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Performing Geography in Global History¹

Carla Bocchetti

Global history is an innovative approach which permits the integration of research on under-studied subjects, and places, without being attached to the history of Europe. Global history, therefore, challenges the privileged position of European history within the larger discipline of historiography – it is a critique of Eurocentrism. There have recently been several workshops at different institutions to identify the type of research questions that a global perspective can best address. These conferences have included “Writing the History of the Global” The British Academy Conference 2009 held in London; “Global History: New field and new questions” organised by the French Institute for Research in Africa held in Nairobi in 2013; and “Connections and Disconnections in the History and Cultures of Eastern Africa” organised by the British Institute in East Africa and the University of Warwick in Nairobi 2015.

Many suggestions about what constitutes global history research and practice have emerged from these and other similar conferences. Some of the suggestions about what global historians should focus on include transnational history², imperial history³, comparative history⁴, economic history⁵, divergence⁶; commodities and material culture⁷; mobility, migration, communication⁸; ocean history⁹; multilingualism, the circulation of texts and knowledge¹⁰; contagion, ecology and the environment¹¹; connected histories¹², and biographies crossing borders¹³.

However, in spite of the boom, little emphasis has been put on geographical understandings as an important element of enquiry into global history. Not only is geography a crucial way of understanding new human relations beyond nations, but the narrative of space can tell a different story from one rooted in theological chronologies. This paper aims to understand the depiction of Africa in the early modern maps and geographical accounts of the Swahili,

¹ This research was written at different institutions: the library of Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, the French School at Rome, Nairobi National Archives and IFRA. I want to thank Stephanie Buttler and Henry Mitchell for their support. Field work was conducted at Manda Island, Lamu, Mombasa, Malindi and Zanzibar. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at NYU Abu Dhabi.

² Christopher Bayly, “AHR conversation: On Transnational History”, *The American Historical Review*. Vol 111, (2006): 1441-1464, p.1442.

³ Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History* (Princeton, 2009).

⁴ Isabel Hofmeyer, “AHR conversation: On Transnational History”, *The American Historical Review*. Vol 111, (2006) 1441-1464, p.1444.

⁵ Maxine Berg, *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century* (The British Academy / OUP, 2013); David Washbrook, *European Miracle in Non-European Perspective -Historical Connections* (Routledge, London, 2002).

⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000).

⁷ Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (OUP, 2013).

⁸ Wendy Kozol, “AHR conversation: On Transnational History”, *The American Historical Review*. Vol 111, (2006) 1441-1464, p.1445.

⁹ N. K. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985); Bosé Sugata, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Globafrica Project. IFRA-IFAS/ CNRS

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 31(1997): 735-762.

¹³ Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (Random House New York, 2008); Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture and the Conquest in the East 1750-1850* (Random House New York, 2006).

Arabs and Portuguese trading along the East African coast from a global perspective; my purpose is to create an awareness about the role that spatial relations (space and place) have in studying different connections beyond the frame of the nation. Maps and geographical accounts (navigation manuals, charts and genealogical surveys) took part in the creation of a sense of self and projected particular identities on vast areas - and thus interact with numerous questions that lie at the base of global history.

Global History and Geography

By emphasizing a global perspective, this new sub-discipline of history asserts that historians cannot continue to focus primarily on nations and nationalism, but must go beyond borders. Traditionally, the history of nations has been the dominant historiographical model, and most scholars working in history departments focus on the history of the particular country in which they are based. Global history's focus, however, is not the study of nations¹⁴. Instead, it examines the interconnections between places, people and objects in transit, spatial representations, and communication. Thus, geographical references are of genuine interest to global historians, not just as a narrow frame of investigation but as a subject of interrogation. Although geography is implicit in all scholarship within global history, it has yet to be at the centre of global historical enquiries. More recent trends in cultural geography - a discipline which also aims at embracing marginalized perspectives - have similarly drawn on the work of Henri Lefebvre¹⁵, David Harvey¹⁶, Michel Foucault¹⁷, Carl Sauer¹⁸, postcolonial studies scholars¹⁹ and feminists²⁰ who have critiqued the concept of geographical determinism. Following Foucault's lead, cultural geographers have reached a consensus that it is space, more than time, which influences contemporary preoccupations²¹, and I contend that global history must undertake a similar decisive turn towards focusing on projections and performances of space and place.

Another issue with the overemphasis on nationalistic framings in historiographical research is that, with the exception of the British Empire as a modern nation-empire, nations are largely a product of the 19th century. Before this, other forms of states or empires existed which included territories attached to one another by other political structures; the Hapsburg and Bourbon empires offer models of differential governance in which territories and ethnicities were attached through non-national *liaisons*²².

Arguably, the British Empire's longer history of nationalistic perspective has unduly influenced the entire discipline of history because of the centrality of British history within

¹⁴ Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* (Blackwells, 2004); Maxine Berg, *Writing the History of the Global* pp.1-18.

¹⁵ Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991).

¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-modernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989).

¹⁷ Michael Foucault, Space, Knowledge, and Power. In *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984); Michael Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, Vol. 16 (1986): 22-7, p. 23.

