

## SEEING THE WORLD WITH ZANZIBARI POET NASSOR HILAL KHARUSI

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I first met Nassor Hilal Kharusi when, looking for an editor for a translation I was doing from English into Swahili, I was introduced to him via email by his niece, a friend of mine in the USA. I was translating a very elegant short story, and I wanted to put the Swahili version into the care of someone who would not only note errors and ask questions but who would be a writer too, strict about sound and flow and prepared to make suggestions. My friend had simply said, “My uncle is a person who likes words and language.” But I soon realized that I was in the company of an important literary figure. What has followed since then between us – as I imagine it does for Nassor’s many Zanzibari and non-Zanzibari interlocutors – is a provocative literary exchange, ranging from the nature of language itself to the forms of Swahili poetry, the power of fiction, the dangers of translation, and the complex interrelation between ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ in Zanzibari life.

Although Nassor is also a writer of fiction and non-fiction, I am most familiar with his poems. Nassor’s verse, often focused on the nature and power of emotion, reflects his attentiveness towards the people of his city, the dramas of life and love both as they unfold in private and can be sensed in public, and a fascination with the natural world as a source of knowledge and meaning. Born in 1978, Nassor has spent all his life in Zanzibar City. He was raised in Malindi, near the Zanzibar port, and now lives and manages a shop near Kisiwandui in a busy shopping area that is also home to several mosques and a well-known *madrassa*.

After writing verse privately for many years, Nassor published his first collection of poems, *Diwani ya Barsheba: Safari* (*The diwani of Barsheba: a journey*), with Kara Printing in 2014. In 2016, several poems appeared in the volume *Kurasa mpya: fungamano la malenga* (*New pages: an assembly of poets*, Zaima Publishing), from which the poem *Mambo yamegeuka* (*How things have changed*), appearing in translation in this issue, is drawn. In 2017 his second collection, *Hisia*

*zangu* ('My impressions'), was published by Medu Press. And, in 2018 his third collection, *Siku zapishana* ('The days diverge'), was published by Zprint in Zanzibar.<sup>1</sup>

During a conversation about translation, I told Nassor that I would like one day to translate a poem of his, if he would comment on the work and help to shape it. The poem *Mambo yamegeuka*, which appears in *Kurasa mpya* (p. 55), stood out to both of us as particularly apt. Although the poem is rooted in Nassor's witnessing of change, tensions and inversions in contemporary Zanzibar, it also captures the experience of many people in the world today – a sense of dislocation and shock as we witness dramatic tensions (war, environmental stewardship, concerns about control over news media, and numerous and increasing disputes over power, rights and justice) that increasingly seem to put human welfare at risk. I think it is important for people across languages, cultures and societies to know that others feel the way they do – that people all over the world hope for better things, decency and sense. This is a poem that can, in translation, connect its original readers to others, across languages, in shared discomfort and concern.

Nassor Hilal can be heard talking about his work in a video made in June of 2018 by Zaima TV.<sup>2</sup>

*Mambo Yamegeuka*

*The world's different now*

Mambo sasa 'megeuka, ya ajabu twayaona	The world's different now. We witness strange things.
Watu leo 'mejitiwika, mizigo yenye fitna	People today take up quarrelsome loads.
Wengine wana mashoka, mpini hutaiyona	Others wield axes and you won't see their hands.
Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	We witness strange things. The world's different now.
Chura amezua taabu, kuruka na kutafuna	Frogs stir up trouble, leaping and biting.
Mtangazaji ni bubu, habari zake za kina	The announcer is mute but his news is profound.
Watoto wana sharubu, wao sasa ni mabwana	Small boys have whiskers – they're now great men.
Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	We witness strange things. The world's different now.
Kuna wapenda sulubu, wakikosa watanuna	Some cherish torment, without it they'll pout.
Aendae taratibu, hufika mapema sana	The slow-walking one arrives very early.
Jahazi na merekebu, njiyani zasangamana	Dhows and big ships throng in the street.
Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	We witness strange things. The world's different now.

<sup>1</sup> The translated titles appearing here were determined with the generous help of Nassor Hilal Kharusi, Meg Arenberg, and Mohammed Ghassany.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV-ekQqBoFQ&t=9s> (last visited 27-05-2019)

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Avisomae vitabu, mjinga anaonekana Majinuni ndio hatibu, kwa sifa hujulikana Amilikiye dhahabu, njaa inamtafuna Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	A reader of books looks like a fool. The madman makes speeches and he garners praise. Hunger consumes one who owns gold. We witness strange things. The world's different now.
Bibi amsema babu, kutwa ni kusengenyana Apitae kujinabu, avalishwe uungwana, Watizimao wajibu, wabaki wakisonona, Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	Bibi slanders babu – they both do, all day. One who struts, bragging, is declared to be courteous, as dutiful people sit back aggrieved. We witness strange things. The world's different now.
Dunia ni masaibu, mengi ya kila aina Wale wanaoharibu, ndo wendao wakituna Suali hukosa jibu, azomewe alonena. Ya ajabu twayaona, mambo sasa 'megeuka	The world's made of affliction, legion, all kinds. The destroyers themselves walk about with a swagger. The question's unanswered: mock he who asked it. We witness strange things. The world's different now.
<i>mtunzi (poet): Nassor Hilal Kharusi</i>	<i>mfasiri (translator): Nathalie Arnold Koenings</i>