Elizabeth Brooks
East African Culture and Society
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Essay #2
Tutor: Iain Walker
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Cultural Production and Diaspora: the novel as a vessel for a transnational voice

Abdulrazak Gurnah's remarkable novel, *Desertion*, paints an intricate portrait of life in a diasporic African community. His characters are unparalleled in their complexity and humanity. The details of time and place, and the historical context of the novel all combine to create a reading experience that seems to somehow illuminate Gurnah's particular corner of the world. But, what makes *Desertion* a distinctly Zanzibari novel? What makes Gurnah a Zanzibari author? In order to read the novel from an anthropological perspective, we must first establish what it means to be Zanzibari, to be Swahili, from the corner of Africa that falls on the southernmost tip of the monsoon winds. If there exists some kind of a unifying principle that can be called culture, a way of seeing, perhaps, that is particular to a certain time and place, then we must identify it and search for it within the text of *Desertion*.

The most immediately unifying principal in Swahili culture is a more nuanced one than an anthropologist would hope for. The culture is founded on multiculturalism. The East African coast is like an exotically spiced stew, stirred by the currents of trade, empire, and, lately, tourism. Swahili peoples have long been the subjects of an almost

absurd anthropological debate.[1] People cannot seem to figure out who they are. While the term ostensibly refers to the coastal populations of Eastern Africa, modern migration has further muddled the ethnic makeup of the peoples of the coast. Do the people of Dar es Salaam count as Swahili, even though many of them are not Muslim and come originally from the interior of the country? How about people from Nairobi? They speak the Swahili language, but in a different dialect, and Kikuyu culture, to give one example of the many cultures that contribute to the human landscape of Nairobi, differs vastly from Zanzibari culture. Comorian culture is fairly similar to Zanzibari culture, but the Comorian people do not speak the Swahili language. How can they be Swahili if they do not speak the language?

Pat Caplan suggests that there are, in fact, many cultures within Swahili culture, that the term may be more like a catchall than an actual cultural identity.[2] It is possible to be Swahili and Kikuyu, or to be Swahili and *mbongo*, a resident of Dar es Salaam. Laura Fair argues for a distinct Swahili women's culture in urban Zanzibar,[3] and Francoise Le Guennec-Coppens identifies the East African Hadramis as a culture that is both within and outside the definitions of Swahili identity.[4] Even the most Swahili of Swahili identities, the black Muslim Zanzibari living in the ancient and half-crumbling Stone

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[1] From Carol Eastman's 1971 Article, "Who Are the Waswahili" (Africa 41: 228-236) to Pat Caplan's 2007 piece, "'But, the coast, of course, is quite different': academic and local ideas about the East African littoral," (Journal of East African Studies, 1 (2): 305-320), the subject of Swahili identity has remained alive and fascinating for nearly half a century.

[2] Caplan, Pat 1997, *African Voices, African Lives. Personal Narratives from a Swahili Village*. London: Routeledge.

[3] Fair, Laura, 2001, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Zanzibar, 1890-1945*, Oxford: James Currey.

[4] Le Guennec-Coppens, Francoise, 1989, "Social and cultural integration: a case study of the East African Hadramis," *Africa* 59: 185-195.

Town, enjoys an unusual degree of cultural ambiguity. More often than not, a shopkeeper, a street hawker, or a temporary tour guide will identify himself as 'Arab' rather than 'Swahili', citing vaguely prestigious affiliations with Oman and the world beyond the African coast.

Given its history as a trading center, it is not unusual that Zanzibar has a local culture that borrows vastly from its visitors. Nor is it unusual that a certain amount of racial mixing has occurred, and that the people local to the island tend to employ well-developed stereotypes to describe the various racial and national identities that add to their gene pools. It is in its treatment of the subject of multiculturalism that *Desertion* emerges as a distinctly Zanzibari novel. While Gurnah's descriptions of the taste of homemade pilau, the need to ring the bell of a bicycle while traversing the narrow streets of Stone Town, and the experience of sneaking away for a quiet afternoon swim strongly evoke the feeling of Zanzibar, it is his treatment of interracial interaction that gives the novel its conspicuously East African voice.