¹⁸ Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape", *University of California Publications in Geography*, Vol. 2, (1925): 19-54.

¹⁹ Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2000); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London, 1989).

²⁰ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994).

²¹ Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power", p. 70

²² Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Harvard University Press, 2014), pp.63-89.

the field. Global history, however, opens up the possibility to study other connections which are not necessarily contingent upon Europe or empire. Examining the role of geographical discourses and map making in relation to East Africa and its place in the Indian Ocean world is one way of exploring such connections. The Indian Ocean, over which the British Empire did not hold much control (even in the 19th century), yields rich possibilities for exploring global encounters outside of a Eurocentric framework. My research on geographical accounts, particularly those written records circulating the Indian Ocean - navigation manuals, maps, charts and genealogical accounts - demonstrates global history's potential to articulate geography and space within a discourse not only of local identity, but also an identity which is fashionable within wider communities overseas²³.

Many global historians have so far been focused on the circulation of material objects transported by transoceanic trade, but a focus on maps reveals broader issues than an assessment of the discrete circulation of objects or economic relations. In contrast, maps explore political and cultural phenomena relevant to larger areas of the world, and offer a chance to break with convention by finding connections between objects and archives that have been left out of main stream historical conversations. By studying the relationships between geographical places that have previously been studied separately, we can learn about how modern identities were transferred to larger areas, and the extent to which modern identities were built upon projecting oneself as belonging to a wider community overseas²⁴. In my work I apply global history as a research methodology to study maps in conjunction with dynamics of space, in order to create a new story about encounters in the context of East Africa's presence in the Indian Ocean world. By comparing the maps and manuals of Arabs and Europeans to African conceptions of space, my research complicates understandings about the role spatiality plays in the shaping of contemporary identities and the transgression of borders.

Geographical records of the Swahili have come down to us mainly through oral tradition, but assumptions about the region's lack of written culture are being undermined by new research into East Africa's written records. Delmas and Penn²⁵ have recently given importance to the role of writing in global encounters or contexts; and with Schaub's concept of 'asymmetries', destabilizing the legitimacy of certain cultures and sources, we can make new comparisons²⁶. Comparing societies that possess written records and made maps with those that have been studied largely within the framework of oral tradition it is possible to examine performances of space and place that are usually overlooked in the academic canon. This emphasis on the enduring legacies of cultural asymmetries informs my research into the disparate representations of East African space in early modern maps.

The coherence of the Indian Ocean world has been demonstrated through patterns of

²³ See Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, esp. Chapter 3.

²⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Exploration in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (Oxford, 2011).

²⁵ Adrien Delmas and Nigel Penn (eds.), *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900* (University of Cape Town Press, 2011), p.112.

²⁶ Jean-Frédéric Schaub, Notes on some discontents in the historical narrative. In Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global* pp.48-65.

migration, cultural synthesis and the religious dominance of Islam²⁷; the cycles of monsoons, ports, ships and sailors, and the widespread distribution of certain products from particular areas²⁸. And yet for Chaudhuri, Africa remains irrelevant. He asserts that the Indian Ocean world includes four ‘civilizational identities’: Islamic, Chinese, Sanskrit Indian and Southeast Asian, and excludes Africa from this pantheon stating “indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean”²⁹. Despite considerable evidence of Indian Ocean trade with the Swahili Coast, East Africa has been largely neglected in writings on the Indian Ocean world.

The tendency to exclude Africa however is now changing. Ray and Alpers very much problematize the absence of Africa in Indian Ocean studies stating that “maritime communities were points of contact to many different cultures and ideas”³⁰. And Sugata Bose’s study of the Indian Ocean offers a full account of the East African Coast³¹. A special issue of the journal *Africa* has also been dedicated to the subject, as well as an edition of the *Journal of African History*³². Through the use of an oceanic metaphor, Braudel has demonstrated that people from across oceanic spaces have determined the destiny of seas, and not the other way around: “Mediterranean civilization spread far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns”³³. Maps highlight the existence of a written culture that circulated throughout the Indian Ocean, and encompassed the Swahili Coast within it. The Indian Ocean therefore should be considered as an interregional arena unified by trade and migration, but also written culture and transmission of knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to make evident the importance of geography for global history, to explore the way in which geographical information taken from local sources was used to project a European and Arab sense of self onto global encounters, and contrast these projections with the ways in which Africans considered their place and sense of belonging in the world, far removed from the ways in which they have been represented in European and Arab geographical maps and accounts. It also re-examines the power of maps as part of written culture and as fashionable objects dictating a new world order. Based on information collected at the level of local experience, and transformed into a global object, maps created an incoherent, asymmetric narrative in which only few could project themselves into the world.

East Africa in Early Modern European Maps

I consider maps as texts - textual commodities travelling on ships - that tell stories about global encounters. Not only do they contain routes for sailors and navigational instructions, but also they hold stories which have symbolic and allegorical meanings, and tell us a great

²⁷ Michael Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: the Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

²⁸ Gaurav Desai, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India and the Afroasian Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

²⁹ Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe* p.36.

