

Words for Worlds

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Here are eyes that look up and into and in between time, within and beyond ocean horizons, who also evokes from within maps of assorted seas with rare words. His name is Haji Gora Haji.¹ He lives in Zanzibar. He is from Tumbato Island. He is over 80 years old. Before the onset of Islam, his forebears hosted Persians seeking political asylum. He told me this. His people called themselves Shirazi before the idea or name of Africa gained common usage on the continent. Before there were Africans, there were Shirazi. . .Haji Gora Haji is an archetypal old man of the sea. His skin is a worn map, a cartography of hard-gained knowledge, his silences as profound as the mysteries of the sea he understands, a man of African interstices – seafarer, navigator, artist, trader, porter, thinker, poet, minstrel, father, grandfather, African, Indian Ocean citizen. He personifies the secret, but rich, lives of those given no space in the current architecture of our chatter. I went to see him early this year with questions about the East African Ocean imagination, but that's another story. Mr. Haji Gora had things to say. I listened. Here's a short version of thoughts reaped from his memory:

- 1) The geography of the imagination over seas is boundaryless.
- 2) Lived memories are platforms upon which we may stand to glimpse the horizons and the shape of future destinations.
- 3) The lines between sky, land, and sea blur. It is all a matter of perspective.
- 4) If we wanted, we could see limits for human maps are mere suggestions. Actual routes are only born out of direct experiences of the sea.

“You are looking for a map?” Haji Gora asked me. “The sea is the map.”

¹ Haji Gora Haji is a poet, a writer, and a minstrel, whose art remained largely unknown to a wider Swahili public until the publication of his brief anthology *Kimbunga* (The Hurricane) in 1994.