Ibid.*, posted on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009, #3). It clearly states the regulations framing the behaviour and language to be used in posting, highlighting notions of stupidity (*upumbavu*) as opposed to wisdom (*hekima*), connected to those of respect (*heshima*) and trust (*imani*), hence supporting the notions of membership, and belonging («Ficha upumbavu wako; usifiche hekima yako!» - «Hide your stupidity, don't hide your wisdom!») <http://www.jamiiforums.com/jukwaa-la-siasa/18042-jamiiforums-rules.html> (posted on 10th September 2006, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2018).

13 - «mimi wala siongei neno...» <https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/>



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