³⁰ Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward Alpers, *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (OUP, 2007), p.39 and 136.

³¹ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean and the Age of Global Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

³² Journal “Africa” published by the International African Institute 2011, and *Journal of African History*, Vol. 54, 2013.

³³ Braudel F, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949).

deal about the society which produced and consumed them³⁴.

During the 15th century, map publishing was mainly concentrated in south and central Europe³⁵. But by the middle of the 16th century, leadership of the industry had moved to the Low Countries, with Amsterdam and Antwerp leading map making and map consumption. In these cities, cartographers reached a masterly level in the technique of engraving, with the Dutch explorations to the East Indies (VOC) at the end of the 16th century further catalysing the development of map making in the Netherlands³⁶. Much of the geographical information gathered from these explorations was kept secretly³⁷. But some information was disseminated from navigational charts and increased the demand for maps both as technical items to help navigation, and as fashionable objects³⁸ - collected and displayed both in the public sphere of government buildings and in the private sphere of home interior decoration. For instance in Italy and the Netherlands there was a fashion of hanging world maps (*mappamundi*) on the walls for decoration.

Maps were practical objects which primarily served an administrative purpose, but they have also been examined as expressions of imperial expansion, domination and appropriation, and examples of power, knowledge and possession³⁹. Early European maps affected space, and cannot be considered passive objects or neutral artifacts. They offered a way in which Europe became connected in the collective mind, for they portrayed an area locked together into relational patterns.

However, as social products, maps also conceptualized space within the relations, fantasies, ideas, religious tendencies, fears and ideological values of the society that produced and used them. They conserved established views and preconceptions of the world. For Simon Schama, maps from societies characterised by maritime expansion and mercantilism were a product of the encounter between fresh historical experience, ideological frameworks and the constraints of geography⁴⁰. In this respect maps fell well short of exercising control over territories and people. Much of the way in which Africa was depicted in these early maps was a consequence of myths about Africa as ‘the dark continent’.

But if we are to think of these maps as texts, as speaking objects, then we need a way of reading those stories. Early modern European maps of Africa encapsulated a framework of a particular society and also constituted ideas about the self and the world. In other words, these depictions tell us far more about Europe and colonization than they do about Africa.

³⁴ Christian Jacob, “Towards a Cultural History of Cartography”, *Imago Mundi* Vol.48 (1996):191-198.

³⁵ David Woodward, Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change. In *History of Cartography* Vol 3. (The University of Chicago University Press, 2007), pp.3-24.

³⁶ John B. Harley and Kees Zandvliet, “Art, Science and Power in Sixteenth Century Dutch Cartography”, *Cartographica* Vol 29 (1992):10-19.

³⁷ Kees Zandvliet, *Mapping for Money: Maps, Plans and Topographic Painting and their role in Dutch overseas expansion during the 16th and 17th centuries* (Batavian Lion International, 1998).

³⁸ Genevieve Carlton, *Wordly Consumers: The Demands for Maps in Renaissance Italy* (The University of Chicago press, 2015); Catherine Delano Smith and Roger J.P. Kain, *English Maps: A History* (University of Toronto Press, 1999).

³⁹ John B. Harley and David Woodward, *The History of Cartography*, Vol 2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Daniel Cosgrove and Stephen Daniel, *The Iconography of Landscape: The Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (University of California Press, 1988).

For the Portuguese, the Indian Ocean itself was the imperial domain. They were interested in the monopolization of trade, the control of coastlines and coastal trade routes, and applied taxation to ships crossing the Indian Ocean waters. They were not making inland incursions and laying the foundations of cities. The control of the sea was their real empire. The Portuguese made maps of routes (charts) in the 15th century, called *Portolanos*, depicting sites along the coast following the *periplous* tradition⁴¹. The *periplous* tradition goes back to antiquity, when the narratives of itinerary journeys that have survived in the documentary record must have been accompanied by charts which are now lost. An early example is *The Periplous of the Erythraean Sea*⁴² written in the first century AD in which the coast of Africa is included. The *periplous* is a journey along the coast which mentions the principal geographical features of the territories in a linear sequence. It shows how to go from one point to another highlighting the prominent geographical features, such as rivers, mountains and towns. Due to the *portolano*, the coast was fairly well known for Europeans after the 15th century, but the interior of Africa remained a complete blank, in spite of the fact that there were numerous caravan routes, pilgrimages and merchants belonging to a non-European tradition of travelers with a considerable knowledge of the African interior.

Ptolemaic space, classical myths, and biblical references were all important components of the intellectual context which framed these European conceptions and served as the basis for European understandings of the unknown⁴³. Yet at the same time⁴⁴, the Renaissance provided the intellectual tools necessary to achieve the liberation from antiquity. The imperial boundaries that Europeans put into classics, as well as to biblical references, were thus an exercise of power and exclusion. Imperial identities and the maps transmitting them were simultaneously shaped by the use, and abuse, of the classical and biblical repertoire.

Africa was considered a dark place on European maps for centuries. Although geographical information of Africa goes back to Herodotus⁴⁵, and the Romans had contact with Africa and India at an early date⁴⁶, the map of Ptolemy was the established paradigm through which to understand Africa from late antiquity to the beginning of the 16th century (Figure 1).