The story opens with ethnic complexity. Even before the introduction of Martin Pearce, the white explorer with whom Rehana has an affair, Gurnah introduces the question of ethnicity. Hassanali, the first character whom we meet, is immediately introduced as half Indian. Gurnah very subtly defines mixed race as a positive characteristic; Hassanali is a positive character. If not altogether respected in his community, he is an honest and upstanding citizen.[5] As readers, we are meant to understand that Hassanali is a good man, and that his parents, an Indian father and African mother, are also good people. Gurnah gives his readers a very positive portrait of

[5] Gurnah, Abdulrazak, *Desertion*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2005, page 5-6.

the relationship between Hassanali and Rehana's parents. Their father was an Indian man who embraced Swahili culture. Gurnah paints a portrait that suggests that the marriage of an Indian man and an African woman was a respectable and appropriate event, one that should not raise moral questions among his readers.[6] Gurnah deliberately eases his reader into interraciality; the first characters whom we meet skate easily across racial divides.

By contrast, later in the book, Amin and Rashid's parents are much less sympathetic to Rehana's mixed heritage. The parents' judgments come late in the novel, however, and by that point, Gurnah's readers are already sympathetic to the event of interracial attraction. It is crucial, however, that Amin's mother's racism is incorporated into her own multidimensional character. Mwana is not merely a vessel for racism. Rather, she is a whole character for whom racial and cultural prejudice forms part of the social landscape. While the children do not agree with their mother's judgment of Jamila, they do acknowledge that her views coincide with the cultural norm. [7] Gurnah's narrative skill is such that he is able to communicate the parents' prejudices without vilifying their characters.

The dichotomy of cultural fusion and negative stereotyping that characterizes multiethnic societies is richly engrained into the Swahili worldview. This duality is never less apparent than in the interactions between African and Indian communities on the Swahili coast. Gudjerati immigrants are deeply entwined into the cultural fabric of East Africa, but they remain a distinct population, occupying a social space that is neither on

[6] Ibid., page 62.
[7] Ibid., page 204.

the lowest, nor on the highest rung of society.[8] Historically, the South Asian population served as a link between the British colonialists and their African subjects. Gurnah cites this relationship in Frederick's speech about the role of Indians in the colony.[9] The position of South Asian peoples, ambiguously located between the dominator and the dominated, set them up for persecution in the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar. Racial tensions leading up to the Zanzibar revolution are too complex to discuss in detail in a paper of this length, and they do not directly relate to the "Zanzibari-ness" of Gurnah's story. The changing views of Indian heritage that appear in the novel, however, are likely the result of changing views of the South Asian minority in Swahili culture. When Amin's mother calls Rehana a half-breed, [10] her slurs echo the social climate of the times.[11] Gurnah's inclusion of the subtly shifting racism in Zanzibari culture is less a nod to history than a necessary piece of his Zanzibari narrative. In order to understand the voice of Rashid, the present-time narrator of the novel, the reader must understand the fraught history of racial interaction in Swahili East Africa. It is only once the reader has this understanding, that he or she can truly appreciate Rashid's sadness when he talks about the feeling of giving up to stereotype, of resigning to the reigning discourse that defines race as black and white and ends there.[12]

Differing understandings of race and ethnicity, across time, gender, and generation, contribute to the complexity of multicultural interaction in the novel, and in

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[8] Seidenberg, Dana, *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750-1985*, Delhi: New Age International, 1996.
[9] Gurnah, *Desertion*, page 84.
[10] Ibid, page 205.
[11] Glassman, Jonathan, "Sorting out the Tribes: The creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar's Newspaper Wars," *Journal of African History* 41 (2000), pages 395-428.
[12] Gurnah, *Desertion*, page 222.

Zanzibari culture. Amin's parents have a different view of Jamila's mixed-race background than do Amin, Rashid, and Farida, the younger generation. This has to do, in large part, with the constantly changing nature of racial interaction in Zanzibar, and the ability of young people to catch new trends quicker than their elders. Individualized understandings of race and social space, however, are particular to Zanzibar Swahili culture. Kelly Askew's work on Taarab clubs and women's cultures around the time of the Zanzibar revolution suggests that female conceptions of ethnic identity were, and perhaps still are, much looser than the racial ideologies that existed among men. Askew suggests that women were more likely than men to occupy more than one racial category.[13] Women with mixed race backgrounds frequently identified with Arab, Omani, or Indian heritage, rather than calling themselves Swahili.

While Askew's work approaches this phenomenon from a historical perspective, Gurnah's novel gives voice to the ongoing experience of living in a multicultural society. Jamila acknowledges her complex ethnic background. As she tells the story of her grandmother to Amin, she does so carefully, aware that he has been raised to judge Rehana, and people like her, for the way that she stepped outside of her cultural background. As readers, we are immediately sympathetic to Jamila's version of the story. It is difficult to say who the protagonists are in *Desertion*, but Gurnah's voice is implicitly aligned with to those characters who complicate the roles allotted to them. Gurnah has crafted the narrative in such a way that we sympathize with Hassanali, Rehana, and Martin Pearce. We stand behind them in their interactions with the colonial government and the conservative elements of Swahili culture. In spite of the fact that

[13] Askew, Kelly, 2002, *Performing the Nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Frederick loves literature, has a poet for a wife, and is, on the whole, a likeable character, we judge him harshly for his compliance with a regime that refuses to see the humanity of the Swahili population.[14] Though we know substantially less about him, we prefer Martin Pearce, because he is a sympathizer when, according to stereotypes, his people are not supposed to be sympathizers. Pearce is an outlier, and Gurnah has coaxed us into liking him for it.

Swahili society is famous for its ability to incorporate foreign outsiders. Aside from Martin Pearce and Hassanali's father, many travelers have stopped in their wanderings to settle near the beaches of the Indian Ocean, fusing their own cultural practices with those of the people around them. Carol Eastman's work gives a poignant description of the process by which foreign elements have been incorporated into Swahili culture.[15] Eastman describes the means by which foreigners arrived along the trade routes, either as traders or as human cargo, and left varied influences that long outlasted their introductions. The nature of East African slavery was such that slaves and their masters coexisted with one another, interacting and trading cultural knowledge on a daily basis.[16] Through this process, practices from mainland Africa mingled with practices from the Arabian Peninsula, India, and sometimes as far as China.

I recently visited my friend Hemed in Holland. He served spiced noodles for breakfast and explained to me that the noodles are a traditional Zanzibari breakfast dish, but that Zanzibari people learned noodles from the Chinese.

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[14] Gurnah, *Desertion*.
[15] Eastman, Carol M., 1971, "Who Are the Waswahili?" *Africa* 41: 228-236.
[16] Eastman, Carol M., 1988, "Women, slaves, and foreigners: African cultural influences and group process in the formation of northern Swahili coastal society," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21, (1): 1-20.

'We took noodles from the Chinese, but then we changed the spices,' he said.[17] Hemed is Zanzibari, as Swahili as anyone else from Zanzibar, yet his complexion is lighter than that of his friends. When I asked, he said that this is because he is Arab.

'What kind of Arab,' I asked him.

'*Marabu*," he said, looking to the rest of his friends for agreement.

'Just Arab,' someone else said.[18]

The difficulty of determining ethnicity in modern Zanzibar and in the growing Diaspora finds a voice in *Desertion*. When Amin and Farida discuss Jamila's family history, they assign little import to her mixed race background. Instead, her wealth is cited as a potential problem, as is her refusal to comply with the gendered mores of a Muslim society.[19]

Rashid's experience in London addresses the multicultural experience from another angle. While Zanzibari culture is quick to embrace outside influences on its home soil, the interaction of Zanzibari and European cultures within the Diaspora is rather different.

On visiting my Zanzibari friends in Holland, I was surprised at how little Dutch culture I experienced. During my stay, I ate Zanzibari food (pilau, biryani, fried fish, and spinach), I listend to Taarab music and Bongo Flava,[20] and I spoke in Swahili. I was amazed to observe the level of cultural preservation. We removed our shoes before entering the house. Food was stored in African plastic bowls, and a pair of colored rubber

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[17] Interview with Hemed Hazal Munthir. Conducted by Elizabeth Brooks in Castican, Holland, January 3, 2008. Translated from Swahili by Elizabeth Brooks, March 27, 2008.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Gurnah, *Desertion*, page 165.
[20] Current hip-hop from Tanzania.

flip-flops was conveniently placed just inside the door. We even shared a bottle of Konyagi, Tanzanian spirits that someone had carried into Holland on a recent visit.

I asked Mohammed, another friend of mine, what he thought of Dutch culture, and why he preferred to do things the Zanzibari way.