In Ptolemy's map the interior of Africa was unknown and its geographical features were mainly associated with the river Nile: the Nile was sourced from the Mountains of the Moon, which were located south of the Equator. From these mountains different streams flowed towards two lakes situated symmetrically on the same latitude. These two lakes were the sources of two big streams which at some point in the North converged and formed the course of the Nile. At the start of the 16th century, the Ptolemaic outline was

⁴¹ David Turnbull, "Cartography and Science in Early Modern Europe: Mapping the Construction of Knowledge Spaces", *Imago Mundi* Vol 48 (1996): 5-24, p.9.

⁴² O.A.W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974); Carla Bocchetti, "Cultural Geography in Homer", *ERAS Journal* Vol. 5 (2003). <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras/edition-5/bocchettiarticle.php>. Carla Bocchetti, "The *Periplous* Tradition in *The Iliad* and *The Homeric Hymns*", *Revista ARGOS*, Vol 29 (2007): 29-52.

⁴³ David Woodward, 'Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change', *The History of Cartography*, Vol.2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁴ Carlton, *Worldly Consumers*.

⁴⁵ James Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁶ Lionel Casson, "Rome's Trade with the East: The Sea Voyage to Africa and India", *TAPhA* Vol 110 (1980): 21-36, p.24.

Fig. 1. Map of Ptolemy.

replaced by one reflecting contemporary experience of travelling, like the Martellus Map of 1507 and the Cantino Planisphere of 1502⁴⁷ By the time of the Gasdaldi map of Africa 1564 there were no Mountains of the Moon and, following Barros' cosmological notions, the two lakes were replaced by one large lake from which flowed the most important rivers of the continent. With exploration, details of the seaboard were gradually added.

The interior however remained a vacuum in which the space was filled with African animals and mythical figures. The Monoculi in the map of Sebastian Münster (1554) in which inhabitants of the African continent are represented by a Cyclops, is a good example to illustrate the barbaric notions circulating about Africa in early modern maps (Figure 2).

Actions of exploitation and expropriation were legitimised through depiction of others from below as monsters, as has been well explained by Linebaugh and Rediker⁴⁸, who examined recurring images of the Greek hero Hercules (identified with colonial progress) in his battle against the Hydra (the many headed monster representing those at the bottom of colonial infrastructure). These early maps of Africa did not make use of the totality of the geographical information collected by exploration. The interior of Africa remained unknown for many decades, even centuries. Even with new discoveries, partly because

⁴⁷ Kenneth Nebenzahl, *Maps from the Age of Discovery, Columbus to Mercator* (London: Times Books, 1990), Pix, 234.

⁴⁸ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Beacon Press Boston, 2013).

Fig. 2. The map of Sebastian Münster (1554)

geographical routes and information were kept in secret⁴⁹, maps promoted the mentalities of the mapmakers and the society that consumed them - which remained fixed to the classical mythological paradigm. Blaeu, who was the official cartographer of the VOC, was unable to use new geographical information from the discoveries. For example his map of Africa c.1664 is highly decorated with vignettes of cities, forts and landscapes; the borders depict inhabitants from different regions, the ocean space is decorated with sailing ships, flying fish and mermaids; yet the interior of Africa maintain the presence of wild beasts (Figure 3)⁵⁰.

Although this type of map added new information about places and names regarding the islands of Mauritius and Madagascar (following the discoveries of Dutch exploration), the mythical Mountains of the Moon still are depicted, even if they are not the source of the Nile. Other earlier maps, such as the Lopes-Pigafetta (1591) do show a great improvement on the interior of Africa, but for Zandvliet, Blaeu's work perfectly illustrates how a VOC chart was turned into a commercial atlas map. At the end of the 16th century scientific

⁴⁹ Adrien Delmas, *From Traveling to History: An outline of the VOC writing system during the 17th century*. In *Written Culture in a Colonial Context*, p.112.

⁵⁰ Kees Zandvliet, *Mapping the Dutch World Overseas in the Seventeenth Century*. In *History of Cartography*, (ed.) by David Woodward. Vol 3 (University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 1438.

Fig.3. The Blaeu Map, c.1664

knowledge started to come to the fore, and maps began to separate from a now unsustainable, mythological background. In the map of Herman Moll (1732) the vacuum spaces of the interior of Africa were filled not with animals or monsters but by two inscriptions, one reads: “Ethiopia is wholly unknown to Europeans”. Nevertheless the cartouche of the map keeps the traditional allegories of Africa as a seated woman half naked holding an ivory tusk, and there are references to African animals denoting uncivilization together with civilized forces represented by a horseman hunting an ostrich (Figure 4).

Concurrently, the *querelle* between ancient and moderns, taken up by some scholars to challenge the status of antiquity, set up the idea that men from the age of discoveries were much better than the ancients. These views are best expressed in the epic poem *Os Lucidas*, of Luis de Camões (1776) which celebrated Vasco de Gama’s exploration of the Indian Ocean⁵¹. Maps continued to portray the European self for public consumption within the boundaries of social and ideological references that went back to narratives from antiquity, showing the enduring legacy of traditional attitudes in the face of modern developments.

⁵¹ Let Fame with wonder name the Greek no more, / What lands he saw, what toils at sea he bore; / Nor more the Trojan’s wandering voyage boast, / What storms he braved on many a perilous coast: No more let Rome exult in Trajan’s name, / Nor Eastern conquests Ammon’s pride proclaim; A nobler hero’s deeds demand my lays / Than e’er adorned the song of ancient days, / Illustrious GAMA, whom the waves obeyed, / And whose dread sword the fate of empire swayd.

Fig. 4. The Map of Hermann Moll 1732 and a detail of the cartouche. Private Collection Lorenzo Rissini Bizzinelli.

But they simultaneously started to reflect an increasingly proximate, material engagement with the world they were representing as informants and explorers surveyed inland. These maps were images in the process of becoming⁵².

With trade and exploration before the Europeans, the geographical knowledge of the interior of Africa was obtained mainly by the information given to the Europeans by caravan guides, nomads, travelers, merchants or pilgrims. These routes were dominated by the gold trade from the mines in Ghana, Mali and Zimbabwe to places on the coast like Sofala, Kilwa, Mombasa or Malindi. These routes connected Angola on the Atlantic Ocean, to port cities in East Africa, where there was also trading of iron, seeds, ivory, spices, labour, books and manuscripts.

Although maps are said to have been tools of power and control, European maps of East Africa show a fragmented view of the world perceived through the kernel of European ideas and misconceptions, built mainly upon classical and biblical references. Early maps tell us far more about Europeans themselves than about the people or places they pretended to portray - the mapping of the Indian Ocean, and Africa in particular, was one of the main ways European imperialists fashioned themselves through geography. Nonetheless, they also speak to the limits of European colonialism and commerce; and point to Arabs and Africans – beyond the sailing ships and coastal forts - as the dominant disseminators of geographical knowledge about the African interior.

Geographical Tradition in East Africa

Although Swahili maps have not survived in the historical record, a great amount of geographical information of Swahili geography exists in different manifestations, and can be tangentially accessed and approached through diverse forms: from the Arabic books on navigation, to social performance of space, poetry and song, and as we will see below genealogical accounts can be considered geographical documents too. The echoes of the Swahili's local geographical knowledge of the coast, both at a practical and theoretical level, are loudest in the dialectically-informed Arabic written geographical records and

maps which were circulating in the Indian Ocean⁵³.

There are still some doubts as to whether or not Arab maps were “geometrically drawn” like the Portuguese *portolanos*⁵⁴, but navigational literature in the form of practical advice for navigators and pilot guides certainly existed; charts of the Indian Ocean are mentioned by Marco Polo⁵⁵ and Vasco de Gama⁵⁶, and there are also earlier examples of drawn maps of Piri Re’is (1513) and Al-Idrisi (1154).

Arabic knowledge of navigating the Indian Ocean including the East African coast has mainly come down to us through the work of Ibn Mājid⁵⁷ (1421), a sailor from Oman and author of numerous geographical works, who is best-known for the controversy over whether or not he was the pilot of Vasco de Gama. In the *Kitab*, Ibn Mājid refers to the sailing season from India to East Africa (Zanj), Madagascar and Zanzibar mentioning numerous ports along the way⁵⁸. Arabic classical geography relied on Ptolemaic geographic understandings, just as Europeans did. But Ibn Mājid’s work is an outstanding example of a tradition of navigational literature used as practical advice for pilot guides circulating the coast of the Indian Ocean which broke with Ptolemy’s geography. Also notable is his use of the compass and the wind rose: a method of using starts risings and settings for directional purpose. Although no map of Ibn Mājid has survived, we must understand his work as being part of an Arab tradition of geographical maps which were accompanied by a textual description. While maps themselves have been lost, logbooks, or pilot guides, written in verse as part of a *mnemotechnique* process (easy to memorize) intended to didactically pass information from one generation to the next, have endured in the historical record.

Furthermore, although there is little work done by Western scholars on Omani geographic corpus associated with its empire⁵⁹, we should not conceive the Arabic geographical corpus as a compact unique enterprise, but as the result of collected different traditions around the Indian Ocean in which are put together knowledge from disparate different sources in which Ibn Mājid is one of the examples par excellence. For instance, Egyptians were sending missions to the East African coast as early as 1500 BC - there is evidence in a relief that portrays the fleet of Queen Hatshepsut⁶⁰ being sent down to the Red Sea to reopen trade with the East African Coast.

⁵³ Michael Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Blackwell, 2000), on the *periplous of the Erythraean Sea* and the *Geography of Ptolemy* see p.31-37.

⁵⁴ Gerard R. Tibbets, *The Role of Charts in Islamic Navigation in the Indian Ocean*. In *The History of Cartography*, Vol 2 Book 1. (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 256-257, 261-262.

⁵⁵ Thomas Suarez, *Early Mapping of Southeast Asia: The Epic Story of Seafarers* (Periplus Edition LTD. Singapore, 1999).