'Our food is better,' he said. 'The taste is better and it is healthier. The Dutch eat too much cheese.'

'What about the music?' I said, 'Don't you want to mix with Dutch people?'

'Yes, Dutch people are very friendly,' he said, 'but we are different. Our music is slower. It uses a different scale. And the language is difficult.'

'Aren't you interested in trying things?' I pressed.

'I tried,' he said.[21]

It happened that my visit to Holland coincided with the aftermath of the disastrous Kenyan election in December of 2007. When the conversation turned to politics, my friends' views of Europe proved quite different. They agreed that the situation in Kenya was unfortunate, but no one was surprised.

'That's Africa,' Mohammed said. 'That's why we left. In Holland, we are free.'[22] The group nodded in agreement, even Eddie, who had just arrived at Hemed's from an illegal nightshift, which he worked for less than minimum wage because he had no visa.

The subtle complexity of Rashid's relationship with European culture is one of *Desertion's* greatest strengths. Rashid is fascinated with Europe from a very young age. As a kid, he studies an Italian phrasebook until he can acquires the nickname *Mitaliano*.

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[21] Interview conducted with Hemed Hazal Munthir and Mohammad Kassim-Haji in Castican, Holland, January 3, 2008. Translated from Swahili by Elizabeth Brooks, March 27, 2008.
[22] Ibid.

In his schooling, he searches for validation from his teachers through the comprehension of English literature and poetry.[23] English culture, both literary and practiced, is held above him as something to strive toward understanding and mimicking. European influence is incorporated into daily life in Zanzibar in a fluid and hegemonic fashion.

Upon arrival in London, Rashid has a very different experience. The Zanzibari version of British culture, one that he has grown up with and to which he is accustomed, bears little resemblance to social landscape that he sees in England. In London, he is an outsider. He feels the gap between his upbringing and that of his classmates; he is no longer a European among Zanzibaris, he is a Zanzibari among Europeans. In coming to terms with this, he embraces his own culture as a means of identity and distinction. Like my friends in Holland, despite seeing Europe as a land of opportunity, he experiences it through the eyes of an outsider.

The anthropological study of migration and Diaspora provides some useful insight into the process of creating cultural identity outside of one's culture. Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson discuss the means by which exiles and refugees embrace and reject imported traditions while living as members of a minority.[24] Unlike the ____ people, Rashid goes to London by choice, to study. His privilege separates him from many immigrants, but the fraught relationship between host and immigrant culture remains relevant. Because Rashid is such a sensitive narrator, the feeling of being at once connected and separated from two cultures falls gracefully on the ears of the reader.

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[23] Gurnah, *Desertion*, Rashid's nickname, *Mitaliano*.
[24] Matsuoka, Atsuko and John Sorenson, 2001. *Ghosts and Shadows: Construction of Identity and Community in an African Diaspora.* Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

The Swahili impulse towards multiculturalism is invariably limited by the unnatural and imbalanced relationship between Europe and Africa. *Desertion* is an ambitious story because it seeks to explore that fraught relationship from a humanist perspective. No one is vilified and no one is entirely blameless in muddle of white and brown culture that sloshes around on the margins of East African society. Gurnah does a brilliant job of conveying that African history is really just a series of millions upon millions of personal stories. *Desertion* is a deep and narrow novel. It does not seek to make sweeping judgments about the nature of cultural interaction or the legacy of colonialism. In the simple poetry of its story, it works the colonial bruise from a human angle. By instilling feeling into the history, it adds a crucial element to the scholarship of the region.

It is difficult to analyze *Desertion* from an anthropological perspective because in its essence, it is a personal story. Gurnah's characters are deeply human. They are individuals who are no more symbolic of Swahili culture than they are symbolic of female culture or youth culture or the culture of men who are going prematurely blind. Fortunately, modern anthropology allows for the study of specificity. Modern anthropology allows for storytelling. Through the weaving of countless individual histories, we may stumble upon something that resembles a cultural truth. For such an incongruous subject group as the 21st century Zanzibari Diaspora, a few stories might be as much as we can do. In giving us Rashid's story, three generations and several family members worth of it, Gurnah gives a solid voice to this experience. With the voice of an unnaturally articulate informant, he explains a little bit of the way it feels to be from

Zanzibar and living in England. *Desertion* speaks to its readers in the highest language of cultural communication.

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