⁵⁶ De Barros J, *Asia: Década I*. 1552. bk.4 ch.6.

⁵⁷ Gerard R. Tibbets, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese*, translation from *Ibn Majid* (London, 1971), p.169. See also Thomas Vernet, *East African Travelers and Traders in the Indian Ocean: Swahili Ships, Swahili Mobilities*. In *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*. ed. by Michael Pearson (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015).

⁵⁸ Gerard R. Tibbets, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean*, pp.237, 221, 234-235, and about the rose wind p.296.

⁵⁹ John C. Wilkinson, “Oman and East Africa: new light on early Kilwan History from the Omani Sources”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14 (1981): 272-305. John C. Wilkinson, “A Sketch of the Historical Geography of the Trucial Oman down to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century”, *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 130 (1964): 337-349.

⁶⁰ Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton University Press, 1971), p.21 fig.18; and A. Aleem, “History of Indian Navigation in the Indian Ocean”, Special Publication dedicated to Dr.N.K. Panikkar (Marine Biological Association of India. India, 1973).

The Omani and other powers of the Gulf had been active in East African coasts since the 9th century⁶¹. Although the Arabic geographical tradition has been at the margin of the studies of European geographic tradition, nevertheless Swahili geographical knowledge must have played an active role concerning geographical information, as the Swahili were the product of a fusion of cultures, (a porous and fluid identity as explained by Vernet)⁶², they must have shared information of navigating the East African coast to Arabs, Portuguese and other groups around the Indian Ocean. In spite of that, the Swahili contribution is silent from the Arabic corpus, (as it is from the European corpus), we may be facing a way in which Arabs are exercising another form of otherness, reflecting the overlapping of imperial projects on commanding sea routes.

How much did Swahili geography influence the Arab tradition on geographical knowledge? Rather than endogenously produced, as we mentioned earlier, we should consider the possibility that Arab navigational manuals were the product of a long tradition of shared knowledge, built upon the different geographical approaches of local people living within the Indian Ocean shores. In that way it is possible to explore the contribution of Swahili geographical knowledge to the geographical information that remains accessible for us about the East African Coast.

In fact, Ibn-Khaldun gives a glimpse of the multiple agents involved in the Arab navigation enterprises: “When the Arab empire was established, and grew predominant, men of different professions offered their service to them. They employed boatmen and sailors, who helped them to improve their nautical knowledge and activities. Experts in navigation were produced amongst them”⁶³.

The Swahili certainly had considerable navigational expertise of their own. From Masʿūdī⁶⁴ (c. 896–956) we learn that each sea had separate sailors and experts, and that the African Sea (Abyssinian sea) and Barbara (Mozambique channel) were very difficult to navigate⁶⁵: “sailors says this is a mad sea... When they reach the waves of the sea and go with currents, which rock them high and low they sing the following verse during their work on the ship: “Barbara and Jafoni – And this mad storm / Jafoni and Barbara –And its waves as you see”. A well-known illustration from a Mesopotamian manuscript al-Hariri’s Maqamat (MS Arabe 5847 fo.119) dated AD 1237 now at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, also shows a wooden boat with two masts, and the oculi at each end of the craft, resembling the Lamu mtepe⁶⁶, with what seems to be a Swahili crew (Figure 5).

The Swahili had first hand experience of oversea sailing. As Vernet⁶⁷ has shown Swahili

⁶¹ Randall L. Pouwels, “Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean to 1800: Reviewing relations in Historical Perspective”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Vol 35 (2002): 385-425. See p.395 for records of slave trade by Arabs in the 9th Century.

⁶² Vernet, *East African Travelers and Traders in the Indian Ocean*, p.171.

⁶³ Allama Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, *The Arab Navigation* (Pakistan, 1966), p.68:Ibn Majid exhorts pilots to follow his work: “you can not possess knowledge/to cheer you in high seas or in tempest / so when misfortune smite you, cling/ to my work and my wisdom on every course”.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.88

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.90

⁶⁶ Johnstone Paul, *The Sea-craft of Prehistory* (Routledge: London, 1980), p.177.

⁶⁷ Vernet, *East African Travelers and Traders in the Indian Ocean*, p.167 and 169.

elites were involve in long distance voyages to the Arabian and Southern Arabian seas during the period of the first European expansion. They were aware of the main trading networks, markets and maritime routes of the Indian Ocean as whole, owned big ships and were partners in large oceanic enterprises, taking advantage of the multiple agents involved in trading on the African coast. They were also on board ships as pilots, free sailors, merchants or pilgrims.

Further, from the Pate Chronicles we know of Swahili having knowledge of the monsoon season, shipwrecks and tides⁶⁸, and records of military expansions refer to geographical information⁶⁹. For Ibn Mājid, experts on navigation are learned men who had to have access to books on geography, astronomy, latitude, longitude, and the shape of the stars⁷⁰. Similarly, although much emphasis has been placed on African oral traditions, there is evidence uncovered at the Timbuktu Library to argue that written tradition existed alongside this⁷¹ and was connected to library production in East Africa at Siyu⁷². These newly-revealed literary traditions indicate that chart and maps must have been circulated among merchants and traders alongside cosmological treatises which were associated with their geographical conceptions of the world (Figure 6). These relationships with distant places were also part of social dynamics in which people built their sense of cosmopolitanism.

Fig. 5. Manuscript al-Hariri's Maqamat (MS Arabe 5847 fo.119) dated AD 1237

⁶⁸ Marina Tolmacheva, *The Paté Chronicles*, edited and translated by Marina Tolmacheva (Michigan University Press, 1993). pp.19 n.20 and p.21,301,303,308-310,314,318,320 (MS 358 of the Dar es Salaam University)

⁶⁹ "Sultan 'Umar bin Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Sulayman gained great power (and) conquered the towns of the Swahili (coast) – Ozi, Malindi, Kiwayu, Kitao; Miya and Imidhi and Watamu – until he reached Kirimba. He gained possession of all the towns from Pate to Kirimba," (*The Pate Chronicles* p.299) See also *Utendi wa Fumo Liyongo* for geographical references.

⁷⁰ T.A. Chumovsky, *Três roteiros desconhecidos de Ahmad Ibn-Madjid o piloto árabe de Vasco da Gama*, tradução portuguesa de Myron Malkiel-Jirmounsky (Lisbon,1960), p.88 (Ms.2292 R.6V).

⁷¹ Shamil Jeppie, Making Book History in Timbuktu. In *The Book in Africa: Critical Debates*, ed. by Caroline Davies and David Johnson (Hampshire, 2015), see Ch.4.

⁷² James de Vere Allen, "Swahili Book Production", *Kenya Past and Present* 13 (1981):17-22.

Fig.6. Cosmological Charts from Timbuktu.

Although we can only speculate that geographical knowledge in form of books and charts was also circulating on the Swahili shores, we certainly know from recent archaeological work, that the Swahili had knowledge of nautical engineering, as can be seen in Kilwa's causeways, as well as command of nautical warfare⁷³.

As we possess only the Arabic written sources it is difficult to assess the asymmetric communication process and the dialectic with other agents from India, Yemen, Iran, Oman and China⁷⁴. And if we can consider Arab navigational manuals as collections of shared knowledge built upon different geographical understandings of the local people living around the Indian Ocean shores, then the Swahili's geographical nautical system was itself the product of a two-way conversation, in which Arabs influenced Swahili and Swahili influenced Arabs with their own views of place and space, local geographical information for sailing and particular landmarks of coastal features. But we certainly do know that the Swahili coast was a point of contact between local African, Arabic and other cultures, and it is unlikely that this was a hegemonic, one-way engagement.

Although Swahili maps do not remain, we have access to songs and poetry in which the Swahili project themselves across the Indian Ocean world. For instance, there is a

⁷³Edward Pollard, "The Maritime Landscape of Kilwa Kisiwani and its Region, Tanzania, 11th to 15th Century A.D.," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* Vol 27 (3) (2008): 265-280. For the nautical Battle of Sheela c.1812 see *Pate Chronicles*.

⁷⁴ Simplification of the Swahili culture is expressed in Carl Velten, *Desturi za Wasuaheli & Sitten und Gebräuche der Suaheli*. (Göttingen, 1903), p.335, 338. However, James de Vere Allen refers to a wider influence in terms of "Indian Ocean Culture" and current bibliography reevaluates the previous simplification of Swahili culture.

considerable sense of place and of cosmopolitanism expressed in the Swahili Sailor's Song, which lists places to which the Swahili consider to be related, these includes southern Arabia, islands south of Oman, and the Comoros: "Let's go to Iran as well, and Ras al-Khaima/Basra, Hadd and Sawkira/ Bandar Abbas on the Fars Coast"⁷⁵. Similarly the Swahili also fashioned themselves through geographical references in which they expressed the complex nature of their identity: East African and Asian locales are placed next to each other in spite of the geographical distance between them, Goa is mentioned next to Lamu and Pemba, and a reference to Maskat is preceded by Siyu and followed by Bombay⁷⁶. Crafted doors from Lamu may also inform of local places projected into far away arenas. Even more interesting are perhaps the geographical references made in daily life practices and sensual and nostalgic scenarios (see the poem *Inkishafi*)⁷⁷ which is another example where geography fashions identity.

Performing Space and Written Culture

The two entangled, but dissonant geographic traditions of the Portuguese and Arabs – both drawing on Ptolomeaic understandings of the world, but separated by contrasting conceptions and contact with the Swahili – are directly comparable through the two versions of the Kilwa Chronicles (one Persian, one Portuguese) that survive to this day (Figure 7).

Fig. 7. The Kilwa Chronicles, Persian Version.

The Chronicles are a narration of genealogies dating from Persian migrations into East African during the Middle Ages, and are primarily a list of kingships establishing a

⁷⁵ Jan Knappert, 'Swahili Sailors' Song', *Afrika und Uebersee* 68 (1985): 105-133, see p.115.

⁷⁶ Marina Tolmacheva, *The Paté Chronicles*, edited and translated by Marina Tolmacheva (Michigan University Press, 1993), p.23.

⁷⁷ William Hichens, *Al-Inkishafi* (The Soul's Awakening) translated and edited by William Hichens (The Sheldon Press, 1939).

foundational story associated to trade and port cities. But, they can also be regarded as examples of geographical accounts or social maps, for genealogies map space, creating links between East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean world.

Though genealogies are often associated with myth and do not represent an authentic historical account, as social practices of performing space, they play an important role in placing a group of people in connection to others establishing links between people in distant places. Genealogical records transmitted information and ideas of authority and prestige⁷⁸ and in the particular case of Swahili, they are related to the construction of a urban identity of stone towns, the establishment of a thalassocracy as opposed to pastoral life⁷⁹. Part of a broader pattern of book production on the East Africa coast – with some examples of Swahili writing existing⁸⁰ – the Chronicles were not written or composed by foreigners for foreigners, but are a link to the Swahili world. They are an example of the Swahili themselves reconstructing their own mythical ancestry and urban connections to the far shores of the Indian Ocean.

The two remaining versions of the Kilwa Chronicles (the Persian and Portuguese versions) are different and present omissions, gaps and censorship regarding the succession of kings. These may have occurred for different reasons: diverse fonts of transmission, emphasis in certain kings associated to political purpose, addition or the erasure of dynasties⁸¹. As geographical documents, the genealogies recorded in the Chronicles replicate the Omani tradition of geographical records that were actively antagonistic – Ibn Mājid's writings indeed are an example of a geographical corpus generated through Omani imperial expansion, which competed with the Shirazi genealogies as documents of identity and location with the liaisons of the Indian Ocean.

The written description that accompanied the pictorial representation of maps is a kind of document that can be studied in association to genealogical and geographical accounts, and it belongs to the context of written culture, associated to map making in the shores of the Indian Ocean world.

⁷⁸ For a critique to genealogy; museum and society see Beth Lord: Foucault museum. www2.le.ac.uk/museum/studies, p.8.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Fleisher and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "Finding Meaning in Ancient Swahili Spatial Practice", *African Archaeological Review*. Vol 29 (2012):171-207.

⁸⁰ James de Vere Allen, "Siyu in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Transafrican Journal of History* Vol. 8 (1979):11-35; Rider Samson, "The Swahili Manuscript Culture," *Manuscript Culture Newsletter* 4 (2011):68-77. Howard Brown, "The Development and Decline of a Swahili Town," PhD thesis UMI /BIEA, 1987. Lyndon Harries, "Siyu the chief seat of old Swahili learning". In *Swahili Poetry* (Oxford, 1962). In p.6 refers to the process of writing and fabricating ink in Siyu: "The conventional description of the copyist writing material survived in the prelude to some of the poems long after the copyist had adopted more modern materials for writing. It seems plain that the copyists lined their paper by the use of a board around which was wrapped a silken cord so that parallel ridges could be impressed on the paper. Mica-sand was sprinkled on the writing to dry it. Black ink was made from rice, burned and then ground to powder, mixed in water with a little gum, lemon juice and some lamp black. Red ink was made from cinnabar or native Mercuric oxide and was prepared locally from the mzingufuri or mzinjifuri plant (Ar. Zinjafu) Bixa Orellana. Coloured title pieces adorned some of the manuscripts, but generally of rather inferior design and execution. The section of a line or rhyme endings were usually divided or marked by stops. (sw kituo/zituo, or kikomo/zikomo) though in some manuscripts there is no division at the medial rhyme and a space takes the place of the marked stops, which were shaped by inverted hearts and often lubricated. As with Arabic of course, the Swahili Arabic script is written, and the manuscripts paginated, from right to left". Howard Brown, "Siyu: Town of Craftmen," *Azania* Vol 23 (1988):101-113, esp. 110-112. Hichens W, *Al- Inkishafi*, p.122.

⁸¹ Elias Saad, "Kilwa Dynastic Historiography: A Critical Study", *History of Africa* Vol.6 (1979):177-207. Randall L. Pouwels, "Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean to 1800", p.385-425. Rick M. Thomas, "Persian Gulf Seafaring and East Africa: Ninth-Twelfth Centuries", *African Historical Studies*. Vol 3 (1979): 339-357.

Conclusion

According to Gassmann⁸² and Cooper⁸³ race, empire and identity as categories of analysis are dissolving. Global history focusing on space offers new categories to understand mobility, change and crossing borders, focusing on non-fixed identities beyond national limits.

Maps inform of movement of people as well as objects, and are partially the result of histories of consumption as well as fashioning of people projecting themselves into larger areas of the world. In the case of East Africa, Europeans and Arabic maps of Africa were actively disengaged and resisted by the Swahili at the same time that their geographical knowledge was been erased and incorporated into a new geographical corpus. Global history and the geographical 'turn' support history from below, and the inclusion of maps and the geographical discourse bear the possibility of opening up new readings of inclusion.

⁸² Jonathon Gassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁸³ Cooper, *Africa in the World*.

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